

## Producer profile

# Weingut Keller

A prominent name in the Rheinhessen since it was established in the late 18th century, it is under the guidance of the current generation that this family producer has been grabbing the headlines with its definitive dry Rieslings. William Kelley hands out the high scores

SINCE KLAUS-PETER KELLER took charge of his family's Rheinhessen winery in 2001, his rise to fame has been meteoric. His old-vine cuvée G-Max, its source a carefully guarded secret, reigns as the world's most expensive dry Riesling, winning commensurate acclaim from critics and connoisseurs alike.

'Is G-Max the Montrachet of Germany?', tweeted Christie's wine department some months ago. 'Or is Montrachet the G-Max of Burgundy?', riposted New York auction house Zachys. Keller's other dry grand cru Rieslings command a scarcely less cultish following, though happily they can be enjoyed at more modest prices.

At first glance, the Rheinhessen seems an unlikely source for such sought-after bottlings. None of Germany's wine regions suffered greater post-war indignities. Noble names like Nierstein, long associated with celebrated sites, were applied to larger, less distinguished areas – sometimes even to former beetroot fields. The greatest and most historic vineyard in Worms, the Liebfraunstift-Kirchenstück, was traduced by oceans of sweet and characterless Liebfraumilch.

As if that weren't enough, Riesling and other serious varieties were grubbed up in favour of higher-yielding grapes of dubious quality such as Bacchus and Optima: in fact, by 1980 Riesling accounted for a mere 5% of the region's plantings.

The core of the Keller estate, moreover, lies

## Weingut Keller at a glance

**Founded** 1789

**Area** 18ha, 15ha of which classified as grand cru

**Location**

Rheinhessen, Germany

**Varieties** 80%

Riesling, with plantings of Pinot Noir and small amounts of Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Sylvaner, Scheurebe and Rieslaner

**Soils** Limestone soils in the Hügelland, near the villages of Dalsheim and Westhofen; red slate soils on the bank of the Rhine near Nierstein

not on the famed Rote Hang – the 'red slope' – on the banks of the Rhine where the region's 19th-century reputation was made, between Nierstein and Nackenheim, but instead in the relatively obscure Hügelland, whose rolling hills evoke the Loire Valley more than the precipitous slopes often associated with prime German viticulture. So what is the secret of Keller's extraordinary success?

## Inspired by history

While the Hügelland's history in recent times has been less than glamorous, Klaus-Peter Keller is inspired by a longer perspective. During internships in Burgundy in the early 1990s, he acquired more than just a deft touch with Pinot Noir.

'The church played such an important role in Burgundy, and I knew it was equally active in our region,' he recalls. 'So my father and I started trying to find old texts from the Middle Ages which might tell us more about wine growing here.'

Sure enough, the Kellers uncovered a wealth of history: in the 14th century, the Hügelland's best vineyards were esteemed as among Germany's greatest, cultivated by monks from the Abbeys of Schönau and Lorsch with a fastidiousness for nuances of site and quality equalled only by their brethren in Burgundy's Côte d'Or.

'Of course, the climate was much warmer back in the Middle Ages', Keller explains.



As temperatures cooled in the 16th century, the vineyards along the Rhine's sloping bank near Nierstein, better situated to capture scarce sunlight, rose to prominence.

But in the era of global warming, the tables have been turned once again. 'We are real beneficiaries of climate change in the Hügelland,' Keller admits. 'We can attain perfect ripeness every year.'

By contrast, the challenge in Nierstein these days is to delay ripening and preserve acidity – as the Kellers have discovered since purchasing two small parcels there in 2009.

When Keller and his wife Julia took over responsibility for winemaking and viticulture at Weingut Keller, they were well-placed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by climate change. Nestled in the picturesque

walled town of Flörsheim-Dalsheim, the winery has been family-owned since 1789. Keller himself is quick to pay tribute to the eight preceding generations of the family, and above all his parents, for laying the foundations of his own success.

