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Austria's red heart

It's not easy to grow, but its sensitivity to terroir makes Blaufränkisch Austria's best red grape. Stephen Brook takes a tour of the regions, finding expressive bargains along the way

IT WAS MID-SEPTEMBER, about two weeks away from the harvest in the Burgenland. Silvia Prieler tugged some berries off a Blaufränkisch vine near her home village of Schützen and tipped them into my palm. Sweet and juicy, yes, but with a sharp acidity that was bracing and piquant. We jumped back into her car and a few minutes later were in another vineyard, overlooking the town of Rust and the shallow, mist-enveloped Neusiedlersee lake. Another soft tumble of berries into my hand. 'Different,' I opined, 'just as sweet but fleshier, broader, and less acidity.'

'Exactly,' she exclaimed. 'Different because the soils are different. The first grapes were grown on gneiss and mica, which gives that minerally acidity. The ones you have now are grown on limestone, which gives fuller, richer wines, but with less verve and minerality.'

This sensitivity to terroir is what makes Blaufränkisch Austria's best red grape. The Prieler vineyards are close to the Neusiedlersee, but 100km away, in the Südburgenland, you can find similar contrasts: the slate and iron soils of Eisenberg, and the loam soils of Deutsch Schützen. Between the two, in the Mittelburgenland, the vineyards have some proximity to the Neusiedler lake, but also higher elevation and thus cooler nights.

Variations like these give nuance to the wines. The primary fruit aroma is usually cherry, but other black fruits can loom up when the grapes are exceptionally ripe, and less ripe fruit can contribute

red fruits too. The variety's other characteristic is pronounced acidity, which is refreshing when correctly balanced, but can be sharp when slightly underripe. Ripeness levels also affect alcohol levels, so that simpler versions are relatively low in alcohol; but the search for maximum ripeness is prevalent in Austria too, resulting in full-bodied wines with a good but not usually perceptible dose of alcohol. Good Blaufränkisch can either be sleek and elegant, or rich and full-bodied, but astringency at one extreme, and jamminess at the other are generally avoided. Its versatility allows

producers to express great stylistic individuality.

Austria has other good red varieties, such as St-Laurent and Zweigelt, and in certain areas Bordeaux grapes can be coaxed to ripeness in most years, but Blaufränkisch, with 3,225 hectares under vine (20% of all red plantings), is surely the most interesting. Not that it's easy to work with: its high natural acidity and tannins derived from thick skins can present a challenge, although those thick skins

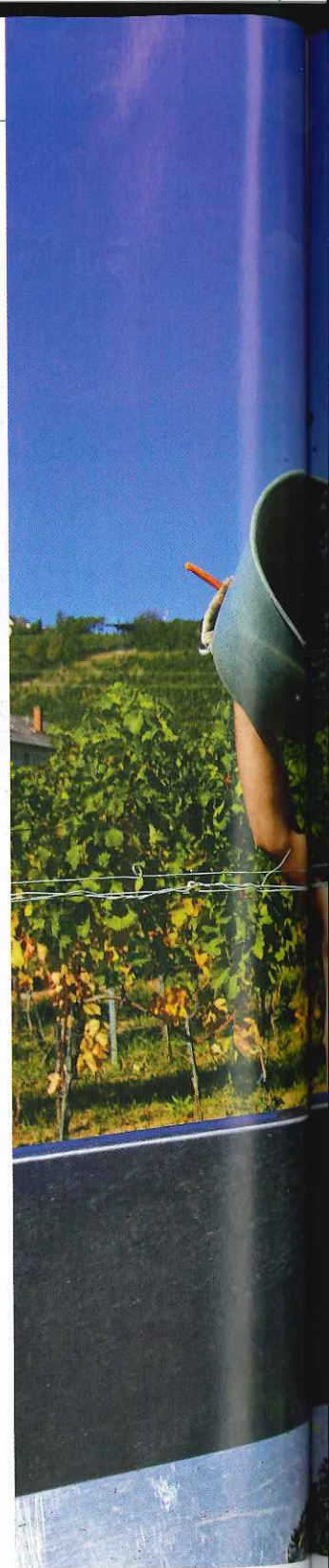
also help the bunches to resist rot. Overcropped Blaufränkisch can be thin and astringent, but truly mediocre examples are rare nowadays.

