



(veraison)

ROLAND VELICH

David Schildknecht introduces a new series devoted to noticing and nurturing gifted but underrecognized producers. He then offers as a classic case in point one of Austria's most original and talented winemakers

The world of fine wine—not this magazine, but the vinous realm—exhibits increasingly schizoid tendencies. An elite few wines ascend to unprecedented price levels, in the process not only distancing themselves from their traditional customer base, but opening up a dizzying chasm between themselves and wines from less fashionable estates, less celebrated vintages, or those that break unfamiliar stylistic ground. Prestigious estates and vineyards fall into the hands of fabulously wealthy investors—more often corporations than families—while an ever-increasing number of conscientious vintners struggles to make ends meet. A small range of wines trades under the sign of “commodity” or of “collectible,” while among those sold as beverages, more and more sell only on price. Extreme manifestations of these tendencies include gouge-or-dump bipolar disorder in the retail marketplace, and a viticultural landscape in the most prominent wine-growing region of the world, Bordeaux, whose dissonant juxtaposition of luxury and squalor calls to mind that on the streets of Manhattan.

An ocean of unloved, unlovely, and ultimately unsold wine in the marketplace basement may be the most frequently talked-about—and certainly the sole politically relevant—aspect of viticultural crisis. But those of us who treasure fine wine ought not and cannot afford to overlook the plight of growers destined to fail not just despite but sometimes because of their quality aspirations. The sheer number of serious growers mitigates the possibility that more than a lucky few of them can achieve commercial success, no matter how true they may be to genuine agricultural, artisanal, and aesthetic visions. Excellence in the glass may still at some level—or at least in the long run—be the critical factor in establishing a reputation and to that extent influencing, if not exactly determining, price. But frustrated, quality-conscious vintners the world over could be forgiven their doubts concerning that proposition. In the long run, far too many of them are likely to be out of business, some of whom might have enriched us as wine lovers immeasurably. That, at least, is the proposition to

Photography © Andreas Durst, courtesy of Roland Velich



The sun rising over the Lutzmannsburg plateau

which *The World of Fine Wine* is dedicating a new section, *Veraison*, designed not just to promulgate tales of intrepid and *intègre* wine growers, but to reflect some hard thinking that the authors of these tales have done, asking themselves how best to cultivate talent in an era when markets are harsher impediments than Mother Nature, and the pen sometimes trumps the pipette and the corkscrew.

Some might think it arrogant for self-styled critics or wine journalists to stress the role that their caste plays in nurturing or furthering wine-growing talent. But we wine writers could point out that we're often enough—perhaps inevitably—blamed by winemakers, estate owners, and the public for the effect that our reviews have on the sale of wine, so even if this effect is exaggerated (which surely it is), we should nonetheless critically ponder our possible role in the stylistic evolution and commercial fortunes of wine growers. Even if wine writers don't hugely influence wine-drinking fashion, they certainly serve as conduits that reinforce or restrain it. And when it comes to the *language* of wine, there's no question that fashion begins—at least, often begins—with wine writers, whose jargon gets passed to consumers by merchants as well as by vintners. Implausible or ill defined as some may be, that's how such locutions as "fruit-driven," "natural wine," "interventionist,"

or "sense of place" make the rounds. These concepts are boxes more often than conduits and can impede both cognizance and enjoyment among wine lovers, and hamper wine growers in realizing their own ideals. For here, above all, is the place where responsible writers must carefully tread—trying not to discourage or misdiagnose vinous developments that are original, those that break stylistic ground, or those that renew our sense of enchantment and of wonder that such a thing can come from grapes.

