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TASTING ARTICLES

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BLAUFRÄNKISCH



## Dorli Muhr's Blaufränkisch

TASTING ARTICLES AUSTRIA BLAUFRÄNKISCH



*A one-woman wine estate in Austria put together in a doctor's waiting room. Sort of.*

As Tam pointed out in her recent article about the Heimanns of Szekszárd, Blaufränkisch (known as Kékfrankos in Hungary) has great potential for making refreshing-but-serious red wine that expresses terroir.

Austrian wine producers have increasing respect for this middle-European variety. The first article we published that made this crystal clear was Moric – Blaufränkisch champion back in 2012, about Roland Velich's operation in Mittelburgenland.

Earlier this year, before the expressions 'lockdown', 'confinement' and 'shelter in place' had even entered, let alone come to dominate, our vocabulary, I had the chance to taste a historical retrospective of a dedicated Blaufränkisch-focused enterprise based in an Austrian wine region we hear too little about, Carnuntum.

Austria's best-known wine publicist Dorli Muhr went into business with her ex-husband Dirk Niepoort of northern Portugal in 2002 to produce wine grown on the Spitzerberg, a long row of south-south-west-facing low hills at up to 300 m (1,000 ft) that are so far east they are almost in Slovakia. Routinely exposed to the finest wines of Austria, and the world, she'd long wanted to make wine herself and originally bought 10 ha (25 acres) of unplanted land close to Scansano on the Tuscan coast. But the business plan refused to move from red to black even 15 years in, so she gave up that particular dream.

Then her plans were put on hold when she met Dirk and went to live in Oporto. 'I realised I didn't actually want to work with young vines in a hot climate', she says now. 'I wanted to make wines that are fresh.'

Her grandmother came from Prellenkirchen, the nearest village to Spitzerberg, and had been given by an aunt as a wedding gift in 1918 a parcel of 0.17 ha (0.4 acres) of vines in the Roterd vineyard. 'My parents kept on cultivating them', she says, adding, 'and I often went with them as a child, until the late 1970s. They dug them out once the vines became unproductive. When my parents retired as farmers the farm went to my sister, except the unplanted vineyards, which they gave to me. I replanted it with Blaufränkisch in 1996 for sentimental reasons without knowing that I would start my own project there some years later. I just wanted to go there once a year to say "that's my vineyard".'

She finally started to make wine in 2002, having bought a tiny bit of land just before harvest. Then she gradually added more land, planting it over the next two years. After experimenting with several other grapes she realised that Blaufränkisch was best here, followed by Syrah.

