

SLIDING into success

If Austria's Blaufränkisch is to compete on the world stage, the country's producers need to persuade consumers of the wine's quality, writes *Gabriel Stone*

IF AUSTRIA has one serious problem, it's the fact that its greatest wine regions and superb skiing lie at opposite ends of the country. That challenge was briefly surmounted in December 2022 as some of the country's finest wines travelled to the upmarket mountain resort – and serious gastronomic hub – of Lech, which played host to The Blaufränkisch Summit.

The goal of the event was to address Austria's second, hopefully less intractable problem: that the country's red

wines have yet to achieve the international prestige and popularity of its Riesling and Grüner Veltliner.

An international panel of wine writers, including Jancis Robinson MW, Austrian specialists David Schildknecht and Stephan Rheinhardt, and *the drinks business* joined local sommeliers and producers for an event designed to offer a meaningful answer to the question: "Is Blaufränkisch one of the world's great grape varieties?"

But why Blaufränkisch? Why Austria? And why now? Moderator Andreas Wickhoff MW, general manager at Weingut Bründlmayer in Kamptal (so helpfully disinterested in Blaufränkisch, as it does not make any wines with the grape), provided context. "Austria is not the largest holder of Blaufränkisch in the world," he said, "but in the last 10 to 15 years its recognition has grown hugely."

Indeed, Austria's 2,597 hectares of Blaufränkisch not only represent just 5.8%

of the country's total area under vine, but are dwarfed by the almost 8,000ha found just across the border in Hungary under the alias Kékfrankos. Also known as Lemberger, the variety also has a meaningful home in Württemberg, Germany, as well as a modest but interesting base in Washington State. Meanwhile, in Slovenia it makes noteworthy wines under the alias Modra Frankinja.

Despite these international credentials and some star individual performances, there was consensus from the summit group that Austria is the only Blaufränkisch hub able to combine commercially useful volumes with consistently high quality. On top of this, Wickhoff pointed to a steady shift in the past couple of decades among Austrian producers to make single-varietal Blaufränkisch wines, and, increasingly,

Among these voices was Roland Velich, founder of Mittelburgenland producer Moric. "I was very early onto the market with these wines, and was always asked what variety I would compare it to," he recalled, and using a musical reference, added: "But here on this Pannonian Plain there's a whole new key which has been forgotten." Velich noted the challenging political conditions in this part of the world over the past 150 years, especially in Hungary, which saw the loss of many great wines, vineyards and records. "We have to find ourselves, our styles, and get experience of our terroir," he insisted.

VARIED TERROIR

Even if the vast majority – over 90% – of Austria's Blaufränkisch production is centred on Burgenland, that terroir can still vary considerably. The iron-rich clay of Eisenberg and Mittelburgenland may

be shot through with quartz or limestone, Neusiedlersee's climate and soil is profoundly shaped by its lake, and Leithaberg's marine limestone brings altitude with a twist of schist. Then there are other small but notable Blaufränkisch hubs, such as the sandy limestone slopes of Spitzerberg in Carnuntum. Here, in this dry, windy corridor between the Alps and Carpathians, Dorli Muhr produces separate wines from

each of her single-vineyard sites, while blending grapes from the lower, more fertile slopes to create a fruit-forward regional cuvée. She explained to delegates how her affinity for Blaufränkisch is inextricably linked to its suitability for this specific region. Indeed, so open-minded was Muhr about the best tool for achieving her ultimate goal of site expression that, she observed: "When I started in Spitzerberg I planted different varieties to see which showed the place. I realised that Blaufränkisch was the grape that expressed Spitzerberg better than all the other varieties."

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single-vineyard expressions too. In short, he noted, "sense of place has become more of a focus".

Over a tasting of more than 40 Austrian examples, the group discussed Blaufränkisch's intrinsic attributes, most notably its high acidity, moderate tannins, mix of dark and red berry fruit, spice and a dried herb component that ties into an overarching freshness.

Although the panel highlighted stylistic parallels with Pinot Noir, Syrah, and Nebbiolo, there was a strong feeling that any truly great variety must stand up to definition on its own terms.