For its exemplary pool of vine material, the estate owes a debt of gratitude to Klaus-Peter's mother Hedwig, who drew on her experience working in a nursery to select top-quality, low-yielding, open-clustered Riesling cuttings from ancient vines in the Saar. And under his father Klaus, the winery had already begun to win celebrity as early as the 1980s.

In 2000, his swansong vintage, Klaus was even named Gault Millau's Winemaker of the Year. So Klaus-Peter's rapid rise to superstar status began from a firm foundation. ➤

**Above: bottles of Grosses Gewächs Riesling from Weingut Keller's 4-hectare Hubacker vineyard**

*'Each vineyard reminds me of something, and when I walk in it, it always returns to me'* Klaus-Peter Keller

'I'm not a wine taster, I'm a wine drinker,' Keller explains. 'I'm interested in the mineral kick on the finish that makes you want to drink more.' He's fortunate that the Rheinhessen's terroirs lend themselves to making the kind of wine he likes.

'We have rocky, limestone soil here in the Hügelland,' he explains, 'so we can make great dry wines; racy wines with precision and minerality. That's my focus.'

### Risk taking

But since his father's reputation for excellence derived from his traditional off-dry and sweet wines, dry Riesling represented something of a departure for the winery. Keller had made his first dry Riesling only three years before his return to the estate, as a student at Geisenheim University. In the beginning, Julia tells me: 'There were some difficult conversations around the kitchen table about what we could afford to do; we were taking a big risk.'

Keller was afraid of alienating the estate's long-time clients, but he needn't have worried. Since their debut vintage in 2001, the Kellers' dry Rieslings from grand cru vineyards in Dalsheim, Westhofen and more recently Nierstein, have been the jewels in the winery's crown, showcasing their different terroirs with magical transparency (see box, right). 'Each vineyard reminds me of something,' Keller explains, 'and when I walk in it, it always returns to me. I want to retain that



**Above: the entrance to Weingut Keller in Flörsheim-Dalsheim, to the west of Worms**

special flavour that's typical of the vineyard.'

Only the fruit from the best-situated parcels makes it into these dry bottlings, and the vines must be at least 25 years old, for Keller is a great believer in terroir and vine age. 'I'm a fan of old vines. They are in full balance so you don't need green harvest; they're resilient in very dry years; they give low yields; and they produce more complex wine – they give power without weight.'

So fruit from younger vines, even from grand cru sites, goes into entry-level cuvées such as the crisp, expressive Von der Fels.

It would be a pity, however, if the celebrity of the Kellers' dry wines eclipsed the excellence of their other bottlings. 'My mother comes from the Mosel, so off-dry and sweet wine is in my veins,' Keller insists. 'And if nature presents the opportunity to make >



**Above: the Hubacker vineyard in Dalsheim, where the Keller family has owned vines since 1789**



**Above: Keller's Kirchspiel Riesling is made from the oldest vines on the site**

with deep minerality. Also the source of the Cuvée Felix Pinot Noir, named after the Kellers' eldest son – one of their rarest bottlings.

### Westhofener Abtserde (2.5ha)

The favoured vineyard of the Bishop of Worms in the 14th century, today a sub-plot of the Brunnenhäuschen grand cru. The Kellers acquired their parcel in 1996 and own the oldest vines. Like Morstein, Abtserde ripens late, often in November. Very stony ground with little topsoil tends to produce sparse clusters of small berries. Beautiful minerality and finesse, dances over the palate. Good Riesling, sweet and dry.

### Niersteiner Pettenthal (0.3ha)

Acquired in 2009. Red slate soils from the steep slopes by the Rhine are very different from the limestone of the Westhofen and Dalsheim vineyards. Smoky, exotic and more delicate than its hill-country cousins. Makes both sweet and dry Riesling.

### Niersteiner Hipping (0.5ha)

Also acquired in 2009, and also red slate soils on the bank of the Rhine; the 80% slope presents considerable viticultural challenges. More reserved than the Pettenthal, floral and exotic.

### G-Max

A very rare special cuvée from the estate's oldest vines, named in honour of Klaus-Peter's great-grandfather Georg and his youngest son Max. From an undisclosed grand cru site.

