



Burgenland's Wine and Food

Renaissance



Austria's most varied wine region is undergoing dramatic changes, as restaurateurs are creating a dining scene matching the excitement and creativity of the area's food-friendly red wines BY ROGER VOSS

It is high summer, and the wide wooden deck of the Mole West restaurant in the town of Neusiedl am See is packed with lunchtime vacationers tucking in to the vibrant dishes of Chef Wolfgang Ensbacher. At the end of the deck, yachts bob in placid waters and in the distance, the calm blue of Lake Neusiedl disappears into the horizon. The lake, 40 minutes southeast of Vienna,

PHOTO © STEVE HAIDER.COM

straddles the Austrian border with Hungary and serves as the marine playground for land-locked Austrians. The landscape around the shallow 121-square-mile lake is wide and flat, just fringed by hills to the west. To the east, across the marshland and vineyards, the Pannonian plains stretch toward Hungary and on to the Ukraine, the hot winds blowing uninterrupted.

This is Burgenland, home to many of Austria's famed sweet white wines and, increasingly, dry red wines. It's also the place where wine and food have come together to nudge traditional Austrian cooking toward a more international approach. Burgenland is Austria's most varied wine region. The changes over the past 15 years have been dramatic and dizzying. New win-

eries have been built, vineyard methods have been improved, organic and biodynamic procedures have been adopted and indigenous grapes reintroduced. While sweet, botrytized wines made from grapes as diverse as Muskat Ottonel, Welschriesling, Chardonnay and Traminer have long created the reputation of Burgenland, the red wines from native *Vitis vinifera* Blau-

fränkisch, St. Laurent and Zweigelt grapes are the new stars. They have come a long way in 10 years.

One big difference is a more nuanced use of wood. It had been common for Austrian winemakers to employ new oak barrels both for fermentation and aging. “In the 2000 vintage, we were fermenting and aging in 200% small new barrels,” acknowledges Franz Weninger, who specializes in Blaufränkisch at his family’s Weninger winery in Horitschon, Middle Burgenland. “Now, my 2009 Dürrau Cuvée is in 500-liter barrels and not all of them are new.”

This results in reds that are elegant and food friendly, ready to accompany Burgenland’s new creative food traditions. “Now we want to make wines where you want to drink more than a glass,” says Clemens Reisner, winemaker at the Hans Iglér winery in Middle Burgenland. The winery is a 300-year-old former stable building, now converted into spectacular cellars and tasting areas. Burgenland is ready on all fronts.

The Blaufränkisch boom

Touring the region and talking with winemakers, it’s clear that they are as comfortable talking about their country’s evolving cuisine as they are discussing their wines. Even as vintners profile the three main grape varieties that comprise their red wines, the subject of food is never far behind.

“Zweigelt always has this nice, fruity style,” says Paul Achs, winemaker and owner of Weingut Paul Achs. “In Austria, if you go into a restaurant and want to try a glass of red wine, you ask for a Zweigelt. You can just drink it and have fun.”

Wines made with St. Laurent are more ro-



BURGENLAND'S SUBREGIONS AND THEIR STYLISTIC MARKERS

Around Lake Neusiedl, the Blaufränkisch shows considerable power when it's solo, but it's just as often found in blends with Zweigelt, St. Laurent or Cabernet Sauvignon.

Those of Middle Burgenland (Mittelburgenland) are the ones for aging; they are structured, packed with red fruits and layered with acidity.

The wines from South Burgenland (Südburgenland) are spicy and concentrated, characteristics deriving from the iron-rich soil.

bust, sharing some similarities with Pinot Noir. “It goes with food in a spicier way, and needs more time to mature,” says Achs.

The variety on most everyone’s lips is Blaufränkisch. Burgenland winemakers seem to agree with Achs that Blaufränkisch is the “wine for aging. It’s the wine for steaks and rich meats, and its acidity cuts through the fat of meat dishes.”

“Blaufränkisch goes so well with food because it is not overpowering to taste—it’s a perfect partner,” says Weninger. “It has the acidity of Pinot Noir and the structure of Nebbiolo.”

Blaufränkisch is fast becoming Austria’s signature red grape, and Burgenland is its home. With its typical flavors of dark black currant and blackberry, and more than a hint of minerality

The Wines

94 Hans Iglér 2008 Ab Ericio (Burgenland); \$62. Blaufränkisch dominates this blend with Merlot and Zweigelt. This flagship wine from the Iglér winery is powered by its perfumed fruit, cherry and red berry flavors. It’s ripe and juicy at the same time. There is no question of the ageability of this concentrated, complex wine. *Imported by Magellan Wine Imports.*

94 Weninger 2007 Dürrau Cuvée (Burgenland); \$NA. This Blaufränkisch is Weninger’s top wine, an impressive array of spice, black berry fruit, dusty tannins and layers of wood and acidity. There is weight and restrained power in a dark structure. Age 5–6 years. *Imported by Monika Caha Selections.*

91 Josef Pöckl 2008 Rosso e Nero (Burgenland); \$40. A blend of Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, created as a fusion of international and Austrian varieties. This dry-textured, firm wine is rich and full-bodied with plum skins and concentration. Age for 3–4 years. *Imported by Monika Caha Selections.*

90 Prieler 2008 Blaufränkisch (Leithaberg); \$NA. The initial impression is of black fruit, chocolate and coffee flavors. These delicious tastes are supported by its intense tannins and juicy acidity. Age this elegant Blaufränkisch for another two years. *Imported by Michael Skurnik.*

89 Paul Achs 2010 Heideboden Blaufränkisch (Burgenland); \$27. Tannic, red fruit and a firm structure characterize a wine that offers spice and wood as a backdrop. There is power here, partnered with elegance. *Imported by Winebow.*

87 Wachter Wieslers 2008 Steinweg Blaufränkisch (Eisenberg); \$69. Aged in 500-liter barrels, this wine brings out a very mineral character, packed with spice, juicy red berry fruits and underlying dryness. For drinking now and over the next two years. *Imported by Carlo Huber Selections.*

and pepper, Blaufränkisch is a distinctive grape with considerable aging potential.

