



Three Grosse Lagen over ten vintages: The intrinsic truth of the vineyard

Anne Krebiehl MW reports on a special vertical tasting featuring a grand cru apiece from top estates Ökonomierat Rebholz, Wittmann, and A Christmann

Each year at the end of August, the genteel spa town of Wiesbaden welcomes journalists and wine merchants from around the globe for an event that has become a fixture for German wine lovers: the annual *Vörpremiere*, or prerelease tasting, of the latest Grosse Gewächse vintages, held by Germany's Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter, or VDP. These are the dry wines from classified single sites, produced to stringent standards. Naturally, this is an opportunity to grab a portion of this Riesling-loving audience, lure it away from the youthful exuberance of these new releases—often still either painfully shy or held back by adolescent awkwardness—and present the more settled, expressive, and revealing charms of maturing

wines. This is not a step taken lightly; more than 500 newly released GGs were on show at this year's *Vörpremiere*, and there were just three days to taste them. Taking people away from the main event leaves them much less time to get to grips with this vast offering. Nonetheless, about 30 people allowed themselves to be whisked off to Weingut Christmann in Gimmeldingen in the Pfalz for the prospect of tasting three verticals. Ten Riesling vintages each from three Grosse Lagen (grands crus), farmed biodynamically by three leading estates, were on show: the Birkweiler Kastanienbusch of Weingut Ökonomierat Rebholz, the Westhofener Morstein of Weingut Wittmann, and the Königsbacher Idig of Weingut A Christmann. This was

the third iteration of this tasting; the first ten-year verticals of the trio had been shown in 2009, the second in 2014. The next is to be expected in 2024.

Letting the wines speak

The only reason for these three sites to be presented together is the friendship between the three estates, one in southern Rheinhessen, two in the Pfalz, from the Mittelhaardt and the Südpfalz, respectively. All of them have farmed biodynamically for years. Since time was of the essence, the three winemakers lost few words. They welcomed their international guests with a glass of (exquisitely dry, long-aged Pinot Noir) Rebholz Sekt in the garden and then proceeded with a most business-like tasting.

Photography by Jon Wyand

They themselves did not comment on the individual wines. All ten vintages were poured, and we tasters could move at our own—hasty—pace. The winemakers, very wisely, allowed the wines to speak entirely for themselves. It was at the end that they spoke briefly, and then only to pay tribute to their families, all as deeply engaged as themselves, and their teams. This was a smart move; tasted in silence, without the disruption of changing glasses or re-pouring, without commentary, these expressions of a singular site revealed so much: the intrinsic truth of the vineyard, the handwriting of each estate, both constant and wavering, the trajectory of age—all through the prism of different vintages. For me, it was the Kastanienbusch that stood out; it was the most clear-cut, most precise, most enduring, and most stylistically effortless wine. Its personality fairly shimmered through the vintages, as the face of a mimic moves through moods: one year as a brisk, bright greeting from flashing eyes; the next a shy glance from a downcast gaze; another a warm, benevolent and generous smile. This was soil, site, weather, care, and devotion made manifest. It was the most moving flight. The Morstein showed a very different personality, its limestone coolness always evident, its evolution framed with increasing precision year by year. The Idig was the least steady, the most wavering, but its flashes of beauty were just as clear and soaring.

THE WINES

WEINGUT ÖKONOMIERAT REBHOLZ BIRKWEILER KASTANIENBUSCH RIESLING GROSSES GEWÄCHS 2008-18

(Here 2008 was supplemented for the missing 2013 vintage in which no Kastanienbusch GG was made)

The 3.4ha (8.4 acres) of parcels within the 29.26ha (72-acre) Kastanienbusch vineyard belonging to Rebholz are in the convex, south-facing core part of the site, enjoying full protection from westerly winds. There are steep parts as it rises from 525 to 1,050ft (160–320m), and most of the Rebholz parcels are in the upper reaches.

