

From Scandal to Stardom: Austrian Wines Bounce Back



BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD

1985: PAMHAGEN, Austria.

A low-ranking government sales tax auditor in this remote viticultural village just across the border from Hungary stumbles on the first clue to what will become the biggest wine scandal in Europe since Roman times. He is examining the tax returns of a local wine merchant and is mystified by the unusually high number of entries for purchases of diethylene-glycol—widely publicized by the media as an ingredient of antifreeze. Actually, it's a substance which makes it impossible to detect sugar added to wine; adding it makes wine artificially sweeter, thus driving up production both inside and outside Austria. Many of the best known Austrian winemakers—producing more than 1,000 Austrian wines—are involved, along with 60 German and Italian wines which have been blended with adulterated Austrian wines. Sales slumped by 80 percent. Apparently the image and reputation of Austrian wines is sullied forever.

Flash forward to 2005. Robert Parker, the great panjandrum of American wine critics, rates 80 of 260 Austrian wines tasted as "outstanding wines with exceptional complexity and character" and awards them 90 points or more.

One of the stars of Austria's wine comeback is Grüner Veltliner. Known as GrüVee (get it?) in today's wine-speak, it's a delightfully zesty and refreshing white wine vinted to deliver a taste as cool as they come with a touch of spice on the palate. No need to cellar this alongside your vintage Bordeaux and Burgundy—it's instantly quaffable provided you chill it to around 58 degrees. It's often available in 1.0 liter bottles with Austrian wines' signature red-and-white crown caps for as little as \$10. For special occasions, try one of Bründlmayer's Estate Bottled Grüner Veltliners such as 'Kamptaler Terrassen' for \$18. With hints of lemony sherbet and boxwood, it's the perfect partner to raw fish delicacies like sushi and salmon carpaccio.

Remember Riesling? Austrian winemakers have brought a new dimension to this varietal with a distinctive mineral component making it even more of a palate pleaser. Riesling flourishes in the Upper Austrian viticultural

regions such as Kamptal, Kremstal, Wachau and Traisental where, like Grüner Veltliner, limestone soils with traces of granite provide the ideal nourishment for the grapes. Often described as 'racy,' Austrian Riesling is fragrant with stone fruit and citrus blossom tastefully complementing shell fish and lightly sauced fish dishes. Good Austrian Rieslings are not difficult to find in the \$12 to \$15 range. For a few dollars more, Schloss Gobelsburg 2005 'Gobelsburger' Riesling will reward you with pear, green tea and verbena flavors followed by a fresh, cleansing finish. Crisp, fruity Welschriesling and refreshingly dry, tangy Weissburgunder are the other most commonly available Austrian whites here.

The choice of Austrian reds is limited but this is amply compensated for by their quality. Sylvia Prieler, one of the growing number of successful women winemakers in Austria, is famed for her Blaufränkisch red wine.

She claims the limestone, slate and loam content of her tiny 24-acre vineyard brings out the best in these vines. The rows of vines she owns are typically parceled out between several different fields in the vineyard—the result of Austrian inheritance laws dividing property between all surviving family members over the centuries so the task of tending the vines is that much more challenging. "To compensate for this," says Prieler, "we are focusing on traditional native varieties to produce the best possible wines with the help of scientific methods and technology." Prieler's 2004 Blaufränkisch Ried Johannashöhe, priced at \$21 reflects her success, exhibiting juicy red fruit and soft, ripe tannins on the palate. Perhaps her best achievement yet is her 2003 Blaufränkisch Ried Goldberg for \$98 which has been compared to a classic vintage Italian Monsanto Il Poggio with roasted almond and spicy cold cuts aromas. Not surprisingly,

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Blaufränkisch is the ideal wine to complement charcuterie like pâté, salami and country ham.

Heidi Schröck, tapped as Vintner of the Year in 2004, is another of Austria's gifted women winemakers. Does she think women are better at making wine than men? "Decisions don't always ripen in the brain," she smiles, "but more often in the heart. Men decide sooner but women give decisions more thought."

Schröck's Zweigelt Kräftn red wine for \$24 makes her point marrying a

delicate fragrance with firm tannins and pairing well with veal, pork and poultry dishes. But the love of her winemaking life is her Ruster Ausbruch. Vinified from Furmint grapes which have been shriveled by botrytis ('noble rot') concentrating their sugar and alcohol content, Ausbruch is a hedonistic dessert wine. It demands a microclimate that's found only in Schröck's native village of Rust and in Tokay in Hungary. The resulting ambrosia, derived from the vagaries of nature and the winemak-

ers' art, is suffused with honeysuckle, candied fruits, nougat and hazelnut flavors. The finish is clean but not cloying. To savor this postprandial *pièce de résistance*, try Schröck's 2004 Ausbruch 'On the Wings of Dawn' available here for \$53 (375ml).

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Austrian wines aren't just scrumptious summer sippers. Here are two recipes for wine-based winter warmers perennially popular with Austrian après-skiers. Prosit!

Glühwein

1 bottle of Zweigelt or other robust red wine
6 cubes of white sugar
2 cloves
1 stick of cinnamon
1 fresh orange
1 small piece of lemon rind
1 tablespoon of Grand Marnier (optional)

Slice the orange. Pour the wine into a saucepan and add all the ingredients except Grand Marnier. Stir the mixture. Cover the saucepan and slowly heat the mixture for five minutes but do not allow it to boil. Then add the Grand Marnier (optional). Allow to stand for five minutes. Sieve and serve while still hot.

Christmas Punch

One bottle of Blaufränkisch or similar dry red wine
1 piece ginger root about one inch long
½ teaspoon of vanilla essence
1 stick of cinnamon
3 cloves
3 star anise
2 ounces of raisins
2 ounces of chopped almonds
3 cardamoms
3 peppercorns
4 tablespoons of brown sugar
6 ounces of dark rum
Peel and juice of one fresh orange and one fresh lemon

Peel and thinly slice ginger root. Pour the wine into a saucepan and add all of the ingredients except the rum. Cover the saucepan and gently simmer for 30 minutes. Add rum to the mixture, sieve and serve.