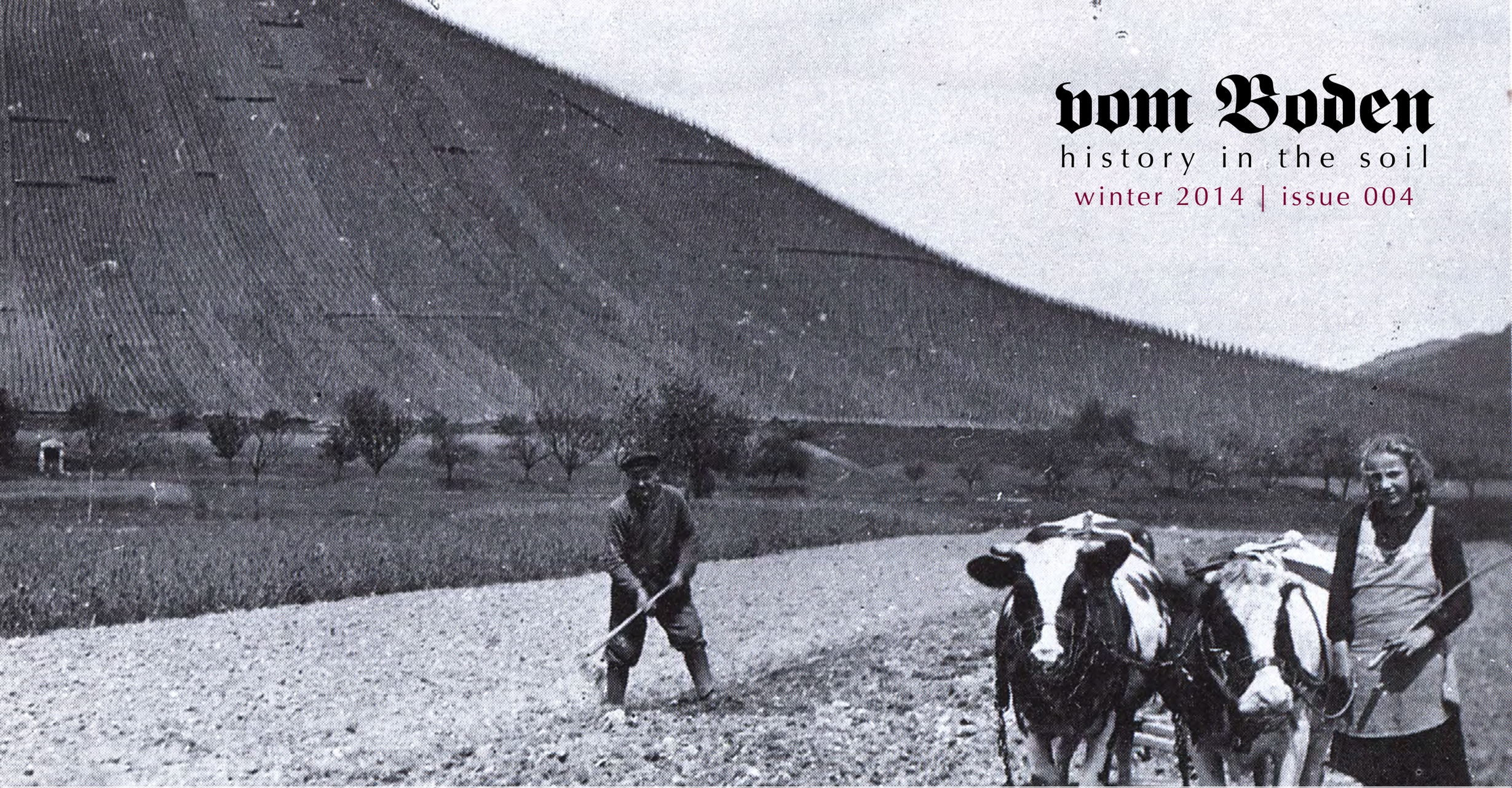


vom Boden

history in the soil

winter 2014 | issue 004

Mosel: Taking the Long View

vom Boden
history in the soil

An article by Eric Asimov about dry German Rieslings ("Germany's Rieslings on the Tip of the Tongue," *The New York Times* August 22nd, 2013) launched a hundred online discussions questioning the place of these wines in the context of the region's better known off-dry and sweet Rieslings. Lars Carlberg presented the most reasoned forum for this discussion on his eponymous wine website (www.larscarlberg.com) with heavyweights Terry Theise, Stuart Pigott and David Schildknecht each weighing in.

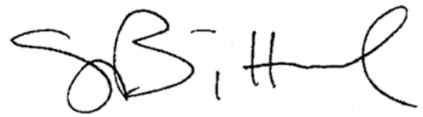
As happens in impassioned back-and-forths, the conversation wandered a bit, yet the key questions were simple enough: Are dry German Rieslings the rightful heirs of a long history that predates the only rather recent vogue for sweet German Riesling? Or are these dry Rieslings a force, with or without historical precedence, destined to destroy a unique and complex wine culture?

This journal does not seek to answer these questions, as if the scenario had to be an either/or proposition (luckily, it does not).

What this journal strives to do is simply add some historical context for those who are curious. So I am proud to present what I think is one of the greatest recent essays on the history of winemaking in the Mosel. It was written by Joachim Krieger, a scholar living Germany who I know by reputation only. The article was commissioned by the now-defunct Mosel Wine Merchant and published in its 2009 catalogue. It was beautifully translated from the German by Dan Melia and Lars Carlberg, who deserve much praise for their work. It is being republished with the kind permission of Alex Rinke.

"I am proud to present what I think is one of the greatest recent essays written on the history of winemaking in the Mosel."

Five years later it remains as fresh as it was on its first publication. German wine essays cellar well. Who knew?



Stephen Bitterolf
New York, winter 2014

OLD SCHOOL
Training Riesling vines on single poles. The photograph dates to early in the 20th century.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH The Ayler Kupp, a vertical patchwork of Riesling vines, in the late 1930's.

