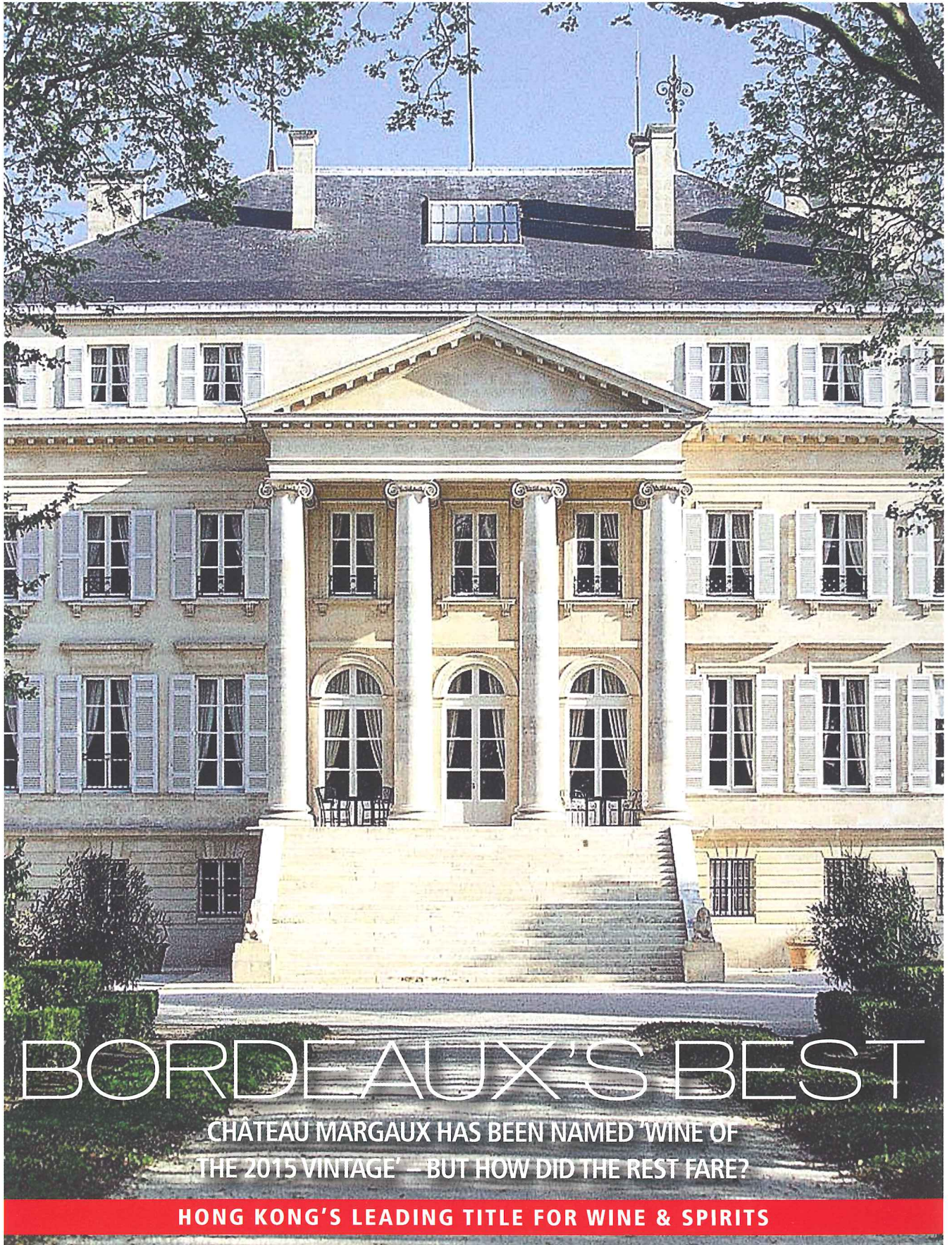


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HONG KONG



BORDEAUX'S BEST

CHATEAU MARGAUX HAS BEEN NAMED 'WINE OF THE 2015 VINTAGE' – BUT HOW DID THE REST FARE?

