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The 2012 BTI Austrian Wine Review

An Amazing Array of Exceptional Wines from the 'Amber Road'

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By **Bob Bansberg, Senior BTI Wine Panelist**

When asked to help evaluate a broad range of Austrian wines, many not currently imported in the US market, I was excited about experiencing many newly released rieslings and gruner veltliners—well known wine categories that have consistently improved in the last few years. I am happy to report that all Austrian wines have truly come into their own. White varietals, both dry and sweet, are a true value at all price points. The biggest surprise however, came as we blind tasted wines from the red side of the slope. The Austrian reds as a whole have all taken a giant step forward in quality and have a more highly developed sense of place, balance, and age-worthiness.

The Austrian wine industry has come a long way from the Iron Age Celtic tribes that brought the vine to Austria around 700 BC. The oh so clever Romans planted and mapped out the best vineyards as they moved along the "Amber Road", the ancient trade route for the transfer of amber that connected the Mediterranean to the Baltic Sea. They grew traditional food crops on the hillsides and quickly figured out that the Austrian terroir would also be well suited for their riesling and gruner veltliner grapes. The Romans knew viticulture. The vineyards they established back home all contained loess, an un-stratified, windblown soil comprised of silt and clay particles, often including calcium carbonate. Soils underlain by loess have very good, deep drainage—important for low yield and concentration of flavors in wine grapes. Loess greatly benefits Austrian grape varietals and was a descriptor that kept coming up as a leitmotif in many of my tasting notes.

The Roman influence on Austrian wines endures and even extends to their wine law. Recently the Austrian government created a "Romanic" appellation system called DAC (Districtus Austriae Controllatus, Latin for Controlled District of Austria) that defines regional origin and typicity for seven wine districts. This system coexists with their Germanic, varietal-based 'Qualitätswein' system and is used to identify unique wines that truly capture the terroir of a particular Austrian appellation, much like designations Chianti Classico or 1st Cru Chablis would respectively in Italy and France. We found many of the thirty-one DAC wines in our tasting to be exceptional examples of their type, well worth seeking out.

Most Austrians have come to regard their national grape as Grüner Veltliner, but after tasting the elegant, well-structured, and wide range of reds, they may want to make some adjustments to that convention wisdom. The thoroughbred that got my heart beating was the world-class 99-point 2009 **Domaine Pöttelsdorf "Exzellenz" Blaufrankish** from Burgenland. Excellent indeed with exotic aromas and flavors, this is a superbly stylish red that will excel with prime rib or lamb. blaufrankish, also known as lemlberger in Germany and even Washington State, is the most widely planted red grape in Austria and the blaufrankish wines we tasted would all be welcomed at the table, especially with some bottle age.

Other notable reds included a refreshing range of pinot noirs (aka Blauburgunder), most notably the 2009 **Umatham Unter den Terrassen zu Jois Pinot Noir**, which drank very much like a premier cru Burgundian wine and would work very well with duck confit or a nice range of roast feathered game. Also impressive and very consistent was a series of zweigelts—a rather unique grape that is a cross of other distinctive Austrian red grapes. These were powerful, balanced wines that I predict will age gracefully. The 2011 **Winzer Krems Blauer Zweigelt** was a standout in this category and classic goulash dishes would allow these wines to sing an aria or two.

Going down the white side of the slope, the dry, uniquely styled rieslings exhibited crisp, balanced acidity with a nice purity of fruit—peaches and citrus, mainly lime, came into play. Notably, the 2010 **Martin & Anna Arndorfer die Leidenschaft Riesling** came off as very sleek and in the textbook dry style that Austria has championed, bringing visions of a freshly-caught river fish with a classic buerre blanc sauce or perhaps a melt-in-your-mouth chicken Kiev. The sauvignon blancs were all vibrantly flavored with expressive earthiness and a nice edgy intensity of fruit. The stunning 2010 **Walter Skoff Royal Sauvignon Blanc** would be wonderful with a lively pumpkin-seed-studded goat's milk cheese, a southeast Austrian local specialty. In the morillon category, the Austrian name for chardonnay, we tasted dry, yet very balanced, earthy wines that definitely had their cognates in the wines of the Cote Châlonnaise in Burgundy. The 2011 **Weingut Rucker Chardonnay** would work beautifully with a Dover sole or turbot entrée.

