

# Forever young in Germany's Pfalz



*A regional predilection for bonhomie has fostered a Pfalz winemaking generation that celebrates freshness in both the wines and each other. Above, the Junge Pfalz winners 2022 (© Stephan Presser Photography).*

For the last three years, the Junge Pfalz (Young Pfalz) summer competition has been one of the first events circled on my annual wine calendar. The campaign to promote young regional winemakers delivers a focused snapshot of talent, time, terroir and trend; a compelling window into the current *esprit* of Pfalz viticulture. And as one of seven individuals on the diverse judging panel, year upon year I am amazed at the depth of the sea change taking place in Germany's second-largest winegrowing region.

Part of what makes the competition such a fascinating example of young Palatinate savvy is in the nature of the event itself. Every winemaker must be under 35 years of age, and submit a collection of five wines for the blind tasting that represent the region's most important varieties and/or styles as well as a 'calling card' for the estate. Unlike many competitions where the most technical and safest wines win, this one is open to 'wild cards' – wines that may not have an AP number (ie fit within the classic regional profile for Qualitätswein). And contestants really do submit a dizzying range of contenders, from cloudy and amphora-aged to Sekts made from hybrid varieties, for the jury to evaluate. The 20

winner then receive a year-long platform, as well as critical access to restaurants and retailers, and internal and external networking that for some of these young estates represents the first such exposure of this kind.



Hans-Christoph Stolleis (left) and Florian Haas

### **When we were young**

Although billed as a competition, the Junge Pfalz is ultimately far more about one of the key pillars of the young Pfälzer: community. For newcomers Hans-Christoph Stolleis and Florian Haas of Weingut Stolleis in Neustadt, the internal network has been the biggest prize. ‘It brought me in touch with restaurants, sommeliers and wine merchants’, Stolleis says. ‘Besides that, there is a great exchange within the Junge Pfalz community, tasting together, swapping ideas, helping each other.’

A mere six years after Weingut Seckinger impressed the jury as absolute unknowns with a sleek blend of austerity and distinction, the three brothers, Jonas, Philipp and Lukas, today count among Germany’s superstars, raising the bar for natural wines of voice and expression all with a discernible Pfalz accent. ‘It was the best stage for a young and quickly developing estate’, Jonas Seckinger writes in a recent email. ‘It was the first time that we took part in a competition and to win on the first try was a great feeling.’

For Yvonne Libelli of Riesling-centred Weingut Margarethenhof, and a frequent Junge Pfalz winner, the collaboration also has a critical role in helping smaller private estates develop a unique vinous voice. ‘For the young winemakers, especially from small family wineries without a long history, [the exchange and focused tastings] free them up to find their own way which is maybe also off the

beaten path.’ And this diversity, as a result, ultimately supports a healthier and stronger region.



Ilbesheim bei Landau in the Pfalz

### **Can't we all just get along?**

While Riesling grows on nearly 6,000 of the Pfalz's 23,000 hectares (15,000 out of 57,000 acres), the region has long endured a reputation as the embodiment of the Italian grandmother, throwing spaghetti – or in this case grape varieties – at the cabinet to see what sticks. The region extends from the south-eastern corner of Rheinhessen, near Worms, all the way down to the French border; its eastern flank stretches up to the Rhein Plain, near the great river but never quite on it, while its western edge extends into the hillside country of the Palatinate Forest. The diverse terroir allows varieties as disparate as Viognier, Grüner Veltliner and Syrah to thrive.

While the many terrains and characters of the Pfalz have long supported a 'little bit of everything' mentality, today's growers are taking it one step further, looking to make wines that dig even deeper into their Pfalz DNA. The common message? The power of place, the taste of origin. 'The generations before wanted to show that the Pfalz was capable of making great wines as in Burgundy, Bordeaux and Champagne.' Today, Libelli believes, simply making great wine is no longer enough. Beyond improving the overall quality of the wines, this generation is also eager to establish a recognisable regional identity. And she, as well as many of the other winemakers I spoke with, is particularly proud of the sense of camaraderie and collegiality achieved while defining this common pursuit. 'Maybe the fact that there's more than enough physical space for everyone to spread out encourages an

easy-going approach’, she says. ‘Everyone is looking for their own strength, especially when it comes to Riesling and Spätburgunder, but there’s no need to be competitive. An environment of exchange benefits everyone, and in the end we all know there will be more than enough to go around.’

