

German Sparkling Wine – The Next Big Thing?

Since centuries German vintners know how to make great Riesling. German Spätburgunder is since 25 years marvelous - but now? Could be German Sekt the next big thing? The German Wine Institute organized a tasting with 290 Premium Sekt and I had the opportunity to get an overview of the status quo. The conclusion: Sekt has great potential and can be the next big thing but there is still a long road to go.



The German Wine Institute organized in January a grand Sekt tasting for Tom Stevenson. I had the opportunity to join the tasting.

The German-French Connection & history of sparkling wine in Germany

“There is, in fact, not a single wine establishment in all Champagne which is not under the control, more or less, of a native of Germany.” Robert Tomes – US Consul in Reims in his book “The Champagne Country” of 1867.

Mumm, Krug, Bollinger all the German names that still play in Champagne, reveal the long affinity of the sparkling wine industry in the two neighboring countries. It was Georg Kessler, from Wurttemberg, who started his career in the sparkling wine business at “Verve Clicquot Fourneaux & Cie.” in Reims. In 1826 he was the founder of the first sparkling wine house in Germany and was decisively involved in the industrialization of sparkling wine production. Trade and the exchange of knowledge drove the development of the sparkling wine industry in Germany. German wineries advertised French technicians for the entire manufacturing process. Young German men went to Champagne to learn about the champagne production from the French and then imitate them in their own home.

From 1850 the production of sparkling wine in Germany overall rose steeply: the consumption climbed to 1.5 million bottles, 1873 to 4 million, 1895 to 8 million, from 1903 to 1913 it was in no year under 10 million bottles. However, while Champagne was from the beginning pure luxury, German Sekt was a sort of cheaper alternative. Champagne or Sekt was a question of which social class you belonged. Countess of

Psadowsky, for example, wrote in his speech in the Reichstag in 1894: *"French champagne now costs about 10 to 12 Mark the bottle. This can be done by the upper ten thousands, the middle class will be glad when it comes to German sparkling wine. This is considerably cheaper, the bottle is already sold at 2.50 to 3 marks, and the artificially impregnated with carbonic acid even more cheaply."*

With other words, from the beginning onwards there was a competition and a constant comparison between Champagne and German Sekt, while the latter was supposed to be the cheaper alternative. This was also due to the fact that the success of the sparkling winegrowers such as Kessler arose a goldgrass mood and shot sekt cellars out of the ground like mushrooms. Books were published on "The fast fabrication of sparkling wine", which led to a drastic deterioration in the quality of many products. They were banded and fake what was going on. So for a long time, German sparkling wine had suffered the reputation of being just a cheap imitation of champagne.

One way out of the misery was the development of a brand. An idea that arose in the end of the 19th century. The legend of the sparkling wine producer Otto Henkell has become legendary about the insight gained on his tour through the US in 1892: *"... how much easier and more pleasant and also lucrative it is to be able to sell a single branded item, once introduced by millions of consumers again and again. Instead of offering again and again still wine to the customer under the name of the American wine merchant. "*



Some examples for Sekt advertising.

The bad image and economical situation as well as the special suitability of sparkling wine for the branded product, due to blending, laid the cornerstone for the brand building of Sekt. New laws that protected brands from imitation helped to increase quality and awareness among the consumers. This was the beginning of the success of many big Sekt brands like Henkell, Kupferberg or Rotkäppchen.

Already around 1860, it was thought to mechanize the very complex workings of sparkling wine production. One came up with the idea instead of carrying out second fermentation in many small bottles, but in a large vessel. In 1856 such containers with 3200 liters capacity were used for the first time tentatively in the Champagne. Since the competition was too big and the technology was not yet mature, such considerations were quickly rejected. It was only around 1930, with the invention of filters that were under pressure, that these thoughts were resumed. 1936 was then the rebirth hour of

the large-space and the tank fermentation method. These ideas were resumed at the same time in Germany and France.

