
TASTING REPORTS

Change is in the Air

An ambitious generation of Austrian winemakers reaches for a new style



Burgenland producer Claus Preisinger is at the forefront of Austria's natural wine movement. (Hertha Hurnaus)



By Aleks Zecevic

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Austrian wine is going through a metamorphosis. The quest for quality has pushed vintners to new heights, with every region picking up the pace. The market is currently rich with wines from the outstanding 2017 vintage, which delivered terrific dry whites, the country's strongest suit, along with noteworthy reds from Burgenland.

American wine drinkers are taking notice. According to the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, exports to the U.S. nearly doubled in volume since 2009, and those higher numbers are represented in our tastings. Since last year's report ("[Austria's Appeal \[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/austria-s-appeal-57081\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/austria-s-appeal-57081)," Nov. 30, 2018), I have reviewed more than 425 Austrian wines at our New York office, a significant increase over previous reports. (A [free alphabetical list \[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-austria-111519\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-austria-111519) of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

Historically, the spotlight has been on dry white wines from Lower Austria (Niederösterreich), where producers emphasized quality over quantity much earlier than in the rest of the country. In Wachau primarily, and also in Kamptal and Kremstal, the shift from bulk production to artisanal winemaking took place between the 1950s and 1980s.

More regions made the shift toward quality after the wine scandal of 1985, when several Austrian négociants illegally added diethylene glycol as a sweetener to batches of inexpensive wines, largely for German markets. The consequence was massive reform to Austrian wine laws, now some of the most rigorous in Europe, as well as a fundamental rethinking of the wines themselves.

"After the scandal, people in our area were forced to think of new ways of marketing their wines and also of a new style of wines," says Burgenland vintner Judith Beck. "Before that, wine was mostly semi-sweet, and it was always a question of price, not of quality."

Beck is part of a wave of Austrian vintners who are changing the style of the country's wines. They are responding to the effects of a changing climate and maturing vineyards. Many are reassessing their traditional bottlings to experiment with new expressions. Those who have travelled abroad are bringing different concepts and experiences home with them.

The Wachau still leads the way in crafting high quality wines with aging potential, with five of this report's six classic-scoring wines coming from the region. Yet even the established producers that made these wines—Alzinger, Prager and F.X. Pichler—are making changes. Eschewing traditional late-harvest and noble-rot styles, many winemakers are picking earlier. The resulting wines are lighter, lower in alcohol and less extracted. Leo Alzinger is a leading proponent of this trend, and Lucas Pichler of F.X. Pichler has also started focusing more on elegance, as seen in his 2017s, which was one of the earliest harvests on record.

The sixth classic-scorer—the one not from the Wachau—comes from an unexpected region: the Sattlerhof Sauvignon Blanc Trockenbeerenauslese Südoststeiermark 2017 (95 points, \$65/375ml). In recent years, a new generation of Styrian vintners has been working to adapt the styles inherited from their parents and produce distinctive bottlings all their own.

“Styria is a fairly unknown region, and we realized that we have to focus on quality and unique style to differentiate ourselves,” says Alex Sattler, explaining the region's new focus on organic farming. With 11 other wineries, the Sattlers are now members of the STK (Steirische Terroir & Klassik Weingüter), which is working to improve the quality of Styrian wine.

In Burgenland, Roland Velich of Moric has led a movement away from international varieties and toward the use of Austria's native red Blaufränkisch grape. Velich began pushing back on the use of international grapes when he started his winery in 2001, explaining about Blaufränkisch: "This was a noble variety during the time of the empire, and I want to bring back the essence of Austrian wine culture." Wineries such as Muhr-van der Niepoort, Markus Altenburger and Wachter-Wiesler have also embraced this Blaufränkisch revival, with outstanding results.

In addition to the overall improvement in quality, the growing demand for organic and biodynamic wines has helped propel Austrian wine exports. Nikolaihof, a benchmark producer in the Wachau, is one of the oldest wineries in the world to practice biodynamic farming. In 1971, Nikolaus and Christine Saahs, who were running the estate at the time, began to farm their vineyards according to the practices of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher and biodynamic pioneer. "My father never thought he needed chemicals, but it was my mother who was a biodynamic doctor that introduced this idea," Nikolaus Saahs Jr. says.

What started with Nikolaihof in 1971 can now be seen throughout Austria. About a dozen renowned growers, including Gernot Heinrich, Fred Loimer, Hans Nittnaus and Bernhard Ott, formed a biodynamic association called Respekt, which now includes members from Germany as well. Judith Beck and Claus Preisinger are also members, but they adopted the organization's ideas and took them to the next level, proclaiming themselves not only biodynamic, but also natural wine producers. Indeed, many Austrians, particularly in

Burgenland, have experimented with low sulfur or none at all, as well as not fining or filtering their wines.