Opposite: Kastanienbusch, "whose personality fairly shimmered" through the ten vintages in the tasting.

The soil is what the Germans call *Rotliegendes*, a reddish, iron-rich, ancient Permian sandstone formation that came to the surface as a result of the Upper Rhine Rift. The vines are up to 40 years old. It is telling that harvest, even in hot 2018, was not started until October 1. In fact, warm 2017 is the only year when harvest began in late September; all previous years started in October,

2008 (from double magnum)

The nose, initially of beeswax and dusty maturity, comes alive with air and sprays vibrant, lifted citrus reminiscent of dried lemon zest, becoming gradually more lifted. The palate bears this out even more: a linear, taut shaft of citrus right through the heart of the wine. Bone-dry, and a poem of intense citrus freshness. Mature but not yet at its peak. Glorious and long lemon notes. Exquisite clarity and finesse.

2009 (from double magnum)

The nose opens with a touch of dried, golden sultana, edged with white currant and bright, lifted notes of dried lemon rind. The richness of Amalfi lemon zest is easily evoked. The nose also has an overtone of wet stone. The dry palate seems buffered: mellowed by extract, broader, cast in a more diffuse but intensely lemony light. Any of the dried-fruit notes from the nose disappear and dissolve in a citrusy, lemony freshness. The finish is almost tart, lasting like an elixir.

2010 (from double magnum)

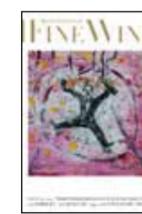
Golden blossom honey and fresh honeycomb fill the nose with both their sweetness and waxiness. There is something intensely concentrated and ethereal on the nose, combining that beeswax intensity with brightest, most luminous citrus. The palate is concentrated, arrow-like in its drive and precision. Ultra-light but ultra-deep, like an ocean that submerges all the senses in lifted lemon scent. This is slender, poised, but so, so concentrated, with rapiers Riesling acidity. For adults only.

2011 (from double magnum)

Emollience already beckons on the nose, aligned to lifted, ethereal notes of dried, crushed yarrow. The palate is fluid and balm-like in its rounded concentration. Yet there is no fat, just richness, gentleness, generosity, smoothness. A wine that offers solace with its DNA of warmth and mellowness. A dry, gentle finish, with the slightest, subtlest hint of pineapple. Perhaps this should be registered as a psychoactive, benign, and supremely comforting substance.

2012 (from double magnum)

Stone, lemon, and sunshine seem to rise from the glass. The palate delivers earth, extract, and purest lemon freshness on a slender, dry body. There is something serene at work, something airy that is nonetheless anchored in the fresh sandstone soil. A wonderful interplay that hovers deliciously between two spheres, two elements: soil and air. Very long.



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2014

Primary fruit still plays a role here as the ethereal freshness of crushed citrus foliage beguiles with its inherent headiness. Lemon zest does the rest. The palate offers further immersion in a sea of lemon-scented purity, freshness, pristineness. Slender, concentrated, graceful, shimmering in the most silvery, cooling notions of bright freshness. Utter slenderness and delirious depth seduce completely.

2015

This wine is more reticent on the nose, but offers a promise of something solid, lasting, substantial. The palate hits with utter concentration. There is a stony austerity, despite the ripeness, and that solidity promised on the nose feels like it needs another decade to unravel. Stone and lemon are the hallmarks, with a texture reminiscent of creamy, wet soil. Leave well alone. This is not ready.

2016

Primary fruit is still very evident: yellow plum, pitched somewhere between Mirabelle and greengage, has an edge of lemon balm while basking in Amalfi lemon ripeness. The lemony nature ebbs and flows in fragrant waves, beguiling citrus charm and lissom slenderness. Its playfulness belies the serious depth this notion springs from. The finish is of utter citric purity and zestiness.

2017

A shaft of citric lift hits the nose, but there is more to come. More air reveals the slightest hints of pineapple. The palate is plush with fruit, concentrated with citrus, vivid with scent. After the maturing, evolving wines, this has lots of baby fat, but the core already shows that straitlaced, lemon purity that was the hallmark of all these wines.

