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Domäne Wachau: producer profile

The Austrian cooperative Domäne Wachau is focused, as it should be, on producing often magnificent single-vineyard wines from the Wachau's great sites.



Stephen Brook: March 31, 2022



Wine tourists usually drive past cooperatives without stopping, and for good reason. Most of them operate on the principle of the lowest common denominator. Finding a home for tons of often mediocre grapes is the priority, not high-quality wine production. There are exceptions in Chablis, St-Emilion, Barbaresco – and in the town of Dürnstein in the Wachau.

Originally known as the Freie Weingärtner Wachau, this cooperative's name was changed in 2008. But by then it already had a strong reputation. It works with 250 growers who farm 450 hectares, and the annual production is around three million bottles. It does help that the region contains some of Europe's outstanding vineyards.

The Wachau is the most westerly region along the Danube, with most sites overlooking the river, which has a strong moderating influence. Soils vary, with ancient gneiss and other stony soil types high up, where Riesling is planted on



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terraced vineyards. Lower down Grüner Veltliner, the dominant variety, thrives on slightly more fertile soils.

Many of the growers farm tiny parcels, often well under a hectare, but located in exceptional sites. All told, the Domäne has substantial holdings in some of Wachau's top sites such as Achleiten, Kellerberg, Singerriedl, and many more. The result is a spectacular collection of single-vineyard wines, as well as more commercial offerings such as rosés from Zweigelt.



Roman Horvath, one of Austria's few Masters of Wine, is the director, and at his side is Heinz Frischengruber, who comes from a local family of growers. Frischengruber is the cooperative's secret weapon.

During the summer he is out in the vineyards with the growers every day to supervise the farming and, later, the harvest. He also runs seminars on treatments, organic farming, and other issues of common interest.

Together with Horvath and the growers, he decides on picking dates by tasting in each vineyard. All sorting is done among the vines, and there are no sorting tables at the winery.

Fermentation takes place using indigenous yeasts and also the Domäne's own selection. Malolactic fermentation is discouraged. The single-vineyard wines are generally aged in large casks so there is no overt oak influence.

Botrytis is quite common in the region. Some producers welcome a touch of noble rot for the added complexity and weight it brings; others try to avoid it at all costs to retain a classic style. The team here is in the latter camp, so any



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heavily botrytised fruit is separated and used to produce sweet wines. But these are the exceptions, as the main focus is on dry white wines.

The Wachau has created a quality hierarchy based on ripeness at harvest. Steinfeder is the lowest level – fresh wines for early drinking – while Smaragd, named after a green lizard that suns itself on the dry stone walls around the vineyards, is the highest, with alcohol levels generally between 13% and 14.5%.

Steinfeder has all but disappeared, as global warming guarantees good ripeness in most recent vintages, but the Domäne remains keen on its Federspiel wines. Most of them are blends under the 'Terrassen' brand, and they offer good value, with varietal typicity, great freshness, and a moderate capacity to age.



Some years ago I attended the launch of the Wachau's 2010 Smaragd vintage and asked when the wines would be consumed. 'From tomorrow,' I was told. There is no doubt that Austrians and Germans too like their white wines young, and their youthful vibrancy can be very enjoyable. But bottle age can bring out aromas and nuances not apparent when the wine is very young, and in a good vintage, both Riesling and Grüner Veltliner Smaragd wines can easily age for twenty years. This is entirely a matter of personal preference.

Domäne Wachau also enjoys producing more experimental wines under their 'Backstage' category.

These include a Riesling fermented on the skins for six months in 300-litre amphorae, then aged further in neutral barrels. Müller-Thurgau 'X' is



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fermented in concrete eggs, but in my experience, it's an austere wine with many of the limitations of this generous variety.

More interesting is 'SteinWerk', a Grüner Veltliner vinified in a tank made of marble. For me, the most intriguing of the Backstage wines is the Gemischter Satz or field blend. This style is common in Vienna but less so in other parts of Austria. These vines – some from varieties that are no longer planted – are close to a century old, and fermented in older tonneaux.

