

WAGNER STEMPEL DAS WEINGUT



URSPRUNG | HANDWERK | LEIDENSCHAFT



AUTUMN LEAVES 2021



Roller-coasters

, in modern parlance, refer to the revered attractions that classically serve as the backbone of carnivals, traveling fairs and amusement parks. Thrill-seekers can climb aboard to experience extraordinary g-forces, and then disembark afterward largely intact, happy and adrenalin-charged. What goes unsaid is that the rider is never in any real danger. Viewed historically, though, the term is actually a relic of mountain railroading, where it was anything but harmless. It is also a fine fit for the 2021 viticultural year, which put us here in Siefersheim through a series of wild swings that were often anything but amusing. How and why — that is a story in and of itself.



A grape stricken by downy mildew during this summer. When people talk informally about fungal disease, they rarely grasp just how catastrophic it can be when not addressed with vigilance. Utter destruction. A 100% loss of grapes, canopy and even the entire vineyard.

For the first time in years, the western corner of Rheinhessen enjoyed the return of a nice cold winter. Sure, it was still a far cry from Siberian cold and its weeks of snow, ice and bobsled rides, but nevertheless things here **were notably frosty, cold and unpleasant for an extended period**, pushing the dawn of spring back until late March. April proved similarly cool and changeable. In response, bud break stalled until the start of May.

The chestnut tree growing at the heart of our estate, and whose inimitable charm ties together the ensemble of our picturesque inner courtyard, serves as an excellent all-natural early indicator into how things are developing at a technical level. It was mid-May **before the tree achieved full blossom this time around**. As a comparison: the same process finished up a full four weeks earlier back in 2017. Only one data point, to be sure, but still a clear signal that 2021 might well run differently than previous years.

It rained on and off throughout May, with much of the spring vineyard work conducted under unfriendly conditions. At one point it felt like every single sunny day had to be “paid” with a series of rain showers. The calendar had already turned to June before a true abundance of warmth and sunshine arrived, at which point our canopy management in the vineyards kicked into turbo mode. **It was an extremely busy and challenging period**, but the team’s diligent vineyard preparation,

including bending, tying and shoot thinning, as well as the manageable scale of our vineyards, meant we could complete the work in an orderly manner. We managed to achieve slender, largely vertical canopies with sufficient air circulation that **lasted until flowering in late June**, and they were an important factor in safely navigating the challenging weeks that followed.

Warm, stormy weather would then accompany us from late June until well into August. We didn't catch even a hint of the classic stable high-pressure system with summery hot days and long stretches of dry weather. Quite the opposite: One swirling low pressure system after another crashed through the region, encouraging vitality and promoting vegetation growth at levels unseen for many years. To put it in more visual terms: **it was Siefersheim's greenest summer in recent memory**. The cost was the worst fungal stress since 2016. Downy mildew in particular caused serious problems for us.

With over 60 liters of rain measured in the first half of July alone, the question was no longer whether we'd suffer losses, but rather how bad it would get. This kind of **extremely tense and difficult situation** makes abundantly clear just how much modern organic winegrowing is working at the absolute limits of feasibility in the face of such microclimatic conditions. With that said, we would be remiss if we didn't mention that our neighbor, working solely with conventional methods, fared little better than we did and suffered bitter losses despite the use of standard fungicides. Whatever the cultivation model, any winegrower in 2021 who didn't put a laser-focus on the vineyards in this phase was doomed to lose more than just a few bunches of grapes. Their entire vineyards were in play.



2021 was a long voyage from bud break in May through the meteorological ups-and-downs of summer until late August, when the Riesling vineyards looked picture perfect, like the VDP.GROSSE LAGE HEERKRETTZ shown here. It's a minor miracle that some sites navigated through this period almost unscathed.

Fortunately, things calmed down starting in mid-August. Like firefighters battling a forest fire, **we got the blaze under control, but remained on tenterhooks watching for any potential flare-ups**. The utmost vigilance and care was needed throughout the season, in the form of decisive, quality-focused action in the vineyard. This year's "green harvest" demanded a scope and precision like rarely before, with damages from the mildew hard to pin down firmly. But given the year's

tendencies toward cool weather, further reduction of yields proved inevitable. This meant a more substantial thinning of crop cover in late summer than at any time in recent memory. We even **called in a herd of Rhön Mountain sheep for the first time**, trusting they would be eager, if not particularly selective, in trimming back the canopy. In tough conditions, they did a good job and offer a promising option for the future. All in all, we pulled most, if not all, of the levers that were available to us; it felt risky at the time, but over the course of the final quarter proved tremendously prescient.

September felt almost like we were in a theater and the stage crew pulled a quick change on the backdrop. As if someone had simply flipped a switch, the weather suddenly delivered the dry and sunny conditions we'd been longing for — **with more than 80 hours of sun in the first September week alone**. That was more than during the entire second half of August combined. It would be hard to imagine better conditions for ripening the fruit and making steady preparations for autumn. Yet after the summer we'd just been through, everyone had a little trouble relaxing and enjoying the fine weather. But conditions remained blissfully stable, and so we kicked off the primary push of our 2021 harvest on October 4.

The quality of initial berries was not just good, but even perhaps surprisingly and encouragingly so. Quantities were another matter entirely, with little reason for joy. Taken as a whole, the vintage is perhaps best summed up with one word: **heterogeneous**.



Beautiful Riesling grapes along the tower on the HEERKRETZ site. By late October, the canopy had already turned to yellow, and we harvested our final parcels to lovely autumn weather. Fully ripe, sweet and almost perfect berries. A dream!

Some parcels showed the effects and damage from the summer months, and a great deal of selection work was required to draw out the best of those grapes. Other vineyards looked like they'd been through nothing out of the ordinary at all. They were perfect and grand as ever. And this spectrum was visible not just from vineyard to vineyard, but also within the respective varieties. It provided a set of data that has proven stubbornly difficult to explain, let alone harness. **Yet one clear key to the success was the reduction, at times radically so, of yields** during summer. Almost all of the thinned sites ultimately delivered virtually perfect grapes.

Fully ripe, highly aromatic and concentrated. The Riesling on the two VDP.GROSSE LAGE sites in particular, HÖLLBERG and HEERKRETZ, were marked by relatively late ripening, and fantastic results. Their Oechsle readings ranged between 84 and 94 degrees, with acidity measuring between 10 and 12 grams.



Epic evening light on the HÖLLBERG in late October. A reassuring and happy ending, with a parting kiss from the sun

After four “warmer years”, the 2021 vintage marked a return to a late and cool, but also sunny, autumn that came to its happy conclusion on October 28. It was a year that demanded everything we had, and more.

Where its predecessors were like a gift from nature, with yellow-gold maturity and plentiful volumes leading to wines bursting with charm, juice and approachability, the 21s reminded us just how hard and steely winegrowers need to be, ready to work and fight through whatever may come, if they truly want to achieve absolute top quality. There was no escaping **radical reductions to yields**, nor the unbelievably **labor-intensive maintenance required during the growth period**, not to mention the **final hand harvest that this vintage demanded**.

The 21s are destined to stand alone in terms of style. This much is already clear: Just as the warmer vintages enchant with juiciness, expressiveness, and even at times opulence, 2021 will win hearts and palates with its **clarity, finesse and elegance**. These might well emerge as beautiful, tremendously thrilling wines that undulate and shine in the glass. In their fundamental character, the wines are probably closer to the 2016s, 2012s or even the 2008s. Except in much smaller volumes. We are highly excited to keep polishing these “diamonds in the rough” in the months to come.

Daniel Wagner & Oliver Müller
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