

## The Winegrowing Region of Alto Adige: A Multifaceted Land, Unique Wines

Alto Adige lives from its contrasts, so it is no wonder that they also shape the winegrowing region. The vineyards run from Mediterranean valley locations to over 1,000 meters in elevation, more than twenty grape varieties cover a broad spectrum, and they are tended by both individual winegrowers and cooperative wineries, each having a lengthy tradition. What is common to all is their focus on sustainability and innovation. It is only at first glance, though, that this is a contrast.

### SMALL AREA, LARGE VARIETY

The contrasts that make up Alto Adige and thus the winegrowing region result from two factors: nature and the landscape on one hand, and culture on the other. In Alto Adige, nature provides a plethora of different soils, the origins of which go back to the formation of the Alps and which lastingly shape each corresponding terroir. Moreover, the heart of the Alps is characterized topographically by mountains and valleys which, in turn, have their influence upon the climate. Thus the tall mountains in the north have an effect like a wall, shielding Alto Adige from cold northern air, while in contrast, the province is open toward the south, including for mild air currents from the Mediterranean area. Alto Adige's winegrowers know how to take advantage of this gift of nature and extend their vineyards to elevations as high as 1,000 meters (3,300 feet) and above. The German word for vineyard is Weinberg, meaning "wine mountain", and that can be taken completely literally in Alto Adige.

Furthermore, in cultural terms, the province lies at the interface between North and South, between the Romance and Germanic linguistic and cultural areas. Since time immemorial, Alto Adige has allowed itself to be inspired by both, and thus the best of both worlds flows into Alto Adige wines: the artisan skill, the precision, and the reliability from the North just as much as the charm, art of living, and wine tradition from the South.

This multilayered quality brings forth a multitude of multifaceted mountain wines, each of which reflects their grape variety just as much as their corresponding terroir. And even though the province is a small one, the spectrum of Alto Adige wine is extremely broad. Thus in the winegrowing region of Alto Adige, around two dozen different grape varieties are grown, and there is enormous variation between the locations. They range from harsh, well-aerated places on the precipitous slopes of the Val Venosta or the Valle Isarco to

the Mediterranean-like, sun-drenched, mild vineyards in the south of Alto Adige, such as in the Bolzano basin, Oltradige with Lake Kaltern, or the Bassa Atesina. It is therefore no wonder that in the winegrowing region of Alto Adige, the entire bandwidth of types of wines is exploited: from primarily fruity varieties and discriminating selections to impressive dessert wines to bubbly sparkling wines. Combined with a consistent quality policy in both the vineyard and the winery, this diversity has ensured that in recent years, Alto Adige has step by step worked its way up to the peak of winemaking, which has also been confirmed by the most important wine guides.

### STRIVING FOR QUALITY IN ESTATE WINERIES OF MANAGEABLE SIZE

Alto Adige's winegrowers and winemakers have worked hard over the past few decades for the attention of the wine world. Every detail has been scrutinized and oriented toward the highest possible quality. That begins with the selection of varieties which today, in contrast to what was the case earlier on, is optimally oriented toward each location. Over the years, a winegrowing region that had been dominated by Schiava (Vernatsch) has become much more broadly structured, with above all else Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Lagrein, and Pinot Noir all having greatly gained in importance. At the same time, though, Schiava remains one of the leading varieties. One reason for this is because the demand for light, vivacious red wines is growing again.

In addition, the careful new orientation is evident on the image of the landscape, which up to a few years ago was still shaped in winegrowing zones by the traditional pergola trellis. Although it continues to be used above all else for Schiava, and with good reason, the espalier training system is becoming more and more dominant.

