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WEEKEND

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Lettie Teague makes a case for Gewürztraminer, the wine people love to hate  
DS



## OFF DUTY



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EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE: LETTIE TEAGUE



## Please Don't Let This Wine Be Misunderstood

**GEWÜRZTRAMINER IS ONE** of the great contradictions of the wine world. A white grape with red skin, it is grown all over the world yet remains obscure, often missing from restaurant wine lists and retail store shelves. Among drinkers who do manage to find it, Gewürztraminer is as much reviled as it is adored.

English wine writer Jamie Goode believes drinkers in the former group are often repelled by the grape's very name (pronounced GEVURZ-tra-MEAN-er). In his new book "I Taste Red," out this September from University of California Press, Mr. Goode considers the name's outsized influence. "I have a friend who claims to hate Gewürztraminer," he writes. "For her, the word comes loaded with meaning, and to each experience of Gewürztraminer there is a framing effect that comes with the name."

A surfeit of consonants is a distinct disadvantage, but Gewürztraminer has other challenges, too. Its intense scent is every bit as complicated—some might say overwhelming—as its name. Aromatic notes range from roses to passion fruit to lychee to spice. (*Gewürz* means spice in German; *traminer* is a grape.) The fragrance is one that people passionately love or hate—making it the Patchouli of grapes.

Catherine Faller—proprietor of Domaine Weinbach, a highly regarded estate in Alsace, France, that produces great Gewürztraminers—has an unsurprisingly positive take. She described the grape as "a monument of elegance, with a baroque start and a gothic finish," which may be the best Gewürztraminer tasting note I've ever read.

Yet for all her fondness for the grape, Ms. Faller conceded that it could be less than charming if handled incorrectly. Harvested at the wrong time or grown in the wrong climate, Gewürztraminer could turn out "vulgar, plump and cloying, like a cheap perfume," she noted.

One of the biggest challenges in avoiding such specimens is maintaining high enough levels of acidity to balance the grape's natural sweetness and rather high alcohol content. This is easier to do in cool



Alpine climates. "The grape tends to ripen very fast if it isn't able to cool down at night," said Karoline Walch, co-owner of Elena Walch estate in Alto Adige, northern Italy.

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Alto Adige is where Gewürztraminer is said to have originated, and the region's version tends to be much drier, with higher levels of acidity, than those made elsewhere, especially Alsace. Buying a bottle of Alsace Gewürztraminer is a bit like spinning a roulette wheel unless you

know a producer's style. For example, wines from Trimbach Estate are generally reliably dry, while those from Domaine Zind-Humbrecht tend to be sweeter, and Domaine Weinbach turns out wines of both types.

To help consumers, some Gewürztraminer producers indicate sweetness on their back labels. Rendered as a numerical scale (1-5, with 5 as the sweetest) or in words (dry, off-dry or sweet), these guides might seem useful, but they aren't always reliable. Wines can taste sweet even if they are technically dry, and one person's off-dry can taste a lot like someone else's quite sweet.

This kind of unpredictability can make Gewürztraminer difficult to pair with food—even for top wine professionals. Thomas Pastuszak, wine director of NoMad restaurant in New York, said that when he and his peers talk about their top food-friendly wines "Gewürztraminer is

not a grape that usually pops up."

And yet there is much to like about Gewürztraminer when all goes well. Full-bodied, rich, even opulent, the wine has an assertive personality that can make it an attractive match with equally assertively flavored food. It's regularly touted as a good match with Chinese, although that characterization generalizes both the wine and the cuisine. Gewürztraminer is, however, almost always a great companion to hard cheese. That is, of course, if you can find a bottle.

My search for Gewürztraminer didn't turn out to be all that easy. To secure the 12 bottles for my tasting, I had to shop in seven different stores. There were rarely more than three choices at any one shop. At Astor Wines & Spirits in New York, I asked head wine buyer Lorena Ascencios why she stocked so few. "Most people buy Gewürztraminer

during the holidays," she said. "We'll stock up then." This was a bit of a mystery to her and a surprise to me; I'd never considered bland Thanksgiving turkey and a powerful wine like Gewürztraminer a good fit.

I purchased bottles from various countries, regions and vintages. While they all had some sweetness, I tried to stick with wines that were mostly dry. Truly sweet wines tend to be made in limited quantities, be higher priced and appeal to a narrower range of oenophiles.

The friends with whom I tasted the wines responded with the full range of emotions, from outright dislike to indifference to great enthusiasm. It was one of the most polarizing tastings I've staged in a while. The drier wines were mostly preferred; favorites included the crisp, lively 2015 Elena Walch Gewürztraminer Alto Adige (\$18) and the powerful, mineral 2014 Lawson's Dry Hills Gewürztraminer (\$14), from Marlborough, New Zealand, which was the hardest to find. According to Ms. Ascencios of Astor Wines, that's because any wine from New Zealand that isn't Sauvignon Blanc is a tough sell.

The 2014 Dr. Konstantin Frank Gewürztraminer (\$12), from New York's Finger Lakes region, was also

a crowd-pleaser. My friend Bonnie, who had never tasted Gewürztraminer, waxed ecstatic over this fairly dry wine with a hint of sweetness and a floral, lychee aroma.

The 2013 Domaine Weinbach Gewürztraminer Réserve Personnelle (\$28) was my top choice. Well-balanced between rich fruit and lively acidity, with a lush texture and intense aromas of floral and spice, it was a great example of what Gewürztraminer can achieve in the hands of a gifted producer.

For drinkers who like predictable flavors and a dry style, the grape will probably never be a true favorite. But for those who favor a touch of flamboyance and uncertainty—not to mention the opportunity to employ a few extra consonants—Gewürztraminer, dry or sweet, just might be worth a try.

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### 2013 Domaine Weinbach Gewürztraminer Réserve Personnelle \$28

This beautifully balanced, medium- to full-bodied, off-dry wine from a top Alsace estate is the perfect combination of lush fruit and tantalizing floral and spice aromas. Pair with a rich dish.