Austrian Wine: Spreading the Good Word

by Lisa Perrotti-Brown, MW

These days I don’t think there’s a need to try and persuade any well-informed wine evangelist (journalist, merchant, critic, sommelier or otherwise well-travelled-palate) that Austria produces some heavenly wines. It would be a case of preaching to the converted. But let’s face it - we’re devoted wine disciples that slavishly exist to discover new vinous interpretations, holy grails and uncharted terroir miracles. Trying to convey this fanaticism and the Austrian message to a world of largely ambivalent alcohol consumers would be a bit like the Pope promoting piety in a Macau casino.

That most wine consumers just don’t “get” Austria is a little unsurprising. Austria is a victim of being a complicated story within that overly long world-of-wine Bible that already contains too many mixed messages. It’s as I so often point out when I’m giving lectures - wine religion is seldom like most other religions where a simple pithy parable can succinctly nail the point home like a sanctimonious sledge-hammer. With wine, too little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Specific to Austria, I’m thinking ethylene glycol (anti-freeze) scandal and knee-jerk associations with neighbouring Germany’s wine styles.

Compounding this Austrian wine communicating conundrum - what exactly is Austria known for? Mozart? Skiing? Vienna boys’ choir? Most folks would be hard-pressed to even name an Austrian dish let alone a wine. And with good reason - the bottles look German, the grapes are largely indigenous and difficult to pronounce and the delimited regions of quality are a work in progress.

But generally speaking the wines of Austria are unquestionably good and some are a lot more than just that. So while the knowledge of Doubting Thomas general consumers continues to lag behind wine evangelist interest and while we disciples tirelessly seek to wallow in relatively uncharted terroir territory, it was fun to recently have a few Austrian and more renowned supreme beings of the fine wine world put through their paces in a show-down of virtues.

Michael Thurner, formerly of The Austrian Wine Board, has recently taken up residence in Singapore and started his own agency for Austrian wines called, “Austria’s Fine Brands”. In August 2009 he invited thirteen of Singapore’s top wine experts to a blind tasting. In fact, it was sold to us as nothing more than a blind tasting, so sitting down to the wines we had no reason other than to expect that we would taste purely Austrian wines. But a couple of flights into the tasting and the game was up – we were tasting mostly Austrian wines with a benchmark super-star label from France added to most flights. Interlopers included: Meo-Camuzet, Didier Dagueneau, Leflaive, Guigal, Mouton Rothschild and d’Yquem. Fun aside, Thurner was in fact conducting an experiment to see how some of Austria’s best wines measured-up to France’s most highly acclaimed names.

In short, Austria measured up very well indeed. When the 13 wine experts’ votes were tallied at the end of each blind flight, of the six flights that featured a non-Austrian wine, only one flight came out as a tie (the one that included Guigal La Turque 2004) and the other five flights had Austrian victors. So Austrian wines won 5 out of 6 matches and drew 1.
HOWEVER this is the abridged, “simple pithy parable” version of the story that I warned earlier does not wholly ring true given the complicated nature of wine. As all wine acolytes intimately know, wines of a certain echelon are singular entities that by nature of their terroir, grape variety and winemaking idiosyncratically develop at individual rates. To drawn out a direct quality comparison based on blind tasting between an Austrian TBA Chardonnay 2005 and Chateau d’Yquem 2005 is misleading and not just because it’s like comparing apples with oranges (or Chardonnay vs Semillon / Sauvignon). By virtue of the terroir and winemaking involved, it’s also like comparing a burgeoning Lolita to a baby. Of course the former is still far too young yet infinitely more precocious and alluring than the latter at this stage. Therefore while the tasting presented some interesting sparring opportunities, I wouldn’t exactly call them fair matches. Nonetheless, it was a thoroughly enjoyable tasting full of revelations for this wine evangelist, cheers Michael!

To follow is a list of the flights / wines that were tasted with the overall choice of the tasting panel for each flight highlighted in brown and with two wines highlighted in the case of a tie. My tasting notes for all the wines are also listed.
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Flight 1
Jurtschitsch - Grüner Veltliner, Käferberg 2007
Leflaive - Puligny Montrachet "Les Pucelles" 2007
Huber - Grüner Veltliner, Berg 2006

Flight 2
Huber - Riesling, Berg 2007
Jurtschitsch - Riesling, Zöbinger Heiligenstein 2007
Reinisch - Rotgipfler, Reserve 2007
Reinisch - Zierfandler, Reserve 2007

Flight 3
Tement - Sauvignon blanc, Grassnitzberg 2007
Tement - Sauvignon blanc, Zieregg 2007
Didier Dagueneau - Pouilly-Fumé Silex 2006
Tement - Sauvignon blanc, Zieregg 1999

Flight 4
Meó Camuzet - Clos de Vogueot, Grand Cru 2006
Markowitsch - Pinot Noir, Reserve 2006
Reinisch - Pinot Noir, Holzspur Grand Reserve 2004

Flight 5
Moric - Neckenmarkt Alte Reben 2006
Guigal - Cote Rotie, La Turque 2004
Reinisch - St. Laurent, Holzspur Grand Reserve 2004

Flight 6
T.F.X.T. - Arachon Evolution 2004
Mouton Rothschild - Pauillac 2004
Markowitsch - Rosenberg 2004
Weninger - Dürrau 2004

Flight 7:
Weninger - Blaufränkisch Reserve 2002
Weninger - Blaufränkisch Reserve 1992

Flight 8
Tschida - TBA Chardonnay 2005
Tschida - TBA Chardonnay 2005
Chateau Yquem - Sauternes 2005

Tasting Notes

Jurtschitsch Grüner Veltliner 2007
Käferberg, Austria
91 points
Somewhat mute aromas yielding interesting notes of citrus fruits, chalk and white pepper.

