

Pinot Grigio



Origin

One of the three classic Burgundy varieties. Pinot Grigio was selected from a mutation of Pinot Noir. The unstable, grayish-red color of the grapes is due to a periclinal chimera, with the skin of the berry containing types of tissue that are genetically different from each other and layered over each other. The ease of mutation is maintained in this way, and thus differences in color with blue or white bunches, including individual grapes, are to be observed.

Cistercian monks supposedly brought the variety in 1375 from Burgundy to Lake Balaton in Hungary, where it got its name Szürkebarát (“gray monk”) as an allusion to those who brought it. Going in another direction, the variety came to Alsace in 1568 and then into Breisgau in Germany. It may also be found as Roter Burgunder (“red Burgundy”) in the older specialized literature. The synonym in German Ruländer arose in the middle of the eighteenth century. A merchant from Speyer by the name of Ruland supposedly recognized the quality potential of the variety and substantially contributed to its spread. Pinot Grigio represents the last development in the dance of names. In Alto Adige, the grape variety has carried the name Ruländer since its introduction.

The first planting in Tyrol took place in 1848 at the initiative of Archduke Johann in Appiano-Monte. Up through the end of the nineteenth century, additional vineyards of it were established in Terlano, Appiano, Caldaro, Ora, Nalles, Marleno, Postal, and Scena. In this early phase, the cultivation took place together with the Pinot Blanc variety, with the wine then being sold as Burgunder (“Burgundy”) or Strahler (“radiant”).

Distribution

The variety spread above all else in Hungary, but also to a small extent in Champagne, Burgundy, and Germany. Because of the high fluctuations in yields, though, it gradually fell into disfavor, and by 1930, it hardly had any importance any more. Only after 1960 did the variety experience a Renaissance, at first primarily in Northern Italy. Under the name Pinot Grigio that is common there, it also made the leap to countries overseas. Today, it is represented in nearly all of the winegrowing countries in the world, with the worldwide area of cultivation at around 54,500 hectares (134,672 acres), whereby Italy, with 25,000 hectares (61,776 acres) is at the head of the list. The regional strongholds of Pinot Grigio are the Veneto (8,000 hectares/19,768 acres), Friuli (6,000 hectares/14,826 acres), Trentino (2,900 hectares/7,166 acres), and Sicily (2,500 hectares/6,177 acres). The second most important country for Pinot Grigio cultivation is the USA, with an estimated 8,500 hectares (21,004 acres). In Europe, significant cultivations are found in Germany (7,100 hectares/17,544 acres), France (2,920 hectares/7,215 acres, of which 90% is in Alsace) and Moldova (2,100 hectares/5,189 acres), followed by Hungary, Austria and Romania. But in other countries overseas, such as Australia (4,000 hectares/9,884 acres) and New Zealand (2,600 hectares/6,425 acres), the variety has also firmly established itself.

In Alto Adige, there are currently 699 hectares (1,727 acres) planted with Pinot Grigio. It has been the most planted white wine variety here for over three decades now. The majority of the Pinot Grigio vineyards are located in the southern Bassa Atesina, above all in Salorno, Magrè, and Cortina s.s.d.v.

However, the majority of the grapes are processed in the neighboring province of Trento (in Mezzocorona), but as a result,

these wines do not come to the market with the designation of origin as Alto Adige. The second most important subregion for the variety is Oltradige, with the winegrowing areas of Appiano and Caldaro. Planting has increased continuously, especially after the year 2000. By way of comparison, in 1966, Alto Adige had less than a third of today's area planted with Pinot Grigio at only 195 hectares (482 hectares).

Vines

The main feature of this Burgundy variety is the medium-sized bunches that are either cylindrical or else shouldered, with their nearly brown or grayish-red berries that may also be bluish-red when fully mature. In order to reduce the variety's susceptibility to rot, the former clones with tight berries have increasingly been replaced by clones that are more disposed to loose berries, which are also lower yielding. The variety flourishes under the most varied of conditions. In Alto Adige, it is predominantly planted in warm locations on the valley floor up to a maximum of 500 meters (1,600 feet) above sea level. Soils that are not too fertile yield wines that are better in quality.

Wine

Depending upon the elevation, different wines will result. Those from the valley floor are mild, rather broad, and with regard to the aromatic quality, they are reminiscent of ripe apples, pears, or quince. Added to this are tones of cantaloupe, but also hazel nuts and coconut. The wines from higher locations (Appiano-Monte or the Isarco Valley), on the other hand, demonstrate aromas of limes, fresh stone fruit, white peaches, and hay blossoms. Because of their more prominent acidity, they have a slimmer effect, but they are juicy when drunk. In spite of the size of its area of cultivation, the German name Ruländer appears comparatively infrequently as a varietal wine with the corresponding indication on the label. The reasons for this lie in the marketing abroad. On the other hand, the Pinot Grigio Alto Adige (Südtirol) from the Santa Margherita winery in the Veneto is among the best-known Italian wine brands in the USA at the higher price level. In Alto Adige itself, the traditional name Ruländer continues to be listed on the label. For several years, though, the name Pinot Grigio that is better recognized internationally has also increasingly been used. The actual type of wine – whether full-bodied and for the most part completely or at least partly vinified with wood, or else fresh and mineral-rich from higher elevations – has no influence upon the language that is chosen for the label.