

## Rheinhessen

10 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

**In a nutshell:** Increasing trend away from bulk towards quality wines.

**Main grapes:** Müller-Thurgau, Riesling (white); Spätburgunder (red).

The varied terrain, much of it rolling farmland across the Rhine from the [Rheingau](#), is Germany's biggest wine region, and one for long used as a source of blending wine (more than half of all Liebfraumilch comes from the Rheinhessen). But it also has its classic fine wine district, the dramatic Rheinterrasse, and, more recently, a healthy crop of well-travelled, conscientious and quality-minded young winemakers showing just what marvels can be wrought in the villages further from the river.

The vineyards of the Rheinterrasse rise steeply from the left bank of the Rhine, of which the Roter Hang strip with its distinctive red soils just north of Nierstein is one of the most characterful. It must be particularly depressing to be an ambitious, dedicated winemaker here, knowing that most of the world's wine drinkers associate your precious Nierstein with the dreariest, cheapest commercial blends sold as Niersteiner Gutes Domtal, made up of over-produced Müller-Thurgau grown miles away on flat, much less promising sites.

But a burgeoning new generation, led by Philipp Wittmann and Klaus-Peter Keller, have started a revolution and their wines – from Riesling to Spätburgunder – have become highly sought after in many parts of the world, particularly in the United States.

The Rheinhessen is famous for the variety of grapes it grows and in the second half of the 20th century it led the way with an exotic range of new(ish) crossings such as Domfelder, Ortega and Optima, which needed conveniently few rays of sunshine in order to ripen their grapes to impressive QmP levels (see [Understanding German Labels](#)). Today, however, there is greater emphasis on the highest quality varieties, and Riesling is now the third-most planted variety in the region.

**Some favourite producers:** Gunderloch, Heyl zu Herrnsheim, Huff, Keller, St Antony, Wagner Stempel and Wittmann.