

Austrian Wine Summit 2007
By Anne Whittingdale

Ashamedly writing this a whole year on, the five days spent with the Austrian Wine Academy as part of my diploma scholarship award, rate amongst the best of my life. I take great joy in recalling the time, the area I visited, the wines and the people I met.

Many “non winos” asked why I had chosen to go to Austria – I have always loved the purity of the Gruner Veltliners but outside of textbooks, knew little of the reality of the rest. A whole new world opened up in 5 days and I am now even more convinced of the talent and quality to be seen in Austria both now and to come in my lifetime.

The trip was immaculately organised, the schedule on the Germanic side of tight but with original Viennese interludes. It incorporated an in-depth tour and study of the eastern areas around Vienna : Burgenland; Wienviertel; Kamptal and Kremstal with tastings throughout each day (like coffee breaks) to explore the wines from wider afield Styria and Wachau.

So complete with a full agenda, eye-opening lectures and palace parties all with 100 of the world’s top sommeliers and journalists, it was an adventure I revelled in from start to finish.

It began with a welcome get together at a typical heurigen in the village of Stammersdorf just outside Vienna. This provided a chance to get to know others on the trip, experience the cabin culture and local heurigen wines and to have a “taste” of what was to come.

Lecture one, day one. The honourable Pepe Schuller MW deservedly took first slot in the elegant wine academy on the shores of Lake Neusiedl, Rust. (The venue itself is almost enough to sell the MW!)

The lecture confirmed the variety within Austria and the reason being that wine has been grown for 2500 years in Austria and each area still reflects and maintains, in most part, the specific local history through its unique grapes. (80% are indigenous treasures, which have in some cases slowly evolved) When the republic of AustroHungary split last century, the style within the country became broadly segregated into the Northern zesty whites and the warmer reds of the south.

The infamous 1985 wine scandal, mocked by so many, is more humbly what Austrians have chosen to strengthen their resolve and to turn into a positive. Their wine culture has as a result, to our delight, mercifully undergone a seismic change : converting the perhaps narrow minded beginnings into the current dynamic young wine production.

Despite the evident strength of the marketeers for Wines of Austria, there is relatively speaking, no real world wine distribution, so the majority remain focused on selling to smaller specialist independents and restaurants and 75% remains drunk domestically.

Before the various Austrian winegrowers from around Rust, so warmly welcomed groups into their homes for lunch, we sampled wines from “Austria’s Tuscany” ; Styria. A warmer, more humid Mediterranean climate producing quality rather than quantity with classic and now world class Sauvignon Blancs (called “Muscat Silvaner”) and Morillon, aged classically in barriques, and delicate soft, early ripening

St Laurent. Schilcher Rosé was worlds apart from the UK consumer's perception of a rosé – this being crimson in colour, bone dry and with piercingly high acidity, which reached 14 grams in the past of acidity.

A tasting of Styrian Sauvignon Blancs was proceeded by a sunny excursion to another tasting in Donnerskirchen vineyard, northern Burgenland but still overlooking the lake. Again, followed another much anticipated tasting : “the sundowner” of rich sweeties: gentle Gewürztraminer auslese and Chardonnay and Scheurebe in Beernenauslese styles. With the low yielding 2005 vintage the character was powerful with sometimes untamed fruit but racy, balanced, refreshing acidity. A true delight.



The evenings meal, at the best restaurant on the lake Neusiedl partnered typical food and local wines. Asparagus was obviously in season during this visit but interestingly so because it is not the easiest of foods to match wine to. This night it married with a fresh elderflowerly Muskat Ottonel. 10 wines, 10 courses completed, aptly by a wine called “peccatum” !

I was blown away by the exterior alone of the venue for day 2's lectures – the spectacular grounds of Palace Schloss Hof in the Wienviertel. The first by Willi Klinger (Marketing Director of Wines of Austria) was given in an echoey beautiful room which carried resonances of the cultural wealth of Austria.

