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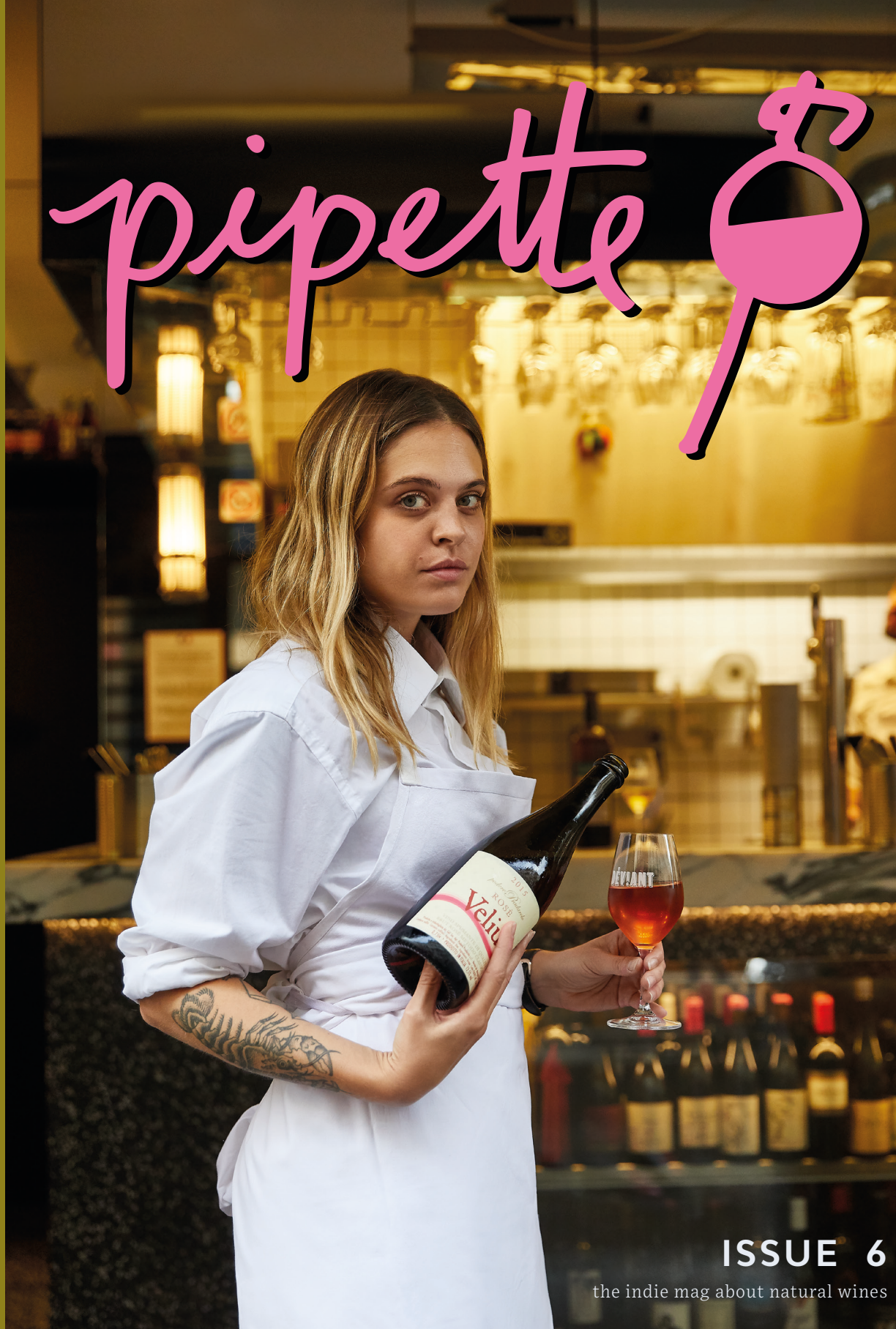


