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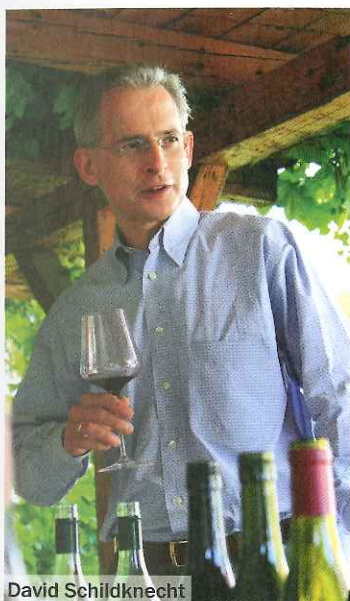
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noble blues

Several years ago, when I received an invitation to a blafränkisch tasting at *Gramercy Tavern*, my brain took a moment to process it. Lemberger...David Schildknecht...Roland Velich...Dorli Muhr. I knew and respected the last three, but had no idea what they were doing stamping the blunt, peppery blue juice of the grape with their reputations.



David Schildknecht

Especially Schildknecht. He had in the past proposed a story on blafränkisch, which seemed too limited a subject for in-depth research. After the tasting, I began to come around.

As it turns out, blafränkisch is a grape of lost nobility, capable of clearly representing its terroir when given the right site and treated with care. Schildknecht recognized this early on, as a denizen of Austrian cellars and as the precise taster that he is—you'd have to look to the über-geeks and their algorithms at Google or Facebook to find a parallel to the way his brain connects wine to site.

I'm excited to present this story with our annual *Restaurant Poll*, a barometer of the shifting American tastes in wine, measuring the boundaries of our comfort zone and the frequency with which we leave it. As wines like this classic from the Austro-Hungarian Empire gain their

footing in the 21st Century, we are increasingly open to travel from our comfort zone to more esoteric lands.

April is an issue devoted to sommelier darlings like blafränkisch and to the wines diners relax with—including pinot noir, which, only a moment ago in wine time, was a bridge too far. Now, it's expanding into the nether regions of the Anderson Valley's coastal hills, as chronicled by Talia Baiocchi in her first feature story for *W&S*. Somewhere, buried in the poll data, is the next great wine we may all adopt as our own.

One last bit of esoterica: With Easter and Passover approaching, Howard G. Goldberg has uncovered a revisionist history of the events chronicled in *Exodus*, this one short and required reading for anyone invited to sit through a seder this spring.


Joshua Greene

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Blaufränkisch

The Restoration of
Austria's Noble Red

by **David Schildknecht**

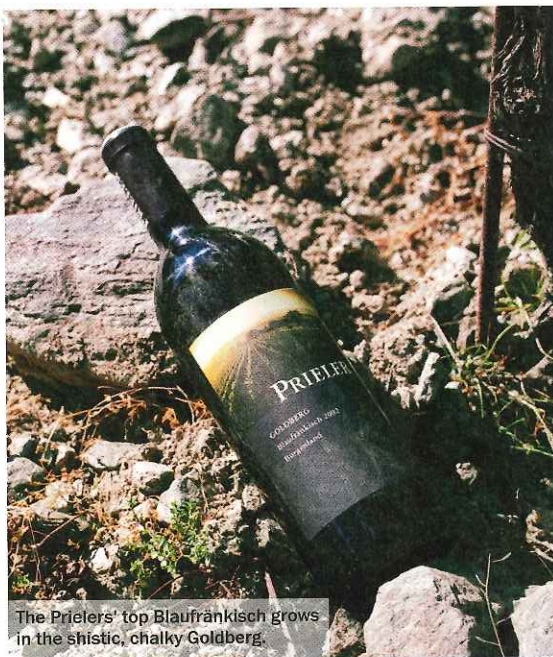
Though little-known internationally,
this grape's glorious future has been
secured by a handful of talented growers.

Blafränkisch—the “Blue Frank”—no doubt came east from France, and has most likely grown in what was long known as “German West Hungary” since before medieval times. Its name, at least, points toward the aftermath of Charlemagne, when things that were noble were “Frankish” as opposed to “Hunnish.” (Heunisch the grape—a.k.a. gouais blanc—is a parent of chardonnay, first mentioned in 1330, and ancestor to numerous other well-known varieties.)

