

Decanter

German Grosses Gewächs new releases: Top wines

Is 2018 a Riesling vintage for non-Riesling drinkers? Anne Krebiehl MW investigates as she gets to grips with this year's top Grosses Gewächs releases.



Anne Krebiehl MW | September 4, 2019



A first glimpse of the new German vintage can always be had at the [VDP Weinbörse in April in Mainz](#): but it is a jostle and tasting conditions are not ideal. The real test comes in August in the airy, light-flooded space of Wiesbaden's Kurhaus, an ideal tasting environment with flawless organisation where more than 500 Grosse Gewächse, Germany's 'grands crus', are presented: still dry wines from single, classified sites produced to stringent standards. More than 500 wines could be tasted: from Weiss- and Grauburgunder, via Silvaner, Chardonnay, Lemberger to Spätburgunder – and Riesling of course: 298 of them.

While some have already praised 2018 to the rafters, as though the old paradigm of 'the riper the better' still held true, 2018 was a challenging year viticulturally, if not a challenging harvest. It was the year which illustrated who had adapted best to the ever-changing whims of nature since 2018 presented growers with a heatwave, drought and record yields.

Scroll down to see the top 20 Grosses Gewächs recommendations

[See the top 40 wines tasted here](#)

Vineyards late last summer looked downright biblical: groaning with picture-perfect, healthy grapes. Most of the vines were still in fine fettle when other vegetation had started to droop. Particularly old vines took everything in their stride. But what of the burgeoning fruit? Only those with careful yield and canopy management could harvest wines with tension. Rot was not a problem, but possibly concentration.

One winemaker encapsulated it: 'There are hardly any bad wines, many decent wines and very few outstanding wines.' Another said: 'Great wines are not made in extreme years. Really great Riesling vintages are those where the vines can develop in a more normal fashion.' A third said: 'You have to pick wisely in 2018.'

A Riesling vintage for non-Riesling drinkers?

Tasting the wines, there was a lot of variation – but down to winemaker rather than region, even though Rheingau was one of the patchiest. The Mosel did well but really is atypical – but again, those who were in tune with their vineyards delivered.

Germans often speak of 'ripe acidity' and mean an acid structure that is pleasantly fresh without being bracing, think Cox Orange Pippin rather than Granny Smith, or golden Amalfi vis-à-vis pale, anaemic lemon. The good 2018s had that in spades. Almost every winemaker remarked on it.

Philipp Wittmann of Weingut Wittmann in Rheinhessen said: 'Indeed, a crazy year, but cool nights afforded us a vintage with German virtues: freshness, elegance and thankfully moderate alcohol levels, more classic than we all expected. We all worried about overripeness, about acid that would be too soft, but acid levels were stable. Harvest logistics, as we learnt in [previous hot years] 2009 and 2011, had to be spot on.'

Urban Kaufmann of Weingut Kaufmann in the Rheingau said the same: low pH levels and surprisingly stable acidity plus a good weather forecast made this harvest almost 'relaxing'. According to Hansjörg Rebholz, of Ökonomierat Rebholz in the Pfalz, 'picking the right harvest point, not too early, not too late, was the biggest challenge of the year.' But he also mused: 'I think we have learned such a lot in the meantime when it comes to hot, dry years. We worked a lot in the vineyards, reduced yields accordingly, shaded the fruit to prevent overly phenolic notes. I think all these measures paid off.'

Cooler nights in late summer also helped to save the day. The combination of ripeness and freshness prompted Dr Carl von Schubert at Maximin Grünhaus in the Ruwer to say: 'Even for someone like me who has 40 vintages under his belt this was astonishing.'

What of the sweet wines? Caroline Diel of Schlossgut Diel in the Nahe said 'with really great ripeness and juiciness but also gripping acid structure we could make thrilling Kabinett style wines.' Veronika Lintner at Egon Müller Scharzhof in the Saar noted that botrytis could develop despite the dry conditions: 'Even if 2018 was not a strong botrytis vintage, we nonetheless had an early onset of very clean, clear botrytis. Of course, the acid levels were not quite as high as usual but the pH levels, on average at 2.9, were very low, so the wines remain very expressive. We were able to harvest all Prädikat levels up to Trockenbeerenauslese.'

