

Lagrein – A Rising Star



For decades the only wine from the Alto Adige known outside the region itself was the Schiava. For the tourists the light, fruity red was the incarnation of the “Dolce Vita”, the lifestyle in this region on the edge between the cultures of northern and southern Europe. During the last thirty years the Schiava (or Vernatsch in the local dialect) had its lows; it regained its popularity as wine for food in the last years, but it isn't

100 years old Lagrein vines of Taber – Hof / Gries

anymore the only red wine that makes up the image of Alto Adige. Big leaps have been made in the past with white grape varieties like the autochthonous Gewürztraminer, the Pinot Blanc or international reds like Cabernet, Merlot and Pinot Noir.

The most impressive change happened for one grape variety: The Lagrein.

The Lagrein grape is considered as the oldest grown grape in the region. Already in the end of the 19th century scientists tried to identify the origin of the strange name. Some explained it with the Greek word “lagarinthos”, which means “hanging” or tried to find the origin in the antique Greek colony of “Lagaria” in southern Italy.

The word could also be linked with the “Val Lagarina”, the southernmost part of the Adige valley. But there, no medieval documents have ever shown the variety's name.

The newest genetic researches (*IASMA, 2006*) were an important step ahead.

According to this serious research the Lagrein is a direct offspring of the Teroldego grape that is grown in the northernmost part of the neighbouring Trentino region. Scientists did believe already in the nineties that there is a strong genetic link between the two and also between them and the varieties Marzemino and Syrah.

And it is in fact true. Lagrein is also very close to Marzemino (Trentino and Veneto) and Refosco (Friuli), both Lagrein and Teroldego are cousins of Syrah grape. But the most important news lies in the genetic origin: the ancestor of these grapes is the Pinot Noir.

With this novelty the theory of the Greek roots of Lagrein has completely lost its credibility, considering that the Pinot Noir was spread over Europe in Roman times.

The first documents in Alto Adige mention the Lagrein in the year 1379. From the late Middle Ages on the history of Lagrein can be traced quite well. Till the 15th century this grape variety was planted everywhere in the region. Only in the following centuries it was slowly replaced by the variety Schiava (Vernatsch) which showed to be more resistant and more productive.

But especially in the alluvial plain between the rivers Isarco, Adige and Talvera, where Lagrein could find ideal growing conditions the variety survived.

Not too long ago most Lagrein was made into the fruity and easy drinking “Lagrein Kretzer”, the only rosé wine with old traditions in the Alto Adige region.

The remaining quantity was vinified as very dark, but often also very tannic and bitter red wine. So it was mostly used to give more colour and body to the wines made out of the Schiava grape, especially in bad vintages.

Nowadays this old tradition lives forth in the S.Maddalena wine, where the laws allow to add a maximum of 15% Lagrein to the Schiava grapes.

After the big crisis of the wine industry in the end of the 70s and in the beginning 80s people’s taste changed. The consumers wanted more quality and more concentrated red wines. In these years began the rising of the Lagrein, this time as real red wine. By reducing yields and by using new techniques in the vineyard and in the cellar the real qualities of this indigenous variety had now clearly shown. The dark, smooth Lagrein wines with the typical nose of dark berries, chocolate and spices found more and more fans in and outside of the region. Now the best Lagrein wines belong to the most awarded reds in Italy and can compete with premium products from other nations as well.

Wolfgang Kager, Cantina Bolzano