

# NEW WAVE OF GERMAN WINE MAKING

*Jonas Dostert*

*Julien Renard*

*Rosalie Curtin*

*Lukas Hammelmann*

*Kai Schätzel and Jule Eichblatt*

*Jan Wongse Raumland*

In conversation with

**ALEXANDER  
SHCHURENKOV**

Sheep in the Schätzel vineyards. Photo: Courtesy of Weingut Schätzel.





episode 1.2

**BY.O.B.**

magazine

81



## Nierstein's Futurism

It takes a lot of bravery to not follow a well-beaten path. But Kai Schätzel, who runs the Schätzel winery—with 650 years of history and 70% of its vineyards classified as VDP Grosse Lage—is going against the stream, with the help of his life and business partner, Jule Eichblatt. In fact, they don't think of Schätzel as a winery. To them, it's a community. This even led them to create a project called Kommune 3000 (more on that below).

Most importantly, they're envisioning a future where humans are much closer to nature than they are now. They listen to it and help it thrive. And the results are remarkable. At one point, they discovered flor in their barrels and began producing a unique Riesling in a dry, non-oxidative style.

Hearing “flor,” many of us think of Jura wines—but Schätzel's are nothing like those. They have their own very specific identity. If you spot one on a wine shop shelf or a wine list—don't overthink it. Just give it a try. And that's only the starting point.

Photo: Courtesy of Weingut Schätzel

I'm really curious to hear the story—how did you decide to plant a forest to really shift the perception of how wine can be made, in contrast to the late 20th century? Because I'm pretty sure this approach—to be together with nature—was much more common many centuries ago. And now, after the 20th century and industrialization, many wine regions embraced standardization, and a lot of wines became the same.

**Jule:** You're absolutely right. We think about these topics every day, and I think this is what gets us up in the morning and drives what we do. Sometimes we don't even call it "making wine," because we're farmers—we don't really identify solely with wine-making.

I come from the north of Germany and grew up on a farm myself—a crop farm. My father did a lot of grain farming, and of course, that shaped my life. I've always been deeply interested in agriculture and nature, and in how we can survive as human beings without treating the planet like shit.

After earning my bachelor's in economics, I co-founded a startup in Hamburg focused on delivering local food directly to people's homes. It emphasized organic farming—not just delivering products, but really telling the story and digging into what the farmers were doing. We felt a deep connection to the producers in our curated (and small) portfolio.

After doing that for a couple of years, we realized we needed to add wine, because people wanted to include it in their orders. That's how Kai came into my life—his wines joined our portfolio,

and... you can probably guess how the story unfolds.

In 2020, I needed a break from my hectic startup life, so I asked a friend—who's a chef in Hamburg—where I should go for harvest. He said, "Go see Kai. He has this fun group running around the vineyards—you'll love it. It's like a commune." Two days later, I packed a bag and my bike and rode to Nierstein. That's how we met.

Some people say I first fell in love with the natural Silvaner—but I think it was really us falling in love first, and the wine came later. It was a process: moving in together, immersing in the work, and after about two years, managing the winery together. It's not a classical winery anymore—it's also like a startup, because we've transformed a very traditional, old-school place into something forward-looking and modern.

**Kai:** As you can see, we're not "wine-makers" in the classical sense. We're a team—Jule, me, and everyone else in the crew. We're working, thinking, and developing the future together.

I was born and raised at a 650-year-old, very traditional winery. It looks just how you'd imagine an old German estate: a garden, a dark cellar, oak barrels, a family coat of arms—all that heritage stuff. And sure, it's nice to have. We also have incredible potential: 70% of our vineyards are classified as VDP Grosse Lage (Grand Cru). We've got the dream setup—historic cellars, top vineyards, everything you could wish for.

But even with all of that, we realized early on that something needed to change. That might sound obvious today, now that the "modern" story is mostly in place—especially with Jule's



influence and our latest releases—but the real transformation started much earlier.

We realized that what we used to call “Grand Cru” was defined under completely different climate conditions. These sites were great in the cooler era. But it’s not cool anymore. It feels like we’ve moved 500 km south in the last 20 years. That shift changes everything.

You can respond by treating the symptoms—irrigation, for example—or you can change the system. We chose the second path. We wanted to adapt, to develop what we call a modern farming system. And for us, “modern” doesn’t mean fancy equipment. It means using today’s technology and knowledge to build something long-lasting.

### **How did you decide how the whole ecosystem should work?**

**Jule:** Both of us studied economics, so we’re not the deepest agricultural specialists. But Kai brings a ton of hands-on experience—he basically took over the cellar when he was 13. So you can imagine how much he’s seen.

