

Wine & Spirits

SPECIAL ISSUE

★★ ANNUAL GUIDE TO TASTING WINE ★★

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INFLUENTIAL
WINEMAKERS

10 GREAT
VINEYARDS

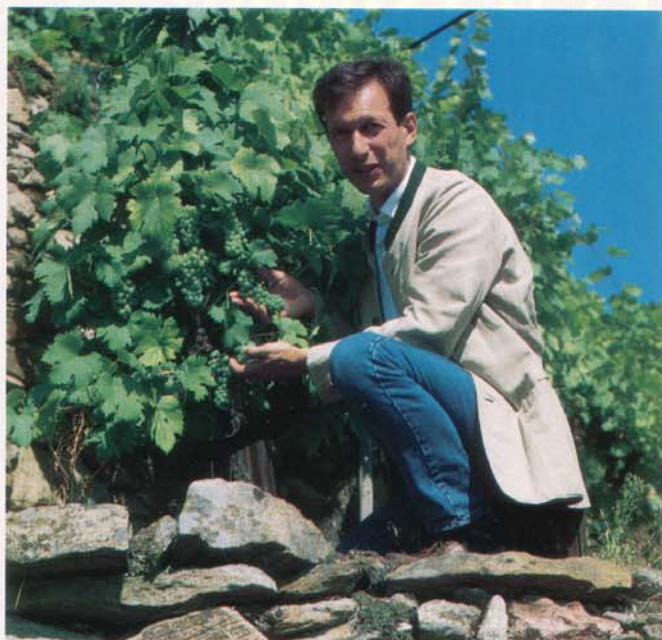
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[Toni Bodenstein] WACHAU



No one has proved a better spokesperson for the subtleties of Austrian riesling.

The tale of Toni Bodenstein must seem suspiciously like fiction, beginning with that name: "Boden- (soil, fundament) -stein (stone)." Had Austria's Wachau not been handed Toni Bodenstein, they would surely have wanted to invent him and could scarcely have picked a better *nom de pressoir*. The international ascendancy of Danubian riesling and grüner veltliner has itself been one of those stranger-than-fiction tales, one that began in the late 1980s just as a young agronomist from alpine western Austria named Bodenstein, having married (another agronomist) Ilse Prager, took charge of the Weingut Franz Prager in Weissenkirchen.

Franz Prager's shoes were large ones. Along with Franz Hirtzberger Sr., Josef Jamek and Willi Schwengler, Prager had founded and directed the growers' organization "Vinea Wachau," redefining the products of this ancient growing region as dry wines spanning a stylistic range from delicate to full-bodied. In 1988, the Vinea Wachau directorship changed hands, with new chairman Franz Hirtzberger, Jr. now flanked by associate Emmerich Knoll and secretary Toni Bodenstein. It seemed Bodenstein's luck to have inherited not just an estate with a 275-year vineyard tradition, but a significant political role. In fact, the Wachau got lucky, finding in Toni Bodenstein an eloquent spokesperson.

Toni Bodenstein wouldn't count as one of the wine world's leading figures, though, if he were merely a mouthpiece. Many talk terroir, but few are so fluent. In a region like the Wachau, Bodenstein insists, the vine is literally rooted in the rock, so geological influences are direct and go well beyond those of topography, topsoil or temperature. Rock comes alive when Bodenstein explains the distinction between orthogneis (directly descended from lava as in the great Achleiten vineyard) and paragneis (formed through recompression of eroded material like Achleiten's neighbor Klaus), and shows how the resultant differences in root penetration matter to taste. The role of trace elements and the underlying mechanisms of plant physiology are not "dry science" but keys to understanding flavor. The best locations balance finesse (maximized in the stoniest locations) with corpulence and structure (favored in heavier, clay-rich soils), while contributing unique flavor characteristics, truths Bodenstein sees himself as rediscovering a thousand or more years after they were postulated by the Wachau's earliest vintners.

"These monks weren't just interested in making the best wine," Bodenstein insists, "they were passionate about the differences between sites and their correspondingly distinctive wines" — a passion he shares just as he shares a press house that has served Weissenkirchen since the Middle Ages. Bodenstein has delved into the Latin archives of Austria's monasteries and ancient communal

records. As a result, his expertise is now in high demand among local historians and will eventually inform a book about ecclesiastical Austrian viticulture.

Global warming is another issue growers often talk about, but what does one do about it? Bodenstein reclaimed the highest vineyard in Weissenkirchen after decades of neglect and proved that under today's conditions, with low yields, this cool windswept site can achieve distinctive excellence — surely thus earning his right to rename the vineyard "Wachstum Toni Bodenstein." Franz Prager was not the only one skeptical of this project, dedicated to a site formerly known for its reluctance to ripen riesling, but his son-in-law has proven to fel-

low growers how profoundly times — and climes — change.

No amount of eloquence or insight into matters geological or historical will earn the respect of one's fellow vintners if one cannot prove oneself by taste. When it comes to showcasing distinctions of terroir in a glass of riesling — and two-thirds of Weingut Prager's twenty-nine acres, unprecedented for the Wachau, is planted to this great grape — Toni Bodenstein's mastery ranks with that of Helmut Dönnhoff or Olivier Humbrecht. Like these masters, he respects the winemaker's role as watchman, attentively letting the soil, the vines and the weather dictate each year's unique agenda, never tinkering needlessly with a young wine's inner workings.

In order to render pristine, mineral-inflected rieslings, Bodenstein practiced a ruthless selectivity that resulted in a potentially precious botrytized "byproduct." He embarked on a series of breathtakingly pure, rich and terroir-inflected riesling trockenbeereauslesen. "I see absolutely no danger of blurring the classical dry image of Wachau riesling," Bodenstein insists. "Wines such as these will always be in homeopathic quantities." Indeed, he dedicated three pickers for a week to collecting the few liters of his inaugural 1993 TBA.

"The Grüner" has become Bodenstein's latest frontier. An opportunity arose to purchase a piece of the great Achleiten planted with a heterogeneous collection of ancient veltliner vines, which he is assiduously studying and re-propagating. Grüner veltliner in the Zwerithaler vineyard — acquired from the Jameks — has also joined the roster.

As a new generation of Wachau vintners picks up the reins — young men like Emmerich Knoll, Jr., Lukas Pichler and Leo Alzinger, Jr. — Toni Bodenstein emerges as a bridge. By rooting himself in the local soil, this Wachauer sets an example of enthusiastic and intelligent experimentalism. By steeping himself in local tradition, Toni Bodenstein lights the way to a future in which wines of the Wachau are no longer new stars in the vinous firmament but established international benchmarks of quality. —DAVID SCHILDKNECHT