2017 red wines

As regards the reds from the 2017 vintage, a year diminished by frost and hail damage, a new German paradigm starts taking hold – and this goes for both Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir) and Lemberger (Blaufränkisch). The best estates no longer chase power and have shifted the focus on the purity of their fruit which only really shines when sufficient acid is present. This pristine fruit is no longer cloaked in too much oak, either. Depth, purity and poise speak for themselves. Especially Baden has turned a corner while Franken has led the way for some time. This, however, only goes for the best estates. There still are some ungainly reds marred by the triple flaw of overripeness, extraction and oak. But what is good is spectacular.

Now that a few more Silvaners are exported, two wines have made it to the top 20 selection, too. It is an exquisite, understated and underrated variety worth getting to know better. More and more estates presented their GGs with (welcome) delay – two 2017 Rieslings are thus also included.

Riesling, Silvaner, Pinot & Blaufränkisch: Anne's 20 top Grosses Gewächs picks

[See the top 40 wines tasted here](#)



Peter Jakob Kühn, Oestricher Doosberg, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

Gravel, loess and loam provide an ideal mix of drainage and water retention on the Doosberg while an extra year of maturity does wonders for this individualistic style. Chamomile and ethereal citrus peel dominate the heady nose. The palate is poised and presents itself in a seemingly suspended juiciness, heaven-bound...

Points 97



Dr Bürklin-Wolf, Forster Pechstein, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

The Pechstein trumps again, and again from biodynamically farmed vines: Smoke and earth almost have an edge of cured, smoked meat. The palate carries these notions along with fresh red and yellow apple and some bright lemon. The mouthfeel seems very well knitted together, fluid, with a balm-like edge. There...

Points 97



Clemens Busch, Pündericher Marienburg 'Rothenpfad', Grosses Gewächs, 2018

Both a touch of reduction and a notion of fine, freshly crushed herbs rise from the glass. The palate is concentrated and brings layered notions of fruit: of Mirabelle and Reine Claude skins with a pleasantly bitter edge, of gentle juicy plum, of ripe and vivid lemon peel. Then there...

Points 96



Van Volxem, Wiltinger Scharzhofberg Pergentsknopp, Grosses Gewächs, 2018

From the top knoll on the crest of the legendary Scharzhofberg, the Pergentsknopp does honour to this windy parcel, ideal for dry wines. Cool concentration, ripe, candied lemon peel, fresh lemon zest -- all this creates a glorious picture of ripeness and tension - captured at the right moment. There...

Points 96



Horst Sauer, Am Lumpen 1655, Grosses Gewächs, Franken, 2018

Horst Sauer is the master of Silvaner and the Echerndorfer Lump, a steep amphitheater-shaped vineyard on a loop of the Main is his chief site. Am Lumpen 1655 is the core parcel, all on Muschelkalk, a triassic limestone. Dried hayflowers and fragrant, dry grass waft from the nose. The palate...

Points 95

Ökonomierat Rebholz Siebeldinger 'Ganzhorn' Im Sonnenschein, Grosses Gewächs, 2018

Stony tautness is apparent from the off. Grown on a tiny parcel of coloured sandstone with lots of gravel sand and loam deposited by the river Queich, this is slender, stony, taut and dry. There is citric, mouth-watering juiciness and an inherent harmony - despite the relative mildness of 2018....

Points 95



Geheimer Rat Dr von Bassermann-Jordan, Forster Pechstein, Grosses Gewächs, 2018

The nose is shy to wake up but slowly reveals smoke and ripe mandarine peel. The palate is immensely concentrated, vivid with citric verve, luscious with extract, compact with fluidity. A central shaft of lemony purity lasts and lasts. This goes to show that exquisite, storied vineyards, like the Pechstein,...

Points 95



Wittmann, Westhofener Kirchspiel, Grosses Gewächs, 2018

Gorgeous precision, lemony tautness, sharp linearity: even in 2018 the inherent coolness of the limestone soils in this gently east-south-east facing site afforded these vines immense freshness. Sites which 30 years ago were too cool for greatness now come into their own. The finish is bone-dry and an ode to...

