



## Vertical Tasting: Castell Silvaner Schlossberg Grosses Gewächs 2019-1999

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by Ian D'Agata

Located in the postcard-pretty Franken region, between Frankfurt and Munich, Castell (or rather, Furst Castell in English and the Fürstlich Castell'sche Domänenamt in German) is a family-owned winery always under the helm of the noble family of Castell, that spans more than twenty-six generations (and counting). The estate is justly famous, as is the Franken in general, for world-class Silvaner wines, though the winery also makes excellent wines from other varieties too, such as Müller-Thurgau, Bacchus, and Pinot Noir (Sptäburgunder). The estate makes a series of different wines divided into categories: Single Vineyards (bottled in the classic and instantly recognizable *bocksbeutel*, the typical short, flattened and ample Franken wine bottle); Schloss Castell Estate wines (single variety wines such as Bacchus and Silvaner bottled in the *bocksbeutel*); Sparkling wines or Sekt (bottle-fermented Silvaner Brut wines); and entry-level varietal wines of the Castell Castell line.



### ***A little bit of history***

Castell is one of Germany's, and the world's, oldest wine estates, founded in 1057 when Rupert de Castell is known to have settled in the area. Since 1205, the Castells were a noble family of Counts (at least, that's the year of the oldest existing record attesting to the family's right to bear that title), but became Princes in 1901, when Prince Regent Leopold of Bavaria raised the Castell-Castell and Castell-Rüdenhausen lines to that higher noble rank. But despite those noble titles, the family members have always remained heavily involved in agriculture, viticulture and forestry, and other activities. For example, wine is mentioned in association with the family's Count Rupert II as early as 1224. In 1266, four of the vineyards the family still owns today (the Hohnart, Reitsteig, Schlossberg and Trautberg) were documented, and were also clearly identified a little later, on a 1497 map. In 1556, two "firkins" of Castell red wine were specifically referred to in a document of the time (which is interesting and a sign of how times change, given that the majority of the Castell estate's production today is of white wines). It was in 1774, following a local famine, that the family established a bank to help take care of the population, the Fürstlich Castell'sche Bank: it still exists today, and is in fact the oldest bank of Bavaria (the largest state/region of Germany). Today, the Castell winery is owned by Ferdinand Graf zu Castell-Castell and is part of a three-pronged reality: the wine estate and forestry reality [forestry is in fact as important to the family as vine-growing (they also use their own oak to make wine barrels); at Castell they are experts in managing their forests with minimal intervention while maintaining a pragmatic approach to a more sustainable future], the bank and the Fürstlich Castell'sche Forstabteilung; the family is also related to the owners of the prestigious and well-known Faber-Castell writing utensils, luxury leather goods, office and art supplies company. And as if all that wasn't quite enough, Castell was the first to plant Silvaner in the Franken, turning it into not just the wine ambassador of the whole region but focusing the Franken and Germany as perhaps the most important producer of Silvaner wines in the world.



## ***Silvaner and Castell***

Silvaner gives delightful minerally white wines redolent of herbal and white fruit nuances; they are also wines that can age almost forever, in both dry and sweet (Auslese, Beerenauslese, Trockenbeerenauslese, Eiswein) versions. It grows mostly in Germany (in the Franken and the Rheinhessen especially, but also in the Nahe and other German wine regions), France (Alsace) and Alto Adige in Italy, but small plantings exist elsewhere in Europe as well.