If frankly you don't give a damn about history, then Burgenland—that place where most of the world's blafränkisch grows—may be hard for you to comprehend. This place where the Alps dramatically meet the Puszta, Hungary's Great Plain, was ruled from Budapest and Esztergom for a thousand years, even though its traditional northwest boundary—the *Leithagebirge*—comes to within 25 miles of Vienna. Successive monarchs including Empress Maria Theresa encouraged Bavarians and Croats to fill the vacuum of a land laid waste by two centuries of Ottoman incursions. The region's long, shallow steppe lake, whose origin is a scientific puzzle, was named for these “new settlers,” *Neusiedlersee*. The local Princes Esterházy offered protection to Jews throughout the Empire, completing a unique and polyglot mix of peoples. In 1681, the lakeshore village of Rust—thanks to a reputation for late-harvested Ausbruch (Aszú)—became a free city, the tiniest under the Hungarian Crown.

Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, among the few residues of Wilsonian idealism to percolate into the post-war political fabric of Europe was a plebiscite in which German and Croatian speakers voted to cast their lot with Austria's nascent republic. The result was a

long, narrow Austrian *Bundesland* severely pinched at the middle near the region's traditional capital, Sopron, which renewed its



The Prielers' top Blafränkisch grows in the shistic, chalky Goldberg.

allegiance to Hungary. “So you see”—as the resident late master of botrytis Alois Kracher said often (with his usual sly twinkle, not a knitted brow)—“we have a big image problem. This is a land that was only invented in 1921.”

Several Burgenland growers were just setting themselves up to compete internationally with red wine, though not necessarily blafränkisch, when the 1985 wine scandal broke (a crisis whose origin was sweet Neusiedlersee wines found to have been laced with glycerin-enhancing diethylene glycol). “When my father introduced cabernet to this country,” says Andi Kollwentz of Grosshöflein about still-hale and ever-modest pioneer Anton Kollwentz, “nobody would have been prepared to pay a high price for an Austrian blafränkisch. It would have been completely impossible; but cabernet? Customers took it with a ‘let's see what this is like’ [attitude]. And when it was good [they said] ‘Aha! Austria ... red wine ...perhaps interesting after all.’” Meanwhile, in 1976, Ernst “ET” Triebaumer had acquired some promisingly low-vigor, already 25-year-old blafränkisch vines on the edge of Rust, and not long after Kollwentz bottled his first cabernet, Triebaumer's 1986 Blafränkisch Mariental became that grape's first star appearance in Austria, or indeed anywhere. But the lure of cabernet and merlot overshadowed blafränkisch for a decade thereafter.

“I took over my family's estate in 1985,” relates Hans “John” Nittnaus. “We drank Bordeaux, Burgundy, Barolo and the like; and we planted cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Internationalism was in. Only in the Ungerberg, one of our best sites” on the Neusiedlersee's generally sandy eastern shore, “we planted blafränkisch as an experiment. The 1990 vintage rewarded us with two outstanding successes, our cabernet sauvignon, and that blafränkisch.” Convinced that these two were a “dream pair,” he married them off, the blend becoming Nittnaus's flagship and the repository for most of his blafränkisch. Such blends were to become a familiar pattern. One village away, the late Josef Pöckl launched his estate to national fame with Admiral, a barrique-aged blend begun in vintage 1990, heavily dependent on cabernet and merlot as well as two other Austrian locals—St. Laurent and Zweigelt—but in which blafränkisch played only an occasional, supporting role. Triebaumer's neighbor Feiler-Artinger inaugurated a single-vineyard Blafränkisch Umriess in 1992, but at this address, too, Bordelais *cépages* and blends were long to remain the headliners. Moreover, Bordelais ideals and methods—of fermentative extrac-

tion and *élevage* in *barrique*, as well as of finished wine style—continued to set the tone, not so surprisingly given a region and nation determined to demonstrate that “we too” could perform on an international stage whose most famous actors included the great Bordeaux châteaux and whose most glamorous newcomers at the time were Napa cabernets.

