

VINTAGE REPORT 1996 FROM GERMANY

30th October 1996

"Never count your chickens till they hatch", or as a wise vintner in Germany would say, "wait till the wine is in cask before judging the quality". Truly, a fitting comment for those speculating on the 1996 crop! We have delayed our report this year, such were the ups and downs, hopes and disappointments. Today, although picking of Riesling grapes will not be completed till earliest 10th November, especially in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer regions, the overall picture is very positive for a successful vintage 1996.

Although the Winter lasted longer than in past years, with masses of snow falling even as late as mid-February, the temperature never dropped below -10C (16F) in the vineyards, thus causing no damage to the vines. It was not until 27th February that the temperature reached +10 C (48F) during the daytime, and warmer weather to start the bud break did not come till 18th April. May was dismal, but June was splendid allowing the vines to accelerate growth, with flowering commencing mid-June. Flowering before end of June is essential to ensure ripe grapes at the end of the growing season. Unfortunately, the splendid weather ended abruptly on 21st June. Although flowering was completed before end of June, the cold spell decimated the potential crop. The weather during July & August brought warmth and intermittent moisture to most areas. Severe hail damage struck the Himmelreich site in Zeltingen end of July, but Nierstein escaped being hit again, after three hailstorms in 1995. September was far cooler than average, the temperature dropping down as far as only +4C (38F) at night.

This cool climate weather kept the grapes absolutely healthy, an enormous advantage over the severe rotting which struck the Rhine areas last year. Periods of sunshine during September allowed the grapes to continue their ripening process, and the main harvesting of Müller-Thurgau did not commence until 2nd October, 2 weeks later than usual; the Riesling harvest in the Rhine areas commencing

14th October. The stable anticyclonic weather, named *Moritz*, resulted in only 7 rainy days during October, allowing excellent harvesting conditions, and the ripe grapes have remained healthy!

As opposed to 1982 or '83, when rain caused wide-spread over-yielding, the 1996 yields are well below average, even for Müller-Thurgau, which has resulted in good must weights of up to 70 Oe for main pickings and ideal ripe fruit acidity in the must of around 9%. Silvaner has also been successful with normal yieldings. Due to the healthiness even of the early ripening varieties, there will be no major quantities of Beerenauslese or TBA; Siegerrebe and Huxelrebe at good Auslese readings in Nierstein and Dalsheim; ripe & healthy Kerner grapes with 90 Oe at the Schales estate for down-grading to a top Kabinett. Red wines will also profit from the low yields of ripe & healthy grapes from Spätburgunder, Dornfelder and Portugieser.

The harvesting of Riesling in the Pfalz, Rheinhessen & Rheingau regions has resulted so far in satisfactory yields in tons/acre, but the berries contained very little juice! Must weights from 68 Oe for normal pickings and up to 90 Oe with ideal ripe acidity levels in the top sites, such as the Sackträger in Oppenheim, have been possible. Following the devastatingly low 1995 crop in Nierstein, as also in most of the Rheingau, the 1996 harvest, although below average in quantity, comes as a great relief to the estates. Later on in November, the estates will hopefully be able to harvest Eiswein.

First results of the main Riesling harvesting in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer regions are also very positive with good quantities of fine Kabinetts, but about 15% lower yields than 1995. Weather permitting next week, with the onset of noble rot, selective pickings of Riesling Spätlese & Auslese will be possible.

The 1996 harvest, a Kabinett vintage *par excellence* for Riesling estate wines. The total crop will be about 9 million hl (8.3 in 1995 and 10.3 in 1994). The overall quality can be ranked higher than the 1986 or 1985 vintages, and will probably be crisper & firmer, showing more intrinsic fruit than the elegant 1988 wines.

30th December 1996

EISWEIN - ICE WINE HARVEST 1996

The Christmas festivities at the wine estates had to be postponed this year. The harvesting of Eiswein took place on 24th-26th December! As mentioned in our report 30th October, the grapes were healthy, so the vintners were able to patiently await the cold weather, but the weeks passed without any severe frost. The arctic depression, *Tom*, arrived on 23rd December and the temperature dropped below freezing. By Tuesday morning the temperature had reached -10C (16F) and harvesting commenced. The temperature has remained very low since then, even reaching down to -17C (5F).

Horst and Harald **Bretz** from Bechtolsheim harvested Riesling and Spätburgunder from the Homberg, and Silvaner from the Kloster-berg vineyard in Bechtolsheim on 25th and 26th December.

At the **Schales** estate in Dalsheim, Riesling was harvested in the Steig vineyard on all three days 24-26th, and the pressings (one of which was up to 180 Oechsle!) will allow for two different bottlings. Part of the crop will be reserved for the production of their unique and rare sparkling Eiswein Sekt. The first-ever release this year sold out quickly. The 1996 Eiswein Sekt will not be released till the turn of the Century. Roland **Sander** harvested Silvaner in the Dexheimer Doktor vineyard on 24th December; Silvaner also being harvested by the **Christmann-Roll** estate in Gau-Heppenheim. Georg & Markus **Machmer** harvested Riesling in their Hasensprung site in Bechtheim on the same day.

The pressing of these grapes at the extremely low temperatures has provided some problems, with temperatures below freezing point even inside the pressing houses, and the mash freezing solid after the initial pressing! Total quantities will be nearing 50% less than last year, but the super concentration of these unusual 1996 ice wines will undoubtedly be tremendous.

Following our report 30th October, the main picking of Riesling was completed during the 2nd week of November. In spite of the ideal weather conditions, the late picking took a heavy toll on the yield, reducing the total crop far more than expected (up to 30% less than 1995 in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer region!), but increasing the quality far beyond initial expectations. The total small crop will not exceed 8.5 million hectolitres, similar in size to the 1995 crop and 21% less than 1994.

With the even spread of fine quality throughout all areas, the 1996 Riesling vintage almost deserves being classed as a great vintage, especially in the middle Mosel areas. Not only at the Dr Thanisch estate are similarities with the great 1990 vintage visible, despite the obvious climatic differences. The Saar & Ruwer areas have however not excelled to this extent, and in the Rheingau, only QbA and Kabinett qualities have been harvested in the Steinberg vineyard, Spätlese being more widespread in Hochheim or Rüdesheim, or in the Nierstein area of Rheinhessen. The overall picture however indicates a very fine vintage 1996.

Riesling regards,
Derek Vinnicombe

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