

Recovery Rather Than Reinvention: Sybille Kuntz, Lieser, and the Reassertion of Dry Riesling in the Modern Mosel

By Charles Kirkwood

In the early 1980s, in the village of Lieser, the best vineyard land in the Mosel was being given away.

Not literally. But close enough. The steep parcels of Niederberg-Helden — slate that French surveyors had ranked among the region's finest under Napoleon, that Prussian tax assessors had confirmed again on their maps of 1868 — were coming up for sale because the families who owned them could no longer afford to farm them. The slopes ran to seventy percent. No tractor could climb them. Low stone walls closed the foot of each row, so even where a machine might have reached, it could not turn. Every task had to be done by hand, all year, on dangerous ground. And the wine that hand-labor produced was selling, by late 1983, for around two Deutschmarks a liter. Below the cost of making it.

So the owners let it go, and their children, who had watched the work and the money, did not want it back.

One person was buying.

The question that act raises is the one worth holding onto, because the whole story answers it. Why would anyone buy the steepest, most expensive, least profitable vineyard in a region that had stopped paying for quality? To understand Sybille Kuntz, you have to understand what made that land worthless in 1984 — and what it had been worth before anyone alive to sell it was born.

Lieser is old in the way only a few places on the Mosel are old. It sits where a small river of the same name slips into the larger one, on a bend that opens the slopes to the south and turns them toward the sun. The Roman poet Ausonius, riding through the valley in the fourth century, named it in his *Mosella* — *Lesura* — and by 817 it appears in the documentary record as *Lisura*, already a settlement defined by its vines. The remains of a Roman wine press have been found in the area. Wine here is not a tradition someone introduced. It is closer to the reason the place exists.

For most of that long history, the land did not belong to the people who worked it. It belonged to the Church. Himmerod Abbey, the Cistercian monastery founded in the hills above the Mosel in 1135, accumulated vineyards across the Middle Mosel, Lieser among them, and the monasteries were not passive landlords. They were the region's agricultural managers — building cellars, keeping records, deciding which slopes deserved the labor and which did not, accumulating across centuries a body of knowledge about where great wine could be made.

That knowledge outlived the institutions that built it. When Napoleon's armies redrew the map and the monastic holdings were secularized in the early nineteenth century, the vineyards passed for the first time into private hands, carrying their reputations with them like deeds.

The reputation of the slopes above Lieser was already established. The French administration that reorganized the region assessed its vineyards methodically and ranked the best of them, and the steep slate that would later be gathered under the name Niederberg-Helden stood among the elite. Two generations on, the Prussians did the same, more formally, for tax purposes — the survey associated with the cadastral inspector Clotten in 1868, which colored the finest sites of the Mosel, Saar, and Ruwer in differentiated tiers and gave the export trade its first systematic map of which hillsides were worth the most. Niederberg-Helden was again near the top. It was not a sentimental judgment. It reflected the prices those wines had already proven they could fetch.

The vineyard itself, it should be said, is not a single ancient parcel but a modern composite. The name joins two formerly separate sites, Niederberg and Helden, with a third, Süßenberg, folded in as recently as 2003. Today the whole runs to some thirty-three hectares, classified by the VDP — the association of Germany's leading estates — as a Grosse Lage, the highest rung, dedicated to Riesling alone. It faces south to southwest, climbs from a hundred and ten to a hundred and ninety meters, and tilts at sixty to eighty percent over weathered Devonian slate. The numbers describe a place that punishes everyone who works it and rewards only those who refuse to stop.

For most of the twentieth century, the custodian of its reputation was Schloss Lieser, the castle estate that from 1904 served as the press house and cellar for the extensive Mosel and Saar holdings of the Freiherr von Schorlemer. Under the Schorlemer family the estate carried a serious name through decades of the century. Then, in the mid-1970s, it was sold to a large bottler, and the attention that great vineyards require drained away. The decline that followed was not unique to Lieser. It was the local face of something happening across the whole region — and it is the second half of the story, the one that explains why the best classified slate in the village ended up for sale at the price of the labor it demanded.