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ICE AGE
The frozen Mosel river, 1956.

The Mosel: Taking The Long View

by Joachim Krieger

The archaeological record for winegrowing on the Mosel stretches back at least as far as the second century AD, and the region's status was well established by the fourth century. Trier, the capital of the Western Roman Empire and the region's most important city, had emerged as a Roma Secunda. Among its inhabitants was Ausonius, the most famous poet of Late Antiquity, who, in addition to serving as the top aide to successive emperors, wrote what is the only surviving work from all of antiquity which in both title and content turns its attention to one region: Mosella. It is a paean to the Mosel's industrious winemakers and their commitment to cultivating grapes on the steepest, most impossible slopes and cliffs. Only the beauty and magnificence (both cultural and economic) of his home in Bordeaux along the Garonne River received similar praise—quite something, given the vastness of the empire and Ausonius's intimacy with it. Over the next 1,500 years, despite obvious and understandable changes in fortune, isolated examples of appreciation for Mosel wines turn up again and again in the works of other authors and observers.

"The archaeological record for winegrowing on the Mosel stretches back at least as far as the second century AD."

By the 1840s, no less a personality than Karl Marx, born and bred in Trier, had inserted himself into one of the largest and longest crises in the Mosel's history. As a result of expanded planting and rising production due to surging demand, the bottom had fallen out of the Mosel market, and, facing high taxes, poor harvests, and correspondingly deflated prices, growers faced extreme hardship. Some even abandoned their vineyards for America. Marx penned fiery editorials in the Rheinische Zeitung against the Prussian government both on behalf of the over-taxed growers and in support of a free press that he hoped would allow their grievances to be aired. Within two decades, advocacy of increased fairness and transparency had borne fruit when, on the heels of several outstanding vintages and with demand soaring, the wines of the Mosel had reclaimed their spot at the top of the list of the world's finest wines and knew few, if any, peers.

