

mountain rescue

Spurred on by a Riesling renaissance in the US, a group of committed growers are resurrecting some of Germany's finest, steepest and most labour-intensive vineyards. **Anne Kriebiehl** dons her crampons to see some of the once-abandoned plots that have been brought back to life

There is a rediscovery of great German wines,' states Roman Niewodniczanski, owner of the Van Volxem estate in the Saar, a Mosel side-valley, 'and I am fortunate to have the opportunity to help revitalise this region which was almost lost. Mosel wine was all but dead.'

You believe him when he recounts removing 'fridges, car tyres, wheel-caps and axles' from two of Germany's historic vineyards, the Wawerner Goldberg and Herrenberg, whose wines once fetched record prices. Formerly planted partially to easy-ripening Kerner and Bacchus, these are sites where only Riesling has a birth-right to be. Such renewal is no isolated incident; numerous

vineyards are being revived now that Riesling is finally becoming hip again.

The spirited, worldwide 'Summer-of-Riesling' campaigns instigated by full-time Riesling nut Paul Grieco, sommelier in Manhattan's Restaurant Hearth, have done

has changed completely,' explains Billy Wagner, sommelier at the trendy Berlin Weinbar Rutz. 'Even restaurants which only sold Bordeaux, Burgundy, Tuscany and Piedmont are today selling great German wines.'

'WHAT PEOPLE ENJOY MOST IS THE TRANSPARENT MINERALITY' DUSTIN WILSON MS

a lot to alert the world to the wonders of this variety, especially now that an eager, excited and talented Germany once again produces spankily good Riesling.

'Ten years ago, when I started out, you could not sell Riesling – today this

Franken-wines

Why even Germans frowned upon their own Riesling is explained by Nik Weis, owner of Mosel estate St Urbans-Hof: post-war viticultural and oenological advances slowly created Frankenstein wines. New clones, new varieties and agrochemicals assured reliably large yields.

A wine law equating quality with must weight meant that so called 'quality wine' could be grown anywhere, regardless



But that also left Riesling and its often sweet wines behind. People failed to understand the difference between the wine's own residual sweetness resulting from the aromatic, mildly sweet fructose and the sickly, sticky glucose from added Süss-reserve.

'It took the Germans until the turn of the millennium to have faith in German wines again,' says Weis. Winemakers not only improved quality, they were no longer ashamed to talk about it. Weis was one of the first to do so, especially in the States where Dustin Wilson MS, wine director at Eleven Madison Park in Manhattan, is a fan.

'In the last five years having wine with a little sweetness is not necessarily a bad thing anymore. German Rieslings tend to have at least a little bit of sugar and, comparatively, they tend to be the most elegant, the lightest – they are bright and slate-y with a higher-acid profile,' says Wilson. 'They are lean, focused and nervy. What people enjoy most is their transparent minerality, their drive and sense of place.'

Wagner in Berlin's Weinbar

AN EAGER, EXCITED AND TALENTED GERMANY IS ONCE AGAIN PRODUCING SPANKINGLY GOOD RIESLING

Rutz echoes this: 'No matter where you look, kitchens are defining themselves by producing light but very flavoursome dishes, and Riesling is very exciting in that situation.'

A real fairytale

Geisenheim graduate Axel Pauly, who took over his family's vineyards in Lieser, champions Riesling. His success convinced him to rescue a part of the Lieserer Schlossberg. 'There was one hectare belonging to several owners who had all given up as much as 20 years ago,' he recounts. 'It was as overgrown as Sleeping Beauty's castle. We had cut arms and faces. It took a good week to clear but it is now a perfectly clean slate. We planted rapeseed

to loosen and revitalise the soil. The following year we ploughed and replanted with non-vigorous rootstock and massal selections [where cuttings from a number of the best vines are propagated].'

He credits enthusiasm, climate change and 'a string of good vintages' for the Riesling revival, but there are other factors, too. 'Putting a German flag on your car for the football would have been unthinkable 20 years ago, but today this – and Riesling – has become acceptable.'

The world has taken note: Nick Trower from London's Dock Kitchen comments, 'Pauly has been very successful: an example of new German Riesling with a modern approach.'

Rolling down the river

Downstream in the Mosel village of Pünderich, biodynamic pioneer Clemens Busch rescued the historic Rothenpfad, part of Marienburg, a grosses gewächs (equivalent of grand cru) site. 'Rothenpfad was classified as a top site in 1811,' explains Busch. 'I knew from the parcels I had in the vineyard that quality was possible. Also, old winemakers remembered that in great years the best wines came from Rothenpfad, due to

more moisture and its south-easterly aspect lending shade in the early evening. But there was no proper access, it was all manual work and thus more and

more parts lay fallow. Of the 2.5 hectares, only 1.5 were still looked after.'

