

THE BEAUTIFUL ECCENTRICITY OF CANTINA TERLANO'S JUST-RELEASED 1991 TERLANER RARITY



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For all of the monk-like discipline required to be a top winemaker, it's rare these days to find a producer who's seriously patient in the cellar. Most release their wines soon after harvest (especially whites, which are bottled and sold before they're even a year old) and two and a half years after harvest is the latest relatively common release date. It makes sense. They've got bills to pay like the rest of us and contemporary consumers are impatient. But this is exactly why Cantina Terlano's recently-released 1991 Terlaner Rarity is all the more exceptional, perhaps even eccentric.

Situated in Italy's Alto Adige, Cantina Terlano waited much longer than the two and a half years after the harvest before releasing its wines. They waited decades. Indeed, ageing this wine more than ten times as long as a high-end white Burgundy could look like a sensationalist strategy to attract attention to the most successful cooperative winery in this mountainous Alpine region. However, this is a tradition that goes back to the release of the first Terlaner Rarity, the 1979 Pinot Bianco, a quarter of a century ago. So far, Cantina Terlano has released 20 different wines of this type and just as many still lie in its cellar awaiting bottling during the coming years. The oldest unreleased Rarity dates back to 1979!

Each of these wines was fermented in a 3,000 liter oak casks where it then spent a full year on the gross lees, before being transferred into one of a battery of 2,500 liter stainless steel tanks where it rested until bottling on the fine lees. Those tanks were installed back in 1967 by the cooperative's then-winemaker Sebastian Stocker. Fermenting in stainless steel tanks was a radical and daring move back then. Not three years earlier in 1964, some experts were laughing at First Growth Château Latour, which was the first producer in Bordeaux to use stainless steel tanks for fermentation.



1991 Terlaner Rarity

Stocker was no modernistic technocrat. He saw a very particular advantage in the new technology and was interested in the possibility of slowing down the ageing process of his best dry whites. He was convinced this would make the wines even more complex and exciting. That goal ran contrary to the dominant winemaking trend of the period, which was to vinify and bottle whites as fast and as early as possible.

Stocker was right and under current winemaker Rudi Kofler, these wines have been perfected to the point that they are truly unique. The most astonishing thing about this 1991 Rarity is that it has exceptional vitality for its age and still needs years of further maturation to open up fully. That, in itself is truly astonishing, particularly when you consider that the main grape in the cuvee, Pinot Bianco, is not known for long-living wines.



Soil Snapshot: Quarzitic porphyry rocks

How does it taste? The 1991 Rarity is no longer fruity in the obvious sense, but neither does it smell nor taste particularly leesy, lacking the brioche and biscuit notes that Champagnes with long ageing on the lees gain. Instead, it has subtle notes of dried flowers and herbs, while on the palate it is concentrated and super-straight with a salty-mineral aftertaste that goes on and on. I gave it 96 points, but it is way out on a limb from most of the other high-end dry whites. After some further bottle maturation, it may deserve a point or two more. It certainly doesn't taste anything like well-known top Riesling, Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc, although the latter two grapes account for 7% and 3% of the blend respectively.

This "odd" blend has actually been the tradition in Terlan since the cooperative winery's foundation in 1893. Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc were new arrivals from France having been introduced during the extensive replanting that took place after phylloxera decimated the vineyards of Europe during the latter decades of the 19th century.

The uniqueness of this wine's aromas and flavors undoubtedly have to do with the very stony soil of the steep terraced vineyards of Terlano, based on sandy material weathered from the quarzitic porphyry bedrock. There is little organic material and no clay in the soil that could hold water, and yields consequently tend to be low. The cooperative winery's 165 hectares of vineyards produce an average of just over 1.2 million bottles per year. However, it seems that the special crystalline structure of this type of porphyry makes the soil particularly rich in some nutrients.

The recently 2013 Terlaner "1," the other top dry white from the Cantina Terlano shares enough characteristics with the 1991 Rarity that these cannot simply be the product of winemaking. They must be the product

of terroir. Here too are the herbal aromas are intense, although they are much fresher (I noted lemon balm). In spite of its considerable power and some creaminess on the middle palate, this wine—also a cuvee of 90% Pinot Bianco, Weissburgunder, 7% Chardonnay and 3% Sauvignon Blanc—likewise has a linear structure, is finely-nuanced and has a salty-mineral finish. I gave it 94 points.

In common with all the dry whites from this producer, the alcoholic content of the 2013 "1" is higher than you would imagine, considering the freshness of the aromas and flavors. I guessed it to be around 13%, but it is actually 14.5%! What it has that the 1991 Rarity lacks is a fruity character, although this is candied lemon rather than anything lush or juicy. It spent 15 months in those 3,000 liter wooden barrels, then a further six months in stainless steel before bottling in January 2015, followed by almost a year of bottle-ageing before release.

It would be fascinating to compare this somewhat more conventionally styled high-end dry white against Premier Cru/Grand Cru white Burgundies from top domaines that use oak with caution. Grab a bottle soon after the March 2017 release if you're curious: Cantina Terlano-Kellerei Terlan made only 3,340 bottles. —Stuart Pigott, Contributing Editor

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CANTINA TERLANO ALTO ADIGE TERLANER RARITY 1991

CANTINA TERLANO ALTO ADIGE TERLANER 1 2013