The version of the Viticultural Map of the Saar and Mosel that appeared in 1868 was crucial in advancing the region's reputation. The publication of the map followed a decades-long effort to establish a more equitable tax structure for the Mosel's vineyards and winemakers. For that system's creation, all vineyards were divided into one of eight classes based upon net profit (meaning that not only quality and price were taken into consideration but also yields and labor costs). Quality vineyards that produced consistently high yields with relatively little work landed in the first class (leading to the steepest taxes but also the implication of superior quality). Lower-yielding regions, like the Saar and Ruwer, despite occasionally fetching the best prices for their wines in the strongest vintages, often could not achieve consistently high net

MAPPING HISTORY
Commissioned by the Prussian government in 1868, this map represented an unprecedented step in the direction of transparency and site specificity. It is available to purchase at www.rieslingfeier.com.

profits. Accordingly, these sites were not taxed at top-tier levels and many of the best fell into "lesser" classes. For the clarity of the published map, the eight classes were reduced to three, each a different shade of red, and clear, legible site names were attached.

tampered with and sold only under the crudest designations, the ability to reference clearly the provenance of a given wine, combined with the powerful trend within Germany toward natural winemaking, added up to a small revolution. Such openness was

"At a time when the majority of the world's wines were doctored and tampered with, the ability to reference clearly the provenance of a given wine added up to a small revolution."

Now the trade had at its disposal a visual tool with which it could promote the sale of wines from the region. The Trier district government, more economically dependent upon the wine trade than any other region in Germany, had taken an unprecedented step in the direction of transparency by publishing the new map. At a time when the majority of the world's wines were doctored and

hardly widespread. Similar maps for the Rheingau, the Nahe, the Mittelrhein, and the Lower Mosel did not appear for decades and were poorly distributed when they did arrive. The trade—middlemen who purchased and then resold wine—had a vested interest in keeping growers in the dark about the value of their holdings. They aimed, of course, to buy low (from the growers) and sell high

(to whomever they could. This short-sightedness allowed the Middle Mosel, Saar, and Ruwer to cast a decades-long shadow over the producers of the Lower Mosel and other German winegrowing regions. It is only in the last 20 years, thanks to the independence and strength of a handful of dedicated producers, that the Lower Mosel, with its extremely steep-slate vineyards, has closed the gap—or the perception of a gap—with its more famous neighbors.

Whatever the shortcomings of the various classifications or publications, there is no doubt that as the global wine trade expanded at the end of the 19th century the wines of the Middle Mosel, Saar, and Ruwer, had become the world's leading source for fine white wine. Though Bordeaux held tightly to its role as the wine trade's primary commercial center, one of the Mosel's small Protestant enclaves, Traben-Trarbach, had become the second leading hub, and the first for white wine. While regions like the Rheingau or the Pfalz had a relatively small amount of top-class vineyards at their disposal, the Mosel was comparatively flush with prime winegrowing land.

Together with its tributaries, the Mosel could lay claim to more than 5,000 hectares of valuable, slate-covered, steep slopes, and what is more: nearly 100 percent of those sites were planted with Riesling, the most noble white variety in the world. Not even Burgundy could lay claim to as much prime land under vine.

Growers' commitment to Riesling—filigree, fresh, lively, well-suited to long aging and sturdy enough for long travel—was driven at least in part by contemporary market forces, which witnessed a valuation of average Mosel Riesling above that of Grand cru classé Bordeaux. By the early 1900s, the German focus on unique, varied sites, and natural winemaking (i.e., the avoidance of "improvements" such as chaptalization) was largely unthinkable elsewhere, including France. Even Burgundy, a logical point of comparison with the Mosel because of its focus on individual plots and single-variety winemaking, struggled well into the 20th century with the problem of high yields and an over reliance on inferior varieties. Within Germany, mass-production winemaking was often sharply criticized in the trade journals of the day.

