



INSIDE THE ANNUAL RIESLING AUCTIONS



Willi Schaefer sits attentively on the brightly lit stage, observing an animated huddle of wine brokers bidding on his 60 bottles of Auslese gold capsule wine. They pause to size each other up, compare charts, but the auctioneer moves them along: "Going once!" One of them raises the bid, then another. The auctioneer looks at Schaefer, he nods his head. The hammer falls.

by Peter Liem

I'm sitting at the 118th auction of the Grosser Ring VDP Mosel-Saar-Ruwer in Trier, the largest and most prestigious of Germany's annual wine auctions. There are perhaps 500 people here, speculatively swirling and sniffing, some hastily marking down last-minute bids on their auction cards. The auctioning of wine has a long tradition in Germany. In the Mosel, the Grosser Ring, a growers' organization currently composed of 30 members, has been holding auctions since 1908, but there were already various wine auctions taking place here in the late-19th century. Up until World War II, the bulk of German wine was sold in this manner, auctioned in cask to wine brokers who would then bottle it for resale to private clients. After the war these auctions declined in importance, as producers developed more direct sales to individuals, but they saw a revival in the 1970s and 1980s, reinvented to showcase special lots of top-quality rieslings.



Auctioneer Eberhard von Kunow at the Grosser Ring



Hammertime in the Rheingau

Bidding has reached a frenzied pinnacle in the last decade or so, as buyers spent increasingly larger amounts of money on high-end rieslings, such as Zilliken's Saarburger Rausch Eiswein, Dr. Loosen's Erdener Prälat long gold capsule Auslese or just about anything from Egon Müller. In September 2001, Müller's 1994 Scharzhofberger Riesling Trockenbeereauslese fetched DM 7,800 (about \$3,700) per 750ml bottle, not including the broker's commission or value-added tax. It's the current record here for a newly released wine.

This year, there isn't anything approaching that price. Among the upper-end items, Dr. Loosen's opulent, 100-percent botrytised 2004 Riesling Auslese long gold capsule from Erdener Prälat exceeds its estimate at €370, not including commission or tax, while the price for the 60 bottles of 1998 Karthäuserhof Eiswein stops at €235 per bottle. Prices like these make the 2004 Fritz Haag Auslese gold capsule—for me one of the stars of the auction—look like a bargain at €80, and Haag's filigreed Spätlese sells for only €30, in plentiful supply with 420 bottles available.

The appeal of attending these auctions, other than the opportunity to bid on these small-production wines, is that except for the occasional single-bottle rarity, you get to taste every wine offered for sale. Twice. In the morning there is a preview tasting, where all the producers pour their wines, and during the auction itself, each wine is poured again before it's offered for bidding. Considering the prices that some of these wines will fetch, you may never have the chance to taste them again.

I will most likely never taste Willi Schaefer's gold capsule Auslese again, not because of the €70 price tag, but because there are only 60 bottles available in the world. I slowly savor the last precious drops as I watch Schaefer leave the stage. Nik Weis from the St. Urbans-Hof estate takes his place, and the battery of servers emerges once again, bearing bottles of Weis's auction Spätlese wrapped in crisp white linen.

The wines being sold here aren't the same wines that are offered through the trade, but rather specially selected lots that are available only at these auctions, with a small, round sticker attached to the bottle that designates it as such. For example, Forstmeister Geltz-Zilliken, in the Saar, has a 2004 Spätlese from the renowned Saarburger Rausch vineyard available for bidding, but this isn't the same 2004 Saarburger Rausch Spätlese that you might buy at your local wine merchant. The sale of auction wines prior to the auction itself is strictly prohibited, and while the producer might have the auction wines available later, the price cannot be lower than that established at the auction.

Does that mean that these auction wines are better than the nonauction versions? Not necessarily. As always, it depends on your interpretation of better. Being a high-profile event, the auction does encourage a very lofty standard of quality, as producers naturally want to present themselves well. But it's often a question of style. Many auction wines tend to be bigger and richer than the regular ones, showier in character and often with a healthy dose of botrytis that adds a velvety texture and opulence. If this is the style of wine that you're looking for, these wines can be without peer. But they're not everyday wines. That 2004 auction Spätlese by Zilliken is a terrific wine, densely concentrated and obviously harvested very late. Yet I prefer the nonauction version in 2004 for its greater sense of clarity and its delicate, graceful poise.

