

EISENBERG IS AUSTRIA'S GREATEST WINE SECRET

What's the most beautiful winegrowing region specializing in reds that you've never heard of? My guess is that it could well be the dramatic hill country of the Eisenberg, close to the Hungarian border in the southeast of Austria. Steep vineyards alternate with dense forest and meadows, and the main vineyard sites are dotted with charming old winemakers' houses called Kellerstöckel.



The view from the top of the Eisenberg looking towards Styria, another Austrian wine region but one devoted to dry whites.

When Austrian wines returned to international wine markets during the 1990s, it was the dry white wines, most notably the grüner veltliner from the Wachau on the Danube and the neighboring regions of Kremstal and Kamptal that caught the limelight. "Grooner" was the nickname New York City somms called it. However, that would never have happened had those wines not had such distinctive aromas (famously white pepper, but also veggies like snow peas and green beans) and such a distinctive balance (quite close to unoaked Chardonnay). A couple of years later in many markets around the world and Austrian Grooner was suddenly "in" and remains so.

When the reds began to catch up about a decade ago, it was the vibrant and aromatic wines of the blaufränkisch grape (a.k.a. kékfrankos in its native Hungary and lemlberger in Germany) that generated the greatest interest. That doesn't surprise me at all. The quality of the best examples from the Austrian state of Burgenland was often good, prices were friendly and the wines tasted like nothing else. Different aspects of them resembled wines from different grape varieties. The black pepper aroma resembled syrah from the Northern Rhône, the crisp acidity resembled Gamay from the best cru of Beaujolais, and the finesse of the best examples was rather like that of great pinot noir from Burgundy. Those were all positive associations and the combination of them made it plain that the new wines were not copies of classics from a well-established region. The breakthrough red was arguably the 2006 Neckenmarkt Alte Reben (Alte Reben means "old vines") from the Moric winery founded by ex-casino croupier Roland Velich. Critics showered it with high scores and praise in 2009 and 2010 and suddenly Blaufränkisch had arrived in the company of the world's great wines.



Green slate dominates the vineyards of the Eisenberg region. Note the reddish material that contains iron. Eisen is the German word for iron, and during the Middle Ages low grade iron ore was mined here.

At the same time, the small region of Eisenberg, where there are just 500 hectares of vineyards, of which 36% are planted with Blaufränkisch, was lagging behind. Few producers had more than a couple of hectares

of vines, as much of the region had suffered until 1989 from being directly next to the closed Hungarian border. Most winemakers were disorientated after recently losing its main market of day-trippers from the nearby city of Graz who traditionally filled the trunks of their cars with cheap unpretentious wine.

By the time I visited the region in June 2012, a group of young winegrowers were already pushing the envelope to improve the region's reds and establishing a new identity on the domestic market. The group they formed had already succeeded in getting two new DACs (or appellations) for blaufränkisch reds introduced in 2010: Eisenberg and Eisenberg Reserve. And yes, although the dominant soil/sub-soil type here is green slate, there are veins of iron. The combination of this soil and the coolest (and wettest) climate in Burgenland due to the high altitude (vineyards up to 440 meters above sea level) gives the wines their sleek and fragrant personality

The stage was set for a winemaking revolution. It began with the move away from new oak for ageing and towards lower alcohol levels (12.5% is now typical and 12% quite common for regular Eisenberg DAC wines) pioneered by the then almost absurdly young Christoph Wachter of the Wachter-Wiesler winery in Deutsch Schützen. For him, this was all about letting the floral (violets and lilac), black fruit (elderberry and sour cherry) and spicy aromas (black pepper and clove) from the grape shine, and allowing the dry tannins and bright acidity of the grape to speak clearly rather than being smothered by flavors extracted from new oak barrels.

These wines recently began attracting international attention in much the same way Austrian Grooner did 20 years ago. Thomas Kopfensteiner, also of Deutsch Schützen, is the most dynamic and exciting of those in the following pack, but watch out for Jalits (Badersdorf), Poller (Deutsch Schützen), Schützenhof (Deutsch Schützen), Straka (Rechnitz) Rainer Stubits (Harmisch) and Walter Stubits (Eisenberg)

It is a measure of the openness of this group of producers that they easily seemed to accommodate the Krutzler winery, also in Deutsch Schützen. From the first vintage in 1992, Reinhold Krutzler's "Perwolff" (the original name of Deutsch Schützen) had rapidly become the first collectible wine from the region. The style of this wine—with pronounced new oak and a much more muscular body that was partly the result of blending in a few percent of Cabernet Sauvignon—might look like a contradiction of the group's declared aims.

