

OLD VINES

The wines produced from Old Vines, Alte Reben, Viñas viejas, Vinha velha, Vieilles vignes and vigne vecchie are highly appreciated by winelovers throughout the world. Those winemakers who strive to produce outstanding wines are convinced of the qualitative superiority of mature grapevines and are prepared to invest more time and effort into nurturing them, and in accepting lower yields. However, how 'old' is an old vine? At what age does a vine become mature enough to warrant this term? The international wine scene does not state a given period of vine maturity, although the consensus seems to be approximately 25 years. The Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in Burgundy defines a minimum age of 35 years for their top Grand Crus. At Domäne Wachau, we consider the maturity of old vines as being 45 years of age.

Two World Wars and harsh economic conditions during the first half of the last century took their toll on viticulture in the Wachau, when a mere 400 hectares (ha) of vineyards were managed. Fortunately, this has since increased back to around 1,350 ha. The boom began in the early 1950s once tourists rediscovered the Wachau, and the demand for the local wine led to hundreds of acres of vines being replanted and recultivated. Hence much of the vineyards tendered to today date from vineyards rejuvenated during the 1950s and 1960s. These vineyards are labour intense, especially in the steep, dry-stone-walled terraces, and grape-growers worked hard to maintain the health of their vines for as long as possible. This is the worthy inheritance, from which we all benefit from today, and compared to many wine-regions in Austria, the Wachau has by far the highest average age of vines, which in cases exceed sixty years old. When we began to extensively replant vineyards with Grüner Veltliner and Riesling between the years of 2005 and 2010, we were careful to graft the young vines onto the original rootstocks. This means that the new variety can benefit from the established roots from the original grapevine.

A significant number of our vineyards are planted with very old vines, although this detail is not explicitly shown on the labels. Our "Rieden" or single-vineyard-sites with a high proportion of old vines include Kaiserberg, Liebenberg and Achleiten. The vines in the small Ried Vorderseiber vineyard are at least 80 years old, and the grapes picked here form the basis of our mixed field blend, or the "Gemischter Satz". These vines are literally ancient.

Naturally, there are numerous wine regions in the world that cherish old vine vineyards, and one of the most famous is Barossa Valley in south-eastern Australia (<https://www.barossawine.com/vineyards/old-vine-charter/>). In the extremely sandy soils, where phylloxera could never do any harm, there are even vineyards dating back to the 19th century. This is credited to the extraordinary quality of the Henschke Hill of Grace iconic wines, which is attributed to these age-old vineyards (Grandfather's Block). Parts of Latin America (<http://www.vigno.org/>) and California, with old Zinfandel plantings in Lodi, also boast grand old vines. South Africa is also another hotspot for old vines and the "Old Vine Project" (<http://oldvineproject.co.za/>), set up by Rosa Kruger, aims to identify and maintain as many old vines as possible.

Our old vines here in the Wachau are not just aesthetic declarations. Moreover, they have attributes that differ them from their younger counterparts: These old vines yield significantly fewer grapes with smaller berries, especially from barren, meagre terraced vineyards. The ratio of pulp and juice to berry skin is much lower than in younger vines, and accordingly, the wines show noticeably more grip, complexity and mineral characters. The roots of our old vines reach deeper into the weathered Gneiss and delve their way through the brittle, of cracks and crevices within the bedrock of gneiss and marble to extract essential minerals, nutrients and trace elements. Due to the smaller grape berries, the yield is dramatically reduced. At the same time, the smaller bunches free up space within the canopy and provide ample ventilation within the critical grape-growing zone, which minimizes fungal infections. Our old vines have more wood surface area and are more robust and more resistant to weather conditions, frost, heat and - due to the deep root system - also against drought stress. All these factors not only help our old vines in resisting extreme climate conditions; the finished wines display an impressive firmness and minerality, even in warm vintages.

Different grape varieties react differently according to their old vine maturity, and Grüner Veltliner is once such variety that it is characterized by its strong vegetative growth and that benefits greatly from old vine status.

Yet age alone does not play the leading role within the final picture of our wines produced from old vineyards. A key factor is



the selected clone, and this has always been due to the natural growth of the vineyard (clonal or massal selection).

It is the gene pool of Grüner Veltliner and Riesling over the years, that give us the subtle personality of wines bottled today. All the natural elements, factors and aspects, such as the high-slate gneiss-weathered soils, differences in altitude and exposure contribute to the longevity and development potential of our wines, along with the more natural method of pruning (the original term is the sanfter Rebschnitt) adapted to both variety and conditions, soil management and the sustainable management of our vineyards. All these elements form the foundation for our great wines - Federspiel and Smaragd - that are acclaimed for their depth of character, balance, complexity and longevity.

At the same time, this does not mean that young vines are not valuable. Quite the contrary, young vines can bring magnificent results in a perfect harvest, as was the case in Bordeaux almost 60 years ago. The 1961 vintage goes down in history as a perfect example of producing outstanding wines, and when one remembers, that this crop largely came from young grapevines planted after the devastating frost in 1956 - i.e. a textbook vintage from 5-year-old vines.

Our very own example is the Roter Traminer we planted in 2005, which initially displayed reduced vigour and comparatively slow vegetative growth and in turn leads to balanced ripeness. In such cases, the leaf canopy remains smaller, thus allowing the more natural sunlight into the grape-growing zone and ensures improved air circulation. Young vines generally have shallower roots and can retain less moisture, therefore making them more susceptible to extreme weather patterns, as well as dry stress and disease.

As a rule of thumb, vines are most vigorous between 10 and 25 years old, which coupled with the wine-grower's experience, knowledge and intuition, will fall into a perfect balance of foliage and grape growth year after year. However, the commercial aspects of viticulture often determine a set yield as being the most important criteria, and for this reason, vineyards are generally grubbed up and replanted after 25 to 35 years.

A consistent stock of very old vines is an integral part of the Wachau and a profound understanding of quality. Consequently, we are devoted and committed to their preservation together with our winemaking families. The care of old vines requires a huge wealth of experience and long-term sustainable working in the vineyard. They contribute to the identity and sustainability of the Wachau, but ultimately also bring greater qualities in our wines from the Wachau. Hence the unspoken obligation to respond; because only their own and unique character justifies the excessive manual labour and due diligence in the vineyards in conjunction with lower yields. The survival of the vines depends on its ability to provide a desired quality, otherwise it would have been long replaced.

