

1. Dear visitors, welcome to the Sexau Räbhisliweg!

I'm Winemaker George and I'll take you on a tour through 4.6 km of the unique cultural landscape of the Sexau vineyards. The elevation gain from the village centre to the forest edge is about 90 meters. Along the way, you will find 13 panels with fascinating information about viticulture in and around Sexau.

As you walk through this glorious landscape, you will learn about the grape varieties cultivated here at the foot of Hochburg Castle, explore the geology of the Sexau vineyards and become familiar with the scenery and its views. I will explain the work of winegrowers in the course of the year, and how winemaking has shaped the village and its community. I'll also tell you some fun facts about the farms of Sexau and which animals you might encounter in the vineyards.

Climate change also affects the vineyards of Sexau. In what way? I'll tell you. By the end of this tour, you will have explored an ancient cultural landscape, and you will know a lot about winegrowing in Sexau. And, hopefully, you will be curious about tasting some of our fine wines. You can buy wine directly from the winemakers, such as the winegrower's co-operative (Winzergenossenschaft) Buchholz Sexau or vine-growing estates Weingut Frey in Denzlingen and Weingut Moosmann in Buchholz.

Off we go! Winemaker George

2. Winegrowing in Sexau

According to a document from 1284 found at Andlau Abbey, viticulture has a long history in Sexau, which was part of the Abbey's estate. The document granted the Abbess the "right to perform pruning and picking of the vines and grapes". In 1414, the vineyard was described as being 5.8 hectares in size.

Sexau wines must have been outstanding already back then! This is evidenced by a complaint made by a priest in 1558, stating that "church discipline seems to have been wanting... during the sermons, people drank, gambled and made contracts... church attendance left much to be desired..." and it was mentioned that the citizens of Sexau in the 16th century "... liked to swear and make merry!"

The chronicles document special events that happened over the centuries, such as bitterly cold winters, wet summers, hailstorms, droughts and pests, but also prime vintages. Thanks to these records, we also know which grape varieties were cultivated in 1925: Elbling, Gutedel, Sylvaner, Ruländer, Burgunder, and Portugieser.

The Great French Wine Blight also hit Sexau's vineyard with full force. But even towards the end of World War II, wine was only regarded a side product. Farmers mainly pressed grapes for their own consumption, selling what was left to local innkeepers. This did not leave much for the wine merchants.

But quality prevailed, and in 1977, the winegrowers of Sexau became members of the Buchholz winemakers' cooperative. Today, the most cultivated grape variety is the Pinot noir (Blauer Spätburgunder), followed by the Pinot gris (Grauburgunder), Pinot blanc (Weißburgunder), Riesling, Müller-Thurgau, Sauvignon blanc, Chardonnay and several varieties of Cabernet.

The grapes from the 17 hectares of the Sexau vineyard produce approx. 135,000 to 140,000 litres of wine per year.

3. Hochburg Castle

In the distance, you can see the magnificent Hochburg, the most famous landmark of the municipality of Sexau. After Heidelberg Castle and Rötteln Castle, Hochburg Castle is the third largest castle in Baden!

Actually, Hochburg Castle's original name was "Hachburg", after the Lords of Hachberg. The castle was built in the 11th century by Dietrich von Emmendingen, who later changed his name to "von Hachberg". The first official mention of Hochburg Castle dates back to 1127. Only a few years later, Erkenbold von Hachberg, the last of his name, sold the castle to the House of Zähringen in order to finance his participation in the Crusades (1147–1149). The castle was later turned over to the Margraves of Baden, and in 1535, to the Margraves of Baden-Durlach. Hochburg Castle had its heyday in the 17th century, when Margrave Georg Friedrich von Baden-Durlach had it fortified. From 1634 to 1636, during the Thirty Years' War, Hochburg Castle was besieged and had to surrender to the attackers, who demolished it. The Castle was rebuilt in 1660 and destroyed once more in 1681, after France had expanded its rule to Freiburg im Breisgau following the Treaties of Peace of Nijmegen, and objected to the existence of this defensive structure. Finally, French troops destroyed Hochburg Castle for good by blowing it up in 1689. Hochburg Castle was part of Sexau district until 1932, when – against the will of the people of Sexau – it was transferred to Emmendingen. Since 1971, the Castle had been managed by the Verein zur Erhaltung der Ruine Hochburg e.V., a voluntary association based in Emmendingen. In 2007, the association became the official lessee of the castle grounds.

