

Northern star

Pinot Bianco seems an unlikely variety to be a local hero, but the results prove its superstar status in northeastern Italy, as Michael Garner explains



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SPECTACULAR VINEYARDS SHOULD produce equally special wines, and in the Alto Adige, where some of Europe's highest vines cling to precipitous Alpine slopes, the formidable list of contenders includes Chardonnay, Sauvignon, Gewürztraminer and Riesling. Yet the relatively unsung Pinot Bianco outperforms them all.

Until the 1980s, Italy's northernmost region produced mainly cheap bulk wine, much of it red, for its traditional markets of Austria and Germany. During the quality revolution that followed, Pinot Bianco was to shake off the shackles of its long-held role as workhouse white and soar to local hero status. 'Before the 1980s,' says Hans Terzer, winemaker at the

acclaimed St Michael-Eppan cooperative, 'Pinot Bianco and Chardonnay weren't recognised as separate varieties and they were both known as Pinot: Verde and Giallo. But even then growers knew to plant Giallo (Chardonnay) lower down the slopes and leave the higher sites for Verde (Bianco).'

Terzer was one of the first to unlock the variety's potential by reducing vineyard yields for his Schulthaus selection, whose debut was the 1982 vintage. The wine continues to be a blueprint for producers keen to explore a traditional, local approach to winemaking.

The key to the variety's success in both Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia is altitude

– the higher the better, according to the region's agricultural research centre at Laimburg. It has been predicted that the vine's future may lie above 900m, if average summer temperatures continue to rise. For now, the best sites are mainly found at 450m-900m, where cool microclimates favour freshness of fruit and good levels of acidity.

Freshness is a central theme when it comes to Pinot Bianco's diverse styles, which range from fruit-forward, stainless-steel fermented wines bursting with apple and nectarine aromas, notes of white flowers and lime, to more serious, part barrel-fermented examples enriched by extra lees contact and suitable for ageing for up to 20 years. There are super-premium examples too, but they often lack the restrained elegance of the simpler versions: much of Pinot Bianco's beauty is in its silky texture and salty freshness.

As a rule of thumb, lower-altitude examples are quite fleshy, forward and faster to mature; those from the poorer soils of higher vineyards

show greater intensity of aroma, are leaner, livelier and longer-lasting.

The highs of Alto Adige

The ideal conditions for Pinot Bianco, according to Terzer, are limestone and clay soils below the Mendola massif, which towers above the western side of the valley between Appiano and Caldaro. It is home to noteworthy cooperatives such as Giran and Kaltern and a growing number of smaller growers such as Niedrist and Niklas. However, the central Adige valley is challenging the area's preeminence.

The south-facing lower slopes of the sheltering mountains between the cities of Bolzano and Merano produce distinctive, racy wines. A cooperative is once again the pace-setter: Cantina Terlano produces several versions of Pinot Bianco, including the elegant Vorberg Riserva. Terlano's marketing director Klaus Gasser claims that the village's unique south-facing amphitheatre and sandy-loam soils are responsible for the wines' ageing >

Below: the Pinot Bianco vineyard adjacent to Moos-Schulthaus castle at Eppan (Appiano)

Photograph: Matteo Carpi





capacity – even its standard Pinot Bianco can hold up for decades in bottle. Beyond Merano, the Venosta valley marks the western limits of winemaking in the Alto Adige. Better known for its apple orchards, the 80ha or so of vines here show great promise, and Franz Pratzner in particular makes wonderful, ageworthy Pinot Bianco at his Falkenstein estate.

Three other outposts complete the Alto Adige Pinot Bianco scene. The hillsides between Cortaccia and Magrè produce a slightly more delicate style from esteemed names such as Lageder, Tiefenbrunner and the Nals Margreid co-op. On the eastern side of the valley opposite Termeno, the villages of Montagna and Mazzon may be better known for Pinot Nero, but growers such as Franz Haas and Pfitscher make excellent Pinot Bianco too. The Pfitscher brothers claim the relatively cool microclimate is the key. Finally, east of Bolzano and just above the narrow entrance to the Isarco valley, estates such as Ebner, Gumphof and Wassererhof and the local cooperative Cantina Valle Isarco make intensely flavoured Pinot Bianco, which ages well.

