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The Wines of Hofgut Falkenstein

Thirty or Forty years ago, one had to be an optimist to farm grapes in the Saar. As Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson put it in *The World Atlas of Wine*: "The battle for sugar in the grapes rages most fiercely in this cold corner of the country." Only three or four vintages in each decade were warm enough to produce quality still wine. In the remaining years, the wines were sold in bulk or used to produce sparkling wine, or "Sekt" as the Germans call it.

One would think the Saar would be warmer than the Mosel, more reliable for grape growing. It is further south after all, and "south" equals "warmer," in Germany as in the U.S. But this cursory interpretation of geography fails to consider the location of the vineyards in the respective regions. In the Mosel, the best vineyards lie on the river's edge, many facing south. The steep river banks, the moderating effect of the water, and the reflection of light warm and ripen the grapes.

The Saar is another story. Few of its vineyards are actually on the banks of the Saar river. Most are in adjacent valleys, or on hills, where the influence of the river can be slight. The vineyards of Hofgut Falkenstein are in the northern part of the Saar, far from the river, actually closer to the Mosel. One doubts whether there is much moderating influence from river water at all.

The location of Hofgut Falkenstein's vineyards is one reason why these wines are often described as having "searing" acidity. But, apart from location, Erich Weber is a hands off parent, when it comes to his wines. His importer Lars Carlsberg puts it well. After fermenting the grapes in old wooden casks in a cool cellar, the wines "end up" either naturally dry or off-dry. There is no effort to create dry wines or sweet wines, or to de-acidify as many German winemakers do. Mr. Weber lets the grapes decide what kind of wine they will be.

In many ways, Herr Weber fits the mold of the "natural" winemaker. Farming is

Vineyards of Hofgut Falkenstein



One of the wines is made in the Euchariusberg Vineyard, above the Village of Krettnach, pictured here.



Vines above Krettnach, No River to be Seen



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nearly organic, except for the application of one synthetic spray which he prefers to Bordeaux mixture. Ambient yeasts ferment the wine, and there is no addition of sugar, enzymes, or other chemicals. Nor are any other winemaking tricks employed.

Weber's work has been described as "ultra-traditional" and this traditionalism is particularly apparent in his labels, which are chock-a-block with terms that will befuddle most wine drinkers. While many German wineries are working to simplify their labels (e.g. using "Pinot Noir" instead of Spätburgunder, avoiding the terms Spätlese and Auslese), Mr. Weber is not. His Spätburgunder label is a masterpiece of confusion.

Apart from the terminology on the labels, they are classic in another sense. In Uwe Kristen's *Der Kellermeister*, he writes that "[the label] looks like it has been printed on an old ink-jet printer sitting on one of the large barrels." And don't try to bake off the labels. They are affixed with old-fashioned glue.

Weber's ultra-traditionalism extends to the bottling of the wine. Each of the wines is hand bottled; there is no blending of casks. If your Hofgut Falkenstein wine is from a different cask than mine, they aren't the same wine.

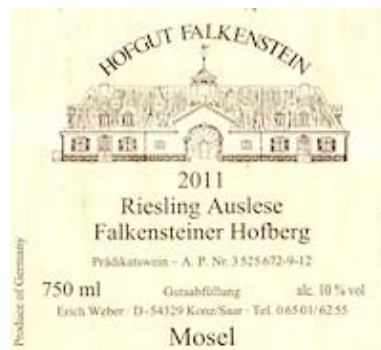
By all accounts Erich Weber is a self-effacing, kind and modest individual. His wines may not be self-effacing, but as the [Chambers Street Wines web site](#) puts it, they are "high-acid, terroir-driven... honest, singular and delicious wines." Oh yes, and they are very fine values too.

All of these wines were consumed in August 2013.

Hofgut Falkenstein Falkensteiner Hofberg Riesling Auslese 2011

The **Hofgut Falkenstein Falkensteiner Hofberg Riesling Auslese 2011 \$26 [Very Good+ to Excellent]** could hardly be more different from its cousin, the [Hofgut Falkenstein Krettnacher Euchariusberg Riesling Auslese 2012](#). The latter wine is low in alcohol and pretty but not especially intense. The Falkensteiner Hofberg is anything but. It shows the blazing acidity of the Saar, is reserved and tightly wound, and appears very cellar-worthy. It is the best of the Falkenstein wines I tasted.

