

Austria

Dr Philipp Blom

With 2002 and 2003, Austria could not have had two more stylistically contrasting vintages.



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Both are excellent, but while 2002 showed elegance and acidity, the hot and dry 2003 will be remembered for the perfectly ripe, perfectly healthy grapes and for the concentration of the fruit. First tastings also show a surprisingly balanced acidity. The intense sun presented new challenges in the vineyard, and many growers resorted to partial leaf canopies to protect the grapes from sunburn.

There is some debate in Austria about whether 2003 was a freak year or a taste of things to come, and some leading growers, among them Willi Bründlmayer and Toni Bodenstein (Prager), are actively thinking about how the wine landscape might change if temperatures continue to rise and seasons become more extreme. With earlier budding and a longer vegetation period, Grüner Veltliner and Riesling will have to be vinified accordingly. Riesling has less trouble with hotter temperatures, while Grüner Veltliner tends to broaden out and lose its finer aromas if the effects of the warm weather are not countered very consciously in both the vineyard and the cellar.

Some more daring colleagues, especially in the Burgenland, are betting on hotter vintages by planting classic hot varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, which have not yet proved their worth against

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Austrian red varieties, especially Blaufränkisch. Stylistically, too, 2003 will be a challenge. If the previous vintage demonstrated that elegant and focused wines can rise to true greatness in Austria, the effects of the hot summer demand considerable craftsmanship and conviction.

Changeable?

When it was announced that the Freie Weingärtner Wachau, often called 'the world's best cooperative', had put its fate in the hands of a new director, many eyebrows were raised. Until then, two young codirectors, Fritz Miesbauer and Rainer Wess, had built on the work of their predecessors and energetically pushed the 800-odd participating growers for ever-better grape qualities, as well as realizing an ambitious renovation programme. They reaped the benefits in international critical praise and a surge in exports, but their constant vigilance made them few friends within the cooperative. The divorce was swift but not amicable, and the growers chose as their successor Roland Grossinger, the brother of a former chairman of the cooperative board and an appointee whose previous experience lies in selling sparkling wines.

Whether Grossinger has the will, and the clout, to continue the previous line of uncompromising quality remains to be seen. The two former directors, meanwhile, have gone their own ways: Rainer Wess as perhaps the first true *négociant-éleveur* in the Wachau, making wines exclusively from bought-in grapes; Fritz Miesbauer as director of the Weingut der Stadt Krems, a medium-sized producer in neighbouring Kremstal, where he just might succeed in waking this immensely promising region from its profound slumber.

Grapevine

- **The Master of Wine course** will be offered by the Austrian Wine Academy in Rust, in conjunction with the Institute of Masters of Wine in London, from February 2004.
- **The Styrian winery Polz** has become one of the region's, and the country's, largest producers by buying one of its main local competitors, Tschette, and leasing it back to the former owners, who had to sell due to insolvency.
- **Exports continued to grow rapidly** in Austria in 2002. For the first time, exports exceeded pre-1985 levels both in volume (45 per cent) and value (16 per cent). The proportion of red wines exported rose by 22 per cent.
- **Aristocratic Burgenland estates** Esterhazy and Halbturn, after many a year of genteel slumber, have now started major programmes of investment and building.

Opinion:

Core values

Increasingly, blockbuster wines with up to 15 per cent alcohol are a thing of the past. Many producers have understood that they are, to quote one, "too vulgar, too easy to make", and most top producers are now turning away from this style, aided by two vintages, 2001 and 2002, which favoured more elegant, balanced wines. Red wines have especially benefited from this. Now it remains to be seen whether the hot 2003 will produce fewer overly heavy red wines than 2000.

The modification in the styles of some Austrian wines is not only due to the influence of two cool years, however. After the great wave of renewal and revolution, there has been a noticeable return to roots. Having experimented with new vines and vinification methods, many producers and regions are now formulating the core values of their area and are intensifying their investigations of *terroir* and traditional wine styles. Riesling and Grüner Veltliner in Lower Austria and Chardonnay (locally called Morillon) and Sauvignon Blanc in Styria are increasing their dominance as leading white varieties, with a sprinkling of aromatic varieties such as Muskateller and Traminer, especially for the sweet wines of Lake Neusiedl. Among the red varieties, the star is undoubtedly Blaufränkisch, which shows immense potential, as well as perfect suitability for the climate of the Burgenland, with, to a lesser extent, Pinot Noir (which still holds lots of potential) and Zweigelt as supporting varieties.