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Before long, however, the roles became reversed. Burgundians began in the 1970s to embrace the demands of higher quality (with a commitment to Pinot Noir grown in the best sites with lower yields), while producers on the Mosel, as a result of increasing demand and the profound economic growth of the post-war period, loosened their ties both to tradition and to good sense. Modern science and a dominant industrial mentality preached the virtues of new grape crossings that promised both higher yields and high-

POSTKARTE 1908-1910
Even a simple postcard from the early 20th century shows the complexity of terroir. The 1971 German wine law would allow all of this land, slate or soil, vertical or flat, to take the great name of "Kupp."

er quality, the latter's definition increasingly linked to must weight (measured on the Mosel in degrees oechsle). Many winemakers—products of their time just like anyone else—proved susceptible to the prevailing wisdom, especially powerful in a country that was undergoing an Economic Miracle, that linked "more" and "new" with "better" or, from the consumer's perspective, "better" with "cheaper." It is the same logic that led municipal governments, in the name of rationalization and progressive planning, to knock down more historic buildings than had been destroyed by wartime bombing. A similar call was made for the reorganization of German vineyards. This remodeling and restructuring of vineyards, including the removal of thousands of hectares of old Riesling vines, was not limited to prized steep sites alone. Significant tracts of flatland at the banks of the Mosel, in addition to the hinterlands of the Eifel and Hunsrück hills, were cleared of nut and fruit trees and otherwise cultivated land and planted instead with grapes. The burgeoning demand for Mosel wines was being met, but growth was taking its toll.

The restructuring of the vineyards was often pure parochialism, with short-term gain trumping any consideration of potential damage to the region's reputation. It was not only a physical but also a linguistic remodeling: Favorable place-names were bestowed upon a wide range of sites, independently of the accuracy of the claim. Many of the newly named and expanded single-vineyard sites, or "einzellage," contained zero traces of slate. But they still managed to lay claim to the noblest names (e.g., Piesporter Treppchen, Ayler Kupp, and Erdener Bußlay), which were simply transferred from the best steep sites to far inferior flat land.

This collection of untruths—the blending of east and west, north and south, steep and flat, slate soil and alluvial land—all took on the force of law in 1971, resulting in an official designation system that was, at its core, a corruption of the reality on the ground.

Up until then, producers had at least had the chance, with the help of terms like “Wachstum” (Growth) and “Original-Abfüllung” (original bottling) to describe their location precisely and truthfully on the label. When distinguished growers like Clemens Busch or Florian Lauer write pre-1971-Wine Law place-names on their best wines; they do so not only as a complement to coarsened or adulterated (but legal) single-vineyard names but also as an intentional, purposeful challenge to the law, which does not include those smaller specific site names on the roster of officially recognized vineyards. There is, in other words, both a bureaucratic and a physical reality, and the two are in consistent conflict with one another. The law blotted out the truth, and with it a unique, deep tradition, now to be found largely in old maps, books, labels, and, crucially, in both the hearts and the everyday activities of serious growers.

“The designation (Prädikat) system that emerged was deeply bound to the demands of the mass market, which at the time wanted sweet wines”

Prevailing marketing dogma preached the need for uniformity without making allowances for the small or the irregular. A wayward spirit of egalitarianism justified the consolidation of plots of wildly different pedigree into larger single vineyards (not to mention the creation of vast Grosslagen, consisting of single vineyards from 10 or 15 villages) by claiming that high-quality wine could grow anywhere and that all sites are to a certain extent equal. If, for example, Riesling did not ripen well enough in a given location, growers should simply select a different, earlier-ripening variety, and make wine from it. Unlike in France or most other wine countries, then, practically all vineyard land within Germany is legally authorized to produce quality wine. The law fails to define a hierarchy of specific varieties or privileged sites. And the craving for the new that infected politicians, press, viticulturalists, oenologists, and marketing consultants of the 1970s relegated centuries’ worth of experience and tradition to the scrap heap. Even today, it is astonishing to consider with just how much gusto otherwise discriminating journalists praised every newly created grape and every cheap international-style wine. It is a strange mania of the Germans that they seem to prize the development of the new or the unfamiliar rather than concentrating on their own rich tradition.

