Dry German Riesling Grosses Gewächs

From the top-rated vineyards in Germany, these wines are vaunted as the pinnacle of quality – and the focus is shifting from power to finesse, says Anne Krebiehl MW

THIS PANEL TASTING encompassed the whole of Germany – 13 wine-growing regions covering 4° of latitude (from 47.5°N in Baden to 51.5°N in Saale-Unstrut), and every imaginable kind of soil. However, rather than look at all levels of Riesling, it focussed in on Grosses Gewächs (‘great growth’), the top category of the VDP’s private classification. So the wines came only from VDP member-estates, but covered the breadth of German dry Riesling: only the tiny Hessische Bergstrasse and Mittelrhein were missing, as were the easterly outposts of Sachsen and Saale-Unstrut. But certainly the heartlands of German Riesling were well represented.

Grosses Gewächs wines are made from clearly delimited single vineyards that have been classified as Grosse Lage (‘grand cru’), and are produced to stringent regulations. All GGs are trocken (dry), which in Germany means no more than 9g/l of residual sugar. Only three of the 95 wines tasted touched this mark, while a further seven were in the vicinity – but they had the acidity to provide the balance. I must emphasise that at these levels sugar acts as flavour-enhancer rather than sweetener, as is amply demonstrated in brut sparkling wines, which likewise come with high acidity and easily accommodate six or even eight grams of dosage while being perfectly dry. All this is to say: if you are looking for dry Riesling, the GGs are your go-to category. Most of these wines were around the 5g/l mark and below, with higher acidities than your average white.

Delicate balance

When GG wines were first made in the early 2000s, it was still thought that an estate’s top wines had to show their mettle. The mindset has since shifted from power back towards elegance, with delicate alcohols of 12.5% and below for almost half the wines here. The germans have discovered what makes their wines truly german: a cool finesse and depth. When the 2016 white GGs were first released last August, the regions that stood out were the Nahe, Rheinhessen and Pfalz: the Nahe for its uncompromising drive for purity and expression; Rheinhessen for embracing its inherent diversity, from Roter Hang via Wonnegau to its far west, close to the Mittelrhein; and Pfalz for its exemplary restraint and nuance.

German Riesling: the facts (2016)

Total Riesling 23,700ha (of a total 102,493ha under vine)  
Riesling plantings by region  
Pfalz 5,850ha; Mosel 5,395ha; Rheinhessen 4,536ha; Rheingau 2,495ha; Württemberg 2,113ha; Nahe 1,202ha; Baden 1,069ha; Franken 343ha.  
Riesling is Germany’s most planted grape variety, the 23,700ha planted representing 49% of the world’s plantings. While 23% of Germany’s vineyards are planted to Riesling, the variety accounts for 55% of VDP estate vineyards. According to the VDP, its members are responsible for 12% of Germany’s Riesling vineyards and 5% of the world’s. The VDP has just 3% of the total German harvest, but this accounts for 7.5% of the total turnover. Grosses Gewächs represents just 5% of production.

Germany: know your vintages

2016 A difficult year: a humid spring and summer affected yields rather than quality, but a long, dry and warm autumn saved the day, allowing great aromatic development. Subtle Rieslings for the long run.  
2015 A dry, warm year with a ‘gloriously sunny’ September gave rounded, sunny, ripe Rieslings. Hailed as a great vintage.  
2014 Challenging year with some rain, but stringent selection delivered racy, taut wines.  
2013 Tiny vintage, difficult year, selection was everything.  
2012 Ripe, balanced, long-lived.  
2011 Great in the Mosel, very good in other regions.

Born in Germany and resident in London, Anne Krebiehl MW is a widely published wine writer, consultant and educator, and a DWWA judge ➔

Source: Deutscher Wein Statistik 2017/18 and www.vdp.de
The results
A consistently high-scoring tasting, showcasing the finesse and ageability of dry German Riesling. Our experts tell Tina Gellie why wine lovers need to try them.

The scores
95 wines tasted

Exceptional

1

Outstanding

6

Highly Recommended

68

Recommended

16

Commented

3

Fair

0

Poor

1

Faulty

0

The judges

Gearoid Devaney MS

Anne Krebiehl MW

Sebastian Thomas

Our trio of expert judges were impressed at the quality of wines on show in this tasting, encouraging wine lovers to stock up their cellars.

German Riesling has ‘finally come of age’, said Sebastian Thomas: ‘Five years ago I don’t think anyone would have considered doing a Grosses Gewächs tasting, because as recent as that Riesling wasn’t really mainstream. But the GG category has been very successful in a short space of time, and that’s very exciting.’

