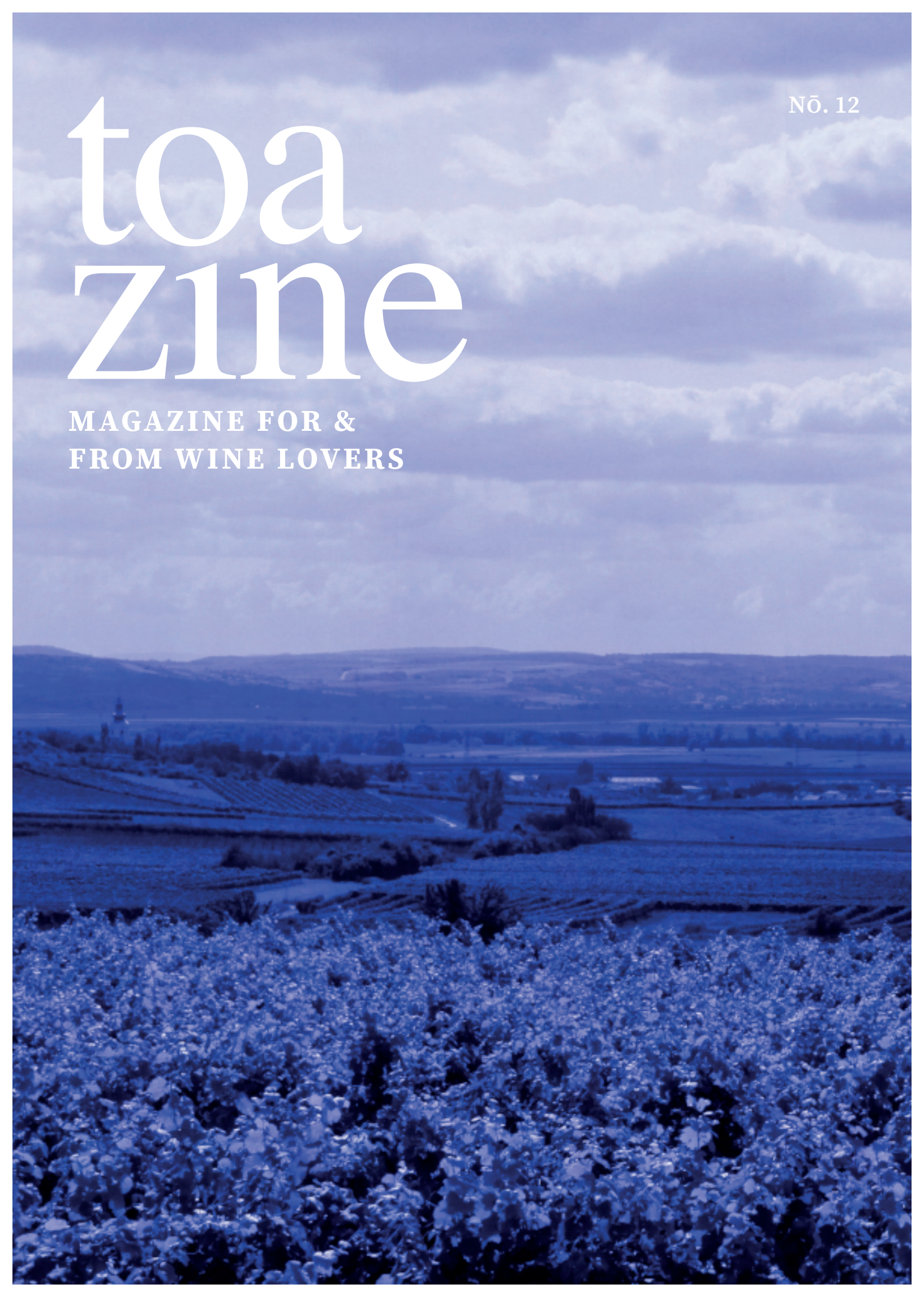


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