

ALTO ADIGE

Northeast Italy's verdant alpine region has a reputation for fresh, pristine white wines, but its rocky slopes are producing impressive reds too. **Michael Garner** selects his favourites from both camps



The biennial Wine Summit in Bolzano is more than just another anteprema tasting. Seminars and winery tours form an integral part of the event, providing the background knowledge for a better-informed approach to the 200 or so new releases available to taste. The unique conditions of the Alto Adige's jaw-dropping vineyard scenery – climate, topography and altitude – are the key feature.

An extraordinary turnaround since the 1980s has seen the area transformed from a supplier of anonymous,

mainly red, bulk wine into Italy's most exciting source of fine whites. While international grapes like Chardonnay and Sauvignon paved the way, nowadays the stunning cocktail of freshness, aroma and structure that varieties such as Gewürztraminer, Pinot Bianco and Riesling deliver with such grace takes centre stage. Even Pinot Grigio can produce something special.

Meanwhile, heading along the autostrada from Bolzano up the Isarco valley (or Eisacktal, as it is frequently called in this quintessentially bilingual area) towards the Brenner Pass, Italy's northernmost

vineyards produce outstanding examples of the less fashionable Müller-Thurgau, Sylvaner, Kerner and Grüner Veltliner at altitudes of up to 1,000 metres. Think 'as clean and fresh as a mountain stream'.

While the higher vineyards clinging to the rocky slopes seem predestined to produce fine white wines, more surprising perhaps is the commendable surge in quality of the reds. Again, international grapes have played an important role. Mumelter Riserva, a Cabernet Sauvignon from excellent local cooperative Cantina Bolzano, even won a 2019 Decanter World Wine Awards Best in Show trophy. Similarly, the Alto Adige enjoys a burgeoning reputation for Italy's finest Pinot Nero (Pinot Noir), primarily on the cooler, west-facing slopes of the Adige valley around the villages of Mazzon and Montagna.

As with the whites, attention is turning back towards the red grapes traditionally associated with the area. The variety behind those oceans of anonymous bulk red,

Schiava (Vernatsch in German), is undergoing a radical shift in favour. Experiments with lower yields and vines grown in different types of *terreno* (the Italian word for terroir) are beginning to tease out unexpectedly impressive nuances from this working-class hero.

Preferring the lower altitudes around the area's principal city of Bolzano, the other important indigenous red grape is Lagrein. Until just a few decades ago, the variety was mainly used to produce Kretzer (a rosé wine) but nowadays the pendulum has swung the other way and 80% of Lagrein is made into a full-bodied red that's usually at its best by its 10th birthday.

Still, if the Alto Adige has an iconic wine, it has to be Pinot Bianco (Weissburgunder). Its unique combination of scintillating freshness and juicy ripeness seems to encapsulate the best of this remarkable area. Add in the wine's undoubted ageing capacity, and its true potential becomes as clear as the alpine sky.

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Cantina Tramin, Epokale Gewürztraminer Spätlese, Alto Adige 2013 98

POA Hallgarten Wines

Once bottled, this is aged for a further four years at 4km below ground. Despite its depth of flavour, plus 45g/L residual sugar, it's light on its feet. Exquisite. **Drink 2020-2035 Alc 13%**



Ignaz Niedrist, Berg Pinot Bianco, Südtirol 2018 96

POA Astrum Wine Cellars

From low-yielding vines at 600m on Appiano's famous Monte hillside, Ignaz Niedrist produces a textbook Pinot Bianco. Vibrant and floral-toned. Sumptuous yellow-fruit characters and ageing potential. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 14%**



Markus Prackwieser, Praesulus Weissburgunder, Alto Adige Valle Isarco 2017 96

£20.50 (2016) Arthouse Wine

A wizard with Pinot Bianco, Prackwieser always conjures up something special. A wine of precision, with aromas of preserved lemon and white flowers. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14%**



Tiefenbrunner, Rachtl Riserva Sauvignon Blanc, Alto Adige 2017 95

POA Armit

Symphonic, from a tiny plot near Fiè allo Sciliar in the Isarco valley. A crescendo of pineapple, lime and kiwi aromas, with notes of rosemary, mint and ginger. **Drink 2020-2027 Alc 13.5%**



Cantina Terlan, Nova Domus Riserva, Alto Adige Terlano 2017 94

POA Astrum Wine Cellars, Hedonism, Huntsworth Wine Co, Harrogate Fine Wine Co

Terlano is the prototype of the area's white blends. Mineral-toned fruit with pinpoint acidity and style. **Drink 2022-2035 Alc 14%**



