

WINE & RATINGS

Meet Grüner Veltliner, Central Europe's Sexiest Grape

From slender and zippy to creamy and rounded, Austria's signature grape variety, Grüner Veltliner, has a multifaceted identity that adapts and shines.

BY ANNE KREBIEHL MW

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Photo by Meg Baggott

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You may know Grüner Veltliner as a light-bodied, dry white for all seasons, but there's much more to it. It possesses too many guises to pin down: peppery, light-bodied guzzler; oak-aged and long-lived; terroir-driven, single-site expression; and other variations.

As Austria's most widely planted variety, grown across each of its wine regions, Grüner Veltliner is the country's ultimate chameleon. This is due to factors like climate, which ranges from cool, elevated vineyards exposed to the elements, to southern-facing gentle slopes in sheltered spots. Also at play are soils, which range from gravels with some clay to rich, fertile loess. Viticultural decisions like yield and harvest dates also have impact, as do winemaking choices.

With Grüner Veltliner, variables mean everything. Are the wines fermented and aged in stainless-steel tanks? In large, old oak vats? Or in newer, smaller barrels? Are they kept on their lees for months to become rich and rounded? Or are they bottled soon with a little bit of residual carbon dioxide for that tell-tale, refreshing spritz? What distinguishes Grüner is that it adapts and shines in every incarnation.

Slender and Zippy Grüner Veltliner

This is the most friendly and easy style of Grüner, the stuff of lazy afternoons and balmy summer evenings with drinks, snacks and conversation. With snappy acidity and a peppery vibe, its lack of heft might be its supreme summertime virtue.

The Austrians embrace their *heurigen*, down-to-earth taverns that serve local wine and simple, hearty foods. They understand that you might want to sip for hours without falling over. These light-bodied styles of Grüner Veltliner were made for that. They refresh, animate and fit the bill of authentic, local thirst-quenchers. And, they don't break the bank.

The cause of Grüner's pepperiness is a naturally occurring compound known as rotundone. It's found in the grapes' skins, and it's the same compound that makes Syrah so peppery. Grüner Veltliner's naturally high levels of rotundone are up to 17 times the average person's sensory threshold.

The northerly Weinviertel is this style's spiritual home, where the grape is known as *Pfefferl* for its spicy edge. However, easy-going Grüner is made throughout Austria. Slightly higher yields, timely harvest and vinification in stainless steel add to its lightness and verve.

“What I love about Grüner Veltliner as a grape is that it can make spritzy wines at moderate alcohol levels [that] bring lots of character and personality, even at 12.5% abv,” says Franz-Josef Gansberger, winemaker at the Stadt Krems Estate in Kremstal.

These styles are often bottled with a little residual carbon dioxide, which provides a slightly fizzy mouthfeel that heightens the perception of freshness. If you're really thirsty, this uncomplicated, fresh wine is ideal to make a G'sprizter, the Austrian summer drink of half white wine, half seltzer. Just make sure to select the newest vintage and have lots of friends around to share it.



Photo by Meg Baggott

Recommended Wines

The Dot 2016 Austrian Apple (Niederösterreich); \$14, 90 points. Pear and herb scents combine for a savory, fruity nose. The palate plays out its lovely, yeasty savoriness with hints of sage and fern. Citrus freshness animates and enlivens the lovely midpalate texture, leaving a clean and very refreshing finish. Esprit du Vin. **Best Buy.**

Stadt Krems 2016 Grüner Veltliner (Kremstal); \$15, 91 points. A touch of yeast and sage emerges amidst lime peel scents on the nose of this wine. The palate reinforces those flavors, while white pepper and lime notes tingle around the edges. It's lean but concentrated and finishes with such a clean and refreshing zip that you just want to sip more. **Best Buy.**

Höpler 2016 Grüner Veltliner (Burgenland); \$15, 89 points. Fresh green pear, lemon and lime notes pervade the nose and palate of this light-footed, zesty wine. It's slender in body and easy-drinking, with a fruity, dry and refreshing finish.