The Mosel most people carry in their heads is a sweet-wine region. Spätlese and Auslese, residual sugar held in balance against bright acidity, the great off-dry whites that age for decades. That picture is real. It is also recent, and it has crowded out an older one.

Before the First World War, the Rieslings of the Mosel, Saar, and Ruwer were among the most expensive white wines in the world. They poured in the royal courts and grand restaurants of London, Paris, Berlin, and St. Petersburg, and they fetched prices that ran with the first growths of Bordeaux. Riesling covered nearly ninety percent of the region's slopes. And the wines that

built that reputation were not, by the descriptions that survive, mostly sweet. They were dry, or nearly so — austere, high in acid, mineral, built for the table and for long cellaring, the slow and complete ripening of a northern slate slope rendered into a wine of unusual precision.

The dry Riesling that looks, today, like a modern affectation was the Mosel's native tongue. Sweetness was the accent it picked up later.

It picked it up after the Second World War, and for reasons that had little to do with what the slopes could do. New cellar technology made residual sugar easy to hold and to repeat — to arrest a fermentation cleanly and keep the wine stable in bottle, which earlier generations could not reliably manage. Export markets, Britain and America especially, preferred the soft to the severe, and a sweeter Mosel sold more easily abroad than a bracing one. The legendary 1959 vintage fixed lush German sweetness in the popular imagination, and the trade had every reason to keep it there. Then the 1971 German wine law graded the entire category by ripeness and residual sugar rather than by the worth of the vineyards themselves — a system that rewarded sugar over site — and the drift hardened into law.

The deepest damage, though, came from the ground up, and here Kuntz names the mechanism more bluntly than most historians dare. The Mosel of the 1960s, she points out, was a smaller and poorer and better place. "In the sixties Mosel Riesling was rare and expensive," she says, "and the acreage under vine was much smaller and the yield per hectare much lower." Then the fertilizer arrived. "By the eighties the use of artificial fertilizer pumped up yield levels dramatically, and the acreage of the Mosel region grew in size also dramatically, and the quality went in turn dramatically down." More land in production. Yields per hectare more than doubled, climbing past a hundred hectoliters where fifty had once been the ceiling. The wine thinned and simplified into volume — light, sweet, cheap Riesling for a market that had been taught to want exactly that.

The region had not lost its slopes, or its slate, or its grape. It had lost its standards. And when the surplus finally broke the market, the wines that had once made the Mosel famous were the first to become unaffordable to make. Germany's wine production had swollen from 5.9 million hectoliters in 1969 to 15.4 million by 1982, and prices collapsed under the weight of it. Average must prices fell from 197 Deutschmarks per hectoliter in 1980 and 1981 to 83 just two years later — a drop of nearly sixty percent — and profits across the industry fell by roughly half. Mosel Riesling's particular curse was its acidity, once the signature of a wine built to last, now treated as a flaw to be corrected. Growers softened the severity with sugar-water, a practice common enough to carry a name, *Nassverbesserung*, the sweetening of a wine the market would otherwise refuse. By late 1983 the wine itself was worth around two Deutschmarks a liter, at or below what it cost to grow.

The slopes that paid that price first were the steepest and the finest — the ones that demanded the most hands and returned the least margin. Which is how the best classified slate in Lieser came to be sitting unwanted, waiting for a buyer who valued what the market had decided was worthless.

She came to it from outside the cellar, which is part of why she could see it.

The Kuntz family had been in Lieser since the sixteenth century, threaded into the village's wine economy through the trades that held it together — growing grapes, making and trading barrels, dealing in wine, filtering and bottling for other growers, producing wine on commission for those who had none of their own equipment. They were not lords of a great estate, and the modern winery makes no claim of unbroken ownership stretching back five hundred years. From all of that history, Sybille inherited only a few small parcels, in Lieser Schlossberg and in Niederberg-Helden. What the centuries gave her was not land so much as proximity — a family fluent in every part of how wine was made and moved, the kind of knowledge that accumulates in a household over generations and cannot be acquired any faster.

