

# GERMAN GRAND CRU

## The Genesis of Grosses Gewächs

Germany's Grosses Gewächs, or Grand Cru, is still a work in progress and much needs to be refined, but, as **Joel B Payne** explains, the initiative is slowly laying the foundations for a true revival of German wines.

**H**ugh Johnson once wrote that he was surprised that Cambridge had not created a chair to teach people how to read German wine labels. His quip would likely bring an immediate and knowing smile to the lips of anyone who has ever stood bewildered before a shelf of German wines. Just over a generation ago, though, German wine nomenclature was not nearly as confusing as it is today. Most wine labels merely stated the vintage and the name of the producer. There was the occasional mention of a village, but only the finest wines carried the name of a single vineyard – and they were made in minute quantities. Today, however, understanding German wine labels is almost impossible, even among the initiated, and most German attempts at simplifying matters have only made them more complicated.

Until 1971, the labels on the market were never cluttered with unknown sites; terms like Spätlese were reserved for quite rare, naturally pure wines and adjectives like halbtrocken, describing the residual sugar content, were never seen. Moreover, until then, all chaptalized wines – and these were by far the majority – tasted dry or at most off-dry in flavour.

Beginning in 1971, as the barriers limiting the residual sugar in chaptalized wines were gradually lowered and then abandoned, the race was on to produce ever sweeter and cheaper wines with ever more complicated labels so that by the early 1980s Germany's reputation had fallen on hard times. No longer the most expensive wines in the world, they were seldom more than cheap and sweet. Some in the trade made a quick buck with questionable methods, but all woke up with a hangover after the party was over – and Germany's reputation was in ruins.

Against this backdrop, the concept of Grosses Gewächs, or German Grand Cru, began to evolve. The foundations were first laid in 1984 by the Charta association in the Rheingau. By 1987, its members had resurrected Dahlen's vineyard classification of 1885 and were making "traditional wines from first class sites". In 1992, the first dry(ish) Rieslings were released that used three roman arches on the label as their new logo to designate the quintessence of their production. Shortly thereafter, both Rheinhessen and the Pfalz began developing like-minded concepts based on similar classifications from the 19th century.

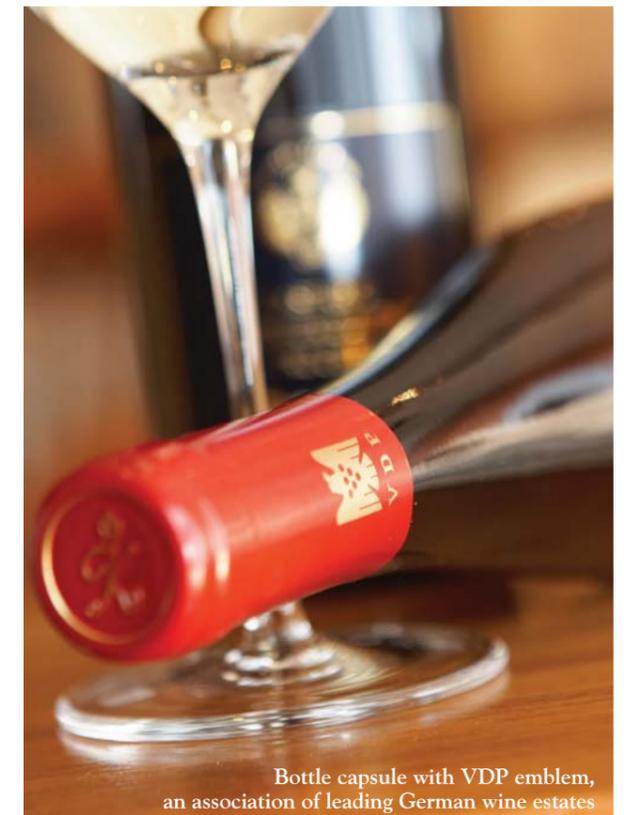
Interestingly, in 1971 there had already been lively debates within the trade about whether Germany should classify its finest sites as it was done in France or place more emphasis on the ripeness level of the grapes at harvest. The resulting compromise was typically German. It incorporated everything, but resolved nothing. Like a legal contract, only

the lawyers who wrote it understood its contents, if at all. No one understood the implications.

