

PAST FORWARD

THREE VISIONARIES WHO ARE LOOKING
BACK TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF
GERMAN RIESLING AHEAD.

WORDS VALERIE KATHAWALA

Anyone who thinks German Riesling is just one thing clearly hasn't drunk much of the stuff. Those who are alert to the electrifying array German wine now offers know that this grape is a shape-shifting muse. An invigorating exchange of ideas and energy across borders and generations injected with creative confidence and virtuosic skill are supercharging German wine—especially Riesling. These are wines that speak to the zeitgeist: low alcohol, high acid, and totally, utterly of place. As with any movement, it takes mavericks and visionaries to move the needle. These three individualists teach us what it takes to propel a variety into the future.

Lorchhausen, Rheingau

MARKUS BASLER

EVA FRICKE WEINGUT EVA FRICKE, RHEINGAU

Eva Fricke has high standards. In Germany, that puts her in good company. What sets her apart is eyebrow-raising determination: to ensure environmental stewardship and achieve exacting terroir expression, to bring that precision from vineyard to cellar and to the idea that the market will meet you where you set those standards.

This approach has taken her far—too far, apparently, for the taste of whoever took several rows of perfectly ripened Riesling grapes out of her Rheingau vineyards. Twice.

In October 2022, a parcel of Fricke's Riesling grapes from the Lorcher Krone vineyard, a historical site where Fricke crafted a 2019 Trockenbeerenauslese that received 100 points from renowned critics, were nearing optimal ripeness. They were kaleidoscopically complex in flavor and aroma, honeyed and concentrated by botrytis, made eternal by Riesling's legendary acidity. All through the growing season, Fricke's vineyard team had successfully fended off disease and birds. Harvest was tantalizingly close.

"We kept it low key and wondered what we should do with them," recalls Fricke. "It was just a tiny production."

Before she had a chance to decide, the grapes disappeared—an apparent theft. Last year, it happened again.

What is it about Fricke's wines that triggers such envy or desire?

"What I do here didn't fall from heaven," says Fricke. "It comes from years of handcrafted, detailed work and blood, sweat and tears, things going wrong and coming back from that."

Fricke grew up in northern Germany—beer country—without a family winery or generational knowledge

to inherit. But an early stint at a South African estate sparked her wine interest. She returned to Germany to study at Geisenheim, the country's leading wine school, in the heart of the Rheingau. When she graduated, she stayed in the region. At the time, it was a curious choice for a smart, ambitious young grower to settle into an area better known for conservative winemaking and big, historic domains.

She worked first for noted traditionalist J.B. Becker, then rose to a top role at international powerhouse producer Weingut Leitz. In 2006, she set out on her own and started to hone the purist-minimalist approach that has become her signature.

One by one, she collected forgotten Riesling vineyards, like Krone, adding more as she could. Her main criteria for selection were old vines, a minimum of 25–30 and up to 80 years old. Steep sites and hard work came with the territory. Early exposure to the dangers of chemical farming convinced her to practice organic viticulture, minimizing copper where possible and occasionally working without it. She rented cellar space, put together a team and began applying her keen understanding of theory and practice to her site-specific wines.

Today, she works with a patchwork of 50 parcels across nearly 45 acres in Lorch, Kiedrich and Eltville. She taps into the expressiveness of Riesling on slate and quartzite soils and interrogates what she calls "a history of taste."

Fricke says that the greatest wines she has ever encountered were late-19th century Rheingau Rieslings. "They were so vivid and complex," she says. "It makes you question, what happened in those years?"

Answering this question includes hunting down the genetics of old Riesling plantings. She is repopulating

sites with massale selections (vines propagated from cuttings of existing material) from historic old vines. This year, she is introducing fruit and nut trees into her vineyards. This was a common practice, she learned through research, in Rheingau vineyards before the region's rise to wine monolith.

Countering the widespread return to old wood casks in German cellars, Fricke has built herself a sparkling cathedral of stainless steel. She admits that wood appeals, but her above-ground rented space lacks the climate for it. The array of tanks of various heights and widths calls to mind a great pipe organ, on which Fricke composes intricate harmonies.

The young team she has recently assembled to assist her includes a cellar-master from Japan and a vineyard manager from Portugal. Fricke values their far-ranging views. Under her direction, they hone Rieslings that honor her holy trinity of salinity, acidity and sugar, judiciously but unapologetically anointed with the preservative sulfur dioxide.

"The parameters come from the vineyard," she says, but the balance and blending are Fricke's. These are "moments of truth—moments when you have to really taste, create and decide." Her principled decisions add up, layer on layer, like the flavors and textures of her wines. The results are striking, like crystalline pools, each with its own depth and quality of refreshment.

