



FIRST PERSON, FAR FLUNG

BLURRED BORDERLINES

In South Tyrol, locals speak German,
drink Gewürztraminer, wear Tyrolean
hats—and call Italy home

STORY *Nick Czap* PHOTOGRAPHY *Andrea Wyner*

SIGHTSEEING

Panorama Restaurant at the
Miramonti Boutique Hotel
offers breathtaking views
of Meran/Merano

SOUTH TYROL



From a certain vantage, human history can seem like little more than an extended exercise in cartography, of maps fashioned and refashioned in the course of war or conquest or, perhaps less frequently, in the interest of peace. What the people in the lands in question make of the cartographers' work is another matter entirely. Such is the case of South Tyrol.

A bastion of Bavarian culture since the 6th century, and part of the Habsburg Empire since the mid-1300s, South Tyrol was annexed by Italy at the end of World War I. It subsequently endured Mussolini's campaign of forced Italianization, which, among its affronts, emblazoned the region with the name Alto Adige and forbade the use of the German language. The South Tyroleans resisted and, after decades of struggle, won a significant degree of political, economic and cultural autonomy, including the right to teach German in their schools. Today, Italian is seldom heard outside the provincial

capital, Bozen/Bolzano, and institutions like Italian post offices seem oddly out of place in villages that are otherwise Austrian to the core, giving the impression that it was South Tyrol that made a few begrudging concessions to Italy rather than the other way around.

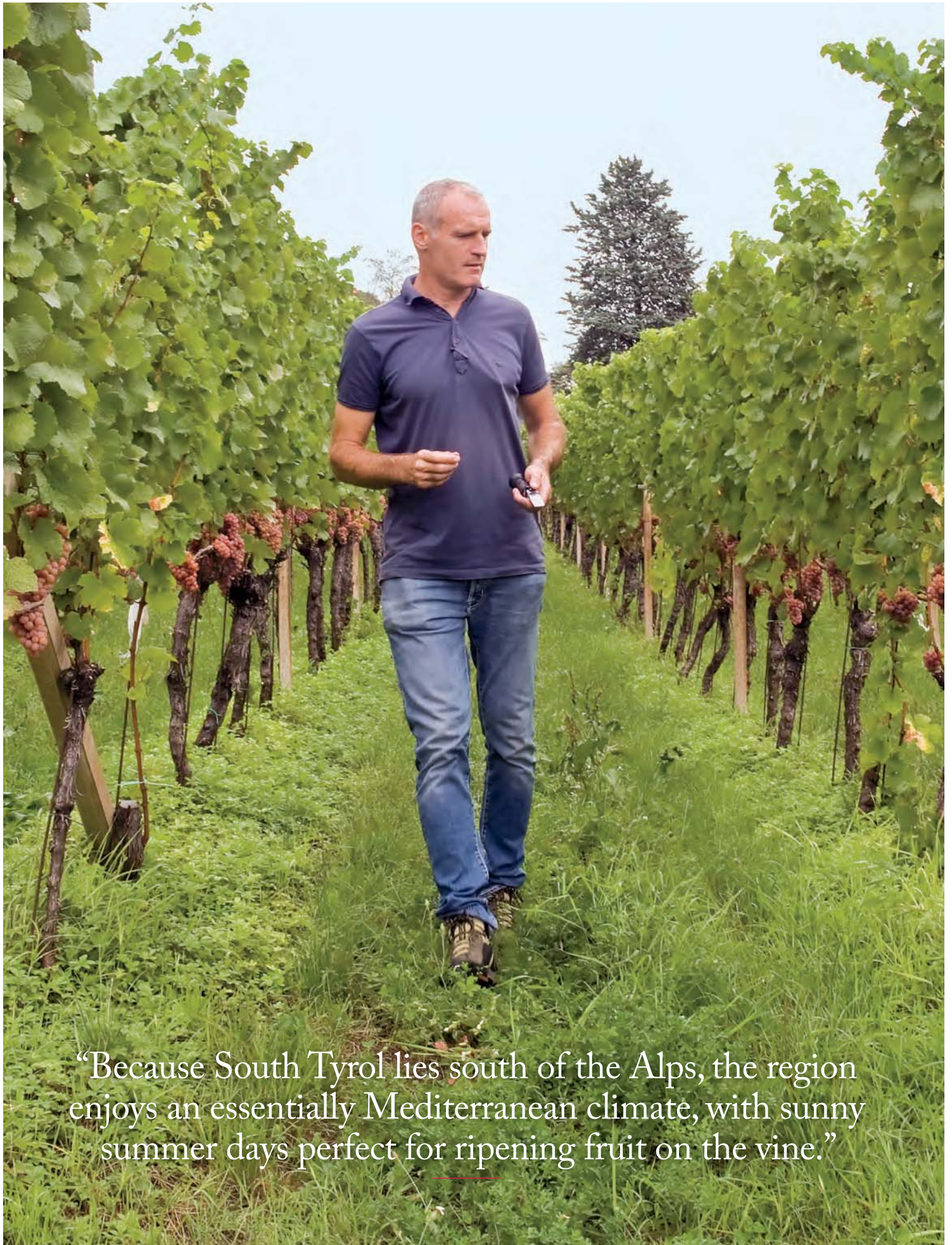
Some years ago, on a flight to Venice, my wife and I peered down with wonder at South Tyrol, the scope of its landscape so extreme—from forbidding peaks that rose like stone spears to valleys of impossible green—that it seemed not entirely real. And as we began to make out the signs of civilization—roads, steeples, villages and, high in the hills, the stunning green of Alpine pastures—I felt an odd certainty that we would one day come to know this place, which from such a height had so completely captured our curiosity.

