

Interview with Wine Importer Circo Vino | The Hungarian Girl

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Weingut Markus Huber in the Traisental, Austria. Photo courtesy of Circo Vino.

Circo Vino is one of the newest wine importers in the United States to specialize in artisanal wines from unique terroirs. Their mission is to introduce great wine to the palates of America.

Owned and operated by Sariya Jarasviroj Brown and Anne Zakin who are long time veterans of the wine industry, they have recently partnered with Austria's award-winning Weingut Markus Huber and Hungary's Weninger Winery.

The Chicago-based company will now import both the Huber estate-grown wines and the winery's internationally successful Hugo line.

Their distinct portfolio also includes wineries such as Emmerich Knoll, [Peter Veyder-Malberg](#), [Johanneshof Reinisch](#), [Schellmann](#), [Claus Preisinger](#), and [Sattlerhof](#).

Respect for tradition, a sustainable vision for the future, creativity and humor are just some of the qualities that Circo Vino showcases through their work.

1) Tell us about Circo Vino?

Circo Vino is a small, privately-owned fine wine import company based in the United States. The company is owned by two women, Sariya Jarasviroj Brown and Anne Zakin. Sariya and Anne have worked for many years in the wine business with experience in all areas: restaurants, retail, distribution and importing. Previously both women worked with Vin Divino Ltd., an importer of primarily Italian and Austrian wine. Anne and Sariya helped to build the category of Austrian wine in the USA.

From their previous experiences, both women saw that there was a lack of connection between importers, their winery partners and customers who buy their wines. As well, due to the three-tier system of sales and distribution of alcohol in the USA, it was/is often difficult to bring wines to market at a fair price. Circo Vino was created to provide a vehicle for wineries to more directly connect with their clients in the USA.

While this isn't a new concept since there are other importers who take a more direct approach, Circo Vino is one of the few to utilize a multitude of logistical options simultaneously. For example, we have customers who operate at a volume of business that allows them to ship their own full containers directly from the wineries. We have other customers who work with numerous wineries throughout Europe to direct import wines, but are not yet able to do enough critical mass of Austrian and Hungarian wines to build a container of just these wines. For these customers we have a warehouse in Livorno, Italy, a lively port of consolidation, from which they can pull wines in smaller quantities to combine with other orders they are consolidating at port. Yet another option we have is

to consolidate orders for smaller state markets in the USA and bring them on our own containers. Once our container arrives in the USA, the customer can pick up their order from our stateside warehouse locations. We call this our Less Than Container Load (LCL) service. We also keep a small amount of product stateside to bridge the gap for customers who are in between direct orders.

Surely, none of this sounds very sexy, but for us it is very exciting. We want people to drink the wines we love and believe in. We want them to know the stories of the people who make these wines. We want the wine available in the USA to be fresh and offered at a fair price. We want to break down the barriers and mysteries of imported wine. The best way to do this is to offer a more direct relationship with our winery partners and make sure that wines are fresh and flowing in a flexible manner through our shipping model.

2) How did it get started?

We have been long time business colleagues and great friends. For many years we fantasized about opening a business together. We didn't always know what the business would be, we thought of many options inside of and outside of the wine business, but the world of wine is what we both love. There was a great deal of change and upheaval in the import wine market in 2009 and we saw a great opportunity to bring new ideas to fore. We have always joked with one another that the wine business is like a three ring circus. We are contortionists, tightrope walkers, trapeze artists, lion tamers and sometimes shot from a canon. Anne was on vacation in Cape Cod and sent Sariya a text that just said, "it should be called Circo." Sariya felt like they had shared a psychic moment since she too had been thinking about "a circus." Circo Vino (Wine Circus) was born in spirit before there was a business plan or wines to sell.



Markus Huber's 2008/09 Riesling Traisental DAC and Grüner Veltliner Traisental DAC with limestone rock from the Erste Lage. Photo courtesy of Circo Vino.

3) Your company imports wine from Austria and Hungary. Can you tell us a bit about your wine selection?

