

vom Boden

February + Elbling = "Felbling"

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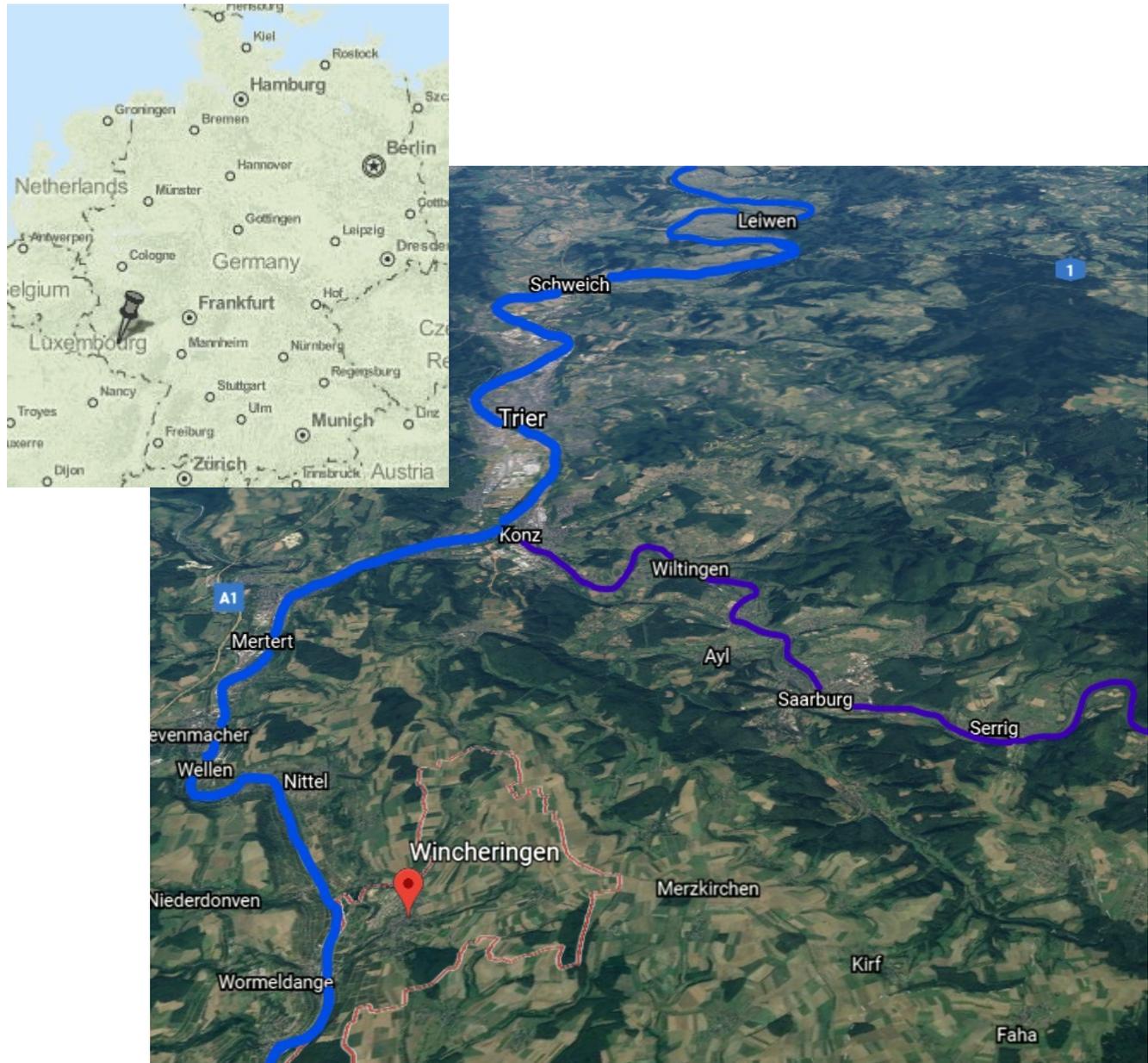
the Obermosel: no story is told, until someone tells it

The reputation (or lack thereof) of the Obermosel seems to me the unlucky result of a rather spectacular collision of history, geography and geopolitics.

