



SPITZER GRABEN

The Spitzer Graben is a side valley of the Danube - whose riverbed was once responsible for its formation - running northwest from Spitz. The bottom of the valley begins at Spitz, at 223 metres above sea level, and ends eight kilometres further on, in Mühldorf, at 360 metres above sea level. The Spitzer Graben is lined by nearly a dozen vineyards perched mainly on very steep slopes that are amongst the highest in the Wachau and, in fact, all of Lower Austria.

History

The Spitzer Graben is a historic wine-growing region. In the 13th century, it was the largest and most important area cultivated for an already highly developed wine culture around Spitz. However, over the centuries, climate changes and other upheavals saw this focus gradually shift to the Danube valley. The wines from the Spitzer Graben increasingly lost their reputation, and by the 19th century weren't considered good enough even for making vinegar. Fortunately, this was reversed by the end of the 20th century. Today, the Spitzer Graben is one of the cool and highly sought-after outlying vineyard sites where budbreak and harvesting often take place weeks later than in the vineyards along the Danube.

Climate

The conditions in the Spitzer Graben are more extreme than in the vineyards directly along the Danube and even the rest of Austria. The harvests are later, the terraces steeper, and the rains more frequent. The average temperatures are lower than in the Danubelined vineyards because the narrow valley has more shade. Also, drying after rainfalls takes longer.

Total annual rainfall is just over 500 mm; that's ten percent more than in the rest of the Wachau. Viticulture's climatic limits are practically reached the further inward and upward one goes. In general, there are two dominant climatic factors identified in the Spitzer Graben: the cool air currents from the Waldviertel - which influence the growth of the vines; and the cold air masses that flow down continuously into the Graben across the wooded slopes of the Jauerling, which is around 1,000 metres high. That viticulture is possible at all is because of the mainly south-facing sites and their soils, which are based on mica schist and gneiss and store the daytime-accumulated heat throughout the night.

Geology

The dominant rock specific to the Spitzer Graben is granodiorite gneiss from the orthogneiss group. The single vineyards Bruck,

Kalkofen, Zornberg, Offenberg and Gasselreith are comprised of this to a large extent. Sometimes also known as Spitzer gneiss, granodiorite gneiss had metamorphosed from granodiorite hundreds of millions of years ago. This igneous rock is mostly gray in colour, resembles granite and, like it, consists of the three main minerals feldspar, quartz and mica. Gneiss can protrude through the ground surface when either the topsoil has eroded away or tectonic movement has pushed the gneiss upwards. Orthogneiss soils, like granodiorite gneiss, are sandy and warm up quickly. This light soil type also guarantees easy water drainage and good rootability. And in some vineyards, there are also deposits of mica schist - which is also metamorphic - but the content is lower in feldspar and higher in mica than that of granodiorite gneiss.

The core of other various single vineyards (Offenberg, Singerriedel and 1000-Eimer-Berg), is Spitzer marble, known also as Wachau marble and which is a crystalline, granular limestone with a dark gray colour, a strong granite content and a high degree of hardness. Its chromophoric mineral is graphite. Marble was quarried in the Spitzer Graben until the 1970s. Like gneiss, it is a metamorphic rock formed by marine deposits (mussels shellfish, fish skeletons) that have been transformed by pressure and high temperatures. In weathered form, marble is also part of the topsoil, in which the two carbonates, calcite and dolomite, are predominant. Because of its hardness and resistance, it is also called granite marble.

Amphibolites are always present with Spitz granodiorite gneiss and appears in differing extents in the paragneiss packages. Amphibolite soils are sandy, permeable and warm up well, and are rich in potassium, iron and magnesium. Paragneisses develop light, poor and sandy soils with good water drainage and easy rooting and that warm up quickly in spring.

Grosslage Spitzer Graben

Due to its distinctive climatic, topographical and geological conditions, the Spitzer Graben became in 2018 the only part of the Wachau to be defined as a Grosslage, a large collective vineyard site. It is considered highly distinctive from the rest of the Wachau.

The Grosslage Spitzer Graben encompasses the vineyards in Gut am Steg, Spitz, Vießling, Elsarn am Jauerling and Mühldorf. The best-known single vineyards of the Spitzer Graben include Trennung (the highest in Lower Austria, at 529 metres), Brandstatt, Bruck, Schön, Kalkofen, Biern, Zornberg and Offenberg. The Spitzer Graben also includes the single vineyards in Spitz,





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including Setzberg, Axpoint, Singerriedel and 1000-Eimer-Berg. Domäne Wachau has 33 of the 75 hectares of vineyards in the Grosslage Spitzer Graben. Just under half of this is planted with Grüner Veltliner, 20 percent is devoted to Riesling and nine percent comprises Neuburger. The rest are a range of other grape varieties traditionally found in the Wachau.

Excursus: The Neuburger

Although there are only a few hectares of Neuburger left in the Spitzer Graben, it is still one of the significant grape varieties here. A natural cross between Roter Veltliner and Sylvaner, the Neuburger grape actually had been planted extensively from the 1870s onwards.

One of its most important advantages is resistance to heat and drought. This may seem rather paradoxical, considering that the Spitzer Graben is a valley with an abundance of rainfall. However, the terrain of the vineyards is so stony that the water drains away very quickly, thanks to the extremely low water storage capacity of the shallow surface.

Before drip irrigation and climatic changes allowed for the planting of Grüner Veltliner and, especially, Riesling, Neuburger was exactly the right answer to the extreme conditions in the valley. But because this variety also has disadvantages due to its short shoots and tight, compact berries that are, as a result, susceptible to rot, its vineyard plantings have gradually decreased over the past decades. This is unfortunate, because - aside from the fact that Neuburger is part of the local cultural heritage and contributes to biodiversity - it is also adaptable, full of character and highly distinctive aromatically and produces excellent results in all quality categories of the Wachau.

The Wines

Wines from the Spitzer Graben generally have vibrant acidity and a tight, focused texture. These characteristics are currently being explored and revealed especially by several very small wineries, most of which are significantly smaller than those in the rest of the Wachau; this plays an important role for Domäne Wachau. Around 70 wineries have an average of just over one vineyard hectare and cultivate their vines almost exclusively by hand.

The wines of the Högl and Johann Donabaum wineries also have a precise style that is influenced by the terroir. And in recent years, the spectrum of wines from the Spitzer Graben has expanded to include very fine, subtle and profound versions from the Malberg, Grabenwerkstatt and Muthenthaler wineries. Nevertheless, the Spitzer Graben would not have the importance it has today if Domäne Wachau had not been promoting the smallscale structure and special character of the vineyards and sites for decades. In the meantime, we are getting to the bottom of the immense potential of the terroir through three of our wines.

We've already presented the Riesling Federspiel Bruck in an individual portrait. But there are also two other wines dedicated to the Spitzer Graben and its unique conditions. The Neuburger Federspiel Spitzer Graben Sommelier Edition is compact, vital and powerful, with a multidimensional aroma spectrum of citrus fruit, nuts and white stone fruit.

Also the grapes for the Grüner Veltliner Steinwerk come from the Spitzer Graben. Fermented and matured in a marble barrel and partly in a cask carved from granite, the "wine from stone" is captivating with its intense fruit, deep spiciness, elegance and balance and, of course, the pronounced minerality.

