VDP. Die Prädikatsweingüter

THE EAGLE IS LANDING

Germany's Grosses Gewächs classification is a work in progress, and much still needs to be refined. But as Joel B Payne explains, 25 years from now, the next generation will understand that the road, though long and tortuous, not only marked a return to roots but opened up new horizons

ONCE UPON A TIME, life was simpler, and German wine labels were not nearly so confusing as they are today. Most Riesling was sold with at most the vintage, the name of the variety, and that of the producer on the label. The occasional mention of a village meant little more than that it was bottled there, much as was the case in Bordeaux for centuries, when in fact the wines came from as far away as Bergerac, Cahors, or Madiran. Only the finest wines carried the name of a single vineyard—and they were made only in minute quantities.

Since then, a cacophony of names has arisen that makes understanding a German wine label almost impossible, even to the initiated. Though the days of old had been surprisingly uncluttered, turning back the clock is never an easy enterprise. And as with much else, every German attempt to simplify things has only made them more complicated.

Until 1971, few labels on the market were littered with unknown sites and certainly not the now ubiquitous *Grosslage*; the *Prädikate* Kabinett (more often Cabinet) and Spätlese were reserved for the rarer, naturally pure wines; and words like *trocken* (dry) or *halbtrocken* (off-dry), describing the residual sugar content, were never seen.

Moreover, until then, a law known in the trade as "one to three"—which limited the level of residual sugar in a given wine according to its total alcohol level—essentially insured that all chaptalized wines (and these were by far the majority) tasted dry or, at most, off-dry in flavor. Indeed, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, chaptalized wines with residual sugar were regularly rejected by the agricultural commissions as "not typical for the region."

At that time, the "naturally pure" wines promoted by the Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter (VDP; Germany's equivalent of the Union des Grands Crus) were still the exception rather than the rule. Thus, a Kabinett with 25 grams of residual sugar per liter (g/l RS) was clearly, in its transcendent purity, an entirely different beast than its chaptalized, at most off-dry sibling. As the barriers limiting the residual sugar in such chaptalized wines were, beginning in 1971, first lowered to "one to two" and then abandoned completely, the race was on to produce ever sweeter and cheaper wines with ever more complicated

The famous Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr vineyard in the Mosel; photography courtesy of Weingut JJ Prüm / the VDP

labels, so that by the early 1980s Germany's reputation had fallen to that of plonk. No longer the most expensive wines in the world, they were seldom more than cheap and sweet, often sporting the names of unknown varieties like Albalonga, Bacchus, or Nobling—all bred to achieve high must weights—and adorned with the magic word Spätlese. Some in the trade made a quick buck with questionable methods, but all woke up with a hangover after the party was over and Germany's reputation had plummeted.

The reforms of 1971 also banished the use of the phrase *naturrein* (naturally pure), effectively eliminating the VDP's reason for being. (It had come into existence in 1910.) The association might well have been dissolved, rather than be celebrating its centenary this year, were it not for the passionate intervention of Dr Peter von Weymarn, who became the group's new president. His brave, personal commitment to dry wines during the surge of the sweet wave set the framework for further change.

The genesis of Grosses Gewächs

Against this backdrop, then, the concept of German grand cru, or Grosses Gewächs (plural Grosse Gewächse), began to evolve. The foundations were laid in 1984 by the Charta Association in the Rheingau. By 1987, their members had resurrected Dahlen's historic vineyard classification of 1885 and were making "traditional wines from first-class sites." In 1992, the first dry(ish) Rieslings were released that used three Roman arches on the label as their new logo to designate the quintessence of their production. Shortly thereafter, both Rheinhessen and the Pfalz began to develop similar concepts, based on classifications from the 19th century.

Interestingly, already in 1971 there had been lively debates in the trade about whether Germany should classify its finest sites, as in Burgundy, or place more emphasis on the ripeness level of the grapes at harvest. The resulting compromise was typically German. Like a legal contract, only the lawyers who wrote it understood its content, and maybe not even they.

Under the promise of progress, the introduction of *Grosslage* allowed wines blended over vast regions to strut their stuff as if they were of single-vineyard quality—a travesty, if not outright debauchery. The poor consumer was thus expected to be able to distinguish between a Niersteiner Gutes Domtal, which could come from as many as 15 villages scattered across the hills of Rheinhessen, and a Niersteiner Brudersberg, one of the finest sites along the Rhine and only 1.2ha (3 acres) in size.

