

The Wachau region, northwest of Vienna, is arguably the source of Austria's most sought-after Grüners. Wachau created its own classification system in the 1980s, based on the wines' natural alcohol levels.

The Blossoming of Grüner Veltliner

What You Need to Know About Austria's Signature White Wine

BY CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW

Grüner Veltliner is THE Austrian grape—it accounts for one-third of all white grape vines planted in Austria, and there is almost as much Grüner as all red varieties combined. Over the last decade, Austrian Grüner Veltliner transitioned from “Huh?” to “Yeah!”—at least in major dining cities.

In less wine-savvy cities, however, it's a different story. Evan Spingarn, a senior member of NYC-based David Bowler Wine, says, “Almost no one shopping for wine outside the top markets knows what the heck the wine is.” Toni Silver, co-creator of the GROONER brand agrees, “Outside urban areas, there is resistance to the unknown.”

Still, Grüner's ascent in major markets should be viewed as a positive harbinger of things to come, as the U.S. is a prime export target; with multiple importers stocking it, the wine is bound to spread. In 2010, the U.S. was Austria's third largest export market by value

and fourth largest by volume. That's an impressive feat for a small, alpine country that ranked 18th in global wine production in 2010. It's doubly impressive for a country with no major “industrial” production. Farming is primarily family-owned in Austria, which means there's little margin built in for marketing.

Joe Quinn, wine director at Proof in Washington, DC, explains why he and sommelier Jennifer Foucher carry eight Grüners on their list: “Grüner Veltliner is particularly useful in a few ways. It's amazingly versatile with food, which helps with the quite varied flavors on our menu. It seems, like Riesling, especially transparent, expressive of vineyard and vintage; we want to showcase wines that wear their terroirs on their sleeves. And, it represents tremendous value. With Grüner, you can find exceptional, complex, thrilling wines of place without breaking the bank.”

Styles & Quality Levels

Grüner Veltliner is malleable and can be coaxed into a wide expression of styles. As Quinn notes, “I think we're not alone in continuing to be amazed by the variety's many talents.”

The still wines range from under-\$15 crown-capped 1L bottlings to three-digit 750mls. The high-end wines sell best in restaurants and specialty retailers. The heart of the retail action is \$20 and under. Toni Silver says this space has been gaining steam over the last five years, particularly among consumers aged 21-40 and especially with women. Silver and her partner Monika Caha were early pioneers in the category, having created the GROONER brand in 2006 to target price-conscious retail consumers looking for a fun “new” drinking experience. This lighter style of Grüner Veltliner can easily sub in for Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Blanc at the same price point.

Knowing Austria's official quality designations helps decode its wine styles. Two markers identify Austrian



All Austrian wine bottles feature the nation's flag stripes on their capsules.



Toni Silver (center) and Monika Caha (right) created the GROONER brand in 2006 to target price-conscious consumers looking for a fun “new” drinking experience. Pictured here with winemaker Meinhard Forstreiter.

“quality wine,” assuring consumers the wine has been through both chemical and taste tests. The most obvious is the banderole. This is Austria’s red-and-white striped national flag found on all capsule tops. The other marker is a unique State Control Number (Prüfnummer) found on each wine.

DAC, or Districtus Austriae Controllatus, is a fairly new designation. It means “protected Austrian declaration of origin.” The DAC operates in the spirit of most French, Italian and Spanish appellations. It emphasizes regional character over variety. Naturally, varietal character shines through; it’s just a bit different for each DAC. Austria currently acknowledges four for Grüner Veltliner: Weinviertel, Traisental, Kremstal and Kamptal. Each also allows for a “Reserve” level.

The Wachau, arguably the source of Austria’s most sought-after wines, created its own classification system in the 1980s: Vinea Wachau Nobilis Districtus. Only members may use these designations. Purity of provenance is paramount. Vinea Wachau wines can be neither chaptalized nor concentrated as the wines’ natural alcohol levels determine their status. Furthermore, no flavor enhancement is allowed, including new oak barrels.

There are three different classifications for the Grüns of the Wachau: Steinfeder, Federspiel and Smaragd. Steinfeder is the lightest bodied and generally the crispest in acidity. Its

Austria’s Most Noteworthy Grüner Veltliner Regions



Best Bets

Most of the Grüner Veltliner in Austria is grown in and around Vienna as well as to the capital’s north and west. Here are a few names to look out for, from the budget-friendly to the wallet-popper, organized by region.

