

WINE

The amazing taste race

Jane Faulkner takes a breakneck-speed tour of Austria's spectacular vineyards.



PRIMARY rock, loess and loam soils, volcanic basalt, steep man-made terraced slopes full of gneiss right down to sand and gravel on the flat vineyard sites — Austrian winemakers love talking about the disparate soil types supporting their patches of land. It's fair enough, as these soils are not just the lifeline for and foundation of the grapevines; they ultimately contribute to the style of wine.

Of course, other factors are instrumental — all those essential elements of terroir, including the climate, site, exposition and man's influence — but during a recent whistle-stop tour of Austria's best-known wine region, Niederosterreich, soil types were a recurrent theme.

Touted as "an in-depth study trip through the classic cool-climate wine-growing regions of Lower Austria", all I know is three days and about 300 wines later, the surface is barely scratched. And yet the Austrians seem at pains to showcase the diversity of their wine regions, albeit efficiently. Hence the soils. Hence the crammed time frame.

Niederosterreich, or Lower Austria, is the country's largest wine-growing region. It covers about 30,000 hectares, and is largely white-wine territory, where one indigenous grape reigns supreme: gruner veltliner. Austria also produces outstanding riesling and smart weissburgunder (pinot blanc) but its strength lies in indigenous varieties.

First day and bang! A quick intro-

ductory taste of a dozen gruner veltliners from the Weinviertel region slightly north-west of Vienna with its dominant loess soils, always distinguished by a whiff of white pepper. These wines were from 2010, which turned out to be a difficult vintage throughout the region, as it was largely wet and cold, yet some very good wines were made with much reduced yields.

Next, a tasting of classic and reserve wines from '10 and '09, with spot-on examples from Hagn, Zull and Durnberg.

The afternoon is dedicated to the Kamptal area (showcasing about 50 gruner veltliners and rieslings) with its fascinating soil types of ancient volcanic elements, desert sand and terraced vineyards comprising loess and loam. The gruners here are different — rounder and slightly richer on the palate, with the producers Hiedler, Fred Loimer and Brundlmayer standing out.

The second day turns out to be more enlightening and still at breakneck speed.

To the Wachau. For me, the wines of the Wachau are incomparable — defined, precise, rich mineral-driven gruner veltliners and subtle, oh-so-fine riesling. This region is home to outstanding producers; the long list includes Emmerich Knoll, Domane Wachau, Prager, Hirtzberger and Pichler.

Preceding the all-too-brief Wachau visit was a race through 28 wines from Kremstal and Traisental. The latter is Austria's smallest and young-

est wine-growing area, comprising 800 hectares under vine, with juicy, spicy gruner veltliners; the former has a foundation of primary rock plus loess, producing wines that are floral, rich with hints of tropical fruit, yet are zesty and minerally.

It's during a tasting among the biodynamic vines of the Klausberg vineyard (pictured) owned by Weingut Nikolaihof — which happens to be Austria's oldest estate — that a sense of place, those soils and a respect for the vineyards come together. These are expressive, artisanal and world-class wines. Certainly

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NIKI MOSER, Sepp Moser estate

the vista from the vineyard helps reinforce the point, with a view of the Kamptal and Kremstal through to the Wachau, with the majestic and ever-present Danube River separating the northern vineyards from those facing south.

"We're in a time of change," says Niki Moser from the family estate Sepp Moser.

"Austria is such a small country [just 1 per cent of total world wine production] and we can't compete with big wine-producing countries in

terms of pricing," he says. "Anyway, viticulture in Austria is handcrafted, and that has to be our point of difference."

"We have to realise that even cheap wines in supermarkets are clean and more or less drinkable. The problem is, for many consumers that's enough. They can't see a big difference between branded wines produced in a rather industrial way and a vintner's wine. Today, many conventional wines [those derived from using pesticides, herbicides and chemical additives] are so marked by the treatments in the vineyards and in the cellar. We have to work in a more environmentally friendly manner to show individuality and a difference from those cheap, industrial clean and fruity wines. It is the vintner's challenge to point out individuality as much as possible."

It's why he predicts that within the next 20 years, all Austria's vineyards will be organic or biodynamic. While there is burgeoning movement towards such practices, today about 10 per cent of vineyards are farmed that way and genetically modified organisms are banned.

Moser's admirable projection stems from a desire to protect Austria's unique vineyards and, by extension, those precious, diverse soils. It all makes sense.

It hasn't been an easy road. Moser's grandfather, Dr Lenz Moser, was a legend among viticulturists for establishing the high vine-training system that makes vineyard work so much easier. Yet, the Lenz Moser

winery — like so many in the mid-'80s — was financially devastated by the diethylene glycol wine scandal. Much wine in that period was cheap, bulk white sold to the German market. The illegal addition of diethylene glycol, a key ingredient in antifreeze, made the tart, hard wine appear weighted and more drinkable. The fraudulent activity was eventually detected and, while people were prosecuted, there was a domino effect; the scandal tarnished the reputation of all in the wine industry.

Good producers, good people, were affected. Lenz was forced to sell his winery. His son, Sepp, managed to keep some of the best sites, which Niki now looks after biodynamically. Austria's top vignerons still wince at the mention of the period but they need no longer feel ashamed. Since then, heroes have emerged — it's those soils and unique vineyards — and the producers who have long-recognised their value.

Austria makes some of the world's most thrilling wines, with gruner veltliner leading the charge, but also with its exquisite dry rieslings. And let's not forget the fragrant red, blaufrankisch. But that's another story. Oh, and next time — please — not so fast with the tasting tour.

Most wines mentioned are available at independent outlets such as Prince Wine Store, City Wine Shop, Blackhearts & Sparrows and Rathdowne Cellars.

■ Jane Faulkner was a guest of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board.

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