



Mosel Fine Wines

"The Independent Review of Mosel Riesling"

By Jean Fisch and David Rayer

Karl Erbes | A Precursor of the Flying Winemaker

Karl Erbes is the senior boss at the similarly named Estate in Ürzig. But what few people know is that he was also the head winemaker for no less than seven VDP Estates ... and this at the same time! Join us in meeting the de-facto precursor of the flying winemakers!



KARL ERBES | THE SENIOR BOSS AT A WELL-KNOWN ESTATE IN ÜRZIG

Most lovers of Mosel wines will recognize the name Karl Erbes as that of one of the well-known Estates in Ürzig. And this is of course correct.

Karl Erbes comes from an old family active in Ürzig since centuries. He set up his own Estate in 1967 with 0.1 ha of vineyards. Over the years he gradually developed his Estate by taking over small parcels, ideally in the better sectors of the Ürziger Würzgarten, in particular in and above the Kranklay situated in the vicinity of the Erdener Prälät. His son Stefan joined him as early as 1984 and took over the family Estate in 2002, after Karl Erbes officially retired. Stefan Erbes has continued the work of his father since, adding more vineyards when these became available. As a result, the Estate now tends 5 ha situated in the finest sectors of Ürzig and Erden.

From one of the many (over 100) small producers active in Ürzig in the 1960s and 1970s, the Karl Erbes Estate has emerged as one of the main growers of the village, regularly producing some of the region's finest wines. It has been a fixed feature of our annual Estate reviews ever since the start of Mosel Fine Wines back in 2008.

KARL ERBES | THE FORMER WINEMAKER OF SEVEN VDP ESTATES ... AT THE SAME TIME!

What is less known is that, for much of the 1960s and 1970s, the main activity of Karl Erbes consisted of being the winemaker (*Küfer*) at some of the greatest Estates of the era. This included no less than seven founding members of the VDP Mosel including the Richard Jos. Berres Estate, the Geschwister Berres Estates and even, for some time, the Mönchhof Estate! The Geschwister Berres Estate was not one Estate but had been split into five different Estates (Dr. Peter Berres, Hugo Berres, Christoffel-Berres, Norbert Weber and Heinen-Berres), each a member of the VDP and each with its own cellar.



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How did Karl Erbes end up being the winemaker for so many Estates? "While Erbes is an old name in Ürzig, my branch of the family was not active in wine when I started to work. But wine was my passion. So I joined and later took over a major *Küferei* [a cooperage] in Ürzig. This was a normal way to enter into the wine business. This gave me a regular job as well as the means to gradually acquire some vineyards and develop my own Estate."

In his role as winemaker, he ended up being in charge of the cellars of no less than seven VDP member Estates at the same time in the late 1960s and 1970s, namely the Geschwister Berres Estates (which was split into five separate Estates), the Richard Jos. Berres Estate and the Mönchhof Estates.



Geschw. Berres / Christoffel-Berres
(VDP)



Mönchhof / Robert Eymael
(VDP)



Geschw. Berres / Dr. Peter Berres
(VDP)



Richard Jos. Berres
(VDP)

Geschwister Berres, Richard Jos. Berres (they were one Estate, the Erben Jos. Berres jr. until the 1910s) and Mönchhof were among the most reputed winemaking Estates in the Mosel. They were precursors of quality winemaking and had been selling their wines for high prices at Auction as early as the 1870s. Consequently, they were among the founding members of the Grosser Ring (the VDP Mosel) in 1908 and their wines were highly sought-after.



In addition, as you can see from the label here above, the Geschwister Berres Estate owned the original Prälat, i.e. what was already back then one of the most prestigious names of the Mosel (those interested in the fine details of the Prälat and the Berres families should read the 10-page article on the Erdener Prälat published in Mosel Fine Wines Issue No 10).

Karl Erbes was therefore the winemaker behind the great bottles of the Erdener Prälat from the 1960s and 1970s which still prove stunningly beautiful today!

If you believe that seven such prestigious Estates were more than enough for one life, you will be wrong: Karl Erbes was also responsible for handling the cellars of many other Estates, including several members of the Bernkasteler Ring. Asked about how many they were in total, he simply said: "Honestly, I would not know anymore, but there were many!"

Over the years, many of these Estates were given up or the owners took over the winemaking activities in their own hands. But, Karl Erbes remained the winemaker of the great Christoffel-Berres Estate right until it was given up after the vintage 1997.



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THE KÜFER | THE PRECURSOR OF THE FLYING WINEMAKER

When asking Karl Erbes how he managed to handle so many different Estates at the same time, he smiled and simply answered "with a motorbike, a trailer and a full set of keys for all the cellars!" But he conceded that it required some juggling: "It was not always easy, especially before the Auctions, when every owner wanted to see me and discuss about which casks to sell at the annual Auctions in Trier. It required a little bit of organization as well as some *Fingerspitzengefühl* to deal with all the demands."

