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METAMORPHOSIS FROM WONNEG AU TO WORLD CLASS

For German wine growers the Holy Grail is no longer ripeness but terroir. For Klaus-Peter Keller, the leading producer in the Rheinhessen, his marl and limestone soil is one reason for the rising quality of his wines. Another, as **Stephan Reinhardt** explains, is his technique of arresting ripeness, showing how completely traditional wisdom is being turned upside down

Producing wine is just a profession for many people – a business like any other. But for 31-year-old Klaus-Peter Keller at the family winery in Flörsheim-Dalsheim making wine is a *raison d'être*. He is also a father – he and his wife Julia have two sons, Max, 5, and Felix, 7, continuing an unbroken family tradition of producing only male descendants stretching back to 1789, when the winery was established. But Keller gives the impression that he couldn't be anything other than a winemaker. Actually, he is as much Apollo as Dionysus, guided by a reflective and sophisticated mind. 'If you want to produce fine wine, you have to know what fine

wine is about,' he insists. 'So the first thing you have to do is travel and drink the world's finest wines.' The second? 'Work on your vineyards meticulously.'

Metamorphosis

Although most Keller wines are Riesling (dry, off-dry and noble sweet), they also include Pinots, Silvaners, Rieslaners and Scheurebes. But despite this impressive range, the Keller name began to command recognition in Germany only in the late 1980s, when Klaus-Peter's father Klaus and his wife Hedwig established

its reputation as the most prized winery in Germany.² This achievement was all the more remarkable because Dalsheim is not a village on the famous Rote Hang (Red Slope), the most interesting part of the so-called Rheinfront (Rhine Front) farther north. It was in the steep Grosses Gewächs (grand cru) vineyards of villages like Nackenheim and Nierstein, rising up from the River Rhine, that some of the finest German Rieslings had been grown, whereas the Keller vineyards are in Hügelland (Hilly Land), a region that has a much less illustrious reputation. Its rich, clay/loam soils between Alzey and Worms had never produced wines that could rank among the finest of the Rheinhessen. Instead, Worms is better known as the city where Luther was declared a heretic, the home of mass-produced, sweet Liebfrauenmilch, and the place where Richard Wagner's cack-handed heroes in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* reduced themselves and the whole world to ruin.

Against this bleak background, it is perhaps understandable that the Keller wines, though highly respected, were always regarded as the result of meticulous work in the vineyards and winery (the family boasts a proud Swiss heritage), rather than the product of special terroir. Although the 1999 Keller wines were praised as phenomenally successful by the German press, the critical (some would say heretical) English émigré wine writer Stuart Pigott was less than impressed by the top wine, the Hubacker Riesling Spätlese trocken (sold today as Grosses Gewächs): 'I'm still searching for the soul of the Hubacker,' he lamented.³ For him, the wine attempted to imitate the best Smaragd Rieslings from Austria's Wachau, but as the climate and soils are completely different, the project was doomed to fail. 'Probably he was right,' admits Klaus-Peter today. 'But where did we come from? Hügelland! There was nothing but shit to taste around here, and nobody knew that fine wines could be grown. We did not know anything about our soils. Nobody knew anything about which style of wine would be best. Before we began to find that out, our wines were modelled on wines we liked.'

The Kellers started to explore their terroir a few years ago, boring some 60,000 holes in the soil, so that today they know the character of almost every square metre under vine. 'At last we know how to handle our parcels,' says Klaus-Peter.

The Keller wines have indeed become better and better since they began to demonstrate the Hügelland's potential in the late 1970s. But as often happens when we look back far enough, we find that what was greeted as a discovery is actually a rediscovery: in medieval times, cathedral chapters and monasteries had a particular preference for what are now the Grosses Gewächs sites of Dalsheim and Westhofen.

