THE DIVERSITY OF GERMAN RIESLING

- BY ROMANA ECHENSPERGER, GERMANY -

German Riesling is experiencing a renaissance, about which a great deal has recently been written. For 40 years after the Second World War, Riesling was a low-quality, mass-produced wine with a poor image, but after hard work by wine-makers across the country, it is making it onto the world's top wine lists again.

Romana Echensperger has worked for 12 years as a sommelier in high-end restaurants in Germany. In 2005, she was elected "Best Sommelier of Berlin", working from a list of 1,000 German wines. From 2007 to 2010, she was head sommelier at the three-star restaurant Vendôme near Köln, which was selected "Best Restaurant of Germany". Echensperger is a second-year Master of Wine candidate.

Needless to say, nothing is perfect. The cacophony of label descriptions in particular has been understandably discussed and criticised, although I would argue, what's the point of trying to straightjacket such a diverse product?

German Riesling is diverse in a variety of ways: each region has its history and winemaking traditions; single vineyards have different microclimates and soils, making for multiple combinations of this highly sensitive grape variety; wine styles vary from bone-dry to every imaginable sweetness level; and last but not least, ageing behaviours vary, offering an underestimated opportunity to bring more colour into the world of Riesling.

Riesling performs best in cool climates. The plant is frost-resistant thanks to its hard wood and late budding. Usually an early-ripening grape variety, the diverse German wine regions provide the long and cool ripening period needed to bring out the flavours and berry extract. This and the immense diversity of single vineyards, each with its own microclimate and soil, explain (together with winemaking practices, of course) remarkable taste differences and characters.

Riesling can show potential and typicity at very different yield levels. Severe pruning and green harvest aren't recommended. The berries grow thicker, skin-to-pulp ratio isn't optimal and the berries can burst. A very good and balanced and sweet Kabinett needs a yield of some 60-70 hl/ha. Dry wines like "Grosses Gewächs" need more concentration, and a lower yield of around 40 hl/ha.

DIVERSITY OF SOILS AND MINERALITY IN WINE

When describing wine, minerality is always a key word, although there is no scientific proof of a direct link between the soil and the taste of a wine. This is a controversial topic, and I would need a very long separate article to discuss it in detail. I'd nonetheless like to mention Professor Otmar Löhnarz (University of Geisenheim) and his scientific project called "Terroir Hessen". For the project, Riesling was grown on different soil types. It was harvested with the same yield, the same ripeness level, and all the wines were fermented with the same yeast and using the same winemaking techniques. The result was predictable: each wine tasted different, but the difference in mineral content wasn't measurable. Soil appears to have only an indirect impact on a wine's aromas.

It does, however, influence microclimate. Take for instance the Mosel's black slate soil that collects the sun's

The other parts of Rheinhessen have had a very unsettled history and most of its producers have tended to focus on quantity rather than quality, although this is not the case anymore. Rheinhessen's revival began in the 1990s when young winegrowers with good university educations and international experience came back to work on their parents' wineries.

One of most interesting newcomers is Daniel Wagner, who returned from California in 1995 and planted Merlot. Today he can only shake the head about it… The first step these young winemakers took was to reduce yield and make wines according to the rules (very clean musts, temperature-controlled fermentation, stainless steel, etc.). The result was an enormous boost in quality, but the wines were driven by fruitiness and varietal character and they lacked depth.

Today some of these winemakers have gone the opposite, or what they call the "traditional", way. This involves skin maceration, less sulphur, warmer fermentation temperatures and a sometimes quasi-religious believe in indigenous yeasts. The result is a broader and more succulent wine style.

The focus on indigenous yeast in particular is a strange phenomenon on the German wine scene. Everyone spoke about it, especially under-educated sommeliers, which has led to a misunderstanding about the importance of yeast in the winemaking process. The decision to use indigenous or cultured yeast has to be expertly assessed every year, and depends on the quality of the grapes. Sometimes it pays to be pragmatic. Using indigenous yeasts is a question of style, but does not explain quality or "terroir". Fantastic wines are made both ways.

It is lack of history and a long tradition that makes the winemaking in these wineries a little "adventurous", particularly in the second and third row.

Nevertheless, Rheinhessen is a region where quality has increased spectacularly. Such associations as "message in the bottle" (founded in 2001) have brought people together not only for marketing purposes but also to share knowledge openly and generously. This hasn't always been the case in other regions, but it certainly explains why Rheinhessen has such a strong and fast-moving scene.

