

Austria's ALPINE MAGIC

Winemaking is a family affair at top estates such as that owned by F.X. Pichler (right), here with his wife, Rudolfine, daughter Elisabeth Krutzler, winemaker son Lucas and Lucas' wife, Johanna. The Pichlers bottled 11 outstanding wines in '07.



Winemakers best the weather in 2007 to deliver full-bodied Rieslings and vibrant Grüner Veltliners * BY KIM MARCUS

Austria's Wachau district continues to dominate when it comes to making the best wines from this small Alpine nation in the heart of central Europe. Wachau vineyards represent less than 3 percent of Austria's 120,000 acres of wine grapes, but they account

for a solid majority of the country's top recent releases.

Led by Riesling, the Wachau produced half of the nearly 30 Austrian wines that scored 93 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale in blind tastings held in our New York office since my last report on the region ("Austria's Tour de Force," June 15,



Vineyards in the Wachau, with the Danube in the distance. Although small in terms of vineyard acres, the district consistently produces Austria's best Rieslings and Grüner Veltliners.

2008). Two producers' classic-rated 2007 Wachau Rieslings offer bold stylistic contrast. The FX. Pichler Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Loibner Steinertal (95 points, \$68) is on the creamy side of the spectrum, spicy and rich, with ripe white fruit flavors, while the Rudi Pichler Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Weissenkirchner Achleiten (95, \$95) is vibrant, intense and minerally.

With their firm structures and full-bodied flavors, these wines are memorable examples of Austrian Riesling: richer and more powerful than their German counterparts, more fleshed-out than their peers from France's Alsace region. These and many other versions from the high quality 2007 vintage are just in their infancy. Enjoyable to drink as sippers or with rich cuisines, they should gain complexity and power with time in the cellar.

Overall, I have reviewed more than 400 wines from Austria over the past year. White wines dominate, with the country's distinctive white grape Grüner Veltliner joining Riesling at the top of Austria's quality hierarchy. Besides the Wachau, the neighboring districts of Kremstal and Kamptal also contributed many top dry wines, as well as many values. There is a smattering of interesting reds made from the Austrian grapes Blaufränkisch and Zweigelt, along with some from Pinot Noir. For fans of unctuous sweetness, there are amazing dessert-style wines being made near the eastern border with Hungary, on the shores of the Neusiedlersee, Burgenland's large, shallow lake. (An alphabetical list of all wines tasted for this report is available at www.winespectator.com/053109.)

Nearly all the whites in this report come from the 2007 vintage, which presented difficult conditions but rewarded vintners who worked hard to harvest the best fruit. Rain in September followed a hot summer that sunburned some grapes. Damp conditions at the beginning of the harvest resulted in rot, especially in the Riesling vineyards. But warm winds later in the fall limited the damage by

drying out the bunches still ripening, and a number of growers harvested into November.

The Rieslings were slow to develop in the bottle but are opening up now, while the Grüner Veltliners showed forward fruit flavors from the start, backed by impressive acidity. The wines from 2007



Austria's 2007 Rieslings and Grüner Veltliners are very pure-tasting, a contrast to the ripe and powerful style of their counterparts from '06.

are very pure-tasting, in contrast to the ripe, powerful and seductive profiles of their predecessors from the 2006 vintage.

The Austrian white wine industry is dominated by family-owned operations that are on the cutting edge of winemaking technology but that also respect tradition. Reliable quality year in and year out is a hallmark of Austrian wine, and most top estates produce multiple bottlings each vintage, with some wineries emphasizing single-vineyard wines, and others vineyard blends.

A case in point is F.X. Pichler. This small, family-run winery in the village of Durnstein made 11 2007s, all of them dry, that scored in the outstanding range (90 points or better). Such a record of quality across a range of bottlings is reflected in the efforts of many of Pichler's neighbors in the Wachau.

In addition to the two (unrelated) Pichlers, a list of producers who made three or more outstanding bottlings—all either Riesling or Grüner—reads like a who's who of Austria's best: Allram, Alzinger, Bründlmayer, Johann Donabaum, Sighardt Donabaum, Schloss Gobelsburg, Hirtzberger, Högl, Josef Jamek, Loimer, Malat, Nigl, Prager, Salomon-Undhof and Rainer Wess.

The Wachau lies about an hour's drive west of Vienna and is spread along the banks of the Danube River. Terraced vineyards are aligned on the steep slopes, which are composed mostly of schist along with light-colored and sandy deposits of loess, formed during glacial epochs. This is one of Austria's driest and warmest regions, providing the climatic boost to ripen grapes to rich fruit flavors.