What turned that inheritance into a conviction was not the vineyard but a shop. In 1981, while studying business administration in Wuppertal, Sybille opened a wine shop to pay for her studies, and on its shelves she set dry whites from the Loire and white Burgundy beside the light, sweet wine of her own river. The comparison did the rest. "For me the Riesling wines available at the time were light and sweet and cheap," she says. "I was missing a dry Riesling like from the Loire or in Burgundy that I was selling already in my wine shop."

The gap was not theoretical. It stood on her own shelves, bottle against bottle, every working day for three years.

So when she started her estate in 1984 with just over half a hectare, and took over the small family holding of around a hectare and a half full-time in 1990, the dry Riesling was not a style she stumbled into. It was decided in advance, and it had a model. "To make a dry Riesling was a conscious decision from the beginning," she says, "ideally as a food wine on the example of Burgundy and Loire." Sweetness was not banished — but it was demoted to a consequence rather than a goal, permitted only in the years botrytis arrived and earned it, climbing through Auslese, Beerenauslese, and Trockenbeerenauslese when nature, not the buyer, supplied the conditions. She was not arguing with Mosel tradition. She was reaching past the recent one to the older one beneath it. The dry wine she missed on her shelves was the wine the Mosel had made when its bottles ruled the tables of Europe — and had since forgotten how to make.

Her parents let her do it. They had their own style of wine and kept making it; she helped them with theirs, and they let her pursue hers. "My parents were proud and loyal and let me do what

I wanted to accomplish in my own way," she says — two generations under one roof, the older Mosel and the one she was reaching back to recover, working side by side without a quarrel.

That is what makes the act in Lieser legible. The growers selling Niederberg-Helden were not wrong about the work. "They sold me their vineyard land in the Niederberg-Helden because it was for them too steep and they couldn't use the tractor technology," Kuntz recalls. "And in most cases there was a wall at the lower end of the vineyard row which made it even more complicated to use machinery. And for all that hard work there was not enough money to be made for a bottle of wine." Their children did not want it. Every practical judgment those families made was correct. The slopes were brutal, the walls were real, the money was not there.

They were wrong about one thing only — whether anyone would ever again be willing to make the argument the slope demanded. She had stood behind a counter watching good wine find its buyers, and she drew the opposite conclusion. "I never feared hard work," she says, "and always believed that good quality will always and eventually find a customer, like the Loire or the Burgundy wines."

So she bought the slopes nobody wanted, from the 1990s onward, parcel by parcel — patiently, opportunistically, as the difficult land kept coming free. The result is a mosaic rather than a holding. Mapped out, the estate's parcels scatter in small red slivers up and down both flanks of the Lieser's side valley and along the Mosel front, dozens of separate lots strung across the slopes wherever steep old-vine ground happened to come loose. In Niederberg-Helden the holdings reach some eight hectares without ever consolidating into a block; the largest pieces there are single hectares, and three of them sit apart from one another at different heights on the face. The estate's one genuinely large parcel — four hectares in a single stretch — lies elsewhere, in the Schlossberg, up toward the steep blue-slate head of the side valley known as Pauls Tal. Across Niederberg-Helden, Lieser Schlossberg, Rosenlay, and Bernkastel-Kues the whole comes to around twenty hectares, the vines between forty-five and a hundred years old. The oldest, planted by massal selection in the 1920s, were still alive when she acquired them, and six decades of roots driven through Devonian slate do something no young vine on easy ground can imitate. What the market read as the liability — old, low-yielding, scattered, unmechanizable — was, to her, precisely the asset.

She plants nothing but Riesling, and her reasoning is not sentimental but physical. The Mosel, as she describes it, is a machine for ripening this one grape: the steep slopes catching the low northern sun, the river below working "like a mirror," the slate taking the heat of the day and giving it back to the vines through the night. "For me it's the best location to make Riesling," she says — and Riesling, in her view, is the grape with the architecture to translate it, refreshing, high in acid, what she calls a pure variety. The VDP's modern classification of Niederberg-Helden

as a Grosse Lage did not create that greatness; it ratified what the Prussians had recorded in 1868 and the French before them. What her acquisitions restored was not the vineyard's quality, which had never left, but a custodian willing to farm it as if the quality still mattered.

