

Newsletter

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This summer's trip was well off the beaten wine path, so to speak, taking in Hungary and Austria as well as a sightseeing detour to Krakow in Poland. As has become the norm I travelled with my old university friend Mike Bolt. He was keen to take in some of Eastern Europe's cultural highlights so although I was anxious to get stuck into some tasting I agreed to see a few cathedrals and museums first. Krakow is a world heritage site and apart from its magnificent square is best known as Pope John Paul's hometown and the nearest city to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. The city was largely spared from the ravages of World War II and is now a bustling and appealing venue for a couple of days of sightseeing.

Budapest on the other hand did take a beating in 1944 as Russian and German forces faced off across the Danube river. Some lovely old buildings and streets survive, especially on the Buda side of the river but in retrospect I wish we had headed to Prague instead. Having just agreed to represent the Vega Sicilia stable of wineries (Vega Sicilia, Alion, Valbuena and Pintia, all in Spain) I was tempted to visit their Tokaji outpost called Oremus but the five-hour journey from Budapest made this impossible. We did, however, manage to taste Oremus' dry white offering called 'Mandolas' and the 2006 vintage is available.

The trip from Budapest to Vienna was supposed to be accomplished by hydrofoil taking in many of the beautiful villages along the Danube. Sadly a booking cock-up meant the train had to be used, perhaps unfairly colouring my Hungarian experience.

From Vienna I headed on to Langenlois in the Kamptal area about an hour east of Vienna by car. Having no hotel booked I called Weingut Bründlmayer for a recommendation and duly booked into Loisium Hotel (www.loisiumhotel.at). Strikingly modern but extremely comfortable it turned out to be a superb base and I highly recommend it for anyone visiting the Wachau or Kamptal wine regions. As my first appointments were the next day I took the opportunity to visit the Vinotek, Ursin Haus, in Langenlois where a tasting was proposed - sixty different wines for ten euros! An hour later, despite spitting conscientiously, I staggered out into the evening air with my notes. Because the tasting represented such a large cross-section of producers and inevitably contained mostly their lower price offerings I was unprepared for what was to come qualitatively the next day.

I started at Bründlmayer, considered by many critics as the top address in the Kamptal region. I was met by Barbara Resch who gave me a tour of their vineyards and cellar before we settled down to taste through their range.

Most wineries in the region do a sparkling wine and Bründlmayer actually has two, a regular Brut and a Brut Rosé, the latter dry with delicate bubbles. We then moved to the Gruner Veltliners rising through the vineyard hierarchy from the Terrassen, Loiser Berg, Katerberg and Alte Reben all from the 2007 vintage. These were all very good but better still were the Rieslings with the Lyra 2007 being a knock out.

I was left impressed and delighted that the 2007 vintage was showing so well.

Next stop was Schloss Gobelsburg where I met with winemaker/owner Michael Moosbrugger. Michael had fished my request for a visit out of his junk mail a month earlier in what turned out to be a stroke of good fortune for me.

Schloss Gobelsburg is an old abbey on the outskirts of Langenlois. Up until the mid-nineteen nineties the monks had made the wine from grapes grown in some of the greatest vineyard sites in the region. Tasting through his selection of 2007 whites I was struck by the purity and elegance of his wines, especially the Gruner Veltliners. Michael took me through the different vineyard cuveés, from Steinsetz to Lamm, and it was one of those days when I thought the first wine was excellent and yet the others that followed kept getting better! The Rieslings were just as impressive with the Alte Reben (Old Vines) being quite superb.

Michael told me that Riesling preferred the hillside locations where there was less soil and more rock while Gruner Veltliner thrived at the foot of the hills, where the soil, washed down over the years, was deeper and richer.

Schloss Gobelsburg also produces a St. Laurent, an Austrian variant in Pinot Noir. The 2006 vintage of this was ripe with violets and red and black fruit notes.

Rather than review all of the wines individually I will be posting online a copy of the Falstaff guide's reviews. This publication is considered the 'bible' of Austrian wine commentary and will also give you more background information on Schloss Gobelsburg and the producers that follow.

Having had the opportunity to compare the wines from Bründlmayer and Schloss Gobelsburg I concluded that the latter's were as compelling and better value for money. Perhaps in the future I will bring in the Bründlmayer wines but for now I hope that you will enjoy the brilliant offerings from Schloss Gobelsburg.

