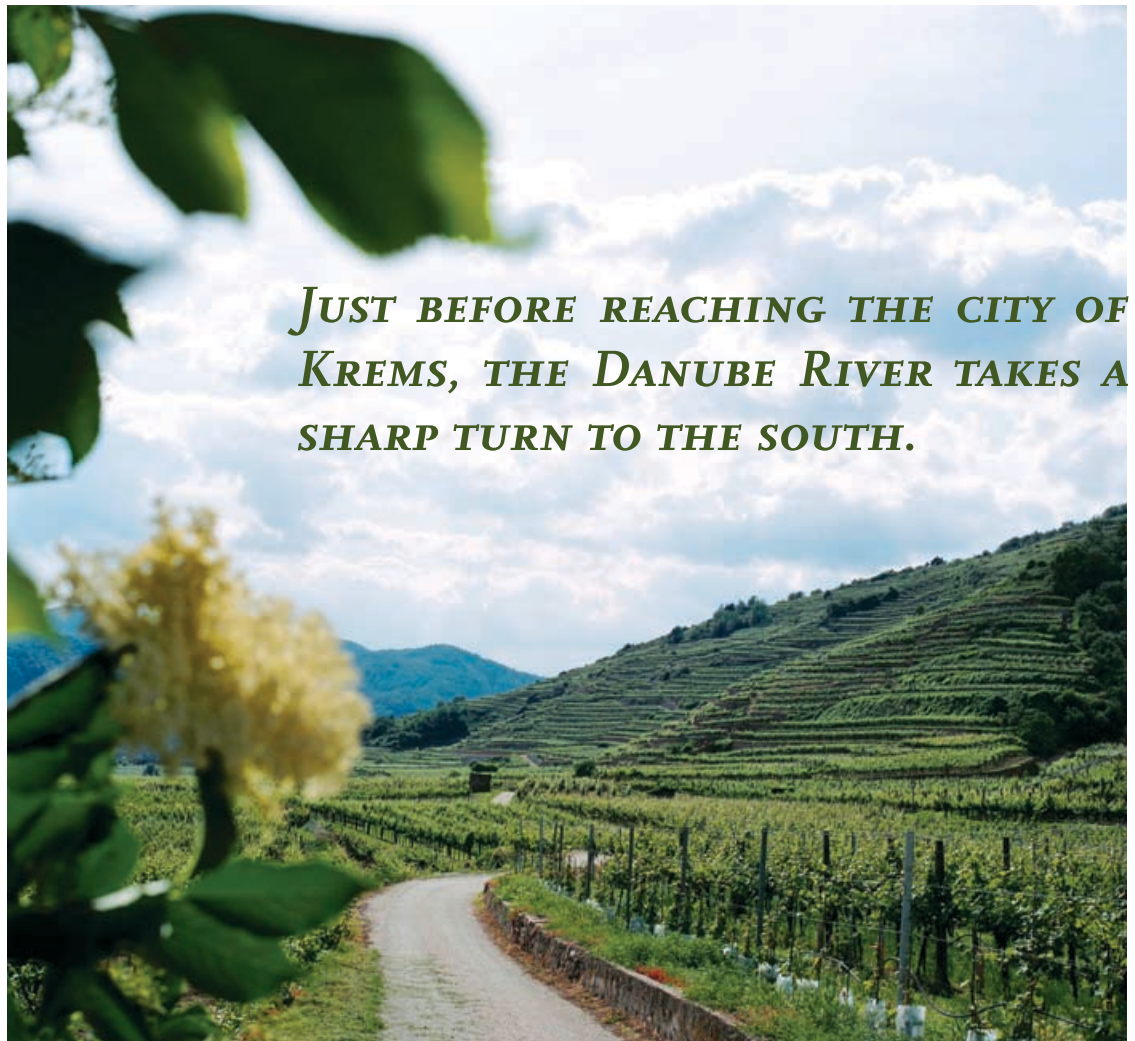


Loibenberg

Wachau, Austria

DAVID VOGELS, CWP



JUST BEFORE REACHING THE CITY OF KREMS, THE DANUBE RIVER TAKES A SHARP TURN TO THE SOUTH.

Here, on the north bank between the towns of Dürnstein and Unterloiben, perched on steep terraces banking away from the river, are the most storied vineyards in the Wachau: from west to east, Kellerberg, Hollerin, Schütt, Loibenberg, and Steinertal. The largest and rockiest of these, and the one facing most directly south, is the Loibenberg.

In the Wachau—part of Lower Austria, the northeast corner of the country, hemmed in by the Czech and Slovak borders—Riesling tends to be planted higher on the slopes, where it can reach Mosel-like intensity in the granitic gneiss. Farther down, the sandy, gravelly soils favor Grüner Veltliner, which achieves perhaps its finest expression in this bend of the river. But



Photos courtesy of F.X. Pichler

the vineyards are a patchwork quilt of ownership that produce varying results in the hands of different producers.

On the 50 acres of the Loibenberg, there are 23 owners producing grapes for 17 different wineries. Franz Xaver Pichler, since taking the reins from his father, Franz Sr., in 1971, has gradually accumulated one of the largest hold-

ings on the mountain—nearly 9 acres, perched just above his winery in Unterloiben. “We wouldn’t want one hectare more, because the work is all done by hand,” says Lucas Pichler, translating for his famously taciturn father in a recent interview at the winery. The internationally educated Lucas assumed the role of winemaker in 1999, although Franz Xaver remains



F.X. Pichler and his son, Lucas Pichler (above); Emmerich Knoll III (right).



the vineyard manager.

