



SCHARZHOFBERG MARGINAL, MAGICAL WINDSWEPT, WONDERFUL

One of the Saar Valley's coldest vineyards is also among Germany's greatest and oldest, with a legendary reputation stretching back more than one thousand years. **Anne Krebiehl MW** explains "the multitude of variables" that make it so special, and explores the unparalleled range of styles from the consistently excellent producers that are revealing more facets of this miraculous site than ever before

Sunlight, not heat, ripens grapes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Germany's Saar Valley. No other vineyard epitomizes cool-climate viticulture as much as the Scharzhofberg. Its name evokes near mythical reverence; its bottles fetch record prices. Planted entirely to Riesling, its wines are the embodiment of marginality. Aromas stir like clouds of herbal lift, fruit, blossom, and smoke. Depending on vintage and style, the wines run the gamut of flavors but remain precise and linear with something at their core that can only be described as stone. Botrytis adds further layers. The wines' longevity is legendary, their youthfulness astonishing. Their early stages of development still swing with zestiness, their maturity shimmers with heady inflections that make one struggle for words. Yet there is always that stony core and their arresting, surreal weightlessness. That their soaring, tiptoe-dancing lightness should be anchored in such profound, stony depth is an eternal contradiction that results in pure thrill. Every sip is lip-smackingly good. That such a northerly, inclement, and windswept slope should produce wines of such complexity is miraculous.

The Scharzhofberg lies in a cool side valley of the Saar between the villages of Wiltingen and Oberemmel. Its massive bulk rises from 590ft (180m) to 1,017ft (310m) with a central knoll known as Pergentsknopp amid forests and meadows. Its 28ha (69 acres) look solid but not as dramatic as you would expect; the slope is steep but neither as stony nor as vertiginous as some Mosel sites. At a latitude of 49.65° N, it is more southerly than the Mosel but cooler. Nor is there a body of water that would moderate temperatures, so diurnal temperature swings can be dramatic. The River Saar cannot even be glimpsed from the vineyard. Standing on its ridge, you can feel that this lateral

valley is a wind tunnel with constant air movement. Turning around, you see that the other side of the slope, facing north, is thick with hazel, briar, birch, and oak—no grape would ripen there. The vine rows run downhill, facing south and southeast at a gradient of up to 60 percent; most are trellised, but some are still on single stakes. The soil is 60–70 percent slate, extremely weathered and fine. While there are stones, shimmering red with iron oxide, looking sharp and slivered, my shoes sink easily into the very fine, soft ground.

Always highly prized

The exact origins of this slope as a vineyard are lost in time. Sources usually point to Roman beginnings. Considering the proximity of Trier and its historic importance to the Roman Empire, this is a strong probability. Some sources, however, suggest even earlier Gallo-Roman origins. The etymology of Scharzberg, the mountain itself, is often linked to the Latin term *sarcire* and refers to the clearing of land in order to plant vines. The word *Hof* refers to an estate or farmstead. Sources are not clear whether the Scharzhof and its land formed part of the initial endowment of the Benedictine convent of St Maria ad Martyres, founded in AD 700, or was a later gift. It is clear, however, that it was in monastic hands since the early Middle Ages, just as Wiltingen, in whose district the Scharzhofberg lies, was an enclave of the Duchy of Luxembourg within the Electorate of Trier from that time on.

Maximilian von Kunow, owner and winemaker at Weingut von Hövel, explains: "Ideal conditions existed here. Not only could you grow wine, but very good wine. Understanding this is central to understanding the Scharzhofberg. It was always a recognized site, and good sites were special. This was always a

place unto itself, almost with its own jurisdiction, within certain rules." This relative, centuries-long autonomy ended only with the French occupation of the western Rhineland in 1794.

It was after the confiscation of church estates and their secularization that Johann Jakob Koch, or Jean Jacques Koch, great-great-great-grandfather of Egon Müller IV,¹ the vineyard's most famous co-owner, purchased the estate from the French Republic in 1797.² "Why is the Scharzhofberg more famous than other sites?" asks Maximilian von Kunow. He explains the continuity, first monastic then as private property, that allowed the Scharzhof and its land to remain a unit and gain such an undiluted reputation: "Egon Müller cannot tell you because he is too modest, but the fame is down to the Müller family. The Müllers knew how to market this slope. Of course, this has a firm basis, which is the Scharzhofberg, the estate and its land." What is now referred to as Scharzhofberg comprises original parcels of the Scharzhof but also neighboring parcels on the Scharzberg. Some parcels of Weingut von Hövel and Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt also go back to the secularization. Many parcels have changed hands, but today's principal holdings belong to Egon Müller, Weingut von Hövel, Weingut Van Volxem, Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt, and Bischöfliche Weingüter Trier.

