

# The Trockenwelle

## Variations on a theme of dry German riesling

By John Winthrop Haeger

Hans Oliver Spanier remembers standing in the Frauenberg vineyard in 1988. He was 17 years old, gazing across the hills on the south edge of Rheinhessen, contemplating the giant chunks of broken limestone that make the soil so hard to work. “One day I want a vineyard here,” he told himself. At the time, parts of the rocky vineyard had been abandoned; much of the rest was planted to Müller-Thurgau, Rheinhessen’s 20th-century workhorse grape. But Spanier imagined the vineyard revived and replanted to riesling, showcasing the exuberant minerality of its calcareous clay soil. The persistent wind might allow him to pick botrytis-free grapes as late as the end of October or early November.

And he imagined Frauenberg riesling made dry, in the style of an amazing silvaner from Heyl zu Herrnsheim he had tasted a few years earlier.

Forty years ago, virtually all German rieslings were sweet to some degree. By 1991, when Spanier took the reins at his family’s wine estate, the *Trockenwelle*, or Dry Wave, was already well underway, but still acutely controversial. The trend had begun at the end of the 1970s, driven by demand from a new generation of wine drinkers who were enamored of French and Italian wine and food cultures. By the time it peaked at the beginning of the new century the stylescape of German wine had been completely transformed, from one dominated by sweetish (*lieblich*) wines to mostly dry (*trocken*) styles: In 2003 the dry and semi-dry (*halbtrocken*) categories accounted for two-thirds of total riesling production in Rheinland-Pfalz, and 85 percent in the Rheingau, Germany’s most riesling-centric region.

It wasn’t exactly a smooth transition: In 1978 most German cellars had not made a dry riesling for more than a generation, and the country imported what dry wine it then consumed, so vintners had few models or mentors outside of the sweet wine traditionalists. What they had learned at Geisenheim was fairly straightforward: cover riesling’s acidity with enough unfermented sugar to make the wine taste balanced





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(*ausgleichen*). Without the sugar, there was no balance. Some misguided early trockens were wine lots that had been deacidified in efforts to make them palatable without residual sugar; others were from uncommonly warm sites that were naturally low in acid, if not particularly fresh. Some were also bitter owing to the way they were harvested and handled in the winery. In dry riesling, infelicities cannot be masked with sugar.

Getting good at dry riesling meant getting serious about site and more skillful in the vineyard. It's because of this that some vintners refer to the period of the Trockenwelle as "the German rediscovery of terroir"—a belated reaction against the German Wine Law of 1971, which had tied quality exclusively to must weight at harvest, reduced the number of recognized vineyard sites by 90 percent, and effectively obscured most important relationships between sites and wine quality.

For Spanier, getting serious about dry riesling meant first of all divesting virtually all the vineyard his family then owned—"all rubbish" he says candidly—in favor of parcels in sites once considered great that vintners of his father's generation had grown unwilling to farm. Then replanting the neglected parcels he was gradually able to acquire in sites like Frauenberg without using clones. Instead, he used custom-grafted vines, the budwood selected from old vines in great riesling vineyards ranging



The rocky, limestone-rich soils of the Frauenthal vineyard.

from the Mosel to the Wachau. He privileged riesling, but in some sites he also included blocks of pinot noir, pinot blanc and silvaner, varieties he respects as well. He was also an early convert to organic farming, and then to biodynamics in 2003. "I am not naturally an organic type," Spanier admits, confessing his love for Porsches, "but if you want to talk about sites and terroir, you really must be organic or you are talking simply about dead dirt."

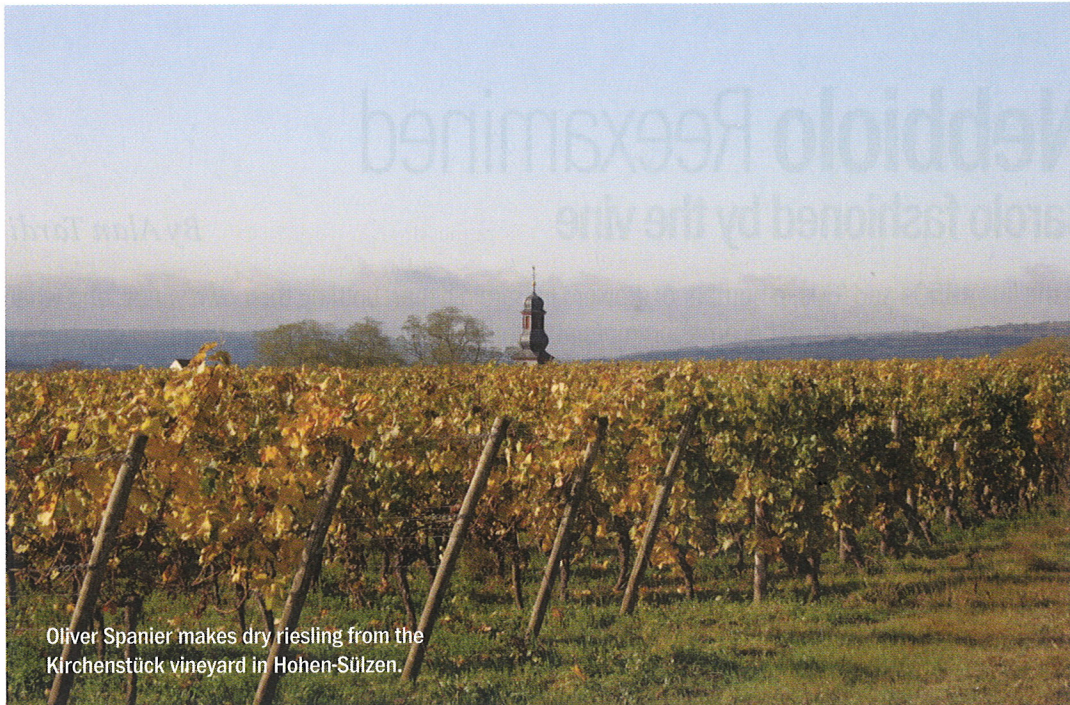
On the west bank of the Nahe River about 35 miles northwest of Hohen-Suelzen, another son took over his father's wine estate a few years later. Here the story belongs to Martin Tesch, who at first could not imagine himself as a winemaker and left home at the age of 15. He traveled, worked in a brewery and earned a doctorate in biochemistry. Then in 1996, when his father became concerned that the family's estate might not survive, Martin came home, on the condition that he be allowed full control to overhaul it completely.

