

# WACHAU'S WONDEROUS SINGLE VINEYARDS



**Discover five  
of the Austrian  
region's most  
prominent  
sites and the  
world-class  
wines they  
produce.**

BY ANNE KREBIEHL, MW

**T**he Wachau Valley is a tiny treasure. Northwest of Vienna, it boasts Austria's most dramatic wine landscape, stretching for about 20 miles between the towns of Melk and Krems and hugging the Danube River. Its stony, often terraced vineyards rise steeply from the shore, catching every ray of sunshine and taking full advantage of a special microclimate and dynamic airflows. Concentrated Grüner Veltliners and hair-raising Rieslings are stars here.

The Wachau has a three-tier scale based on the ripeness of grapes at harvest. This system harkens to a cooler era before the onset of climate change, but its categories still offer valuable stylistic clues.

Dry wines with a maximum alcohol by volume (abv) of 11.5% are referred to as Steinfeder, a somewhat rare category nowadays. Dry, typically medium-light yet taut wines between 11.5–12.5% abv are categorized as Federspiel. Dry, powerful and long-lived wines with at least 12.5% abv are known as Smaragd.

While there are just 3,321 acres of vineyards here, more than 650 growers farm the vines. This means that artisanal production is key. There are subtle, distinct differences between vineyards, variances that depend on subsoil, aspect and altitude. Teasing such site-specific nuances out of the wines is nothing short of a joy.

Here are five of the best, most unique sites within the Wachau, from the warmer east to the cooler west and down to the southern bank of the Danube.



# LOIBENBERG

A kestrel swoops past as Leo Alzinger, of Weingut Alzinger in Dürnstein, stands high up on Loibenberg, one of the Wachau's warmest, most heterogenous, sites. It's steep, south-facing and almost completely terraced, exposed to warm airflows from Hungary's Pannonian plain to the east. Its warmth, however, is tempered by altitude, as the site rises to 1,300 feet behind the village of Unterloiben.

"The Loibenberg is one of the larger single sites in the Wachau, so you have a wealth of climatic and soil conditions, even within these 76 acres," says Alzinger. "The western part has rather poor soils with less than two feet of topsoil. The lower reaches have considerably more loess. Riesling stands on the rocky terraces, Grüner Veltliner on those terraces where we have more loess with more water retention.

"Grüner is not as resilient as Riesling and needs a little more water. In some places, the loess cover can be three feet deep and more. Riesling, on the other hand, even needs some stress to show its real structure."

Alzinger exploits the topography where the stone terraces trace the contour of the hillside.

"Our Riesling grows in a dell that only gets morning sun, but is shaded during the afternoon," he says. "And you also see that the sheer rock surfaces here."

The subsoil is composed of Gföhler gneiss, a hard orthogneiss derived from igneous rock. Alzinger says that some of these parcels cannot even be planted.

"Not all of the subsoil is solid rock," he says. "Some of it is weathered and fissured, so vine roots can penetrate. While Loibenberg wines always have a certain charm due to the exposure and the warmth, there is a lot of shade in my Riesling parcel, so the wine is precise and cool."

**96 F X Pichler 2016 Ried Loibenberg Riesling Smaragd.** A faint, flinty touch of reduction still informs this wine's lifted citrus scents. On the palate, a taut, textured structure sends zesty lemon flavors darting across the tongue. This still needs to open up, but all the ingredients for an explosive citrus party are here. It has concentration, freshness, fruit and potential. This may become smoother, but will remain beautifully slender. Drink 2020–2035. Weygandt-Metzler.

abv: 13%

Price: \$55

**94 Alzinger 2017 Ried Loibenberg Riesling Smaragd.** The most aromatic hints of pear, Mandarin orange zest and lemon balm play on the nose. The juicy palate broadens out generously and lets ripe stone fruit speak. Mirabelle plum juiciness makes this easy to like. Fresh zestiness becomes present on the appetizing, dry, long and lemony finish. Skurnik Wines, Inc.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$56

