

Parker Wine Report Austria 2004

Austria 2004: The Pay-Off for Patience










If no other growing regions in the world can it be said with more truth than about those of Austria that „it ain't over ,til it's over.“ The periodically cool and - due to intermittent rain - exceedingly tricky and frustrating growing season of 2004 could only be turned into vinous success by those willing to wait. This of course presupposes that one's viticultural practices throughout the year - plus no doubt an element of luck - permitted fruit with concentration and good health. It also presupposes selectivity in picking and sensitive vinification.

While the weather this year seems in stark contrast with that of 2003, there are more similarities than you might think when it comes to the conditions for success. The exceptionally hot dry weather of 2003 put such stress on vines that only those with low yields and the best of care could perform at all satisfactorily, and the number of wines elevated in alcohol yet fundamentally under-ripe in flavor were legion. As elsewhere in Europe in 2003, shockingly high must weights at a shockingly early date were seldom grounds for euphoria. On the contrary, if you bit into the grapes you found them green and slimy in the center and the pips burning and bitter to the palate. There was thus no alternative but to drop crop even at a late date in order to remove stress from the vines, and then to wait. Fortunately, in September of 2003, cooler weather arrived and - this being Austria - the torrid August counted more as an entre-act than a dénouement.

Flash forward to 2004. A late flowering and a cool, intermittently rainy July set things behind. And September and October featured rain as well. This meant crop dropping („green harvest“) again and yet again by those who were genuinely determined to end up with ripeness and concentration. Acids were slow to drop and the pips weren't ripe even after they turned brown, but only later. Make no mistake, twenty years ago, either of these vintages would have been a near disaster for Austria's vintners. (And for some, even today, they came close to that!) In the era before drip irrigation, the vines in 2003 would have shut down and eventually delivered green, mean results. A 2004 would have been compromised by the lack of know-how in the vineyards and of sheer quality determination that so many Austrian vintners now possess.

As Wachau vintner Emmerich Knoll's reflected, „We had moments of doubt,“ while waiting out the 2004 weather, „but at some point you're there with your back to the wall and have no alternative. If you don't make the effort and it might have succeeded, you can blame yourself the year long. If you make the effort and nothing comes of it, at least you can't make accusations!“ Toni Bodenstein, also of the Wachau, summed the 2004 vintage up perfectly when he said, „It was the year that demanded the most risk-taking, and was the most trying of the vintner's patience,“ adding, sotto voice, that it was also his most expensive.

What was the payoff? There are some ravishingly complex wines, generally with higher than normal acidity and usually with relatively low alcohol. For those who would like to imagine Grüner Veltliner incorporated into a lithe, bright, Riesling-like frame, there are liquid manifestations in 2004 beyond your imagination. And for those who imagine the intricate minerality, brightness, and lively interplay of flavors that characterize the best German Rieslings allied to the textural substantiality of Austria, this is the place and time. As for those of the best, late-harvested 2004s that do pack higher alcohol, they seldom betray this, and a wine of 14% often drinks delightfully and deceptively like one of 12%. Time and again I was cautioned that the 2004s had been slow to open up and show their personalities in spring, probably on account not just of their relatively high acidity, but of the late harvest and cold winter. It was in every respect a vintage in which to allow the young wines time on their lees, provided of course that one had blemish-free lees with which to work. To the above generalities, permit me to add a few details by region.

<u>VINTAGE</u>	<u>WINE NAME</u>	<u>RATING</u>	<u>COST</u>
2004	Prager Gruner <u>Veltliner</u> Federspiel Hinter Der Burg	85	\$22.00
2004	 Prager Gruner <u>Veltliner</u> Smaragd Zwerithaler	90	\$39.00
2004	 Prager Gruner <u>Veltliner</u> Smaragd Weissenkirchen Achleiten	90	\$39.00
2004	 Prager Gruner <u>Veltliner</u> Smaragd Weissenkirchen Weitenberg	89	\$36.00
2004	 Prager Riesling Federspiel <u>Steinriegl</u>	86	\$28.00
2004	 Prager Riesling Smaragd <u>Hollerin</u>	88	\$42.00
2004	 Prager Riesling Smaragd <u>Kaiserberg</u>	89	\$42.00
2004	 Prager Riesling Smaragd <u>Achleiten</u>	94	\$48.00
2004	 Prager Riesling Smaragd Klaus	92	\$48.00
2004	 Prager Riesling Smaragd <u>Steinriegl</u>	91	\$42.00
2004	Prager Riesling Smaragd Wachstum Bodenstein	94	\$48.00