



Austria



THE WINE MERCHANT

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here are an awful lot of good wines available to UK independent wine merchants from UK-based suppliers. Indeed, we'd go so far as to say the UK is blessed with more than its fair share of the world's best wine importers.

That's at least part of the reason why, when we established The Wine Merchant Top 100 competition back in 2013, we decided to confine entrants to wines exclusively available to independent wine merchants from UK-based importers: we knew we'd have plenty of wines to choose from.

But at a time when more wine is being made at a higher average standard in a greater number of places than at any time in history, there will inevitably be great wines that slip through UK importers' nets.

At the same time, many independent wine merchants are looking to import direct – 17% of wine

sold by UK independents is already imported directly by those businesses.

All of which led to the launch of Breakthrough Wines, a competition with the explicit aim of finding wines that would work brilliantly in UK independent retail but which do not yet have representation in the UK.

The judging works in a very similar way to the Wine Merchant Top 100: the winners are decided by a panel of independent wine merchants who are asked to assess the wines as if they were making a buying decision for their own stores.

And, just as we do in the Wine Merchant Top 100, we're looking for high-quality wines with plenty of character at a fair price; the kind of wines that our judges – and their independent wine merchant peers – would be happy to list.

THERE ARE DIFFERENCES. Since the wines were by definition not part of the UK market, and since the judges were unfamiliar with the producers involved, we did not ask the judges to taste blind. We wanted them to have the opportunity to weigh up the whole proposition on offer. That meant the wine, of course, and the price. But it also meant the packaging – the way the wine looks on the shelf.

Our team of six took to the task with serious critical rigour, providing detailed feedback on each of the 140-plus wines entered, including notes

and scores on pricing, packaging and commercial potential, as well as the quality and character of the wines themselves.

An Austrian Breakthrough

Austria was the perfect place to start a hunt for undiscovered gems. The country's wines are much admired by UK independents, providing a quality level and a set of styles that are ideally suited to adventurous consumers. Its place in the UK market is growing, and its brand identity as a quality-oriented producer is secure.

All the same, Austria's full potential is very far from being exploited: as any wine-interested visitor can confirm, there are dozens of fine producers working in the country whose wines

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are absent from the UK. Relative to what's available on the ground, Austria remains under-represented in UK importers' and merchants' lists.

That sense of untapped potential came through loud and clear in this inaugural Breakthrough assessment. There were representatives from all of Austria's wine regions, from Burgenland to Wachau. Entries covered the full, stylistically diverse range of modern Austrian wine, from trendy but beautifully made pet nat and classy traditional Sekt, to aromatically brisk and richly ageworthy whites via thirst-quenching spicy young reds and the fullest of rich Bordeaux-style blends.

There were high scores for the established white classics, Grüner Veltliner and Riesling, and plenty of love for the native reds from Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch. But there were Breakthroughs from lesser known grapes, too: Roter Veltliner, Rotgipfler, Muskateller and St Laurent, as well as some very fine wines from "international" varieties such as Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Merlot and Syrah.

On the whole, our judges were repeatedly impressed by the quality of the wines submitted. But the wines featured here have met their stringent commercial criteria, too.

They have all been selected by at least one judge as worthy of consideration for the UK market. Some (which we have called Tier One winners) are particularly impressive in terms of quality-to-value ratio, style and packaging flair. But all would make a fine addition to any independent retailer's range. ■

The Wine Merchant magazine would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, whose help in contacting producers and organising samples was invaluable in this first Breakthrough Wines project.



Judging Panel



David Williams

David Williams has been writing, editing and talking about wine for more than 20 years. Since 2010, he has combined his roles as the wine correspondent for The Observer newspaper, the deputy editor of The World of Fine Wine and columnist and feature writer for The Wine Merchant with freelance writing, editing and speaking work for, among others, The Guardian, The Wine Gang and Decanter. In 2013, he co-founded The Wine Merchant Top 100 competition with his friend and colleague Graham Holter, and the duo went on to launch Breakthrough Wines in 2020.



