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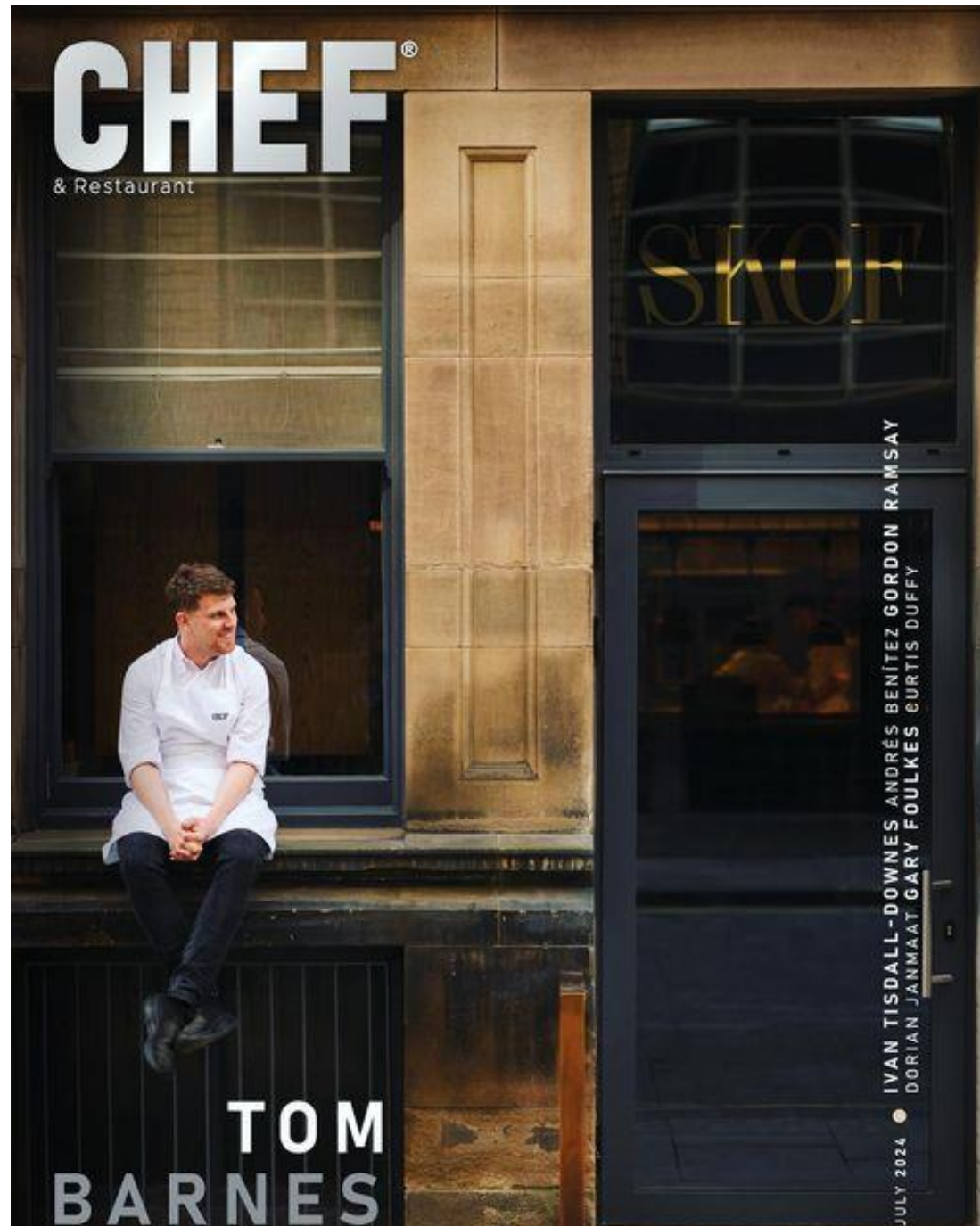
Chef & Restaurant Magazine

Wednesday 3 July 2024

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Circulation: 64,000

SPRITZ





## THE SOMMELIER DIARIES

Words Quentin Sadler



# Vienna's Sea

Looking across the vineyards around the village of Gols towards the Neusiedlersee and the village of Weiden-am-See.

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Vineyards near the Neusiedlersee

a wine region. Once lake tourism began here in the 1920s, the lake was often referred to as Vienna's Sea, or lake, as the capital is just 30 minutes or so away. Tourism remains an important draw to the area and the lake and its surroundings are a national park with UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Neusiedlersee is a D.A.C. in Burgenland, the south eastern section of Austria, whose capital is Eisenstadt. Austria has a wine labeling system called Districtus Austriae Controllatus, or D.A.C., which works exactly like A.O.C./A.O.P. in France in that it controls the boundaries of the area and the grapes that are permitted to be used. Until 1921 Sopron was the capital of Burgenland, but today it's in Hungary, southwest of the Neusiedlersee lake. About a third of the lake is in Hungary and the area around Sopron is an important Hungarian wine region. Although Austria-Hungary broke up 106 years ago, with both countries now in the EU Single Market several producers now make wine on both sides of the border.

