



Jancis Robinson

26 Jan 2023

Blaufränkisch goes uphill

All about the red wine grape of which Austria is most proud.

Nick has already written about the [Austrian ski resort Lech](#), where in early December we discovered how easy it is to eat well. So what took us there?

Two years ago Vienna wine merchant Clemens Riedel and Burgenland winemaker [Roland Velich](#), who specialises in Austria's signature red wine grape Blaufränkisch, dreamt up the idea of organising a summit devoted to the variety of which the Austrians are now increasingly proud. Initially they thought of holding it in Vienna but over time they saw a great match with the Weinberg wine festival held in Lech every December. They got the Austrian Wine Marketing Board and the resort's leading hoteliers on board and recruited Andreas Wickhoff MW of Bründlmayer in the white-wine region of Kamptal as a suitably independent moderator of the discussions. And who else to organise the event but Austria's leading wine PR, who also happens to make some of the most distinctive Blaufränkisch of all, [Dorli Muhr](#)?

She accordingly assembled wine writers and sommeliers from all over Europe and quite a few from the US together with some key Austrian winemakers in Lech in order to discuss Blaufränkisch's place in the world, and Nature did its stuff by snowing heavily on Austria's Arlberg just before our arrival. I'll spare you the tale of why we arrived in the resort at 3 am and checked in to the wrong hotel. More germane to wine, perhaps, is the fact that our three days in Lech coincided exactly with my annual heavy, streaming head cold. Of course I tasted all the wines, and felt that I could smell perfectly well, but it's possible that my tasting faculties were subpar; there's no way of knowing because you can't just snap out of the lurgy and compare impressions.

35 examples of Blaufränkisch were served over a long morning in a rather capacious chalet a steep climb above the Hotel Almhof, in flights designed to guide the conversation about the variety. My notes are below, with the proviso above.

Wickhoff kicked things off by asking us to list the qualities required in a variety if it is to be regarded as great, presumably in the hope that Blaufränkisch would match the spec, though the Austrians admitted that it hadn't yet. 'When did Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah become great?' asked Muhr rhetorically, or even perhaps plaintively.

These were the qualities for grape greatness that the assembled company suggested:

- capacity to age
- capacity to reflect a sense of place
- complexity
- finesse and elegance
- possible to pair with food (I assume this was a somm suggestion)
- exemplified by some icon wines
- quality at entry level, too
- balance
- inspirational aspect → other regions and producers want to plant it
- uniqueness and authenticity
- good PR (!)
- a decent quantity produced
- combination of fame, status and quality
- history
- pricing leads to demand on the secondary market
- intellectual profile
- capacity to blend
- should sustain old vines
- should have a beginning, middle and end when tasted.

Pauline Vicard, author of yesterday's [article on profitability](#), was a particularly vocal participant (unlike your then-hoarse correspondent) and added the factors that James Miles, CEO of global trading marketplace Liv-ex, says make a wine relevant on the secondary market:

- a long history of quality
- a clear hierarchy of quality
- availability on export markets.

Our first flight was called Origins and I think was selected to give us a fair appreciation of current varietal Blaufränkisch in Austria and to check out how many of the conditions above were satisfied by them.

As Velich pointed out, ‘we always get asked “Which varietal would you compare Blaufränkisch with?” but we have our own style with Blaufränkisch. We’re where the Alps end and the large plains of Europe start, which is a special place. We have to find our chance and make our own place in the world.’ American wine writer David Schildknecht, pictured below, concurred approvingly, noting in Austria what he called ‘a move from a “we too” mentality to a “we only” mentality’.

The second flight was selected to demonstrate regional and subregional variation within Austria, and Wickhoff commented that it was very much more stylistically varied than the first flight – but in the first flight most of the wines were grown in the Blaufränkisch kingdom of Burgenland, with the Dorli Muhr wine the lone non-Burgenland Blaufränkisch, having been grown in the shallow soils of windy Carnuntum. I would argue that it was quite different from all the Burgenland examples, being much more transparent in several ways.

