



SUMMER LEAVES 2016



Romana Echensperger MW

• genius loci •

Siefersheim

When speaking of special wines one soon comes to mention the term „terroir“. In a broader sense, this term is connected with a concept that describes the influence of climate, soil and man on the taste of a wine. In the case of some wines one can even go a step further, and speak of the spiritual influence of the „**genius loci**“.

The meaning of this pair of Latin terms additionally includes aspects such as the special character and ambience of a specific location. The spirit of the founders, the traces of the past as well as the current activities and forming by man are so instrumental in defining a place in such a special way that a completely individual aura and spiritual atmosphere is created.



Step into the picturesque courtyard of the Wagner-Stempel winery and you will immediately appreciate this thought. Framed by historic buildings and the open cross-vaulted architecture you will see a solitary chestnut tree at the centre of the courtyard. The entire architecture, the generous design and this central tree that stands out from all else will tell you: this is a place where generous, spiritual people have always lived and worked.

The landscape in the northern parts of Rheinhessen, directly on the border with the northern Pfalz and Nahe regions speaks the same generous language. Gently rolling hills with open valleys, covered with vineyards and rocky bars, all framed by a heather landscape, profuse wild hedgerows, small pockets of woods and colourful flowery orchards. These offer the eye of the observer an attractive change from the typical industrialised farming landscapes, in which one feels compelled to utilise every available square metre.

It is here in Siefersheim, characterised by these impressions, and a little off the beaten track of the major wine circus, that Daniel Wagner can be found working on his family wine estate.

Climatic conditions - special and otherwise

I arrived here in early June 2016 to taste the current 2015 vintage, and to do my research for this report. Unusually for Siefersheim, but in line with the rest of Germany at this time, the area was experiencing grey skies and continuous rain. The usual situation in central Europe is that the Gulf Stream blows in bad weather from the west, but that this is blocked here in Rheinhessen by the Hunsrück and Donnersberg mountain ranges.

But what can be considered to be normal in the summer of 2016? Storms and heavy rainfall this year are a real challenge for any organic winegrower, including Daniel. He converted the estate to **organic farming methods**, beginning in 2005. Not in order to market this aspect aggressively, but acting on a feeling. No doubt also because it is relatively easy to cultivate vines in Rheinhessen without the necessity of employing systemic chemical sprays. This applies particularly to the generally rather dry and windswept area around Siefersheim, where in many vintages the lack of humidity ensures there is little threat of fungal disease, and where even the steep vineyard slopes are not too steep, allowing one to carry out cultivation work in the vineyards using tractors and other pruning and mowing equipment.



The climate in Siefersheim is characterised not only by the wind, and by the location in the lee of the wind. This is also the highest and coolest region in Rheinhessen – the so-called „**Switzerland of Rheinhessen**“. Compared to the Wonnegau district, the vegetation here often only develops two weeks later. The result of this is that the final ripening period of the grapes falls into a cooler period, thus ensuring more acidity and fresh fruit are retained.

Generally speaking, the dry, cool climate sees less botrytis developing, and this is particularly true in a vintage such as 2015. The dried grapes were hand-selected for the production of the Auslese wines from the Höllberg and Heerkretz sites. The result is that the brilliant sweet wines demonstrate tremendously precise fruity aromas. „In 2015 we had lots of time to pursue a luxury programme entailing several harvesting passes and selections in the vineyards. We harvested practically no Riesling before the 10th of October, and then we were able to pick golden-yellow, healthy grapes with a must weight of 90 - 95° Oechsle and more than 10 grams of acid – that was great,“ enthuses Daniel. The intensity and clarity of aromas in the 2015 wines clearly demonstrates this full physiological ripeness.

Soil – the backbone of the wines

The backbone of the wines is particularly characterized by the rhyolith – also known as **quartz porphyry**. This is an acidic, magmatic type of igneous rock from the Perm age, and was formed around 290 million years ago by tectonic fault lines in the Nahe-Saar Basin. Siefersheim itself is located on the extreme south-easterly border of this fault line, and is basically surrounded and framed by the hills of this magmatic mass.

