

# THE MOSEL: TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Joachim Krieger



MOSEL WINE  
MERCHANT



Bremm

Aldegund

zu Bengely

Höllenthal

zu Alf

zu Arras

Aif

Rohrpfad

Bullay

MhL. Pünderich  
Pünderich

Bruckberg

Hopfenberg

Birnbaum

M. Marienburg

Adler oder Adlerberg

Küschel

Layen

Proverg

Steffensberg

Kellerhausberg

MhL. Marienthal

Scharfenstein

Fettyrten

Mänchlay

Tischberg

Tyleren

Merl

Schäferstai

Burslai

Bilbaum

Kaportchen

Kaimt

ZELL

Reil

Reilkirch

Burg

Briedel

Carren

Petersborn

rier

## MOSEL WINE MERCHANT



# **THE MOSEL: TAKING THE LONG VIEW**

Joachim Krieger

Translated from the German by Dan Melia



Stein's cellar in Bullay.

## THE MOSEL: TAKING THE LONG VIEW

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.

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 *Saar und Mosel Weinbau-Karte* (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 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 color, and clear, legible site names were attached.

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 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 hardly widespread. Similar maps for the Rheingau, the Nahe, the Mittelrhein, and the Untermosel (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 (today also called Terrassenmosel) 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 neighbor.

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, and to a lesser extent those of the Lower Mosel, 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 to 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—filigreed, 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 *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.

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 higher 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 (known as the *Flurbereinigung*). 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 Hill Country, 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 sites 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. (On the Saar, Scharzberg, a vineyard towards Oberemmel bordering on the Scharzhofberg, the river's most famous site, lost its identity completely when the Saar's entire Grosslage was named Wiltinger Scharzberg. Any wine from the Saar could now legally identify itself as Wiltinger Scharzberg, no matter how distant its origins from this singular *climat*. Confusingly, the original Scharzberg, also known as *im neuen Scharzberg*, was simply integrated into the somewhat larger Scharzhofberg.)

This collection of untruths—the blending of east and west, north and south, steep and flat, slate soils 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 “*Originalabfüllung*” (original bottling) to describe their location precisely and truthfully on the label. When committed, 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.

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—Spätlesen and Auslesen 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 *Weinkellereien* (large-scale bottling companies/wineries that purchase grapes and wine), *Winzergenossenschaften* (wine growers' 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.



A chapel in Piesporter Goldtröpfchen.

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 of Mosel Riesling's typically low pH levels 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 so 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 *Kellereien*-produced brand wines (like Moselblümchen) 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 really 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—by many producers, completely—forgotten. 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 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 winemakers 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 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 Beerenauslesen 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.

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: because 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 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 grapes for their dry bottlings and orient their production toward the goal of making world-class trocken 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 residual sugar 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. Unfortunately, up until now many of these wines have remained unavailable outside of Germany. That international consumption continues to ensure the existence of first-class residual sugar wines is worthy of celebration. But 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 feinerb 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. Why not get to know what the Germans themselves love? Mosel Wine Merchant (MWM) is committed to enhancing the reputations within the United States and beyond of those producers who have already achieved acclaim in Germany and whose main desire it is to produce elegant, distinctive, and ambitious dry and feinerb wines. (Several of them also make some of the finest and most noble residual sugar wines in the entire country!) But MWM's goal is not merely the export of one narrowly defined style of wines. The producers have been selected because, even within the world of great dry Mosel Riesling, they produce in aggregate a wide range of styles, from lively, zippy, acid-driven wines to rich, ripe, opulent ones. If this is a new world of Mosel wine, it is a new world with a thousand years of history and tradition at its back.



LEFT: Kaiserthermen,  
Roman imperial baths in Trier.

RIGHT: An old *Fuder*  
in Stein's cellar.

