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A Complex Red With an Austrian Accent

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EVERYBODY knows that wine is intimidating. The terminology and the connoisseurship can set even the most confident person atremble. But nothing scares wine consumers so much as an umlaut.

This diacritical mark, a mere two dots, is simply intended to communicate a particular pronunciation of the vowel it tops. Instead, it often signals to consumers that they must flee in terror to the nearest bottle of pinot grigio. Yet if they can surmount the obstacle of the umlaut, I believe they will find a lot to like in a glass of good blaifränkisch.

The blaifränkisch grape is grown mostly in Austria, where it makes a spicy red wine that can be graceful yet intense, complex yet tangy and refreshing. Blaifränkisch is made as well in Germany, where it is often called lemlberger, which, if you think about it, is really no better than blaifränkisch, umlaut or not.

Even five years ago, blaifränkisch wines were not easy to find in the United States, and the ones I found I didn't like much. Many producers seemed to be aiming for weight and power rather than finesse. The results were heavy-handed, stolid wines of little grace and a lot of oak.

Without a doubt, things have changed. The turning point for me came a couple of years ago, at a tasting of blaifränkisch wines that had been made with great care, from grapes grown in cooler sites and with more restraint in the cellar. These wines I loved, and I have been seeking them out ever since.

Blaifränkisch has an additional hurdle to overcome. As with Germany, Austria is perceived as a white wine country, not without good reason. Its grüner veltliners have become popular, proving that consumers can transcend the umlaut issue if they can achieve a sense of familiarity, while Austrian rieslings, of course, are superb.

Nonetheless, more of the country's reds have become available. Unlike five years ago, when we were unable to find sufficient wines for a blaifränkisch tasting, we had no trouble this summer putting together 20 bottles for the wine panel. Florence Fabricant and I were joined for the tasting by Leo Schneeman, sommelier at Kurt Gutenbrunner's Austrian restaurants, including Wallsé, Blaue Gans and Café Sabarsky, and Aviram Turgeman, the beverage director for the [Tour de France](#) restaurant group, which includes Nice Matin, Café d'Alsace and Marseille.

We all found a lot to like. Our favorites were beautifully balanced, with smoky, spicy fruit flavors, winning textures and a rippling acidity that made them seem juicy, savory and refreshing. We found a clear continuum from light-bodied, subtle wines to denser, richer wines that in the best examples betrayed no heaviness. Our favorites, especially among the lighter-bodied wines, showed a versatility with food that reminded me of a slightly peppery [pinot noir](#), while the denser versions were a little closer in richness and texture to syrah. Less successful wines showed their weight, and even with the beautiful flavors of the wines we found too many that were marred by overly apparent oak flavors.

I wondered whether one reason for the difference in the density of the wines was geographical, and Leo pointed out the wealth of soils and climates in this part of Austria. “The richness in the Mittelburgenland, you’ll never find that in Carnuntum to the north,” he said.

Let us pause for a moment to reach for an atlas, virtual or not, because it’s fascinating simply to locate Austria within Europe. Since Austria escaped the Iron Curtain, it’s often placed politically and geographically as part of Western Europe. Yet a look at the map reveals Austria nestled snugly in the heart of the continent, south of the Czech Republic, stretching east of southern Germany and north of the countries that once comprised Yugoslavia.

The Burgenland, where much blafränkisch is grown, is on the eastern edge of Austria, abutting Hungary. The Burgenland is subdivided into regions, with Neusiedlersee on the northeast, Mittelburgenland in the middle, naturally, and Südburgenland to the south. Carnuntum, another source of good blafränkisch, is a little south of Vienna. Apart from its own charms, blafränkisch offers a hint of the wealth of wines that may one day come flowing from Eastern Europe.

Our hands-down favorite was the 2008 Weninger Hochäcker from Mittelburgenland, a graceful, harmonious wine with bright, complex flavors of fruits, flowers and spices. At \$21, the Weninger was also our best value, although that honor could just as easily have gone to our No. 2 bottle, the 2009 Spitzerberg from Markowitsch in Carnuntum, a \$19 wine. If we judged the Weninger slightly higher, we still loved the savory, mineral-tinged Markowitsch, with its light-bodied texture that can be typical of the Carnuntum style.

Our No. 3 wine, the 2008 Wenzel from Neusiedlersee, was spicy and earthy with flavors that lingered long after the wine left the mouth, while No. 4, the 2009 Uwe Schiefer from Südburgenland, was a richer, denser wine that nonetheless was not heavy.

My favorite blafränkisch producer, Moric, is a star in this world and fetches prices beyond many of these wines. Yet, in our blind tasting I was mildly disappointed with Moric’s 2006 Neckenmarkter, at \$53, from Mittelburgenland, our No. 6, which seemed a bit disjointed and oaky, though its quality was nonetheless obvious. Forgive me for saying so, but one blind tasting — even my own — is not enough to change my mind about its wines. Another of my favorite producers, Muhr-van der Niepoort, was unfortunately not in our tasting. But I highly recommend its wines as exemplary examples of the lighter Carnuntum style.

The Moric was not the most expensive wine in the tasting. That was the 2007 Paul Achs Ungerberg at \$86. It struck us essentially as an oak bomb and did not make our top 10. We found the 2008 Achs Heideboden, a \$23 entry-level blaufränkisch, more congenial. It was our No. 9 wine.

Most of these wines seem reasonably priced, and they are certainly worth exploring. Grüner veltliner made it over the umlaut barrier. It may be time for blaufränkisch to do the same.

Tasting Report

BEST VALUE

Weninger Mittelburgenland, \$21, *** ½

Blaufränkisch Hochäcker 2008

Graceful and harmonious with bright aromas and complex, lingering flavors of fruit, flowers and spices. (A Monika Caha Selection/Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)

Markowitsch Carnuntum, \$19, ***

Blaufränkisch Spitzerberg 2009

Light-bodied and savory with lovely flavors of berries and minerals. (Weygandt-Metzler Importing, Unionville, Pa.)

Wenzel Neusiedlersee, \$25, ***

Blaufränkisch 2008

Complex and textured with long, lingering flavors of ripe berries, spices and earth. (Winemonger, San Anselmo, Calif.)

Uwe Schiefer, \$30, ** ½

Südburgenland Blaufränkisch 2009

Rich and dense but not heavy, with balanced berry and mineral flavors. (Weygandt-Metzler Importing)

Birgit Braunstein Burgenland, \$15, ** ½

Blaufränkisch Heide 2008

Light-bodied, spicy, minerally and fresh, yet a bit tannic. (Capshaw Wine Merchants, New York)

Moric Mittelburgenland, \$53, ** ½

Blaufränkisch Neckenmarkter 2006

Great spicy, floral mineral flavors, but oak flavors are apparent. (Winemonger)

Glatzer Carnuntum, \$19, ** ½

Blaufränkisch 2008

Plenty of smoky, dark fruit flavors but a tad oaky as well. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Iby Mittelburgenland, \$16, ** ½

Blaufränkisch Classic 2009

Earthy, pleasing flavors of berries and minerals with a touch of oak and earth. (Domaine Select Wine Estates, New York)

Paul Achs Burgenland, \$23, **

Blaufränkisch Heideboden 2008

Tart fruit flavors, spicy; a bit tannic and closed. (Winebow, New York)

Nittnaus Burgenland, \$27, **

Blaufränkisch Kalk und Schiefer 2008

Dark, with earthy fruit flavors and a touch of oak. (A Monika Caha Selection/Frederick Wildman & Sons)