



THE TIM ATKIN talks **rot** with **ALOIS KRACHER**
ALCHEMIST
the man who turns **mould into gold**



1000 LITRES PER HECTARE AND THE QUALITY WAS AMAZING. EVERYTHING GOT BOTRYTIS, EVEN MY BOOTS'

Alois Kracher on the excellent 1995 vintage

different crops and raised chickens as well as making wine, but my father saw the potential of this region.' Kracher may look like an old-fashioned farmer – with strong faintly pugilistic features – but he is a man of broad tastes, who enjoys modern jazz and French films as much as a joke and a glass of beer.

A trained chemist, Kracher started to work alongside his father in 1981, but continued with his day job in the pharmaceutical industry until 1991, the vintage that many consider the greatest of the century in the Seewinkel. He acquired a lot of knowledge from his father – who continues to run the estate's 17 hectares (ha) of vineyards at 71 years of age – but Kracher has always had his own international perspective, too. In the early 1980s, he spent a lot of time visiting the sweet wine regions of France, Hungary, Italy and Germany learning about 'wine, marketing and life'.

'Very few Austrian producers sold their wines overseas in those days,' he says. 'Those who did were hit by the diethylene glycol

scandal in 1985. Kracher, like many of the top winemakers, thinks the ensuing brouhaha was a positive thing for Austria. It certainly helped him. 'The winery's image went crazy after 1985. A lot of people stopped making sweet wines because of what had happened, but I thought that botrytis wines were this region's only chance.'

Ah botrytis. I must admit I've never seen anyone as animated as Kracher about this schizophrenic fungal disease. The Seewinkel's unique climate of cool autumn evenings, morning mists and high humidity followed by warm, dry days is perfect for the development of noble rot. 'We get more botrytis per hectare than anywhere else in the world. Occasionally we get difficult vintages – like 1997, which was too warm and produced grapes with thick skins – but eight years out of 10 we have botrytis here. No one else can say that.'

Working with botrytis is not easy, mind you. In 1990, for example, Kracher and his

team did seven separate pickings to come up with a paltry 100 litres per hectare. If quality were directly related to quantity, things wouldn't be so bad, but that's not the case,

Inset top left: Alois Kracher always likes to use his specially designed straw for drinking

Below: Kracher in his cellar among the new barriques, courtesy of botrytis-vision



Photos: Herbert Lehmann/Copha

DECANTER INTERVIEW

according to Kracher. 'In 1997 we had 200 litres per hectare and the vintage was so poor I wish it hadn't happened. But in 1995 we got 1,000 litres per hectare and the quality was amazing. Everything got botrytis, even my boots.'

Knowing when to pick is extremely important. 'If you leave the grapes on the vine for too long, you get high levels of volatile acidity and even oxidation in the finished wine. These things start in the vineyard.' For Kracher, the first picking is the most important. 'That's when you get the best grapes from the best vines. The grapes that ripen first have the earliest botrytis and the most concentration.'

In any one vintage, Kracher makes as many as 18 wines, not all of them sweet. There's a dry, jazz-influenced white called Days of Wine and Roses and two red blends of Blaufränkisch and Zweigelt, labelled, rather less poetically, as Blend One and Two. The dry white is Kracher's biggest seller (with some of it made from bought-in grapes), but it's something of an exception. As a rule, Kracher makes varietal wines. 'I bottle every wine that has a different character. Sometimes I blend, but if the character of a wine is really interesting, I don't want to subdue it or change it.' Each different sweet wine is given a number: one to 15 in 1995, one to nine in 1996.

Give or take a few thousand bottles of rather good red, Kracher's focus is on whites. His vineyard is made up of a mixture of Austrian and international grapes: mainly Welschriesling and Chardonnay with lesser amounts of Scheurebe, Traminer, Muskateller, Bouvier, Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch. With these, Kracher makes two distinct styles of sweet wine: the first, labelled as *Zwischen den Seen*, tends to be more 'traditional' (fermented and aged in large older oak barrels); the second, called *Nouvelle Vague*, is aged in new French barriques and is more 'international' in character. Kracher also makes four wines in California – 'just enough to be dangerous' – under the Mr K label with Manfred Krankl of *Sine Qua Non*: a botrytis-affected

Photos: Manfred Krankl/Wine & Partners



Viognier, a Sémillon *Vin de Paille*, a Traminer and a dry blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre.

For all his reputation as a moderniser, Kracher's approach to winemaking is fairly traditional. 'We've got more control than winemakers had in my father's day – when it was common to lose wines because of refermentation or bacterial spoilage – but other than that we don't do things so differently.' Kracher likes to open bottles of his father's 1981 Welschriesling *Trockenbeerenauslese* (a vintage when 'I switched the pump on and off, but not much more') to prove that his father is a gifted winemaker in his own right.

Kracher uses a cocktail of natural and 20% selected yeast for complexity as well as a measure of control. The fermentations are allowed to run their course – which can take a year or more. 'The hardest thing if you're a niche sweet wine producer is to have so many wines in your cellar at once; it's a big investment if you're keeping four vintages at the same time.'

Kracher uses old barrels on some of his wines, but prefers to use brand new rather than one- or two-year old barriques, so that he doesn't have to worry about spoilage. 'There's nothing cleaner than a freshly toasted new barrel,' he says. 'It's a microbiological, as much as a flavour, thing as far as I'm concerned. If the wine is concentrated enough, you shouldn't be able to taste the new oak anyway.' Kracher believes that great wines need what he calls 'a school

of air'. 'You don't get the same effect in a stainless steel tank,' he says.

Kracher's sweet wines are intense, even by the standards of the *Secwinkel*, but they're not ponderous in the least. He has the knack of expressing the varietal characteristics of Scheurebe, Muskateller, Chardonnay, Traminer and Welschriesling, but of adding something special of his own: weight, concentration and harmony. 'Concentration isn't the same as residual sugar,' he adds by way of explanation. 'It's all about flavour and extract and it's always expensive to achieve.'

Asked to define the special character of Austrian sweet wines, Kracher resorts to a geographical analogy. 'We're south of Alsace, north of Sauternes and west of Tokay and our wines are somewhere between the three.' To this I would add the natural acidity of some Loire whites. 'We never have to acidify here,' he says. 'If our region were warmer, the wines wouldn't have the same balance. The freshness we get is very Austrian and you don't lose that freshness with barriques.'

Kracher is still some way short of his 50th birthday. The next generation, in the shape of young Gerhard Kracher, will take over one day, but for the time being Lois is at the peak of his considerable powers. 'Making new wines keeps me young,' he says. 'I still feel that I have masses to learn.' That, more than anything, is what makes him such a great winemaker.