

VINTAGE REPORT 1998 FROM GERMANY

19th November 1998

No vintage year follows a set pattern, and 1998 is no exception. The harvest has now been completed and a first resumé can be released. The overall impression is very positive, and the 1998 harvest was near to ranking as a truly great vintage, had it not been for the dismal weather these last 6 weeks during the picking time.

The vines suffered no Winter damage, and some amazing 1997 vintage Eisweins were even harvested end of January 1998, albeit very small quantities, but unique to Germany, 1997 vintage wines being harvested in 1998! No frost damage occurred to the opening buds in May, and an early flowering around 8th June in the Rhine areas was an excellent omen for the ripening and quality potential. In poor years we have had to wait till July for the flowering! The Summer months were mediocre, but intermittent sunshine coupled with the rainfall had a positive effect on the vines - *the original cool climate phenomena*. Riesling suffered natural yield reduction of about 15%, caused by sunburnt berries during a mid-August heat-wave. Even older vintners had not witnessed this before to such an extent. The Fitz-Ritter estate recorded similar damage during the great 1947 vintage. The late-ripening Riesling was especially effected, whereas early ripening varieties had already produced sufficient juice inside the berries to act as a cooling agent.

Fine dry & sunny weather 21-27th September heralded the beginning of the 1998 harvest, and Müller-Thurgau produced very high yields, after the low yields 1995-1997. A period of torrential rainfall then beset Germany (20 litres/m² recorded by us on 2/3rd, 25 litres/m² on 23rd, 25 litres/m² on 28th October!). This resulted in flooding of villages and some lower vineyards near to the banks of the Mosel; last seen during the harvest back in 1922. The rumour was spread that growers were employing fishermen to harvest, but luckily the 1998 grapes had already been harvested in these endangered sites.

The picking was therefore spread over a period of 6 long & cumbersome weeks. Careful harvesting during the sunny intervals with dry or windy weather has produced amazing results (a wet vineyard lead to a loss of around 15 Oechsle).

RHEINHESSEN: Riesling has excelled at low yields of 55hl/ha, Oechsle readings above 80 and ideal fruit acidity levels, averaging 10%. The Baumanns report 95 Oechsle in their Oppenheimer Sackträger site, Heinrich Seebrich and Albrecht Schneider also reporting Oechsle of 85 to 104 in their top Nierstein sites;

Schales in Dalsheim with Riesling all above 88 Oechsle. The estates will therefore be able to maintain their high benchmark levels of quality which we have experienced since 1995. Berry-selecting of Riesling has not produced Beerenauslese or TBA qualities, but the Ernst Bretz estate harvested an Ortega TBA of 185 Oechsle on 23rd October, apart from further BA and TBA. The Schäfers report excellent Spätburgunder Spätlese in Mettenheim, and all estates report excellent red Dornfelder or Portugieser.

PFALZ: similar results also at the top estates, such as Fitz-Ritter with Gewürztraminer in their Nonnengarten site at 100 Oechsle.

RHEINGAU: the Rudesheim and Hochheim Riesling areas have been more successful with Spätlese than the Erbach-Hattenheim area, with the Molitors reporting 94 Oechsle in their Berg Schlossberg site and Schloss Schönborn with 98 Oechsle. Riesling has otherwise varied between 80 and 92 Oechsle, a Kabinett vintage; yields have however been 25% less than 1997.

SAAR: a good-sized crop of Riesling, but mainly Kabinett, with no Spätlese in Ockfen or in the Scharzhofberger; the Fischers having completed their harvest on 12th November.

MOSEL: a fine crop of Riesling at the estates, with ideal acidity levels, but 20% less quantity than 1997. Stefan Bollig reports Oechsle readings between 80 and 90; and Gerd Studert with Auslese in the Wehlener Sonnenuhr up to 100 Oechsle.

