

Mixed Case: Opinion And Advice

Crafting Blaufränkisch

Austria's Burgenland region has been quietly molding the grape's identity



Photo by: ÖWM / Egon Mark

The bucolic Eisenberg is home to some of Austria's best red wines.

Mixed Case

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By Emma Balter

Franz Weninger returned from a trip to California in 1999 amused that everyone there was emulating French winemaking. But back at his family winery in Burgenland, Austria, he realized his father was doing just that. French yeasts, French enzymes, French knowledge. "Oh my god, he's not making Austrian wine, he's copying Bordeaux!" Weninger thought. Many emerging wine regions were doing the same.

However, in the last decade, Burgenland has found its bearings, with help from its star grape: Blaufränkisch.

Burgenland was part of Hungary until 1921, when it was annexed as Austria's ninth (and easternmost) state. "We are much more related culturally, geologically, climatically to all the Hungarian winegrowing areas, like Tokaj or Balaton," says Roland Velich of Moric winery. Weninger goes further: "When Burgenland [became] part of Austria, somehow we lost our heritage a little bit, or our knowledge."

The area is certainly different than the rest of Austria, whose *terroir* favors whites like Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. Burgenland is red country, with Blaufränkisch leading the way. To Weninger's point, it took a little while for "Blau"—as the locals call it—to plant its flag firmly in the ground, due to past mistakes in selecting clones and rootstocks.

Stefan Tscheppe, general manager of Esterházy, attributes the recent rise in quality to slower-growing rootstock, denser plantings and a better understanding of cover crops. In the cellar, vintners stopped overextracting the variety. Many believe this practice, coupled with the grape's naturally high acidity, led to wines that were too rustic in their youth. "We have to accept the high acid as a god-given thing," says Weninger, explaining that gentler tannins are needed for balance.

Ask producers to describe Blau and you'll repeatedly hear the "triangle" comparison: The grape has the elegance of Burgundy Pinot Noir, the pepperiness of Northern Rhône Syrah, and the structure of Nebbiolo from Piedmont. The consensus, however, is that Blau is as much a vehicle for *terroir* as, say, Chardonnay. "Blaufränkisch is like a phantom. It really tastes like the place it grows on," says Martin Nittnaus, who helms his family's namesake winery.

Beginning in 2005, Austria created four DACs (its equivalent of France's AOC) in Burgenland; three of them are at the forefront of Blaufränkisch's revival. The hilly Eisenberg has the most significant elevation in the region and makes elegant, minerally Blaus. Mittelburgenland's dense loamy soils deliver a richer, more fruit-forward version of the variety. In Leithaberg, with limestone and slate soils, vintners can blend Blau with up to 15 percent Zweigelt, Saint Laurent and Pinot Noir for full-bodied wines that also display mineral and spice.

Within these DACs exist many *terroirs*, with distinct microclimates and their own complex soils. Vintners have recently capitalized on this by bottling single-vineyard cuvées, following the Burgundian model. "The more this model picks up, people will realize that Blaufränkisch is a highly complex and noble grape," says Nittnaus. All the producers above make single-vineyard Blau, an effort to elevate the category in the market.

What drew me to learn more about this Austrian grape is how much it offers after several years in bottle. I was impressed by recent tastings of Blau from 2011 back to 2006; the wines were vibrant and fresh, showing plush red and blue fruit, solid minerality, and intense, peppery spice. This variety is a testament to acidity's role in the ageability of wine. "The acid is the force in the wine that keeps it alive," says Weninger.

Look for the Dürrau, Szapary, Altenberg and Tannenberg vineyards, which are exceptional with five to 10 years of bottle age. Other notable Blaufränkisch producers include Paul Achs, Judith Beck, Gut Oggau, Heinrich, Anton Iby and Prieler.

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