Austria 2007 vintage so far

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The Austrian wine marketing board have published their official summary of the vintage so far, calling it 'the winemaker's year'. In other words, there have been quite a few hurdles for them to overcome - in the vineyard perhaps even more than in the winery.

In Vienna and to the west of the city, in the Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal, where I spent this weekend, the main problems have been sunburn on the grapes due to a sudden heat spike in July, plus the rain in August, causing problems with botrytis (rot). If the rot dries out, you get what is called 'noble rot' and the grapes can still make great wine as long as the botrytis-affected grapes do not dominate. In fact, 'noble rot' can concentrate the flavours of a wine and add complexity, even in a dry wine, though some growers prefer to avoid it altogether in their dry wines. If the rot does not dry out, the grapes are useless and have to be discarded. This makes selection in the vineyard critical: sometimes even parts of bunches need to be cut away, which is an incredibly laborious process. However, the fact that the growers have the skill and the commitment to do this means that there will still be some excellent wines this year. In the vineyards I visited (admittedly some of the top ones), there were predominantly healthy bunches after this careful selection process, with wonderful sweet flavours in the grapes. What is particularly amazing in this part of Austria is just how late the grapes are picked for the weightier and richer styles of dry wine classified as *Smaragd* (named after the sun-basking lizard) - many of the best Riesling and Grüner Veltliner vineyards will not be harvested until well into November, sometimes later.

Here's the official summary so far.

Austrian Vintage 2007 - The Winemaker's Year
For several weeks now, the grapes in Austria's vineyards have been undergoing a very diligent 2007 vintage harvest. In some regions, such as Burgenland and Vienna, the harvest is already nearly complete, while in cool wine-growing areas in Lower Austria and Steiermark [Styria], the harvesting of top-level grapes has only recently begun. The weather conditions in 2007 - hot summer; rainfall at the beginning of September - make this year a true winemaker's vintage. The meticulous work in the vineyards and the careful handling of the grapes in the cellars are key to this vintage's success.

Hot Summer, Cool Autumn, Big Challenges
The unusual weather during 2007 resulted in painstaking efforts being made in Austria's vineyards. The extremely hot summer required intensive leaf work in order to prevent sun burning of the grapes. Up to the end of August, comparisons with the 2003 vintage harvest could be made, but the rainy period at the beginning of September was yet again a potent reminder that nature holds a strong influence over the wine in Austria. The high volume of rain - around 150 mm in several of the wine-growing areas - meant that appropriate soil cultivation (for better water absorption) and particularly careful grape selection have been necessary. Often, more than one selection process has been required. Because the early September rains were followed by cool and windy conditions, rot in the vineyards has been limited.

Beautiful Ripening Period Promises Aromatic Wines
Determining the exact point of grape selection in terms of sugar ripeness and phenolic development has been even more of a key factor this year - one which has tested the nerves of the winemakers. That extra dash of patience, waiting just a bit more time, has been delivering wonderfully aromatic white wine grapes, as well as red variety grapes - especially those with thick skins, like Blaufränkisch - that promise attractive, piquant wines. A significantly positive effect of the rains has been the development in the lake areas of Burgenland of botrytis, which is necessary for the production of many top-quality

sweet-wines à la Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese.