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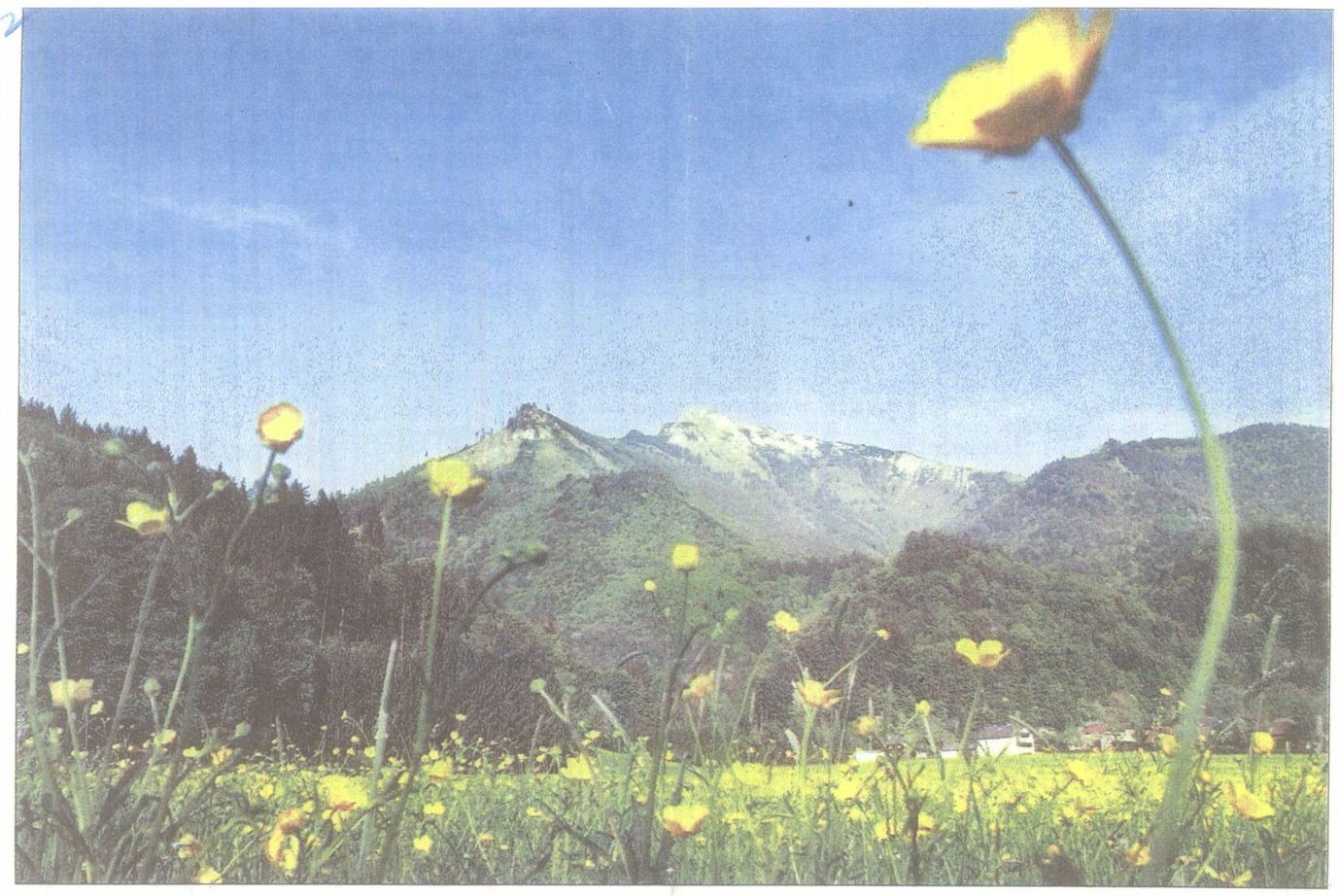

Boston Globe

The taste of Austria's gruner veltliner can best be described as rich and brisk, bringing to mind the beautiful scenery of *The Sound of Music*.

# Austria's bright wines

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Making wine is nothing new in Austria, where village roads often are lined with small huts called *kellergasse* that lead to individual wine cellars.

## Fresh reds and whites have distinct personalities, with little resemblance to the wines of neighboring Germany.

By CHRIS SHERMAN
Times Food Critic

In the category of unpronounceable wines, Germany and Italy face a tough competitor: Austria's gruner veltliner.

While it looks like a jawbreaker, gruner veltliner goes down smoothly, a distinct refreshing white wine that can challenge its neighbors' wines for a place in the fridge — or with a rich dinner. And the pronunciation isn't that hard, five syllables that sound just like you would expect. You could say "GruVe," but that's not truly groovy.

Do master it. Gruner veltliner is the signature wine of Austria, leading that country's return to American shelves and wine lists and accompanying new menus of Central European delicacies.

It's a fabulous grass-green wine, rich and brisk at the same time, a new flavor in whites at affordable prices (and sometimes in 1-liter bottles). And its great aromas and fruit, pepper and spicy flavors have a magical ability to match all kinds of food.

Beware confusions. This wine is from Austria, not Australia. Forget *Matilda*, just waltz and think *Edelweiss*. Hold the Julie Andrews' image: Crisp breezes, wildflower meadows and stony mountains are appropriate.