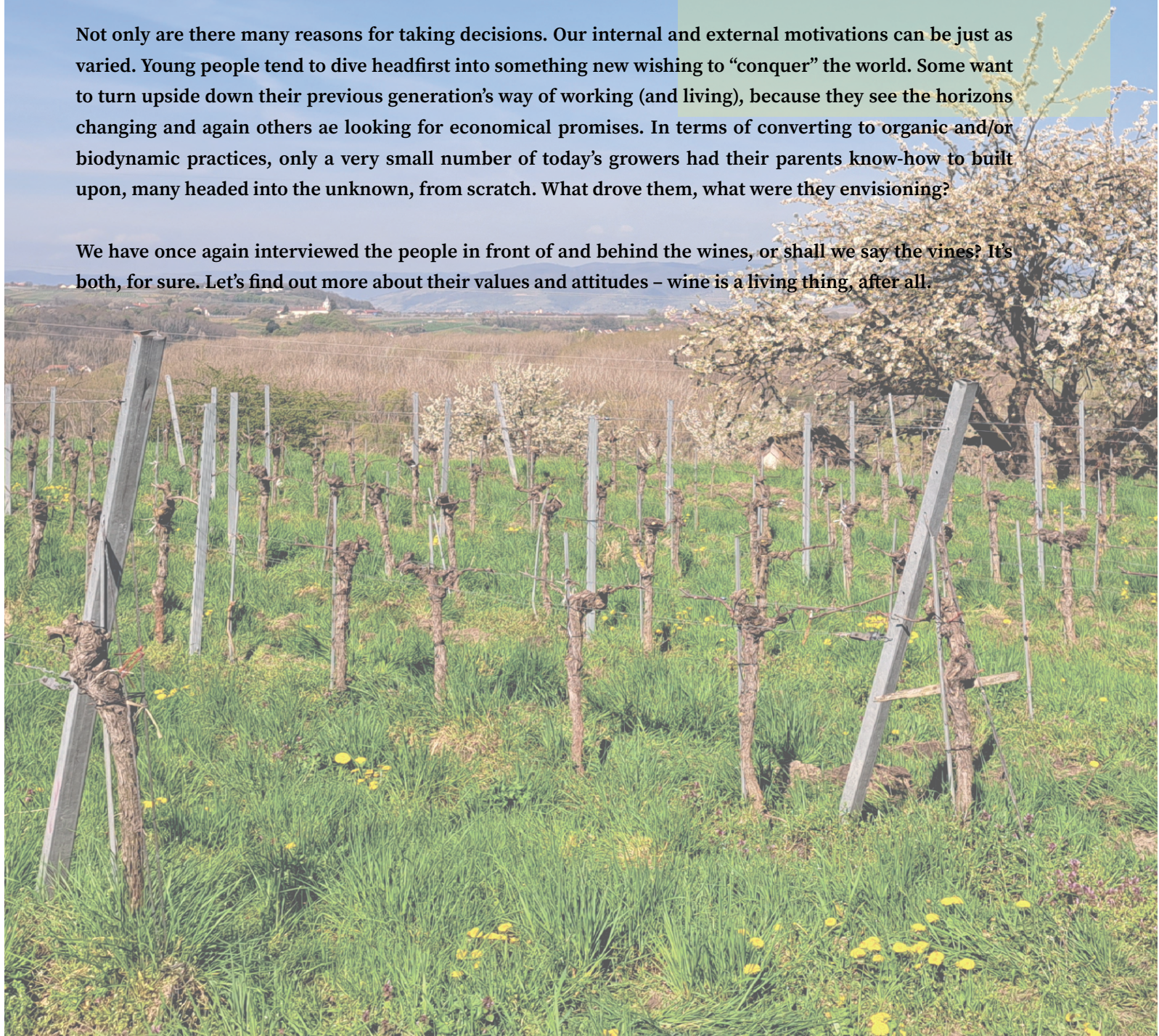


