



Alois Lageder and son Clemens overlook the steeply terraced vineyards of Alto Adige.

// TYROLEAN AVANT GARDE

ALOIS LAGEDER: A half-century of pioneering spirit in Italy's far north

BY ROBERT CAMUTO

Photographs by Thilo Weimar

The German-speaking, Tyrolean village of Magrè is a tidy, quiet, antique burg of about 1,300 people in northern Italy's Alto Adige—a small, mountainous wine region known for fresh, cool-climate wines from the appellation of the same name. Orderly vineyards along the western side of the Adige River Valley climb up the dolomitic limestone cliffs behind the town, where historic buildings date to the 13th century.

Yet Magrè is more than a postcard town on the region's *Strada del Vino*, or *Weinstrasse*. Thanks to Alois Lageder, it's also a center for avant-garde winemaking. Lageder, now 70 and in his 46th vintage, pioneered biodynamic agriculture and introduced modern cellar techniques to the region as he built



Lageder Vineria Paradeis offers a visitor's experience that includes dining at the estate's organic and seasonally sourced restaurant, plus tastings and guided tours of the property.

the family wine business from a bulk-seller to a 100,000-case label sold in 40 countries.

Moving into 2021, Alois will hand all duties over to the sixth generation, led by his son, Alois Clemens Lageder ("Clemens"). By all indications, Clemens and his sisters, Anna, who handles industry events, and Helena, who focuses on marketing and communications, plan to carry on their father's innovative spirit.

Though Lageder has been well-known for its Cor Römigberg, from a steep vineyard planted with Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot, and its Alto Adige Löwengang Chardonnay bottlings, the winery works regularly with more than 30 varieties and 40 wines across the region—from local Gewürztraminer, Lagrein and Schiava to more widespread varieties such as Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio and Müller-Thurgau.

"He introduced the concept of biodynamics in the Alto Adige," says Elena Walch, a fellow regional wine pioneer. "And he inspired many other winemakers [here] to follow."

In an eco-friendly winery built 25 years ago, (powered by what was then Italy's largest solar energy installation), Clemens leads a guest through a tasting of some of the 100-plus "experiments," arrayed in small steel tanks and wood barrels. It is a crazy mix of heirloom and international grapes, various clones and different ripeness levels, all fermented with indigenous yeasts in styles including whole cluster, whole berry, and skin contact for whites.

"We want to find answers to certain questions," says the tall, lean Clemens, 32, an exuberantly youthful version of his father

who has overseen winemaking for the past five years. "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."

To keep its edge in recent years the winery has bottled and released some of its small batch experiments (typically 10 to 80 cases), called "Comets." In some vintages there's a wine called Tik, made from Greece's hot-weather Assyrtiko grape. A wine called Zie is a field blend made from the 150-plus variety collection of the late naturalist Rainer Zierock. Then there is a low-alcohol sipper called



Informed by his mother's studies of biodynamic agriculture, Alois Lageder slowly converted the family vineyards to sustainable methods over a period of 20 years.

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Bla Bla Bla, the recent release of which blends three vintages (2016–2018) of the near-extinct local heirloom grape Blatterle and is 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."

Reflecting on his career one early summer morning, Alois credits his two greatest influences: his mother and the late Robert Mondavi.

The Lageder family began wine trading in Bolzano nearly 200 years ago, and in the 19th century, when the Alto Adige was still part of Austria, the family began its own négociant winemaking. That model changed in 1935, when Alois' father bought the Löwengang estate in Magrè, which included one of the region's oldest vineyards, an 1875 plot filled with pergola-trained Carmenère, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

In 1974, 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 newly planted vineyard on the gentle sloping valley below Magrè. "But at the time, you couldn't just think of converting a whole farm—the



Clemens Lageder tastes with enology team members Paola Tenaglia (left) and Jo Pfisterer in the eco-friendly cellar facility built by Lageder Sr. in the 1990s.

Selected Recent Releases From Alois Lageder

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SCORE	WINE	PRICE
91	Alto Adige Red Cor Römigberg 2015	\$65
91	Lagrein Alto Adige Conus Riserva 2016	\$30
90	Alto Adige Löwengang 2016	\$50
90	Alto Adige Red Krafuss 2015	\$57
90	Manzoni Bianco Vigneti delle Dolomiti Förra 2017	\$30
90	Pinot Bianco Alto Adige Haberle 2017	\$27
89	Chardonnay Alto Adige 2018	\$15
89	Pinot Grigio Alto Adige Porer 2017	\$27

convention was so strong."

With resistance to change even from within his own family, Alois had to wait 20 years to lead the total conversion to biodynamics. "To convert the plants was easy," he says with a laugh. "To change the minds of the workers here and others was difficult. There was a lot of resistance."

Lageder made his mark by questioning local orthodoxy. For that he credits the influence of Mondavi whom he met when the American winemaker visited Lageder on a 1981 tour of Italy.

"Mondavi got me to look at tradition in the right way," Lageder explains, "to preserve it, but to evolve."

Mondavi convinced Lageder to use small French barrels to age his Löwengang red blend, and to ferment his white Löwengang, from Chardonnay, in barrel. He also recommended trying less-productive vine training systems versus Alto Adige's traditional tall

pergolas. Lageder followed both recommendations, and the Löwengang wines became internationally successful.

But Lageder never went in for some of the extracted, “big wine” styles associated with *barriques* in the decades that followed. “The wines here have always been cool mountain wines,” he says in his frank and soft-spoken manner.

Though Alto Adige has a two-century-old tradition growing Bordeaux and Burgundy vines, in the 1980s Alois—concerned by the first studies on climate change—planted late-ripening antique local varieties as well as hot-climate varieties from the Rhône Valley and southwest France. Many of them, like Tannat and Viognier, were successes that helped grow his portfolio of offerings.

In the 1990s, Lageder bought a second estate with a historic vineyard in Magrè, called Hirschprunn. Then he built a new stone-and-wood, solar-powered and gravity-fed winery in the town. 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 a primordial groan from the underworld.

In the next decade he led the estate’s conversion of its 135 vineyard acres to biodynamic certification, awarded in 2007. He ultimately convinced half of the winery’s 80 small local growers—whom he works with 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. “My brother-in-law (Luis von Dellemann, Lageder’s winemaker until 2012) was very conservative.”

In the past eight years, Clemens helped launch a new and more daring era—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’ ex-classmate Jo Pfisterer as production manager.

Meantime, the Lageders have accelerated their moves in sustainability. They began a partnership with a mountain dairy wherein alpine cattle winter in their vineyards; developed a bucolic organic restaurant sourcing their own vegetable garden and the produce of local farmers; and have made other eco-friendly changes such as replacing foil capsules on all bottles with paper closures.

They are also looking at new methods and grapes that will handle climate change and the hotter growing seasons that have become more frequent in the past decade.

“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,” says Clemens. “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.”

In an ironic twist, while Alois advocated modern training systems in the 1980s, he is today a champion of the 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 such as Chardonnay.

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

The decisions will be left to the next generation—though Alois says he 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.” □



The family’s sixth generation of winegrowers is represented by Clemens and his sisters, Helena (left) and Anna. While Clemens handles the cellars, Helena oversees marketing and Anna coordinates international trade events.