Silvaner was first planted in Germany at Castell. It was on April 6, 1659 that Johann Georg Körner, the bailiff of the Count of Castell's estate, had "*twenty-five Austrian cuttings*" planted at the foot of the Schlossberg (or the "castle hill", in English, meaning "castle on top of the hill") that he had ordered via a messenger from the village of Obereisenheim, Michael Saueracker. The reference to "Austrian cuttings" was because Silvaner was known at the time as "Österreicher" (or "the Austrian grape"), in observance of its Austrian origin. [Silvaner is the result of a natural crossing occurring between Traminer (Savagnin) and Österreichisch Weiss (Austrian White) and its name, Silvaner, harkens back to the Latin *silva*, meaning "wild vine" or "living in wild places".] At Castell they believed Silvaner might be an ideal variety to plant on their land; and replanting had become necessary, given both the Thirty Years' War (one of the longest and most disastrous wars in European history, lasting from 1618 to 1648: roughly 75% of the greater Franken area's 40,000 hectares of vines were abandoned) and severe winter weather that had greatly damaged the vineyards. Back then, there was a need for wine grape varieties that could withstand winter frosts and generally cold weather; in other words, cultivars characterized by a later bud burst (and therefore better able to survive unexpected, late spring frosts); fast-ripening curves that would allow grapes to be picked relatively early at full physiologic maturity; and yield a good crop from year to year. In all those respects, Silvaner was, and still is, just about ideal. I wish to point out that Silvaner's ability to reach full physiologic ripeness at low potential alcohol levels makes it an especially attractive grape variety in these times of climate change, and this not just in Germany, but I digress.

Castell's role in bringing Silvaner into the country is noteworthy, especially given the grape variety's importance over the years. By the end of the eighteenth century Silvaner had already become an extremely popular grape (for example, there are records showing that by 1791, the viticultural advice of Johann Christian Fischer was to plant every tenth vine with "Österreicher". A little later, in 1833, Johann Philipp Bronner (a noted pharmacist and viticultural pioneer) wrote that Silvaner was as ubiquitous as "salt in food". It is therefore not by chance that the Franken is referred to colloquially as the *Silvanerheimat*, or the "home of Silvaner". And at Castell, it still represents about 40% of the total grape variety plantings. But Silvaner was not just popular at Castell and in the Franken; in fact, Silvaner has always been popular in much of Germany and up to the 1970s it was in fact Germany's most planted white wine grape (and it still is the most planted grape in the Franken today).

## ***The Franken viticultural region and Castell***

The Franken's vineyards have long been famous and their grapes sought after. It is documented that as early as in 777 CE (common era), the Fulda Monastery received a deed of gift of eight different vineyards belonging to the royal estate of Hammelburg. Apparently, Charlemagne's men studied and drew up the viticultural area between Randersacker and Würzburg already in 779 (in fact, it appears from documents dating back to 1298 that the Abbots from the church already owned a vineyard, presently known as Saalecker Schlossberg). In Napoleon's re-organization of Germany, the Franconian region was divided between the kingdoms of Bavaria and Württemberg and the Grand Duchy of Baden.

Today, the Franken is an area that lies in the northern part of Bavaria, nestled between the Rhön, Steigerwald, Taubertal and Spessart hilly-mountainous ranges and is characterized by its own cultural

and linguistic heritage. The Franken has currently over 6000 hectares of vineyards that are mostly planted on south-facing hillside slopes between Aschaffenburg and Schweinfurt following the zig-zagging course of the Main River (it really does flow along a “W” shaped course). The Franken wine appellation has always been historically divided into three sections: the Maindreieck (extending from Schweinfurt down to Marktbreit and up to Gmünden), the Mainviereck (covering the territories of Lohr, Wertheim, Miltenberg and Aschaffenburg, to the west of Würzburg) and the Steigerwald, or the “elevated forest” (to the east and the south, where some of the greatest of all Silvaner vineyards are found: it is here that Castell is located) with the three main district areas boasting 23 Großlagen and 216 Einzellagen. Though there have been numerous attempts to improve on this basic three-pronged subdivision, it is still used today by everyone in the Franken (certainly everybody I talked to) as it is clear, easy to grasp and fundamentally quite helpful, besides accurate.

Castell’s vineyards stretch across seventy hectares in the Steigerwald and the area’s characteristic geology, characterized by the presence of the Keuper Formation and its heavy gypsum-loam-clay soil, not to mention the warm, dry climate ensures very flavourful, ripe wines but with good acidity and lift. Castell farms at least seven different vineyards, many of which are truly excellent (for example, the Hohnart and the Kugelspiel, the latter a personal favourite of mine), but the most famous is the [Grosse Lage](#)-classified Schlossberg, first described in the thirteenth century for its small volumes of high-quality wine. It is this vineyard and its wines that are the subject of the present vertical tasting report.

