



# RHEINHESSEN - THE YEAR OF SILVANER

German wine generally has been going through difficult times in recent years, but winemaking and viticultural advances - and global warming - have all had an effect. *John Radford returned to Germany after a gap of ten years.*

All images courtesy of Wines of Germany.



The rot set in in the mid-1970s: a new German wine law, which was supposed to make things simpler, did exactly the opposite and also opened the door for a flood of cheap, sweetish white wine which was to destroy the image of German wine for almost a generation.

However, recent tastings in London – especially an event at the German embassy a few years ago – had started to intrigue me, and in 2008 the international Pinot Noir trophy at the DECANTER World Wine Awards went not to a wine from Burgundy, but to a red wine from Germany. This would have been unthinkable even five years ago, so I jumped at the chance to go on a trip to the Rheinhessen, organised by Rheinhessenwein, the generic body for the region. The trip was to climax at the gala dinner in celebration of the Year of the Silvaner in Mainz, but more of that in a moment.

This was a FIJEV tour organised by German journalist Wilfried Moselt, and my fellow members were from Holland, Belgium, France, Greece, Israel, Chile, the Czech Republic, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Hungary and Luxembourg, so there was a good deal of debate about how different styles of wine were perceived in different countries, but most of us were hoping to see some radical changes in the way wines are made in Germany. We were not to be disappointed.

### High Tee

Our base for the trip was the Golf Hotel Rheinhessen, Hofgut Wißberg in St-Johann, about 30 km south-west of Mainz. It's a smart, modern hotel set within a golf course which in turn is surrounded by rolling vineyards with regimented rows of vines, immaculately trimmed and showing some pendulous bunches waiting for the harvest. The hotel's restaurant is called Metzlers im Golfclub after the chef Bernhard Metzler, who runs one of the region's best restaurants (Metzlers Gasthof in Hackenheim). On the night we were welcomed by Thomas Schätzel, president of Rheinhessenwein, who explained that the purpose of the trip was to show the world outside that German wine in general – and Rheinhessen wine in particular – had changed radically in recent years. The wines served with dinner were made from Silvaner unless otherwise mentioned.

Bernhard had created a four-course meal for us, with each dish accompanied by two or three wines from the region. We started with a 2007 sparkling brut (Winzersekt) with the canapés, which was pleasantly, surprisingly good. The starter was a terrine of wild duck with a small green salad, served with two wines, and the best match was a 2008 Dittelsheimer (Winter) which was just slightly off-dry but actually partnered the duck slightly better because of that. I would never have dreamed of ordering this wine (or, indeed, any German wine) with a duck terrine, in a restaurant. This was a pointer to how the trip was going to develop.

The fish course was barbeau-rouge with scallops in a saffron and vegetable jus, served with three wines, and the best match was a 2007 Scheurebe (Meiser) which had some of that Riesling-style wood-oil character, and enough richness on the palate to match the fish, while remaining perfectly dry: a revelation.

The main course was pigeon and pâté de foie-gras with kohlrabi, served with two wines, and my vote went to a 2006 Spätburgunder (Hirschhof): slightly smoky pot-pourri on the nose with light, crisp, fruit, some tannin, and a hint of caramel on the finish. The acidity was just right to cut the gaminess of the meat, and made an excellent combination.

Dessert was a daring mixture of fromage frais boulettes with roasted cretons on grilled plums with two sweet wines: 2005 Hahnheimer Knopf Huxelrebe Beerenauslese (Kapellenhof) and 2002 Bodenheimer Reichsritterstift Riesling Eiswein (Staatliche Weinbaudomäne). They were both magnificent, the Beerenauslese rich, spicy and delicate all at the same time, and the Eiswein clean and citrusy, with an orange-scented finish, and somehow the combination worked extremely well. This was only the first day and already my view of German wine (and, indeed, German food) had changed radically. The only problem seems to be that most wine-lists in the UK are not wide enough to cope with the wines' names, never mind trying to get the customer to pronounce them.