Feature findings

- The Blaufränkisch Summit, held in Austria in December 2022, addressed how the country's red wines can achieve the international prestige and popularity of its Riesling and Grüner Veltliner.
- While the vast majority of Austria's Blaufränkisch production is centred on Burgenland, that terroir can still vary considerably
- Producers were concerned that creating a fixed hierarchy of either estates or vineyards might stifle further desirable development.
- There was a suggestion that Blaufränkisch is a variety not just surviving in but perhaps even benefiting from warmer conditions.
- Any success for Blaufränkisch at the top end of the market needs close regional alignment.

For Velich, who has bottled wines from his own single-vineyard sites separately since the 2019 harvest, this evolution forms part of "a whole new narrative" for Austrian producers' approach to their red wines. "The wines from the '90s were about structure and oak," he remarked. Closely linked to this stylistic shift is a change in attitude towards Blaufränkisch's naturally high acidity, a key factor in its ability to age so well. "It's about seeing acidity as being a friend with this variety rather than the enemy," noted Velich, "which it maybe was in the pursuit of ripeness 20 years ago."

Bringing a critic's perspective, Schildknecht pointed to another key development in producers' understanding of how to steer Blaufränkisch on the path of finesse rather than pure power. "It's actually a low-tannin variety," he observed, comparing this grape's polyphenol levels





Taking the floor: producer Roland Velich

consumer and say 'Enjoy', said Muhr. "We really need to hold the wine back a few years." Velich agreed, noting that he aims to keep back 20%-25% of production for later release. "It's the only way to prove the quality of Blaufränkisch," he argued, "to allow these wines to develop the charisma that is a factor of great wine."

A SERIOUS WINE

While it became increasingly clear that Blaufränkisch possesses all the attributes of a serious wine, the challenge remains of convincing customers that this is the case. Austria already has its own loosely equivalent version of France's Premier and Grand Cru system, the Österreich Traditionsweingüter (ÖTW) Erste Lage and Grosse Lage classifications, which creates an even more rarified hierarchy within the "Ried", or single-vineyard, uppermost tier of the DAC system. Owning a top site is not enough: estates can only become ÖTW members by signing up to quality criteria that include a maximum yield, hand harvesting, and minimum maturation period. However, although Spitzerberg is part of the ÖTW, the organisation's 68 member estates are concentrated along the Danube's white



Slope and glory: view from the summit

wine-dominated regions, with no representation in Burgenland.

Marc Almert, chef sommelier at Baur au Lac in Switzerland, and ASI Best Sommelier In The World 2019, offered some balanced thoughts on the development of a more rigorous classification system for key Blaufränkisch regions.

"A hierarchy based on estates is too difficult - look at St Émilion," he warned, referring to the ongoing legal and political classification headaches in this Bordeaux appellation. On the other hand, Almert suggested there was a useful commercial case for some sort of quality classification. "If you have a hierarchy in place, it makes higher prices easier," he noted with a smile.

Among producers there was some concern that, at this stage, a fixed hierarchy of either estates or vineyards might stifle further desirable development. "The most important thing is to give us a chance to develop, to gain experience year by year," maintained Velich. "We lost a lot of our cultural references so we have a lot to make up."

Instead, he outlined current discussions for a Burgenland DAC, including but not



Dawn of the red: a tasting flight

with Zinfandel and Barbera. "That's why people used to feel they had to throw oak at it to convey structure."

Improved tannin management is not only the result of a change in philosophy, but also of climate. There was a clear suggestion among producers that Blaufränkisch is a variety not just surviving but perhaps even benefiting from warmer conditions. Wickhoff outlined a development he has observed in Austrian expressions. "The past 20 years of climate change is definitely assisting in ripe phenolic components," he insisted. "In the '70s and '80s producers really struggled with tannin management." Meanwhile, Muhr noted

that this late-ripening variety is "not afraid of some heat," but also pointed to its relatively thick skin. This provides useful protection against the fungal risks posed by rain, which now tends to fall more frequently in September than previously, throwing producers an unwelcome challenge in those crucial few weeks before harvest.