And so it was on a fine July afternoon, we found ourselves on the terrace of Castel Fragsburg, the former hunting lodge of a German count. We were somewhat peckish, having driven up the autostrada from Venice, and a bite to eat was in order. My wife chose spaghetti al pomodoro garnished with creamy bits of mozzarella. I went for >



**BILINGUAL
GOODS**

In Bozen/Bolzano,
South Tyrol's capital,
street signs and
store names are
written in Italian
and German



“Because South Tyrol lies south of the Alps, the region enjoys an essentially Mediterranean climate, with sunny summer days perfect for ripening fruit on the vine.”


**THROUGH THE
GRAPEVINE**

Opposite page:
Winemaker Willi Stürz
of Cantina Tramin, a
cooperative winery;
this page: the cellar at
Cantina Tramin

kartoffelgnocchi mit pfifferlingen—potato dumplings with chanterelles—and ordered a bottle of Gewürztraminer made by a winery in a nearby village. Between bites it began to occur to me that South Tyrol's cuisine might be the area's most enthusiastically bicultural aspect. On its bilingual menus, *knödel* and cappelletti cohabit as if they had always been the best of friends. On wine lists, Proseccos from the Veneto and Pinot Grigios from Friuli-Venezia Giulia rub shoulders with Grüner Veltliners from the banks of the Danube and indigenous South Tyrolean varieties like Vernatsch and Lagrein.

Looking down at the Etsch Valley—flat as a table and every inch of it planted in disciplined rows of green, from the darker greens of the apple orchards to the brighter greens of the vineyards—I struggled to recall a place as bewilderingly pretty. The Etsch/Adige River—chalky green, cold and turbulent—sluices from its source near the Austrian-Italian border, down the valley, before turning east across the plain of the Veneto. On the far side of the valley stands a range of high forested hills and, behind them, much higher mountains of naked stone, row upon row like great sharks' teeth. As the light shifted, these distant mountains disappeared and reappeared, at times as gauzy as veils, at times in sharp relief, their high crevasses snow-packed, gleaming.

While the Alpine landscape never felt anything short of exotic, linguistically I had never felt more at home. In the past five years, in the course of as many trips to Italy, I'd picked up enough Italian to get by as long as a conversation involved food, wine or cars—the subjects of my journalistic work. And after a brief period living in Vienna as a

10-year-old, I took up German. Never did I imagine how useful the latter would prove in Italy.

After moving across the valley to Vigilius Mountain Resort, a striking contemporary hotel on Vigiljoch/Monte San Vigilio, I found myself eavesdropping on waiters, who spoke to one another in a hybrid tongue, starting a thought in German or Italian, switching seamlessly to the other in mid-flight, and back again. They were a diverse group, from many different countries—among them India and Cameroon—and perhaps hadn't yet developed a particular allegiance. In chatting with them, I found myself emulating their technique. Unable to remember a particular German word or expression, I'd pop into Italian until the next blockade, and so on, concocting from two sadly incomplete languages something stranger, yet more whole.

The sheer depth of the area's history came into view at Cantina Tramin, a 126-year-old cooperative in the village of Tramin/Termenò, where we received something of an education in South Tyrolean viticulture. When I asked the cantina's sommelier, Tramin native Jürgen Geier, how long his family had lived there, he replied, "For hundreds of years," as if it were a totally unremarkable thing, relative, say, to the fact that the nearby chapel of St. Jakob dates to the year 1120, or that winegrowers have been going about their work here since pre-Roman times.

