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DOMÄNE WACHAU

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A Wine Cooperative Reimagined: Domäne Wachau Sets New Benchmarks Worldwide

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by Sonja Planeta | Kalk & Kegel, Oct. 25th 2024

From underdog to the region's trailblazer! Domäne Wachau Winery Director Roman Horvath MW and Winemaker Heinz Frischengruber have shifted the model of the winegrowing cooperative onto a modern, forward-looking track — and catapulted Domäne Wachau to a place among the elite. Domäne Wachau cultivates the largest area with organically farmed vineyards amongst all Austrian wineries.

"Time and patience are important virtues in wine — all the more so in a tradition-minded region like the Wachau, where the mood can at times feel sluggish," explains Roman Horvath. For the past 20 years, he has served as winery director at Domäne Wachau in Dürnstein, working together with Heinz Frischengruber, winemaker and vineyard manager, on the future of this estate at the foot of the Kellerberg. In this time, the duo made deep changes to the structure of the cooperative, all with an eye to long-term sustainability. Their revolutionary concept is unparalleled anywhere in the world. "Since 2021 at the latest, we've reached places that we didn't even know we wanted to go. When we first started, we had no real vision, goal, or even concept. Looking back, it was a series of a thousand little steps; a daily questioning, correcting,

adjusting, and pushing on. Today we see ourselves as a new kind of cooperative, unlike any other."

Unique worldwide
Extremely fragmented vineyards, steep hillsides, cool climate: The Wachau is considered one of Europe's most spectacular and important winegrowing regions. Working these terraces is challenging and complex. A huge share of those vineyards is not accessible to machines. The 200 vignerons at Domäne Wachau cultivate one to two hectares of vineyards each on average, many alongside other professions or as part of mixed agriculture. All are deeply rooted in the region. They are craftspeople in their own right, working based on a strict quality model, a precisely coordinated harvest plan, and a comprehensive micro-vinification concept for their individual parcels. Given the complexity of the Wachau terroir (differences in elevation, east/west location, situation on the right or left bank of the Danube, different orientations and topsoils of the vineyards), this kind of meticulous overview is essential for each individual piece of micro-terroir. All fruit is harvested by hand and exclusively within the family association.

"No one offers better specialization or has more experience with these vineyards than our vignerons. Their daily tasks always occur within the context of Heinz' work in the cellar and my own efforts, not to mention the quality models, concepts, and strategies. The vignerons are us — they're the heart and soul of Domäne Wachau," says Roman Horvath. The experience of those vignerons, in some cases decades deep, and their artisanal skill are what ensure the quality of the wines. "Our vignerons, for their part, are not always fully aware of the extensive skills and valuable knowledge they possess. In recent years, we've helped them draw the best from their pooled experience and adapted it to the requirements of modern viticulture, while also helping

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raise their awareness for quality, formulate processes, and reinforce the organizational infrastructure — freeing them up to concentrate on their own artistry as grape growers."

Modern & forward-looking

When Roman Horvath and Heinz Frischengruber assumed the reins at Domäne Wachau 20 years ago, they avoided the descriptor "cooperative" wherever possible. They saw it as burdened with by negative connotations within the wine industry, a hint of poor quality, supermarket-quality wares, and the bottom-end price segment. Those prejudices remain today, it should be added. But something else is also true: 50% of the overall wine production in Spain, France, and Italy comes from businesses organized as cooperatives. Within Germany, the figure is closer to one-third. In Austria, by contrast, the share of cooperatives is relatively low. Only a very few of them have managed to achieve top quality levels; not least because "there's no intensive collaboration and no controls. Each grower does his own thing out there and nobody is focused on a sustainable overall structure. We too had to make a lot of investments in the past 20 years, because we were not up to the current standards at the time," Roman Horvath remembers. "Today we're proud to be a winegrowing cooperative."

As a non-profit company, the uppermost goal of the cooperative is "to provide a good income for our vignerons while also producing modern, origin-driven wines. And of course, to communicate the quality of our work. Making good wine is one thing; effectively communicating that story is another." 160 hectares of vineyards are currently cultivated under organic guidelines. That gives Domäne Wachau the largest share of organic vineyards of any estate in Austria, a figure that is likely to continue rising. The goal is 100%, "although who knows if Heinz or I will still be here by the time it's achieved. That has much to do with generational transitions. We have good vignerons out there,

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but the older generation sometimes needs a bit more time to appreciate the value of organic. But we do give them the time they need, since we're ultimately here to help drive responsible change within the region."

Far-reaching changes

The model of the winegrowing cooperative as a concept built on ethical, social, and sustainability factors has proven a durable one. The business has added tremendous value to its vignerons in the past 15 years, restoring a long-lost sense of a promising future to many of the region's winegrowers. Or as Horvath says: "I think that we, as a structured wine producer, also stand for far-reaching societal change. It's very important for small, individual businesses to show the potential of a new approach and to get things rolling by serving as the tip of the quality spear. The deeper impact then comes during the next stage when companies with even more significant resources look to the future and decide to take bold steps."

A lack of skilled and experienced vineyard workers is one of the major challenges facing the wine industry right now, but it is one that Domäne Wachau feels well prepared to handle. "For us, it's always the vignerons themselves, perhaps supported by their families during the critical phases, who are working the vineyards. Access to temporary workers, migrant farm-workers, picking teams, or a heavily mechanized alternative are no options for us." The primary focus at present is nevertheless on communicating the slow, considered, and measured changes that have been taking place in recent years. "Already back in the day the estate had good wines — but those were always the tiny tip of the pyramid. Now we have our own style in our wines, built upon incredibly reliable work from the vineyards and based on the principles of micro-vinification."

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