

best vineyards, Castel Ringberg. After fermentation, a third is aged in new and old barriques, the remainder in stainless steel.

Karoline also believes that raising quality can take the estate further. Since her mother's inspiration for founding the winery was to produce the very best with international varieties through the identification of superior sites and the lowering of yields, this could prove a daunting task for her and her sister. Their input has been a new cellar that allows a completely gravitational way of working, with many small tanks enabling each parcel to be vinified separately.

The rise of the international varieties, especially Pinot Grigio and Pinot Bianco, in Alto Adige went hand in hand with the decline of Vernatsch. Once highly sought after for its refreshing, light strawberry fruit paired with modest alcohol and fine tannins, Vernatsch fell out of fashion after the market became inundated with masses of dull dilute wines, trying to copy the original version. Trained on high-yielding pergola systems, Vernatsch produced insipid wines, and was seen as the culprit for Alto Adige's reputation for mediocrity. While the international varieties never shared these image problems, it was, yet again, high yields and vineyards planted outside the classic zones that were to blame.

Vernatsch reinvented

While local varieties are now again in demand, several producers never turned their back on Vernatsch. Franz Gojer at Glögglhof was one, clinging on to his old vines in St Magdalener. Like many, he used to sell the grapes off until in the mid-1970s he decided to bottle his own wine. Trips to California, Australia and France made him realise the uniqueness of Vernatsch and, instead of producing a feather-light style, he drastically reduced yields, while fermenting the wine longer on the skins.

While his colleagues accused Franz of making 'un-typical' wines, his son Florian is

Alto Adige producers and vineyards

- 1 Schreckblich
- 2 Castel Ringberg
- 3 St Magdalener
- 4 Kalterersee
- 5 Glögglhof
- 6 Alois Lageder
- 7 Tröpfthalhof
- 8 Nusserhof



Map: Maggie Nelson

equally convinced of Vernatsch and the maligned pergola. 'All our Vernatsch is on pergola', Florian tells me. 'You need to reduce the yield but you get much riper grapes due to a larger canopy, which also provides shade.' Since he joined his father in 2013, he has been given his own task, managing a new southwest-facing site on 600m from which he skilfully makes a Pinot Bianco and a Kerner.

The pergola is regaining popularity in some corners of Alto Adige, because many of the old pergola vineyards have unique and rare clonal material, which is highly sought after. The pergola system can help offset some of the effects of climate change, providing shade to the grapes in ever hotter vintages while also protecting against the hail storms which are becoming more frequent.

Below: Andreas Dichristin uses skin contact and amphorae to emphasise the terroir

At regional standard-bearer Alois Lageder, one of the first wineries in Alto Adige to introduce organics and biodynamics, sustainability and climate change are at the forefront of everything done by father and son team, Alois and Clemens. Clemens tells me that 30 years ago, out of curiosity, his father planted many international varieties, which were, 'undrinkable' in Clemens' own words, because the grapes wouldn't ripen. That has changed over the years, and Clemens is now custodian of many experimental barriques, filled with Assyrtiko, Petit Manseng and Chenin Blanc, as well as the almost extinct local white Blatterle. All these whites show great minerality and freshness and it is easy to see their potential future role.

While the current generational handover secures the continuation of some of Alto Adige's seminal estates, another generation has begun bottling the produce of their tiny



Photograph: Alex Filz

Speller's top Alto Adige buys



Alois Lageder, Benefizium Porer, Pinot Grigio 2014 91

£17 Exel Wines

Minerally and savoury – so different from the cliché. Beautifully textured and fresh. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alcohol** 13%

Nusserhof, B....., Vino Bianco 2011 91

£17 (2012) Amazon.co.uk

Pure quince fruit and lemon peel, this has zingy acidity, and is both linear and ripe. **Drink** 2016-2026 **Alc** 12%

Schreckbichl Colterenzio, Praedium, Puiten Pinot Grigio 2014 91

£13.20 Amazon.co.uk

Brilliant straw yellow. Beautiful peach and spice with a touch of oak and grapefruit. Feather-light and succulent. **Drink** 2016-2019 **Alc** 13.5%