Regionality and appellations proved one of the most lively topics. Austria of course has its own (to outsiders rather complex) DAC system, which decrees not just the area but the grape variety or varieties to which it applies. Within the Burgenland region there are DACs for Blaufränkisch in calcareous Leithaberg, exciting Mittelburgenland and, in the south, schistous Eisenberg (Paula will be writing more on this subject). Velich’s Moric label is anchored in Mittelburgenland but, he told us about his Burgundian, terroir-influenced wines, ‘I don’t put Mittelburgenland on the label because I know consumers will be disappointed by my wines because they are very different from other Mittelburgenland wines.’

Velich, pictured above, calls Blaufränkisch ‘the Pinot of the east’ and says he ‘won’t rest until Pinot is called “the Blaufränkisch of the west”’. He and others feel strongly that there should be a DAC for Blaufränkisch throughout Burgenland. ‘It would make much more sense to have a Burgenland DAC and then we can do what we winemakers want. We could decide

whether to make a Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt or whatever, so producers could slowly move into the DAC and build a very solid base for it. Over the last 10 years producers have started to really develop a sense of place with their wines. Slowly but surely the idea is there, associating a style of wine with a certain place. But several very important producers have stepped out of the DAC system, especially the better young ones. It might be helpful to have a Burgenland DAC to bring them in again.’

Much frustration was expressed by the winemakers in the room about the intransigence of the tasting panels that decide which samples are deemed quality wines. This has long been a problem in Austria (and elsewhere for a while – see Wine’s Salon de Refusées and Arise, lowly Vin de France). They tend to accept only one style of wine, a style set many years ago. Wickhoff told us how at Bründlmayer they had to submit one 2020 from their Lamm vineyard in the Kamptal region no fewer than six times before getting approval, which, *inter alia*, meant they had to pay six times for the tasting. ‘We’re losing high-quality talents. The rules need to be flexible and the tasters told to accept this’, he added.

So how does one describe the spectrum of Blaufränkisch’s taste characteristics? Views were canvassed and here they are: ‘Freshness and acidity, combined with pure fruit; a good match for food because of the acidity and bitterness; dark berry fruit; smoky spiciness; juniper; dried herbaceousness.’

As for viticultural characteristics, growers were unanimous about Blaufränkisch’s late, slow ripening (so it has benefited considerably from warmer summers and autumns). Muhr, above, pointed out that its grapes have a usefully thick skin (though not quite as thick as Cabernet) so they can withstand rain, even quite close to harvest ‘which we see a lot recently due to climate change, but even so Blaufränkisch stays healthy’. It conveniently has a much longer picking window, unlike Pinot Noir that almost has to be picked on exactly the right day.

There has recently been a dramatic increase in growers who specialise in Blaufränkisch, often at the expense of the common Austrian red wine grape Zweigelt. But to make Blaufränkisch with real character, yields have to be conservative. They were agreed that Zweigelt is more forgiving – and makes juicy, simpler wines for easy drinking. ‘With Blaufränkisch you have to be very precise.’

The second flight also featured historic wines, including as a real treat the first, seminal varietal Blaufränkisch made by Ernst Triebaumer back in 1986, as well as the truly beautiful

Moric 2006 from Roland Velich. This inevitably inspired a few comments on individual vintages. 2015 and 2017 made big wines whereas 2016 with its ‘useful little showers in summer’ made wines with generally more moderate alcohol levels. 2012 was very hot and dry while 2013 was described as ‘a dream vintage because you had all the time in the world to decide when to pick’. 2010 was a cool year, 2009 on the other hand very warm.

There were two 2009s in the regional flight. Kollwentz was a red-wine pioneer in Austria and the contrast between the concentrated, oaky, beefy Kollwentz 2009 and the subtler Krutzler 2009 was fascinating. As Austrian wine writer Willi Balanjk pointed out, Austrians used to prefer the Kollwentz style but now are more likely to favour the gentler Krutzler one.

