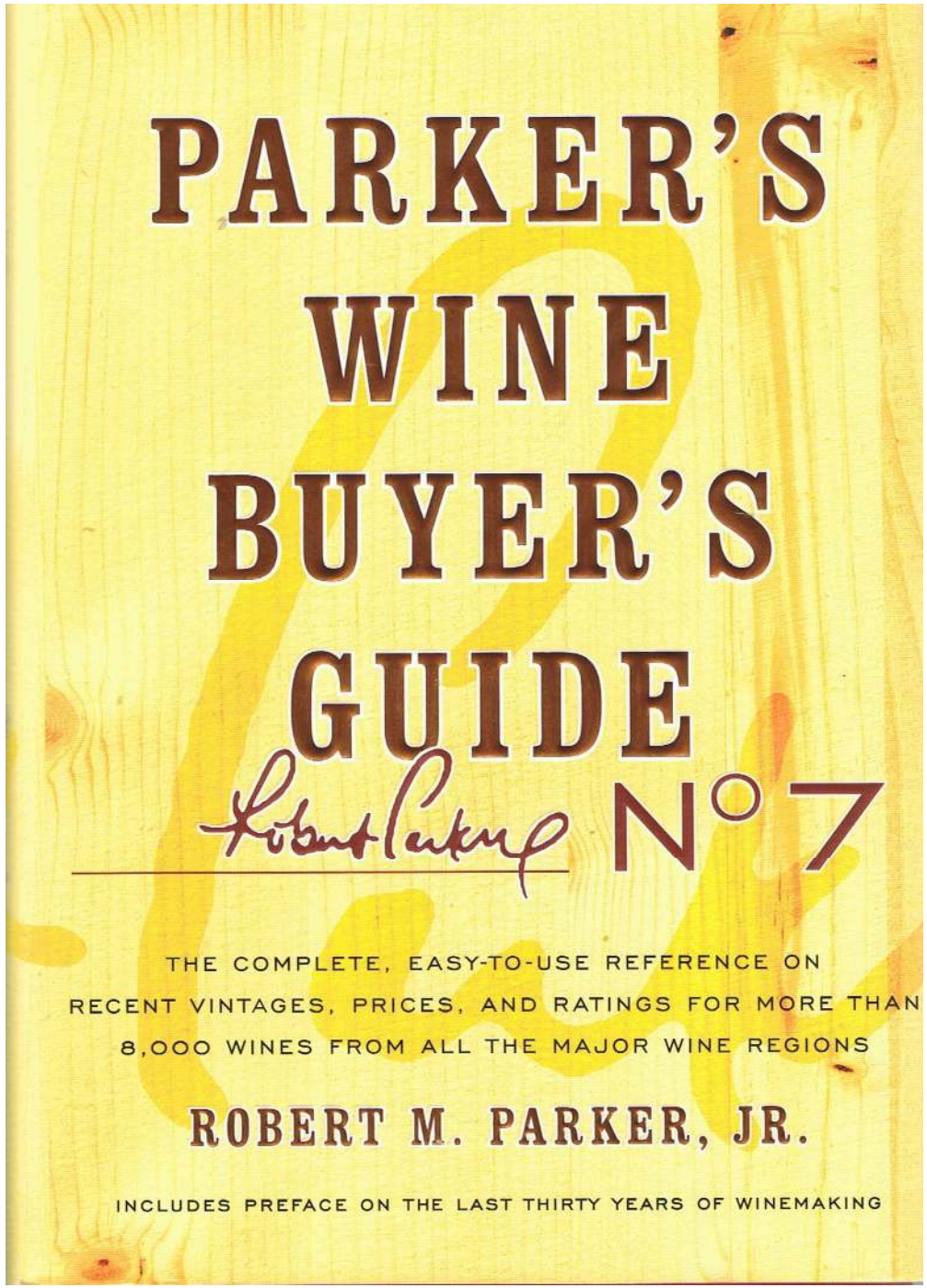

[austria]

