

From Öchsle to Terroir

An Oenological Manifesto / by Reinhard Löwenstein

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A spook is going around the world of wine. His name is Terroir.

He unnerves many a wine drinker used to spätlese, scares the odd winemaker and increases the blood pressure of old established Politicians.

Since almost a century the quality of wine in Germany has been defined by "öchsle", the sugar accumulated in the grapes while ripening. The more the better. That way every vineyard, every grape variety, has its chance to rise through the olympia of labelling, as Spätlese or Auslese. Then along come the avantgarde of wine professionals and preach "Terroir", denouncing the legal quality criteria and modern production methods as an abomination of a heavenly beverage through the cold spirit of the times and industrialisation. They want to define the quality of a vineyard through the expression of flavour and culture. Grape varieties and methods will be stipulated, vineyards classified. Isn't that feudalism through the back door?

At the end of the 19th century, as the idea of öchsle- degree determining quality was taken on by German wine law, it was clear to all- as it is now- that Our Lord wasn't sharing out quality amongst the vineyards by popular democratic criteria. Despite this, the grading of wines by regions bound to certain stipulations, a method developed since the early middle ages, gave way to a chemical component in the grape juice. In the modern world of protestant Prussia this may well be treasured, but is surely also an expression of the specifics of the German wine market. This had its "Golden Years" in the last decades of the 19th century. With the "bordeaux solution" an effective antidote was found against the moulds brought in from America with the emmigration rush. Newly developed machines helped ease the hard manual work in the vineyards and a modern rail network optimised the distribution. On top of that, the new romantic spirit of the German bourgeoisie led them to dream not only of castles, rocky cliffs and the tempting Loreley but also of wines preferably from the Rhine and Mosel valley. German wines were "mega-in" and

in the top metropolitan restaurants of Europe they were more expensive than the famous Chateaux from Bordeaux. Even today the villas and splendid winery cellars on the Rhine and Mosel bear witness to the economic prosperity of those years.

Light brings shade. Some made a quick buck with quite questionable methods. Raisins from Greece, Cheap wine from Italy, sugar water...Compared to the Frankenstein-wine practices of today this may all seem quite "natural". Nevertheless: Many honest producers justifiably saw their livelihoods threatened and demanded protection through new wine regulations. In 1892 the first draft of this was passed. The worst of the concocting was banned and as a compromise an addition of 25% sugar water to the must was legalised for simple everyday wines. This had the effect of pushing up the alcohol levels, reducing acidity and profitably increasing volume. However, manipulation of the top wines in any way was prohibited. This meant they could call their wines "naturally pure", a term only abolished by the wine law of 1971 to which many top producers still feel obliged to today. It's no surprise that the members of the "Predicate Wineries", a unification of the regional auction rings for naturally pure wines founded at the turn of the century, are the strongest advocates of terroir movement today. Just as a hundred years ago the definition of the old fashioned term "naturally pure" distinguishes itself from flavour manipulation in the wine cellar.

The answer to the question whether must should be kept "naturally pure" or "improved" was delivered by the öchsle scales. This density spindle constructed by Ferdinand Öchsle proved a very practical measuring device for sugar content and slowly became a virtually objective measure of quality.

The breakthrough for öchsle came only with the economic boom years, as the cards for German viticulture were reshuffled with tractors, fertilizers and new high öchsle clones and grape varieties. The area planted doubled, harvests multiplied and new machines and gadgets led to unimagined productivity in the vineyard and entirely

new prospects in the cellar. After all, it was meeting the growing demand that counted, not only in volume, but taste as well. Keep it nice and sweet, flowery and drinkable. Was it due to the candy deficit of the post war generation described by various psychologists or the archaic longing for sweet ripe fruits? In any case for the first time it was technically possible to produce sweet wines on a large scale. While such sweet wines were often rejected by the chamber of agriculture as "not regionally typical" in the fifties, they were already the norm by the sixties. The sweet wave reached its peak with the wine laws of 1971. The term "naturally pure" was abolished and replaced by "predicates", which were defined by öchsle degree. Kabinett, Spätlese or Auslese, all of them well used terms today, were linked to öchsle thresholds. Naturally the winemakers aimed at highest possible öchsle levels to attain the more profitable "predicates". The character of the vineyard and soil, grape variety, age of the vines, planting distances, yield, i.e. decisive quality factors recognised worldwide, were not mentioned in this wine law. In reality these factors faded into the background. As long as there's öchsle, as long as its spätlese. Even the thinnest of wines became legally sanctioned "quality wines" with nice sounding names sold with great success on the world market. Not only did terroir play no longer role in the grading of wines, with viticultural methods as they were it simply was not there to taste.