She is, for what it's worth, unsentimental about the famous name itself. Ask her what would change if Niederberg-Helden vanished tomorrow and she does not reach for poetry. "If you mean only the name, then nothing would change for us," she says. "We don't sell the name of the vineyard. We sell the quality of the wine in the bottle." The classification is a line on the back label, a detail. The slope earns its place by what it does, not what it is called.

What it does, it does mostly outside. The conviction underneath the whole estate is that wine is made in the vineyard and merely finished in the cellar, and Kuntz states it plainly: by the time the fruit comes in, she says, the quality is already ninety percent settled in the tank. The year's real labor is in the rows — the pruning, the tying, the endless hand-work on slopes too steep for anything else — and the cellar's job is to stay out of the way. "It's very pure and direct," she says of the winemaking. "We don't use any additives. It's fermented with indigenous yeast. Everything is done by nature."

The methods follow from that restraint rather than from any recipe. For the classic dry Rieslings, the fruit is given a short maceration in a closed press, the juice allowed to settle for around half a day, then fermented by its own wild yeasts in stainless steel at sixteen to eighteen degrees, slowly, over six to eight weeks, and left on its lees until a single filtration in the spring. Nothing about it is dramatic. That is the point. The range itself is disciplined to the edge of austerity: a single wine in each category, the labels color-coded to the ripeness of the berries at harvest — the greener fruit giving a brighter, appley wine; the mineral, concentrated bottling drawn from the oldest vines, the hundred-year-old plants, standing as the estate's most serious expression of dry Riesling. The first three tiers — Qualitätswein, Kabinett, Spätlese — are dry by default. Only when botrytis arrives do the wines turn sweet, and then they climb honestly through Auslese and beyond. "Every wine has its own profile in taste and aroma," she says. The structure is not imposed on the vintage; it is read off it.

Even her one concession to modernity is decided by use rather than doctrine. The estate bottles its first two categories under screw cap — the Qualitätswein and Kabinett that pour by the glass in restaurants, where freshness matters more than the ceremony of a cork. From Spätlese upward, the grand-cru wines built to age, she returns to natural cork, which she still regards as the best closure a serious wine can have. She is not an evangelist for either. She matches the closure to the wine's purpose, the same way she decides everything else.

The farming follows the same instinct, and it is here that her language stops being practical and turns to memory.

Biodynamics, in most mouths, is a philosophy of the present tense — Rudolf Steiner, the preparations, the lunar calendar, an argument made in the language of the avant-garde. Germany has a particular claim on it; Demeter, the certifying body, originated there, and the country adopted Steiner's agricultural ideas earlier than most. But Kuntz does not talk about Steiner. She talks about her grandparents. What the chemical era destroyed, she says, was "the connection and respect to the soil and vineyard land" — ground worn out by artificial fertilizer, the sub-soil life killed off by weed killer, fungicides deployed to manage the ever-growing yields and the swollen canopies those yields produced. Before all of it, she points out, normal farming was simply natural farming, with yields well under fifty hectoliters a hectare instead of the hundred-plus that became routine. And then the sentence that gives the whole estate away: "Biodynamic farming is viticulture like my grandparents did it. The change came with the generation of my father and the chemical help."

The break in the Mosel's story, in her telling, has a date and a household. The thing she farms back toward is not a doctrine she adopted but a practice her own family was talked out of within living memory — the same shape as the dry Riesling, the same recovery of something recent enough to remember and old enough to have been forgotten by almost everyone else.

