Germany

Germany's wines are the most misunderstood in the world. Her best vineyards lie as far north as grapes can be persuaded to ripen. Many are on land until for normal agriculture if there were no vines there would be forest and bare mountain. All in all their chances of giving the world's best white wine look slim. And yet on occasion they do, and stamp it with a racy elegance that no one, anywhere, can imitate.

Their secret is the balance of two decidedly unfashionable ingredients: sugar and acidity. Sugar without acid would be flat; acid without sugar would be sharp. But in good years the two are so finely counterpoised that they have the inevitability of great art. They provide the stage for a stirring fusion of essences from the grape and the ground that is more apparent in German wines than any others because they are far lower in alcohol (another unfashionable trait) and therefore more brilliantly transparent. Thanks to all that acidity, the best also age magnificently - far better than most other white wines.

Germany's sweeter wines are best enjoyed, unlike most wines, alone in all their glory rather than with food. But rather than being seen as a merit, today this is a commercial handicap that has resulted in far drier German wines and has led growers to make many, sometimes all, of their wines completely or almost completely dry and offer them as wines of the table like any others.

Since the von trocken (dry) wines began in the early 1980s the genre has advanced from thin productions (a fully dry Mosel Kabinett can be painfully tart) to wines of firm and convincing elegance, primarily dry Spätlesen. Yet so far the world at large has not learned to love them. It is a challenge that a new generation of growers is facing vigorously with wines of thrilling vitality. The tragedy is that they are being undercut and demonized by the ethos of bulk production which is, sadly, sanctioned by their government. A country whose chief ambassador is Liebfraumilch rather than an eloquent exponent of serious wine quality has no place in the competitive international wine marketplace.

But since 1971 German wine law seems almost to have set out deliberately to confuse and even mislead the consumer. The laws were apparently framed for the short-term advantage of growers who overproduce to sell at unsustainable low prices. The result, too much totally undistinguished wine, has been a critical and commercial disaster for German wine as a whole - but especially for the perfectionists (and there are many) who have dazzlingly good wines to offer.

The German wine label (see box), one of the most explicit yet confusing on earth, is both cause and instrument of much of the industry's problems. The most regrettable deception is the existence of Grosslagen, commercially useful large geographical units whose names are indistinguishable to most wine drinkers from those of Einzellaenge, individual vineyards. Take the Rheinhessen village of Nierstein, mapped in detail on page 235. It is blessed with many fine vineyards whose wines are full of fire and character labelled, for example, Niersteiner Hipping or Niersteiner Petteental. But there is a vast Grosslage which includes the much less distinguished produce of 15 villages in the flat hinterland of Nierstein called Niersteiner Gutes Donntal. Oceans of blended semi-sweet blandness are so labelled every year. The only way the consumer can tell the difference between such a heavily blended bulk product and the painstaking produce of a difficult-to-work single vineyard is by memorizing the names of all Germany's Grosslagen. Our maps clearly distinguish between Grosslagen and Einzellaenge.

The Riesling (see page 25) is the great grape of Germany. The great majority of Germany's best wines are made from it, and it is planted to the exclusion of almost everything else in the best sites of the Mosel-Saar-N rwer, Rheingau, Nahe, and Pfalz (the Palatinate). In a lesser site in a lesser year it stands no chance of ripening.

For larger and less risky production, Germany turned during the mid-20th century to the Müller-Thurgau, a much earlier-ripening, more productive crossing bred in 1882. The wines are bland and lack the lovely backbone of fruity acidity of the Riesling, and in 1996 lovers of fine German wine had the satisfaction of seeing Riesling regain its rightful place as Germany's most planted vine. Nevertheless standard cheap German wines with no mention of the grape on the label can be assumed to be made at least mainly) from the Müller-Thurgau, which still covers about a fifth of all German vineyard. Plantings of Silvaner are far behind these two varieties, although it thrives on the best sites in Franconia, where it makes better wine than Riesling, and can also make some excellent wine in Rheinhessen and Baden.

New crossings, bred especially for ripeness, enjoyed a great vogue in the early 1980s, particularly in Rheinhessen and the Pfalz (which makes some good Scheurebe in ripe years). Two factors have dampened the early enthusiasm for them: their student, over-obvious flavours, and experience of very cold winters, when they have proved less hardly than the Riesling. This has encouraged Germany's indefatigable wine breeders to incorporate genes from cold-hardy Mongolian vines.

Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir), the commoner Portugieser, the newish crossing Dornfelder, and, in Württemberg, the Trolinger grape, are Germany's increasingly important sources of red wine, although only the valley of the Ahr nearby as far north as Bonn cultivates more red, mainly Spätburgunder, than white.

Until recently German wine law made no attempt to limit yields (which are some of the highest in the world) or to classify vineyards as the French do. Any vineyard in Germany can, in official theory, produce top-class wine. The low

Language of the Label

Quality designations

Qualitätswein mit Prädikat (QmP) wines made from the naturally ripest grapes. Germany's best sweet wines are QmP, although, depending on the character of the vintage, this category can comprise anything from 7% (1981) to 15% (1975) of the crop. No chaptalization is allowed. The additional Prädikat, or classifications, are in ascending order of ripeness: Kabinett light, refreshing wines, ideal aperitifs Spätlese literally "late harvest", meaning ripener than Kabinett. Wines can vary from dry and fairly full to sweet and lighter. Can age will Auslese made from riper grapes, sometimes botrytized, than Spätlese with, usually, some residual sugar. Need agingBeerenauslese (BA) rare, sweet wines, made from botrytized grapes (beerenauslese) Eiswein wine from grapes high in sugar and acidity concentrated by being frozen on the vine, less rare than a TBA Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA) very rare, very sweet, very expensive wines made from hand-picked grapes fully "dried" (trocken) on the vine by botrytis Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete (QbA) literally a "quality wine from a designated wine region" but the criteria are ludicrously low in terms of natural ripeness and the wines also routinely chaptalized Classic new category of dry wines for good everyday drinking made from a single grape variety Selection top-quality dry wines from a single variety Landwein Germany's half-hearted answer to Vins de Pays, not a popular designation when QbA is so widely available Deutscher Tafelwein very small category of the most basic, lightest wine

Other common expressions

Amtliche Prüfungsziffer (AP No) every lot of wine has to be officially "tested" and gets this test number; the first digit signifies the test station, last two the year of the test Erzeugerabfüllung or Gutsabfüllung estate bottled Halbtrocken medium dry Trocken dryWeingut winery estateWeinkellerei wine cellar or wineryWinzerkonzern wine growers' co-op
concerns itself instead only with ripeness, or “must weight”, the measure of sugar in the grapes at harvest time, outlined on page 26, which crucially decides what will appear on the label (see box). But nobody truly pretends that all German vineyards are equally well sited, with equally perfect soil. On our detailed maps that small proportion of vineyards we consider consistently superior are clearly indicated in lilac and (best of all) purple. This bold vineyard classification, made in collaboration with Germany’s consortium of top-quality growers, the VDP (Verband Deutsches Prädikatsweingüter), local wine organizations and experts, was first published in the previous (1994) edition of this Atlas. As was hoped, it seemed to encourage German officialdom along a tortuous path beset by politics of all sorts towards its own vineyard classifications, although yet again (see page 220) the will to distinguish clearly between the great and the merely serviceable seems to be lacking. The German government has steadily backed away from what it chooses to call “elitism”. The French are not afraid to call it quality.