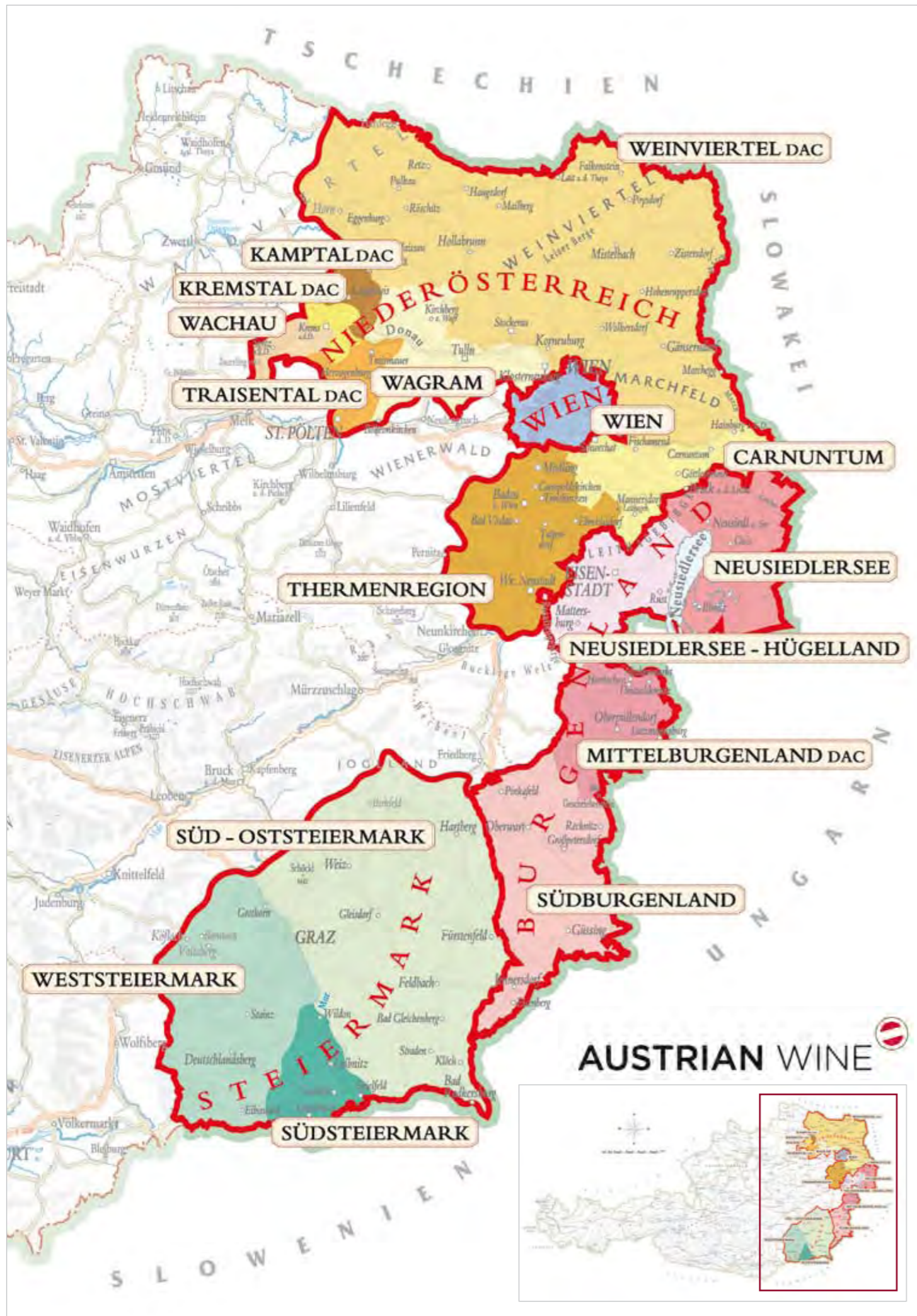


AUSTRIA 2009

A Decanter guide to the wines and regions to know
produced in association with Austrian Wine Marketing





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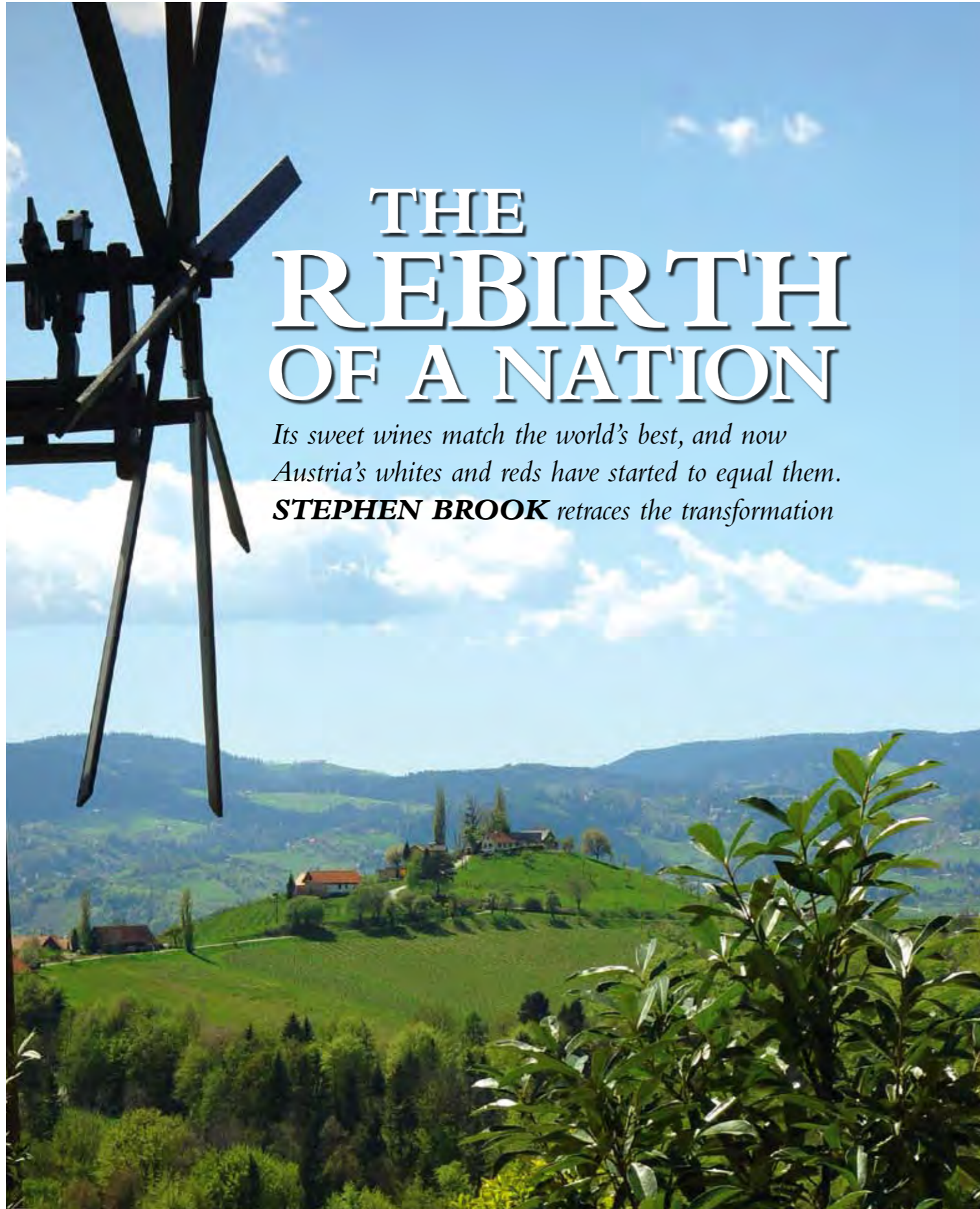
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THE REBIRTH OF A NATION

Its sweet wines match the world's best, and now Austria's whites and reds have started to equal them.
STEPHEN BROOK retraces the transformation

FEW WINE-PRODUCING countries in Europe have made such strides in recent decades as Austria. I visited the country frequently in the late 1970s and 1980s, and while there were some fine white wines made from Grüner Veltliner and Riesling, most whites were strictly for quaffing. Then there were the sweet wines, such as the thick, heady Spätrot-Rotgipfler from the Gumpoldskirchen region and occasional Trockenbeerenauslesen from Burgenland, from where the Tokay-like Ruster Ausbruch also came. As for the reds, they were barely drinkable. Until the mid-1980s winemakers were encouraged to prevent malolactic fermentation, so the wines were tough, and often made from overcropped vineyards planted with mediocre grape varieties such as Portugieser.

ALL CHANGE

By 1990 all this had changed. The growers in Austria's finest white wine region, the Wachau, had decided to work together to define their own wine styles. Top growers in nearby Kremstal and Kamptal followed in their wake. In Styria, growers had begun to produce Sauvignon and Chardonnay of extraordinary limpidity and purity, while the dynamism of Alois Kracher had almost single-handedly restored the reputation of Austrian sweet wines after the devastating scandal of 1985. In eastern Austria, even red wines were taking on richness and structure – sometimes to excess.

I may not make friends in Austria for saying so, but the turning point was the

LEFT: South Styria is one of the few regions to focus on international grapes

scandal. As scandals go it was not that serious – nobody died or even felt unwell – but the practice of adding illegal products to sweeten wine is clearly indefensible. For a few years Austrian wine became unsaleable, but the scandal acted as a stimulus. A new generation swiftly realised there was no room for adulterated sweet wines, sugary reds or acidic whites. Young winemakers were travelling and tasting widely; they recognised Austria's potential and knew it had been falling short.

'It is particularly impressive that Austria has remained true to its native traditions'

Today their mastery is complete. Many would argue that the dry Rieslings from the Wachau and its neighbours are as good as any in Europe. Nor do the Grüner Veltliners lag behind. In 1998 I participated in the first blind tasting in Vienna that pitted top Veltliners against the world's best Chardonnays. Veltliner took the top three places. This was clearly a wine to be taken seriously. Moreover, it has a capacity to age that equals and often surpasses that of Riesling. Yet a great Riesling from Pichler, Hirtzberger, Alzinger, Bründlmayer or Nigl can be a thrilling wine – rich but mineral, strong but racy.

The sweet wines are still among the world's greatest. The Kracher estate remains supreme, but it is far from alone. The reds face more competition, but the best of them – from Krutzler, Umathum, Pöckl, Ernst Triebaumer and Kollwentz – are beautifully balanced and age gracefully.

