

The fall and rise of the house of Hermannsberg

8 Jan 2014 by Michael Schmidt

The name of Gut Hermannsberg may actually not ring a bell (yet) with too many lovers of German wine, so it might come in useful to know that this Nahe estate was once known as the Staatliche Weinbaudomäne Niederhausen- Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. Founded in 1901 by the Kingdom of Prussia as a model estate to promote modern production methods, it was initially named Königlich Preussische Domäne Niederhausen- Thalbökelheim, but achieved greater fame after switching to the more prestigious village designation of Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube.

For many years the State Domaine was the biggest Nahe player by far, and it would be fair to say that, before the days of Dönnhoff and Schäuble, wines from the State Domaine's Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube vineyard were probably the most sought-after Nahe wines of all. In Hornickel's Weinbibliothek, the German 'wine bible' of 1976, a ranking of the greatest sites of Germany (and Europe) classified five Nahe vineyards as grand crus, and the Staatsdomäne was represented with holdings in three of these sites: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle and Am Stein- Rotenfels.

Though never quite hitting the big time, the wines of the estate remained highly respected among the cognoscenti throughout the 1980s, but it appears that the government of the State of Rheinland-Pfalz began to have second thoughts on its financial involvement in the project, and after some half-hearted attempts at outsourcing operations, the estate was finally sold to a private investor in 1998.

It was renamed Gutsverwaltung Niederhausen- Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube, with high hopes that an injection of capital would enable the incumbent director of operations, who had been retained by the new owners, to bring back the glory days. This did not quite work out, as a downgrading by the 2005 Gault-Millau wine guide from three to two stars indicates, though the estate never lost its VDP membership status.



In 2009 the property was sold once again. The first act of the incoming owners was to install a new winemaker and they could have done worse than to pick Karsten Peter (pictured above with owners Jens Reidel and Dr Christine Dinse, photograph by Kerstin Bänsch), previously a member of the team of Nahe shooting star Tim Frühlich of Schäfer-Frühlich. To signal a totally new beginning, the estate also dropped all associations in its name with its former existence and its new title Gut Hermannsberg now simply refers to the winery's beautiful location at the Hermannsberg site (above left, photograph by Klaus Mäurer). Contrary to most German wine estates, which tend to own different plots in different locations often considerable distances away from each other, Gut Hermannsberg most resembles a French château, immediately surrounded by 24 of the 30 hectares of vineyard they own.

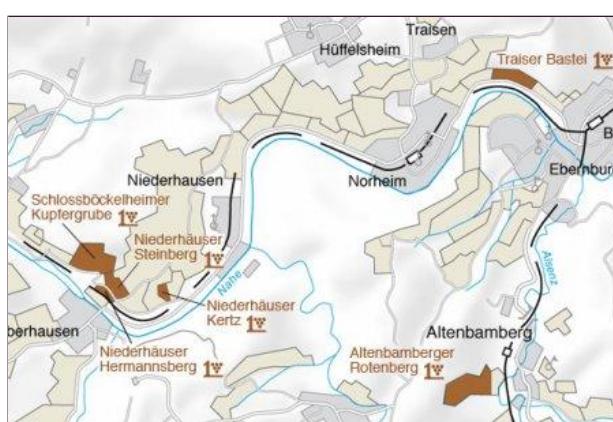
A few weeks ago I was privileged to be invited to a tasting of the estate's Grosses Gewächse and Spätlesen produced under Karsten Peter's stewardship since 2009.

Not realising that the young winemaker was actually the brother-in-law of Tim Frühlich, I may have put my foot in it [you, Michael? - JR] by expressing my personal opinion on the effects of spontaneous fermentation, but the wines presented to me did not give me any reason to doubt my own theories, even with hindsight. In actual fact, Mr Peter's own calculation, that the contribution of natural yeasts coming in on grapes from the vineyard may not amount to more than 1% when compared with the input of cellar flora, seemed to back up my belief that spontaneous yeasts do not actually represent part of the terroir of a site per se.

Neither did I try very hard to endear myself to the third taster and instigator not only of this but of many outstanding tasting events, publishing magnate Ralf Frenzel, who was looking for a development of the winemaker's signature in the run of vintages from 2009 to 2012, whereas I believed that the idiosyncratic conditions of these four years required a completely different approach to each vintage. Fortunately we did not come to blows, as respect for my age was awarded priority over dissent from my opinion!

GROSSE GEWÄCHSE

Gut Hermannsberg produces Grosses Gewächse from three different sites, the Traiser Bastei, Niederhäuser Hermannsberg and Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. See the map below.



In a nutshell these are the vineyards of the estate which accumulate the most sunshine hours and have maximum exposure to sunlight, resulting in fruit with great ripeness and slightly lower acidity levels than their neighbours. The grapes are picked at between 95% and 98% Oechsle, as the young winemaker does not believe in any benefit of must weights beyond that degree for his top dry wines. This philosophy is quite in keeping with a general trend towards slightly less alcohol in Grosses Gewächse, as confirmed by Armin Diel of Schlossgut Diel, also in the Nahe, in a presentation of his Grosses Gewächse a few weeks earlier.

