



Lackner-Tinnacher's Steinbach vineyard,  
home to their oldest sauvignon blanc vines.





# Styrian Frontiers

By David Schildknecht

Exit the Austrian autobahn just before reaching Slovenia and in two steeply uphill minutes you'll find yourself overlooking seemingly unending, steeple-crested hills verdantly carpeted in poplars and vines. This is the epicenter of Styria, a wine region once considered among Europe's most important. Today, Austrians consider "Steiermark" on a label to be a badge of vinous quality and authenticity. Yet abroad, the name is scarcely recognized.

That may soon change, as the qualitative and stylistic frontiers being explored by Styria's growers reach center stage. When that happens, the performance will feature sauvignon blanc, a grape that, outside Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, has never enjoyed solo stardom.

Politically speaking, today's Steiermark is a much-reduced share of its former self and one of Austria's nine Federal *Länder*, self-described as that nation's "Green Heart." Viticulturally, it is a reincarnation of Greater Styria's powerful 19th-century persona: an engine of innovation and a cradle of vinous diversity. Of Steiermark's three official wine-growing regions, the smallest in total surface area but by far best known and most widely planted is Südsteiermark, a majority of its vineyards located within a few miles of the contemporary border with Slovenia, where Styria becomes "Stajerska." (Along some stretches of South Styria's *Weinstrasse*, which country you're in depends on which direction you're driving, as stenciled lane markers prominently point out.)

## STYRIA AND SAUVIGNON

Responsible during the mid-19th century for modernizing Greater Styria, Hapsburg Archduke Johann had been banished to the regional capital of Graz, a hundred miles as the crow flies south of Vienna, after his seditious notions for post-Napoleonic Austria threatened and embarrassed his relations at the Viennese court. Determined to create models that he thought the entire Empire should emulate, Johann oversaw fundamental administrative, infrastructural and educational reforms, not least of matters agricultural. The Archduke personally managed one of the several model research vineyards he instituted, introducing to Styria an unprecedentedly large cast of grape varieties, including riesling and sauvignon blanc. As he had hoped, Johann's viticultural innovations eventually resonated throughout the Empire. But Styria's vineyards, in terrain challenging to traverse, remained relatively remote, often associated with mere hamlets rather than villages, circumstances that were compounded when Austria went from vast empire to small Alpine republic in

1918, and three decades later, when Styria itself was divided by an “Iron Curtain.” Today, the Steiermark retains an almost embarrassing diversity of grapes; of these, sauvignon blanc began an ascent to primacy in the 1980s, when the region re-emerged in the consciousness of thirsty Austrians.

Like so many other virtuous features of Austria’s wine scene, Styria’s re-emergence is directly tied to the notorious wine scandal of 1985, with the discovery that sweet wines from Burgenland had been laced with oily diethylene glycol to simulate the effects of botrytis. The scandal up-ended Austria’s established wine order as wine drinkers rushed to distance themselves as much as possible from the geographical epicenter of this affair; from mercantile middle men; and from residual sugar. It was a rush headed straight into the arms of Styrian growers.

Styria had been spurned by merchant houses due to its low-yielding vineyards on steep, machine-defying, frost-prone slopes. The region’s winegrowing hamlets were connected solely by circuitous routes, and well into the 1970s typically traversed by ox cart—provided that the region’s prevalent rain hadn’t rendered them entirely impassable. Styrian growers could, after 1985, advertise themselves and their wines as “frank, deeply rooted and unspoiled” (all conveyed, with remarkable Germanic succinctness, by one word: *urwüchsig*). They promoted their region as a place to reconnect with rural beauty and

down-to-earth virtues (buzz word *Bodenständigkeit*) while filling one’s trunk with dry white wine.

At the time of the scandal, 25-year-old Manfred Tement had for a half dozen years been in charge of his family’s estate on the Zieregg, a slope bisected by the border with Yugoslavia, adjacent to the vineyards his father had managed for the local Carmelite monastery. He chose to position sauvignon blanc as his calling card. “I could well have chosen riesling,” he related in 2005, “but I eliminated it from consideration because, in that case, we would at best have been in third place, Austria-wide.” Rather than chasing Wachau and Kamptal riesling, he was convinced that he could vindicate Archduke Johann’s wisdom in having promoted sauvignon blanc for his homeland. Locally prominent and ambitious growers Alois Gross and Fritz Tinnacher were also enthusiastically on board.

