

# Austria: All Along the Danube River – The Great 2019 Vintage and First Heralds of the 2020 Vintage

Stephan Reinhardt 16th Dec 2021 | The Wine Advocate | *December 2021*

## Domäne Wachau Ratings

### **96 Points - 2019 Riesling Smaragd Ried Achleiten**

The citrus-golden colored 2019 Ried Achleiten Riesling Smaragd offers a gorgeously concentrated and defined bouquet of perfectly ripe, just juicy peaches and crushed dark stones whose enormous smokiness reminds me of dark volcanic rocks. Full-bodied, rich and concentrated, with enormously piquant fruit and thrilling tension, this is a great, always pure, tight and also refined Achleiten with a long, intense and juicy as well as salty-piquant finish with fine tannins. Challenging and a great vin de terroir. 13.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **96 Points - 2019 Riesling Smaragd Ried Kellerberg**

The 2019 Ried Kellerberg Riesling Smaragd is another coolish, citric and a flinty but intense and complex cru of the Domäne that is reminiscent of crushed stones and lemon oil notes combined with white peach, quince and even intense floral aromas. Very elegant and refined on the balanced and seamless palate, this is a full-bodied, concentrated and very powerful yet not alcoholic Riesling with a long and sustainably salty finish with lime and lemon zest bitters and grip. Still very young but already impressive. 13.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **95 Points - 2019 Riesling Smaragd Ried Singerriedel**

The 2019 Ried Singerriedel Riesling Smaragd opens with a coolish and flinty bouquet of crushed stones and white stone fruits and is an exemplary representation of the coolish terroir of Spitz. Refined, piquant and stony on the palate, with crystalline acidity and a firm phenolic structure, this is a linear, straightforward and impressively precise Riesling with finely concentrated stone vineyard peach fruit and dense and finely crystalline mineral acidity. It is impressive and cooler, purer and fresher in style than Hirtzberger's. Very long and salty-piquant, with great aging potential. 13% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **95 Points - 2018 Riesling Amphora**

From terraced Riesling vineyards in Dürnstein and fermented in Spanish and Georgian amphorae, the 2018 Riesling Amphora was vinified on the mash for about six months. This intensely golden-colored Riesling offers a matured nose of ripe and elegant stone fruit and tart orange zest, porcini sud and floral/herbal aromas with phenolic, herbal (nettle), earthy and some feral notes. Bottled unfiltered, unfiltered and unsulfured, this is an elegant, refined and crystalline but structured and phenolic Riesling with noble lemon zest bitters and a slightly drying finish that needs the right dish. The wine is really elegant and fruity, but you shouldn't fear bitterness and grip on the long and intense, very concentrated and aromatic finish. 12.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **94+ Points - 2019 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Ried Kellerberg**

From the bottom of the cru, the 2019 Ried Kellerberg Grüner Veltliner Smaragd opens with phenolic notes covering the ripe and partly tropical fruit aromas that are dense and concentrated and again quote mirabelle aromas. This is a wine that needs to be poured into a



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carafe before it is served. Full-bodied and rich on the palate, it is a powerful and structured Kellerberg Veltliner that needs a big glass and lots of patience. 14% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

#### **94 Points - 2019 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Ried Achleiten**

From manifold plots from west to east, the 2019 Ried Achleiten Grüner Veltliner Smaragd has a brilliant and intense citrus color and offers a deep, delicately flinty and refreshing bouquet of crushed stones intermingled with lemon oil and juice notes as well as mirabelle aromas. Full-bodied and round, with crystalline acidity and a tight mineral and phenolic structure, this is a dense and complex Achleiten with an intense and still tight but persistent finish. An excellent 2019 to be aged for years. 14% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