A NEW WINE CONSTELLATION IN THE "OLD WORLD" SKY

A quarter of a century ago, no one would have predicted the emergence of Austria into the footlights of the world's wine stage which took place at the millennium. In mid-1985, dessert wines from the Burgenland region were found to have been laced with ethylene glycol, added by unscrupulous vintners or middlemen to boost (or merely mimic) the unctuous textured and honeyed sweetness associated with botrytis. No one was ever found to have been poisoned by these wines, but the market for Austrian wine most certainly was. "It is the worst disaster to hit this region since World War II," Rust's mayor and vintner Heribert Artinger told *The New York Times* that August. "The job," said Austria's then Chancellor Sinowatz, himself a *Burgenländer,* "is to pick up the pieces, to start anew." And that is just what Austria did. Decisive action instituted stringent quality controls, laying the groundwork for future bragging rights and effective marketing. At the same time, ever wine-thirsty Austrians set out in search of small estate bottlers, since *négociants,* middlemen, and export agents had been wiped out almost overnight. Pulling together, growers along the Danube in the Wachau set benchmarks for quality that, within a decade, would catapult them to fame. The star of South Styria, whose wines from along the Slovenian border had been almost forgotten for a century, began to rise. And back in Burgenland, a young man named Alois Kracher left his job in Vienna as a pharmacist, determined to rescue that region's reputation by crafting at his family's estate nobly sweet wines second to none.

Today the Wachau influences the way that Riesling is perceived both at home and abroad; thence arose the impetus that turned Grüner Veltliner—once merely the name of a humble native grape—into a buzzword known to wine lovers worldwide. South Styria's hilly acreage today struggles just to keep up with domestic demand, as the projects of its vintners spill over into Slovenia. The late Alois Kracher lived to see his wines compared with those of d'Yquem and to consult—as "Mr. Botrytis"—on sweet-wine projects around the globe. Under the influence of new laws and new quality benchmarks, a generation of Austrian growers for whom the wine scandal of 1985 is ancient history has helped give birth to one of the world's great

wine constellations, full of fascinating stars, and incorporating a range of grapes, soils, microclimates, and traditions at times downright exotic, and surely unprecedented for such a small country. Austria accounts for a mere 1.3% of the European Community's wine volume, yet—without even remote competition from other member states—Austria accounts for more than twice as high a percentage of the total *value* of EU wine. Success abroad has been accompanied by an intensification of what was already arguably Europe's most enthusiastic, if not downright frenetic, wine culture. The hoopla accorded every new vintage is enormous. It is not at all unusual for wines to be sold out on subscription before they have finished fermenting, let alone been bottled. And top vintners are celebrated as national heroes.

Roughly two-thirds of Austrian wine is white. The vast majority of that is dry, but outstanding sweet wines are also crafted in most of Austria's growing regions, particularly in parts of Burgenland, which have reestablished a reputation for the botrytis wines that had already put "German West Hungary" on the world's wine map more than three centuries ago. Most Austrian white wines were still blends much later in the 20th century than was the case in Alsace or California; insofar as they were from Grüner Veltliner, they bore no such indication on the label. Now wines from a single grape and labeled with its name are the norm. Acreage of red grapes, as well as serious quality aspirations and achievements with them, are surging. Increasingly many of the best reds, too, are *monocépage*, although some are blends.

Gelber Muskateller (the Muscat à Petit Grains of southern France) is grown sporadically in Austria, just as it is in such far-flung former portions of the Hapsburg Empire as Tokaj. This variety's pungently herbal, citrus zest, and dried pit-fruit character is much beloved of Austrians in its brisk and dry Styrian renditions. In part as a result of their success, acreage—still well under half a percent of Austria's total—is on the increase outside Styria, too. Muscat Ottonel (discussed in the chapter devoted to Alsace) is much more widely grown, but with the exception of its role in nobly sweet wines from Burgenland, proves less distinctive and less desirable.

