

## VINTAGE REPORT 1997 FROM GERMANY

### 10<sup>th</sup> November 1997

This week marks the completion of the 1997 harvest, a harvest which has brought great joy, but also woe to winemakers in Germany; a *neidischer Herbst*, a jealous harvest, as the vintners would say. The quality can be ranked high up the benchmark ladder, a fine vintage to follow the great 1995 & 1996 wines. Riesling has once again performed a miracle under difficult climatic conditions, and we have only just missed a truly great harvest due to the cold weather 20th October which abruptly ended photosynthesis, and after heavy rainfall on 5th November.

The problems came early April: after a long, but uneventful winter, the opening buds were struck by an unusual, severe cold period with temperatures down to -5 C (24F). In unprotected low-lying flat vineyards the damage was devastating; red varieties also suffering severe damage. The finest sites, especially those planted with Riesling escaped unscathed! The heaviest losses have therefore been caused to those growers producing regional or generic wines which reduced the total crop to around 8 million hectolitres (6% less than the small 1996 harvest of 8.6 mil. hl), the third very small crop in a row.

The flowering commenced w/c 16th June, but poor weather followed which delayed the completion till end of June, albeit "on schedule" to allow for sufficient ripening time. July was equally dismal, but both August and September were glorious months, however lacking rainfall and further reducing the crop size. Severe hail damage was only reported between Assmannshausen and Lorch in the Rheingau.

Due to the dry weather the grapes have remained perfectly healthy in all regions. The much needed rain fell 12th September & 13-15th October, followed by cool & dry weather until 5th November; perfect conditions for the picking. We can report fully ripened, healthy grapes in all regions, with the Oechsle quality level relative to the respective yield.

After two very small crops in Nierstein (Rheinhessen), 1997 heralds a fine quantity of ripe Riesling Kabinett & Spätlese musts mainly between 80 and 90 Oechsle. Some bunches are still hanging in best sites, such as the

Hipping & Oelberg, for Auslese selection. Friedrich Baumann in Oppenheim has indeed equalled his 1990 results, with all Riesling in the Sackträger & Kreuz sites at a minimum 100 Oechsle, which will again be partly down-graded to great Kabinett. The Schales estate commenced picking 29th September with a fine Siegerrebe Spätlese, other varieties, including fully ripened Gewürztraminer, followed the Spätlese pattern, except for Scheurebe as Kabinett and Riesling as Auslese; the Bretz family having also selected Beerenauslese in their Klosterberg and Sonnenberg sites.

Classic Riesling Kabinett around 80 Oechsle has been harvested in the Rheingau. Grapes are still hanging in top sites (Erbacher Marcobrunn, Steinberg & Rauenthal for Spätlese & Auslese). Good quantities of Spätlese in Hochheim; although steep sites in Rudesheim have been disappointing, suffering from lack of moisture.

Due to being "one step ahead" with growth, even the Middle Haardt area of the Pfalz between Ungstein, Bad Dürkheim, Forst & Deidesheim suffered severe damage in April, but quality results for the crop are excellent.

The middle Mosel has seen a far larger Riesling crop than 1996, with a good spread between Kabinett-Spätlese-Auslese, especially in best sites such as the Wehlener Sonnenuhr. Yields have been far lower in the Saar & Ruwer valleys, similar to 1996, but better results than 1996. The Dr Fischer estate this time managed to harvest fine Spätlese in the Bockstein site.

Overall, the ripe grapes have remained healthy, unfortunately with no large-scale onset of Botrytis. The ripe acidity levels are at least 2g/l lower than the monumental 1995 & 1996 sizzling levels, so we can expect more accessible, earlier maturing 1997 vintage Riesling wines with a fine, elegant structure and clear, clean fruit flavours.

Hopes are now directed towards Eiswein later this year. Apart from Riesling, Silvaner & Spätburgunder, the Ernst Bretz estate is also hoping for their first Chardonnay Eiswein.

Many other vintners, including the Schales estates in Dalsheim, the Sanders in Dexheim, Dr Fischer in

20th December 1997

## **EISWEIN - ICE WINE HARVEST 1997**

The vintners have been carefully watching the weather since our report 10th November, and a cold depression in fact hit Germany this week. On Tuesday, 16th December the temperature dropped well below freezing, and on Wednesday, before daylight broke with a clear sky, the thermometer had dropped to -8 C (20 F) in the countryside areas of Rheinhessen. The Rhine and Mosel valley areas were 2 degrees warmer, and the Saar valley was sheltered by a blanket of low cloud, making Eiswein production impossible there.

The Ernst Bretz estate in Bechtolsheim has harvested Riesling and Spätburgunder in their Homberg vineyard, and as an absolute novelty, a first-ever Chardonnay Eiswein in the Klosterberg site. The general quality will not quite equal their former sizzling 1995 or 1996 ice wines, seeing that the 1997 acidity seems softer according to Ernst Bretz sr. himself, but the relatively healthy state of the grapes will hopefully provide clear fruit and precise Eiswein character.

In Gau-Heppenheim, the Christmann-Roll estate harvested Silvaner in their Schlossberg vineyard at 135 Oechsle. Here the temperature had even dropped down to -9 C (18 F).

Ockfen or the State Domaines will have to wait for the next arctic depression, probably not till January by which time the crop will be further decimated.

Riesling regards,  
*Derek Vinnicombe*

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**WINE BROKERS • CONSULTANTS**

Weinbergstrasse 62, D-55297 Nackenheim/Germany  
Ph +49 6135 8269 Fax: +49 6135 8279

*21 years of vintage reports 1976-1997*