Rheinhessen's hotspot is the undulating Wonnegau region. Morstein in Westhofen and Hubacker in Dalsheim are vineyards with international reputations. Klaus Peter Keller (father of the current owner) was making headlines in the 1990s with his impertinently good wines from a relatively unknown and underestimated region. Fantastic wines by his colleagues Fritz Groebe and Philipp Wittmann also show the potential of the vineyards around the villages of Dalsheim and Westhofen.

Westhofen's vineyards are unspectacular, neither steep nor stony. The secret is the soil, with a thick layer of loess providing a balanced water regime in this dry region (only around 500-600 mm rainfall a year). This, along with the high limestone content, the many sunshine hours (more than in other regions) and the relatively cool climate (in average 10 °C/year) is responsible for this unique Riesling. The wines have a creamy mouth-feel with well-integrated ripe acidity, intense grapefruit and citrus aromas and chalk dust notes. I find their texture typical and always recognisable – the "bite from Westhofen", a slightly mineral bitter taste at the back of the palate. It's the same feeling as when you bite into the white skin of a grapefruit.

The single vineyard Aulerde is made up of loess with clay in the subsoil and the wines are therefore more baroque and fruit-forward. The Kirchspiel and Morstein vineyards are planted in weathered limestone and the wines always taste salty. The fantastic wines by Klaus Peter Keller and Philipp Wittmann have an international reputation, but Fritz Groebe's wines are in the same range – he's a very likeable and thoughtful winemaker.

Rheinhessen has another huge talent. Daniel Wagner of the Wagner-Stempel Estate has brought the north-western lying village of Siefersheim centre stage. The climate is cooler than in Wonnegau and the region has profited from climate change. The soil is Porphyr of volcanic origin with no chalk content, which means a lower pH than in Wonnegau, and a more racy acidity. The balanced dryness is around 7-9 g/l of residual sugar.

Wines from Wonnegau with this level of residual sugar would taste sweet. The Heerkretz single vineyard is open to the west, which lets the wind dry the grapes and allows for long hang times. Picking takes place when the grapes are slightly overripe and their skins are starting to thin in the very early stages of Botrytis. If he can, Wagner will macerate the skins, and use spontaneous fermentation with not highly clarified musts. The wines are powerful but perfectly balanced, with a creamy texture but a fine acidic and phenolic kick on the palate. The flavours are driven by spiciness, herbal notes and a hint of flintstone, with underlying but never loud yellow fruitiness. A slight saltiness is always detectable.

NAHE: THE BAUHAUS STYLE RIESLING

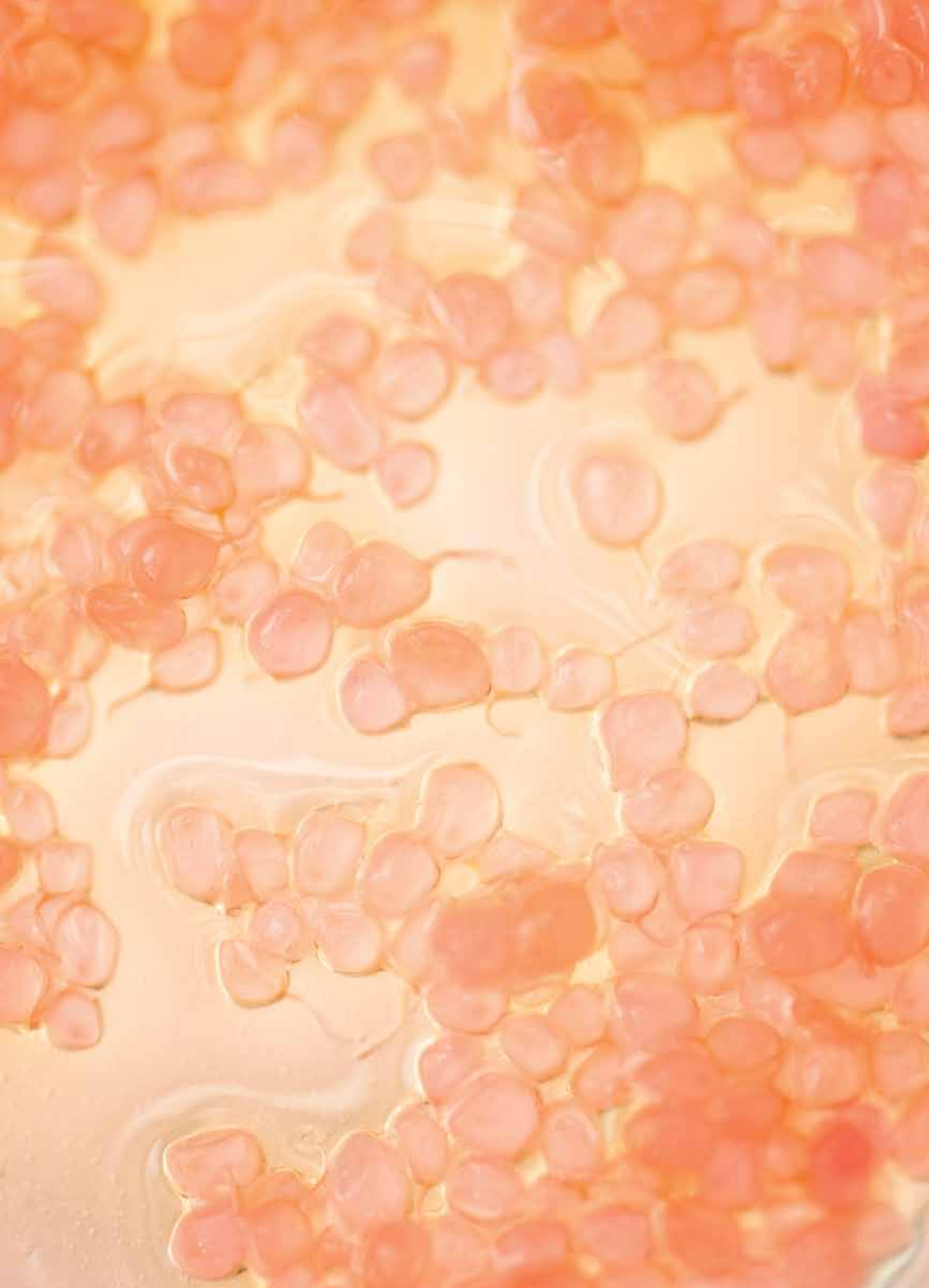
Along with Ruwer and Saar, Nahe is one the regions to have benefited from global warming. Tim Fröhlich of the Schäfer-Fröhlich winery told me that before the 1980s, only three to four vintages a decade ever ripened. Over the last 10 years, they have had a succession of fantastic vintages. One secret for this comet-like rise of the regions over the last years is that the macroclimate is relatively cool, with an annual average temperature of 9.5 °C.

