

# **Exec meeting around blackcurrants in Austria**

## **Blackcurrant history, Austria**

While Austria grew around 4.000 tonnes of blackcurrants in the 1980ies, there are only 200 tonnes per year today. How it came to such a decline is not surprising, and reflects what is happening in many of the (former) big blackcurrant growing countries in Europe. With good prices, an easy and simple way to harvest blackcurrants, more and more growers took their chance to have their part of the cake in every country. And with the opening of the borders to Poland and the entry of Polish crop into the EU market, a big and powerful player entered the blackcurrant market. Austria did not wait and drew the consequences: there was no chance to win. Austria decreased its blackcurrant growing surface, and those who continued... changed, and turned their production into organic. This was in 1990.

## **Blackcurrants in Austria today**

Today, almost all the blackcurrants in Austria are grown organically. Austrian blackcurrant growers thus have the longest experience in organic blackcurrant growing in the world on a large scale. Secondly, one of the biggest concentrate producers in the world has its origins and headquarters in Austria. This raised our curiosity in this country and was the starting point for our Exec meeting 2020.

## **3 impressive visits**

## **STBOG manages 90% of the blackcurrants in Austria**



4.000 tonnes of blackcurrants in Austria in the 1980ies, 200 tonnes per year today: Austria's production declined, but some of the growers found a way to continue. They turned their production into organic in the 1990ies, and 95% of the whole yield is organic today. Most of the growers are in Styria, a hilly region in the South-East of Austria. The "Steirische Berrenobst-Genossenschaft" StBoG (Styrian Berry Cooperative) and its manager Stefan Lampl gave us an insight in their production.

[Read more about organic blackcurrants in Austria.](#)

## **May I introduce AUSTRIA JUICE?**



We have met Franz Ennser, CEO of Austria Juice, at Agrana's headquarters in Vienna. Not only because Austria Juice has been one of the longest partners of the IBA since its creation. But especially because he is an expert in the fruit juice business. His long-lasting experience and view of the whole market is always of help.

Read more about our meeting.

## Growing and marketing blackcurrants: here comes “RIBES“!



Gudrun and Franz Schriebl have adapted to the changing situation in Austria by investing in growing organic blackcurrants in Austria and selling their own products locally. Ribes is the name of their brand of organic fruit juices and other products, which they sell in their own farm shop. But not only: local supermarkets, restaurants and hotels are part of their customers.

Read more about their story

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## Austria Juice and blackcurrants

Austria Juice, one of the biggest concentrate producers in the world, has its headquarters in Kroellendorf and Vienna, Austria. They have also been partners of the IBA from the beginning and until today. Two good reasons to meet CEO Franz Ennser in March 2020.

# **May I introduce AUSTRIA JUICE?**

For many of our readers, Austria Juice is already well known. This is no surprise, as it is one of the leading fruit and vegetable processors. With its 1000 employees and 250 million € turnover from 15 factories, Austria Juice is playing a major role in the concentrate business. Many may refer to the company under the name of Agrana - which is not completely wrong.

Actually, in 2012, Agrana merged with Ybbstaler Fruit - both companies had the same main shareholder: RWA Raiffeisen Ware Austria AG. Their product portfolio includes fruit juice compounds, concentrates and natural aromas - and thus makes it one of the biggest buyers for European blackcurrant growers. There are five processing plants in Poland, five in Hungary, one in Ukraine, one in China and another one in Germany. The biggest share of the concentrate business lies in apples (around 80%), but beside other berries, blackcurrants have their role to play.

## **Austria Juice and the IBA**

In 2016, the International Blackcurrant Association has created a working group called "New Product Development Unit". With the support of Austria Juice, this group aims at raising awareness of the multiple possibilities of blackcurrants.

Different events have taken place with its help, like a smoothie contest in the framework of the Tour de France 2017 and a chef's cooking contest for the gala dinner of the IBA conference 2018.



## **Franz Ennser, expert in the juice business**



Former purchaser of raw material at Agrana, Franz Ennser has a 15 years experience in the juice sector. His responsibilities after the merger have changed

and now include Purchase, Production, Quality Management and Security, Humain Ressources and Technical Research & Development. He has a clear view of the blackcurrant market:

“There is an ongoing soft decrease in demand for blackcurrant juice concentrate. This is totally in line with the general decline in the juice business. People tend to drink more flavoured waters or sodas. Moreover, the high natural sugar content of fruit juices has become a subject for nutritionists”, he says.