Other White Grapes Among internationally familiar white varieties, the two most widely planted are Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, both (but particularly the latter) of special significance in Styria. Results with Sauvignon Blanc among those growers along the Danube and in Burgenland who have taken it seriously to heart strongly suggest that there is much more potential for this grape in Austria than even its current modest acreage, manifest quality, or high reputation in Styria would suggest.

STYRIA: HILLS ALIVE WITH THE SMELL OF SUCCESS

Styria is officially made up of three growing regions. Weststeiermark, curiously, is dominated by production of generally tart pink and sparkling wines from a local grape known as Blauer Wildbacher, or Schilcher, which seldom travel beyond the region's, much less Austria's, boundaries. Südoststeiermark represents a large but relatively sparsely planted region whose potential for diverse grape varieties is only gradually being discovered, thanks in large part to the exceptional winegrowing and promotional efforts of Neumeister. Südsteiermark, along the Slovenian border, has much narrower boundaries, but incorporates more than half of Styria's total vine acreage. In its reputation and success inside Austria, this region is rivaled only by the Wachau. Indeed, the problem here will soon be growers running out of vineyards to reclaim or new sites to plant. On these windy, steep pre-Alpine hillsides, the number of sites that are well exposed and not excessively frost-prone is limited. Several of the region's top estates now farm property across the border in Slovenia as well which, under certain circumstances or for a limited period, may actually be bottled under the name "Südsteiermark."

The wines of South Styria fall into two major classes. The vast majority are typically labeled Steierische Klassik. These are harvested at modest levels of sugar to keep alcohol around 12% or less and are vinified bone dry in tank or large, older casks (without malolactic fermentation) to capture freshness. Wines bottled from and labeled with the names of individual vineyards are always much riper, are generally vinified in smaller barrels—often, but not always the classic French 225-liter *barrique*; often, but not always new—and typically go through malolactic transformation. There has been a welcome tendency lately to experiment more with larger and older barrels for ostensibly top wines to reduce overt woodiness and bring into focus the differences among sites. So to some extent, there has been a blurring of the stylistic distinction between Klassik and Lagen (site-specific) wines. Essentially, the growers of this region offer two very different styles at very different price points.

Welschriesling is the most common local grape; grapes with the most cachet are Sauvignon Blanc and Muskateller, the latter almost always vinified in the Klassik style. Other important white grapes are Chardonnay, Traminer (usually the so-called "red" variant), Pinot Gris, and Pinot Blanc. Some 2% of acreage is planted with Riesling, but that normally celebrated grape is accorded little importance and no prestige in southern Styria. Zweigelt completely dominates the modest acreage of reds in Styria; in fact, few other reds will ripen properly in these vineyards, although here too several growers are devotees of that "heartbreak grape," Madame Pinot.

Pronounced phenolic "kick," briskness, and pungency are all classic characteristics of Styrian wine. The region's simpler Sauvignon Blancs can be compared with those of New Zealand for their tendency to evoke gooseberry, passion fruit, and hay, while the Muskateller can be practically, but pleasantly, sneeze-inducing in their pungency. Chardonnay in the Klassik style seldom seems more interesting than the refreshing, modestly endowed Welschriesling of the region. The more ambitious single-vineyard wines of South Styria—particularly from Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Blanc—can be marvelous in their intricate expressions of citrus, herbs, nut oils, and what most tasters will, for lack of any better word, call "minerals." But there are also many examples where new wood and/or overtly lactic notes create a bifurcated personality. Nobly sweet wines are few and far between in these parts, but Tement and (in Southeast Styria) Neumeister bottle some notable exceptions.