The new law also saw the hideous enlargement of almost all of the classical single vineyards, essentially rolling the 30,000 sites previously recognized into the 2,700 used today. At the same time, the *Prädikate* (Kabinett, Spätlese, and so on), which had generally been reserved for the finest Riesling from the best sites, were cast, like pearls before swine, to any variety from any "field of potatoes," as long as the required must weights were achieved. As a final twist, the addition of words like *trocken* or *halbtrocken*—or nothing at all, which could mean dry, off-dry, or sweet—to describe levels of residual sugar that were previously self-evident made understanding the flavor profile associated with a wine's name almost impossible. Hugh Johnson once expressed surprise that Cambridge had not created a chair to teach how to read German wine labels.

As the reputation of German wine abroad reached its nadir, there were serious discussions about ranking the producers rather than the vineyards (something that I still do in my guide book). This, though, is nothing new. We all know that there is a pecking order among the Burgundy domaines that produce a Chambertin, a Bonnes Mares, or Clos de Vougeot. The core value, though, is the intrinsic quality of the site—and we all expect Armand Rousseau's Clos de Bèze to be better than his Gevrey-Chambertin.

> The VDP set its own standards. Only noble varieties should be produced from the finest sites; yields should be low; hand-harvesting should be mandatory; and a sensory evaluation should decide whether the wines satisfied expectations

Originally, Michael Prince Salm-Salm, who became president of the VDP in 1990, wanted to work closely with the various public organs involved in implementing wine policy to establish guidelines for all producers in the country. Strict, even idealistic, his association had four principal objectives: to insure that (1) *Grosslage*, similar to Côte de Nuits Villages, be abolished, or at least be clearly differentiated from individual sites such as Richebourg; (2) only finer sites should produce wines labeled Grosses Gewächs; (3) yields for these wines be limited; and (4) levels for ripeness be set high enough to guarantee the production of fine wine every year. All this was outlined in April 1993 in the so-called Strasbourg manifesto.

By 1994, however, it was clear that, since the vast majority of growers were dependent on high yields and low prices, there was little hope of finding common ground. In 1995, the VDP thus began setting its own standards, with each growing region defining rules that made sense for its own wines. In 1998, a committee was established to set minimum national standards. The common denominators were that only noble varieties should be produced from the finest sites; that yields should be low; that hand-harvesting should be mandatory; and that a sensory evaluation by

Michael Prince Salm-Salm, head of the oldest family estate in Germany to be continuously owned by the same family, played a crucial role in the development of Grosses Gewächs as president of the VDP from 1990 to 2007

What varieties may be used to make a Grosses Gewächs?

Each growing region has established a list of the traditional varieties that are allowed to be used in the production of a Grosses Gewächs. Not surprisingly, Riesling is the only grape that makes the cut everywhere. Pinot Noir, though, is a strong second and is even more widely planted in top sites in the southern part of the country.

Region	Varieties
Ahr	Riesling, Spätburgunder, Frühburgunder
Baden	Riesling, Weisser and Grauer Burgunder, Spätburgunder
Franken	Riesling, Silvaner, Weisser Burgunder, Spätburgunder
Mittelrhein	Riesling
Mosel	Riesling
Nahe	Riesling
Pfalz	Riesling, Weisser Burgunder, Spätburgunder
Rheingau	Riesling, Spätburgunder
Rheinhessen	Riesling, Spätburgunder
Saale-Unstrut	Riesling, Silvaner, Weisser Burgunder, Spätburgunder
Sachsen	Riesling, Weisser Burgunder, Spätburgunder
Württemberg	Riesling, Spätburgunder, Lemberger

local councils should decide whether the wines satisfied expectations. In its basic form, this is still true today.

Grosses Gewächs or Erstes Gewächs?

Because Germany is a federal democracy, wine law is left largely to the individual states. Thus, because the Charta Association in the Rheingau had laid the groundwork for this new approach to wine quality, because the growing region was small, and because it was the only one in the state of Hesse, it became the first and, to date, only region able move its concept through the chambers of power and have its classification ratified by a state parliament.

