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FROM AUSTRIA
TO ZIERFANDLER

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Out of Obscurity

Austria's Under-Appreciated **Autochthones**

By David Schildknecht

Austrian wine growers are lucky. They've taken center stage with grapes they practically have to themselves.

The country's two most important and potentially profound grape varieties—Blaufränkisch and Grüner Veltliner—are little planted elsewhere in the world. Zweigelt—Austria's most widely planted red, is a source of easy-going, forwardly fruited reds and a key component in many a synergistic blend, but, similarly plays scarcely any role outside its (1922) birthplace.

There are, in fact, numerous underappreciated, internationally obscure grape varieties whose delightful and even exciting potential at least a few imaginative and intrepid Austrian growers are routinely demonstrating. Some are working with cépages of miniscule acreage such as the mysterious Gelber Traminer, or Furmint in its recent revival around Rust. Others are demonstrating the potential of a quite widely planted—and, in instances such as Blauburger, Gelber Muskateller, Neuburger or Roter Veltliner, an at-one-time much more widespread—cépage. When it comes to Welschriesling, that grape's sheer ubiquity even today is, no doubt, a major reason why until recently so few growers attempted to render from it something memorable.



St Laurent is a deep, plushly textured son of pinot noir



Rotgipfler wines from the Thermenregion combine body and citric vivacity

The grape illustrations by Siobhan Thomas were inspired by plates from *Atlas der für den Weinbau Deutschlands und Oesterreichs werthvollsten Traubensorten* by Hermann Goethe and Rudolphe Goethe, published in Vienna in 1876.

Illustrations by Siobhan Thomas

Austria's sheer number of autochthones is impressively large. Few of these have a secure place on Austria's future grape roster. Every year, growers (including a couple who make my personal hit list below) ask themselves questions such as whether the capriciousness of Gelber Muskateller or St. Laurent—not to mention the greater commercial attraction of the latter's famous parent, Pinot Noir, in identical sites—make it worth persevering. Still, one would hope that of all people, Austrian wine growers would recognize a Cinderella lesson in the rise of Grüner Veltliner, from obscurity largely within mixed plantings to solo stardom within three generations, and would not view any grape's lowly or even despised station today as decisive evidence of its lack of potential.

Happily—thanks almost entirely to Viennese growers' desire to promote a distinctive category among vineyards that have survived in significant numbers—the revival of Gemischter Satz is secure, and some of those grape varieties capable of extraordinary solo feats that few wine lovers have witnessed will at least live on in these field blends if nowhere else. Even Pinot Blanc (a.k.a. Weissburgunder), a grape most wine lovers only think they know, and with which some dozen Austrian growers excel, might only survive in this way. But here's hoping it doesn't come to that!

Herewith, a personal hit list highlighting outstanding and imaginative proponents of Austria's underappreciated and autochthonous varieties. Most of their wines are site specific if not in fact vineyard designated; those starred with an asterisk are growers who routinely bottle more than one wine per vintage featuring the cépage in question.

BLAUBURGER

Once more common in much of the Weinviertel than Grüner Veltliner, this black grape offers a profusion of juicy, spice-tinged dark berries coupled with remarkable absence of appreciable tannin.

Pollerhof (Weinviertel)

ability to capture sustained primary juiciness.

Bründlmayer (Kamptal)

Knoll* (Wachau)

Sepp & Maria Muster

(Südsteiermark)

Pollerhof (Weinviertel)

FURMINT

Thanks to the Wenzels and a few others in Rust, this cépage is staging a small comeback, not only with selections culled from old vineyards in Tokaj, but with back-from-the-dead propagation of a few degenerate vines discovered to have survived in Rust. Furmint, in fact, was once a mainstay of what was then called German West Hungary, now Burgenland. With time on the vine (and time on the palate) piquant lime and buckwheat can give way to effusively floral honey, and firmness to opulence, even in dry versions.

