



### Terraced Vineyards in Jeopardy

✎ [Elisabetta Tosi](http://palatepress.com/author/elisabetta-tosi/) (<http://palatepress.com/author/elisabetta-tosi/>)   🕒 October 27, 2016

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Let’s play a game: let’s imagine the steep, dramatic Douro vineyards of Portugal are completely smooth. Imagine the hostile, rocky landscape of the island of Pantelleria: totally flat. Or the undulating countryside of Cinque Terre (Italy) or the mountainous Lavaux (Switzerland). Do you see what I mean? In this imaginary picture one particular feature is missing: the terraces, with their ancient, dry stone walls – the terraces that support the vineyards. An awful vision, isn’t it? Not only from a design point of view, but without those terraced landscapes we would not have some of the most historic, iconic (and wonderful) wines in the world, like Port from the Douro, or Sciacchettrà from Liguria, or Passito di Pantelleria. Even Valpolicella production in the Veneto would suffer because some of the finest Amarone and Ripasso wines of the area are made with grapes from terraced vineyards.

Terraces are a system of adapting the slopes of a hill in order to gain a bit more land to cultivate. This way, you can use a mountainous area without distorting its essence, its organic balance. A terraced landscape is able to combine food and agricultural production, soil conservation, the transmission of knowledge and the preservation of a unique aesthetic value. Furthermore it is amazing and exceptional in its beauty.

Although widespread throughout the world for many centuries, nowadays terraced landscapes are in jeopardy almost everywhere. And so are the vineyards they hold. The threats are mainly two: industrialization and abandonment. The first one is deliberate: breaking down the walls of the terraces to use the land in other ways. The second occurs due to the high cost of maintaining the walls – often because the number of people who know how to build and preserve dry stone walls is rapidly declining.

In 2010, an international network was founded – the International Terraced Landscape Alliance – after the first International Congress on Terraced Landscapes held in Mengzi (China). The goal of this alliance is the worldwide connection of all terracing projects. Because caring for terraced landscapes means being aware that these landscapes carry cultural and historical value, maintain environmental and hydrogeological functions, and improve quality of life and sustainable development. Recently, the third World Meeting of Terraced Landscapes was hosted in Italy, in some of the most renowned terraced areas in the country. Among the many topics of discussion, particular attention was paid to terraced vineyards. Do they deserve the effort of maintaining them? How important are terraced vineyards to the quality of a finished wine?



[http://palatepress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/IMG\\_9965.jpg](http://palatepress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/IMG_9965.jpg)

Terraced vineyards in Pantelleria (photo: Joe Roberts)

“We can define ‘heroic’ viticulture (<http://palatepress.com/2015/08/wine/heroic-viticulture-on-the-island-of-pantelleria/>) in areas like Pantelleria,” says Antonio Rallo, owner of Donnafugata winery. “To us, that means training vines in the goblet system. Everything is done by hand, on terraces supported by dry stones walls: a commitment that triples our labor requirements. Additionally, every year we are also involved in the maintenance of approximately 40 linear kilometers (25 miles) of these walls. Heroic viticulture, however, repays all these sacrifices by preserving the landscape, and enabling us to produce something unique, like our Passito Ben Ryé, one of the most popular sweet wines in the world.”

“To me, if there are dry stone walls in a landscape it means that you are on a hill, and wines from hillside vineyards are usually very good,” comments Pier Paolo Antolini. He is a wine producer in Valpolicella, and nearly his whole estate is comprised of terraced vineyards supported by the old, regional dry stone walls called *marogne* in the local dialect. With the help of his brother Stefano, he cares for and maintains the walls by himself. This is hard work that requires specific and rare building skills – not to mention the costs. Antolini is not the only one in this area to maintain terrace walls: there are many like him here because the *marogne* are a major feature of the hills in Valpolicella, Soave, and even Prosecco. In the Veneto region alone, you can see hundreds of kilometers of dry stone walls and terraced vineyards.

In other European countries, when you mention “terrace walls” people’s thoughts may to Portugal, and to its stunning Douro valley. Just like the Italian Cinque Terre and Pantelleria vineyard areas, the Alto Douro Winemaking Region is a UNESCO World Heritage site.



Would you say that wines from terraced vineyards are different from any other?” I asked Ana Margarida Morgado, the person in charge of PR for Taylor’s, one of the oldest and most famous Port houses. “No, the differences in the wines (in terms of quality) are not dependent on the terraces but on the location of the vineyards, the age and the variety,” she replied. “Taylor’s has 162 kilometers (100 miles) of terraces. In the past, this was the only way to plant on a steep hill. But today we don’t build terraces anymore; we just plant on steep hills.”

Growing vines on terraces everywhere in the world seems to be very expensive because the most work is manual and very difficult. So we wonder: is it even worth it nowadays if we cannot perceive the difference between a wine from a terraced vineyard and one from another type of hillside vineyard?



(<http://palatepress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Douro-and-its-vineyards.jpg>)

Terraced vineyards along the Douro in Portugal

Actually, there are other reasons, no less important, to commit to caring for and preserving that particular form of grape-growing and the landscapes with the dry stone walls: preserving the biodiversity of the place, along with endangered indigenous and wild grapes.

To give you an example, in 2005 the Liguria region started a project of “historic vineyards” with the aim of recovering the terraced territory of Cinque Terre. Here are some of the results:

- New discoveries: among the vines recovered, varieties such as Rossese, Ruzzese and Scimiscià were subsequently added to Italy’s National Register of vine varieties.
- Protection of the land: recently, serious floods have occurred in some regions, partially caused by collapsed walls in abandoned terraced hills.
- Cultural history: maintaining the old traditional cultural values of these sites.

Worldwide, various cultures created these terraced landscapes as an expression of harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural environment. And we need that harmony – today more than ever.

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Elisabetta Tosi is a freelance wine journalist and wine blogger. She lives in Valpolicella, where the famous red wines Amarone, Ripasso and Recioto are produced. In her working time Elisabetta is a web-consultant for wineries, and in her free time she writes books about Italian wines. Elisabetta is a contributor to Vino Prigo.

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