

**Written by**

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**Ludwig Knoll - a most unusual Franken estate**

*As Michael's many tasting notes on this year's crop of 2017 Grosse Gewächs are prepared for publication, we publish this early taster.*

Every November the members of the VDP Franken celebrate Thanksgiving with a get-together called Niederfall which could literally be translated as downfall, the name probably derived from the falling of the leaves from the vines rather than the vintners falling over drunk after successful completion of the harvest.

I am lucky enough to be regularly invited to this event, probably on account of being a fervent protagonist of Franken's flagship variety Silvaner. Activities include winery visits, tastings, round-table discussions, lectures and a jolly knees-up with local food and Silvaner's finest offerings. In November 2017 the programme included a whistle-stop tour of the estate of Ludwig Knoll, aptly named Weingut am Stein, as it lies in the foothills of the famous Würzburger Stein vineyard. Even though I am a bit of an architectural heathen, I was suitably impressed by the design of the winery, with its eye-catching and highly visible glass and oak cube construction at the front of the complex probably leaving the most enduring impression on the majority of visitors.

What really piqued my curiosity, however, lay underground. While we were being rushed through the cellar, I spied with my little eye a greater variety of wine vessels than I had ever seen before at any other estate. Stainless-steel vats glinting, very nice indeed. Barriques, old and new, nobody would be seen without them, but nothing out of the ordinary so far. Then I saw what looked like glass lids of oversized saucepans just bulging above the floor. On closer inspection they turned out to be the tops of amphorae buried in the ground (see right of Stefan Schütz's picture above). There was not enough time to dwell on them, particularly as around the next corner an even greater surprise awaited us in the shape of what appeared to be gigantic Easter eggs, the only difference being that they were not brown, but grey, and not made of chocolate, but concrete. Our tight schedule did not allow me to linger for probing questions but, sensing my disappointment, Ludwig Knoll invited me to my own personal viewing at a more convenient date. This would also give him more time to talk about his total commitment to biodynamic cultivation of his vineyards and environmental sustainability in all his wine-related activities.

On my return visit, my first question to him was how he had managed to get permission to build his winery in as prominent a location as the history-laden site of the Würzburger Stein, one of the most famous vineyards of Germany and, as some may recall, the provenance of the world's oldest bottle of wine deemed still drinkable, from the year 1540, the so-called vintage of the millennium. It turned out that Ludwig Knoll had been rather crafty in securing himself a favourable deal when the city of Würzburg needed the site of his old winery right in the heart of Würzburg for the development of a grand shopping mall.

Some of his rival growers may have audibly ground their teeth at the time, but they will admit today that, far from being an eyesore, the new building complex in the vineyard is a very tasteful and attractive addition to the landscape. His competitors would also have found some consolation in the fact that, despite the physical presence of Knoll's estate in the Stein, he owns only some hectares on the fringes of the vineyard, but none in what are considered the prime locations. The grower has no problem admitting that, particularly as he has another trump card up his sleeve which in his and the eyes of many a wine critic represents more than adequate compensation for his supposed loss.

Ironically enough Knoll's most outstanding wines do come from a site also called Stein, but this one lies about 20 km (12 miles) downstream of Würzburg on the river Main at Stetten, an outlying district of the town of Karlstadt. He owns 15 ha (37 acres) of this vineyard and, after having painstakingly restored his holdings, became so convinced of its potential that he applied to the VDP to have it registered as a Grosse Lage (grand cru) with the right to produce Grosse Gewächse, the highest classification for dry wines in the VDP hierarchy. This did not go down well at all with the Juliusspital, Bürgerspital and Staatlicher Hofkeller, the three big owners of the Würzburger Stein, who protested that it would lead to confusion in the minds of unwary consumers, particularly as the VDP, in an imitation of the Burgundy classification system, rightly or wrongly, has for some time promoted the concept of displaying only the vineyard name on the label of Grosse Lagen wines – so Stein instead of Würzburger Stein. Having two Steins would obviously be as confusing as having two Chambertins, but to defuse the crisis, Knoll agreed to identify his wines as Stettener Stein. Storm in a wine glass over!

