



Photography by Simon Woolf

AUSTRIA'S BORDERS REPRESENT THE FUTURE, NOT JUST THE PAST

Simon J Woolf reports on the flow of winemaking expertise between Austria and its eastern neighbors, an exchange that recalls the old days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and points to an exciting Mitteleuropean future

Some years ago, the Austrian Wine Marketing Board (AWMB) website featured an evocative video promoting the country's beautiful wine lands. The climactic point panned around a naturally heart-shaped vineyard in Styria (*see p.130*)—a bucolic idyll that seemed like the perfect advert for wine tourism and an ambitious wine nation.

There was just one problem: The vineyard wasn't actually in Austria but was about 300ft (100m) over the border in Stajerska—the Slovenian part of Styria. "For five years, nobody complained," recalls AWMB director Willi Klinger, "but then there was a little shit-storm in the emerging social media." Klinger promptly received a call from a Slovenian journalist at Radio Ljubljana. The offending video had to be removed, apologies were made and diplomatic meetings brokered.

Admittedly, it was an easy mistake to make. The modern-day border between Austria and Slovenia is unmarked because it skirts the photogenic vineyard and the hamlet of Špičnik. Yet the blooper is a salutary reminder that Austria once sat at the core of a vast Mitteleuropean empire, encompassing not just Slovenia but another six modern-day nation states.

The Austro-Hungarian empire splintered apart over a century ago, yet it still holds the key to parts of Austria's winemaking heritage—even if that heritage was often sidelined by its reinvention as a squeaky-clean, quality-focused wine nation post-1985. Now, Austria's easterly neighbors Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic are forging their own individual voices in the modern wine world. Could these former fiefdoms play an important role in Austria's winemaking future, and not just its past?

Mittelburgenland

Franz Ludwig Weninger, one of Burgenland's leading biodynamic growers and winemakers, would certainly answer yes. Based in Horitschon, 2.5 miles (4km) from the Hungarian border in Mittelburgenland, Weninger grew up with the reality

Opposite: A reproduction border fence on the old Hungary/Burgenland border, which ideas and winemakers have been crossing far more freely since it opened in 1989.

of the Iron Curtain and a border that was completely closed. "My grandmother always told me how beautiful Hungary was and how nice the wines were," he explains. "My grandfather and my uncle went to school in Sopron and had to learn Hungarian—so I always felt that these two countries belonged together." Weninger became one of the first Austrian winemakers to explore Hungary's potential after the borders were opened in 1989.

That potential was definitely underexploited by Hungary's domestic winemakers. As Sopron-based winemaker Peter Wetzter recounts, "Hungary went through a dark period during the communist era. Most of the wine trade was run by Jewish families—and they were murdered [by the Nazis] in 1944. Then we had 40 years of mass production [of wine]." Like most communist countries, Hungary adopted the state-owned cooperative model for winemaking in the 1950s, so growers became focused on the highest possible yields—there was simply no incentive to produce quality. Wetzter feels that most vineyard owners and winemakers in the Sopron area still haven't got beyond this paradigm. Furthermore, even though Kékfrankos (the Hungarian name for Blaufränkisch) is the longest established variety in the region, it continues to suffer from a poor reputation. "High-acid Kékfrankos is still a bad image from the communist era," he says.

Weninger didn't initially look to Sopron either. In 1992, he embarked on a joint venture with Hungarian winemaker Attila Gere, in Hungary's southerly Villány region. The pair created the label Gere-Weninger. As Weninger explains, it was partly a response to the cataclysmic Austrian wine scandal of 1985 (where a number of major producers were caught adding diethylene glycol to pump up their sweet wines). "After that, no one wanted Blaufränkisch or any other Austrian varieties—it was pretty frustrating, so we started looking for new ways of doing things."

Villány's climate is warmer than Burgenland's, which initially seemed like a blessing for growing red grapes, but Weninger rapidly came to the conclusion that the wines were a little too broad for his liking. The considerable distance from Horitschon was no doubt also an issue. Luckily, Weninger was



able to acquire a 30ha (75-acre) property much closer to home, in Balf (near Sopron) in 1997. It included parcels in one of Sopron's most revered vineyards—Spernsteiner—from which Weninger makes an entrancing and elegant Blaufränkisch.

Peter Wetzter adds that Weninger became something of a mentor to those Hungarian growers who were ready to improve, showing them a different and more respectful way to treat vineyards and a way to achieve higher-quality results. Wetzter himself is currently one of very few independent, quality-focused growers in the Sopron area, aiming to showcase its superior terroir and suitability for Blaufränkisch/Kékfrankos. His stunning Spernsteiner really helps prove the point.

