

A photograph of a vineyard with rows of grapevines and a field of wildflowers in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

NEW sensation

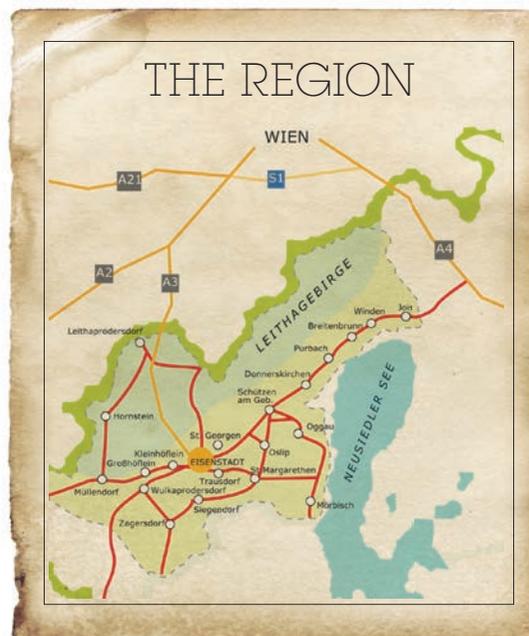
WITH WHITES 'LIKE CHABLIS' AND REDS 'LIKE THE NORTHERN RHÔNE', THERE'S PLENTY FOR THE ON-TRADE TO GET EXCITED ABOUT IN AUSTRIA'S NEWEST DAC. **JULIE SHEPPARD** CHECKS OUT THE MINERALITY ON SHOW IN LEITHABERG

Think of Austria and the wine regions that spring instantly to mind are Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal, whose Rieslings and Grüner Veltliners deservedly feature on many wine lists across the UK. I'm going to hazard a guess that you'll probably never even have heard of Leithaberg, let alone be able to name-check its top producers.

'Leitha-where?' you ask. Located around 50km south-east of Vienna in Burgenland, Leithaberg – pronounced 'lighter-bairg' – is Austria's newest Districtus Austriae Controllatus, awarded DAC status in 2010. It's made up of 19 wine-growing communities and around 3,500 hectares of vineyards planted between Lake Neusiedl and the Leithagebirge mountain ridge.

The DAC designation may be relatively new, but archaeological evidence of wine-growing in this region dates back to the 8th century – the oldest in Central Europe – with vineyards named Leithaberg first recorded in the 1500s.

Today, it's the only Austrian region that produces both red and white wines of DAC quality. Reds are made from the Blaufränkisch grape, with up to 15% of St Laurent, Zweigelt or Pinot Noir permitted;



are minerality, elegance, a long palate and ageability – and this is the style of wine we want to promote,' explains Nehrer, who also makes a mineral-led Chardonnay/Grüner Veltliner blend at his winery in Eisenstadt, roughly in the centre of the DAC.

'All of the wineries here produce several

'IN THE RIGHT YEARS WE CAN ACHIEVE THE TENSION AND ACIDITY OF A GREAT BURGUNDIAN PINOT WITH BLAUFRÄNKISCH' JOHN NITTAUS

while white grapes are Grüner Veltliner, Pinot Blanc/Weissburgunder, Chardonnay and Neuburger.

In the beginning...

'I was the first to coin the term "Leithaberg" back in 1993, but it didn't catch on. Ten years later I tried again,' says Hans Nehrer, president of the Leithaberg Association, which began as a collective of 14 winemakers who labelled their 2004 vintage 'Leithaberg' and began promoting a regional identity.

Tasting that original bottling of the Nehrer Blaufränkisch 2004 highlights the potential of both the region and the grape: complex, rich and savoury but underpinned with an elegant minerality, it's a classy customer.

'Characteristics of Leithaberg wines

different wines, usually from small parcels of vines,' explains Erwin Tinhof, another Eisenstadt grower, whose wines are imported by Savage Selection. Tinhof makes six whites, nine reds and a rosé from his 14ha vineyard.

