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A New Spin on the Bottle

Introducing seven emerging faces on the Austrian wine scene, bringing renewed vitality and fresh perspectives.

BY ROGER VOSS



PHOTO BY JON VAN GORDER

The next generation taking over from the previous: it happens in every country, in every industry, every 40 years or so. But in Austria's wine industry, the current succession has a different resonance. In this new Old World wine country, the members of the generation that is now taking charge is often the first in the family line to be formally trained, the first to see quality as the primary objective and the first to treat exports as a natural part of business. In some cases, they are only a single generation beyond the era of mixed farming, where vines were just a part of general agriculture.

The latest generation also seems to have embarked on a winery building boom. Everywhere I traveled in Austria, the wineries were new, or at least seriously modernized. Stunning architecture is now the norm: walls of glass, sleek lines, warm wood. This is winemaking that expresses lifestyle as well as practicality.

It also expresses confidence. Winemakers of this generation have traveled, worked overseas and see Austrian wine as part of the wider world of wine. "We don't have to explain that we don't come from Australia," one winemaker joked. They are the beneficiaries of the revolution that has taken place in Austrian wine since the 1980s.

Much of that revolution has taken place in the vines, from sustainable practices to the more extreme biodynamic. Every young winemaker sees him- or herself as the custodian of the land. Christoph Neumeister is heading towards organic viticulture; Judith Beck talks of giving the vines back their health; and Phillip Zull explains why his wines are more focused: "We are doing better, more natural work in the vineyards." Everybody wants to show off their vines to their visitors instead of their new bottling line.

These are the people who epitomize the vitality in Austria today, the excitement as every new wave of experimentation adds another layer to a 2,000-year-old tradition of growing grapes and making wine.

Phillip Zull, Weinviertel

Schrottenthal's claim to fame is that it is the smallest wine town in Austria. Packed tightly behind its fortified gate and close to the Czech frontier, it feels remote, far from the main truck routes across Europe. Among the old, one-story wine cellars is one striking modern glass façade, the frontage of the Zull winery.

Phillip Zull, 30, is the face of this modern winery. Trained at the Austrian wine school in Klosterneuburg near Vienna, he traveled the world to work, from Burgundy to Oregon to New Zealand before heading back home in 2002. As I arrive, he is busy bottling his 2009s, clearing the cellar, as he puts it, for the 2010 harvest.

Zull's parents started making wine, selling directly from their cellar, but it is Zull who has built up the national and international sales. "What did I bring back from traveling? To be more concentrated, more focused." He's done this by "changing our image from an old-fashioned red wine producer to a producer of high quality white wines."

From Lust und Laune (joy and pleasure), his snazzy-labeled, entry-level Grüner, to his crisp, taut Riesling, Innere Bergen, Zull makes modern, elegant, stylish wines, reflecting the breezes that riffle across the wide plains of the Weinviertel.

91 Zull 2009 Aussere Bergen Grüner Veltliner (Niederösterreich); \$24. *Planted with cuttings from many Austrian wine regions, this vineyard produces a ripe, full wine, packed with yellow fruits, spice and a feeling of opulence, while always remaining balanced. Imported by Magellan Wine Imports.*

Markus Huber, Traisental

At 31, Markus Huber is the young face of a young region. Traisental was only designated in 2006, although vines have grown here for over 2,000 years. But Huber, as president of the local wine committee, is on a mission to tell the world about his home and its wines. In one corner of the modern, minimalist tasting room in this brand-new winery is his suitcase: he's off to New York that afternoon.

Mind you, the family company is hardly new. It had been a cooperage since 1548, and his dad produced every style of wine imaginable for sale in the family heurige (wine tavern). "I suppose I'm a farm boy at heart," he admits. "I remember feeding the pigs when I was a kid. But I didn't want to do that, so I thought [I would focus on] wine. You can't do five things at the same time."

Huber trained at the wine school located in Klosterneuburg and then worked at wineries in South Africa. "I came with theories," he says. "But what I also learned is that while the techniques may be the same all over the world, what makes the difference is understanding the soils. That's our treasure." Samples of the local limestone soils are in a glass tray on the tasting room table.

