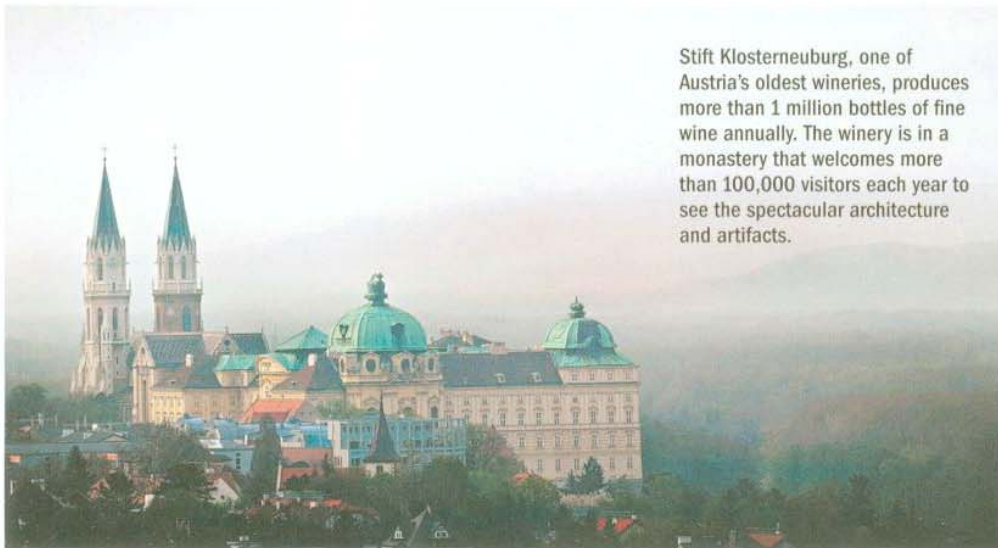
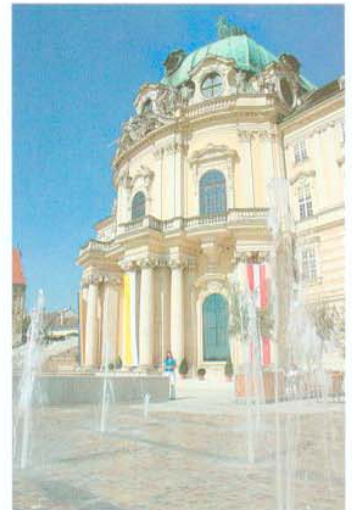


# Divine Wine



Stift Klosterneuburg, one of Austria's oldest wineries, produces more than 1 million bottles of fine wine annually. The winery is in a monastery that welcomes more than 100,000 visitors each year to see the spectacular architecture and artifacts.



PHOTOGRAPHY / COURTESY OF STIFT KLOSTERNEUBURG



BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD

In March 1985, a sales tax auditor in the remote Austrian village of Pamhagen stumbled on the first clue to what would become the biggest wine scandal in Europe since Roman times. While examining tax returns, he was mystified by a wine merchant's many purchases of diethylene glycol.

Contrary to Austrian wine laws, sugar was being added to the wine; mixing in diethylene glycol made it impossible to detect the sugar. The scam was widespread and many

of the best-known winemakers were implicated — some unwittingly, since their wines were being doctored by wholesalers. Authorities estimated that more than 1,000 Austrian wines were involved. Sales slumped by 80 percent.

But within a decade, a new generation of dedicated Austrian vigneron began making seismic changes in their winemaking methods, eventually producing world-class wines.

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Stift Klosterneuburg, one of Austria's oldest wineries, was in the vanguard of this revival. They were not involved in the wine contamination practices, but by implication their business suffered a serious downturn. "With this scandal," says Dr. Wolfgang Hamm, managing director of winemaking operations, "most of our exports stopped from one day to another."

Today, Stift Klosterneuburg produces more than 1 million bottles of fine wine annually. Exports to France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands, Scandinavia, Japan and Canada attest to their international renown.

The Stift, established in the 12th century to generate revenue for the abbey in which the winery is housed, owns vineyards in three grape-growing regions of Austria as well as around the abbey itself. In the Middle Ages, monasteries were the primary source of wine production. These days, Stift Klosterneuburg is the sole survivor of this winemaking milieu.