The experience and expertise Hedwig acquired when working in a nursery allowed the Kellers to plant better clones (the Riesling ones from the Mosel and Saar). They also dramatically reduced their yields, started crafting quality wines and won even greater respect. 'I just had to continue the work my parents had begun,' says Klaus-Peter, who has worked at the family winery since he was a child. Before studying viticulture and winemaking at Geisenheim, he had stints in South Africa (at Haut Cabrières) and in Burgundy (at Domaines Hubert Lignier and Armand Rousseau).⁴ Since the 2001 vintage he has been in charge of the entire production, while father Klaus still keeps the machinery running smoothly and works in the vineyards. Klaus-Peter's wife Julia also studied at Geisenheim and trained at Müller-Catoir (in the Pfalz) and Robert Weil (in the Rheingau).

The vineyards

Continually refining their understanding of their soils has allowed the Kellers to take their wines to new heights over the last three to four years. Even more carefully than previously Klaus-Peter has matched the varieties, clones, rootstocks and techniques to the several vineyard types – decomposed limestone and shell limestone, with layers of loess, loam, clay, marl, *terra fusca* and red latosol. He has concentrated more on classical varieties, such as Riesling (60 per cent), Silvaner, Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir), Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) (30 per cent combined), Rieslaner and Scheurebe (10 per cent).⁵ His father was famous for rarities such as Huxelrebe TBA. Klaus-Peter has also swapped sites with less ambitious colleagues and purchased several top parcels during the last few years.

Today the Keller family owns 16ha of vines in prime spots. Some 70 per cent are classified as Grosses Gewächs, though they account for only 20 per cent of the production. There are four Grosse Gewächse. Two of the Rieslings are in Westhofen – Morstein (south facing, but quite windy, with marl over limestone) and Kirchspiel (east-southeast facing, windless and quite warm, with marl and limestone). A third Riesling is in Dalsheim – Hubacker (a sheltered spot of 4ha, south-southeast facing, on a 25–30 per cent slope, with loess, loam, marl and limestone). The fourth wine Dalsheim Spätburgunder from the Grosses Gewächs Bürgel (a protected south-facing site with shell limestone and *terra fusca*, predominantly planted to this red variety).

Soil type and sun exposure are crucial variables for the Grosses Gewächs concept. Accordingly, only small, select parcels of the Morstein, Kirchspiel, Bürgel and Hubacker vineyards are classified as Grosses Gewächs – those dominated by the decomposed limestone (ideal for Riesling) or shell limestone (Pinot Noir). The parcels with deeper soils are declassified, since the wines show a different, less mineral, character. Keller's yield in the classified parcels averages around 30hl/ha, and the average age of the vines is 30–40 years old. 'The vines have to be at least 15 years old,' insists Klaus-Peter, 'as we want our crus to be complex, mineral wines that express their terroir as well as their vintage.'

The wines

Younger vines in the Grosses Gewächs Riesling parcels are used for the Riesling von der Fels (From the Rocks), a kind of second label. Old vines from other parcels are taken for the S-class wines – Riesling S, Silvaner S and so on. And then there are the straight varietal wines, though even these are of such high quality that they reflect Keller's striving for the essence of fine wine.

The *Geheimwaffe* (secret weapon) of the Keller family, however, is the extremely rich and powerful G-Max Riesling, which many experts believe to be the best (as well as the most expensive) dry German Riesling. It is made from the oldest vines in an unspecified Grosses Gewächs site – Keller will not reveal its source, fearing that the grapes could be stolen. And if that sounds fanciful, it is exactly the fate suffered by its predecessor, made from the oldest vines in the Hubacker vineyard. G-Max Riesling is almost a virtual wine – so little of it is made and it is so often out of stock.

More accessible are the off-dry and noble sweet wines. They are crafted solely from Riesling, Rieslaner and Scheurebe. The grapes come mostly from Grosses Gewächs sites, but from more south-facing, sheltered spots, where morning fog dissipates more slowly. These striking sweet wines – the Spätlesen, Auslesen, Beerenauslesen and Trockenbeerenauslesen (especially the

Goldkapsel version) – are renowned worldwide for their elegance and finesse. The Riesling Hubacker TBA Goldkapsel 2003, for example, was awarded the perfect 100-point score in the 2005 *Gault Millau Guide to German Wines*. But despite such endorsement, the Germans themselves do not drink them. Paranoid, they now tend to regard every wine that is not declared dry as dishwasher. 'It's a pity in one way, but not in another,' smiles Klaus-Peter, 'as otherwise we couldn't satisfy the US, UK and Japan.'

