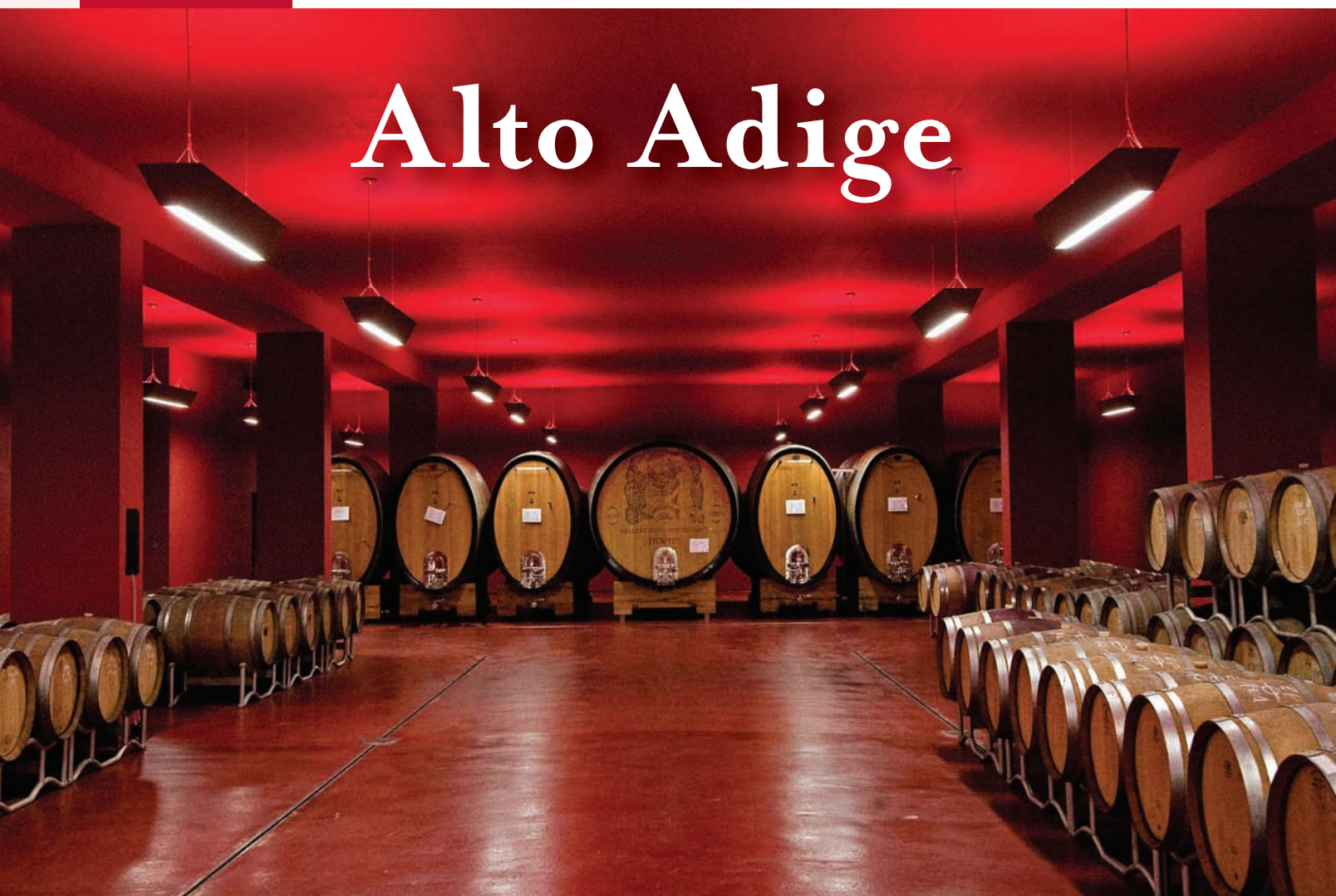


Alto Adige



KELLY MAGYARICS

Picturesque, sloping vineyards; labor-intensive hand-harvesting; aromatic white grapes: a wine professional presented with this list will naturally think of Germany or, perhaps, Alsace. But three hours' drive east of Milan, close to the Austrian border, Alto Adige can lay claim to the same defining viticultural characteristics. In fact, the atmosphere of this northern Italian wine region, also historically referred to as South Tyrol or Südtirol, is decidedly Germanic.

"South Tyrol has always been a bridge between the north and the south," explains Heike

Platter, marketing director of The Gardens of Trauttmansdorff Castle and Laimburg winery. "People have passed through over the centuries and millennia, leaving their footprints from a social, economic, and agricultural point of view." The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I allowed Italy to annex a region that had been part of Austria for more than five centuries. Subsequent years of negotiations with the Italian government eventually resulted in an autonomous administration that has made Alto Adige a model for other European countries.

