

Austria's Tour De Force

Rieslings and Grüner Veltliners from the 2006 vintage excel

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At first glance, the medieval town of Weissenkirchen, Austria, complete with a fortified Gothic church and surrounded by breathtakingly green countryside, seems a well-preserved page from the past. Rugged mountain slopes with terraced vineyards rise above the banks of the surging Danube River. Narrow country lanes wind their way to small, family-run wineries flanked by well-tended vines of Austria's leading white grape varieties, the native Grüner Veltliner and Riesling.

Yet appearances can be deceiving. Weissenkirchen and its neighboring villages lie at the epicenter of Austria's remarkable upsurge in quality over the past two decades. The latest evidence is the 2006 vintage, one of the best in recent memory, which has delivered hundreds of delicious wines ready to drink now. The year's top bottlings also hold out the promise of further development with long-term aging. For Lower Austria as a whole, I give the vintage a rating of 95 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale.

This tasting report encompasses the more than 550 Austrian wines I have tasted in our New York office over the past year, about 300 of them either Rieslings or Grüner Veltliners. Austrian vintners also make a range of other dry and off-dry whites as well as unctuously sweet dessert wines and a smattering of reds. (An alphabetical list of all wines tasted for this report is available at www.winespectator.com/061508.)

Overall, I slightly favor the Rieslings over the Grüner Veltliners, though the success of both varieties points to the superlative quality of 2006. Of the 125 Rieslings I tasted, 72 earned outstanding ratings (90 points or higher), while 70 of the 176 Grüns broke the 90-point barrier. (Grüner is the most widely planted variety in Austria, with nearly 10 times the acreage of Riesling.) The better Rieslings impressed me with the precision and raciness of their fruit flavors—mostly peach, apple and fresh citrus—backed by crisp acidity and mineral notes. The 2006 Grüns feature up-front pleasure in spades, with tropical fruit flavors, distinctive notes of white pepper and seductive creaminess. Both varieties are extremely food-friendly and are favorites of leading sommeliers across the United States for their utility and complexity.

Weissenkirchen is in the middle of Austria's best winegrowing district, called the Wachau, situated about an hour's travel time west of Vienna, in the shadow of the Alps. The region is dry by Austrian standards; only about 15 to 20 inches of rain falls annually, and warm winds blowing down the mountainsides can quickly dry out the soil. The small trees and underbrush on the forested slopes are reminiscent of a Mediterranean climate, although the distinctive bell-shaped steeples of baroque churches leave little doubt about the middle European setting.

Outside the town walls is the Prager winery, one of the most successful producers in 2006. Its lineup is impressive in depth and quality: Six whites rated at least 90 points, led by the Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Klaus (95 points, \$61), which lives up to the pedigree of the Klaus vineyard, one of the best in the Wachau. This powerful wine features concentrated flavors of grapefruit, ginger and spice backed by a firm structure and an intense minerality. It's also a fine candidate for long-term aging.

Just a touch behind in quality is the Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Wachstum Bodenstein (94, \$58) and a pair of luscious, fruity and creamy Grüns: the Smaragd Trocken Wachau Achleiten (93, \$54) and the Smaragd Trocken Wachau Zwerithaler (93, \$47).

Prager's winemaker is Toni Bodenstein, who is also the mayor of Weissenkirchen. He has a keen sense of the challenges of growing grapes in the Wachau. The Wachstum vineyard, for example, is one of the highest sites in the region, at about 1,000 feet, and is situated at the rim of the Danube valley that defines the Wachau's topography. "The soil is very poor, based on gneiss, and is friable with no clay. It cannot hold water or nutrients, but holds heat," Bodenstein explains. Yet those difficult conditions are just the ticket for making full-flavored wines. "Riesling likes poor soil," he says.

The Wachstum site, like most vineyards in the Wachau, is irrigated, a practice that was first approved for use in the 1970s. Since then, irrigation has allowed Austrian vintners to explore new *terroirs* and expand the range of quality grapegrowing. (Although it is common in New World regions such as California, irrigation is not allowed in most of Europe's fine wine regions.) A group of reforms instituted after a wine-adulteration scandal in the late 1980s has also contributed to the country's quality revolution, transforming an industry that had previously been dominated by mass-produced, commercial bottlings. Today, Austrian wineries feature modern technology and are increasingly manned by a younger generation of highly trained, knowledgeable winemakers who are anxious to compete on the world stage.

Combined with these long-term trends, the fortuitous weather pattern in 2006 allowed many vintners to excel. The growing season was marked by a hot July and a cool, wet August, yet two months of nearly perfect warm, dry weather followed. "We had a beautiful autumn after a cold and rainy August. For two months, we had only sunshine. We could decide when we wanted to pick," says Leo Alzinger, whose family's Wachau winery was another top performer in 2006. Alzinger's best bottlings include the racy, zesty Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Steinertal (94, \$66), the riper style Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Loibenberg (93, \$64), and the very pure and fresh Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Trocken Wachau Steinertal (92, \$64).

Another factor in the quality of the '06 vintage, according to Alzinger, was the health of the grapes at harvest. There was little or no rot, including the fungus botrytis, or noble rot, which, though it can lead to rich flavors in dry wines—and is necessary for making high quality dessert wines—can also produce unbalanced bottlings. On the downside, the vintage experienced a wet spring that reduced yields significantly by not allowing the vines to set fruit properly (this is known as shatter, or in French, *coulure*). In the Wachau, yields were down nearly 30 percent from the norm.