Organic Affection

The way we work and the way we live are often inseparably connected. And we take decisions for many reasons: emotional, educational, economical or family-related ones, among others. Inevitably, we evolve as we grow older, as we gain experience, as we learn to see things differently – if that is the case, of course. It's like with wine, it can get better with age but this does not apply to every single one. We have to be ready to learn, to accept and to adapt, be openminded and sometimes ready to take chances as well. But how does what we do impact who we are? What are the effects on our way of thinking, our values and on the choices we make – in regard to people, family, environment, consumption, etc. Speaking of winegrowers, let's not forget that being a producer never is a 9 to 5 job, it's rather around the clock. You cannot simply shut down the computer and go home, so to say. And given Austria's small(er) scale structure, wine estates are usually family-run enterprises so the family members not only live close to or directly at the winery but actively take part in the winegrower's approach, impact him or her while taking decisions and more often than not even assume working activities.

Not only are there many reasons for taking decisions. Our internal and external motivations can be just as varied. Young people tend to dive headfirst into something new wishing to “conquer” the world. Some want to turn upside down their previous generation's way of working (and living), because they see the horizons changing and again others are looking for economical promises. In terms of converting to organic and/or biodynamic practices, only a very small number of today's growers had their parents know-how to built upon, many headed into the unknown, from scratch. What drove them, what were they envisioning?

We have once again interviewed the people in front of and behind the wines, or shall we say the vines? It's both, for sure. Let's find out more about their values and attitudes – wine is a living thing, after all.



What motivated you to convert to organic or biodynamic cultivation and how did this change your life? Why do you work the way you do?

Karl Fritsch - Oberstockstall, Wagram



At a younger age, one tends to find his place in the world and a personal style and one is inevitably influenced by trends. Speaking of wine, the early 2000's were a time of a heavy use of oak, of alcoholic strength and concentration, for reds and whites. These wines were receiving high praise and like many, I was also part of it. However, there was always contact to other growers, to people who thought differently. Organic production started to be better known but it didn't come without concerns, for the ups and downs it brought along. But somehow, this path seemed promising, also because of family reasons. When you have children, you start thinking about healthy food etc. but also how to preserve our resources for them, enabling the future generations to have the same opportunities.

Coincidence played a role as well. Some of my colleagues were tending towards converting to organic, for various reasons and a loose group of growers engaged in discussions and invited speakers – later, they would form the respekt-BIODYN association. One of the experts we engaged with was Andrew Lorand who confronted us with the basic concepts of biodynamic cultivation. Although we had been in close contact to agriculture from when we were small, there was quite some terra incognita and a lot to learn. So we embarked on this new path in 2006, and this conversion not only affected our vines but also us as humans. And we didn't do it for economical reasons – the biodynamic way was far from a being a business back then – but because we were convinced it was the right thing to do. We are now in the 18th season of working that way and while you'll never have complete control and Nature will always be the boss, we have gained a certain level of experience and know how we can influence the outcome in a positive manner.



Martin Obenaus - Glaubendorf, Weinviertel

One of the reasons for converting was for me a trivial one: we used to apply plant protection using a tractor with a broken filter. I was full of chemical sprays after work and I hated it. Another reason was that I met Rudi Hohenender (a producer of organic vegetables and biodyn expert) who motivated me to convert. That was around 2008, I was 18 years old. I simply thought, "Hey, let me try it, it's gonna work out!" but it was also about accepting the challenge, especially as many people were claiming that it's bullshit and all is going to rotten. I thought, there is organic winegrowing all over the world, so why couldn't I do it as well? Also, I felt that every wine from the growers I knew tasted the same but the wines from organic growers were indeed different, more individual. My father gave me 3 hectares to try it and we had a 100% loss in the first year.