Weninger's son Franz Reinhard, now in charge of the family's wineries in both Sopron and Horitschon, points out that Austria had little expertise in red wine once it was cut off from its former empire: "All of our red-wine knowledge came from Hungary." Indeed, when he studied at Austria's prestigious Klosterneuburg wine school in the 1990s, he was taught only how to make white wine. Austria had become almost color-blind.

The Weningers' experience with their Hungarian vineyards has been overwhelmingly positive—and in some cases, their Hungarian parcels outperform the Austrian ones. Franz Reinhard recalls the disastrous 2016 vintage, when frost and hail destroyed almost 80 percent of their Horitschon crop. In Balf, however, the vineyards were unscathed. "I really appreciate working across borders," he says. "Driving over the border working in Austria or Hungary, it's like coming back from abroad. You see things from the Hungarian viewpoint or from the Austrian viewpoint. It's enlightening."

Weninger's son Franz Reinhard points out that Austria had little expertise in red wine once it was cut off from its former empire. "All of our red wine knowledge came from Hungary," he says. "It has the more interesting wine culture, more interesting [indigenous] varieties. Everything is there; it just needs a bit more time to develop"

He also adds that "Hungary has the more interesting wine culture, more interesting [indigenous] varieties. Everything is there; it just needs a bit more time to develop." Modern-day Burgenland lacks any truly regional white varieties: Grüner Veltliner's heartlands are along the Danube, and otherwise Weissburgunder, Welschriesling, and Chardonnay proliferate. But since Hungary's borders opened up, there has been renewed interest in Furmint—a variety with some pedigree in the Neusiedlersee area but historically only vinified as a sweet wine. Winemakers such as Michael Wenzel, Ernst Triebaumer, and (farther afield in Styria) Herrenhof Lamprecht are all now making dry Furmint, a style that was almost unheard of in Austria a decade ago.

Above: Eisenberg in Sudburgenland, which was split down the middle by the Iron Curtain in 1944 but is increasingly regarded today as one of Austria's "grands crus."

Photography by Simon Woolf

Making wine in two countries isn't without its challenges. The Weningers initially assumed that they could truck grapes from Balf back to their Austrian winery in Horitschon but rapidly realized that the bureaucratic challenges and the potential for delays at the border made this impractical. A makeshift winery had to be erected in 1997, and today the family continues to run two completely separate operations. Franz Reinhard also recalls that the Hungarian labels were harder to market, at least until recently. "Suddenly, in the past three years, it's changed," he says. "Now our Hungarian wines are the easier sell—people are becoming more open and more interested in wines from farther east".

Sudburgenland

Interest in wines from "exotic" Eastern European countries like Hungary may well be building, partly as a result of the natural wine movement and its focus on diversity, but a great deal of Hungary's wine potential still lies latent. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Eisenberg DAC region—the southern-most tip of Burgenland, which touches Styria and borders Hungary all the way down. Picking up speed since the mid-1990s when Uwe Schiefer relocated to the area, Eisenberg's nuanced Blaufränkisch is increasingly regarded as one of Austria's "grands crus." The steep vineyards rise to 1,440ft (440m) and make for an impressive vista. Standing on the viewing platform in the Saybritz vineyard (one of Eisenberg's most celebrated), the picture looks rosy. But move just a few hundred yards across the Hungarian border, and there are semi-abandoned vineyards and empty plots. What's going on?

The marketing tends not to dwell on the fact that two thirds of the Eisenberg area (almost 1,000ha [2,500 acres]) now lies over Hungary's borders; some have even suggested that the top parcels are on the Hungarian side. And while the Austrian growers are in no doubt about Eisenberg's exceptional terroir, the situation is very different on the Hungarian side. Wetzter laments that "most of the Hungarian owners just don't understand the value of these vineyards. They say it's too much work; the site is too difficult, and they can't make money out of it." His frustration is palpable—most of his countrymen are still stuck in the high-yields/cheap-wine culture fostered by the communist era.

The Iron Curtain ran right through the middle of Eisenberg after 1944, in some cases cutting off families from each other and putting an end to what local politician and teacher Eduard Nicka describes as "a common economic space and a cultural meeting point, where people had always worked together." The area had already started to become depopulated after World War I, and this process escalated after 1944. It's hard to imagine what the AWMB now describes as "the most unspoiled wine landscape in Burgenland" crisscrossed with border fences and two observation towers staffed by Russian guards armed with machine-guns. When Nicka says that the area's history has been written in blood, it is no exaggeration.

