

AWMB - The Austrian Vintage 2007

Erratic Weather; Wines of Supreme Quality

After the first tastings of the young 2007 vintage wines, the faces of the winemakers and professional tasters throughout Austria's wine-growing areas expressed strong satisfaction about the high level of quality achieved. And those faces were much brighter than they were at harvest time, when the results - from good to outstanding - couldn't even be hoped for, due to the difficult summer and autumn weather conditions. In general, those somewhat extreme weather capers are not reflected in the wines, which are quite balanced. In fact, there are no extremes in the picture. And, another major plus-point is that, after three years of below-average quantities, a "normal harvest" could once again be achieved.

The weather capers...

... weren't all that accurate nature observers remembered. After a winter that certainly did not live up to its name, the vines sprouted very early, and the continuously beautiful spring, with its lovely sequence of sunny days and timely rainfall, even led - similarly to the 2003 vintage - to the earliest flowering "of all time". Eager anticipation of an optimal beginning of the vegetation period, however, was spoiled by late frosts, which caused some damage at around the 1st of May. There was some damage also at the beginning of summer because of hailstorms that occurred on the high plateau north of Krems and in the Thermenregion; this resulted in some harvest volume losses.

A roasting hot July, which made vineyard cultivation a torturous experience, is seared in everyone's memory. Still, highly meticulous work in the vineyards was essential during this heat wave, especially in order to deter sunburn that can cause unpleasant, bitter tannins in finished wines. Punctually, on 1st August, the weather changed, bringing bountiful rainfall and cooler night temperatures. Nevertheless, at the end of August, wine-growers were given an extremely early harvest - just like in 2003 - and therefore, "warm" style wines.

But also during this period, everything was different as well: heavy downpours in eastern Austria at back-to-school time caused much concern regarding the stability of the grapes and the danger of rot. However, there were few worries for northern Burgenland winemakers, most of whom had mainly white wines, plus some Pinot Noir and St. Laurent, which were already in the cellars. Also the producers in southern Burgenland and in the Steiermark kept their cool, because their vineyards did not have to endure excessive rain.

Variable weather conditions in the fall, which brought some sunny days during the first half of October, helped determine very careful harvest times. Harvests in the areas north of the Danube river lasted quite long - for example, until mid-November in the Wachau. This meant that more than one harvest was necessary, so that the grapes were as healthy as possible.

Cold and warm - or, the big harmony

We begin with the most important category of the Austrian wine economy, dry white wines, which also is the easiest to assess. Generally, the harmony, which is quickly evident, is very impressive - there is a striking balance between the most important ingredients, like alcohol, sugar-free extract and acidity. This is a result of tame alcohol levels - some predictions of high alcohol content did not materialize - and for the rich extract, which is only marginally less than in the 2006 wines. The acidity is ideal, providing the white wines with exactly the right racy structure, and no aggression. Absolutely remarkable is the sensorial feeling from the acidity - which is likely appreciated more than the actual analytical value.

Besides the harmonious balance, the real phenomenon of the vintage is that, in the very well done white wines, the cool fall period - expressed by the filigree and fruit nuances, delicate texture and nervous acidity - comes through in the same sip that reveals the high ripeness shown by ripe fruit flavours, ample body and appropriate alcohol provided by the spring, July, and by the long vegetation period. The symbiosis of cold and warm is, therefore, quite a positive surprise!

Pleasant summer wines; wonderful Veltliners

In contrast to last year's wines, also the lighter varieties, which profited from the longer ripening period, came into their own with a charm that hasn't been captured in a long time. Grüner Veltliner in particular soared to wonderful levels: from Weinviertel DAC and Steinfeder to late-harvested Premium single vineyard wines and Eiswein (ice wine), there is something to satisfy every kind of taste. Also impressively successful are Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) and Steiermark's Morillon, which seldom features such silky elegance and is so subtly rounded.

Perhaps it is a little too early to properly evaluate the Rieslings, which are developing somewhat slowly and releasing their stone fruit notes rather shyly. The classic origin wines, from the weathered primitive rock soils, are putting their aromas out in front, but they also sparkle with finely chiselled fruit tones and mineral definition - as long as distinctive Botrytis influences are avoided.

Sauvignon Blanc, especially from the Steiermark, is highly impressive: those grass and nettle tones, even in the light, steel tank-matured styles, have been left behind. Few wines with such numerous dominant, developed flavours can be found outside of the Steiermark. Real luck was struck with Gelber Muskateller wines, which rarely express such a grapy, crispy character. The stellar Traminer, however, seems to be a little dull because of the low acidity, and still needs more time to mature. But it is not yet clear if it can match its outstanding 2006 vintage performance.

Fruit-accented red wines - with Austrian distinction

The tasted young wines from the red wine strongholds of Burgenland and the red wine islands in Niederösterreich (Lower Austria) are revealing pleasant charm so far: the fruit flavours are tending to the light side with notes of red berries instead of the dark berries that we came to know from last year's vintage. The areas which did not harvest the grapes before the big rains came - this means most areas - had to choose carefully when their harvests would take place; a long waiting period was not possible, especially, for example, around the Neusiedlersee.

The results, therefore, are red wines of medium- to full concentration, with pleasant, soft tannins and unobtrusive acidity - which, in structure, surpass the 2005 vintage, but probably will not quite reach the 2002 vintage. In principle, the changing weather patterns were neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to the grape varieties, because the Austrian premiere red varieties, Blaufränkisch and Zweigelt, as well as the early ripening Blauer Burgunder (Pinot Noir) and late ripening Cabernet, all seem to have done well; if there is a favourite, then it would be the extraordinary fruity-sweet Merlot. Also, the Schilcher will please fans of this Weststeiermark speciality because of its mature style, concentration and, yet again, its pointed acidity.

Sweet Essenz - ante portas

Because botrytis in 2007 took place in all of the right vineyards, suddenly and nearly everywhere, significant amounts were able to be harvested - in contrast to the other excellent sweet-wine vintages of 2005 and 2006. Lovers of these sweet delicacies certainly will be thrilled. The first barrel samples show solid, fruity Prädikatswein with glass-clear varietal character, relatively little noble rot flavour, and just enough - but not too much - acidity; closer to 2006 than 2005.

These early speculations must also consider that 2007 was fortunately a vintage that enabled the production of Essenz level juice with the highest must weights; with slow fermentation in the barrels, the wines should live for decades. The 2007 vintage completes a stunning triathlon that includes the two previous vintages. But it may even be possible to compare it to the legendary sweet wine vintages of 1995 and 1981 as well.

For further information, go to: www.weinausoesterreich.at