



JUST A TOUCH

A little sweetness promises balance
for some of Germany's iconic wines.

Story by BETSY ANDREWS



Vineyard, wine, and grapes
at Weingut Markus Molitor.

“So, friend, this is terroir!” Daniel Kiowski, export director for Germany’s Weingut Markus Molitor, has driven me—careening up a steep, dirt road and around a tractor, narrowly missing a drop off the edge—to a vineyard sloping at a precipitous 60 degrees down to a bend in the river below. This is Ürziger Würzgarten—the “Spice Garden”—one of the Mosel Valley’s most storied plots. “There’s a specific microclimate here,” he says, “and very poor soil.”

One would be hard-pressed to call it soil; it’s as rocky as a quarry. I climb from the car and crunch along the top of the vineyard. Iron-rich slabs of red slate slip from under my feet, clanking metalically. I ask who works this vertiginous plot. “Tough guys,” Kiowski says. More than 60 different owners hold small parcels of Ürziger Würzgarten. Harvest requires Sisyphean labor. “You carry a box on your back and work upward. Then you have to carry it all the way back down to the river.”

Accidents are not uncommon on the Mosel’s most precipitous vineyards. Kiowski tells me that a worker died here last year, and I feel for the Polish and Romanian laborers who pick the grapes. They’d be better off on harvesters across the river. There, densely planted vinerows stretch across flat valley floor. “On this side the vineyard takes 2,000 working hours per year, all by hand. Over there, they use machines.”

But it’s Jack-and-Jill terrain like Ürziger Würzgarten’s that yields the Mosel’s most gorgeous wines, including my favorites: wines made with residual sugar, ranging from off-dry kabinetts on up through late-harvest spätlese and select-harvest auslese to overripe beerenauslese and near-raisined trockenbeerenauslese. Before climate change heated things up, only vineyards like Ürziger Würzgarten could reach the ripeness needed for the best sweet wines. The slate beneath my feet helps explain why. “There is the impact of temperature on the rocks,” notes Kiowski. On the south-facing hill, the stones radiate the sun’s heat, helping the grapes on the individually staked, 100-year-old Riesling vines to ripen. But it’s more than just sugar that makes wines from a vineyard like this so good. The wines’ hallmark is their balance. The soil imparts minerality, and the wind up here, along with the cool nights, refreshes the grapes. The wines walk a tightrope between opulence and laser-like acidity.

The phenolic ripeness that yields so much poise takes time, and as the growing season wears on, there’s a lot that can happen to grapes while they hang. Some might be infected with what wine professionals call noble rot: the fungus *Botrytis*, which intensifies flavors, layering in apricot, spice, and honey notes. The picking gets as concentrated as the wines; workers select fruit down to the individual berry. “In the cellar, Markus makes the wine like they did 100 years ago: long yeast contact, filtered just one time, and no other intervention,” Kiowski tells me. “You can only do that with perfect, hand-selected grapes.”

Later at the winery, with Molitor himself—an eighth-generation producer who, over four decades, has built his family’s business into the Mosel’s largest privately owned winery—I sample many dry wines. It is not until we get

to the ones with the most residual sugar that I taste the beauty of the vineyard I visited. Generous yet with an earthy, bittersweet edge, which comes, says Molitor, from the iron in the red slate, his Ürziger Würzgarten Kabinett 2020 tastes of orange and almonds. As it ages, it will mellow, gaining new layers of flavor. Natural preservatives, both sugar and acid help these white wines grow more elegant with age. Molitor’s Zeltinger Schlossberg Auslese 2022, an off-dry Riesling from another lauded vineyard in the middle of the Mosel, is all flowers and lychees. Golden and viscous, the same wine from the 2001 vintage smacks deliciously of crushed pears.

This is why I have come to this classic wine region. The last time I was in Germany, in 2016, I focused on dry Rieslings, which have proliferated in recent decades as climate change has made it possible to ripen grapes to the point where they can be fully fermented and reach alcohol levels over 12 percent. After a few days of tasting in the Rheingau, Rheinhessen, and Pfalz regions, my mouth ached; those bone-dry wines were too acidic for me. I longed for the lushness of a late-harvest wine from the Mosel Valley, where the Riesling’s acidity, I have always found, goes down so much more enjoyably with a counterbalancing dose of residual sugar. Apparently, in the U.S., I am in the minority. “People fear sweet rieslings,” wrote *The New York Times*’ Eric Asimov in 2022, though he said he didn’t know why.

Sommelier Paul Grieco thinks he gets it. Most restaurants only offer one Riesling by the glass, slotting it in as their off-dry option. “So we are reinforcing the notion that Riesling is always sweet,” he says. But sweet Riesling is an acquired taste. Diners are looking for food-friendly wines, and Rieslings with residual sugar have gotten pigeonholed as only appropriate to drink with certain types of Asian foods, where their sweetness offsets the spice.