Regrettably, many of Austria's top bottlings are made in small quantities, and imports to the United States can be minuscule. Prices are high as well, pushed up by the sinking value of the dollar and hefty importer and distributor markups. In addition, Austrians are keenly aware of the wines in their own backyard, snapping them up as soon they become available. The saving grace is the high quality shown by a wide range of producers with remarkable consistency. This allows you to choose from restaurant wine lists or retail shelves with confidence, especially since many top Austrian vintners offer multiple bottlings from different vineyard sources that are equally first-rate. A rich vein for values lies in the 88- to 92-point range. For some of the highest-production and most well-priced bottlings, look for Wachau wines carrying the terrassen designation, which indicates multiple sources drawn from terraced vineyards.

Besides Prager and Alzinger, the top Riesling and Grüner producers include Bründlmayer, Johann Donabaum, Sighardt Donabaum, Birgit Eichinger, Meinhard Forstreiter, Schloss Gobelsburg, Högl, Josef Jamek, Knoll, Stadt Krems, Loimer, Nigl, Rudi Pichler, Proidl, Salomon-Undhof and Josef Schmid. All of them produced multiple bottlings scoring 92 points or higher.

Another stellar performer in 2006 was F.X. Pichler, located in the village of Oberloiben near Weissenkirchen. The estate's best bottling is the only other classic-rated dry wine in this report besides Prager's Klaus, the Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Dürnsteiner Kellerberg 2006 (95, \$90), showing ripe, rich flavors of pear, peach, apricot and tropical fruits, with a well-structured finish of mineral and cream. It's delicious now, but has the potential to age another 10 years or more.

Pichler also made one of the highest-rated Grüners of the vintage, the Smaragd Trocken Wachau M (94, \$80). Lucas Pichler explains that the grapes are harvested as late as possible to make the winery's fullest-bodied wine, which is sourced from two prized Wachau vineyards, Loibenberg and Kellerberg. This is a big-time Grüner: creamy, rich and powerful, with intense apricot, honey, peach and spice flavors. "I think this wine can age for 10 or 15 years," Pichler says. "We think the perfect time is three to five years after the vintage, and they are the perfect wines for storing."

My experience in tasting older Grüners is limited, but the performance of the older Rieslings I have tried bodes well. During my visit to Prager, Toni Bodenstern poured several earlier vintages of the Wachstum and Klaus bottlings. My favorites included the 1990 Klaus, which was filled with rich flavors of dried apricot, smoke and mineral. I rated it 96 points in a non-blind tasting. Close on its heels were the 2000 Wachstum—very rich, with peach and apricot—and the riper 2003, which hails from a drought vintage. I rated both wines 95 points, non-blind.

The best dry table wines in the Wachau carry the smaragd designation, which indicates the use of grapes of the highest ripeness. These wines usually fall in the range of 13 percent to 14 percent alcohol, while those bottlings labeled federspiel represent a lighter style of wine with about 12 percent alcohol. At Pichler, for example, the federspiels are fermented and aged in stainless steel, whereas the smaragds see more skin contact and are aged up to seven months in large oak casks. Federspiels offer fine value, especially in a vintage as ripe as 2006. The Karl Stierschneider Riesling Federspiel Trocken Wachau Hinterkirchen Kartäuserhof (91, \$22) and the Johann

Donabaum Riesling Federspiel Trocken Wachau Bergterrassen (90, \$21) both make fine sippers and aperitifs.

The quality-oriented Wachau cooperative Freie Weingartner Wachau is the region's biggest vineyard owner and makes some of the most widely available values from Austria. Look for the Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Trocken Wachau Terrassen Domäne Wachau 2006 (91, \$22) and the Riesling Federspiel Trocken Wachau Terrassen Domäne Wachau 2006 (88, \$15). Many other fine values hail from the Kremstal district, just east of the Wachau, including Grüners from Meinhard Forstreiter, Stadt Krems, Josef Schmid, Turk and Winzer Krems, and Rieslings from Mantlerhof.

Most Austrian reds in this report are from the more problematic 2004 and 2005 vintages. The center of Austria's red wine production lies in the Burgenland region southeast of Vienna. One of the best bottlings is the Leo Hillinger Pinot Noir Qualitätswein Trocken Burgenland 2004 (90, \$18), with ripe flavors of red cherry, spice, mincemeat and smoke. Increasing numbers of Austrian vintners are experimenting with this finicky grape and finding success in warmer regions.

Burgenland is also home to Austria's best dessert wines, which are buttery and rich. Their production is made possible due to the humidity and warmth provided by the region's large, shallow lake, the Neusiedlersee. These conditions spur the formation of botrytis, the beneficial rot that concentrates sugar and flavor through a long harvest extending well into late autumn.

This report's high-scorer, the Willi Opitz Pinot Gris Trockenbeerenauslese Neusiedlersee 2006 (95, \$114/375ml), is a luscious sweetie, offering layers of baked apple, piecrust and peach cobbler flavors, with cream and spice on the long, rich finish. One of the region's pioneers and quality leaders, Alois Kracher, died this year, but his wines will live on for decades. The best of the extensive line from Kracher is the Scheurebe Trockenbeerenauslese Burgenland Zwischen den Seen No. 4 2005 (94, \$77/375 ml), which is concentrated and lush, with loads of ruby grapefruit, peach, apricot, honey and butter flavors.

Looking ahead, the 2007 vintage presented challenges to grapegrowers. A very hot summer ended with rain in early September, which meant that rot was a threat in the vineyards. Cool and windy conditions followed the rain until October, when warmer, drier weather returned. Harvest in the Wachau extended into mid-November. It will be a winemaker's vintage, but with their skills in the cellars, the Austrians should be up to the task. In the meantime, search out and enjoy the 2006s—and be patient enough to lay a few away for later.

Managing editor Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Austria.

- [Kim Marcus' Recommended Wines From Austria](#) (in PDF Format)

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