



## Notes on Koehler-Ruprecht

By Stephan Reinhardt, *Wine Advocate* (August 2020 Week 3)

Koehler-Ruprecht in a nutshell: Here are some key facts about one of the Pfalz's most iconic producers. The domain follows the traditional philosophy to produce only natural wines that are cultivated on various limestone soils around the village and made without any additions such as nutrients, yeasts, acids, tannins, etc. All of the wines, predominantly Riesling but also Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir (to name just the most important of the varieties), are vinified in traditional oak vats and barriques, while stainless steel is only used for settling the musts or preparing the wines for bottling. All of the wines are kept on the lees for at least seven or eight months, the finest whites even for nearly a year. Another crucial thing about KR is that it doesn't fit with the classification of the VDP, which was founded by Koehler-Ruprecht. In fact, none of the GG wines are predicate wines but instead are "QbA" wines (quality wines of specific growing areas), which includes permission to chaptalize, change the pH artificially, use coal, etc. KR, still under the former owner Bernd Philippi, never wanted to follow this road and left the VDP years ago for another reason: There is not just one wine sourced in the grand cru site (i.e., the Kallstadter Saumagen) but several styles from Kabinett to Auslese, while the vineyard—and vintage—character is still represented in all the different styles. Weird? Not at all, it's just not French. This traditional "German" philosophy is still followed by many producers, particularly in the Mosel....

Does that actually mean a vineyard is divided into several plots and each plot is dedicated to one specific style? No, this is not the case here at KR. It means that one single plant within a given vineyard can bear several styles, even in one vintage, if its fruit is picked in several passages. Dominik sends his harvest team (which, by the way, is a family of 12-16 members who have come to harvest here for about 30 years) through every single plot up to five times, and the team picks the grapes according to color and taste. Ripe grapes are picked, less-ripe fruits are allowed to hang a bit longer, if the weather forecast allows. During the entire harvest period, the colors of the clusters range from predominantly green-yellow to pink with all shades of yellow and gold in between. Last but not least, each wine, even from one vineyard, is composed of several plots within this vineyard that is rarely homogenous by nature but has different kinds of soils (even though the base is always the same), different altitudes, expositions, micro-climates, age of vines, etc. In the very end, it is a question of tasting the final vats that make the decision which barrel becomes which wine or predicate. If this all doesn't already sound exciting enough, you should taste the wines! But attention: If you expect the full range of 2019s here or at least all the 2018s, I must disappoint you. Things are not that easy here, since you'll never find only one vintage in the offering.

Selecting grapes and making wine at Koehler-Ruprecht: The details

The recent releases are the 2018s—but not from all the wines. The crowns of the vintage are released only years later, just like Trimbach does with the Clos Ste. Hune in the neighboring region of Alsace. For example, the finest Rieslings from the iconic Saumagen are released with a golden capsule instead of the regular white capsule, and the letter "R" on the label following the predicate, which is either Spätlese or Auslese, depending on the vintage. The Spätlese R is released after four years, the Auslese R is released after 6 years, and the regular wines come out more or less a year after the harvest.

The making of the wines has hardly changed over the years and decades. Usually, the must is left on the mash overnight and clarified for 36-48 hours after pressing. As mentioned above, the fermentation takes place in wooden barrels of various sizes from 300 to 2,400 liters in capacity, while the reds are fermented in open wooden fermenters and aged in barriques. The principle: the higher the quality, the smaller the barrel. The wines remain on the lees until about four weeks before bottling. The racking of Weissburgunder, Muskateller and possibly also the Kallstadter takes place in May or June, and the Rieslings from the Saumagen follow in July/August after about 10-11 months on the full lees.