When the local council decided to create access for hiking trails in 2004, Busch volunteered to re-cultivate. 'It took two winters to clear the site. It all had to be removed by hand after 30 years of neglect,' says Busch. 'Dry stone walls had crumbled; we reconstructed 30 of them with the help of talented artisans.'

While authorities made funds available for the installation of a monorail (with which 150 tons of newly-quarried slate were transported into the vineyard), Busch carried the chief cost and now owns 1.7ha. 'In 2011, we had our first real harvest; we salvaged one entire hectare of existing 70-year-old vines that still bring



BARRELS AT ST URBANS-HOF, ABOVE: ALEXANDER LOERSCH ON MONORACKBAHN

forth beautiful grapes which are the basis of our grosses gewächs.'

Today, the steep slope (up to 53°) is covered in wild strawberry plants whose perfume is sometimes apparent in the wine. The name 'Rothenpfad' hints at red slate from the same seam that runs through the famous Piesporter Goldtröpfchen and Ürziger Würzgarten. Busch believes that 'these sites yield wines with lots of savouriness and herbal spice and are predominantly made into sweeter styles – but they are great when they are vinified dry.'

Size doesn't matter

Smaller projects are no less important, as 33-year-old Alexander Loersch of the Loersch-Eifel estate explains: 'Within the famous Trittenheimer Apotheke site, the steepest, rockiest parts, the Vogelsangterassen, were given up about five years ago because it is such hard work. You really have to climb, it is all manual, there are high walls and it's very slippery. The soil is poor and vines grow slowly.'

As part of an official *Flurbereinigung*, a programme re-distributing the myriad tiny parcels created by Napoleonic inheritance law, the Vogelsangterassen were supposed to be grubbed up and left fallow. 'But I applied to the authorities to purchase the site because I love those terraces and the fantastic quality vines

that grow there,' enthuses Loersch. 'I got the go-ahead and pruned those 60- to 80-year-old vines, still on their own roots, back to life. They were so overgrown with brambles that it took me two years to free them, but now we get wonderful, tiny grapes from those rocky terraces.'

Yields are low, 'the soil is 80% rock, roots run deep and the wines have a slate-marked, fine-fruited elegance and can reach 12.5%-13% abv,' he says.

Sara Bachiorti, head sommelier at The Glasshouse loves them. 'It's a beautiful style of Riesling, I like the richness, the dry finish, the ripeness on the palate... it's a very food-friendly wine.' Bachiorti also loves the fact that these wines come with a story. 'Customers have no idea what it is to grow Riesling on steep slopes – it gives us the opportunity to talk about the wines.'

Around Traben-Trarbach, the Klitzekleine Ring, a group of young winemakers, have started a project, producing the 'Bergrettung' – literally the 'mountain rescue' – selling Rieslings

WHAT PRICE A BOTTLE OF RIESLING?

Before you go telling everyone to plant on vertical slopes, take a look at these figures – and feel the dedication...



Johannes Leitz did not start repairing the dry stone walls of the Kaisersteinfels vineyards until 2009 'when we had the money'. To get the necessary permission, Leitz had to deal with no fewer than 19 different authorities, which eventually contributed 35% of the reconstruction cost.

However, it's only possible to undertake such monumental work now that consumers are willing to pay adequate prices for Riesling. Five years ago Leitz could not have imagined being able to do this.

Roman Niewodniczanski agrees. 'Finally consumers are prepared to pay decent prices. We are talking about steep sites, production is expensive, but the wine is different.'

Alexander Loersch details the amount of work that steep vineyards require: 'Work on flat land with a tractor takes about 500 hours per hectare per year; for a really slick operation that can be cut to 400. In partially mechanised steep sites where caterpillars with winches can pull machinery you still need 1,000 hours per hectare a year, but in the steepest sites where all work is manual, you easily clock up an exhausting 1,500 hours per hectare of manual labour.'

These particular challenges faced by the winemakers have forced them to focus on quality above all else. 'On our steep slopes we cannot compete on price with flat vineyards,' explains Axel Pauly. 'The only thing we can do is concentrate on quality and on exploiting the potential of our sites, just like people did 100 years ago.'



VINEYARD STAIRS, MEHRING; BELOW: NIK WEIS AND HIS NURSERY CREW, ST URBANS-HOF



of site. The invention of Süss-reserve – concentrated grape must, added to dry wine before bottling – created flabbily sweet wines without tension – and for a time the world couldn't get enough of it.

But the term Riesling became a travesty – at home and abroad. Weis emphasises that estates like Egon Müller, JJ Prüm and Maximin Grünhaus always continued making world-class wines, but they alone could not stem the tide. By the 1980s when New World wines appeared, Riesling was almost done for. Changes stirred and quality slowly returned – trocken, or dry, became the watchword.

