

Photography **Jennifer Soo**
Riedel wine glass from Ultimo Wine Centre

Move over, pinot grigio. Austria's "great white" is destined to be the next big thing, writes Peter Bourne.

If you haven't heard of grüner veltliner, you soon will. It's a white variety indigenous to Austria that has only recently been planted in Australia. The most outstanding feature of grüner – as it is commonly known – is its food-friendly nature. It's perfect with sushi or sashimi, welcomes the spiciness of Asian food and pairs equally well with seafood and white-meat dishes. The boldest grüners accept the challenge of Austria's national dish, Wiener schnitzel, while the subtlest happily partner the delicacy of fresh abalone.

Perfumed with boisterous aromas of white pepper, ginger and allspice, flavours range from grapefruit and apple to gooseberry and honeydew melon, showing ripe guava and tropical-fruit notes when picked at maturity. Late-picked styles offer rich custard apple and tropical-fruit flavours. For all its generosity of smell and taste, it's grüner's unique lanolin-like texture that helps to carry the flavours and subdue the mineral acidity that is the hallmark of the variety.

Grüner veltliner is an ancient variety that dates back to Roman times. While it has been known under its varietal name since the middle of the 19th century, grüner has only flourished in the past 50 years. It is now Austria's most planted grape variety, representing almost one-third of the 50,000 hectares under vine. The vast bulk of these plantings are in Lower Austria, where a trio of high-quality subregions along the banks of the Danube River claim the best sites. The high level of humidity and wide diurnal temperature range, along with ancient bony schist, sand, gravel and loess soils, make Kamptal, Wachau and Krems the outstanding sites for grüner, which can comfortably age for a decade or two.

The grüner veltliner grape's pioneering Australian plantings have been in the Canberra district, where Lark Hill is about to bottle its second vintage. The variety also looks promising in the Adelaide Hills, where it enjoys the region's wide diurnal range, and there are some experimental plantings in Tasmania and New Zealand, where grüner is attuned to the soft, maritime climate.

Some of our young-gun winemakers have played with grüner back in its homeland. Jonathon Hesketh, for example, has worked with the highly respected Salomon Undhof winery, whose owner, Bert Salomon, also has a vineyard in South Australia's Finnis River region. Yarra Valley maker Mac Forbes has followed a similar path to Austria – making, bottling and exporting a grüner from the Carnuntum region. His 2009 vintage (\$28 ex-mail list) will hit our shores soon.

Is grüner veltliner destined to be the great white hope for Australian wine? It's far too soon to tell but on the evidence of the Austrians' success and the insatiable desire of Australian consumers for the new and the unusual, grüner has a decent chance – especially if it's planted in cooler sites that parallel its home on the Danube.

While those fledging vines are coming of age, Austrian grüners are set to go. Look for names such as F.X. Pichler, Franz Hirtzberger, Emmerich Knoll, Willi Bründlmayer, Ludwig Hiedler, Leo Alzinger and Fred Loimer. All produce exciting grüner veltliners that are available here at reasonable prices.

wine

Grüner Veltliner



2010 Hahndorf Hill GRU Grüner Veltliner (Adelaide Hills), \$28

Larry Jacobs planted his grüner vines in 2006 and they're just beginning to show their true potential. His 2010 GRU is fresh, bright and appealing, with apple-skin and ripe grapefruit aromas, a clean, tight palate with ripe gooseberry and honeydew melon flavours, and a delicate Meyer lemon acid finish.



2008 Gobelsburger Lösterrassen Grüner Veltliner (Kamptal, Austria), \$29

Schloss Gobelsburg was founded by monks in 1171. Michael Moosbrugger leased the vineyards and winery facilities in 1996, lifting the wines to fresh heights. Indeed, fresh is an appropriate word for this deliciously spicy grüner, with its bosc pear and honeydew flavours and crisp mineral acidity.



2009 Nigl Gärtling Grüner Veltliner (Kremstal, Austria), \$30

The Nigl winery is located below the 12th-century Senftenberg ruins but its winemaking approach is entirely modern. The 2009 Gärtling is fruit-forward with a peppery nose and juicy palate of tangy citrus fruits, apple skin and ripe cumquat – flavours that are accentuated by a mouth-watering lemon-fresh acidity.



2008 Prager Grüner Veltliner Thal Steinfeder (Wachau, Austria), \$44

Toni Bodenstern married into the Prager family, bringing his considerable winemaking skills as a dowry. Under his watchful eye, Prager has moved into the top echelon of Wachau wines. His Thal is a leaner style with lots of flinty characters from the stony soils of the Danube, along with white pepper and spiced apple flavours.



2008 Hesketh Perfect Stranger Grüner Veltliner (Kremstal, Austria), \$25

South Australian winemaker Jonathon Hesketh toured to Stein to make his Perfect Stranger at the Undhof Salomon, a winery that dates back to 1792. It has lots of white-pepper spice, typical of the variety, with flavours of pear and green apples and a hint of musk. A pleasing minerality adds both zest and vitality.