"The Scharzhofberg certainly enjoys an exceptional reputation," affirms Roman Niewodniczanski, who bought the run-down Van Volxem Estate in 1999 and has since expended enormous energy and effort in renovating the estate, as well as reviving numerous vineyards. Niewodniczanski has amassed countless documents chronicling the heyday of Saar Riesling in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His declared aim is to return Saar Riesling to this former glory. He draws the parallels: "Even if I would not call it the best of the Saar vineyards, the Scharzhofberg is certainly one of several Saar top sites. It is representative of the Saar as a whole. Its southern exposition in a cool, lateral valley affords it daytime warmth, which is in constant conflict with permanent wind. This is exactly what brings this freshness and verve to the wine. If you look how high and windy this slope is, you wonder how grapes can ripen at all. This is exactly what makes this site so magical—that the grapes only just achieve ripeness. There is probably no other vineyard so close to that limit of physiologically ripening grapes—this constitutes the magic. Yet the acidity in the wine always seems rounded. Three things distinguish this vineyard: the uniqueness of this cool, conflicting climate; the very fine slate soils; and the historic prices the wines have achieved." The stellar auction prices Scharzhofberger wines fetched during the 19th and early 20th centuries are well documented.³ And as recently as September 2015, a 2003 Egon Müller Scharzhofberger TBA achieved a record price at the Grosser Ring auction in Trier.

The recent history of the Scharzhofberg—that is to say, its past 219 years—is inextricably linked to the Müller family. Much of the Scharzhofberg's world renown is down to Egon Müller I, who took his wines to international exhibitions where they won countless accolades, including first prize at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900. The family's current representative, the thoughtful and introverted Egon Müller IV, is often referred to as the Scharzhofberg's *Lichtgestalt*, or shining light. His nobly sweet wines are the most sought-after expressions of the Scharzhofberg, of which he owns 8.3ha (20.5 acres) spread over 12 parcels, all of different vine age, with the most recent parcel replanted four years ago. When asked if the Scharzhofberg

