

The review Danube: classifying and clarifying

The borders between the Danube's regions may be political, but the differences between vineyards are very real. The ÖTW's annual tasting afforded Anne Kriebiehl MW insights into the 2015 vintage, the two key grape varieties, and the 62 Erste Lage

Stift Göttweig is an ideal vantage point. Perched on a mountain top on the southern bank of the Danube since 1083, this Benedictine monastery provides a full view of the Danubian wine regions. To the west, the Danube emerges in the Wachau from its narrow valley; right opposite on the northern bank is the town of Krems with vineyards extending on either shore. The vineyards of Kamptal, named after the northern tributary, stretch north and east all the way to the Wagram, that vast bank of loess in the east, with glimpses of Traisental to the south and east. Michael Malat, of Weingut Malat, takes full advantage of this panorama as he explains the lay of the land: "From here, you can see everything," he says. "We winemakers are always asked what the differences are between the wines of Kremstal, Kamptal, Traisental, and Wagram—but you see how compact the area is. Most of the borders are political. There really are more similarities than differences. While the area is small [altogether 9,359ha (23,127 acres), excluding the Wachau], it is very diverse. That's why we can have both Grüner Veltliner and Riesling here despite their very different needs. That is why we focus on single vineyards, everything is site-specific." Malat spoke to a group of journalists and tradespeople on the occasion of the 2015 vintage release tasting of the private organization of producers known as the ÖTW, the Österreichische Traditionsweingüter (Traditional Estates of Austria), which took place at the end of August at the mock-gothic marvel that is Schloss Grafenegg im Kamptal.

The afternoon outing, first to Stift Göttweig, then to the Gottschelle and Silberbichl vineyards, was a lesson in geology. Both historic vineyard sites exemplify what Dr Maria Heinrich of the Austrian Federal Geological Institute termed as "transitional areas," where the landscape of the underlying Carboniferous and Permian crystalline rocks was shaped by the effects of several ice ages and rivers charting their course, depositing or exposing various layers

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of rock, sand, loam, gravel, and loess. How deep these deposits can be is apparent when one looks at the veritable walls of loess near the vineyards and villages. Grüner Veltliner thrives on these water-retentive, deep loess soils whereas Riesling excels on the poorer, well-drained, stony sites. The influence of the rivers Danube, Traisen, and Kamp—all responsible for different deposits, all with different chemical and mineral properties—adds another layer of variation to the 62 sites that are currently classified as Erste Lage or premier cru.

The wines from these classified sites were tasted over two mornings at Schloss Grafenegg. Its airy, well-lit, and well-ventilated rooms with generous space for each taster made for a quiet and ideal setting. Ultra-light Zalto glasses were a bonus, as was the flawless organization whereby one could taste the wines in any order, according to any aspect. The warm 2015 vintage provided sunny and generous wines—fluid and rounded but still poised and fresh. Fritz Miesbauer, winemaker at both Stift Göttweig and Stadt Krems, reports a "very good vintage. There was no rot, and the dry autumn days allowed us to work very selectively. There was water stress in some drier sites, but these were harvested first to go into the estate wines. In our best single sites, we luckily have drip-irrigation, which not only helped with high physiological ripeness but also preserved acidity. There was no pressure to harvest until the end of October." For him, the 2015 vintage brought forth very "authentic" wines with some similarity to 2009. Dr Berthold Salomon of Salomon-Undhof, also in Krems, reports that he trimmed the top of the canopy to lower photosynthetic activity and kept the fruit shaded in this warm year. The Grüner Veltliners are plush in places but balanced. There is a creaminess to them, as though herbal savor and juicy pear fruit were embalmed in cooling, balm-like fluidity. The Rieslings are pure expressions of the full and exuberant citrus spectrum, some with tropical overtones and considerable power. The ample freshness and tension were apparent in the sounds of my fellow tasters smacking their lips across the room.

Sites and varieties

This tasting of 73 Grüner Veltliners and 59 Rieslings from the 2015 vintage was an opportunity not only to taste but to compare, fair and square, winemakers, sites, and geologies. It was also an opportunity to delve into the very natures of both these expressive varieties. While Riesling's transparent capacity for site expression is well documented, Grüner Veltliner, for most non-Austrians at least, is not yet three-dimensional. It is much loved as a spicy, fresh, and, above all, versatile white wine, but few know what a broad spectrum of styles it can cover. Here, at the very top of



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Photography courtesy of ÖTW

the Grüner stakes, this lesson is evident. Far removed from the popular, almost thirst-quenching and zippy Grüners that are the stuff of languid summer evenings are rich, ageworthy-wines of considerable savoriness.

