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Call it vinous color blindness: for years, the white wines of Central Europe have been the darlings of the international wine congnoscenti. Riesling, of course, is Germany's headliner, extolled by sommeliers and embraced by wine geeks for its bright complexity and unique ability to express terroir. And let's not forget Grüner Veltliner, the dry and spritely Austrian white that in the last decade has also emerged as a star. Still, delicious and drinkable as those wines may be, they're only half the story: nearly 40 percent of the grapes grown in Germany and Austria are red varieties—like Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt, St. Laurent and Spätburgunder (aka Pinot Noir)—that, despite storied histories and appealing, balanced profiles, have long languished in obscurity outside *Mitteleuropa*.

Scumbet Fever





GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN REDS
ARE ON A HOT STREAK.

STORY BY SARAH KARNASCIEWICZ
PHOTOS BY CAROLYN FONG

But you can bet that's about to change. While the names of the indigenous reds from Germany and Austria may stump the tongue, there's no mistaking these wines' irresistible combination of personality and potential, vivaciousness and value. And thanks to a fortuitous storm of factors—including the rise of some innovative young winemakers, an increasingly hospitable growing climate, and improving international distribution—they've never been more worthy or easier to track down.

Structured and sophisticated, and both wallet- and food-friendly, a juicy, zippy Zweigelt or a plush, spicy Blaufränkisch could be the answer to all your autumn-entertaining needs. So the next time you're looking for a dinner party red to impress, say *auf wiedersehen* to your usual pours and give what importer Terry Theise calls the "reds *mit umlauts*" of Central Europe a try. "In the last 10 years, Austrian red wines have really exploded in quality—what you're getting today is remarkable," says Stephan Schindler.

He should know. Eleven years ago, Schindler (a native of Austria) and his wife Emily founded Winemonger, a California-based importing and online retail company whose mission was to bring previously overlooked and undervalued Austrian wines to discerning American drinkers. Among the prized bottles in Schindler's current portfolio are St. Laurents (pronounced Sonkt LOWW-rent) from producers like Umathum and Rosi Schuster—elegant, velvety wines from an indigenous Austrian grape that, like Riesling, has a special affinity for transporting terroir. "St. Laurent has been Austria's best-kept secret for a while," he says. "But it was only a matter of time before the rest of the world

caught on and realized they could buy wines on par with high-end French wines, at half the price."

Erin Barbour Scala, sommelier at the Charlottesville, Virginia restaurants Petit Pois and Fleurie, agrees. "When I became a somm a decade ago, it was all Riesling, all the time," she laughs. "But the first time I tried an old Rebholz Spätburgunder, I was blown away."

Scala has taken a fierce interest in the cool-climate reds of Germany and Austria ever since—and it's easy to understand why. "Herbaceous, delicious Pinot Noirs that you can buy for \$10 a bottle and sell by the glass? That's something wine directors should be really excited about," she explains. "I visit these regions now, and I see producers making complex wines from young vines that in 20 years will be extraordinary. And old vine producers that already measure up to the best of Burgundy."

To be clear: just because American drinkers are finally waking to the charms of Central European reds, doesn't mean these wines haven't been an integral part of their homelands' wine culture for generations. (Indeed, a whopping 70 percent of the wines made in Austria are consumed in the country.) What has begun to change more recently, however, is the attitude of many growers—away from a style modeled on the great châteaux of Western Europe and towards a proudly native approach that embraces the idiosyncrasies of the region's proprietary grapes and celebrates the unique geographic conditions. "Twenty years ago, Austria was still deciding whether it wanted to be Bordeaux, Burgundy or Tuscany, and growers were planting all the usual suspects," says Theise. "But now there's been a return

THE FAB FOUR

Four varietals dominate red wine production in Austria and Germany—each delicious and distinguished in its own way. From pronunciations (damn those diacritics!) to bottles to scout, here's the primer you need to dive into them.

