

HARVESTREPORT

A YEAR OF Lows and Highs

The 2014 vintage may have been a year of lows and highs for VDP Rieslings, as Peter Csizmadia-Honigh describes it, but all is not lost as some delicious wines were produced

There are times when vintners fear it is too good to be true and other times when they despair it could not become worse. If these feelings are put into one box and shaken together, their mix describes vintage 2014 perfectly for VDP producers. (VDP in German stands for The Association of German top quality wine estates). The final outcome of the year of lows and highs is exactly a tale of such a vintage, with some very delicious wines even if not necessarily for long bottle ageing.

Wiesbaden, a pretty spa town on the right bank of the river Rhine, is popular among visitors seeking the curative powers of the thermal waters. The state capital of Hesse, located in central western Germany, is also the meeting place for leading international wine journalists at the end of August every year. We flock to the picture-postcard perfect town to review the Grosses Gewächs wines made in the previous vintage by producers of the VDP association, an organisation of Germany's elite wineries.

THE CLASSIFICATION SINCE 2012

Grosses Gewächs, the German word for *grand cru* designated wines produced in the very best of VDP classified vineyards, represents the pinnacle of quality. The VDP classification was overhauled and re-launched starting with the 2012 vintage. At the core of re-designing the classification was the desire to shift the focus from the level of

ripeness, expressed in sugar, to highlighting provenance. The new VDP classification is, therefore, Burgundian in its philosophical stance, with the *grand cru* and *premier cru* sites or Grosse Lage and Erste Lage, respectively, representing the best vineyards and giving way to the lower levels of the quality pyramid – village and regional wines, or Ortswein and Gutswein in the German language.

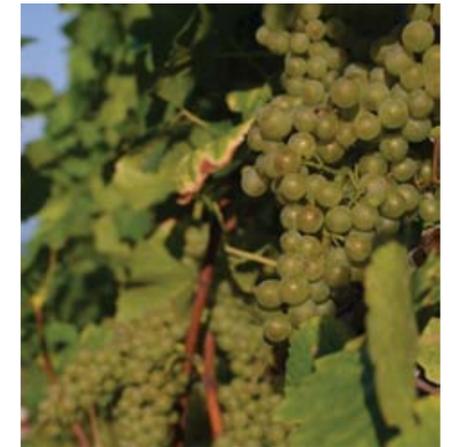
LOWS AND HIGHS

After a challenging 2013, the weather did not let vintners sit back and relax in 2014 either. Dr Loosen reports the year to have started with an exceptionally mild winter in the Mosel and the Pfalz, just as Robert Weil observed the same in the Rheingau. There was hardly any day, when the mercury dropped below zero. Spring continued in the same pattern and bud-break was already at the end of March in the Mosel and early April in the Rheingau.

When the weather is this warm so early, the viticulturist fears that there will be a price to pay later. However, the unseasonably good weather was not giving in. Not even during the week of the “Eisheiligen” or Icy Saints, in English, which falls between the 11th and 15th of May and gets its name because frost typically strikes again during the feast days of St Boniface, St Pancras and St Servatius. Johannes Selbach-Oster in the Mosel noted the period between March and June was warmer than the 10-year average.

Summer brought a change, however. As Robert Weil writes, July and August brought “sustained precipitation”, which is an euphemism for a cool and terribly wet summer. In fact, excessive rain raised an alert across the northern and central European wine regions. But German winegrowers were fortunate to enjoy a decent Indian summer with sun in September, which saved the vintage in the end.

Despite the very rainy last two months of summer, there was no pressure of fungal diseases in the Pfalz vineyards, according to Dr Loosen, because the low temperatures were a deterrent. In the autumn, however, the warmer temperatures put pressure on the vintners to remain vigilant in case the berries, which were full of water, should burst as the skin ripened and weakened, raising concerns about rot. Adding to the problem, according to Johannes Selbach-Oster, was the



Above: Riesling grapes in the Pfalz
Below: Georg Moserbach's Forst grand cru vineyard in the Pechstein village of the Pfalz



VDP

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appearance of the Asian fruit fly, *Drosophila suzukii*, because they chew through the skins of healthy berries unlike their European counterparts which attack only unhealthy berries.

