



Mosel Fine Wines

"The Independent Review of Mosel Riesling"

By Jean Fisch and David Rayer

An Introduction to the Annual Trier Wine Auctions

Mosel Fine Wines

The aim of Mosel Fine Wines is to provide a comprehensive and independent review of Riesling wines produced in the Mosel, Saar and Ruwer region, and regularly offer a wider perspective on the wines produced in other parts of Germany.

Mosel Fine Wines appears on a regular basis and covers:

- Reports on the current vintage (including the annual auctions held in Trier).
- Updates on how the wines mature.
- Perspectives on specific topics such as vineyards, Estates, vintages, etc.

All wines reviewed in the Mosel Fine Wines issues are exclusively tasted by us (at the Estates, trade shows or private tastings) under our sole responsibility.

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Principles

Drinking window

- The drinking window provided refers to the maturity period: Mosel Riesling has a long development cycle and can often be enjoyable for 20 years and more. Like great Bordeaux or Burgundy, the better Mosel Riesling generally goes through a muted phase before reaching its full maturity plateau. At the end of each tasting note, we provide a drinking window, which refers to our estimation of the maturity period for the wine. This maturity period consists of the 'fruit' and 'terroir' phases defined in our introduction on Maturing Mosel (which can be found [here](#)).
- Without further reference, all wines are assumed to have in addition a drinking window of 1-3 years after the vintage: Top Mosel Riesling is also extremely enjoyable in its primary fruit phase, which typically lasts 1-3 years after the vintage. This primary fruit drinking window always applies and is therefore not referred to in each individual tasting note.

Scoring Approach

The use of scores to evaluate a wine is often debated and has its advantages (communicating a perspective) and its disadvantages (in particular in reducing such a complex and fascinating matter as Riesling wine to a number). We believe that the advantages outweigh the drawbacks as long as a score is put in perspective of a tasting note and all our scores should be seen in that context.

We believe that Riesling is not about "more is better" but rather about seeking a combination of the following:

- Intrinsically complex and balanced: Great Riesling should be complex and multi-layered, and offer a perfect balance between acidity, flavor intensity and alcohol as well as sweetness for wines with some residual sugar.
- Expression of a terroir: Any wine should carry the signature of its unique terroir into the bottle. An Ürziger Würzgarten should not taste like a Scharzhofberger or vice-versa.
- True to its wine style: German Riesling has the incredible richness of coming in different styles, which vary in terms of degrees of residual sugar or in terms of flavor profile and intensity (i.e. Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, etc.). Great Riesling should glorify its declared style.

A great Kabinett, which remains true to its style, can therefore get a higher score than, say, an average Spätlese or Auslese.

We rely on a 100 point scale with the following overall principles:

95-100	Classic: A true classic that sets the standards for its style and terroir. Only few wines make it into this "super-class" of Riesling and no stone should be left unturned to find them.
90-94	Outstanding: Stands out as distinctive example of its style and terroir. It will offer immense pleasure and should be actively looked out for.
85-89	Good to very good: Is a good to very good wine with special qualities. It will be delicious and is worthy of any cellar, especially if the price is right.
80-84	Solid to good: Is technically correctly made and will be enjoyable in its simple solid way. Price is the key driver for the decision to buy.
Below 80	Not worth it: Does not show any distinction and may even have some flaws. Given the currently still quite reasonable price level for Mosel Riesling, there is no reason to bother.

Riesling is an aromatic grape that rarely goes through malolactic fermentation. Therefore, bottling generally occurs six to nine months after the harvest, which allows us to generally taste bottled wines. Some wines may however not yet be bottled at the moment of our tasting. In such an instance, we provide a tasting note based on a cask sample and only a score range (instead of a firm one).

Nomenclature

Please note that we are using the following simplifying principles in any wine description:

- No Prädikat in the name of a wine means that it is bottled as QbA.
- GG stands for Grosses Gewächs and EG for Erstes Gewächs.



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Background Information

Each country has its own specificities regarding naming, labelling, style, etc. This is no different in Germany. In this country also, there are specific subjects such as vineyard classification, AP numbers, etc. which the lover of Riesling will need to understand.

We regularly publish articles on topics which may help readers get a first grasp at or deepen their knowledge in a particular aspect of German wine and winemaking.

