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A fresh face for Austria's Wachau

By Paula Sidore, January 23, 2023



This fourth report from Austria's Single Vineyard Summit takes a new look at an old region and reveals a significant stylistic shift, with a powerful catalyst: Domäne Wachau. See also Austria's top Grüners loved 2021, Austria's top Rieslings in 2021 and Betting on distinction in Austria's Steiermark.

It's hard to talk about Austria without talking about the Wachau. The narrow, westerly valley located between the Waldviertel and the Dunkelsteiner Wald (see map) has traditionally represented a formidable style and flavour of Austrian wine cultivated in a cadre of revered, south-facing sites. Its iconic dry-stone terraces mark the heart of traditional winemaking in Austria. And the long-lived, opulent Smaragd Grüner Veltliners for which the region is best known have historically skewed stylistically more toward statement than question. Monologue, not dialogue. Frontal instruction over experiential. Thus, it was that I sat down to the



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region's debut at the Single Vineyard Summit tasting this autumn with more than a fair amount of trepidation.



Domäne Wachau

But times have changed, and so has the 1,323-ha (3,269-acre) region. The last decade has seen a marked shift towards elegance over opulence, stemming in part from a single driver: Domäne Wachau. With over 250 vintner families (constituting nearly 400 ha), the large, 300+ year-old co-operative makes wine from parcels in nearly every one of the region's well-known single vineyards. And as of the 2018 vintage, the Domäne achieved the 'Sustainable Austria' certification, the result of intense efforts to educate growers on ecological ways to better mitigate heat and water stress in the vineyard. The success of the Domäne's approach has in turn inspired the private winemaker's association, Vinea Wachau Nobilis Districtus (aka Vinea Wachau) to implement stricter and even more sustainable-focused standards with its wide base of regional members.

The 2022 tasting featured over 108 wines, all but three (two late releases from Nikolaihof and a 2020 Riesling Smaragd from Weingut Eder Wachau) from the 2021 vintage. That year's cool conditions helped highlight the new focus in the Wachau. Delayed budbreak and a wet summer made way for a picture-perfect autumn – despite the mid-summer hailstorm in Rührsdorf and Rossatz – with large diurnal temperature shifts especially in the steep vineyards, and excellent development and balance when it comes to the twin poles of the modern profile: aromatics and acidity.

One of the Vinea Wachau's trademarked calling cards has traditionally been Federspiel: dry and linear white wines that accentuate not only the region's stony power but also its ethereal enchantments. While the style, together with its lighter



sibling Steinfeder, has experienced a decline in popularity, the wines represented some of my favourites of the tasting. They showed a fresh – and refreshing – face of the region: a nimble agility, a mineral-laced austerity and a filigreed delicacy unafraid to jump and play and inspire while maintaining its stony and serious soul.

The 53 wines below are grouped by grape variety – Rieslings then Grüner Veltliners – and in those groups are presented in the order tasted, Domäne Wachau wines first. You can reorder the wines within groups if you wish.

Dom Wachau, Achleiten Riesling Smaragd 2021 Wachau **17**

Juicy and fresh with stone fruit precision, bright acidity and a mildly bitter finish. The stony Achleiten spice shines through. (PS) 13.5% Drink 2023 – 2027

Dom Wachau, Singerriedel Riesling Smaragd 2021 Wachau **17+**

Cool and elegant aromas of peach and apricot, a touch exotic. Lithe, grippy palate channelling the cool, high terraces of the Spitz with a racy acidity and fine saline finesse. (PS) 13.5% Drink 2023 – 2030

Dom Wachau, Achleiten Grüner Veltliner Smaragd 2021 Wachau **17**

Herbal, grassy and nearly smoky aromas marked with ripe quince spice. Concentrated palate shows good energy, supple texture and a juicy, zesty finish. Rich in texture while keeping the weight in check. (PS) 14% Drink 2022 – 2029

Dom Wachau, Axpoint Grüner Veltliner Smaragd 2021 Wachau **16,5**

Cool yellow fruit aromas, hints of grass and hay. Spicy, concentrated palate with fruit purity and a savoury reveal. So crisp as to be nearly crunchy, yet with plenty of substance. Well balanced. (PS) 13.5% Drink 2022 – 2028



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Dom Wachau, Kirnberg Grüner Veltliner Smaragd 2021 Wachau 16,5

Nuanced smoky aromas, white flowers, drying herbs and ripe grapefruit. On the palate, deep zesty spice and minerality are woven throughout the juicy expression. Lithe and long, mildly heady on the spicy finish. (PS) 12.5% Drink 2022 – 2028

Dom Wachau, Kreuzberg Grüner Veltliner Federspiel 2021 Wachau 17

Characteristic pear and herbal spice aromas. Taut, zesty and nuanced citrus palate with delicate grip. Beautiful example of depth without width. Utterly fresh and balanced. (PS) 13% Drink 2022 – 2027

