

AUSTRIA'S EXCELLENT 2019 VINTAGE MARKS A TRANSITION IN OUR TASTING

Tuesday, September 29, 2020



The view over the Danube and the Wachau from the road that divides the famous Klaus (left) and Achleiten (right) vineyards of Weissenkirchen.

The 2019 vintage is an excellent one for Austria's wine producers and we found a slew of dry white wines that combine ripe fruit and expressive herbal/spicy aromas with medium-full body plus lively acidity that makes them extremely appealing. We can wholeheartedly recommend them to you.

Above and beyond the large number of well-made 2019 wines that remind us of the excellent 2011 and 2009 vintages there are a small number of truly spectacular ones. We rated both the complex and super-elegant Emmerich Knoll Riesling Wachau Ried Schütt Smaragd 2019 and the incredibly dense and highly-structured F.X. Pichler Riesling Wachau Ried Unendlich 2019 (both in Loiben/Wachau) a perfect 100 points. There were 18 other wines, both white and red, that received ratings of 99 and 98 points highlighting the greatness of the vineyards and winemaking of a handful of key names including Emmerich Knoll, F.X. Pichler, Franz Hirtzberger, Hirsch, Moric, Nikolaihof, Prager, Proidl and Schiefer. We tasted more than 700 samples this year from Austria both in the country and in our tasting room in Hong Kong.

But we think it's necessary to also point out some problems behind the generally positive new vintage. Most of them relate to the gruner veltliner grape, the most widely-planted white grape in the country with 31% of all vineyards (just over 14,420 of the total 46,515 hectares). Austria's signature grape also plays a vital role for the image of the nation's wine industry and was popular enough in the United States more than a decade ago to earn the nickname "grooner".

The 2019 vintage was a relief for producers after the 2017 and 2018 vintages, both extremely dry years with very warm late summers. Those conditions made the production of aromatic and well-balanced dry whites challenging. We found some of the 2017 and 2018 gruner veltliners heavy, alcoholic and unappealing, but we (James Suckling and Stuart Pigott split the tasting work) also found some 2019s with issues created by climate change.

As Willi Brundlmayer of the eponymous estate in Langenlois/Kamptal told us: "Do we have a pause button for the warming climate? No!"



Willi Brundlmayer of Weingut Brundlmayer with his cellar cat, which traditionally sits on the best barrel.



Dorli Muhr's Spitzerberg vineyards.

His gruner veltliners show how successfully some leading producers are dealing with the problems this variety's genetics and climate change create. We rated his Brundlmayer Grüner Veltliner Kamptal Ried Loiserberg EL 2019 97 points. It's a powerful and texturally complex dry white, but still bright and fresh. In fact we feel that it needs a bit of time to open up. In the Danube region we found dry whites with excellent balance and similar aging potential at producers like Hirsch in Kamptal, Nigl and Proidl in the Kremstal, Markus Huber and Ludwig Neumeyer in Traisental and Bernhard Ott in Wagram. More about the Wachau in just a moment.

The above producers know that in the new climatic situation it's important not to pick gruner veltliner too late, because grape sugar levels easily march on to levels that translate into 14% or more alcohol. The warmer it is during the ripening period the faster the substance responsible for the characteristic pepper aroma of gruner veltliner, rotundone, degrades in the grapes. Austrian producers were lucky in 2019, because September was cool, but they were unlucky in 2017 and 2018.



Franz Hirtzberger's great Singerriedel vineyard that he brought back into cultivation from the early 1980s.



Emmerich Knoll Snr. (left) and Franz Hirtzberger Snr. (right).

"In my opinion, gruner veltliner still has a future in Austria," said Dr. Bertold Salomon of the Salomon Unhof estate in Stein/Kremstal. "But in the high-altitude sites or those that are cooler due to their exposure. Low-lying south-facing terraced sites are definitely disadvantaged in hot years." We rated all his 2019 gruner veltliners 90+ and liked their brightness, so he's already doing things right.

