

# GRÜNER VELTLINER

*Just call it Gru Vee, baby*

BY EVAN DAWSON



ZUGIBE

FINGER LAKES  
GRÜNER VELTLINER  
2009



**W**HILE WE'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR the next great Finger Lakes red wine, the next great white has been hiding out under our noses. Figuratively, of course, because if we were speaking literally, you couldn't possibly have missed it. Gruner Veltliner is one aromatic missile of a variety.

So why is there so much growing buzz about a variety that enjoys roughly 15 acres in the region?

"There's a lot to be excited about," says Sayre Fulkerson, owner of Fulkerson Winery on Seneca Lake. "It doesn't have a whole lot of overlap with Riesling, and it's another high-quality white variety."

The spiritual home of Gruner Veltliner, known colloquially as "Gruner" or "Gru Vee", is Austria, where the latest count had more than 42,000 acres planted. Fulkerson sees a parallel between Austria's Danube River and the Finger Lakes. "Without these bodies of the water, I'm not sure Gruner would be able to ripen," he says. "But the influence of the Danube and the Finger Lakes gives the variety just enough to do some special things."

In the Finger Lakes, Gruner is young, but winemakers find the results promising. Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars boasts the most Gruner; Fulkerson has barely an acre, but he envisions more of the variety showing up in vineyards around Canandaigua, Keuka, Seneca, and Cayuga lakes.

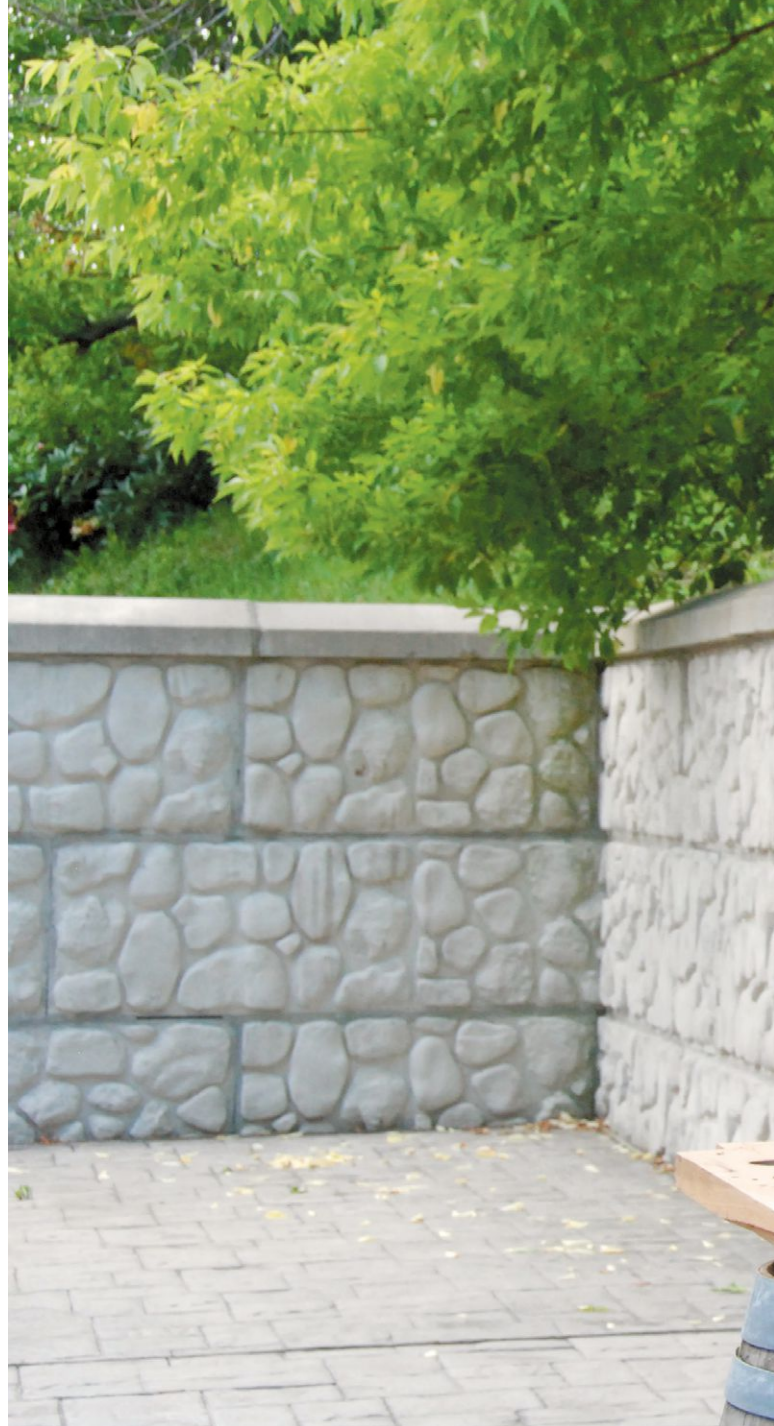
Gruner almost suffered an early Finger Lakes extinction.