Tasting according to altitude was revealing. Two Grüner Veltliners from the Loiserberg site in Langenlois/Kamptal at up to 1,250ft (380m), planted on loess and crystalline rock, from Bründlmayer (12.5% ABV) and Jurtschitsch (13% ABV), had none of the creamy opulence of the wines from the quintessential loess-based Grüner sites such as Spiegel or Lamm (both Kamptal, both almost flat sites at 705–935ft [215–285m]). Both Loiserberg Grüners came with a stony slenderness that structurally, if not aromatically, was reminiscent of Riesling. Vincent Bründlmayer says it is a very cool, almost marginal site. The Riesling from the same site, also from Jurtschitsch (13% ABV), shimmered with an exquisitely subtle scent of tangerine, mandarin, and orange peel. It was equally slender and structured, just with a different aroma spectrum. Here, the site spoke clearly and articulately. For those who love Grüner, this is where they will find the stony style that will match a fresh *Forelle blau (truite au bleu)*. For their Wiener Schnitzel or richer, creamier dishes, they can always return to Lamm or Spiegel. Similarly, Grüner Veltliner on the higher elevations of the Traisental, which differs due to its predominance of calcareous soils, was also filigree and taut: Markus Huber's Grüner Veltliner from the Getzersdorfer Berg, a steep, terraced site of calcareous conglomerate at 850–1,065ft (260–325m), showed zesty, precise lemon freshness with edges of peppery spice. His Grüner from the Inzersdorfer Zwirch, also on calcareous conglomerate covered in loess and loam, was fragrant with grapefruit and fern. Both are subtle and slender expressions of Grüner Veltliner that, according to Huber, come into their own especially with some bottle age.

A global picture of site evaluation

Apart from tasting according to soil or altitude, one could also compare winemakers' intentions for the sites; it would be simplistic and even foolish to relate all expression just to the site. With Steinmassl, a site of paragneiss

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and mica schist in Langenlois at 785–1,115ft (240–340m), Fred Loimer has a generously fruited, almost tropically fluid and expressive Riesling at 14% ABV. Bründlmayer, at a modest 12.5% ABV, clearly shows a less ripe, more lemon and green citrus-focused style, while Weszeli, at 13% ABV pitched just between, manages to capture exoticism (think pineapple) tempered by zesty freshness (think grapefruit peel). All three wines are balanced, whistle-clean, and exciting. The site has it all—but clearly the resultant wine is open to interpretation. Seen from a different perspective, the sites are what winemakers make them—and have made them—over centuries.

However, history and geology are only two aspects of the ongoing work of vineyard classification undertaken by the ÖTW. The association was founded in 1992 with the aim of establishing a classification of the Danubian vineyards and currently has 33 member estates in the regions of Kamptal, Kremstal, Traisental, and Wagram. In Michael Moosbrugger, managing director of Schloss Gobelsburg in Kamptal, the ÖTW has a thoughtful chairman. That the identification of the first 53 Erste Lagen, or premier cru, sites was not completed until 2009 is telling. Numerous aspects are weighed up and taken into account before a site is so designated: Historic land registry records, historic sources and mentions of vineyard and wines, current standing of the vineyard, number of wines made and marketed as site-specific, market pricing, and even media ratings make their way into the classification. In 2016, there are now 62 single vineyards that are designated as ÖTW Erste Lage. The classification of Grosse Lage, or grand cru, has only just begun and will

take years yet. The eventual aim is to get this private classification ratified into wine law. Chances are that this will happen, considering the relative dynamism and open-mindedness of the powers that be in Austria. For now it is salutary to observe that even famed sites like Heiligenstein are designated as Erste Lage—their suitability to be eventually classified as Grosse Lage is yet to be assessed. If only such caution was more widespread. This slow and conscientious approach stands in some contrast to the German VDP's modus—even though the two systems admittedly start from different historic and cultural backgrounds. Moosbrugger is clear when he posits two central challenges: “The crucial question is, How do you classify? What is good, and what is better?”

Moosbrugger emphasizes that the ÖTW declines to be an “elite association.” “Mind-set and attitude toward provenance-oriented marketing are far more important. To us, the idea of provenance is central. To accomplish our eventual aim of ratification we need to have a broad base,” he explains. Consequently, the experience and knowledge of non-member estates also flows into the classification process. How critically every aspect of the ongoing classification is examined becomes clear in Moosbrugger's careful deliberations to come up with “a kind of global picture of site evaluation.” How valid and applicable this evaluation will be in other Austrian regions like Burgenland or Weinviertel remains to be seen: Moosbrugger has his puzzles and challenges cut out for years to come. He is under no illusion: “It simply takes time,” he says. “Real greatness is only revealed over time.”

The two days of tasting concluded with an open-air concert on Grafenegg's purpose-built Wolkenturm stage. The surrounding parkland was manicured; the acoustics were all-encompassing; the summer night was balmy, clear, and full of stars. An appreciative international audience lapped up the exertions of a virtuoso violinist and the London Symphony Orchestra. The evening was perfect and revealed something about Austria, about its own particular strand of hedonism. It had been created purely for pleasure but with immense sophistication, exactitude, and precision. Quite like the wines themselves.