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KING RIESLING'S QUEEN SILVANER

Few know, and fewer still love, Silvaner, once the most important grape in German-speaking countries. **Stephan Reinhardt** does both, arguing that, as a partner for food and transmitter of terroir, it can be fully Riesling's equal

All photography courtesy of Andreas Durst

It took me some time to decide whether to finish this article's title with a question mark. Silvaner (or Sylvaner in Alsace, Italy, and Switzerland), queen? How can this neutral if not characterless variety be mentioned in the same breath as regal Riesling?

But please, before you condemn it and deprive yourself, have a glass or two of Horst Sauer's Escherndorfer Lump Silvaner Grosses Gewächs (if you can't find his Trockenbeerenauslese), and ask yourself whether there aren't times when you are tired of fighting Riesling's acidity or the mass of fruit and tannin of high-scoring red wines? Or do you drink fine Pinot Noirs every day? So why not try a good Silvaner and reflect on Oz Clarke's apt characterization: "Even the best Silvaners represent a certain manner/style/sort/type rather than a genuine aroma."¹

Indeed, the quite late-ripening Silvaner—a centuries-old cross of Traminer and the now largely unknown Österreichisch Weiss—is a wine *sui generis*.² More often than not, mouthfeel characterizes Silvaner better than does its bouquet. Even the best Silvaner producers falter when asked to describe Silvaner's nature. "Silvaner is not a blustering wine," they say, almost apologetically, rather than referring to its merits straightaway:

Silvaner is an elegant, subtle, well-balanced, and digestible wine that appears in different, mostly dry styles: appetizing, fresh, and light, sometimes similar to Riesling; full-bodied, gentle, and rich, sometimes similar to the "Burgundian style" or *nouvelle vague* Grüner Veltliners; an incomparable noble sweet wine (Horst Sauer and Schloss Sommerhausen are both top performers). But general style is one thing; distinctive expression of a particular place, quite another.

As self-effacing as a mirror, Silvaner offers a brilliant reflection of its terroir and is just as richly varied. Ask the Würzburg Steinweingüter to demonstrate Stein's particular personality, and they will likely serve you a Stein Silvaner rather than a Stein Riesling. Horst Sauer would do exactly the same to explain Lump, while Joachim Heger in Ihringen/Kaiserstuhl (Baden) would pour not only his excellent Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris) from Achkarren Schlossberg or Ihringen Winklerberg but also his outstanding dry Silvaner Spätlesen.

Because of Silvaner's elegant but gentle acidity and soft style, it matches perfectly with food. Since it does not show off, it serves extremely well many kinds of dishes, especially vegetables such as asparagus and salads, fish from trout to lobster, and pork or veal. As a classic *Brot- und Butterwein*, Silvaner Kabinett goes fantastically well with many sausages, breads, and cheeses.

And yet it is strangely difficult to share a bottle of Silvaner with friends. Even in Germany—by far the world's largest producer, with 5,314ha (13,131 acres)—many connoisseurs turn up their noses at it. As soon as you mention its name, they think of green apples (if they think of fruit at all), grass, and mud. Tell them it's Sauvignon Blanc, and they will probably love it—even though Silvaner tastes completely different.

Sadly, their prejudice or skepticism is readily understandable. Far too many Silvaners conform to the critics' stereotype of a boring, dull wine that serves only, on occasion, to swell the volume of Liebfrauenmilch. On the other hand, a really good Silvaner offers you ripe apples, quinces, pears, peas, sweet herbs, blossom, grass, hay, raisins, nuts, honey, caramel... Isn't that rather too much for a wine that is supposed to smell and taste of nothing?

Conqueror of the continent

The image of Silvaner has been poor since the 1960s and '70s, and not only in Germany. But it was all very different 300 years ago, when Sylvaner (the German "i" was introduced after World War II) was one of the most important grape varieties not only in Germany but throughout Central Europe. All the evidence suggests that the grape originated in the Danube Valley, or what is now Austria. From there, one road led Silvaner (whose aliases are numerous) eastward, to what is today the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, and Croatia, where the variety is still cultivated. Another road was opened up by Cistercian monks who brought Silvaner to Obereisenheim and Castell in Franconia in April 1659, replacing with it the then common mixed vineyards. In 1664, Silvaner climbed the Würzburg Stein and during the following two centuries spread widely in Germany, Alsace, and Switzerland. Even before Riesling, Silvaner had displaced less valuable varieties such as Elbling, Gutedel (Chasselas), and Heunisch to the extent that in the 19th century it accounted for one vine in two. Was that because of its vigor and the high yields it presumably brought even then?

