

An aerial photograph of a village built on a hillside. A winding road curves through the landscape, which is covered in vineyards. In the background, a lake is visible with a bridge crossing it. The overall scene is captured in a monochromatic, slightly desaturated style.

vom Boden

the riddle is the reason

spring 2014 | issue 005

lucky 2013: the vintage electric

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As an importer, going to Germany in January doesn't make sense.

The cellars, cold during the summer, are icy, almost biting. Going into them is like jumping into a river. At best it wakes you up, at worst it hurts. The new vintage is still in the early stages of fermentation, embryonic and cloudy. There is a giddy, school-kid joy to be had in pulling this grape-juice-not-yet-really-wine across your palate. It's like holding a newborn, all wide-eyed and awkward.

In April it's different. The new vintage is in the throes of its "coming out" party with all the wine fairs and buyer visits that entails. It all feels like a festival, though by the end of May the growers are exhausted (imagine answering the question, "so what do you think of the vintage?" five times a day for two months). Still, there's a reason for the mania – it's a good time to taste the wines. They are beginning to sort out their baby-selves and you can get a sense of what they are about, or what they might be about.

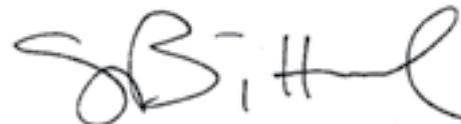
"There is a giddy joy to be had in pulling this grape-juice-not-yet-really-wine across your palate... It's like holding a newborn, all wide-eyed and awkward."

Though I've made this trip for a number of years, there are no essential truths to discover, no predictions to be made. It's just fun. One feels lucky to have been present at this stage.

Above the cellars, the sun sets early and rises late; breakfast almost always takes place in darkness. The air smells of wood-burning stoves. All of the hustle and bustle of the summer, with the crowds of tourists, is gone. The landscape is frozen still. You can almost hear the snowflakes falling. The growers are relaxed. There are lots of lazy evenings.

Outside, the gray blanket of winter has lifted (though this winter it barely came) and green is, once again, beginning to overtake the gray of the slate as the most prominent color in the vineyard.

And so it is that while the market prepares for the bounty of the past harvest, the vineyards are already thinking about the coming fall and all the potential it holds. It's a comforting circle that surrounds us, whether we realize it or not.



Stephen Bitterolf
New York, spring 2014

COVER PHOTOGRAPH a view of the Goldtröpfchen through the lens of @soilpimp - see page 16 for more







lucky 2013: the vintage electric

by Stephen Bitterolf

The general wine-buying public may write off much of vintage 2013 in Germany.

Their rationale will be simple enough: The vintage began with a delayed flowering and ended with a difficult harvest plagued by rain. Verily, the vintage must not be good, or so the thought-train goes.

Yet the one fact does not necessarily follow the other. For vintage 2013, the key was intense vineyard work and a near-pathological level of selection.¹ Those that succeeded crafted some of the most exciting young wines I have tasted. 2013 is a thrilling and spectacular vintage for those looking for more classic examples of German wine (Kabinetts that are actually Kabinetts!). With 2013 we have

**“The top examples of 2013 are some of the most exciting young wines I have tasted...
I write this knowing full well that 2013 will be a divisive vintage.”**

wines with the proportions of their brethren from the 1960s and 70s benefitting from the vineyard and winemaking rigor of today. For me, this is truly exciting.

I write this knowing full well that 2013 will be a divisive vintage – some people are going to absolutely love the petite architecture of the vintage’s offerings, the low alcohol, moderate ripeness and whip-smart acidity. Others are going to find the wines too shrill, too sharp. It’s not my job to convince you of any ultimate “truth” about 2013, as if there was a single truth to reveal. You are going to taste the wines and make up your own mind.

What I want to do is tell you why *I love the vintage*.

The best of 2013 are super fine, somehow both razor sharp and dense. The wines crackle with acidity. They have some of the energy of 2010, yet are not nearly as discombobulated and manic as those wines were at this young age. They are more feminine and angular than the 2012ers (another favorite vintage), with a palate that shows slightly more crystalline and certainly sharper.

The 2013ers are startlingly bright, achieving crashing high notes that I have rarely encountered; they have a shimmering saline and mineral quality that is spectacular – truly awe-inspiring. The vintage in general feels something like 2004 or 2008 with a bit more detail,

a bit more tension, a bit of a crazy streak. The volume is lower, but the sound is clearer. In fact, for me, the “great” vintages that have come to market with stories of sunshine and fall picnics, flawless ripening and lazy, joyous harvests; these are the vintages I find myself less and less enamored by. As I’ve really gotten down to the business of *drinking* these wines, well, they often feel a bit ponderous, a bit heavy and slow.