Reed beds around the lake shore with wind turbines on the opposite shore

## WINES FROM AUSTRIA'S NEUSIEDLERSEE

AUSTRIAN WINE SEEMS TO BE THE FLAVOUR OF THE MOMENT. LAST MONTH, JEAN SMULLEN TOLD YOU ABOUT THE VIEVINUM WINE FAIR IN VIENNA AND THE WORK OF THE AUSTRIAN WINE MARKETING BUREAU. THIS MONTH QUENTIN SADLER FOCUSES ON A SINGLE AUSTRIAN WINE REGION.

Austria is a really exciting wine producing country that too often gets overlooked. It shouldn't as it produces so much terrific wine, in a wide range of styles and from an enormous array of grape varieties.

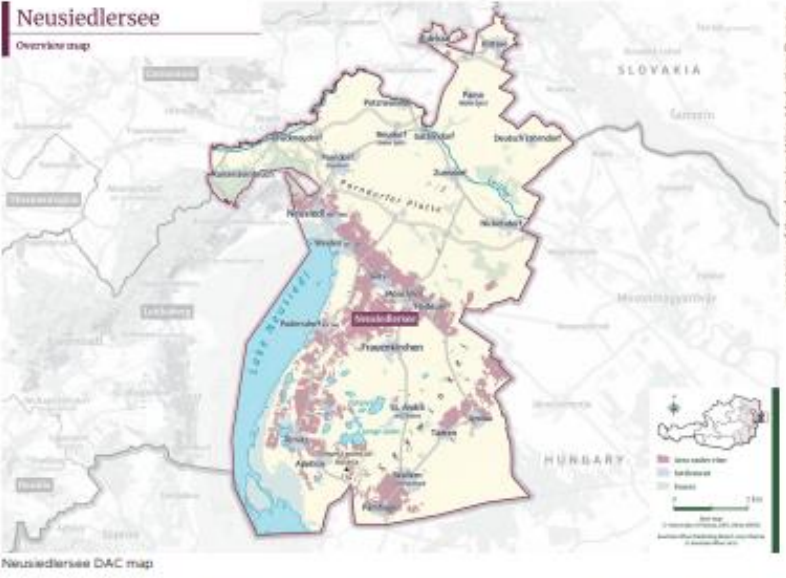
Recently I was fortunate enough to revisit a part of the country that really brings into focus just how vibrant the Austrian wine scene is. That place is Neusiedlersee (pronounced *Noy-seed-ler-sea*), which is both a lake and



The more well known wine areas in Austria, places such as Wachau, Wagram and Kremstal, are concentrated in Lower Austria (Niederösterreich) to the northwest. That region, as well as the regions of Steiermark and Wien (Vienna), produces much more white wine than red – hence Austria's reputation as a white wine producer.

In Burgenland as a whole black grapes account for 57% of total plantings and Neusiedlersee has a 49% black grapes to 51% white grape split – so red wine is much more important here than anywhere else in Austria.





A salt pond and the black soils of Heideboden near Illmitz

This success with red wine is partly because this is the sunniest part of Austria and partly because the Neusiedlersee lake used to be double the size. Much of it was drained in the early nineteenth century, just as the Médoc in Bordeaux was 150 years earlier. As in Bordeaux, this draining revealed a mixture of gravel soils perfect for red wine grapes. There are also sandy and loamy soils in the region.

The Neusiedlersee is a steppe lake, a shallow fragile lake on a plain – indeed the region is

just about the only flat land in Austria and the country's lowest spot is found in the vineyards right here – ironically not in Lower Austria!

Intriguingly the water is not freshwater, but has salt concentration making it about 1/20th of seawater. This salt comes from the sediments on the bottom of the lake basin. These were formed thousands of years ago when it was connected to the sea. This salty quality gets into some of the local soils and can impart a captivating minerality to the wines.

The size of the lake has fluctuated throughout history from its largest size of 515 km<sup>2</sup> to about 320 km<sup>2</sup> today. Along the way it has dried up completely many times, most recently in 1866, when part of the lake bed was used for agriculture, before it returned to its normal size in 1876. In 1949 the northern half of the lake dried up for a few weeks. Today the water level is controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Water Commission, so while it can no longer dry up, the level can fluctuate. Generally speaking it is no more than 1.8 m deep.



