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# Weingut Kracher

## Illmitz, Austria

### AN ICONIC AUSTRIAN WINERY COPES WITH THE SUDDEN LOSS OF ITS PATRIARCHS.

#### **Weingut Kracher**

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*Michaela, Luis, Gerhard, and Alois Kracher Sr.*

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#### **BENJAMIN T. WEINBERG**

Burgenland is the wet, low-lying part of southeastern Austria that surrounds Lake Neusiedl, a forelimb-shaped body of water 22 miles long and only 5 feet deep. Towns such as Rust, Illmitz, and Gols have long been winemaking centers, with vineyards dating back to Roman times. But the area has consistently played second fiddle to the more famous Austrian districts of Wachau, Kamptal, and Kremstal, in the Danubian region of Niederösterreich to the north.

Although botrytis isn't much of a concern in other parts of Austria, the humid breezes that blow off Lake Neusiedl often produce "noble rot" in the vineyards of Burgenland. It's an occupational hazard for producers who want to make

dry wines. But over the past 30 years, this region has become famous for botrytis-affected dessert wines, particularly the superconcentrated Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA).

Burgenland's emergence as a world power in sweet wines is due, in large part, to the efforts of Alois "Luis" Kracher, who died unexpectedly of complications from pancreatic cancer in his hometown of Illmitz on Dec. 5, 2007. Immediately after Luis's death, there was skepticism in the global wine community over whether Gerhard (Luis's then-26-year-old son, now the winemaker), Michaela (Luis's widow, who oversees winery business), and Alois Sr. (Luis's father, who came out of retirement after his son died,

Photo by Lalo Jodlbauer

## WINERY SPOTLIGHT



*Kracher vineyard (above) and winery (middle); Michaela and Gerhard Kracher (bottom).*

but passed away himself in March) could keep their surname synonymous with Austrian TBA.

Gerhard was already heavily involved in the family business when Luis died. He worked side by side with his father and grandfather for almost a decade. But the self-effacing Gerhard is quick to point out that no one person is capable of covering all of his legendary father's roles. "It was, of course, a huge loss," he said as he drove me around the basin that holds most of Burgenland's vines. "But we banded together and made it through the darkness. The first two years were very hard, but we're past that now. He will always be missed, but this beautiful place and our winemaking tradition is his greatest legacy—one we all constantly work to maintain."

As serious as Gerhard is about his family's wines, he's also boyish and charming (he directed me to my hotel by riding alongside my car on his bicycle). And he's a fount of knowledge about the Kracher vineyards in particular and the Burgenland in general. During our tour, he showed me several bare patches of white ground composed of mineral salts left behind by evaporated rain. "You can see where these soils lie in the vineyard," he said, "even when the vines are full of fruit. The plants don't like so many minerals in the soil, and they show their displeasure by turning bright yellow."

He also explained that the Pannonian Plain, a swath of grassy steppes stretching from Russia to eastern Austria, is what makes it possible to grow grapes in this challenging terroir. In good years, the steady wind from the eastern plain dries out the moisture from the lake. As a hedge against the not-so-good years, the estate has diversified into wine importing, vinegars, cheeses, jellies, and chocolates in partnership with other artisanal producers. These extensions of the Kracher brand help keep cash flowing, so that Gerhard can continue to obsess over the quality of his bottlings.



Photos by Armin Faber (top), Steve Haider (middle), Manfred Klimek (bottom)

## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

<b>Pinot Gris</b>	2008	\$14	<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Chardonnay #4</b>	2006	\$59
Smooth pear notes join lemon-lime on the nose, followed by quince and bright acidity on the expansive finish. Lovely with fish, fowl, or hard cheeses.			<b>Nouvelle Vague (375 ml)</b>		
<b>Pinot Gris</b>	2007	\$14	Plenty of caramel and honeycomb, followed by grilled pineapple and white pepper. Quite complex (and this is still the lower end of the Kracher numbering scale in terms of concentration).		
Eight months on the fine lees shows in the bottle. The wine weaves in grassy and deep honey flavors, building to a delectably subtle finish.			<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Scheurebe #5</b>	2006	\$59
<b>Zweigelt Rosé</b>	2008	\$15	<b>Zwischen den Seen (375 ml)</b>		
Fresh strawberries dominate both nose and palate, and there's lots of cotton candy on the light, creamy finish. Well made and refreshing.			Lemon verbena and banana-cream pie lead into fresh mango and papaya, with grapefruit on the finish. Layers upon layers of flavor.		
<b>Zweigelt</b>	2006	\$20	<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Grand Cuvée #6</b>	2006	\$69
Tobacco and dark chocolate burst from the glass, followed by cedar and hay on a warm, expansive finish. Nicely tangy, this is a wine that will pair with nearly any food.			<b>Nouvelle Vague (375 ml)</b>		
<b>Red Blend I</b>	2003	\$29	Smoky musk and honeydew melon are followed by cashews and olive oil on the broad, mellow palate. Thick and viscous as fine honey, this just oozes down the throat.		
Bitter chocolate, cigar ash, and roasted nuts lead to more obvious tobacco notes and an intriguing cherry-pit finish that goes on and on. An eye-opening example of Burgenland dry red wine.			<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Welschriesling #7</b>	2006	\$69
<b>Spätlese (375 ml)</b>	2008	\$14	<b>Zwischen den Seen (375 ml)</b>		
Banana-cream pie and bitter-almond extract drive the nose on this delicate Spätlese. The finish is full of lemon curd and more cream, and it's just sweet enough for light desserts.			Aged at least two years on the lees, and it shows. Honeydew, peach, and red licorice are followed by sweet gherkins (yes, pickles) and a long, savory finish.		
<b>Auslese (375 ml)</b>	2007	\$19	<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Traminer #8</b>	2006	\$69
Honey, caramel, and an elegant, fresh, tart yellow-apple finish make this wine long and clean in the mouth. I preferred it over the Spätlese, but not by much.			<b>Nouvelle Vague (375 ml)</b>		
<b>Traminer Auslese (375 ml)</b>	2006	\$19	Cedar aromas dominate the nose on this wine, at once powerful and elegant. The palate features white pepper and balsamic vinegar. It's thick, but not cloying—just a joy to sip.		
Rose hips and rose water dominate this wine, leading to a hint of lime peel and meringue on the clean, grassy finish. A fascinating example of an ancient varietal made in a sweet style.			<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Welschriesling #9</b>	2006	\$79
<b>Beerenauslese (375 ml)</b>	2007	\$25	<b>Zwischen den Seen (375 ml)</b>		
Tangerine and orange candy hover on the nose, followed by candied orange peel and a nervous, elegant, saline-tinged finish. Always one of the best values in the portfolio.			Limeade and apricot, followed by white peach, honeydew, and musk melon. It's incredible that each successive wine just keeps raising the bar.		
<b>Zweigelt Beerenauslese (375 ml)</b>	2005	\$28	<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Chardonnay #10</b>	2006	\$79
Cherries and varnish vie with rhubarb, strawberry, vanilla, and cranberry on this broad, fleshy, delicately pink wine. Overripe plums and tobacco leaf round it all out.			<b>Nouvelle Vague (375 ml)</b>		
<b>Trockenbeerenauslese (187 ml)</b>	N.V.	\$20	Sweet and tropical, lush and clean, it finishes with a charming grapefruit-and-spice note.		
Saline elements lead into orange cream and a candied citrus-peel finish. An amazing value from one of the finest TBA houses in the world.			<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Scheurebe #11</b>	2006	\$89
<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Zweigelt #1</b>			<b>Zwischen den Seen (375 ml)</b>		
<b>Nouvelle Vague (375 ml)</b>	2006	\$49	Reminds me of Georgia peach pie with pineapple topping; orange-cream notes are also evident. The long, slow finish creates an elegant, harmonious whole.		
Tobacco and cherries mingle with black pepper and balsamic vinegar in this complex, intellectual wine. Not for the faint of heart, but well made and unique.			<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Scheurebe #12</b>	2006	\$89
<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Muskat Ottonel #2</b>			<b>Zwischen den Seen (375 ml)</b>		
<b>Zwischen den Seen (375 ml)</b>	2006	\$49	Viscous and syrupy, with banana-cream pie and lemon highlights. On the finish, it's even thicker, like clotted cream.		
Who loves dried apricots? If you also like candied orange peel and red licorice, this wine is for you. The finish goes on for a full minute—but that could be said of many of these TBAs.			<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Chardonnay #7</b>	1999	\$69
			<b>Nouvelle Vague (375 ml)</b>		
			Honey and crème caramel notes lead to apricots that turn sticky in the mouth, like the glaze painted on fruit tarts. Somehow, it's also lively and easy to drink.		
			<b>Trockenbeerenauslese Welschriesling #11</b>	1998	\$79
			<b>Zwischen den Seen (375 ml)</b>		
			Grippy, zippy, and fun. Caramel and toasted nuts dominate, followed by apricot and brown butter. A little bottle age makes these wines even better.		

Prices are current estimated retail.

While Kracher is justly famous for its sweet lineup (including some dynamic Spätleses and Ausleses), the winery remains part of the long tradition of dry table wine in Burgenland. Gerhard was excited to pour his most recent Pinot Gris, bursting with grassy textures and honeyed end notes. He also waxed enthusiastic about his estate's succulent, light-pink rosé, made from Zweigelt, a native Austrian grape, as well as the Red Blend 1 (Zweigelt and Merlot). I had never even seen this wine before, but it still tasted like a Kracher—deep and nuanced, albeit dry.

The TBAs are released in two styles: Nouvelle Vague (NV, translated as “new mode”), which is matured in new French barriques, and Zwischen den Seen (ZDS, or “between the seas”), which sees only stainless steel and neutral oak. Drawing from 78 parcels spread over 63 acres in Burgenland, Kracher has established a custom of numbering its TBAs from 1 to 15, corresponding to six different grape varieties and increasing levels of residual sugar. The traditionally vinified ZDS versions are often more honeyed and fruity on the palate, even when made from the same varieties in the same vintage, whereas the NVs are bold and spicy, with the vanilla-bean, caramel, and smoky overtones of new oak.



*Kracher vineyard on the edge of Lake Neusiedl (above), soil (bottom left), and wines (bottom right).*

The results can be eye-popping, and the only reason these remarkably viscous wines (some topping out at more than 400 grams per liter of residual sugar) aren't overly cloying is the ultra-high acidity that's one of the hallmarks of Kracher TBAs. They're perfectly balanced and capable of aging like fine Sauternes—as proven by several older bottles that Gerhard broke out at the end of our dinner, along with a platter of local cheeses.

After trying the recently bottled 2006s, it was easy for me to see why Kracher is one of Austria's national treasures. Even in half-bottles, as most of the labels are released, these wines aren't cheap. But they are a transcendent expression of terroir, made with consummate skill in a trademark style that oozes class and distinction. And today, they are also a way for Gerhard and Michaela to honor the memory of their extraordinary father and husband. 🍷