In the spring of 1999, the Rheingau was therefore able officially to present its map of classified sites and market the first wines as Erstes Gewächs (first growth, or premier cru). These wines were, if the acidities were sufficiently bright, allowed to have as much as 13g/l RS rather than the 9g/l RS allowed for a dry wine by German law. In the state of Rheinland-Pfalz, which incorporates the growing regions of Mosel, Ahr, Mittelrhein, Nahe, Rheinhessen, and Pfalz, finding the consensus necessary to ratify a similar concept for their many different growing regions is, at present, next to impossible politically.

In July 2001, several other regional chapters of the VDP, but not the states themselves, ratified their own systems of classification, and in June 2002 the term Grosses Gewächs was chosen to differentiate them from those of the Rheingau, which has legal precedence for the sole use of Erstes Gewächs. Later, in March 2003, the Mosel, Saar, and Ruwer decided that, in addition to Grosses Gewächs for dry Rieslings, they would use the term Erste Lage (first site) to designate wines of similar pedigree but that ran the gamut from dry through Kabinett, Spätlese, and Auslese all the way up the sweetness scale to Eiswein.

Thus, today, there are three terms—Erstes Gewächs, Grosses Gewächs, and Erste Lage—that, at least when referring to their dry manifestations, essentially mean more or less the same thing. Add to this the introduction of Hochgewächs, Classic, and, for a similar category of dry wine, Selection by the German Wine Institute, and you have overlapping classifications that make German wine labels even more complicated than they were before. Worse, some of Germany's finest dry Rieslings—such as those bottled by Bernard Breuer (whose Rauenthaler Nonnenberg was not classified by the Rheingau authorities), Josef Leitz (who is now asking that all of his holdings in the famous Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg and Berg Rottland sites also be recognized), and, until this year, Franz Künstler—are still marketed with the "traditional" post-1971 designations.

To make matters even more complicated, the consumer is also confronted with a multitude of designations by individual wineries, often in conjunction with Grosses Gewächs, like Alte Reben (old vines), or "R" (probably intended to mean reserve), or "S" (selection). For Spätlese and Auslese, you might also see, in addition to "gold capsules" of differing length, various uses of one to three or even five stars to denote different levels of quality. That the consumer is confused in this maze is self-evident, but the goal is that the labels on the finest wines be simple: The 2008 Kirchenstück by Dr Bürklin-Wolf, arguably the finest dry wine of that vintage, need not even identify itself as Riesling on the front label. The supposition is that the variety should be understood (as well as subordinate

Photography courtesy of the VDP

to the vineyard), as Chardonnay is for a Montrachet from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (or any other producer, for that matter).

One of the problems, however, is that the VDP can only make rules for its members. What others do is beyond their control; and for the time being, there is little political will to impose a new (or old) system—certainly not one based on quality—on the whole industry.

Currently, for example, in order to avoid legal problems, the VDP can classify a site as Grosses Gewächs only if at least one of its members has holdings there. Moreover, a site can only be classified if and when the member estate makes the request and it is approved. In fact, a few traditionally excellent sites have yet to be classified, even if members do have holdings in them—principally for marketing reasons, as only a finite amount of grand cru currently finds a buyer.

Furthermore, Germany has numerous other sites whose high quality is amply demonstrated by estates who are not members of the VDP. There are also others whose potential quality is known from the wines of an earlier era but that today are underperforming, have been neglected, or—in the case of many steep slopes along the Mosel, Mittelrhein, and Nahe—have all but disappeared.

Thus, there are numerous excellent vineyards that are not on the VDP's map. Initially, the VDP wanted to invite non-members with holdings in those sites to submit their wines for approval as Grosses Gewächs, as long as they met the criteria, but that concept has largely been put on hold. Obviously, though, any final classification that hopes to gain international credibility will have to take the potential of all German vineyards into account.

More troubling, though, for many—producers and consumers alike—is what to do with secondary sites that in Burgundy would be called premier cru. Though the rules of the VDP do envisage classified sites that are not Erste Lage, and the idea is embedded in its Vision 2015, this class of vineyards still lacks a satisfactory name or a credible marketing strategy. Bürklin-Wolf has tried to do this with its designations GC (grand cru) and PC (premier cru), but that solution is a one-off that works, if at all, only for this estate. The country needs an overarching solution. At present, some estates resort to contorted solutions like that of Johannishof in the Rheingau, which places a "G" after the name of the village Johannisberg to represent what was once Goldätzel. Steffen Christmann, the current president of the VDP, openly admits that his association needs to differentiate the two classes of vineyards more successfully but has yet to find a solution palatable to all parties.

