



Natural Wine Welcomes You, Mosel Riesling

-Megan Krigbaum

Crystalline, laserlike, pure, precise—these are the words that have come to define Mosel riesling. Can a place so bound by technical winemaking carve out space for natural wine?

Two turns north of the famed Bernkasteler Doctor vineyard, Germany's winding Mosel River passes the village of Kröv, where Jan Matthias Klein runs his family's centuries-old Staffelter Hof winery. Here, he's been producing the sort of riesling that we expect from the Mosel: vivid, exacting and water-clear, in the manner that his father and grandfather did. But more recently, in the same cellar, he's embarked on a side project called Pandamonium (named for a short-lived '80s cartoon featuring three pandas with superpowers). The project currently encompasses an entirely distinct set of natural wines, including an unsulfured, unfiltered, just slightly hazy riesling called Papa Panda's Rising. This is, at least in part, what the Mosel's relatively new go at natural wine looks like.

The German region and its wines have historically been dictated by overbearing stylistic norms and their attendant lexicon. *Crystalline, laserlike, pure, precise*—these are the words that have come to embody what the world expects of the wines born from the Mosel's steep slate slopes. Riesling is hallowed here as the perfect transparent lens through which to understand this Brutalist geography and climate. But much of the grape's iconic character is a byproduct of postwar invention, including the kinds of technical winemaking practices—sulfite additions, prevention of malolactic conversion, sterile filtration, etc.—that stand directly opposite natural wine's less-is-more mentality.

"These things are really pretty recent; the ability to stylize or manufacture a wine is a postwar thing," says Stephen Bitterolf of importer Vom Boden. "And then the natural wine movement arrives... It's no longer turning the dials to create a perfect wine, it's manipulation."

The Mosel has always been a place that could do one grape in myriad ways, from sparkling to rich, and dry to mathematically sweet, but balanced by outstanding acidity. The entrance of the more natural mindset is expanding on this. "Low- to no-sulfur wines have such a different reflection of the land than traditional German winemaking," says Jarred Gild, beverage director at Stadt Garten in Detroit. "It's thrilling to get to see these sites and this grape expressed in a greater range of styles than any other great vineyards."

One end of the spectrum certainly lies in orange wines and pét-nats, but there are also producers who are attempting to hew to the Mosel style, only without the heroics in the cellar. For Klein, not sulfuring riesling was an easy and rational stop. “I think it’s easiest to do it with riesling,” he says. “It has the lowest pH level, so the least chances of something going wrong.” To further improve the stability, he’s bringing in oxygen at an early stage and leaving his wines on the lees for as long as possible; he even includes some residual lees in his final bottling.

Rita and Rudi Trossen (along with Thorsten Melsheimer), are the originators of this style of natural wine in the Mosel. They have been farming biodynamically, and making wine without sulfur or filtration, since the late 1970s. Rather than rushing their wines to ferment fully, the Trossens allow them to move slowly, resulting in wines that are golden in color, spritzy, but ripe; they offer an extraordinary look at what the Mosel could be if left to its own.

It’s not unexpected that much of this rise of natural wine is from producers who are deeply committed to mindful farming. Sybille Kuntz, who has been farming organically since 1984, has since 2015 been making an orange riesling, an idea that came by way of her vineyard manager. “We had only tasted bad orange wine,” she jokes, emphasizing grape quality and cleanliness as crucial for the style. What started with one barrel became three, and has tripled every year since. Perhaps surprisingly, other old-guard wineries in the Mosel have looked to orange as well, including Johannes Selbach at Selbach-Oster, who for the past seven years has made his OMG (“Oh Mein Gott” or “Orange Mighty Good”) as a means of exploring orange and natural wine for himself.

It’s impossible to talk about the Mosel’s push toward natural without mentioning Clemens Busch, who has been farming biodynamically since 2005. His tactic to avoid manipulation is to leave his wines on the lees for an extended period, years even, which gives stability, structure and aging potential without having to filter or add sulfur. His wines frequently see malolactic fermentation—often intentionally blocked in traditional Mosel riesling—giving them an idiosyncratic fullness. While Busch is often looked upon as a renegade for his methods, the resulting wines hew fairly closely to the regional expectations. (Other producers, including Vollenweider, Julian Haart and Weiser-Künstler, bear a similar mindset, though they use some degree of sulfur at bottling, depending on the vintage.)

Much of the experimentation from the likes of Busch has led to an influx of upstarts. “It’s cool to see new producers or outsiders coming in from outside the Mosel to look for abandoned or vineyard sites that aren’t the crus and buy up vines where they can be a little more experimental,” says Josh Perlman, beverage director at Giant in Chicago.

One such producer is Philip Lardot, who was born and raised in Amsterdam but worked as the No. 2 to Mosel iconoclast Ulli Stein. Having tasted wines from Jura’s Domaine Ganevat in the early 2000s, Stein decided to try his hand at making wines without sulfur, mostly as an intellectual experiment. This resulted in a wine called Ohne, which in turn became inspiration for Lardot’s approach when he set out on his own. Lardot leases old vineyards, from which he makes vivid, if slightly softer wines that have the same transparency that we’d expect from the Mosel, made with little to no sulfur.

He is joined by other upstarts, including Wolfram Stempel, an import from Bavaria, who is working organically in the Mittel Mosel in the largely unknown village of Maring. His tiny-production wines are nearly impossible to find, but he remains one to watch. As does Jakob Tennstedt, who produces single-vineyard rieslings without filtration and without added sulfur in the wooded wilds above the village of Traben-Trarbach.

This new energy and eagerness to challenge the Mosel's hidebound culture is reverberating throughout the region, and offering a new perspective on what it means for riesling to articulate this place. As Gild puts it, we've yet to fully understand the spectrum, from "the glossy magazine page to kraft paper."

Sybille Kuntz Orange Organic Riesling 2020

Boldly orange in color, this is one of few orange wines produced in any large-ish quantity in the Mosel—for now. Kuntz's goal here is to make sure that even though it's an orange wine, it still smells like riesling. She has more than accomplished this, with fresh apricot and other peak-of-summer stone fruits aligning with some oxidative notes of apple and earth.