

XTRAVAGANCE

THE RIESLING RENAISSANCE

Germany's best-known wine is regaining its place beside those of Burgundy and Bordeaux

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SPECIAL TO THE NATION

You don't speak German but you enjoy a nice Riesling with dinner. Fortunately it just got easier to get past the language barrier and the confusing German wine laws, with an *Erste Lage* (Grand Cru) designation.

Riesling wines have their own globe-trotting ambassador, American Joel Payne, to explain the technicalities. He works for VDP - Verband Deutscher Naturweingüter, meaning the Association of German Estates, a century-old organisation whose wines are sold at auction.

Payne was at the German ambassador's residence in Bangkok recently conducting a workshop, co-hosted by local importer Fin (Fabulous is Needed).



VDP. Prädikatsweingut

Payne - who has thrice been named Germany's best sommelier but remains best known for his annual guide to German wines - explained that the regulations there rank the top quality as QmP (*Qualitätswein mit Prädikat*), and others, mainly "chaptalised" wines, as QbA (*Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete*).

Chaptalisation is "sugaring" - adding sugar to grape juice before or during fermentation. It's entirely legal in Germany because cold temperatures sometimes prevent the grapes from fully maturing.

Other classifications are for the table wines - *Tafelwein* and *Landwein*.

The QmP category grades the grapes by ripeness, from *Kabinett*, *Spätlese* and *Auslese* to *Eiswein*, the sweet so-called "ice wine".

The VDP seeks to preserve Germany's traditional viticulture heritage by encouraging high standards among its members, as well as practices that are environmentally friendly.

The organisation has 194 member estates in all 13 of the country's wine-growing regions.

RIESLING ambassador Joel Payne



THE WORKSHOP'S guests were treated to 'The Finest German Wines of the 2008 Vintage'.

Together they cultivate some 4,000 hectares, accounting for 4 per cent of Germany's total vineyard area, but they harvest only 2 per cent of the crop.

In terms of sales, VDP members produce 30 million bottles a year, worth 217 million euros (Bt9.1 billion).

Just over half of the members' holdings are planted with Riesling grapes, representing 10 per cent of Germany's Riesling vineyards - and 6.5 per cent of Riesling plantings around the world.

The VDP logo on any container of wine signifies the highest quality and guarantees ecologically responsible vineyard maintenance and cellar procedures. It means the wine has been produced using only traditional methods, and amid regular inspections.

By giving consumers such assurances, the VDP aims to restore German Rieslings' glory - they were, after all, once spoken of with the same reverence accorded the products of Bordeaux and Burgundy.

Such efforts have generated a global "Riesling Renaissance", greatly assisted by the introduction of new categories such as *Classic* (dry wines for daily consumption)



JOEL PAYNE, back row centre, had among his guests, from left, Malik Arami of Wine Connection, Marco Casanova of PB Valley, Pattira Kietvanichanon of Ameba Film, Isolde Felskau of the Germany embassy, Benjawan Wisootsat of Fin, writer Parani Chitrakorn, Stefan Duppel of the embassy and Anindam Choudhury of Jet Airways.



PAYNE shares his enthusiasm for Riesling.

and *Selection* (dry premium wines).

There are ripeness levels, too, since quality categories beginning at *Spätlese* are restricted to wines with natural sweetness - with no chaptalisation.

All phases of production are strictly controlled according to VDP standards. The grapes must be handpicked, especially varieties that are indigenous to a specific area, such as Riesling, Silvaner, Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) and Spätlese (Pinot Noir).

Erste Lage means "first growth" and is synonymous with *Grosses Gewächs*. This is a private brand of the VDP, designating top-quality wines from the Rheingau region.

The second level is *Klassifizierte Lage/Ortwein/Terroirwein* - signifying wines from sites classed for superior quality. The third level, *Gutwein*, refers to high-quality wines for everyday drinking.

Having explained *Erste Lage* in theory, Payne guided his guests through a tasting of the wines, the part of the evening we were obviously looking forward to the most.

There were a dozen wines on offer - 10 whites of 2008 vintage and two reds from 2007.

On the list were Lump Silvaner from Franken; Mandelberg Burgunder

from Pfalz; Feuberg Grauer Burgunder from Baden; both Garkammer and Wildenstein (both Spätlese) from Ahr and Baden, respectively.

The dry Rieslings were Felseneck, Hohenmorgen, Idig, Kirchenstueck, Schloss Johannisberger and Morsten, which invariably hailed from wine regions such as Nahe, Pfalz, Rheingau and Rheinhessen.

The only *Spätlese*, or late-harvest Riesling, was Jeffer-Sonnenrühr from Mosel-Saar-Ruwer.

It was an informative and impressive experience. We ended a pleasurable night with that eternally reassuring German phrase, *Endes gut, Alles gut!*

The 12 wines we tasted haven't yet been imported to Thailand. If you'd like to taste some non-VDP wines from the same producers, though, contact Benjawan Wisootsat of Fin.

Parani Chitrakorn is a food-and-wine-pairing consultant who took wine courses in London and Napa Valley, California. She's certified as an expert, is one of 178 accredited international Bordeaux wine educators and is a member of the Guild of Master Sommeliers.

» OFF YOU GO

There are two big wine shows coming up in Germany: ProWein 2011 from March 27 to 29 in Dusseldorf and VDP Weinboerse on April 18 and 19 in Mainz.