In German, Grosses Gewächs should be grand cru, and Erstes Gewächs, premier cru, but at present these terms are being used for both sides of the same coin. Given the legal status of Erstes Gewächs in the Rheingau, it is producers there who need to show a willingness to find a more equitable approach. Fortunately, there is evidence that a minimum appreciation of the common goal is emerging.

In addition, all agree that making the individual village names more attractive to consumers will be an important

What are the criteria for Grosses Gewächs?

- Vineyard site must be classified as Erste Lage
- Grape varieties must be traditional for the region
- Yields are restricted to 50hl/ha
- Manual harvest
- Minimum must weight of Spätlese quality
- Only traditional production techniques
- Wine must pass a sensory examination by the regional board
- Style must be dry (less than 9g/l RS)
- The capsule must bear the VDP emblem
- The label must carry the Erste Lage logo:

- White wines only released on September 1 after previous harvest
- Red wines only released on September 1 two years after harvest

Above: the Erste Lage logo is of special significance, since Grosses Gewächs cannot yet appear on labels. Right: Steffen Christmann, head of his own estate in the Pfalz, is in charge of consolidating the classification as president of the VDP; the grand entrance to the Erbacher Marcobrunn vineyard in the Rheingau

Photography (right) by Armin Faber, courtesy of the VDP; (far right) courtesy of Weingut Schloss Schönborn / the VDP

part of their future strategy. Currently there are few buyers who will pay much more for a Wehlener, Rüdesheimer, or Forster Riesling than for the simple estate bottling—even if the contents of the former are solely from grand and premier cru sites. Armin Diel, for one, would like to introduce something like a Dorsheimer Premier Cru, analogous to the Chambolle-Musigny Premier Cru from Comte Georges de Vogüé, which is made from younger vines in Musigny Grand Cru. The idea is not bad, but since there is at present no premier cru at all, it may still seem rather premature.

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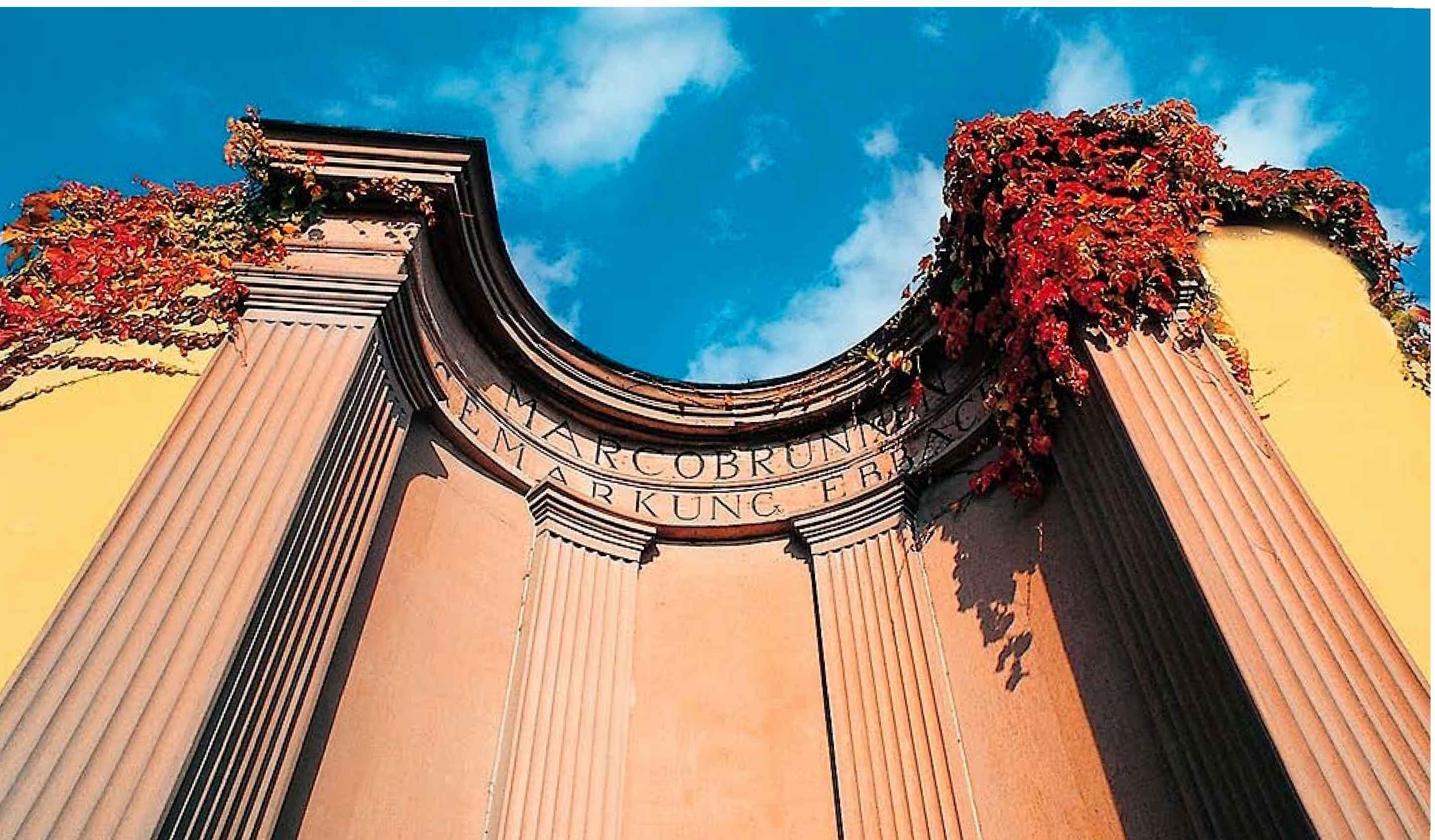
Growing pains

