THE ANDRÉ L SIMON LECTURE 2011

Presented by

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"German Viticulture, The Last 20 Years"

In his introduction to *The Great Wines of Germany and Its Famed Vineyards*, written with Fritz Hallgarten, which was published in 1963, André Simon described his first visit to Germany in 1911:

I fell in love with the Rhine and Moselle.
How could I, or anybody else with eyes to see, fail to do so?[1]

Alas, many have subsequently failed to do so, as the international renown which German wines enjoyed in André Simon's youth was remorselessly destroyed both by the political conflicts of the twentieth century and by the misguided marketing policies of its leading exporters, of whom, indeed, Fritz Hallgarten was one.

The modern history of German viticulture has to begin with the German – in reality, European Community – Wine Law of 1971, to which developments over the last twenty years are in large part a belated and necessary reaction. The chief defects of the 1971 Wine Law were threefold: 1. It permitted no distinction on the label between individual vineyards (*Einzellagen*) and collective sites (*Großlagen*), the latter by definition of lower quality; 2. The grape varieties were not always specified, allowing the blending of quality grapes, above all Riesling, with lesser varietals without any indication on the label; 3. The Law made no attempt to regulate or restrict yields in the interests of quality. On this latter point it is a common misconception that yields in German vineyards were traditionally very high. The reverse is true, not least on account of their northern latitude and harsh climate. From the 1930s to the 1960s, barring exceptional years, yields mostly ranged between 40 and 50 hectolitres per hectare (427 to 534 gallons per acre).[2] The real damage came later, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the advent of new crossings, bred specifically to ripen earlier, to be more frost-resistant, and to produce greater quantities of juice per bunch, drove annual yields up to 90 over even 100 hectolitres per hectare (961 to 1070 gallons per acre) on occasion.

From the outset growers and wine merchants knew that the 1971 German Wine Law was the result of collusion between the large firms and regional bureaucrats and politicians, especially in the Rhineland Palatinate, thereby making any hope of substantial legislative revision most unlikely, since agricultural affairs in Germany are essentially a matter for the *Länder*, the provinces, rather than for the Federal Government. The very fact that nothing was done in 1971

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[1] André L. Simon and S. F. Hallgarten, *The Great Wines of Germany and Its Famed Vineyards* (New York/London, 1963), p. 11.
[2] Ibid., p. 167.

to outlaw, or at least marginalize, the ubiquitous brands is an indication of that. Fritz Hallgarten, for instance, declared in his 1963 book that Liebfraumilch is not a geographical denomination, but a fancy name applicable to all Rhine wines of good quality and pleasant character, though at least he had the honesty to admit that 'under the name of Liebfraumilch may be hidden a number of sins'.[3]

The only legal change came in 1994, with a revised German Wine Law which in point of fact contained hardly any substantial revisions at all! It failed to address the deficiencies of the 1971 Law, but introduced yet another quality category, that of *Qualitätswein garantierten Ursprungs* (Quality Wine of Guaranteed Origin), for wines from a specific vineyard or village which were subject to more stringent controls in terms of typicity and origin. It is quite bizarre that the first to use the QgU designation was a group of Moselle growers on the Luxemburg border who produced not simply a dry wine, but an Obermosel *trocken* made from the Elbling grape, not Riesling! It is perhaps not surprising that the predicate QgU has subsequently sunk without trace. Above all, the 1994 amended law did nothing to address the scandal of *Großlagen*, and, though it prescribed increased minimum must weights for quality wines with predicate (i.e. from Kabinett upwards), feebly sought to limit yields by stating that they should not exceed the average of the previous ten years for the appellation in question, with the result that yield continued to top 100 hl/ha in many instances.

Since 1971, and especially over the last twenty years, a reaction has set in to a state of affairs which has consigned German wine to mediocrity or irrelevance in overseas markets, except for a hardy band of top-class producers, the Association of German Quality Wine Estates (*Verband Deutscher Prädikats- und Qualitätsweingüter*, or VDP for short), founded in 1910. The two principal spurs to reform have been consumer preference within Germany itself, and climate change.

