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Eastern Slovenia, the tasting notes

TASTING ARTICLES
SLOVENIA
FURMINT
BLAUFRÄNKISCH

Roka, Kog

Liam and Sinead Cabot got to know Slovenia through Liam's father, Dr David Cabot, environmentalist, ornithologist, academic and author, who lived in the country for several years, advising the administration on environmental issues in preparation for their entry into the European Union.



The Cabots bought their 1.5-ha (3.7-acres) Šipon (Furmint) and Laški (Welschriesling) vineyard along with a no-frills Slovenian house in 2007, but it was four years before they took the plunge into winemaking. In 2011 they bought some grapes (the previous owner of their vineyard was still using the vineyards to make his own wine) and played. In 2012 they made wine to sell.



The Šipon vines are over 35 years old and the Laški vines range from about 35 to nearly 55 years old. They planted a half hectare (1.24 acres) of Modra Frankinja (Blaufränkisch) in 2012. The vineyards are south-west to west facing on a fairly steep slope, rows running top to bottom. The soil is two to three metres (6.5 to 10 ft) of heavy clay over Pannonian seabed. The bottom of the vineyard, edged by forest, is markedly cooler but more sheltered from the wind. It is also more vulnerable to the deer, which emerge from the forest to nibble on young buds and sweet fruit.

Sinead and Liam stopped using pesticides, fungicides and herbicides when they took the vineyard over, and have planted cover crops between the vines, mowing or hand-strimming for weed control. A week of hard, uphill work for

any fitness enthusiast! Last time I was there, they were hand sowing clover for nitrogen fixing.