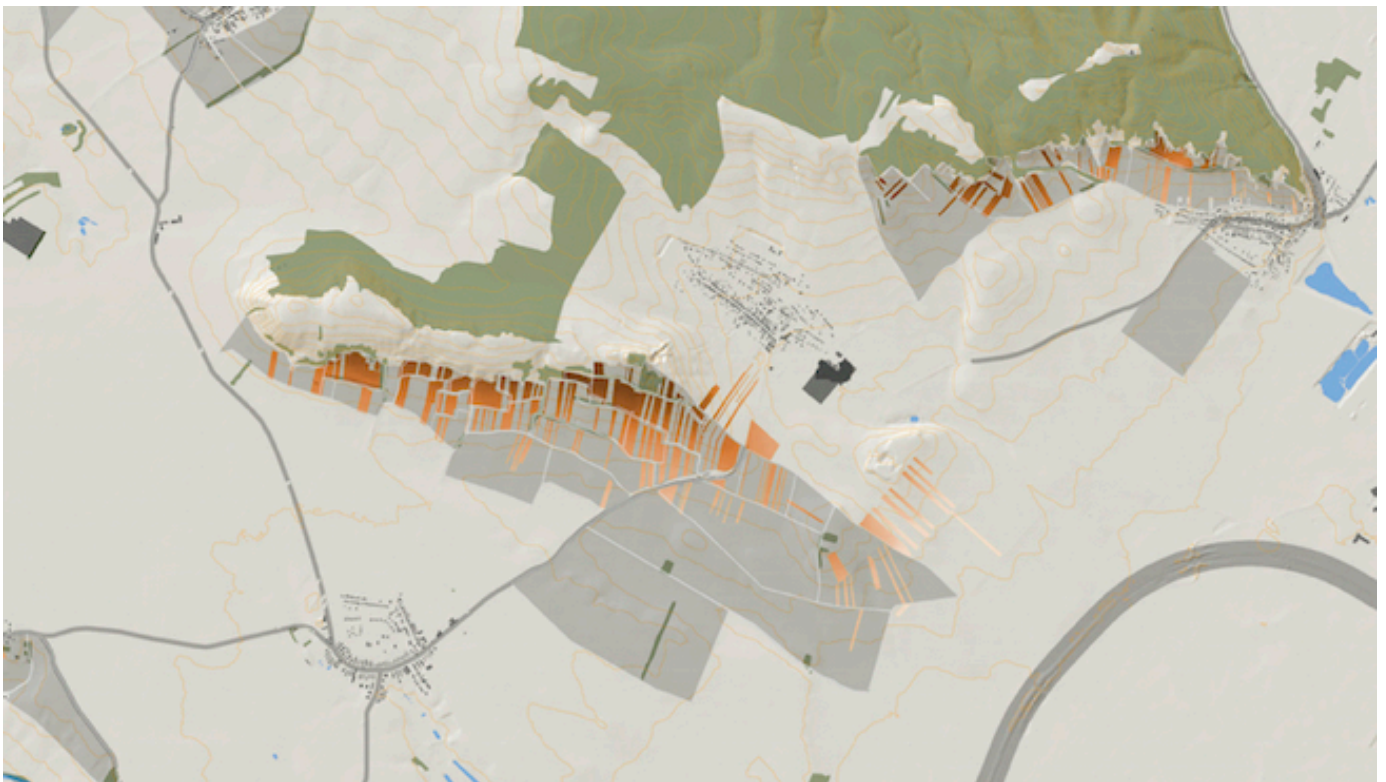
Spitzerberg had only about 80 ha (200 acres) of planted vineyard (see below in both an aerial photograph and map), mostly owned as a hobby by elderly men. After her experiments she decided she definitely wanted old vines so she cunningly put a poster in the local doctor's waiting room, reckoning that these senior vine growers were highly



likely to suffer from bad backs and other aches and pains. She also put an ad in the local church newspaper. (This is known as lateral thinking.)



The vineyards of Spitzerberg photographed by Herbert Lehmann



2004 was a really classic vintage which gave Dirk and Dorli the confidence to carry on.

Step by step, the old owners either rented or sold them their vineyards, whose old vines she was delighted to save. 'I never had a business plan. I took pretty much everything I was offered. Then I realised', she says now, 'that it would take five years to get them into shape and wean them off agrochemicals.'

Having given back some of the rented vines in 2019, she reckons 12 ha (30 acres) will probably be the limit of her holdings. She had rented four parcels of old Grüner Veltiner vines but this is a variety that really needs water, and drier summers have persuaded her to graft these vines over to Blaufränkisch, which is more tolerant of drought.

With eyes shining brightly, she told me that her objective is to make 'the very, very best Spitzerberg wine. Dirk stopped investing because he wanted to go for bigger production, so now I'm all on my own – and everything is just perfect.' Last year she was offered a little old house in the middle of a vineyard and felt the time was right to buy Dirk out. 'It's a big step – I also bought a field where I can build a cellar. But I'm very happy. I had a partnership with a local farmer and I also separated from him last year. I still have a garage in Göttlesbrunn 10 km (6 miles) from the vineyard where I make the wine currently. It's not glamorous, but it's next to Markowitsch.' Gerhard Markowitsch has so far been the best-known of Carnuntum's relatively few wine producers, though with 12 ha, Dorli is probably now the biggest grower after him in Spitzerberg.

So now her job is to put Spitzerberg on the map, having realised what a difference in character there is between wines from different vineyards on the hill. The dominant soil type is sandy limestone left by the sea in this gap between the Alps and the Carpathians, which leaves the vineyards exposed to constant winds. They also tend to suffer from poor water-holding. She went from one vineyard to the other with a geologist, who pointed out that the crucial difference is in the size of the sand grains. They are particularly tiny in the east so they're better at holding water. But she says she has always loved the west best, where her three main vineyards are located and where there is even less water. Annual rainfall has averaged just 400 mm (16 in) a year and can fall just before harvest. Yields are typically low: well under 30 hl/ha. She averages 35,000 bottles a year from her 12 ha.