Adding to the current confusion is the fact that two dry wines can still be made from the same site using essentially the same designation. On the Nahe, for example, even a leading producer like Helmut Dönnhoff availed himself of the opportunity to make a Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Trocken and a Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Grosses Gewächs. To continue with the above example, that is about as coherent—or rather, as incoherent—as allowing Comte Georges de Vogüé to market both a Musigny and a Musigny Grand Cru. Dönnhoff now admits that this was a perverted idea and plans to stop making the former wine. For commercial reasons, however, he long felt that he had no choice. There was only a finite market for the upscale Grosses Gewächs, and his clientele insisted on seeing the name Hermannshöhle on the label of the "other" wine at a price they were willing to pay.

In most instances, we can put this down to growing pains, but the delusion is pushed to the extreme in Franken, where some of the estates make a Würzburger Stein Silvaner Grosses Gewächs, but also a Würzburger Stein Silvaner Spätlese Trocken, a Würzburger Stein Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, a Würzburger Stein Silvaner Trocken in the traditional *Bocksbeutel*, and a Würzburger Stein Silvaner in a liter bottle for restaurants. Obviously, a better solution needs to be found, but for now they all come up against the hard financial reality of sales and marketing.



Above: a carved stone testifies to the longstanding reputation of the Forster Kirchenstück vineyard in the Pfalz, where several top growers have holdings. Right: greater respect for the vineyards has encouraged more sustainable viticultural practices, including plowing by horse to avoid compacting the soil

What are the finest sites?

Most savvy consumers will be able to drop names like Chambertin, Musigny, or Clos de Vougeot at a dinner party, but few would be able to cite a single German vineyard. As in Burgundy, where there are myriad grands crus with lesser name recognition, Germany has well over 100 top sites. Here, though, is a short list that every Riesling lover should learn by heart.

Mosel Wehlenenr Sonnenuhr, Bernkasteler Doktor, Erdener Prälat, Ürziger Würzgarten, Graacher Domprobst, Zeltinger Sonnenuhr, Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr, Trittenheimer Apotheke, Wiltinger Scharzhofberg, and KanzemerAltenberg.

Nahe Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Monzinger Halenberg, Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube, Traiser Bastei, Dorsheimer Burgberg, and Münsterer Pittersberg.

Rheingau Erbacher Marcobrunn, Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg and Berg Rottland, Kiedricher Gräfenberg, Ostricher Lenchen, Johannisberger Hölle, Hattenheimer Nussbrunnen, Rauenthaler Baiken, and Hochheimer Hölle.

Rheinhessen Niersteiner Pettenthal, Nackenheimer Rothenberg, Westhofener Morstein, and Binger Scharlachberg.

Pfalz Forster Kirchenstück and Pechstein, Deidesheimer Hohenmorgen, Königsbacher Idig, Wachenheimer Gerümpel, Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Kallstadter Saumagen, Ungsteiner Herrenberg, and Birkweiler Kastanienbusch.