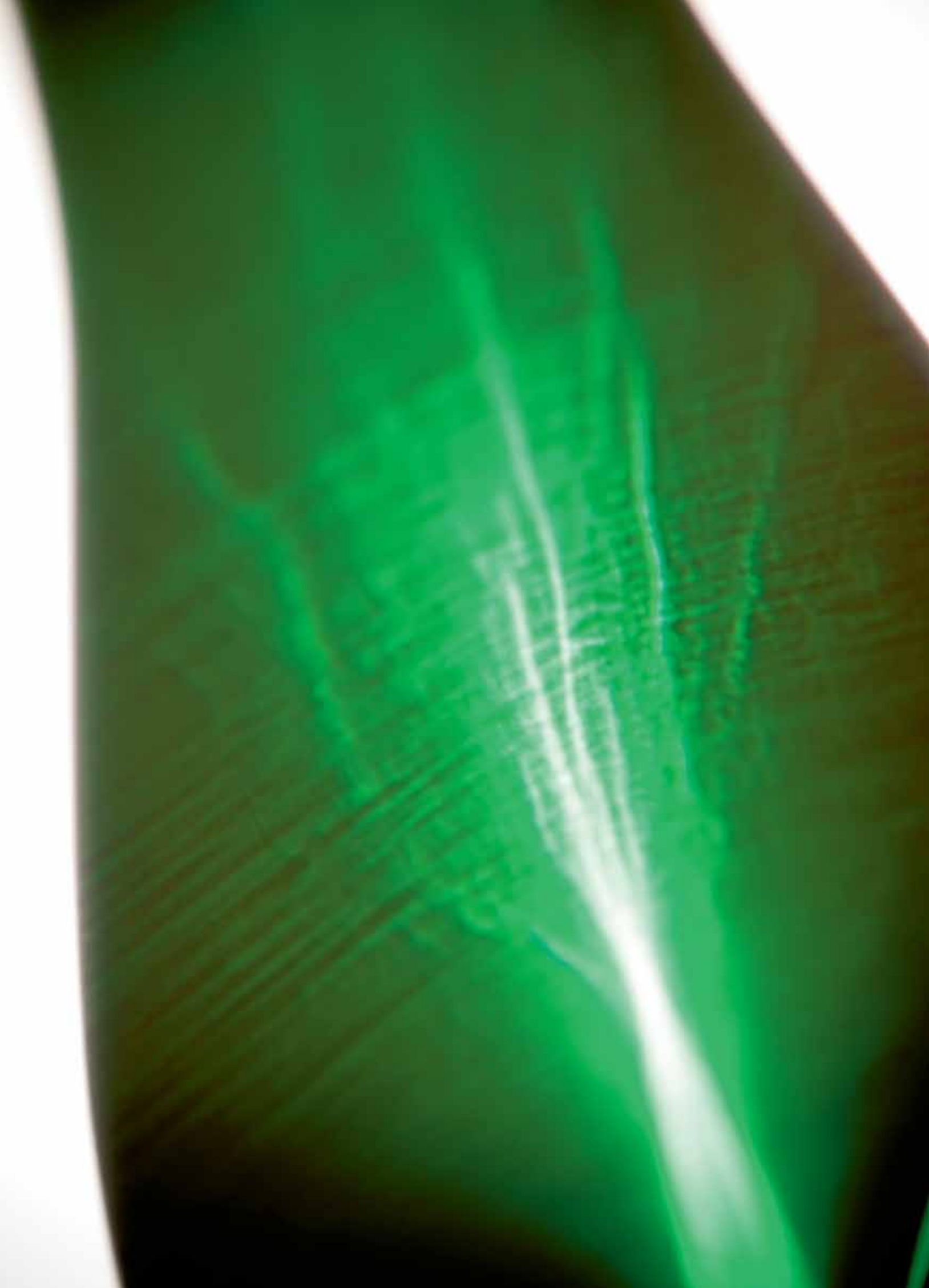
All the vineyards are planted in sheltered areas, and Riesling rules! The best vineyards are all planted with Riesling. Like Rheinhessen, Nahe has a wide portfolio of soils - porphyry, slate, volcanic soil, quartzite, and so on. And all its wines have one thing in common - a crystal-clear, well-defined, elegant style and a fine fruity tone - without any useless squiggle. I like to compare the style to the Bauhaus's 1920s architecture.

