

Surrounded by the Alps, bottles of Dom Perignon in hand, they celebrate a successful gold heist in Venice. Later, traversing a bridge, they are subsequently ambushed by armed hooligans. It is at this point that the "Judas" in their midst reveals himself and proceeds to commandeer the loot with his henchmen, but not before "phylloxer-ating" the patriarch of the group as if he were a non grafted vine. In the end his protégés escape by plunging into the frigid water.

Alto Sight

by Evan Saviolidis

Congratulations if you recognize one of the opening scene's from 2003's hit movie the Italian Job. Now you may ask; what is the connection with wine other than the well regarded monk? Well, the backdrop for that particular scene was the Italian/Austrian border, in the province of Trentino-Alto Adige, more precisely Alto Adige, which is also known as Südtirol. Officially it is Italy's most northerly wine growing post. Unofficially, and patriotically in the hearts of the inhabitants, it is an extension of Austria.

Though the region falls within Italian borders, many factors set it apart from the rest of La Bella Italia. First is language and culture. Italian may be spoken by all, but German is the dialect of choice as the region was part of Austria for 600 years, until annexed by Italy in 1919. To this day, most family names end in m, n and er not o or i.

Homes are distinctly Heidiesque, with garden gnomes decorating entrances. They punctuate the Alps as far as the eye can see. The only thing really missing is yodeling, but with enough wein, anything is possible.

Second is food. Classic Italian ingredients are supplanted by a heartier, stick to you ribs, mountain food- a necessity for this cool, alpine area. Good luck in trying to find a tomato-potatoes, cabbage and root vegetables reign supreme. Apples replace figs. Olive oil plays

second fiddle to butter as lipid of choice and proscutto finds a new identity as Speck; a smoked/fattier version of the famed ham. As for grains risotto and rye bread, not pasta and crusty loaf are the choice.

Adding to the melting pot of cultural influences is a selection of French grapes. After the ravages of phylloxera destroyed the vines in the late 19th century, peasants could not afford to replant the ancient (or any other for that matter) cépages. Their savior came in the form of Arch Duke Leopold II. Having sympathy for the growers' plight, he funded the replanting.

His selection sided with personal preference- Burgundian ones - Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc (Bianco, Weissburgunder) and Pinot Gris (Pinot Grigio). Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot would find a home later on. Still, this is a hotbed of distinctiveness and two native red grapes have survived from the 19th century. Schiava produces every day wine and Lagrein, which I believe makes the best red wines of Alto.

Not so Cool

Of the 11 000 acres under vine, viticulture is conducted primarily on bench land but can reach altitudes as high as 3 000 feet above sea level. Many different mesoclimates punctuate the valley and altitude plays a big role. Reds are grown in the warmer, lower lying portions, while whites are grown higher up and/or in cooler areas. While the region is officially classified as cool climate, summers are warm, even hot while winters are cold.

The majority of grapes are grown and cultivated by farmers who are members of the ever predominant co-ops. In many cases vines are still stalked on the old "Pergolas", which produce

canopies (think parasols) that partially block the sun from the grapes and also encourage growth over quality. Thankfully, growers are now realizing that quality lies with trellising. Planting lower to the ground, they are taking advantage of the natural slopes, which provide superior sun exposure and heat retention.

Alto Grape -o- file

Schavia: The most populous grape of the region, producing vast quantities of light bodied wines with aromas of sour cherries and red berries accompanied by fresh acid. The Santa Maddalena DOC produces a fuller bodied version of Schavia, which usually contains 10% or more Lagrein as a quality enhancer.

Lagrein: By far the most impressive red grape of the Alto Adige when yields are controlled. Dark Dark coloured wines with blackberries, cherries, violets and plums which are accompanied by chocolate and spice when oaked. They deserve more attention but production is limited and most of it is sold in Italy and Europe.

Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot: Planted in the warmest microclimates and only really interesting in the best years or when growers are willing to sacrifice yields for the sake of quality.

Pinot Grigio: Crisp, clean and fruity. Being the latest super model of grapes, producers are adhering to the adage- "Carpe Dium."

Pinot Bianco: Delicate and refreshing with apple, honey and white flowers.

Sauvignon Blanc: On the rise as the climate is perfectly suited to its propagation. High quality seems to be the rule of thumb.

Chardonnay: Fruit driven and judiciously oaked, if at all. An important grape in sparkling wine production

Gewurztraminer: Said to be of Adigian birthright, from the town of Tramin. Along with Muller Thurgau, it represents a small percentage of production.

