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Grüner the Great

Best known in Austria, Grüner Veltliner has gone global

By Tamara Belgard

Some people travel the world in search of the grandest and most famous of all wines only to find themselves seduced by the modest carafe of table wine at the neighborhood restaurant. If they're in Vienna, eating schnitzel, that carafe is likely filled with Grüner Veltliner (grooner velt-LEEN-er).

Others search the shelves at their favorite wine shops, seeking a wine so versatile it's as enjoyable at the dinner table paired with challenging vegetables like artichokes and asparagus as it is without food, slipping easily through your lips as you relax into a peaceful evening.



Grüner Veltliner vines thrive at Illahe Vineyards in Dallas. The winery bottled its first Grüner in 2007. *Photo provided by Illahe Vineyards.*

Despite its protean nature, not many are familiar with it, especially in this part of the world. Yet Oregon winemakers are trying to change that for the white they simply call Grüner.

Mike Hinds, winemaker/owner of Franchere Wine Co., speaks passionately about the complexity and intrigue of Grüner.

He says, “It can perform this neat trick where, at first, it seems like a simple, crisp dry patio wine, good for sipping on a warm day, but in the presence of food, it takes on weight, complexity and depth — only a few other wines can do that.”

For Hinds, part of Grüner’s attraction is its flexibility with food.

“Generally, it pairs well with any fare that’s not inherently red, brown or black, but most everything else is fair game,” he said. “What winemaker wouldn’t love that? Quinoa, pork, halibut, celery, asparagus, chicken, wild rice, savory pies... I could go on. And as a somewhat earthy wine — often showing cereal grain characteristics — it goes well with earthy foods, such as root vegetables.”

In Vienna, Grüner traditionally accompanies cold meats and fish, salads and light vegetables. But after discovering how brilliantly it paired with a spicy Thai dinner, Scott Shull, owner/winemaker at Raptor Ridge, planted Grüner at the foot of his estate in 2006. He says he immediately fell in love with this wine’s ability to cleanse the palate and cool the heat of piquant food.

Grüner Veltliner is often compared to Riesling in its mouthfeel, texture, richness and ageability. It also contains some Sauvignon Blanc-esque qualities, flavors of pear, herbs and tropical fruit, yet its charming combination of minerality, zestiness and layered flavors of

fruit, pepper, nuts and cream make Grüner an exotic alternative to more traditional white wines.

Most consider the wine originated in the western Austrian village of Veltlin in Tirol. The variety dates as far back as Roman times, with DNA analysis suggesting it a likely grandchild of Pinot Noir. Though 75 percent of the world's supply of Grüner currently comes from Austria, it is also grown in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and throughout the U.S., including Maryland, Pennsylvania, Washington and here in Oregon.

Grüner vines prefer clay, mineral-rich soils such as loess, an abundant silt-sized wind-blown sediment common throughout Oregon vineyards, as well as a good water supply and location at the foot of slopes — neither too flat nor steep. Grüner, known to be easy to manage in the vineyard — especially compared to the more fastidious Riesling — can prove somewhat challenging in the cellar.

When asked how Grüner performs in his vineyard, Schull explains how the large, loose clusters naturally open to sun and air; consequently, they're not as prone to rot as tighter bunches.

"We're still playing with crop loads and canopy management, but the grape doesn't strike me as finicky," Shull said. "It wants to come out and play."

Hinds maintains compatible terroir also makes Grüner a wonderful grape for Oregon.

"We have an abundance of deeper silt loam soils that are somewhat analogous in their soil profile and water-holding capacity to the deep loess soils in Austria, plus, the climate isn't too dissimilar," he said.

Hinds discovered it tends to ripen a week or two after Pinot Noir, but because it works well at a variety of weights and alcohol levels, the producer has an expanded picking window. He aims for a "Federspiel" style of wine — an Austrian classification stipulating a certain alcohol level of roughly 12.5 percent — which he achieved in the 2014 and 2015 vintages.

"In the cellar, Grüner isn't necessarily difficult, but it can produce a high level of proteins, which can affect both color and clarity," added Hinds, who uses a small proportion of acacia barrel — traditional in Austria — during fermentation, which he calls less impactful than oak.

Winemaker Brad Ford of Illahe Vineyards also has made adjustments along the way.

"We continue to work on honing the wine," Ford said. "In the last few years, the struggle has been picking early enough to retain good acid. Last year, we picked fairly early, so we got good acid, but even then we had to guess on the balance we would get between rich, developed flavors and the citric, white pepper character of leaner Grüns."

Illahe Vineyards, working with the grape since 1988, uses cuttings from Vitae Springs Vineyard in South Salem; however, their first bottling didn't occur until 2007. The winery also uses acacia barrels during fermentation.

