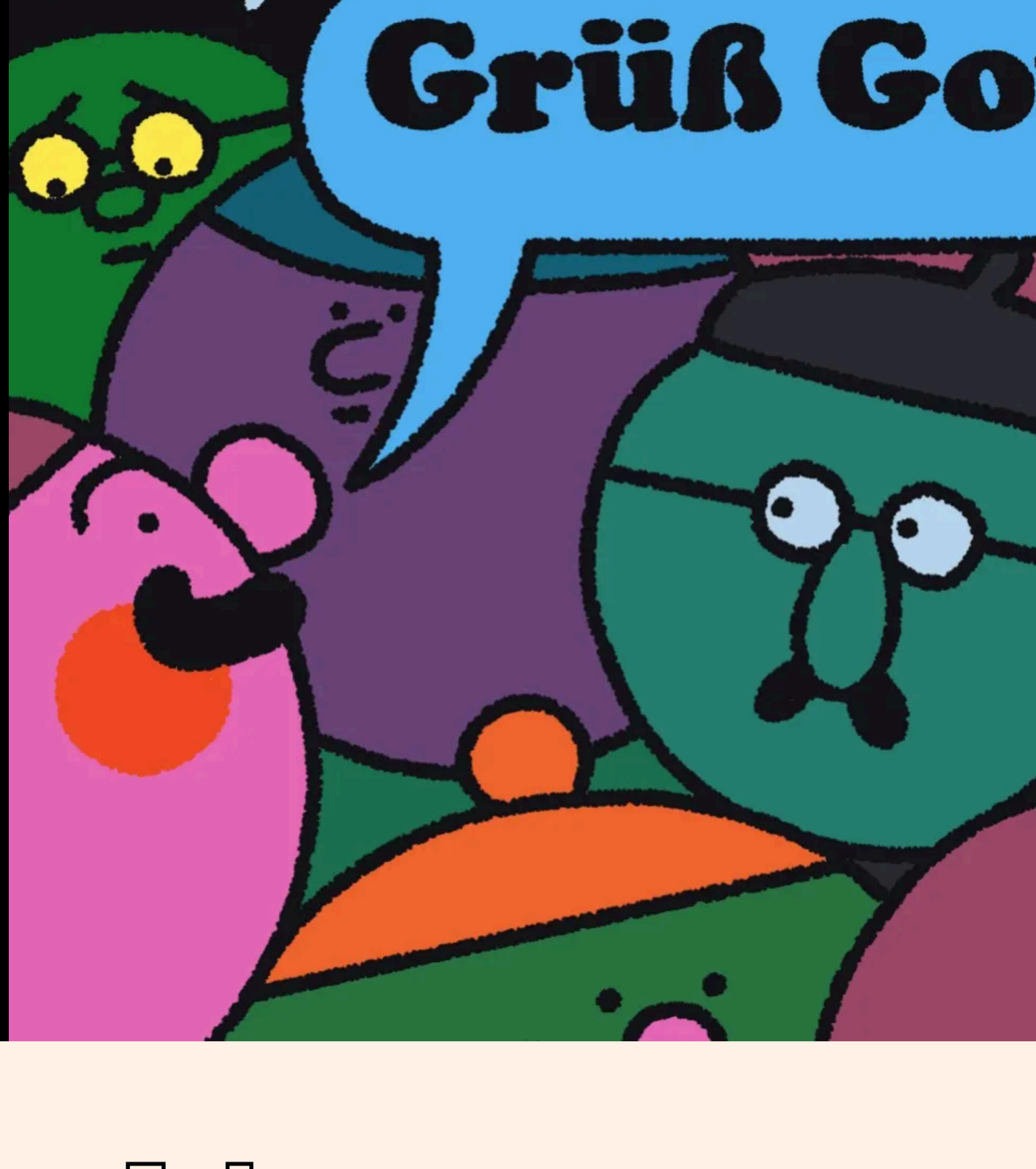


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Austria finally fell in love with red wine. It wants you to do the same

In Blaufränkisch, winemakers believe they have a grape to join the greats



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Jancis Robinson JANUARY 28 2023

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Austrians would like you to afford their signature red wine grape Blaufränkisch the same sort of respect as Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Syrah. But there is a snag: they only started to do so themselves relatively recently.

Like so many of their counterparts elsewhere, Austrian wine producers at the end of the last century were preoccupied with the famous French grape varieties and heavily oaked, powerful styles of red wine. Red was still a bit of a novelty in the land of Grüner Veltliner and the most admired examples tended to be copies of red bordeaux based on Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, with Kollwentz of Eisenstadt a revered pioneer of the style. Blaufränkisch, which is naturally high in both acidity and tannin in its youth, was relatively difficult to appreciate as a single-grape “varietal” wine. Viewed by Austrians themselves as a gauche native, it generally got a look-in only as an ingredient in blends.

Austrian winemakers’ growing experience with making varietal Blaufränkisch has resulted in better and better wines, and its notoriously long growing season has become less of a problem given warming summers. But the inconvenient fact remains that most serious varietal Blaufränkisch really needs extended time — years — in bottle to show its best, which is not helpful in our fast forward age.

