

# Wine Spectator

## ROBERT CAMUTO: LETTER FROM EUROPE

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### Life-Changing Whites

*Italy's Terlano cooperative sets the bar high in the Dolomites*

In Italy, “wine cooperative” can be a pejorative, synonymous with grape-buying collectives that produce oceans of basic wine destined for supermarkets.

Northeastern Italy's Alto Adige is an exception, known for co-ops that produce wines as good as those from top independent winemakers. Here, on the edge of the Dolomites, just six miles northwest of the regional capital, Bolzano, Cantina Terlano produces some of Italy's most prized—and most historic—white wines.

How good? Since it began exporting its wines in the mid-1990s, this cooperative has released 73 wines that scored 90 points or higher in Wine Spectator's blind tastings. Something special seems to happen to white grapes—particularly Pinot Bianco—grown in the quartz-rich volcanic soils (known as red porphyry) at up to 3,000 feet in the hills above sleepy Terlano (pop. 4,200).

“It's a different culture here,” says enologist Klaus Gasser, 48, who has been the winery's public face for 20 years. He is maneuvering a four-wheel-drive up steep, narrow roads flanked by terraced vineyards and tidy, white stucco Tyrolean farmhouses. “It's a little bit more organized. It's the German spirit of taking care of the land.”

Indeed, the Alto Adige, or South Tyrol, was annexed by Italy from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 following World War I and, according to census data, most of the population still considers German their first language.

Cantina Terlano has 143 individual member-growers who farm a total of more than 400 acres. “People live close to their vineyards,” Gasser says of area farmers, who typically grow grapes on the hillsides and apples on the Adige valley floor. “It's a family job. They see the vines every day.”

The wine cooperative began in 1893, blending and bottling a wine called Terlaner that was made from the classic white French cultivars that spread through Austria: Pinot Bianco (Pinot Blanc), Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

Yet for most of the 20th century, Terlano remained a secret.

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Gasser, an Alto Adige native who grew up 10 miles from the town and honed his craft in German wine cellars, came to Cantina Terlano in 1994 to work one harvest.

“Terlano was then a very closed area. All the wine was sold within an area of 15 miles,” Gasser says. “Then we discovered these old vintages, and we saw the incredible potential.”

The co-op had stored bottles of every vintage back to 1954, as well as some vintages back to 1893.

“I had supposed that 80 percent of the wines would be oxidized,” Gasser says. Then he opened bottles and tasted. Not only were the wines not oxidized, many decades-old vintages had retained freshness, a characteristic salinity and rare complexity. “It was an incredible experience that changed my life.”

Gasser never left Terlano. He decided to dedicate himself to making the wines known to the world.

Today, Terlano wines are now exported to 45 countries, though 70 percent of its production stays in Italy—most of that served at restaurants that devote attention to fine wine.

Sampling decades of Terlano wines in the cooperative’s sleek, modern winery is an eye-opening experience. Wines that you might think should taste over the hill are young and vibrant and pushing a lot of olfactory buttons. I found myself spontaneously saying, “Wow.”

The winemaking team here, led since 2002 by Alto Adige native Rudi Kofler, 40, can’t say exactly what gives the wines such long and graceful aging potential.

“There are wines that in the first years don’t express at all. It’s difficult, but you have to read where a wine is going,” he says.

How long of an aging potential are we talking about?

“Forty to 50 years,” Gasser responds.

To be sure, Terlano makes excellent modestly priced wines meant for short-term drinking, along with the tiers of ageable whites and reds from Lagrein, some vineyard-designated, some blends. Then there is the top line, called “Rarities”—exceptional vintage whites released from time to time after aging at least 10 years on their lees in 2,500-liter stainless-steel casks.

This spring, Cantino Terlano releases its Rarity Pinot Bianco 2004, expected to be priced at about \$165 in the United States. After pulling the cork on a bottle, pouring and tasting, Kofler says, “It still needs more time—five years would be nice. If you can wait 10 years—even better.”

“We are a co-op,” Gasser adds with a laugh, “but we also make crazy things.”

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