



# The importance of being Ernst

Riesling king Ernst Loosen has worked wonders for the image, and sales, of German wine since taking over family estate Weingut Dr Loosen in the Mosel two decades ago. **STEPHEN BROOK** meets Decanter's 2005 Man of the Year

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**Just outside the** touristy village of Bernkastel, 110km from Frankfurt, a sombre manor house flanks the swift-flowing Mosel. This is St Johannishof, the family home and cellars of the Loosen family. Visitors are ushered into the library, with its large bay window overlooking the river. It's a room that hasn't changed in decades, with shelves laden with books collected by Ernst Loosen's grandfather, some comfortable chairs strewn around a cloth-covered dining table, an untidy desk, and a dresser on which ancient cuttings and magazines – anything with a reference to the Loosen wines – are scattered.

When Loosen comes bounding in, he looks at home here, a country gentleman with a slightly raffish, but also studious, air. His energy is immediately apparent when he starts to talk, a flow of passionate memoir, anecdote and ideas. He hasn't changed much since I first met him, in this very room, almost 20 years ago. A touch of grey on the mop of hair, perhaps, but he still wears the professorial specs, the weathered waistcoats and colourful ties. Nor has he mellowed. Loosen is a man of strong convictions, and he isn't afraid to express his ideas, which mostly run counter to those of the German wine establishment.

## THE EARLY DAYS

Although born into a winemaking family, it was never Loosen's intention to devote his life to wine production. He was sent to Geisenheim, Germany's top wine college, in 1977, but admits he was far from an ideal student.

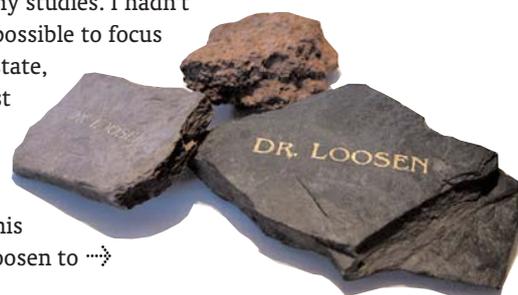
'I had a wonderful time at Geisenheim,' he recalls with some glee. 'I and my flatmates never got up before noon. Then we'd discuss what to have for dinner and other important subjects. I don't think I ever went to a single lecture. It had been my father's idea that I should go there, and he didn't like to be challenged, so I went along with it. But it wasn't my intention to be a winemaker. So after leaving Geisenheim in 1981 I went to the University of Mainz to study archaeology. My father was still keen for me to come and help run the wine estate, but I didn't want to.'

'Then, in 1986, my father fell very ill with hepatitis, and it was clear he wasn't well enough to keep running the property. My mother summoned a family meeting, with myself and my three brothers and two sisters.

She was thinking of selling up. My grandfather had been a director of the Zeitz company, and my father was a lawyer and politician. For both of them, the wine estate was essentially a sideline. I didn't want to see the property sold, so I agreed to take it over, though this really meant abandoning my studies. I hadn't completed my thesis, but I soon found it impossible to focus on my thesis one day a week, and on the estate, where there was much to be done, for the rest of the week. So I decided to give the estate my full attention. 1987 was my first harvest.'

It was to prove a troublesome introduction. He took on Bernhard Schug as his winemaker, and he remains at Weingut Dr Loosen to

Below: three different types of slate found in Dr Loosen's vineyards: red volcanic rock (centre), red slate (left) and grey slate





## ERNST LOOSEN: THE CAREER

**Born:** September 1957  
**Studied at** Geisenheim Wine College, 1977-81  
**Studied archaeology at** Mainz University, 1981-87  
**Took over family estate:** 1986  
**Leased JL Wolf estate:** Pfalz in 1996  
**Created joint venture with:** Chateau Ste Michelle in Washington State, USA 1999

### DR LOOSEN ESTATE

**Size:** 15ha  
**Winemakers:** Ernst Loosen and Bernhard Schug  
**Grape varieties:** 100% Riesling  
**Age of vines:** 60-100 years (ungrafted)  
**Principal sites:**  
■ Erdener Prälät  
■ Erdener Treppchen  
■ Urziger Würzgarten  
■ Wehlener Sonnenuhr  
■ Bernkasteler Lay  
■ Graacher Himmelreich  
**Production:** 10,000 cases