By today's standards, it seems surprising that someone would be responsible for so many cellars. This was quite common right until the 1970s, as Karl Erbes explained: "You need to understand the central role of the *Küfer* [the cooper] played in those days. Many of the grand Estates of the period were owned by local notables who were not active in winemaking. For instance, Dr. Peter Berres was a judge in Trier, Dr. Karl Christoffel from Christoffel-Berres was an architect in Düsseldorf, etc. Large Estates such as von Kesselstatt appointed full-time Estate managers. But for smaller Estates such as the Geschwister Berres, Richard Jos. Berres or Mönchhof, with 2 ha each, this was not really feasible. Instead, they appointed someone responsible for the vineyards, called a *Baumann* (from the term *Weinbau*). The cellar activities were outsourced to a *Küferei*. Most Estates only had a few casks. Their handling did not warrant full-time employment. The role of the *Küferei* was to oversee the fermentation in the casks, possibly add sugar to the wines if necessary and, overall, be responsible for the maturing process."



What proved fascinating during our discussions with Karl Erbes was the division of labor between the *Baumann* (vineyard manager) and *Küfer* (cellar master) which prevailed right until the 1970s. The vineyard manager was also responsible for pressing the grapes, an activity which falls today under the responsibilities of the cellar master. Here also Karl Erbes provides some explanation: "At the time, the pressing of the grapes was a rather straightforward activity. You had a big basket press and the grapes were immediately pressed upon arrival at the cellar. Today, Estates have much more decisions to take, such as decide on pre-fermentation cold soak, choose their pressing technology, select yeasts or rely on ambient yeasts, choose the recipient, etc. It is therefore not surprising that the division of labor has shifted somewhat since: Modern day vineyard managers are responsible for the grapes up to the cellar door, while the winemaker now also oversees the pressing activities."

Lastly, back then, the activities of the cellar master were quite different to those carried out today: "Today, nearly every vintage is of outstanding quality. This was not the case back in the 1960s and even 1970s. For every 1971 [Note: one of the great vintages of all time], there were three or four vintages in which acidity remained very high and sugar levels were distressingly low. In such vintages, the role of the cellar master involved techniques such as a de-acidification or a Gallization, i.e. adding sugar and water in order to increase the alcohol content and dilute the acidity of the wines. In addition, wines were usually bottled after the summer. This required making sure that the wines remained stable over the summer and did not start re-fermenting. Cooling systems back then were very rudimentary, certainly for small cellars. Temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks were still a thing of the future."

Handling so many "clients" was not always an easy task, as Karl Erbes remembered all too well: "As one would expect, all Estate owners wanted my full attention and quite some planning was needed to make sure that one could meet everybody's desires. The most intense period was always just before the Auctions, when every owner wanted advice in order to select the right barrels to be auctioned off and make sure that the samples were properly prepared. In the days before the Auctions, I rarely came home before 10 pm. However, the smile on their faces after the Auctions, when the casks were sold for good money, made it worth it!"



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KARL ERBES | FROM "GUARDIAN OF" TO "OWNER IN" THE PRÄLAT

As we mentioned, Karl Erbes was, among others, in charge of the celebrated Erdener Prälat wines in the 1960s and 1970s, a vineyard solely but jointly owned by the different Geschwister Berres Estates.

In 2012, Karl and Stefan Erbes closed the circle when they were able to lease the parcel in the original Erdener Prälat which was owned by the Dr. Peter Berres Estate. From guardian of the Erdener Prälat, Karl Erbes had become an "owner" in the Erdener Prälat a generation later.



Unsurprisingly, the Estate immediately excelled at this vineyard and has regularly produced some of the finest Prälat wines of the vintage since its debut.

While modesty will certainly forbid Karl Erbes to agree, his talents as a winemaker were surely behind the fact that he was the trusted partner for so many of the leading Estate of the 1960s and 1970s.

In that sense, the story of Karl Erbes is rather unique as we are not aware of any other winemaker having achieved this. Yet, in many ways, his story is also the story of the Mosel as a whole as it allowed a fascinating view on how winemaking used to be done in the Mosel.

We could not resist asking if Karl Erbes was regretting these "good old days." He thought a little before answering: "No, not really. At our Estate, we have remained rather close to the principles we have used back then and still only rely on ambient yeasts, gentle pressing, etc. But overall, we have a much better understanding of winemaking today, which reflects in the overall quality available to consumers. It was a great period but we should be looking forward."