

The Moric Wineries Roland Velich about his groundbreaking wines: “I want to create something unique and original…”

Christian Seiler, an Austrian journalist, interviewed Roland Velich in March of 2009.

Christian Seiler: Robert Parker’s “Wine Advocate,” the most influential wine-publication in the world, has just published its scores of Austrian wines. Your wines did magnificently well. The Moric Blaufränkisch Neckenmarkter Alte Reben 2006 was awarded 95 points, thereby attaining a standard heretofore unachieved by any Austrian red. Were you surprised?



Roland Velich: Well, in any case, quite glad of it. Not totally surprised, though, because David Schildknecht, who evaluates Austrian wines for Robert Parker, had scored our wines very favourably in the past couple years. And he had already drawn attention to the excellent quality of the 2006 vintage: he said that it was “at least” as good as 2004—so although not entirely surprised, I was most certainly wonderfully pleased.

Christian Seiler: **In recent years you have consistently withdrawn from any critique by the Austrian wine-press—for this reason some people might be surprised at your delight over the Parker points.**

Roland Velich: I had invited quite a few Austrian journalists to visit me in my cellar and observe the different forms of vinification that we use, to find out what’s going on. Nobody came. David Schildknecht undertook the long trip from the East Coast of the USA to Burgenland, and devoted several hours to tasting my wines. He tasted intensively and referred frequently between wines, made his notes and was as a result of this very well prepared to write quite perceptively about Moric, because he understood it so well.

Christian Seiler: **So with this you intend to criticise the fashion for blind tastings currently prevalent in Austria, where the tasters sample a great number of wines without knowing their origin. Isn’t that a good way to prevent yourself from being inordinately influenced by the image or the mystique of a wine?**

Roland Velich: Not at all. In blind tastings as a rule one tends to prefer wines of the currently fashionable style, which means alcohol content, intensity from new oak and the degree to which it has been toasted—so that one is distracted by opulence, weight and power. Finesse doesn't stand a chance in blind tastings.

Christian Seiler: **How is that?**

Roland Velich: The palate is simply not intended to try 30–50 samples within a couple of hours. And wine isn't made to be experienced in this fashion. The very nature of wine invites one to spend time with it, and to appreciate over time the pleasure of its various qualities and characteristics.

Christian Seiler: **Plainly speaking, wines that don't follow the current fashion score poorly in blind tastings?**

Roland Velich: Clearly so. Elegant and finely-tuned wines—which are designed to develop over time, first in the barrel and then in the bottle—are very difficult to evaluate when you taste them young. They don't reveal themselves. And they don't stand a chance alongside the heavyweights. For this reason I've stopped showing my wines in Austrian tastings. The style of your wines, as you describe them, presents quite a departure from the currently favoured model of Austrian red wine. You are pursuing the goals of expressing minerality and terroir, while your most successful colleagues are producing fruity, powerful and oak-influenced wines.

Christian Seiler: **Why did you decide to swim against the mainstream?**

Roland Velich: For me that's got a lot to do with the concept "Tradition." Burgenland is an ancient wine-region. For example, the vineyards of Neckenmarkt, in the southern foothills of the Ödenburger Mountains, have always fascinated me. I had always engaged myself with differing soils types, but primarily with the ancient grape variety Blaufränkisch.

Christian Seiler: **Why exactly Blaufränkisch?**

Roland Velich: Because so far as quality is concerned, the variety is fairly durable. Even when it's made in style that's totally modern, or even sloppily vinified, it yields interesting results. So I got it into my head to find out what happens when I allow Blaufränkisch grapes to ferment into wine under the best possible conditions. I wanted to know: what are the expressive capabilities of this variety? What happens when I don't distort the wine by means of technology?

Christian Seiler: **How did you get the idea, that in fact the Blaufränkisch possessed the potential to yield great wine?**

Roland Velich: Initially in a purely theoretical fashion. Burgenland is situated at the northwestern gateway to the Pannonian world, where the climate is rather somewhat cooler. The nights in September are no longer so oppressively hot, and since the Blaufränkisch is picked in October, frequently toward the end of October, the grapes have time in the cool nights to develop very refined aromas. That fits quite well with my idea of making wines that are not so powerful and opulent as in the southern regions of Europe, or in the New World, where the heat suppresses most any sense of delicacy.