On the whole, the grape growing areas in Alto Adige comprise 5,600 hectares (13,838 ac), and this area is tended by no fewer than 5,000 winegrowers. Just from these proportions alone, it can be seen that in Alto Adige, there is no large operation that dominates, but rather small, manageable family-run winegrowing estates which in the majority of cases have already been tended for generations. The experience upon which the winegrowers build is, however, just one of the ingredients of the recipe for success of these small and very small structures. Their deep roots in the trade is a second, the involvement of the entire family is a third, and thinking for the course of generations is a fourth. At the same time, though, many of the wine-growing estates are too small to make and market wine themselves, which is why a cooperative system formed that is now around 150 years old. It is one of the pillars upon which the Alto Adige winemaking business is based. A winery cooperative is not a large, anonymous company to which the growers sell their grapes, but rather a communal operation, and the success or failure of every supplier/co-owner is tied to that of the cooperative. In addition to the cooperative wineries, private estate wineries and independent winegrowers also determine the picture. They have decided upon a self-reliant path for the making and marketing of wine and thus substantially contribute to the colorful variety within Alto Adige's wine industry.

### SUSTAINABILITY: THE PATH INTO THE FUTURE

Regardless of whether or not the organization is by cooperative, in 2020 the wine industry initiated together the "2030 Alto Adige Wine Agenda" which oriented the entire sector toward one goal: sustainability. What is therefore to be sustainable is not only the winegrowing, but also the winemaking, the storage, and the logistics. Thus in the "2030 Alto Adige Wine Agenda", five areas were established within which over the next ten years, targeted and thoroughly broad reaching steps are to be taken in the direction of the protection of resources and sustainability. Within that context, the cycle begins with the soil and the care of it that is to protect resources and maintain fertility. There will thus be a change in coming years to purely organic fertilizing, to the replacement of artificial substances to biodegradable materials, and to introducing efficient water management. The path toward sustainability will also be consistently followed in dealing with the grapevines. Thus everything possible will be undertaken, for instance, in order to support biodiversity in the vineyards.

With the wine production, on the other hand, what is concerned is a detailed recording and, consequently, a targeted minimizing of the CO2 footprint. Associated with this is also a goal that has been set within the "Territory" field of action: the setting up of a regional circular economy, and thus the support of shorter supply and delivery paths and recycling. The "2030 Alto Adige Wine Agenda" thus provides a series of ambitious goals to which all of the stakeholders have now committed themselves: first and foremost the 5,000 winegrowers and their families, as well as the employees of the wineries. But the market will also be correspondingly studied in detail in order to provide wine connoisseurs throughout the world with an image of how the future path will look for the Alto Adige wine industry that will become sustainable through and through.

### 2,500 YEARS OF WINEGROWING TRADITION

Sustainability is therefore the future of the Alto Adige wine industry. It is in focus when the gaze looks forward. But in order to know where the Alto Adige wine industry came from, it is necessary to turn the gaze back – far back. Ötzi the Iceman, the glacier mummy from Similaun, is five thousand years old, and winegrowing in Alto Adige is about half that old – and there is proof of that. Findings of pruning hooks and ladles from the fifth century BC, for instance, show that the Rhaetians had recognized the winegrowing potential in what is now Alto Adige. Thus the province is the oldest winegrowing region within the German-speaking world. Although while the Rhaetians had hardly carried out winegrowing in a systematic way, the Romans set up their own structures starting in 15 BC. Thus with the "Via Claudia Augusta", a transalpine road connection was established on which not only goods could freely circulate, but also – and most importantly – knowledge, ideas, and last but not least new grape varieties. The innovations brought a first upswing to Alto Adige winegrowing, and a second was induced above all else by Frankish and Bavarian monasteries which, starting from the eighth century AD, acquired a whole series of winegrowing estates on the sun-drenched southern side of the Alps. The Habsburg monarchy also knew to appreciate the wine from the favorable locations in Alto Adige which, in the late nineteenth century, led to an additional push for quality and innovation. Thus during this period, the Burgundy varieties took on a more and more important role.