**Above:** the town of Bernkastel-Kues on the banks of the Mosel.  
**Below:** Loosen with his whippet, Timo



this day. The rest of the staff were unhappy with the new team. Loosen knew that although the estate had always produced good wines, quality could and should be improved. The vineyards were located in some of the Mosel's most renowned sites, and almost all the vines were old and ungrafted. He couldn't ask for more in terms of raw material to work with. But yields needed to be reduced, and he also required more scrupulous selection during the harvesting. The workers didn't like the idea, as it involved more work, and they walked out.

'I had two options,' he recalls. 'I could either apologise to my staff, in which case they might return but I would never be able to control them. Or I could call their bluff and let them go. If I fired them I would have to pay a lot of compensation which we couldn't afford. But they had walked out, so I didn't have to pay them anything. Bernie Schug and I decided to make a fresh start on our own.'

It wasn't long before their efforts paid off. Stuart Pigott, a British journalist with an unflagging enthusiasm for German wines, was impressed by the improvements and took him under his wing, inviting him to London, where he attended tastings and got to know many leading wine writers.

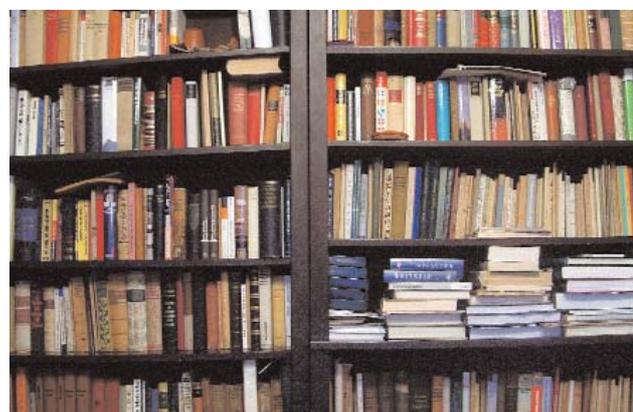
'At that time the world of great Bordeaux and Burgundy was a closed book to me. Then all of a sudden my new friends in London were happy to expose me to the wonderful wines in their cellars. It was a revelation, but it also made me realise that here in the Mosel we had a fabulous heritage in terms of great vineyards and an ancient wine culture, which it was essential to preserve.'

Pigott didn't drive, and in the late 1980s Loosen was easily persuaded to chauffeur him around on his visits to the great estates of

Burgundy, Alsace and California. 'That way I got to know many other winemakers, such as Olivier Humbrecht in Alsace. It was Olivier who first explained techniques such as whole-cluster pressing, which no one was doing in the Mosel at that time.'

### BUILDING A REPUTATION

Ernst Loosen was swift to make his reputation, but the business affairs of the estate took longer to sort out. The dollar exchange rate



### 'Ernst Loosen is a man of strong

altered for the worse soon after he took over, and the important American market for his wines dried up overnight. The domestic market had been neglected, so he had to expand it, starting from scratch. At that time dry wines were in vogue in Germany, but Loosen knew his vineyards weren't ideally suited to their production. 'We started making about 10% dry wines, and they sold well in Germany, but we could never produce enough.'

It would be 1993 before Loosen could be confident of selling his entire production in

# Decanter Man of the Year 2005

## DECANTER HALL OF FAME

2004	Brian Croser	Adelaide Hills
2003	Jean-Michel Cazes	Bordeaux
2002	Miguel Torres	Penedès
2001	Jean-Claude Rouzaud	Champagne
2000	Paul Draper	California
1999	Jancis Robinson MW	London
1998	Angelo Gaja	Piedmont
1997	Len Evans, OBE AO	Australia
1996	Georg Riedel	Austria
1995	Hugh Johnson	London
1994	May-Eliane de Lencquesaing	Bordeaux
1993	Michael Broadbent	London
1992	André Tchelistcheff	California
1991	José Ignacio Domecq	Jerez
1990	Prof Emile Peynaud	Bordeaux
1989	Robert Mondavi	California
1988	Max Schubert	Australia
1987	Alexis Lichine	Bordeaux
1986	Marchese Piero Antinori	Florence
1985	Laura and Corinne Mentzelopoulos	Bordeaux
1984	Serge Hochar	Lebanon

tastings. At the beginning it seemed a heavy investment for little return, though there were side benefits like participating in Britain's unique wine culture. In the late 1980s, when my importers organised tastings, it would be me and three old ladies in the room. Today we sell out and have to turn people away. It's very gratifying, but it's taken 20 years to achieve.'

