

AUSTRIA 2005s: By The Skin of Their Grapes

For the growers around Krems - that is to say in all of Austria's important Riesling and Grüner Veltliner growing regions - 2005 is the vintage that almost wasn't. A small crop „enjoyed“ - from a plant's perspective - a moderately cool and well-watered summer, culminating in extensive August and September rains. In this year, vintners who have drip irrigation to support their farming of the best stony, terraced sites never had to activate their drip lines. „There was stress not for the vines,“ explained Toni Bodenstein of Weingut Prager, „but for the vintners. We all thought in the middle of September that we would be lucky to harvest Federspiel this year.“ As Ludwig Neumayer in the Traisental south of Krems put it, „You had to have a pretty stable personality to stand up to this vintage.“ „And then,“ continued Bodenstein „came a golden October and November.“ „An October more beautiful than any in recent memory, with brilliant sunshine from morning ‚til evening for the entire harvest“ was how Leo Alzinger Jr. of the Wachau described it. „We didn't even have the ground fog that we usually get.“ The growers had been granted more than a stay of execution. They got a six week window from the beginning of October until the first hard frosts. That said, not all growers were in a position - or were willing - to risk late harvesting, at least not for Riesling. The effects of rot were especially felt in that varietal. The desire to mitigate botrytis and stem rot in Riesling resulted in many growers picking it at the same time as or even ahead of Grüner Veltliner, a rare occurrence in the recollection of every grower with whom I discussed this phenomenon, and one that could scarcely be conducive to optimizing Riesling's notoriously late acquisition of phenolic depth. Nevertheless, while it seems evident to me that 2005 favors Grüner Veltliner over Riesling, some outstanding results were also achieved with that varietal and a few vintners, notably Lucas Pichler, had the results to support a contention that it was „hard to make the call“ between success with these two grapes. The Kamptal and Kremstal suffered less rain than the Wachau and had correspondingly a slight advantage with Riesling, at least going into October.

Two thousand five is a small crop, and not just on account of the culling of botrytized bunches. „Nature always tries to compensate,“ Alzinger Sr. reminded me, „so the set was modest after the large crop of 2004,“ itself a reaction to the heat and drought of 2003. This small crop set was a godsend in retrospect. And when full ripeness came in October and November, it was by no means always accompanied by vestiges of botrytis. „We also had completely healthy bunches,“ reports Bodenstein, „whose berries simply began to dehydrate. I produced for the first time in my career a wine with over forty grams of sugar-free dry extract.“

Many a more problematic Riesling or Grüner Veltliner in this vintage can be compared with the wines of 1998: amazingly dense, but rough in phenolics and at times strident in their reflection of botrytis. But the better wines (blessedly often) lean toward the sharply-focused, high acid, mineral intense character of 2002. For the sake of balance both in alcohol and acidity, many growers chose - as in 2002 - to leave behind a bit more residual sugar. It might seem paradoxical that the best wines of this vintage possess finesse, clarity and dynamic interplay of flavors, while others express their extract - a legacy of well-watered days of summer and dehydrated fruit in fall - in a massive, static manner. But veteran vintner Emmerich Knoll suggested a connection. „Often when the weather is not so good as the harvest is about to begin and afterwards turns good, you get more elegance and finesse in the wines.“ Their narrow escape from disaster forms the personality of the best 2005s. In the precariousness of the pellicule, you could say, lies precisely the possibility for complexity and finesse. The rigors to which the grape skins were subjected built character.

In Burgenland, 2005 brought enormous challenges as well as opportunities. Challenging was the effect of rain and rot on early-ripening or sensitive reds such as Zweigelt and Pinot Noir, whereas Blaufränkisch was more easily able to achieve phenolic ripeness. The opportunity was present for nobly sweet wines of the sort for which the area around the Neusiedlersee is internationally

best-known. But it is too early to assess those results. In this year's report, I have concentrated on 2004, a vintage for reds such as one seldom encounters in Burgenland, particularly in recent times: phenolic maturity went ahead of sugar accretion, making possible wines of complexity and ripeness at lower than usual levels of alcohol. I have also utilized this year's report to catch readers up on some of Burgenland's successes from previous vintages, since I visit most of the growers there only every other or every third year.

