

The Mosel's natural philosopher

"I DON'T SELL GERMAN WINE, I SELL RIESLING that has a certain cultural aspect," says Reinhard Löwenstein, owner and resident philosopher of Weingut Heymann-Löwenstein. With that one statement he very concisely sums up his whole approach to winemaking and his deep connection to the land and its cultural history. For Reinhard, wine is more than just a pleasant drink, it's also a historical and cultural record of the civilization, the geology and the incredible wonder of nature that produce it. He recognizes that wine is an "ancient symbolic beverage, since the dawn of human consciousness," and treats the winemaking process with uncommon care and consideration.

On the other hand, Reinhard's primary goal is to simply make wines that provide great pleasure, and that he does with tremendous success. Whether or not the cultural backdrop is perceptible is, as in the fine arts, up to the individual tasting the wine. You probably won't, for example, be able to taste all the hard work that's gone into restoring the terrace walls in the insanely steep vineyards around Winnigen. But recovering the forgotten art of dry-fitted stonework was important to Reinhard, because not only are the new walls more durable than those built with the shoddy stone-and-mortar work of the past century, they also provide better drainage, offer habitat for many small creatures, and are immensely pleasing to the eye. Reinhard spent some DM50,000 (about \$25,000) to rebuild one terrace wall in Röttgen that supports a mere 100 vines. He does it because he feels a deep personal responsibility to preserve the culture, ecology and taste of the vineyards entrusted to his care.

Authentic wine

The objective at Heymann-Löwenstein is to make "authentic" wine, as opposed to mass-produced "fast food" wine. For Reinhard, it's all about taste. If a wine has a discernable taste, from year to year, that says "this is Riesling from the steep, south-facing, red slate terraces of the Uhlen vineyard on the Lower Mosel," then it's an authentic wine. Yet, while he wants to preserve the cultural heritage of his vineyards, Reinhard is not trying to relive the past. "Wine has always been a child of its time," he says. Now, because he, too, is part of the local culture, it's the time for his style of full-bodied, highly aromatic, dry Rieslings.

After some years away from the estate as a student, and after extended stays abroad, Reinhard and his wife took over the family estate 20 years ago. With no formal training as a winemaker, he has relied upon his innate intelligence and voracious appetite for learning to guide him. He has tried many unorthodox techniques to achieve the style of wine he seeks: an



Reinhard Löwenstein

Heymann-Löwenstein

Total vineyard area
7.5 hectares/18 acres

Average production
50,000 bottles

Varieties
Riesling 95%

Top vineyards
Winniger Uhlen
Winniger Röttgen
Hatzenporter Kirchberg

Contact information
Weingut Heymann-Löwenstein
Bahnhofstrasse 10
D-56333 Winnigen/Mosel
Tel: (+49) 2606-1919
Fax: (+49) 2606-1909
www.heymann-loewenstein.com

intense, dry style of Riesling that first struck a chord with him during a visit to Emmerich Knoll in Austria's Wachau district.

Over the years, Reinhard has had many people — especially by-the-numbers wine-school and government “experts” — tell him what he's doing will never work. Undaunted, he forges on, learning from his own mistakes, constantly improving and refining his winemaking style. “Just as in music or art, there's not just one style, one truth, in winemaking,” he says. “Because of my many interests and my varied educational background, it's easier for me to break away from the norm and try something new. Failure is not something that worries me.”



The terraces of Winninger Röttgen. In the center you can see a section of terrace wall that has been restored by Reinhard Löwenstein. At the bottom right is the rickety little car that rides the monorail up and brings the harvested grapes down the steep hillside.

From the vineyard to the womb

Over the past 20 years, Reinhard has been gradually increasing and consolidating his holdings in the two great vineyards of Winnigen: Röttgen and Uhlen. Recently, he also added a third top-quality site to his repertoire: the Kirchberg vineyard in the neighboring village of Hatzenport. Early on, he reasoned that these sunny Lower Mosel vineyards were more suitable for dry Riesling than their cooler counterparts upstream in the Middle Mosel. It took years of experimentation, but now we can confidently say that his instincts were right on.

Those years also taught him that winemaking is more than a philosophical concept. It takes skill and knowledge and manpower and, yes, technology. “It's rather absurd to say simply that winemaking is an art,” says Reinhard. “Of course it's an art, but it's also craft and industry.”

With his finger, he draws a triangle in the condensation on one of his stainless steel tanks. Each point of the triangle represents one of these three aspects of winemaking. One point is the artistry that can express the ecology and cultural history of the wine's origins, as well as the personality of the winemaker; another is the pure craft of fermenting the juice of grapes into an alcoholic beverage. And finally, there's the industrial aspect that involves the physical logistics of harvesting, vinifying, bottling, shipping and marketing the wine. Heymann-Löwenstein, naturally, falls more toward the art and craft points of the triangle, but it could not produce commercially viable wine without the industrial element.

In the vineyard, Reinhard relies heavily on art and craft to make harvest decisions. He is more interested in aroma and taste than analytical figures. He looks for the golden color of mature, thoroughly ripened grapes and a taste that he recognizes as authentic.

When harvest time comes, crews pick everything together from a particular plot and take it back to the winery to be sorted. After pressing,

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the wines go into stainless steel tanks in Reinhard's cellar, which he describes as a "womb" for the developing wines. "The idea in here is not to destroy what good things happened in the vineyard," he says, adding that "winemaking is not so much making, as waiting." They do nothing to the wine as it gestates in the cellar, which can be quite worrisome because the fermentation often stops in the cold of winter. All they can do is hold their breath until it starts again in spring. "It's a little bit like a game of poker," says Reinhard. Fortunately, he is on quite a winning streak.

