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SPREADING the word

As Austria seeks to broaden its appeal from the top down, the regional message is just one of several tools at its disposal. By **Gabriel Savage**

BARRING THE occasional bottle of Blaufränkisch on more enterprising lists, Austria's wine profile in the UK remains resolutely white; indeed, almost exclusively Grüner Veltliner. For countries with larger volumes to shift, such a tight niche might be worrying, but it seems to serve Austria rather well. Even so, the message needs to evolve or risk

stagnation. The question is, which direction should Austria take?

Given its relatively high average price point and positioning within independent retailers, not to mention a strong sommelier fan base, Austria can afford to take a slightly more highbrow line than other parts of the world. As many countries work to raise their own image –

and price points – by touting the regionality message, there's an argument that Austria above all should be nudging its customers' focus beyond just grape variety into the more profound context of site specifics.

The regional angle is certainly one that the Austrian Wine Marketing Board is keen to push. In part that comes down to

the nature of the country's key varieties. Willi Klinger, managing director of the AWMB points out "that Riesling needs [a sense of] place for its marketing seems very clear". Indeed, he goes so far as to argue: "It even needs single vineyards to be upmarketed." As for the country's Sauvignon Blanc, a speciality of the Styrian region, Klinger describes the case for regional distinction as "even more dramatic". Acknowledging Sauvignon Blanc's international scope, both in terms of vineyard plantings and consumer popularity, he observes: "If wines of this variety are not linked to a prestigious origin marketing, they fall into the trap of grape variety marketing and get heavily under pressure in terms of price. There is just too much industrial mass produced – and not even bad – Sauvignon Blanc around, that a super terroir with such high labour cost and low yields like Styria could survive without establishing itself among the greatest origins of world class white wines."

RISING STOCK

Moving on to what is by far the country's most commercially significant variety, especially in export markets, Klinger indicates there is room for a number of different approaches with Grüner Veltliner, which he describes as "a genius grape". At a generic level, Klinger points to this variety's ability to produce "light, crisp and fresh whites that make all Pinot Grigio and the like look quite flat". However, looking further up the quality spectrum, he explains the requirement of site specifics: "Its higher-end versions are to be named with the world's best whites and those need origin; in the best version even single vineyards."

Speak to the corners of the UK trade who take a particular interest in Austria and it's easy to argue that the status quo is serving this category just fine. "Our Austrian sales are actually up about 50% in volume terms versus last year," reports Damian Carrington, sales & marketing director of Fields Morris & Verdin. On the one hand, he attributes this leap to the fact that "at the slightly more accessible

end, Grüner Veltliner and, to a certain extent, Blaufränkisch, have almost become must-stock items in the on-trade." However, Carrington also confirms rising interest in the merchant's top end Austrian producers such as Nikolaihof, Knoll and Prager. "There's a growing group of consumers out there who recognise the intrinsic value of these wines," he remarks. "On top of that, the top whites of Burgundy are becoming ever more expensive and difficult to get your hands on. It's driving people in Austria's direction, which is really exciting." Of course, once you get the Burgundy fans on board, that regional message is falling on fertile ground. Carrington points out that "people who are brought up with or who collect Burgundy are comfortable with the idea of site specifics."

Nevertheless, for all the importance that FMV and its producers attach to this sense of place, in general he suggests: "I'm pretty sure that's not translating to the end consumer at the moment."

This weakness of regional understanding is not something that is going to cause Charles Lea, director of London retailer Lea & Sandeman, too many sleepless nights. "I don't think it's very important," he remarks, "it's more a question of style and we question weighty Chardonnay-ish and especially oaked versions which seem to us to miss the essential point of difference that Grüner Veltliner offers." Due to this, Lea says: "The growers and winemakers are the important element."

