

Opinion **FT Magazine****Jancis Robinson: Austrian wines feel the heat**

'In 2018, many Austrian growers had to pick in September, not October, to preserve acid levels'

**JANCIS ROBINSON**

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Jancis Robinson FEBRUARY 15, 2019

All over the world, crops are being picked earlier and earlier. Grape harvest dates, in particular, are in transition. In the supposedly cool Mornington Peninsula, south of Melbourne, old hand and star winemaker Tom Carson of Yabby Lake reports that the vintage there is a full four weeks earlier than it once was. On the other side of the world, in Châteauneuf du Pape, they used to pick well into October in the 1950s but, nowadays, many grapes are picked in August.

Give or take a terrible spring frost, summer hail or winter flood, summers in wine regions are getting hotter and hotter, ripening grapes earlier and earlier. In Europe, one country known for its fine wines is feeling the effects with particular force: Austria. As wine producers, Austria and Germany have had much in common, but Austrian wines are rather softer and lower in acidity than German ones. In cooler times, this was an advantage but, having tasted about 50 Austrian whites from the 2017 vintage recently, I suspect Austrian vine growers are starting to regard their warm

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creditable, if varied, sparkling wines (which generally have higher acidities than still wines) was a Langenloiser Alte Rebe Reserve Grüner Veltliner from the excellent Bründlmayer. It was almost shocking in its softness and low acidity, and many of the succeeding 2017 whites seemed really quite evolved already, despite Grüner Veltliner's reputation for producing wines worth ageing.

As the tasting progressed, my palate adjusted and I found a few white wines where light, not unpleasant, bitterness on the finish seemed to provide the stimulation that would normally come from acidity. So when I saw [Willi Klinger](#), the head of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, I remarked on the effects of what seemed to have been a particularly hot summer in 2017. I had noted, for instance, that in the vintage guide in the immensely detailed 128-page book *Austrian Wine in Depth* at each taster's place, 2017 had been allotted an all-red disc to signify one of the three hottest years since 1992. (The others were 2011 and 2003.)

He grimaced and pointed out that last year was even hotter, suggesting that, to allow for this, 2017's colour might be amended in future editions to three-quarters red and a quarter blue, like 2015 and 2012. To wait until they are fully ripe, Austria's best grapes have usually been picked in October, but in 2018 many growers had to pick in September to preserve acid levels. Thanks to global warming, some quite mountainous, less traditional parts of Austria are being revived as wine-producing areas, particularly Kärnten/Carinthia around Klagenfurt.

While most of the 2017 whites shown were relatively low in acidity, one wine stood out for its level of freshness: Bernhard Ott's Ried Rosenberg Reserve Grüner Veltliner from Wagram, conventionally associated with particularly full-bodied wines. As is the Teutonic way, we were supplied with an analysis of all the wines, so I could see that the Ott wine was actually lower in acidity than the Bründlmayer one. Knowing that Ott is a particular fan of natural compost (he was once contacted by the authorities because they couldn't understand how one farm could use so much) and is certified biodynamic, I thought that might provide the explanation for the wine's vivacity. (Biodynamically grown vines seem to be extra healthy and to produce particularly well-balanced wines.)

Klinger corrected me by reminding me that Austria has one of the highest proportions of fully sustainable viticulture in the world: 13 per cent of all Austrian vines are grown either organically or biodynamically, and the proportion for general farming is even higher.

Because this London tasting was restricted to indigenous Austrian grape varieties (except for the Chardonnay lurking in the new long-aged sparkling wine Grosse Reserve g.U. category), we didn't have a chance to try Austria's Rieslings. They can also be excellent and are generally fresher and higher in acidity than the country's signature white wine grape Grüner Veltliner, so they may be in a better position to withstand hot summers.

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focused on the Austrian white wine grapes Neuburger, Roter Veltliner, and the Gumpoldskirchen grapes Rotgipfler and Zierfandler; red wines, from the 2016 vintage and older, based on Zweigelt and St Laurent, plus four flights of Blaufränkisch, the most successful Austrian red wine grape; and one flight of the sweet whites for which Burgenland is so famous.

The Neuburgers, a natural crossing of Roter Veltliner and Silvaner, were pretty impressive — unlike the fancier versions of Austria's basic red wine grape Zweigelt. As an unadorned deliverer of juicy, young and fruity wines, Zweigelt can be delicious, but on this showing, it should be left alone and drunk early.

Klinger was in valedictory mood, with (semi) retirement in view. This would be his last London tasting, he told us. And he recounted with glee how, during his record 13-year reign, the value of Austrian wine exports had grown by an average of 6.5 per cent every year. They benefited enormously by Grüners being flavour of the month with [New York sommeliers](#) about 10 years ago, but then there was the predictable backlash. Still, thanks to Klinger's tenacity, perhaps helped by the charm of the popular Austrian resident sommelier Aldo Sohm at Le Bernardin in New York, the US has steadily become Austria's third most important export market.

Klinger isn't tall, but he will leave big shoes — and a complex web of new appellations — behind.

## Particularly distinguished Austrians

### WHITES

- Alzinger, Ried Steinertal Smaragd Grüner Veltliner 2017 Wachau
- Hirtzberger, Rotes Tor Smaragd Grüner Veltliner 2017 Wachau
- Knoll, Ried Kreutles Smaragd Grüner Veltliner 2017 Wachau

### REDS

- Silvia Heinrich, Alte Rebe Ried Goldberg Reserve Blaufränkisch 2012 Mittelburgenland DAC

### SWEET

- Kracher, No.1 Rosenmuskateller Trockenbeerenauslese 2016 Österreich
- Michael Wenzel, Furmint Beerenauslese 2016 Burgenland

*Tasting notes on [JancisRobinson.com](#). Stockists on [Winesearcher.com](#)*

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