

Austro Turf

FOR A BUNCH OF BIG-CITY AESTHETES, BURGENLAND IS THEIR OWN PRIVATE PARADISE. MAURA EGAN STOPS AND SMELLS THE STRUDEL.

Photographs by ELFIE SEMOTAN



Taubenkobel Clockwise from above: perch topped with fried celery served at the restaurant; the outdoor dining area; a room at the hotel.

Burgenland unfurls like a long ribbon through eastern Austria, nudging up against Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia. Here the Alps loom farther in the background; the land is somewhat flat, a patchwork of sunflower fields, farmsteads and small, scraggy-looking vineyards perched on hills. Until 1989, when the Iron Curtain came down, a high chain-link fence crisscrossed the border between Burgenland and Hungary. “No one wanted to come here,” explained Gerhard Kracher, a third-generation vintner whose family has been producing prestigious wines here for decades. “It was the end of the world, but there was great weather and world-class sweet wines.”

A few visitors saw that the region — one of the country’s poorest — had its charms. Elfie Semotan, a fashion and art photographer based in Vienna and New York, recognized its potential back in 1974. That’s when she bought a farmhouse in the village of Grieselstein with her husband, the artist Kurt Kocherscheidt, who died in 1992. Other Vienna-based artists, like the sculptor Walter Pichler and the painter Christian Attersee, began investing in country houses, too.

The night life was limited, so Semotan and her artist friends transformed an old farmhouse about a mile from Slovenia into their

clubhouse, Klub an der Grenze (Club on the Border). They strung up lights in the courtyard and tacked up gallery posters in the bathroom. Kocherscheidt designed the zinc bar; Semotan’s second husband, the late art provocateur Martin Kippenberger (he died in 1997), made the bar-stool seats to look like Alka-Seltzer tablets; Pichler orchestrated the spare-looking dining room. Most Saturday nights there is a group dinner, the ingredients foraged from local farms and vineyards. Last summer, during a sweltering July weekend (“Burgenland is called the sauna of Austria,” Semotan volunteered), she took me shopping in preparation for a meal at the club, and we stopped at all her favorite food haunts, not to mention vintners.

There are hundreds of vineyards in Burgenland, from small family plots producing garage-style wines to world-class operations like Kracher and J. Heinrich, which features a Modernist glass-and-steel tasting room. Semotan and her friends have tried most of the area’s offerings, but she is most excited by the dry, elegant reds from Moric, made by Roland Velich in the village of Grosshöflein. The photographer, who was a longtime collaborator of the designer Helmut Lang, is so enthusiastic about Moric that she advised Velich on the



Klub an der Grenze Clockwise from top: a gathering at the social club; the bathroom; Elfie Semotan on a stool co-designed by Martin Kippenberger.

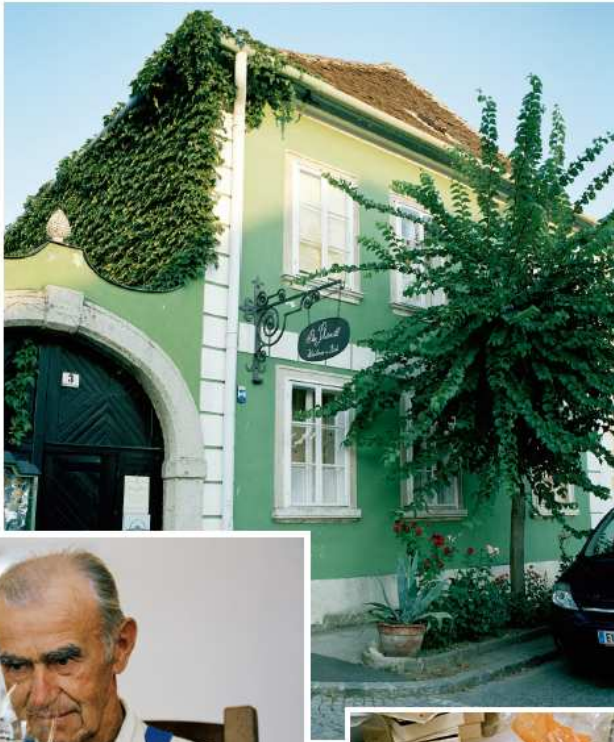
Neusiedler Lake Shallow and reed-filled, it straddles the border between Hungary and Austria.