Evidence for the latter is, as in all matters concerning the environment, still subjective and impressionistic. Nevertheless, if we review the decades from the 1960s in the Rhine and Moselle it is clear that there were usually between four and five indifferent vintages per decade (including some utter wipe-outs in the 1960s). Since 2000, however, there has been only one poor vintage – 2000 itself, with 2008 a taut but none the less classical Kabinett vintage. 2003 was (as in many other parts of Europe) if anything too hot, not a problem with which German growers have had to contend in the past. Of course, painting with such a broad brush obscures many variations and difficulties. The much lauded 2001 vintage, for instance, was a success in the teeth of adversity, and in the long run will probably be outshone, at least on the Moselle, by the 1999 vintage, whereas 2005 was blessed with an even and consistent growing season from budburst to harvest and in effect made itself, and that appears to hold good for the 2009 vintage as well.

The increasing ripeness (of the must, measured in Germany by degrees Oechsle) has benefited Riesling, as a late-ripening varietal, in particular, but it has also enabled growers to ferment their wines through, that is to convert more sugar into alcohol, to a greater extent than

[3] Ibid., p. 72. In an amendment to the 1971 Law it was determined that no quality wine may originate from two districts, even if the vineyards are adjacent, the only exception being Liebfraumilch! See S. F. Hallgarten, *German Wines* (London, 1976), p. 159. The 1971 Law stipulated that Liebfraumilch must contain residual sugar, therefore it cannot be dry, but in a bizarre twist there is nothing in the 1971 Law which states that Liebfraumilch must be a blend; *in theory*, it could come from an individual site. Ibid., pp. 212-14.

hitherto without sacrificing fruit, or, more precisely, the balance between fruit and acidity which is the hallmark of all great German white wine, and above all Riesling.

It is precisely this balance which has been the source of so much confusion on the part of German consumers. German wines at quality level are divided into categories of increasing ripeness and sweetness, from Kabinett through Auslese to Trockenbeerenauslese, but they still retain – or should retain – that crucial balance. No German wines of this kind are ever bone-dry; most, below dessert-wine level, are off-dry, a term in German hitherto fatefully rendered as *lieblich*, with inescapable connotations of bland sweetness. It is therefore commonly supposed that such wines, specifically at Kabinett or Spätlese (late-picked) level, cannot accompany food, even though the rise in popularity of spicy Asian food has shown these wines – alongside Alsatian gewürztraminers and muscats, or Austrian grüner veltliners – to be an ideal match for this cuisine.

The point which is invariably missed is that the ripe acidity of the Riesling grape effortlessly cuts through even the richest sauces, and that there is accordingly no reason, apart from individual preference, to choose bone-dry rather than off-dry wines to drink with food. Even twenty years ago German growers were making 70% or more of their wine dry, to suit their domestic market, though many were only too eager to assure British wine merchants, operating in a market which at that time had no interest in dry German wines, that they regarded this development as a complete aberration, but one before which they must bow if they were to stay in business.[4] In the meantime the figure now often exceeds 90%.

There can be no doubt that the reaction against wines perceived as sweet and ill-suited to food has been largely driven by fashion and snobbery. As Germans began to travel more widely and to experience the wines of other European countries, especially Mediterranean ones, they realized that German Riesling was unique among other off-dry wines, inasmuch as its florality and low alcohol found no counterpart in, say, a demi-sec Vourvray from the Loire, and therefore concluded that it could or should not be drunk in similar circumstances. Exposure to the wines of the New World merely enhanced this prejudice, for the high alcohol levels of many of these wines, at 14° or above, made traditional off-dry German wines with alcohol levels of between 7° and 9° (or even lower for Beerenauslese upwards) seem anaemic by comparison: they were perceived to lack, in that dreadful jargon, mouthfeel.[5]

At the same time, the owners of some of Germany's most famous estates were becoming increasingly alarmed by the diminishing reputation of their wines and chafed at the restrictions – or rather, undue laxity – of the German legislation then in force. In 1984 thirty Rheingau growers, with Graf Matuschka-Greiffenclau of Schloß Vollrads and Dr Hans Ambrosi, director of the Rheingau state vineyards at their head, founded the Charta Association to restore the prestige which their wines had enjoyed a century earlier. All wines, which had to be submitted to an independent, not state-controlled, tasting panel, had to be 100% Riesling and with an acidity of at least 7.5 grams per litre, with very little residual sugar, and Oechsle levels significantly higher for each quality category than prescribed by the legal minimum.[6] The aim was to produce, not bone-

[4] As I can attest, as a regular attender at the annual VDP London tastings in the Victoria & Albert Museum in the 1980s and 1990s.