As these have been published over the last seven years, we insert here a comprehensive list of articles published to date with the topic and where it can be found:

Theme	Topic	Issue	Website
Wines	Winemaking in the Age of Climate Change	Issue No 28 (Jun 2015)	Click Here
Vineyards	Geisberg - The Revival of Forgotten Saar Glory	Issue No 28 (Jun 2015)	Click Here
Wines	Maturing Mosel (drinking windows)	Issue No 27 (Mar 2015)	Click Here
Wines	AP Number	Issue No 27 (Mar 2015)	Click Here
Region	Mosel Visiting Guide	Mosel Visiting Guide 2015	-
Wines	Grosser Gewächs Erstes Gewächs Grosse Lage Erste Lage	Issue No 26 (Oct 2014)	-
Wines	Dry Mosel Riesling	Issue No 14 (Jan 2011)	-
Vineyards	Erdener Prälat	Issue No 10 (Jan 2010)	Click Here
Estate	Jos. Christoffel jr.	Issue No 7 (May 2009)	-
Wines	Eiswein	-	Click Here

Past issues are available to subscribers on simple request.



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The Annual Trier Wine Auction

Every year, two winemakers' associations in the Mosel, the Bernkasteler Ring and the Grosser Ring / VDP, each hold an auction at which some of the best wines of its members are auctioned off.

We regularly get many questions about these auctions:

- What are these auctions?
- How did they come about?
- Which wines are being offered? Are they the same as those available in the shops?
- How can one participate?
- Who should buy at the Auctions? Is it really worth it?
- Etc.

We provide here in this document the necessary basic background information on these Auctions.

The Annual Trier Wine Auctions at a Glance

Here a short answer to the key questions:

How did the Auctions come about?	The Auctions were set up in the 19th century essentially as an efficient manner to capture value vs. the powerful trading houses. These Auctions gradually structured around grower associations by the turn of the 20th century, also to improve the traceability of the wines. Until the middle of the 20th century, Auctions were to be the standard approach for selling wines, with commissioners as middlemen. With the development of Estate bottling and direct sales, the Auctions became an annual event dedicated to selling off selected high quality and rare wines only. Two grower associations emerged in the Mosel, each organizing an Auction of wines from its member every year.
Which wines are sold at these Auctions?	The vast majority of the wines brought to these Auctions are special wines (not sold via traditional sales channels) made from particularly prized parcels or the result of painful selections. The Kabinett, Spätlese and Auslese are usually from the latest vintage, the Eiswein, BA and TBA from older vintages. In addition, some Estates may bring some mature rarities or rare large format bottles from wines which are sold via regular channels.
How to participate at the auctions?	Auctions are held annually in the third week of September. Private individuals as well as professionals can bid at these Auctions. It is however advisable to contact a commissioner prior to bidding on the best way to handle any import or duties issues into your country.
Should one buy at the Auctions? Is it worth it?	Auction wines represent a pinnacle of Mosel Riesling but they are not cheap and often sell at a significant premium. However, this premium needs to be relativized by the fact that most fruity-styled or sweet auction wines are heavily de-classified. Some relative bargains can however be made, which allow one to get the "best of Mosel" at reasonable prices. The question of whether the premium and effort of buying at Auctions is worth it is a very personal one. Auction bottles do not necessarily need to be acquired at the Auction itself, some Estates and wine merchants / importers offer them also later.
How does one recognize an auction wine?	In principle, all auction bottles carry a round sticker to distinguish them from regular ones. In practice, not all do carry a sticker and then only the AP number can help out. AP numbers may not be very consumer friendly but a little effort may allow one to make some bargains.

To help wine lovers throughout the world, Mosel Fine Wines has been publishing a complete guide to the Auctions with tasting notes in advance of the Auctions since 2009 which are available on the website ([click here](#)).



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How did these Auctions come about?

The Auctions were set up in the 19th century essentially as an efficient manner to capture value vs. the powerful trading houses.

In order to understand the annual Auctions, one needs look back the way wines were sold in the 19th century. The wine trade in Germany was dominated by wealthy and powerful merchant houses. These merchants went to the Estates, purchased wines in casks and had these transferred to their own cellars. Here, the wines were matured and bottled, before being delivered to their customers in Europe and worldwide. Leading Estates first started to sell their top casks via Auction in the best vintages, such as 1857 or 1865, when demand was high, simply to secure the highest price from the merchants. These Auctions were often organized at the Estates themselves. The success and growing demand for Mosel wine led more and more Estates to sell their wines via Auction. Soon enough, a series of days in spring emerged at which these Estates were all auctioning off their wines.