Christian Seiler: **Despite this, it wasn't obvious to concentrate on Blaufränkisch and to develop an entirely new style for this variety...**

Roland Velich: No, not at all. But here comes the practical part: I had always tasted old Blaufränkisch wines, which reminded me of entirely different regions: of wines from Piedmont, of Pinot Noir from Burgundy—possibly also of the Syrah from the northern Rhône. I was struck by flashes of similarity.

Christian Seiler: **And these were?**

Roland Velich: Partly the fruit, partly the structure, partly the spice. There are places in Burgenland which provide a spice similar to that of Northern Rhône Syrah, particularly when the Blaufränkisch has the chance to develop for years in the bottle.

Christian Seiler: **You mean the top wines?**

Roland Velich: No, it works with simply made wines as well. In grapes from certain vineyards in Lutzmannsburg, a tannin structure develops in this fashion that is similar to Nebbiolo from Piedmont.

Christian Seiler: **You have, then, utilised a deep knowledge about international wines to divine the potential of Blaufränkisch**

Roland Velich: Of course. I am a wine grower, body and soul. My enthusiasm for wines didn't stop at the borders of Burgenland, or even Austria. It was clear to me that I wanted to know more about the so-called great wines. How do the vineyards look? How are the soils composed? How are the grapes harvested? How do the people work in the cellar? What, all things considered, distinguishes a great wine?

Christian Seiler: **You acquired this knowledge with the intention of making a great wine yourself someday?**

Roland Velich: I just took notes, and made comparisons. What is it that makes La Tâche so special? Why does it stand apart from all other wines?

Christian Seiler: **And the answer?**

Roland Velich: That it's not the opulence, not the power—but rather the eloquence of a special perfume, which makes a wine from a particular region or site so incomparable. The French call this “goût de terroir”: the flavour that a small patch of ground calls forth in combination with a grape. That's the special thing—the encounter with nature. It's the art of allowing something to develop naturally, something that no technical wizardry can possibly fabricate.

Christian Seiler: **Where have you experienced this “goût de terroir” the most intensely?**

Roland Velich: Interestingly enough, in the borderlands of winemaking, at the extremes of where grapes can be grown. The places where the vines have a tougher time of it, where they are challenged by climatic conditions during the course of a year. That's exactly what puts a vine in the position of producing something totally great.

Christian Seiler: **And why is that?**

Roland Velich: Because the plants must root themselves deeper, and the day-to-night differences in temperature are substantial. We find this in Burgundy, in Chablis, in the Riesling-growing parts of Germany, in Austria with Riesling and Grüner Veltliner, and—as I see it, particularly with Blaufränkisch in Burgenland.

Christian Seiler: **So you just put two and two together?**



Roland Velich: It wasn't quite that simple. It was more of an experiment. I wanted first-off to understand what is possible, naturally inspired by the thought that a fine and elegant wine should be the result, a wine that doesn't grab attention by means of opulence, but rather from the lasting impression of terroir in its character. For this reason I

came simultaneously to two places, to Lutzmannsburg and Neckenmarkt, to vineyards some ten kilometers apart, in order to see what the detailed combinations of soil, grape variety and microclimate might be capable of producing.

Christian Seiler: **You say that great wines bring the flavour of their place of origin to the fore. Can Blaufränkisch do that?**

Roland Velich: I believe that with Moric we've provided the evidence of this.

Christian Seiler: **And how is that evidence demonstrated?**

Roland Velich: Our wines, which come from various vineyard sites, but made by a single hand, exhibit totally different flavour-profiles. One notices this not only in sites that are a few kilometers apart from one another in Neckenmarkt and Lutzmannsburg, but also in the individual vinification of grapes from gneiss, loam, limestone or slate soils in Neckenmarkt. This provides me with the evidence that Blaufränkisch can do what a great variety has got to do.

