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**Austrian Wines Have a Voice, and It's Excited**



Nigl's terraced Senftenberger Piri vineyard in Senftenberg, Austria.



MORE than once in the last two decades, Terry Theise confesses, he has felt like Sisyphus as he traveled the country, trying to sell the German wines, especially rieslings, that captivate critics but leave many American consumers cold.

"That was hard enough," he said recently. "A labor of love, really, pushing that rock up the hill. So about 10 years ago I proposed to strap a grand piano on my back while I did it, and start promoting Austrian wines at the same time."

J. Carrier for The New York Times

By championing the wines of Austria, Terry Theise has become their most articulate spokesman.

They turned out to be an easier sell than he expected. Americans searching for food-friendly alternatives to oak-bomb California chardonnays began discovering grüner veltliners, the peppery white wines, made only in Austria, that can be paired even with legendarily wine-hostile foods like asparagus and artichokes. From them it was a hop and a skip to full-bodied Austrian rieslings and honeyed dessert wines.

To be sure, Austrian wines remain a minority enthusiasm in the United States. According to the Department of Commerce, Austria ranked 13th among sources of American wine imports in 2005, just behind Greece and Israel; Austrian imports totaled 250,000 gallons worth about \$7.1 million, compared with 14.8 million gallons from Chile, for example. Still, Austrian imports have increased fourfold since 1998.

As recently as 1985 the Austrian wine industry was back on its heels, after a scandal in which some winemakers gave their wines added sweetness by adulterating them with diethylene glycol, a toxic chemical. Four-fifths of the country's exports dried up overnight. But then passage of rigorous new laws halted the rot, and a long comeback began.

Mr. Theise, 52, has played a leading role in that comeback, at least in this country. He lives in the Washington suburbs with his wife, Odessa Piper, who for many years ran L'Etoile, a much-esteemed restaurant in Madison, Wis. The gems he ferrets out in central Europe are actually imported and distributed by Michael Skurnik Wines in Syosset, N.Y., freeing Mr. Theise to taste, sell and write. And, boy, does he write!

Every year he produces catalogs for each of his specialties, small books packed with anecdotes, opinions, tasting notes and love letters to his growers. An excerpt: "The kinds of people I choose to work closely with are restless truth seekers, viticulturally speaking." He has no qualms about singing the praises of their products. Austria, he writes, offers "the best values on earth for monumentally structured dry white wines." It produces "the world's best pinot blancs." Grüner veltliner is "the last of the great European white wine grapes" — and *do not* call it "grüner" for short, as some critics and merchants do, Mr. Theise says; he considers that an ignorant vulgarity.

A fierce foe of the American passion for scoring wines numerically, Mr. Theise also crusades (as you might expect a salesman of off-dry wines to do) against "the idea that sugar is evil." His argument: "A dash of salt in your soup isn't to make it taste salty; it is to awaken flavor, to make it taste more like itself. A similar dash of sweetness in a wine both enhances flavor, extends fruit, provides another voice to the dialogue of nuances, reduces alcohol and in many cases makes for a more elegant finish."

Sometimes, straining to convey his encyclopedic knowledge of his products lures him into prose as overripe as a starlet's lips, like this description of Nikolaihof wines from the Wachau: "These wines don't so much meet you halfway as show you a third place that's neither You nor Them, but somewhere you meet in truth only by

dissolving your respective walls. Each of them is like a slow centering breath, a quiet breath, the breath of the world, unheard almost always beneath the clamor.”

Bada-bing! Bring on Doc Gibbs and the “Emeril Live” band!

Mr. Theise (pronounced theece; rhymes with fleece) is not the only champion of Austrian wines, of course. While he handles big names like Nigl and Brundlmayer, competitors like Weygandt-Metzler of Unionville, Pa., bring in F. X. Pichler’s wines, and Vin Divino of Chicago represents others, like Alois Kracher, king of Austrian sweet wines.

Austrian restaurateurs have played a role as well. [David Bouley](#) and Kurt Gutenbrunner in New York promote Austrian wines at Danube and Wallsé. Wolfgang Puck himself once materialized at Chinois, one of his Southern California restaurants, carrying a bottle of Nigl Privat riesling after I complained of the dearth of Austrian drink on the list. And Manfred Krankl, who now makes Mr. K sweet wines near Santa Barbara in California in partnership with Mr. Kracher, was an advocate of all things Austrian during his years as a partner at Campanile in Los Angeles.

The floral, herbal qualities of grüner veltliner — some taste sorrel, others smell mimosa — have endeared the wines to fans of Asian food; the noted San Francisco Vietnamese restaurant, Slanted Door, included a half-dozen of them on a recent list.

But by writing about it, talking about it, selling it and proselytizing for it in every way he can Mr. Theise has established himself as the voice of Austrian wine, its most knowledgeable and articulate (if occasionally overexcited) champion. Who can fail to appreciate a man who says of his favorite wine (grüner veltliner, of course) with perfect concision, “It can be as sleek as a mink or as big as Babe the Blue Ox.”

