

WINE STYLES

There are two principal styles of wine from Austria: unoaked and racy, and oak-aged and, it's hoped, more complex. This is true of other wine-producing countries too, but it is especially marked in Austria, where an unoaked style is often signalled on the label by a term such as *Klassik* (or *Classic*). This division is not surprising in a country dominated by white wine production. Most white-wine drinkers want to be refreshed and stimulated rather than bludgeoned into admiration by excessive oak. But consumers have a choice, with many wines, red as well as white, either aged solely in stainless steel tanks or neutral vats and casks, or in smaller barrels of 225, 500 or 600 litres.

In the 1980s and 1990s many producers, especially of international varieties such as Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon, assumed that the more oak, especially new oak, employed, the more 'serious' the wine. The result was a plethora of clumsy wines that may have impressed local wine critics, but fell flat in international markets. Today oak use is far more measured and sophisticated. Most wine makers have sharply reduced the amount of new oak, and pay far more attention to the origin and quality of the wood. Although there are still some heavy-handed reds being produced, especially in the Burgenland, there are also many beautifully nuanced wines, in which the wood adds complexity and subtlety rather than overtly woody aromas and flavours.

White wines such as Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay from Styria were often absurdly over oaked, with new wood overwhelming their primary fruit. Almost without exception the producers have reined back the use of new oak, and the wines are all the better for it. Fortunately new oak was very rarely used for ageing the great white wines of Lower Austria, the Grüner Veltliners and Rieslings, although today you can still find some top wines that do indeed spend months, even years, in wood, but with the intention of oxygenating the wine slowly rather than imparting woody flavours which hardly anybody believes can enhance these wines.

In recent years there has also been a revival in the use of acacia barrels and casks, employed by wine makers who admire the wood's neutrality and lack of vanilla flavours. Many large casks are also made from Austrian as well as Slavonian oak, and Austrian-coopered casks can be found in areas as diverse as Bergerac and Italy.

One typical Austrian wine style is established long before the grapes reach the winery. This is *Gemischter Satz*, the German term for field blend, that is, a wine made from a number of different varieties planted together in the same vineyard and generally picked at the same time. Field blends, which are also quite common in California, were planted as a kind of insurance policy: if one variety does poorly, because of problematic flowering or disease, then some of the others will come through strongly, allowing a good wine to be made. *Gemischter Satz* is a speciality of Vienna, but is also found elsewhere in Austria.

Austria has not escaped the fad for organic, biodynamic, ‘orange’, and ‘natural’ wines. Organic wines are made from grapes grown without recourse to chemical products such as fertilisers, herbicides, or pesticides. Biodynamic wines follow similar practices but also apply homeopathic doses of plant treatments to vineyards; the system incorporates a mystical element derived from the writings of its founder Rudolf Steiner, which more scientifically minded wine makers find dubious or unacceptable. But in the right hands, biodynamism can produce wines of exceptional quality.

‘Natural’ wines pursue organic principles into the winery. The most extreme practitioners refuse to make any intervention in the wine making process, such as temperature control or additions of antioxidants such as sulphur dioxide. Such wines are controversial, as they can be less stable than conventionally vinified wines and more subject to oxidation and bacterial problems. Personally, I am no fan of ‘natural’ wines, being reluctant to spend good money on wines that often turn out to be flawed, unstable, or suffering from premature death throes.

‘Orange’ wines are quite different. They are based on an ancient Georgian method of vinification, in which bunches of grapes, usually destemmed, are dumped into amphorae or clay jars that have been buried in the earth. Here the grapes, whether red or white, are left to ferment at their own speed. The amphorae are generally sealed, though I dare say winemakers will sometimes take a peek to ensure that all is well. For red wines the difference between conventional whole-cluster and amphorae vinification is not striking, but for whites the difference is dramatic. White grapes tend to be pressed immediately or after a brief skin contact to extract some aromatic compounds. Vinification in amphorae not only ferments the juice, but extracts phenols, tannins,

and other compounds from the skins. This accounts for the orange colour of the wines and for their grainy texture. These wines can also have an oxidative character that is not to everyone's taste.

The first orange wines other than the Georgian originals were made by Josko Gravner and his disciples in Friuli, in northeast Italy, and in neighbouring Slovenia. The trend then spread into Austria, where there are many practitioners. Some, such as Fred Loimer and Bernhard Ott, produce a single orange wine alongside their conventional wines; others, especially in Styria, produce all their wines by this method, although many use a prolonged maceration on the skins in conventional tanks or casks rather than in amphorae.

In my view, good orange wines can have great richness of texture and flavour and considerable complexity, although their tannic character can make them hard to match with food. Unfortunately, the good wines tend to be outnumbered by the flawed wines, which simply have an excessively oxidative character and a staleness of flavour. These are wines that need to be judged on an individual basis. One generally valid criticism of orange wines is that the winemaking method overrides characters derived from variety or soil – in short, they can all taste rather similar.

STATISTICS

Precise statistical information is hard to come by, not because data isn't gathered, but because official figures are only published every ten years. The last set of figures on plantings in each region was in 2009. I have managed, thanks to inquiries made by the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, to locate more recent data. Thus the figures used in this book may differ from those in most other published sources but should be far more accurate.

I have also tried to include figures about how many bottles each profiled estate produces. Where this information is missing, it is because either the estate does not disclose the figure or it has not responded to inquiries.