

Into the Gröve

America gets excited about Austria's Alpine whites

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BY ERICA DUECY

➤ IN SKIING TERMS, GRÜNER VELTLINER IS THE POWDER STASH. The dry white varietal — Austria's native grape — is hidden in plain sight on wine lists, but many drinkers cruise right by, selecting wines with more familiar names. In doing so, they're overlooking an immensely flexible, food-friendly wine, with styles that range from fresh and light to rich and full-bodied. But Austria's secret may soon be exposed. The Old World wine region has New World attitude, thanks to a new generation of winemakers focused on quality and innovations like biodynamic winemaking.

Grüner Veltliner is especially suited to on-mountain drinking, given its alpine provenance. At Austrian ski resorts, like the luxury Arlberg Hospiz Hotel in the Tirolean Alps, it is resoundingly popular all day long. At lunch and après-ski, the spicy, light-bodied



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“classic” style wines are sipped alone or with food, while the concentrated, full-bodied “reserve” wines are enjoyed at dinner. “Reserve wines have higher alcohol and need to be paired with rich preparations — cream sauces, meats — foods with big flavors,” says Thomas Bitterman, who oversees the hotel’s food and wine program.

Austria has several winegrowing areas, with a total acreage slightly smaller than France’s Bordeaux region. The country’s cool climate makes for a long growing season, with harvests into October and November. Grüner Veltliner is the country’s most dominant varietal, covering about a third of its vineyards, and finds its best expression in the steep, terraced vineyards of the Wachau, Kremstal, and Kamptal regions. “As soon as you climb onto those terraces, and you have really complicated soils, then Grüner Veltliner really starts to find its voice,” observes Terry Theise, the premier American importer of Austrian wines.

The best expressions of the grape are sensuous, viscous, full-bodied wines of fascinating diversity. One top-scoring selection may display tropical fruit and warm spice on the nose, while another may be redolent of grapefruit, cream, and white pepper. They also offer exceptional value, with the most expensive Grüner Veltliners topping out around \$100; reserve wines with excellent structure and complexity can be had for as little as \$25.

So why isn’t this versatile wine more popular in the states? It may be a fear of the unpronounceable. Theise has a term for this hesitancy: “death by umlaut.” “I think if Grüner Veltliner came from a country that spoke Spanish or French or Italian,

people would be over the top with the discovery wondering what they ever drank before.” Instead, would-be imbibers get bogged down by confusing Austrian wine terms.*

Or it could be a lingering image problem. It took Austrian wine producers years to recover from the hangover caused by the diethylene glycol scandal of 1985, where several producers were found to have added the toxic ingredient* to their bargain-priced dessert wines. The episode nearly ruined the Austrian wine industry, and tainted public perception for a decade. In the mid-’90s, Grüner Veltliner experienced a moment of trendiness among American sommeliers — giving it at least token attention on most wine lists — but the wine has yet to become a staple.

However, the varietal’s transformation from once-trendy to timeless may be nearing, thanks to two shifts among producers. Austria’s ravenous domestic market consumes 70 percent of the country’s wines, most of which are the classic style of light wines meant to be drunk within a year or two after bottling. But in the past few years, several prominent vintners have changed tack, shifting their production to a bigger style of wine celebrated by the export market.

Additionally, more winemakers are embracing biodynamic and organic winemaking — movements that have swept across the international wine world. In Austria, the acclaimed estate of Nikolaihof-Wachau is leading the curve. It has followed the holistic farming and production philosophy — which incorporates organic growing techniques with mystical elements like harvesting by the moon cycle — for decades. Typifying the low-intervention philosophy of the movement, Nikolaus Saahs, the 30-year-old heir of Nikolaihof-Wachau, says: “I don’t like the title ‘winemaker.’ The wines make themselves, and I just stay out of the way so they can achieve their potential.”

Top producers like Hirsch and Loimer have followed suit in the past several years, creating compelling wines perfect for the luxury-export market. Fred Loimer, who took over his family’s estate in 1998, works with biodynamic grapes from his vineyards, as well as conventional and organic grapes from partner vineyards. The biodynamic grapes “have more individuality and more character ... a little more minerality, and in organic or conventional, you get more fruitiness and primary fruit,” he says.

Whatever the reason, the resulting Grüner Veltliners are better than ever, yielding outsize pleasure for the price. It’s an adventure in discovery, and an adventure* in pronunciation. ●



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