What the region of Rheinhessen, which formerly was dominated by a dry, hot climate and characterized by a reddish landscape of desert and grasslands, experienced at that time was not true volcanic activity. Rather, liquid magma made its way to the surface from the core of the earth, emerging at only a few individual sites. In fact, it did not quite reach the surface of the earth, but got stuck close to the surface. The slow process of cooling off and the following process of erosion and decomposition shaped the rhyolitic formations visible today.

In the Tertiary period, when Rheinhessen was covered by an ocean, the hills of quartz porphyry surrounding Siefersheim stuck up out of the water as islands, and one can find traces of the former coastal landscape at many locations of the communal area. Limestone deposits, sharks' teeth and oysters can still be found today in many of the vineyard parcels. It is a **surprising unique feature** that one can retrace the geological history of this region for more than 250 million years in the volcanic hills surrounding Siefersheim.



The flora and fauna found here is characterised – and that also applies to the effect on the style of the wines – by the acidic reaction and the lack of nutrients of the porphyric soil. In the eye of the observer, this can be seen in the frequent alternation of vineyards with lilac-coloured areas of heath. A **unique landscape in Rheinhessen**, well-known and very popular with many hikers.

The geology imparts the wines with an extreme mineral character that can almost be described as salty. The wines have a particularly straightforward structure, the racy acidity spans an enormous arc, and in their youth they are often still very closed and subtle. These are essentially light-bodied wines with prominent acidity, wines that need time to show their multi-faceted structure, and which can impress one with their freshness, complexity and elegance even after many years of maturation.

Höllberg and Heerkretz

If you want to understand the character of the wine, you should take a walking tour through the vineyards. Even if it is raining cats and dogs. My first station is the **Höllberg**, the warmest vineyard site, and also the driest, as a result of the thin layer of topsoil. Even following the continuous rains of June 2016 one can walk through the vineyards comfortably, practically without getting your feet wet. The estate owns 6 hectares of this site, including around 3 hectares in the central core area of the site. Indeed, if one is so inclined one can describe the Höllberg as the „seminal site“ of the wine estate. „We call it our house site“, explains Daniel Wagner, „my grandfather already cultivated significant areas in this site.“



The other famous site is the **Heerkretz** and this is Daniel's very own contribution. It is here that he was able to acquire a particularly large number of parcels in the past. These were often areas covered in bushes, that has lain fallow, their cultivation simply abandoned sometime in the past. In total he owns almost 10 hectares of this vineyard site. However, currently only around 6 hectares are cultivated. It can be said that the risk of re-establishing this steep sloping site in the 1990's, and the considerable effort involved in this, has definitely been worth it. The slightly more reddish soil of the Heerkretz is a little stronger than on the Höllberg, interspersed with more clay. The soil has a greater ability to retain water, which is a great advantage in dry vintages such as 2015. In addition, the valley of the Appelbach stream runs along the bottom of the slope, opening the Heerkretz site for the cool air coming in from the Donnersberg hill. At night, in particular, the site is subject to the cold air streaming in from the south-west, and in cooler vintages the Riesling here only becomes fully ripe in November. That, in fact, is the main difference between the two sites: the microclimate. The Höllberg site lies in the lee of and behind the Golden Horn plateau, which has an altitude of just on 300 metres. The Heerkretz is the southern break of this plateau, completely open to the wind.



The Heerkretz site is one of the last vineyard sites in this most westerly location, thus in a sense providing the **volcanic bridgehead between Rheinhessen and the Nahe** region. From there you can see the windmills of the northern Pfalz as well as the woods surrounding the city of Bad Kreuznach.

With a total of 9 hectares of Riesling vines planted in the Höllberg and Heerkretz sites, distributed among more than 30 different parcels and sub-sections, Daniel Wagner has by now amassed a selection of outstanding vineyard sites which enable him to implement something which is of inestimable value particularly in difficult vintages: **Selection**. Depending on the development, ripeness and degree of acidity, picking in autumn can take place selectively parcel by parcel, and handled appropriately and separately in the cellar, in order to be combined again when making up the final blends of the wines at their different levels of quality. It is this factor that has in recent years become a real guarantee of quality from the entry-level wines right up to the Grand Crus.

Tasting notes of the 2015 vintage.

...a change in style...