The truth is 2019 in Austria was not a cool growing season. June, July and August were all really warm months (average temperatures well over 20°C) with low rainfall (under 50mm per month). We found that in 2019, as in 2018 and 2017, riesling, weissburgunder (pinot blanc), chardonnay and sauvignon blanc did significantly better than gruner veltliner. There are just shy of 2,000 hectares each of riesling and weissburgunder in Austria, just over 1,600 hectares of chardonnay and about 1,250 hectares of sauvignon blanc.

Luckily, 2020 was a cooler and wetter growing season in Austria, but scientists expect more warm years to follow, so we think it's high time for the Austrian wine industry to seriously rethink gruner veltliner. That means replanting the warmest vineyards with other more heat and drought resistant varieties, altering pruning (later), canopy management (shorter canopy, more shaded fruit) and harvesting strategy (earlier). Much can be done and the leading producers are already doing it.

We have to question Austria's promotional strategy focused on gruner veltliner because it might awaken expectations that too many wines don't fulfill. Worse, does it mean abandoning the concept of a signature Austrian grape variety in favor of "international" varieties like sauvignon blanc or chardonnay.



Lucas & Johanna Pichler of FX Pichler, who created a perfect 100-point wine with their Riesling Unendlich 2019.



The Medieval town of Durnstein rests in the Wachau region.

Of course, riesling is an option but Austria has stiff competition. Germany is the world's largest producer of riesling and in the 21st century it is focused on dry wines just like Austria. France, Australia and the USA are also serious competitors with this grape. Germany is also the world's largest producer of weissburgunder/pinot blanc, followed by Italy and France. So that's not an option.

One other point we would like to point out from our tastings over the last three years: standardized winemaking. We found a lot of wines that tasted rather similar to other wines from the same grape variety and with similar scores. Using the same lab, the same consultant winemaker or just looking over each other's shoulders can lead to this, and to be fair this is not solely an Austrian problem.

Standardized wine styles is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, consumers like knowing what they will get when they order a particular combination of country and grape variety, and modestly-priced New Zealand sauvignon blanc is a perfect example of this. But in our experience, at higher price levels and over time, diversity stimulates consumer interest. Some people may tear their hair out when faced with the complexity of Italian wine, but Italy is probably the best example of that working really well.



Ilse and Toni Bodenstein of Weingut Prager in Weissenkirchen in the Wachau.



The ancient press (still in use for some wines) at Nikolaihof in the Wachau.

We have been following Austrian wines since 1988 and for a long time much of their appeal derived from the way the top dry whites were so expressive and individual. This individuality still makes the top Wachau producers stand out. The pristine and crystalline style of Toni Bodenstein's winemaking at Prager in Weissenkirchen/Wachau contrasts starkly with the richer, textural wines Franz Hirtzberger makes at the eponymous estate in Spitz/Wachau, but both stunned us. The "retro" wines of Nikolaihof in Mautern/Wachau also prove that great individuality is still possible, but tasting some Austrian wines you wonder how and when it disappeared.

Maybe the answer is Austrian red wines? If you focus on the blends, many of which contain merlot and/or other Bordeaux grapes you also have to wonder. They tend to have similar weight – at the generous end of the cool climate range – and the same kind of obvious new oak aromas. However, there's an additional factor in the red wine field that saves Austria from uniformity: the blaufränkisch grape (called kekfrankos in its Hungarian homeland and lemlberger in Germany).



Roland Velich founded Moric as a startup in 2001 with money he made working as a casino croupier.



The great Achleiten vineyard site of Weissenkirchen in the Wachau towers over the Danube.

When blaufränkisch is made well, avoiding too much oak and hard extraction, it's a wonderfully aromatic red wine with a distinctive freshness resulting from the interplay of tannin and crisp acidity. Our two highest rated Austrian reds were Moric Blaufränkisch Burgenland Lutzmannsburg Alte Reben 2017 and Schiefer Blaufränkisch Burgenland Reiburg R 2015 (both 98 points.) They have the personality and sensibility of grand cru Burgundies with the uniqueness of Austria. This is what the world wants.

The wine world of Austria may be in a transition period but it still has a lot of options and exciting bottles to buy and drink now and in the future. That's why it's a joyful and intellectually stimulating experience tasting and drinking Austrian wines each year.

– *Stuart Pigott, contributing editor, and James Suckling, editor*