These Auctions gradually structured around grower associations by the turn to the 20th century, also to improve the traceability of the wines.

The high prices and strong demand for Mosel wines had another side effect: Some merchant houses could not resist the temptation to "fiddle around". This included blending wines, adding sweetening products, etc. To address this problem, leading growers in different parts of the Mosel started to organize themselves into grower associations at the turn of the 20th century. These grower associations committed themselves to some basic but stringent practices to ensure the quality of their wines:

- Produce only *Naturein* wines, i.e. wines without any addition of sugar (be it as sweetener or for chaptalization).
- Sell their wines only through the Auctions organized by their grower association.
- Bottle the wines at the Estate with an original Estate cork to ensure the traceability of the product.

These principles may sound basic. One needs however to remember that the concept of wine as being made solely from fresh grapes had only been codified in law in 1892! In addition, commercial considerations most certainly played an equally important role in setting up these grower associations, be it only to improve their bargaining power with respect to the mighty merchants.

Until the middle of the 20th century, Auctions were to be the standard approach for selling wines, with commissioners as middlemen.

Until the 1930s, nearly all casks produced by any member of such a grower association were sold at the annual Auctions. Their success was so big that grower associations in some parts of Germany (but not in the Mosel) held Auctions several times a year! Estates sold full casks at auction. While this may not have been an issue for regular wines, it proved more problematic for top casks of Auslese because the price and volume were often too much to handle for a single buyer. Here, commissioners came into play as middlemen. They would buy a specific cask on behalf of several buyers and organize the orders between them. For instance, a famous cask of 1911er Ayler Kupp *feinste Auslese* auctioned off in the 1920s went to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, another part to a prince in Sweden and the remainder to some private English customers.

With the development of direct sales, the Auctions became an annual event dedicated to selling off selected high quality wines only.

As of the 1930s, leading Estates started to market their wines directly and they gradually used the Auctions only to sell their finest casks. The fact that "only" better casks were sold off at the Auctions required the Estates to introduce some differentiation between casks sold directly (via merchants) and those sold via the Auctions. Consequently, a sticker with the year and location of the Auction was added on all auction bottles to distinct them from regular ones (more on how to recognize auction bottles in the last part of this document).

Two grower associations emerged in the Mosel, each organizing an Auction of wines from its member every year.

Several grower associations were operating at the turn of the 20th century, each holding their separate annual Auction. These were gradually to merge into two grower associations which still exist today:

- **The Bernkasteler Ring:** It was set up by six growers as *Vereinigung der Weingutsbesitzer der Mittelmosel* in 1899 and was holding its biannual Auctions in the casino in Bernkastel. In 1978, it merged with the *Naturwein-Versteigerungsgesellschaft Trier* (another grower association set up in 1911) and subsequently took its current name. It is sometimes referred to as the *Kleiner Ring*, i.e. the "Small Ring", in opposition to the *Grosser Ring* here below.
- **The Grosser Ring / VDP:** This grower association, originally called *Trierer Verein von Weingutsbesitzern der Mosel, Saar und Ruwer*, was set up in 1908. It merged three grower associations (one in the Middle Mosel, one in the Saar and the association of catholic Estates in Trier). Given that it had 56 members at its inception, it was referred to as *Grosser Ring*.

Each of these two grower associations organizes one Auction per year. Both take place in Trier (the location may vary from year to year – see the annual Auction Guides).



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What wines are being sold at the Auctions?

The vast majority of the wines brought to the Auctions are special casks of the finest wines (not sold via traditional sales channels).

Still today, which wines are being sold via the Auctions remains a major source of confusion, even to the most experienced Mosel wine lovers. In principle, each Estate has the freedom to decide which wine(s) to auction off: A young wine, a mature one, a special cask, etc. The only restriction is that any Eiswein, BA or TBA has to have seen at least two winters (i.e. are at least 2 years old) before going to Auction. For the rest, every winemaker has a free hand. In practice the winemakers bring essentially special wines, made from a particularly old or prized parcel or from a painful selection of berries, bottled separately (i.e. with a distinct AP number) to the Auctions. These wines are therefore not available via traditional sales channels (although some wine merchants buy some extra bottles to add them on their list, or some Estates may offer them ex-cellar after the Auction, at least at the hammer price achieved during the Auction (if there are some remaining bottles).

The Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese are usually from the latest vintage, the BA and TBA from old vintages.

