



The vineyards of Alto Adige

Have Pen, Will Travel

A tale of two cities, Italian-style

BY WES MARSHALL

Bolzano and Verona. The two cities are just 80 miles apart, about the distance from Austin to San Antonio. Culturally, they might as well be on opposite sides of Europe. Bolzano is hip and casual, ranked as one of Europe's most livable cities. It's also a curious border town, where 27% of the inhabitants speak German and 73% speak Italian. Yet, wherever we went, Germans seemed to be in charge. Somehow, the German speakers and Italian speakers get along. So well, in fact, that the Dalai Lama has visited several times hoping for a solution to the Tibet/China problem.

Bolzano was a toy tossed around like a political hot potato by Hitler and Mussolini, forcing the residents into a fascist guessing game. Hitler offered repatriation to the fatherland; Mussolini offered the option to stay if they learned the Italian language and adopted Italian customs. Today, it's one of Italy's most favored cities, and its agricultural area, called Alto Adige, is rich with a natural climate and perfect soils. The grapevines and fruit trees in this area explode out of the ground with intense flavors, making their fruit prized throughout this part of Europe.

Verona is more grounded in history and is even more important to the region. Since Roman times, Verona has been a crossroads for trade and politics. It's also a gorgeous location, though missing the stunning alpine surroundings that the Dolomites give to Bolzano. And though it too was a toy for opposing fas-

cist groups, the city has always been very much Italian. Recently, Verona has been a favored destination for immigrants from Romania, Sri Lanka, and other countries, to the point that 20% of the children being born have at least one foreign parent. Romantic Verona is also the fictional home to Shakespeare's young lovers, Romeo and Juliet.

I was lucky enough to be able to attend two wine shows in Italy a few weeks ago. The Bozner Weinkost Mostra Vini di Bolzano (Bolzano Wine Tasting Festival) is a five-day party where hundreds of very attractive people and a few old wine lovers drink too much local wine and dance until daylight. The educational element of the festival includes serious, learned presentations by experts in the field, as well as organized tours to wineries.

The other program was a definitive look into one of the greatest (and most expensive) of Italian wines. The Amarone Anteprema is a yearly affair where the local governmental wine agency rolls out the latest vintage so the world's wine press can give their evaluation. Amarone takes a long time to be released and even longer to be ready to drink. This Anteprema's vintage was 2006, considered a fine, problem-free year. Hundreds of journalists from all over the world attended the Anteprema; it was humbling to be among so many famous masters of wine and world-renowned journalists in the middle of what was obviously an important moment in Italian wine.

Cuisines a World Apart

While there is some crossover, you can always count on finding polenta in Bolzano and rice in Verona. Both are proud of their meats. The folks from Alto Adige adore *speck*, a gently smoked cut of pork, rich with fat and thin-sliced or cubed to be served at the table. Oddly enough, the pigs that make speck are raised in Denmark; the people of Alto Adige think the feed lots stink, so they simply buy Danish pigs. Over in Verona, the common meats are the cured *sopressata*, a type of salami, and the raw beef carpaccio. And as with most agricultural areas in Italy, natives are always proud of their local version of prosciutto.

Risotto reigns in the Verona area, where versions with white truffles and the delicious indigenous mushrooms and asparagus rule the table. The local rice – Riso Nano Vialone Veronese – makes the best risotto I've had, with a light, creamy texture that's totally addictive.

Alto Adige restaurants had more corn-based starches and featured dozens of dishes made from the spectacular local apples. The fact that there are more than 8,000 apple farmers in Alto Adige gives you an idea of the European demand for the area's apples. Gala, Granny Smith, and Golden Delicious predominate. The German influence yields the yummy *apfelküchel*, a crispy apple fritter. The standout dish of the region is the lowly bread dumpling. There are as many recipes as there are imaginations, but

the classic is the *canederli* which is flavored with speck, just slightly crispy on the outside and like a down pillow inside, all swimming in *strangolapreti* (a melted butter sauce).

One Area of Strong Unity

Italians are transfixed with wine. No matter the area of the country, the local people have a set of grapes that creates wines that are perfect with the regional cuisine. Unlike most of the rest of the world, Italian winemakers have largely resisted the temptation to rip out all of their own best grapes so they can replace them with wines Americans can pronounce. Zinfandel? Nope. Shiraz? None of that either. Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet? Well, yes. To some degree, these grapes lend some structure and familiarity that a few of Italy's finest winemakers seek. For their cheaper wines especially, it's hard to resist the temptation of English-speaking markets.

In Italy, we drank wines made from grapes such as Corvina, Rondinella, Molinara, Garganega, Lagrein, and Weissburgunder. These wines are distinctive and their makers are intent on keeping them that way. The idiosyncratic flavors come from growing methods and vinification choices that have been developed over centuries, sometimes millennia. During that time, both gastronomy and wine have advanced symbiotically, and, like the people who tenaciously hold on to their customs, winemakers are intent on holding on to what it is that makes their wines special. They create wines for the dining table. Oh, and one other area of total unity – Italians like corks. It's futile to search through an Italian store for screw tops or bag-in-a-box wines. Something about tradition honoring tradition at home. They will export them, though.

The Wines of Alto Adige

Most of the wines imported into Central Texas from Alto Adige are dry, white, and named by the grape. Given the region's German background, most labels will show the name of the wine in both German and Italian, if different. So Pinot Nero (or Pinot Noir) will also be listed as Blauburgunder,