Spätburgunder (SHPATE-bur-GUN-der)

Intimidated by umlauts? Then ditch the Germanic nomenclature and go ahead and call this wine by its international name: Pinot Noir. Surprised? Germany is the third-largest producer of Pinot Noir in the world behind France and the United States. Indeed, though it lacks the high profile (and high prices) of Burgundy, Spätburgunder has been a staple in Germany and Austria since the 13th century, when it was introduced to the Rhine region by Cistercian monks. Like most cool-climate reds, Spätburgunders have typically been bright and light and lean—but recently, rising temperatures in the major growing regions of Baden, Ahr and Mosel have been yielding more robust results. The best bottles show a bright berry backbone and what sommelier Erin Barbour Scala calls "a nervy complexity."

GOOD BETS:

Juris Pinot Noir Selection 2010 (\$25)

A terrific value, this mouthwatering wine hails from the Austrian town of Gols, halfway between Vienna and Budapest. Earthy up front, with a silky, ripe finish, it mingles the depth of New World Pinots with the elegance of Europe.

Riedlin Spätburgunder "Rot" 2011

(\$45) Winemakers Sybille Kuntz and Markus Kuntz-Riedlin have wine in their blood: Sybille is a sixth-generation vintner and the Riedlin family has been making wines in Baden since 1656. This vintage, Markus's second since taking over production from his parents in 2009, is lush, bright and faintly woody, owing to maturation in oak barriques.

Rudolf May Wellenkalk Spätburgunder

2011 (\$23) Bavaria is better known for beer, but this soft, velvety Pinot from a small, organic family vineyard in Franconia is proof that the region's slate soils and cool climate can also produce world-class wines which elegantly express their terroir.

Ökonomierat Rebholz "Tradition"

Spätburgunder 2011 (\$45) Revered among German wine buffs both at home and abroad, Hansjörg Rebholz has cemented his reputation as a rock-star winemaker by producing both award-winning whites and remarkable reds that are naturally made, expressive of place, and perfectly dry. It's not cheap, but should you see this on the shelf, consider snatching up two—because while perfectly lovely to drink now, like its pricier French counterparts, it is also eminently age-worthy.

to the indigenous varieties—wines with grace and elegance and density, each unusual, and each offering something you won't find elsewhere."

It's a shift Schindler has witnessed firsthand. "For generations, vintners would go study at Cheval Blanc and come back armed with that standard," he says. "But then a few growers, like Roland Velichof of Moric, pointed out that Austria is on the 48th parallel like Dijon, not Bordeaux—and proved it was possible to make wines that, in that refined style, were still true to Austria, to this place."

Of course, the ever-improving quality of reds coming from the region may also have to do with a crucial physical shift as well as a philosophical one: climate change. In Germany, for instance, the average August temperatures have risen 2 degrees Celsius in the last 70 years—a trend which, while potentially perilous for heat-intolerant grapes like Riesling, is quite hospitable to red varieties like Spätburgunder and Blaufränkisch, which ripen and round out elegantly when blessed with a little extra sunshine.

Does this mean that Riesling's days in the sun are literally numbered? Maybe, maybe not. But either way, says Peter Honegger—owner and cofounder of Newcomer Wines, a London-based retailer devoted exclusively to what he dubs "revolutionary Austrian wines"—there's no harm in getting to know the other kids on the block. "Reds may still be treated as orphans compared to Grüner Veltliner and Riesling," he explains. "But varieties like Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent are going to be the next driving force, internationally speaking, when it comes to Austria's wine reputation."

We'll see. Then again, maybe the best-case scenario we drinkers can hope for isn't an either/or—it's a future where the region's sophisticated, age-worthy whites and distinctive, balanced reds live side by side on wine lists and liquor store shelves. Or, as Terry Theise puts it: "I entertain the radical thought that the Summer of Riesling could easily segue into the Winter of Blaufränkisch without missing a beat." ■

Blaufränkisch

(Blau-FRONK-isch)

"Keep an eye on Blaufränkisch," says Leo Schneemann, wine director for Kurt Gutenbrunner's Austrian-focused NYC restaurant group. A versatile, crowd-pleasing quaff that's nonetheless elegant and highly reactive to growing conditions, Blaufränkisch is generally considered the most "noble" of Austria's emerging reds. Schneemann's hunch? "This is the grape that will carry Austrian wine for the next 10-15 years—because it has the body and structure to replace a Pinot or a Cabernet on any high-end wine list."

