



Gut Hermannsberg: A century of Riesling

Anne Kriebel MW attends an “exceptional” tasting held to mark the 10th anniversary of Dr Christine Dinse’s and Jens Reidel’s ownership of an estate whose roots go back to the Prussian state wineries of the early 20th century

Preussische Tugenden, Prussian virtues, are rarely invoked in the early 21st century. We have all seen where this particular blend of stern authoritarianism, moralistic rectitude, and aggrandized militarism leads. Yet there is the other side to that Prussian coin, that of Protestant work ethic, rigor, and discipline. And as anyone making wine knows, these virtues still constitute well-tested, valid, and proven routes to quality. Whatever else the Prussians may have been up to, when they put their minds to making wine and improving German viticulture, they acted on one clear principle only: quality. Following the triple scourges of downy mildew, powdery mildew, and phylloxera, the

Prussians established viticultural state domaines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to serve as research stations and model estates of best practice.

One of these was the Preußische Weinbaudomäne Niederhausen-Thalböckelheim in the upper Nahe Valley. Work on the south-facing parcels, then still covered in shrub, began in 1902. The Prussians knew exactly what they were doing, blasting away hard melaphyre rock to create that exceptional portfolio of vineyards we know today. By 1905, 3.3ha (8 acres) of Riesling had been planted; by 1906 this had risen to 5.8ha (14 acres)—and the first scientific trials, on fertilization, also started in 1905. The first harvest was in

1907. In 1908, the two core sites were officially named: Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube and Niederhäuser Hermannsberg.

From state to private ownership

Just as the domaine started hitting its stride, the other face of that Prussian coin spelled misery and destruction with World War I. While works at the domaine continued, they were hampered by lack of labor and materials. Throughout the tumultuous 1920s, the ever-darkening 1930s, World War II, and the first few decades of the Bundesrepublik, or Federal Republic, the domaine remained in state hands. During the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, it saw a

renewed flowering, but by the late 1980s the estate had lost its luster. In 1998 the Federal State of Rheinland-Pfalz put the estate on the market. The first private owners, the Maurer family, invested heavily, set their sights on quality, and named the estate Gutsverwaltung Niederhausen-Schlossböckelheim. But in 2009, a lack of successors forced them into the difficult decision of selling.

A resurrected shrine to Riesling

It was then that the current owners—Dr Christine Dinse and Jens Reidel—took over, with even more stringent standards of production and the aim of making this estate, now called Gut Hermannsberg, once again a shrine to Riesling. They hired the young Pfalz winemaker Karsten Peter, who devoted, and still devotes, all his energy, ability, intuition, and aspiration to this historic Riesling jewel.

The tenth anniversary of the new ownership was the occasion for this exceptional tasting of the estate’s single-site Rieslings. The south-facing Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube rises from 400 to 800ft (120–250m) in a narrow part of the upper Nahe Valley. It was blasted out of the volcanic melaphyre rock and covered with debris of Carboniferous shale. Its terraces are at a gradient of up to 70 percent steepness. The tasting was led by Karsten Peter. “We’ve decided to taste from old to young,” he started out. “1907 was the first vintage. The wines then always had a touch of residual sugar, because cultured yeasts did not exist and spontaneous fermentation usually stopped at around 15–20g/l of sugar.” It must be noted, though, that they also had respectable acid levels. The first wine, the 1914, is poured and seems youthful right away, which prompts one taster to ask if the wines were ever recorked. “According to my knowledge, when the domaine was sold into private hands in 1997, the wines were recorked and resulfured. Before that, we do not know, but they have not been recorked since,” Peter advised. The handwritten old cellar-book was then taken out of its glass case and consulted wine by wine. Peter notes that even then, each parcel of vines was harvested and vinified separately.

Opposite: The tasted wines from the 1914 vintage on. Overleaf: The steep Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube.

Photography by Ralf Kaiser

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THE TASTING

1914 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling

The cellar-book notes that grapes were harvested at 80° Oechsle (Oe), which, Peter feels, was high for the year, as the highest must weight came to just 95° Oe, which Peter suspects to have been botrytis-infected, concluding that at 80° Oe the grapes were fully ripe, with 12.7g/l of acidity in the juice. Since the domaine only made Naturwein—unchaptalized wine—assuming residual sweetness of 15–20g/l, Peter assumed the ABV level of the 1914 vintage to be 10%. The cellar-book also notes that 6,227.4 liters of wine were harvested in that vintage. The following vintage, 1915, saw a much bigger harvest, of 72,481.2 liters.