At Koehler-Ruprecht, a staggered harvest with several passages is practiced, and this means that each wine type is given its own grape selection. The Kabinett wines are based on healthy, green-yellow grapes, the Spätlese on golden-yellow and the Auslese on amber. The grapes for the dry wines are obligatory to be healthy. For the R predicates, a further selection is made: Amber-colored millerandage grapes (composed of tiny berries with no seeds and little juice but much skin) form the basis of the R selections. It is important to emphasize, though, that they are not the result of a selection of individual, single berries like a Beerenauslese, but of a whole cluster selection. It is therefore the majority of the berries on a cluster that decides which bucket the grape is sorted into. However, a Spätlese or Auslese becomes an R only after the fermentation in the barrel has finished, because it is not said that the most beautiful berries always produce the finest wine—although this is the case in most vintages. The classification is therefore based solely on the taste of all the barrels and is always in the context of the respective vintage and the predicate. The Kabinett is a light, drinkable type of the Saumagen, the Spätlese is fruity and elegant, and the Auslese is deep, mature and complex.

However, is the R always the better wine? To give a brilliant example of an exception: I personally prefer the 2018 Saumagen Auslese trocken to the Auslese trocken R, because it is more buoyant and finessed than the dense, mildly acidic and rather solemn R selection. The 2018 Auslese R might be the more typical 2018 perhaps, but from the point of view of the wine drinker, the regular, vibrantly fresh and delicate Auslese is perhaps a more stimulating wine. The regular 2018 Auslese trocken will be on the market this autumn, while the Auslese trocken R will not be available until 2024. The 2018 Spätlese trocken R will come as early as 2022. This year, the 2015 Saumagen Spätlese trocken R will be on sale. An Auslese trocken R was not produced in 2015, but a sweet Auslese and a Beerenauslese were produced—both wines are based on healthy, botrytis-free grapes. In all probability, there will be no R Auslese in 2019 either. The reason: "The quality of the normal Auslese is already so extraordinarily good that we can no longer place a wine above it," says Dominik Sona without a wink.

The recent vintages (and wines)

"2016 is a great vintage, my best yet," finds Dominik Sona. "If I get a vintage like this again, I'll retire immediately or find a new job." September started out hot, but then the grapes were able to ripen calmly to perfect physiological ripeness, as autumn was cool and stable. "The must weights and acidity levels remained stable, while the taste and aroma steadily increased and developed optimally." The harvest lasted a total of six weeks—perfect! "The wines are elegant, moderate in alcohol and show a nice saltiness in the finish," Sona finds. "They represent a rather cool vintage type."

2017 is the strongest of the three vintages after 2015. "The year was as warm as the other two, but we had more rain during harvest than in 2016, so that the grapes are not only physiologically ripe, but also the must weights increased. However, the richness is well-balanced, similar to 2015, but the 2017s are more juicy and less ethereal. We were pleased to see that Riesling can handle the heat well. The wines undoubtedly have very good aging potential," Sona believes. A disadvantage was that the heavy rainfall

during the harvest, which forced them to pick everything in just three weeks. "Nevertheless, we had to record a loss of about 30%," reports Sona.

"2018 was the year of the impossible," he proceeds. "Spring and summer were almost too warm and dry, yet we ended up filling our cellar. The grapes were beautiful and in perfect health." Because Sona refrained from reducing yields via green harvesting, the grapes were able to ripen with a delay due to the good crop on the vines. The must weights also remained moderate. The wines are still complex and juicy, "a bit like 2012," Sona believes. "At first, they are lean, but with time they become more complex." The 2018s also represent a rather cool vintage, although the acidity is rather moderate. Sona is nevertheless "very satisfied" with the 2018s. "All in all, we can say that we have been very satisfied with our wines for the last few years. The acidity at harvest is almost exclusively tartaric acid, which is good for microbiological stability, but of course also for the aging potential," Sona says. You'll have to get used to higher alcohol levels at Koehler-Ruprecht. In any case, they will not follow the fashion of early harvesting, as Sona explains, "Then the wine will no longer taste the way we know it from KR. After all, they're supposed to be a great drinking pleasure in 20 years from now."