

# Austria's Wine Quarter

A new generation reimagines the Weinviertel

by David Schildknecht

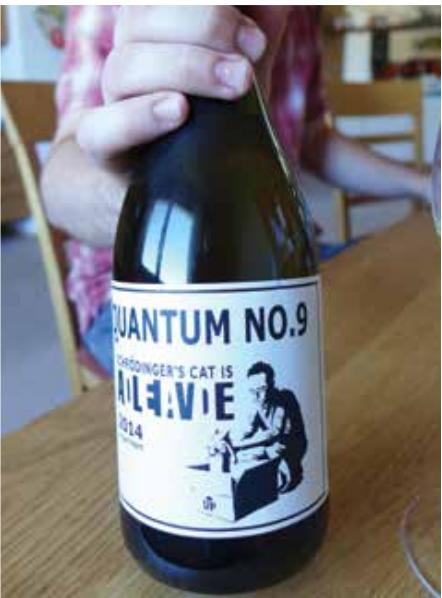


Photo of Ingrid Gross courtesy of the winery; other photos by David Schildknecht

"The Weinviertel is a sleeping giant with unbelievable potential but low self-esteem," says Marion Ebner, who in 2007 relinquished the comforts of Vienna and a vanity label that had gained her justifiable local renown, to join her husband, Manfred Ebenauer, at his family's estate in Austria's extreme northeast. Poysdorf, with its dozens of diminutive, largely abandoned press houses lining the *kellergassen* that separate Weinviertel villages from their vineyards, and its 360-degree vista of vine-clad hills rolling to the horizon, struck her as pretty far from nowhere. This village's growers, like most in the vast "Wine Quarter" of Lower Austria, were isolated for decades from traditional markets by the Iron Curtain, but they were thankful to at least be scraping by on the lucky side of that demoralizing divide. A widely traveled post-Cold War generation is now becoming aware of its viticultural good fortune. Theirs is the region from which grüner veltliner began its long march to the head of Austria's varietal roster. Yet when this grape, long-disparaged as an undistinguished mass-producer, entered the international spotlight thanks to a cadre of overachieving late-20th-century Krems-area growers and their agents, its newfound fame merely rippled across the Weinviertel as enhanced demand for a varietal commodity, without enhancing the region's reputation. "Especially at the beginning," reports Ebner, echoing a refrain familiar among this new generation of Weinviertel vintners.

"Our regional identity hindered us more than it helped, at least domestically; which is why we concentrated from the start on developing export markets."

"It's a bit sad," relates Ingrid Groiss, in another typical Weinviertel refrain: "Although Breitenwaida is a mini-village of only two hundred inhabitants, we have four separate *kellergassen* and now I'm the only one who makes wine." Yet Groiss, who started out in 2010 with a parcel from her grandmother, rapidly came to a sober realization: "Farmers don't want to sell their land." Fortunately, her father was able to trade some grain acreage for one vineyard, and long hours that Groiss invested in convincing old-timers of her sincerity and diligence proved well spent.

That persuasiveness won't surprise anyone whom Groiss guides through the acreage she has managed to rent in three far-flung sectors of the Weinviertel, ranging from her home base a mere dozen miles north of the Danube, to within sight of the Czech frontier. Nearly every other sentence in her enthusiastic narrative includes the word *spannend* — "exciting, fascinating." And you'll nod.

"I take people up here to destroy their image of the Weinviertel as endlessly gentle terrain and loamy soil," says Groiss, gesturing toward the pre-

cipitous hillsides where a kaleidoscopic array of sand, mica schist and ancient, iron-rich Danube gravel are exposed on the surface; the conglomerate mother rock beneath drove her to contemplate dynamite as a means of establishing young vines. Some of Groiss's vineyards are indeed gentle and loamy, but even from those, what gets into the glass is *spannend*. Here, as at other promising Weinviertel estates, diversity of terroir is creatively compounded by diversity of *cépage* and winemaking. While grüner veltliner dominates her portfolio, Groiss is nursing a newfound passion for riesling as part of Weinviertel tradition. In less than 18 months, she went from telling me, "Should I accept this plot of riesling I've been offered? That isn't really what the Weinviertel is about," to "I'm finding riesling parcels in lots of places and their owners are telling me these were among their family's first mono-cépage vineyards." She's also taken to reviving *Gemischte Sätze* (field blends): "Herr Bernhard" takes its name from the oldest man in Breitenwaida, who, over strenuous family objections, offered his ancient vines to Groiss, then threw in

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Marion Ebner and Manfred Ebenauer; Ingrid Groiss and her grandmother, Anna J.; Erwin Poller; Florian Schuhmann's Schrödingers Katze bottling; vineyards in Poysdorf; Ingrid Groiss with the soils of Fahndorf.

