

Johns Trap

“A Spitzerberg Love Affair”

Dossier

Johannes Trapl, born in 1978, is a vintner who may be characterized as “tenaciously precise”. He is co-initiator of the association of Spitzerberg wineries that produce distinctive Blaufraenkisch wines from the historic Spitzerberg site. Despite this, he has his own ideas about making wine. One of his mottos is: “I have to try out everything for myself; I cannot just borrow ideas from others.”

Looking back at his decision to build a new winery in anticipation of future expansion at a very early age he says, “If I were 24 again, I would no longer take such a risk.” Despite this, the precision of his wines (for which the all-too-frequently-used expression “unique” can truly be applied) has brought the success that justifies the early investments.

Johannes Trapl sees himself as a person who “thinks a lot about everything and realises his ideas step by step.” Conversations with him are at just as rewarding as the enjoyment of his wines.

DEVELOPMENT

Johannes Trapl's parents ran a mixed farm in the small village of Sarasdorf located between about 40 km (25 miles) east of the capital towards Lake Neusiedl – an area not really famous for wine. The region Carnuntum (named after an ancient Roman provincial capital) was known for good, inexpensive wines popular in simple Viennese restaurants. Trapl's grandfather planted most of the estate's vineyards.

The question for Johannes was whether to focus on winegrowing or mixed agriculture. He chose to attend the vocational school of viticulture in Klosterneuburg, because he thought the sector of wine and food inspection would have a promising future. After finishing school in 1998, he went to California to gain practical experience at the Cardinale Winery. It was there that he really became infected with the “wine-virus”.

Trapl says, “Other young winemakers from Austria were in California at the same time and we took several excursions together so we could see as much as possible. We spent every free minute visiting wineries and tasting. At Cardinale I was first put on the bottling line and bottled their top Cabernets for 10 days. They were satisfied with my work and generously allowed me to take one bottle with me each evening. One bottle of their Cabernet Sauvignon cost \$130 at the time. Because winemakers and interns from all the wineries hung out together and always brought their best bottles, I had the opportunity to taste a lot of wonderful wines.”

Johannes was offered the position of assistant winemaker with a good income and career opportunities, which meant would have to move to California. He was at a crossroads and before making his decision, he first returned home. There he asked his father, “What could you offer me to convince me to stay in Austria?” The answer was, “I'll give you a carte blanche – you may do as you please, but you have to bear the consequences.” So he took the responsibility for the small family winery with half a hectare (1 acre) of vineyards. As this was not enough to fully occupy his time, he started working for the newly established winery “Muhr-van der Niepoort” in the same region. With increasing experience and after a small expansion, he founded his own operation in 2003.

Then followed what Johannes today calls the “fighting years”. The Carnuntum region had positioned itself as a producer of big, sometimes heavy, wines made predominantly from Zweigelt. A few miles to the east near Prellenkirchen, not very far from the Slovakian capital Bratislava, is a small subregion located on a meagre limestone ridge called Spitzerberg. Very old Blaufraenkisch vines thrived there and the wines had once enjoyed high reputation during

the Habsburg Monarchy, but had since become nearly forgotten. Through his work for the Muhr-van der Niepoort winery, Johannes got to know the area and its small winegrowers. In 2004 the chance to buy a small lot of Blaufraenkisch grapes from the Spitzerberg arose.

“I wasn’t aware at the time that Blaufraenkisch played such an insignificant role in sales in our region. At home in Stixneusiedl, we had Grüner Veltliner, Weissburgunder (Pinot blanc), Zweigelt, Merlot, Cabernet and others – a large number of varieties for such a small winery. But we had no Blaufraenkisch. Perhaps because the yields are low and the wines are not very supple or deep in colour.”

The Trapl 2004 Spitzerberg Blaufraenkisch won the prestigious Falstaff Trophy for the best varietal wine of the year. In the A La Carte magazine Johannes achieved two “Grand Cru” accolades. He thus became well known overnight and things gained momentum.