If you have followed the wines produced by Daniel Wagner since his beginnings, you will probably have noticed the change in style that has taken place. Perhaps it was simply the style of the times in the early 2000's that made one mistake concentration for quality. „I used to be convinced that our cool sites and lean porphyric soils demanded overripe grapes in order to produce full-bodied, powerful wines“, explains Daniel on this point.

He has distanced himself completely from this idea ever since the 2009 vintage. Since then, his main focus has been on totally healthy grape material at a moderate degree of ripeness, in order to better showcase this very specific **minerality, reminiscent of sea salt, of the Siefersheim sites**. The wines have become more crisp, drier and more vibrant, and the wine market has become more intelligent, and now more readily appreciates such wines with character. The crystal-clear style of the 2015 vintage is particularly suited for this style of wine.

The cellar is entirely Daniel's responsibility. Here one will find mainly 600 litre barrels (Halbstückfass), in part, this is also where the Grand Crus are matured. „I am a fan of smaller barrels, as I have so many vineyard parcels, and they allow me to mature the batches separately. For example, whether they have been naturally fermented or whether cultivated yeasty were used, whether there is a lot of trub, or only a little“, he explains. This method gives him a great deal of flexibility later on when he is blending the wines, and in the end provides the wines with even **more complexity and aromatic differentiation**.

The Riesling musts, in particular, with their high acidity and the lean porphyric soils show a particularly low pH value. This makes the use of wild yeasty for fermentation more predictable. The reason is that many of the wild yeasty and bacteria that can lead to the formation of off-notes cannot survive in this medium. The result can be seen in particularly clean, clear, pure wines, even where they have been fermented completely using wild yeasty. In addition, the wines can benefit from a long lees contact.

Review of the 2015 vintage

In his autumn report last year Daniel Wagner already made some careful forecasts with regards to the results of the last autumn season:

„We believe these will be very vibrant, powerful wines with strong aromatic expression that will reflect the perfect late harvest, with a piquant acidity that will make the full body appear elegant and light-footed. A style that can come very close to our own ideal idea of Siefersheim wines.“

Adding on to this I can simply confirm that the 2015 vintage was indeed very good to Daniel. All of the wines display an intense and precise fruit that expresses the perfect physiological ripeness of the grapes. In addition, there is the sheer perfect ratio of ripeness and acidity, giving the talented cellar master the basic ingredients to produce great wines. Similarly typical of the vintage is the extremely high but also very ripe and therefore juicy acidity, which introduces tremendous vibrancy and life into these wines, a feature that really makes the typical salty minerality of the Siefersheim wines **shine brilliantly**. Power paired with lightness and freshness, a firm structure coupled with moderate alcohol – what more could one ask for?



VDP.GUTSWEIN (estate wines)

The basic estate wines (Gutswein) already show this universal character of the 2015 vintage. Lots of juicy, vibrant acidity with minerality, concentration and precise fruit aromas. Daniel is justified in being satisfied with the current vintage, which at this stage represents a new high point in his career.

2015 Silvaner trocken (dry)

The Silvaner variety is well known for the fact that it is difficult to press. For this reason, the grapes are often left on the skins for a while, to allow enzymatic processes to take place. In this case half the grapes were fermented using natural wild yeast, the other half was fermented with cultured yeasts. The result is a wine with restrained aromas of grass, quinces, hazelnuts and white almonds. The residual sugar of close to 7 grams underlines the tart fruity notes on the palate, balancing the fresh acidity and tannin. Overall, however, the fruity character gives the wine the impression of a slightly broad and heavy character.

2015 Weissburgunder trocken (Pinot Blanc dry)

It can happen that Pinot Blanc with its restrained style can create rather an indifferent impression. In this case, even the basic estate wine is far from being characterized in this way. The acidity typical of the 2015 vintage, in combination with a long yeast contact and just a hint of oak through the maturation in Halbstück (600 litres) and Doppelstück (2400 litres) barrels give the wine the necessary kick. The bouquet is clear with light fruit, with aromas of Brazil nuts, early-ripening apples, lemon, tree flowers and butter cake. The lees contact provides a creamy texture on the palate, while the fresh acidity, extract and toasted notes from the oak barrels provide an attractive bite on the finish.

