

Many of Liechtenstein's hobbyist winemakers grow their grapes in Balzers, where Castle Gutenberg stands.

An Up-Close Look at LIECHTENSTEIN

THIS EMERGING WINE REGION IS READY FOR ITS BIG REVEAL

by Roxanne Langer

THE ROMANS GOT AROUND. They even made it to Liechtenstein, a tiny country of only 62 square miles nestled between Austria and Switzerland, with Germany a stone's throw away. And as we all know, where the Romans went, vineyards were planted. It is believed that grapevines have existed in what is now the Principality of Liechtenstein for over 2,000 years; though there is some evidence that a Celtic tribe might have beat the Romans to cultivating grapes in the area, it's the latter who are credited with creating and fostering a local wine culture long after the Celts were gone. In Balzers, the most southerly town in Liechtenstein, there is archeological evidence of a wine press from 1385 as well as an intact wine press from 1777. The latter is nicely hidden in a beautiful old building adjacent to a small vineyard in the middle of town. In order to see it, you have to know someone. Making that connection is truly worth the effort.

Clearly, elevation wasn't an obstacle for the Romans, as they didn't hesitate to plant vineyards at 1,500 feet and higher on Liechtenstein's valley floor, which is surrounded by peaks of up to 8,527 feet. Though unbeknownst to them, this landscape sits in a unique location at the juncture of two climate zones: alpine, which is cool and wet with up to 80

inches of precipitation annually, and continental, which is dry and warm; the valley sees about half as much precipitation as the higher elevations. Yet it gets only about 1,110 hours of sunlight during the growing season of March through October; luckily, the famous *foehn*, a rain-shadow wind that comes from the south, assists in warming it, helping the grapes to ripen. The Rhine River running directly through the valley, meanwhile, helps moderate its climate and contributes minerals to its soils.

Wine was one of Liechtenstein's main exports until the 19th century. However, with the arrival of the railway—which brought with it much less expensive foreign products—commercial wine production in the country slowly ground to a halt. In the early 20th century, several bad vintages along with vine parasites furthered its demise until a half-century later, when local producers armed with better scientific knowledge ushered in a viticultural renaissance that continues.

Today, vineyards are around every corner—tucked into small plots between houses, terraced on hills overlooking castles, and even planted at elevations of 2,800 feet, where some growers are experimenting with the Léon Millot hybrid grape, which ripens early while showing strong resistance to fungal infections and diseases. Liechten-

stein's key red grapes, meanwhile, include Pinot Noir; which has reigned supreme since the 17th century, as well as Blauburgunder; Rotburgunder; Weissburgunder; Zweigelt, Gamaret, Garanoir; Pinot Meunier; St. Laurent, and Merlot. Among whites, Chardonnay, Riesling, Saphira, Johanniter, Pinot Blanc, and Sauvignon Blanc are the main contenders (although the first known white grape grown in Liechtenstein was Elbling, dubbed *Vitas alba*—literally “white grape”—by the Romans).

The country is home to a strong contingent of some 100 hobbyist winemakers, who all seem to know one another and help each other out by sharing the use of large equipment and even communal labor. In the U.S., many of these hobbyists would be considered professionals, as they are allowed to sell their extremely high-caliber wines to private individuals. One such producer, Christian Putzi, makes a wine from the hybrid Saphira grape under his label, Balzner Saphira Runda Böchel, that could easily compete in the U.S. marketplace in the \$25–\$30 range (check out his Instagram account [@balzner-saphira](#) for details).

As for the country's four commercial producers, Liechtenstein now operates under the European wine-quality system, so they use the AOC classification. I recently visited and tasted at three of them.



Arnold Hoop tastes from barrel.