According to Franz Ennser, the need for blackcurrants in the juice sector is of 70.000 to 80.000 tonnes per year. It is between 5.000 and 8.000 tonnes for red currants, by the way. The prices for the raw material, of course, depend most on what the end product industry is ready to pay. Unfortunately, this is not much. Everybody knows that there are enough blackcurrants, and low prices are more important than quality currently.

“Additionally, in the past few years, more and more people turn their back to fruit juices from concentrates. The demand for NFC (“not from concentrate”) in the fruit juice business is growing. This is in line with the general trend for healthy, fresh and regional products”, explains Ennser.

## **News and trends in the food and beverage industry**

If you want to read more about new market trends in the food and beverage industry, we strongly recommend you to have a look at the Austria Juice website. There is a lot of information to gather which will help you to adapt to the changing market and stay connected with current trends!

In line with the IBA Executive meeting in Austria and visits in Austria, there is a very interesting article about changes in the new EU organic regulation for 2021 and the general trends in the organic market.

Explore much more, according to your field of interest!



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# Ribes



More than 25 years of organic blackcurrant growing and marketing: Ribes is unique. Its success comes from continuous investment and renewal, good ideas and perseverance of Gudrun and Franz Schriebl, the founders of Ribes.

We have met them in the framework of an IBA Executive meeting in March 2020.

## **Growing and marketing blackcurrants: here comes “RIBES“!**



Growing blackcurrants and aronia, regional production and marketing of their own range of products - this is Ribes. Some of our readers may already know Franz and Gudrun Schriebl. They usually attend our international conferences -

but may be seen as part of the German delegation. Quite normal, as they speak the same language. Most of the times, the Schriebls are the only Austrian growers to attend our conferences. While the Austrian blackcurrant production has been declining dramatically over the past twenty years, Gudrun and Franz decided not to give up. Today, they have found their own place in the market.



## IBA Executive meets RIBES



Ribes is the name of the Schriebls' family business. The choice of the name was simple: they grew blackcurrants (*Ribes nigrum*), and they started their product range with blackcurrant products. The couple works together with their son Bernhard. Apart from themselves, only a part time employee for the farm shop and some helpers for bottling during the season work for Ribes.





## A blackcurrant story from Styria

Gudrun and Franz Schriebl's farm dates back to 1960. Already in 1990, they started producing their own range of products and turned organic in 1993. "Styria is very hilly, and the growing conditions are not easy. We could not compete with regions where the geographic conditions are much more positive. This is how we decided to start our own production of fruit juices", explains Franz Schriebl.





The Schriebls grow their own blackcurrants (mainly variety Tisel, which is the best choice in this area) and aronia. But they also buy blackcurrants from other growers in the same area, together with apples or pears. “We don’t concentrate any more on growing. In fact, it takes too much time for the three of us, and our focus today is clearly on marketing our products”, Gudrun explains.

Their market is mainly local: restaurants and hotels, local supermarkets and a farm shop for direct sales. They produce still and sparkling products in glass bottles.

## Challenges in organic blackcurrant growing

“For the agricultural aspects, we do what we can - but it’s not enough”, Gudrun explains. She looks embarrassed while the IBA Executive has a look at her plantation. All those who have already tried know that organic blackcurrant growing is a tough job. Weed control is the biggest challenge, very time consuming and frustrating.

“We have planted horse beans between the rows to increase the amount of nitrogen in the soil. Between the plants, we try to keep control over the weed with Chickweed in spring and Galinsoga in late summer.

“We use a Greenmaster at least four times a year for doing the weeding”, says Franz. “Of course, we should do more to increase the yield, but it’s impossible, we



are not enough people. Therefore, we keep doing what we can to secure a part of our juice production and have control over the quality. But for another part of the fruits, we prefer buying them from other growers in the region.”



## Organic blackcurrant juice and more

The juice production is the main part of Ribes turnover. They only produce NFC juices – and only organic. The pomaces that are left from the pressing process are dried, crushed and sold for teas and more.



The Schriebls are proud of their juice production area. Sophisticated fruit presses with an extraction capacity of 80-90% can press between 700 and 800 tonnes of apples per year. Blackcurrants and aronia represent less. The produce goes into glass bottles only – a trend everywhere in Austria today.