That may have been one motive, but it was far from being the only one. In documents from the 17th and 18th centuries, the taste of Sylvaner grapes (in Germany at the time it was also colloquially known as Franken and Österreicher) is described as *süß* (sweet), *kräftig* (substantial), *mild* (gentle), and *weich* (smooth). And they should have resulted "in the most beautiful and sweetest wines that improve all the others considerably."³ So the taste of Silvaner was clearly very alluring at that time. In his *Geschichte des Weinbaus*, Friedrich von Bassermann-Jordan cites a Kloster Ebrach chronicle from 1713 that cautions against planting Silvaner by the wayside, because it will be too tempting for thieves, and warns that it should be harvested under strict supervision or else the pickers will gorge themselves.⁴ (Horst Sauer says that boars are his deadliest enemies today.)

For at least the past five decades, however, Silvaner's fortune has plummeted. To give only one example: in the Palatinate of 1953, it accounted for more than 50 percent of plantings; today it is less than 4 percent (at 888ha [2,194 acres]). Although Silvaner is still third in Germany, in terms of area under vine—with 5,314ha (13,131 acres) or 5.2 percent, behind Riesling at 20.8 percent and Müller-Thurgau at 13.7 percent—it is, at least among the classic varieties, public enemy number one. Even in 1975, Silvaner's holding in German vineyards was three times higher than it is today, at 16.1 percent. But between 1999 and 2005, no fewer than 1,500ha (3,707 acres) of Silvaner vines have been uprooted.

Today, Rheinhessen is the largest Silvaner producing region in the world (with 2,486ha [6,143 acres], or 9.5 percent of plantings), though even here extraordinary Silvaners are rare. Then comes Alsace, where Sylvaner is officially trivialized by the Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace as "a remarkably fresh, light wine [...] easy to enjoy."⁵ About 2,000ha (4,942 acres) are still cultivated here (10 percent), and Sylvaner may be produced as a varietal wine or—in the case of one grand cru, the 36ha (89-acre) Zotzenberg in Mittelbergheim—worked into a blend. Franconia is third, with 1,250ha (3,088 acres, 20.5 percent), and the Palatinate fourth (3.8 percent).

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A CASE STUDY

Ökonomierat Rebholz Silvaner Spätlese Trocken 2005 (Siebeldingen/Pfalz)

Hansjörg Rebholz is one of Germany's top dry Riesling producers, also well known and respected for his Weissburgunder (Pinot Gris) and Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir). He produces at least one Grosses Gewächs from each variety each year. But his more traditional Palatinate wines—Gelber Muskateller (Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains), Gewürztraminer (Traminer), and Silvaner—are equally exceptional.

There is less than 1ha (2.4 acres) of the Silvaner, but in deep loess soils, and the vines are up to 40 years old, yielding small berries of high quality. The 2007 vintage will probably be Rebholz's best so far for Silvaner, with intense fruit flavors and an excellent minerality. In 2006, when the whole harvest had to be completed in only 15 days (*Blitzlese*), Rebholz concentrated more on his Rieslings and Pinots than on his Silvaners. So after a radical selection he produced only a Kabinett (non-chaptalized, as usual) with 11% ABV. It shows nice aromas of freshly cut grass and quince, as well as a fine mineral spiciness and filigree acidity. Better still, however, and exceptional by any standard, is the extremely luscious 2005 Spätlese (13% ABV)—a rich Silvaner with intense tropical fruit aromas and a correspondingly full flavor. It's a very concentrated and mineral wine, with an impressive aftertaste, and it should age magnificently for another ten years. All this at an extremely reasonable price of only €9.50.



