

Wine region Alto Adige: Ancient tradition, many facets, highest quality

Alto Adige is a small wine growing region, and yet, year after year, it produces an impressive number of top wines. It is justified to ask why this is the case, however, there is no simple answer. Is it due to 2500 years of tradition? Or the small, family-run businesses? Is the reason a consistent policy of quality together with plenty of manual labour? Or is it all due to the ideal conditions of the environment? Only one thing is certain: The wine region of Alto Adige impresses with its many facets and therefore with an extent of variety that is probably unique.

A MULTI-FACETED WINE REGION

Clearly, the wine region of Alto Adige is privileged in two aspects. There is its nature which contributes to the many facets of Alto Adige wine. The climate, the soils and the locations create the many varied conditions in the individual Alto Adige wine growing regions. Even within those regions there are differences which can also be detected in the wine glass.

In any case, it is primarily the soils that literally form the base of the wine region of Alto Adige. Their origins go back to the formation of the Alps, before huge ice age glaciers, but also rivers, streams and volcanoes ensured that the soils differed even within small areas: from the clayey subsoils on the valley floor to skeleton-rich soils on former moraines.

With around 150 different types of rock occurring in Alto Adige and the resulting small-scale differences, it is difficult to localise specific soil types. Generalising, it can be said that volcanic porphyry soils dominate in Bolzano and the surrounding area, primary rock soils with quartz, slate and mica are prevalent in Valle Isarco and Val Venosta, while limestone and dolomite rock set the tone in the south of Alto Adige.

In addition to the variety of soils, countless microclimates ensure that the conditions vary from growing area to growing area, often even from parcel to parcel. This is due to the topography of Alto Adige, which - being at the heart of the Alps - is characterised by mountains and furrowed by valleys. This results in a wide variety of altitudes and hillsides, which in turn lead to different levels of sunlight, wind conditions and temperatures.

On a larger scale, too, the Alps shape the climate of Alto Adige. To the north, the main Alpine ridge protects the province like a wall from cold air currents, while the mild, warm air from the Mediterranean region flows in unhindered. The combination of these two factors cre-

ates hot summers and not too harsh winters, sufficient rainfall that is largely distributed evenly throughout the year and a constant breeze that blows the moisture off the sensitive grapes.

“WINE MOUNTAINS” - THE ALTO ADIGE WORD FOR STEEP VINEYARDS

The climate on the one hand and the vineyards laid out like a staircase on the other ensure that very different grape varieties feel at home in Alto Adige. In lower sites with higher temperatures, late-ripening varieties are favoured, such as Lagrein, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay. For wines rich in finesse, especially Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Noir, higher and therefore cooler sites are favoured - incidentally these days tending to be higher than in the recent past, as climate change is also making itself felt in Alto Adige.

The special climatic conditions in Alto Adige make planting in the northernmost vineyards south of the Alps possible. In Alto Adige, the traditional German word of “wine garden” for vineyard has been supplanted by the more common use of the word “wine mountain”. After all, most of the rows of vines nestle on steep slopes at altitudes of up to 1,000 metres. Although they require more work (especially manual labour), they also ensure that the sun can shine unhindered on the vines, that winds blow over them keeping the grapes dry, and last but not least, that after hot summer days, downdraughts from the mountains create cool nights and with them the temperature differences that are particularly favourable for the grapes.

WINE CULTURE WITH DEEP ROOTS

The Alto Adige wine region is not only privileged in terms of nature, but also in terms of culture. This starts with the location of Alto Adige, which has always formed a bridge between the Germanic north and the Romanesque south, between Central Europe and the Mediterranean. Its location at the crossroads of great cultures not only characterises everyday life, but also the wine culture in the region, which benefits from the best of two worlds: the craftsmanship, precision and reliability of the north and the charm, art de vivre and wine tradition of the south.

This wine tradition is deeply rooted in Alto Adige. Very deeply. There is evidence that the Rhaetians cultivated wine here some 2500 years ago, which is earlier than anywhere else in the German-speaking world. Archaeological finds such as vine knives and ladles confirm this, as do the writings of the Romans who settled here after the Rhaetians. From the 8th century AD, it was mainly monasteries from southern Germany who developed the wine culture in Alto Adige and dominated it for many years before the people of Alto Adige took their wine destiny (and history) into their own hands.