"There is a problem with over cropping of Gruner," Fulkerson explains. It reminds him of Cabernet Franc, a variety that often produced thin, simple wines in the Finger Lakes. The problem, Fulkerson says, is that growers were overloading vines with Cabernet Franc, and they had begun to do the same with Gruner Veltliner. "You don't have to have tiny yields with Gruner, but you can't get away with seven or eight tons to the acre, or even six. People have been learning that lesson."

Then again, Fulkerson says he meets plenty of Finger Lakes growers who have still never heard of Gruner. They will soon if winemakers ask them to start ripping out Chardonnay, which is what Brendan Zugibe says could happen. Zugibe Vineyards, on the northeast side of Seneca Lake, has been making Gruner for several years. Brendan says his customers tend to find it interesting, which is a nice change from more common varieties. "You can't give Chardonnay away," he says. "There's too much out there and there is almost zero demand in the tasting room."

Zugibe's Gruner has proven to be a strong addition to an impressive young portfolio. It bears a whiff of white pepper, like many Austrian Gruners. Compared to the regional flagship, Riesling, Gruner is more like an odd uncle than a twin. "There's less fruit and more herbal notes," Zugibe confirms.

The Gruner movement is beginning to broaden. Several years ago, it included just a select few, with 3 Brothers releasing one of



the first Finger Lakes bottlings. By 2015, local producers could number in the double digits. It is almost always made in the dry style; Fulkerson says, "It just doesn't work semi-dry. We take it very dry, and we find that most others do, too."

But here's where Gruner has a surprising advantage over other dry whites, including Riesling. Dry Riesling tends to be a tougher sell, because it's more austere, more severe on the palate, not as accessible. Winemakers will tell you that a fully dry Riesling is one that can be captivating, but it can easily lose balance, with too much acidity. Customers tend to gravitate toward richer styles.

So why would Gruner be any different? The simple reason is that in the Finger Lakes, producers don't offer multiple bottlings of Gruner. Unlike Riesling, customers can't ponder the variety





with more sugar and less acidity. They have one option—dry—and winemakers prefer it that way. “We have no problem selling it,” Fulkerson says, adding that he expects to see Finger Lakes Gruner Veltliner in many New York City restaurants in the near future. “There is a segment of the wine loving population down there that looks for Gruner, and we can give it to them.”

Careful observers will see Gruner coming off the vine a few weeks earlier than Riesling in most years. It’s considered a mid-ripeners, with greenish-yellow berries that can fill a winery with myriad scents within minutes of arrival. “The only thing it doesn’t seem to have is minerality,” Fulkerson said. “Not like Riesling, anyway. But it’s extremely aromatic.”

Fulkerson’s Gruner is \$13.99, a comparative song in a wine

world with steadily climbing prices. Dr. Frank’s version is just a dollar more. The variety fits snugly into the value category.

But this is not a grape destined for the value bin in this region. Years ago, Sheldrake Point’s Bob Madill began a steady refrain that jangled around in Finger Lakes winemakers’ brains: “Aromatic white wines.” That was the regional specialty, Madill insisted. The path was laid for Gruner to make its way to the Finger Lakes. So, haven’t seen it around yet? You will. Soon.

*Evan Dawson is the author of the critically acclaimed Summer in a Glass: The Coming of Age of Winemaking in the Finger Lakes. He is a news anchor at WHAM-TV in Rochester. He is also the managing editor for the New York Cork Report and a columnist for Palate Press online.*