The increase in demand from all industrialized countries after the Second World War and the simultaneously growing competition led to enormous further developments in the processes of tank fermentation and apparatus for the production of sparkling wine. The processes have been developed so far that the sparkling wines are produced fully automated. Thanks to these techniques, it is possible to produce fairly good quality at a favorable price level.

Today Germany is world champion in sparkling wine consumption. We drink 310 Million Liter of sparkling wine per year and produce 260 Million Liter. Most of the productions are big brands like Henkell or Rotkäppchen, producing sparkling wine with the charmat method. The base wine is not even German, it can be a blend from all over Europe. Those mass-produced Sekt is dominating the picture when it comes to German Sekt. Only 2% of the whole Sekt production is Premium Sekt like "Winzersekt" (see extra description) made by traditional method. However, since wineries like Raumland or youngsters like the Krack brothers are brave enough to focus on sparkling wine only, since former Bollinger cellar master Mathieu Kauffmann moved to the Pfalz to show the world the potential for sparkling Riesling and since the growers are ready to learn new things after they know by heart how to make great Riesling and Pinot Noir, the seed for German Sekt as "the next big thing" is laid.

What are the challenges?

Most of the Premium Sekt are made by vintners as additional product to their portfolio. In average not more than 10.000 bottles are made from each Premium Sekt. Therefore, the Premium Sekt production is in general a service business - Vintners deliver their base wine to a professional Sekt producer. Wage production overall is not the problem. But too much vintners just don't know the requirements on a base wine for great sparkling wine. Just one example: 81 out of the tasted 290 sparkling wines had more than 12,5% alcohol. Not only that this tastes dull, it underlines the theory of Dipl. Ing. Wolfgang Pfeifer, from Geisenheim university, that most of the vintners "just second-ferment still wine without any clue that Sekt base wine has to have other characteristics." Very bad for the taste are phenolics, Botrytis flavors, not enough ripeness, unbalanced acidity and too much of everything like yeast and yeast nutrients in the tirage or SO₂, alcohol and residues of plant-protection (whether organic or systemic) that detract the second fermentation.

In the tasting we had quite some Sekt, which had an exaggerated and cloying smell of old bread crumb. There are different reasons for that. One is a bad nitrogen management. The best for the quality would be no addition of any yeast nutrients. Therefore you have to think about the right management of cover crops, don't allow any botrytis cinerea which limit the nitrogen supply and use nitrogen saving cultured yeasts for the first fermentation. In addition with too much yeast stressing SO₂-levels, alcohol and spraying residues in the base wine, the temptation to use for the tirage too much yeast and yeast nutrients to have a "safe" fermentation is high. This results in very broad and dull Sekt.

Bitterness and too much phenolics are another quality diminishing issue. Pointing to the problem of botrytis cinerea, which resolves phenolics into the base wine. Furthermore,

whole bunch pressing and the separation of press fractions such as “cuvee” and “taille” in Champagne is not yet done by everybody. The result is a gushing effect with a very rough CO2 development. Furthermore, some vintners have the bad idea that one can balance bitterness with sugar in the dosage.

In addition: “German vintners love to sulfur...” says Wolfgang Pfeifer laconically. “They learned this in Geisenheim” says Mathieu Kauffmann former cellar master of Bollinger and now responsible for the prestigious winery Reichsrat von Buhl. “They sulfur the base wine like still wine” he explains further. Indeed was a piercing sulfur note in the nose and an abrasive mouth-feel another issue in many sparkling wines I have tasted. However, with the low pH level, sulfur is much more effective. Furthermore, with high CO2 pressures you don’t have to be afraid that the sugar of the dosage starts refermenting. Winemaking techniques like a more oxidative handling in order to accustom the wine to oxygen would help to significantly reduce the sulfur input, too. Here one notices that the winemakers are not yet confident with the preparation of Sekt.