Winemaking here is more traditional and not as "hyped" as in the youthful wineries of Rheinhessen. Fermenting in big barrels is widely used and the decision about yeast (cultured or indigenous) is reached pragmatically.

Nahe also has a long history. In the Middle Ages, it

"Using indigenous yeasts is a question of style, but does not explain quality or terroir"





the same time profound. The acidity is mouth-fillingly juicy with a smoky mineralic impression in the nose and fine chiselled citrus notes.

They used to write the cask numbers on the labels. Number 6 is a plot in the Juffer Sonnenuhr that faces east, and therefore gets the morning sun and always gives a lighter, more mineralic impression. Number 10 faces west, gets the evening sun and is more opulent and powerful.

In the village of Pünderich, Marienburg vineyard has three slate types along a very narrow band – grey, blue and red. The vineyard's best area is the south-facing "Falkenlay" plot at the vineyard's centre. Clemens Busch has been working along organic lines for the last 25 years. The result is a lively and vital soil flora.

He says that this is also the reason the vineyard and cellar use indigenous yeast types that can ferment wines with 14% potential alcohol to dryness. Busch specialises in dry wines. These are powerful, with a creamy texture; they are tightly woven and have hidden exotic fruit and savoury aromas. They always require bottle age to reveal their grandiose potential.

SAAR - LIKE A BITE IN A JUICY, STOUT, RED-CHEEKED APPLE

The Saar is a very small wine region covering only some 730 ha. But its refined and crisp wine style can render us breathless. When you drink these wines, it's like biting into a stout, juicy red apple that makes your mouth water. The region is influenced by the river Saar, which is smaller than the Mosel and has less influence on the microclimate. The vineyards can be divided into two groups, one facing the river, the other not. Another difference with Mosel is that the vineyards are located some 50-100 m higher, hence the temperature is roughly 0.5°C lower. Proximity to the low mountain range means higher day and night temperature differences.

This gives the wines a higher malic acidity and their own aroma, which is not as baroque and succulent as on the Mosel. These wines share a style at different sweetness and density levels, with exceptions like the dry wines of the Van Volxem estate or the fantastic van Othegraven estate.

The climate is definitely marginal. The ripening conditions are difficult and vintage quality is therefore changeable. In the 1970s and 80s, it was difficult for some vintages to reach 70° Oechsle (around 9% potential alcohol). But here too you can feel the effect of global warming, with the last decade rich in fantastic and ripe vintages.

The soil is made up of slate and very homogeneous, unlike the Mosel, where in vineyards like Winninger Uhlen the soil type changes with every footstep.