Anne Krebiehl MW was pleased that producers had toned down the wines’ power. ‘In 2002, when GG was first presented as an official category, winemakers thought, “if this is my top wine, then bigger is better”. In the latter camp was Württemberg, which was “a real discovery” for Gearoid Devaney MS. “It was a really solid showing. They probably weren’t troubling the higher scores, but the wines were good, in a riper, spicier style.”

There was unanimous agreement that Rheinhessen was the most exciting region, offering a broad range of styles with real energy. ‘Lots of balance, elegance and purity,’ said Devaney, ‘and when I think of Riesling, purity is always the key word.’ Close behind was Nahe, whose wines Devaney found had ‘good acidity, lovely purity,’ said Devaney, ‘and when I think of Riesling, examples, but there wasn’t a single region we thought

The GG category has been very successful in a short space of time, and that’s very exciting’ — Sebastian Thomas

Pfalz divided the judges somewhat, with Thomas enjoying them more than Krebiehl and Devaney, who found the feisty oak a bit dominant in a few examples. Rheingau was criticised for being a bit uneven in fruit weight and oak, as well having ‘unsuitable oxidative or natural winemaking elements’. ‘We should have seen more from these historic vineyards,’ bemoaned Krebiehl. ‘We should have seen more from these historic vineyards.’

Regardless of the region, the big selling point with these wines was their incredible capacity to age, said Thomas, particularly the ‘luscious, perfumed’ 2016s and ‘powerful, rounder’ 2015s. ‘Some of the great dry wines of Germany have matured very well, so those GGs have enormous capacity to last – 15, 20, 30 years no problem.’

But drinking them earlier was fine too, assured Krebiehl. ‘The GG wines almost got lost in a power play. But German Riesling is powerful not by brawn, but by acidity, ageability and finesse. I’m so happy producers have stopped chasing that misguided idea.’

In terms of regions, quality was very consistent. ‘I’ve never seen so many wines scoring 90 points or more,’ said Thomas. ‘Of course there were some poorer examples, but there wasn’t a single region we thought was underperforming – even those we don’t know well.’

The panels suggested that if a region is not able to produce top wines, it should think, ‘if this is my top wine, then bigger is better’. But drinking them earlier was fine too, assured Krebiehl. ‘The GG wines almost got lost in a power play. But German Riesling is powerful not by brawn, but by acidity, ageability and finesse.’

The judges

Gearoid Devaney MS

Anne Krebiehl MW

Sebastian Thomas

Devaney is a director of independent merchant Flint Wines. A Master Sommelier since 2009, he was UK Sommelier of the Year 2008. He was head sommelier at London’s Capital Hotel when it had two Michelin stars with Eric Chavot, and he helped open Tom Aikens’ one-star Michelin restaurant, where his wine list won awards with the AA and Wine Spectator. ‘It’s a great feeling when you see the wines you’ve recommended and the wines you’ve bought for your restaurant in a portfolio, and then you see how well they’ve been received by your customers. It’s a great feeling when you see the wines you’ve recommended and the wines you’ve bought for your restaurant in a portfolio, and then you see how well they’ve been received by your customers.’

Krebiehl is a freelance wine writer and lecturer. She is the contributing editor for Austria, Alsace and England for Wine Enthusiast and publishes in other trade and consumer titles including Decanter. She is a judge in the DWWA and other international wine competitions, and has helped to harvest and make wine in Germany, Italy and New Zealand.

Thomas came late to wine, beginning his career in book publishing. His first wine job was selling to New York restaurants, then on his return to the UK he worked for Laytons, where he fell

Kühlng-Gillot, Hipping, Rheinhessen 2016 96 GD 96 AK 96 ST 96 £43 Howard Ripley

The monks of Kloster Eberbach have been producing wine here for almost nine centuries – at one point in its history it laid claim to being the largest wine estate in all Germany. The Marburgern vineyard’s existence can be traced back to the end of the 14th century, making it one of the oldest monastic vineyards in the world. It’s a south-facing site on deep, calcareous clay-marl soils, farmed using organic methods.

GD Fresh, lively, green apple, citrus, lime skin, linear and focused. Classic style and long, with a pleasing finish.

AK A plump fullness on the nose leads into a palate of concentrated freshness, with easy fruit and a textured mouthfeel.

ST A muted nose, yet very elegant and refined in the mouth with smooth, vibrant acidity and powerful orchard fruits accompanied by notes of spice. A long, bright finish.

Drink 2018-2031 Alc 12%

Kloster Eberbach, Marburgern, Rheingau 2016 96 GD 96 AK 95 ST 96 £70 Andrew McKibbin & Perks, WineVintners

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Wagner Stempel, Heerkretz, Rheinhessen 2016 Decanter average score: 98/100pts

Individual judges’ scores: Geaorid Devaney MS 96
Anne Krebiehl MW 97
Sebastian Thomas 99 £68 Winemakers

Established in 1845, Wagner Stempel is now well into its ninth generation of family stewardship. Current proprietor Daniel Wagner has converted the vineyards to organic production, and has lowered yields. Half of the Heerkretz vineyard, overlooking the village of Siefsheim, is planted to Riesling, ripening up to two weeks later than its neighbours. This wine is fermented in stainless steel before maturing in medium and large German oak barrels.