## Keller's grands crus

### Dalsheimer Bürgel (0.5ha)

Gently south-facing, clay soils underpinned by mussel shell chalk. Planted with Pinot Noir. Produces elegant, focused and full-bodied wines.

### Dalsheimer Frauenberg (0.5ha)

Not far from Bürgel, but later-ripening, and also planted to Pinot Noir. Doesn't succeed in every year, but in good ones yields wines with deep minerality, purity and transparency.

### Dalsheimer Hubacker (4ha)

In the Keller family since 1789, yellow limestone soils and southeasterly exposition; 40-year-old Riesling vines ripen later than all Keller's other grands

crus. Distinguished by exotic flavours of passion fruit and peach, combined with a deep mineral core.

### Westhofener Kirchspiel (2.5ha)

Bought in 1999. Keller owns the oldest vines here. An east-facing site, planted with Riesling, characterised by limestone rock with a high iron content. The cooler exposition emphasises finesse and elegance.

### Westhofener Morstein (1.4ha)

Bought in 2001, Keller owns the oldest vines. Typically ripens in November, in part because of its exposure to cooling winds. Heavy clay soils over limestone rock make for more powerful Rieslings

## Weingut Keller – a timeline

1789

Johann Leonhard Keller came to the Rheinhessen from Zurich, Switzerland



1999

Klaus-Peter and wife Julia return to work at Weingut Keller

2000

Weingut Keller joins the VDP organisation of Germany's best producers

1993

Klaus-Peter Keller interns at Domaine Armand Rousseau in Burgundy



2001

Produces first Grosses Gewächs and first bottling of G-Max



**Above: Klaus-Peter Keller and wife Julia took over full control at the family winery in Rheinhessen from his father Klaus in 2006**

sweet and nobly sweet wines, we seize it.' And though Weingut Keller is best-known for its Rieslings, Keller exhibits tangible delight in his three cuvées of Pinot Noir, which are arguably the best in Germany.

Drawing inspiration from his internships at Domaines Armand Rousseau and Hubert Lignier, Keller devotes painstaking attention to these reds, sometimes even destemming by hand in the vineyard, and leaving the stems on the vine to ripen more completely in the autumn sun before adding them to the fermenting must. 'Good Pinot is like red

Riesling; you just want to drink it,' Keller is fond of saying.

### Attention to detail

In addition to these Rieslings and Pinot Noirs, the Keller cellar holds further surprises. 'During my time at Müller-Catoir in the Pflaz,' Julia explains, 'I acquired a taste for some of the more eclectic grape varieties in which they specialised.' So the Kellers produce an array of interesting bottlings from less-heralded varieties such as Scheurebe and Rieslaner – the latter memorably dubbed the 'Viagra of >

## Weingut Keller – a timeline (continued)

**2006**

Klaus-Peter and Julia take over full control of the winery



**2009**

Buys first vineyards in Nierstein

**2010**

G-Max becomes the most expensive dry Riesling ever auctioned



**2012**

Produces wine for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee

**2016**

Felix Keller, the 10th generation, begins winemaker internships in Germany and Burgundy

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Riesling' by writer-importer Terry Theise. In the process they are preserving some of the heritage of this varietally diverse region.

What all these different bottlings have in common is the Kellers' meticulous work in the vines. 'Here in Germany we are all Mexicans,' Keller jokes, quoting his response when a Californian visitor observed that the Keller family did work that only immigrant labourers would undertake in the US.

Pruning, deleafing and shoot positioning is all done by hand. Canopy heights are mindfully adjusted according to the vineyard's water-holding capacity; something the Kellers have tried to augment after the scorching summer of 2003 by spreading bark mulch between the vines. And all this work is informed by a geological survey involving 70,000 boreholes to reveal the soil's secrets.

Keller devotes particular attention to achieving perfect maturity, his aim being to arrest and extend ripening to broaden and intensify the flavour of the fruit. Since it's the photosynthesising leaves that produce the sugar that accumulates in grapes, he adjusts the ratio of leaves-to-bunches to ensure optimal ripening late in the season. It's a sensitive calculation: more leaves are removed in sunny Nierstein than in cooler Westhofen, for example. Thus while Keller's crop typically ripens in November, his dry Rieslings only rarely exceed 13% alcohol.

