The Native Son

TOURING GRÜNER VELTLINER, **AUSTRIA'S CALLING-CARD VARIETAL**

by Kyle Billings

BEYOND THE NORTHEASTERLY REACHES OF THE VAST ALPINE RANGE, A wearied world traveler settles into a modest inn nestled in an alcove of huddled houses along a suburban expanse of Vienna, Austria. Despite fatigue, a curiosity of the fabled wine taverns, known as *heurigen*, compels the traveler onto an ivy-laden patio of one of these storied settings. Here, culinary offerings include humble yet undeniably charming local dishes and the most recent season's wine. The rejuvenated traveler rejoices at the discovery of a varietal whose best vinous examples are recognized with international distinction, the crown jewel of Austrian wine: Grüner Veltliner.

Alongside the rich musical legacy of Mozart and Beethoven and the scientific advances of Gregor Mendel and Sigmund Freud, the colorful tapestry of Austrian glory includes another of its native sons: the small-berried, late-ripening white grape fermented dry (most often with no oak treatment) to extraordinary results. While Grüner Veltliner is grown in neighboring Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic and even as far reaching as Australia and Oregon, the grape reaches its apogee in its Austrian roots.

A third of all grape vines cultivated in Austria are dedicated to Grüner Veltliner. All four major wine growing regions, or *weinbaugebiete*, extend along the eastern reaches of Austria's border. Compelling reds featuring the Blaufränkisch and Zweigelt grapes are made most notably in the southerly *weinbaugebiete* of Styria and Burgenland. The remaining two regions dedicated to quality Grüner Veltliner envelop the Baroque city of Vienna: Vienna itself (the only capital city in Europe recognized as a delimited wine region) and Niederösterreich, where 60% of all wine in Austria is made.

With a discordant name and obscure parentage, a crossing of ancient varieties Traminer and St. Georgen, the success of Grüner Veltliner in recent years was hardly ordained. And yet the wine has seduced sommeliers and dilettantes alike for its versatility and verve. In the *heurigen* and watering holes throughout the country, Austrians slake their thirst with this native white wine: aromatic and dry with a racy, acidic lift and a bounty of herbs and spice, notably white pepper. Whether fish or fowl, Grüner Veltliner can complement whatever graces the chef's table sight unseen and still succeed.

Continuing westward, with echoes of Viennese composer Johann Strauss's "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" hanging on the edelweiss, our curious traveler commences a quest in search of the finest Grüner Veltliner, sampling wine regions with increasing distinction. The first stop after Vienna is in the largest subzone of the Niederösterreich: Wienviertel. Enacted in 1991, the Austrian appellation system, Districtus Austriae Contrallatus (DAC), recognized Wienviertel, dedicated exclusively to Grüner Veltliner, as the premier DAC region out of an eventual nine currently. Located in the hills north of the Danube River, it's cool climate and limestone-rich soils provide the literal groundwork for lithe and spicy wines, with distinction coming from a more significant pepper note than wines from other regions.

Aligned firmly in the center of Europe with a latitude corresponding closely with the Canadian-American border along Washington State, the climates of Wienviertel and the other wine-growing regions dedicated to Grüner Veltliner in Austria are adamantly Continental. The Alpine influences colliding with the warming effects of the nearby Pannonian Plain create diurnals and distinct seasons—brief, hot summers and frigid winters—moderated alternately by the Danube and its tributaries.

Our traveler ventures next into the triumvirate of Traisental, Kamptal and Kremstal regions of the Niederösterreich and their thriving examples of Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. Here, Grüner Veltliner prefers the more fertile loess soils nearer to the river's edge, compared to the granitic soil lofted atop the slopes best suited for its companion, Riesling. Each of these regions is a designated DAC, and in Burgundian fashion all three feature some of the best single-vineyard sites of international renown. These include the Berg vineyards in Traisental, Heiligenstein and Lamm vineyards in Kamptal and Sandgrube and Kögl, the sonorous sobriquets of vineyards in Kremstal. Kamptal, home to the vital wine-loving town Langenlois, deserves special recognition for its refreshing and vibrant, mineral-driven wines.

At long last, the traveler's occidental pilgrimage climaxes in the mecca of Grüner Veltliner winemaking: the Wachau. Starting at the Melk Abbey, remnants of yesteryear such as the Dürnstein Castle (once temporary home to Richard the Lionhearted) and the Göttweig Monastery pepper the landscape of this UNESCO world heritage site, standing as peaceful sentries to rows of terraced vines fanned out over rolling green slopes mirroring each other on opposite sides of the Danube like a kaleidoscope of wine butterflies.

Austria's most revered wines subscribe to their own governing wine body (and subsequent rules), the Vinea Wachau, which oversees nearly 85 percent of the wines in the Wachau. Their classification system has

The Achleiten vineyard in Austria's Wachau region is a revered site for Grüner Veltliner.

three tiers: Steinfeder, Federspiel and the most prized, Smaragd. Named for a local feathergrass, Steinfeder wines are lively and light, dancing on the palate with a maximum 11.5% ABV. The Federspiel wines, the name referencing a device used to beckon back the bird in falconry, features more body and soaring nuance, and by decree have between 11.5% and 12.5% ABV. Finally, the gold standard of Grüner Veltliner, the preeminent and marquee expression of the grape in the world, is named after a little green lizard: Smaragd wines have a minimum 12.5% ABV as these grapes of greater maturity have achieved layers of concentrated flavor and finesse.