### The Blindprobe

"I didn't realise there was going to be an exam!" Remarked one of our group the following day at the Haus der Landwirtschaft in Alzey, which is where wine regulation and quality control are administered. Journalists are usually reluctant to be put on the spot but, as it happened, nobody was going to mark our papers. Dr Ludwig Tauscher is the director of the wine office and he gave us a flight of 14 wines, all presented blind, and all red. Our task was simply to determine the grape variety in each case, and whether the wine was from France, Germany or Italy. A detailed report on the tasting is in the wine supplement with this issue of YES CHEF! but I will say that the general consensus gave the top mark to the 2006 Gaia Ca'Marcanda from Tuscany. I, as always, begged to differ and my highest mark went to a 2007 Mainzer St.Alban Syrah (Fleischer). The same vineyard also produces a Merlot, and there was a generic 2007 Rheinhessen Cabernet-Sauvignon (Peth-Wetz) both of which had my second-highest mark. Global warming is certainly having an effect here. As a bogey, Ludwig had included a South African Syrah just to confuse us which, interestingly, came towards the bottom of the poll. Dare I confess that my lowest mark went to the 2007 Chassagne-Montrachet (J.M. Morey)? I spotted that it was Pinot Noir but wrote it off as an over-tannic wannabe super-Tuscan. I shall probably never work for them.

### The Gutschänke

Then it was back to the taste of 'real' German food with lunch at the Alte Brennerei in Mölsheim. It's housed in a lovely old stone monastic building dating from 1713, and has been beautifully refurbished by Gerd and Judith Göhring in typical German schänke (tavern) style: plain wooden floors, long tables for communal dining, and big candles on the tables. We were greeted by Gerd in his chef's 'whites' (jeans and a red apron) and he started us off with baskets of freshly-baked blätterteigtaschen – the savoury puff-pastry turnovers that begin the meal so well with an excellent glass of sparkling Pinot Blanc de Noirs (Göhring). The wines were supplied and presented by a new group of young winemakers who, in common with



Harvest time in Rheinhessen

so many of their generation, have turned their backs on the bad old days and eight years ago formed an association called 'Message in a Bottle'. There are 26 members, and two of them had come along. I spoke to Max Pfannebecker who was showing his 2008 Riesling Trocken, which was excellent, with classic Riesling style and crisp acidity. In case you missed out on the trocken (dry) 'revolution' the category was introduced some years ago to counter the trend for slightly-sweet, bland, 'nothingy' white wines by reducing the residual sugar to 4 g/l or less. In the early days all it meant was that wines were made in the traditional way and then had the sugar removed, which meant that they tasted as if they had had the heart ripped out of them. According to Max, warmer ripening seasons now mean that they can simply ferment all the sugar out, giving a higher strength (up to 13% abv or even more) and a dry wine (rather as they have been doing in Alsace for many years). The result is excellent. Also represented was the winery of Karl May with his 2008 Liebenauer Hof Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) which had astonishing fruit, richness and power while remaining completely dry.

But the main course was about to arrive. On the English-language menu it was described, rather coyly as 'granny's cutlet'. This proved to be a generous escalope of pork in breadcrumbs served with a mountain of sauté potatoes, caramelised onions and a gigantic salad, which I eventually shared with the rest of the table. This was splendid (especially with the Grauburgunder), and a real taste of traditional German country food.

## The Other Pfannebecker

As thunderstorm clouds gathered we moved on to Michel-Pfannebecker (no relation to Max, above) in Flornborn for a tasting in the courtyard of the winery. Heinfried and Gerold Pannebecker (pictured left) are enthusiasts for terroir, and gave us a



tasting of a range of wines defined by the soils in which the vines grow – this is particularly important for Riesling, which is widely seen as a ‘transparent’ variety, uniquely showing its origins in the glass. Without going into too much detail, the winemaking was such that wines made from grapes grown in the various soils really did show different characteristics. My top marks went to two wines, the first from terra rossa (red clay over limestone): 2008 Westhofener Steingrube Selection Rheinhessen – fresh, delicate, subtle ‘green grass’ perfume with ‘wood-oil’ overtones, classic Riesling; and the second from kalkstein rendzima (decayed limestone with primeval sea fossils): 2008 Flornborner Feuerberg Selection Rheinhessen – delicate, delicious, fresh Riesling character, long ‘wood-oil’ finish, bone dry; superb.

Then the heavens opened and we did a runner back to the hotel, but this had been a real learning experience. More information in the wine supplement to this issue.

