

Silvaner

subtle, shapely & stylish



Wines of
Germany

THE STYLE OF SILVANER WINES

Silvaner is one of the most important white grape varieties in German viticultural history. From its debut in Germany in the second half of the 17th century through the mid-1960s, it was the most widely planted grape variety in Germany. At its peak, it was cultivated in ca. half of Germany's total vineyard area. It replaced inferior grape varieties, including Elbling and Gutedel, until it was supplanted by the more prolific grape Müller-Thurgau. But Silvaner has made its comeback.

The world's largest acreage of Silvaner lies in Germany, with ca. 5,000 ha (12,500 acres), where it is the fifth most important grape today, equal to 5% of the country's vineyard area. Of this 2,371 ha (ca. 5,859 acres) are planted in Rheinhessen and 1,406 ha (3,474 acres) in Franken, the world's largest Silvaner regions.

The grape is particularly adept at reflecting its terroir: mineral tones clearly underscore fruity, spicy or herbal/vegetal aromas reminiscent of honeydew melon, apricot, apple, orange or lemon peel; coriander; celery and new-mown hay or grass; and sometimes, toasty notes – as depicted in the glass to the right.





Leading producers plant Silvaner in top sites that are protected from wind and cold, yet have good circulation and sufficient moisture.

If left unchecked, it is a prolific bearer of grapes suitable for uncomplicated everyday wines. With quality-oriented vineyard maintenance, including stringent pruning, Silvaner grapes can produce very good and excellent Prädikat wines. Thanks to their sturdy stems, the grapes are able to “hang on” long enough for the frosty temperatures needed to produce Eiswein.

Silvaner is even more demanding than Riesling in terms of soil. The terroirs that bring forth the best of Silvaner are almost always associated with Franken’s great Triassic trio (colored sandstone, shell-limestone, colored marl/keuper), which find echoes in Rheinhessen (chalky Tertiary marl underpinned by limestone), and elsewhere, often in conjunction with loess, loam and/or soils of volcanic origin (Baden). The colored marl/keuper in Franken is heavy and yields very powerful, earthy wines; the chalky marl soils in Rheinhessen are green-gray, younger than their Franconian counterparts, and yield wines that are perhaps a bit more vegetal in character. Silvaner is also a traditional variety in the Pfalz, Nahe, Baden (southern Kaiserstuhl), and Saale-Unstrut regions.

“Silvaner deserves a top ranking and need no longer stand in the shadow of Riesling. This grape variety must continue to be fostered, and the existing vineyard areas maintained and cultivated.”

Gian Luca Mazzella (Italy), Jancis Robinson MW (UK), and David Schildknecht (USA) – impressions shared by three world-class wine critics at a tasting celebrating 350 years of Silvaner in Germany, 2009



Small quantities of Silvaner are also cultivated in Tyrol (northern Italy) and Switzerland, as well as in Austria and Alsace, where it is spelled Sylvaner; and in eastern Europe. Minimal quantities are grown in California, British Columbia, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

ORIGIN

The origin of Silvaner had long been debated. Silvan (in southeastern Turkey) or Transylvania (in Romania) seemed to be reasonable possibilities, given their etymological affinity with the name of the grape. The name could also derive from the Latin *silva*, meaning forest, which suggested wild vines as parents. Recent DNA fingerprinting, however, shows that Silvaner originated from a spontaneous crossing of the ancient varieties Traminer and Oesterreichisch Weiss (literally, Austrian white), a descendant of Hunnic origin. Both grapes have long been cultivated in the Danube Valley / Austria.

Prior to Silvaner's debut in Germany, three factors were impacting German viticulture. During a phenomenon known as the "Little Ice Age," from the mid-16th to the mid-19th centuries, temperatures declined and growing seasons were shorter. At the same time, the demand for local wines decreased when other beverages, such as coffee and tea, became more accessible to the middle class, and beer and inexpensive imported wines gained in popularity. By the start of the Thirty Years' War in 1618, Germany's vineyard area had reached the height of its expansion (ca. 300,000 ha or 741,300 acres). The ensuing destruction of the countryside (including vineyards) and decimation of the population led to a drastic reduction in viticulture.



