

# Austria's new age

Many European producers are increasingly pulling away from the rules imposed by appellations, yet Austria is embracing a growing number of DACs. **Sarah Jane Evans MW** finds out why



Photograph: Herbert Lehmann



At a time when many of Europe's winemakers are breaking free of the straitjacket of appellation rules, who would think it was a good idea to introduce them? When the 'SuperTuscans', among others, have proved that it's possible to enjoy a fine reputation outside the system, which country would want to set one up? The answer is Austria. In 2003, it introduced its first DAC (the Austrian version of AC and DOC) and, in the decade since then, it has created seven further DACs, with plans to double that number.

**Below: Leithaberg DAC in Burgenland produces elegant and spicy wines. Both red and white grapes are permitted**

Why start now, when the significant producers in Europe started creating appellations more than 70 years ago? The reason for doing it is much the same: to protect the origin and guarantee a standard of quality for the wine.

It's helpful to start with a little history. There were two triggers to action. The first was in 1985, when it was revealed that certain wines had been adulterated with diethylene glycol. This 'antifreeze' scandal forced Austria's wine industry to take rapid steps to renew itself, and part of this recovery resulted in lessening the focus on regionality, including removing town names. So this more recent desire to create DACs, and to emphasise terroir and typicity, was an inevitable reaction. The second trigger was the realisation that





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Austria needed to take action to defend the origin of its wines. Christian Zechmeister, marketing director for Burgenland wines, remembers, 'cheap Grüner Veltliners being sold in supermarkets, made from Hungarian grapes'. Though not labelled as Austrian, many consumers would automatically associate Gruner with Austria.

The first step was to guarantee the national identity – hence the red-and-white capsule bottle top (pictured opposite). The appellation was the second step in building defences. It was perhaps unfortunate that there was initially just one DAC region, Weinviertel, the large zone of Grüner Veltliner production north-west of Vienna. Until the Mittelburgenland DAC was created three years later, the concept of DAC was somehow misunderstood by many.

Another difficulty was that the Weinviertel wines back then didn't measure up in quality against the Grüners of any regions further west along the Danube. Vienna-based wine consultant Jason Turner puts it kindly when he says: 'The DAC was probably the best thing to happen to Weinviertel – it increased the reputation, quality and consistency of style of the wines.'

There was an added complication, though. At the outset, many producers chose not to show the grape variety on the label. Consumers were just supposed to know that Weinviertel DAC meant Grüner Veltliner. The requirement has, sensibly, now been relaxed. When international sommeliers

are doing such good marketing for 'Grooner' and 'Groovy' wines, surely it is better to join them rather than insist on imposing 'Weinviertel'.

Looking back on the decade since DACs were first introduced, the director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, Willi Klinger, reflects that there was another way the situation could have been handled. With his tongue not entirely in his cheek, he says: 'If I was Napoleon, I would have implemented the DACs all at once. Then we could have tweaked the details later to reflect developments in knowledge and changes in climate.' Klinger, surely

Europe's most dynamic generic wine marketer, formerly worked for Angelo Gaja, that other wine-marketing star. He was able to observe the confusion of multiple DOCs and DOCGs in Italy, and is determined that Austria will follow a simpler path, with no more than 16 DACs.

Members of the newer DACs have also had time to learn from their country's early mistakes. Biochemist Silvia Prieler is one of the founders of Leithaberg DAC, which permits a number of varieties. She supports the DAC concept for democratic reasons. While Austria is famous for individual winemakers and single vineyards, she believes that in the long term 'our region must be famous, not just the winemaker'. Her colleague, Erwin Tinhof, adds that for smaller, lesser-known producers, another plus is that they receive advice on pricing DAC wines –



**Above: Silvia Prieler, pictured here with her brother Georg, is one of the founders of Leithaberg DAC. Left: Fred Loimer is one of the leading wine-industry figures in Kamptal and an active participant in DAC issues**