## Si, Si, Silvaner

My first ever visit to Germany included a stay at the Favorite Parkhotel in Mainz, and I was delighted to see that little or nothing seemed to have changed over the passing years. The event was a celebration of the Silvaner grape, which is one of the main varieties grown in the Rheinhessen and which, until relatively recently (and in common with many other European grape varieties) was seen as a ‘second-class’ grape only suitable for blending. Over the years I have developed a philosophy which has determined that there is ‘no such thing as a bad grape, just bad winemaking’ and this event was to prove to be another piece of supportive evidence.

The head chef at the Parkhotel is Helmut Danker and he had created a special menu to showcase the different styles of Silvaner from trocken to eiswein – ten wines in total, accompanied by the Oppenheimer saxophone quartet and hosted by the lovely 20-year-old wine student Lisa Bunn who is this year’s Rheinhessen ‘Wine Queen’.

The starters came, rather beguilingly, on a three-level etagère: on the top, marinated vegetables with scampi; middle - carpaccio of black Angus beef with leaves, and on the bottom vitello tonnato with a giant caper and a light tuna sauce. This was a good, light introduction to the meal, and the best match was a 2008 Grüner Silvaner trocken (Manz) with a clean fruit and fresh acidity which went well with the starter.

Next up was half a quail with black lentil ‘caviar’ in a Silvaner sauce, and this was excellent. The wines were a cut above, too, with a 2008 Silvaner Classic (Russbach – good fresh ‘green’ fruit) and a 2008 Silvaner Trocken Von Rottliegenden (Staatliche Weinbaudomäne – clean, musky fruit and a crisp finish), both bone dry and as good as each other with the quail.

Then it was an unusual pan-fried turbot in a sweet-and-sour curry sauce, with wok-fried vegetables and basmati rice. This was an ambitious dish and very much not what you expect in Germany, but it came together very well. With it they served three more wines and the best match was 2008

Flornborner Feuerberg Silvaner Trocken (Michel-Pfannebecker – lighter fruit, fresher, slightly smoky).

By now it was becoming apparent that, in the right hands, the Silvaner really could show its prowess as a food wine, right across the spectrum from European to oriental food. Before the dessert they pulled out a real blast from the past – a 1971 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Silvaner Auslese (Bungert-Mauer). This was splendid, if starting to fade: wonderful rich fruit, still with clean acidity, showing a bit of oxidation on the finish, but a wonderful experience.

Dessert was home-made plum tart with sabayon and walnuts, served with 2008 Albiger Schloss Hammerstein Silvaner Eiswein (Köster-Wolf – absolutely sublime with honeyed richness and yet still fresh acidity) and 2008 Neu-Bamberger Kletterberg Silvaner Eiswein (Schweiz – another classic eiswein style – superb). The tart was excellent and the wines even more so, but I do feel at this level the wines perform better just by themselves rather than with food – especially something as hefty as plum tart with sabayon. The whole event had, however, confirmed my new-found enthusiasm for the Silvaner grape, and opened my eyes to the range of modern German cooking.

## Three Regions in One

Although we were guests of Rheinhessenwein, the Johannerger winery in Biebelsheim actually sits close to the meeting point of the Rheinhessen, Rheingau and Nahe and, with the new emphasis on terroir, offers a wide range of different combinations. It’s another of these ‘new-wave’ wineries run by a new generation of winemakers, in this case Jens Heinemeyer, Dieter Schufried and Markus Haas who established the business in 2005. They grow a wide selection of grapes and, over the years, have been able to ascertain which variety grows best in which particular patch of terroir. They also make sparkling wines (and have their own distillery, too) and we started off in the old, cobwebby candlelit cellars with an excellent Pinot Noir rosé brut. The tasting was upstairs in a very contrasting setting: the company also sells barbecues and we tasted in the sales room. The wines were, however, fascinating. The highlights were:

**2007 Riesling ‘Berg’, Rheinhessen** (stony pebble soil) – wood-oil rich Riesling style with good complexity.

**2006 Pinot Gris sur lie, Nahe** (clay over limestone) – rich, ripe, mature old-vines character, with fruit, wood-oil and a long finish.

**1997 Lorcher Bodenthal-Steinberg Pinot Noir, Rheingau** (phyllite slate) – dark, classic Pinot Noir with a hint of liquorice and dark chocolate, mature, excellent.

And I must say a word about their 2006 Müller-Thurgau, Rheinhessen (old vines on lower slopes) – this grape is widely ridiculed as bland and featureless, but on this showing had depth, warm, honeysuckle scents and an astonishing structure and complexity. See ‘There’s no such thing...’ in Si, Si, Silvaner above.