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# Cracks of the Mosel

**Delving into Biodynamics with  
Rita and Rudolf Trossen**

BY VALERIE KATHAWALA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOPHIA SCHILLIK





**I** F YOU WORSHIP at a certain temple of German Riesling, having Rudolf Trossen meet your train is a bit like being picked up by the Dalai Lama. Trossen's wines are modern legends, mystical testaments to the forces of nature and energy of place. He embraced biodynamics before Nicolas Joly. His were the first truly natural wines of the Mosel, a place long synonymous with synthetics in the vineyard and sulfur in the cellar. His understanding of the teachings of Austrian philosopher, founder of Waldorf education, and father of biodynamics, Rudolf Steiner, is profound. And his steady gaze into the Mosel's past and unflinching look at its present appear to have given him a gift for divining its future.

Last autumn, I made a harvest-time pilgrimage to Trossen's home and vineyards in the village of Kindel, hoping to gather clues to a few mysteries of his wines. How do they manage to be so of the Mosel and so of another world—as shimmering, shifting, and textured as the river itself? The answers turned out to be both more spiritual and more practical than I could have imagined.

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The plan had been to start by disarming Trossen with my checkered German. Instead, I'm on the railway platform, totally tongue tied. From the first syllable, his German is the fluid argot of the poet-philosopher, fitting for his classical Roman profile, though somewhat at odds with the ruddy cheeks, brimmed farmer's hat, and mahogany boots that belie his true vocation.

We hop into his tiny yellow car and are not a minute down the road when he's wading deep into the most esoteric reaches of biodynamics. We thread through villages and lush, misted fields, all looking more Ireland than Germany, to stop at an idyllic dairy farm. Trossen talks with the farmer, buys a loaf of bread, and picks up a little pot marked with his name. He lifts the lid and urges me to inhale deeply. It is full of shit.

Cow shit. Something biodynamics is frequently accused of being full of. Also, it turns out, a subject of consuming interest to Trossen, and a fertile medium for our exploration of biodynamic viticulture. Over the next few days, the interconnections between cows and cosmos, humans and vines will ground our conversation, eclipsing clones, soil types, and vintages as the true influences on these elliptical, elegiac wines.

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The Mosel is a tributary of the Rhine, famously cutting a serpentine course through layered mountains. *Schiefer*, or slate, is everywhere, from the grey-blue shards that crunch beneath your feet in the vineyards to the darkly glistening slabs that shingle every rooftop.

A squat 3rd-century carving of the Gallo-Roman god Sucellus—patron of vintners and coopers—unearthed in the town of Kindel is a reminder that wine has flowed from this valley for millennia. As in most of Europe, field blends dominated here until the mid-19th century, when Riesling began to usurp them. The grape excelled in the valley's austere climate and on its angled slopes.

This section of the river is strung with celebrated villages and vineyards. The twin towns of Kinheim-Kindel, with their dour houses, empty shops, and unheralded parcels, are not among them. This makes it easy to pick out the home and winery of Rita and Rudolf Trossen: It's the only house that looks like a cheerful little Waldorf school. The marigold exterior is wrapped in crimson and emerald vines, the roof slopes protectively over a hand-carved wooden door replete with the organic forms Steiner favored, and a garden tumbles across a compact front lawn.

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Trossen has lived in this house, built by his grandfather, his whole life. Born in 1955, to a family of small growers, he grew up under the chafing privations of post-war Europe. Work in the vines



was fiercely difficult and pitifully compensated. By his own account, Trossen—curious, self-taught—loved to fish and work in the vineyards with his father. A formative, unloved chore was applying chemical treatments to the vines. “When the wind blew, the sprays came right into my face,” he remembers. In the classroom, he was a good, but unfulfilled, student. He left at 14, returning only for mandatory trade school. By his own admission, he spent most of what would have been his student days in cafés, composing a play in verse. But he got out, too.