Currently our portfolio is a great snapshot of Austria and a peek at Hungary. We work with seven Austrian estates and one Hungarian estate. Our vision is to have a small but intense portfolio that is representative of the important terroirs of the countries we represent. We also are interested in representing appellations and growing regions that have heretofore been underrepresented in the USA. For example, we love wines from the Thermenregion in Austria where they grow indigenous varieties like Rotgipfler and Zierfandler. From the Thermenregion we represent two wineries: Johanneshof Reinisch and Weingut Schellmann. We also love Sauvignon Blanc from Styria and this is why we work with Sattlerhof. We've succeeded in spreading the message about Grüner Veltliner in the USA. We want to

now show how dynamic Austria really is – all the exciting, high-quality and delicious wine that exists that doesn't start with the letter G. Of course, Grüner Veltliner remains queen and important to our own dinner tables and to our customers – we love it – but we are ready to expand the journey. This desire to explore is what led us to Hungary and Franz Reinhard Weninger. We have both had a long love affair with Austrian red wines. Austrian Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch, St. Laurent and Pinot Noir have been served in our houses for years. When we heard about Weninger and their Kekfrankos, we had to check it out. What is fascinating about Weninger's terroir in Sopron is that it is really a continuation of the Lake Neusiedlersee ecosystem that originates in Austria. If you look at a map, this area is like the missing link. So, while the flavors of the Weninger wines are unique there is an

echo of Austria that you can taste in the wines. This is a great way to introduce Hungarian red wine to the USA since some Americans already have an idea about Austrian red wines but really only know Hungary for Tokay.

4) Why did you decide to choose those wineries?

We both are drawn to wines that show a sense of place and good upbringing. As many people in our wine world, we love great ingredients, wholesome food, and we love good people. So, our selection of winery partners is generated from these simple ideas of place, purity, and honest work. Wine is the result of a collaboration with Mother Nature. We find when we work with people who share these basic interests, the wines are vibrant and excellently crafted. In the end, the choice to work with a certain winery is a mutual choice. It has to feel right for us personally and in a business sense. It has to click. It's the wine that brings us together, but it's our ability to be good partners to one another that sustains our business. If you look closely at our winery partners you'll find that most of them are very careful farmers who work organically, biodynamically or sustainably. We are not dogmatic about choosing winery partners based on farming philosophies but we do find that farming choices influence the quality of the wines and therefore our overall assessment of enjoyment and appeal to others.

5) Is it better to focus on geographical origin or grape variety?

It is important to us to focus on both geographical origin and grape variety. All in all, though, it is the place that makes the difference. Great sites produce wines with singularity and character. We love these kinds of wines. Not everyone can afford to drink ultra place specific wines though. So we look for a balance. We work with grape varieties that people recognize like Grüner Veltliner, Zweiglet, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir and we've found high-quality wines from our winery partners that sell for under \$20 retail. These are more general, regional wines. We also work with winemakers who farm tiny single vineyard plots that yield intense, vineyard driven wines that are by nature more expensive.

6) Where do you see the future for the Austrian and Hungarian wine market? Do you think there's a growing demand in North America?

We absolutely think there is a growing demand for Austrian and Hungarian wine in North America. A great example is a new restaurant in Portland, Oregon called Grüner. Grüner focuses on wines from Austria, Hungary and the Südtirol. They seek out the great Austrian red wines and want to expose their customers to everything Grüner Veltliner and beyond. It is widely expected that, presently, to have an interesting wine list you must have Grüner Veltliner. There is a small but intense group of people in the USA who are tuning into Hungarian Wine. Hungarian wine poses greater challenges in a sense due to a great unfamiliarity with the language on the part of most Americans. We predict that restaurants will be the driving force of introducing these wines to the market. The new generation of restaurant goer and wine drinker in America is really interested in experiences and is more likely to take a leap to try something new and different because she or he is curious. Wine creates a bridge between cultures, histories and people. We find that our customers are very interested and want to know more about both Austria and Hungary.

7) Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

We welcome you all to join our circus.

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