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Lenz whites v the best



Austrians like to check themselves out against the competition ... including Château d'Yquem.

In the early 1990s the late Alois Kracher spent three months' salary on some of the best sweet wines in the world, including two vintages of Yquem, for a blind tasting he was planning in London. His family winery is based in Illmitz in Burgenland, their vineyards sloping down to the shallow Neusiedlersee, which straddles the Austria/Hungary border (see this *World Atlas of Wine* map). Botrytis is guaranteed in the misty mornings there and a considerable proportion of the vines his father so carefully tended went into superlative sweet wines which were appreciated by local wine lovers but little known outside Austria.

Kracher was determined to change this and decided to organise a blind tasting of his wines and the world's most famous botrytised wine in London. From memory, his tasting took place one afternoon in the Austrian Chamber of Commerce and it was relatively sparsely attended. But I went and both he and the wines were a revelation.

As well as being an accomplished winemaker, he was an extremely engaging character. Quiet but self-assured with a definite twinkle in his eye, he let us tasters make up our minds rather than engaging in a heavy sales pitch. I don't know whether he was disappointed by the turnout but I think he was probably quite pleased with the article I wrote afterwards in the *American Wine Spectator*, for which I, at that time, wrote a column.

Today Kracher is a name known internationally and the torch is carried by Alois's son Gerhard, who not only manages the Illmitz estate but makes a range of Grüners with New York sommelier Aldo Sohm, Blaufränkisch with the Winzerkeller Neckenmarkt and a Romanian ice wine with Liliac winery.

Last March something a little similar took place not far away from that original Kracher tasting. Two Austrians laid on a blind tasting of 16 white wines, this time from Greece, Hungary, Austria, California, China, Alsace, Portugal and Bordeaux. It was an eclectic affair and it's worth noting the location, a private room in the smart, new Hong Kong-owned Peninsula Hotel in London. I don't imagine many of us wine professionals had ventured past the Rolls Royces in the courtyard and into the hotel before, so it was interesting to see that the decor was 100% HK, all dragons and red silk. It was also notable that the bank of red flasks hanging below the ceiling lights made all the wines look a little pink. They may have looked a little similar but they certainly tasted different.

The logistics of the tasting were organised by Stefan Neumann MS, ex-sommelier at the Mandarin Oriental down the road and now a wine consultant and educator. Hence the entrée to the Peninsula, I suspect, and the heavy concentration of top somms among the tasters.

The tasting was the idea of Lenz Moser, veteran Austrian winemaker with, like Gerhard Kracher, irons in the fire in several different countries today, most notably China, where, with the dominant wine company there, he has been making Changyu Moser wines in Ningxia for almost 20 years. He is a big believer in blind tastings (see Lenz Moser's big Chinese trial) and told us he learnt to love them when working in Napa Valley for Robert Mondavi, who liked nothing more than to show his top Cabernet with first-growth bordeaux.

At 9.30 in the morning we were all seated at large round tables each with a lazy Susan in the middle, designed to share out the Peking duck for which the Peninsula's restaurant is already famous. But instead of duck there were three different Austrian breads, apparently brought in by Moser from Vienna that morning. (It must have been a very early flight.)

Moser began by explaining that he wanted to show his white wines alongside some of the best in the world, but was a bit nervous because making white wine is more difficult than red. He reported with glee the OIV's latest report that white wine is becoming more popular again and told us that even in China, once a red-wine stronghold, whites are now so popular that they sell out immediately. We were to taste his Chinese white, with the proviso that when he started making (red) wine in China, Chinese whites were 'undrinkable'.

All the wines were served blind, except for three Grüner Veltliners, wines 3, 4 and 5. I asked Neumann after the tasting to explain the philosophy behind the wine selection and here's what he wrote:

'Lenz and I had done a few tastings beforehand and the initial idea or thought was always to compare his wines on the one hand to the world's best on the other hand and to choose wines with a similar taste profile. This is where my experience in hospitality as a wine buyer and sommelier came in.

'As so-called wine experts, we often come to conclusions rather fast: what is similar and which wines can certain wines be compared to? My experience and passion for hospitality has shown me that first and foremost I have to listen to my customers and guests.

'So on the one hand volcanic soils such as in Tokaj and Santorini have shown a similar aroma and flavour profile in their wines. There has been an increase in the appreciation of Greek wine, and in particular Assyrtiko from Santorini so that people now know about Greek wine more than a few years ago, but dry Furmint from Tokaj is still a bit of an unwritten story.

'We also chose some recognisable wines or brands which are commercially very successful to provide a reference point.

'Comparing the wines from Lenz to the world's best like Château d'Yquem also gives a perspective to buyers about differences, similarities and may make it easier to understand and relay this information afterwards to their respective readers/clients/guests.

'Benchmark comparative tastings, especially when done blind, may even change a person's opinion or at least change someone's perception about a variety or region. We have often heard before "I never thought Tokaji or Furmint could be that good". The same goes for the Chinese Icewine we showed and his white Cabernet. For the latter we had great success in restaurants serving it confidently by the glass and pairing it with a variety of different dishes. It was not about the perfect pairing with one dish but rather having a wine which is lovely on its own but works across different cuisines well - and tells a story of a man producing premium wine in China for almost 20 years!

