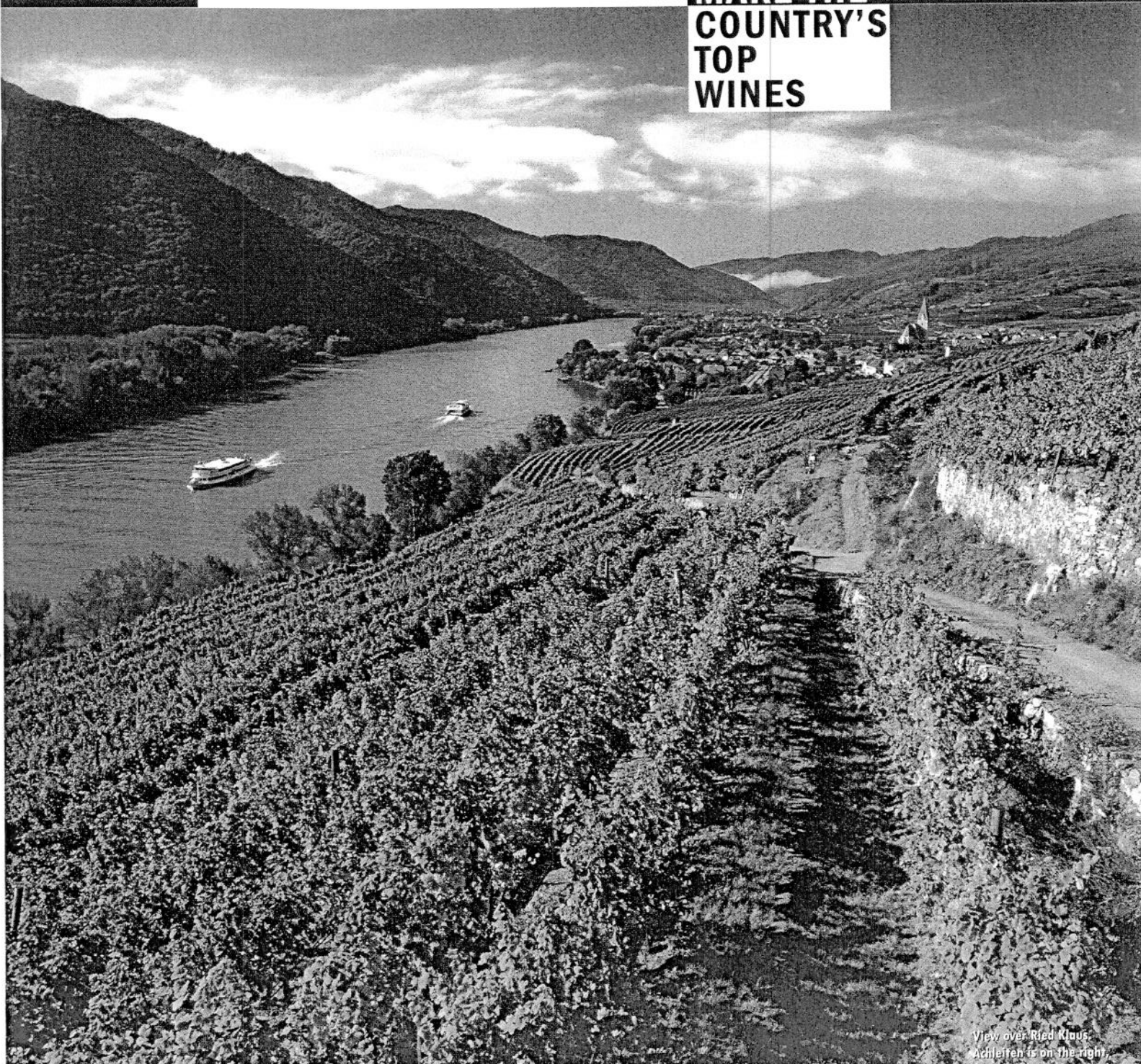


AUSTRIA'S MOST HERALDED VINEYARDS

THE STORIED
SITES THAT
MAKE THE
COUNTRY'S
TOP
WINES



View over Ried Klaus.
Achleiten is on the right.