So far she has chosen to blend the produce of her three oldest vineyards to sell as Ried Spitzerberg but probably in the future she will want to label wines with the names of individual sub-vineyards instead. (It is not allowed to use both a vineyard and sub-vineyard name on an Austrian label, and Blaufränkisch is not cited on the label because all DAC Carnuntum wines from Spitzerberg are Blaufränkisch.)



For Dorli the key characteristics of Spitzerberg Blaufränkisch are a hint of lychee and then caraway (I clearly need more experience to pick these out). She claims, ‘Spitzerberg wines have a central core like a pirouetting ballerina. They are sort of like a red white wine!’ They certainly share the sort of combination of fruit, vivacity and ageability that you find in a top cru beaujolais.

I asked her how Blaufränkisch from Spitzerberg compares with the same variety from another of its strongholds Leithaberg. Her answer: ‘You can see Leithaberg from Spitzerberg but Leithaberg is next to the lake [the vast Neusiedlersee] and so it’s more humid with a more moderate climate, whereas Spitzerberg is very extreme, very continental. The Leithaberg wines are more powerful because of the humidity. Vines often shut down in the hot, dry summers on Spitzerberg and start ripening again only in September with the rain.’

Apparently, Anna, Dirk and Dorli’s daughter, broke their refractometer when she was three, which they took as a sign not to worry about sugar levels and now Dorli bases her picking decisions on tannin ripeness. Most of the wines are about 13% alcohol.



Anna and Dorli in the vines photographed by Anna Stöcher, who also took the main portrait above

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Dorli is a big believer in whole-bunch fermentation with a whole-bunch component in

all vintages other than the particularly rainy, seriously shrunken 2014 vintage. Ambient yeast, open fermenters and no pumpovers are the rule and she last bought a new barrel in 2010. Her wines usually spend 20 months in barrel. They started with barriques but found that 'Blaufränkisch doesn't need new oak'. Now she uses much larger casks, 'preferably old'.

There's apparently quite a difference between the grapes grown at the bottom and the top of the slopes on which all Spitzerberg vineyards are based. Fruit from the foot of every vineyard makes the wine that used to be called Cuvée vom Berg and has been called simply Carnuntum from 2017. Carnuntum has long been a permitted regional designation on Austrian wine labels, but it achieved DAC status only in 2019, the year after Dorli's vineyards were certified organic. They are now looked after by her 27-year-old winemaker Lukas, together with a couple of Hungarians who follow the Simonit & Sirch pruning methods. 'This is our first year', reported Dorli. 'Bründlmayer started quite a few years ago and is very happy. If we want old vines, we have to look after them and prevent esca.'

All but 15% of Dorli's vines are Blaufränkisch but she grows a little Merlot for her entry-level wine as well as the Syrah described below at the end of the run of Blaufränkisch.

Black Lamb Wines import the wines into the US and Justerini & Brooks took over from Indigo as UK importers in 2018. As Dorli showed me the range of wines below from 2012 to 2017, this dedicated small-business owner admitted ruefully, 'It's very tricky to get the balance of income and showing wines at their best right. Ideally I'd sell only 2012 now!'

Here are her thoughts on recent vintages:

2019 – Some rain before harvest but better balanced than 2018 and with more acidity.

2018 – Very interesting because of the very hot, dry August and enormous rain in early September. Some had already picked, some after the rain, some even later. Willi Klinger, recently retired head of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, said it was the worst vintage ever but Dorli thinks you just have to wait.

2017 – Similar to 2018 with rain before harvest but less rain than 2018. The vines digested it better. In some places the rain was beneficial. Best for the good sites.

2016 – Frequent showers in summer (but not September).

The ten wines are shown below in the order tasted.