**94 Pichler-Krutzler 2017 Ried Loibenberg Grüner Veltliner.** A funky whiff hints at some promising reduction on the nose before savory notes of citrus, arugula and miso take over. There is a ripe core that adds juicy, rounded pear notes to the savoriness that goes well with the rich, smooth texture of the wine. The finish is lasting, salty and more-ish. Weygandt-Metzler.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$NA





## KELLERBERG

**B**ehind the scenic village of Dürnstein, the Kellerberg vineyard starts at 669 feet above sea level and rises to more than 1,100 feet. While most of its terraces face south and look straight onto the Danube, there also are those that face east and southeast and catch just the morning sunshine. Given such uneven slopes and levels, mechanization and machine harvesting are not possible here.

Like in the Loibenberg, the subsoil is Gföhler gneiss, though Kellerberg's lower reaches have a thicker cover of loess and loam topsoil.

"Grüner Veltliner needs a little more grease," says Heinz Frischengruber, oenologist and winemaker at Domäne Wachau, the local cooperative, as he starts to climb the slope past rows of Grüner Veltliner. "These richer soils lend a fruity, spicy edge to the Grüner. The farther up you go, the poorer the soil becomes. You can see how stony the soils are. They are destined for Riesling.

"This is how meager the soils are up here, but this gives tension and stoniness to the wines," he says, pointing to sheer rock. "Kellerberg is a warm site, and the wines have a certain savoriness. Both for Grüner and Riesling, there is a real herbal flavor."

A lateral valley, the Flickagraben, brings cool air that results in a pronounced freshness in Kellerberg wines. Even within the vineyard, harvest times can differ up to a week, depending on altitude and aspect.

There's diverse flora everywhere between the rows and terraces: yarrow, clover, eglantine, wild thyme with purple blossom and stonecrop in the wall crevices with their red-tinted, succulent, green leaves.

"We want a lot of flowering plants to counteract the monoculture of vines, and we love the drystone walls," says Frischengruber. "They are fantastic 'hotels' for all manner of beneficial wildlife. We are blessed with all this diversity, even though working here also means lots of sweat."

**96 F X Pichler 2016 Ried Kellerberg Riesling Smaragd.** Aromatic notions of blood-orange zest and ripe Meyer lemon swirl on nose and palate. Its slender yet concentrated body imbues that citrus tautness with hints of juicy Mirabelle plum and ripe orange. A lemon note keeps the balance firmly in the tart camp, which makes for a zesty, intense and clean midpalate and finish. Drink 2020–2035. Weygandt-Metzler.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$77

**94 Pichler-Krutzler 2017 Ried Kellerberg Grüner Veltliner.** Pear and salty miso on the nose promise a dramatic clash of opposites. The creamy, textured, pithy and pleasantly bitter edge of yeast and zest meet rounded, harmonious and ripe pear fruit. The long, lip-smacking finish is crave-worthy. Weygandt-Metzler.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$NA

**94 Tegernseerhof 2017 Ried Kellerberg Riesling Smaragd.** The nose is shy and hints at pear and lemon. The palate then comes in with an unexpectedly earthy, grippy texture that owes as much to zesty citrus as to concentration. There is ripe Mirabelle plum and juicy peach. The finish is easy, zesty, dry and clean. KWSelection.com.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$49



# ACHLEITEN

If any single vineyard embodies the Wachau, it's Achleiten. In the village of Weissenkirchen, in the temperate middle of the region, this terraced site reaches directly from the Danube riverbank up to the beginning of a forest line at 1,174 feet in elevation. Its name is derived from Latin: *Ach* comes from *aqua*, which highlights the great water availability of the site, while *leiten* references a conduit for water. Its green, vine-covered terraces are best viewed from a boat on the river.

