

# The rise of the bubbles

Sparkling wine isn't Austria's best-known export, but as **Susie Barrie MW** explains, a new three-tier quality system could herald a fresh beginning for sekt

From Champagne to Prosecco, even English sparkling wine, the fizz category is in effervescent form – it appears our love of bubbles knows no bounds. While sparkling is not a style you might

automatically associate with Austria, with fizz enjoying such global popularity the country is understandably keen not to get left behind. There are some delicious, characterful Austrian sparklers to be had, and new legislation for the country's fizz should raise its profile. So what are these new wine laws, and who are the producers to look out for?

It's worth considering the context. Following the infamous anti-freeze scandal of the mid-1980s, Austria redoubled efforts to convince the world of the integrity of its still wines, from Grüner Veltliner to Riesling and beyond. Along the way, though, its sparkling wines got left behind. 'You could say we forgot to board the train,' admits Benedikt Zacherl, managing director of the Austrian Sekt Committee.

It's a situation Zacherl and colleagues have been working hard to change. In 2009 they launched the Austrian Sekt Day. In 2013 came the establishment of the Austrian Sekt Committee. The latest and most significant step is the creation of a brand-new, three-tier quality pyramid for Austrian sparkling wine (see box, p6) with protected designation of origin (PDO) status: Austrian Sekt g.U.

There have been difficulties along the way. Not least the imposition of a sparkling wine tax in Austria in 2014, which had a significant negative impact just as the category was gaining momentum on the domestic market. The formulation of the three-tier system, as with any consensus decision, has had its inevitable ups and downs and has been slower to arrive than originally intended. Yet the overriding hope in the industry is that these new regulations will have a positive effect on quality and in raising awareness, both at home and abroad.

With the first of the new three-tier wines finally about to hit the shelves, it's time to take a closer look at them and find out just what you can expect from Austria's finest sekt.

## Rare pleasure

Firstly, don't be surprised if you haven't yet come across Austrian sparkling. Although accurate figures are hard to come by, it's estimated that only 10% of the annual average of 2.5 million hl (hectolitres) production is sparkling (including lower pressure perlwein). According to Statistik Austria, only 2% of



*'We are not at the historical point where we can talk about an Austrian style of sparkling wine'* **Michael Moosbrugger (above)**

all exports are of fully sparkling wine, with the UK importing a minuscule 3,000 bottles in 2015.

If you are looking for one or two descriptors to sum up Austrian sparkling wine, I'm afraid you won't find them. As winemaker Michael Moosbrugger of Schloss Gobelsburg states: 'We are not at the historical point where we can talk about an Austrian style of sparkling wine. Producers need time to "find themselves" at each level [of the new system].'

Variety and experimentation are the buzzwords. Everything from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, to Grüner Veltliner, Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Welschriesling, Riesling, Traminer, Muskateller, Zweigelt, St Laurent and Blauer Wildbacher (used in the dry, aromatic Schilcher rosés) can potentially crop up in the blend. Likewise, it isn't easy to pin these wines down to any specific area – the regions most readily associated with sparkling wine production range from Niederösterreich in the north, to parts of northern Burgenland and, to a lesser extent, Steiermark in the far south.

As you might expect, most of the better wines >

**Left: bottles of sekt in the riddling racks at Vienna's Sektkellerei Schlumberger**

are made by the traditional method, but the tank method (permitted at the lowest level of the new system) also plays a part. Many are vintage-dated, but there are plenty of great NV blends too.

## Attitude shift

Over the last few years, Austria's big, established sparkling wine producers, such as Schlumberger (also its oldest), have been joined by smaller wineries already known for their still wines, but who have a growing interest in making top-quality fizz. Annemarie Foidl, president of the Austrian Sommelier Association, senses a shift in attitude: 'Winemakers have begun to take sparkling wine seriously; before it was just the big players.'

Estates such as Bründlmayer, Loimer, Malat, Schloss Gobelsburg and Steininger – along with less well-known names including Harkamp and Ebner-Ebenauer – have all tried their hand, and the results are seriously impressive. Very much in the mould of the grower-producers in Champagne, these houses are experimenting with everything from organics to old oak, and no dosage or sulphur.

The question is, will the new three-tier system make Austrian sparkling wines any easier to navigate and understand? If we go back about five years to the initial discussions surrounding a quality framework for Austrian sparkling wine, the idea came from the larger houses and the intention was to implement a system that would help consumers better understand the wines, as well as offering minimum quality standards.



