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DOMÄNE
WACHAU

• Antonio Galloni
VINOUS

2022 Wachau and Lower Austria: An Overshadowed Vintage Worth Exploring

BY ANNE KREBIEHL MW | FEBRUARY 01, 2024

Riesling Achleiten Smaragd 2022 - 95 points

The 2022 Riesling Achleiten Smaragd opens with subtle smoke infused with lemon and crushed citrus foliage. The palate is streamlined, showing brightness, linear energy and sheer life force. Concentrated, driven and bold, like a genie in a bottle, this rises upward, at the same time driving deep into stone with its insistent citrus force. This will take years to unveil its full and true colors. Wait for it. All is here. (Bone-dry)

Grüner Veltliner Achleiten Smaragd 2022 – 95 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner Achleiten Smaragd is still shy on the nose. Mere glimpses of yeast, juicy yellow stone fruit and peppery verve only tease with brief appearances. The palate, however, is alive with white pepper, concentrated, tingling, chiseled and taut. This will take time to come out of its shell, but the promise of orange zest, pear flesh and even more white pepper is there. This is a powerful, elegant wine from this near mythical site. (Bone-dry)

Riesling Kellerberg Smaragd 2022 – 94 points

The 2022 Riesling Kellerberg Smaragd emerges from a vineyard that extends right behind the winery. Vivid citrus, nettle and bright lemon bring herbal savoriness to the nose and much concentration to the palate. Stony intensity, drive and power characterize the wine, packing quite some punch and much freshness that rings with lemon intensity, stony insistence and power. Leave this until it has a chance to calm down—the power is undeniable. (Bone-dry)

Riesling Brandstatt Smaragd 2022 – 94 points

The 2022 Riesling Brandstatt Smaragd is from a site tucked away at the furthest edge of the Spitzer Graben, a cool lateral valley. The tender nose holds citrus blossom and crushed citrus foliage. This rings with vivid freshness and slenderness on the graceful palate, finishing with echoes with lemon. Absolutely lip-smacking and super-racy. (Bone-dry)

Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd 2022 – 94 points

The 2022 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd is from cooler, more western parcels close to the Mentalgraben, on poorer soils. Immediately revealing citrus foliage on the nose, this is aromatic and holds notions of ripe peach juiciness. The palate is concentrated, super-straight-laced and very taut, clearly in need of bottle age. All of its power and drive reveals a deep-seated peachiness. This is long and vivid. (Bone-dry)

Grüner Veltliner Kellerberg Smaragd 2022 – 94 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner Kellerberg Smaragd brims with yeasty savoriness that harbors citrus notions. The palate comes in with white miso and pepper that trails zesty tanginess. The freshness is vivid, with salinity, pepperiness and absolutely racy acidity. The Kellerberg is enticing, animating and very vivid. (Bone-dry)

Grüner Veltliner Kirnberg Smaragd 2022 – 94 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner Kirnberg Smaragd was harvested on a plateau on the right bank of the Danube that gets both morning and evening sun. A slight veil of smoke on the nose is followed by fern and moss. The palate holds very tight white pepper—like a little pepper bomb—accompanied by green notions. Concentration and energy hold through a savory citrus finish. The bright palate is quite svelte and taut. (Bone-dry)

Grüner Veltliner Steinwerk Spitzer Graben 2022 – 94 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner Steinwerk Spitzer Graben is from the coolest sub-region of the Wachau, fermented with whole berries in a marble vessel. The nose is unusual and savory, channeling crisp chicken skin umami and lovely earthiness. The palate holds varietal pepper notes and channels all of Grüner's essential stoniness and spice. This goes deep into soil and spice with much concentration, making for an unusual, spicy, compelling and delicious wine. (Bone-dry)

Grüner Veltliner Schön Smaragd 2022 – 92 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner Schön Smaragd is from the lateral valley of the Spitzer Graben, bottled separately for the first time in this vintage. Nutty, aromatic yeast on the nose continues onto a palate of lemon, fresh white pepper and crushed sage, superimposed on a creamy backdrop. This is taut, fresh and smooth yet brisk—a Grüner with Riesling-like raciness and exciting, delicious drive. (Bone-dry)