The soils here are highly complex, with Gföhler gneiss at its upper reaches and migmatite-amphibolite, a hard, metamorphic rock, at its base. There's even a little slate.

"It's an incredible site," says Dr. Herwig Jamek, of Weingut Josef Jamek. "From sunrise to sunset, Achleiten is never in the shade. The complex soil combination, plus optimal water availability, plus sunlight, create ideal conditions for vines."

Jamek stands in front of a giant drystone wall that took a year and a half to rebuild. Maintaining the drystone walls that support the terraces is a never-ending process.

"We'll be doing this for the next 20 years before we can move on to another part of Achleiten," he says. "All of it is done by hand."

"Achleiten wines have recurring characteristics, a typical tone that takes a number of years to evolve," says Jamek. "The best thing you can do to an Achleiten wine is bottle it and leave it alone. The wines are most famous for their evolved flavors, even after 30 years of bottle age."

Compared to other Wachau sites, the Achleiten is much closer to the Danube, which can mean moisture in the air.

"It also means that the wind always whistles past," says Jamek. The valley's narrowness allows the Danube to flow fast. It creates its own, dynamic airflows, which promote inherent freshness in Achleiten wines.

**96 Domäne Wachau 2017 Ried Achleiten Riesling Smaragd.** Fresh lemon and crushed lemon leaves lead the nose, but underneath, ripe Mandarin oranges and clementines shine through. The palate has a juicy softness, despite the zestiness on the midpalate, with tropical hints of passion fruit. The freshness is key, but it's softly expressed on the long finish. Drink now–2039. Gonzalez Byass USA.  
**abv:** 14% **Price:** \$50

**96 Josef Jamek 2017 Ried Achleiten Grüner Veltliner Smaragd.** Ripe pear and golden stone fruit beckon with sunny juiciness on the nose. The palate then presents a tight, rich core of salty, spicy yeast, miso and pepper tones. The pithy texture and the lemony brightness are ideal counterweights in this compact, concentrated and complex wine. Carlo Huber Selections. **Editors' Choice.**  
**abv:** 14% **Price:** \$48

**88 Jäger 2018 Ried Achleiten Riesling Federspiel.** Ripe pear and citrus pith on the nose reappear duly on the palate, which majors on this pithy, textured element. The body is slender, dry and fresh, but it's the pithiness that defines the wine. Grand Cru Selections.  
**abv:** 12.5% **Price:** \$30







# SINGERRIEDEL

**T**he Singerriedel vineyard is perhaps the most prominent site within the town of Spitz, one of the most western locales in the Wachau. This is where the valley is narrowest and coolest, as cold winds enter from the Spitzer Graben, a lateral valley.

Steep, terraced and southwest-facing, this site is more remarkable for the fact that it's been continuously recultivated over the past 30 years. Much of this work has been done by the Hirtzberger family, of the Franz Hirtzberger winery.

"It fell fallow because it was too cool in the 1950s and '60s," says Franz Hirtzberger. "Grapes would not ripen reliably. With all the effort involved in such a site, you need stable yields to make it economically viable."

"My father started recultivating this in the 1980s, repairing one or two drystone walls a year. He just knew that it was one of the best Riesling sites ever."

Today, there can be a one- or even two-week difference in ripeness between the vineyard's lower and upper reaches, which leads to a staggered harvest. Terraces are narrow and numerous, with the vineyard ultimately rising to 994 feet.

Overall, the site is a composite of paragneiss, mica schist and quartzite. The advantage of paragneiss is that it's permeable by vine roots, while generally poor soils mean that Riesling typically does better here than Grüner Veltliner.

"Up here, you almost see naked rock and the little topsoil there is comes from the terraces," says Hirtzberger.

Regarding the wines, Hirtzberger says that he loves the combination of "generous apricot notes from the lower part of the Singerriedel, while there is cooler peach at the top. These are very distinct fruit aromas. When we blend these components, they are more than the sum of their parts."

