



EXTREME sports

The steepness and altitude of some of Austria's wine lands can be offputting to all but the most determined of producers. But some winemakers look at these conditions as a challenge, and make stunning wine, reports *Anne Krebiehl MW*

'EXTREME' IS not an attribute we readily associate with Austrian wine – bucolic and artisanal seem more fitting for this fragmented, mainly family-operated wine sector that is concentrated in the east of the country: Austria's vineyards begin where the majestic Alps have already given way to a far gentler landscape. Yet there are extremes both in altitude and attitude – and steepness.

Austria's highest wine estate lies at just above 900m in Tyrol. Planted by oenologist Claus Anibaldi in 2001, there is just one hectare of vines. He grows Grüner Veltliner, Chardonnay, Gelber Muskateller and Sankt Laurent – all of which easily reach 12.5% ABV, and "need not fear comparison with other Austrian wines," he says. But far from being a bloody-minded freak trying to prove a point about altitude, Anibaldi and his

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wife, Hannelore, dreamt up the idea of this high-altitude vineyard looking out on the meadows from their terrace "one balmy evening". Anibaldi's worst-case scenario, in case the wine turned out to be terrible, was to make balsamic vinegar.

"I was completely free," he says about his project – which he started alongside a career in drinks sales. The wines are sold locally and reach respectable scores in Austrian wine guides. But what Austria refers to as its 'Bergland' vineyards in Alpine settings such as Carinthia, Vorarlberg and Tyrol, amounts to just 237ha or 0.5% of the country's vines, according to the latest Austrian Wine data.

The real contender for extreme Austrian viticulture is the Steiermark, or Styria, on Austria's southern border with Slovenia, especially its southern sub-region, Südsteiermark. The Styrian Chamber of Agriculture says 10% of Styrian vineyards are at a gradient of between 40% and 50%, and 2.4% of them are at more than 50% – the provenance of Styria's most famous single-vineyard wines.

STEEPNESS AND ALTITUDE

Steepness combined with altitude and a cool, often damp climate makes for challenging viticulture but unusually expressive wines. In Austria, these single-vineyard bottlings already have cult status; internationally they still struggle for recognition. Unusually, Styria's flagship variety is Sauvignon Blanc, until the 1980s still referred to as Muskat-

Sylvaner. Introduced to the region more than 150 years ago by Archduke Johann of Austria (1782-1859), an effective agricultural moderniser, it finds supreme expression here. Next to Sauvignon Blanc, the chief varieties are Riesling, Gelber Muskateller and Chardonnay, in Styria called Morillon.

"Our vineyards lie between 400m and 600m," says Gerhard Wohlmuth of Weingut Wohlmuth in Fresing. "As of about 550m the

exposure has to be full south so that grapes reach physiological ripeness."

The labour involved is extreme, but these sites unite three crucial elements: "High altitude means coolness, steepness means the sun has real power in summer and autumn, and constant ventilation means there is no disease pressure. These three things combine so we can harvest really late. The exciting thing is the long vegetation period. Flowering is the same as down in the valley but we harvest a fortnight later."

Wohlmuth's most extreme recent project is the extension from 1.5ha to 4.5ha of the historic Dr Wunsch site, a steep vineyard

Feature findings

- > Although making up a relatively small proportion of its total vineyards, Austria's extreme vineyards – in terms of altitude and attitude – certainly pack a punch.
- > Vertiginous vineyards can be found in Austria's 'Bergland' of Carinthia, Vorarlberg and Tyrol, but the majority lie in the Steiermark, or Styria, in the South East of the country.
- > Despite their cult status, many single-vineyard wines from these steep slopes struggle for recognition in the international market.
- > The high altitude, exposure and constant ventilation gives the vines a long vegetation period, good exposure to the sun, less risk of disease and a later harvest – but labour costs are high and much work has to be done by hand.
- > Austria is seeing a rising tide of young, wild winemakers, keen to bend traditional rules to better express the land.

between 500m and 560m. The producer had 9,500 Riesling and 2,000 Sauvignon Blanc vines planted by hand. "Until the vines have developed a proper root system, everything has to be done by hand," he says. It is only later that special light tractors can be used for some of the work. "One parcel of Dr Wunsch is terraced, is extremely steep and has extremely poor soil," Wohlmuth says. The site had been a vineyard for more than 1,000 years but parts of it lay fallow for the past 30 years as it is so steep. "But we wanted to recultivate this cumbersome historic site. Economically this isn't plausible but for us it is a matter of the heart," Wohlmuth says.

Bernhard Schauer of Weingut Schauer in Kitzreck agrees: "The extreme thing

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Close encounters: Vienna's vineyards are part of the city

generally in Styria is that we work in rough terrain, on various small steep parcels and everything is done by hand."