"We have a unique offering here in the special flavors of the Grüner and Riesling from our soil. Why would we want to make high-alcohol, wood-fermented wines when our wines have such purity, a crystal clear flavor?"

93 Markus Huber 2009 Berg Reserve Grüner Veltliner (Traisental); \$NA. *A firm and closed wine, packed with quince, pear and spice held in a mineral structure. It is potentially rich, but is still closed, needing several months to broaden out in all its richness. Imported by Circo Vino.*

Franz-Josef Gritsch, Wachau

Franz-Josef Gritsch's backyard has a stunning view of the church spire of Spitz in one direction, the Danube in another and the semicircle of vineyards all around. Under him is the cellar, behind is the 13th-century Mauritiushof, his family's home since 1799. Before that, monks used the house as a winery and the old cellar is still in use as the public tasting room.

His entire family works in the winery, but since his first vintage in 1999, he has taken the leadership position. Having studied at the local wine school in Krems, and then having worked in California, "I now believe in learning on the job." One of the things he has learned is that "every generation gives a new experience to winemaking," and that his contribution is in the vineyards.

He is most excited about the Atzberg. This is an ancient, steeply terraced vineyard just outside Spit (you can see it from his house) that was abandoned for years because it is so hard to work. Now he has restored the terraces, planted vines and hopes to harvest the first crop this year. "It will be very traditional, very powerful," says Gritsch.

The Atzberg wines will join a list from Spitz's top vineyards, Axpont, Singerriedel, Steinportz and 1000 Eimerberg (meaning, 1,000-bucket vineyard, because that's how many buckets were needed to harvest it). Clean, fresh, focused and structured,

they reflect the minerality of Spitz and the granite soils at the limits of viticulture on the Danube.

92 Gritsch Mauritiushof 2009 1000 Eimerberg Riesling Smaragd (Wachau); \$40. *Apricot aromas are followed by ripe fruit flavors, giving a rich texture, yet retaining a very clean, fresh character. Opulence with steel. Imported by Winemonger.*

Josef Ehmoser, Wagram

Like many of the younger generation in Austria, Josef Ehmoser doesn't just want to make fine wine; he wants to make wine that's from his region, that reflects its terroir.

And in his region, the long, low slope of the Wagram, the sandy loess soil is its heart.

"I wanted wines with character, that showed there are very good wines from our soil," says Ehmoser, 35. Modest and soft-spoken, he took over his parents' winery in 1996, fresh out of Krems wine school. "My grandfather started bottling in the 1960s, selling to local restaurants, and then my parents continued with one-liter bottles." But the wine was, he admits, "not the quality I wanted to produce. And I decided to export, because there was a world out there that wanted something different."

The Ehmoser winery, like so many run by the rising stars, is the modern standout in Grossweikersdorf's village street of traditional buildings, of small wineries and wine taverns. The village is right at the foot of the Wagram slope, the vineyards hanging on the hill above the village.

Grüner Veltliner is Ehmoser's grape. He's developed a classic range of ascending quality from the Von den Terrassen, the singlevineyard Hohenberg and the old-vine Aurum. They are powerful and fullbodied, with the rich loess soil speaking in the bottle.

92 Josef Ehmoser 2008 Aurum Grüner Veltliner (Wagram-Donauland); \$41. *The late-harvest Aurum is Josef Ehmoser's flagship. The newly released 2008 is bold and ripe, the acidity of the intense fruit cutting through herbs, spice, vanilla and tropical fruits. It is definitely from superripe fruit, but Ehmoser manages to retain a delicious balance. Screwcap. Imported by Magellan Wine Imports.*

Andi Kollwentz, Burgenland

A statue of the Virgin Mary stands guard over the Gloria Chardonnay vineyard on the slopes of the Leithagebirge. In this vineyard on the western shore of Lake Neusiedl, Andi Kollwentz stops the 4x4 for a reverent moment before charging downhill again, back to his family's modern, multilevel winery in Grosshöflein. A tour of the vineyards with Kollwentz seems to consist of crossing major roads as quickly as possible and then shooting up rough hill tracks. Always, the emphasis on terroir, on single vineyards, epitomizes the wines from this award-winning winery.

