

WINE FROM THE MINE

A disused silver mine has become a cellar for one of Italy's most notable white wines. Stephen Quinn goes underground to find out more.

The search for the best ways to cellar quality wine has a long history, but Cantina Tramin in Italy's Alto Adige has taken the concept to new heights - storing its premium white inside a disused silver mine about 2,000m above sea level.

Willi Stürz, who was born in Tramin and has done 27 vintages at Cantina Tramin, is the company's technical director and chief winemaker. Bibenda, Italy's association of sommeliers, gave Stürz the title of best winemaker in the country in 2003 while Gambero Rosso, Italy's prestigious wine guide, named Stürz Italian winemaker of 2004.

Stürz wanted to resurrect a traditional style of Gewürztraminer and see how the wine aged. The wine was named Epokale and the first vintage was 2009. In August 2010, a handful of staff delivered about 1,200 bottles to the Monteneve silver mine in the village of Ridanna, which is about 120km north of the winery in Tramin.

The 2009, and all subsequent vintages, are stored about 3.5km inside the mountain about 450m below its peak. Each vintage stays in the mine for at least seven years.

Hard to get to

Cantina Tramin arranged for a guide to meet the writer and another journalist in Ridanna. The guide drove us to the mine entrance, where we boarded a small train that took us 3km into the mountain. We then walked about 500m in the mud to the winery's locked cellar.

Humidity of 90% is constant all year but the mine was so cold that our breath condensed immediately. The only light came from our helmet lamps. The walls were covered with white lace-like fungus and the floors were muddy because of water dripping from the ceiling. The water comes from melting ice on the top of the mountain.

Wines stored in the mine are better than those cellared in the winery because of constant temperature and pressure, Stürz explains. "Constant high humidity, darkness, silence and

above all the constant fresh temperature of 11 [degrees] Celsius are ideal conditions for ageing of the wine. Also atmospheric pressure is lower at such a high elevation. Less oxygen is forced into the bottle and the oxygen content inside the mine is lower compared with the air outside."

The fact the winery lacked a proper space for long ageing spurred the decision to move Epokale to the mine, and the number of bottles stored there has gradually risen. About 3,000 bottles of the latest vintage, the 2016, are stored there. Grapes are harvested at the end of October and the wine spends eight months on lees. About 10% of grapes are botrytis infected.

Wolfgang Klotz, director of sales and marketing, says the ideal conditions in the mine could not be reproduced even with the best cellar. "Compared with an Epokale stored in the best possible conditions in our winery, an Epokale that has aged in the mine enjoys a more homogeneous maturation process," he says. "With time, the freshness and fruit of a wine usually wither," but "ageing in the mine gives the wine an excellent balance without losing freshness and fruit and at the same time maintains its crispness."

How does it taste?

Wine expert Dr Ian D'Agata noted in his monumental book *Native Wine Grapes of Italy*

that the non-aromatic Traminer grape mutated centuries ago into a spicy variant called Gewürztraminer. It is mostly associated with Alsace in France; Traminer originated around the town of Tramin in Alto Adige in northern Italy.

Grapes for Epokale come from two of the oldest vineyards near Nussbaumer on the south-eastern slope of the Mendola mountain in Tramin. Until Epokale was developed, Cantina Tramin's Nussbaumer was recognised as one of the best wines in Italy. The 2012 version was named Italy's best white wine in 2013.

Klotz conducted a blind tasting of four 2009 Gewürztraminers at the winery. Three of the four were grand cru from Alsace. The fourth, Epokale, stood out. It was powerful yet delicate, its freshness balancing its high residual sugar. It had aromas of roses, citrus and tropical fruits, along with mineral and spicy notes. "Our goal was to create a new wine that explored, as never before, the ageing potential of Gewürztraminer," he said.

Founded as a co-operative in 1898, Cantina Tramin represents about 300 growers who cultivate 260 ha of vines. It makes about 1.8m bottles a year and sales in 2017 were worth about €14m. The 2009 Epokale, just released, has been sold mainly to fine restaurants around the world, at a wholesale price of €51.00 (\$59.00). ■



Willi Stürz and Wolfgang Klotz outside the mine entrance in Italy's Alto Adige

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