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» A Taste of Sunshine -- The Groovy Grü-V

I spent a couple hours last week with young Austrian winemaker **Christof Höppler**. It was a nasty afternoon, cold and clammy, with strong winds and fierce black clouds. But it sure *tasted* sunny.



That's because Höppler brought along a bottle of **Grüner Veltliner** to share. This unique wine - the grapes are grown only in Austria --- has become hip over the past couple years, especially in the U.S. That's "hip" as in groovy, which is what fans who can't pronounce the intimidating name call it: "Grü V." (For the record, it's pronounced GROO-ner FEHLT-lee-ner.)

Grü-V is a delicious wine, fresh, fruity and crisp, with subtle spicy notes. And, though "light and refreshing" is an overused descriptive, that's exactly what Grü V (which has just 11 percent alcohol) really is.

It's great all by itself, especially if there's a colorful sunset involved. But it's also an elegant partner to oysters, sushi, and tuna or salmon tartare. I think it's terrific with Thai food and salade Nicoise. And Höppler bragged that "it even goes well with asparagus."

After the Grüner Veltliner, we opened a bottle of Pinot Blanc, which Höppler calls a "real food wine." (It's the #1 seller in Austria, though Grüner Veltliner is the most widely planted grape.)

"It's lighter than Chardonnay, in a positive way," Höppler said, adding that it's more delicate than Chardonnay and has a lovely creaminess. I liked the faint tropical notes and the hint of almond in the wine; I also like the nice balance of fruitiness and acidity that make it such a good match with many foods.

Last summer I visited with Jöst Höppler, Christof's father, at the winery in the tiny town of Winden, in Austria's Burgenland region. (See my [blog post](#) about that visit and the wonderful bike ride we did along picturesque Lake Neusiedler.) Though the family had been involved in the wine business for generations, Jöst took the winery to new levels in the late '80s, and eventually built it into the international presence that it is today.



But now it's Christof's turn. The handsome, boyish-looking 33-year-old oversees the winemaking operation today - though he says he still consults his father when making final blends; contributes to marketing efforts (he has created a clever "interactive" museum exhibit at the winery), and travels to places like Southern California to spread the word about his wines.

Christof's goal is to expand the number of varietals produced (Höppler currently produces about 25,000 cases per year), and to keep the flavor profiles of his wines in sync with consumer tastes.

As we sipped one of the label's elegant Pinot Noirs, Höppler talked about the *color* of red wine. "There's been a dramatic change in taste since I started making

wines," he said, adding that today's consumers like their red wines really, really red...deep, dark red.

Höppler has also made other changes in the family's portfolio. He created the yummy K-7, a blend of Syrah, Blaufränkisch and Merlot which he designed with a young, sophisticated, cosmopolitan audience in mind. I wrote about it in my [blog post](#) last year: "It's fruity and fragrant, earthy, easy to drink yet with plenty going on if you're into analyzing and expounding. The label is unique; so's the trendy glass "cork."

The young Höppler also created the brand's first **Single Vineyard** wines, including a Blaufränkisch Kirchberg and the Pinot Noir Rosenberg. He also debuted the first Höppler rose wine, Rose Celeste. And, like most people his age, he's big into social networking, landing Höppler wines on the lists at trendy restaurants, such as those run by [Bobby Flay](#) and [Jamie Oliver](#).

Oh, yeah. There's also the matter of management style. As befits his age, Christof uses a full panoply of techie tools to run the show. Though he may travel far and wide, he's never far from the action, he says. Using Google Earth, GPS and the like, he knows where his tractors are at all times, whether the ignition is on or off, their RPMs, who's cutting vines, who's fertilizing, and much more.

(Höppler wines are available in Southern California, including at [WineSeller/Brasserie](#) in San Diego. The Web site [Snooth](#) also offers an excellent selection.)