This philosophy has allowed for the rise of a Pfalz different from the one I learned upon first coming to German wine. The focus back then was on the esteemed wines of the Mittelhardt. Geographically, geologically, and historically, this northern stretch of the Deutsche Weinstrasse (German wine road) beginning near the Zellertal and stretching down to Neustadt an der Weinstrasse was far more staid and sheltered than the Südpfalz, its rugged southern brother. Many of the most respected estates were both literal and figurative German nobility with names containing a ‘von’ or a ‘zu’ or both. And the wines from those iconic crus like Pechstein, Ungeheuer and Kalkofen were proud monoliths rising from their oft volcanic origins to command attention and challenge palates with their weight and gravitas.

Like museum pieces, they were essential to both understand and experience the Pfalz wine canon, but to enjoy? Perhaps less so.

‘The strength of the Pfalz today’, says Jonas Seckinger, ‘is that you can get everything and every style you want, and all wines are made at a crazy high level. The best example is the Junge Pfalz showcasing the different styles of every village and region. And that is what makes the Pfalz so strong.’



Kathrin Otte (© Anna Ziegler)

## The value of healthy ecosystems

‘This generation has had the opportunity to gain an education, travel and exchange’, says Kathrin Otte, who runs the organic-certified estate Weingut Mehling in Deidesheim. ‘Yet we’re all seeking the flavours of home, as well as continuing to keep some fun in the glass.’ For Otte, the healthy ecosystem that comes from working with, not against, each other is as vital to the region’s health as it is to her vines. A realisation, it seems, that is shared by many. Diversity, exchange, a bit of competition and respect for the process; as little as possible, as much as is needed.

Industry figures suggest that approximately 12% of the region’s 1,200 commercial estates are working organically, with numbers steadily rising. And there, too, exchange is at the core of the success. Evidence (oft fragrantly so) can be found in the growing gatherings of biodynamic winegrowers to, among other things, pack and bury Preparat 500, aka *Hornmist*. From household names to hobby growers, these winemakers come together on an equal footing to share experience, ingredients and labour. And what might elsewhere be a solitary affair is in today’s Pfalz an excellent excuse for a party.

### **Something old, something new, something borrowed, something ... red?**

While the Pfalz grows more Riesling than any other single place in the world, ironically it seems the region’s common thread is red, not white. Pinot Noir (aka Spätburgunder), although comprising a mere 7.2% of the region’s total plantings, is that elusive variety every grower seems eager to embrace.

‘Pinot in the Pfalz is a love story, albeit a young one’, said Joseph Greilinger, managing director of marketing for the regional consortium, [Pfalzwein](#). ‘It started in the Südpfalz with Weingut Becker, velvety soft, filigreed and balanced. Then Ökonomierat Rebholz got into the game. Wehrheim too. It next moved north to Frank John, Weingut Christmann and [Rings](#), who are developing their own clear and distinctive style.’

When Sophie Christmann started working with her father at their Neustadt estate, one of her first solo projects was to revive the Pinot programme. While the estate has long held the vineyards, they were rarely given much attention. Christmann cleared one of the winery buildings of an old restaurant and transitioned to team Pinot with 150 barrels in the repurposed ageing cellar. Yet she admits that the identity of Pfalz Pinot is a story still being written. ‘It’s easy for me to define the heart of Pfalz Riesling’, she said, ‘but when it comes to

Spätburgunder, I still have a way to go. Pfalz Pinot just hasn't been around for that long yet.'