Overall, I felt very lucky to be immersed in this variety that is grown widely in Hungary (even more widely than in Austria) as Kékfrankos, in Germany and Washington state as Lemberger, in Bulgaria as Gamé, in Slovakia as Frankovka, Borgonja in Croatia, Burgund Mare in Romania, and Modra Frankinja in Slovenia, where its birthplace is probably located.

I know this Blaufränkisch Summit was focused for obvious reasons on Austria, but I wondered in retrospect whether the Austrian wines might have been shown to advantage if compared with a few non-Austrian examples. Funnily enough, with the exception of the highest-scoring of the [57 tasting notes on Hungary’s Kékfrankos](#) in our tasting notes database, I think the most impressive non-Austrian Blaufränkisch I have tasted is that produced by Hahndorf Hill in Australia’s Adelaide Hills. I see the six tasting notes we have, from the 2008 vintage onwards, have all been scored 16.5 – quite an achievement for a grape so far from home.

The 41 wines below are presented in the flights and in the order tasted.

Origins

Rosi Schuster Blaufränkisch 2020 Burgenland

15.5

Bitter-cherry nose. Some sweet candy initially, then high acidity. Not that long. Slightly bitter finish.

Drink 2023 – 2025

Schiefer Blaufränkisch 2019 Burgenland 16

Rich, round, ripe nose. Then zesty, fresh fruit and an attractively bitter note on the end. Chalky finish.

Drink 2022 – 2027

€12 producer's website

Moric Blaufränkisch 2019 Burgenland 16 +

Paler crimson than some. Complex, assured nose. Bone-dry palate. Still very youthful. But convincing with all of the palate covered and not bitter.

Drink 2024 – 2028

Gesellmann, Creitzer Blaufränkisch Reserve 2020 Burgenland 16

From Deutschkreuz.

Shaded crimson. Damson fruit. Salty note. Aged in tank. Lively. Desperately needs food.

Drink 2023 – 2029

Wachter-Wiesler, Deutsch Schützen Blaufränkisch Reserve 2019 Eisenberg 16

Village-level wine from the producer's home village of Deutsch Schützen.

Sweet morello-cherry notes. Lots of acidity and not that much undertow.

Drink 2023 – 2029

Krutzler, Spätfüllung Blaufränkisch 2018 Eisenberg 16 +

Sweet cherry start and then bitter, bone-dry finish. Quite hard work!

Drink 2024 – 2028

Claus Preisinger, ErDELuftGRAsundreBEN Blaufränkisch 2020 Burgenland 16

Very pale and slightly cloudy – natural-looking. Super-fruity, definitely floral, and transparent. With real lift and a hint of rhubarb. Very tart finish and just a hint of candy. Looks quite different from the rest.

Drink 2022 – 2025

Kolfok, Güterweg Neckenmarkter Blaufränkisch 2019 Burgenland 16

From Neckenmarkt.

Deep crimson. Healthy shaded crimson. Sweet and oaky nose. A more international style than most. Sweet. Powerful. Lots of tang.

Drink 2023 – 2029

Dorli Muhr, Prellenkirchen Samt & Seide Blaufränkisch 2019 Carnuntum 16.5

All mid-slope Spitzerberg limestone in Prellenkirchen. The name means 'velvet and silk',

Much less blue than the Burgenland Blaufränkisch wines. Very distinctive nose with more obvious fruit and suppleness with the fruit carrying right through. Very refreshing and with enough fruit to beguile.

Drink 2022 – 2029

Kollwentz, Leithakalk Blaufränkisch 2019 Burgenland 16.5

Octogenarian and his son are very aware of wines from other parts of the world.

Very deep purplish crimson. Sweet start with a certain inkiness and great confidence. Very mineral and interesting. Lots to chew on.

