

PEAK WINE EXPERIENCE

It would be a mistake to think of Austrian wines as merely interchangeable with those of the country's neighbours, says David Swartzentruber.

This Alpine nation produces vintages many of which attain great heights

Although Austria has a history of winemaking going back thousands of years, the country's wines have remained little known in Thailand. But now thanks to two determined wine importers, Austrian wines will become better known and appreciated in the Thai wine market, which, as a country only recently taking to wine production, can certainly benefit from any exposure to the craft of experienced practitioners. Austria produces but one percent of the world's bottles, yet these wines are becoming increasingly popular among discerning wine drinkers in the West. The resurgence began

after a scandal in 1985 involving potentially unsafe additives and that led to the establishment of tougher quality-control laws. The changes put Austria among those countries with some of the strictest rules and regulations governing wine production.

These developments in Austrian wine were on display during a recent dinner at Rossini's at the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, where two accomplished Austrian chefs, Thomas Walkensteiner and Maximilian Kollienz, created a wonderful meal to accompany the wines of Fred Loimer of Loimer and Toni Bodenstein of Prager, both leading Austrian wineries. The event was hosted by the afore-

mentioned importers, Jan Ganser and Benjawan Wisootsat of Bangkok's take fin.

Prager's gruner veltliner is grown in the Wachau region and provides a fine alternative to the ubiquitous and often over-sugared chardonnay. What's that you say, gruner veltliner? This excellent varietal, which accounts for 36 percent of Austria's production, results in a wine that is light but dry. It will have a mineral character owing to the granite-based soil on which it is grown, a medium body as well as a peppery character, the last of which makes it an ideal pairing with Asian cuisines. The wine can age up to five years, developing complexity throughout.

I must admit that gruner veltliner, sometimes shortened to GruV and cheekily pronounced "groovy", is so new on the scene that my taste of the wine at the Sheraton was my first. The wine did not disappoint. The first GruV was a Lois 2003, followed by a Spiegel of the same vintage. These wines were matched with chartreuse of salmon with buttermilk and tomato-honey and a parsley cream soup with truffle, respectively. Both wines excelled, especially the single-vineyard Spiegel. When a wine has real character and authenticity, something the French term *terroir*, it shouts these qualities at you. I heard the shouts plain and clear.

Two other Austrian dry white wines of note are riesling and pinot blanc. That Austria produces riesling comes as no surprise since the country's southern border abuts Germany, the more familiar location of this noble grape. Diners at the Sheraton tasted a 2003 Seeberg,





Above: The Wachau wine growing region Right pictures: The gruner veltliner and riesling wines of Fred Loimer are among Austria's finest Opposite page: The home of Prager winery



which, although beautiful, was not the equal of the Prager Steinriegel Riesling Federspiel 2003 by Toni Bodenstein. The latter wine evinces luxurious riesling fruit and it well accompanied Rossini's fish entree.

Another star in Austria's white wine line-up is pinot blanc. Reinhard Murer of food-comthailand.com has brought in the Dr Franz line of wines produced in the Burgenland wine region, and the line is very good indeed, the pinot blanc especially so. This grape too has a noble heritage. A cousin of pinot noir, it's grown in Alsace, northern Italy, southern Germany, East Europe, Austria and California, where barrel-aged versions are a great treat. Pinot blanc may make you forget only the top chardonnays produced. Identified as medium-dry on the label, the Dr Franz 2003 pinot blanc is medium-bodied with a fragrant and lively character.

Now we turn to red wines. The Austrian government has mandated that Austrian wine-makers increase their red wine production to 30 percent of the total wine output. I think that they can, and should, do that, given the examples from Fred Loimer and Dr Franz. Austria's cool climate is suitable for pinot noir ripening. Fred Loimer has produced at his estate in the Kamptal area a 2002 pinot noir that is blended with a small amount of a native

Turning to sweet wines, it must be said that Thailand has not yet gained an appreciation of the world's high-quality sweet or dessert wines. A visit to any local wine shop in search of one will not yield much success. Jan Ganser of take fin company is trying to change that. He has brought in what has been called the king of Austrian sweet wines, Alois Kracher. This is a world-class vintner and I encourage discriminating wine customers to taste these

long-established and highly developed viticulture tradition, stringent regulations, and favourable climate and soils for particular varietals, this relatively small producer is set to make a big splash. I heartily recommend that wine buyers in Thailand seek out the fine vintages of Austria. □

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Austrian red grape called zweigelt, which gives added colour and body to the finished wine. This wine was offered at the tasting event and I can say it is quite a decent example, the grape's true character emerging sufficiently to accompany the Austrian chefs' fantastic venison entree. Dr Franz produces a sumptuous and fruity pinot noir as well as a cabernet sauvignon that most will enjoy.

exquisite wines, both of 1998 vintage: a welschriesling Zwischen den Seen No 6 Trockenbeerenauslese and a barrel-aged chardonnay, Nouvelle Vague No 2 Trockenbeerenauslese. Dr Franz has as well three dessert wines available in Thailand.

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Assorted Austria Facts

- Austria produces three million hectolitres of wine, most of it white with the most notable being gruner veltliner.
- Many Austrian wineries are small and primarily family owned and operated. Full-time producers work vineyards averaging only 2.8 hectares, making Austria a place of boutique wineries.
- Vienna has distinction as the world's only national capital containing a wine region within its city limits. The wines produced here seldom leave the city but are instead drunk locally, often in the city's wine taverns.