Christian Seiler: **At the time you began to devote yourself to Blaufränkisch, who shared your assessment of the variety?**

Roland Velich: Let's just say that there were more skeptics than there were believers.

Christian Seiler: **And as your first wine from the vintage 2001 came on the market?**

Roland Velich: The reaction was relatively unanimous: we've got something lean and wispy, it's got relatively little alcohol and relatively little new wood. No new super-Burgenländer. Of no great interest.

Christian Seiler: **So the skeptics saw their views confirmed?**

Roland Velich: Yes, but there were of course individuals who considered the experiment to be a success, like the wine merchant Oskar Ammann in Nenzing. There were a few others, and that was also extremely important for me.

Christian Seiler: **For economic reasons?**

Roland Velich: Exactly. I was fortunate in that I already had many contacts—international ones as well.

Christian Seiler: **Since you together with your brother Heinz had already made white wines, including the very successful chardonnay "Tiglat," considered to be one of the best whites in Austria.**

Roland Velich: Yes. With "Tiglat" we managed to make a variety—not native to Austria—speak with our voice. With the Blaufränkisch I wanted rather to

give an indigenous grape an unmistakable and distinctive status. I wanted to create an original.

Christian Seiler: How does your winemaking philosophy translate itself into practice? How does one “allow a wine to express itself,” as you are fond of saying?

Roland Velich: First we looked for old vines, which perhaps don't yield as bountiful a harvest as the younger ones, but offer significantly more flavour. The stalks were a little weaker, the bunches looser, with smaller berries. That's the first resource. Then it became a matter of harvesting perfect quality. That meant, most frequently, reducing the yield, and—most importantly—stringent selection at harvest. Then we brought the grapes into the cellar, where we tried to do what earlier generations had always done.

Christian Seiler: Namely?

Roland Velich: We let the grapes begin fermenting on the skins in wooden vats, with only a little extraction made by means of punchdown, so that the tannins couldn't get the upper hand. We attempted to take the raw material to the next part of the process in the best possible condition, without changing the character of this material at



all... Because when you cut the bunch from the vine, that's when the quality of the wine is determined. You can only try to optimise this in the cellar—you can add no quality to the wine. You can only express what's already there.

Christian Seiler: You speak about the traditional methods of vinification. Whose tradition? Cellar technique in Burgenland, or in other wine regions?

Roland Velich: Naturally, it's a synthesis, because that's the story of winemaking tradition in Burgenland. The winemakers certainly had no three-week maceration time seventy or thirty years ago... and they hadn't reduced their yields, simply because they couldn't afford to do so. The old winemakers valued abundant harvests more than they did a bunch of grapes in perfect balance and ripeness. Refinement, depth and elegance aren't really part of our tradition here.

Christian Seiler: So, no tradition?

Roland Velich: Let's call it a re-acquaintance with a grape variety, with old growing-regions and old vines, but also with the determination to perfect the product contrary to tradition, for the high-end sector. Not to render the wine more impressive, but to enhance its delicacy of expression.

Christian Seiler: **And how do you define delicacy?**

Roland Velich: Balance between alcohol, tannin and acids. The tactile style and the feel of the wine. Wine should ultimately be able to quench thirst, and do this without needing a liter of water alongside to wash it down. This brings me back to Burgundy—a classically made red Burgundy is never heavy or cumbersome. Never.

Christian Seiler: **Back to delicacy...**

Roland Velich: Delicacy has much to do with aesthetics. One's senses and perceptions must be educated, like in music or visual art. One requires a certain education of the palate, in order to appreciate the delicacy that is there to be appreciated. That is crucial.

Christian Seiler: **Back when you launched Moric, there were very few purely varietal Blaufränkisch at the top-end. Today that's different. The upper echelons of the Parker ratings are almost exclusively populated by Blaufränkisch. Have you changed the Burgenländer winemaking landscape?**

Roland Velich: Let's just say this: never before in the history of winemaking in Burgenland did we have so many wines from hundred-percent Blaufränkisch grapes in the upper-quality range—whose expression is based in elegance, expression and character of origin, that are fermented with natural yeast in large wooden barrels—as we do today.