Back down to earth in the eighties, as the bottom fell out of the market for German wines and even in Germany nobody was really enthusiastic about the cocked-up spätlese. The German wine business was simply caught sleeping by the trend towards modern food culture, savoir vivre, and ecology. No wonder, since the government subsidies had ensured that the wine landscape looked like a puzzle of thousands of small businesses. Much like the rest of agriculture, economic policy had long given way to rural social policy. Subsidies from an over-filled watering can hindered the development of economically sensible business structures, but with fatter pigs, full sacks of potatoes and sweeter wine

they provided an important contribution to the ideological conflict with the “DDR”.

That wasn't much help to the wine growers. They hadn't a clue why their supposedly top wines were not seen as such, so they resorted to diabolising Brussels and cheaper foreign wine. But since the official and political eyes of wine growers inclined towards stainless steel bottling plants more than cultural developments the way the branch reacted to the crisis was predictable: Instead of initiating an economic and cultural U-turn an attempt was made at optimising the old strategies and concepts: more power, sink production costs further, more technic, to make it better and cheaper. An important innovation of the times was the adaption of the term “marketing”. To be “inable” to do this honours the German wine makers soul and corresponds to the picture the townies are looking for, but the magic word has been boiled down to “the worm has to taste good to the fish”, where target groups are bombarded with taste and design. Even today this is a supposed carrier of hope. It wasn't only changing consumer behaviour that completely changed the wine market in the 80ies and 90ies. Highly modernised businesses, in particular from California and Australia, set the tone as global-players. With modern Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and various softened red wines they hunted the French and German bottles from the supermarket shelves, they freed the world of its remaining respect for its wine heritage. The motto “taste can be made” also began its march of triumph in conservative Europe. Methods such as must concentration, reverse osmosis or vacume evaporation, long known but frowned upon, were legalised. The latest biochemical discoveries filled innumerable plastic sachets in the form of yeasts and enzymes. Anyone for apple aroma? Peach, mango? Or would you prefer black cherries with blackcurrents?

The instruction leaflet reads like a horror trip through Frankenstein's laboratory. Drunk on mega-design blockbuster the German apologists bombarded the intimidated traditionalists: Allow us to do what the Australians and French have been doing for years. Whether international wine organisation or regional wine

growers association. Everyone was fighting for freedom at the lowest common denominator. With increasing success! The straight thinking of “more” and “better” leads to plastic wines which numb the brain and senses. The ancient dream of human rule over nature seems within reach, the python guardian of the Holy Grail of wine fatally wounded. Wine can be ruled, wine is reproducible, wine is measurable.

While the German wine law, with its anachronistic steam engine attitude, rode on further with its shaky öchsle, the market established various medals and gradings on the principle of “school grades for taste”. Internationally, “Parker points” rule the

present day. The wine assessments of Robert Parker jnr. reshuffle markets and decide the fates of whole regions. But while the American journalist and his team go to the archaic lengths of actually tasting the wines, the Californian company Enologix goes a step further. For a contribution from 500 to 5000\$ a growing number of wine producers put their trust in a data bank with chemical parameters of 50,000 analysed wines, all of which are calibrated with “Parker points”. As such they know exactly whether their wines can cost 5 or 100 \$. Wine has arrived in the modern industrial society. The development made years ago by other beverages such as juice and beer