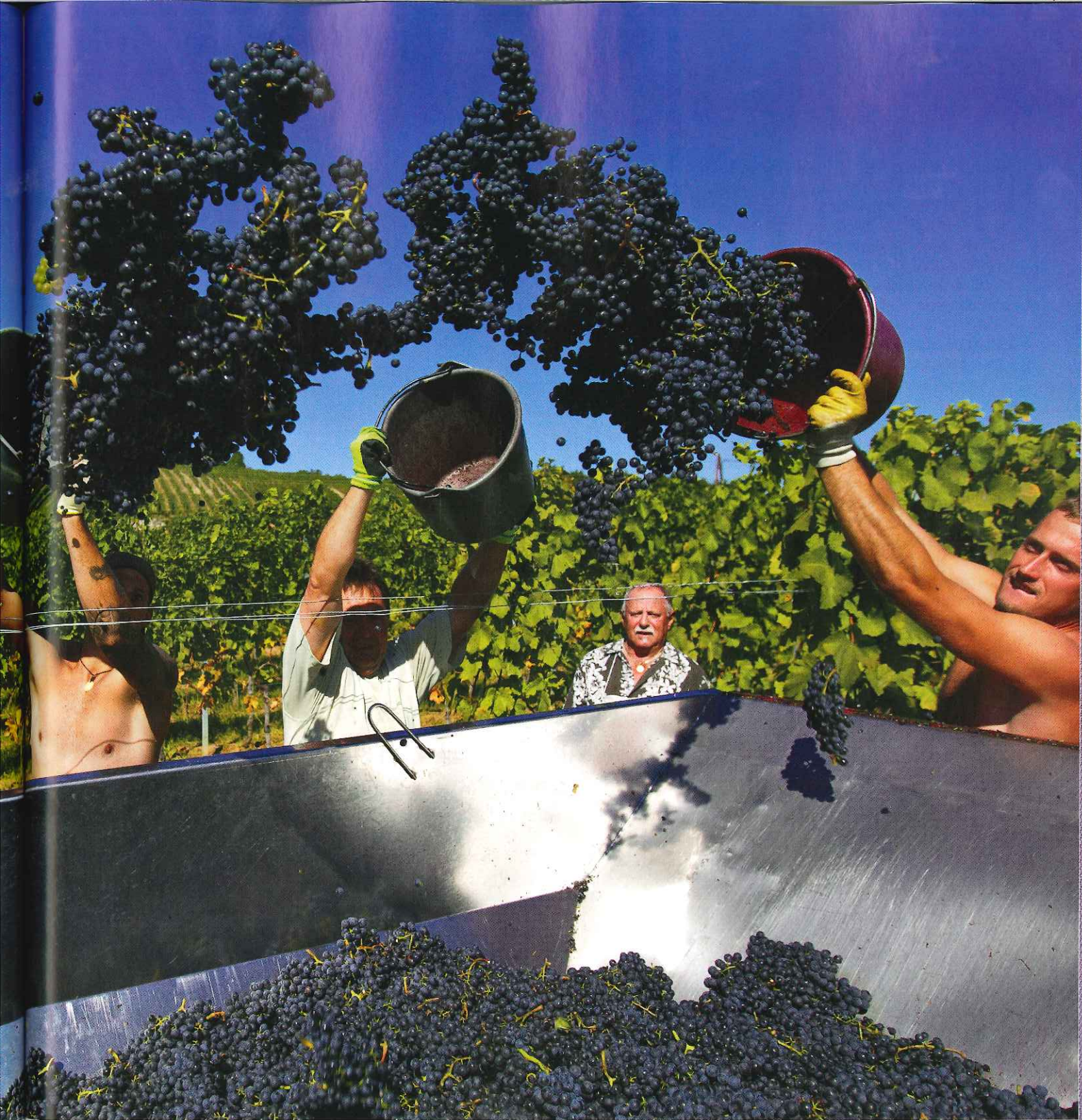
Seek out Burgenland

The Burgenland, southeast of Vienna, is where Blaufränkisch fares best. Its most famous attraction, the Neusiedlersee, is surrounded by vineyards best known for sweet wines. But fringing the lake are modest hills that offer perfect

'Good Blaufränkisch can either be sleek and elegant, or rich and full-bodied. Its versatility allows producers to express great stylistic individuality'

Above: harvest time at Krutzler winery in Deutsch Schützen, a sub-region of Südburgenland, whose loam soils give rich wines





conditions for red grapes. East of the water is Gols, one of Austria's warmest areas. Here sites such as the Unterberg, Altenberg and Spiegel are the source of some outstanding wines. The modest but gifted Paul Achs makes single-vineyard wines from all three, as well as simpler, fruitier blends. He seeks elegance more than power, and, unlike many Austrian red producers, goes easy on the new oak.

Hans Nittnaus, who turned to biodynamic farming in 2007, owns vineyards both near Gols and on the other side of the lake, on the slopes of the Leithaberg. Tasting wines from both areas, the refinement of the latter comes shining through. His basic Blaufränkisch blend – called Kalk und

Schiefer (chalk and slate) – reflects the two soil types that Silvia Prieler had illustrated for me. It's inexpensive but delicious. His more serious offerings from the Leithaberg are the wine of that name, which has immense charm and persistence, and the weightier, spicier, single-vineyard Tannenberg.

Not far away, in Frauenkirchen, the Umathum estate is known for its exceptional red blends. Pepi Umathum has also acquired a vineyard on the Leithaberg, a historic site he calls Kirschgarten. Here too are both slate and limestone soils, which in Umathum's hands result in a vibrant yet mouth-filling wine of considerable power. Silvia Prieler produces a blended Leithaberg

Blaufränkisch, as well as single-vineyard wines, of which the finest is almost always from Goldberg. In Rust, Ernst Triebsaumer and his son Herbert are also masters of Blaufränkisch, producing three bottlings, notably the Marienthal, which has long been one of Austria's most celebrated red wines. It's always harmonious, and has superb length, so it's easy to overlook his other fine Blaufränkisch, Oberer Wald. Both have vines more than 40 years old. Marienthal has elegance as well as power, while Oberer Wald shows a fruitier, wilder character.