Glass in hand, standing between rows in the revered Achleiten vineyard, our traveler observes one of the emerald (*smaragd*) lizards in its natural condition, basking in the Wachau sun. The traveler raises the glass in a silent toast, both creatures reveling in the glory of Austria's native son's eminence on the world wine stage.

TASTING NOTES

Fred Loimer 2014 Grüner Veltliner "Lois," Kamptal A faint straw color, this wine features notes of limestone, candied lime, nectarine and hay with a soupçon of chamomile tea on the nose. The palate is lifted almost to the point of effervescence with the added essence of savory pear skin and a lingering citrus finish.

THE WINEBOW GROUP

Rudi Pichler 2014 Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Terrassen, Wachau Delicate aromatics include bruised apple, underripe honeydew and snap peas. Layered on the nose are also notes of white flowers, honey and a nutty quality. Grass and apricots tantalize the palate with a moderate acidity and a lengthy, elegant white pepper finish.

THE WINEBOW GROUP

Stadt Krems 2014 Grüner Veltliner, Kremstal While not aggressively aromatic, notes of white flowers and rain-soaked rocks prevail alongside celery, honeysuckle, mandarin and ginger. The mouthfeel is round and succulent with white peach and savory cooking spices.

THE WINEBOW GROUP

Prager 2014 Grüner Veltliner Weissenkirchen Federspiel Hinter der Burg, Wachau Accompanied by a lustrous yellow color, this wine showcases a plenitude of aromas and flavors. The nose features prominent pepper, kumquat, celery, green apple, wasabi, top soil and wet rock. A racy acidity and angular palate confirm notes of bitter arugula and basil and even a hint of spearmint. The finish is long and palate-cleansing.

THE WINEBOW GROUP

Wieninger 2014 Grüner Veltliner Vienna Hills The aromas give the impression of sweetness, with mandarin, apricots and peach along with qualities of herbs, pink sea salt, and ruby red grapefruit. Bright acidity greets the palate followed by a spicy mid-palate and concluding with a limestone, mineral finish.

THE WINEBOW GROUP

Pfaffl 2015 Grüner Veltliner vom Haus, Niederösterreich This wine has a tropical perfume, notably ripe mango accompanied by herbs, pepper, baked apple, powdered-sugar lemon tart and candied lime. Tangy and ripe on the palate, this offering is simple yet charming.

PALM BAY INTERNATIONAL

Pfaffl 2014 Grüner Veltliner Goldjoch, Weinviertal DAC Reserve Fragrances of sweet orange, fresh earth, and honey harmonize with a velvety mouthfeel with notes of pineapple and melon. A mature and complex wine, the finish is lengthy and textured.

PALM BAY INTERNATIONAL

Pfaffl 2015 Grüner Veltliner Haidviertal, Weinviertel DAC A juicy and robust bouquet features freshly cracked black pepper, ripe peach, lemongrass, wet rock and limestone. The mouthfeel is weighted and generous of stone fruit with a mineral finish.

PALM BAY INTERNATIONAL

Malat 2013 Crazy Creatures Grüner Veltliner, Kremstal DAC The nose highlights essences of cherry blossoms, layers of lemon and lime, wet rock and surprisingly, a pleasant petrol note reminiscent of riesling. The palate is angular and bright with notes of lime and spice followed by a cleansing finish with a hint of tea leaves.

Stift Göttweig 2013 Grüner Veltliner Gottschelle, Kremstal DAC Reserve Celery, herbs, pepper, lime skin, and a slight barnyard quality are showcased on the nose. The palate is muscular and lively, with welcoming impressions of pepper, stone fruit and prominent pear and a lingering finish.

Ingrid Groiss 2014 Grüner Veltliner, Wienviertel DAC Redolent of white pepper, pear, white peach, gravel and grass on the nose this wine transitions gracefully to the full, opulent palate with generous quince, lemon and lime. The mouthfeel is juicy with a lifted acidity and pleasant finish whose final impression is complex and rewarding.

CIRCO VINO

Meinhard Forstreiter 2015 Grooner Grüner Veltliner, Niederösterreich Pink grapefruit, pistachio, lemon tart, hibiscus and marzipan provide this wine with a very pleasing bouquet. Hints of green apple emerge on the palate. Freshness reigns in this lively, easy-drinking wine.

FREDERICK WILDMAN AND SONS

Emmerich Knoll 2014 Grüner Veltliner Ried Loibenberg Smaragd, Wachau Entry of the nose into the glass proves instantly pleasing and seductive. White flowers, mandarin orange and a soupçon of custard charm alongside added notes of lime and honey. The palate is balanced and rich, with a touch of brioche and honeycomb and chamomile with a luscious finish. SJ

CIRCO VINO