



tom hyland

Blogroll **learnitalianwines** <http://learnitalianwines.wordpress.com/>

Alto Adige Reds

In my last post, I discussed the superb whites of Alto Adige; in this post I will deal with this region's unique red wines.

Most people will be surprised to know that red varieties account for more plantings than white in Alto Adige. The numbers used to be higher, as much of the red plantings were the Schiava grape, which produces lighter, high acid, low tannic reds. This grape is still seen in good numbers, but it is far less important today. Still, a lightly chilled Schiava is a pleasant wine for lighter fare.

PINOT NERO and LAGREIN

The two most important red varieties of Alto Adige then are Pinot Nero (Pinot Noir) and Lagrein; these are two very different grapes.

Few people think about Pinot Nero in Italy, but there are some excellent examples produced in the cool climates of Alto Adige. Many are medium-bodied with pleasant red cherry fruit, high acidity and soft tannins; these wines are meant for consumption within 2-3 years of the vintage date. But there are a few examples that are from single vineyards (crus) or special selections that have greater depth of fruit, more pronounced aromatics and are more complex in general. These top offerings of Alto Adige Pinot Nero are in the vein of a Burgundy from the Cotes du Beaune and can be enjoyed anywhere from 5-10 years after the vintage.

A few of the **best bottlings of Pinot Nero from Alto Adige** include:

- J. Hofstatter "Barthenau Vigna S. Urbano"
- Colterenzio "Cornell"
- **Alois Lageder "Krafuss"**
- Cantina Tramin "Riserva"
- Abbazia di Novacella "Praepositus Riserva"

LAGREIN

Lagrein is one of Alto Adige's most unique red varieties, offering rich purple color, ripe black fruit flavors and moderate tannins. Most examples of Lagrein are quite delicious upon release and as the acidity is not too high, they are quite enjoyable on their own, although most work better paired with a variety of red meats. Some examples are medium-bodied and meant for short-term consumption (2-3 years), although many producers also make a richer, riper, more serious version (often aged in small oak barrels) that have more tannin and can age for as long as a decade.



Vineyards at Cantina Terlano, a top producer of Lagrein (Photo ©Tom Hyland)

Among the **best bottlings of Lagrein in Alto Adige** are:

- Cantina Terlano "Porphy"r
- Elena Walch "Castel Ringberg Riserva"
- Cantina Tramin "Urban"
- Muri-Gries "Abtei-Muri Riserva"
- **Alois Lageder "Lindenburg"**
- J. Hofstatter "Steinraffler"
- Cantina Bolzano "Taber Riserva"
- Abbazia di Novacella "Praepositus Riserva"

OTHER VARIETIES

A few producers also work with Cabernet Sauvignon; the cool climate here preserves acidity and brings out some of the herbal components of the variety. These are not flashy examples of Cabernet Sauvignon, but are well made and tend to age well. Arguably the finest is the "Cor Romigberg" from **Alois Lageder**, which drink well at 10-12 years after the vintage.

A few producers also make a varietal Merlot or blend Merlot with Lagrein.

All in all, the red wines from Alto Adige may not reach the same heights as the region's whites, but they are of high quality and are quite distinct.

July 19, 2009

Alto Adige – Superb White Wines



Vineyards near the town of Cortaccia, Alto Adige (Photo ©Tom Hyland)

Some of Italy's finest white wines – and a few wonderful reds – are produced in the region of Alto Adige. In reality, Alto Adige is the northern part of the Trentino-Alto Adige region, but as Alto Adige is so different in nature from Trentino – as well as the rest of Italy – I will discuss Alto Adige separately.

There are several things that make Alto Adige so distinct. First is the situation of dual languages used here, both Italian and German. Alto Adige until the end of World War I was part of the Austria-Hungary empire, so the German influence is still quite strong. Menus in restaurants, road signs and even names of cities are bilingual – for example, the town of Termeno is also known as Tramin, while the region's largest city of Bolzano is also known by its German name of Bozen (Alto Adige itself is also known as Südtirol, or South Tyrol.)

