The German 2005 growing season

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See also my tasting notes on nearly 200 German 2005s tasted so far.

The second-born has just left university, so recently that I cannot yet use the verb graduate. He reports that at a final get-together of about 10 fellow students at a restaurant, the overwhelming answer to the question 'What shall we drink?' was 'Riesling'. He was not asking for money at the time so this particularly warmed the cockles of his mother's German wine-loving heart.

It could just be that a new generation of German wine enthusiasts has come along at the perfect moment to enjoy the exceptional charms of the 2005 vintage in Germany. It is even possible that a small percentage of the football fans currently visiting Germany are profiting from Nature's work in German vineyards last summer.

I have yet to taste widely in the main Rhine regions and hope to do so at the end of August but on the evidence of the nearly 200 examples of German 2005s that have so far come my way I can confirm Oliver Haag of Weingut Fritz Haag's view that they "combine the minerality of 2004 with the body of 2003". The 2003s, as elsewhere, were often dangerously low in acidity and extract while some of the 2004s were a little on the lean side but the 2005s, certainly up to Spätlese level, are tasting very friendly indeed at the moment with open, super-clean fruit flavours plus bracing fruity acidity. The sweeter specialty wines of Auslese quality and above, of which there is an impressive proportion, are clearly exceptional but are not yet really ready to express themselves fully.

In fact so delightfully bright are most 2005s looking now that they make the 2004s, which looked so impressively classical and finely etched a year ago, look rather surly when tasted alongside. An Annegret Gartner of Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt pointed out at the big Grosse Ring tasting of top Mosel and Nahe estates in London recently, "the 2004 vintage is more reductive than the 2005". But master winemaker Helmut Dönnhoff of the Nahe was sanguine about how much better German Rieslings tend to show in their first rather than second year in bottle. "It's always that way," he shrugged.

His counterpart in Wehlen, the historically famous estate J J Prum, always releases its small-paced wines a whole year later than everyone else incidentally. This rarely flatters them, and particularly not this year – although the patient almost invariably find that a wait of 10 years and more does the trick. Their humble Graacher Himmelreich Kabinett 1992, for example, is drinking well at 14 years old, even if when the wines are very young many tasters can find their sulphur levels obtrusive.

The 2005 growing season is widely viewed in Germany, as in most of France, as nearly perfect – except for the fact that the quantities produced on good estates was between 20 and 40 per cent less than average. Egon Müller of the Saar reports that his average yields were as low as 15 hl/ha, a mere fifth of the German average, "but there was enough Beerenauslese and so on to make a living." Quite. His Scharzhofberger TBA has been known to fetch 4,000 euros a bottle, a record price for a white wine.

Winter was cold but dry – offering no respite from two very dry summers. Spring was mild and the first buds burst at the end of April in the Ruwer, much earlier than usual. It was not until late May that there was much precipitation – so much in fact, combined with unusually warm weather, that vegetation raced ahead and the flowering took place early and reasonably efficiently in June.

With the exception of a late June hailstorm in the Ruwer with hail that wiped out up to 95 per cent of the growth in some vineyards, June and early July were hot and dry and the vines romped ahead. From late July and in August however, with vines well ahead of their usual development, there was cloud and light showers, although not enough rain to make up the deficit of the previous two summers. During the exceptional heatwave of 2003 officials allowed irrigation of German vineyards for the first time ever and, as David Schildknecht has pointed out here, many vintners were spotted trying to water their vineyards in the exarly summer of 2005 too. The Saar tributary of the Mosel however experienced rather more serious rainfall than most areas setting the stage, via swollen grapes and thinner skins, for the arrival of the botrytis fungus in autumn, without which Germany's really sweet Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese cannot be made. But, again as in Bordeaux, temperatures were not high. As Erni Loosen of the Mosel and Pfalz put it, "it can't have been that great a summer – I don't remember many barbecues".

The relatively thin skins of the grapes encouraged evaporation, a major factor in reducing the amount of wine produced, so that by the end of August, sugar levels were about two weeks ahead of average but since the weather had been so relatively cool, acidity levels were also impressively high, as high as in 1990 for instance. September was if anything warmer and sunnier than August, although rain in late September and early October brought some ignoble rot to some vineyards, especially in such southern German wine regions as Pfalz, Rheinhessen and Baden, and put pressure on some growers to start picking – generally in the second week of October.

Those who waited, particularly in the more northerly regions of Nahe and Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, especially the Saar, were rewarded with noble rot of a particularly pure quality and concentration, and sweetness levels further concentrated by some berries that dried, raisin-like, on the vine. "In the dry periods the thin-skinned grapes shrivelled so that acidity rose, which made for excellent balance in the Beerenauslesen and TBAs," according to Hans-Joachim Zilliken who made a quite stunning range of Auslese and richer wines – in such quantity that, like Egon Müller, he is able to sell them in regular commercial channels rather than restricting them to the famous Trier auction of rarities. His Spätlese and Kabinett wines were made from later-picked grapes which did not shrivel.

According to Helmut Dönnhoff, his 2005s were picked over just three weeks as opposed to the usual five to six because the botrytis came so quickly, helped by warm nights. Thomas Haag of Schloss Lieser in the middle Mosel however claimed, "we could relax over the timing of the harvest, which is important for maximising the quality of Beerenauslese and TBAs. The 2005 vintage is much finer than 2003 – the perfect mix of finesse and minerality." Oliver Haag also reported that they were able to pick the botrytised grapes in the middle of the harvest rather than the end. The picking pattern among quality-conscious German growers today is to pick the grapes into two buckets in the vineyard, the nobly rotten ones in the smaller bucket for the sweet rarities and those untouched by botrytis fungus for drier wines.

The top quality dry Grosses and Erstes Gewächs wines will not be released until September and I hope to taste a good selection of them in Germany at the end of August but what is already on show is a very convincing herald of what promises to be one of Germany's most glorious vintages. Something to tempt those who failed to secure their favourite 2005 bordeaux?

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