*'The DAC was probably the best thing to happen to the Weinviertel region'*

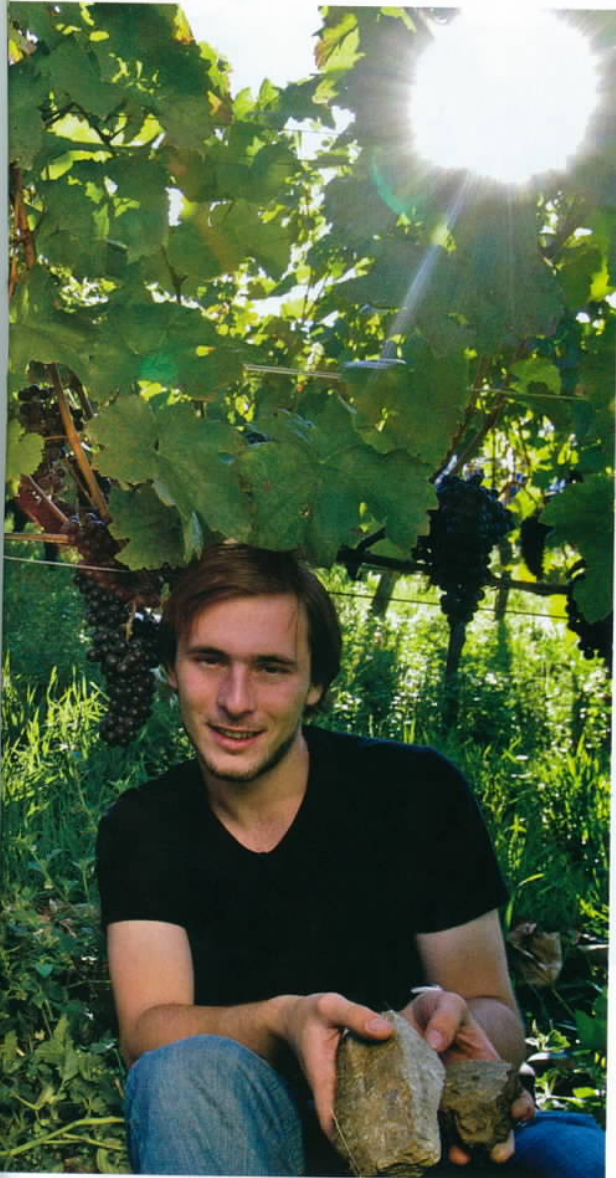
Jason Turner

encouraging the inexperienced grower to be ambitious.

Over in Kremstal, in the city-centre winery of Stadt Krems, Franz-Josef Gansberger isn't afraid to say he is a 'fan' of DACs. 'Nobody used to put Kremstal on the front label, but now we're there – between the big guns of Wachau and Kamptal.' Zechmeister adds: 'In the medium and long term, the DAC will be important internationally. For instance, sommeliers in the USA need to be able to tell a story about the wine and this way they can say, "this is a typical wine from this appellation".'

Zechmeister's remit at Burgenland is strongly focused on reds. Of the four DACs, three are for red varieties only. Blaufränkisch features in all three; each clearly enables him to tell a different story of terroir and style. Eisenberg DAC, for instance, lies next to Mittelburgenland DAC, but





the iron-rich soils of the Eisenberg ('iron mountain') after which the district is named lend a mineral purity.

Despite his enthusiasm, the system has its critics. Take UK wine merchant Noel Young, who represents Fritz Wieninger, Kurt Angerer and the Kracher estate. He is blunt: 'It may work in Austria, but turning Kamptal into Kamptal DAC does not make any difference in the UK.' He also articulates the global concern about using tasting panels to enforce typicity: 'Who is going to dictate a style? I don't think that one way is the only way.'

Klinger is alert to the problems of regulations and inward-looking tasting panels. He uses Chablis as a reference: 'Every Master of Wine student should be able to spot it in a blind tasting, but we celebrate the fact that some wines are fermented in stainless steel, others in oak, and we love the diversity.'

One of the leading figures in Kamptal, Fred Loimer, is actively involved in DAC issues, and one of his solutions for the tasting panels is to have more retasting of wines which fail first time or divide opinion. Yet he recognises that every system has rules which can trap even the best. >



## DAC in a nutshell

### What is DAC?

Austria's version of the appellation system, the equivalent of France's AC/AOP. DAC stands for the Latin, *Districtus Austriae Controllatus*.

### How many DACs are there?

Currently eight (see p11). There is the potential to grow the number to 16, but the intention is to keep the total eventual number no higher.

