

## FOOD AND DRINK

## Austria tries to bring its own grape to the masses



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ON WINE

Grüner Veltliner has become increasingly common on wine lists. Now it is being aimed at retail shelves

Austrian wine can be so very good. I often serve a serious Austrian Riesling or, particularly, the country's peppery Grüner Veltliner instead of a white burgundy and these less conventional wines invariably go down well. The only trouble is that they tend to cost about as much as a fine white burgundy but, with a devoted market at home and increasing recognition among quality-conscious sommeliers on both sides of the Atlantic, perhaps this is hardly surprising.

Fine Austrian white wines seem an easier sell than fine German wines, perhaps because they are fuller-bodied and taste drier, making them closer to the familiar build of a Chardonnay. Readers may remember my report here a few years ago of a blind tasting comparing the best Grüner Veltliners with some top white burgundies and other famous Chardonnays in which the Austrian wines triumphed decisively.

Now however an increasing number of Austrian wine exporters is trying to introduce us to cheaper versions of its native grape Grüner Veltliner, which is planted on more than a third of Austria's vineyard land. That land is expensive to buy and even more expensive to work so none of these "everyday" Grüns is cheap by southern hemisphere standards. They are mainly designed to retail at between £6 and £10 a bottle in the UK even if not all of the examples I have tasted seem to justify this above-average price tag.

Many seem just too simple at the moment – all fermentation aromas of pineapple chunks or nail varnish remover, with some astringency. But it

is possible that these very youthful 2005s – whose fermentations have been some of the slowest anyone can remember – will settle down. Certainly on the basis of the 120 or so Grüner Veltliners at all quality levels that I tasted earlier this month from the last three vintages, 2005 seems to have the greatest potential. This relatively small vintage was saved by a dry October and considerable selection was needed to save the crop after a cool, wet summer but many of the more serious wines seem to have real definition and concentration. Toni Bodenstein of Prager in the Wachau likens 2005 to the classic vintages of 1990 and 1993.

The 2004s have more obvious acidity but are often a bit dilute and in many cases taste fully mature now whereas the 2005s have real intensity and zest, without the sometimes excessively high alcohol and low acid of many 2003s.

Most of the "introductory" Grüner Veltliners are sealed with screwcaps rather than corks and it seems generally as though Austrian producers are further along the road away from natural cork than their German counterparts. Some producers, as in Germany, are also trying out the more expensive, though more aesthetically pleasing, option of special glass stoppers reminiscent of a traditional pharmacy.

Many of the cheaper Grüner Veltliners have been given catchy names such as Gru-Vee or Green Grape. Laurenz V, for example, is a new outfit run by a member of the Lenz Moser family who at one time represented the Mondavis of California in Europe. He has just launched three screwcapped variants on the Grüner Veltliner theme called,

respectively, Charming, Friendly and Singing Grüner Veltliner, all of which do indeed taste absolutely ready to gulp this minute. Laurenz V, Charming Grüner Veltliner 2005 (no specific geographical appellation) is the one aimed at shelves rather than restaurant lists and is expected to retail at £6.99 by its UK importers Bibendum Wine. Michael Mondavi's new company Folio is US importer.

Probably the best value of the "everyday" Grüns is Salomon Undhof, Hochtterrassen Grüner Veltliner 2005, which has much more concentration and real Grüner Veltliner flavour than most at this price level. Lea & Sandeman shops around London will be selling this young Kremstal wine soon at £6.95 a bottle.

Another useful offering from Kremstal is Felsner, Moosburgerin Grüner Veltliner 2005, which is so lively and appley it almost tastes as though it contains some Sauvignon Blanc. Waitrose is currently selling the particularly good 2004 at £7.99.

Both these wines struck me as slightly easier drinks than the admirable Willi Bründlmayer's Bründlmayer, Kamptaler Terrassen Grüner Veltliner 2005 made in neighbouring Kamptal. The Wine Society sells this as its own Society's Exhibition Grüner Veltliner at £9.95 and will be moving on to the 2005 in a month or two, by which time the slightly bitter finish on this pungently smoky, ambitious wine may well have become less obvious.

Also from Kamptal, from a particularly vivacious winemaker, is Birgit Eichinger, Hasel Grüner Veltliner

2005, a wonderfully pure, finely-etched wine that is on John Armit's list at £92.50 a dozen.

The Weinviertel is to Grüner Veltliner what the Languedoc is to Carignan (there is a great deal planted, by no means all of it top quality) but there are several respectable examples, including Graf Hardegg, Veltinsky Grüner Veltliner 2005, which Noel Young is offering at just £5.99 per grapefruit-stuffed bottle. This struck me as a better buy than the same retailer's Angerer Kurt, Kies Grüner Veltliner 2005 from Kamptal at £7.99, which tasted dangerously evolved but it had admittedly only just been bottled when I tasted it.

Burgenland is much better known for its increasingly fine red and incredibly sweet white wines than for Grüner Veltliner but from here comes a particularly cool, introvert style of Grüner Veltliner that is not only organic but memorably named. Who could resist a wine called Meinklang? In a few weeks, you should be able to buy the very cool, introvert and mineral-scented Michlits, Meinklang Grüner Veltliner 2005 for just £5.95 from Vintage Roots of Arborfield.

Söllner in the pretty village of Gösling on the Danube in Wagram/Donauland goes one step more wholesome with its biodynamic certification and I was impressed by its lively, tightly furled Söllner, Danubio Grüner Veltliner 2005, which is, mercifully for those of us who drink rather than sip, just 11.5 per cent alcohol. The wines are imported into the US by Weygandt-Metzler.

Another wine at this delightfully amiable alcohol level, also from

Wagram/Donauland, is Bernhard Ott, Am Berg Grüner Veltliner 2005, which still smells a little of its cool fermentation but should drink beautifully from later this year and through 2007. There is lovely fruit on the palate and this is a particularly zesty wine from a producer who, unusually, devotes 85 per cent of this vineyard to Grüner Veltliner. The wine should be £7.70 when it reaches Savage Selection of Northleach in May.

The most famous Austrian wine region, the Wachau with its steep terraces overlooking the Danube, is probably best at producing serious, very fine Grüner Veltliner (and Riesling) for drinking with food rather than these new, less expensive "entry level" bottles designed to be drunk as relatively simple aperitifs. Certainly I tasted many exciting but more expensive Grüner Veltliners from here and its neighbouring regions Kamptal and Kremstal – some of the most successful made in acacia, some of the least successful too obviously made in oak.

Those curious about the Grüner Veltliner grape may like to know that Nick Dobson Wines ([www.nickdobsonwines.co.uk](http://www.nickdobsonwines.co.uk)) offers a mixed Grüner Veltliner dozen from respectable addresses for just £154.55.

*Those outside the UK should seek stockists via [www.winesearcher.com](http://www.winesearcher.com). For tasting notes on a total of more than 170 current Austrian Grüner Veltliners and Rieslings, see the purple pages of [www.jancisrobinson.com](http://www.jancisrobinson.com)*

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