

THE SAVIOUR

One man has, almost single-handedly, turned Austria's sweet wines from the butt of jokes to the subject of high praise. **STEPHEN BROOK** meets him

PHOTOGRAPH: ALOIS KRACHER WAS PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR DECANTER BY HERBERT LEHMANN AT WEINLAUBENHOF

Alois Kracher, with brilliant technical winemaking skill and sheer force of personality, took the ailing Austrian wine industry by the scruff of its wrinkled neck, prised open its stubborn jaws, and from them snatched unlikely victory. Were it not for Kracher, Austrian botrytised wine might still be regarded as a curiosity rather than a style that merits the same serious attention as Sauternes, Tokaj or the TBAs of Germany.

Although he comes from a winemaking family, Kracher has always acted as though he were starting from scratch. No convention is ever left unchallenged. He spent his childhood in Illmitz on the shores of the Neusiedlersee. Sweet wines were abundant, easy to produce, and inexpensive. In the 1960s and 1970s, Germany was an obvious and grateful market. But by the early 1980s, when Kracher started working with his father at the family winery, there were already signs that all was not well with the region's winemaking.

'The region was exporting four times as much TBA as it could produce. By 1985 everyone knew that something was wrong, but the Burgenlanders were simple people and didn't really understand what was going on at some of the larger companies.' What was going on was that some companies were adulterating and stretching the wines with glycol. Nobody suffered ill health as a consequence, but nobody wanted to be associated with a region where fraud had been practised. 'Many young winemakers simply lost heart – our industry is still suffering from that loss of talent.'

Alois Kracher is not a man to be discouraged by calamity. 'My reaction was anger at the unfairness of it. Our customers knew we were innocent and remained loyal, but that was not enough for me. I decided we had to show the world what we were capable of. The only strategy we could adopt was to charge ahead. In 1991 I began to attack the international market, which only a few others, such as Willi Opitz, were doing.'

Kracher was atypical in his intelligence and his intellectual hunger. He befriended Pierre Meslier, then nearing the end of his career as Château Yquem's winemaker, and from him learnt how Sauternes is made. He also got to know Egon Müller of Scharzhof in the Saar and learnt how great Riesling TBA is made. Then he went back home to apply his knowledge.

In 1991 he divided his wines into two ranges: *Zwischen den Seen* (between the lakes), made in traditional, reductive style in large neutral casks, and *Nouvelle Vague*, fermented and aged in new French oak. Wasn't that certain to confuse his customers?

'I couldn't bear to give up either style. *Zwischen den Seen* was the traditional style from here, while *Nouvelle Vague* encapsulated everything I had learned from Meslier and others.'

In 1993 he presented his wines in a blind tasting in London, alongside the other great sweet wines of the world, Yquem included. I was there, and remember my surprise at how high my scores were for the Kracher wines. Given that he was a relatively unknown winemaker from a discredited region, wasn't this tasting asking for trouble?

'Not really. I was motivated by pride in what my region was capable of. I'm confrontational by nature and had nothing to lose. I wasn't trying to show that my wines were better than Yquem. I simply wanted to show we could talk of Austrian wines in the same breath as more prestigious labels. It was a risk because it was expensive to do. But I only invited tasters whom I was sure would appreciate the quality of our wines. And they did.'

In 1995 he decided to number his wines in ascending order of fruit concentration, a concept that includes extract as well as residual sugar. 'I admit it was confusing at first. But importers and consumers soon realised the highest numbers were the most concentrated and expensive wines, which not everybody preferred. There was a good market for the more accessible and less pricy wines in the mid-range, too. In 1995 I also introduced ➤

KRACHER AT A GLANCE

Born: 1959 in Illmitz, Austria

Education: Studied pharmacy in Vienna, then worked for a chemical company until 1990

Winemaking career: Assisted father since 1981, took over entirely in 1991

Surface: 40ha

Production: 90% sweet wines

Family: Wife Michaela and son Gerhard (26)

Hobbies: Eating and drinking

He says: 'What I don't know, I cannot understand'

They say: 'Kracher's larger than life personality belies his lightness of touch as a winemaker' **Noel Young, Noel Young Wines, Cambridge**





Alois Kracher (centre) works alongside son Gerhard and father Alois who, though in his 70s, still looks after the vineyards

the Grande Cuvée, our only blended wine. It was a novelty, and it also helped me manage our production. I like to demonstrate all the possibilities. I'm a bit of a show off in that respect.'

Producing some of the world's top sweet wines was always going to be the core of his career, but Kracher wanted to do more. He makes red wines for a local butcher with expensive tastes and has launched a range of sweet wines from California in a joint venture with restaurateur and winemaker Manfred Krankl. He works with wine jelly and vinegar producers, and has a wine importing business, bringing in top labels from Germany, Piedmont, Alsace and California. Recently he started making Moscatel with Malaga producer Ordonez, and Ausbruch with Heidi Schröck on the other side of the Neusiedlersee.

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'I'm not a consultant in these enterprises, I'm actively involved. These projects keep me fresh, they make me think. I see them as confrontational – other personalities, other regions, other wine styles. I've planted Moscato Rosa here. In Alto Adige it's a late-harvest wine, but I'm making it as a botrytis wine.'

Kracher is more than confrontational. He can be obsessive in his quest for quality and his determination to communicate. Before a recent bout of illness slowed him down (very slightly) he could keep a wine bar open till 3am as he ordered wines from all over the world and poured them for his friends. He was partying but he was also learning, absorbing, digesting. He may have the doggedness of a peasant, but he also has a formidable intellect. You ask him a simple question – are you tempted by biodynamics? – and the answer is surprising.

'Absolutely. But it's not just a matter of applying potions to the vineyards. It means changing your life! We would become proper farmers, keeping cows for manure, and growing herbs and plants. And I'm not sure whether it's appropriate. Biodynamics thickens grape skins, makes them resist disease better. That's not our goal. We want thinner skins that succumb to



botrytis. We're looking for rot! To go biodynamic would be a huge risk. If it worked, tremendous. If it didn't, we'd be finished.'

Kracher has been in the forefront of those who have put Austrian wine on the international map. But many have followed in his wake. Has he been surprised by the stunning leap in quality from Austria over the past decade?

'Yes, and in part that's a legacy of the 1985 scandal. Our most skilful winemakers were determined to overcome it. The new generation, unlike their parents, speak English and travel the world. They have an international vision. We Austrians do pull together when it comes to marketing and I hope that we can maintain our image as producers of wines of character, cleanliness, and consistency. Sweet wine producers can make a living from a few hectares, if they make wines of good quality that fetch a good price. In a good vintage I'll get 1,000 litres per hectare; in a poor one just 300. So it's always going to be a niche market – that means room for just a few.'

Over a family lunch at his home he characteristically pulled six wines from his cellar – not with a view to emptying each bottle, but to sip, to mull over, to discuss. I asked him what he enjoyed drinking when visitors weren't around. Again, the answer was unexpected. 'First, I drink names; secondly, regions. I know who makes great wine from around the world, so those are the names I trust. If I see DRC wines on a list, I know I won't be disappointed. For my personal cellar, I buy top wines from Burgundy, Bordeaux, Spain, Italy, Australia and California. It's partly for my pleasure, but also for my business. What I don't know, I cannot understand.' **D**

NEXT MONTH: MIKE GRGICH, CALIFORNIA