Finally, in the largest white wine category, gruner veltliners, we tasted a broad range of styles, well made and possessing all manner of subtle fruit, mineral, and pepper flavors. Overall, the grüners were not as austere as the Rieslings, yet were all true to an inherent Austrian blueprint of precision and pinpoint acidity. The lighter-styled grüners would pair nicely with and stretch out the flavors of green vegetables. For example, a glass of 2011 **Winzer Krems Ried Sandgrube Grüner Veltliner** with a bistro salad or even a difficult pairing like artichokes poached in a

lemon-scented broth. The nice thing about these acid-driven grüners is that they hold their flavors for days after opening them, making them a useful by the glass option for restaurants. For those of you who want to impress your Austrian friends, veltliner is pronounced "Velt-LEEN-er." The larger-scaled grüners such as the **2010 Martin & Anna Arndorfer "Die Leidenschaft" Grüner Veltliner** could easily take on all manner of poultry, sausage and pork dishes.

Oscar and Emmy catered events aside, Wolfgang and his sommelier brother Klaus have dialed in perfect pairings of Austrian wines with their homeland's classic cuisine. Puck's Wiener Schnitzel with a well-aged grüner is definitely something to put on your bucket list. Puck has always been able to cook to the wine and always displays a sense of Austrian pride. Recipes from his website, such as his beef stew with winter vegetables for example, I would pair with a glass or two of **2008 Dolle Blauer Zweigelt Reserve**. With his Asian burgers or bacon wrapped meatloaf, one doesn't have to spend a fortune and should consider the **2011 Hafner Family Estate Kosher Organic Classique Zweigelt**.

Going back to the future, Virgil, ancient Roman poet of the Augustan period, praised "sapien" wines, those made from shriveled, and more specifically, botrytized, "noblely rotted" grapes—those infected with the specific, flavor intensifying fungus *botrytis cinerea*. Along the "Amber Road" in Burgenland, the most eastern wine region of Austria, it is the gentle slopes and the salty mists of Lake Neusiedl (in German, Neusiedler See) that every year creates the conditions for "noble rot" that makes Austrian dessert wines world-class. Because of this unique microclimate, Austria consistently makes some of the finest sweet wines in the world. To put this in a broad global context, having worked as a sommelier with a number of the best Sauternes, those with honeyed stone fruit and an almond underlayment, the Austrians stand toe-to-toe in terms of sleek textures, length and complexity, often exhibiting heirloom apple or soft lemony notes. The 99-point **Proidl 2009 Trockenbeerenauslese, Riesling Vom Urgestein** is a perfect example. A lemon crème brûlée or a Tarte Tatin would be a nice match, but these Austrian wines are complete and can stand on their own.

In conclusion, after tasting this impressive range of food-friendly wines, I feel that Austrian winemakers have built a rock solid foundation on the loess-tinged terroir of their "Amber Road". A sense of place and history was captured in our glasses and this added dimension enhanced the complexity and enjoyment of each sip of these fine wines. I hope you will enjoy these golden, ruby and even amber liquid gems as much as I did.

- October 2012 Austrian/Bordeaux Varietal Red
- October 2012 Austrian Grüner Veltliner
- October 2012 Austrian Riesling
- October 2012 Austrian Beerenauslese
- October 2012 Austrian Blanc de Blancs
- October 2012 Austrian Blaufrankisch
- October 2012 Austrian Brut
- October 2012 Austrian Brut Rosé
- October 2012 Austrian Cabernet Sauvignon
- October 2012 Austrian Chardonnay
- October 2012 Austrian Dessert Wine
- October 2012 Austrian Ice Wine
- October 2012 Austrian Muscat
- October 2012 Other Austrian Dessert Wine
- October 2012 Other Austrian Red
- October 2012 Other Austrian White
- October 2012 Austrian Pinot Blanc
- October 2012 Austrian Pinot Noir
- October 2012 Austrian Rosé
- October 2012 Austrian Sauvignon Blanc
- October 2012 Austrian Sparkling
- October 2012 Austrian St. Laurent
- October 2012 Austrian Trockenbeerenauslese
- October 2012 Austrian Zweigelt