Silvia Prieler recalls how a mere 24 bottles of her family’s inaugural Blaufränkisch Goldberg had been sold to her countrymen two years after its 1996 release, until a Swiss merchant showed up and carted away the lot. “No Austrian had the least inkling that this indigenous variety could reflect *terroir*, and none wanted to pay the same price for it as a cabernet sauvignon.” Yet, within five years, Prieler’s Goldberg had become one of Austria’s most sought-after and concomitantly expensive bottlings. Austrians were justifiably proud of the diligence and stylistic innovation shown by their growers; their stringent new laws; and the improbable international prestige accorded to *grüner veltliner* from the Wachau and Kamptal—wines from a *cépage* and grown in places formerly unknown abroad. Suddenly, they were ready to open their minds, hearts and pocketbooks to what had been thought of as a rustic local grape. Mittelburgenland, which had long styled itself as “Blaufränkischland” on account of the grape’s prevalence there, and whose growers’ association had already auditioned a sort of appellation system in 1995, captured increasing national attention; yet even so, local headlines gave pride of place to blends and focused on body-building and ripeness within a framework that would raise no eyebrows in Bordeaux or Napa.

Romantic Revolutionaries

In 1994, a young Südburgenland-born Viennese sommelier, Uwe Schiefer, indulged his fantasy of making wine from the Eisenberg, a steep, rugged ridge of iron-rich clay and quartzite-laced schist astride the Austro-Hungarian frontier nearly as close to famed Lake Balaton as to the Neusiedlersee. This southern outpost had historically enjoyed vinous renown but was now almost exclusively—save for regional pioneer Hermann Krutzler—a steadily dwindling patchwork of small family and hobby plots. Schiefer’s fruit from the 1995 vintage filled a couple of *barriques*, but by 1999 he had purchased enough vine rows to supply a modest fan club. Schiefer became confident in a vision of blaufränkisch excel-



A non-interventionist by nature, Uwe Schiefer proclaimed his aesthetic goals as “elegance, finesse, delicacy, clear and precise fruit; naturally with balance and length.”

lence for which he knew no other reference point save Burgundy.

A non-interventionist by nature in a time when the term was not yet debased by overuse, Schiefer proclaimed his aesthetic goals as “elegance; finesse; delicacy; clear and precise fruit; naturally with balance and length.” One taste of the wines told you those weren’t just buzzwords. Fermented in open-top wooden tubs, foot-trodden, spontaneously fermented and leisurely raised in a range of mostly 500 liter and larger casks, these were unlike any of their blaufränkisch kin. The Eisenberg’s wide diurnal temperature swings and frequently prolonged but cool autumns brought to mind the Wachau, and accentuated the abundant acidity, peppery phenolics and late ripening that seem already by its varietal nature to characterize Austria’s “blue frank.” Schiefer and his wines thrived on precisely this accentuation. Gradually, he acquired some of the oldest, morphologically most diverse vines in his neighborhood, in historically prime parcels with names like Szapáry and Reihburg that would soon not only adorn his labels but trigger covetous emotions among Austrian wine lovers.

After extended university years, Roland Velich and his brother Heinz enjoyed lucrative work as *croupiers* for a decade, all the while helping their father at the family estate in Apetlon, near the southern tip of sandy, reedy Lake Neusiedl and one village away from Alois Kracher. Velich’s keen intellect cohabitated with a romantic’s soul, and he dreamed of honoring and helping to focus worldwide attention on “this fine and distinctive, colorful and diverse [Burgen]land of ours” while leaving brother Heinz free to

pursue personal visions of equal intensity from the white grapes and often beneficent botrytis that characterized Weingut Velich. Impressed by the efforts of Schiefer, as well as by ostensibly rustic examples of 1980s blaufränkisch that came had come his way, Velich conceived a plan only in need of a place...a relatively *cool* place, he was already convinced. In 2001 he found it—along with centenarian vines and a partner in Erich Krutzler—on the high, loess-clay plateau of then far-from-famous Lutzmannsburg in southeastern Mittelburgenland. He struck gold again the following year, in Neckenmarkt’s terraced slopes of gneiss, schist and limestone that rise up to 1,300 feet above sea level (a veritable mountain when viewed from the Puszta). But Krutzler—who eventually married the daughter of famed Wachauer F.X. Pichler and nowadays crafts with her not only outstanding, innovative Wachau wines but also blaufränkisch from Südburgenland—was lured away to a Slovenian project. In the end, Roland Velich debuted solo under the name Moric (Magyar for—and pronounced as—Moritz).