### ***The Schlossberg***

The Schlossberg is a 1.3 hectares large vineyard that is a Castell *monopole*: breathtakingly steep, it is a mostly south-facing (and slightly southwest-facing too) site, nestled between the Erste Lage (premier cru) vineyards of Reitsteig (another Castell *monopole*) and the Kirchberg. It is characterized by a microclimate influenced by its southern exposure, but the potentially hot microclimate is partially offset by the protection afforded by the surrounding forest to the north and east. The Schlossberg’s soil is rich in heavy gypsum and clay, and the vineyard is planted mostly to Silvaner, Riesling and Rieslaner at altitudes averaging 340 meters above sea level.

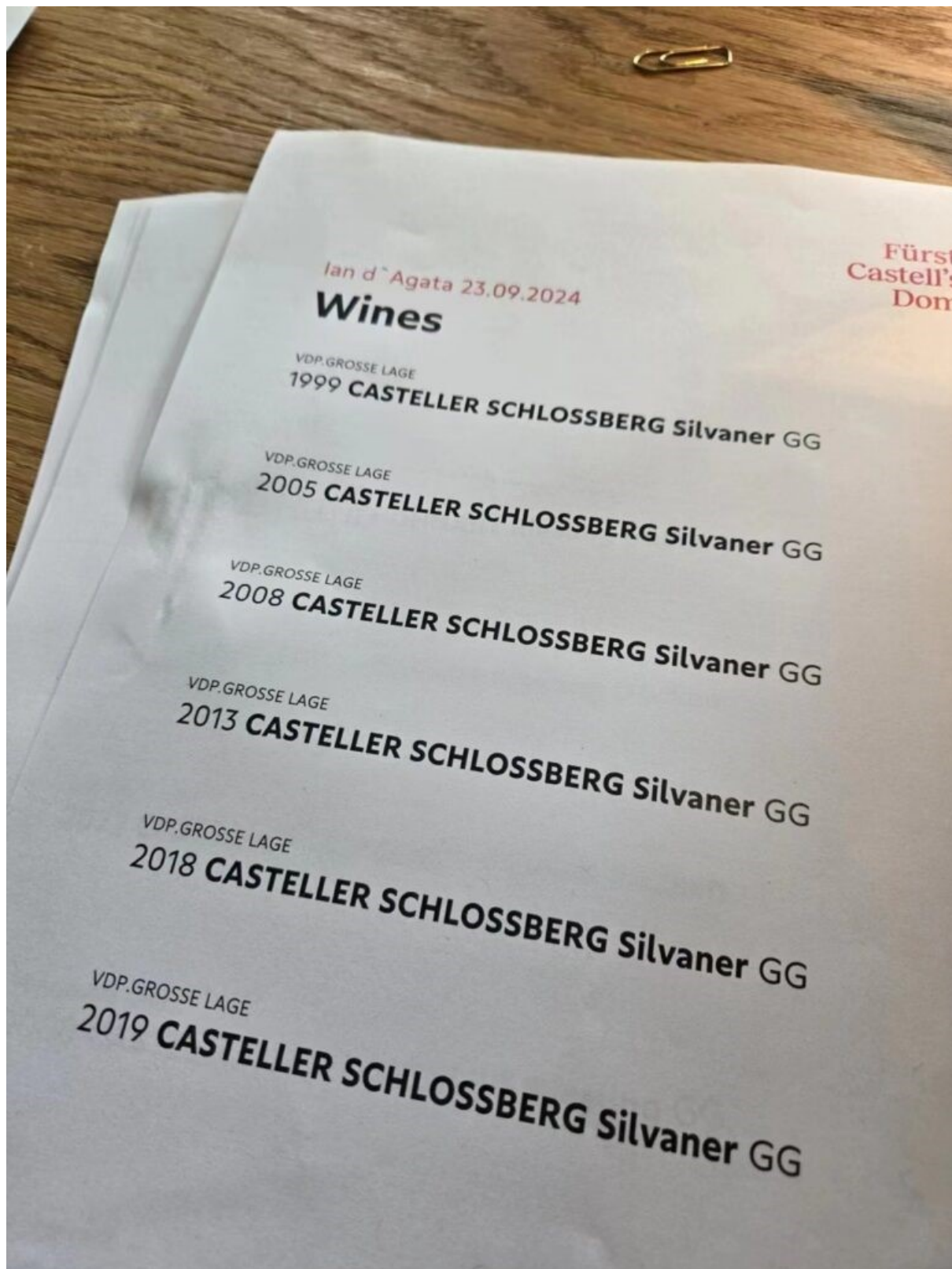


The Schlossberg

The estate first made a Silvaner Grosses Gewächs wine from the Schlossberg in the 2001 vintage (in 1997 and 1999, the estate bottled the wine as a Spatlese Trocken). In fact, the name “Schlossberg” appears on a Castell wine label much earlier, in 1903 (and the first naming of Schlossberg as “Lage” was in 1266). As mentioned, Castell’s modern-day Schlossberg wines are bottled as Grosses Gewächs (GG, for short), the highest-quality category possible for dry German wines. Unfortunately, many GG wines end up tasting unbalanced and unpleasant for they are actually much too dry to be actually enjoyable (it is a category of wine that Germans badly need to rethink: just because a wine is classically dry does not make it automatically a good or better wine). Fortunately, at Castell they do not let dogma interfere with logic, and their GG wines are not just highly enjoyable and eminently drinkable, but downright excellent.

In the 2018 and 2019 vintages, the estate took the decision to ferment their Schlossberg wine in different mediums, including stainless steel tanks, barriques, and 600 liters oak casks, but also to use different harvest times to achieve a better blend of grapes sporting different characteristics so as to gain greater complexity. They also introduced whole bunch fermentation so as to give the wine more structure to better buffer the increasing alcohol levels (thanks to the presence of stalks) resulting from climate change and grapes that are riper all the time. Both the 2018 and 2019 vintages were made with grapes harvested in three different passes. In general, Castell’s Silvaner Schlossberg spends twelve to fourteen months on the lees in spent oak casks, then another one and a half years in steel, and finally two years in bottle prior to release. It is safe to say it is the estate’s top wine, of which unfortunately only a paltry 3,000-3,500 bottles are made a year.

