DOMÄNE WACHAU
NERD NOTES

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AMPHORAE ETC.

Making wine in amphorae has its origins in Georgia, from where the practice slowly spread westward. Amphorae served as fermentation, storage and transport vessels for nearly 6000 years before they were replaced with wooden barrels around the year 0 in the Mediterranean and northern European regions. The improvement of wine quality was not the intention of their introduction. Wooden barrels were simply easier to make, repair, transport and clean. Amphorae remained the only wine vessels used in Georgia until the beginning of the 20th century and they never completely disappeared. A clear distinction was always made between amphorae and so-called qvevris in Georgia. Wine farmers used amphorae for the storage of wine in the house, while qvevris were employed for winemaking. Qvevris are egg-shaped and have a volume of 100 to 10000 litres. They have no handles and are usually buried in the earth. Because qvevris are thinner-walled and larger than the usual amphorae, they would burst if they were filled while standing free. In addition to this, temperatures are also milder and more constant a few metres under the earth. Due to the mostly conical forms, yeast sinks on a very small surface to the bottom and reduces the risk of reduction aromas.

A renaissance of qvevris and Spanish tinajas (another common type of amphora) began in the 1990s. With advent of the natural wine movement, also came a renewed interest in old cultural techniques. Amphorae found particular favour in Italy and Slovenia and producers like Gravner, Kristancic, COS, and Foradori used them. Interest successively spread to nearly all wine-producing countries. The first vintner In Austria to ferment wine in an amphora was the Styrian Sepp Muster in the year 2007. Around another dozen Austrian winemakers have followed in his footsteps.

DOMÄNE WACHAU'S AMPHORAE

Our amphorae are completed with four qvevris and a clayver. Clayvers, the are from Liguria, are contemporary amphorae versions that are also egg-shaped, but made of compact sandstone that resembles granite. They are very stable, watertight, and like qvevris allow minimal air exchange through microscopic pores. Georgian qvevris are coated inside with beeswax; our tinajas are made of flavour neutral baked clay and remain untreated.
Our vessels are small and have content volumes between 200 and 300 litres. For this reason, they need not be buried in the earth. They are stored at a constant 10 °C (50 °F) in our baroque cellar. Our first experiments were with Grüner Veltliner and Riesling, but we decided fairly quickly that we would continue with the latter. The low pH values and the tauter base structure of Riesling delivered more tension and guaranteed more stability. Our experimental years were not always positive – one vintage was poured down the drain – but we learned from our mistakes. We collected valuable experience and slowly began to understand the very unique attributes of our amphorae.

Although we react to potential vintage variations, the genesis of the wines usually occurred as follows. The harvested grapes are destemmed, slightly crushed and filled in amphorae with skins, pulp and seeds. The amphorae are then sealed with a wooden lid that has been coated with a layer of food-neutral silicon and fastened to the top of the vessel. The lid also has a glass fermentation bung attached, which allows CO2 to be released and fermentation activity to be observed.

After completion of fermentation, seeds sink together with expended yeasts and other solids to form a layer at the bottom of the amphorae. Grapes and grapes skins float to the surface due to captured CO2. Because very little CO2 continues to be produced, there is no more turbulence or movement to mix the solids with the liquid. The floating grapes and skins must therefore continue to be submerged until all the CO2 has been released to enable further maceration on the skins for around another 5 months. The long maturation allows all contents like tannin to be extracted from the grapes and skins. During the long maturation phase, tannins are polymerized and condensed. Microscopic pores in the clay also allow air into the amphorae, which helps to soften the otherwise often coarse or bitter tannins. Through polymerization, tannins become more velvety and instable and undesirable hard tannins fall out as solids. Wines become smoother, finer and more harmonious. Just as with wines in stainless steel tanks, tartrate crystals also form. Due to the continued presence of seeds and grape skins, tartrate crystals are precipitated more efficiently and completely; the wine is stable. Wines that ferment on the skins often have less acid and make a softer, creamier impression. After completion of maturation, amphorae are lifted and emptied using a forklift and then meticulously cleaned. Hygiene plays a decisive role in vinification in amphorae. After resting for another

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half year, the wine is racked and bottled unfiltered and without addition of sulphur.

THE WINE

The Riesling Amphora breaks the boundaries of expectations. Open and inviting, it combines exotic aromas with delicate spice. Flavours are similarly complex with caramel, marzipan and stone fruits taking the lead. Very fine tannin and a mild yet structuring acid lend the wine focus. The texture is compact, concentrated and juicy; the finish is long and impressive. The Riesling Amphora should be decanted and enjoyed at 14 °C (57 °F) in a generous glass.