New problems, new solutions

Of course it has not been only the change of generation and the purchase of new sites that have caused the quality of the wines to soar in recent years. Tasting Hubacker Rieslings from the 1995 to 2004 vintages, you are surprised by the metamorphosis in style. It starts with the climatically challenging 2000 vintage ('We did our first experiments then,' says Klaus-Peter), becomes more obvious in the 2001 and is quite striking in the 2002 to 2004.⁶ Although Keller Rieslings have always been delicious, elegant and full of finesse, the more recent vintages from Hubacker, Westhofen, Mortsein and Kirchspiel are highly complex, intensely mineral, world-class wines, surpassing those of the 80s and 90s in their expressiveness, persistence and richness.⁷ The metamorphosis came when Klaus-Peter and Julia assumed responsibility for the estate in 2001, though they had been introducing new ideas for a year or two before then. The quantum leap was in the vineyard.

You had to rise early to meet Klaus-Peter in the hot and sunny days of June 2005. At seven o'clock he was already in his vineyards since 'it would be even harder working here at noon, when temperatures rise to between 35 and 40°C (95–104°F),' he explains, spreading bark mulch over the soil. There has not been any rainfall here for eight weeks. The loamy soil shows long crevices. Klaus-Peter takes some clods of earth from his neighbour's vineyard in his hands and tries to pulverise it – but the earth remains solid, unyielding. 'We like to stress our vines, but in a positive way,' he says. Just a few metres away, and with both hands, he digs through the bark mulch and breaks out a clammy, mouldable mass of claylike soil. 'We learnt a lot in 2003. And this vintage might be similar. Nowadays we benefit from our rich soils, as they retain water and the temperature rises only slowly.'⁸

Especially when looking at the 15 or so Apulian *trulli* built by migrant Italian workers in the early 20th century, the landscape seems so Mediterranean that you can easily forget where you are. In this hilly countryside, the slopes covered with cereals as well as vines, you feel like a speck on an ocean of gently rolling waves. The peaceful scenery spreads as far as the horizon, where the green vineyards and straw-coloured fields hit the azure sky, which has not changed its colour for weeks now. There are also citrus and fig trees, Mediterranean herbs like amaranth and plants like oleander, which 'were not here ten years ago,' Klaus-Peter notes. The north is definitely moving south – or the other way around.

Worms and its hinterland have always been dry and warm thanks to the Donnersberg mountain and the Rhine river, its average annual rainfall of 500mm being similar to that in Jerusalem. But global warming is accentuating these climatic features. On a hot summer's day in sheltered Westhofen Grosse Gewächse like Aulerde or Kirchspiel, you feel like a clay pot baking in an oven rather than a Riesling grape struggling towards ripeness at the northern limit of viticulture.

'There is absolutely no problem bringing grapes to full physiological ripeness here,' says Klaus-Peter. Quite the opposite, in fact. 'Sometimes, as in 2003, ripeness is achieved too quickly. Many wines from this extraordinary vintage were too heavy, too



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powerful, lacking the qualities we want – mineral complexity, *innere Dichte* and finesse'. The term *innere Dichte* refers to both the flavour and the structure of the wine – its natural inner intensity and persistence. For Klaus-Peter, this should be achieved without high alcohol levels, since he prefers dancing, elegant, fresh wines with an acid vibrancy.

So how does he confront these new challenges of constant heat and drought? 'We try to arrest and extend the ripening process until the end of November, so the vines can take up mineral trace elements from the soils. This both broadens and intensifies the flavours of the grapes and the wines.'

