

# A natural approach

Small, but perfectly formed, Austria's winemaking fraternity continues to innovate, looking increasingly towards natural methods. **Darrel Joseph** reports

It's not surprising that Austria represents barely 1% of global wine production. But it's certainly astounding what this small central European country has done with its 46,500ha of vineyards over the past couple of decades: turning its Grüner Veltliners and Rieslings – particularly those from single vineyards – into some of the world's most exalted dry white wines. It has seen its luscious botrytised sweet wines paired with fabulous desserts listed on the finest restaurant menus from New York to Hong Kong, and more recently showcased the evolving versatility and

complexity of its dry wines made from indigenous red grape varieties such as Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt and Sankt Laurent.

But more and more of Austria's talented winemakers are proving highly adept at also embracing less typical wine styles and taking them to astonishing heights. The natural wine movement, for example, has become extremely progressive in this country and is finding a rapid growth of welcoming palates abroad.

Claus Preisinger is one tradition-bucking producer highlighting this movement, with wines such as

**Austria offers wild, innovative, cool-climate wines**

**“More and more producers are swapping conventional farming for biodynamic”**

**Peter Honegger, Newcomer Wines**

Puszta Libre, a red blend of Zweigelt and Sankt Laurent grapes grown in his biodynamic vineyards around the village of Gols, near the Neusiedlersee in the Burgenland region of eastern Austria. It's named for the “Puzsta” – neighbouring Hungary's Pannonian Plain, which reaches to the Burgenland – and the wine underwent partial whole-bunch pressing, some carbonic maceration, spontaneous fermentation and no filtration. With its Beaujolais-esque character, the Puszta Libre is clearly unlike the traditionally deeper, fuller red wines of the Gols region. However, 6,000 bottles of the 2017 vintage are now in the UK, selling in London at Sager & Wilde for £40 per bottle, and at Marcus Wareing's two-Michelin-starred restaurant, Marcus at The Berkeley.

“This is a wine that's about freshness and fruitiness, not power and tannins,” says Preisinger. “It's for drinking now, and even chilled.”

Other distinctive Preisinger wines – also spontaneously fermented and unfiltered – are his Kieselstein Zweigelt 2017, born from pebble and gravel (Kiesel) soils and matured up to 10 months in large oak barrels; and the Kalkundkiesel Red 2017, which is a blend of red and white grapes (Blaufränkisch, Sankt Laurent, Weissburgunder, Müller-Thurgau and Welschriesling) and vinified by direct pressing, whole-bunch fermentation and three days of maceration.

## BIODYNAMIC TRENDS

Like Preisinger, a slew of other premier producers are taking the biodynamic route, including Feiler-Artinger, Umathum, Prieler and Moric (Roland Velich). And a host of other renowned names, such as Willi Bründlmayer, Fritz Wieninger, Fred Loimer, Gernot Heinrich and Alwin Jurtschitsch, are farming organically.

“More and more famous producers are swapping conventional farming for biodynamic or organic farming,” says Peter Honegger of Newcomer Wines in London. “High quality wines are being made in a sustainable way. And even traditional audiences in the UK are beginning to respect these now – not only in experimental London, but even beyond.”

Alwin Jurtschitsch – of the Jurtschitsch Sonnhof estate in Austria's Kamptal region – has been using some of his organic vineyards for a project he launched six years ago with winemaker Martin Arndorfer: a series of “volumes” of skin-fermented pét nat (pétillant nature) wines called Fuchs und Hase, or Fox and Hare.

“I wanted to make all-natural sparkling wines that emphasise the characteristics of the grape varieties and, at the same time, are more attractive price-wise than traditional sparkling wines,” says Jurtschitsch. “With traditional method sparklings, the variety steps back and the precision focuses more on the terroir. The pét nats, however, are driven more by varietal aromas and flavours, and have a touch of wildness, free spirit and emotion. Pét nat wines undergo bottle fermentation only, instead of the two-fermentation process of the traditional method sparklings. And my pét nats have no added sugar, no added yeast, no added sulphur. There is just the taste of the wine, simple and pure.”

Jurtschitsch adds that he does disgorge his Fuchs und Hase wines to expel any wine crystals, but not the lees, which must remain to protect the wines against oxidation since no sulphur is added. He also emphasises that his pét nats tend to have a degree or so less alcohol content than traditional method sparklers, and can be around €5-7 cheaper as well.

The current Fuchs und Hase range includes the 2016 Volume 3, a blend of Riesling and Welschriesling; the 2015 Volume 4 with Müller Thurgau and Grüner Veltliner; and the Pét Nat Rosé 2016, made from Zweigelt and Cabernet Sauvignon, and imported by Les Caves de Pyrene in the UK.

## COMING UP ROSÉS

Rosés – not just pét nat versions – have become an integral part of Austria's wine landscape in recent years, with a slew of producers making them in a range of qualities. One producer, Markus Altenburger, has even designed a series of natural still rosés made from his organic vineyards on the Leithaberg (Leitha Hills) near the Neusiedlersee lake – under the playfully titled RoSée Connection (with Sée reflecting the name of the lake). The 2017 collection features the crisp, fresh Jerry & Barry (6,000 bottles) with 11% abv; the medium-bodied En Garde! (1,500 bottles), aged for seven months in used barriques, and the full-on Witzbold (900 bottles), from 45-year-old Blaufränkisch vines growing in limestone and schist soils. All RoSée Connection wines are spontaneously fermented, unfiltered, have a minute sulphur content and are priced from £13 to £25 per bottle in the UK.

For those who want just to try out natural rosés without committing to buying a bottle, many eateries in London offer them by the glass. Jerry & Barry has been poured in London at Marcus at The Berkeley, and The Ledbury offers the gorgeously sophisticated Rosé Dogma 2017 from biodynamic producer Gerhard Pittnauer in Gols in Burgenland. According to Lance Foyster of Clark Foyster specialist importers in the UK: “The Rosé Dogma is a zeitgeist wine, fully natural with no added yeast or sulphur, and with flavours of cherries, blossom honey, herbs and spices and an orangey finish. The appeal is tremendous.”

Austria's love of rosé has, like in many countries, grown intensely in recent years – so much so, that it has just recently installed its latest (and smallest) appellation, Rosalia DAC (Districtus Austriae Controllatus), as the only one of Austria's 13 DACs to give rosé wines designation of origin status.

From 297ha of vineyards near the Leithaberg and the Mittelburgenland regions close to the Neusiedlersee, Rosalia DAC rosés – which can be made from any of Austria's roster of officially permitted red grapes – can come to market as of the 2018 vintage.

While this is just a glimpse of some of the important recent developments in Austrian winemaking, it is obvious that this remarkably small but innovative cool-climate wine country does not let up as a force of creative juices in today's wine world.