This is one of Italy's most gorgeous wine zones, as vineyards have been squeezed in every possible inch amidst valleys below the Dolomite Mountains as well as on steep hillsides. The northern border of Alto Adige abuts Austria, so this is a cool climate, best suited for white wines. Thanks to moderate temperatures and cold air from the mountains, the local whites have vibrant acidity, one of the signatures of Alto Adige whites.

WHITE VARIETIES

The leading variety planted in Alto Adige is Pinot Bianco; versions vary from simple, crisp dry whites to more medium-full efforts with a light spiciness. Pinot Grigio is also popular here and as these wines have excellent acidity, they are among the very best examples of this variety produced in Italy.

The two finest varieties are Gewurztraminer and Sauvignon (known as Sauvignon Blanc outside of Italy). Gewurztraminer comes from the German word *gewurz*, meaning spicy. This is one of the most beautiful aromatic varieties grown anywhere and it is in the town of Tramin (thus Gewurztraminer means roughly, "spicy from Tramin" that it reaches its heights. There are **three superior bottlings of Gewurztraminer from Tramin**: the "**Kastelaz**" from **Elena Walch**, the "**Kolbenhof**" from **J. Hofstatter** and the "**Nussbaumer**" from **Cantina Tramin**. Each of these three is a full-bodied, tremendously complex Gewurztraminer with exotic aromas of lychee, grapefruit and yellow roses along with rich spiciness in the finish. All have beautiful texture (the Hofstatter has almost an oily feel on the palate) and age well for 3-5 years and sometimes longer. These wines are ideal with Thai food, although Martin Foradori told me it is a pity that there are no Thai restaurants in Tramin!

As for Sauvignon, the best versions in Alto Adige combine intense varietal aromatics of bell pepper, pear and asparagus with bracing acidity – these are not the simple, fresh, melon-tinged versions of this variety you would find in a warmer climate. Rather these are intense with plenty of herbal character to them, so pair these with seafood with herbal sauces or accompaniments. Among the **best bottlings of Alto Adige Sauvignon** are the "**Montan**" from **Cantina Tramin**," the "**Castel Ringberg**" from **Elena Walch**, the "**Sanct Valentin**" from **St. Michael-Eppan**, the "**Quartz**" from **Cantina Terlano** and the "**Lafoa**" from **Colterenzio**. Each of these wines is outstanding; in my opinion, the "Lafoa" is a brilliantly realized Sauvignon and is one of the finest white wines produced today in all of Italy!

Among the best producers of white wines in Italy today are the following producers:

- Abbazia di Novacella
- Cantina Terlano
- J. Hofstatter
- **Alois Lageder**
- Colterenzio
- St. Michael-Eppan
- Tiefenbrunner
- Cantina Tramin
- Elena Walch

COOPERATIVE PRODUCERS

Most regions in Italy have large co-operative wineries where grower members sell their grapes. This is a long-standing tradition in Alto Adige and it is here that there are more great co-operative producers than anywhere else in Italy. Among the best are Cantina Tramin, Cantina Terlano, St. Michal-Eppan and Colterenzio.

Cooperative producers have the great advantage of purchasing some of the finest grapes in all of Alto Adige and as they have so many grower members (most usually have more than 100), prices can be kept at reasonable levels.



Vineyards of **Alois Lageder** near Lake Caldaro (Photo ©Tom Hyland)

ORGANIC/BIODYNAMIC

Alto Adige is becoming one of the top regions in Italy for wines made from organically grown grapes as well as wines made according to biodynamic procedures. Several producers are working with these practices, none more highly regarded than **Alois Lageder**. A courteous, reflective individual, **Lageder** has been producing organic wines for some years now and recently released a Chardonnay/Pinot Grigio blend under the "beta delta" moniker (the 2008 is stunning!). A toast to **Alois Lageder** and other Alto Adige producers for their work with organic and biodynamic wines!

In a future post, I will deal with the unique reds of Alto Adige, from the sensual Pinot Nero to the ripe, forward, purple-hued Lagrein.

July 14, 2009