He notes that topography and the Styrian cool climate "with relatively high precipitation" throughout the year exacerbate each other, making access to vineyards difficult at times. The Schauers farm otherworldly old-vine Weissburgunder on Ried Höchtemmel at up to 570m. The vineyard lies on southern Styria's highest elevation, the Demmerkogel, where the terraces are so

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narrow that no tractor can pass. The wine is emblematic of Styria's style. With expressive aromatics, slow ripening, moderate alcohol and high acid, these wines are real winners of climate change, with their inherent elegant coolness and crystalline flavours. For now, they are still exceptional value.

But extremists are also at work right on the Danube in the Wachau region. Viennese property developer Robert Wutzl had heard about the Atzberg, a vineyard abandoned more than 70 years ago in the western Wachau because of its steepness. In 2007 he got together with local winemaker Franz-Josef Gritsch, and Hans Schmid of the Viennese Mayer am Pfarrplatz estate, to start buying up vineyard parcels. "The challenge was to do something where many others had said 'why do this to myself?'" Wutzl says. And as it is hard to find a crew who are prepared to work the



City living: Jutta Ambrositsch is Vienna's only garagiste winemaker

vineyard, everything has to be done by hand. Spraying means going on foot with a canister on your back and covering 80m every time you go up and down, he says, and the same goes for pruning, tying in and harvesting. Even getting to the point of planting Grüner Veltliner vines was "extremely cumbersome" because the vineyard was so overgrown – the first vintage was in 2012.

LONG-TERM PROJECTS

Not satisfied with one extreme vineyard, Wutzl partnered with Gritsch on another Wachau vineyard, the Kalkofen site in the Spitzer Graben, the western and cool lateral valley of the Danube. Here only Riesling grows, and the first vintage was in 2015. Gritsch and Wutzl have one permanent employee just to restore and rebuild the drystone walls of the ancient terraces. "These are long-term projects and of course there is effort and there is cost," Wutzl says. But the wines, in all their stony glory, are worth it.

Where attitude is concerned, Austria has no shortage of fizzy pét-nats and cloudy, skin-fermented, amphora-aged wines. Austria's young, wild winemaker scene is lively and progressive with an ever-greater focus on expressing land and site. One particularly pure and therefore extreme approach takes us back to Styria and Weingut Schnabel. The biodynamic practices mean, like many places elsewhere, that nettle and yarrow are collected on the farm, and cows roam in the vineyard. But Karl Schnabel, who has not used any additives at all in his wines



extreme austria



Bladerunner: Karl Schnabel

for 13 years, has a far more integrated approach that goes far beyond any Demeter standard. This means a hand-held scythe to mow just underneath the vines to keep the fruit zone ventilated, and living, wild grass between the rows.

CLOSED-LOOP FARMING

“Working with nature means that where nature helps us, we let it,” Schnabel says about his “colleagues, the insects”. Wines are bottled by hand, the bottles rinsed with local spring water, and no inert gases are used because putting the wine through a bottling machine would “violate” it.

This is not crankiness but absolutely consequent and heartfelt practice according to Kreislaufwirtschaft, or closed-loop farming, envisioned by biodynamics. This, much more so than any moon phase, defines this farm. For Schnabel the integrity and “stability” of his wines are key.

Yet another vision of extremism is espoused by star winemaker Jutta

‘This is extreme, this narrow path between all the advantages the city of Vienna has to offer and the beauty of the vineyards. I live this every day’



Difficult to access: Weingut Schauer in Kitzreck

Ambrositsch: the clash of city life and vineyard that is Vienna. “This is extreme, this narrow path between all the advantages the city has to offer and the beauty of the vineyards. I live this every day,” she says. Vienna is the only world capital with a sizeable wine industry in its city limits – currently there are 637ha of vines – and Ambrositsch is Vienna’s only garagiste (the controversial winemakers group that emerged in Burgundy in the 1990s to challenge the traditional style of red Bourgogne).

She started with “a teeny, tiny” vineyard in Burgenland in 2004 while still working in advertising, before scouting for vineyards in Vienna. She now makes wine from almost five hectares made up of eight parcels, five of which are old Viennese field blends (see pp14-17 for more on Vienna’s wines), including a rare red blend that goes into her snappy, light, chillable red called Rakete, or ‘rocket’. The wines are made in cellars of long-established

Viennese wine estates, and have clear-cut labels with imaginative names that try and do justice to each wine’s personality: Kosmopolit, Revision or Ringenspiel. Today they are served in cool London and New York bars, but while the bold labels stick out, this winemaker’s name only appears in small print, modestly styled as ‘sender’. “The bottles are supposed to be beautiful, plain,” she says. “The contents are the most important thing.” But it was also Ambrositsch who asked: “What does ‘extreme’ actually mean? I always think of extreme exertion.”

She is right – extreme exertion is widespread in Austria – for countless tiny family estates who make the very best wine they can every year. Is there any other country where even the entry level is at such a high standard? Now that is truly extreme. db