Golden. Ethereal. A warm scent of crushed, dried chamomile with an edge of fir honey is followed by an almost icy breeze of wet stone. The ethereal headiness promises lightness and ease on the one hand, stony, absolute concentration on the other. With air, a note of honeycomb becomes apparent. The wine is dry, absolutely fresh, totally alive, has overtones of iron oxide, and retains its ethereal, herbal nature. The palate is rapier-like, pristine, exquisite, slender, long, and still so, so fresh. Not a wrinkle, just grace.

1923 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling

Peter reads from the cellar-book that the wine was harvested at 81° Oe with 11.2g/l of acidity in the must on November 8. The 1923 harvest had started on October 31 and finished on November 11.

Golden. Smoke, *larde*, a lemon-oil headiness with that chamomile lift, and iron-oxide and petrichor smell that is so visceral. The palate is slender, has killer acid, is lemony and still totally bracing. That smoky cured-meat edge returns on the finish. This is an essence of history. This is amazing. An elixir of unbending, enduring, otherworldly freshness.

1933 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling

1933 was an earlier vintage, Peter notes, with harvest starting on October 9 and finishing by November 11. He says that it must have been a warm year, because acid levels are below the 10g/l mark and must weights of that year ranged from 69 to 115° Oe, helped along by botrytis. Fully ripe, healthy grapes had around 80° Oe and ranged from 8.5–9g/l of acidity in the must. It was also a record harvest of 33,782 liters.

Pale golden. Hay flowers, fragrant and floral, crushed wild thyme, heady and glorious, before an earthy notion anchors this in stone. The palate is precise, sharp, unbelievably youthful. There is a lovely mellow backdrop to the palate, like a canvas against which the flavors are projected, illuminated by brilliant, lucid acidity. This mouthful is like balm, like a vivid mirage of lemon and herbs.

1949 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese

This was the first vintage of Herrmann Goedecke, who had taken over as domaine director in 1948.

1949 was an early, warm year. A Beerenauslese of 152° Oe was harvested, while 355 liters of TBA could be harvested in this spectacular year for botrytized wines. A total of 32,760 liters of wine was harvested at the domaine.

Pale gold. There is something of caramel on the nose. The palate is juicy, and it also has a bitter edge, that burned caramel again, but its flavor stands vis-à-vis a vivid, taut, bright acidity that still spells lemon, still shines with freshness. Luminous—but in a very different mold. Less ethereal, more concentrated, more solid. Very lasting and definitely dry tasting.

1958 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese

Peter reads the 1958 commentary in the cellar-book for the dates of November 15, 16, and 17: “Overcast, misty, cool-cold.” Since winters were bracing then, a specific mention of “cold” must hint at extremes, Peter suggests. Harvest did not finish until November 22. Must weights ranged around the 80° Oe mark, with acidity levels between 10–11g/l.

Deep straw-gold. A hint of smoke, of earth, but also of white pepper. The palate seems smooth, light, slender, but also less incisive. Somehow this, despite the silvery Riesling freshness, has something mellow, something less stony, more playful. This has something fluid, coming with an ease, a lively freshness, and a dryish finish.

1969 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Auslese (not recorked)

The cellar-book reveals that this Auslese was harvested at 90° Oe and had 11.5g/l of acidity in the must. 2,800 liters of this was harvested on four parcels. The cellar-book also allows a glimpse into what happened to the lesser wine; in 1969 the harvest started with *Bodentrauben*—that is, grapes that had fallen to the ground. They measured just 52° Oe (just 12.86° Brix or 6.88% potential ABV!) and 23g/l of acidity. And yet wine was made from these grapes, and these were the only ones to be chaptalized—or rather Gallicized—that is, they were enriched not with dry sugar but with a sugar solution that increased the sugar content and diluted the acid. These wines were then given to the estate workers as part of their pay.

