

The Region.

Viticulture in the Dolomites.

The Dolomites, a set of mountain groups spanning the Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige and Friuli Venezia Giulia regions have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2009. Pale rock peaks, disarmingly beautiful, that are often over 3,000 meters high, are alternated with numerous valleys where human communities have established their settlements and their activities. Viticulture is widespread mainly in the western part of the Dolomites, in the Trentino and Alto Adige areas, where evidence of vine cultivation dates back to before the middle ages and in some cases even to the Etruscan and Roman eras.

It was however an essentially local production that satisfied basic home consumption in a general context of social and food self-sufficiency; furthermore, the early harvests led to wines with low alcohol content that could not be kept for long. Even though viticulture was strictly regulated, until the 13th and 14th century the focus of agricultural production and trade was represented by timber and hay. The former was conveyed by boat downstream as far as Venice, the latter ensured overland transport and the hauling of boats upstream by animals. It is in this very period that the rivalry between the two regions took shape: on the one hand the area of Trento governed by its Bishopric, considered as the North of the Veneto-Po area; on the other hand, the South Tyrol (Alto Adige area) generally regarded as the productive South of the German lands.

The development of quality viticulture began in the South Tyrolean area and was triggered around the 10th century by local clerics that needed the wine for liturgical celebrations as well as being fuelled by the vibrant trade with Austria, Bavaria, Bohemia and Switzerland. We must wait until the 15th century to find the first evidence of note-worthy wine products in Trentino: previously the monasteries and the markets of Veneto and the Po Valley obtained their supplies of wine mainly from the vineyards of Vicenza and Verona while the most interesting product from Trentino was considered the oil from the olive groves around the Garda lake.

Teroldego, Marzemino, Gocciadoro, Rosso d'Isera, Malvasia, Schiava: during that period, the alcohol content of Trentino wines generally increased permitting a longer conservation and long distance travel, making its sale fur-

ther abroad possible and requiring greater precision in the identification of the grape varieties and of the wine's origin. The harvests were regulated according to grape ripeness and all the productive-commercial system related to wine production became increasingly important. This led to a yet unresolved rivalry with the equivalent sector in Alto Adige for control of the highly coveted access into the northern markets. In 1709, an unprecedented frost completely revolutionized the European viticultural system. It marked the loss of much of the germplasm variability developed in the previous centuries. Consequently, the need arose to base wine production on more productive varieties resistant to cold conditions. In the nineteenth century, the diseases that had undermined European viticulture (downy mildew, powdery mildew, phylloxera) reached Trentino, decimating vineyards and permitting the introduction of non-native varieties when the stricken vineyards were replanted. Fortunately, the geography of some inland and protected valleys and the fact that in some areas the production continued with traditional varieties, such as Teroldego, Marzemino and Nosiola, has ensured the survival of a greatly important ampelographic heritage.

Due to its border location and the continuous changes in the region's political structure, Italian consumers did not display a significant demand for Trentino wine until the twentieth century when, after the First World War, commercial trade was diverted mainly southwards.

The current situation of winemaking in Trentino is an extremely thorny issue: viticulture in the 60's imposed a focus on high yields, high mechanisation and mainly catered for a uniform and standardised taste which promoted the spread of 'international' varieties while drastically depleting the genetic heritage of local ones.

Today, the answer comes from several wineries, usually small, which have undertaken an antithetical path for years, promoting local varieties through the recovery of their biodiversity, decreasing synthetic chemical use and reducing the degree of mechanization in the different productive phases. Hence, a truly unique wine is obtained that is the distinctive expression of the land and its interpreter.