When it comes to finding the right strategy to enable Austria to reach out to a wider audience, Lea believes that the

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Feature findings

- ▶ As other countries step up their regional message, some supporters of Austrian wine are keen to highlight the country's own geographical distinctions.
- ▶ While many UK merchants are enjoying booming sales of Austrian wine, there seems to be little evidence that customers have a strong awareness of the country's various wine regions.
- ▶ In place of any specific regional focus, there is a feeling that grape variety, style and gastronomy are more productive talking points for introducing Austrian wine to a wider audience.

simple varietal-focused approach has plenty of mileage left. He observes: "There are grape varieties here which are not grown anywhere else in the world, barring a few experimental plots." Lea continues: "Even though the on-trade-led niche marketing of these styles has been pretty successful so far, for now the focus should be on introducing a wider public to these unique offerings and avoid directing too much energy in preaching to the converted."

That said, Austria is unlikely to be a country that wine consumers are likely to discover without some coaxing. At Laithwaites Wine, where Austrian sales have grown "exponentially", according to buyer Christine Weingut, the retailer has found its mixed case offers to be an invaluable tool for this category. Weingut reports: "Once they try it they are really surprised and go back to it."

Despite its 90% revenue growth for the company during the last year, Weingut admits that Austria still accounts for just 0.05% of Laithwaites' total wine

Austrian wine exports to key markets (2012-2013)

Source: AWMB/Statistik Austria

Country	2012		2013		% volume change	% value change	Share of total export value
	1,000 litres	1,000 €	1,000 litres	1,000 €			
GERMANY	34,382	75,733	33,497	77,142	-2.57	1.86	56.42%
average price/litre		€2.20		€2.30			
SWITZERLAND & LIECHTENSTEIN	2,597	15,517	2,458	15,963	-5.35	2.87	11.67%
average price/litre		€5.97		€6.49			
US	2,028	8,610	1,725	8,146	-14.94	-5.39	5.96%
average price/litre		€4.25		€4.72			
NETHERLANDS	1,426	5,455	1,463	5,757	2.59	5.54	4.21%
average price/litre		€3.83		€3.94			
SWEDEN	829	3,473	923	3,984	11.34	14.71	2.91%
average price/litre		€4.19		€4.32			
FINLAND	436	2,088	678	3,350	55.50	60.44	2.45%
average price/litre		€4.79		€4.94			
UK	306	2,729	479	3,203	56.54	17.37	2.34%
average price/litre		€8.92		€6.69			
CHINA	339	2,067	363	2,548	7.08	23.27	1.86%
average price/ litre		€6.10		€7.02			
NORWAY	524	2,118	478	2,148	-8.78	1.42	1.57%
average price/litre		€4.04		€4.49			
BELGIUM	187	956	279	1,480	49.20	54.81	1.08%
average price/litre		€5.11		€5.30			
JAPAN	202	1,393	193	1,435	-4.46	3.02	1.05%
average price/litre		€6.90		€7.44			
DENMARK	137	817	134	818	-2.19	0.12	0.60%
average price/litre		€5.96		€6.10			
Total	47,058	131,909	45,743	136,730	-2.79	3.65	100.00%
average price/litre		€2.80		€2.99			
Bottled wine	39,757	123,705	39,342	128,958	-1.04	4.25	94.32%
average price/litre		€3.11		€3.28			
Bulk wine	7,301	8,205	6,401	7,772	-12.33	-5.28	5.68%
average price/litre		€1.12		€1.21			

sales. What's more, until a Zweigelt debuts later this year, the country has been entirely represented by Grüner Veltliner.

If you're looking for a wine for dinner then you cannot go wrong with Grüner Veltliner

EAT, DRINK, SELL

Weingut believes that the food friendly attributes of this variety in particular offer the key to converting more customers to Austrian wine. "Its versatility and food matching is the main selling point," she argues. "If you're looking for a wine for dinner then you cannot go wrong with Grüner Veltliner." It is this culinary angle that the retailer plans to pursue this year with support from the AWMB. These gastronomic, stylistic and varietal approaches may run contrary to the increasingly regional emphasis being employed by other countries, but then Austria has hardly built its UK market base in the traditional manner.

As the country seeks to broaden its appeal from the top downwards, rather than vice versa, it is perhaps these more accessible narratives that will open up the category to a wider audience. *db*