Nonetheless, these Backstage wines are sidelines. The focus remains, as it should be, on the often magnificent single-vineyard wines from the Wachau's great sites.

Thanks to the domaine's scrupulous attention to detail, especially in the vineyards, these bottlings can be every bit as fine as many pricier offerings from established estates in the region.

Stephen Brook's top Domäne Wachau picks

Domäne Wachau, Federspiel Terrassen Grüner Veltliner 2021

90 points

The nose is fragrant, with delicate and charming apple aromas. This is fresh and tight, and the fine acidity gives a tangy, almost sherbety aftertaste.

Precise and persistent, with a long, dry finish. It's been bottled recently, but is already approachable.

Domäne Wachau, Federspiel Ried Liebenberg Grüner Veltliner 2020

91 points

This is a single-vineyard Federspiel, and is less fruit-forward than the Terrassen. The nose is discrete and reserved, with herbal aromas. For Federspiel, this is rich and creamy but it's also concentrated and quite assertive. Ample acidity brings out the spiciness, but there's no rawness although this was a cool vintage. Quite long, mineral finish.

Domäne Wachau, Smaragd Ried Kellerberg Grüner Veltliner 2020

92 points

Although 2020 was a fairly cool vintage, the nose is rich and juicy, with aromas of apples and fresh herbs. It's suave and concentrated, an imposing wine with some grandeur, and while broad, it's not heavy. The finish is prolonged by the wine's fine acidity.



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Domäne Wachau, Smaragd Ried Achleiten Grüner Veltliner 2019

94 points

Cool nights in September helped preserve the freshness of the grapes, and the result was a fine, ripe vintage. There are rich apple compote aromas on the nose, which is lightly floral and smoky. The attack is zesty but the mid-palate has considerable weight and volume, underpinned by good acidity. This is harmonious, with a long, nutty, mineral finish.

Domäne Wachau, Smaragd Ried Achleiten Riesling 2020

93 points

The Riesling fruit comes through strongly, with intense citrus aromas, and an assertive attack that's very dry. It's not a fleshy style, but it has extract and mineality. It's not very expressive now, so needs time. There's tension and persistence but at present it's austere.

Domäne Wachau, Spitzer Graben Steinwerk Grüner Veltliner 2020

92 points

This is one of the Domane's backstage wines, from a top site in the western part of the region, but aged in a marble tank. The nose is open, and richly floral. It's plump and exuberant, full and fleshy despite the moderate alcohol. It lacks some drive but it's accessible, with a long juicy finish that's also quite mineral.

Domäne Wachau, Smaragd Ried Achleiten Riesling 1995

95 points

Tasted from magnum. Although this was a vintage affected by botrytis, it's not really evident on the nose, which is vivid, herbal and smoky. It still displays explosive fruit, rich but fresh, spicy and zesty. It's full-bodied but very mineral, and any botrytis is now integrated into the palate. The finish is persistent but not aggressive. Overall, a magnificent demonstration of how these wines can age.

Domäne Wachau, Auslese Ried Achleiten Grüner Veltliner 1969

90 points

This is a throwback from a time when lightly sweet wines had a good following. This Auslese would have been fermented in casks for a few years before bottling. The residual sugar is modest - either 10 or 25 grams per litre. The full straw colour shows the age, and the nose has aromas of dried apricots and honey. It's lightly sweet, delicate and silky. Quite concentrated, the finish is gentle and graceful. Fully ready but not tiring thanks to its pretty acidity. Quite long.



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Domäne Wachau, Gemischter Satz Smaragd Uralt-Reben 2021
92 points

Gemischter Satz is the Austrian term for a field blend, and this one is composed of vines planted in the 1920s and 1930s. Some are virtually extinct varieties, so the precise blend is unknown. This tank sample has muted apricot aromas, while the palate is compact, austere, and very dry. It has grip but lacks some charm now, though there's a chewy nuttiness. Fine acidity assures a very long finish.