Leithaberg was part of Hungary for 800 years and, like the Napoleonic inheritance laws that shaped French vineyards, Hungarian inheritance laws meant that land here had to be divided into small parcels for the next generation. 'You need at least 10ha of vines to be able to make a living from wine,' says Tinhof, adding that a single parcel of just six hectares is 'enormously big' for the region.

Grapes in Leithaberg are typically picked by hand due to this fragmented nature of the vineyards 'and cherry trees getting in the way', according to Nehrer.



AT A GLANCE

- Leithaberg is one of Austria's eight DACs
- Awarded DAC status in 2010
- Located in Burgenland
- 3,576 hectares of vineyards
- 62 wineries
- White grapes: Grüner Veltliner, Pinot Blanc/Weissburgunder, Chardonnay, Neuburger.
- Red grapes: Blaufränkisch with up to 15% of St Laurent, Zweigelt or Pinot Noir
- White wines released the year after harvest; red wines must be aged in oak barrels and released the second year after harvest.
- All DAC wines are Reserve category
- Alcohol level 12.5-13.5% abv

Around 30% of the producers are also organic or biodynamic.

'For me organic growing is a necessity; it's for the next generation,' explains the energetic Birgit Braunstein, who grows vines in Purbach, in north-east Leithaberg and describes the Leithaberg style as 'structured, mineral, elegant'. Her wines include a restrained Reserve Chardonnay 2009 and black-fruited single-vineyard Blaufränkisch Felsenstein 2007, with finely knit tannins and a lovely persistence.

'It's easier to be biodynamic here than in other parts of Austria due to our microclimate,' says John Nittnaus, whose wines are listed by Lea & Sandeman. Vines only come under attack from deer, birds and the local black-spotted pigs. Nittnaus has a single vineyard site in Jois, in the top north corner of Leithaberg, which is the closest vineyard to the shallow Lake Neusiedl.

Covering 320 sq km, Neusiedl is one of the largest lakes in Europe and one of

the key influencers in Leithaberg. 'The lake has a very big impact on the wines. Whether a vineyard is closer to the lake or further away gives different styles,' explains Markus Altenburger, another Jois producer. 'As Jois is closer to the lake, it's warmer, so with our Blaufränkisch we get riper plum fruit, rather than raspberry flavours,' says Nittnaus.

'CHARACTERISTICS OF LEITHABERG WINES ARE MINERALITY, ELEGANCE, A LONG PALATE AND AGEABILITY' HANS NEHRER

Another influential factor for producers is the region's unique microclimate. In the west the 400m Leithagebirge mountains run for around 40km and form part of the foothills of the Alps. They create cold fresh air which blows through the vineyards and balances the effect of the warmer 'Pannonian' climate blowing from the east across the Hungarian Plains.

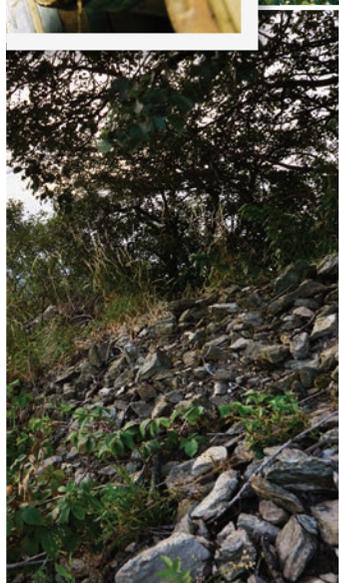
'We're warmer than Burgundy, cooler than Côte du Rhône,' summarises Nittnaus. 'In the right years we can achieve the tension and acidity of a great Burgundian Pinot with Blaufränkisch,' he continues. 'My 2005 vintage now tastes like a Burgundy – ageing for 10 years or more shouldn't be a problem,' he says.

'In a hot year Blaufränkisch reminds me of a Rhône Syrah,' adds Altenburger, whose wines are listed by Newcomer Wines.