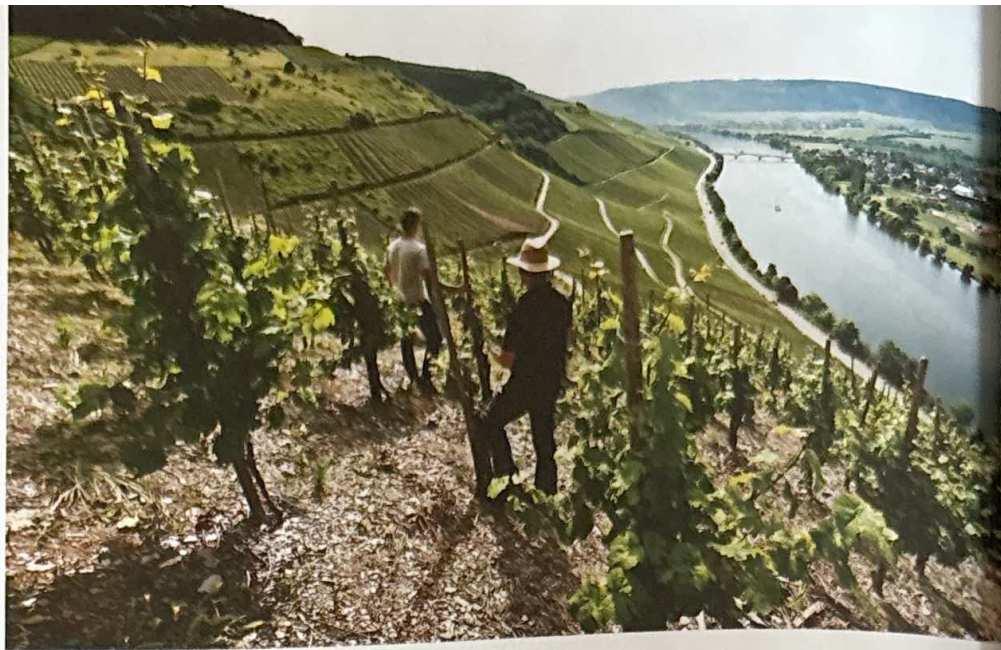
Certainly, these wines work well in that vein. At the pan-Asian restaurant Dian in the town of Bernkastel-Kues, which spans the Middle Mosel, I enjoy a Fritz Haag Riesling Feinherb 2023. Light, floral, and slightly sweet, the easy-drinking wine goes well with Thai red curry. But that’s not all that these Rieslings can do, and it’s a sommelier’s job to dispel the misperception.

At Terroir, his Manhattan wine bar, Grieco offers 20 to 30 Rieslings by the glass, “to play over the total panoply of styles and help people find their place of comfort, matching the dish and the wine in front of them”: a late-harvest spätlese with oysters “because that’s how we ate oysters 120 years ago”; a very ripe auslese with a cheese course, “and, holy crap, your brain explodes from the glory of it on your palate.”



Markus Molitor (below)
and the steep slopes of
his vineyards (this photo).





Clockwise from top left: Lara Haag, who runs Weingut Schloss Lieser with her brother, Niklas; Christopher Loewen and his father Karl-Josef, in one of their vineyards; Schloss Lieser's Niederberg Helden vineyard; Sofia Thanisch from Weingut Wwe Dr H Thanisch; wine from Schloss Lieser; the harvest at Markus Molitor.



"To consumers, 'off-dry' can be a dirty word, but these wines can hover at 100 g RS [grams of residual sugar] and still be elegant," says GuildSomm's Jonathan Eichholz, MS. "They are zippy and bright and crisp, and the sugar evens that out. Instead of saying 'sweet,' we should call them 'well-balanced.'" Off-dry kabinet and spätlese pair with fresh crudo, he argues, and they can "cut through the fat and add a kaleidoscope of fruit" to savory, weighty dishes.

I'll say. The following day, I'm sitting on the bank of the Mosel River at Weingut Wwe Dr H Thanisch, Erben of a name—enjoying an off-dry Riesling Kabinett Feinherb 2022 alongside a rich, thick bowl of squash soup dolloped with sour cream and dotted with green onions. Sofia Thanisch and her daughter Christina are the fourth and fifth generation of women to run the winery, since the widowed Katharina Thanisch took over in 1895. The Feinherb is one of their entry-level wines, blended from several vineyards. Yet, it offers all the dimensions that complement the soup: salinity, herbal savoriness, and, of course, sweet fruit notes, with a luxe texture from plenty of time fermenting on the lees.