Medium lemon in color, the nose is initially rather tough and hard, with nose-tickling sulfur. Air brings forward notes of lime, honey, slate, herbs and mint. It is not an especially fruity nose. The Hofberg is light to medium bodied, round and sweet, but with a very high level of acidity that largely negates the sweetness. The flavors show lemon, lime, dried peach, honey, and slate and have a mouthwatering richness. At the same time, this wine is tightly wound and somewhat restrained. The finish shows some of the richness of the mid-palate and is quite long, but there is also a toughness and a reserve right now that makes this wine a candidate for the cellar. **August 2013**



Hofgut Falkenstein Niedermenniger Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb 2012

The **Hofgut Falkenstein Niedermenniger Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb (Mosel, Germany) 2012 \$17 [Very Good+]** was not the acidic monster I was led to expect. Citrusy for sure, this wine has surprising body and

depth for a wine with 10.5% alcohol. It is not a delicate and flowery Mosel, but scores with its freshness, precision, and juicy flavors.

Pale lemon in color, the Falkenstein has a very citrus-y nose, with lemon oil, grapefruit, grapefruit pith, hints of peach, and accents of smoky slate and petrol. Despite the low alcohol level, the wine's mouthfeel is round, nearly viscous. Moderate sweetness and high acidity complete the picture. Flavors of juicy grapefruit, grapefruit pith, citrus, sulfured peach, slate and mineral have a mouthwatering intensity, and are well defined & harmonious. The finish has very good length. **August 2013**



Hofgut Falkenstein Niedermenniger Herrenberg Spätburgunder Spätlese Trocken 2011

The Germans haven't made much progress simplifying their labels, have they? Translated, this wine comes from the Falkenstein estate, from a vineyard in the town of Niedermennig (in the Mosel) named Herrenberg, is made from Pinot Noir (Spätburgunder), which was harvested at Spätlese sugar levels and fermented dry (trocken). This is a highly unusual & novel Pinot Noir, the grapes raised on slate rather than the usual limestone.

Light orange ruby in color, the aromas of the **Hofgut Falkenstein**

Niedermenniger Herrenberg Spätburgunder Spätlese Trocken

2011 (Mosel, Germany) \$17 [Very Good+] are striking. Cinnamon-tinged red fruit, bitter herbs, lots of slate, and touches of vanilla and licorice are very intriguing. Medium bodied, velvety and plump, the Falkenstein is well delineated by acidity and fine light tannin. The ripe and spicy red fruit has very good intensity and is allied with fairly intense slate notes and a slightly bitter herbal quality. The flavors gain richness and buttery sensations with air. The finish is spicy, peppery and slate-y, with nice length and lingering sensations of vanilla and mushroom. **August 2013**



Hofgut Falkenstein Krettnacher Euchariusberg Riesling Auslese 2012

Oddly, Falkenstein's Auslese has more delicacy (and less power) than the **Spätlese**, a reversal of the roll these wines usually play. The **Hofgut Falkenstein Krettnacher Euchariusberg Riesling Auslese (Mosel, Germany) 2012 \$23 [Very Good]** is charming, for sure, but compared to the Spätlese seems to have less definition and length.

Pale lemon in color, the nose is initially prickly and steely. Aromas of lemon oil, green apple, and ripe pears emerge



with aeration, along with hints of fennel and subtle smoky notes. Soft and pillowy in texture, sweet, acidity seems a bit low although a bit of spritz helps

to add liveliness. Succulent flavors of ripe pear, honey, slate and subtle herbal and soapy notes are quite attractive. The finish is gentle, with very good length, but would have been better, perhaps, if the wine had a touch more acidity. Very tasty, although this does not seem like a "keeper." **August 2013**



Hofgut Falkenstein Krettnacher Altenberg Riesling Spätlese 'Trocken' 2012

The **Hofgut Falkenstein Krettnacher Altenberg Riesling Spätlese "Trocken" (Mosel, Germany) 2012 \$19 [Very Good]** may not be the best in Falkenstein's portfolio, but it has a quirky charm and the focus to hold your attention. With its smoky matchstick qualities and "cut", it is a very good food wine.

Medium lemon in color with a bit of fizz, the aromas feature lots of matchstick, as well as citrus, pear, slate and a hint of volatile acidity. Overall, the nose has an austere quality, and some aeration is needed for it to come around. Light to medium bodied, off dry, with high

acidity, the Krettnacher also has a distinctly chalky mouthfeel. The flavors of slate-y apple, grapefruit, lime and nut oils are narrowly focused, lively, and have a very appealing spicy quality. The finish has very nice length and focus with attractive spice and slate notes. There is a chalky-appley-spicy aftertaste and slight barnyard notes. **October 2013.**

