

ITALY'S BORDER REGION

Alto Adige sits at the intersection of the Alps, and the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas, and while the nationality is Italian, the language is German. Adam Lechmere samples the wines.

Elena Walch's gewürztraminer vineyards rise vertically above the attractive town of Tramin like the tiered seats of an amphitheatre. South-facing, the vines shimmer in the June sun; you can almost feel the vigour coursing through the bright green canopy.

These vertiginous terraces are typical of the mountainous appellation of Alto Adige. The narrow valleys are hemmed in by forbidding escarpments, their lower sides thickly wooded, dotted here and there with farmhouses, each one with a handkerchief-sized vineyard in front of it. With the snow-capped peaks of the Dolomites rising in the background, the scene is so alpine (the appellation is mere miles from Austria), it's easy to forget you're in Italy. German is the common language, the cobbled streets of the



The Alto Adige is one of Italy's most compact wine regions.

PHOTO: SIEDRICH-MARKETING/REXELTZ



small towns are lined with wooden chalets, their carved balconies lush with geraniums. Outside the towns large, prosperous-looking houses sit in the green meadows that slope up from the road. It's picturesque, and classically Tyrolean.

For decades this part of Italy has been a favourite of hikers, but in the last few years interest in its wines has been increasing. High-end tour operator Patricia Kozmann told Meininger's that "well-educated wine lovers", especially New Yorkers, now want a serious wine element bundled in with their walking tours.

Alpine region

Alto Adige (or Südtirol, if you're speaking German) sits at the intersection of the Alps, and the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas. The wine culture here is one of the oldest in Europe - pruning hooks and winemaking tools dating back to the 5th century BC have been found. It is said that when the Romans arrived they were surprised to find ancient evidence of winemaking this far north. Today, it's one of Italy's most compact wine regions,

representing less than 1% of the country's wine production. The total vineyard covers 5,400 ha; within that area there's a remarkably wide variety of grapes grown, and considerable variation in soil types, topography and climate. Its centre is the pleasant alpine town of Bolzano, from where its seven appellations radiate outwards like three spokes of a wheel, north-east, north-west and due south. In the south, the warmer Bassa Atesina region is also home to Alto Adige's highest vineyards, where Müller-Thurgau grows at 1000 m. Then there is Oltradige on the lovely Lake Caldaro, Bolzano, the biggest wine-growing area, Venosta in the far west, Valle Isarco and its ancient quartz and mica soils, Val d'Adige and Merano. All have their particularities. The best white wine district, for example, is the Isarco Valley - only 5% of the wines produced here are red - while Merano in the north and Oltradige in the south are rated for their reds.

The appellation's southern neighbour is Trentino. The regions are similar - so much so that they are usually listed as Trentino-Alto Adige by wine merchants and restaurants. But they are distinct: Trentino is further down the valley, lower in altitude, and Italian-speaking. It is dominated by small producers supplying cooperatives with vast amounts of Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay, 80% of which goes to the US. There are producers bucking that trend, most notably the extraordinary and renowned Elisabetta Foradori, who makes intense and restrained wines from the native Teroldego grape.

White wines also dominate in Alto Adige, even though 40% of production is red. Two thirds of production comes from cooperatives which have in the past dictated which varieties are planted, hence the preponderance of profitable international varieties. But quality production has always been key to this region. Ninety-eight per cent of the vineyard is DOC, for example; the smallest artisan producers and the largest cooperatives constantly stress their focus on expressing the uniqueness of their terroir.

Of the whites, Pinot Grigio, Gewürztraminer, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and Gewürztraminer take centre stage; Sylvaner, Riesling, Müller-Thurgau and Sauvignon Blanc are also widely planted. Red wines are no less varied, from the indigenous Lagrein, the light, Gamay-like Schiava, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Carmenere, Tannat

and many others. But still, Alto Adige's reputation as a white wine region is difficult to shake.

Wide white range

In some regions, like the Isarco Valley, production is almost entirely white. The stated aim of one of the leading cooperatives, Cantina Valle Isarco, is to be "the leading white wine producer of the Südtirol", with the aromatic Sylvaner as the flagship grape, agronomist Hannes Munter says. Their 140 members, who farm 150 ha between them, produce 95% white wine.

Peter Pliger's whites at Kuen Hof, another producer in Isarco Valley, are an example of how power and restraint can be achieved. Pliger's grapes come from walled, schist and quartz terraces that were laid down 400 years ago. He says the combination of altitude and soil gives his wines their minerality; their fruit and alcoholic structure come from the sun. "At 700 m the sun can be very hot and there is more luminescence than at lower levels. But night-time temperatures can be very low - it can get down below 7C in September, after day-time temperatures of 25C."

