



FROM EVOLUTION TO REVOLUTION



DOMÄNE
WACHAU

Once an underdog, now a pioneer! With their globally unique, revolutionary forward-looking strategy, winery director Roman Horvath and winemaker Heinz Frischengruber fundamentally redefined the model of artisanal and sustainable viticulture as well as the concept of a cooperative - catapulting Domäne Wachau and its growers into the international top league.

"Time and patience are essential virtues in viticulture - even more so in a region as steeped in tradition as the Wachau," explains Roman Horvath. For 20 years he has managed the fortunes of Domäne Wachau in Dürnstein at the foot of the Kellerberg together with winemaker and vineyard specialist Heinz Frischengruber. During this time, the duo deeply intervened in the cooperative's structures and initiated numerous sustainable changes. Their revolutionary concept now sets global standards.

"At the latest since the 2021 vintage, we have been approaching a point we never imagined we would reach. At the beginning, we had no clear vision or concept. In retrospect, it was a sequence of thousands of small steps; a daily questioning,

correcting, fine-tuning and moving forward. Today, we see ourselves as a NEW coop, one like no other, and on equal footing with the best wineries in the country."

Roman Horvath is considered as one of the defining figures of Austria's wine world. Before Domäne Wachau, he worked for several years in the purchasing and import of international wines and is one of only three Masters of Wine in Austria. Heinz Frischengruber grew up in a Wachau family estate and gained international experience overseas and in Europe before joining Domäne Wachau.

UNIQUE WORLDWIDE

Extremely fragmented vineyard structures, steep terraced slopes, cool climate: the Wachau

is considered one of the most spectacular and important wine regions in the world. The vigneron of Domäne Wachau come from traditional families deeply rooted in the region and have cultivated their vineyards for generations.





Work on the terraces is challenging and labour-intensive. A significant part of the vineyards cannot be mechanized. The advantage: due to the low level of machine use and - in the case of Domäne Wachau - 100% hand harvesting, CO₂ emissions, soil compaction and general stress on vines, soils and nature are low. "We can only keep improving if our soils and vines are in balance, we act economically soundly and everyone feels comfortable - in short, when all the pieces fit together," explains Heinz Frischengruber.

"The growers are Domäne Wachau – they are the heart and soul of the estate."

VIGNERONS AS EXPERTS

The vigneron of Domäne Wachau are experts in vineyard management. On average, they cultivate one to two hectares each; some part-time, others as part of mixed farming. The average age of the vines is 50+ years, and vine density on the terraces is extremely high - up to 8,000 vines per hectare.

All work is carried out at the highest artisanal level according to a strict quality concept, a finely tuned harvest plan and individual micro-vinification for each plot. Due to the complexity of the Wachau terroir (altitude differences, east-west climatic changes, right and left banks of the Danube, various slope aspects and topsoils, etc.), such a detailed view of every micro-terroir is essential.

"Our growers are highly specialized, extremely expe-

rienced vineyard professionals. What they do is not disconnected from Heinz's work in the cellar or my work or from any quality standards, concepts and strategies. The vigneron of Domäne Wachau - they are the heart and soul of the estate. Together, we are one big Domäne Wachau team," says Roman Horvath.

The sometimes decades-long experience of the growers and their craftsmanship are what make the quality of the wines. "Over the past years, we have shaped the experiences of the growers into the right form and adapted them to modern requirements of viticulture, given them a sense of quality and laid out processes and organization - always trusting in their craftsmanship." The result is that today's wines are more puristic, precise, and terroir-driven than ever before - and not just at the top of the range, but across the board.

MAXIMUM CRAFTSMANSHIP

The growers of Domäne Wachau are very diverse personalities: they are unique characters, vine whisperers, veterans, creative spirits and young high-flyers.

For example, there is Jasmin König: she cultivates 3.5 hectares (8.5 acres) in Arnsdorf, also works part-time at the Von der Vogelwaide winery and plays as a striker for soccer club Rapid Vienna. Willi Fögerl and his





two sons cultivate nearly two hectares (5 acres) in Dürnstein and have just restored several terraces on Kellerberg with dry-stone walls. Christian Lengsteiner in Weißenkirchen, by contrast, is among the larger growers with around 8 hectares (19 acres) of organic vineyards and also runs his own small wine tavern (Heuriger).