HONG KONG'S LEADING TITLE FOR WINE & SPIRITS

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'Dynamising' biodynamic vine treatments at Weingut Loimer

CAUSING a stir

For all its controversy, biodynamics continues to exert a profound influence on viticulture – nowhere more so than in Austria, where a growing band of producers is adopting an undogmatic approach to make wines of real distinction, writes *Darren Smith*

THE EMERGENCE of a new generation of winemakers, a rejection of industrial methods of production and a growing focus on organics or biodynamics – it's a narrative arc common to many of the world's wine regions. But Austria's slant on the story may have that bit more substance.

Biodynamics so plainly has momentum in Austria right now that it does not seem unreasonable to imagine that it – or some form of it – could one day become a national viticultural signature.

That Rudolf Steiner, the father of biodynamics, whose eight lectures on the subject in 1924 were the basis of the entire agricultural system, was born in Austria is a powerful symbol. That one of the country's most respected wineries, Nikolaihof in Wachau, became the first

biodynamic wine estate in Europe when it converted in 1971 is also significant. But it's the present where biodynamics is thriving and where the story gets interesting.

"For a long time, the biodynamic wine scene in Austria was limited to a few pioneers, with Nikolaihof in the lead," Willi Klinger, director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, explains.

"A few years ago, all of a sudden a new wave of high-end wineries joined in. I think it is a sort of group dynamics and an increasingly environment-conscious zeitgeist that has created that momentum.

"With our family-driven, small-scale wine sector, Austria has always been a less industrial wine country. The decision-makers in our wine industry are still real farmers who work in close contact with

nature. Austria as a whole is a very environment-sensitive 'green' country."

DEMETER AND RESPEKT

The country's biodynamic thrust is coming from two sides: Demeter, with its strict (in Austria, particularly strict) regulations for agriculture generally, and viticulture specifically; and Respekt-BIODYN, a recent movement, set up by Austrian winemakers in 2008 to focus purely on winemaking.

It is a sign of the turn against industrial method of agriculture that overall, global certified biodynamic farm hectareage has doubled from 1997 to 2016, from 87,101ha to 164,323ha (that figure excludes Australia, which left Demeter International in 2005 and which at the time had 5,000ha).

Austria is a small wine region (just under

50,000ha under vine, compared with Germany's 100,000ha), yet it is fifth-placed in the world's Demeter member countries by hectareage.

According to Niki Moser of biodynamic Weingut Sepp Moser, the Demeter family in Austria is "rapidly growing", with 187 members of which 43 are vine-growers. Moser estimates that this number has doubled in the last three years.

Although it follows the more general principles on biodynamics set out by Demeter International, Demeter Austria is regarded as one of the strictest national branches of the organisation with regard to vinegrowing regulations (see boxout, p38).

But Demeter is only a fraction of the Austrian biodynamic presence. The emergence of a group of younger export-focused biodynamic producers has created another important strand to this story.

UPDATING STEINER

Respekt is a biodynamic winemaker's association that, according to founding member Judith Beck, is based on a

converted to biodynamics in one step three years later. From this collective conversion, Respekt emerged in around 2008 – strongly under the influence of Lorand, who believed a move away from Demeter's dogmatic approach was necessary.

Interestingly, the Respekt way of working has attracted winemakers from beyond Austria's borders. Four new members joined from Germany, including one of the Mosel's few biodynamic producers, Clemens Busch, plus one from Alto Adige. According to Fred Loimer – a key member of the group who manages 60 hectares of vineyards in the best sites of Langenlois and who has been biodynamic since 2005 – "many other producers" have expressed an interest in joining the group.

In our area, in Gols, we are very close to one another," Beck explains. "It helps a lot because we can exchange experience, you see what they others are doing, you talk to each other. So we have close co-operation within the group."

Beck confirms the positive effect it has had in export markets, remarking that Beck winery "increased exports a lot within the last couple of years".