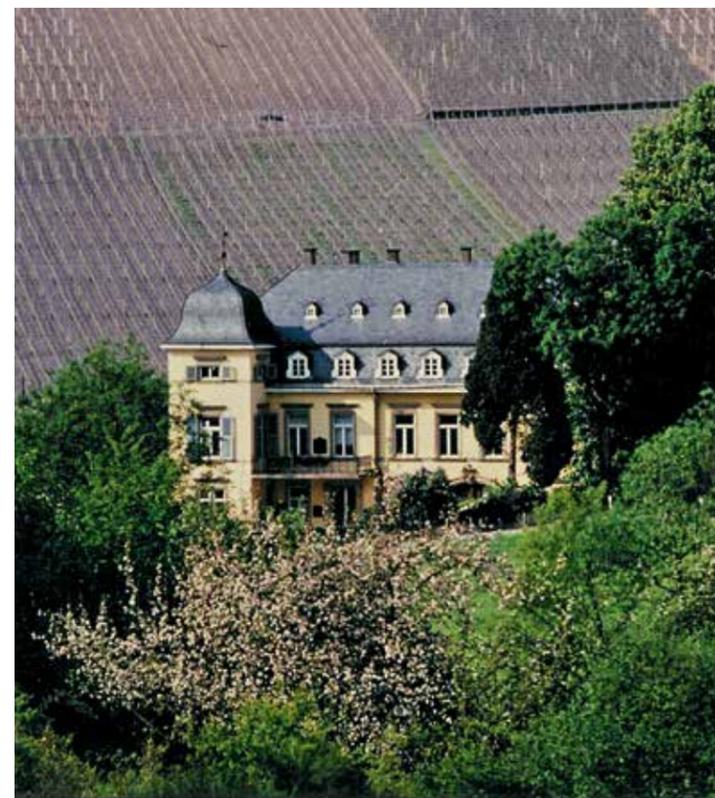
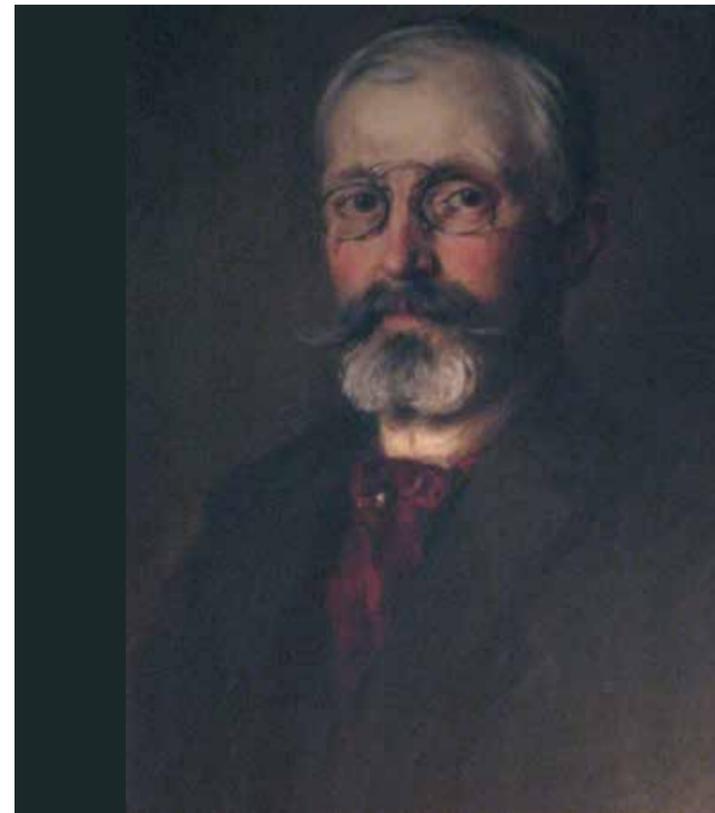
really is the coolest of the Saar vineyards, Egon Müller IV replies, "Let us say that, of those that still exist, it might well be the coolest. But certainly, of the better and better-known vineyards, it is the coolest." Müller expresses himself with extreme caution, speaking hesitantly. "Usually we have a west wind; it's unpleasant and often brings rain. With an east wind, it's usually fine. Even if the wind is cold, there is sunshine."

Having trained in the Rheingau, Bordeaux, California, and Japan, the Geisenheim graduate returned home to work alongside his father in 1985. Having experienced all these different climates, did he come back to find he was at the very margin of what is possible? "Yes," he replies wholeheartedly, but adds, "Things also changed in recent years. 1985 was deemed a good vintage, despite the fact that we sold one third of the harvest in bulk because it was not ripe enough. Grapes did not start to ripen until the final days of October, when there were no leaves left on the vines." The Saar, possibly more than any other region, has benefited from climate change. Müller says, "You would think that climate change was a steadily increasing line, but to me it feels more like we just went one step up in the late 1980s and not much more has changed since." Müller reports, "My father always noted flowering dates and such things, so I can tell that since the late 1980s, spring started about a week earlier, and that in autumn, the first frost, if it came at all, arrived about a week later. So, fundamentally, we have a vegetative period that is two weeks longer, without necessarily noting that this period is warmer or cooler. The last vintage that was poor due to unripe grapes was 1987. These days we call it a poor vintage when we have rain during harvest."

A multitude of variables

Nobody knows exactly when Riesling was first planted in the Scharzhofberg. Clemens Wenzeslaus, elector and archbishop of Trier, decreed in 1787 that all vineyards be planted to Riesling within seven years, but it is not clear whether this extended to the Luxembourg enclave. Auction prices in the 19th century suggest that Riesling was predominant, since lesser varieties like Elbling would not have fetched such sums. Egon Müller knows that the last red grapes were grubbed up in 1921 and also notes that "there used to be a lot of Gemischter Satz [a field blend]. I know that the big [Riesling] parcel we have was replanted between 1895 and 1905. Why would such a big parcel be replanted within such a short period if not to plant over to Riesling? Interestingly, this was post-phyloxera, but they still planted the vines on their own roots." This parcel is the oldest Müller has. Tending these single stakes is labor intensive. It takes four or five passes through the vineyard each summer to bind in new shoots by hand. This takes skill and judgment. All the shoots are tied with raffia, and there is something quaint about the countless hand-tied little knots, some with neat bows.

