

# *fine lees*

**New classifications  
in Rioja:**  
Are they working?

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**Climate change in  
the Mosel:**  
Tackling the challenges and  
embracing the opportunities

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**Forget regionality,**  
English sparkling wine's  
about branding



# the unfiltered wine report

# Issue 06

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Convincing the consumer to spend their hand-earned money on something they've probably never tried before is a daily challenge for wine industry.

Sure, there are a few producer names and brands which are enough to get bottles flying off the wine list, but how many of those are there? More than that, people rely on known grapes, regional designations or flavour profiling to make their choice.

But what happens when lesser quality wine starts slipping through under the same label as some of the more serious stuff. We've recently seen the consequences of this in Cava DOC, with nine producers, fed up of the poor-quality plonk that can legally sit next to them on the shelf, breaking away to form their own, more stringent designation 'Corpinnat'. Harry Crowther investigates a similar story in Rioja, where for too long, lengthy ageing in barrel has been held up as the only mark of quality, leaving no space for terroir or light-touch winemaking. He examines the proposed introduction of regional classifications and the impact this will have on the industry.

Over to England, and Charlotte Levy tackles the issue from a completely different angle. While trying desperately to find a case for regional classifications in England, she discovers that the fledgling English sparkling wine industry might have the most to learn from those doyennes of fizz across the channel, the Grande Marques... Prepare to have your feathers ruffled!

Our final piece tackles quite a different issue facing today's wine industry. Climate change is having a significant effect on wine producers throughout the world, and across the northern and southern hemispheres, winemakers are having to change their approach and adapt to changing conditions. But is this always a bad thing? Robert Mathias heads to the Mosel to examine the conflict between the negative and positive impacts of climate change in this region and what it means for the future of German wine.

So pour yourself a glass of something tasty and dive in!

*Sophia Godyn*




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*Sophia is Bibendum's Brand Communications Manager.*

*It was Sainsbury's Beaujolais that helped her bridge the gap from Snakebite & Black to the world of wine and she hasn't looked back since.*

*After a stint doing 'a proper job' in the financial services sector, she decided to mix business with pleasure to start marketing wine. Today she runs Bibendum's website, social media channels and printed publications, and is now more likely to be seen with an elegant Spatburgunder or barrel-fermented South African Chenin than a Snakebite & Black...*

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# New classifications in Rioja: **ARE THEY WORKING?**



**BY HARRY CROWTHER**

In a move to define Rioja's sense of place, the Consejo Regulador has introduced new area-specific classifications in addition to the existing age classifications. Harry Crowther considers the opportunities this represents for the region and investigates the potential for confusion among end-consumers.

**Wine lists are becoming increasingly extravagant. As the wine world extends its reach of obscurity, uncovering wines from distant lands, a few home comforts go a long way, particularly for the uninitiated.**

I'm thinking, for example, about my father and his steadfast love for Rioja: *"It's a safe word, Harry... I get intimidated by choice when I read a wine list. At least with Rioja, I know what I'm getting"*.

Rioja does what it says on the tin and the structure of the ageing classification helps casual drinkers, like my old man, make informed, safe drinking decisions, minimising the financial risk of ordering an expensive bottle of something from a lesser-known corner of the world.

But changes are on the horizon. In fact, they have already been made, they just haven't necessarily come into play just yet. Is my dad's (and so many other Rioja disciples') faithful, warm duvet of Rioja familiarity about to be taken away? And, crucially, are these changes for the better?

### **A brief history of time (in barrel)**

The Rioja classification system is one based on time. It's a concept that suggests the older a wine is, the better it must be, particularly in the eye of the consumer. Time is money after all, so something that's been sitting in a barrel for two years longer than something else, will be more expensive.

From Joven through to Gran Reserva, the ageing guideline has served as a benchmark for consumers for over a century and a half.

It's far easier to understand four quality designations based on age than, say, the five-tier quality system (and corresponding Chateaux) of the Bordeaux classification system.

### **But where does this leave 'a sense of place'?**

Calls for provenance to be more defined have led Rioja's Consejo Regulador to introduce another layer of classifications to the region.

'Saber quien eres' is the tagline that's been assigned to the new system, which means 'to know who you are'; where you are from, a sense of place. Something that many feel is lost in the rigidity of the current ageing system.

### **So what are the changes?**

In June 2017, the Consejo announced plans to introduce some new regulations to identify Single Vineyard (or Viñedos Singulares) wines. Wines that are produced from specific sites now qualify for this new classification tier.

