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Austria Red & White. Part II

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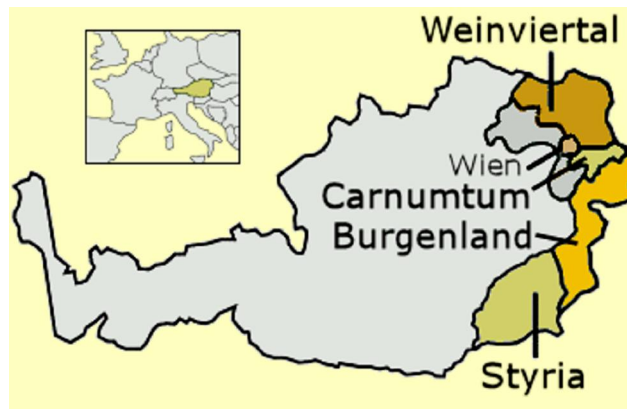
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This is part II of this report. [Part I](#) includes an introduction to Austria and its wines, and reports from the Weinviertel and Carnuntum regions.

The Estates and Wines - South

Part I of this report covered my brief visits to two regions to the north and east of Vienna, Weinviertel and Carnuntum. In part II I travel further south, to Burgenland and Styria.



Burgenland

Stretching south and east of Vienna, Burgenland is subject to two important climatic influences. The first is its long border with Hungary and proximity to the Great Hungarian Plain. The largest part of the vast Pannonian basin, warm winds from the Great Hungarian Plain create conditions suitable for ripening red wine grapes, especially Blaufränkisch. The second great influence is further north: the Neusiedlersee, or Lake Neusiedl. The warmth and humidity created by the 121-square miles of this huge lake (and numerous, small, shallow lakes around it) encourages the development of Botrytis, the noble rot, making vineyards near here some of Austria's best sweet wine vineyards, as well as allowing red wine grapes to ripen fully. Burgenland is arguably the red wine heartland of Austria.

Burgenland is home to no fewer than four of Austria's eight DACs (see [Part I](#) for a full explanation). In 2005 Mittelburgenland DAC was established (specialising in Blaufränkisch), to be joined later by Leithaberg DAC (specialising in Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Neuburger and Grüner Veltliner for white wines, Blaufränkisch for reds), Eisenberg DAC (specialising in Blaufränkisch) and most recently in March 2012, Neusiedlersee DAC, specialising in Zweigelt.

Burgenland is mostly fairly flat, though the foothills of the Leithaberg and Eisenberg Mountains are planted with vines that enjoy some altitude. Much is made of its complex soils too. A lot of it is rich and loamy, but clay and slate over lime can be found on the hillsides and there are pockets of more chalky soils suitable for white wines, as well as plenty of mineral content in the soils of the south.

Burgenland has been a particularly active and high profile region for Austria, both for sweet wines and for the big Blaufränkisch push. Though Zweigelt is the most planted variety, it is Blaufränkisch that is seen by most as making the more serious wine, wines with the capacity to cellar, and wines with the potential for the greatest level of quality.

Weingut Prieler

I arrived for my appointment with Georg Prieler (right), winemaker at his family estate, just as the late autumn sun was beginning to set. We immediately jumped into his 4x4 and headed to a vantage point where we could survey his vineyards. He pointed out a vineyard of 80-year-old Pinot Blanc, and explained that here on the limestone and slate soils of the Leithaberg mountain foothills he farms organically, though not certified as such.

Georg is perhaps typical of the young generation now making such an impact in Burgenland and across Austria. Whilst the parents often gained their



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experience working only on the family farm, after graduating Georg travelled to New Zealand to make wines with Austrian ex-pat Rudi Bauer at Quartz Reef in Central Otago, then on to Argentina to work at Norton, before a stint in California making Cabernet Sauvignon and working at the commercial end of the wine business for an importer in Berkley.



Georg is clearly a very thoughtful and switched on winemaker - and a great one based on my tastings with him. He works only with wild yeast, uses minimal sulphur, and makes all of his white wines with skin contact. He already uses some biodynamic techniques, including working to the lunar calendar and using only humus to condition his soils. "I believe in biodynamics," he tells me, "but not necessarily the whole concept. If I'm honest, I grew up saying 'I can believe in anything, but I want to try it for myself to make sure'." One example of that came with the pumps used in the winery. They were turning in the 'wrong' direction according to biodynamic theory, and so he has changed the rotation of all pumps - "But only after I had blind tasted various samples to prove it made a difference."

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 8 wines from Weingut Prieler

Groszer Wein

What a fascinating project this is. In the far eastern corner of Burgenland, literally a kilometre or two from the Hungarian border, Groszer Wein is a new name with a highly individual take on things.

The winery itself is 20 years old, and was built originally as a project to save the winemaking tradition of the area, which had been in steep decline in the 1980s, mainly because winemaking was barely professional, barely profitable, with many smallholders making wine on a part-time basis. A group of 15 individuals came together to create a company to save the tradition. "It was not a cooperative," explains current owner Mathias Krön, "but they brought together equipment and expertise, and access to 90 different parcels of vines in 17 hectares, which they leased on a long term basis from the owners."

Fast forward to just three years ago, and Mathias, a Vienna-based entrepreneur who comes from the area, bought the company. Mathias was already involved in local agriculture businesses including growing and producing Soya-based products, and says he was persuaded to take on the company that would become Groszer Wein by two things "mainly because Markus is a young, dynamic and a great winemaker, plus we have some great old vineyards, some up to 70 years old, with an interesting variety of clones." The Markus in question is winemaker Markus Bach, pictured above.

