

## ***Alto Adige: The Pearl of Italy***

*by Antonio Galloni*

It is one of my favorite drives in Italy. The highway turns north just past Verona. After a short while it feels like the valleys literally open up to reveal a dramatic landscape marked with apple orchards, the Adige River and the spectacular Dolomites. Just past Rovereto and Trento the vistas start to change again. We are in Alto Adige, one of the most spectacular regions in all of Italy. Seldom frequented by Americans, Alto Adige remains largely undiscovered. A wealth of starred restaurants and gorgeous, decked-out hotels – many of them in historic castles – are found in the charming, small towns that mostly attract visitors from northern Europe. During the winter, Alpine sports dominate the breathtaking hillsides. You won't hear much Italian here, although it is spoken. German and the local Ladin dialect are more common. Visiting Alto Adige is like stepping into a whole other world. A world with fabulous food, great wine and the purest mountain air. It is hardly a surprise the locals are extremely friendly and inviting. They know they live in a little corner of paradise.

Unfortunately I only visited Alto Adige once this year and my trip was too short, but I still came away totally inspired by the best wines I tasted. Like so many parts of the world, there is an increase in small, family-run estates that have begun to bottle their own wines rather than selling grapes or bulk wine to larger cooperatives. While that is a generally positive trend, it is also clear that many of these smaller properties don't have a lot of resources and therefore struggle with maintaining the level of consistency that is common throughout other parts of Italy. Hopefully those wineries will find a way to raise the level of their game. The best artisan wines, though, are stunningly beautiful and deserve of a far broader audience than they enjoy today.

Alto Adige stands out for the distinctive varietal character of its wines. The whites are clean, pure and steely. Sauvignon, Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay, Kerner, Sylvaner and, of course, Gewürztraminer, all thrive in Alto Adige. Over the last few years producers have begun pulling back on the super-rich approach they sought in their top wines a decade ago, so there is a stylistic shift underway that is quite noticeable. Among current vintages, 2010, a year that featured a late harvest, plays right into the region's strength of excelling with focused, varietally true, food-friendly wines.

Among the red grapes, Lagrein and Pinot Noir reign supreme, followed by Schiava, the main grape used for St. Magdalener, the every day red of Alto Adige. Lagrein can take many shapes from rustic to opulent, but it is always a wine with a distinct personality that never fully loses an element of wildness. Pinot Noir is arguably the variety that has benefitted most from weather conditions that continue to trend warmer, which has allowed growers to achieve levels of ripeness that simply weren't possible before. I tasted a number of Alto Adige reds, many from the hot 2007 and 2009 vintages, that were exceptional.

High-quality cooperatives abound in Alto Adige, and that is generally a good thing for consumers as it keeps prices reasonable. At a time when prices for so many wines appear to be escalating at an alarming pace with no end in sight, Alto Adige remains full of well-priced bottles that also work beautifully at the dinner table. Readers obsessed with the pleasures of great food and wine – rather than labels – will find much to admire in Alto Adige.

For practical purposes, I have also included a few wines from neighboring Trentino, the province that lies just south of Alto Adige. While Alto Adige is distinctly Germanic in culture, Trentino still feels very much like Italy. Admittedly, I find fewer wines of real interest in Trentino than I do in Alto Adige, with a handful of notable exceptions.

**FRANZ HAAS Moscato Rosa 2009 – 93 points**

“The 2009 Moscato Rosa is surprisingly rich and dark in this vintage. Rose petals, sweet candied cherries, spices, new leather and licorice are some of the nuances that are woven together in a dazzling expression of pure elegance. All the elements come together beautifully in the glass. I especially like the plushness and focus of the 2010. This is a terrific effort from Franz Haas.”

**FRANZ HAAS Lagrein 2009 – 92 points**

“The 2009 Lagrein bursts onto the palate with a rush of dark red fruit, licorice and smoke. There is a bit of unrestrained wildness to the Lagrein that gives the wine an air of excitement. There is no shortage of personality here.”

**FRANZ HAAS Pinot Nero 2009 – 92 points**

“The 2009 Pinot Nero emerges from the glass with crushed red berries, cherries, flowers and licorice. It possesses lovely mid-palate pliancy and an understated personality. Haas’s Pinot is built on elegance and persistence. It is absolutely delicious.”

**FRANZ HAAS Manna IGT 2009 – 91 points**

“The 2009 Manna is very pretty in this vintage. Layers of expressive fruit are nicely woven together in this pretty, understated wine. Hints of tropical fruit and spices linger on the finish. The 2009 is a hugely attractive Manna that impresses for its balance and overall sense of harmony. The blend is 50% Riesling, 20% Chardonnay, 20% Traminer Aromatico and 10% Sauvignon Blanc. The Chardonnay is aged in oak, while the other grapes are aged in steel.”

**FRANZ HAAS Gewürztraminer 2010 – 88 points**

“The 2010 Gewürztraminer is made in an up-front, immediate style that emphasizes the bold fruit. This pretty white is best enjoyed over the next year or two. Although not the last word on finesse, it is hard to argue with the quality considering the price.”