

Wine & Spirits

SPECIAL ISSUE

GUIDE TO TASTING WINE

25 GREAT
VINEYARDS
OF THE WORLD

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150
WINES

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A Glint of Danube Sun

AUSTRIA'S WACHAU claims many great vineyards, but Achleiten stands out as one of the best. It's uncommon that both riesling and grüner veltliner would grow well in the same vineyard (veltliner tends to be grown on loess, while riesling takes to the schist), but on this steep, southwest-facing slope, they perform equally well, their hallmark a particular elegance and fine minerality combined by impressive strength.

That character comes through every Achleiten wine, no matter who vinifies it, but it's been of particular concern to Toni Bodenstein, a graduate of Vienna's University of Agriculture, who came to Weingut Prager in Weissenkirchen as an outsider when he married Ilse Prager in the early 1990s. There are many climate characteristics the vineyard shares with others in the area — the tempering influence of the river below, the competing cool breezes from the Waldviertel forest above, and the cool winds that blow from Spitz — but you need to go deeper to get to the factors that give Achleiten wines such a different character than that from neighboring vineyards, such as Klaus.

First, there's exposure: Achleiten has an advantage, seated as it is on a slight curve of the river which gives it a perfect south-southwest exposure to the sun and cool Spitz wind. Add to that its 1,000 foot altitude, and the growing season becomes long and slow, letting the grapes gather all the aroma and complexity they can hold. Klaus, the vineyard on the other side of the curve, basks in warmer, Pannonian winds.

But a more dramatic difference lies in the ground, in the fracture that separates the two. "Achleiten is from a migmatic rock: gneiss. This rock is harder; gneiss is the little brother of granite, born by 750 degrees Celsius, and a lot of pressure," Bodenstein explains. "Klaus is from a metamorphosed rock, paragneiss, which is not so hard and is structured like schist." Wines grown

in Klaus tend to be rich and fat, gorged as they are on warmth and minerals. Achleiten's wines may be less overt at first taste, but their tight, sinewy flavors reflect the vines' strong, long roots. Those flavors gradually leave an impression as firm as the ancient soil of this precipitous slope, and the wine's long, graceful lines mirror the growing season's gradual ripening.

And the hallmark flavor, the note that sings out "this is an Achleiten wine"? A hard-won minerality, as clear yet as modestly presented as the glint of the sun off a gemstone.



ACHLEITEN

Weingut Prager Weissenkirchen Achleiten Riesling Smaragd 2000, 1998

Achleiten's character is particularly pronounced in Smaragd wines, the Wachau term for a minimum sugar level that puts the wines about equal with a German Spätlese. While increased ripeness might imply more and riper fruit flavors, Prager's Achleiten 2000 doesn't pack on the fat, even though the year was considered a warm one. Instead, it seems to have used the extra energy to pull minerals from the slope's hard stones. It's young and vigorous, yet indelibly Achleiten, with slim, delicate fruit and mineral flavors that grip



the tongue as hard as the vines do the slope.

The 1998, a wine from a more difficult vintage, is much more open and giving. It offers a more opulent taste of Achleiten — still understated, still restrained, but full of the sun in its nectarine flavors and as warm as the rock beneath the vines. But that's not to say it's ready: much like the 2000, this possesses an uncannily delicate firmness, a filigreed minerality that promises it

will keep well into the next decade.