Newer parcels, due to cost, are also on wire trellises, but Müller says the work is done just as it was 100 years ago. "Yes, tradition and history are rather important here," he ventures. "I was lucky. My father was a rather old-fashioned man who did not immediately adopt new things. The entire slope was almost completely covered in single stakes until the 1970s. Now ours are the only ones left." Why does he persist? "Because I believe that this makes better wines in the long run. This is a rather complex mosaic, and if I were to just move one little stone of it, the whole thing would be thrown out of balance."



Photography: previous page, courtesy of Van Volxem; opposite, courtesy of Egon Müller

Top: Egon Müller I, who did much to create the Scharzhofberg's global reputation. Bottom: The Müllers' handsome manor house at the heart of the original estate.

"I'd rather not touch it, and continue the way it was always done." He almost sighs when he says, "If you pull up one row, it is forever lost. That is the sort of mistake you can only make once. These parcels are still here, and it is lucky that they are. I just tell myself to carry on as before for as long as I can afford to. It's also a financial effort. But as long as I get money for my wine to pay the bills, I'll carry on."

What Müller calls a "mosaic" is a multitude of variables. Maximilian von Kunow explains: "Numerous water veins run through the mountain; there is never water stress. At the top of the slope, you have very fine, weathered slate; in the middle part, you have slightly coarser slate with some Graywacke and a little quartzite. In the lower part, you have larger Graywacke and slate and a higher proportion of quartzite. The topsoil is also deeper. Each part—top, middle, and bottom—has its appeal. Bottom and top are cooler; the middle is warmer. There are different acid structures. The harsh climate, this mix of immense warmth and immense cold, creates a longer ripening period, supported by the good water supply."

Unprecedented stylistic variety

Then there is the question of style. Aiming for dry wines, for wines with residual sugar with as little botrytis as possible, or for nobly sweet, botrytized wines, demands different measures. Botrytis, everyone attests, is more or less a matter of course. Living with its influence, and guiding the ripening process to coincide with the almost inevitable botrytis at a sooner or later point, is the high-wire act every producer performs afresh each year. The measures available to them are planting density, soil cultivation, cover crops, canopy management, and spraying. All of these must be finely tuned, depending on each year's climatic conditions, the position of the parcel within the vineyard, vine age, relative vigor, and the desired wine style. This is no easy task and depends more on instinct and experience than on data readings. Egon Müller's "mosaic" is carefully tuned to his desired, botrytized style. He says of his single stakes, "They are very close together—if you were to install wire trellising, there would no longer be sufficient air—but I need this density. If I were to rip out every second row, I'd have more space between the rows, there would be too much sun on the ground, and it would probably dry out more than necessary."

At Van Hövel, Kunow aims for a "salty, mineral style," with bright but not necessarily heavily botrytized fruit. Cover crops between the rows, he explains, help take up moisture and slow the ripening and vigor of the vines. He also emphasizes how important the right harvesting point is, and illustrates the complex interplay of factors: "Selective harvesting in different passes at the right time is key. You have to be a man of the soil to make such decisions. You cannot just listen to the weather forecast; you have to observe both nature and weather. How much rain has fallen? How warm is it? How will this affect the ripening and aroma development in line with the speed of botrytis infection? This is not only down to the weather but also to the different water-retention capacities of the different parcels and so on." Von Kunow and Müller grew up with this vineyard and had the benefit of learning from their fathers. Others are not so lucky.

