



THE JOY OF SEKT

Fine German sparkling wine is barely known outside the country itself. But as **Anne Kriebehl MW** explains, it once rivaled Champagne in the big-brand luxury stakes.

And now, a combination of individual and institutional initiative is helping restore its former luster, in a broad range of styles that deserve far wider recognition

What is Sekt? The term simply means sparkling wine in German. On the one hand, it covers a multitude of sins—namely the millions of bottles of indifferent, mass-produced, fizzy plonk that the Germans make and drink every year as the world's most enthusiastic consumers of sparkling wine.¹ On the other, this rather unglamorous heading also applies to some of the finest sparkling Riesling wines. Fine Rieslingsekt exists in such a niche that it is barely known beyond the confines of Germany, but two key developments are set to change that. The VDP plans to adopt a Sekt category, which will restore at least some of the former glory to the name. Then there was the arrival in 2013 of Mathieu Kauffmann, former *chef de cave* of Champagne Bollinger, at Reichsrat von Buhl. The legendary Mittelhaardt estate, whose wine was used in Riesling's heyday to toast the opening of the Suez Canal, has big plans for Kauffmann and Rieslingsekt. History reveals early links between Champagne and Sekt, and even the term itself has a surprisingly literary connection.

Shakespeare's plays were most successful in the German translations of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) and Johann Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853). They both translated Shakespeare's "sack"—Sherry—as "Sekt," which in German denoted sweet Spanish wine. Legend has it that Sekt became a term for sparkling wine one late November evening in 1825, when the celebrated actor Ludwig Devrient went to his favorite Berlin tavern and, still caught in his role of Falstaff, demanded of the waiter, *Bringe er mit Sekt, Schurke!* ("Give me a cup of sack, rogue!" Falstaff in *Henry IV: Part I*, Act II, Scene IV).² The waiter obliged with Devrient's usual tippel: Champagne. Sekt thus became shorthand for sparkling wine in Berlin and, by the late 19th century, was also common parlance in Germany more widely. By 1908, the German association of sparkling-wine producers, *Verband Deutscher Schaumweinkellereien*, which was founded in 1894, had renamed themselves *Sektellereien*. These *Sektellereien* had close links to Champagne: Georg Christian von Kessler learned the secrets of Champagne production at Veuve Clicquot and founded the first German Sekt estate in 1826, even though sparkling-wine production had been attempted earlier.³ Indeed, many Germans went to Champagne to learn—and some even stayed there, as is evident in the names of numerous Champagne houses. Those who returned turned Riesling-based "sparkling Hock" and "sparkling Mosel" into brand-marketed successes of the late 19th century. Houses like Deinhard, Henkell, and Kupferberg enjoyed international renown. In 1870, Princess Alice of Great Britain visited the Kupferberg cellars in Mainz extending seven stories below ground.⁴ In 1876, the Rheingold brand was launched by JJ Söhnlein at the first ever Bayreuther Festspiele and was "ordained" by none other than Richard Wagner himself.⁵ It was probably this heady mix of celebrity, media manipulation, and money surrounding Sekt that led Thomas Mann to make the charming but fraudulent protagonist of his Belle Époque parody *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull* the son of a nouveau-riche Sekt producer in the town of Eltville on the Rhine. This allowed Mann to illustrate the prevailing decadence perfectly. Competition between Champagne and Sekt was intense, Moët & Chandon's White Star and Söhnlein's

"I tried to go in a Champagne direction but also to show local expression—this is a real balancing act. If someone says to me, 'Your Sekt tastes like Champagne,' then I have got it wrong. I like to have the same quality, but I don't want to copy"



Rheingold outdoing each other to become the christening fizz for the launch of the German Kaiser's imperial yacht in New York in 1902.⁶ However, whereas Champagne safeguarded its interests by protecting its name and restricting it rigorously to wines produced from and in the region as early as 1887, with the first delimitations of the area in 1908 and a final revision in 1927 still in force today, the Germans did no such thing. As a result, the vast majority of what is sold as Sekt today, at retail prices as low as €2.49, is imported, blended, tank-fermented, and sweetened bulk wine—and certainly not Riesling. Today's industry is highly consolidated, with some of the old brand names still extant, albeit subsumed into the portfolios of a few large players. Nonetheless, there is an undeniable tradition of traditional-method Sekt, especially in the Rheingau and Mosel, and a lively production of traditional-method so-called Winzersekte by individual, small wine estates that produce Sekt from their own grapes—from Pinot varieties and Chardonnay, as well as from Riesling. A few of them are highly specialized and produce fine, traditional-method Rieslingsekt in a range of styles that deserve a far wider audience.

