

Austrian wines boost Australian profile

They may have names that are hard for Australians to pronounce but those in the know urge you not to let that stand in the way of including Austrian wines on your lists. By Christine Salins.

The Austrian wines that Andreas Puhar sells through his wine import business, Enoteca Sydney, and his Sydney CBD restaurant, deVine, have a dedicated following. But Puhar is the first to admit “it’s a small drop in a large ocean”. “Austrian wines are world class but Australians are not familiar with them,” he said. “It’s not far from Syrah to Shiraz but it’s a long way to Blaufränkisch.”

According to Puhar, one of the main barriers for consumers is in pronouncing the names of Austria’s popular grape varieties. Names such as Grüner Veltliner, Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch don’t roll easily off the tongue for most consumers. “Grüner Veltliner is the one they struggle with because of the pronunciation,” he said. “Once they drink it, it’s fantastic.”

As well as importing an extensive selection of wines, Enoteca Sydney represents a diverse selection of Austrian labels, including Schloss Gobelsburg, Hiedler and Hirsch, from the Kamptal region; Alzinger, Rudi Pichler and Johann Donabaum, from Wachau; Wenzel, Gesellmann and Nittnaus, from Burgenland; and Heinrich Hartl and Schneider, from Niederösterreich (Lower Austria).

Puhar says Austrian reds are getting good press but it’s mostly Austrian whites you’ll see on Australian restaurant menus. His imports from Austria are about 80 to 20 in favour of whites. “Sommeliers are very receptive to Austrian wines, especially the experienced ones, but the challenge is in convincing their customers to try them,” he said.

Aria sommelier, Matthew Dunne, has several dozen Austrian wines on the restaurant’s award-winning wine list, most of them Riesling and Grüner Veltliner, but also a couple of reds including Schneider Reserve St Laurent, a Burgundian-style wine from Lower Austria, and Nittnaus Kalk und Schiefer, a Burgenland Blaufränkisch from one of Austria’s red pioneers.

Riesling and Grüner Veltliner also dominate the Austrian wines on the list at Rockpool in Sydney, though



Willi Klinger is promoting the many merits of Austrian wines.

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there is also a Mantlerhof Gelber Muskateller, a full bodied white from Lower Austria, and Kurt Angerer, a Pinot Noir from the Kamptal region.

Sydney’s Shangri-La Hotel has a close connection to Austria through its general manager, Austrian-born Franz Donhauser. Jeremy Burke, sommelier in the hotel’s Altitude restaurant, said they aim to serve wines that complement their menu from all regions around the globe, but there are currently two Austrian whites and two Austrian reds on their list. These include Heidler Maximum Riesling, Salomon Weiden & Berg Grüner Veltliner, Andert Pamhogna Cabernet Sauvignon and Kummer Schuster Zweigelt.

Burke says the Zweigelt is a medium-bodied red wine that offers a real point of difference for Australian diners. “The whites are my personal favourites, particularly the dry Rieslings and Grüner Veltliners,” said Burke. “There seems to be quite a buzz around Grüner Veltliner wines and the Salomon Weiden & Berg, made by Bert Salomon, is wonderful. (It’s a) lovely single vineyard wine, medium to full bodied, dry with vibrant citrus notes, peach and white

pepper. It makes an excellent accompaniment with white-flesh fish.”

From August 1 to 6, the Shangri-La Hotel will host Taste Culture, a wine and culinary week being held in conjunction with the Austrian National Tourist Office and Austrian Airlines. Chef Werner Pichlmaier, from Vienna’s renowned Hotel Sacher, will collaborate with Altitude’s chef de cuisine, Steven Krasicki, to create a six-course degustation menu designed to complement specially chosen Austrian wines.

A highlight of the culinary week will be a dinner hosted by managing director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, Willi Klinger. Klinger is the dynamic international face of the Austrian wine industry and for the past five years has spearheaded its global expansion, including the penetration of Austrian wines into the Australian market.

He will also be present at a dinner on August 9 at the National Gallery of Victoria which will be coordinated with an exclusive private viewing of Vienna: Art & Design there.

Klinger said although Austrian wine imports to Australia have come from a small base, they’ve increased

Aussies dabbling with Austrian varieties

Despite the willingness of Australian winemakers to experiment with “alternative” grape varieties, only a few have embraced the Austrian varieties.

Hahndorf Hill, in the Adelaide Hills, and Lark Hill, in Canberra, produce lovely examples of Grüner Veltliner that have been warmly received by Australian sommeliers.

Hahndorf Hill has also just released its 2009 Blaufränkisch. Aged for 11 months in French oak, it’s a smart full-bodied red that provides the perfect antidote to winter.

significantly in the past few years.

Importers had achieved significant on-premise market penetration, especially in the eastern states, providing an ideal platform for the Austrian Wine Marketing Board to launch into the next stage of its program to increase exports to Australia.

When I met Willi Klinger in Austria not long after he took over as head of the marketing board, he spoke candidly about the impact of “the big scandal” in 1985, when it was revealed that some wine brokers had been adulterating their wines with diethylene glycol, or anti-freeze.

The scandal all but destroyed the export market for Austrian wine, but Klinger says it was a turning point for the industry, prompting it to reposition itself as a producer of quality wines. “There were 46,000 grapegrowers in Austria...now there are 23,000,” he said. “It took about 10 years to recover.”

While the food-friendly Grüner Veltliner accounts for a third of the country’s production, its seductive reds, Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt and the fruity cherry-like St Laurent, were becoming very popular.

“You couldn’t make a top 25 list [of Austrian wines] in 1986,” Klinger said. “Now you couldn’t confine it to 300.”