

Austrian Diversity:
New wines from the Old World

Austrian Wine Marketing Board Unit 3 Diploma Scholarship
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Up until attending this year's Austrian Wine Fair in Vienna, Vie Vinum, my experience of Austrian wines had been positive – albeit pretty limited. I had thoroughly enjoyed Grüner Veltliner, Riesling and the occasional Blaufränkisch, but had no idea of the scale of other Austrian varietals on offer, or the huge amount of work going into their positioning on the international stage.

Austria went through a pretty hard time after the wine scandal of the early 80s. So much for the old adage that 'all press is good press', the scandal was hugely damaging to the reputation of its wines and its spectre still lingers today. However, it does appear that every cloud has a silver lining. The upshot of the scandal was that the industry suddenly received a huge amount of attention within Austria and led to the creation of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board (AWMB). The AWMB has worked hard to transform the industry. Now comprising 23,000 growers (some part-time) compared to the 45,000 in 1988, the industry has been sharply focused and concentrates on its strengths: individual, handcrafted, boutique wines from family-owned wineries dedicated to providing the purest possible expression of their terroir. The AWMB is a fascinating case study on its own in the influence of a clear marketing strategy on the structure of an entire industry, as they have worked closely with producers for the benefit of Austria as a whole. It can't have been easy, and the AWMB must have met with objections along the way, but the hard work is now paying off and it seems that Austria's strategy is definitely taking them in the right direction .

At a lecture at Vie Vinum, Willi Klinger, Managing Director of the AWMB, spoke of the advantages and disadvantages facing Austrian producers as they market their wines on the international stage. The disadvantages are evident. Firstly, Austrian wine labels can be confusing for the consumer; they are often written in German and may be difficult to distinguish from German wines which the average English-speaking consumer might avoid, given preconceptions about sweetness and quality. Secondly, Austrian wine can be made from a multitude of different varieties (35 to be precise) many of which are indigenous and relatively unknown to global consumers. Thirdly, Austria's wine regions have also been little known to consumers who are unaware of the differences in terroir throughout the country. And finally, as the average Austrian grape grower owns only 2.2 hectares, opportunities for creating well-known multinational brands, which would lift the awareness of Austrian wine among consumers, are slim.

However, all is most certainly not lost for Austrian wine, and the advantages for producers trying to market their wines today are manifold. First and foremost, for the last two decades the focus has been all about quality. Never again will Austria's reputation be smirched by concerns about standards in wine production. Thanks to the AWMB there is now a high level of state control over quality procedures in wineries. These are rigorously monitored (quality is controlled twice by state laboratories: a chemical analysis followed by a tasting

commission) and Austrian wines now display an impressively consistent high level of quality. The introduction of the Banderole (the red-white-red end of the capsule of every Qualitätswein and Prädikatswein in Austria) to illustrate this was a quite brilliant piece of marketing and is now a clearly identifiable mark, differentiating Austrian wine bottles from any other wines in the world.

Secondly, Austrian producers today do not view their many varieties as a handicap but in fact celebrate their uniqueness. Grüner Veltliner has become Austria's flagship grape variety, one that only Austria can produce to a high standard, thus developing the international standing of the country. But Austria is not just confined to Grüner; the plethora of other varieties on offer is staggering. With regard to international varieties, Austria produces wonderful Riesling, fine Sauvignon Blanc (especially from Styria), complex Traminer, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc (Weissburgunder), Pinot Gris (Grauer Burgunder) Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. However, the indigenous varieties unique to Austria are even more numerous and comprise (among others) Roter Veltliner, Rotgipfler, Zierfandler, Rheinriesling, Welschriesling, Blaufränkisch, St Laurent (a real eye-opener for me) and Zweigelt (St Laurent x Blaufränkisch). Yields are low, and are very much controlled by the AWMB to ensure consistency in quality, year in, year out. All these wines display an impressive individuality of style, from aromatic dry whites to powerful, multilayered dry and sweet wines which require concentration, and from fruity early drinking reds to complex, concentrated wines to savour.

This uniqueness and individuality is also present in Austria's varied climate and terroir. From the Riesling slopes above the Danube in Wachau and the slopes of Sauvignon Blanc in Styria to the botrytised banks of Neusiedlersee, Austria boasts incredibly varied soils and climates which offer interest and variety to the consumer. Cool climate viticulture is possible in the north with the cooling air streams from the Arctic, whilst the south of the country basks in Mediterranean warmth and the east bakes in the heat of the Pannonian plain. The AWMB has spent much time analysing individual regional characteristics and has worked hard to define specific terroir profiles (DAC - Districtus Austriae Controllatus) in certain areas of outstanding quality, thus strengthening their marketing of origin as a brand in its own right. Weinviertel DAC was the first controlled appellation of origin and grows typically peppery Grüner Veltliner whilst Traisental DAC has forged a reputation for fine, aromatic Grüner Veltliner. Kremstal DAC is famed for its Rieslings and Grüner Veltliners whilst Mittelburgenland DAC is the heartland of Austrian Blaufränkisch.

So Austria's apparent disadvantages have clearly been turned into advantages by the dedication of marketers, winemakers and growers alike. Whilst attending VieVinum, I was hugely impressed by the number of dynamic, young winemakers from small wineries who were passionate about their products and who felt strongly that Austrian wines' diversity and individuality of style would win over intelligent consumers around the world in the end. Given the hard work and individual attention involved in these wines, they don't come cheap, but Austrian wines represent a breath of fresh air in a world dominated by commercialised production, and I sincerely hope that they realise their full potential on the world stage.