Feature Articles

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German Bubbles on the Rise: A Sparkling New Era for Sekt

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The global market for sparkling wine continues to grow. With a market size of US$41.6 billion in 2024, the sector is expected to reach US$69.1 billion by 2033. Prosecco and Champagne still dominate, as emerging cool-climate sparkling regions such as England and Tasmania garner early excitement for the potential of their traditional method wines. One category that should not be overlooked is German Sekt. Germany's best bubbles are back, and it's time to pay attention.

Sekt has several reputational hurdles to overcome. The industry is massive, with Germany producing around 350 million bottles of Sekt annually. Only a small portion, however, is fermented from base wines harvested in Germany, rather than imported in bulk and made effervescent locally; merely 12 million bottles come from the country's quality winegrowing regions. Despite Sekt's illustrious early history, the name has been tainted by the cheap supermarket fizz that defined German sparkling wine throughout the 20th century.

But German bubbles are popping anew. An initial push toward quality that started in the 1980s is now being followed by a surge of energy, which began only in the past several years. The latest examples of German Sekt of the highest quality have very recently reached the public. The potential is ready for today's crop of Sektmachers to harness. What will they do to meet the moment?

A Brief History of Sekt

Since the advent of the modern Champagne industry, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Germans have been critical to the advancement of sparkling wine. At the houses of Reims and Épernay, German employees often managed the books, sales, and administrative work. After learning the business and developing an international trade network, several of these German-born tradesmen eventually built brands that remain at the forefront of Champagne's *grandes marques*. Florenz-Ludwig Heidsieck, Joseph-Jacob-Placide Bollinger, and Johann-Josef Krug are but three of the German founders of Champagne's great houses. Georg Christian von Kessler, however, took his learnings from France back to his native Germany. After working as a bookkeeper for Veuve Clicquot, he founded G. C. Kessler & Co. in 1826. While a mention of an unnamed sparkling wine in the Rhineland is dated to 1791, G. C. Kessler & Co. is regarded as the first producer of Sekt.

The Etymology of Sekt

At first glance, the name Sekt might resemble the French *sec*, listed on the labels of so many off-dry sparkling wines globally. The term's etymology, however, is much more convoluted and without any French derivation. The name Sekt is twice modified, first from Spanish to English, and then from English to German. It was born from *sack*, an anglicized and antiquated term associated with Sherry and other Spanish fortified wines. The verb *sacar* means "to take out" and once referred to Spanish exports. Eventually, *sacar* led to *sack*, especially in association with Sir Francis Drake's looting of Sherry casks during his 1587 raid of Cádiz. The English term gained popularity in the ensuing centuries, enshrined in Shakespeare's plays as a favorite tipple of the buffoonish knight Falstaff.

In 1825, the actor Ludwig Devrient was reciting the German translation of Falstaff's line from *Henry IV, Part I*, "Give me a cup of sack, rogue!" or "Bringe er mit Sect, Schurke!" The waiter promptly arrived with a glass of sparkling wine, Devrient's favorite, and inadvertently gave the name Sekt to German sparkling wine. One century later, after German producers lost the right to use the term Champagne on their labels, Sekt was codified into German wine law, in 1925.

Kessler was quickly joined by other ambitious sparkling wine producers, and the German Sekt industry rapidly grew throughout the 19th century. Those developments were hindered with the enforcement of a sparkling wine tax enacted by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1902 to finance the imperial navy. The initial tax levied was 0.50 Reichsmark per bottle, and the tax remains in place today, now €1.02 per bottle. The journalist and Master of Wine Caro Maurer explains, "Sekt production was always looked at by the state as a different thing than wine. Wine has been seen and taxed as an agricultural product, and Sekt was considered to be an industrial product."

The financial burden of the Sekt tax led to sacrifices in quality among German sparkling wine producers. Looking for more efficient vinification practices, wineries abandoned the traditional method, with secondary fermentation in bottle, in favor of the cheaper and faster tank method. Production was consolidated among a smaller number of large, industrial wineries that kept a legal monopoly of the Sekt market. By the mid-1970s, that monopoly was officially abolished, providing the opportunity for small wineries to bottle Sekt. Ambitions, though, were not always high, and Sekt production was often used as a means to offload unwanted lots. Says Maurer, explaining this mindset, "There was one barrel found in the cellar. We couldn't sell it. It didn't fit into the Spätlese, it didn't fit into the Kabinett. What do we do with it? Let's make a sparkling."