Franz Gojer, Glögglhof, Kerner, Karneid 2013 90

N/A UK www.gojer.it

Piercing, fresh lemon and pineapple flavours. This is both crisp and long. **Drink** 2016-2018 **Alc** 14.5%

Elena Walch, Castel Ringberg Pinot Grigio 2014 90

£17.45 Amazon.co.uk, Bancroft

Elegant oatmeal and white fruit. Very fresh and lemony. In a class of its own. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Nusserhof, Lagrein Kretzer (Rosé) 2014 91

N/A UK +39 0471 978 388

Creamy, with fresh strawberry fruit flavours, fine-grained tannins and a lovely freshness. Classy stuff. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 13%

Franz Gojer, Glögglhof, Vernatsch alte Reben 2014 91

£12.27 Uvinum

Fresh and perfumed with soft tannins giving it just the structure it needs. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 12.5%



Nusserhof, Elda, Vernatsch Vino Rosso 2014 91

£21.87 Uvinum

Fresh strawberry fruit with real structure and finely tuned balance. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alc** 12%

Pranzegg, Campill Vernatsch, Mitterberg 2012 91

£19.25 (2011) Amazon.co.uk

A touch of oak and a great purity of raspberry fruit. Amazingly expressive. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 12.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p95

estates – grapes which in the past would have disappeared into anonymous co-op vats. Recognising the value of local varieties, which are seen as the key to transmitting Alto Adige's identity, they try to interfere as little as possible between the vineyard and the glass. They achieve this through low yields, long skin maceration for Vernatsch, adding the stalks to the fermentation tank, and fermenting whites on the skins without letting them turn into crude, orange-tinged wines.

One of the most radical is Andreas Dichristin of Tröpfthalhof estate, who ferments Sauvignon Blanc on the skins and Cabernet Sauvignon in closed-top amphorae. Dichristin is not motivated by any desire to be extreme, but by a wish to accentuate the terroir with as little obstruction as possible. The Tröpfthalhof wines are elegant, fascinating and bursting with personality.

It doesn't have to cost a fortune to make exciting wines. Martin Gojer admits that when he started his tiny estate, Pranzegg, with his wife Heidi, he simply didn't have the money to plant international varieties. Wine lovers are the luckier for it, because Gojer became infatuated with Vernatsch, sourced from a 60-year-old vineyard trained on – you've guessed it – a pergola. Using tronconic (tapered) oak and tiny cement tanks, he leaves his Vernatsch for as long as 30 days on the skins, while keeping the cap submerged in the wine. The result is a truly transparent version

of the grape, with fine, muscular tannins and layers of depth.

An important source of inspiration for this new generation is doubtlessly Heinrich and Elda Mayr's estate, Nusserhof. Once situated on the outskirts of Bolzano, real estate has relentlessly encroached on it, but Nusserhof remains a treasure trove of local varieties. Its jewel-like, organic vineyards supply the raw material for Mayr's beautiful, lithe yet complex white Blatterle.

Mayr, a pioneer in organics and biodynamics, has saved Blatterle from extinction. Still so rare that it has yet to be officially registered, it is illegal to use the name of the grape on the label. Nusserhof circumvents the law by labelling the wine as 'B.....', which, if anything, shows the absurdity of Italian wine law.

Mayr's range includes Elda, a beautiful, firm and ageworthy Vernatsch made from 80-year-old vines; and a stunning rosé, Lagrein Kretzer. This was once a traditional wine style in Alto Adige, but has since long been given up. It was Nusserhof which, again, gave it a new lease of life.

Alto Adige is slowly realising it must raise its game, and a new generation is already showing how this can be done, by rescuing local varieties, using the undervalued Vernatsch grape to create terroir-driven wines, and employing a gentler use of oak to bring out the texture and complexity of its much loved international varieties. **D**



Above: Martin Gojer at Pranzegg sources his Vernatsch fruit from a 60-year old, pergola-trained vineyard

Wine consultant Walter Speller divides his time between London and Padua. He writes on Italy for JancisRobinson.com