Austria's wines are floral, earthy and crisp as a mountain rain, with a flinty minerality and a tiny touch of sweetness. They are decidedly not German.

Despite a few other shared grapes, Austria's wines are a distinctive lot. Gruner veltliner is just a start; its remarkable pinot blanc is fatter than tart Alsatians. Its sauvignon blanc is as crisp as a Sancerre, and the top rieslings can be as great as the Rheingau's.

Its mild ripe reds — zweigelt and Sankt Laurent — are exclusives rarely found elsewhere.

Unlike German wines, Austrian whites and reds have a strong punch of alcohol, from 11 to 15 percent. Austrian wines also are not rated in categories of ripeness, the level of sugar is noted on each bottle and the great majority are bone dry.

Austria's grape growers have made wine for centuries, reflected in the seasonal taverns farmers set up in their barns and along village streets lined with small huts called *kellergasse* that lead to individual wine cellars. But not enough to be a significant exporter.

"The people drank it themselves," remembers Dunedin restaurateur Peter Kreuziger. He grew up in Austria and studied at the Benedictine abbey at Melk, which crowns an island of great vineyards in the Danube River, and still returns. "Their wines are fabulous but not enough to sell."

There was also the 1985 scandal when some Austrian illegally sweetened their wines, which produced a black eye in the wine trade — and reforms that created the toughest wine laws in Europe.

About five years ago gruner veltliner showed up on trendy big-city wine lists, just as Austrian chefs opened U.S. restaurants with refined Viennese flavors and the turn of the century art and design of Klimt and Loos returned to fashion.

At first only a few bottles were for sale at retail and usually at $20 or more, high for unknown labels.

By now the trend has settled. Austrian wines are not a complete rarity; exports to the United States have grown fourfold and range from everyday quaffers to finer stuff. They have reached Tampa Bay where merchants and chefs are increasing their stocks. That means easier prices and attractive packaging.

Gruner veltliner from Loimer in Langenlois is now simply Lois in abstract green. Gernot Heinrich goes farther with a luscious blend with bold graphic that says only "Red," easier than mostly zweigelt and blaufrankisch. Michael Mondavi has included two gruner veltliners from Lenz Moser, styled "Singing" and "Charming" in his rebuilt portfolio.

The most appealing starting point in the search for Austrian wine is not Maria von Trapp's Alps but farther east Vienna, which has its own vineyards closer to Hungary and Slovakia. The nation's most famous white wines, gruner veltliner and first-class rieslings, grow in the Wachau and neighboring valleys in the highlands along the Danube leading to the capital.

More of the wine lands, especially for reds, lie south and east of Vienna, in Burgenland and Styria. All are growing in maturity and exports, with a lovely 2005 vintage next in line. That means more variety, from bargains to treasures, and more practice saying "gruner veltliner."

A new wine country with new whites and new reds to explore: These may well be a few of your favorite things.

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**COMING SUNDAY**

Visit the glories of Mozart's Austria with *Times* performing arts critic John Fleming in the Travel section.

### AUSTRIAN ENCOUNTERS

**Taste of Austria**

The wines of Austria are still a little hard to find but they are easy to drink, affordable to buy and understandable without too many new words.

The white wines most evident are gruner veltliner, riesling and pinot blanc (*weissburgunder* in German). The best come largely from northern vineyards in Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal. Austrian whites are good young and also age well.

Cool-climate reds are mild and go by less familiar names: the rather gutsy blaufrankisch, sleek Sankt Laurent and zweigelt, a peppery cross of the first two. They grow largely in the somewhat warmer south.

Austrian wines, including the whites, are dry and range in alcohol from 11 percent up, much higher than most German wines.

Tampa Bay area stores carry only a few Austrians but more are on the way. Try any you find. Here's a sample of some in the market.

**GRUNER VELTLINER, HOPLER (2002):** Aroma of flowers, spice and surprising touch of honey; rich, full taste with a bit of citrus and flint for balance; not as dry as most. 12 percent alcohol; $12.

**GRUNER VELTLINER, LOIS (2004):** An easy introduction to Austrians, as crisp as pinot grigio but with a bigger bouquet of spice and meadows; green apples and lime on the palate. Fill your cooler. 11.5 percent; $10.

**GRUNER VELTLINER, RUDI PICHLER (2003):** Full spectrum of the varietal flavors for nose and tongue; orchard of peaches, pears, apricots, and washed by a mountain stream. Creamy texture and pleasant finish. 12.5 percent; $17.

**PINOT BLANC, HOPLER (2003):** As big and ripe as white wine gets. Huge honey nose with a woodsy tinge of pine but light and not too sweet in the mouth. 13 percent; $12.

**RED, HEINRICH (NONVINTAGE):** Pop-smart version of a pricey meritage, this blend puts Austria's reds into a rich ripe spicy summer drink. Calls for pasta or barbecue. 12.5 percent; $12.

**RIESLING, DOMANE WACHAU, 2003:** Floral nose with hints of honey, clean round taste, more soft than crisp. 12 percent; $13.

**SANKT LAURENT, ZANTHO (2004):** Something of a pinot noir with medium body, easy drinking, fruity nose, pleasant taste of berries with a smoky touch of oak and cinnamon. Great fun. 12 percent; $9.

— CHRIS SHERMAN