

BECOME A PATRON!

BACK



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TIME IN A BOTTLE : GOOD THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO LATE

BY PAULA REDES SIDORE

While artists throughout the ages have longed to catch time in a bottle, it is winemakers who have indeed come closest to achieving this noblest of goals. A fine wine captures not just a single moment, but the span of a vintage, a lifetime, of eons of geology. A liquid suspension of sugar, acids, ethanol, tannins, phenolics, and chemical compounds can become a remarkable crucible of climate, soil, and vision.

Yet unlike many other artistic disciplines, there is no fixed point at which the winemaker can lay down his pen or her brush and declare the bottle finished. There are certainly inflection points – the moment when the fruit is picked or bottled. But wine ultimately exists, alpha and omega, in the space-time continuum, taking on a life of its own even as it continues to mature in the bottle and beyond the artist's control.

For like it or not, every winemaker needs an external artistic partner. And this partner, the consumer, plays a central role in this grand performance. Not in the drinking, or even the pairing per se; but rather in the timing. While fine wine may itself be an art, it is anything but infinite. Drink too soon at

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None of us need Albert Einstein to understand that time is relative. A new mother's first minute is her newborn's entire lifetime. Fifteen minutes are interminable while waiting in winter for a bus, never long enough when one is newly in love. For the vine, each berry reflects the entirety of its existence; for the consumer, a wine's time is measured by the sip.

Which is why great winemakers often develop skills beyond the vinicultural. They learn to be part farmer's almanac, part philosopher, and part fortune teller. They come to divine their terroir well enough to anticipate the wine's pace of development, and more importantly the point at which – were a bottle a book – the full story arc is to be revealed. And if they see that the normal commercial path will invariably lead to that bottle being opened before it comes to align with the *meisterwerk* in their mind's eye, then they have the tools to put a thumb on the scale.

Such as through a simple yet remarkable method for manipulating space and time to include not only art but also intention: late release.

THE PROVENANCE OF TIME

Late release wines are bottles held back from the market until the time at which the winemaker declares them ready to drink. They are, in a sense, the rare vinous equivalent to a writer typing "the end."

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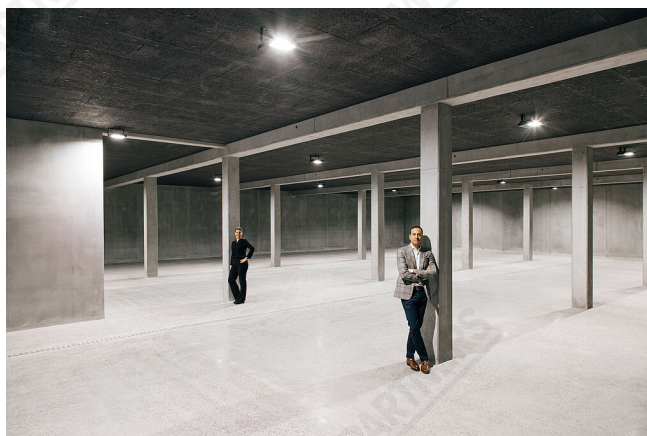
There are many wayfarers on the path of late release, but they do not all share the same commercial, intellectual, and aesthetic motivations. For Carolin Spanier-Gillot and H.O.

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is about how time is filtered through lived circumstances. Late release wines typically represent carefully selected bottles from grand vineyards, in great vintages, produced in miniscule amounts. Yet all of that attention to detail does no good if the wines then lack a place to lay down their weary capsules.

A developing wine requires a dark, still, cool, and constant setting, ideally between 50° and 57° F [ed. note: 10-14° C]. Deny it these conditions and a potentially mature bottle becomes simply old, or worse yet, turned. And once released from the estate's control (aka, onto the secondary market) a bottle might move from person to person, intact but hidden from view. There's no way for the buyer to differentiate one seller's *Weinkeller* (wine cellar) from another's *Heizungskeller* (boiler room) until it's too late.

Spanier and Spanier-Gillot thus see late release as their chance to serve in loco parentis for consumers and retailers, ensuring that a given bottle has truly lived its best life and is ready for the next stage. They spent nearly five years designing and building a dedicated underground sanctum within the ancient limestone bedrock of southwest Rheinhessen to house their expanding late release program. "We all know that wines mature far better in stone cellars made from natural materials than in modern concrete cellars," says Spanier of the construction completed in early 2020. "So our challenge was to find and use materials that best mirrored natural cellars and their ideal conditions."