Discussions about the introduction of an appellation system keep the issue alive and help to develop the essential wine styles of the country.

Grapevine

- **With more and more** outstanding red wines produced in Austria, the identity of Austrian red wines, which have less of a tradition than the great white or sweet wines, is still a focus of discussion and trial. One experiment in particular seems very promising: a series of wines called Moric, made by the Velich brothers (Neusiedlersee) with bought-in grapes from 35- to 100-year-old Blaufränkisch vines in

Neckenmarkt and Lutzmannsburg of Middle Burgenland. Taking their cue from burgundian village wines, Heinz and Roland Velich are trying to make authentically regional wines from indigenous grapes, without artificial concentration and with the greatest possible awareness of *terroir* character. The 2002 vintage shows considerable promise.

Vintage Report

Advance report on the latest harvest

2003

It is always dangerous to mumble prophetically about a vintage of the century, especially if the century is only three years old, but 2003 certainly was an exceptional year, comparable only, older growers say, to 1947. An early heat wave swept over the country after Easter and, except for a cool week each during May and August, four searingly hot months followed. Hailstorms in mid-May devastated parts of the Vienna vineyards and reduced yields there drastically, but otherwise conditions were ideal. The hot and almost rain-free summer caused the plants to build up a considerable advance on the normal vegetative cycle, despite the fact that some younger vines suffered. In view of the almost Mediterranean climatic conditions – the Styrian capital of Graz recorded top temperatures of 40°C (104°F) – many growers used overhanging leaf canopies to provide the grapes with foliage ‘parasols’ to prevent sunburn. The competition between vines and other plants in the vineyard also had to be limited to a minimum in 2003.

The vineyards on the eastern banks of Lake Neusiedl were harvested from 20 August – earlier than ever before. During the last week of August, the weather suddenly changed and temperatures dropped as low as 10°C (50°F). Cool nights during a September Indian summer slowed down physiological ripening. The virtual absence of rain until mid-October ensured the perfect health of the grapes. Harvests in Lower Austria were finished in the third week of November and the cool nights gave good acidity.

Early tastings show Riesling and Grüner Veltliner surprisingly balanced with great concentration, promising a vintage that is, although very different in style from 2002, another classic year. Chardonnays and the Thermenregion grapes thrived, but in some instances Sauvignon Blanc suffered from heat stress. The only white-wine growers less happy about the almost-perfect health of the grapes were sweet-wine growers, who had either managed with minimum botrytis or chose to bet more heavily on icewines than in previous years. Red wines were still fermenting at the point of writing, but the quality, especially of ‘hotter’ varieties such as Blaufränkisch, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah, was excellent, with perfectly ripe tannins. Pinot Noir (often tending to a certain fatness here) may be almost overripe.

Updates on the previous five vintages

2002

Vintage rating: 92 (Red: 90, White: 93, Sweet: 83)

After an almost-ideal summer, torrential rains in mid-August caused the collapse of many terraced vineyards in the Wachau and catastrophic floods in Lower Austria. Despite these misfortunes, grape qualities were uniformly very good throughout Austria. Red wines are well balanced with ripe tannins, and the prevalent botrytis was good news for nobly sweet wines.

Styrian growers made expressive Sauvignon Blancs and Chardonnays, and in Lower Austria this difficult vintage proved to possess the seeds of true greatness for producers who practised rigorous grape selection and who harvested late. Wonderfully balanced Rieslings and, to a lesser extent, Grüner Veltliners, especially in the Wachau and the Kamptal, show great elegance, depth, and enormous potential. In the best cases, this is a classic vintage.

2001

Vintage rating: 89 (Red: 91, White: 89, Sweet: 85)

The never-ending September rain (Vienna saw only four clear days in as many weeks) made the harvest very work-intensive, since healthy grapes had to be sorted. Two frosty periods in December, finally, allowed an icewine harvest. This is a year that vindicates conscientious vineyard work and good vinification, where wines are marked by clarity and balance. The reds are less powerful than 2000, but possess more charm. A good crop of botrytis wines was harvested, too. Generally, these wines will evolve quite quickly.