Such thinking began to shift in the 1980s, largely because of the pioneering efforts of Volker Raumland. Following an uninspiring apprenticeship at Siemens, Raumland returned to school to study winemaking at Geisenheim. There, he participated in the Sekt-Projekt program, transforming his grandfather's 1981 Müller-Thurgau into a sparkling wine. In a blind competition pitting his very first Sekt against his fellow students' bottles, as well as examples of sparkling wines from across Europe, Raumland took first place. After gaining further experience, working for Egon Müller in the Mosel and Dr. Heger in Baden, Raumland realized his passion was with sparkling. Volker's daughter Katharina Raumland, who recently completed her own studies at Geisenheim and joined the family company, recounts her father's perspective: "Why would I compete with these guys? I will do something else. And why not make Sekt?"

To fund his own Sekt winery, Volker Raumland purchased a truck outfitted with mobile equipment for sparkling wine production. Driving from client to client, as far as Austria and the Loire Valley, Raumland helped small wineries develop their sparkling wine programs while premiumizing the Sekt industry with his own family label. Raumland still offers these services today, with the base wines transported back to the Raumland winery in Rheinhessen.

One of Raumland's former clients is Weingut A. Christmann, in the Pfalz, a biodynamically farmed family winery now run by its seventh and eighth generations. Sekt was very much a side project for Christmann in the 1990s and 2000s. Sophie Christmann explains, "All the things that were not dry Riesling were not so much in focus," leading her father, Steffen, to eliminate the program altogether in the early 2010s. Destiny, however, brought Christmann back to bubbles when its neighbors offered to sell their estate, dotted with old vines. Mathieu Kauffmann, the Alsace-born former *chef de caves* at Bollinger, had moved to the Pfalz and had just left his position at Weingut Reichsrat von Buhl that summer. Sophie Christmann says, "For us, it was mostly coincidence," but swiftly and serendipitously she, her father, and Mathieu formed a collaboration, purchased the property, and established Sektgut Christmann & Kauffmann. Ten days later, they began harvest.

Christmann & Kauffmann is just one of the exciting projects reimagining the potential of Sekt in the past half decade or so. With new generations taking over from their parents, and established wineries experimenting with sparkling for the first time (notably Keller, with its first Sekt vintage in 2018), the Sekt market is quickly evolving. Only in recent years has the first wave of the new Sekt hit the shelves.

The Many Classifications of Sekt

It is important to distinguish between the elite sparklers that lead the recent quality push and the much larger sea of more innocuous German bubbles. Even calling them German is something of a misnomer. Germany was the third largest bottler of sparkling wines in 2022; with approximately 350 million bottles and 14% of global production, it trails only Italy and France, besting Spain and Cava's seeming ubiquity. But the bulk of this production is composed of cheap Schaumwein, tank-fermented wine that usually retails for a few euros and is made at a large-scale, industrial winery. Maurer explains, "They buy the cheapest white wine on the wine market they can get," with Catarratto from Sicily and Airén from central Spain common sources of base wine.

A step higher is Deutscher Sekt (German Sekt), which mandates that base wine originate in Germany, and above this is Sekt bestimmter Anbaugebiete (Sekt b.A.), which specifies that the base wine be harvested from one of Germany's 13 quality wine regions. German wine law also includes two prestige categories: Winzersekt and Crémant. Winzersekt most closely aligns with the top sparkling wines exciting the German wine industry today. Winzersekt is similar to Champagne's *récoltant-manipulant*, or RM, category (colloquially, grower Champagne) and likewise requires that the wines be made from estate fruit. For Winzersekt, the traditional method must be used, with

secondary fermentation in bottle and a minimum of nine months of aging *sur lie* prior to disgorgement. But despite the term Winzersekt being used conversationally to describe many of Germany's top sparkling wines, which tend to align with its requirements, producers often forgo its usage on their labels.

Also elusive on the market is Crémant. The name is an obvious nod to Germany's western neighbor. When used, it is followed by the Anbaugebiete from which the wine comes (Crémant Pfalz, for example). Ernst Büscher, the press officer of Wines of Germany, likens the category and its diversity to the range between Crémant de Loire and Crémant de Bourgogne or Alsace. He says, "In Baden, you won't have Riesling sparkling, which in the Mosel would be typical." As for Winzersekt, nine months of aging after secondary fermentation is required. Dosage for Crémant is capped at 15 grams per liter, and whole-cluster pressing is mandatory, while yields and sulfur dioxide additions are restricted.