Having already tasted his GGs from the Stettener Stein several years running at the annual VDP Grosse Gewächse preview, I did not need convincing of their outstanding quality, but readily agreed to check out *in situ* what makes the site so special. The heart of this other Stein is concave, ending abruptly 80 metres above the river at the edge of a rock formation which bears more than a passing resemblance to the white cliffs of Dover. As if the vertiginous slopes of the vineyard rising above were not frightening enough already, Knoll insists on nudging you closer to the edge of the precipice. Getting as close as somebody suffering from vertigo dares, you begin to feel a warm stream of air rising from the river below. As it drifts uphill, it raises the temperature on this slope at least two degrees above that in the surrounding area. Riesling and Silvaner vines send their roots deep down to penetrate the shell-limestone substrate in search of water and minerals and welcome the extra heat in ripening the grapes. The faster you understand this equation, the quicker you get to move away from the precipice!

Next stop is a tiny, inconspicuous-looking hut in a marginally more comfortable location in the vineyard with a wonderful view of the meandering Main and, on the opposite side, of a sea of bright yellow and green: apparently endless fields of rapeseed, meadows and clumps of trees. Ludwig Knoll pulls three rickety chairs out of the dark hut and serves a simple picnic with local bread, three types of local cheese and even more local wine. My innocent assumption about the contents of a nearby water butt being hardly sufficient in times of drought simply leads to proof that nothing in the life of Ludwig Knoll is done without purpose. The hut may be too small to store a lot of vineyard implements, but it's big enough to house six cow horns, indispensable equipment in biodynamic viticulture. Using a simple wooden stick and a little powder derived from decomposed cow manure he initiates me in the art of summoning the powers of the dung by stirring the powder in quick circular motions into the water. What surprises me the most is that it takes only the contents of six cow horns to energise the whole of Knoll's vineyards, a not insubstantial area of about 30 ha (74 acres). Homeopathic teas made from nettles and other local plants and herbs are also used in the vineyards as natural supplements.

On one more pit stop before we return to the winery we visit a building tucked away at the back of beyond, with the size and looks of an aircraft hangar. There's nothing remarkable about its contents of machinery, equipment and pallets, but it's not what's in it but what's on it that matters. The roof is completely covered with solar panels, enough to feed the grid with the equivalent of the estate's entire energy needs. Behind the building, excavation works are designed to create a basin large enough to collect all the rainfall from the roof as an independent source of water. Ludwig Knoll is not talking about economic sustainability, he is living it.

But behind every successful man is a great woman, in this case Ludwig's wife Sandra, and I'm not saying that just because she cooks a mean lunch. Presentations, marketing, administration are safe in her hands, as is the friendly entertainment of visitors when her husband is called away to deal with the pressing issues of the day-to-day running of the business.

Finally, we get down to the cellar and the object of my original curiosity. Stainless-steel tanks represent the lion's share, 70%, of wine vessels and are used for all Gutsweine (estate wines), the base tier of the classification of the VDP of which the Weingut am Stein is a member, as well as all Erste Lage wines (premiers crus from named sites). The remaining 30% are divided between wooden barrels (20%), seven concrete 1,700-litre eggs (7%) and clay amphorae (3%). Interestingly enough, since 2014 the top dry wines of the estate, the Riesling and Silvaner (made from the Gelber Silvaner variety) Grosse Gewächse from the Stettener Stein, are completely vinified in concrete. The egg shape of these vessels is based on the aesthetic value of the golden ratio, sometimes called golden mean, which in this case means a receptacle without corners, edges or blind spots. Knoll explains to me that cosmic powers generate a continuous flow in the egg, keeping the yeast in suspension and thus leading to greater empowerment of the enzymes. He views this process as a natural conclusion of the biodynamic cycle and keeps the wine in contact with the full lees for 12 months. He also maintains that concrete, just like wood, does not provide a 100% hermetically sealed surface and that therefore reduction is not as pronounced as it would be with stainless steel. In a further twist of Knoll's biodynamic philosophy, the concrete eggs are located in front of a large wall lined with copper, considered a positive conductor of cosmic energy. A constant stream of water runs down the surface, keeping temperature and humidity on an even keel.