It's easy to see why bigger wines might be chosen for auction. In a marginal and northern climate such as the Mosel, where grapes can struggle to achieve optimal maturity, riper is often equated with better. The German classification system is based on this, in fact, with increasingly higher minimum ripeness levels required for Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese and so on. The higher ripeness categories—Auslese, Beereauslese, Trockenbeereauslese and especially Eiswein—are more difficult and expensive to produce, and therefore held in higher regard. It's no surprise that when selecting special lots to feature at a prestigious event, they end up being on the riper side, even within their respective categories.

They're not necessarily intended to be that way, however, and each producer has his or her own method of selecting which wines will be

auctioned. "They're not always the richest wines," says Egon Müller of his auction wines, four of which are offered this year, from Kabinett to Eiswein. He pauses, then concedes, "Well, the Auslese is usually the richest. But with the Kabinett, we selected the one with the clearest Scharzhofberger character."

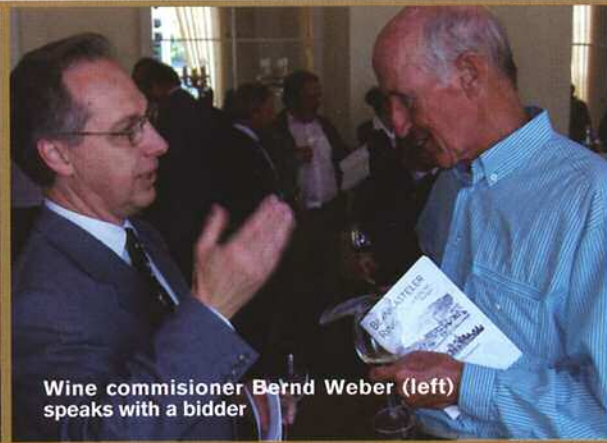
Whether they're the richest wines or not, there is no question that they are intended to be of high quality. "It should be the best Spätlese and the best Auslese," says Willi Schaefer, whose steely, racy wines from Graacher Domprobst are always some of the most highly sought-after each year. "Usually these have higher must weights, but not always. We have a lot of international customers who visit the auction, and I think that they like a little higher acidity, wines that can age well. So these

are going for much lower prices here than at the Grosser Ring auction, and it isn't until lot number 16, a 2003 Auslese by Edmund Reverchon, that the hammer price even reaches €20. But there aren't a lot of compelling buys. The Schmitt-Wagner Spätlese is a steal at €9.20, and a 2004 Merkelbach Auslese from Urziger Würzgarten is worth more than the €13 it goes for, but overall the standard of quality is lower here than in the first auction.

As in the Grosser Ring auction, it's a small group of wine brokers, called *Weincommissionäre*, or wine commissioners, that actually does the bidding. These commissioners must be officially registered with the auction authorities and act as go-betweens for transacting the bids.



Auctioneer Hans-Jürgen Podzen at the Nahe/Ahr VdP auction



Wine commissioner Bernd Weber (left) speaks with a bidder

should have very fresh acidity, usually a little higher than normal."

For Dr. Manfred Prüm of the Joh. Jos. Prüm estate, selection for the auction begins as soon as the grapes are picked. "We put aside some small lots after the harvest and wait to see how they develop," says Prüm. "We select the best ones to put in the auction. These should be the wines made with the most care."

At today's auction Prüm's 2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Auslese, predicted to go for 65 to 75 euros, causes quite a stir when the bidding stops at just €32. Some buyers are elated at their unexpected windfall; others in the crowd feel that the wine lacks the expected complexity and tension for a Prüm riesling. There are no concerns about Prüm's 2004 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese long gold capsule, however, which climbs to €210. Other buys are more reasonable: A creamy and complex Niederberg Helden Spätlese from Schloss Lieser seems fair at €23; a racy, elegant Wiltinger braune Kupp Spätlese by Le Gallais is snapped up for €25.

No one is surprised when Egon Müller once again achieves the highest price of the auction with his regal 1998 Scharzhofberger Riesling Eiswein, at €1,310 a bottle. I drink my small pour, refusing to spit, and mourn the fact that I don't have €1,310 to burn. Only a few more wines follow, but by the time the last TBA is sold, it's been nearly five hours since the auction began.