What they all have in common is that they are deeply embedded in the region. And that they are not simply employed workers but have worked their own vineyards together with Domäne Wachau for many years - some for decades and across several generations.

This creates a completely different and, above all, deeper sense of purpose in their work and an intrinsic, sustainable way of thinking. "The vigneron of Domäne Wachau are not just members and certainly not suppliers - they don't 'deliver or offload their grapes. They cultivate and tend their vineyards year-round with great know-how

and experience and know them down to the smallest detail. With a slight exaggeration, one could say they know every vine by its first name," Horvath emphasizes.

"And it is always the grower themselves who stands in the vineyard, not hired labourers. Harvesting - often in several passes - takes place almost exclusively within the family. This means we are not dependent on external helpers, seasonal workers, temporary wage labour or harvest crews."

"Top priority is origin: grapes are harvested individually by site."

ORIGIN-SPECIFIC

Each vineyard has its purpose, a defined farming concept, a predetermined style and stands for a specific goal. No grape is assigned to a wine arbitrarily or by chance.

The growers know exactly what their vineyards and parcels are destined for and what work is necessary throughout the year. There are many hands, but

only one signature. A Grüner Veltliner on Kellerberg, for example, requires a different approach than a Riesling on the 1000-Eimer-Berg.

The harvest date is, of course, determined primarily by nature. After consultation between Heinz Frischengruber and the growers, harvesting proceeds according to location and precise vineyard, and exact picking days are specified. Top priority is place of origin: grapes are harvested individually by site (Rieden).

Example: The growers with holdings in Kellerberg all harvest on the same morning, and the Grüner Veltliner originating in Kellerberg is fermented as a single lot.

FAIRNESS & REMUNERATION

As a non-profit organization, the coop's foremost goal is to achieve a good income for the growers while simultaneously vinifying cutting edge, site-specific wines.

For their extremely meticulous and labour-intensive work in each plot, the vigneron are paid appropriately and fairly - ensuring sustainable, long-term cultivation.

Due to the complex Wachau terroir, each vineyard demands a



different workload, which in turn demands a sophisticated formula for remuneration. At the end of the day, there is no uniform grape price per kilo; instead, behind the remuneration lies a complex matrix that considers and values quality work in the vineyard and the terroir.

Appreciation is also expressed through the consciously chosen German term "Weinhauer:in", derived from "Haue", a tool symbolizing the labour-intensive manual work in the vineyards and still used today in the steep sites.

AUTHENTICITY & ORIGIN

Vinification and aging take place in a 300-year-old natural cellar under ideal conditions. The cellar lies up to 15 meters underground and features a sophisticated ventilation system that allows the cellar tunnels to ventilate themselves - visible via ventilation shafts in the vineyards.

Temperature remains constant year-round at 12-14°C with a humidity of almost 90%. The energy required for cooling and air conditioning is correspondingly low, supported by environmentally friendly water treatment and photovoltaic systems.



The must reaches the cellar by gravity, is gently clarified by sedimentation, followed by spontaneous fermentation or fermentation with indigenous yeast selected from the Kellerberg vineyard of the Wachau.

Long lees contact (without batonnage) is essential for the slow transformation into wine and for the quality of Domäne Wachau wines, as is the carefully reduced use of sulphur and traditional aging in large (1,000-10,000 liter), sometimes 60-year-old Stockinger and Schneckenleitner wooden casks.

There is a focus on skin contact, and in small amounts whole clusters are co-fermented (semi-carbonic maceration). Wines of the "Backstage" line, with styles outside the Wachau classic, are alternatively matured in amphorae, concrete eggs, marble or granite vessels.

Nevertheless, all wines of Domäne Wachau show a clear signature: they are a reflection of their unique origin, shaped by barren soils and a typical, cool and lively Wachau acidity structure. They are puristic and precise, with transparency, grip, depth and great drinkability.