That's a weighty sentence,
let me explain. above;

The upper Mosel ("Obermosel" in German) is the region that runs south and gently west from Trier (marked in the upper inset by the thumbtack), defined by the Mosel River itself as it runs south into France, to its source in the western heights of the Vosges mountains. The Mosel here defines the border between Germany (on the east) and Luxembourg (on the west) until the river crosses the border, at Perl, Germany, into France. From Trier to Perl, traveling along the river the distance is roughly 27 miles and takes about 35-40 minutes by car.

In the larger inset, to the right, we see a 3-D perspective of the region, looking north toward Trier and then, beyond, a portion of the middle Mosel as it runs north into the Rhein. The Mosel itself has been redrawn in a bold blue to make its course more visible. For added context, the Saar River has been traced in a dark purple. Thus we can see where the Obermosel is in context to both the middle Mosel and the famous vineyards of the Saar. You can see the Hild's home town of Wincheringen, marked by the red pin on the right side of the Mosel.



So, now that we know *where* the Obermosel is, it's worth asking *what the **** is there?*

The answer is Elbling.

Elbling is one of the oldest European grapes we know of, likely brought to the Mosel region and planted by the Romans some two-thousand years ago. While at one time there were likely thousands of hectares of Elbling planted, today, in the entirety of Germany, there are less than 600 hectares. For comparison, there are over 400 hectares of Riesling planted in the village of Piesport alone.

For my own part, I had been traveling to the Mosel on wine trips since 2007 and I had never even *heard* of the upper Mosel. It wasn't until maybe six years later, when I started vom Boden and began driving, with some regularity, from the Mosel to my wife's family in Strasbourg, that I began to wonder about this region.

"What the **** is up with these vineyards?" a youngish Stephen thought to himself driving due south from Trier. On my left, Germany and these little villages I didn't even know the names of; on my right, Luxembourg and its moneyed suburbs.

at the 3-D inset on the previous page: Müller is in Wiltingen; Lauer is in Ayl. They are so close... and yet there is no Riesling here in the Obermosel. Instead, as stated, we have the scrappy, joyful, indigenous old-timer Elbling.

Let's spend a moment discussing Elbling because in this area, as I've come to learn, Elbling is something of a religion. It's a culture, a regional dialect that is spoken through this wine of rigorous purity, of joyous simplicity, of toothsome acidity.

Even at its best, Elbling is not a grape of

Elbling, in the Obermosel, is something of a religion. It's a *culture*, a regional dialect spoken through this wine of rigorous purity and joyous simplicity.

Let's start with the history, though we can jump ahead from Roman times some 1,800 years, to 1787 and the famous Rieslingsedikt, the official decree declaring that Riesling alone should be the grape of the Mosel. This is the oft-quoted, history-making declaration by the Archbishop-Elector of Trier that shaped the Mosel as we know it today. *The Mosel as Riesling ground zero.* The Obermosel was left out of the famous Rieslingsedikt simply because, at the time, it was a part of the Duchy of Luxembourg and well out of the control of the Archbishop-Elector and his Riesling fetish (god bless him).

Thus we have a scant few hectares of Elbling in the Obermosel, simultaneously saved from, and committed to, oblivion.

As much as this tiny, forgotten region is *absolutely* a part of the world famous winemaking region we call the Mosel (just look at the label of any wine from here, there you see it, "Mosel"), just as obviously, *it is not in the least bit a part of it*, not in terms of soil, grape(s), history, culture or, importantly, recognition.

First, the soil: The Obermosel is a Mosel awash in limestone. Put a different way: there's no damn slate! The limestone here is, in fact, that same limestone that informs parts of Chablis, Champagne and Sancerre.

Then, the grape(s): This is a Mosel, only 13 miles from Riesling's most famous hillside, Egon Müller's Scharzhofberg. Take a look again

"greatness" as much as it is a grape of refreshment and honesty and conviviality. The comparisons are plenty, though none of them are quite right.

If Riesling is Pinot Noir, then Elbling is Gamay. If Riesling is Sauvignon Blanc, then Elbling is Muscadet. You get the idea.

