

Germany 2003 - the Ferrari vintage?

3 Nov 2004 by JR

I have just noticed that the FT editorial staff have decided to put the heading 'Germany's best vintage yet?' on their, slightly shorter, version of this article. I would like to make it plain to anyone who might conceivably care, that I would not have chosen this headline myself.

Germany's 2003 wines may be too much of a good thing for purists but they may well make new converts to the particularly distinctive style of German wine. A typical young, top quality German Riesling from a classic vintage is searingly high in acidity, sometimes rather astringent and often strongly marked by the smell of sulfur, which ambitious German producers still add routinely in much higher quantities than elsewhere to preserve the sweeter wines for the long life that is expected of them. Put like that, it is difficult to see why anyone buys them at all. The answer lies in what happens in the bottle over the next 10, 20 or more years. Last week I enjoyed a 1911 Erbacher Markobrunn Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese which was still miraculously vigorous, if not nearly as sweet as when it was bottled. And at a less rarefied level, the 1993s that I bought in 1994 for well under £100 a dozen are drinking beautifully now.

To those who have long enjoyed Germany's unique combination of bottle-aged refreshing fruit, mineral extract and low-alcohol elegance, the 2003s may seem just a bit too much – more a punch in the nose with already-opulent fruit than the usual sophisticated whisper of things to come. But I think that many newcomers to German wine will love the directness of the 2003s and will be worried not the slightest whether the wines will last 30 years or not.

Vintage 2003, made from grapes grown in record temperatures, is exceptional everywhere in Europe but nowhere more so than in Germany (and England of course) where grapes usually struggle to ripen. Last summer the season got off to an early start even before the heat arrived. Riesling vines budded in mid April, almost two weeks earlier than in 2002 in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, and flowering was even further ahead. In the Rheingau, grapes benefited from 350 more hours of sunshine than average and day and night temperatures topped 40 and 27 degrees Centigrade respectively. On well-run estates virtually all grapes reached at least Spätlese levels of ripeness, and the harvest generally began earlier than in any previous known year.

The great fear among growers was that their grapes, uncommonly yellow in early September rather than the relatively hard, green berries often seen at this time, might develop overripe flavours and that acidity could be dangerously low. Certainly by analysis total acid levels are a point or two lower than usual. In 2001 and 2002 at Dr Loosen in Bernkastel for example, total acidities averaged between 8 and 9.5 g/l whereas in 2003 they were rarely much more than 7. But while up to half of the acidity in the two earlier years was malic, by far the dominant acid in 2003 throughout Germany was the fresher-tasting tartaric. This has given growers the confidence to believe in the longevity of their 2003s.

“At first we thought that 2003 was too dry and ripe for Riesling,” said the gifted Helmut Dönnhoff of the Nahe, who made only one wine at basic Kabinett level in 2003, “but after the first tasting of the wines we immediately saw the balance. The acidity is very pure and pronounced. Normally we lose about a gram of acidity during fermentation but not in 2003. This is definitely my best vintage yet, better even than 1971, but it needed more work than any other, especially in the vineyard, because it was complicated by extremes. It was as though I were suddenly given a Ferrari but there was no-one to tell me how to drive it. It was possible to make far more mistakes in 2003 than usual.”

In the Saar valley in the far north Egon Müller, always one of the more sphinx-like producers, claimed on the other hand that 2003 was one of his easiest vintages. There was no need for lots of spraying against vine disease and each vineyard

matured in convenient succession. The Saar certainly seems to have benefited from wonderfully crisp acids in many of the wines.

"I asked Manfred Prüm about 1959," Ernie Loosen told me about one of the 20th century's most famous wine producers and vintages, "and he said 2003 was the closest he has ever seen. So maybe we shouldn't worry too much about the analyses. And probably the 2003s won't go into their shell as much as the 2001s and 2002s."

