

WINE OVERVIEW



GERMANY

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Closely review the syllabus for this wine level to determine just what items require your attention in each of the region/country overview documents.

The wines grown in Germany are extremely diverse, although they bear a family resemblance. Tasting is the best way to appreciate the special character of German wines, as well as to understand the subtle differences that distinguish a Rhine wine from a Mosel wine, or a Riesling from a Silvaner, or a simple table wine from a late harvested one. This document should provide some useful information about the factors that influence the character/taste of German wines: grape variety, climate, soil, practice of harvesting grapes at various degrees of ripeness.

WHAT MAKES GERMAN WINE SPECIAL

The most northerly of the wine-growing countries, Germany produces the loveliest, lightest, most delicate white wines in the world. Low in alcohol and exquisitely balanced, they are wines of charm and subtle nuances. Other wine countries have planted the same grapes- most notably Riesling and tried to make the same wines, but they have been imitations at best. Other factors that contribute to the unique character of German wines, such as soil structure and climate, simply cannot be relocated.

GRAPES GROWN IN GERMANY

Germany has about 100,000 hectares of vineyards. About 81% of this area is planted in white grape varieties, only 19% in red grape varieties. By contrast, the worldwide ratio of white to red wine cultivation is almost exactly, the opposite.

WHITE GRAPES

Riesling is the finest and best known of Germany's white varieties (22%). Its small grapes ripen late- in October or November. This long, slow ripening period allows it to develop more aroma and harmonious balance. The resulting wine is fragrant, fruity and lively, with pronounced acidity. It has very good aging potential, due to the high levels of acidity.

Mueller-Thurgau is now the most widely planted grape in Germany (23% of total vineyard area). It is named after Professor Muller of Thurgau, Switzerland, who created it in 1882, by crossing Riesling and Madeleine Royale (not, as previously assumed, Riesling and Silvaner). The grapes ripen early - usually in September. The wine it produces has a flowery bouquet, milder acidity than Riesling and a slight muscat flavor. It is best enjoyed young and fresh.

Silvaner is a traditional variety (7%). Its medium-sized juicy grapes ripen somewhat earlier than Riesling. Grown in many areas of Germany, but focused on in the Franken region, this wine provides a subtle bouquet, mild acidity and full bodied pleasant wine that is to be consumed young.

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Kerner is a cross between Riesling and Trollinger, a red grape variety. It was bred in 1929 by August Herold. It has thick-skinned, early-ripening grapes. The wine it produces has a light muscat bouquet with racy, lively acidity, which is similar to Riesling.

Scheurebe represents 3% of German white grapes and is a crossing of Riesling and Silvaner. It often is used for late harvest beerenauslese and trockenbeerenauslese, as well as eiswein. Lively acidity is its calling card with a bouquet and taste that is reminiscent of black currants.

Rulaender/ Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) is among the best varieties in Germany (2%). It ripens at the same time as Silvaner. Its wines are robust, full-bodied, smooth, soft and full on the palate.

There are many other white varieties that add to the palate with which German winemakers paint. The fruity, flowery Bacchus, the light, mild Gutedel, the racy, neutral Elbling, or the Morio Muskat, with its flower bouquet and pronounced flavor.



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RED GRAPES

German red wines are refreshing, often light, and show more of a fruity than tannic acidity. They are a specialty, usually consumed where they are grown. Little is exported.

Spaetburgunder (Pinot Noir) is Riesling's red counterpart (7% of total vineyard area), producing elegant, distinctive wines. Its small grapes ripen late. It originally came from the French region of Burgundy. The wines it produces are velvety, medium bodied, with hints of almonds and red berry fruit.

Portugieser originally came from the Danube Valley in Austria, not Portugal which is implied in its name. It ripens early and represents 4% of grapes under vine in Germany. They are flavorful, light, mild; very pleasant, easy-going wines.

Dornfelder was created in the 50's by August Herold in Weinsberg is gaining popularity in Germany, having already surpassed Portugieser as the number two red varietal under vine. Wines made from Dornfelder are characterized by a cherry/currant aroma, gentle tannins, and deeply extracted color.