#### **94 Points - 2019 Roter Traminer Reserve**

From the Ried Setzberg and a plot facing the forest, the radiant golden-colored 2019 Roter Traminer Spitz an der Donau Reserve is beautifully aromatic but in an elegant and floral way (think of the Alsace Grand Cru Sporen), with refreshing orange aromas and notes of crushed stones and finely toasted oak (Stockinger). Round and juicy on the palate, with fine tannins and some oaky nuances, this is an elegant, refreshing, crystalline and salty Traminer with candied grapefruit bitters on the finish. Excellent yet still a baby. 13.5% alcohol plus 10 grams per liter of residual sugar. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

#### **93+ Points - 2019 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Ried Axpoint**

From the bottom of the Spitzer Singerriedel and from deeper soils in a coolish climate, the 2019 Ried Axpoint Grüner Veltliner Smaragd is bright and elegant on the finely aromatic nose that delivers ripe and elegant white fruit aromas intertwined with flinty notes. Full-bodied, precise and fresh on the palate, with intense but substantial fruit and structure, this is a sustainable Axpoint with remarkable finesse, freshness and tension and a refreshing and mineral finish. It is very salty and crystalline on the aftertaste and with fine tannin bitters. 13.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

#### **93+ Points - 2020 Riesling Federspiel Ried Steinriegl**

From steep terraces in Weissenkirchen that have a high content of chalk intermixed with the characteristic gneiss soils, the 2020 Ried Steinriegl Riesling Federspiel offers an intense and aromatic bouquet of stewed apricots and milled stones intertwined with lemony aromas. Dense and silky on the palate, this is a textural, pure, refined and very elegant as well as complex and stony Riesling with a tight tannin structure and sustainable fruit. This is a wine that needs to be aged for at least 2-5 years but already shows its huge talent today. 12% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

#### **93 Points - 2018 Chardonnay Reserve**

The 2018 Chardonnay Reserve comes from two plots in Weissenkirchen and was vinified in 300-liter oak barrels (one to six years old) and aged for 20 months on the fine lees. It displays a radiant yellow-golden color and opens with a very elegant, refined and flinty, very aromatic, finely oaky and tannic bouquet of ripe stone fruits. It is full-bodied, refined and very elegant on the palate, with fine tannins and good mineral freshness; this Chardonnay from crystalline soils reveals an extensive and tensioned palate with fine tannins, lemon bitters and persistent salinity and grip. It is stunningly fresh and pure for this hot and warm vintage but from a late and cooler terroir and still very young. Excellent aging capacity. 13% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.



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### **93 Points - 2019 Grüner Veltliner Spitzer Graben Steinwerk**

Fermented and vinified naturally in stoneware (granite and marble) and aged on the lees for one year plus another couple of months in stainless steel for clarification, the 2019 Spitzer Graben Grüner Veltliner Steinwerk comes from 50- to 60-year-old terraced vineyards and displays a radiant golden-yellow color along with a clear, elegant and refined, remarkably vegetal and herbal bouquet with delicate notes of spicy seeds and finely milled stones. The wine shows a very elegant, pure, refined and fresh palate with an intense and quite powerful but seriously structured and phenolic finish. Excellent, but even better when aged in a carafe for some hours. Bottled in December 2020, tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **93 Points - 2020 Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Ried Kreuzberg**

The 2020 Ried Kreuzberg Grüner Veltliner Federspiel is from an extremely cool, terraced site in Rossatz that cools down extremely in the night. Cultivated on loess and loam topsoils covering amphibolite, this Kreuzberg is very clear and herbal on the remarkably complex nose that reveals concentrated but still reduced fruit intertwined with flinty notes due to the black stones of the bedrock. Full-bodied, dense and complex on the palate, this is a firmly structured and more phenolic Federspiel that might be the wing designation for a deep and complex wine like this. The wine is pure and refined, provided with crystalline acidity, serious grip and lingering salinity and finishes with a persistent ripe mirabelle aroma. It's an impressive wine that deserves all our patience. 12.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **93 Points - 2020 Riesling Federspiel Ried Bruck**