Ted Sandbach

Ted is a stalwart of the UK wine trade, and his business is much admired by other UK independents. He established The Oxford Wine Company in the early 1990s and remains very much at the forefront of the business today. The wholesale operation is large and wide-reaching and there are now five retail shops in the Oxford area, most with an on-trade element or event facilities. The business has its own wine school held in several locations including the company's historic Turl Street Cellar.

Jeff Folkins

Jeff and his wife Claire opened Dalling & Co Wines in Kings Langley 2009 to complement their delicatessen next door. They love to offer their customers unique wines alongside the more well-known styles. They have a long-standing love of Austrian wines; Jeff says he was “looking for not only great wines, but wines that would offer good value to our customers who hadn’t had the opportunity to experience and enjoy them before”. He adds: “I love Austrian wines because of the numerous and creative varieties that come from this under-appreciated wine country.”





Hal Wilson

It's almost 30 years since Hal and friend Brett Turner started Cambridge Wine Merchants. They started with just one shop and now they are one of the biggest independent wine merchants in the UK, with a total of seven shops and a large wholesale operation. Several of the shops incorporate wine bars, serving food and running tasting events. The business has a range of more than 800 wines and it is a leading WSET School. When it comes to the buying strategy, Hal says: "We want only the best, at the best price, and we put a lot of effort into finding it."

Alice Archer

Alice is a buyer for Cambridge Wine Merchants and she also looks after the private client sales for one of the UK's largest and most experienced institutional wine buyers – the wine stewards of Cambridge and Oxford University colleges. Alice is also studying to be a Master of Wine and she is the company's resident Champagne expert. In her spare time (yes, despite all this she has a little spare time), she is the chairman of The Champagne Academy and a Dame Chevalier of the Ordre de Coteaux de Champagne.



Matt Harris

Over the past decade Planet of the Grapes has become a bit of a London institution and operates from three locations in the heart of the City. Matt was definitely a trailblazer of the hybrid model and his stylish wine shops, bars and restaurants all have the emphasis firmly on quality. The business brings a touch of levity to the old, more traditional serious-wine City scene, with its range of events and wine tastings employed to showcase its extensive range of Old World classics to New World ingénues.

Ben Franks

Ben teamed up with Gyorgy Zsiga, a Hungarian wine importer, just over four years ago to set up Novel Wines in Bath. The business focuses on wines from small producers and community co-operatives. Their mission to track down and stock unique wines has led to Decanter awarding them Best Central & Eastern European Retailer of the Year, two years in a row. Ben's message to his customers is: "You don't need to be a wine specialist to taste something fantastic and unusual; all you need is a little curiosity and a desire to try something new."





BREAKTHROUGH
WINES

Top 30



Fink & Kotzian Ried Königsberg Niederösterreich 2017

Commercially attractive and balanced Grüner Veltliner with unmissable packaging

ABV 13.5%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €6

A wine that is “fit for a king” is what the small family producer Fink & Kotzian promise from their Grüner Veltliner grown in the “king’s rock” or Königsberg vineyard.

And the judges certainly thought it was fit for the UK market, giving unanimous approval. “I really enjoyed this,” said our first judge. “The nose was quite fresh, with citrus and stone fruit. The palate was wide and fresh, with great racy acidity and very enjoyable in the sun. Thank you!”

Our second judge was more succinct but no less enthusiastic: “Straw, tropical nose, citrus and tropical ... commercial, and appealing to a wide audience.”

The packaging was a little more divisive, but, like it or hate it, it’s likely to get your customers talking, and some are sure to “like the mesmeric effect of the circles and the pale green”.

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Lenz Moser Kremstal DAC Grüner Veltliner 2019

Solid entry-level Grüner Veltliner for customers looking to start their Austrian vinous journey

ABV 12.5%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €3.85

If Austrian wine is to build its brand recognition and sales in the UK market, it needs top-end fine wines. But it’s important not to overlook the lower price points where many customers will be looking to start their Austrian wine adventure.