Schröck* (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)

Wenzel* (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)

GELBER TRAMINER

While not even officially recognized by Austrian wine law (though one may legally label the fruits of its yellow berries "Traminer" or "Roter Traminer"!), this Savagnin Vert look-alike is unmistakably distinctive, combining the rose petals of Gewürztraminer with almost Riesling-like vivacity and refreshment, its acidity helping render it outstanding in sweet versions. Knoll obtained their cuttings in the late 1990s from the Salomons, and a few other growers, like Umatham, have encouraged vines found within mixed plantings.

Knoll* (Wachau)

Umatham (Neusiedlersee)

Salomon—Undhof* (Kremstal)

Salomon—Oberstockstall (Wagram)

GELBER MUSKATELLER

A long-standing mainstay of Austrian, Hungarian and German viticulture, this piquantly citrus-zesty and pungently herbal variant of Muscat à Petits Grains typically informs invigorating but brusquely dry wines, especially in Southern Styria. Those growers rendering more memorable versions tend toward idiosyncrasy (Bründlmayer, for instance, nowadays always harvests this grape last; the Musters subject their fruit to extended, sulfur-free lees élevage) but share an uncommon

NEUBURGER

According to legend, Neuburger was discovered at mid-19th century as a bundle of vines floating in the Danube. A crossing of Roter Veltliner and Sylvaner (the latter long known as "Österreicher," though nowadays almost entirely neglected in its homeland), it quickly spread east from the Wachau. Its proclivity to require long hang time combined with susceptibility to rot and disease—and perhaps, too, its



Zierfandler is Chenin-like in its juxtaposition of opulence with brightness.

discrete manner—have led to a steady drop in acreage, but its wines' florality; nutty, sweetly vegetal flavors of white asparagus; and strikingly silken texture render it distinctively versatile as well as an irresistible quaffer. (But be careful; it tends toward high alcohol.) A serious search will turn up terrific examples with 30 or more years of bottle age.

G. Heinrich (Neusiedlersee)
Hirtzberger (Wachau)
Mantlerhof (Kremstal)
Nikolaihof (Wachau)
Tinhof* (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)

ROTER TRAMINER

A century ago, to the extent that Traminer was known at all, it was in this variant, which is still prominently featured (as a body-booster and aromatizer) in old field blends not just in Vienna but elsewhere (including what few such mixed plantings remain in Germany). The carnal and peppery aspects of the Traminer family tend to be emphasized, and relatively high potential alcohol tends to be requisite for achieving interesting flavors. (Umamath's is field-blended with Gelber Traminer.)

Neumeister (Südoststeiermark)
Umamath (Neusiedlersee)

ROTER VELTLINER

Unrelated to "Grüner," Roter Veltliner—once dominant in the Wagram, east of Krems—ripens only at high potential alcohol, yet the best (routinely dry) renditions manage to hide it. Musk, citrus and rhubarb are among features of its opulent yet simultaneously piquantly phenolic (as well as potentially long-lived) wines unsuited to the faint of heart.

Leth (Wagram)
Mantlerhof (Kremstal)
Rudi Pichler (Wachau)
Setzer (Weinviertel)

ST. LAURENT

St. Laurent (pronounced in Austria "sahnkt-LORE-ent") takes after its famous parent Pinot Noir (in intercourse with we-know-not-whom) by being site-sensitive and generally finicky (today it's unripe, tomorrow it rots), which is why many growers ask themselves, "Why take the trouble if it's not Pinot?" The best St. Laurent, however, resoundingly answers that question with deep cherry fruit, satiny but plusher texture than most Pinot, plus alluring animality and spice. (Zweigelt, incidentally, is a crossing of St. Laurent with Blaufränkisch.) Hannes Schuster is rescuing much of what's left in his sector, with

memorable results that he points out now sell very well in the US though not at home.