THE STORY OF AUSTRIAN WINE is the story of its vineyards. With its cold winters and short, hot summers, Austria's weather is a lot like that of Burgundy. And, like Burgundy, the way Austria's vineyards are situated has much to do with the quality of its wines. Plant vines too far along the slope, and the exposure is not good enough. Plant them too far up, and it is too cold. Too far down, the grapes are plump and tasteless.

Austria's top vineyards are situated in the country's choicest viticultural spots, and produce its top wines. These vineyards are the small parcels of land in which the grape varieties, soil and climatic conditions coexist in perfect harmony.

Again, as is the case in Burgundy, these vineyards are rarely owned by a single person or producer. They may each be owned by 3, 4, or over 20 different entities. But the fact that they're typically co-owned means that an extra element—the human one—plays a critical role in the quality and character of the wines that come from these vineyards.

Yes, Austria's most renowned vineyards do produce its greatest wines, though the grapes will express themselves differently in the hands of different producers. But the taste of the land is the constant theme, regardless of the producers' names on the labels.

BY ROGER VOSS

● **ACHLEITEN**

REGION **Wachau**

SIZE **54 acres**

GRAPE VARIETIES **Grüner Veltliner, Riesling**

TOP PRODUCERS **Weingut Prager, Rudi Pichler, Freie Weingärtner Wachau, Josef Jamek**

The Wachau is a tiny region, less than 15 miles long. Yet its influence within Austria, and its international renown, are huge. Why? Because of its landscape and vineyards.

The Wachau is stunning wine country. Steep mountainsides jut straight up from the Danube. Small, picturesque villages cluster at the base of these mountainsides; up their slopes climb terraced, hand-pruned vines.

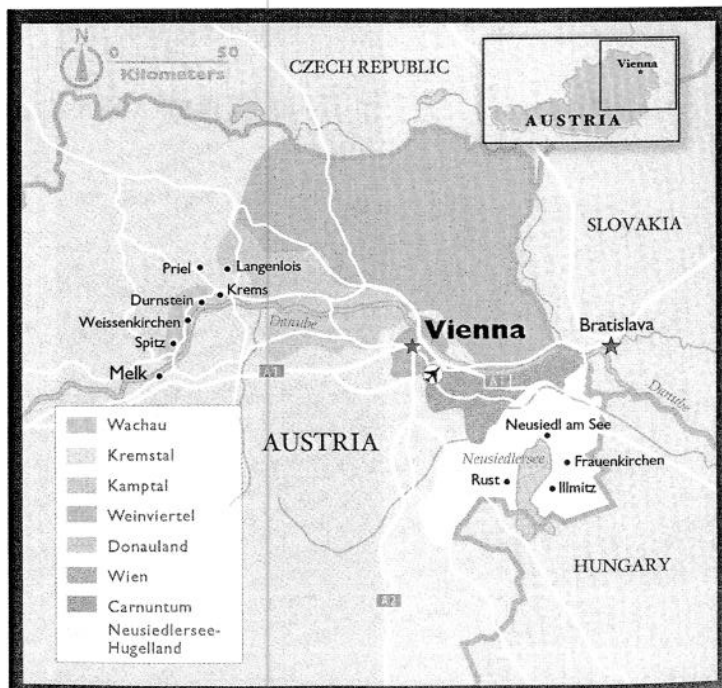
Just east of Weissenkirchen, a village in the Wachau, a huge, south-east-facing slope rears up. This is the Achleiten vineyard; it's shaped like a humpback whale, bursting out of the water. At the top of Achleiten is forest, and at its base is the Danube. Vines enclosed by 12th-century stone walls run from the foot of the steep slope to about two-thirds of the way up. Viewed from the base, this vineyard's slope is so

steep that it seems to lean forward.

Achleiten is an ancient vineyard. Its granite subsoil is mixed with mica, slate and amphibolite, and is topped with thin patches of loess, which is a fine, silty type of unconsolidated deposit. It is this complex soil composition that gives Achleiten's wines their intense minerality. The slate in the soil also adds a smoky quality to many of the wines.