Whereas many producers resort to shaping their wines in the cellar, Klaus-Peter shapes his in the vineyards. For him terroir is a question of both nature and nurture. 'The essential foundation of fine wine has to be created in the vineyard. In addition to terroir, it is the meticulous care of the vines that guarantees perfect ripeness and totally healthy grapes,' he stresses. As a top winemaker, he observes nature very closely. 'The best thing you can do is anticipate the needs of your vines, come to grips with them and keep conditions under control.' Highly selective hand harvesting is also obligatory, and more important than merely restricting the yields.

For Klaus-Peter it is important to expose his vines to 'positive stress'. His best parcels have poor, stony soils with no more than a thin layer of humus (loess, loam, clay, marl), naturally restricting the vine's vegetative growth. The compact limestone beneath is

porous, and planting densities are high for the region at 5,000–8,500 vines/ha, forcing the roots down in search of the mineral trace elements that contribute complexity to the wines.⁹

Negative stress is prevented by bark mulch and humus mingled with the soil, and irrigation is used only in case of emergency. The former technique, together with the low-yielding clones, ensures small berries in loose bunches – a precondition for healthy, ripe grapes. The sunlight strikes every berry, while the wind reduces the risk of rot.

For good air circulation and light exposure, Klaus-Peter separates each shoot of the cane-pruned arch by arranging it upright. There are no shoots growing across each other. To build up the berry's resistance and improve the phytosanitarian situation, he and his six-man team start stripping two leaves per shoot as early as June. Any weak shoots are removed and double shoots thinned to one. Later, when he tops the growing shoot tips, he again removes two leaves per shoot, so at 80–100cm (31–39in) high his canopy is often lower than that of his neighbours. By retarding the ripening process in these ways he is able to avoid high sugar levels. For him a potential alcohol level of 13.2% around the middle of November is 'perfect'.

From Spätburgunder vines (initially with three bunches per shoot), Klaus-Peter strips the leaves in the grape zone on both sides. As soon as the berries have become as big as peas, the grape load is halved and the third grape bunch of the shoot is cut off. 'Compared to the crop that has been traditionally thinned, the berries are healthier and have higher acidity levels,' he explains.

Riesling vines are thinned in July, so that only one or two bunches per shoot remain (the smaller the berries, the better). The grape load is not halved and leaves are plucked only from the shadow side, because otherwise Riesling's purity and typicity would be reduced.

The results are striking. In 2004 the last Grosses Gewächs Riesling grapes, from the famous Hubacker vineyard, were picked on 26 November – 'healthy, small and golden, covered in freckles, with intense flavours and ripe acidity,' reports Klaus-Peter. This is extremely late for the production of dry Riesling. Even in a cooler region like the Saar, a top producer like Roman Niewodniczanski (at Van Volxem) normally picks the last Riesling grapes no later than mid-November. So in this case terroir can be seen to be as much an intellectual concept or viticultural technique as a natural condition.

Winemaking

At Keller, there is little that is unusual in the vinification – the most crucial steps have already been taken in the vineyard. Klaus-Peter does, however, macerate the white grapes – at a temperature of 14–15°C (57–59°F) for up to 40 hours, depending on the vintage – prior to pressing. But for this technique to work, perfectly healthy, rigorously selected grapes are essential.

The must runs free to large wooden vats (1,800–2,400 litres), where the unracked must, high in solids, starts fermenting spontaneously. 'We adopt a laissez-faire approach,' says Klaus-Peter, 'since we do not fear a fermentation temperature of about 24°C (75°F)'. Even on the rare occasions when he has decided that he had to inoculate, it was a wild yeast, either from the cellar or from the vineyards, that finally took hold. The basic range of wines is fermented at slightly cooler temperatures in stainless-steel tanks, because Keller wants to stress the character of the variety. His Grosse Gewächse lie on their lees until March and are bottled with only a light filtration. There is no *bâtonnage* for the Rieslings, as Klaus-Peter does not like too creamy a texture in these, and it is only the Pinots that receive this treatment.