[5] It is sometimes forgotten that the diethylene glycol scandal in Germany in 1985 (though never on the scale of Austria's) stemmed as much from a desire to impart greater *weight* to the wines on the palate through higher glycerine as from a desire to make already off-dry wines any sweeter.

[6] See Stuart Pigott, *Life beyond Liebfraumilch. Understanding German Fine Wine* (London, 1988), pp. 59-70.

dry wines, but concentrated off-dry wines, known as *halbtrocken*, especially at Kabinett or Spätlese level. But note here the nomenclature: *halbtrocken* (now superseded by another term, *feinherb*, to which I shall come in due course) was a response to wines which were regarded as too sweet, yet technically in English they would *all* be designated as off-dry. Alongside these wines genuinely *trocken* (bone-dry) wines and even *Diabetikerweine*, with no more than 4.5° grams of residual sugar, began to appear, which may have satisfied dietary requirements but scarcely discerning palates. By 1999 the Charta members had joined forces with the VDP producers of the Rheingau as promoters of dry German wines, which now account for around one-third of total Rheingau production.

That was the initiative of growers in only one designated area, and until the VDP initiative of 2002 found no imitators elsewhere. Consumers might be forgiven for their confusion at dry wines produced from traditionally sweet categories such as Spätlese and Auslese. As a result, it was decided officially in 2000 to dispense with designations such as *trocken* and *halbtrocken* and replace them with two new categories, Classic and Selection – note the use of English rather than German. These changes were approved by the European Commission in Brussels in July 2000.

These easily memorized categories specified, in the case of Classic, wines which are dry but which display an *intensity of flavour*, achieved by a minimum alcohol level of 12° (or, in the case of the Moselle, 11.5°), where the maximum sugar level may be twice the acid level, but no more than 1.5 grams of sugar per litre. Selection – in effect a Spätlese *trocken* – goes one stage further by specifying wines from a single site with reduced yields and hand-picking, with the release of the wines held back until the following September. Yet, although these designations were intended to achieve higher quality across the board, chaptalization (the controlled addition of sugar) was permitted for both Classic and Selection wines, a procedure explicitly banned for *Qualitätsweine mit Prädikat*, and which can only be regarded as a retrograde step. It is perhaps symptomatic of the confusion within the German wine industry – and the German wine public – which these changes have occasioned that the new designations, although legally sanctioned, have entirely failed to catch on. Only the term *Erstes Gewächs*, literally 'first growth', has established itself as the legally recognized term for dry Riesling from top Rheingau sites.

Under the *Erstes Gewächs* label in the Rheingau, yields were limited to 50 hectolitres per hectare. In a conscious echo of French *grands crus* not only was production capped at between 2% and 3% of total Rheingau production; a minimum price was set, initially DM25,- (£7.50, or today €8.60), at which the wines could be sold (today as a result of inflation the minimum prices are much higher). The attempt to set a minimum price was quite unprecedented, and it went hand-in-hand with a further recommendation that the wines be marketed in a distinctive Rheingau blue flute bottle (as opposed to the customary brown).

These attempts by top Rheingau growers to set clear blue water, as it were, between themselves and other growers culminated two years later in the accord reached by the VDP which regulated the criteria for great growths, first growths, and wines from classified sites throughout the whole of the Rhine and Moselle. This accord signalled a profound reorientation in the production of fine German Riesling. Significantly, twenty years on, it has still to be sanctioned in law.

Two notable features of the 2002 VDP agreement were, first, a clause which permitted members in the constituent wine-growing regions to introduce even stricter conditions over

yields, must weight, and site demarcation if they so chose, and, second, a clause stating that the production of great growths (*Große Gewächse*) or first growths (*Erste Gewächse*) should be voluntary; that is to say, VDP members were not bound to produce exclusively great growths – nor could they have been.