2000

Vintage rating: 91 (Red: 85, White: 92, Sweet: 88)

With little rain in November and above-average temperatures, the perfect conditions were created for late-harvest wines. This was an extraordinary vintage for red wines, with record must weights and dark colours, though many growers let themselves be seduced into thinking they could produce competition-winning wines when it was actually not easy to balance the alcohol and tannins in the more concentrated wines. With their punch and body, this has been declared a great red-wine vintage, though I personally think too many are over the top. For white wines, this was an almost perfect year, with big Grüner Veltliners and Rieslings in Lower Austria and Chardonnays in the Burgenland ideally suited for *barrique* treatment. Styrian growers also harvested wines of great concentration and harmony.

1999

Vintage rating: 94 (Red: 88, White: 96, Sweet: 90)

This was a wonderful year for dry white and red wines. Red wines show good structure and deep fruit, with less tannin than the 2000s, which are usually rated more highly in Austria. The best producers made beautifully balanced 1999 reds, especially with Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt, and Pinot Noir. White wines in Lower Austria reached great purity, equilibrium, and concentration, with less alcohol than 1998, but a more pronounced acidity than 2000. These are wines expressing varietal character and *terroir* to perfection, ideal for ageing, but often already approachable. In the Wachau and the Kamptal, especially, this was a great year. Beautiful whites were also made in the Burgenland, where the Chardonnays in particular show excellent fruit and well-integrated wood. Styria produced deep and expressive Sauvignon Blancs and Morillons (Chardonnays).

1998

Vintage rating: 85 (Red: 78, White: 87, Sweet: 80)

A late harvest brought grapes that were almost overripe, with high sugars, resulting in wines that are very high in alcohol (up to 15 per cent), low in acidity, and less clearly profiled than those of 1997.

Grapevine

• **Austria has suffered** from a dearth of big and reliably high-quality producers. Now, with avant-garde wineries shooting up everywhere in Austrian wine-growing areas, the commercial and ownership structures are following suit and several large quality producers are consolidating their positions. Until now there were only a few traditional middle-sized quality producers (Willi Bründlmayer and Jurtschitsch, for instance), while the large houses were undistinguished and exclusively mass-oriented, with the notable exception of the Freie Weingärtner Wachau. Now a new generation of winemakers and entrepreneurs is putting the cat among

the pigeons. The famous Burgenland sweet-wine producer Alois Kracher used to make his wines on 7 hectares (ha) a few years ago, but now he owns or buys from 30 ha. In a neighbouring village, Gernot Heinrich has realized an ambitious vision and is vinifying wines from 90 ha of vineyards (from 12 ha five years ago), while the irrepressible Polz family in Southern Styria now owns or controls 105 ha of vineyards. Other successful growers work in partnerships, such as Manfred Tement, FX Pichler, and the late Tibor Szemes with their red *cuvée* Arachon, or as *négociants*, such as Heribert Bayer with his In Signo Leonis label.

GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS

- 1 Alzinger (Wachau)
- 2 Willi Bründlmayer (Kamptal)
- 3 Hirtzberger (Wachau)
- 4 Knoll (Wachau)
- 5 Kracher (Neusiedlersee)
- 6 FX Pichler (Wachau)
- 7 Pöckl (Neusiedlersee)
- 8 Prager (Wachau)
- 9 Tement (South Styria)
- 10 E Triebaum (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)

FASTEST-IMPROVING PRODUCERS

- 1 Josef Gritsch (Wachau)
- 2 Ludwig Hiedler (Kamptal)
- 3 Karl Lagler (Wachau)
- 4 Undhof Salomon (Kremstal)
- 5 Mittelbach (Tegerseehof, Wachau)
- 6 Franz Proidl (Kremstal)
- 7 Engelbert Prierer (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
- 8 Weingut der Stadt Krems (Kremstal)
- 9 Söllner (Donauland)
- 10 Velich (Neusiedlersee)

NEW UP-AND-COMING PRODUCERS

- 1 Kurt Angerer (Kremstal)
- 2 Josef Bauer (Donauland)
- 3 Heribert Bayer (Thermenregion)
- 4 Günter Brandl (Kamptal)
- 5 Walter Buchegger (Kremstal)
- 6 Johann Donabauer (Wachau)
- 7 Meinhard Forstreiter (Wachau)
- 8 Toni Hartl (Thermenregion)
- 9 Alois Höllmüller (Wachau)
- 10 Bernhard Ott (Traisental)

BEST-VALUE PRODUCERS

- 1 Kurt Angerer (Kremstal)
- 2 Willi Bründlmayer (Kamptal)
- 3 Walter Buchegger (Kremstal)
- 4 Knoll (Wachau)
- 5 Schloß Gobelsburg (Kamptal)
- 6 Roman Pfaffl (Weinviertel)
- 7 Peter Schandl (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
- 8 Heidi Schröck (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
- 9 Ludwig Hiedler (Kamptal)
- 10 Platzer (South-East Styria)