Tement’s choice of signature vine proved auspicious, at least from the perspective of late-20th-century Austria. Not only did his sauvignon blanc from the Zieregg achieve national cult status, a host of fellow growers successfully harnessed their stars and their business models to efforts with this grape variety, whose acreage more than doubled between 2000 and 2012, reaching a trans-Styrian share of 18 percent.

Yet the importance placed on sauvignon had vulnerabilities in the international marketplace.

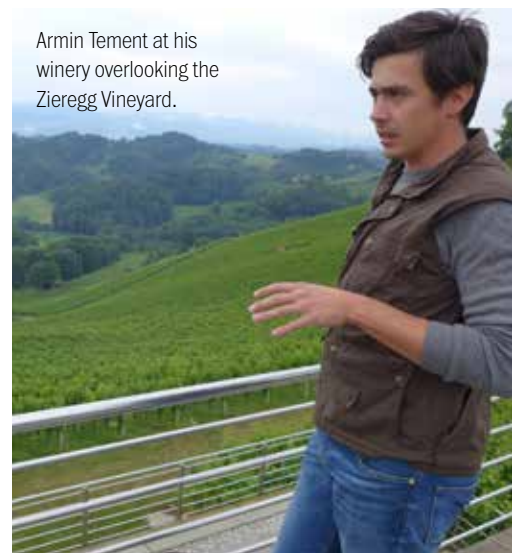
Manfred Tement harvested a pristine 1985 Sauvignon Blanc Kabinett trocken from the Zieregg that is still superb today.



## WELSCHRIESLING

The “welsch” in welschriesling simply signifies “foreign” origin. But this ubiquitous cash-flow grape, which has nothing to do with riesling, must have set out on its conquest of Central Europe from somewhere. In fact, signs have long pointed toward Styria, where it was already common two centuries ago. But this grape had never demonstrated profound potential until Heidi Schröck and Alois Kracher collaborated on a wine: The 2006 Greiner—named for a once-famous vineyard on the shores of Burgenland’s Neusiedlersee—represented the first known attempt to demonstrate that with low yields, late harvest and long élevage, this grape could deliver dry wine of intriguingly delicious depth. Armin Tement, son of the Styrian wine pioneer, was determined to launch his own ambitious welschriesling with a 2012 Weinstock Alte Reben from one of several tiny old blocks in the family’s prestigious Zieregg. After 14 months on the lees in a used barrique, this grape’s typical, brashly invigorating pineapple, lime and orange flavors emerged intact, married to palpable extract and an almost electric, vividly chalky and mouthwateringly saline finish. There look to be roughly a thousand liters worth of welschriesling from the Zieregg’s old vines, ideal for a fuder-sized experiment. But the stock of old vines Styria-wide is enormous. Liberating them from heavy crop loads, anaerobic enclosures and hasty bottling might demonstrate that Tement’s approach and exciting results are scalable.

Armin Tement at his winery overlooking the Zieregg Vineyard.



Renditions of sauvignon in what came to be known as the “Steirische Klassik” mode—primarily tank-raised and bottled early—often failed to distinguish themselves from sauvignons grown in places where enormous volumes could be machine-harvested. And one such region, Marlborough, New Zealand, had already achieved international brand recognition and cachet.

If *Klassik* renditions of sauvignon blanc were stylistically and commercially vulnerable, so too was the style of single-vineyard bottling to which Styrian growers owed their prestige within Austria. A preference for the barrique was understandable, considering that vessel’s unchallenged late-20th-century reputation. Too often, though, wood and grape seemed at odds in barrique-raised Styrian sauvignon blancs, and an awkward milkiness was not uncommon, due to malolactic bacteria transforming cool-climate musts of elevated malic acidity.

## STYLISTIC EVOLUTION

Tement once again took a transformative lead. By 2005, he claimed to be looking forward to letting the barriques in his cellar age to the point where their influence would be subtle. He would then renew wood only at an extremely selective pace. That renewal came in the form of larger barrels as well as new casks of 1000-liter capacity or greater, precisely the “fuders” once widely employed

throughout Austria. Along with Tement, Gross, Tinnacher and many other prominent Styrians began fermenting and aging their sauvignon in larger wooden vessels. They also allowed a more leisurely pace for their young wine’s evolution and, often, a correspondingly more relaxed approach to when or even whether nature opted for malolactic transformation. Their single-vineyard wines became more nuanced. Their corresponding willingness to give generic *Klassik* offerings some time in large casks and a later bottling, blurred a once-sharp stylistic distinction, and allowed both sorts of wine to become more expressive and distinctively Styrian.