ORIGINS

The wine-growing region Carnuntum reaches from the eastern limits of Vienna to the border of Slovakia. The vineyards are strewn about three hilly landscapes: the Leitha Mountains, the Arbesthaler Hills near Göttlesbrunn and the Hainburger Mountain. In Stixneusiedl on the slopes of the Arbesthaler Hills, heavy soils with loam and loess and sandy gravelly soils dominate. The Pannonian climate with its hot summers and cold winters, the nearby Danube River and the moderating effect of Lake Neusiedl allow black grapes to ripen perfectly.

On the Spitzerberg near Hainburg, an extension of the Little Carpathians, wines with extraordinary elegance and minerality grow on meagre dry limestone soils with traces of schist. Blaufraenkisch in particular attains a special character.

The archaeological excavations of Petronell-Carnuntum are counted among the most eminent in Europe. With modern methods, new “treasures of the soil” are unearthed every now and then that provide new insights into life in this important Roman provincial capital.

Spitzerberg

Together with Dorli Muhr (winery Muhr-van der Niepoort), Johannes Trapl was co-instigator of the renaissance of Spitzerberg in which Blaufraenkisch plays the leading role. This extension of the Little Carpathians is comprised of limestone with a little schist and has a very dry climate (ca. 300 mm rainfall per year). It is extremely small structured with just under 100 ha (250 acres) of vineyards situated between 185 and 200 m above sea level along the flanks between the plain and the wildlife reserve on the ridge. Most of the vineyards are cultivated by families as a secondary occupation and there are therefore lots of old vines. The loose alliance of the 9 wineries that put Spitzerberg Blaufraenkisch on the market together cultivate only 20 ha (45 acres). The yields are extremely low – Johannes Trapl is one of the biggest producers there with 5 ha (12,5 acres) and makes only about 2.500 bottles per year!

The vineyards are extremely healthy, well aerated and marginally prone to diseases. The wines are delicate and filigree in their tannic structure, but always fresh and lively – and enormously long-lived. They always express the character of their origin. The resulting wines are perhaps not suitable for the masses, but they are appreciated by connoisseurs for their delicacy and complexity. They are perfect representatives of the style for which Johannes Trapl is aiming. It’s not surprising that Johannes Trapl is “in love with Spitzerberg”.

WORKING THE VINEYARDS

Since 2010 Johannes Trapl's vineyards are certified organic. As of the 2016 vintage, the whole operation will be certified organic including purchased grapes. Only then will the corresponding logo be printed on the labels. This fulfils Johannes's quest for precision and transparency. *"Only when we are 100% organic with all of our wines, will we go public with it. I don't want my customers to be confused about which wines are made from organic or non-organic grapes. I want everything to be clear and transparent!"*

Johannes Trapl focuses on plant growth in the vineyard. Vines grow quickly on his rather fertile soils. Higher yields are one of the possibilities to keep plants in balance; avoiding mineral fertilizers is another. *"Never in my life have I used mineral fertilizers. So I never made the vines thirsty with any salt"*, he says. In the rather dry climate of Carnuntum this is an important factor. Conscientious canopy management and working with green cover allows grapes to ripen more gradually and develop more intense aromas.

According to Johannes Trapl, vine age is decisive for quality. He compares his vines to children who need a lot of attention and grow quickly when very young. You have to accept that and let them live it out. But through fertilizing, the plants won't become any calmer or more independent even after 10 to 15 years. Trapl regulates vine vigour through green cover between the rows and is satisfied with the results. *"Work in the vineyards goes like clockwork now!"*

The biggest challenge is choosing the perfect time to pick grapes. Johannes Trapl hasn't used a refractometer since 2006. He is permanently in the vineyards tasting grapes during the decisive period. Taste determines the moment to pick. Harvest starts rather early with the first selection of grapes and vigour and shoot growth are thus reduced. In the second round, grapes don't have that much "puppy fat" and exhibit rather cool aromas. Trapl explains his philosophy follows: *"I control vigour and yield volume in a natural way and do several selections in the vineyard. It is more work than picking in just one round, but it allows me to achieve my preferred style: more freshness, more liveliness! We don't interfere in the cellar any more with the signature wines and simply let them be. All we determine is the blend from the different barrels!"*

Since 2014, Johannes Trapl also cultivates 5 hectares (12.5 acres) of vineyards in Rossatz in the Wachau region that a befriended investor purchased. The grapes are processed in his cellar in Stixneusiedl and sold globally under the independent brand PUR. The additional effort is compensated by the opportunity to work and learn in a completely different region with different preconditions.