The joy of Elbling is its raucous acidity, the vigor and energy, the fact that it is so low in alcohol you could probably drink a bottle and still operate heavy machinery.*

**That's a joke: Please don't operate heavy machinery while drinking Elbling.*

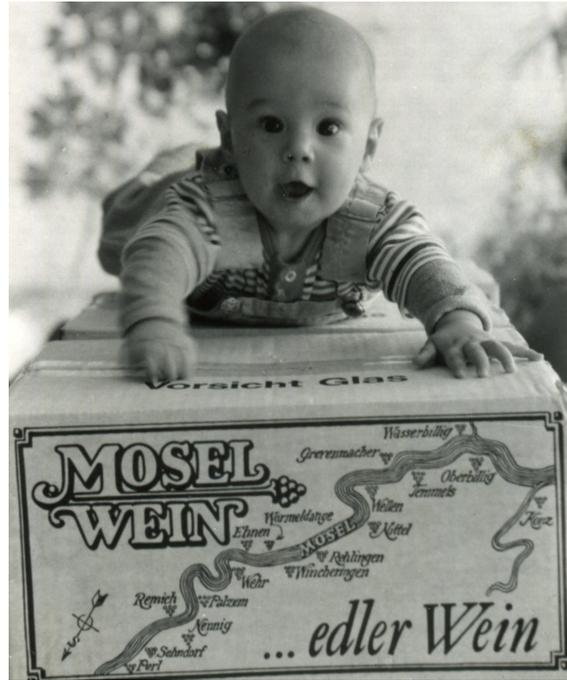
1. Obermosel basics

Until a few years ago, if anyone ever mentioned the Obermosel in your presence (an unlikely scenario even for the well-versed U.S. wine dork) it was likely a mildly derogatory remark, made in passing and without any real detail.

Similarly, for the lauded Riesling winegrowers of the middle and lower Mosel, the upper Mosel isn't on their radar any more than, say, Albuquerque, New Mexico is. If they've heard of Elbling at all, it's a cheap grocery market kinda wine, likely sold as "white wine" and on the shelf for a Euro or two. Saying it's not "fine wine" would be a most delicate way of putting it.

Truth be told, some of the derision is probably deserved: The upper Mosel has had a long tradition of selling grapes by the truckload (literally) to cooperatives interested in high yields irrespective of quality. Some of this is explained by the deeper history and geography.

For our purposes, we can likely start in the late 19th century. That'll do. This time period (1870 to the beginning of World War I) was a good time for German wine – a heyday of sorts. At the time, bizarrely enough, the tiny Protestant enclave of Traben-Trarbach on the Mosel River (also the current day village of both Vollenweider and Weiser-Künstler) was the *second leading commercial center for wine* in western Europe, bettered only by *Bordeaux*. The Mosel was the unrivaled region for world class white wine, period.



But the boom here was for more than what would have been mostly dry, still Riesling. Throughout the entire region, though likely centered in the Saar and the Obermosel, another industry boomed: sparkling wine. As Per Linder writes in his article entitled *A Brief History of the Upper Mosel*, published on Lars Carlberg's wine website: "If the French invented Crémant, it was the Germans that succeeded to make a business out of it. Already in the first half of the 19th century, many German families emigrated to the Reims area, including the Krugs, the Bollingers, the Heidsecks and the Mumms."

But many more families stayed behind and made sparkling wine in the Mosel. It is here

