

## GERMANY'S BEST- GROSSES GEWACHS from the VDP

German wine has always tried to be informative on its labels but the excess of information has worked to its disadvantage. The 1971 wine law sought to establish the quality levels of Prädikat ie unsugared , natural wines from defined areas and of different styles- Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese and sweeter levels still (Beeren and Trockenbeereauslese)- and to indicate these were a step above QbA, quality wines from defined areas but which could be chaptalized, and Deutscher Tafelwein. Village and vineyard names made for a long mouthful of pronunciation eg Schloss Böckelheimer Kupergrube Riesling Spätlese. The problem with this wine law was that German wine production even then, in 1971, was moving to a significantly drier style on the domestic market and these trocken (dry) wines were awkwardly described as Kabinett, Spätlese or Auslese Trocken which confused the consumer at home and abroad. Auslese is made from selected late-picked grapes (not bunches) and therefore full of natural ripe sugars which can be left in the low-alcohol wine to glorious fruity complexity on the palate, but it can be fermented out to dryness, hence Auslese Trocken. But the two words together seemed contradictory and confusing.

The VDP unites about 200 leading estates from all over Germany and works according to self-imposed quality standards, not those of the 1971 law. They are Prädikat estates ie defined vineyard sites but they are making both dry and off-dry/sweet wines. The VDP has established for its members four levels of quality: entry-level Gutswein, Ortswein from superior sites and the two top-levels of Erste Lage (defined vineyards with reduced yields) and Grosse Lage, the very best vineyards as agreed by its members. The Grosses Gewächs designation is a dry wine from these very top sites. The traditional Prädikats can be made at all four levels-kabinett, spätlese etc- from these estates and for the classic estates long associated with these designations these descriptions remain valid for much of the production, especially in the Mosel. Only a smaller percentage is vinified dry as Grosses Gewächs. All VDP wines carry the eagle-and-grape logo.

So we have two parallel designations. From estates not in the VDP (95% of Germany's vineyards!) there are the Kabinett-Spätlese- Auslese levels, vinified as wines with natural sweetness or fermented out to dryness- and the deliberately trocken (dry) Grosses Gewächs wines of the VDP, their flagship wines, (made from 5% of Germany's vineyards), wines that reach effectively the Auslese level of ripeness in the grapes, without *pourriture*, and vinified out to 12.5/13.5 alcohol.

The VDP is unashamedly elitist with very high standards and internal moderating of quality. It does not suit everyone; over the last 30 years the membership has grown from 161 to 197 members but this increase is actually made up 128 new estates having joined and 94 leaving; perhaps it did not suit the leavers, or was too expensive a profile or perhaps some standards slipped. Whatever. Its wine production in total is only 3% of the German wine harvest but 7.5% of revenue from total German wine sales, with 1.7 million bottles of VDP wines sold in 2015 at an average price of 32e per bottle. 77% are sold domestically, to consumers, specialist retailers and restaurants; 23% is exported. The very few available in the UK are well-over £40 a bottle, many considerably more. The emphasis is on prestige, quality and wines that can stand up to the best dry white wines of the world.

The legendary autumn presentation of the VDP is in the Kurhaus in Wiesbaden, the finest wine tasting in the world, with total luxury for the lucky invitees- seated at a desk with the wines brought to one in flights and at the most untroubled pace. I have been privileged to attend three times in the 1990s, but this time the VDP came to London where a selection of 125 wines were brought over and the tasting at the Army and Navy Club was coordinated by the Institute of Masters of Wine. In addition, there were tastings in London recently of two very big ranges of GG wines offered by

specialist merchants, Awin Barrett Siegel and Howard Ripley Wines. In-bond prices ranged from £80 to over £600 for cases of six. This must be a concern for marketing, such disparate prices. The modestly-priced full-flavoured strong wines of Dengler-Seyler in Pfalz, for example, were a bargain at £78 for 6, especially Im Obern Weinspar, but keeping strange company with Dr Loosen's Wehlener Sonnenuhr at £110.60 RRP for a single bottle (and not by a very long chalk his most expensive GG). The best can sometimes be the worst enemy of the good.

