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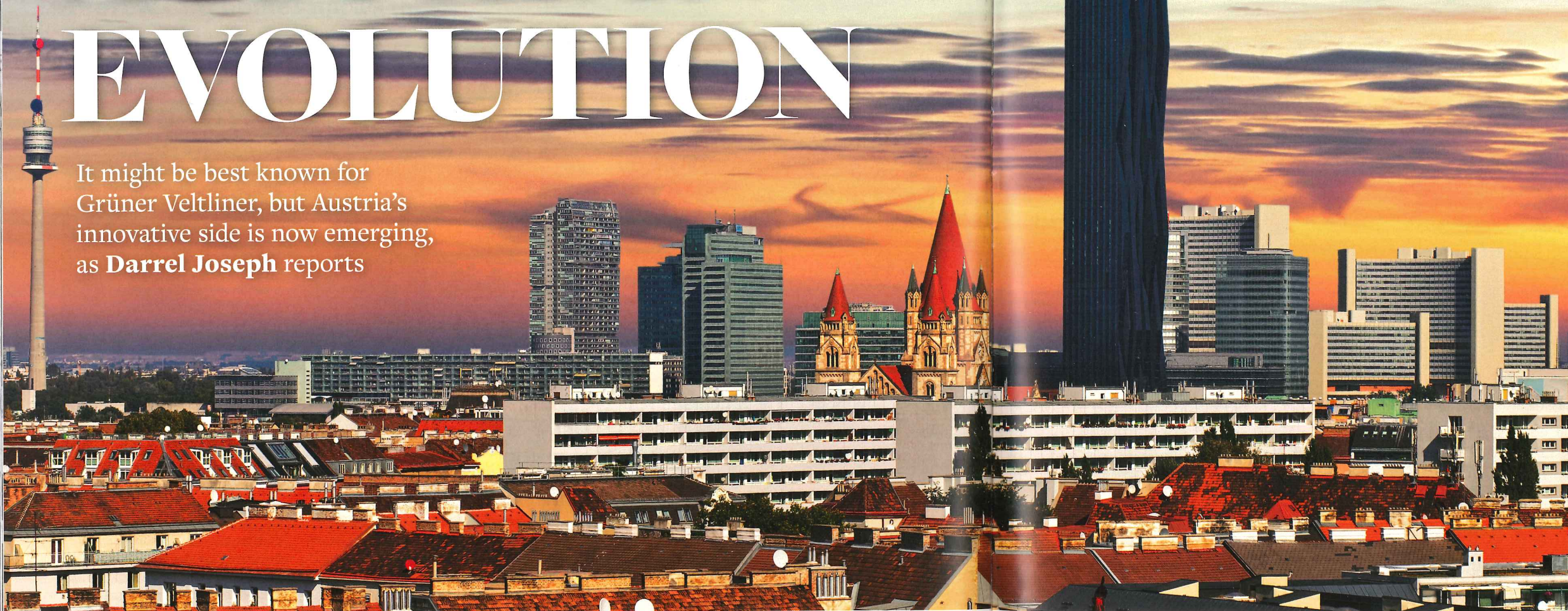


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AUSTRIAN EVOLUTION

It might be best known for Grüner Veltliner, but Austria's innovative side is now emerging, as **Darrel Joseph** reports



Austria continues on its highly creative and diversified path through its vast mix of traditionalist and renegade producers. They have taken the Grüner Veltliner ball and sprinted with it, meaning the same ambition, talent and individual drive that turned an unknown grape variety into one of the wine and culinary world's darlings over the past couple of decades continues full speed ahead today.

Intensive work with other indigenous and regional grape varieties, plus better understanding and utilisation of terroirs, along with bottling an array of controversial styles – whether biodynamic, organic, natural or “orange” – means that it definitely will not be “same old same old” at the annual Australian VieVinum fair this June.

One of the more impressive success stories has been sprouting right on Vienna's home turf. Indeed, as both the nation's capital and an Austrian federal state, Vienna is a wine region in its own right. And with approximately 630ha under vine, it is one of the few capital cities with a significantly developed wine sector.

Vienna grows primarily white grape varieties – as do nearly two-thirds of Austria's 46,000ha of vineyards – but Grüner Veltliner, the country's crown grape, does not reign here. In fact, it is not a wine

variety that has weight in Vienna, but rather a wine style: Wiener Gemischter Satz.

This translates as “Viennese field blend”, and is an old traditional wine made from a mixture of grape varieties that have been planted together in one vineyard, then harvested and fermented together.

While once a relatively common style throughout Europe, this was the standard wine that the Viennese were quaffing at the local wine taverns well over a century ago. But through the decades, as more organised quality vineyards were planted, the plonkish character of the Gemischter Satz wines faded from favour.

