

p.a. ohler'sches weingut

rheinhessen • bingen

Just call it “Ohler!”

Bernard Becker is the proprietor here, a bachelor with no airs and a local accent you can cut with a knife. He's really too simple a soul to fit in with the august overlords at the VDP, who are trying to give him the heave in any case (I imagine his prices embarrass them, plus the inconvenience of his making better wine than many of his trendier colleagues). His is one of those almost painfully old-fashioned estates; you can sometimes tell by the grandfather clock. When it booms out its chimes with an almost imperious command—“by GOD it's four o'clock!” you do get a sense that things are done the old ways.

Becker had a certain sangfroid about his wines which I think I might have done a little to correct

He had bottling problems a few years ago and had to use the local co-op to custom bottle for him. His wines, so vibrant in cask, ended up muted and dull in bottle, and I lost confidence in them. Becker noticed the result in sharply falling sales, and we had a heart-to-heart. The next year I fire-bombed his house. The year after that I had to tie a sixteen-ton weight to his leg and drop him in the Rhine. That got his attention. Now the wines are fine again. Ruthless business, this wine thing.

I do believe he does the whole five hectares all alone. About forty percent of it is on steep slopes; this isn't easy work! Each year I see a few wines in the cellar that I gather our man has simply not gotten around to. Sometimes they're shot, other times they're superb for the extra aging. But there's no systematic method, except to work clean and reduce the Süßreserve when I come around.

Bingen must be the most undervalued place in Germany for fine Riesling. And having just been through Flurbereinigung, its reputation isn't likely to leap ahead until the new vines get some age. The soils on the Bingen hill, which is directly parallel to the Rüdeshheimer Berg (only the Rhine lies between) contain a mélange of Rotliegend and porphyry, an amalgam of Nierstein and



Bernard Becker

- Vineyard area: 6.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,000 cases
- Top sites: Binger Scharlachberg, Münsterer Dautenpflänzer
- Soil types: slate, quartzite, sandstone, porphyry
- Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe, 40% (Silvaner, Müller-Thurgau, Kerner, Huxelrebe, Dornfelder), 15% (Spätburgunder, Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder)

Nahe which gives the wines Nierstein's smoky savor with the Nahe's curranty succulence.

Becker also has some land across the Nahe, now officially Nahe wine (imagine his paperwork load dealing with two sets of bureaucrats) in two excellent sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer and Kapellenberg. All of these wines can be among the very best values I know, and Becker is more accommodating than ever with them. He's tapping into my desire for more transparent wines with lift and relief and not so much sweetness; nowadays he shows me his wines with an air of “Is this how you mean?” Yes, this is how I mean. There's good stuff in these here hills.

And prices remain almost embarrassingly low. It is odd; one ferry ride over the Rhine, less than a mile as the crow flies, and price can differ by 60%. Mind you, Becker makes these wines for all intents and purposes in his basement; he lives in an apartment building on a downtown street that looks like the last place on earth a winery would be. With the right physical space, updated equipment and his own bottling line, a man of Becker's conscientiousness would be making stellar wines. As it is, they're charming and fragrant enough and you can own them almost just by thinking about them!

Ohler at a glance:

Value value value. Charming, fruity, uncomplicated, easy-to-like wines at ludicrous prices. As he always seems to do in high-acid years, he made splendid 2000s, including my first-ever “starred” wine from here. In 2001 he reports an unfussy vintage which needed only an “acid-correction” of the must, as the acids were “too prominent” in his rather old-fashioned view. This is one of the few estates where 2001 and 2000 are close in quality, so don’t be despisin’ dem 2000s, Slim!

how the wines taste:

They’re forthright and fruity. The Scharlachberg wines have a peachy lift and fragrance of red roses. The Nahe wines are cooler, slatier or more violet-y and tangy according to site. Sheer charm is their strong suit. Great class or detail of flavors is unusual, but there’s plenty of sheer likability for the pittance we’re asked to pay. In favorable vintages such as 2000 and 2001, they soar above their class.

- GOH-40 **2000 Binger Schlossberg-Schwätzerchen Scheurebe Kabinett**
 It was an odd vintage for Scheu in general. Usually it likes a zingy high-acid year but it ripens seven to ten days before Riesling and this wasn’t ideal in the September clammies; this, therefore, is one of the few great Scheu success stories. It shows the catty sagey side-o-Scheu and it tastes like sage leaves fried in butter with lime zest. Deft and interesting.
 SOS: 2 (now to three years)

- GOH-043 **2001 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett**
 With Riesling dosage; a wine of unusual grip and persistence here, discreetly varietal but almost a Pinot Gris deep demi-glace of fruit; sagey, curranty-spicy salty wash over the sides of the tongue; long nettley finish. Yang Scheu!
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (from one to five years)

- GOH-41 **2000 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Kabinett** +
 This could be the best wine Ohler has ever made. Whew! Elegant and pretty, a Juliette Binoche of a wine; not just peaches but roses and tropical fruit; rarely seen dialectic, interplay and filigree; wonderful grip, yinyang of fruit and mineral. STYLISH. Be smart this year and buy the bejeezus out of it.
 SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

- GOH-42 **2000 Binger Rosengarten Riesling Spätlese**
 Rosengarten is the eastern extension of the Scharlach hill, less steep. For this domain, the Rosengarten is a subtle and interesting Riesling with a touch of wild-herb and cassis. It’s planted with thirty-year-old vines on gravelly soil. I asked about that cassis thing and he told me the former owner had a few Scheu vines mixed in among the Rieslings! This is just a touch less fine, a jot more voluminous, a scintilla less polished than the Kabinett, but the basic material of this vintage does these wines a **power** of good, that dense, thick core of extract.
 SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

- GOH-044 **2001 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese**
 At 89 Oechsle this was the lighter of two Scharlachbergs, but I liked it more (the other might be tres grande if he diddles with the sweetness, which he said he might); a fine, classy, discreet aroma in the freesia and papaya direction; palate has fine acid-mineral posture and is a civilized, judicious Riesling, careful to say its flavors without gaudiness or flourish. That, plus it tastes good.
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