The wine-growers who survived these climatic and politico-economic problems were forced to give serious thought to their future. Ecclesiastical and aristocratic estates had long been proponents of quality over quantity. They also owned a large number of Germany's best vineyards – sites that consistently, over a long period of time, yielded grapes for top-quality wines. At this time, though, all growers had to assess their choice of site and grape variety, including varieties new to Germany. It was against this backdrop that “Oesterreicher,” as Silvaner was known then, initially made its way into Franken from Austria. From there, it spread throughout Germany and became the country's leading grape variety in the course of three centuries.



The earliest documented mentions of Oesterreicher in Germany are from the villages of Castell, Obereisenheim, and Ebrach in eastern Franken. An innkeeper and tanner in Obereisenheim, Georg Kraus, also sold grapevines, including Silvaner. Johann Georg Körner, the estate administrator of the Fürstlich-sches Domänengut Castell, is known to have frequented Kraus's tavern in the course of business travel, and it is feasible that this is where he learned about the “new” grape. On 5 April 1659, Körner sent a messenger from Castell to Obereisenheim to pick up 25 Silvaner vines. They were planted at the foot of Castell's Schossberg hill in the Reitsteig vineyard the following day. An invoice (dated 10 April 1659) in the Castell estate's archives chronicles the purchase and planting. Each vine cost 8 Schilling and 3½ Pfennig, or about twice the cost for the usual varieties of that time.

Alberich Degen, abbot of Ebrach Monastery from 1658 to 1686, was another early propagator of the “grape from Austria.” The Cistercian monks of Ebrach are credited with having imported Oesterreicher vines from their affiliated cloisters in Austria. Monastery documents first mention the grape by name in 1665. A stone plaque commemorating Degen’s efforts to help restore viticulture in Franken was discovered in the Würzburger Stein site in the course of vineyard consolidation in the 1960s. Today, the memorial stone can be viewed in the cellars of the Bürgerspital zum Heiligen Geist in Würzburg.



On 17 June 1806, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote to his wife Christiane:

“Please send me some Würzburg wine, no other wine tastes as nice, and I am in a surly mood if I lack my usual favorite drink.”





TYPES, STYLES + FOOD AFFINITIES

Silvaner wines are extraordinarily versatile thanks to their subtle character and fresh, harmonious acidity – less austere than that of Riesling. Whether vinified as a still or sparkling wine, Silvaner

appeals with its juicy, rounded, mouth-filling taste. The wines range in style from dry to off-dry to lusciously sweet dessert wines – a diversity that yields easy-drinking, lighter wines for everyday enjoyment as well as fuller, powerful versions that go well with food. Special occasions call for special beverages, be it a sparkling wine (*Sekt* or *Winzersekt*) or a mature, rich rarity. Silvaner is a veritable workhorse that can deliver a wonderful array of wines.



“The temperaments of Franconian Silvaner and Franconian wine-growers have much in common: at first glance, they may appear somewhat reserved and reticent – but suddenly they open up with an engaging laugh. You have to get to know the Silvaner a little to fully appreciate its merits.”

Horst Sauer, award-winning Franconian Silvaner producer

“The time is ripe for Silvaner...”

...is the motto of the Silvaner Forum, a German initiative founded in July 1998 to foster awareness of and rekindle interest in Silvaner worldwide. While the majority of members are estates in Rheinhessen and Franken, there are members throughout German wine country. Its biennial wine competition is open to Silvaner producers worldwide.

Because the flavors and aromas of Silvaner are particularly influenced by the soils in which the grapes were grown, the Silvaner Forum has compiled a résumé that sums up how soil type manifests itself in Silvaner wines.