2018

Stone fruit and savoriness hit the nose first, speaking of ripeness in this youthful state. The palate almost seems raw, so fresh is the impression. This still seems boisterous—mild but with that stony citrus signature. In this context, this really is too young to assess.

WEINGUT WITTMANN WESTHOFENER MORSTEIN RIESLING GROSSES GEWÄCHS 2008-18

The Wittmanns have 5ha (12 acres) within the 24.04ha (59-acre) Morstein vineyard: 3ha (7.5 acres) of contiguous parcels at around 590–656ft (180–200m) altitude, and another half-hectare (1.2 acres) on higher parcels (up to 787ft [240m]). The remaining 1.5ha (3.7 acres) are of younger vines. Morstein, first mentioned in 1282, is of water-retaining clay and marl that sits atop the Tertiary limestone of the Wonnegau. It faces south and slopes gently from 787ft to 590ft at a gradient of up to 25 percent. The site really has come into its own with climate change, still ripening Riesling relatively

late; even in warm 2017 and hot 2018, the harvest did not start until late September, while in all the previous years the harvest was in October. Philipp Wittmann remarked that 2009 and 2011 were key years in learning to “deal with warm vintages. Today we work with a fundamentally different understanding to steer the wines toward freshness and saltiness,” he said.

2009 (from double magnum)

Lifted, citrus-edged sultana on the nose projects an image of both ripeness and precision. The palate only adds to this with a honeyed touch. Underneath, there is inherent coolness and concentration. But the dual sensory notions of this wine are smoothly linked, swaying between smooth, fluid warmth and poised, cool freshness.

2010 (from double magnum)

Like spilled lemon juice on dry chalk, this evokes something solid and austere, something authentic and earthy. There almost is a hint of lanolin alongside the chalk. The palate shows utter concentration that seems to be a sublimation of soil, citrus, and sunshine. This is all about earth, soil, depth, and eternity. An essence of Morstein, with a timeless, almost primal draw deep into a limestone underworld. Incredibly long.

2011 (from double magnum)

Dried white currant, dried sultana, dried lemon peel: ripeness is evident, and abundant sunshine is preserved in this golden, concentrated liquid. Then the full force of chalky limestone hits. There is lanolin and earth, smoothed along by lemon oil. Dry and elemental, this is soil made manifest in a ripe, luscious vintage. Yet the finish is a dry, austere, concentrated linearity of lemon freshness.

2012 (from double magnum)

A touch of smoke hovers on the intense notions of chalk and lemon. The palate seems to float on a buffered cloud of chalky citrus freshness. This is elastic, springy, billowing with reverberating ripeness bouncing off fine, slender freshness. There is something enlivening, encouraging, refreshing, and sky-bound about this. An inherent, lovely, gentle balance.

2013 (from double magnum)

Dried lemon rind and golden sultana have an edge of lanolin. An insistent, ethereal lift that carries purest lemon becomes ever more insistent. The palate is gorgeously tart, razor-sharp but also gilded with notions of ripe, juicy Mirabelle. There is something contradictory, something mercurial about this wine with its arresting notions of both ripeness and freshness. An exciting, arousing wine with utter, uncompromising concentration.

2014

An earthy, funky touch hovers on the nose before chalk and lemon take over. Lifted lemon

balm adds an ethereal element to the nose. The palate comes in with clear-cut, slender freshness. A concentration of chalky lemon. Slender, concentrated, vivid, electric, alive.

2015

Dried fruit richness is signaled immediately on the generous nose: both stone fruit and blossom honey whisper softly. The palate stops these murmurings with a clear-cut, utter freshness that is surprising in such a warm year. This is a watershed vintage. Utter concentration, inherent balance, thrilling freshness. Whoa.