The lack of self-confidence in the sparkling wine production is also evident with the exaggerated lees ageing of some Superpremium Sekt. There were good examples but we had many in the tasting where lees ageing up to 12 years didn’t help to enhance the taste. If the base wine is bitter and unbalanced, ageing just don’t help. This idea of exaggerated lees-ageing is comparable with the mindset of the 1990s, when German growers started to use new Barrique barrels for their Pinot Noir. “More is better” was the guideline. We know that it takes more courage to do less. But for this you have to have self-confidence!

In order to provide a wider range of top products in future, the winegrowers have to deal more with the issue of sparkling wine production. The leading universities should take on the topic, too. As Niko Brandner from the Winery Griesel said: “I was taught only rudimentary basic knowledge about Sekt production. I had to learn everything myself. This topic is far from adequately dealt with in German universities.”

Different grape varieties and the potential of Riesling

Of course, there are Sekt producers making great fizz from the classical Champagne varieties Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier. The latter grape variety has always been widespread in Germany, but it was often used to make light red wines from it and growers are glad that Sekt offers a different possibility for the already existing plantings. However, Pinot sparkling is not unique in the world.

Riesling Sekt is unique and the grape variety with its refreshing acid shows overall great potential for the sparkling wine production. Mathieu Kauffmann, former cellar-master from Bollinger is convinced about the quality and marketing potential. For him Riesling is among Pinot Noir and Chardonnay the grape variety that shows the right balance between ripeness and acidity even at the traditional early harvest for base wines. “While you must touch Pinot Noir with velvet gloves, just to get no color, Riesling with its pH of 3.0 is as uncomplicated as Chardonnay in the production.” He explains further.

Many of the growers are concerned about petrol notes in Riesling Sekt. Indeed, some of the sparklings I have tasted had an issue with cloying kerosene notes overlaying the refined yeast aromas. For Matthieu Kauffmann this is more a problem of too severe

pressing. "If you use the "taille" of a Pinot Meunier your Champagne becomes soon bitter and old. A "cuvée", on the other hand, can mature as long as Pinot Noir or Chardonnay. The same applies for Riesling." he explains.



Since 2013, Mathieu Kauffmann has been producing Sekt with excitement in Germany. The former cellar master of Bollinger Champagne, proves the potential for Riesling in sparkling wine. In addition helps extravagant label design and professional marketing to establish "Reichsrat von Buhl" as brand in the world of sparkling wines.

Fascinating is the potential of Riesling to show terroir differences even in sparkling wines. I have tasted Sekt from slate, sandstone or limestone and all had different aromatics. This is very promising also for Mathieu Kauffmann who has in the cellar already a sparkling from the famous vineyard "Forster Pechstein" which he wants to release after 4 -5 years lees ageing. Within the VDP are lively discussions about the potential to add German Sekt to the classification system. There were already meetings and tastings to evaluate guidelines and think about opportunities and challenges of single vineyard Sekt. This is another signal that producers have more interest in high-quality Sekt.

Other varieties used, Dosage levels and marketing aspects.

According to the German Wine Institute, around 50% of Premium sparkling wine is made from Riesling, around 30% from Pinot varieties and the rest is made with all other varieties one can imagine. Especially aromatic varieties like Muscat, Mukattrollinger, Gewürztraminer or Sauvignon Blanc can fill an interesting niche market. However, the wide range of varieties used make it difficult to establish a clear image.

Concerning dosage levels, a sweeter style is among German consumers very popular. Out of the 290 presented Sekt around 10% had more sugar level than the Brut category (more than 15 g/l). Around 25% of the samples were adjusted with more than 10 g/l Dosage in the upper level of the Brut category. This high level of dosage can be perfectly balanced and can be a stylistic device to become "crowd-pleasing". However, some examples showed that sugar was used as make-up to balance bitterness and very unripe acidity, resulting in an obnoxious "sweet-sour" taste.