Ex-sommelier Uwe Schiefer, who founded his winery in Welgersdorf in the mid-1990s, remains the only lone wolf of the region, although he was one of the first to make world class Blaufränkisch reds in the new style. Arguably his wines are still the best of their type, though he now faces very serious competition from the new kids on this rugged and beautiful block. —*Stuart Pigott, Contributing Editor*

TASTING NOTES

KRUTZLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG PERWOLFF 2011

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2011

Score
96

If you like Grand Cru Classé Bordeaux, then the chances are high you will love this. Mulberries, plums and dried cranberries easily match the toasty-oak aromas and ensure that this powerful wine is all about the grape. The combination of ripeness, generously dry tannins and elegant acidity brings grace and finesse into the picture.

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG RIED WEINBERG RESERVE 2012

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2012

Score
95

A great Eisenberg blaufränkisch that's just beginning to give its best. The uplifting nose of laurel and bay leaves as well as elderberries leads to a sleek but very concentrated palate, in which the fresh acidity and moderately dry tannins are beautifully integrated. Achieves lift-off just as the long, brilliant finish enters the picture.

KRUTZLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG PERWOLFF 2013

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2013

Score
95

Nearly perfect integration of spicy oak and herbal notes is followed by freshness and considerable flesh on the palate, making this an impressive wine. The tannins then come through in a great wave at the finish.

UWE SCHIEFER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG SZAPARY RESERVE 2013

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2013

Score
95

The elderberry and sour-cherry aromas of this wine are really intense, but on top of that a mass of herbal notes give it serious complexity, power and concentration. The body is delivered without a hint of heaviness, the freshness without a hint of sharpness, and a very long, silky finish makes this a near-perfect single-vineyard blaufränkisch.

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG RIED WEINBERG RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
94

For a medium-bodied red, this has great complexity (herbal, spicy and smoky notes) and lots of tannic power. Even so, it's elegant in a way that resembles 1er and Grand Cru Burgundies from the best producers, with fresh acidity carrying right through the long and very subtle finish. A great wine in the making!

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG RIED WEINBERG RESERVE 2011

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2011

Score
94

Although this vintage is more floral than either the 2014 or 2012, it's also more mellow and supple with notes of oolong tea and white chocolate married to generous, soft tannins. The long, silky finish is only moderately tart for this category.

KOPFENSTEINER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG REIHBURG RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
94

The complex nose of smoke, earth and bitter chocolate announces a wine with a huge personality, but this hardly prepares you for the way it miraculously marries charming fruit and concentrated dry tannins on the palate. Needs a couple of years to reach its peak, but capable of very long ageing.

KOPFENSTEINER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG SAYBRITZ RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
94

Cool and minty, the nose of this wine still seems a bit closed. However, it already has great balance and elegance from the moment it touches your tongue right through to the very long finish with its mineral freshness.

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG ALTE REBEN RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
93

The bouquet of this one is spicy and smokey although it saw no new oak. The acidity is ripe and the warm, while dry tannins give this some serious power that carries through into the long, complex finish; this will improve with a few years of ageing and will keep for decades!

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG ALTE REBEN RESERVE 2012

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2012

Score
93

Diamond brightness and considerable concentration make this an exciting wine. The dry tannins build beautifully on the finish where there's considerable herbal complexity.

KRUTZLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
93

The toasty oak and vivid black-cherry fruit are almost perfectly matched in this concentrated and elegant blaufränkisch. The long finish is impressive with chocolate, herbal and mineral freshness all intertwined.

KOPFENSTEINER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG SZAPARY RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
93

The vitality and concentration of this wine are amazing, but in spite of the great sour-cherry and floral aromas, this is still slightly savage like many parts of the region; stunning finish. Patience will be rewarded!

KOPFENSTEINER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG REIHBURG RESERVE 2012

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2012

Score
93

Considering this is the first vintage Thomas Kopfensteiner produced from this site, the result is stunning. The wine's packed with red-berry and blackberry aromas in addition to an intense violet note. The considerable richness is balanced by generous dry tannins that build at the imposing yet fresh finish.