Since 2019, Fricke has offered her wines *en primeur*, also known as wine futures or pre-release purchases, as the Burgundians and Bordelais do. This further elevates her wines to a level of covetability and collectability. It is the sort of assurance that harkens to a past when German Riesling's status was unrivaled worldwide. And it speaks to a future when the same may again be true.



KAI SCHÄTZEL AND JULE EICHBLATT WEINGUT SCHÄTZEL/KOMMUNE 3000, RHEINHESSEN

A German winemaker with a bankable name and legendary vineyards who adds the words *Kommune 3000* (Commune 3000) to his estate clearly thinks differently. Kai Schätzel, of the Rheinhessen winery Weingut Schätzel, which has rocketed to acclaim over the past decade, and his partner, Jule Eichblatt, are renegade futurists like that. They are creating wines—and systems—for a time yet to come.

“How would we behave now if we were looking back from the year 3000?” asks Schätzel. That mindset animates everything they do.

This is edgy by any standard. But it’s particularly striking coming from the owner of a 600-year-old estate in the heart of Rheinhessen’s iconic Roter Hang, or red slope.

“We are in the very lucky situation that we are in between the worlds,” says Schätzel. “We have a connection to the classical wine world and we are one of the bridges to the new wine world. It’s a liquid and an intellectual exchange.”

That exchange started in 2008, when Schätzel took over his parents’ domain in the wine village of Nierstein. Straight away, he began to farm organically. He soon realized this approach was bidirectional.

“The funny thing is, and perhaps it’s the biggest truth in agriculture, when you start listening to nature, nature starts listening to you,” he explains. “So if you come with a new mentality to the vineyards and you start looking to the details, the impact is dramatic.”

Tasting his family’s library of Rieslings from over half a century ago was the next revelation. “The wines were far more stable,” he says. “And not because they had more sulfites!

We realized it was because they had lower pH [higher acidity] and [lower] alcohol levels.”

He started to think about how he could bring this stability back to the wines. That, in turn, was an impulse for a new approach in the vineyards.

“We realized that if you slow down ripeness in the vineyards, you change everything,” says Schätzel. And there it is: nature, working both ways.

Schätzel increased the shade over grape clusters (through experimental pergola-like trellising), biodiversity (by adding sheep and planting vegetables) and density in plantings (including a parcel planted on single stakes, as was common in medieval Rheinhessen) into the vineyards. These were all “things that take energy out of the system,” he says, returning growing conditions to something more like what they were pre-climate change. Sure enough, the grapes now deliver more concentrated flavor with lighter body and less alcohol.

Back in his 14th-century cellar, deep below the rambling winery compound, carved oak casks line stone walls. But the time-darkened casks aren’t museum pieces. They are living vessels incubating mind-bending Rieslings. Schätzel and Eichblatt track each wine’s development using clear glass “indicator” bottles drawn from the barrel. They offer a visual check on each wine’s evolution.

Normally, a German Riesling quietly aging in wood wouldn’t have much to show. But Schätzel and Eichblatt work with natural flor yeasts where and when nature allows. They have found that flor can stabilize their dry Rieslings without sulfites, fining or filtration.

The couple also experiment with solera-aged Riesling. Their six-vintage “17–22” bottling is a prime example of the layered complexity, vibrance and

natural balancing that blending across time allows.

“Solera makes us far more relaxed than ever before,” says Schätzel. “It can heal the energy and character of nature. It lets the vintages be more self-confident. We trust in nature to bring it back together in the end.”

Tasting through the barrels, Schätzel and Eichblatt speak less of flavors, and more of the moods of the wines in progress: “grumpy,” “relaxed,” “demanding,” “charming,” “super serious,” “crying to be bottled.” These minimal-intervention Rieslings, farmed with scrupulous attention to balance and energy, stabilized by years on the lees, are dry yet vividly concentrated, complex and loaded with savory, salty flavors—and whistle clean. They are wines to drink, inhabit and age alongside.

Weingut Schätzel earned early acclaim for its off-dry Kabinett wines. Although now focused on dry wines, Schätzel continues to work with this style, albeit in a separate cellar area he winkingly calls “the sulfite zone,” since wines with residual sugar require the common preservative for stabilization.

Schätzel and Eichblatt share an understanding of change as a constant, nothing to fear, but rather a welcome impulse to reinvention and action. *Kommune 3000* is an outgrowth of that refreshing idea. This is their playground for creating zippy pét-nats in returnable, reusable flip-top beer bottles and a low alcohol hop water-Riesling under crown cap. They teach small-group classes that bring curious students and fellow growers to learn at the estate. The couple even toys with starting something more like a campus than a winery.

“In German, we say *nicht lange fackeln*—just do it,” says Eichblatt. What they are doing already feels more like a future within grasp.

COURTESY WEINGUT SCHÄTZEL