This wine autonomy is also connected with the fact that Alto Adige wines were popular in the cellars of the entire Habsburg monarchy - including at the imperial court. However, in order to meet the high (and ever increasing) demands, wine growers had to keep their eyes on the ball at all times. At the end of the 19th century the first significant boost in quality and innovation came with the beginning of experiments with new cultivation methods and, above all, new varieties. This period also paved the way for varieties like Burgundy.

But whatever grape varieties, cultivation methods or players: it is not surprising that two and a half millennia of wine culture have left their mark. Winegrowing and wine making define the course of the year in many parts of the province, numerous customs and festivals can be traced back to the wine economy and, of course, wine culture is also reflected in the local cuisine. Thanks to its long history, wine is an integral part of the landscape, society and life in Alto Adige.

THERE IS ONLY ONE GOAL: TOP QUALITY

Looking at the history of Alto Adige wine, the late 1980s marked a turning point. Whereas until then the focus had largely been on mass production, the rudder was turned and the course reset. The goal now became "highest quality", and this is still being consistently pursued today: with comprehensive training of all

those involved, with plenty of information and training work, with awareness-raising and an open spirit that - building on tradition - also allows for innovation.

The foundation of the pursuit of quality, however, is a simple realisation: that due to their natural diversity, the vineyards and growing regions in Alto Adige cannot all be treated the same. And that in turn means that the first step is selecting the optimal grape variety for the respective location. The turnaround in quality of the 1980s was therefore accompanied by a paradigm shift: From then on, it was no longer the variety that was imposed on the location, but the location that determined the ideal variety.

The consequences of this paradigm shift were far-reaching. Over the past almost 40 years, Alto Adige has developed from a region dominated by Schiava/Vernatsch to one in which around 20 grape varieties now find ideal conditions. In addition, the "red wine region" of Alto Adige has developed into a region that is almost two-thirds dominated by white varieties: from Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc to Gewürztraminer and Pinot Blanc. There has been plenty of development among the red wines too: Schiava/Vernatsch is no longer king; its place has been taken by Pinot Noir and Lagrein, although Schiava/Vernatsch has also made an enormous leap in quality and is increasingly listed in renowned wine guides as one of the great Alto Adige wines.

86 ADDITIONAL GEOGRAPHIC UNITS (UGAs) DESIGNATED AND RECOGNISED

The new producer regulations, which were approved by the Ministry of Agriculture in October 2024, officially recognise the consistent adaptation of the grape variety to the respective location: in the form of 86 clearly defined and documented geographic units. For these, up to five grape varieties that best suited the conditions of the respective UGA were approved. Furthermore, strict quality rules apply. Only DOC wines can also be UGA wines. In addition, the permitted harvest quantities were reduced even further to a quarter lower the highest permitted level for DOC wines. And last but not least: The grapes for UGA wines must come 100 per cent from the designated UGA. For consumers, this means: From the 2024 vintage onwards, the name of a UGA will be indicated on the label together with the corresponding pictogram in the form of a stylised bunch of grapes, enabling the exact location of the wine to be identified.

UGA wines are just one expression of the constant striving for the highest quality, which is itself inscribed in the landscape. Until a few years ago, the traditional

pergola dominated the landscape. Today, many vineyards are switching to espalier training - not only because this is good for quality, but also because it simplifies processing. After all, the use of machinery in Alto Adige viticulture is already subject to tight natural limits (for example due to the steep slopes); what is done elsewhere with the help of machines is still often done by hand here. Although this is a disadvantage in terms of effort, it is also part of the quality policy of the vineyards – as it does, for example enable careful selection of the grapes during the harvest.

QUALITY OF PRODUCT AND PRODUCTION

Because quality today extends beyond the product, Alto Adige wine industry is doing everything it can to make its production as sustainable as possible. To this end, the jointly developed “2030 Alto Adige Wine Agenda” sets out a clear roadmap with detailed milestones. Efforts are not only focused on soil care and sowing between the rows of the vines, but also on the careful use of water as a resource, the systematic reduction of the CO2 footprint, the consistent conservation of resources (for example through recycling) and the avoidance of binding materials that are not biodegradable - to name just a few. In addition to ecological sustainability, the aim is also to achieve socio-economic sustainability, which can be evidenced by the preservation of family farms and the promotion of small cycles.

