

The Region.

Mezzolombardo and the Campo Rotaliano.

Situated in Northern Trentino, at the gates of the Alto Adige region, the Campo Rotaliano - or Piana Rotaliana - is the flood plain formed by the Adige and Noce rivers: a triangle of only four hundred hectares whose apex is the Rocchetta pass leading into the Val di Non, while the sides are the towering cliffs that rise vertically from the plain.

This area held a key role as a hub for trade routes since Roman times; the region was a crossroads between the Noce and Avisio valleys with the Adige valley and the 'Claudia Augusta' imperial road. These were thoroughfares of great importance, fundamental for the passage of people and goods between the Latin world and continental Europe.

This region's importance as a commercial hub is evinced from its very denomination that dates back to even remoter times. In fact, the etymology of the term 'Rotaliana' seems to derive from the language used by the Illyrian and Celtic people who inhabited this area about four thousand years ago: "Piana Rotaliana comes to mean Plain (fields) of the (= ro)" - prefix indicating the genitive case - "site of duty (= tal), i.e. the duty to be paid to enter in Val di Non." (G. M. Rauzi, *La Piana Rotaliana*, 1978)

The plain, although geographically divided in two by the Noce, was historically referred to by the generic name of 'Mezo' (and its variants 'Mec', 'Mece', 'Metze', 'Mezum' and 'Mez', from the Latin medium, plain), which included both areas to the south and north of the river. However, in the second half of the thirteenth century, the two areas, with their respective villages and castles 'Mezo S. Pietro' and 'Mezo S. Gottardo'/'Corona de Mezo', separated into two distinct "ville" (towns), which frequently changed names in the following centuries. The present day 'Mezzolombardo' refers to the feudal control by the Bishopric of Trento (and therefore to the linguistic influence of Lombardy, Italy); while 'Mezzocorona' refers to the custom in Trentino to call 'corona' (crown) the castles built in caves or recesses in mountains.

It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that the area's morphology acquired its current appearance: in fact, between 1848 and 1853, the Habsburg

Emperors Ferdinand I and Francis Joseph oversaw the execution of a huge reclamation project that put an end to the plague of frequent flooding. The Noce was deviated from its original bed and its confluence into the Adige River was moved southwards from S. Michele to the area of Zambana Nuova.

The soil, finally freed from the threat of flooding, has unique physical and chemical properties, that vary markedly from place to place depending on the distance to the ancient river bed: gravel, sand and pebbles of different origin and nature (granite and alpine limestone from the Presanella ranges, porphyritic sandstone from the Ortles - Cevedale, quartz porphyry from the Penegal, superior alpine limestone and dolomite from the Roen and the Brenta mountain group, slate), smoothed by water and carried downstream, are found in varying proportions deep underground, covered by a layer of fertile silt and fine soil. A poor, loose soil with excellent drainage properties that make it warm and dry and, despite being totally flat, its properties are amazingly similar to the soil found on slopes and hills. The richness in minerals and the low water retention combined with the mountains' influence, which in their embrace protect the Campo Rotaliano from cold winds and temper both the winter cold and the summer heat, help to create a perfect microclimate for the cultivation of grapevines.

This is where Teroldego has been farmed for centuries, a grape variety that is rooted in the history as well as the stones of the Piana Rotaliana. It is a structural element, charged with economic, social, political and symbolic connotations, witness to a tradition and to the parallel evolution of a landscape and its society. The oldest known document referring to the *vinum teroldegum* dates back to 1383 and the fields between Trento and Povo. It is necessary to wait until 1540-42 for it to be referred to in the area of Mezzolombardo, to which the history of this variety has been bound for centuries until today. As early as 1231, however, a document reports the excellence of the vineyards in the area of the Mezo, indicating precise references to place names and highlighting already the dramatic contrast between the fertility of farmland near the Noce river and the devastating effects of its frequent floods. In the thirteenth century, the administration of the day-to-day running of the viticultural practises together with the management of the dispute between the Bishopric of Trento and the Tyrolean counts regarding the *causa vinaria*, occupy a privileged position in a number of administrative texts of the area, proof of wine's central role in all levels of society.

Its position on the border between Tyrol and Trentino - South and North

respectively of two very different cultures and languages – as well as continually influencing the direction of trade, has shaped the history of the region and its inhabitants due to constant comparisons, clashes and exchanges. Land of passage or of convergence, over time this area has developed the richness and complexity that only border regions have.

A richness and complexity that is reflected in Teroldego, a wine with a unique and complex character that due to its popularity was exported to Germany, Switzerland and the Habsburg Empire until the end of the nineteenth century and the First World War. Subsequently, the political divide and the closure of central European markets determined a reversal in sales that went back to a local scale and to a renewed but shy interest among Italian consumers.

The need for a new reconstruction in the aftermath of World War II was followed by a deep restructuring of the agricultural system focusing on high yields achieved also thanks to the prolific scientific research in the field of chemistry. The conversion was favoured by a gradual fragmentation of land property into smaller and smaller fields. The newfound economic stability culminated in the establishment of the big cooperative wineries to which the farmer – a vintner no more, but simply a grapevine farmer – brought his grapes, valued only for their weight and sugar content. Teroldego was thus planted, mainly with the pergola trellising system, and focusing on the endless repetition of very few clones selected for disease resistance and hyper-productivity. In the context of the strong growth of the Italian wine market, the deep historical and social bond between the Campo Rotaliano and the production of Teroldego led to the registration in 1971 of the first Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC – a State certification of quality) of the Trentino region. However, this did nothing but strengthen this approach, permitting a production of 17 tons/hectare, and thus favouring vineyards with high yields rather than promoting choices aimed at increasing grape quality.

Recently, however, quite a few producers and consumers are showing a renewed interest in the conservation of biodiversity in the vineyards and a sincere concern for the originality of wine. They have discovered that diversity and complexity are key factors for the richness of a DOC, and consequently have chosen a path in which Teroldego Rotaliano can return to being the true expression of its land.

