

## Gewürztraminer's Passionate California Devotees

by Steve Pitcher, Special to The Chronicle

Gewürztraminer occupies a special niche in California. Its fans are enthusiastically loyal. It's often as expensive as some other top whites - in the \$16 to \$27 range - which makes selling it to the uninitiated a daunting effort. The Teutonic name leads to an erroneous suspicion that the wine is always sweet.

Yet Gewürztraminer producers persist in their efforts. It can only be attributed to a labor of love.

"We feel lucky to have about 2 1/2 acres of the 1,670 acres of Gewürztraminer planted in California," says Peter McCrea, proprietor of Stony Hill Vineyards in St. Helena. "But then compare that to the 470,000-acre total of wine grapes in the state and you have to ask yourself, 'Why so little Gewürztraminer?' when with one taste you realize what a distinctive wine it is."

That Gewürzt still exists in these vineyards, given the opportunity to make more money by replanting with more lucrative varieties, speaks volumes about the passion of these producers. Husch Vineyards even went so far in 2004 as to convert a 4-acre Anderson Valley vineyard from Chardonnay to Gewürztraminer. Imagine that.

Deborah Cahn and Ted Bennett, proprietors of Navarro Vineyards, fell in love with Gewürztraminer while touring in Alsace in the 1970s. "It became our favorite white wine," Cahn recalls. They planted it in their vineyard in 1974, on the site of a onetime sheep ranch. It soon became Navarro's flagship wine.

### QUITE A MOUTHFUL

As to the name, it's often shortened in conversation to "Gewürzt" (ge-VERTS). Its fragrance is pleasantly distinctive and instantly recognizable, inasmuch as Gewürzt represents the pinnacle of exotic aromatics in fine wine.

With its pleasantly distinctive spice aromas and little new oak, Gewürzt may be the ultimate chilled picnic wine and accompanies ham and sausages with aplomb. It's equally at home with savory pork preparations; some spicy Asian, Cajun or Mexican fare; and Alsatian creations like choucroute garnie, the sauerkraut and sausage dish.

Most high-quality California Gewürzt is made in a dry style with less than 1 percent residual sugar, following the model



### 2007 Handley Anderson Valley Gewürztraminer (\$18)

Aromas of white melon, lychee and wilted roses are replicated on a plush palate, which is enlivened by layers of spice, grapefruit and white peaches.

long established in the Alsace region of France. Such wines often come from lovingly tended estate vineyards, most located in Mendocino's Anderson Valley, plus a few in Sonoma County and at least one in Napa Valley.

## EUROPEAN ORIGINS

Gewürztraminer is grown in several countries - it started out in northern Italy as Traminer, gaining the modifier "Gewürzt," German for spice, as it migrated to Germany and Alsace - but achieves its greatest distinction in Alsace. Anderson Valley - Gewürzt central in the USA - is close behind, lacking only the diverse soil types and exposures of grand cru Alsace vineyards that yield wines with discernable multiple personalities.

Each February, the Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association holds its International Alsace Varietals Festival. The 2007 vintage was showcased this year, and what a sublime revelation it was. Mindful of the need to replenish my nearly exhausted supply of Gewürzt, I sampled the 15 wines and came away with the conviction that 2007 was a great vintage, the greatest ever for Anderson Valley's Gewürztraminers.

## WARM AND COOL

"If there's a grape that's really affected by vintage, it's Gewürztraminer - even more so than Pinot Noir," explains Milla Handley of Handley Cellars in Philo, who first produced a Gewürztraminer in 1987. Handley uses grapes from a mix of warmer and cooler sites to deepen the complexity.

"In a cooler year like 2007, the valley's Gewürztraminer is much more complex," she says, with tropical fruit flavors of a warm year and the delicate nuances of a cool year.

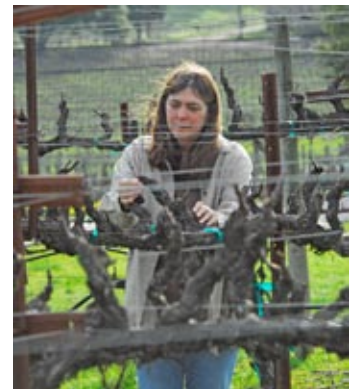
What else accounts for the stellar vintage? Ryan Hodgins, winemaker at Breggo Cellars in Boonville, explains that rainfall in 2007 was significantly below average, which stressed the vines and concentrated the fruit, "resulting in great flavor and intensity." A cooler summer gave the grapes more time to ripen, which allowed greater flavor development.

Sixth-generation vintner Jeff Bundschu, who's responsible for the ultimate wine tongue twister - Gundlach Bundschu Gewürztraminer - credits smaller, more intense grapes, which led to "wines of astounding concentration and expression," he says.

Though quantities of the 2007s are diminishing, three cheerful circumstances remain: There is still some left; several wineries are discounting their 2007s to make way for 2008s; and the 2008s seem to resemble the 2007s in terms of quality.

This is a golden opportunity for Gewürzt fans and for those who don't know what they've been missing all these years - all because of the dedication of California's

*Steve Pitcher is a contributing editor for Wine News magazine. He has covered Anderson Valley wines for more than 15 years. E-mail him at [wine@sfgate.com](mailto:wine@sfgate.com).*



*"If there's a grape that's really affected by vintage, it's Gewürztraminer - even more so than Pinot Noir," explains Milla Handley of Handley Cellars in Philo, who first produced a Gewürztraminer in 1987.*