It is particularly impressive that Austria

has remained true to its native traditions. Ten years ago, there were several Merlots, Cabernets and Chardonnays being made; today there are fewer. Growers were swift to admit that some international grapes (Cabernet Sauvignon in particular) rarely work in Austria, but Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay remain important in Styria, where they have a long tradition. The less interesting local varieties – Bouvier among the whites, Portugieser among the reds – have lost ground, clearing the way for

exquisite Gelber Muskateller from Styria, rosé from Wildbacher, racy Blaufränkisch from Burgenland, elegant St Laurent from various regions, Zierfandler and Rotgipfler from Gumpoldskirchen, thrilling TBAs from Welschriesling, and Weissburgunder and Chardonnay from Burgenland.

These traditions have been preserved by the creation of the DAC (Districtus Austriae Controllatus) system, which defines the classic style for, at present, five regions. Thus a DAC from the Weinviertel has to be Veltliner, with no oak; and DAC reds from Mittelburgenland must be Blaufränkisch. The most recent DAC is for the Kamptal, for Riesling and Veltliner (Traisental and Kremstal have a DAC for the same grapes). So far the system has had more impact within Austria than on export markets.

FOOD WINES

Until 1918 Austria was the heart of an empire, drawing in immigrants from all corners; with them came their speciality dishes. Such is the variety of Austria's wines that one is never at a loss to find an appropriate bottle to open with a dish of calves' lung or sweet dumplings. Not that Austrian wines can only pair Austrian dishes. A dry Veltliner or Riesling is as versatile as a Chablis or Fiano, while the deft Burgenland reds are often more food-friendly than a burly Shiraz or Brunello. Nor will you find the aberrations – still too common in Australia or California – of ill-balanced wines that fatigue rather than stimulate the palate.

As for vintages, dry white wines fared well in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2007; reds in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2006; and sweet wines in 2002 and 2004 to 2007. But remember that Austrian wine regions are spread out: a good vintage in Styria is not necessarily so successful in Kremstal or Vienna, and vice versa. **D**

Stephen Brook is an author, wine journalist and contributing editor to Decanter

AUSTRIAN WINES: SPREADING THE WORD

The sad fact is that most of the world's wine drinkers will never discover the delights of Austrian wine, writes Amy Wislocki. Willi Klinger, general manager of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, is sanguine about its limited reach. 'Austria accounts for not even 1% of world wine production, and 75% of that is consumed at home – leaving less than 0.25% of the world's wine to export. It's such a small amount that we don't think of other cool-climate countries such as Germany or New Zealand as competitors. We're not threatening anyone.'

Klinger is passionate about what the wines have to offer. 'Made from wonderful native grapes, these are typically Austrian, but they speak an international language when paired

with food. Grüner Veltliner in particular has great food-matching capabilities – it has physiological maturity and a fuller body than some aromatic wines, so works in Chardonnay-type pairings. But it also has a fresh acidity, retaining crispness even at 14% alcohol.'

He acknowledges that you need a certain level of wine knowledge and culture to enjoy Austrian wines. 'We printed T-shirts saying: "Austrian wine is for intelligent people, and vice versa". We don't make wines to fit a gap in the market; we stick to what we believe is great wine, and then find those people who appreciate them. A complicated product like Austrian wine needs ambassadors. Luckily for us we have them in journalists, sommeliers and wine merchants all over the world.'

**‘Any of the UK’s top
restaurants now have several
Veltliners on their lists’**



GREAT WHITE HOPE

*It took a while to get there, but today Grüner Veltliner is well and truly ready to take its place among the world’s great white grapes, as **GILES MACDONOGH** reports*

THE PROGRESS MADE by Austrian wine these past 20 to 25 years is a true phenomenon. Who would have believed it, when, with a few notable exceptions – the quality, dry white wine organisation Vinea Wachau was created in 1983 – up until the late 1980s, Austrian wine was viewed as cheerful, semi-sweet, frothy stuff served up to German tourists in country inns by buxom girls in dirndls. Now Austria is one of the most highly prized and fashionable sources of European wine, and wine lovers simply can’t get enough of one white wine in particular – ‘Grouner’.

With a 33% share of the country’s vines, Grüner Veltliner has played a prominent part in Austria’s rise. Wine writers and sommeliers now see Veltliner as one of the world’s great white grapes, with its astonishing versatility, and the different hues and flavours it throws when grown

ABOVE: The Kamptal region is home to many of the top Grüner Veltliner producers

in schist and gneiss or its favourite loess soil, which imbues it with a racy, lemony acidity and retains the moisture Veltliner craves. Where you would have been hard-pressed to find an Austrian wine a decade ago, any of the UK’s top restaurants now have several Veltliners on their lists.

LEARNING CURVE

The grape’s humble beginnings were until recently the subject of debate. It used to be said that it drifted down to the Danube Valley from Bohemia during the 18th century, while later commentators pointed to a nobler ancestry in the Valtellina in northern Italy. Traminer has long been identified as one of the cultivar’s parents, and now ampelographic researches have revealed the other parent to be an

unknown grape found in the St Georgen/ Eisenstadt area of Burgenland.

Until fairly recently Grüner Veltliner was considered little more than a weed. Many lamented the fact that it had gained ground at the expense of other native varieties (Silvaner, for example) following the introduction of high training in the 1950s and 1960s. High training was naturally all about high yields, for which the period was famous. It was not a method conducive to quality.

Michael Moosbrugger of Schloss Gobelsburg takes up the story: ‘After 1945, the pioneering wine producer Lenz Moser began to popularise this new wine style, and initially all varieties that had been part of the mixed vineyards were planted in single-varietal vineyards. The 1940s and >



1950s saw plantings of Silvaner, Sauvignon Blanc, Muskat Ottonel, Müller Thurgau, Welschriesling, Roter Veltliner, Riesling... and Grüner Veltliner. It was not until the 1960s that this bewildering variety began to gain focus. Growers began to understand the relative strengths of individual grapes and clients began to request some varieties more than others. By the 1980s it had become clear that Grüner Veltliner and Riesling were particularly favoured.

Even in the late 1980s and early 1990s, though, Grüner Veltliner was at best an also-ran, and where possible, growers concentrated on their small plot of Riesling or the 'Burgunders' – Pinots Blanc and Gris or Chardonnay. It was at this time that I first encountered the variety.

Some people were already making serious wines from Veltliner, particularly in the Wachau and the Kamptal, but for the rest of Austria it was unsophisticated, picked comparatively unripe and then chaptalised by half a degree to improve the texture. The old style was often very pleasant: a fresh, quaffable wine reminiscent of lentils, white pepper and bay leaves, and delicious with the sort of pork products you could expect to find in a *Buschenschank* or country inn.

ABOVE AND BELOW: Kremstal and Kamptal are both home to some of Austria's finest Grüner Veltliner (right). **BELOW RIGHT:** Willi Bründlmayer, creator of the 'Alte Reben' style

These wines possibly exist now, but not in such great numbers, as Austrian growers have become more technically proficient and possess modern gadgetry. The grapes are picked riper, often with a potential alcohol nudging 15°. Some wines are fermented very cold in computer-controlled vats, and the aromas are largely muted. All you can expect is the pear-drop smell of cold fermentation and that vague minerality on the palate that is a characteristic of the grape.

BAROQUE STYLE

Austria gradually woke up to the potential of Grüner Veltliner in the 1990s. It could be world class, says Berthold Salomon of Weingut Salomon, 'if grown in cool-climate areas, on poor soils and pruned to low yields'. The fathers of this new, serious Veltliner were chiefly to be found in the Wachau, and the Kamp and Krems valleys. Franz Hirtzberger's super-ripe Honivogl established a canon for quality in the Wachau, while Willi Bründlmayer created the 'Alte Reben' (old vines) style, picking as late as November and producing a heady,

highly alcoholic wine that often benefited from a smidgen of botrytis to give it creamy complexity. This was the beginning of the 'baroque' school of Grüner Veltliner: complex, elaborate wines with lashings of everything – aroma, flavour, alcohol.

These complex, high-octane Veltliners won friends and admirers all over the world. GV was ready to shed its inferiority complex and proclaim its place in the panoply of great varieties. The 1998 Vienna 'Chardonnay' tasting proved something of



MACDONOGH'S RISING GRÜNER STARS AT A GLANCE

KAMPTAL: Allram, Dolle, Ehn, Eichinger, Jurtschitsch, Rabl, Steininger, Topf, Weixelbaum, Wutzl. **KREMSTAL:** Buchegger, Forstreiter, Hermann Moser, Türk. **TRAISENTAL:** Huber; **VIENNA:** Christ, Wieninger (Ried Preussen), Zahel (Nussberg);

WACHAU: Mauritiushof, Pichler-Krutzler, Thierry-Weber. **WAGRAM:** Ehmoser, Kolkman (Perfektion), Leth, Stift Klosterneuburg. **WEINVIERTEL:** Weinrieder, Pollak, Pollerhof (Extrem), Studeny, Taubenschuss (Alte Reben)

PHOTOGRAPHS: ÖWWM, ÖWWM, FABER



a watershed. The three top wines were all Veltliners, with the prize going to Bründlmayer's 1995 Ried Lamm. Those present recognised that they were among the best wines in a tasting that included some of Burgundy's top names.

Fame, however, can have its drawbacks. Grüner Veltliner accounts for 46% of the federal state of Lower Austria and 29% of Vienna. It suits cool climates and tolerates damp years. In Lower Austria it has always

been grown in warmer spots as well, like Thermenregion and Carnuntum south of Vienna, with slightly less success. With 18%, it is the most widely planted variety in Burgenland, but Welschriesling has always yielded better wines, and until recently very little wine bore the legend 'Grüner Veltliner'. Burgenland is simply too hot and dry, apart from the Leithaberg sub-region, which can produce fresh, racy and complex Veltliners.

Because the public expect great – and expensive – wines to have a long cellar life, Grüner Veltliner is meant to age well. It is not true to say that the grape cannot age, and some wines – Rudi Pichler's are a case in point – need a while before they come round. On the other hand, it sometimes develops a musky flavour after a few years that is not to everybody's taste. Like Viognier, say, it is at its best after 18 months to two years. I have tasted Veltliners from the 1920s and 1930s that were still lively, but it has to be said that these wines had been kept alive by a whack of residual sugar.

Around 2000, Austrian wine turned

another somersault with the introduction of marketing programmes and a profusion of weird names such as *Perfektion*, *Exklusiv*, *Summerwine* (sic), *Wahre Werte* (true values), *Charming*, *Grand Crü* (sic), *Fortissimo* and *Privat*. Some were French, some Italian, some broken English, but very few German, which was avoided, perceived as a negative selling point.

In some cases, brands rather than vineyard sites dictated style. 'Summer wines' are now part of most Veltliner portfolios and were created by the new technology to some extent in imitation of the Wachau's *Steinfeder*. The idea of 'summer wine' is an integral part of Austrian culture, and consumers still often add sparkling mineral water to their Veltliners, or growers would have used

'The 1998 Vienna "Chardonnay" tasting was a watershed. The top three wines were all Veltliners'

these under-ripe grapes to make sparkling Sekt. Now they are turned into a refreshing, fairly neutral wine to drink during the summer months. This is the Austrian answer to Pinot Grigio, but more aromatic. Its significance should remain local – it is not a style to suit cool climates.