Well-versed in Piedmont and the Northern Rhône as well as Burgundy, Velich knew that each of these places showed certain resemblances to soils and microclimates of Burgenland, and their wines—at least potentially—to blaufränkisch. He was also convinced that the “unplugged,” hands-off, less-is-more approach pioneered with this grape by Schiefer was the route to self-expression for site, *cépage* and vintner alike. “The basic idea behind Moric was simply to craft wines that unequivocally permitted their origins to be recognized—wines that could only be grown in one place, even if that



“I want to make a lovely red Austrian white wine, something that you can’t find anywhere else.”

—Dorli Muhr

meant wines that are harder for wine lovers—or critics—to understand at first,” and he added that he would not “merely give lip service to these notions as marketing strategy.” Gentle fermentative extraction in open-topped wooden fermentors (including at times a share of whole clusters) resulted in quite site-specific lots, which after close to two years in 500 liter or larger Austrian and French barrels were assembled into a few cuvées, the best featuring the oldest vines from Lutzmannsburg and Neckenmarkt.

“I’m not trying to make great wine,” Velich protested in 2006, “just wine that reflects its origins.” But the need to protest arose because, by then, with his third collection about to be bottled and his enthusiastic customer base growing, certain critics at least were convinced that these wines demonstrated a profound truth: One seldom achieves originality or greatness by vainglorious fixation on doing so; they may emerge where sensitivity and craft permit site and grape to script the message in one’s bottles. And these wines displayed abundant sap, uncanny levity and

transparency to nuances of floral, animal and mineral sorts such as nobody—least of all Velich—could have foreseen.

By the time Dorli Muhr and her then-husband Dirk van der Niepoort crushed their first blaufränkisch, the potential for elegance with this grape was evident; what’s more, these were two avowed terroirists. “I’m convinced,” said Niepoort at the time, “that pinot noir alone among red grapes can so sensitively reflect its site as blaufränkisch; and when I found out that my fiancé’s family owned blaufränkisch vines, I wanted to tap that potential.” Expressing an attitude that only seems superficially to contradict Niepoort’s, Muhr has said, “I don’t care about cépage, not even if it is pinot or chardonnay—I don’t think for one instant of them when I drink Burgundy—but only of that which has permanence both physically and promotionally, and that’s place. So you’d better be able to recognize, compare, smell, taste and feel that.” The place in question could have been—indeed now is—a poster child for eastern Austria’s wealth of once famous but long-neglected sites. The Spitzerberg is the last western outpost of the Carpathians, near where Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary meet on the Danube (north of Burgenland, near Austria’s old Roman capital—a ruin now—for which this small wine region is named, Carnuntum). A nature preserve, home to flora and fauna otherwise regionally unknown, much of this site had been reclaimed by scrub in the course of the last century as wine growing ceased to be profitable on such steep, rocky and dry slopes. Its gneiss, mica-schist, chalk and sand over a core of granite make for geological complexity you can instantly see and, as often happens under certain conditions, that manifests itself in the glass.

Muhr and Niepoort elected to vinify certain lots with stems and whole clusters (ripening conditions permitting), which enhanced both the floral propensities inherent in blaufränkisch from such a site and this grape’s peppery phenolic pungency. Maturation is principally in large Austrian barrels or the upright wooden fermentors themselves, guaranteeing that scarcely a hint of oak penetrates a taster’s consciousness. Add to this a consistently infectious juiciness, refreshment and mouthwatering salinity, and it’s not so surprising that Muhr was heard to say, “I want to make a lovely red Austrian white wine, something that you can’t find anywhere else.” Granted, this was remarked while tast-

ing her young 2008s from cask, wines from a precarious vintage that needed a light touch; but today those wines are indeed lovely, little less-so in their way than ones from the exceedingly ripe and universally praised 2006 vintage (which Muhr harvested in late September). “What makes blaufränkisch great in my site is the lightness and elegance of it,” she reiterates, “but I don’t claim that it tastes at all like pinot noir.”