THE CELLAR

The most striking feature of Johannes Trapl's cellar is the big vats in which grapes for the "Signature" wines are foot-trodden. He can thus shorten the time for maceration. *"After two days the grape skins have released everything without tannins being leached too massively."* This physically exhausting method is employed for 20 tons of grapes each year, but the wines recompense all efforts. It goes without saying that the wines then ferment without use of cultivated yeasts or enzymes. The fermentation processes therefore may take quite some time. *"In springtime they start to ferment again on their own, so why should I force it?"* Of course this only works if wines are allowed enough time to mature before they are bottled and released on the market. Johannes's philosophy is also quite clear in this respect: *"I don't want to drink wines that are still in their swaddling clothes. Only with some maturity can they show what they are made of and that cannot be 6 months after harvest."* Again and again Johannes's wines succeed at vertical tastings and give proof that his words are not empty rhetoric.

PHILOSOPHY – JOHANNES TRAPL FIRST HAND

What happened after your spectacular first appearance in 2004?

Johannes Trapl: Yes, that was a bombshell. But our region is quiet; we don't enjoy that much publicity. For me the most important things are to subtilize and perfect our workflow in the vineyards and the cellar according to my ideas. Apparently this is recognized: we were able to raise our sales.

In your view, is it an advantage or a handicap to be so far away from Austria's big wine centres?

Johannes Trapl: Previously I saw a disadvantage to life in Stixneusiedl, because I am quite isolated. Today I appreciate the benefit of remaining uninfluenced. I can discuss with colleagues from other areas and get suggestions from them. Then I reflect on whether they are useful for me. I can work completely autonomously. In the Spitzerberg alliance we have a right to a say; in Stixneusiedl we are more or less solitary. For me, this is satisfactory.

Two catchwords that characterise you are "precision" and "tenacity". Your wines buck the trend; they are brushed in the wrong way and require time and attentiveness.

Johannes Trapl: I have to try out everything; I don't automatically believe what others say. Why does our winery function so well? Because we feel comfortable. Despite this, I know there are still things to be improved. In some aspects we have to become quicker and more efficient. Nowadays I spend more time in the office and look after distribution, because this is work I enjoy. We have wonderful staff in the vineyards who are experts at what they do and so I am able to look after other things. We can feel everyday that things are going nicely.

You seem to be someone who rests on his laurels...

Johannes Trapl: I thought for a long time that I was not born for hard work. I originally wanted to get an unhurried job as a food inspector. Sometimes I say to my wife Melanie, "I am not a workhorse!" And she replies, "You work 60 to 70 hours per week, but you don't notice, because it makes your day!"

You and Melanie make a perfect team!

Johannes Trapl: Whenever I have a bad patch she says, "Think about how it was 10 years ago, where we have been, and what we have achieved! We are thriving well and you still find time to spend with your family; you don't have to be on the road continuously." She's right. I even have time to continuing spinning dreams. We are currently restructuring our enterprise to accommodate 30 vineyard hectares. The most important thing is that on December 31st, all of our balances – financial, health-wise, social – are positive!



THE MOST IMPORTANT WINES

Carnuntum white

A white blend made of 60% Weißburgunder (Pinot blanc), 30% Grüner Veltliner and 10% Welschriesling. Grown on chalky sandy chernosem soil of Stixneusiedl. Vines up to 25 years old.

Handpicked, whole cluster pressed. After 48 hours of macerating the must is fermented temperature controlled in stainless steel tanks. 6 months of ageing in stainless steel tanks.

Typical hints of citrus fruits, honey and hazelnuts, underlain with pepper and spice. Clear, juicy fruit with perfect balance.

Pairs with fish, seafood and Italian food.



