An Austrian white but far from a joke? That's Gru-vee, baby

Austria 7, Burgundy 0: that was the unlikely score of a fascinating blind tasting of top-quality white wines held in London last week. Seven of the extremely able tasting group's 10 favourite wines were Austrian, whereas five of the seven least-liked came from Burgundy. So how come Austrian wine is still seen as a joke?

Perhaps partly because the Austrians, cowed by the wildly exaggerated effects of a long-gone wine scandal have been slow to blow their own trumpet. For this was the fifth such tasting in various parts of the world from which they have emerged victorious, and yet the Austrians have created little bally-hoo as a result.

In fact the country's official wine body, the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, has been scrupulous in having this blind comparison between its own white wine speciality, the Grüner Veltliner grape, and some of the world's most admired Chardonnays organised by a non-Austrian, a Swedish dentist-cum-fine wine merchant living in Germany, Jan Paulson of www.rare-wine.com.

It was all of four years ago that he first assembled some keen palates in Vienna to assess the relative merits of his favourite Grüner Veltliners and famous Chardonnays, including of course some great names in white burgundy. Since then the performance has been repeated for (mainly French) sommeliers in London, once more in Vienna and, last month, in Singapore for some of Asia's most finely honed palates.

Last week's event was attended by 17 of London's great and good in wine writing, wine selling and wine serving. It was triggered by myself and my colleague on The Observer, Tim Atkin, who when told about the results of previous such tast-

JANCIS ROBINSON ON WINE

> The Austrians have been slow to blow their own trumpet despite victories in five tastings

ings in Austria last summer, could not quite believe them.

When we saw the Chardonnays proposed by Jan Paulson we were rather underwhelmed, so tinkered substantially with the list in order, as we saw it, to beef up Chardonnay's chances against this mild and extremely obscure Austrian grape, Grüner Veltliner.

But still, despite the inclusion of appellations such as Montrachet and Corton Charlemagne, vintages such as 1996 and 1992 and producers such as Domaines Leflaive and Ramonet, Grüner Veltliner triumphed magnificently.

In fact, only 11 of the 35 wines tasted were Grüner Veltliners, and all but three of them were in the top 16.

Perhaps more telling still, only four Chardonnays made it into the top 10 and two – including the top-scoring Chardonnay – were not from Chardonnay's homeland Burgundy but Austria. The other two were delicious examples from California.

A common complaint on behalf of Burgundy when results such as these emerge is that burgundy needs much more time in the bottle to show well than other, more forward wines. But this tasting mingled wines of similar vintages, from the very young (1999 and 2000), through the middle-aged vintages of 1996 to 1998, to the positively senior years of 1990 to 1992. The older the wine, the more difficult it was to tell the Grüner Veltliners from the Chardonnays, but if anything the older Austrian wines were in fact more lively and youthful than their counterparts from Burgundy.

It is perhaps significant that I marked the Grüner Veltliners highly even though I spotted in most cases that they were not Chardonnay. They were simply very well-made, well-balanced, full-bodied (very occasionally too full-bodied), peppery, refreshing, interesting wines, particularly well-suited to drinking with food.

All this would seem to point to a glorious future for Grüner Veltliner, or "green grape from th Tirolean village of Velti nt that its name is so difficult to pronounce, spell and remember. Various promulgators, notably sommeliers in smart restaurants in the US where the grape is rather in vogue at the moment, have suggested calling it simply Gruner or even Gru-Vee.

One of them, in Manhattan's Danube restaurant, launched the grape on New Yorkers by asking them what colour wine they wanted to drink: "red, white or green?" Perhaps that is the way to introduce newcomers to this extremely impressive grape.

UK importers of Grüner Veltliner include Ben Ellis Wines of Brockham; Boxford Wine of Sudbury; Morris & Verdin of London SE1; Raeburn Fine Wines of Edinburgh; and Noel Young of Trumpington. The two most important US importers of Grüner Veltliner are Terry Theise at Michael Skurnik of Syosset, NY and Vin Divino of Chicago.

For detailed results and recent food and drink articles, including Jancis Robinson's wine column, go to:
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DAS LONDON TASTING 2002

DER HISTORISCHE DURCHBRUCH FÜR ÖSTERREICHS WEINE

Bei einer Serie von internationalen Verkostungen in Wien, Singapur und Tokio 2002 stellten sich Österreichs Grüne Veltliner und Chardonnays der Weltspitze. Höhepunkt der Verkostungsserie war ein Tasting am 30. Oktober 2002 in London, das mit Recht als das LONDON TASTING 2002 in die Weingeschichte eingehen wird. Wie bereits bei dem legendären Bordeaux Tasting 1976 wurden international renommierte Weine von aufstrebenden, „unbekannten" Weinen herausgefordert. Nach einer Reihe von erfolgreichen Verkostungen weltweit wollten es Jancis Robinson MW (Financial Times), Tim Atkin MW (damals The Observer) und der Weinhändler Jan-Erik Paulson genau wissen: Wie schlagen sich österreichische Grüne Veltliner und Chardonnay im internationalen Vergleich?

