

THE AUSTRALIAN

Of wine and women

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Winemaker Birgit Eichinger. Source: Supplied

IT'S a pleasant 1½-hour drive northwest from Vienna airport to the wide, green, wine country of Kamptal just to the north of Austria's Danube valley. The chic sophistication of the capital gives way to the invigorating enthusiasm of the highly individualistic wine entrepreneurs of this pretty mountainous region and, as it is summer just before the grape harvest, the small towns and villages and their wineries are open for visitors.

There is the opportunity to drink well and economically of gruner veltliner, a wine we are beginning to see a little of in Australia, and powerful (frequently 14 per cent) rieslings.

It's best to head first to Langenlois, a small traditional wine town of 7000 in the valley of the river Kamp just 75km from Vienna. My wife and I begin our journey here for a particular reason. In the centre of town is the great Brundlmayer winery's hotel, with garden dining and a comfy, airconditioned saloon bar of the old style that sells the famed Brundlmayer.

Pater familias Willi Brundlmayer has been acknowledged by James Halliday in these pages as Austria's most accomplished winemaker.

An excellent trick of the Brundlmayer empire is to sell its wines by the glass over lunch, dinner or snacks, so visitors can get a sense of the varieties and vintages they like — riesling or veltliner this year or an older tipple?

The Austrian wine industry often appears to be a throbbing hub of testosterone, but 11 of the nation's best female winemakers have circled their wagons to attract attention. They have established a marketing co-operative, entitled 11 Frauen (11 Women), to get the word out about their products. And it has worked. They now have significant markets in Germany and Austria, and several have advanced in to the US, China and Japan.

The Austrian media's immediate reaction was one of shock and horror: women make wine! But we are keen to visit these enterprising females, and try their vintages.

First stop is the neat, stylish winery of Birgit Eichinger near the town of Langenlois, just down the road from Brundlmayer. Eichinger radiates vitality and ambition, despite having had only five hours' sleep. She and her husband attended the winemakers' and grape growers' annual community party in their tiny village of Strass the previous night, and hadn't made it home until 3am.

Like most of her colleagues, when asked how she got into winemaking, Eichinger replies: "There was no son."

Eichinger and her sister divided their father's life work between them and went their own way. The 44-year-old has, since 2000, built the original 3.5ha of grapes to 15ha and 100,000 bottles. She has won major awards in Austria for her gruner veltliner and riesling and the 2005 Decanter magazine Gold Medal for the latter.

Yet Eichinger runs the enterprise — winemaking, cellar and office — with just one full-time helper and some part-time assistance, when study allows, from her daughter Gloria, 16, who naturally enough has her eyes on succession. Husband Christian, a builder and developer, constructed the attractive and efficient winery, house and plant and offers generous support. "But no labour [from him]," Eichinger says. "So it's all mine."

She sells half of her output to Germany, Britain and the US, and recently to China, though not yet Australia.

"There were plenty of males in the wine business who seemed to think, 'Nice girls, but they can't make wine,' " Eichinger says. "But they didn't say it too loud. Now the young girls go through the technical colleges for the wine industry and join the business without a thought of any problems. But at the start our group was a big help. We would give each other support — very important."

Eichinger has a small piece of the famed Heiligenstein, which Halliday called one of Austria's greatest vineyards, recommending the Brundlmayer Heiligenstein riesling vintage 2010, priced at more than \$100.

The 2012 riesling from Heiligenstein is euro38 (\$56) at Brundlmayer. The equivalent from Eichinger, from neighbouring Heiligenstein ground, is just euro20 — and barely beaten for quality.

From Langenlois it is 15km to Krems, on the edge of the Danube and at the beginning of a beguiling run by bike, car or on foot along the river.

Just across the river we find Helma Muller-Grossmann. As one of the first women to take over a commercial winemaking business, in 1986, and one of the first to win awards, she is something of a pioneer.

Muller-Grossmann's father died young and suddenly. He had transformed the family's generations-old wine-grape growing business in to a sturdy, if small, producer. She was 38 at the time and contemplating starting a family when she had to make her move if the business was to survive. As she says: "There was no son ..."

Daughter Marlies, 26, intends to succeed Muller-Grossmann in the business. University educated in economics marketing and wine technology, Marlies is typical of the younger generation, and acknowledges the advantage of being an only child born just 12 months after her mother began making wine.

The powerful traditions of wine village life are evident when we meet Muller-Grossmann. She is

cooking lunch for nine — the field and winery employees as well as her family. Chicken, soup and noodles plus the specialty of this area of the Danube, marillenknoedel, or apricots in a traditional dough fried as dumplings, are on the menu.

“My mother believes that if everyone eats a hot lunch together that builds the spirit of the entire workforce. And she feels hard-labouring workers need a substantial meal — soup and a hot meat dish, roasts or kidneys,” Marlies says. Muller-Grossmann’s wines sell well in Scandinavia and Japan and at the cellar door the best of her 5500-bottle annual output costs no more than euro10. Look for the 2011 Gruner Veltliner Alte Reben.

Another winery not to be missed is Nigl at Senftenberg, 14km from Langenlois and 10km from Krems. Like Brundlmayer, the vineyard offers good food, hotel rooms and tastings by the glass with meals or snacks. Martin Nigl’s vintages often carry joint bylines with his wife, Christine, or sister, Gisela.

And there are three other female winemakers close to Krems, including Petra Unger, less than 5km from Muller-Grossmann.

I recommend two nights in Langenlois, a night with the Nigls and a night or two in Krems, taking the opportunity to cruise the Danube and then follow it by bike or car upstream to beautiful Melk.

Checklist

The Renner family’s historic Vierzigerhof B&B in Lagenlois has 10 comfortable rooms, from euro76 a person a night twin-share. More: vierzigerhof.at.

The Loisium Wine & Spa Resort at Langenlois has rooms from euro188. More: loisiumlangenlois.at.

In Krems, the Hotel Unter den Linden, a short walk from the village high street, has rooms from euro94. More: udl.at.

11 Frauen has a retail outlet in Langenlois. More: 11frauenundihreweine.at.

- weygandtwines.com/birgit-eichinger.htm
- weingutnigl.at
- mueller-grossmann.at
- weingutnigl.at