



HAND HARVEST

MAN OR MACHINE?

To harvest by hand or by machine? It's a polarizing topic that has been hotly debated, discussed, and reported on. For good reason, since hand harvest and mechanical harvesting each offer their own specific advantages. For us – Domäne Wachau and its vigneron – there has never been any question. We are true believers in the power of a well-deployed pair of pruning shears when it comes to crafting premium, tradition-minded terroir wines.

Domäne Wachau for its part works exclusively with hand harvested fruit – neither for political nor legal reasons, but rather from personal conviction. Nevertheless, harvesting machines are becoming more common in many regions. Faced with warming climatic conditions, many estates see no choice but to harvest earlier in the season. While we in the Wachau have seen some of this trend, the coolness of the marginal climate here might not have reduced but certainly reframed its impact all over the region. There's no doubt that mechanical harvesting can be a major boost in certain areas, especially when the goal is to achieve high efficiency at a uniform, standardized quality level. It works best in regions with flat, homogeneous vineyards with little focus on terroir-specific expressions. Mechanical harvesting is especially attractive for wines in the entry and middle segments, which lend themselves to large volumes in short time frames. It offers efficiency and lower costs, especially for larger vineyards, and can be a helpful approach under certain conditions, such as threatening rainy weather or in very hot regions where night harvesting is required. Because our growers each cultivate just 1-2 hectares, time pressure is less of a factor for us. At harvest this tight structure allows us to work in an extremely flexible and agile way.

MECHANICAL HARVESTING: STRESS ON VINE AND NATURE

People sometimes forget just how much strain mechanical harvesting puts on the vineyard and its surroundings. Automated harvesters use powerful shaking movements, which not only threatens small animals but ultimately has negative effects on the overall structure of the vine. That micro-damage may be invisible at a casual glance but can have an oversized impact on the health and vitality of the vines, allowing diseases such as esca to arise. In regions where machines are more heavily used

and higher yields are common, the vineyards must often be uprooted after just 15-20 years, as the strain of mechanical harvesting sharply reduces the lifespan of the vines.

100 % HAND HARVEST – NO EXCEPTIONS

It's fair to say that mechanical harvesting offers benefits to some. From our point of view, however, the negatives are too strong. Admittedly, Domäne Wachau faces its own special challenges. We work with steep terraced sites, complex soil structures, and a cool, marginal climate. This encourages the grapes to ripen slowly; further distinctions in ripening pace come through different elevations and how the terroir shapes each parcel into its own microcosm. Machines simply have no place on these steep and narrow terraces – here, hand cultivation is needed. Moreover, the manual harvest also allows us to tailor our efforts to the specific needs of each individual vineyard. We engage in no homogenized mass production. To the contrary, as befits Domäne Wachau's role as a restructured, worldwide unique wine cooperative with attention to detail, we conduct our harvest through multiple passes, each selective and precise. At times a pass may just cover a few parcels or even individual rows, based on the different ripening stages within one site, and as part of our micro-vinification.

For some vintages, multiple rounds of selection (two to three passes per vineyard) are required for our village and single vineyard (Ried) wines. Each run through the vineyard allows us to identify the absolute healthiest fruit, to be picked at the optimal moment for our top wines. The first harvest pass culls any grapes showing signs of potential disease stress. The fruit is then cleaned by hand and used for our initial estate-level wines. Thanks to this selective harvest, we can monitor the maturation of the individual vines, while also establishing a thinner canopy to promote harmonious maturation. It also puts us on more agile footing for the coming (final) harvest passes. The exact moment of harvest for each grape relies heavily on experience. Our topmost priority is ripe, high-quality fruit, as this forms the foundation for our various distinctive, terroir-focused wines.

Flexibility and experience are the key to success in an age of weather extremes. 2024 provided a classic example: While some winemakers interpreted the predicted rainfall as reason to perform



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an emergency round of rapid mechanical harvesting, we chose to wait and watch. The later harvest date, the experience, and the fine touch of Cellar Master Heinz Frischengruber allowed us to harvest precisely at the moment when the grapes reached their optimal balance.

The vigneron at Domäne Wachau can deliver top quality because the people tending the vineyard throughout the year are the same ones who are ultimately bringing in the fruit by hand. Given the many, many hours that we've invested in manual labor, we would never let a machine take over the most important step of all. Each berry is assessed, each parcel individually planned – no machine offers that level of care and proximity to the product.

NO COMPROMISES: SELECTION IN THE VINEYARD, NOT ON THE SORTING TABLE

Our selection happens directly in the vineyard. As a result, no sorting is needed in the cellar, since any damaged or diseased fruit has been removed before it ever left the vineyard. In many cases the growers even smell the grapes to check whether there are any traces of rot in them. This meticulous selection ensures that only the finest fruit makes it into the cellar. Mechanical harvesting, by contrast, is more susceptible to contamination, especially when burst, damaged, unripe or diseased grapes are picked. Because those damaged berries often contain higher concentrations of microorganisms such as mold or bacteria, the overall quality of the wine suffers. Given its high sugar content, grape juice offers an optimal breeding ground for microorganisms of that kind, which raises the risk of microbial contamination. Therefore the selection in the vineyard is crucial for the high quality of grapes and for the health of our soils and vines.

AN EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL CLIMAX

Harvest is more than just one more step in our year's work. It represents the culmination of the wine year and serves as a social event bringing the entire team together to transport the literal fruits of their labor into the cellar. It's a moment of discussion, of community, and of pride in what has been achieved. Together with their family and friends, our growers celebrate their hard work in the steep terraces throughout the year. No such festivities would be complete without some home-cooked food and perhaps a glass or two of well-earned wine. This tradition is a vital part of our community and lends our harvests a social dimension beyond just the manual labor itself. This connection with nature, with wine, and with people is part of our identity and culture. To put the most important phase in the life of a wine in the 'hands' of a machine goes against our very nature.

All of which is why a hand harvest is an essential part of the Domäne Wachau soul. It's more than a method. It's an expression of our philosophy: top quality achieved through passion, precision, and close cooperation between human and nature.