The Saar has a handful of exceptional vineyards. The marginal climate with its differences in microclimate has a huge effect on the character and aromatics of the wines. The famous south-facing Scharzhofberg is one of the vineyards that isn't directly on the river. It's not very imposing to look at. The magic resides in the soil, which is more weathered and finely granulated than in other parts of the Saar. It is the balance of this soil that is neither too rich nor too poor that is part of the secret. But the microclimate also plays an important role. The vineyard is higher than in the other parts of the Saar, in a side-valley where cool winds dry the grapes. This very long and cool ripening period results in wonderfully extracted wines with unique elegance. The archetypical Scharzhofberg wine is made by Egon Müller IV (the family is almost dynastic, with the son and heir bearing a roman numeral behind his name). Designative is the easy-looking but skilful winemaking. Fermentation is done with indigenous and sometimes cultured (as in 2005) yeasts in big old barrels until the wine stops fermenting. Overly dry wines are blended with sweeter wines to create balance. Filtration and sulphuring is done before bottling. And that's it.

The Altenberg vineyard in the village of Kanzem is another monument. When you drive to the von Othegraven winery the very steep vineyard rises like a wall in front of you. The soil is made up of Devon slate with a hint of iron oxide. When the sun shines in winter the soil has a rosé appearance. The hill is south-facing and its steepness is responsible for higher sun radiation especially in spring and autumn, which means a very warm microclimate in this generally cool climate.

Altenberg vineyard sits on a small sidearm of the Saar, which has no influence on the microclimate or the development of Botrytis. Botrytis isn't a big issue. Bockstein in Ockfen is another vineyard in this portfolio, and has a cooler microclimate. It is also on slate soil and faces south, but extends into a side valley were winds cool the grapes. It is fascinating to try these wines one after the other. With Bockstein you invariably have the impression that the wine is some degrees cooler than the Altenberg, even when they came out of the same fridge. The Bockstein has more vegetal notes and its spicy red paprika finish on the palate is unique. The hidden fruit is driven by sharper citrus notes. The Altenberg is the warmer and rounder, with riper acidity and a very profound body and complexity.

The winery makes fascinating sweet wines at every density level but also dry wines, which have a shorter tradition and are very good, although they need more time to open up. The residual sugar in the first category makes the wines most charming when young. The pleasant and gifted Andreas Barth makes the wines, and listens closely to his terroirs. The delicate vineyard work is followed by very sensitive winemaking. He brought the winery back on track after a period of decline.

Some unbelievably inspiring wines from the Rausch in Saarburg are made by Hanno Zilliken. The modern interpretation of Saar wines by Roman Niewodniczanski from the Van Volxem Estate are also impressive.

RUWER - STEELY WITH GRIP

The Ruwer is its own microcosm and its wines are as unique as those of the Saar and the Mosel. The climate is cooler and less humid than in the Mosel. The Ruwer is more like a puddle than a river, and there's no Mosel to influences its climate. This is also why the diurnal temperature difference is greater here than on the Mosel and the wine has a more gripping acidity.

This is a very small region with only around 200 ha of vineyards, planted with 90% Riesling. Climate change has had its influence. Harvest now begins in early October – three to four weeks earlier than in the 1960s and 70s. In

THE MAGIC OF SWEETNESS

- BY HANNO AND DOROTHEE ZILLIKEN, GERMANY -

The international reputation of German Riesling rests on its best vintages, and particularly those outstanding vintages of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Most of these wines had some residual sweetness.

Hanno Zilliken studied viticulture and oenology at Geisenheim university. In 1976 he started working as cellar master at his father's winery, taking over the estate in 1981. Over the years, he created a reputation for classical, fruity and noble-sweet Riesling. His daughter Dorothee also studied at Geisenheim and is the 11th winemaking generation in the family. She's working with her parents Ruth and Hanno since 2007.

Fermentation occurred spontaneously; in very cool cellars, the yeasts couldn't ferment high-sugar level wines to dryness. It was impossible to reach any particular residual sugar level because the right filtrations didn't exist yet. Some of the sugar level was maintained by frequently racking and sulphuring the barrels by burning sulphur candles inside them.

These off-dry to sweet wines were much appreciated around the world as aperitif or to match food. In those days, residual sugar was a sign of quality, and lighter, "lower quality" musts with lower sugar levels could usually ferment to dryness. Better filtration methods were progressively developed.

It was only with the development of fine to sterile filtration and the use of SO2 that fermentation could be halted at a particular residual sugar level. Over time, more and more light and sweet wines reached the market; the sweet wine wave reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. Many of these wines were sweet and sour light wines without substance, reinforced with aromatic, excessively sweet wine made from new varietal crossings. Residual sugar was still considered a sign of quality. But residual sugar needs more than acidity for freshness and balance; it also needs body and extract.

Sweetness went out of fashion, and was promptly replaced by another excess: the dogma of dry wine. Early on in this dry "wave", the wines tended to be unbalanced and acidic. Since then, the wine style has developed into the perfectly made "Grosses Gewächs".