Rieslingsekt on its own merits

Riesling's suitability as a base for sparkling wine is plausible enough; it has the necessary acidity and light-bodied freshness. It is, however, a fundamentally different beast from Pinot- or Chardonnay-based sparkling wines so should be treated as a sparkling-wine genre in its own right, with its own merits. Most notably, it shows autolysis far less than Pinot- or Chardonnay-based wines. To those used to the intricate autolytic aromas of fine Pinot-/Chardonnay-based sparklers, this may at first seem less complex, but Riesling's distinct personality can result in beguiling, long-lived Sekts of almost weightless elegance and ethereal scentedness. As all of the producers attest, Riesling also presents its very own challenges.

Klaus Herres of Sektgut St Laurentius in Leiwien, Mosel, whose Sekts have won countless accolades, says, "The typicity of Riesling has to be preserved. Here [in the Mosel], Riesling is very mineral, it must have light citrus aromas. We ferment some of the Riesling from steep slopes spontaneously, but 100 percent spontaneously fermented Riesling base wines are difficult. The challenge is to carry the Riesling aromas across the second fermentation. These citrus aromas get lost during malolactic fermentation. We, thus, make base wines with and without malolactic fermentation, and we also have spontaneously fermented base wines, which show the typicity most. That is why we make cuvées of these three bases and then *dosage* later with very high-quality Riesling. This adds another touch of quality and rounds off the flavor." His grapes grow around the Mosel villages of Leiwien, Köwerich, Klüsserath, and Piesport, and he specializes in Sekt alone. His top Sekt is made from a single vineyard of 80- to 120-year-old ungrafted vines in Piesport that is accessible only by boat. This is his only Sekt based completely on spontaneous fermentation of the base wine. It is a creamy, subtle evocation of jasmine, mandarin peel, and freshly cut citrus, and a fascinating expression of Riesling. His other extra-brut and brut cuvées have all the dancing joy of Mosel Riesling, made even more light-footed by the creamy fizz.

It was in the late 1970s that a visit from a few Champenois vigneron from Le Mesnil-sur-Oger (Leiwien's twin village via

a European village-*jumelage*) got Herres started. He had been given little choice other than to take over his home estate and wanted to do something challenging. "In our schools, we weren't really taught about sparkling wine at that time, so I went off to Champagne and worked in five or six different companies. I told myself that I had to start at the level where Champagne was then—otherwise I'd forever lag behind. And that is where I got my expertise. I had lots of support. Now a lot of young Champenois winemakers come to us to learn," Herres explains. He bottled his first serious Sekt in 1982 and has been refining his process constantly ever since, learning and experimenting all along. His Sekts are paradigms of fine-boned elegance and slenderness. Taming, or rather harnessing, Riesling's acidity is central, both in terms of mouthfeel and *dosage* interaction. Herres says, "We initially started with 10g/l total acidity [TA], but you need milder acidity. So today we do partial MLF and blend it with non-MLF wines. We like to end up with final values in the finished Sekt of about 6.5–7g/l TA. This way you need less *dosage*; you don't even need to go to the upper extremes of brut, just 8–9g/l *dosage* suits Riesling quite well. Without MLF you also have coarser bubbles; lactic acid makes for better mousse. All of this takes a lot of *Fingerspitzengefühl*," he says—an instinctive sensitivity. For him, Sekt has to be "elegant, it has to have Riesling typicity, it must be creamy, then everything comes alive." His base wines, some of them in wood, are so clean that they can stay on their gross lees until *tirage*. "Botrytis, of course, is a complete no-no for sparkling wine," explains Herres. "If you had botrytis in a base wine, you would have unwanted acetaldehydes, oxidation, and bitterness."