Vim and Versatile Grüner Veltliner

Grüner Veltliner's freshness and savoriness are perfectly expressed in these taut, full-flavored wines. The rare combination of character and unobtrusiveness make this style the darling of sommeliers. These wines have enough acidity to brighten and counter numerous foods without taking center stage, yet possess the spice to stand their ground. They play effortlessly alongside Wiener schnitzel, but also with dishes as varied as piquant ceviche and creamy risotto.

These wines come in a range of weights, from zesty Wachau Federspiel to concentrated single-vineyard wines. However, all have plenty of verve and backbone, and they can age well.

Marion Ebner-Ebenauer, who makes precise but expressive Grüner Veltliners in the Weinviertel, says the secret is to take things slow, especially in prime sites like Sauberg.



Experiencing the Weinviertel, Austria's Wine Quarter

“We harvest late, either on very cool days or early in the morning when days are warm,” she says.

The crushed grapes have 12 to 24 hours of skin contact before they're pressed and fermented with indigenous yeasts.

“We realized that the spontaneous ferment gives us less-alcoholic wines with more depth and tension,” says Ebner-Ebenauer. “The fermentation is very slow, often continuing well into the new year. The wine is thus in contact with its gross lees for a long time. This has a real influence on the wine's character.”

The slow ripening season pays dividends for Roman Horvath, MW, of Domäne Wachau, in the steep vineyards of the Wachau.

“It preserves acidity in the wine,” he says. He attributes the light-footed, spicy style of his Terrassen Grüner Veltliner to the densely planted vineyard terraces on which his grapes thrive.

“They're very old vines planted in the 1950s and '60s with unusually high density,” says Horvath. “The soils are stony, and the vines thus give naturally low yields with much smaller grapes than you would get on flat land. The fruit-skin ratio is thus very different, and the resulting phenolics lead to real juiciness.”



Photo by Meg Baggott

Recommended Wines

Eichinger 2015 Ried Gaisberg Reserve Grüner Veltliner (Kamptal); \$29, 94 points. A wonderfully intense nose speaks of yarrow and moss, mirabelle plums and lifted, invigorating freshness. The palate fizzes away with flavor and excitement. This is a very lively, concentrated wine that flirts with us right now but has its real treasure of fruit still buried in its deep core. This will blossom with bottle age: Right now, the zesty tangerine peel flavors merely hint at the pleasures to come. Drink 2020–2030. **Editors' Choice.**

Ebner-Ebenauer 2015 Sauberg Reserve Grüner Veltliner (Niederösterreich); \$29, 93 points. Fresh and spicy form the first impression: ripe pear and moss, stone fruit and yeast combine to create an inviting, rounded and rich sensation. The palate adds the requisite freshness and surprises with wonderful concentration. Yellow plum and juicy pear shimmer, always edged with savory yeast. Tons of character and great length are present, and yet demonstrate no heaviness at all. What a lovely but honest wine! **Editors Choice.**

Domäne Wachau 2016 Terrassen Federspiel Grüner Veltliner (Wachau); \$20, 90 points. Fresh Conference pear notes abound on the nose of this wine. The palate is sprightly and fresh, with a zestier core of lime and pear peel. Slender in frame, it dances on the palate, displaying seriousness and levity at the same time. The finish is totally refreshing.

Creamy and Rounded Grüner Veltliner

This is the mellowest side of Grüner Veltliner. Grown on the rich, deep loess soils of Wagram or in the richer soils of Kamptal and kept on their lees, they attain a rounded creaminess and are almost soft in an herb-tinged way. These are uniquely savory wines with a rich appeal all their own.

Bernhard Ott, in Wagram, is one of the masters of this style. While he acknowledges the role that rich loess soils play, he emphasizes that warmer vintages make the wines even creamier. For his single-vineyard wine from Rosenberg, he treats the grapes exactly as they would have been 100 years ago.