These dry Rieslings are not the only top Rieslings.

Today's connoisseurs have a more varied view and focus on a wine's individual structure. Above all, they're seeking crucial balance, assuming that every wine has its own personality. One single wine can't fulfil all expectations.

For many years, "halbtrocken" (medium-dry) Riesling received little attention compared to the dry and sweet wines. This may have been partly due to its graceless name. Renamed "feinherb", it has recently regained its former glory. Feinherb wines are good at tempering spiciness and heat in food and should complete any good wine list.

Our Riesling wines generally develop in the following order: when young (the first year after bottling), they are driven by primary fruit aromas. The interplay between sweetness and acidity is lively, and the wines are very pleasant to drink.

The first year, the wine develops a great deal, with smaller changes the following years. After a few years the wine enters a dormant phase - it doesn't taste young anymore but neither does it taste aged; it is relatively closed. During this phase it's better left alone. With our wines, you have to wait at least 10 years before the complexity of an aged wine starts to show.

MAKING SENSE OF RIESLING AND TERROIR

- BY ULRICH FISCHER, GERMANY -

Gironde would plant a Pinot Noir or Chardonnay there.

A-propos Bordeaux, no one would complain that in the middle of the Graves region, where you find the Premier Grand Cru Classé producer Château Haut-Brion, you also find the Sauternes appellation, where another Premier Cru producer Château d'Yquem produces a totally diverse sweet wine style from a different array of white grape varieties. Thus it makes sense that in the Mosel, where the steep-sloped slate terroirs have an unrivalled potential for producing some of the most exquisite sweet wines in the world, their "Erste Lage" vineyards express themselves best in a fruity Spätlese or Auslese style. It would be a pity to force them to express this potential only in a dry "Grosses Gewächs" style, in the same way as it would be a shame to produce dry Cabernet Sauvignon red wines under the Sauternes appellation.

Some critics of "Grosses Gewächs", including most recently Gerhard Eichelmann, the author of an influential wine guide in Germany [3], compare the young and still developing VDP classification system with its long-established Bordeaux and Burgundy counterparts. Singling out "Erste Lage", "Grosses Gewächs" and "Erstes Gewächs", embracing dry and sweet wines, he neglects the crucial fact that the VDP classification system is attempting to unite 13 viticultural regions with different wine traditions developed over centuries. Furthermore, he attacks VDP members offering icon wines at higher prices than their regular "Grosses Gewächs" wines.

However, why is Klaus Peter Keller's G-MAX Riesling immoral when a Cabernet Sauvignon-based Ornellaia or Sassicaia are hailed as Super Tuscans, although they circumvent traditional winemaking prescriptions and neglect the local hero Sangiovese?

	REGION													
GRAPE VARIETY	Ahr	Baden	Franken	Mosel	Mittelrhein	Nahe	Pfalz	Rheingau	Hess. Bergst.	Rheinhessen	Sachsen	Saale-Unstrut	Württemberg	sum
Riesling	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	13
Grauburgunder		•							•					2
Weißburgunder		•	•				•		•	•	•	•	•	8
Silvaner			•									•		2
Spätburgunder	•	•	•				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	10
Frühburgunder	•													1
Lemberger													•	1
number of grape varieties	3	4	4	1	1	1	3	2	4	3	3	4	4	

(table 2) Regionally selected grape varieties for "Erste Lage" wines

Back to the real world: the second tier offers wines from vineyards classified by the regional VDP members as a "small group of traditional vineyards with a distinctive character" [1]. In order to differentiate wines from second vineyards versus those from first-tier "Erste Lagen", you have to combine the vineyard designation with its village name (f.e. Graacher Himmelreich). In contrast, a growing number of wine estates restrict their "Erste Lage" labels to the vineyard designation alone (see figure 3), not mentioning a village name (f.e. Josephshöfer). Still, the major distinction is the use of the 1er logo, which is reserved for first-tier wines only.

Recently, some second-tier wines have been labelled without a vineyard designation, using instead the predominant bedrock type of the vineyard. These vary from slate varieties such as grey, red or blue slate, porphyr, buntsandstein (blunder), limestone or shell limestone, basalt, gypsum or volcanic rock. This approach makes it easy to understand the link between wine and soil, and it also circumnavigates a trap contained in the VDP rules. Single vineyard designations can be as large as several hundred hectares, and not each lot in this designation is able to produce "Erste Lage" wines. However, if a wine produced from a superior lot is already marketed as "Erste Lage" wine, this single vineyard designation can no longer be used for a second-tier wine. Thus a growing number of wine estates use this terroir approach, or more precisely bedrock, to label these second-tier wines with a more distinct quality cognition than a simple village designation. These are often used for second-tier wines, which need to be offered in larger quantities to meet the demand of large national distributors and international importers of VDP wines.

