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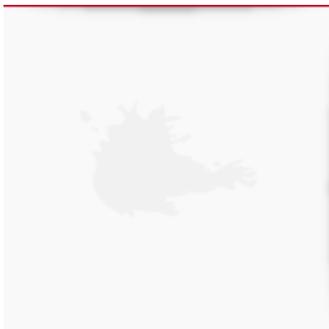
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Roland Velich and great Blaufrankisch

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This interview was preceded by a meeting that had happened in Austria two years ago.

Roland Velich presented his Moric project, uniquely dedicated to Blaufrankisch, at a large tasting in Burgenland. Velich wines were different. They caressed the palate, stirred emotions and made one listen to a story about little known Blaufrankisch grape. Another meeting happened a year later. When there was a chance to meet Velich for the third time, I asked for an interview. He agreed, and thus came a conversation that opened mysteries of the grape and its dedicated winemaker.

– *So, Blaufrankisch wines...*

– You know there are a lot of modernist driven wines. They are blended, maybe focused on traditional European varieties with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah, there is a lot of new oak, meaning new tradition, new technology. Our wines are different.

– *Sounds like true Blaufrankisch character is hidden behind other things.*

– Yes, people cannot recognize it. It is quite unknown for historical and social reasons. Pannonia where Burgenland is found was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for a long time and was influenced by Hungarian winemaking tradition. Blaufrankisch, or Kekfrankos, was made in Sopron which is now in Hungary. When Blaufrankisch was widely planted in Burgenland, its idea was based on Kekfrankos from Sopron. Burgenland has been part of German speaking Austria for 80 years, but traditional winemaking and culinary rules of this area have lost substance in a certain way.

Look at Mittelburgenland — it is a bit higher and more away from the Neusiedlersee Lake. There is, of course, lake influence, but it is not as intense as in Gols, for example. As it is also on average 100 metres higher, the microclimatic situation is a little bit cooler, especially in Neckenmarkt where the vineyards are going up to 400 metres. This brings us back to the question that people don't really recognize nature's potential. In this area winemakers should make elegant, fine wines, but instead they sometimes try to copy expressive styles you find in Spain or in Italy which is definitely a pity because there is so much elegance and minerality in our terroir.

– *How can you describe Blaufrankisch character in general?*

– It sits somewhere in between Burgundy Pinot Noir and Syrah of the Northern Rhone. There is cherry elegance and fruitiness like in Pinot and juicy, spicy aromas like in the Northern Rhone Syrah. Sometimes we are reminded a little bit of Nebbiolo. It's a rather incomparable grape variety and very ageable. We did a lot of tastings of old basic wines and were pleased with the results, especially for 1983 or 1985 vintages. Blaufrankisch deserves big success.

– *When did you first realize that the grape has unique potential?*

– We started the Moric project in 2001, but of course we followed Blaufrankisch

for quite a long time. I've been in wine business since the beginning of the eighties. I would say 1986 was a turning point. It was a vintage with normal bottlings of very simple farmers, but the grape was able to express the soul of the region. I found that quite interesting, so I followed that and then became efficient in making Blaufrankisch in a cooler climate, on mineral soils.

– *How difficult is it to cultivate the variety?*

– Not as difficult as with Pinot Noir, for example. It doesn't easily develop botrytis which is quite important. It is a late ripening grape and needs to be harvested late to get good pH, acidity and balance. Yields shouldn't be high, like with any classic grape variety. It is a pity that in Austria the Lenz Moser trellising system uses only 3,000-3,500 vines per hectare which is not good for high quality wines. I believe in higher density, up to 6,000-7,000 vines. Then results start getting interesting. We are lucky that we have found some very old vineyards which are nearly 7,000 plants per hectare. This is very important.

– *You always stress that Moric wines are made in a traditional way. On the other side, their style is not rustic or old-fashioned. How do you combine tradition with a refined style?*

– Of course, through the yields. Low yields give great finesse to the wine. It also helps that we harvest late. In 2005, for example, our grapes were left in the vineyard to be picked up last in Neckenmarkt. But we take risk. In 2004 we lost a crop in Lutzmannsburg. The quality was great, then there was a fog for 2 days, and everything was rotten. Late harvest doesn't mean overripe grapes. It means harvest at the perfect time. Overripeness is not good if we want to have the elegant prime fruit character. So we have to harvest at the right point.