Amber gold. Very heady, with an ethereal, volatile note. Fir honey. The palate has mellow sweetness, an edge of smoky, cured meat, then a candied lemon-peel freshness, bedded in beeswax, a lifted, joyful, citric exuberance. Swirling clouds of citrus. You imagine that this is what golden, translucent, little angels sip for breakfast. Exquisite balance. The lightness, the finesse, the waxy, graceful, yet firm substance. An elixir of youth, a testament to residual sweetness.

1979 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese

Peters cites the cellar-book: Harvest started on October 25, “in dry weather.” The must had 80° Oe and 13.2g/l acidity. The last day of harvest was November 23.

Golden. A slightly smoky, earthy note precedes, which has a hint of fresh, white field mushroom. The palate then sweeps these notions away with a fresh-faced, vivid sweetness that shimmers

with silvery, cool, gentle freshness. Like a summer breeze. The precision of that sweetness, its glorious dance on the tongue, happens on tiptoe and swirls in dizzying pirouettes.

1996 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Beerenauslese

This wine prompts Peter to state, “Kupfergrube always has the talent of delivering very clean botrytis. You always have clear-cut fruit with clean botrytis. Clarity and finesse—that is Kupfergrube.” Peter reckons that this was made from 90 percent botrytis-infected fruit, the rest from overripe grapes.

Deep amber, almost with a red tinge. White truffle, white nougat, candied redcurrant and golden sultana move with delirious intent on the nose. Botrytis is evident, but at a supremely precise level. Utter concentration, streamlined finesse, such depth, and such gentle sweetness. On the finish, an edge of bitter fir honey sets a fresh accent in the almost red-fruited, aromatic abundance. The finish is lip-smacking, refreshing, peppery, endless. Rarely have I tasted a wine with such length. A monument to Riesling.

2005 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Auslese

This was Karsten Peter’s first vintage in the Nahe, but at a different estate. He notes, “This vintage brought perfect musts. It was also my first encounter with the Kupfergrube site. It is a catastrophe to have to work there—it is so rocky, so stony, so steep. But this wine reminds me of 1969. It is very fine and expresses how fine Kupfergrube really is.

Lifted rhubarb-leaf and pineapple freshness on the nose. The palate also presents pineapple and oxalic acid. Wonderfully exuberant in its tropical fruit allure. A perfect dollop of precise sweetness, of tempered, acid-framed sugar bursting with aromatic but fresh, green intensity.

2009 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

“2009 was my first vintage at Gut Hermannsberg,” Peter notes. “A ripe year, the Riesling harvest started in early October. For me, it was a very difficult vintage, because I stood here and saw so many possibilities while trying to keep some sort of focus. In 2009, all of the wines were made in 100 percent stainless steel, because the barrels in the cellar had been spoiled.”

Pale straw. The nose is golden, the palate streamlined. There is real texture, beautifully balanced dryness. There is something serene and taut, with a lasting, lemon-pure freshness.

2010 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Peter comments, “The first really great Gut Hermannsberg vintage [since its renaming in 2009]. Harvest started on October 28 and finished on November 26. The press had already trashed and written this vintage off—but for us, it was gigantic. We harvested grapes between 90 and 95° Oe, with acidity between 9.5-10g/l—close to perfection. Unlike so many others, we did not have to deacidify. There was little botrytis, and there were only about 100 liters of Auslese,

because there was a lot of *millerandage*. But 2010 was also the initial spark of recognition that these wines need time. It was the first vintage we worked with *Halbstück* (600-liter barrels).”

Subtle citrus, wet stone, and purest, fresh lemon rind. The palate is taut, of killer precision. A cool breeze, a central, absolute freshness radiates from the core across an expanse of stoniness. This is austere, strict, forthright, slender, and of such astonishing purity, concentration, and endurance. This has not ceded an inch of its position. There is no concession. This is absolute: stone, Riesling, purity, acid, concentration. But utter balance prevails. A benchmark.

2011 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

“2011 was the exact opposite of the 2010 vintage,” Peter says. “In the spring, I saw what I had never seen before: spring frost. It was a very unusual year, the shoots were already 20-30cm [9-12in] long, and the frost just nipped the top shoots, not the lower shoots, due to radiation from the ground. I had never seen this before. During harvest we thus had to select intensely: depending on which shoots were frozen, we had a 14-day difference in ripeness in the same vineyard. The sorting tables paid for themselves.”

