

Harvest 2019 When Bacchus smiles

'At the Kellers' you understand how the light of happiness can come from wine', reported the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the summer of 2019. A lovely metaphor which strengthens our determination to pass on with passion and commitment our love for wine to the next, highly motivated generation of winegrowers. **When we see the number of young winegrowers who trained with us and who are now making top-quality wines, we are proud and happy.**

This has also helped to radically improve the image of German wine in the last two decades.

I still remember well when I first visited Burgundy 25 years ago, with some excitement, to learn more about the great Pinot Noirs. Almost no one there was interested in Riesling at that time. Today when we travel to France, the boot is so full of cases of wine – ours and that of our colleagues – that Julia, Felix and I sometimes wonder if it would be more sensible to travel in our minibus.

The conditions for the production of top-quality wine in Germany have perhaps never been as good as they are today – we are seeing the positive side of climate change, at least for now. Demand has rocketed and no well-known restaurant on earth, be it in London, New York or Tokyo, can afford not to list German wines.

Only the greatest optimists and visionaries predicted these developments 20 years ago. I often think of the rousing speech given by our dear friend, wine merchant and passionate lover of Riesling Tino Seiwert. As early as 2004 he announced to a host of wine friends in our cellar that German wine would regain the position it had more than a century ago: appearing on the best wine lists around the world.

This development has been in full swing for several years now.

Of course it's not just because of a more favourable climate that German wines are of such high quality that they are sought after way beyond Germany's borders.

It is much more to do with today's excellent training of the next generation, with constantly looking beyond our own horizons and even more a consequence of the solidarity and exchange of ideas among winegrowers. Without innovative producer associations such as Message in a Bottle, Rheinhessen's viticulture would not have achieved its current momentum. The idea of all being in the same boat and rowing together in the same direction was unimaginable for the previous generation. And it's not just in Rheinhessen. We hear the same stories when we get together to discuss and philosophise with colleagues from Chambolle-Musigny, Vosne-Romanée and Gevrey-Chambertin.

Winegrowers are spurring one another on, do not begrudge one another's success, and climate change provides the tail wind without which it would be impossible to bottle great wines from the best sites with such consistency. **We can't say that every vintage is the vintage of the century but if we took years such as 1921, 1934, 1959 or 1971 as reference**

points for such vintages, we would conclude that instead of four such vintages per century we are now getting four in every decade.

But wait! Of course it is not all sunshine these days. The risk of frost after early budburst is increasing, as are hailstorms (2017!). Increasing incidence of erosion after heavy rains, long periods of summer drought and the plants' struggle with insufficient water reserves are all causing growing concern.

Despite all this, my 70-year-old father Klaus ('Why would I want to be on the golf course when I have Hubacker?') declares quite rightly that there were far more smiling faces during harvest time in the 1990s and 2000s than there were in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Whereas once winegrowers' main concern in the vineyard was just getting Riesling and Spätburgunder ripe (they were often unripe and sour), today the bunches reach perfect ripeness because it has got warmer and because three generations of Kellers with nearly 100 years of harvest experience give thought to how to slow down and prolong the ripening period.

The constant to and fro, the mix of experience and dynamism, discipline and curiosity, gut feeling and love for vine and wine is this best thing we could have grown up with (and is often the greatest help when we have to make winegrowing decisions).

Julia and I got married on 2 October 1997, which was before the harvest in those days. Today we often start harvesting the Pinot between the beginning and middle of September and celebrate our anniversary in the vineyard. Time are changing! That's why it's even more important that in each and every year we pay particularly close attention to the vines and the vineyard, to understand what the vines need, be it sunshine or shade, in this decisive moment of the year.

Or as Patrick P Bauer so aptly put it in the gourmet magazine *Feinschmecker*, 'The Kellers have no recipe. Every year they adapt their work to the prevailing conditions. The Kellers are like chess players, planning dozens of moves and taking every eventuality into account. They set up experiments around the world, for example a Riesling project at the southern tip of Norway to see how vines behave when there is not enough sunshine to fully ripen the grapes. North of Madrid on the high plateau of Segovia, they are experimenting to see how, under extreme conditions, they can get greater freshness and elegance from the local Verdejo grape. In a cold year, they benefit from their experience in Norway, in a hot year from what they have learnt in the south, for example full shade for the fruit.

Vintage 2019

The 2019 vintage started slowly. While in 2018 the wines were in full flower by the end of May, in 2019 Nature took her time in 2019 – right up to the middle of June. Flowering took place in fine weather without any problems, although we noticed early on that the berries were small and very loose. There had been none of the winter rain that in 2017/18 had provided such an important reserve for the vines in the hot summer of 2018.

In 2019 we had to wait until July for rain. The heatwave, with temperatures above 40°C, led to sunburn and a 10–20% reduction in yields in some vineyards. Fortunately, just 200 mm of

rain between August and October replenished the water reserves. If in July it still looked as if the canopy had been undernourished, it was flourishing by the end of August.