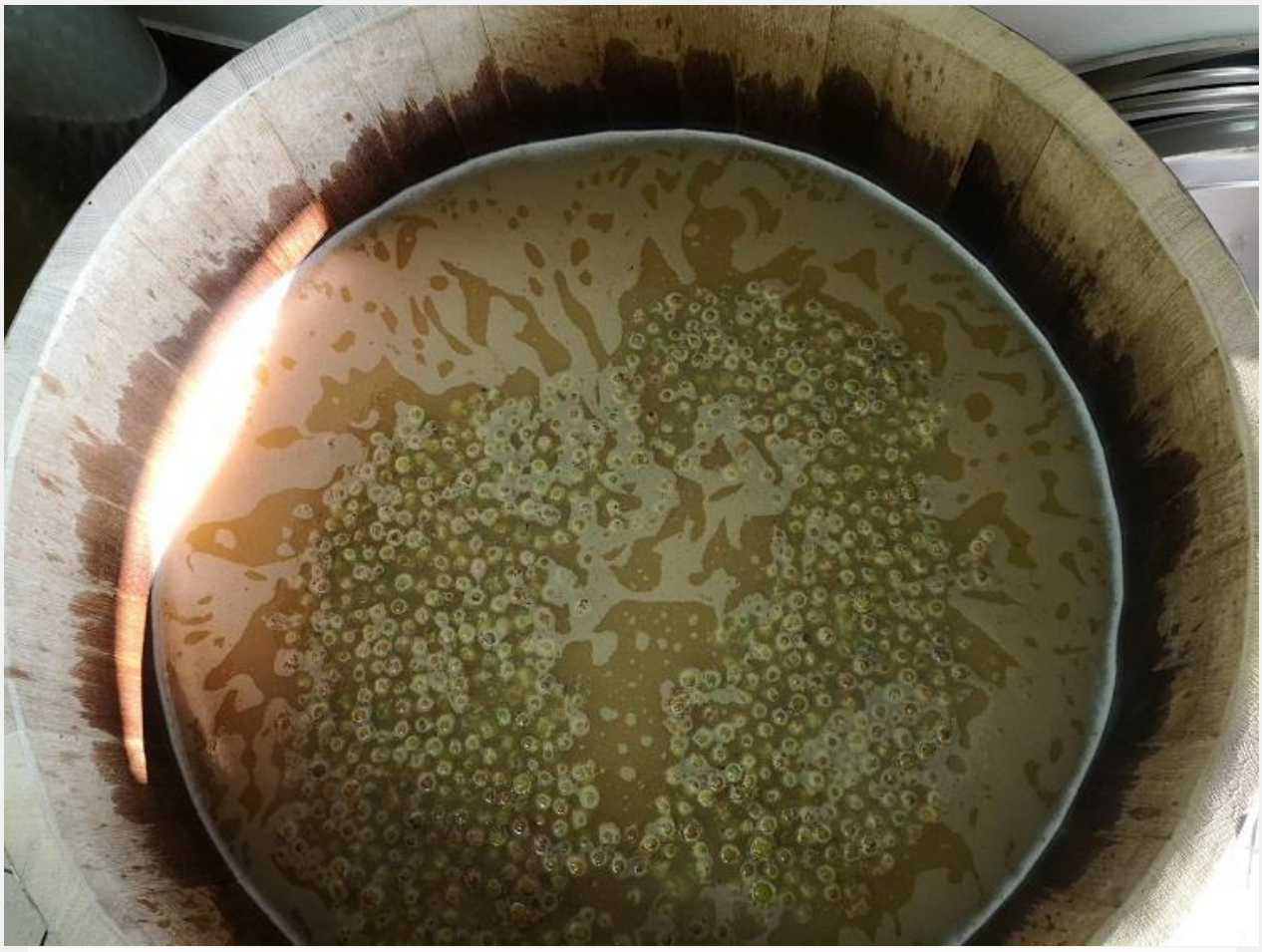


They use as little sulphur and copper as possible (way below what organic regulations stipulate – in 2019 they used just 200 g per hectare cf the organic limit of 4 kg per hectare/year) and in 2018 started trialling whey for mildew. They pick nettles from the edges of the vineyards and make a tea which they spray on the vineyards several times a year.

Manually intensive canopy management helps control ripening, yields and disease resistance. When they deleaf around the fruiting zone in June, they remove leaves on the side that gets the morning sun but leave the foliage on the side that gets the hot afternoon and evening sun (Slovenian summers get very hot!). They've adapted the pruning to reduce yields, which initially shocked the old vines into a sulk, but they bounced back better and stronger after a year.

Their regime in both vineyard and cellar is deceptively simple. Listening to them, you'd think a child could make wine. Their teeny cellar looks like a toy one, with two small shiny tanks, two open-top oak fermenters (big enough to fit one person each) and a big plastic tub. A few barrels are tucked in at the back over a nest of *penina* (Slovenian for sparkling wine).

Winemaking equipment amounts to a wine glass, a hydrometer, a plastic jug, a bucket and a pipette. They destem (might throw in a couple of whole bunches, depending), ferment with natural yeast, and add SO2 judiciously – after racking in May when the cellar warms up for the whites and a top-up dose at bottling if the wine needs it. The Modra Frankinja gets a bit of gentle hand punching (more pushing than punching) and they all get a bit of stirring now and then if the ferments go a little stinky.



Borut, the man who runs the wine-supplies shop in nearby Ljutomer, thinks the Irish couple are barking (but interestingly) mad. He sells yeast and nutrients for good reason: to save wine from spoilage. They don't buy any of it. Every year he's speechless with surprise that, for Roka at least, it doesn't happen.

Temperature control is large bottles of frozen water chucked into the vats and a little electric fan when things get too hot. Mostly they rely on the earth that the cellar is built into for natural insulation.

No acids, no sugar, no yeasts, no enzymes, no DAP, thiamine, potassium, gum arabic or lactic acid bacteria. They think their Laški sometimes does partial malolactic; maybe over winter, Sinead says, wrinkling one eyebrow upwards in a quizzical question mark. They don't fine, and the wines only get the coarsest filter before (hand) bottling. 'It fractures the wine!', she wails, 'It really does go into bottle shock. It's soul destroying, disheartening. Every time you want to cry. The wine tastes *awful* immediately afterwards.' Of course, it recovers. Wine does. But for me it was an insight into how nail-biting winemaking can be. And how miraculously resilient wine can be when you're not nursing it every step of the way with a cabinet full of 'medicine'.



Sinead, in that potent mix of fierce passion, high drama and brutally self-deprecating humour that the Irish seem to do better than anyone else, describes their wines and each vintage as if she was describing her children – with a mixture of love, awe, exasperation and trauma. In fact, she likens it to

childbirth, drawing on the metaphor with earthy gusto, her big brown eyes widening with all the horror and wonder as she tells me their harvest war stories.

The Cabots veer away from categories. They're not organic, biodynamic, natural or sustainable. Liam is deeply cynical about organic certification, and to illustrate his point pulls out the long list of permitted additives in organic winemaking (none of which they use bar sulphites). It's a long, crazy list and I see his point. When I ask about biodynamics, he sighs, raises his eyes (and eyebrows) to the sky, and points to the solitary, local electricity line crossing the vineyard. 'This would disqualify us even if we wanted to be.'

