

#5: GERMAN WINE BASICS

German wines are produced according to an imperfect scale based on the ripeness of the grapes at harvest time. In general, riper grapes produce richer, more complex wines. This system was put into place in 1971 because of Germany's cool, northern climate, where full ripeness was often difficult to achieve. With global climate change, however, getting full ripeness is no longer as difficult, and the distinctions between the ripeness levels can be less clear.

Another potential problem with this ripeness-based system is that it ignores the historically proven superiority of certain grape varieties and vineyard sites, and does nothing to address differences in quality among producers. Judging only from the label, a Riesling Spätlese from a dedicated winemaker and a great vineyard would seem to be of the same quality as a Spätlese from an inferior grape variety, an industrial producer, and lousy vineyards. It's important to become familiar with the producers that offer consistent quality.



GERMANY'S LEVELS OF WINE QUALITY

Qualitätswein/QbA: [kval-ee-TAYTS-vine] German for “quality wine.” QbA is an acronym for “Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete,” which means a quality wine that comes entirely from one of the 13 designated wine regions in Germany. This is an estate's basic wine, and can often be a very good value, especially from a top-rated producer. Chaptalization (adding sugar to improve ripeness) is allowed in QbA.

Qualitätswein mit Prädikat/QmP: The word Prädikat [PRAY-dee-cot] literally is the grammatical term, “predicate.” Prädikat wines are “predicated” on a certain level of natural ripeness. But this does *not* necessarily refer to the amount of sweetness in the finished wine. How dry to ferment the wine is up to the winemaker. There are six Prädikats:

Kabinett: This is the lightest and most delicate style of Riesling, made from normally ripe grapes picked early in the harvest. In a cool-climate region like the Mosel, Kabinett can be quite low in alcohol (7.5–8%).

Spätlese: [SHPAYT-lay-zeh] German for “late-harvest.” Spätlese has more richness and body than Kabinett because the grapes are allowed to ripen for an extra week or more. Once harvested, the wine can be fermented fruity (lieblich), half-dry (halbtrocken) or dry (trocken), depending on the preferences of the winemaker.

Auslese: [OWS-lay-zeh] Auslese means “selected from the harvest.” This is the Prädikat level for very ripe, late-harvested grapes, and often involves some amount of botrytis (aka “noble rot”). Normally made in the fruity style with residual sweetness, Auslese is considered by most winemakers to be their finest achievement (aside from the rare dessert wines).

Beerenauslese/BA: [BEAR-en-ows-lay-zeh] By adding “Beeren” to the word “Auslese,” this means “berry selection.” Beerenauslese is a rare dessert wine made from extremely overripe grapes that are fully affected by botrytis and have shriveled down about half way. The dessicating effect of the botrytis concentrates the juice.

Eiswein: [ICE-vine] Quite literally, “ice wine.” One of the rare dessert wines, made from overripe grapes that have frozen solid on the vine. They are harvested quickly before sunrise and pressed while still frozen, so that only ultra-concentrated grape juice is extracted. The water stays in the press as ice, so the resulting wine is very dense, but with vibrant, racy acidity.

Trockenbeerenauslese/TBA: [TRAW-ken BEAR-en OWS-lay-zeh] Germany's greatest and rarest dessert wine. Trocken (dry) here refers to the individually selected berries, which have been completely shriveled to dried-up raisins by the botrytis mold. It does not refer to the taste of the wine, which is quite the opposite of trocken. This is the sweetest, most intense dessert wine produced in Germany. When made from Riesling, that variety's superior structure keeps the wine vibrant and elegant, despite its massive weight.

Goldkapsel: German for “gold capsule.” This is not a Prädikat, it's an unofficial designation used to distinguish a special selection wine. At Dr. Loosen, we use a Goldkapsel for the Auslese from Erdener Prälat, our finest vineyard. This wine is a selection of clusters that are 50 to 100 percent affected by botrytis, but not yet shriveled to the must weight of BA.