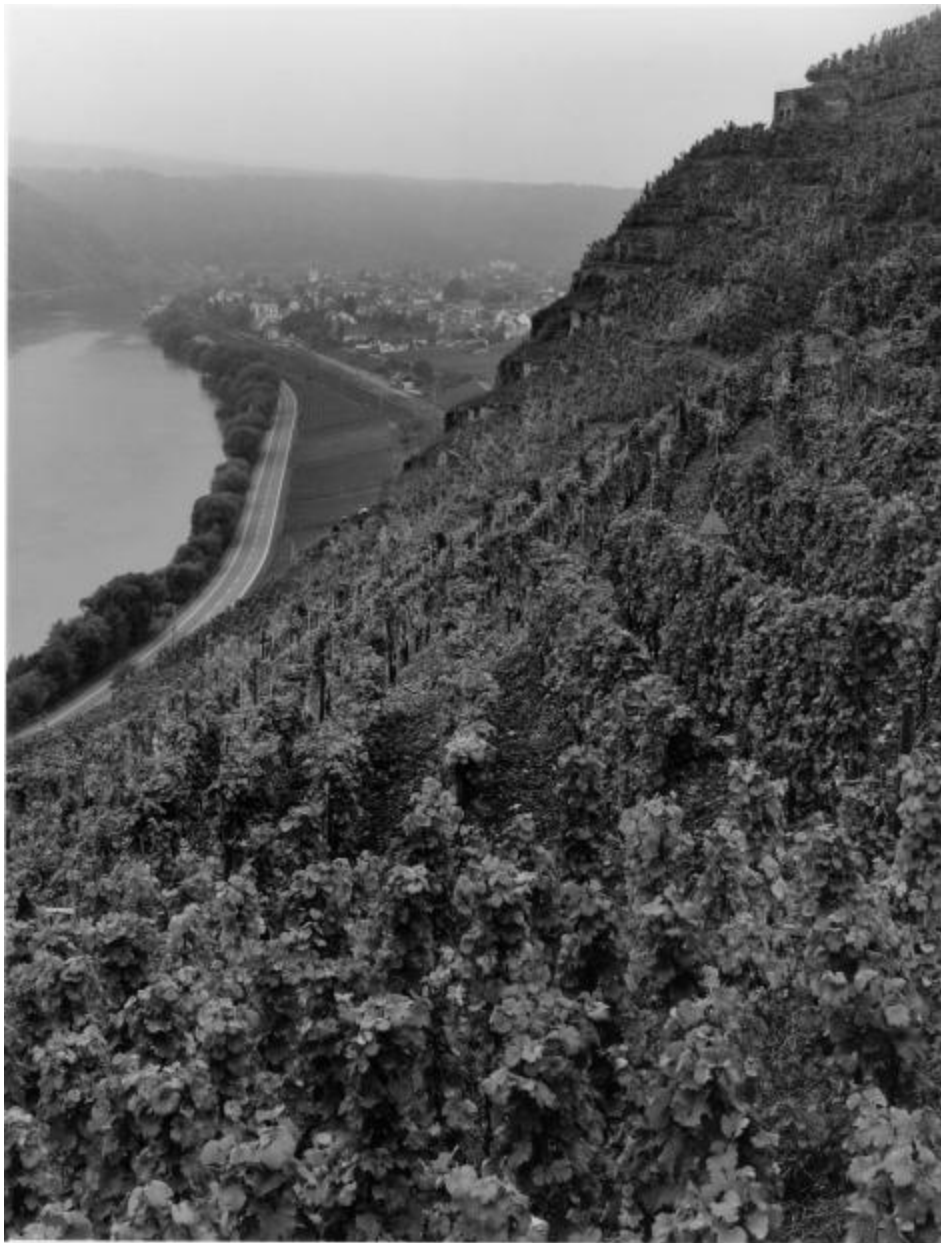


Foto: Manfred Hamm, Der Röttgen, 2001

has reached wine. Food design instead of vinification. So what's the problem? Who cares as long as the wine is cheaper and tastes better? Why be Luddites in the 21st century?

While the chemists in Frankensteins laboratory rub their hands with glee, it's looking, with a few exceptions, very sad in the wine regions. Over-production, falling prices, identity crisis. No wonder, most of the wines are interchangeable or don't conform to the market. Subsidies have long surpassed gross product. Winemakers degenerate to subsidised museum-guardians of their own vineyards. And as soon as the subsidies run dry training schools will be closed and whole villages left without wine growing descendants. Top wines that cost the equivalent of 3 days wages a hundred years ago are now paid for in 15 minutes. Slopes of stunning wine landscape, part of a thousand year old culture, can be bought for a few cent, are given away, lie fallow. With respective consequences for tourism. The encroaching blackberry bushes, stone acorn, stone cherry and others, all part of a unique vineyard flora, rob the emerald lizard, sail moth and the even rarer apollo moth of their environment. By ruining the landscape and impoverishing the villages the wine regions lose tourism, one of the few still profitable economies.

Worldwide, another culture becomes barren, the taste culture. True to the cry of food globalisers: "Get children's tastes popular amongst adults!" Rieslings that previously tasted fascinating, Barolos hidden behind astringent tannins and wild spicy Syrah wines have become more and more like fruit salad, strawberry jam or chocolate syrup. The strategists in the marketing departments have got it: Adults everywhere in the world have different food cultures. But all the children of the world like it fruity and sweet. Therefore, long live the infantilisation! Back to the oral phase!

