

A new Austrian empire?

By Jancis Robinson

Austrian white wines have been the darlings of the world's more sophisticated sommeliers for some years now, but are wine drinkers ready for Austrian reds? In San Francisco, the cradle of Californian wine, the Chronicle last month devoted a long article to them. The forum on my website has been animatedly discussing the burning topic: "Are Austrian reds poised for a popularity explosion?" Last August a high-profile blind tasting was held with the top tasters of Singapore, who ended up preferring Austrian Pinot Noirs to many a famous red burgundy.

For the first time ever, therefore, I decided at the recent generic tasting of Austrian wines in London, an event held every year at the Institute of Directors, to ignore the whites made on the Danube upstream from the capital and to taste only reds - most of them made south and east of Vienna where Pannonian warmth spreads in from Hungary.

I can report that these wines must be very absorbing because my tasting speed seemed to be only about half what it usually is and I ended up for the first time ever being shooed out of the tasting room by the men from Sensible Wine Services, ostentatiously gathering up bottles, glasses, spittoons and ice buckets around me.

As for the quality of the Austrian reds on show at the IOD, I found some that were really, really exciting, but perhaps not quite enough for me to make a blanket recommendation that wine lovers should head decisively to the Pannonian plain for red wine thrills. It does seem to be worth paying a bit extra for single vineyard bottlings, which generally sell for closer to £20 than £10 a bottle. That said, I have noticed at generic tastings in London that potential exporters have been told so often that the UK market is dangerously competitive, and British wine buyers horribly penny-pinching, that some tend not to bother to show their top wines. (This was manifest, for example, at the recent inaugural generic tasting in London of, believe it or not, Turkish wines.)

What Austria can offer, however, is a trio of truly distinctive dark-skinned grape varieties. One of them, Zweigelt, is capable of making exuberantly fruity wines that, in their usual unoaked form, can provide charming drinking for less than £10 a bottle. A good introduction to Zweigelt's juicy flavours would be the regular 2009 from the admired Thermenregion red wine producer Johanneshof Reinisch. This is a big, bold wine that somehow tastes, as well as looks, purple - perhaps because it seems to be stuffed with the fruit of purple-coloured berries.

I found myself admiring two much more serious examples of Zweigelt, however. K+K Kirnbauer's Girmer 2008 is made from 52-year-old Zweigelt vines whose roots burrow as deeply as 25 metres below the Girmer vineyard in Mittelburgenland. Chock-full of energy, it was aged for 18 months in barrels made from oak

grown in a forest owned by the same family, making it a truly local product.

Franz Leth, whose vines are grown on the deep loess soils of Wagram, makes particularly striking Zweigelts. The unoaked Leth Klassik 2009 is modelled on the exuberant reds made in Austria before the late-20th-century invasion of the fruit-snatchers, otherwise known as small oak barrels. (One of the reasons that the time may be right for Austrian reds is that Austrian winemakers have ended their love affair with barriques and now have a more balanced relationship with oak.) Leth also makes perhaps the most dramatic Zweigelt of all, in really successful vintages only, in Gigama - late-picked, carefully selected grapes from which maximum flavour is extracted and the result given almost two years in barriques but is not dominated by their influence.



Another Austrian red wine grape speciality is St Laurent, whose origins are obscure but whose wines are unusually velvety. The wines tend to lusciousness and can taste a little sweet, lacking the structure and perhaps longevity of Austria's finest Pinot Noir. Again, Johanneshof Reinisch of Thermenregion made one of my favourite examples, its Holzspur 2004, which actually tasted almost more like a Côte Rôtie, so smoky and satin-textured was this marvel, made from very low-yielding vines planted by the grandfather of the current incumbent Michael Reinisch. In Burgenland to the south, on the shores of the Neusiedlersee, both Pittnauer and Umathum make fine, if plumper, St Laurents.

But the grape variety that is probably most likely to put Austrian reds on the map is Blaufränkisch, known as Kékfrankos over the border in Hungary, and Lemberger in southern Germany and Washington state. It has the most attractive, and currently fashionable, combination of medium rather than full body, a refreshing aroma, and the ability to transmit quite subtle differences in terroir with precision - in Austria anyway. The greatest concentration of fascinating Blaufränkisch is in Burgenland,

with the wine produced in Leithaberg on the western shore of the Neusiedlersee being so distinctively mineral-soaked that it has earned its own special appellation.

One of many exciting examples I tasted recently in London, Pala 2009, was made from grapes grown across the border in Hungary by the specialist in the variety, Schiefer. For this reason it has to be labelled as an EU Tafelwein, or table wine, rather than anything grander. I loved this and all four Austrian Blaufränkisch bottlings presented by Schiefer at the Institute of Directors. Other superior Burgenland producers of fine Blaufränkisch include K+K Kirnbauer, Moric, Pichler-Krutzler, Pittnauer, Prieler, Triebaumer and Wohlmuth.

And then there is the exceptional Spitzerberg site in Carnuntum from which Muhr-van de Niepoort seems to be able to demonstrate an almost Pinot Noir-like aspect to this very promising grape variety.

Grüner Veltliner may be even more difficult to pronounce than Blaufränkisch but its success has probably been partly due to its frequent abbreviation to Gru-Ve, or simply GV. I fear the most obvious initials are unlikely to work the same magic on the variety that might eventually come to be seen as its red wine counterpart.

Jancis's Picks

Jurtschitsch Sonnhof, Pinot Noir 2007

K+K Kirnbauer, Das Phantom 2008/
Girmer (Zweigelt) 2008/Vitikult
Blaufränkisch 2007

Moric, Neckenmarkt Alte Reben
Blaufränkisch 2008

Pichler-Krutzler, Weinberg Blaufränkisch
2008

Pittnauer, Rosenberg Blaufränkisch/Alte
Reben St Laurent 2008

Prieler, Blaufränkisch 2008

Schiefer, Königsberg/Szapary/Reihburg
Blaufränkisch 2008

Ernst Triebaumer, Blaufränkisch/Cabernet
2009

Umathum, St Laurent 2007

Wohlmuth, Privat Rabenkropf
Blaufränkisch 2007

Schiefer's Königsberg Blaufränkisch 2008