

Gewurztraminer

Gewurztraminer (Germans spell it Gewürztraminer) competes with Sauvignon Blanc as the beginner's grape - the one that is easiest for a newcomer to wine to recognise. With Sauvignon it's all about that unforgettable smell and a virtual absence of colour. With Gewurz, it's all about another unforgettable smell and one of the deepest colours of any white wine.

This last is because, like Pinot Gris/Grigio, the skin of a Gewurz grape is actually pink, not pale green, so it is not surprising that pigments remain in the wine to give it a deep golden, sometimes copper colour.

As for Gewurz's aroma, the first thing to say is that it is extremely powerful. If a sample of Gewurz does not have much smell then it was probably made from shockingly over-produced grapes. Then the smell is heady, for Gewurz the wine is usually high in alcohol - the grape (and wine) ripens easily. Its exact character is probably most accurately likened to the smell of lychees/litchis - that exotic, tropically-laden scent - with a fair measure of pungent rose petals and, in some of the most concentrated examples, a savoury element that some have likened to bacon fat. Sounds a strange combination? It is certainly a potentially combusive mixture, not a wine to take second place to food.

This, I believe, is why Gewurz is not more commonly drunk and served. If my experience is anything to go by, Gewurz was one of the first wine tastes I fell for, because it is so opulent and easy to identify. But as I thought my tastes became more sophisticated, I tended to put Gewurz behind me - a childish thing perhaps, and one that can be difficult to match to food.

Lazy tasters tend to describe the distinctive smell of Gewurztraminer as 'spicy' because the word Gewurz means 'spicy' in German, but in fact there is no single spice that is particularly like the smell of Gewurz. Here, 'spicy' was being used as a synonym for 'aromatic'. Some less fastidious producers blend in a bit of Muscat to give overcropped Gewurztraminer a bit more aroma.

There was a time when it was accepted wisdom that Gewurztraminer went well with vaguely Asian, vaguely spiced food. But that was when western knowledge of the many hundreds of Asian cuisines was extremely limited. Today we understand a bit more, and I think probably realise that it's no good simply prescribing one grape variety for a whole, particularly vast continent. The French counsel drinking Gewurz with particularly - agriculturally - stinky soft cheese such as Munster, Maroilles or Livarot.

The original, green-berried, not-particularly-aromatic forebear of Gewurz is Traminer, called after the village of Tramin (Termeno) in the Alto Adige in what is now the far north of Italy where it was particularly popular between the 11th and 16th centuries. Like many grape varieties however (Chardonnay included) an aromatic (Aromatico in Italian, Musqué in French) version evolved, in this case pink-berried, which came to be known variously as Traminer Aromatico or, in German, Gewurztraminer and sometimes Roter Traminer. Ampelographers, those who study vine identification, believe there is a very close relationship between the various Traminers and Savagnin, the grape responsible for some of the most distinctive white wines of the Jura region in eastern France.

As Gewurz builds up particularly high sugar levels, its acid levels can fall to dangerously low levels. If some particularly ripe Gewurzes have a fault it is that they are unappetisingly low in acidity, so malolactic fermentation of this varietal is rare. As Gewurz ages it can rapidly become oily and, if extreme care has not been taken to avoid excessive extraction of phenolics from its deep-coloured skins, it can also be slightly bitter on the finish.

Alsace in eastern France is Gewurz's most significant home ground (even though the plants grown there today were probably originally imported from Germany's Pfalz region across the Rhine). It performs best on the heavier, clay soils of Alsace's Haut-Rhin departement, and can quite easily attain the sort of ripeness needed for expensive late harvest bottlings labelled Vendange Tardive and Selection de Grains Nobles.

Earlier-picked Alsace Gewurz should be pungent yet dry and powerful enough to accompany savoury food. Too often however the wine can be rather vapid and given perfume by a proportion of Muscat in the blend. Leon Beyer, Zind-Humbrecht, Mure, Schlumberger and Cattin are some of those producers who try hardest with their Gewurztraminers.

Germany has only fraction as much (Roter) Traminer planted, mainly in Baden and Pfalz, where the wines produced vary between slightly lighter-bodied answers to Alsace Gewurz and sometimes heavy, even oily versions. These, as Gewurz in general, are not designed for ageing more than a very few years. (Time in bottle rarely concentrates that characteristic aroma but more usually dissipates it.)

Austria has almost as much Traminer planted as Germany with the most successful, aromatic and lively examples coming mainly from Styria in the far south east. It is planted all over eastern and central Europe, called variously Mala Dinka (Bulgaria), Rusa (Romania), Traminac (Slovenia) and Tramini (Hungary, particularly on the rich soils round Lake Balaton). In Switzerland small quantities are grown as Haiden or Heida.

Torres of Catalonia has long grown Gewurztraminer for its full bodied, aromatic Vina Esmeralda but perhaps the most delicate version is Vina del Vero's grown in the high altitude vineyards of Somontano in the north of Spain.

In Italy some fine Traminer Aromatico is produced in Alto Adige, although many of the wines lack real concentration and are much lighter-bodied and higher in acidity than their counterparts in Alsace.

Gewurz ripens so fast, it needs to be planted somewhere relatively cool if it is to develop any discernible perfume. This rules out many New World wine regions but some interesting examples have been produced in South Australia's Clare Valley, New Zealand's east coast, the cool new wine regions of Chile's deep south and in cooler corners of North America.

It is clear that the Pacific Northwest is well suited to the variety but it is just not fashionable enough to maintain its slender hold on vineyard there in any significant fashion. Canada and New York state have a little planted and Navarro of Anderson Valley in northern California bravely keep making rare but delicious examples.

While it is difficult to imagine an overwhelming craze for Gewurz which would see Chardonnay vines, for example, giving way to this full-bodied, scented alternative to any great extent, the wine world without Gewurztraminer would be a very much poorer place.

Some suggested bottles:

Léon Beyer, Comtes d'Eguisheim, Alsace
Schlumberger, Cuvée Catherine, Alsace
Muré, Clos St Landelin, Vorbourg, Alsace
Zind-Humbrecht, Rangen de Thann, Alsace
Faller, Cuvée Theo, Alsace
Rebholz, Pfalz
Hofstatter, Kolbenhof, Alto Adige
Viñas del Vero, Somontano, Spain
Stonecroft, New Zealand
Knappstein, Clare Valley, South Australia
Navarro, Anderson Valley, California