After a tour through the Wachau and its photogenic hillside vineyards it was on to Burgenland, a relatively flat region near the border with Hungary. The area has a warm microclimate and has proved to be promising for a number of red varieties including St. Laurent, Pinot Noir, Zweigelt and Blaufrankirsh. Armed with my Falstaff guide I decided to visit two of the top producers, namely Heinrich and Umathum.

Weingut Umathum is located near the village of Frauenkirchen. The owner and wine maker Pepi Umathum could not have been nicer and after a tour of the cellars we tasted through his selection. The highlights were a beautifully pale pink rosé 2007 and a number of older reds from specific vineyard sites. These showed considerable depth and character and although not inexpensive indicate the potential of wines from this region.

I had earlier tried various Heinrich wines at the local Vinotek and had been very impressed. The winery is brand new and backs onto some of the best vineyards in the region. Sadly a few days before my arrival a hailstorm had severely damaged swathes of his vines so the crop in 2008 will be much more problematic than normal. A tasting confirmed the quality of his complete range with the 2006 vintage, in particular, standing out. In the end I decided to purchase some of his St. Laurent, Zweigelt and Blaufrankirsh all of which show a lovely fresh balance between fruit, acidity and structure.

My last visit in Austria was to Wohlmuth in Styria, about sixty kilometres south of Graz. On the way down I stayed one night in Graz and was pleased I did as the centre was quite delightful with many old well-preserved buildings and a thriving restaurant scene. The liveliest area was the so-called 'Bermuda Triangle' home to many outdoor restaurants and bars.

I had been introduced to Wohlmuth several years ago by Franz Wohlmuth, executive chef at the Bank of Bermuda, and have enjoyed representing their well-priced selection of whites from Styria and reds from Neckenmarkt, Burgenland.

I met with Gerhard Wohlmuth Jr. and was taken for a tour of their best vineyards including the famous Steinriegel, planted on steep slopes in a huge south-facing bowl. As we went through the tasting, starting with the local favourite Gelber Muskateller, I could not help but be impressed by the elegance and purity of all of the wines. The chardonnay and pinot gris were outstanding and I could not find anything that I did not really like. As their prices are incredibly reasonable for the quality I ended up ordering a significant amount of wine. Gerhard also suggested I visit a local pumpkin seed oil producer (Hartlieb – see website www.hartlieb.at) as this is a local specialty, and after doing so ended up ordering a small quantity to supplement my olive oils from Spain.

To introduce people to the wines of Austria I have put together two sampler cases (see below) showcasing the best of this wonderful region. Information on the wines will be included.

Although I did not get to France this year I have taken on a new house, namely Chateau du Seuil. This domaine is located in the Graves region of Bordeaux and are producing some lovely sauvignon blanc/semillion blends as well as a merlot dominated red cuvee. I have purchased good stocks of the 2006 white and 2004/2005 red and highly recommend them.

In other news I have restocked Vincent Pinard's 2007 Sancerres, and these will take the place of Alphonse Mellot's wines which was not ordered this year due to price increases. On a sad note Didier Dagueneau died last month in a microlighting accident. What will happen to his wines remains to be seen.

Finally I am pleased to announce that I should have an updated website in the new year - thanks, Martin! This should allow me to keep the wine list current and offer various search options. I will let you know when it becomes 'live'.

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Austrian Sampler (12 bottles)

1. Schloss Gobelsburg Brut Reserve NV
2. Wohlmuth Gelber Muskateller 'Steinriegel' 2007
3. Schloss Gobelsburg Gruner Veltliner 'Steinsetz' 2007
4. Wohlmuth Pinot Gris 'Gola' 2007
5. Wohlmuth Sauvignon Blanc 2007
6. Schloss Gobelsburg Riesling 'Zobinger Heiligenstein' 2007
7. Wohlmuth Chardonnay 'Gola' 2007
8. Umathum 'Rosa' (Rosé) 2007
9. Heinrich Blaufrankisch 2006
10. Heinrich St. Laurent 2006
11. Schloss Gobelsburg St. Laurent 'Haidegrund' 2006
12. Wohlmuth 'Aristos' 2006 (\$220)

Best of Austrian Sampler (6 bottles + oil)

1. Schloss Gobelsburg Gruner Veltliner 'Lamm' 2007
2. Schloss Gobelsburg Riesling 'Alte Reben' 2007
3. Umathum Pinot Noir 'Unter der Terrassen' 2006
4. Heinrich 'Pannobile' 2006
5. Umathum Blaufrankisch 'Kirshgarten' 2004
6. Schloss Gobelsburg Eiswein 2007 (375 ml)
- + Hartlieb Pumpkin Seed Oil (250 ml) (\$210)