For both of us, it’s really about intrinsic motivation and a pioneering mindset. We never settle for the status quo. We always want to push it forward. Personal development is part of our identity—like brushing our teeth. So we stay curious, constantly rethinking what we’re doing. And when we think about optimization, it’s not just about economics—it’s also about sustainability.

Of course, we work with consultants. We’re always seeking experts—people who can advise us on which tree species are suited to our soils and our climate zones. But we don’t just

outsource the decisions. It’s about identifying with the process—making it our own.

**Kai:** We try to gather the best knowledge globally. For example, the inspiration for our viticultural forest project came from a crop farm in northern Germany. They had a consultant from Switzerland—Ernst Götsch. He’s basically the godfather of syntropic farming. He started with coffee and cacao plantations in South America and turned degraded land back into vibrant ecosystems by integrating trees, crops, and everything else together.

Eventually, we met him and attended workshops with him. Then we hired a consulting team specifically focused on combining viticulture and forestry. Over the past few years, we’ve developed our own plan—what we believe can work here.

But, like Jule said, it’s not about copying and pasting someone else’s method. It’s a dialogue—between us, our consultants, and the land. We use soil analysis, wind data, sunlight, heat—all that—to build a system that isn’t fixed. It’s not “the final model.” It’s iterative. It evolves. It learns.

**Jule:** And that’s maybe also what really sets us apart from many of our colleagues. We don’t see it as a big risk—we see it as a chance. We always look for the possibility to adapt, to take the first step with courage. Because it’s just that: one step.

It’s the same with the sheep in the vineyards. In the beginning, we had just three sheep. Now we have five. Maybe next year we’ll have ten—because we’ve seen how they’ve impacted the agricultural system, and we can see it’s working well. But if it hadn’t worked

out, of course we could've adapted and sent them back to their owner. So it's never about seeing something new as a burden—it's about seeing the chance to be better.

**Kai:** For example, when people ask us if we know what the impact of planting trees will be in 30 years, our answer is: we don't know exactly. But we do know that we can't continue the way things were done 30 years ago.

The farming system we grew up with—it's over. Our vines are dying. And this isn't a small issue anymore. Even in our best southeast-facing Grand Cru vineyards—like the south-facing slopes of Pettenthal—we're losing 10 to 20% of vines every year if we don't irrigate. That's how serious it is.

So, we know the old system can't be preserved. We have to adapt. We have to move forward. And we believe it's our responsibility—as it has always been with Grand Cru vineyards and pioneering work—to develop something that will soon become necessary across the entire wine industry.

What's happening in the Grand Cru plots today will happen in the Premier Crus tomorrow, and in other vineyards the day after that. We're just getting hit first, and hardest, by the heatwaves and the trauma of climate change—but this will affect everyone. This isn't some fringe idea. It's real. You can see it.

Our solution is something we call the "3000 Model." It means not reacting with short-term fixes, but inventing long-term solutions. "3000" stands for the long view—thinking in millennia. Don't irrigate the vines—plant trees. Build an ecosystem that might survive the coming climate decades.

**Speaking of irrigation, I see this as a more sustainable system—to build an environment where the vineyards don't need irrigation. Trees can lower temperature peaks, reduce extreme heat, and help retain water. But have you ever irrigated if it seemed necessary, or do you deliberately avoid it altogether?**

**Kai:** First of all, we believe irrigation cannot be the solution. Society won't accept using drinkable water to produce alcohol. If people aren't even allowed to water their lawns anymore, they definitely won't accept us using water for winemaking.

Secondly, it's not even practical. You can maybe water the worst-hit spots, but it's just a firefighting solution.

Thirdly, yes—if we're planting trees or young vines, we might need to irrigate those at first. But the goal is to build a system that becomes independent. That's what we're trying to do.

And maybe now it's time to talk about the complex system we call "syntropic vitiforestry"—the full program we've developed. Because it's more than just planting a few trees for shade. It's the idea of a closed system.

We already know that a single tree next to a vine takes water from the vine. That's what we see in many vineyards: vines near lone trees are weaker than others. So one tree doesn't help.

But according to syntropic theory, if you build a full system—meaning a real forest—it can work like a forest. Our current plan includes planting 250 trees per hectare. That's a real canopy.

If the system is closed, the forest can begin to function. It draws water from

deep layers of soil. It creates shade. It breaks the wind. It increases biodiversity. It generates biomass. In theory, the humus layer increases by 2% per year—which stores far more water than any previous system could.