Cantina Valle Isarco, Aristos Grüner Veltliner, Alto Adige Valle Isarco 2018 94

£24 Astrum Wine Cellars

Grüner Veltliner makes a scented wine here: sweet spice, fresh herbs, greengage, marron glacé, plus white pepper. 50% fermented in large acacia barrels. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14%**



Cantina Tramin, Troy Riserva Chardonnay, Alto Adige 2016 95

POA Hallgarten Wines

Exemplary Chardonnay which balances 'rich and ripe' with 'fresh and lively' in the classic alpine style. Clever use of oak and salty mineral tones to the finish add extra depth. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14.5%**



Cantina Valle Isarco, Sabiona Kerner, Alto Adige Valle Isarco 2018 95

£42 Astrum Wine Cellars

Sabiona monastery is surrounded by one of Italy's most beautiful vineyards. The wine lives up to the setting, with grapefruit, passion fruit, mint and flowers. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 15.5%**



Köfererhof, Riesling, Alto Adige Valle Isarco 2013 95

N/A UK www.koefererhof.it

Günter Kerschbaumer makes great wines, but you sense that his 'baby' is Riesling. His 2013 is still incredibly fresh and juicy. Bottle age has accentuated the wine's depth and length, bringing finesse. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.5%**



Gottardi, Südtiroler Blauburgunder 2016 97

POA Les Caves de Pyrene

Alexander Gottardi's first time using whole-bunch fermentation has paid off. Bewitching aromas and a balanced palate. Graceful, supple and long. On this showing, Italy's top Pinot Nero. **Drink 2022-2035 Alc 14%**



Cantina Bolzano, Mumelter Riserva, Alto Adige 2016 95

POA Mondial Wine

Compelling Cabernet from vineyards close to Bolzano. Juicy and expressive aromas of cassis, molasses and eucalyptus, and a velvety palate with lightly seasoned oak notes. Hugely impressive. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14.5%**



Ignaz Niedrist, Pinot Nero vom Kalk, Südtirol 2016 94

£65 Astrum Wine Cellars, Christopher Keiller

Pinot Nero can also work well on the Appiano Monte hillside. From low-yielding vines, this is suave and round with lashings of caramelised red fruit and sweet, ripe tannins. Should age really well. **Drink 2022-2030 Alc 14.5%**



Pacherhof, Pinot Grigio, Alto Adige Valle Isarco 2018 95

£19.20 Italvinus

From vines grown at up to 900m, this stunning Pinot Grigio almost reinvents the variety. Rich and spicy, with purity of fruit and partial oak fermentation. Finish of candied pear and toasted hazelnut. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 13.5%**



Pacherhof, Alte Reben Sylvaner, Alto Adige Valle Isarco 2018 95

N/A UK www.pacherhof.com

From 40- to 45-year-old vines and partially fermented in acacia barrels. Classic alpine splendour. Voluptuous, spicy green-fruit aromas and a tapering palate. Mineral-toned, soft fruit finish. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.5%**



Tiefenbrunner, Feldmarschall von Fenner Müller-Thurgau, Alto Adige 2018 95

£40-£44.54 (2017) Armit, Christopher Keiller, Hic

Surprisingly rich: jasmine, green tea, nutmeg aromas. It will continue to develop beautifully in bottle, too. **Drink 2025-2035 Alc 13.5%**



Muri-Gries, Abtei Muri Riserva Lagrein, Alto Adige 2011 94

N/A UK www.muri-gries.com

Classic Lagrein at the peak of its maturity: a heady mix of blackberry, loganberry, dark chocolate, liquorice and tobacco with the ripe but slightly rustic tannins typical of the variety. Firm and satisfying. **Drink 2019-2022 Alc 13.5%**



Hartmann Donà, Liquid Stone Granit, Mitterberg 2018 93

N/A UK www.hartmannadona.it

A distinctive, original take on Schiava grown at 500m near Merano. Fragrant, almost floral red-fruit aromas and flavours with liquorice and woodsmoke. Poised and stylish. Almost Pinot Nero-like. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 12.5%**



Untermoserhof, Hub, Südtirol St Magdalener Classico 2018 93

POA Les Caves de Pyrene

Delightful example of a denomination once feted by Mussolini. Mostly Schiava with 5% Lagrein. A lighter-bodied red: fresh, lively and intense with marzipan, loganberry, violets and a hint of liquorice. **Drink 2020-2023 Alc 13.5%**