**Above: Manfred and Marion Ebner-Ebenauer on their estate at Poysdorf in Weinviertel**

Fast-forward to today, when the three-tier system is up-and-running, and what you have when buying a bottle of Sekt g.U (be it Klassik, Reserve or Grosse Reserve) is a minimum guarantee of where the grapes come from, how the wine is made, how long it has been aged, and that it has been produced according to a set of regulated criteria.

## Laying down the rules

The issue was – and is, of course – that in order to make the system work, both the larger houses and the smaller producers needed to get involved and adhere to the same set of rules. When you have small producers making wines in many different ways, often defying normal convention, the additional rules required for each category are inevitably difficult to determine.

In practice, this has led to the Klassik level of the pyramid being most problematic for consumers. In order to make a wine that qualifies as Klassik, not only are producers allowed to use any of 35 permitted grape varieties, they can also make the wine by any method, and are only required to age the wine for a minimum of nine months. The flexibility that this level offers is necessary for producers who wish to make a top-quality, aromatic and fruit-driven wine without long lees ageing. It also means, however, that consumers have very little to latch on to, in terms of stylistic consistency.

At the Reserve and Grosse Reserve levels, the situation is different. For both, the wine must be made by the traditional method and must be aged on lees for a minimum of 18 and 30 months respectively. The wine must also be classified as brut or drier. This leads to a good initial

## The three tiers at a glance

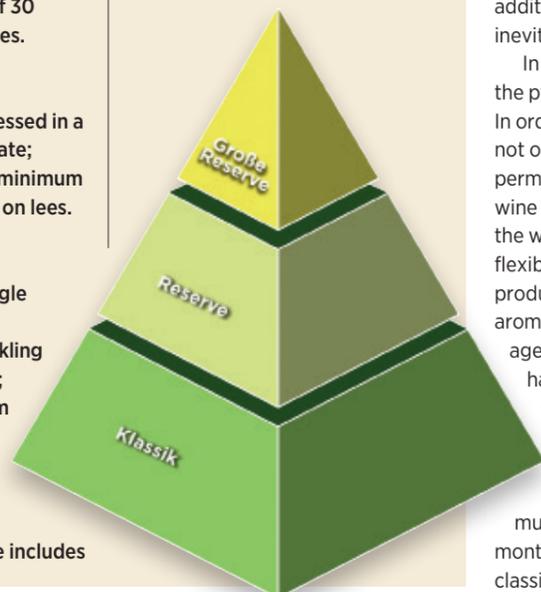
**Level 1: Grosse Reserve**  
Grapes harvested and pressed in a single municipality; traditional method only; minimum of 30 months' maturation on lees.

**Level 2: Reserve**  
Grapes harvested and pressed in a single Austrian federal state; traditional method only; minimum of 18 months' maturation on lees.

**Level 3: Klassik**  
Grapes harvested in a single Austrian federal state; all methods suitable for sparkling wine production allowed; maturation for a minimum of nine months on lees.

Each level encompasses further quality assurance standards. The focus here includes

work in the vineyard, harvesting, hand-picking, packing height, rate of yield and gentle pressing.



## Barrie's picks: best buy Austrian sparkling wines



**Schloss Gobelsburg, Blanc de Blancs, Niederösterreich NV 96**  
£27 **Clark Foyster, Highbury Vintners**  
Reserve Grüner Veltliner, Welschriesling, Chardonnay. From its struck-match, toasted hazelnut nose to its steely, mouthwatering palate, it is quite superb. A real standout. **Drink 2017-2022 Alcohol 12%**

**Ebner-Ebenauer, Blanc de Blancs, Niederösterreich 2008 95**  
£67 (2010) **Roberson**  
Grosse Reserve Rich flavours of honey, mushroom and truffle belie this wine's zero dosage status and make for a richly textured and beautifully harmonious glass of fizz. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 12%**

**Harkamp, Zero Dosage, Steiermark 2013 94**  
N/A UK [www.harkamp.at](http://www.harkamp.at)  
Reserve A wonderfully characterful zero dosage. Young but full of nutty, steely and red apple flavours. If it develops as well as the 2011, it will be fabulous in a couple of years. **Drink 2018-2020 Alc 12.5%**

