



Mosel Fine Wines

"The Independent Review of Mosel Riesling"

By Jean Fisch and David Rayer

News from the Mosel : Geisberg – The Revival of a Forgotten Saar Glory

Did you ever hear about the Geisberg? Probably not. And yet it is a vineyard which regularly commanded the highest prices in Mosel-Saar-Ruwer. Markus Molitor and Van Volxem are about to give it a new life. We provide here some background to this upcoming new name in the Saar. As you will see, in many ways, history repeats itself!

Where is the Geisberg ?

A vineyard tucked away in a side valley of the Saar, behind the Ockfener Bockstein.

The Geisberg is a south to west facing vineyard on a comparatively steep slope tucked away in a side valley of the Saar behind the Ockfener Bockstein hill. It extends formally over 30 ha but only a mere 5 ha is still under vine today. Much is sold locally, partly in cask.

Was Geisberger that great ? Oh yes !

Classified in the highest levels on the taxation maps and achieved top prices, only Scharzhofberger were higher.

In top vintages, prices paid for Geisberger equaled or exceeded those of such icons as Scharzhofberger, Brauneberger or Grünhäuser at the turn of the 20th century. Our foraging into old books and catalogues showed that the average price paid per cask in the heyday period (the 1890s) was one of the highest in the region, only "beaten" by Scharzhofberger!



This explains why the central part of the vineyard, despite being a late comer to the Saar scene, was classified in the highest category on the taxation maps, a privilege reserved to only a few vineyards in the whole region.

Appreciation fueled by some of the grandest Estates of the 19th century.

Many of the big Saar names from the 19th century were active on this hill. This included Gebert, Rheinart, Keller, Geltz and the predecessors of Dr. Fischer as well as, later, von Schorlemer and Friedrich-Wilhelm-Gymnasium. All these makers were among the "who is who" of the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer and would be eventually founding members of the Grosser Ring in 1908. The presence of so many quality-minded winemakers clearly contributed to the general appreciation of Geisberger wines.



Huge potential from what we have tasted over the years.

Of course, the appreciation and price levels prevailing a century ago do not necessarily carry over into modern times. But, it is nevertheless a strong indication that there is something special here. Having tasted some older Geisberger, among others from 1976 and 1959, we understand the potential of the vineyard: In these vintages, it still conveys coolness, when compared to the Bocksteiner for instance, without giving up any of the typical fiery spiciness of Ockfener wines.



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OK, got it. But if it was so great, why did it get lost? What went wrong?

It is difficult to say why this vineyard got somewhat forgotten. We suspect a series of factors to have been at play.

As you can see from the extract of the 1906 taxation map below, the Geisberg vineyard was significantly extended around 1900 (from approx. 10 ha to eventually over 50 ha). This did certainly not help its image as much of this new fruit was sold in cask, often at low prices.