bottles' stylishly austere labels. Velich dresses the part of the Young Turk winemaker: slicked-back hair, faded Levi's and Adidas sneakers. His wines are served at restaurants in Manhattan like Café Sabarsky and Wallsé, where the sommelier Aldo Sohm describes them as "out of control." But Velich isn't interested in global domination. As he sits on the ground and opens a bottle for us to taste, he warns about not growing too quickly (his output is only 40,000 to 50,000 bottles a year) and sticking to more of a biodynamic ideology. "I want to show the substance of the region," he declared. "It's the border between East and West." Semotan explained that the region's appeal has partly been its proximity to Eastern Europe: "The Viennese can be very elite," she said. "But here the land has changed hands so many times that people are more flexible and open."

Which is why she was all smiles when she introduced me to Alois Kracher Sr., a salt-of-the-earth farmer turned vintner working in the village of Illmitz. Every day, save for Sunday, Kracher slips into his blue coveralls to tend to the grapevines. "Sundays are hard for him," said his grandson, Gerhard, who helps his father, Alois Jr., run the day-to-day operations for Kracher wines. "My grandmother won't let him work."

Kracher produces some of the best trockenbeerenauslese dessert wines in Europe. The early-morning fog that rolls off the nearby shallow, reed-filled Neusiedler Lake has fostered ideal conditions for *Botrytis cinerea*, a fungus that shrivels the grapes, concentrating their sweetness. We sampled a flight of dessert wines, each more honeyed than the one before it. "These would be good with cheese or chocolate," announced Semotan, who advised that we eat something before we imbibed any more alcohol.

For lunch, she made a reservation at Taubenkobel restaurant, a 200-year-old farmhouse in the village of Schützen, about an hour and a half from her home. Her friends Walter and Eveline Eselböck opened their luxe country-style restaurant in 1984 and the hotel in 2000. It's where Semotan dines on special occasions. Eveline is the sommelier (she also acts as the earth mother to the region's biodynamic movement), while their daughters Barbara and Stephanie run the adjoining shop, which sells wine and jams made from berries from the forest. (We picked up a few jars of apricot marmalade for the road.) The whole family pitched in to perfect the World of Interiors look of the place. The blown-glass table lamps come from Goa, the wonky sea-green plates



Kracher vineyard From left: Alois Kracher Sr., a farmer turned vintner; the outside of the estate; the vineyard's prized trockenbeerenauslese.

Moric vineyard From top: the vintner Roland Velich and his generation are putting Burgenland on the map; sunflowers fill the region in summer.

were thrown by a local potter, and the dinner knives were designed by the French company Forge de Laguiole.

Walter has earned two Michelin stars for his high-concept cuisine — our meal included foie gras in a liquefied Parmesan bath and slivers of perch from a nearby lake sprinkled with fried celery strings. If the kitchen pyrotechnics seem reminiscent of Spain's El Bulli, they are. He frequently goes on cooking pilgrimages, training at the stoves of master chefs like Pierre Gagnaire, Heston Blumenthal and, of course, Ferran Adrià. "I don't copy him. I do my own thing," said Walter, who once customized an ayurvedic menu after a trip to India. "Regulars always know where we went on vacation," Eveline said. He's currently looking to Slovenia and Hungary for inspiration; Semotan informed him of her favorite spot in Vienna for Bohemian-style pancakes.

Despite these grand foodie gestures, Walter isn't really gunning for that third star. "It's about raising my children and having a good marriage," he explained as a waitress with blond cornrows refilled his water glass. The staff is an extension of his family, and he treats them all to an annual culinary trip. One year, they ate at one of Marco Pierre White's restaurants in London. Even the dishwasher, who had never left Burgenland, came

along. "He had to buy a suit," Walter said. "He'll be buried in that suit."