PHOTOS: ANNE KREBIHL

RIESLING REVIVAL

bottled under a striking label. But it's not only in the Mosel that vineyards are being regenerated...

Reworking the Rheingau

In the Rheingau, Johannes Leitz restored the Kaisersteinfels vineyard on the Rudesheimer Berg, beneath which the mighty River Rhine is forced to take a left turn, thereby creating a full southerly aspect for these vineyards that were first terraced in the 13th century.

A large-scale *Flurbereinigung* in the 1960s removed many of these terraces, created access and redistributed the fragmented holdings. A recalcitrant owner saved the Kaisersteinfels from this fate. 'It was always a dream to own this vineyard,' Leitz confesses. 'Even when I was a boy I always saw that the Kaisersteinfels was different – it had dry stone walls like all the vineyards in the past and I soon began to wonder how the wines would taste.'

In 2002 Leitz was finally able to buy it. 'Of course it was unkempt so we cut back the vines, but it was clear from the start that the wine was great. What makes it so special is its location at the top, with the latest flowering and the latest harvest. The dry stone walls act as underfloor heating as those rocks warm up. Cool nights ripen the fruit very late but I get all the aromatic development. Quartzite soils lend a beautiful minerality and give clear, slender, toned wines.'

Working out such characteristics is central to Leitz's work. 'We have four sites on the Rudesheimer Berg, and to say that all four wines taste completely different is the best compliment I can get.'

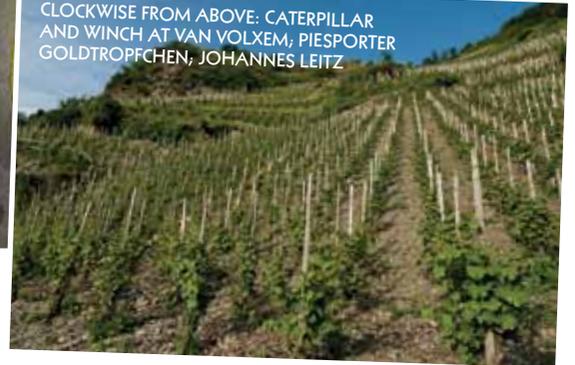
A sense of place

Back at the Van Volxelm estate in the Saar, Niewodniczanski obsessively researched the history of his vineyards. 'Provenance is the central principle. Wines are the mirror-images of their sites and soils. One of the main reasons I worked like a madman to buy many hectares of land over the past 12 years is that I am convinced by this climate, its unique tension between day and night temperatures and those structure-giving slate soils.'

He works organically and has foresworn enzymes, cultured yeasts and fining. 'The wines need time, we don't want to work with methods that impair their future



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: CATERPILLAR AND WINCH AT VAN VOLXEM; PIESPORTER GOLDTROPFCHEN; JOHANNES LEITZ



development,' he says. For him, buying the Van Volxelm estate and quite literally unearthing old sites by moving thousands of cubic metres of soil and replanting them with 180,000 vines from massal selections was a 'retro-project'.

'We declare that we want to make classic Saar Riesling – not bone-dry or sweet but *feinherb*,' he says, using the German word to describe that slight flavour-enhancing portion of RS.

Wilson is a fan: 'Van Volxelm wines give a lot of nerve and focus. They tend to be austere. They're all about bright acidity and that very clean, fresh transparent minerality. They offer incredible value.'

Nik Weis – who took over an old parcel of the iconic Piesporter Goldtröpfchen – looks after another essential part of Riesling's revival: he selects material from old Saar and Mosel vineyards and propagates them in the nursery he runs along St Urbans-Hof. 'We avail ourselves of this "genetic bank", we plan to propagate them and preserve this biodiversity. This is not only great fun, but something wine-growers need in order to produce world-class quality. There is huge potential.'

Grieco is right: 'Riesling has not inherently changed, we have changed. And in that change, a greater acceptance of this variety has appeared.' Just in time, it seems, before such an integral and unique part of Germany's culture disappeared forever. Those rescuing heroes deserve our custom. 🍷

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Structured and versatile wine seeks modern cuisine for long-term relationship. Sommeliers pick their favourite Riesling and food-pairings



SARA BACHIORRI, THE GREENHOUSE

'Loersch-Eiffel's Vogelsangterrassen pairs with pork belly Japanese style, or with cod with nori and soy, which is a bit richer, but the wine will stand up to it – it's got structure.'

TAMARA ARCHER, NAHM

'Leitz's 2006 Kaisersteinfels has a smoky salinity, but also a richness that goes very well with some of our grilled dishes. Aged Riesling with Thai food is perfect.'

LAURE PATRY, POLLEN STREET SOCIAL

'I recommend Van Volxelm's *feinherb* when diners are sharing a mix of rich fish dishes, because it stands up to them.'