



Austrian Reds Reward Wine Drinkers With a Sense of Adventure

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Sometime before too long, you're going to walk into a wine store and see some or all of these words: Blaufränkisch, St. Laurent and Zweigelt. Do not be alarmed! It's just more evidence of the bounty of interesting, distinctive, world-wide wines ever more available to consumers.

You've probably read pundits foaming at the mouth about how all wine is becoming "international" and tasting the same. Like so much conventional wisdom, this is hogwash. While it's true that far too many wines all over the world have substituted oak for fruit and simplicity for personality, those wines are quickly replaced these days by other wines that still offer new, different, interesting flavors. That doesn't mean everyone will like them, but they all help fill in the rainbow of tastes.

Exhibits B through Z today are Blaufränkisch, St. Laurent and Zweigelt. They are three prominent red wines from Austria. While Austria is best-known for its whites, and especially its signature grape, Grüner Veltliner, more reds are showing up on shelves these days, too. Blaufränkisch is the same grape known elsewhere as Lemberger; St. Laurent is related to Pinot Noir; and Zweigelt is a cross of the two that has become Austria's most widely planted red grape. If you see one of these, should you try it? What should you expect? We bought a sampling of each varietal off the shelves of stores in four states and conducted three separate blind tastings to find out.

We'll get to our conclusions and our descriptions of the wines in a minute, but, first, let's discuss food. Whenever we conduct a tasting, we talk about what dishes might pair well with the wines we're trying. As we went back over our notes, here are some of the foods that came up during these tastings: Game, Black bread, Venison with juniper berries, Foie gras paté, Rabbit stew, Veal stew, Sauerkraut, Grainy mustards, Oily fish, Mushrooms, Curried lentils.

That unusual list of food pairings should give you some idea of the unusual tastes we found in these wines. They were certainly different from each other. The Zweigelt tasted most of black pepper and seemed simple and charming, generally a wine that was gulpable yet filled with personality; the Blaufränkisch had berry-like tastes that were very approachable and easy; and the St. Laurent was most elegant, with stature and sometimes a velvety texture.

But what was remarkable about these wines was what they had in common. Overall, they looked dark and smelled dark and spicy, bursting with blueberry and blackberry fruit as well as some juicy plums. From the look and the nose, we would guess they were big red wines. In the mouth, though, they were surprisingly light-bodied. In fact, when we closed our eyes, some of them reminded us of Sauvignon Blanc, with its tart, grapefruit acidity. They were generally ripe yet light, with vibrant, berry-like tastes. Many of them offered tastes of sage, tarragon and other spices, sometimes along with some licorice.

At various times, we compared their various tastes to red Burgundy from France, Malbec from Argentina and Pinotage from South Africa. Rarely has a tasting taken us quite so many times around the world.

As Dottie put it at one point in the tasting, "These taste foreign," and, at another, "These taste local and real, like a regional grape." These wines really do taste like they come from someplace different. They are wines with an authentic sense of place and that is something that we love in wine. These are also wines that were made for food; they could stand up to game, but they're light enough on their feet that they wouldn't add to the heaviness of the meal. We happened to be tasting a flight of Zweigelt one night when we had take-out barbecue chicken and the lively pepperiness and easy drinkability of the wine paired beautifully with the food -- not just its tastes but its informal, slightly rustic sense.

The attached index of our favorites will give you some idea what these wines taste like and how much they cost, but it's impossible to know which Austrian reds you might see. All fine wine is made in limited quantities and distribution is haphazard. The total production of our single favorite wine of the tasting, for instance, Fischer St. Laurent, was 600 cases, of which 100 cases were imported and distributed in California, Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey and New York, according to the importer, Vignaioli Selection of New York City.

It's a great time to be a wine drinker with an open mind and a sense of adventure. We can't promise that you will love these Austrian reds, but we can tell you that the wines we tasted were generally well-made, distinctive and enjoyable. They're worth a try.

ZWEIGELT			
Hillinger 2006 (Burgenland)	Very Good	\$18.99	Best of tasting. Utterly charming, with black pepper and verve and a winning fruitiness. Boldly grapey. Plenty of character, but not challenging. Lovely with food.
Steininger 'Novemberlese' 2006 (Kamptal)	Good/Very Good	\$15.99	Very purple, like grape juice, and, indeed, it tastes grapey and fun, with a dry finish and a touch of chocolate.

KWSelection also imports: www.kwselection.com

Hillinger St. Lauren, Steindorfer St Laurent Reserve

Anton Bauer Wagram Reserve and Wagram Cuvee 11 – both are blended with Blaufrankisch

Anton Bauer Zweigelt and soon in stock Tegernseerhof Zweigelt Rose 2007

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