Trollinger is grown almost exclusively in Wurttemberg (2%) and probably originated in Tyrol. It is often called the bread and butter of Wurttemberg. The origin of this variety is located south of the Alps where it is called Vernatsch. It produces a fragrant wine reminiscent of flowers and sour cherries with good acidity and hearty flavorful fruit.

There are a few other varietals that are produced and have growing fans in Germany today. A few to be mentioned are Lemberger, often called Blaufrankisch in neighboring Austria, offering some richer dark berry notes not found in other red German Grapes. There is Schwartz Riesling, known also by the French synonym Pinot Meunier (Meunier = Miller), which points to the fine white hairs on the leaves that makes them look like they are dusted with flour. Regent also is a newcomer with some interesting parentage coming from Silvaner and Riesling crossed with Chambourcin. It is very resistant to disease and also produces hearty rich reds.

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GERMANY'S WINE GROWING REGIONS

Germany's wine regions are concentrated in the Southwestern part of the country. Her vineyards are located on steep south-facing slopes, in a few valleys and almost always close to a river, which tempers the climate, acting as a heat reflector, helping to maintain a constant temperature day and night. In autumn, the mist and fog that rise from the river offer the grapes protection from early frost.

In addition to the general climate, it is important to consider the micro-climates of individual vineyards. The direction and inclination of a particular slope, the intensity of sunshine reflected from the mirroring rivers, a protective ridge of hills or a forested mountain summit, which deflects the wind all help the wine achieve its ultimate taste and quality.

Germany has 13 specific wine growing regions all of which have a unique touchstone in soil type and cepage - from the depths of the subsoil to the varietals grown in each area of the 39 Bereiche. There are 160 collective vineyard sites or Grosslagen into which the Bereiche are divided. The smallest designation is the Einzellage, of which there are 2632. This translates to single vineyard in English.

AHR

This is red wine region. Over 80% of the wines produced in Ahr are red. Ahr is the smallest of Germany's regions, with vineyards extending along the steep hillsides that line the Ahr River as it flows into the Rhine south of Bonn. Most of the vineyards grow red grapes- Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir) and Portugieser- producing red wines of light charm and racy fruitiness. Lively, fresh Riesling and Müller-Thurgau are the white wines grown here. Nearly all of the region's wine is consumed locally.

MITTEL RheIN

Beginning just below Bonn and extending about 60 miles south on both banks of the Rhine, the Mittelrhein is a beautiful region of steep terraced vineyards crowned with medieval castles and ruins. Bacharach has been the most important wine village of this region since the Middle Ages. The clayish slate soil yields lively wines with a pronounced acidity. Riesling, Müller-Thurgau, Spätburgunder and Kerner grow best on these inhospitable slopes. Over 80% of the wine produced in the Mittelrhein is white. Most of the production is consumed locally or sold to visitors.

MOSEL

This is one of the most noble regions that also includes the tributaries of the Saar and Ruwer Rivers. Mosel is the home of some of the most ancient estates in Germany. From just south of the ancient Roman city of Trier, north to Koblenz, where it empties into the Rhine, the Mosel River snakes its way past dramatically steep, slate slopes covered with some of Germany's most famous vineyards. The wines of the Mosel and its tributaries, the Saar and the Ruwer, are richly fragrant, pale in color, light-bodied with a lively, fruity acidity. The slate soil imparts a distinctive taste to Mosel wines, ranging from fine and fruity to earthy, or "flinty". Often they have a hint of effervescence.

Riesling wines of great elegance and breed grow best on the steep, southern-facing slopes, particularly around Wiltingen and Scharzhofberg in the Saar-Ruwer district and in the Middle-Mosel district around Berncastel, Piesport, Wehlen Brauneberg, Graach, Zeltingen and Erden. Müller-Thurgau and an old variety cultivated by the Romans, the Elbling, are also planted in this region.