The terraces provide a variety of exposures and fascinating *terroirs*. Prices for the top wines are mostly in the \$50 to \$90 range, and wine lovers in Austria snap up many as soon as they are released. If you are looking for a good introduction to the Wachau's whites without emptying your wallet, try those that carry the terrassen designation. This signifies wines blended from multiple vineyard sources. One release with an impressive quality-to-price ratio is the rich, smoky Rainer Wess Riesling Qualitätswein Trocken Wachau Terrassen 2007 (92, \$28), showing baked peach, apricot and vanilla flavors.

Top 2007 Wachau Rieslings come in a wide range of delicious flavors: The elegant Alzinger Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Steinertal (94, \$78) offers vibrant pear, peach, grapefruit



The Kamptal's Fred Loimer bottled a quartet of well-priced Grüners and Rieslings in 2007, all with outstanding scores.

and mineral; the Prager Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Wachstum Bodenstein (94, \$85) is pure-tasting, with apple, grapefruit and peach accented by notes of slate and sea salt; and the Gritsch Mauritushof Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau 1000-Eimerberg (94, \$53) shows power, with ruby grapefruit, ripe peach and piecrust. (In the Wachau, the smaragd designation denotes wines of the highest ripeness and thus alcohol.)

Value-priced Rieslings are not as plentiful in 2007 as in other recent vintages. Fred Loimer in Kamptal was particularly successful in delivering both quality and value with his rich, focused Loimer Riesling Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal Langenlois Terrassen 2007 (93, \$35) and his crisp Riesling Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal 2007 (90, \$22), which offers plenty of minerality.

Grüner Veltliner is Austria's most widely planted grape and

Rating Austrian White Wine Vintages

2007	93	Bracing acidity and fresh minerality; slightly better for Riesling than Grüner Veltliner. Excellent cellar potential	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2006	95	Immense structures, with intense fruit and minerality	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2005	92	Creamy and rich; ripe Rieslings and viscous Grüners	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2004	89	Easygoing and fruity, with good structure	<i>Drink</i>
2003	88	Very ripe and full-bodied; a drought vintage	<i>Drink</i>
2002	90	Ripe, pure flavors despite flooding rains	<i>Drink or hold</i>

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended

Drinkability: "Drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

generally offers more bang for the buck than Riesling. The top-scoring 2007 Grüner is from one of my favorite Wachau domaines, Johann Donabaum. Its Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Trocken Wachau Spitzer Point 2007 (94, \$51) comes from a top vineyard site and features the prototypical flavors of the variety: grapefruit, sea salt and white pepper accented by lemon curd and cream notes. An amazing value is the Allram Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal Strassertaler 2007 (93, \$12), which is elegant and balanced, with grapefruit, lentil and white pepper flavors.

Well-priced Grüners from producers with solid track records for quality include the Birgit Eichinger Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal Gaisberg 2007 (92, \$30), the Salomon-Undhof Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kremstal Wieden Tradition 2007 (91, \$28) and the Josef Schmid Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kremstal Kremser Weingärten 2007 (91, \$21). An outstanding example in a lighter style, denoted by the federspiel designation (signifying wines with no more than 12.5 percent alcohol), is the Gritsch Mauritiushof Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Trocken Wachau Axpoint 2007 (90, \$19), emphasizing crisp flavors of apple and citrus.

The country's red wines are slowly establishing a reputation for quality, though their quantity and overall success lag far behind that of the whites. The top releases come from the Burgenland region south of Vienna. Blaufränkisch, my favorite of the native grapes, can offer dark fruit flavors that feature plenty of chocolaty notes. The Weninger Blaufränkisch Qualitätswein Trocken Mittelburgenland Reserve 2005 (90, \$35) is a prime example for its concentrated and well-structured flavors of hazelnut, red plum and dark cherry, with touches of chocolate.

Another Austrian red worth attention is Zweigelt, whose flavor profile is softer than that of Blaufränkisch. The best in my recent tastings is the Winzer Krems Zweigelt Qualitätswein Trocken Kremstal Kellermeister Reserve 2005 (89, \$16), featuring impressive focus and density to its ripe, intense mocha, dark plum and kirsch flavors.

Then there are Austria's sweet wines. The spread of the beneficial rot botrytis is promoted by the cool, humid days of autumn around the Neusiedlersee. The top '06s from the leading producer, Kracher, were not released in time for this report, but look for them in an upcoming Buying Guide.

