



MAN OF GOOD CHARACTER

When natural wine fairs started to spring up in major cities a decade or more ago, they were a breath of fresh air for anyone who had ever suffered a major wine-trade event. In place of the sterile conference centre, you had a slightly gritty warehouse location – the more exposed brick the better. Instead of massive booths to flaunt how much cash the winery had to splurge, there was the same standard-issue folding table for every exhibitor. Not to mention the significantly higher chance of tasting something thought-provoking – and maybe even transcendent, depending on your preferences. It might have become a formula, but it's a formula that clearly works. Just witness the massive growth of the RAW Wine Fair, which started out in London and now takes place on multiple continents and in half-a-dozen different locations each year.

But there's been a lot of soul-searching about wine fairs in the post-Covid era. Some have suggested that their time is nigh, that they're inefficient and too costly for winemakers – who sometimes feel they're bankrolling everyone else's all-you-can-drink party. Now more than ever, each new event has to justify its existence both to the growers – who pay handsomely to participate, in addition to pouring their wine for free – and to the punters and professionals who pay entrance. Karakterre always felt like a bit of an outlier to me. It started out small and chaotic in Vienna in 2013 but has quietly morphed into one of the scene's most major happenings. Almost 200 growers participated at this year's European edition in Eisenstadt, and a successful New York chapter was inaugurated in late 2022. That success is especially surprising given that the fair focuses almost entirely on Central and Eastern Europe. These terms might have a clearer political or cultural meaning than a geographic definition, but for Karakterre they denote a firm anchor in Austria, with significant showings from growers in Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and the Balkans. You read that correctly: Europe's most famous wine-producing countries, France, Italy and Spain, are not part of the concept.

SIMON J WOOLF VISITS KARAKTERRE, THE WINE FAIR FOCUSING ON CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Illustrations by ZEBADIAH KENEALLY

KARAKTERRE'S SUCCESS IS ESPECIALLY SURPRISING GIVEN THAT THE FAIR FOCUSES ALMOST ENTIRELY ON CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE. EUROPE'S MOST FAMOUS WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES, FRANCE, ITALY AND SPAIN, ARE NOT PART OF THE CONCEPT

The absolute dominance of France in terms of reputation, column inches and shelf space is a constant in the wine world. Call me a heretic, but I suggest this has far more to do with volume than anything else. France is not the only place on earth that boasts clay limestone soils, high quality indigenous grape varieties or a long heritage of wine production. But it does produce almost 20% of the world's wine. That in turn has translated into occasional myopia, or even prejudice, in the eyes of many wine lovers when it comes to the output from less lauded parts of the world. And perhaps, aware of Communism's destructive effect on wine production, people doubt what Hungary, the Czech Republic and the Balkans can offer. Karakterre's co-founder and organiser Marko Kovac is well aware of these issues, and the event is intended to redress the balance. "The area that we are addressing is an historic region for winemaking," he says. "People forget that this is one of the places where wine was born. If you look at Croatia for example, it was a natural path for wine from Armenia, Turkey, Georgia and Greece." He adds that when the French wine industry was decimated by phylloxera in the mid-1800s, the Balkans

enjoyed a further half-century of production. I tease Kovac by asking if a French wine lover could expect to find something of equivalent quality at the event. "Not just as good, but probably better" is his unequivocal reply.

My own sampling over the two days of Karakterre substantiated that claim. For me, the Central and Eastern European focus offers a smorgasbord of exciting discoveries and a diversity that would be hard to replicate in most 'classic' wine countries. Austria is of course very much top dog, not just because it is the host country but also because of its extremely strong natural wine sector. (Before we go any further, let's clarify that 'natural wine' according to Karakterre – and to me – does allow for the use of limited amounts of added sulphites.) Almost 70 Austrian growers participated in this year's event, and if there was such a thing as Austrian natural wine Top Trumps, you could have grabbed the whole deck, with the biggest crowds flocked around Gut Oggau, Sepp Muster, his son Elias, and Christian Tschida. Looking for new names, I was blown away by Kobatl, Michael Gangl's winery in southeastern Styria. Predominantly whites and oranges, they have a laser-like focus and superb concentration. They are fine wines on any level, and even more impressive when you learn that Michael only works with modern disease-resistant varieties (AKA PIWIs), such as Sauvignier Gris, Bronner and Muscaris.

If there is one Hungarian region that really excites me right now, it is Tokaj – but for dry wines rather than sweet. Tasting with Szóló (Tímea and Tamás Éless), I found the purity and energy of its whole range really stood out. If you love that Burgundian hint of gunflint, paired with Furmint or Hárslevelű's thrilling acidity, look no further. Heading north to Slovakia, Filip Nagy is a name to watch. Nagy showed the wines from his 7 Řádků (7 Rows) project, which started out in Moravia in the Czech Republic, but now includes wines made near Bratislava. Nagy has

a knack for making everything he touches sing. I particularly love his 'Black Label', a silken-textured field blend of white varieties. I offered a sip of his elegant Frankovka Modrá to a visiting Canadian wine importer friend, telling him, "This is the Czech Republic's best Blaufränkisch." He gave me a disbelieving look before tasting the wine, and then announced his intention to buy the entire stock.

Sticking with reds but heading to Slovenian Styria, the spicy freshness of Srečko Šumenjak's Pinot Noir wowed me. His lightly macerated whites all excelled too, showing the lighter, fresher touch of this region when compared with more westerly Primorska. And in Croatia, two growers convinced me that it's possible to make elegant and refreshing wines even in hot, southerly Dalmatia. Vinas Mora (Krešo Petreković and Niko Dukan) focuses on Babić, a local red variety that tends to play second fiddle to the better-known and rather blustery Plavac Mali. Its 'Andreis' perfectly balances velvety fruit and refreshing acidity. Based a little further inland, Filip Bibich coaxes fascinating, understated wines from varieties such as Debit, Lasina and Plavina that don't usually get much love. Confusingly, his father Alen's more conventional range shares the Bibich name, but with a completely different label concept.

Wine fairs often come under fire for vaguely defined conditions of entry: Karakterre has a little manifesto that forms its 'participation criteria', but adherence is entirely based on trust. Growers are expected to be family run, farm organically or biodynamically, not to exceed 50mg/L of total sulphites in their wines and to "actively promote authentic grape varieties, sustainable farming and living". Kovac insists that this woolly-sounding approach works and "we rely heavily on the input and knowledge of the community to

guide us". What it doesn't state openly is that entry is also refused to wineries that only farm or vinify part of their production according to the Karakterre manifesto principles. I found this useful, because it avoids having the hall filled with major commercial wineries that want to dip a toe in the waters of the natural scene without fully embracing it.

Kovac further distinguishes Karakterre by saying that it is not a wine fair or tasting per se, but rather a salon. I asked him to clarify what that meant. "People don't just come for a few hours to the fair," he explains. "They come for several days, they visit winemakers, we take them into the vineyards." The fair itself had a festive, convivial atmosphere, helped by perfect weather and the expansive terraces of Eisenstadt's orangery, situated in the middle of the Esterházy Palace park. It's at the core of a vibrant and expanding Mitteleuropean scene, filled with passionate winemakers and their clients. Even if some wine events fall by the wayside, Karakterre's singularity should ensure it survives and thrives.