F.X. Pichler, as the winery is now known to distinguish it from the other Pichlers in the Wachau, uses Loibenberg grapes not only in its vineyard-designate Riesling and Grüner Veltliner (labeled as Loibner Berg), but also in the basic Urgestein Terrassen line (“primary-rock terraces,” formerly called “von den Terrassen”). The best selection, however, is reserved for Pichler’s flagship wines: the Grüner Veltliner “M” (for “monumental”), in which Loibenberg accounts for about 70% of the blend, and the Riesling Unendlich (“endless”), where it usually constitutes a smaller percentage. Other outstanding, ageworthy Loibenbergs are produced by the increasingly well-regarded Alzinger and Knoll wineries; more economical versions come from producers such as Domäne Wachau (the cooperative formerly called Freie Weingärtner Wachau), Bäuerl, and Tegernseerhof.

“The Loibenberg vineyards are higher altitude, a little bit cooler, and a bit more stony; the soil is poorer” than on the lower Steinertal and neighboring Kremstal sites, says Emmerich Knoll III, British-educated son of the second-generation Emmerich, whose winery is just across town from Pichler’s. “So the wine shows more vibrant acidity, with a lot of tension; it’s leaner and tighter, and the minerality is more pronounced.”

Under the 1985 classification of the Vinea Wachau, the local growers’ association, most of the Loibenberg grapes reach sufficient late-har-

vest ripeness to qualify as Smaragd (meaning “emerald,” referring to the native green lizard that serves as the area’s mascot). Roughly comparable to a Spätlese in Germany and elsewhere in Austria, a Smaragd must have an alcohol level of more than 12.5% and a Klosterneuburger Mostwaage (KMW) level of at least 19° sugar must-weight at harvest. Lighter wines are classified as Federspiel (a signal used in falconry)—the equivalent of a Kabinett—which must have at least 17° KMW and between 11.5% and 12.5% alcohol. The lightest wines are called Steinfeder, after the “feather” grass that grows on the terraces.

The Wachau in general is affected by wide diurnal temperature shifts, thanks to the confluence of warm, dry winds from eastern Europe and cool breezes from Austria’s northern plateau. Loibenberg vineyards do not cool off as much at night, however, and because of the heat and dry climate, have been irrigated since 1989 from a well shared among the growers. “It was one of the first sites in the Wachau to allow irrigation,” says Lucas Pichler. “There are years when you have, in summer, five or six weeks with no rain, high temperatures, and some windy days,” adds Knoll, “where we lose a lot of the water from the ground. We have only about 50-70 centimeters of topsoil”—20-27 inches—“and below, there is pure rock.” Because of Austria’s low yield allowance, he says, irrigation is used sparingly.

IF YOU VISIT

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OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

**Alzinger Riesling
Smaragd Loibenberg** 2005 \$50

Pale gold. A touch of sulfur blows off to reveal petrol, citrus, melon, peach, and orange blossom notes. Warm, juicy peach and nectarine dominate the palate, fading on the finish to leave a sensation of mineral oil and a bit of residual sugar.

**Domäne Wachau Riesling
Smaragd Loibenberg** 2007 \$30

Light straw with green highlights. Aromas of green apple, pear, and peach combined with a slaty minerality. Elegant palate with a fresh finish.

**F.X. Pichler Grüner Veltliner
Smaragd Loibner Berg** 2007 \$65

Pale straw color. Nose of fresh green apples, riverbed gravel, and smoke. Mouth-filling texture, backed by enough acidity and minerality to make this an excellent food wine.

**F.X. Pichler Grüner
Veltliner "M"** 2007 \$80

Harvested in early December, 70% from Loibner Berg, 30% from the southeast-facing Dürnsteiner Kellerberg vineyard. Straw color with greenish-gold highlights. Notes of slate, melon, apple, and pepper, combined with more exotic peach and mango aromas from the Kellerberg. Full-bodied, viscous mouthfeel.

**Knoll Grüner Veltliner
Smaragd Ried Loibenberg** 2007 \$60

Light straw color with gray-green tint. Citrus fruits, green apple, melon, and stony minerality on the nose, followed by a big mouthfeel and juicy acidity. Taut, angular structure.

Prices are estimated retail.



Leo Alzinger with his son, Leo Jr.

skin contact to get all the aromas from the skins, and we store all the Smaragd wine for three or four months on the lees before first racking, so we have much more roundness and harmony in the wine."

According to F.X. Pichler, both Riesling (brought in from Germany) and Grüner Veltliner began to be planted around 1900 to improve the quality of grapes grown in the Wachau. Before that, with no irrigation, the tart, rustic local varieties such as Brauner Veltliner were often mixed with sweet wines from Hungary to make them palatable. Today, says Lucas Pichler, "we can produce high-class wines with the Grüner Veltliner, and it's unique to Austria. We don't want to plant other varieties that are grown around the world, because it's not interesting to us. We have unique soil, and we know that Grüner Veltliner and Riesling are perfect for the Wachau."

Both Pichler and Knoll have been pleased with the 2007 vintage, in which a classic growing season produced greater acidity and more typical flavors than in the hot 2006. A period of heavy fall rains, Pichler reports, necessitated the culling of some vines that were affected by rot and delayed the 2007 harvest by two or three weeks.

"We have a special microclimate and special sites," Pichler summarizes. "We can talk about 'terroir' now because the French do, and all the journalists come in and talk about terroir, but these are the things that we know for generations before, so it's not new for us." Sommeliers around the world are catching on as well. ☞

Although no de-alcoholization or other manipulation in the winery is permitted under Vinea Wachau rules, and natural acidity is lower than in Germany, the relatively high alcohol of most vintages does not dominate the wine. "It's the minerality of the soil that keeps it fresh and drinkable," Pichler believes. "We also store it in big wooden casks to get more harmony and creaminess, so you don't feel the high alcohol. The Smaragd wines normally have 24 hours of