Geaorid Devaney MS: Fresh and open, with plenty of concentrated lime zest and green apple on the palate, balanced by bright acid and leading to a mineral finish.

Anne Krebiehl MW: This is a very subtle wine, only slowly revealing its depth of citrus fruit. It’s gentle, delicate and long, demonstrating seamless elegance.

Sebastian Thomas: Very elegant and understated, this is gorgeously fine on the palate. The integrated, ripe acidity balances the subtle but juicy mineral character. Very long and fresh. Another sip please?

Drink 2019-2032 Alcohol 15%
Highly Recommended (continued) 90-94pts

Aldinger, Marienlas, Württemberg 2016
91 GD 92 AK 91 ST 91
£38.75 The Wine Barn
Lovely notes of ripe citrus, orange zest, lemon peel, juicy pear and yellow apple. The palate is full-bodied, with distinct woody overtones and bright acidity leading to a long, warming finish. Drink 2018-2027 Alc 12.5%

August Eser, Oestrich-Dosseberg, Rheingau 2015 91 GD 92 AK 91 ST 91
N/A UK www.eser-wines.de
Lemon, lime, Williams pear and green apple aromas lead into a plump and generous, powerful palate. It’s a rich style that will take a long time to settle down. A very clean, long finish. Drink 2019-2028 Alc 13%

Bürgerspital, Würtzburger Stein Hagemann, Franken 2016
91 GD 90 AK 93 ST 92
N/A UK www.buehler-centrum.de
A lovely notes of lemon balm on the nose, joined by fragrant floral notes. Lush fruit in the mouth with a ripe core of peach and aromatic fruit. Lovely balance, and a zesty, herbal finish. Drink 2019-2027 Alc 13%

Dautel, Steingrüben, Württemberg 2016 91 GD 91 AK 91 ST 91
£36 www.dautel-wine.de
A reductive nose but with an abundance of fruit and structure underneath. Smooth and fine on the palate, it has citric depth and ripe, elegant, juicy citrus fruits and mineral notes in what is a fairly rich and weighty package. Drink 2018-2024 Alc 13%

Freimuth, Unterer Bichsfogel, Rheingau 2016 91 GD 91 AK 91 ST 90
N/A UK www.freimuth-wine.de
Fragrant stone fruits and juicy pear aromas make this an approachable style. Rich, with juicy and ripe fruit in the mouth, it has an exotic tropical element and nice texture. Very much on the fruity side but not overblown. Drink 2018-2027 Alc 13%

Fürst Hohenlohe Oehringen, Verrenberger Verrenberg, Württemberg 2016
91 GD 89 AK 93 ST 92
N/A UK www.fuerst-hohenlohe.de
Citric perfume, summer blossom and apple freshness lead into a very rich, slightly oily palate. A bit of spice, mineral touches and a long, pure finish. Drink 2019-2028 Alc 12.5%

Grafskaff, Apotheker, Mosel 2016 91 GD 92 AK 92 ST 88
N/A UK www.gran-fassian.de
A pretty, floral nose here, with hints of tropical fruit and nectarine. It’s concentrated on the palate, with a good mouthfeel and lip-smacking acidity. There’s balancing minerality and a feeling of ripe zestiness towards the finish. Drink 2018-2023 Alc 13%

Grohe, Kirchspiel, Rheinhessen 2016 91 GD 90 AK 93 ST 90
£43 Swiss
The honeyed nose shows touches of lemon, while the palate displays incise freshness with clean and precise lines, and delightful fruit concentration. Balanced and textured, with a long, powerful, juicy finish and a mineral kick. Drink 2019-2030 Alc 13%

Hans Wirsching, Iphöfer Julius-Echter-Berg, Franken 2015 91 GD 92 AK 94 ST 89
£30.99 The Wine Bar
Floral, zesty and rich on the nose, the vivid palate is round and powerful but balanced, with good viscosity. Notes of green grapefruit are lifted by bright acidity before a long finish. Drink 2019-2028 Alc 15.5%

Jürgen Ellwanger, Schnaiter Altenberg, Württemberg 2016 91 GD 92 AK 92 ST 92
N/A UK www.schnaiter-ellwanger.de
A rich and smoky nose with pithy lime notes, minerals, oak moss, earth and a lovely, pure citrus fragrance. It has an appealing chalkiness on the oily palate along with ripe stone fruit, spice and juicy acidity. Drink 2019-2026 Alc 13%

