

Cinque di Maggio

BY DREW STOFFLET, TIME OUT WINE COLUMNIST

It was a rare treat to spend time in San Francisco with a few innovative old world Italian wine makers last week, both on the business side — tasting and talking — and later cutting loose on a California winery property. It was about as gorgeous a day as any wine gods could conjure, celebrating the fifth day of May, Italian-style, with eating, drinking, laughing and dancing.

The maestro of this event was Brian Larky of Dalla Terre imports. Based out of Napa, Dalla Terre ("of the earth") is the only Italian winery and direct-importing business in the United States (the business model cuts out the middle man and eliminates those pesky high-end mark-ups). Larky is just as pesky: He studied fermentation at U.C. Davis, worked for Far Niente and Domaine Chandon, and eventually came to launch his company after a five-year stint making wine for Ca' Del Bosco in Italy, while continually fueling his addiction to adventure.

The wine-and-adventure impresario boasts an impressive resume: As a river runner he was head whitewater guide for African Rainbow Equatorial Expeditions, for which he completed the first known crossing of equatorial Africa from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. He is part transoceanic voyageur, yacht racer, dive master and a licensed pilot, and has been known to devour powder from Cortina to Taos. Along the adventure route, he broke through language and cultural barriers to earn the trust and respect of Italian masters young and old, to assemble his cast of characters — the 21 producers on DT's roster.

Any proper Italian theme begins with a glass of prosecco, and for my two cents (and about \$14 a bottle) it's **Adami**. The ancient art of producing nimble, crisp prosecco is alive and well in the calcerous-soiled hills of Trentino Alto-Adige, where the Adami family makes a range of styles, from brut to extra dry.

Standing next to the Adamis, with a big smile on his face, was Alberto

Di Gresy. He looked like one of Ken Kesey's merry pranksters, with white hair and rosy cheeks. I introduced myself as a longtime fan of the wines of Marchesi Di Gresy, which Alberto delicately and passionately crafts from the hills above the village of Barbaresco in Piedmont. He looked at my business card and said, "Ah, you're from Aspen," with immediate warmth and recognition, continuing "You come skiing with me in Italy and stay with me." For sure! I tasted his glorious Barbaresco:

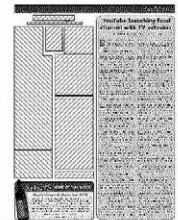
the Martinenga — his estate nebbiolo — and his single block wines, the Gaun and Camp Gros. Alberto's Barbaresco, the lady of Italian reds, is light and lithe, with its truffled notes and violet hues-evoked memories of his wines I enjoyed from the exceptional vintages of 1995 and 1997. All stunning in my world.



Next were the wines of Alois Lageder. Though the famed fourth generation producer was not present, his pinot grigio and pinot bianco were, and they did not disappoint. Lageder is an advocate of Austrian Rudolph Steiner's biodynamic farming model.

His wines express both the rich splendor of the south and the elegance of the north, as the Alto Adige region where they are produced was part of Austria until after WWI. Lageder's Müller-Thurgau — a Swiss-born grape most common in Germany and Austria — stood out. With its floralistic virtues, it tasted like a basket of fresh white spring flowers; his pinot noir was as light and delicate as rosé.

Inama Soave Classico was an old friend, but I was less familiar with the



oaked reserve versions of wine made from garganega grapes in the Veneto region; as well as their carmenere releases, which feature prominent oily chili pepper aromas and bold, dark Italian fruit.

I enjoyed a sip of Marco Felluga's Molomatta, a heady blend of pinot bianco, ribolla giallo and tocai friulano, which tasted as hedonistic, rich and fruity as ever. Also from the Collio region were Villa Russiz's sauvignon blanc and cabernet franc, beckoning the old times, before cabernet sauvignon was born. Ah, Collio: to walk among its hills, valleys and forests from Slovenia to the Adriatic coast, like my friend Tom Preston, in his book "A Walk to the Crossroads."

I made my way through tastes of Vino Nobile de Montepulciano (my favorite sangiovese-based wines); Barolo, the king of wines, and Amarone, the lustiest of wines. I was finally stopped in my tracks at the table of La Vietti, and their offering of the many different barbaras from all the hillsides and growths in both Alba and Asti.

By the end, all of the flavors, depths and scents of earth created their own world. Herbs, spring flowers, rose petals, white truffles, old leather, red fruit and black earth. Bene! Wine reveals truth.

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