Forms of flattery

Despite all these shortfalls, because neither Grosses Gewächs (which cannot be written on the label anyway) nor the abbreviation "GG" is legally protected, all growers are free, informally or formally—as is the case for the estates belonging to the Bernkasteler Ring, whose members adhere to the same strict codes of production as their VDP brethren—to refer to certain wines as Grosses Gewächs and to put the letters "GG" on their labels or neck stickers, whether such wines fulfill similar conditions or not. Even the cooperative GWF in Franken uses similar types of logos to indicate that a given wine comes from a classified site. Imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery.

As if this were not already enough, there is also the inconvenience that the boundaries of the original vineyard sites were redrawn in 1971—a bit like gerrymandering in politics. Generally, the name of the best-known site was given to a much larger vineyard area, to help the unfortunate producers in neighboring sites to sell their wine—a bit like allowing a Volkswagen to sport a Mercedes star on its hood. Not surprisingly, the result was that some sites are now quite disparate in terms of soil, microclimate, style, and quality. Though there is more leniency on the

Photography (above) courtesy of Weingut Geheimer Rat Dr Von Bassermann-Jordan / the VDP; (right) courtesy of Weingut Dr Bürklin-Wolf / the VDP

part of some local wine authorities, in most instances the concerned estates are not allowed use the original name of old parcels if they want to distinguish between two wines made from different sites in what has become a far larger, conglomerate vineyard. Hansjörg Rebholz has done this, for example, with his Ganshorn within the Sonnenberg vineyard in Siebeldingen, but others—like Fritz Becker in Schweigen—have been sent cease-and-desist letters by the authorities for using names such as Sankt Paul in the Sonnenberg vineyard, which now covers more than 200ha (500 acres) in two countries. Yes, part of this vineyard is in France.

Notwithstanding the problems, there has been one enormously beneficial effect, at least in terms of Germans' perception of their dry wines, which itself makes the whole venture worthwhile: All of these producers concentrate principally on their finest sites and make wines that would have been unthinkable ten years ago, defining quality by the origin of the grapes and not by their level of ripeness at harvest. It thus seems certain that the concept of Grosses Gewächs will gradually become synonymous with excellent dry Riesling from Germany. The best of these wines are beyond reproach. What remains now is for the producers to work out the terminology, anchor the concept for all producers into a legal framework, and find a solution for Kabinett and Spätlese within the system.

What is dry?

All that said, the concept in its current form is not without question marks. For many, for example, the insistence on defining a Grosses Gewächs as *trocken* (dry)—that is to say, with less than 9g/l RS—is considered a poor compromise. On this I must agree. Should not the warmer sites in Baden in southern Germany, which are classified in zone B by the European Union, be confined to only 4g/l RS, as are their counterparts in Burgundy? A Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) from the Kaiserstuhl, with as much as 15% ABV and 8g/l RS, will taste almost sweet. A Riesling from the Mosel, on the other hand, with only 12% ABV but much higher acidity, may taste tart with the same level of residual sugar.

In fact, the definition of Erstes Gewächs in the Rheingau allows up to 13g/l RS. Adding insult to injury, however, if the member estates want to display an Erstes Gewächs at a show of Grosses Gewächs organized by the VDP, they are allowed to present only those wines that have 9g/l RS or less—that is, those that are Grosses Gewächs within Erstes Gewächs. Who else but the Germans could (mis)manage such details?

Originally, Rheinhessen, the Nahe, and Mittelrhein had set 12g/l RS as the upper limit for their Grosses Gewächs; the Mosel was even looking at 15 or 18g/l. In the end, it apparently came down to a game of poker. Reinhard Löwenstein of Heymann-Löwenstein in Winningen, then the president of the local chapter of the VDP Mosel, tried

to raise the bar even higher, to 20 or 22g/l and, in showing little ability to compromise, drew the losing hand. At its conference in Marienthal in 2005, the VDP decided that a Grosses Gewächs, whether from Baden or from the Mosel, must have 9g/l RS or less.

This, though, is nonsense, especially for the Mosel. Yes, there are estates like that of Markus Molitor that are able to produce excellent dry Rieslings within this constraint, but the even finer wines of Roman Niewodniczanski at van Volxem regularly show how much better they taste with between 10 and 15g/l. These wines are now not allowed to be called Grosses Gewächs. Nor are they Kabinett or Spätlese. Instead, they drift in a vinous no-man's-land.