The fault lies not in your cépage, but your selection

Late-ripening blaufränkisch, it’s frequently pointed out, is not only a vigorous variety prone to over-crop; it’s also generally a bigger-berried grape. Many growers (and critics) argue that gentle extraction or Burgundian fermentative techniques aren’t appropriate to it. Yet, if one turns to the hand-colored plates in Hermann and Rudolf Goethe’s *Atlas der Traubensorten* (completed in Austria in 1887), one finds a depiction of blaufränkisch so tiny-berried and tight-clustered as to suggest pinot. Long-time local usage of “Grosser Burgunder” for this grape—like the ancient Frankish allusion—suggests that it was thought of as pinot-like though bigger-bunched if not bigger-berried.

“My father began selecting and grafting his own vines in the mid 1960s. So we escaped even the temptation of clones,” relates Herbert Triebaumer, who suspects that blaufränkisch’s genetic degradation (like so many similar European wine phenomena) owes much to the economic perils of post-phylloxera re-cultivation, which didn’t begin in this area until around 1910. “An influx of Lemberger clones from Germany in the early eighties left him unimpressed. Even if you planted tightly and left the rows green to reduced vigor, the berries were far too fat and the yields too high.”

Many of the ancient (in places, centenarian) stands of blaufränkisch that Roland Velich and Uwe Schiefer access are quite small-berried. Josef “Pepi” Umatham—a vintner with the imaginative insight to appreciate old selections as the repositories of viticultural “wisdom”—has recovered and propagated material from ancient vines to arrive at something like a “blaufränkisch *fin*,” which in 2010 was duly registered. “I see this work of selection as the cornerstone for long-term individuality, genetic diversity, and the ability of vines to adapt to adversity,” he explains. Uwe Schiefer, too, has developed a se-



lection based on the old vines in the Eisenberg. This is not, he points out, work with a terminus, but rather the shouldering of a responsibility that was taken for granted before the 20th century. There is plenty of evidence in other parts of Austria to prove that Umathum and Schiefer do not exaggerate.

Consider the more than three decades of painstaking vine-by-vine monitoring and selection begun in 1928 by Franz Pichler Senior, one of whose meticulous record-books can be viewed on Weingut F. X. Pichler's home page. Absent a handful of patient visionaries like Pichler, grüner veltliner with the requisite berry size, phenolic profile and genetic diversity to achieve excellence might not exist at *any* Austrian addresses—something to ponder when one hears (in Austria and other EU lands) of governments considering stipulating the planting only of specifically authorized clones.

To matters genetic must be added those of the environment: wind-exposed sites such as Lutzmannsburg's high plateau, the Eisenberg or the Leitha range naturally result in smaller, thicker-skinned berries. And in the early 21st century, both Burgenland's new breed of stylistically innovative terroirists and its most established red wine growers were increasingly, literally, heading for the hills.

Terroir capital

Josef "Pepi" Umathum, resident of the small market town of Frauenkirchen, had by the late 20th century acquired a reputation as one of Austria's most important red wine growers. This sandy, gravelly area near the

Recapturing the genetic memory of generations devoted to fitting cépage to site is an extension of Josef Umathum's emotional, almost mystic, yet clear-eyed connection to his homeland.

southeastern shore of the Neusiedlersee is so flat that the two graceful and iconic towers of Frauenkirchen's basilica (which also adorn Umathum's label) can be seen for many miles from all directions. Through painstaking selection, biodynamic viticulture and attentive vinification, he had brought Dr. Zweigelt's eponymous 1922 crossing—representing by far the majority of Umathum's vines not to mention Austria's red acreage—to a level of expressiveness that none of his countrymen had thought possible (this at a time when precious few non-Austrians had even an inkling of Zweigelt's existence). Recapturing the genetic memory of generations devoted