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RHEINGAU

The Rheingau is Germany's most central wine-growing region and the home of some of the world's oldest wine-growing families. It is located between Hochheim on the the Main River and Lorch near the Mittelrhein. The whole of the Rheingau is one long hillside topped by the thick forests of the Taunus Hills to the north and bordered by the Rhine River to the south, forming one district, Bereich Johannisber. This is where the famous cloisters and estates cultivated and refined the noble Riesling. It was the rheingauers who first recognized the value of Botrytis Cinerea (Noble Rot) and the Spaetlese (Late Harvest). The term Kabinett is said to have originated here. In this favorable climate and ideal soil, the Riesling develops to perfection producing noble, elegant wines characterized by a refined and sometimes spicy fragrance; a fruity, pronounced acidity; and a rich ripeness in flavor. A full bodied, distinctive red is made from the Spaetburgunder (Pinot Noir), particularly from the steep vineyards around Assmanshausen. Modern high-quality dry Riesling has been the signature of Rheingau since it gained momentum in the late 60's and early 70's. Much credit for this is due to Georg Breuer and his sons who continued to carry the torch for dry Riesling and were relentless in their insistence on maintaining strict quality requirements.

NAHE

The Nahe region is set west of Rheinhessen, which it borders and east of the Mosel. Bad Kreuznach is the region's most important town. The Nahe's vineyards thrive in a variety of soils along the steep slopes of the Nahe River and its tributaries. The more Northerly district with its loam and sandy soil produces wines that resemble neighbouring Rheinhessen, while the slate soil further south yields wines which suggest the fine flowery bouquet of Mosel wines and the elegance of Rheingau wines. Mueller-Thurgau, Riesling and Silvaner are the predominant varieties planted in the Nahe region.

PFALZ

Bordered by Rheinhessen on the north and France on the south and west, the Pfalz's vineyards sweep across this pretty, peaceful land for nearly 50 uninterrupted miles and produce more wine than any other region in Germany. The northern half of this region is home to some of the best vineyard sites. The villages of Wachenheim, Forst, Deidesheim and Ruppertsberg are well-known for Riesling wines that combine substance and finesse. Pleasant, mild wines rich in bouquet and full of body from Mueller-Thurgau, Kerner, Silvaner and Morio-Muskat grapes are also grown in the clay and marl soils of this district. Chalk, clay and loess soils yield mild, fresh, often intense wines in the southern half of the Pfalz. In addition to its white wine, the Pfalz is known for smooth fruity red wine made primarily from the Portugieser grape.

The word Pfalz is a derivation of Palast, or "palace", and comes from the Latin word palatium. The English equivalent, Palatinate is often used when speaking about the Pfalz.

RHEINHESSEN

Rheinhessen lies in a valley of rolling hills, bordered on the west by the Nahe River and on the north and east by the Rhine. This 20 by 30 mile area between the wine-growing communities of Worms, Alzey, Mainz and Bingen is the largest of the German wine growing regions and its production is second only to that of the Pfalz.

Due to the varying soil types and micro-climates, many grape varieties are planted, including the three traditional white varieties. Mueller-Thurgau, Silvaner, Riesling. The Portugieser grape is the most important red variety, and the area around Ingelheim is known for its noble full bodied Spaetburgunder (Pinot Noir) wine.

The Rheinfront or Rheinterasse are names given to the vineyards on gentle slopes directly facing the Rhein near the town of Nierstein. Here, some of the finest wines in Germany are produced, especially from the Riesling grape.

FRANKEN

Before the reunification in Germany, Franken was the easternmost of Germany's wine growing regions, with most of its vineyards planted on hilly slopes of the Main River and its tributaries. Wuerzburg is the principal city of Franken and home of the famed vineyard, Stein, which gave rise to the generic term

(FRANKEN CON'T)

“Steinwein”, formerly used to denote all Franken wines. Traditionally, most Franken wines are bottled in a squat green flagon called a Bocksbeutel.

Franken wine is the most masculine of Germany’s wines, often drier and earthier than wines from other regions. Mueller Thurgau and Silvaner are the main varieties planted, as well as new crossings.

HESSISCHE BERGSTRASSE

The wine-growing region Hessische Bergstrasse is located north of Heidelberg, bordered by the Rhine on the east. The wines tend to be fragrant and rich with more body and a little less acidity and finesse than those of the Rheingau. The Riesling is the main grape variety followed by the fragrant Mueller Thurgau and Silvaner.