Evaluating the crop, as in 1983, we have to differentiate between the fine estates with their normal to low yields, and the mass-producing generic wine market. The total 1998 crop in Germany will be about 12 million hl, i.e. over 40% more than 1997. The estates, with their philosophy and devotion to producing top qualities, have produced in 1998 about 20-25% less quantity than 1997! The grapes in the Mosel areas kept very healthy during the main harvest, whereas rotting spread to some extent in the Rhine areas, reducing the yield, but not necessarily increasing the quality, thanks to the rainfall. We now wait & hope for Eiswein weather.

Consumers, now describing the 1997 estate wines with adjectives such as *delicious* and *beautiful*, will therefore hopefully find comparable wines to follow from the 1998 vintage.

23rd November 1998

EISWEIN HARVEST 1998

Nature has gloriously rewarded the vintners, following the cumbersome task experienced during the main harvest (our report 19th November). Arctic weather suddenly arrived in Germany last Friday, and this past weekend has seen the picking of some splendid Eiswein, with the temperature down to -11°C (14°F) on Sunday morning in the hillside region of Rheinhessen. It is seldom cold enough in November, but 1980, 1983, 1995 and now 1998 are the fortunate exceptions. A November Eiswein is usually blessed with the advantage of fairly healthy, ripe fruit, coupled with that great high sizzling acidity. January Eisweins tend to have low acid levels, despite the concentration. The quantity in 1995 was disappointing due to the severe rotting, but both 1983 and 1998 have been produced from good quantities of healthy fruit, especially in the Rheinhessen region.

Ernst Bretz, Bechtolsheim: Horst & Harald Bretz harvested 1.15 ha (2.9 acres) of Spätburgunder, Riesling and Silvaner in their Homberg and Klosterberg vineyards, commencing picking at 5am and at -8°C (19°F) on Saturday. Heike Bretz kept the team happy with a hot breakfast at 10:00am.

Christmann-Roll, Gau-Heppenheim: Silvaner was harvested early Sunday morning in the Schlossberg site with 150 Oechsle.

Machmer, Bechtheim: Georg & Markus Machmer had selected Gewürztraminer in their Rosengarten site. Harvesting of the 0.37 ha (0.9 acre) healthy, frozen grapes started at 7am Sunday morning; the final pressing reaching around 150 Oechsle.

Schales, Dalsheim: a novelty at this fine estate, with the first-ever Kanzler Eiswein from the Bürgel site. They had not originally intended to make an Eiswein from these healthy grapes, but were waiting for dry weather to select an Auslese. Only 50ha are cultivated world-wide with this white varietal, first crossed by Dr Scheu between Müller-Thurgau and Silvaner in 1927. Although of high quality, the very low yielding has prevented its spreading. The German word Kanzler translates to Chancellor, and the first bottles will be presented to Germany's new Chancellor Gerhard Schröder next year to

remind him that Germany produces some great wines.

In the neighbouring Steig vineyard, 1200 litres of healthy Riesling were also harvested at -11°C (14°F) early Sunday morning from 5:30am onwards with a sizzling 16‰ fruit acidity.

Fitz-Ritter, Bad Dürkheim (Pfalz): harvesting of Riesling commenced at 7am Sunday morning in the Hochbenn site at -8°C (19°F). 700 litres have been pressed at the Trockenbeerenauslese reading of 153 Oechsle and sizzling 16 ‰ acidity. Once again, Alice Fitz was in charge of the much-needed hot breakfast.

Dr Fischer, Ockfen/Saar: the missing Spätlese has been partly compensated by two great Eisweins, picked on Saturday morning at -8°C (19°F) and Sunday at -10°C (16°F) with 125 and 162 Oechsle respectively. Only a small compensation, seeing that the 1997 Eiswein crop failed completely.

The sheltered micro-climate in the Rheingau has prevented wide-spread Eiswein production in that region. The Rheingau legal minimum of 125 Oechsle for Beerenauslese or Eiswein is also higher than in the other regions. There the vinters will have to patiently wait, seeing that warmer weather is now forecasted.

Riesling regards,
Derek Vinnicombe

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22 years of vintage reports 1976-1998