But the most incessant and lasting stimulus in the direction of a systematic, innovative quality policy that concerned all areas came in the 1980s from sev-

eral visionary winegrower personalities. For the first time, they focused on a rigorous reduction of the yields, targeted the DOC distinction, sought the ideal grape varieties for each terroir, and made the initial introduction of concepts such as cultivation that was close to nature and gentle processing of the grapes. Thus the foundation was laid for the meteoric rise for Alto Adige wines which continues today.

### VARIETY IN SOILS, VARIETY IN WINES

Volcanism, sedimentation, orogeny: in Alto Adige, no geological form is missing, and thus the variety of rock is very particular. Around 150 different types of rocks can be counted in a comparatively small region, and the compositions of the soils are correspondingly varied and can often change drastically within the smallest of distances. For that reason, as well, the soil types can only be roughly classified. Thus in Bolzano and vicinity, soils from volcanic porphyry dominate, in the Valle Isarco and Val Venosta it is primarily primitive rock soils with quartz, slate, and mica that are found, while in the southern part of Alto Adige, in contrast, it is calcareous and dolomite rock. This variety in the soils has its advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage is that the selection of the suitable grape varieties is a complex task in which earlier on, it was above all else the experience of generations of winegrowers that had its influence. But today, it is based primarily upon scientific findings. However, the variety of sub-soils also has a crucial advantage: it provides the ideal foundation for a broad spectrum of grape varieties and thus an enormous diversity of wines.

### SUN-DRENCHED AND WIND-KISSED

This diversity is not only thanks to the soils, but also to the particular climate in Alto Adige that allows for winegrowing at an extreme range of elevations. Thus the lowest vineyards in valley locations are found at an elevation of around 200 meters (less than 700 feet) above sea level, while the highest are over 1,000 meters (3,300 feet). All of the locations profit from an above-average number of sunny days, sufficient precipitation, and a comparatively mild climate throughout the year which does not subject the grapevines to conditions that are too harsh even in wintertime. Within that context, what is formative for the climate in Alto Adige is the main ridge of the Alps, which seals off the province to the north, while mild and moderately moist air can flow through the valleys that open up toward the south. This provides not only pleasant temperatures and enough rain, but also constant air

circulation that keeps the grapes dry. The southern orientation is furthermore responsible for the fact that precipitation amounts and average temperatures decrease the further north one goes into the cultivation zone.

From factors such as the location with the cultivation zone, the elevation, and the orientation on the slope, what therefore results is a whole series of microclimates within the closest space which, just as with the soil composition, affects the choice of the suitable grape variety. Moreover, the topographical and climatic particularities of Alto Adige ensure the possibility of reacting to the consequences of climate change. Thus in lower locations with higher temperatures, the concentration is on late-maturing varieties such as Lagrein, Merlot, or Cabernet Sauvignon that find their optimal conditions there in order to ripen perfectly year after year. For wines that are rich in finesse, though, such as Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, or Pinot Noir, higher locations are chosen – and the trend is now to plant them even higher than in the recent past.

### CULTIVATION ZONE WITH COLORFUL VARIETY

Even though the winegrowing region in Alto Adige is of a manageable size, with only 90 kilometers (around 56 miles) between the northernmost and southernmost points, it is still enormously varied. Thus because of its west to east orientation, the Val Venosta in the northwest of the cultivation zone is a comparatively dry valley in which primarily Riesling as well as Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir are grown. The Valle Isarco in the north, because of its rather harsh climate, is a stronghold of white wines with specialties such as Kerner, Sylvaner, or Müller Thurgau. The conditions in the area around Merano are much milder, so the leading varieties are Schiava, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc, and Sauvignon Blanc. The soils from red porphyry rock, in turn, which dominate the Adige Valley between Merano and Bolzano bring forth first-class white wines with a mineral-rich character. The winegrowing zone in and around Bolzano, on the other hand, is famous for Santa Maddalena, which grows above all else on the hill whose name it bears and is regarded as especially refined Schiava. In contrast, in the southwestern district of Gries, the most powerful Lagrein crus grow on alluvial soils that can warm easily with a great deal of sand and gravel. Bolzano may well be the provincial capital of Alto Adige, but the largest winegrowing community is the next one to the south, Appiano which, along with Caldaro and Lake Caldaro, forms the heart of the wine region of Alto Adige. What thrives here are above all