4. Sexau wine – from the Garden of Germany

Baden is the third-largest wine-growing region in Germany. Thanks to the warm climate and diverse terroir (see panel 6), Baden is the only German wine-growing region that is rated a European Union wine growing Zone B, along with the regions of Champagne, Alsace, Jura, Loire and Savoy.

Within Baden, the Breisgau region, which expands along the slopes of the Black Forest from Oberschopfheim (south of Offenburg) to Freiburg, has been renowned for its viticulture for centuries.

When it comes to grape varieties, the large share of Pinot noir (Spätburgunder) is striking. Baden provides the ideal conditions for this exacting wine, which is why more than half of Germany's Pinot noir is produced here. With its full-bodied, velvety characteristics and red fruit aroma, Pinot noir from Baden can hold its own against the wines from its namesake region, Burgundy. The Cabernet Sauvignon, another famous red wine grape, is also cultivated in Sexau.

In terms of white wine, Sexau is keeping up with the latest trends: Riesling, Chardonnay, Sauvignon blanc, Pinot gris (Grauburgunder), Pinot blanc (Weißburgunder) and Müller-Thurgau are the predominant varieties, complemented by rarer ones such as Gewurztraminer and Kerner. The wines made from these grapes have a distinct character and fine minerality. The local varieties have an invigorating freshness, vibrant fruitiness and are a great pleasure to drink.

5. What a view

You're standing in the middle of the Sexau vineyards – one of Europe's most beautiful vistas. From here, you can see, clockwise, the prominent peaks of the main ridge of the Southern Black Forest, Freiburg with its cathedral spire, and – on a clear day – the Swiss Jura, the Tuniberg and the Kaiserstuhl, and, to the west, the Vosges Mountains in Alsace – ancient cultural landscapes with a rich and diverse history.

This unique view is undoubtedly the highlight of any hike around the winegrowing community of Sexau. But how far can you see from here?

We're at 350 metres above sea level, so theoretically, we should be able to see about 100 kilometres. The best visibility is usually on clear winter days. That's when you can see the mountains of the Swiss Jura in the distance. The orientation table shows prominent landscape features and their distance from here.

6. Terroir

What makes each wine? On the one side, it's the winegrower's work in the vineyard and wine maturation, on the other, it's the terroir that impacts the vine and the grape. Terroir includes climate, landscape and soil, with the main factors being day and night temperatures, rainfall distribution, hours of sunshine and the slope angle.

Sexau is located in the fault zone of the Upper Rhine Plain. When the African and Eurasian tectonic plates collided, the Alps and the Upper Rhine Plain were formed. The rising waters created ore and mineral veins (lead glance and fahlore-containing baryte veins) in the rift of the hard, 300 million year old gneisses of the base rock. These veins were mined in the Caroline pit in Sexau.

The vines of Sexau grow on steep slopes, deeply rooted in the residual gneiss soil. They benefit from a very special microclimate: Thanks to the steep slopes, the sun shines almost vertically on the vineyard in the summer ("equator effect"), producing grapes with higher ripeness levels.

What's more, the air currents moving along the slopes make for a rather temperate transition between day and night temperature. All of this combines to give Sexau wines their fine character, a vibrant freshness and structure.

7. A year in the life of a winemaker

The shimmering appearance of the wine belies the year-long journey of hard work that goes into making it. The steepness of the slopes presents a particular challenge because most of the work in the Sexau vineyards has to be done by hand – only about 3 of the 17 hectares are flat enough for harvesting machines.

Once the permanent wood is mature enough, the winegrowers start winter pruning the previous season's vine growth, leaving only one or two fruit-carrying canes. Pruning vines is crucial for new shoot growth and regulating yield, which in turn affects the quality of the grapes.