**95 Franz Hirtzberger 2016 Singerriedel Riesling Smaragd.** A lovely touch of freshly grated lemon rind appears on the nose of this wine, with the slightest hint of green Seville orange. The palate comes in with pristine green apple freshness, highlighted by lively, zesty lemon notes. It's zingy and taut with citrus freshness, which attains a riper Mandarin notion as it lingers. How enlivening and how lip-smacking. Drink through 2035. Weygandt-Metzler.  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$89

**95 Franz Hirtzberger 2015 Singerriedel Riesling Smaragd.** Bittersweet hints of honeycomb color the rounded citrus notes on the nose. The palate, on the other hand, uses zesty, concentrated citrus to corral the ripe generous stone fruit at its core. This is concentrated, incisive and flowing in its intensity. It's a big wine, but it has tension and grace. While it's lovely now, in order to do it justice, this will need bottle age. Its true nature will only become apparent over time, but it's most promising. Drink 2025–2040. Weygandt-Metzler.  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$89



# KIRNBERG

**T**hough most of the famous Wachau vineyards are on the north bank of the Danube, young winemakers have emerged from the shadow of their more famous neighbors across the river. Because it looks less spectacular than the steep slopes on the north bank, the southern bank has historically lacked a certain self-confidence, with small growers making wine mainly for the local market.

But what lies beneath certain vineyards is remarkable. The flatness of Kirnberg is deceptive. It suggests deep soil, when the opposite is true.

“The Kirnberg actually is a plateau,” says Georg Frischengruber, whose family has farmed vineyards here for five generations. “A slight loess layer covers a subsoil of paragneiss that lies above the river meadows and flood plains of the Danube.”

A difference between this plateau and the river meadows just a few feet below, where apple and apricot orchards thrive, is immense. Flooding has brought a lot of sand and mud to these meadows, which makes the soils too fertile for top-quality grapes.

While the Kirnberg is 728 feet at its highest point and lacks the steepness of the other riverbank, it offers the same geological properties, but without the intensified radiation or evaporation that comes with steep slopes. Yet, it’s still a warm site that brings ripe and generous fruit flavors to its wines.

“But there is a constant wind,” says Frischengruber, which helps to ease disease pressure and allows for long hang times.

To tease out ripeness and balance it with freshness means that harvests can stretch into November.

“The Rieslings from this site are very approachable,” says Frischengruber. “They show their potential and charm with both fruit and depth.”

Despite his family history of winegrowing, Frischengruber is a driving force amongst the young winemakers on the south bank, pushing the wine quality and prominence of the underdog site.

“You can achieve a lot within one generation,” he says. “We can show what is possible on the southern shore.”

**94 Georg Frischengruber 2017 Ried Kirnberg Grüner Veltliner Smaragd.** Subtle notes of Russet pear peel and lime zest on the nose lead to a very concentrated body where the attractive zestiness combines winningly with notes of salty miso and hints of white pepper. It’s citrus freshness that highlights the aromatic, savory nature of these flavors and gives this wine its racy, refreshing tension that leaves you wanting more. Schatzi Wines.  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$42

**93 Georg Frischengruber 2017 Ried Kirnberg Riesling Smaragd.** Glorious heady aromas of crushed citrus foliage and vivid lime zest scents introduce this wine. The palate brims with tangerine and Meyer lemon notes. Their headiness fills nose and palate, tingling with gorgeous, scented freshness. Lovely now, and it’s sure to develop. Drink now–2028. Schatzi Wines.  
**abv:** 13% **Price:** \$45

**90 Fischer 2018 Ried Kirnberg Riesling Feder-spiel.** Green apple and pear appear tenderly on the fresh nose. The palate is slender and fresh, but also has a note of riper, mellow apple flesh. The finish is dry, fresh and mouthwatering. Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd.  
**abv:** 12.5% **Price:** \$20

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