

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

## Putting Austria's Best to the Test



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**For Grüner Veltliner, A Little Caution Reaps Big Rewards**

**J**UST A FEW YEARS ago, anyone who asked for Austrian wines at most stores would probably be led to the Austrian aisle and anyone who asked for a Grüner would have left the store groaning. How things have changed. Wines from Austria and especially its signature grape, Grüner Veltliner, a peppery white, are widely available and widely discussed among wine-lovers. We have been writing about Grüner Veltliner for quite a while now, but we had never conducted a broad blind tasting because there weren't enough of them available nationwide. But we've been monitoring that and now have found them in good stores just about everywhere. Obviously, Austrian wines are still a small part of any wine shop's inventory, but imports have risen sevenfold in just five years. We figured it was time to put Grüner Veltliner to the test.

Grüner Veltliner is far and away Austria's most popular grape. More than a third of all of Austria's wine acreage is planted to it. It's pronounced something like GROO-ner felt-LEE-ner. If you go to the excellent [winesfromaustria.com](http://winesfromaustria.com) Web site, then click on "adventuretour" and then click on "wine rap," you can hear someone pronounce it and study some of the difficult language of Austrian labels. Yes, it's true: Austrian labels aren't much easier than German labels. Smaragd, for instance, is a special category of wine in the Wachau region and, yes, you can hear it pronounced on the site.

### Widely Available

We checked wine stores nationwide to make sure plenty of Grüners were available and then ordered 50 from stores in five states. We set a price limit of \$50 and generally focused on younger vintages, because these are the ones you are most likely to see. We tasted them in blind flights over several nights. Having finished, we would say that the excitement about this wine is justified—but some caution is justified as well.

To get a sense of the excitement, consider our notes on one wine: "Very serious wine and quite different from other

white wines. Very, very ripe, but not at all sweet. The ripeness creates a kind of big, almost neutral base on which white pepper, some lemon and some grapefruit play on the palate, but it's a somewhat serious, almost somber wine, not a happy-go-lucky, fun white. Very much a food wine, not a wine to sip and swirl. Some floweriness on the nose, but no sweetness. Not fruity, but ripe. Fascinating and fine." This turned out to be a 2006 from Domaine Wachau and, frankly, when we looked at our notes and saw that it cost us \$11.99, we simply couldn't believe it. What a deal!

Some of the other wines were equally bold and interesting, with tastes of grapefruit, white pepper and very ripe white grapes. These are clean, fresh wines with the class of fine Riesling. But one problem we encountered was that there was an inconsistency of style, while some of the wines were quite serious, others were bright, sunny and fun, with little depth but plenty of up-front fruit. They reminded us of the charm of an inexpensive Châteauneuf du Pape. We enjoyed both styles, but it was impossible to know from the label,

the price, the region or the vintage which wine might be which. Even when labels indicated levels of ripeness and weight, tastes varied from bottle to bottle. (In the Wachau region, there are three designa-

tions that are intended to give some indication of ripeness and quality, from lightest to most full-bodied: *steinfeder*, *feder-spiel* and *smaragd*.)

### Consistent Problem

More serious was the problem of inconsistency of quality. While we enjoyed a majority of the wines, more of them than we would have expected tasted flat and dull, almost like bland industrial wine. Two wines tasted corked, which was surprising since they were both closed with screw caps. Here's our fear: Austrian exports have increased so quickly and so dramatically that there's not enough good stuff to go around, so we're seeing more of the so-so stuff. We would strongly caution the Austrian wine industry, which is aggressively trying to increase exports, to be vigilant about this.

The U.S. is an increasingly demanding and competitive wine marketplace where you can't assume you'll get a second chance. Even the shapes of the bottles varied for no obvious reason, and their size was no help, either. You might think, for instance, that a wine that costs \$11.99 in a liter bottle with a very plain label would be trouble, but in fact that wine, a 2006 from Berger, was utterly delightful and a wine we'd serve at a party anytime.

All that said, we would still urge you to go out of your way to find a Grüner Veltliner sometime soon. These are generally

**The Dow Jones Grüner Veltliner Index**

In a broad blind tasting of Grüner Veltliner from Austria, primarily from recent vintages, these were our favorites. While there is suddenly quite a bit of Grüner on shelves all over the U.S., it's impossible to know what labels you might see. These will give you an idea of some of the names, tastes and prices. (At the higher end, FX Pether is also a good name.) Austrian wines are sometimes hidden among German wines, so look closely. Many are closed with screw caps.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
<b>Weinquit Alinger</b> Leibner Lohenberg Smaragd 2004 (Wachau)	\$46.00	Very Good/ Delicious	<b>Best of tasting.</b> Rich and serious. Filled with white pepper and character. Zingy acidity and good weight, with a long, crisp, peppery finish. Distinctive and interesting. (We also liked the 2005 "Steinental.")
Domaine Wachau (Freie Weinart-ner) Terrasset-Federspiel 2006 (Wachau)	\$11.99	Very Good	<b>Best value (tie).</b> Ripe and full, with a hint of floweriness and, paradoxically, a real seriousness of purpose. Needs, and deserves, a fine meal. Great deal. Consistent favorite.
Weinquit E. & M. Berger 2006 (Krenstal)	\$11.99 (liter)	Good/ Very Good	<b>Best value (tie).</b> Perfect party wine—fresh, fun and delightful. Zingy, with lemon-lime-grapefruit tangness. No real depth, just drink-me-now, fun fun.
Hogler 2006 (Burgenthal)	\$14.99	Very Good	Great nose of kiwi, lychee, grapefruit and fresh herbs. The taste is just as interesting and fun, with a little bit of spritz.
Kartäuser 2004 (Wachau)	\$11.99	Very Good	Fresh and alive, with juicy acidity and some stuff underneath to give it backbone.
Mikolajhof "Hebeszug" 2005 (Wachau)	\$24.00	Very Good	Juicy, with great grapefruit acidity. Relaxed and confident. Charming, yet complex enough to hold interest.
Weinquit Hiedler "Leas" 2005 (Kampfl)	\$13.99	Very Good	Lovely. Restrained and elegant, with nice stature. Grapefruit, minerals, pepper and a very dry finish. Highly drinkable.
Weinquit Stadl Krems "Sandgubel" 2006 (Krenstal)	\$16.99	Very Good	Honeydew and white pepper, with minerals and a splash of lime. Real character, real intensity, real stuff, with a clean, juicy finish.
Weinquit Brundlmaier "Alte Reber" 2002 (Kampfl)	\$37.00	Good/ Very Good	Rich fruit, with depth, weight and a calm undertone that would make this a good pairing with spicy food. Always a good name.
Weinquit Summer "Steinhau" 2006 (Langenlois)	\$16.99	Good/ Very Good	Easy and very pleasant, with a hint of earthiness. Not as intense as many, good as a light aperitif.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Very Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious. These are the prices we paid at wine stores in California, Colorado, Michigan, New Jersey and New York. We paid \$43.99 for Alinger, \$25.99 for Mikolajhof and \$34.99 for Brundlmaier, but these prices appear to be more representative. Prices vary widely.

far more pleasant, easier to drink and better with food than most inexpensive Chardonnays. If you happen to walk into a wine store and see a handful of Grüner Veltliners, that probably means the merchant is a fan and can give you some advice. If you get one of the good ones, you are in for a treat—a white wine that truly tastes like nothing else (don't miss that grapefruit nose and that long, white-pepper finish). And if you do happen to

taste one that leaves you cold, don't give up on Grüner. Try another one, especially the next time you have veal.

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**RIEDEL**