

Tasting Grapes and Wines at Geilweilerhof

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South of Frankfurt, west of Karlsruhe, and east of the Rhein River lies the German wine region called Rheinpfalz. The Rheinpfalz is less glamorous than the Rheingau or the Mosel (which is its neighbor to the northwest), but is ten-fold more productive. And they produce wines every bit as good as their more famous brethren. Not having to carry around the burden of fame has been kind of a blessing to the Pfalz. They are a bit more practical about the wine business and more willing to invent and experiment. The Federal Research Station at Geilweilerhof is responsible for the innovation in enology and viticulture in this region. It is the only station in Germany that breeds interspecific hybrid grape varieties and has been singularly successful at it. Their theme is that of combining disease resistance and high wine quality. The varieties, Regent and Phoenix were recently approved for growing throughout Germany for quality wines. Geilweilerhof also has the second largest collection of grape varieties in the world, numbering some 5600 different varieties. The Station also manages the international Vitis Inventory (www.dainet.de/genres/idb/vitis/), by far the largest and best managed electronic directory of grape varieties in the world.

In August, 1999, my job took me to a conference in Munich. Following the conference, I travelled to Geilweilerhof and spent two days of sheer joy tasting experimental wines and grapes from around the world. My hosts were Dr. Rudolph Eibach, the grape breeder at the station, and Dr. Erika Dettweiler, the curator of the grape collection and manager of the International Vitis Inventory. Both are from German winery families (Dr. Dettweiler from the Rheinhessen and Dr. Eibach from the Pfalz). Both showed me outstanding hospitality and kindness, and helped me make the most of my two days in the region.

During my visit I was able to wander about the huge planting of grape varieties. I tasted and evaluated literally dozens, no, probably hundreds of varieties, for their potential as parents in breeding grapes suited to Minnesota and to the Baltic. I simply told Dr. Dettweiler what I was interested in and, in a few seconds, her computer database of the collection had sorted out the names, origins, and vineyard coordinates of all the varieties of interest to me. I also had the pleasure of tagging along with Dr. Eibach on one of his seedling selection sessions. This year, Dr. Eibach had about 10,000 seedlings from which to make selections. We evaluated about 200 of those. Of the 200, we tagged about 5 seedlings for continued evaluation. I now appreciate what selection for disease resistance really means. Dr. Eibach has very absolute standards for this criterion. Even one speck of mildew on a leaf eliminates a selection from further consideration.

During my stay at Geilweilerhof, I also was able to taste many wines from new named varieties or from experimental selections. One of the great experiences was a visit to the Wolf Winery in Bad Durkheim, where we tasted test lots of wine produced from many new grape selections made by Geisenheim (Rheingau) and Geilweilerhof. Mr. Wolf is a great kindred spirit to Minnesotans. He is unbiased and thoroughly dedicated to varietal improvement. He also runs a terrific restaurant and winery and was a wonderful host.

So, of all the grapes and wines I tasted during my Geilweilerhof tour, what ilit me upî? Did I really find anything that would help our breeding programs here in Minnesota and those of my friends in the Baltic countries and Russia?

The Eye-openers

GfGa 48-12

From a cross of Bacchus x Villard blanc (same cross as Phoenix) made by Dr. Eibach at Geilweilerhof. I tasted a test sample of wine from this selection at the Wolf Winery. It was delicate and flowery, resembling Riesling, with a fresh crisp acidity in the mouth and finish. This was the very best white wine I tasted during my two days in the Pfalz.

GfGa 47-42

Cross of Bacchus x Seyval made by Dr. Eibach. The wines from selection have a very pronounced floral nose, moderate acidity and a long soft, fruity finish. There is not a hint of hybrid flavor in this selection. Resistant to Downy and Powdery Mildew. Fruit was 16-17 °Brix in late August.

Regent

From a cross of Diana (Sylvaner x Müller-Thurgau) X Chambourcin. I tasted four wines from Regent during my stay in the Pfalz, one from Rheinhessen and three from the Pfalz. All were excellent. Typically, Regent wines had a rich ripe fruit aroma in the nose, good body and tannin in the mouth, and a long soft finish. Even when young, Regent wines were quite soft and drinkable. Regent ripens rather early in this part of Germany, unlike most other vinifera varieties for red wine. Because of its full ripening and resulting wine quality, Regent is redefining what German red wine is all about. In a recent milestone decision, the German government approved the classification of Regent as a vinifera for winemaking purposes. Kudos to Dr. Eibach!

Super-early ripening varieties

Castel 19637

Vitis rupestris x Oeillade. This old French-American hybrid keeps popping up on my trips to Europe. The best red wine I tasted in Denmark during my 1998 trip was produced from this variety. I tasted Castel 19637 in the Geilweilerhof collection on 27 August with the sugar content ranging from 19-21 °Brix. The clusters were beautiful. The juice was deep red in color. There was no Powdery Mildew and only one tiny spot of Downy Mildew on one leaf. The Danes are on to something here. Castel should be used in breeding early ripening, high quality red wine varieties.

Reform

From a cross of Perle de Csaba (vinifera) x Aurore (Seibel 5-279). This variety comes from the program in Hungary. On 27 August, the berries I sampled at Geilweilerhof ranged from 20-22 °Brix. They were dead ripe, having a rich flavor and aroma of oranges. About 12 inches of wood had hardened off already on these vines. There was some berry rot on the fruit and a little Downy Mildew here and there on the foliage. Reform appears to be an excellent candidate for breeding high quality, super early ripening white wine grapes.

Augustovskij

Villard noir x Perle de Csaba. One of the super early ripening Russian varieties I saw in the collection. Also one of the few Russian selections with almost no mildew. This is a white grape with a nice muscat flavor. The fruit ranged from 18-21 °Brix on 27 August at Geilweilerhof, so Augustovskij is an extremely early ripening variety. Useful for breeding super early white wine grapes.

Early Geisenheim Selection

While at the Wolf vineyard and winery on 28 August, I tasted grapes from a numbered selection developed at Geisenheim (Rheingau) that was extraordinary for its ripeness, already 110 Oechsle. The selection had rather small, compact clusters and was pretty neutral in flavor. I think this would be a pretty useful selection for growing in cool, short season areas.

Russian Varieties

I looked at dozens of Russian selections in the Geilweilerhof collection, including Burmunk, Vynoslivi, Golubok, and Kazachka. With a few exceptions (e.g. Augustovskij), these selections were heavily infested with mildew on both the foliage and fruit to the extent that the fruit was ruined. No surprise. This simply validates the experiences we have had here in Minnesota with many vinifera x amurensis hybrids on low spray programs.

Minnesota Varieties

The collection at Geilweilerhof includes Kay Gray, St. Croix, LaCrosse, and St. Pepin! It is always fascinating to see these growing under very foreign conditions. When I saw these in the Baltics in 1998, they all suffered from poor berry set and retarded ripening. The vines growing in the collection at Geilweilerhof were similar to this. The berries on St. Croix, for example, had just started to color up. While they may be successful in Minnesota, these varieties just don't seem to like the conditions in northern Europe.