Most growers retain a number of vineyard sites for their classic Veltliners. These are the 'terroir' wines that were formerly the real joy of Austria: you could taste the soil in every bottle. On the other hand, there has been a new concentration on geology, with growers beginning to understand the effects of soil on flavour.

The new thinking has dictated that there must be a 'top-of-the-range' wine corresponding to a 'reserve' wine. This has been enshrined in the rules for the DACs (Districtus Austriae Controllatus; like French AOCs) that have been cropping up all over Austria. 'Reserve' (13% and over) replaces the 'spätlese' category. Grüner Veltliner is subject to DACs in Weinviertel, Kremstal, Kamptal, and the tiny Traisental. Salomon points out that the advantage of the new system is that it is also a means of 'moving away from the German sugar pyramid', whereby the best wine is always the sweetest. Or as Ludwig Hiedler puts it, 'The Kamptal establishes itself in the eyes of the consumer as a top-quality wine ➤



Above: Berthold Salomon says the DAC system is a good way of moving away from the 'German sugar pyramid', where the sweetest wine is always seen as the best

region for Grüner Veltliner and Riesling.'

The move towards 'top-of-the-range' or 'reserve' wines means that the mix of small oak barrels and Veltliner has reared its head once again when most of us had heaved a sigh of relief at its passing. In the early 1990s some growers experimented with oak with their high-strength *Alte Reben* (old vine) wines – notably Fred Loimer, who still uses wood but has abandoned new oak: 'I think Grüner can handle a little oak and maybe a bit more acacia flavour... but the goal in making ripe, full-bodied Grüner Veltliner is a slight oxidation, to give more character.' Bründlmayer has also largely gone over to acacia.

For some producers, the barrique has appeal, as oaky wines apparently justify a higher price. But most Veltliner producers had abandoned the use of small oak by the end of the 1990s: Veltliner is an aromatic variety and oak tends to mask aromas. Other growers turned to large oak casks where a slight oxidation fills out the flavour without adding vanillin notes.

For most people, DACs or no DACs, it is business as usual. Former marketing director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board Thomas Klinger, who now represents Willi Bründlmayer, reports: 'Our wines won't change for the DAC; most of the Grüns and Rieslings will be DAC and DAC reserve, and this should be the case for all

'Sweet Grüner Veltliner wines can be delicious at beerenauslese level and above'

the top producers of the Danube region.'

In some instances the move towards a 'reserve' wine has led to an idiosyncratic range of 'premium' wines. One has only to think of Wagram's Bernhard Ott, whose concentrated, almost oily wines are some of the most 'baroque' around. Ott, however, remains unique in his cult of personality: his wines are made in his own image.

A few growers make sweet Veltliners when climatic conditions allow. These can be delicious at beerenauslese level and above. And an eiswein from a top grower such as Rudolf Rabl can be sensational. Veltliner has been discredited as a semi-sweet wine, however. Maybe that smacks too much of the bad old days, before Grüner Veltliner joined the world's great wine club.

Giles MacDonogh is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Austria

A TASTE OF GREATNESS

FX PICHER, KELLERBERG SMARAGD 2006
Pale gold. Lychees, pineapples and honey on the nose; creamy honey and nougat on the palate. The very model of baroque style Grüner Veltliner. **£35; Rae**

FRANZ HIRTZBERGER, AXPOINT SMARAGD 2007
Pineapples, apricots, some botrytis character. Hirtzberger's Honivogl is the yardstick by which all GV is measured. **£24; Cfo**

MALAT, DAS BESTE 2007
'The beast' smells of rosewater; on the palate there is something savoury. The wine is massive and ornate; a real classic of the genre. **NA/UK www.malat.at**

JAMEK, ACHLEITEN SMARAGD 2007
Classic pineapple and honey nose of really ripe GV. This is a great return to form after 10 years in the cold following Josef Jamek's retirement. Intense, long, lingering finish. **£19.75; NDW, Ult**



BRUNDTMAYER, ALTE REBEN 2007
The wine that started the ball rolling. It has become a model of elegance – big, ripe fruit concealing its quiet power. The hand of the master. **£26; RdW**

BERNARD OTT, RESERVE 2006
Nutty, honeyed and impressively long. A mite less oily in style than some of Ott's wines. **£19.90; Sav**

HIEDLER, NOVEMBERLESE 2007
Comes from four sites. Gives the impression of sweetness and generally has a touch of botrytis. Excellent structure. This one can wait a couple of years. **£13.65 (2006); BBR**

SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG, KAMMERNER LAMM 2007
Very exciting nose; on the palate, the fruit is intense and long. This also has a baroque complexity and does not shrink from power. **£24; Cfo**

NEUMAYER, DER WEIN VOM STEIN 2007
Massive nose of roses, with huge persistence. Luscious pears; grip. A first-class wine. **£19.75; WKe**

RUDI PICHLER, WOSENDORFER HOCHRAIN SMARAGD 2007
Very tight structure, not ready yet. One feels the haunting presence of the fruit for all that. **£25.10; Gau**



PRAGER, HINTER DER BURG SMARAGD 2007
Dried apricots, hay. Excellent length, with a twist of pepper on the finish. **£18.40, MHI**

KNOLL, RIED LOIBENBERG SMARAGD 2007
Excellent structure that conceals an impressive power. Has been slow to come round. **£25.25–£26; Aph, RdW, Rae**

SALOMON, VON STEIN RESERVE, KREMSTAL DAC 2007
Something of the baroque here, with lashings of fruit. **£21.95; L&S**



STIFT GÖTTWEIG, GOTTSHELLE RESERVE, KREMSTAL DAC 2007
Masculine style – loess soil – made from shrivelled berries. Fleshy palate, and power on the finish. **£16.42–£17.49; Loe, WLI**

NIKOLAIHOF, IM WEINGEBIRGE SMARAGD 2006
Quite austere as usual, not typical Veltliner. Pretty nose, lovely length, above all pretty. **£26–£27.60; Aph, Rae**

NIGL, PRIVAT, KREMSTAL DAC 2007
Apparently harvested later, and from the oldest vines in Piri; a savoury character, very ripe, lingers at the end. **£19.53 (sold out); Gau, NDW, Ult**

PFÄFFL, HAIDVIERTEL, WEINVIERTEL DAC 2007
Ripe pineapple nose, tightly wrought as ever from Pfaffl, but it is an obvious GV. Could loosen up over the next 12 months. **NA/UK www.pfaffl.at**

HÖGL, RIEDEN CUVEE 2007
Very concentrated and brim full of spice. Högl remains one of the best producers of the variety. **NA/UK www.weingut-hoegl.at**

PHOTOGRAPHS: ÖWMA

For full details of UK stockist codes, see p109 of the main issue

GRÜNER IN ITS ELEMENT By Ch'ng Poh Tiong

Last May, 110 people spent three days pairing Chinese, Indian and Japanese foods with wines including Champagne, Sancerre, Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Bordeaux, Shiraz and Grüner Veltliner. The latter as one of the most adaptable, versatile and accomplished matches tested.

Over four panel discussions, two lunches and two dinners, participants in the inaugural International Congress of Chinese Cuisine & Wine discovered the varied properties and complex personality of Grüner Veltliner. When young, fresh and unoaked, it possesses characteristics that hint at Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Chablis, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc. The aroma and palate conjure up apples, citrus, stone fruits, floral notes, spice and minerality.

Young Grüner Veltliners are vivacious aperitifs, and a can't-put-down food match with tempura, dim sum, pakora and sushi. Although engaging when young, it is the magic of time in bottle that transforms Grüner Veltliner from a good wine into a great wine. There have been blind tastings conducted around the world where Grüner Veltliner has knocked the socks off Chardonnay.

Wonderful as those results may be for producers, the discovery that Grüner is an excellent match for Chinese favourites such as Lo-Han Vegetarian dish, Sichuan Ma La Beef, Cantonese Roast Chicken and Roast Pigeon and Hakka Mei Chye Pork Belly may, in the long term, have more practical benefits.

Evolved, aged and mature Grüner Veltliners are commanding white wines. Although the original youthful acidity has calmed down, the wines maintain their freshness. As a result, old Grüner Veltliners are not flabby. Just as well – flabbiness is a disaster when putting wine and food together.

Even as Grüner Veltliner heaps on secondary and tertiary flavours, the wine doesn't fall apart or disintegrate because of the stamina of the acidity. Instead, aroma, fruit and structure are lifted to a new pitch. Great Grüner Veltliners have a tantalising viscosity. Properly contoured, this sumptuous



quality is disarming. To drink such a wine on its own may be a trifle rich. With food, such velvety Grüner Veltliners are devastating.

Fatty toro or belly tuna is tricky to pair with wine. Indeed, it is massively disagreeable with astringent, high-acid wines. When such scrawny whites encounter big-time Omega 3 fish fat, there's a clash of 'metallic' proportions. One of the best pairings for toro tuna is a rich, ripe, creamy Grüner Veltliner. Fat and flesh wrap round each other like long-lost lovers. Tandoori lamb will

also thank you for the match. So too – but making sure it is not overly sweet – Dongpo Rou ('Rou' means meat, which is pork here). This was the favourite of, and named for, Su Shi (1037–1101 AD) or Su Dongpo, one of China's most beloved poets, painters and calligraphers. Su loved drinking as much as he enjoyed eating and would no doubt have approved of a wine with the effortless charms of Grüner Veltliner.

Even as Grüner Veltliner heaps on secondary and tertiary flavours, the wine doesn't fall apart or disintegrate because of the stamina of the acidity. Instead, aroma, fruit and structure are lifted to a new pitch. Great Grüner Veltliners have a tantalising viscosity. Properly contoured, this sumptuous

Ch'ng Poh Tiong is the organiser of the International Congress of Chinese Cuisine and Wine

ELIXIR OF LIFE

*Austria producers mourned the loss of sweet wine genius Alois Kracher in 2007, but their efforts are ensuring his work lives on in some truly stunning stickies, says **STEPHEN BROOK***



AUSTRIA IS ONE of the few wine countries awash with sweet wines. In Sauternes and the Loire, such wines are common enough, but it can be a struggle to produce them: the climate there is often too capricious, especially since the great sweet wines of France depend on the timely arrival of noble rot (botrytis), which only flourishes when mornings are damp or foggy and afternoons sunny. In Germany, sweet wine is a luxury item, at least in the classic Riesling zones, where only the most fanatical harvesting methods will yield a few hundred litres of Beerenauslese (BA) or Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA). Not so in eastern Austria...

