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Germany's 2014 vintage: "Exactly what we needed – no TBA!"

Harvest notes from Ernst Loosen, owner of Dr. Loosen and Villa Wolf

BERNKASTEL/MOSEL, GERMANY — For me, 2014 in the Mosel valley was quite a good vintage. It was not without its challenges, particularly because of rainy weather during the harvest, but it produced a good quantity of the "normal" wines that we need to please our customers around the world. In addition to a very good quantity of off-dry wines and lightly sweet Kabinetts, we did the extensive selection work to get healthy, fully ripe fruit for our increasingly important production of dry wines.



Ernst Loosen, overlooking the Erdener Prälater vineyard.

We've produced dry wines ever since I first took over the estate in 1988, but it was in 2008 that I decided to launch a new crusade to rediscover how my paternal grandfather and great-grandfather had produced dry wines in the first half of the 20th century. Back then, they made only dry wines and those wines aged just as well as any Auslese. I was determined to figure out how they did that.

After years of experimentation with traditional techniques, such as native yeast fermentation and extended maturation on the full lees, I think we're on to something. We are seeing that properly matured dry wines develop a natural harmony that shows vintage variation, but enables us to produce beautifully balanced wines regardless of the vintage conditions. And when it comes to the idea of terroir, I would argue that this new generation of dry wines offers a cleaner, more precise expression of the soil and climate than the sticky-sweet dessert wines that get the big scores.

I have often wondered why it is that German vintages are rated primarily on the über-sweet dessert wines, like Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese. These labor-intensive, extremely limited wines typically account for less than one percent of our total production, yet they seem to have a disproportionate influence on those who declare vintage ratings. In some ways it's understandable, because these wines are truly amazing — intensely concentrated and massively impressive. But for producers, like me, it's the more normal wines — the classic dry and off-dry wines — that really determine the value of a vintage. These are the wines that people actually drink, which means they are the wines that keep us in business. In fact, when a German vintage is hailed as "great," it often means that it was a financial disaster for the growers, who end up with a lot of expensive botrytis wines that very few people buy any more and not enough of the wines that people want.

The 2014 growing season in the Mosel

We had an extremely mild winter leading into the 2014 growing season, with no snow or ice at all. This naturally led to a very early bud break at the end of March, with shoots reaching two to three centimeters in length in the first days of April. Because it was still so early, we were quite concerned about the danger of frost, which can happen well into May. In fact, there is a week in May (the 11th through the 15th) that we refer to as the "Eisheiligen" ("Ice Saints") days because we so often see frost then. But in 2014 we were lucky, in this regard, and no frost came.

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Harvest selection in the Erdenr Prälät vineyard — separating the botrytis fruit (red bucket) from the unaffected fruit.

By the end of spring, the vines were well ahead of average growth, but then came a relatively cool and rather wet summer. The rainfall was welcome because the vines needed water, but then it just kept raining, particularly in August, which was the coolest and wettest August we've had in perhaps 100 years. Still, the vines looked to be in pretty good shape at the beginning of September, but it turned warmer and that, combined with all that rainwater in the ground, caused an overgrowth of the grapes. The risk then was that the grapes would burst as they finished ripening, which would have given rot fungi the opportunity to attack. So we had to act quickly, especially with the Riesling, which reached full ripeness in a very short period of time.

The harvest began on the 30th of September and was completed a month later. Our crew had to work long and hard to get everything in as fast as possible. We had to really kick it into high gear after a very heavy rainstorm from October 3 to 6, which greatly accelerated the onset of botrytis in the vineyards. But through our usual process of very strict selection to separate the botrytis-affected fruit from the clean, unaffected fruit, we harvested a beautiful range of wines in the classic Mosel style. There was only a very tiny quantity of the high-end dessert wines, but we are quite happy with the beautiful, pure fruit and perfect acidity of the dry wines, the off-dry estate wines, and the lower Prädikats (Kabinett and Spätlese).

The 2014 vintage at Villa Wolf in the Pfalz

At Villa Wolf, our estate in the Pfalz, we saw a similar start to the growing season, with a mild winter, warm spring and an early start to the vegetative cycle. This was immediately stalled by cooler temperatures in May. But then, just as flowering was about to start at the beginning of June, a heat wave set in. This led to a very short blooming period and rapid development of the grapes, which depleted our water resources. Heavy rain came in July, replenishing our water supply, but increasing the risk of the berries taking on too much water and bursting. Thankfully, a cool August kept fungus issues under control and helped slow down vine and grape development.

The days leading up to the harvest were dry and sunny in the Pfalz and we anticipated ideal harvest conditions. We picked our first Pinot Gris on Sept. 18. While the white Pinot varieties ripened quite quickly, the acidity in the Riesling remained rather high, requiring a bit more patience. After three weeks, we finished up the harvest by picking a beautiful parcel of perfectly ripe Riesling in Forster Pechstein — just before the rain started once again.

Our young team at Villa Wolf — Patrick Möllendorf and Sumi Gebauer — have everything perfectly under control, so in all of our vineyards we were able to harvest healthy grapes with excellent ripeness levels and lively acidity. The young wines have developed nicely and are showing great aroma, freshness and balance.



Our dedicated winemaking team at Villa Wolf: Patrick Möllendorf and Sumi Gebauer.

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For more information, contact:

Kirk Wille, Loosen Bros. USA, Ltd.

(+1) 503-984-3041 • kirk.wille@drloosen.com

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