There are two other lines of wines, which in the estate's own ranking enjoy the same kind of esteem as the VDP Grosse Gewächse, but are not graded according to the association's classification. The Knolls' premium Pinot range is sold under the label Montonia, named after their daughter Antonia. Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) and Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir) are matured in barriques, Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) half in barriques, half in larger wooden casks. Even more intriguing are the two wines under the label Vinz, named after son Vincenz. There is an unfiltered Silvaner from a parcel of 50-year-old vines from the Stettener Stein, a mix of primarily Grüner Silvaner and a small proportion of Gelber Silvaner, 80% of it vinified in concrete egg without skin contact, 20% vinified in amphorae with skin contact. The second Vinz is a Scheurebe from the same provenance, but vinified two-thirds in amphorae and one-third in barriques made of Caucasian oak.

If the 30% share of wood does not seem properly accounted for, it's because there has been no mention yet of the category of Ortsweine (village wines). These wines from the communes of Würzburg, Stetten and Randersacker, mainly Silvaner, Riesling, Scheurebe and the Pinots, are partly vinified in stainless steel and partly in oak barrels, mostly used and of the larger kind. What goes without saying is that fermentation at the estate is carried out by ambient yeasts, only natural compost is used as fertiliser in the vineyards, and there is no place for chemical insecticides and herbicides, strategically selected herbs and grasses being responsible for a healthy population of microorganisms between the rows of vines.

The 13 wines below are listed in the order tasted, but you can change this.

Order by 

No points or drinking windows have been given for the 2017 Grosse Gewächse, as they have since been evaluated from bottle at the annual late August showing in Wiesbaden.

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Stettener Stein Silvaner Grosses Gewächs 2017 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623297)

*Cask sample; score/drink dates will be allocated when tasted from bottle.*
Still very much in its infant stage, but already showing an attractive combination of herbs and lively acidity. Sneaky, sneaky, as this was supposedly all concrete-egg vinification, but my nose picked up a hint of oak, and Ludwig Knoll admitted to a touch of barrique. (MS)

Drink ??-??
[??](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623297)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Stettener Stein Riesling Grosses Gewächs 2017 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623298)

*Cask sample; score/drink dates will be allocated when tasted from bottle.*
Pronounced primary aromatic aromas dominate the nose, but the palate is hinting at stony minerality and a touch of apple kernel. (MS)

Drink ??-??
[??](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623298)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Gemischter Satz 2016 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623299)

Quite popular in the olden days, Gemischter Satz represented a cuvée of varieties grown on the same plot. In this case it’s a mix of mainly Traminer with a small amount of Silvaner, and the aromatics of the Traminer definitely dominate nose and palate. A hint of bitter orange adds a bit of tang to the flavour, which becomes even more idiosyncratic with a touch of new wood. (MS)

Drink 2018-2021
[16](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623299)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll Blauer Silvaner 2016 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623300)

A pale amber colour tells you that something unusual is about to happen on your nose and palate. Smells a bit like vermouth with plenty of herbal variation. Fruit is definitely not of the essence, this is all about forest, with wood, mushrooms and earth sharing the honours. Demand an explanation and you are informed that this is a pure amphora wine, which has spent 9 months on its lees. It’s an acquired taste, and probably goes down well with the hipster scene in Berlin. (MS)

Drink 2017-2020
[16](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623300)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Würzburger Innere Leiste Silvaner trocken 2017 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623301)

*A VDP Erste Lage wine.*Vinified completely in stainless steel, the wine shows an attractive combination of fresh primary and secondary aromas, squeaky clean, lime and yellow fruit well supported by a fine herbal finish. (MS)

Drink 2018-2022
[17](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623301)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Würzburger Innere Leiste Riesling trocken 2017 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623302)