Tim Atkin MW cites in his 2019 Special Report on Rioja, that: *This is "recognition of what consumers, especially high-end ones, increasingly want from wine"*.

Though I hardly think the pitchforks and torches have been waving with chants for change, the high-profile exodus of producer Bodegas y Viñedos Artadi from the DOCA system could have been a push for the Consejo to allow producers of Rioja to express themselves (and their wines) through the notion of place.

Alberto Ruiz of Bodega Vivanco believes these changes were inevitable: *"It has been a common matter for a few years, [Artadi's exit] opened new thoughts, considerations and active discussions regarding Rioja"*.

This is “recognition of what consumers, especially high-end ones, increasingly want from wine”.

### The new classification

Enter Viñedos Singulares - wines from Rioja with a greater sense of place. This feels indicative of that sense of pride that should inherently come with a region as established as Rioja. Although, we won't be seeing a reduction in the use of age classification, just more diversity.

*Fear not old man!*

### How to qualify as a Viñedo Singulare

Qualifying for single-vineyard designation can be fairly complex, and “pretty stringent,” according to Atkin, but to summarise:

- Vineyards require long-time ownership
- Vines must be at least 35 years old
- Yields must be at least 20% below those allowed for the whole region
- All vineyards must be hand harvested
- There is a double quality assessment:
  - An initial certification
  - Certification prior to market release



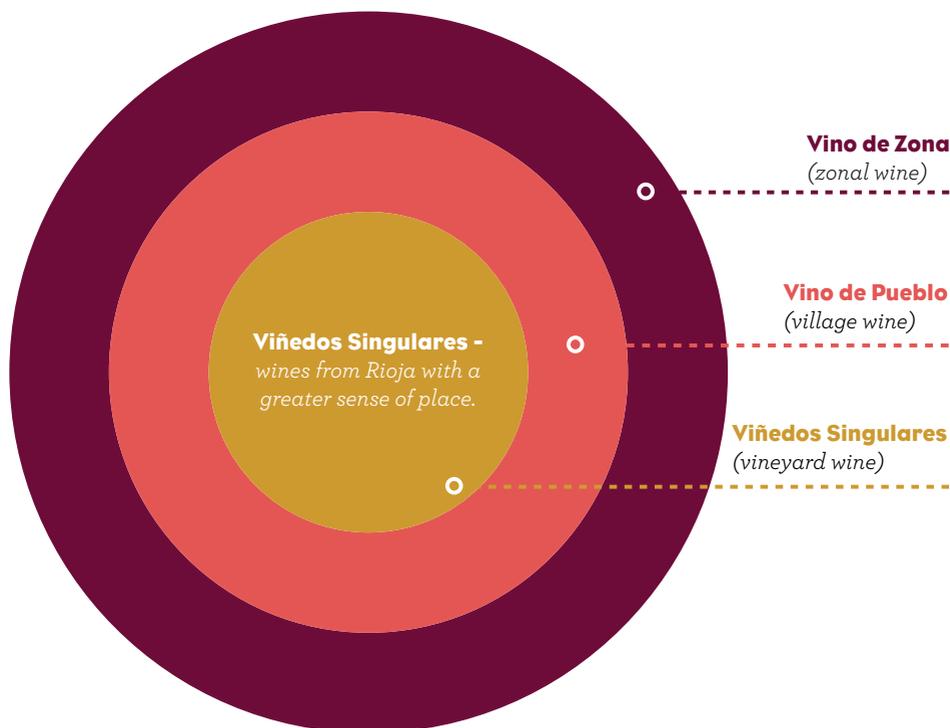
## And are there other new regional classifications?

In short, yes. Below the single-vineyard classification are two further regional classifications: 'village' and 'zonal' areas of production. Imagine a bullseye target encircled within two rings. The outer ring would be a *Vino de Zona* (zonal wine), with the next level representing *Vino de Pueblo* (village wine), and *Viñedos Singulares* at the centre.

The idea behind these designations is the same. They are an opportunity to indicate a greater sense of place for the consumer, albeit with a slightly broader, sub-regional accent instead of just a single vineyard microclimate.

## Nothing new

Single Vineyard sites are not exactly a new phenomenon in Rioja. A number of producers have been making these for some time now, albeit without formal regulation. Out of the three new designations (vineyard, village, zonal) there is a feeling that *Viñedos Singulares* has the most to gain from recent changes. For starters, many producers boast vineyards from all over the region, making it somewhat difficult to produce a wine under a single village or zonal classification.