Proud Riesling producers, who, like their counterparts in Burgundy, had never listed a variety on their labels, were confronted in the wake of the 1971 Wine Law with a deluge of new grape crossings that both ripened much more quickly than Riesling and offered supposedly riper aromas in those years when the nobler grape struggled with full maturity. Without question, this ill-conceived leveling of the playing field was not unrelated to the dramatic shift, accelerating at the time, away from small shops and toward large, cheap supermarkets. The designation (Prädikat) system that emerged was deeply bound to the demands of the mass market, which at the time wanted sweet wines—Spätlese and Auslese most of all—and wanted them cheap. What had long been a relative (and relatively expensive) rarity, produced mainly in the best years, from the best sites, and from the best producers, was now there for the taking. With the help of more manageable

and earlier-ripening new crossings it became possible to harvest grapes at Spätlese and Auslese levels, in whatever quantity was desirable, sometimes before the Riesling harvest had even begun. Huge, sometimes absurd price differences, especially among the higher Prädikat wines (still the great paradox of the German wine world), were the result. Sublime, sumptuous Riesling from first-class producers could not match the low prices of the cheap bulk wines of undetermined variety made by "weinkellerien" (large-scale bottling companies/wineries that purchase grapes and wine), "Winzergenossenschaften" (winegrowers' cooperatives), or winemakers willfully ignorant of quality. The best growers continued throughout the 1970s to stand by Riesling and often made brilliant wines, but others manipulated their juice shamelessly and abandoned the noble Riesling for pale imitations, thereby chipping away at the status, not to mention the economic viability, of those who looked to maintain ambitious, traditional, and natural winemaking.

The demand for sweet wine in the 1970s—indeed the existence of so many wines with sizable amounts of residual sugar—was the result of relatively recent advancements in winemaking technology. The majority of Mosel wines had traditionally been dry. Because of very cool temperatures both during harvest (which formerly took place exclusively in November) and in the cellar, there had nevertheless always been limited numbers of wines with natural, modest amounts of residual sugar. With the addition of sulfur, they remained lightly sweet—what we would, in today's terminology, refer to as "feinherb" or off-dry. Essentially the only wines which achieved sweetness levels beyond off-dry were the highly concentrated Auslesen and dessert wines in which botrytis would eventually halt the spontaneous fermentation. The combination

THEY NEEDED TIME
Peter Lauer I (left) and Peter Lauer II (right) smile for the camera in 1959. Writes Florian Lauer: "My grandfather (Peter Lauer I) always had five vintages in the cellar - only the oldest was for sale. The young wines had 10+ grams acidity with only 25-30 grams residual sugar; they needed time in those days."

of Mosel Riesling's typically low pH values and its naturally high acidity more or less guaranteed the stability of these wines. Most growers, however, in the absence of a filtration mechanism that promised that the remaining sugars would not re-ferment in bottle, did not trust their own ability to tackle residual sugar wines. It was only with the development of pressurized tanks and the sterile filter that certain growers (today among the region's most famous) began to make major strides with wines beyond the off-dry realm. That is not to imply that growers had not previously been trying.

Even before the Second World War and throughout the 1940s (especially at estates where the winemakers had not been called to fight and could continue to collect experience in the cellar) producers sought to expand stylistically beyond dry wines. There was some progress in the 1950s, especially among "kellerei"-produced brand wines (like moselbluemchen) and a small number of ambitious estates. But it was really in the 1960s, as the sterile filter became commonplace and winemakers shared their know-how with each other, that residual sugar wines took off.

