The Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia is perhaps the least well known by Americans. Tucked away in the northeastern corner of Italy, stretching almost from Venice to Vienna, the region proudly grows the widest range of grape varieties in all of Italy. The Friulians, therefore, are extraordinarily aware of the interaction between food and wine. Fred Plotkin wrote La Terra Fortunata after 25 years of visiting the small region. His knowledge of its food, its wine, and its people and their customs is immense. Plotkin offers a comprehensive history of the region and great insight and understanding in his choice of recipes and their instructions. There are few generalities that can be used to describe this collection. Friulians are great wine drinkers and have a reputation for working hard, and so have a custom of eating small dishes to wash down with their wine and to satisfy their hunger between meals. So its no surprise that many of these dishes can be served alongside one another. The herbs and spices used are not necessarily those we think of as Italian; they are much more international. Yogurt-Dill Sauce sounds Greek and Mustard-Wine Sauce sounds French, but both they and Montasio-Mint Sauce can be found in Friuli (the Montasio cheese gets just a hint of mint, beautiful on pasta or soft polenta). From a garlicky Mussel Frittata to the most traditional Frico Croccante (a thin crispy pancake made entirely of cheese, it makes a delicious cup for Gnocchi with Mountain Herbs or Risotto with Crabmeat and Peas), Plotkins recipes are flavorful, unusual, and well explained. Because the region stretches from the coast to the mountains, traditional cooking includes everything from seafood to game and every herb, vegetable, and fruit under the sun. Plotkin introduces every recipe with a story, and they, along with his guide to Friulian wines, make La Terra Fortunata an indispensable guidebook both for the cook and for the armchair traveler. --Leora Y. Bloom
My Personal Review:

`La Terra Fortunata' on the culinary landscape of Friuli-Venezia Giulia by noted writer on Italian food, Fred Plotkin belongs to the ranks of many outstanding books on regional Italian cooking such as `The Splendid Table' by Lynne Rossetto Kaspar, `Naples at Table' by Arthur Schwartz, and `Cooking the Roman Way' by David Downie. Not only does Plotkin give us a superb picture of the cuisine of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, he convinces me that this region easily ranks with Kaspar’s Emilia-Romagna as one of the two or three foremost culinary centers in Italy.

There are at least three culinary reasons why this region is interesting. First, it is one of Italy's leading wine-producing regions, with a greater variety of grapes than any other part of this great wine country. Second, it ranks just behind Emilia-Romagna as one of the world's great producers of cured hams, with the procuitto San Daniele equal in quality to that of the more famous Parma hams. Third, it is literally at the crossroads of the Latin, Germanic, and Slavic culinary worlds, as it was once the primary port of the great Austro-Hungarian empire and it's dishes and ingredients show almost as much Germanic and Slavic influence as it does Italian.

One symptom of this multicultural influence is the large number of different recipes there are for gnocchi. While Rome is famous for the potato gnocchi, generally served in Trattoria on Thursdays, Friuli-Venezia Giulia gives us at least eight (8) different gnocchi recipes, some different by only the sauce, but some with different ingredients such as squash, ricotta, and plums. This makes total sense when you consider that gnocchi is halfway between Italian soft pasta and the dumplings and spaetzle of the Austro-Hungarian world. While I have seen recipes for gnocchi with squash and ricotta in other books, this is a first with plums. Although this leads to another highlighted difference from the rest of Italy. In no other region of Italy do I see as many savory recipes with fruits, especially apples, pears, and figs, combined with the `cookie spices' as I do in this book on Friuli-Venezia Giulia. While Sicily is famous for using `cookie spices' due to the North African influence, Trieste and the rest of Friuli-Venezia Giulia was actually as close or closer in contact with Moslem culinary influences when Trieste sat just on the border between Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman empire.

A major symptom of Friuli-Venezia Giulia's cosmopolitan culinary heritage is the fact that olive oil, butter, and pork fat all seem to be used in about the same quantity. There is no strong inclination to use one of the three as there is in southern Italy, Spain, Provence, (olive oil) or northern Europe (butter).

Of all the treatises I have read on Italian regional cooking, this seems to have the best evocation of the region's history and how that history influenced the people, the food, and the wine of the region. While Arthur Schwartz' `Naples at Table' gives a good picture of the history of
Campania, Plotkin ties this all together more effectively and does it so well that one can almost sense the romance of the region which lead to its being home to so many notable literary figures such as James Joyce and Italo Sveve (who happened to be p protégé of Joyce as well as his teacher in Italian).

For those of us who really like treatises on regional cooking to be as ‘authentic’ as possible to the language and ingredients of the area, this book pleases us in virtually every regard. The names of all recipes are not in Italian, but in the local Friuli dialect, all, of course with English translation. Where a local non-English name is used, the author always indicates whether the language is Italian, German, a Slavic dialect, or Friuli.

While this cuisine is just a little different from any other Italian (or German) cuisine, it is not inaccessible, as it is a cuisine of poverty which happens to include very common foodstuffs, with emphasis on greens, especially cabbage, lettuces, asparagus, and corn.

Corn, in the form of polenta, is also eminently important in that it is the primary daily starch of the region, edging out even pasta and potatoes.

By contrasting Friuli-Venezia Giulia with other Italian culinary regions, Plotkin dishes out some interesting insights on other parts of Italy. While he concedes that primacy in Italian cuisine goes to Emilia-Romagna with its Parma hams, Parmigiano Reggiano, and balsamic vinegar, he states that the while the cuisine of Campania (Naples) is great, it is not very portable. He also states that while Tuscany leads in reputation, this reputation is based largely on its wines and that the Tuscans are fairly low on the food chain with their doting on beans, spinach, and grilled meats, and not much more. He actually puts Liguria (Genoa) more on a par with Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Emilia-Romagna. This is little surprise, as this region is the subject of his earlier book on regional Italian cuisine.

Other reviewers have taken strong issue with the details of some of Plotkin's recipes. My reading tends to agree that Plotkin is much more the culinary journalist, historian, and geographer than he is the chef / anthropologist such as Paula Wolfert. I have found some recipes where one needs to exercise just a little culinary common sense, as when Plotkin throws fresh parsley into a hot pan with onions and garlic to cook for a few minutes rather than to add the delicate green herb at the end.

With that reservation, I must say that this book's rewards in revealing an 'Undiscovered Region' far outweighs a little culinary misstep. While I did not discuss it, the book gives much information on the wines of the region and the major wine producers. I was tickled also to find sources for chairs in the author's appendix on regional ingredient sources. Now I know why Mario Batali gets all his restaurant chairs from Friuli!
Highly recommended.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:

La Terra Fortunata: The Splendid Food and Wine of Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Italy's Great Undiscovered Region by Fred Plotkin - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!