Carnuntum red

A red blend of 60% Zweigelt, 30% Blaufränkisch and 10% Sankt Laurent grown on sandy soil over heavy cool loam around Stixneusiedl.

Handpicked and sorted manually. 80% destemmed, 20% stomped by foot with the stems. 6-8 days maceration. Matured in 500-l barrels, stainless steel tanks and amphorae. No cultivated yeasts or bacteria; no additives or fining. All natural.

Intense colour with violet reflexes. Herbs and Spices underlain by dark cherries and berries, mineral touch. Juicy elegant styled, endless finish.

Pairs with beef, duck or deerdishes.



Gruener Veltliner Karpatenschiefer

White wine from the Spitzerberg – therefore the name “Carpathian schist”. Limestone with small schist inclusions. The grapes were planted 1970.

Handpicked, destemmed, fermented in amphorae. 60-90 days maceration, maturation for 6 months in 50% used oak barrels and 50% in amphorae. Bottled at the end of August one year after harvest.

Intense yellow-green; clear fruit, spicy pepper; the fine balance of acidity and residual sugar makes this wine remarkably animating. Fancy drinking pleasure.

Pairs with starters, fish, asparagus, and poultry.



Rubin Carnuntum Zweigelt

From vineyards with calcareous chernozem, loess and loam soils. Vines up to 33 years old.

Handpicked, destemmed and crushed. Fermented with native yeasts in stainless steel tanks, 12-18 days maceration. Matured for 12 months in stainless steel tanks and oak casks. No fining or additives.

An elegant statement of the region and the variety: cherries, figs, nougat and cardamom. Fruit-driven style with crispness and good ageing potential.

Pairs with BBQ, beef, pork or Wiener Schnitzel.



Sankt Laurent Reserve

Vineyard in Sarasdorf planted in 2000; soils of gravel, loess and loam.

Handpicked in small crates; selected on the sorting table. 80% of the grapes were destemmed and crushed and stomped by foot. Fermented with native yeasts, gently pressed, then matured in 500-litre oak barrels for 14 months. No additives, no cultivated yeasts or enzymes, and no fining. All natural.

Lively texture, wonderful silky balance. Good ageing potential.

Pairs with lamb, duck or game.



Blaufraenkisch Reserve

Handpicked from vines up to 40 years old that grow in Stixneusiedl and Prellenkirchen on gravel, loess, loam and limestone soils.

80% destemmed and trodden by foot, 20% stomped by foot with the stems. 6-8 days maceration. Matured in 500-l barrels for 14 months. No cultivated yeasts or bacteria; no additives or fining. All natural.

Hints of cinnamon, liquorice and blackberries. Filigree style with deep flavour.

Pairs with lamb, duck or game.



Stix

The best Blaufraenkisch vineyard in Stixneusiedl, planted in 1978, is the source for this exceptional wine. The soil is sandy on heavy, cool loam.

80% destemmed and trodden by foot, 20% trodden by foot with the stems. 6-8 days maceration. Matured in 500-l barrels for 14 months. No cultivated yeasts or bacteria; no additives or fining. All natural.

Herbs and spices provide the aromatic frame for cherries and orange zest. Filigree style with deep flavour.

Pairs with lamb, game or duck.



Spitzerberg

Blaufraenkisch vines planted between 1951 and 1968 on the meagre limestone soil of Spitzerberg near Prellenkirchen.

80% destemmed and foot stomped, 20% stomped by foot with the stems. 6 – 8 days maceration. Matured in 500-l barrels for 14 months. No cultivated yeasts or bacteria; no additives or fining. All natural.

Intense dark berries, graphite and pepper. Elegant with tight tannin structure.

Pairs with lamb, duck or game. Due to its delicacy it is also very nice with modern meatless dishes.



A FEW NUMBERS

Production area: 25 hectares (61 acres)

Wines:

20% white

80% red

Varieties:

10% Gruener Veltliner

5% Riesling

5% Weissburgunder (Pinot blanc)

35% Zweigelt

32% Blaufraenkisch

4% Sankt Laurent

3% Merlot

3% Cabernet Sauvignon

3% Syrah

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