

Cayman leads Austrian wine revival

Wall Street Journal wine writers Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher recently reported on their experience enjoying Austrian wines at Cayman's very own Lobster Pot restaurant. *Business Editor, Lindsey Turnbull* speaks with the restaurant's manager Gunter Gosch to find out more on the current Austrian wine revival that is being spearheaded by restaurants here in Cayman.

The resurrection of Austrian wines is an insider secret that is quickly being picked up by those outside the wine industry, as momentum for this once overlooked wine region gathers speed, in particular in the United States.

In their report entitled 'Destination: Wine. On a Caribbean cruise, a hunt for treasure; Austria in the Caymans', *Wall Street Journal* wine writers Gaiter and Brecher describe their hunt for interesting wines during a Caribbean cruise, stating, "we'd urge you to consider wine discovery a part of your trip...By searching for good value wine you're also likely to find good food and interesting people..."

In particular, the pair were delighted to discover such a wide range of Austrian wines in Grand Cayman at the Lobster Pot.

They say, "Austrian wine is coming on strong these days – especially its signature grape Grüne Veltliner – but this was special. We don't know about you, but we don't often see lists that include a 1991 Blaufränkisch Eiswein. Clearly, we had to go."

The Lobster Pot manager Gunter Gosch explains the current interest in wines from his home country, "Austrian wines are different to what is generally available. In places such as New York they are considered chic and highly sophisticated, particularly with those who really know wine."

Gunter explains winemaking in Austria, "Vineyards in Austria tend to be small and there is not much large-scale mass production. They are usually family-owned and run, with vineyards that are handed down through the generations. This means that the owners tend to take extremely good care of their product. It is a way of life for them, not just a job and they take a great deal of pride in their work."

He continues, "In the late 1980s a new breed of winemaker took over and we are now seeing the fruits of their labours in the form of some excellent wines."

According to Gunter, these new winemakers chose to extend their knowledge by studying viticulture overseas, bringing back with them the latest ideas in technology and innovation.

This knowledge has resulted in a new vision for Austrian wines, and combined with the traditional high standards of winemaking, makes for some fantastic wines.

Gunter says, "Austria has strict guidelines within which winemakers must operate. For example, adding sugar to wines as well as irrigation of vineyards is prohibited. These rules are in place for a reason – when there is less rain the vintage style changes completely. Thus the wines are a true reflection of a particular vintage and not simply geared to one particular style that caters for mass marketing."

Leo Hillinger is one such new generation Austrian winemaker, who has created an entirely new dimension to his brand.

Gunter explains, "Hillinger is one of the stars on the Austrian wine horizon. His methods are innovative, modern and driven and he is currently producing some top-rated wines."

In 1990 Leo Hillinger took over the wine retail business from his father and developed it into an internationally renowned winery changing the infrastructure and buying excellent sites around Jois, Oggau and Rust.

In 2004 he built a new production site and an associated tasting and seminar centre in Jois for five million Euros to combine state-of-the-art cellar techniques with sophisticated architecture and excellent design, and in 2005 Hillinger opened a flagship-store in the nearby Parndorf which exclusively carries his own wine.

The wines – Hill 1, Hill 2 and Hill 3 constantly win prizes at home and abroad, awarded by experts in the field such as Robert Parker, Wine Spectator, German Wine Price, Wine and Spirits and so on.

With innovative products like Secco, a rosé sparkling wine launched in autumn 2005 or the Small Hill series (red, white, rosé), Leo Hillinger succeeds in addressing young and new groups of consumers.

In 2006 the Hungaro Hill series was launched on the market – an elegant, dense Pinot Noir and a fresh juicy Sauvignon Blanc which come from Hillinger's new vineyards in Hungary where they are also vinified.

He also introduced sleek labeling that incorporates clean lines and has an avant-garde appearance – in keeping with attracting a young and hip crowd.

On the Lobster Pot's wine list they feature a great selection of Hillinger wines, including the Hill Secco, Hill 2 from 2003 (a cuvee of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay), a 2003 Hill 1 (a cuvee of Cabernet Sauvignon, Zweigelt, Merlot and Syrah) and a 2004 Small Hill (Pinot Noir, St Laurent and Merlot).

Gunter says, "It's exciting for us to see our customers get such enjoyment out of a wine that they perhaps had never tried before. We hope they come back for more."

Austrian grapes

White

Grüner Veltliner is a white wine grape variety widely grown in Austria but almost nowhere else. It has a reputation of being a particularly food-friendly wine.

It is made into wines of many different styles - much is intended for drinking young in the bars of Vienna, a little is made into sparkling wine, but some is capable of long ageing. The best has proven to be world-class in blind tastings against chardonnays.

The steep, Rhine-like vineyards of the Danube west of Vienna produce very pure, minerally Grüner Veltliners intended for laying down. Down in the plains, citrus and peach flavours are more apparent, with spicy notes of pepper and sometimes tobacco.

Welschriesling is an ancient variety of white wine grape that is unrelated to the Rhine Riesling. It is grown throughout Central Europe, particularly in Hungary. In general the wines are fresh and fruity if somewhat bland, and intended for drinking young. However some late harvest dessert wines are made from the grape which can be aged for a few years and are much richer.

Müller-Thurgau is a variety of white grape also known as Rivaner and/or Riesling X Sylvaner (especially in Europe). It was created by Hermann Müller from the Swiss Canton of Thurgau in 1882, and is still used to make white wine in Germany, Austria, Northern Italy, England, Australia and New Zealand. With around 42,000 hectares cultivated world-wide, Müller-Thurgau is the most successful newly-created varietal of the last 125 years.

Next month learn more about other stellar Austrian winemakers and more on Austrian grapes varieties.