“It might be a bit easier to farm organically in our area because it’s usually quite dry,” explains Beck. Yet there’s more to it than that, she adds. “I think that it is a question of will, because we find some examples of outstanding biodynamic farming in [rainy] Styria as well, like Muster and Werlitsch.”

Werlitsch is a leader among natural wine producers, with two wines scoring 94 points: the Freude 2015 (\$62) and Ex Vero III 2015 (\$62). Ewald Tscheppe, who manages Werlitsch’s winemaking, crafts complex wines with seductive textures. He credits the estate’s success to his unique vine-training methods, keeping the topsoil fertile through biodynamic practices.

“It is important for roots to go deep, but for me it is important for them to take the information from the topsoil as well,” Tscheppe says. “In one square meter of my topsoil, there are more microorganisms than people on earth.” He believes that each microorganism offers the grapes something different, a philosophy shared by his sister and brother-in-law, Maria and Sepp Muster, who took over Sepp’s parents’ estate in Styria in 2000. A prime example of the Musters’ approach is their Steirerland Gräfin 2016 (93, \$49), a skin-macerated Sauvignon Blanc.

A leader of the group in Burgenland is Claus Preisinger, who started his career working at the renowned winery Anita & Hans Nittnaus. His top-scoring wine is the Blaufränkisch Weinland Erdeluftgrasundreiben 2016 (93, \$59), produced from a single, limestone-rich vineyard called Edelgraben. Preisinger’s

techniques in the cellar, such as his refusal to filter his wines, have at times made it difficult for him to label them under specific appellations.

He remains confident in his experimentation. "I like to push the envelope and I'm someone who always asks, 'Why not?'" he says. "I believe that this is the only way to be unique."

In Lower Austria, this movement is less pronounced. But there are devotees, such as Stephanie and Alwin Jurtschitsch from Kamptal. When the couple began working at Alwin's family estate in the mid-2000s, their first move was to convert the vineyards entirely to organic practices. "I believe in a romantic style of winemaking," Alwin notes. They have stayed committed to a low-intervention approach, reducing yields and increasing biodiversity. The resulting wines are leaner and more complex than in the past. Their line "Discoveries from the Winery" is led by the label "Belle Naturelle," which represents their most experimental bottlings.

A number of other producers are practicing low-intervention winegrowing to craft a range of precise, complex wines that represent differing expressions of grape and *terroir*. This remarkable diversity is matched by the country's rising quality, as Austrian winemaking continues to evolve by building on the past while branching out in exciting new directions.

Associate tasting coordinator Aleks Zecevic is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Austria.

ALEKS ZECEVIC'S RECOMMENDED WINES FROM AUSTRIA

More than 425 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online [Wine Ratings search](https://www.winespectator.com/wines/search) [<https://www.winespectator.com/wines/search>].

ALZINGER

Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Wachau Ried Steinertal 2017

Score: 95 | \$65

WS Review: Aromas of oolong tea and vanilla bean turn to pineapple, grapefruit and savory mineral details on the palate in this exquisite style.

ALZINGER

Riesling Smaragd Wachau Ried Hollerin 2017

Score: 95 | \$51

WS Review: Elegant yet richly flavored, with white cherry, blood orange and melon notes. Very creamy midpalate, adding to the structure and texture.

F.X. PICHLER

Riesling Smaragd Wachau Ried Kellerberg 2017

Score: 95 | \$75

WS Review: Well-crafted, offering a seductive character and a multilayered profile, with creamy notes of lemon, baked peach and roasted pineapple.

PRAGER

Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Wachau Ried Achleiten Stockkultur
2017

Score: 95 | \$80

WS Review: Gorgeous flavors of yellow apple and lemon cream open this rich white, which is richly textured and concentrated, yet nicely balanced.

PRAGER

Riesling Smaragd Wachau Wachstum Bodenstein 2017

Score: 95 | \$80

WS Review: This multidimensional version offers a wave of white peach and roasted pineapple flavors, with spice and chamomile notes.

SATTLERHOF

Sauvignon Blanc Trockenbeerenauslese Südoststeiermark
2017

Score: 95 | NA

WS Review: A splendid dessert wine, featuring a lush, unctuous profile filled with flavors of apricot glaze, butterscotch and lavender honey.

KNOLL

Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Wachau Loibner Ried Kreutles 2016

Score: 94 | \$72

WS Review: Acacia blossom aromas open this white, followed by flavors of apricot, vanilla and lentil. The full-bodied profile is backed by a beam of acidity.

RUDI PICHLER

Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Wachau Ried Hochrain 2017

Score: 94 | \$75

WS Review: Precisely crafted, with a well-focused frame, this features white fruit and ripe citrus flavors that show mineral and white pepper accents.

TEMENT

Südsteiermark Ried Zieregg IZ Reserve 2012

Score: 94 | \$120

WS Review: Very distinct, showing lots of complexity, this white will bend your mind. Rich, yet elegant and finely meshed.

