Lemberger aka Blaufr□nkisch

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The latest addition to our collection of grape profiles at Resources/Learn about wine/Wine grapes.

Lemberger, also known as Blauer Lemberger, has, like virtually all red wine grapes grown in Germany, become increasingly popular there in recent years so that now total plantings are approaching 2,000 ha.

Lemberger buds early and ripens late so it needs mild springs to avoid frost and warm autumns to ripen fully, which is why it is not suitable for Germany's more northern vineyards. It is grown mainly in Württemberg, where in blends it can add weight and colour to the local Trollinger. Producers such as Ernst Dautel of Bönnigheim and Gerhard Aldinger of Fellbach are now taking it as seriously as producers in Austria, which has the greatest concentration of this vine planted and where, under the name Blaufränkisch, it enjoys the highest status among both wine producers and wine consumers of all the many middle European countries where it is planted.

In medieval times, those vine varieties described as 'fränkisch', whose origins were with the Franks, were considered superior and certainly this seems to have been a very old variety. Recent DNA analysis in Austria has demonstrated its close relationship to the variety known there as Heunisch, known in medieval France as Gouais Blanc, a parent along with Pinot of a large family of vaguely 'Burgundian' varieties such as Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder, Chardonnay, Gamay, Auxerrois, Aligoté and the Muscadet variety Melon de Bourgogne. (It should be said, however, that Heunisch seems to have a parent-offspring relationship with so many different varieties that is has earned itself the reputation among vine geneticists of being 'the Casanova of vines'.)

Austria's Blaufränkisch kingdom is in Burgenland in the warm eastern part of the country on the border with Hungary and the Pannonian Plain, where about 3,000 ha of vineyard are devoted to this highly regarded variety – half as much again as in Germany. In fact four vines in every five in Mittelburgenland produce red wine and the region even has its own association Verband Blaufränkischland, which recognises and encourages maximum quality in the wines made from this vine variety. Gesellmann, Heinrich, Igler, Kerschbaum and Weninger all make serious, often barrique-aged wines from Blaufränkisch - either as a single varietal or as a cuvée, or blend, with other popular local varieties such as Zweigelt and Cabernet Sauvignon. Blaufränkisch grown in the iron-rich soils around Eisenberg is also one of Südburgenland's relatively few wine specialities.

On the warm, gentle shores of the shallow Neusiedlersee Lake, Blaufränkisch reaches such levels of ripeness that it is a serious yet juicy wine, always with a refreshing level of acidity too and quite respectable tannins. This bracing yet ultra-fruity quality in the wines produced by this variety has led some commentators to compare the wines with a fine cru Beaujolais and may explain the name under which it travels in Bulgaria, Gamé, presumably a word inspired by the Beaujolais grape Gamay – although the wines produced from the variety in Bulgaria are a pale shadow of those made in Austria, perhaps because yields are too high or perhaps because of the particular clone(s) planted.

In some ways Lemberger could be said to be the quintessential middle European red wine grape. Not only is it grown in Austria and Bulgaria, it is also grown in a wide range of other locations in Central Europe. In Hungary, across the border from Burgenland in Sopron, its Austrian name is translated pretty directly as Kékfrankos, occasionally Nagyburgundi. Today the best examples can be racy, lively red table wines but in another era, in a much darker, sweeter, almost porty form, it was singled out for praise by Napoleon. It also thrives in the warmth of the red wine country of southern Hungary.

The variety is also planted, as Frankovka, over the border in Vojvodina, effectively a continuation of Hungary's sandy southern plain.

It is also known as Frankovka in the Czech Republic, where it can show evidence of particularly bright fruit. The most common example of the variety exported to northern Europe other than such Austrian Blaufränkisch as is allowed to escape its fans in its homeland comes from the Black Sea coast in Romania and labeled Burgund Mare. For many years it was assumed to be some form of Pinot Noir but it is in fact Lemberger, in unusually sweet, diffuse form – but very inexpensive indeed! The vine is naturally vigorous and, unless strongly discouraged by strict pruning, as the most conscientious Austrians tend to do, this variety tends to yield prolifically.

Some is grown in Friuli in the far north east of Italy, where it is known as Franconia and makes wines that are zesty but often tarter than almost anywhere else, with the possible exception of the Bela Krajina district of the Posavje region of Slovenia, just to the east, where the variety is known as Modra Frankinja.

Here the climate is partly warmed by the Gulf of Kvarner so that wines grown here tend to be stronger and even red grapes, notably Modra Frankinja, will ripen.

The only other part of the wine world where Lemberger is known is, for reasons that are (to me) obscure, Washington state in the far Pacific Northwest. Here a few producers treat it to serious oak ageing just like the best Austrian producers but, with its rather easy berry fruit and generally marked acidity, it does not enjoy the cachet of local favourites Cabernet and Syrah.

Ernst Dautel, Lemberger S trocken, Württemberg

Gerhard Aldinger, Fellbacher Laemmler Lemberger trocken, Württemberg

Heinrich, Gabarinza (cuvée), Burgenland

Weninger, Blaufränkisch Durrau, Burgenland and Sopron

Patrick Bayer, In Signo Sagittarii Blaufränkisch, Burgenland

Kiona Lemberger, Columbia Valley, Washington

Two Mountain Lemberger, Yakima Valley, Washington

Steele Lemberger, Washington