An hour's drive from Vienna lies a large, shallow, reed-fringed lake: the Neusiedlersee. Vines are planted close to it, as well as on hillsides overlooking it. The former are very susceptible to noble rot, stimulated by the frequency of autumnal fogs. Hundreds of hectares of these low-lying vineyards routinely produce large quantities of sweet wine from Welschriesling, Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Chardonnay, Bouvier (a local speciality), Scheurebe (often known locally as Sämling 88), Traminer, Muskat Ottonel and, occasionally, Riesling.

Not all these wines are of exceptional quality. Indeed, many of them are bland and mediocre. To make a great sweet wine in Austria is no easier than anywhere else: yields must be low, you need the correct balance of sugar and acidity, selection is



ABOVE: the wines of Kurt Feiler of Weingut Feiler-Artinger (top) are intensely sweet, as is the TBA from Weingut Tinhof, one of many top producers in Burgenland

essential to keep grapes trashed by black rot out of the presses, and you need to vinify with care to avoid excessive volatile acidity. Happily, a number of sweet wine specialists in the area have mastered the techniques, and even wineries better known for dry wines, such as Kollwenz or Velich, can effortlessly produce fine sweet wines when conditions are right.

Sweet wine production is not restricted to the Neusiedlersee. The Gumpoldskirchen area south of Vienna became known for its heavy but undoubtedly opulent sweet wines from the Rotgipfler and Zierfandler varieties. Although less common than they used to be – since the primary market is for dry white wines – BAs and TBAs are

still made in outstanding vintages. The classic white wine regions along the Danube – Wachau, Kremstal, Kamptal – can also produce exceptional stickies, as can southerly Styria. But in those regions, too, most growers focus on dry wines. In the northerly Weinviertel, colder autumns can deliver some exceptional Eiswein, which is less common, and rarely as fine, around the balmier Neusiedlersee. Eiswein fans can also find the style in Wagram.

It took guts to make sweet wine the country's calling card in the years that followed the Austrian wine scandal (see p3). But that is precisely what the late Alois Kracher did. His approach was the exact opposite of what one might have expected from a sweet wine producer at that time. Instead of timidly suggesting his wines might be of interest, he declared brazenly that they were among the pinnacles of the genre. With heroic nerve, he staged

'Even wineries better known for dry wines effortlessly produce fine sweet wines'

high-profile international blind tastings of his wines alongside Château d'Yquem and other benchmark sweet wines. The purpose was not to assert that his wines were 'better' than top Sauternes, but to demonstrate that they deserved to be taken just as seriously.

RISING PROFILE

His strategy worked. Writers and sommeliers lured to his events by the prospect of a few vintages of Yquem came away dazzled. It helped that Kracher was not just an inspired strategist but a great winemaker. Instead of choosing between 'classic' vinification and ageing in neutral tanks and 'modern' ageing, Yquem-style, in new oak, he did both, depending on the fruit. From the outset he created two equally valid lines. In any case, his use of new oak was so subtle that it was rarely apparent in the wines. He was more interested in the contrast between a totally reductive style, with minimal exposure to oxygen, and a style that showed the influence of the very gradual oxidation that results from barrel ageing.

At the same time another clever young man, Willi Opitz, was also making a name for himself. His wines, though not as consistent or majestic as Kracher's, were ➤

very good, but he had a rare gift for marketing. Within a few years Opitz and his wines were everywhere. If Kracher was a classicist, Opitz is an exponent of the baroque, delighting in different styles and techniques, and rejoicing in jazzy labels. One of his wines, wittily called Opitz One, drew writs from lawyers in the Napa Valley. Characteristically, Willi Opitz made the most of the ensuing publicity.

Kracher and Opitz came from the east side of the Neusiedlersee. On the western side, around Rust, the sweet wines can be very different, as the climate is cooler and the soils different. The eastern wines are similar to those from Germany, with

‘Noble sweet wines can crop up just about anywhere in Austria’

moderate alcohol, high residual sugar and good balancing acidity. The Rust speciality is Ausbruch, which used to be closer to Tokaj in style than to German TBA. Until 1918, most of the Burgenland had been part of Hungary, so eastern influences are not surprising. Traditional Ausbruch wines were higher in alcohol and tended to be less sweet; sometimes they had a slight oxidative tone, which, if not too blatant, gave them more complexity.

Today, traditional Ruster Ausbruch is harder to find. Wines such as the Essenz from Feiler-Artinger are intensely sweet and hard to differentiate in style from, say, TBAs from Kracher or Helmut Lang. Kurt Feiler explains: ‘Ausbruch has become sweeter and more fruit-driven, as these are the styles that find most favour with



ABOVE: Hans and Anitta Nittnaus in their Burgenland vineyard **BOTTOM LEFT: winemaker Ernst Triebsaumer** **TOP RIGHT: botrytis-affected Muskat Ottonel grapes**

critics and consumers.’ Although slightly different rules of production apply to Ausbruch, they are rarely observed in practice, and it would take a very acute palate to pick it out in a blind tasting of Neusiedlersee sweet wines. Some Ruster Ausbruch is made from varieties such as Furmint, and Heidi Schröck’s ‘Turner’ is pure Furmint. Hence Ruster Ausbruch covers a wide spectrum.

Neusiedlersee’s sweet wine specialists make other styles too. ‘Strohwein’ is none other than straw wine, made by drying the

grapes to concentrate the sugars further before pressing and fermentation. Weingut Juris is one of the few practitioners. Opitz and Gerhard Nekowitsch also make ‘Schilfwein’, after drying the grapes on reed mats for eight weeks. Opitz places plastic tunnels over the reeds to form a wind tunnel to help the drying process. Both producers also make sweet wines from red grapes such as Blaufränkisch and Zweigelt, even Pinot Noir, though I find they can be cloying and lack the bracing acidity of the classic varieties.

GREAT VALUE

You can still find mediocre sweet wine around the Neusiedlersee, especially in years when botrytis is abundant. But a handful of producers stand out for the excellence of their wines and the commitment they show to the style. Although far from cheap, economies of scale mean they are considerably less expensive than their German counterparts. If the top TBAs have soared in price, BAs remain relative bargains, and while they have less intensity of flavour, can give just as much pleasure as the TBAs.

Gerhard Kracher, who now runs the winery in place of his late father, says there is a growing interest within the region in producing sweet wines of high quality:



‘There’s an international demand for these wines, so one way for Burgenland producers to break into the international market is to make wines in this style.’ He reports that the US is still the largest importer of his wines, but demand is also growing in Asia, Russia and Switzerland.

There is no shortage of producers at the top of their game, including the following reliable names: in Rust and neighbouring villages, Feiler-Artinger, Heidi Schröck, Kollwentz, Wenzel, Tinhof, Esterházy and Ernst Triebsaumer; on the eastern side of the lake, Hans Lang, Anita and Hans Nittnaus, Hans Tschida (Angerhof), Münzenrieder and Martin Haider. In the Weinviertel, meanwhile, Weinrieder is a master of Eiswein. Indeed, noble sweet wines can crop up just about anywhere in Austria – even in the Wachau when botrytis attacks the grapes – but not with the regularity and consistency of the Burgenland region.

Yet despite the undeniable quality of many of the wines, they are admired more than consumed. At Austria’s best-known restaurant, the Steirereck (see p18), such wines are always poured with dessert courses in wine-inclusive menus, but few customers dining à la carte would order a bottle, according to chef Heinz Reitbauer.

It’s the wines with the highest residual sugar and greatest intensity of flavour that win the most praise, but such wines can only be consumed in small quantities, which can diminish their utility as food wines. Ideal when poured by the glass in top restaurants, they sadly lack a regular place in the cellar or family dining table.

Although some of the wines command very high prices, others compare favourably with their German equivalents. Lovers of this style of wine are also fortunate in that most recent vintages since 2004 have produced excellent quality, although the 2005 vintage was small. **D**

Stephen Brook is a wine journalist, author and Decanter contributing editor

PHOTOGRAPHS: HERBERT LEHMANN

THE SWEETEST THINGS (prices per half-bottle)



FEILER-ARTINGER, RUSTER AUSBRUCH ESSENZ 2006 ★★★★★
Astonishing wine with intensely honeyed aromas and an unctuous texture. Despite 430g of residual sugar, it is not at all cloying. Very long. Drink 2010–2030. **£24.50; Tan**

HAIDER, CHARDONNAY TBA 2006 ★★★★★
Apricot, mango and honey nose. Silky and intense, with lovely acidity and texture, apricot and pineapple. Delicious. Very long. Drink 2010–2025. **N/A UK; www.weinguthaider.at**

KRACHER, TBA No 6 NOUVELLE VAGUE 14 (CHARDONNAY/WELSCHRIESLING) 2006 ★★★★★
Discreetly oaky nose, with candied lemon rind. Lush, creamy apricot and citrus, with no trace of heaviness. Balanced, lively and long. Drink now–2025. **£33.95; You**

RUDOLF RABL, RIESLING TBA 2006 ★★★★★
Rare TBA from the Kamptal, with lovely aromas of apples and candied pineapple. Lean, very concentrated and vivacious, with excellent drive and length. Drink 2010–2020. **£38; Hal**

SATTLERHOF, SAUVIGNON BLANC ‘KRANACHBERG’ TBA 2007 ★★★★★
From Styria, a brilliant wine confected with superb honeyed aromas. Creamy, velvety, very concentrated, thickly textured but not heavy thanks to racy acidity. Very long. Drink 2010–2025. **N/A UK; www.sattlerhof.at**

TSCHIDA/ANGERHOF, SCHEUREBE TBA 2005 ★★★★★
Lean, complex nose with aromas of apricot, oranges and mint. Rich, suave, creamy and opulent. Tangy, persistent and well balanced. Drink now–2020. **N/A UK; www.angerhof-tschida.at**



KRACHER, BA (CHARDONNAY/WELSCHRIESLING) 2006 ★★★★★
Bracing lemon-curd nose. Silky and

concentrated, with ripe citrus fruit, fine acidity and a long, tangy finish. Drink now–2018. **£13.70; You**

HELMUT LANG, SCHEUREBE TBA 1995 ★★★★★
Splendid burnished nose, hefty botrytis, marmalade. Very rich and sweet, with a voluptuous, full-bodied, powerful botrytis tone. Marmalade and barley sugar, packed with flavour. Barley sugar finish. Long. Drink now–2015. **N/A UK; +43 2175 2923**



HANS & ANITA NITNAUS, CUVÉE TBA 2005 ★★★★★
A complex blend with peaches and tropical fruit aromas. Very fresh, lively and concentrated, with passion fruit, quince and dried fruits on the long finish. Drink now–2020. **£18.95; L&S**