The Wineries (German/Italian names)

Cantina Arunda

There is probably no better way to kick off an educational wine junket than sipping a half dozen bubbies at 9 o'clock in the morning at the highest winery in Europe, some 1200 meters above sea level.

Owner, Josef Reiterer is a hard working "salt of the earth" man with a constant Gandolphian/grandfather caring smile from ear to ear- essentially the type of person you can't help but like.

He started his winery in 1979, at a time when most people only knew Henkell Trocken and Asti. Needless to say, more than a few people thought he was off his rocker. Today he produces wines under two labels- Arunda and Vivaldi, using Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc grapes.

The wines are extremely crisp and refreshing thanks to the altitude of the vineyards. His entry level sparklers garner scores of 86 points. The top end 1990 Arunda Riserva scored 88 and Cuvee Marianna 89.

Josef also operates an Acetorium, a vinegar making facility. His fig and apple vinegars are sublime.

Cantina Niedermayr

Without a doubt, Josef Niedermayr is the King of Lagrein. While at his winery he poured us a vertical of his Lagrein Auf Gries Riserva dating back to the mid 80's. A testament to the quality that he produces is the fact that all the wines came from pergola vineyards (which have now been abandoned for trellised ones.) The highlights of the tasting were the 1997, which I gave 93 points and the '00 which garnered 92 points.

Euforius 2001, his IGT, a blend of Lagrein, Cab Sauv and Merlot garnered 88 points while his 1983 received 90 points. Also noteworthy is his Sauvignon Blanc, it was one of the best that I tasted on my trip. Serious wine is being made here.

Kellerei Kaltern/ Cantina di Caldaro

The "Chariots of Fire" theme resonates through the cellar as you watch the short montage of life at the co-op which was founded in 1906 and has 410 members. A self imposed quality philosophy coupled with higher prices for lower yielding grapes has had a profound positive effect.

Great were both the Weisburgunder Vial and Sauvignon Premstaler 2003-88 points each. The Cabernet Riserva Pfarrhof, sourced from old vines is a dead ringer for a St-Julien, with aromas of earth, cassis, black cherry, animal and chocolate (90). A specialty of Alto is Moscato Giallo, made in the passito method (from dried grapes). Kalern's is low in acid but full of marmalade,

ripe apricot and spice flavours that linger on the palate (89).

Kellerei Girlan/ Cantina Sociale di Cornaiano

Another co-op, Girlan has 230 member/vintners. The best wine of this establishment is their Lagrein Scuro 2000 (88), which displays a spicy, cherry/vanilla, sweet fruit and licorice nose with very good length. As for whites, the 2003 Weissburgunder Pattenreiegel and Chardonnay Select Art Flora both garner 85 points.

Cantina Kössler

Kössler is a house which makes little sacrifice to modern niceties such as new oak and stainless steel. Instead row upon row of old wooden vats line the cellars. Like most wineries in Adige, it is a co op. The entry level 2003 Weissburgunder, Gewurz, Schiava and Pinot Grigio are decent with marks between 81 and 83. More alluring are the top end reds which benefited from the heat wave in Europe of 2003. The Merlot and Cabernet which are still in cask receive preliminary scores of 87 to 89.

Kellerei Bozen/ Cantina di Bolzano

Two of the area's oldest wineries, Gries (founded 1908) and Maddalena (founded 1930) came together in 2001 to form the Cantina Produttori Bolzano, Tyrol's youngest co-operative. Gambero Rosso, Italy's premier wine magazine has given every vintage of their Lagrein Taber, since 1998, its highest mark of "3 glasses". Having tasted most of them I agree totally as they score between 88 to 91. My nod for best Merlot goes to 00 Riserva Siebenejich(90) and the 01 Cabernet Riserva Mumelter(87) is a medium bodied offering with a soft mouthfeel and flavours of raspberry, bell pepper and vanilla.

Roner Distillery

After a long day of wine sampling, we finished with a light, soothing tasting of grappas and other spirits. My favorites were the Gewurztraminer, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay Grappas, Willaims; their version of the famous pear brandy and Caldif, an apple brandy. Apple martini aficionados might be interested in Pomme, an apple liqueur which makes excellent cocktails.

The LCBO currently carries two of Roner's Grappas as well as Myrtillo; a liqueur of grappa and blueberries.