Incubating talent

To cultivate new growth and *veraison* among winemakers implies publicizing their deeds. But gardening metaphors point us toward the dangers of doing so. The wine press's constant attention and self-reinforcement has made for a hothouse environment that can be anything but good for talent. A greenhouse—as witness *la serre, en français*, or *der Treibhaus, auf Deutsch*—is a place built for forcing; and forcing a wine-growing talent too quickly, like forcing a singing voice or a young business, can make for disaster. Gentle encouragement free of hyperbole may make for less sizzling copy but, in the end, for better wine. The fact is, all too often, new talents or innovators feel pressed to perform as the stars in a circus. Overachievement is good, but trying

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to be the next Mouton or La Tâche or the Next Big Thing is too often destructive, to say nothing of unrealistic. Talent—like young vines—needs time, and temptations to overreach must be avoided. A more useful metaphor is “incubation.” But while a far higher percentage of premature babies or those needing special attention now grow into healthy adults, of wineries one can say without a doubt that more and more are doomed not to survive beyond infancy.

That trying too hard can thwart growth and court failure is not a lesson in winemaking that one reads often, but it should be. Many a young vintner goes to heroic extremes in the attempt to achieve world-class results and ends up a victim of the bottom line. The price of low yields and high tech, of risk-taking and stringent selection, has got to be paid by consumers or become red ink. The same goes for brand names in new wood or high-paid consultants. One thinks of young athletes whose social, emotional, and intellectual growth has been stunted by aiming for stardom, and chances are only a little bit better for winemakers to reach that goal. It would be far better for wine growers—and for consumers—to concentrate greater attention on the art of good wine and not just on the “great.” In an era of hyper-reactive markets and overwrought wine prose, one can almost sympathize with Michael Broadbent MW’s ode to the “undramatically drinkable.” But why not attend to the remarkably *good*?

Before there is great wine, there is nearly always good, though overnight stardom is not unknown. More often than not, the direct pursuit of great wine, like that of press accolades, fails to meet with success. Rather, the acknowledgment of vinous greatness comes—if at all—when a wine grower has first set and followed progressively his or her own steady course in pursuit of good wine that’s distinctive, and when he or she has cultivated a loyal clientele. A focus on greatness in wine—one that holds up a handful of icons as its epitome—fails to assist, and may cruelly mislead, winery owners who find themselves squeezed between their idealistic pursuit of excellence and a crowded, hyper-competitive marketplace. Enormously wealthy winery owners can entertain even fanatical steps in the pursuit of ideals. If, in the final analysis, some of these prove to be overkill, they can still make for a great story line. If the wine is an icon or a “hot collectible,” costs can be passed on to wine lovers who have deep pockets. But for the bulk of wine growers to wander romantically or unrealistically far down the path of diminishing returns is too often to court financial disaster.

Delicious liquid testimonials

Each aspect of wine growing—site, soil, vine, and weather—and of wine “making”—fermentation and *élevage*—is fraught with contingency and is fertile ground for surprises. So, let us celebrate some of the biggest of these. Amazing goodness is emerging under our noses from winemakers who take the long view and who follow their own star, allowing nature to bless or confound them. They may have harnessed their ambition to a grape—Blaufränkisch, in

Austria, for example—that few wine lovers have heard of yet, much less experienced. And—like Dorli Muhr, Dirk Niepoort, Uwe Schiefer, or Roland Velich—they may be making discoveries only one step ahead of us wine writers and wine consumers about this grape or the potential of once-famous, long-sighted sites. Speaking of vineyard renewal, it’s happening, and it is needed in regions and with grapes that everyone’s heard of, too, such as Mosel Riesling. The efforts of Andreas Adam, Karl-Josef Loewen, Daniel Vollenweider, Konstantin Weiser, and many others in the Middle Mosel alone are transforming mysterious, deep-red dots on the old Prussian tax maps into delicious liquid testimonials to truth-in-terroir. And in Tokaj, comparable rediscovery affects an entire growing region, surely the least known in the world to carry a famous name.

Patience has its surprising rewards when applied to the most unloved grapes, too. Consider lowly Sylvaner’s revival in Rheinhessen or in the Eisacktal (Alto Adige); or the elevation of Mendoza’s ubiquitous Malbec; or, in an earlier time, of California’s Zinfandel; or the emergence of Grüner Veltliner in Austria; or that once-despised “black trash” grape Carignan in Priorat (though in these last two cases, we seem to have witnessed celebrity in the fast lane). Planting the most prestigious grape varieties in unlikely or untested sites is often as futile as it is fashionable, and yet there is no other route to discovering such surprising synergies as are displayed by Pinot Noir at Castel Juval in the Alto Adige’s Vinschgau, or Syrah at Schneider Vineyards on Long Island. There is no telling what other lowly or obscure grape varieties, or untested combinations of *cépage* and site, will show their colors given time and the right human talent.

