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# Andrew Jefford: revolutionary reds

By Andrew Jefford

‘Some Austrian reds can approach the richness and balance of right-bank Bordeaux’

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[Austria](http://www.ft.com/topics/places/Austria) is in the middle of a red revolution, although one could argue that it has been a long time coming. It was in 1918 that the Austro-Hungarian monarchy collapsed; the first Austrian Republic came into being the following year. Under the old order, Austria principally contributed white wines to the imperial table while, Tokaji aside, red wines were a Hungarian speciality. A gastronomically self-sufficient republic would, of course, need both.

The vicissitudes that lay ahead for Austria meant the reddening process has sometimes stuttered​, notably in​ 1985​ when Austrian wine production as a whole was mired in​ scandal. Happily, the long-term consequence has been a surge in quality wine, and a steady increase in red-vine plantings. Between 1999 and 2009 these increased by almost 28 per cent. One-third of the country’s vineyards now produce red wine.

* But which red? The growers’ choice so far has been Zweigelt. This cross was a child of the new republic, obtained by Professor Fritz Zweigelt in 1922 from Blaufränkisch and Saint Laurent, and memorably described by Philipp Blom in his book The Wines of Austria as “the cocker spaniel of Austrian grapes: always friendly, always happy to oblige, and never aggressive”. The best Austrian Zweigelt is delicious: juicy, quenching and exuberant. It is twice as widely planted as any other Austrian red variety.

Austria has been able to prove since 1985 that it can produce fine wines of resonant singularity, though these resist easy definition. Whites from its signature grape, Grüner Veltliner, have few allusive pegs, but their substance, texture, pith and sappiness gives them almost unparalleled food-friendliness and adaptability. Its great Rieslings, too, are wines of unusual substance, wealth, texture and structure: world landmarks for the rich white style (as opposed to the sweet white style). Austrian wine producers want their red wines to compete at this level. Juicy Zweigelt isn’t quite up to the job.

Enter one of its parents: Blaufränkisch. The first references to this grape date to the mid-19th century; it is identical to Hungary’s Kékfrankos (and Lemberger in Germany and the US). In common with dozens of leading European grape varieties, it is an offspring of the obscure but fecund Gouais Blanc. “Much of the history of Blaufränkisch is lost,” says leading grower Roland Velich of Moric, “because it was principally a Hungarian variety, grown in Burgenland when it was a part of Hungary. Many of the wine merchants were Jews, so tragically the culture and records are missing.” Almost all Austria’s red-wine makers, though, see it as the country’s finest red grape. “You make the money with Zweigelt,” says Johannes Trapl, a leading Carnuntum grower, “but you make the point with Blaufränkisch.”

It is not an easy grape. “There are seven years every decade when Zweigelt is great,” says Trapl’s fellow Carnuntum grower Martin Netzl, “but only three when Blaufränkisch is great.” At high yields, it loses its personality; pick too early, and it can easily be green in flavour. Throughout much of the 20th century, it was regarded as a commonplace red, a kind of red Müller-Thurgau. Then, when ambition finally caught up with its potential in the 1990s, “everyone,” says Roland Velich, “tried to make the Austrian Tignanello. It was a decade of heavy oaking and chunky wines.” The new century has brought a new refinement, and growers have realised that Blaufränkisch is capable not only of making poised, refined, even aerial reds, but of reflecting region and vineyard site with fidelity, too.

No commentator ventures into a description of Austrian wine geography without taking a deep breath, as the country has evolved complex and overlapping administrative and classificatory systems. As far as Blaufränkisch is concerned, though, the deepest, warmest and most complete examples come from Leithaberg, on the hills and villages set back from Lake Neusiedl in the eastern state of Burgenland. Lighter and finer-grained Blaufränkisch wines come from two areas to the north and south of this. One is Carnuntum, a kind of transition zone between the Danube wine regions and those of the Lake Neusiedl (the soft slopes of the Spitzerberg in eastern Carnuntum have been attracting a lot of recent interest). The other area is the Eisenberg region in Südburgenland, and especially the grand landscape of its hilly central zone.

In each case, there is a climatic tension between the cooler Alpine air masses from the west and, in the summer, the warmer air of the Pannonian plain to the east; indeed a gigantic wind farm near Carnuntum harvests these currents. Leithaberg gets the most Pannonian influence, and the large, shallow lake creates its own warm microclimate, too. “We actually have to look for freshness rather than ripeness,” says Georg Prieler, of the domain of the same name. If you want French equivalents, Leithaberg Blaufränkisch can approach the weight and depth of fruit of a red from the northern Rhône such as Saint-Joseph, and sometimes even the textural richness and easy-going balance of right-bank Bordeaux.

The wines of Eisenberg and Carnuntum are more exposed to western influences, and either have a Burgundian profile (from growers aiming for finesse and restraint) or, if made in a more exuberant and extractive manner, can evoke the Cabernet Franc-based wines of the Loire valley. No disrespect is intended by these analogies; indeed they attest to the startling attainments of Austria’s greatest winemakers. Those studying for stringent tasting exams (such as the practical component of the Master of Wine qualification) often fear an Austrian encounter, white or red. Once the label is hidden, they become beguiling chameleons of the fine wine world. Perhaps the truth is that few outside Austria are familiar with its wine diversity. And the revolution may not be over yet: Austrian Pinot Noir can be remarkable, too.

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Andrew Jefford’s weekly blog [*Jefford on Monday*](http://www.decanter.com/news/blogs/1/expert) appears every Monday on [*www.decanter.com*](http://www.decanter.com/)

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2010 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, Prieler (£32.70 from [www.philglas-swiggot.com](http://www.philglas-swiggot.com/)). Deep in colour, with raspberry and citrus scents. Long, resonant, stylish and amply structured flavours with some smoky intrigue and a saline edge.

**Blaufränkisch Picks**

• Birgit Braunstein (Leithaberg)

• Groszer Wein (Eisenberg)

• Krutzler (Burgenland)

• Moric (Burgenland)

• Markowitsch (Carnuntum)

• Muhr-van der Niepoort (Spitzerberg)

• Anita and Hans Nittnaus (Leithaberg)

• Prieler (Leithaberg)

• Uwe Schiefer (Carnuntum)

• StephanO (Eisenberg)

• Straka (Eisenberg)

• Tinhof (Leithaberg)

• Trapl (Spitzerberg)

• Weninger (Mittelburgenland)

• Umathum (Burgenland)

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