There was enormous enthusiasm for this "new" style of Mosel wine. In contrast to the misguided attempts to produce sweet wines in other regions (like in the Mâconnais in the 1920s where they became known as "Headache Wines"), producers on the Mosel succeeded in making light, delicious, and elegant sweet wines. Soon, dry wines had been largely forgotten by producers. Most estates doubted the value of using their best grapes to produce dry wines because the price and value of sweet wines had risen so prodigiously. Whoever could stop fermentation at the best—that is to say, the most elegant — moment was considered the best producer. (Even today, many winemakers stay up late into the night in order to arrest fermentation at the most desirable moment, even if it arrives at 3 a.m.) Of course, in the wake of the inspired initial attempts and early successes with residual sugar wines came the inevitable perversion of the style: cheap, sweet, blended mass-market wines of little character and, finally, of enormous damage to the reputation of the region and its noble variety. Still, there is no denying that German winemaking culture in the 1960s had undergone, in a way that imitated larger social, political, and cultural trends, a radical shift. Ironically, at the same time that both winemakers and the mass market embraced residual sugar wines, there were increasing calls for dry wines from a burgeoning gourmet culture, which looked with reverence toward France for inspiration and guidance. Leading German media, themselves susceptible to the impression of French expertise, declared dry wines to be essential partners for food. Indeed, Germans who had acclimated themselves to French and Italian gastronomic culture and had grown comfortable with those countries' wines through their travel maintained those preferences at home. German wine-

"It was not until the 1980s that the majority of Mosel producers reacted to the rising demand for dry wines."

makers simply conceded the market for dry wines to the French. (The concept of matching wine with food, in obvious counterpoint to their French neighbors, was relatively foreign to the Germans on the Rhine and Mosel). Often people would nurse a bottle of Spätlese at the end of the meal and would celebrate Riesling's great finesse without the "intrusion" of food. Even so, sweetness levels at the time were not so high—normally between 20 and 30 grams of residual sugar, much like today's feinherb wines—so as not to prevent the wines from pairing perfectly with typical German dishes like Rinderroulade mit Rotkohl (roulade with a slightly sweet-sour red cabbage). The gap between the drinking preferences of the average German and those of the gastronomic tastemakers, therefore, was rather sizable, and the latter carried with it certain intimations of superiority. Only people ignorant of status or contemporary eating culture, so the logic went (forgetting

for a moment independent-minded wine lovers, not to mention a significant number of the country's top winemakers), would have continued to drink wines with noticeable residual sugar. This was a chasm of class as much as of taste, and the perceived link between elitism and dryness did the continuation of the tradition of dry Riesling no great favors.

It was not until the 1980s that the majority of Mosel producers reacted to the rising demand for dry wines. The decisive break arrived with the 1985 glycol scandal. Though it was really an Austrian scandal, German bulk bottlers who combined their wines with Austrian juice suddenly had Spätlesen, Auslesen, and "ba" that were contaminated with glycol, a liquid similar to antifreeze intended to amplify a wine's extract and roundness. The economic and stylistic consequences were considerable. At least partly as a result, Austrian producers began to dedicate themselves to the development of dry wines, and the suddenly taboo status of sweet Spätlesen and Auslesen led to changes within Germany, too. (The scandal had hit right in the summertime news dead-zone, and the media grew obsessed with it, though German winemakers, outside of a handful of bulk wine producers, had virtually nothing to do with it. Whatever the facts, many wine drinkers lost their appetite that summer for sweet wines.) Combined with the stock market crash of 1987, the scandal led to the utter collapse of the export market and forced growers to confront the needs and desires of the domestic market with greater urgency. Even with a long tradition of dry wine production on the Mosel, for years the majority of the best producers and the best sites had been dedicated largely to residual sugar wines. The ideological and practical re-allocation of the best resources toward dry-tasting wines was a sizable shift, and these were effectively the early years for superior-quality dry wine on the Mosel.