He often refers back to Champagne, where he even owns some land. "The most important thing Champagne has is the discipline of the wineries regarding yields, harvesting point, and marketing. To this day, no Champagne grape has been harvested without an agreed price. Yield and price are set before harvest. Legally, this is impossible in Germany. We can learn a lot from Champagne, and I am not sure if I'd have got very far without their support. But I must also emphasize that I never, even at the start, wanted to copy Champagne," he says. "I tried to go in a Champagne direction but also to show local expression—this is a real balancing act. If someone says to me, 'Your Sekt tastes like Champagne,' then I have got it wrong. I like to have the same quality, but I don't want to copy."

It is in terms of malolactic fermentation, lees contact, and *dosage* wines that Rieslingsekt styles differ. But no matter what the stylistic aim may be, all agree that Riesling destined for quality Sekt is not just early-harvest Riesling or the stuff from racy years, made as a kind of contingency in cooler years. They also all insist on exactly the right harvest point, somewhere between 75° and 78° Oechsle (10–10.4% potential ABV); hand-harvesting; whole-bunch pressing; and separating press fractions.

With his Champenois expertise, Mathieu Kauffmann at Reichsrat von Buhl in picturesque Deidesheim is ideally placed to compare. "I think that Champagne's pressing protocols are the world's best," Kauffmann states. "If we apply the same rigor to pressing Riesling, that cannot be a bad thing. But it's just the beginning." While many questioned his move from Bollinger to the German Riesling house, which has made Sekt since 1994, Kauffmann is excited, because he is now



This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 1795 414 681

making both still and sparkling wines. “As an Alsatian, I recognize the potential of Riesling. It simply shows the diversity of soil, whether that’s sandstone, granite, volcanic, slate, or limestone. It can have more facets than Chardonnay. The diversity of those facets of Riesling can be equaled only by great white Burgundy. The Mittelhaardt has huge potential for Riesling: We have the kind of sunshine to make absolutely bone-dry Riesling with our grapes—and this is what I need for Sekt, but with an earlier harvest.” Regarding Riesling as a Sekt base, he says, “Fundamentally, it has what Sekt needs: acidity, elegance, fruit, freshness. Sekt should, of course, be fresh and animating, and in this respect Riesling is for me as well suited as Chardonnay. It smells fruity, has beautiful backbone and creaminess. It just takes time—I’ve got Pechstein [Riesling base wine from this legendary, single, basalt-dominated site in the neighboring village of Forst] in the cellar that will take at least three years. I also make Sekt from Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc, but that’s a different kettle of fish, just as you have Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir—both make great wines but have little in common.” The grapes at Reichsrat von Buhl have been farmed biodynamically for years, and Kauffmann also works according to the lunar calendar in the cellar. “I want the wine to be alive,” he says. His first Sekt, from the 2013 vintage, was released with great fanfare and was possibly quite a bit rushed in late 2014. “I choose grapes that are just ripe but not green; the pH should be low, the acid high but ripe.” His process was a very short pressing, overnight *débourbage*, then yeast (a carefully raised *pied de cuve*), no chaptalization, no filtration, no enzymes. Post-fermentation, the base wines remain on their gross lees without sulfuring; a small proportion is matured in wood before being bottled for the second fermentation. There is no malolactic fermentation—this is in line with the taut, precise style that Reichsrat von Buhl is known for throughout its range. Despite this, the first Sekt is rounded by creamy apple flavors—but in the uncompromising von Buhl style. The *liqueur d’expédition* was made from dry Riesling and sugar at 8g/l. “Everything you do to wine, every time you pump or filter or do anything, you diminish it. People ask me how the mousse can be so fine. That is simply down to the carbon dioxide; it’s as if the carbon dioxide were held in a net and the net were held firm by macro-molecules. Every time this is filtered or fined, this net of macro-molecules is broken. This is why you need patience for the wine to clarify itself.” It is too early to witness Kauffmann’s full impact on the house, but it is already clear that we can look forward to exciting Sekts here. “I made many different base wines in 2013 and 2014,” he says. “We now have to wait until 2018 or 2019 until we see where this goes. It remains to be seen whether we’ll make more single-site Sekts in the future.”

