

# Austria '08 Candidate: The Water Buffalo in the Vineyard

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**Johannes Hirsch leads the way for a new generation of Austrian vintners**

Those beasts certainly produce a lot of manure. This is a good thing for Johannes Hirsch. This is the fertilizer for his vineyards. He is convinced as he explains, "There is no better dung than that from water buffalos." Water buffalos for vineyards? This top vintner from the Kamp Valley doesn't surprise anyone anymore. His unconventional approach has hit the headlines and even been scorned much too often.

Johannes Hirsch has taken his own road and it has been a road to success. It is though, not the only reason why the 37-year-old was nominated for the Austria'08 in the economic category. Johannes Hirsch is considered the leader of a new era in Austrian wine production.

## Hirsch eliminates red wine

He first made headlines in 1999. As the Austrian red wine scene was buzzing about a centennial vintage, he pulled out all his red wine vines. His were even considered among the best red wines in Kamptal. But Hannes Hirsch has a vision and he is following it. In the meantime on the 25 hectares of Hirsch estate vineyards, there are only two varieties: Grüner Veltliner and Riesling.

The then 28-year-old vintner not only shocked his colleagues, but the entire Austrian wine establishment. The agricultural commission was promoting red wine as the answer to the climate change. Millions of Euros in government subsidies were invested in this ludicrous project. Vintners that followed this call are now left sitting with their red wine or are forced to sell them for dumping prices.

On the other hand, Riesling and particularly Grüner Veltliner are in international demand. Every fourth bottle of Hirsch wine is currently consumed in the USA.

Hirsch really shook up the wine branch in 2002 as he became the first Austrian producer to bottle premium wines under screw cap closures. "This was preceded by a key experience," remembers Hirsch. He harvested an outstanding Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese in the 2000 vintage. An entire 150 litres of this valuable nectar were produced. "I had to dump out half of the bottles because the corks were faulty!"

The screw caps caused quite a national debate. A few famed wine critics even called for a boycott of the Hirsch wines. They saw the demise of wine culture in the rejection of cork stoppers. Sommeliers missed their ceremony of bottle opening. "If a sommelier is just there to open a wine bottle, then he is overpaid," says Hirsch. He had travelled in New Zealand where vintners have been bottling their premium wines under screw caps for years. Hirsch's rejection of natural cork stoppers is now often called a "courageous step". He himself sees it as a purely economic decision.

Practical open-mindedness won over stubborn ignorance. The calls for a boycott proved to be valuable advertising. Restaurants joined together and added Hirsch wines to their wine lists. The screw cap now enjoys general public acceptance.

## A Focus on the Environment

As progressive as Hirsch seems, he is conscientiously old fashioned in the vineyard. "Every intervention damages the wine," he says. "You can't improve nature." Hirsch despises the word "winemaker". "The answer to climate change is healthy soils," claims Hirsch. His father Josef eliminated artificial fertilizer decades ago. In the meantime, the dung comes from the water buffalos.

The resulting wines are of international format. Grüner Veltliner Lamm and Riesling Heiligenstein have long been synonyms for a new vintner generation in Austria.

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