

## Fifty Years of Alto Adige DOC

*On April 14, 1975, the decree was published with which the designations of origin Alto Adige DOC and dell'Alto Adige DOC were introduced. It was not the first DOC that concerned Alto Adige, but it became the foundation for a development that continues to this day: towards the highest quality and a closer and closer connection of the wines to their origin.*

### What does DOC mean?

In 1963, wine law in Italy entered a new stage. Protected designations of origin, above all else the DOC (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata*), were intended – in the truest sense of the word – to prevent any labeling that could be fraudulent. Since that time, detailed regulations for production have been issued by decree for every individual DOC designation. They regulate the cultivation method, the zone of cultivation, the harvest quantities, the quality of the must, the pressing methods, and the geographical indications on the label. Special inspection authorities monitor the adherence to the production regulations.

### DOC in Alto Adige

The pioneer of DOC wines in Alto Adige was Lago di Caldaro (Kalterersee), the production regulations of which were published in March 1970. These were followed in 1971 by those for the DOC wines Santa Maddalena and Meranese, in 1974 by those for Valle Isarco, and in February and March 1975 by those for Terlano and Valdadige, respectively. The big leap for the Alto Adige wine industry came with the decree of the President of the Republic on April 14, 1975 with which the DOC designations Alto Adige DOC or dell'Alto Adige DOC [Südtirol DOC or Südtiroler DOC] were introduced.

The recognition was preceded by comprehensive preparatory work by the Committee for Viticulture and the Wine Industry (also known simply as the “Viticulture Committee”). It was based at the Chamber of Commerce and met in the historic Bolzano Mercantile Building, and it was given the task by the responsible ministry in Rome of creating the basis for recognition.

The goal of this was to achieve a better position on the market, which was also achieved through Alto Adige DOC: “For the first time... it is possible to market our wines with a protected and controlled designation of origin, thus enhancing their value and distinguishing them from table wines and wines from other regions,” explained Franz Zelger, head of the

agricultural inspection authorities at the time (today's Provincial Department of Agriculture). He went on to add, "This is of crucial importance for our viticulture... because the future prospects of winegrowing in Alto Adige lie exclusively in quality production."

### **What Did DOC Change in Alto Adige?**

The original DOC production regulations from 1975 already contained specifications for the cultivation of the grapes as well as for the wines that were made from them. The cultivation zones were established (outside of those zones, no wine may carry the abbreviation DOC). So with the exception of the Valle Isarco, which had its own DOC designation, the defined cultivation zones encompassed the entire winegrowing region in Alto Adige at that time, and thus the Adige Valley from Lagundo to Salorno, the area around Bolzano, and the Oltradige.

The grape varieties were also defined for which the designation Alto Adige DOC could be used. The list represents a reflection of the palette of varieties that were cultivated at that time. It included the white varieties of Pinot Grigio, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Müller-Thurgau, Yellow Muscat, Welschriesling, and Rheinriesling, and Sylvaner, as well as the red varieties of Schiava (Vernatsch), Pinot Noir, Lagrein, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Moscato Rosa, and Malvasia Nera.

Probably the most drastic change that the DOC regulations brought to Alto Adige viticulture was the establishment of harvest quantities, that is, the maximum amount of grapes that were allowed to be harvested per hectare. Up until that time, Alto Adige's winegrowers were accustomed to growing and picking as many grapes as possible per unit of area. Payments to the growers were based solely on the amounts that were harvested. The more that was delivered, the greater the incomes that the growers could achieve. With the DOC regulations, harvest quantities were now limited for the first time, and thus the quality of the grapes was given a higher priority than the quantity.

### **Development over the Years**

In order to understand the historical background to the Alto Adige DOC regulations, two important dates should be indicated. As late as 1975, only four percent of the total wine production in Alto Adige was bottled in 750 ml. bottles. The lion's share was still being sold as bulk wine (and thus in large tanks) or else in one liter or two liter bottles. In addition, the styles of vinification varied widely, even though it was already clear in the mid-1970s that the

strength of the Alto Adige wine industry lay in “wines which by nature are mild and dry”, according to a report from that time. Corresponding to this, the production regulations required that only wines that were produced dry could carry the Alto Adige DOC designation.