Nonetheless, I converted the whole estate the year after and it worked. In my case, it was converting to organics and biodyn, all at the same time. My friend Christoph Hoch (we went to wine school together) was kind of my partner in crime as we took this path together, attending working groups, helping each other and discussing what we were going through. As for my parents, my father thought I was an idiot, changing things which were working before. But I knew I wasn't going to be successful, doing the same all over again, there would be no development. I wanted my wines to have a profile and personality, a proper "spirit". Yes, a lot went wrong in the beginning, but I more was happy committing errors than never to learn from them.

Christoph Hoch - Hollenburg, Kremstal



Right after wine school, around 2008, my prime intention was to produce “great” wine. Not in terms of volume but quality (a notion that is disputed and changes constantly, sure). Wines which evoke emotions, which infuse enthusiasm. So I did some research to find out what the top estates in the world were doing, whether there was a common denominator. For all the differences, I found out that most of them worked organic and of those again many even biodynamic! I didn’t learn anything about organic or biodyn methods in school but it was clear to me that those top notch wineries were not doing it for the fun of it, that there had to be good reasons.

Another reason was health as my parents are very sensitive to allergies and after applying plant protection, my father simply couldn’t be in the vineyards for 3 days. The social aspect, especially in finding the right staff and treating them responsibly also changed dramatically after converting, the interaction, mutual respect, all these things. My parents very totally openminded and supported me from the start, despite me being very young, inexperienced and thirsty for “adventure”. What’s more, we didn’t leave one stone unturned, our conversion process went down fast and without compromise.

Gruber Röschitz - Weinviertel



We were the first ones in our region to convert to organic practices. Naturally, many people we knew were skeptical about we although they didn’t confront us directly, we only learned that later. They claimed that it was impossible to do, especially for a larger estate such as ours. (In the meantime, 50% of our village’s vineyards are farmed organically!) Obviously, it’s a process and you need to gather experience but when you don’t give up when first troubles arise, it eventually works really well. Our advantage is and always was that it’s three of us, my sister, my brother and me. The biggest part of the conversion happens in the vineyards, in the cellar, the changes are only minor ones. You sulfur less and refrain from excessive additives but that’s about it. As I said, it’s a step-by-step process and you gain more experience as years go by. You do not try new methods every other week and we have learned that things work out pretty well when you have trust in what you’re doing. Our parents let us do even if they for sure have had concerns – they had built up the winery over many years after all and it’s natural to be worried, I think. Now, they do not drink but organic wines!

Erwin Tinhof - Leithaberg, Burgenland

I came in touch with the topic early and years before organic was a widely known concept. When I was a student at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna, we had a lecture about “ecological viticulture”, a pretty rare event back in the days (around 1986) and for sure not common knowledge nor “suitable for the masses”. I found it was super interesting! Another impact and a reason I wanted to continue going that way was for me a couple of years later when I visited Domaine Leflaive in Burgundy, whose at the time young Anne-Claude was converting to organics because of the very bad shape of the soils. I thought, “Hey, this is Montrachet, a world-famous region, so there must be something to the topic, otherwise they would not have to do it.” I had also read the lectures of Rudolf Steiner in university and found it interesting but only focusing on agriculture. We started the official conversion in 2009 but we have been working that way already before – the reason way that I wanted to get a feeling for what would be the impacts of organic methods. It has worked out for us very well ever since!



Johannes Trapl - Stixneusiedl, Carnuntum



For me, the conversion kind of started with how the wines were turning out in 2005/2006. Due to increasingly hot and dry vintages, we started having issues with acidity and sugar levels. We were asking ourselves how we could alter this by adapting our cultivation. Thus, it was studying first, then we started applying organic methods and those brought along economic adjustments. Even though my parents had been farming conventionally, they were totally open to me changing the direction. Let's not forget that there have always been changes – my parents had a different situation when they started compared to what it was before I took over. Mind that the industrialized form of agriculture only became prevalent in the 60's and 70's, a time when all livestock disappeared from the villages and food was not worth anything anymore. Labor was not paid appropriately, an issue we're back to facing nowadays.