Kabinett, Spätlese or Auslese brought to the Auctions are likely to be from the latest vintage (i.e. from the 2014 vintage for the Auctions held in September 2015), although several producers, in particular from the Bernkasteler Ring, regularly bring older bottles to these Auctions. The practice varies more widely what concerns Eiswein, BA or TBA bottlings. Some Estates tend to bring them to the Auctions immediately or soon after the minimum two years period. Other Estates prefer to let them mature somewhat in their cellars before bringing them to the Auctions after several years after the vintage. Most wines going through the Auctions are fruity-styled even if an increasing number of producers from the Bernkasteler Ring propose some off-dry (Feinherb) or dry wines as well.

In addition, some Estates may bring some mature rarities or rare large format bottles from wines which are sold via regular channels.

On an exceptional basis, some Estates may bring mature rarities to the Auctions (such as the singly bottle of 1971er Graacher Domprobst Riesling BA sold by the Willi Schaefer Estate in September 2010) that could have been sold via regular channels upon release. In addition, some producers in the Bernkasteler Ring sell rare large formats of top regular wines at these Auctions. These wines, while sold at the Auction, would not be considered by wine lovers as "auction wines" but rather as "auction bottles" as the underlying wine was or is also sold via regular channels.

Who should buy at the Auctions? Is it really worth it?

Auction wines represent a pinnacle of Mosel Riesling.

We have personally been avid buyers of auction wines for many years as these bottlings represent for us the essence of Mosel Riesling greatness. Simply put: Not all auction wines are magical but our greatest Mosel wine memories have nearly all come from auction wines (at least from those Estates that are members of the two grower associations). The greatness of auction wines is underlined every year in our 10-Years-After and 20-Years After retrospectives which we publish in our Spring Issue. As you can see for yourself, auction bottlings are always among the very best of any vintage.

Auction wines are not cheap and often sell at a significant premium.

The quantities of wines brought to the Auctions are minute. They can go up to a few hundred bottles for some Spätlese bottlings but sometimes not exceed 24-36 bottles for rare TBA ones. It is therefore not surprising that these wines can be very, very expensive. The price of a Spätlese or Auslese auction bottling can sometimes be three times that of its equivalent regular bottling and prices for rare TBA can easily exceed €1,000 per bottle (even before taxes, commissions, etc.!).

This premium needs to be relativized in view of the fact that most fruity-styled or sweet auction wines are heavily de-classified.

More than often auction Spätlese bottlings are made from fruit which are well into Auslese levels, auction Auslese could easily have been sold as Auslese GK on a regular had they not been offered at Auction, etc. Readers of our tasting notes have most probably already noticed this. And thus one can see the high prices at Auctions as comparatively reasonable. Actually prices of say an auction Spätlese should not be compared to the regular Spätlese but more to the regular Auslese or even Auslese GK, and then the price difference is far less appalling. Remember also that BA and TBA are only released after a minimum of two years at Auction. Therefore a lot of wines which could be sold as regular BA or TBA are "declassified" as auction Auslese GK or lange GK. Here also our tasting notes will help readers to find out what is really in the bottle.

Some relative bargains can however be made, which allow one to get the "best of Mosel" at reasonable prices.

While auction wines can hardly be called cheap, some of these wines can prove relative bargains. At each auction, there are always a few bottlings which sell for hardly more than their regular equivalent, as the great 2007er Geltz-Zilliken Saarburger Rausch Auslese did at the 2008 Auction. In particular, the Bernkasteler Ring Auction offers great opportunities to acquire great wines at reasonable prices. For instance, the gorgeous 2012er Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Spätlese Urglück went for "only" €10.50 (hammer price) in 2013.

The question of whether the premium and effort of buying at Auctions is worth it is a very personal one.

Anyone who "only" wants a good Mosel wines for everyday drinking is probably best served by buying regular (i.e. non-auction) wines from his favorites Estates. However, anyone seriously interested in Mosel Riesling should make the effort to get hold of some of these auction gems. In addition, lovers of Eiswein, BA and TBA often have no choice but to go through the Auctions to be able to get their hands on some of the finest examples by the likes of Joh. Jos. Prüm or Egon Müller as these Estates generally only sell Eiswein, BA and TBA through the auction channel.



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How to acquire auction wines?