Gernot Heinrich displays a key element in the terroir of his Alter Berg.

to fitting cépage to site was an extension of Umathum's emotional, almost mystic, yet clear-eyed connection to his homeland. (In an alcove of his tasting room, next to detailed 19th century Magyar maps of land use, you'll find among other things a collection of documents and books that serve Umathum's mission as a local truth squad committed to public awareness of this region's history, including genocidal destruction of human capital.) St. Laurent as well as several white cépages have been selected and registered by

Umathum, although what he calls "the still-imperial Austrian bureaucracy" has refused to recognize his re-introduction—after perhaps two centuries—of hárslevelű. So it wasn't surprising that he devoted attention to blaufränkisch as well, even though it made up a very modest part of his acreage. That changed dramatically in 2000, when Umathum received an opportunity to purchase the Jungen Berg in Jois, on the far side of the lake.

The Jungen Berg represents one of just three sites in Burgenland that were private possessions of the King of Hungary, in this instance since 1324—though two centuries later it passed to the Emperor of Austria who instituted its use as an appellation. This rise of quartzite-laced schist is unique in how close its steep slopes come to Lake Neusiedl. In 1700, a series of stone terraces were installed, which Umathum painstakingly restored over six months comprising 15,000 work-hours. "Talk about terroir," he joked. "Even a lay person can see that this is a very special vineyard." Into these terraces went Umathum's selection of blaufränkisch (and below that, pinot noir). Finding a later but still time-honored name for this site more euphonious, evocative and memorable, he called it "Kirschgarten" (cherry garden), and indeed Jois had also been known for cherries, which had fetched premium prices under the village's name in Vienna's great *Naschmarkt*. Even the 2003—a pathetic first crop in a punishingly hot, dry year—exhibited exceptional purity of fruit. The alliance of floral perfume, black fruits and chocolate in a silken-textured 2004 might have made a top Pomerol blush; and by 2006 it seemed that, however youthful, the roots of these vines had already hit some kind of pay dirt, yielding mouthwatering savor embracing saline, musky, spicy, and ineffably mineral nuances.

Like Pepi Umathum, blaufränkisch pioneer John Nittnaus had become an early convert to biodynamics and had achieved his reputation through blends from grapes grown on the sand



Rebuilt after exactly 300 years, Josef Umathum's terraces of blaufränkisch in Jois rise just back from the vast Lake Neusiedl.

and gravel east of the Neusiedlersee. But in 2004 Nittnaus accessed vineyards on the western shore of the lake in the chalky and schistic Leitha hills, for which he named the resulting blaufränkisch (while an amazing-value “second wine” would soon be baptized *Kalk und Schiefer*—“chalk and schist”). From the beginning, it was evident that Nittnaus’s experience permitted him to capture subtle complexity, inner tension and sheer refreshment in a nonetheless rich red wine. His results and regimens—including open-top wooden fermentors, spontaneous fermentation, restrained manual punch-downs and extended *élevage* relying on older 500-liter casks—called to mind Velich’s contemporaneous revelations. Gernot Heinrich, Nittnaus’ Gols neighbor, had also embraced biodiversity and achieved a reputation through singularly merlot-rich blends. In 2007, Heinrich pressed his first wine from 20- to 30-year-old blaufränkisch vines he had acquired in the Alter Berg, a cool chalk-sandstone site not far inland from Umathum’s Kirschgarten. It rises steadily if not quite steeply to forest, which shade it in late afternoon. The result is in an intriguingly floral, pungently herbal, tea-tinged and intensely black-fruited wine of almost electrical vibrancy.