"This is a late vineyard to harvest," says Roman Horvath, managing director of Freie Weingärtner Wachau, one of the region's two cooperatives. Members of the cooperative have 24 acres of the vineyard. "We have almost finished the rest of the harvest before we move on to Achleiten."

Achleiten's long growing season only increases the intensity of the wines. Green fruit and prominent acidity dominate the Rieslings when young, while young Grüner Veltliner has exotic flavors of quince, grapefruit and pepper. And both varieties age well; a recent tasting of a 1982 Freie Weingärtner Wachau Achleiten Riesling revealed fruit that was still pure and fresh.



● LOIBENBERG

REGION Wachau

SIZE 69 acres

GRAPE VARIETIES Grüner

Veltliner, Riesling

TOP PRODUCERS Dinstlgut Loiben

Wachau, Emmerich Knoll, Freie

Weingärtner Wachau, F.X. Pich-

ler, Leo Alzinger, Rainer Wess

This is the most easterly vineyard of the Wachau—it actually borders vineyards in Krems. Here, the convoluted rock formations that characterize most of the Wachau are gone. So while the slope is still steep, the land is more gentle and rounded. The Danube Valley opens out to the east, and the influence of warm, easterly winds is more keenly felt here than in more westerly areas of the Wachau.

It's no surprise, then, that Rainer Wess describes this as the warmest vineyard in the Wachau. Wess, who has worked in Bordeaux and with large wine companies in Austria before setting out on his own, is one of the Wachau's young guns. He produces wines from Loibenberg

and the adjacent Pfaffenberg vineyard, which is in Krems. "Despite being next door, on the same slope, they are different," he says. "Loibenberg is gneiss, Pfaffenberg has more loess. The wines from Pfaffenberg are softer and more open; those from Loibenberg are spicy, more structured. It is the difference between the wines of Wachau and Kremstal expressed in the terroir."

● PFAFFENBERG

REGION Kremstal

SIZE 452 acres

GRAPE VARIETY Riesling

TOP PRODUCERS Salomon-

Undhof, Winzer Krems, Rainer

Wess, Dinstlgut Loiben Wachau

Berthold Salomon, who runs the family-owned Salomon-Undhof winery in Kremstal, stands with a wicker basket full of wines. He is on the edge of the sharp slope in the Pfaffenberg vineyard. Below him—almost directly below—is the Danube, with the city of Krems to the left, and the

Wachau to the right.

Salomon opens a bottle of wine. "This was made here," he says, gesturing around him.

The Pfaffenberg is the most westerly of the five hills (the others are Schreck, Goldberg, Wachtberg and Kögl) that form a line of vineyards around and to the west of Krems. The primary rock is gneiss, granite and schist. On the top is loess. The terraces are at 750 to 810 feet; in some places, the decomposed humus layer is as little as six inches deep before you hit bedrock.

This is Riesling country. The wines express pure, perfumed fruit, and flavors of white currants and crisp green apples. As with all fine Rieslings, they age well—at least 10 to 15 years is typical.

"For me, these are the purest Rieslings in Krems," says Salomon. "They have all the intensity of flavor, the structure and the richness, but at the same time, a steely heart."

● ZÖBINGER HEILIGENSTEIN

REGION Kamptal

SIZE 98 acres

GRAPE VARIETY Riesling

TOP PRODUCERS Willi

Bründlmayer, Weingut Allram,

Ludwig Ehn, Schloss Gobels-

burg, Jurtschitsch Sonnhof,

Weingut Hirsch, Weingut Hiedler

In the Middle Ages, this area used to be called Hellenstein, or "stones of hell," because it was a place where "the sun burns like hell." Some religiously correct monk renamed it Heiligenstein, or "holy stones," at some point during the Reformation.

Facing due south, this fabulous vineyard is one of the glories of Austrian viticulture, but boy, can it get hot. Geologically speaking, the hill can be dated back 250

million years, to when it was a 21,000-foot mountain. This is compressed soil, with soft stones and great drainage, the result of volcanic activity. This is Riesling's home.