### The Magic of Acidity

The heart and backbone of every exciting wine is its acidity and so the key to every great *terroir* is its capacity for producing wines with enough acid to balance and invigorate the wine. Acidity not only makes the wine lively, it is the basic prerequisite both for micro-biological stability in the

early phase of the wine and for a noble maturation. All great classic wines, whether from Bordeaux, Barolo, Burgundy, or the Rhine often struggle with too much rather than too little acidity. But if there is any question about the inherent quality of the match between grape and the place where it grows, the answer is often to be found in their combined potential for producing balanced wines with a range of acidity levels. If a capacity for differing levels of acidity alone determined the greatness of a given *terroir*, then Mosel Riesling would arguably be without peer. The wines can have as much as 20 grams of acidity per liter in, say, a 1994 Trockenbeerenauslese and as little as 5 grams in a wine from the hot 2003 vintage. Both extremes can still offer balanced wines. But it is the more typical levels of 7 or 8 grams of acidity per liter, maybe sometimes closer to 10 grams that reveal the “everyday uniqueness” of wines from the Mosel. White wines from other regions of the world would taste sour and unripe with such high acid levels. In fact, it is not uncommon in other regions, in the quest for ripe fruit, to allow the acidity to fall to such precipitously low levels that it must be raised up artificially during winemaking.

The question of what level of acidity a Mosel Riesling from a given vintage requires remains, without proper context, effectively unanswerable. Contrary to the contemporary compulsion that sees in quantitative superiority a link to qualitative excellence, acidity in wine can only be viewed as a part of the whole, that is, in its relationship to other aspects of the wine. It is that interplay with alcohol, sweetness, minerality, tannin, fruit, and spice that provide the context through which the qualitative value of acidity can be understood. Perhaps the clearest proof of the magic and the mysterious power of Riesling in this particular *terroir* is to be found in the range of styles and sensations that result from acidity’s wide “bandwidth.” (Not to mention the enormous range of alcohol and sweetness levels of which Mosel Riesling is capable.) It is not unlike a musician of enormous versatility, one who can flow with any tempo or pitch, more beautifully than anyone else on the stage.

The delicious acidity of Mosel Riesling is not that far removed from the

mouth-watering sweet-tart effect of biting into a perfect apple or, indeed, eating a Mosel-Riesling grape directly from the vine. A relative concentration of malic acid—and its lively interaction with the wine’s tartaric acid, which allows the fruit to shine—is what gives the residual sugar wines of the Mosel their grand elegance and vibrancy. This particular style would have much to lose were the wines to undergo malolactic fermentation (malo), i.e., the transformation of unripe but lively and racy malic acid into softer lactic acid. Dry and off-dry Riesling, however, especially in conjunction with higher pH and ripeness levels, increasingly common and lengthy pre-fermentation macerations, and long, slow fermentations, are sometimes disposed toward malo, with fascinating, sometimes extraordinary, results. Whether having undergone partial or full malo, the resulting wines are fuller and more complex but maintain that crucial core of essential acid structure and backbone gifted by the variety and the *terroir*. The full range of dry-tasting styles—whether with no, partial, or full malo offers a wide, deep, and delicious view of what Mosel Riesling, in the right hands and with a careful, thoughtful approach, can be.

#### A Few Words About Sugar

Much praise has rightfully been heaped upon the fruit-driven sweetness of Mosel Riesling. Virtually no other white wine in the world can lay claim to a taste as delicate and sublime. But more credit for Riesling’s inimitability should go to the wine’s acidity. It, not residual sugar, is the defining prerequisite for fine and elegant wines from the Mosel’s slate soils.

A kind of reverse logic is sometimes used to argue that residual sugar is in fact necessary in order to balance out high acidity, that a Mosel Riesling without sweetness is too sour or too dry. A preference for great sweet wines is a (fully understandable, fully welcome) matter of taste. But great Riesling does not depend upon sweetness, the presence of which is conditional—its existence hinges, after all, on the extent of its conversion into alcohol. Acidity, on the other hand, is elemental, and wines with lively acidity and minimal sweetness can be profound, delightful, and thirst-quenching.

