



Credit: Lorenzo Visser

HOW FREISTIL REFRAMES SOUTH TYROL

BY VALERIE KATHAWALA

Pranzegg. In der Eben. Thomas Niedermayr. Garluder. Four names that will mean more or less to you depending on where and how you drink wine. Four small-scale organic and biodynamic growers from four points on the compass of northern Italy's Südtirol-Alto Adige (aka South Tyrol). Four individualists who, after years of being stuck in the corners at tastings and fairs — singled out as “crazies” for their cloudy cuvées, atypical varieties, and defiant styles — decided that being outsiders together would, at a minimum, be more fun. More off-piste than pissed-off, Freistil (“free style”) was born.

South Tyrol's trademark is mountainous diversity. A remarkable living laboratory of elevations, soils, microclimates, varieties, and cultures — the more variables, the better, it would seem. But the work and mark of the past generation have been to bring the region's wines up to a quality standard that would ensure international respect. That effort, by all accounts admirably achieved, has, however, brought with it a certain safe uniformity.

But imagine if the region's signature were more expansive. South Tyrol has a small but steadily increasing number of growers who are working their own seams of tradition and experimentation — that margin of interpretation that pushes a region's understanding of itself — to catalyze

a new awareness of both heritage and future identity.

If wine from South Tyrol can mean both lusty Lagrein from the warm Bozen basin and chiselled Müller-Thurgau from 1,000 meters above the sea, why can it not also mean arresting [PiWis](#), minimalist renderings of rare native grapes, skin-fermented Silvaner, or pét-nat Vernatsch?

These are questions the members of Freistil are asking, one bottle at a time.

OUTSPOKEN WINES

Two of Freistil's members, Urban Plattner of In der Eben and Thomas Neidermayr, have known each other since childhood, but the foursome gelled in 2012 when, along with Martin Gojer of Pranzegg and Christian Kerschbaumer of Weingut Garlider, they all wound up on the road together in Austria and Germany working part time with the pruning outfit [Simonit & Sirch](#).

“We'd been in various organizations together, and worked together for a while with this pruning project,” explains Gojer. “Five years ago, we decided to find a name that would signal our identity: friends following a common goal of organic or biodynamic farming and making natural wines outside the mainstream in South Tyrol.” Now the low-key group meets to

taste each other's wines, problem-solve, and raise the collective bar of their work.

Beyond responsible farming, Freistil's hallmark is thoughtful cellar minimalism and plenty of patience with process. Now and then a wine emerges with the Freistil label — currently a Merlot from Plattner and a PiWi pét-nat from Niedermayr — but “it's totally up to wherever one of us thinks the name fits the wine,” explains Niedermayr.



Credit: Freistil

"ANOTHER FORM OF QUALITY"

Kerschbaumer is the force behind Weingut Garlider, a 4.2-hectare estate in Feldthurns, high in the **Eisacktal**. This is South Tyrol's northernmost subregion, best known for mountain-climbing Kerner and Müller-Thurgau. Kerschbaumer has a typical mix of varieties, but what he's really after are singular expressions of those that are being left behind, like

Silvaner.

Weingut Garlider got its start in the 1960s, when Kerschbaumer's grandfather added some vines to the family's small, self-sustaining mix of crops and cows. In 1999, Kerschbaumer started to cultivate "one little parcel" organically. Inspired by the work of Rainer Zierock, the late oenologist and former husband of [Elisabetta Foradori](#) in neighboring Trentino, he realized he "was and is moved by wines that have a different energy, another form of quality."

A few years later, a hard frost took out enough of Kerschbaumer's vines to open the way for major change. In 2003, he left the local co-op, started farming organically across the board, rebuilt his cellar, and began to make wines himself.

Today, he sees popular aromatic varieties gaining the upper hand in the Eisacktal — "at the expense of Müller-Thurgau and, above all, Silvaner," Kerschbaumer says. He believes this is a mistake: "Silvaner is *the* perfect variety for the Eisacktal, especially for the higher sites. It needs the better soils, the better expositions we have here."