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"Each late release bottle receives a round sticker on the neck that says '*Schatzkammer*' [Treasure Collection], which we then inscribe by hand on the exact date that the wine leaves our cellar," says Spanier-Gillot. "That is the date up to which we guarantee perfect storage." In the minds of the makers at this

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I myself am incredibly skeptical when it comes to mature wines on the secondary market. We just don't want that for our wines."

THE TEMPO OF TIME

It's less about the where than the why for the storied Pfalz estate [Koehler-Ruprecht](#), located 20 kilometers south in Kallstadt. One of the founding fathers of dry cellarable German Rieslings, late release wines are not just what Koehler-Ruprecht does, it is who they are. Among aficionados, even the name can elicit a nearly mythic devotion to the twin deities of tradition and time. Their R and even RR series are highly sought-after late releases emerging up to seven years after harvest, and date back to a philosophy started by the estate's legendary winemaker Bernd Philippi. "Those wines represented at the time an entirely new dimension of dry German wine," says wine critic Stuart Pigott, "However, one could argue that this is just a return to the way things were done before sterile filtration."

In this same vein, [Ernie Loosen](#) of the eponymous Mosel estate in Bernkastel-Kues, where late release has been part of the program for decades, notes that "today we have the technology that allows us to bottle wines earlier and younger – in some cases just two or three weeks from harvest to bottle. Yet we have forgotten what time brings in winemaking. We must give the wines the time they need." Proving once again that Einstein's theory of relativity can apply to realms far outside the classroom.

"Everything has traditionally taken a little longer with us," says Koehler-Ruprecht General Manager Dominik Sona. "The reputation of Koehler-Ruprecht and mature wines just go hand in hand." In 2014, the convergence of several factors – a minimal 2013 yield, an exceptional harvest quality, and the estate's departure from the [Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter](#) – led to a decision to hold back a deep, complex Auslese trocken to give it a two-year "headstart." This then set the precedent for a release schedule that continues today. Yet, Sona also admits that when it comes to Koehler-Ruprecht wines, the difference of one or even two years is almost beside the point. "Most of our customers accept – or even expect – that our wines simply need more time. The most important thing for us is that the wine is healthy, so that we can better show our customers what is possible with a little bit of patience."

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But just as the concept of terroir encompasses much more than vineyard soil, a late release wine is more than just a promise of provenance. It is also the winemaker's guarantee that the wine's release date is the time at which the wine is truly ready to drink. That from that moment on, the bottle can declare its own destiny.

THE LANGUAGE OF TIME

The language of wine is strikingly akin to that of parenthood. In both French and English, one raises a wine. Vines are trained. Bottles mature. There are questions of lineage, lost parentage, and distant cousins. And winemakers, like parents, take quite seriously the responsibility of shaping their charges, of providing a nurturing environment and of understanding the inherent and, in many cases, still emerging potential within.

"Every wine has the ebb and flow of time in its veins, periods where it shows well. "It's not that the wine is bad or poorly made, rather, when it's in an ebb phase, it's very difficult to recognize the full potential. And that's just a shame," says Karsten Peter, winemaker at [Gut Hermannsberg](#), the former Royal Prussian domaine built on the scrub and stone of an abandoned copper mine. The 12-hectare estate perches like the eagle on its label among the steep terraces and craggy cliffs of what this writer likes to call Germany's Wild West, but others simply refer to as the [Nahe](#). Of the estate's seven GG, or grand cru wines, three are (as of 2020) held back as late releases.

Some wines, like some children, just need longer to reach their full potential. "That's the Kupfergrube," says Peter of the estate's crown jewel vineyard. In 2017, the winemaker pushed the market release of its flagship bottle from two years after vintage to five, i.e. a full three years later than the estate's other

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it and I said, I don't think so. Let's wait until it's really ready. Five years."



© Nils Weiler

Long before the bottles reach the cellar, a winemaker must have a thorough understanding of the myriad factors encompassed in vineyard temperament, and vintage, in order to predict the potential when it arrives, even in nascent form. Who among us hasn't stared at a sleeping newborn and whispered and wondered: astronaut? architect? archeologist? How will you tell me? How will I know?

At Koehler-Ruprecht, it's all about what Dominik Sona calls the "aha moment."

"A late-release wine needs to have a perceptible flavor difference from a 'normal' **prädikat**...to achieve something higher, be somehow better," Franziska Schmitt, cellarmaster at Koehler-Ruprecht says, "Better elegance, length, structure, complexity. And only when that is there do we know we've got a winner." Spanier, who has spent over a decade refining his vision and experience for what sets a late release wine apart from the rest, is even stricter: "It makes no sense to hold back a wine from a vintage that is anything less than incredible. And of course it has to be a wine from an exceptional vineyard. That's the key to our philosophy. A sense of place. A late release needs origin."

