

### German wine: is simplicity desirable?

I was very fortunate to be able to travel through Mosel, Pfalz, Rheingau and Rheinhessen earlier this year, thanks to a bursary from the Peter Hampson Memorial Trust. Having never visited Germany before, but having a keen interest in German wine, I was thrilled to visit several different wine producers and go home with a much better understanding of German grapes, soils, viticulture and viniculture, and the wine styles themselves. Everyone I met was open and friendly, like the wines they showed me, and only too happy to try to explain what it is that makes German wine very different.

My first WSET scholarship examination, back in 2008, consisted of a room with ten tutors sitting behind ten desks. The candidates had to move from desk to desk, and at each desk answer a question on one topic, speaking for five minutes without hesitation, deviation or repetition. One of the desks contained a question about German wine labelling. I was presented with a photocopy of a German wine label – busy with dark, gothic lettering – and simply had to talk about it for five minutes. I remember stumbling many times as the tutor glared sternly at me.

The question of the complexity of German wine labels, and of the dozens of different styles available – from dry to half dry to ‘half-dry-with-possibly-a-bit-more-sugar’ to medium sweet to sweet to super sweet – came up time and time again during my trip. While some producers are sticking with the tradition of making many different wines from many different grape varieties (as insurance against the vagaries of the marginal climate) lots are beginning to move towards a more simple philosophy of making and marketing wine.

Weingut Paulinshof is slightly unusual in the Mosel as it produces dry wine styles, and does this very well. Christa Jüngling who kindly opened up the winery for me even though it was a weekend, told me that the German consumer increasingly prefers dry wines, especially when drinking with food. Almost all their sweet wine is exported to the UK, including the Brauneberger Juffer Riesling which has typical Mosel icing sugar sweetness, deliciously refreshing on a hot day.

Paulinshof are interested in simplifying labels, like that of their Vom Roten Schiefen, a Riesling blended from different vineyards with a simple label depicting the red slate of the soil the grapes are grown on. This wine is very popular and Christina puts this down to the fact the label is easily understood and attractive. The wine itself tastes young and vibrant, dry but not too dry, presumably to appeal to the audience it is intended for.

Christina told me she would welcome the freedom that putting less information on the label would bring to producers. She would also like to see a reduction of the amount of what she sees as unnecessary information given on a label. She cited “Feinherb” as an example of this which, as it has no upper limit for residual sugar, “is like saying nothing”. She also thinks that removing certain words would encourage consumers to try a wine they might otherwise have avoided because of their prejudice about sweetness, for example.

However she showed me no less than 17 wines which seems a large number for a property of just 9 ha. The wines were very pretty and charming, especially those of the top vineyards which showed juicy yellow fruit and spices.

At Dr. Bürklin-Wolf the number of wines produced from their 85 ha has been reduced to 30 across all styles, compared with during the 1980s and 90s, when they made 30 different 'basic' Rieslings alone! The message from Tom Bennis when he showed me round was "less is more". This extends to the easily-understood hierarchy of their wine styles – Grand Cru, Premier Cru, Village and House – and their labels, which are modelled on French labels with the grape variety and vineyard name (if appropriate) on the front, and all other information on the back. This is a policy of the VDP and I came across it again at other producers, for example Rebholz.

The hierarchy of styles is evident in the wine, from the simple zesty freshness of the house "dry Riesling", to the structured, complex minerality of the Pechstein, Kalkofen and Gaisböhl Grand Crus. Bürklin-Wolf do not put any ripeness information on their labels and Tom explained they are more interested in terroir than Oechsle. They produce only one wine from each vineyard and are passionate about biodynamism. Tom was very proud when he told me that in 2009 and 2010 they achieved spontaneous fermentation (i.e. without cultured yeast) for the first time, having used biodynamic practices for some years. He told me that their winery is too big, as it was built in the 1960s when they were producing around 1.2m litres of wine per year. Now the average volume is 250,000 litres per year, and in 2010 was just 130,000 litres (due to a poor harvest). One could say a lot of effort has gone into achieving this simplicity.

Weingut Ökonomierat Rebholz is another example of a German wine producer working to do less, to achieve more. They have been practising biodynamism for years; in 2005 they were certified organic, and in 2008 ceased filtering their wines. During my visit they told me that they had lost 40% of their crop in the 2010 vintage, a familiar story throughout German wine-producing regions. However the quality of their wines demonstrated that with diligent and careful vineyard management and wine-making, it is possible to produce beautiful wines even from a greatly reduced crop. The Weissburgunders, Grauer Burgunders and Rieslings I tasted were rich and balanced, the high acid wines having been left in tank longer than normal to settle into themselves.

Reichsrat von Buhl, like other members of the VDP, have simplified their front labels to grape variety, vintage and vineyard. The style of the wines I tasted there was understated but powerful: pure, clean, and linear. They produce one Weissburgunder, one Grauburgunder, one Chardonnay, one Sauvignon Blanc and one Spatburgunder, and the rest of the wines (around 40 in total) are all Riesling. The wines are muscled and spicy but restrained. Monika Schmid, who showed me round, said she does not get involved in debates about wine production; each producer has his own philosophy – the important thing is to HAVE a philosophy. She giggled with spontaneous glee when we tasted the 2010 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Auslese. My notes describe this wine as having plenty of sugar and acid, 'like freshly cut pineapple'. A simple, joyful pleasure.

My visit to Weingut August Ziegler provided a sharp contrast to what I had experienced at other producers. The family home was built in 1894 and the Zieglers have kept it exactly as it was, including furniture, flooring and wood panelling; the tradition of wine-making seems not to have changed either. Ziegler produce over 60 different wines from no less than 18 different grape varieties, harvested from 20 ha (plus a little more that they might buy in). In the winery Harald Ziegler showed me tanks of dozens of different sizes, some almost pocket-sized, some of many hundreds of hectolitres, and explained that he produces just 200 bottles of some of his wines. Ziegler use modern-looking, simplified labelling, however I was left wondering if producing 200

bottles of something, unless it is a spectacular wine, is a good example of the supposedly famous German efficiency.

It was at Weingut Knipser that I understood just how glorious a variety of wine styles made from many different grape varieties can be. Amongst the many deliciously perfumed and mineral Rieslings, Pinot Gris and St Laurents I tasted, there was a 2007 Sauvignon Gris which was still not quite ready to drink, a fresh pale orange Clarette made from a blend of Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc and Malbec, a super-acid, low alcohol Gelber Orleans, and several Bordeaux-style blends with distinct German accents. All these different wines are produced from 37 ha, and are extremely popular. 80% of Knipser's wine is sold at the cellar door and people come from far and wide, almost every day of the year, to taste and buy. Volker took time out of busily loading wine into the back of his customers' cars to taste with me and offer his opinion. He said he thinks the different wine laws in each German wine-producing region are "a mess", however unlike some producers who rebel against tradition, his labels are made in the old-fashioned way to include all the information about each wine you would ever need. Volker seems to rejoice in making wine just for the sake of it, experimenting with growing different grapes and producing different styles. As I was leaving he was excited at the prospect of finishing the analysis of the 2010 Gelber Orleans.