

VINTAGE REPORT 1999 FROM GERMANY

8th November 1999

The 1999 German harvest prompts the question "Segen oder Fluch", a blessing or a curse? The answer depends on which side of the fence you stand. For the consumer and connoisseur alike, the 1999 is a splendid vintage, promising delicious wines at stable prices, and at all quality levels. The small grower on the other side, producing only mediocre bulk wine, has experienced a complete collapse of market prices for his produce, and some may well "drown" in their lake of financial problems.

Once again, nature follows its own course, and the 1999 growing season has kept surprises in store for us, right to the very end of the harvest. The omen of those vintages ending in 9 raised hopes for a vintage of the Century, thinking back to the great 1989, 1959 or 1949, but then the 1899 was a flop!

Why were hopes set so high? The mild winter months left the vines unscathed, and plenty of rainfall with mild temperatures in March and April allowed for an early bud-break around 19th April in the Rhine area. The growth of the vines then exploded between 17-30th May with temperatures around 25 C (72 F) which led to an early flowering around 10th June, very similar to 1998. A splendid Summer followed with warmth and sufficient rainfall. Expectations for a great quality? The picking of early varieties commenced 20th September, the grapes being perfectly healthy and fully ripened. Rainfall followed early October, swelling the berries, and this, combined with the large on-set of bunches after the very successful flowering, has led to very high yields; far higher than first anticipated, and too high for fine wines. The estates then began pooking with the weather, delaying the picking, waiting and hoping for improvements. There was in fact no rush, seeing that the grapes were still completely healthy. 24 days of excellent dry weather followed between 10th October and 6th November, with morning mist only occurring on 3 days, a truly golden autumn! Most estates have not experienced such a long and exhausting harvest since 1989. The painstaking efforts have been well worthwhile!

RHEINHESSEN: Riesling has yielded at least 45% more than 1998, and at astonishingly high Oechsle readings with fine ripe fruit acidity levels of 8.5 - 9.0 ‰. Albrecht Schneider has crushed Riesling from 84 Oechsle up to a top Auslese reading of 105 Oechsle in the Hipping site. Heinrich Seebrich reports similar readings

with an Auslese of 108 Oechsle in the Hipping. The lack of widespread Botrytis and lack of experienced pickers has reduced the possibility to make Riesling Beerenauslese or Trockenbeerenauslese, but the Schales brothers in Dalsheim are proud of a fine Riesling Beerenauslese at 130 Oechsle, berry-selected on 27th October. Gewürztraminer has excelled with fine Spätlese above 90 Oechsle, followed similarly by Weissburgunder & Chardonnay. Horst & Harald Bretz have even produced a Chardonnay Auslese at 115 Oechsle in Bechtolsheim which will be fermented dry. Spätburgunder has also been very successful with readings above 95 Oechsle, and the Schäfers in Mettenheim have selected Auslese at 99 Oechsle in their Goldberg & Schlossberg sites. Ernst Bretz sr in Bechtolsheim had never experienced such a crop and added "I never will again": huge quantities of various Ortega, Huxelrebe and Siegerrebe Beerenauslese (e.g. 135 Oechsle on 19th October), and their largest crop ever of Ortega Trockenbeerenauslese at readings of 170 Oechsle. The Schales estate also has Huxelrebe TBA at 175 Oechsle and 13.5‰, and Roland Sander in Dexheim a Huxelrebe BA at 140 Oechsle as well as Ortega TBA at 180 Oechsle. The best results since 1976!

PFALZ: similar results reported; the Fitz-Ritter estate with Gewürztraminer and Chardonnay above 100 Oechsle, which they will again down-grade to Spätlese, and Riesling from 80 Oechsle upwards. Over 2000 hectares between Gimmeldingen and Ellerstadt were completely destroyed by hail on 2nd June, a brutal loss to those affected.

RHEINGAU: Riesling at all quality levels, depending on the yield, starting with Auslese at over 100 Oechsle possible in the steep Rudesheim sites (e.g. State Domain and Schönborn), whereby readings above 90 Oechsle for normal pickings of Spätlese were hardly possible before 21st October. All top sites have excelled, with plenty of Kabinett in the Steinberg. The Schönborn estate has also berry-selected a Beerenauslese at 155 Oechsle in their monopole Pfaffenberg site (the official minimum level for Rheingau Beerenauslese is 125 Oechsle). Klaus Molitor has experienced one of his largest Riesling crops, but also fine Riesling Spätlese at 93 Oechsle, and a full crop of red wines from his Spätburgunder and St. Laurent vineyards in Hattenheim.

MOSEL-SAAR-RUWER: At long last, a great textbook Saar vintage, perhaps the greatest since 1976! Karin Fischer is "all smiles" with many Fuder of Spätlese and Auslese up to 115 Oechsle and a Beerenauslese of 120 Oechsle from their Ockfener Bockstein. Their harvest commenced on 11th October, and by the 13th, they had over 20 Fuder with 82-84 Oechsle and a further 5 Fuder for Spätlese! The exhausting hand-picking continued until 4th November. The middle Mosel has not seen such splendid results this year, and Stefan Bollig was frustrated with Oechsle readings of 75 - 80 during the first 10 days of picking; the final 10 days however saw readings up to 89 Oechsle in their Apotheke and 85 Oechsle in their Dhronhofberger site. The Studerts have harvested up to 95 Oechsle in the Wehlener Sonnenuhr, and good quantities of Kabinett and Spätlese at fine acidity levels between 8.5 and 10‰. The Dr Thanisch (Müller-Burggraef) estate has harvested up to 96 Oechsle in their Bernkasteler Doctor site, and berry-selected at 120 Oechsle (down-grading to a top *** Auslese).

NAHE: Riesling similar to Rheinhessen results with normal to high yields.

AHR: also at long last, a good and plentiful crop of red Spätburgunder, with results approaching the 1976 vintage! Stocks were "next to nothing" in the Ahr valley.

Fine results have also been reported from FRANKEN, BADEN and WÜRTTEMBERG.

Hopes now remain for the harvesting of Eiswein, but a cold arctic front is not yet forecasted. Riesling, Silvaner & Spätburgunder vineyards have been prepared for Eiswein in all areas.

The total 1999 crop in Germany will be the largest since 1989 (14.3 mil. hl), and may even approach the huge 1982 crop of 15.4 million hl. As in 1989, there will be a split between the huge volume of mediocre generic wines and fine wines. Since 1989 there has however been a remarkable quality turn-around, even at the leading large wineries, following huge investments into cold fermentation, increased tank storage capacity and quality control. From the estates, we can expect delicious, smooth 1999 vintage wines with good ripe fruit next year at stable prices. Generally, the 1997 and 1998 wines with more concentration of flavours and fine crisp structure, will however remain excellent recommendations.

Riesling regards,
Derek Vinnicombe

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