Drink 2023 – 2030

Prieler Blaufränkisch 2019 Leithaberg 16.5

Very deep purplish crimson. Very fresh and lively. Real transparency and light tannic grip. Stony quality – a bit like a high-elevation Mendoza wine?!

Drink 2023 – 2030

Lichtenberger González Blaufränkisch 2019 Leithaberg 16

Very deep purplish crimson. Quite rich start and then lots of freshness. Bitter cherry and stones. Slight lack of fruit.

Drink 2023 – 2028

In pursuit of regional expression

Rosi Schuster, Sankt Margarethen Blaufränkisch 2017 Burgenland 16.5

All from the village of Sankt Margarethen, 80% is from two vineyards – Hinkenthal and Lamer (from 2019, 100% of the fruit for this cuvée is from those two vineyards). Quite old vines (46–66 years). Son (Hannes Schuster) changed everything when he took over in 2007 and they lost lots of customers for several years. Used oak only.

Not heavy or oaky but pure! Rich and velvety nose. Then very fresh and vital with a bitter finish. But long and pure. Almost austere. 13.5%

Drink 2021 – 2027

Hans & Anita Nittnaus, Tannenberg Blaufränkisch 2013 Leithaberg 16

North-facing, quartz and slate in Jois. The new generation – Martin and Andreas Nittnaus – took over this year. They are adopting an entirely new approach with no SO₂ etc, apparently.

This was probably very dark initially but now it looks quite evolved. Very sweet, rich nose. Then chewy palate. Dry end.

Drink 2018 – 2025

Prieler, Goldberg Blaufränkisch 2012 Leithaberg

17

Cooler site, in Schützen am Gebirge, in a hot year. Two-thirds new oak.

Very obvious balance. Rich and flattering. This would be a good introduction to Blaufränkisch and the oak doesn't disguise it.

Drink 2017 – 2027

Gesellmann, Hochberc Blaufränkisch 2011 Burgenland

16.5

From Ried Hochberg in Neckenmarkt. Mainly new oak. 2011 saw cool and very difficult conditions but, strangely, they resulted in some of the best tannins in Austria ever.

Very opulent nose. And very gentle tannins – notable! With a little cordite on the nose. Sappy and attractive. Though no showcase for Blaufränkisch. Muscular and refreshing.

Drink 2016 – 2026

Gernot und Heike Heinrich, Alter Berg Blaufränkisch 2011 Leithaberg

16.5

Vineyard in Winden am See. One-third new oak or more. From magnum.

Deep, rich and a bit international. A bit of sweet black cherry. Nice wine but not a very expressive Blaufränkisch.

Drink 2018 – 2025

Paul Achs, Altenberg Blaufränkisch 2011 Burgenland

16

From Gols. 50% new oak.

Very deep blackish, purplish. International character. But not too sweet. Even a bit sour. Emphatic.

Drink 2018 – 2028

Schiefer, Reihburg Blaufränkisch 2010 Burgenland

17

Vineyard in Deutsch Schützen – Eisenberg.

Lots of lovely development. There's a sweetness but no bitterness, even though there's a tangy bite on the end that recalls Sangiovese. Very fluid and fresh. Just at the right point! Lovely. Long.

Drink 2018 – 2028

Muhr-van der Niepoort, Spitzerberg Blaufränkisch 2010 Carnuntum

16.5

From Prellenkirchen. Dorli Muhr: '2010 was really a shitty year but I wanted to honour Blaufränkisch in this cool, humid year.'

Positively tawny at the rim – very distinctive colour for a Blaufränkisch. Quite delicate and Pinot-like. Floral. Nice balance. Very clean and at peak. Very distinctive expression. 12.3%

Drink 2016 – 2025

Kollwentz, Setz Blaufränkisch 2009 Burgenland

15.5

Vineyard in Eisenstadt.

Shaded crimson. Warm, evolved nose and still quite oaky, which intrudes. Hint of coconut.