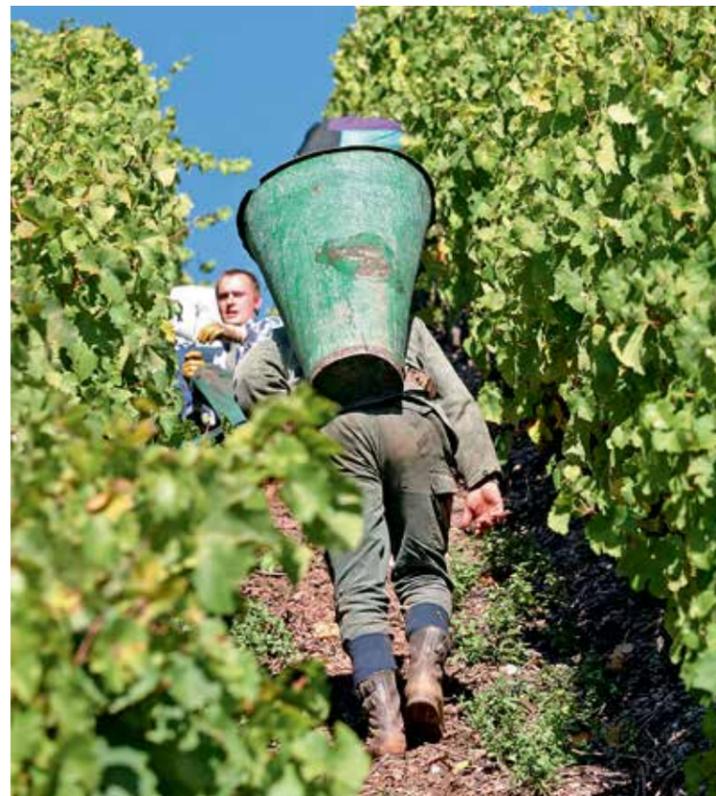
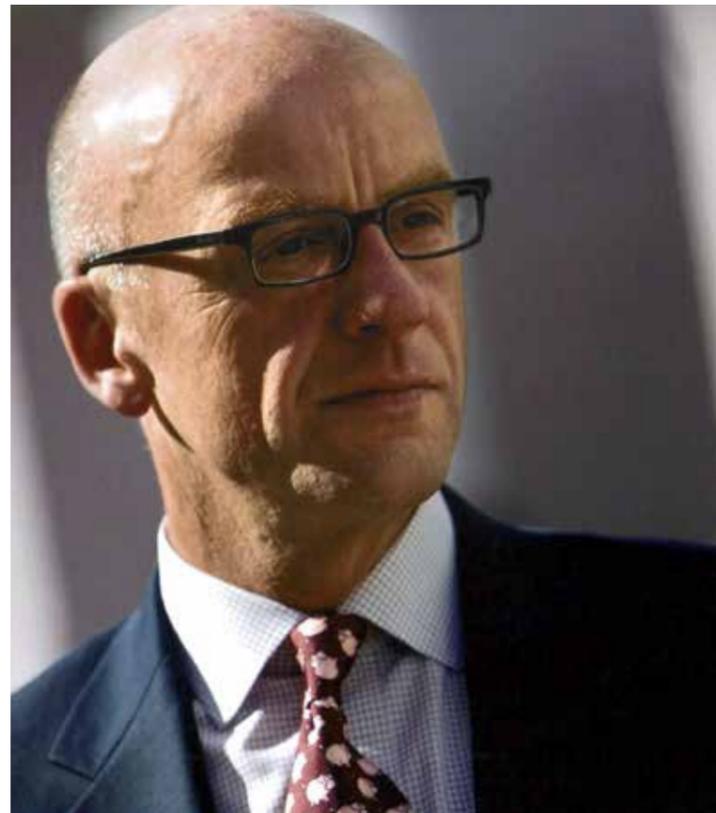
Bischöfliche Weingüter Trier, still owned by the ancient town's church, seminary, and episcopal college, owns 6ha (15 acres) across nine parcels of the slope. Its estate manager

Stephan Bigus, likening Scharzhofberg to both a “diva” and a “wild horse,” speaks of the vineyard as though it were a person with a distinct will. “There are vineyards that are easier to manage. Guiding the vineyard here is more difficult, taking into account the high diurnal temperature shifts and the water availability in the mountain, the location of the parcel and vine age. Then again,” he relents, “it’s incredibly exciting to work within that field of tension between the things I learned before and the things I am learning now. Of course, the input of people who have worked here for decades is invaluable. Both the vineyard and the knowledge of what this vineyard can do are treasures.” Expectations for the site are always high, but he is not beholden to any one style: “We can take the wine as it comes; sometimes it is a dry style, sometimes fruitier—it depends on the year. I see it as a privilege to be able to play with that.” It might seem surprising that Bischöfliche Weingüter also makes a Scharzhofberger Sekt—this requires healthy grapes, harvested at the earliest point in their ripeness window. But Sekt is not in fact quite as unusual as might be supposed. The catalog of the Great London Exposition of 1862 lists Prussian merchants exhibiting “1857er moussierender Scharzberger Saarwein.”⁴

All of the interviewed estates apart from Bischöfliche Weingüter Trier are VDP members; however, only Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt and Van Volxem produce a Grosses Gewächs from the site, which, according to VDP rules, has to be dry. Annegret Reh-Gartner, whose family bought the historic Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt estate in 1978, has run it since 1983. She says, “We made an effort to show that this mountain can also produce great dry wines. They take a little longer to come into their own, but it is possible.” Reh-Gartner also characterizes the wines as “salty” and “flinty.” She made her first Scharzhofberger Grosses Gewächs in 2005, having become a VDP member in 2004. She recalls, “We also made dry Scharzhofberger in 1980, but these were not great wines. The must weights then were often not so high, and if they were, you’d rather make an Auslese. But it’s a totally different market today; there is no comparison.”