Another of the great virtues of grüner veltliners, he said over lunch at Vidalia, a Washington restaurant that features several Theise selections, is their availability across a broad price spectrum. Those selling for \$50 to \$55 — top-of-the-line aristocrats from growers like Brundlmayer, which are still much less expensive than blue-ribbon white Burgundies — will always outshine their more proletarian rivals priced from \$9 to \$13. (Many of the “introductory” grüner veltliners are now produced with screwtop caps.)

But the common lineage is almost always obvious. “The main difference in production is the ripeness of the grapes when picked and the level of cropping,” Mr. Theise said. “The main difference in the glass is richness, complexity and concentration.”

As an example of the bang-for-the-buck species, we tasted a 2005 Grüner Veltliner Renner from Gobelsburg, designed to sell at retail for \$27 or \$28. With lemony and peppery notes on the nose, medium-ripe, it had plenty of

power — “fine-grained,” as Mr. Theise remarked. It reminded me of something he said earlier: “For me, utility and charm are more important virtues than simply blowing your socks off.”

In general, grüner veltliners from the Wachau are the costliest (and some think the best). A steep, almost indecently scenic valley through which the Danube flows with undeniable majesty, about 70 miles west of Vienna, it has two crowning glories: the great cliff-top Baroque abbey at Melk and the castle above Durnstein, where Richard the Lion-Hearted was imprisoned after the Third Crusade in the 12th century.

I have a soft spot for the Wachau; decades ago I tasted Austrian wines for the first time at Jamek, a riverside restaurant now almost a century old. The warmhearted Landhaus Bacher in Mautern, where the Italian-inflected food lives up to the spectacular cave, came as a thrilling discovery to my wife, Betsey, and me on a cold, dark night not too many years after that.

But Mr. Theise finds all but the wines at the very pinnacle of quality overpriced, victims of supply and demand; only about 3,500 acres are planted to vines in the entire Wachau, and not all of that is grüner veltliner. So Mr. Theise looks downriver, toward Vienna, to the adjacent districts, the Kremstal and the Kamptal, where the falloff in quality is slight and the prices gentler, and to growers like Hirsch and Nigl.

I'm a Champagne man when it comes to bubbly; with few exceptions, other sparkling wines leave me flat. Mr. Theise added a new item to my list of exceptions with his Gobelsburg nonvintage reserve, a silky blend with a soft mousse, made from grüner veltliner (70 percent), riesling (15) and pinot noir (15). Without prompting, I would have had no clue what I was drinking.

Austrian rieslings are another matter. They are instantly recognizable as riesling but drier than their Alsatian cousins, with a somewhat more refrained floweriness, as Mr. Theise put it, than most of their German relatives. Juicier, too, I would add, with the aroma of yellow mirabelle plums in some cases and of tropical limes in others.

Once again, many of the best rieslings come from the Wachau (Jamek, Prager), which has its own system of nomenclature, just to live up to the Germanic tradition of confusing labels. Wines marked “federspiel” must by law contain between 10.7 percent and 11.9 percent alcohol, for example; higher than that, they command a premium price and are designated with the word “smaragd,” which is the name of a small green lizard that likes to sun itself on the steep vineyard hillsides.

Austrian rieslings can be bargains. The other night, at a Legal Sea Foods outlet, Betsey and I drank a nicely aged federspiel (2001) from Franz Hirtzberger at Spitz in the Wachau, imported by Vin Divino, which cost only \$39. With forward fruit flavors, round and clean, it was dry but not bone-dry. Perfect with shrimp, clams and scallops, or grilled fish, almost anything from the sea, but not a very good match for oysters.

As always, a sturdy minerality underpins and focuses these wines.

Dry Austrian whites do not stop with riesling and grüner veltliner, the ever-enthusiastic Mr. Theise wanted me to know, so he brought out several bottles produced by Heidi Schrock in Burgenland, south of Vienna. Her furmint, made from the grape famous as the basis of Hungarian tokay, reminded me a lot of chenin blanc from the Loire Valley; her grauburgunder (pinot gris), gently oaked, struck me as a little too alcoholic (more than 14 percent); her muscat is a creamy, spicy delight.

If Ms. Schrock's whites constitute one kind of novelty, Austrian reds must represent the height of obscurity, medium-weight wines that are made from grapes few have ever heard of. Zweigelt, anyone? Mr. Theise touts it as a "lush, fine, useful" alternative to syrah. St. Laurent? A bit like an old-time Nuits-St.-Georges, he told me. Blaufrankish? A hint of Chianti Classico, perhaps, or even of malbec.

Most of the best reds come from the sun trap that is Burgenland, hard by the Hungarian border and the large, shallow, reedy lake called the Neusiedlersee (which is also the region where Mr. Kracher and Willi Opitz make their world-class sweet wines, aided by the mist that rises in the autumn from the three-foot-deep lake).

Here Mr. Theise introduces an uncharacteristic note of caution. "Austrian red wine is to be taken seriously, that much is beyond dispute," he writes in his 2006 Austrian list. "Yet for every truly grown-up wine there are many others that are silly, show-offy, insipid, even flawed."

So leave the final word to Doug Mohr, Vidalia's sommelier, who is bold enough to list 13 Austrian reds with twice that many whites. The reds, he said with a smile, "do not yet have the following of grüner veltliner," but he still manages to sell them, often a glass at a time, to skeptics.