## Which regions will be making the most of these new opportunities?

I see an opportunity here for the Oriental (formerly Baja). As a region often associated with the bulk end of the spectrum, there could be some wins for the Oriental producers; a chance to take a step away from high volume stigmas and take more regional-specific pride in their wines.

Interestingly, a large portion of producers who have applied for Viñedo Singulare status are those based in the Rioja Alavesa; 51 out of 97 according to Tim Atkin's Rioja report. I was keen to understand a little more from Atkin, who explained: "There are pockets of vineyards in all three sub-regions, they tend to be smaller in Alavesa, which is important if we are talking about potential Grand Cru sites... a disproportionate number of the best vineyard sites are located there."

*And speaking of single vineyard Alavesa...*

### **Bodegas Bhilar – Biodynamic Rioja with a sense of place**

Bodegas Bhilar is a prime example of a producer who is well placed to adapt to the new Vinedos Singulares classification system. Situated in the Rioja Alavesa, where many contend the best single vineyard plots can be found, Bhilar are experts in not only single vineyard wines, but village wines as well.





# But how are these changes going to work commercially?



This is a chance for trade operators and consumers alike to take a deeper dive into Rioja. There are over 60,000 hectares under vine, so maybe it's time that we, and the consumer, started connecting the wines we drink to the place they come from.

## **Communication and education will be key to the success of these new changes**

Jonny Kleeman, Director of Hydration at the shiny and new Twisted Cellar, and former Michelin star sommelier, argues that the ageing system has become somewhat “watered down”. You can purchase a Rioja Reserva at both the £15 and £50 price points, which is confusing for consumers. The greater focus on terroir aims to create more consistency, sure, but “it will be a big challenge to re-educate the consumer,” adds Kleeman.

Another champion of training is Raul Diaz, wine educator and Spanish expert at [winetraining.co.uk](http://winetraining.co.uk):

“[We] need to educate staff in the hospitality industry to be able to assist their guests with simple and effective information about the new labelling terms. This requires an investment of time and money. I hope that we will see that in the near future.”

Easier said than done, I fear. While education is fine for the trade, what's the best line of communication for the consumer? Will they take notice? Steven Spurrier thinks not:

*“Most consumers go by brands. Since Rioja will still be called Rioja, for them, nothing will have changed”.*

Alberto Ruiz from Vivanco agrees that there is a challenge and believes that while the producers themselves are doing their bit to make the new classifications clear, that the biggest wins will come from “crucial marketing campaigns and contributions from the Consejo Regulador”.

## Single Vineyards, Villages and Zones: what will the future hold?

I am excited about the prospect of single vineyard crus. We're familiar with this system in Burgundy, and nothing is more stimulating for us in the trade than seeing one-off single vineyards and microclimates being acknowledged and championed.

I expect to see a mixture of styles across all three designations. Learning about terroir-specific characteristics for single vineyard sites is easier because it is just one place. But if we start bringing villages and zones into the equation, with their larger areas and greater variance, there is more possibility for confusion.

I suspect that the likes of my old man won't notice the changes happening in Rioja at first. It will take time, and the age-based classification system will service the market as efficiently as it has done for many years. Times of change are usually met with a measure of opposition; a positive attitude to these changes is integral to the success of this initiative, alongside an effective educational strategy.

The opportunity here lies in engaging the top end of the market with a guarantee of better quality in *Vinifedo Singulares* wines, whereas the current ageing system can, at times, be pretty inconsistent.

**But if there was ever a region to achieve this, it's Rioja! As a brand it is strong and showing diversity will only lead to, in the long run, greater strength. Succeeding with these changes is not a case of if, but when.**



**Harry Crowther** is a freelance consultant based in London where he works with bar groups to create a culture of wine knowledge, training and confidence. He is the founder of Grain to Grape, a free wine education platform for members of the hospitality community. Harry has experience working multiple harvests overseas, notably in the Douro Valley, Portugal, and he now represents five producers in the UK market as Brand Ambassador. Harry is also a contributing writer at The Buyer.