Doug Wregg of natural, organic and biodynamic wine-focused importer Les Caves de Pyrene confirms the profound influence that such group activity can have: "Pannobile and Respekt are really important because it gets all these growers together to taste, explore, reflect, talk about indigenous grapes, talk about styles of wine, support each other."

"Burgenland seems to be quite a tight area in that respect. Everyone is quite close to each other. That's a good wine culture to have."

Wregg points to Beck, who worked at Cos d'Estournel in St-Estèphe before starting her own winery in Gols, as a prime example of a winemaker whose experience with biodynamics has led her to a fresher, more site and vintage-specific style.

"That's what everyone aspires to is drinkability," Wregg says, "and I think biodynamics supports that, because when you have a healthy, functioning vineyard, you tend to be harvesting earlier with greater acidity, and you can be much more selective. Then effectively the grapes are

Feature findings

- > As the birthplace of Steiner and home of Europe's first biodynamic winery, Nikolaihof, Austria is central to the story of biodynamics.
- > Austria's small-scale, family-driven wine sector, and the country's naturally ecologically-sensitive outlook provide an ideal environment in which biodynamics can thrive.
- > Demeter is growing rapidly in Austria and the national branch of the association has possibly the strictest regulations on wine production.
- > A group of winemakers called Respekt has emerged and is having strong success with their undogmatic approach to biodynamics, particularly in export markets.
- > Biodynamics goes hand in hand with Austria's recent commitment to become one of Europe's flagbearers for sustainability.

'The decision-makers in our wine industry are still real farmers who work in close contact with nature. Austria as a whole is a very environment-sensitive "green" country'

"contemporary synthesis" of the ideas of Rudolf Steiner with "modern agroecology and the practical experience of biodynamics [gained] in recent decades". It sets itself the goal of "producing outstanding wines with maximum individuality".

Beck is also a member of the Pannobile group, the highly regarded collective of export-focused Burgenland winemakers. Beck explains how, in 2004-5, the group was looking for someone to teach them about organic production and by chance met biodynamics consultant Andrew Lorand.

Lorand taught the group for three years and, according to Beck, all of them

telling you what to do... and [you] just guide it towards the bottle and keep that vineyard definition going."

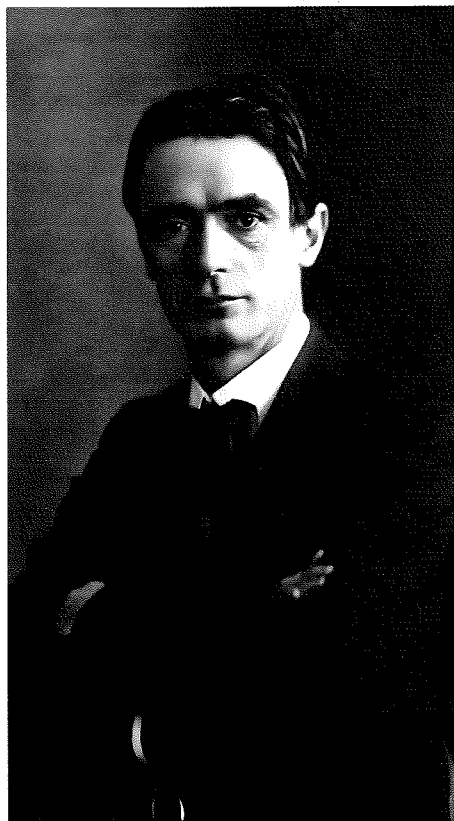
One criticism about Respekt's biodynamic credentials is that, until now, its members have been allowed to source conventionally made grapes for their entry-level wines, which muddies the waters somewhat.

However, as Fred Loimer points out: "this process will end with this upcoming vintage. From 2017 on it's not allowed to use conventionally produced grapes".

FOCAL POINTS

So where in Austria is the biodynamic buzz most apparent? Burgenland and Styria are the main hotbeds, while there is a smattering of biodynamic viticulture in Weinviertel.