Yet some of those mixed vineyards survived and, in recent years, a group of ambitious Viennese winemakers decided to revive the tradition, but produce a wine with a quality that reached new heights.

“Wiener Gemischter Satz is our identity, it's our history,” says prominent Viennese winemaker Fritz Wieninger, who spearheaded efforts to raise the stature of the wine. “This is what we should concentrate on.”

Along with several other Viennese producers – including Michael Edlmoser of Weingut Edlmoser, Rainer Christ of Weingut Christ and Gerhard Lobner of the Mayer am Pfarrplatz winery – Wieninger helped to catapult Wiener Gemischter Satz to an exalted and appellation status.

In 2013, Wiener Gemischter Satz DAC (Districtus Austriae Controllatus) came into being – the first ever

wine style in Austria to achieve the region-typical quality designation.

Around 150ha of Vienna's vineyards are officially classified specifically for Wiener Gemischter Satz production, which totals approximately 1 million bottles annually. The wine must comprise at least three grape varieties of around 20 that are planted – such as Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Grüner Veltliner and Neuburger – with no one grape exceeding 50%.

Wieninger produces around 135,000 bottles of Wiener Gemischter Satz yearly, including two versions from Vienna's most prominent single vineyards, the Nussberg and the Bisamberg.

Imported into the UK by Liberty Wines, his Nussberg 2013 is described by Wieninger as “a terroir-driven wine expressing intense minerality, the chalky character of the soil”; while the Bisamberg 2014, comprising Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) and Chardonnay is “more like a Chablis, with a soft expression and easy to approach”, he says.

Sparkling future

Also given a quality boost – not only in Vienna, but in Austria's three other generic wine regions of Burgenland, Steiermark (Styria) and Niederösterreich (Lower Austria), is the Austrian sparkling wine sector, specifically with the newly defined Österreichischer Sekt mit geschützter Ursprungsbezeichnung – a

Protected Designation of Origin for Austrian Sekt.

With global sales of Champagne continuing to soar, and with the success of other high-end fizz like English sparkling wine, Austria is upping the potential of its own Sekt production.

This was established in the mid-19th century and, with the new PDO, has established strict quality standards for the wines. Set to be signed into law this month, the quality pyramid comprises three quality categories: “klassik” Sekt, requiring grapes harvested from one Austrian federal state and a minimum of nine months of maturing on the lees; “reserve” Sekt, made solely according to traditional bottle fermentation from grapes harvested and pressed in one Austrian federal state, and with a minimum of 18 months of maturing on the lees; and “grosse reserve” Sekt, made exclusively from grapes sourced and pressed in a single wine community (with its name shown on the bottle label) and through traditional bottle fermentation and a minimum of 30 months spent on the lees.

“I am sure this will lead to a much stronger demand for high-end Sekt from Austria, both domestically and in exports,” says Willi Klinger, managing director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board. “And, in fact, we hope to double our exports within the next five years.”

Austria exports around between 750,000 to 1 million litres of Sekt annually.

While Germany is the main export market, other countries, including Switzerland, the Netherlands and the US are growing. The UK is also on the rise, but perhaps with a more eclectic offer – ranging from the Schloss Gobelsburg Brut Reserve, imported by Clark Foyster and retailing in shops for around £25, to a unique St Laurent sparkling made in the ancestral method (“pét-nat”) by the hyper-experimental producer Claus Preisinger and imported by Newcomer Wines in London.

The natural angle

Preisinger is just one of an ever-increasing group of prominent Austrian producers including Gernot Heinrich, Sepp Muster, Fred Loimer and Roland Velich (of Moric), who are taking a more radical route in winemaking – vinifying some of the most innovative and sometimes unorthodox wines (“natural” is one description). These wines can often be at odds with what the Federal Institute for Viticulture deems a “Qualitätswein” – a quality wine.

Many of the wines produced from these winemakers are, for example, spontaneously fermented, have undergone long skin maturation, are unfiltered and have minimal sulphur content – if any.

While these wines, like all Austrian wines that are produced for sale in the Qualitätswein category, must be submitted for quality testing and approval by the institute, they often do not satisfy the tasters despite having passed all chemical analyses.

When this occurs, and the tasters do not give their final approval, the wines cannot be given Qualitätswein status – which ultimately means that they also cannot bear the name of their vineyard site, village of origin or even region of origin on the bottle labels. In short, they have no designation of origin.

This hasn't stopped the winemakers, however. In fact, they often find imaginative names and labels for their bottles, creating a mystique that is clearly attracting wine drinkers. It's all part of the new winemaking face of Austria and is a fascinating addition to a country that has long been known simply as a source of Grüner Veltliner.

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