

## **Austrian Wine Summit 2009 – Nick Whittal**

I was very fortunate to attend the Austrian Wine Summit 2009 as a guest of the Academy. Our group's programme, *Discover Wine Wonderland Austria*, was aimed at people with limited experience of Austrian Wine many of whom were visiting the country for the first time. The emphasis was certainly on tasting the wide range of wines it has to offer, but we also enjoyed a taste of the country's fascinating history and exciting culture. It seems apt to highlight some of the scores of wines tasted that really stood out.

### **Overview**

Every wine marketing board is eager to push its country's wines, but there is something remarkable about the energy of Wines of Austria headed by the energetic and charismatic Willi Klinger. His team continues to work hard to reaffirm the country's place on the world wine map. Austria produces less than 1% of the world's wine and 75% of its production is consumed in the local market, so the country will never be successful on the scale of France or Chile, but it is striving to increase its annual export value of around 112 million Euros. Commercial wines have seen some progress, but it is the emergence of more expensive quality wines that will strengthen Austria's reputation. Austrian wine continues to show promise on the UK market, especially in restaurants and independent stockists.

### **Gemischter Satz**

Gemischter Satz was the first wine I tasted (along with people from over 30 countries) at a very pleasant get-together, held at Heurigen Zahel just outside Vienna. We were immediately intrigued by the notion of a blend of grape varieties planted next to each other and harvested at the same time. The first of a dozen Gemischter Satz was sparkling and included Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, and Gewürtztraminer. Although such an inevitably inconsistent curiosity may not have a place on the UK market, the better made examples were delicious. This small revelation hints at the bigger picture: Austrian wine is complex but that is partly why it is so fascinating.

### **Grüner Veltliner**

Representing a third of Austria's vines, Grüner Veltliner will no doubt remain the country's signature grape. On a parallel with Gewürtztraminer, it is not the easiest grape name to pronounce and it is certainly not a generic style of wine like commercial Colombard. Grüner is therefore immediately intriguing to wine drinkers who are open-minded, who venture beyond cheap Pinot Grigio or even dearer Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. Grüner can have restraint, racy acidity and a touch of white pepper. Other examples are fuller, riper and spicier. The wine can succeed at various levels of residual sugar, but its most noteworthy examples are dry to medium-dry.

A Grüner from Kremstal that certainly showed well was a 2008 from the Gebling Vineyard of Sepp Moser's son, Nikolaus, who was one of the first wine-growers in Austria to convert to biodynamic viticulture. This was a simple wine but its concentration, ripeness and length were excellent for the lower end of the price range.

I was particularly impressed by some of the Grüner Veltliner wines from Burgenland because it is not famed for its success in the region as it is in Kremstal and Kamptal of Niederösterreich. These two Grüners were very well made and had beautiful balance of ripe stone fruit and acidity, with spice and mineral notes carried by good length.

Grüner Veltliner, Leithaberg Weiß 2007, Neusiedlersee-Hügelland, Sommer  
Grüner Veltliner, M Bergweingarten 2008, Neusiedlersee-Hügelland, Sommer

### **Riesling**

Had this been a German Wine Summit, we would have tasted a wide variety of Riesling. The emphasis was on Grüner, but of the small number of Rieslings tasted there were some very fine examples, the best from single vineyards. Heiligenstein in Kamptal revealed a 2007 from Hirsch. This had excellent concentration of fruit coupled with wonderfully fresh acidity, resulting in well defined varietal character. An outstanding Riesling savoured during the Gourmet Dinner at Landhaus Bacher (Mautern, Wachau), was the Loibenberg Riesling 1999, Domäne Wachau. The winery was brought to standard by Willi Klinger himself and it shows in the wines now more than ever. This Riesling was pronounced in varietal aroma and flavour which lasted and lasted. It would be great to taste it again as it still showed plenty of ageing potential.