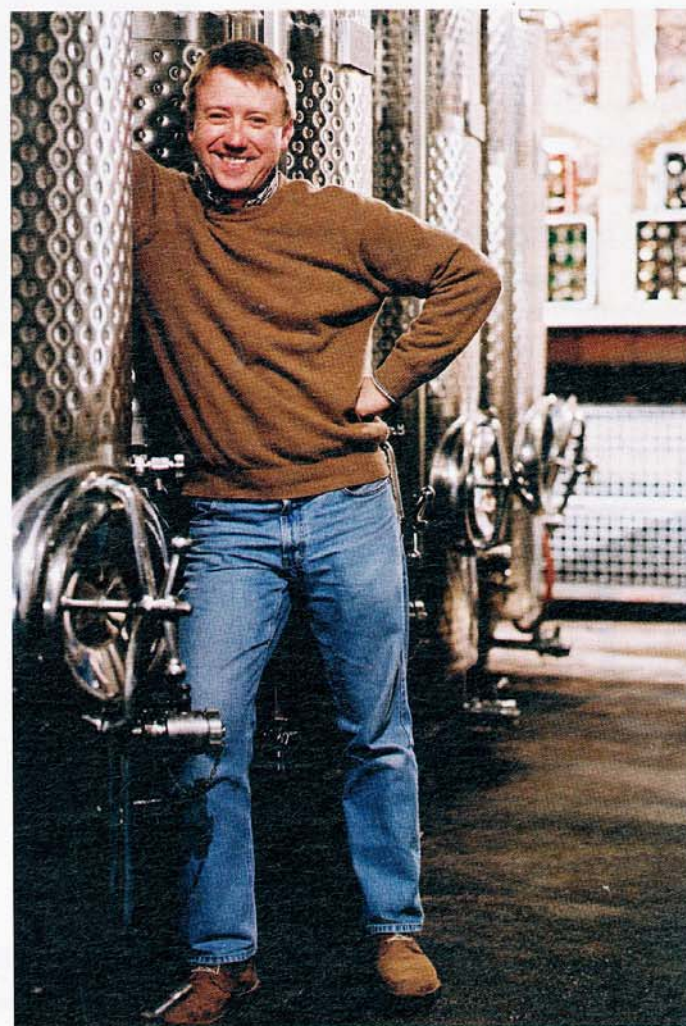
In the meantime, the star of the most recent releases is Feiler-Artinger in the small village of Rust. The Feiler-Artinger Ruster Ausbruch Burgenland Essenz 2006 (95, \$58/375ml), a blend of Chardonnay and Welschriesling, is unctuous, rich and ripe, with concentrated glazed white fruit flavors joined by luscious notes of butter, cream, honey and exotic spice.

Looking ahead, buy the '07 whites while you can because quality in the 2008 vintage could be problematic. The warm autumn rains that followed cool summer weather resulted in some mildew in the vineyards. "2008 will be a split vintage because we had high disease pressure," says Bert Salomon of Salomon-Undhof. "The harvest started Oct. 1, but went slowly because we didn't have all the ripeness in all our vineyards. But then we got warm winds and finished our harvest on Nov. 7." Overall, Grüner fared better than Riesling for Salomon because the latter struggled more to ripen.

With their distinctive pure flavors, consistent quality and potential for long-term aging, Austrian white wines compete with



Michaela Haas has overseen the vineyards and cellars of Allram, her family's Kamptal winery, since 1992. The label focuses on white varieties at affordable prices.



Rainer Wess is part of the new generation of Austrian winemakers, founding his eponymous Wachau winery in 2003. His 2007s are among the vintage's top performers.

the best in the world. Their versatility makes them favorites of savvy wine directors and sommeliers throughout the United States. If you are looking for something besides Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc to have with your next meal, try an Austrian Riesling or Grüner Veltliner.

Managing editor Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Austria.