Willi Bründlmayer, who is perhaps Austria's most famous wine producer, owns one quarter of the Zöbinger Heiligenstein. He drives up the steep slopes in his 4x4, pausing for effect as another rise to a higher terrace is negotiated. It is also so that he can point out the open-lyre canopy, which opens out the center of the vine for greater exposure.

"We have our vines in the Zöbing half of the vineyard," he says. "It's the part [with poorer soil], cooler with less soil, more stones." The other half, in the village of Kammern, doesn't make such fine wines. "But we do have a problem: We are finding that the sun and the heat are getting stronger, as global warming takes effect. I'm finding the lower slopes are too hot for Riesling, so I'm trying out reds."

The Riesling benefits from the big swings between daytime and nighttime temperatures, which lengthens the ripening period. "In the day we get the heat of the sun," says Bründlmayer, "while in the night, cooling winds come down from the Weinviertel."

● SCHEIBEN

REGION Donauland

SIZE 110 acres

GRAPE VARIETIES Grüner Veltliner,

Roter Veltliner, Traminer

TOP PRODUCER Franz Leth

The vineyards of Fels are on the Wagram, which is a long, low slope that runs east-west to the city of Tulln. The Wagram is the last southern outcropping of the Weinviertel. It has its own appellation, the Donauland, and its



Terraces on the Loibenberg vineyard



own great vineyard, the Scheiben.

Franz Leth is one of the most important producers on the Scheiben; he owns 5 of the vineyard's 45 total hectares. "Scheiben is right in the middle of the Fels slope," he says. "You need old vines to bring out the best in the deep loess soils of the Scheiben, and we have 50-year-old vines. That allows for great depth of flavor."

Gudrun Grill, of Weinhof Grill, owns 2 hectares. She echoes Leth's thoughts about the soils adding. "And luckily this is an easy vineyard to work—the slopes are not too steep."

The Wagram is one of the many vineyard areas north of the Danube that was formed by glacier activity. The huge earth barriers they created are now slopes that reach heights of 840 feet.

Fruit from these vines produce full-bodied wines that are concentrated and rich in fruit flavors. Grüner Veltliner is the dominant variety here, though Franz Leth grows one curiosity: Roter Veltliner, of which only 540 acres now exist in Austria, and only along the Danube. It makes a wonderful, apricot-flavored wine, but is a difficult grape to cultivate.

● HUNDSLEITEN

REGION Weinviertel



SIZE **34 acres**
GRAPE VARIETIES **Grüner Veltliner, Zweigelt**
TOP PRODUCER **R&A Pfaffl**

● SCHNEIDERBERG

REGION **Weinviertel**
SIZE **5 acres**
GRAPE VARIETIES **Grüner Veltliner, Riesling**
TOP PRODUCER **Weinrieder**

These two vineyards are at the extreme ends of the Weinviertel. At the southernmost end, close to Vienna, is Hundsleiten, while to the north, close to the border of the Czech Republic, is Schneiderberg.

They have one thing in common: climate. Because they are in the Weinviertel, these two vineyards are cooler than others in Austria. "Because Weinviertel is cool, the vineyards have to be very site specific," says Heidi Pfaffl of R&A Pfaffl in Stetten.

Roman Pfaffl, Heidi's father, is

the most important grower in Stetten. He owns five acres of Hundsleiten, which is Stetten's best vineyard. This is the first hill up from the Danube, about 10 miles away, facing southwest. The soil is made up of loess, then sandstone. It's on a tongue of flysch, the fine-grained sedimentary soil that comes from the Alps. The vineyard "was once a beach," says Heidi Pfaffl. "You can still find oyster shells."

Climatically, Hundsleiten is



warmer than many Weinviertel vineyards. With its southwest exposure, it gets hot sun for much of the growing season. "It ripens early. Hundsleiten doesn't have such great diurnal swings as other local vineyards, because the heat stays in the stones at night," says Heidi Pfaffl. It's the reason that the vineyard can also produce attractive, fresh red wines from Zweigelt.