All of the 2005 Austrian wines - with the exception of a few collections sent to me as samples - were tasted in the course of my June visits to nearly fifty estates. For consistency, I have designated all vineyards without preceding them with the name of their village or the word „Ried“ (vineyard) although one or both of these may appear on the label. Those seeking additional information on many of the estates canvassed below, as well as on my approach to rating the wines, are encouraged to consult my coverage in Issue 160.

NOTE: The wines of Alois Kracher will be covered separately in a future issue, since his collection of 2004 Trockenbeerenauslesen had not yet been bottled when I visited, and for wines of this significance, an assessment from barrel seemed to both him and me insufficient. -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Gruner Veltliner Stockkultur

Rating: 95 points

Producer: Prager

From: Austria

Variety: Gruner Veltliner (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost:

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

The 2005 Gruner Veltliner Achleiten Stockkultur, named for the traditional propagation of vines low to the ground and on a single stake, reflects the precocious ripeness, susceptibility to botrytis, minuscule yields, and enormous genetic variety characteristic of a single ancient parcel Bodenstein acquired several years ago. (In fact, the more botrytized fruit from his younger vines in the Achleiten were directed to this bottling as well.) Twenty-six grams of residual sugar - while not especially obvious in its effect due to its sheer density and Mosel Riesling-like acidity - prevent this opulent, rich, honeyed wine from being labeled as „Smaragd.“ For all of its fullness, creaminess, and sheer ripeness, it displays remarkable clarity and lift, as well as subtle herbal, floral, and mineral notes and a remarkable degree of interplay. In short, it dramatically illustrates its great vineyard origins as well as the unique heritage of its ancient vines. The finish is transcendently long and evocative. How can something this nearly over the top evince more Achleiten typicity than its largely botrytis-free Smaragd counterpart? Perhaps its record-breaking forty-two grams of sugar-free dry extract are trying to tell us something. They certainly raise an eyebrow. The wine itself will raise the hair on the back of your head. My guess is it will also make old bones and if you are trying to latch on to some of it, all I can say is „break a leg!“ Like his Gruner Veltliner - and reflecting the effects of the viticultural wild card that is botrytis, Bodenstein's results with Riesling also varied widely in their degree of success, with the best being superb.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Gruner Veltliner Federspiel Hinter Der Burg

Rating: 89 points

Producer: Prager

From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria

Variety: Gruner Veltliner (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost: \$22.00

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

With a few exceptions, Toni Bodenstein's 2005 wines finished their fermentations early in the new year, but he bottled them later than he ever has, in May. White pepper, lentil, and iris scent his 2005 Gruner Veltliner Federspiel Hinter der Burg, a wine with lovely balance, delicacy, and a mouthcoating and white pepper-dusted palate impression. Refined in finish, it evinces subtle beet root and lentil beneath a carpet of flowers.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Gruner Veltliner Smaragd Weissenkirchen Weitenberg

Rating: 87 points

Producer: Prager

From: Weissenkirchen, Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria

Variety: Gruner Veltliner (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost: \$36.00

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

A 2005 Gruner Veltliner Smaragd Weitenberg vaults out of the delicate range and into rich, full, 13.5% alcohol territory. Dried yellow plum laced with honey, green herbs, and brown spices dominate the aromatic and gustatory proceedings, and an oily cling accompanies bittersweet finishing flavors that hint at this wine's brush with botrytis. The corresponding 2005 Gruner Veltliner Smaragd from Zwerithaler -a site relatively water-retentive by the stony standards of Wachau terraces - betrayed its botrytis with bitterness and fungal flavors.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Gruner Veltliner Smaragd Achleiten

Rating: 90 points

Producer: Prager

From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria

Variety: Riesling (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost: \$45.00

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

Bodenstein was largely able to cull out botrytis from his picking for a 2005 Gruner Veltliner Smaragd Achleiten and thereby obtained a rich, honeyed, estrous, peachy set of flavors and aromas free of blemish, opulent, but not at all exaggerated. White peach, honey, nut oils, and wet stone inform a long, rich, just faintly warm and smoky finish. Will embryonic botrytis character and relatively high alcohol trip this up as it matures? Possibly, but it is a very impressive drink today.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Riesling Federspiel Steinriegl

Rating: 91 points

Producer: Prager

From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria

Variety: Riesling (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost: \$28.00