The timeline bears the reading out. She abandoned herbicides and synthetic pesticides in 1990, the moment she took the estate on full-time. The certificates came much later, and for reasons that had nothing to do with the farming itself. "I wanted to start organic from the beginning," she says. It was customers, increasingly, who wanted proof — a stamp on the back label that told them the practice was real — and so she began the certification process around 2010, reached organic certification in 2013, and produced her first Demeter-certified biodynamic vintage in 2016. The farming did not change to earn any of it. The paperwork merely caught up to what had been true for more than two decades.

And it remained, even then, an outlier's position. When she was certified, only four or five estates on the entire Mosel were farming biodynamically. Across all of Germany the number was perhaps seventy; in France it ran past a thousand, common enough there to seem ordinary. The handful of German peers who had taken biodynamics seriously as a path to quality rather than a fringe — estates like Clemens Busch, downriver in the Mosel, or Peter Jakob Kühn in the Rheingau — were still, in the regional scheme of things, a rounding error. She had not joined a movement. She had gone back to the way the land was farmed before her father's generation accepted the chemists' help, and she had done it largely alone.

There is one honest knot in the story, and she ties it herself.

In 1995 she married Markus Riedlin, and the marriage was also a partnership. Riedlin had trained at Geisenheim, Germany's foremost wine university, and then spent eight years making

wine near Lake Erie, in western New York, before coming home. He arrived, she says, with "the same clean thinking" about winemaking she had already built her estate around — so closely matched that there was, in her telling, no fight about direction, only agreement. The estate describes his arrival as the "go" for further development, and the word is exact: he intensified a project already underway rather than redirecting one.

What he brought that was genuinely new was in the vineyard, and it is the most revealing detail in the whole partnership. He set about restructuring how the vines were trained on the steep slopes, replacing the traditional single stake of the Mosel — the *Einzelpfahl*, each vine tied to its own pole — with a one-cane Guyot system, the vine trained along a wire the way it is in Burgundy, and in the Markgräflerland of Baden where Riedlin himself came from. The change is technical, but its meaning is not. The model she had carried in her head since the wine shop, the Burgundian way of making serious dry white from a single noble grape, was now being written into the architecture of the vineyard itself. "We both liked to experiment in vineyard and cellar," she says, "to find ways and means for our new style of Riesling away from the traditional style of Mosel Riesling at that time."

New, not old. And the apparent contradiction is the most precise thing about the estate. The tradition they were leaving was the recent one — sweetened, high-yield, one-dimensional, the Mosel of the fertilizer years. The place they were heading was the older seriousness buried underneath it. Backward in principle, forward in execution. Not a reenactment of the nineteenth century but a modern dry Riesling that takes its legitimacy from what the region used to be, built with Burgundian training systems and wild-yeast fermentations and an old family's hands. Riedlin would go on to revive his own family's Baden estate in Laufen, whose vineyards the Riedlins have held since 1656, taking it over in 2009 and releasing his first vintage there in 2010, and to serve as managing director of a state domain in Trier — a man, like his wife, in the business of carrying old vineyards forward rather than inventing new ones.

The same logic explains the part of the estate that now draws the most fashionable attention, and tends to be misread.

Sybille Kuntz makes orange wine, pétillant naturel, unfiltered and zero-sulfur bottlings — the vocabulary of natural wine, a movement that in Germany arrived along two distinct currents. One ran through biodynamics, old and quality-minded, the tradition of Demeter and the serious growers. The other was younger and louder, a wave of producers influenced by France, Austria, and Italy who began in the 2000s and 2010s to make spontaneously fermented, minimally sulfured, skin-contact and pét-nat wines for the wine bars of Berlin and Hamburg and Leipzig. To file Kuntz under that second current is to get the chronology exactly backward. She was farming organically and making low-intervention dry Riesling for two decades before it had a name. The practices the movement prizes — wild yeast, no additives, the vineyard before the cellar —

were already hers. The fashion did not reach her and convert her. It eventually arrived at positions she had held since 1990.