ECOSYSTEM

Ecological measures have always gone hand in hand with the restructuring of Domäne Wachau. The estate is located within a nature preserve, part of the EU's Natura 2000 network, and the Wachau region is also a UNESCO cultural and natural heritage site, a fauna-flora habitat area, and a bird sanctuary. Twenty years ago, on the initiative of the Domäne Wachau, the first Wachau cover-crop greening mixture of wildflowers and plants such as serradella, white, yellow, and incarnate clover, phacelia, oil radish, and buckwheat was developed. There are now numerous variants of cover-cropping, adapted to the different soil conditions in the Wachau (deep, barren, stony, acidic, alkaline). These ensure biodiversity, provide living soils and a vital soil structure due to deep roots, strengthen mycorrhizal symbiosis, and increase humus supply, water



storage capacity, and nutrient availability. In addition, cover-cropping helps to reduce soil erosion. The seed mixtures for cover-crops are not only available to Domäne Wachau growers, but to every wine producer, and thus shape the appearance of the Wachau vineyards and landscape.

“A living ecosystem is the foundation for healthy soils – and for great wines.”

The vineyards of Domäne Wachau are small in size. Many are surrounded by forests, including ones of indigenous oak and beech forests or are located next to dry grasslands, apricot orchards, and fruit gardens. In many places, almond and peach trees stand directly in the vineyards. Dry stone walls, of which there are approximately two million square meters throughout the Wachau (a large part of which are in the vineyards of Domäne Wachau, which are cared for and maintained by the growers), provide habitat for a wide variety of insects, microorganisms, and plants. Bird perches, nesting

boxes, and insect hotels in the vineyards promote the protection of endangered species such as the hoopoe and the wryneck (“crook-necked”, woodpecker). Beehives are located on the Kellerberg hill directly behind the estate. Growers are actively involved in their communities in the revitalization of Danube tributaries, such as in Rossatz-Rührsdorf for the Pritzenau nature preserve, which covers an area of 36 hectares (90 acres) around the Wachau vineyards. All this and more benefits a special and unique ecosystem that must be preserved. All measures taken by Domäne Wachau are therefore always guided by the principles of sustainable, ecological vineyard management.

RESPECT

Domäne Wachau is a pioneer in the complete ban of herbicides. Instead of insecticides, pheromone confusion traps are used. The confusion technique against grape moths, launched by Domäne Wachau, is now used throughout the Wachau.

In addition, the estate operates a unique and Austria’s largest biodynamically prepared permanent compost project made from its own pomace, grape stems and shrub-cuttings to continuously increase humus levels in the vineyards. This compost is biodynamically vitalized (preparations 502-507), partly carried in backpack vats up steep terraces and spread by hand.



Modern canopy management, the maintenance of hedgerows and embankments planted with native species, as well as closed soils with diverse ground cover, are also standard practice.

In recent years, an innovative under-vine cover-cropping project has been running, aiming to strengthen the vineyard ecosystem, minimize intervention and find plants that naturally provide ground cover under the vines, such as thyme, clover and fescue species.

Roman Horvath: "The connection between nature and the cultural value of wine to people is part of our identity and culture." For us, the continuous promotion of biodiversity, the preservation of ecological balance and strengthening the resilience of the vineyards are self-evident - both to improve quality and out of respect for nature and the vine."

"We are proving that our concept offers unbeatable advantages – for soil, vine, and region."

Domäne Wachau has been continuously certified as sustainable since the 2018 vintage. This also required breaking new ground, as the certification was not originally developed for a wine producer structured in the manner of Domäne Wachau. In collaboration with the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna, a concept for the sustainability certification of a coop working on steep slopes was developed (according to which each individual Domäne Wachau grower must be certified). These standards were later adopted by the Vinea Wachau association and by many individual producers within the region "The many measures taken in recent years, such as the total ban of herbicides and insecticides, our own cover-cropping, biodynamic permanent compost project, and much more, now come together to form a coherent new overall picture," Horvath sums up. „What’s more, we are proving that our concept offers unbeatable advantages. The growers are working with us to develop a concept for the future - maximally artisanal, close to nature, contemporary, flexible, and enormously effective."



MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

All these assets are more crucial than ever in the context of climate change. Extreme weather events such as heavy rain, hail, frost, drought and heat cannot be ignored in the Wachau either. Vineyard work on the steep terraces, which are already difficult to cultivate, must be adapted accordingly. „What was taught 20 years ago, and in some cases is still taught in schools today, is now only applicable to a limited extent. The knowledge base has become extremely dynamic," says Heinz Frischengruber. With a comprehensive communication and training program, the growers stay up to date on efficient cover-cropping and soil health, as well as topics such as organic viticulture and gentle pruning according to Simonit & Sirch. "We have built up an incredible knowledge management system at Domäne Wachau. Our growers are supported throughout the year by plant specialists, soil scientists, climate researchers, organic consultants, nature protection





officials, entomologists and other experts.”

According to Frischengruber, organic farming is an important leverage for combating climate change. The vines become more resistant and the soil more vital. Domäne Wachau is the estate with the largest organic vineyard area in Austria. „We cannot predict what will happen in twenty years, but there will certainly be adjustments, because it is a matter of constant development. We must remain agile and flexible. This is only possible where small individual growers are motivated to move forward step by step. And it is precisely this small-scale structure that will enable us as a coop to continue to practice agriculture and viticulture in a socially and ethically sustainable manner in the future. Our growers are deeply rooted in the region. The entire value added remains with them.”

“Terroir is more than soil and climate: it is a cultural understanding and a way of thinking that shapes the future.”

FAR-REACHING CHANGE

The concept of terroir defines the Wachau in a more nuanced and far-reaching way. The natural conditions in the Wachau are unique (diverse geology, special climate, altitudes, etc.), but just as important are the social and cultural influences and background. The people, their actions and thoughts, their self-image, and also their history and social interactions, or rather how these are dealt with, are important. “If you rely too much on the stone, the geology, and the climatic conditions, you run the risk of neglecting many other components,” says Heinz Frischengruber. „It is the genius loci, the spirit, the local mindset, that shapes us. It’s about an attitude to life, a self-image, and a mindset in a unique region, and about transferring this to tomorrow with pride and, at the same time, a down-to-earth, natural conviction.”

The coop model has already proven itself as socially-ethically sustainable concept. The continuous increase in added value over the last 15 years has given many growers in the region new prospects for the future. Roman Horvath: „I think that as a coop, we also stand

for far-reaching social change. When individual wine producers demonstrate novel approaches, it’s crucial - especially when these turn out to be quality initiatives and spearheads of a new era. These are usually selective niche and pilot projects. As a next step, such initiatives can have a much more powerful impact when larger establishments with far-reaching influence take bold steps that lead to the comprehensive transformation of a region or even an entire industry.”

“It is the genius loci, the spirit of the place, that shapes us,” says Heinz Frischengruber.



RESPONSIBILITY

When Roman Horvath and Heinz Frischengruber took over the management of Domäne Wachau 20 years ago, they avoided using the term “cooperative” at all costs. The term is too fraught with prejudice, and even today it is still associated in the wine industry with low quality, standardized wines, and the lower price segment. However, the fact is that in Spain, France, and Italy, 50% of total wine production comes from cooperatively organized businesses, while in Germany it is around one-third. In Austria, on the other hand, the cooperative share is relatively small. Only very few have managed to achieve top quality, partly, recalls Roman Horvath, ‘because there is no proper team-work and no strategic orientation. Each member-grower does their own thing, but no one cares about a sustainable overall structure. We had to learn a lot over the past 20 years and also make numerous investments because we were initially behind the current standards.’ Today, Domäne Wachau is proud to be a coop.

“Domäne Wachau shows that the highest quality does not arise despite a cooperative, but precisely because of it.”

The growers want to continue on their chosen path in the future. Organic farming will be further promoted. “But we also want to go one step further,” says Heinz Frischengruber. „Whether you call it biodynamic or regenerative farming: it’s about a holistic view of the region, not of a single estate - in other words, a regional organism. The growers of the Domäne Wachau are like many small acupuncture needles, providing stimulus and energy in the region and thus contributing to change throughout the Wachau. In any case, we want to pass on to the next generation a landscape and soil that is improving, where something extra is being created.”

The biggest lesson learned over



the last 20 years is that you can’t rush things. It takes time and perspective to work within the structure. The Wachau is a microcosm. It requires a deep understanding. Everything has to come at the right time. Domäne Wachau belongs to the growers of Wachau. They have to want change. And they do, because they are aware of their responsibility for the region and for future generations.