Photo © Rickard Kust



Italy's most northerly wine region is a flavorful and complex cuvée of its Italian and German influences.

ALTO ADIGE DOCS

The Alto Adige or Südtirol DOC comprises 71% of the vineyard area. Seven subappellations also qualify for DOC status, as listed below.

Alto Adige Santa Maddalena: 5% of vineyard area; northern end of Bolzano. Known primarily for Schiava, with small amounts of Pinot Noir and Lagrein.

Alto Adige Valle Isarco: 5% of vineyard area; extends from Brenner Pass to Bolzano, including Italy's northernmost vineyards in the Bressanone valley basin at Novacella. A cool subregion most suitable for fruity and aromatic whites.

Alto Adige Meranese: 3% of vineyard area; hill-sides in the Merano Valley basin. Known for light and fruity Schiavas labeled as "Meranese."

Alto Adige Terlano: 3% of vineyard area; southeast-facing slopes overlooking the village of Terlano. Produces mainly whites such as Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, and Pinot Grigio.

Alto Adige Colli di Bolzano: 25 acres at high altitudes north of Bolzano. Same grapes as in Santa Maddalena.

Alto Adige Val Venosta: Created in 1995; 74 acres extending westward from Merano to the Resia Pass. Grape variety must be stated on the label along with "Val Venosta."

Lago di Caldaro: 12% of vineyard area. Produces a Schiava that may include as much as 15% Lagrein or Pinot Noir.

Many of the region's 480,000 residents still speak German as well as Italian, and signage includes both languages. But the abrupt introduction of Italian cultural influence has had a profound effect on Alto Adige's winemaking, which dates back to pre-Roman times. Platter speaks of the combination of a German and Austrian attitude toward discipline and order with an Italian love of *la dolce vita*—a life filled with good food and wine. Dinner here may start with a light, fruity red made from the indigenous Schiava (Vernatsch), served with the local cured Speck and crusty Schüttelbrot, followed up with Pinot Nero and beet-filled Knödel dumplings, and finally a hearty red Lagrein with pasta and braised short ribs—a delicious marriage of cultures, indeed.

Cantina Tramin cellar (left); Cantina Andriano vineyards (below).





Cantina Bolzano vineyards (left) and winery (right).

The terroir

*Klaus Gasser (below);
Cantina Andriano winery
(bottom left) and vine-
yards (bottom right).*



Although it's responsible for a little less than 1% of total Italian wine production, with only 12,750 acres under vine, Alto Adige leads the country in percentage of Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) wines, which account for 98.8% of the vineyard area. Two-thirds of this region, in the foothills of the majestic Dolomites, lies at altitudes above 4,900 feet, and most of the vineyards are

planted on steep, south-facing slopes between 650 and 3,250 feet. Constant variations in elevation result in pockets of microclimate that allow successful cultivation of more than 20 varieties; late-ripening, heat-seeking grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon succeed in the lower vineyards, while aromatic, early-ripening white varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc thrive in the higher altitudes.

Although the viticultural area, including the main city of Bolzano (Bozen), sits at about the same latitude as Mâcon in Burgundy, Alto Adige's climate is more Mediterranean. A long ripening season with warm days and cool nights, more than 300 annual days of sunshine, and an average temperature of 64.4°F translate into wines with intense flavor and crisp acidity. The central Alpine Ridge and the Dolomites stave off harsh weather from the north, and the



Photos courtesy of Kellerei Bozen (top); photos © Cantina Andriano (bottom)



Christof Tiefenbrunner.



ALTO ADIGE



Atlantic Ocean and the *ora*—a dry, cooling wind from Lake Garda to the west—tame the heat of summer days. Rainfall is variable, depending on the microclimate, but ranges from 20 to 32 inches per year. Soil is primarily porphyry (volcanic rock with quartz crystals) and limestone, with glacial deposits of gravel, sand, and clay. Traditional overhead *pergola* trellises are gradually being replaced by wire-trained Guyot systems for more precise control of plant yields and leaf pruning.

The wines

Alto Adige cooperatives are highly respected by the local growers and consumers. Fifteen co-ops, each with several hundred members who may own small plots of 2.5 acres or less, are responsible for 70% of the region's wine production. Klaus Gasser of Cantina Andriano and Cantina Terlan explains the advantages of this system: "Every grower gets exact producing directives for every parcel, strictly controlled by the winemaker, and every vintner is paid at the end for the quality of grapes he brings. This is a good system, to push the grower to always produce a better quality product." Forty larger estates and 100 private winegrowers produce the remaining 30% of the wine. About 40% is exported, with Germany, the United States, and Switzerland accounting for the largest market shares.