In the regions of Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal, biodynamics remains a small concern, but the winemakers involved are



Biodynamics founder Rudolf Steiner

nevertheless very influential: Nikolaihof in Wachau, Bründlmayer, Loimer and Hirsch in Kamptal, and Geyerhof (Ilse Maier of Geyerhof wrote a seminal book on organic farming, *Praxisbuch Bioweinbau*; Christine Saahs of Nikolaihof is also Ilse's sister) and Stagard in Kremstal are among the most prominent.

In Burgenland, where Roland Velich (Moric), Christian Tschida, Claus Preisinger and Gerhard Pittnauer are among the pioneers, according to Wregg, "there's probably about 40 or 50 guys who are working in an amazingly interesting way – using wild ferments, doing skin contact, pushing the boundaries". Styria is much smaller, but is very influential in terms of perception, producing some stunning biodynamic whites to Burgenland's reds.

The group of five key biodynamic producers Schmecke das Leben ("Taste of Life") leads the way. They are: Weingut Werlitsh (Brigitte and Ewald Tscheppe), Weingut Andreas Tscheppe, Weingut

Alice and Roland Tauss, Christine and Franz Strohmeier, and Weingut Maria and Sepp Muster.

"For us," says Muster, "the product itself is important and not the title

'biodynamic'." Muster says that being part of the Schmecke das Leben group has made it easier to connect with potential customers, particularly outside of Austria "If you work in a real biodynamic way in the vineyard and in the cellar the taste is different than the technically made wines," he says.

"The consumer was not used to it. So we were searching for costumers all over the world and we were involved to build up good networks for this style of wine.

"Slowly its getting more and more that people are searching for these wines. They feel some different experience when they enjoy them. Because of this, the image of biodynamic Austrian wines will grow stronger and stronger in the future, in the own country and abroad."

EXPORT MARKETS

It is overwhelmingly in export markets that Austria's biodynamics story is being told – and where indeed Austrian wine is beginning to thrive.

In 2014 exports of the country's wine set new records. Value sales grew by €6m, amounting to total sales of €145m. While sales to principal markets Germany and Switzerland grew, there was also strong growth in markets such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, UK, Ireland, the US and China.

"Export markets were the first getting interested in biodynamic wines from Austria," Loimer explains. "Scandinavia is in the lead, but many other countries like Japan or England have followed."

It's interesting to note that the wine list at Noma – that trailblazer of Scandi cuisine and twice World's Best Restaurant – is a big supporter of Austrian producers, almost all of them biodynamic. Consider also the use

**'If you work in a real
biodynamic way in the vineyard
and in the cellar, the taste is
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made wines'**

Demeter in Austria

According to Niki Moser of Weingut Moser, Demeter family in Austria is rapidly growing – at the moment there are 187 members, of which 43 are wine-growers. "Demeter regulations differ across Europe," Moser says. "As the first national Demeter association, Demeter Austria released vinification rules in April 2006 and is seen as a model for other countries.

"The regulations for certified Demeter wines are stricter in Austria than anywhere else. They stipulate: no systemic plant protection products whatsoever; grapes must be hand-picked; fermentation and ageing should be in stainless steel, wood, stoneware, concrete or porcelain, with synthetic tanks used only as working containers; no added yeasts; no enzymes; no yeast nutrients; no acidification; no concentration of juices; no chemical stabilisation of tartaric acid; fining with bentonite and active carbon (in case of excessive botrytis) only; maximum sulphur content corresponding to the Austrian organic guidelines."

of biodynamic produce in such trend-setting restaurants like Hibiscus, the all-vegetarian L'Arpège in Paris. Then there are statements from hugely influential chefs like Heinz Reitbauer of Steirermark – widely reputed to be Austria's best restaurant – who predicts that "biodynamics is going to be the regular farming"; Anne-Marie Foidl, president of the Austrian Sommeliers Association, is also very publically enthusiastic about biodynamic wines.

SUSTAINABILITY DRIVE

The growth of biodynamics comes in the context of a concerted move by the Austrian wine industry to become one of Europe's flagbearers for sustainability.



