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Drinking Wine and Saving Ancient Steep Vineyards

Interview with winemaker Martin Müllen (Mosel)

Anke Klitzing

Abstract: I spoke with winemaker Martin Müllen about the challenges and rewards of cultivating and maintaining the ancient steep vineyards along the Mosel river, which yield amazingly complex Riesling wines and have been renowned for centuries.

Keywords: *food writing, food studies, wine, Mosel, Moselle, Steillagen, vineyards, winemaking, Slow Food*



When you drive across the Hunsrück hills from the south towards Traben-Trarbach, the steep slopes of the Mosel river cannot be seen for a long time. Open fields gently roll on your left and right. But then, the road descends into forest. High tree trunks rise on both sides of the road; it is dark and slightly clammy. The GPS says 4km to go when the trees suddenly thin out and the road swings into a sun-filled curve. The first vines are combed up the steep slopes. Nestled among them, a small white sign with a green snail. This is the “Trarbacher Hühnerberg”, a natural amphitheater that, on its slate-covered slopes, catches precious sunshine and shapes it into grapes for deliciously complex wines. 19 years ago, this south-facing steep vineyard was a Sleeping Beauty that the [Weingut Müllen](#), with the support of the [Slow Food Germany vineyard patrons](#), raised from its slumber.

Mr Müllen, what are the challenges in steep-slope winegrowing?

In the steep slopes (Steillagen) you have to work everything by hand, in wind and weather. Since you often have your hands up, the rain keeps running into your sleeves and you get wet to the skin. It takes a lot of working hours – up to 1,600 hours a year per hectare. That is the average annual working time of an office worker! In addition, the yield from the steep slopes is usually lower. You have to sell the wine for at least € 8 per bottle, better for € 10.

Martin Müllen among the vines of the Hühnerberg

Why do you do this work?

The finest wines come from the steep slopes, and that won't change in a hurry. The steep slopes have a better microclimate, and the ground is often incomparable. Our steep slopes are very stony, and this is ideal for the vines. They do not like dense, heavy soils. The stones loosen the floor and make it permeable. Thus, water enters deeper layers and is then accessible to the vines



even in dry periods. Even in hot summers like in 2003, the stoniest vineyards have continued to produce the best wines, full of vitality, despite their low acidity. If it rains heavily, loose soils can absorb a lot of water at once and prevent soil erosion. In other vineyards, erosion damage is common, but nothing happens in the steep slopes.

What happens when steep slopes are neglected?

If steep slopes are no longer cultivated, it creates problems. Fungal diseases such as downy and powdery mildew can take hold there, and the spores spread through the air into neighboring vineyards. The untamed shrubbery also allows wild boars to settle in. These then devastate surrounding cemeteries, gardens and parks, or, even worse for us winegrowers, they eat our grapes. Damages easily run as high as €100 000 – a real threat to our livelihood. We had problems with wild boars in the Hühnerberg, until we secured our sites with electric fences.



On the other hand, there are a number of insects and animals that settle in well-kept vineyards because it is open and sunny there – lizards, fire salamander and the rare Apollo butterflies. The stones in the soil warm up and become heat stores. The vineyards are surrounded by forest, and fallow slopes quickly turn back into forest. These animals don’t survive there.

What is the impact of the [Slow Food](#) vineyard patrons project on your work in the steep slopes?

When we started with the Trarbacher Hühnerberg and the vineyard patrons project, we were still a very young winery – we started very small, with 0.9 hectares, in 1991. The Trarbacher Hühnerberg was the first vineyard I owned outright. When we bought it in the year 2000, about 70% of the vineyard area had run to seed – there were fir trees, birch trees and dense blackberry hedges. Only the stakes upon which we train our vines were still visible. But the wine we got from the existing vines was so good that we said to ourselves: “We have to save this vineyard!” A part of the Hühnerberg was mentioned as an Erste Lage (top vineyard) in the vineyard maps of 1897, which was not common at that time. Only 2-5% of all Mosel vineyards fall into this category.



There were no Riesling vines in the Slow Food patron vineyard, but we wanted to grow Riesling. We began the collaboration by planting the vineyard together with the vineyard patrons in July 2001. That was a great thing. Many of the Slow Food patrons have become loyal customers. For a young, rather small winery, this is invaluable. The patrons come to the annual vineyard patron fest (party), get to know the winery and the vineyard, and go home with a better impression of our work and the heart and soul we put into the steep slopes. Over time, a beautiful bond has developed with our patrons.

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What is the future of the steep slopes?

We continue to work with tradition, but we also consider how to sensibly improve the work in the steep slopes. Machines for steep vineyards exist, but they are so heavy that they compact the soil. This causes great erosion damage as the water simply slips off. I sometimes see ditches up to 40cm deep in vineyards, several times a year after heavy rain. This ruins the soil.

But other technological novelties offer opportunities – drones, for example. Unfortunately, we cannot completely avoid the spraying of pest control products, but with drones we can spray at very specific target areas, and therefore less, and without putting pressure on the soft ground.

I think it is important that we create enthusiasm among young winegrowers for the steep slopes. Due to climate change, flat vineyards are now also becoming more attractive on the Mosel, where work can be done with less effort and with machines. But the steep slopes were once the breadwinners of the region, and it would be a pity if they were to disappear. They also simply make the finest wines.



Note: the Slow Food Germany vineyard patrons project is only open to residents of Germany.