As the reputation of German wine abroad reached its nadir, there were then serious discussions about ranking producers rather than vineyards. This, though, is nothing new. We all know that there is a pecking order among the estates in Burgundy who make a Chambertin, Bonnes Mares or Clos de Vougeot. The core value, nevertheless, is the intrinsic quality of the site – and we all expect Armand Rousseau's Clos de Beze to be better than his Gevrey-Chambertin.

However, as the vast majority of growers remain dependent on high yields and low prices, it quickly became clear that there was little hope of finding common ground among the various public organs involved in implementing wine policy to establish guidelines for all producers in the country. Turning back the clock is difficult, especially as the owners of third-class sites have no interest in giving the elite a competitive edge. Even though they quietly admit that the concept is correct, they vote against it. All men are created equal; all vineyards are not.

Thus, in 1995, the VDP (Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter, Association of German Prädikat Wine Estates) began setting their own standards, with each individual region delineating rules that made logical



Bottle capsule with VDP emblem, an association of leading German wine estates

sense for their own wines. In 1998, a committee was then founded to set minimum national standards. The common denominator was that only noble varieties should be produced from the finest sites, that yields would be low, that hand harvest be made mandatory and that a sensory evaluation by local councils would decide if the wines held up to expectations.

## ERSTES GEWÄCHS

As Germany is a federal democracy, wine law is left largely to the individual states. Thus, the Rheingau, the only winegrowing region in the state of Hesse, became in 1999 the first and to date only region able to move its concept through the chambers of power and have its classification ratified by a state parliament. After officially presenting its map of classified sites, the region then began to market its finest single vineyard wines as Erstes Gewächs or First Growth. In the state of Rheinland-Pfalz, which incorporates the winegrowing regions of Mosel, Ahr, Mittelrhein, Nahe, Rheinhessen and Pfalz, finding the consensus necessary to ratify a similar concept for their many different growing regions has proven more difficult.

In July 2001, several other regional chapters of the VDP, but not the states themselves, ratified their own systems of classification and in June 2002 the term Grosses Gewächs (Grand Cru) was chosen to differentiate them from those of the Rheingau, which has legal precedence for the sole use of Erstes Gewächs. Later, in March 2003, the Mosel, Saar and Ruwer decided that, in addition to Grosses Gewächs for dry Rieslings, they would use the term Erste Lage, or First Site, to designate wines of similar pedigree, but which ran the gamut from dry through Kabinett and Spätlese to Eiswein. Thus, today, you have three terms – Erstes Gewächs, Grosses Gewächs and Erste Lage – that essentially mean the same thing, at least when speaking of their dry manifestations.

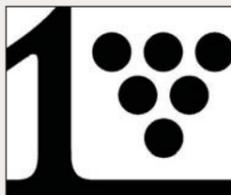
The VDP, though, can only make rules for their own members. What others do is beyond their control and for now there is little political will to implement a new (or old) system – and certainly not one of quality – for the whole industry.

That spadework done, the group is now working on classifying secondary sites that in Burgundy would be called Premier Cru, an idea that is embedded in its Vision 2015.

IT SEEMS CERTAIN THAT THE CONCEPT OF GROSSES GEWÄCHS WILL GRADUALLY BECOME SYNONYMOUS WITH EXCELLENT DRY RIESLING FROM GERMANY. THE BEST OF THESE WINES ARE TRULY BEYOND REPROACH

## Criteria for Grosses Gewächs

- Vineyard site must be classified as Grosses Gewächs
- Grape varieties must be traditional for the region
- Yields are restricted to 50 hl/ha
- Manual harvest
- Minimum must weight of Spätlese quality
- Only traditional production techniques
- Wine must pass a sensory examination by the regional board
- Style must be dry (less than 9 g/l of residual sugar)
- The capsule must bear the VDP emblem
- The label must carry the Erste Lage logo (pictured)
- White wines only released on September 1 after previous harvest
- Red wines only released on September 1 two years after harvest



## Varietals used to make Grosses Gewächs

Each growing region has established a list of the traditional varieties that are allowed to be used in the production of a Grosses Gewächs. Not surprisingly, Riesling is the only grape that makes the cut everywhere. Pinot Noir, though, is a strong second and is even more widely planted in top sites in the southern part of the country.