Das Resultat war überwältigend. Die ersten 4 Plätze belegte Österreich. 7 der ersten 10 Weine waren Grüne Veltliner bzw. Chardonnays aus Österreich. Auch der beste Chardonnay kam aus Österreich. Die internationalen Weine kamen von Top-Betrieben wie Ramonet, Latour, Thénard, Jadot (Burgund), Gaja (Italien), Mondavi (Kalifornien), Penfold (Australien),.... "Mit diesem Ergebnis könnte dem Österreichischen Wein auch international ein Durchbruch gelungen sein", kommentierte damals die Österreichische Weinmarketinggesellschaft stolz das Resultat.

Dem für Österreich erfreulichen Ergebnis folgte ein großer Artikel in der Wochenendausgabe der „Financial Times" vom 16/17. November. Zitat Jancis Robinson: "An Austrian white but far from a joke? That's Gru-vee, baby"

Das Resümée aus heutiger Sicht: Österreichs Weißweine sind nicht "besser" als die großen Burgunder. Dazu sind vor allem die Unterschiede zwischen Grüner Veltliner und Barrique Chardonnay zu groß. Aber:

1. Österreichs große Weißweine gehören zur Weltspitze.
2. Sie zählen zu den lagerfähigsten Weißweinen überhaupt.
3. Ihr Preis-Leistungs Verhältnis ist auch in der Topliga unerreicht.
4. Sie sind authentische Weine von einzigartigen Terroirs.

CHARDONNAY & GRÜNER VELTLINER

LONDON, GROUCHO CLUB, OCTOBER, 30TH 2002

Final Result (Best 20 out of 30)

1	1990	Grüner Veltliner "Vinothekfüllung" Smaragd, Knoll, Austria	18,09
2	1997	Grüner Veltliner "Ried Lamm", Bründlmayer, Austria	17,78
3	1997	Chardonnay Tiglat, Velich, Austria	17,67
4	1990	Grüner Veltliner Steinriegl Smaragd, Prager, Austria	17,66
5	1998	Byron Chardonnay, Nielson Vineyards, Mondavi, California	17,63
6	2000	Grüner Veltliner Exceptionell, Freie Weingärtner Wachau, Austria	17,54
7	1999	Grüner Veltliner Spiegel Alte Reben, Loimer, Austria	17,51
8	1996	Kistler, Dutton Ranch, California	17,51
9	1999	Chardonnay 100% Barrique, Mulderbosch, South Africa	17,48
10	1990	Chardonnay, Bründlmayer, Austria	17,33
11	1997	Yattarna, Penfold, Australia	17,15
12	2000	Grüner Veltliner Lamm, Schloss Gobelsburg, Austria	17,06
13	1999	Chardonnay Rey, Gaja, Italy	17,03
14	1997	Morillon "Zieregg", Manfred Tement, Austria	16,87
15	1995	Grüner Veltliner Kellerberg, F.X. Pichler, Austria	16,84
16	1999	Grüner Veltliner Wösendorfer Hochrain Smaragd, Rudi Pichler, Austria	16,82
17	2000	Chardonnay Grand Select, Wieninger, Austria	16,74
18	1990	Corton Charlemagne, Louis Latour	16,72
19	2000	Chardonnay Kumeu River, New Zeeland	16,69
20	1997	Chardonnay, Hamilton Russel, South Africa	16,67

Tasting Panel:

Tim Atkin *Harpers and The Observer*
John Avery *Averys of Bristol*
Bill Baker *Reid Wines and Conran restaurants*
Stephen Browett *Farr Vintners*
Richard Ehrlich *Independent on Sunday*
Brett Fleming *BRL Hardy*
Matthew Jukes *Daily Mail and Bibendum restaurant*
Martin Lam *Ransome's Dock restaurant*
Jason McAuliffe *Sommelier, Chez Bruze*
Steve Pannell *BRL Hardy*
Jan-Erik Paulson *Paulson Rare Wine*
Jancis Robinson *Journalist, Financial Times*
Gordon Roddick *The Body Shop and vigneron*
Anthony Rose *The Independent*
Hugo Rose *Lay & Wheeler*
Steven Spurrier *Decanter*
Charles Taylor *Charles Taylor Wines*
Simon Woods *free lance*

ÖSTERREICH WEIN