Bundsandstein (colored sandstone):

pear aromas; juicy; straightforward

Muschelkalk (shell-limestone):

aromas of apple and pear; silky texture; creamy smoothness; elegant finish with a hint of spring violets

Keuper (colored marl with varying proportions of sand or clay; often mixed with gypsum or shell-limestone):

apricot, spicy on the nose; juicy; finely honed acidity, fine-fruity elegance, and good balance; slightly bitter aftertaste

Löss (loess):

aromas reminiscent of yellow fruit; the soil's high lime content lends the wine a rounded acidity; slow to develop; chalky smoky notes; lean and straightforward

Kalkstein (limestone):

apple aromas; well-balanced acidity due to the buffering effect of lime, yet still lively; needs time to open up; great aging potential

Mergel (marl, a crumbly mixture of clay, sand, and limestone):

exotic aromas; juicy; full-bodied and intensive; moderate acidity; creamy smoothness; long finish

 VERSATILE ALL-ROUNDER WITH FOOD

Fresh, lively, uncomplicated Silvaners that have a fine fruitiness and are relatively neutral on the nose and palate are not only great summer sipping wines, but also delicious with light, summer fare. Thanks to its agreeable acidity, it goes well with salads dressed with a mild vinaigrette and with vegetable dishes. Silvaner is also a favorite partner with Germany's delicate, white asparagus. Pairing asparagus and a wine with a pronounced acidity, for example, can lead to a metallic or even bitter taste. Therefore, a dry Silvaner or a Silvaner with a touch of sweetness can complement a mild Thai curry as well as the slightly sweet



flavor of crabmeat, lobster, scallops or shrimp with pasta in a lightly seasoned cream sauce or in a seafood quiche. Since sweeter wines seem drier with age, a mature, mellow Spätlese or even Auslese is often a wonderful partner with food.

The terroir-driven aromas and flavors of Silvaner are perhaps most evident in the dry versions made from carefully selected, fully ripened grapes from top sites, harvested with an optimal balance of acidity and natural sugar – to yield firm wines without overblown alcohol. Popular pairings include salmon (poached, soufflé, grilled, smoked or gravlax), shellfish (clams, mussels), and freshwater fish as well as veal and poultry. Powerful or earthy dry Silvaners go well with hearty German-Alsatian dishes (onion tart,

sauerkraut, sausages) and nicely enhance a meal with richer or more flavorful meats (pork, game) and mushrooms. As always, the method of food preparation and the accompanying sauce are important considerations for the choice of wine.

Silvaner is also a promising partner with many kinds of Asian cuisine...from India to China and Japan. Full-bodied dry Silvaners can beautifully complement many stir-fried and savory steamed, simmered, or fried dishes prepared and / or served with intensely flavored (salt, vinegar, garlic, ginger, etc.) ingredients.



Silvaner's perceptible, but rounded, acidity enables it to harmonize well with various kinds of cheese. Brie and Camembert are potential candidates as are fresh, unripened cheeses (cottage cheese, mascarpone, ricotta, quark, and cream cheese). Fresh cheese mixes with sheep or goat milk cheese also make for a tasty match with dry Silvaner wines.

With their honeyed or caramel tones, the rich and sweet Silvaners partner well with ripe, sweet melon; foie gras or pâté de foie gras; blue-veined cheese; and desserts (particularly those with honey or caramel as an ingredient)... or simply served on their own as the crowning touch to a festive meal or special occasion.







READ ON ...

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SILVANER, PLEASE SEE:

For suggestions on pairing Silvaner with Asian cuisine, please see:

- **Perfect Pairings – German Wines and Asian Flavors**
 Jeannie Cho Lee MW, Hong Kong
 (available from the
 German Wine Institute/Bodenheim –
www.germanwines.de)

For the names of some of the finest Silvaner producers in the world, please see:

- **www.silvaner-forum.de**
 Although the website is not yet available in English, the Silvaner Forum publishes the results of its biennial, international wine competition (2013, 2015, etc.).



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