Drink 2015 – 2025

Krutzler, Perwolff Blaufränkisch 2009 Burgenland

17

1992 was the first vintage. Famous wine from 35- to 40-year-old vines. 3% Cabernet Sauvignon. From magnum.

Old oak and gentle and more savoury than most. Austrian wine critic Willi Balanjuk argues this is at the other end of the spectrum from Kollwentz 2009. Gentle now. Lots of life on the end and a true expression of Blaufränkisch, not oak. Drier than most – really impressive. 13.5%

Drink 2015 – 2028

Moric, Neckenmarkt Alte Reben Blaufränkisch 2006 Burgenland 18

South-facing site in Neckenmarkt at 250–400 m with some limestone and schist and gneiss. Picked much later than now – late October. Aged in mainly used large oak, mainly Stockinger, for two years.

Slightly cloudy garnet. Very gentle and pure and real Blaufränkisch expression. Now this is the best Blaufränkisch so far in this tasting! Freshness and a bit velvety but real lift and balance. Hint of tamarind. Amazingly long and throbbing.
Drink 2014 – 2028

Ernst Triebaumer, Mariental Blaufränkisch 1986 Burgenland 17

The historic Blaufränkisch that kickstarted it all. 10-ha limestone vineyard in Rust. Amazing colour! Still crimson and only a little pale at the rim. Lovely perfume. Hint of sourness but great fruit with notable tannin still and some acidity – good balance. Not quite as beautiful as the Moric 2006 but an amazing relic.
Drink 1994 – 2025

Perspectives – producers asked to submit their special favourites

Claus Preisinger, Bonsai 2021 Burgenland 16.5

Just three days on skins!

Very pale ruby again, like the same producer's 2020. Sweet and floral nose. Early-maturing and very fruity. Very distinctive. Pretty natural. A good proof of one end of the spectrum. 12%
Drink 2022 – 2026

Ernst Triebaumer, Mariental Blaufränkisch 2020 Burgenland**16**

Successor to the famous 1986.

Deep luscious crimson. Seems quite marked by sweet oak. Very international style which may be very successful in Austria but doesn't seem too distinctive from an international point of view. Again, that point of bitterness on the end.

Drink 2024 – 2030

**Kolfok, Güterweg Neckenmarkter Ried Bodigraben 2018
Burgenland****16.5 +**

Blaufränkisch grown on steep slopes on gneiss at 400 m in Neckenmarkt.

Quite pure and mineral on the nose. Bone-dry finish but reasonably expressive.

Good freshness – despite the vintage?

Drink 2023 – 2030

Krutzler, Weinberg Blaufränkisch 2017 Eisenberg**16.5 +**

Vineyard in Deutsch Schützen on loam with some iron. 25- to 30-year-old vines.

Spontaneous fermentation.

Still quite a bit of purple in the crimson. Aromatic. Very direct and still quite youthful. Needs time.

Drink 2025 – 2034

Wachter-Wiesler, Saybritz Blaufränkisch 2017 Eisenberg**17**

Vineyard in Deutsch Schützen on green schist; lo-fi winemaking.

Very gentle texture and already approachable. Gentle start but quite aggressively tart on the end. Nice job! Lots of subtlety. 13%

Drink 2022 – 2030

Gernot und Heike Heinrich, Edelgraben Blaufränkisch 2017 Leithaberg

16.5 ++

Ried Edelgraben is in Breitenbrunn. Basket press. 30 months in 500-litre casks.

Tension and excitement. Tight.

Drink 2024 – 2030

Schiefer, Szapary Blaufränkisch 2016 Burgenland

16

Ried Szapary is in Deutsch Schützen, Eisenberg, on slate, quartz and loam. Frost then very cold spring in 2016.

Deep crimson. Sweetness and some dustiness. Still quite tart. And with lots of tannin. Quite roughly treated fruit in the winery?

