

I sometimes think of Alto Adige as a regal crown fitted to the head of Lady Italy. The jagged peaks of the Dolomites rise sharply into an azure sky and draw the contours of this northernmost Italian region. The crystalline quality of light reflected off the quartz-like rocks of these mountains, made from fossilized coral reefs in a primordial ocean, shines like diamonds on a tiara. If the symbolic importance of a crown is to make a leader appear taller, more triumphant and glorious, the Dolomites similarly create a magical halo atop the elongated Italian peninsula. With Austria at its immediate northern border, the autonomous and bilingual region of Alto Adige (or Südtirol in German) is mapped in a rather straightforward and intuitive manner in both Italian and German. The rocky summits of the mountains make up the majority of the region, leaving a few main valleys or inhabited areas where the towns and cities are chained together with agriculture and viticulture buffered in between.

The only passageway through the Dolomites follows the A22 *Autostrada* from Trento (in the neighboring region of Trentino) to the city of Bolzano (Bozen). Each village along the way is associated with its own wine tradition and represents a unique microclimate, often with distinct geology. Starting from the south and moving north, you will encounter Magré (Margreid), Cortaccia (Kurtatsch), Mazzon (Mazon), Termeno (Tramin), Caldaro (Kalter), Appiano (Eppan), Cornaiano (Girland), San Paolo (St. Pauls) and Colterenzio (Schreckbichl). These villages are located on the west side of the *Autostrada*, where the slopes of the mountains face the morning sunshine. The one exception on the list I have presented above is Mazzon, an area highly specialized in Pinot Nero. Termeno is celebrated for its excellent Gewürztraminer, and the lower altitudes of Lake Caldaro are associated with red grapes such as Lagrein and Schiava.

If you drive along the wine roads, or *weinstraße*, of Alto Adige you will notice an oversized church steeple, some with small onion domes, in each village along the way. These steeples underline the importance of the local priest, a fundamental figure with both religious and political reach. The important historical role of the priest is complicated and nuanced. However, he is ultimately linked to the rise of the wine cooperative, in which many families band together to farm for a single shared winery. Average land ownership in this labor-intensive, high-altitude mountainous growing area is highly fragmented. With more than 5,000 growers in the region farming a total of 5,000 hectares of vines, each family is responsible for roughly one hectare each. Adopting a cooperative model was the only competitive solution, and these dynamic co-ops represent a clear advantage for Alto Adige wine today.

Once at the bustling city of Bolzano (the regional capital) with its gingerbread houses and frescoed buildings, two distinct valleys branch out. The valley to the west follows the Adige River, culminating in the Val Venosta (Vinschgau) subregion where excellent Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling are cultivated. The villages of Andriano (Andrian), Terlano (Terlan) and Nalles (Nals) dot the valley between the cities of Bolzano and Merano (Meran). This area, unlike any other in the world, shows a profound affinity for the Pinot Bianco grape, which in truth is grown throughout Alto Adige with exceptional results. But the clarity and brilliant focus of the grapes grown along the south-facing inclines above the village of Terlano with its mineral-rich Dolomitic soils are truly outstanding.

The Valle Isarco (Eisacktal) extends east of Bolzano (along the A22 *Autostrada*) to Bressanone (Brixen) and up to the Brenner Pass at the border with Austria. The Valle Isarco counts some of Italy's highest altitude vineyards, ranging from 900 to 1,200 meters above sea level, and you can see them perched up in the clouds and mountain mist as you drive along the highway. This area is specialized in Sylvaner, Müller-Thurgau, Riesling and Grüner Veltliner (called Veltliner here). One of the most interesting grapes to my palate is Kerner (a hybrid of Schiava and Riesling). I tasted three or four memorable Kerner-based wines in this report, and I think we can expect more excellent results from the Valle Isarco in the future.

Vintages

Most of the white wines in this report are from the 2018 and 2019 vintages. Neither growing season was easy. Lots of snow fell in winter 2018, and the spring months were rainy and cool. The vegetative cycle was initially delayed as a result. The temperatures warmed up considerably, but June hail events reduced crop yields in some areas. The summer was quite hot, and harvest started the third week of August thanks to accelerated ripening.

Cantina Andriano (Kellerei Andrian) president Georg Eyrl describes the 2019 harvest as "varied." The growing season started off with a warm and dry month of March, with storms and below-average temperatures to follow in May. Those cooler conditions delayed flowering and caused the entire vegetative cycle to get off to a late start. June brought scorching temperatures, with temperature peaks at about 40 degrees Celsius. This accelerated the vegetative cycle, but things slowed down again in July and August as temperatures fell back into normal ranges. Some areas near Bolzano and Gries saw violent hailstorms that caused serious damage to the vines at the tail end of summer. Harvest started at the beginning of September, a bit later than average, with mild temperatures and beautifully sunny days. Despite the challenges, 2019 is set to be a very good vintage for Alto Adige wines, both white and red.

Many of the red wines I tasted in this report are from the 2016 and 2017 vintages. The cooler 2016 vintage was ideal for white wines and proved a little more challenging for reds. Humidity during the summer months put pressure on vintners in terms of fungal disease, and some of the later-ripening varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon reveal some green notes. A very different set of problems emerged in the 2017 vintage that saw violent hailstorms and frost events in the spring months that damaged fruit and reduced yields. The summer was very hot and dry, and like elsewhere in Italy, volumes were reduced by as much as 30% in some areas. Harvest started abruptly and much earlier than average.