**What about the choices you're making in the vineyard now—how do they differ from before? Have you changed things like pruning? Everything?**

**Kai:** You get it!

**Jule:** But not everything all at once. It's a learning curve.

**Kai:** We started working organically back in 2008. Then we added sustainability and biodynamic practices. Later, we realized pruning is a huge topic, so we began testing new pruning systems.

Then we understood that cover crops aren't just nice for pictures. So we started planting cover crops—at first intentionally chosen ones. But then we noticed that wild cover crops adapted even better, so we began cultivating those.

Then strawberries started growing in the vineyard. Then we realized we weren't producing stable, natural wines—we needed more shade. That's when we started building pergolas. In hot, dry summers, every second row grows together to form a kind of tunnel of shade.

And then we noticed that grapes from these shaded rows were different. They made wines with totally new character. Today we call that a natural or modern wine style.

But it wasn't designed—we didn't invent it. We just realized: the grapes we picked from those shaded rows

had better pH, didn't oxidize, and could even allow flor yeast to grow. Totally new qualities. And they came from the vineyard. That's the key point.

**What's the idea behind strawberries in the vineyards?**

**Jule:** Well, they were wild—we didn't plant them. They just appeared. Like the flor.

**Kai:** The syntropic system is built on this principle: let grow what wants to grow. Don't try to force nature into something it doesn't like. That means looking, listening, and feeling what's happening—and supporting the systems that want to emerge. Don't label anything as a bad crop. Everything that appears deserves attention. First, you say: "Okay, thank you, you're here—we see you. What can we do with you?"

**Jule:** The idea is that every growing system has its function. So what's the function of the strawberry, maybe? It's not a dominant plant—it grows low to the ground and returns each year. We don't see it as something that only serves a short-term role. But there are also plants that appear just once, for one season, and then disappear again.

**Kai:** Nature strives for stability. Plants, fungi, fermentations—they all come together to form systems that want to be balanced and resilient. Pandemics, by contrast, arise in monocultures.

**How does your vineyard philosophy translate to your work in the cellar?**

**Kai:** Just as we don't try to dominate the vineyard, we don't dominate the cellar. We listen to the grapes. We try to make the best out of them with as little intervention as possible.

Even 15 years ago, we were already

working with wild fermentation. After the first fermentation, we noticed that some wines turned brown, and others didn't. That told us some wines were more prone to oxidation, and others were naturally resistant.

Then we saw a pattern: the wines that resisted oxidation came from organic, shade-rich vineyards. That taught us something. It also meant we could move into malolactic fermentation without a prior oxidative phase.

Eventually, in 2017, we noticed something growing on the surface of a barrel. At first we were worried—but then we tasted the wine and loved it. That's when we realized it was flor yeast.

There was no vinegar, no volatile acidity (VA)—even after nearly a decade under flor. So over time, this became a kind of recipe for us. Now we know how to recreate the conditions. Our focus is on farming grapes that are stable enough to reach the point where flor can take over.

Because once the flor starts working, there's no more VA, no oxidation, no mouse. The wine becomes extremely stable. Our good friend Paul Wasserman always reminds people that flor doesn't cause oxidation. And that's a common misunderstanding—people associate flor wines with oxidative character.

But the truth is: oxidative flor wines were already oxidized before the flor appeared. The flor reduces oxidation levels. That's an important distinction.

**Julie:** The wine style—and the decisions we make in the cellar—have changed a lot in recent years. Not because we set out to make a specific kind of wine, but because of the stabil-

ity of the fruit nature gives us now. And because we give that fruit more time.

Our style of farming is already very advanced in terms of cost and resource investment. And it's the same in the cellar—it takes time and a lot of commitment. But in the end, that's also reflected in what the wine costs.

### **Why do you prefer foot stomping?**

**Kai:** The answer's not super romantic—it's just practical.

We harvest with a small but very careful team, and we sort grapes intensely in the vineyard. That means we might only harvest one 450-kg box per hour. So we try to get the grapes to the winery quickly and keep them cool.

At that point, it's just easier to take off your boots and stomp the grapes than to start up a machine for each box. Machines require cleaning, setup—it's more complicated.

So we have one person in the cellar welcoming each box. They just step in with rubber boots and gently walk over the grapes.

From that moment, oxidation is reduced and natural enzymes are activated. An uncrushed box of grapes might have a surface area of one square kilometer—because every grape skin is exposed to air. But once you gently crush them, juice comes out and covers the mass. That surface shrinks to maybe one square meter. So oxidation and the window for microbial attack are dramatically reduced.