WERLITSCH

Steiermark Freude 2015

Score: 94 | \$62

WS Review: This skin-contact white offers paraffin aromas on the nose, opening up to flavors of apricot preserves, fresh honeysuckle and mandarin orange.

NEUMEISTER

Sauvignon Blanc Vulkanland Steiermark Ried Moarfeitl 2015

Score: 93 | \$61

WS Review: At a gorgeous stage of development, this has a silky texture and a rich palate, offering lemon curd, verbena, tangerine and persimmon flavors.

NIKOLAIHOF

Grüner Veltliner Wachau Hefeabzug 2017

Score: 93 | \$28

WS Review: Multilayered and idiosyncratic, but focused and precise, with pumpkin spice, cinnamon, passion fruit and lavender notes.

TOP REDS

PAUL ACHS

Blaufränkisch Burgenland Altenberg 2015

Score: 93 | \$80

WS Review: Opens with an Asian spice aroma, leading to hints of coffee on the palate that develop into notes of cassis, dark plum and pomegranate.

MARKUS ALTENBURGER

Blaufränkisch Burgenland Ried Gritschenberg 2015

Score: 93 | \$68

WS Review: Very elegant for the vintage, this features an expressive palate, displaying a mix of damson plum, black currant and violet flavors.

GUT OGGAU

Weinland Joshuari 2015

Score: 93 | \$86

WS Review: Refined, complex and well-knit, this is scented with violet, mulberry and raspberry notes and tinged by licorice and rooibos tea accents.

MORIC

Blaufränkisch Burgenland Lutzmannsburg Alte Reben 2015

Score: 93 | \$120

WS Review: Rose hip, violet, jasmine and currant flavors highlight this pure and elegant red. The tannins are silky and well-integrated.

MUHR-VAN DER NIEPOORT

Carnuntum Spitzerberg 2013

Score: 93 | \$65

WS Review: Very elegant, with a plush texture, this features mulled strawberry, mulberry and iron flavors and vibrant acidity.

ANITA & HANS NITTNAUS

Blaufränkisch Burgenland Tannenberg 2012

Score: 93 | \$90

WS Review: A richly flavored red, with developing notes of sanguine and tar, turning to seductive flavors of hoisin sauce and Turkish coffee.

CLAUS PREISINGER

Blaufränkisch Weinland Erdeluftgrasundreiben 2016

Score: 93 | \$59

WS Review: An elegant red, with freshness and persistence, displaying a juicy mix of blackberry and currant flavors, laced with lavender and violet notes.

WACHTER-WIESLER

Blaufränkisch Eisenberg Ried Ratschen Reserve 2015

Score: 93 | \$51

WS Review: Velvety, showing kirsch flavors that mingle with notes of lavender, kumquat and rooibos tea, this is juicy, with beautiful acidity.

TOP VALUES

JOSEF FISCHER

Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Wachau Ried Zanzl 2017

Score: 92 | \$20

WS Review: Offers ripe flavors of orchard and stone fruit, with piercing acidity.

NIGL

Grüner Veltliner Niederösterreich Freiheit 2017

Score: 92 | \$20

WS Review: An exuberant style, gaining a fizzy impression from the minerality.

BERNHARD OTT

Niederösterreich Am Berg 2017

Score: 92 | \$21

WS Review: Vanilla aromas accent the peach and pineapple flavors in this white.

HIEDLER

Grüner Veltliner Niederösterreich Löss 2017

Score: 91 | \$18

WS Review: This white features ripe peach and tobacco flavors at the core.

PAUL ACHS

St. Laurent Burgenland 2017

Score: 90 | \$25

WS Review: Shows blackberry and dark cherry flavors, with loam and lavender.

SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG

Grüner Veltliner Kamptal Schlosskellerei 2017

Score: 90 | \$16

WS Review: Acidity fuels the peach, white raspberry and ground ginger notes.

JOSEF FISCHER

Riesling Federspiel Wachau Ried Kirnberg 2017

Score: 90 | \$20

WS Review: Mineral-driven, with salty details to the papaya and kiwifruit flavors.

FORSTREITER

Grüner Veltliner Kremstal Kremser Kogl 2018

Score: 90 | \$17

WS Review: A well-built version, with notes of iodine, lentil and white pepper.

ANITA & HANS NITTNAUS

Blauer Zweigelt Burgenland 2016

Score: 90 | \$18

WS Review: Pure-tasting, with aromas and flavors of violet and blueberry.

CLAUS PREISINGER

Weinland Puszta Libre! 2018

Score: 90 | \$19

WS Review: A charming version, showing floral notes of violet and hibiscus.

DOMÄNE WACHAU

Riesling Federspiel Wachau Terrassen 2018

Score: 90 | \$20

WS Review: Offers elderflower and pine notes, with hints of orange blossom honey.

JOHANNES ZILLINGER

Zweigelt Niederösterreich Velue 2016

Score: 90 | \$19

WS Review: Bright and silky, with blackberry and raspberry aromas and flavors.