Pinot Bianco has always been the area's classic aperitif, but it works well with a wide range of foods too, in particular the local speciality schlutzkräpfen – filled pasta parcels served with melted butter and sometimes cheese. On the other hand, Helmuth Zozin, winemaker at Manincor, prefers his excellent, long-lasting Pinot Bianco from Terlano with oven-baked sea bass and vegetables.



Rich pickings in Friuli

A rather different picture emerges to the east in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, where the variety faces even stiffer competition from local favourites Friulano, Malvasia and Ribolla, as well as international varieties. In general, earlier harvests from lower vineyards result in wines with lower acidity and higher alcohol, but they still have a real majesty.

While growers in the Alto Adige prize the verticality of their Pinot Bianco, meaning their wines have a depth and length of flavour defined by acidity. In Friuli, by contrast, other features are more pronounced – principally the wine's weight, richness and texture. Fruit aromas and flavours are similarly luscious, with aromas of red apple and ripe pear backed up with citrus inflections and salty, mineral tones.

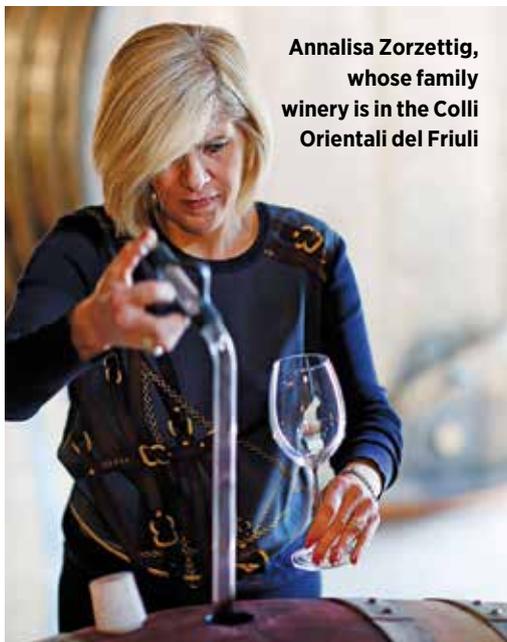
The variety is grown throughout Friuli. In the areas of Grave and Aquileia, Pinot Bianco produces simple and fresh wines to be drunk young, but the variety hits its stride in the three hillier denominations that form Friuli's border with Slovenia. The most southerly is Isonzo, a gravelly limestone plain that stretches from Gorizia towards the Adriatic coast. On the northern bank (Rive Alte) of the river Isonzo, a number of highly rated growers make an attractive, ripe style of wine, including Pierpaolo Pecorari, whose Pinot >

Above, from left: Sabine, Anna, Christof and Johannes Tiefenbrunner, fifth and sixth generations at the family producer at Niclara, near Cortaccia

Below left: Nals Margreid, Sirmian Pinot Bianco 2017 (see p28)

'We really believe in Pinot Bianco. It has an elegance and sapidity all of its own'

Annalisa Zorzettig



Annalisa Zorzettig,
whose family
winery is in the Colli
Orientali del Friuli

Bianco peaks at around five years and, according to its maker Alessandro Pecorari, is the perfect partner for seafood risotto.

Isonzo's neighbour, Collio Goriziano (or simply Collio), is the region's most celebrated denomination. Vineyards stand on undulating sand and marl slopes and the wines display a distinctive mineral tang that provides the perfect foil for the variety's sumptuous fruit flavours and persuasive texture. The wines age well for up to 10 years.

