



Published: 2/20/2008 12:14 AM

## Austria's grapes the next big thing in wine By Mary Ross

Above and beyond sun, precipitation and all the vicissitudes of climate; more than gravel, clay and other variations of soil; before the myriad techniques of winegrowing and making, the grape stands as the most important factor in a wine's character.

There are 6,000 catalogued grapes, yet by the 1960s, American wine drinkers were familiar with three: Cabernet Sauvignon (made famous in Bordeaux, France), Chardonnay (from France's Burgundy) and Riesling (from France and Germany.)

Merlot exploded on the scene in the 1970s, as did Zinfandel (as a white). In the '80s, Australia introduced us to Shiraz and Viognier, Italy gave us Pinot Grigio and Sangiovese. Early in this century, we re-discovered Zinfandel (as a rich red), the film "Sideways" gave star power to Pinot Noir, and Argentinean Malbec began to edge out Oz Shiraz in shopping carts.

Now, according to international taste-makers, it's time to add new grapes to our active vinous vocabulary. According to chefs, merchants and a growing number of happy consumers, the wine world's Next Big Thing is Austria and its unique grapes: Gruner Veltliner, Blaufrankisch and Zweigelt.

Gruner Veltliner (GROO-nur VELT-leener) is Austria's signature white grape. Its sweeping quality spectrum ranges from light and spritzy -- as served in Austria's wine café's to wash down endless wursts Krautfleckerl (Viennese Pasta and Cabbage) -- to wines of power and complexity that rival the finest white Burgundy. Loimer's Lois (\$12-ish), with delicate stone fruit flavors and soft acidity, makes a great Pinot Grigio alternative for cocktails and to complement appetizers and casual cuisine.

For wines of stature, look for Prager, Hirtzberger and Brundlmayer, (\$40-ish) with concentrated flavors of stone fruit, wild honey, cress and sweet pea accented with white pepper and powerful minerality to enhance elegant preparations of rich seafood and white meats.

Zweigelt (ZVEYE-gelt), with supple tannin and plump flavors of cherries and chocolate, is a unique alternative to Merlot, cru Beaujolais and other mid-weight reds.

This grape gets its name from professor Fritz Zweigelt who bred it in 1922 for successful viticulture in Austria's climate. Today, Zweigelt is Austria's most-planted and most popular red variety. Look for Nitthaus Turn Me Red (about \$12) to complement casual red and white meat meals, as well as hearty vegetable dishes. For more power and complexity, look for Heinrich or Umatham (in boutique wine shops, over \$20.)

Blaufrankisch (BLAU-frankish) was dubbed a noble variety in the 10th century with its association to French varieties (frankisch) as opposed to not-so-nice varieties (called hunnisch.) Lightly-oaked examples are suave and sophisticated; barrique-aged wines become brooding and multi-layered. Producers to seek out in boutique shops include Umatham (\$20-plus) or Paul Achs (over \$30) with bittersweet chocolate and spice accents that reminded me of a fine mole.

Riesling is a recognizable name, but if you think you know the grape simply from tasting examples from Germany, the U.S. East and West Coast, Australia and France and South America, think again. Austrian Riesling from producers like Brundlmayer combines power, elegance and mystery, with lush flavors of stone fruits keenly focused by an endless finish. Expect prices to be \$45 and up.

A few caveats: Prices are high because most wineries are family-owned and operated, with limited supply but no limit on quality. In addition, Austria's cool climate and rocky soil endow wines with lean acidity -- an excellent quality for food compatibility, but perhaps off-putting to palates accustomed to ripe Californian and Australian flavors.

Finally, as Austria vies for position on the international scene, the myriad techniques of wine growing and making becomes ever more multi-faceted.

But that, as the saying goes, that's a story for another day.