Whether with Rudolf Steiner's "agricultural thesis", or an enlightened, modern ecology conscience, religiously founded responsibility to creation, sober economic calculation or love of the Fatherland: For many years resistance has been rising. A countermovement formed only as a reaction to the excesses of recent years.

A spook is going around. He's a good ghost. His name is terroir.

Terroir is explanation, not Ludditism. No-one has a problem with industrially produced wines. On the contrary, since they allow access to a traditionally elitist drink they contribute to the democratisation of wine. But much as a poster differs from the original painting and a ghetto blaster differs from a concert hall there is a world of difference between a mass produced wine

and a terroir wine. "Not everything that made of grapes and tastes good is wine" writes the respected wine law critic Prof. Hans-Jörg Koch.

Terroir stands for clarity and transparency. Wine culture should only be on the label when its in the bottle. If the name of a region, a village or a vineyard is on the label it shouldn't just be a formality, the wine should reflect the character of its origins. Same goes for grape variety and vintage.

Terroir stands for an ecologically responsible care for nature, in the vineyard and in the cellar, and abstaining from many dubious modern blessings.

Terroir stands for culture and therefore removes itself from the world of measurable science. The "objective wine assessments" and awards have no place in the terroir world. Michael Broadbent, grandseigneur of wine journalism phrased it: "At wine awards I always think of Miss-contests, the prettiest and cleverest girls stay at home".

Many progressive forces in ministries and wine growers societies support the terroir movement, and build valuable ideas into their concepts. The first fruits are showing in the VDP, the association of predicate vineyards. After grading all vineyards only about ten percent remained as real terroir, for which special quality parameters for vini-and viticulture are given. As of 2004 only wines classified as such are allowed to carry the name of the vineyard location. As all other wines will be marketed as village or estate wines, from the classified locations a top group of German "grand crus" is cristalising. Depending on the region these are called "erstes Gewächs", "grosses Gewächs" or "erste Lage" and can be recognised by a logo. For years the demand for such terroir wines has been continually growing, and market observers agree that the countermovement to the likewise increasing Coke-isation will climb further. Already the worldwide enthusiasm for culture imbued wines provides a sufficient income for a growing number of wine makers and to more and more young people the profession of wine maker seems interesting. In some places fallen walls are being rebuilt and fallow vineyards newly planted.

Are, then, terroir wines the magic potion to rescue German wine? That would be nice. But the German wine landscape doesn't only consist of traditional vineyards. Thousands of hectares of alluvial land and turnip fields put under vine in the boom years, even if yields of old vines are halved, will only deliver "just wine". And that's caught in the globalisation trap. Why should a right minded citizen buy German wine when the same taste can be found cheaper in many other countries. No-one honestly

expects the rising reputation of German terroir wines to pull in its wake the cheap wine into the profit zone. Instead of investing lots of money into product optimisation, marketing and destilisation we would all be well advised to think about sensible alternatives of land use: alleys of nut trees, parks with camping sites, river overspill areas or just meadow and biotope. What a heavenly scenario, should the wine retreat to its traditional vineyards.

Every traditional wine region, be it in Europe, Australia or South Africa faces the question of how to confront the coke-isation and save its cultural heritage. Its no wonder that the first terroir congress was organised in California as a declaration of war on fast food. Worldwide wine makers are moved to rediscover their vineyards: the different soils, the changing microclimate, traditional varieties, old, deep rooted vines with few, but small, berries...

Terroir is grasping that wine is more than the sum of soil, vine, microclimate and work: a fragile process of change, a complex picture on the border between planing and intuition, checks and laissez faire, of Apollo and Dionyses. Terroir has turned its back on optimisation by linear extrapolation. The exhibition of the Mona Lisa in the Palace of Living Arts in Los Angeles, where not only a perfect reproduction of the famous picture can be marvelled, but a waxwork Leonardo next to his bare butted model Gioconda, seems ridiculous next to the original in Paris

Its not the perfect, but the "mistakes that taste grand" acknowledges the tenor and wine lover Christoph Prégardien. Wines with an almost cubistic aura and give us insight to another level of reality. Terroir wines have a lot in common with going to a concert. "The ear to the heart of the listener needs a greater musical vocabulary and a more complicated musical grammar. In return you're rewarded with an enormously rich world of sound", says Anne-Sophie Mutter and speaks from a "secret, almost spiritual link" between performer and audience.

A good ghost wafts through the world of wine. His name is terroir.

He unites critical gourmets, committed wine makers, forward-looking politicians and nature lovers. Beyond coca-cola he's gathering a community of uncompromising connoisseurs to an exciting journey into the world of authentic and complex taste.

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