Another challenge is the price point, especially in a price sensitive market like Germany. Like many other sparkling wines, German Sekt is pricewise trapped between Champagne on the one end and Prosecco on the other side. Furthermore, you can buy Sekt from big producers like "Henkell trocken" in supermarkets for 5,80 Euro on promotion – some even cheaper. Furthermore, it is really strange that many consumer knows how good wine should taste but don't care about the quality of a sparkling wine. Generic marketing boards as well as producers and key professionals should invest

more in education. Better label design, packaging and brand building would help to further the appeal of Premium Sekt.

Why the hell I think that German Sekt has potential?

When you read until here you might think: “are there only bad news and criticism?” Of course there are not! Among many less convincing Sekt, I had also outstanding sparklings during the tasting in the glass. They showed that in the tasting that there is a rough diamond waiting to get polished. My favourite picks I would like to present here in different style brackets:

1. Riesling Darling - How the German's love their Riesling Sekt

The average German consumer has a certain idea of a Riesling Sekt. We love it not too dry, fruity, not too much acidity and a delicate frothy mousse. You find many good examples like that. Extended lees ageing would overpower the Riesling fruit. Therefore, with an average lees ageing of 15 – 18 months one get a sophisticated yet crowd-pleasing and affordable sparkling wine. Those three are very good examples for this kind of style.



Riesling Brut / Weingut Toni Jost / Mittelrhein / 12,50 Euro (retail)

Toni Jost is VDP member and known for its dry Rieslings from the steep and with slate tiles covered vineyards from the Mittelrhein region. Sparkling wine is not the core business for him but here one can find an elegant example. It shows pristine citrus and floral aromas combined with the typical flinty slate note, frothy mousse and refreshing acidity. The dosage of 8 g/l pushes the fruit flavor on the palate. It's the perfect summer drink.

2014 Riesling Sekt Brut / Weingut Mohr / Rheingau / 19,90 Euro (retail)

Another sophisticated but quaffable Riesling Brut. Pristine, balanced and typical Riesling flavours combined with the right amount of yeast aromas of 24 months lees ageing. Shows with 11,5 g/l a higher level in dosage. This Sekt is easy-to-drink and sophisticated at the same time.

2. Riesling Sekt – The wine geek selection.

It is difficult to say “the typical style for Riesling Sekt is like...” There are many interpretations out there. The winemakers have started experimenting and exploring the boundaries: How far can one drive the oxidative wine-making, how little sulfur one can add, how early can you harvest and so on. One could understand this very well in the tasting. These three examples show where the journey can go in the future.



2013 Riesling Brut / Sekthaus Krack / Pfalz / 12,90 Euro

This sparkling is a real discovery. It was just recently that the 3 Krack brothers carry on the father’s winery, who has already made a name with the Sekt production. Focused on sparkling wine production only, they set a new standard in freshness and elegance. This Riesling Sekt is inspired by champagne where body should come by lees ageing after second fermentation and not from the base-wine. It’s just a hint of Riesling fruit that this Sekt exhibits. Very linear, crisp, fresh and driven by very fine autolytic notes. Persistent mousse, long-lasting on the palate and with just 4 g/l dosage perfectly balanced.

2011 Riesling Jour Fixe Zero Dosage / Immich-Batterieberg / Mosel / 22 Euro

Un-grafted wines on slate deliver the grapes for this special fizz. The first fermentation took place in big wooden vats, which explains the broader texture, candied fruit and toasty flavours. After 42 months lees ageing and without any dosage this Sparkling shows pure flinty flavors, delicate lees aromas and a frothy mousse. This sparkling is with Zero Dosage nothing for beginners. It’s naked Mosel.

2012 Riesling Brut / Frank John / Pfalz / 21,90 Euro

Frank John is a well-regarded consultant for organic and biodynamic wineries. He has started his own biodynamic project and the sparkling wine is one of his babies. With 11,5% alcohol it’s the lightest Sekt of the tasting but one of the most profound ones. He decided for the perfect harvest date. Whole bunch pressing and first fermentation in big wooden vats laid the cornerstone. 41 months lees ageing and very low sulfur level made a very delicate, fine and persistent Sekt with airy Riesling and lees flavours.