## BROAD HORIZONS

Travel and exposure to international markets made him anxious to spread his wings. It was not unusual for German winemakers to take on external projects – Bernhard Breuer in the Rheingau and Bernd Philippi in the Pfalz were involved in consultancies and joint ventures in South Africa, Portugal, and elsewhere – but in the Mosel the attitude was more parochial.

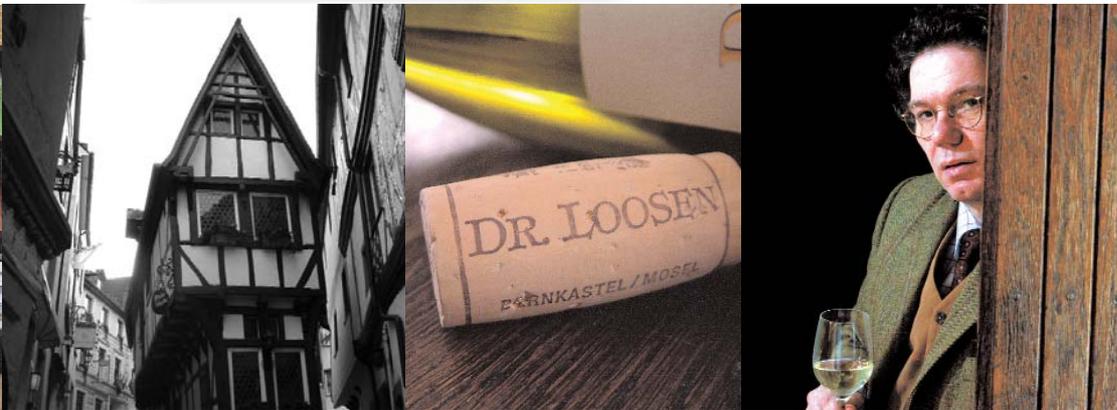
In 1996, the opportunity to join a consortium that was leasing an important but run-down estate in the Pfalz proved irresistible. The JL Wolf estate had prime vineyards in top villages such as Forst and Wachenheim.

'This gave me the opportunity to try my hand at dry Rieslings, which are marginal at Dr Loosen, and to work with other varieties such as Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, and Pinot Noir.' This new venture has been a considerable success. The Wolf wines have great purity and



Above: a glass of Loosen's Riesling.

Below, from left: Loosen's impressive book collection, started by his grandfather; a timbered Spitzhäuschen (pointed house) in Bernkastel's Altstadt (old town)



## convictions and he isn't afraid to express his ideas'

any vintage. He was working ferociously hard to promote and sell his wines, and that hasn't changed. He now sells the Dr Loosen wines in 43 different countries. 'My colleagues here in the Mosel think I am mad to go to all that trouble to sell wine in Iceland or Israel, as I do. But I like my wines to have an international presence, and I find that importers in such countries develop great loyalty if they like the wine, especially if the grower takes the trouble to visit and do some

clarity, and the prices have been kept fairly reasonable despite the strong demand for top dry Rieslings from the Pfalz.

Soon after, he was tipped off by an American-based friend that Chateau Ste Michelle in Washington state was unhappy with its Riesling range. Some 200,000 cases were sold each year, but sales were declining. Loosen approached the directors and in 1999 was hired as a consultant. Five years later sales of Chateau Ste



## COLLEAGUES PAY TRIBUTE

### Michael Broadbent

'Ernie is stimulating to know and his wines are delicious to drink. Decanter has at last recognised "the importance of being Ernst".'