In Franconia, Silvaner is deeply embedded in the regional wine culture and is the image-building *Leitsorte* here, even though Müller-Thurgau is more widely planted. As many as 14 sites in Franconia qualify for VDP Erste Lage status. But although Silvaner Grosses Gewächs cannot be produced anywhere else in Germany, there are some from other regions that are at least as expressive as those from Franconia. Among them are those of Heger, from the volcanic soils of Schlossberg in Achkarren and Winklerberg in Ihringen, Baden; of Rebholz, from the limestone soils of the Palatinate; of Keller and Witmann, from calcareous sandstone soils in the Wonnegau/Rheinhessen; and of Wagner-Stempel, from porphyry soils in the western part of the Rheinhessen.

Silvaner is also grown in the Nahe, Saale-Unstrut, Württemberg, and the Valais in Switzerland (where it is called *Johannisberger*). For several years, top-quality Sylvaners have also come from the Valle Isarco in South Tyrol, where three received the coveted *tre bicchieri* from the *Gambero Rosso* 2008 wine guide. Not least for this reason, Silvaner—which crossed the Alps only in the late 19th century and is also cultivated today in Terlan—is held in relatively high esteem in Italy. This is far from being the case in the variety's home country of Austria, where fewer than 40ha (99 acres) remain, mostly in mixed vineyards in Vienna, the Kamptal, and the Weinviertel.

Risks and rewards

The reasons for the constant decline of Silvaner in Europe are manifold. Cruelly and ironically enough, some of Silvaner's blessings—its elegance, finesse, and restraint—seem to have been a curse as well. Even so, the modern preference for aromatic wines with ample fruit and fresh acidity is much more recent than Silvaner's fall from favor. The real causes of its downturn are rather the nature of the grape itself and its neglect relative to other more fashionable varieties.

Silvaner—in Germany it is officially Grüner Silvaner (Gelber Silvaner means the same, whereas the very rare blue-skinned Blauer Silvaner is a separate variety)—is a quite late-ripening grape (normally 7–14 days before Riesling). It therefore needs the best-sheltered, warmest vineyard spots and suitable soils. When grown in unsuitable sites, it cannot ripen properly and causes unattractive, unripe, earthy aromas. Clay soils virtually guarantee broad and fat Silvaners lacking flavor and extract. So already Riesling is an unbeatable competitor in the vineyards. More recently, Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) has also become a rival, and in Alsace, Pinot Gris.

Silvaner is also a very frost-sensitive plant, so especially in Germany its cultivation has always been risky. Producers have therefore taken full advantage of its vigor, especially that of the pervasive high-yield clones that have been propagated since the 1880s. But if the soil is too fertile, the rootstock is too productive, the canopy is not managed, and the yields are not dramatically reduced, Silvaner again struggles to ripen.

The goal in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s was quantity. In terms of yield, however, there is no white grape variety in the world that can rival Müller-Thurgau, whose triumphal procession through German vineyards began in the 1960s. It can easily

bring 250–300hl/ha, so in the cooler 1960s and '70s it overtook not only later-ripening Silvaner but also late-ripening Riesling as Germany's most cultivated grape variety. Even today, Müller-Thurgau is second only to Riesling.

Because there are fewer and fewer consumers with a fondness for Silvaner, the cultivation area continues to decline, and many old vines are still being ripped out. (They are also a casualty of *Flurbereinigung*, the restructuring of Germany's vineyards.) Only a very few producers—like Joachim Heger at Dr Heger (Ihringen/Baden) or Georg Hünnerkopf at Graf von Schönborn (Hallburg/Franconia)—are fortunate and wise enough to have Silvaner from the pre-clonal era. According to them, the bunches are looser and the berries smaller and more golden yellow than those from modern clones. Because the vines are up to 60 years old, moreover, yields are naturally very low. The overwhelming majority of Silvaner vines today are clones, designed to meet the priorities of the 1960s: high yields as early as possible. As regrettable, says Robert Haller from Würzburg Bürgerspital, “The diversity of the six or seven Silvaner clones today is as poor as those of newer varieties such as Bacchus.”