'In the case of Lenz's new Tokaji, very few producers release mature wine these days. So we had to be brave in comparing it to a range of sweet wines of the world and try to remind everyone that sweet wines are delicious and so much deserve a place and recognition.

'Lastly, listening to feedback encouraged me to put the Pinot Gris against the white Cabernet. Tasters' perceptions about sweetness in wine and slight colour variations (like vin gris) was the idea here. Both are technically bone dry but boast a certain amount of fruit sweetness. Pinot Gris, like White Cabernet, is often too quickly judged and put in box as being sweet and greyish. I reckon we are often influenced by the colour. Provence rosé is a case in point and, as you so correctly pointed out, the lighting at the Peninsula gave a lot of the wines a pinkish hue.'

My conclusion from the tasting is that Moser is certainly on the right track with his wines, especially with his Hungarian wines, both dry and sweet, and with that exciting new Portuguese white.

Also, that he arguably should have chosen a more successful vintage of Yquem. But the Fargues made up for it.

The 16 tasting notes below are presented in the order the wines were served.

Vassaltis Assyrtiko 2022 Santorini

Founded in 2010 during the financial crisis. Motto: we don't want to return to our roots but to grow them. From three villages. 60- to 200-year-old vines. Whole-bunch-pressed and seven months on lees.

Tasted blind. Pale apricot. Very smoky nose, not unlike last night's Hatzidakis Nykteri. Lots of acidity and a very smooth texture. Salty finish. Assyrtiko from Santorini?

14%

Drink

2024

-

2029

17

Ma'd Moser, MM5 Furmint 2021 Tokaj

Partners Rita Takaro (Mad Wine) and Lenz Moser found making this style very difficult. (There are now five or six Austrian producers of Furmint, too.) Oremus have successfully sold their oaked Mandolás Dry Furmint around the world but Lenz concentrates on fruit. Masses of recent investment in Tokaj. A blend of three different vineyards. 10% wood-aged.

Tasted blind. Paler apricot. Floral nose suggests Riesling. But it's dry on the finish, after lots of acidity. Quite long. Really tingly! And a bit of texture/skin contact? But it could be from almost anywhere with a little volcanic influence. Baden?

14%

Drink

2025

-

2028

16.5

Lenzmark, New Chapter Grüner Veltliner 2022

Niederösterreich

A third of Austria's 44,000 ha of Grüner Veltliner is in Lower Austria: 14,612 ha. This wine is served in Business Class on Emirates. No umlaut on Grüner on the label to indicate its novelty. They're trying to spread Grüner Veltliner around the world in this blend of top sites. The next bottling, 2023, will be labelled Traisental and be made from biodynamically grown grapes. Tasted from a magnum in a sort of Ch Haut-Brion bottle shape, stretched a bit.

Pale greenish straw. Light and fragrant, with classic white-pepper nose. Slightly commercial. Clean and varietal. Crisp and fresh. Vibrant. A hit of paint aroma on the end.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2026

16

Markus Huber, Zwirch 1ÖTW Grüner Veltliner 2022

Traisental

Huber is Lenz's business partner in New Chapter. Huber is far-sighted and, for example, harvests solar energy as well as grapes on his 120-ha estate and sells it. Traisental is along the Danube south-east of Wachau, on red gravelly soil left when the river retreated, plus limestone (unusual for Grüner Veltliner) and loess, also found in China and Canada. The region has less than 1,000 ha in total.

Pale honey colour. Slightly reticent nose but with a suggestion of depth. Cool and restrained, with some light chalky texture on the end. But not that long.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2029

16.5

F X Pichler, Kellerberg Grüner Veltliner 2022 Wachau

The Pichlers moved from Kremstal in 1898. The seventh generation now runs the family's Wachau estate. The sixth generation F X is quoted as saying, when asked whether his work was to express Nature, 'We fight Nature every day'. 50% of Wachau Grüner Veltliner is made by the co-op, Domäne Wachau. F X dropped out of Vinea Wachau but this is Smaragd level from a steep site in Dürnstein, the Pichlers' most famous site, on Urgestein (= gneiss). Aged in big oak casks.

Pale straw. Intense varietal nose. Very broad start to the palate that then tenses up towards the end and has flowers and herbs as well as the white pepper. Real concentration but not heaviness in this wine. Sappy, concentrated and energetic. Very obviously the best of these Grüners.

13.5%

Drink

2024

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2030

17 +

Ma'd Moser, MM55 Furmint 2021 Tokaj

Three different vineyards on two different soils - rhyolite and another one used for cat litter(!) and food supplements. Aged for six months in new Hungarian oak. Furmint doesn't like too much oak, according to Moser.

Tasted blind. Deep straw. Lots of oak on the nose, with a bit of spice. Is this another dry Furmint from Tokaj? Quite a rich start, then it spreads across the palate and then the acidity kicks in. It needs to lose that oak while ageing in bottle. Lots to chew on the end. Some honeyed character. Really tangy. This just needs time.

