

Alto Adige: Italy's most northerly wine region – with Europe's fastest-growing reputation

[Justin Keay](#) 9 August 2018

*Italy's most northerly wine region is an odd mix of grape varieties, culture and climate. But it's also got one of the fastest-growing reputations in Europe. **Justin Keay** goes to Alto Adige in search of beautiful music*

Imagine an [Italian wine](#) region that makes delicious, cutting-edge wines – but from varieties not normally associated with Italy, and where Sangiovese is absent. Imagine a region that wins more awards for quality than any other, and is loved by sommeliers and wine writers for its diversity, despite production being just 1% of Italy's total; that has delicious food made from fresh local produce, but where pasta is more of an afterthought (think polenta and dumplings instead).

Oh, and which has more than 250 days of sunshine a year, and where most locals aren't even nominally Italian, with surnames and a mother tongue that reflect an Austro-Hungarian heritage.

Confused? Well, so was I on the first of my two visits to Alto Adige this past year, as I drove past road signs with distinctively Germanic place names and passed my first night in a picture-postcard, wooden-balconied Alpine village, where I half expected Heidi to step out and regale me with a yodel or



two.

But pretty Tramin (Termeno in Italian) – which is where Gewürztraminer originated and is home to Cantina Tramin, one of the best of the region’s uniformly excellent co-ops – is typical of what makes Alto Adige great. Not only has it successfully married tradition with modernity; today it positively relishes the cultural diversity forced on it after 1919 when the Austro-Hungarian region was handed to Italy, with the forced Italianisation that followed under Mussolini all now historical water under the bridge.

This is a land of beautiful rivers – not least the Adige from which the region takes its name – sparkling green meadows and dramatic mountains that stay snow-covered until late in the year. Historic Bolzano is a must-visit. Its street markets are a foodie’s paradise – and restaurants like Pretzhof, in Val di Vizze outside Vipiteno, deliciously recall Germanic mountain traditions with fresh produce and meat from the property’s farm.

Alto Adige’s cuisine may reflect its

Key Alto Adige grapes

Or, how to tell your Kerner from your Schiava

For such a tiny region, Alto Adige has amazing diversity, with indigenous and international varieties (notably Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Nero) flourishing in the sub-Alpine terrain. Single varietal wines and blends abound, the latter often throwing three or more varieties in the mix.

Pinot Bianco

Ubiquitous across the region, this variety – often labelled Weissburgunder, emphasising its arguably Germanic roots – gets better and better thanks to lower yields and a greater focus on terroir. Certainly it is far more interesting than Pinot Grigio, with round, buttery wines generally hailing from the right bank of the Adige river and more linear ones coming from around Terlano.

Gewürztraminer

Makes great wines, usually in a drier, more linear style than those from Alsace, but with all the floral notes that make this variety so distinctive.

Kerner

This is the grape to surprise and test your friends with. OK, there aren’t that many producers, but those who do bother – notably Abbazia di Novacella – produce extraordinarily rounded, spicy wines unlike anything else. Kerner was created in 1929 by crossing Riesling with local variety Trollinger, also known as Vernatsch or...

past, but when it comes to wine, eyes are firmly on the future. ‘More and more, Alto Adige is recognised as a high-quality region,’ says Werner Waldböth of the [Konsortium Südtirol Wein](#)/Consorzio Vini Alto Adige.

‘One of our strengths is the diversity in soils, microclimates and grape varieties, but at the same time this is one of our weaknesses, making communication quite difficult.’

As well as being a fresh, high-altitude region, it is also a very sunny one. Bolzano, home to some of the best wineries including [Cantina Bolzano](#) and nearby [Cantina Terlano](#), is actually Italy’s hottest city, with huge diurnal temperature variations. Co-operatives rule the roost, making 70% of the wine, but uncharacteristically these have also led the quality revolution over the past two decades, helping to ensure that 98% of the region’s wine is DOC.