On the other hand, the vintages with lackluster stories of adequate (but not exceptional) ripeness, good (but not exceptional) hang-times, less than ideal ripening and harvesting conditions,² these are





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the vintages that I actually like to drink. These wines seem to have more definition, more clarity, more energy. They are more lively and personality-driven. This is exactly the type of vintage that will get overlooked (or panned) by the wine critics and their laboratory-tastings, while the bottles will absolutely *sing* on the dinner table.³

That said, if you do favor the riper vintages of 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2011 (to stay in the last decade), 2013 may feel a bit too stern, the acidities too harsh. In these cases, simply tread lightly. This is not me being self-sacrificing; 2013 is such a painfully short vintage that there is no need to “sell” the vintage. The wiser course would likely be to downplay the quality of 2013 and save the glossy

Because 2013 is a high-acid vintage, the wine press will emphatically declare it a vintage for residual-sugar wines – Kabinett, Spätlese and the like. This is largely true, in the most general sense.

Yet, this is a vintage that will elude easy classification, at least for those who care to dig a bit deeper. For example, it will also produce a few dry Rieslings that will rival the greats of any vintage.

Klaus Peter Keller’s 2013ers are mind-bogglingly good. At this point, they remind me of his 2008ers (heretofore my favorite Keller vintage) and, as much as I liked the 2012ers, I like the 2013ers slightly more. In the Nahe the big three (Dönnhoff, Emrich-Schönleber

“2013 offers *profound*, old-school Kabinetts - nervy little sparrows that dart gracefully - Spätlesen with vigor and lightness, refreshing Auslesen you can actually drink with your dinner.”

adjectives for a vintage with more wine to sell!⁴ Either way, history suggests there will be another vintage available in roughly one year’s time, so no need to drop out of the game for too long.

For those who do want to explore 2013, this vintage offers us *profound* Kabinetts that clock in at 80 Oechsle and below⁵ – nervy little sparrows that dart gracefully. The Spätlesen have uncommon vigor and some of the more “old school” estates produced refreshing Auslesen that are astounding. Karthäuserhof’s 2013 Auslese is phenomenal, its numbers don’t do the wine justice but for those who like this sort of thing: 7% alcohol, 65 grams residual sugar, just under 10 grams acidity.

Here’s an Auslese you can actually drink with your chicken pot pie.

and Schäfer-Fröhlich) all have great, great collections, both for the sweet and the dry wines. In the Mosel, there are some spectacular dry Rieslings, as crystalline and pure (and easy to drink) as mineral water. Thomas Haag at Schloss Lieser made Riesling-razors; they are frighteningly good. Julian Haart’s 2013ers are sharper than his 2012ers; Stein, Weiser-Künstler and Vollenweider all turned in exceptional collections. Florian Lauer, in the Saar, worked counter to common practice (as he usually does) and with one of the longest harvests of his career, produced a collection that goes from strength to strength to strength.⁶

The botrytis of 2013, where it is present, trends toward the lighter, brighter and fresher type. This is a botrytis caught in youth, a botrytis that turned the grapes golden and not into fuzzy blankets of







shriveled gray. In most cases, the botrytis of 2013 provides a density and depth to the wines without weight or sticky exoticism. This was mostly a matter of timing and ripeness. Things went quickly in 2013 and by the time winemakers would have been picking the grandiose dessert wines, all the remaining grapes were on the ground, covered in gray beards of botrytis and rot. You do not find many Beerenauslese (BAs) and Trockenbeerenauslese (TBAs) in 2013, at least in the Mosel.

Many estates deacidified some wines in 2013. I think it's safe to say that most every estate deacidified their most basic wine(s) in some part, though I think conditions, vineyards, grapes, winemakers and

but it clocked in at nearly the same amount as vintages 2004 and 2008, which are top Keller vintages for serious Riesling folk. I am not trying to paint an overly bucolic picture here. There was definitely rain, but the quality that made it into the cellar was top-notch. The basic one-liner introduced above – high quality due to low quantity – is a theme that gets more and more amplified as one heads northwest, from the Rheinhessen through the Nahe and into the Mosel.

To put things into some context, Keller's area of the Rheinhessen had about half as much rain as the Mosel. Yes, in the Mosel the challenges were significant. The flowering was late⁷ and much of

“The basic one-liner - high quality due to low quantity - is a theme that gets more and more amplified as one heads northwest, from the Rheinhessen through the Nahe and into the Mosel.”

ambitions differ largely enough to overrule any blanket statements beyond this, as tempting as they are to make. Some people deacidified higher up the food chain than others, some showed more restraint. It's worth noting that some of the deacidified wines will taste much better than the non-deacidified wines – in other cases the opposite is true. This is certainly not a fashionable thing to write, but that is the complex truth so far as I can gather.