Tasting in the Pfaffl cellar, a cleanly modern space, you look out on to a pretty internal courtyard, dominated by a huge sandstone rock. "That's from Hundsleiten," says Pfaffl, as she pours glasses of 2005 Hundsleiten Grüner Veltliner. Grüns from Hundsleiten are rich and ripe, packed with typical pepper and spice flavors.

An hour's drive north is Friedrich Rieder's Weinrieder cellar in Kleinhadersdorf. This is deep country, very remote from the main routes of Austria. It's an

area of wooded, rolling hills. The Schneiderberg vineyard, a 5-acre patch of southwest-facing vineyard, has been carved out of the forest.

"Here we are in the coolest wine region of Austria," says Rieder. "Vineyard exposure is essential." Schneiderberg is a steep, 26-degree slope, 900 feet above sea level. Fruit can ripen here, but the wines they make are delicate ones.

"It's rare to have a site like this, which can ripen fruit, but still give great delicacy," says Rieder. Purity of fruit is what Schneiderberg wines are all about. That, and a rarity: Riesling ice wine. The combination of delicacy, acidity and honey flavors is stunning.

● NUSSBERG

REGION **Vienna**
SIZE **172 acres**
GRAPE VARIETIES **Grüner Veltliner, Traminer, Riesling**
TOP PRODUCERS **Weininger, Weiungut Zahel**

Fritz Weininger sits in the courtyard of his family *heurige*—the Viennese version of a country inn—and pours his wines. It's strange to think that big, bustling Vienna is less than a mile away. Here in the village-like suburb of Stammersdorf, the houses are single-story, and face out on to a tree-lined street. Behind the street are vines.

Vienna is the only European capital city that has serious vineyards—1,500 acres of them. And the Nussberg vineyard, which is across the Danube from Weininger's cellar, is the jewel. "The Nussberg is the most expensive vineyard real estate in Austria. Think of the pressure for expensive housing on a site overlooking Vienna," says Weininger.

The Nussberg is the final outcrop of the Vienna Woods, a large forested area that stretches west of the city. The hill dominates the suburbs of Dobling and Grinzing.

Weininger owns 20 acres on the Nussberg. "You can't make light wines on the Nussberg, because of its minerality," he explains. Its flavors come from the limestone soil that's near the surface in the vineyards. At the heart of the Nussberg are two smaller vineyards, Preussen and Kassgraben (just 25 and 4 acres each, respectively). They produce the best of the best.

The dense, mineral flavors of Nussberg contrast with Wiener's other wines, which come from his Stammersdorf vineyards. Stammersdorf's sand and loess soil produces open, generous, fruity wines.

● **MARIENTAL**

REGION **Neusiedlersee-**

Hügelland

SIZE **29 acres**

GRAPE VARIETY **Blaufränkisch**

TOP PRODUCER **Ernst Triebaumer**

Ernst Triebaumer, known locally as E.T., is anything but extra-terrestrial. In fact, mention the land and the vineyards, and his eyes light up. The next thing you know, you're in his 4x4, going for a drive up the hill that overlooks the ancient, walled city of Rust.

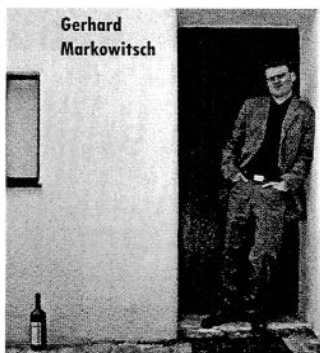
On the drive, Triebaumer points out how, suddenly, the soil changes from granite and gneiss soils to much denser loess and chalk. It's this dense soil that allows red grapes to grow so well in Rust, and in many other places along the western shore of Lake Neusiedl (Neusiedlersee).

The Mariental vineyard is at the heart of Rust's own patch of red wine heaven. The vines face straight on to the Neusiedlersee.

Triebaumer owns 10 acres of the vineyard, which face directly east into the morning sun. The lake acts as a reflector, thus increasing the strength of the light.