GOOD BETS:

2012 Weingut Moric Blaufränkisch (\$30) When it comes to breathing new life into Blaufränkisch, Moric has proved itself the master. Winemaker Roland Velich's old vines and high-elevation vineyards produce wines that are sleek and sophisticated, with rich, black-fruit flavors and a peppery bite.

Weninger Blaufränkisch Hochacker 2009 (\$24) With fine acidity and a savory fullness, this biodynamic Austrian wine—from a pioneering Burgenland producer—was the vineyard's entry-level bottling. Sip it with a steak and marvel.

Heinrich Blaufränkisch 2012 (\$25) Working from the fringes of the Alps on Austria's central-eastern border, Gernot and Heike Heinrich embrace a philosophy of transparency, crafting wines—like this lush, raspberry-scented Blaufränkisch—with an emphasis on vineyard management and a minimum of intervention in the cellar.

St. Laurent

(Sonkt LOWW-rent)

Stetson Robbins of Blue Danube Wine Company likes to call St. Laurent "the bastard child of Pinot Noir," and indeed the grape—a demanding diva that's sensitive to sunburn and rot—has long been thought to be a wild crossing of Pinot and an unknown partner. But whatever the source, the marriage is indeed a happy one, producing fascinating wines with a hint of pine, a deep berry pucker and a bewitchingly gamy edge. A true thinking-drinker's grape—if any Austrian red has the potential for trendiness, this is it.

GOOD BETS:

Paul Achs St. Laurent 2011 (\$30) Heir to a proud winemaking family, Paul Achs spent the '80s working in California vineyards before returning to Austria in the 1990s. A leader of the country's red-wine renaissance and co-founder of the Pannobile (an association promoting red wines from the village of Gols), Achs makes wines—like this fresh, spicy, St. Laurent—that are indeed proof of the genre's immense potential.

Steindorfer St. Laurent Reserve 2011 (\$34) Deep, dark, and spicy—this is a wine that shows off St. Laurent's immense potential. Expect notes of anise and black cherry.

Umathum St. Laurent Classic 2011 (\$23) A thing of beauty. Ripe and intense, with a pleasantly rustic, funky edge, this St. Laurent by a pioneering biodynamic producer is hand harvested, fermented with native yeasts, and finished in large wooden barrels fashioned from Austrian oak.

Zweigelt

(TSVYE-gelt)

Though a relative youngster—the grape was "born" in 1922 when scientist Fritz Zweigelt bred a cross of Blaufränkisch with St. Laurent—Zweigelt quickly established itself as a staple in the Austrian wine industry and a favorite among native drinkers. Why? Chalk it up to an exuberant yet graceful juiciness and extreme drinkability. "Zweigelt is easy to love," says Thiese, "because it almost always tastes marvelous and smells seductive."

GOOD BETS:

Geyerhof Familie Maier Red Liter 2011 (\$16): Welcome to your new house wine. At \$16 a liter, this no-frills red is a mind-boggling value—a pretty, downright-gulpable Zweigelt with cassis notes, a delicate body and just enough minerality to make it dimensional.

Rosi Schuster Zweigelt 2011 (\$24): Deeply aromatic, with a fine-tuned balance of earthiness and ripeness, this versatile red from a serious Austrian estate is the ultimate entertaining wine—as perfect alongside a plate of spaghetti and meatballs as with Thanksgiving turkey. For an unexpected twist, serve ever-so-slightly chilled.

M. Altenburger Zweigelt 2012 (\$17): When Markus Altenburger took the helm of his family's winery in 2006, his goal was to develop "unvarnished" Austrian wines using sustainable growing practices and no artificial yeasts, enzymes or adulterants in the cellar. Evidence of his success? This beguiling Zweigelt graced with ruby-red fruit and a gently tannic finish.



At Wallse—one of Kurt Gutenbrunner’s Austrian-focused restaurants in New York—wine director Leo Schneemann (above) features Austria-made Blaufränkisch among the reds on his wine list.

web extra  Check out our favorite red wines for fall: imbibemagazine.com/S014