**Domaine Leflaive Puligny Montrachet 1er Cru "Les Pucelles" 2007**
Burgundy, France
90 points

**Huber Grüner Veltliner 2006**
Berg, Austria
92 points

**Huber Riesling 2007**
Berg, Austria
91 points
Floral, honeyed nose with a waft of kerosene and some spicy/white pepper elements. Very crisp acidity countered by a touch of sweetness. Good concentration. Long spicy finish. Enticingly exotic. Tasted August 2009

**Jurtscihitsch Zöbinger Heiligenstein Riesling 2007**
Austria
90 points

**Reinisch Rotgipfler Reserve 2007**
Austria
89 points

**Reinisch Zierfandler Reserve 2007**
Austria
87 points
A little mute on the nose giving subtle hints of crushed stones and green apples. Medium+ acidity and a good concentration of citrus fruits. Long minerally finish. Tasted August 2009.

**Tement Sauvignon Blanc Grassnitzberg 2007**
Austria
88 points
Intense aromas of grass and fresh grapefruit juice with a whiff of stuck flint. Medium to high acidity, good concentration of juicy fruit and a long finish. Tasted August 2009.

**Tement Sauvignon Blanc Zieregg 2007**
Austria
91 points
Pure, zesty aromas of lemon, fresh herbs, lime leaf and a touch of cedar. Medium to high acidity and plenty of mouth-filling citrus fruit. The oak is still a little disjointed but should marry with a further 6 months. Very long finish. Tasted August 2009.

Didier Dagueneau Pouilly-Fumé Silex 2006
Loire, France
90 points

Tement Sauvignon 1999
Zieregg, Austria
84 points
Evolved Sauvignon nose, going a bit bruised apple and rotten vegetable in character complimented by a more appealing honey / nut element. Medium acidity on the palate with fading though interesting flavours. Medium to long finish. Tasted August 2009.

Meó Camuzet Clos de Vougeot Grand Cru 2006
Burgundy, France
91 points
Pale to medium ruby colour. Perfumed nose with floral notes of violets beneath a cherry core, complimented by a touch of beetroot. Crisp acidity, soft to medium level of finely grained tannins. Long, earthy finish. Tasted August 2009.

Markowitsch Pinot Noir Reserve 2006
Austria
84 points
Pale ruby with a touch of orange. Slightly medicinal / menthol nose with notes of cranberry, wild strawberry and a touch of herbs. Medium acidity and a low level of chewy tannins. Medium to long finish. Tasted August 2009.

Reinisch Pinot Noir Holzspur Grand Reserve 2004
Austria
87 points
Pale to medium ruby. The nose begins a little animal / gamey with a yeasty, marmite aromas and a hint of truffles. This gives way to dark cherry and raspberry scents with a touch of spiciness. Crisp acidity and a low to medium level of tannins with a slight grip of astringency. Medium+ body and a long finish. Tasted August 2009.

Moric Neckenmarkt Alte Reben 2006
Austria
89 points

Guigal Cote Rotie La Turque 2004
Northern Rhone, France
89 points
Pale to medium garnet colour. Earthy aromas of forest floor, loam and truffles complimented by blackberry, cassia, black pepper and a whiff of cumin. Crisp acidity. Medium level of chewy tannins, a little astringent. Long finish. Tasted August 2009.

**Reinisch St. Laurent Holzspur Grand Reserve 2004**
Austria
90 points

**T.F.X.T. Arachon Evolution 2004**
Austria
91 points
Pale to medium garnet colour with a touch of brick. The nose is predominately earthy with evolving aromas of game, leather and spice. Crisp acidity, good concentration. Medium+ level of firm fine tannins and a long finish. Tasted August 2009.

**Chateau Mouton Rothschild 2004**
Pauillac, France
91 points

**Markowitsch Rosenberg 2004**
Austria
88 points

**Weninger Blaufränkisch Dürreau 2004**
Austria
92 points
Medium to deep garnet colour. Aromas of cassis, graphite and tobacco leaf. Crisp acidity and a medium to firm level of finely grained tannins. Medium to full body. Long finish. Tasted August 2009.

**Weninger Blaufränkisch Reserve 2002**
Austria
88 points

**Weninger Blaufränkisch Reserve 1992**
Austria
90 points
Pale to medium garnet colour with a brick rim. Quite a spicy nose with aromas of vanilla, cinnamon, cloves and white pepper supporting evolved red berry and dried cherry notes.

**Tschida TBA (Trockenbeerenauslese) Sämling 2005**
94 points
Intense nose of orange and lemon marmalade, warm pineapple and lime cordial. The palate is very sweet and very rich with great concentration and purity. Lovely backbone of crisp acidity provides just enough freshness. Very long, layered finish. Tasted August 2009.

**Tschida TBA (Trockenbeerenauslese) Chardonnay 2005**
93 points

**Chateau d’Yquem 2005**
Sauternes, France
92 points
Somewhat muted floral aromas of jasmine, orange blossom and honeysuckle over candied pineapple. A waft of anise and some cedar. The palate is quite restrained with well balanced sweetness versus medium to high acidity. Very long finish – a mineral character coming through. Tasted August 2009.