

## DINE &amp; WINE

## Austrian interlude

The Central European nation's wines are coming into their own and achieving world recognition

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Until recently, we were not highly aware of Austrian wine here — or food, for that matter. Waltzes in Vienna, opera in Salzburg, skiing in the Alps, these were probably what this Central European country of eight million people was best known for.

But it was once the heart of an empire that spanned most of Eastern Europe, a kind of European Union ruled by the Hapsburg emperors. It broke up as empires do, and dissolved in the cauldron of 20th century Europe; but all those disparate member states, now neighbours who include Hungary, Germany, the Czech Republic and Italy, contributed to Austrian cuisine.

While the south of the country is mountainous, most of the wine grows on gentle slopes of the northeast. There are even vineyards on the outskirts of Vienna which have given rise to an enjoyable element in the local culture. They have cheerful open air cafes called *heurige* where the young wines are sold, with food and music to accompany them.

Most of the wine served in the *heurige* will be white, and probably Gruener Veltliner, which represents a third of the country's plantings. It is a perfect outdoor summer wine: light, fresh and lively, easy to drink but not without substance: the enological equivalent of a Strauss waltz. And it was Gruener Veltliner "Lois" that opened the proceedings at the Austria Wein-Dinner last week at Rossini's Italian restaurant of the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit.

With a smart label designed by Isabelle Steger, "Lois" is named for the region in which it is grown, Lagenloiser, with an overtone of the name of the winemaker, Fred Loimer. The first dish at the Wein-Dinner put this young Gruener Veltliner to the test, as it was a blend of many flavours. Leaves of marinated salmon were wrapped around sour, creamy buttermilk to form a little tower with tomato honey and a scattering of Beluga caviar. The young Lois had the presence and personality to deal with the sweet-sour-salty combination and start the meal with a noteworthy match.

The accepted view of Austrian food is that is rich and a bit on the heavy side with lovely, creamy pastries. Not if Thomas Walkensteiner and Max Kollienz have anything to do with it. They are the chef and pastry chef of the Hotel Schloss Fuschl in Salzburg, and they are driven by a shared insistence that food need not be dull to be healthy.

The wines around which they built the menu were provided by Fin, the company that presents fabulous events (its name means "fabulous is needed"). One element in the

Fin operation is a collection of exclusive wines from small, quality-driven wineries around the world, and from this, the five Austrian wines from Loimer in the Kamtal region and Prager in Wachau were chosen.

Living proof of the diversity of Gruener Veltliner came with a tasty and elegant parsley cream soup surrounding an island of grilled bread with a poached quail's egg and slices of black truffle. It was accompanied by a wine from Loimer's top vineyard, Spiegel. An altogether deeper, more concentrated wine though still young, it will benefit from being allowed to breathe or even being decanted. It was rich, too, with a slightly unctuous mouthfeel, a touch of spice in the mineral and



Toni Bodenstein from the winery Prager, Wachau, Austria.

fruit flavours and a long dry finish. This is a Gruener Veltliner that will age happily.

With peeled crayfish in a vermouth sauce we turned to Riesling, the classic grape of Germany and the star of Alsace. Grown on the sunny slopes of the northeast, Austrian dry Rieslings are now coming into their own and achieving world recognition.

My notes on Loimer's Seeberg Riesling read, "Rings on the palate like a golden bell." Dry? Sweet? It's neither and both, rich yet elegant, the kind of wine you'd really want to savour on its own. This year, Loimer carried off first prize in the International Wine Challenge for his Dry Riesling. We couldn't taste that particular one, though, because the entire production had sold out.

One of the most promising wine regions is around the vast lake on the Hungarian border, Neusiedlersee, and it is a reminder that Austria is a totally landlocked country. Authentic fish dishes, then, are going to be freshwater fish, and a pike-perch was a triumphant example. It's a big one, growing up to a metre in length, with firm yet delicate white flesh.

Served with Szegendiner white cabbage and a piquant yellow pepper sauce, it was a truly exotic dish, and was accompanied by a Riesling from one of Austria's top producer's, Prager and their star winemaker, Toni Bodenstein.

This is a product of Wachau, where summers are warm and the south-facing terraced hillsides allow for maximum sunshine with great ripeness potential. Nights are cold, however, so a balance with lively acidity is maintained. Top local growers proudly claim that yields in Wachau are lower than in Germany and Alsace. Federspiel "Steinriegl" is a Riesling with depth and body, floral aromas and a big surge of fruit and mineral flavour on the palate.

So far, so white, but Austria also produces very attractive red wines, most with the prefix "Blau" — or blue, the traditional epithet for dark skinned grapes. They are similar in character to the Burgundian Pinot noir and gamay grapes; in fact, Blauburgunder is the German/Austrian name for Pinot Noir. But the most popular and widely planted red Austrian does not have blue in its name, but gold: Zweigelt.

I had always assumed that this was a grape variety, but no, it is a crossing between two varieties, the lively, fruity Blaufrankischer and the softer, fuller bodied St Laurent. The crossing was made in 1922 by a Dr Zweigelt, hence the name. And if that isn't complicated enough, Fred Loimer has made an outstanding blend of Zweigelt and Pinot noir. It has some of the deep down undergrowth aromas you find in a Burgundy, with red berry flavours on the palate and soft tannins. It is delightful to drink now, and promises well for the future.

Loimer Zweigelt Pinot noir was served with a crepinette of venison loin in which the meat is wrapped in a light, creamy chicken sauce which is then covered with very finely sliced mushrooms held in place by muslin while cooking. It is done with a light touch, for chef Walkensteiner's motto is, "Enjoy — but sleep well afterwards!"

I can recall a fairly spectacular Austrian wine tasting with 32 labels some six years ago, but there has not been a lot of Austrian food and wine activity since. One can only hope that this exemplary Wein-Dinner will be the first of a whole lot more.

Weissenkirchner Steinriegl Riesling Federspiel 2003.



Gruener Veltliner "Lois" 2003.



Langenloiser Zweigelt Pinot Noir 2002.

Spiegel Gruener Veltliner Trocken 2002/2003.

