

# Wein à la carte: A heroically comprehensive attempt to map a great wine country

Dieter Braatz,  
Ulrich Sautter, and  
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*Wine Atlas of  
Germany*

University of California Press  
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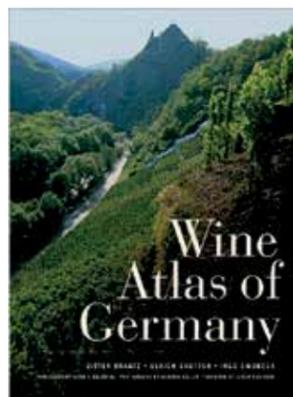
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What a welcome and valuable resource for lovers of German wine: at long last, a detailed atlas of German vineyards encompassing all German regions. While the seventh edition of Hugh Johnson's and Jancis Robinson's *World Atlas of Wine* (Mitchell Beazley) already gives a lot of detail on Mosel, Saar, and Rheingau and sketches out parts of Ahr, Nahe, Rheinhessen, Pfalz, and Baden, *The Wine Atlas of Germany* takes in all 13 growing regions in much more detail. Six maps are dedicated to the river Mosel alone, and the vineyards along Saar and Ruwer have their own maps. Franconia, for example, covering a far larger area, also has seven maps to its name. While the contour lines denoting altitude are missing on the maps themselves, most named vineyards, and certainly those you might find designated on a label, are listed separately, with their size in hectares, altitude, exposure, gradient, and soil, as well as its predominant grape varieties and owners. Other topographical features, bordering forests, or defining rivers, as well as some historic details, are also given; the atlas thus provides the most comprehensive listing of Germany's vineyards to date. This is no mean feat: The dedication and thoroughness of the authors in gathering and compiling this information is clearly evident. All three of them are veterans of

German wine writing and came to their task fully aware of the numerous pitfalls in Germany's vinous landscape. This English edition is based on the 2007 edition published by Hallwag and no longer in print. This atlas finally gives the world a one-stop resource for Germany, a wine country at the very heart of Europe still carrying heavy baggage.

Germany suffers from the travesty that is the wine law of 1971—certainly the most egalitarian in the world, quite possibly noble in its intentions, but disastrous in outcome—according to which *Qualitätswein* (“quality wine”) can be made both on a vertiginously steep slate slope or a potato field. The idea of *Qualitätswein* says both these wines are equal before the law. While such egalitarian ideals are laudable in other respects, they make a mockery of wine and fly in the face of everything we know about vine cultivation. In its comprehensiveness and the damage it did, the German wine law illustrates the triumph of ideology over fact. What is more, the 1971 wine law also re-drew and shifted the borders of numerous historic vineyards, enlarged various sites that nonetheless kept the name of the much smaller original site; it “rationalized” nomenclature so that numerous former single sites and *lieux-dits* became subsumed into larger sites and were almost forgotten altogether. Most horrendously, the law created so-called *Grosslagen*, or collective sites, whose naming borders on fraud, clearly misleading the consumer. Here is a perfect example: In the Mosel village of Piesport, the famous historic vineyard of Goldtröpfchen is 66ha (163 acres); the Domherr, 5ha (12 acres); as is the Grafenberg; the Kreuzwingert, of just 0.5ha (1.2 acres), is one of the smallest allowed to keep its name. These exist still today as single sites, or *Einzellagen*. The corresponding *Grosslage*, however, is called Piesporter Michelsberg and covers 1,106ha (2,733 acres), also of flat, indifferent vineyard. A consumer thus

is faced with Piesporter Michelsberg and Piesporter Grafenberg has no way of telling a *Grosslage* from an *Einzellage*, unless he or she has a list of collective *Grosslagen* to hand, and nobody has. The ever-so-highly regulated wine law makes no allowance for that; nor does it prescribe a certain grape variety for a certain site. This is the way the German wine industry shot itself very comprehensively in the foot: by deliberately obscuring, diluting, and misrepresenting historic vineyard sites and thereby its own heritage. Lawmakers who intended a sweeping, egalitarian rationalization that would do away with the residual privilege of aristocratic and ecclesiastic vineyard sites could not quite prevent themselves from piggy-backing on the inherent glory of these historic names. We all know what happened next: It took the German wine industry decades to recover from the resulting mind-set and marketing damage. Small exceptions, of course, prove the rule. The translator's note makes immediate reference to this perfidious law: “Since 1971, groups within the German wine trade have sought to overcome the law's shortcomings in myriad ways. This atlas [...] represents one such attempt.” The authors Braatz, Sautter, and Swoboda declare in their introduction, “The authors strongly urge that the German wine law be amended to once again permit the use of parcel



identifiers on labels in order to give more credibility to vineyard names. Our work on this atlas has underscored for us the merits of impartially classifying all pertinent top-quality vineyard parcels rather than recognizing only the current, bloated vineyards [...].” The authors also discuss the vineyard classification undertaken by the VDP, the Verein Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter, also a direct consequence of and reaction to the 1971 law. They also outline some of the VDP classification's limitations fairly and sensibly. The translator duly notes that some of the VDP-related information from 2007, translated despite being obsolete, has by now been superseded.