Dom Wachau, Pichlpoint Grüner Veltliner Federspiel 2021 Wachau 16

Tropical fruit aromas and herbal accents on a creamy fruit-driven palate. Balanced acidity and a soft, fruity finish. (PS) 12.5% Drink 2022 – 2027



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RISK AND REWARD IN AUSTRIA'S WARMING WACHAU

BY SIMON J. WOOLF | Nov. 2022

Great wine nations typically have their signature regions, the acknowledged leaders with global recognition or time-honored standing. In France, it's a toss-up between Bordeaux and Burgundy, whereas in Italy, Chianti and Barolo would probably fight it out. Austria, however, has no such ambivalence: The Wachau has been top dog for three decades running. Its status once allowed it to set rules rather than obey them; to create trends, not follow them. But in an age more and more defined by climate emergency, does this quietly conservative region now risk complacency — or can its winemakers react and adapt to maintain the Wachau's pole position?

The most westerly of Austria's regions ranged along the Danube, the Wachau is defined by dramatic, south-facing terraces along what is locally termed the "left bank" — a confusing expression that only makes sense if you are standing in Krems facing west. The "right bank" is therefore the vineyards on the north shore of the Danube, historically of far less interest in part due to their (once) unfavorable aspect. It's not just the Danube and the landscape that defines the region: so too does its modern-day focus on just two grape varieties, Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. Chardonnay is positively exotic here, red grapes close to nonexistent.

Historically, the Wachau has been considered a cool-climate region, situated at a more northerly latitude than Burgundy. The steep, stony terraces facing the river were the grower's best shot at getting their grapes ripe, with a little extra heat reflecting off the water and onto the fruit. In the mid-1980s, when the private winemaker's association Vinea Wachau drew up its famed Steinfeder, Federspiel, and Smaragd classifications, a clear connection was forged between ripeness and quality. The most prestigious category, Smaragd, is defined by its minimum alcohol level of 12.5%, a throwback to times when optimally ripe grapes were not the given that they are today.



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SIDELINING STEINFEDER

As summers grow hotter and vintages riper, it's becoming more challenging to harvest for lightweight Steinfeder, which must be bottled with 11% alcohol or less. Grower Georg Frischengruber, who is based in Rossatz on the "right bank," notes that "it's massively declined in popularity over the last 10 years or so, partly because people see Steinfeder as a cheap wine" — perhaps an inevitable consequence of Vinea Wachau placing it at the base of their quality triumvirate. Roman Horvath MW, director of the region's largest winery Domäne Wachau, confirms that "we have reduced this style from roughly one million bottles to about 300,000 bottles in the last 10 years."

Wachau's status once allowed it to set rules rather than obey them. But in an age defined by climate emergency does the cautious region risk complacency?

Isn't there a paradox here? The next generation of wine drinkers chase lightweight, fruit-focused cuvées in natural wine bars, of the type where growers harvest earlier and deliberately aim for lower alcohol and racy acidity. Just look to Burgenland and the Weinviertel, where, for example, Florian Schuhmann (Quantum) bottles a Blauer Portugieser which barely hits 10% alcohol in a good year. Growers such as Claus Preisinger, Renner & Rennasisters, and Koppitsch are all oriented around this approach. Although Steinfeder is conceptually tailor-made for this growing customer base, the Wachau's growers have yet to seize the opportunity. The closest might be Erich Machherndl's "Pulp Fiction" natural wine line, or a mouthwatering, hazy 12% abv Müller-Thürgau made by the team at Domäne Wachau as part of their "backstage" range. Needless to say, these more avant-garde wines do not fit into the current classification. But as models for a future reimaging of Steinfeder, they are surely faithful to its spirit — fresh, light styles for easy drinking and low ceremony.

CLIMATE-PROOFING THE VARIETY

Müller-Thürgau, it goes without saying, is not one of Wachau's noble grapes. And herein lies another issue. Out of the two exalted varieties in the region, only one seems climate-proof. Grüner Veltliner is a thirsty plant. Each winemaker I spoke with confirmed that growing Grüner in the Wachau without irrigation is next to impossible. Grüner has a tendency to stop ripening when conditions become too hot and dry, resulting in the risk that the hottest years ironically produce unbalanced and overly acidic fruit. Horvath admits that



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“irrigation is essential as a little help,” but explains that Domäne Wachau (which is a cooperative with around 200 members) is now working with its growers to focus on techniques such as denser planting and canopies, and a reduction in leaf plucking as alternative ways of reducing heat and water stress.

Horvath also concedes that “Riesling on certain terroirs will slightly increase” as a result of its greater suitability to warmer, drier conditions — it tolerates heat-stress and drought considerably better than Grüner. But he doesn’t see a future where Grüner declines in importance. “It’s our variety and I do not see any other that could replace it,” he says. In general, there is little deviation from this focus in the Wachau. Franz Hirtzberger, Jr. extols the virtues of his Chardonnay, a variety that is not only more drought-tolerant than Grüner, but also retains acidity better in hot climates. Hirtzberger’s Chardonnay Smaragd 2021, by way of example, is crisp and fresh despite its harvest in late October. The challenge? Chardonnay is disqualified for single-vineyard bottlings, and thus does not sit at the top of the region’s quality hierarchy.