An initial whiff of verbena tisane and a hint of lemon-edged pineapple play on the nose. Its aspect is softer, more playful, but the same austere, stony, taut background remains at the core. Lovely stoniness helps.

2012 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Peter notes that “2012 was a ‘very classic’ vintage. It is super-fine, super-elegant, in all directions, but for me it lacks the *Ecken und Kanten* [edginess].”

This comes in with smooth serenity: gentle and self-assured. It projects something balanced; there is innate ease, inherent balance. Something salty beckons on the dry finish, like preserved Persian lemons. Slenderness prevails. Lovely.

2013 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Pale lemon. Still a yeasty edge on the nose, before white currant and lemon appear. The palate has an uncommon, tingling brightness, almost like the silvery peal of cymbals, echoing and tinkling away. The body is light, sinuous, playful, flirtatious, beckoning with acidity and that silvery allure.

2014 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Peter is once again compelled to explain: “You start seeing an evolution in style in 2014. The idea was to get tannins into the wines via skin contact. In 2015 we pedaled back a little, but what, apart from sulfur and acid, preserves these wines? Certainly tannins. That topic of tannin in white wines was frowned upon, but each year we work in the vineyard to get great grapes, so why should you need to take anything away? So, one thing after another, we started leaving off. In 2010 we started spontaneous ferments, which we had trialed in 2009 to see what the cellar-yeast population would do. We wanted to move toward

the winemaking methods of 100 years ago. Look out the window. This is not a tame, smoothed-over landscape. [We see the steep, jagged rockiness of the Kupfergrube.] The wine must be like that, too. Initially, there is always an edge; but in the end, elegance has the upper hand—this is what I want to express, what I want to make sing. This takes *äußerste Zurückhaltung*, extreme restraint, in winemaking. Pressing should leave me the best possible grape constituents. Once the wild yeasts take over, it is out of our hands. This happens in *Halbstück* and stainless steel. 2014 was the first vintage to spend two years on gross and fine lees, depending on the vessel.”

Still primary notes of fresh meadow herbs, still under a pleasantly promising cloud of reduction. The vintage’s slenderness is apparent and exquisite. Svelte, bright, taut, and utterly lemony. There is something weightless here, something that struggled but managed to bring forth a tender flower that charms with delicacy rather than impact or power.

2015 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

The nose is still shy; mere glimpses of lemon. The palate is concentrated but has a sylph-like, airy top note that propels lemon-rind purity. A very interesting, almost chalky, concentrated, textural backdrop aligned with a cool, cool freshness. Flavor-wise, purest lemon is still to the fore. This is taut, bright, vivid, luminous, and radiant.

2016 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächs

For Peter, 2016 is “the most classic Nahe vintage—on a silky thread and super-elegant. This valley gives you everything, from super-warm years, to extremely cool years, but ‘normal’ is almost the exception. The extreme is what sets the tone in this valley—and no matter what, Kupfergrube delivers.” Here Peter reveals his approach to tasting: “You don’t recognize the beauty of the younger vintages when you have not tasted mature vintages.”

There is a hint of pineapple and oxalic acid again, aligned to zesty grapefruit. The palate homes in on a slender, concentrated, high-soprano note of purest citric freshness. This is slender, vivid, bright, tight, silvery—and very young. Too young.

Conclusion

After the tasting, Jens Reidel commented on these wines—which ranged across a century of Riesling, from 1914 to 2016—“We look upon quality as our foundation; quality that we will pursue resolutely. We want to do what the vineyards deserve.” His characterization—that the story of this estate mirrors the fortunes of 20th-century German wine history—is true. Germany went through horrendous convulsions, and has changed immeasurably. World-class Riesling—the chief impulse for the creation of this and other domaines—was traduced in that same century, but is once again allowed to show its true nature. In his official *laudatio* to mark the tenth anniversary of Gut Hermannsberg, Prinz Michael zu Salm-Salm, honorary president of the VDP, encapsulated what the estate was all about: *Man hat aus der Natur die Kultur geschaffen*—“Out of nature, culture was fashioned.”

Photography by Nils Weiler

