Chardonnay v Gr□ner Veltliner, a knockout contest

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Fresh from Vienna and the delights of the native Austrian grape variety Grüner Veltliner, I am inspired to pass on the following, written by Jan Paulson, a Swede living near Munich whose love of wine has overtaken his career in dentistry resulting in www.rare-wine.com, a business supplying fine, rare and Austrian wines in quantities as small as a single bottle all over the world. On 9 June 2002, under the auspices of the VieVinum wine exhibition in Vienna, he organised the following blind tasting of some lauded Chardonnays, including some of Burgundy's most famous white wines, with just about all of Austria's top Grüner Veltliners. The results are fascinating, and so surprising that I feel the need to participate in a similar taste-off in which I get to choose the Chardonnays.

Four years ago I was asked by the Austrian Wine Marketing Board if I would like to arrange a comparative tasting to see where Austria was standing internationally. I agreed to do this under certain conditions, the first being that I had free choice to choose the wines for the tasting myself – I did not want to lend my name to one of those tastings where one tries to make certain wines look good by comparing them with wines from poor vintages or producers from other regions. The other condition was that it had to be judged by a truly international jury.

In the tasting four years ago we tasted 11 Sauvignon Blancs and 15 Rieslings on their own and then a group of 17 Chardonnays with four Grüner Veltliner smuggled in amongst them. The sensation of the tasting was how excellent the Grüner Veltliner showed and how badly some of the burgundies did. Some burgundy lovers criticised the tasting at the time, first for mixing Grüner Veltliner with burgundy and secondly commenting that the wines were too young for the burgundies to show their real class.

I can partly understand the criticism regarding comparing two different varietals with each other, however it is not possible to arrange an international Grüner Veltliner tasting since it is more or less only grown in Austria. Secondly, they have a number of similarities in that they both are good 'food wines', do not have very high acidity, have good body structure, weight and alcohol as well as good ageing potential. They also share the ability to show their *terroir* if the wines are well made. Thirdly, it is a matter of the quality that the wine is showing that is judged and not the varietal. To counter the second criticism I included three flights of more mature vintages this time around.

Regarding the choice of wines, I asked the growers or their importers themselves, where possible, what they would like to show, in other cases I asked renowned specialists and wine journalists for suggestions. All in all I think it is a fair selection of wines from the different wine regions of the world. The only exception is Australia, where I had asked one of their most important wine journalists to select the wines for me, unfortunately the wines did not arrive in time and we had to try what we could find in Vienna on a short notice. The jury consisted of 39 wine journalists and other experienced tasters from 13 different countries. The wines were tasted blind in flights of six and were scored on a 100 point scale, the highest and lowest score not counting. There was also some bottle variation and here only the good bottles were scored.

First we tasted 18 wines from 1999 and 2000. Here the winner was the 1999 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel Alte Reben from Fred Loimer in Kamptal, ahead of the 2000 Grüner Veltliner Exceptional Reserve from Freie Weingärtner Wachau – probably the world's best cooperative winery. In the third place came the 1999 Chardonnay Monte Bello from Ridge Vineyards, California.

We then tasted 12 wines from 1995 to 1998. Here the winner (and overall winner of the whole tasting) was the 1997 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm from Willi Bründlmayer in Kamptal. I would like to add that it was his 1995 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm that was the overall winner four years ago as well.

In second place came Mondavi's 1998 Byron Chardonnay Nielson Vineyards followed by another Californian wine that four years ago also showed very well, the 1995 Chardonnay Mer & Soleil from Chuck Wagner of Caymus Vineyards.

Finally six mature wines from 1990 to 1992 were tasted and the three Austrian wines took all the medal placings. In first place the only Grüner Veltliner in the flight – the 1990 Grüner Veltliner Vinothekfüllung from Weingut Knoll

in Wachau. Second place was taken by the 1990 Chardonnay from Weingut Bründlmayer in Kamptal and third place by the 1992 Chardonnay Ratscher Nussberg from Weingut Gross in Styria.

