

MARTIN OBENAU, Glaubendorf, Weinviertel

MO: the unchained path....less is more and timing is everything.



Martin Obenaus from Glaubendorf ("Locus Fidei") in Weinviertel is a young passionate biodynamic winegrower. He loves working his vineyards and with the creatures around them. "Unchained" is his credo in all aspects. Farmed biodynamically, his vineyards shall once again turn into an ecosystem in which interventions become less and less necessary. Martin protects, supports, lets nature take its course, he unchains it. Hunting shapes the environment in a similar way as winegrowing. It might seem unusual to strive for a development in which the hunter becomes dispensable and the nature is unchained. But so was the return to winegrowing the way our ancestors used to do it - the low intervention way. Martin has taken this path which will be a never-ending one. The ecosystem changes every year but so do we.

Unchained: looking forward into the past

Freedom, letting go and the breaking of "chains" are attitudes that are often associated with young people who are keen to experiment. Looking at agriculture and viticulture, we see that such attributes are rarely mentioned. After all, these cultural techniques are massively influenced by human hand, whether it concerns vine training systems, the cultivation of the soils, plant protection or, finally, vinification. Constraints and "chains" all over the place, often aided and nurtured by a systematic treatment industry. Nature - which after all produces the fruit to be fermented - is constantly being steered in "desired" directions. Yes, steering by humans is often unavoidable, but it should be done in harmony with a healthy environment and not in defiance of it. Nowadays people like to optimize until "system" is the only thing that remains of "ecosystem". No natural balance whatsoever, we let medicine treat the symptoms caused by a previous medicine.

When we compare today's "modern" economy and working methods with the methods of our grandparents, the difference becomes clearly visible. Maybe grandpa and grandma couldn't help it, but they did treat their resources with more respect and in a way that they would be preserved for the next generation. A clever farmer always thinks about the future. So how can a wine grower (in the literal, "farming" sense of the word) treat his vines, soils and the nature (meaning flora and fauna) which makes all living possible in such a way that it can be "unchained" from too many manipulations and interventions? Can he reduce those interventions, support the natural balance and observe the annual cycles of nature instead of influencing them? Should we not take a look back into the past in order to remain fit for the future?

Hunting for new solutions without a hunter

Martin Obenaus is a passionate hunter. However, he is fully aware of the fact that hunting clearly is a human activity – and today only very few people hunt for food in order to survive. In many aspects, hunting displays a lot of parallels to viticulture. A conscientious hunter cares for ecosystems such as woods and meadows servicing pathways, creating grazing areas, protecting ponds and swamp meadows. Ideally, the hunter is a guardian who helps to preserve the habitat of many animals and promoting balance (also in terms of the animal populations). Similar to the winegrower, he bears responsibility for his region, indeed for his terroir, understood as the interaction of nature, climate, flora, fauna and man.

Due to current massive human interventions in nature, both the winegrower and the hunter are needed more than ever. This may sound absurd, but both should contribute to a development that makes them less and less necessary in the ecosystem. The more nature can help itself, the less intervention will be needed, the more balanced the cycles of nature will be. Translated into the vineyard, it's to say that the vine is enabled to find its own balance and the winegrower leaves it alone as much as possible. Certainly: viticulture will never be possible without our help and we will not be able to declare all the surrounding landscapes as areas where hunting is forbidden. But we should strive towards this, work and act like Martin Obenaus. For him, there's a signpost and it reads "Biodynamics".



Work and let go

Glaubendorf („Locus Fidei“): 48°30' N, 15.°57' E, 481 inhabitants. In concrete terms, this tranquil village is located in the western part of the Weinviertel, the northernmost wine region in Austria, at the geographical intersection of the Manhartsberg and the Danube. Only a stone's throw away from neighbouring Wagram, its vines grow on the same loess soils and also the climate is similar, with cold winters and warm, dry summers. Nature sets the rules. Temperature, rain, sun, wind, humidity, the soil and the life in it, the flora and fauna in the vineyards and around them: these factors shape the realities of the terroir.

"Active soil life leads to a higher resistance of the vine to parasites and pathogens; it enables an intensive exchange with millions upon millions of microorganisms and a better resistance to negative environmental influences. The vines are allowed to grow old, their roots go deeper and thus interact with a more vital soil fauna. A living soil is also better protected against erosion and its nutrient system is more diverse. Apart from that, it seems obvious to me that the information and nutrients that the vines absorb from the soil will ultimately be felt and can be tasted in my wines," Martin is convinced.

The decision to work biodynamically (in practice since 2012, in official conversion since 2018) was a logical consequence for Martin. For quite some years now he has been treating his vines and the soil with respect, evaluating and serving their individual needs thoroughly. This is why he is now able to harvest grapes that ripen earlier. We are not talking about a ripeness in the sense of alcohol degrees. The ripeness Martin cares about is one of ripe aromas, ripe texture of skins, seeds and tannins. Producing power and alcohol in today's ever warmer vintages is truly no longer any art. The truly artful thing is to produce wines with a lot of taste but little alcohol! It's all about harmony and balance!

Animals are also of big help in Martin's effort to restore an ecosystem that is as intact as possible. He relies on a flock of sheep that he lets graze in his vineyards. They manage to significantly improve the soil quality within a very short time. He plans to extend this method to most of his land in the upcoming years.