Complicating matters further are multiple quality pyramids more recently created by private organizations. The Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter (VDP) excluded Sekt from the quality scheme it enacted in 2001 for still wines, but in 2020 the organization adopted a new bifurcated classification for Sekt wines. Beyond requiring its producers to be VDP members, basic VDP Sekt must age for a minimum of 15 months on its lees before disgorgement, and VDP Sekt Prestige must age for a minimum of 36 months. For both categories, grapes must be estate grown, hand-harvested, and whole-cluster pressed, and the wines must pass a taste assessment. While VDP Sekt does not include Grosses Gewächs on its labels, VDP Sekt can specify the village on the label, and VDP Sekt Prestige can list the vineyard site.

A competing classification comes from the Verband Traditioneller Sektmacher (VTS). Like the VDP, the VTS is a private association of quality-focused producers, but this group is composed exclusively of traditional method sparkling winegrowers. Basic requirements for members' Sekt wines include fruit grown entirely in Germany; use of the traditional method; and at least 12 months of aging *sur lie* in bottle prior to disgorgement. The VTS's top-tier Sektmacher Réserve, like VDP Sekt Prestige, must age for a minimum of 36 months *sur lie*, with whole-cluster pressing and a taste test also obligatory. For Sektmacher Réserve, grapes can be purchased, but base wines cannot, and varieties are limited to Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Meunier, in addition to Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Auxerrois.

Organizationally, the VDP and VTS overlap, with some producers holding membership in both. Currently, the VDP has 202 members and the VTS has 42, and 8 wineries belong to both organizations. Raumland, for example, lists Sektmacher Réserve and VDP Sekt Prestige (as well as Sekt b.A.)—but only in small print on its back labels.

These classification schemes are new, reflecting the exciting and rapid developments in the category at large, but more widespread adoption by winery members and significant consumer education will be required before they carry much meaning on the market.

An Opportunity with Riesling

While 40% of Sekt b.A. is made from Riesling, compared with 17% from Pinot Noir and just 2% from Chardonnay, at the highest levels of quality, producers show a great affinity for the Champagne grapes. Given the massive shadow Champagne casts on the global sparkling wine industry, the desire to make wines in the image of their French analog is not too surprising. With Riesling Sekt, however, Germany has an opportunity to define a category entirely on its own merit.

Many producers prefer making their Riesling Sekt wines in a fresher style compared with their wines from the Champagne varieties. The Pfalz winegrower Vincent Eymann, for example, makes only a Sektmacher Réserve from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Generally, Eymann aims to avoid Riesling's classic petrol notes in his sparkling wines, which become more prominent with extended time aging *sur lie* after secondary fermentation as well as with longer-aged base wines. While Eymann uses 25% to 30% reserve wines in his Pinot-based cuvées, for Riesling the percentage is much smaller and limited to more recent vintages to preserve a youthful fruitiness and limit the petrol character. He explains, "It will appear anyway after a while under the cork, but I don't want to have it when I disgorge the wine freshly."

That fresher style also proves valuable on the market, capturing a different segment of sparkling wine consumers. Maurer says, "The combination of autolytic and fruity character makes it approachable for a lot of people who struggle to understand why they should love a wine which only tastes like champignons or brioche." Although the best examples of Riesling Sekt are made using the traditional method, much of their appeal is similar to that of top Prosecco—a flavorful, primary-fruit-driven expression of sparkling wine that deemphasizes the more savory austerity of Champagne.

Some producers interpret these stylistic differences as evidence that Sekt wines from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are more serious than those from Riesling. This is especially true the longer a producer waits to disgorge. Katharina Raumland says, “When it comes to long aging on the lees, we prefer how the Burgundy varieties develop.” Sophie Christmann and her father did not particularly like Riesling Sekt at first, but they proceeded at Kauffmann’s insistence. She says, “We treat everything with the same ambition. Now, I would say the Rieslings are more interesting.”

Christmann continues, “People usually have low expectations. They are a little bit afraid of it,” explaining consumers’ surprise when they realize the potential of great Riesling Sekt. That defiance of expectations has served the winery well. She adds, “With the Pinot blends, we are always in comparison to Champagne. With the Riesling, we can be on our own.”