When Andi, 41, took over from his father, Anton, Kollwentz was already a winery with a reputation for great red wines. "My dad went to South Africa and was really impressed with Cabernet Sauvignon," says Andi. "So he planted Cabernet and started the Cabernet boom in Austria."

Blaufränkisch and Chardonnay are the stars at Kollwentz. And when we have recovered from the rapid vineyard tour, the wines are poured. Andi is a perfectionist, having trained at Klosterneuburg and worked in Bordeaux. "I want full-bodied wines that express the quality of the vineyard," he says. "You should have ripe grapes, but I don't want them overripe. It's too easy if everything is overripe."

As a consequence, however powerful these wines are, their alcohol levels are moderate. "A few years ago, people were praising high alcohol and I thought that's crazy. Now they are changing."

94 Kollwentz 2008 Gloria Chardonnay (Burgenland); \$80. *A tight, mineral and taut wine, showing citrus, lime zest and pear skin flavors. Stone fruits go with an elegant texture. This is structured and powerful, offering serious aging potential. Imported by VOS Selections.*

Christoph Neumeister, South-East Styria

It's a long journey to the Neumeister winery, past Styria's strange volcanic outcrops, almost to the Slovenian border. "When I was born, that was the Iron Curtain over there," says Neumeister, 31, pointing to the hills in the not-so-far distance. "Now it's all part of Europe."

The steep slopes of the Neumeister vineyards, tough terraces that demand hand cultivation, are echoed in the many levels of the ultramodern, gravity-driven winery. "Vineyards were always planted here on the steepest slopes where nothing else would

grow,” Neumeister tells me, as we arrive at the top of the Saziani vineyard in his 4x4, his large lolloping dog in the back. It’s hard to look over the edge, so sheer is the drop down to the village of Straden, the winery and Neumeister’s Saziani restaurant and B&B, both run by his parents.

Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay (locally called Morillon) are the grapes here. “My grandparents put the estate together after the war, but it was my father Albert who started to produce quality wine,” explains Neumeister. “Then I learned about wine by going as far away as possible, to Australia.” And, he adds, that’s where he met his wife, Rachel.

The Neumeister style is different from so many hugely fruit-driven Styrian wines. “I wanted more complexity, so I stopped focusing just on the fruit. We have that anyway in Styria. I started long maceration and lees contact to get more interesting flavors, to make the wines more multilayered.”

93 Neumeister 2008 Moarfeitl Sauvignon Blanc (Südoststeiermark); \$48. *Christoph Neumeister’s top wine, this is a classic among Sauvignon Blancs. It is tightly structured, very herbal, with Greengage and gooseberry flavors over asparagus and spice. It can age well, needing 3–4 years to reach its peak. Cellar Selection. Imported by Frederick Wildman & Sons.*

Judith Beck, Burgenland

“There is a big difference between my generation and my father’s,” says Judith Beck. She is standing in her brand-new winery on the edge of Gols. “Then everything was small and cramped in the winery, stainless steel was new. Now we have a new winery, but we are returning to our roots.”

For Beck, those roots are biodynamic. “We converted in 2007. We could see the soils and vines were not healthy, there was a risk if we had gone on the old way, the soils would have been exhausted. I’m really excited; it feels right.”

Beck, 32, took over the winery from her father, Matthias, in 2004, after training at Klosterneuburg and working at Cos d’Estournel in Bordeaux, Braida in Piedmont and Errazuriz in Chile. This is a red wine winery; its star wines include the Pannobile blend of Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent, and the flagship red blend Judith (which includes Merlot).

“This region is dominated by the lake,” says Beck, pointing outside into the shimmering July heat toward the Neusiedler See. “You can see the water from here. It gives us high sunshine hours and it also acts as a sort of memory at night, retaining the heat. That’s why red wines work so well here.”

92 Judith Beck 2007 Altenberg Blaufränkisch (Burgenland); \$60. *Firm and structured, packed with ripe berry fruits, a touch of pepper and firm, solid tannins, all sustained by acidity and dry elegance. Imported by Adventures In Wine.*