3. Riesling Sekt – The lees and terroir champions.

These Sekt explored the limits of lees ageing. In the tasting we had many sparklings who were not made for this extensive time on the lees. But those three prove the right balance between Riesling fruit and lees aromas. Furthermore, this flight was exciting concerning terroir differences. Rheingau versus Mosel was definitely clear: riper fruit expression and linear acidity compared to citrus flavours and flinty slate aromatics. Also the differences between the Mosel sub-regions became obvious. This shows that there is a potential for single-vineyard sparkling.



1998 Riesling Reserve Brut / 18 years lees ageing

Sektmanufaktur Bardong / Rheingau / 28 Euro

Manufactory is the right word for the Winery Bardong. Focused since 1984 on sparkling wine only, Norbert and Renate Bardong are some of the old crocodiles for Premium Sekt. They don't orientate themselves towards Champagne but define their own style: delicate but with more body and grip. This Riesling shows very complex aromas of candied pineapple, peach, white blossoms, brioche, toast and ash. It shows refined and persistent bubbles, mid-palate weight and definitely a very unique style.

2009 Riesling Brut Schieferterrassen / 7 years lees ageing

Weingut Heymann-Löwenstein / Mosel / 21 Euro

The base wines grow in the sub-region "Terrassenmosel" which is the warmer part of the Mosel. Compared to Molitor the fruit expression was riper and more exotic and the flinty slate aromatics were really upfront. The palate was driven by salty and rich mineral impression woven into a creamy and mouth-filling texture. This is not an easy-drinking aperitif fizz. This Sekt should be paired with food.

2008 Riesling Sekt Zero Dosage / 6 years lees ageing

Weingut Markus Molitor / Mosel / 34 Euro

The base wines are grown in the sub-region "middle Mosel" – the core of the Mosel region. The Sekt has much more pungent acidity, is driven by floral and citrusy flavours and shows the flinty character in a very elegant and sophisticated way. Fine and persistent mousse and medium body makes this Sekt more airy and lingering compared to Löwenstein. However, both Sekt show the typicity of the sub-region. Great!

4. Pinot outstanding

Of course, there are sparkling wines in Germany, which focus on the same grape varieties and style like Champagne. Those three outstanding examples are the hallmark sparkling from the wineries.



2009 IX Triumvirat / Sekt Brut / Raumland / Rheinhessen / 37 Euro

Cuvée of 60% Pinot Noir, 28% Chardonnay and 12% Pinot Meunier. Volker Raumland is the godfather of Premium sparkling. Next to Mathieu Kauffmann from Reichsrat von Buhl he is the authority for Sekt production. Focused on sparkling wine only he has great experience. The Triumvirat is a classic blend of champagne varieties, 6 years lees ageing and with 3 g/l dosage perfectly balanced. This one is fine, elegant with lovely toast and brioche aromas. It shows fine and persistent mousse and a lovely perfumed palate.

2010 Chardonnay Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature / Weingut Huber / Baden / 25 Euro

Bernhard Huber was one of the Pinot experts in Germany. His Pinot Noirs are one of the best in Germany. He did everything with meticulous care also this Sekt.

No other grape variety can show the autolysis aromas as a Chardonnay. This Blanc de Blancs is another example for this thesis. The Sekt shows linear character combined with pure brioche, toast and almond flavors. The grapes for this fizz are grown on limestone soil, which is one explanation for the balanced acidity without any dosage.

2010 Brut Nature / Weingut Aldinger / Württemberg / 50 Euro

Cuvée of 49% Chardonnay, 21% Pinot Noir and 20% Pinot Meunier, 5 years lees ageing and the base wine was fermented in used Barrique barrels. A multilayered, refined, full-bodied and very complex sparkling wine. It shows perfect balance between lees aromas and a touch of new oak flavor. Very fine and persistent mousse makes this a really high-class sparkling wine.

