

Orange Wine Exploration

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Written by Christy Canterbury in [Masters of Wine](#), [Revelations](#), [Travel](#), [Wine Notes](#)



Rust, Austria, was busy last week. There to teach first year Master of Wine Candidates, I also participated in the simultaneously occurring [Wein Akademie](#)'s annual conference for industry types. The afternoon's discussion focused on the highly topical subject of "natural wines", followed by a tasting of these wines from Austria and nearby countries. Much was on offer in just a sliver of time, so I had to be selective. I made a beeline for the "Orange Wine Bar".

Briefly, for the uninitiated: "orange" wines are made from white grape varieties. Rather than discard the skins once the juice is pressed from the grapes, the skins and juice remain together during the fermentation and aging processes. This contributes the orange color to the wines, along with tannins and denser texture, the latter two characteristics more akin to red rather than white wine.

I appreciate orange wines, among other reasons, because they are the most straightforward in the natural wine category. (It bears mentioning that it is possible to make orange wines using conventional methods.) Their colors immediately alert the imbiber that something different has been done (or rather, not done, with regard to removing the skins.) Expectations are established from the outset.

Orange wines provide a special utility in wine consumption patterns. Their tannins, and sometimes bitterness, mean they play well with food. In fact, orange wines generally work best with food. Additionally, their oxidative natures, sometimes encompassing aromas that resemble beer, open a new dimension of food pairing.

I advocate delicious wines, whether they are natural or not, and I've enjoyed many an orange wine. This tasting did not, however, sit well with everyone. Two friends – one a natural wine fan – expressed near anguish after working through the orange wine table. I found several wines I loved, some I appreciated, many I'd leave behind (they were okay, but why bother) and two that should put their producers behind bars for taste bud assault. Furthermore, I was thoroughly disappointed by the Radikon Oslavje, a wine I know well, which showed impressively poorly.

Curious, I punched up a few numbers to see much I liked the wines. Of the 21 wines, I rated eight wines 90 or above. (I've recently begun scoring as *a final note to myself* as to where I place the wines overall. However, my note is my most important reference.) So, 38% of the wines – mind you, this was importer [Egon J. Berger](#)'s quality portfolio – earned at least 90. The highest score was 93. Only two wines rated below 85, both generously awarded a 75. As I mentioned, those two were criminally bad. The average score was 87, both when I averaged all scores and when I threw out the highest and one of the lowest scores. This is *not* a statistically relevant sampling, but I thought the numbers might add context. Here are my brief notes on the eight wines scoring 90 and above.

93 [Tauss](#) 2007 Roter Traminer H (Südsteiermark, Austria) 14%

Massively perfumed, like one of the elaborate perfume bottles that sat on my paternal grandmother's dresser. Though definitely marked by oxidation, the imprint does not detract from the overall generosity of fruit on the nose. Its lingering finish, the longest and most poetic of the tasting, validates this as my highest rating. Definitely the most exciting wine of the bunch.

92 La Castellada 2007 Ribolla Gialla (Collio, Italy) 13.5%

Lively fruit despite the oxidative winemaking with a profound diffusion of aromas on the open nose. Plentiful mid-palate creaminess. Balanced alcohol and supporting acidity. Medium plus finish. Contrary to what I wrote before, this drinks well on its own.

91 Brandulin 2007 Cuvée Belo (Brda, Slovenia) 14.5%

Composed of 75% Pinot Grigio with Sauvignon Blanc, Rebula, Jakot and Pinot Blanc constituting the remaining 25%, this wine sported good breadth on the palate and a rather plump center. The textural creaminess of this wine would make it a fine change of pace for Chardonnay fans, as long as they don't mind the lightly drying finish. Suave, this is an orange wine that isn't overly oxidative.

90 [Cotar](#) 2007 Malvazija (Karst, Slovenia) 12.5%

Initially restrained on the nose, with a bit of time this wine offered spiced apple cider, fresh-grated cinnamon and a whiff of musk. Brightly acidic with seamlessly integrated alcohol and rather modest weight. In case you didn't initially catch it in the name, this wine is made from Malvasia.

90 Sirk/Koletnik 2010 Atimo Chardonnay (Goriska Brda, Slovenia) 13.5%

Served from magnum, this neither looked nor tasted like an orange wine. But, it did offer deliciousness, with flavors that reminded me of Meursault: baked yellow apples drenched in cinnamon, served with fresh whipped cream and topped with roasted hazelnuts. The finish was moderate, the palate was expansive and the discovery was much appreciated.

90 [Strohmeier](#) 2009 Wein der Stille 2 (Weststeiermark, Austria) 14%

This was another wine that didn't look very orange though its aromas maintained it was stylistically faithful. The fruit flavors were anonymous, with straw, hay and candlewax playing starring roles. The aromatics did, however, nod to the underlying varieties. There was the musk

of Muskateller and the grass of Sauvignon Blanc. The Chardonnay provided mid-palate suppleness.

90 [Werlitsch](#) 2007 Ex Vero II (Südsteiermark, Austria) 12.5%

Yet again, this wine showed no orange color yet it displayed lambic-like acetic notes. If you like sour ales (I do), this is a wine for you! Straw, pine needles, beeswax and yellow plums are the core flavors. Punchy acidity and medium body keep this wine lively on the palate. A smart blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay.

90 [Wimmer-Czerny](#) 2011 Pur Grüner Veltliner (Kamptal, Austria) 14%

Exotic aromas exude from this wine. Foremost were Normandy cider and Calvados. These were followed by wafts of spruce and fresh-sliced Asian pear. Interestingly, orange wines occasionally have residual sugar to balance out their tannins. Here the sweetness stuck out clearly, more than in all other orange wines I've tasted, despite the faint dry tannins. Other than the obvious sweetness being a surprise, the package was harmonious.