Erwin Tinhof was a blaufränkisch veteran who didn’t need to be told of the Leithaberg’s potential. Already in 1993—the vintage of Engelbert Prieler’s inaugural Goldberg—he had bottled his first blaufränkisch-dominated *Feuersteig* from a breezy, once-prestigious site high up behind the Esterházy summer palace and gardens in Eisenstadt, its soil a coarse welter of ancient coral, mussels and snails. As befits his largely cool, fossiliferous

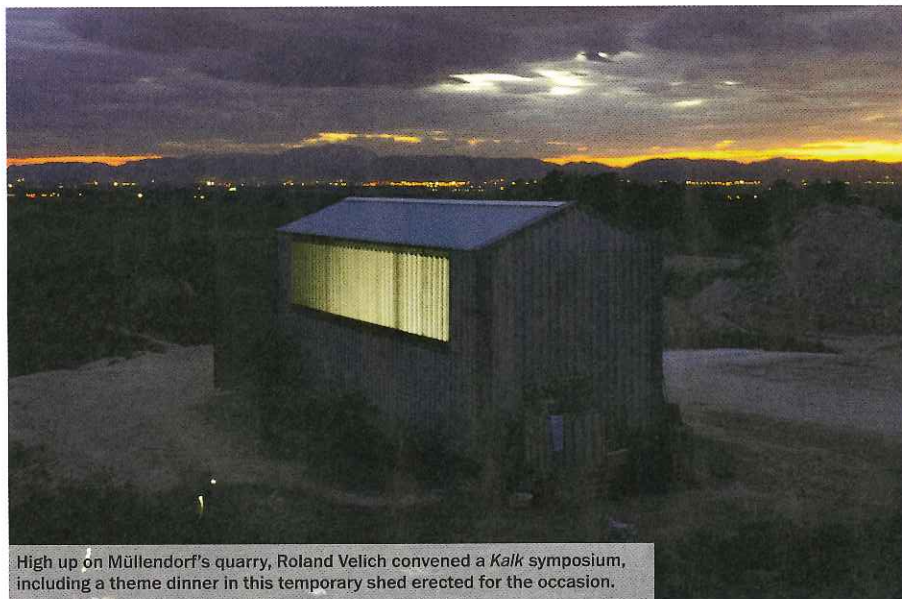
sites, Tinhof (like Prieler) had masterful success with whites too, especially neuburger and pinot blanc (a.k.a. weissburgunder). Today, he is enthusiastically expanding his acreage of blaufränkisch as well as whites. In conspicuous contrast to Zweigelt, blaufränkisch does not take well to reductive up-bringing in tank and quick bottling—“blaufränkisch punch,” if you will, lacks allure much less intrigue—whereas barrels and time mean money. But Tinhof—like Nittnaus and Prieler—has been notably successful in offering a distinctively delicious and bargain-priced bottling raised in large casks to serve as Blaufränkisch 101 or a routine table companion.

Roland Velich, too, looked toward the Leitha Hills—which, considering he lives in the ancient former parsonage of Grosshöflein, just outside of Eisenstadt, did not require him to look far. The message of terroir influence had begun to resonate with him in a very strong sense. Tasting the individual lots from Neckenmarkt fruit in Velich’s cellar it’s possible by scent, taste and texture to discern the geological underpinnings of each, quite possibly even to someone as yet barely familiar with the grape in question (as I still was on my first visit). The pronouncedly high-toned, almost distilled fruit essences and energetic vivacity that accrues to fruit from limestone; the floral enhancement on gneiss or granite; the pronouncedly smoky, peppery, and crushed stone characteristics seemingly accentuated by mica-schist...these and other patterns would be familiar to someone versed, say, in tasting carignan and grenache from the similarly diverse soils of Roussillon.

Not only, it seemed, was blaufränkisch proving chameleon-like in its adaptation to site and soil; Burgenland could prove an excellent laboratory in which to investigate the degree to which certain geological foundations promote certain vinous characteristics irrespective of grape type.

The first Leitha object of Velich’s affection was an old mussel-chalk vineyard in St. Georgen, little more than a mile east of Tinhof’s *Feuersteig*, and—like so many in this area—planted to both blaufränkisch and grüner veltliner. Anything but a “fresh and fruity” exemplar of Austrian white wine virtue, the first Moric St. Georgen Grüner Veltliner was barrel-fermented and given extended *élevage* on its lees with minimal sulfur. It displayed extraordinary, high-toned sensual diversity as well as an uncanny alliance of density and creaminess with vivacity born of some inexplicable inner tension. Or perhaps not so inexplicable, because the two things that most stood out about this unprecedented wine were how much it resembled its just as distinctively delicious blaufränkisch counterpart, and how much it resembled great Chablis.