In many other parts of Austria, growers experiment with the growing family of modern grape crossings known as PIWIs — fungus resistant varieties, to translate literally from the German. PIWI grape varieties are bred for a variety of reasons, with drought resistance being one possible vector. Others include resistance to oidium and/or peronospera, plus suitability for colder climates. But there is close to zero attention given to this potential avenue in the Wachau. Horvath remains adamant that “proper viticulture, Grüner Veltliner and Riesling,” will endure.

As models for a Steinfeder reimagined, these avant-garde examples remain faithful to its spirit — fresh, light, easy drinking and low ceremony.

Gazing out at the broad expanses of the Danube as it courses past the Wachau’s top vineyards — Achleiten, Kellerberg, Loibenberg, Axpoint, Singerriedel — it’s hard to imagine how water could be an issue here. But the Danube recorded historically low levels in nearby Bratislava during this summer, and even in the Wachau its level has sat close to a historic low for much of the last few months. Wherever the water is sourced, the option to irrigate is not a given for the future.

DOMÄNE WACHAU AS A FORCE FOR CHANGE

Despite Horvath's dismissal of alternative grape varieties, under his direction the work that the Domäne is doing to mitigate heat, drought, and sustainability issues is inspirational. Ground cover is a vital tool to aid water retention in the soil and to moderate the effects of excess heat, something that Horvath points out was barely implemented by anyone in the region 15 years ago. Domäne Wachau has worked to educate growers, and also has research plantings of some 100 different indigenous herbs and grasses, which are being analysed for their positive influence as cover crops in-between the vines. A specific mix of plants is recommended as a cover crop on the shallow, stony soils of the Wachau's steep terraces.



Roman Horvarth (l) and Heinz Frischengruber (r). Photo Credit Rogl

The Domäne is a vital organ when it comes to driving change. Since 2018, it offers the incentive of a 50% bonus on the grape price to growers who convert to organic viticulture — a farming practice that not only eschews chemical inputs, but also typically encourages cover crops in place of more interventionist solutions. Georg Frischengruber told me that in Rossatz, around 50% of the growers have now converted to organic as a direct result of Domäne Wachau's policy. Horvath confirmed that the Domäne itself has



around 130 of its 400 hectares already converted. He is also eager to point out that their initiatives “are for the whole region.” There’s often a clear pattern of Vinea Wachau adopting policies that the Domäne initiates. As Horvath explains, first to go were glyphosates, then herbicides and insecticides, then the Domäne achieved “Sustainable Austria” certification in 2017. Vinea Wachau has followed suit and is now working with all of its 200-plus producers to ensure that they achieve this minimum standard.

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Importantly, the stylistic trend over the last decade has also shifted. Where overripe botrytis-influenced Smaragds had become de rigeur by the beginning of the 21st century, many of the brightest lights in the region now prefer elegance and restraint. This translates into earlier harvesting, combined with the aforementioned vineyard tweaks to maximize freshness, acidity, and fruit purity. Domäne Wachau is exemplary in this regard, as are Georg Frischengruber, Pichler-Krutzler, and a clutch of newer names in the cool Spitzergraben sub-region: Martin Muthenthaler, Peter Veder-Malberg, and Grabenwerkstatt.



Photo Credit Simon J. Woolf

Still, it can’t be denied that the Wachau lags behind many other Austrian wine regions when it comes to exploration of alternative farming methods, a wider diversity of grape varieties, or more radical changes to the profile of its wines. Nikolaihof remains perhaps the only estate where Neuburger, a variety with a long history in the region, gets any real respect. It has better odds of surviving



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drought and heat-stress than Grüner Veltliner, yet plantings have dipped below 16 hectares in the whole of the Wachau, compared to 830 hectares of Grüner. Biodynamic farming and minimal intervention or natural winemaking have gained significant traction in Burgenland and Styria, and to a greater or lesser extent all along the Danube's other wine regions. There might not be a direct relationship between these philosophies and a response to the climate emergency, yet they do provide a clue to the region's appetite for change.

That said, the Wachau's trump card is definitely those two major forces for continual improvement: Domäne Wachau and Vinea Wachau. Whilst other regions sometimes show more of a scatter-gun approach, with different factions and philosophical groupings taking their own directions and inching forward on multiple fronts, the Wachau is capable of a more consistent and meaningful response when it decides to move. The extraordinary response to Domäne Wachau's organic conversion incentive is simply one example. Reactiveness and evolution are in train, even if Wachau continues to operate under slightly different rules. After all, no one here wants to lose that top spot on the pedestal of Austria's wine regions.