Their success is predicated on maximizing the best their grapes have to offer in the bottle.

"We aim to transfer the purest and most authentic characteristics from the terroir and the grapes that nature has given us into our wines with the minimum intervention," says Hamm. "Once the grapes get to the winery, you can only lose; you can't gain anything that is not already in the fruit. Our 24-year-old winemaker Christian Schmidt works very hard to capture the essence of each different grape variety in our wines." And the Stift's portfolio of wines exhibits all the zest and succulent flavors of the native Austrian grape varieties from which they are vinified. Their Grüner Veltliner 2006, for example, exudes a slightly spicy aroma of citrus, green



A ceiling fresco inside the monastery.

apples and pepper. The Riesling 2006 is fresh and fragrant to the nose with a delicate body and lively acidity. A lightly aromatic floral bouquet followed by a juicy complex of tropical fruits and a friendly farewell characterizes their Rotgipfler Spätrot 2006.

The cream of the Stift's crop is Grüner Veltliner Hengsberg 2006, which comes from the abbey vineyard itself. Light gold in color, the wine has a spicy nose with full, crisp apple fruit flavors on the palate and an extended finish. Red wine crafted from the St. Laurent grape is Stift Klosterneuburg's pièce de résistance and their St. Laurent Barrique 2004 is a delicious witness to their achievement with this grape. Their flagship red, Chorus 2004, is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Pinot Noir and St. Laurent. But Stift Klosterneuburg is much more than a fine wine mine. What else would you expect of a place the locals describe as "Where heaven embraces the earth?"

In 1114, Austrian nobleman Leopold III, who married a daughter of German Emperor Henry IV, founded the monas-

tery. Legend has it that Leopold found his wife's wedding veil, which had been swept away by a gust of wind nine years earlier, at the site of the Stift. He saw this as a sign from heaven and immediately ordered the abbey to be built on the spot. It is rumored that a fragment of the veil remains cloistered in the archives.

Today, the monastery is sanctuary to 52 canons or monks from as far afield as America and Vietnam. The Stift is a treasure-trove of spectacular architectural, religious and secular historical artifacts, all immaculately preserved for the viewing pleasure of more than 100,000 visitors each year.

The Verdun Altar is perhaps the most impressive of the religious icons. Completed in 1181 after a decade of artistic dedication by renowned jeweler Nicholas of Verdun, the altar is a panorama of 51 exquisitely colored tiles framed in pure gold depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Another must-see is the gigantic seven-armed candlestick Leopold III and his wife presented to the abbey. Its design is based on the Root of Jesse from the book of Isaiah.

What is thought to be the earliest painting of Vienna showing its most treasured ecclesiastical monument, the Stephansdom cathedral, is on display in the Sebastiani Chapel. There are paintings, too, of the carpenter's workshop and blacksmith's courtyard by 20th century Austrian artist Egon Schiele, who attended high school in the nearby town of Klosterneuburg. Relics of Roman times unearthed when the abbey was recently renovated are also on view including tombstones, pottery, household artifacts and a centurion's certification cast in bronze.

Their wine, too, has played a role in the rich and varied history of the Stift. A devastating

*Locals describe Stift as a place where heaven embraces the earth.'*

fire broke out in the town in 1330 and soon reached the abbey. By the time the firefighters reached the Verdun Altar, their water supply was exhausted, so they resorted to wine to save the precious panels. Centuries later, history repeated itself. But this time their wine came to the salvation of Austria's wine reputation. **W**

### If You Go

You can take the Schnellbahn (local train) S40 from Vienna to Klosterneuburg/Kierling or bus No. 239 or No. 241 from Vienna – Heiligenstadt to Niedermarkt. In either case, it's a short walk after you arrive. By car, follow Route B14 for about 15 minutes after leaving the outskirts of Vienna.

There are guided tours in English every day for about \$9 a person. They include the Sacred Tour, the Imperial Tour, the Vinicultural Tour with optional wine tasting and the Secret Gardens Tour. There's even a tour during which you can enjoy a three-course meal at the gourmet Restaurant Schuttkasten.

For more information, go to [www.stift-klosterneuburg.at](http://www.stift-klosterneuburg.at)

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