Geier poured nine wines for us, including the cantina's acclaimed Gewürztraminer, made from an ancient native grape whose name denotes perfume or spice, and a Sauvignon that conjured alpine flowers and ripening peach. Irresistibly quaffable, the wines owed their unique >

SOUTH TYROL

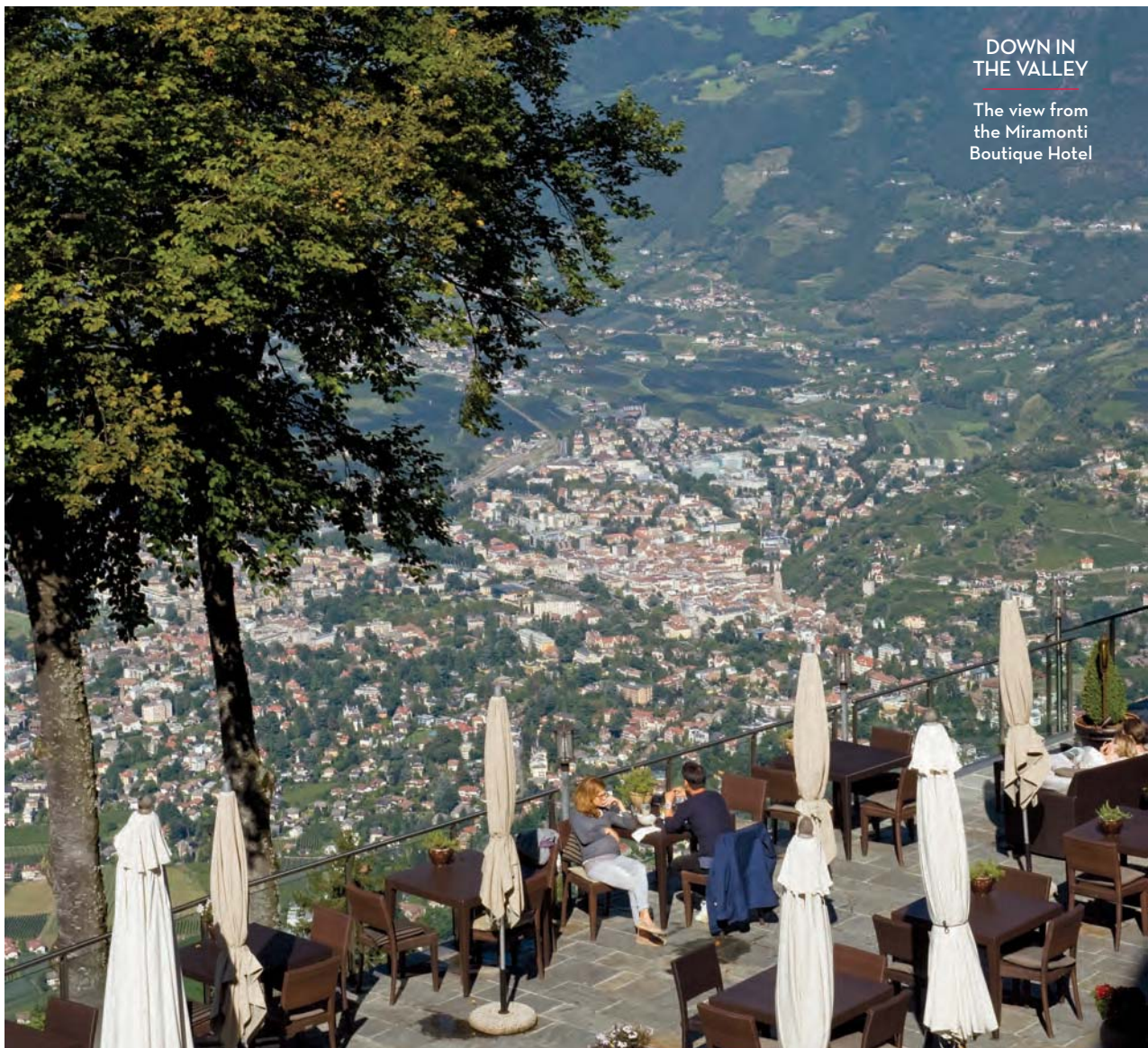
characteristics to South Tyrol's fortuitous topography. Because it lies south of the Alps, Geier explained, the region enjoys an essentially Mediterranean climate, with sunny summer days perfect for ripening fruit on the vine. In the evenings, cool air descends from the mountains and flows into the valley, allowing the vines to rest and preserving the elements that give the wines their pronounced aromas and acidity. Thanking Geier for his tutelage, we stocked up on several bottles and made our way back to our aerie in the hills.