2015 Grauburgunder trocken (Pinot Gris dry)

Pinot Gris always turns out to be more spicy than its colleague Pinot Blanc. In the nose there are aromas of peaches, Williams pears and some smoky traces. The fresh acidity is remarkable, providing a juiciness reminiscent of Riesling. Overall, this is a light-bodied, playful white wine with a dry character, which is underlined by a crisp tannic bite on the finish. The fruit aromas are more intense on the palate than in the glass, the same can be said of the spicy, smoky notes that unfold fully in the mouth.

2015 Scheurebe trocken (dry)

Dry Scheurebe can sometimes be compared with Sauvignon Blanc, based on their aroma structure. However, while the acidity of Sauvignon Blanc can sometimes be harsh and somewhat coarse, the juiciness of Scheurebe shows that this new crossing carries Riesling in its DNA. In addition, the acidic porphyry soils result in wines that are not too flowery. The wine shows delicate aromas of orange blossom, red currant, lime zests, candied ginger and fenugreek seeds. A dry, playful wine which, like all the 2015 wines, is precise and fresh, with not too much alcohol. No wonder that the Scheurebe sells out so quickly.




2015 Riesling trocken (dry)

You can recognize artisanal wines such as this estate wine by their mouthfeel. They show a tranquil structure that integrates aromas and constituent substances such as acidity or alcohol, and do not let these components hang in the air helplessly next to each other in a vacuum. The Riesling needs some time in the glass to develop. Then it reveals aromas of small yellow plums, green pawpaw and jasmine flowers. The interplay between sweetness and acidity is vibrant – and it becomes obvious that Daniel is not dogmatic about pursuing a dogma of absolute dryness. Give the wine as much sweetness as it needs, and not a gram less. This allows the moderate exotic fruit shine once again on the palate. The juicy acidity and salty minerality combine to provide a backbone that gives the wine length on the palate, with a long aftertaste. A really well-made Riesling, and at the price a bargain to boot.

2015 Sauvignon Blanc trocken (dry)

In order to ensure the Sauvignon Blanc is not characterized by overly aggressive green aromas, the grape hanging zone is defoliated timeously. This means that the direct sunshine onto the grapes can remove overly offensive grassy aromas. The result is a rather more fruity wine, with appealing aromas of gooseberries, pink grapefruit and blood orange. Similarly, the medium body and creamy notes ensure the wine is approachable, giving the full aromas the necessary grounding. A relatively complex Sauvignon with subtle, crystal- clear fruit character, creamy with a long finish.



VDP.ORTSWEIN (communal wines)

Just a few words on the VDP classification. Member estates in Rheinhessen have agreed to implement the 3-step model, thus eliminating the “VDP.ERSTE LAGE” (site-specific Premier Cru wines). This means that the communal wine has a **much greater significance** here, compared to other regions. This category includes many real jewels. Particularly in varietal categories such as Pinot Blanc or Silvaner one should not be put off by the Ortswein, or communal wine designation. It would be a great pity if these varieties, which are not permitted for the production of Grand Cru wines, were to be disregarded.

2015 Fürfeld Riesling Melaphyr

The neighbouring Fürfeld site has a vineyard slope, close to the Thaler mill, which shows a totally different soil formation: melaphyry. This, too, is a magmatic rock from the Perm age, but closer to basalt in structure, and basic rather than acidic, lacking the high level of quartz content. This is also a very lean soil, poor in nutrients, but with a higher pH-value. The slope is more decomposed and gritty, even cooler and more open to the wind than the Heerkretz site. A project to be developed in the future.

This wine was matured exclusively in stainless steel tanks, although it displays some smoky aromas that might lead one to suspect some oak influence. This is the spicy note of the melaphyry soil, with hints of smoked bacon. As is the case with all the Riesling wines of the 2015 vintage, the Fürfeld wine also shows crystal-clear, defined aromas with notes of Gallia melon (or cantaloupe), apricot, ginger and chrysanthemum flowers. Very special and characteristic, too, are the Mediterranean aromas of dried thyme and lavender.

Overall a very complex wine that needs some time in the glass, and a slightly higher drinking temperature in order to develop its aromas. On the palate, the fresh acidity is reinforced by cool menthol notes. The extended maceration on the skins has provided an elegant tannic backbone that enhances the dry character of the wine, while extended lees contact is responsible for the creamy texture, as well as for the yeasty notes on the finish, reminiscent of iodine. A Riesling with a very recognizable tart, smoky character.