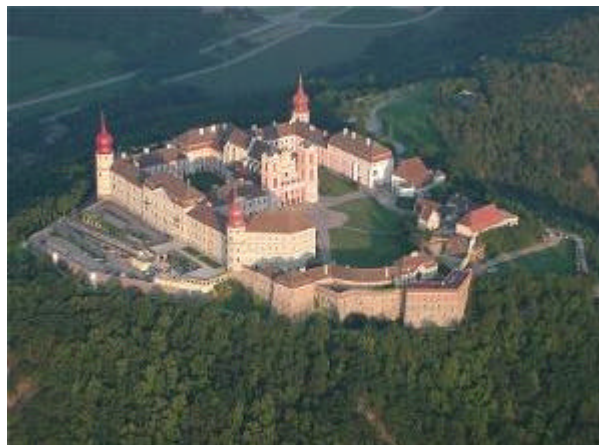
But our focus was on the riches of the Lower Austria regions : Gruner Veltliner from Traisental; Riesling from Wachau (in various levels of harvest ripeness) ; Roterveltliner from Wagram; contrastingly buttery Chardonnays from Kamptal; aromatic Zierfandler and St Laurent from Thermenregion and a few blends based on Zweigelt and Blaufrankisch from Carnuntum.





A tasting to exemplify the diversity of the Wienviertel wines in the palace stables wet the appetite for the cookery course of wiener Schnitzel in the old palace kitchens.

From one palace onto no less impressive surroundings of the Benedictine monastery, (one of the most famous in Austria) Stift Gottweig in the Wachau, from where we had panoramic views of surrounding regions (Traisental, Kremstal, Kamptal, Traisental and Wagram) and were received by their renowned producers to sample their Gruner Veltliners and Riesling.





On to one of the best meals of my life – at Landhaus Bacher, accompanied by matured wines from Niederosterreich such as Pichler’s Riesling Smaragd 1999 to perfect Austrian salmon and an Alte Reben Pinot Noir 2000 Schloss Gobelsburg to wet a venison gratinated with nuts and ported cherries. Followed by a not to be shared, Riesling Beerenauslese 1999 Mantlehof and (or!) Springzenberg Eiswein 2001 Dr Unger to accompany sweet cheese soufflé wrapped in pancakes with strawberries and rhubarb cream....in that order!



The last compact day begun with the wonders of the wine museum in the Langenlois, a sparkling Sauvignon Blanc wine reception.



Once transferred to the Wachau a few local domains introduced the Wachau's single vineyards wines to accompany the lecture from Kellerberg, Loiberberg and Durnstein.



We then climbed up into the vineyard Kellerberg to experience the steepness, variations in perspective and vine training methods and spectacular view of the winding, not so blue, Danube – which was where we were heading next, for a taster of Federspiel wines on board a boat heading down the Danube to our lunch of asparagus and trout at the ancient Richard the Lionheart restaurant in Durnstein.

The day and trip went out in unbeatable splendour at a black tie party for the original 100 at the Schloss Belvedere in Vienna, complete with a blind wine tasting competition of native varietals, a 5 star, 5 course meal, 100 more wines to taste and dancing till dawn all set in the most romantic of houses, home to Gustave Klimt's "The Kiss".



For those who were still partying in the morning, there was a final trip (and tasting....) to the Viennese House of Music.

As outlined at the start, I hope you can see why these few days rate so highly and made such a memorable and now treasured, impression on me. I got everything I had hoped for in choosing to take my prize in Austria and much more. Needless to say, I went out singing the praises of Austria's jewels and have been contributing to marketing them in the UK and hopefully helping to increase their deserved growing presence in the world of wine today.

I should like to thank all who made this trip possible – especial repeated thanks to Josef Schuller MW for his buoyant, enthusiastic warm welcome and to all at WSET who taught and inspired me during my diploma to work my socks off to result in this fantastic prize. – Thank you!