She started experimenting with dry wines again in 2001. Reh-Gartner has been a driving force behind the increasing awareness and acceptance in Germany of dry Rieslings from the Mosel, Ruwer, and Saar. Now, after the initial flush of bigger, fleshier Grosse Gewächse when the category was first created in the early 2000s, she is happy to see a return to elegance. “Dry has to be dry, not fat,” she emphasizes. “That’s a good development.” Her estate manager, Michael Weber, who worked in California and Australia before accepting a job back home in Wiltingen with Kesselstatt, explains how important canopy management and extremely low yields are to coax a dry wine out of this site. His new plantings are 80 x 36in (200 x 90cm) on wire trellises with vertical shoot positioning. Ventilation of the canopy, achieving ripeness without botrytis infection, and selective harvesting are key. He usually harvests toward the end of October and in early November. Small-berried, loose-clustered clones like GM198 and GM239 help. “The drier you make Scharzhofberg wines, the more its minerality shines through,” he says. “It reveals the saltiness.”

Van Volxem’s drive for dryness lies with history: “I am looking for a style as close as possible to the prevalent wine style of 100 years ago. These wines tasted dry. Within this dry style, we aim for maximum finesse, elegance, and, above all, harmony,” explains Niewodniczanski. “In a dry wine, I want physiological



Top: Egon Müller IV, referred to as the Scharzhofberg’s *Lichtgestalt*, or shining light. Bottom: One of many arduous ascents of the slope during the Van Volxem harvest.

ripeness and high inner density. We achieve this via very low yields. I want ripe, extroverted, almost erotic fruit; I want something ripe, voluptuous, and seductive in that fruit. At the same time—and this is the most important point—I place the highest importance on lightness and digestibility. Our wines have 12% ABV at most; I don’t want any more than that and prefer 11.5%. This is the real, great strength of the Saar: the ability to achieve high aromatic ripeness with the lowest possible alcohol. You don’t get this anywhere else.” He eschews skin contact, enzymes, and all “modern enological tricks. We take the historic idea of *Naturwein* [unadulterated, non-chaptalized wine] very seriously,” he states. “I have realized that harmony, finesse, and elegance are best achieved with the utmost restraint in the cellar.”

Egon Müller made his last dry wines in 1998. (He says they had about 8–9g/l residual sugar.) “If you are convinced that a vineyard does one style specially well, then you are compelled to produce that style,” he says. Does he believe that the best Scharzhofberg wines are sweet? “Empirically speaking, yes.” Is that because wines with 20g of residual sugar can taste completely dry? “No, that is not the explanation,” he insists. “The explanation is that if you want dry Riesling, you can have that across the whole world—this here does not exist elsewhere.” He may make very different styles from Van Volxem, but the two winemakers echo each other. Müller says: “Riesling is a variety that is particularly great when ripening is slow. When ripeness does not arrive until September, when the sun sits far lower on the horizon, you no longer get high temperatures or high solar radiation; you get sunlight and slow ripening.” Müller also makes Riesling in Australia under the Kanta label; he adds, “At the same sugar content, you have far more flavor here than you have in Australian grapes. That’s why a Kabinett from a late-ripening year can have 7.5% ABV and taste good. We make the sort of wine that can only be made here.”

Just like Niewodniczanski, Müller avoids trickery in the cellar, ferments spontaneously if possible, and bottles early. “People who come are always astonished how easy it is to stop a fermentation here. This has a lot to do with our very low pH values, where sulfur is exponentially more effective.” With all this talk of sugar, Müller feels compelled to mention Riesling’s most central and enduring characteristic—its illuminating, bracing acidity: “Acidity is actually what turns Riesling into Riesling. You have to have acidity, otherwise the wine is not good.” Of his wines, he says he likes to drink the current, fresh Kabinett vintage. Beyond that, he recommends a bottle age of at least 10 to 15 years, and “after that, the older the better.” In such a marginal climate, vintage variation is a given. “In my opinion, there are too few people who really accept Riesling as Riesling, who are ready to commit to the whole spectrum. People say 2013 was a high-acid vintage and possibly not the best because the wines did not necessarily show their best side then. Or people say 2011 was too ripe, too broad; or that 2012 was a real classic. But there are many things that just get lost because the verdict, the ranking, seldom exceeds a single sentence,” he observes.