The mountains here are laced with hiking trails. A great many of South Tyrol's visitors come from Austria, Germany and Switzerland and, as such, are members of a broader group for whom summers filled with days of vigorous hiking are a cultural imperative. Inspired by their example, we undertook an expedition of our own.

We departed mid-morning, armed with a map and plenty of water; nearly a mile above sea level, the sun was beating

down hard. Traipsing up into the forest, we saw a family carrying empty wicker baskets. We spotted them later, their baskets filled with sheaves of what appeared to be nettles, destined, possibly, for a cream-of-wild-herb soup like the one we had enjoyed at the hotel restaurant the night before. We also encountered a man of about 70. Lean and muscular and deeply tanned, wearing a wool felt Tyrolean hat, he walked swiftly and easily despite the weight he carried—a rucksack, a hunting rifle slung over one shoulder and a small deer over the other. One could eat well in the mountains, it seemed, with the requisite skills.

Poor hunters and foragers ourselves, we would have to rely on the skills of others, specifically, those of the cooks at Gasthof Jocher, a mountain inn situated just below the little stone church of St. Vigil am Joch. Upon completing our pilgrimage to the church, we retired to a picnic table on the gasthof's terrace. My wife ordered a glass of Pinot >



DOWN IN
THE VALLEY

The view from
the Miramonti
Boutique Hotel



SPRING AWAKENING

The quartzite-lined pools at Vigilus Mountain Resort are filled with natural spring water from Vigljoch/Monte San Vigilio

Bianco and toast with speck and cheese; I myself, a half-liter of wheat beer and roasted *knödel*. Just as we were taking our first bites, a wild wind leapt up. The grass rippled in the meadow, the sky turned an unsettling slate gray, and a hail of cold raindrops came pelting down. We looked nervously at our fellow diners, who in turn looked at one another, then at the sky. Moments later, a prong of lightning, chased by thunder like cannon fire, sent everyone scurrying, clutching their plates and steins and glasses, to the shelter of the gasthof's dining room.

In the safety of the inn, with its plain oak walls and leaded-glass windows, its atmosphere dense with the perfumes of sausage and cabbage, I imagined the scenario couldn't have been terribly different in just such a refuge five or six centuries earlier, when rather than anorak-clad nature lovers, these forests and meadows were home to shepherds and hunters and farmers who knelt in the church

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of St. Vigil am Joch while begging God's protection from the fickle Tyrolean weather.

As the wind and rain thrashed and the thunder roared away, the gasthof grew only cozier as one after another wanderer ducked in from the elements. Two men, perhaps in their 80s, in wool trousers and windbreakers, joined us at our table. "Grüß Gott," they said. "Grüß Gott," we replied, "May God greet you," a particularly Austrian hello.

The two men ordered espresso and cake and savored them quietly. My wife and I set about finishing our lunch, then strüdel and coffee, and when the storm subsided, said goodbye to our tablemates and ventured out. The air was cool and damp and smelled of pine needles and earth. Raindrops glinted on the grass in the meadow and on the green boughs of the larches, and the vagaries of history and of borders drawn and redrawn seemed very far away. ☺

The Best of South Tyrol

CASTEL FRAGSBURG

The former hunting lodge of a German count, Castel Fragsburg feels as historic as its 17th-century foundations, yet as fresh and modern as its Michelin-starred cuisine. The mountain views from its terrace are so captivating, you may find yourself forgetting your itinerary entirely. fragsburg.com

MIRAMONTI BOUTIQUE HOTEL

This sleek chalet is perched high on a mountainside above Meran/Merano. The Panorama Restaurant serves—you guessed it—panoramic views alongside venison tartare and wild spinach risotto. A pair of vintage Alfa Romeos are available for guests' use. Day trip to Switzerland, anyone? hotel-miramonti.com

VIGILIUS MOUNTAIN RESORT

Situated 5,000 feet above sea level, on Vigljoch/Monte San Vigilio, and accessible only via cable car, this resort was designed by South Tyrolean architect Matteo Thun to evoke a fallen tree. Treat yourself to a massage at the luxurious spa or take an aqua pilates class in the natural spring-water pool. vigilius.it