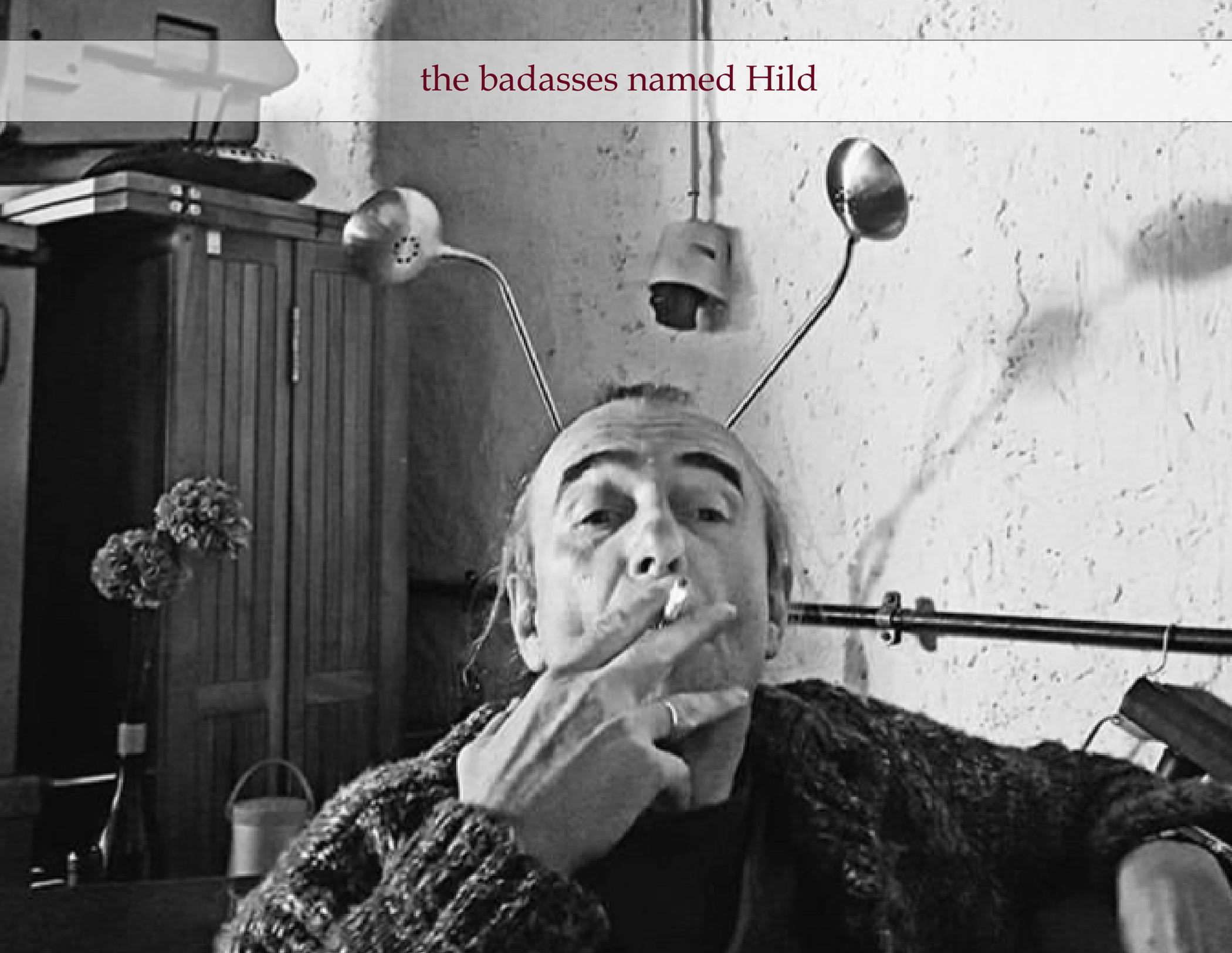
where our friend Elbling and the Obermosel likely first makes its economic power felt. Per Linder writes that in 1850 there were about 50 sparkling wine production facilities producing roughly 1.2 million bottles a year. By 1903 there were over 100 producers making nearly 11 million bottles.

And already, the producers here in the Obermosel found themselves at a strategic disadvantage to the producers further downstream. The cause? Geography. They simply had to travel longer distances and had a harder time marketing their wares to the Riesling-centric commercial centers hours away. One solution to this? Focus more on quantity. And thus a bad habit began.

Still, from an economic standpoint, these were good times. While Elbling likely had little identity beyond the villages of the Obermosel, the market for good basic dry wines and for sparkling "Moselle" and, very likely, sparkling Moselle sold as Champagne, was good.

And yet, disasters, both self-imposed and not, were soon to destroy much of this region. Beginning in the 1870s, phylloxera began to creep northward, coming up through the Lorraine and into both Luxembourg and the Obermosel. Then, of course, from 1914 through 1945 the area was devastated by two world wars. While it's clear that viticulture survived here, it's safe to assume it neither thrived nor developed significantly.

the badasses named Hild



2. the badasses named Hild

When I first showed up in the Obermosel, in the spring of 2014, Matthias Hild (let's call him "Matz") looked at me like I was an alien.

"*What the **** is an American importer doing in the Obermosel?*" You could basically read the question on his forehead.

The truth was, I didn't really know. I had done some research and knew, from books at least, what Elbling was, what this place was. But obviously I also had no idea.