Drink 2024 – 2030

Hans & Anita Nittnaus, Altenberg Blaufränkisch 2016 Leithaberg

16.5

Calcareous soils. From Jois, on the west shore of the lake. Biodynamic. Spontaneous ferment.

Spicy nose that seems to come from the fruit not oak? Rich and flattering.

Though there's a slightly disconcerting sweet coffee note. Far from gentle, though long.

Drink 2024 – 2030

Paul Achs, Golser Altenberg Blaufränkisch 2016 Leithaberg

16.5

From Gols, east of the lake. Biodynamic.

Very deep purple. Spicy, rich nose with good tannin management and balance even if not the purest expression of Blaufränkisch. Quite a dry finish.

Drink 2024 – 2032

Christian Tschida, Felsen I Blaufränkisch 2015 Burgenland 17

From Illmitz, on limestone and quartz. From magnum.

Masses of blackberry fruit – very appealing. Fresh acidity and no excess tannin.

Very fresh. No bitterness. Yes!

Drink 2022 – 2028

Rosi Schuster, Sankt Margarethen Blaufränkisch 2013 Burgenland 17

Blend of many vineyards in Sankt Margarethen.

Real vitality here and round fruit. All in balance – not too much bitterness

or tannin and the acid is just not too much. 13%

Drink 2019 – 2027

More examples tasted post Lech

Heumann, Rosé 2021 Villány 16

Full, screwcapped bottle just 1,183 g. 75% Kékfrankos, 25% Syrah.

Pale to mid salmon. Not quite star-bright. Lots of interesting fruit on the nose.

Bone dry and interestingly smoky. A wine with much more grip and personality

than most at this price. Admirably persistent. This would be a wonderfully

versatile food wine. 13.5%

Drink 2022 – 2023

£8.50 The Wine Society (reduced from £9.50)

Heumann, Reserve Kékfrankos 2017 Villány 16

Full bottle 1,363 g.

Mid crimson. That high-toned freshness of the variety on the nose. Initially quite

a rich impact on the palate but definitely not recommended for oakphobes. 14%

Drink 2022 – 2027

£16 The Wine Society

Péter Wetzer, Spern Steiner Kékfrankos 2018 Hungary

16.5

Full bottle 1,358 g. This is a low-sulphur wine vinified by an Austrian but grown in Hungary from 60-year-old vines in the 'grand cru' Spern Steiner, a vineyard dating back to 1684.

Mid to dark crimson. High-toned, intensely fruity nose with freshness. Lots of appetising impact and good balance and length. Goes on and on. Ready to enjoy but far from over the hill. **QGV** 14%

Drink 2022 – 2026

£19 The Wine Society (reduced from £23)

Hans Igler, Classic Blaufränkisch 2020 Burgenland

16

Full, screwcapped bottle 1,132 g.

Mid garnet. Bright fruit and the promise of acidity on the nose. Really pretty, sweet, floral fruit on the palate. This is a real bargain! It may not be designed to age for a decade or two but it provides enormous and distinctive edgy, fruity, juicy pleasure. Delightful balance. **VGV** 13%

Drink 2022 – 2025

£10.50 The Wine Society

Pittnauer, Ungerberg Blaufränkisch 2010 Burgenland

15.5

Full, glass-stoppered bottle just 1,254 g. Organic (AT-BIO-402). Member of both Respekt and Pannobile.

Mature-looking shaded ruby. Tastes just a little reduced, tart and meagre to me with a notably drying finish. Great to find a Blaufränkisch this old but I'm not sure it's such a convincing example. 13%

Drink 2018 – 2023

£26 The Wine Society

Aldinger, Hanweiler Berg Lemberger trocken 2020 Württemberg 16

Full bottle 1,344 g. A VDP Erste Lage.

Notably darker and bluer than the Austrian and Hungarian counterparts. Smooth and ready to enjoy. Though it finishes a little suddenly with quite a bit of tartness.

Perhaps it will become more charming? 13.5%

Drink 2022 – 2026

£24 The Wine Society