



SPLIT personality

Austria is unique in its regional wine divisions, layering a French-style appellation approach over a more Germanic system. *Anne Kriebehl MW* looks at how this two-pronged approach, despite possible confusion, is actually of benefit to the country

IN 2015, Austria's first DAC, or Districtus Austriae Controllatus, celebrates its 13th birthday. In little more than a decade, this new designation of origin coupled with a specific grape variety and style, completely transformed a region, raising its quality standard, its profile and economic output.

Since the creation of Weinviertel DAC in 2002 for its signature variety Grüner Veltliner, eight new DACs have followed with the most recent one, Wiener Gemischter Satz DAC, re-establishing and anchoring a historic and unique style firmly in wine law.

The DAC clearly models itself on a French-style appellation of origin, designating a particular grape variety or varieties and a particular style for a particular region. What is unusual though is the fact that this French-style system is super-imposed on the pre-existing Germanic system (at least if we take it that the Germanic system started post-1971), thereby creating a "dual" wine law.

Interestingly, the development of DACs continues apace while there is no intention of departing completely from the Germanic system, for want of a better term. Willi Klinger, head of the Austrian

Wine Marketing Board, is quite clear about his intentions, citing three factors that speak for this unusual system: focus, diversity and innovation. He says, "Strategically, the best way of promoting a region generically is to identify regions and their typical wines. This is in fact nothing but an appellation of origin which not only stands for the provenance of the wine but also for the style of wine – whether that is based on just one or more grape varieties. This is critical. It creates a marketing advantage because a wine stops being interchangeable and becomes unique. This clearly is a strategic idea."

He is absolutely clear, too, that this takes at least one if not two generations to take hold in consumers' minds. This is what he calls "focus". Diversity comes in by way of the Germanic layer of the law: a winemaker making designated DAC wines from the most typical varieties is still free to produce wines from other varieties, international or indigenous, if he/she so chooses, without diluting the strategic message of the DACs. Innovation, maintains Klinger, is inherent in "constantly having a certain revolutionary dynamic; wine is always a work in progress."

The effects of the DAC are most clearly felt in the Weinviertel, the first DAC created in 2002: they made and make the creation of further DACs so compelling. Weinviertel is Austria's largest and most northerly region, just to the north of Vienna, with 13,356 hectares. Its history is one of mixed agriculture with a very fragmented producer base, often growing wine as a side-line. Few bottled their own wines and much was sold in bulk to Austria's sparkling wine producers.

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The region had a reputation for guzzling wine but not for quality.

The creation of the DAC, says Ulrike Hager, director of the Weinviertel's Regional Weinkomitee, made a huge difference. It was the impetus to raise quality. "The Weinviertel did not have a great image. You had many winemakers, many grape varieties, many wines. But how could a consumer tell if any of them were any good? If you wanted to buy with confidence you went elsewhere," Hager explains. Creating a Grüner Veltliner-based DAC defined a high-quality taste profile, giving consumers the

confidence to buy. "The fact that there is a quality standard and taste profile was decisive in terms of consumer confidence. Within one decade producers concentrated on Grüner Veltliner, and this message was communicated." Producers' self-confidence increased accordingly: "Today we have many young, well-educated winemakers who are very ambitious; the young generation is once again interested in making wine. Today even the smallest producer has a DAC wine, they fully support this concept," attests Hager. Even so, some of those enterprising young winemakers today regret the predominance of Grüner Veltliner and the increasing disappearance of indigenous Weinviertel varieties like Silberweißer Veltliner, Weißer and Grauer Vöslauer and Roter Veltliner, also known as Hietl Roter. However, it is doubtful they would have chosen to become winemakers had it not been for the resurgence of Weinviertel as a quality region. They now can tend these old, indigenous vines and market them as authentic Weinviertel wines, if not as

DAC. Hager emphasises that the rise in wine quality has also given a boost to local tourism and gastronomy and turned the Weinviertel into a destination in itself.

Nonetheless, there is still more DAC wine produced in smaller Kamptal (3,802ha) than in all of Weinviertel: for the 2013 vintage Kamptal bottled approximately 5.1 million bottles of DAC, whereas Weinviertel only bottled 4m. According to Unger, this is

down to the far more fragmented producer base of Weinviertel compared to Kamptal which has some bigger producers like Jurtschitsch, Loimer and Schloss Gobelsburg. But even in a region always known for quality production, DAC has had an impact. As of the 2008 vintage, both Riesling and Grüner Veltliner could be labelled Kamptal DAC. Has its introduction been positive? Barbara Koller, responsible for export sales at Schloss Gobelsburg reports that "DAC is getting ever more important because you are selling a wine of origin. This works as a brand that can be

Feature findings

- > Since the creation of Weinviertel DAC in 2002 for its signature variety Grüner Veltliner, eight new DACs have followed.
- > The DAC clearly models itself on a French-style appellation of origin, but is super-imposed on the pre-existing Germanic system.
- > Willi Klinger of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, is clear about his intentions, citing three factors that speak for this unusual system: focus, diversity and innovation.
- > He is absolutely clear, too, that this takes at least one if not two generations to take hold in consumers' minds.
- > The dual approach has also been seen as a return to an older, pre-EU, locality-based tradition of labelling.

protected and means quantities are limited, this is a factor that can also work as a basis for higher margins."