### Are there any new DACs coming soon?

A new DAC has, in fact, just been announced – Neusiedlersee (see 'What's New in Austria', p2) – which includes the group of renowned red wine producers known as Pannobile. This DAC focuses on Zweigelt: 85% minimum for the classic (younger) wine, a minimum 60% blend for the reserve. There are no specific plans for further DACs, but Thermenregion and the Gemischter Satz wines of Vienna would be logical choices.

### When did DACs start?

In 2003, with Weinviertel, northwest of Vienna. This DAC is for Grüner Veltliner only. If you buy Weinviertel DAC wine, you're buying Grüner.

### Is the DAC label only for white wines?

No, it's for reds too – in the Burgenland region, including the new Neusiedlersee DAC.

### What does DAC guarantee?

That the wine is a quality wine, with approved typicity. Each DAC has its own rules about levels of botrytis and alcohol, oak usage and ageing.

### What is the approval system?

A panel of producers and members of the wine trade tastes the wines blind. Four or five out of six of them have to agree that a wine is typical.

### Does every grower make DAC wines?

There are many wines made in Austria that fall outside the DAC geographical areas. There are also a number of top-quality growers working inside a DAC area who choose not to use the letters.

### What if a producer wants to use a different variety from the ones allowed in the DAC?

An Eisenberg, Mittelburgenland, Neusiedlersee or Leithaberg DAC producer would label the wine as Burgenland; a wine from Kamptal, Kremstal, Traisental or Weinviertel would still qualify as quality wine, but would take the more generic Niederösterreich label.

### What about the sweet wines?

All DAC wines are dry, under 6g/l residual sugar for the classic Weinviertel style, and up to 9g/l for reserve wines. There is a case for creating a DAC for the western part of Lake Neusiedel, for the Ruster Ausbruch wines, and another for the eastern part, around Illmitz.

### What is the benefit for the consumer?

The DAC label guarantees a certain typicity from a specific region. The classic wines are fruit-driven and medium-bodied in style. The reserve wines are more full-bodied, with potential for ageing.

### What is the benefit for the producers?

In established regions, where individual producers are already known, it's less important. Whereas for Eisenberg, which became a red-wine DAC in 2010, the difference was immediate. Many producers, especially of Blaufränkisch, which has no international profile, see DAC as a shortcut to quality recognition.





## Austria's most widely planted grape varieties

Top six whites	Planted	% of total
Grüner Veltliner	13,514ha	29.4%
Welschriesling	3,597ha	7.8%
Müller Thurgau	2,102ha	4.65%
Weissburgunder	1,995ha	4.3%
Riesling	1,863ha	4.1%
Chardonnay	1,431ha	3.1%
Top six reds	Planted	% of total
Zweigelt	6,412ha	13.9%
Blafränkisch	3,228ha	7%
Blauer Portugieser	1,621 ha	3.5%
Blauburger	897ha	2%
St Laurent	775ha	1.7%
Pinot Noir	646ha	1.4%

*'In 25 years' time, our children will order a Leithaberg DAC in the same way that we order a Brunello now'*

**Erwin Tinhof**

His colleague, biodynamic producer Hannes Hirsch, the Falstaff Guide's 2011 Winemaker of the Year, has a powerful Riesling with 9.5g/l residual sugar – 0.5g/l above the permitted level for reserve wines. In many circumstances, 9.5g/l would taste sweet, but the level of acidity is so high in this wine that the overall effect is dry. Rules are rules, though, and this exceptional wine from a single vineyard doesn't qualify for the DAC.

For the same reason, a top producer from, say, Kamptal who makes an exceptional sweet wine, such as an Eiswein or a Trockenbeerenauslese, can't put DAC on the label – Kamptal DAC is for dry wines only, as this is what the region is famous for, and the DAC system is all about typicity. Instead the producer would have to rely on its own reputation to sell the wine.

A further issue for growers is that the DAC defines release dates, and growers believe this fuels consumer desire for the newest vintage. As Traisental's Markus Huber observes: 'Single-vineyard wines aren't made to be drunk young, and yet no one is interested in buying last year's vintage once the new vintage is out.'