Non-Riesling-Sekts

A little farther north, with vineyards straddling the border between Pfalz and Rheinhessen, is Sekthaus Raumland in Flörsheim-Dalsheim. Volker Raumland made his first Sekt in 1982 and founded his Sektgut while still studying at Geisenheim. His breakthrough came with the acquisition of his current premises in 1990, which came with numerous vineyards of Müller-Thurgau and the like. “It was the first step toward the top. It was then that I realized that producing

one’s own grapes makes for a very different base wine.” He has since replanted or head-grafted to more suitable Sekt varieties, and he converted to organic farming in 2002. Raumland loves autolysis and really prefers making Sekt from Pinot varieties and Chardonnay rather than Riesling, but he still uses the latter. He confesses, “I want these autolytic aromas of brioche, nuttiness, yeastiness, bread crust. I want that also in Riesling, and you get that a little but certainly not to the same degree you get it with Pinot varieties or Chardonnay.” He emphasizes how difficult it is to make great Sekt from Riesling: “Early harvest means that at 72°–76° Oechsle [9.7–10.1% potential ABV] we don’t necessarily have all the aromatic precursors of full ripeness. The next point is that malolactic fermentation decisively changes the wine: We get creamy aromas and a rounder mouthfeel. I am a fan of MLF because it provides a certain creaminess. I even let the wines go through malo in the hot year of 2003. Nonetheless, you do need a certain ripeness. The less ripe the grapes are, the more phenolic compounds you have, and the more careful you have to be with pressing. The pressing is crucial. We harvest into 15kg [33lb] boxes. We cool the grapes overnight to 5–6°C [41–43°F] and press the whole bunches the following morning.” He then lets alcoholic and malolactic fermentations run almost concurrently. He also manages to get autolysis into his Riesling. His Prestige Riesling from 2008, a cooler year, is wonderfully fresh and was on its lees for six years. At just 6g/l *dosage*, it shows expressive aromas of apple crumble. The apple notes, rather than peach or stone-fruit, are typical of early-harvested Riesling. His non-Riesling Sekts, especially the Triumvirat and the Mon Rose from the Dalsheimer Bürgel site, are worthy of a feature of their own. For him, the biggest challenge in making Rieslingsekt is that the varietal aromas are tricky to manage during aging; while evolved varietal aromas may be lovely in a mature still Riesling, in a mature Sekt they may be overpowering.

Autolytic tightrope walk

Wolfgang Pfeifer, enology engineer and Sekt specialist at Geisenheim, outlines why Riesling behaves so differently when it is made into sparkling wine. While many winemakers describe Riesling’s different post-autolysis aroma as “mineral,” Pfeifer has a more apt explanation: “Pinot varieties and Chardonnay are far more neutral aromatically; Riesling, on the other hand, has very high terpene levels [flavor compounds that reside mainly in the grape skins]. This means that the mature, post-autolysis aromatic composition is different. With Riesling you have some autolytic aromas and the varietal terpenes, which leads to different esterification—this is not something you have in Pinot varieties or Chardonnay, which are far more neutral and thus show their brioche and bread-crust aromas of autolysis more strongly.” He explains: “Very simply, Pinot varieties and Chardonnay release very different autolysis aromas from Riesling. The aromatic composition is very different. Riesling-Sekt autolysis is a tightrope walk: If it’s unripe, you have very grassy, green aromas, whereas with too much ripeness you run the risk of the development of a petrol note [or TDN, 1,1,6-trimethyl-1,2-dihydronaphthalene developed from flavor precursors caused by exposure of grape skins to sunlight]. There are great Rieslingsekts that have had a very long autolysis, but you



Volker Raumland’s non-Riesling Sekts, especially the Triumvirat and the Mon Rose, are worthy of a feature of their own. For him, the biggest challenge in making Rieslingsekt is that the varietal aromas are tricky to manage during aging

always have the feeling that Riesling needs to be in that little window, otherwise it is brutal in its varietal expression of either greenness or petrol. If you manage that, you get grandiose Rieslingsekt. This simply is not a risk you run when you make sparkling wines from Pinot varieties or Chardonnay.” He concludes by saying that “those who grow their own grapes for Rieslingsekt production thus have a great advantage.” Klaus Herres agrees with him: “It takes at least 15 months for the yeast to give its best. Usually my Sekts are on their lees for 18 months. More time on lees brings out nutty notes in Riesling. Riesling does not really get brioche or bread aromas. For me, the ideal time for Riesling on lees in bottle is between 18 months and three years.” Raumland managed to get the patisserie aromas of apple crumble into his Prestige Rieslingsekt, but that took six years.