At first Klaus-Peter's father was not convinced that it would be worth adopting the new, riskier techniques – keeping grapes on the vine longer, macerating the white as well as the red grapes, retaining musts high in solids, relying on wild yeasts, fermenting at warmer temperatures, using less stainless steel and more wood. But eventually he was persuaded that risk is often part of producing great wine and reassured that the risks were still being weighed. The line between *Genie und Wahnsinn* (genius and madness) may be thin, but Klaus-Peter is on the right side of it.

Rheinhessen renaissance

Keller's passion and success have influenced many of his fellow producers, especially those in the Rheinhessen. It may appear an ironic twist of fate that for the last three or four years the Rheinhessen in general, and the Wonnegau in particular, have been considered the most revolutionary German wine regions. Massive changes are taking place, mostly thanks to young winemakers deciding to produce high-quality wines based on classic varieties. The German horror show, in which Bacchus, Huxelrebe, Kerner, Müller-Thurgau and Regent were the prime villains, is ending. And now, close to where some of the worst German wines have recently been made, come some of the most impressive dry Rieslings and Silvaners ever produced.

Philipp Wittmann in Westhofen is one of the new stars (the 9-point score for his Morstein 2003 from one of the tasters in *The World of Fine Wine* 5 has caused consternation among critics in Germany, where the wine is rated up to 10 points higher). Dirk Würtz in Gau-Odernheim and Daniel Wagner from Wagner-Stempel in Sifersheim are other producers to watch.

Germany as a whole is undergoing a process whereby previously less well-known sites are emerging as better adapted to the new climatic conditions. But nowhere more so than the Rheinhessen. So if you have never heard of anything from Dalsheim, nor of world-class Pinot Noir and Riesling from Wonnegau, taste Keller's 2003 Bürgel Spätburgunder and 2004 Hubacker Riesling – then update your map of the world's finest red and white wines. ■

Notes

1. Klaus-Peter's definition of great wine is 'a wine that you have to quaff since you can't wait to open the second magnum'.
2. Keller is the most highly prized winery in Germany according to the 2005 *Gault Millau Guide to German Wines* by Armin Diel and Joel Payne, where many wines are recognised as Best of Vintage. In a table showing the top-ranked wines in the 1994–2005 editions, Keller has a total of 63 – 53 of them in the 2000–05 editions. This is roughly one and a half times the number of the second and third producers – Robert Weil in the Rheingau with 45 and Egon Müller in the Saar with 40. Keller was also named Best German Winery of the Decade by the German wine review *Alles über Wein* two years ago, and in 2002 the Kellers received the VinItaly Award in Verona, previous winners of which have included Château Margaux, Vega Sicilia and Penfolds.
3. Stuart Pigott, *Meine Weinheimat – Die grossen Weissweine Deutschlands* (Hallwag, Munich, Bern; 2001), p.144.
4. Haut Cabrières owner Achim von Arnim is Klaus-Peter Keller's uncle (Achim's wife Hildegard being the sister of Klaus-Peter's late mother Hedwig).
5. It was at the Landesanstalt für Rebenzüchtung (State Wine School) in Alzey that Georg Scheu cultivated the Scheurebe variety by crossing Riesling and Silvaner in 1916. Today

Scheurebe is widespread in the Rheinhessen. If you ever get bored by Sauvignon Blanc, quaff a Scheurebe from Keller and taste the difference.

6. The wine that had been identified as Spätlese trocken was marketed as Hubacker Max in 2000 and as Hubacker Riesling from 2001. The term Grosses Gewächs cannot legally appear on the label, as the classification is that of the VDP Die Prädikatsweingüter, an association of 200 leading producers, rather than one recognised by the state.
7. Klaus-Peter says that many older clients were shocked by the new style of the wines, since they show much less primary fruit, and more alcohol and power, than his father's wines.
8. Even so, the drought and heat in 2003 were such that several young vines were destroyed. Lighter, less retentive soils were not able to replenish reserves in 2004 and are again suffering this year.
9. The newer the planting, the higher the density; all newer plantations have a density of at least 7,500 vines/ha.