The wines of Heymann-Löwenstein

Schieferterrassen

Heymann-Löwenstein's "basic" wine, Schieferterrassen (slate terraces) is made from fruit that shows the slate soil of the terraced vineyards, but not the unique terroir of either Röttgen or Uhlen.

Vom Blauen Schiefer

A special wine with cooler aromatics from a section of blue slate vineyard adjacent to the upstream end of Uhlen. Not quite a grand cru like Röttgen or Uhlen, but it is distinctive enough that Reinhard likes to bottle it separately in years when the blue slate character comes through.

Hatzenporter Kirchberg

Reinhard's newest vineyard has red slate soil that's rougher than Uhlen and contains a lot of silicates. It has a fruitier mineral aroma that reminds him more of the Middle Mosel.

Winninger Röttgen

"Röttgen is always a flower-power wine when it's young," says Reinhard, referring to the forward fruit and sheer generosity of this wine in its youth. In some years, wines from this extremely steep terraced vineyard just downstream of Winnigen can equal the great Uhlen, but they are generally quicker to develop.

Winniger Uhlen

Clearly the top dog on the Lower Mosel, the Uhlen vineyard forms a grand amphitheater as the Mosel makes a broad bend from northeast to southeast. The terraces here get sun nearly all day long, making for exceptional ripeness. In fact, Uhlen holds the record for the highest must weight ever measured on the Mosel. "But this neither makes it the best Mosel wine, nor is it reason for me to play along with the ridiculous German wine law," says Reinhard, referring to the fact that he doesn't play the Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese game. Aside from a little botrytized dessert wine, everything is made dry and labeled simply as "Qualitätswein."

In a class of his own

In the past, Reinhard worked for an official vineyard classification based on historical records, but now he's moved on without it. For him it's a fait accompli — the best wines from his historically documented top sites have the vineyard name on the label. His customers quickly comprehend this de facto classification and, like us, they come back every year for more of these extraordinary wines from an extraordinary man.



Elemental connections

The cellar at Heymann-Löwenstein contains an enormous panpipe that sticks up through the earth and into the open air above. The deeply resonant chord that is produced by the wind provides, as Reinhard describes it, "a symbolic connection to the natural element of air."

In addition, a small trickle of water is pumped through the cellar to maintain a symbolic bond with the Mosel. The element of earth envelops the cellar, and we can only assume that the fourth elemental symbol is the fire in Reinhard Löwenstein's spirit.

Heymann-Löwenstein

Tasted at the Heymann-Löwenstein estate in September, 2000.

Riesling Schieferterrassen QbA trocken 1999

AP 15. Sleek and pointed, with a nearly Grüner Veltliner-like brotiness. There is a really nice richness on the palate, bursting with peach pit, apple and pear skin flavors, all held together by a driving minerality that frames everything in an elegantly refined manner. An excellent balance of acidity carries the aromas on a lingering finish, very pretty and discreet. **88**

Riesling von blauem Schiefer QbA trocken 1999

AP 6.99. Rounder and more fruit-driven than the Schieferterrassen, with a pronounced smoky-slatey richness. Big, high-toned impact upfront – hasn't got the intensity on the finish of the previous wine, but it's well-made. **87**

Hatzenporter Kirchberg Riesling QbA trocken 1999

AP 8. This is the first vintage from this newly-acquired red slate plot. Noticeably richer and bigger than the wines from Löwenstein's Winningen sites, with lovely mineral dimension and a berry candy fragrance lurking in the background. A lot of tension and energy on the palate, very expressive and subtle, showing a beautiful harmony of fruit, acidity and earthy minerality. Of this wine, Löwenstein says, "I am very happy with this because it brings a completely new taste to my range." **90(+?)**

Winner Röttgen Riesling QbA trocken 1999

AP 9. Electric in its energy, vibrantly racing across the palate in focused, stony splendor. Aromas of tangerine rind, lime and crushed rock are tautly intertwined, concealing a lot of depth in a super-sleek frame. Beautifully built on a long, baritone-driven finish, insistently minerally and resonating with uncommon clarity and harmony. **91**

Winner Uhlen Riesling QbA trocken 1999

AP 10. Very fine in tone, with grand cru dimension and intensity. Immediately more complex than the Röttgen, unfolding in subtle aromas of litchi, kiwi, nectarine and spicy stoniness, yet firmly encased in a backwards structure, taut like a violin string. Superbly expansive richness and expression on a fine finish. **93**

Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling QbA 1999

AP 7. These grapes were acquired in a trade with Selbach, in Löwenstein's relentless exploration of terroir. Löwenstein allowed this wine to finish at 20 g/l of residual sugar, saying, "Once again, this proves to me that the Mittel Mosel is better for making sweet wines, and our area for dry wines." High-toned and filigree, with perfumed slate and lime-floral aromatics, this nicely expresses the profile of this great site, but ultimately hasn't got the length or grip of the previous three wines. But it is tremendously instructive to taste in this lineup, being a superb demonstration of terroir and how terroir is fitted to a winemaker's style. **87**

Winner Uhlen Riesling Auslese 1999

AP 11. Very fine and delicate aromas of poached pear, mango and Meyer lemon. Superb balance and precision, finely-tuned grace and breed, building with subtle depth to a penetrating and aromatic finish. Löwenstein's focus may be on dry wines, but this is proof that his philosophy and stylistic ideas can be expressed in wines that contain residual sugar as well. **92**



The steep, terraced vineyards of Heymann-Löwenstein overlook the meandering Mosel as it nears its confluence with the Rhine just a few kilometers downstream at Koblenz.