This vintage variation only adds to the regional character: 2009 was a very warm year, 2010 was cooler, meaning wines showed greater elegance and finesse. 'For me

2011 was my master year – it was one of the best years ever,' says Nehrer.

The final defining characteristic of Leithaberg's terroir is its soils. 'Leithaberg whites are like Chablis and our reds are like the Northern Rhône in terms of style and soil types,' says Tinhof, drawing on that useful French comparison again; though other producers are keen to point



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LEITHABERG VINEYARDS OVERLOOKING LAKE NEUSIEDL; JOHN NITTAUS; ERWIN TINHOF IN HIS EISENSTADT VINEYARDS; MARKUS ALTENBURGER, MINERAL-RICH SOILS; THE PRIELER FAMILY



SOMMELIER PICKS

TOM CASH, THE DELAUNAY

Tinhof Blaufränkisch 2008

This wine is bright, clean, fresh and quite pronounced. On the nose, there are notes of white pepper and crunchy red cherry fruit. On the palate, it's dry and balanced with ripe juicy red stone fruit. Clean finish; it's a good food wine.

£8.67, *Savage Selection*, 01451 860896



MICHAEL DESCHAMPS,
MARCUS AT THE BERKELEY

Birgit Braunstein Felsenstein Blaufränkisch 2010

A fresh attack and shows good maturity. Long and suave finish.

£POA, *braunstein.at*, +43 2683 5913

Markus Altenburger

Jungenberg Chardonnay 2010

This Chardonnay has good potential for the future. It displays a nice balance between oak and minerality.

£POA, *Newcomer Wines*, 07447 512061



MARTIN LAM,
CONSULTANT

Nittaus Chardonnay/ Pinot Blanc 2012

Intensely aromatic, balanced, very much a food wine — although good as an aperitif with food too!

£18.95, *Lea & Sandeman*, 020 7244 0522

Prieler Blaufränkisch Reserve 2010

Funky nose with perfumed aromatics and a savoury element. Palate is quite soft and generous with lots of minerality.

£20.26, *Clark Foyster*, 020 8832 7470



out the unique regional typicity that can be found here. 'Leithaberg DAC wines are very original and very terroir-driven,' says Milan Arti of Esterházy Winery, which boasts Stéphane Derenoncourt as a consultant and is featured in the Tanners Wines portfolio in the UK.

Down to earth

The mineral-rich soils of Leithaberg are made up of two elements: a base layer of mica-shist slate, with a covering of shell-limestone known locally as 'Leithakalk'. These elements vary, depending on proximity to the mountains. In Donnerskirchen, a hillier part of the region, Josef Bayer has pure slate soils in his vineyard. 'Very dry mineral soils make this area particularly unique and mean that 70% of the wine I make is white,' he says.

In nearby Schützen am Gebirge, there's a high percentage of Leithakalk. 'Our soils have a high amount of active limestone — you can compare it with Chablis or Champagne,' says Georg Prieler of Weingut Prieler who has planted his vineyards with Welschriesling, Merlot

and Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as the permitted Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay and Blaufränkisch. 'The limestone produces complex wines. Austrian wine can't be super-powerful, but it can be complex!'

As you'd expect, these complex, mineral-led wines serve as a perfect foil to the local cuisine, which majors on heavy meat, pasta and potato dishes. But they are equally at home in the UK on-trade, where they can match a variety of dishes. Prieler's wines are on the list at The Fat Duck and Gordon Ramsay (via Clark Foyster) and he says: 'I always think about food when I'm making my wines. Neuberger goes well with sushi and sashimi; Blaufränkisch is an obvious match with lamb but can even pair with curry; Pinot Blanc is great with lobster and chips or oysters.'

Leithaberg will doubtless be a hand-sell on wine lists due to customers' lack of familiarity with the region. But given the quality of its wines and the enthusiasm of its talented producers, it certainly deserves to be as well known as its more famous Austrian cousins. Wachau had better watch out. 🍷