

THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL

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Prayer Rock Vineyards;
and Terry Brandborg,
owner/Winemaker,
Brandborg Vineyard &
Winery, at Reustle-Prayer
Rock Vineyards in
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UNDERCOVER UMPQUA

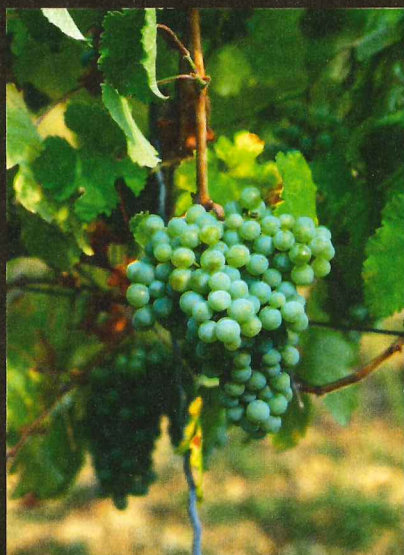
DISCOVERING THE
BIG THREE WINERIES
IN SOUTHERN OREGON'S
UMPQUA VALLEY



Kremstal is one of the regions behind the push for Austria's DAC classification system.

Austria Now

PHOTO: FABER, COURTESY OF THE AUSTRIAN WINE MARKETING BOARD



In one instance of DAC classification, Grüner Veltliner has been approved as a DAC wine for Weinviertel, provided it is made in a style that the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture describes as "aromatic, spicy and peppery, with no oak or botrytis notes."

THE DAC CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM REPRESENTS A CONSCIOUS MOVEMENT TOWARD REGIONAL, RATHER THAN VARIETAL, FOCUS

by Bob Bath, MS

OVER THE LAST 25 YEARS, a growing number of both regions and countries in Europe are focusing on identifying and classifying their vineyards *à la* Burgundy. Barolo and Germany are immersed in this process, and you can now add Austria to that list. At the moment, the vineyard classification movement in Austria is being driven by grower associations in the Kamptal, Kremstal, Traisental, Wagram and Sudsteiermark wine-growing regions. This process of identifying top vineyards certainly validates Austria's wine history, but it will take many years before all of Austria's wine regions become involved and even longer for everyone to agree on the "grand cru" vineyards within the country.

In the meantime, there is a relatively new regional/grape variety system that has been developed by the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture to identify "wines which clearly represent the character of a region." DAC (Districtus Austriae Controllatus) certification began in 2001 and now includes nine different regions that are linked with specific grapes. The inspiration behind DAC was to move beyond the historic Qualitätswein and Prädikatswein system that classified wines on a "Germanic" must weight system. DAC also represents a conscious movement towards a regional rather than a varietal focus.



Above: A patchwork of vineyards in Kamptal. It will take some time for everyone to agree on the "grand cru" vineyards within Austria. Right: The primary role of DAC is to identify "special region-typical quality wines" in Austria.



In a nod to the traditional must-weight philosophy, there are two categories of DAC wines, Klassik and Reserve. Klassik wines are earlier-picked wines with less cellar treatment, while Reserve wines represent minimum higher-alcohol wines and more winemaking options.

The primary role of DAC is, however, to identify "special region-typical quality wines" similar to Chablis in France and Chianti in Italy. The unique aspect of DAC is that specific grapes (and styles of wine) are being identified for specific regions. For example, Grüner Veltliner has been approved as a DAC wine for Weinviertel, provided it is made in a style that the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture describes as "aromatic, spicy and peppery, with no oak or botrytis notes." Any other non-DAC varieties produced in Weinviertel are forced to identify their wines by the political state they are located in or a larger regional appellation. So a Pinot Blanc or Blaufränkisch produced in Weinviertel would be forced to use the larger regional Niederösterreich appellation.

There is a strong argument for the grape varieties that have been chosen so far for the nine DACs, and in some regions like Wiener Gemischter Satz, a blend of grapes is allowed. The most debatable example of a varietal oversight is in the Neusiedlersee, where Zweigelt has been given DAC status while the world-famous sweet wines of this region are curiously ignored. Not all of Austria's wine regions are participating in DAC at the moment, so regions like Wagram and Wachau are using their regional name for all varieties. Adding to that confusion, some regional names, such as Vienna, are also federal states, so non-DAC wines will share the same appellation name as DAC wines.

There are several advantages that DAC has created for all of us. It does help identify the best grapes in a region, especially when there are potentially 35 "approved" grapes that can be produced in

a region. DAC has also helped identify wine regions less known in the U.S. that are producing high quality wines. DAC has also helped to solidify a "classic" style of wine within a region that represents a subtle form of guarantee to the purchaser of these wines.

Two of the wine industry's experts on Austrian wine have weighed in on DAC, in different respects. David Schildknecht, who writes significantly and thoughtfully about Austrian wine, insists that DAC "is going to merit attentive following, especially as the number of Austria's wine regions to which a DAC category applies reaches what some predict will be a critical mass or tipping point, at which those regions that have been resistant to defining their typical wines by means of a DAC will, it is averred, feel compelled to avoid being left behind."

On the other hand, celebrated Austrian wine importer Terry Theise feels that "DAC, however laudable its aims (and to a certain extent they are) is essentially a bureaucratic and abstract construct... only adding to the drinker's burden, because now he needs to learn not only the facts but the bureaucratic system of categorizing them."

The big question is how well do wine consumers really understand Austrian wine? The Austrian Wine Marketing Board has done a tremendous job over the last 15 years educating sommeliers about Austrian wine, but most of the American public is still discovering Grüner Veltliner; let alone Kamptal and Kremstal. DAC will help simplify that process.

The best news is that DAC is an evolutionary process and inevitably more regions will participate. It's also safe to say that this system will develop much faster than the vineyard classification system in Austria. In either case, it's only a matter of time. SJ