

For the Long Haul....Grüner Veltliner or Riesling??

Has a recent trip to Austria resolved or sparked the debate about these two mainstays?

I was having a chat with a fellow sommelier recently when the controversial topic about the popularity of Austrian Riesling and Grüner Veltliner popped up. I personally have always been a big fan of Riesling. It's a completely under-rated grape variety, fascinating and built to last. It has the ability to show unique varietal definition and truly express the terroir of its origin. On the other hand there is Austria's own Grüner Veltliner which is versatile with food and very compelling in its own right. It has been around for centuries but was basically considered 'jug' wine by local consumers until the 1980s. DNA tests have confirmed that Grüner Veltliner is a progeny of the Traminer variety, although its exact origin cannot be identified.

On a recent trip to Austria I tried more stunning Grüner Veltliners than imaginable and the 2009 Vintage is shaping up well as a smart year. So the question needs to be asked: Is Grüner Veltliner as noble as Riesling and can it age as gracefully? Is it as interesting and it is as versatile with food?

'Vie Vinum' is a Springtime wine extravaganza that is held in Austria's capital every two years. The fair is held in Vienna's stunning Hofburg Imperial Palace. With around 400 local producers (plus a network of other surrounding countries) on show, the scene was set for some pretty serious tasting and a chance to view and compare Austrian wine regions against each other. The Palace had a fantastic atmosphere, people were warm, friendly and keen to talk to some foreigners from a place that kind of sounds almost the same as Austria...

In their youth, Riesling and Grüner Veltliner can share similar characteristics: they have racy acidity, floral citrus notes, often some minerality and a dry, crisp finish. In Austria, it is known that Grüner is not as resilient to vine stress as Riesling can be, especially during heat affected years, which can lead to great inconsistency between vintages.

It was a privilege to back up the 'Vie Vinum' experience by visiting some of cult producers on their home turf. Some of the older curios they pulled out made the visit even more special. A fine 'home style' banquet lunch at 'Schloss Gobelsburg' in Kamptal was preceded by a tasting of Michael Moosbrugger's wines with some other stand-out producers (Kurt Angerer, Hiedler and Hirsch). As well as all the nine centuries of wine making which ooze out of the walls, everywhere within Schloss Gobelsburg there seemed to be a strong synergy between the past and present. Although more current release wines were the focus, we were shown a 1973 Schloss Gobelsburg 'Renner' Grüner Veltliner. The 'Renner' is a single vineyard which is situated at the foot of 'Gaisberg' and consists of vines that were planted in 1951. The soils here are geared up to produce great Grüner: from the terraced vineyards there are eroded Gfoeler gneiss (schist) supported by an ideal water source located beneath the porous earth. This wine was jam packed with that 'WOW' factor. On the nose there was oyster shell and a salty minerality, the acidity was firm and the trademark waxy texture complimented a remarkable citrus backbone that still had plenty of lift. Was I surprised.... maybe a little! At dinner Ludwig Hiedler pulled out a 1979 Hiedler 'Thal' Grüner which was bottled in 1984 after 5 years in cask. This still looked incredibly fresh and had crazy rich aromas of dried porcini mushrooms, and with the main courses it continued to inspire as it opened up in the glass.

In comparison, on a visit to Leo Alzinger's property in the Wachau proved really interesting. The Wachau is arguably the most famous region in Austria, and classifies its wines into three categories: Steinfeder (light and racy), Federspeil (elegant and with body), and Smaragd (highly ripe and powerful). We trekked up the stepped terraced slopes to check out the vines on a tour before retreating to the tasting room, where we were joined by superstar winemaker Bert Salomon. My favourite wine of the whole trip was 1986 Alzinger 'Loibenberg' Riesling Smaragd, a reminder how awesome these gems can hold up. It was the purest expression I am yet to encounter from Austria, so incredibly balanced. It didn't look one bit of its 24 years of age. Although some of the more stewed fruit characters were beginning to show, there was plenty of kero characters and a great acidic backbone shone through with fresh lime notes. Bert Salomon opened up a 1990 Salomon 'Kogl' Kremstal Reserve Riesling. Although it had some more richer, oxidative characters there was still fragrant white flowers on the nose and the palate was powerful and with bolder structure - but still with that famous chalky, mineral notes with stone fruits on the back.

I can honestly say that the older Grüners I tried this time I likened more so to aged white burgundy than to Riesling. I mean this more in terms of palate weight and texture, as when it comes down to aromatics, both varieties are vastly different. Older chardonnay definitely have more neutral characters whereas the old Grüners I tried still had the trademark citrus characteristics (lime with grapefruit) alongside more peppery, spicy and exotic notes. This opened the door for a greater scope of food matches, especially in Austria where we indulged in brilliant home made breads, cured meats and other specialties such as Tafelspitz and of course Wiener Schnitzel that required a bolder style of wine. Tafelspitz is topside of beef which is usually boiled and the best version of this dish I tried was at 'Zum Schwarzen Kameel' Restaurant in Vienna. It came with traditional sides of cream spinach, roasted potato, chive sauce and apple horseradish, and was served by well groomed professional waiters. I will never forget the Head Sommelier who walked the room wearing an emerald green suit... I tried a more modern version of this dish at one of Austria's trendiest food dens, a restaurant called 'Motto'. This place was casual and hip but so incredibly dark. I could not believe how massive in both appearance and flavour the white asparagus was here! It went pretty well with the Grüner on the table. Previously in Australia, I've served Grüner Veltliner to customers with roasted pork or veal but my ultimate match is with a ripe, pungent washed rind cheese or soft ripening cheeses at room temperature.

So what will it be... Gruner Veltliner or Riesling? Both have their merits but for me I love the younger, brisker Grüners and on the flipside I prefer Riesling with more age and with more of those secondary characters. Is Riesling more noble? Perhaps its history leads me to think so, but Grüner Veltliner is closing the gap. In terms of versatility for matching with food it depends on the time, the place and the occasion. Both are capable to last decades if stored correctly so if you can get your hands on a bottle or two and stash them away then you are doing well and that will send you on a journey that is well worth the effort. With both Australian and New Zealand Wine Makers getting in on the Grüner act, access to these wines will become greater. And if Lark Hill's (Canberra District) 2009 Grüner Veltliner is anything to go by, we should be seeing some pretty serious local examples in the future.