Overall, however, Turner believes the judgment on Austria's appellation system has to be favourable. Naturally it will take time before a DAC wine is ordered with the same confidence as a Rioja or a Champagne, but Tinhof, for one, is convinced that time will come: 'In 25 years' time,' he says, 'our children will order a Leithaberg DAC in the same way that we order a Brunello now.' **D**





Above: Traisental's Markus Huber grows 50% of the region's Riesling  
Left: Kamptal DAC is home to many renowned producers and single vineyards

## The eight DACs...

### (Niederösterreich)

#### **Kremstal DAC (2,243 ha)**

Grüner Veltliner, Riesling

Moving from west to east, primary rock gives way to loess (wind-blown silt). The former makes for intense, mineral wines, while the latter is ideal for opulent Grüners. DAC Reserve permits subtle botrytis and oak influences.

**Launched from 2007 vintage**

#### **Kamptal DAC (3,802ha)**

Grüner Veltliner, Riesling

There are so many renowned producers and single vineyards here, they hardly need a DAC to market them. Soils are mixed – from loess and gravel to volcanic, most famously Heiligenstein. DAC Reserve permits subtle botrytis and oak influences.

**Launched from 2008 vintage**

#### **Traisental DAC (790ha)**

Grüner Veltliner, Riesling

The chalk and gravel terraces of Traisental give a distinctly structured character, with brisk acidity, to the wines. Made for long ageing, no botrytis or oak influences are permitted.

**Launched from 2006 vintage**

#### **Weinviertel DAC (13,356 ha)**

Grüner Veltliner

Austria's first DAC. An extensive region with varied soils. In general, the Grüners are rounded, with peach fruit, and white and green pepper notes. Reserve styles are full-bodied and riper, some with oak influence.

**Launched from 2003 vintage**

### (Burgenland)

#### **Neusiedlersee DAC (7,615ha)**

Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch, St Laurent, Pinot Noir

The newest DAC, for reds only, grown on varied soils. Wines have red cherry notes with silky tannins. Two styles are made: young and fresh; or fuller and deeper.

**Launched from 2011 vintage**

#### **Leithaberg DAC (3,576ha)**

White: Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Chardonnay, Neuburger (Roter Veltliner x Sylvaner), Grüner Veltliner  
Red: Blaufränkisch

Terroir profile of primary rock, chalk and lime results in elegant, spicy wines. Reds must be aged in oak and released a minimum of two years after harvest.

**Launched with reds from 2008 vintage, whites from 2009**

#### **Mittelburgenland DAC (2,117ha)**

Blafränkisch

For red wines only. DAC wines are bright and juicy, with red cherry fruit and spicy notes when young, grown on deep loamy soils. Reserve wines are bigger styles, often with oak influence.

**Launched from 2005 vintage**

#### **Eisenberg DAC (498ha)**

Blafränkisch

For red wines only. While Mittelburgenland's Blafränkisch is spicy, round, and full-bodied, Eisenberg's is structured and mineral, with more precise fruit. The reserve has depth from oak ageing.

**DAC classic from 2009 vintage, DAC reserve from 2008**

## ...and beyond

### Niederösterreich (non DAC)

#### **Wachau (1,350ha)**

Wachau introduced its own quality categories for dry wines in the 1980s: Steinfeder (light), Federspiel (classic) and Smaragd (full, powerful), with the focus on Grüner Veltliner and Riesling.

#### **Wagram (2451ha)**

Formerly known as Donauland, it focuses on Grüner Veltliner and Roter Veltliner.

#### **Carnuntum (910ha)**

Focuses on red grapes, Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch.

#### **Thermenregion (2,196ha)**

Produces whites in the north (Zierfandler, Rotgipfler) and reds in the south (St Laurent, Pinot Noir).

### Steiermark (4,240ha) (non DAC)

Subject to sub-region, it focuses on Morillon (Chardonnay), Schilcher, Weissburgunder, Sauvignon Blanc and Muskateller.

### Vienna (612ha) (non DAC)

Whites and reds. Wiener Gemischter Satz, meaning 'field blend' or 'mixed planting', is Vienna's traditional white and is a blend of several varieties. **SJE**

For Sarah Jane Evans' top DAC wines to try, visit [www.decanter.com/austriadac](http://www.decanter.com/austriadac)