Harvest started on September 30 in the Mosel and it was a race with time, which afforded us a new term, “turbo harvest”. The same is true for the Rheingau. As Weil notes in his vintage report, even though they had 80 pickers it was still a considerable task to accomplish. Most growers finished the harvest within four weeks and grape selection was key. Winemakers in Franken, or Franconia in English, and the Ahr suffered some hail damage during the harvest, adding to the challenges. There was hardly any opportunity for botrytis to exert its beneficial impact, which resulted in minute quantities of noble sweet wines.

REGIONAL ROUND-UP

The Mosel-Saar-Ruwer wines reflect the vintage conditions perfectly in that they are generously ripe and rich, and yet they retain a sense of lightness and freshness, most possibly the result of the lower level of fruit concentration and yet a sufficient level of acids. Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt’s Scharzhofberger excels not only in the region, but across all the Rieslings made by VDP producers in 2014, it combines finesse and outstanding concentration with the hallmark rich minerality of the Pfalz before a long finish.

Geheimrat J Wegeler’s Berg Schlossberg grand cru vineyard in the Rudesheim village of the Rheingau



Horst Sauer’s Am Lumpen 1655 grand cru vineyard in the Escherndorf village of Franconia

Other producers did not get to achieve a similarly exceptional level of quality, but they collectively set the bar high with extremely good levels of ripeness, albeit with more modest acid levels. The Heymann-Löwenstein wines are powerful and ripeness instills a sense of strength, with the Uhlen “Blaufüßer Lay” entertaining perky acids and the Stolzenberg being reminiscent of a floral explosion. All the Grans-Fassian wines showed a noticeably deeper colour than the rest of the Rieslings, quite likely due to longer skin contact, which was showing a richer and heavier style too. Dr Loosen’s Würzgarten charms with its superb balance between ripe tropical fruits, honey tones and minerality. In fact, this elegance of structure characterizes all his wines.

Despite the high precipitation the wines of the Rheingau show, in general terms, a fairly decent concentration across the board, with a well-scented nose lending the wines richness. The underlying minerality adds a sense of elegance even though the intensity may vary. Künstler’s Kirchenstück and Weiß Erd vineyards exemplify how diversity of *terroir* translates into different personalities, as the wine crafted from the first piece of land is exuberantly rich in aromatics, ripe and well textured, whilst the wine from the latter is lighter in style

and more refined, with concentration, minerality and gentler floral tones taking the centre stage.

Generosity and ripeness are the common themes running through the wines made from grapes grown in the Marcobrunn and Rosengarten sites by producers such as Jakob Jung, Kloster Eberbach or Wegeler and Spreitzer respectively. The wines of the Jesuitengarten vineyards, made by producers Fritz Allendorf, Schönleber and Wegeler, all radiate with the spiciness of Riesling. Robert Weil's Gräfenberg tops the list of Rheingau wines with a combination of lean elegance, rich minerals and very good concentration. Overall, the region does not come top of the list in 2014, as far as VDP producers are concerned, but delivers a consistently strong performance across vineyard sites and producers, maybe being the only exception when ambitious use of new oak overshadows the gift of *terroir*.

Even the Nahe shows all the beneficial effects of the Indian summer with its undeniably ripe character, whilst retaining lightness, a character that defines the region. The wines of Schlossgut Diel from the 2014 vintage confirm that the transition of the classification to focussing on vineyard sites is the way forward. The wines from the Pittermännchen, Goldloch and Burgberg crus of Dorsheim village could not be more different. Pittermännchen is the epitome of Nahe in that it is light, elegant with a perky freshness and minty tone, along with the rich acacia and honey tones. Burgberg bursts with florals and has a very convincing concentration, whilst the Goldloch is straightforward, fresh and light. *Terroir* certainly must be at play. Others to note are the Stromberg and Halenberg from Schäfer-Fröhlich with the purity of ripe tropical fruits or Dönnhoff's Dellchen with an oily rich texture and remarkable length.