Although individual winemaking styles definitely exist, there is a shared philosophy that involves determining the right grapes for the right microclimates while maintaining their varietal character, both in the vineyard and in the winery. Christof Tiefenbrunner, current director of his family's eponymous winery in Niclara (Entiklar), summarizes other widely accepted practices, including extended contact on the fine lees and minimal filtration, as a gentle approach that usually results in a balanced structure with a streak of minerality.

Just 20 years ago, white grapes accounted for only 15% of the region's vineyard area. Today,

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

| | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Abbazia di Novacella Kerner Valle Isarco DOC | 2008 | \$24 |
| Pale straw color with green flecks. This Kerner displays apple and peach on the nose, with a hint of mango. It's ripe and full on the palate—opulent, but cut by crisp acidity. | | |
| Cantina Terlan Terlaner Classico | 2008 | \$20 |
| Produced since the inception of the winery in 1893, generally with about 60% Pinot Bianco, 30% Chardonnay, and 10% Sauvignon Blanc, it is Terlan's biggest seller around the world. Light yellow in color, the wine shows tropical fruits and light yeasty notes. The Chardonnay adds a round mouthfeel, and the finish is persistent. | | |
| Tiefenbrunner Pinot Bianco | 2009 | \$15 |
| Bright yellow, youthful, fresh, and mineral-driven, Tiefenbrunner's prototypical Pinot Bianco shows hints of apple and tropical fruit, along with zesty acidity. | | |
| Tramin Gewürztraminer Nussbaumer Alto Adige DOC | 2008 | \$40 |
| Bright, shiny yellow, with notes of roses and litchi; full-bodied and unctuous. This wine has won the most <i>Gambero Rosso</i> awards of any Italian Gewürztraminer for nine years running. | | |
| Tramin Pinot Grigio Alto Adige DOC | 2009 | \$15 |
| With clean, refined aromas and flavors and a mineral-driven style, Tramin's Pinot Grigio shows excellent length and balance. | | |
| Cantina Valle Isarco Pinot Nero | 2008 | \$22 |
| From the Valle Isarco co-op. Bright ruby red in color and slightly tart, with a velvety structure and well-balanced tannins, it's intense and characteristic. | | |
| Manincor Réserve del Conte | 2006 | \$29 |
| Full-blooded and dark. The initial fruity, red-berry bouquet opens up with hints of spices, followed by elegant structure and ripe, velvety tannins. | | |
| Tiefenbrunner Lagrein Linticlarus Riserva | 2006 | \$30 |
| Deep garnet color. The nose is full of wild-berry aromas, and the palate offers fine, ripe tannins; an elegant mouthfeel; and a persistent, round finish. | | |

Prices are current estimated retail.



Valley near Cantina Tramin (left top); Cantina Tramin winery (above) and vineyards (bottom); Wolfgang Klotz (left middle).



the share is 48%, which speaks not only to the increasing popularity of whites in the world market, but also to an increased emphasis from local winemakers. Alto Adige can boast varietally correct, fragrant white wines with concentrated aromas and vibrant acidity. Fresh and mouth-watering in their youth, they also have the ability to evolve in the bottle, thanks to their intensity, acidity, and relatively high alcohol.

With 1,149 acres under vine, translating to almost 10% of all plantings here, Pinot Bianco (Weissburgunder) is Alto Adige's most widely planted white variety. "Alto Adige has a long tradition in growing this grape, as it reflects our terroir," says Gasser. The wines "are fresh and allow good combinations with food." Tiefenbrunner points out that when the grape is grown at 600-2,000 feet, it retains its minerality and bracing acidity; vineyards in the center of the valley, closer to the Adige River, render a broader, fuller-bodied style. In either case, the consensus advice is to enjoy these wines within two years of release, while their zesty green-apple notes are front and center. Winemakers are also permitted to blend Pinot Bianco with Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio and label the wine as "Alto Adige Bianco."

Much of the Pinot Grigio bottled in Italy is relatively neutral, with light body, aromas, and flavors—quaffable, if not cerebral—due in part to the high yields needed to satisfy its global demand. In contrast, Wolfgang Klotz of Cantina Tramin describes Alto Adige DOC Pinot Grigio as rich, full-flavored, and aromatic, with notes of ripe tree fruits. Grown in practically all sub-regions and responsible for 10% of the area's

plantings, Pinot Grigios from Alto Adige are also more ageworthy than those from elsewhere in Italy.

