

GRÜNER VELTLINER'S

SECOND COMING

IS AUSTRIA'S FLAGSHIP WINE COOL AGAIN?

BY KRISTEN BIELER

Regarding Grüner Veltliner's original ascent, the wine world is in agreement: In the late 1990s, Austria's flagship wine skyrocketed to prominence in the U.S. market, becoming *de rigueur* in top wine programs across the country.

Exactly when and why the grape fell out of favor, however, is a matter of debate. Somewhere towards the later-2000s—



Sommelier Michael Dolinski made the bold decision to make Wallcé's 300-bottle wine list 100% Austrian. "I expected a bit of pushback, and got none, which was interesting," he says.

roughly a decade after it burst onto the scene—Grüner Veltliner was disappearing from wine lists and conversations. Some blame the influx of inexpensive one-liter Grüner bottles. (Yet, given the excellent quality-for-money these offer, it's hard to believe they did any real damage.)

Others conclude Grüner Veltliner was a victim of overexposure followed by the inevitable backlash. "It's hot then it's not," says Jodi Stern, Austrian Portfolio Specialist for The Winebow Group. "Many wines are cyclical in their popularity and Grüner Veltliner fell under this lens. It was simply the pivoting of people's attention and fascination with new wines."

In other words, a casualty of the fickle hipster sommelier culture. "Somms just got sick of talking about Grüner and moved onto the next thing—which was Chenin Blanc," believes Gabe Clary, Terry Theise Portfolio Manager for Skurnik Wines.

Flash-forward a decade, and the winds of change appear to be blowing in Grüner's favor. Gatekeepers are once again excited about the grape. "I'm seeing more interest in Grüner Veltliner from buyers, particularly for by-the-glass lists. It's a very vibrant time for the variety right now," reports Stern.

Jienna Basaldu, sommelier at The Morris in San Francisco (whose list features 30 Austrian wines), is witnessing the same trend with her customers: "I have more and more guests asking for Grüner by name; the Tegernseerhof I pour by the glass is one of our best-selling whites."

Last year, Austrian wine imports to the U.S. were up almost 20%, and while some of this enthusiasm is fueled by the country's increasingly impressive red wines, some excellent Sauvignon Blancs and a blossoming natural wine movement, the growth-driving stalwart remains Grüner Veltliner, which represents more than a third of the country's vines.

A Fresher Take

Could it be an evolution in the wines themselves that partially explains this newfound spotlight? “A number of influential Austrian winemakers are going for more acid, freshness and balance today,” believes Arvid Rosengren, partner/sommelier at New York’s Legacy Records. “There was a trend towards impressive, opulent Grüner Veltliners that were built for critics, not for gastronomy. Now winemakers are leaning towards less ripe, less botrytis-laden styles, yet they are still able to craft wines with richness and intensity.” In regions across Austria, producers are “realizing that freshness is what Austria has to offer,” explains Sabine Bauer-Wolf of Austrian Wine Marketing Board.

Climate change may ironically be helping. A string of warmer vintages has allowed vintners to more easily achieve ripeness without relying on botrytis—the noble rot that can occur when grapes are picked late—to bring concentration and roundness, explains Michael Dolinski, Sommelier at Wallsé, the Austrian restaurant in New York’s West Village. “Consider many smagard-level Grüners from Wachau; famous producers like Knoll and Hirtzberger are using less botrytis than they used to,” he says.

A “changing of the guard” may also be a factor in this subtle style shift, Dolinski adds: FX Pichler, Emmerich Knoll and Franz Hirtzberger are now all in the



Jienna Basaldu, Sommelier at The Morris in San Francisco, says, “Because Grüner has acidity and roundness it can work throughout a whole meal and with challenging dishes; a huge selling point.”

TOP RIGHT PHOTOGRAPH BY AWMB/MARCUS WIESNER



Opposite page: The warm Wachau region, known for full-bodied, powerful Grüner Veltliners. In cooler Kremstal (above), wines can be racy, mineral-rich and smoky.

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– Arvid Rosengren,
Legacy Records

hands of the younger generation. “I see an increase in purity,” says Stern, who believes the young leadership has a role in this. “There is a new generation taking over and they are passionately committed to finding an authentically Austrian voice. Some producers are reigning back on oak and alcohol levels, which yield wines that better showcase their origin and the diversity of Austrian terroir.”

Grüner the Shape Shifter

It’s hard to generalize about Grüner because it is incredibly chameleon-like in its sensitivity to terroir: Powerfully rich, tropical and oily from the warmer Wachau region; citrusy, spicy and elegant from Kamptal; and often high-toned, mineral-driven and smoky from Kremstal. What most Grüners do tend to have in common is a savory acidity



Wachau’s legendary Rudi Pichler estate dates to 1731 and consistently produces benchmark Grüners that are impressively savory and concentrated.