KIM MARCUS' RECOMMENDED WINES FROM AUSTRIA

For complete reviews, see the Buying Guide of this or previous issues or www.winespectator.com.
An alphabetical listing of all wines tasted for this report is available at www.winespectator.com/053109.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
FEILER-ARTINGER Ruster Ausbruch Burgenland Essenz 2006 Unctuous, rich and ripe, with concentrated glazed white fruit flavors. Chardonnay and Welschriesling.	95	\$58 375ml
KRACHER Scheurebe Trockenbeerenauslese Burgenland Zwischen den Seen No. 11 2006 Thick, with an aroma of orange blossom leading to concentrated flavors of baked pineapple, peach, pear and spice.	95	\$109 375ml
F.X. PICHLER Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Loibner Steinertal 2007 A very seductive and refined white that's plush, rich and creamy, with baked peach, apple and glazed apricot flavors.	95	\$68
RUDI PICHLER Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Weissenkirchner Achleiten 2007 Vibrant, intense and minerally, with a deep, rich core of baked pear, cream and apricot flavors.	95	\$95
ALZINGER Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Steinertal 2007 Very elegant, with vibrant pear, peach, grapefruit and mineral. Shows impressive structure and impeccable balance.	94	\$78
JOHANN DONABAUM Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Trocken Wachau Spitzer Point 2007 Delivers intense grapefruit, sea salt and white pepper flavors that explode across the palate. Distinctive and powerful.	94	\$51
GRITSCH MAURITIUSHOF Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau 1000-Eimerberg 2007 Powerful, with ruby grapefruit, ripe peach and piecrust flavors accented by white pepper and slate notes.	94	\$53
KRACHER Scheurebe Trockenbeerenauslese Burgenland Zwischen den Seen No. 12 2006 Richly viscous, peachy and suave, with glazed apricot and pineapple flavors, followed by a silky finish.	94	\$114 375ml
KRACHER Trockenbeerenauslese Burgenland Grande Cuvée Nouvelle Vague No. 6 2006 Offers a pure-tasting mix of ripe apple and peach flavors that are fresh and crunchy. Finishes with smoke and spice.	94	\$95 375ml
RUDI PICHLER Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Terrassen 2007 Intensely minerally and well-crafted, with elegant flavors of citrus, stone, apple and pear and a lush, concentrated finish.	94	\$57
PRAGER Riesling Smaragd Trocken Wachau Wachstum Bodenstein 2007 Elegant and pure-tasting, with pretty flavors of apple, grapefruit and peach accented by notes of slate and sea salt.	94	\$85
RAINER WESS Riesling Qualitätswein Trocken Wachau Loibenberg 2007 Lush and creamy, with glazed apricot and ripe peach flavors that glide across the palate. Very smoky and plush.	94	\$48
SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal Kammerner Renner 2007 Rich and creamy, with a deep well of ripe pear, apricot and peach flavors that are joined by notes of pineapple.	93	\$42

TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
NIGL Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kremstal Privat 2007 A luscious spicy aroma is followed by concentrated flavors of ripe peach, glazed apricot, honeydew melon and cream.	93	\$58

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
ALLRAM Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal Strassertaler 2007 This elegant Grüner has an intense minerality and vibrant acidity, with grapefruit, lentil and white pepper flavors.	93	\$12
ALLRAM Riesling Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal Strasser Gaisberg 2007 Juicy, rich and ripe, showing intense flavors of apple, pear, peach and dried apricot, with a luxuriously spicy finish.	92	\$25
KURT ANGERER Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kamptal Kies 2007 Rich, with deep, well-developed flavors of ripe peach, apricot and golden raisin. The finish features spice and cream.	92	\$17
MEINHARD FORSTREITER Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Kremstal Kremser Kögl Bergwein 2007 There's good density and power to the grapefruit, apple, orange peel and peach flavors, with plenty of fresh acidity.	90	\$12
LETH Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Wagram Steingrund Lagenreserve 2007 Rich and lush, with ripe peach and buttery apple flavors. Impressive for the appellation.	90	\$17
NIGL Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Niederösterreich Freiheit 2007 This pure-tasting Grüner delivers flavors of quince, pear, apricot and white peach, with notes of lemon curd and cream.	90	\$24
WINZER KREMS Riesling Qualitätswein Trocken Kremstal Kremser Pfaffenberg 2007 Redolent of fresh-cut apple and peach, this is very crunchy and fresh-tasting. Turns ripe and creamy on the finish.	90	\$20
MACHHERNDL Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Trocken Wachau Kollmütz 2007 Minerally, with plenty of green apple and peach flavors. Vibrant quince and gooseberry notes fill the finish.	89	\$19
LETH Riesling Qualitätswein Trocken Wagram Felser Weinberge Lagenreserve 2007 A vibrant Riesling, with rich melon, pear and ripe apple.	88	\$19
WINZER KREMS Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Trocken Kremstal Ried Sandgrube 2007 Shows some power and heft behind its well-sculpted flavors.	88	\$10
ZANTHO Zweigelt Qualitätswein Trocken Burgenland 2007 Fruity and well-structured, with blueberry, plum and currant.	87	\$16
SCHLOSS HALBTURN Grüner Veltliner Qualitätswein Trocken Burgenland Velt. 1 2007 Medium-bodied, showing crisp flavors of fresh-cut peach.	85	\$12