SCHLOSS HALBTURN, GRAND VIN TBA 2002 ★★★★★
A very sweet but lean, silky and precise blend of Chardonnay, Sauvignon and Welschriesling. Lacy and pineapple on the long finish. Drink now–2020. **POA; Coe**

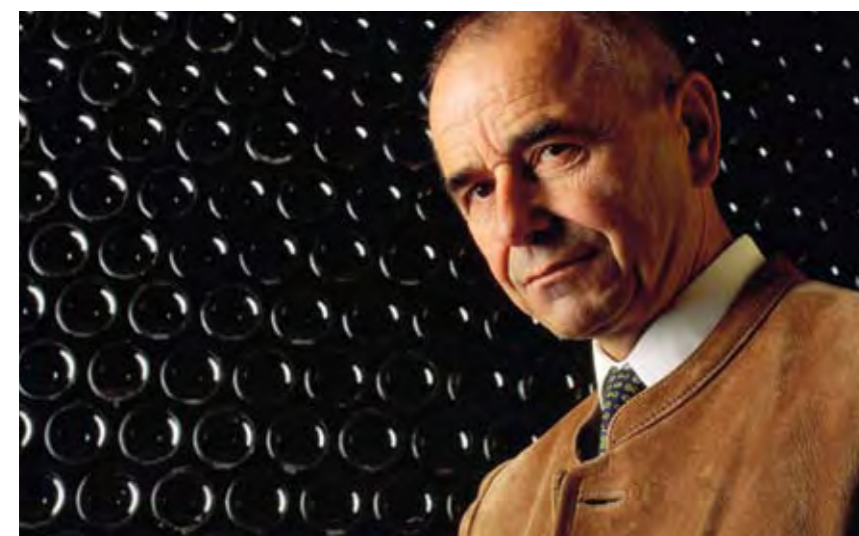
SCHRÖCK, AUSBRUCH ‘AUF DEN FLÜGELN DER MORGENRÖTE’ 2006 ★★★★★
Firm, rich, dried-apricot nose. Rich, peachy, full-bodied, creamy and voluptuous, quite exotic. Very long. Drink now–2020. **N/A UK; www.heidi-schroeck.com**



FEILER-ARTINGER, BEERENAUSLESE 2007 ★★★★★
Honeyed nose, oranges and peaches. Intense, tangy, with mandarin and pineapple fruit and good length. Drink now–2015. **£9.49; Wai**

OPITZ, PINOT GRIS TBA 2006 ★★★★★
Honey and passion fruit on the nose. Creamy, delicate, with fine acidity, yet one-dimensional. Drink now–2015. **£48.19; T&W**

For full UK stockist details, see p109 of the main issue



A WINE TO REMEMBER

Leading wine writers, merchants and sommeliers recall the most unforgettable Austrian wine they've ever tasted and tell us what made it so special

Lance Foyster MW

OF AUSTRIAN SPECIALIST CLARKE FOYSTER



The precise details are probably buried in a notebook somewhere, but it was a mid-1980s **NIKOLAIHOF RIESLING** from Wachau. It was memorable for the wine, of course, but mostly for being my first taste of Austria, and for the place and company I drank it in: Mosel, Germany, with an open-minded producer and wine writer.

'It was served by Ernst Loosen and [German wine authority] Stuart Piggott in Bernkastel, when I visited to taste the 1990 Mosel vintage. After a day tasting off-

dry German Riesling, my hosts concluded that we needed a change, and a dry Riesling was served blind. It made an enormous impression: the wine contained all the character I associate with Riesling, and so much more: the weight, richness, fat and spice added new dimensions to my idea of Riesling. The structure, balance and elegance of the wine stayed with me for years before I made my first serious trip to Austria.

'It was all the more memorable for Stuart and Ernie's agreement that the Wachau, at that time, was the source of the world's best dry Rieslings. This struck me as impressively open-minded, given Ernie's pride in German Riesling and his reputation for his own excellent wines. I reminded him of this a couple of years ago, and he denied having said it. Upon reflection, though, he concluded, "Yes, in 1990, maybe. Now Germany makes the best!"

Jancis Robinson MW

WINE CRITIC, AUTHOR AND DECANTER WOMAN OF THE YEAR 1999

'I still remember clearly the first range of sweet Kracher wines I tasted in the late 1980s. I had no idea how good they could be and devoted a *Wine Spectator* column I then wrote to them. We made sure we included Alois Kracher in our BBC TV series *Jancis*

Robinson's Wine Course, but unfortunately the cameraman was having a strop when the time came to film the truckload of botrytised grapes that had just been harvested so we missed the best image of all.'

Giles MacDonogh

DECANTER WORLD WINE AWARDS REGIONAL CHAIR FOR AUSTRIA



'The pleasures of Austrian wine are intimately bound up with place, and the unforgettable experiences I have

had in the country itself. One of these was a visit to Erwin Retzl's now rather overlooked Schwedenkeller with the authority Walter Kutscher, where we tasted wines dating back to 1949. The cellar was all the more remarkable for having resisted the thirsty Russians, who drank Lower Austria dry from 1945 to 1955.

'If I had to choose a single experience, however, it would be sitting on the terrace of Josef Jamek's restaurant on the Danube at Joching and enjoying the **1976 RIESLING SPÄTLESE**, served up by the dour figure who invented Wachau wine. I can still remember the smell of roses, nuts and whipped cream.'



James Halliday

AUSTRALIAN WINE CRITIC, AUTHOR AND JUDGE

'In June 2004 I tasted seven Grüner Veltliners from seven decades, starting with the 1990s and finishing with the 1930s. It was held at the Loisium Museum in Langenlois, and the wines had come direct from the seven different producers' cellars. The oldest wine wasn't the best (that was a 1962 Leithner), but it was the most memorable, because it came from my birth year. It was a **1938 HAIMERL** – slightly high acidity, but still a star-bright green-yellow, and displaying a strongly varietal nose.'



Wolfgang Puck

AWARD-WINNING, US-BASED AUSTRIAN CHEF AND RESTAURATEUR

'It has to be the **FX Pichler Grüner Veltliner Smaragd 'M'**. I tasted this with the legendary journalist Johnny Apple at Chinois on Main, and we enjoyed it with the Shanghai Lobster Risotto. The combination was amazing – it was like two superstars in love.'



Jens Priewe

GERMAN WINE WRITER

'One of the most unforgettable was Manfred Tement's

1997 SAUVIGNON BLANC GRASSNITZBERG. Tement himself poured it during a visit to his Styria winery in 2005, and we tasted it blind. Usually it's easy to distinguish between Sauvignon and Chardonnay, but on this occasion I couldn't. It seems that after a couple of years terroir is stronger than grape variety. It was absolutely not pungent but big and mellow with tropical fruit and lots of mineral flavours – a great wine indeed.'



Darrel Joseph

WINE JOURNALIST SPECIALISING IN AUSTRIA AND CENTRAL & EASTERN EUROPE

'One that stands out is a **GRÜNER VELTLINER EISWEIN 2002** from **WIMMER-CZERNY**. Winemaker Hans Czerny poured it for me in Vienna five years ago. The pepperiness, grapefruit, pineapple and orange flavours carried by the acidity-sweetness combination was electrifying. I tasted it again a few months later, and gave it a five-star rating for *Decanter*.'



Vincent Gasnier

MASTER SOMMELIER AND WINE AUTHOR

'In 1997, just arrived in England – and still thinking only France could produce the best sweet wine – I went to the Austrian stand at the London Wine Trade Fair. Trevor Hughes from T&W Wines asked me to taste the **1992 TROCKENBEERNAUSELE** by **WILLI OPITZ**, then a piece of runny blue cheese, and then try the desert wine again.

The interaction of flavours was so awesome, I can still taste it now. The sweet wine counterbalanced the strong flavours of the cheese, and brought a refreshing touch. The flavour combination was elegant harmony.'

PHOTOGRAPH: ALEX BERLINER; HANS STRAND



Stephen Brook

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR TO DECANTER

'It has to be the **1990 DÜRNSTEINER KELLERBERG SMARAGD RIESLING** from **FX PICHLER**, which I first tasted

in 1991. This wine demonstrated beyond all doubt that the Wachau was producing some of the finest white wines in the world – it had an intense minerality on the nose and palate that was hard to match. The sumptuous apricot fruit, pungency, concentration and drive left an indelible impression.'



Andreas Larsson

MULTI-AWARD WINNING SOMMELIER, INCLUDING 2007 BEST SOMMELIER IN THE WORLD, HEAD SOMMELIER AT PM & VÄNNER IN SWEDEN

'My unforgettable Austrian wine moment was at a private dinner with sommelier colleagues in Stockholm – we had a blind flight of Rieslings and my contribution was the **1973 ZÖBINGER HEILIGENSTEIN** from Bründlmayer. It stood out as the most vibrant, complex and harmonious of all among the top names from Alsace and Germany. Most of the other wines were 20–25 years younger but not nearly as fresh. A great wine from a magical site.'

A CHEF'S BEST FRIEND

Star US chef and self-confessed Austrian wine nut Charlie Trotter tells **AMY WISLOCKI** why the wines make such perfect food partners

CHARLIE TROTTER ISN'T your average chef. Certainly the restaurateur behind the eponymous Chicago restaurant is more famous than most – US foodies who haven't eaten in one of his restaurants can acquaint themselves with his cuisine through a wealth of books. Also unusual is his route into cooking. Entirely self-taught, he became passionate about food while sharing a room at college with an avid cook. But perhaps the quality that distinguishes Trotter most from his peers is his genuine and deeply rooted love of wine, and the prominent role wine plays in his restaurants.

Trotter will happily tweak a dish to complement a wine selection; rare in top restaurants, where wine invariably plays second fiddle to the food. 'Wine in the bottle can't be altered, but food can always be adjusted,' he says on the subject of food and wine pairing.



Recently, Trotter has been turning particularly to Austrian wines – especially the whites – again and again to complement his cuisine, which he describes as 'light in style, with an Asian minimalism but rooted in Western European traditions'. So what makes Austrian wine so food friendly? 'They tend to be lower-alcohol wines, with medium acidity and medium body, so they work fantastically with many of our dishes, which don't use a lot of fat and rely strongly on vegetable and seafood components,' Trotter explains. 'For instance, we might serve lightly cooked seafood and vegetables with slight caramelisation – fennel perhaps, or maybe mushrooms. A Grüner Veltliner would be heavenly paired with a dish like this.'

But do most customers naturally gravitate towards Grüner or do they need some gentle nudging? 'I'd say about 20% know their way around a wine list, but

'We recommend Austrian Rieslings more often than German ones – they are more nuanced'

most guests are open minded. I'd estimate that half of all diners don't even look at the menu – they just ask what we recommend, and are happy to do the same with the wine. When introducing Grüner to them, we might say that anyone who loves Sauvignon Blanc but likes slightly more tropical fruit overtones will love it.'