With the decision to increase the focus on Pinot in his home estate, Stolleis, like many in his generation, sought out apprenticeships with the pioneers who helped put German reds on the world map. 'I spent vintage 2018 at Konrad Salwey in Baden and 2019 with Andy and Steffen Rings in Freinsheim to learn more about making Pinot. Today, we have 15% Pinot in our vineyards and I'm planning to increase that to 20% in a couple of years. In 2023, I will be planting it [Pinot] in the Gimmeldinger Biengarten, a quiet, warm, heavy-limestone site which has been known for Riesling, but I think Pinot will be perfect there in the future.' With sleek restraint and svelte fruit, his wines – from entry-level to cru – are not only worthy of watching, but still, at least at the time of writing, an absolute bargain.



Jonas, Lukas and Philipp Seckinger (© Tilo Wiedensohler)

### **Vive La Pfalz**

Striking the balance between individual expression and common messaging is the challenge for the new Pfalz. Too much exchange and the wines run the danger of becoming interchangeable. The goal is to be recognisable but never commutable. I am, however, confident that the generation making wine today is in good hands, channelling a beautiful blend of curiosity and confidence. 'My grandfather always talks about how the wine culture in the Pfalz changes every 30 years', says Jonas Seckinger, 'and I think we are in a changing time right now. There's a lot of innovation, and also a look back to natural styles that are more than 100, 150 years old. Tradition is a matter of definition.'

wild acidity carries the lithe palate with dizzying momentum. A racer slaloming through the trees dodging ripeness and fat at every perfectly executed, razor-sharp turn. Lemon, salt and quince. Much more structured than the Ölberg – here we feel the complex forest cool. Stony, spicy and long. (PS)

Drink

2022

–

2028

**17.5 +**

### Peter Stolleis, Gimmeldinger Biengarten Riesling trocken 2020 Pfalz

Ripe orchard fruit with bright citrus and expressive spice. Cool, green tones and meadow flowers. Juicy concentration lends it a sweeter touch than the numbers (1.5 g/l of residual sugar) suggest. A delightful citrus approachability keeps the palate's energy high, yet still remarkably balanced. As this is only the second vintage, Hans-Christoph's winemaking feet are still quite wet. Yet, this is already showing a skillful restraint and understatement. Both wine and grower have excellent future potential. (PS)

12.5%

Drink

2022

–

2026

**16.5**

### Peter Stolleis, Pinot Noir trocken 2020 Pfalz

Vibrant aromas of cranberry and hibiscus, with a definitive red twang and woody spice of juniper and rosemary. Cool and sleek on the juicy palate. The same deliberate restraint is felt as in the Riesling with every fruit that comes into play. A blend of clones and young vines from Burgundy mass selections lend texture and layers. Lively acidity, chalky finesse and stunningly long. (PS)

12.5%

Drink

2022

–

2027

16.5 +

**Peter Stolleis, Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Pinot Noir trocken 2019 Pfalz**

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*Vines over 30 years old, from the Mariafelder clone. Low yields. A portion undergoes whole-bunch pressing. 50% aged in new French oak for 24 months.*

Deep black fruit, damson plum, wild cherry, blackberry. Bits of baking chocolate and black-pepper spice. Velvety, nuanced palate with a creamy concentration and surprising depth. Polished, silken tannins and taut acidity come together in a lingering, stony finish. (PS)

12.5%

Drink

2023

–

2028

16.5

**Villa Hochdörffer, Riesling trocken 2021 Pfalz**

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*RS 4.5 g/l.*

Aromas of ripe peach, bright citrus and appley goodness accented with a touch of limestone smoke. Refreshing and expressive Riesling palate skilfully captures the cool of the vintage and the warmth of the region. Dry by design, but with enough residual sweetness to keep the supple concentration confidently charming.

Persistent minerality and a long lemony finish. (PS)

12%

Drink

2022

–

2028

16.5

**Klaus & Mathias Wolf, Birkweiler Kastanienbusch vom Schiefer Riesling trocken 2020 Pfalz**

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*From vines over 40 years old. Hand-harvested. Fermented with ambient yeast and aged in stainless steel.*