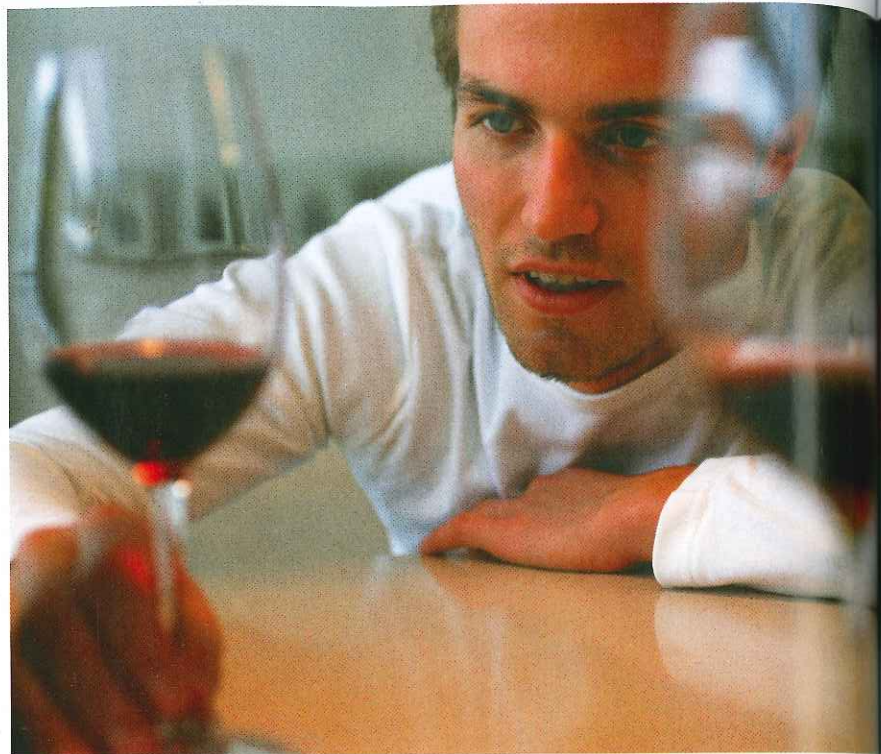
An equally celebrated grower, Andy Kollwentz in Grosshöflein makes three Blaufränkisch wines, of which my favourites are the Leithegebirge blend and the single-vineyard Setz.

In 2010 the Leithaberg became a region entitled to its own DAC appellation. For the red wine, it must be at least 85% Blaufränkisch. Many DACs are too broad to be useful to consumers, but the Leithaberg DAC has coherence, as the red wines share an elegance and precision not always apparent in other Blaufränkisch zones. However, not all growers make use of the appellation, a system so complex that many growers bypass it.

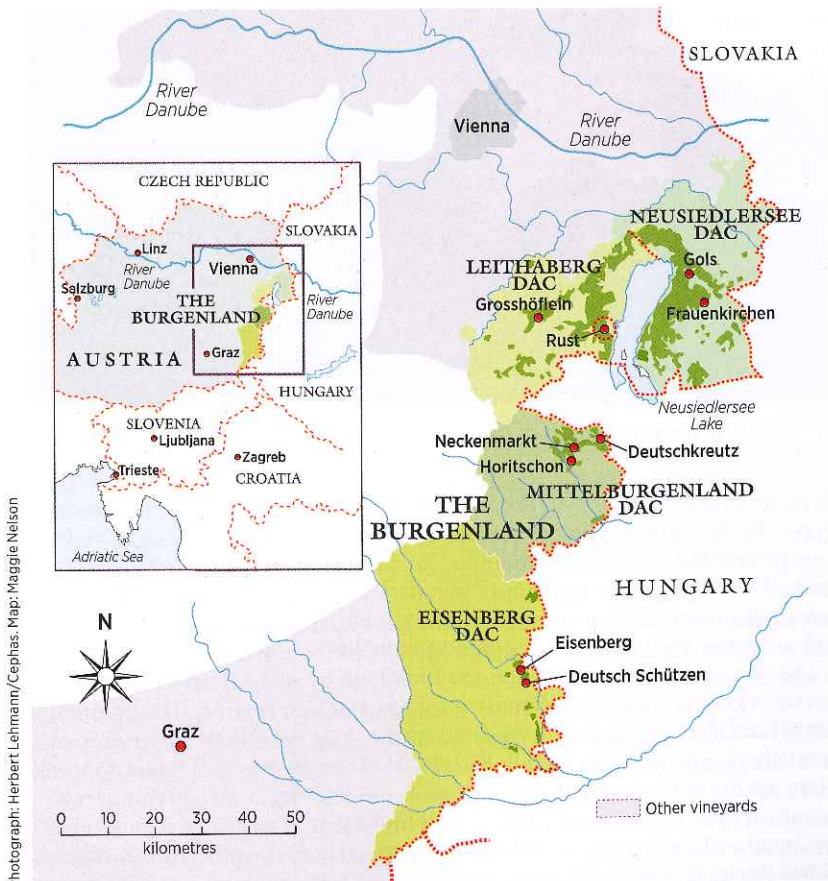
Moving south

It's the growers of the Mittel- and Südburgenland, south of the Neusiedlersee, who plausibly claim to be Austria's true Blaufränkisch specialists.