Sugar levels climb in the daytime and acidity is retained at night, making for wines with a powerful kick of alcohol but electric acidity. Handled right, it's a winning combination, but it's a constant surprise to note alcohol levels as high as 15% on Sylvaners and Gewürztraminers. That much alcohol makes for a hard sell for the modern, health-conscious consumer, who expects whites to be at least a degree and a half lower. Pliger is happy with the balance of his wines but he admits he'd like to bring the alcohol down. "It's too high but it's difficult to reduce. We

ALTO ADIGE AT A GLANCE

Land under vine: 5,400 ha

Number of growers: 5,000

Number of wineries: 150

White grapes (60%): Pinot Grigio, Gewürztraminer, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Müller-Thurgau, Sylvaner, Kerner, Riesling, Grüner Veltliner

Red grapes (40%): Schiava, Lagrein, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc

can't pick earlier because then we would lose the fruit." And he's certainly not going to add water or strip out the alcohol mechanically. It's true, too, that not all producers get it right - many white wines from across Alto Adige are unbalanced by alcohol.

The variety of whites in Alto Adige is bewildering and winemakers admit there can be a lack of focus. Gewürztraminer might be considered the signature, indigenous grape (the debate rages as to whether it originates here as the perfumed - "gewürz" - grape of Tramin, or in Alsace) but wineries typically show half a dozen or more white wines. Franz Haas for example, a long-established winery producing 600,000 bottles from 60 ha in Montagna, has Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco, Gewürztraminer, Petit Manseng, Moscato Giallo, Sauvignon Blanc and Müller Thurgau.



Murie-Gries in Bolzano. Once a monastery, it dates to the 12th century.

The 400-member cooperative Kellerei Kaltern-Caldaro adds Chardonnay and Kerner to that list; another co-op, Cantina Valle Isarco, farms 10 different white grapes.

Franz Haas himself - he's the seventh holder of the name since the winery was established in the 1880s, and his son Franz is the eighth - is an evangelist for indigenous varieties. He may make Sauvignon Blanc, but he champions the local reds Schiava and Lagrein. The region made a lot of mistakes with overproduction of these varieties in the 1970s and 80s, resulting in thin wines with dry tannins, he tells Meininger's. "They were over-cropped, a bit like Pinot Grigio is today. Thirty or forty years ago Alto Adige was 90% Schiava. Now it's more like 20%."

Regional evolution

Haas is an example of the older generation of Alto Adige producers who are keen observers of the evolution of the region. Just as Pliger can see that his powerful whites might be out of step with the current appetite for lightness and low alcohol, Haas notes that



The Dolomite mountains tower over Alto Adige.

PHOTO: DOM SUTTORU/FREEDER BLOCKE

"Alto Adige needs another ten years to find the right interpretation of the land. Things have changed over the last twenty years - now there are lots of young guys searching for that interpretation, but few have found it."

There are many that agree the region is just beginning to work out its place in the international market. UK importer Caves de Pyrene has overhauled its Alto Adige offering, for example. Director Doug Wregg says that while there is "nice clarity of fruit and varietal expression... the styles are manufactured - a lot of stainless steel and temperature control for the whites; new oak and extraction on the reds." He goes on: "Alto-Adige is a super-warm climate. Making balanced wines there is a bit of an art form unless you are looking to achieve power. Some of the white grapes are reaching 14% and more."

But producers here, from artisans like Pliger to the major cooperatives, are dedicated to understanding and better interpreting their terroir. At the 1.8m bottle Kellerei Terlan cooperative in Terlan, which was founded in 1894, Judith Unterholzer explains how their 220 growers, most of whom farm less than a hectare, are encouraged to farm for quality. "While we used to pay on quantity or sugar level, we now pay on quality. We set maximum yields and harvest dates." Growers, many of which have been with the coop for generations, have a share in the equity. Terlan is an operation of the highest sophistication and experimentation, releasing its 'Rarity' white cuvée after a minimum ten years on lees,

for example. It is rightly proud of its much-awarded flagship wine, the Terlaner I Grande Cuvée, which sells for €160.00 (\$180.00) a bottle and is Italy's most expensive white wine.

Elena Walch also dedicates herself to the vineyard. She has just completed a renovation of her winery in the centre of Tramin. The old barrel cellar with its great carved barrel ends gives onto a gleaming new gravity-fed reception area with robotic hoppers and dozens of small tanks for separate fermentation of individual parcels of grapes. Viticulture at Walch is lute raisonnée - minimal use of any chemical product. Most of the vineyards are moving to organic viticulture. There are 56 ha in total, in Tramin and Caldaro, all of them at between 250 m and 600 m and some - like the granite terraces of Kastelaz, on slopes of 75% and more.

