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AUSTRIA'S GOLDEN YEAR: 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

Saturday, November 19, 2022

606 Tasting Notes



The spectacular Wachau, Austria's most famous wine region. (Photos by JamesSuckling.com)

The leading wine producers of France were unlucky in 2021, and those of Germany were only saved by fine weather in the late fall. In contrast, 2021 was a golden year for Austria's winemakers.

"Yes, we have high acidity in 2021, but it tastes so ripe," said Lucas Pichler of F.X. Pichler in Loiben, in Austria's Wachau region. "Right from the beginning it tasted very well integrated."

His perfect F.X. Pichler Riesling Wachau Ried Kellerberg 2021, with a tidal wave of crushed rock minerality, shows just what great excitement the best 2021 Austrian dry whites have. It is also moderate alcohol compared not only to recent vintages at this winery, but recent vintages in the Danube wine regions in general.



Lucas and Johanna Pichler of F.X. Pichler in the Wachau.

"Great wine doesn't need high alcohol!" Pichler added with great vehemence. "In Austria we need to go back in the direction of the 1980s, when the wines had moderate alcohol." And the 2021 growing season really helped make that possible.

2017 and 2018 were very warm, dry years in Austria. 2019 was also warm, though it was blessed by adequate rainfall and a beautiful fall. Then followed the cool and rainy 2020. After tasting more than 550 wines for this report, talking to dozens of winemakers and studying the weather stats, I think it's fair to say that 2021 lies between these extremes of temperature and rainfall.

"The year started modestly enough, consequently flowering was rather late, but beautiful and short," said Andreas Wickhoff, the general manager for Weingut Brundlmayer, in the town of Langenlois in Austria's Kamptal region. "Summer was warm, but never really hot."

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"Several marvelous late-summer days revived our hopes for a good vintage, then from mid-October, the Foehn [a warm Alpine wind from the south] provided the ultimate push toward ripeness and led us into a golden finale," he said.

It wasn't only famous producers like F.X. Pichler who made amazing wines in the 2021 vintage. Another perfect example of the vintage is the spectacularly elegant Nigl Riesling Kremstal Ried Hochäcker EL Privat 2021, with its off-the-scale minerality.

2021 not only brought a career high point for Martin Nigl Sr. and Jr. of the Nigl winery in the Kremstal, but also for Johannes Hirsch in the Kamptal region, with his diamond-bright Hirsch Riesling Kamptal Ried Gaisberg EL 2021 and its cornucopia of stone fruit and wild herb aromas.

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Markus Huber shows off the chalk and iron rich conglomerate at the Ried Berg vineyard site.

The same can be said for Markus Huber of Reichersdorf, in the Traisental region. His Markus Huber Riesling Traisental Ried Berg EL 2021 has mind-blowing freshness. The chalk-rich conglomerate soil in this region gives this wine a striking minerality.



The perfect-scoring and spectacularly elegant Nigl Riesling Kremstal Ried Hochäcker EL Privat 2021.

Quite recently, I was also able to taste the 2001 vintage of the Nigl Riesling Hochäcker, and the parallel in quality and style with the 2021 was striking. Other winemakers drew comparisons with the 1999 and 1997 vintages, the top wines from which continue to stun and impress. That bodes very well for the way the best 2021 wines will age.

If I was asked to pick a recent vintage for dry whites from Austria's signature grape, gruner veltliner, then I would also go for 2021, thanks to the brightness of the acidity. Low acidity can be a problem for the wines of this grape in warm vintages and/or when they are too late-picked. A few high-end 2021 gruner veltliners that fell into the latter category were the vintage's only real weak spot.



The view from the Gaisberg vineyard site, one of the Kamptal appellation's "Grand Crus," which gave us the Hirsch Riesling Kamptal Ried Gaisberg EL 2021.

The breathtaking Rudi Pichler Grüner Veltliner Wachau Ried Achleiten Smaragd 2021 with its underplayed power embodied the best side of the 2021 vintage as much as the richer Emmerich Knoll Grüner Veltliner Wachau Ried Schütt Smaragd 2021 with its spot on interplay of herbal freshness and exotic richness.

For the first time in many years I was able to spend some days in the Steiermark, or Styria, in the southwest of Austria close to the border with Slovenia. Not only is this region on a roll, but the winemakers were also lucky with both the 2021 vintage and 2020.

The question of why 2020 worked so much better here than further north was answered by winemaker and hobby pilot Reinhard Muster of the Muster Gamlitz winery in the Sudsteiermark. He took me on a tour of the region's hill country in a light aircraft.

From the air you clearly see how the region's vineyards cling to the steep south-facing slopes, while the slopes with northern exposure are forested. Equally clear is how the region is protected from northerly and westerly airstreams by chains of mountains.

"We belong to a completely different weather system than most of Austria," Muster told me. "Ninety percent of our rainfall comes from the Adriatic, that is from the Mediterranean." It was rain from the Atlantic that caused all the problems in 2020, and Styria largely missed out on it.

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Left: Johannes Hirsch of the Hirsch winery, who produced several of the highest-rated 2021 dry whites from the entire Danube Valley. | Right: The steep vineyards of Kitzeck in the Sudsteiermark, where Wohlmutth makes some amazing sauvignon blancs and dry rieslings.

Look out for the Muster Gamlitz Sauvignon Blanc Südsteiermark STK 2021, an excellent entry-level wine that's an ideal introduction to the region. Sauvignon blanc is the region's signature grape, and a decade and more ago many of the region's ambitious sauvignons tasted like copies of dry white Bordeaux, high-end Loire whites or even cheaper New Zealand wines.

Our experience is that the problem with wine copies is that they are always second best to the originals. Thankfully, the leading winemakers of the Steiermark have recently developed their own distinctive style of sauvignon blanc. The most typical aroma of this style is grapefruit, rather than the grassy notes of New Zealand or the cassis of the Loire.

The enormously concentrated and precise Lackner Tinnacher Sauvignon Blanc Südsteiermark Ried Flamborg GSTK 2020 epitomizes all the virtues of new style Steiermark sauvignon and tips the scales at just 12.5 percent alcohol.

Even more amazing is our highest-rated Steiermark wine to date, the Tement Sauvignon Blanc Südsteiermark Ried Zieregg Vintothek Reserve 2019, which is simultaneously monumental but with the freshness typical for this beautiful region.

The 2020 vintage reds from Burgenland provided more excitement than we had expected, and for varietal blaufrankisch and blends it was a very good vintage.

There were also some amazing late releases, such as the Heinrich Burgenland Ried Gabarinza 2018, bottled by Gernot and Heike Heinrich in Burgenland after 43 months in 500-liter oak casks. It is extremely complex and expressive cuvee of the Austrian zweigelt and blaufrankisch grapes with the French merlot grape.

This is an exciting moment to buy Austrian wines and next year will be, too, as the late-release 2021 wines start to come to market.

- Stuart Pigott, Senior Editor

Note: You can sort the wines below by country, vintage, score and alphabetically by winery name. You can also search for specific wines in the search bar.



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