### Hugh Johnson

'Ernie Loosen brought the Mosel and its Rieslings into the 21st century with a bang. He thinks worldwide, as few German vintners have done.'

### Jancis Robinson MW

[www.jancisrobinson.com](http://www.jancisrobinson.com)  
'Ernie Loosen has singlehandedly put German wine on the world stage and in the 21st century. He has done it by a mixture of irreverence, tireless travelling and an uncompromising quest for quality.'

# Decanter Man of the Year 2005

## COLLEAGUES PAY TRIBUTE

**Prinz Michael zu Salm-Salm,  
President, VdP**

'Ernie Loosen is a great ambassador for German wine in the whole world. The quality of his wines is tremendous and he has been great at getting his message across. I wish there were more characters like him in the German wine world.'

**Jeffrey Grosset,  
Grosset Wines**

'Ernie Loosen is an excellent communicator with a great sense of humour. He is a visionary from a country where the importance of place - that great wines come from great sites - was once understood, but for generations somehow overlooked or forgotten.'

**Bob Betz MW,  
Betz Family Winery**

'Diligent, ambitious and visionary, few vintners are as dedicated to quality inside and outside their own wine regions as Ernst. With the skill of a winemaker and the spirit of a zealot, he reaches for the limits of excellence around the globe. He's an inspiration in the vineyard and a worthy companion in the beer hall.'

Michelle's Riesling had trebled. As well as improving the basic ranges, Loosen created a superior brand called Eroica with more minerality and less residual sugar than the standard Rieslings. His boldest move was to propose making a TBA-style wine if conditions permitted it.

'The team in Washington was very doubtful. Chateau Ste Michelle is a very big company, and had no idea how to market a few hundred half-bottles of expensive sweet wine. They also worried about the additional labour costs involved in harvesting a TBA berry by berry. I told them it didn't matter if they never sold a single bottle. The cost was roughly equivalent to an ad in *Wine Spectator*, and the publicity value would be tremendous. Eventually I persuaded them, and the 1999 TBA achieved a 97 score in the *Spectator*. We topped this in 2000 with a 98 score, their highest ever rating for an American wine.'

## FIGUREHEAD

Loosen remains a restless and controversial figure. He rarely misses an opportunity to rail against the absurdities of German wine laws, which have allowed large producers and coops to drag down the overall quality of German wine, ruining its reputation and undermining the numerous estates that produce consistently great wine. He is impatient with the rivalries and bickering that preoccupy some sectors of the German wine industry, and has little time for the 'all things to all people' approach of the German Wine Institute.

He is no pillar of the establishment. On the contrary, he is something of a gadfly, and not uniformly popular within German wine circles. Yet he is no rebel. His

wines remain as resolutely traditional as those from his great neighbours JJ Prüm, Willi Schaefer, or Wilhelm Haag. He loves to show visitors his vineyards, and one of the most joyous moments I have spent in the Mosel was high up in the celebrated Urziger Würzgarten as Loosen opened and poured a bottle of his own glorious Würzgarten in the perilously steep heart of the vineyard.

His pride and joy is the tiny Erdener Prälat, 1.44 hectares of heat-trapped vineyards on a curve of the river. He is not the sole owner, but has the largest parcel. The Prälat produces the most exotic, luxurious Rieslings on the Mosel, and these are always the last of his vines to be picked. Loosen's Prälat auslesen are among the great wines of Germany. Hard on their heels are his eisweins from the Bernkasteler Lay, and the rich but racy Rieslings from his other sites.

His wines are among the most outstanding in Germany, but that is not why Ernst Loosen is a treasured figure in the European wine scene, and the 2005 Decanter Man of the Year. He has incessantly sung the praises not only of his own wines but of Mosel Riesling as a whole. He has battled against those who would exploit its renown by producing mediocre wines. No one would dispute that there are other great winemakers in the Mosel, but no one else has mounted such a tireless campaign on their behalf worldwide. And in his spare time he has improved the quality of Riesling outside his home region. If a Riesling renaissance is truly under way, Ernst Loosen can take as much credit as anyone. **D**

*Stephen Brook is a contributing editor to Decanter and author of The Wines of Germany (£20, Mitchell Beazley).*

