AROMATICS of austria

Get to know these charming, intriguing white wine varieties.

BY ANNE KREBIEHL, MW

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NADIA FLOWER

Half of the pleasure of wine is in its aromas. Aromatic grape varieties, however, can be a challenge. To make quality wines, they demand fine-tuned interaction between climate, variety, site and handling. Austrian winemakers have long been blessed with this elusive combination, and they produce some of the world's most alluring aromatic wines.

Sauvignon Blanc, Gelber Muskateller and a range of Traminer varieties thrive across Austria but excel in the cool, sunny, high-altitude vineyards of Styria, or Steiermark, Austria's southernmost region. The Thermenregion, on Vienna's doorstep, is home to two indigenous aromatic specialities, Rotgipfler and Zierfandler.

All of these varieties have a long history in Austria, where they furnished the aromatic top notes in the field blends of the past. They have been vinified separately since the mid-20th century and have become stars in their own right.

Not widely planted and made in small quantities, they're not as well known as they should be. While Styrian Sauvignon Blanc is making international waves, Gelber Muskateller, Traminer, Rotgipfler and Zierfandler still occupy a delectable niche. The lovely thing about them is their dryness, precision and freshness. They're highly aromatic, but never overbearing.

Sauvignon Blanc

Austrian Sauvignon Blanc, formerly known as Muskat-Sylvaner, enjoys cult status at home, where it displays notes of lemon peel, hazelnut, smoke, flint, beeswax, honeycomb, smoke, ripe Mirabelle plum and wet walnut. It is grown across the country, but the best wines hail from Styria and owe their heightened finesse to climate.

"Styria is characterized by rough weather and poor soils," says Alex Sattler, who's the winemaker at Weingut Sattlerhof in Südsteiermark. "Precipitation is high, and cool Alpine winds whip through the [often steep] high-altitude vineyards, which can rise up to 1,960 feet. Sauvignon Blanc is a robust variety which develops a unique character in these tough conditions."

He says the quartz soils make it "smoky and savory," while limestone soils give an "elegant, salty" edge to the wine.

"No other grape variety interacts as much with the cool and damp Styrian weather or the different soils as Sauvignon Blanc," says Armin Tement, of Weingut Tement, also in the Südsteiermark.

Some simple wines are made with the pronounced grass and passion fruit notes for which the variety is famous. The finest wines, however, are aged in various sizes of oak and acacia barrels, and they often have a creamy aspect from malolactic fermentation.

"The higher the wine quality, the more subdued the expression," says Tement.

Single-vineyard wines have an uncommon lightness and brilliance, combined with a subtle yet profound depth of flavor.

"This is a paradox," says Tement. "They are never loud, opulent or exotic. A mature Styrian Sauvignon Blanc shines with finesse, elegance and the clarity of its provenance. It is never superficial, always profound."

The cool, extended growing season allows for full aromatic development and retention of acidity, which results in high maturity at harvest and natural tension. Tement says that this gives the local Sauvignon Blanc "an extra dimension but, above all, longevity."

95 **Sattlerhof 2017 Kranachberg Sauvignon Blanc (Südsteiermark); $75, Craft + Estate–Winebow**

93 **Stefan Potzinger 2018 Ried Czamillonberg Sauvignon Blanc (Südsteiermark); $35, Yountville Wine Imports**

92 **Schauer 2018 Sauvignon Blanc (Südsteiermark); $25, The Sorting Table**

Gelber Muskateller

Few wines spell summer and scented lightness as much as Gelber Muskateller. Elsewhere in the world, this ancient variety, also known as Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, is often made into sweet and even fortified wines. In Austria, a dry, slender style triumphs. Inherent, almost weightless freshness and aromas of nettle and fern allow the elderflower, honeysuckle, jasmine, citrus and grape aromas to dance without ever becoming overwhelming.

Christoph Neumeister, of Weingut Neumeister in Vulkanland Steiermark, says that Gelber Muskateller needs a long, cool vegetation period.

"This allows us to harvest fully ripe grapes at a potential alcohol level of 11.5% in the middle of October," he says. He points out the big difference in day and night temperatures, which encourages the full aromatic development and acidic brightness of this late-ripening grape.

Neumeister employs skin maceration to get as much aroma as possible, and he ages his spontaneously fermented wines on lees to make Gelber Muskateller that's "bone-dry and juicy."

"I want my Muskateller to be a continuous unit from first sniff to finish," says Neumeister, who notes that long lees contact lends stability and longevity.

Gerhard Wohlmuth, of Weingut Wohlmuth in Südsteiermark, also emphasizes that Gelber Muskateller can mature for years, despite its inherent lightness. Wohlmuth cautions that site is key, though.