Some twenty years ago, glass bottles were the new “old-fashioned” way of packing fruit juice. Today, the one-liter-bottles for juices are “Mehrwegflaschen” – bottles that can be used several times. As they are the same for all the producers, the consumer can buy them anywhere from anyone, and hand them back anywhere to anyone with a pawn system.



“Our transforming capacity is of 200 tonnes per day – or 60.000 bottles per day. We also sell juice to Agrana“, mentions Bernhard Schriebl, who graduated as a

fruit juice maker a few years ago and is a specialist in this field.

Franz and Gudrun Schriebl are independent from the Austrian cooperative StBoG, as they use their whole production for themselves.

And as we could see, Ribes represents another prosperous way of marketing blackcurrants in Austria - and another success story of grower / producers in Europe. The trend to local production and consumption is still increasing and promising for the future of Ribes.

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## **StBoG - the Styrian berry cooperative**

4.000 tonnes of blackcurrants in Austria in the 1980ies, 200 tonnes per year today: Austria's production declined, but some of the growers found a way to continue. They turned their production into organic in the 1990ies, and 95% of the whole yield is organic today. Most of the growers are in Styria, a hilly region in the South-East of Austria. The "Steirische Berrenobst-Genossenschaft" StBoG (Styrian Berry Cooperative) and its manager Stefan Lampl gives us an insight in their production.

## **STBOG manages 90% of the blackcurrants in Austria**

The IBA Executive decided to see how the Austrians grow and market blackcurrants. Our trip thus leads us from Vienna airport to Graz, the capital of Styria in the southeast of Austria. Styria is not far from the Slovenian border. Stefan Lampl, the head of the Styrian Berries Cooperative (StBoG), welcomes us at their headquarters in Liboch.

If you have a look at the cooperative's website, you may be surprised at first sight to see no blackcurrants or any other of the usual berries, but... elderberries.



“We are the only cooperative in Austria to deal with blackcurrants and elderberries. 95% of the growing surface of our members is planted with elderberry bushes: this represents 1200 hectares. They belong to around 350 growers. But their number is decreasing”, states Lampl.

The StBoG has members from Styria, Lower Austria and Burgenland (around Vienna), where they grow black, white and red currants, aronia, and of course elderberry. Their production is mainly organic, and goes to almost 200 customers. In fact, 75% of the yield has to be delivered to the cooperative.

“Our role as cooperative is to control the production and organize the harvest in our 18 collection points. From there, the harvest is delivered to Beerenfrost in Liboch. This company provides technical services like cooling, storing, destemming, but also does the quality management”, explains Stefan Lampl. From the window of our meeting room, we can see the Beerenfrost facilities: 94.000 m<sup>3</sup> of stocking capacity! Beerenfrost and StBoG have a longlasting partnership and share their offices - Beerenfrost is the main customer for the Austrian berry growers.

## **More elderberries than blackcurrants**

Austria has specialized on more than berries for juices or juice concentrate. Their core business is superfruits: aronia, elderberries and blackcurrants in Austria are organic and go into the production of teas and extracts - health is the keyword here. And some of them have their own production which they sell locally.





The biggest share of the cooperative's products are elderberries and elderflowers - all handpicked! Karl Kienrich, one of the growers we met, has 7-hectares elderberry plantation, where he harvests the berries from mid-August till end of September. "We plant 500 bushes per hectare, and we have a yield of 15-20 kg per bush. This makes an average yield of 6 to 7 tonnes per hectare", he explains.



They are used for making extracts, and mostly go to other countries. Exports represent 97%. Practitioners of traditional medicine have used elderberries for centuries. They have a high vitamin C content, and many use them to prevent minor diseases such as flu and colds. "The demand hasn't stopped from growing over the past few weeks", smiles Stefan. "With the threat of an infection from Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, the market is blooming for superfruit extracts and juices. People want to boost their immune system."

# StBoG manages superfruit production



The Austrian growers and cooperative have found a sort of equilibrium for their production, which is difficult because of the location of the plantations in a very hilly region. Impossible to compete with growers from other regions in Europe, where blackcurrants can be planted and harvested on a large scale.