Anyway, my father doesn't want to drink conventional wines anymore, it's interesting how attitudes evolve – maybe it's about maturity, to find out what we really like. It was an evolution for me as well, changes happened slowly, step by step but they were significant and up to this day, we are still adjusting and fine-tuning. Maybe I've gotten calmer and patient when I grew old. I'm not in such a hurry like when I was 25 because I know that we're on the right path...

Claus Preisinger - Gols, Burgenland



We started our new path in autumn 2005. My motivation to do it? Well, in principle, it was something like the Quest of the Holy Grail, we wanted to improve the quality, in the vineyards and in the wines, to simply become better, as naturally as possible. In order to do so, we felt that the biodynamic approach was more promising than just going organic. To put it frankly, it made me a much better farmer: I have learnt to see things more consciously, to attend and to react like an agnostic – for example, I see by the looks of the leaves what's going on, whether the vineyard needs anything or not. You engage on a totally different level seeing and feeling how the natural processes take place. I have become much more sensitized towards these processes, and learned completely new ways of seeing viticulture as a whole, the soils, how to treat them, etc. It's not necessarily about biodynamic preparations, “watching the stars” or the energy of life.

It's about doing farming practices much more precisely and at appropriate times. You'll realize that you cannot work against something but merely accompany and support the processes – the work connects you to earth, continually, it's a permanent process that doesn't stop. Just looking at the last couple of years, we had all kinds of conditions – drought, heavy rains, drought again, all of it unforeseeable and the pendulum swings ever wider. All we can do is helping and supporting with homeopathic stimulants, good compost but I think that biodyn is only the icing on the cake – really crucial is to do your basic work as good as possible!

In my opinion, within 80-90 years, we had reached a point in viticulture where nobody was anymore able to work without systemic agents in the vineyard and all kinds of “helpers” in the cellar. I myself have worked in that industry before and I had come to the conclusion that this system couldn't go on like that, I didn't see the point. Agriculture had worked 100 or 150 years ago and I wanted to go kind of revive for me these practices and traditions. A second, important, aspect was health. I don't want any of my workers or my family to come in contact with plant protection agents of which we still don't know how they affect our bodies. We started small, with 1.5 hectares up until 2008, a part-time business with a wine tavern (“Buschenschank”). We have actually worked organic already before and in 2014, we started the certification process as well. Curiously enough, Straka is still the only organic estate in our village but I think the other wineries gradually “get it” – they have seen for 15 years that is actually does work, I guess.

Thomas Straka - Rechnitz, Burgenland



Julie Hoch - Pure Joy Botanicals, Hollenburg



The founding idea of Pure Joy Botanicals has emerged from a fact that might not be obvious at a first sight. First there were grapes, worked biodynamically, certified Demeter and treated with the utmost efforts, dedication and care. And comes harvest time, we only picked the fruit of the vine. I thought that this was strange given the enormous diversity in the vineyards and I'm not talking cover crops here! In one of our vineyards, we worked as non-interventionally as possible – no tractor, no open soil, no additional cover crops, etc.

So what happened? Suddenly, there were full bushes of St. John's Wort, a very rare plant, actually, which was most probably suppressed by vineyard cultivation. This was a key experience for me as I saw what else this biodynamic ecosystem vineyard could "give" us, such as beautiful herbs. We decided to use this wonderful diversity, to make something of it. Another anecdote: we were brining out chamomile tea as a plant protection and drank of it (yes, you can actually drink plant protection!). And I thought: "if this was sparkling as well, how awesome would that be, made with what grows here, in our region?" These were the kick starters of my project and I took it from there...

Wabi-Sabi Wines - Wachau, Danube Region

If asked how the idea came up to become a producer, well, it's based upon some fundamental reflections. After working many years in the wine business, you realize that you get to hear a lot of things. What's important to one person might not be important to another one, there are few topics everyone sees the same way. It seems that many roads lead to Rome. When I got the opportunity to work my first vineyard, I wanted to find out for myself and not having a professional winemaking education, I simply developed my own idea of how to proceed.