The book suffers from a rather clunky translation, not reflecting the more nuanced original text, occasionally abbreviating whole passages or even misinterpreting sentences. While we do not know under what constraints of space the translator had to labor, in places the translation is downright wrong: *Kellertechnik* certainly is not “cellaring”; *Ausbaurichtungen* certainly are not “taste trends.” Neither was the term Kabinett used at Kloster Eberbach, but Cabinet—an important distinction, even if it represents the origin of today's term Kabinett. This may seem like nitpicking, but German wine culture is arcane enough; it is not helped by skirting issues or simplification, especially not in a book dedicated to Germany. The introductory passages do not gain from the translation. “*Der Boden wird mystifiziert*” is simply translated as “soil is mysterious,” and so on. *Burgunderweine* is translated as “Burgundy wines” when it clearly should read “Pinot wines.” This does the authors no justice, even if they tried to address soil, a now outdated attempt at explaining minerality, and a whole sweep of history in just a few hundred words. Their disapproval of the current systems seems mildly expressed, especially when it comes to the *Prädikate*, which are always talked about in terms of quality but merely denote the ripeness level of the grapes at harvest, and which, incidentally, they do little to demystify. The translation makes this even less clear: That ripeness was once prized in a country as cool and marginal as pre-climate-change Germany, Riesling needing an exceptional vineyard to attain such rare ripeness is not mentioned. But

this historic explanation may throw some light on the enduring obsession with degrees of Oechsle. Neither do they mention the fact that a *Prädikat* like Auslese signifies absolutely nothing when it appears on a bottle of high-must-weight-cloaking Bacchus. Likewise, the list of German grape varieties has not been updated to reflect current plantings. Nonetheless, the careful reader will spot some of Germany's now thankfully waning bulk-wine reality when the explanatory text for Müller-Thurgau reads, “reliably high yields, up to 200 hectoliters/hectare.”

But nobody will buy this book in order to read up on obscure varieties like Acolon or Regent. Lovers of German wine will buy this book for its vineyard maps and detail. For the purpose of this atlas, the authors have heroically tried to classify all of the vineyards themselves into a four-tier hierarchy of exceptional, superior, and good, followed by the category “without distinction.” In this endeavor, they say, they have been impartial, having no vested interest. All vineyards deemed exceptional, superior, and good are listed with additional information. Braatz, Sautter, and Swoboda have thereby created an invaluable source for anyone worshipping at the altars of Riesling, Spätburgunder, Lemberger, and Silvaner.

Each regional chapter comes with an introduction outlining geographic and climatic factors, history, and soils. Often, notable winemakers are singled out who led the way by favoring quality over quantity as Germany emerged from its vinous nightmare period in the mid-1980s. Each chapter also states average annual rainfall, sunshine hours, and temperature (even though the information relies on data from 1961 to 1990), allowing readers to draw informed conclusions about wine styles, connecting cause and effect, vineyard to wine, and to compare regions to each other. The additional detail provided in the vineyard listings is varied but pertinent: Was part of the original site sacrificed to roads? Are particular parcels, often referenced by their old names, better than others? Readers will see the expanse of Rheinhessen's vineyards and find the small 13.7ha (33-acre) vineyard of the Wormser Liebfrauenstift Kirchenstück—the name that launched a thousand bottles—or

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millions rather, as its originally famous Liebfrauenmilch Riesling was turned into the cursed brand name of indifferent, non-Riesling plonk sourced from countless nameless hectares.

While it is fun to compare the steep gradients of Mosel vineyards, this atlas at long last brings us equal coverage of far less well-known regions: of Württemberg's exceptional but underrated vineyards—now that the wines finally also make it outside the regional borders—we can look up the Kleinbottwarer Süßmund and the Untertürkheimer Gips. We can look up Baden's, Sachsen's, and Franken's diverse sites, often scattered but always clearly advantaged. The significance of rivers and topography to a marginal climate becomes obvious and clear. Germanophones can also rejoice in the multitude of vineyard names: Wildsau, Osterlammchen, Kuhstall, Seligmacher, Hinkelstein, Schikanenbuckel, Inkelhöll, Hasenzeile, Sauschwänzel, and Maushöhle. Photography, mostly of featured vineyards, shows the still underappreciated but undoubted beauty of Germany's wine-scape. It was only very recently that I stood at the top of the Rudesheimer Schlossberg, with a glass of balm-like, dry, golden 1997 Schlossberg Riesling, the Rudesheimer Berg and the majestic sweep of the Rhine at my feet, the Nahe joining the much mightier river just across the shore, Rheinhessen and Nahe on the opposite bank—three age-old regions seen from one glorious vantage point, echoing with history, lore, and literature, its mature wine like an elixir of all I could survey. Reading this atlas, or even better, taking it along on a tour of German vineyards, leaves no doubt that there is an impressive, long viticultural tradition in the large and diverse country that is Germany. Its rich heritage, its sites prized over generations, deserve to be known; its checkered history deserves to be told. Notwithstanding all my criticism, this atlas does just that.



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