

## WINES of Austria – An Overview

# Wine Wonderland

Austria's wine industry has had its share of highs and lows. But now, over the last so many years, Austrian wine has found pride of place on the world wine map, writes **Marisa D'Vari**

When you think of Austria, do images and songs from *The Sound of Music* come to mind? While Austria retains much of its old world charm, right now it is the country's revitalised wine culture which goes back nearly 4,000 years that is attracting attention. Archaeological evidence shows that in the 9th century

BC, seeds from the Chardonnay grape were found along the Amber Road, an ancient trade route linking the Baltic coast (near present-day Poland) with the Mediterranean. By the time of the Roman Empire, the region's wine was so renowned that an amphora of this wine was worth the price of an (expensive) young slave.

From Roman times, the quality and fame of Austrian wine continued to grow until the 1880s, when phylloxera ravaged the region, with the two World Wars furthering the devastation. By the 1980s, a combination of high yields (good for produce, bad for wine), damaging weather and stagnant economic conditions decimated the once celebrated reputation of Austrian wine in the international marketplace. The world saw Austria's thin, flavourless wine as "cheap plonk", which merchants found impossible to sell. Then someone discovered that adding the chemical, diethylene glycol, which is found in antifreeze to the blend could improve its texture and flavour. When this leaked out, the Austrian wine business was ruined.

Yet the scandal turned out to be a good thing for the Austrian wine trade as it resulted in today's extremely

stringent requirements that have brought about the excellent quality of wine we find today. The country has an appellation control system similar to France called DAC (Latin for Controlled District of Austria) which strictly controls yields, vinification and also demands that the wines be submitted to a tasting panel.

Austria is a country of small, independent family wineries, many of which have made wine for generations. Typically, the father and son work in the vineyard, while the mother and daughter focus on export sales or accounting. In virtually all cases, the families have owned the mostly steep, terraced vineyards for generations. The centuries old, retaining walls often crumble after heavy rains and are constantly being repaired.

In many instances, the steep vineyards are located within walking distance of the family's home, which is usually the site of the winery as well. It is interesting to hear stories about how the winemaker, as a child, played among the vines. Another new trend is that though Austria has always had its famous single vineyards, more producers today are making a clear separation between their best vineyards and creating premium single vineyard wines that often receive some oak maturation.

Grüner Veltliner is one of the most popular exported white wines in Austria. It is an aromatic wine marked

Typical fruity and spicy flavours found in a glass of Blaufränkisch wine



THE WACHAU IS FAMED FOR ITS BEAUTY, AND DIVERSE GEOLOGICAL TERRAIN. WITH ITS TERRACED SINGLE VINEYARDS OVERLOOKING THE DANUBE, IT PRODUCES THE BEST EXPRESSION OF GRÜNER VELTLINER

Top: The Danube bordered by vineyards and the Nussberg, a 332-meter mountain in the suburb of Nussdorf, Vienna. Above right: A windmill in the wine region Weinviertel in Niederösterreich or Lower Austria. Above left: Clusters of Grüner Veltliner grapes



by racy acidity and a peppery quality that can take on many different flavours depending on the region where it is grown, level of ripeness, vinification and use of oak.

The top region for Grüner Veltliner is Lower Austria (Niederösterreich), the largest of the regions in terms of size and production. The top three quality subregions include the Wachau, Kamptal, and Kremstal, where steep terraced vineyards maximise exposure to the sun. These wines are sometimes aged for a period in large, neutral oak casks before bottling, with expressive varietal fruit and mineral flavours evolving over time to generate complex layers of toast and honey.

The Wachau is famed for its beauty and diverse geological terrain. With its terraced single vineyards overlooking the Danube, it produces the best expression of Grüner Veltliner (and also Riesling) for long-term aging. In the 1980s, producers in the Wachau created their own codex that divided dry white wines into three categories based on their natural alcohol content by volume. Aromatic light bodied wines up to 11.5% are called Steinfeder, named after tall, feather-like blades of grass. The most common category is Federspiel, with 11.5% to 12.5% alcohol, and the late-harvest, rich powerful dry wines are called Smaragd.