That's why we do it as quickly as possible: grapes in, foot-stomped, then cold maceration for 6 hours to 4 days. This isn't fermentation—it doesn't add bitterness. It just allows the enzymes to



## Jule Eichblatt on future of Kommune 3000

Since we founded Kommune 3000 in 2022, the initial idea was simply to do projects together. When Kai and I decided we wanted to collaborate, the first thing we created was a pét-nat—and we wanted to make it as something separate from the VDP winery.

We created Kommune 3000 primarily as a kind of playground, a laboratory for new projects. And as we've told you about this "3000 perspective," we embedded that into the name. Kommune means community—and while in Germany people often associate that word with politics, for us it's closer to the Scandinavian idea of a shared, collaborative living and working space.

We really identify with flat hierarchies, integrating everyone—including our trainees. Right now, we have four trainees at the winery. We live together with a Ukrainian family in one house, and we have an open-door policy. Many international interns come during the summer. We're all living under one roof and working side by side—there's no "boss" telling people what to do. Instead, everyone takes responsibility. That's what we mean by Kommune. It's the Kommune of the future.

At the beginning, it was more like a think tank. Today, it feels like a virus—in the best sense. We didn't plan it this way, but now you can't imagine how many young people, from universities like Geisenheim in Germany and internationally, want to join Kommune 3000. They really identify with this new way of working and collaborating.

It's a new kind of work culture—and that hasn't really reached agriculture or farming yet. But again, we see ourselves as a kind of pioneer winery trying to live this idea.

gently open up the grape structure.

And then, when we press, we don't actually press. The juice flows out on its own—85% of it—without mechanical stress. The enzymes already did the work.

That juice is so clean, we don't need to clarify it. In fact, we keep the sediment because it's good for the yeast. When you harvest grapes this precisely, you want to use every part of them.

**Do you prefer old oak, concrete—what do you choose for aging?**

**Jule:** It's old oak. We don't really have space to add many more barrels. If we could make more space, we'd definitely consider adding some new oak to the cellar.

**Kai:** It's an old cellar—the oldest barrels are from the 1930s. Of course, every five to ten years, there's a barrel we need to replace, and then we get a new one. But it takes five to ten years to

adapt the new barrel to our conditions. These are German foudre-sized barrels—600 liters and 1000 liter barrels of heavy oak, built to last 400 years.

All of our dry wines age in oak. The minimum aging is one year. That means at the next harvest, we empty the barrel and fill the uncleaned barrel with the next generation of juice. But that's only for our entry-level wines.

For most of our wines, the stabilization processes we've been talking about take much longer. For example, alcoholic fermentation—sometimes it takes a whole year to reach zero. And some grapes we harvest at a pH of 2.8, which is quite acidic. So malolactic fermentation can take one or even two more years before it's fully finished in terms of taste.

That already brings us to four years, sometimes. So our Grand Crus, for example, age in barrel for a minimum of three years. For our icon wines from Pettenthal, we still have vintage 2016 aging in barrels. So yes—it's a long-term investment. We're careful, but we also have a market solution in between.

**Jule:** We're also working with a Solera system. For our Premier Cru wines—Riesling and also Silvaner—we have a Solera product. The Riesling Solera includes three barrels, each 5,000 liters. So it's a significant volume.

Two barrels are used as pre-aging vessels, and one is the Mother Solera. From this barrel, we bottle half once a year. The rest stays in. Then the wine from the other two pre-aging barrels is used to top it up. It's a serious Solera system. We're now talking about eight vintages aging, from 2017-2024.

**Kai:** We started this with a Premier Cru wine that functions as our “second wine.” It works like this: if, after three years, a Grand Cru barrel isn't going to make it into the final Grand Cru bottling, it goes to the Solera—to the Premier Cru.

So this was the first logical step toward a multi-vintage second wine. Because if you can't predict how long a wine will take to age, then a single-vintage second wine doesn't make sense. The Solera gave us flexibility.

Then last year, we realized we had eight different vintages of Pettenthal in the cellar. That's Germany's most expensive vineyard. So we did our first blend of all eight vintages and bottled it. We just took a couple of liters from each barrel.

**Jule:** They hadn't all aged together in one barrel—we just took some from each individual vintage and blended them. We really enjoy playing around with vintages.

**Kai:** It's amazing. Once you start doing it, you get addicted. The potential of blending three-dimensionally—with time (the vintage) as a dimension—gives you a totally new power to create something unique. We know this from Champagne and Sherry. But we've never seen it applied like this to Grand Cru Riesling.

Every time we think about it, we start smiling. It really gives the wine a new kind of superpower.