Gemischter Satz Uralt-Reben Smaragd 2022 – 92 points

The 2022 Gemischter Satz Uralt-Reben Smaragd is from a site in Weissenkirchen planted in the 1920s and 30s to a field blend consisting of Grüner Veltliner, Riesling, Neuburger, Muskateller, Brauner Veltliner, Heunisch and more. It was fermented with whole berries and much turbidity in a 500-liter barrel. A touch of honey on the nose points to ripeness, while the tiny grapes of the old vines spell concentration. The palate is super smooth and rich with texture and character, referencing blossom honey, lemon peel and chalkiness. Fine freshness highlights all, while subtle phenolics add fine-boned structure and poise. This finishes long and taut—quite distinctive. (Bone-dry)

Riesling Bruck Federspiel 2022 – 92 points

The 2022 Riesling Bruck Federspiel, also from the lateral valley of the Spitzer Graben, was grown on weathered gneiss and amphibolite. Yeast is far more prevalent here, as is smoky, flinty reduction. The palate brings lemony precision, lemony flavors and lemony zestiness. This is bright, vivid and juicy. There is proper mid-palate traction and body, with a lovely, lasting, crystal-clear tautness—bracing and fresh. (Bone-dry)

Riesling Loibenberg Federspiel 2022 – 92 points

The 2022 Riesling Loibenberg Federspiel is picked from higher parcels in Loibenberg, ranging from 350-400 meters of altitude. The nose flickers with reduction that dissipates to present green pear and Reine Claude plum, with a riper aspect of yellow fruit. The palate has a yeasty

element of creaminess, but it is driven by Riesling's essential raciness, enabled by altitude. Juiciness, freshness and drive are key here. (Bone-dry)

Riesling Trenning Federspiel 2022 – 92 points

The 2022 Riesling Trenning Federspiel was harvested in one of the Wachau's coolest and highest sites, a steep slope in the lateral valley of the Spitzer Graben. This is the first vintage where this has been bottled separately. The nose is exquisitely fragrant, with crushed citrus leaf, glimpses of tangerine peel and a sense of conifer. The palate is super-slender yet exquisitely aromatic—bright and tight. This is svelte, brisk and incredibly refreshing, with and despite lovely substance. It's almost weightless. (Bone-dry)

Chardonnay Reserve 2021 – 92 points

The 2021 Chardonnay Reserve was harvested in vineyards with some calcareous soil, like Steinriegl, and fermented with some turbidity in 300-liter barrels, staying on fine lees for 24 months. Ripeness on the nose channels creaminess to meet vivid freshness on the palate. Bright verve reveals stone and resonance with unusual depth. Creaminess defines a finish that echoes with lemony length—an unusual but absolutely streamlined Chardonnay. (Bone-dry)

Riesling Amphora 2021 – 92 points

The 2021 Riesling Amphora was fermented spontaneously on skins and only pressed after six months. The nose has a lovely touch of Golden Pearmain apple and a peppery concentration that echoes of white, mellow apple flesh sprinkled white pepper. There is much concentration and a beautifully long, dry finish. This stands with a straight back and much mid-palate depth—a fresh-faced, textured and streamlined wine. It was bottled without sulfur dioxide. (Bone-dry)

Grüner Veltliner VDN 2022 – 90 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner V.D.N. Is a wine fortified with brandy distilled from Grüner Veltliner, modeled on southern French sweet wines. The French bulldog on the label was chosen to signal a wine that is both strong and sweet. The brandy nose is undeniable, shimmering with Williams pear and presenting a gentle sweetness on its potent body. It segues into vanilla and smoothness but needs time to integrate.