The argument, led in particular by estates from more temperate climes, was that 9g/l RS was already an exception accorded to Germany by the European authorities as an all-too-broad definition of dry; in the rest of Europe, 4g/l RS is the norm. If things were pushed too far, the producers might lose everything. In diplomatic terms, they may well have been right, but in terms of quality and style, certainly wrong. Indeed, insisting on this strict definition of legal dryness not only binds winemakers in a corset, it often forces them to yeast, warm, or blend wines that might have tasted better had their fermentations been able to stop naturally. Instead, and as things are, they are whipped to happiness in order to reach the holy grail of less than 9g/l RS.

Armin Diel—who was one of the hardliners in refusing ever to allow higher levels of sugar to be considered dry—agrees that these wines can be lovely and perhaps even better balanced than their drier peers. He also trusts that they will continue to be made. But he does not want to see them referred to as Grosses Gewächs. The fact that such wines remain outcasts in most tastings does little to encourage estates to make them.

Interestingly, Diel also agrees that Baden, and perhaps Württemberg, Franken, and even the Pfalz, should curb the use of residual sugar in their dry wines and believes that something at this level may well occur. There is nothing in the national charter, for example, that would stop any of these regions from steering a tighter course than the national body. A limit of 4g/l RS for Baden and Franken, and 6g/l RS for Württemberg and Pfalz, would be, at the very least, an interesting starting point for discussion.

Flavor corridors

Because Kabinette, which in Germany's golden age often had only 25–28g/l RS, might today have 50 or more, the segment of flavor between 9 and 40g/l RS has essentially been abandoned by most of the finest estates. That is particularly sad, because many of the great dry(ish) wines from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Riesling's prime, often weighed in between 10 and 18g/l RS. Ironically, it was exactly these wines that the doctors who hoped to resurrect the dying patient were trying to emulate.

Though a broad consensus has yet to be found on tolerable sugar levels, there is a growing understanding that the primacy of the site, as with the Erste Lage created for the Mosel, must be the highest priority. Even better, most agree, would be Grosse Lage and Erste Lage. The focus on the dry Grosses Gewächs today is in large part a reflection of the market in Germany, where most of these wines are sold—and where little other than dry wine is now consumed.

> One argument that is often raised against completely dry wines, in particular Rieslings, is that the higher levels of alcohol that they often bring to the plate comes at a cost—namely the loss of equilibrium

It will add, for some, an unneeded or at least unwanted level of complexity, but room must be found within the classification for Kabinett and Spätlese, all the while honing their flavor profiles by limiting their levels of ripeness (as has been done in the Wachau) and creating bandwidths for residual sugar. A Kabinett, for example, should never, in my mind, be harvested at more than 88° Oechsle or have more than 35g/l RS (or less than 15g/l RS); in the same vein, a Spätlese should never be harvested at more than 98° Oechsle or have more than 50g/l RS (or less than 25g/l RS). This would not only reinvent the styles of yesteryear, it would bring these wines back to the dining table. At their current levels of sweetness, these wines are admired but neither purchased nor consumed—like the proverbial library books that are never taken out. The VDP is moving in this direction in its Vision 2015 but has set only minimum, not maximum, limits, which is not sufficient to guarantee that the consumer will someday recognize each individual style.

With time, though, I expect that the dry(ish) style of wine, if given a touch more flexibility, will ultimately again become the mainstay of consumption. Indeed, even well into the 1970s, the gospel at Geisenheim—German's elite winemaking school, akin to Bordeaux, Davis, or Roseworthy—was that Rieslings with final acidities between 7 and 18g/l RS brought the desired balance. Granted, the style of winemaking at that time was different, including the more widespread use of large oak casks, longer lees aging, spontaneous fermentations (which are often less efficient in alcohol production), and even the occasional malolactic conversion; but the inner equilibrium in the triumvirate of alcohol, sugar, and acidity was by and large the same. In any case, the core question is

that of taste and balance—and many chefs and sommeliers will tell you that these dry(ish) wines go better with food than their bone-dry brethren do.