Beyond these concessions, great growths had to fulfil five criteria: 1. Yields were to be restricted to 50 hl/ha; 2. Grapes must be harvested by hand; 3. Grapes must be ripe enough to qualify for Spätlese (late-picked) category; 4. Great growths should be dry in style; 5. Great growths should be produced exclusively from varietals deemed traditional by the regional wine-growers' associations. In practice, this meant in the major growing regions Riesling, with the addition in the Palatinate of *Weißburgunder* (Pinot blanc) and *Spätburgunder* (Pinot noir). Further clauses regulated marketing and packaging, including the provision we have already encountered that wines should not be released until the September following the harvest. Below the category of *Großes Gewächs* a second tier of wines from classified sites was permitted, with yields of up to 65 hl/ha. A third tier of *Guts- und Ortsweine* (estate and village sites) need not detain us, since these wines are rarely seen in export markets.

In launching the VDP accord of 2002 its president, Michael Prinz zu Salm- Salm, concluded on a somewhat rueful note:

In recent years...we have had to accept the fact that we were not able to effect the changes we deemed necessary to improve the wine law. As such, we have gone our own way and voluntarily opted to: 1. Abstain from using collective vineyard site names [*Großlagen*]; 2. Limit yields; 3. Lay the groundwork, i.e. set minimum standards, for the 'grand cru' wines of Germany, now valid nationwide. Our association will continue...to produce wines of distinguished character based on the precept of 'quality before quantity'.[7]

With that, clear guidelines at last appeared to have been laid down, in terms of vinification and labelling, for the various quality levels of VDP wines. Alas, appearances were deceptive. The term *Großes Gewächs* was not used for Rheingau wines, where the previous term *Erstes Gewächs* was retained. On the Moselle the term *Erste Lage* (first-class site) was preferred. Meanwhile, wines of the Charta Association in the Rheingau continue to be marketed alongside the VDP 'first growths'.

Whether this classification will have much impact on the bulk of German wines, given that it is restricted to VDP members, is doubtful. Moreover, it is not at all clear how some vineyards and growers found their way onto the list in the first place. The parallels with Alsace spring immediately to mind, where the *grand cru* system, again voluntary not mandatory, has arbitrarily excluded certain vineyards, sometimes on the grounds of mixed varietal plantings, while some distinguished growers have simply refused to participate.

Beyond the remit of the VDP (which only accounts for a fraction of wine production on the Rhine and Moselle, though it has members in Franconia, Württemberg, and Baden as well) further changes have been introduced. The most significant of these was the pioneering of a new term – or rather an old term, common in the early twentieth century and now revived, – namely *feinherb*, in place of the previous *halbtrocken*. Unfortunately, the German word *feinherb* – itself a neologism – is completely untranslatable in any direct fashion into other languages; for wine, it

[7] Press conference statement following the VDP meeting at Castell/Franconia, 19 June 2002.

certainly cannot be rendered as 'bittersweet'. What the term is seeking to indicate is a balance between fruit and acidity: off-dry wine with elegance and depth of flavour.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the German love of classification has led to more confusion than clarity, an impression only confirmed by the recent introduction on the Moselle of yet another designation, Riesling S, to denote wines which are dry, harvested from specified sites, and which have passed a strict tasting panel, without qualifying as 'first-rate sites' (*Erste Lagen*). The superimposition of new categories of designation, even if several have failed to establish themselves, has left a terminological wilderness, with signposts pointing in seemingly contradictory directions.

So far my remarks have concentrated on quality wines at Kabinett and Spätlese level. But it is necessary to say something about German sweet and dessert wines as well, on which recent legislation has had less of an impact. The problem, in a nutshell, is what to expect from wines labelled Auslese, that is, wines made from selected bunches of ripe grapes, *some* of which may be affected by botrytis. From those which are not it is possible to make a dry Auslese, as some growers indeed do, believing this to have been a style much sought after in the late nineteenth century, though nowadays such wines are usually labelled as Spätlesen.

The fact is that Auslese wines fall into two different brackets: those which are semi-sweet, with an indicative sugar level of between 30 and 60 grams per litre; and those which are truly sweet (with some botrytis), with sugar levels between 100 and 150 grams per litre. The sizeable gap between these sugar levels is in itself an indication that Auslesen can embrace both off-dry wines veering towards medium sweet (very common on the Moselle, where the minimum Oechsle requirement is lower than on the Rhine),[8] and sweet dessert Auslesen. The latter are often distinguished by supplementary labelling, such as *Goldkapsel* (gold capsule), a star system, or by *Fuder* (vat) number. They are correspondingly more expensive than ordinary Auslesen.