All these factors point to a grape variety that is capable of greatness, but Schildnecht went a step further. "Blaufränkisch has to be serious or not at all," he insisted, drawing a direct contrast with Austria's other major red grape variety, the more widely planted Zweigelt. Although more ambitious examples of Zweigelt do exist, this variety is generally prized for its commercially useful ability to offer producers generous yields and straightforward vinification to produce cheaper, immediately appealing wine for consumers. When it comes to Blaufränkisch, a different mindset is required and, in particular, some bottle age. "We can't just put young Blaufränkisch in front of a

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Blaufränkisch plantings by country

Source: AustrianWine.com, Wines of Hungary, Wines of Germany, www.Gov.si, Washington Wine

Country	Region	DAC	Hectares	Share of national vineyard area (%)
Austria	Burgenland		2,597.13	5.8%
			2,436.68	20.7%
		Eisenberg	156.59	30.70%
		Leithaberg	587.58	20.4%
		Mittelburgenland	1,046.10	51.5%
	Niederösterreich	Neusiedlersee	535.07	8.8%
		Rosalia	111.34	46.2%
		Carnuntum	147.16	0.5%
	Steiermark		94.89	11.4%
		9.16	20.0%	
Wien		3.14	0.60%	
Hungary		<8,000	n/a	
Germany		≈1,200	≈1%	
Slovenia		650	4.0%	

In 2021 Washington State crushed 109 tons of Lemberger (Blaufränkisch), representing 0.06% of its 179,600-ton total.

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blaufränkisch



Table talk: a selection of Dorli Muhr's wines

limited to Blaufränkisch, which would offer more refined village and single-site tiers. "This makes sense and gives a lot of space to keep developing," suggested Velich.

Chris Yorke, managing director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, suggested that this three-tier model of regional wine, village wine, single vineyard wine – already implemented in top white wine-focused DACs such as Wachau and Kamptal – looks set to be rolled out on a national level. With early 2023 due to see Thermenregion become the final piece of Austria's DAC jigsaw, he set out plans to create a "special task force" to analyse the existing DAC system

and explore future developments. Already, legal foundations are being laid for "the planned official, national classification of single vineyards", confirmed Yorke, who added: "In the context of all these developments, the Burgenland will re-evaluate its current DAC systems. However, it is still too early to predict any specific amendments or changes."

A more pressing concern for many ambitious producers is the current requirement for all Austria's DAC 'Qualitätswein' to gain approval from a tasting panel as representing a typical expression of its region. "We represent our wines in the markets; those four or five people tasting them have no idea," argued Velich.

Wickhoff confirmed frustration with the tasting panels is not restricted to red wines, saying one of Bründlmayer's star wines, Ried Lamm Grüner Veltliner, recently took six attempts to gain approval. "Unfortunately, a few top producers have stepped out of the system, but we hope this system can bring them back," he said.

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Yorke acknowledged this issue. "It is something we're looking at," he confirmed, noting the stylistic discrepancy between domestic wine sales and exports, which account for just 25% of the country's production. "There is a palate, a house style, that Austrians like to drink, which is different to international markets," noted Yorke diplomatically. "Now we're starting to see producers who have more than half their wine going to international markets; they have a different consumer in mind. The mix of styles of wine we sell in Austria is very different to the mix we sell abroad."

In particular, Yorke noted the disproportionate amount of wine without a Qualitätswein designation being sold abroad, observing: "The average price of non-quality wine is higher than the quality wines. You then ask the question, 'what is a quality wine?'"

SITE EXPRESSION

Whatever help or hindrance posed by any legislative framework, there were no quibbles in the room about the quality, age-worthiness and nuanced site expression on show in this broad spread of Blaufränkisch examples. But no variety can achieve top-ranking status in isolation; the world's great grapes are all closely tied to specific regions. The fine wine market trades in Barolo, Napa and Burgundy, not Nebbiolo, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir.

Any success for Blaufränkisch at the top end of the market therefore needs close regional alignment. The variety's ability to travel remains relatively untested, but the wines tasted during this summit left no doubt about its suitability for Austria's eastern border.

Indeed, here its character appears happily inseparable from Austria's own identity: the ripe fruit of warm Continental summers, the venison-friendly, savoury seasoning of wild meadow herbs, and yes, that stony, bright, breezy character of those gloriously snowy mountains. db