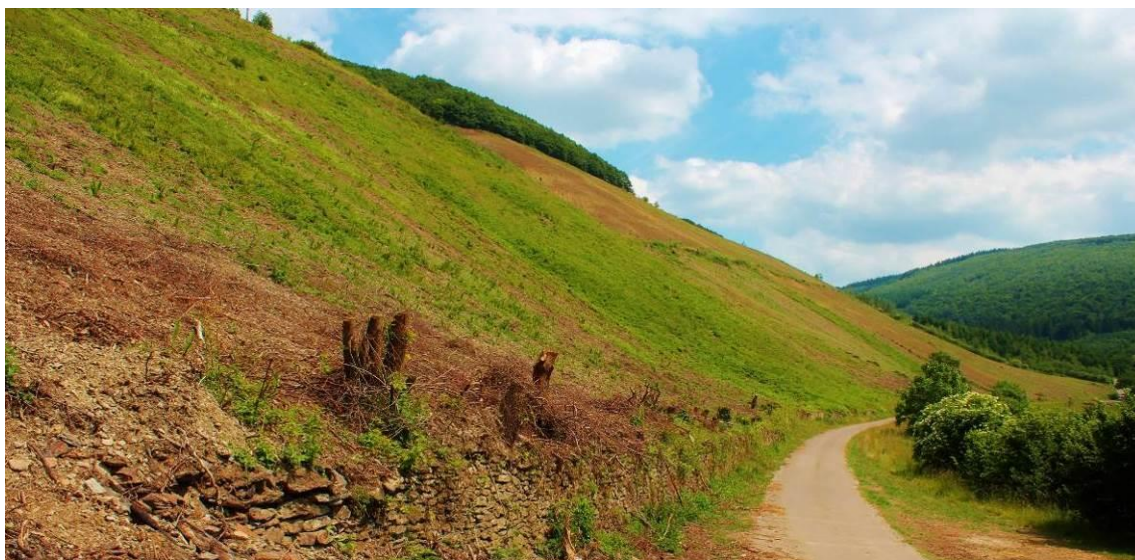


Most importantly, many of the leading Estates which were "making" the success of the Geisberg were sold off to "lesser" makers or split up by the 1960s-1980s. Other Estates active in the Geisberg focused their attention on other vineyards (e.g. Zilliken on Rausch or Dr. Fischer on Bockstein and, at the time, on Wawern).

In the end, the vineyard simply lost traction and its core part has been laying fallow since many years now.

Worry not: Van Volxem and Markus Molitor are about to be revive it!

Roman Niewodniczanski (owner of the Van Volxem Estate) and Markus Molitor have acquired much of the central south-facing part of the hill and already cleared a massive 12 ha areal earlier this year for replanting, most likely next year.



Roman was over the moon with excitement when we spoke to him about the project: "This is a great opportunity to revive a vineyard which was among the most respected in the heydays of German Riesling. It is only the beginning, much of the work still lies ahead ... but Markus and I are so much looking forward to the results!"



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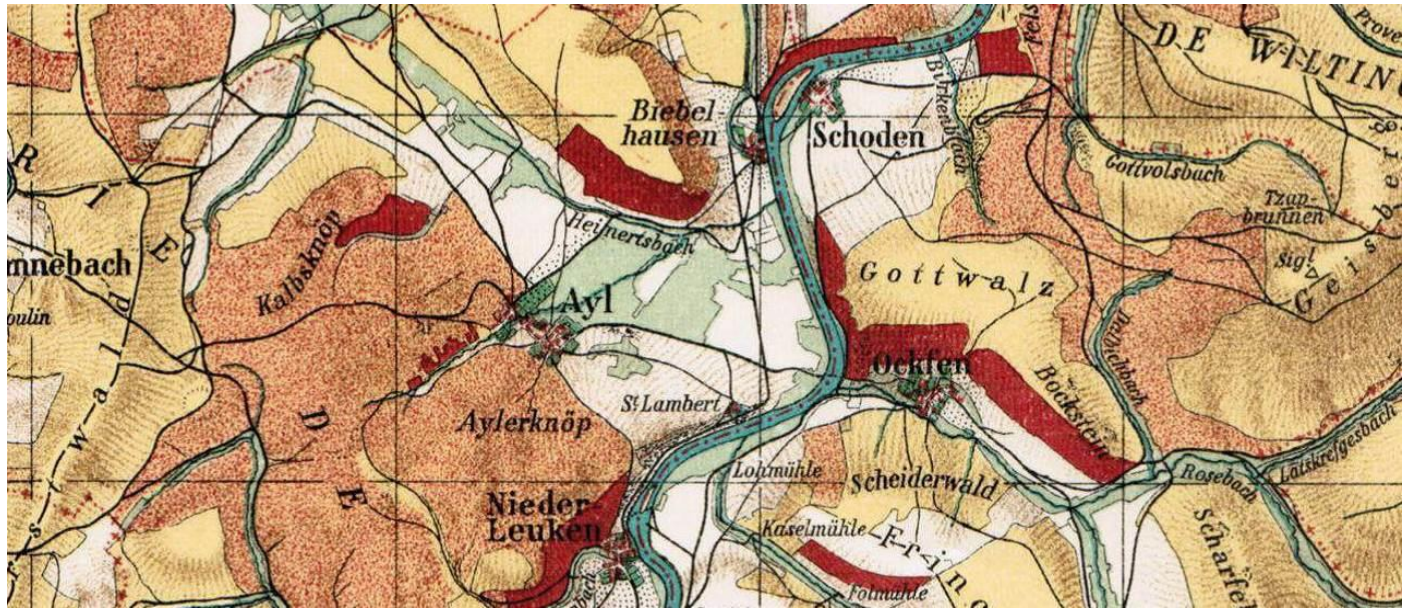
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In many ways, it is like history repeating itself ... 150 years later !