THE TASTE OF TIME

Having posed the question of *whether* we can put time in a bottle, inevitably raises the equally important corollary: were such a thing possible, what exactly would time taste like?

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at their pace, most follow a more or less established curve of development. “Many Rieslings,” according to Spanier, “follow a wave of movements; they close up a bit in the first five years.”

"Young wines can just be so... arbitrary."

This initial young phase in a wine's life is marked by charming, but ultimately primary fruit aromas that reflect the influence of variety and winemaking far more than provenance. “Young wines can just be so... arbitrary,” says Koehler-Ruprecht's Schmitt, “They are nearly interchangeable. But when the wine is a bit older, it expresses the philosophy of the estate in a clearer way.”

As the hues of white wines deepen and those of red wines fade, as acids and alcohols separate and join to form new compounds, as tannins soften into sediment, a range of tertiary aromas begins to reveal itself. “To evaluate a wine based solely on its primary fruit is rather ridiculous,” says Loosen. “These ‘esters,’ as they're called, are fleeting. After a year at the outset, they will have disappeared. In earlier times a wine was described using its tertiary aromas, because those are the aromas that develop over a lifetime, and stay.”

Without the raucous and impulsivity of youth, this more mature wine can begin to weave its individual elements into a more cohesive whole. Structure and mouthfeel take on a more important role. What ultimately emerges, says Gut Hermannsberg's Peter is “something else entirely, a finer balance, a different finesse.”

At that point, what remains is the beating heart of the wine: vineyard and vintage, in other words: time and place. “The mature wines are always more nuanced,” notes Sona, “They express the vintage better. Once the ‘baby fat’ is gone, what remains is more angular, chiseled, nuanced.”

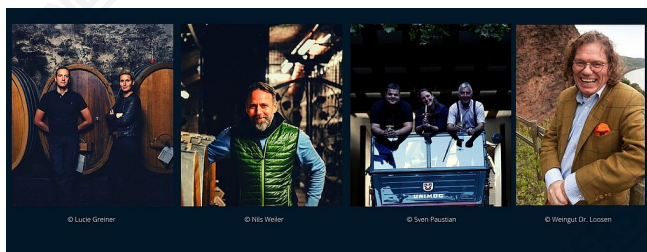
“What remains,” says Peter pointing out the window to a vineyard shrouded in ivory layers of November fog, “is the soul of the vineyard; a little arrogant perhaps, but every grand

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winemaking ideas? They don't matter to me. I am here, I am who I am and my time is now."

Few vintages have put Einstein's theory of **time dilation** quite as effectively to the test as 2020. It's now 2021 and many of us are still locked in our houses. Time ticks by, seemingly slower by the day, despite the promises of a return to normalcy. Cornerstones like gastronomy that we took for granted have crumbled almost overnight. Others, like vaccines, have moved faster than we could have hoped, while still others, like relief checks, rotate seemingly in circles. I can only hope that as we begin to re-experience time as a society that we will emerge from our own metaphorical cellars more cognizant and representative of this time and of our place.

If it's good enough for Riesling, it's good enough for me.



2015 Kupergrube Riesling, Late Release. Weingut Gut Hermansberg. Nahe, Germany

"Initially the mad 2015 vintage was simply like having two wines in one bottle. There was the exuberant fruit together with the brilliant acidity from the massive temperature swings in September. The bottle needed the time to come together and find itself."

Karsten Peter, winemaker

Whether viewed from the estate terrace or the steep **Kupfergrube** terraces itself, the depth and power of this 15-hectare vineyard is as undeniable to the eye as it is to the palate. Two years on the lees, three in the bottle. Deep, concentrated waves of passionfruit, spiced peach, and candied lemon linger into a sensual range of cloves, allspice, rose, and buttered breakfast toast. A thousand and one nights of smoky

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Lemon zest and grapefruit course across the tongue, jumping, and sparking as they snap from one side to the other. The moody and dare I say, cranky, edge — like that of being woken unexpectedly and early on a lazy Sunday — faded over the course of opening to be replaced with a more mature momentum, depth, and just a touch of attitude. Gorgeous, unyielding, comely but never coy. It took three days to really get to know each other, posturing first, before letting down our guard, and remembering how to laugh. The final sip was marked by fruit, spice, and a striking salinity. Whether from the wine or my tears realizing that the bottle was gone, we will never know.

Wine was received as a review sample.



Paula Redes Sidore

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