Bründlmayer (Kamptal)
Schloss Gobelsburg (Kamptal)
G. Heinrich (Neusiedlersee)
Rosi Schuster* (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)

WELSCHRIESLING

Ubiquitous throughout central Europe—and in more linguistic variants than there are national tongues—this grape gets little respect (outside its usefulness for nobly sweet wines), in part no doubt because its name suggests *ersatz*-Riesling but mostly because it's harvested at marginal ripeness with refreshing but simple, slightly green results. Give it time on the vine (and proper élevage)—plus perhaps a dollop, at least, of botrytis—and its spiced pineapple can pick up remarkable complexity, as proven in recent years by Schröck and Kracher's vineyard-designate "Greiner," which spends three years in cask, or by the 2013 debut of one small barrel's worth from old vines in the Weinstock sector of Zierregg, an insightful project that young Armin Tement plans to expand.

Schröck Kracher (Neusiedlersee-Hügelland)
Tement* (Südsteiermark)

ZIERFANDLER, ROTGIPFLER

These two white wine grapes (the latter's shoot tips—*gipfel*—are what's red) are features of the Thermenregion south of Vienna, and are often blended, in which case the Zierfandler curiously tends to take the name Spätrot (also that of an important family estate). Wines from Rotgipfler strikingly combine body with citric brightness; Zierfandler is Chenin-like both in its juxtaposition of opulence with brightness, and its spiced quince and citrus flavors. To taste Stadlmann's rendition from the Mandel-Höh is to realize that Zierfandler can generate long-lived and irresistibly seductive libations of mind-bending complexity. (Quite possibly, a mix-up of labels when vines of this cépage were brought to the US from then Imperial Austria accounts for the name Zinfandel.)

Spaetrot—Familie Gebeshuber* (Thermenregion)
Stadlmann* (Thermenregion)

And a few outstanding practitioners of "Gemischter Satz" (field blends) that include autochthones and neglected cépages:
Jutta Ambrositsch* (Wien)
Ingrid Groiss (Weinviertel)
Hajszan* (Wien)
Neumayer (Traisental)
Wieninger* (Wien) ■

YEAR'S BEST AUSTRIAN WINES

blanc to mind. Pour it as you would a Savennières, with all manner of river fish. *Vignaioli Selection, NY*

SAUVIGNON BLANC

93 | Neumeister \$25
2012 Südoststeiermark Steirische Klassik Straden Sauvignon Blanc (Best Buy) Ostensibly, this should be less impressive than Klausen, a single vineyard sauvignon also recommended here. And yet the 2012 is so succulent, stony and dynamic that it's riveting. It has power, but it's restrained, the flavors honing to delicate, floral citrus notes, and the body maintaining crystal clarity despite its size. *Monika Caha Selections/Frederick Wildman and Sons, NY*

91 | Tement \$64
2011 Südsteiermark Zierregg Sauvignon Blanc Armin and Stefan Tement work with their father, Manfred, to produce this wine, from the limestone vineyard that slopes down just in front of their winery. It needs time and air to work its way out of its concentration; right now, it's a tangy nugget of sauvignon blanc. But what lasts is the impression of limestone, a seashell, chalky minerality that's mouthwatering all on its own. Decant it for a bowl of clams in garlic butter and herbs. *Weygandt-Metzler Importing, Unionville, PA*

90 | Adolf & Heinrich Fuchs \$19
2012 Steiermark Sauvignon Blanc (Best Buy) Heinrich Fuchs got hooked on wine when he worked at Lindemans in Australia's Hunter Valley in the 1950s. Today, his grandsons, Adolf and Heinrich, run the winery in Glanz. Their 2012 sauvignon is dynamic: spicy and salty in its minerality, the limey flavor running on a firm, swift current of acidity. *Vignaioli Selection, NY*



90 | Sattlerhof \$22
2012 Südsteiermark Sauvignon Blanc (Best Buy) There's an almost aggressive power to this wine even while its flavors are reserved, more about stone and lime pith than any overt fruit. It feels large, charged with momentum, ready to take on an herbed pork loin twice its size. *Circo Vino, Tucson, AZ*

