

Down the Danube

The Grüner is Greener on the Other Side

By Evan Saviolidis

A few years back, it seemed that Grüner Veltliner would become the next big white, supplanting Pinot Grigio as the height of fashion. But, as quickly as the candle was lit, it was soon extinguished. Now, I am not sure if this was because of price, pronunciation, or some other reason, but it is a shame. Grüner's profile of white pepper, apple, grapefruit and green notes, combined with its depth and undeniable food friendliness, make it a great alternative to other acid driven varietals. Personally, I can think of no better partner for asparagus, fish with lemon or herb influenced white meats.

'Groovy', as it is sometimes called, accounts for 30% of all Austrian plantings, and has been the driving force behind Austria's 'phoenix from the ashes' renaissance. This catalyst for this was the now infamous diethylene glycol (antifreeze) scandal of 1985.

Prior to 1985, the industry was primarily industrial. As a means to ameliorate the bulk wines that were being produced, a handful of larger producers/blenders doctored a small proportion with antifreeze, as a means to animate its body and sweetness. Even though harmless to humans, their reputation was tarnished.

Today, Austria has some of the most stringent rules in the world. The industry is an authentic/artisanal one, controlled by families which produce individual and natural wines. Austrian producers are also quick to point out that there are no kangaroos in their country -a gentle ribbing of the fact that many people mistake their wines with those from the land down under-wines which are generally bulk, technical and uniform.

Virtually all Grüner hails from Austria's northern eastern corner, known as the Niederösterreich, or if you will, Lower Austria. Here, the Danube runs through the famed regions of Wachau, Weinviertel, Kamptal, Kremstal and Wagram.

Traditionally, the wines would be classified using a modified Germanic system of ripeness i.e. Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, etc. But with the transition in the 90s from a bulk/sweeter style to a quality/dryer style, these terms seemed less fitting. Furthermore, the Wachau had created its own special internal classification. The result of much deliberation was the creation of the Districtus Austriae Controllatus or DAC. The concept is a quasi-appellation system, where the classic/best grapes will only be authorized/labeled in conjunction with the region. If a non approved grape is grown, it is then labeled under a larger geographic area.

The first DAC was issued in 2003 to the Weinviertel region, for the production of Grüner Veltliner. Today, seven of Austria's sixteen wine regions have transitioned to DAC, most working with one or two grapes. There are also two distinctions: Klassik, which are the standard wines; and, Reserve, which denote wines that adhere to more stringent and different rules.

Of course, no story about a Germanic culture would be complete without a reference to Riesling. With only 4% of all plantings, it might be a minor player, but the quality is undeniable. Also, the grape should not be confused with Welschriesling, another prominent Austrian grape. Niederösterreich is once again the dominant region of production.

When looking at the vineyards, the majority of Riesling vines are planted north of the Danube, on slopes composed of primary rock-granite, gneist and schist. As for Grüner, it loves loess, a compact sand. Here, the plantings are primarily south of the Danube, where flat lands and rolling hills are situated.

The Niederösterreich climate is defined as continental. Winters are much harsher than those in France, but summers tend to be drier and warmer. With this in mind, stylistically, Austrian Riesling's are closer to their Alsatian counterparts- dry, high in alcohol, and fuller bodied - a dichotomy to the lower alcohol, sweeter styles of Germany. This perception was confirmed while doing a side by side tasting in Austria this past summer.

A word about the Austrian's themselves. Even though there is a Germanic thread, Austrian's are quick to distinguish themselves their northern neighbours. In fact, they borrow the 'La Dolce Vita' mentality from their southern neighbours, the Italians. In other words, they work hard, and play even harder, as well as being extremely friendly and hospitable.

The Niederösterreich Regions

Wachau

This UNESCO world heritage site, laden with walled steep terraces, might be one of Lower Austria's smallest districts, with only 1350 hectares, but to the wine cognoscenti, it is the pinnacle for rich Grüners from loess and elegant/refined Rieslings made from granite soils, which are sourced from the steep terraced banks above the Danube river.

Here you will find a three tiered quality classification system for dry wines called Vinea Wachau. Steinfeder, named after the feather grass in the vineyards. It is used for the lightest and most quaffable wines. Alcohol can be no more than 11.5%. Federspiel (a falconary device) is the middle tier and alcohol must be between 11.5% to 12.5% alcohol. The summit is Smaragd (emerald lizard), with a minimum of 12.5% alcohol. Harvested at Spätlese (late harvest) level of ripeness, these wines are full bodied, intense and are some of Austria's best.

