

## Understanding German labels

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

German labels are some of the world's most confusing. Quite apart from the usual advice that producer is crucial and vintage year can affect quality, look for 1 quality level, 2 grape variety, 3 region.

**1** In ascending order of natural grape ripeness (though not necessarily quality): Tafelwein, Landwein, QbA, Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, BA and TBA.

**2** Most German wines are made from single grape varieties, specified on the label. For example, in declining order of importance within Germany's vineyards overall: Riesling, Müller-Thurgau, Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir), Dornfelder, Silvaner, Portugieser, and so on. Riesling, Scheurebe and Silvaner in Franken tend to be the best bets, although some fine dryish Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) and Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) is also produced and is very popular in Germany. Increasingly well-made Spätburgunder and Dornfelder are the best of the reds.

**3** Labels on all but the most basic German wines should carry the name of one of the following wine regions: Ahr, Baden, Franken, Hessische Bergstrasse, Mittelrhein, Mosel (previously known as Mosel-Saar-Ruwer), Nahe, Pfalz, Rheingau, Rheinhessen, Saale-Unstrut, Sachsen, Württemberg.

These regional names may be a lot more helpful than the often very complicated name of the wine itself. Like burgundies, German wines have tended to be named with a combination of village and vineyard name, although in the case of German a possessive *-er* is usually added to the village name, as in Berkasteler Schlossberg for the Schlossberg vineyard in the Bernkastel district.

In 1971 the Germans made life even more difficult for consumers than it was already by giving vast zones called *Grosslagen* a familiar name so that it is extremely difficult even for a professional to remember whether, for example, Badstube is a Grosslage zone or a small single vineyard or Einzellage. Some of the most famous Grosslagen are (Zeller) Schwarze Katz, (Kröver) Nacktarsch, (Bernkasteler) Badstube, (Bernkasteler) Kurfürstlay, (Piesporter) Michelsberg, (Klüsserather) St Michael, (Wiltinger) Scharzberg, (Niersteiner) Gutes Domtal and (Oppenheimer) Krötenbrunnen - how on earth is the poor wine drinker to distinguish these from the genuine produce of a single site?

### Some specific terms

**Auslese**, naturally fully ripe grapes produce what is usually a long-living medium-sweet wine.

**Beerenauslese (BA)**, very sweet rarities usually sold at a very high price.

**Classic**, official designation for dry wines made from traditional grape varieties. See Selection.

**Deutschersekt**, German wine made sparkling (cf Sekt)

**deutscher Tafelwein**, the most basic sort of German wine constituting less than 5 per cent of an average crop. Although see also Tafelwein below.

**Eiswein**, ice wine, which often fetches more than Beerenauslese.

**Erste Lage**, one of the VDP's controversially selected 'first growth' vineyards.

**Erstes Gewächs**, name for Grosses Gewächs in Rheingau and Hessische-Bergstrasse.

**feinherb** unofficial term for off dry wine.

**Grosses Gewächs**, term for top quality dry wines from top sites as decided by and for members of the VDP.

**Gutsabfüllung**, estate bottled.

**halbtrocken**, literally 'half dry', wines which taste medium dry.

**Kabinett**, the least ripe of the QmP categories (see below). Such wines can make lovely light-bodied dryish aperitifs.

**Landwein**, Germany's answer to France's Vins de Pays. Still embryonic as a serious category but arguably the entire QbA category should be demoted to Landwein status.

**Liebfraumilch**, strictly a creation for export markets. In practice almost any medium-dry vaguely aromatic blend can qualify as Liebfraumilch, which is traded savagely as a commodity.

**Prädikatswein**, wine with one of the Prädikats: Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, BA, TBA and Eiswein.

**Qualitätswein** is sometimes used as an abbreviation for QbA.

**Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiet (QbA)**, bar far the dominant category this includes not only all of the Liebfraumilch and basic blends but also some perfectly creditable wines from top producers who decided they needed chaptalization (which is outlawed for QmP wines) to make them balanced.

**Qualitätswein mit Prädikat (QmP)**, the old name for Prädikatswein.

**Sekt**, sparkling wine. **Deutscher Sekt** is a member of the elite made from German rather than imported (often Italian) wine.

**Selection**, official designation for dry-tasting wines made from hand picked grapes from a specified plot with a controlled yield.

**Spätlese** means literally 'late harvest'. This category includes many fine, concentrated wines from bone dry (trocken) to medium dry.

**Tafelwein**, basic table wine which may not even be made entirely from German wine - in fact these 'European blends' are often made up of cheap dry white from Spain or Italy, 'Germanised' by a dollop of a particularly aromatic German wine and sweetened by added grape concentrate.

**trocken** means 'dry' and any wine so labelled is designed to be drunk with food. It is also likely to be more alcoholic than wine not labelled trocken because the grape sugar has been fermented into alcohol. These wines are particularly popular in Germany and increasingly so abroad.

**Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA)**, (literally 'dried grapes that were late-picked', a reference to the shrivelling effect of botrytis or extreme heat), the sweetest, richest most luscious sort of QmP wine which is produced in tiny quantities and usually sells for fabulous prices. [Noble rot](#) (Edelfäule) is usually needed to concentrate grape sugars sufficiently to meet the required ripeness levels - although some grape varieties have been specifically bred to ripen spectacularly, if not always sumptuously.

**VDP, Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter**, association of many of the top producers, most of them with a long history.

**Winzergenossenschaft, Winzerverein**, two common names for co-operatives.