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Elena Walch at Castel Ringberg, a 50-acre estate vineyard climbing to an elevation of 1,500 feet

WINE BY DESIGN

IN ALTO ADIGE, ELENA WALCH'S
VISION HAS SET THE BLUEPRINT
FOR HER FAMILY WINERY

BY ROBERT CAMUTO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLIN DUTTON

Over three decades marrying fairy tale with entrepreneurial drive, architect-turned-vintner Elena Walch has earned acclaim for her estate-grown wines from northern Italy's picturesque Alto Adige region. Capped by the Chardonnay-based Beyond the Clouds, she has produced 35 wines scoring 90 or more points in *Wine Spectator* blind tastings.

Now the story line passes to the next generation, with the business in the hands of daughters Julia, 31, and Karoline, 29, who are writing the next chapter with new vineyards and new wines.

Looking to build on their current production of 50,000 cases across a lineup of more than two dozen whites, reds, rosés and *pas-sito* styles, the sisters are moving to plant or replant 45 acres of newly acquired vineyard land—more than half of which lies in the Trento appellation to the south, known for sparkling wines. They are also making a push to organic farming, with about 25 of the 150 acres they source converted so far, and more on the way.

Karoline studied business in Austria before setting out for Australia, where she earned a master's degree in wine business and



Vineyard manager Gianfranco Faustin in the Gerwurztraminer-dominated Kastelaz vineyard above Termeno

winemaking and worked at Bird in Hand winery in the Adelaide Hills. “Then,” she recalls, “Mom called and said, ‘Do you want to come home?’” A similar call went to Julia, who had studied history and wine management in France and worked a stint at Bordeaux’s Château d’Agassac.

In the summer of 2013, the sisters returned to Termeno. With Elena looking on, they quickly navigated the learning curve and took the reins from their mother in 2015.

When she first developed big ideas about wine, Elena knew little about winemaking or the mountainous *terroirs* of Alto Adige. Though her parents hailed from the region, where Tyrolean traditions run deep, Elena (née Elena Schenk) was born and reared in cosmopolitan Milan and later studied architecture in Venice.

At 28, she founded her own architecture studio in Bolzano, Alto Adige’s capital. But seven years later, in 1985, her life changed dramatically. She was hired to oversee restoration of a 17th-century Austrian Hapsburg castle surrounded by 50 acres of terraced vineyards with stunning views over mile-long Lake Caldara. The owner was Werner Walch (pronounced “Valk”), fourth-generation proprietor of the Wilhelm Walch winery in nearby Termeno.

Before the project was completed, she and Werner fell in love and were soon married. The renovated castle became home to a fine dining restaurant. But things got really interesting when Elena began thinking about the vineyards.

“I discovered this life and wine and the closeness to nature,” says Walch, 67, whose intense green eyes flash as she recalls her inspiration. “I said, ‘I need to do a project in wine.’”

From the start, she urged Werner to do more with his family’s prime vineyards and the cellar of hand-carved oak casks dating to the winery’s 1869 founding. She questioned why her husband continued the family tradition of blending estate grapes with those bought from scores of growers.

“I said, ‘Beauty must go with quality. If you have wonderful vineyards, you must have wonderful wines,’” she recalls on a spring day at the family home and winery in Termeno (also known by its old Austrian name, Tramin) nestled amid the manicured vineyards above the Adige Valley. “Beauty must be kept separate, and must be shown and must be known.”

SELECTED RECENT RELEASES FROM ELENA WALCH

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SCORE	WINE	VINTAGE	PRICE
91	Alto Adige Beyond the Clouds	2015	\$65
91	Gewurztraminer Alto Adige Vigna Kastelaz	2016	\$35
90	Merlot Alto Adige Kastelaz Riserva	2014	\$46
90	Vino d’Italia Kermesse Cuvée MMXII	2012	\$68
89	Gewurztraminer Alto Adige	2016	\$21
89	Sauvignon Alto Adige Vigna Castel Ringberg	2016	\$28
88	Pinot Grigio Alto Adige	2016	\$18
88	Pinot Grigio Alto Adige Vigna Castel Ringberg	2016	\$26

Walch implored Werner to use estate vineyards to launch new high-end wines, but he resisted. “[He] said, ‘I have no time to do these things,’” Walch remembers with a laugh. “And I said, ‘Give them to me—trust me.’”