The canes must be trained on the wire trellis in early spring, before the vines begin to bud. As the temperature rises, the shoots become more flexible and can be tied to the trellis. When water oozes from the prune scars, the vine is said to be "weeping", and about to start budding. At this stage, the soil surrounding the vine is loosened to help the roots grow. In May, the winegrowers supply the vines with nutrients by fertilising them. Excess young shoots are now thinned. Around this time, the panicle-like inflorescence of the grapevine emerges. At the end of May/beginning of June, the vine starts to flower and soon after, small green grapes become visible.

Grapevines need plenty of sun and love warm temperatures. During the summer, the winegrower's work doesn't stop either: Some grapes and leaves are thinned out to ensure that the remaining grapes receive more nutrients and sunlight, and the air can circulate better. Sun and warmth produce sugar and reduce acidity in the grapes, and form colour and flavour. To combat the spread of fungal diseases, the vines are sprayed with a protective coating from May to July.

The high point of the winegrowing year is the harvest in the autumn. It involves a lot of manual labour, especially on steep slopes, so the winegrowers need a lot of helpers. Once grape bunches have been harvested, the stems are removed and the grapes are pressed.

Fermentation transforms grape juice into wine with the help of yeasts that turn the sugar into alcohol. After about 2–3 weeks, the fermentation process is complete, and the yeast is raked. The wine is then filled into stainless steel or wooden barrels to mature. The following spring, the wine is filtered and treated to remove all the lees. Once the wine in the barrel is clear, it can be bottled. White wines are bottled first while red wines can also be bottled when the outside temperature is high. Some white wines – in Sexau, these include Riesling and Chardonnay – are allowed to continue ageing on fine yeast until they are ready for bottling in August.

In the winter, when it's quiet outside, the work continues in the cellar: The wines must be constantly monitored for acidity degradation and purity. It's also time to maintain the equipment and barrels.

8. Pests

To produce a good yield, vineyards need a lot of care. Unfortunately, some animals and fungi particularly thrive in the kind of monoculture environment a vineyard provides. Pests have robbed many winegrowers of their livelihoods.

The most infamous grapevine pest is the phylloxera, an insect that spends part of its life cycle feeding on the roots of vines, causing them to wither and die. Originally native to North America, phylloxera first appeared in the Rhône Valley of France in 1863 and subsequently spread to all European winegrowing regions. It was first discovered in Baden in 1913. The Great French Wine Blight, as the phylloxera disaster was called, destroyed large parts of Europe's vineyards and left winegrowers helpless. It is no small wonder that hitting the vines with sticks or burying toads in the ground was no use. Many American vines were resistant to phylloxera, so the French botanist Jules Émile Planchon (1823 – 1888) came up with the idea of grafting European grape varieties onto the rootstocks American vine species. Planchon literally saved European viticulture – and the first biological pest control in the history of winegrowing is still applied today! Phylloxera is currently spreading again in abandoned vineyards and ornamental grapevines on houses.

The above-ground part of the vine is eaten by vine moths. Organic winegrowers use pheromone dispensers that confuse the male moths, preventing them from finding females.

But there are other types of insects that are very welcome in vineyards because they are the natural enemies of the pests, or lay their eggs inside of them. Beneficial organisms include predatory mites, green lacewings, earwigs, centipedes, spiders and ladybirds.

9. Farms in the vicinity

Ahead, you can see Sexau with its farms and plots. Their potential yield is determined by soil quality and location. The shadier northern side of a valley is the winter slope (Winterhalde), the sunnier southern and western sides, the sun slope (Sonnenhalde) or mirror slope (Spiegelhalde). Winterhalter and Spiegelhalter are common family names in the Black Forest.

The structure of the plots is the result of local inheritance laws. Historically, in Sexau and throughout the Rhine Plain, partible inheritance applied: The estate, and especially the land owned by a family, was divided equally among the heirs. This meant that with each generation, the plots became smaller and smaller. Some Sexau families, however, applied the right of succession to undivided estate, which was common throughout the High Black Forest. In these cases, the estate was passed on as a whole to a sole heir.

Partible inheritance led to estates being subdivided into ever smaller fields and vineyards, often in the form of thin stripes, with the usable area being further reduced by borders and paths. Partible inheritance pushed many small farmers into poverty – their small plots simply didn't produce enough food.