As the historical scars heal, a number of collaboration projects have sprung up around Vaskeresztes (the Hungarian town next to Eisenberg—or Vas-hegy to give it its Hungarian name), but virtually all have been brokered by Austrian interests: Domaines Kilger and Eisenberg legend Uwe Schiefer



now make a Kékfrankos in Vas-hegy, as does Thom Wachter. Hungarian winemaker Irme Garger makes a fine Kékfrankos together with his Viennese cousin Rainer Garger. The wine is vinified in Austria, though, either at Wachter-Wiesler or Krutzler's cellars. Meanwhile, there's the constant threat of precious vineyards being pulled up as Hungarian old-timers lose interest in tending their plots.

Ironically, Burgenland itself is not particularly Austrian. The entire region was part of the Kingdom of Hungary before its absorption into the Habsburg Empire. The county of Burgenland was only created when the area was ceded to Austria after World War I in 1921, with the region's erstwhile capital Sopron replaced by Eisenstadt, as Sopron's inhabitants voted to remain Hungarian. Franz Reinhardt Weninger says, "In Burgenland many of us still feel half-Hungarian, even if we don't speak the language." (He does, as a matter of fact.) Burgenland in its current form is thus an entirely modern, 20th-century concept, a compromise born out of war and politics rather than culture. Its ethnic makeup remains mixed, with sizable Croatian- and Hungarian-speaking minorities in addition to German-speaking Austrians.

Slovenia

If Burgenland's borders are not entirely logical when it comes to ethnic or linguistic divides, they seem simple compared to those that now separate Austrian Styria and Slovenian Stajerska. Previously a harmonious single region, the Duchy of Styria was split in two after World War I. Placement of the new borders was overseen by the so-called Inter-Allied Border Commission between 1919 and 1920—a team that included a Japanese observer, who apparently caused quite a stir in the region.

The challenges were formidable, as Dr Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik (a specialist in central Europe's cultural minorities) explains: "Austria's original plan to create the border around the then largely German-speaking cities of Marburg [Maribor] and Pettau [Ptuj] was now out of the question. Drawing a border along German- and Slovene-speaking lines was also impossible in such a mixed-language region." In the end, local residents close to the proposed borders were often consulted on an individual basis and given the choice of remaining Austrian or having their property placed within the newly created SHS state (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which would later become Yugoslavia).

These choices could tear communities and families apart. Winemaker Hans Dreisiebner (Dreisiebner Stammhaus) recalls the experience of his grandfather and great-uncle, who chose to be on different sides of the border for their own personal reasons. His great-uncle Erwin Dreisiebner (who had opted to be on the Slovenian side) was branded a traitor when Hitler's Nazi Germany annexed Austria in 1938, causing him to panic and shoot his neighbor Emmanuel Gaube, before crossing over to Austria and committing suicide. The story has a happier ending as successive generations of the Gaube and Dreisiebner families then intermarried, helping to soothe the troubled history. Both families are still in the wine business, with Dreisiebners remaining on both sides of the border.

The new borders also disrupted wine production and continue to do so. The Styria/Stajerska border was so messy that it split the vineyard holdings of some 50 growers across

Above: Weingut Dreisiebner Stammhaus's photogenic heart-shaped vineyard in Špičnik, Slovenia, skirted by the unmarked modern-day border with Austria.

Photography by Rok Breznik, Slovenian Tourist Board



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the two countries. Most of these families are Austrian and are now known as *Doppelbesitzer*s, or dual-owners. The *Doppelbesitzer*s initially struggled with the threat of having their vineyards repossessed by the Yugoslavian government when it implemented its state-owned cooperative model, then with oppressive border controls that made it challenging to access their Slovenian parcels. This eased after 1953, but more trouble was on the way.

After Austria joined the EU, producers were no longer permitted to take grapes grown in a different country and sell or process them as Austrian wine. The *Doppelbesitzer*s gained a temporary exemption that lasted until 2015, though they were not allowed to list either the grape variety or the vintage for their wines made from Slovenian grapes—effectively reducing the output to a table-wine status.

Above (left): Anna Gamsler, the younger generation at her family's Styrian estate; (right) a Gamsler bottle with its Historische Doppelbesitzer (dual-owner) logo.

Photography by Simon Woolf



After the exemption expired in 2015, four years in limbo followed. The Historische Doppelbesitzer is now a formal association that campaigned to get permanent recognition for their Slovenian vineyards. Finally granted for the 2019 vintage, the new ruling improves on the previous situation. Now, wines from the Slovenian parcels can not only be bottled and sold as Austrian quality wine, but the grape variety and vintage can be listed as well. A handsome Historische Doppelbesitzer logo will soon start appearing on bottles. A question-mark hangs over Styrian producers who acquired Slovenian vineyards more recently—the exemption grants permission only for historic estates whose vineyard holdings predate the war, which appears to have put some noses out of joint. The EU regulations note this minor dissent, and it remains to be seen if further regulation will follow.