***The wines in this tasting***



All the wines in this report were tasted directly at the Castell winery in September 2024.

#### **Castell 2019 Silvaner Castell Schlosberg GG Franken 95**

Luminous straw-green. Green apple, pear, coriander and mineral notes are lifted by a perfumed white flower topnote. Rich ripe and round, with flavours of passion fruit, tangerine, guava and lemon that give this a unique sweet and sour connotation. Finishes long and juicy with a saline bent and

remarkable freshness, leaving the taste buds bathed in a wave of saliva. Lovely stuff. There's just the slightest hint of alcohol on the nose that is not found in Castell's other 2019 cru wines, but its presence, though discernible, is neither excessive nor bothersome. Drinking window: 2026-2049.

#### **Castell 2018 Silvaner Casteller Schlossberg GG Franken 95**

Straw yellow green. Quince, glazed pineapple, and balsamic oils dominate the orchard fruit aromas and flavours, but all is very delicate and nuanced. Very solid, clean long and vibrant, this rather big, textured wine remains wonderfully light on its feet and shows no undue heaviness. More linear and monotonal in its aroma and flavour profile than the 2019, but I like this wine's well-balanced delivery of slightly compressed tropical fruit (guava, mango), and its honeyed, floral nuances nicely framed by laser-like acidity that really helps extend the flavours on the chewy finish. In a different style from the 2019, but each wine is outstanding in its own way, and each will have a similarly large boatload of fans. Drinking window: 2026-2040.

#### **Castell 2013 Silvaner Casteller Schlossberg GG Franken 94**

Golden yellow nose. Extremely intense concentrated yellow apple, orange marmelade, lemon pepper, tropical fruit and a hint of chlorophyll on the gorgeous nose. Then offers potpourri and ripe tropical fruit flavours buoyed by harmonious acidity. Made in what was a relatively cooler year, but you'd never guess it from the way this wine wallops you across the face aromatically. Long lively and ripe, it improves noticeably with aeration, gaining in complexity. This is a remarkably impressive wine and the spicy peppery finish will win lots of admirers. Drinking window: 2025-2045.