**Loimer, Extra Brut, Niederösterreich NV 92**  
£20 **Oddbins**  
Klassik With its spiced green apple aromas and yeasty palate feel, this second release from Loimer displays

great energy and a very contemporary appeal. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 12%**

**Madl, Cuvée Spéciale Brut, Niederösterreich 2006 92**  
N/A UK [www.madlsekt.at](http://www.madlsekt.at)  
Grosse Reserve Having spent more than eight years on the lees, this wine wears its savoury and mushroomy character with pride. A great demonstration of the ageability of top Austrian sparklers. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 11.5%**



**Malat, Brut Reserve, Niederösterreich 2012 92**  
N/A UK [www.malat.at](http://www.malat.at)  
Grosse Reserve Restrained and elegant style, with toasted notes of bread and nuts. A blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, this is still young, but shows great balance and ageing potential. **Drink 2018-2022 Alc 12.5%**

**Schauer, Brut Burgundersekt, Steiermark 2013 92**  
N/A UK [www.weingut-schauer.at](http://www.weingut-schauer.at)  
Reserve The Schauer brothers want their wines to be challenging. With its low sugar (3.5g/l) and crisp acidity, this one certainly is. It is also vibrant and tangy with a lovely mineral core. Impressive length too. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 12.5%**

**Bründlmayer, Brut, Niederösterreich NV 91**

£29 **Fields Morris & Verdin, WoodWinters Reserve** Creamy and biscuity, with crisp acidity and bright apple and pear fruit. Reminiscent of a fruity NV Champagne. **Drink 2017-2018 Alc 12%**



**Erich & Walter Polz, Brut Rosé, Steiermark 2010 91**  
N/A UK [www.polz.co.at](http://www.polz.co.at)  
Reserve A blend of Pinot Noir and Zweigelt, this is a serious rosé with a charm that slowly envelopes you. Its sour cherry and earthy maturity also make it a great match for food. **Drink 2017-2018 Alc 11.5%**

**Potzinger, 1860 Brut, Steiermark NV 91**  
£22.50 **GK Wine House**  
Reserve Lifted, fresh and very drinkable, this is an elegant and well-made fizz with delicate lemon notes and an impressive amount of flavour, given its lightness of touch. **Drink 2017-2018 Alc 12.5%**

**Friedrich, Schilchersekt Brut, Steiermark 2015 89**  
N/A UK [www.friedrich-schilcher.at](http://www.friedrich-schilcher.at)  
Klassik From the Blauer Wildbacher grape, Schilcher is a speciality of Steiermark that should be fruity and fresh, and is meant for early-drinking. A lovely example of this fun style of pink fizz. **Drink 2017-2018 Alc 12.5%**

For full details of UK stockists, see p34

indication of style, and while grape variety/ies does have an additional impact, from experience this tends to add interest rather than significantly altering the overall style.

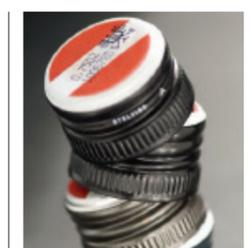
For producers such as Marion Ebner of Ebner-Ebenauer, being able to put Grosse Reserve on her label rather than just sekt makes a difference. Her superb single-vineyard blanc de blancs with no sulphur, no dosage and six years on the lees, retails at above £60 a bottle. She feels that: 'The system is a good idea, because in the past people didn't understand why there was a difference in price.'

The first of the three-tier wines will appear on our shelves this spring and will be the Klassik wines, followed by Reserve wines in October 2017 and the first Grosse Reserve wines in October 2018. The likelihood is that labels won't change significantly

from what they were, but they will be required to state whether a wine is Klassik, Reserve or Grosse Reserve. Look out too for the red-and-white seal also carried by other Austrian quality wines (right).

At this early stage it is difficult to say what impact the new three-tier system will ultimately have, but there is certainly a sense that an exciting new era for Austrian sparkling wine is on the horizon. The category is likely to remain niche, but with a growing band of producers making small quantities of exciting wines, there is every reason to be optimistic, and to seek out one or two of these surprising sparklers as they start to appear. **D**

Susie Barrie MW is a wine writer, author and broadcaster who, with her husband Peter Richards MW, runs Wine Festival Winchester



**Above: the official seal for Austrian quality wine is based on the nation's flag**