

Altitude matters

Mountain- or hillside-grown grapes' combination of sun, soil and lack of water results in dark fruit with high acidity and concentrated flavors

BY BILL ST. JOHN

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You need neither your taste buds nor a phone app to ascertain which are the higher-quality vineyards along the steep slopes of Germany's Mosel river valley. A little church history and a topographical map will do.

For centuries, the more costly wines have come from vineyards high up these slopes, not by and large from those closer to the river itself.

The vineyard names often indicate for whom the grapes were destined, once made into wine; the loftier up the ecclesiastical or social scale, the higher the vineyard and the better the wine. At the estate of Maximin Grunhaus, for instance, grapes from the low-lying vineyard Bruderberg ("the monks' hill") made everyday wine, while grapes from the higher-up vineyards of Herrenberg ("the choirmasters' hill") or the Abtsberg ("the abbot's hill") made superior wine. They still do.

In fact, a long stretch of the topmost vineyard areas over the Mosel towns of Graach and Wehlen is called Himmelreich ("the kingdom of heaven"). That's as high as it gets.

Those ancient Germans knew that altitude matters to wine grape growing. But how so? Here are a few wines recently tasted to show what matters when growing at high elevations.

Aspect matters

More sunlight, less water and temperature inversions from day through night all conspire to make mountain- or hillside-grown fruit different from the fruit raised on lower slopes or along valley floors.

Rainfall depletes soil as well as draws off nutrient-rich topsoil, depositing it at lower elevations (that's why cereal crops and other food-giving plants thrive on it), forcing grapevines to struggle for both water and nutrients. Stress and struggle actually make for better wine grapes.

Being closer to the sun, often unprotected from it by growing above fog lines, increases sunlight exposure on grape skins and, just like humans tanning poolside, thickens skins and darkens pigments.

If fog does show, it burns off top down; high slopes are almost always warmer (hence, more encouraging for ripening) than lower slopes during the productive daytime. Some steep slopes, especially if they face into the sun, become solar panels of sorts, an amphitheater for the sun's light and force.

Not only does nighttime bring cooler temperatures, good for retaining acidity, but because cool air flows downward, the dark also brings drying breezes helpful against diseases, molds and pests.

What generally results, given

this high-altitude combination of sun, soil and lack of water, is dark, thick-skinned fruit, especially for red wine grapes, high acidity and concentrated flavors.

2012 Vinas del Vero La Miranda de Secastilla Garnacha Blanca, Somontano, Spain:

From old-vine, high-altitude vineyards in northeastern Spain literally uncovered of brush and overgrowth, discovered after laying fallow for many years; most enticing is the combination of "fat," juicy white peach and pear fruit tied together, as if by baling wire, with tangy acidity. \$13

2011 Elena Walch Lagrein, Alto Adige, Italy:

Make this little-known red grape better known, especially come summer (it takes well to chilling), for its effusive dark cherry and wild raspberry fruit, chewy but non-grating tannins and long after-taste. \$13-\$15

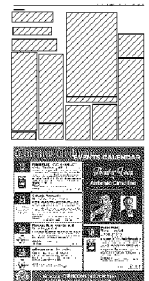
2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett

Mosel Germany: Like many Mosel slope-side vineyard rieslings, a dynamic combination of "fat" fruit (mango, yellow apple, pineapple) and lean, incisive acidity. \$22-\$25

Yield matters

Grapevines at higher elevations just don't — they can't — produce as much fruit as vines on more forgiving, generous or fertile soils. "Yields are lower," says Graham Weerts, winemaker at Sonoma's Stonestreet Winery, "in general 1.5 to 3.5 tons an acre, with those thick skins that protect against the sun and smaller berry size due to lack of water."

Higher yields, sometimes called "overcropping," result in a simple diffusion of a vine's energy into a larger volume of fruit. Concentrate that same energy into a smaller volume, like beaming a laser, and everything goes up along with the altitude: aroma, color, flavor and structural components such as richly rendered tannin and the effusive (though oft-tasted from high-elevation



wines) minerality.

This same structural difference also can give wines a long life in the cellar, not only because more elements need more time to work themselves into harmony, but (especially with higher acidity levels) there also is just more to go on there and for a longer time.

2009 Stonestreet Alexander Mountain Estate Cabernet Sauvignon "Christopher's," Alexander Valley, Sonoma, California: Savors and scents as long as its name; sure, there is concentration at every level, but like many mountain wines it's all delivered so prettily, like a line-backer running on tippy-toes. \$100

2012 Loimer Gruner Veltliner Langenlois Spiegel Reserve, Kamptal, Austria: This is what gruner can be best at, like an apple or pear "dal," scented with vetiver, whip-snapped with a comet's tail of white pepper in the finish. \$35-\$40

2011 M. Chapoutier Hermitage "Sizeranne," Rhone, France: Interesting to taste this 24 hours in the glass after opening: red-black fruit with wide-open "black" aromas (dried rose petal, wet black stone, bresciola, dried piney herbs) and as suave as a chamois rub. \$125

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.

Bill St. John has been writing and teaching about wine for more than 40 years.



BILL HOGAN/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTO

Wines made from grapes grown in high altitudes are different from those made with grapes raised on lower slopes or valley floors.