Gr□ner Veltliner

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Ten, perhaps five, years ago very few wine lovers outside Austria had even heard of Grüner Veltliner. Today, no self-respecting restaurant wine list, whether in New York or Hong Kong, can afford to be without at least one example of this, Austria's signature white wine grape.

I would submit that this is only partly because of Grüner Veltliner's undoubted inherent character and quality. Another reason Grüner Veltliner has impinged on the consciousness of the wine world recently is that the quality of all Austrian wines has become so excitingly and consistently high that no fine wine enthusiast can afford to ignore them. And since it is Austria's white wines that are even more distinctive than her reds, it is inevitable that the country's most planted grape variety will gain recognition - especially since Austria's other major white wine grape is Riesling, which has, unfortunately, not been an easy sell for half a century.

As a confirmed Riesling enthusiast, I was slow to recognise Grüner Veltliner's charms. For a long time I thought of it as a poor second to the great Riesling in Austria's wine lexicon. It took one of several significant blind tastings staged by Munich dentist and fine wine merchant Jan Paulson of www.rare-wine.com to convince me that Grüner Veltliner was truly a great grape variety. It was an audacious exercise. In each case a panel of renowned wine tasters was invited to taste a range of top Austrian Grüner Veltliners mixed, in flights arranged by age, with top Chardonnay-based wines made around the world. Best of all, we in London were allowed to choose the opposition, so it included such names as Montrachet, Corton Charlemagne, Leflaive and Ramonet.

Before this London tasting, I could not imagine it would be anything other than a walkover for Chardonnay in general and white burgundy in particular. After the tasting I could hardly believe the results: seven of the top 10 places had been taken by Austrian wines, some Chardonnays but mainly Grüner Veltliners - but this was a result that replicated similar ones in the other, similar tastings. This proved to me that Grüner Veltliner is capable of producing very fine, full bodied wines well capable of ageing. The top wine of all was a Knoll Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Vinothekfüllung 1990 which obviously had years more ahead of it - unlike many white burgundies of the same age.

Of course the Austrian examples in this tasting represented Grüner Veltliner at its best. When it's overcropped it has - like any other grape variety - much less character. But in general Grüner Veltliner produces very refreshing, tangy wines with a certain white pepper, dill, even gherkin character. The wines are spicy and interesting and in general this is because of the grape's own intrinsic qualities because the great majority of them, unlike Chardonnays, see no new oak. They are generally fermented in stainless steel and aged either in tanks or very old, large casks, although there have been recent experiments, not always successful, with barrique-aged Grüner Veltliner.

One vine in every three grown in Austria is Grüner Veltliner, and in Lower Austria [Niederösterreich] in the north east of the country, this proportion rises to one in every two. The vine is hardy and naturally productive so that from the less distinguished vineyards of Lower Austria come large quantities of relatively neutral Grüner Veltliner, some of it used as base for Sekt. Much of the Grüner Veltliner grown around the city of Vienna is drunk very young in the famous Heurige inns in its suburbs. But the finest Grüner Veltliners in the world come from seriously distinguished sites, with the greatest concentration of them being west of Vienna on the Wachau's famous south-facing terraces on the bank of the Danube - the ripest examples being labelled Smaragd - and on similar slopes in Kremstal and Kamptal. There are also some fine sites for Grüner Veltliner in Donauland and the Weinviertel. A host of quality-conscious producers include Bründlmayer, Schloss Gobelsburg, Hirsch, Jurschitsch and Loimer in Kamptal; Felsner, Malat, Sepp Moser, Nigl, Salomon, Dr Unger and Winzer Krems in Kremstal; Alzinger, Donabaum, FWW, Hirtzberger, Jamek, Knoll, F X Pichler, Rudi Pichler, Prager and Schmelz in Wachau; Graf Hardegge and Pfaffl in Weinviertel; and Fritsch and Ott in Donauland. Wines are typically rich but dry but some late-picked sweet versions labelled Auslese or Trockenbeerenauslese are also made.

For many years Grüner Veltliner has also been grown just over the Czech border in the Czech Republic, as Veltlin or Veltlínské Zelené, and just across the Hungarian border in Sopron where is is known as Zöldveltelini. But since top quality Grüner Veltliner has begun to make an international impact, we can expect to see the variety being planted much further from Austria. The vine ripens relatively late, which will limit it to relatively warm climates, but there are already plans afoot to plant it in Central Otago in southern New Zealand. The only likely brake on its expansion, the difficulty English speakers have with pronouncing the name, has already been addressed. Some retailers and even producers, call it Gru-Ve.

Grüner Veltliner means literally 'green grape from the village of Veltlin in the Tirol', and it has been commonly believed that it must be closely related to two other varieties making something of a comeback at the moment, Roter Veltliner and Früher Roter Veltliner, otherwise known as Frühroter Veltliner. Nowadays however we have access to DNA typing which can identify once and for all the relationship between different grapevines (and everything else with a genetic make-up). This shows that, while Frühroter Veltliner is the result of a crossing between Roter Veltliner and Silvaner, there is no relationship at all between Roter Veltiner and Grüner Veltliner. Roter Veltliner turns out to the parent of two other Austrian grape varieties, Rotgipfler and Neuburger, and is today much less widely planted than it once was. At one time it was grown in Lower Austria for table grapes as well as wine. Today it can produce some rich, aromatic wines in warm years, particularly in Donauland's Wagram district.

Frühroter Veltliner, also known as Malvasier, is still grown on about 600 hectares in the Weinviertel district of Lower Austria. The grapes are red-skinned but, like Pinot Gris/Grauburgunder so this far south doesn't stand much chance of developing interesting flavours. It therefore makes less exciting wine than Grüner Veltliner in Austria but its lower acidity makes it particularly suitable for more northerly wine regions. It is planted to a limited extent in the Rheinhessen in Germany where it is known as Frühroter Malvasier, or occasionally Roter Malvasier. It is also grown, known simply as Veltliner, in some old Alto Adige vineyards in the Italian Tirol, and, as Malvoisie Rouge d'Italie, in France's subalpine wine region Savoie.

Some top Grüner Veltliners:

Hirtzberger, Smaragd Honivogl

Knoll, Smaragd Schütt

F X Pichler, Smaragd Kellerberg

Prager, Smaragd Achleiten

Bründlmayer, Käferberg

Loimer, Spiegel Alte Reben