A Sekt stronghold and renaissance

In the former Sekt stronghold of Rheingau, there is just one old name left that still (after an interlude) makes traditional-method Rheingau Rieslingsekt today: Schloss Vaux. It was founded as Champagner-Kellerei in Berlin in 1869, when Sekt was the height of fashion. Its vineyards and cellars were located in Metz when Lorraine was briefly German, after the Franco-Prussian War. When Lorraine reverted to France in 1918, the company relocated to Eltville in the Rheingau. A bottle of Château Vaux is even depicted in Otto Dix’s characteristically ghastly 1920 painting *Memory of the Halls of Mirrors in Brussels*. A print of it is in Chairman Nikolaus Graf von Plettenberg’s office in a beautiful Gründerzeit villa in Eltville.

Schloss Vaux exclusively produces traditional-method Sekt: Rheingau Rieslingsekt, single-vineyard Rieslingsekts, and a number of Sekts from Pinot varieties, Grüner Veltliner, and even Sauvignon Blanc, sourced from elsewhere in the Rheingau, Pfalz, and Rheinhessen, as well as from their own vineyards. “Ideally we would like to source all the grapes from the Rheingau, but we cannot get enough,” says Plettenberg, who is also vice president of the Deutscher Sektverband and joined the company as chairman in the late 1990s. “We are the last Mohicans of the once highly regarded German Sekt culture. Of course, there are now other quality producers, but none of the old houses.” He offers the following historical overview: “German Sekt houses all established themselves here in the Rheingau in the 19th century because they recognized that Rheingau Riesling was an ideal Sekt base and a counterpoint to Champagne. It is from this culture that we derive our portfolio. We are very proud of our single-site Rieslingsekts.” He refers to the limited-edition vintage Sekts from Steinberg (Hattenheim), Erbacher Marcobrunn, and Rudesheimer Schlossberg. “These are very elegant, fruity, and very complex Rieslingsekts that we also recommend with food.” He also describes the postwar cultural decline, when the name Sekt still suggested something special and aspirational while the product itself became ever more of a travesty: “The reorientation of the German Sekt industry happened after World War II. The economic boom meant that German wine was sacrificed on the altar of efficiency and technological progress and turned into branded consumer goods. German Sekt in the 1970s and ’80s was just aimless. Rieslingsekt then was homeless in its own home. Some was very sweet, some sour—nobody wanted it.” While he is aware

Rieslingsekt may still be a high-quality niche, but already there is real diversity within it. We shall see more of all the different styles. Whether it emphasizes purity or plays with plump fruit, it adds yet another dimension to Riesling



that “we operate in a niche,” he also observes that “Germany has witnessed a tentative renaissance of Sekt over the past ten years.” This year, Schloss Vaux will reach the 400,000-bottle mark. This is nothing compared to the millions of bottles of mass-produced German Sekt, but it nonetheless shows that a market for quality traditional-method Sekt is there and that the trend is upward.

