

Wine Spectator

THE TYROLEAN AVANT GARDE

A Look at the Winemaking of Alois Lageder



ALOIS LAGEDER



among *ALOIS LAGEDER'S* legacies will be Alto Adige's
REPUTATION for *CUTTING-EDGE*, quality wines

PART ONE

Even after 45 vintages in northern Italy, Alois Lageder stays “radical”

The German-speaking Tyrolean village of Magrè is a tidy, quiet, ancient burg of about 1,300 people in Alto Adige, a small, mountainous region in northern Italy acclaimed for its cool-climate white wines.

Along the western side of the Adige river valley, orderly vineyards climb up the dolomitic limestone cliffs behind the town, with its historic buildings dating to the 13th century.

Yet Magrè is more than another postcard town along the region’s strada del vino, or weinstrasse. It’s a center for avant-garde winemaking, thanks to Alois Lageder. Now 70 and in his 46th vintage, Lageder helped pioneer biodynamic agriculture and modern winemaking in Alto Adige, as he built the family winery from a regional bulk producer into one that makes 100,000 cases of quality wines sold in 40 countries.

Today, the winery regularly makes 40 wines (see Wine Spectator blind-tasting reviews) and works with more than 30 grape varieties across the region, from local Lagrein and Schiava to the more broadly popular Pinot Bianco and Pinot Grigio.

In the past eight years, Lageder’s son, Alois Clemens Lageder, 32, has helped him launch a new and even more daring era.

In an eco-friendly winery, built here 25 years ago and powered by what was then Italy’s largest solar-energy installation, Clemens leads me through a tasting of some of their 100-plus “experiments,” arrayed in small steel tanks and wood barrels. These are a crazy mix of heirloom and international grapes, varied clones and grapes picked at different ripeness—all fermented with indigenous yeasts with a range of techniques, including whole cluster, whole berry and skin contact for whites.

“We want to find answers to certain questions,” says Clemens, 32, who is tall, lean

and blue-eyed like his father. Over the past five years he has been overseeing the wine-making. “In order to find answers, we need to be radical.”

“All the experiments are important,” he adds. “Even if they turn out shitty, they are important for us to learn.”

Lageder is still known for its classics, like its Cabernet Sauvignon–Petit Verdot blend from the steep Cor Römigberg vineyard (2015, 91 points, \$65) and its Löwengang Chardonnay (2016, 90 points, \$50).

But to keep its edge, in recent years, the winery has bottled and released some of its experiments, typically small batches of 10 to 80 cases, called “Comets.” In some vintages, there’s a wine called Tik, made from the Greek variety Assyrtiko, which thrives in hot weather. Another wine, called Zie, is a field blend (sometimes made as a white and sometimes as a red) from the collection of 150-plus varieties planted by the late naturalist Rainer Zierock (and ex-husband of Trentino winemaker Elisabetta Foradori). Then there is my new favorite white summer sipper, called Bla Bla Bla, which blends three vintages of Blatterle, a nearly extinct local heirloom variety, made with light skin contact.

“When the DOC was created in Alto Adige, they forgot to include Blatterle,” says the elder Lageder. “It’s ridiculous, but we can’t call it Blatterle, so we call it Bla.”

Later this year, Alois plans to formally retire and hand the last of his duties over to the sixth generation, led by Clemens with his two sisters. Reflecting on his career one early summer morning, Alois credits his two greatest influences: his mother and the late pio-

neering California vintner Robert Mondavi.

The Lageder family began wine trading in the nearby city of Bolzano nearly 200 years ago; in the 19th century, when the Alto Adige was still part of Austria, the family began its own négociant business, making wine from purchased grapes. That model changed in 1935, when Alois’ father bought the Löwengang estate in Magrè, which includes one of the region’s oldest vineyards, dating to 1875. The plot is filled with pergola-trained Carmenère, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, which were among the many imported varieties planted in the region under Austrian rule in the 19th century.

In the mid 1970s, when Alois took over the winery, it still sold most of its wine in bulk as red table wine or as base wine for spumante. The vineyards were farmed conventionally, but Alois’ ideas were shaped by his mother, who had studied the esoteric teachings of biodynamics founder Rudolf Steiner.

“I grew up with the idea from my mother of looking at nature. So I knew I couldn’t continue to farm conventionally—always working against nature,” says Alois, walking to a vineyard newly planted on the valley’s gentle slope below Magrè. “But at the time, you couldn’t just think of converting a whole farm—the convention was so strong.”

With resistance to change even from within his own family, Alois had to wait 20 years to completely convert the estate to biodynamics.