However, she also considers the longer term. In her view, building a brand on the basis of origin rather than an individual producer is far more effective for all concerned. She knows that this will still take time and require the co-operation of all stakeholders. Andreas Wickhoff MW, managing director of Premium Estates of Austria, representing six producers across the country (Gölles, Loimer, Heinrich, Sattlerhof, Wieninger and Schellmann) says that while there is no way of measuring the benefit of DAC in figures, "it certainly helps in communicating the idea of a quality-driven DAC that can be associated with a certain style of wine." However, for him, "a higher price and DAC are not necessarily linked." Does he believe that consumers find Austria's "dual" wine law confusing? "Absolutely," he answers, "but I can only confirm Willi

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Klinger’s thoughts that this project will take two to three generations to take hold.” He even sees it as a return to an older, pre-EU locality-based tradition of labelling but cautions: “We’d be shooting ourselves in the foot if we took Grüner Veltliner off the label. Overall, I believe we are on the right track but adjustments that take the classification away from alcohol (and therefore ripeness) levels and vineyard classifications need to be addressed in order to succeed.”

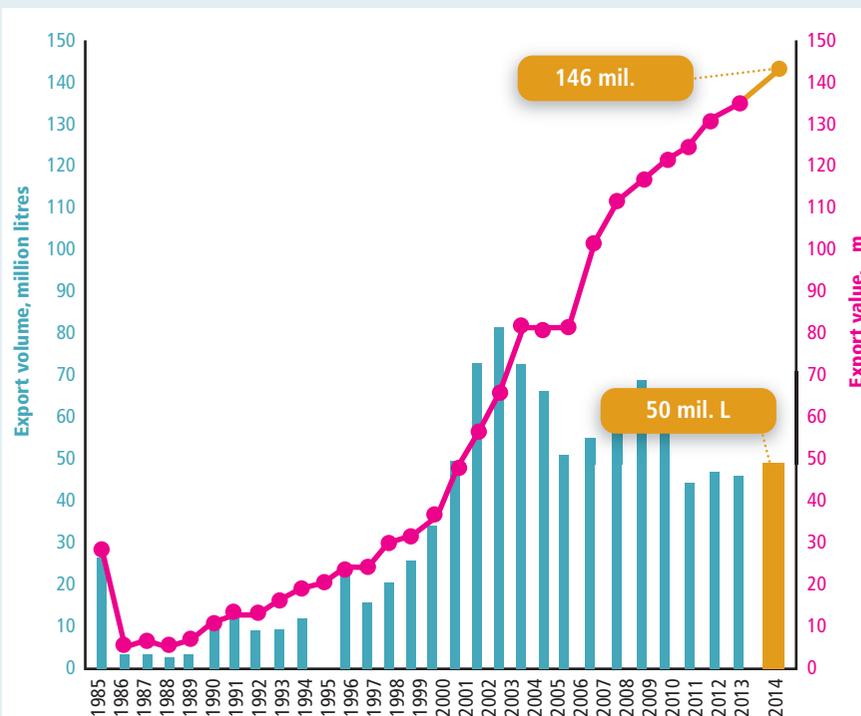
The premium region of Wachau has had its own three-tier ripeness-linked Vinea Wachau classification since 1983 (Steinfeder, Federspiel and Smaragd) while the Verein der Österreichischen Traditionsweingüter, a union of quality producers along the Danube, started a process of site classification in 2011 covering Wachau, Kremstal, Kamptal, Traisental and Wagram. This is probably what Klinger had in mind when he

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referred to “a revolutionary dynamic.” But his vision is clear: “DAC is a basic structure which explains Austria’s main regions and varieties. The dual system is a quality key for Austria which allows diversity and yet spearheads regional identity.” This is especially true for a country that simply is no longer competitive where bulk wine production is concerned. Klinger says that the next DACs will probably be in Styria: Weststeiermark, Südsteiermark and Süd-Oststeiermark while both Thermenregion and Carnuntum are moving apace. With a decade of increasing export sales by value behind him, Klinger knows his strategy is working and that DAC development will take its course. “I exert no pressure,” he says confidently. db

Austrian wine exports (1985-2014)

Source: Statistik Austria



Austrian DACs

Region	Valid as of vintage	Permitted Varieties
Weinviertel DAC	2002 Klassik 2009 Reserve	Grüner Veltliner
Mittelburgenland DAC	2005 Klassik and Reserve	Blafränkisch
Traisental DAC	2006 Klassik and Reserve	Grüner Veltliner, Riesling
Kremstal DAC	2007 Klassik and Reserve	Grüner Veltliner, Riesling
Kamptal DAC	2008 Klassik and Reserve	Grüner Veltliner, Riesling
Leithaberg DAC	2008 for Reserve reds 2009 for Reserve whites	Blafränkisch Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Grüner Veltliner, Neuburger
Eisenberg DAC	2008 Reserve 2009 Klassik	Blafränkisch
Neusiedlersee DAC	2011 Klassik and Reserve	Zweigelt-dominated
Wiener Gemischter Satz DAC	2013	Only co-planted with or without single vineyard designation