

# Chicago Tribune

## Why your pinot grigio should come from Italy's Alto Adige region



Pinot grigio from the Alto Adige is known for floral softness, a range of succulent fruitiness, food-friendly acidity and a bit of heft in the body. Bottlings to try include Abbazia di Novacella, from left, Terlan and Schreckbichl Colterenzio. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)



**Michael Austin** The Pour Man

One man's vino is another woman's wein.

In Alto Adige, the Italian wine region also known as Sudtirol by the locals who drink "wein," multicultural bilingualism comes with the territory. This is Italy's northernmost wine region, bordering Austria to the north (thus, the language duality), Switzerland to the west, and other Italian wine regions to the east and south, including Lombardy and the Veneto.

Another southern-bordering region, Trentino, is actually connected to Alto Adige at the hip, referred to in the same hyphenate-way as Minneapolis and St. Paul. Despite the hyphens, each place has its own identity, and I'm not just talking about Trentino and Alto Adige. Ask anyone from St. Paul if they live in Minneapolis and you will see what I mean.

So Trentino-Alto Adige is the overall region, cut on the bias by the Adige River (or "Etsch" to the area's German speakers), but let's focus on the northern half, Alto Adige, which reaches up the slopes of the Italian Alps. About 20 grape varieties are grown in Alto Adige's seven sub-regions, including Colli di Bolzano, Lago di Caldaro, Meranese, Santa Maddalena, Terlano, Valle Isarco and Valle Venosta. The region's white-to-red grape ratio is roughly 60/40, with pinot grigio leading the way in white plantings.

Alto Adige is the Italian name for South Tyrol (Sudtirol in German), which was part of Austria until after World War I when it was handed over to Italy. Just because you move a border doesn't mean you also move a culture with it. If you stretched the northern border of Louisiana all the way up to Canada it wouldn't make people in the Twin Cities suddenly Cajun. Traditions, cuisine and languages would remain, as they have even in the much smaller readjusted area of Alto Adige for close to 100 years. Wineries there go by the Italian "cantina" and the German "kellerei" and you will often see both words on labels.

While we're at it, let's talk about the name of the grape itself, because of course even pinot grigio has aliases. The Germans call it rulander, and you might see that word on an Alto Adige label right next to "pinot grigio." But it's a French grape variety, and its original name is pinot gris. I know, this whole thing has become a mirror facing a mirror. Or at least two funhouse mirrors side-by-side. But if wine didn't take us on these delightful diversions now and then, we probably would have lost interest a long time ago.

When you see an American wine called pinot grigio, that winery is choosing to refer to the Italian spelling of a French grape. Whether it's pinot grigio or pinot gris, it's the same grape, no matter where it comes from. When it comes from Alto Adige, it will be pinot grigio or rulander.

Through the years, pinot grigio has gained in popularity despite not being of the highest quality in some cases, but Alto Adige is a place known for producing solid expressions of this pleasant white wine. This is not the lackluster, watery version of pinot grigio that was a staple of by-the-glass restaurant wine lists in the 1990s. That stuff was unobtrusive at best.

The pinot grigio of Alto Adige, like all good versions of pinot grigio, has something to say and it says it with abundant floral softness, a range of succulent fruitiness, food-friendly acidity and a bit of heft in the body. Served well chilled, at 50 to 55 degrees, it will be a nice sipper or a worthy accompaniment to a variety of salads, seafood, pastas, roasted chicken and pork.

### **Try it**

I opened several bottles of the 2014 vintage recently and found that the Cantina Bolzano (\$17) offered melon, pear, honey and a soft mouthfeel. Look for the German version of Bolzano, "Bozen," on the label. The Abbazia di Novacella (\$20) was full of peach, citrus and, because a third of the wine was fermented in oak barrels, a buttery roundness.

The Cantina Terlano (\$24) was full-bodied, floral and soft with the suggestion of tropical fruits and melon. Again, look for the German spelling "Terlan" on the label. A biodynamic offering from Alois Lageder called Porer (\$25) was bursting with bright tropical and stone fruit aromas, along with a clear mineral presence.

The Schreckbichl Colterenzio (\$14) was tangy and kissed with green apple, citrus and a touch of anise, while the St. Pauls (\$24) had aromas reminiscent of fresh hay and wildflowers, plus a juicy component of tropical fruits. It is a sheer coincidence that this wine is called St. Pauls, having nothing to do with the Twin Cities analogy. There just so happens to be a village in Alto Adige called St. Pauls.

You probably won't find too much pinot grigio being referred to as rulander or grauburgunder (another German synonym) outside of Germany, Austria or Alto Adige in northeastern Italy. But if you do, now you'll know what you're dealing with. The road beyond that default pinot grigio order of the past is much longer and winding and interesting than it first appeared — that much is perfectly clear.

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