Then it was in to lunch – the winery has its own dining room and, perhaps unsurprisingly, it was barbecue time: I’d reflected that I’d been in Germany for three days and hadn’t had a sausage, but this was to change. The restaurant is light and airy with white-painted tables and pictures of rock formations and zebras (no, me neither) and looks out on to a garden area. Unfortunately the weather wasn’t good enough to sit outside, although the barbecue was working well under a hood. The food was simple German fare – meat and vegetable kebabs, rather beguilingly served on an artist’s palette, and then barbecued salmon with stir-fried vegetables (excellent with the Riesling) and finally, at last, sausages, although surprisingly enough they were not German but South African boerewors, which must be the ultimate barbecue sausages. Finally we had a dessert involving a lot of fruit, yoghurt and nuts which is, apparently a secret recipe of the winery. With that we drank ‘J’ which is described as ‘The Exclusive Gourmet Wine’, a 2009 Huxelrebe beerenauslese with a rich, gamey nose and lovely, gentle, unclinging sweetness.



## Hanging Red

You think you’ve seen steep vineyard slopes? Well, the Roter Hang just outside Nierstein is so called because the red sandstone soil vineyards tilt at a frightening 45° down towards the river and, while the scenery is spectacular, it does make you wonder how they actually pick those grapes at harvest time. We met at the wonderfully-named Fokkenberghütte, which is a kind of wooden summer-house overlooking the majestic Rhine as it curves around Nierstein, and the tasting was hosted by Konstantin Guntrum of Weingut Louis Guntrum after a walk through the vineyards. Once again (and I have to confess that my personal image of German wines had now shifted through 180 degrees) there were splendid examples here:

**Niersteiner Hipping** – lovely classic wood-oily ripe Riesling with warmth, ripeness, just a little off-dry but it works. Wonderful.

**Niersteiner Orbel** – bright fresh acidity on the nose and musky fruit with that classic Riesling mineral character on the palate.

**Edition ‘S’** – just a hint of ‘cabbage’ on the nose, but clean, fresh fruit on the palate. Delicious.

And an honourable mention for the **1978 Niersteiner Auflangen** which had a big, soft honeyed, velvety-oily nose with a hint of cabbage on the palate but with the fruit creeping back. It needs drinking up but, once again, it was a privilege to taste a wine of this calibre and maturity.

## Do I look like an Australian?

Dinner on our last day was another German classic, at the Weinschänke (wine-tavern) ‘Altes Pfarrhaus’ in Ober-Hillbersheim. The name translates as ‘old vicarage’ and the building dates from 1701. Then 26 years ago Edwin and Marei Kull took it over and created what Edwin describes as a ‘seasonal wine tavern’ open sporadically throughout the summer, which has since evolved into a popular local restaurant. It has an outside seating area (sadly, the weather had not improved) and we enjoyed a pink Pinot Noir as Marei welcomed us and led us indoors. On the way to the table a lady dining at another table stopped me and asked if I was Australian. I mean, am I 6’5” with blond hair and blue eyes, with a surfboard over my shoulder and a can of XXXX in my hand? Er, well, no. I asked why she could have entertained such a misconception, and she said that the local paper had reported that a group of Australians were visiting the area that week. We had a dozen nationalities, but no-one from Australia.

Once again the food was simple but delicious (steak and chips and caramelised onions in my case) and we drank Riesling, Silvaner an excellent Frühburgunder (Weber) and an even better Spätburgunder Classic (Schales - €14.90 on the table) but by now my detailed note-taking was hitting the buffers. The dinner was warm, relaxed, friendly, and very German. We finished off with coffee (in nice little multi-coloured coffee cups) and grappa (apparently there is no German word for this spirit) which was rather hot but very welcome.

We staggered back to the hotel and Wilfried regaled us with an excellent Sankt-Laurent (Keth), a Blauer Spätburgunder (Mett) and a Westhofener Morstein Spätburgunder (Gutzler) all of which made an excellent digestif. This had been an educational and very enjoyable trip. For more information about the red wines please see the wine supplement with this issue of YES CHEF! Magazine.



Lisa Bunn, Rheinhessen ‘Wine Queen’, 2009



Helmut Danker