

Viticulture Cross Visit Report

Organic viticultural systems in Friuli-Venezia Giulia

ITALY, FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

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Summary

Cross-border exchanges and learning opportunities among peers are gaining momentum in many research and innovation projects on a broad variety of topics. In particular, the organic community promotes several occasions for interaction as practitioners' knowledge proves to be relevant and reliable to gain insights from other contexts and experiences.

Hosting such cross visits is thus thrilling as well as challenging as you're asked to provide an enabling learning environment, pleasant venues and tangible aspects to see and discuss. This can be further stimulating if the cross-border exchanges are targeting advisors (organic advisors, in particular), who are often travelling nationally and abroad looking for novelties and techniques to apply in their own contexts.

But what if you are the first in a row of such events and you want to overperform? Well, you try to pool together and intriguing sector (wine), a tour of organic farms and cellars, an Italian region (Friuli Venezia Giulia), meetings with organic and non-organic viticulture advisors and an exchange with the regional administration to get to know the system of public extension offered to organic producers and how it interacts with the private sector. And, of course, wine tasting!

Touching base with the reality of organic food and wine sector in the region

Organised by the Italian Foundation for Research in Organic and Biodynamic Agriculture (FIRAB), with the indispensable support of the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture (AIAB)'s regional chapter, the first Organic Advice Network's cross visit took place at the end of March 2025 in Friuli Venezia Giulia, the Italian north-east region bordering Slovenia and Austria and having a flourishing wine sector.

The participants were advisors from Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Italy and – notably - Slovenia, as the farm visits were quite literally across border and the group crossed the Italian/Slovenia border several times.

The event started with an appetizer: the group met in Udine, at around lunchtime and quickly moved to an organic farm (Cascina Lavaroni) nearby for lunch, preceded by the cellar visit and a welcome toss with local sparkling wine. The cellar tour and the meal were a first touching base with the reality of the organic food and wine sector in the region, with some valuable insights on the organic wine market dynamic and the main technical challenges in both vine growing and the cellar.



No siesta after lunch! Once we picked up the last participant (always be flexible to accommodate arrival and departure time of people coming from different countries and places), the group moved to the next appointment. The Visentini farm is organic since 2002 and is a well-reputed farm in the region, known for its explorative attitude on a variety of technical aspects, notably for soil management, vine training systems, cover crops and new machinery testing. Welcomed in the wine tasting hall with a selection of bottles and snacks, the meeting was introduced by an overall presentation of the cross visit agenda and a more formal and thorough presentation of participants to get acquainted and to allow the host to better know its visitors. The meeting was also attended by a few local advisors who explained their job model and the main technical challenges, especially focusing on weather data analysis and climate change prediction models.

Getting to know different formats and business models for advice for organic viticulture and wine making

The organic wine sector is in fact one of the few in Italy providing promising professional conditions for advisors, thus enriching the formats for advice. Generally specialized in either vineyard management or oenology, advisors are often operating exclusively in the organic sector. This is particularly true for the advisors working in the framework of the technical assistance provided by AIAB FVG, part of its advisory and extension service granted to organic farms and funded by the regional administration. Other local advisors contributing to the cross visit exchanges also predominantly operate in organic. The discussion thus revolved around the typology of advisory services and the related business models. But - you know what? - it's not that easy to come to know some professional 'secrets' such as fees for consultancy ... This was a recurrent theme that both organisers and participants had to learn along the visits. In general, most of the advisors are working on a per service fee, or a more common annual fee based on farm area, with the latter preferred especially when a specific tool is used.



Image 1. Azienda Agricola Visentini, field visit, photo: Luca Colombo, FIRAB.

How could that tiring first day of travel and visits end? With a gorgeous dinner in a family-owned organic farm (Borgo dei Sapori by Irene Cencig) with local products and delicatessen and – inevitably – a selection of wines and spirits.

On the second day, the group moved far eastern to visit the Collio wine region and to take a look at the Slovenian landscape while visiting the hilly organic vines planted amid calcar rocks (this peculiar soil is called named Ponca or flysch) and a few 1st World War weapons harmless remainings... A toss to the nearby 2025 European Capitals of Culture jointly hosted by Gorizia (Italy) and Nova Goriza (Slovenia) inaugurated a new tour of talks shared with the farm owners and a couple of additional companies who shared their private advisory systems and business models (always very humble, fee-wise), and how they are interacting with public advisory services.