At the heart of the denomination lies Roberto Felluga's Russiz Superiore estate in Capriva del Friuli. His succulent Pinot Bianco is produced from 40- to 50-year-old vines planted by his father, but he acknowledges the variety has an image problem. 'It really suffers from its association with Pinot Grigio,' he says. 'There have been discussions about upgrading Collio to DOCG status and we're looking at creating sub-zones for premium varieties like Pinot Bianco to boost its reputation.' Capriva would doubtless be towards the head of the queue for special status. Collio is a treasure trove for those who love the seductive side of Pinot Bianco: seek out wines from Castello di Spessa, Schiopetto and Toros.

Further to the north in the Colli Orientali, Pinot Bianco has to contend with the area's famous dessert wines Picolit and Ramandolo. Annalisa Zorzettig, whose family has farmed hillside vineyards here for more than a century, believes Pinot Bianco is greatly undervalued. 'Ribolla Gialla and Friulano may be easier to sell, but we really believe in Pinot Bianco. It has an elegance and sapidity all of its own.' ➤

Photograph: REDA/Alamy



**Castello di Spessa in
its beautiful grounds
at Capriva del Friuli**

Garner's top Pinot Bianco picks

① **Cantina Terlano, Vorberg
Riserva Pinot Bianco, Alto Adige
2015 95**

£29.50-£32.99 **Widely available via**

UK agent Astrum Wine Cellars

Archetypal Alto Adige Pinot Bianco that has been partially fermented in large barrels. Luscious ripe pear with hints of kiwi, pineapple and quince jelly. Opulent texture that brings balance for further ageing.

Drink 2022-2033 Alcohol 14%

**Le Vigne di Zamò, Tullio Zamò,
Colli Orientali, Friuli-Venezia
Giulia 2015 95**

N/A UK www.levignedizamo.wine

Extravagant and voluptuous style from partial barrel fermentation

with plenty of ageing on the fine lees and in bottle. Balanced, long, poised and surprisingly graceful.

Drink 2020-2027 Alc 14%

**Nals Margreid, Sirmian,
Alto Adige 2017 95**

£24.99 **Define Food & Wine, Noel**

Young, Vindependents, WoodWinters
Stony, salty nose, notes of lime and quince jelly; juicy and ginger pears on the palate. Lively acidity with flowers all over the finish. Delicious, will keep. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 14%**