Leitz, Berg Kaiserstiefeinf Rüdesheim, Rheingau 2016 91 GD 92 AK 92 ST 90
N/A UK www.aesming-wines.de
A touch of bruised apple freshness on the honeyed nose. There’s some reductive funkiness throughout but this is rather joyful, with gorgeous apple freshness, length and texture. Drink 2019-2030 Alc 12.5%

Lowman, Berrister Prat Alt Reben, Mosel 2015 90 GD 90 AK 99 ST 89
£75.35 ABS Wine Agencies
Perfumed and aromatic, showing citrus zest and citrus blossom on the nose. The palate has a kind of herbal, grassy tinge, alongside sweet peach and tangerine flavours. Slender and layered. Drink 2018-2027 Alc 13%

Augustus, Schlossberg K Klingelberger, Baden Ortenau 2016
91 GD 89 AK 94 ST 91
N/A UK www.markgraf-von-baden.de
Taut, lean and zesty in its tangerine and lemon peel expression. Green apple notes are driven by spiky acids. Weighty but balanced, with a juicy mineral finish. Drink 2018-2030 Alc 13%

Maxim Grünhäuser, Abtsberg, Mosel 2016 91 GD 92 AK 91 ST 91
£30.20 Howard Ripley
Lush stone fruits are laced with fresh limes, apple skin and ripe, almost tropical fruit. Generous and full but refreshing, thanks to the acidity. There’s a pleasing mineral hit on the ripe, lemony finish. Drink 2018-2028 Alc 12%

Schloss Lieser Thomas Haag, Niederberg Helden, Mosel 2015 91 GD 90 AK 92 ST 91
N/A UK www.grans-fassian.de
Aromas of fresh white flowers, limes, green apples and a touch of passion fruit. Very pure, lean, racy and angular, with a citrus mid-palate and a pleasing minerality on the long finish. Clean-cut style. Drink 2018-2027 Alc 12.5%

Schloss Vollrad, Schlossberg, Rheingau 2016 91 GD 90 AK 94 ST 90
£29.40 Carruthers & Kent, Ely, Liberty, Nicks & Perks
A lifted, lemony nose leads into an open palate that’s vibrant, concentrated and brimming with citrus fruit, green apple, pear and white flowers. It’s tarty, racy and textured, with a mineral edge. Drink 2018-2027 Alc 13.5%

Siegrist, Sonnenberg, Pfalz 2016 91 GD 90 AK 94 ST 90
POA Alexander
An uncompromising wine, streamlined and austere yet ripe and bone dry. A taut, textured mid-palate has pure lemon, lime and green apple, plus a smooth, underpinning minerality. This needs time. Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.5%

Wegeberg, vineyard Schlossberg, Rheingau 2015 91 GD 89 AK 90 ST 90
N/A UK www.schloessle.de
The medicinal, herbal nose is lifted by notes of Cox apple and peach. It’s textual and balanced in the mouth, with upfront fruit and a citrus backbone. An easy style of Riesling. Drink 2019-2029 Alc 15%

Weltner, Hoheleite, Franken 2015 91 GD 92 AK 90 ST 90
N/A UK www.weltnerweine.de
Ripe fruit and spice aromas are joined by a chalky line and a hint of dandelion. The viscous palate has very ripe fruit and plenty of texture. Smooth and long. Drink 2018-2026 Alc 14%

Wöhrling, Deinharder Herkengarten, Württemberg 2016 91 GD 91 AK 90 ST 91
N/A UK www.woehrwag.de
A rich and spicy style, with ripe stone fruits and fresh, juicy acidity – it’s all at full volume here. Vivid and full, but balanced, with nice length. Drink 2018-2027 Alc 13%

Markgraf von Baden, Durmbacher Schlossberg K Klingelberger, Baden Ortenau 2016
91 GD 89 AK 94 ST 91
N/A UK www.makom-baden.de
A touch of bruised apple freshness on the honeyed nose. There’s some reductive funkiness throughout but this is rather joyous, with gorgeous apple freshness, length and texture. Drink 2019-2030 Alc 12.5%

Alc palindrome is round and powerful but balanced, zesty and rich on the nose, the vivid palate is round and powerful but balanced, with good viscosity. Notes of green grapefruit are lifted by bright acidity before a long finish. Drink 2019-2028 Alc 15.5%

Dry German Riesling Grosses Gewächs

Dr Loosen, Erdenener Prat Alt Reben, Mosel 2015 90 GD 90 AK 99 ST 89
N/A UK www.sturm.de
An elegant, perfumed nose of rich stone fruits leads into a plump, rich palate – maybe a little warm – with a lot of weight to the fruit, and a long finish. Drink 2018-2026 Alc 14%