Grüner Veltliner Kreuzberg Federspiel 2022 – 90 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner Kreuzberg Federspiel, from the right bank of the Danube, is grown on amphibolite with a loess cover, benefiting from the cool night air from the Dunkelsteiner forest. It opens with a note of ivy and moss, a freshness and cool verve that carries right onto the palate. This shines with tingling pepper and cooling, minty, greenish freshness that lingers. Concentrated and poised. (Bone-dry)

Grüner Veltliner Liebenberg Federspiel 2022 – 89 points

The 2022 Grüner Veltliner Liebenberg Federspiel is from 60-100-year-old vines on a terraced site of paragneiss with some amphibolite. Subtle yeast notes come with just a notion of green and yellow pear and a smoky edge. The nose is rather closed and still slightly reduced. The palate is absolutely taut, crackling with white pepper—totally straight-laced, juicy, peppery, savory and stony. This is just so streamlined. It's a very racy and exciting Grüner without any fat. (Bone-dry)



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The first thing to state about Austria, emphatically so, is that its weather patterns are quite different from those of the more Atlantic-influenced classic and key regions in the rest of Europe, where, though things differ dramatically at a local level, a general tenor does nonetheless apply across the board. Not so in Austria. Its wine regions are tucked away in the deeply continental east of the country, behind the Alps. Cooling Alpine influences of a formerly marginal climate (just north of 48° latitude) meet the warming influences of the Pannonian Plain in Hungary. That said, 2022 was marked by a very dry summer.

2022: A Year with Challenges

Across Lower Austria, a relatively late budburst in late April, following a mild and dry winter, meant there was no danger of being caught in spring frost. But things were not smooth sailing. Here is Heinz Frischengruber, of Domäne Wachau in Dürnstein: "Flowering in June took time because it was cool and rainy. It was round-the-clock in the vineyards," he notes, regarding the necessity of dealing with fungal disease pressure. "In high summer, unusual heat lasted until mid-August, by which time we had started performing rain dances." The rain duly arrived from late August onwards. "Rain and cool weather took over and lasted until late September. Ripening and maturation were slow in a rather cool September, and we started harvesting on 20 September. The selection effort was immense. In October, an Indian summer with a spell of dry weather helped." Their harvest concluded on 8th of November. Frischengruber notes that there was a big difference between the flat sites closer to the Danube, subject to more disease pressure, and the elevated vineyards. His take on 2022 is that "it was difficult for the early-harvested wines." Frischengruber casts some doubt about the longevity of the early harvested wines, but since most Smaragds were harvested late, no such doubt exists for them.

Refreshing Honesty and Modesty

While Frischengruber above speaks for the Wachau, what he reports also applies to Kremstal. Michael Malat, of the eponymous estate in Furth-Palt, on the right bank of the Danube, says that an "extremely selective harvest was needed." But he is also clear that, while rain punctuated harvest, getting rain into the soil was a matter of survival for the vines after the dry stress of the summer. In Traisental, south of the Danube, in this slightly cooler and wetter region, Markus Huber says, "2022 was not late, but rather late-ripening, which I see as positive because it gives the wines lightness and freshness." Likewise, Fred Loimer in Kamptal, where there was, in fact, more precipitation than average and "great water availability," noted disease pressure at harvest. He says, "2022 is, by and large, a touch lighter, a touch less concentrated than 2021, slightly softer." Andreas Wickhoff MW, of Weingut Bründlmayer in Langenlois, Kamptal is up-front when he says, "We hoped for more ripeness, especially in Grüner Veltliner." Michael Moosbrugger, also in Langenlois, praises the "wonderful Indian summer. In Wagram, Anton Bauer notes that there was dryness in summer, which for him meant "more concentrated wines with slightly lower acidity."

Stylistic Preferences

Back in the Wachau, however, stylistic preferences also come into play when it comes down to assessing a vintage. Franz Hirtzberger in Spitz says, "For me, 2022 was an interesting year because it was so different from 2021. Two thousand twenty-two was a hot year with a cool harvest, while 2021 was a cool year with a warm harvest. In 2022, we had rain in late August and early September, so disease pressure was on, and harvest meant much selection. We had to work hard." To ensure the late harvest, which is customary at the estate, Hirtzberger says that three weeks were spent mitigating damage, which meant that any diseased or non-promising fruit was cut off so as to enable the remaining fruit to ripen. This effort paid off, as the late part of the harvest, concluding on 12 November, could be performed swiftly. Leo Alzinger, of Weingut Alzinger in Dürnstein, on the other hand, noted about 2022: "As of mid-August, it was relatively cool. Harvesting took its time, but we could pick fruit with good physiological ripeness, relatively moderate sugars and great acidity." I can confirm that 2022 suited the Alzinger style and their more restrained approach. Rudi Pichler in Wösendorf sums it up: "The 2022 wines are just a little more moderate in alcohol."