Both Auctions are held annually in the third week of September, with the wines available for tasting in the morning and sold in the afternoon. They are held once a year, on two consecutive days in the second half of September. The Bernkasteler Ring traditionally holds its Auction on a 3rd Thursday of September and the Grosser Ring / VDP on the subsequent Friday. Both Auctions are open to the public with the possibility to taste the wines in the morning. The wines are then auctioned off in the afternoon in a so-called "wet Auction", i.e. the wines are served again while they are being auctioned off (this may not be the case of course for some rare and / or old bottles).

Private individuals as well as professionals can bid at these auctions.

Technically speaking, only the accredited commissioners are actually allowed to bid at these Auctions. However, anyone who wishes to acquire some bottles at these Auctions can do so by placing bids with their wine merchant / importer (if they offer this service) or by contacting directly one of the accredited commissioners. Bids are put in the form of "I want X bottles of wine so-and-so for up to €Y hammer price per bottle". Please note that, at the Auction of the Bernkasteler Ring, a bid price is always made for the equivalent 75cl bottle, even if only half-bottles are offered (this is a relic of the days in which casks were sold prior to bottling and hence the price determined per "unit").

It is however advisable to contact a commissioner prior to bidding on the best way to handle any import or duties issues into your country.

After the Auctions, the commissioners will contact the successful bidders for payment and shipment. Within the European Union, as far as we understand the law, wine lovers can work directly with a commissioner if he fetches the bottles himself or takes care of shipment and import administration and duties into his country of residence (wine lovers may still choose for easiness to work via a wine merchant / importer to avoid the logistics hassle). For bidders from outside the European Union (and in particular from North America or Asia), further shipping / importing restrictions may apply. In any case, we strongly advise wine lovers to contact a commissioner or his wine merchant / importer prior to bidding to check how this is best organized. The latest list of accredited commissioners to each of these Auctions is provided in our annual Auction Guides. The end price paid for the wines will be composed of the hammer price, to which one needs to add a commission fee (a few percentage points of the hammer price) for the accredited commissioners, shipping costs as well as any import duties and VAT (or sales tax).

Auction bottles do not necessarily need to be acquired at the Auction itself, some Estates and wine merchants / importers offer them also later.

Despite being made in minute quantities, auction wines can be found on the open market. Our experience is that many leading merchants / importers specialized in German wines throughout the world often acquire some auction wines to enhance their catalogue (either immediately or for release after some years). Also, some Estates offer the possibility to acquire their auction wines at the Estate after the Auction, usually at or close to the hammer price. Going for this secondary market can therefore be an alternative option to acquire some of these auction wines, and one that does not require the hassle of preparing bids and importing the resulting wines.



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How does one recognize auction bottles on the open market?

In principle, all auction bottles carry a round sticker to distinguish them from regular ones.

In order to differentiate them from regular wines, auction bottlings do carry a round sticker, usually above the front label or stuck to a corner of the label with the indication "Versteigerung", and in the case of the VDP, the year in which it was auctioned. As an image speaks more than a thousand words, we have attached pictures of some auction bottles.

Auction Sticker – Bernkasteler Ring



Auction Sticker – Grosser Ring / VDP



In practice, not all auction bottles do carry a sticker and then only the AP number can help out.

In principle, auction wines should be easy to identify in a shop. In practice though, things may not necessarily be as straightforward as it seems as several Estates offer these wines ex-cellar after the auction (of course at auction prices or higher). Over the years, our experience has been that these auction bottlings may not always carry the "auction sticker" (this is often an indication that the bottles were brought after the Auction at the Estate). In that case, the only way to know whether a bottle is an auction one is to check the AP numbers.

AP numbers may not be very consumer friendly but a little effort may allow one to make some bargains.

While this may not be very consumer friendly (who keeps track or want to keep track of AP numbers?), it may be worth the effort and can reward one with some nice bargains. Indeed, auction wines do appear now and then on the secondary market. However, as these wines are not widely distributed, their singular value is often not recognized and these wines sell for not much more than their regular equivalent. Savvy Riesling lovers can therefore make some nice bargains... if they can recognize these wines on the open market.

Mosel Fine Wines Auction Guides

Every year since 2008, we have been publishing a complete full guide to the Auctions with tasting notes in advance of the Auctions.

As we mentioned, some of the best wines of the Mosel are being sold at these events. We also realize that not every Mosel wine lover will be able to drive or fly in to taste or bid for himself. Therefore, right from the start of Mosel Fine Wines in 2008, we have been publishing full reports and provided full tasting notes of the wines being auctioned at the annual Auctions in advance of the Auctions:



These Auction Guides are available for [free download](#) on the website.