Some wine growers are conscientiously researching and reviving long-dormant traditions, including a few rugged individualists—such as Friuli’s Josko Gravner—so radical that they really do seem to have stepped back into another century, if not another millennium. Of others it can perhaps more accurately be said that they are reinventing the past as much as they are inventing a promising future. And then there is a band of real innovators—those fearlessly pursuing hunches and stylistic visions wherever they lead, resulting in wines the likes of which no one has tasted before, wines which might—as did those of the late Didier Dagueneau for the Loire and for Sauvignon—forever transform our perception of regions or grapes.

In the series of profiles to come in these pages, daring forecasts for the transformation of wine as we know it—to say nothing of self-fulfilling pretensions—will defer to the giving of reasons why readers should taste for themselves wines whose authors, if not also regions, styles, grapes, or traditions, will be unfamiliar. Each grower must grapple with inherent limits and prospects imposed or afforded by vineyard location (a reasonably good way to define terroir); with forces of nature (as expressed in vintage); with forces of markets and weight of tradition; and, not least, with luck. The goddess of serendipity must be assuaged just as much as that of weather, but perhaps the passionate outpourings of us wine journalists may yet have some effect.

A NEW DIRECTION

The Seewinkel was for much of the past century among the poorest and quietest corners of Austria—sandy wetlands on the far side of the steppe lake called Neusiedlersee, perched at the edge of the great Pannonian Plain. When Roland Velich was growing up there, the whitewashed, thatched-roofed houses of tiny Apetlon and its myriad lakes, so often filled with migratory birds, were blighted by watch towers and tangles of barbed wire. But tourism and wine were on their way to rescuing the Seewinkel from poverty and obscurity well before the Iron Curtain rusted and began retreating into the recesses of collective memory.

“Luis” Kracher of nearby Illmitz was the dynamo behind worldwide awareness of this neighborhood and its potential for profound nobly sweet wines—part of a tradition as old as that of Tokaj, at the opposite end of the former Hungarian Empire. But the accomplishments of the Velichs—Roland and his younger brother Heinz—also secured a place in 20th-century Austrian wine history, thanks not only to excellent Trockenbeerenauslesen, but also to a singularly accidental success with barrel-fermented Chardonnay. Their father didn’t even know he had planted it—the vines were supposed to have been Pinot Blanc. But their true origin was discovered around the time that Chardonnay began enjoying its 15 years or so of international fame, and with their Tiglat, the Velich brothers crafted a wine that could hold its head high in the company of competition from the Côte de Beaune or Sonoma, without sacrificing a distinctive identity.

During the 1990s, Roland Velich’s search both for the viticultural roots of his home region (long known as German West Hungary) and, under the influence of Burgundy, for the sources of profundity in wine, led him in a new direction. Heinz Velich continued to hone his skills at the family’s Apetlon estate, taking his Chardonnay to a new level of refinement, even as that grape’s worldwide luster faded, and crafting nobly sweet wines in a key that paid homage—creatively rather than nostalgically—to the oxidative winemaking traditions of an earlier era. The object of Roland Velich’s hopes and ambitions was literally higher ground on the western side of the elongated Neusiedlersee—sites cool enough, he thought, to call “northerly.” Never mind that this was not literally true, and that Burgenland (as this region became known when, following a plebiscite, it joined Austria in 1921) prides itself on an abundance of sunshine and warmth. Velich’s grape of choice was Blaufränkisch (Kékfrankos in Hungary, or Lemberger in Germany and the USA). The family tree of this traditional mainstay of Pannonian vineyards remains obscure, but its name harkens back more than a millennium, to when all grapes in the lands ruled over by Charlemagne tended to be classed either as Hunnish—base—or Frankish—noble. (The white known as Heunisch is still found in Austrian and Magyar vineyards.)

