

Germany Along the Rhine: Heat, Drought and Then, Almost Too Late, the Great Rain of 2022

By Stephan Reinhardt, Dec 29, 2023

2022 was another climate-related challenge. While budbreak in later April was within the 30-year average, the start of flowering was already about seven days ahead of the long-term average. Start of ripening was another nine days earlier and the start of the Riesling harvest about 22 days ahead, depending on wine style and philosophy. Eva Fricke, for example, started 11 days before most of her Rheingau colleagues; but she wasn't alone in Germany, where organic producers in particular tend to pick remarkably earlier due to an earlier physiological ripeness, as they report.

The extremely sunny summer of 2022 brought drought and temperatures that were on average 2.4 degrees above the long-term average in the Rheingau. This led to "excessive evaporation rates in the soil," says Fricke. "This increases the water loss and drought stress of the vines and thus hinders the uptake of nutrients and minerals available to the plants." She clearly states, "The drought had a rather negative effect on skeleton-rich soils over the course of the summer." Not all the producers comment on the vintage that honestly.

Particularly in the summer months of July and August, when there was no rainfall for weeks but serious drought stress problems, there were little dramas in the vineyards. Especially (but not only) when planted with young vines, whose poorly developed root systems searched in vain for water, the vines had to be relieved of their burden at an early stage to ensure their survival. But even old vines could do nothing if they stood in soils that were too poor and unable to store water.

The must weights remained low even after the 2022 drought, although after some rainfall, the suffering vines visibly breathed a sigh of relief and even turned green. However, the grapes remained as they were: moderate in sweetness and acidity; at most, there was an intensification of aromas here and there. But with the onset of rain at the beginning of September, which came as hail in some places, even rot could become a problem in a vintage that was actually quite relaxed in terms of plant protection.

However, the 2022 vintage did not need high must weights to be able to put a lot of expression into the wines. It didn't even need 90° Oechsle to produce deep Rieslings, as Eva Fricke and Michael Andres (Pfalz), for example, prove, alongside Breuer, where must weights were even below 85° Oechsle.

Nevertheless, and generally speaking, deeper soils were at an advantage in 2022; and so it is hardly surprising that the most complete white wines of the vintage tend to come from less stony areas, such as the Moselle or Nahe, but mainly from southern Rheinhessen and the northern Palatinate, where the limestone rock is often overlaid by strong loess, loam, clay or even limestone marl soils.

The Mittelhaardt and the Southern Palatinate are also among the winners of the 2022 vintage, which is developing surprisingly well and is now revealing aromatic, juicy, sometimes full-bodied white wines with elegant acidity and a fine tannin structure. Even in the Rudesheimer Berg (Rheingau), which has been plagued by heat and drought, the best producers have produced Rieslings that are far better than could be expected from these barren soils. First and foremost, Georg Breuer, but also Künstler, who is at the other end of the Rheingau.

In years of heat and drought, such as 2022, which break record after record, it becomes increasingly clear how important the availability of water is even for a plant as capable of suffering as the grapevine. Although Riesling has the fascinating talent of being able to stop its activity completely or to a minimum during drought in order to survive, even this late-ripening variety does not bring its grapes fully ripe into the fall without water. And by that, I don't mean sugar ripeness but physiological ripeness.

The sun itself also becomes a problem when its rays burn the grapes and dry out the soil. Without appropriate measures in the vineyard and on the foliage, producers will not be able to meet the challenges of global warming. Fundamental viticultural considerations are needed here, which need have little in common with the

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viticulture of the late 20th century. Anyone traveling through German wine-growing regions still sees the majority of high-performance plants from supposedly cooler climates. This will no longer be possible in the future, as 2022 and 2023 show, as they had to suffer the stress of the previous vintage. As if the current vintage does not bring its own tasks or even challenges. After all, 2023 was the warmest year since records began in the 19th century. However, unlike 2022, it was not a dry year.

According to my findings, those wines that come from a prudent viticulture, in which compost and cover crop have been used for years to build up the humus layer in order to protect the soil and soil life from heat and drought, are ahead in the comparison. Foliage management and yield reduction were just as advisable as short standing times on the press so as not to lose too much acid. Low pressing pressure was also an advantage, as the grape skins could well contain phenols due to increased exposure to sunlight. Art often lacks the extracts to be able to integrate these.

The 2022s did not actually need to be aged on the lees for a particularly long time, in contrast to the leaner, less ripe 2021s, which benefited from the long lees aging. The Rieslings and Pinot Blancs from Rebholz (Pfalz) are recommended as examples of the often-fragrant style of the 2022s. The Rieslings from Battenfeld-Spanier, Kühling-Gilot, Keller, Wittmann, Rings or Bürklin-Wolf show that the 2022s do not necessarily lack depth and complexity.

The climatic extremes in Baden also led to excellent results. The pressure from fungal diseases was also low here over the course of the year, so that the grapes hung in the vines in perfect health, as if painted. The high temperatures accelerated the ripening process, especially after the onset of rain at the early harvest time, which was a good two weeks before the long-term average. Due to the associated moderate temperatures and, above all, the cooling at night and, finally, a good water supply, the feared Oechsle rally like in 2003 and 2018 did not occur, reports the organic association Ecovin. Ripening progress was moderate but steady, and the different varieties and qualities were harvested "on time." "This was extremely beneficial for the development of aromas, the preservation of acidity and moderate alcohol content," reports the association. Joachim and Rebekka Heger can therefore boast a strong collection of 2022s, even though most of the Grosses Gewächs bottlings are only on the market as 2021s.

Most of the current red wines of the vintage come from 2021 or even 2020. The 2021 Pinot Noirs impress with clear, fresh fruit, lively acidity and fine, elegant, quite spicy tannins. They do not have the generosity and body of the 2020s but are nevertheless of great finesse and remarkable precision, especially at Huber in Malterdingen, who has certainly produced one of the strongest Pinot Noir collections of the 2021 vintage. His white wines offered at the same time also leave nothing to be desired. They are elegant and fruity but also minerally firm Chardonnay or Pinot cuvées that are not lacking in palate drama, pure and salty as they are.

Heger also produced great red and white wines from the Kaiserstuhl in 2021. In neighboring Tuniberg, the white and red wines from the Gebrüder Mathis estate are a real discovery for both 2022 and 2021 and even 2020.

Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to find a date with the Keller and Holger Koch domaines, both of which are also located in the Kaiserstuhl.

All in all, the 2022s tasted for this report over the last five months are much better than I had expected after the first samples in Wiesbaden at the end of August. However, at that time, I mainly tasted wines from the Mosel, Nahe and Palatinate and was often bothered by unpleasantly bitter phenols, which I associated with drought stress. Many wines were also warm in the fruit and somewhat washed out, which could have been related to the rain at harvest time. However, these impressions could also have been related to the early tasting date, as many wines were very freshly bottled at the time and, as always, given a rather generous dose of sulfur to ensure good development in the bottle.

In the coming weeks, I will certainly taste a few more 2022s, including excellent Franconian Sylvaner and certainly the heroes from the Nahe and Mosel.