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Pinot Bianco

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When it comes to white grapes from Italy, Pinot Bianco may be the country's best-kept secret, making pure, elegant and harmonious wines.

Known as Pinot Blanc in France and Weissburgunder in Germany, Pinot Bianco is part of the Pinot family tree, the largest group of grape varieties in the world. It is a genetic mutation of Pinot Noir. Outside Italy, the grape is popular in Germany's Baden region (12,671 acres), the Alsace region of France (7,054 acres) and Austria (4,868 acres).

Pinot Bianco commands only 1,334 acres in Italy's Trentino-Alto Adige, yet the wines have distinctive character and deliver on value. At its best, Pinot Bianco is delicate but not fragile, with aromas of spring blossoms, citrus and apple, and a refreshing palate, with citrus, orchard fruit and mineral notes. Notable producers are Colterenzio, J. Hofstätter, Alois Lageder, Nals Margreid, St.-Michael-Eppan, Cantina Terlano, Tiefenbrunner and Elena Walch.

"Alto Adige, Alsace and Germany all produce different and distinct styles," says Karoline Walch of Elena Walch. "Generally speaking I would say that the Pinot Bianco from Alto Adige aims for a dry style, yet with significant structure and well-integrated acidity with more salinity."

The best Pinot Biancos come from grapes grown at elevations of between 1,300 and 2,100 feet, giving freshness and finesse. Below and above that range, according to Martin Foradori, who owns J. Hofstätter in Alto Adige, Pinot Bianco has little expression or cannot ripen fully.

"Pinot Bianco is a cool-climate variety and does very well on high-elevation sites," explains Walch. "In Alto Adige, we benefit from warm days but extremely cold nights and hence, with strong temperature fluctuations between day and night, we are able to fully develop the primary aromas of the variety, yet retain the desired acidity."

The grape's production tends to be prolific, so yields must be curtailed to make an interesting wine. And its compact bunches are susceptible to fungal diseases, including botrytis.

Because of its delicate nature, Pinot Blanc must be handled carefully in the winery. New oak can overwhelm its refined primary aromas, so most producers use larger, neutral oak casks for fermenting or aging, if they use oak at all. Elena Walch uses a combination of large casks and stainless-steel tanks for its single-vineyard Kristallberg; Cantina Terlano ages its Pinot Bianco Vorberg and Nova Domus blend in 12- to 70-hectoliter casks.

Lower in elevation (265 to 900 feet) and closer to the sea, the Friuli-Venezia-Giulia region, east of Alto Adige, is also the source of fine Pinot Bianco, particularly Colli Orientali, Collio, Isonzo, Rosazza and the DOCs bordering Slovenia. Versions there tend to be richer and rounder, with some new oak treatment and less mineral expression than their counterparts from Alto Adige.

"In Friuli's most southern cultivated region, the climate is Mediterranean and the soils are a stratification of marl and sandstone originated by the sea," explains Andrea Felluga whose family owns Livio Felluga winery.

Some of the best examples from Friuli are blends of Pinot Bianco with other varieties, such as the Friuli Colli Orientali Illivio, Rosazzo Terre Alte and Rosazzo Abbazia di Rosazzo from Livio Felluga, and the Collio Molamatta and Collio Russiz Superiore Col Disòre of Marco Felluga.

In Alto Adige, though Pinot Bianco is used in blends, it is most often labeled as a varietal wine, containing a minimum of 85 percent of the grape. One notable blend is Cantina Terlano's Alto Adige Terlaner I Primo Grande Cuvée, which adds 12 percent Chardonnay and 3 percent Sauvignon Blanc.

Most Pinot Biancos from Alto Adige cost less than \$25. More expensive versions, including blends from Friuli, generally deliver exceptional quality.

This French transplant delivers a pure expression of fruit, citrus and mineral in a harmonious profile, and Pinot Biancos from Alto Adige and Friuli represent this elegant white at its best.

PRODUCERS TO KNOW

LIVIO FELLUGA

The fifth generation of the Felluga family farms 383 acres of vines in Collio and Colli Orientali di Friuli. There is a long history of blending in the area, along with production of varietally labeled wines. Terre Alte is equal parts Pinot Bianco, Friulano and Sauvignon; Illivio combines Pinot Bianco with Chardonnay and Picolit.

Wine	Score	Price
Rosazzo Terre Alte 2015	92	\$80
Friuli Colli Orientali Illivio 2015	91	\$35

MARCO FELLUGA

Roberto Felluga makes whites from Pinot Bianco at the Collio estate founded by his father, Marco, in 1956 and at the nearby Russiz Superiore estate. Molamatta and Col Disòre are blends with Pinot Bianco, the former with Friulano and Ribolla Gialla, the latter Friulano, Ribolla Gialla and Sauvignon. The 100 percent Pinot Bianco Riserva is fermented and aged in 500-liter barrels for three years.

Wine	Score	Price
Pinot Bianco Collio Russiz Superiore Riserva 2015	91	\$36
Collio Molamatta 2015	90	\$26
Collio Russiz Superiore Col Disòre 2015	90	\$39

J. HOFSTÄTTER

Martin Foradori is the fourth generation to run this estate, founded in 1907. Pinot Bianco is among several grapes grown in the 124 acres of vineyards, which range from 820 to 2,790 feet in elevation. The Weissburgunder sees all stainless steel; the single-vineyard Vigna S. Michele is fermented and aged 15 months in large oak casks. Both are pure Pinot Bianco.

Wine	Score	Price
Alto Adige Barthenau Vigna S. Michele 2016	91	\$37
Weissburgunder Alto Adige 2016	90	\$19

CANTINA NALS MARGREID

This cooperative, founded in 1932, works with 138 growers spanning 395 acres of vineyards around Alto Adige. There is a "classic" Pinot Bianco made entirely in stainless steel, plus two vineyard-designated bottlings: Penon, aged six months in a combination of stainless steel and large oak casks, and Sirmian, aged entirely in large oak for eight months.

Wine	Score	Price
Pinot Bianco Alto Adige Sirmian 2017	90	\$33
Pinot Bianco Alto Adige Penon 2017	89	\$25

CANTINA TERLANO

A cooperative dating from 1893, Cantina Terlano controls 420 acres among its 143 grower members. There are two ranges—Tradition and Selection—with a 100 percent Pinot Bianco from each.

Wine	Score	Price
Pinot Bianco Alto Adige Terlano Vorberg Riserva 2015	91	\$43
Pinot Bianco Alto Adige Tradition 2017	90	\$22