"I got the idea for acacia from David Schildknecht (of the Wine Advocate) and have since been told by Austrian winemakers that soaking and barrel fermentation are how they typically make their finest wines," Ford said.

And yet, the first winery to bottle Grüner, not only in Oregon but the U.S. as well, lies far south of the aforementioned Willamette Valley wineries, in the Umpqua Valley, where owner/winemaker Stephen Reustle of Reustle-Prayer Rock strategically chose to plant his vineyard.

"We traveled many miles visiting various grapegrowing regions, looking for the perfect place," he said. "Settling down in a small valley in Umpqua, we found everything we were looking for: the right slope, the right soils and the right climate to make world-class wine. This site, coupled with a sense of community and feeling of family that we were searching for, was home."

After consulting with Southern Oregon University climatologist Greg Jones about the vineyard's heat unit accumulation, the Reustles discovered their property was well suited for growing Grüner.

So, in 2003, they planted it, becoming the first winery in the country to commercially produce Grüner Veltliner with their 2005 vintage. Their wines have won numerous awards and recognition all around the country, including the recent accolade in Sunset Magazine's October 2016 edition, naming Reustle-Prayer Rock's Smaragd Grüner Veltliner "Best in Class."

Less than a dozen Oregon wineries now produce Grüner; the list includes: Chehalem Wines, Franchere Wine Co., Illahe Vineyards, Johann Vineyards, Kramer Vineyards, Raptor Ridge, Reustle-Prayer Rock, Scenic Valley Farms, Sineann and Vitae Springs.

Tamara Belgard is a freelance writer and who explores the Oregon wine scene from her home in SW Portland.

TASTING NOTES

Grüner is often enjoyed while it's young and bright, but due to its typically high acidity, they can mature gracefully for a decade or more, developing an interesting bouquet as well as evocative petrol characteristics one might expect with Riesling. The wines highlighted below are some favorite examples of Oregon Grüner.

Chehalem 2014 Ridge Crest Vineyards Grüner Veltliner

With a hint of residual sugar, this pleasing yet complex wine captivates the senses with decadent characteristics of quince, juicy honeydew, Meyer lemon, jasmine and white pepper. The satisfying, creamy mouthfeel and subtle aromas of petroleum are positively swoon-worthy.

Franchere 2014 Havlin Vineyard Grüner Veltliner

Like your favorite pair of jeans — dress it up or down — this wine represents perfection for every occasion. Although elegant and sophisticated with lively fruit flavors and savory undertones, the wine's easy-drinking nature also makes it cozy and comfortable. Dominant flavors of Fig Newtons, blood orange, nectarine, nutmeg, sweet pineapple and white tea mingle harmoniously, displaying its eclectic personality.

Illahe 2015 Estate Vineyard Grüner Veltliner

Kefir lime, eucalyptus and kiwi make a strong and immediate impression, but the long and juicy finish is what keeps you coming back for more. Well-balanced from first taste to final sip, this wine is a definite crowd pleaser.

Kramer Vineyard 2015 Sparkling Grüner Veltliner

When looking for the life of the party, search no further than this celebrated bottle of bubbly joy. Subtle citrus dances across the tongue, while a hint of white pepper and fine bubbles burst playfully like Pop Rocks on the palate.

Raptor Ridge 2015 Estate Vineyard Grüner Veltliner

Don't overthink it because this straightforward wine is an obvious choice, complementing your meal rather than competing with it. Pair with simple foods layered in salt, heat and spice, such as honey- and red pepper-crusted fried chicken, and experience the clean flavors of citrus and stone fruit as they reawaken on your palate.

Reustle Prayer Rock 2014 Smaragd Grüner Veltliner

Tropical papaya kisses your lips at first sip, while notes of green apple, lime and white peach linger on the palate. Whispers of petroleum and spicy white pepper add complexity and intrigue to this stunning wine.

Reustle Prayer Rock 2014 Revelation Grüner Veltliner

Classic in style, this lively, complex wine offers layers of white pepper, ripe summer peaches, honey, green tea, passion fruit and a splash of sweet pineapple. Crisp and tart, this

racy yet voluptuous wine bursts in your mouth with pleasant minerality, a touch of effervescence and a delicate thread of balancing acidity.

Scenic Valley Farms 2015 Estate Vineyard Grüner Veltliner

Like a flag unfurling, this wine opens strong with delightful aromas of arrowroot biscuit while a suggestion of allspice teases the senses. Flavorful citrus components provide a steady hum in the background of this deep and generous wine.

Sineann 2015 Pear Blossom Vineyard Grüner Veltliner

Washing over the palate like a refreshingly cool summer breeze, this gem offers eat-over-the-sink white peach flavors that stand out against the rich, full-bodied peppery foundation. Enjoy now or lay it down; the balanced structure makes it a solid contender for aging.

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