### **Other White Varieties**

It was unsurprising that only a handful of Sauvignon Blanc wines were tasted by our group as the grape accounts for less than 1% of Austria's vines. Austrian Sauvignon Blanc from producers like Gross, Skoff and Polz demonstrates that the grape does succeed in Styria, as a result of cooler meso-climates and skilled wine-making. The choice of Graz in 2008 for the first World Sauvignon Congress was not random. Esterhazy's Pinot Blanc Tatschler 2007 in Burgenland revealed a great match for an Austrian favourite, roasted wild mushrooms.

## **Sweet Wines**

Top Austrian producers like Feiler-Artinger (Rust, West of Lake Neusiedl) and Kracher (Illmitz, East of Lake Neusiedl) excel at a wide range of superb sweet wines using several other grapes including Chardonnay, Traminer, Scheurebe and Pinot Blanc. A pertinent example and one of the most notable sweet wines I have ever tasted was the Pinot Cuvée Ruster Ausbruch, Neusiedlersee-Hügelland 2007 from Feiler-Artinger.

A blend including Weißburgunder, Neuburger and Chardonnay, with around 220 grammes per litre of residual sugar, the Ruster Ausbruch style of sweet wine (somewhere between Trockenbeerenauslese and Beerenauslese) has been made in Rust for over 400 years. The skilfully crafted balance of rich toffee and sweet fruit with fresh, lively acidity is an obvious pre-requisite for this calibre of wine.

The truly distinctive quality, however, lies in the layers of flavour, the elegance and the purity which all linger on the palate. Other names which stood out in the tasting of wines from Lake Neusiedl were Nekowitsch and, of course, Kracher.

## **Red Wines**

Zweigelt is Austria's most planted Black grape. It can be light like Beaujolais or more powerful. Esterhazy, Burgenland make a very good example of the light style. One of the fuller versions which showed well was the Arachon (T.F.X.T.). This was Zweigelt blended with Blaufränkisch, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. The dense black fruit and blueberries coupled with smoky, savoury notes lingered well with the lamb and shallots at Restaurant Nyikospark, Neusiedl am See, Burgenland.

It is hard to form an opinion on Blaufränkisch, Austria's second most planted grape, the precise origin of which remains unclear. Tasting the variety is also a mysterious encounter. Most examples tasted had very high levels of acidity and chewy tannins which were at best velvety. Flavours were typically black and red cherry, blackberry, liquorice and smoke. The better examples showed more fruit cake and a longer finish. One of the more notable examples of the variety on its own was the 2006 Reserve from Krutzler. The silky nature of this wine distinguished it from a number of tougher wines. Again, that combination of smoke, black fruit and fresh acidity was very well crafted.

During the party at Gloriette (Schönbrunn Palace, Vienna), I asked Willi Klinger to recommend a decent Blaufränkisch. He suggested Wurzinger's M+ 2007, Neusiedlersee. This was fresh, ripe and soft, but it seems more likely that UK wine drinkers will get their palates round Blaufränkisch in the big blends that stand out from the crowd; given the prices of many Bordeaux blends, this curiosity has a good chance!

The Estoras 2007 (Blaufränkisch and Cabernet Sauvignon), Esterhazy is another pertinent example of what Austrian winemakers can achieve when it comes to blending black grapes.

Another speciality which will help put Austrian red wine on the world map is St Laurent from the likes of Schneider (Reserve 2006), Thermenregion. This exemplifies the grape's silky, smoky similarity with Pinot Noir, but also that richer, denser chocolate character which distinguishes it from the lightness of Pinot.

### **Challenges**

Emerging wine producing countries have an obvious tendency to showcase a wide range of grape varieties, distributed in differing regional climates to maximise their potential. Austria should clearly boast some of its great wines, but it faces challenges. Chile, South Africa and Australia have demonstrated - with varying degrees of success- how vital it is to promote quality, provenance and regional identity. Research into clones, climate, soil and even *terroir* is important. However, consumers must not be overwhelmed by too many obscure grape names and complicated classification systems of wines and regions. Austria simply needs to maintain its agenda of quality and it needs to continue to expose the versatility of its wines, especially as food wines. Whether recommended by a sommelier in a decent restaurant or enjoyed with good company at home, there are many superb Austrian wines at surprisingly reasonable prices.