90 | Neumeister \$25
2011 Südoststeiermark Klausen Sauvignon Blanc (Best Buy) From a 20-acre east- to southeast-facing vineyard, this was fermented with indigenous yeasts and left on its lees for a year in large wooden casks. The result in 2011 is intriguing, as the fruit is limey and peppery in a green peppercorn mode, while the body is broad and full, almost chunky. It needs time to knit together, and a *blanquette de veau*. *Monika Caha Selections/Frederick Wildman and Sons, NY*

TRAMINER

93 | Familien Wimmer-Czerny \$26
2012 Wagram Mitterweg Trio Traminer Even if you don't typically like floral whites, try this one. Hans Czerny has run his family's 250-year-old estate since 1987, transitioning it to organics and then biodynamics; he blends this wines from three traminers: roter, gelber and gewürz. They all come off the same limestone-rich vineyard, the youngest vines about a quarter-century old. Blended together, they create a rich harmony of flavor, running from snappy herbs to expansive gardenia in scent, and grapefruit to pineapple in flavor. The acidity keeps it lively and clean; the minerality gives it a salty savor. It's lovely, especially with something herby and vital, like a big bowl of *fattoush* this summer. *Domaine Select Wine Estates, NY*

WHITE BLENDS

91 | Christ \$20
2012 Wien Gemischter Satz (Best Buy) Breezy and fresh, this traditional field blend is meant for immediate drinking: it's easy and inviting in its juicy, fresh fruit, and thirst-quenching in its balance of mineral and acid. And yet this wine has even more to offer: a broad firmness of flavor that holds it fresh for days after opening, ready to embrace whatever dish you might want to pour it with. *Carlo Huber Selections, Salisbury, CT*

90 | Spaetrot Gebeshuber \$21
2011 Thermenregion Klassik (Best Buy) A blend of half and half rotgipfler and zierfandler vinified entirely in stainless steel, this is a spicy, succulent white, the fruit falling somewhere between grapefruit and starfruit in refreshing pucker and sweetness. The spice turns toward floral scents, revealing a delicacy that's played up next to sautéed scallops. *Vignaioli Selection, NY*

ness, this is a rustic and intriguing riesling, built for wheat berry salads or the elegant, earthy sprout salad at *Betony* in NYC. *Domaine Select Wine Estates, NY*

87 | Schloss Gobelsburg \$35
2012 Kamptal Gaisberg Riesling (Best Buy) This is very pretty, perfumed with sweet violets and juicy with peach flavor. It's clean, round and inviting, and ends a little sweet; to chill for *Pok Pok's* lacy Thai catfish salad. *Terry Theise Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, NY*

ROTER TRAMINER

88 | Neumeister \$30
2011 Südoststeiermark Steintal Roter Traminer Made from the pink-skinned variation of traminer (savagnin rosé), this is plush in texture and floral in scent. Its gentle white cherry and citrus notes bring to mind a match with grilled mackerel or river fish. *Monika Caha Selections/Frederick Wildman and Sons, NY*

ROTER VELTLINER

90 | Ecker \$21
2012 Wagram Eckhof Roter Veltliner (Best Buy) Roter veltliner has nothing to do with grüner veltliner; it's an old variety that's a specialty of the Wagram. Ecker's 2012 is one of the tamer versions, citric and saline, like a salted, spiced limeade. It's wild and mouthwatering, and would be good with choucroute. *Terry Theise Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, NY*

ROTGIPFLER

92 | Alphart \$24
2012 Thermenregion Vom Berg Rotgipfler The Alpharts have been making wine in Thermenregion since 1762; they still focus on the region's autochthone varieties. This is their basic rotgipfler cuvée, and yet it's a powerhouse, with screaming acidity charging through its dense, juicy fruit. It tastes of honeydew melon and fresh pineapple, herbs and earth, and yet it feels savory, a large-boned wine for roast turkey. *Winemonger Imports, San Anselmo, CA*

92 | Spaetrot Gebeshuber \$43
2010 Thermenregion Lage Laim Rotgipfler This combines tropical fruit with a rainforest cool, the acidity winding through it in a way that makes it feel elegant despite its size. A slight grape-skin grip relieves the oiliness of the wine, a balance that brings chenin