He is doubling down on his work with the grape. In a line of skin-fermented wines he calls Hautnah (which translates into many things, but "close enough to touch" probably comes nearest), which includes a

Silvaner, he is working out a process for minimizing oxidation, a problem he sees with many skin-ferments, and one that poses particular challenges for the Alpine delicacy of his Silvaner. “My answer,” Kerschbaumer says, “is to leave them on their skins for about two weeks, ferment and raise them in wood, but then put the wine in 300L to 550L porcelain vessels — like amphora, but with the clay fired at a higher temperature, minimizing porousness.” The results push our experience of both the variety and our understanding of the Eisacktal into new dimensions.



Credit: Weingut Garlider

DEFENDING TRADITION, DELICATELY

A few hundred meters down the mountain, on the warmer soils and slopes of Kardaun, Urban Plattner finds himself both defending and questioning tradition at the tiny, 14th-century estate Weingut In der Eben. His special charges there are a 0.15-hectare plot of the now nearly extinct native red grape Roter Malvasier and just over a hectare of old-vine Vernatsch, now both facing a threat that has nothing to do with fashion. Urban is keenly aware that the decisions he makes will echo, however quietly, through South Tyrol's future.



Credit: Weingut In der Eben

Urban's father, Johannes, took ownership of the estate in 1982, converted to organic farming not long after — one of the few who followed in the

footsteps of South Tyrol's organic (now biodynamic) pioneer, [Rainer Loacker](#). Johannes started to make his own wines in the '90s alongside maverick Heinrich Mayr of [Nusserhof](#), sharing cellar space there until he was able to improve conditions at his own ancient winery.

In 2010, Urban joined the family business. Like his fellow Freistil-ers, he split his time between the home estate and the pruning group. Those years brought him in contact with icons such as Josko Gravner, Gernot Heinrich, Fred Loimer, and Claus Preisinger, whose various forms of vineyard and cellar radicalism he sees as having been decisive in shaping his thinking.

One by one, Plattner dropped the crutches of convention: commercial yeasts, filtration, all but a trace of added SO₂, and started “to give everything more time, in wood, to work out a stronger sense of character for our wines.” By 2014, he was farming biodynamically and gaining a keener understanding of how to let his wines develop their own identities in the cellar.

All along, he has had to contend with a stiff challenge, carried on the wings of a [fruit fly](#) that has been decimating his thin-skinned Roter Malvasier and Vernatsch. This has forced him to tough sorting and even tougher questions: “Am I on the right path? The old varieties that have always been here, do they still make sense?,” he wonders openly.

If Urban can find a way to co-exist with these predations, he is convinced Vernatsch, especially when grown on the warm volcanic porphyry soils of the vineyards he tends, can and should be both the past and the future of the region. “Even in very hot years, it can still produce wines of freshness, elegance, and moderate alcohol that still have tension and age well.”

“To be honest,” he says, “I think these Vernatsch and Roter Malvasier are very, very good, and I value continuing a tradition that’s existed on these sites for centuries. But then I also think maybe this very rigid view isn’t always the only way.” He turns the question over every year, finding his answers — for now — once the wines are in the cellar: “Then I feel, yes, this is the right thing to do after all.”

PIWI PURIST

Thomas Niedermayr received an inheritance that would have been unusual anywhere in the world, let alone the tradition-bound village of Eppan. In 1994, Thomas’ father, Rudolf, planted a few of their 5 hectares to PiWis, pronounced *pee-vees*. In the German-speaking world, this is common shorthand for *Pilzwiderstandsfähige* (fungus-resistant) hybrids. For Rudolf, PiWis were the logical outgrowth of his early conversion to organic farming. For Thomas, who was a boy at that time, “this has always been the only way I know.”