‘This is an area that boasts some of Italy’s most interesting white wines, and some of the reds are not far behind. The microclimates are quite unique and make the resulting wines unique too. Nowhere else in Italy can grow these varieties so successfully,’ argues Gino Nardella, head sommelier at London’s [Stafford Hotel](#). For Nardella, the lifted freshness of the whites is the key, and other sommeliers tend to agree.

‘I love Alto Adige,’ says Jacopo Mazzeo, head sommelier at [The Pig Hotel](#). ‘When I was still living back in Italy, I used to look for its wines when I felt I needed whites of good character.’

For him, the aromatic whites are the most sought after, especially Gewürztraminer, with Ritterhof and Cortaccia being the producers to look

...Schiava

This used to be the most grown variety across Alto Adige, but changing tastes and its low international profile led many wineries to pull it up. A shame, because at its best it produces distinctively earthy, medium-bodied floral reds.

Lagrein

Dark berry flavours, warm spice and a broad taste profile are the main characteristics of this red variety, produced here for more than 700 years and usually made in a medium/full-bodied style.

for. Riesling is also good, particularly when made by Falkenstein and Unterortl, he adds.

Reds? Mazzeo says it is hard for the region to compete in such a red-dominant country like Italy where Sangiovese and Nebbiolo rule. But things are beginning to change.

‘The region is producing reds of interest, especially with Pinot Nero (Weingut Plonerhof, Klosterhof and Elena Walch), which are the best in Italy,’ he says. ‘Schiava/Vernatsch (aka Trollinger, once the region’s most-grown grape) make OK wines, but I prefer Lagrein for its delicate berries, floral nose and smooth acidity.’

For Lionel Periner, head sommelier at [Adnams](#) in Birmingham, all three of these varieties deliver on both flavour and ‘otherness’, in the sense of offering something uniquely Alto Adige that couldn’t really come from anywhere else.

Periner, however, suggests that the real go-to grape is Kerner. ‘It offers wonderful, magical flavours and is lightly aromatic, like Gewürztraminer, but without the Turkish delight notes,’ he says.



The region's growing confidence was evident in September when it hosted the first ever Alto Adige wine summit, attended by press, sommeliers and wine buyers from around the world. A series of tastings held at Laimburg – a research centre established to improve the quality of wine and food produced in the region – showed just how far things have come since the dog days of the 1970s and 1980s, when quality took a back seat to quantity and much more red than white wine was made.

The transformation since then has been truly remarkable. Reds account now for just 42% of production, against 80% only 20 years ago. The focus is on whites with freshness and elegance, made increasingly from local varieties that capture the feel of the mountainous terrain. More than one winemaker suggested that the ideal should be a 'consistent style that drinkers around the world can always identify as Alto Adige.'

Six for you to try



Franz Haas, Manna 2015

An amazing, balanced blend of Riesling, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer and Kerner, this is a full-on, deliciously rounded wine made from varieties harvested separately because of differing ripening dates. A great introduction to Alto Adige.

13% abv, £18.54, [Liberty Wines](#),

020 7720 5350



Cantina Andriano, Rubeno Lagrein 2016

Amazing deep-purple colour and full flavour, with well-balanced tannins and substantial fruit. A no-nonsense introduction to this local red variety.

13% abv, £10.72, [Astrum Wines](#),
020 3328 4620



Cesconi, Nosiola Dolomiti 2015

Actually not from Alto Adige at all, but made just to the south in Trentino, from grapes normally reserved for Vin Santo (though also occasionally blended). Very light while also quite rounded and aromatic.

12% abv, £11.49, [Liberty Wines](#),
020 7720 5350



Cantina Terlano, Terlaner 2016

This superb co-op makes lots of good, award-winning wine – including some great Schiava and Pinot Bianco – but is best known for its moreish Terlaner cuvée, an age-worthy white made from Pinot Bianco (60%) Chardonnay (30%) and Sauvignon Blanc (10%). Aged on the lees for up to seven months in huge stainless-steel tanks and then in wooden barrels, the wine is blended one month before bottling.