- **Kamptal:** Bründlmayer, Birgit Eichinger, Hirsch, Schloss Gobelsburg
- **Kremstal:** Buchegger, Forstreiter, Nigl
- **Niederösterreich:** GROONER
- **Traisental:** Markus Huber, Ludwig Neumayer
- **Wachau:** Domäne Wachau, Franz Hirtzberger, Josef Högl, Jamek, Emmerich Knoll, Nicholaihof, FX Pichler, Pichler-Krutzler, Rudi Pichler, Prager
- **Wagram:** Karl Fritsch, Leth, Bernhard Ott
- **Wien:** Jutta Ambrositsch, Mayer am Pfarrplatz, Wieninger
- **Weinviertel:** Graf Hardegg

maximum alcohol by volume (ABV) is only 11.5%. Of the three, this category is the least imported. Federspiel also has a maximum alcohol content—12.5%. This is still quite a low number, so the wines are light to medium in body. However, certain Federspiel wines show some glycerol that boosts their weights and textural profiles. Finally, Smaragd requires a minimum, not maximum, alcohol, beginning where Federspiel ends (12.5%). These wines can be quite dense, sometimes leaving an impression of sweetness on the palate, whether real or perceived.

Other Label Indications

Grüner Veltliners that are neither DAC nor Vinea Wachau are likely to bear one of three additional labels. They are, from lightest to fullest in body, Kabinett, Spätlese and Auslese. No wines employing these labels can be chaptalized.

Kabinett wines provide refreshment. They are light-bodied with brisk acidity and no more than nine grams of residual sugar per liter. Compared to the Wachau classification, these wines fall somewhere between Steinfeder and Federspiel but can rise to 13% ABV.

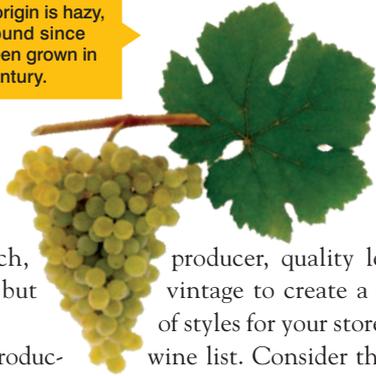
Spätlese wines step up in weight, creamy texture and alcohol. Most times, they are more complex than Kabinett wines, and they command higher prices. Spätlese resembles the Wachau’s Smaragd.

Auslese wines are rich and can only include the best, unblemished grapes. These wines are usually sweet, denoted by süß. However, they—like Kabinett and Spätlese—can be labeled trocken, meaning dry; extra trocken, meaning drier than trocken; halbtrocken, mean-

Grüner At A Glance

FUN FACTS:

While Grüner Veltliner's origin is hazy, the variety has been around since Roman times and has been grown in Austria since the 18th century.



ing half dry; or lieblich, meaning quite sweet but not as sweet as süß.

Finally, top rung producers with premier sites may indicate on their labels a “first growth”—the number “1” followed by a grape cluster in superscript. These are dry, age-worthy wines from some of Austria's best sites.

With these Grüner Veltliner building blocks, you can navigate the Austria's plethora of distinctive Grüner Veltliners. Just vary the region,

producer, quality level and vintage to create a diversity of styles for your store shelf or wine list. Consider that if you only choose one or two, they will seem lost in the maze of more familiar options and possibly end up in a back corner to be forgotten. And, as Silver suggests, consider creating a special section for Grüner Veltliner or for Austria rather than grouping it with German wines (they certainly are not the same) or in an “Other Varieties” section. ■

■ Grüner means “green,” and it is common to find dill and cut grass notes in its wines. (Veltliner means “from the town of Veltliner” in Tyrol.) Other frequently found aromatic highlights are grapefruit and lentils. Grüner can thank one parent, Traminer, aka Gewürztraminer, for its distinctive white pepper notes.

■ On the palate, acidity levels range from zippy to medium, depending on the wine's ripeness. At higher harvest sugar levels, Grüner often acquires a mouth-coating layer of extract, making its wines feel richer.

■ Grüner is a copious cropper. I worked the 2012 harvest in Kamptal and Wien, and some clusters were as large as my head! Luckily, Grüner produces rather interesting flavors even at fairly high yields.

■ Grüner may appear in base wine blends for sekt, typically a tank-fermented sparkling wine. Granted, not much is produced; bubbly comprised only about 2.5% of Austria's total export volume in 2011. Some producers also use Grüner for méthode champenoise sparkling wines. Grüner also can be harvested late for sweet wines, or even left on the vine in hopes of becoming ice wine.

■ As for still table wine, Grüner usually goes it alone, except in Gemischter Satz, or field blends. Grüner can be easy-going and light-bodied with citrusy fruit flavors or super-charged with alcohol and dried apricot character with suspicions of residual sugar. Typically vinified in neutral vessels, producers are now experimenting with barriques, too.



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