To some, this might seem like mere tedious paperwork—and perhaps of no consequence to Austrian wine at large. But Anna Gamsler, the younger generation at her family's Gamsler estate (0.6 mile [1km] from the border with Špičnik), sees things differently. "Our Sauvignon Blanc is planted on the Slovenian side of the border," she explains, "and the opok soils really give us the classic Styrian Sauvignon style. For all the Historische Doppelbesitzer, there is considerable value in being able to sell our Slovenian grapes in Austria and to preserve our tradition." All too often, borders don't respect terroir or culture—and winemakers end up in the crossfire when it comes to finding solutions.

Producers on the Slovenian side of the Styrian border have tended to remain more obscure than their Austrian neighbors, partly because they were not freed from the cooperative system until 1992 when Slovenia became independent—and thus were

largely not able to make and sell wine under their own labels. Still, a clutch of producers in western Slovenia (bordering the Italian Friuli Collio region) have since achieved cult success—names such as Movia, Batič, Tilia and Marjan Simčič are now well known internationally. This level of repute hasn't entirely reached Stajerska, even though Slovenia's tourist board pushes the region—and particularly the area around Jeruzalem—as being one of the country's top wine-producing areas.

Styrian winemakers have in some cases been influenced more by western Slovenia and beyond. The minimal-intervention forms of winemaking, and specifically the once-forgotten orange-wine technique (fermenting white grapes with their skins), arguably have their strongest roots in the western regions of Brda, Vipava, and Italy's Friuli Collio. Styrian biodynamic grower Karl Schnabel has been using the skin-contact method for all of his white wines since 2003, just a few short years after pioneers Radikon and Gravner re-popularized it. All five of the winemakers in the Schmecke Das Leben group (Sepp Muster, Andreas Tschepp, Roland Tauss, Franz Strohmeier, and Werlitsch) make what are now described as orange wines, citing the influence of Radikon and Gravner (both Slovene, even if their wineries are now in Italy), along with other winemakers around the Adriatic such as Giorgio Clai, from Croatian Istria, or Sandi Skerk in the Italian Carso region.

Although skin-fermented white wine was more or less forgotten in Styria by the 1950s, it has historical provenance. Arthur Freiherr von Hohenbruck's exhaustive volume *Die Weinproduktion in Oesterreich*, published in Vienna in 1873, notes that Riesling and Muscat (most likely Gelber Muskateller) were commonly skin-fermented in Styria. He doesn't make a distinction between Styria or what was then called Lower Styria (the modern day Stajerska), so it is difficult to confirm whether he refers to the whole region. Whatever the case, Slovenia's independence and the opening of the borders between Austria, Slovenia, Italy, and Croatia have allowed unbridled enthusiasm for orange wine to spread not just to Styria but all over Austria. Some 150 Austrian winemakers—from big names such as Domäne Wachau or Gernot Heinrich, to iconoclasts like Claus Preisinger and Michael Gindl—have embraced the style with open arms.

Styria's producers are taking inspiration not only from Slovenia's orange-wine tradition but also from its high-quality vineyard sites. Major wineries such as Tement and Gross (both from Southern Styria) have recently invested in land in Stajerska. Gross has planted Sauvignon Blanc and Furmint—the latter variety seems to excel in the area around Ljutomer-Ormož, as well as in Burgenland.

Czechs and Slovaks

There's little, if any, cross-border activity when it comes to winemaking along Austria's northeastern borders with the Czech Republic and Slovakia (combined as Czechoslovakia from 1918 until 1993). Slovakia's border with Austria runs along the watercourses of the Danube and Morava rivers—there has always been a clear separation between the two countries, so there are no border-straddling estates as there are in Styria. Austria's borders with the Czech Republic also have more historical provenance than those with Slovenia or Hungary.

Czechoslovakia endured one of the most repressive Stalinist regimes from 1948 until 1989, with the cooperative system

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reducing its wine production to little more than poor-quality plonk. Ironically, as Slovak winemaker Vladimír Magula notes, it was during the communist era that Slovakia's vineyard surface reached its peak. (It has since massively declined.) But the output from those vineyards was of regrettable quality.