Most of the grower members have come back to a polycultural way of producing, with several sources of revenue. Their focus is not only on berry growing (red and black currants, elderberries and elderflowers, blueberries, aronia), or other fruits like apples, but also on pig-farming, wood economy and more.

## **STBOG member “ARONIA-BAUER”**

On Aronia-farmer Christoph Reinhart’s farm, he and three more growers of the cooperative explain us about their way of growing blackcurrants organically. Varieties Ben Hope, Tisel, Ben Finley and Zusha are planted on different fields over 10 hectares.



Christoph fertilizes with pigshit. And like any other organic blackcurrant grower, he confirms that weeding is what prevents good yields. Even with legumes or grasses sown between the rows. Handweeding is normal, but he also uses a finger-picker machine of 70 cm, before cutting the grass between the rows. He needs to repeat this between six and eight times per season - fastidious, time consuming and still there are weeds left. Sulphur is not authorized in organic production in Austria. And he has to spray bacillus thuringensis against winter moths.

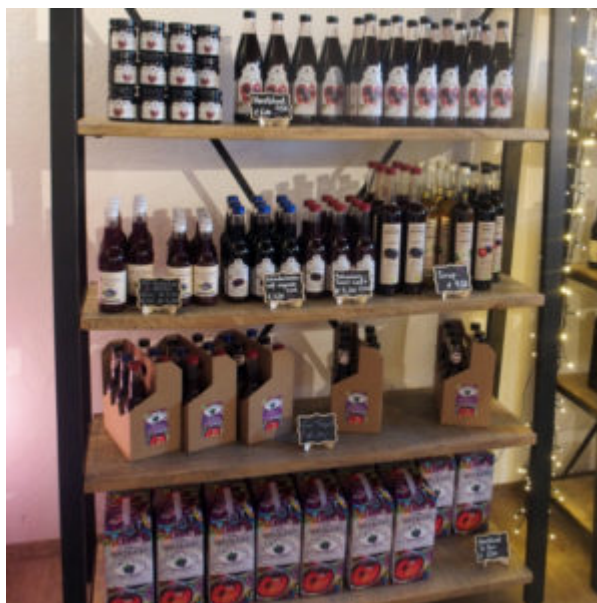




Last but not least, Austrian berry growers have started facing problems with scales like the French growers. They have tried to increase the pH with the use of calcium and magnesium hydroxide. Vice president Florent Baillard from France had lots to add from his experience in France, where scales are currently under control thanks to the use of chemicals. But this can, of course, not be used in organic production. Rhyzobius from the lady beetle family may be a good solution, though.



With 4 tonnes per hectare, Christoph Reinhart has his average yield. He uses it partly for the production of his own juices, together with several aronia products, sold on his farm in a nice little shop.



## Thank you, Styria!

In sum, it looks like Austria has managed to transfer knowledge about conventional growing to organic growing and regional marketing. They do not have a huge influence on the world's blackcurrant production, but can be seen as an example.

Our visit to StBoG has been exciting - not to forget the famous Austrian hospitality! We now hope to be able to present their production in more details in one of our future conferences.

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# Genjiro Katayama awarded IBA honorary member

In its ten first years of existence, we did not have any IBA honorary member. The time has now come to acknowledge our gratitude to one of our most deserving members.

In 2020, the International Blackcurrant Association has therefore awarded its first



Honorary Life Membership to Genjiro Katayama.

## Genjiro Katayama and the IBA

Genjiro Katayama first met the members of the global blackcurrant “family” in 2008, when delegates from more than 14 countries attended the world’s first global blackcurrant conference in New Zealand. Katayama was approached by New Zealand growers to assist develop the conference so that it could become the starting point for a unique international organisation. Katayama agreed to be a major sponsor, assist with the planning through his own team, and also to address the delegates with his perspective on how countries could work together to each achieve more for their members and for their societies.

His plenary presentation was a significant factor in creating the mindset that the



many diverse countries could achieve much more by working together. The result was the 2009 conference in Copenhagen and the creation of the embryonic International Blackcurrant Association. At each and every conference since then, Genjiro Katayama's company has been a major supporter and sponsor of the IBA.

## **IBA honorary member Genjiro Katayama's background**

Genjiro Katayama was born in Japan in 1959. He graduated from Konan University in Japan with a Law degree, majoring in Law, and has been involved in business management since he was a university student.