“Rudi and I met in the disco!” Rita says, laughing. “I was 17, he a year younger.” There is something about Rita, now with the sturdy build and bobbed grey hair of an Italian nonna, that still hints at a wild youth. She and Trossen felt the call of art, music, study, Berlin. But in 1976, when Trossen was just 21, his father was killed in a tractor accident. He and Rita never left the valley to chase their dreams.

These circumstances—Trossen's innate intelligence and lack of formal schooling, the small scope of the family winery, early partnership with Rita, a father's premature death and consequent absence of a strict family style to follow—were decisive in freeing Trossen to work intuitively from the start.

Two years later, Trossen had his first encounter with biodynamics, at a seminar in Darmstadt led by figures like Maria Thun, creator of a farming calendar based on lunar and astronomical cycles. Trossen remembers the “knowledge and presence, perspective and flexibility of thinking” of these leading lights, as well as the respect they accorded him. He dove into Steiner's works: *Knowledge of the Higher World and Its Attainment*, *Philosophy of Freedom*, and, later, after the Trossens' two sons were born, the pedagogical writings, which form the basis of Waldorf education.

TROSSEN



By 1978, the Trossens felt ready to carry biodynamics into their vineyards. They were early adopters of what the writer David Blackbourn has called “the environmental imperative” of West Germany in the Eighties, an expression of *Naturliebe* and the German landscape that traced its origins to 18th-century Romanticism. Against this background—rebellion, zeitgeist, parenthood—the Trossens’ adoption of biodynamics is less radical than logical. The shock is how few other growers felt the same impulse.

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“We started as the first *Winzer* on the Mosel to renounce synthetic fertilizers, chemical agents, and herbicides,” Trossen recounts. “We were young and prepared to take risks; naive and brave. We wanted to do so much differently.” Their very first wines were made without added yeasts or adjustments, and minimal SO<sub>2</sub>. They were also dry in style. In other words, entirely contrary to most German Riesling at the time. “We quickly made a name for ourselves in the valley,” he recalls now. “But we had to find new customers; my father’s didn’t want such wines.”

This is where biodynamics became indispensable. Trossen compares its guiding spirit to being “a bit like when you’re hiking in the mountains and you lose your way, but then find a map and regain your orientation: ‘Ha! There is the tree that I passed, and there the path. Ah, there is the stream I can drink from, and the hut where I can sleep.’”

The foundation for all this is Steiner’s *Agricultural Course*: eight lectures, with Q&A, which the philosopher presented to farmers in 1924, collected and printed as a book. To those who dismiss the Course—with its quizzical diagrams, recipes for animal innards preparations, and cosmic spirituality—as bizarre, Trossen bluntly replies: “It is rather presumptuous to grab the book, read from it here and there, and then shrug it off as nonsense, as some simpleminded contemporaries like to do.” Adherents to Steiner’s philosophy, called Anthroposophists, return to this book again and again for insight. Trossen has grappled with it and

related literature as very few other growers have.

I wonder aloud why should we care what Steiner—son of a railway worker, cosmopolitan citizen of Vienna and Weimar, Goethe scholar, and teetotaler—had to say about growing wine grapes? “Steiner came from the old Austrian peasantry,” Trossen explains. “It was all still very much an agrarian world in the 1860s,” when the philosopher was a boy. Witnessing the decline of traditional agriculture alongside the rise of the locomotive and the telegraph catalyzed Steiner’s theories and practical farming prescriptions, he asserts.

At heart, Trossen sees biodynamics as nothing less than “an increase in interest in everything.” From the soil and the life within it, to the plants, animals, and humans at work on the farm, to those who consume its produce. He calls it “an education in attentiveness, away from abstraction and speculation, toward a living, unprejudiced, flexible observation.” Above all, he believes, it is highly individual, “like a bottle smashed against a wall—the shards will always all be different, but the end effect will also always be the same.”

If you wonder why biodynamics remains inscrutable to the average wine drinker, try squeezing that onto a back label.

