



Basic Juice Article
Ripeness or Ruin

by: *Beau Jarvis*

Picture a quaint vineyard alongside a river in Germany. It's a foggy autumn morning. The grower crouches next to a vine and examines a cluster of grapes. What is he thinking? Perhaps he thinks, "*Mein Gott!* I need to harvest these grapes today before the frost arrives." Maybe he is a bit of a risk-taker and thinks, "*Mein Gott!* If these grapes can hang on for a few more weeks, I'll be able to make stunning wine."

I've always found risk-takers to be more interesting than path-of-least-resistance types. Even a wine grower in Southern Germany willing to roll the dice with his vineyard makes for an engrossing tale.

There is a reason that Germany is more famous for its beer and bratwurst than its wine. Autumn arrives early and spring arrives late. In short, the growing season isn't ideal for grapes. The ballsy German souls who choose to grow grapes rather than hops or barley have their work cut out for them. As vines bud and begin to produce grapes, a spring frost or hail storm can obliterate an entire vineyard. At the end of the season, growers run the repeated risk of frost and hail if slowly ripening grapes are not harvested quickly.

For this reason, the bulk of German wine production has been supported by not-quite-ripe Riesling grapes combined with sugar at the time of fermentation to produce sweet and off-dry wines (think: the bottle of *Blue Nun* in your grandma's liquor cabinet). It's much safer to harvest earlier, add some sugar and live with mostly mediocre wine. Of course some wine makers are not satisfied with mediocrity. They strive to produce the sublime.

Striving for the sublime requires a significant amount of risk. For the boldest of German growers the risk is losing most, if not all, grapes in a vineyard. The reward is offering 'divine nectar' for which, connoisseurs will pay a premium. In this corner of the world, the most significant factor is ripeness. In fact, the highest quality German wines are ranked by the ripeness level of grapes used to produce such wines.

The entry level of ripeness for quality wines is called *Kabinett*. *Kabinett* wine is the *Audi A4* of German luxury wine. No sugar is added to these wines and they are normally dry or slightly off-dry. Riper grapes qualify for the *Spätlese* (meaning 'late harvest') segment. These wines can also be either dry or off-dry. At this point, many risk-loving growers and wine makers figure they are pushing their luck to leave grapes on the vine so late into autumn. Thus, most of the high quality German wines you'll find at the wine store are either labeled as *Kabinett* (from ripe grapes) or *Spätlese* (from quite ripe grapes). A nice example of the *Kabinett* wine style is *Bassermann-Jordan Deidesheimer Paradiesgarten Kabinett, '02* (\$20).

Of course, there are those who want to continue pushing their luck in the vineyard. For these grape gamblers, there are three more ripeness categories. *Auslese* is the first of

these, and refers to the picking of select, very ripe grape bunches for wine. The resulting wine is either off-dry or sweet. *Auslese* wines generally have an intense aroma, complex taste and are quite unique in character. For the obsessive grower who wants to pick one grape at a time, there is the 'über-ripe' category, *Beerenauslese*, also referred to as 'BA.' These wines are made from individually selected grapes that are really, really ripe. The resulting wine is very sweet, very intense and very expensive. For the obsessive-compulsive grower who wants to pick individual overripe, rasiated grapes, there is the category *Trockenbeerenauslese* (also known as 'TBA'). The resulting wine is extraordinarily intense, exotic and unique. A reasonably affordable example of these highly intense wines is *Bassermann-Jordan Forster Kirchenstück Auslese*, '99 (\$26).

At any point along this quest for ultra-ripe grapes and exotic wine, a severe frost could hit and ruin any chance of success. Yet some German wine makers actually welcome frost - if the timing is right. These folks are not only risk-takers, but also somewhat masochistic. You see, a grower might postpone harvest until grapes are exceptionally ripe or overripe and then pray for a frosty night. If conditions are right, the grapes will freeze on the vine. The grower will then pick these grape Popsicles, one-by-one, in the middle of the night and press them while still frozen to make something called, *Eiswein* (ice wine). Ice wines are not only exotic and intense, but they are also highly concentrated with both intense sweetness and intense acidity. Most ice wines are very expensive. However, the Canadians have been making their own ice wines for a few years, and their prices are a bit more reasonable. One to try is *Magnotta Riesling Ice Wine*, '00 (\$40), from Ontario. This wine will give you an introduction into the otherworldly flavors that comprise *Eiswein*.

Yes, it is much easier and cheaper to buy a bottle of wine that is: A) labeled in English, B) around ten bucks, and C) tastes 'alright.' But the next time you go to the wine store, think of Horst, Ernst and Wolfgang – risk-taking German wine makers who left their grapes on the vine and scoffed at hail, frost and approaching winter. Look for the term *Kabinett*, *Spatlese*, *Auslese*, *Beerenauslese*, *Trockenbeerenauslese* or *Eiswein* on the label. Take a sip, sit back and appreciate the result of odds successfully defied. Cheers.

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