

GRÜNER VELTLINER BRANDY

HISTORY OF DISTILLING AT DOMÄNE WACHAU

Austria's most comprehensive collection of high-quality aged brandies resides in the cellars of Domäne Wachau in Dürnstein. The historical importance of distilling in the Wachau can be grasped from a poem by Provost Hieronymus Übelbacher, the lead party in the construction of the Dürnstein Kellerschlüssel. He composed the following lines in 1718: „Should someone make the trip to my grave, let them bring me a glass of good wine: even if my body be already rotten and lay in ashes, it would nevertheless stir once more and show its appreciation. Even more: brandy wine is distilled from the lees, so fill me up with lees, and when my body decays, you can take it out and make a brandy as a fitting finish.”

The modern era of brandy distillation at Domäne Wachau launched in 1965. It came under the oversight of former estate director Wilhelm Schwengler. Faced with a surplus of low must weight grapes, he opted to produce brandy instead of undistinguished wine that needed supplemental sugar. His journeys as a student to Charente, in the heart of Cognac, clearly inspired him. It was his decision to establish an estate distillery, which he then appointed with four raw distillate stills, each roughly 750 L, and two fine spirit stills, each roughly 500 L.

From the start, the focus was on top quality. Where knowledge was lacking, he consulted with Bernard Lalanne, the former master distiller at Remy Martin. The peak of brandy production came between 1970 and 1990, when large volumes of wine were distilled into spirits. However, with the growing prestige of the wine sector, better ripening of the harvested grapes, and the establishment of Wachau wine styles, the art of distillation waned in importance starting in the mid-1990s.

Since the start of the new millennium, distillation has been a far less frequent occurrence at Domäne Wachau, typically conducted only when the conditions are ideal. Many of Domäne Wachau's brandies have been aging for decades in oak barrels in our winery's cellar, all under perfect conditions. Our inventory of highly mature brandies is solid, albeit constantly shrinking, and over the years we have become masters at the art of blending. This process calls for aged brandies to be brought together with younger batches that have been artisinally distilled by the cellar team at Domäne Wachau to achieve the highest quality. Thanks to our

deep pool of available vintages, Domäne Wachau has achieved what it considers a monument of complexity and depth: the Grüner Veltliner Weinbrand XA22. It is a vintage blend, with grapes sourced exclusively from Wachau vineyards. Only a few thousand bottles of brandy are brought onto the market each year.

THE BASE WINE

Years of experience in distilling have shown us that the best brandies come from grapes with low potential alcohol and low pH values. While a smaller volume of ripe grapes would also suffice, that quality of fruit tends to impart fewer ethereal aromas in the brandy – precisely the factor that matters most in determining the quality of a fine spirit. Our gold standard is a must weight of between 13° and 16° KMW.

Grüner Veltliner is and remains the exclusive variety for our distilling work. It is the ideal choice for Wachau's cool climate, as even at low must weights and high acidity levels it produces a finely spicy, extract-rich wine.

After a hand harvest, the grapes are transported immediately into the cellar for processing. To avoid any oxidation, the grapes are pressed as soon as possible, followed by cold fermentation. We undertake no enhancements, nor do we fine or add sulfur. Because the base wine is completely untreated and not exposed to the air, it is moved immediately after the completion of fermentation to the distillery. There it is distilled into brandy, occasionally with the addition of a bit of yeast.

THE DISTILLATION PROCESS

Domäne Wachau uses the pot-still method, a discontinuous form of distillation: In other words, the overall process actually involves two distillation passes. The goal is to transfer the wine's ethereal substances – its aromatic elements – into the brandy by means of distillation.

The core vessels for the distillation process are the stills. These are always produced from copper, whose heat conductivity makes it the ideal material for the distillation process without influencing the sensorics of the finished brandy. The interior of the still is built around a heating coil that allows for perfect temperature regulation – a key factor during distillation. The stills are filled with base wine and then heated to 78°C. Ethanol (drinking alcohol)





begins to evaporate at this temperature, while water of course doesn't boil below 100°C. As a result ethanol and its numerous ethereal essences then rise, collecting in the onion-shaped crown before passing through the swan's neck into the condenser, where the vapor resumes liquid form and flows into the collection tank. The product produced by this first distillation pass is known as 'low wine.' It is slightly cloudy, with an alcohol content of roughly 30 percent.

The low wine is then subjected to another round of distillation. This occurs in the fine distillate still, where it is again warmed to 78°, where it spends an extended period at precisely this temperature to separate out the purest possible ethanol. Three different batches are created in the process. The heads, as the first batch is known, contains much of the methanol, ethyl acetate, acetaldehyde, and other volatile substances. It generally smells quite unpleasant and harsh, with an astringent feel on the tongue. It is followed by the center, or heart, of the distillate. This batch is clear, with an alcohol content of roughly 70 percent, and contains the decisive aromatic elements for the final brandy. The heart is followed by the tails. This sometimes contains a higher portion of higher alcohols, so-called fusel oils, and, like the heads, is separated away from the heart. While the heads and tails are either disposed of or used for other purposes (typically cleaners, pharmaceuticals, or agricultural alcohol), the heart is what is put into oak casks, to be matured over years and, in the case of Domäne Wachau, decades.

AGING OF BRANDY

Domäne Wachau ages its brandies for at least 22 years. With that said, the age should be understood as an averaged value, since the final product is actually a blend of various casks and vintages. For the initial maturation period, Domäne Wachau uses exclusively 300 L oak casks from Austria and France. Used wooden barrels have the benefit of emphasizing the fruity character of the brandy. Because the fine-pored structure of wooden barrels encourages constant contact between the liquid and ambient air, a small portion of the brandy evaporates every year – known as the angel's share. This has two consequences: Because of the high air humidity in the cellars, more alcohol than water tends to evaporate, reducing the alcohol levels from 70 to roughly 50 percent over a 20-year period. The brandy becomes softer and milder. At the same time, the aromas grow more concentrated and the drinking experience more complex. The color also changes naturally, from transparent to a yellowish gold.

FINISHING –

THE FINE BRANDIES OF DOMÄNE WACHAU

Grüner Veltliner Weinbrand XA22 from Domäne Wachau is the end product of the aging process described above. It is an expressive, creamy, and multifaceted reserve brandy, which is reduced to a drinking strength of 40 percent through the addition of water from ancient rock springs. It also forms the basis for further interpretations that bring truly remarkable aromatic nuances through a second maturation in alternative vessels. The second aging, also known as finishing, in wood barrels of various provenance, is a frequently used tool for high-quality spirits.

XA22 Single Cask Oloroso is refined through five years of aging in 600 L Oloroso Sherry barrels. Oloroso is an oxidative Sherry style whose aromas harmonize perfectly with well-aged brandies. The additional finishing time and the targeted selection of the aging vessel are reflected in a variety of aromas stretching from almond, truffle, and chocolate to raisin and prune.

XA22 Double Oaked by contrast undergoes five years of finishing in new French barrique. This lends it a texture more satiny than in the other two brandies, with aromas reminiscent of Bourbon vanilla, Christmas spices, sweet barrel spice, cinnamon, and ripe fruit.

The brandies also pair superbly with various sweet delights, as well as aged cheese, fine prosciutto, and selected dishes such as glazed duck and porcini risotto. They can naturally also be served as a digestif or alongside coffee, or as a refined and distinctive alternative in cocktail classics such a Sidecar, Between the Sheets, Brandy Crusta, or Vieux Carré.