10. Life in the vineyard

There is more to a vineyard than just vines! Vineyards are home to many animal species. Winegrowers encourage useful insects by planting certain plant species while they fear pests that feed on roots, leaves or grapes. Pests include the dreaded phylloxera (see panel 8), aphids, harmful mites, vine moth larva and snails.

Beneficial organisms help winegrowers by preying on the pests and laying eggs in them. This makes them an important part of biological pest control. The most important beneficial organisms are predatory mites, which are particularly prevalent between June and August. They are tiny and look like a yellow-white spot to the naked eye. When they're not eating, they hide somewhere on the vine leaves, preferably near the leaf veins under the bristles. Vines protect themselves from harmful mites by providing hiding places for predatory mites like these! What's more: The vines provide predatory mites with additional "vegetarian" food in the form of pearl bodies.

Another important beneficial organism is the green lacewing larva, which mainly feeds on aphids. For this reason, it is also known as "aphid lion". The famous ladybird also eats aphids. Fairyflies and ichneumon wasps are also welcome in the vineyard because they lay their eggs inside the vine leafhopper, an insect that causes the leaves to wilt.

Centipedes and spiders that eat vine moths are beneficial, as are salamanders that eat snails. Diverse flora between the vines is crucial for providing a habitat for beneficial organisms and has the added benefit of absorbing nitrogen, loosening the soil and protecting it from drying out.

Now you know that the vineyard is a biotope and home to many different animals. Winegrowers have to keep a close eye on them, too.

The large number of part-time winemakers in Sexau is a result of the partible inheritance system. Some fragmented plots (day-labourer plots, subdivided vineyards) that had been too small for efficient cultivation have been consolidated and transferred to larger operations.

11. Tasting station

Dear visitors to our gourmet trail, within the signposted area, you may sample the different grape varieties! Grapes are delicious and full of vitamins – particularly vitamin B1, B6 and niacin. They also contain potassium, calcium and iron. The plant colour pigments and the phenolic acid are also good for you!

But please only pick grapes within the designated area! Unfortunately, many walkers and hikers pick grapes wherever they want. But even small amounts can be detrimental for our winegrowers. Just think about it: If everyone who passed by took just one bunch from the vines, there soon wouldn't be much left.

Thank you for your understanding and fairness! This is your contribution to ensuring that the hard work in the vineyard pays off and that our unique cultural landscape is preserved.

12. Climate change

If you're a winegrower, you have to think and act with future generations in mind. A vine planted today provides grapes for decades to come, so it's an investment in the future. Climate change will be a major factor in the coming decades.

It is a reality that winegrowers must also face. Greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide and methane, are heating up the Earth's surface and the lower atmosphere. Since people first started recording the weather in 1881, the mean air temperature in Germany has increased by around 2 degrees Celsius. This may not sound like a lot, but it is. Half a century ago, you could go down the Sexau vineyard or the slopes in the Reichenbächle on a sleigh, that's how much snow there was each year! Overall, there are now more heat waves and fewer cold waves. In a hotter and drier climate, there is less water evaporation to cool down the vines. Another negative effect of the changing climate is more frequent sunburn in grapes, which is particularly critical during the sensitive development phase just before ripening, because it causes the grapes to dry up and stop ripening.

Add to this an increasing number of extreme weather events like droughts, hail and late frosts, which primarily affects young shoots. Many winegrowers now leave a spare "frost cane", which can either grow grapes, or, if the main cane wasn't damaged by frost, be removed in mid-May.

At the same time, weather phenomena such as morning mist, summer rain and cool autumn nights occur less often. Climate change affects half of the world's wine growing areas.

13. How winegrowing has shaped a village

Winegrowing has been shaping Sexau for centuries. To this day, the steepness of the slopes still limits the use of machinery in the Sexau vineyards.

If you look around the village, you will notice some farms displaying historical winegrowing equipment and tools – as decoration and a memento of the past. You may spot wine presses (Trottis), wine barrels, grape carriers (Biggis) or stave planes that were used for making the staves of wine barrels. Many of these objects were still used a few decades ago. An old bent vine knife (known as "Hippe" or "Sesle" in German) used to be the universal tool for working in the vineyard. Today, the pruning shear has taken its place!

In some gardens in Sexau, you might spy a historical wine press (Trotte).