Like others at the time, Walch started replanting the red Schiava-dominated vineyards with what were seen as more distinctive local and international varieties, aiming to set herself apart with single-vineyard wines from her two principal sites: Castel Ringberg (50 acres) and Kastelaz, a 13-acre Gewürztraminer-dominated vineyard perched above Termeno.

Castel Ringberg, the more varied of the two vineyards, climbs to 1,500 feet in altitude and features bands of dolomitic rock, granite, volcanic porphyric stones and glacial sediments. In the 1990s, Walch began to produce monovarietal *crus* from Castel Ringberg, now counting seven bottlings, including Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon and Lagrein.

Walch took to the road to sell her wines—starting with local restaurants and hotels and then traveling north to the German-speaking countries that were the traditional export markets for Alto Adige wines.

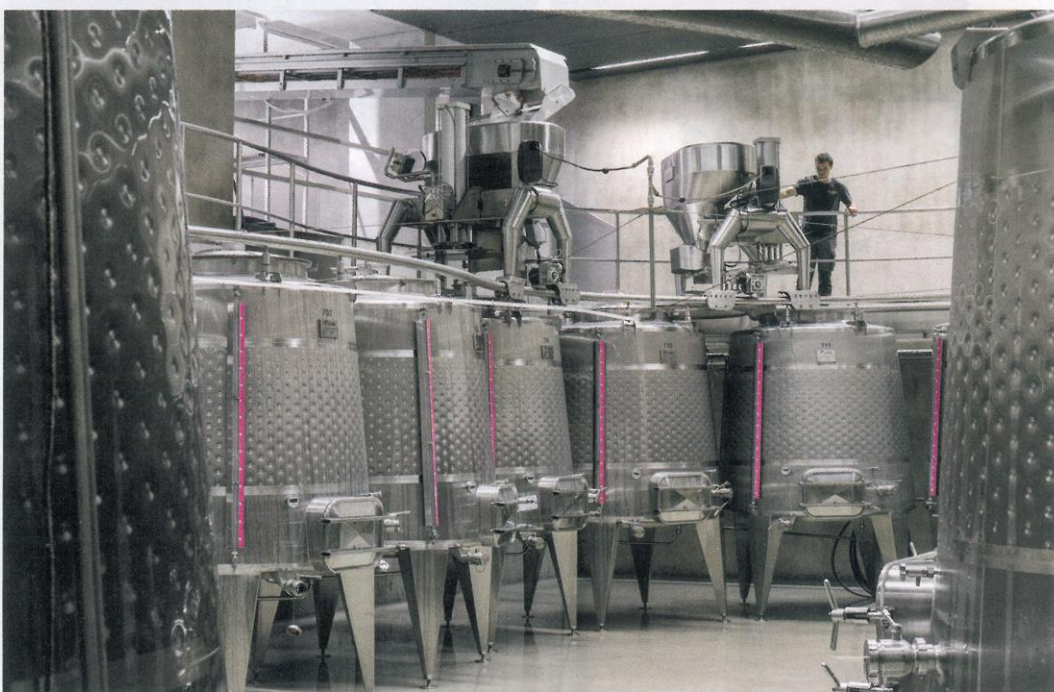
Then, from the 1997 vintage, she released what would become her breakout wine: a single-vineyard Gewürztraminer from Kastelaz. Termeno, about 60 miles south of the Austrian border, is believed to have lent its name to Gewürztraminer, an aromatic variety whose reputation in the U.S. was based on the sticky-sweet versions that had flooded the market decades before. But in contrast to the many overperfumy or overripe Gewürztraminers, Walch’s examples aimed to “show how Gewürztraminer develops here”—with minerality, clean floral notes and delicate aromas. “In Italy it became iconic,” she adds. “Italians still love Gewürztraminer.”

