

Schiava



Origin

The origin of the Schiava (Vernatsch) varieties in Alto Adige continues to be uncertain. The search for its beginnings is made more difficult because of the different names in German and Italian. The Italian name “Schiava” is derived from the former growing method that was closer to the ground, which at the time of the Langobard rule in what is now Northern Italy was referred to as *vineis sclavis* [slave vine]. This was in contrast to the high *majores* growing method on trees. As a result of this, the thesis is false that “schiava” (“slave” in English) could refer to a Slavic origin. Different grape varieties throughout all of what is now Northern Italy bore this name, also including white varieties. With the exception of some scattered cases in Lombardy, these have all disappeared. As a varietal name, the designation Schiava appeared for the first time in the year 1195 in Brescia. During the time of the Langobards, the main production areas were presumably to the west of Lake Garda. Why it is that the variety took on the name Vernatsch in German, which stems from the broadly diffuse varietal indication Vernaccia in Italy, is not clear. Vernaccia was already a sought-after white wine as early as the Middle Ages and was originally produced in Liguria. It may be that the name was provided by the village of Vernazze in Cinque Terre. Today, the white varieties of Vernaccia di San Gimignano (in Tuscany) and Vernaccia di Oristano (in Sardinia) still exist, as does the red Vernaccia from Serrapetrona (in Le Marche). Also adding to the confusion surrounding the name “Vernatsch” is the so-called “Gschlafenen”. This consists of an ancient grape variety in Tyrol that was very widespread, including in Alto Adige, up to the twentieth century and yielded wines that are similar to Schiava. The name “Gschlafenen” unambiguously originates from the

German word for “slave”, Sklave. In Trentino, though, this same variety was called Rossara, another name that is repeatedly found in the wine literature of Northern Italy.

The term “Vernaccia”, and consequently also “Vernatsch”, comes from the Latin root *verna* which stands for a slave that was born in the house of the master. This developed into *vernacula* (for a local variety) and subsequently *vernaccia*. It may therefore be the case that the term “slave” represents the connective element for the various names of the same variety in both German and Italian. Dessert wines with a low alcohol content that could not be stored for a long time were also called Vernatsch in Tyrol. As a result of the way it was produced, it also carried the name of Sacklwein (bag wine). The fact that a white must is used for this pretty much says everything.

In conjunction with Alto Adige, the name Vernatsch appears in 1490 in a wine bill from the Bavarian monastery of Tegernsee, which at the time possessed extensive wine cellars in Bolzano and also later in Oltradige. From the same monastery, there was an evaluation of varieties from 1492 in which Muscat, Lagrein, and “Vernetzer” are described as the best grape varieties in Tyrol. What is not known is whether the Lagrein and Vernatsch varieties of that time were red or white grapes, since it has been shown that during that period, the name was used for both kinds of wine. The independent variety of White Vernatsch (in German, Weißvernatsch; in Italian, Vernaccia bianca) was very widespread up to the nineteenth century in the Adige Valley to the south of Bolzano.

Reports from the nineteenth century confirm earlier indications according to which a radical change took place in wine produc-

tion between the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The fermentation of the pressed juice that was customary in the Middle Ages was superseded by fermentations with the skins and seeds, the classic method for producing red wine. The consequence of this was that the red, large-berry varieties such as Schiava and Gschlafene were increasingly cultivated. A list of varieties from a considerable winegrowing estate in Bolzano from 1643 listed not only the “black (dark-colored) Vernatsch”, but also an edlen Vernatsch (“noble Vernatsch”). Whether this consists of a white Vernatsch or a predecessor of today’s Großvernatsch, which also carries the synonym of Edelvernatsch, is not known. The Trollinger variety in Württemberg corresponds to the Großvernatsch. The name is probably a derivation from “Tirolinger” (“coming from Tyrol”). The designation was mentioned in a document for the first time in 1560 and must have been used originally in the Rhineland Palatinate.

Over the course of three centuries, up to the beginning of the twentieth century, the so-called “Tyrolean wine” was very famous in German-speaking Europe. The Schiava (Vernatsch) was only one part of this wine brand, because varieties such as Gschlafene, Edelschwarze, and Lagrein were also used. The predominance of Schiava began with the interim occupation of Tyrol by Bavaria in 1810. Because the demand for wine grew quickly, the high-yielding Schiava varieties were increasingly cultivated.

