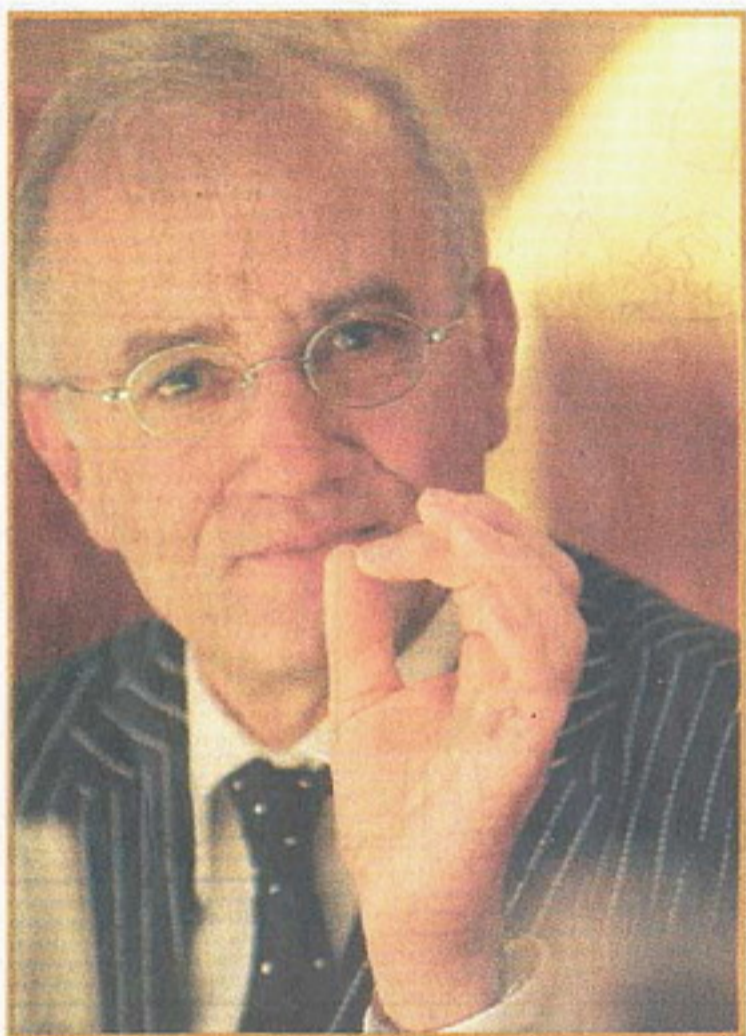


# The great white way

There are those who believe that Riesling is the finest white wine in the world; and some believe the finest Riesling comes from Nahe

BERNIE COOPER



Helmut Donnhoff, stellar producer of Riesling wines.



Five Donnhoff wines were selected with a specially-matched menu.

Nahe is one of the lesser known wine regions of Germany. I looked it up in the index of the massive Atlas at the library: it didn't merit a mention. That's how lesser known it was a few years ago.

In fact, it lies between two very well-known wine areas in Southwest Germany, Mosel and Rheinhessen, and it is in Nahe that Helmut Donnhoff makes the Riesling that has been causing a sensation throughout the wine world in recent years

Every credible wine commentator from Jancis Robinson to Robert Parker (whose *Wine Advocate* magazine named Donnhoff Wine Personality of 2004) is fulsome and sincere in his/her praise for Donnhoff's wines. Parker has awarded his ice wines an unheard of 100, and Jancis Robinson is not the only writer to declare Riesling the finest white wine in the world.

Why? "On the basis of the longevity of its wines and their ability to transmit the characteristics of the vineyard without losing Riesling's own inimitable style," Robinson writes. And that style comes from the grape's extraordinary ability to ripen with intense fruit while at the same time preserving good levels of acidity. It is immensely varied, but always produces powerful, complex aromas and rich, long-lasting flavours.

While at the Singapore Gourmet Festival last month, Helmut Donnhoff responded to an invitation to present a selection of his wines at The Oriental's Lord Jim's. The evening was orchestrated in concert with Fin, the company that specialises in events where "fabulous is needed". Fin's Jan Ganser also has the largest selection of Rieslings in Thailand among his collection of specialist boutique wines, and the Donnhoff vintages feature prominently.