Water at the right time gives the vines energy and strength. And rain combined with the cool August nights slowed down ripening a little for us in the hillier sites, which is exactly what the vines and we growers needed. **When our vines suffer, we suffer with them, and you cannot imagine, dear wine friends, how happy is the whole family when, during summer nights, beautiful, regular rainfall soaks through the soil and refreshes the vines.**

Rainfall in Hubacker vineyard, August to October:

2010: 217 mm

2013: 186 mm

2016: 112 mm

2017: 195 mm

2018: 58 mm

2019: 194 mm

September began with wonderful late-summer weather and some rain on 7 and 8 September. At this time Felix and his small team harvested his grapes for Sekt. Yields were more than 30% down on 2018 (small berries, thick skins, not much juice) but the juice tasted excellent: pure, fresh, with evident acidity. After five days we had finished the Sekt harvest and with big smiles we started on the Spätburgunder in mid September, roughly two weeks later than in 2018. The acidity was stable, the skins were crunchy, the seeds brown and ripe. As our second son Max has now finished school and is doing work experience for a year before he starts his studies, the whole Keller family were in the vineyard with the team for the Pinot harvest. We love to see the zest and love for life, and for the vines, of the next generation and how passionately they develop new ideas, and defend them in discussions. Felix and Max: we are very proud of you. Keep going!

At the end of September the showers started to become more frequent and you can imagine that we were not sure, in this sensitive period of the harvest in which everything is decided, whether the rain was too much of a good thing for the vines. Too much water can cause the berries to burst and set off rot – like being on a knife edge. But without anxious phases in the autumn, you don't make great wine and we are always ready to take serious risks for the sake of the highest quality. Therefore we had already prepared the harvest team to be ready for all eventualities. The soil absorbed the water well, the vines gathered their strength, the bunches remained healthy thanks to the small, thick-skinned, loose berries and continued to build up fine aromas.

The harvest of the old Silvaner parcels in Dalsheim and Westhofen was one big party for the whole team. The bunches were loose, the berries thick skinned and they tasted simply fantastic. The young wines, elegant and spicy in the cask, showed bright acidity, a substantial mouthful of the soul of Rheinhessen. The bunches of the white Burgundy varieties hung picture-perfect on the vine. We can already look forward to our Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay cuvée (which Felix once again takes particular care of): creamy, layered and characterful. That's Felix's flair for Burgundy ...

Julia's favourites, Rieslaner and Scheurebe, shone too: the vintage gave us a charismatic and exotic Rieslaner, and from the Scheurebe we have a characterful dry wine and a fine-boned Kabinett with aromas of gooseberry and elderberry blossom.

When in the autumn we at last come to the grapes for the Riesling Kabinett, the whole team smiles broadly because they know that in the evenings we will toast the vintage with a few good bottles of Kabinett. Kabinett has always been a hobby horse for me and Julia and the more our climate changes, the greater the challenge to bottle the perfect wine.

'Light Kabinett wines are in danger of becoming an extinct species – a victim of climate change', reported Oliver Bock in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung at the end of December.

He's quite right. In some autumns it is now easier to find shrivelled berries for Auslesen or Beerenauslesen than crunchy yellow-green ones for filigree Kabinett wines. But we gladly accept this challenge and we have many truffle pigs in our team who seem able to sniff out from afar the best fruit for Kabinett.

'What superb precision landing' was how Gault Millau enthusiastically described the Limestone Kabinett 2018. Our 2018 Prince Louis Hipping Kabinett was chosen by Gault Millau once again as the 'Kabinett of the year', and in the vintage reviews by John Gilman (View from the Cellar), MoselFineWines and on JancisRobinson.com (Julia Harding MW), one of our Kabinetts was the top wine. For my wife and I, Kabinett wines are the most multi-faceted diamonds of German wine. They shine in youth, are great companions at the table and, with good cellaring, age well for decades.

The 2019 Kabinett wines are crunchy, mineral, marked by their vineyard site and full of character. Alongside the Limestone Kabinett (from the best limestone parcels in Dalsheim and Westhofen) we have the single-vineyard Kabinetts from Hipping, Pettenthal and Schubertslay. Wines that make our hearts beat faster.

The fifth week of harvest started with great expectations: it was the turn of the best parcels for Von der Fels and the Grosse Gewächse. **Even on the vine, the berries tasted dense and many-layered, underpinned by noble acidity. It's no wonder when the yields in all the parcels were lower than in 2018.** The cool freshness and the fruitiness of the berries was also remarkable. You could taste the fact that in July to October 2019 there were about 100 fewer sunshine hours than in the record-beating 2018 (1,008 hours July to October).

Up to 15 October we were picking small but extremely fine lots for the Grosse Gewächse. The young vines, still cloudy from the lees, revealed themselves to be characterful, dense and complex. You can taste the small yields, there are high levels of dry extract, and they are very well balanced by fine acidity. At this stage they remind me a little of the 2001 vintage – one sip from the cask makes you thirst for the next one.

It's not just Bacchus who smiles happily at the 2019 vintage – dear wine friends, we will all find joy in them.

Dear wine friends, good wine grows in the vineyard. Old vines, narrow rows, the best sites, and a family who is very close to the vineyard – that is our recipe. In the cellar we watch in heightened anticipation as the wines develop – as proud parents watch their children. 2019 is a vintage in which the wines seem to continue to grow on their lees in the casks, constantly building depth, complexity and character.

Even during the harvest, the bunches seemed to smile invitingly at us, now the young wines gleam in the glass and cause our winemaker to beat faster. As with children, it is hard to pick a favourite, even if we are often asked to do so. It almost hurts when we have to think of letting go of these high-quality wines. Along with us, look forward to one of the best vintages of the last 20 years.

We are happy to know that these wines will be in good hands.

Your Keller family.