UNUSUALLY GREEN

Austria boasts the highest proportion of organic and biodynamically-farmed vines in Europe—over

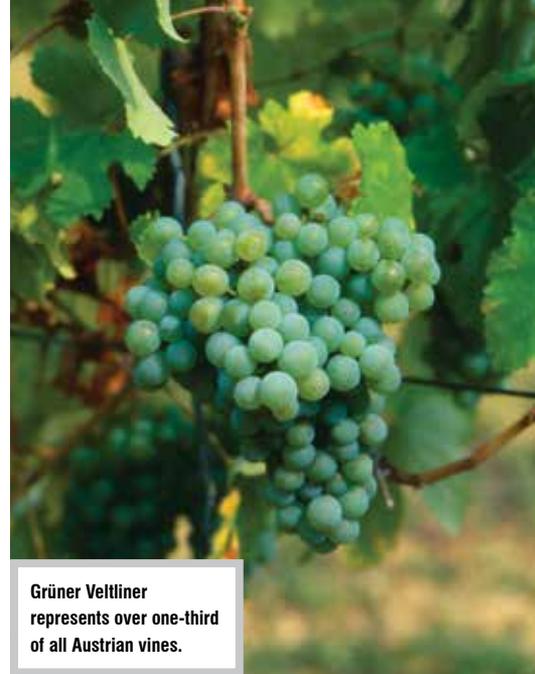
13%. “Rudolf Steiner—the founder of biodynamic agriculture—was Austrian and the impact of his philosophy is enormous,” says Monika Caha. While Caha’s portfolio includes natural-leaning producers, even her non-biodynamic, more traditional estates craft wines “very close to nature with very little intervention; these practices have deep roots in Austria.”



A new group of biodynamic producers, called Respekt, has 20 members and is growing. A big reason for this, believes Skurnik Wines’ Gabe Clary, is that many producers see biodynamic viticulture as the best defense against climate change and the increasing frequency of warmer vintages (like 2017 and 2018). “Our growers talk a lot about soil health as the solution to climate change. Biodynamically-farmed vines retain more water and allow grapes to ripen more slowly to achieve phenolic ripeness, not just sugar and alcohol,” he explains.

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– Gabe Clary, Skurnik Wines



Grüner Veltliner represents over one-third of all Austrian vines.



One of Austria's oldest estates, Nikolaihof is also one of the longest practitioners of biodynamic viticulture in Europe (since 1971!). Pictured: current owner/winemaker Nikolaus Saahs.



wines is becoming available and bottles are being snatched up,” Dolinski reports.

Value Factor

Value—in addition to complexity and ageability—is what makes Grüner a triple threat. “To match the quality of what you get for \$100 out of Austria in other fine wine regions, you would have to spend at least twice as much,” says Stern. When Dolinski made the bold move last year to make Wallse’s wine list 100% Austrian, his team was nervous about bottom line: “My somms were worried when we eliminated the Pétrus and Krug and Montrachet; we had nothing left at those price points. Austria offers the same quality for a fraction of the cost.”

Other regions pricing themselves out of by-the-glass reach has meant new opportunity for Grüner. “Sommeliers who want to feature interesting, Old World, mid-weight, textured whites are increasingly turning to Grüner, particularly as regions like Burgundy get more expensive,” Clary observes.

But while Grüner Veltliner’s praises are being sung

The organic Fritsch estate in Wagram was a biodynamic pioneer in Austria, and a founding member of the Respekt group. Monika Caha created her Grooner label to bring national attention to the grape.



that is refreshing yet not sharp. “Grüner is vibrant and invigorating and because it has acidity and roundness it can work throughout a whole meal and with challenging dishes,” says Basaldu. “That’s a big selling point for Grüner.”

It’s hard to argue with outgoing managing director of the Austrian Wine Bureau, Willi Klinger, when he boldly proclaims: “There is simply no other place on earth where refreshing wines are so concentrated and substantial, or where the opulent wines exhibit such grace.”

Basaldu particularly loves “blowing people’s minds” with older vintages which remain unctuous, focused and bright decades after they were bottled, she finds. Although older Grüner Veltliners are in short supply, a broker market is developing in response to new demand. “A trickle of

once more, there is still tremendous work to be done, cautions Monika Caha, who founded Monika Caha Selections 15 years ago—and created her Grooner brand to bring more national awareness to the grape. Aside from some sommeliers who chose it “for a short time in mainly trendy high-end places in urban areas,” Grüner Veltliner never really had its heyday. She explains, “Austrian wine has never reached the popularity with the consumer that wines of other countries have—it’s still new to most Americans. Austria still needs champions; sommeliers and retailers who are leaders who aren’t afraid to distinguish themselves from the crowd.”

Only then, Caha believes, will Grüner Veltliner finally transcend its passing fad status and assume its rightful place as a timeless classic. ■



Monika Caha founded her Austrian import company 15 years ago and believes that Austria still needs more “champions” (aka, influential buyers and sommeliers) to build a true national audience.

