

SCHIAVA

Not Just for Breakfast Anymore

by STEPHANIE JOHNSON

For a Minnesotan who grew up in a baseball family, the summer of 1987 was an exciting time. The Twins were riding a wave of success that would culminate in their first World Series title, and my family followed every twist and turn of the season. Each morning I would tune in to the *KQ(RS) Morning Show* to get Tom Barnard's breakdown of last night's game, and the thing I most hoped to hear was the "light, happy music," a twinkly, Disney-esque tune that sounded ironic on a classic rock station, but it always brought a smile to my face because it meant the Twins were in first place. Maybe it's the absence of baseball during this COVID-19 shutdown that resurrected the memory, but the tune began running through my head as I tasted a series of light Italian red wines for this issue's tasting report. Made from frappato, grignolino, pelaverga, vespolina and schiava, the wines may be tough to pronounce, but are easy-going and refreshing. They're happy wines, meant to be enjoyed with a light chill and without too much thought.

My first encounter with one of these wines occurred some ten years ago in Alto Adige, the mountainous province that flows down from the Austrian Alps in a long, narrow, dramatically steep valley. Alto Adige is Italy's most

Germanic region, still referred to as Südtirol from the pre-World War I days when it comprised the southern end of the Austro-Hungarian county of Tyrol. Road signs and town names appear in both languages, as in the tidy village of Egna (Neumarkt) on the valley's eastern slope. Ducking into an Egna shop for coffee and a strudel before my first appointment of the day, I was intrigued to see several elderly men standing at the bar with tumblers of pale red juice that turned out to be schiava. A red wine that's light and lively enough to drink with breakfast? That sounded appealing, but schiava, a variety that some trace back to Roman times, has seen its share of ups and downs.

Schiava (skee-AH-vah) was ubiquitous in this valley half a century ago, according to Martin Foradori Hofstätter, vice president of the Alto Adige *consorzio* and proprietor of the J. Hofstätter winery. Schiava vines covered more than three-quarters of the vineyards, and much of the wine was shipped to German-speaking countries north of the Alps which, at that time, produced little red wine and had favorable trade agreements with Alto Adige. The wine was also a source of sustenance for vineyard hands, and thus it wasn't surprising that some might still be drinking it at the start of the workday: "Until the 1970s, farmers working in the vineyards would drink about two liters of schiava a day.





They needed it as calories,” says Hofstätter. But schiava’s popularity led to overcropping and, in too many cases, low-quality wines. When Austria joined the EU in 1995, other Italian wine regions gained equal access to that market, opening the door for more robust reds that began to push schiava aside.

Schiava now accounts for just 13 percent of Alto Adige’s vines, having lost ground to varieties like pinot bianco and pinot grigio. Crisp whites have become Alto Adige’s calling card for export markets, though schiava retains a place in the hearts of many locals. “It’s the wine that you get when you go to a tavern and order a glass of red,” says Andrea Moser, chief oenologist at Cantina Kaltern.

Given the viticultural challenges schiava presents, it’s a wonder anyone still grows it. “Schiava is a diva in the vineyard,” says Matthias Jaeger, the sales manager at Manincor, where they make up to 25,000 bottles a year of Kalterersee Keil from about five acres of vines. Schiava’s large, thin-skinned berries make it vulnerable to powdery mildew, and the pergola-trained vines, which support the heavy bunches and shield them from sunburn, require many hours of manual labor. “Schiava should be our most expensive red because it’s so hard to manage, but historically it was a simple bulk wine. We make it almost as a public service,” says

PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PERGOLA-TRAINED SCHIAVA VINES ABOVE LAKE CALDARO; MARTIN FORADORI HOFSTÄTTER; SCHIAVA CLUSTERS AT MANICOR.

Jaeger. Despite this, he notes growing interest from markets like New York. “We export about 5,000 bottles, and they’re asking for more.” That interest is reflected in schiava’s overall sales figures for the region, which were slightly higher in 2018 (for wine sold in 750-milliliter bottles) than in 2005, despite a 55 percent decline in plantings over the same period.

Renewed enthusiasm for schiava tracks with evolving consumer preferences for lighter reds that are moderate in alcohol and versatile at the dinner table, but it may also be a reaction to the quality initiatives that some producers have undertaken. One reason plantings are down is that many schiava vines were planted on unsuitable sites where the grapes struggled to ripen properly. Cantina Kaltern’s growers cultivate some 270 acres of schiava vines, nearly one-sixth of the entire plantings in Alto Adige, but Moser says they have been reducing plantings on inferior sites and focusing on better quality clones. “Schiava used to be a mass wine with high yields. The quality focus began with some of Alto Adige’s other varieties in the 1980s and 90s, but now it is happening also for schiava.”

A similar initiative has taken place at Kellerei Kurtatsch, where plantings of schiava went from 111 acres in 2010 to just 42 today. “Schiava is very sensitive to its growing site,” says export manager Harald Cronst. “The vines we have left are in well exposed and ventilated vineyards, all on slopes between 980 and 1,470 feet of elevation, which are ideal for schiava.” Some of those sites include vines planted between 1933 and 1960, and their fruit goes into Sonntaler, Kurtatsch’s top-tier schiava (recommended on page 45).

Prestige bottlings like Sonntaler are a sign of the schiava quality movement, as are site-specific wines. One of the most interesting experiments in this vein comes from Hartmann Donà, the former oenologist for the highly regarded Cantina Terlan. Donà struck off on his own in 2002, and makes about 40,000 bottles a year in total, including his Liquid Stone series, a set of three schiavas (or vernatsch, since he uses the variety’s Germanic name) from different soil types and elevations. Phyllit is the lightest and most ethereal of the three, a high-toned, herb-inflected wine from vines grown at 1,960 feet on phyllite, a metamorphic rock. Dolomit is its opposite, a rich and savory wine from chalky dolomitic soils at lower elevations in the southern part of the valley. Pitched between these extremes is Granit, my favorite of the series, a linear wine with bright fruit tones and moderate (12.5 percent) alcohol. It hails from granite soils near Merano, at an elevation of 1,640 feet.

This attention to site and focus on quality is good news for fans of schiava. Even better is the fact that most of the wines, including those fancier bottlings, remain fresh and lively, unencumbered by new oak, offering transparent red berry flavors and waves of refreshment at budget-friendly price points. It’s a sign that schiava is poised for a comeback, and nobody loves a comeback story more than baseball fans. In fact, there’s talk that baseball may make a comeback of its own before this season ends. If it does, I’ll be watching with a glass of lightly chilled schiava in my hand and the light happy music resounding in my head. ■