Guests of honour were the German ambassador and his wife, HE Andreas and Mme Junko Stechcow, and The Oriental's almost legendary GM, Kurt Wachtveitl, made an appearance, too.

Five Donnhoff Rieslings had been selected for Lord Jim's chef Enrico Froehnel and Fin's Benjawan Vitoosatt to arrange culinary marriages, beginning with a Riesling Kabinett trocken, Oberhauser Leistenberg 2003. This we enjoyed with creative canapes in the aquarium-lined approach to the restaurant, including a demi-tasse of *tom yum goong*.

On German labels, Kabinett denotes the first level of higher quality wines made with suitably ripe grapes; "trocken" meant that this was a Kabinett wine that would be drier than most. It was at once steely and floral, lean and clean but also bringing

fruit and fresh herbs to the palate. It was a well-chosen introduction to the kind of complexities that top class Riesling can offer.

Surprisingly, Helmut Donnhoff came to winemaking reluctantly. His family were farmers in Nahe and the vineyards, planted in his grandfather's day, were not of prime importance. Nonetheless, someone had to look after them, and the job fell to the young Helmut.

"All my time as a young man was spent in the vineyard," he told us. "I saw nothing of the world outside! Then slowly I began to love my work and then all at once I knew I was making good wine and could make it even better.

"It's not investment that makes good wine, it's passion: putting all the elements together and finding your way. I try to make individual wines that reflect the soil they grow in — to make the soil talk to you through the wine."

The soil in the valley he works in is basically of two types: one side is slate and the other is volcanic rock, and broadly speaking, the wine from the slate side will have more mineral quality while the other side has more fruity characteristics. But the beauty is in the detail, the amazing variety of aromas and flavours these wines produce, and their depth, power and elegance.

Norheimer Dellchen 2003, for example, is a Spatlese trocken that was accompanied by pan-fried prawns and caramelised foie gras on balsamic onion confit. The spatlese — late-picked — grapes had had 14 more days of late October sunshine than those of the previous wine, so although it was labelled "trocken" it was markedly less dry. The colour was silvery gold, and you could taste silvery gold on the palate, the sweet and the dry merging in a long, persistent flavour with a dry finish. "Dellchen", incidentally, means, "little valley."

With smoked salmon and crabmeat salad with coriander beurre blanc came another delightful name: Schlossbockelheimer Kupfergrube 2003 Spatlese. Stony, steely mineral flowed into baked apple and pears in this dense, plump wine with layers of lush flavours from the prime vineyard site called the Coppermine, or kupfergrube. It will continue to age grace-

fully for a dozen or more years. However high in flavour these wines are, they are quite low in alcohol, usually around seven or eight percent per volume.

All the wines presented at the dinner were of the 2003 vintage, which makes three in a spectacular row for Helmut Donnhoff. Both 2001 and 2002 were remarkable, with long hot summers ensuring splendid ripeness, but 2003 has proved even more outstanding. We should spare some superlatives for the Auslese Niederhauser Hermannshohle, though, and might also mention that Parker awarded it 97 out of 100.

This majestic wine had been deftly matched with an aristocratic fish, dover sole, steamed with lemon grass on a mascarpone and chive risotto with a fennel salad. Auslese means that it was made from specially selected grapes and they were picked in November, four weeks later than the previous wine. Eighty percent were from the slate side of the valley, 20 from the volcanic slope. The aroma suggested stone, fresh herbs of the more perfumed variety, like tarragon, and ripe apples and pears. On the palate it fused immense richness with elegance in a texture of satin. Its complex layers of flavour admitted candied fruit, spice, minerals and flowers, extending into a long, long finish. This wine will continue to mature for another 20 years or more.

Even so, for some at the table it was the last wine of all that they would remember the longest, ice wine made from botrytis grapes: Eiswein Oberhauser Brucke. The grapes were picked at Christmas with all the family out in the vineyard, and the wine's chill, winter origins seemed a perfect contrast to the dense concentration of the bursting honeyed flavours of tropical and Mediterranean fruit that filled the mouth. And such was its structure and balancing acidity that it never seemed sticky or syrupy.

The terroir of Donnhoff's vineyards is extraordinarily diverse, and to produce the wines that best express them is a task akin to composing music. Not that he would describe himself as a composer. "I'm an owner who's also a winemaker," he says. And one of a small band of contemporary icons in today's wine world.



Lord Jim's was the setting for the exclusive wine dinner.