The Mittelburgenland is the larger of the two, with estates based in the villages of Deutschkreutz, Horitschon and Neckenmarkt. Here the soils are mostly clay and loam, with some limestone and stony sectors, especially in Deutschkreutz.



'You must learn to trust rather than manipulate the vine. If a vine is in balance it doesn't want to over-produce' Franz Reinhard Weninger (pictured above)



Photograph: Herbert Lehmann/Cephas. Map: Maggie Nelson

Such soils suit the variety well. Franz Reinhard Weninger, an outstanding producer, observes: 'We rarely get jammy, overripe flavours here. The soils retain water so the grapes always have freshness and the wines can be long lived.' Horitschon is a touch higher and cooler than Deutschkreutz, and Neckenmarkt is even higher, with vines planted at up to 400 metres along the Hungarian border. It also has the greatest soil variation, with red slate and fossil limestone in some sectors.

Among the Mittelburgenland's many excellent producers, I sampled fine wines from Kirnbauer, Iby, Wellanschitz and Josef Igler. Those from Gager strike me as over-extracted and too oaky, although they have a strong following in Austria. The most exciting wines came from Weninger, Albert Gesellmann and J Heinrich. Franz Ludwig Weninger now entrusts the winemaking to his son Franz Reinhard. The estate is biodynamic, and Reinhard believes that the principal benefit is that the vines achieve their natural balance: 'You must learn to trust rather than manipulate the vine. If a vine is in balance it doesn't want to over-produce.' Even the most basic Blaufränkisch is delicious here, although it's worth paying the slight premium for the Hochäcker bottling. There are also single-vineyard wines, of which the best, to my taste, is Dürrau.

Gesellmann, who like Weninger worked in California, farms organically in Deutschkreutz. Here, too, the more basic Blaufränkisch, such as the Hochäcker, are delicious. The single-vineyard

Austria's other reds

French varieties apart, Austria does produce some good red wines from other varieties. The most widely planted is Zweigelt, a grape little known outside the country, as it was the creation of viticulturist Dr Zweigelt in 1922. It's a crossing of Blaufränkisch with St Laurent (see below). Early ripening and copious, it delivers a dark rich wine best enjoyed for its youthful fruit. Some growers do produce ageworthy versions, but Blaufränkisch, in most cases, does a better job. St Laurent seems to be a mutation of Pinot Noir, but larger-berried and ripening far earlier. It can be as silky as Pinot Noir, and it can show Pinot-like refinement, even if its structure is modest. Versions from serious producers, such as Juris and Umathum, can age well, growing in resemblance to Pinot Noir.

'Hochberg', his eccentric spelling of Hochberg, is sumptuous and has fabulous depth of flavour.

Silvia Heinrich also makes a highly reliable range: her best Blaufränkisch comes from the Goldberg, which has some very old vines. Her barrique-aged Cupido has great intensity of flavour, achieving high ripeness without jamminess or clumsiness.

Steep-sided Südburgenland

The landscape is very different even further south in the Südburgenland. Here many of the vineyards are on extremely steep sites. About a third of its 500ha are planted with white grapes, so in terms of production the region is small. The village of Deutsch Schützen has loam soils, giving fairly rich wines, while Eisenberg (which has its own DAC) has slate and iron soils. Elevation and extensive local forests ensure cool nights and ample acidity.

Top-rank growers are thin on the ground, but Krutzler and Uwe Schiefer are clearly in that group, and Mathias Jalits is a rising star. From Reinhold Krutzler's range of Blaufränkisch wines, the Reserve is consistently good, but his most famous wine, since 1988, is the old-vine Perwolff, with a drop of Cabernet Sauvignon to give more structure. It is aged in mostly new barriques, but has the grip to benefit from it.