Learning about Decision Support tools for pest management & biodiversity integration and machinery



Image 2-3. Gradis'Ciutta farm, field visit and private advisory system service presentation, photo: Luca Colombo, FIRAB

The group had the opportunity to learn about the tools and Decision Support Systems (DSS) private advisory services propose to farmers, targeting different aspect of the vine growing system, from vegetation indexes, to leaf analysis for pest management and biodiversity integration. Concerning IT we understood that at present many tools are available. Even many more are under development, making use of more "traditional" sensors of humidity, temperature etc., but also of more sophisticated image reading and AI. The main scope in the use of such technologies is pest and disease management and early detection and optimization of grape quality parameters, or at least early understanding of best harvesting moment and identification of grape potentials in terms of wine quality.

The farm (Gradis' Ciutta) visit also offered the occasion to discuss about tailor made machineries for pruning and harvesting in an overall mixed situation between manual and machine operations (due to hills, plains, different soils and vine training systems), transitioning to a more mechanized conditions in the vines, not least to be faster and more timely in operations under more and more severe and erratic climatic conditions.



Image 4. Grape harvester at Gradis' Ciutta farmn, photo: Luca Colombo, FIRAB. From the hills to the plain in a sort of wine-production continuum. Not commenting the lunch, the group in the afternoon moved to an organic wine farm to discuss how two young siblings gave new orientations to the family farm (Scarbolo), exploring innovative avenues for top-quality wine production and its marketing. At the eve of the early April Trump's showdown on US tariffs on trade, wine export and markets were debated and the cool mood of the young farmer and former business student in the US impressed the audience: forward-looking discussions with the US importers and no change of plans, despite Trump!

SISSAR: a special regional advisory programme

The farm visit was also attended by regional advisors in complementary domains: water and energy. AIAB FVG is among a bunch of regional organisations providing advisory services to farmers in Friuli Venezia Giulia under the special extension programme promoted by the regional administration. The programme includes not just technical advice on farming (in the area of arable, fruit and vegetables, hazelnuts, olives, ruminants and viticulture), but also irrigation and energy extension services, the latter in relation to optimized use of energy and renewable energy facilities and opportunities (such as agrivoltaic), as well as on weather forecast.



Image 5. Scarbolo farm, discussion with advisors, farmers and advisory services, photo: Luca Colombo, FIRAB.

A range of technologies and expertise are thus available for the farmers integrated in such extension services. In the case of AIAB FVG, it is provided to organic viticulture, horticulture and arable farms along two major tracks: a) one-to-one farm advice for specific counseling with a limited number of paid visits per year, and b) demo activities and events, study visits as well as periodic bulletins publicly available for any regional farms, whose information is also gained through the farm visits, further to DSS data collection and analysis.

The third and final day of the cross visit was then focused on this peculiar programme (called Sistema Integrato dei Servizi di Sviluppo Agricolo e Rurale - SISSAR) funded by the Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) Region: a visit to the regional administration offices to meet the civil servants in charge of the programme. For you to know, FVG is an autonomous region having some fiscal prerogatives, which offer some budget flexibilities, such as a broad extension plan to reach out virtually all regional farms. This is done outside the CAP measures and it's not necessarily easily replicable in other more ordinary administrative contexts. Nevertheless, it presents a valid example of synergies and complementarity across sectors, of public-private collaboration and of funds channeled to provide direct and functional technical assistance to farms.

Trains and flights don't respect the cross visit schedule and it's time for participants to leave: no time for a farewell with all at once, but the light baggage they had with them is now full of farms scenes and landscapes, technical solutions, advisory schemes and a peculiar regional programme having at its core the mediation offered to farmers by advisory organisations and the farmers interest of performing better and more sustainably.

A final thought

All farms were quite specialized in viticulture and have their own cellars, implying a broad range of savoir-faire:

- Soil management
- Vine physiology
- Plant protection
- Variety and rootstock choice
- Machinery
- Digitalization and use of digital tools
- Oenology
- Marketing and consumers choices

Such a wide-ranging knowledge domain clearly offers occasions for more specialized consultancies complementing the farmers' own know-how: this is the advisors' room for manœuver and this led to some internal reflections within the visiting group on ways to fill gaps and build collective operational intelligence.



Image 6. Vine growing in Friuli Venezia Giulia, Colli Orientali, photo: Luca Colombo, FIRAB.

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