

## Typisch

I had one hour to spare before check in at Vienna and decided to continue the sensorial immersion of the last five days by diving into the nearest art gallery. I found an exhibition in Vienna's Jewish Museum entitled "Typisch". The name translates into the English word for Stereotype. Via shock and novel installation art, the exhibition aimed to challenge perceptions of archetypes of all kinds; the point here was a moral one, but I wondered how it could be extrapolated on a commercial axis.

Much of the psychology of marketing is rooted in stereotyping, having become a conditioned consumer response; for example, the shiraz grape has become globally synonymous with Australia, and even the Barossa region within it. Sauvignon Blanc has come to mean New Zealand, malbec, Argentina. Commercial enterprise needs to be concerned with the exploitation of stereotypical responses. It has been Austria's goal to develop a consumer reflex for its wines-that of quality.

Statistics support the country's aim: just over 70% of Austria's total wine production is consumed domestically, with the remainder being exported to Germany Switzerland and the USA in respective volume terms. Export volumes rose from 51 million hl in 2006 to 56 million hectolitres in 2007; more notable was the 30% increase in value, reflecting the realisation of the quality message.

### The Wine Growing Regions

Austria benefits from a plethora of regions with individual climates; it therefore offers a range of styles from crystalline, dry whites, structured yet fruity reds, sparkling sekts, to the botrytised sweet wines. It is also able to offer a range of styles for particular grape varieties, reflecting terroir.

Wine production is focused in three main areas:

- 1) Weinland Österreich, including Niederösterreich (Lower Austria) and Burgenland
- 2) Steirerland comprising three Styrian wine regions
- 3) Wien (Vienna) with around 700 hectares of vineyards.

Niederösterreich includes the regions of Wachau, Kremstal (DAC), Kamptal (DAC), Trainsental (DAC), Wagram, Weinvertel (DAC), Carnuntum and Thermenregion;

Burgenland encompasses Neusiedlersee, Neusiedlersee-Hügelland, Mittelburgenland (DAC), Südburgenland.

Steiermark includes Südsteiermark, Südsteiermark and Weststeiermark.

The DAC (Districtus Austriae Controllatus) appellation is granted to a wine when, in the opinion of the Ministry of Agriculture, it is felt to truly reflect its region, i.e. a wine of great typicity. Wines of a more generic character are labelled accordingly, without DAC status.

The AWMB summit covered almost all of these regions and stylistic examples within them.

Too numerous to mention, I am chronicling those which impressed me the most.

Under the ecclesiastical setting of the Stift Göttweig, the wines of the Danube underwent organoleptic scrutiny. Grüner Veltliner and Riesling from Kremstal, Traisental and Kamptal DAC produce fresh and racy styles. In Kremstal, the loess terraces produce wines of full body, spice and individuality. The wines are usually hand picked quite late in the year, sometimes November and December to ensure physiological ripeness. Soils of the Kamptal date from the Permian era and contain desert sandstone and volcanic elements. Riesling does particularly well here as its vines cling to life on the precipitous terraces; the firm, mineralic wines have great longevity, perhaps reflecting their struggle. The Traisental is Austria's youngest wine region, established in 1955. Grüner veltliner dominates, representing 63% of production although it coexists with Riesling, which represents 11% of plantings. The cross section of soils (dry, limey, conglomerate, sandy and gravelly) engender structure and mineralic character. The diurnal temperature difference is marked as the warm Pannonian air currents meet cooler mountain air from the Alps. This ensures elegance, structure and aromatic character. I especially enjoyed the wines of Brandl and Proidl-perhaps the tasting backdrop of frescoes inside the towering Ottoman symmetry of cupolas enhanced my appreciation of art meeting order in a glass.

The Single Vineyards of the Wachau, presented by Austria's new MW, Roman Horvath, was a memorable lecture. Styles graduate from light bodied Steinfeder (up to 11.5% abv), to Federspiel (11.5-12.5% abv), ending at Smaragd (from 12.5% abv). The purist rules only allow growers to own vineyards in the Wachau region, which has no plans to expand whatsoever and is controlled by an oligopoly of families. Austria's answer to Burgundy perhaps.

As the tasting progressed, it became clear these wines had even more elegance than those of the Kremstal and with higher acidity. Horvath explained that this is due to a cooler climate (despite the Pannonian influence) and also the complex geology. The region is characterised by ancient rocky soils, with shallow top soils. Vine roots must struggle to penetrate the mother rock in search of moisture, yielding serious quality fruit. Loess is present in some of the younger soils (10,000-15,000 years old!) In Spitz, the variety of soils includes marble but also amphibolite elements, which are alleged to lend mineralic qualities.