Points 95



Dönnhoff, Norheimer Dellchen, Grosses Gewächs, Nahe, 2018

From a site of slate and porphyry facing the Nahe river and from Cornelius Dönnhoff's capable hands, this is an expression of stone and sun. A very scented nose of citric ripeness sets the tone. The palate is mild and fresh at the same time, pristine and vivid but beautifully...

Points 95



Gut Hermannsberg, Altenbamberger Rotenberg, Grosses Gewächs, 2018

The Altenbamberger Rotenberg is an isolated, out-of-the way site of rhyolite and slate, surrounded by forest and rising to 350m. Despite the relative coolness of the site, the 2018 wine is rounder than expected, it is concentrated yet slender, but comes across with a lovely, effortless balance and a kind...

Points 95



Schloss Lieser, Lieserer Niederberg Helden, Grosses Gewächs, 2018

Thomas Haag simply is a master. The brilliance of his collection once again stands out. His take on this south-facing site of blue Devonian slate. Cool, slatey, smoky reduction hangs on the nose. On the palate, zestiness hits with a gorgeously spicy edge that evokes grapefruit peel but also pepper....

Points 95



Rudolf May, Rothlauf, Grosses Gewächs, Franken, 2018

From a site that combines two of Franken's chief soils, Muschelkalk (Triassic limestone) and Buntsandstein (Triassic red sandstone), in a lateral valley of the Main river, this shows May's subtle hand. The nose is tender with fresh Mirabelle fruit, laced with lemon, unusually fruity for a Silvaner. The palate then...

Points 94



Bernhard Huber, Malterdinger Bienenberg Wildenstein, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

The nose is a little shy but the structure is one of fluid, unimpeded elegance. The manicured vines on the reddish limestone on this tiny parcel face south and give a wine here of golden symmetry that speaks of innate balance. Nothing is forced, there is no make-up, the inherent...

Points 96



Rudolf Fürst, Bürgstadter Centgrafenberg, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

Blood, iron-oxide and lovage on the nose express an incredible savouriness that is intensified on the slender palate by notions of white pepper. The palate is svelte but concentrated and brims with tart, bright redcurrant fruit. This is unusually open and vivid and utterly beguiling with all its spice and...

Points 95

Rudolf Fürst, Klingenberg Schlossberg, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

The Klingenberg Schlossberg is one of Franken's iconic sites: steep, terraced and of poor, red sandstone. Some of that stone and freshness appears on the nose right away. This is vivid, lifted fresh with a spicy, peppery, slender body. Quiet, bundled power slumbers at the core. Gentle smoke hovers around...

Points 96



Dr Heger, Achkarrer Schlossberg, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

Joachim Heger is another one of those Kaiserstuhl winemakers who has never rested on his laurels. The stylistic evolution thus carries apace and we are presented with some of the most elegant wines he has ever made. The steep, warm Schlossberg site demands exacting management in order to be tamed...

Points 95

Aldinger, Gips Marienglas, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

Named after the gypsum crystals that can be found in this south-facing site of Triassic keuper, Marienglas shows the dynamic spirit of the Aldinger brothers as they continuously refine their game. They manage to unite luscious fruit, snappy freshness, unforced depth and a firm but fine structure in this elegant,...

Points 95



Friedrich Becker, Sankt Paul, Grosses Gewächs, Pfalz, 2016

There is no doubt that the Becker Pinot Noirs are muscular and structured in style, but of the three GGs presented here, Sankt Paul shows the most elegance and poise. Grown on French soil in Alsace, on a south-facing site sloping down towards Wissembourg, this is an enduring German classic....

Points 95



Schnaitmann, Fellbacher Lämmeler, Grosses Gewächs, 2017

Lemberger, at home in Württemberg, is Germany's last red wine secret. At an altitude of 380m, grown on coloured marls, this variety, the same as Blaufränkisch and Kekfrankos, shows its elegant side. Wunderkind Rainer Schnaitmann, who borrows heavily from his Pinot Noir philosophy when making Lemberger, delivers a fragrant, white-pepper-scented...

Points 94



Jean Stodden, Recher Herrenberg, Grosses Gewächs, Ahr, 2017

In his steep and partially terraced greywacke site of Herrenberg, Alexander Stodden shows off a slimmed-down Ahr style. A shy nose is not yet willing to give a lot away but the palate is alive with drive, concentration and proper freshness. There is something effortless about the energy and well-tamed...

Points 94