And where does Austrian Riesling fit in the picture? 'We recommend these more often than German Rieslings, as they seem to be more nuanced and slightly less sweet. While Grüner works fantastically with lighter dishes, Riesling steps in with richer dishes with more fat, such as salmon, or perhaps turbot.'

Even with dessert, Austria delivers the goods, says Trotter. 'Austrian sweet wines tend to be a little leaner than many dessert wines, and so are perfect for lighter desserts. If Yquem is the benchmark – the big California Chardonnay of dessert wines – Austrian sweet wines offer more subtlety and nuance. We often incorporate vegetable notes into our desserts, and wines like those from Kracher would work a treat with some of these – lightly caramelised fennel ice cream in a cannoli tube of pastry, with caramelised pistachio

PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY CHARLIE TROTTER



TROTTER'S MOREL MUSHROOMS, WHITE ASPARAGUS AND BRAISED LEEKS

Created by Charlie Trotter as a match for Grüner Veltliner

SERVES 4

250g of fresh morel mushrooms

8 spears of white asparagus

4 leeks of medium thickness

1 bunch of spring onions

500ml of light chicken stock

4 sprigs of thyme

100ml of extra virgin olive oil

1 bunch of chives

50g of mixed baby salad greens

50ml of water

Sea salt

White pepper

METHOD

1. Clean morel mushrooms using a delicate brush to remove sand and debris. Set aside.

2. Remove woody bottoms of the asparagus with a knife, leaving a 10cm–15cm stalk. Using a vegetable peeler, remove the first layer of skin to reveal the silky inner portion. Set aside.

3. Trim leeks by removing all green tops as well as the root section. Wash thoroughly and dry.

4. In a small saucepan, add 20ml of olive oil and place over a medium heat. Add the leeks and brown on all sides. Deglaze the pan with half of the chicken stock and add the thyme. Cook until tender to the knife, then remove the lid add the asparagus and reduce the liquid until it has reached the consistency of a sauce. Set aside.

5. In a pan, sauté morels in 20ml of olive oil. Season with salt and pepper. Deglaze the pan when mushrooms are tender. Reduce until liquid becomes emulsified with 20ml of olive oil. Adjust seasoning and add chopped chives.

6. Blanch spring onions in boiling, lightly salted water until tender. Place blanched spring onions into a blender with water and the remaining olive oil. Blend until smooth.

7. Place a few spoons of spring onion sauce around a serving plate. Place two pieces of asparagus along with one leek over the sauce. Evenly disperse morel mushrooms around the plate.

8. Sprinkle baby greens over the plate.

9. Evenly distribute the remaining sauces using the pan sauces from the mushrooms and leeks.

and dried fruit folded in.' (Book me that ticket to Chicago now.) And the key to all of it, explains Trotter, is balance. Successful food and wine pairing means considering the dish in its entirety – not just its main components, but the cooking technique as well as the herbs and spices used.

In a sea of overbearing wines, and at a time when many diners are shunning rich

and fussy dishes in favour of a lighter style of cuisine, Austrian wines have a strong hand to play. It will be thanks to the enthusiasm of chefs like Charlie Trotter that Grüner Veltliner becomes as much a fixture on wine lists as Sauvignon Blanc. **D**

For more on Charlie Trotter's restaurants and books, visit www.charlietrotters.com

GOURMET HEAVEN

Visitors to Austria will find high quality – and sometimes bizarre – places to dine, not only in its capital but in the wine regions beyond says **STEPHEN BROOK**, between mouthfuls



AUSTRIANS LOVE TO EAT. Luckily for them, they have many opportunities to graze between meals at the *Konditoreien* (cake shops), sausage stands and restaurants specialising in light offal snacks for elevenses. They like some heft to their food too: schnitzels and trout that overflow the plate; dark, chewy venison stews; and peasant fare such as liver dumplings, and pasta squares with cabbage. This kind of cooking – and its variety is almost infinite given Austria's distant but not forgotten imperial past – still dominates the rural *gasthaus* and the urban *lokal* or *beisl* (colloquial terms for an informal neighbourhood restaurant). Nor is it to be dismissed, as it is usually tasty, inexpensive and filling.

Since the late 1980s, however, Austria has proved no slouch in the fine dining stakes, its best chefs combining technical sophistication with a fidelity to local ingredients and traditions. The best-known restaurant in the country has long been the **STEIRERECK**, which offers superb cooking and all the frills and accessories, such as a sumptuous bread trolley, a monumental wine list, schnapps and good cigars. Some years ago it moved from its original location to a palatial building within the Stadtpark, Vienna's city park which fringes the Ringstrasse. The chef, Heinz Reitbauer, is the son of the founding chef, and his wife presides over the spacious dining room. Heinz junior has retained his father's respect for the family's Styrian roots, but the cooking, for better or worse, shows more technical wizardry than when I first dined here 20 years ago.

Dishes are smaller now but exquisitely composed; for example, rolled artichoke leaves poached in white wine, topped with herbs and tiny cubes of sautéed artichoke. Smoked Alpine char (a fish related to salmon, with pale pink flesh) came coated with freeze-dried grated foie

green pepper. Everything is testimony to a kitchen that likes to experiment and refines its dishes to the utmost degree.

Such cooking doesn't come cheap, so it's useful to know of a good *beisl* or two for everyday meals. Vienna is packed with them, and few disappoint. One of my favourites is the vaulted **GMOAKELLER**, a former late-night watering hole on the opposite side of the Stadtpark from Steirereck. For €15 I tucked into a bowl of pumpkin soup, some tender fried liver with onions, and a glass of local Grüner Veltliner. The **GLACIS BEISL** is another dependable place, a useful lunch spot close to Vienna's Museum Quarter.

The middle ground is occupied by a wide range of restaurants. The former chef from the Steirereck, Helmut Oesterreicher, has set up shop in the **MAK**, Vienna's equivalent of London's V&A Museum, and in summer the museum garden is packed

gras (a touch borrowed from Barcelona's El Bulli), a dangerous but successful combination. Local eel is cooked in spiced pepper oil, served with chicory and a sweet red pepper stuffed with a ragout of shallots and peppers. Slivers of braised lamb's heart are simmered in red wine and garnished with anchovies and mushrooms. Dark, glutinous oxtail is tipped over ravioli-like pods made of turnip and

with diners. The menu is divided into traditional and modern dishes; service is swift and friendly, with prices to match. My *zander* (pike perch) came with a risotto speckled with sunflower seeds.

In complete contrast is **ZUM SCHWARZEN KAMEEL**, which has been in the city centre for centuries. There's a sandwich bar and patisserie, and a very old-fashioned but comfortable restaurant, serving traditional food discreetly spruced up for modern tastes. Chicken with *steinpilzen* (ceps) can be excellent, and meals usually end with the Kameel's latest pride and joy, tall tumblers filled with brightly coloured layers of fruit and mousses.

MRAZ & SOHN, outside the city centre beyond the Augarten, practises a more

'It makes sense to eat at winery restaurants where food is simple but well cooked'

innovative style. But yoking contrasting ingredients is not always a formula for success. My tom yam soup was fine without its superfluous peanut butter accompaniment; nor did my barbecued prawn need a garlic foam dissolving on top. The grated, frozen foie gras (El Bulli begat Steirereck begat Mraz) was coated over, of all things, Sachertorte crumbs. Yet the aioli soup with local snails, the kohlrabi with lentils, and a serving of halibut with



OPPOSITE PAGE: Red mullet at Meisl am Graben. **TOP LEFT:** petits fours at Zum Schwarzen Kameel. **ABOVE:** Steirereck remains Austria's best-known restaurant



its velouté offered in a shot glass were all good, as is the wine list, which features a selection of reasonably priced Austrian reds and whites.

Vienna's restaurants are in a state of transition. The luxurious Palais Coburg Hotel has closed its outstanding restaurant; the long-established Korso in the Bristol Hotel has lost its chef; and celebrity chef Tony Mörwald has closed his restaurant in the Hotel Ambassador. However, the sumptuous and very expensive **MEINL AM GRABEN**, right in the city centre, is still going strong – but beware some high wine prices.

Good cooking also thrives outside the capital. In the Wachau, **LANDHAUS BACHER** at Mautern has a fine reputation (and its wine list is sensational). But although it is comfortable and welcoming, I have always found the cooking inconsistent.

In this great wine region it makes sense to eat at winery restaurants, where the food is simple but usually well cooked and very reasonably priced. At the **LOIBNERHOF**, owned by the Knoll family, I tucked into crackling ravioli, a small bowl of *Beuschel* (sliced lung) with herbs, a fillet of pike with spinach, and sponge cake with plums and an apricot sauce. Best of all, you can drink 20-year-old Rieslings or Veltliners from Knoll at prices lower than recent vintages on other restaurants' wine lists. (Austrians drink their wines young, so mature vintages, when available, have very low mark-ups.)

In the woods south of Vienna, the luxurious **HANNER** hotel and restaurant was rebuilt in 2002. Chef Heinz Hanner presides over the restaurant. The wine list is superb, with vertical flights from top Austrian growers and first-rate French wines too. A starter of *Saibling* (char) came



ABOVE: Panoramic views from the Kreuzwirt terrace. **LEFT:** Heinz Hanner cooks at his eponymous restaurant. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Helmut Oesterreicher's restaurant in MAK

with a macaroon filled with marinated char. Chopped crayfish, wrapped in milk skin, was served with a silky leek purée. Even more exquisite were the feather-light gnocchi in a spinach velouté, topped with a translucent poached egg cooked at a low temperature for two hours; this in turn was topped with grated black truffles and a Parmesan foam.

The main course was hare: three nuggets of dark meat larded with truffle, and a rich, dense disc in the

'Austrians drink their wines young, so mature vintages have very low mark-ups'

shape of a hockey puck made from the braised legs cooked in their blood and topped with a little foie gras. The dessert



consisted of seven 'lozenges' of chocolate, from different sources and with cocoa content ranging from 36–100%; alongside each was a contrasting flavour element to be consumed with a bite of the chocolate. I can't say I adored the Maldon salt or wasabi combos, but the chocolates were delicious.

The Styrian wine region is deeply rural, and restaurants there have always focused on regional produce, such as pumpkin and its offshoots, hams and salamis, and cheeses. I had high hopes of the **KREUZWIRT** restaurant, which opened in 2006 to rave reviews. It is owned by the Polz family, who make some of Styria's best wines. Yet my lunch there, while copious, lacked focus, and the service could have been better.

The chef at Kreuzwirt, Gerhard Fuchs, made his reputation at another restaurant, the Saziani Stub'n, which was excellent when he was there. Hints of his talent showed through in the Kreuzwirt dishes – a nicely chilled cucumber vichyssoise, for instance, and monkfish cheeks with tiny tomato-filled ravioli and a bed of sweet, sliced veal tripe. What let the cooking down for me was a tendency to add pointless accompaniments, and a few bizarre combinations which included goat's cheese with baked potato, garnished with pesto and a dribble of tomato sauce.