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Early one evening during my stay, Trossen leads the way into his garden, where three cow horns wait on a table. He holds one up for me to observe. “These are the animal’s organs of perception, of resonance. This is what the cow uses to listen, with her entire intelligence—a high intelligence that is directed inward, toward digestion, toward recognizing the inner quality of the plants that she is eating at that moment.” The cow’s “sensibility and creativity,” Trossen continues, culminate in one thing: her manure.

I’ve never heard anyone wax so philosophically about, well, shit.

“This is a precious substance,” Trossen tells me,



spooning the fresh but odorless manure into one horn after another. “The forces that are gathered in the buried manure are those that course through the ground during fall and winter: digestive forces. The manure-filled horns focus all of this immense activity within the soil.” He understands the need for a relatable equivalent. “You could say the cow horn is like a battery, gathering an electrical charge.”

“What comes out of the cow is full of . . .” Here he pauses, uncharacteristically at a loss for words, “*information*. But we’ve lost the ability to receive this information, to perceive these living processes.” He pauses again, this time to tap the horns, slightly compacting the manure within them. “Steiner gives this back to us.”

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The next day, Trossen and I cross the river and head up to the Lay, a treasured parcel high above a quiet stretch of the river. From this spot, Trossen tells me,

he can see Rita working in the garden. He can also view the vineyard from his desk at home.

Trossen is fascinated by the Celts, Romans, and early Catholics who lived and worked this land so long before him. He sees it suffused with reverence and spirituality. “In the past, everything was threaded through with religiosity—the many holidays, wayside crucifixes—that put farmers in a reverential mindset.” He takes a long moment to reflect in silence. “That might sound too romantic now. But it was so.” Today, he points out with apparent regret, it is “possible to surmount the phase of faith.”

He kneels in the rich, rocky soil of the Lay and sets to digging a hole, placing the horns inside, recovering them with earth, and leaving three slate slabs to mark the spot. At Easter, he will unearth the horns, mix their contents with water in a practice known as dynamizing (“to bring my own spirit and intention to the materials”), and disperse the mixture over his parcels. In biodynamics, this preparation with cow

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manure in a buried horn, known as BD500, is valued for stimulating life within the soils and the plants that grow from them.

The 55 tiny plots dotted across Kinheim's slopes that Trossen inherited from his father are now 12, thanks mostly to *Flurbereinigung*, the "vineyard reorganization" that swept through here in the Seventies. Although consolidation meant the loss of many old vines, it was also responsible for creating the larger, contiguous parcels crucial to minimizing exposure to conventional treatments in neighboring plots.

Trossen's 2.4 hectares are generally not the strap-in-or-die pitches we associate with the Mosel, but moderate slopes, open to river breezes and northern light. There is one mighty exception: the Madonna, a parcel within a striking up-tipped triangular plane, suggesting a pyramid—a shape Steiner, fascinated by geometry, again would have loved. Its pastel fragments of slate appear to cling magnetically to the vertiginous slope, as do ungrafted centenarian Riesling vines. Trossen picks his way among them, fingering the tiny berries, deeply golden and freckled, not so much clustered as stick-figured onto the stems. Though all of his sites are sacred to him, this is the one vineyard he says he will never part with.

The work in these single-staked, heart-trained vines is, perforce, by hand. Trossen is as vital as a man in his mid-60s can be. But even he acknowledges his vineyards are a young person's work, and change will eventually come to his estate as well. Neither of his now-grown sons will take over. A few months ago, Trossen brought on a young vintner, trained in biodynamics, to help in the vineyards, and, possibly, carry on what the Trossens have built with such fierceness and love. "Apparently," Trossen muses, "it takes a grower's entire lifetime for compacted, depleted soils to be lifted to a new level of liveliness and to express their terroir." His reflection begs the questions: Can biodynamics be passed down? Is a lifetime of living and working in a single place, of study and observation, of developing intuition and spiritual connection, teachable at all?

