

Germany in 2008 - an overview

9 Jun 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is a longer version

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'Germany's 2008s are like the perfect sorbet', according to Helmut Dönnhoff. 'They are so refreshing.' No spin doctor could cast the seeringly high acidities of the 2008s in a more favourable light than this acclaimed Nahe winemaker, not naturally prone to hyperbole. In fact in the same modest breath he went on to say that in his sixtieth year he is finally getting the hang of making wine. 'Now I can start. I know how things are done.'

Wilhelm Haag, a leading light of the Mosel wine growers, had a more pragmatic view of this vintage's very distinctive character: 'The '08 is very good for our economy at the moment because the wines are mostly in lower price range'.

It is certainly true that there are quite remarkably few late-picked sweet wines. Among the hundreds of German 2008s I have so far tasted I have come across less than a handful of Beerenauslesen and Trockenbeerenauslesen, and most of the Auslesen I have tasted have been Auslese Lite (just as the 2008 Sauternes are in a minor key compared with their 2007 counterparts) rather than the intensely rich beauties yielded by the more generous 2007 crop.

What 2007 and 2008 had in common was a summer that was more 'normal' than most other years of this climatologically challenged millennium when the concern was that grapes might be too ripe. Thanks to a particularly cool spring, budburst was rather later than usual in 2008 but a warm May speeded things up before the long, cool summer. It was not until the second week of September that 2008's true colours became evident. Cool, wet weather slowed the ripening of the noble Riesling grape to a snail's pace and brought the threat of rot, even if in most cases the skins were still too thick for the fungus to make much impact. Those who arrived from eastern Europe in hopes of finding work picking grapes had to wait quite a while yet, especially at the best estates.

By the end of September, sugar levels in the grapes were quite respectable but acidities were still fiendishly high and the grapes were not yet properly ripe, with flavour compounds still half-formed. Even in the first half of October, according to Dönnhoff, 'There was a green feeling in the grapes in early October. The first two weeks of that month were too early to pick, even though the Polish workers came and wanted to work then'. (There is a thesis to be written on German vineyard labour trends and their status as eastern European economic indicators. Apparently the Poles felt sufficiently well-heeled in 2007 for there to be a sudden shortage of vineyard workers in Germany, but they came back last year, and in April this year there was a flurry of calls for work in German vineyards.)

Low temperatures in October, and particularly cool nights, kept botrytis rot at bay and malic acid levels high so that those who picked early have produced extremely tart, sometimes rather thin wines. As Julia (Frau Klaus Peter) Keller of the Rheinhessen puts it, '2008 was a bit like 2004 - nice but you had to wait so long, until November, to pick. We were still picking our Hubacker vineyard on 20 November. In 2007 on the other hand - everything was perfect. Both years had good weather during the vintage but we had to work so much harder in 2008.' Total acidities that had typically fallen to about 4 g/l by the end of October 2007 were still 8 g/l in grapes in November 2008.

Carl von Schubert in the Ruwer (who provided both the images here) deliberately prolonged contact between the juice and the grape skins to eight hours or so before beginning fermentation in an effort to soften the impact of the acidity. Those high malic acids persisted in the young Rieslings as they matured in stainless steel and large old wooden casks in the better estates' cellars. The second, softening, malolactic fermentation is not commonly practised on such wines, but fortunately it was a very cold winter, and in the freezing cold cellars a certain amount of acidity was precipitated out of the wine. In fact, as Dönnhoff observed wryly, the 2008 Rieslings would actually taste rather more appealing if they contained about 10% of the much lower-acid Silvaner grape.

One bonus of the very cold 2008/09 winter is a reasonable crop of Eiswein, made from frozen grapes, typically picked on 30 December but some picked in calendar year 2009 (although as usual they will carry the year of their growing season on the label). Gunderloch have lots of TBAs in tiny quantity picked in February. Carl von Schubert reports his best Eiswein in 10 years in the Ruwer (the picture shows his vertiginous estate in the snow, Abtsberg vineyard in the foreground). His grapes notched up over 160 degrees Oechsle while his neighbour Christoph Tyrell at Karthäuserhof reports an Eiswein picked that day of over 170.

What is clear is that the 2008s are extremely variable – much more so than the harmonious and obliging 2007s – from grower to grower and site to site. Grapes needed to be well exposed to such sunshine as there was in cool October, and they needed to stay on the vine for much longer than usual in order to develop real depth of flavour.

One thing I noticed when tasting from the vast range shown to German wine professionals at the Mainzer Weinbörse at the end of April is that the difference in profile between dry (trocken), half dry (halbtrocken and feinherb) and fruity wines is being seriously eroded. It seems eminently sensible that there should be a greater emphasis on producing well balanced wines rather than making a political statement about dry v sweet. Indeed some serious producers seem to be abandoning the traditional Prädikats (Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, BA and TBA) on their labels altogether.

I note that those UK merchants currently making offers of the particularly useful 2008 vintage (Justerini & Brooks, Montrachet and Howard Ripley, whose wines I had not tasted before writing this, to be followed by The Wine Society in September) are offering more dry wines than they have in the past, although they tend to be relatively modest examples since German wine lovers will pay such handsome prices for the best. The Wine Barn and The Winery have particularly good selections of dry German wines.

I also noticed that screwcaps are on the ascendant in Germany. Willi Haag will put more than half of the 2008 crop under screwcaps for the first time, because so much of the harvest will be sold at relatively modest price levels.

I shall certainly be buying some 2008s. The weather may have presented challenges but Germany's best producers are more skilled and more determined than they have even been. The best are lovely, expressive, truly refreshing wines that will mature relatively early and will make delicious aperitifs – so much better value than most champagne.

As totemic, fourth generation Saar winemaker Egon Müller put it, '2008 is a step back from 2005, 2006 and 2007. 2008 is more normal. We're not used to that.'

Producers of successful 2008s

(Please note that this list was compiled before tasting a number of producers.)

Bassermann-Jordan, Pfalz
A Christmann, Pfalz
Clemens Busch, Mosel
Bürklin-Wolf, Pfalz
Dönnhoff, Nahe
Grans-Fassian, Mosel
Reinhold Haart, Mosel
Freiherr Heyl zu Herrnsheim, Rheinhessen
Keller, Rheinhessen
Kühling-Gillot, Rheinhessen
Kloster Eberbach, Rheingau
Sybille Kuntz, Mosel
Josef Leitz, Rheingau
Loosen, Mosel
Georg Mosbacher, Pfalz
Egon Müller, Saar
S A Prüm, Mosel
Rebholz, Pfalz
Horst Sauer, Franken
Schäfer-Fröhlich, Nahe
Schloss Lieser, Mosel
Emrich Schönleber, Nahe
von Schubert, Ruwer
Van Volxem, Mosel
Wagner-Stempel, Rheinhessen
Stefan Winter, Rheinhessen
Wittmann, Rheinhessen

Zilliken, Saar