The chef these days at **SAZIANI STUB'N** is Jürgen Kleinhappl, who relies heavily on local products and in winter produces delightful themes and variations based on root vegetables such as black salsify and

chervil root. This makes for a very harmonious form of cooking, with the salsify appearing as a purée and as chips to accompany a piece of catfish.

This is gentle, reflective cooking that doesn't try to dazzle but pleases with the skill with which the dishes are put together. With the coffee, Kleinhappl produced a platter of 20 or so petits fours, all different. Service here is excellent, and the wine list is strong on Austrian reds as well as Styrian whites.

The final wine region I visited was the Burgenland. In Neusiedl, the **NYIKOSPARK** has in recent years developed a good and deserved reputation, bolstered by the high-quality wine list. Sascha Huber was the chef on my last visit, in 2003, and is still there. Among the dishes he offered me this time were a goose liver terrine 'brûlée' with brioche and quince, a spicy Hungarian-style fish soup, tender hare on lentils, wild duck breast with loganberries and walnuts, suckling pig with crackling dumplings, and veal fillet with batons stuffed with blood pudding. Hearty stuff, but there were no false notes in Huber's cooking.

Finally, the **TAUBENKOBEL**, which over the past quarter-century has been going from strength to strength. Like the Steirereck, it's a family business: Walter Eselböck cooks with his son-in-law, while his charming wife, Eveline, presides over the dining room brigade. The wine list is excellent, but the Austrian wines, not to mention the swanky French and Italian offerings, are very expensive. The restaurant fills a series of low vaulted rooms, and the experience of eating there is intended to beguile. Letters spelling out my name had been placed beneath the tablecloth, giving the impression that the linen had been specially watermarked. A buttery brioche, served with the goose liver terrine, nodded from a thin wire attached to a metal base.

Presentation matters here. A delicious red pepper soup was accompanied by scarlet tortellini filled with curd cheese, and scarlet red-pepper-infused ravioli. Banana split arrived in the form of a white chocolate sphere slightly larger than a cricket ball. A hot chocolate sauce was poured over it, and this melted a groove around the ball so that it cracked open to spill the banana and coconut cream within. Sheer brilliance. And it tasted wonderful too. The cooking overall is less dainty than at the Steirereck, but no less skilful, and the cosy rooms of the Taubenkobel generate a convivial atmosphere more easily than the more formal Steirereck. Both richly deserve their two Michelin stars, as does Hanner. **D**

STILL HUNGRY? TRY THESE

VIENNA

WEIN & CO; www.weinco.at
Small chain of wine bars and wine shops. Bar snacks, and more formal dining at main Jasomirgottstrasse branch. About 40 wines, two-thirds Austrian, by the glass at shop prices.

WEIBEL'S WIRTSHAUS; www.weibel.at
Small, atmospheric *beisl* in the city centre with an outstanding wine list.

GOTTLESBRUNN (CARNUNTUM)

BITTERMANN VINARIUM; www.bittermann-vinarium.at
Wine shop and restaurant specialising in Carnuntum wines with very low mark-ups.

EHRENHAUSEN (STYRIA)

VINOFAKTUR; www.vinofaktur.at
Outlet for Polz empire and other wines, and for regional products. Regional snacks and wines available.

NEUSIEDL (BURGENLAND)

MOLE WEST; www.mole-west.at
Restaurant and bar complex jutting out into the Neusiedlersee. Snacks and meals served all day.

JOCHING (WACHAU)

JAMEK; www.weingut-jamek.at
Traditional cooking served at lunchtime in a cosy interior or the lovely summer garden. Only Jamek wines are available.

LANGENLOIS (KAMPTAL)

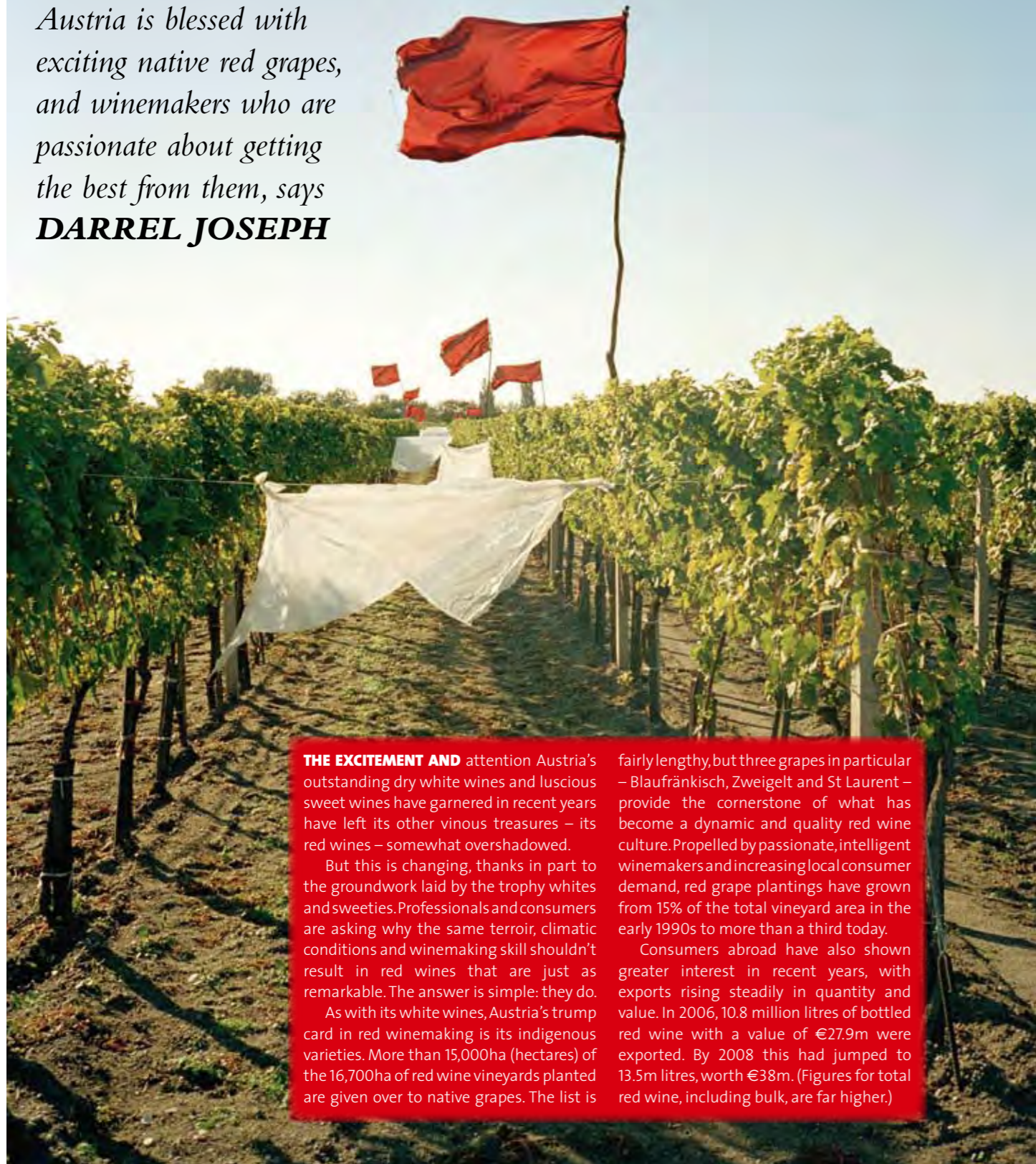
LOISIUM; www.loisiumhotel.at
Stunning modern hotel and spa, with a restaurant specialising in fresh local produce. Solid wine list at fair prices.

ADDRESS BOOK

STEIRERECK: www.steirereck.at
GMOAKELLER: www.gmoakeller.at
GLACIS BEISL: www.glacisbeisl.at
MAK: www.oesterreicherimmak.at
ZUM SCHWARZEN KAMEEL: www.kameel.at
MRAZ & SOHN: www.mraz-sohn.at
MEINL AM GRABEN: www.meinlamgraben.at
LANDHAUS BACHER: www.landhaus-bacher.at
LOIBNERHOF: www.loibnerhof.at
HANNER: www.hanner.cc
KREUZWIRT: www.gasthaus-kreuzwirt.at
SAZIANI STUB'N: www.neumeister.cc
NYIKOS PARK: www.nyikospark.at
TAUBENKOBEL: www.taubenkobel.at

REDS THAT SPEAK OF HOME

Austria is blessed with exciting native red grapes, and winemakers who are passionate about getting the best from them, says
DARREL JOSEPH



THE EXCITEMENT AND attention Austria's outstanding dry white wines and luscious sweet wines have garnered in recent years have left its other vinous treasures – its red wines – somewhat overshadowed.

But this is changing, thanks in part to the groundwork laid by the trophy whites and sweeties. Professionals and consumers are asking why the same terroir, climatic conditions and winemaking skill shouldn't result in red wines that are just as remarkable. The answer is simple: they do.

As with its white wines, Austria's trump card in red winemaking is its indigenous varieties. More than 15,000ha (hectares) of the 16,700ha of red wine vineyards planted are given over to native grapes. The list is

fairly lengthy, but three grapes in particular – Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt and St Laurent – provide the cornerstone of what has become a dynamic and quality red wine culture. Propelled by passionate, intelligent winemakers and increasing local consumer demand, red grape plantings have grown from 15% of the total vineyard area in the early 1990s to more than a third today.

Consumers abroad have also shown greater interest in recent years, with exports rising steadily in quantity and value. In 2006, 10.8 million litres of bottled red wine with a value of €27.9m were exported. By 2008 this had jumped to 13.5m litres, worth €38m. (Figures for total red wine, including bulk, are far higher.)

Austria's flagship red is Blaufränkisch (3,340ha and rising), coveted for its ripe, fresh fruitiness and juicy acidity, which enable it to be vinified in a range of styles: fresh, youthful and fruit-forward; firm and medium-bodied; or mature and complex, with layers of elegant spice and ripe fruit.

The most widely grown red grape is Zweigelt (6,500ha), a hardy, early-ripening variety that generally yields approachable young wines with fresh cherry fruit tones and soft tannins. With good crop thinning, its wines can deliver deeper body and fruit with a peppery edge and ageworthiness.

Streamlined elegance à la Pinot Noir is found with the temperamental St Laurent variety. It is a relative of Pinot Noir, so understatement and finesse are part of its character, as are sensitivity to frost and botrytis, and many other edgy traits. However, when coddled in the vineyard, it delivers wines that ooze juiciness and spice when young, and fruity depth with suave acidity as they age. Although grown in only 800ha of vineyards, it is one of the jewels in Austria's viticultural crown.