"It loves well-ventilated, high-altitude vineyards with poor soils," he says.

Much farther north in the Kremstal region, Martin Nigl, of Weingut Nigl, ensures his Gelber Muskateller is planted on "light and stony soils. This way, the berries don't get too big, and the varietal character is particularly pronounced."

Despite these endeavors to craft expressive, long-lived wines, Austrians love to mix Gelber Muskateller with sparkling water to make summertime spritzers. Nigl says he also enjoys these bone-dry light wines as an apéritif.

92 **Wohlmuth 2018 Gelber Muskateller (Südsteiermark); $20, VOS Selections**

91 **Tement 2018 Gutswein Gelber Muskateller (Südsteiermark); $20, Weygandt-Metzler**

90 **Nigl 2018 Gelber Muskateller (Niederösterreich); $23, Skurnik Wines**

Traminer

Traminer, which has been identified as Savagnin, comes in a number of ways in Austria, each with slightly different characteristics. There is Roter (red) Traminer with red grapes, Gelber (yellow) Traminer with golden grapes and Gewürztraminer with pink grapes. They have slightly different characters.

"Yellow Traminer has distinctly yellow fruit notes and higher acidity," says Neumeister. "Hence, it has been planted more over the past 15 years."

Joseph Umathum, of Weingut Umathum in Burgenland, says that "yellow Traminer gives the lowest yields, is filigree, but its golden berries make spicy, savory, almost honeyed wines with real freshness."

Red Traminer, on the other hand, "is the quietest and most elegant," says Neumeister. Andreas Eder, of Weingut Eder in the Wachau, says that red Traminer has "distinct notes of rosewood, mallow and a lot more body."

Gewürztraminer, the best known of the trio, "has an intense rose scent, almost overpowering and very memorable, with low acid," says Umathum.

Older Traminer vineyards are often still a mix of these varieties, and most are just labeled "Traminer."

Neumeister says that despite its "baroque" varietal nature, Austrian Traminer has "a kick of freshness."

It's mostly produced in a dry style. The grape takes particularly well to warmer sites in Burgenland or the Wachau, where its thick skins protect it from fungal infections.

Eder makes dry wines from his red and yellow Traminer in the Smaragd style, which is Wachau's designation for the latest harvest and highest alcohol level. He says that the phenolic nature of the wines, resulting from the thick grape skins, requires some cellaring for a harmonious expression.

For Umathum, these phenolics are a structural element that help balance the moderate acidity and allows the wines to age. Austrian Traminer is softly scented, rather than heavily perfumed. This makes it a joy.

94 **Eder 2017 Smaragd Traminer (Wachau); $36, Slocum & Sons**

92 **Neumeister 2018 Ried Steintal Roter Traminer (Vulkanland Steiermark); $40, Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd**

92 **Umathum 2017 Traminer (Burgenland); $23, Winemonger**

Zierfandler and Rotgipfler

These two varieties, usually mentioned in the same breath, are absolute rarities. They're specialities of the Thermenregion, where they grow in calcareous soils.

There are just 464 acres of Rotgipfler and 190 acres of Zierfandler in all of Austria. In the past, they were mostly blended together, and their quality made wine villages like Gumpoldskirchen famous.

Few winegrowers are willing to take on these demanding grapes because they are so susceptible to fungal disease. Those who grow them do so for their local authenticity and great quality potential.

Heinrich Hartl, of the namesake winery in the Thermenregion, says that Rotgipfler "has power, structure [and] longevity alongside a big portion of elegance and full-bodied aromatics." The challenge, he says, is to express this "with precision."

Rotgipfler is redolent of aromatic fruit like quince, citrus and red apple, often with floral overtones, and those characteristics come with an intense, textured mouthfeel. Zierfandler, on the other hand, is known for its acidity. It's a late variety whose pink skins gradually turn red with real ripeness. The nose often has waxy, nutty overtones and a citrus-oil richness.

"It is the last variety we harvest in mid-October," Michael Reinisch, of Johanneshof Reinisch, says about Zierflander. He describes the grape as "rich in finesse, multilayered, with vibrant acidity and aging potential."

The varieties require great care. Reinisch vinifies Zierfandler for a time in amphorae and keeps it on gross lees until bottling. Some continue the tradition of blending the two, because the grapes complement each other so well.

Older vintages of these wines, which seem to get ever more viscous even when made in a dry style, are a revelation.

93 **Gebeshuber 2017 Gumpoldskirchen Zierfandler (Thermenregion); $37, Vignaoli Selections**

93 **Johanneshof Reinisch 2017 Ried Spiegel Zierfandler (Thermenregion); $40, Circo Vino**

92 **Heinrich Hartl 2018 Rotgipfler (Thermenregion); $24, KW Selection.com**