Distribution

Schiava vines continue to play a central role in Alto Adige winegrowing. Over the past thirty years, though, the cultivated area has shrunk continuously. Although in 1970, 68 percent of the grape growing areas were planted with Schiava, that is currently only 8 percent, namely 468 hectares (1,156 acres) of Schiava and only 7 hectares (17 acres) of Schiava Grigia (Grauvernatsch). Schiava achieved its greatest distribution during the postwar period, thanks above all to the high demand from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. The differentiation into Großvernatsch, Kleinvernatsch, and Grauvernatsch has only existed since the nineteenth century. They presumably consist of independent varieties that provide a similar type of wine. The three varieties were originally also indigenous in three different subregions: Großvernatsch in the Burgraviate (near Merano), Kleinvernatsch in Oltradige and in Bolzano, and Grauvernatsch (Schiava Grigia) in the Santa Maddalena area. Today, Vernatsch wines are made almost exclusively from Großvernatsch. Pure plantings of Grauvernatsch or Kleinvernatsch are only found on a cultivated area of around 15 hectares (37 acres).

The DOC wine legislation allows the designation of origin Alto Adige along with the indication of the grape variety Schiava or Vernatsch. However it is more common to find on the labels of the bottles the traditional geographical indications of Santa Maddalena, Lago di Caldaro, and Merano (Colli) without providing the variety, even though these are pure Schiava wines. The traditional blending partner Lagrein is only used now in the smallest amounts. Even with Santa Maddalena, it is only blended in to a maximum of between four and ten percent. Around 90 percent of the Schiava vineyards are located in the delimited zones of Santa Maddalena, the Burgraviate (Meranese), and Lago di Caldaro. The most important growing locations are Bolzano, Caldaro, and Appiano, along with the communities around Merano. In the

Bassa Atesina, Schiava is cultivated above all else in Termeno and Cortaccia. Outside of Alto Adige, Schiava is found primarily in the neighboring Trentino (210 hectares/519 acres) and Lombardy (40 hectares/99 acres). Otherwise, the variety only plays a central role in the German cultivation zone of Württemberg (1950 hectares/4,819 acres), where it is called “Blauer Trollinger”.

Vines

The Großvernatsch of today has very large, pyramid-shaped bunches with likewise large, dark blue grapes. The color changes into grayish blue if the natural growth layer that covers the grape skin is maintained. The skin of the berry is soft, which is why that variety is also treated as a table grape in the Burgraviate. Since the yield potential is high, the vineyards are thinned or else the grapes are reduced by half. Thanks to the decrease in the area of cultivation, today Schiava is cultivated almost exclusively in the locations that are best suited for it, with warm microclimates and good ventilation. These are terraced slopes with deep soil located between 400 and 500 meters (1,300 and 1,600 feet) above sea level that cool down well at night. This promotes the aromatic expression and prevents too great a reduction in the acidity levels. This variety tends to mature late. In order for the large bunches to be able to hang free, the traditional growing method on the pergola trellis is maintained for Schiava. This trellising system also offers protection against sunburn and mild hail. In addition, the pergola trellis also accommodates the hanging shoot growth of the variety. What is unusual for a red wine variety is that in the autumn, the leaves of the vines turn a bright yellow color.

Wine

Schiava grapes yield light, accessible wines with rather low tannins and acidity. Thanks to these properties, they have an elegant effect and are ready to drink when young. The bright, ruby-red wines have their own aromas that are reminiscent of sweet cherries, red currants, raspberries, and even strawberries and pomegranates. Added to this, there are often tones of almonds and violets.

THE DIFFERENCES IN LOCATION EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN THE WINE AS FOLLOWS:

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| <i>Caldaro (Lago di Caldaro)</i> | <i>Bright ruby-red. Rather restrained fruit with noble tones of violets and almonds. Mild and elegant on the palate.</i> |
| <i>St. Maddalena</i> | <i>Powerful ruby-red. The nose shows the characteristic berry-like aromas of Schiava. Thanks to the Lagrein content, it has a full-bodied effect on the palate with fully-present tannins. It needs a few months of time in the bottle in order to reach its ideal drinkability.</i> |
| <i>Meranese</i> | <i>Radiant ruby-red. Aromas of sour cherries and raspberries. Light on the palate but with tangible, robust, well-integrated tannins. It often also has slightly savory tones.</i> |