From a very pure and cool site in the Spitzer Graben that is located up to 500 meters in altitude, the 2020 Ried Bruck Riesling Federspiel is a fascinating wine with regard to terroir style and quality. It is pure, precise and refined on the nose, with concentrated, ripe white peach aromas intertwined with floral and herbal notes (i.e. woodruff). This is a medium to full-bodied, dense and crystalline, beautifully pure and elegant Riesling with finely concentrated apricot and peach aromas (but with this coolish touch), spectacularly precise and salty acidity that cuts the apricot like a laser sword and fine tannin grip on the stimulatingly bitter finish. This is another remarkable terroir wine from the Domäne, and I would keep to for at least 10 years, although it already tastes very attractive. 12.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **92 Points - 2019 Müller-Thurgau Extrem MTX**

From 60-year-old vines on the Ried Weitenberg's plateau, macerated on the press for some hours, vinified naturally in a concrete egg and bottled without filtration and the addition of SO<sub>2</sub> in December 2020, the 2019 Müller-Thurgau Extrem MTX displays a bright and fresh but slightly cloudy citrus color. Clear, fresh and characterful on the nose, with flinty notes and precise white fruit aromas with discreet mocha and lemon notes, this is a clear, fresh and elegant, finely structured and persistent white with a lemony grip on the finely bitter finish. This medium-bodied wine is very quaffable but on a serious and expressive level. There are citrus notes with a fine phenolic grip on the finely bitter and stimulatingly salty aftertaste. Excellent. 12.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

### **92 Points - 2020 Gemischter Satz Smaragd Uralt-Reben**

From the Ried Vorderseiber that was planted in the middle of the 1920s, the 2020 Gemischter Satz Uralt-Reben Smaragd was vinified in 500-liter tonneau and was bottled in June just a few days before I tasted it. The wine is precise and flinty on the nose but also reductive, pure and stony. Fresh and piquant on the palate, this bone-dry and herbal field blend reveals an untamed and quite phenolic character at this early stage. It is very salty on the citric finish with fine tannins. 13% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

**92 Points - 2020 Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Ried Liebenberg**

The 2020 Ried Liebenberg Grüner Veltliner Federspiel offers a more generous and aromatic bouquet of stewed stone fruits along with darker-toned flinty notes of gneiss and slate. Crystalline, very pure, vibrantly fresh and salty, this is a challenging terroir wine with great expression of a coolish terroir but also finesse. The finish reveals delicate lime and grapefruit bitters and fine tannin grip. Excellent. A very stony character. 12.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

**92 Points - 2020 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Terrassen**

The 2020 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Terrassen is intense and spicy on the generous and quite complex nose that reveals notes of crushed (black) stones rather than from loess. Round and elegant on the palate, with fine, crystalline and salty-mineral acidity and fine bitters on the finish, this is an impressive wine for low budgets. 13% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

**91 Points - 2020 Riesling Federspiel Ried Loibenberg**

The 2020 Ried Loibenberg Riesling Federspiel is precise and concentrated on the deep and flinty nose that displays ripe stone fruit including golden passion fruit aromas. It is pure, fresh and salty on the palate, with certain bitters on the finish that seem to be a bit forced for my personal taste. This is a lean, straight and coolish Loibenberg with ripe but tart fruit and a somewhat astringent finish. 12% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

**91 Points - 2020 Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Kaiserberg**

From the most western site of Dürnstein that is very steep and some of the oldest vines of the Domäne Wachau, the 2020 Ried Kaiserberg Grüner Veltliner Federspiel offers an intense and spicy, quite complex and deep bouquet of ripe yellow stone fruits and crushed (gneiss) soils. Medium-bodied, very elegant and refined on the palate, this is a pure and crystalline Veltliner with a serious mineral expression and fine tannin grip on the finish that reveals stimulating bitters but also a juicy substance. It is still tight but straight and with a limey/grapefruit bitterness in the finish. 12.5% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