Another winery that is part of this “tentative renaissance” is Wein- und Sektgut Barth in Hattenheim. Mark Barth, whose father-in-law started making Sekt in the late 1980s, even wrote his Geisenheim thesis on Sekt. Making both still and sparkling wines, Barth describes the crucial differences: “The wines we use for Sekt come from slightly higher yields of 75hl/ha—this is also related to potential alcohol and sugar levels—whereas our still wines are significantly below that. Sekt grapes are the first we pick: ripe but not overripe, and very clean. We definitely avoid any botrytis in Sekt base; you can really taste it because carbon dioxide magnifies everything. We harvest at approximately 11% potential ABV, so we get 12–12.5% ABV in the finished Sekt. At least that’s the aim, but it’s difficult to achieve; we want physiologically ripe grapes without any green aromas. This really is decisive, especially with Riesling, where acidity is also a big factor. We want our Sekts to taste of Riesling, and green aromas would jar. The grapes are handled very carefully and whole-bunch pressed into fractions. Clarification happens overnight, the first fermentation is induced with neutral cultured yeast. After the first fermentation, we let the wines go through malolactic fermentation to reduce acidity and to make everything a little smoother and creamier. This additional softness works well with Riesling. We may lose some primary aromas, but in the glass you will still have a very Riesling-fruited Sekt. The base wines stay on their fine lees for two to three months before *tirage*, and all our Sekts are on the lees in the bottle for two years at least. [The legal requirement is nine months.] We sometimes leave it longer; our site-specific Sekts are often on the lees for three years or more.” He also thinks that conversion to organic farming in 2010 (with certification in 2013) is helping, because the grapes must have sufficient nutrients to sustain two fermentations. Regarding autolysis, Barth, who riddles everything by hand, is cautious: “Autolysis and Riesling are a little bit of a contradiction. With a Rieslingsekt, you always have to question whether it makes sense to leave it on the lees; you have to keep disgorging and tasting. Extended time on lees gives us a finer mousse; it also adds to the mouthfeel. We see *Verséktung* [the process of making a wine sparkling] as an enhancement, as a heightening and intensification of the base wine. That goes for the positive as much as for the negative aspects.”

His words could have no better illustration than the juxtaposition of his (yet unreleased) 2011 Rieslingsekt and 2011 still Riesling, both from the Hattenheimer Hassel, a single loam- and loess-dominated site. Whereas the still Riesling is a total sublimation of golden, ripe apricot already showing signs of evolution, the Sekt, disgorged in August 2014, opens with dew-fresh sprays of citrus. The apricot fruit is here, too, but more like apricot-frangipani tart—another appearance of Riesling-fruited autolysis. Both wines are incredibly long, both are undeniably Riesling, both are a complete joy. Here *Verséktung* does indeed work like a heightening, and certainly

as a tonic of youth. Another great juxtaposition comes from comparing his “standard” (what an understatement) Rieslingsekt brut and extra-brut. The brut, with a *dosage* of 8g/l, smells and feels like a Kabinett with bubbles and is chock-full of citrus and white-berry fruit. The extra-brut, at 4g/l, shows the purest grapefruit notes, flesh and zest, and is a taut, gorgeous Sekt full of tension.

Dosage is a fascinating aspect of Rieslingsekt. At Barth, there is no question of whether this should be neutral sugar or expressive wine: “Of course we also add a *dosage* of our own sweet Rieslings.” But how does one choose the right wine? “In order to find the right wines—Spätlesen or Auslesen, generally—we have to taste and test. We try to avoid for the *dosage* wines that have botrytis, but we have used Eiswein, which is rather special. We have test disgorgements and try various *dosages*, let them marry, and then taste again. It is down to experience and experimentation,” Barth explains. “We really want to show the variety, the bouquet of Riesling—it should be a joy to drink. With our site-specific wines, it is all about provenance, which should be recognizable across vintages. Fundamentally, I do not have a problem with vintage variation. We are in a region that has clear vintage differences, so our Vintage Sekts reflect that.” Barth is part of the VDP group thrashing out the criteria for the association’s forthcoming Sekt category, which is likely to govern yields, press fractions, and lees aging, as well as *dosage*.

Quintessential Rheingau Rieslingsekt

The next village upstream, Oestrich-Winkel is home to another quintessential Rheingau Rieslingsekt—Geheimrat J of Weingüter Wegeler. Wegeler released its first Geheimrat J Sekt in 1987. There is, however, a small link to the Rheingau’s glorious Riesling past: Julius Wegeler, founder of the estate, married into the famous Deinhard Sekt dynasty and bought prime sites in both the Mosel and the Rheingau, which now constitute the Weingüter Wegeler, the Deinhard brand and business having long been sold.