All this emerged at a recent Blaufränkisch Summit at the Austrian ski resort of Lech am Arlberg. It was organised by Dorli Muhr, Austria’s leading wine publicist, who also happens to produce some of the most distinctive Blaufränkisch in the windswept Carnuntum region. Addressing a convocation of wine professionals from all over Europe and the US, she explained that “in our new red wine era [Austrian] consumers wanted early-drinking copies of bordeaux so this was not a good time for Blaufränkisch. Now we realise we must give Blaufränkisch both time in bottle and the right site, so we need to help the consumer understand that.”

Ernst Triebebaumer’s 1986 Blaufränkisch, still in good shape, was a seminal, if lone, example that showed many years ago just what was possible for varietal Blaufränkisch. The next milestone came when celebrated winemaker Roland Velich decided to devote his new Moric label to varietal, terroir-driven Blaufränkisch, launching it with the 2001 vintage. He has made increasingly complex and expressive examples, often from very old vines, every year since. That both of these producers are based in the warm Burgenland region in the far east of Austria is no accident. Burgenland summers tend to be very dry and Blaufränkisch copes with drought conditions much better than most wine grapes.

But Burgenland is very different from most other Austrian wine regions, being effectively a continuation of Hungary’s Pannonian plain. And, as Velich pointed out, communism shrivelled wine culture and quality-driven wine in Hungary. This means that Blaufränkisch, essentially an Austro-Hungarian grape, suffers from a shortage of history. In Hungary, the grape also has a different name. It is known as Kékfrankos, which may be a direct translation of Blaufränkisch, but the synonymy is not obvious to those who don’t speak both German and Hungarian.

Translation issues extend beyond this particular border. Recent DNA profiling suggests that Blaufränkisch is probably a spontaneous crossing of Gouais Blanc, parent of the giant Pinot family, with an obscure vine apparently proven to be Slovenian. This most likely took place in what is now Slovenia, where it’s known as Modra Frankinja. It’s also known as Frankovka in Slovakia, Gamé in Bulgaria, Borgonja in Croatia and Burgund Mare in Romania — oh, and as Lemberger in Germany and Washington state. This profusion of names does nothing to help the reputation of Blaufränkisch, whose Austrian name and spelling are a bit challenging in many of the world’s most important wine markets.

At the Blaufränkisch Summit, Sascha Speicher, respected editor-in-chief of German magazine Meiningers Sommelier, reported that he had recently organised a blind tasting of Austrian Blaufränkisch and German Lemberger for top producers of the latter. The Austrian wines were judged consistently superior, as well as notably and unexpectedly higher in acidity. The Germans were (wrongly) convinced that the Austrians must routinely add acid to their Blaufränkisch.

Even in warmer vintages Blaufränkisch is typically quite fresh and chewy in youth, only medium-bodied with deep colour and often has a little bitterness on the finish. (Local sommelier Günther Meindl suggested comparing it to Tuscany’s relatively tart red wine grape: “close to Sangiovese but a little lower in acidity”.) Its elements need time to knit together to produce something truly satisfying. Velich suggests at least 15 years. Can 21st-century wine consumers wait that long?

Of course, as is so often the case, there is a new generation that wants to do things a little differently. This was shown most dramatically at the summit by the 2020 and 2021 examples from Claus Preisinger that we tasted, with early-picked grapes and fashionable amphora ageing. These wines were much paler than most, having had only a handful of days’ contact with the grape skins in the fermentation vat. They seemed already approachable. An increasing number of Blaufränkischs are beginning to be made like this but they are routinely rejected by the tasting panels which are notoriously inflexible in the styles they allow to carry the appellation of a “quality wine”.

One of the liveliest discussions at the summit was about this longstanding issue in Austria. The head of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, Chris Yorke, made the point that the country’s wine rules had been devised for prevailing tastes in the domestic market which don’t necessarily match those outside Austria today. “But now there are some producers who export a lot and they are affecting the internal market too,” he reported. According to Yorke, 20 per cent of exported wines — and 50 per cent of those exported to Canada — are not officially approved. “And yet the average price of non-quality wines is higher than the average price of quality wine!”

Things do seem to be changing in Austria. But I’m still not sure how long it will be before Blaufränkisch joins the grape greats.

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Blaufränkisch and Kékfrankos

- **Heumann, Rosé 2021 Villány, Hungary (Kékfrankos with 25% Syrah) 13.5%**
£8.50 The Wine Society
- **Hans Iglar, Classic Blaufränkisch 2020 Burgenland 13%**
£10.50 The Wine Society
- **Peter Wetzler, Sporn Steiner Kékfrankos 2018 Hungary 14%**
£19 The Wine Society
- **Claus Preisinger, Bonsai Blaufränkisch 2021 Burgenland 12%**
£34.49 Sip Wines Shop, London; \$4999 Wine Therapy, New York; also (cheaper) in Germany, Czechia and Norway
- **Rosi Schuster, St Margarethen Blaufränkisch 2013 Burgenland 13%**
€49 Broeding, Munich; AU\$75.83 (£43) Wine Seek, Melbourne
- **Wachter Wiesler, Ried Saybritz Blaufränkisch 2017 Eisenberg 13%**
€49 Nur Gutes, Germany; SFr63.97 (£56) Smith & Smith; \$81.95 The Wine Consultant, California
- **Krutzler, Perwollf 2009 Burgenland 13.5%**
SFr149 (£131) Weingallerie, St Gallen

Moric’s Burgundian Blaufränkisch wines are imported into the UK by Clark Foyster and the US by Winemonger.

Dorli Muhr’s Carnuntum examples are available from Justerini & Brooks in the UK, as well as from dorlimuhr.at.

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