



## MIXED CASE: OPINION AND ADVICE

# Exploring Styria: Austria's Hidden Gem

Get to know the ABCs (and DACs) of this Austrian region producing Sauvignon Blancs and Chardonnays unlike those found anywhere else in the world



Maria & Sepp Muster's Sgaminegg vineyard in Austria's Styria region (Aleks Zecevic)

By Aleks Zecevic



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Austria occupies a niche market in the United States, often overshadowed by its wine giant neighbors Germany and Italy. Nevertheless, Austria's wines, led by its signature Grüner Veltliners, have earned their place on the world stage.

The country's major winegrowing regions are located along its eastern border, and Americans will be most familiar with the northeastern Niederösterreich region, home to top appellations Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal. Below Niederösterreich lies Burgenland, where [Blaufränkisch is the leading red](#) and where [the late Alois Kracher's extraordinary dessert wines](#) from the Neusiedlersee subregion might be Austria's most coveted vinous export.

And south of Burgenland, on the border of Slovenia, the region that stands out for me as Austria's most beautiful: Styria, where the verdant natural splendor has earned it the nickname "The Green Heart of Austria."

Styria is Austria's best-kept secret. A drive through the region's rolling green hills, lush forests and picturesque villages is a storybook experience, and all along the way are traditional winery-run taverns known as *buschenschank*, offering house wines and local hearty dishes. Most important, the quality of Styria's wine is very much on the rise.

Less than 10 percent of Austria's wine comes from Styria, but in 2018, three of its subregions—Vulkanland Steiermark, Südsteiermark and Weststeiermark—were elevated to Districtus Austriae Controllatus (DAC) status, Austria's equivalent to France's Appellations d'Origine Contrôlée. These three DACs are the names to seek for a taste of this region's exciting up-and-coming wines.

The hearty Welschriesling grape (no relation to Riesling) dominates the region, but Styria's diverse top *terroirs* are dedicated to more characterful varieties. The most important grape in Vulkanland Steiermark is Sauvignon Blanc, but Traminer gets special treatment as well, yielding light-bodied but highly aromatic and minerally wines with unique spice profiles. Sauvignon Blanc is also the top grape in Südsteiermark, but the region's Chardonnays, known here as Morillon, are worth pursuing for their mineral-driven and high-acid profiles, similar to those of France's Jura. Finally, in Weststeiermark, the indigenous Blauer Wildbacher grape is used to make the region's invigorating Schilcher rosés.

### Building a Foundation of Quality

Steirische Terroir & Klassik Weingüter (STK) is a group of 12 Styrian producers dedicated to raising the quality bar and championing sustainability. Its founders set the standards that served as the framework for the rules adopted by Styria's three DACs. "It started out of friendship, but today the goal is to push [higher] quality for the whole region," says STK vintner Alex Sattler. Light-bodied wines of elegance and minerality are the common denominators among STK's member wineries.

The leading producer of the group is Armin [Tement](#), whose 250-acre estate is the largest privately owned winery in Südsteiermark. Winemaking here leans toward the non-interventionist school, with spontaneous [native yeast](#) fermentations and minimal additions of sulfur. Tement's white wines also get up to three days of skin contact, or [maceration](#), which adds to their structure and creates crunchier textures. The best wines here are the single-vineyard bottlings, led by the Südsteiermark Ried Zieregg IZ Reserve, which is made entirely from Sauvignon Blanc—the [2012 vintage](#) (\$120) earned 94 points in my official blind tasting. The wine is a rarity to say the least: After a 100-day [slow carbonic maceration](#), the grapes are pressed and the juice is aged on its [lees](#) for five years in neutral oak barrels. "We can only use tight [grape] bunches with small berries," says Tement, explaining that the cuvée can't be made every year. Although this type of fermentation (most famously employed for Beaujolais Nouveau) is normally used to produce light-bodied, fruit-forward red wines, the IZ Reserve is distinctly complex.

Also in Südsteiermark, the Sattler family has been growing vines since the late 19th century, but it was Willi Sattler, now joined by his sons Andreas and Alex, who set the [Sattlerhof](#) brand on the path to quality. In 2013, the Sattlers converted to organic farming, but Alex wants to push their viticultural program further. "I've been reading a lot about [biodynamic](#) farming and am very interested in this holistic approach," he says. Sattlerhof's Sauvignon Blancs are precise and linear, with distinctive silkiness; the [2017 TBA Südoststeiermark](#) (\$65/375ml) earned 95 points.



Christoph Neumeister's latest vintages lie in wait. (Courtesy of Weingut Neumeister)

Another key member of STK is [Neumeister](#), in Vulkanland Steiermark. Led by Christoph Neumeister, the 75-acre estate has been farmed organically since 2008. Neumeister likes high density in his vineyards. "I like my plants to compete for nutrients with one another, because that way they give me high-quality fruit," he explains. The Sauvignon Blancs and other whites have electric acidity that take years to integrate; the [2015 Sauvignon Blanc Vulkanland Steiermark Ried Moarfeit](#) (93 points, \$61), is intense, focused and refined.

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