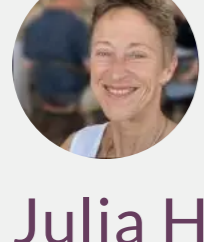


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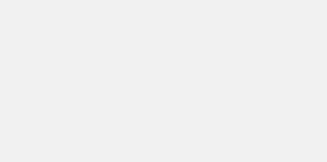
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INSIDE INFORMATION

AUSTRIA

CLASSIFICATION



Austria's Erste Lage dilemma



Austrian winegrowers may be focused on the harvest but the new law has given them plenty to think about. Above, Michael Moosbrugger at this year's Single Vineyard Summit at Schloss Grafenegg.

In August this year, Austria's Minister of Agriculture and Forestry signed the Wine Law Collective Decree, laying the basis for a legal recognition of the terms Erste Lage and Grosse Lage, terms equivalent to premier and grand cru, respectively.

Prior to this decision, the term Erste Lage was used only by members of the Österreichischer Traditionsweingüter (ÖTW), the private winegrowers' association established in Krems 30 years ago by a group of 10 producers. Today the ÖTW has members in Kamptal, Kremstal, Traisental, Wagram, Wien, the Thermenregion and Carnuntum (see this [World Atlas of Wine map](#) to get your bearings) but even they could not use the term on the label. The move has its proponents and opponents, and was keenly debated at this year's ÖTW Single Vineyard Summit.

The ÖTW mission has from the start been to establish a hierarchy of named single vineyards along the lines of premiers and grands crus in Burgundy. Its criteria for classifying the top vineyards are both physical and commercial, ie based not only on the potential of a vineyard to produce high-quality wines but also on the track record (critics' scores and market prices) of those wines. More like the [Bordeaux 1855 classification](#).

As Michael Moosbrugger, long-standing chairman of the association as well as managing director of Schloss Gobelsburg in Kamptal, pointed out at a press conference during the Single Vineyard Summit, this tasting event, now in its tenth year, is part of the classification process: every year the ÖTW collects scores from selected tasters and tracks the performance of specific vineyards (not specific producers) over time. By participating in the event I have already endorsed what the members do – and I certainly admire their focus on origin and wine quality, and their persistence.

Moosbrugger, who lives and breathes Erste Lagen (but still manages to play the piano for an hour a day), repeatedly stresses that the ÖTW is not elitist; that, to quote from their vineyard-classification booklet, 'The basic foundation of the ÖTW's work lies in the conviction that place of origin – provenance – and its collaborative promotion within a winegrowers' community is the most socially appropriate and democratic form of marketing wine.'

I find it very hard to agree that the ÖTW is not elitist even if there is democracy within their own ranks. The top vineyards may be shared among several growers but they are not a common good such as a geographical indication, which all growers in that region may use on the label (which was the foundation of the French appellation system, for example).

Were their vineyard evaluation criteria purely physical, and not dependent on a producer's ability to promote and sell wines from that vineyard in addition to their ability to make great wine from it, I could see a more egalitarian opportunity for younger winegrowers, particularly those who have not inherited family land.

Moosbrugger counters this criticism by suggesting that the rise in individualism – in wine as well as in society more generally – has already challenged the appellation system (he cites the example of Italian producers such as the early proponents of [Supertuscans](#), who chose to abandon their DOC in favour of VINO DA TAVOLA or IGP) and that one of the principles of the ÖTW is collective responsibility: 'origin is a collective good' is his mantra.

However, I do agree that from the consumers' point of view it could be helpful to identify Austria's best vineyards from among the more than 4,000 vineyard names officially registered, allowed on wine labels of [DAC](#) wines, and wonderfully documented on the [Riedenkarten](#), ie the named-vineyard maps. How is a consumer new to Austrian wine to know that Ried X is better than Ried Y?

The wider debate about vineyard classification, which highlights the distinction between naming and classifying, has become more acute now that it is possible for the country's regional wine committees to apply for the right to use the term Erste Lage on single-vineyard wines, so-called [Riedeneine](#). This debate is not exclusive to Austria, as you will know if you have kept up with Walter's articles on named vineyards in Italy; see, for example, [Red-hot classification of Barolo crus](#).

Having not prevented the ÖTW from using the term Erste Lage in the first place, the national wine committee really had no choice but to add single-vineyard classification to the Austrian wine law. Many non-ÖTW members felt at a disadvantage because although they could put the name of their vineyards on the label – the pyramid of quality enshrined within the DAC regulations of most wine regions put [Riedeneine](#) at the top – they could not refer to them as Erste Lagen. As Roman Horvath MW, managing director of Domäne Wachau, explained to me, 'The lobbying of the non-ÖTW winegrowers became so strong that the Austrian winegrowing policy felt compelled to make the site classification legal and to open it up to all wineries.'

No one is happier about this amendment to the wine law than Michael Moosbrugger. Members of the ÖTW have been using this term within the association for many years, even if they are permitted to use only the group's trademarked symbol (below) on the label. Wine regions with members in the association are likely to be the first to apply since they have already done the work of evaluating and privately classifying their own top vineyards. Moosbrugger told me that the ÖTW have volunteered to give up their trademark once Erste Lage appears on labels as part of national wine law.



