

Alto Adige



Wolfgang Klotz of Cantina Tramin.



Regional varietal Schiava and the locally cured ham called Speck make a classic snack in Alto Adige.

Sooty

Alto Adige produces world-class wines at the foot of the Alps

story and photos by Kelly A. Magyarics

Sloped and trellised vineyards, hand harvesting, extensive plantings of Gewürztraminer and mild daytime temperatures must surely be a description of one of Germany's wine regions. Unless, of course, it's Italy's Alto Adige.

Three hours east of Milan, close to the Austrian border, the feel here is decidedly Germanic. Signage is listed first in German, and then in Italian. Many residents refer to the area by its German name, Südtirol, and switch between languages at a rapid-fire pace. A tumultuous history of takeovers and border disputes finally led in 1971 to the creation of two autonomous provinces, Bolzano-Bozen and Trento, resulting in a duality of cultures, people, languages and wine.

Both international and indigenous varietals are produced here, and though Alto Adige's wines account for only one percent of the country's total production, bottles are becoming increasingly sought-after beyond Italy's borders. Its 300 warm and sunny days each year, coupled with the cool nights brought on by proximity to the protecting slopes of the Alps, translate to wines that are crisp, clean and mineral-driven, with intense aromas, well-preserved fruit and a long finish. White wines' lively acidity assists cellaring, and the mild tannins in Alto Adige reds make them more approachable early on. A varied geological landscape results in microclimates that tweak the nuances of every grape suitable for growing on the slopes of this major agricultural area. (The valley floor is reserved for apples—the region produces an impressive 12 percent of the European total.)

Gewürztraminer is the region's signature varietal. Its very name means "spicy grape from Tramin," a reference to the small town in Alto Adige where the grape was first grown. Gewürz here is dry and full-bodied, with rose, lavender, fig and lychee aromas. Depending on whether it's grown in Tramin, or the nearby Isarco Valley, the wine can be rich and opulent, or leaner and juicier; the latter style tends to be kinder and gentler with a wider variety of food. Most widely available in the U.S. are bottles from Cantina Tramin, Elena Walch and Tiefenbrunner.

Though Pinot Grigio is Italy's ubiquitous go-to white wine, easy-drinking and accessible albeit decidedly not complex, Wolfgang Klotz of Cantina Tramin instead praises the finesse and food-friendliness of the region's Pinot Bianco, in the U.S. market represented by wineries like Giralan, Terlano and Tramin. But as Dr. Heike Platter, wine expert and Marketing Director of the Laimburg Research Center, points out, Pinot Bianco's lack of an international image

gives it a niche status just waiting to be discovered. The grape shows a delicate Reinet apple aroma that becomes increasingly floral as altitude increases, along with crisp acidity and a decent structure that avoids coming across as fat or opulent.

2008 was the first year that Alto Adige's white wine production surpassed that of its red (54 to 46 percent, respectively). Nonetheless, reds continue to flourish, and no local grape is better poised to take the international stage than Lagrein (lah-GRINE). "Lagrein for sure fits more of today's market trends, being dark in color and medium- to full-bodied," admits Klotz. Comparable to Syrah in color and flavor profile, Lagrein from producers including Lageder, Giralan and Cantina Bolzano serves as an interesting blending partner, and its structure makes it age-worthy.

Though Lagrein and Gewürztraminer are becoming synonymous with Alto Adige, local producers speak most proudly and animatedly about indigenous varietal Schiava. Historically referred to as a "farmer's wine," Schiava's light ruby red color, fruitiness, low acidity and tannins evoke comparisons to Beaujolais.

Platter positions the wine as "nicely balanced without showing extremes. We drink Schiava slightly chilled, with or without food as an aperitivo, for lunch or late at night." Economical and versatile with everything from fish, meat and pasta to the fennel cracker-bread known as Schüttelbrot and the locally cured ham called Speck, Schiava's aromatics and low tannins also make it a fitting partner with Asian cuisine. Platter recommends it for young or new consumers who have just started drinking wine. These wines are limited in availability, though versions from Lageder and Laimburg can be found on American shelves.

Restaurants and bars seeking to add Alto Adige to the Italian or "Interesting Wines" sections of their lists may face a challenge. Seventy percent of their wine market is controlled by 15 co-ops, and the same percentage of the region's wines stay in Italy, to be sold mostly to restaurants. However, five percent is exported to the U.S., and Klotz offers advice on where to begin: "I suggest that owners make their own experience. There are a quite a lot of well-distributed wineries in the U.S.; ask the importer for samples. Or why not let the customer decide by putting Alto Adige on the 'by the glass' list?"

Education and experimentation are indeed the keys to success of Alto Adige's wines. Like the red and green fruits growing so prolifically on the floors of the valleys, the region's wines are ripe for the picking. ■■