

# Not According to Plan: Christmann & Kauffmann

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Somehow it only makes sense, especially in 2020, that a new venture founded on planning and precision, on absolute dedication and uncompromising principles, on having only one job and doing it exceptionally well, began entirely by chance.

Deep in the green Gimmeldingen hills, nestled in a cradle of Pfalz sunshine, the plan at Weingut Christmann had been to scale down. Steffen Christmann and his daughter Sophie were set to refocus their impressive portfolio of world-class Rieslings and Pinots. Their 22 hectares of biodynamically farmed vineyards, and the efforts it took to maintain them at the quality level they demanded of themselves, were reaching their limits. On June 21, 2019, the road ahead seemed clear.

And then the phone rang.

Ratzfatz, as the Germans would say, the Christmanns found themselves saying “yes” to neighboring estate Weingut Mugler and some of the best vineyards in the region. Twelve hectares on a long-term lease that would stretch easily into the next generation, with names to make your knees weak and your mouth water: Gimmeldinger Quacken, Ruppertsberger

Reiterpfad, Gimmeldinger Meerspinne, and Königsbacher Idig. Names of legend and history. Names that have made the Pfalz famous. The names that can make you change plans — fast.

Another phone call was in order.

For many, Mathieu Kauffmann's 2013 arrival in the Pfalz was the modern spark to Germany's sparkling revolution. The well-known Alsatian was the former *chef de cave* at Bollinger Champagne and Weingut Reichsrat von Buhl, and above all else, a good friend to the Christmann family.

"How would you feel about some grapes?" asked Steffen, seeking a home for 12 hectares of new fruit that didn't involve an overnight expansion of the Christmann's estate. Mathieu agreed immediately. A few months later, following disagreements about the style and future of the Deidesheim estate, Mathieu unexpectedly left Von Buhl. Where one plan ends, another begins.

The Christmanns now found themselves with grapes to spare, and Mathieu with time on his hands. It was a potential five-star pairing. A new plan emerged, this time from Mathieu's hand.

Christmann & Kauffmann was born.

The unassuming and call-it-as-you-see-it name belies the grandiose vision, experience, and expertise behind this new venture. Unlike many other estates, they don't just make Sekt — they make just Sekt. While Christmann & Kauffmann wait for construction to finish on a new gravity-fed cellar being built at the edge of town, the operation is being housed in the Mugler winery. Fruit from the vineyards, including the 65% classified sites of Riesling, Spätburgunder (aka Pinot Noir), Chardonnay and Weißburgunder (aka Pinot Blanc), will be used solely for Sekt. The new house is poised to make sparkling wines of Champagne-level quality, and distinctively, deliberately Deutsch. No umlaut necessary.

TRINK's Paula Redes Sidore recently spoke with Sophie, Steffen, and Mathieu about bubbles, barrels, and setting the highest bar possible for German Sekt.

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***German bubbles are having a moment. Suddenly everyone seems to have a Sekt in their portfolio. What do you see as the state of the Sekt scene in Germany today, and what makes your approach different?***

**Steffen:** When I think about where we were in Germany, in terms of sparkling, even just 10 years ago, it's hard to believe. It's all changed so much.

**Sophie:** Single vineyard Sekt, for example.

**Steffen** There are a number of people doing exciting things. And there are a few wineries, including Griesel & Compagnie in Bensheim and Raumland in Florsheim-Dalsheim, who — like us — have dedicated themselves to Sekt. That's important to say because sparkling wine requires an entirely different approach. Something that became especially clear in a year like this one, when the Sekt harvest was finished before the still wine harvest had even begun.

***To you, Mathieu, as a Frenchman, and in particular, as an Alsatian with family roots in the Pfalz, what is German Sekt?***

**Mathieu:** In a word: Riesling. Riesling can interpret these Pfalz soils — perhaps even better than Chardonnay — especially if the soils are healthy. Riesling expresses a wonderful, chiseled focus.

**Steffen:** And the Riesling in Germany today is quieter — less fruit, more spice, more terroir.

***How does your Sekt fit into this?***

**Mathieu:** Minimal sulphur, spontaneous fermentation. Structured wines with less fruit and fantastic spice. Taken together this approach allows us to tease more of the tremendous terroir from the variety.

**Steffen:** We want to make a wine that expresses the Pfalz, while still inspired by wines from around the world. We have the luxury of being able to say: "We're going to take our time, make no compromises, and ultimately produce a Sekt that meets all of our expectations."

**Sophie:** It's about finding the right balance between staying small enough that we can maintain our established level of craftsmanship, and still doing every step ourselves. Yet with enough resources to bring our vision to life. A Sekt on equal footing with the best Champagne has to offer, while remaining distinctly German. That's the goal.

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***What makes a sparkling harvest different?***

**Sophie:** We harvested 12 hectares of vineyards in 10 days with a 40-person team and 800 small grape boxes. We spent months planning and preparing; we knew exactly how things were going to have to run. So it's no real surprise then that it worked like a dream. Ultimately, we're looking at producing around 80-90,000 bottles. That makes it all the more important that we get it right from the start.

**Steffen:** Sekt requires a completely different approach. When harvest takes place over the course of five or even six weeks, it's hard to get fruit at the exact point, the day, of ripeness. As Sophie said, we laid the groundwork ahead of time to do what we wanted — and needed — to do in order to make the base wine of the quality that we need it to be.