5. Specialties – different grape varieties

One can find German Sekt made from every imaginable grape variety. A funny niche are those from aromatic varieties like Muscat, Muskattrollinger, Sauvignon Blanc, Scheurebe or Gewürztraminer. A real surprise were those elegant Silvaner styles.



2014 Silvaner Brut / Weingut Horst Sauer / Franken / 13 Euro and 2011 Silvaner Brut / Fürstlich Castell'sches Domänenamt / Franken / 24,50 Euro

Both Sekt were refined, pristine with pure Silvaner aromas of quince, freshly cut grass and hazelnuts. Here, too, one could clearly taste the terroir-difference. The first one grown on limestone soil showed more expressive yellow fruit and creamy texture while the second from the heavy gypsum soil showed fresher acidity and a more greenish touch in the aromas.



2015 Muskateller Sekt trocken / Graf Adelmann / Württemberg / 14,90 Euro

Made with the traditional method, this sparkling made from an aromatic variety was the most convincing one in the tasting. A classic Muscat bouquet with loads of delicate floral aromas combined with persistent mousse. Dosage of 20 g/l residual sugar pushed the fruity flavors on the palate - for anybody who likes aromatic varieties like me.

Conclusion:

We have a long history for sparkling wine and potential for authentic, distinctive and first-class sparkling wine. Riesling can become the hallmark variety even for Sekt. We see that winemakers are increasingly concerned with this subject to improve the qualities, work on different styles and promote them in a better way. Better education on that subject at German wine universities but also better label design and marketing could help to establish a Premium category next to the mass produced simple Sekt. The potential is there. Here we go!

Side information in a box .

Terms and wine law – source: German Wine Institute

The word “Sekt” originates indirectly from Shakespeare! A well-known actor, Ludwig Devrient, ordered his favourite drink champagne in the Berlin wine bar “Lutter und Wegner” (still in existence today!) around 1825 with a quote from Henry IV: „Bring er mir Sekt, Schurke – ist keine Tugend mehr auf Erden?“ (act II, 4: “Give me a cup of sack, rogue. Is there no virtue extant?”) Shakespeare had Falstaff actually order a sack, a dry sherry wine. But as Devrient meant sparkling wine the expression “Sekt” for sparkling wine became popular. In 1925 it became the official designation because the term champagne could no longer be used for German sparkling wines.

"Sparkling wine" is a broad, umbrella term. Within the European Union, uniform and binding regulations for the labeling and packaging of sparkling wines have existed since 1986. For example, the components of a product labeled Deutscher Sekt (German sparkling wine) must originate 100% from Germany. Blending regulations are analogous with those for still wines, ie multi-regional cuvées are permitted, but cannot bear the name of a specified region on the label.

Sekt b.A. or Qualitätsschaumwein b.A. (b.A. means "from a specified region") must indicate on the label the name of the region from which the grapes originated. A smaller geographical unit is also permitted, e.g. the name of a vineyard site, if at least 85% of the wine originates from that appellation. The same is true if a vintage or grape variety is named on the label: at least 85% of the wine must be from that vintage or grape variety. These sparkling wines are subject to quality control testing that includes a sensoric examination as well.

German Winzersekt (a vintners' vintage varietal sparkling wine) is respected for its individual character and high quality. These are varietal sparkling wines produced by wine estates and cooperatives of growers or producers, using only the grapes they grow themselves. Furthermore, Winzersekt must be produced by the traditional or classic method of bottle fermentation. The vintage, varietal and producer's name must appear on the label.

Perlwein is a carbonated wine with 1 - 2.5 atmospheres. The carbon dioxide is produced during fermentation and/or added before bottling. It is sold simply as Perlwein or, if the components are from one specified region, Qualitätsperlwein b.A.