A few steps up in quality, their Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Kabinett 2023, from the lauded vineyard that towers over the town, starts off heady with peaches and finishes in lemon-lime acidity. At just 9 percent ABV, it offers an awful lot of fruit character. That's a bonus of these sweeter wines: As the yeast hasn't fully fermented all the sugar in them, they're lower in alcohol. They're also, in general, easy on the wallet, particularly considering the labor that goes into making them. "In a world of unattainable wine prices, they are staying in price point, while being compelling, tasty, and insanely age worthy," as Eichholz says. This kabinet retails in the U.S. for around \$35.

A bit pricier, around \$70, Weingut Wwe Dr H Thanisch's spicy, effusive Bernkasteler Doctor Riesling Spätlese 2023 comes from another grand-cru vineyard with a "special microclimate," says Sofia Thanisch. Because the Mosel meanders, vineyard aspects vary widely. The Doctor vineyard, she says, "is perfectly facing the sun." The location is so coveted that the best barrels of every vintage are sold at the annual VDP auction in Trier.

Doctor is a sunny slope in a historically chilly clime, where sweet wines were once harder to achieve. In recent years, global warming has helped grapes ripen on vineyards like Doctor. That's a reason to buy these wines now. As climate change accelerates, some producers are looking to move plantings to higher altitudes or onto slopes facing north or east, fearing that the Mosel's storied slopes may become too hot to retain the balance of its classic styles. The final wine Thanisch pours me is a Riesling Eiswein 2004. "Recently, we are less and less likely to make Eiswein," she says, "because, by German law, the grapes have to be frozen on the vine." Prunes, caramel, and savory miso notes; a chewy, dense texture; and, still, a finishing zing—sipping this wine, I can't help but mourn the endangerment of the style.

Then there's what's happening to precipitation. "There were two floods already here this year," Thanisch tells me. "One was in May, which is very unusual."

Averaging over 30 inches of rain a year, the Mosel Valley is a relatively wet region. But viticulturalists have learned to work with the conditions. Further upriver in the town of Leiwen, Christopher Loewen, the newest generation of winemaker at Weingut Carl Loewen, scrambles down the dizzying, quartzite slope of a vineyard called Ritsch to show me how he grooms the Riesling vines that go into the auslese he makes from this site. "The Mosel River reflects sunlight, and the Eiffel Forest above us cools the air down. The difference in temperature makes the Mosel pull cold wind into the valley. That refreshes the grapes and keeps disease pressure down," he says. "We are leaf pulling, so the wind can blow into the vines when there is rain, and we need to dry the grapes."

Loewen wants his wines to have a light touch, and when the weather is cooperating, the results are spot on. The 2017 auslese I taste with him is spicy, minty, just a touch tropical, and shockingly refreshing. Under climate change, however, says Dr. Manfred Stoll, head of the Department of General and Organic Viticulture at Germany's Hochschule Geisenheim University, "the entire dynamic of rainfall is altered. If you have warmer air, it can take up more humidity. If you have more humidity with stronger uprising conditions, that creates larger clouds and stronger rainfall."

At Weingut Schloss Lieser, Lara Haag, who runs the estate with her father Thomas and her brother Niklas, describes the fallout of all that moisture. "In 2023, there was too much water in August, so we had to select extremely carefully," she tells me. "We probably lost 15 percent of the harvest." Sampling Schloss Lieser Niederberg Helden Riesling Feinherb 2023, a wine from 110-year-old vines that evokes papaya with a squeeze of lemon, followed by a juicy, peach-blossomy spätlese from the same vineyard and vintage, I'm saddened to think of any of the precious fruit for these wines being lost.

But as weather patterns become unpredictable, it is more difficult for growers to prepare for disease risk, as well as its opposites: heat stress and drought. At his Geisenheim vineyard, Stoll has been experimenting with plantings of fungus-resistant grapes, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon among others, with an eye toward both possibilities in the climate-altered future.

That's a future with less of the Mosel's lovely Rieslings in it. Haag uncorks a Schloss Lieser Riesling Auslese Goldkapsel, vinified with Botrytized grapes. It smells like fresh apricots and tastes, of all things, like macerated strawberries. I resolve then and there to drink as many wines like this as I can, while I can.

Back home in New York, I call Grieco for his take. "When it comes to really late harvest wines in the Mosel, you are picking grape by grape to find an individual grape affected by noble rot. It's insane. It's a 30- to 60-degree slope, there's no soil, just slate covering the hillside, and then you take those grapes back, and the amount of labor and focus and dedication it takes for that nectar you will produce? There is clarity in your actions. No one phones that in," he says. "The sweetness in these wines is given to us by Mother Nature, and it very well may be the yummiest thing to ever cross your lips. You're really going to say no to that?" ■