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When Riesling grapes come in from the vineyards—two small bins at a time, pulled by Trossen's vintage 275V Fendt tractor—they go directly into an analog press built the year Trossen was born, a tool he appears to operate by intuition as well. At that point, the key is "to do nothing that stresses or alienates the wines." Trossen claims that spontaneous fermentation typically kicks in the evening after pressing, and that once the wines are in tank or barrel, he leaves them on the full lees and waits until all "biological processes" have been completed, even if that takes two years or more.

He always direct-presses the wines. "Skin contact is a crutch for varieties that can't walk on their own two legs," he explains. "Here in the Mosel, we have the gift of fruit and acidity, so we don't need that. Our Riesling is perfect, like the Mona Lisa." He has just a trace of her smile.

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Trossen clearly recalls his own introduction to natural wines, in the late-Aughts, when friends gave him a bottle of Radikon Jakot 2004—a wine that sees months on the skins: "It didn't speak to me at all. It stood before me, as inaccessible as a wall with its hard tannins. I set it aside." But when he returned to it, it stunned him. "After a few weeks with air, I found a doorway into it."

Not long after, Trossen was visited by some Scandinavian somms already familiar with his wines. They urged him to lift the last measures of control: sulfites and filtration—a controversial suggestion for the Mosel, where dogma has long held that Riesling's delicacy demands stabilization. Trossen took the risk and marveled at the results: "The aromas and flavors were completely different than what we had been accustomed to and revealed 'til-then-undiscovered depths and finesses."

In 2010, Trossen made his first zero/zero wines. Now the Pur-us line includes Rieslings, Pinot Noirs, a Pinot-Dornfelder blend call "Rot," and a pét-nat. The wines are unsettlingly gorgeous. Some strike in a flash, others require an openness to receiving



complex, unexpected signals. The 2018 Lay is shimmering and layered, like mica in the spring sunlight. A Pinot Noir from the same vintage is saturated yet focused, with the freshness of damp, moss-covered earth, held taut by a fine acid spine. Most confounding is a 2017 “Schiefergold” from the Madonna. Its extraordinary concentration is so uncommon both for Mosel Riesling and for Trossen: fully dry, yet dense and saturated with ripe nectarine, savory tangerine peel, and something almost tobacco-like in the grip that Trossen assures me comes from the tiny berries and unfathomable drawing power of ancient roots.

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Compared with its neighbors, Germany is a natural wine *arriviste*. The country’s wine drinkers have been particularly slow to warm to the style and producers have had to look abroad for acceptance. Even there, German natural wine is still largely met with puzzlement. “It’s perhaps a bit like back when modern composers wanted to set a counterpoint to the blitheness of the waltz,” Trossen contextualizes.

He sees how quickly “natural wine” has become a buzzword, and it makes him wary of newcomers on the scene, who he feels miss the point: Natural wine must come from organic or biodynamic farming and be “hands off” in the cellar. To this end, he and likeminded neighbors, including Thorstein Melsheimer, in Reil, and Jan Klein of Staffelter Hof, in Kröv, see themselves as the necessary guardians of the soul of natural wine in the Mosel. Success, says Trossen, will depend on legal protections and vigilance, but much more than this, the continued presence of what he calls “lifeblood growers,” who “spice and enliven this terroir with devotion, humility, sweat, callouses, laughter, dance, and song.”

Singularity of intuition and intention, a profound and individual spirituality: That’s what I taste in the Trossen wines. I write such words despite having always been skeptical of religion and faith of all kinds. And yet, as Trossen says, “It is so.” Now when I drink the Trossen wines, I will think

of Rudi, late in the evening, running his press, at once part of and apart from the neighbors, acolytes, and old friends who sip, talk, and play *fussball* in the same capacious room. Of Rita, with her arms around Rudi’s shoulders, the two of them absorbed in a moment of music and conversation over a table strewn with candles burned low and bottles emptied, so at home in the little utopia they’ve made. Of Rudi’s improbably and infectiously hopeful world view that is grounded in Goethe, concretized in Steiner, magnified by his own studies, and given wing by people like me, lucky enough to have been touched and transformed by the experience. Still the wines have not given up all their secrets. I hope they never will. 🍷