Matz farms about five hectares in the sleepy town of Wincheringen with his son Jonas. Matz reminds me of Randal Graham, the famous founder/winemaker of Bonny Doon, in his eclectic mix of scholar, advocate, farmer and trickster. He also sports a thinning ponytail and takes everything at his own pace and on his own terms. This strength of character likely explains some of how Hild has survived in the Obermosel making quality-minded, honest wines in a region where this is not a financially wise thing to do.

the cooperative system, where growers could share resources and band together to secure a place in the market.

Matz's father, also a Matthias, was born in the 1920s and helped his father before going to Trittenheim in the middle Mosel to learn about both vineyard and cellar work. He also did some basic business studies but came back to work in the winery until 1939, when he was drafted and went to fight. He ended up a Russian prisoner of war, only returning to

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I spent two days driving around the Obermosel, knocking on doors, politely sitting through tastings where you knew - *just knew* - five seconds into the appointment that this wasn't the place, these weren't the wines. Still, there's a certain decorum and an obvious measure of respect to be paid, regardless of what one thinks of the wine. Winemaking is no easy life; every grower deserves respect.

With Hild, with Matz, I'd say I knew pretty quickly. I remember leaving the appointment with my friend Lars and we both looked at each other: the wines had cut and honesty. *They were real*. That much was wildly apparent, from the first sip; it was undeniable. This was the Obermosel I had been looking for even before I knew it existed.

As is often the case though, in these types of scenarios, the genes run deep. Matz seems to be part of a long lineage of bad asses from the Obermosel.

Though obviously grape growing goes back a long time here (everyone back in the day had a small vineyard, along with some cows and pigs, etc.), the Hild's began focusing on wine well before the majority. Matz's grandfather Johann Hild was born in 1890 and already by around 1910, he was one of the more important people in the valley, teaching other winemakers the ropes and even, already, bottling Elbling. At the time, this would have been a wine made from his own grapes as well as other growers' grapes and wines. The commercial structure here was something close to what would later become

Wincheringen in 1949. In 1950 he married Matz's mother Hildegard and, with money from the bank and from siblings, began the estate again.

Matz was the fourth of five children, born in 1957. Rebuilding from the ashes of World War II, the Obermosel remained rather unknown and undefined compared to its famous neighbor the Saar, but there was a healthy market for these ultra-light wines, both still and sparkling. Matz has told me, while they weren't rich, he never wanted for anything.

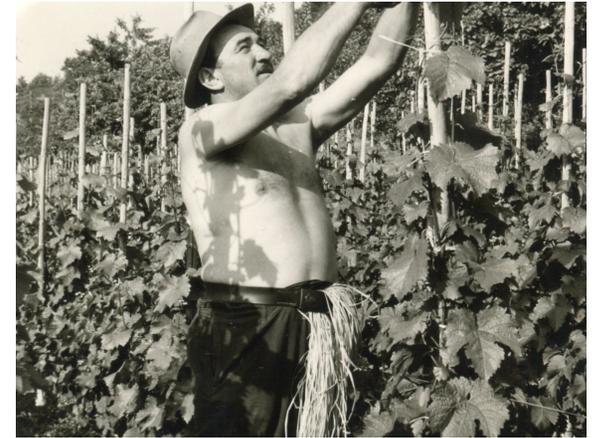
There was a viable market for the wines; the growers were happy. It was as simple as that.



Matthias Hild (senior) with the current proprietor (and his son) Matthias "Matz" Hild (right), sometime around 1962.



Current proprietor Matz Hild's two sisters, Elisabeth and Irmgard in the vineyard, sometime in the 1960s.



Matthias Hild (senior) tying up canes the traditional way, with willow (hanging on his belt), 1960s.



Current proprietor Matz Hild's sisters Elisabeth, Irmgard and Rosemarie in front of the estate in the 1960s.



Current proprietor Matz Hild's sisters Elisabeth, Irmgard and Rosemarie in front of the terraced vineyards in the 1960s.



Lunch break in the Obermosel, harvest 1959 with the Hild family and friends.



Matthias Hild, senior, in the cellars tasting, 1963.



Matthias Hild, senior, bringing manure into the vineyards late winter / early spring, sometime in the 1960s.