Moosbrugger said 'We [the ÖTW] are proud that we achieved something for the greater good of Austrian wine.'

But not everyone is happy. And many winegrowers are undecided. The legal pathway is in place but the process is inevitably long, bureaucratic and complicated, and not everyone is sure they have anything to gain.

This is how it works. The winegrowers in a DAC region have to agree that they want to go down this path. Their regional wine committee then has to apply to the national wine committee to be allowed use the Erste Lage classification. The national wine committee deliberates and then the regional committee has to identify the candidate vineyards and prove the historical, topographical, climatic, geological and soil homogeneity of each one, also taking into account the economic/market success of the wines it produces. Importantly, such vineyards may not exceed 35 ha (86.4 acres). In addition, it seems, there will be a limit of 20% on the percentage of a region's vineyards that can be classified. After a vineyard has been classified as an Erste Lage for five years, it is eligible to be considered for Grosse Lage status.

Chris Yorke, managing director of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, believes the first Erste Lagen will be in place by 2025 – though in the same breath he warned not to believe in anyone's prognostications.

It's not just the paperwork that people object to. There are more fundamental, ideological objections. [Vinea Wachau](#), the association of producers in the Wachau region established 40 years ago, has a very different ethos, restricting membership only on the basis of where producers have their vineyards and winery, and is therefore far more inclusive than the ÖTW.

There is a risk that producers who are already successful will only become more successful, widening the gap between top producers' incomes and opportunities and those of anyone starting at the bottom of the ladder. (This might sound very familiar to anyone versed in Bordeaux's current split between wealthy classed growths and struggling petits châteaux.) Furthermore, many of the Wachau's top vineyards, for example Achleiten, Singerriedel and Loibenberg, are already firmly fixed in the minds of knowledgeable merchants and consumers and need no further imprimatur of approval.

Vinea Wachau president Emmerich Knoll described himself to me as 'a divided soul'. As a winegrower, he would rather see a classification built solely on physical terroir characteristics with no reference to the market position of the wines. He wonders what will happen to potentially great sites that are not currently farmed by any of the top-tier producers – how will they join the classification? And any classification will inevitably result in conflict: not every candidate vineyard will be successful, to the detriment of any growers making wines from those sites.

One other complicating factor in the Wachau is their continued definition and promotion of wines styles exclusive to their region, notably Smaragd and Federspiel. Some untangling and relinquishing might be required. The same untangling would be necessary in [Styria](#), where another private association, the STK, has its own [classification system](#).

A view frequently expressed by those outside the ÖTW was that they did not want the legislation but now it is in place, they would be disadvantaged if they did not join in. Coercion is never a good feeling.

On the other hand, Marion Ebner-Ebenauer in the [Weinviertel](#), who is tired of not being able to get her single-vineyard wines through the region's conservative DAC tasting committee, warmly welcomes the Erste Lagen developments. Apologising for being in a rush to get back to the press station – harvest is in full swing – she wrote to me to say, 'Our single vineyards that we have been working with for three generations are a heritage and we are proud of these soils, climate and the mineral-driven taste ... and we are happy that they will be Erste Lage soon!'

Christoph Wachter of Wachter-Wiesler in Eisenberg is also optimistic, and says that he will campaign for Eisenberg to apply for the right to use Erste Lage. 'I sincerely believe it will open the eyes of many winemakers and give an incentive and motivation to "recognize" what treasure they are actually sitting on. This could help many smaller winegrowers realize that the land they own is something great.'

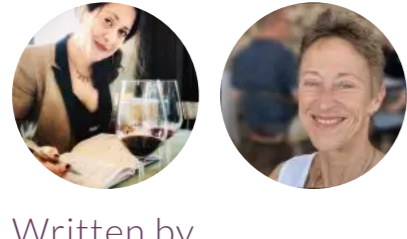
I asked Heinrich Hartl of Weingut Heinrich Hartl III in the Thermenregion if he thought the region would soon apply for Erste Lage status. His response was pragmatic:

'I believe the question here is "What is soon?". We were the last region to establish the DAC regulation and this happened for a reason. It took a long while to agree on what we now have and what we need to work on to actually implement it among growers ...

'At the moment, we really have to focus on our DAC regulation. We have started an internal process of defining and describing the various wines and are working on the positioning of our Ortsweine (village wines: Gumpoldskirchen, Tattendorf, Perchtoldsdorf, Sooss, Baden and Wiener Neustadt) on the market.

'There are only a few wineries who have marketed [Riedeneine](#) in the (more recent) past. I assume as we were not the first with the DAC system, we will also not be one of the first growing regions to jump into this absolutely new system; we will need some time. That should not mean we have to be the last ones in Austria again.'

I foresee much heated debate and hand-wringing in the regional wine committees and I just hope the agonising and the process of application, if that is the route they take, does not distract the winegrowers from making great wines.



Written by

Paula Bire & Julia Harding MW

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Grüner Veltliner wines from ÖTW estates tasted at the annual Single Vineyard Summit at Schloss Grafenegg (above). See Julia's report...

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