Blaufränkisch is found all over Burgenland, but its most emblematic manifestations are in South Burgenland in the Eisenberg area, in Middle Burgenland around Deutschkreutz and Horitschon, and on the north and west shores of Lake Neusiedl.

Eating well in Burgenland

Burgenland cooking bears the stamp of the region's Hungarian past and of the harrowing poverty which once reigned in the now-prospering province. Since meat was scarce, beans were a necessary and inexpensive source of protein. An entire three-course meal was prepared from beans: bean soup, bean mash or bean strudel for the main course, and even bean cake for dessert.

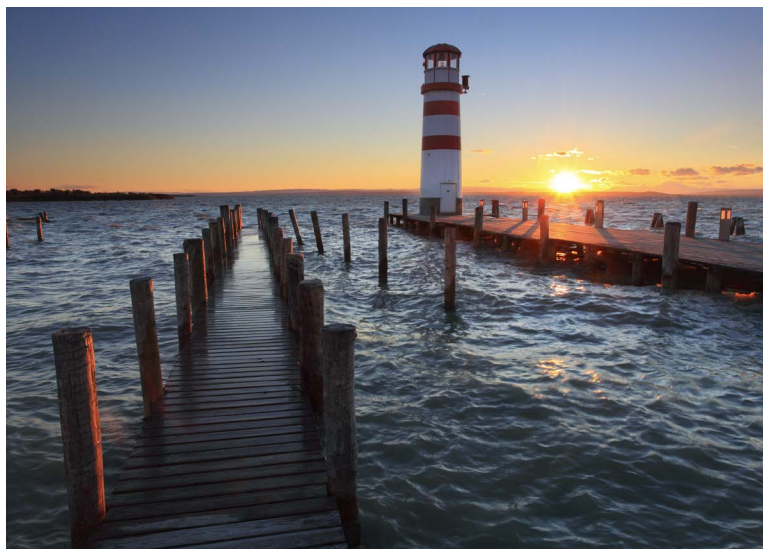
The Burgenland cook's partiality for paprika—in sausages, goulash or simply on the table as a seasoning—is further evidence of the old Hungarian influence. The dividing line between regions where salt and paprika are found on the

Lighthouse at Lake Neusiedl

table and the rest of Austria, where salt and pepper are more usual, is sometimes referred to in Austria as the "paprika equator."

While they have developed an international outlook, Burgenland's chefs have not forgotten their roots. They rely on local produce, perch and catfish from Lake Neusiedl, beef from the salt marshes that surround the lake and from the mountains in the south, and pork from the black pigs that still abound in the central portion of the province.

When in Austria, by all means visit Vienna. Its restaurants are all about world-class haute cuisine and fine wine. But while there, do as the Viennese do: visit Burgenland, the weekend



playground of the city sophisticates. Here, the style is casual, both in the traditional *heuriger* and *buschenschank* (restaurants often owned by wine producers selling their own wine) as well as the new, impressive modern restaurants that are creating the wine and food renaissance. 🍷

The Restaurants

Here's the rundown on Burgenland's hottest restaurants. All feature the local wines, although the wine lists generally include wines from the rest of Austria, France, Italy and a New World selection here and there. Hungarian wine appears, too, as several winemakers have vineyards just over the border.



Mole West. You can't get much closer to the lake than this modern harborside restaurant in Neusiedl am See. While people watching (or watching the sunset over the lake), enjoy Chef Wolfgang Ensbacher's very locally based menu, on which dishes such as black sausage and truffle and venison with puréed sweet potatoes are rich in Hungarian spices.

mole-west.at/en



Wachter-Wieslers Ratschen. This modern restaurant in South Burgenland sits on a hill surrounded by vines and serves seasonal food—local beef with simple leek and potatoes, and flavored with house-made pumpkin oil. Wachter Wieslers' own wines star along with others from the Eisenberg region. New eco-friendly cottages are opening this year, perfect for a quick wine weekend away from Vienna. ratschen.at



Zur Blauen Gans. Reopened this year after a fire, Chef Oliver Wiegand's modern "see and be seen" restaurant by Lake Neusiedl offers delicious combinations such as foie gras with raspberry sauce and truffle vinaigrette; catfish from the lake with red pepper risotto; and veal shoulder (like an osso buco) with apple and horseradish sauce—surprisingly good paired with a Pinot Noir.

zurblauengans.at



Taubenkobl. Burgenland's Relais & Chateaux restaurant and small hotel is consistently rated as one of Austria's top restaurants, fusing a modern style of presentation with new interpretations of local dishes. Chef and owner Walter Eselböck has been the model and inspiration for the new generation of chefs in Burgenland.

taubenkobel.com



Buschenschank Schandl. In the heart of Rust, Winemaker Peter Schandl and his family offer hearty home cooking, serving only his wines. On most nights, the place is packed with families enjoying classic dishes such as spicy sausages with rye bread and hot mustard.

schandlwein.com