Neither of them has any winemaking qualifications (although Sinead does have her WSET Dip and they've been importing and selling wine in Ireland for nearly 20 years). But they're both super-bright, they burn with curiosity, they absorb information like sponges, take everything apart like children with a box of treasure, and they really, really do stop and listen.

Their teachers are the producers they import from: Roland Velich of Moric 'for the revelation about Blaufränkisch'; Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey 'disarmingly honest about premox and so open about his journey' and for his invaluable lesson on the concept of SO2 stability – 'he won't bottle a wine until the SO2 has been stable (ie unchanged) for at least a month prior to bottling'; the Mugneret sisters, 'generous with their knowledge and a great sense of girl power before it was a "thing"'; Andreas Tscheppe in Styria, 'a more recent, but inspirational guide'; Juan Carlos Sancha in Rioja: 'his pursuit of the celebration of indigenous varieties was an early encouragement to embrace local varieties'; KP Keller, who 'welcomed us into his home … was honest about the business of wine'; 'and of course Miro – nothing would have happened without him'.

But their wines, made without fuss, certification or oenologists, without moons or horns or micro-oxygenation, have a great sense of purity, a sense of purpose – comfortable in their own skins, as it were – and, undeniably, a streak of impish glee. Their 2018 vintage, however, has taken an indefinable step towards something altogether more serious. They've stepped into fine-wine territory.



Continue for tasting notes……

Roka, Penina Šipon 2013 Stajerska Slovenija

Penina is the Slovenian term for sparkling wine. An experiment. Champagne method without disgorgement, zero dosage and on the lees since 2014. 4 bars pressure.

Baked apple and then that distinctive cotton-candy-wax Šipon nose. Lots of apples on the palate and starts with quite an attack of fizz and then softens into a bit lacy cloud of soft bubbles. Apples and bread. Fresh and slightly herbal. It's absolutely fantastic when you stir up the yeast, get it all cloudy pet-nat style and taste it with the local smoked sausages (*kranjska klobasa*)! (TC)

Drink 2018– 2020

16.5

Roka, Penina Modra Frankinja 2013 Stajerska Slovenija

Their first red sparkling. RS 17 g/l. Champagne method without disgorgement.

Plums. Ripe, succulent, plump purple plums. Smells beautiful. Tastes of plums, like falling back into a little velvet pillow. And there's chocolate. And mint. The bubbles, precise and fine, just seem to serve to accentuate the beauty of the fruit. So resolved. So fresh. So lithe. This wine is a sommelier's dream! I can think of 20 totally different things this would work with. One of the most delicious sparkling reds I've ever tasted. (TC)

13.5%

Drink 2018– 2023

17.5

Roka, Penina Modra Frankinja 2015 Stajerska Slovenija

RS 17 g/l. Champagne method without disgorgement.

Mushroomy and umami. Lots of dark fruit and some sweet volatility. Tannins are chalky, still very unfinished, hasn't quite melted into itself and opened up like the 2013. Yet. (TC)

Drink 2020– 2025

16 +

Roka Laški 2018 Stajerska Slovenija

Picked 1 October 2018 (same day as the Šipon/Furmint). Spontaneous fermentation in stainless-steel tank. Racked almost at the end of alcoholic fermentation, just before it's dry, to give the yeasts an extra kick of air which helps them to finish fermentation (natural yeasts are not the strongest yeasts). The final fermentation trundles on and tails off very slowly; 45 days in total. Racked in May and sulphur dioxide added for the first time: 52 mg/l total and 29 mg/l free. TA 5.38, RS 2.8 g/l. Bottled end of August 2019.

A palms-wide-open bouquet of sage, spiced apples, ripe melons. Almond-oil nuttiness. Delicious baked-pear sweetness hugging the palate, and fantastically vibrant acidity. Sparkles with acidity. Extrovert, dazzling, utterly beguiling. Like someone throwing her head back and laughing from her bones. More warmth than the Furmint – it doesn't have that cool, slightly aloof steeliness. Poached quince and cloves and a little cheeky bite of five-spice powder. Full of joy. So gloriously good it almost feels nutritious! (TC)

13.6%
Drink 2019– 2026
€21.50 Cabot & Co, Grapevine, Poppy Seed, Market 57, No 1 Pery Square
17.5

Roka Laški 2017 Stajerska Slovenija

A difficult vintage thanks to a heat spike in August following a long drought summer, and the vines just shut down. Instead of picking with low sugars and green acidity, they decided to wait it out. They lost nearly 30% of the crop to rot. But they've found that Laški seems to be more resilient when it comes to vintage challenges. Šipon resonates the vintage, Laški tangos with it. Harvested 24 September and it was still fermenting on 23 October. They don't put it through malolactic but have found that the Laški tends to do partial malo in tank over winter.