That’s where wines like this come in. “Good solid Grüner Veltliner nose and palate,” the judges said.

“Pale straw. Stone fruit – white peach – and spice. Juicy, comfortable Grüner, easy to enjoy but elegant and linear; focused, mineral. A bit of pith but mainly steely fresh citrus fruit. Good length and balance.

“It would make a solid listing as a mid-level wine.

At this price point it could be a good gateway Grüner Veltliner for customers unfamiliar to the style. We know the producer, and we can respect the intention behind this wine. Pricing is good and limits the customer risk.”

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Fink & Kotzian OT, Niederösterreich 2017

An unoaked Chardonnay-Pinot Blanc blend from Fink & Kotzian's flagship OT range

ABV 13%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €6

All three OT wines entered into the Breakthrough Wines competition from Fink & Kotzian had some appeal for at least one judge. And it was interesting to see how variations in oak, blend and vintage hit the spot in different ways for different tasters.

For the OT 2017, the blend is 50/50 Chardonnay/Pinot Blanc, a combination that works beautifully here, where the wine is unadorned by oak, having been fermented and aged entirely in stainless steel.

"The nose has poached pears and subtle spice. The palate has a lovely texture to it," said one judge. "It's not lacking in acidity and bite, though."

Fink & Kotzian's trademark "trippy" packaging seems to work better for some judges than others, but one liked the "variation on a nice theme" for a "very good wine at fair price, which makes it commercially viable".

"Cracking value – at this price I possibly prefer it to its big reserve brother."

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Fink & Kotzian OT Reserve, Niederösterreich 2016

Delightful, mature oak-aged blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc – the best of the OT three?

ABV 13%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €10

Mature at four years old, and, like the straight OT 2017 an equal-parts blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc, the 2016 OT Reserve may have been the favourite of the three wines entered in the Breakthrough competition from the OT range by Fink & Kotzian.

The judges were full of enthusiasm. "Subtle oak and stone fruit nose – with similar flavours on the palate underpinned with some creaminess and a rich yet dry finish. Nice wine," said one judge.

"Pale white gold; brilliant. Some oak evident, some butter and nuts, flowers and white peach. A tasty ripe palate, plenty of acid, nice and long with some slight pithiness. Perfect use of oak," said another.

As a "delicious and interesting" wine in "stand-out" packaging, it's a "nice blend with full rich flavours and fairly priced that could work well" in the UK independent scene.

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Fink & Kotzian Riesling Berg und Meer Artist Proof, Niederösterreich 2018

Well-made Riesling from one of the breakout stars of Breakthrough Wines

ABV 12.5%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €5

As the name on the label suggests, this wine has been packaged with great attention to detail by the consistently excellent producer, Fink & Kotzian.

And our judges were intrigued by the results. “Is it an artist label? It’s striking and stands out,” said one. “Love the name ‘artist proof’. The design is eye-catching immediately. It could be brighter in the style but nonetheless I think customers would pick it up. It’s obvious it’s a Riesling by label and bottle shape.”

The wine inside is no less intriguing. “Racy palate with limes, freesia flowers, packs of fennel and a little touch of honeysuckle sweetness on the finish,” said one judge. “I actually really like the fennel notes here. Something different and well made.

“This would do really well. It ticks all the boxes: price, packaging, quality.”

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Weingut Buchmayer Gelber Muskateller Ried Äußere Bergen, Niederösterreich 2019

Accessible and enjoyable introduction to a grape variety that deserves to be better known in the UK

ABV 12%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €6.20

After impressing the judges with an example of Austria’s best-known white grape variety, Grüner Veltliner, the family-run Buchmayer estate follows up with a highly attractive take on the rather less well-known Gelber Muskateller.