An important element of the new regime is that following a short period of maceration on the skins to extract some tannins for structure, all musts are fermented in small barrels (*Halbstärkfüder*). For the vintages of 2009 and 2010 the use of stainless steel could not be totally avoided as the old stock of wooden barrels was no longer in mint condition. Vinification is undertaken without prior clarification at temperatures of around 25 °C. The finished wine then remains on its full lees until July. This prolonged period of lees

contact with warts and all means a very stringent selection of grape material at harvest time to avoid any impurities in the must. In 2009 this presented few problems as, following a dry summer, the crop was very healthy.

In 2010 a relatively wet late summer and very modest September presented growers with a much higher risk of rot as well as lack of ripeness if grapes were harvested too early. Gut Hermannsberg decided to take a gamble and pick only towards the end of November. This was rewarded with very high extracts, and these were certainly needed to balance the exceptionally high levels of acidity. Contrary to many of his colleagues, Karsten Peter decided not to de-acidify, an omission definitely vindicated by the showing of his Grosse Gewächse.

Another change implemented with the 2010 vintage was the reduction of residual sugar levels in the Grosse Gewächse of the estate. Although Karsten Peter generally believes in the virtues of spontaneous yeasts, the exceptionally late harvest of 2010 only allowed partial implementation of this practice.

With 2011 more or less a perfect vintage, there were no such problems and according to a source who shall remain anonymous, 'almost any idiot could have made a decent wine'. Decent maybe, but the jury is still out whether the model weather conditions of 2011 resulted in wines as complex and fascinating as those of the cool summer and glorious autumn of 2012. Only time will tell!

Gut Hermannsberg, Traiser Bastei Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2009 Nahe 17.5 Drink 2010-2016

Stone fruit, mainly peach, also slightly earthy in the best possible taste. I have been disappointed at how quickly some 2009s have started tiring, but the Bastei is still fresh, steely and has a tactile minerality that gives it plenty of edge. Some people refuse to accept slatey as a tasting perception: I don't think the Bastei is in close proximity to an orchard, but it does have the taste of stone fruit. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Niederhäuser Hermannsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2009 Nahe 17 Drink 2010-2016

The 2009 exhibits a distinct aroma of citrus fruit, with orange the main contender. On the palate it's going down a little more of a grapefruit alley, with a hint of pith and kernel, juicy but quite soft, as to be expected from the vintage. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Schlossbockelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2009 Nahe 17 Drink 2010-2016

The Kupfergrube 2009 exudes a cool fragrance of green fruit which finds confirmation in a fresh ripe apple flavour with a touch of almond kernel and just a hint of herbs. Very lively performer on the palate, maybe a little extra CO₂ to compensate for the lower acidity of the vintage? (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Traiser Bastei Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2010 Nahe 17 Drink 2012-2018

Generally I do not bother too much with colour observations within the range of Grosse Gewächse, but the 2010s from Gut Hermannsberg certainly show much greater depth than any of the other vintages. The Bastei has a golden yellow hue which reflects its extra time on the vines. Although the nose is intriguing with an almost rhubarb-like scent, this could lead to trepidation about excess acidity – not so, as on the palate the texture is incredibly rich as a result of very high extract. Because of the adverse conditions of the preceding months a gamble had to be taken with very late harvesting in November and it paid off! Despite a very sound level of acidity the mouthfeel could almost be described as velvety, were it not for a sound measure of flinty minerality. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Niederhäuser Hermannsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2010 Nahe 17.5 Drink 2012-2018

Pale gold. On the nose gentle citrus fruit aromas. Just like the 2010 Bastei, the Hermannsberg exhibits a really rich texture too, reflection of exceptional extract. Ripe grapefruit mingles with a stony and salty expression of minerality, a fine almond note adding further interest. Despite its relative youth the wine is already showing remarkable complexity. A long finish completes a quality performance. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Schlossbockelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2010 Nahe 16.5 Drink 2012-2017

Pale gold with watery green hue on the rim. A gentle herbal note gives the fragrance an aromatic character and also seems to reflect some influence of spontaneous fermentation. Green herbs continue on the palate, partnered by a pronounced salty minerality and a gentle notion of stone fruit. The texture is generous, though not quite as rich as those of its stable mates. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Traiser Bastei Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2011 Nahe 18 Drink 2012-2018

Ripe apricot and peach are the main components of a pronounced fruity fragrance. This theme continues on the palate, supplemented by a touch of almond kernel with a delicate bitter notion. A stony minerality is making its presence felt and well balanced by a fair amount of acidity. One of the fresher Grosse Gewächse of 2011. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Niederhäuser Hermannsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2011 Nahe 17.5 Drink 2012-2018