It is so hard to generalize about this vintage because conditions were very different, region to region, village to village, vineyard to vineyard. The weather for the harvest in the Rheinhessen wasn't that bad – in fact, it was one of the driest of all the German wine-making regions. Total rainfall was greater than normal, to be sure,

June and July were on the cool side, though very pleasant in many cases. I actually took my two-year-old son on a pilgrimage of sorts to the Mosel in July (pictured at right in front of the Ayler Kupp) and the weather was beautiful, mild yet comfortable and sunny. Most of the winemakers seemed optimistic. If August and September turned a bit warmer and if the harvest took place under good conditions things might turn out very, very well. Quality *and* quantity would be great.

Konstantin Weiser and Alexandra Künstler actually went out and bought two 2,000 liter stainless steel tanks, worried that they might not have the capacity to hold the coming vintage.⁸ Unfortunately, not only were the new tanks not used, but the final yield was so





small that nearly half the cellar remained empty after the harvest. This “empty tank syndrome” was an epidemic in the cellars of vintage 2013, especially in the Mosel. Egon Müller harvested less than 10 hectoliters per hectare (hl/ha), which is, even for 2013, even for an estate that can afford to be draconian, beyond extreme. In 2013, the average yields seemed to fall between 25 hl/ha and 40hl/ha. Depending on where you set your “normal,” this means anywhere from 20-50% less wine than in that elusive “normal” vintage.

Outside of the general luck of having old vines and steep slopes, vineyard work was the critical factor in 2013. Is there a direct relationship between the amount of filth under a winemaker’s fingernails and the clarity and quality of the wine? I’d say yes – it’s certainly something I’ve noticed.⁹ 2013 is the clichéd “winemaker’s vintage” for sure. For the harvest itself, most estates brought on extra help – friends, neighbors, anyone. It was a cruel harvest that allowed for little rest, extra hours, no weekends. And all of this costed

“Is there a direct relationship between the amount of filth under a winemaker’s fingernails and the clarity and quality of the wine produced?”

The vineyards that fared best shared a few commonalities. First, drainage was key. Steep slopes with stony soils allowed the water to pass through, like a sieve, keeping the grapes from filling up and bursting. Stein’s example is particularly enlightening. In the Alfer Hölle, a warm site with more clay and water retention, yields were devastating and even the lightest wines show the exoticism of botrytis. Conversely, in the Palmberg, a steep site riddled with rocks, there was little drama, few issues with rot and yields close to normal. The Palmberg, it should be noted, is also filled with very old (ungrafted) vines. Old vines, with their thicker skins, tiny berries and looser bunches handled the rain with less problems. Not only do the thicker skins prevent the grapes from bursting after intense rainfall, the looser bunches also allow the wind to pass through, keeping the grapes dry and rot at bay. Julian Haart noticed that the single-pole trained vines seemed to have a similar advantage in 2013, with fewer leaves, less ripeness and smaller berries.

money. Lots of money. Add one more heinous reality to vintage 2013: It is not only one of the smallest vintages of the last few years, for many winemakers it was one of the most expensive harvests of the last few years.

Low yields and tremendous expenses - financially speaking, 2013 in Germany is a disaster. Perhaps the one simple truth of the vintage is this: Many German growers can’t afford another 2013. Quality wise, however, the vintage is a triumph. My guess is that, as with 1991 in Burgundy,¹⁰ we will be ever-more surprised, year after passing year, by how *serious* the “light” wines from these “average” vintages can be.

Whatever your final evaluation of 2013, the vintage will most certainly serve as a lovely reminder that, in winemaking, there is never, ever, one simple narrative. Of course that’s the beauty of it.





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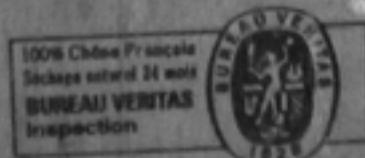
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this number is interesting is that it signals, in some part, a return to the ripeness levels of wines from decades past (I consider this a good and refreshing change). “Oechsle: A German scale for measuring the ripeness of grapes based on the sugar density in the must. The (too-low) minimum must weight determines the Prädikat. The focus on Oechsle started in the late 19th century. Today, with climate change, it can be an outdated measurement, as quality-conscious growers who seek physiologically ripe grapes usually have to pick at higher sugar levels than before.”

Who doesn't like them some footnotes?