Growing recognition and none

Based on the 1868 map of the Prussian tax inspector, the Scharzhofberg is ranked as Grosse Lage under the VDP’s private classification.⁵ This compensates, to a degree, for the contempt

in which the 1971 Germany wine law holds history.⁶ According to this law, the mountain lends its name to an entire area, but the actual vineyard is not recognized as an *Einzellage*, or single site. Producers are allowed to label the wine “Scharzhofberger” since Scharzhofberg is the official name of that part of Wiltingen—a lucky quirk. The “village” name thus designates the single vineyard. Since nobody bottles any wine under the *Grosslage* Scharzberg anyway, the law is observed, and nobody’s feathers are ruffled. Von Kunow says, “The Scharzhofberg is a role model for German viticulture, for achieving a world reputation, sustained over centuries, by a geographic provenance that is not even fully recognized by the legislation today.”

Throughout the 1980s and ’90s, most Scharzhofberger was exported. Müller notes that a mere 5 percent of the production remained in Germany then—most was sold to the USA, UK, and Japan, which are still his most significant markets. But the tide is turning. Reh-Gartner notes that, for her, “the different wine styles coming from the Scharzhofberg are a welcome challenge for winemakers and for drinkers. The diversity helps everyone to engage with the wine and to think.” Thankfully, all of the producers owning parcels of this vineyard are only interested in quality. Reh-Gartner says, “The Scharzhofberg is not marred by numerous owners who dilute quality,” as is still the case in other historic vineyards, adding, “The reputation of German wine has changed enormously; today Scharzhofberger is in real demand.” Von Hövel also exports most of his Scharzhofberger wines. Germany, however, is catching up, showing much more interest now than it did—“because the Germans finally grasp what a magnificent site it is,” says von Kunow.

Despite probably being the person with the most thorough tasting experience of Scharzhofberger wines, Müller will not be drawn into describing them. “People say that Scharzhofberger often has a herbal taste, but that is not always the case. And anyway, that’s far too simple. It’s merely an approximation. Scharzhofberger wines are fine and elegant—I am not sure how else to express it.” What is the trait he most recognizes in the Scharzhofberg? “There is something in my mind, yes, but I cannot put it into words,” he says. Perhaps Müller has, quite wisely, resigned himself to the fact that his wines, ripened only by virtue of a topography that catches every last ray of northerly sunlight, remain by their very nature ineffable. ■

Notes

1. The dynasty runs as follows: Felix Müller was the son-in-law of Jean-Jacques Koch and father of Egon Müller I.
2. Franz Irsigler, *Die Privatisierung des Scharzhofes zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts. Eine Erfolgsgeschichte mit Beigeschmack* (Trier University; 2015), available at www.uni-trier.de
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Special-Catalog der gewerblichen Ausstellung des Zollvereins, Commissarien der Zollvereins-Regierungen* (Berlin; 1862).
5. *Saar und Mosel Weinbau-Karte für den Regierungsbezirk Trier—Im Auftrage der Königlichen Regierung zu Trier, angefertigt im Jahre 1868 unter der Leitung des Königlichen Kataster Inspectors Steuerrath Clotten.*
6. The law created *Grosslagen*, collective sites both containing and subsuming single sites or *Einzellagen*. The 729ha (1,800-acre) *Grosslage* around the Scharzhofberg is called Scharzberg, encompassing the vineyards of the villages Ayl, Falkenstein, Filzen, Kanzem, Kastel-Staadt, Könen, Konz, Krettnach, Niedermennig, Oberemmel, Ockfen, Saarburg, Schoden, Serrig, and Wiltingen. This *Grosslage* contains many single sites recognized in German wine law, such as Aylér Kupp, Ockfener Bockstein, or Saarburger Rausch; however, the part of the map that shows the 28ha of the actual Scharzberg is *einzellagenfrei*, “not designated as single site.”

Photography: top, courtesy of Egon Müller; bottom, courtesy of Van Volxem