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TASTING NOTES

2004 Silvaner S trocken

A medium-bodied, stylish and delicate wine that shows a gently buttery bouquet, with notes of flowers, sage and white pepper as well as ripe apples and pears. Very elegant and savoury taste, subtle minerality, sappy richness and a citrus, delicate finish. Drink now until 2010. **16.5**

2004 Kirchspiel Riesling Grosses Gewächs

The best dry Kirchspiel Riesling to date shows a slightly smoky, nutty, herbal bouquet, with healthy, ripe, yellow-fruit aromas in the background. Powerful and full-bodied, with a very complex taste and lots of finesse. A tight structure and good concentration, cut by acidity and a mineral freshness. Very distinguished. Till 2015–20. **18**

2004 Morstein Riesling Grosses Gewächs

A superb, mineral-structured Riesling that has nothing in common with the cool-fermented, fruity, fragrant Rieslings widely produced in Germany today. This is really shocking stuff. A smoky, tangy bouquet with hints of white pepper, red berries, thyme and bacon. Could almost be great white Burgundy. Powerful and compact in structure, this is an extremely complex Riesling, a giant in an embryonic state, crying out for a magnum in which to grow. Finest juice, noblest wine, very persistent. Till 2020. **19**

2002 Morstein Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Intriguing, mineral and vibrant, this is a very complex and expressive Riesling with a distinctive character and personality. Herbal notes as well as white pepper and nuts. Although concentrated and complex, it shows a fascinating finesse and vitality that should not diminish over the next 10 to 15 years. **18.5**

2004 Hubacker Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Keller's hallmark Riesling exudes golden autumn splendour. Aristocratic and mineral on the nose, with hints of white pepper and herbs. Overwhelmingly seductive on the palate – beautifully balanced, elegant and pure, as mineral as molten limestones. Expressive and powerful. Challenging finesse and persistence, with many years over which to improve and soften. **19**

2002 Hubacker Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Assertive, mineral bouquet, with hints of white pepper, mint, walnut and tobacco. This powerfully structured, taut wine is characterised by its cool minerality, purity and finesse, and is suggestive of rocks metamorphosed into wine. This excellent Riesling epitomises Hubacker's ability to combine richness and transparency. **19**

2004 Kirchspiel Riesling Spätlese (Goldkapsel)

This exhilarating Spätlese from Westhofen shows typical Kirchspiel characteristics: spicy, tangy aromas intermingled with scents of wet stone and ripe yellow fruits. Cool rather than exotic. The acidity and bracing minerality are beautifully balanced by rich, ripe and succulent fruit. Very complex, intense, focused and persistent. An appetising, sappy wine, to drink now and over the next 10–15 years. **17.5**

2004 Dalsheimer Hubacker Riesling Auslese *** (Goldkapsel) (8% ABV)

One of the most beautiful Auslesen of recent years. Light yellow with greenish tints. Highly noble botrytis, almost tangible, but also a cool freshness and minerality that seems almost forbidding initially. Discreet fruit, smoke (olibanum) and herbs. Fascinating in its crystalline clarity and freshness, but with a honeyed piquancy to match the transparency. Being very focused and precise, it starts to lure you. Rich and opulent to taste, this is a mouthful of finest Riesling. Extravagant and luxurious, like the best 2003 Auslesen, but cooler, fresher and more complex than most. An absorbing, enveloping texture of ripe yellow fruits and pineapple countered by a fine acidity and mineral complexity. The essence of golden Riesling, this nectar is beautifully balanced and elegant, as well as extremely persistent. Till 2025 and beyond. **19.5**

2002 Dalsheimer Hubacker Riesling Auslese *** (7.5% ABV)

Straw yellow with discreet greenish highlights. Noble botrytis aromas – lush, super-ripe, yellow fruits, such as dried apricots and peaches, combined with notes of honey, nut, nougat, caramel, white pepper and mushrooms. Full-bodied, intense, rich and succulent, with a seductive, velvety texture as well as vibrant acidity. Voluptuous sweetness. Intense, but marginally less focused and persistent than the 2004. Till 2020. **18.5**