

Rheingau

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: The home of hock and noble estates has been coasting of late.

Main grapes: Riesling (white); Spätburgunder (red).

The Rheingau, a south-facing slab of vineyards on gentle slopes leading down to the Rhine, usefully protected from chill winds by the Taunus mountains to the immediate north, was for years regarded as Germany's noblest wine region. This was partly because of its long association with aristocratic estates and the famous abbey Kloster Eberbach. Grand and ancient castles such as Schloss Johannisberg, Schloss Schönborn and Schloss Vollrads have winemaking reputations which stretch back almost as many centuries as their cellars. From the 1980s, however, it became clear that winemaking was much more exciting in some other regions (notably the Pfalz and then Rheinhessen) than here and that there was a real danger that the Rheingau was coasting on its past reputation. Fortunately, new life is now being breathed into the region by the likes of August and Johannes Eser of Joahnnishof and, not least, by the Japanese whisky giant Suntory, which seems determined to extract wines of Yquem's reputation and price from its Robert Weil estate.

Key wine villages here, in countryside almost devoted to the vine (separating villages devoted to entertaining the human spillage from Rhine cruisers) include, moving downstream, Hochheim (inspiration of the word 'hock' which nowadays means just any old Rhine wine), Eltville, Hattenheim, Oestrich-Winkel, Geisenheim (famous for its wine research institute), Rüdesheim and Assmannshausen, where red Spätburgunder of varying but sometimes excellent quality is made, with good examples from August Kessler, Krone and Robert König.

The best Rheingau wines are almost invariably Rieslings with strongly pronounced mineral qualities and rather more body than most Mosels. A significant proportion of Germany's best sweet Beernauslese and Trockenbeernauslese wines (see [Understanding German labels](#)) have been made here (the famously deep golden 1959s, and the 1971s, which are still remarkably youthful) and the Japanese-owned Robert Weil estate continues to make remarkable sweet wines here. But the Rheingau has also been a key player in the trend towards making drier German wines and today more than 80 per cent of the region's output is dry. The dynamic Bernhard Breuer founded the Charta (pronounced 'Carter') group of top-quality wine estates dedicated to styling Rheingau Riesling into medium-bodied, refreshingly crisp dry wines suitable for the dining table, a style which has now been widely copied and is enshrined in the region's Erstes Gewächs bottlings. The [VDP](#), an increasingly respected growers' association which has its own classification system, has also done much to promote dry wines here and in other parts of Germany. Most of the best single vineyard dry Rieslings are denoted Erstes Gewächs, or first growth, the Rheingau's own version of Grosses Gewächs.

Some favourite producers: J B Becker, Georg Breuer, Domdechant Werner, Rainer Flick, Schloss Johannishof, August Kessler, Kloster Eberbach, Knyphausen, Peter Jakob Kühn, Franz Künstler, Langwerth von Simmern, Leitz,