Cellar life: when time is of essence

Martin's strives to reduce necessary manipulations to a minimum during the processing of the harvested grapes. He wants to "unchain" his cellar as well. The recipe for this is basically a simple one (although the simplest things in life are also the most difficult): perfect grapes and a lot of time. Wines with taste despite low alcohol, here's how this works for Martin:

- The incoming grapes are being gently **pressed**, as a general rule in whole bunches in order to put emphasis on precision and finesse. Fermentation takes place **spontaneously** without adding artificial yeast.
- Grapes for almost all wines - white, rosé or red - are **macerated** in order to extract the aromas from the skins. The skins remain in contact with the must both before and during fermentation, but rarely for more than 7-10 days. The aim is not to produce wines that are as "orange" as possible, but to gain structure and flavour. A forward-looking approach that is becoming more and more prevalent in the world of natural wines.
- The **vessels** in which the wines are destined to mature are both "classic" and avantgarde: on the one hand, Martin uses stainless steel tanks to accentuate the fruit, and large, old oak barrels to secure stable ageing over a long time. But on the other hand, he also uses stone barrels made of granite, which lend the wines a very unique character.
- After being put into barrels or tanks the wines are left to **mature** on their lees. Depending on grape composition and style, this will be for at least 10 months (for the "MO" series) and up to 24 or even 36 months for the "Unchained" series.
- **Time** is of essence in the Obenaus cellar since it helps the wines to cast off their chains. While being in contact with the lees and profiting from introducing oxygen into the large wooden or stone barrels, the wines become stable on their own. As a result, they do not

require fining nor filtration. Naturally low pH-values also allow to reduce sulphur additions to a minimum. Sulphites are usually added only once before bottling.

- Finally, the wines are **filled** into light bottles (environment!) and are allowed to rest in peace for a couple of months before being put on the market. That's it – not more, not less.

Stone age

When visiting Martin's ancient cellar (which, according to family reports, is at least 320 years old) you can spot about a dozen of unusual granite barrels. They weigh 2 tons and can hold 1000 liters of wine. Martin helped to develop and design this type of barrel, he owns the prototype and can draw on several years of experience in handling this material. He is convinced that granite is exciting in that - similar to a wooden barrel - it allows oxidation but does not release any flavours. The results are very pure wines with a unique fruit character. What's more: stone is a natural substance that has always had a strong influence on viticulture. Wine and stone, they belong together.



The importance of grape variety

Once upon a time, grape variety didn't matter at all. It was the origin that made a difference - and the winemaker's skills. It's true, every grape variety has its own character, displays more or less acidity, more or less of this or that fruit, tannin, and so on. But what really counts is to have a balanced, fresh wine with a character. The vineyards of Glaubendorf ("Locus Fidei"), their loess soils and the somewhat cooler climate (compared to neighbouring regions) produce distinctive grapes. Martin Obenaus aims to showcase their character, whether by means of one grape variety alone or in the interplay of several. Producing ambitious, courageous wines requires freedom of thought – here we go again, this is where the idea of "unchained" wines manifests once again.

Lines of simplicity – the portfolio

Martin Obenaus' wines display many layers. The portfolio however is simple: 2 series, that's it. Life is complicated anyway.



MO:

MO: stands for Martin Obenaus, as simple as that. But simple does not have to mean trivial. It's rather easy-going in the most positive meaning. The MO line of wines is usually aged in stainless steel for the whites and large old oak barrels for the reds. The focus is put on a pure and elegant fruit character which, together with fresh, palpable acidity and low alcohol ensures joyful drinking without remorse. The MO-wines currently come in white and red and are composed of the typical grapes of the region: Grüner Veltliner as a basis for the white plus Riesling and Müller-Thurgau, Zweigelt for the reds. A dash of white grapes can occasionally be added to the red to emphasize its fresh nature.



UNCHAINED

Unchained is the centerpiece of the Obenaus portfolio. While the human factor is more noticeable in the entry level "MO:"-wines, Martin takes a step back when it comes to his "Unchained"-range. He leaves the wines alone as best as he can and grants them the time they need. Consequently, they spend up to 2 years at the winery until market launch. They age partly in stainless steel tanks, partly in those beautiful old oak barrels (up to 4000 litres), which provide the wine with oxygen but do not impart any oaky character. Grüner Veltliner, Weissburgunder and Riesling are the backbone for the white edition, Zweigelt for the red. Thanks to their profound balance, they serve as a symbol of their soils, grape varieties and climate. Unadulterated, sometimes edgy, always true, unchained.

Martin: inventor, activist, cook, eater and host

Martin's path towards interfering less, towards "unchaining" nature is filled with a lot of work. No pains, no gains. What's more - Martin is a young guy full of energy, an "activist" if you like - and an artisan. If you do your stuff yourself, you don't have to buy it and you can also develop a personal connection to the piece. To give an example, Martin has helped to design the kettle for the teas he brings out into his vineyards. He designs his own traps and equips them with GPS. He builds (you can order one if you're lucky) especially great "insect hotels" designed for harbouring those indispensable little helpers. These hotels are then placed in suitable locations in the vineyards. Biodiversity, another key to biodynamics.

All animals killed during hunting are processed (the fox fur for example) or eaten - deer, badger, pheasant, wild boar, hare, in the form of fresh meat, pâté or smoked meat. Martin is a gifted chef, excelling at his barbecue and smoker and there is a dispute on whether he prefers to cook or to eat. It's probably both. In the Obenaus family, the quality of the food is at least as important as the wine poured in the process. Martin's mother Christine, who actually goes hunting even more often than her son, prepares the most delicious dishes day after day. It comes as no surprise that wine is always part of the meal. A tasting at Obenaus is always unpretentious and a culinary highlight.

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