

THE DECANTER TRAVEL GUIDE TO

Styria, Austria

For the active wine lover who enjoys a cycle or mountainside hike before a sumptuous meal, this ancient and stunning southern wine region is a slice of paradise, says Darrel Joseph

STEIERMARK (STYRIA IN English) is Austria's southernmost wine region. Its 4,240ha of vineyards are planted among the hills and valleys between the Austrian Alps in the west, Hungary's Pannonian Plain to the east and the undulating hills of Slovenia in the south – and beyond that, to the southwest, the Adriatic Sea. This means stunning terrain and climates that embrace both continental and Mediterranean influences.

This sets the scene for escapist pleasures: pampering the body and inspiring the spirit with everything from hiking and bike riding to soaking in the waters at spa resorts. While spring, summer and autumn are ideal for seeing Styria in its colourful splendour (blankets of morning fog in autumn add to the dramatic beauty), really any time is fine for a visit because Styria is a Shangri-La for wine and food lovers.

The region's long viticultural history dates back to when the ancient Celts camped here 2,500 years ago. But the past few decades in particular have seen a new generation of talented winemakers apply unwavering quality standards in the vineyards and cellars.

Styria boasts some of Austria's most distinctive wines from its three sub-regions: South Styria (Südsteiermark), Vulkanland (formerly Südoststeiermark, or Southeast Styria) and West Styria (Weststeiermark). Of these, South Styria, with more than 2,300ha, has the greatest concentration of wineries and a slew of excellent vineyard sites.

South Styria

A perfect introduction to this region is the winery of brothers Erich and Walter Polz in Spielfeld (www.polz.co.at), at the gateway of the 70km-long South Styrian Wine Road (www.suedsteierischeweinstrasse.at). Near the Polz winery itself are two of its premium, steep single-vineyard sites with limestone soils: the powerful Hochgrassnitzberg, which delivers Sauvignon Blanc – the region's premier grape variety – for the spontaneously fermented, cask-aged wines; and the Obegg, yielding >

FACT FILE

- Planted area**
4,240ha
- Sub-regions**
South Styria, Vulkanland, West Styria
- Main grape varieties**
Sauvignon Blanc, Morillon (Chardonnay), Gelber Muskateller, Welschriesling, Weissburgunder, Traminer; plus Blauer Wildbacher for Schilcher rosé
- Main soils**
Schist, limestone, marl, slate, gravel, basalt

Right: morning fog over Weingut Wohlmut's Steinriegl vineyard



Maps: Maggie Nelson

MY PERFECT DAY IN SAUSAL

MORNING

Begin the day in this small, mountainous wine area just 18km from the renowned South Styrian Wine Road, at the region's only sparkling-focused winery, Weingut Harkamp (www.harkamp.at) in the town of St Nikolai in Sausal. Hannes Harkamp creates a fine range of traditional-method bubbly, including a Sauvignon Blanc Extra Brut and a vibrant zero dosage. Then drive 9km to Kitzeck to see the charming Steirische Weinmuseum and 17th-century Our Lady of Sorrows church.

LUNCH

A few kilometers further on, in Fresing, is Weingut Gerngross*. Whether in the rustic-style dining room or on the outdoor terrace with spectacular views to the surrounding valleys and mountains, enjoy



Weingut Gerngross

fantastic homemade local specialities, like the classic Steirische Brettljause: an array of cold cuts, smoked meats, cheese spreads and vegetables. Perfect with Gerngross Sauvignon Blanc and Morillon.

AFTERNOON

Backtrack to Kitzeck to visit the cellars of Weingut Wohlmut (see main text p124). Book ahead for a tour of the steep,

slate-laden Edelschuh and Steinriegl vineyards, which offer unparalleled views to the Koralpe mountains. Continue on a few kilometres to Hartlieb Olmühle (www.hartlieb.at) to taste fine regional Kürbiskernöl (pumpkin-seed oil).

EVENING

Eat and stay at the TomR* in St Andrä im Sausal. This 15th-century beauty was once a manor house and church rectory. Today you can enjoy an eclectic 12-course menu prepared with ingredients from the garden, and local fish and meats. Superb wine list, too. All of the six guest rooms (converted from centuries-old animal stalls) are uniquely designed and overlook the pool and vast countryside landscape.

For details on entries marked with an asterisk (*), see p125



Above: Manfred Tement and his son Armin's family estate has vineyards in both Austria and Slovenia

wonderful Chardonnay for fine (also naturally fermented) wines aged in small barrels.

You can taste the wines at the winery itself, or with a meal or snack at the Buschenschank (www.polz-buschenschank.at) next door, where stylised versions of local dishes, such as cured and smoked meats, cheeses, pâtés and vegetarian dishes are offered. Like at Polz, most wineries throughout Styria have tasting rooms available for visitors, and pre-arranged winery tours (including through the vineyards) are available in English.

At Weingut Tement (www.tement.at), run by Manfred Tement and his son Armin in Berghausen, a vineyard walk takes you to two countries. Surrounding the winery itself is the steep single-vineyard of Zieregg. This continues on into the Stajerska region of Slovenia, which was part of Austria until the end of World War I; Tement labels these wines as *Domaine Ciringa* (Ciringa is Slovene for Zieregg). At Tement, not only can you taste wines from both of these terroirs, but you can hike through the cross-border vineyards. Bring your passport along just in case.

