



DR. LOOSEN

A Brief Guide to the Wines of Germany

German wines are produced according to a quality scale based on the ripeness of the grapes at harvest time. In general, riper grapes produce richer, more complex wines. Because of Germany's cool, northern climate, full ripeness can often be difficult to achieve, so this ripeness-based quality scale does make some sense. The problem is that it ignores the historically proven differences in variety and vineyard site and does nothing to address differences in quality among producers. The result is that, judging only from the label, a Riesling Spätlese from a dedicated winemaker and a great vineyard would seem to be of the same quality as a Müller-Thurgau Spätlese from an industrial producer and lousy vineyards. The best way to proceed as a consumer is to find the producers whose style you enjoy and then focus on the differences between the quality levels and vineyards in their wines.

GERMANY'S LEVELS OF WINE QUALITY

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

Qualitätswein mit Prädikat/Qmp. The word Prädikat [PRAY-dee-cot] literally is the grammatical term, "predicate." Prädikat wines are "predicated" on a certain level of quality, of which there are six: Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, Beerenauslese, Eiswein and Trockenbeerenauslese. These are the finest of German wines. No chaptalization is allowed.

Kabinett. This is typically the lightest and most delicate style that an estate will produce. Kabinett is made from normally ripe grapes picked early in the harvest. In a region like the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, Kabinett will be quite light and delicate, with just seven to eight percent alcohol.

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

Auslese. [OWS-lay-zuh] Auslese means "selected from the harvest." This is the Prädikat level for overripe, late-harvested grapes that are selected cluster by cluster. Often made in the fruity style with residual sweetness, Auslese is considered by most winemakers to be their finest achievement (aside from the rare dessert wines). Top winemakers often make several Auslese from different selections based on botrytis levels. In this case, the wines are distinguished by AP Number, by gold and long gold capsules or by stars after the vineyard name, depending on the winemaker's preference.

Goldkapsel. German for gold capsule. These are used by some winemakers to distinguish a special selection wine from its "normal" counterpart. For Dr. Loosen, Goldkapsel Auslese indicates a selection of grapes that are about 50 percent affected by botrytis. In some vintages, a Long Goldkapsel Auslese may also be made from grapes that are fully affected by botrytis, but not yet shriveled, as in BA and TBA (see below).

Beerenauslese/BA. [BEAR-en-ows-lay-zuh] Adding on to the word Auslese, in that inimitable German orthographic style, this means "berry selection." Beerenauslese is a rare dessert wine made from extremely overripe grapes that are fully affected by the botrytis mold. The grapes are selected one berry at a time!

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

Trockenbeerenauslese/TBA. [TRAW-ken BEAR-en OWS-lay-zuh] Germany's greatest and rarest dessert wine. Trocken (dry) here refers to the individually selected berries, which have been completely shriveled by the botrytis mold. It does not refer to the taste of the wine, which is quite the opposite of trocken.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Wines of Germany by Stephen Brook, Mitchell Beazley, 2003. Excellent book – concise, comprehensive, up-to-date.

Riesling Renaissance by Freddy Price, Mitchell Beazley, 2004. A beautiful new book that covers great Riesling worldwide.

The Wine Atlas of Germany by Stuart Pigott, Mitchell Beazley, 1995. An invaluable resource, but sadly out of print.

The Oxford Companion to Wine, 2nd Edition Jancis Robinson, editor, Oxford University Press, 1999. The single greatest wine reference book in existence, this should be a part of any true wine lover's library.