AGEING ABILITY

Whether produced as monovarietals or as cuvée blends – some with international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Syrah – the true beauty of these wines is extracted through

'The reds from top vintages are pointing to life spans of 10, 15 and 20 or more years'

the terroir and climate that nurture them, as well as their ageing ability. The high-quality reds from top vintages such as 1999, 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2007 are pointing to life spans of 10, 15 and 20 or more years.

The lion's share of Austrian red wines are born in the Burgenland region (pictured left), which lies along the country's eastern border and laps up the warm air wafting over from the Pannonian Plain. One of the first wine-growing areas exposed to that air is the Neusiedlersee, or Lake Neusiedl.

This sprawl of land with 8,000ha of vineyard wedged between the Hungarian border and the lake's eastern shore features numerous low-lying hill sites for which Austrian grape varieties seem tailor made. The loam and clay soils of the sunny, south-facing Ungerberg site, for example, bring a mineral elegance to Blaufränkisch,

while the pebbly stone terroir of the cooler Goldberg site is ideal for extracting spiciness from St Laurent. Some sites on Neusiedlersee yield excellent Pinot Noir, but the region's calling card is the Zweigelt red grape. Open, sunny areas dominated by cool, black earth soils, such as the Heideboden, are ideal for the early-ripening grape, which is a focus, along with Blaufränkisch, of the Pannobile movement. This grouping of local winemakers seeks to encapsulate the typicity of the area's terroir and grapes.

AUTHENTICITY

One of the most exciting developments in Austrian red is taking place across the lake in the Leithagebirge Hills in Neusiedlersee-Hügelland (4,000ha). The three-year-old Leithaberg movement comprises – for now – 14 producers whose goal is to maximise authentic expression of grape (mainly Blaufränkisch) from the area.

The Leithaberg region is truly exciting, with plenty of slate and shell limestone soils, and a big drop between day and night-time temperatures, which is optimal for mineral, platinum-edged, Burgundy-style wines. As producer Silvia Prieler says: 'Our region is not about oaky red wines with a marmalade character, and it's not about big power wines.' My bets are on for the creation of a DAC before too long. Other regions to look out for are Oggau and Ruster Berg, which share a terroir similar to that of Leithaberg.

Blaufränkisch is also the focal grape of Burgenland's two other wine-growing areas: Mittelburgenland (2,100ha) and Südburgenland (600ha). Südburgenland is known for its slate-rich Eisenberg Hill, from which finely woven and mineral Blaufränkisch wines are produced. And the Mittelburgenland uses this same grape to drive the area's status as a DAC appellation.

Given the grape's diverse expression via the heavy loam and sand soils, it is vinified as a DAC wine in two styles: the light, fruit-driven classic, with no detectable oak flavours; and the full-bodied Reserve, which allows new oak maturation and for the blackberry and cherry spice flavours to evolve slowly in the bottle.

The Carnuntum wine region (1,000ha) to the north of Burgenland is bursting with innovative winemakers who are taking Blaufränkisch and Zweigelt as well as international varieties such as Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon, to new heights. Using the climatic influences of Lake Neusiedl to the south and the Danube river to the north, and the pervasive Pannonian warmth, producers have created wine movements such as Rubin Carnuntum,

GUIDE TO RED REGIONS

NEUSIEDLERSEE

KEY VARIETIES: Zweigelt; Blaufränkisch; St Laurent
OTHER SPECIALITIES: Pinot Noir (also called Blauburgunder); Merlot; Cabernet Sauvignon
TOP PRODUCERS: Paul Achs; Judith Beck; Gesellmann & Hans; Schloss Halbturn; Gernot Heinrich; Juris (Stiegelmar); Sepp Moser; Hans & Anita Nittnaus; Gerhard Pittnauer; Josef & René Pöckl; Claus Preisinger; Erich Scheibelhofer; Johann Schwarz; Josef Umatham; Weingut Zantho

NEUSIEDLERSEE-HUGELLAND

KEY VARIETIES: Blaufränkisch; Zweigelt
OTHER SPECIALITIES: Pinot Noir; Merlot; Cabernet Sauvignon
TOP PRODUCERS: Birgit Braunstein; Esterházy; Feiler-Artinger; Toni Hartl; Andi Kollwentz; Richard Mariel; Hans Nehrer; Hans & Anita Nittnaus; Georg & Silvia Prieler; Rosi & Hannes Schuster; Leo Sommer; Erwin Tinhof

MITTELBURGENLAND

KEY VARIETY: Blaufränkisch (DAC)
OTHER SPECIALITIES: Merlot; Cabernet Sauvignon
TOP PRODUCERS: Arachon T.FX.T; Josef Gager; Albert Gesellmann; Johann & Silvia Heinrich; Anton Iby; Weingut Hans Iglar; Paul Kerschbaum; K+K Kirnbauer; Paul Lehrner; Graf Trauttmansdorff; Roland Velich (Weingut Moric); Wellanschitz; Franz Weninger; Juliana Wieder

SÜDBURGENLAND

KEY VARIETY: Blaufränkisch
OTHER SPECIALITIES: Zweigelt; Cabernet Sauvignon
TOP PRODUCERS: Reinhold Krutzler; Uwe Schiefer; Wachter-Wiesler

CARNUNTUM

KEY VARIETIES: Zweigelt; Blaufränkisch
OTHER SPECIALITIES: St Laurent; Pinot Noir; Merlot; Cab Sauvignon; Syrah
TOP PRODUCERS: Peter Artner; Johann Böheim; Christian Dietrich; Walter Glatzer; Philipp Grassl; Gerhard Markowitsch; Lukas Markowitsch; Muhr-van der Niepoort; Robert Nadler; Franz Netzl; Robert Payr; Hans Pitnauer; Franz Taferner; Johannes Trapl

THERMENREGION

KEY VARIETIES: Pinot Noir; St Laurent
OTHER SPECIALITIES: Zweigelt; Merlot; Cabernet Sauvignon
TOP PRODUCERS: Leopold Auer; Leo Aumann; Christian Fischer; Gustav Krug; Johanneshof Reinisch; Weingut Schellmann; Georg Schneider



Johannes Trapl (ABOVE LEFT) and Niki Moser (ABOVE RIGHT) both specialise in producing quality reds from indigenous varieties

which has turned the Zweigelt grape into the premier variety for wines exuding lush cherry-toned freshness and beautiful ripe fruit tannins. Many delicious examples come from around the town of Göttlesbrunn, one of Austria's most traditional centres for Zweigelt.

EXCITING TERROIRS

But the real prize of Carnuntum has to be the Spitzerberg, the last foothill of the Carpathian mountains. Although some of this site's vineyards are between 35 and 50 years old, the true potential of the limestone-dominant soils, cool evening temperatures and Blaufränkisch variety is only now being discovered. Over the past few years, a handful of winemakers have been exploring ways of growing and vinifying Spitzerberg Blaufränkisch, and results have been hinting at greatness.

'Spitzerberg's soils do not have loam, they have sand, granite, gneiss and mica schist,' says winemaker Johannes Trapl. 'These lend a real elegance and fine tannins to the wines. The acidity is also very good, very understated. We don't emphasise oak, and the wines have a kind of Pinot character.'

Other excellent red wine areas in Austria include the Thermenregion, where the alluvial limestone soils produce meaty, and minerally St Laurent and Pinot Noir; the Weinviertel; and the famous white wine regions of Kamptal and Kremstal, whose elegant St Laurent, Pinot Noir and Zweigelt varieties are showing serious – and in some cases – outstanding results. This may be a surprise to some, but it really shouldn't be, considering that the cool-climate conditions are ideal for getting the best expression from these distinctive and exciting native grapes. **D**

Darrel Joseph is a wine writer based in Austria

REDS TO TRY: A TRUE TASTE OF AUSTRIA

MORIC, NECKENMARKTER ALTE REBEN

2006 ★★★★★ Cranberry, black raspberry and rosehip laced with mineral and peppered earth tones. Long, ripe and cool with suave acidity and tannins. Drink 2009–2018. **£50; Cfo**

JOHANNES TRAPL, SPITZERBERG 2006

★★★★★ Glides across the palate, leaving a trail of cranberry, clove, white pepper, cumin and menthol. Precocious acidity frames the fruit, minerality and body. Needs time. Drink 2010–2018.

N/A UK; www.trapl.com

PAUL ACHS, PANNOBILE 2006 ★★★★★

Cherry and lingonberry aroma with spice and leather. Cherry and plum fruit, minerals and peppery spice. Long finish. Drink 2009–2016. **N/A UK;**

www.paul-achs.at



SCHLOSS HALBTURN, PINOT NOIR 2006

★★★★★ Strawberry, lingonberry and currant. Spice and dry stony earth tones. Juicy acidity. Superb varietal expression. Drink 2009–2016. **£33.39; Coe**

GERNOT HEINRICH, GABARINZA 2006

★★★★★ Black cherry, blueberry, pepper, tar and mocha aromas. Raspberry, rosehip, currant, cherry palate. Finely tuned acidity and zesty tannins. Drink 2009–2019. **£39.95; You**

STIFT KLOSTERNEUBURG, CHORUS 2006

★★★★★ Ripe blackberry, toasted mocha, liquorice and juicy meat. Vegetal/leafy

note. Firm acidity; subdued tannins. Drink 2010–2017. **N/A UK; www.stift-klosterneuburg.at**



SEPP MOSER, ZWIEGELT RESERVE 2006

★★★★★ Violet and lilac aroma. Palate of cherries, blackberries and currants with minerality and spice. Sleek acidity. Drink 2009–2012. **£16.99; BoW**

FRANZ NETZL, ANNA-CHRISTINA 2006

★★★★★ Violet, berry, tobacco and pepper aromas; blackberry, cherry and tobacco flavours. Beautiful acidity, zippy tannins. Drink 2009–2015. **£19.95; NDW**

HANS & ANITA NITTAUS, LEITHABERG

2006 ★★★★★ Blackberry, raspberry, rosehip, cherry flavours. Young tannins; fine acidity. Good mineral expression. Long fruit and spice finish. Drink 2009–2015. **£22.95; L&S**

GERHARD PITTAUER, ST LAURENT ALTE

REBEN 2005 ★★★★★ Plum, raspberry, cranberry and rosehip palate with citrusy, herb undercurrent. Touch of creaminess. Vibrant acidity. Drink 2009–2015. **£27.10; Cfo**

JOHANNESHOF REINISCH, ST LAURENT

HOLZSPUR, GRANDE RESERVE 2004 ★★★★★ Cherry aromas; blackcurrant, blackberry and raspberry flavours. Good mineral integration. Drink 2009–2015.

N/A UK; +43 2253 81423

For UK stockists, see p109 in main issue.