

ProWein 2023 – Trendtext No. 3 / 3rd March 2023

#kabilove: Reframing Riesling Kabinetts and Co. at ProWein 2023

By Stuart Pigott & Paula Redes Sidore

The most striking thing about the rapid growth of interest in German Riesling Kabinetts is the mere existence of this burgeoning trend, represented now more than ever before through pop-ups, masterclasses and stand events at this year's ProWein (19-21 March). For according to the maxim of modern wine marketing, if a wine is to be popular then there's nothing worse for it to be than sweet.

Since analytically Riesling Kabinetts from Germany weigh in at 25 – 50 grams per liter of grape sweetness or the equivalent 1 to 2 teaspoons of sugar per glass, this trend shouldn't exist at all. Famously, gravity doesn't pull upwards. Yet just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too is sweetness in the palate of the taster. Especially when it comes to Riesling. While the Kabinett movement has been gaining underground momentum for more than a decade, it first become strikingly visible only a few years ago.

It all goes back to the Egon Müller Scharzhofberg estate on the Saar, widely acknowledged to be Germany's leading producer of Riesling wines with natural grape sugar. Almost every year the estate produces a Riesling Kabinett "Alte Reben" from its oldest vines, a Kabinett that is marketed exclusively through the VDP Mosel auction every September. The 2009 vintage sold for Euro 43 per bottle, and a mere decade later the 2019 went under the hammer for a staggering Euro 241 per bottle!

Today, Egon Müller is far from the only producer playing this game. As light and playful as the liquid within these sought-after bottles is, the attached price tag is anything but. The 2021 wooden "Kabinettkiste" from Julian Haart in Piesport/Mosel contains one bottle



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each of his 6 different Riesling Kabinett wines. Long since sold out at the producer, on the secondary market, this box will set you back Euro 1,899 or just over Euro 315 per bottle.

And that's not even the pinnacle of the new Kabinett Cult. A single bottle of the 2021 Schubertslay Riesling Kabinett "Alte Reben" from Klaus Peter Keller, producer of the famously sought-after G-Max, demands a staggering Euro 1,590!

The point is that this niche where collectors fight over every bottle has sent ripples out over the surface of the global wine pond. German Kabinett is gaining traction in a number of international markets. A quick search on <http://www.winesearcher.com> showed over 300 Kabinetts available in New York City alone, ranging from a price of \$8.99 for a bottle of Schmitt Sohne to a dizzying case price of \$3,617.70 for that aforementioned Egon Muller Riesling Kabinett Scharzhofberger Alte Reben Auction 2020.

How did all this happen? Changing the way a narrative is framed is a tried and true method of rejuvenating a product category that has become weighed down by a negative image, and this could be the most spectacular example of its use in the modern wine world.

Nobody would think of dismissing all high-end Chardonnays as "Oak Wines", although they undeniably contain significant aromas and tannins from maturation in oak casks. However, during the late 20th century many categories of wines that retain some natural grape sweetness were reduced to little more "sweet wines."

Beginning in the late 1970s, these words became an albatross hanging around the neck of every one of those categories right up to Château d'Yquem in Sauternes/France. This seemingly harmless label made consumers think the wines were heavy in an old-fashioned way and lacking in character/authenticity. In addition, defining a category solely by its sugar content inherently has put it at a disadvantage with today's younger, health-conscious consumers who often view sugar as unhealthy, and, even inherently suspect.



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At a recent session of the “Concours Mondial de Bruxelles”, a roundtable was held to address the future of sweet and fortified wine. Experts from traditional sweet wine regions around the globe including Tokaji, Hungary; Sauternes, France and Mosel, Germany came together in Marsala, Sicily to discuss ways in which to “put stickies back in the limelight.” The heart of the discussion revealed that, to put it quite bluntly, this wine category has a serious image problem.

When it comes to Kabinetts, the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to 21st Century Wine Cool were overcome by radically changing the narrative. Refreshment, vibrancy and minerality were emphasized, so too were modern buzzwords like citrus and salt. Riesling Kabinetts were presented in cool locations to a trend-orientated audience and bingo! Insiders suddenly started talking “Kabinett Newspeak” (to adapt a term George Orwell invented). And from that moment on gravity seemed indeed to pull upwards.

Adapting this to a much wider audience has required streamlining, something that Dr. Bürklin-Wolf (Hall 4/E22) has cleverly done with its Hommage à Luise, launched with the 2020 vintage. With just 9.5% alcohol and a touch of grape sweetness this is a classic Kabinett although the label doesn’t mention that word. By focusing on the wine’s other attributes – story, flavor, even it’s off- the-beaten-track identity when placed within the estate’s traditional (dry) line up – it becomes more than just its residual. In fact, retailer descriptions focused almost uniformly on “trinkfluss” and balance, with sugar receiving little more than a passing mention, and sweetness not at all.

For Sauternes getting away from the perception of weightiness is not easy since the Appellation law requires a minimum of 13.5% alcohol in the finished wine. Château Lafaurie-Peyraguey took the daring step of suggesting that their wine could be used as the basis of a cocktail that they christened SweetZ. This is simply made by serving Sauternes (Hall 9/E64) on the rocks with a twist or two of orange zest. The melting ice not only lowers the temperature of the Sauternes, it also dilutes the alcohol. The orange zest then emphasizes the refreshing citrusy side of the wine’s natural aromas.



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By actively subverting tradition and ritual, Chateau Lafaurie-Peyraguey has infused their Sauternes with a twist of playfulness and innovation, serving a whole new audience, both figuratively and literally, in the process.

So what's the best way to deal with an image problem? As anyone with a cell phone camera knows, the solution is sometimes as simple as changing the angle. Easier said than done when that it comes to an angle as ingrained in tradition as wine. But one look around at ProWein 2023 will reveal that today's "sweet wines" are ready to answer to a new name.

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