

Starting at the Top, from Grape to Grape: Alto Adige

LAURA DONADONI BEGINS HER TRAVELS IN ITALY FOR PART ONE OF A SERIES

OUR JOURNEY THROUGH Italy starts in the northeastern region of Alto Adige, a viticultural heaven defined in part by the Dolomites mountain range and alpine lakes. While Alto Adige's winemakers have access to just 5,300 hectares of vineyard land, they've planted them with more than 20 indigenous grape varieties, making this winegrowing region one of the most diverse in Italy for its size

Farmer and grower cooperatives are traditional in Trentino-Alto Adige; dating as far back as the Hapsburg Empire, they represent the lion's share of production. Their success stems from the need to create an effective economic system for the region's fragmented viticultural industry: The average grape grower here owns little more than 1 hectare of steep-terraced vineyards, where most vines are still trained by the pergola method.

Though the preconception that cooperatives make only cheap, easy-drinking wines is still alive, Alto Adige producers like Cantina Giralan actively disprove this. Founded in 1923 on a 16th-century farmstead, it's one of the best representatives of the modern cooperative in Alto Adige, producing exquisite Pinot Bianco and other white wines as well as delightful, light-bodied red wines of Schiava and minerally Pinot Noir. About 200 winegrowers farm an area of approximately 215 hectares



Grapes for the Pinot Bianco Flora Riserva are grown on gravelly, limestone-rich soil, which contributes to the wine's smooth, full-bodied character and fruity freshness.

under the supervision of Winemaker Gerhard Kofler, who is focused on translating the distinctive terroir into the wines.

Housed in an ancient building, Cantina Giralan's cellar hides a labyrinth of under-



The Pinot Noir Riserva Vigna Ganger 2014 is an elegant surprise with mature, refined tannins; red fruits and hints of violet; and a spicy mouthfeel. Fewer than 2,000 bottles of this top-tier Giralan wine were produced.

ground corridors carved out of stone and crammed with old casks and barrels. I particularly recommend the Pinot Bianco Flora Riserva and the Pinot Bianco Plattenriegl. Plattenriegl is among the best areas in Alto Adige for growing Pinot Bianco, as its gravelly, limestone-rich soil contributes to the smooth, full-bodied character and fruity freshness of its wines.

You can't leave Giralan without a taste of Schiava (also known as Vernatsch), which locals consider their everyday red wine for pairing with smoked and cured meats. The Vernatsch Alte Reben Gschleier brings an explosion of wild strawberries and red currants with hints of ginger, bright acidity, and soft tannins. Made with grapes from 80- to 100-year-old vines farmed without artificial irrigation or mineral-based fertilizers, this wine gives you a true sense of place.

There are other varieties worth exploring in Alto Adige, including Gewürtztraminer, Sylvaner, and the indigenous Lagrein. But we'll leave them for the next trip, because once you've visited the area for the first time, you'll plan to return again and again. **SJ**

Where to Stop

Lodging: While in the Bolzano province, drive roughly 30 kilometers from Giralan, Cornaiano, to the vibrant old town of Merano, home to one of the region's best spas. Stay at the stunning Hotel Terme Merano, conveniently located by the city center and the botanical gardens.

Dining: At Culinaria im Farmkreuz in Tirolo, Michelin-starred chef Manfred Kofler and his brother Stephan provide a fine-dining experience on a beautiful hillside above Merano. The wine list, composed mostly of local wines, is extensive and well curated.

Giralan Wines to Buy

Pinot Bianco Plattenriegl (\$17)
Pinot Bianco Flora Riserva (\$23)
Vernatsch Alte Reben Gschleier (\$17)
Pinot Noir Riserva Vigna Ganger (\$150)

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