Kamptal

Named for the Kamp river. Once again, the best vineyards are on slopes with high sun exposure. It is renowned for Austria's most concentrated Groovies as well as fine Rieslings. The DAC here recognizes both grapes. As mandatory purchases go, anything sourced from Heiligenstein vineyard is the way to go. For those who prefer a more sensory adventure, the futuristic Loisium museum, dedicated to all things vinous, is a must visit.

Kremstal

Downstream from Wachau, is the Kremstal district, which is centered on the twin towns of Stein and Kamptal. Stein also abuts the Wachau, sharing much of the same soils, and hence similar attributes apply to both Riesling and Grüner.

Weinviertel

Austria's largest and most northerly region touches the 48th parallel. Ten years ago it was all about bulk wine. Today it is one of the leader's in the quality revolution. Of the 13 500 hectares grown, over half are dedicated to Grüner, which is Austria's spiciest. When tasted for DAC certification, five of the six tasters on the panel must achieve consensus. If not, the wine is declassified.

Wagram

The motto for this region is 'Grüner craves Loess', and Wagram's flat terrain is filled with compact sand, producing full bodied/aromatic examples.

The Wines

92 Nikolaihof Wachau Grüner Veltliner Weingebirge Smaragd 2009, Wachau (\$64.95)

This biodynamic wine reveals spice, grapefruit, pineapple, green elements and honey. It is full bodied, with wonderful refreshing acidity, and a long finish. I can see this wine aging for 15 years easily.

92 Nikolaihof Wachau Riesling Klausberg 2006, Wachau (\$99.95)

Sourced from the slopes over the Danube, this concentrated wine is starting to mature nicely, adding a slight nutty tone to the peach, grapefruit, apple, petrol, citrus and honey. Dry and full bodied, there is great ripeness and superb length. It still has another decade ahead of it, at least.

91 Rudi Pichler Grüner Veltliner Hochrain Smaragd 2009, Wachau (\$64.95)

Light yellow colour, there is an intense nose of peaches, flowers, prickly pears and green pepper. Full bodied, dry and ripe, there is a definitive pepperiness which meshes with the apple and pear on the long finale. Fresh acid bodes well for long aging.

91 Salomon Undhof Von Stein Reserve Grüner Veltliner 2006, Kremstal (\$39)

Here is a superb Grüner that offers great depth and ripeness. Light yellow, the aromatic nose of pineapples, honey, caramel, pepper and apples are built on a full bodied frame. The finish is very long with mouthwatering acidity giving no sense of heaviness. Drink it over the next 10 years. (ES)

90 Loimer Riesling Reserve Steinmassel 2009, Kamptal DAC (\$59.95)

Pale in colour, this dry Riesling is mineral driven, with peach, citrus, honey and a long bergamot aftertaste. It possesses a medium body and is to be drunk over the next 5 to 6 years.

90 Salomon Undhof Linberg Grüner Veltliner Reserve 2006, Kremstal (\$35)

This Groovy is just a smidge lighter than Von Stein, but with many of the same attributes: pineapple, honey, spice and apples. Crisp acidity and excellent length will allow it to age gracefully over the next decade. (ES)

90 Nigl Grüner Veltliner Privat Senftenberger Pellingen 1.Lage 2010, Kremstal DAC (\$51.95)

This 14.5% Grüner comes from a grand cru vineyard. It is chock full of herbs, white pepper, grapefruit and flowers. Medium body, the palate is mineral and citrus driven, with excellent length.

88 Leth Grüner Veltliner Steinagrund Lagenreserve 2009, Wagram (\$16.95)

Here is a great introduction to the world of Grüner that will not break the bank. Light yellow with a green tinge, the bouquet of honey, white pepper, grapefruit, flowers and green pepper meet up with a spicy and somewhat oily palate. None the less, there is still enough acidity to backstop the finale. (ES)

88 Salomon Undhof Riesling Reserve Steiner Kögl 2009, Kremstal DAC

Here is a Riesling which expresses itself in the purest of forms- mineral, lime and bergamot. Dry, the palate is imbued with minerals and very good length.

87 Bründlmayer Grüner Veltliner Kamptaler Terrassen 2010, Kamptal DAC (\$19.95)

Two thousand and ten was a difficult vintage for Austria, but as the old adage goes, a good producer will always produce quality regardless of vintage. This light to medium body Grüner exhibits floral, citrus, spice, banana and green qualities. It has very good length and is ready to drink.

85 Salomon Undhof Salomon Groovey Grüner Veltliner 2010, Kremstal (\$12.95)

Here is a light bodied, entry level Groovy, and it serves up pleasant aromas of citrus, herbs and pepper. It is light bodied and easy to drink.