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2008 Gruner Veltliner: a leaner take in Austrian wine

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Gruner Veltliner was supposed to be the Great White Wine Hope. Just a few years ago it could routinely be found on the tip of wine directors' tongues - the great converting wine to trim away the ranks of Chardonnay drinkers.

Its success has been sustained, for the most part. Despite a dip in 2009, Austrian wine exports to the United States in 2008 were roughly double from four years earlier. But as its place matures in the market, questions arise: Is it a casual wine for home, as telegraphed by the metal-capped one-liter bottles from producers like Becker and Hofer? Is it something more serious to tuck in the cellar? Can it survive both roles?

The 2007 vintage in Austria, despite a blazing-hot July and rains at the start of fall, provided ample sun (and an early harvest start) to make wines with lots of everything - fruit, acid and balance.

But the market marches on, and the 2008 vintage now appearing in shops is harder to assess. A mix of hail, frequent rains and rot kept vintners busy. Importer Terry Theise described it as "a reality check in your glass," with lower alcohols, high acids and lean flavors after several notably ripe years.

Which is about what we found in our tasting of some 30 Gruner Veltliners from 2008 - mostly at basic ripeness quality levels (versus smaragd and other riper wines, which are still just arriving). To help, I was joined by Beccy Breeze, wine director at Aziza, and Chaylee Priete, sommelier at the Slanted Door - two San Francisco restaurants that long have stood behind Gruner Veltliner as a worthy and versatile choice, thanks in part to wine buyer Mark Ellenbogen, who may be the West Coast's biggest Veltliner evangelist.

The wines we liked were pretty and subtle, with the exotic green flavors that Veltliner can yield. A year or so in the bottle might help some that still seemed tamped down, perhaps due to their delicacy clashing with the muting effects of the preservative sulfur dioxide. At the same time, leanness could go to an extreme, with some wines that had sharpness but no real interest or depth. Thus the travails of what's charitably being called a "classic" vintage.

I wouldn't worry too much. The wines are still good, if not as rich and generous as the past few years.



And looking forward, the 2009s are just beginning to show up, with a return to ripeness and form.

Just judging from the first of the recently unveiled '09s - keep an eye out for that liter of Hofer - there will be plenty to enjoy. As for the '08s, choose carefully and find wines that play to more subtle tastes, more for salads and lunch than a heavy meal. And that's just fine.

2008 Ecker Eckhof Schlossberg Wagram Gruner Veltliner (\$23) Edgy stone, lemon zest, jalapeno and quince, with a sticky quality to the finish. Give it some time in the glass. (Importer: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

2008 Felsner Gedersdorfer Moosburgerin Kremstal Gruner Veltliner (\$16) From a site on the Kremstal's eastern side, near the edge of the Kamptal region. More limpid and rich, with ripe apple, Meyer lemon and banana flavors, and a suppleness to the texture. The finish balances grip and mineral punch. An opulent style for the price. (Importer: Grape Expectations)

2008 Geyerhof Rosensteig Kremstal Gruner Veltliner (\$20) Josef and Ilse Maier farm plots near the banks of the Danube. Here, there's ripe apricot and fresh lemon, plus aromas of fennel and caraway seed, and darker mineral notes. Ripe and focused, with a bit of sweetness and pleasing hints of red fruit. (Importer: Blue Danube Wine Co.)

2008 Gritsch Mauritiushof Axpoint Federspiel Wachau Gruner Veltliner (\$20) Axpoint is sourced from older vines in the lower part of the Singerriedel site. Wild spice notes, with dark stony verve reminiscent of the wines of Germany's Pfalz. Serrano chile, grass, tangerine. Curious and layered, with impressive density if a touch less power at the finish. (Importer: Winemonger)

2008 Hirsch Heiligenstein Kammern/Kamptal Gruner Veltliner (\$26) Fresh fava bean, olive pit and apple pulp, with lime-like bite and a surprisingly sweet, plump presence given the vintage, almost like phantom sugar. A lean expression but still has the softer edges the Hirsch wines can show. (Importer: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

2008 Laurenz V Singing Niederosterreich Gruner Veltliner (\$13) This relatively new Veltliner-focused label blends grapes from the Kremstal and larger Weinviertel regions for this bottling. Green bean, herb and yuzu, with flavors of orange and a mineral bite, and surprisingly ripe fruit. (Importer: Folio Wine Co.)

2008 Loimer Kamptal Gruner Veltliner (\$21) Fred Loimer's popular and reliable effort is juicy and citrus-fruited in '09, with subtle flinty aromas. Straightforward in its fruit, with a bit of bite to the finish. (Importer: Winebow)

2008 Nigl Kremser Freiheit Kremstal Gruner Veltliner (\$22) Nigl's latest is intensely fresh and bright, with a curious grapefruit presence amid the grass aromas. Almost channeling Sauvignon Blanc in its way. Right now it's more about austerity, but should be increasingly rewarding over the next five years. Peach curd flavors, with big mineral presence, melon and lime pith. (Importer: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

2008 Schloss Gobelsburg Gobelsburger Kamptal Gruner Veltliner (\$17) Slightly grapey even for Gobelsburg's basic bottling but with a bit of time it opens into Gruner-land: green pepper, yuzu and charcoal scents, with tremendous acidity all along. (Importer: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

2008 Schloss Gobelsburg Steinsetz Kamptal Gruner Veltliner (\$29) The Gobelsburg estate puts the Steinsetz in casks to mature, giving it notable roundness and palate weight. Yet it's still spritzy and mineral-focused, and bursting with orange peel, berries, apricot and heather. A lot going on in this glass. (Importer: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

2008 Schmelz Pichl Point Federspiel Wachau Gruner Veltliner (\$20) Johann Schmelz crafted this lighter effort from one of the Wachau's outstanding vineyards. Celery seed, freesia and stone, with a slight bitter-melon bite to the flavors. A bit exotic, with less distinct fruit and more aromatic punch. (Importer/Distributor: Blue Danube Wine Co.)

2008 Schwarzbock Kirschberg Weinviertel Gruner Veltliner (\$24) Great ripe intensity, with tropical fruit and peach amid the herbal tones. An up front wine with a wet-stone Riesling quality. (Importer/Distributor: Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

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