Vintage character can alter the balance of Styrian wine rather radically. In 2003, for instance—besides being plagued by a sheer shortage of juice in an Austrian market that is crazy for their wines—South Styria's growers weren't really capable of delivering the Klassik character at all, as the wines had too much alcohol and too little acidity. At the upper end of that vintage's sugar and price scale, many wines were ponderous and top-heavy. Then came 2004 with cool, rainy weather that caused many Klassik bottlings to take a screeching 180-

degree turn from 2003; Attempts to stick to the barrel-aging and malolactic formula with single-vineyard wines frequently yielded grotesquely oaky or milky results. (The grapes possessed abundant malic and precious little ripe tartaric acid at harvest.) 2005 brought noticeable improvement, while 2006 and 2007 have turned out very well. Klassik wines are generally best consumed within two or three years of bottling. The single-vineyard wines can be fascinating to follow for a decade or more; however, given the wide range of grapes, sites, meteorological vicissitudes, and rapidly evolving, personal winemaking styles that characterize Styria, it is difficult to generalize about this.

—DAVID SCHILDKNECHT

[the ratings]

AUSTRIA'S BEST PRODUCERS

★★★★★ (OUTSTANDING)

Willi Bründlmayer (Kamptal)
Schloss Gobelsburg (Kamptal)
Franz Hirtzberger (Wachau)
Emmerich Knoll (Wachau, Kremstal)
Alois Kracher—Weinlaubenhof (Neusiedlersee)
Moric—Roland Velich (Mittelburgenland, Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Nigl—Martin Nigl (Kremstal)
Nikolaihof (Wachau, Kremstal)
F. X. Pichler (Wachau)
Prager—Toni Bodenstein (Wachau)

★★★★ (EXCELLENT)

Leo Alzinger (Wachau)
Heribert Bayer—In Signo Leonis (Mittelburgenland)
Gernot Heinrich (Neusiedlersee)
Hiedler (Kamptal)
Hirsch (Kamptal)
Fred Loimer (Kamptal)
Muhr—Niepoort (Carnuntum)
Neumayer (Traisental)
Neumeister (Südoststeiermark)
Ott (Wagram)
Rudi Pichler (Wachau)
Engelbert Prieler (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Uwe Schiefer (Südburgenland)
Heidi Schröck (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Strablegg-Leitner (Südsteiermark)
Manfred Tement (Südsteiermark)
Ernst Triebaumer (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Tschida—Angerhof (Neusiedlersee)
Umathum (Neusiedlersee)
Velich—Heinz Velich (Neusiedlersee)

★★★ (VERY GOOD)

Paul Achs (Neusiedlersee)
Kurt Angerer (Kamptal)
Johann Bäuerl (Wachau)
Günther Brandl (Kamptal)
Marion Ebner—Mesuline (Carnuntum, Kamptal)
Feiler-Artinger (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Freie Weingärtner (Wachau)
Albert Gesellmann (Mittelburgenland)
Gross (Südsteiermark)
Haider (Neusiedlersee)
Schloss Halbtrun (Neusiedlersee)
Högl (Wachau)
Josef Jamek (Wachau)
Jurtschitsch—Sonnhof (Kamptal)
Kollwentz—Römerhof (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Krutzler (Südburgenland)
Lackner-Tinnacher (Südsteiermark)
Karl Lagler (Wachau)
Paul Lehrner (Mittelburgenland)
Josef Lentsch—Gastmifus zur Dankbarkeit (Neusiedlersee)
Malat (Kremstal, Wachau)

Mantlerhof—Josef Mantler (Kremstal)
Sepp and Maria Muster (Südsteiermark)
Anita and Hans Nittnaus (Neusiedlersee)
R. & A. Pfaffl (Weinviertel and Vienna)
Pöckl (Neusiedlersee)
Pollerhof (Weinviertel)
Pittnauer (Neusiedlersee)
Polz (Südsteiermark)
Claus Preisinger (Neusiedlersee)
Franz Proidl (Kremstal)
Salomon—Undhof (Kremstal)
Sattlerhof (Südsteiermark)
Schmelz (Wachau)
Josef Schmid (Kremstal)
Schwarz (Neusiedlersee)
Setzer (Weinviertel)
Stadlmann (Thermenregion)
Tinhof (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Weingut der Stadt Krems (Kremstal)
Franz Weninger (Mittelburgenland)
Wenzel (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Rainer Wess (Wachau, Kremstal)
Fritz Wieninger (Vienna)