else Schiava, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc, while it is not by chance that Termeno – the German name of which is Tramin – has given its name to Gewürztraminer. Finally, in the mild South of Alto Adige between Cortaccia and Salorno, late-maturing varieties dominate, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, while the slopes around Montagna are above all else home to Pinot Noir.

### THE CLASSIFICATION: DOC AND VIGNA

No less than 98 percent of the entire grape growing area in Alto Adige falls within the DOC Controlled Designation of Origin – more than any other winegrowing region in Italy. But because this hardly permits a more detailed categorization of the wines, over time great value has come to be placed on the classification of origin “Vigna” (meaning “vineyard”), which since 2014 has been reserved for historical single vineyards. For this, it is required that the winegrowing plots are not only geographically contiguous, but also have to be uniform with regard to the growth training system, year of planting, vine density, and grape variety. On top of that, it is required that the grapes be harvested and vinified separately. Having each been named according to the official designation of location, there are currently around sixty Vignas with an area of nearly 200 hectares (almost 500 acres). In addition, the traditional subzones may also continue to be used as controlled designations of origin.

### TOO MANY CHOICES: GRAPE VARIETIES IN ALTO ADIGE

The fact that tradition and innovation do not have to be opposites is shown not only by the outstanding work of many open-minded, visionary winemakers in Alto Adige. It is also demonstrated by that of the winegrowers who in their vineyards focus not only on the traditional grape varieties – first and foremost Lagrein, Schiava, and Gewürztraminer – but also on international types. In Alto Adige, the latter consists primarily of Sauvignon Blanc, but Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir are prominently represented. On the whole, more than twenty different grape varieties are grown in Alto Adige, whereby this broad spectrum is thanks to, on one hand, the aforementioned diversity in the cultivation area and, on the other hand, to tradition. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Archduke Johann of Austria brought the first white Burgundy varieties as well as Riesling to Alto Adige. Since the late 1800s, Bordeaux varieties (Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon) have also been planted in Alto Adige, and thus far ear-

lier than in such renowned winegrowing regions as Tuscany.

The lengthy tradition of the multitude of grape varieties in Alto Adige changes nothing with regard to the fact that the collection of varieties has been fundamentally transformed in the past few decades. Today, Alto Adige is no longer a pronounced land of Lagrein and Schiava, but rather the majority of its production is now white wines, with 64 percent of the grape growing areas. What has above all else contributed to this has been the extension of the cultivation zone into higher elevations and more northerly areas, where specialties such as Riesling, Sylvaner, Veltliner, Müller Thurgau, and Kerner find their optimal conditions. While the trend toward white wines has consolidated, some adventurous winegrowers are focusing on fungus-resistant varieties, among which are Bronner, Solaris, Souvignier Gris, and Cabernet Cortis. In the end, though, there continue to be six leading varieties that set the tone in Alto Adige (with around 60 percent of the total grape growing areas): Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Lagrein, Pinot Noir, and Schiava – and thus a successful mixture of traditional varieties and international greats.

## THE WINEGROWING REGION OF ALTO ADIGE IN FACTS AND FIGURES

- > Grape growing areas: 5,600 hectares (13,838 ac)
- > Average area per company: 1 ha (2.5ac)
- > Wineries: 274
- > Elevations: 200 - 1,000 m (650-3,280 ft)
- > Employees in the wine industry: 10,000
- > DOC classification: 98% (approx. 5.400 hectares/13,838 acres)
- > Percentage of Italy's total wine production: less than 1%
- > Red/white division: 64% white wines, 36% red wines
- > Bottles of sparkling wine annually made with méthode champenoise: 400,000

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