A few kilometres away, in Gamlitz, is the Sattlerhof (see 'Address Book', opposite page), offering fabulous organic wines, wonderful eateries and a hotel. Willi Sattler Jr and sons Andreas and Alexander produce knockout Sauvignon Blancs, such as the slightly saline, smoky versions from the 435m-high Kranachberg vineyard, as well as other ageworthy wines like Morillon (the regional name for Chardonnay) and Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) from the 365m-high Pfarrweingarten; all have impeccable complexity and balance of ripeness, acidity and minerality.

About 20km northwest in Kitzack, in the Sausal area (see 'My Perfect Day', p123), the Wohlmuth (www.wohlmuth.at) winery, run by Gerhard Wohlmuth Sr and his son Gerhard Jr,



'Stunning terrain and climates that at once embrace both continental and Mediterranean influences'



GETTING THERE

From Graz-Thalerhof airport, drive 35 to 45 minutes via the A9 to the South Styrian Wine Road.

Above: the ultra-modern Neumeister winery boasts curved walls lined with 8,000 empty bottles

creates an array of wines from some of the steepest vineyards around – including the Edelschuh, with an incline of up to 90%. From its barren red and blue-black slate soils come not only Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, but also one of Styria's few Rieslings.

Other excellent South Styrian wineries include Gross, Jaunegg, Lackner-Tinnacher, Hannes Sabathi, Erwin Sabathi, Gerngross, Sepp Muster, Trummer, Potzinger and Skoff.

Vulkanland

For a different perspective of Styria, drive an hour east to Vulkanland, named for its ancient volcanic terroir. The Winkler-Hermaden winery based in Kapfenstein, uses the basalt soils to make an organic range of wines, including a long-macerated Gewürztraminer orange wine and the showcase Olivin, a red wine made from Zweigelt and named for the green rock, olivine, which is embedded in the soils here.

Above: the 11th-century Schloss Kapfenstein (hotel and winery) sits on top of an extinct volcano

The dramatically beautiful castle, Schloss Kapfenstein, which goes back 1,000 years, is the seat of the Winkler-Hermaden family, which also offers aristocratic guest rooms and a restaurant (see 'Address Book' right).

The sleek, ultra-modern Neumeister winery (www.neumeister.cc) in Straden, 18km away, features an interior with curved walls cleverly lined from ceiling to floor with 8,000 empty wine bottles. But the winery's filled bottles reflect the wizardry of Christoph Neumeister's work with, among other varieties, Pinot Noir, Weissburgunder, Gelber Muskateller and Sauvignon Blanc, from organic vineyards. Neumeister believes in minimal intervention winemaking and applies the gravity-flow principle from grape harvest to final bottling.

Another top Vulkanland producer is Ploder-Rosenberg (www.ploder-rosenberg.at) in St Peter am Ottersbach, whose natural winemaking often includes the use of qvevri – the Georgian amphora-like clay vessels.

An ideal way to wrap up your Styrian adventure would be to head to West Styria (about an hour's drive from Vulkanland) to taste the regional speciality that has recently regained popularity in Austria: Schilcher, a concentrated rosé-style wine made from the indigenous, acidity-generous Blauer Wildbacher grape. Producing fine versions are Domäne Müller (domaene-mueller.com/dm), in Gross St Florian, Christian Reiterer (www.weingut-reiterer.com) in Wies, and Strohmeier (www.strohmeier.at) in St-Stefan ob Stainz. **D**

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YOUR STYRIA ADDRESS BOOK

HOTELS

Loisium Wine & Spa Resort, Ehrenhausen

A comfy getaway with spacious rooms and suites overlooking a vineyard and castle landscape.

Styrian and international wines in the bar and vinothek. Fantastic breakfasts. www.loisium.com

Schloss Kapfenstein, Kapfenstein

Aristocratic flair defines this castle hotel in an 11th-century fortress on top of an extinct volcano. Fine cuisine with fresh local ingredients. Perfect showcase for the wines of the owning family, Winkler-Hermaden. www.winkler-hermaden.at

RESTAURANTS

Sattlerhof, Gamlitz

Two excellent eateries at this hotel-winery complex: one with gourmet dishes, plus a Wirtshaus (tavern/inn) with traditional regional specialities. Excellent wine list. Book ahead. www.sattlerhof.at

TomR, St Andrä im Sausal

Tom and Katarina Riederer's dining and hotel paradise. Hyper-creative cuisine, sophisticated wines from sommelier René Kolleger and décor from Baroque to retro-1960s. Golf courses and motorbikes available for hotel guests. Reservations necessary. www.tomr.at

Saziani Stub'n, Straden

Harald Irka whips up sophisticated

dishes under two concepts: light and green, and deep with concentrated flavours, both using ingredients like birch tree leaves and apple tree moss. Part of the Neumeister winery. Book ahead. www.neumeister.cc

Die Weinbank, Ehrenhausen

Sleek, modern eatery with lengthy wine list. Casual (Wirtshaus) and fine dining (restaurant). There's no set menu – just chef Gerhard Fuchs' daily 'surprise'. Book ahead. www.dieweinbank.at

Gerngross, Fresing

Part of the Gerngross winery, this Buschenschank serves up exotic nibbles like air-dried Turopolje pork and smoked venison ham. Don't miss the Käferbohnen (scarlet runner beans) drizzled with local pumpkin-seed oil. Stunning views from the terrace. www.weingut-gerngross.at

SHOPPING

Gölles, Riegersburg

Producer of natural, barrel-aged fruit and wine vinegars, including tomato, quince, Grüner Veltliner and Schilcher rosé. Also great schnapps and whiskey. Excellent tour and tastings. www.goelles.at

Genussregal Vinofaktur, Vogau

Emporium for high-quality Styrian products: wine, pumpkin-seed oil, jam, honey, pesto, schnapps and cured and air-dried hams. www.genussregal.at