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

The 2005 Riesling Federspiel Steinriegel - not harvested until November - smells of dried herbs and coffee, then comes onto the palate with a stone soup brothy mineral richness worthy of a premier cru Chablis and finishes with a mineral rich display of wet stone, salts, and herb and meat broth. Both its alcohol and residual sugar push the limits set for the category „Federspiel.“ Think of this outstanding value as a relatively compact, dramatically mineral-dominated and lower-alcohol Smaragd that will stir the pot with practically whatever you're cooking.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Riesling Smaragd Achleiten

Rating: 92 points

Producer: Prager

From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria

Variety: Riesling (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost: \$48.00

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

Bodenstein's 2005 Riesling Smaragd Achleiten displays clarity and refinement of flavors that transcend what is missing from so many 2005 Austrian Rieslings. Its aromatic and palate interplay of white peach, wet stones, and subtle herbs and flowers practically defines Riesling from this site. A glossy, creamy-rich texture and smoky note nod in the direction of botrytis, but that in no way keeps the wine from displaying juicy length, with accenting notes of bitter-sweet peach kernel, almond, and fine mineral nuances. As expressive as this is today, Bodenstein says it was the longest to ferment and was quite shut down at one point.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Riesling Smaragd Hollerin

Rating: 87 points

Producer: Prager

From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria

Variety: Riesling (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost: \$42.00

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

Whereas this year's undeniably concentrated Riesling from the Kaiserberg is somewhat constricted by botrytis, the 2005 Riesling Smaragd Hollerin expresses a creamy texture and honied richness that represent a more positive side of that fungus. That near nobility of rot is allied to a site-typical black currant character. Nor is this undeniably rich wine without some lip-smacking notes of salty minerality. Still, a bit less botrytis would probably have allowed more clarity and fruitfulness in the finish.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Riesling Smaragd Klaus**Rating: 91 points****Producer: Prager****From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria****Variety: Riesling (a medium dry white table wine)****Estimated Cost: \$48.00****Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)**

This formidable Riesling needs time. The 2005 Riesling Klaus, at more than twenty grams of residual sugar, transcends the boundaries of Smaragd, although it would be deceptive from a stylistic standpoint to label it as „Auslese.“ You couldn't harvest all of the vineyards that were coming ripe together, Bodenstein explains, and by the time he and his team got to picking Klaus, the fruit was far gone in ripeness. Smoky and nutty in aroma, rich and creamy in texture with marzipan, honey, and poppy seed filling its yeasty, buttery, pastry-like envelope, this opulent entry displays considerable exotic spice and just a hint of warmth in its formidably long finish. The underlying mineral character of this great site begins to emerge as the wine opens in the glass, even as the sheer intensity of fruit, too, seems to grow. This should be fascinating to follow, although it might betray its alcohol more with time. Bodenstein says it is very much like the corresponding 1990, and that wine proved to be extraordinary when opened up alongside.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Riesling Smaragd Steinriegl**Rating: 87 points****Producer: Prager****From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria****Variety: Riesling (a dry white table wine)****Estimated Cost: \$45.00****Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)**

The 2005 Riesling Smaragd Steinriegl adds distinct cherry-almond and peach pit notes to the basic brothy mineral richness of its Federspiel counterpart, thus even more strikingly reminding me of Chablis. It finishes with impressive minerality but nowhere near the clarity and purity of the Federspiel.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht

2005 Prager Riesling Smaragd Wachstum Bodenstern

Rating: 90 points

Producer: Prager

From: Wachau, Niederösterreich, Austria

Variety: Riesling (a dry white table wine)

Estimated Cost: \$50.00

Source: Wine Advocate #166 (Aug 2006)

Harvested at the end of the second week in November from vines planted in 1990 in the nose bleed elevations of the Hinterseiber vineyard, the 2005 Riesling Smaragd Wachstum Toni Bodenstern did not succumb to botrytis. Ample ventilation, plus the fact that ripeness always comes late here and the fruit stayed firm, and high acid through the rain staved-off rot. Piquantly-scented and flavored with lime zest, toasted nut oils, and honey, this displays a striking combination of thickness, richness, opulence and density with a dynamic interplay of fruit and mineral, and a lively, not entirely integrated acidity. There is a note of finishing bitterness, more from sheer concentration than from botrytis.

Also recommended: 2005 Riesling Smaragd Kaiserberg (\$42.00; 86).

Importer: Vin Divino, Chicago, IL; tel. (773) 334-6700 -David Schildknecht