HAUS WALDFRIEDEN
Built in the year 1892, this "Gasthaus" or small hotel sits perched high above the Mosel River (visible in the background). It is currently the home of the grower Ulrich Stein. This photograph was taken sometime before the year 1900.

And it was by no means easy to suddenly begin producing dry wine. The reductive style that is typical for making sweet wines—early doses of sulfur, early filtration—is not necessarily appropriate for dry wines. The increasingly high yields (often well over 100 hl/ha) of the 1960s and 1970s, and especially the dramatic mass production of 1982 and 1983, were too large to allow for well-balanced, structured, and ripe dry wines. Growers were forced to re-orient their thinking toward consistently limited yields. All of a sudden it had become clear why, in comparison to those with residual sugar, dry wines had for so long been judged unfavorably: the high yields that played quite well to the strengths of sweet wines left dry ones tasting sharp, thin, and sour. With gradual

changes in the vineyard and in the cellar, growers could begin making dry Riesling on terms that suited those wines best. The term "trocken" which had first appeared on German wine labels with the establishment of the 1971 Wine Law (dry wines of the past had not needed to be labeled, they were simply understood as such), had finally become accepted.

From this point forward, great dry wines remained on the agenda. Producers who wanted to see their wines sold in the best restaurants and to the most demanding clientele, praised by journalists or celebrated in competitions could no longer focus only on wines with a relatively high concentration of residual sugar. The international market has been slower to catch up to this evolution, both because of a familiarity with and an inclination toward sweeter wines, and indeed because those wines are so inimitable. And this despite the fact that dry Mosel Riesling, with its lively acidity and occasional natural effervescence, produces the same thirst for more as a similarly structured residual sugar wine. Why not drink a dry Mosel Riesling, rather than Muscadet, Sancerre, or Chablis with seafood? While some growers continued to focus on the export primarily of residual sugar wines, others, often those without international representation or fame (or the financial dependence upon those sales), devoted themselves to developing more and more dry and feinherb wines for the German market, and in so doing created a rejuvenated level of excellence for those styles. A terrific competition now exists for dry wines on the Mosel, where consumers can buy excellent bottles in certain villages from more than half a dozen growers.

In a complete turnaround from earlier practices, many producers now reserve their best, most beautiful, and healthiest Riesling grapes for their dry bottlings and orient their production toward the goal of making world-class dry wines (not only legally trocken but also ones, like many feinherb wines, that leave an impression of dryness). The weaknesses of less impressive, less ripe, or less healthy grapes are today to be found more often in the residually sweet wines. (Sweetness, after all, can go a long way in covering up the faults of a wine.) Both the extreme precision and the pride that the best Mosel growers pour into their dry wines is deserving of much greater attention.

As illogical as it is that the majority of Germans now ignore residual sugar wines, whether out of blindness or stubbornness, it is equally backward that the pleasure, versatility, and usefulness of dry and feinherb wines has been denied to Americans for want of awareness or availability. The Mosel is characterized by a grape and a terroir that allow for a wildly expansive range of tastes and styles.

To deny that range would be akin to limiting a prodigiously gifted singer to the performance of charming lullabies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joachim Krieger's articles and essays covering the classic wine regions of Europe have appeared in many publications since 1983. He has written the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, Nahe, and Portugal chapters, among others, for several editions of the Slow Food Guide to Wines of the World and is the author of the Portugal section of André Dominé's Wine. His Terrassenkultur an der Untermosel (Terraces of the Lower Mosel, 2003) is the first book to appear in Germany that comprehensively details and classifies all of a subregion's vineyard sites. Over the years, Krieger has made his home on the Rhine, Mosel, Saar, and Ruwer. The preceding texts are exclusive extracts from his writings intended for a future book about Mosel Riesling.

BACK COVER A group of workers in the Lower Mosel take a break from the harvest to smile for the camera. The photograph is believed to have been taken in the 1920s.

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