2015 Neu Bamberg Riesling Rotliegend

This Riesling grows on the south-western extension of the Heerkretz site within the communal boundaries of Neu Bamberg. Here, the soil, and with it the wine, is characterized more by the reddish layers of clay, slate and sandstone from the period of the Rotliegend formation.

The bouquet is an inspired mixture of savoury and sweet aromas. You can identify notes of malty rice wine, soy sauce, wasabi, iodine and smoked bacon as well as slightly artificial fruit aromas of mango, ripe peaches and candied ginger, reminiscent of boiled sweets. In addition, the Bamberg Riesling is significantly more opulent than the other Riesling wines in the range of communal wines. Creamy, mouth-filling texture, moderate acidity, and at 13% also slightly more alcohol, as well as a long, smoky, spicy finish leave an impression of a powerful, vibrant wine. By the way, this Riesling, too, was matured exclusively in stainless steel.



2015 Siefersheim Riesling Porphy

The most complex of the communal wines is that from Siefersheim, which is sourced from the two Grand Cru sites Höllberg and Heerkretz – although these days it is based almost exclusively on grapes from the Heerkretz site. It is the visiting card of the estate, and represents perhaps the most typical wine of the entire range. The wine shows an enormous range of aromas – not least because it is a blend of so many different parcels of grapes. This wine combines Riesling components matured in either stainless steel tanks or in 600-litre barrels, wines that have been fermented using either wild or cultured yeasts.

The bouquet changes constantly. Sometimes local herbs such as lovage, camomile or linden flower dominate the mix, at other times one notices primarily the clear yellow fruit, tart, leathery Boskoop apples, apple leaves and some licorice. This Riesling has the most prominent acid bite, elegantly underlining the herbs and spices as well as the sea salt-driven minerality on the finish. The long finish shows both juicy acidity and refreshing astringent notes. A vibrant, inspired Riesling!

2015 Sieferheimer Silvaner

The communal wine includes the wines produced from older vines, these have almost exclusively been matured in oak barrels. The wine has a medium body, and shows aromas of wild orchard herbs, quince, sage and juniper. A delicate, elegant touch of oak complements the structure of the bouquet. The palate displays the clear fruit aromas, to which are added notes of brioche and a fullness that results from the lees contact, with moderate fresh acidity on the finish.

2015 Siefersheimer Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc)

This wine, which is modelled on a Burgundian style, is sourced from the highest vineyard parcels on the Golden Horn, as well as from the two oldest and best parcels of the Höllberg site. Each year, the grape bunches are carefully split in order to reduce the yield, and in order to avoid any pressure between grapes that might increase the risk of rot. The wine is matured partially in new 600-litre barrels supplied by the Hoesch cooperage in Rheinhessen. The oak, which is sourced from the Hunsrück region, as well as the way in which Hoesch builds his barrels contribute a characteristic oak aroma to the wine.

This aroma is more reminiscent of the tart sweetness of a fir honey than of the vanilla notes associated with French barriques. The Pinot Blanc has lots of substance, it is both creamy and elegant, but also introduces an aromatic floral note that clearly differentiates it from a steely Chardonnay. The wine gets off to a full-bodied, broad start in the mouth, and ends in a fairly light-bodied but very spicy finish. A wine that brings its power into play in the style of a thoroughbred racehorse.



VDP.GROSSE LAGE (Grand Cru sites)

As of June 2016 the Grand Cru wines were still in barrel, and due to be bottled in July. Here, too, the barrel samples show the whole splendour and pure fruit of the 2015 vintage. Whereas in recent vintages often more than half the volume was matured in 600-litre barrels, the use of oak has now been slightly reduced again. „I want to achieve even more precision and vibrancy in the wines“, explains Daniel – and judging by the wines in their current state, he has a point.

2015 Höllberg Riesling GG (barrel sample)

The Höllberg is the sycophant and charmer that stands alongside the Heerkretz, with riper yellow fruit aromas that tend towards the exotic. In addition, there are floral notes of jasmine and elderflowers, citrus zests, lanolin and iodine. The barrel sample is still dominated by yeasty notes, although the precise fruit is already very evident.