PRODUCT OF ENGLAND  
SPARKLING WINE

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FORGET REGIONALITY

ENGLISH SPARKLING  
WINE'S ABOUT

# BRaNDING

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BY CHARLOTTE LEVY

12% ALCOHOL VOLUME

As the English wine industry matures, home-grown wines have gone from being a novelty item on specialist wine lists to a hospitality trade staple, with many restaurants starting to list multiple English wines, across different styles, grape varieties and even regions. But does this mean we should start talking about English terroir in the same way as we would other wine producing countries? Charlotte Levy thinks not.

It's a bold claim, and I can already feel an onslaught from the strictest of oenophiles berating my apparent disregard for regionality and terroir. Marketing and branding are a bit of a turn-off in cool wine circles, but they're not the enemy. In fact, they're the best tools we have in the industry.

Why? Because frankly, we aren't the only people to make fantastic quality sparkling wine. Of course, there's Champagne, but if you're talking premium you can also get unbelievable wines from South Africa (Graham Beck), New Zealand (Huia) or Tasmania (Josef Chromy), to name just a few. Saying that, we do have something unique: our fruit is different to New Zealand and Champagne, our wines are generally leaner, with fantastic acidity and a character that clearly differentiates us from other sparkling wine producing nations. And the key selling point? It's made in England!

But while 48% of consumers try to buy locally-sourced producers wherever possible\*, we cannot rely on this to grow the industry alone. How do most wine drinkers make their purchasing decision? If it isn't their knowledge of how it will taste, or merely the fact it's made in England, they need something else...

### Don't look for what isn't there

When I first began this piece, I was looking for regionality in England. Because that's what anyone who's studied wine is conditioned to look for. We learn about Chablis and Bordeaux, their nuances and characteristics; we find links and similarities, all to make the complex world of wine that little bit more ordered. It's a common behaviour pattern to search for familiarity, consumers do it all the time; picking up branded products over supermarket own, spending more on New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc over a delightful unknown French alternative. But what I swiftly learnt during my research is that quite frankly, there is no regional identity in England - at least in sparkling. And in fact, to try and 'create' regionality is limiting, and a hinderance to the potential of our fledgling wine industry.

If you look at the chalk outcrops in England on a map, you can see that they don't follow county boundaries. During a discussion I had with viticultural consultant and English wine specialist Stephen Skelton MW, he pointed out that Sussex goes from Rye to beyond Chichester. Therefore, it's wrong to assume that the soils, microclimate, sites etc. are all going to produce wines in a similar, 'characterised' style, especially in something like sparkling, which, according to Stephen, is "so much more a winemaker's wine".

But while we don't necessarily need wine appellations we do need to give the consumer something to latch onto. It's comforting to order Cotes du Rhone in a restaurant and handy to buy a bottle of Bollinger as a gift, as the consumer has some idea of what they're getting and feels reassured to part with their hard-earned cash for something they recognise. The former (regional identity) isn't really relevant to us, but the latter (brand identity) could be a real winner. And this is where Champagne comes in.

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**KEY**

- England & France
- Chalk Outcrop
- Vineyards



## What can we learn from Champagne?

How have Champagne producers committed 24 million English drinkers over the past year to their product? Mainly through their Grande Marques! These powerhouses have long mastered the art of strong branding, and we should be taking note from our French cousins. Because if anyone can find me a still wine that is selling 30 million bottles a year for over £30, I'll buy you a case of it.

With sparkling wine in particular, a strong brand is key. Can most consumers tell you much about the ins and outs of English sparkling wine? No. Can most name an English sparkling wine producer? Probably! Ridgeview, Nyetimber, Chapel Down, Gusbourne... they are leading from the front as the bigger players, each with a clear brand identity.

But these English producers are fairly new to the winemaking game, so let's take a look at what those Champenoise veterans have been doing across the channel. Firstly, they have a house style; Taittinger tastes different to Veuve Clicquot, which in turn tastes different to Moët or Bollinger. This clarity is extremely useful for the consumer, who can decide, by taste, which is their preferred brand. Next is consistency; each time you buy a non-vintage Grand Marque, you know roughly what you are going to get. And thirdly they have clear, unique branding; you can tell it's a bottle of yellow Veuve from a mile away!

I'm not saying every wine needs to be non-vintage or in this exact model, and we don't want to be Champagne, but we can certainly learn from it if we want to start owning that premium sparkling territory.

## Building a brand identity: style and substance

I've never understood why it's so unfashionable to care about how your product looks, feels, and appeals to the consumer. Especially because when I think about brand, I don't just mean the look of the bottle or the website – although this is vitally important – but a wine style too. It's all these things combined that are really going to drive the English sparkling wine industry's growth.

