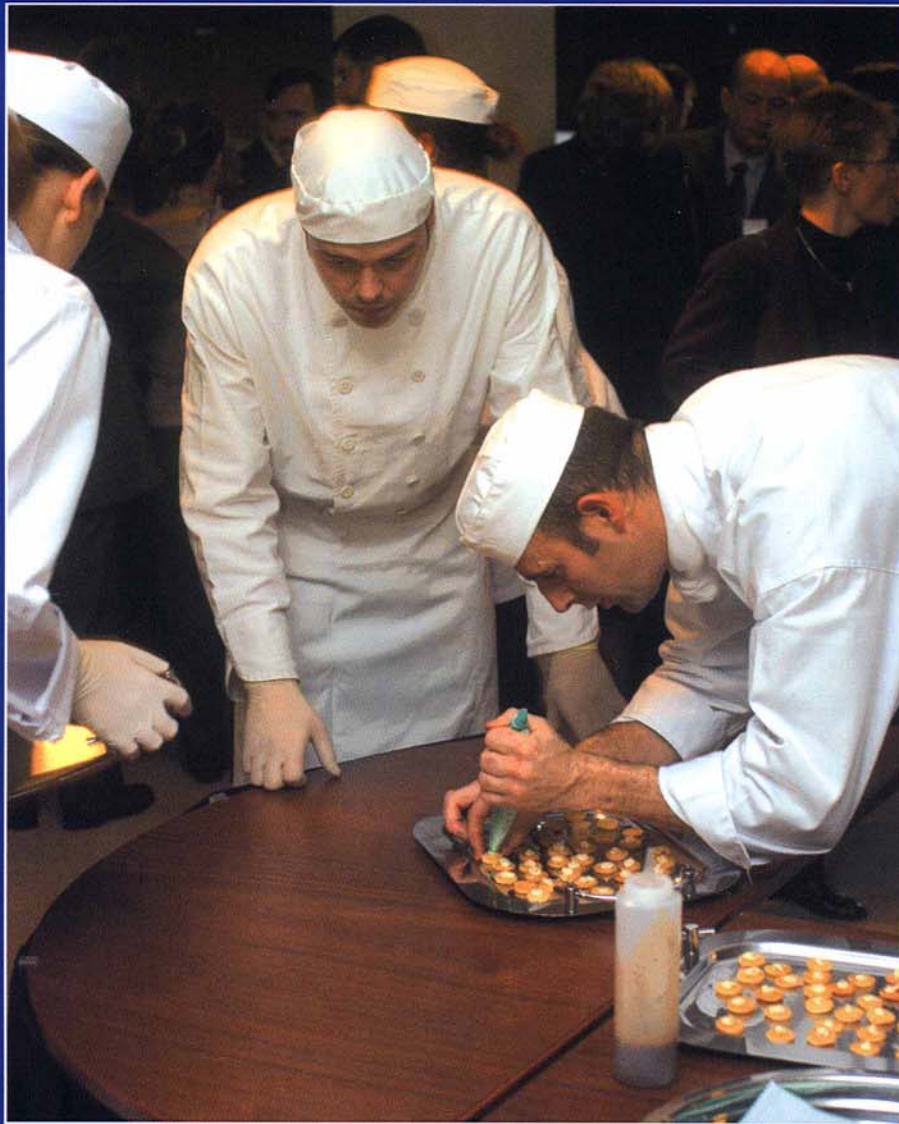


# Master's Table

The Voice of the Master Chefs of Great Britain



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# Schmitt-Wagner

## The beauty of the Middle Mosel

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'Sweet and cheap' is the popular British view of German wines. It is true that there are still far too many cheap, characterless, over-sweet, thin wines on the shelves of our high street multiples and supermarkets. They are 'manufactured' mainly by huge merchant houses that insist on proclaiming their quality and suitability for food. These are the very people whose products have given German wines such a poor reputation that last year exports to the UK fell by over 13%.

The good news is that if you look hard enough you can still find small, quality-driven, German winegrowers. By keeping their yields at harvest time naturally low, these dedicated producers are making delicately light and astonishingly pure world-class Rieslings.

This was brought home to me on the first evening of a trip to the Middle Mosel with a group of international wine writers. Before dinner we tasted 40 wines from ten growers. Tasting every one of the wines I found one producer whose four, in my opinion, stood head and shoulders above the rest. This was Weingut Carl Schmitt-Wagner whose wines combined subtle depth, white flower and mineral complexity with stunning purity. I made sure that at dinner I sat next to the young Carl Schmitt and his charming American wife, Kristina. This gave me the opportunity to break away from the rest of the group, who were going to a wine auction, to visit their vineyards and learn more about them and their wines.