The first impression on the palate is full-bodied and initially quite creamy in texture. The Höllberg wine shows far fewer phenolics than the Heerkretz, which underlines the mouth-filling character. The acidity spans a powerful arc, with salty piquancy. A wine of great concentration, intensity and power which nevertheless also radiates tremendous elegance and finesse. Naturally, the wine also reflects the gentle notes of sea salt typical for wines from the Siefersheim site.

2015 Heerkretz Riesling GG (barrel sample)

The Heerkretz Riesling is permeated by notes of herbs and spices. Aromas of yarrow, dried wild orchard herbs, chamomile, hay flowers and tobacco simply stream into the nose. The fruity aromas are reminiscent of perfectly sun-ripened stone fruit presented without a single blemish on a silver tray.

On the palate, it has significantly more grip than the Höllberg – not least because of the prominent tannins, that swerve to put the richness and sweet extract of the wine back on a dry foundation. The acidity is noticeably more racy and lively than in the Höllberg wine, making this expression appear much more light-bodied, cooler and more firm. Worth noting is the elegant touch of oak from partial maturation in 600-litre barrels, as well as the menthol note that unfolds on the back of the palate. This is an irrepressible Riesling with an extreme mineral expression, combining ripe fruit and cool menthol with juicy acidity and a tannic bite.



Sweet Riesling

Just as great, but often underestimated, are the sweet wines from Siefersheim. The 2015 vintage, in particular, saw the grapes for these wines picked with either minimal botrytis infection, or even in a healthy state, with partial drying on the vines, so that these wines show clear fruit aromas in spite of their concentration. The fact is that the botrytis fungus not only causes the grape berries shrink to raisin size, with a concomitant concentration of sugar and acidity, it also destroys the primary aromas provided by the grape variety itself. It is therefore remarkable when – as in the 2015 vintage – Spätlese and Auslese wines can be made entirely without botrytis, leaving them with intense primary aromas. In combination with the high level of ripe acidity, this has seen the production of highly extraordinary sweet wines.

2015 Siefersheim Riesling Kabinett

This is only the second time a wine in this category has been produced, with the 2015 vintage providing the ideal conditions. There are prominent salty piquant notes as well loads of acidity, allowing this Kabinett to balance the 40 g/l of residual sugar in an almost playful manner. The bouquet is characterized by restrained cool yellow fruit aromas and notes of dried herbs. With prominent salty mineral notes and cool menthol notes on the finish, this Riesling is really vibrant on the palate. And the alcohol level of 9% is as light as one would wish for in a in a good Kabinett wine.

2015 Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese

This wine, too, is characterized by the unique herbs and spices, smokiness and aromas of yellow it that is typical for the Heerkretz site. The aromas of red vineyard peach and small yellow plums appear as though wrapped in cotton candy. An extremely elegant and precise Spätlese, in which the residual sugar of 79 g/l is easily balanced by the 2015 acid structure, a salty piquancy and a noticeable does of tannins.

2015 Heerkretz Riesling Auslese

It is this concentration with only a small degree of botrytis that is a special characteristic of the sweet wines of the 2015 vintage. In the glass, they show intense aromas of candied ginger, pineapple, pawpaw and apricot. In addition, there are notes of eucalyptus, dried herbs and moderate notes of smoke and honey. On the palate there is a pleasant fruity sweetness, which is by no means sticky in spite of the youth of the wines. The clear fruit, acid structure and precision provide tremendous drinkability to this Auslese. An Auslese wine with a moderate residual sugar level of around 100 g/l, a light-bodied structure and complex aromas that are a perfect match for modern tastes in desserts.

2015 Höllberg Riesling Auslese

The darker, yellow-gold colour of this wine reveals that the Höllberg site is clearly the warmer vineyard site. The bouquet shows intense notes of exotic fruit, with mango, pineapple and passion fruit. Overall, the aromatic expression is more wide-ranging than that of the Heerkretz Auslese. On the palate, this opulence is underlined by a very full body, prominent sweetness, and a creamy texture. A fully ripe, expansive Auslese that is characterized by a fullness of baroque proportions.