Mathias and Markus clearly work as a close team and say "We decided to completely change a lot of things, not just the wines but the concept behind them." It seems that, in common with many Austrian red wine-focused estates in the 80s and 90s, the original company tried to make wine "like the French," with new, small barrels, cultured French yeasts and by planting with Cabernet and Merlot. Mathias says "We believed we should revive the traditions of this part of Austria - which in fact was been part of Hungary for 1,000 years until 1921." Subsequently they "threw out many of the barriques, got rid of a must concentrators, and introduced ambient yeasts only." Markus shrugs: "We now accept that there will be variation each year. This is a natural product after all."

One of the most controversial decisions surely, was to revive what Mathias says was a tradition in the area, of only bottling in one-litre bottles. "Many people say we are mad," he confesses, but so far the market seems to have taken to this larger format. I note that the labels are also a little bit kitsch for what are serious wines: "The labels are a bit of burlesque," says Mathias, "We do want to have fun even when we drink serious wine."

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 6 wines from Groszer Wein

Styria

Deep in the south-east corner of Austria, Styria seems to march to a slightly different beat to the other regions I visited on this trip. As a wine producing region and as a tourism hot spot it has only a very short history, certainly in the south of the region. "It was only a stopping point on motorway down to Italy or Slovenia," according to Hannes Sabathi of the eponymous Weingut Hannes Sabathi.

It was after the now infamous Austrian wine scandal of 1985/86 that this region became a



new focus, with wine lovers turning to the few wineries in the region at that time, basically because Styria had not been involved. To show the rapid growth of wine here, the vineyard area has doubled in size over the past 25 years whilst many estates farm on a much more serious level. The development of restaurants and tourism has enjoyed a corresponding boom.



Though Welschriesling is the most abundant variety of Styria (or Steiermark), it is - surprisingly perhaps - Sauvignon Blanc that has put the region on the map for many. Dubbed "Austria's Tuscany", it is an absolutely beautiful area of rolling hillsides and tiny villages, where vines climb steeply up breathtaking inclines. There is a freshness to the air here, and a freshness in the wines. The three sub-regions of South-eastern Styria (Süd-oststeiermark), Western Styria (Weststeiermark), and Southern Styria (Südsteiermark) each have their own specialities, but aromatic varieties are to the fore including Muskateller and Traminer for white wines, and Pinot Noir for red wines. Schilcher - a rosé wine made from the local Blauer Wildbacher grape is a speciality of Western Styria.

Hannes Sabathi

Hannes Sabathi is the 4th generation here, who took over the family business in 2005. Hannes says his parents were older and really wanted to retire, so "I finished wine school on Friday and took over on Monday." But during his working life he has found time to travel like many young Austrian winemakers, including a two year project where he has been making Sauvignon Blanc in South Africa, which was made "in a European style," and brought back for sale in Europe. That project has now ended because his partner in it has divorced and sold up.



This is South Styria, where white wines constitute 90% or more of production. The Sabathi vineyards are at 450- to 500 metres in altitude and as well as Sauvignon Blanc there is Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Muskateller, Welschriesling and Chardonnay, the oldest vineyards around 42 years old. "That's mostly Scheurebe and Muller Thurgau," Hannes tells me, "but we have a little Sauvignon Blanc that's really old too."

The pioneers of the modern-day region are now in their 60s. It was they who planted Sauvignon and Chardonnay (known locally as Morillon), but Sauvignon proved to be the real success story here. Now 40% of Hannes' plantings are Sauvignon, including his Jägerberg vineyard which is farmed organically, but not certified. The steepness of the vineyards means everything is done by hand here, and high rainfall always brings humidity, which can so easily lead to mildew and rot. Hannes tells me that "half a dozen wineries in the region are working organically or biodynamically, but the rainfall is a problem with over 1000 litres annually. In the first two years I lost 50% of the crop in Jägerberg."

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 10 wines from Hannes Sabathi

Weingut Harkamp

Hannes Harkamp (pictured) and his wife Petra look after this substantial estate in Southern Styria, whilst brother Heinz runs the family's 26-room hotel which sits amidst the Flamberg vineyards above the town of Saint Nikolai Im Sausal. Sparkling wine is the speciality here, driven by Hannes' passion for Champagne and other sparkling wines. Indeed, Harkamp is the only sparkling wine producer in Styria, and as well as their own range of wines, they make sparkling wines for more than 20 other estates.



The Harkamps do produce the gamut of wine styles, including white, red and rosé still wines, and sweet wines

too. Partly for sparkling base wine, they have the largest Pinot Noir vineyard in Styria and many of their vineyards are planted on vertigo-inducing 45° slopes. Hannes' grandparents started producing wines here, but it is only for the past five years that the sparkling wine business has been developed by Hannes. The soils are limestone, though Hannes explains that the Flamberg vineyard, which rises to more than 400 meters, is the remains of the coral reef of an ancient sea that extended along the entire hill. Calcium deposits allow the grapes to ripen very well and give them a minerality.

A whole variety of grapes is planted here including Riesling, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris, Muscat, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay for white wines, and Zweigelt and Merlot as well as Pinot Noir for red wines. All of the wines from Weingut Harkamp are good, though it is fair to say that the range seemed a little diffuse, perhaps just a touch variable. At their best, especially the Sauvignon and Pinot Gris from the top Kogelberg and Oberburgstall, they are superb. The Sekts are a work in progress but are of high quality. Perhaps the operation has just too many wines - plus the added complication of their 20+ sparkling wine customers?

[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 15 wines from Weingut Harkamp

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