Triebaumer explains that he makes his own clonal selection. "I tried French clones, but they attract too much botrytis here. That's fine for the sweet wines I make, but not for the reds. So now I field graft my new vines from local clones. I've been doing this for 35 years."

Oak and Blaufränkisch go well together, in Triebaumer's view. But he does vary the size of the barrels and the duration of the oak aging. His simpler blends go into large, older wood, while his top wines go into smaller, 300-liter barrels. His Mariental wine is the top of his reds. It's aged for two years in 80 percent new oak. But such is the intensity of the herbal, berry flavors that the wood does no more than support the powerful fruit. This is, without doubt, one of Austria's great red wines.



● **ROSENBERG**

REGION **Carnuntum**

SIZE **86 acres**

GRAPE VARIETIES **Zweigelt, Merlot**

TOP PRODUCERS **Gerhard Markowitsch, Weingut Hans Pitnauer**

The compact nature of Austria's vine growing is borne out by the Carnuntum region. Though it's

just 20 minutes from Vienna's airport, and half an hour from the Neusiedlersee in Burgenland, the village of Göttlesbrunn is its own separate world. A small stream runs through the village, and the streets are lined with vintners' houses.

Behind the traditional façade of Gerhard Markowitsch's house is an impressive, modern winery, evidence of his status in Göttlesbrunn. He has vines—60 parcels in all—right along the slope that runs behind the village.

But his pride is his 16 acres of the Rosenberg vineyard. Planted to Zweigelt and Merlot, it is a beautifully exposed, 86-acre steep slope, facing due south, and enclosed in its own amphitheater. The soil is comprised of sand and loam, with a high limestone content. The cool winds from the north are stopped by the forest on the top of the hill.

Markowitsch may have a modern winery, but the gate to his parcel of Rosenberg is ancient and rusty, evidence that he is still a farmer at heart. Rows of vines are enclosed by a crumbly wall that still, says Markowitsch, gives extra protection against the wind. Tufts of sheep's wool are attached to posts in the vineyard "to stop other predators eating the grapes," says Markowitsch. "It really works."

From the Rosenberg vineyard, Markowitsch produces Cuvée Rosenberg. In style it is spicy, with dark berries, and sweetness from the very ripe fruit. The Merlot in the blend is surprisingly tannic, lending structure to Zweigelt's fruitiness.

● **ILLMITZ**

REGION **Neusiedlersee**

SIZE **2,200 acres**

GRAPE VARIETIES **Welschriesling, Chardonnay, Scheurebe,**

Traminer, Zweigelt, Pinot Gris
TOP PRODUCERS **Alois Kracher, Helmut Lang**

Illmitz is famed for its sweet wines. The Seewinkel is a 12 mile-wide stretch along Lake Neusiedl, and Illmitz is at its heart. Tiny vineyards are scattered throughout the village, which is why it is not possible to choose one parcel over another. What these parcels all have in common is their ability to yield botrytized wines regularly due to their proximity to the lake.

"This is the lowest point in Austria," says Gerhard Kracher. His father, Alois, is widely regarded as the king of Austrian sweet wine. "Illmitz has around 20 small lakes in the marshes, apart from the Neusiedlersee itself. They give humidity, which is good for botrytis. These little lakes are very shallow, just a few centimeters and they evaporate easily, especially in the autumn after a hot summer."

Kracher's wines come from two types of soil: One is sandy, the ancient bed of the lake, which has shrunk over the years. The other is more gravelly. The sand gives power to the wines, the gravel gives acidity and freshness. "We blend the two styles," says Kracher. "We have 82 different parcels around Illmitz. We don't do single-vineyard wines."

Everybody in Illmitz makes sweet wines. But Kracher makes a greater variety of sweet wines than just about anybody else. In 2002, he made 12 different trockenbeerenauslese wines, numbered from 1 to 12 in order of intensity. But in 2003, he made just one wine—there wasn't enough botrytis. Even in the heartland of Austrian botrytized wines, the risk is enormous, and the waiting each autumn is tense. **WE**

PHOTO: HERBERT LEHMANN/CEPHAS