

# Chicago Tribune

## Gewürztraminer: A Grape Like No Other

*The white wine grape gewurztraminer is a world of its own.*

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By Bill St. John

No other grape, when made into a wine, can boast that it has perfume and flavor as fierce as gewurztraminer's — of rose petals and orange blossoms, litchi fruit, citrus and bergamot peel, and juicy, ripe tropical fruits.

Sauvignon blanc, yes, and muscat can boast of their powerful aromas; viognier's texture is plush, sometimes almost oily; pinot noir's flavor is persistent, seemingly never-ending. But gewurztraminer sports all those characteristics in and of itself. (When poorly made, it can go overboard on any of them, too.)

Long thought to be from the town of Tramin in northern Italy, recent DNA research shows that gewurztraminer's origins are actually in southern Germany and that it is a form of the European parent grape, savagnin.

The name is a mouthful, too: it's guh-VOORTZ-trah-mee-nair in the Old World, or geh-VEHRTZ-trah-mee-ner, in the New.

In German, "gewurz" means "spice" or "spicy," although gewurztraminer's aroma doesn't call to mind any particular spice such as clove or juniper. Because of the name, gewurztraminer has long been suggested as a wine partner to spicy food, such as Indian cuisine or Asian cooking, the spice referred to being chili heat.

In fact, it is disastrous with chilies because of its high alcohol (14 percent or higher is common), not to mention difficult to pair with most food due to its generally low acidity.

The best gewurztraminer, most would agree, comes from Alsace. It's helpful to note how those in Alsace are gifted at distilling a fruit such as the raspberry into an extraordinarily heady eau de vie, clearer than water but more perfumed than anything by Chanel. They do the same thing, in a wine, with the grape gewurztraminer.

Other countries grow gewurztraminer, of course, sometimes successfully. In northern Italy, especially in the region of Trentino Alto Adige, gewurztraminer is less rich in both texture and flavor than in Alsace, but often with greater acidity.

Gewurztraminer does well in Germany's Rheinpfalz; in the U.S., particularly in cooler climates such as Monterey and Mendocino counties in California; in Austria, where (like Alsace) it makes both steely dry and lusciously sweet wines; and, quite happily, in New Zealand, which has made noticeable strides in the past few years with gewurztraminer.

Most winemakers agree that, with gewurztraminer (as with many wine grapes the world over), there is a clear correlation between vine yield and wine quality. Gewurztraminer is a vigorous vine and can dilute its juiciness and perfume with high grape yields.

The problem is that growers get paid a lot more for sauvignon blanc or chardonnay than for gewurztraminer, so the impetus is to let the vine go to town. But more money for a grower means less for a winemaker to work with.

Over-cropped gewurztraminer turns out thin and with deadened perfume (a double pity and a complete turnaround from what the grape should be).

A bit of residual sugar — often the norm for New World gewurz — can help soften the wine's sometimes-dusty or even bitter finish. And, though prohibited in Alsace, some winemakers boost the grape's low acidity by simply adding some in the form of tartaric acid.

In good (that is, ripe) years, Alsace produces some of the most concentrated, powerful gewurztraminer ever, in two styles: Selection de Grains Nobles (from very ripe and sweet, sometimes botrytised, grapes) or Vendage Tardive ("late harvest").

When well balanced, with sufficient acidity, and from low yields, gewurztraminer struts its stuff: ripe fruit, heady perfume, and juicy palate. When sweet, it can be like sipping a delicious, almost meditative liqueur.

The typical fare of Alsace is an obvious match for gewurztraminer, all those terrifically fatty terrines, pates and other renditions of goose liver, or tarte flambe (an onion "pizza"), smoked trout or salmon, and roast fowl.

It is the classic match for another of Alsace's powerhouse foods, Munster cheese (served there with caraway or cumin seeds, as if Munster needed any stronger accent).

### **Recommended gewurztraminers, by price**

2012 Erste + Neue, Trentino-Alto Adige: Super value; lots of peach and apricot aromas and flavors, with big bounce of minerals in the end. \$15-\$20

2012 Dr. Konstantin Frank, Finger Lakes, New York: White peach and litchi to the fore; great acidity focuses the lush fruit; dry. \$15

2013 Gundlach-Bundschu Estate Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, California: A longtime favorite; very dry, crisp and lean; a go-to American gewurz. \$20-\$23

2012 Domaine Ehrhart "Rosenberg," Alsace, France: Opulent in both aroma and taste; rose petal, litchi, orange, with slight sweetness. \$22

2012 Fitz-Ritter Spatlese Rheinpfalz, Germany: A light touch, some sweetness, low alcohol; delicate but juicy. \$25

2012 Hugel et Fils, Alsace, France: Textbook gewurz from Alsace: very dry; wide open aromas and tastes of litchi, rose water, orange blossom; long finish, touch of minerals. \$25-\$30

2013 Cantina Terlano, Trentino-Alto Adige: Delicate in texture, soft, quiet for the grape, but very pretty. \$32

2012 Cantina Tramin "Nussbaumer," Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy: Fleshy and flashy, slightly sweet, unctuous, heady. \$32-\$40

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.