The Laški smells more open than the Šipon, smells of sunshine and wide-flung windows. Yellow fruit and spice and powdered citrus peel, still opening in the glass. Lots of dried ground clove spice, lots of very ripe cantaloupe melon; minty, coffee. There is a chalkiness of flavour and texture towards the end that feels grippy. Cold, it's so peppery and crackling it's street dancing in your mouth, wired, spice flaring up your nose. It warms with the amplitude of a string orchestra. Starts on a single violin, and then grows and grows in crescendo as other strings pick up. Tiny bit of white flower and whitecurrant wafting in on the finish. More weight and less angles than the Šipon. (TC)

12.7%
Drink 2019– 2025
€20 Cabot & Co
17

Roka Laški 2016 Stajerska Slovenija

RS 1.5 g/l, pH 3.49, TA 4.72 g/l. Double decanted five hours before tasting.

Green apples. Much more rigid than the 2015. A bit starched and anxious. But lots of greengage and lovage with a tingle of white pepper. Wiry with elbows and ants-in-pants energy. (TC)

13.5%

Drink 2019– 2021

16.5

Roka Laški 2015 Stajerska Slovenija

Their 2015 wines were easy, apparently – they never went through an awkward stage, unlike the disaster of 2014 (which became cognac) and the difficult 2016s. Took just over a month to ferment in stainless steel. About 6 g/l RS. Double decanted five hours before tasting.

Very spicy on the palate, crackling with the fragrant-pepper spice of Baharat and then some sweet spearmint. Feisty and argumentative with a touch of oiliness. Cancans around your mouth, kicking acidity and green peppercorns into corners like ping pong balls. Much looser weave than the Šipon. Honeyed age just starting to mellow the finish. Good food wine! Thai fish cakes or pulled lamb and mint wraps. (TC)

13.5%

Drink 2016– 2022

16.5

Roka Furmint 2018 Stajerska Slovenija

A straightforward vintage with no heat spikes, enough rain. The first year they'd started working with whey and nettle tea. Picked 1 October 2018. Spontaneous fermentation in an open-top oak fermenter, 42 days' fermentation, racked into stainless steel and left until May on fine lees without sulphur dioxide. Little bit of lees stirring at beginning. Racked in May and sulphur dioxide added for the first time: total 61 mg, free 31 mg (after bottling). PH 3.24, TA 5.45 g/l, RS 0.9 g/l. Went through spontaneous malo. Bottled end of August 2019. 550 bottles.

Deep pear and Reine Claude nose, touch of cotton candy – very Furmint. Acacia blossom. I got goosebumps down my spine on the first sip. Pink grapefruit curd, vineyard mint, lime directness. It fills every corner of your mouth. Presses against you. Lime-peel oil and samphire. Such tingling, direct, racy, fiercely shining minerality that is all at once acidity and flavour and structure, but it's a spine, a shaft of light, a silver arrow – long and piercing through the mouth-filling breadth. Dawn light and evening light all at once. Seems to shimmer in the mouth. Deeply quenching. Has a kind of taffeta and shot-silk texture, grainy pear skin. Deeply contented, generous wine. The fascinating thing is that the warmer this wine gets, the more salt and texture and depth it seems to gather (we tasted it from about 10 °C (50 °F)through to 20 °C (68 °F) in the glass and it was beautiful from the first sip to the last). Achingly long finish. A violin solo on a mountain top. (TC)

13.2%
Drink 2022– 2030
€21.50 Cabot & Co, 64 Wine, Grapevine, No. 1 Pery Square, Tartare
17.5

Roka Furmint 2017 Stajerska Slovenija

2017 was a difficult vintage. There was an extreme heat spike in August, and although the leaves didn't go brown, they shut down photosynthetically. So, while high sugars developed early on, they abruptly stopped rising in August. The Cabots tend to harvest two weeks later than most of their neighbours, but this year they decided to wait an extra two weeks. They picked on 1 October, a month after everyone else. No malolactic fermentation. Natural-yeast fermentation in open-top oak fermenter. No sulphur additions during élevage, no enzymes, acids, DAP, chaptalisation etc.

