

Zeitgeist for **ZIERFANDLER**

REDISCOVERING ONE OF AUSTRIA'S NOBLEST GRAPE VARIETIES

by Cliff Rames

in the Gumpoldskirchen district of the wine-growing region Thermenregion just south of Vienna, Austria, a set of railroad tracks suddenly disappears under a small hill—more a mound than a mountain—only to re-emerge again about 500 feet later. There seems no apparent reason for the tunnel to exist in the undulating, vineyard-carpeted terrain, other than to prove that it can.

Just beyond the tunnel, Mandel-Höh vineyard fans out in southeast-facing rows, more in deference to than in defiance of the quirks of the landscape. While many vineyards throughout Austria have been replanted to the popular and profitable Grüner Veltliner, Mandel-Höh endures as the historical and spiritual home of Zierfandler; the Grand Cru for one of Austria's most celebrated yet obscure indigenous grape varieties.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF WEINGUT STADLMANN

Zierfandler grapes before harvest, when the berries take on a distinctive blush-colored hue.

PHOTO: AMMERWEINGUT STADLMANN

Mandel-Höh vineyard, the ancestral and spiritual home of Zierfandler.

Wines, including Zierfandlers, at the guided tasting of the wines of the Thermenregion wine-growing region during the Austrian Wine Summit in May.



Bernhard Stadlmann, an eighth-generation winemaker whose family has continuously cultivated Mandel-Höh for 170 years, is a benchmark producer and champion of the variety. In an interview for *The Somm Journal*, Stadlmann highlighted Zierfandler's importance in the development of Austrian wine culture.

"Zierfandler is an old autochthonous grape from the Thermenregion," he told me, "celebrated and served at royal courts throughout Europe and Russia. At the Exposition Universelle of 1855 in Paris [where the Bordeaux classification was established], a Zierfandler-based Gumpoldskirchen blend won the gold medal in the white wine category. After World War II, Zierfandler was among the first Austrian wines to be exported to the U.S. It is truly one of Austria's most noble grape varieties." Monika Caha, a New York importer of artisanal Austrian wines (including Stadlmann), concurred with a chuckle: "During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, peasants drank Grüner Veltliner. The Habsburg monarchy enjoyed Zierfandler."

Also known as Spätrot, meaning "late ripening red" (its berries blush pale crimson before harvest), Zierfandler is a natural cross between Roter Veltliner (no relation to Grüner) and a Traminer-related variety. Stadlmann cautions that Zierfandler is difficult to cultivate, prone to botrytis and requires a long, dry ripening period. But in the right conditions (downslope winds to lick off moisture; calcareous, weathered brown soils; low precipitation; and lots of autumn sun), it can produce elegant yet well-structured wines with rich fruit and floral aromas, crystalline acidity, vibrant salinity, and extensive aging potential.

With just 82 hectares (203 acres) currently under vine, Zierfandler represents a fraction of Austria's 30,500 hectares (75,367 acres) planted to white varieties (Grüner Veltliner dominates with 14,376 hectares). Consider also the variety's tendency for low yields, and it is no surprise so little Zierfandler finds its way into the consciousness and dining rooms of sommeliers and consumers.

Undeterred, a handful of producers led by Stadlmann and Johanneshof Reinisch, importers such as Caha and Sariya Jarasviroj Brown of Circo Vino and high-profile sommeliers like Pascaline Lepeltier from Rouge Tomato in New York City are striving to restore Zierfandler to its past glory by introducing it to new generations of wine lovers. "Zierfandler is an unsung hero with a great potential," Lepeltier told me via email. "It combines power and acid structure with noble aromatics of orchard fruit. The texture is superb, unctuous yet with tension in the backbone. It reminds me of Chenin Blanc. How can I not be interested?!" Jesse Becker, Master Sommelier and a Market Specialist for Winebow Group, says he enjoys Zierfandler's

Benchmark Zierfandler: the single vineyard Mandel-Höh from Stadlmann.



Rotgipfler, another specialty of the Thermenregion. It is a cross between Savagnin and Roter Veltliner and produces aromatic wines with a distinctive spicy character and chalky backbone.



Michael Reinisch of Johanneshof Reinisch winery (left) and Bernhard Stadlmann (right) present a guided tasting of the wines of the Thermenregion during the Austrian Wine Summit in May. Stadlmann's family has been cultivating Zierfandler at Mandel-Höh for 170 years; he is an eighth-generation winemaker at Weingut Stadlmann.

fabulous mouth-watering acidity and luscious, round texture. "It's a delicious, fun and unique wine to try—definitely worth seeking out." And Aldo Sohm, Head Sommelier at Le Bernardin and owner of Aldo Sohm Wine Bar in New York City, features Stadlmann Zierfandler on his wine lists. "I love that wine. It drinks so pure and elegant and pairs well with so many dishes. Our guests are responding really well to it."