We couldn't spend all afternoon grazing in their bucolic setting — there was still more zigzagging across the countryside to be done. Next stop: the butcher in Loipersbach. Otmar Tschürtz, who supplies meat for Taubenkobel, also happens to make a world-class prosciutto. Although he looks more like an extra from "The Office" than a second-generation country butcher, he is fastidious: checking his meat every morning at 6, fiddling with the temperatures, protecting the ham shanks with a lard-and-flour paste and pricking the skin with an Italian horse-bone tool to make sure the meat hasn't spoiled. Tschürtz used to slaughter his own pigs, but now he buys the animals from a friend. "You need the older pigs because they are fatter and have a higher sugar level," he explained. "It makes for more aromatic pigs." Served with just a drizzle of olive oil and lemon juice, it is melt-in-your-mouth prosciutto. "This area is the Tuscany of Austria," Tschürtz proudly announced. Semotan picked up some prosciutto and sausage links, neatly wrapped in wax paper. She stowed it in the trunk of the car, which had become a de facto wine cellar with a half-dozen bottles rolling about.

We had room for one more pit stop, at Aloisia's Mehlspeiskuchl &



Otmar Tschürtz "This area is the Tuscany of Austria," says the local butcher, who makes world-class prosciutto.



Frieda Winkler Her turn-of-the-century tiled oven has produced countless strudels over the decades.

Kaffeestub'n, a bakery that has been making wedding cakes for every bride from here to Vienna for 10 years. There were all sorts of elaborate designs: a cake with a cathedral on top and one with a horse and carriage perched on it. We settled for a box of assorted cookies and headed to dinner.

Back at Klub an der Grenze, two men were prepping at a carved-up wooden table. Franz Merlicek, who runs a large advertising firm in Vienna, arranged piles of arugula, picked from his garden. He topped the greens with beets and a local goat cheese. Yoschi Sammer, a professional chef, was sautéing the beef, which he bought from his neighbor. Semotan took me into the bar area, where guests had gathered for cocktails.

The dinner lasted five hours; between bottles and bottles of Burgenland wines, there were spirited discussions about art and politics and the Bosnian war that was fought "just down the road," according to Semotan. It was getting late and kids were falling asleep on the wooden benches as Reinhardt Knaurs, a local who lives in the farmhouse (it was his parents' home), finished his 10th topfenknödel, a cottage-cheese dumpling rolled in sugar and bread crumbs. I was too full to try one, but Semotan assured me she would have something even better in the morning.

The next day, after a dip at the public swimming pool (her exercise

regime keeps her looking great in a bikini at age 66), Semotan took me to meet her longtime neighbors, Josef and Frieda Winkler. "They plowed their land with a cow," Semotan boasted as we walked into their farmhouse kitchen. She hugged Frieda, who once modeled for an advertising campaign that Semotan shot, before Frieda pulled an apple strudel out of her turn-of-the-century tiled oven (complete with a small oven for pig scraps). Josef, who recently shed 30 pounds, looked longingly at the flaky pastry. "This is a fried-chicken graveyard," he said, patting his downsized paunch. "She makes it hard to stay thin."

Burgenland makes it hard for anyone. ■

Essentials Burgenland

The relatively mild climate of Burgenland makes it a lovely place to visit most of the year, though temperatures soar in late July and August. In the town of Schützen, don't miss **Taubenkobel** (011-43-2684-2297; www.taubenkobel.at), which offers some of the finest food in Austria. It also has several luxurious rooms. Sample the sweet wines at **Kracher** (011-43-2175-3377; www.kracher.net) in Illmitz and bold reds at **Moric** (011-43-664-400-3231; www.moric.at) in Grosshöflein. Pick up prosciutto at **Otmar Tschürtz's** shop in Loipersbach (011-43-2686-7235; www.der-tschuertz.com). For pastries, head to Badersdorf to **Aloisia's** (011-43-3366-773-69; www.aloisia.at).