The “2030 Alto Adige Wine Agenda” is merely the most visible expression of the pursuit of sustainability, a concept instilled in Alto Adige winegrowers from childhood. It may sound like a cliché, but the reason is simple: There are only a few large farms in Alto Adige and even these are not of the large sizes that are commonplace in other growing regions around the world. In fact, the entire wine region of Alto Adige comprises 5,850 hectares of vineyards, which are cultivated by no fewer than 4,800 wine growers.

Alto Adige wineries are therefore of manageable sizes and the vast majority are family owned and run. This in turn means that farms are passed on from generation to generation. And because sustainability is nothing other than thinking and acting across generations, it is in the nature of things that today’s farmers do everything they can to leave the next generation with fertile soil, sufficient clean water, good air, healthy vines and an economically sustainable business.

DIVERSITY IN STRUCTURE AND OFFER

One thing is clear: a small-scale system like this does not only have advantages. Many of the wineries are simply too small to produce and market wine themselves. For this reason, some 150 years ago the first winegrowers came together to form cooperatives in order to be able to assert themselves on the market. Unlike large anonymous companies, cooperative wineries are joint ventures, meaning that all farmers fulfil a dual role: They are suppliers and co-owners at the same time.

In addition to the cooperative wineries, there are also private estate wineries in Alto Adige with a mostly long-standing tradition, which use their own grapes and those from suppliers. There are also independent winegrowers who do everything from working in the vineyard to finishing the wines. Although all actors have been united in the Consorzio Alto Adige Wines, the umbrella organisation of the Alto Adige wine industry, since 2007, the diversity of the Alto Adige wine-growing region continues to be reflected in its organisational structure...

... and is naturally also reflected in the product range. This ranges from primarily fruity varietal wines and sophisticated selections to impressive sweet wines and sparkling wines. What they all have in common is not only the constant striving for quality, even perfection, but also the endeavour to make Alto Adige wines typical representatives of their respective terroirs. In the cellars in particular, the guiding principles are not international trends and fashions, but rather the pursuit of authenticity and thus uniqueness.

THE TERROIR IN A GLASS

This strong emphasis on terroir also has its origins in the rich diversity of the Alto Adige wine region. Although no less than 98 per cent of the total vineyard area comes under the controlled designation of origin DOC– the DOC designation ‘Kalterersee’ has existed since 1970, and the general DOC designation ‘Südtiroler’ since 1975 – the conditions in the individual growing regions are hardly comparable.

While there are only some 90 kilometres distance between the northernmost and southernmost vineyards in Alto Adige and the east-west expanse is no greater, conditions are nevertheless very different. In Val Venosta in the far west, for example, it is comparatively dry, which is why Riesling, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir are predominantly cultivated. Due to its somewhat harsher climate, Valle Isarco in the north is a stronghold of white wines with specialities such as Kerner, Sylvaner, Grüner Veltliner and Müller-Thurgau.

The climate is much milder in the Merano region, which is characterised by varieties such as Schiava/Vernatsch, Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc or Sauvignon. The red porphyry sandstone soils that dominate the Adige Valley between Merano and Bolzano produce first-class white wines with a mineral character. The wine-growing area in and around Bolzano, on the other hand, is known for its Santa Maddalena, which is considered a particularly fine Schiava/Vernatsch. In the south-western district of Gries a strong Lagrein grows on easily warmed alluvial soils with plenty of sand and gravel.

The largest wine-growing communities in Alto Adige are located a little further south of Bolzano. The grapes thriving in Caldaro are mainly Schiava/Vernatsch, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay and Sauvignon, in Appiano it is Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir, Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon and Chardonnay. In Termeno - how could it be otherwise - the focus is on Gewürztraminer, in the mild south of Alto Adige it is on late-ripening varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, and finally on Pinot Noir on the slopes above the southern Val d'Adige.

THE WINE REGION ALTO ADIGE IN FIGURES

- > Cultivated area: 5,850 ha (approx. 1% of Italy's winegrowing area)
- > Elevations: 200 - 1000 m
- > Winegrowers: 4,800
- > Annual production: 40 million bottles
- > Share of DOC wines in production: 96%
- > Proportion in production: 65% white wines, 35% red wines
- > Proportion of the most important grape varieties in cultivation area:
 - 12% Pinot Grigio
 - 11% Chardonnay
 - 11% Gewürztraminer
 - 10% Pinot Blanc
 - 10% Pinot Noir
 - 9% Lagrein
 - 9% Sauvignon Blanc
 - 8% Schiava/Vernatsch
- > Annual sparkling wine production: 600,000 bottles made with Metodo Classico

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