



the Art of Eating

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A Call for Saving the Great Mosel Vineyards

In January of 2010, Ulli Stein, winemaker at Weingut Stein in Germany's Mosel Valley, fired off a manifesto warning of threats to the region's 2,000-year-old viticultural tradition. It has become increasingly difficult for many grape growers to earn a living harvesting the Riesling vines planted on the Mosel's steep slate slopes. Over the next three to five years, some 3,000 hectares of Mosel vineyards – fully one-third of the current total – are in danger of going fallow. The underlying causes are diverse and deeply entwined: a bottoming-out of the bulk wine market, an aging generation of winemakers no longer able or willing to work the steepest sites, merchant houses and supermarket chains that allot too much production and shelf space to wines from characterless, quick-ripening varieties, and a drinking public focused more on price than on quality, tradition, and provenance. To be sure, a number of treasured estates continue to work at the highest level, and many, like Stein, A.J. Adam, Clemens Busch, and Weiser-Künstler, have achieved excellence while also restoring the reputation of historically renowned but largely forgotten sites. But even in the face of this energetic, top-tier winemaking on the Mosel, Stein's concerns are real. In recent months, retiring winemakers in his village of St. Aldegund have cut down half the Riesling vines grown on steep slate slopes, and little more than thorny scrub will follow in their wake.

For the sake of the cultural, social, environmental, and economic vitality of the entire region, Stein is calling for a concerted, widespread effort to save the remaining vines. He urges winemakers to pay above-market prices for grapes purchased from steep sites and to seek out endangered vineyards; he encourages grape-growers to hold out in the face of downward pressure on prices; he suggests that aging winemakers relinquish their plots in alluvial soils along the river in favor of continuing to work the steep slate sites above it; and he solicits support from fellow Mosel residents in trumpeting the singularity of their region. None of these suggestions will succeed in isolation, and even with a coordinated effort, the forces aligned against wines of unique personality and uncompromising quality are well entrenched. Still, as Ulli Stein says, it's worth a try, if not for lovers of Mosel Riesling, then at least to honor the old Riesling vines themselves, which have earned a chance to be protected from thorns.

- Dan Melia

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