Uwe Schiefer, a former sommelier, has a more quirky range, but his Blaufränkisch wines include one from across the border into Hungary. Most of them are aged in 500-litre tonneaux so as to minimise the oak influence. The wines are less rich and peppery than Krutzler's but have an exemplary delicacy and aromatic charm. His single-vineyard wines from Szapary and Reihburg have more weight and spice than the other bottlings. Jalits also makes a wine from Szapary, although his top wine is a barrel selection called Diabas.

If it appears that Blaufränkisch is near ubiquitous in southeastern Austria, you'd be right to think so, and there are dozens more producers with good reputations. The best growers recognise that although the simpler and less concentrated

Brook's top Blaufränkisch



Uwe Schiefer, Reihburg 2008 18/20pts (93/100pts)
£45 **Chris Keiler, Fine & Rare**
Lush but vibrant cherry nose, quite oaky. Velvety and concentrated, but also structured with good acidity. Taut, youthful, and long. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Ernst Trieubaumer, Oberer

Wald 2009 17.5 (91)

£27.50 **Flint**

Cherry nose. Rich and quite dense, full-bodied but fruity, chewy and long. Needs time. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 13.5%



J Heinrich, Goldberg 2009

17.5 (91)

£15.44 **Austrian Wines Direct**

Dense brooding nose, with splendid plum and blueberry fruit. Super-ripe but not jammy, with suave tannins and delicious fruit and a long fresh finish; good length.

Drink 2014–2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Krutzler, Reserve

2010 17.5 (91)

£19.39 **Savage Selection**

Perfumed, elegant, cherry nose. Sleek and taut, intense but quite tannic, with plenty of grip but not at the expense of finesse and length. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Prieler, Goldberg 2007

17.5 (91)

£37.45–£45.65 **Philglas**

& Swiggott, Slurp
Spicy mocha nose, oaky and stylish. Very rich, tight, with good acidity and firm but sweet tannins. Has power and needs time. Long. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13%



Umathum, Kirschgarten

2006 17.5 (91)

£38.50 **Theatre of Wine**

Bright cherry nose, with smoky oak. Full-bodied, mouth-filling and weighty, with power and spice and a long tangy finish. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alc** 13.5%

Moric 2011

17 (90)

£17.50–£21 **Bottle Apostle, H2Vin, Theatre of Wine**

Ripe, intense, but charming cherry and blueberry nose. Sleek, bright and zesty, with lively acidity if not very complex.

Drink 2013–2015 **Alc** 13%



Muhr-Van der Niepoort, Spitzerberg 2009

17 (90)

£35 **Bottle Apostle**

Delicate, perfumed, oaky nose, cherries. Ripe and almost sweet, silky and seductive, with good acidity, moderately concentrated but stylish and refreshing. **Drink** 2013–2016 **Alc** 13.5%



Weninger, Hochäcker

2009 17 (90)

£15.90 **Nick Dobson**

Delicate cherry nose. Soft, juicy and quite concentrated, with good acidity; well balanced and not extracted. Persistent. Good value. **Drink** 2013–2016 **Alc** 13%

Hans & Anita Nittaus, Kalk und

Schiefer 2010 16.5 (88)

£15.50 **Lea & Sandeman**

Fresh, reasonably concentrated, not very complex but has charm and zip. Quite long. **Drink** 2013–2016 **Alc** 12.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p102

wines are best aged in large casks, the more powerful, weightier wines can gain in structure and ageing potential with careful maturation in barriques or tonneaux.

This gives consumers a vast range of wines and styles to choose from. While price can be an indication of quality, the costliest single-vineyard wines are not invariably more enjoyable than the lively, fruitier blends offered at a fraction of the price. You don't always get what you pay for. **D**

Stephen Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter for 17 years