Success in business led to his establishing many corporations and he has held various Director/CEO positions. His companies include: Japan Food and Chemistry; Jاسبco (Japan Social Business Consulting); Digital Standard; and most well-known to members of the IBA - **Beneseed**.

His business domain covers a wide range of fields, including medical and health, regional revitalization, system development, entertainment, and finance. He is especially interested in the positive dynamics of relationships between related organizations, and between his beloved Japan and other countries.

## **Philanthropist Genjiro Katayama**

In 2019 Katayama was made a Visiting Professor (New Business Creation Theory / Venture Business Theory) of the Faculty of Business Administration, Tokyo Fuji University. In this role he explores, with his students, the theme of "the fusion of learning and business" so that "business is a successful, ongoing dynamic learning environment always relevant to the future". He has authored books such as "Live out today with all the might" (*Hojosha*).

Notably, when he was 23, his father fell ill and became bedridden.

Since then, for 22 years, Katayama has been caring for his father at home. This personal family experience taught him the potential fragility of humanity. From his own experience he decided to contribute to society through his own business success being based on sound and ethical practices, and a sense of "family and

social harmony” within his company structures.

## Creation of the JBA

In 2016 Katayama established the Japan Blackcurrant Association. This organisation works to help humanity benefit from the inherent natural goodness in the blackcurrant fruit.

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## Blackcurrants: More to offer than we think

*For several years, the IBA has had pleasure in listening to the presentations of Mark Willems. In fact, his research at the University of Chichester (United Kingdom) has lead to astonishing findings on the antioxidant effects of blackcurrant. The ongoing research on the reduction of oxidative stress during exercise (and more) is captivating! Here is a bit of what he wants to share!*



Mark Willems (University of Chichester)

# Health benefits from antioxidant properties of the blackcurrant

When you hear or read that eating blackcurrant is good for you, they mean normally that it is good for your health. And yes, most of us can expect health benefits from blackcurrants (and other berries). Provided that we consume them as part of a balanced diet, of course. We think that it is the antioxidant properties of blackcurrant that are associated with the health benefits. And there is a role for the anthocyanins.

## Anthocyanins - the center of attraction

The anthocyanins, but also the anthocyanin-derived substances that appear in the blood, change the function of cells in humans. This is how they give us the health benefits. However, what is less appreciated is that anthocyanin-rich blackcurrant can also provide changes in the function of cells that are beneficial when humans exercise.

## Antioxidant properties and exercise

About 7 years ago, we began exercise physiology studies at the University of Chichester in the United Kingdom. Until 2013, only one study from Plant & Food Research in New Zealand, had examined effects of blackcurrant intake **after** exercise. And that was in 2009!

We in Chichester focused on effects **during** exercise. Research showed that the intake of blackcurrant in endurance trained athletes lowered the presence of lactate in the blood during exercise. Because lactate is the consequence of the breakdown of glycogen (basically a form of sugar). This led us to believe that we use more fat as an energy source during exercise. Indeed, this was shown in endurance trained and physically active men and women during 2 hours of cycling but also during 30 minutes of brisk walking. We have also shown that blackcurrant can better exercise performance from high-intensity repeated sprints to cycling as fast as you can the distance of 16.1 km.

At this time, we are still not sure what is causing these effects by intake of

blackcurrant and there may be a role for the antioxidant properties. So basically, anything that is the result of oxidative stress may benefit from the antioxidant properties, in effect working against the oxidative stress.

## **Positive effects while ageing**

One of our recent studies showed that blackcurrant reduces the production of 2-nonenal. This is a so-called volatile organic compound emitted by the skin and produced by oxidative stress. What is even more important is that 2-nonenal is a compound that is causing the body odour in older people. There is also evidence now that blackcurrant can reduce blood pressure in older adults. Globally, you can see that the research on blackcurrant has provided some remarkable findings with application for sport and exercise. But likely also for well-being. There is still so much to explore, and I expect that more scientists will take interest in examining the effects of blackcurrant in humans.

Blackcurrant has still more to offer than we think.

Professor Mark Willems

*University of Chichester, United Kingdom*

<https://www.chi.ac.uk/staff/professor-mark-willems>

For more information on the health benefits of blackcurrants see our section dedicated on Blackcurrant - the stress hero

Further reading on the research of Mark Willems (and more)