



[F. X. Pichler] WACHAU

Every region has its icons, and in the Wachau no one is held in higher esteem than Franz Xaver Pichler. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what the Wachau would be like today without him. Through his relentless and uncompromising pursuit of quality, he has heavily impacted the modern style of winemaking and expanded the boundaries of possibility in the region.

Pichler's wines are renowned for their intensity and concentration, often reaching alcohol levels of up to 15 percent. Yet despite their girth, they are remarkably harmonious, complex and soil-driven, often displaying an astounding elegance and balance that can seem to defy the imagination. Pichler emphasizes meticulous work in the vineyards, and the impeccable health of his fruit allows for a long hang time and very late harvesting, giving his wines tremendous depth and concentration of flavors. He is no less a perfectionist in the cellar, where he treats his wines as gently and as naturally as possible in order to preserve the characters of each of his individual sites.

Pichler's success has encouraged frequent attempts to emulate his style, and in the last decade many Wachau winegrowers have been lowering yields and harvesting increasingly later, often well into December, in order to increase concentration and alcohol. Few, however, can match Pichler's ability to combine this richness with such refinement and finesse. —P.L.





The local and eventually the international image of grüner veltliner changed when its rustic wagon was hitched to a star. More precisely, a constellation of stars, that generation of talented and ambitious Austrian growers who emerged in the 1980s and rocketed Austria's dry wines to heights undreamed of by their parents or grandparents. They didn't just drag along their country's indigenous grape but proudly pushed it to the forefront of their efforts. F.X. Pichler, whose wines had by 1990 achieved cult status at home and in Germany, says with satisfaction, "We showed that there is no need for growers to sacrifice grüner veltliner for the sake of riesling."

Pushing the qualitative envelope can earn wine great reviews. It can also engender controversy. One hears vociferous reactions to the 14 and 15 percent alcohol grüner veltliners of Pichler just as one hears rejections of Larry Turley's Zinfandels. But the facts are, if you plant good clones in a good site, prune for low yields, and let the fruit hang for maximum maturation of flavors, you are going to get higher sugars, like it or not. The crafty Pichler has an uncanny ability to fold high alcohol harmoniously into a rich, voluminous whole that leaves most tasters stunned by the majestic scope and riveting intensity of the wine's flavors, not by its proof. His are the sort of grüner veltliners I've witnessed trounce the world's best chardonnays in international "competitions." Less-talented winemakers who follow Pichler onto the tight rope may end up tumbling into an alcoholic mire.