The stunning result is that six of the seven Grüner Veltliners came in amongst the top eight wines of the tasting. Even more amazing was however the disastrous showing of the burgundies, all six were in the bottom half and five of these were amongst the bottom eight wines.

A complete list of the wines placed in order with their average score:

1. 94.64 1997 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm, Bründlmayer, Kamptal
2. 93.97 1999 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel Alte Reben, Loimer, Kamptal
3. 93.57 1998 Byron Chardonnay, Nielson Vineyards, Mondavi, California
4. 93.52 2000 Grüner Veltliner Exceptional Reserve, Freie Weingärtner Wachau
5. 93.43 1990 Grüner Veltliner Vinothekfüllung, Knoll, Wachau
6. 93.01 1995 Mer & Soleil Chardonnay, Caymus, California
7. 92.93 1995 Grüner Veltliner Honivogl, Hirtzberger, Wachau
8. 92.93 1995 Kellerberg, F X Pichler, Wachau
9. 92.56 1999 Monte Bello Chardonnay, Ridge, California
10. 91.77 2000 Chardonnay Wirra Wirra, McLaren Vale, Australia
11. 91.52 1990 Chardonnay, Bründlmayer, Kamptal
12. 91.41 1999 Chardonnay, Gantenbein, Switzerland
13. 91.30 1997 Morillon (Chardonnay) Zieregg, Tement, Styria
14. 91.18 1999 Chardonnay La Strada Reserve, Fromm, New Zealand
15. 91.15 1999 Chardonnay Reserve, Markowitsch, Carnuntum
16. 91.08 1999 Chardonnay Barrique, Rebholz, Pfalz, Germany
17. 90.90 1995 Chardonnay Tiglat, Velich, Burgenland
18. 90.85 1992 Chardonnay Ratscher Nussberg, Gross, Styria
19. 90.59 1992 Chardonnay Reserve, Chalon, California
20. 90.37 1999 Chardonnay 100% Barrique, Mulderbosch, South Africa
21. 90.37 1997 Montrachet, Domaine Baron Thénard, Burgundy, France
22. 90.23 1999 Chardonnay Pandkräftn, E Triebaumer, Burgenland
23. 90.14 1996 Chardonnay, Evans Tate, Margaret River, Australia
24. 89.82 1999 Morillon (Chardonnay) Hochgrassnitzberg, E&W Polz, Styria
25. 89.81 2000 Chardonnay Tatschler, Kollwentz, Burgenland
26. 89.78 1999 Chardonnay Rey, Gaja, Italy
27. 89.47 2000 Chardonnay Reserve, Johanneshof Rheinisch, Thermenregion
28. 89.36 1997 Chardonnay Grand Select, Wieninger, Vienna
29. 88.99 1990 Corton Charlemagne, Louis Latour, Burgundy
30. 88.18 1999 Grüner Veltliner Achleiten, Prager, Wachau
31. 86.51 1999 Chablis Butteaux, Raveneau, Burgundy
32. 86.07 1999 Weiss, Schwarz, Burgenland
33. 86.04 1999 Meursault Charmes, Louis Jadot, Burgundy
34. 85.93 1996 Chevalier Montrachet, Etienne Sauzet, Burgundy
35. 84.69 1997 Chardonnay, Hamilton Russel, South Africa
36. 81.57 1992 Chassagne Montrachet La Boudriotte, Ramonet, Burgundy

The value of a tasting like this may be well be disputed and should not be taken too seriously.

The taste of a wine and the way we taste seems to vary from day to day, and a wine that shows best in a tasting is not always the wine that give most satisfaction where it really matters, namely at the diningtable drunk by the glass instead of sipped at a blind tasting.

However two conclusions can be made from these results:

- The grape Grüner Veltliner can produce wine of world class quality and any serious wine lover who does not know these gems should be buying some as soon as possible while the prices still are as low as they are
- The second conclusion is that the Burgundian winemakers will have to get their act together, their prices

do in many cases not reflect the quality of the wines they produce.

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