Franz Schneider in his beloved vineyards



Markus Iro waxing lyrical about his wines



Thomas Stadler and Günther Neukamp



Markus Lentsch

This really is a beautiful part of Austria and the conditions allow it to produce a range of diverse wine styles. Here are some of my favourite producers and their wines:

**ALLACHER VINUM PANNONIA, GOLS**  
The Allecher family farm around 36 hectares of sustainable vineyards around the village of Gols at the northern end of Neusiedlersee. The business is centred on a stunningly beautiful new, modern winery and visitor centre that sits in the middle of their vines, giving breathtaking views of their raw material.

**Try their:** pristine Grüner Veltliner and suave Zweigelt.

*Allacher Vinum Pannonia wines are distributed in the UK by GWGP Trade/Good Wine Good People.*

**MARKUS IRO, GOLS**  
Ingrid & Markus Iro are a dynamic couple who farm 24 hectares of vines, including some of the very best sites the region has to offer. Although their white wines are excellent, the focus here is on red wine production with the split being 70% red to 30% white wine.

**Try their:** silky, citrus Welschriesling, richly fruity and herbal Blaufränkisch and their supple, scented Zweigelt.

*Markus Iro wines are distributed in the UK by The Good Wine Shop.*

**NESTOR (NEUKAMP & STADLER), HALBTURN**  
The Stadler family have farmed their 39 hectare vineyard near Halbturm, right by the Hungarian border, for more than forty years. Thomas Stadler is the current head of the family and he decided to go into partnership with the jovial and fiercely driven Günther Neukamp in order to produce a top level range of wines aimed squarely at the export market.

**Try their:** funky, dry, skin-contact Gelber Muskateller, complex, Burgundian take on Pinot Gris, their fine Norton Cuvée red blend and their lacy and elegant Cabernet Franc.

*Nestor wines are distributed in the UK by GWGP Trade/Good Wine Good People.*

**SEEGUT LENTSCH, PODERSDORF**  
Brothers Thomas and Markus Lentsch are now the third generation to be in control of

their family winery. Based right by the lake in Podersdorf, hence the "Zeegut" rather than "Weingut" name for the estate, their vineyards are all in the Seewinkel zone – indeed their motto is "the lake in every drop".

**Try their:** fresh Grüner Veltliner, textured and complex Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris), juicy and supple Zweigelt, their captivating, Pinot-like St. Laurent.

*Seegut Lentsch wines are distributed in the UK by GWGP Trade/Good Wine Good People.*

**ARTISAN WINES, HALBTURN**  
This winery certainly lives up to its name. Franz Schneider and his partner Ulrike Schmed have just 7 hectares of vineyards. They farm sustainably and the different soils in their vineyards allow them to produce a wide range of wines; Zweigelt in the Seewinkel gravel and the whites in the lighter soils.

**Try their:** saline and citrus Welschriesling and their spicy, mocha-oak infused Zweigelt Reserve.

*Artisan Wines wines are distributed in the UK by Stone, Vine & Sun & HVin.*

**GEORG PREISINGER, GOLS**  
The Preisinger family have been linked to the land here since the 17th Century and formally established their farm in 1851, however it only became a wine estate in the early twentieth century. The current Georg Preisinger is the fifth generation of his family to be the custodian of the estate, which includes an impressive amount of old vines. He practices a form of viticulture called Horna Fire, which like biodynamics, is based on the bio-rhythms of sunrise and sunset. Fire rituals are carried out and the pure ash produced is used to enrich the soils. I have no idea what this does, but I do know that the wines are excellent and that I love the labels with their drawings of rockets!

**Try their:** ripe, velvety and complex Zweigelt 68 and their intensely fruity and spicy Zweigelt Heideboden Cru.

*Georg Preisinger wines are distributed in the UK by Milestone Wines.*







The beautiful winery and visitor centre at Allacher Vinum Pannonia in Gols

Despite its shallowness, the lake itself is the defining element in how the region's wines are created. Heat and humidity pour out from this large expanse of shallow water, this helps the ripening process and protects the vines from frosts. The lake is a windy place too, as evidenced by the number of wind farms, and the winds whip across the lake cooling the vineyards in the height of summer – which helps retain those all important acids.

The area around the lake remains marshy with reed beds making an excellent habitat for all sorts of wildlife. This helps maintain biodiversity that helps keep a natural balance in the nearby vineyards.

Seewinkel was historically a local name for the Neusiedlersee wine area. Since the 2021 vintage it has been officially approved as a sub-zone name for wines produced from the villages of Podersdorf down to Apetlon and Illmitz on the east/southeast side of the lake. This zone has a large number of shallow ponds that have particularly high salt content



Johannes Müzenrieder on the terrace at Allacher Vinum Pannonia



René Pöckl



Christoph Salz among his vines



Georg Preisinger on the terrace at Allacher Vinum Pannonia



The brothers Nittnaus, Andreas (left) and Hans Michael (right)

in the water and as a consequence are surrounded by especially salty soils.

