

Weingut Sybille Kuntz

Lieser Niederberg-Helden, Mosel



Gosh! So chock-full of wild-flower (biodynamic) flavours. Really beautiful. Gorgeous already. Vital and unlike the Mosel Rieslings of old (more potent and drier) but such a well-balanced joy.

-Jancis Robinson, August 2021



The Kuntz family history in winemaking and cooperage goes back centuries in Lieser (*lee-sir*), one bend upriver from Bernkastel, in the heart of the Mosel Valley. As might be expected, Sybille grew up working in the vines, a travail she frankly resented as a kid. Even so, studying business administration at university, she operated a wine shop to help with expenses because keeping a hand in wine was second nature. Following her degree, she returned to the Mosel, having come full circle...to believe that *she* could make Riesling from the Mosel as well as any she had come

to know and sold in her store. Her taste had developed, and her roots went deeply into wine, so why not?

Sybille started with just over an acre of vines in 1984, a dreadful vintage. From the beginning, her wines were made in her preferred drier style. This had been the tradition in much of the Mosel Valley before the two world wars, when grapes with ripeness levels corresponding to QbA, Kabinett, or Spätlese fermented more or less dry, and the wine was left to age for a couple of years to ensure stability before shipping to market. Following the wars, the practice of making wines with residual sugar took hold and was cemented with the superlative, and very ripe, 1959 vintage. Even today, most of the Mosel's producers remain firmly in the sweeter camp.

Consequently, Sybille had a hard time of it despite her family's history in viticulture, being not only an outcast who made dry wines, but also doing so as a woman. To add insult to injury, she was a winemaking woman without an enology degree.

In 1990 she quit the use of herbicides and pesticides. In 1995, she married Markus Riedlin (an enologist!--from the Geisenheim University, no less), who had spent eight years managing a vineyard in upstate New York overlooking Lake Erie. He returned to Germany to become managing director of the large State Domain Friedrich-Wilhelm-Gymnasium in Trier. Soon thereafter at a tasting he met Sybille, who proved to be no shy retiring flower but a woman of formidable character who, on their first date, brought a bottle of her bone-dry Spätlese to drink. He found himself quitting the state domaine not

long after to join forces with her in Lieser. Subsequently, they stopped using synthetic fungicide in the vines, and earned organic certification in 2013. In 2016, she gained

biodynamic certification from Demeter, and in 2018 Markus gained Demeter certification for the small estate in Baden that he inherited from his father some years earlier. Wines from both estates are made at their winery in Lieser, and the two of them make every decision together. It's worth noting that even today, throughout the entire Mosel Valley, there are less than ten certified biodynamic estates.

Stylistically, Sybille settled firmly on making dry wines in 2011, going with one wine per category, and making the first three levels decidedly dry, with her *auslese feinherb* marking the turn into sweetness. This was logical because it follows the ripening cycle of the grape. With that vintage she also revamped her labels to indicate the level of ripeness by the color of the label, corresponding to the color of the grape at each stage. The exception to that rule is the Kabinett label of blue, which points to the Devonian slate of her vineyards and the minerality it imparts.

The estate's best vines are in the *grosse lage* (literally great site, or grand cru) of Niederberg-Helden, already recognized as such when Napoleon sent vineyard experts to rate site in the Mosel (then part of France) and gave it an A+ ranking. The vineyard grows on Lieser's steep south flank overlooking the river—locally known as Lieser's gold coast—at an incline of as much as 70%. At its base are remains of the largest of the 12 Roman wine presses uncovered so far in the Mosel Valley. The cru covers 62 acres, and the Sybille Kuntz estate farms nearly 19 of them, some of which are *sélection massale* vines from the 1920s. These old vines have roots going as deep as 45 feet in the blue Devonian slate soil.

From those 19 acres come all of her Spätlese and later ripening wines. Depending on the year, some grapes may go into the Kabinett, which tends to be sourced primarily from her vines in the Pauls Valley, contiguous with the Niederberg-Helden slope but turning corner at Lieser to go up an ancient, now dry, path of the Mosel. The QbA also comes from the Pauls Valley, as well as from vines in the communes of Bernkastel and Kues, but Sybille is sourcing more and more strictly from vines in Lieser for the QbA. The estate owns 45 acres of vines in total and over 90% of her grapes come from her own vines; the remainder come from long term rental contracts.

Roy,

So glad you encouraged me to try Sybille's wines! Her 2018 Spätlese leaped immediately to the top quartile of my personal Riesling list, and is the first Mosel wine in that space. I like this wine a lot and will buy more. I like its slate-y base, its solid core, its bracing cut, firm structure and sober presentation of fruit and aromatics. I like that it is not flashy, even if I also love a lot of flashy Rieslings from (mostly) limestone-based soils. Sybille's wines appeal in a different way. I also like some of her presentation choices. Like the use of a hyphen between Mosel and Riesling. At the end of the 19th Century, Riesling from the Mosel was usually written as one word – Moselwein – which helped distinguish it from Rheingau wines that were stylistically different. I also like her juxtaposition of "Spätlese" with "trocken" -- once upon a time in the Mosel, Auslese was trocken naturally, as were a few Spätlesen as well. I have promised myself that I will henceforth approach Sybille's wines with great respect, and look for new vintages with happy anticipation!

--John Haeger, September 2023, <http://oenosite.com/>