Christian Seiler: **You put that very diplomatically. Now name some names.**

Roland Velich: I had, of course, a few colleagues, who have always had a good hand with Blaufränkisch. Uwe Schiefer from Eisenberg, for example, who was perhaps convinced by my work to apply himself more intensely... And that goes in the other direction as well: Uwe's 1997 Rheiburg is an unbelievable wine, which still today tastes youthful and shows what exactly what grew on the vine. And of course there are other examples—wines from a few Mittelburgenland producers, the ones from the Krutzler family, from Ernst Triebaumer, old bottlings from the Schuster family in Zagersdorf, which demonstrate how great the potential of this variety is.

Christian Seiler: **So you related to these experiences, without feeling obliged to recreate them personally.**

Roland Velich: That's correct. I can build upon the experience of the old masters. They help me to refine my own philosophy, in that I can compare and correlate my results with theirs.

Christian Seiler: **And did you know, tasting the first Moric vintage, that you'd hit paydirt?**

Roland Velich: Honestly, yes. 2001 was not a great vintage, and I had a few start-up difficulties to deal with. But this wine already showed evidence that was very encouraging. Then came 2002, a magnificent vintage—not too hot, but rather with cool periods, which is ideal for Blaufränkisch. The grape material was better than I could hope for, and in the meantime we had added wooden vats for the open maceration, and we could work like I'd always dreamed of doing.

Christian Seiler: **The 2001 Moric received a rather cool reception from the pundits—did that change with 2002?**

Roland Velich: The reactions were, very good but not exceptional. That's totally ridiculous, when one drinks the wine today. There's a cloud of perfume that climbs out of the glass. So much intensity, finesse, velvety elegance. I'm always impressed myself, again and again.

Christian Seiler: **What happened during the maturation in the bottle?**

Roland Velich: It wasn't just that the tannins mellowed and the acids worked themselves into balance, but the aromas just exploded. That is exactly what I had always wished for.

Christian Seiler: **In the current Parker reviews your Grüner Veltliner from St. Georgen got rated on the same rung of the ladder as the best Wachauer and Kamptaler GV's. What's this with Grüner Veltliner from Burgenland?**



Roland Velich: I'm always inspired by the idea of creating something original, and incidentally, Grüner Veltliner is in fact the most widely planted grape variety in Burgenland. So I said to myself, it must be possible to make a Grüner Veltliner that doesn't emulate the style of

Lower Austria, but strives in the spirit of originality to strike a path appropriate to Burgenland. We have different soils, different microclimates, and I wanted to let the wine ferment not in the usual steel tank, but in a large wooden barrel—these were experiments that we undertook, just as with Blaufränkisch, to let the wine express itself.

Christian Seiler: **And how was it received?**

Roland Velich: My English importer said, “Don’t force me to sell this as Grüner Veltliner?”

Christian Seiler: **Why?**

Roland Velich: He wasn’t alone. The people said, “this wine is quite good, but it’s not GV as we understand it.” So I had achieved my aim. I had created something original.

Christian Seiler: **What’s your next step? Riesling from Rust?**

Roland Velich: No, we’re working together with Hannes Schuster to preserve an ancient winegrowing district in the neighbourhood of St Margarethen, in Zagersdorf. Fossil grape-seeds provide evidence that people have been making wine there for 3000 years. 20 years ago there were 120 hectares under vines, today only 30, thanks to the government’s unfortunate land-clearing subsidy. It’s a crying shame, when old grapevines get hacked out like this—they can’t be replaced within a person’s life-span. So we’ve leased three hectares and are launching our new brand M. Jagini red wine.

Christian Seiler: **From Blaufränkisch?**

Roland Velich: Of course. An absolutely unmistakable type of Blaufränkisch.

Christian Seiler: **And now you’re producing wines from several different areas. Will you build your own winery/tasting room?**

Roland Velich: Yes, without a doubt. I won’t remain the amateur without an address for very much longer.

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