Exploding myths about German wine □ white and red

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As we circled over Frankfurt airport last month after a terrifyingly aborted landing in a whiteout which had cancelled all Lufthansa activity, I questioned my sanity in flying out to Germany from my home in London for a single dinner. Once we did eventually land, in a silent airport that looked eerily like the Antarctic, my doubts continued. The drive to the Hotel Kronen Schlösschen in Hattenheim which can take as little as 30 minutes took three hours of inching along the icy Autobahn in the Friday evening rush hour traffic.

But just two of the 24 wines served at this Wine Rarity Dinner, at 1,250 euros a ticket by far the most expensive event of the 2006 Rheingau Gourmet and Wine Festival, reassured me that I had made the right decision. They were wines I would like all of the world's many sceptics about German wine quality to taste. They certainly destroyed several of my own preconceptions – and I count myself a fan of German wine.

Strangely enough however, neither of these mind-changing wines was one of the many lusciously sweet marvels we were served at the end of our six-course meal: four exceptional Beerenauslesen and six quite extraordinary Trockenbeerenauslesen. All the wines served at this dinner, incidentally, had come from the famous cellar (which inspired the word Cabinet, later Kabinett, for special 'treasure' wines) of the 12th century Kloster Eberbach monastery, now the site of the Hessische State Winery. Germany has a tradition of top quality winemaking by the state, although some of these state domaines have had their ups and downs.

The original plan had been that the 25 participants in this extraordinary dinner would be ferried up to this hauntingly quiet Cistercian monastery in the woods above the river Rhine in the early evening to taste the first three wines, up to 70 years old, in the Kloster Eberbach cellars themselves. Such was the depth of the snowdrifts however that it had been decided to bring the wines down to the hotel where the dinner was to be held. This struck me as admirably sensible, not least because I arrived so late, just as the last of these three, a quite stunning **1947 Steinberger Riesling Auslese**, was being served. The second summer after the end of the second world war had been exceptionally hot and dry, and this nearly 60 year-old wine was bursting with life. There was honeyed sweetness of course, as one would expect of a classic Rheingau Riesling Auslese, but the main impression was one of lovely firm freshness, a tribute to the height and obvious superiority of the walled Steinberg vineyard planted high on a ridge above the Rhine near the abbey all of 700 years ago.

This was the perfect preparation for the first of my two mind-blowing wines, one which I would like to serve to every single die-hard lover of German wine who thinks *trocken* (dry) is a dirty word in the German wine Lexikon. This marvel was an **1997 Steinberger Riesling trocken Cabinet**. It honestly tasted not a day older than the 1947. It was the palest, brightest of tawnies, had the most incredibly complex, rich nose with hints of freshly-cut apricot and dill with only the slightest suggestion of some form of polish. It had great attack on the palate and then, most notably, finished dry. According to my neighbour, current Kloster Eberbach managing director Dieter Greiner, this was a wine that had been made from grapes grown at 100 degrees Oechsle (Auslese level) and had ended up with about 11 per cent alcohol (a similar profile to today's Erstes Gewächs, the modern successors to this wine style), 10 g/l total acidity and 17 g/l residual sugar. This makes it not bone dry admittedly but certainly the overall impression was one of a dry wine, a wine that went beautifully with the juicy Breton scallops that chef Hans-Stefan Steinheuer of the Restaurant Zur Alten Post of Bad Neuenahr-Heppingen presented us with, one on ribbons of green asparagus stalk, another on sautéed fennel shavings and another on a chilli and papaya compote, the lot served with saffron and shellfish foam in a small shot glass that I was sorely tempted to clean with my finger.

Eat your heart out, those of you who refuse to countenance German Riesling unless it is palpably sweet. The **2003 Steinberger Erstes Gewächs** served at the end of this flight (effectively the same wine from the next but one century) tasted as though it came from another planet, so young and explosively floral was it. And it was obvious that this 21st century heatwave summer resulted in much softer, lower-acid wines than usual. I cannot imagine this is a wine that people will still be drooling over in a hundred years' time but it should certainly give pleasure in the relatively short term.

The other wine served during this dinner which should smash the average preconception about Germany's ability to make red wine came during the next flight, served with the hotel's own chef Patrik Kimpel's dish of stuffed oxtail with beetroot, the latter specially chosen to complement the four Rheingau Pinot Noirs that went with it, a 1921, a 1925, a 1947 and a 2003. The out and out star of this flight was the **1947 Assmannshäuser Höllenberg Spätburgunder trocken Cabinet**, as stunning a variant on red burgundy as I have enjoyed in many a year (Spätburgunder being the German name for Pinot Noir).

It was followed by three 1947 grand cru burgundies, a Chambertin Clos de Bèze from Drouhin-Laroze, a Corton from Faiveley and a Charmes Chambertin from Liger-Belair, but every one of them was knocked into a cocked hat by the majestic Spätburgunder, another product of the exceptionally hot, dry 1947 vintage – which presumably flattered the Rheingau, which is generally a little cooler than the Côte d'Or even in midsummer.

The 1947 Spätburgunder, from the Rheingau's most famous village for the red burgundy grape, was still dark purplish crimson and amazingly rich, lively and dramatic. Powerfully reminiscent of violets, woodsmoke, liquorice and truffles, it still has an exciting life ahead and just got better and better in the glass. It happily saw us through the next course of pigeon in truffled jus, indeed with its more obvious fruit than the red burgundies, all of them drier than the German red, it was a better match.

I feel the evident superiority of this wine is particularly significant since Germany is now producing so much Spätburgunder – indeed Germany's total plantings of its favourite red wine grape almost doubled in the 1990s so that it is now the country's fourth most important vine variety (after Riesling, Müller Thurgau and Silvaner).

It is surely significant that the two great German wines described above so eloquently vindicate the trend in modern Germany to produce dry wines from the country's greatest white and red grapes – however heartbreakingly beautiful, and still energetically youthful, was the **1921 Steinberger Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese** that reverberated on my palate at the end of this exquisite dinner.

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