Barrel delivery time, Hild estate, 1957.

The real cooperatives formed in the 1970s and, in a way, they helped save the region as grape and wine prices began to plummet. This region, this grape, had no larger or international reputation. While it had thrived producing basic wines for a rather local population, once grapes and wine became a generic commodity, well, there were always cheaper grapes and cheaper wines to be had. In a way, the region had earned its keep being the greatest inexpensive wine, but now it was battling *all white wine*. And there is always something cheaper to be found.

identity of the Obermosel and the historic importance of the grape and the region. Matz has described it as something like a euphoria. "Here we have the oldest cultivated grape in Germany; *the wine the Romans drank*. We have the famous kimmeridgian soil. And there is no confusion here with sweet wines or not; Elbling has always been dry. And still, despite all these advantages, we have one big problem. No one knows what the **** Elbling is."

If this time was the nadir for this region, it was also the beginning of the change. And the

1982. He married his wife Dorlies in 1985 (she is the Instagram force to be recognized with @wein-hild) and had two children, Alena (1988) and Jonas (1986). Jonas will be the fourth generation to take the reigns at Weingut Hild.

Quality began to rise, and yet, truth be told, the grape really was the problem. Not because of what it was, *but because of what it was not*. In other words: It was not Riesling. Remember that 1787 Rieslingsedikt?

What do you do if 200 years of history have

"Here we have the oldest cultivated grape in Germany; the wine the Romans drank! We have kimmeridgian soil. Yet we have one big problem: No one knows what the **** Elbling is."

Slowly, from about 1975 through the mid 1980s, many growers simply stopped working in the vineyards, stopped pressing their own grapes and making their own wine; prices dropped to a point where farming the vineyards was simply no longer viable.

This was about the time Matz's father founded the world famous (at least it should be!) "Association of Friends of Elbling Wines" - in German "Verein der Freunde des Elblingsweines."

3. from the ashes the Phoenix rises

This was the beginning of a revolution, of quality, yes, but also a coming to terms with the

Hilds, both by conviction and raw will, as well as experience, were well positioned to lead the renaissance. There were, after all, only a few estates in the region that had any experience whatsoever bottling and selling the wines of the Obermosel.

The Hild's were one of these estates, not only helping to process and bottle other peoples' grapes, but also bottling their own wines and selling them to restaurants and private customers from the mid-1950s onward.

If Matthias (Matz's father) helped start the revolution, Matz has been there from the beginning. He took over the family business in

been selling the Mosel as "Riesling's birthplace and spiritual homeland." It's a pretty serious fly in the ointment to have a Mosel that has nothing to do with Riesling.

So what do you do? Well, as we've learned so painfully so many times, if the narrative doesn't fit the story you're telling, you ignore that part of the story. So, that's what's happened. The Obermosel has simply been *ignored*.

Matz will tell you: "During these times, even the German Wine Institute didn't have maps that articulated what the Obermosel was! None of the marketing of the Mosel included us."

the "Zehnkomanull" vineyard



Of course, we're to blame too. While Riesling is a genius and a diva, a wine capable of profundity in the form of the baroque sweet wines or in the chiseled dry wines, Elbling is a more familiar affair. With Elbling, there isn't the easy blue-chip category to crown, nothing for the critics to ooh and ahh over. There are no "TBAs" or "GGs," no 100-point wines. Truth be told, we ignored the region too.

As Matz says, "Here, honestly, most of the winemakers just focus on a delicious wine for everyday."

Keep in mind this was, for most of the 20th century, an agricultural region where difficult labor in the fields and vineyards was a common part of every day. And so what was called for to pair with the calorie-laden, meat-intensive fare

if you walk through the "forest" you can see the vines, the terraces. Some of the stone walls are still in good shape, others are crumbling. Yet, the few vineyards that remain, though they are profoundly expensive to farm, as everything must be done by hand, are now being worked by Matz and his son Jonas.

Let us not mince words: The fact that Matz and

"Elbling is a grape, very much like Melon de Bourgogne or Gamay, where much of the charm is the *immediacy* of the wines, the energy.

Elbling is a grape, very much like Melon de Bourgogne or Gamay, where much of the charm and fascination has to do with the immediacy, the purity, the ease and the energy.