The meso climate results from the confluence of the Western Atlantic influences and the warm winds from the Eastern Pannonian lowlands. Cooler streams enter the Wachau from the north and this creates the all important diurnal temperature difference, crucial to achieving ripeness whilst preserving acidity around harvest time. Where the Pannonian influence dominates, the wines are fuller bodied, higher alcohol and with greater power. Wines from the steeper reaches of the valley are more elegant than those from the flatter valley floor.

## **Grape Varieties**

### **White**

Despite a triumvirate of delightful reds (mainly Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt and St. Laurent), Austria's typical is the white stalwart, Grüner Veltliner.

Grüner Veltliner is Austria's most important variety, currently representing 32.6% of plantings. It is grown in the wine growing area of Lower Austria, Weinviertel, Traisental, Kamptal, Kremstal, Wagram, Wachau, Vienna and Carnuntum. The spectrum of styles ranges from the light, elegant and spicy to the fuller bodied examples capable of ageing - some in oak. All are characterised by high levels of acidity, lending firmness and structure, with flavour notes of green apple, pepper and lettuce. They are invariably dry.

Austria's Rieslings are fuller bodied than their German counterparts, with distinct notes of apricot, peach and citrus fruits. The high acidity levels ensure good ageing potential and the fruit character remains well preserved. Wachau, Kamptal, Kremstal, Wagram and Wienvertel show the grape at its best.

Gelber Muskateller produces light, grapey, fragrant wines with racy acidity. Southern Styria is most famous for the variety but we enjoyed some fine examples from the Wachau on a boat ride along the Danube.

Welschriesling, Bouvier, Chardonnay, Traminer, Muskateller amongst others are used to make sweet wines. High levels of residual sugar are achieved in a number of ways; in the eastern region of the Neusiedlersee, higher levels of humidity result from the proximity lakes and noble rot attacks the grapes, concentrating sugar levels and flavour components. The grapes are picked later than usual and result in either Beerenauslese (BA), most common, or Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA) made from virtually shrivelled berries. Eiswein is made only when the morning temperature is lower than -7 degrees Celsius; grapes are harvested and pressed despite being frozen, the result being a highly concentrated, sugary must. There is a great difference in flavour between eisweins and nobly rotted wines; this is due to the alteration of varietal character when botrytis cinerea attacks a grape versus the preservation of flavour by merely being frozen.

### **Black**

To the average UK consumer, Austria's reds are unpronounceable and probably inaccessible. However, connoisseurs, prepared to visit specialists will be well rewarded.

### **Zweigelt**

The happy issue of a marriage of Saint Laurent and Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt is the most planted black grape in Austria, representing 9% of plantings. When its naturally high yielding tendencies are curbed, the resulting full bodied, fruity, spicy, aromatic and concentrated wines are harmonious. It is often aged in small oak barrels and is a good food wine. The Weinviertel is the most important region for Zweigelt.

### **Blaufränkisch**

This is Austria's second most important black variety, representing 5% of total plantings. Notable flavour characteristics are dark cherry, spice; the wines are capable of complexity and ageing, especially in small barriques. The medium tannins morph to give the wines velvety yet subtle structure in time. The key regions are Burgenland and Carnuntum. In

Suzanne Staggl's Lecture on "The Many Faces of Niederösterreich", at the magnificent Schlosshof, we tasted several fine examples.

### **Saint Laurent**

Despite some difficulties in cultivation, this charming indigenous variety produces wines with elegant tannins, dark amarello cherries and plums. Its ageing potential lends it to blending and it is reminiscent of pinot noir. Its spiritual home is the Thermenregion but its recent resuscitation had brought it to northern and central parts of Burgenland, Styria and parts of Lower Austria.

Aside from their quality, Austria's wines are layered with character. This is unsurprising in a country blessed with a rich heritage of history, art, music and gastronomy. The wines reflect the personality of the country-high quality, arty, precise and having developed and defended individuality in a geographic crossroads.

A wild night was enjoyed at the Schönbrunn palace, with more than one hundred wines to taste. The trip was well attended by all nationalities-participants from every continent and thirty six different nationalities. This coverage of the globe was as comprehensive and smart as the content of the trip. As the Italians would say, un piano astuto.