And, once again, it found an appreciative audience. In the words of one judge: “Beautiful nose, if a little restrained: some yellow fruit, and flowers. Intensity grows through the mid-palate. Has a higher acidity and virtual salinity that is very agreeable. Finish is mineral-driven, and enjoyable. A gastronomic wine.

“We think this wine would perform well,” the judge continued. “There are other Gelber Muskatellers in the same price range that are rounder and bring a little more to the table, but this is a different stylistic expression and would be a good way to introduce the grape to aromatic wine lovers. We’d like more intensity, but that’s not always a good thing for customers who prefer more subtle, approachable styles.”

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BREAKTHROUGH
WINES

Highly
Commended

Weingut Setzer Weinviertel DAC Ausstich 2019

Great value Grüner from a family estate with deep roots in the Hohenwarth area

ABV 12.5%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €4.27

The Setzer family have had vineyards at their farm in the relatively high (400m above sea level) lands around Hohenwarth since the early 1700s, but it wasn't until 2001 that the decision was taken to focus their operation entirely on wine.

It's a move that would have met with the approval of one of our Breakthrough Wines judging panel, who gave high marks to the Setzer's Grüner Veltliner Weinviertel DAC Ausstich 2019.

"White pepper, and Granny Smiths – the perfect Weinviertel Grüner. The palate has lovely weight to it – chilled down I could drink it all day," the judge said

The packaging, too, lived up to the quality inside the bottle. "So simple and with some stand-out colour, too," the judge added.

Can it succeed in the UK market? "It's a great value, well made wine," the judge said. "It has everything going for it."

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Weingut Setzer Weinviertel DAC Reserve "8000" 2018

A reserve-tier take on Grüner Veltliner for the serious Austrian wine-lover

ABV 14%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €10.01

The measure of a good reserve wine is how much of a step up in quality and intensity it provides compared to more everyday bottlings. And for one Breakthrough Wines judge, Weingut Setzer has very much managed to provide the next rung up the quality ladder with a wine sourced from one of the estate's best, highest-density vineyards, and which is aged until the spring after vintage on its fine lees.

"Subtle honey and mixed spice on the nose with creamy apple fruit on the palate," the judge said. "The wine has great balance of fruit, acidity and weight. It's very classy indeed."

With "simple but good" packaging that features a "classic label on a bold colour", it's a "good quality wine from a producer that obviously knows what it is doing."

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Fink & Kotzian Weinviertel DAC Ried Hintern Dorf 2018

Strikingly packaged Grüner Veltliner with plenty to like inside the bottle, too

ABV 13%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €5

In a world filled with tens of thousands of brands and labels, the importance of shelf standout cannot be underestimated. Fink & Kotzian's Grüner Veltliner certainly stands out from the crowd. "Love this modern approach to label design. Very much aimed at the vibrant modern younger drinker or the on-trade environment," said one Breakthrough Wines judge. "It's slightly trippy but it would grab attention on the shelf," added another.

The wine itself divided opinion, but was much loved by one judge for its combination of quality, authenticity and reasonable pricing.

"I like the wine and the price is very good – if correct," they said. "A bit more weight to this wine, and deeper colour too. A touch of richness on the palate underpinned with clean acidity. Good finish. Picked later?"

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Weingut Jäger Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Ried Achleiten 2018

Another smart Grüner from this family-run Wachau producer based in the village of Weißenkirchen

ABV 14.5%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €14

The second Breakthrough Wine from this multi-generational family producer in the village of Weißenkirchen in the heart of the Wachau is a true terroir wine.

That terroir, according to the Jäger family's publicity material, is "sand made from Gföhler gneiss, which forms a wonderful basis for the vines. For centuries, the rain-washed soil in the Achleiten ried was carried up again by hand – the river sands mixed with the weathered primary rock. This special soil characterises the wine and its finesse-rich play of aromas."