I have no doubt you *could* make a "Grand Cru" Elbling (whatever the hell that means) in the same way you can make very serious Muscadets and Cru Beaujolais.

Yet I doubt such a wine would prove that much more compelling than the regular or mid-tier bottlings, in the same way I'd still probably rather drink Pépère's "Clos des Briords" than Luneau-Papin's "Excelsior," or Coudert's "Tardive" as opposed to the luxury cuvée they make called "Griffe de Marquis." The latter are both fascinating wines, but when most speak openly at the end of the night, if the matter at hand is actually *drinking*, of conviviality and enjoyment and versatility, well, the "basic" cuvees almost always excel.

was a light wine with acidity. Here, Elbling delivers. (Note: In an age where we largely sit around on our asses doing very little difficult labor, yet still insist on a calorie-laden, meat-intensive fare, *Elbling still delivers.*)

Matz once told me that back in the 1980s, when he'd have an Elbling clock in at less than 8.5 grams acid, he'd taste it and question if it was Elbling at all. Which is sort of like saying you're not sure the music is loud enough because your ears aren't bleeding. Yeah, Elbling has *cut*.

4. "Zehnkomanull" and saving the terraced vineyards

Behind the Hild estate, there's a gurgling creek, and up from the creek, only a few minutes walk from the back patio, rises a blunt hillside, currently covered mostly with young growth, saplings and a thick underbrush, as well as trees of 10 or 20 years. When Matz was young, these were all vineyards of course. Even today,

Jonas are single-handedly trying to save the old, terraced parcels of Elbling (see photo from the previous page, the "Zehnkomanull" vineyard that Matz's father planted in the 1950s) is a move that is equal parts romantic and *completely insane*. (Which maybe sums up Matz, in the best of ways.)

The financial realities of working these vineyards by hand while accepting their lower yields simply doesn't add up. This is an act of cultural preservation more than anything else.

They call the wine "Zehnkomanull," which means simply 10% (the exact translation is "ten, comma, zero"). The wine always ferments bone dry and is 10% ABV or less. The few cases that we're able to get hold of are, to me at least, semi-sacred voices of a time long past. Sacred voices that end up on the \$20-and-under table and most often overlooked. Some things make no sense but what can you do?

The "Zehnkomanull" is an Elbling sourced exclusively from old, terraced Elbling vineyards which would have otherwise gone fallow, if it weren't for the heart and passion and sheer force-of-will of Matz and Jonas. Matz began making this wine not long after he took over the estate; the first vintage was 1986. While they are trying to bring more old, terraced vineyards online, at the moment they farm only .15-hectare of terraced vineyards. That's right: point-one-five hectares, about 1,500 square meters. Thus we get, in any given year, about 30-50 cases of this wine, total, for the entire U.S.



Working old-vine, terraced vineyards of *Riesling* in the middle Mosel is financially precarious; working old-vine, terraced Elbling in the upper Mosel is preposterous.

Yet as much as this is simply an act of cultural preservation, it is also a testament to old vines. *The magic of old vines* – phenolic ripeness without excess sugar. This is an ultra-light white, a quivering, angelic, porcelain wine with glossy, razor-sharp edges and a laser-beam lemon-skin citrus. The structure, the saturating

acidity, the tapering finesse and needle-point fine-ness of the wine showcase its relation to that “other” grape of the Mosel. We won't use the "R" word here.

5. der Zukunft

The Hild's “Zehnkomanull” is a rarity. Yet the regular Elbling and Elbling Sekt are the benchmark wines of this region. They have had, despite their lack of varietal or regional familiarity, an amazing reception in the U.S. For this, we are profoundly thankful. Already, however, I see more and more wines from the Obermosel (both from the German and the Luxembourg side): it's thrilling. And a younger grower, not far away from the Hilds in fact, has gathered some critical praise from some serious tasters in the area. This is an area to watch: cool climate, kimmeridgian limestone, Elbling, and people like the Hilds. The renaissance will continue *and thrive*.

Images: Left: Old Hild label from 1983; note the "Mosel-Saar-Ruwer" appellation. Right: the new classic label of the Hild Elbling. Below: The Hild family, from left to right: Alena, Jonas and Dorlies, the matriarch of the family and the Instagram force of nature you can find @wein.hild





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