Thomas pursued a circuitous path, but a fascination with the transformation of grape into wine eventually led him back to home. In 2012, he took over his parent's estate, converted the winemaking from what he calls "classic organic" to "wines left more to nature." This shift cost him almost all of his father's regular customers. But Thomas embraced the break as an opportunity. "For me it was very, very important to show the world the quality and complexity of PiWi wines. I didn't want to sell them 'only' to local customers who would just drink them at home." He saw that the visibility of PiWis was too low, and that while many talk about PiWi wines, "no one really seemed to understand or appreciate them."

Solaris, Bronner, and Sauvignier Gris are the heroes of this story in Thomas's telling. They have enabled him to embrace the biodiversity and regenerative practices he sees as essential to the future of viticulture. The common fungicide, copper sulfate, permitted even in organic farming, is toxic to grazing animals. Spray programs require frequent tractor trips through the vines, compacting soils and destroying conditions that allow biomass to build up and microorganisms to thrive. Almost none of this is necessary with the right PiWis.



Credit: Thomas Niedermayr

Because of the newness and variable quality of PiWis, they have been slow to find acceptance among serious growers anywhere in Europe, let alone a conservative corner like South Tyrol. But the Neidermayrs have taken the varieties extremely seriously from the beginning. They propagate their own plant material, watching how each individual plant responds in their sites and soils, making selections from this array. The results show exactly what these grapes are capable of: wines of serious complexity, with structure, density, and length that reflect their Alpine climate. Thomas' cellar touches — light maceration, long lees contact — add a complexity that suits these varieties exceptionally well.

Crucially for Thomas, PiWis allow for a way of farming that is in closest accord with the climate of now. "We humans want to plant varieties that have been around for decades or centuries and have stayed the same through clones and propagation," Thomas points out. "Our philosophy is that we're in a wine region where viticulture has been practiced for

generations and where organic farming is possible — but only with varieties that are adapted to current conditions."

Yet, Thomas says, current laws expressly forbid him from identifying his PiWis as being of the region: "You will see that on my labels, on my website, I don't use the word Südtirol anywhere." Instead of being a flag of regional distinction — only a handful of winemakers anywhere in the world are working with PiWis at this level — the wines are swept under the carpet.

WINE WITHOUT FEAR

Martin Gojer's advocacy for a different way of understanding and connecting with South Tyrol wine clearly grows out of a certain kind of critical love. "You can't describe South Tyrol in a sentence," he says. "It's too complex. So we should have a little more openness to the pleasure this complexity gives — not always running around with a thousand charts and statistics, but going out and experiencing the enjoyment of the food, the wine, the environment here."

Arguably, the wines he and his partner, Marion Untersultzner, grow and make at his 3.5-hectare estate just above the regional capital of Bozen under the Pranzegg label, are about opening the most direct path to that. They tend toward a combination of native, traditional, and international

varieties rendered in edgy styles, such as the partially skin-fermented, long-aged cuvée of Manzoni Bianco, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Viognier called “Caroline.”

Gojer took over this family estate at a very young age, facing critical decisions on his own and looking to other growers for orientation. He says that figures like **Gernot Heinrich** in Burgenland and **Georg Meissner** closer to home as well as the writings of **Pierre Mason** helped him on his long path to biodynamics.

Now a big part of the Pranzegg mission is encouraging others by example. “Our goal,” says Gojer, “is to live in our own world here, not to force our wines on anyone. But if others come to us, we are very, very glad to show and to explain what we do and why.”

He encourages his fellow *Südtiroler* to “find the courage to step out of the uniformity of the global market, whether that be tourism, food, or wine, and to focus on our particular flavors and aromas, not to be afraid that if someone doesn’t like them, we’ll fail.”

Untersulztner is encouraged by a new generation “who come to us and taste the wines, to get an idea of what we’re doing here and take some inspiration.” She recalls that in 2019, Gojer was, to their surprise, given a local wine award — in part for serving as a model for young growers in

South Tyrol and for his courage in implementing new ideas. “That,” she says, “gives me real hope that new seeds are sprouting.”

As Thomas Niedermayr observes, "All this is also about much more than just wine."



Valerie Kathawala

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