White-peach perfume and lime-sherbet candy – that cotton-candy smell of Furmint that is so perversely childish and playful for a variety that makes such fierce, serious wines. Floral, but it's such a gauzy top note that it's almost not there. Tightly coiled fruit around glittering shards of acidity – long, drawing, piercingly persistent acidity. On the mid palate it's grapefruit and cardamom carved into seashore pebbles. When I tasted it in August 2018, I wrote, 'a wine to feel more than taste', and even now, more than a

year later, I still find myself writing, ‘fierce fierce fierce lime and salt, like licking handmade recycled glass. Cool, introvert, whetstone. For now, ceviche wine. But I’d tuck this into the back of the cellar and wait. Very very racy and very very long. (TC)

12%
Drink 2021– 2028
€20 Cabot & Co
17.5

Roka Furmint 2016 Stajerska Slovenija

Made in an open-top fermenter. Natural-yeast fermentation, no sulphur dioxide added until the end of alcoholic fermentation after racking into stainless steel. 2016 was a warmer vintage than 2017, with higher sugar and higher alcohol. They picked on 10 October in perfect conditions at 91 Oechsle. TA 7.5 g/l.

Clenched at first, smelling of cold stones and green apple mint and white citrus and pith. The palate a little more relaxed, a touch of creaminess and grilled yuzu and hazelnut skins. Then we tasted the same wine from a bottle that had been opened for six weeks, half consumed and left in the fridge. Furmint really is the most extraordinary grape when it comes to durability. The wine smelt richer, nuttier, with a top note of cardamom becoming broad and generously creamy, deeper and yet still that apple-mint-and-lime freshness tingling like current through the palate. Peach-kernel bitterness. Beautiful. Like crinkled silk. A year later, in October 2019, the nose had become heady with mimosa perfume and jasmine, and the creaminess detected on the opened bottle turning to dulce de leche. Incredible weight for a 12.8% wine but with this coruscating acidity, a platinum blade. Beautiful, but not quite at the level of the 2017 and 2018. (TC)

12.8%
Drink 2018– 2025
17

Roka Furmint 2015 Stajerska Slovenija

Picked 29 September at 93 Oechsle after a wonderful vintage year. Made in stainless steel, no oak at all. Natural-yeast fermentation. This was the year they got to learn and trust natural yeast. It took from 29 September to 7 October to start fermenting and 21 days to finish once it started. 'Gave us lots of sleepless nights. We got lots of advice from local vignerons: "You've got to get to the shop, buy yeast, buy something to get it going or you'll lose it all!" They were looking at us like we were committing vinous homicide. We were still very new to all this and we were in anguish. Luckily when one of us was all ready to dash out to the agricultural supply shop, the other would stay firm.' Double decanted five hours before tasting. Fermentation finished with 5 g/l RS, TA 7.5 g/l. No malo.

Furmint is amazing the way it unfolds with age, loosens, the weave gets less and less starched but it doesn't lose that fierce spike of something that's more than acidity. You can taste, next to the 2017 and 2016, how the 2015 has started stretching and limbering up. A lime-cotton-candy sweetness with a bit of wax and quince and rose water, and just rich and fabulously delicious. The weight and depth and roundness seems more that of a wine with 14% alcohol and a bit of oak than one made in stainless steel and just clocking in at 12.7%. Spicy golden grilled peaches and a gentle back note of toffee. This is like an affectionate kitten, rubbing its head against you and purring, but it has a surprising power and magnificence that is perhaps more lioness than kitten. And then there is the cool wet-grey-pebble finish … (TC)

12.7%
Drink 2018– 2025
17

Roka Blaufränkisch 2018 Stajerska Slovenija

Picked 28 September. Not yet bottled at time of tasting (was bottled on 27 October 2019). Only racked twice: once Fermented in 500-litre open-oak fermenters. Pressed and assembled in tank for 48 hours. Racked to two 500-litre barrels, Stockinger, one new and one fourth fill. LDL toast (light, deep and long). There is a tiny bit of Laški added to the 2018 – they topped up the barrels with fermenting Laški juice. Racked out of barrel after malolactic and left in tank until bottled. It only received sulphur dioxide when it was racked into tank out of barrels. 18 mg/l free SO2, 34 mg/l total SL2, pH 3.21.