Her wines really boomed with the arrival of winemaker Gianfranco Faustin, who joined Walch in 1998 after working for modern Alto Adige pioneer Alois Lageder. Faustin helped get the vineyard mix right in terms of quality and varieties, but just as importantly, he was able to translate Walch’s bold ideas into the bottle.

“Gianfranco was very young and thirsty to do something adventurous,” Walch says. “With all my many ideas, Gianfranco was able to collect them and get a deeper understanding to together develop our wines with a strong personality and interpretation of the various sites.”



Above: A recent renovation at the Castel Ringberg property includes a glass-walled tasting area perched above the barrel room. **Below:** Winemaker Stefano Bolognani surveys the new state-of-the-art winery, built into the hillside below the Walchs’ home.



Walch and Faustin followed up the Kastelaz Gewürz with a unique wine of more global appeal. With the 2000 vintage, Walch told Faustin, she wanted to make a white wine “to show the vintage in one bouquet of flowers.” The result was *Beyond the Clouds*, a blend of Chardonnay and other white varieties crushed and barrel-fermented together; it was a wine as exuberant and expressive as Walch herself.

Though *Beyond the Clouds* is always 80 percent Chardonnay, Walch doesn’t reveal the recipe for the rest—saying only that in every vintage the blend is completed with four of five grapes: Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon Blanc. “I try to show what the year is showing,” she says.

Three years later, Walch began producing *Kermesse Cuvée* as a red cousin to her signature blend, combining the local grape Lagrein with French varieties Syrah, Petit Verdot, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Walch with her daughters, Karoline and Julia (seated), who assumed management of the family winery in 2015



In 2015, the year Julia and Karoline assumed leadership of Elena Walch, Werner also passed along his winery, which itself produces about 50,000 cases, chiefly from grapes purchased from small local growers and destined for the regional market. But clearly Elena Walch is the jewel.

“My mom picks and chooses what she wants to do, and my sister and I run the winery,” explains Karoline. “We have a winemaker and we have a viticulture manager, but where it all comes together is us.”

The Walch sisters have wasted no time moving the namesake winery forward. One of their first decisions was investing in a new fermentation cellar—separate from their father’s winery, where their mother had made her wine.

“We came in with different ideas about winemaking,” Karoline says. “We felt there had been so much done in the vineyards, we wanted to continue that in the cellar.” The sleek, gravity-fed winery, built into the hillside below the family home and winery, was completed just in time for the 2015 harvest.

The new facility helps them refine their blends with a series of small conical fermentors that allow for more parcel-by-parcel vinification. Electric pumps are used only to put the wines in barrel after they finish fermenting.

To soften tannins and increase subtle aromas in many of their red wines, such as their Pinot Noir and Lagrein, the Walchs have moved to whole-berry fermentations. From their first harvest, in an effort to enhance the individual character of their wines, they

isolated native vineyard yeasts to replace commercial yeasts. “We’ve tried to make the fermentations as gentle as possible,” says Karoline.

The sisters also reimagined Castel Ringberg, adding a modern, glass-enclosed tasting center inside the main hall, which they made a barrel room for Ringberg wines. “Our idea was to bring the castle back to its roots in the middle of the vineyard,” explains Karoline.

With their ambitious expansion plans, Karoline and Julia have also reorganized their team. Given the choice, Faustin decided to concentrate his efforts in the vineyards, so with 2017 came the arrival of a new winemaker: Stefano Bolognani, 29, a Trento area native who worked as assistant winemaker at Cantina Terlano, a stellar Alto Adige cooperative.

For their first vintage with Bolognani, in August 2017, the Walchs isolated 2.5 acres of old Chardonnay vines in their new Trento holdings for sparkling wine. The base wine was fermented in rented cellar space nearby, and the vintage is expected to produce about 460 cases of blanc de blancs for release in 2022. Meanwhile, Faustin will oversee replanting of another 22 acres of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in that area for additional sparkling wines.

“It’s a long-term project,” Karoline says with a confidence that seems to have passed from mother to daughter. “In wine, you have to always look to the future.”

Contributing editor Robert Camuto lives in Italy. His blog, “Letter From Europe,” appears regularly on WineSpectator.com.