#### **Castell 2008 Silvaner Casteller Schlossberg Franken 95**

Golden-tinged straw yellow. White truffle, celery, and quince dominate apple and pear on the complex, refined nose. In the mouth, this boasts rich, layered flavours of custard and cream along with notes of banana, guava and starfruit. The delicate but very concentrated tropical fruit flavours linger impressively on the suave back end. Fermented only in stainless steel there is a daintiness and purity and minerality here I find enchanting. Similar to the 2013 in its aromatic explosiveness, but a bit gentler and perhaps even longer.

#### **Castell 2005 Silvaner Casteller Schlossberg Spatlese Trocken Franken 93**

Nineteen years old but you'd never guess it from the colour: beautifully bright, pale golden yellow. Very intense, concentrated aromas of caramel, brown sugar, crème brûlée, lemon, nutmeg and cinnamon on the enticing nose are complicated by hints of earthy botrytis (noble rot). Round, smooth, clean and very long, this showcases very nice balance but a hint of alcoholic warmth emerges on the rising finish. Overall, it's hard not to come away impressed, as this is a real work of art, but I can't help but think that this would have made a very noble late harvest sweet wine that would have shown even better than in this "trocken" version. Drinking window: 2024-2037.

#### **Castell 1999 Silvaner Casteller Schlossberg Spatlese Trocken Franken 95**

Now this is superb: I'm in love. Translucent pale straw yellow with hints of gold. Peach schnapps, apricot, lemongrass, lemon, white pepper and cinnamon dominate on the nose and in the mouth. Very clean and pure, this boasts unbelievable clarity and cut on the long, zingy, gingery finish. The colour is simply unbelievable: 25 years old (young, really) and I am willing to bet a large sum of money that nobody would ever guess so help of the when tasting blind and looking at its still pale straw yellow hue. Importantly, when the Prince started working at the winery in 1996, he decided to follow each important vineyard on his own (with the cellar manager) because at the time nobody was subdividing the vineyards of the main Castell slope into different crus and parcels. It was after that

point in time, with the 1997 vintage, that they made a first vineyard-designated wine at Castell: that was to be a forerunner of the GG wines from the Schlossberg (not made in 1998, the second Castell Silvaner wine from the Schlossberg was therefore this one; with the 2001 vintage, the wine becomes a GG). Drinking window: 2024-2024-2035.



### **Ian D'Agata**

Ian D'Agata is an internationally famous, multi-award winning author who has been speaking and writing about wine for thirty years. His latest books (Native Wine Grapes of Italy, Italy's Native Wine Grape Terroirs, Italy's Grapes and Wines: The definitive Compendium Region by Region and the most recent, Barolo Terroir) are considered the bibles of Italian wine and have received numerous prestigious awards such as the Louis Roederer International Wine Awards "Book of the Year" title, the Gourmand World Book Awards "Best European Wine Book" and being named to the "Best Wine Books of the Year" lists of newspapers and magazines such as the NY Times, the Financial Times and Food & Wine. For eight years, Ian has also been the co-author of the Italy section in Hugh Johnson's Pocket Book of Wine, the world's best-selling wine guide with 46 editions to date and over 12 Million copies sold all over the world; he has since been also put in charge of the Alsace and Malta sections. He is currently the President of Ian D'Agata Wine Culture, one of China's wine education platforms, that includes the Ian D'Agata Wine Review and the Ian D'Agata Wine Academy. Ian is a former staff writer at Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, Contributing Editor of Decanter, and Senior Editor of Vinous. His writings have always focused on the wines of Italy, France, China and Canada, for which he has won numerous international awards and accolades, including the Comitato Grandi Cru d'Italia "Best Youngest Wine Journalist of Italy" and the "Best Wine Journalist of Italy" awards, as well as Canada's 2018 VQA award (Out of Ontario section) and 2017 Cuvée Award of Excellence.

Intensely devoted to the research and study of native wine grapes, Ian was officially named in 2015 to Italy's prestigious Accademia della Vite e del Vino (Italy's official association of wine academicians, researchers, and university professors) and is currently the Vice President of the Association Internationale des Terroirs.

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