It's two days later, and I'm at another Mosel wine auction, this one hosted by the Bernkasteler Ring. The Bernkasteler Ring is comprised of 34 estates in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer and one in Luxembourg, and the consortium has been holding wine auctions in the vicinity of Bernkastel since 1901. Today it's at Kloster Machern, a small abbey tucked into the hillside along the river between Wehlen and Urzig.

I'm still a little hung over from the night before: Since a large number of wine connoisseurs from all over the world are present for the auctions, the producers use this time as an excuse to party. A swig of the clean, herbal 2004 Kabinett from Carl Schmitt-Wagner helps freshen me up—it sells for only €8, and it's delicious. Wines

It's a vestigial tradition, left over from the days when the wine trade, not only in Germany but throughout the wine world, was largely in the hands of negociants. "In the past, the wine brokers were the really wine-savvy people, the ones who traveled beyond the valley," explains wine commissioner Johannes Selbach, whose family business, J. & H. Selbach, has been brokering wines at the auctions for three generations. "They knew the wines, knew the cellars, and were trusted by both growers and buyers." These brokers would purchase the wines from the growers, and private clients would in turn purchase wine from the brokers.

At today's auctions, if you want to bid on a wine, you must place your bid beforehand with one of these commissioners, telling them how much you want of which wines and at what price. Each of them bids on behalf of many clients, each with different price thresholds and quantities of wine requested, and the calculations can be complicated. This is the reason for the group huddle, where they probe each other to see where the bid might go. At times they might even ask the producer if he or she has any more wine available, to keep the price down while allowing a maximum number of their clients to receive some wine.

This seems to happen several times in today's Bernkasteler Ring auction, which ends with 18 half-bottles of 2003 Pauly-Bergweiler Urziger Würzgarten Riesling TBA, selling for €390 a piece. That wine doesn't impress me half as much as the 2003 Erdener Treppchen TBA from Schmitges, which just a few lots prior fetched €165 per half-bottle, although at these prices neither of them are realistically affordable.

The next day I drive with the Selbachs to Kloster Eberbach in the Rheingau. Historically the Rheingau has been the aristocratic center of German wine, famous since the days of Thomas Jefferson, and wine auctions are recorded in Hattenheim and Eltville as early as 1804.

The Cistercian monastery of Kloster Eberbach was founded in the 12th century and has been associated with wine auctions in the Rheingau since 1806. Now home to the Hessische Staatsweingüter, or State Domaine, it is also the venue for the wine auction of the VDP Rheingau,

this region's organization of growers.

In contrast to the genteel atmosphere of the VDP Mosel-Saar-Ruwer auction, the VDP Rheingau is a little more boisterous. At the Mosel auction, when the bid reaches a milestone—100, 500, perhaps 1000 euros—it is acknowledged by a round of polite clapping and murmurs of approval. In the Rheingau, there is instead a tradition of blowing up paper bags and popping them loudly, together with raucous whistling and cheering.

The best buy of this auction by far is Schloss Schönborn's 2004 Erbach Marcobrunn Riesling Spätlese gold capsule, at €30 failing to attract any paper bag action, but impressive for its complexity and refinement nevertheless. Schloss Johannisberg caps their outstanding 2004 collection with the paper bag-worthy Auslese Bibliotheca Subterranea, named for the underground cellar that houses their most highly prized bottles. And superstar Robert Weil predictably takes the highest price among the young wines, €850 for each bottle of the 2004 Kiedrich Gräfenberg Riesling Beerenauslese gold capsule.

The only wines capable of surpassing this heady price are the few lots of older rarities offered at this auction, the last of which, a single bottle of 1936 Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling TBA from the State Domaine, climbs to a whopping €7,050, inspiring much whistling and cheering, and the energetic popping of many, many paper bags.

Sunday morning sees the fourth and final auction of the week, the 54th auction of the VDP Nahe and Ahr. The Ahr wines come first: all pinot noir, and all expensive. The best of them is Meyer-Nüchel's 2004 Spätburgunder from the Walporzheimer Kräuterberg vineyard, but at a hammer price of €102, I wonder how many of the 300 bottles offered have actually sold.