The second figure that indicates just how important the introduction of DOC Alto Adige was comes from late 1975. Just half a year after the publication of the DOC decree, some 92 percent of the total vineyard area in the province at that time (which amounted to 5,083 hectares/12,560 acres) had already been registered with the Chamber of Commerce for entry in the relevant vineyard registries (and thus for the use of the DOC seal).

### **From Quantity to Quality**

The granting of the Alto Adige DOC designation of origin was the first step in a drastic about-face in the wine industry from quantity to quality. The focus on quantity had also previously been the result of massive exports to Tyrol and Vorarlberg in Austria which had been fueled by two factors: on one hand, these were weak markets in which quality played a lesser role; on the other hand, Austria was to the greatest degree closed to other wine imports. But thanks to a bilateral trade agreement, the so-called *Accordino*, Alto Adige played a special role, and thus it was able to export large quantities of wine, with some of it even being duty-free.

In the second half of the 1970s, the markets changed. “Producers became increasingly aware that the market was placing higher demands, and people desired better quality along with knowledge regarding the origin,” recalls Josef Rottensteiner, former general secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Viticulture Committee at the time. Not only was this desire fulfilled with Alto Adige DOC, but in 1976 the Alto Adige brand was also introduced for other agricultural products.

This reorientation of the markets, the desire for better quality, and the interest in origin was realized by the Alto Adige wine industry with the Alto Adige DOC designation of origin. Starting from the mid-1980s onwards, this formed the basis for a consistent turnaround in quality with the wine industry. This was also accelerated, since at the beginning of the 1980s, the wine market collapsed, there was a massive slump in exports from Alto Adige to Switzerland, and the reputation was poor, above all else in those markets that had previously been flooded with cheap wines.

Thanks to the legal basis that was provided by Alto Adige DOC and the foresight of its pioneers, starting from the mid-1980s onwards the wine industry was finally able to adopt a

consistent strategy of quality. The winemakers now worked with the goal of producing high-quality wines in mind, collaborating more closely with the grape growers to harvest grapes of the highest quality.

This change in quality was also reflected in the DOC provisions. Thus, the production regulations of the previously independent DOC designations Santa Maddalena, Meranese or Meranese di Collina, Terlano, Valle Isarco, and Colli di Bolzano were merged in 1993 as sub-zones under Alto Adige DOC, and this also occurred with Val Venosta in 1995. Since then, the Alto Adige DOC has served as the umbrella for the vast majority of Alto Adige DOC designations, becoming the hallmark of Alto Adige wine production.

### **The Organization Today**

For nearly two decades, the organization that handles the Alto Adige DOC designation of origin has been based on two pillars. In 2007, the Alto Adige Wine Consortium was founded as an umbrella organization and competence center for the wine industry. The vast majority of the important players in the world of Alto Adige wine are members of the Consortium, and for that reason, not only has it taken on the worldwide marketing of the Alto Adige wine brand, it also stands by its members with legal and practical support.

The second pillar is the Chamber of Commerce which, thanks to the Viticulture Committee, has had an influence on the fate of Alto Adige DOC from the very beginning. In addition, the promotion of wine (like that for other Alto Adige quality products) was initially the responsibility of the Chamber of Commerce. Today, the Chamber of Commerce manages the inspection authority for wines. It guarantees the quality of production, it monitors the designations of origin, which also include Alto Adige DOC, and it ensures adherence to the producer regulations. Inspections are also carried out in the wineries and vineyards, and it has wine samples taken and analyzed.

### **The Pinnacle of the Connection to Origin**

The development that began fifty years ago with the introduction of Alto Adige DOC has now been enriched by another chapter since last year. Some eighty-six vineyard locations have been officially recognized, and starting with the 2024 harvest, may be listed on the label as an additional geographical unit (*Unità Geografica Aggiuntiva*, or UGA). A specially developed pictogram also identifies them as wines from geographical units.

With the recognition of the additional geographical units, the connection between Alto Adige wines and their origin has been brought to its pinnacle. Wine lovers can now trace exactly which vineyards the grapes used for the wines come from.. This also ensures the highest level of transparency. Today, wines from single geographical units embody the highest quality of wine production not only in Alto Adige, but also in all of Italy. This is also due to the fact that these production regulations even go beyond those of DOC wines, for example by reducing the maximum yield by an additional twenty-five percent.