UWE SCHIEFER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
93

With its mix of elderberry, earthy, chocolatey and savory notes, the complex nose of this wine is like nothing else in this appellation. With each swirl of the glass, new nuances emerge. It's also the most textural wine of this category in the region with a near-perfect balance of warm dry tannins and fresh acidity. Great value for money!

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG BÉLA-JOSKA 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
92

Violet and sour-cherry aromas leap out of the glass at you, and although this is a medium-bodied wine with a burst of fruit on the palate — reminiscent of Beaujolais Cru — some impressive dry tannins and crisp acidity do follow through. The finish has both drive and minerality.

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG RIED RATSCHEN RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
92

This has a great bouquet that's floral and herbal. The concentration on the palate is impressive, but this is the tarest and most challenging wine of this producer's 2014s, and it needs several years in the cellar to give its best.

WACHTER-WIESLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG BÉLA-JOSKA 2012

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2012

Score
92

Shows what bottle age does even for lighter Eisenberg blaufränkisch. This is only just beginning to mature, but it already shows a great bouquet of licorice and herbs. On the palate, it's at once silky, fresh and mineral; great value for money!

KRUTZLER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
92

The intense mulberry, herbal and wet-earth aromas, then the great balance of solid, dry tannins, together with ripeness and fresh acidity, all make this a standout example of regular Eisenberg blaufränkisch.

SCHÜTZENHOF BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG SENIOR RESERVE 2013

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2013

Score
92

Due to its dense licorice and herbal aromas, no less than its serious dry tannins, this is a dark and uncompromising wine. Even so, you have to admire the power and the freshness that keeps it in check.

RAINER STUBITS BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG CSATERBERG RESERVE 2013

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2013

Score
92

With its nose of roasted artichokes and thyme, this is a very distinctive expression of Eisenberg blaufränkisch, and there's as much power as fresh acidity on the palate. The tannins aren't a jot too strong at any point, but they certainly help make the finish unusually warm and generous for this vintage.

RAINER STUBITS BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG RESERVE 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
91

Youthful aromas of black cherries and red beets pour from the glass, heralding a rather rich and creamy palate that ends silky smooth in spite of the fresh acidity — which comes as quite a (pleasant) surprise.

RAINER STUBITS BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG OPAL RESERVE 2011

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2011

Score
91

A great combination of blackberry aromas, savory elements and considerable flesh on the palate. The concentrated, dry tannins and freshness make this a very satisfying wine that still has many years of life in it.

WALLNER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG RESERVE 2013

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2013

Score
91

The black-cherry and red-beet aromas on this wine are completely undisturbed by oaky notes. Although it's only medium-bodied on the palate, this has plenty of character, while the finish is fresh and long. An impressive wine for this rather difficult vintage.

SCHÜTZENHOF BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG PUR 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
90

A bold wine in which intense licorice, clove and elderberry aromas are wrapped around a powerful core of dry tannins and fresh acidity, which lifts the finish very nicely.

KOPFENSTEINER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
90

Floral and fragrant, this is one of the most charming regular-quality blaufränkisch from the Eisenberg. However, behind the charm offensive is some earthy tannic power, and only the slightly sappy finish holds it back from a higher score.

JALITS BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG 2014

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2014

Score
90

As floral as it is fruity (think blackberries!) on the nose, this juicy blaufränkisch is a joyful and animating red in the way the best Beaujolais Cru are. The tannins only show their hand right at the finish.

RAINER STUBITS BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG 2012

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2012

Score
90

The attractive red-fruit and blackberry aromas here are fresh considering the wine's age, and on the palate, this is at once savory and delicate — until a slug of dry tannins hits you at the finish and pulls on the brakes slightly.

WALLNER BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG 2013

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2013

Score
90

If you like fresh reds with a healthy amount of tannins, then this wine offers that together with a ripe mulberry nose and some real depth to carry those tannins through to a surprisingly intense finish.

JALITS BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG DIABAS RESERVE 2012

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2012

Score
89

An unusually rich and chocolatey rendition of this grape that shows supple tannins and moderate acidity. Maybe these grapes were slightly overripe, but the balance is good with no alcohol showing directly (in spite of 14%).

STRAKA BLAUFRÄNKISCH EISENBERG 2012

Country Austria
Region Burgenland
Vintage 2012

Score
89

A rare example of an Eisenberg blaufränkisch that's garnet rather than a youthful ruby color. However, this intensely herbal and rather mellow wine has an attractive raspberry note, and the tannins and acidity on the finish are well integrated.
