



Red is an Austrian gem

Sometimes, diversity in the wines from a single grape variety in a single country can be wonderful; at other times, it's a mark of poor vineyard care or too-interventionist winemaking. In the case of Austria's blafränkisch, the diversity falls very often into the wonderful category – though not quite always.

That caveat makes it tricky for a wine writer leading readers to new and different experiences to offer a universal recommendation. Even so, I urge you to fill your glass with the product of a fresh and aromatic grape, largely particular to Europe's eastern fringes where it goes under a number of different names.

At its best – and the Austrian wine community is generally very good at showing off both the general character of the grape and its ability to express the individual places where it grows – blafränkisch has splendidly concentrated fruit balanced by refreshing acidity. There's an argument it may be a parent of gamay, and in the lighter styles there is sometimes a similarity. In bigger, more complex and concentrated wines, perhaps not.

Thinking of Austria as a red wine country may seem wrong, but over the last three decades there has been a huge shift of emphasis. In 1985, just 15 per cent of the country's wine was red; now it's 34 per cent, and still growing. Over the same period, too, there has been huge advancement in red winemaking skills.

Blafränkisch lies second in the red planting league, well behind its easier-to-grow offspring zweigelt. But it is the red variety which serious



■ Jancis Robinson MW and Willi Klinger, head of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, at the London masterclass *Picture: AWMB/Claudia Gannon*

growers consider their country's most important, and earlier this month it was the subject of a London masterclass led by Jancis Robinson MW, combined with a tasting of Austria's top 100 examples of the variety.

Burgenland and adjoining regions, the Austrian red wine heartland, offer the long ripening time the grape needs. Microclimates and soils are pretty varied, and blafränkisch happily reflects that. Lighter crunchy-fruited examples do have a beaujolais-like character and can be very appealing; move up a bit and the results are structured, complex, serious wines. Just sometimes, new oak is used with too much enthusiasm, and heavy extraction can leave a hint of bitterness. But the best are splendid.

Characteristic

Blafränkisch can be a long-lived wine. The "100 best" tasting focused on the warm 2009 vintage and most examples will repay a year or two at least in the cellar. The following vintage is quite different: 2010 was much more difficult for the growers, with heavily reduced yields. But there were some lovely wines made – blafränkisch's characteristic crisp acidity balances best when

the wines lighter in alcohol, as was often the result in 2010.

Those in the know are lauding the 2011s: "gorgeous" is how Peter Moser sums them up in the latest edition of his respected Ultimate Guide to Austria's wines, and he predicts very good results from 2012. So there are treats ahead.

Currently, you're more likely to find blafränkisch on restaurant lists than on wine shop shelves, but don't be deterred. Again – as for Croatia two weeks ago – head to Theatre of Wine in Junction Road, Tufnell Park (my apologies for misnaming the shop previously), where the selection includes two wines from the talented Roland Velich: his Moric 2011 is a fine introduction at £17.90, Moric Neckenmarkt Alte Reben 2008, £60.50, marks the apogee of the grape.

Other sources: Lea & Sandeman (Nittaus Kalk und Schiefer 2011, £16.50); www.winedirect.co.uk, www.slurp.co.uk (G & H Heinrich 2010/2011, £15); Savage Selection (Krutzler, Tinhof, Schröck – all fine growers), ring 01451 860896 for prices and details; www.nickdobsonwines.co.uk (Triebaumer and more); www.secretwines.co.uk (Gessellman, J Heinrich and more); www.clarkfoysterwines.co.uk (Moric, Pittnauer and more).

Most villagey of pubs is in heart of Highgate

The Flash – a quintessential English inn with nooks and crannies and exemplary cuisine

As the Hampstead poet John Keats so very nearly wrote, here now upon us is the season of mists and mellow lunchfulness. And also here, to tell you all about it, is me: your close-bosom friend. So – how better to celebrate than with a bracing amble across the russety Heath to Highgate, marvelling yet once more how desperately fortunate we all are to have this capital tract of moorland plum upon our doorstep. Of course you don't actually have to surround yourself with countryside to know that autumn now is come: simply glance into the windows of the more upmarket women's clothes shops, which generally will be sporting a casual drift of orange and tawny leaves, swept up maybe by that witch's besom angled so jauntily in the corner. For here also is the season when

our peerlessly talented young designers and couturiers quite unflinchingly invent Harris Tweed and tartan ... again. While happy for you to buy a "statement coat" in one or both of these fabrics, they would far prefer you went for an "investment piece" ... which translates as just another bloody coat, though one that will cost you the equivalent of a garden maisonette.

Highgate remains untouched by all this, however, because – unlike in Hampstead – the High Street isn't choked with overpriced and chi-chi clothes shops, but still is pretty authentic. As I have remarked before, were it not for the constant noise and dirt created by the ceaseless traffic, Highgate would be more authentically villagey than practically anywhere. And – while on that subject – I might as well mention that I would regard any go-ahead

“Kate Moss may not have written so much as two of her house's previous incumbents (Coleridge and J. B. Priestley) but then I hardly suppose that either of those fellows could look quite so fetching in skinny jeans

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