Zierfandler is often blended with Rotgipfler, another specialty of the Thermenregion. DNA tests have determined Rotgipfler is a cross of Savagnin and Roter Veltliner, thereby making it a half-sibling to Zierfandler and equally susceptible to botrytis, although it ripens a bit earlier. Stadlmann notes Rotgipfler wines are more aromatic with warmer tones than Zierfandler and higher alcohol levels. "The texture is fleshier; its fruit opulent and rich with a distinctive spicy character and chalky backbone." While Rotgipfler can age well, the wine is approachable earlier than Zierfandler. "Rotgipfler grows in opulence while developing, Zierfandler into elegance."

Caha admits that while these rare grapes may never go mainstream, they are worth the fight. "Anyone who enjoys and appreciates lesser-known indigenous varieties should celebrate and salute the Stadlmann family. They could get rich growing other varieties, but they preserved Zierfandler and Rotgipfler because they believe in them. They are my heroes."

Willi Klinger, Managing Director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board (AWMB), calls Zierfandler and Rotgipfler "part of our treasure" of indigenous and rare grape varieties capable of yielding unique, high-quality wines. "Until now, these grapes have flourished in secret, appreciated only by locals or very curious connoisseurs from abroad. But today, an increasing number of wine lovers are discovering these obscure varieties. Once they taste these noble jewels of Austria, I am sure they will love them." In a timely display of solidarity at the recent MUST wine summit in Cascais, Portugal, Swiss grape geneticist José Vouillamoz, co-author of *Wine Grapes*, included Zierfandler in his wish list of obscure grapes that could become stars of the future.

In philosophy there exists the concept of Zeitgeist: a powerful force that inspires trends and defines the spirit of an era. Standing with Bernhard Stadlmann on a hill overlooking Mandel Höf, glass of Zierfandler in hand, I watched a train dip into the tunnel and disappear toward a horizon of unseen possibility. Suddenly and simultaneously, I felt the gravity of history and the uplift of epiphany. Indeed—perhaps the Zeitgeist for Zierfandler has arrived.

Austria's Red Revolution

Beyond Zweigelt, red wine is generally not associated with Austria. Aldo Sohm, Head Sommelier at Le Bernardin in NYC, believes that is fast changing, due in part to the rising popularity of two previously overlooked but deliciously intriguing varieties: Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent (Sankt Laurent).



PHOTO: AWMB/PIPER

Blaufränkisch (aka Lemberger), a dark-berried, robust Austro-Hungarian variety, is the second most planted red grape in Austria (2,808 hectares; Zweigelt reigns with 6,311 hectares). It is mainly cultivated in Burgenland and eastern

Niederösterreich near Hungary (where it's known as Kékfrankos). Capable of producing deeply colored, full-bodied wines with black fruit and a spicy, savory character, Blaufränkisch is especially expressive of site and terroir. "It is a bit of a chameleon," says Sariya Jarasviroj Brown of Circo Vino. "It has a large bandwidth capable of a wide range of styles, from fresh and fruity to peppery and incredibly robust." Jesse Becker, MS, believes Blaufränkisch has a bright future and recommends Weingut J. Heinrich. "If there is one variety that will take off, it will be Blaufränkisch."



PHOTO: AWMB/PIPER

St. Laurent has its disciples too. But "it's a funny one," say Becker. Depending on where its grown and how its vinified, St. Laurent can deliver characteristics that either mimic velvety red-fruit Pinot Noir or meaty, earthy cool-climate Syrah.

The origin of St. Laurent is even murkier. Leading grape geneticist José Vouillamoz, co-author of *Wine Grapes*, told *The Somm Journal* in an email that the parentage of St. Laurent "is a long and complex story." Nonetheless, he confirms St. Laurent is indeed "a progeny of Pinot," cultivated for centuries in the Thermenregion, Neusiedlersee and Weinviertel regions of Austria. Back at Le Bernardin in NYC, Aldo Sohm includes the Rosi Schuster 2015 St. Laurent on Chef Éric Ripert's tasting menu. The pairing? Baked striped bass, spaghetti squash and green papaya salad with ginger red wine sauce. **SJ**