Weinbau Hoop GmbH

Annette and Arnold Hoop started their winery by leasing a small vineyard with 450 Pinot Noir vines in 1988. They quickly added another 800, and by the 2000s, they had incorporated several other varieties into the mix, including Merlot, Zweigelt, Garanoir, Pinot Meunier, Chardonnay, Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Müller Thurgau, and a few white hybrids. As they've continued to grow, they've also added liqueurs, spirits, and a sparkling wine to their portfolio. The Hoops work as a team: Annette is quite the businesswoman, while Arnold, who has a wonderfully big personality, makes the wine. In addition to the two tasted below, I tried a phenomenal Riesling in barrel: Fruity and floral, it was unctuous but had great acidity and a lovely, long finish. They are open to exporting to the U.S. For more information, visit weinbau-hoop.li.

Weinbau Hoop GmbH 2019 Bardella Müller Thurgau Nice and fruity, with good acidity, some minerality, and notes of almond on the finish.

Weinbau Hoop GmbH 2018 Viscarage Lovely notes of toast, green and yellow apple, a hint of butter, and pear; the finish is short but pretty.

Harry Zech Weinbau

While studying business administration at college in Switzerland, Harry Zech was offered an apprenticeship as a winemaker in Vaduz, the capital of Liechtenstein, and from there his career was set. He transferred to the University of Applied Sciences in Wädenswil to finish his studies in enology and was able to take over a winery in Vaduz directly after. A relatively reserved, quiet man, Zech is completely committed to wine quality. With approximately 7 acres in vine in six different locations along with 1.5 additional acres in biodiversity-friendly "ecological compensation areas," his vineyards are all certified Biodynamic. They're planted to white grapes Riesling-Silvaner, Pinot Blanc, Muscaris, Johanniter, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Sauvignac, and Sauvignon Soyières as well as some reds: Pinot Noir, Chambourcin, Gamaret, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon. Zech's wines show the great care he takes in the vineyard; these wines, not yet exported, would do very well in the U.S. For more information, visit hz-weinbau.li.

Harry Zech Weinbau 2019 Chardonnay Lion Vaduz AOC Hints of vanilla, Granny Smith apple, butter, pear, and lemon meet lovely acidity and a long, beautiful finish.

Harry Zech Weinbau 2018 Le Rendez-vous Vaduz AOC Neither filtered nor fined, this blend of 50% Gamaret, 48% Merlot, and 2% Cabernet Sauvignon sees 18 months in both first-year and second-year oak. Boasting black berries and black cherries, it's slightly floral, with a hint of mint and a long, juicy finish. *sj*

Hofkellerei des Fürsten von Liechtenstein (The Princely Winery of Liechtenstein)

Principalities tend to come with princes, and the Principality of Liechtenstein is no exception. The Princely Winery of Liechtenstein sits below the castle of reigning Prince Hans-Adam II, so visitors have an amazing view of the royal household on the hill while the Prince has an equally amazing view of his vineyards. It's worth noting that there's a sommelier in his family: Princess Marie, the Prince's daughter-in-law, who's married to his second-born son, Prince Constantine.

Set on rich schist and calcareous soil, the estate grows Chardonnay and Pinot Noir using both traditional and modern cultivation methods, and the grapes are all handpicked. I didn't try the Chardonnay, but the Pinot Noirs I tasted suggested that the winery is transitioning from a bigger style to a more elegant one.

It's also gearing up to export these wines to the U.S. in the near future with a focus on high-end restaurants, where they should easily pique the interest of good sommeliers. Contact commercial sales manager Steffen Rau Steffen at s.rau@hofkellerei.li for details.

Hofkellerei des Fürsten von Liechtenstein 2017 Pinot Noir Bocker Bold, with notes of raspberry and strawberry that move toward florals and a hint of tobacco.

Hofkellerei des Fürsten von Liechtenstein 2019 Herawingert Pinot Noir Beautiful and elegant from the get-go, with bright cherry, slight earthiness, lively acidity, and a long, smooth finish.



A view of Castle Valduz from the vineyards of Prince Hans-Adam II.