Since Czechoslovakia's split in 1993, the Czech Republic has made a slightly better job of resuscitating its wine production than Slovakia. Czech writer and winemaker Richard Stávek noted enthusiastically in the latest edition of *The Oxford Companion to Wine* that "Winemaking techniques have fully recovered from the communist era." New plantings have proliferated, particularly in the Moravia region (which borders Austria). Conversely, in Slovakia the vineyard area has been shrinking from a 1989 high of 25,000ha (61,800 acres), to little more than 10,000ha (24,700 acres) in 2019. This is partly due to vineyard redistribution schemes, where land has often been returned to families with no interest in maintaining or replanting vines.

Magula's grandfather tended vines and made wine until 1948, but the land was then possessed by the state and replanted with wheat during the communist years. The plot was finally returned to the Magula family in 2005. With touching historical symmetry, they planted new vineyards and now have a flourishing boutique wine business.

Austrian producers have yet to be inspired to create joint ventures in these countries, but the Czech Republic and Slovakia have certainly benefited from access to their western neighbor; during the communist years, winemaking education was limited to a few basic agricultural schools or the university in Moravia. With open borders, budding Czech or Slovak winemakers now have the option of attending more prestigious institutions such as Klosterneuburg or, in the case of sommeliers, studying for exams at the wine academy in Rust, Burgenland.

Magula was also able to call on a number of Austrian winemakers to get advice for his family's new venture; he enthusiastically mentions Werner Michlits, at Meinklang, and also Claus Preisinger, Gut Oggau, Nicki Moser, and Toni Hartl as sources of inspiration.

Neither Czech nor Slovak wine has yet made much of an impact in the export market, which may partly explain the lack of Austrian investment. Yet Magula has seen promising changes: "Everyone at the wine fairs is very positive. They know about Slovakia as a winemaking country already—that's a huge difference from five years ago." That said, he feels that the country lacks any coherent strategy when it comes to wine marketing. He's also frustrated that although "the tourists always want to drink something local, the locals only want to drink Austrian Grüner Veltliner."



A great deal of that Grüner Veltliner comes from the large Weinviertel region, which begins just north of Vienna and runs all the way to the Czech border. It is Austria's most important wine-producing area by volume, but it lacks the prestige of the Wachau or other Lower Austria areas. The dominance of Grüner Veltliner (half of the vineyard area) spills over into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where it's also popular, but styles on either side of the borders are distinct. Czech and Slovak Grüner tends to be much more nervy and herbaceous by comparison with the plumper style favored in the Weinviertel.

There's an opportunity here: Weinviertel Grüner suffers from a lack of diversity—there are gallons of technically correct wines but few highs or lows. The leaner, more individual styles from Czech or Slovak sites might offer a welcome interjection of personality into Austria's "Grünerland." For now, though, the Weinviertel seems almost blissfully unaware that it has two other winemaking nations on its doorstep.

Austria's neighbors to the south and west also include wine regions. The Südtirol—or Alto Adige, to give it its post-World War I, invented Italian name—remains ceded to Italy despite continued protests from many of its residents, virtually all of whom are German-speaking. Yet there is no corresponding wine region on the Austrian side of the border, due to a slight geographical inconvenience named the Dolomites; mountains 10,000ft (3,000m) high make viticulture impossible. In neighboring Switzerland, most of the Graubünden canton (which borders the Austrian Tyrol) is also too mountainous for viticulture, though 400ha (1,000 acres) are planted. Tyrol has

Above: Slovak winemaker Vladimír Magula and his family, who have replanted with vines the land that was appropriated by the government in 1948 and planted to wheat.

no significant wine industry; neither does Voralberg, Salzburg, or Upper Austria (which border Germany). As Klinger likes to joke, "In Austria we have skiing in the west and winemaking in the east." It's a sweeping generalization that largely works.

Conclusions

Many other generalizations have been made about Austrian wine over the years. Pre-1985, it was all about white and sweet wines. In the 1990s, barrique-aged Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot became ubiquitous. The 2000s countered that trend with lower-intervention winemaking and increased focus on indigenous varieties.

Whether these summations tell the whole story or not, one point is uncontested: After its monstrous act of self-harm in 1985, the Austrian wine industry has surged from strength to strength. Unlike its easterly neighbors, it was not bound by communism's destructive shackles. Yet as the Iron Curtain came down, it lost some of its diversity and most of its red wine. Now, with its neighbors very much back in the game, the possibilities for cross-pollination—for winemakers on both sides of the borders to learn from each other—have proliferated. The potential is still untapped in many parts: Not everyone is as far advanced as Wening, Wetzler, or Schiefer. But these are exciting times in wine countries now imbued with a spirit of tolerance rather than isolated as theaters of war.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire is long gone, but as Magula contends, "Something like a central European wine identity is emerging." It could be described as a new Mitteleuropean wine empire—an empire without borders, which stands not only to enrich Austrian wine but also to breathe new life into all of its former territories. ■