Third-tier wines are everyday drinking wines that reflect the style of the wine estate as well as regional character.

TERROIR IS THE FOCAL POINT

If a classification system is mainly based on the quality potential of vineyards, the term terroir becomes the central issue. According to the website of the VDP, each of the three tiers of the quality pyramid is associated with a specific degree of terroir expression. "Erste Lage" wines should express "discernible terroir"; second-tier wines should be about "distinctive terroir"; and third-tier estate wines should deliver "a hint of terroir". So we need a definition of terroir and more importantly a proof that terroir really matters and translates into wines via different quality and sensory expression.

Terroir expression of a wine should be defined as the perceptible sensory dimension of the interactions between the grapevines, the geological and pedological factors of a site, the latter's topography, and site-specific climatic conditions. Although this definition excludes anthropogenic elements, terroir cannot be isolated from human activity, as viticultural and oenological procedures may enhance and sometimes suppress terroir expression of the wines produced from these terroirs [3].

According to the VDP, "Three components determine terroir…(1) the overall quality and character of a vineyard site; (2) the skill of the grower; and (3) the quality of a vintage. Terroir is recognisable in a wine. The quality of a vineyard is defined by its soil (topographical position, climate and microclimate). Only some grape varieties are well suited to a specific terroir"[1]. Comparing both definitions, divergence is only marginal and limited to the notion of vintage. With close inspection, vintage effects are mainly expressed via the impact of climatic conditions, which are part of the scientific definition as well.

The VDP members agree on the crucial sensory dimension of terroir. None of their "Erste Lage" or "Grosses Gewächs" wines will receive this prestigious designation, unless in at least two blind tastings the quality and terroir expression was approved by their peers. As always, when human assessment is involved, especially in such an emo-

Riesling and its beautifully balanced linear wines have always been associated with the cool climates of Germany. This is where the interplay between acidity and residual sweetness is at its best, producing wines with great tension. But, as everywhere, Germany's climates are warming up and the question now is whether Riesling growers will have to adapt their viticultural practices.

Hans Reiner Schultz is Professor of Viticulture at the Geisenheim campus of the University of Applied Sciences Wiesbaden in Germany's Rheingau. His research includes grapevine physiology, viticulture, vineyard establishment and management, and the effects of climate change. Schultz is also Director of the Geisenheim Research Centre, and a much-in-demand speaker at international scientific and wine symposia.

Although Riesling is traditionally considered Germany's quality grape variety, it is grown in many of the world's wine regions. Of the 34,000 hectares of vineyards planted with Riesling worldwide, 22,400 hectares are in Germany. Alsace in France has 3,500, Austria 1,640, Australia 4,500, the US 1,700 and New Zealand around 900. Considering that there are more than 7 million hectares of vineyards around the world, this doesn't amount to much!

Obviously, these regions don't all have cool climate conditions, although Riesling is considered a cool climate grape variety. The New World regions are usually the warmest, like the Okanagan Valley in Canada, the Yakima Valley in Washington State, US, or the Adelaide Hills, Australia; Blenheim in New Zealand is on the cooler side of the "Riesling wine regions" with a reputation. How much does climate affect Riesling's distinct character? And can we look at the warmer regions outside Germany as an illustration?

Riesling is thought to be a cross between two very old grape varieties that may have been around before the Middle Ages: Traminer and Heunisch. Traminer was apparently spread across various wine regions in Europe – it is genetically linked to grape varieties like Muscat, Gewürztraminer and Sauvignon Blanc –, while Heunisch is thought to have been a lower-quality grape from Central Europe, mainly Germany. The roots of "Heunisch" are in the Roman "vinum hunicum", meaning "wine of poor quality", as opposed to "vinum francicum", or "high quality wine". The opposition between good and bad wines was particular to the Middle Ages, when people were not yet interested in varietal differences. The name "Traminer" first appeared in Europe in 1349, while the earliest record of "Riesling" dates back to 1435. Riesling is definitely an old grape variety.

DOES RIESLING HAVE A FAVOURITE CLIMATE?

In general, Riesling needs cool to intermediate climates for its crop to ripen properly. Cool regions have average growing season temperatures of 13 to 15°C. They are traditionally suited to grape varieties like Müller-Thurgau, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Pinot Noir, and to a lesser extent Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. We don't have specific information about the upper temperature suitability thresholds for these varieties, but we know that Riesling shares, along with the other varieties mentioned, an adaptability to intermediate climates, with average growing season temperatures of 15 to 17°C.