Another priority is selection: rigorous manual sorting in the vineyard and then again in the cellar eliminates any less-than-pristine berries. This is especially important for the dry wines, which Keller likes to macerate on their skins for up to 24 hours before pressing. Any rotten berries would be fatal, and botrytis is also unwelcome: 'I don't really like the richness it brings to dry Riesling,' he explains, though of course it takes centre stage in the estate's nobly sweet wines.

All this work should make clear that the Kellers have no intention of resting on their laurels. On the contrary, 'all our success only inspires us to do more'.

And it's an inspiration for a renaissance in the Rheinhessen too – now one of the most dynamic wine regions in Germany. **D**

## Keller's top-scoring dry Rieslings



**Weingut Keller, Riesling G-Max, Rheinhessen**

**2015 100**

POA **Howard Ripley,**

**Justerini & Brooks**

Named in honour of his great-grandfather Georg and his youngest son Max, Keller's 2015 G-Max is the most in need of serious cellaring of all his dry Rieslings. Notes of lemon, wet stones, fresh bread and white flowers herald an extraordinarily three-dimensional, complete wine, which stains the palate with minerality and lingers through an impossibly long finish. Simply the pinnacle of dry Riesling – and the only thing that keeps the Morstein and Abtserde bottlings from receiving a perfect score.

**Drink 2020-2070 Alcohol N/A**



**Weingut Keller, Westhofen**

**Brunnenhäuschen**

**Abtserde Riesling**

**Grosses Gewächs,**

**Rheinhessen 2015 99**

POA **Howard Ripley,**

**Justerini & Brooks**

The favoured vineyard of the Bishop of Worms in the 14th century (and today a sub-plot of the Brunnenhäuschen grand cru), the Kellers acquired their parcel in 1996 and own the oldest vines here. A crisp bouquet of lemon zest, tangerine, grapefruit and wet stones is the prelude to a silky, weightless and incredibly intense wine of breathtaking complexity and completeness, which positively screams of its limestone origins. **Drink 2020-2065 Alc N/A**

**Weingut Keller, Westhofener**

**Morstein Riesling Grosses**

**Gewächs, Rheinhessen 2015 99**

POA **Howard Ripley, Justerini & Brooks**

The Morstein's heavy clay soils over limestone rock typically make for more powerful Rieslings with deep minerality, and 2015 is no exception. A brooding, reserved bouquet of caramelised lemon, wet stones and white flowers is followed by a massively textural, powerful wine underpinned by equally pronounced cut and minerality. While this is the largest-scaled of Keller's Grosses Gewächs, it's no less weightlessly elegant. **Drink 2020-2070 Alc N/A**

**Weingut Keller, Westhofener**

**Kirchspiel Riesling Grosses**

**Gewächs, Rheinhessen 2015 96**

POA **Howard Ripley, Justerini & Brooks**

From a cooler, east-facing site that emphasises finesse and elegance, this is the most delicate and immediate of Keller's Grosses Gewächs in 2015. An expressive bouquet of pink grapefruit, green apple, elderflower blossom and wet stones introduces a searingly intense wine with incredible cut and minerality that lingers on the impressively persistent finish.

**Drink 2020-2060 Alc N/A**

**Weingut Keller, Hubacker**

**Riesling Grosses Gewächs,**

**Rheinhessen 2015 95**

POA **Howard Ripley, Justerini & Brooks**

The Kellers have owned vines in the Hubacker's yellow limestone soils since 1789, and they're usually the last to be harvested. This is the most exotic and aromatically brooding of Keller's 2015s, with a complex bouquet of papaya, green apple, caramelised citrus, iodine and complex smoky, spicy top notes. On the palate the wine is deep, racy and concentrated with a touch more texture than the Kirchspiel. **Drink 2020-2060 Alc N/A**

*For full UK stockist details, see p117*

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