



The 2008 German Vintage: The Edge of the Knife

by Zachary Pearson

The first weeks of November are very exciting for lovers of German Riesling. The weather finally cools, some rain falls, and thoughts turn to bundling up and storing away things for the cold days ahead. Gone are the light salads and simple grilled dishes so prevalent when it's near 100 degrees outside and turning on the oven or stove for more than ten minutes seems exhausting. Thoughts now turn to long braised dishes, making stocks and roasts and eating wintery vegetables. And the new vintage of German wines begin to reach store shelves... wines that are exceedingly appropriate for this time of year and the foods we eat.

It is with a lot of pleasure and joy that I get to announce to you that the wines are here, and that they're very, very good. I'd like to talk about not only the vintage itself, but how we're buying these wines now, and what you should expect over the next few weeks as most of them become available.

The 2008 vintage was late by modern standards. Everything from budbreak and flowering to the start of harvest itself was slowed down by a few weeks. In the Mosel, the vintage ran from the beginning of May until the middle of October. Most everything was cooler than normal, especially the nights, which helped preserve acidity. Summer was cool, and there was enough rain in most places to keep the vines from shutting down due to lack of groundwater. But September began to test winemaker's nerves, with a cold snap and a lot of rain all but shutting down photosynthesis and therefore the physiological development of the grapes. Some producers panicked and picked when they had a clear day – the wines that were then made have frightening levels of acidity and are thin, sharp and lack fruit. No amount of residual sugar will repair a wine like this. The best producers waited... and waited... and waited. Some picked in November. But the rain let up, grapes ripened, and acidity levels came down to a more normal level. These are the wines that you'll want on your dinner table.

It is the thankless role of every new German vintage to be compared with the ones that have gone before it, and the 2008's are no different. For those of you who have been watching these wines for a long time, I would say that the closest cognate might be 1998, or 1996 with a modern understanding of the necessary balance of acidity and sweetness. If you've been lucky enough to have only been tasting since the miracle year of 2001, this is much more like 2004, but with a taut, wiry musculature – there's no fat on these wines, and their structure blazes out of the glass.



I've been lucky enough to visit Germany this year, and I've tasted around 200 or so of the best 2008's available in this market. I've spoken to winemakers at trade tastings, and have a good feel for what makes this vintage special. The elevated levels of acidity in these wines make them, of course, great with food. But it also goes further than that. All wines have three main components: Fruit, which is sweet, Acidity (usually malic acid which is like a Granny Smith apple and tartaric acid which is cream of tartar) that is sour, and Tannin (or Minerality) that is bitter. Acidity and Tannin are the structural components of wine – think of them like clothes hangers. Fruit is like a dress shirt – they can be very pretty, and it's always good to have a nice looking one, but if you take that shirt and throw it in a corner, it's going to wrinkle badly. Sweet fruit without anything to give it form isn't enough, but when all the components in a wine work together, you have balance, which is something every winemaker should strive for.

German wines derive their form and shape from the interplay between acidity and fruit, like all wines. Many producers attempt to add fruit flavors by leaving some residual sugar in their wines. If they hit the right balance, a new dimension is formed, which is minerality. The best producers use these ingredients so well that they make wines that have what I call tension – a sweet/tart energetic sensation in the mouth that's vibrant and alive and delicious.

If you're a fan of that 'edge of the knife' tension in your German wines the way I am, you're going to love the 2008 vintage. For those of you out there who follow the numbers, many of these wines analytically have six to eight grams of acidity per liter, but taste like they're up around ten or 12. I feel it was best in the Mosel – where producers like Selbach-Oster, Dr. Loosen, Zilliken (yes, I know he's in the Saar), A.J. Adam, and Kerpen did exceedingly well, and in the Nahe – look for Hexamer, Schafer-Frohlich and of course Donnhoff.



The best wines of the 2008 vintage reward those producers who were willing to wait out the September rains. I also feel that it is best with the producers with top vineyard sites, winemakers who make wines that are usually more structured and less sleek and fruity, and I think the sweet spot is down in the Kabinett prädikat. This is a vintage to buy Kabinett again – you won't get declassified Auslese like in years past. It's a high quality vintage of classical proportions and most of the wines are drier than you think they'll be.

I'd also like to talk very briefly of how we're buying these wines these days. Going to Germany really showed me a different side of the wine world. I went from house to house, and into some great cellars when I was there, and you should see how much Burgundy these winemakers collect! They very rightly think of their wines like the wines of Burgundy – both regions have fractured ownership of vineyards, grow basically one grape, and it's very important to know who's making your wine. I made a mental resolution down in the cellars at Loosen that we were going to buy these wines more like Burgundy than Bordeaux.

What does that mean to you, the wine buying public? It means that we're buying smaller amounts of more wines. We're going to have some wines that will have fewer than 20 cases coming into the country... seriously. We might have thirty or forty new German wines on the shelves in the next week – some Grosses Gewachs, some Pinot Blanc, some Halbtrocken, maybe even some older things and a wine or two that doesn't even hit the shelves (so you might want to ask someone) but some will be two or three or ten cases of a wine, and then it'll be gone. You'll have more fun things to choose from, but if you like something... be quick to come back and get more. I hope you all enjoy these wines as much as I did over the summer, and I hope everyone has a wonderful holiday season. ☺