The revival of Austrian wine in the late 1980s by no means left red wine neglected, but much early betting among Burgenland’s vintners and Austrian consumers was on Cabernet and Merlot. The autochthonous Blaufränkisch



and Zweigelt (a widely planted, early 20th-century Austrian crossing) tended to remain anonymous, even if bottled solo. The youthful ambition of many Austrian vintners and the emergence of successful New World wine regions encouraged the glorification of wines with strong tannic grip, full body, and power. When Ernst Triebaumer bottled pure Blaufränkisch from his Mariental in 1986, the wine achieved cult status among self-styled insiders. Yet successors were slow to emerge. In 1992, Feiler-Artinger’s Umriß, and Hans “John” Nittnaus’s Ungerberg entered the marketplace (wines that retained remarkable freshness and flavor interest 15 years later). Silvia Prieler—whose family’s elegant, complex Blaufränkisch today ranks among Austria’s most celebrated wines—recalls how, a year from release, a mere 24 bottles of their 1993 Goldberg had been sold from the cellar door: “No Austrian had the slightest idea that indigenous grapes could reflect a terroir, and none would pay [for Blaufränkisch] the price of a Cabernet Sauvignon.” Luckily for the Prielers, a Swiss merchant bought up the rest. Sales inside Austria of the 1994 Goldberg—still a superb wine a dozen years after bottling—rose to 60 bottles! The warm and dry 1997 vintage brought success on a broad front for those Burgenland growers who had banked on Blaufränkisch, and wines of that vintage—such as Triebaumer’s Mariental and Krutzler’s Perwolf (from Südburgenland, blended with 15 percent Cabernet)—today justify the zeal with which local collectors covet what bottles

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remain. But as enthusiasm for Blaufränkisch grew, the “bigger is better” mentality—and the liberal use of much raw new wood—characterized increasing numbers of wines.

Uwe Schiefer in Südburgenland, by contrast, strove for clarity, lift, and refinement—with a Burgundian inspiration—and his 1999 Eisenberg (still in top form today) established the tone of subsequent vintages, confirming Roland Velich’s confidence in Blaufränkisch. Even more inspiring to Velich were avowedly ordinary, unpretentious Burgenland red wines that came his way from the early and mid-1980s and happened to have been made from Blaufränkisch (though not always labeled such). In these wines, Velich perceived bridges back to the long expanse of local wine history during which stainless steel, sophisticated temperature control, and yeast cultures—to say nothing of modern means of must concentration—were unknown. And these rustic vinous bridges, he discovered, while never intended for aging, remained surprisingly strong, supple, and brimming with personality after as many as 20 years in bottle.

As a reputation for Blaufränkisch developed inside Austria, so did an urge on the part of those responsible for marketing Austrian wine to get “the real Blaufränkisch” to stand up, in order to explain what sort of wine to expect to wine lovers who had neither heard of it nor knew how to pronounce its name. Velich felt that the dominant style was betraying Blaufränkisch’s potential, or at least not leaving it at liberty to define itself. A case could be made that to ask after “the real” or “best” style for the grape was the wrong question, or at least premature. It’s better to encourage among vintners the freedom to test their own vinous hypotheses. The resulting diversity might itself be dazzling. After all, wouldn’t we be incredulous if someone demanded an account of “the typical Syrah of the Northern Rhône” and then expressed dissatisfaction because Côte Rotie, Hermitage, and Cornas are not only rendered in diverse styles but—regardless of winemaking—present three unmistakably distinctive wines?