One thing that's been holding back English sparkling wine in this respect has been inconsistency, but that should start to change over the next few years. 2018's bumper harvest will help, as producers can finally start building up their reserves. So far, a huge amount of English wine production has been vintage, and extremely variable, which means more expensive products that aren't going to sell in the kind of volumes needed.

So having a strong non-vintage base is necessary. The bigger producers are doing it (Chapel Down, Nyetimber, Ridgeview) but it applies to the niche and small too – everyone should be trying to forge a clear 'house' style because we don't have the luxury of our wine being labelled 'Chablis' or 'Napa Valley'. We cannot allow our unpredictable conditions to justify making sparkling wines of complete variability, as the majority of consumers simply don't have the patience. Most wine drinkers pop a bottle of NV Grand Marque Champagne as a treat, not a 2001 bottle of Grand Cru vintage. We have to be realistic about the demands of the market and respond accordingly.

With these more precise house styles, not only will brand loyalty establish more quickly, but we'll also gain more export potential to places like the USA.

I believe that our market will thrive best on a roughly 70:30 rule; non-vintage to vintage. Non-vintage for high quality, consistent, scalable wines, and the vintage for variation, excitement and rarity.

So, we've discussed taste, but what about look? Consistency is also key here. From label to logo to website and social media, you want your brand to be quickly recognisable and truly memorable. But it's a competitive world out there, so time and money needs to be invested to make a brand stand out. But it's worth it, as you can't build brand loyalty through taste alone. As blind tasting experiments have shown, from baked beans to washing up liquid, a brand is extremely powerful in influencing consumer purchasing choices.

### Going forward

English sparkling wine is seriously exciting, with recent WSTA figures predicting a 6% sales increase in the next year. But we shouldn't be complacent. We need to look ahead too, and think about how we can grow that 6% to 10%! And branding will be a big part of it.

But we are only just beginning. Right now, we're on page one of our wine book and there's a long journey of discovery, practice, failure and success ahead to really secure a solid, sustainable future for the industry.

**But for now, pour a glass and say cheers to a wonderful industry and an exciting, but not yet certain, future.**

**...a brand is extremely powerful in influencing consumer purchasing choices.**

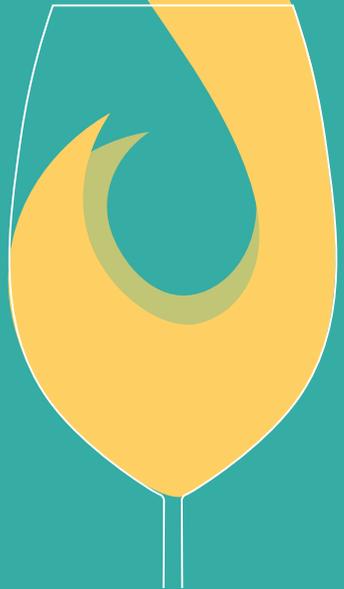


Charlotte Levy's gastronomic love affair began young, with this caviar-adoring child going on to chase Michelin stars as an adolescent. Many meals later, a wine obsession grew. Now she's learning fast and delving into the wine world with ambition and a great passion; writing, taking pictures and tasting where she can. You can follow her at @lottiejlevy

# *Climate change in the Mosel.*

tackling the challenges and  
embracing the opportunities

By Robert Mathias



**Climate change is reshaping viticulture everywhere. From Barossa to Burgundy, wine growers are having to innovate and adapt to an ever-changing environment. Wine buyer Robert Mathias takes a look at the future of German wine, and how the Mosel, in particular, is coping with changes to climate and weather.**

As the dust settles after the 2018 vintage, and the 2019 growing season begins, it seems a good time to sit back, pour a refreshing glass of Kabinett, and take a broader look at the future of German wine. 2018 turned out to be yet another outstanding vintage across Germany, despite the drought pressures, with yields on a par with 1999 - about 20% above the 10-year average! It was also one of the earliest harvests ever recorded.

Climate change is changing viticulture as we know it. And within Germany, it's the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer which might stand to benefit the most. It is a region steeped in history, with high quality vineyards still

being discovered and developed - just look what Roman Niewodniczanski and Markus Molitor are doing with the Geisberg vineyard in the Saar! But how are these changes in climate and weather affecting growers and vineyards? What does it mean for the future of Mosel Valley wine? How are things changing?