GREATEST-QUALITY WINES

- 1 **Grüner Veltliner Vinothekfüllung Smaragd 1990** Knoll (€45)
- 2 **Riesling Wachstum Bodenstein 2002** Prager (€30)
- 3 **Grüner Veltliner Kellerberg Smaragd 1995** FX Pichler (€50)
- 4 **Cuvée No 8 Zwischen den Seen 1995** Kracher (€50)
- 5 **Riesling Singerriedel 1995** Hirtzberger (€45)
- 6 **Riesling Lyra 1997** Bründlmayer (€25)
- 7 **Riesling Steinertal 1997** Alzinger (€23)
- 8 **Chardonnay Tiglat 1997** Velich (€50)
- 9 **Blaufränkisch Perwolff 2000** Krutzler, South Burgenland (€35)
- 10 **Morillon Ziaregg 2000** Tement (€28)

BEST BARGAINS

NB: Prices are ex cellar.

- 1 **Grüner Veltliner Spies 2002**
Kurt Angerer (€9.60)
- 2 **Grüner Veltliner Novemberlese 2002** Günter Brandl (€9.50)
- 3 **Grüner Veltliner Kreutles 2002**
Bäuerl (€9.20)
- 4 **Ruster Ausbruch Pinot Cuvée 2001** Feiler-Artinger (€19)
- 5 **Riesling Rosenberg 2002**
Bernhard Ott (€6.50)
- 6 **Riesling Hiesberg 2002**
Groll (€6.90)
- 7 **Gelber Muskateller Ratscher Nussberg 2002** Gross (€9.30)
- 8 **Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben 2002** Jurtschitsch (€12.90)
- 9 **Cuvée Rosso e Nero 2001**
Pöckl (€15)
- 10 **Morillon Sulz 2002** Tement (€14)

MOST EXCITING OR UNUSUAL FINDS

- 1 **Moric 2001** Velich (€37) *A pure Blaufränkisch from old vines, and a beautiful illustration of what this grape can do.*
- 2 **Grüner Veltliner Kellerberg 2002** FX Pichler (€26.50) *A wine famous for its exotic notes on explosive aromatic extravagance, this vintage shows the Kellerberg and its most famous champion unusually floral and introverted, but equally stunning.*
- 3 **Viognier 2002** Graf Hardegg (€33) *True to his image as a maverick, Peter Veyder-Malberg vinifies an extraordinary Viognier, showing a rich, almost waxy and exotic nose but, thanks to the Weinviertel climate, enough acidity to preserve elegance and focus.*
- 4 **Aurum Grüner Veltliner 2002** Josef Ehmoser (€14)

Experiments with barrique-fermented Grüner Veltliner are not always successful, but this example shows that Grüner Veltliner and wood can marry fantastically well.

- 5 **Grüner Veltliner Loam 2002**
Kurt Angerer (€12.80) *Coming almost from nowhere, Kurt Angerer has produced a stunning series of 2002s. This well-focused Grüner Veltliner shows his style.*
- 6 **Grüner Veltliner Tradition 2002**
Schloß Gobelsburg (€12) *Made in traditional 1940s fashion – with fermentation with ambient yeasts and without temperature control in large, used oak and unfiltered – this wine of days gone by is not a marketing exercise but the result of winemaker Michael Moosbrugger's passion for history.*
- 7 **Cuvée Zieregg 2002**
Domäne Müller (€10.50) *Often underestimated, this South Styrian domaine is one of the region's best – and most dynamic. This cuvée, aromatic yet powerful, of Muskateller, Riesling, Traminer, and Sauvignon Blanc builds on the old tradition of mixed vineyards.*
- 8 **Zierfandler Mandlhöh 2002**
Stadlmann (€13) *No, this is not Zinfandel, but a white grape with great power, grown only in Austria's Thermenregion. With its notes of orange and punch, this is a beast of a wine.*
- 9 **Traminer Privat 2002** Leithner (€16.80) *A rose garden in a glass, powerful but well balanced.*
- 10 **Grauburgunder 2002** Nachbaur (€8) *With only 12 ha, the wine-growing region of Vorarlberg, in the west of Austria, is smaller than many single producers elsewhere, but this Pinot Gris shows that it is wrong to ignore wines from this region.*