The orange wine itself proves the point, because it began not as a manifesto but as a favor. In 2015 the estate's vineyard manager, Matthias, asked whether they might try one together. They had tasted others of the style and found them strange, by her own account — but they said yes, and made a single barrel. Then their Swedish importer, Tommy Lind, visited, heard about the experiment, and asked for three sample bottles. A week later he called and bought the entire barrel. Since then the production has doubled or tripled almost every year, the wine traveling far past Sweden to Norway, Finland, Switzerland, and the United States. It is made the way the rest of the cellar works — the fruit fermented spontaneously on its skins, pressed, aged six months in traditional thousand-liter Fuder, bottled unfiltered with no sulfur added — but it was never an ideological project. It was curiosity meeting a market that turned out to be waiting. The same restraint that defined the dry Rieslings simply extended, when the occasion arose, into a wine that happened to be fashionable.

It would be easy, and wrong, to make Sybille Kuntz's significance a matter of her being a woman.

Women have never been absent from German wine. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though, they appeared in it the way they appeared in most family businesses — as widows, as inheritors, as the custodians who held estates together through a death or a war while the names on the labels stayed male. Succession at storied houses often ran through daughters even when the public identity did not; inheritance law fragmented vineyards across generations, and women routinely managed parcels, negotiated sales, and preserved holdings without ever being called the proprietor. What changed in the last decades of the twentieth century was not their presence but their visibility. Beginning in the 1970s and accelerating after, women started appearing as founders and winemakers and public faces of their own estates, as universities like Geisenheim enrolled them in growing numbers and a generation of formally trained women entered the cellar on their own terms.

Most of the names now associated with that shift — Caroline Diel, Theresa Breuer, Katharina Prüm, Victoria Bürklin-Wolf — rose to prominence in the 1990s and 2000s. Kuntz's independent project began earlier, and under harder conditions, with far less of an established path to follow. But the point is not that she was a woman building an estate, remarkable as that was in the Mosel of 1984. It is that she was doing three uncommon things at once. She was an independent female founder. She was a dry-Riesling advocate in a region drowning in sweetness. And she was an ecological grower years before organic or biodynamic farming carried any prestige at all. Any one of those was a minority position. Holding all three together, at the bottom of the region's worst commercial decade, was rare in a way that later accounts —

written after each of those positions became respectable — tend to flatten into a single tidy line about a pioneering woman. The truth is more specific, and more interesting. The three convictions were not separate. They converged on one act: the recovery of an older, more serious Mosel at the precise moment it was most thoroughly forgotten.

She will not tell you that recovery is finished.

Pressed on the Mosel today, she declines the comfortable ending in which quality returns and the story closes. "The Mosel-Riesling of today is still recovering from this situation," she says. "The quality in general is better, but still there is too much mainstream, one-dimensional Riesling in the market." Forty years on, the woman who could not respect her own region's wine beside a bottle of Burgundy still, for the most part, can't. She built one estate's worth of exception — twenty hectares, a single grape, a handful of disciplined wines, a way of farming her grandparents would recognize. By her own flat accounting, the rest of the work remains undone.

The old vines from the 1920s are still alive in Niederberg-Helden, their roots deeper now in slate unchanged since the surveyors ranked it, their canopies retrained to the Burgundian wire and worked by hand on slopes as steep as the ones the owners walked away from. The yields are still low. The labor is still relentless. The wine sells, now, to the customers she always believed it would find — in restaurants and on the lists of importers across three continents, to drinkers who have come back around to wanting exactly the kind of austere, mineral, place-driven Riesling the market spent decades training itself to reject.

She did not invent dry Mosel Riesling. The Mosel made it for a century before she was born, poured it in the courts of Europe, and let it slip away. She did not discover that the steepest slopes of Lieser were great; the maps had said so since the French rode through. She did not bring biodynamics to German wine, or skin-contact to the natural wine bar. What she did, standing at the lowest point the region had reached, was recognize that none of it was actually lost. Only abandoned. The dry wine, the great slopes, the old way of farming — all of it was still there, still possible, waiting in the slate and the family memory and the record of the surveys for someone to read it again.

The only thing missing was someone willing to climb back up the hill and do the work.