## Muhr-van der Niepoort, Spitzerberg 2012 Carnuntum

17

*100% Blaufränkisch. Dorli is very thrilled that this wine was chosen by sommelier Adi Schmid for the Vienna Opera Ball 2020. Specially because it's already approachable.*

Floral notes and again very polished. Very long. Light and grainy. Very refreshing. Very clean and pure and long. Still firm and even inky with some tannin in evidence. 13%

Drink 2018 – 2026

## Muhr-van der Niepoort, Spitzerberg 2013 Carnuntum

17.5

*100% Blaufränkisch.*

Looks older than the 2012! And smells more developed. Violets and very burgundian. Sweet and pretty and seductive. But delicate too. A really gorgeous wine. 13%

Drink 2017 – 2026

## Muhr-van der Niepoort, Spitzerberg 2014 Carnuntum

16.5

*100% Blaufränkisch. 'Shit year – it was raining all the time, and I love it,' says Dorli. It rained in August and didn't stop. 'I'm usually the first to pick Blaufränkisch on Spitzerberg but I had to wait until the grapes were ripe so we were the last to pick in 2014 and I had to throw out 60%.*

Transparent garnet. Very pretty aromatic nose. Black pepper on the nose. Light and definitely higher acid than usual. Quite chewy; needs food. I can imagine that Dorli feels very protective about this hard-won, very clean wine. 12.5%

Drink 2019 – 2025

## Muhr-van der Niepoort, Spitzerberg 2015 Carnuntum

17

*100% Blaufränkisch. A warm, dry year has produced a wine that Dorli finds very young still. The rain of 2014 helped 2015.*

Relatively dark garnet. Quite an umami nose. Full and sweet with masses of

impact and charm. This wine will make friends with everyone. A real charmer; even a little fat on the nose despite the freshness on the palate. Dorli regrets that it's so charming and powerful because it doesn't yet show the elegance of the Spitzerberg, she feels, but I am rather seduced by it. 13.5%  
Drink 2019 – 2027

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## Muhr-van der Niepoort, Spitzerberg 2016 Carnuntum

17

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*100% Blaufränkisch. Interesting year because it was their first organic (not certified) year and there was lots of rain that washed off the Bordeaux mixture. Sprayed more than 10 times! Vines were clearly thrilled to have water.*

Quite a deep crimson. Powerful, intense nose. Lots of fruit that almost disguises the tannins. Great fan of flavours on the finish. Redcurrants. Very pure with great freshness. Reminds me just a little of the 2013. 13%

Drink 2020 – 2030

£295 per case of 6 ib Justerini & Brooks

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## Muhr-van der Niepoort, Liebkind Blaufränkisch 2015 Carnuntum

17.5

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*From Ried Kobeln. Bought and planted in 2008, east-to-west. Just over 1 ha and very dry and exposed to wind. Yield no more than 2,000 kg so far. Tiny berries. Always picked first so it's always high in acid. This is Dorli's favourite place because her experiments with organic viticulture were here.*

Firm and pure again. Very charming. Polished texture. Tiny yield so not cheap! 13.5%

Drink 2019 – 2030

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## Dorli Muhr, Spitzerberg 2017 Carnuntum

17.5

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*100% Blaufränkisch. Picked early, between 17 September and 3 October.*

Rich and broad. Even a little buttery on the nose after a while. Full of appeal already! Precise and eloquent. Violets and freshness. Forest-floor flavours. This has a glorious fan of aromas and is then bone dry on the end. Crunchy fruit.

13%



Drink 2020 – 2032

£240 per case of 6 ib Justerini & Brooks

## **Dorli Muhr, Samt & Seide Blaufränkisch 2017 Carnuntum**

**16.5**

*Means velvet and silk. This is made up of selections of Blaufränkisch that are from vines 10–30 years old from lots of different parcels along Spitzerberg, which is 5 km long.*

Fresh, energetic and spicy on the nose. Quite savoury. Sweet and very seductively smooth. Pomegranate fruit. Quite a bit of grip. Very fresh. Very long. 13%

Drink 2021 – 2026

£70 per case of 6 ib Justerini & Brooks

## **Dorli Muhr, Roterd Blaufränkisch 2017 Carnuntum**

**16.5**

*Dorli's grandmother's vineyard. Replanted in 1996 and the first bottling was in 2017 – marking her changes.*

Firm undertow and with lots of round fruit and freshness. Very pure. With quite a bit of bite on the dry finish. 13%

Drink 2023 – 2030

£120 per case of 6 ib Justerini & Brooks

## **Dorli Muhr Syrah 2017 Niederösterreich**

**16.5 +**

*Limestone. The last to be picked. Thin-skinned grapes so tricky with rain but very good on Spitzerberg in hot, dry years.*

Dark crimson. Sweet start and very fresh though a little bit drying on the end.

Needs a little bit of time. 13%

Drink 2021 – 2028

£95 per case of 6 ib Justerini & Brooks