Other cultivars suited to intermediate climates include

GERMAN RIESLING IN VINTAGES

PAST GLORY

Great vintages were once a matter of good luck. Viticultural practices and cellar techniques were not well developed and the use of sulphur dioxide was rudimentary. The 19th century, for example, was known as "the century of cold vintages" and only very warm vintages produced outstanding wines.

The wines were much less sweet than today's sweet wines. Auslese wines with residual sugar levels of 15-25 grams per litre were quite normal. A lot of these wines were dry, due to the lack of cellar know-how about how to stop fermentation. The high extract of these wines in outstanding vintages is unique, and some of them are still excellent today.

1811 - the best (warm) vintage of the 19th century. Also called the "Goethe vintage", because he wrote about it in a poem.
1893 - great vintage for Botrytis wines, with the famous "Black" TBAs. Although black in colour now, the wines still have fruit and acidity.
1911 - very good vintage that still has excellent ageing potential. Like 1811, 1911 is called "the vintage of the comet", due to the passage of Halley's Comet that year, a phenomenon that takes place every hundred years.
1921 - very ripe vintage that was at first underestimated. Fermentation took a long time.
1934 - very good vintage, but with a very small yield. Fine Auslese wines without Botrytis.
1937 - excellent vintage with high-quality Auslese.

AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The years 1945 to 1985 were difficult for the German quality wine market. The country was recovering from the devastations of the war, and German wine was all cheap and sweet (like Liebfrauenmilch).

The wine law of 1971, which did not acknowledge the best single vineyards, was another step down. There were some very good vintages, but most were mediocre.

1945 - no bottles, no corks, no workers, but a giant wine after a fantastic summer of peace.
1947 - very good vintage.
1953 - very good vintage.
1959 - weather records in Geisenheim reveal the same weather conditions as in 2003: extremely hot, with concentrated, mostly Botrytis-free berries. Low acidity levels, but still very drinkable. Carl von Schubert (of the estate Maximin Grünhaus in the Ruwer) was seven years old when the 1959 vintage was harvested. He told me that his father put milk cans filled with water in the vineyard, so that the workers could wash their hands; the berries were so sweet that their fingers kept sticking together.
1964 - very good, classical vintage; resembles 2004, slim and balanced, with structured acidity.
1971 - outstanding, classical vintage, ripe with fresh acidity.
1975 - outstanding, classical vintage, ripe with fresh acidity.
1976 - vintage of the century, low acidity. Hot year, with a lot of Botrytis.
1983 - fantastic ice wines.
1985 - ripe vintage, but not fat.

THE NEW AGE

The "new age" for German wines is driven by the recovery after the debilitating 1970s and 1980s, and the rise of strong personalities like Bernhard Breuer (of the Georg Breuer estate in the Rheingau region) with his uncompromising quest for quality. A new "wave" of dry wines appeared; in the beginning these wines were often too dry and unbalanced. The VDP established their vineyard classification and the concept of "Grosses Gewächs".

1989 - Botrytis year, although rain sometimes washed out the concentrated flavours. The wines should be drunk now.
1990 - top, classical vintage, high acidity.
1991 - poor vintage.
1992 - mediocre, some good Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese.
1993 - mediocre; Ruwer was special, due to frost in October. The vines lost their leaves early, which meant flavour ripening stopped prematurely. The wines are concentrated but somewhat steely in character.
1994 - mediocre, some good wines in Mittelrhein and Mosel.
1995 - classical vintage, fresh acidity, good ice wines.
1996 - a lot of acidity and extract, riper than 1995.
1997 - very ripe and high acidity, very good vintage.
1998 - very ripe and high acidity, rain at the beginning of harvest.
1999 - Botrytis year.
2000 - bad vintage, a lot of rot.
2001 - top vintage, classical and elegant, ripe acidity, good Botrytis.
2002 - more round and creamy than 2001.
2003 - hottest year ever, most dry wines are mediocre, with some exceptions, outstanding sweet wines because of concentration without Botrytis. Similar to 1959.
2004 - classical vintage, leaner structure, firm and refreshing acidity, good ripeness level.
2005 - outstanding vintage, lush, ripe and creamy.
2006 - not good for dry wines because of early Botrytis, some very good Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese wines.
2007 - outstanding, classical vintage, very ripe but refreshing acidity, long lasting.
2008 - average, good vintage.
2009 - outstanding, classical vintage, ripe and refreshing acidity.
2010 - small yields because of cold and wet weather, resulting in extremely high acidity levels and a lot of Botrytis. May be interesting for Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese wines.