*A VDP Erste Lage wine.*
Not surprisingly the Riesling shows a bit more fruit than the Silvaner from the same site, but also adds a subtle herbal note to the ripe grapefruit flavour. With well-tamed acidity this is more of a soft and creamy kind of Riesling than a crisp barnstormer. (MS)

Drink 2018-2024
[16.5](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623302)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Stettener Stein Silvaner Grosses Gewächs 2016 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623303)

A Silvaner Grosses Gewächs that is all about subtlety. Gentle notes of green fruit mingle with a potpourri of fresh herbs, a fine mineral finish adds complexity. I know I called it a little simplistic before, but that was eight months ago and there’s a bit more diversity now. Drier, and I would have scored higher. (MS)

Drink 2018-2023
[17.5](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623303)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Stettener Riesling trocken 2017 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623304)

This Riesling from Stetten has just about everything I would hope for in an Ortswein*,*maybe even a little more. Fresh on the nose, though not with fruity superficiality but a herbal connotation which I appreciate as a hallmark of Franconian wine. Add a fragrance of pine forest and a wonderful peppery smack on the palate, and you have a real palate motivator that doesn’t cost the earth. (MS)

Drink 2018-2021
[16.5](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623304)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Montonia Weissburgunder trocken 2016 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623305)

If I have a sensory shortcoming, it’s that I find it hard to get excited about the combination of Pinot Blanc and wood, and that’s because I always find more wood than Pinot Blanc. So when I call the Montonia sleek and elegant with a fine notion of cedar spice, it means that the oaky contribution has been administered in a fairly subtle way. It’s also quite fresh, but does still scratch a bit with astringency at this stage. (MS)

Drink 2018-2021
[16.5](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623305)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Montonia Spätburgunder trocken 2015 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623306)

Although aged in barrique, the wood has been handled carefully and does not dominate the wine, either on the nose or the palate. There may be a smidgeon of cedar spice, but the fruit of 2015 is given plenty of room to express itself, not in an overpowering way, but with gentle red and black berry notes. Juicy acidity rounds off a very attractive Franken Pinot Noir. (MS)

Drink 2018-2025
[17](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623306)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Montonia Spätburgunder trocken 2002 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623307)

I stick my neck out here – my notes show only that we tasted a 2002 Spätburgunder, and judging by its quality it must have been the Montonia. Pale garnet red with tile-red rim. Complex nose with aromas of dried fruit, sultanas, autumn leaves and forest floor. Still surprisingly fresh on the palate, sweet strawberries, a little jam here, a smidgeon of tobacco there, a bit earthy too, but in a most tasteful way. Amazing. (MS)

Drink 2004-2018
[17](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623307)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Vinz Scheurebe trocken 2015 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623308)

Scheurebe always makes me wonder why we need Sauvignon Blanc in Germany, as it can easily develop the same intensity on the OTT scale of aromatic pungency, but also produce some refreshing dry quaffing wines with attractive notes of gooseberry or grapefruit. The Vinz has set its sights a little higher, and rather than bombard the nostrils with a cloud of perfume or tropical fruit, exhibits a very subtle fragrance with fresh grassy notes and a mere hint of boxwood. The palate continues with this exercise in elegance and freshness, the gently aromatic fruit well supported by an unobtrusive touch of spicy wood. (MS)

Drink 2017-2020
[17](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623308)

* [**Am Stein - Ludwig Knoll, Stettener Riesling Eiswein 2016 Franken**](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623309)

If you doubt that icing sugar and petrolly fumes can enter into a divine alliance, you have not smelled this. Petrol sends out such a negative signal, but in a ripe waxy and fumy way it can be utterly compelling. Nevertheless, you may not want it on the palate, and Knoll obviously took this into account when he made this ice wine. What you get instead is sweet apricots, orange marmalade and a truly invigorating acidity, which to me is an essential requirement of Eiswein. Let BA and TBA do sweet opulence, let Eiswein do vibrancy. (MS)

Drink 2018-2035
[18.5](https://www.jancisrobinson.com/tastings/view/623309)