

## A new chapter for Sekt?

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*Germany is now not just a confident producer of red wines, but is starting to make really fine sparkling wine too - with terroir, commitment and deep expertise at last playing a part. Above, the Christmanns with Kauffmann on the right in their precious vineyards, pictured by Lucie Greiner.*

Christmann & Kauffmann's long-anticipated Sekt, some of whose limited-release subscriptions sold out in under 10 minutes, is the brainchild of an exceptionally talented trifecta: Sophie and Steffen Christmann of their family's Pfalz estate and Alsace-born Mathieu Kauffmann, Bollinger's former chef de cave.

Kauffmann is often credited with being the catalyst to help transform Sekt from a dirty word into a modern revival of something Germany can be proud of. He left Champagne initially to help the late Achim Niederberger transform the sparkling wines of historic Pfalz estate Weingut Reichsrat von Buhl into the best Germany had to offer. Although the Sekt stage had been set by a few brave pioneers a decade earlier, with his extensive experience, renown, and professed love of Riesling, it looked as though Kauffmann would take things an exciting stage further at von Buhl.

But things didn't go according to plan. Shortly before Kauffmann arrived at the Pfalz estate, Niederberger died unexpectedly. And while Kauffmann's skill and insights did go on to garner considerable praise for his relatively austere von Buhl Sekts, reserves in the estate's cellar and differences in management and wine styles led to a parting of ways just six years later. So when biodynamic vintner Steffen Christmann unexpectedly called in the summer of 2019, Kauffmann was available.

That summer the Christmanns, father and daughter, had been given the opportunity to acquire 12 ha (30 acres) of phenomenal vineyards around their base in Gimmeldingen. These vines would deliver 90 tons of excellent fruit with only a few weeks to go before the 2019 harvest. It was too good an opportunity to refuse; they just needed to find a home for the grapes in the short term. And so, Sektgut Christmann & Kauffmann was born. Three years later, almost to the day, they were ready to launch their first few bottles of Sekt.



The first cuvées were released on 29 June: the 101 is a non-vintage Riesling and the 201 is a non-vintage Pinot Noir. (Later bottlings of the series 200 wines may include Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay as well as Pinot Noir in the blend.) The fruit is farmed biodynamically and picked by hand, spontaneously fermented and raised in used barriques and large oak barrels, bottled and eventually disgorged with zero dosage and low SO<sub>2</sub> additions. As at Champagne Jacquesson, the two cuvées are numbered consecutively based on their disgorgement date. No 101 and No 201 were bottled in February 2020 and disgorged in December 2021 in limited quantities (under 500 bottles per batch). No 102 and No 202, disgorged in June 2022 in slightly larger quantities, are scheduled for an autumn 2022 release internationally. No 103 and No 203, based on wines from the 2020 vintage, are scheduled for a spring 2023 release and will be available globally for private customers as well. Recommended retail price in Germany is €35 a bottle.

In addition, another seven Grands Terroirs Sekts from classified sites in and around Gimmeldingen will complete the Sektgut's range, with an expected autumn 2024 release. 'Longer lees contact will play a significant part with more origin-specific wines', says Christmann, admitting that it will take the better part of a decade to see the entire range on the market.

Germany has long demonstrated a clear predilection for bubbles. Germans drink more sparkling wine per capita than any other market in the world. Yet the term Sekt is a challenging one. It includes everything from the prestigious 19th-century German sparkling-wine houses aiming to make wine on a par with champagne, to industrially produced, tank-fermented fizz. Any sparkling wine produced - but not necessarily grown - in Germany may be called Sekt and throughout Sekt's nearly 200-year history, numerous suggestions have been made to rehabilitate the name and educate the consumer.

'Ultimately, the communication is completely missing', says Nicole Wolbers, WSET diploma holder, educator and wine writer with a focus on sparkling wines. German Sekt needs to come out of its ... bubble. Just presenting the bottles to professionals is no longer enough. Historically, traditional-method Sekt was connected with glamour, luxury and high prices. But for many today the term is confusing. And even though quality levels have improved tremendously in recent years – the best examples today are easily on a par with the top international sparkling wines - [the simple word] Sekt doesn't clarify which quality or production method you have in the glass.'

There are a number of movements under way to address the two-pronged problem of communication and quality. In 2019, the 36-member association of producers of superior Sekt renamed themselves Verband Traditioneller Sektmacher in a signal to the wider world that Sekt's time had come. The association aims to communicate the distinction between industrially produced Sekt and the high-quality and hand-crafted sparkling wines produced by their members according to the traditional method. This was followed two years later, in March 2021, by the ratification of the VDP's Sekt Statut for its members, a strict classification of origin-based sparkling wines with minimum ageing requirements and quality controls. These are, however, mere outward signs of what has long been fermenting. Year after year, the quality of Deutscher Sekt (ie Sekt made from grapes grown in Germany) has improved as growers dedicate labour, resources and respect, finally taking their sparkling wines as seriously as their still wines.

Gerhild Burkard, organiser of last month's International Sparkling Festival and Symposium in Rheingau's Kloster Eberbach, believes one of the keys to the improved quality is a growing awareness on the part of the vintners of the necessity to treat Sekt as a wine in its own right. 'More and more wineries', Burkard says, 'are focusing on sparkling wine and not just using it [Sekt] as a supplement to their product range.' As Christmann & Kauffmann claim proudly in their communication: 'we don't just make Sekt, we make just Sekt'.

'These wines tell another story', says Kauffmann. 'They're not a copy of champagne, because why would we want to do that?'

Like many, Kauffmann believes that Riesling is perhaps the untapped key to Sekt success. 'Riesling where one uses little to no sulphur, where it undergoes spontaneous fermentation on its own yeast, and allows the wood to breathe; [gives] less fruit and fantastic spice.' This approach channels the distinctive characteristics of the terroir through the variety. 'And doing that with Sekt is something that just isn't being done. Or is only starting', he says. 'There is such an incredible potential playground available'.

The uncompromising vision of German Sekt set by the Christmanns and Kauffmann is a high modern benchmark for all those who will follow. It is vibrating tension and ancient stony depths quieted by time on the lees. It is focus, patience and confident curiosity. It is a quieter, more sophisticated side of Sekt, one where place is interpreted through variety. And it really is about time.