Above Auslesen come Beerenauslesen (selected bunches of botrytis-affected grapes); Trockenbeerenauslesen, made from botrytized berries which have shrivelled on the vine and thereby achieved even higher concentration and must weight; and a new category which first appeared in the 1960s, namely Eiswein, that is, berries concentrated by being frozen on the vine and harvested while still frozen. Previously such wines were regarded as a fortuitous and rare bonus, being harvested in December or even January of the following year, as their names in German, *Nikolauswein* (for wines picked around December 6th) or *Dreikönigswein* (for wines picked around Epipany, or Feast of the Magi, i.e. January 6th) indicate. Initially, Eiswein could appear on the label alongside Beeren- or Trockenberenauslese, but since 1982 Eiswein has enjoyed a separate Prädikat (quality designation of its own). At the outset some Eiswein was also botrytized, but nowadays they are usually without botrytis, though that is not a legal requirement. What is not permitted by law is the artificial freezing of either grapes or wine, known as cryoextraction, as sometimes practised in Sauternes, or reverse osmosis. The minimum alcohol for these three dessert categories is 5.5°.

My own view is that Eiswein is less interesting than Beerenauslese, since it emphasizes concentration and intensity of flavour over site-specificity and nuance of flavour. And that brings me to my concluding reflections.

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[8] Moselle Auslese 83° Oechsle; Rheingau Auslese 95° Oechsle. The equivalent figures for Beerenauslese/Eiswein are: M 110°; RG 125°, though Trockenbeerenauslese is 150° in all districts.

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The current popularity of dry wines, or of off-dry wines at the dry end of the spectrum, stems, in my judgement, less from the perceived sweetness of traditional German wines – though florality is a more accurate term than sweetness – than from their alleged lack of intensity. A wine at 7° or 8°, precisely because it is low in alcohol, can display and reflect nuances of site, soil, and exposure which are transmitted through its acidity or the minerals contained therein. These nuances recede, or are overlain, as the alcohol increases. That of course applies to German Rieslings, not to the lesser varietals which have no subtlety in the first place.

The increase in alcohol of 4° degrees or more which the new wave of German dry wines achieves may impart greater intensity of flavour (mouthfeel), but at the same time alters the intrinsic character of the Riesling grape as grown in Germany, stripping it of its ethereal elegance, subtlety, and haunting delicacy, and making it much more like Rieslings grown elsewhere in the world. Since there is an abundance of fine dry Rieslings in Alsace and Austria, not to mention Australia and New Zealand, it is not clear what is to be gained by sacrificing the very features that have made German Rieslings so distinctive.

In a laudable desire to overcome the sins of the past – the lake of undistinguished sugar water – which have so polluted the name of German wine until recent years, German growers have, it seems to me, overcompensated by lurching from one extreme to the other, a feature of the German character mockingly known as *Hundertfünfzigprozentigkeit*. It will require sane voices from beyond Germany's borders to point out the need for a proper balance to be struck – the oenological equivalent of the vinous balance between fruit and acidity which remains the hallmark of German Riesling, the world's greatest white wine.[9]

END

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Professor Tom Scott is honorary professor at the Institute for Reformation Studies at the University of St Andrews. His speciality is the social and economic history of medieval and early modern Germany. He contributed the article on the history of German wine to the Oxford Companion to Wine, edited by Jancis Robinson MW OBE, as well as a survey of medieval viticulture in the German-speaking lands, which appeared in the journal *German History*, 20 (2002). In 1976 he founded the Liverpool Wine Consortium, specializing in German Riesling, and subsequently the top wines of Australia (on which he has also written for the Melbourne review *Meanjin*) and New Zealand.

[9] Given the time constraints of the lecture, it was not possible to review developments in the former East Germany, or in Franconia, Baden, and Württemberg. Equally nothing has been said about organic wines which in Germany, despite the high profile of the Green Party, have not attracted the interest one might have expected. In general, it is highly revealing that there has been no comprehensive survey of German wines published in the last twenty years, despite – or perhaps because of – the welter of changes which have occurred. Readers may wish to consult to VDP website: www.vdp.de.