The 2005 vintage in Germany - my second report

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See also my tasting notes on 200 wines, mainly dry and southern tasted in Wiesbaden, and a further 230 2005 German fruitier wines, mainly Mosel and Nahe.

Some wine collectors have been so horrified by the prices of the most sought-after 2005 red bordeaux that for the first time they are thinking of investing in 2005 German wines.

I feel equivocal about this. It's great that top quality German wine is being taken seriously by an increasing number of people around the world, but perhaps not so great if it means that prices will at long last reach a sensible level and all those lovely bargains will disappear. As it is, the value of total German wine exports rose by nine per cent last year - a reflection of the long overdue shrinking of the market for sugarwater at the bottom end.

But most importantly I feel honour-bound to pass on the second half of my impressions of the 2005 vintage which are not quite as enthusiastic as my report couple of months ago on the generally fruiter wines of the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer and Nahe.

Last week's intensive tasting in Wiesbaden's Kurhaus of 225 top quality wines as officially recognised by the VDP association of top German wine estates, mainly from more southerly wine regions, was much more varied. Almost all of these 'great growths', or Grosses Gewächs wines are dry, in line with current German thinking that dry wines are inherently superior to sweeter ones. And at $45 a bottle and up in the US (invisible in the UK), these wines are considerably more expensive than most sweeter German wines.

Compared with the majority of long-standing German wine enthusiasts in the UK and US, I am relatively enthusiastic about dry Rieslings from Germany, especially the warmer parts of Germany. But although I think German vintners have become more skilled at making dry wines with every vintage, I cannot put my hand on my heart and recommend dry 2005s as wholeheartedly as the traditional fruitier styles made in the more northerly wine regions, especially Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, in this vintage.

The 56 Pfalz Rieslings designated Grosses Gewächs and shown in Wiesbaden were worryingly inconsistent, for example. This may well reflect the notoriously patchy patterns of rainfall in the Pfalz region in 2005, but it did nothing to strengthen my confidence in the Grosses Gewächs designation.

About 150 sites have been officially deemed 'premiers crus' or Erste Lagen, capable of making a great growth, or Grosses Gewächs. These are all owned or part-owned by the VDP members, conveniently enough. The estates submit wines from these top vineyards that conform to the Grosses Gewächs rules: permitted grape variety, yield below 50 hl/ha, Spätlese ripeness level but vinified dry. A panel, different for each region, then tastes them to see whether they are up to scratch. I asked what the failure rate was and was told that in the Rheingau at least, where for the moment for complex bureaucratic reasons Grosses Gewächs are called Erstes Gewächs, as many as 30 per cent of the wines submitted are rejected, which I found rather encouraging.

I can only assume that in the Pfalz the tasters were less fastidious, at least in 2005. I had heard that parts of the Pfalz had been plagued by autumn rain that affected the health of the grapes, and that other parts may have suffered such drought that the grapes failed to ripen properly. Whatever the reasons, this for me was the most disappointing group of 2005 Grosses Gewächs with only Bassermann-Jordan, von Buhl and Biffar making wines with real clarity of expression. (The other Pfalz 'B', Bürklin Wolf, did not feature at all in this Grosses Gewächs presentation, having decided to go its own, biodynamic way.) I gave no Pfalz wine a top mark.

The northern, classic heartland of the neighbouring Rheinhessen region around Nierstein was, similarly, far from the brightest star in this showing but perhaps the most thrilling flight of all was that featuring wines grown on two southern Rheinhessen sites, Kirchspiel and Morstein, which until a few years ago were hardly known outside their own area but which have been put definitively on the international map by the twin young talents of Philipp Wittmann and Klaus-Peter Keller.

The Rheingau, home to some of the most famous, most well-heeled, classic estates, was also inconsistent but I was impressed by a number of producers, and not necessarily the historically most respected names here either (see my list

below).

As has been evident for many years, the Nahe is home to a reassuringly competitive winemaking ethos with many wines displaying great confidence and skill in crafting this drier, fuller-bodied style of Riesling.

Traditionally the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, Germany's northernmost wine region, has been associated much more readily with delicate, low alcohol wines with some residual sweet fruitiness rather than with the more austere, dry style demanded by the letter of the Grosses Gewächs law. That said, I was extremely impressed by half of the relatively few dry Mosels shown (just eight compared with 39 from the Rheingau, for example) - a much higher strike rate than most regions, perhaps illustrating just how successful the Mosel was in 2005, as I described in detail two months ago.

But the region that thrilled me almost of all in this top quality dry white idiom was Franken, way to the east of most German wine regions and distinguished by its squat green flagon-like wine bottles. In all 16 Franken Rieslings and 16 Franken Silvaners had qualified as Grosses Gewächs and very lovely many of them were too, with really convincing racy, super-clean fruit, a nice lick of earthiness and great balance. It is a shame that so few of these wines manage to escape Germany and find their way on to wine lists abroad for they make great wines to drink with food.

The Franken producer which shone head and shoulders above the others for the vibrancy of its wines was Juliusspital. I discovered only by accident that this was one of very, very few in this selection of 107 elite estates to use screwcaps rather than corks. No coincidence, surely.

The red and white Pinots of which Germany is so proud, Spätburgunders, Weissburgunders and Grauburgunders, from a wide range of generally southern wine regions, were not quite as exciting as I had been hoping. German red wine is unrecognisably better than it was 20 years ago but the majority are probably of more interest within Germany than abroad where we can choose from such a wide variety of well made Pinots Noir, Blanc and Gris/Grigio.

One thing worries me. Not all but very many of my favourite wines, the ones that seemed best balanced, had a perceptible level of residual sugar in them. They were off dry rather than sweet, and often no sweeter than many a New World Chardonnay, but I am by no means sure that such wines would qualify according to the recently tightened Grosses Gewächs rules which decree that from the 2006 vintage the wines may have no more than 9 gm/litre residual sugar. In 2005 each region could choose its own limits for sweetness which were as high as 18 g/l in Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, 13 in Rheingau and 12 in Nahe. German wine without rules is of course unthinkable but these ones seem awfully inflexible to me.

Some of the best dry white producers in 2005

Mosel - Reinhold Haart, von Othegraven
Nahe - Diel, Dönnhoff, Emrich-Schönleber
Rheingau - Querbach, Johannishof, Josef Spreitzer, Robert Weil
Rheinhessen - Keller, Kühling-Gillot, Wittmann
Franken - Juliusspital Würzburg, Wirsching

For full tasting notes and scores on more than 400 German 2005s, see **tasting notes**.