The climate of much of Alto Adige can be described as 'Mediterranean Alpine' - the Alps to the north temper the heat as well as providing protection from chill northern winds, while southern warmth comes from Lake Garda, the Adriatic and the Mediterranean. The region boasts 300 sunny days a year - this is wonderful, natural, wine country. Walch's mission statement makes clear that "wines must be the individual expression of their soil, climate and cultivation in the vineyard." They are powerful wines - the entry-level Pinot Grigio from the Castel Ringberg vineyard is 14% but the wine is fresh and balanced. The Kastelaz

THE TERROIR

The Alto Adige is nothing if not mountainous: 85% of the region has an altitude of 1,000 m or more, with more vineyards found at between 300 m and 1,000 m. With 300 sunny days a year, the climate is mild, with the growing season seeing average temperatures of 18C. In July and August, temperatures can reach as high as 40C in some parts of the region, although there is a considerable drop at night. The soils are varied: volcanic porphyry, ancient rock soils of quartz, slate and mica, limestone, dolomite and sandy marl.



PHOTO: DOM SUTTORU/FREEDER BLOCKE



The Kellerei Terlan cooperative in Terlano was founded in 1894.

Gewürztraminer from that amphitheatre vineyard is a mighty 15.5% with 7gr to 8gr residual sugar. On paper it looks like a monster, but in the glass it's light, floral and refreshingly acidic, with a bracing whiff of salinity and a cornucopia of fruit flavours. "This is what the land gives us," Walch says.

At Kuen Hof, Pliger farms according to strict biodynamic principles. Much of the land was devastated in the Second World War and the vines were abandoned; only in the last 15 years has the area rebuilt its reputation, Pliger told Meininger's. He and his wife Brigitte have restored the dry stone walls and secured their position as producers of some of Alto Adige's most sought-after wines (Wregg: "They are strikingly pure and have great character"). Pliger eulogises his quartz soils, how it's impossible that grapes produced from such terroir don't show it in the wine, and indeed his whites have intense minerality and freshness.

Popular reds

The white wines of Alto Adige are so full of character that it can be easy to forget that half the region's production is red wine, exemplified by Lagrein, and Schiava. Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon are also grown in considerable quantities, and very popular in Germany, Austria and Switzerland - considered by many export managers

as Alto Adige's key markets - and with a growing following in the United States. The UK is a tougher proposition, though specialist importers are cherry-picking the best wines. Berkmann Wine Cellars in London, for example, has just taken on Hofstätter in Tramin. "When I tasted their Pinot Noir, any scepticism I had was dispelled," purchasing director Alex Hunt says. "It's a really valid expression of the grape." Hofstätter's entry-level Pinot is a best-seller, but Hunt admits it would be a harder sell "anywhere outside the Italian restaurant scene".

The true regional red wine is Lagrein, from a grape almost as finicky and difficult to grow as Pinot Noir. One of its greatest exponents is Christian Werth of Muri-Gries, the winery belonging to the 12th-century monastery of Muri-Gries in Bolzano. The Lagreins are idiosyncratic wines, grown in alluvial soils in vineyards around the monastery, surrounded by the neat streets of Bolzano - which, Werth points out, "is one of the hottest cities in Italy." This is one of the finest terroirs for Lagrein, and Werth is constantly experimenting with it. He's just produced a single-vineyard cuvée from a vineyard for which they have records going back 300 years; the present vines were planted in 2004.

Alto Adige is an ancient vine region, and it's in constant flux. "We may be known as white wine producers now, but if you go back 30 years, we were known as a cheap red wine region, and 100 years ago we supplied all the red wine for the Austro-Hungarian Empire," Clemens Lageder tells Meininger's. Alois Lageder is one of Alto Adige's most renowned producers, with a portfolio of Grand Crus in both red and white, including some highly-respected Pinot Noirs, and excellent Cabernets like the single-vineyard Löwengang from Magré in Bassa Atesina. It's becoming more difficult to retain acidity in the whites, Lageder says, while fresh, elegant reds are in fashion all over the world. Most importantly, the terroir of this mountainous region is eminently suitable for that style of red. A third of Lageder's red wine is Lagrein, and he's finding it difficult to meet demand. He's also entranced by the quality of a decades-old plot of Tannat he owns: "the freshness and acidity are fantastic." He says he is "most curious" about how the region will look in a generation's time. "I think, with global warming and earlier harvests, the percentage of red to white will change again. We need to focus on our reds." ■