For managing director Dr Tom Drieseberg, the vintage-dated Geheimrat J Sekt is a pure expression of Riesling and Rheingau: “Riesling’s personality is more distinct than most. It has a typicity you can either try to showcase or to hide. Geheimrat J is the fingerprint of the house. We own vineyards across the Rheingau, from Rudesheim to Hallgarten. I can depict the interplay of different soils. There is no other Rheingau Sekt that combines the fruit of Oestrich, Hattenheim, Erbach, and Eltville and the minerality of Geisenheim and Rudesheim. The idea,” he continues, “was to create something that is as authentic as the region, and to destroy as little as possible of what comes in from the vineyard. Keeping wine on its lees for a decade makes no economic sense—but it is fun and thrilling nevertheless. The idea is to lay down great wines that are racy and elegant by nature. A large part of the base wines comes from the quartzite soils of the lower Rheingau, where we have crunchy acids and low must-weights.” The older vintages are sublime. The 2002, which spent ten years on its lees, is super-soft, stony, honeyed, and redolent of baked quince. The 2008 shines with blood-orange peel, candle wax, dried Mirabelle, and mandarins but is perfectly structured, balanced, slender, and light.

Experimentation and intuition

Wegeler is another estate that uses mature sweet Rieslings for *dosage*. This is a key stylistic marker, and views on *dosage* differ widely. Raumland maintains that “using Beerenauslese for *dosage* can be incredibly exciting, but you have to be hellishly careful, because half a percent can be too much. Sometimes an Eiswein is better. We have also experimented with rectified, concentrated grape must, but usually we just use the same Sekt. *Dosage* is not about sweetening; it’s about that last little rounding off.” Herres in the Mosel has experimented widely: “With a botrytized *dosage* wine, you have the real possibility to influence the wine, to give aromatic complexity. You can add some berry aromas, you can refine Riesling, but the base wines must have no botrytis at all.”

Kauffmann takes the purist stance: “Whenever you add something to a wine, it stays there. You want the fruit from the wine, not the *dosage*. For us, the main thing is to show our base wine, so I will not put a mask on it. If my base wine has notes of apple, pear, apricot, and peach, and I add an Auslese with notes of quince, it does not really fit, even though an Auslese with quince notes is lovely. Perhaps there should not be any *dosage* at all.” The choice is a question of style rather than quality. Wegeler’s Drieseberg describes the process: “We use Auslesen with at least ten years of age. The difficulty is that for one vintage, a *dosage* with a 12-year-old Auslese from Geisenheimer Rothenberg results in a dream, while in another vintage, Rothenberg simply won’t work. Why that is the case, I don’t know. You try what worked before and realize that it does not work, so you take a broader approach. It has little to do with analysis, much more to do with mood, with intuition. If I have a six-year-old Sekt that shows great, mature notes, my mind does not tend toward a mature Auslese: I am looking for a partner, I am looking for a counterpoint. 2008, for instance, was a year when we had incredibly fresh raw Sekt with very bright fruit. Using a young Auslese never even occurred to us. We wanted something to swing alongside that. So, we looked to more mature, rounder Auslesen from loess soils. In all earlier years, the Oestricher Lehnchen never managed to fit into a Geheimrat J Sekt, but in 2008 Lehnchen formed part of the *dosage*. This scented, soft Auslese married so well with that vintage. In the end, it all comes down to trial and error. Perhaps a trained enologist approaches this differently, but I approach it purely from the perspective of taste. I ask how this particular personality could be made even more expressive.” To him, the Sekts show “maturity but not age.”

Rieslingsekt may still be a high-quality niche, but already there is real diversity within it. With luck, we shall see—and smell and drink—more of all the different styles. Whether it emphasizes purity or plays with plump fruit, it adds yet another dimension to Riesling, whose freshness, backbone, and unmistakable aromas are always there, in whatever guise they may present themselves. ■

Notes

1. OIV, *Les Vins Effervescents* (2015).
2. Horst Dohm, *Sekt: Zwischen Kult und Konsum* (D Meining GmbH, Neustadt; 1981), pp.20 and 21.
3. *Ibid*, p.81.
4. *Ibid*, p.92.
5. *Ibid*, p.93.
6. *Ibid*, p.111.