Velich’s own stylistic vision took shape in time to inform his earliest essays in Blaufränkisch. “Burgenland [is] a cool-climate region; therefore, its wines, like red Burgundies, should be ones of finesse, structure, and depth. Growers in Burgenland were going the opposite way, seeking opulence, size, and, too often, immediate accessibility.” Floral perfume, diverse fresh red and black fruits, pepper and spices, and sometimes (especially as the wines age) hints of tobacco or sealing wax are among the diverse descriptive categories that apply to Blaufränkisch. But most important are flavor dimensions one can only describe with a “mineral” vocabulary, and sometimes nuances that call forth “animal” descriptors as well. The best wines reveal a wonderful depth and layering of fruit, herbs and spices, and animal and mineral that remind one now of fine Burgundy, now of Bordeaux; occasionally of Syrah or of Nebbiolo. Texturally, Blaufränkisch proved capable in the hands of Schiefer and then Velich of a refinement and caressing mouthfeel that could only be compared with Burgundy. Velich believed it

possible to reflect more clearly this grape’s inherent complexity in Burgenland’s soils and to thereby achieve wines that would testify profoundly to their place of origin as well as honor long-standing local traditions.

Velich discovered his raw material—soil, site, and vines that excited him—in the hills west of Sopron (the region’s traditional capital, now in Hungary) and on a plateau 10 miles (16km) south (also right on the border). In Lutzmannsburg’s mixture of clay and glacial loess over a volcanic bed, he found Blaufränkisch vines up to 100 years old, densely planted, some still trained *gobelet*-style to single stakes. These informed the first vintage (2001) of Plateau Lutzmannsburg, a joint venture begun with Südburgenland vintner Erich Krutzler. The following year, in the breeziest and highest portions (up to 1,310ft [400m]) of Neckenmarkt’s traditionally well-reputed schist and chalk hills, further old vines and promising parcels were staked out and added to the project, which acquired the name Moric (Magyar for—and pronounced—Moritz, a name chosen for its ethnic associations and its simplicity). The project became a solo venture when Krutzler left to begin a major venture in Slovenia.

“The basic idea behind Moric,” explains Velich, “was simply to craft wines that unequivocally permitted their origins to be recognized—wines that could only grow in one place.” Velich is a strong believer in the power of nuance and mystery in wine to capture consumers’ imagination, “even if that may mean wines that are harder for wine lovers—or critics—to understand at first. I believe in this path because I believe in Burgenland and in Blaufränkisch.” To walk the direction implied by his talk of terroir and the refinement of the variety, rather than “merely giving lip service to these notions as a marketing strategy” (as he puts it), means for Velich harvesting late and highly selectively; relying on spontaneous, often slow fermentation, generally in open-topped wooden vats; assembling his finished blends only after extended evolution in cask; and bottling by gravity only after 20–24 months. Barrels of 500 liters and larger are used, among other things to permit a fair share of new (Austrian and French) oak without threatening to skew the flavor in a woody direction. Each parcel’s distinct personality, and the synergies available through *assemblage*, are pursued at leisure, and multiple levels of quality are bottled. Until now, these levels have included a regional wine and, depending on the vintage, both villages and separate “old-vine” bottlings from Neckenmarkt and Lutzmannsburg, though Velich anticipates some changes in marketing.

After seven vintages, Roland Velich has come to believe in a more profound analogy with Burgundy than that of style, and one that lives up to the vision that inspired Moric. “There is no other grape variety on Earth,” he boldly concluded, “that comes closer to the elegance and complexity of Burgundian Pinot Noir than Austrian Blaufränkisch. Furthermore, few if any other black grapes are more reflective of site and soil.” Indeed—as so often with terroir phenomena—differences seem quite apparent even over short distances. Not only the dramatic difference between Neckenmarkt and

Lutzmannsburg, but also those within each commune are evident in Velich's Neckenmarkt cellar. One is very much tempted to believe that a grower of Grenache and Carignan transported from Roussillon—not knowing even the grape here in question—could identify geologically the spice, smokiness, and overt stoniness that characterize schist-rich sites and the distilled fruit notes and sheer brightness that typify chalk. Seven vintages have also deepened Velich's respect for the resilience of Blaufränkisch. The striking success of the 2006 vintage of Moric is due to a significant degree to ideal ripening conditions. The same could be said of 2004's potential as well, but whereas in that year Velich bottled from Neckenmarkt his finest wine to date, in Lutzmannsburg, fog and botrytis just before what would have been a glorious harvest led him to abort that crop. In 2005—almost sure to remain in the minds of Burgenland vintners as the year from hell—the lean, bright, lower alcohol Moric renditions of Blaufränkisch by no means lack either ripe and interesting flavors or a charm all their own, thanks to resisting the rain and hanging into November.