However, one needs a certain technical know-how in order to create reproducible products, you cannot rely on chance. At the end of the day, the business side of things is crucial and so is planning. Ideally, you envision a specific audience for your wines, even people you'd like to spend time with, who you relate to. When we started Wabi-Sabi, we had very little technical equipment and maybe the wines were more "individual" but less predictable back then. We are better equipped now and the wines are probably pleasing a broader audience. But it's not only about equipment. Also, the work we put into our vineyards has increased significantly, the reason being that the often-proclaimed self-regulation is based on coincidence – and it's tough to plan with coincidence. The crucial question for me is: Can I produce a "clean", faultless wine by leaving the vineyard up to regulate itself? I don't think so, it's a lot of work, planning and selection you need to invest. Yes, I wish to produce a "free", not over-protected wine (no added yeast, unfiltered, low SO₂...) but at the same time, I need to steer it into a certain direction so a broader audience is inclined to like it.



Johannes Zillinger - Velm-Götzendorf, Weinviertel



My father has already followed organic methods, so in my case, when you grow up in such a place, you see a lot of things with totally different eyes – and probably you see even other things than your parents as well. Before taking over, I worked with my father and always had my own little projects - I knew what I wanted to change, in terms of both, vineyard management and winemaking. For instance, my father always strived to work super efficiently in the vineyards, of course respecting what was growing and living there. In terms of winemaking, however, his style was rather “classic”, not avant-garde.

As we never stop developing, I have also gone new ways in the vineyard, especially with various animal projects (sheep, pigs...) in order to bring even more life into the ecosystem. Viticulture in general requires a lot of surface and I’m convinced we can use them in multiple ways, not only for the vines. In doing so, the vineyards also show a wider diversity, you see new plant populations coming out. Plus, we can use the animals as sources of food for us. As for winemaking, I have completely restructured the cellar, building up and focusing much more on wooden barrels. Yes, we have had many discussions after I took over as we also “lost” many former customers. But I think that’s a normal development when the next generation takes the lead.

Erich Machherndl - Wösendorf, Wachau

In principle, I’m not sure one can unequivocally connect one’s convictions or attitudes to an organic approach. Maybe this is easier with biodynamics with its full-circle philosophy. But of course, the reasons I converted to organic had a lot to do with my personality. It was a process that took a long time. We have worked without herbicides already before, that was very important to us, we knew that this was not the right way. My father had always followed a very pragmatic approach – he said, that if we renounced herbicides, we could as well work organically, why not, for him it was a more “valuable” way, maybe in terms of marketing, maybe because he knew that other countries were using way more harmful substances. Working and living in the very traditionally oriented Wachau valley, the people’s reactions were foreseeable – but I had always been a little bit of an “outcast” if you will.

The “aversion” against organic farming is also ideological here, I think – many of my colleagues were condemning organic because they believed that the wines would then taste differently, not as fruity, for instance. Even many years later, some of them are still criticizing me and again others complain about the fact that organically produced grapes are sold for much higher prices. In the meantime, as many farmers have converted also in our area, you’ll hear of growers who would not want a conventional estate to purchase their vineyards – the times have changed, for sure (the big coop, Domäne Wachau, already processes organic grapes from more than 130 hectares!). We have gone a long way since the 2000’s!



How did you develop as a person and which impact does your approach have on your way of living?

Martin Obenaus

For sure, when I was 18, I was a totally different guy. I was taking a lot more risks and tried out things, some of them without really having a plan, like adventures, if you will. Today, I still like to experiment but not as wildly as back then, I give it much more thought now. Obviously, knowledge and experience built over the years do help. Something that is hard to describe is how you get a feeling for your environment: I see the clouds coming from a certain direction and I know whether and where the rain will fall, without consulting a weather app. I know that I have to (or don't have to) apply plant protection or whether to mow or not, just be instinct. You kind of "fuse" with your place, you feel it. I used to admire the elder people who had this feeling for our land and I thought I could never achieve this. But it comes naturally when you grow older and observe your surrounding consciously. It's a magic you can learn. For sure, one needs to adapt for every new season and I know that what worked last year, probably won't work this year, so you need to stay alert and open to change.