As we drove up the steep slopes I learnt that the family has owned its seven acres of precious Maximiner Herrenberg and two in the Longuicher Herrenberg vineyards since 1804, when Napoleon sold off all the church properties. I also discovered that the vines, many planted in 1896, are all pure un-grafted

European root-stock as phylloxera hasn't invaded the steep Blue Devonian slate soil that gives the wines their distinctive mineral character. On an average year these vines will only produce some 35,000 bottles; little wonder that they attract such relatively high prices.

Carl explained that in the middle ages the monks travelled up and down the river seeking the very best sun-soaked sites and these included the Maximiner Herrenberg. Because of the special lay of the land it remains free from heavy mists and associated rot. He showed me the gentle curve that is a sun trap from where they harvest grapes for their Auslese and in good years, Beerenauslese. Either side of their vineyard, at the top of the hill, the woods are home to wild boar that he and his father Bruno, who makes the wine, enjoy hunting.

The tiny luminescent grapes were already showing 70° and 80° Oechsle. With at least two weeks to go before the harvest, they should easily achieve that magic 90° - 95° from which great Auslese, and even Beerenauslese, can be created.

Back in their home, which is also the winery and cellars, I was shown their latest investment - a computer-controlled Italian de Franchi 2,500 litre pneumatic press that has replaced a hydraulically powered basket press used since 1911. The grapes are first carefully sorted, to reject any unripe or rotten berries, and then fed into the press that gently squeezes them to a maximum of 1.85 bar. From there, after a short spell while the solids are precipitated, the juice goes to 1,000 and 1,200 litre oval tuns where they are fermented at 16° to 18°C for three to four weeks. Following ageing in similar casks, they are finally lightly filtered and bottled.

Sitting at the family's dining room table I tasted of some of the most exquisite Rieslings that I



have ever experienced. These wines are not fully fermented out, combining relatively low levels of alcohol with harmonious mineral flavours punctuated by most agreeably soft tenderness. Sweet, yes, but sugary, no.

Carl's father, Bruno Schmitt, is a natural winemaker. It is in his blood. He has no great theory or fundamental philosophy. He just wants to 'feel' his wines, they 'speak' to him and he instinctively knows what to do. His objective is to achieve great Kabinets, these are the entry level of the QmP scale - which translated simply means 'quality wine with qualifications' and are based on the sugar levels at harvest. Kabinets are the lowest in sugar and should be delicate and well-balanced; they were usually kept for the winemakers own enjoyment in his cupboard or Kabinet.

As you move up the scale you get Spätlese (late picked grapes), Auslese (selected bunches of late picked grapes), Beerenauslese (individually picked late harvest grapes) and finally the great TBA - Trockenbeerenauslese (selected overripe grapes). Eisweins, a great rarity, are made from individual grapes harvested so late that they have shrunk into little more than raisins and are picked when ice has formed a protective jacket all around them.

The winemakers' skill is to achieve a near miraculous balance between the high natural acidity of the Riesling grape and the huge amount of sugar that has been created inside the grape by the heat of the sun over the 100 to 105 days between flowering and harvest.

Having enjoyed examples of his current Kabinet, Spatlese, Auslese and Beerenauslese the previous evening Carl gave me a stupendous tasting of ten more wines, without telling me which they were. With his guidance I had to try and work out the quality and even the vintage.

We started with a couple of sparkling wines, made in the traditional way with their second fermentation in the bottle. In poor years, when the ripeness is not correct, Bruno sends wines away to be made into fizz. The first, a Brut, was a little too austere, but a Rich - with higher doseage - was quite charming, delicate, yet big enough to accompany cake.

Two 2001, a Spätlese and Auslese were just coming into their own with citrus, melon and mineral aromas, light dancing flavours and hints of kerosene on the long finish. America's influential Wine Spectator magazine gave the Spätlese 91 points and the Auslese 93. No wonder they are selling like hot cakes in the States.

colour of burnished gold whose kerosene, tropical fruits and honey nose was followed by the most extraordinary concentration of floral and mineral flavours - powerful on the side, but delicate and light at the top of the palate - and as long as a giraffes' neck.

But the piece de resistance was the palest of pinks as it was poured from the bottle. This was a 1937 Auslese; a still amazingly youthful wine with a nose of rotted, but not botrytised, sweetness. It still had green apple acidity and astonishingly lively fruit and uncloying sweetness on the palate. A wine that was still very much alive 30 years after its maker, Carl's grandfather (another Carl) had died. Bruno was seven and thinks that he remembers picking a few grapes that year!

Schmitt-Wagner is a shining example of what is being done in Germany by small, quality conscious winegrowers. These are wines that can accompany carefully selected dishes like trout or a fricassee of veal, but are at their best enjoyed with friends and perhaps a deliciously ripe white peach. There is no doubt that their lightness makes them a natural accompaniment to Japanese food.

The family sells its wines very successfully in the US, but so far not the UK. With the Riesling revival well underway isn't it high-time that we also had the opportunity of enjoying these elegant wines for ourselves?

I was also fortunate enough to taste two old wines. The first was a 1975 Spätlese, the