The VDP members (*die mitglieder*) have given every thought to their commitment, not least in giving all tasters a magnificent 488 page textbook published this year with superb maps and photos of the vineyards which are at the heart of the VDP philosophy. There is also a members' handbook available, invaluable for planning visits, and a VDP.APP- VDP.WEINGUTER. Terroir is all-defining, no longer *Oeschle* ie the sugar readings in the grapes, the basis of the old Prädikat system. These precisely defined sites-with altitude, orientation, gradient all exactly delineated- are the heart of the VDP message. In some cases, the differences from one section of the vineyard to another are so precise: at the little-known Marienberg vineyard of Clemens Busch near Punderich on the Mosel-slopes at 50-80% gradient- the soils vary from weathered blue or blue grey slate to the rarer red slate in the Rothenpfad plot near the rail viaduct. Blue slate dominates the Fahrlay parcel right next to the river. Falkenlay lies between these two parcels with grey slate beneath deeper soil. The wines are completely different from the three parcels. Further downstream nearer the Koblenz confluence with the Rhine is Winningen where Heymann-Lowenstein has some extremely steep sites at his Uhlen vineyards (uhlen=owl) where viticulture is heroic (as is the car access): there are three different slate types- Laubach (grey slate with calcareous fossils); Roth Lay with reddish iron oxide content; and Blaufüsser Lay (blue-grey clay with a south-west facing aspect that stores the day's heat and radiates into the vines at night); this last wine had an intriguing saline note.

Reinhard Heymann-Lowenstein writes a fascinating chapter in the VDP Bible. "Who's Afraid of Terroir?" He brilliantly debunks the mythical aura around this word, almost a religion of Mother Earth, and satirises the contradictory approaches to, e.g., cultured yeasts (no genetic manipulation allowed by the organic movement, a naturally good idea as reducing sulphur say the medics, a heresy for traditionalists who've never used it; fine for consistency freaks as essential to avoid risk of wild yeasts out of control and super for marketing because the right yeast can make a wine precisely tailored to the customer). Terroir is the cultural alternative to industrial wine, he asserts, and, by the emphasis on site selection rather than sugar readings, in his words, "fat Rüländers have pupated into gossamer Pinot Gris, Baroque Silvaners have transformed into fleet-footed ballerinas and formerly syrupy Rieslings now radiate elegance, power and electric minerality." And one can understand so much where particular flavours are coming from.

Appreciation starts at the top, and few better than Dönnhoff in Nahe. Felsenberg Felstentürmchen Riesling 2014 had some evolution of texture and flavour but still firm; the 2018 promised even more dimensions of intense flavour. Much more reserved was the 2016 from the same vineyard. These wines are rhyolite, volcanic rock which ensures good drainage. Another dimension of depth and penetration was the Niederhauser Hermannshöhle 2017, from clay slate and limestone, almost painful to taste such was its concentration, and if anything even more the 2018 (£68 RRP per bottle compared to £45 for the first two). While waiting for these to mature, relatively more yielding was

the Hollenpfad im Muhlenberg on red sandstone and the porphyry slate at Dellchen (for long a neglected site because of the steepness) and the Krötenpfuhl 2018 was a relative bargain at £46 RRP with all the fullness and concentration of the house but not inaccessible at this stage. This last vineyard is on loamy, gravel soils with quartzite pebbles south-facing thus warming easily and the stones store heat until the evening. An object lesson in magnificent wines expressing nuances of difference between the sites. Sometimes it is clear that one site really is the best; of Wittmann's trio in Hessen-Aulerde, Kirschpiel and Morstein, the last-named was effortlessly superior where the vines struggle to root in heavy clay with embedded limestone, but find a limestone aquifer that provides a good source of minerals and nutrients, even during prolonged dry spells.

Value for money is not exactly the point of these wines but Rheinhessen usually gives good value and an approachable GG was the Niersteiner Orbel 2016 from Louis Guntrum (£40 RRP) but for concentration and depth it was outranked by Gunderloch's Nackenheim Rothenberg. (£57 RRP).