Some consumers' only encounter with Alto Adige wine may have been Pinot Grigio labeled as "Trentino-Alto Adige." Trentino is the historically Italian portion of the autonomous region, directly south of Alto Adige, but there is no Trentino-Alto Adige DOC, and quality varies widely among these wines. Grouping them with Alto Adige bottlings to simplify a wine list can actually lead to customer confusion about perceived value.

Gewürztraminer is a native not of Alsace, but of Alto Adige—its name translates as "spicy



Photo by Kelly Magyarics (top left); Photo © Rickard Kust (top right)

KEY PRODUCERS

Abbazia di Novacella

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Importer: Banville &
Jones Wine Merchants
www.banvilleandjones
winemERCHANTS.com

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Cantina Terlano

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**Abbazia di Novacella.**

in 13-15% alcohol levels, the wine is structurally well integrated.

Other aromatic white grapes, including Müller-Thurgau, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Grüner Veltliner, and Kerner, are cultivated in the region, especially in the cooler, high-altitude sites of the Isarco Valley. Adjacent to the monastery of Novacella, which has been operated by Augustinian monks since its founding in 1142, the winery of Abbazia di Novacella produces 50,000 cases a year from Italy's northernmost vineyards—25 miles from Austria. "Altitude is very important and influences our decisions on the vines to plant," says administrator Urban von Klebelsberg. Kerner and Müller-Thurgau occupy the highest vineyards, at around 2,950 feet. Klebelsberg finds that Alto Adige Müller-Thurgau has more body and alcohol than its German counterparts, but he considers Kerner the perfect ambassador for the Isarco Valley.

Schiava is the most widely planted grape in Alto Adige, accounting for nearly 30% of the total vineyard area. Fruity and light- to medium-bodied, with soft tannins, it invites comparisons with Beaujolais or easy-drinking Italian reds like Dolcetto. Although Schiava is highly popular with the locals, not much is exported.

The second-most-planted variety, the indigenous Lagrein, is better known and more widely available internationally. This versatile grape is capable of producing fruity rosés; perfumed, medium-bodied reds with berry aromas; or darker, more potent bottlings with notes of

grape from Tramin" (Termeno in Italian). Although it accounts for only 7% of overall production, this aromatic variety is a signature white wine of the area. When grown in the Isarco (Eisack) Valley, around Bressanone (Brixen) in the northern part of the region, Gewürztraminer displays a delicate floral quality; around Tramin, it's more full-bodied, rich, and spicy, with tropical-fruit notes.

Cantina Tramin produces some 30,000 cases a year, and Klotz describes the wines as refreshing and elegant, with attractive acidity from the cool nights. Tramin's Gewürztraminer Nussbaumer teems with floral aromas and litchis in its youth, but develops flinty, wet-limestone qualities as it ages—akin to what happens with top German Rieslings. It complements a variety of foods without tiring the palate, and although the grape's high sugar content results





*Manincor winery (left);
Count Michael Goëss-
Enzenberg (right); local
cured Speck (bottom).*

spice and chocolate. While its more powerful incarnations resemble Syrah in their inky color and concentration, Lagrein's flavor profile leans more toward elegant, restrained fruit. Because it does well in warm sites, its main growing area is the valley around Bolzano. Lagrein also shines in cuvées with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or both. The Biodynamic and organic winery Manincor turns out a *Réserve del Conte* that is a blend of all three grapes; according to the owner, Count Michael Goëss-Enzenberg, it's "almost Burgundian in its drinkability."

That quintessentially Burgundian grape, Pinot Noir (usually labeled here as Pinot Nero or Blauburgunder), is now almost as widely planted as Lagrein, performing well in the cooler zones of Bassa Atesina, Caldaro, and Val Venosta. Klotz draws comparisons between Alto Adige Pinot Nero and the classic French version: elegant, with aromas and flavors of black and dried cherries and

a refreshing palate. In his opinion, however, unlike the more ageworthy whites, most red wines from Alto Adige should be uncorked within four to seven years.

With more than 3,000 years of winemaking experience, Alto Adige seamlessly blends the use of international and indigenous varieties, traditional and modern techniques, and Italian and German cultural influences. As Platter aptly states, "Wine is precious here: the process of transformation from vine to wine is followed with a great deal of effort and love, proudly shared with family, friends, and guests." Always noted for quality over quantity, Alto Adige wines are suitable for any wine list with the same philosophy. 🍷



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Photos courtesy of Manincor (top); photo by Kelly Magyarics (bottom)