“To convert the plants was easy,” Alois says with a laugh. “To change the minds of the workers here and others was difficult. There was a lot of resistance.”

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— ALWAYS WORKING AGAINST NATURE”

PART TWO

On Italy’s northern frontier, Alois Lageder has learned from Mom and Robert Mondavi

At 70, Alois Lageder, a fifth-generation winemaker in Alto Adige, is an icon of innovation in this small, mountainous region that produces some of Italy’s most renowned white wines.

Lageder made his mark by questioning local orthodoxy. His first influence was his mother, who taught him to observe and respect nature. (Read part 1 of my visit.) The other big influence in his career was Robert Mondavi, whom he met when the American vintner visited Lageder on a 1981 tour of Italy.

“Mondavi got me to look at tradition in the right way,” Lageder explains one summer morning at his historic Löwengang estate in the village of Magrè, “to preserve it, but to evolve.”

Mondavi convinced Lageder to use small French oak barrels to age his Löwengang red, a field blend of Carmenère, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot from a site where the vines range up to 140 years in age. Mondavi also convinced him to barrel ferment his white Löwengang, a Chardonnay, and to try new vine-training systems that result in lower yields than Alto Adige’s traditional tall pergolas.

But Lageder never went in for the extractive, “big wine” style that became associated with barriques in the decades that followed. “The wines here have always been cool mountain wines,” he says in his soft-spoken but frank manner.

Though Alto Adige’s history with Bordeaux and Burgundy varieties dates to the 19th century, in the 1980s, Lageder grew concerned by the first studies on climate change and returned to planting ancient, late-ripening, local varieties. He also added warm-climate varieties from the Rhône Valley and southwest France; many of them, like Viognier and Tannat, turned out to be successes that helped grow his portfolio of offerings.

In the 1990s, Lageder bought a second vineyard estate in Magrè, with a Renaissance

palazzo called Hirschprunn, where he continued his experiments with alternative grape varieties.

Then he built a new solar- and geothermal-powered, gravity-fed winery at Löwengang. To mark his attachment to nature, he commissioned an installation by Italian artist Mario Airò: When the wind blows, a roof turbine powers a stereo in a barrel cellar that plays a Bach concerto slowed down to what sounds like primordial groans from the underworld.

In the next decade, he led the conversion of the estate’s 135 vineyard acres to biodynamic farming, with certification awarded in 2007. He ultimately convinced half of the winery’s 80 small, local growers—with whom he works on a handshake and sets prices by consensus every summer—to follow suit.

But Lageder was not content.

“In many ways, the innovation stopped at the cellar door,” he recalls. Though winemaker Luis von Dellemann helped modernize and improve wine quality, “My brother-in-law was very conservative.”

In 2012, Lageder’s son, Alois Clemens Lageder, took over from von Dellemann, recruiting a new team of winemakers from Germany while studying viticulture at the Geisenheim Institute. Viticultural researcher and biodynamics proponent Georg Meissner came on as consulting enologist, with Clemens Lageder’s former classmate Jo Pfisterer as production manager. The new team now undertakes more than 100 small-batch experiments each year—some of which are bottled and sold as part of a wine series called “Comets.”

In the meantime, the Lageders have accelerated their sustainability initiatives. They

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began a partnership with a mountain dairy to have alpine cattle winter in their vineyards to feed and help fertilize the land, developed a bucolic organic restaurant that sources from their vegetable garden and other local farmers, and have made other eco-friendly changes, such as replacing metal capsules on all their bottles with small paper bands.

In an ironic twist, while Lageder helped lead the region’s adoption of modern vine-training systems in the 1980s, today he champions a return to pergolas. With the acceleration of hotter growing seasons in the past decade, he believes pergolas

are better for vineyards, their longevity and grape quality—even for some international varieties like Chardonnay.

“Pergolas protect the soils by shading them; they create a microclimate and they preserve acidity,” says Lageder.

At 32, Clemens Lageder, who is set to take the reins of the estate later this year, is an exuberantly youthful version of his father, extolling the family’s commitment to nature and innovation.

“Forty years ago, the wine culture had the problem of getting enough sugar in the grapes. Now with climate change, the problem is how to maintain acidity,” he says. “We need to get rid of the clones from 40 years ago and either go back to the mixed diversity of vineyards 150 years ago or find new clones.”

The decisions will be his to make—although his father isn’t going anywhere. The elder Lageder sees his retirement as a liberation from the office that will leave him more time to spend in the vineyards.

“I started here at 24 years old,” he says. “Now, I would like to continue to work in the vines—but without the responsibility.”

Robert Camuto

