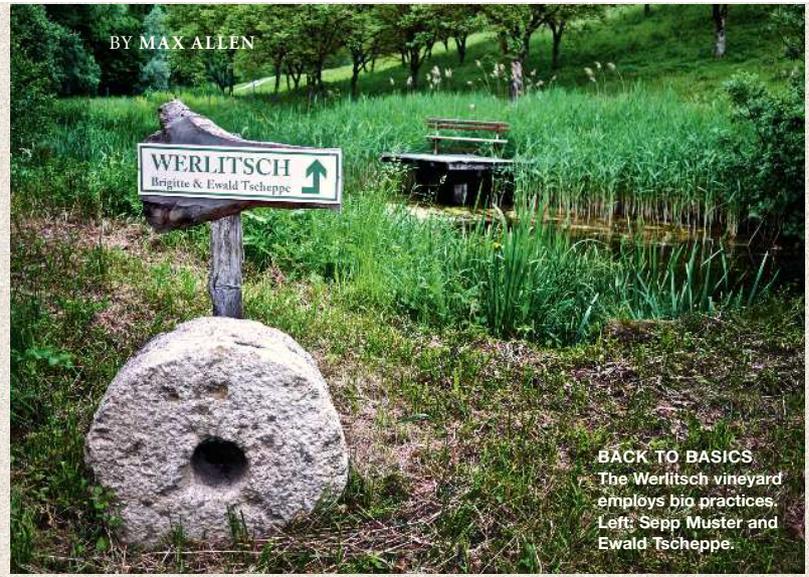




# THE GREEN GAUGE

*Biodynamics is flourishing in Austria as winemakers take note of Rudolf Steiner's techniques.*



**BACK TO BASICS**  
The Werlitsch vineyard employs bio practices. Left: Sepp Muster and Ewald Tscheppe.

We can feel it as soon as we arrive at the biodynamic **Werlitsch** vineyard in Styria, found in the southeastern corner of Austria. There's something different about this place, something somehow more natural. The grasses, trees and vines are a more vivid shade of green. The air is soaked in the sound of bird and insect life, of bumblebees and cuckoos. And as we climb the steep hill behind the winery, the earth under our feet feels thick and spongy, like felt or fruitcake.

I've had this experience a few times before, of walking into well-run biodynamic farms and noticing immediately how different they feel to many conventionally-run farms, how much more alive and harmonious they are. For many of the other Australian wine media and sommeliers on this trip, this is their first time in such a lovingly cared for and well-established biodynamic property: I see their eyes widening and their speech softening in response to the landscape.

Winemaker **Ewald Tscheppe** and his friend and neighbour, winemaker **Sepp Muster**, show us around the vineyard. As all proud biodynamic farmers do, they fork up clods of soil to show us the chocolate-coloured humus and the writhing pink worms. And then they guide us through a tasting in Ewald's small, almost chapel-like cellar door.

Both Ewald and Sepp are members, along with three other vigneron families, of a group called *Schmecke das Leben* (Taste Life), which shares a common belief in ecologically sustainable viticulture and minimal intervention winemaking. We taste wines from all five estates, they are extraordinary: a world away from the precise, correct rieslings

and grüners most of us associate with Austrian wine, these are rich, wild, and in some cases profoundly moving. Highlights include: a thrilling **2010 Strohmeier Sparkling Rosé** made from the wildbacher grape, with tangy, vibrant flavours of hedgerow fruit and spice; Sepp's fantastic, mineral-drenched **2008 Graf Sauvignon Blanc**; and the **2006 Werlitsch Ex Vero II**, a wonderfully floral, richly textured blend of sauvignon and chardonnay.

Biodynamics is gaining momentum in Austria's wine community, which is entirely fitting, as the biodynamic system of organic farming originated in a series of agriculture lectures given by the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, in the 1920s. A couple of days before my visit to Styria, for example, at the huge *VieVinum* wine fair in Vienna, I attended a tasting to launch a new group of 15 Austrian biodynamic producers calling themselves *Respekt*. It was another thrilling tasting, with each member presenting one of their wines and explaining why they follow biodynamic principles.

"Most of us have come to biodynamics through blind tasting," says **Johannes Hirsch**, while we sipped his incredibly focused **2009 Zobinger Gaisberg Riesling** from Kamptal. "I would often try wines that had so much minerality, then find out that they were biodynamic."

"Since converting to biodynamics, I have seen more spiciness, more earthiness, more terroir in our red wines," says **Gerhard Pittnauer**, as we tasted the graphite and

dried-herb complexity of his **2009 Red St Laurent** from Altenberg in Burgenland.

"We see biodynamics as a way of building an immune system in the vines," said **Hans Nittnaus**, another top Burgenland producer, over his deeply savoury red **2009 Pannobile blend**. "The wines taste more vital because the vines are more vital."

Ewald Tscheppe and Sepp Muster expand on these observations in the tasting room at Werlitsch a couple of days later. The first thing I learn is that the land at Werlitsch is farmed according to the system of biodynamics and the unique preparation 500 (the notorious horn manure) developed by Australian **Alex Podolinsky**, who is due to visit in a couple of weeks, is used.

"Alex taught us that the most important thing is to understand how the plant is fed," says Ewald. "A vine gets its nutrients from the humus in the soil and applying 500 is all about promoting humus. Biodynamics helps nature help itself."

Sepp Muster says that, "In my vineyard I have many rocks and little soil. So I use the preparation 500 to make sure that the soil I do have has vitality. In the cellar we try to keep the vitality in the finished wine – that is our main work. For me, the most important thing is tasting the land in the wine." ❗

*Disclosure: Max Allen travelled to Styria and VieVinum as a guest of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, the Austrian National Tourist Office and Enoteca Sydney.*