Christoph Hoch

Embarking on this new way, and that was the most exciting thing, was kind of an adventure for me. Trying new things, discovering, I have always been that type of person and still am. Compared to what the wine school did not teach me, there was so much new to learn, so many steps to improve, it was a like a completely new world has opened up for me. I knew I could keep on learning for 60 years to come! The words liberation and freedom come to my mind and is still valid: I can come up with new ideas myself, of course taking the risks as well and learning from the mistakes along the way. I simply did not want to be old at a young age, if you know what I mean. When I see myself now, I believe that my striving for discoveries remains unchanged. I have always been a restless guy but I guess I have grown to be more balanced in terms of personality. Yes, for sure, this could also be because I'm older now.

Claus Preisinger

When speaking of development as a person, I have for sure always been a curious guy. For instance, I was fascinated about my father trying out methods of composting – but I didn't have the knowledge about subsequent steps, how to carry on. It was a good amount of trial and error no doubt. I think I had a healthy dose of "not giving a shit" and curiosity and I was always striving for producing a "better" wine, without the small helpers...17-18 years later, we have the same problems as before (laughs). Some might claim that one becomes calmer and wiser but I'm not so sure about that – especially when I look into my cellar and see that some wines "behave" unpredictably. So, despite all my positive attitude, I nonetheless question everything, I feel that somehow, we never know for sure whether it's going to work the way we dream of...A big question mark is always going to be there but I'm not giving up, that's not my style.



Johannes Zillinger

I don't think I changed a lot as a person when compared to when I was very young. I believe that you gain confidence and do not doubt the processes so much anymore, what you do sort of becomes "natural". The longer you do something, the more you trust in yourself and in nature. Yes, I had doubts during the first years, around 2011-2014 and not everything worked out as I had imagined. But then again, this can happen today as well, when the vintage is very difficult for example, you have troubles with the fermentations, etc. Every year is different and you never stop learning, getting better and adapting what's necessary. One must not be stubborn and be ready to adapt when necessary. However, I believe we have reached a standard that prevents us from really running into disaster – the reason lies simply in the great shape of our soils and vineyards and I have to thank my father for taking care of them and "preparing" them for me, if you will.



Ewald Gruber

For us and our children, it's very important that we consume and buy products which are certified organic. Furthermore, we try to consume food which comes from our region or where we know the farmer. Also, we try to avoid buying unnecessary things: you don't need bananas every day, an apple from Styria is just as good! Real sustainability was equally our guiding principle for our newly built production site and cellar door. We wanted to waste less energy and go shorter distances: the cellar is built into the ground, the roof is equipped with a photovoltaic system with energy storage so we can use our own electricity for the wine production. Our tractors run on synthetic fuel (sustainably produced from waste materials such as cooking oil) for which we have our own filling station. And we are always looking out for innovations in order to be able to run our winery 100% self-sufficiently as early as possible. We believe that all of this contributes to our future-oriented way of living and working.

Erwin Tinhof

As a matter of fact, my family puts great emphasis on consuming organic products. However, I'd like to stress out that we do not see this as a universal remedy, I'm not saying that we are the good ones and the others are bad. We do not work organically against somebody but we do it for us. For instance, we use wood from our forests for barrels which is not per se an organic approach. But it stresses a different approach to nature – we strive to be close to her, utilizing what she gives us. This way we do not only protect nature but incorporate its fruit to our products, the wines we make. I think that it's crucial to act as role models, so to say. We are not superior because of working the way we work and we know that many people simply cannot afford organic food, drinks, etc. We pursue our idea and act for our region, for the people who surround us, hoping that they will appreciate the values of our produce. There is more than one truth and we should try to look beyond our horizons in order to master other problems, other realities. Everything in life has a value but not everything has a price! It's about appreciating values, not about exploiting values.