**89 Points - 2020 Riesling Federspiel Terrassen**

The 2020 Riesling Federspiel Terrassen offers a beautifully aromatic, typical Wachau Riesling bouquet with precise and crystalline spiced apricot aromas. Lush and round on the palate, this is a full, dense and juicy-piquant Riesling with crystalline and salty acidity and a very good finish. A classic with challenging mineral acidity and citrus-fruit grip. 12% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

**87+ Points - 2020 Riesling Smaragd Terrassen**

The 2020 Riesling Smaragd Terrassen is sourced from multiple vineyards between Spitzer Graben and Loiben and offers an intense, aromatic and elegant stone fruit aroma that is not as brilliant, though, as the impressive single-vineyard Federspiel Rieslings. Rich and intense, with juicy fruit, fine salinity and some phenolic bitters, this is a mouth-filling Riesling that should be aged for about three years. 13% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.

**87 Points - 2020 Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Terrassen**

From terraced Wachau vineyards, the 2020 Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Terrassen is an Austrian icon wine in terms of quality, style and quantity. Ripe and aromatic on the dense and fleshy nose, with stewed stone fruit aromas and fine crystallinity, this is a compact, firmly structured, refreshing and grippy Veltliner with remarkable crisp acidity and precise on the finish. Very stimulating. 12% alcohol. Tasted at the domaine in June 2021.



I wasn't able to taste the acclaimed 2019s from the Danube regions before June this year when I combined them with the first bottlings of the 2020 vintage, which was much less acclaimed at the time. "Please write about our 2019s so that this historic vintage gets immortalized in your review," was the sentence I heard several times during my three weeks in the region. The producers still had their 2019s in mind and were curious about my comments, whereas I had their 2020s on the palate and was thinking something they had never expected: I liked the first heralds of the 2020 vintage, which were the village wines, as the crus or Erste Lage wines were still under protection from being reviewed. The comparison might have been unfair in terms of complexity yet not so in terms of vintage character. My heart was immediately with the 2020s: the 2019s (particularly the Rieslings) were surely and absolutely impressive in all their richness, intensity and power, but the coolish, elegant and spicy nature of the 2020s conquered my heart immediately. Here again was the style for which I have been searching for more than 20 years. I fell in love with the wines from the Danube in the late 1990s (namely with 1997 and 1999) and, ever since, have been missing this spicy, fresh and coolish character that made Austrian wines a serious alternative to German white wines that had just set out on the road to the GGs at that time. In September this year, I joined a silent press tasting of the Austrian Traditionsweingüter and the Steirische Klassik producers at Schloss Grafenegg in the Kamptal and tasted more wines in the following weeks. No producers from the Wachau join the Traditionsweingüter, but I didn't have the time to add a Wachau trip after the Grafenberg tasting as I have done in previous years, which is why several 2020 Smaragd wines from top sites are not included in this report.

Back to the vintages and their wines. The winter of 2019—which was not very wintry, because it was warm and had little precipitation—was followed by a changeable spring. April was very warm, while the coldest May since 1991 brought a lot of rain and slowed down the development of the vines. Late frosts were fortunately absent. In retrospect, however, this wet period was a stroke of luck, as it played a decisive role in ensuring that the vines survived the hot summer months unscathed. But not only that, in the end the cool, damp May also contributed to a noticeably different aroma compared to 2018, in which this "water reservoir" was not present. The flowering of the vines began at the usual time and took place in favorable weather conditions so that losses due to trickling were limited.



The summer began with the warmest and driest June since measurements began and continued with an almost equally hot July and August. However, and fortunately, the heat waves were not as extreme as in 2017 and 2018, nor was there any hail damage, unlike the flyaway year of 2020.