“All the grapes and stems are crushed and have skin contact for about eight to 15 hours before being pressed,” he says. “I believe that this traditional way of working makes the wines spicier, nervier and a touch more savory.”

“Of course, you can only do this when Grüner Veltliner is absolutely hale, hearty and healthy. The variety is known for synthesizing a lot of phenolics in its grape skins in warmer vintages... After more than 20 years of vinifying this way, I'm convinced that Grüner Veltliner needs stems in order to have structure alongside its classic Veltliner character.”

Fred Loimer, who makes a range of Grüner styles, has a creamy, single-site wine from his Spiegel vineyard in Kamptal.

“The mighty loess layer provides excellent nutrients for this wine,” he says. “This, along with the warm microclimate and 10 months on lees in a large, used barrel, creates extreme smoothness, making this a very generous reserve Veltliner.” Ott says that these rich styles possess versatility when paired with food.

“The very well-integrated acidity offers possibilities to match with dishes that have a distinct acidity component themselves,” he says. “On the other hand, the sheer body of the wine allows pairing with heartier dishes without ever coming across as alcoholic.”



Photo by Meg Baggott

Recommended Wines

Anton Bauer 2015 Grande Reserve Grüner Veltliner (Wagram); \$49, 93 points. Soft vanilla hints of oak creep into the mossy aromatic hints of green and yellow pear. There also is a generous core of ripe fruit, almost reminiscent of lychee. While this is fresh with citrus, the deep mellowness and gliding fluidity of the palate will win you over. The finish is clean and lasting.

Bernhard Ott 2015 Rosenberg Grüner Veltliner (Wagram); \$67, 93 points. This radiates fragrance and spice: ferns and pepper, yeast and juicy, yellow pear, mirabelle plums and aloe vera. All of this is on both the nose and the palate and is combined in a harmonious, balanced parcel of rounded goodness. It treads a fine line between opulence and freshness but does not stray from its perfect high wire act.

Loimer 2015 Langenlois Spiegel Grüner Veltliner (Kamptal); \$60, 94 points. There is something juicy on the nose that suggests freshly cut apple and pear. The palate is rich with these flavors but something mellow, savory and yeasty cuts in that is reminiscent of miso and soy, adding interest and above all spice. The palate veers between fruit and spice but is united by bright lemony freshness. The lasting savoriness is testament to this wine's concentration and balance.

Serious and Ageworthy Grüner Veltliner

These are concentrated, impressive wines with weight, stature and longevity to match. Smaragd wines from the Wachau fall into this category, as do wines from classified single vineyards in Kremstal, Kamptal, Wagram and Traisental.

The wines usually get their concentration from the naturally low yields of old vines and are harvested late, often during the latter part of October or even November. They also come in a range of styles. All require bottle age to reveal their true potential.

“Grüner Veltliner can transmit a very complex, concentrated character—to such a degree it can surprise people who are not familiar with the style,” says Michael Malat, who makes an exacting style in Kremstal. “People always talk about the spice and savoriness of Grüner, but for me, it's more than that. There are yellow fruits and melon, more ripeness, more herbs. It's a broad aromatic spectrum.”

“We try and tease out ripeness to the max,” —Franz Hirtzberger, Jr.

Whereas Malat's wines are in a linear, precise vein, the wines of Franz Hirtzberger Jr. tend toward opulence.

"We try and tease out ripeness to the max," says Hirtzberger about his single-vineyard Honivogl Grüner Veltliner. "We are really pushing it in the vineyard, waiting until we hit some overripeness. That gives us immense density, power and texture in the wines, along with incredible aging potential and lots of spice."

Both styles age extremely well.

At this level of quality, winemakers also use oak in a different way. They often opt for barrels that are smaller than the traditional large, oval fuders in order to give flavor and mouthfeel to the wines.