**Russiz Superiore, Collio,
Friuli-Venezia Giulia 2017 95**

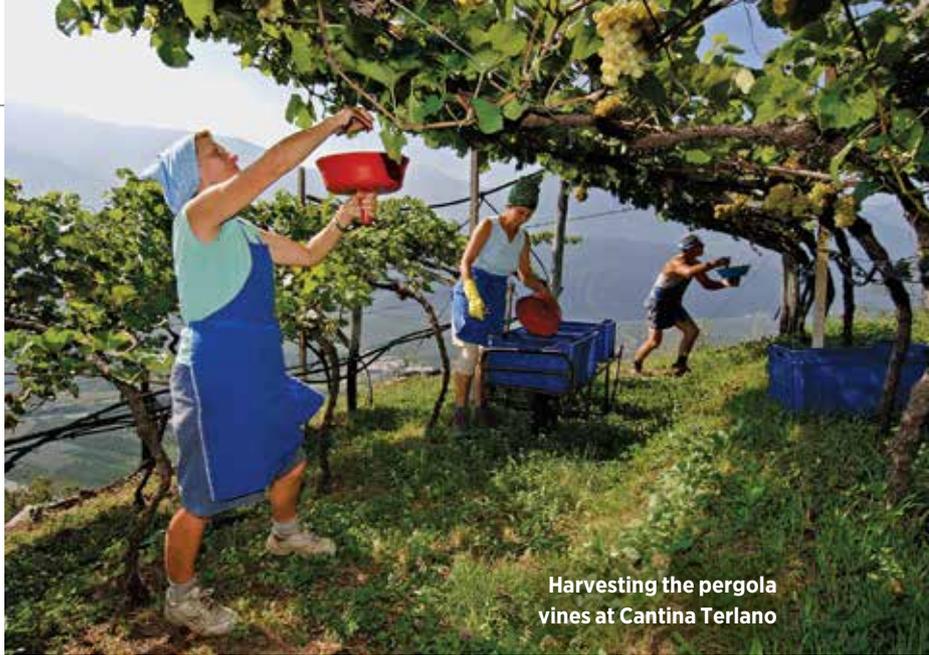
N/A UK www.marcofelluga.it

The essence of Collio: full, ripe ➤

PINOT BIANCO

Whole-bunch fermentation and six months on fine lees help to bring out those very qualities under the family's Myò label. Fortunately the Zorzettigs are not alone in flying the flag, and local growers such as Ermacora, Iacuzzi, Marinig, Petrucco, Pizzulin and Volpe Pasini also produce small volumes of high-quality Pinot Bianco.

Friuli and Alto Adige are rightly recognised as Italy's finest regions for white wine. They both have a veritable array of varieties, and yet Pinot Bianco remains the outstanding performer in both regions. It is a compelling statement of the variety's worth. **D**



Harvesting the pergola vines at Cantina Terlanò

Garner's northeast Italy Pinot Bianco picks (continued)

and forward with floral tones, red apple and nectarine aromas. Full, fleshy palate with creamy lemon and candied pear flavours; long, zingy, and a lightly salty finish. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 14%**

② **Falkenstein, Südtirol Vinschgau, Alto Adige 2016** 94

£17.95 **Dolce Vita Wines**

Wonderful freshness with notes of beeswax and oregano. Round and juicy with a salty finish defined by glorious acidity. Fermented and matured in acacia barrels. **Drink 2022-2030 Alc 14%**

③ **Markus Prackwieser Gump Hof, Renaissance Riserva, Südtirol, Alto Adige 2015** 94

N/A UK www.gumphof.it

Broad, ripe and buzzing with pear and kiwi notes. Salty and silky palate with opulent, perfumed green fruits and even a hint of quinine. Well-integrated oak. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 14%**

④ **Venica & Venica, Tàlis, Collio, Friuli-Venezia Giulia 2017** 94

N/A UK www.venica.it

Lightly candied pear aromas with floral notes of camomile and lemon blossom. Juicy, ripe and fleshy on the palate, which has real breadth: salty pear and walnut flavours. So long and clean. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 14%**

⑤ **Pfitscher, Langefeld, Alto Adige 2017** 93

£16.25 **Tannico**

Stainless steel-fermented and matured

to maintain the pristine glory of aromas and flavours of pear, lime zest, jasmine and sherbet lemon. Rounds off with a lightly salty finish. **Drink 2019-2025 Alc 13%**

Pierpaolo Pecorari, Venezia Giulia 2016 93

£20.49 **Tannico**

Ripe, expressive nose: aromas of pear, quince and camomile. Lively on the palate with tingling acidity; flavours of russet apple and brazil nut. Juicy, fresh and floral-scented with a limey, salty finish. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 13%**

⑥ **St Michael-Eppan, Schulthauer, Alto Adige 2017** 93

£22.99 **Eurowines**

Scented and lightly seasoned orchard fruits and flowers. Fine, delicate and long. This wine is a reference point for

the variety and is as good as ever. Will keep too. **Drink 2020-2027 Alc 14%**

Zorzettig, Myò, Colli Orientali, Friuli-Venezia Giulia 2016 93

£24.06 (2017) **Tannico**

With a full, broad and scented nose of pear, lime and ginger, this has a well modulated and succulent palate with a long, gently tapering finish. Round and polished, seductive and stylish.

Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14%

Petrussa, Colli Orientali, Friuli-Venezia Giulia 2017 92

N/A UK www.petrussa.it

From low-yielding vineyards at Prepotto, a stone's throw from the Slovenian border, this offers full, ripe aromas of greengage, kiwi, pear and lime; nutty and silky finish. **Drink 2019-2025 Alc 14%**