Rules, Regulations and Differences of Opinion

The other discussion point, apart from vintage quality, is the changing legal framework within Austria. Over the past two decades, starting with the introduction of the first DAC, or Districtus Austriae Controllatus, for the Weinviertel with the 2002 vintage, Austria has gradually moved from a German-inspired ripeness-based wine law to a provenance-based wine law that seeks to define “regionally typical wines.” This includes defining grape varieties typical for a region. As an example of this, a Grüner Veltliner made according to DAC standards in the Weinviertel can be labeled Weinviertel DAC, whereas a Zweigelt or Riesling made to the same standards will have to be labeled Niederösterreich because the Weinviertel DAC was created only for the regionally-typical Grüner Veltliner. Each DAC has its typical grapes—sometimes just one, sometimes several, as in the Thermenregion, for instance. Another layer of the DAC system is that regions can distinguish between Gebietswein, i.e. regional wine, Ortswein, i.e. village wine, and Riedenwein, i.e. wine from a single vineyard. While a private classification of single sites has been underway for years now by the association of the Österreichische Traditionsweingüter, or ÖTW (founded in 1991), in August 2023 the possibility of country-wide site classification was enshrined in a new federal law. While this process of delineating and classifying sites will take time, it will inevitably also lead to the kind of conflicts we know from around the globe. The ÖTW, however, under its chairman, Michael Moosbrugger of Schloss Gobelsburg, must be commended for its well-thought-through approach. The best example of this is that all eligible sites are initially classified as Erste Lage, i.e. Premier Cru, rather than Grosse Lage or Grand Cru. The new federal law is linked to the DAC regulations, and the overall and long-term aim is, no doubt, to prove to the world that Austria takes its vineyards, wine culture and wine quality seriously. So far, so good. Wine is a complex subject, so when pushing it into a legal framework that is supposed to accommodate numerous philosophies, a certain amount of shoehorning is inevitable.

What Is Relevant?

Reporting on legal minutiae can be tricky – is it really interesting to a consumer whether the wine label says Kamptal or Kamptal DAC when the wine is good? Is there not a thriving scene of creative and imaginative winemaking that turns its back completely on all of this and simply labels slightly cloudy, skin-fermented wine as Wein aus Österreich? And in the early 21st century, is it really still contemporary to make “quality” contingent upon the clarity of the liquid? Perhaps we are right in the middle of another slow cataclysm, spurred on by climate change and evolving consumer behavior in ever-more-competitive global markets. These are big philosophical questions, and I know several winemakers are grappling with these ideas. So where do I stand?

Two thousand twenty-three was also the year in which one of Austria’s most venerable and longstanding winery associations, Vinea Wachau, celebrated its 40th anniversary. What Vinea Wachau achieved for Austria is immense. They also created a hierarchy of ripeness—Steinfeder, Federspiel and Smaragd—and made it easy for consumers to identify, always a winning move. This framework was created at a time when it was still difficult to ripen grapes. Oh, how the world has changed. As of the 2020 vintage, Wachau has also adopted the DAC system, and the Vinea Wachau members can still label their wines within their 40-year-old hierarchy. Should I now lose myself in reporting these changes and squabbles? As I was traveling, news broke of the Gritsch winery leaving the Vinea Wachau association, like F.X. Pichler did, citing that the Vinea Wachau hierarchy was “no longer contemporary.” The day before, I had discussed the challenges of the Vinea Wachau ripeness scale with the association’s chairman, Emmerich Knoll, addressing this idea that “ripest”, as in Smaragd, is no longer necessarily “best.” He had a thoughtful answer:

We are still caught within that scheme of Steinfeder, Federspiel and Smaragd, but all the world just reduces this to alcohol,” he said. “We have a different situation today, but when Vinea Wachau was created, we said that Smaragd was ‘the best’ because it was so hard to achieve. These days are over, because achieving this alcohol level today is no longer difficult. Yet it is not a completely obsolete system because it enables people to choose a lighter wine if they want.” Since Vinea Wachau has upper limits for the Federspiel and Steinfeder categories, 11.5% and 12.5% alcohol, respectively, he has a point. “Buying a Steinfeder means that you will have a wine that is lighter. Why should we give this up?” Knoll wishes for a “peaceful coexistence” of regulatory frameworks, and I can only agree. Does it matter that F.X. Pichler’s stunning Unendlich wines lack the term Smaragd, while others still carry it, with many 2022 Smaragds hovering around the 13 to 13.5% mark? I decided to let the wine in the glass speak. We are living through immense change, and there will be a lot more to grapple with besides labeling. Good wine can only be a good thing in these circumstances.



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What is needed most is awareness. During my visit to Jamek, I spotted an old, empty bottle of Stein am Rain Steinfeder Grüner Veltliner from 1985. The label proudly stated holzfassgelagert, i.e. matured in wood, and the back label noted that Steinfeder wines, named after the local wispy grass *Stipa pennata*, were “duftig, zart und leicht”, or scented, tender and light. The back label also gave analytics: 10.4% ABV, with 7.1g/L of acidity and 1.6g/L of residual sweetness. This tells us all we need to know about climate change, and it tells us even more about winemakers trying their hardest to bottle a wine that honestly expresses its place and the culture from which it stems. So, in a way, everything has changed, and nothing has.

The Verdict

When tasting 2022 and 2021 side by side, it is evident that 2021 stands out. When tasting 2022 in isolation or simply on its own merit, my observation is that the 2022 vintage is in line with global trends. Blockbusters are no longer called for in this world. Even since I last tasted Austria comprehensively back in 2020, a move toward more moderate alcohol levels is evident, whether helped along by the vintage or not. When speaking of a general standard, the entry-level quality in Austria remains incredibly high. While I tasted many wines during my visits to Austria in November 2023 (along with a few latecomers back home in London) it was a pleasure to behold the immense stylistic spectrum in both Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. Lovers of both varieties will find gratification, whether they are after crystalline, hair-raising stuff, or more emollient wines. I was also reminded that, while rare, Pinot Noir can excel in Lower Austria. Austria simply delivers.

Domäne Wachau

Domäne Wachau is a cooperative winery founded in the 1930s as Winzergenossenschaft Wachau. In 1990, it was re-named Freie Weingärtner Wachau, and in 2008, it was renamed again as Domäne Wachau. The cooperative represents 250 winegrowing families and makes wine from around 400 hectares of vineyard. Of these 400 hectares, 150 are either already certified organic or in conversion. The largest owners have between eight and nine hectares, but most members farm between one and two hectares of vines. The co-op is run by Roman Horvath MW on the business side, with Heinz Frischengruber as cellar master. “We have tried to redefine the concept of a co-op,” Horvath says, “in so far that it is more than just winemakers delivering grapes, toward farming according to a distinct vision of a specific wine.” He also points out the advantage of the co-op model that does not rely on hired harvest workers, calling it “ethically sustainable.” The varietal split is 70% Grüner Veltliner and 20% Riesling, with the remaining 10% Gelber Muskateller, Traminer, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Zweigelt and Neuburger. Most vineyards have two harvest passes, and 25 sites are bottled separately with three harvest passes—so this is far from your usual cooperative. The style is clean-cut and pristine. The 2022 harvest started on 20th of September and required stringent selection. “It was cumbersome,” Frischengruber says, “but a spell of dry weather in early October with a little Indian summer provided relief. The effort to harvest healthy fruit was enormous.” Harvest did not conclude until the 8th of November. During my visit, I tasted a selection of 2022 white wines.