From the end of August, a welcome and much longed-for cooler period set in and, above all, brought pleasantly cool night temperatures, which also had a positive effect on the fruit aromas and acid structure of the wines. Autumn was very mild and balanced, so that the main harvest could take place according to plan and without rush, especially since there was no prolonged rainfall. The grapes were fully ripe and in perfect health in all wine-growing regions, as there was hardly any fungal infection or rot pressure due to the preceding high temperatures and drought. All the winegrowers I spoke to this summer were happy with the vintage. Personally, I particularly like the Riesling crus from the 2019 vintage (with the



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Heiligenstein from Schloss Gobelsburg taking the lead) while many Grüner Veltliners are a touch too opulent. However, this is not a generally valid statement, because the site as well as the processing of the grapes and the musts are also factors in how the wines turned out in the end. On the barren, stony soils in the cool Senftenberg (Kremstal), for example, Riesling and Veltliner are pretty much on a par, while in warmer sites with lighter soils and less coolish nights, the Veltliner could lose a bit of its tension, as in previous years. Unlike Riesling, Veltliner must not be harvested half a day too late if precision is not to be lost. Hours count here. But in general, 2019 has produced numerous Veltliners of absolute world class, with Hirtzberger's Honivogl and Knoll's Vinothekfüllung in front. There were certainly rather few of these in the 1990s.

The 2020 white wines from the Danube region are aromatic, fresh and rather light but show lively structure and then quite a lot of terroir expression at the top. Here and there, for example at Prager, I like the 2020 crus even a bit better than the strong 2019s, but that may be an early snapshot. One thing, however, seems certain: the 2020s are not just a small vintage after the great 2019s.

After a dry winter, budbreak was somewhat delayed in some areas. Another very warm and sunny April did not accelerate development too much, however, as it was accompanied by extreme drought that lasted for weeks. A few frost nights caused damage in unfavorable locations, but overall, the damage was insignificant. Precipitation fell in concentrated form in May, and June was also very wet and changeable. Flowering took place at an average time and was essentially unproblematic, even if there was some trickling.



*Michael Linke, co-founder of Grabenwerkstatt, with the lineup of Rieslings and Grüner Veltliners*

This was followed by a summer in which sunny and rainy periods alternated. There were no prolonged heat waves and no high peak temperatures. However, the frequent rainfall led to strong growth of the vines and disease pressure. Careful canopy management and good ventilation of the grape zone were therefore very important to counteract the spread of fungal diseases. Things looked very good in the vineyards until mid-August. However, hailstorms then occurred in the Wachau, Kremstal and

Traisental, causing terrible damage, particularly in Spitz/Wachau.

September was also changeable: on the one hand, it recorded as many hours of sunshine as a summer month and correspondingly high daytime temperatures; on the other hand, toward the end of the month, many areas experienced persistent heavy rainfall with record-breaking amounts of precipitation. Due to this warm and humid weather, the winegrowers were extremely busy to maintain the health of the grapes. Relatively low nighttime temperatures had a positive effect on aroma formation and acid structure. The main harvest began at the beginning of September and lasted until the end of October under quite good conditions. Precise selections and thus cost-intensive harvesting was necessary.

*Domäne Wachau Leaders Heinz Frischengruber and Roman Horvath*

"When an unprecedented hailstorm destroyed vineyards across the Wachau on August 22, we could hardly imagine being able to present such multilayered and profound wines a year later," sums up Roman Horvath, Master of Wine and director of the Domäne Wachau. "As many vines were slow to regenerate, the ripening of the grapes was delayed, which ultimately turned out to be a great advantage. Harvesting of our single-vineyard Smaragd wines didn't begin until around All Saints' Day, later than ever before."



The sunny but cool late autumn days and the long vegetation phase resulted in crystal-clear, precise, finely fruity and expressive wines characterized by fine minerality and racy acids with a thoroughly rich body. This report will show that there are more than enough 2020s that are worth cellaring, the more so since it won't be easy to find the finest 2019s.

By the way, first comments on the 2021 vintage are more than promising. According to Roman Horvath, "A rather cold spring and a cool, mixed summer led to a delayed development of ripeness. A unique, rarely so magnificent picture-book autumn with lots of sun during the day, little precipitation and cool nights allowed the grapes to ripen perfectly and gave us a very great vintage. Wines with power and equally convincing elegance and finesse, combined with depth, lots of tension on the palate and taut acidity are the key words of the vintage."