Still, outstanding examples are unquestionably coming from the Champagne varieties as well. While also permitted in Champagne, Pinot Blanc and, to a smaller extent, Pinot Gris play a more prominent role in the German sparkling landscape than they do across the border. Raumland says that she likes Pinot Blanc “because as a variety it’s quite neutral. When it’s young, it will be a bit fruity and not taste like much, but, the more it ages on the lees, it will be very subtle, very fine, but with this nice aromatic of the yeasts.” She concludes, “I think it’s the variety that accepts these yeasty flavors the most.” Raumland is more critical of Pinot Gris but thinks that the variety can add valuable structure, though she uses it sparingly.

Where Pinot and Riesling enthusiasts seem to agree, however, is that the varieties should not be mixed. Indeed, there is minimal experimentation in blending Riesling with the Champagne varieties. Explains Christmann, “It’s better to keep it separate. In the end, the structure and style of both varieties, especially when they age and develop a little bit, I would imagine [them] not fitting together too well. It’s also something that is not in our culture. For still wine, no one has blended a Riesling with a Pinot—not for a high-end wine.”

Sekt in the Cellar

There is some consensus about best practices in the cellar for high-quality German sparkling wine. While barrel fermentation and maturation are important stylistic choices in Champagne, they are almost universally practiced for top-shelf Sekt. The wines, though often precise and acidic, benefit from the roundness provided by a more oxidative maturation before secondary fermentation. Vincent Eymann finds this especially important for his Rieslings, where he aims to temper some of

the flamboyant primary flavors more typical of the category. He says, “You bring the taste of Riesling away from this sweet, sour fruitiness, and you bring it more to a maritime, salty, Fino Sherry mineral style.” Notably, to increase exposure of the wine to oxygen, he doesn’t top off the 2,400-liter casks. For his Pinot Noir and Chardonnay base wines, Eymann incorporates smaller vessels (usually around one-third barriques and tonneaux) to amplify those nutty characters.

Similarly, producers nearly always allow their base wines to complete full malolactic conversion, which is seldom done with still Riesling. Says Eymann, “For me, it emphasizes the creaminess, [giving] a bit more of this toffee character to the wines.” He likes how malolactic conversion softens the hard, sharp acidity of the variety. Even in riper, hotter vintages, he enables the practice, noting that, in warmer years, the base wines will have less malic acid to begin with. As such, the result is more subtle sensorially and less significant to total acidity.

In recent years, there has been a shift toward increasing dryness in the best Sekt wines. Büscher explains, “The premium winegrowers, they really go with the residual sugar lower and lower.” For Sekt b.A., the dry and extra dry styles together outpace brut in production (37%, 12%, and 44%, respectively), but nearly all the very top wines are brut, extra brut, or brut nature. (VTS members are also asked to not market more than 10% of their production for Sekt styles exceeding 15 grams of sugar per liter in dosage. Sektmacher Réserve can be no sweeter than brut.) Eymann never goes above a dosage of 3.5 grams of sugar per liter across his range, while Christmann & Kauffmann forgoes dosage altogether. Christmann says, “If you need sugar to make it drinkable, then either the grapes weren’t ripe or the aging was not long enough.”

Importantly, some portions of Sekt country achieve greater ripeness than Champagne does; both Pfalz and Rheinhessen, for example, feature warmer climates than their French sparkling counterpart. Despite associations of Germany with cold-climate winemaking, the often very low dosages of Sekt wines from these regions do not necessarily reflect on the palate in the same way that they might in a brut nature Champagne. Because these Sekt wines have enough body naturally, they do not require higher levels of residual sugar to be in balance.

An Effervescent Future

It is still early to generalize about the new prestige Sekt wines and predict what they mean for Germany’s sparkling wine industry. Producers clearly have their work cut out for them as they reshape Sekt’s image and continue to identify the best terroirs and refine their cellar practices to

challenge further what Sekt can achieve. With limited production and a large portion of bottles consumed domestically (currently, few reach the United States), the top Sekt wines remain one of Germany's best-kept vinous secrets.

Yet slowly, Germany's wine professionals have seen the importance of Sekt grow in their market. Büscher says, "Every good restaurant in Germany will have a German Sekt on the wine list. This hadn't been 10 years before." Maurer echoes, "The basic quality of the big Maisons de Champagne is really so low. If you have a wine in blind tasting compared with it that is half of the price of those wines and double the quality, this is what causes interest now." The new Sekt certainly fits that bill. In time, German bubbles are primed to burst through.

You Might Also Like

- German Sekt: The Next Big Thing, by Romana Echensperger (2017)
- Germany Expert Guide [Members only]
- Sangiovese on Edge, by Bryce Wiatrak (2020)

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