★★ (GOOD)

K. Alphart (Thermenregion)
Arachon—T.FX.T. (Mittelburgenland)
Anton Bauer (Wagram)
Judith Beck (Neusiedlersee)
Berger (Kremstal)
Birgit Braunstein (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Buchegger (Kremstal)
Johann Donabaum (Wachau)
Sieghardt Donabaum (Wachau)
Ludwig Ehn (Kamptal)
Josef Ehnmoser (Wagram)
Birgit Eichinger (Kamptal)
Karl Fritsch (Wagram)
Rainer Gerhold (Wagram)
Glatzer (Carnuntum)
Stift Göttweig (Kremstal)
Gritsch—Mauritiushof (Wachau)
Hannes Harkamp (Südsteiermark)
J. Heinrich (Mittelburgenland)
Hillinger (Neusiedlersee)
H. & M. Hofer (Weinviertel)
Holzapfel (Wachau)
Huber (Traisental)
Iby—Lehrner (Mittelburgenland)
Igler (Mittelburgenland)
Jäger (Wachau)
Juris—Axel Stiegelmayer (Neusiedlersee)
Kerschbaum (Mittelburgenland)
Irene Langes (Vienna)
Leth (Wagram)
Mariell (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Gerhard Markowitsch (Carnuntum)
Mayr—Vorspannhof (Kremstal)
Sepp Moser (Kremstal, Neusiedlersee)
Nastl (Kamptal)
Pitnauer (Carnuntum)
Reinisch—Johanneshof (Thermenregion)
Rotes Haus (Vienna)
Erwin Sabathi (Südsteiermark)
Salomon—Falkenstein (Weinviertel)
Fritz Salomon—Oberstockstall (Wagram)
Schandl (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Schellmann—Fred Loimer (Thermenregion)
Rosi Schuster (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Schwarzböck (Weinviertel)
Skoff (Südsteiermark)
Söllner (Wagram)
Sommer (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Spätrot—Gebeshuber (Thermenregion)
Taubenschuss (Weinviertel)
Tegernseerhof—Franz & Martin Mittelbach (Wachau)
Johann Topf (Kamptal)
Andreas Tscheppe (Südsteiermark)
Wimmer-Czerny (Wagram)
Wohlmuth (Südsteiermark, Mittelburgenland)
Zahel (Vienna)
Zantho (Neusiedlersee)
Zull (Weinviertel)

NEUMEISTER ****

SÜDOSTSTEIERMARK $18.00–$80.00

Even in a land nowadays liberally sprinkled with multimillion-dollar palaces of vinification, to descend from their modest crush pad down into Albert and Christoph Neumeister's cellar, hidden in one of obscure Straden's steep hillsides, confronts visitors with breathtaking architectural drama, behind which lies a control freak's technological sophistication. Albert built his estate up over three decades from a small mixed agricultural family operation; he also has contracts with neighboring vintners. Neumeister wines blaze a path with effective use of skin, lees, and new wood. The superb nobly sweet wines are in a soft and ingratiating style all their own.

2004 Gelber Muskateller Steierische Klassik	89	now
2004 Grauburgunder Steierische Klassik	87	now
2004 Sauvignon Blanc Steierische Klassik	88	now
2004 Sauvignon Blanc Klausen Selektion	90	now–2011
2004 Sauvignon Blanc Moarfeitl Selektion	89–91	now–2012
2003 Sauvignon Blanc Beerenauslese Klausen	93	now–2015+?
2002 Welschriesling Trockenbeerenauslese Sazianni	88	now–2013+?
2002 Welschriesling Beerenauslese Sazianni	91	now–2015+?