Kamptal DAC and Kremstal DAC are also famous for vibrant, spicy Grüner Veltliner and delicate Riesling, with the wines containing a distinctive mineral touch, particularly on Kamptal's Heiligenstein hills (site of many single vineyards), with its volcanic soil. The best Grüner Veltliners can be compared to the finest white Burgundies. On a comparative

note, the dry Rieslings are fuller bodied than those from Germany's Pfalz or France's Alsace.

**T**he three main red wines include Blaufränkisch, (moderate tannins, crisp acidity, peppery, sour cherry flavour), St Laurent and Zweigelt (a cross between Blaufränkisch and St Laurent).

The popular, purple coloured Blaufränkisch finds its best expression in Burgenland, especially the regions of Mittelburgenland and Eisenberg. Mittelburgenland's dense loam and clay soils produce a fruity, spicy style of wine while Eisenberg's steep, slate soils impart a spicy minerality to the wine and give it an excellent structure. The reserve styles of both regions see Blaufränkisch aged in oak, which impart smoother, sweeter tannins. Zweigelt gives deep coloured reds with brambly flavours and soft tannins, while St Laurent is similar in character to Pinot Noir.

Austria has long been famous for its riches of sweet wine, especially Ruster Ausbruch, a favourite of royalty in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the people of Ruster (where the wine is made) bought their freedom from Emperor Leopold I in 1781 by giving him 60,000 Gulden in gold and 28,000 litres of Ruster Ausbruch to acquire a town charter.

Ruster Ausbruch shares a production method similar to other sweet botrytised wines (Beerenauslese, Trockenbeerenauslese) in which conditions are such that the ripe, shrunken, late-harvest grapes are infected by the botrytis cinerea fungus. Workers visit the vineyard many times to pick the perfectly botrytised grapes



Wine glasses filled with the rich gold nectar of botrytised sweet wines

**AUSTRIA HAS  
LONG BEEN  
FAMOUS FOR ITS  
RICHES OF SWEET  
WINE FROM THE  
TOWN OF RUSTER,  
ESPECIALLY  
RUSTER  
AUSBRUCH,  
A FAVOURITE OF  
ROYALTY IN THE  
15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**



Domäne Wachau's Cellar Palace, nestled in the Wachau vineyards, continues to be a major attraction for locals and tourists alike

by hand. Regulations also mandate that the grapes must have a weight of at least 30 degrees and that the grapes used in Ruster Ausbruch must be specifically-grown, vinified, and matured in Ruster and pass a blind tasting.

Other styles of sweet wine produced in Austria include Eiswein (wine made from late harvest grapes frozen on the vine) and Strohwein, ripe grapes left to dry and desiccate on straw mats. The varietals used for the sweet wines include the traditional Welschriesling as well as Chardonnay, Weissburgunder and aromarich varietals such as Muskateller, Muskat-Ortrotel Traminer, Gewürztraminer, Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. Residual sugar can range from 54 grams per litre for a Gewürztraminer-Spatlese to 230 grams per litre for a Strohwein.

In 30 years, the country has made tremendous strides in the quality of its wine, and has quickly gained the attention of

the wine world. The white wines are aromatic and delicious while the reds are full-bodied, balanced, and flavourful.

Both reds and whites are particularly good matches with various types of international cuisine. Though food and wine matching experts such as Fiona Beckett admit that matching wines with Indian cuisine can be a challenge, the softer tannins and moderate alcohol of Austria's red render them a particularly good match for lamb based dishes. White wines, especially those with a touch of sweetness and oak aging, play off the spicy quality of Indian food. The lower alcohol of all the wines, are also in step with today's health conscious wine aficionados.

Yet beyond the quality of the wine, what is most memorable about this region is the passion of the winemakers, who are not merely making wine for a living. Instead, they seem to be enjoying the opportunity to make the best possible wine on the very land their ancestors purchased for them so many centuries ago. ♦