That said, another argument that is often raised against completely dry wines, in particular Rieslings, is that the higher levels of alcohol that they often bring to the plate comes at a cost—namely the loss of equilibrium. Whereas 15 years ago the finest dry Rieslings weighed in with, at most, only 12% ABV (perhaps in the Pfalz occasionally 12.5% ABV), we often see wines with 13.5% and even 14% ABV today. At these levels of alcohol, Riesling loses its balance. Riesling from the Rhine Valley at lower alcohol and higher sugar levels, on the other hand, is inimitable and ages admirably. That is a heritage that needs to be protected.

The same phenomenon, though, is also occurring elsewhere in Europe. A Château Latour from the 1950s or 1960s might have only 12% ABV, too, but recent vintages regularly sport 13.5% ABV. The main difference, though, is that Cabernet and Merlot do not necessarily lose their balance at 13.5% ABV in the way that Riesling does. Yes, the style is different, and we do not yet know if this new generation of wine will age in the same fashion, but few would argue that Latour has become too alcoholic or lost its balance.

In both cases, and irrespective of whether a Grosses Gewächs is ultimately allowed to have (depending on the region) only 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, or even 18g/l RS, this is a factor that all European producers are going to have to fit into their future equations. Better vineyard management, warmer weather, and later harvests have changed the parameters of the grapes being crushed. Canopy management, though, can go a long way in mitigating the negative effects of climate change. By reducing the ratio of leaves to bunches of grapes, producers can slow the ripening process and thereby increase the hang-time at lower levels of alcohol, which is a critical factor in fine wine—provided, of course, that Indian summers continue to allow German producers to harvest well into November.

A question of style

Though each Grosses Gewächs may be the finest wine from an individual vineyard at a given estate, it does not necessarily mean that it is a perfect expression of that site. At the annual tasting of all Grosse Gewächse each year in Wiesbaden, I am always surprised to note how differently six examples of Forster Pechstein can taste, depending on whether from Dr Bürklin-Wolf, Georg Mosbacher, Karl Schaefer, or one of the three others who show that wine. In fact, they are at times so different that in a blind tasting you might think that they were from entirely different regions of production.

All this means, though, is that for at least a large number of estates, the house style still trumps site. And that is not unusual. I could have said much the same of many sites in Burgundy not so long ago—or maybe still could. But with time, as their styles have matured, most estates have gradually learned to be more humble and to allow each vineyard to express itself. This is now happening in Germany as well, especially among those producers who have, however quietly, embraced biodynamic viticulture and favored spontaneous fermentations.

Accept the complication

Although Grosses Gewächs is a work in progress, it has made considerable progress since its inception, and this success is beginning to be quantifiable. From the barely 100 GGs produced by only 78 estates in 2002, that number has soared to more than 414 by 148 estates today. Even so, Grosse Gewächse still represent only 2 percent of the VDP's total production. Since these elite estates themselves make only 2 percent of German output (albeit from 4 percent of the surface area, and with 8 percent of the total value), the 1 million or so bottles sold last year are still but an insignificant fraction of total volume. With average prices in the German market well above €25 a bottle, however, their value is considerably higher.

In the end, this development is far more than a marketing exercise, as some critics have maintained. The slow turn away from only the ripeness of the grapes at harvest as the sole measure of quality to naturally pure wines from the finest sites is the defining step in Germany's return to its roots and will certainly pave the way to new horizons. ■

Evolution of the production of Grosses Gewächs

By the 2009 vintage, the roughly 200 member estates in the VDP had classified approximately 280 top sites and produced more than 1 million bottles of Grosses Gewächs—more than triple the number shown at the first tastings in Wiesbaden in 2002.

2010: 414 Grosse Gewächse from 148 estates
2009: 360 Grosse Gewächse from 143 estates
2008: 346 Grosse Gewächse from 143 estates
2007: 243 Grosse Gewächse from 110 estates
2006: 219 Grosse Gewächse from 107 estates
2005: 239 Grosse Gewächse from 104 estates
2004: 230 Grosse Gewächse from 106 estates
2003: 182 Grosse Gewächse from 96 estates
2002: 108 Grosse Gewächse from 78 estates

Producers of grands crus by region

Region	Number
Rheingau	24
Pfalz	24
Franken	21
Rheinhessen	15
Württemberg	13
Nahe	9
Mosel	8
Ahr	6
Mittelrhein	4
Saale-Unstrut	2
Sachsen	1

Numbers of grands crus by Variety

Variety	Number
Riesling	231
Spätburgunder	65
Weissburgunder	23
Silvaner	20
Grauburgunder	13
Lemberger	6
Frühburgunder	2