## Evolution of Grosses Gewächs

By the vintage 2009, the roughly 200 member estates in the VDP had classified approximately 280 top sites and produced over a million bottles of Grosses Gewächs, more than triple the number shown at the first tastings in Wiesbaden eight years ago. There were 401 Grosses Gewächs from 149 estates in 226 sites for a total production of 900,000 bottles registered in 2011. The slight decrease is due to the short 2010 vintage, which produced about 30% less wine than 2009.

In addition, all agree that making the individual village names more attractive to consumers will be an important part of their future strategies. Currently there are few buyers who will pay much more for a Wehlener, Rudesheimer or Forster Riesling than for the simple estate bottling, but will gladly shell out twice or three times the price for a Chablis or Pommard.

## FORMS OF FLATTERY

In spite of all these shortfalls, as neither Grosses Gewächs nor the abbreviation “GG” is legally protected, all growers are free to informally refer to certain wines as Grosses Gewächs and put the letters “GG” on their labels or neck stickers. Imitation has always been the sincerest form of flattery.

And for all the shortcomings, there is one major change that has made an enormous difference for the German perception of their dry wines: all of these producers concentrate principally on their finest sites and make wines that would have been unthinkable ten years ago, defining quality by origin and not the level of grape ripeness at harvest. It thus seems certain that the concept of Grosses Gewächs will gradually become synonymous with excellent dry Riesling from Germany. The best of these wines are truly beyond reproach. What remains now is for the producers to work out the terminology, slowly anchor the concept for all producers into a legal framework, and find a solution for Kabinett and Spätlese within the system.

## FLAVOUR CORRIDORS

Although it may further add to the level of complexity, room must be found within the classification for Kabinett and Spätlese, all the while honing their flavour profile by limiting their levels of ripeness, as has been done in the Wachau, and creating bandwidths for residual sugar. This would not only reinvent the styles of yesteryear (in Germany’s golden age, Kabinetts were generally off-dry in flavour), but it would also bring these wines back to the dining table. At their current levels of sweetness, these wines are admired, but neither purchased nor consumed, like the proverbial

library books that are never taken out.

With time, though, I expect that the dry(ish) style of wine will, once again, ultimately become the mainstay of consumption. Granted, the style of winemaking back then was different, including a more widespread use of large oak casks, longer lees aging, spontaneous fermentations (which are often less efficient in alcohol production) and even the occasional malolactic conversion, but the inner equilibrium in the triumvirate of alcohol, sugar and acidity was by and large the same. In any case, the core question is that of taste and balance, and many chefs and sommeliers will tell you that these dry(ish) wines are more apt at food pairings than their bone-dry brethren.

## ACCEPT THE COMPLICATION

Although Grosses Gewächs is still a work in progress, it has made a considerable impact on the market since its inception, and this success is beginning to be documented in numbers. From the barely 100 GGs produced by only 78 estates in 2002, that number has soared to over 414 by 148 estates today. That said, these wines still represent only 2% of the VDP’s total production. Yes, as these elite estates themselves make up only 2% of German output, the estimated one million bottles sold last year were but an insignificant fraction of total volume. However, like their brethren in Burgundy, they are the standard-bearers of quality for the country.

In the end, this slow turn away from only the ripeness of the grapes at harvest as the sole measure of quality to naturally pure wines from the finest sites is the defining step in Germany’s return to its roots, and will certainly pave the way to new horizons. ♦

## Editor’s Choice

*Our picks of the wines tasted at the German Embassy, New Delhi:*

### 2007 Pinot Noir Wildenstein, Huber, Baden

A harmonious complexity of herb, cherry, mushroom and coffee notes with supple tannins in fine balance with the wine’s medium body and moderate acidity. Age, 5 to 8 years.

### 2008 Weissburgunder (or Pinot Blanc) Im Sonnenschein, Rebholz, Pfalz

Delicate floral/talcum powder nose. Full-flavoured palate, yet remaining subtle with lychee/exotic fruit notes. Quite a fleshy wine with lemon-like



intense acidity and a long finish.

### 2008 Riesling Felseneck, Schäfer-Fröhlich, Nahe

Perfumed nose with suggestions of rose petals along with hints of smokey/flinty notes. A rather tight, austere wine with fine acidity. Very well balanced.

### 2008 Riesling Pechstein, Dr. Bürklin-Wolf, Pfalz

The only vineyard in the region with 100% black Basalt soil. The wine has pineapple-like tropical aromas on the nose and seems just a bit “nutty” on the palate. Medium-bodied with grapefruit citrus flavours.