**New depths of flavour and power**

The beauty of Mosel wine is balance. The ability to produce intense, flavourful wines but at low or moderate alcohol is the true signature of German winemaking. Before 1989, grapes routinely struggled to reach full physiological ripeness with only two or three excellent vintages a decade. Winemaker Nik Weis of St Urbanshof remembers how his parents sometimes struggled to ripen grapes even to Kabinett level and therefore required chaptalisation. This is no longer the case. Grapes now ripen fully, offering a new palate of quality and powerful dry wine styles. Who would have thought a dry Riesling could sell at €1250 a bottle? But Markus Molitor managed to do just that. A 2016 dry Riesling from their iconic 'Doctor' vineyard, was the first German wine to receive a coveted 100 Parker points.



*Markus Molitor, 'Doctor' vineyard*

## At the mercy of the elements

It seems the growing season is shifting. Budburst and flowering occur earlier than decades before. Yet, at the same time, yearly weather can become more extreme. The devastating frosts of 20 April 2017, for example, dramatically reduced yields across Germany at a point where vine growth was already well developed. Johannes Selbach, of Weingut Selbach-Oster, says

*“every little step from budbreak to harvest seems recently to have been equipped with a kind of a turbo charger.”*

Vines will become more at risk from weather extremes, and the vine-grower needs to be ever more flexible and adaptable. With more heat and drought, stress precursors of a compound known as ‘TDN’ (1,1,6-trimethyl-1,2-dihydronaphthalene) can develop, resulting in wines with more ‘petrol’ aromas. This is not normally desirable for the Mosel, and more associated with Australian Riesling, so is something growers will need to be vigilant about.

## The problem with early harvests and mild winters

The harvest date is also getting earlier. Thirty years ago picking would normally start at the beginning of November in the Saar Valley. Nowadays the harvest is finished well before then. As Daniel Kiowski of Markus Molitor warns, picking earlier is only a tool rather than a solution. It takes a combination of elements beyond just pick time to get that balance, smooth acidity, and harmonious finish which we expect from the region.

Earlier harvests also make certain types of wine more difficult to make – producing eiswein is like playing Russian roulette, but with worse odds...

*Without a proper, arctic style winter, common in the decades before, nasty multi-legged and -winged creatures are starting to become more comfortable north of the Alps.*

A cool, cold winter snap is really important to maintain soil health and kill off pests, so without it, we could start to experience threats that were previously unheard of in these parts of Europe.

## Innovate or die

Farming practices and sites are changing little by little. For example, the Mosel is now responsible for some spectacular red wines. Spatburgunder is planted, for example, in the north-facing vineyards of the Brauneberger Klostersgarten producing some of the most refined Pinot Noirs in all of Germany. This is a trend which is bound to continue as vineyards become warmer.

Sites which had previously been forgotten, due to the difficulty of ripening, will be explored; those side valleys and marginal vineyards will come into their own. Growers will need to look more closely at which vineyards are most suitable for their classic Kabinett wines. Perhaps looking to the sites at the top of slopes, maybe closer to woodland, as the heart of the classic grand cru sites start to ripen too quickly...

"One hundred years ago, Grand Cru Riesling was more expensive than 1er Grand Cru Classe Bordeaux."



*Markus Molitor*

## A return to the glory days of German Riesling?

A lot of research has been done on the suitability of Riesling for warmer climates, and it's clear the Mosel will continue to be one of the most important quality Riesling regions in the world. The world is full of supple, rich wines with low acidity and high alcohol. There are fewer and fewer regions remaining where genuinely refreshing, crisp wines with a delicate balance can be made. Above many others, the Mosel stands to continue to benefit from the slowly changing climate while other regions, even within Germany, need to adapt and make compromises.

What is clear is that Mosel Riesling has benefited from climate change in the past decade, and this looks to continue. Growers continue to be adaptable and flexible to the new challenges presented to them, and this is putting German wines back on the map. One hundred years ago, Grand Cru Riesling was more expensive than 1er Grand Cru Classe Bordeaux. Maybe this is the beginning of a change in fortune for German growers. At the very least, I can be sure the Mosel remains a reliable source for some of the best, and most refreshing wines in the world. *Long Live Riesling!*



**Robert Mathias** has been working for Bibendum for almost 5 years and is the buyer for France, South Africa, Germany, Austria, Greece, Eastern Europe and Emerging Regions. He judges at IWC, IWSC and Decanter World Wine Awards and is currently studying for his Master of Wine.

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