Spurred by his success in St. Georgen—as well as a joint project (dubbed “Jagini”) with young Hannes Schuster to resurrect the nearly-abandoned if once-renowned blaufränkisch vineyards of nearby Zagersdorf (Croatian Cogrštof)—Velich turned his attention to a landmark a mere half mile above his house: the Müllendorf marble and chalk quarry. “There must be some vestiges of vines up there,” he opined, and indeed there were, albeit derelict. Not one to be put-off by



High up on Müllendorf's quarry, Roland Velich convened a *Kalk* symposium, including a theme dinner in this temporary shed erected for the occasion.

Roland Velich's Moric wines demonstrated a profound truth: One seldom achieves originality or greatness by vainglorious fixation on doing so; they may emerge where sensitivity and craft permit site and grape to script the message in one's bottles.

degeneracy or adamancy—whether of vines, stone, or bureaucrats—Velich had found his next cause. Last August he convened *Kalk*, a symposium including comparisons of wines grown in chalk and a dinner party right in the quarry; and soon the first Müllendorf Blaufränkisch—perhaps ever to be singled-out by name—will appear under his label.

A truce in the style wars

As blaufränkisch's reputation grew, the stylistic gulf between a Velich or Muhr-Niepoort on the one hand and the often heady, thickly rich blaufränkisch already beloved by many growers and consumers was unbridgeable in the short run. Nor was that a misfortune. As Velich repeatedly intoned, the very idea of a dominant style betrayed blaufränkisch's potential, not leaving it at liberty to define itself. No account, after all, can be given of "the typical syrah of the Northern Rhône," so diverse are the wine making styles and the naturally given conditions in Côte Rôtie, Hermitage, Cornas, Mauves, Chavanay or Brézème. Velich, however, has contended

that certain approaches are more or less likely to leave blaufränkisch the aforementioned freedom or to promote site-distinctive results. "There should be a three-year moratorium on new wood in Burgenland; then we could see the nature of each grower's fruit revealed," he suggested provocatively several years ago. While that hasn't happened, Burgenland has not hung back when it comes to a few worldwide trends of recent years that are arguably bent on enhancing fruit character and revealing nuance.

Among these are trends toward larger and older wooden vessels and increased sensitivity to the complex calculus of yield, harvest date, flavor ripeness, alcohol levels and sheer drinkability. Efforts to moderate alcohol, in particular, are becoming fashionable, with respect to which the likes of Schiefer, Velich or Muhr were ahead of the curve. And then there's renewed influence of Burgundian models, as several of blaufränkisch's foremost practitioners work also with that region's great grape. Silvia Prieler, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on pinot noir, says that although numerically it neither has nor ever

will have huge importance at Weingut Prieler, "my work with and the evolution of my thinking about this challenging grape has paid dividends in sensitivity toward capturing the fruit of blaufränkisch and a greater sense of finesse and place in those wines." Not that new stylistic infusions or inspirations from Bordeaux be ruled out; on the contrary, as witness Weingut Esterházy's recent retention of Stéphane Derenoncourt as a consulting enologist.

Whatever stylistic trends can be observed today, none should be thought path breaking until proof has been in bottle for many years. It seems virtually assured, though, that various expressions of Burgenland blaufränkisch can hold their own vis-à-vis Burgundy, Bordeaux or Northern Rhône wines in matters of maturation. At a recent retrospective of the first ten Moric vintages, only the wines from punishingly hot, dry 2003 evinced any need to be enjoyed today rather than later. Tasted within the past six years, the first two vintages of Nittnaus Ungerberg and Prieler Goldberg, early efforts of Schiefer, and Triebaumer's unforgettable 1986 Mariental have all displayed persistent intrigue and energy. And none of these growers would pretend to have known "back then" what they know now.

In short, the question of aging potential—like that of where cépage, selection, site, and style will locate their most synergistic sweet spots—is open-ended, issuing wine lovers an invitation to be the judges as blaufränkisch, Burgenland and their growers each explore one another's identity. ■