The Hermannsberg 2011 is all about citrus fruit, from nose to palate. Reflecting the generosity of the vintage there is a little more orange than grapefruit, and although the acidity comes across as relatively soft, there is enough zest of citrus to provide a lively edge. A delicate notion of sweet almond concludes proceedings. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Schlossbockelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2011 Nahe 17 Drink 2012-2018

A pattern is beginning to emerge for the Kupfergrube, with the herbaceous aromas of spontaneous fermentation once again taking the lead. On the palate the green herbaceous character changes to a softer expression of garden herbs. Although the residual sugar is probably similar for all three Grosse Gewächse, the Kupfergrube does not have the same emphasis on fruit and therefore comes across as slightly drier. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Traiser Bastei Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2012 Nahe 17.5 Drink 2014-2022

The nose is already showing an element of complexity, as stone fruit aromas are complemented by a gentle scent of herbal tea and a delicate notion of fennel, while the initial herbaceous character is losing its dominance. On the palate a stony minerality keeps a firm grip on the early perception, but is well complemented by subtle notes of caraway and fennel. Has already developed well since tasting it first two months ago. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Niederhäuser Hermannsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2012 Nahe 18+ Drink 2014-2022

The herbaceous fermentation aromas of two months ago are beginning to relent and are making room for a fine citrus fruit fragrance, supplemented by a gentle notion of green herbs. Lively and fresh with citrus zest on the palate, the Hermannsberg does not neglect minerality either and a most delicate note of quinine bitterness provides a tasteful edge on the finish. Complexity in the making. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Schlossbockelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Grosses Gewächse 2012 Nahe 18 Drink 2014-2022

Once again the Kupfergrube shows consistency by playing the herbal card, some slightly aromatic notion still exhibiting the herbaceous influence of spontaneous yeasts. On the palate the fruit takes a marginally crisper expression than its stable mates with green herbs adding to the coolness of flavour. A stony minerality and a zesty pith and peel effect prove that complexity takes precedence over body in the all new Grosse Gewächse show of Gut Hermannsberg. (MS)

SPÄTLESEN

Beginning with the 2010 vintage, a strict separation was introduced between vineyards destined for the production of Grosse Gewächse and those designated for fruity Spätlesen. Today the latter come from just two sites, the Altenbamberger Rotenberg and the Niederhäuser Steinberg, the microclimate of which is just a little cooler than that of the dry grand cru sites (see map above).

Gut Hermannsberg, Altenbamberger Rotenberg Riesling Spätlese 2010 Nahe 18 Drink 2012-2025

A very gentle fragrance of exotic fruit finds expression on the palate in a successful composition of grapefruit, orange and mandarin flavours. The character of the vintage is reflected in an invigorating acidity. The finish is marked by an exquisite notion of citrus peel. Lithe and lissome classic of a Spätlese which should give pleasure for many years to come. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Niederhäuser Steinberg Riesling Spätlese 2010 Nahe 17.5 Drink 2012-2025

The Steinberg has a fractionally warmer microclimate than the Rotenberg and this is reflected in a slightly fuller and juicier flavour. The sweet fruit of mandarin and lime is balanced to perfection by a pronounced salty minerality and manages to integrate the sound acidity of the vintage without any problems. Racy, elegant and with great long-term prospects. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Altenbamberger Rotenberg Riesling Spätlese 2011 Nahe 17 Drink 2012-2021

The 2011 Rotenberg impresses with a marked presence of fruit on nose and palate, spanning a wide range from the home-grown stone fruit of local orchards to the downright exotic, with citrus fruit delivering a zesty punch. The generous sweetness of ripe peaches and juicy oranges is well harnessed by a lively acidity. A Spätlese which delights with opulence.

Gut Hermannsberg, Niederhäuser Steinberg Riesling Spätlese 2011 Nahe 17 Drink 2012-2021

The pronounced fruit character of the vintage is partnered by the gentle fragrance of garden herbs and a delicate flinty notion. On the palate the sweet wealth of tropical fruit is well supported by a fine minerality, delicate almond flavour and well-rounded acidity. There is much more to the 2011 Steinberg Spätlese than sheer opulence, as a multi-faceted finish ably demonstrates. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Altenbamberger Rotenberg Riesling Spätlese 2012 Nahe 17.5 Drink 2013-2023

Although the nose is still very low key, fine nuances of honey, peaches and citrus fruit are beginning to make their presence felt. First impressions can be misleading, as though initially the palate appears almost overwhelmed by residual sugar, the Rotenberg 2012 subsequently manages to exhibit the charm and grace so customary of its provenance. Honey and oranges set sweet accents which combine with the fine vibrato of gentle acidity in a harmonious composition. (MS)

Gut Hermannsberg, Niederhäuser Steinberg Riesling Spätlese 2012 Nahe 18 Drink 2013-2023

The ripe fruit aromas may still be a little reluctant to release the full power of their fragrance at this early stage, but there is no more holding back when it comes to unleashing the sweet abundance of juicy nectarine and peach flavours. Add to this the presence of a cool minerality and some vibrant acidity and you begin to recognise complexity in the making, giving rise to high expectations. (MS)