To judge from the Rieslings from the better producers in northern Germany, acidities seem generally to be refreshing enough – although some of the other grape varieties, particularly the Pinots, grown further south in Pfalz and Baden lost so much natural acidity while ripening that many producers were panicked, most unusually, into adding acidity, as is regularly done in warmer New World wine regions, with unhappy results in some cases. Some growers, particularly those whose vine leaves had already turned yellow, rushed into picking in early September (a month earlier than usual) and the result, as in Bordeaux, was that there was acid and sugar but a shortage of ripe fruit flavour in the middle. All in all there are strong similarities between Bordeaux's and Germany's 2003s with some very good wines made and some very unbalanced ones.

The best wines, which tend to have riper flavours than usual – more yellow peach than white peach or green apple with the odd note of a tropical fruit such as mango or passion fruit – were picked in very late September or October, having had the chance to build up real flavours in September when nights were cooler but there was no dangerous rainfall.

At least the dry summer delivered very healthy grapes – so dry were conditions in fact that in many areas there was very little botrytis, the 'noble rot' fungus responsible for great, long-lived sweet wines. Although some producers added some botrytised grapes picked as late as January 2004, the sweeter wines were often made from raisined rather than nobly rotten grapes. Josef Leitz of Rudesheim in the Rheingau managed to make no fewer than five Trockenbeerenauslesen picked between 240 and 280 degrees Oechsle. They were still slowly fermenting in glass carboys in his tasting room, central heating on to encourage the yeasts despite the heat of the summer, last month.

High alcohol levels can be a menace however, particularly in the dry styles which are now so fashionable in Germany and increasingly tolerated elsewhere. Record ripeness levels in grapes were fermented out to dry wines with 15 and sometimes 16 per cent alcohol by some producers – something very, very unGermanic. This is a vintage in which drier styles should be bought with extreme caution; many an example has an uncomfortably 'hot' finish and none of Riesling's trademark delicacy. At Schloss Reinhartshausen in the Rheingau for example, the oldest vines with the most complex, best balanced fruit were devoted exclusively to dry wine production – notably for the expensive new Erste Gewächs category (still selling quite slowly in Germany, I hear).

Yields tended to be a bit lower than usual because of the drier weather. Gunderloch harvested an average of 44 hl/ha rather than 50 but the Hasselbachs were so proud of how much greener their plots on the Rothenburg slope above the Rhine were than their neighbours that they published photographs of them. They were not the only growers to credit a covering of hummus on the soil to retain moisture with the quality of their 2003s.

So now Germany can lay claim to three exceptional vintages in a row but, as Walter Bibo of Schloss Reinhartshausen commented last week, "if 2004 were to be another vintage like 2003 it would be a disaster. There is no demand for this much alcohol."

My top 20 producers of 2003s

As usual, J J Prüm has not yet released 2003s.

Dönnhoff, Nahe (dry and sweeter wines)

Leitz, Rheingau (dry and sweeter wines)

Dr Loosen, Mosel (sweeter wines)

Egon Müller, Saar (sweeter wines)

Geltz-Zilliken, Saar (sweeter wines)

Müller Catoir, Pfalz (sweeter wines)

Gunderloch, Rheinhessen (sweet wines)

Wittmann, Rheinhessen (sweet wines)

Schloss Saarstein, Saar (sweeter wines)

Robert Weil, Rheingau (sweeter wines)

Fritz Haag, Mosel (sweeter wines)

Schloss Lieser, Mosel (sweeter wines)

Reinhold Haardt, Mosel (sweeter wines)

St Urbans-Hof, Mosel and Saar (sweeter wines)

von Kesselstatt, Mosel and Saar (sweeter wines)

Heymann Löwenstein, Mosel (sweeter wines)

Milz-Laurentiushof, Mosel (sweeter wines)

Max Ferd Richter, Mosel (sweeter wines)

Schlossgut Diel, Nahe (sweeter wines)

Dr Crusius, Nahe (dry and sweeter wines)

See [tasting notes](#) on purple pages for detailed tasting notes and scores on hundreds of 2003 Germans.