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—Herbert Zillinger



his cellar to boot. The wine represents an as yet undetermined number of varieties co-fermented on their skins in a *demi-muid*. "I studied every vine in my Oma's old Gemischter Satz," relates Groiss, "and if I got stuck and couldn't identify one from the books, I'd go ask her, and she might say, 'Why, Ingrid, don't you know, that's brauner veltliner!'" Now that Groiss's grandmother is gone, an inventory of Herr Bernhard's vines might take somewhat longer.

A divide runs through the western Weinviertel between degraded Mannhartsberg granite and calcareous loam, reminding one of the similar partitioning in Beaujolais. And if Florian Schuhmann, another recently minted vintner, hasn't experimented with gamay, that probably isn't due to legal impediments, as he has tapped into Gemischte Sätze that incorporate not just indigenous varieties but pinot noir, meunier, syrah and malbec. "I bottle everything simply as 'Austrian Wine,'" he explains, "no 'Qualitätswein,' no 'Weinviertel DAC'" — the local, grüner veltliner-only appellation — "and to this day not a single customer has commented on their absence." A professional actor, Schuhmann nursed his wine ambitions while working at the Pollerhof for Erwin Poller, one of the Weinviertel's most inspiring veterans. Many of the practices and projects at Schuhmann's Quantum Winery — such as skin-fermented whites; unfined, unfiltered, low-sulfur bottling off of the full lees; reds designed to test the limits of blauer portugieser; or an amazing *methode traditionnelle* of grüner veltliner and zweigelt sold undisgorged — have no Pollerhof precursors.

But Poller harbors his own wacky, ultimately delicious notions, such as a self-described "sociological project" in which chickens, rescued from imminent slaughter, have been given free run of a vineyard to mutual benefit. (The bottled product features a glued-on feather, and was labeled "Pipi" until some of his clients persuaded Poller to adopt *Hühnergarten* — "hen's garden.")

Michael Gindl, who farms a few miles from the border with Slovakia, midway between Vienna and Poysdorf, renamed his family's estate "MG Vom Sol," to reflect the sun, "le sol," "soul," as well as the three-letter name of Hohenruppersdorf's principle vineyard. He is a biodynamic proponent of low-tech, low-sulfur, late-bottling practices resulting in a disarmingly distinctive array of wines, some raised in barrels coopered from Gindl's ancient stands of acacia. The more one looks, the more one discovers that contemporary thinking among Weinviertel producers is decidedly outside the box, not to mention outside that box labeled "DAC."

Herbert and Carmen Zillinger's calcaire-rich sand-and-loess vineyards, just southeast of Gindl's, practically hug the Slovakian border and benefit, like so many in the Weinviertel, from breezy expo-

sure and proximity to cooling woods. The Zillingers focus their most creative work on variations on grüner veltliner, including fascinating hands-off bottlings under the designation "Radikal," as well as explorations of that grape's singular potential to deliver delicious diversity at alcohol levels well under the 12 percent minimum required under the DAC. "Using alcohol as a yardstick of quality," notes Herbert Zillinger, "is anything but timely. We strive, and regularly succeed, through our vineyard management, to crush physiologically ripe grapes that are relatively low in sugar. The trend internationally is clearly toward lower alcohol, and that calls for rethinking within the Weinviertel."

Hermann and Maria Hofer, two Austrian pioneers of organic viticulture who farm an oil-rich, incongruously derrick-studded vineyard sector not far north of Vienna, are more conventional in the press house and cellar than some of their younger colleagues, but they don't need to rethink the issue of alcoholic levity, since their extensive range of grüner veltliner seldom slights brightness or buoyancy, and their subtly complex, absurdly inexpensive Gemischter Satz rarely reaches 12 percent alcohol by volume. Apropos of which, Schuhmann's "Schrödinger's Katze" — an infectious and striking grüner veltliner-dominated blend from 2010 — weighed in at just 10 percent alcohol, as rare for a modern grüner veltliner as it is among consummate, genuinely dry Mosel rieslings, but probably unachievable in any other genre.

Low prices are only one of several long-standing challenges to succeeding as a Weinviertel *winzer*. Another is the region's proclivity to frost and hail. Even many outstanding growers continue to hedge their agricultural bets. Gindl raises Highland cattle, renders pumpkin seed oil and brews beer. The Hofers are among many who perpetuate the two-century-old Austrian tradition of running a *heuriger*, a tavern where wine and rustic fare are dispensed to locals or to city folk on an outing.

"Two or three vintages in succession like 2010 would be an existential threat," remarks Erwin Poller of a year free from major frost or hail but "merely" plagued by poor flowering and incessant rain. As for existential threats, the next extremely small and challenging harvest, that of 2014, saw Poller literally carried from the field in its midst, but back from hospital in time to see some vibrant young wines through bottling. "Having been told I had come within twenty minutes of dying," he says, "I'm more in love than ever with my vineyards and my profession." Perhaps a secret regional strength is that the Weinviertel's rigors naturally select for growers with resilience, determination and devotion. Nature dealt the vines themselves an awful hand in 2010 and 2014, yet what the wines lacked in volume they made up in vibrancy and delicious distinctiveness. ■