Despite all the challenges, however, Haller and his colleagues are able to produce excellent Silvaners that the fine-wine world should treasure. It is harder to get such impressive results than it is with Riesling, producers say, but it still possible as long as five basic requirements are satisfied. First of all, a top site, and second, old vines. If these are not ideal, the third condition becomes even more important: reducing vigor by choosing the right rootstocks, and reducing yields by managing the vine. The fourth essential quality is patience. “If the summer is cool and wet, Silvaner stops ripening for a while,” says Haller. “But when a golden autumn follows, as in 2006 and 2007, the vines can give you perfectly ripe berries with great intensity and sweetness of flavor.” Last but not least, there must be highly selective, perfectly timed pickings.

In the cellar, you can concoct almost anything—but not good Silvaner. Most producers prefer skin contact to release pectins and flavors. Otherwise, explains Haller, it is extremely hard to get the desirable extraction from the necessarily soft

pressing. He also identifies another risk: “Silvaner's pH level is quite high, so it is much less stable in microbacterial terms.” Constant vigilance is therefore required.

Fermentation normally takes place in stainless-steel tanks but also occasionally in wooden casks ranging in size from 300 to 3,000 liters. Malolactic fermentation is normally prevented nowadays, whereas a few decades ago it, and long maturation in cask, helped mask the unripe acidity. Nearly all Silvaners today are produced in a more reductive, mineral style, with subtle fruit aromas and fine acidity. For some years, however, Hans Ruck in Iphofen (Franconia) has been producing a remarkable oxidative Silvaner, the rich and creamy Myophorium, from very ripe grapes and the oldest vines of the Erste Lage Julius-Echter-Berg.

Silvaner blends with Riesling and Traminer, which replicate the traditional Gemischter Satz, are rare so far.⁶ But there are already three very good Franconian Silvaner/Riesling blends—from Zehnthof-Luckert in Sulzfeld (Unter der Mauer), Fürst Löwenstein in Kreuzwertheim (Kallmuth), and Rudolf (Paul) Fürst in Bürgstadt (Buntsandstein-Terrassen Alter Satz von Riesling & Silvaner).

What more encouragement do you need to discover or rediscover some of world's most undervalued wines? ■

Notes

1. Oz Clarke and Margaret Rand, *Grapes and Wines: A Comprehensive Guide to Varieties and Flavours* (Webster's, London; 2001), p.242.
2. Österreichisch Weiss is a rare and largely unknown Austrian variety that guarantees high yields and high acidity levels.
3. See Friedrich von Bassermann-Jordan, *Geschichte des Weinbaus*, Band 1 (4th edition; Landau, PVA; 1991), p.380 (a reprint of 2nd edition; Frankfurt am Main, FVA; 1923): “die herrlichsten süßesten Wein, so alle anderen Wein gut machen.”
4. Bassermann-Jordan, p.380: “sonst, fressens die Leser rein und glatt auf.”
5. www.vinsalsace.com
6. German chronicler Johann Philipp Bronner noted that single-varietal vineyards of Traminer, Riesling, and Silvaner were rare in South Germany before the 1830s. See Johann Philipp Bronner, *Der Weinbau in Süddeutschland* (Heidelberg; 1833), p.108.

RECOMMENDED PRODUCERS

Franconia

Rudolf Fürst, Josef Walter, Stich (Bürgstadt); Fürst Löwenstein (Kreuzwertheim); Knoll Weingut am Stein, Bürgerspital, Juliusspital, Staatlicher Hofkeller (Würzburg); Schmitt's Kinder, Störrlein (Randersacker); Schloss Sommerhausen (Sommerhausen); Zehnthof Theo Luckert (Sulzfeld); Graf von Schönborn (Volkach-Hallburg); Max Müller I (Volkach); Horst Sauer, Rainer Sauer, Michael Fröhlich, Egon Schäffer (Escherndorf); Weltner (Rödelsee); Johann Ruck, Hans Wirsching (Iphofen); Fürstlich Castell'sches Domänenamt (Castell); Winzerhof Stahl (Auernhofen)

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South Tyrol

Kuenhof Peter & Brigitte Pliger (Brixen); Köfererhof Günther Kerschbaumer, Pacherhof, Abbazia di Novacella (all Vahrn); Haderburg (Salurn); Eisacktaler Kellerei (Klausen)

Alsace

Marie-Claire et Pierre Borès (Reichsfeld)