Like many wineries of the time, especially in areas without a strong historical attachment to riesling, Weingut Tesch was growing everything from rieslaner and gewürztraminer to dornfelder, and was making a wide array of both red and white wines, the latter sweet in varying degrees. Convinced that "the time was ripe for dry riesling" and that riesling has a "backbone" that makes sugar unnecessary, Tesch grubbed up all varieties save for riesling and small amounts of pinot blanc and noir, and returned some vineyards on poorly exposed slopes to fallow ground. He then showered tender loving care on the 27.2 acres of riesling he had left, which were beautifully sited in six Einzellagen on south- and southeast-facing slopes, each with unique geology, some quite steep, carved by tiny tributaries of the Nahe.

From the start, he swore off sweet wines; all "new" Tesch rieslings were made dry, the basic estate riesling made driest of all, with barely two grams of residual sugar. Then he repackaged the wines with clean, color-coded labels and capsules inspired by the London Underground. If customers could not remember vineyard names like Karthäuser and Königsschild, Tesch reasoned, they could at least manage to distinguish burnt umber from the same package in bright blue.

The radical makeover was too much for nearly half of the estate's clientele, who fled, forcing him to scramble for new customers. Tesch doesn't regret the move, however, and points out that the experience led him to think outside the bounds of established wisdom in his quest for balanced dry wines. For





Oliver Spanier makes dry riesling from the Kirchenstück vineyard in Hohen-Sülzen.

instance, where conventional thinking tends to equate low yields with high quality, Tesch has found that there's a limit; very low yields in the vineyard lead to "excessively ripe fruit and fat wines." Tesch believes less intense concentration may allow for more terroir expression and he farms to pick his grapes for dry riesling below 12.5 degrees potential alcohol.

Like others, he struggled with an essential piece to the dry riesling puzzle: resetting the definition of balance so it wasn't merely a formula based on sugar and acid. "If you don't balance acid with sugar, Tesch explains, "you have to balance it with something else." Lees, he found, "were an excellent choice." That choice is now widespread. At Emrich-Schönleber (upstream on the Nahe) dry wines stay on the full fermentation lees until February after the vintage, at Müller-Catoir (at Haardt in the Pfalz) until March or April and until "one day before bottling in June" at BattenfeldSpanier (Weingut Spanier was renamed BattenfeldSpanier from 1993, recognizing the participation of Spanier's friend Heinrich Battenfeld in the remodeled estate).

For dry riesling, many vintners have also abandoned whole-cluster pressing, practiced by white winemakers around the world who aim for bright, clean and fruit-driven wines. For Tesch, "whole-cluster wines are too lean and too simple," he now destems and partially crushes between 30 and 70 percent of the fruit he picks.

Spanier insists on very long skin contact with destemmed berries before fermentation so that the grapes' natural acid is "balanced not with sugar but with mouthfeel." Twelve hours of contact is often

his baseline, but Spanier allowed more than two full days for some lots in 2010, seeking a foil for that year's exceptionally strong acids. Skin contact not only lends texture, it also increases the pH of juice, buffering acid.

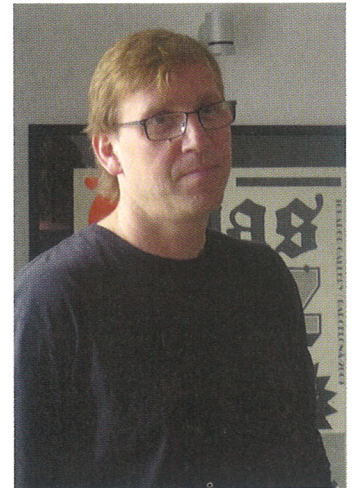
In some ways the Tesch and BattenfeldSpanier wines are similar: both aim for very low residual sugar and very modest alcohol. And every vineyard-designated wine at both estates is allowed to bear the distinctive fingerprint of the site from which it came.

But in other ways they define extremes of variation. The Tesch wines are radical, racy, unadorned and unromantic but nonetheless exciting and delicious. BattenfeldSpanier's are no less vibrant, but also subtle, nuanced, elegant, and pinpoint balanced. Their respective styles reflect the very different personalities and passions of their makers.

Tesch, science-trained, thinks of yeast as a "tool" and wine as a "drink." It is "not religion or sex," he explains cheerfully, sometimes encouraging his customers to think of wine as they would of shoes; that they fit is good enough.

Spanier, who never imagined a career other than winegrowing and was always at home in vineyards, is cerebral and reflective. He looks for wines that are "grown" but not "made," and that are simultaneously "unexaggerated" and "intuitive." "We are operating," he says, "a long way from commonly accepted definitions of wine quality."

Tesch and Spanier are evidence that the Trockenwelle is finally mature. Dry is no longer a style, but an idiom like expressionism in art; within the idiom there is room for many styles of dry wine, and many expressions of individual vineyard sites. ■



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—Martin Tesch

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