The wines from the Bergstrasse are scarce and almost without exception, consumed locally. This is a good reason to attend one of the local wine festivals in the medieval town of Heppenheim (late June) or Bensheim (early September).

WURTTENBERG

Wurttemberg’s vineyards line the slopes of the Neckar River and its tributaries.

Stuttgart is its major city. With nearly half of its vineyards planted in the red varieties, it is the largest red wine region in Germany. Trollinger, Mullerrebe (Pinot Meunier), Spaetburgunder (Pinot Noir), Portugieser and Lemberger make very fruity red wines. Wurttemberg’s white wines- Riesling, Mueller-Thurgau, Kerner and Silvaner, have a vigorous, hearty taste.

Wurttemberg wines can rarely be found outside this region, as the majority are consumed by the indigenous population.

BADEN

This is the southernmost of Germany’s wine regions, along a slim strip that extends from near Heidelberg in the North to Lake Constance (Bodensee) in the South. This is the famed Black Forest area. Germany’s third largest wine region, Baden, is also its most diverse.

It contains soils that range from gravel, limestone and clay, to loess, volcanic stone and shell-lime. Its grapes are also varied and include the flowery Mueller-Thurgau; full bodied Rulaender (Pinot Gris); light, mild Gutedel; spicy Gewurztraminer; and the noble Riesling. About 23% of the vineyards are planted in Spaetburgunder (Pinot Noir), which is full-bodied when grown in the volcanic soils of the Kaiserstuhl. Spaetburgunder Weissherbst, a rose wine, is a popular wine made here.

SAALE-UNSTRUT

The small wine-growing region of Saale-Unstrut is the northernmost of Germany’s winegrowing regions with a long tradition of grape growing and wine making. The first American rootstocks in Germany were planted in the region in 1887 after the Phylloxera disease affected vineyards there. Vines are planted at the beginning of the romantic Saale River valley and on the hills near the town of Freyburg.

In the warm valley of the rivers Saale and Unstrut Mueller-Thurgau, Silvaner and Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) grapes are grown and made into a soft, dry white wine. Due to climatic conditions, Spaetlese and Auslese wines are very rare but QbA and Kabinett wines are excellent when they are young.

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SACHSEN

Sachsen is the easternmost of Germany's wine-growing regions, with most of its vineyards located on the hilly slopes of the Elbe River.

The region stretches for about 30 miles from Pillnitz in the south to Dresden, Radebeul and Meissen. The cultural and historical centers of Dresden and Meissen attract many visitors each year. Most of the wines from this region are consumed locally.

Wines made from Mueller-Thurgau (Rivaner), Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) and Traminer grapes are dry, and full of character with a fruity acidity. Some soft red wines and some Elbtal-Sekt (Sparkling Wines) are specialties of the region.

QUALITY CATEGORIES

The degree of ripeness at harvest time determines quality category. The German practice of harvesting grapes at various stages of ripeness (selective harvest) determines the official quality category of a wine and is also an important guideline when purchasing wine.

Germany's northerly location provides a moderate climate without intense heat, so it takes grapes longer to ripen than in more southerly areas. This is why the German wine harvest takes place in October and November, long after the harvest has been completed elsewhere. The longer the grapes stay on the vine, the riper they become, which means more aroma and more flavor. This long, slow ripening period enables the grapes to maintain their fruity acidity, which gives German wines their stimulating, refreshing liveliness.

Ripeness at harvest is indicated on the label by the quality category. Under the German wine law, there are two categories of quality: Tafelwein and Qualitätswein.

Here are the various quality designations in ascending order:

- 1) Tafelwein
- 2) Qualitätswein
- 3) Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete
- 4) Prädikatswein: These carry the designation Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, Beerenauslese, Eiswein, Trockenbeerenauslese all of which represent an ascending measure of harvest sugar.

The fruit sugar is harvested at certain degrees Ochsle, which is the measurement used in Germany. In the US, we measure our harvest sugar in Brix.