Johannes Trapl

I believe that the staff, the workers who are part of our winery are extremely important. Our approach does not only focus on the now but on the future. I don't believe in the current approach of many to hire people just for peak periods, just to do what's necessary in the moment. I believe the quality of the work in the vineyards suffers when growers employ external staff. This results in increased use of treatments as those shortcomings later have to be "repaired" in the cellar. The harvest is just one example – less than perfect vine care and machine harvest will rather not give you perfectly healthy grapes... We have this human circle logo on our labels which is to say that we are not an entity of separate persons doing their pieces of work. We strive to establish a good climate for them, a collegiality where we support each other – this is a crucial point for me for the upcoming 10 years at least. We provide housing for our workers and employ them throughout the entire year. We also provide them with the food we produce – we know that they prefer to save as much money as possible for their families. We attach value to train our staff, to spend quality time with them and make them feel happy, and not only in terms of paying a salary. Consequently, they'll tend to stay with us and this will make our life more happy as well!

Thomas Straka

We cook a lot, bake pizza in our wine bar (we open our winery 2 days a week for that purpose) and regularly organize a farmer's market in front of our winery, I love doing that! We provide a platform free of charge for small producers so they can present and sell all kinds of great stuff (bread, cheese, vegetables etc.) Regionality is indeed a topic very close to my heart, not only organic production. However, it has become really difficult to find artisan, "hand-made" food in our region. Agriculture seems not to exist anymore, at least not the way I knew it when I was a child. 30 years ago, we had our own pigs, we processed all kinds of food, baked bread, and you could buy similar things from farmers in our village. The farmer delivered the fresh milk to our house and we cooked it ourselves. This kind of craftsmanship, of farming has disappeared – nowadays, you see those guys ("farmers") driving their huge tractors with their Rayban sunglasses on and watch Instagram stories as the tractor does all on its own. Tell them to pluck a chicken, they'd freak out! It's super sad that those skills aren't valued anymore, most of the food you can buy in the supermarkets tastes completely the same. Maybe our wealth has become so big that there's no need anymore for artisanal, authentic and distinctive products in our societies. We are trying to change that a little bit...



Julie Hoch



The work outside, in the vineyards, with my herbs and hops taught me how to be more attentive, how to see all the little details. It starts with an idea and interest for something. Then you go out into the vineyard and see what's happening there, what's growing. This process of engaging in something, wishing to put it into practice, it never stops. Nature and its life cycles have inspired me a lot, no doubt and I have developed a very different view in regard to all those natural processes. Plants and nature in general seem so fragile but they are incredibly resilient! However, what you see is only a first step, what you consume (not only wine, of course!), that's another important story. A little story to explain it: we have been to France for a couple of days and it was great, we had good food and wine. But water in France is far from good and when we came back, we were literally thirsty, thirsty for our water and our food. Often, biodynamics aren't concrete but this is: you drink and eat and don't feel tired afterwards but alive – the power, the energy and the “quality”, they really are something else.

Franz Hofstätter - Wabi-Sabi

When talking about topics such as health (and I believe that Wabi-Sabi has a certain approach of “healthy” wines if there is such as thing, that is fresh wines with no sugar, wines which don't make you tired), food or children, I'm an advocate of balance. And health indeed is super important because when you're sick, most of the things (like money, for instance) quickly become irrelevant. Furthermore, I don't think it's desirable at all costs to be super good in one area. The reason is that when you excel in one field, you might make people not see your weaknesses – which everybody has, obviously. In my view, it's much more worthwhile to live in balance. You don't have to outperform at all costs but you shouldn't under-perform neither. A wave would be a good picture, not a big up one day and a big down the other day. Don't strive for the extremes, ease the pressure a little bit – if things don't work out, there is no need to despair. It doesn't have to be about push-push-push, rather about balance, once again. It's similar with wine, I guess...



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www.karakterre.com

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