Two new projects now threaten to leave Velich's hands very full. Along the border with Hungary south of Großhöflein, the ancient wine village of Zagersdorf (home to amphorae from 800 BC) was long known for Blaufränkisch, yet its vineyards were allowed to dwindle from more than 120ha (297 acres) in the 1980s to a mere 30ha (74 acres) today, and the local co-op long ago closed its doors. Here, Velich has teamed up with young vintner Hannes Schuster, whose father's family came from the village. Vines up to 75 years old on cool, chalk-clay soil have engendered in 2007 a wine displaying bright, promising intensity from barrel. Immediately above Großhöflein in the Leitha Hills lies Müllendorf, a town whose vineyard has been subjected to an even harder fate. Ironically, the spot is known for its marble quarry, and on that rare rock still grow remnants of Grüner Veltliner and Blaufränkisch that will produce the first bottled evidence of their potential—perhaps in history, not just in the history of Moric—in vintage 2008. As if this were not enough, in keeping with his sense of mission and of Pannonian history, Roland Velich has developed a project

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"I'm not trying to make great wine"

Velich, his Swedish-born wife Dagmar, their young son and daughter, and their equally youthfully high-spirited Hungarian Pointer live in Großhöflein, just outside of Eisenstadt (Burgenland's capital since 1921) in the ancient former parsonage of the parish church. Not surprisingly, the vines in his home neighborhood fascinated Velich as well, and the more he looked into history and trod the local terroir, the more excited he became by the prospects. His first viticultural foray outside of Mittelburgenland was into the Leitha hills just north of Eisenstadt, in St Georgen, where he elected not just to employ Blaufränkisch, but to make his white-wine debut as well. Taking the fossil-rich chalk and high, breezy slopes of St Georgen as his inspiration, he elected to apply to their fruit the barrel fermentation and extended lees contact appropriate, in his mind, to a premier cru Chablis. The result was a 2006 that is a revelation—almost more than Velich could have bargained for, even it had been with the Devil. The wine displayed a richness of texture and a mysterious depth of characteristics that can only be described as "mineral" and, indeed, calls to mind equal parts Chablis and Grüner Veltliner. Unhurried *élevage* made for a wine with considerable secondary notes even at bottling, and who knows how long it may live. The Blaufränkisch St Georgen, too, lives in a world of its own, with unusually bright, bitter-sweet fruit and a sensation of structure and mineral depth entirely unlike that found in Velich's Neckenmarkt and Lutzmannsburg reds.

for restoring the ancient, long-abandoned ecclesiastical press house in St Margareten, whose hillsides overlooking Rust and the Neusiedlersee are home to the most famous quarries in the old empire, the stones from which literally formed the foundation of imperial Vienna.

"I'm not trying to make great wine," insisted Velich when he began his curiously named project with a grape little known outside Austria, "just wine that reflects its origins." But not trying to make great wine does not preclude achieving that very end; on the contrary. There is a paradox behind the flavor revelation that more and more wine lovers profess to have experienced in a glass of Moric Blaufränkisch. Neither originality nor greatness is likely to be achieved by striving to be original or important. But on occasion, they manifest themselves where careful, watchful workmanship has somehow permitted the fruit and its place of origin to script the message in the bottle. Of course, this tale of terroir and of letting wine make itself has been repeated so often in recent times that it threatens to drift from mystery into vapid mystification. And yet, something compellingly memorable is being captured by Roland Velich from these vineyards in eastern Austria and their Blaufränkisch—something the likes of which can be recalled by neither tasters steeped in the region's ancient wine culture, nor savvy observers of the international scene. One's sense of smell and taste is challenged, as well as delighted, by Moric wines. It's tempting, in fact, to cup an ear to the glass, hoping to hear what the future will bring and what the past can tell us. ■