The Nahe offers more intriguing wines, among the highlights a Schäfer-Fröhlich Auslese gold capsule from Bockenauer Felseneck, pricey at €62 for a half-bottle, and intensely concentrated, with crystalline purity. Emrich-Schönleber has a dry wine from the Monziger Halenberg, at €35 a satisfying purchase; his 2003 TBA skyrockets to €320.

Unlike the four- to five-hour marathons of the other three auctions, this one is kept relatively short, not only because there are just 23 wines, but also because auctioneer Hans-Jürgen Podzun keeps the action brisk. At times the commissioners are visibly rattled when he prevents them from taking too much time negotiating among themselves, threatening to drop his hammer unless they move the bidding along.

The undisputed star of the show here is the Oberhäuser Brücke Eiswein gold capsule Dienstag from Helmut Dönnhoff, at 210° Oechsle, the richer of two Eisweins that he made in 2004. After a short burst of tense bidding, a few lucky buyers make off with the 12 bottles and 60 half-bottles, at €430 for a 750ml. I think of the most memorable Eiswein I have ever tasted, Dönnhoff's 1998 Montag, offered at this auction in 2000. This Dienstag seems to be its equivalent, yet modeled in the clean, elegant profile of the vintage, the yang to the '98 Montag's yin. I don't spit this one out either.

The German wine auctions have gained notoriety for the extravagant amounts of money spent on blue-chip bottlings, and there is the feeling that in recent years many producers have been opting to bring small lots of upper-end wines, often only 12 or 24 bottles, in the hopes of attracting elevated prices, rather than settling for a larger quantity of wine sold at a lower price.

This had resulted in a constant array of record-breaking prices following one after the other. In September 1998, a 1990 Egon Müller Scharzhofberger Riesling TBA sold for DM 4700 (about \$2,770 at the time), only to be topped in 2000, when a tiny lot—just 6 bottles and 6 half-bottles—of 1999 Kiedrich Gräfenberg Riesling TBA offered by Robert Weil fetched DM 5,000 per 750ml bottle. This was surpassed a year later by the DM 7,800 Egon Müller 1994 TBA.

This attracts a lot of welcome attention, yet some point out that there is a danger in relying on these prohibitively priced, miniature-production wines. Indeed, in this year's round of auctions there is the palpable sense that things are slowing down. "The auctions were very different from [those in] previous years," says wine commissioner Bernd Weber, of the brokerage firm Fritz Steinlein. "We had fewer important customers, who probably bought a little too much in the last few years."

Wilhelm Haag, proprietor of the Fritz Haag estate and president of the VDP Mosel-Saar-Ruwer until last year, is critical of the race for ever-higher prices. "It's very important to show all of the best wines together in one day," says Haag. "But they should be affordable and should be able to be sold afterwards by the trade. It's important for PR, but also important for business."

Selbach echoes this sentiment, believing that producers should take a long-term view of the business side of the auctions. "You should not go for the highest price, but rather offer the opportunity to buy a lot of bottles at a reasonable price. This becomes much more important, when instead of six bottles, a customer buys 600 bottles," he says. "The auctions are good public relations, but also a means to sell a lot of wine at one time."

It's exciting as a consumer to see the TBAs break records, and, for those who attend the auctions, even more exciting to taste them, but realistically there are few people who can afford to bid on these wines. An increased emphasis on more affordable categories such as Spätlese and Auslese, presented in quantities large enough to keep prices down, would give more of us an opportunity to purchase these wines rather than to just taste them, and it would also encourage more buyers to return year after year.

Selbach is hopeful about the future of the auctions, believing that in the end there will be a greater awareness among both buyers and producers that a more balanced view is in order, and he notes that current events will play a role in driving this point home. "The economy is down, people are not spending as much money, cellars are full," he says. "There is a new sense of reality coming into the auctions, and that is what will save them." ■



Even if you don't attend the auctions, you still have a chance of getting these wines. If you want to place a bid directly, the VDP posts the auction catalogs online, as well as the contact information for the various wine brokers who can bid on your behalf. Go to vdp.de/auction for more information. Keep in mind, however, that the logistics and expense of bringing the wines back to the US can be prohibitive due to restrictions on alcohol importations. A better option is to find a US retailer that deals with auction wines. The most active retailer of these wines is Dee Vine Wines in San Francisco (415-398-3838; dvw.com), though there are increasingly more German auction wines being seen at retailers across the country.