As the Rheinhessen is one of the largest wine regions in Germany, the wide variance in terms of quality was not surprising with the 2014 vintage either. There were only very few unexciting wines – some underwhelming in terms of complexity, such as Wittmann's Brunnenhäuschen, others overambitious with the use of oak, such as Wittmann's Aulerde, or again others simply feeble and low in concentration, such as Gunderloch's Pettenthal. Now, looking at the best wines of the region, Wittman's name crops up again with their Kirchspiel, which just proves that wines from different sites and *terroirs* can be strikingly different even though they are made by the same vintner. The top in the line-up was Kühling-Gillot's Ölberg with its weighty body and elegance, which still had a graceful and perky acidity with an oily touch to the texture, making it such a textbook perfect expression of Riesling. Gutzler's Morstein shone through with a mineral elegance and concentrated ripe fruits, whilst St Anthony's Hipping stood out with its peppery lightness and freshness in addition to the generous new oak.

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Minerality, lean elegance and freshness are descriptors normally associated with the Pfalz. With the 2014 vintage, however, there is a great deal of richness, coming from the ripe fruits, which defines the region. Among the top wines are von Winning's Kalkofen with a perky and zesty character and very good concentration; Knipser's Steinbuckel mixes the ripe peach and rose petal tones with a touch of zestiness, while Dr von Bassermann-Jordan's Kalkofen shows its grace and finesse with the intensity of white floral tones. The majority of the Pfalz wines show very elegantly, with only a few examples of lower concentration or clumsy structure. It will not be the longest-lived vintage based on the wines from the Pfalz, but it is definitely one to provide very enjoyable and nicely ripe Rieslings.

The Rieslings of Franken tend to be the lightest of all the German wine regions, but in 2014 the richness and ripeness didn't fail to impress here either. Is it truly such a super-ripe year for Franconia that pineapple and honey tones are in abundance, while the hallmark white-pepper runs through as a theme? It is worth noting that the lowest scoring wines were still very charming even if a bit generously extracted and, therefore, stronger on phenolic grip. The Staatliche Hofkeller Würzburg tops the list with two of its wines; the Pfülsen shows a rounded, elegant and fresh personality, whilst the Stein combines the fragrant ripe exotic fruits with an amazing oily texture. ♦

BEST OF THE CROP: RIESLINGS FROM 2014

1. Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt: Wiltingen, Scharzhofberger 2014 (19.4) – Mosel-Saar-Ruwer
Deep lemon. Well composed and balanced with a floral finesse and ripeness of fruit. Crisp, elegant, excellent concentration and rich minerality. Amazingly long.

2. Robert Weil: Kiedrich, Gräfenberg 2014 (18.9) – Rheingau
White gold. Peppery, grapefruit and honey. Very well concentrated, really elegant with lots of minerals. Terribly graceful and lean.

3. Barth: Hallgarten, Schönhell 2014 (18.5) – Rheingau
Deep gold. Oily, rich, ripe and generous. Plenty of oak, huge but the spices balance it nicely. It is all about the balance.

4. von Winning: Deidesheim, Kalkofen 2014 (18.4) – Pfalz
Light gold. Easy and approachable with good concentration. Perky and zesty acids. Amazing length.

5. Grans-Fassian: Trittenheim, Apotheke

2014 (18.3) – Mosel-Saar-Ruwer
Pronounced lemon. Leaner and herbal nose rather than the Hofberg's rich fruitiness. Camomile, zesty lemon, honey in the middle and acacia to round it off. High in acids, yet nicely elegant.

6. Knipser: Laumersheim, Steinbuckel 2014 (18.2) Pfalz
Deep lemon. Subdued nose with plenty of ripe peach and rose petals. Zesty, lean and well concentrated.

7. Grans-Fassian: Dhorn, Hofberg 2014 (18.1) – Mosel-Saar-Ruwer
Lemon. Rich and sumptuous nose with ripe peach, pineapples and lemon zest. Off-dry mouth-feel, crisp acids, rounded and rich nonetheless. Generous and gentle with an attractive concentration.

8. Künstler: Hochheim, Kirchenstück 2014 (18.1) – Rheingau
Gold. Rich, elegant and intense nose with white lilies, rose and peach. Hugely ripe, fresh, extremely fine and oily texture with great balance.



9. Künstler: Kostheim, Weiss End 2014 (18.1) – Rheingau
Bright golden. Honey, acacia and camomile. Light and easy, very well concentrated, hugely mineral, extremely nicely balanced even if lower in intensity. Silky.

10. Barth: Hattenheim, Hassel 2014 (18.1) Rheingau
Light gold. Well scented with rose petals and peach. Rich but delicately fresh and elegant. White-peppery.