Meanwhile, Tement and his son Armin, like many of their grüner veltliner-growing countrymen, placed increasing emphasis on achieving ripe flavors at lower potential alcohol by means of strategic pruning, picking and managing the vine canopy and crop load. Their wines thus became livelier and more buoyant without sacrificing site-borne distinctiveness or depth of flavor; as a bonus, at lower alcohol, whatever flavors were still being extracted from oak proved decidedly different and more harmonious.

Maverick biodynamic grower Sepp Muster farms farther back from the Slovenian border than Tement, where his vines have greater exposure to Alpine chill. Nonetheless, sauvignon tends to reach higher potential alcohol than do Muster’s other va-



Hartmut  
Aubell

## ALT-STEIERISCHER MISCHSATZ

When Hartmut Aubell took over his family’s Rebenhof in 2008 its vines had been farmed for a quarter century by Weingut Polz. Aubell envisioned the return of family farming and estate bottling as an occasion to explore the approaches of a bygone era, including skin maceration, extended cask maturation and, when nature cooperates, nobly sweet Ausbruch wines. There was still one mixed Rebenhof parcel dating to not long after this estate’s 1924 founding, and Aubell decided that he should revisit the tradition of field blends. Labeled merely as “Alt-Steierischer Mischsatz” (i.e. *Gemischter Satz*), the resultant 2013, at just 10.9% alcohol, offered a tingling sense of stones and seeds allied to mouthwatering salinity and consummate refreshment. “It’s a shame,” muses Aubell, “that vineyards like this, which used to be so common, are now rare.” But *Gemischte Sätze* are a small share of Viennese acreage, too, which hasn’t kept them from becoming the flagships of that metropolitan growing region. And inspired by this same legacy, Aubell is among Styrian growers experimenting successfully with co-fermentation of multiple grapes from separate parcels.





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—Christoph Neumeister

varieties before he deems their fruit properly ripe, so he, too, is constantly concerned with achieving balance and retaining vivacity. Without claiming to offer a definitive explanation, he chooses not to hedge his vines, as he believes that allowing them to keep growing upwards until they stop themselves helps to retard the accumulation of sugars and to enhance acidity. It’s an observation consistent with those of several prominent riesling growers in both Austria and Germany. Even in drought-plagued 2013, and in 2012, when growers measured interior grape temperatures as high as 70 degrees F at harvest, Muster’s finely floral “Opok” sauvignon blanc, for all of its satiny texture, glycerol richness and sense of stuffing, was animated, clear and refreshing.

### BACK TO THE ROOTS

Sauvignon blanc is also the standard-bearer at Weingut Lackner-Tinnacher, a 67-acre estate three miles west of Tement’s, under the direction of Katharina Tinnacher since 2010. Fresh from completing her university dissertation on “The Interaction between Vine, Soil and Microclimate,” Tinnacher was

determined to subject her family’s single-vineyard wines to “an interpretation that will reveal even more the characteristics of the site.” Besides converting to organic viticulture, she began systematically selecting vines from all of the grape varieties on the estate and having them propagated by a local nursery. Estate-specific selections would not just guarantee genetic diversity and, as such, insurance against vine illnesses. Tinnacher believes they would also be the key to fully expressing the unique characteristics of her vineyard sites. Three single-vineyard sauvignons here reflect stark differences in elevation, wind exposure, water retention and geological underpinnings.

Südoststeiermark borders Südsteiermark to the West, Slovenia to the South, and opens up to the warming breezes of the Hungarian plain to the East. Amid this sprawling region’s scattered high hills, Christoph Neumeister discovered a link to vine roots even more tangible than that of estate-specific vine selections. Neumeister located parcels of sauvignon blanc in the thin, gravelly sandstone-based soil of Straden’s Klausen and Buchberg vineyards that were trained in archaic fashion to single posts (*Stockkultur*). The two growers who tended them until 2007 were able to verify planting dates of 1967, 1951 and 1937—the last of these very likely Austria’s oldest sauvignon vines. Neumeister’s initial trio of vintifications collectively displayed clarity and com-

### SAUVIGNON & PARTNERS

Sepp and Maria Muster’s estate consists almost entirely of one massive ridge.

