

# Eleonora Scholes' Site

## on wine and drinks



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#### Styrian Chic

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If you think that the best dry white wines of Austria can be found only in Wachau, Kamptal or Kremstal, it means you have not yet discovered another amazing Austrian region.

It is Styria where winemakers have mastered several white varieties.

The first striking thing about Styria for any traveler is not even wine, but gorgeous natural surroundings. If you drive from Vienna in a southern direction, in about half an hour you can see landscapes remotely reminding of those of Styria. High green hills, deep valleys — but the place lacks vineyards.

True Styrian lands start in 250 km from the Austrian capital. They cover the south-eastern part of the country adjoining Slovenia. One of the first landmarks is Kapfenstein whose old castle perched on the hill opens picturesque surroundings from the height of a bird's flight. Small settlements scattered around on soft hills among fields, forests and vineyards is an idyllic landscape that long stays in the traveler's memories.

This is where winemaking Styria starts, too. The region is divided in three zones — Southeast, South and West. Territories of Southeast and West look impressive on the map. Yet their total vineyard area is smaller than that of South Styria that cuts a wedge between the two neighbours. Sudsteiermark leads not only in the surface of plantings which take 1,740 ha. It is the most significant Styrian region for production of high quality white wines.

South Styria is a point of many attractions. Firstly, it offers variety of both grapes and styles. Welschriesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay are the leading grapes of the area. Nearly all are well known on the world scene, but their international character does not mean production of look-alike wines with a hard to determine origin. Not at all. Local terroirs and winemaking practices are so unique that, once you recognize them, you can make accurate portraits for wines of different varieties.

Perhaps, it is especially true for Sauvignon Blanc. Not long ago the grape was appreciated for its grassy, green peppery notes. Now the accent has moved towards fruitiness. South Styrian Sauvignon Blanc shows original gooseberry taste. It is an appealing taste of ripe, sweet berries without tart, 'green' acidity. The expression of ripe gooseberries is so prominent that it can be classed as a typical feature of local wines. Many producers aim to highlight fruitiness of young sauvignons by vinifying them in stainless steel tanks and noting 'classic' on the label. Willi Sattler of Weingut Sattlerhof does it, too. He is among leading Austrian producers of Sauvignon Blanc, and his basic Sauvignon Blanc Steirische Klassik, which is bottled in March following the harvest, reflects freshness, cleanliness and fruitiness of young Styrian wines.

This is only the first touch in the portrait of South Styrian Sauvignon. "To me it

is the most fascinating variety", says Roland Tscheppe of Vin'o Tscheppe winery. He knows what he is talking about as he grows at least 7 white varieties at his vineyards. The thing is that Styrian producers find it of high importance to communicate features of various vineyards through wines. They are like German or even Burgundian winemakers in this respect. Sauvignon Blanc perfectly 'absorbs' character of different terroirs of South Styria — like Riesling does it in Mosel or Chardonnay in Cote d'Or. A single vineyard is called Ried, and its character is influenced by soils, climate, position and other natural factors. Two best plots in Tscheppe's domains are Possnitzberg and Czamillonberg, former historic properties of the Polish aristocrat Woraciczki. The former bares structural wines with fine aromas and exotic fruit flavours, the latter — full-bodied wines with elegant fruitiness and a great aging potential. Tscheppe uses French barriques for Sauvignon Czamillonberg which do not overshadow, but highlight noble terroir.

If people of South Styria decided to elect a king of terroir Sauvignons, the most likely candidates would be brothers Erich and Walter Polz of Weingut Polz. They own 45 hectares (a considerable figure for a mountainous area!) planted to Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Traminer and other varieties. Hochgrassnitzberg and Therese are outstanding for Sauvignon crus. Hochgrassnitzberg, for instance, is rated in top five vineyards of South Styria. Its warm soils of sand and limestone and southern exposition of the slope provide ideal ripening conditions. The wines feature unconventional, but highly gastronomic flavours of beeswax and propolis. The Polz brothers create two wines at Hochgrassnitzberg — regular, aged in wooden vats and reserve, made in the best years with partial use of barriques. Therese is the second famous vineyard. It is the highest and lies at the altitude of 450 m. Slate soils give wines corresponding minerality and bright citrus flavours.

Manfred Tement's Sauvignons from the best cru Zieregg have large-scale proportions. This is thanks to the superb quality of harvest that fully ripens on the sedimentary marine soils. Tement is not afraid to experiment with new oak and leaves young wines in barrels and vats for several months. But that doesn't affect the fundamentality of Zieregg terroir. Wines reach the peak of greatness after 5-7 years, and oak aging supports well their structure.

Naturally, influence of the place is valid not only for Sauvignon Blanc, but for other varieties, such as Chardonnay, Muskateller, Weissburgunder and Gewurztraminer. All white wines of South Styria have a common feature — bright, impeccably clean aromas of fruit and spices. They are the consequence of dramatic terroirs which were formed on the grounds of ancient extinct volcanoes. Soils are very varied — from basalt and volcanic to limestone and sandy. Vineyards are planted on high steep slopes with marked difference between day and night temperatures. Skilful matching of grapes to terroirs gives authentic wines with nuances of terroirs.

All the earlier mentioned winemakers produce complex Chardonnays from single vineyards, such as Polz Morillon Obegg or Tement Morillon Zieregg. By the way, the variety is better known as Morillon, although both names can be found on the labels.

Very appealing wines are made from local Gelber Muskateller variety. They have gentle floral aromas, fresh acidity and light flavours and are traditionally served for aperitif. More serious versions of Muskateller also exist — like an elegant, mineral single vineyard Gelber Muskateller Ratscher Nussberg by Gross winery.

Alois Gross' Gewurztraminer from Gamlitzberg vineyard is just as refined. The same variety wine by Tscheppe — Gewurztraminer Reserve Possnitzberg — confirms that their style in South Styria is softer and more feminine than, say, in Alsace.

Riesling also produces curious results on the Styrian land. According to Gerhard

Wohlmuth Jr., it was the main variety of the area a hundred years ago. At present it can be hardly found. This is a shame as cool climate on high hills and plots with slate soils are ideal for this great variety. The best evidence is Wohlmuth Riesling Altenberg, a world-class wine with a terroir character originating from Altenberg vineyard that lies at 600 m above the sea.

There are also sparkling wines. Their production is limited, and usually they are just a short extension to the traditional range. The most promising are those from the new Aera Vinum winery. It specializes in sparklers and uses Welschriesling, Rhine Riesling, Chardonnay and Gruner Veltliner. The wines are made by Charmat method, but they are aged on lees for 3 years. It gives the finished products that wonderful extra dimension.

Other wines are made in Styria, too, like Zweigelt reds or original Blauer Wildbacher roses. Yet, the signature wines of the region remain to be the whites. Without them a true picture of great 'white' Austria would be incomplete, and their star is shining brighter and brighter on the world wine horizon.



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