***Speaking of quality, you've been farming biodynamically since 2004. Will that also be the case for these new vineyards?***

**Steffen:** Yes, absolutely. It will take about three years before we gain certification, but from day one we have taken a biodynamic approach in the vineyards, just as we do at the Christmann estate.

***And in the cellar?***

**Steffen:** Because we believe that the defining element of the wine should be structure, not fruit, everything will — eventually — be produced completely in wood. There won't be a single tank standing at our Sektgut. Okay, maybe one for the racking or a short stop between vessels, but in principle we want all the wines to be 100% large format wood or barrique. This is crucial for us as it lends the base wine an entirely different character.

**Sophie:** But not new oak! We're not looking for a rich, Larmandier-Bernier style, for example. The oak won't play a role in the flavor. It's for structure, mouthfeel, longevity.

**Mathieu:** The wood should breathe, evenly, then you achieve all the creaminess without even a hint of barrel aroma. It's really, really important. Just as it is for grand Rieslings. When they breathe, they become more stable, and then you already know — even before blending — where the wine is headed, and ultimately, then the secondary fermentation won't throw you any surprises.

***But wait, somebody needs to start with a new barrel. What do you do as an estate initially when you want the influence of wood without the flavor?***

**Mathieu:** When wine is fermented in barrel, the yeast acts almost like a barrier, it softens and protects. [Raising] a finished wine in the barrel? That's a different story entirely.

**Steffen:** When it comes to large barrels — we're talking 2400-2800 liter Doppelstück — I was truly surprised how little influence even the new oak had on the wine.

**Sophie:** The cooper plays a significant role too. I'll admit it, I was really critical at first. We spent a long time explaining to the cooper how important it was that there be no barrel flavor — even from the first fill. He was extremely receptive, and we love the results. Enough that we bought 10!

**Steffen:** Our wines need to stay linear and stony, edgy, it's part of who they are — who we are. When people talk about barrels, they're usually talking about the toasting. Those intense aromas of vanilla, coffee and coconut. But oak doesn't have to taste like that. Ideally you want nothing more than the essence of oak, just enough to influence the stability...

**Mathieu:** ...and structure.

| “The question of identity is something you can only answer with experience.”

***And when can we expect to see these new Sekts on the market?***

**Sophie:** We recently bottled a first “sneak peek” and even without a long time on the lees, I’ve got to say the individuality and tension is already really beautiful. Some time over the course of next year we hope to have something ready for the trade.

The whole portfolio will eventually consist of seven to eight wines. Starting with the 2019 vintage, the first wines released on the market will be two non-vintage Sekts numbered like Champagne Jacquesson. 30 to 36 months on the lees. One Riesling and one Pinot blend. The single vineyard wines will have more lees contact. So, for example, we will have three premier cru — one Chardonnay, one Weißburgunder, and one Riesling — and two grand cru, one Riesling and one Chardonnay. Each of these wines will have six, eight, maybe nine years on the lees. All I can tell you is that it’s going to be at least a decade before the entire portfolio is available on the market.

***So I guess there’s no point in asking, “Where do you see yourself in five years?”***

**Sophie:** I guess not! We’ve spent a lot of time really honing our ideas to determine why we are doing this, and where we want to go with it. Our [business] partner Achim Berg said it well: “the German Sekt market is a dynamic movement, but the top of the pyramid is missing. The lighthouse, the benchmark to set the German answer to grower Champagne.

**Steffen:** The level of attention the project has attracted from the very beginning is truly unbelievable. People from around the world have come to us and told us: “We want this!” With all this great feedback, one thing has become quite clear: We need to be 100% committed. To ourselves, our vision, even our choice of partners if this project is to succeed.

**Mathieu:** I started in Deidesheim [at Von Buhl] with little more than an idea — a hope — of the potential there. Seven years later, everything I had dreamed has proven itself true. And I know that in Gimmeldingen it will be even better: more focused, more single minded. I am convinced of the success of the Pfalz, of Riesling, and of Sekt. And of all that is going to happen over the next five, ten.... maybe 20 years.

***If the goal is ultimately Champagne quality from German terroir, that takes us back to the question we asked at the beginning: what is the soul of German Sekt?***

**Mathieu:** Good question. This wine, this soil, these grapes, they develop differently. The wine exists — shines — in a completely unique way, whether it is a still wine or sparkling.

**Sophie:** I believe the real answer to that question lies in the future. When it comes to Sekt, we as a winegrowing country still have so much to learn. The question of identity is something you can only answer with experience. I feel like even now I’m only starting to understand exactly what a German Pinot is. But if you were to ask me to characterize the heart of a German Riesling, or to define the heart of a Pfalz Riesling, or a Riesling from

Gimmeldingen, Bienengarten or Kapellenberg, at this point, that'd be easy. But when it comes to Sekt, we need to learn the entire range of the product in its most perfect form before we can start to distinguish its individuality.

**Steffen:** It's like there's a fog settled over everything right now when it comes to German Sekt. But if we look at the landscape around us, we can see patches, intermittent rays of sunlight breaking through.

**Sophie:** Even if some days it's still a bit difficult to see, the sun *is* shining on the top of the mountain. We feel it, we know it. It's there.

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*This interview was translated from the German by weinstory.de*