FOOTNOTES

1. At a dinner in Chinatown not too long ago, a friend and I were discussing vintage 2013 and the importance of selection. He smartly pointed out that the Germans have a rather profound relationship with such work; indeed selection has been part and parcel of German winemaking for more than a century. Does this mean there is nothing to worry about? No, just that perhaps these winemakers were better prepared than most to handle the travails of 2013.
2. Could it be that a phrase like “not exceptional,” when describing a vintage, translates into “balance,” which in turn translates into some form of drink-a-ability? Do adjectives like “exceptional” almost necessitate an extreme?
3. Are you tasting or are you *drinking*?
4. With average yields of between 25-40 hectoliters per hectare, the amount of wine most quality-conscious producers have to sell from vintage 2013 is simply tragic. For some wines, I am looking at U.S. allocations of 10-20 cases and I am talking about Kabinetts, not TBAs.
5. “Oechsle” is simply the German scale for measuring ripeness; I’ve taken the definition for Oechsle (below) from the great Mosel wine website www.larscarlberg.com, with kind permission from Lars Carlberg himself. That said, the reason

6. You may note I’m writing about estates I don’t represent. Before anything else, I’m a lover and champion of German wines. I’ve been visiting numerous German estates for nearly 10 years and with the kind indulgences of the respective importers, I will continue to do so.

7. A late flowering, per se, is not a bad thing. In fact, in the current environment – where over-ripeness is as much (or more?) a problem as ripeness – a late(r) flowering can translate into cooler, lower alcohol, more balanced wines. The problem of course is that such a flowering pushes the schedule back and the further the harvest gets delayed into October and November, the larger the risk of rain, frost, snow, disease, hungry birds, deer and wild boar. (It’s no coincidence that many winemakers are also hunters. At Maximum Grünhaus, enjoy the Rieslings and the wild boar Gulasch, pictured right.)



8. Keep in mind we are talking about a true micro-estate here – the total cellar capacity, even with the new tanks, is a mere 25,000 liters. Weiser-Künstler has one of my favorite cellars on the Mosel, perhaps *because* of its human scale. (Or maybe it’s just because, having lived in a small New York apartment for the last fifteen years, I like small spaces?)

9. The more filth under the fingernails, the less filth in the wine?

10. I have to give credit to Klaus Peter Keller for this comparison; he references it in his own vintage report. This is not to suggest that 2013 in Germany mirrors 1991 in Burgundy from a climactic or qualitative standpoint. Rather, the point is that things are often more complicated than we would like to believe. What would footnotes be without a good Shakespeare quote? “...as a stranger give it welcome. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”¹¹

11. Shakespeare is great but these footnotes are dedicated to the footnotes of David Foster Wallace. I’ve always loved his footnotes.





PHOTOGRAPHY

@soilpimp is a passionate food and wine enthusiast, well known and well loved by many in the restaurant and wine scenes of New York, San Francisco and Paris. He has also been a great friend for nearly ten years. While we spoke of traveling to Germany together many times, it all sort of happened quickly, on a whim and with little fuss, the way most great things occur.

When we returned to New York, he forwarded me around 700 photographs of the trip. I have spent hours pouring over them, partly because I like this sort of thing but mostly because I thought the photos were superb. Despite the many trips I have made to Germany over the last decade, the photographs revealed much that I had overlooked. In this journal, I present only a select few, with his generous permission.

PAGE 2

Only mid-April yet the vineyards in Germany were around 3-weeks ahead of schedule. Here, a detail of an imposing amount of growth in the Schubertslay (a tiny, one-hectare vineyard within the Goldtröpchen) provides a dramatic juxtaposition against the pattern of flat (and low-quality) vineyards across the river.

PAGE 3

Stairs at the Richard Böcking estate in Traben-Trarbach.

PAGE 5

A studious Jordan Salcito sits next to a thirsty Raj Vaidya at Weingut Daniel Vollenweider, tasting barrel samples of the 2013ers as light pours in through the back window.

PAGE 7

The terraced Ellergrub vineyard, just downstream from Traben-Trarbach. Recognized as one of the great vineyards of the Mosel by the 1868 Prussian tax map, it was largely forgotten for much of the 20th century. Estates such as Weiser-Künstler and Immich-Batterieberg are bringing this vineyard back to its deserved fame.

PAGE 8

In the cellar with Daniel Vollenweider (second from left, pointing up), looking at the collection of older bottles in the "Schatzkammer" with a group of New York sommeliers.

PAGE 9

An arched gateway in the foreground frames the Abtsberg vineyard, rising dramatically to the left while the Karthäuserhofberg looms in the background. One photograph, all but consuming the greatest sites of the tiny Ruwer Valley.

PAGE 12

Ulli Stein's beloved Palmberg-Terrassen vineyard. Most of the walls were rebuilt by Ulli's father and the site is awash in ungrafted vines 70 years of age and older. It is a profound vineyard and the center of Ulli Stein's inspired world.

PAGE 13

A barrel of sulfur free Riesling rests in Stein's cellar. Toward the bottom one can read, "Geile Wein" and "nur vom Boden" meaning "great wine" and "only for vom Boden."

PAGE 15, above

Mold on the left wall echoes the sun-and-shadow-dappled right wall in the entrance to Ulli Stein's cellar.

PAGE 17, below

Poppies in a small garden at Karthäuserhof.

BACK COVER

Stephen Bitterolf and Klaus Peter Keller, April 2014.







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