



MATT KRAMER

The Oregonian

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Some 'small speaker' wines can growl

Like quality miniature stereo components, some boutique vineyards produce mighty vintages

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If you follow stereo equipment (and for some reason a lot of wine geeks do), you're likely aware of a new phenomenon: Some of today's best stereo speakers are not the big honkers of our youth, but are instead little bigger than a shoebox. And the sound quality is astonishing.

I was so intrigued by this that I wound up writing an article for a magazine about this revolution in small stereo speakers. The short version is that this achievement was a trickle-down phenomenon: The best speaker designers took their standards and techniques and applied them to small speakers, taking advantage of improved technology along the way.

That's the story of this week's wines as well. You've got high-end producers of known standards and considerable technical talent applying themselves to "small speaker" wines. Yet what comes out is magnificently more than the small (price) size would suggest.

Riff Pinot Grigio 2004

One of Italy's best white wine producers is an ambitious, modern-minded fellow named Alois Lageder, who's made a big name for himself at the high end. He's a good businessman.

This was Lageder's challenge: Italian pinot grigio (aka pinot gris) is the hottest thing on the low-priced market these days. Most of the wines are thin, dilute affairs with little flavor worth mentioning -- which hasn't stopped them from selling wildly, mind you. It would be nice to get a piece of the action without losing your soul (and reputation) in the process.

Lageder knows better stuff is out there, especially where he grows his own grapes, in the northern Italian region called Alto Adige right up against the Alps near the Austrian border. Of course, Lageder's own grapes are too expensive to use because his yields are too low for inexpensive wine. But his neighbors' wines -- especially from decent growers -- well, they may not be quite up to his own standards but they're still pretty good.

That's the story of Riff (German for reef, a reference to the limestone soils of the zone created from ancient seabeds). Lageder buys wine in bulk and bottles it under a brand name. A lot of producers do this. The trick is selectivity and standards. Riff Pinot Grigio 2004 pulls it off nicely indeed.

This is lovely Italian pinot grigio, especially for the price. It's crisp, surprisingly dense (no water-thin dilution here) and actually has a light mineral savor. That's an element sorely lacking in the vast majority of Italian pinot grigios. In short, it's standout dry white wine for the money.

This is very much worth pursuing, especially at its asking price of \$9.95 a bottle. That's downright cheap for this kind of quality.