Bright, red-jewel fruit on the nose. Inky blue shadows. Aniseed dust. Bresaola. Cracked coriander seed. Vineyard mint and tarragon on the nose and palate. Almost grassy, but in the best way with the umami base of nori. The compact, tight, sinewy muscularity of a gymnast in the tannins. Violet, lavender, cumin seed on the palate, a hint of Blaufränkisch meatiness, then that glowing, jewelled fruit opening up like a flower in the mouth. Long, persistently fresh citrus acidity on the finish and length. So damn delicious you want to drink it right now. (TC)

12.6%

Drink 2020– 2027

17.5

Roka Blaufränkisch 2017 Stajerska Slovenija

Picked 25 September. Tough vintage, especially for their very young vines (five years old). Fermented in three fermenters: two Slavonian oak, 500-litre open vats and an open 500-litre resin cubic tank. Has a tiny bit of Laški added to it (3%), just after fermentation, in order to top the barrels up. Aged in one new 500-litre Stockinger and one second-use barrel – previously they used one new barrel and one first-use barrel but felt that was a little too much, the fruit was too black. Total SO2 is 20 mg/l.

Very closed on the nose (it was more open last year when we tasted it before bottling). Starts pointed and very tightly paced, compact. Tense shoulders, the tannins are a bit harder than 2018, not as supple. Acidity is super-fresh through blackcurrant fruit and blackcurrant bud. Carries a cool graphite line. River rocks. It’s moss under stones in the banks of a shady forest river, the scent under ferns and bracken and cold stones and shadows and cool and earth and years of humus and leaves and mushrooms. Tomato leaf on a drawstring finish. Needs another year in bottle. (TC)

13%

Drink 2020– 2025

16.5 +

Roka Blaufränkisch 2016 Stajerska Slovenija

RS 2 g/l, TA 5.78 g/l, pH 3.45, total free sulphur 10 mg/l. Aged in one new and one second-fill barrel. The fruit was a bit riper in 2016. Double decanted five hours before tasting.

Spicy plum nose. Tiny bit of sous bois. Lovely foil of fragrant herbs lying on dark fruit and against a graphite spine. So Cab Franc-like! So fresh, so linear, and herbal and leafy, finishing as precise as the seam of a Saville Row suit. Tannins very determined but very fine. Still young and cocksure, practising dance moves in the mirror. (TC)

12.5%

Drink 2019– 2025

17 +

Roka Blaufränkisch 2015 Stajerska Slovenija

Half of this was Miro Munda's fruit and half was their own fruit from their three-year-old vines. They were trying to get their head around red wine by buying grapes and this was their first red vintage to be sold commercially. Double decanted five hours before tasting.

Molten blue fruit on the nose. Then a bit of cigar smoke. Ripe tobacco leaf. Mulberries and a hint of red meat caramelised over an open fire. Almost northern-rhône-like. Wow, the tannins here are totally different: upfront and driving the direction of the wine with a cocoa-grinds texture. Dark, almost bitter chocolate especially towards the finish, soy, dried thyme. Has a wild, persistent loveliness. (TC)

Drink 2017– 2022

16

Roka Blaufränkisch 2012 Stajerska Slovenija

Bought-in fruit, made in Miro Munda's cellar, but this was the first vintage fermented in their own, new, open-top oak fermenter.

Fruit smells purer than the 2011 – less caramelised. Lighter. Tastes much more leafy – furry tannins and a real tomato-vine furry, herby, green-but-fragrant streak. The fruit isn't as beautiful as the 2015 and 2016 but the acidity is juicy and thirst-quenching. In this vintage they were still punching down a lot (in 2011 they were going mad with punching down, apparently). Turning gamey and a little skinny with a bit of a hole in the middle, but still very drinkable. (TC)

Drink 2014– 2018

15.5

Roka Blaufränkisch 2011 Stajerska Slovenija

This was their first red wine ever. They bought two rows of fruit, picked it themselves, fermented ii in a big, square plastic box (common in this part of the world), made it with little to no sulphur in Miro Munda's cellar and then hand bottled.

Burnt sugar and baked damsons. And cinnamon. Smells like pudding. More yeomanlike, especially in terms of texture, than the 2015 and 2016. The acidity is a bit thicker and finishes more abruptly. Dark fruit, with a nori-seaweed savoury edge. Juicy energy but it fades quickly. Doesn't have the finesse of younger vintages. (TC)

Drink 2012– 2016

15

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