Neusiedlersee sits at 47°, which is the same as Beaune in France's Burgundy wine region. It should come as no surprise then that the grape varieties grown here favour coolish conditions. Grüner Veltliner and Welschriesling are both important, but so are Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc (Weißburgunder) and Pinot Gris (Grauburgunder).

As for black grapes, while Pinot Noir is very rare, St Laurent is grown here and this excellent grape is believed to be a relative of Pinot – and certainly tastes like it. Blaufränkisch is well represented here and was historically grown right across the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The most important black grape though is Zweigelt, which is a cross between Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent propagated by Professor Fritz Zweigelt in 1922. It is disease resistant and can be very productive. As a consequence it appears in a huge range of styles from light, juicy simple wines, to concentrated, full-bodied barrel aged examples.

## WEINGUT PÖCKL, MÖNCHOF

Originally a family farm before becoming a wine estate after 1945, Pöckl have been a red wine only producer since 1986. The reason for this is that the soils of their 40 hectare holding are far more suitable for reds than whites, so they grow a lot of Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch, St Laurent and Pinot Noir. Fourth generation René Pöckl took over the running of the estate in 2021 and is now also experimenting with Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

**Try their:** their vibrant and fruity Zweigelt, mineral-laden Rosso e Nero (Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch, Merlot & Cabernet blend), big & bold Zweigelt Reserve, and their rich umami and salty Merlot.

Weingut Pöckl wines are distributed in the UK by SOMA Wines.

## GEBRÜDER NITNAUS, GOLS

Hans Michael and Andreas Nittnaus (the brothers Nittnaus) are scions of a family that have been farming around Gols for over 300 years – indeed the famous Weingut Anita und Hans Nittnaus is also in Gols. Hans Michael is the winemaker, while Andreas oversees sales. The estate was only established by their father in 1986, but has developed an enviable reputation for high quality. When you taste the wines you can see why.

**Try their:** their perfectly balanced Sheurebe dessert wine, their suave, spicy Zweigelt, and complex and floral Zweigelt Heideboden Cru.

Geb Brüder Nittnaus wines are distributed in the UK by Friarwood Fine Wines & Vagabond Wines.

## MÜZENRIEDER, APETLON

Johannes Müzenrieder farms 35 hectares in the Seewinkel zone with backbreaking detail, with no herbicides or pesticides. It was first planted by his grandfather in 1932 and in 1991 his father took the decision to bottle their own wines, rather than sell in bulk. They have never looked back and enjoy an excellent reputation for their supple reds and honeyed dessert wines.

**Try their:** their honeyed Sámiling TBA dessert wine, smooth and spicy Zweigelt, and mocha-oak tinged single-vineyard Zweigelt Ried Luckenwald.

Müzenrieder wines are distributed in the UK by Milestone Wines.

## SALZ SEEWINKELHOF, ILLMITZ

The Salz family have been farming in Illmitz, two thirds of the way down the lake and near the modern Hungarian border, since 1840 – so would have witnessed the lake drying up and possibly grown crops on what is now the lake bed. It was not until after 1945 that Herbert Salz turned purely to producing wine. As is common in Austria, the initial focus was on white wines and it was not until the 1980s that his son Josef planted red grape varieties, with 2000 being his first red wine vintage. Today the winery is run by his son Christoph.

**Try their:** their bright, juicy and fruity Zweigelt, mineral Zweigelt Selection, silky and complex Zweigelt Sacris Ried Löss,

## SALZ SEEWINKELHOF WINES ARE DISTRIBUTED IN THE UK BY NORTH SOUTH WINES.

Some of my favourite producers who do not yet have UK distribution are, Hannes Reeh, Preiner Wein, Kammere Weine and Keringer.

As you can see, this beautiful part of Austria is home to many small family run wine estates, which are just as much part of the region's landscape as the lake itself. As a consequence they produce thrilling wines that speak of this lovely place and seem to convey the character of the land – and the lake – into their wines. The freshness, the minerality, the salty quality, the bright, savoury notes all seem to reflect the lake and local terroir. The families themselves – linked as they are to this land over generations – provide the human element of this terroir, understanding the rhythms of the growing season and the foibles of each vineyard block. They also provide the vision of how to apply the most modern wine growing and winemaking techniques to produce wines that are brighter and fresher and still retain the essential characters of Neusiedlersee. Georg Preisinger, whose family have made wine here for nearly 200 years summed it up beautifully: "you can taste the origin of good wine. The love for it, too."

These wines deserve to be more widely known. They are very versatile and food friendly, so would sit perfectly on many different wine lists and give drinkers some real excitement and new wine experiences.