One might wonder whether Mosel suits this style. Does the racy elegance and filigree poise of Mosel Riesling translate well into weightier wines? Dr Ernie Loosen has embraced this challenge with no less than nine GG but there was no mistaking the dry, firm power of his Urziger Würzgarten Alte Reben, but he was excelling himself in depth of piquant, spicy concentration in the Erdener Prälat Reserve, only 2500 bottles made and to be treasured, not least at £171 RRP each, reflecting the heroic scale of wine-making here- the slope rises at 210 per cent (65 degrees)- rarely are German vineyards any steeper- with iron-rich red slate. Fritz Haag offers a Juffer for £96, more overtly fruity, while you wait for his Brauneberger-Juffer Sonnenuhr to soften. Schloss Lieser prefers an ampler style and its powerful Wehlener Sonnenuhr did justice to this world-famous vineyard. I preferred Dr Thanisch's Bernkasteler Graben to its Doktor nearby; the former with blue clay slate seemed fruitier and more persistent.

Saar Riesling is inevitably marked by defining acidity and zesty crispness; of a trio from Peter Lauer, a saline note was rather welcome and the Kupp much the best. Von Hövel was more solid with a long finish. Rausch from Zilliken, as expected, was all finesse: delicate bouquet, a fruity middle palate and integrated. Not always is the Abtsberg the best wine at Maximin Grünhaus in the Ruwer tributary (dry years can be a problem at the top of the slope) but in this case it was: the Herrenberg fruity, elegant and harmonious, just more finesse and a lighter singing/dancing touch from the Abtsberg. They are the same price- £138 for 6 in bond-so it is a taste preference, not one being better. Karthäuserhofberg, as expected, was tangy and pure.

Silvaner definitely suits the GG style as this varietal excels as a dry wine. Rudolf May in Franken has a Himmelspfad (quite full texture, a little blunt) coming from the steepest parcel with high solar radiation); Rothlauf, by contrast, on meagre sandstone and shell limestone, a tectonic fault line, had a more intriguing, subtler profile (£150 per 6 in bond for both) with a big mouthfilling flavour and very long finish

With these wines one might as well go for the top price-where structure and complexity sing out; of five from Leitz in Rheingau the Berg Schlossberg Rudesheimer Ehrenfels was very complex, almost nutty (£54 RRP). And why is it the best of his five vineyards- terroir and orientation determine. Steeper than anywhere else in Rheingau the vine rows climb 100 to 190 per cent gradient; the slope bulges outward toward the sun and the Rhine river makes its contribution-solar radiation in the south-facing vineyard is high. Splendid Rheingaus in this year but still very firm, even austere, but there seemed another dimension in Kessler's Seligmacher, the most northerly GG vineyard in Rheingau and one of the steepest.

Time ran out to do justice to the Pfalz wines but the expected excellence and poise were on offer from Rebholz`s Kastaniensbusch, Bassermann-Jordan`s Kalkofen and Idig from the VDP President, Steffen Christmann, the last with a rather special *terra fusca* soil combining limestone, clay, basalt and sandstone.

All these GG whites must be kept for a year before release, ie from 1<sup>st</sup> September of the year following the vintage, when their complexity begins to show. Red wines mature for at least 12 months in cask and are released on 1<sup>st</sup> September two years after the harvest. My apologies that there was time only to taste a few; all day was really needed for this very searching tasting. Surprisingly excellent, of course were the Fürst Spätburgunder wines from Franken, but that is hardly news to lovers of German Pinot Noir. It is quite a quite a journey in style and price from Centgrafenberg (triassic sandstone) -firm but slowly-yielding; through Schlossberg (friable slate and alabaster)- slightly softer-to the succulent texture of Hundsruck, made on very meagre red sandstone soil and demanding great care, at £170 RRP (per bottle, remember). They completely outranked the under-powered if gentler Ahr wines of Jean Stodden which must remain a German taste that I cannot understand. Schnaitmann`s Lammler Lemberger from Württemberg was a full-flavoured mouthfeel worth investigating further but definitely with some wild boar.

What a privilege to taste such wonderful wines and brought over and presented with total commitment and professionalism. I hope it becomes an annual event in London.

Neil Fairlamb

All Saints Day, 2019.