"We age our Lamm single-vineyard Grüner Veltliner in slightly smaller casks to show a little oak impact," says Andreas Wickoff, MW, of Weingut Bründlmayer in Kamptal. "Another oak-aged interpretation of Grüner is Vincent's Spiegel, where this single-vineyard wine is aged in used 300-liter oak barrels, which gives us a really beautiful hazelnut character. Grüner can be so much more than just light, zippy and crisp."



Photo by Meg Baggott

Recommended Wines

Bründlmayer 2015 Lamm Reserve Grüner Veltliner (Kamptal); \$80, 93 points. There is a distinct nutty smoky impression on the nose. The concentrated palate also comes with shades of vanilla and hazelnut, wrapping its fresh lemon and herbal spice into a warming intriguing cloak. It is the purity of the lemon that shines and lasts longest on the palate. This may be a bit young to drink now, so be patient and drink 2020–2030.

Franz Hirtzberger 2015 Honivogl Smaragd Grüner Veltliner (Wachau); \$89, 95 points. A honeyed note clings to the ripe fruit of Bosc pear. The palate adds immense and appetizing spice to the pear notions, edging it with pepper and yeasty notes of soy and sandalwood. The palate is ripe and concentrated but deeply textured and made precise by zesty grapefruit freshness. It appears compact and precise and has a lasting, impressive impact, shining with pure fruit and aromatics. Lovely now but certain to improve with some bottle age. Drink 2017–2035.

Malat 2015 Gottschelle Reserve Grüner Veltliner (Kremstal); \$47, 93 points. The fleshy ripeness of yellow pear plays on the nose but the palate adds gorgeous herbal spice to the proceedings. It is like very ripe pear and yellow plum were bedded on yarrow, thyme and white pepper. All this is held together by gentle rounded lemon freshness and results in a totally, balanced, appetizing, moreish wine with an clean finish.

Sparkling Grüner Veltliner

When tended and harvested with this purpose in mind, the Grüner Veltliner variety can make a great base for sparkling wine, called sekt in Austria.

“Grüner Veltliner’s harmonious fresh, fruity and peppery notes create a unique flavor profile that makes this variety very suited to the production of sekt,” says Markus Graser of Schlumberger Sekt, Austria’s oldest sparkling-wine producer. “Here in the northern Weinviertel, we have an ideal acidity-ripeness ratio and an optimal acidity structure in Grüner to make it an optimal base for typically Austrian sekt.”

Sweet Grüner Veltliner

Austria has a long tradition of sweet wines made from botrytis-affected grapes. When Grüner Veltliner is affected by noble rot, its aromas of herbs and spice balance the rich, concentrated sweetness of these intense, long-lived wines. Depending on the level of botrytis infection, you can have mellow auslese, rich beerenauslese or decadent and luscious trockenbeerenauslese (often abbreviated TBA).

Austria’s fiercely cold winters also produce thrilling eiswein, made in tiny, precious quantities from grapes frozen on the vine and harvested during frosty nights for complete concentration.

Experimental Grüner Veltliner

Martin Diwald from Wagram loves to put Grüner to the test. Each year, he tries something new with his grapes from Altweingarten, one of his single sites.

“I’m pretty hands off,” he says. “I let everything ferment spontaneously. I want Grüner to really taste of Grüner, and of each vintage. I try lots of things, like fermenting Grüner on its skins or fermenting whole berries in stoneware without sulfur, just to see what Grüner can do, how far I can take it. From stainless steel tanks via barrels of acacia or French oak, somehow, anything goes. The great thing is that Grüner can do it.”

Diwald is not alone. Experimentation with the variety is rife in Austria. It’s been foot-trodden and fermented in Georgian qvevri, large earthenware vessels, and also in amphorae sunken into the ground. Sadly, very few of these experimental styles make it to the United States.



About the Author

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German-born but London-based, Anne Krebiehl MW is a freelance wine writer contributing to international wine publications. She also lectures, consults and translates and has helped to make wine in New Zealand, Germany and Italy. She adores acidity in wine and is thus perfectly suited to her Austria/Alsace/England beat. Her particular weaknesses are Pinot Noir, Riesling and traditional-

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