– *Let's talk about terroirs. The idea of the Moric project is to show how Blaufrankisch reflects two different types of terroirs. What are they like?*

– Indeed, we wanted to prove that Blaufrankisch is a great grape variety and can retain the characteristics of terroir in wine. Both terroirs are very intense. On the one hand, Lutzmannsburg vineyards are located on a former volcanic hill. Today it's mainly of clay soil which brings more fatness and a quite intense tannic structure. On the other hand, there are steep slopes, up to 400 metres, in Neckenmarkt which is a typical situation for the Pannonian area where you have down limestone soil which came from the Pannonic sea and then schist soil. The altitude is between 250 and 400 metres in Neckenmarkt.

So we have steep slopes, formed terraces, small plateaus, amphitheatres — 12 vineyards in total. They grow on clay, limestone, schist and have different altitudes and expositions. We harvest, vinify and do initial 8-10 months of aging for them all separately. It helps to see the quality of different sites and to follow wines' development in the first 8-10 months. Then we blend lots, thus blending different soils which bring complexity in the wine.

There are vineyards which are very interesting to bottle as single wine, but nobody really knows Blaufrankisch outside of Austria. To me it is important transport the idea of Blaufrankisch in two Burgenland communes — Neckenmarkt and Lutzmannsburg as they are so different. I think it works better when you work with different vineyards and blend them together. You can overcome slight problems with vintages because in some years lighter soils are better than schist soils. Clay brings elegance to the wine, and the schist soil brings juicy, spicy character. On the highest vineyards we always have kind of impression of dry hay or wet stone. Sometimes with different vintages we have an impression of a white wine with red wine aromas. Limestone brings the backbone, the structure so we can play around it. Now we have for example 12 different vineyards of 2006 in the cellar — it is so exciting to see how they develop.

– *The issue of whether to blend or to make a single vineyard wine is complex indeed. For instance, in Barolo they traditionally made blends, and cru wines*

are a recent phenomenon.

– For a winemaker it's important to work with separate wines in the cellar, but I don't know if it is the best solution for a final product. Yesterday I met Jean-Louis Chave from Hermitage. He has about 10 crus on the Hermitage hill. He vinifies them all separately and then blends together. He says this is the old, traditional way of making Hermitage wine that gives elegant, fine style. I share the same idea. When we taste separate parts and blends in our cellar, the majority prefers blends.

– Moric wines recently got an important recognition in The Wine Advocate where they received the highest scores among the Austrian red wines. Did it help attract attention to your project?

– I think it gave security to a lot of people. When Blaufrankisch wines are young, they are like Burgundy — vertical, rather than horizontal. Quite often there is a difficulty for tasters because wines seem thin and acidic. When non-professionals read Parker comments, they get assured. In Austria a lot of Austrian people don't like Blaufrankisch, but now say that this is great wine. Step by step, strong interest comes from export markets also.

– How much do you export?

– Around 80 percent. I wanted to make an exclusive product. We have low yields and there is no choice. When the yields are only 18-20 hl/ha, you have to have certain price and find the right people, otherwise you cannot survive. We are quite successful in Switzerland, a traditional Burgundy market, also in Germany, Benelux, Sweden, England. They are exported to Japan and Hong Kong — just in small quantities, but for the right places.

– You also organize private seminars and dinners in partnership with a famous Austrian hotel Almhof. Is it important?

– Certainly. On the one hand, there is a special ambiance thanks to a high class hotel. On the other — there is a chance to communicate directly with customers. When you are sitting at a table, the first idea of the wines is to match with food. We don't produce wine for abstract drinking. It should be drunk with food — this is what wine needs. Therefore it's the best way to serve it is at the table, with the right food.

– What dishes do you recommend for Blaufrankisch?

– A wide range. If you want to be traditional, there is goulash. Blaufrankisch also goes well with pigeon, pheasant and raw meat. You can take hints from Pinot Noir, or Syrah, or maybe Nebbiolo. It's a classic red wine, in this way it can match classic European dishes.

– If you were to imagine your future in twenty years time, what would you like to see?

– Ideally I would have a house and a little cellar in a middle of a vineyard, and just 3-4 hectares to work with. It is a lot of fun to develop something which wasn't developed before. When I started to make wine, the idea was of a certain way of life and not of producing something. I saw myself in the middle of the vines, in the nature, very romantic. In real life it's totally different. One day I would love to come back to my first romantic idea of wine.

And Blaufrankisch will make its way — this is not only my view. It is a great variety and Burgenland is a great wine growing country. There is a number of reasons why Burgenland is not at the place where it should be at the moment, but hopefully it will get there.



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