One member of the Breakthrough Wines judging panel was particularly impressed by the Grüner Veltliner that emerged from that vineyard in 2018. "Very attractive with recognisable Smaragd fruit. Very appealing. Green ripe fruit with good length and spice. Elegant and impressive finish."

And all that with a bottle featuring the "classic" Jäger label with its "strong customer appeal".

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Breakthrough Wines: Austria

Weingut Familie Auer Rotgipfler Bio, Thermenregion 2018

Charming interpretation of native grape Rotgipfler that may need a bit of handselling

ABV 13%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €8.30

There's no doubt that the judges enjoyed this, the second of our Breakthrough examples of the relatively obscure Austrian white variety, Rotgipfler.

In the words of one of the judges, it has a "soft, grassy, hay-like nose with some limes and apples. An elegant, silky texture in the mouth. Pink grapefruit, white peach and saline notes. It's pretty herbal on the finish but in a clean, refreshing way. Turkish delight. To use a cliché, summer in a glass!"

Another judge, meanwhile, described a "classic nose, bold and with good persistence. The fruit is well matched and there's good texture. The complete package, and one we really enjoyed tasting."

If the packaging didn't quite live up to the wine – "it's neither here nor there" – and if the pricing takes it into handsell territory, this is nonetheless a product our judges felt they "could get behind in store, no problem".

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Fink & Kotzian OT Reserve, Niederösterreich 2018

Fink & Kotzian's flagship reserve white cuvee goes 100% Chardonnay for the 2018 vintage

ABV 14%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €10

One of three wines from this impressive producer's OT range to make the Breakthrough cut is, in this vintage, a 100% Chardonnay. It's aged in a mix of new and used Weidlinger oak in 300l and 228l barrels, with one third of the blend placed in stainless steel.

It was loved by one judge, who enjoyed the "pale gold, brilliant" appearance.

"A pleasant nose, oak and tree fruit; really lovely texture, long and fine, and fun to drink."

And while that judge would have liked to see some mention of the grape variety on the label, they also liked the packaging and its funky design ethos.

As a whole the 2018 OT Reserve has some "very good potential" even if other judges felt previous vintages are showing better right now.

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Weinhof Seyfried Morillon Vulkanland Steiermark DAC 2018

A Styrian Morillon (aka Chardonnay) made in an attractively crisp and refreshing style

ABV 12%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €8.50

A family winery established in the 1980s and now run by the two daughters of the founders, Weinhof Seyfried is a winery with a big commitment to sustainable agriculture and a broad range of varieties in the Steiermark DAC.

The judges very much enjoyed their take on Chardonnay, labelled here using the local Styrian name for the variety, Morillon, appreciating its subtlety and balance.

"Very pale, white gold; brilliant," said one judge. "A kumquat, white peach nose. Nice fruity attack with well balanced acidity. It's very good in a non-shouty way."

The packaging was also well liked. "There's a smart crest on the bottle and a nice cap and matching colour on the label," said one, while another judge described it as "classy and understated". All of which makes for what one judge called an "interesting" commercial proposition.

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Lenz Moser Prestige Pinot Grigio, Burgenland 2019

A sound, international-style Pinot Grigio that could work as a good-value option

ABV 13%

EX-CELLARS PRICE €3.85

One of the big names of Austrian wine has a knack of producing good-quality commercially appealing wines that are able to hit the right price points in international markets.

And according to the Breakthrough judges that's what he's come up with here again, in the shape of an attractive version of a variety and style that still has considerable mass appeal: fresh, crisp Pinot Grigio.

"Simple pithy citrus nose. More interesting on the palate. A little off-dry. Sweet citrus and some herbaceous qualities. Quite short on the finish, this is pleasant but very simple in style," the judges said.

On the whole it's "good, pleasant wine", the judges continued. "Not something I'd get excited about stocking but I know there's commercial demand for decent Pinot Grigio, so if a customer was looking I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this at around the £6-£8 retail price point."

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Breakthrough Wines: Austria



Austria

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