

May 4, 2005

WINES OF THE TIMES

Rieslings Easier to Drink Than to Name

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

PEOPLE don't talk much about Austrian wines, and for good reason. Unless you are fluent in German, just try saying, "Nigl Kremstal Kremser Kremsleiten," and see how far you get. The characteristically German pileup of consonants fences off these wines from many American consumers. Faced with mouthfuls like "smaragd" or "federspiel," who wouldn't call out desperately for a California chardonnay?

On those rare occasions when people give any thought at all to Austrian wines, they most likely think of grüner veltliner. And why not? Austria is the only place on earth that produces these peppery, lively wines. As they have become more popular, grüner veltliner has solidified its place as the semi-pronounceable headliner of Austrian wines. But Austrian rieslings, already overshadowed by those of Germany and Alsace, and perhaps even of Australia, may continue to wallow in relative obscurity.

For this, true lovers of the riesling grape should bow low and give thanks that a secret source of stunning wines may remain, for now, a secret. As the Dining section's wine panel re-affirmed in a recent sampling of 25 Austrian rieslings, these are focused, utterly distinctive wines that, at their best, could come from nowhere but the vineyards of lower Austria.

Because Austrian rieslings have certain linguistic traits in common with their German counterparts, people tend to lump them together. But they are very different. German rieslings, particularly from the Mosel, tend to be sheer, lacy and fine, and many have a pleasing sweetness to them. Austrian rieslings are almost always bone dry, and are characterized by power and richness. They have great texture, presence and weight, yet are rarely heavy, with wonderful mineral aromas and flavors framed by the gentle presence of peaches and apricots.

They are closer to rieslings from Alsace, but even that comparison is not quite right. The best Alsatian rieslings tend toward austerity, like tightly wound beams of pinpoint flavor. The Austrian rieslings are more generous, without losing focus.

As one who loves minerally white wines, I felt privileged to taste through these rieslings. My colleague, Florence Fabricant, was a little more hesitant in her praise. She was struck by their consistency and felt they would go well with food, but was not terribly excited. "Would I pay a huge amount of money for them?" she asked. "Probably not."

One of our guests, Howard G. Goldberg, who writes the Wine Under \$20 and Long Island Vines features for The Times, took it further.

"Germany is my standard, and by that standard these fall somewhat short," he said. "Most were straightforward and intelligent, with occasional richness but no thrills."

I was about to object, but our second guest, Paul Grieco, an owner and general manager of Hearth in the East Village, beat me to it. "I profoundly disagree," he said. "These wines have a sense of place in spades. They work with an incredible range of dishes. At almost any price point, these wines are worth it."

I share Mr. Grieco's passion for the wines, but have to admit that they are not cheap. One possible explanation is that, with a relatively low demand for Austrian rieslings, those with the best reputations (and highest price tags) were easy for us to acquire. Nigl (rhymes with eagle) is widely regarded as one of the top Austrian wineries. We tasted a couple of their bottles, though we had to settle for a magnum of the 2001 Privat, which was nosed out as our favorite by the cheaper 2002 Hirsch (pronounced heersh) Zöbinger Heiligenstein (high-LIG-en-shtine).

Neither of these bottles, relatively speaking, were nearly as expensive as Nos. 5 and 6 on our list, the 2000 Franz Hirtzberger Singerriedel (\$75) and the 2002 Knoll Dürnsteiner Ried Schütt (\$80). Most likely it's because these two wines come from the Wachau, the most famous area of the region called lower Austria, which, paradoxically, occupies the upper northeast corner of the country. The Wachau and the other two leading sources for riesling and grüner veltliner, Kamstal and Kremstal, are all west of Vienna, where the best vineyards overlook the waters of the Danube. At \$28, the Hirsch was both our favorite and our Best Value. While it lacked the characteristic weight of some other Austrian rieslings, especially those from the Wachau, it made up for it with intense minerality, lingering flavors and vivacious acidity. Mr. Grieco suggested letting it age a couple of years. By contrast, our other favorite, the Nigl, had more body and length to it, with similar mineral aromas and flavors.

"This," Mr. Grieco said, "is why we drink Austrian riesling."

Second bottles from both Hirsch and Nigl also made our list. The Nigl Kremser Kremseleiten (KREMS-light-en), our No. 7 wine, was quite a bit fruitier than some of the others. The No. 10 Hirsch, like the top-rated wine, comes from Zöbing in Kamptal, but from a neighboring vineyard, Gaisberg, near Heiligenstein. This was a leaner version, still with the characteristic stony aroma. Hirsch, by the way, seals its bottles with screw caps, which certainly has not hurt these wines. While Mr. Goldberg professed not to find excitement in these wines, he called the top-rated Hirsch "light as a soufflé" and particularly liked the 2001 Alzinger Liebenberg, in which he found "a bit of majesty."

Incidentally, certain wines from the Wachau region also carry the word "smaragd" on their label. Smaragd (pronounced shmar-AHGD) indicates that the grapes were especially ripe and full of sugar when picked. These wines tend to be the biggest, richest Austrian rieslings, more so than Wachau wines labeled "federspiel," like the 2001 Prager, which indicates grapes picked at a slightly lower degree of ripeness.

If the Austrian names get you down, look for the importer. Six of our top 10 wines are imported by Michael Skurnik Wines. The labels say that they are selected for Skurnik by Terry Theise, who spends his time scouring Austria, Germany and the Champagne region of France for wines that have an intense sense of place. Other importers of Austrian rieslings, like Vin Divino, U.S.A. Wine Imports and Weygandt-Metzler, can be indicators of quality, but for me, the name Terry Theise on a wine is a very good sign.

And, since we are speaking of Austrian wines, it's pronounced theece.

Tasting Report: Fruit, Flowers and Minerals to Sip

BEST VALUE

Hirsch Kamptal Zöbinger Heiligenstein September 2002

\$28

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Fresh, lively and beautifully light, with complex, lingering flavors of minerals, flowers and citrus; zingy acidity. (Importer: Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Nigl Kremstal Privat 2001 (1.5 liters)

\$85 * 1/2**

Earthy and perfumed, with complex, persistent mineral aromas and flavors. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Bründlmayer Kamptal Zöbinger Heiligenstein 2001

\$39

Rich floral aromas and incredibly persistent mineral flavors. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Alzinger Wachau Liebenberg Smaragd 2001

\$42

Rich, golden color with aromas of an older wine; long, lingering flavors. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Franz Hirtzberger Wachau Singerriedel Smaragd 2000

\$75

Complex, pure fruit aromas; superb, persistent mineral flavors. (Vin Divino, Chicago)

Knoll Wachau Dürnsteiner Ried Schütt Smaragd 2002

\$80

Floral aromas; intense, lingering mineral and fruit flavors. (Vin Divino, Chicago)

Nigl Kremstal Kremser Kremsleiten 2001

\$35

** 1/2

Ripe peach and honeysuckle aromas; evolves in the glass. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Prager Wachau Steinriegl Federspiel 2001

\$33

** 1/2

Lean, floral and tangy, with mineral flavors that last. (Vin Divino, Chicago)

Geyerhof Wachau Sprinzenberg 2003

\$21

** 1/2

Well-balanced and pleasing; reminiscent of a Mosel. (U.S.A. Wine Imports, New York)

Hirsch Kamptal Zöbinger Gaisberg April 2002

\$33

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Straightforward, with peach and apricot flavors and mineral aromas. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)