13.5%, £13.07, [Astrum Wines](#), 020 3328 4620



Cantina Tramin, Nussbaumer 2016

Almost everything produced by this leading co-op is excellent, but the award-winning Nussbaumer Gewürztraminer is the wine to try; so delicious yet complex it blows away any preconceptions you may have about this marmite variety. Also well worth a go is the Pinot Bianco 2016, which is rounded and savoury, conveying the essence of the region.

13.5% abv, £20.46 and £11.10, [Hallgarten & Novum](#), 015 8272 2538



Tiefenbrunner, Feldmarschall von Fenner zu Fennberg 2014

Muller-Thurgau is usually seen as something of a blah variety, created by crossing Riesling with Madeleine Royale in 1882 and known for its hardy properties. In the highest vineyard planting of the grape in Europe, however, it's transformed into a delicious, mineral wine that regularly sells out and wins awards.

13% abv, £18.95, [Armit Wines](#),
020 7908 0600

A question of style

In reality though, stylistic differences remain in Alto Adige's various eight DOCs (nine if you include the southerly Trentino region). Valle Isarco in the far north-east – in fact the most northern wine region in Italy – is an outlier, both in terms of style and grape varieties. Sylvaner, Müller-Thurgau, Kerner and even Grüner Veltliner are among those successfully grown. Key producers include Abbazia di Novacella and Eisacktaler Kellerei Cantina Valle Isarco (another excellent co-op).

In the north-west, in Val Venosta and in Merano, Pinot Noir, Schiava and Riesling rule; while to the south, in Bassa Atesina, it's Gewürztraminer that is king.

‘Because of the unique geology of Alto Adige, you can get a huge variety of

styles within a very small area,' says Hartmann Donà. His eponymous winery makes a range of fascinating wines, including Donà Rouge, a Schiava-based blend made from 50-year-old granite-soil vines, and Donà Nero, a Pinot Noir made in rocky soil.

But for restaurants watching the price points, producers like Cantina Tramin and Cantina Terlano offer the best introduction.

Cantina Tramin was founded in 1898 and makes a wide range of wines that include the award-winning Nussbaumer Gewürztraminer and the delicious Stoan, a high-end blend of 65% Chardonnay, 25% Sauvignon Blanc and 10% Pinot Bianco and Gewürztraminer.

'The steep mountain that rises in front of Tramin and the microzones that we can access make our wines aromatic and wonderfully fresh,' explains chief winemaker Willi Sturz.

Although it also makes a good range of high-quality wines (some 1.4 million bottles annually) Cantina Terlano, founded in 1893, is best known for its historic Terlaner blend, which received DOC recognition in the 1970s and comprises Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

However the real treasures here are the vast stainless-steel amphorae in which Terlan keeps its whites. Wines rest on the lees for at least 10 years and are often considered to be among the best wines in Italy, with the Cantina able to bottle vintages as and when demand requires and the market is deemed right.

'We can't really be compared to other Italian white wine producers; we compare ourselves with Burgundy,' says Cantina Terlan's marketing head Klaus Gasser, pointing to the €150 (£131) a bottle being charged for a special 2011 cuvée, and to a 1991 vintage that was bottled last year after 25-years lees contact.

He says the secret of these wines lies in the Pinot Bianco, and that to get the most out of it, 'yields must be very low'.

They certainly will be in 2017, thanks mainly to a nasty frost that hit the

region – and much of the rest of Italy and the Old World – in late April, and heavy hail for three days in early August. Quality is expected to be okay, but volumes will be the worst since 1945.

But with the region gaining a growing recognition for the quality, freshness and diversity of its wines, the Consorzio Vini Alto Adige's mood is upbeat and optimistic. Various plans are underway, including a new quality pyramid aimed at clarifying the definition of vineyard sites and allowing producers to give exact information on the origin of their wines.

‘We know that in an international context Alto Adige is pretty difficult to understand. This means there is still a lot of work for us to do. But regarding the future, we are optimistic,’ says Waldboth. And with good reason.