Sepp and Maria Muster stumbled upon a remarkable synergy of sauvignon and chardonnay while seeking to showcase the rocky upper reaches of their property and the virtues of local Opok marl. “It’s much easier to sell varietally labeled wine,” notes Sepp Muster, “so it was a risk to begin blending this one from our best sites. We did it not for any commercial reason but strictly based on aesthetic intuition.” Leaving the wine in cask for two years was also hardly a commercial decision. The result is a flagship bottling, Sgaminegg, richly textured and spellbinding in its interaction of floral, mineral and herbal elements. Within a few years of



taking over his family’s estate in 2001, the Musters’ had earned a small but dedicated following as champions of “natural wine,” thanks to their biodynamic farming, passive cellar approach, minimal sulfuring and iconoclastic disinterest in convincing the authorities to approve their wines for a “Südsteiermark” appellation. Among their admirers, several have further explored co-fermenting sauvignon and chardonnay, Ewald Tschettepe of Weingut Werlitsch making such marriages the cornerstone of his promising portfolio.

plexity he had heretofore seldom, if ever, achieved. In his fourth effort, the 2011 Straden Alte Reben bottling, flinty, fusel and alkaline notes conveyed an eerily Loire-like aura to ripe and vibrant small-berried phenolic intensity, confirming the value in these old vines.

Of previous efforts at taming and harnessing sauvignon blanc's often headstrong varietal signature, Neumeister had insisted: "We never have 'screaming' sauvignon. It's always more of a grüner veltliner type with a certain spiciness and saltiness that is something you can't make or do, but something that, thank goodness, simply comes out." These old vines and their future propagation will dramatically further their grower's search for subtlety, distinctiveness, and site-synergy, expressed in sauvignons that remain inherently riper and richer in texture than those of Südsteiermark.

The effects of site on flavor—while mediated by style, viticultural regimen and vine genetics—are ultimately decisive if growers hope to justify multiple single-vineyard bottlings. Styria is replete with impressive examples of distinct differences between wines that differ significantly only in site, many of which may depend on the consistency and rock or clay content of their soils. Meager clay content and rapid drainage in Katharina Tinnacher's gravelly Steinbach ("stone brook") site no doubt force vine roots deep and may still, in some vintages, induce

drought stress. But, as in so many growing regions, it's hard to believe that soil chemistry does not play a role, too. The Steinbach sauvignon typically features ripe orchard fruits while Tinnacher sauvignon from the Welles and Flamberg, both sites high in active lime (the latter, like Zieregg, a former coral reef), runs toward citrus fruits and struck-flint pungency. Many growers associate high active lime (calcaire) in soils with energy, lift and enhanced acidity in the resultant wines, a hypothesis that seems to find frequent confirmation in Styria. Young Johannes Gross has a slightly different take on the alleged influence of such soils, specifically on sauvignon blanc. "A grape variety that has such a strong varietal identity," he opines, "needs something to restrain it, and limestone has a cooling effect and brings mineral nuances." Less active lime-rich volcanic soils are regularly associated with more effusive aromas and darker berry or herb manifestations of sauvignon, but it's never easy to rule out other factors, including the influence of tasters' imaginations.

This much seems certain: Recent viticultural and winemaking developments are rendering Styrian wines increasingly sensitive to whatever messages their sites, vines and vintners might have to transmit. The result will be greater diversity. Yet out of this will emerge a clearer sense of what makes this kaleidoscopically shifting region and its wines distinct. ■

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—Johannes Gross



Karl Schnabel's young Blaufränkisch vines in the Sausal.

## FRESH, BIODYNAMIC BLAUFRÄNKISCH

While black grapes were long part of Styria's menagerie, collective 20th-century "wisdom" has it that the region is too cool and rainy to succeed with red wine grapes. When agronomist Karl Schnabel, fresh from a late-'90s *stage* in Burgundy, purchased his dozen steeply sloped Südsteiermark acres, he planted what once were lauded as Austria's "two Burgundies." But that isn't why Schnabel made those convention-defying choices. "I planted mostly blaufränkisch and pinot noir because that's what I like to drink," he declared with what seemed like genuine naiveté. "The disadvantage," he added, "is I don't have any old vines, and had to choose from a restricted range of clones, which I put on the least vigorous root stock I could get." Outside observers would surely have emphasized the disadvantage of having chosen the Sausal, Südsteiermark's coolest, northernmost and sole significant riesling-growing sector. The rewards for Schnabel's low-yielding, biodynamic, backbreaking methods and sulfur-free bottling have been impressive pinot performances and a Blaufränkisch Hohegg of shockingly sublime synergy, silken-textured and vividly fresh. Like Styria itself, this wine seethes with fermentative energy. What Schnabel's vines and methods will yield with maturity and perhaps an infusion of superior vine selections is as awesome a prospect as this region's hilly panorama.