Germany's 2008 growing season

3 Nov 2008 by Jancis Robinson

Considerable interest in Germany's 2008 vintage has been expressed here on our forum, with up to date input from the likes of Klaus Peter Keller and Michael Schmidt . The following 2008 German harvest preview was written by wine shippers Wineconsale of Wiesbaden about a month ago so misses out any mention of the crucial final period of the growing season but includes all the important facts in the lead-up to it.

It has almost become a tradition that our October newsletter entails a preview of the year's harvest and we will not break with the tradition this year.

The weather this spring was pretty variable. In Germany, January and February were dominated by dreary, dull weather. The average temperature was around freezing point. The sun only broke through the cloud cover very occasionally to delight both mankind and vegetation. In March temperatures started rising and rainfall set in which prevailed throughout the entire month. The weather situation did not really improve until mid-April and during the wine trade fair in Mainz we even experienced a climate more typical for summer months. In May we had a real taste of summer – a long period of dry days and high temperatures. This only changed towards the end of the month.

In June, July and August the weather was typical for Germany at this time of year. We enjoyed spells of sunny, warm weather Interspersed with showers and summer thunderstorms. The vines grew formidably. The many hours of sunshine coupled with the right amount of moisture were an almost perfect combination. Up until this time, the weather had been quite similar to that of 2007.

During the first week of September we also enjoyed superb weather. The first grape-pickers arrived in Germany. The objective was a negative harvest. However, the weather changed yet again during the second week of September. We had one rain shower after another which was a cause of concern for all. Even if the onset of rot of the early grape varieties could be coped with, many a vintner had negative recollections of the harvest in 2006.

By mid-September the must weights were high enough for most wine estates to be able to start the main harvest. The Bassermann-Jordan wine estate in the Pfalz region (pictured here) harvested Weissburgunder grapes with a must weight of 85° Oechsle and Grauburgunder grapes with a must weight of 89°. This is corresponding to Prädikat level and will be yet again of a very good quality. In Rheinhessen Friedrich Groebe has also harvested Grauburgunder but also Silvaner and a few red wine grape varieties. In Franken the early grape varieties such as Bacchus & Müller-Thurgau have been harvested; they are of a good quality and have attained must weights of 85° Oechsle and more. Some Silvaner and Riesling grapes have also been picked throughout Germany and will be the basis for sparkling wine and the so-called 'Liter' [basic wines sold in litre bottles] which is very popular in Germany.

Following the beautifully sunny weekend of 26-28 Sep the first vintners also boldly started harvesting Riesling grapes. Although the acidity levels are still a bit on the high side, the grapes are well-ripened. The current low temperatures have a positive preserving effect on the grapes. Despite the high moisture levels, the vintners can be very content with the current situation. In the Mosel region many vintners are still biding time with great anticipation.

Many producers already declared that yields are slightly below average, which can partly be attributed to the hailstorms at the end of May. However, these phenomena were localized and did not affect all regions.

The weekend of 3-5 Oct was surprisingly good, dry sunny days with temperatures around 10° to 15°C throughout the day. This resulted in bustling activity in all wine growing regions. Sometimes it is good that the weather forecast is still only estimation.