## Alcohol in Context

Mosel Riesling has long inspired enthusiasm among wine lovers in no small part because of its lightness. The same comment (even from winemakers outside of the region) surfaces again and again: “so little alcohol, but so much flavor and finesse.” They marvel at the ability to produce wines of such depth with only 7 or 8% alcohol by volume. These low alcohol levels are characteristic of sweet wines, in which the grape sugars do not ferment completely into alcohol. (That they come across light and lively despite relatively high levels of residual sugar is a testament to their intense acidity, their mineral tension, and their typical, natural carbon-dioxide prickle.) Of course, wines with lower residual sugar and fuller body often reach 9 or 10% alcohol, if not more. What they sometimes lack in playfulness (*spiel*) they make up for in structure and food-friendliness. (The range and complexity of these wines is often less well-known, not least because the wines with intense sweetness and more forward fruit more often rule the day at blind tastings.)

Because of increasing attention for dry-tasting wines and a run of extremely ripe vintages (seemingly due to climate change), the issue of alcohol levels has reached a turning point in the new millennium. The exceptionally ripe 2003 and 2006 vintages, at least among the best growers, produced very few dry wines under 13% alcohol, and many bottlings reached as high as 15%. Even in somewhat lighter vintages like 2004, 2005, and 2007, many top growers produced at least a few wines containing 13 or even 14% alcohol. These are wines full of a complexity, aroma, and depth that have allowed Riesling lovers both to reconsider and to expand their understanding of what this grape and this *terroir* can offer.

The dry wines of the 21st century—their richness kept in check both by their acidity and by their slate-soil-derived minerality—serve as wonderful foils for food and occasionally deliver an almost red wine-like texture that makes them something more than thirst-quenchers. This newer style—so-called even if it has roots in the wines of decades past—sometimes prizes intensity more than lightness, and the reference point for the wines may be

found in regions other than the Mosel alone. While some Riesling lovers miss the lightness—the extremely light and fresh Kabinett and Spätlese trocken from the 1990s with only 9 or 9.5% alcohol may be a thing of the past—it is important to remember that the vicissitudes of a given growing season still have as much to do with the character of Mosel wines as do differences among growers or vineyards. The 2008 vintage, for instance, may mark a return to a dry, racy, lower-alcohol style, with many wines clocking in at 10% alcohol or even less. Whatever the prevailing ideology, standardization cannot and will not gain a foothold on the Mosel. That dry wines can taste delicious, interesting and vibrant whether with 10 or 14% alcohol, or anywhere in between, is further proof of the impressive flexibility of this astonishing *terroir* and of the grape which yields its finest expressions.

### Harvest Culture

There is almost no other region where the culture of labor-intensive hand-harvesting carries as much meaning as it does on the Mosel. While it is clear that soil types, wind currents, differences between clones and ungrafted vines, the age of those vines, and the various ways of training and treating the vines each have an immense impact upon the bottled wine, it is the skill, dedication, attention and, not least, the willingness to take wise chances during harvest that often defines the success or failure of a vintage. The best wine growers harvest exclusively by hand and make a minimum of two to three passes through the same vineyard, and sometimes four, five, or six for Beerenauslese and above, rather than harvesting all the grapes at once.

Why so many passes? Top growers consider it essential to pay fastidious attention in order to distinguish among their best grapes; sort out those that are rotten and damaged; harvest the fully ripe and the botrytized; leave the under-ripe and the not-perfectly-ripe hanging; and allow the botrytized to become further shriveled. It is untraditional and often impractical in a cool-climate region like the Mosel to make only one style of wine from one particular site. Because the ripening process is extremely long and the

harvest can last anywhere from four to eight weeks from the time the first ripe grapes are picked, it is only logical and sensible to produce wines that do justice to the various periods of that harvest. This explains how one site can produce a light-bodied Kabinett, a range of Spätlesen and Auslesen and potentially even a Trockenbeerenauslese. The game of poker that the best growers play—waiting it out over several weeks to see if optimal conditions for this array of dry, fruity, and nobly sweet wines will emerge—is possible with very few varieties other than Riesling and in very few places outside of the slate soils of the Mosel, Saar and Ruwer. It is artisanal work of the highest order, and requires attention not only to the grapes in general, but often to individual bunches of grapes, sometimes even to single berries.

---

Since 1983 Joachim Krieger's articles and essays covering the classic wine regions of Europe have appeared in many publications. 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 Joachim 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 the entire Mosel region.