2016

Charming savoriness of crushed wild thyme blends in with a tiny touch of reduction. This is more diffuse, less precise on the palate—but in the finish, that streamlined, lemony finesse comes through. This has yet to hit its stride and still seems uneven.

WEINGUT A CHRISTMANN KÖNIGSBACHER IDIG RIESLING GROSSES GEWÄCHS 2009-16

The Christmanns have 4ha (10 acres) of the tiny 6.53ha (16-acre) Idig vineyard—which can almost be regarded as a monopole. It is one of the unsung, or less sung, sites of the Mittelhaardt and used to be the home vineyard of the Reichsrat von Buhl estate. It is a gentle, south-facing site sloping ever so softly from 590ft down to 475ft (180-145m). Its water-retentive but well-draining *Terra fusca* soils are mixed with Triassic sandstone debris from the Haardt mountains and sit atop a solid Tertiary limestone reef. The site is capable of delivering exquisitely serene wines. Steffen Christmann notes a sea change for 2013, when freshness moved center-stage, an evolution that is furthered by his daughter Sophie Christmann, who is now on board. “Idig is a vineyard that can easily slip into opulence,” Steffen Christmann said. “But we work more and more to understand the vineyards in order to give it its cool precision, which we deem optimal for this limestone vineyard.”

2009 (from double magnum)

A hit of freshly turned, wet earth provides an olfactory backdrop to the notes of dried white currant. The palate already has a balm-like oiliness and a smooth, gentle fluidity that seems cushioned and mellow. The fine, bright line of freshness provides a counterbalance, but something in here seems old-school. The finish is dry but rich.

2010 (from double magnum)

The combined richness of dried sultana and white currant almost overwhelms the nose—but the palate dials this back dramatically. This is incredibly streamlined, with a remarkably cool acidity that seems to radiate its freshness with unusual intensity. The palate is concentrated, vivid, and fresh. It is on the

finish that these dried-fruit notions reappear, transformed as uncommon aromatic markers of freshness. Very long.

2011 (from double magnum)

Lifted lemon balm, smooth lemon peel, almost delirious headiness—such is the seductiveness of the nose. The palate is concentrated, and once again lanolin and chalk have that visceral impact of something elemental, something authentic. This has freshness, but the counterpoint of balm-like smoothness wins the day. The finish is chalk and lemon purity.

2012 (from double magnum)

Apple, herb, manure, and earth notions make for an unusual nose, pitched between freshness and evolution. The palate presents pristine freshness, cushioned—suspended almost—against dried-fruit richness. Yet a halo, an aura of cool, herbal freshness, seems to spread from an epicenter of limestone. This is ripeness and balance anchored in cool, cool soils.

2013 (from double magnum)

Crushed yarrow and dried lemon peel mark a step-change. Finesse is evident from the start. The same acidity is here, but it dances on tiptoe; the same body dances, but its movements are more fluid, elegant, bendy. This seems more pervasive, more insistent, more stealthy. It gets under your skin almost unnoticed. Elegance is the name of the game here; citrus notions have a haunting, lasting echo.

2014 (from double magnum)

Dried lemon rind is distinct on the nose, but there is also the sense of something clear-cut and straitlaced. The palate falls in with this rather strict notion of slender concentration, vivid freshness, driven force. There are edges of dried fruit, layers of citrus, but this is characterized by a clear-cut, taut, almost somber devotion to slender citrus. Its purity echoes long.

2015

Balm-like freshness spreads out from an epicenter of lemon-rind purity. Yet there is an undulating, mellowing touch that transforms the freshness into echoes of cool, compress-like serenity. Underneath slumber notions of dried fruit that add a gilded edge to an uncommon, inherent balance.

2016

Clarity, freshness, and lemony brightness speak clearly on the nose. Lifted purity pushes pleasure buttons with its insistent notions. The palate presents a balanced notion of slenderness, vividness, sinuous freshness that flirts with lemon and grapefruit. Zestiness and lightness rule the finish. Supreme.