Members of the Burgenland-based Pannobile group, from which Respekt emerged



Sheep graze in Fred Loimer's vineyard

Klinger, for one, is convinced that sustainability could become as important to Austria as it is becoming for, for example, New Zealand in the New World, pointing out that 75% of all Austrian estates have already participated in a minimum intervention programme.

As a further sign of Austria's commitment to ecologically aware, holistic ways of working, The Austrian Winegrowers Association has developed an online tool for measuring sustainable practices in the wine sector, allowing producers to make self-assessments of their own sustainable practices.

'We are now in the phase of transition, where many of our most famous winemakers hand over their estates to the next generation, which is even more sensitive to environmental issues'

Since spring 2015 they have also been able to apply for sustainability certification, with certified wineries having the option to use the words 'certified sustainable' on their wine labels. Already 21 wineries have been certified, with many more in the process.

As a holistic approach, biodynamics neatly dovetails into this sustainability drive, and the growing awareness of environmental priorities among the new generation of winemakers.

"We are now in the phase of transition, where many of our most famous winemakers hand over their estates to the next generation," Klinger says, "which is even more open and sensitive to environmental issues. We can expect even more dynamics in this regard."

TIME FOR CHANGE

Greater ecological awareness, the pressing need to reevaluate industrial production methods, growing consumer interest of organics and 'naturalness' – pace RAW Vienna, which launched in 2014; the runaway success of restaurants like Noma, an overarching trend towards

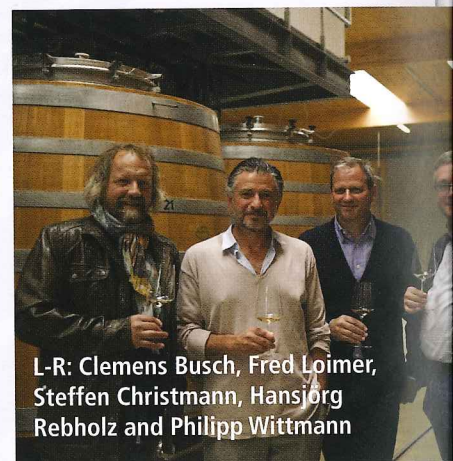
wines with lower alcohol, firmer acidity, less manipulation and a search for 'lightness' (as Kamptal producer Johannes Hirsch puts it) – all of these factors are placing Austria's biodynamic producers front and centre.

The dominance of Grüner Veltliner – representing around half of plantings and not really moving despite the inroads made by indigenous red varieties – is not going to change any time

Respekt-BIODYN

Respekt-BIODYN includes 19 wineries from Austria, Germany, Italy and Hungary. The group uses biodynamic preparations like Demeter winegrowers do and cellar regulations are comparable, but the group seeks to work in a "more open way, a way of dialogue and discussion rather than dogmatism".

Respekt members: Paul Achs, Judith Beck, Clemens Busch, Steffen Christmann, Kurt Feiler/Feiler-Artinger, Karl Fritsch, Michael Goëss-Enzenberg/Manincor, Andreas Gsellmann, Gernot & Heike Heinrich, Johannes Hirsch, Fred Loimer, Hans & Anita Nittaus, Bernhard Ott, Gerhard Pittnauer, Claus Preisinger, Hansjörg Rebholz and Franz Weninger.



L-R: Clemens Busch, Fred Loimer, Steffen Christmann, Hansjörg Rebholz and Philipp Wittmann

soon. It's the lifeblood of Austria's wine economy and an excellent marketing tool.

What can and will happen, however, is the further enhancement of Austrian wine's already considerable quality, with small producers refining their offering of wines which express specific sites and appeal to the modern palate. All that starts in the vineyard and it is in the vineyard where the biodynamic 'magic' happens.

As Fred Loimer confirms: "I think it is the future for Austria's farming and winegrowing. Maybe not biodynamic as leading in number of producers and hectareage, but for sure organic – and biodynamic for the highest quality." db