---

Stairs up Stein's St. Aldegunder  
Palmberg-Terrassen.





The steep Bremmer Calmont.





*Eifel*

*Kyll*

*Sauer*

*Mosel*

Ayl ●

● **Trier**

*Saar*



#### Domaines

- ▶ Winningen KNEBEL
- ▶ Bullay STEIN
- ▶ Pünderich CLEMENS BUSCH
- ▶ Enkirch IMMICH-BATTERIEBERG
- ▶ Traben-Trarbach WEISER-KÜNSTLER
- ▶ Brauneberg GÜNTHER STEINMETZ
- ▶ Piesport SPÄTER-VEIT
- ▶ Ayl PETER LAUER
- ▶ Münchweier ENDERLE & MOLL

Copyright © 2010 // Mosel Wine Merchant

Photographs © 2008 // Tobias Hannemann, [www.fotolino.de](http://www.fotolino.de)

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, except brief excerpts for the purpose of review, without written permission from Mosel Wine Merchant.

Editors // Lars Carlberg and Dan Melia

Design // propeller, Trier, [www.propeller.de](http://www.propeller.de)

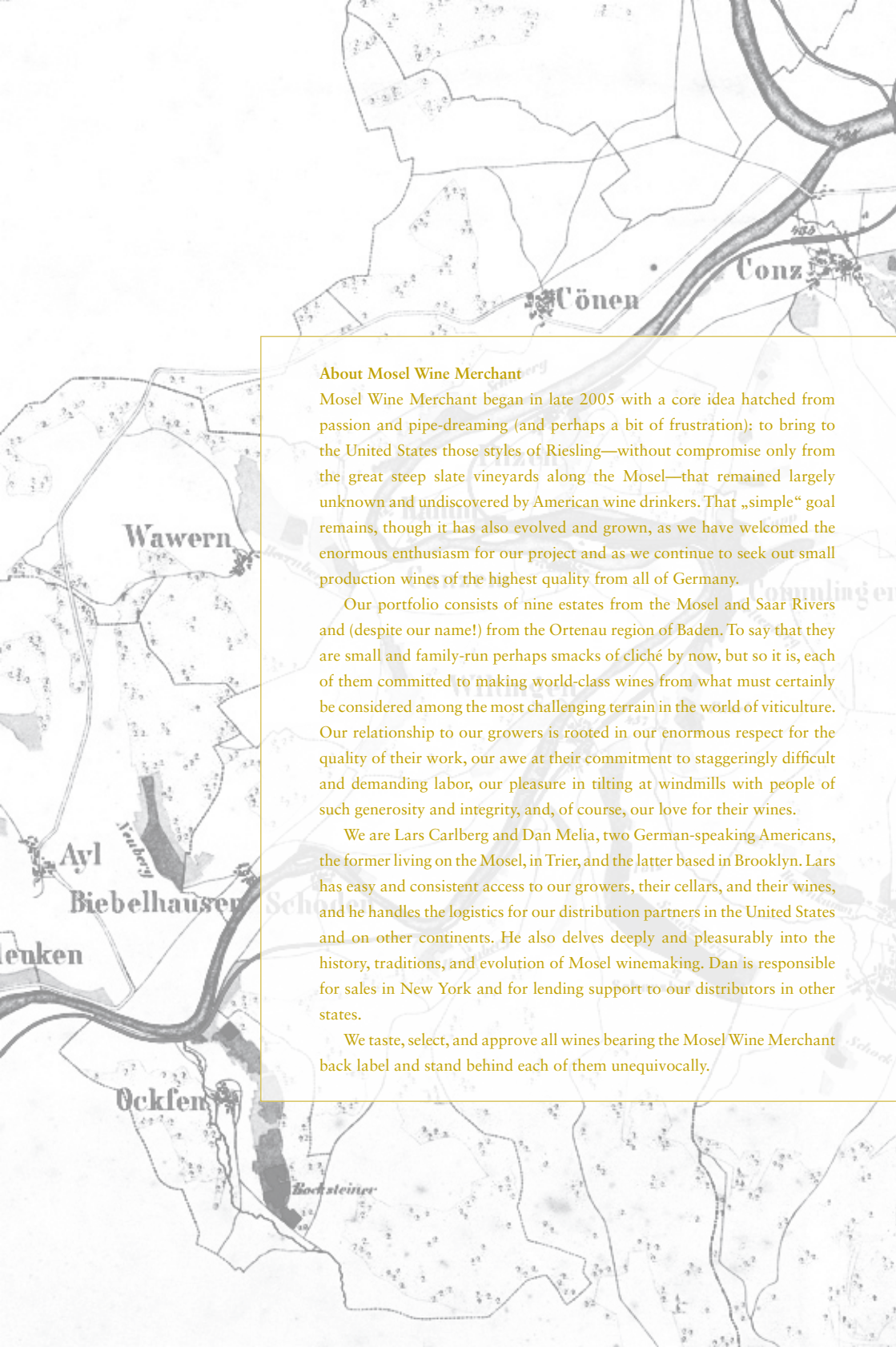
Text // set in Sabon

Thanks to Landesbibliothekszenrum/Rheinische Landesbibliothek for granting permission to reprint *Mosel-Weinbaukarte 1897* // Joachim Krieger und Gernot Kollmann for their knowledge and insight.

GAV GmbH

Managers // Stefan Löbeth, Alexander Rinke

Mosel Wine Merchant is a trademark of GAV GmbH.



### About Mosel Wine Merchant

Mosel Wine Merchant began in late 2005 with a core idea hatched from passion and pipe-dreaming (and perhaps a bit of frustration): to bring to the United States those styles of Riesling—without compromise only from the great steep slate vineyards along the Mosel—that remained largely unknown and undiscovered by American wine drinkers. That „simple“ goal remains, though it has also evolved and grown, as we have welcomed the enormous enthusiasm for our project and as we continue to seek out small production wines of the highest quality from all of Germany.

Our portfolio consists of nine estates from the Mosel and Saar Rivers and (despite our name!) from the Ortenau region of Baden. To say that they are small and family-run perhaps smacks of cliché by now, but so it is, each of them committed to making world-class wines from what must certainly be considered among the most challenging terrain in the world of viticulture. Our relationship to our growers is rooted in our enormous respect for the quality of their work, our awe at their commitment to staggeringly difficult and demanding labor, our pleasure in tilting at windmills with people of such generosity and integrity, and, of course, our love for their wines.