Geisberg was a late comer to the Saar scene and was only cleared for planting in the first half of the 19th century.

As from the early 19th century (see a map from 1810 here below) clearly show, the Geisberg hill was not planted with vines until the early 1800s. When precisely the Geisberg was cleared for planting is not 100% clear, neither to Roman Niewodniczanski nor to us. One record we found mentions a harvest in the Geisberg by the 1840s. The earliest firm record of a wine is that of a 1859er being presented at the 1862 International Exhibition in London.



The development of the hill was done by what were some of the "Roman Niewodniczanski" and "Markus Molitor" of the days.

The early pioneering winemakers who planted the central part of the vineyard up to the 1860s included Viktor Valdenaire, Nikolaus Rheinart, Johann Jakob Keller and Rentmeister Geltz. With the exception of Geltz (because of "Geltz-Zilliken"), these names will probably not ring a bell. However, as our delving into historic documents has shown, these were some of the driving forces behind quality winemaking in the 19th century:

- Nikolaus Rheinart made his fortune through tanning / woodland and started investing massively into vineyards in the Ockfen area. He was for instance the driving force for clearing the whole upper part of the Bockstein and was possibly the first to clear the central section of the Geisberg hill (it was his 1859 which was presented at the World Exhibition). By the turn of the 20th century, the combined family holdings exceeded 20 ha, a huge size for an Estate coming "out of nowhere". The successor Estate, the Adolf Rheinart Erben, sold wine until the 1990s.
- Viktor Valdenaire was the son of Nicolas Valdenaire, one of the big buyers of secularized goods in 1803-1811. He was the local administrator in Saarburg and Konz and owned, among others, vineyards in Ockfen, the Roscheiderhof in Konz and even the Kuno Tower (Kunoturm) in Saarburg. He also heavily invested into winemaking, being a major developer of the Ockfener hill and one of the "co-founders" of the Geisberg (this Estate eventually yielded the Dr. Fischer Estate, which tended parcels here until the 1990s).
- Johann Jakob Keller was the son of Maximilian Keller, who had made his fortune through tanning and dealing in secularized goods, including in woodland in Schoden and Ockfen. It is therefore not surprising that he had joined the group of developers in Ockfen and Schoden. The Amlinger-Keller / Wwe Amlinger Estate, as it was later to be known, was to be one of the major sellers at Auction, selling at extremely high prices right through into the 20th century (this Estate was to yield, in part, the Max Keller Estate whose label is depicted earlier in this article).
- Rentmeister Geltz, the father of the "Forstmeister" Geltz, came from a family already active in winemaking since generations, according to family records of the Zilliken family. He was part of this early group of developers on the Geisberg, having planted his section in 1863 (and producing a virgin wine in 1865). He was to participate in many other "vineyard clearing" (including in later extensions in the Geisberg!) and eventually yielded the Geltz-Zilliken Estate we all know today.

These makers all planted exclusively Riesling (which, contrary to many beliefs, was not an automatic choice in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer until the end of the 19th century) and their exemplary winemaking skills, quality vineyard management and pioneering spirit were regularly highlighted in winemaking books and articles in trade journals of the period.

This bears a more than "désà-vu" resemblance with (serial vineyard reviver) Roman Niewodniczanski and (quality fanatic) Markus Molitor!

We are eager to see history repeat itself and to taste the result of this exciting Geisberg revival!