14%

Drink

2026

-

2034

16.5 +

Kistler, Les Noisetiers Chardonnay 2021 Sonoma Coast

A blend of several vineyards and 10–11 months in François Frères oak. Chosen because Moser loves it and wants to show a very expensive wine and to show what good value Hungarian wine can be!

Tasted blind. Very deep colour – almost Provence rosé colour! Savoury nose and then real concentration but excellent balance. Power! No shy, retiring flower, though more delicate than the MM55 Furmint because the oak handling is non-intrusive.

14.3%

Drink

2024

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2034

17 +

Ch Changyu Moser XV, Helan Mountain Range Blanc de Noir Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 Ningxia

Moser wanted to make white wine but originally had only Cabernet Sauvignon at his disposal in Ningxia. China is still 90% red but it's changing. Ningxia produces the smallest Cabernet berries in the world, according to Moser, who told us he learnt to make white wine from red-wine grapes when his thoroughly rotten 1996 red berries lost colour in Austria. He made them into a white wine, which was a commercial hit. Aged for one year in new French oak.

Tasted blind. Slightly sweaty nose and an impression of sweetness and slight astringency on the end. Not very sophisticated but I bet it goes down well as a novelty in China, where it's unique.

14.5%

Drink

2023

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2025

16

Zind-Humbrecht, Rangen de Thann Clos St Urbain Pinot Gris 2021 Alsace Grand Cru

Bone dry.

Tasted blind. Deep honey colour. Salty edge and an embryonic wine. The elements are there but they're currently fighting each other.

13.5%

Drink

2025

-

2034

16.5 ++

Ribeiro & Moser Arinto 2022 Vinho Regional Lisboa

Moser: I had no plan to make wine in Portugal, but my agile Portuguese importer introduced me to Pedro Ribeiro, who argued that Arinto is the Grüner Veltliner of Portugal. Aged 90% in tank and 10% in Austrian barrique. Moser says he is seeking a wine that's both complex and friendly. It's sold in a super-light 360-g bottle inspired by Lageder, who launched a 400-g bottle. Especially good with food.

Tasted blind. Intense nose. Really exciting, smooth wine with sophisticated texture, depth of fruit and Arinto's characteristic high acidity.

12.5%

Drink

2024

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2027

16.5

Changyu, Golden Ice Wine Valley Vidal 2021 Liaoning

Chinese ice wine grown near North Korea. According to Moser, some Chinese representatives of his business partners in Ningxia, Changyu, went to Canada and picked an Icewine-maker for themselves. Temperatures here on latitude 41 are guaranteed below -8 °C in winter, so they planted 340 ha for ice wine, double Canada's Icewine production. RS 150 g/l.

Tasted blind. Lovely complex dried-apricot nose. Not Sauternes! Something more Germanic. But very luscious. Austrian? Not necessarily a classic grape. Perhaps a little too sweet for some palates.

11%

Drink

2024

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2030

16.5

Ch de Fargues 2015 Sauternes

The Lur-Saluces family's own estate. Bought in Paris for €47 a half! RS 153 g/l.

Tasted blind. Toasted, honeyed nose with a hint of something burnt - crème caramel? - followed by fine acidity. A really good Sauternes? Extremely long and emphatic. Excellent, refreshing but luscious wine.

14%

Drink

2024

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2034

18

Kracher, Cuvée Beerenauslese 2020 Burgenland

Welschriesling and Chardonnay. This wine represents a third of Kracher's total production. Costs about £25-30 for 50 cl - great value! TA 6.3 g/l, RS 135 g/l.

Tasted blind. Hungarian? Lots of acidity but dried apricots, too. Real freshness on the end and not especially heavy. Medium finish, with - amazingly enough - a hint of dried fish!

Super-clean but not classic.

11%

Drink

2024

-

2034

17

Ch d'Yquem 2016 Sauternes

100% new oak. RS 135 g/l.

Tasted blind. Not much nose. Then very sweet barley-sugar palate. Could do with more acidity. But no shortage of sugar! Light toasty note on the end. Sauternes? A rather disappointing bottle but great texture and delicacy.

14%

Drink

2024

-

2032

16 +

Ma'd Moser & Grand Tokaj, MM555 Aszú 6 Puttonyos 2013 Tokaj

Moser admitted he had no experience of making Aszú, so he turned to ex-state-owned Grand Tokaj, who have considerable holdings, for help. He worked with them for a while. He made 30,000 bottles from Grand Tokaj's own vineyards. From a particularly successful vintage. TA 9 g/l, RS 208 g/l.

Tasted blind. Deep, coppery gold. Intense and a little vegetal, with real freshness. Tokaji? It's even slightly sour on the end.

9.5%

Drink

2025

-

2039

17 +

Füleky, Aszú 6 Puttonyos 2019 Tokaj

Moser argued this wine is too young and the sweetness too prominent. RS 193 g/l.

Tasted blind. Dark gold. Well-married sweetness and prominent acidity. Peachy. Another Tokaji? Long and powerful. Well integrated.

10%

Drink

2024

-

2030

17.5