We are Lars Carlberg and Dan Melia, two German-speaking Americans, the former living on the Mosel, in Trier, and the latter based in Brooklyn. Lars has easy and consistent access to our growers, their cellars, and their wines, and he handles the logistics for our distribution partners in the United States and on other continents. He also delves deeply and pleasurably into the history, traditions, and evolution of Mosel winemaking. Dan is responsible for sales in New York and for lending support to our distributors in other states.

We taste, select, and approve all wines bearing the Mosel Wine Merchant back label and stand behind each of them unequivocally.

“The selection of wines that have been handpicked by Mosel Wine Merchant has been a revelation in Paris, where wine professionals greeted these Rieslings with remarkable open mindedness and boundless enthusiasm. If proof is required that the dancing freshness and lightness of touch of these elegant wines represents the future of wine, this welcome and benediction received in Paris is surely it. So versatile in their natural precision and understatement, Mosel Rieslings bring the sensation of cleanness one associates with a mountain stream. In a chunky world of power, they shine through with their rare, very rare, spontaneous, refreshing and enjoyable drinkability.”

—Mark Williamson, owner, Willi’s Wine Bar and Macéó



“One of the frustrating aspects of German wines has been that there are small estates throughout the German wine regions that are known to the most fanatic of German wine followers to produce wines of outstanding and even great quality but that have yet to make inroads in the U.S. because three major importers have dominated the market; the introduction of these producers awaits the warmest of greetings from German wine fans.”

—Claude Kolm, *The Fine Wine Review*



Mosel Wine Merchant  
Neustrasse 15  
54290 Trier  
Tel. +49 (0)651 14551-38  
Fax +49 (0)651 14551-39  
[www.moselwinemerchant.com](http://www.moselwinemerchant.com)



**MOSEL WINE  
MERCHANT**