

Germany: introduction

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Some of the world's finest, lightest, longest-living whites and increasingly respectable reds.

Main grapes: Riesling, Riesling-like crossings, Pinots and their derivatives.

The German wine business has changed out of all recognition in the last 20 years, thank goodness. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s it prided itself on its equipment and administration - a combination unrivalled elsewhere in the world - but somewhere along the line lost sight of the taste of the wine itself. Today, even if the big commercial bottlers are finding the going tough, more and more individual estates are revelling in what makes German wine so special.

The well-intentioned German Wine Law of 1971 neatly assigned a number to every batch of wine, and allowed all but a tiny minority of them to call themselves 'quality wine', or Qualitätswein, the same rank as France's appellation contrôlée elite. More disastrously, it ordained that wine quality could be measured with one simple device, the refractometer with which vine-growers check the sugar content of their grapes. To qualify as a higher grade, or Prädikat, of wine (see [Understanding German labels](#)), the grape juice simply had to be sweeter. The result was a steady invasion of German vineyards by vine varieties specially bred to provide super-ripe grapes (which tend to produce wines which taste as bland as giant, prize-winning vegetables). The major casualty was the difficult-to-ripen Riesling vine, Germany's greatest asset.

Yields, for long unregulated (in sharp contrast to France and Italy), grew so that such flavour as grapes could be persuaded to develop in a climate as cool as Germany's was all too often virtually undetectable in a sea of inexpensive, low-alcohol, medium-dry white shipped abroad at ludicrous prices and sold as innocuous, but hardly vinous, blends labelled Liebfraumilch, Niersteiner Gutes Domtal, Piesporter Michelsberg et al.

Meanwhile, a small band of obstinately quality-minded estates continued to provide evidence of the miracles that can be achieved in German vineyards, which yield grapes with relatively high levels of natural acidity, and cold winters which favour ultra-natural winemaking, relying on long, cool fermentations and minimal wine treatments. The classic wines of Germany may be high in extract, thanks to the soils, but relatively low in alcohol. Riesling grown on the steep, slatey banks of the river Mosel is the epitome of traditional German wine: aromatic, delicate, racy, long-lived, and unlike any wine made anywhere else in the world!

In the mid 1980s a healthy air of self-doubt refreshed the almost infinitely fragmented German winescape (the average vineyard is an acre or two farmed as a weekend income supplement), so a new generation of wine producers emerged to join the standard-bearers of the old brigade. Climate change has brought warmer summers and riper grapes so that in many regions Pinot Noir and its relatives, and even in some places Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon, can be ripened fully and have sufficient substance to withstand ageing in new oak barriques even though the traditional German wine container remains either a neutral large oval barrel or more commonly a stainless steel tank. There is now widespread recognition that limiting yields is the first essential step to producing wines of real interest and flavour.

There has also been a trend towards making much drier wines in Germany than was the norm, so that the average alcoholic strength of German wine has risen (as more of the natural sugar has been fermented into alcohol instead of remaining as sweetness in the wine). This means that those of us who used to regard German wine as incapable of producing a hangover have had a few nasty shocks, but it has resulted in a new palette of wine styles from Germany which are much more at home on the dinner table than their predecessors: relatively full bodied, positively flavoured racy whites, but always with a backbone of fine acidity which can make them much more refreshing than most Chardonnays, for example. Although Germany does now have its own plantings of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

If Germany's wine drinkers have developed a taste for drier wines, they have nurtured a passion for red wine, encouraging a dramatic increase in plantings of red wine vines, specifically early-ripening varieties such as Pinot Noir, known here as Spätburgunder, which has almost overtaken the dreary Müller-Thurgau as Germany's second most planted vine variety after Riesling. Today's wine laws, naming and general wine ethos no longer worships sweetness.

See also [Understanding German labels](#).

See GermanWine.de for more information on this region.