The Rheinhessen

It’s a vast landscape famed for its classic styles and local grape varieties, but now Germany’s biggest wine region is also forging a reputation for some less familiar wines which certainly changed perceptions among visiting merchants from the UK.

The Rheinhessen is Germany’s largest wine region, accounting for about a quarter of the country’s vinelands. Getting to grips with it in just three and a half days is a tall order, but that was the mission accepted by six intrepid wine merchants who recently took part in a Wines of Germany visit.

This is a landscape of gently rolling hills and varied soils – a terroir that suits a wide range of grape varieties and winemaking styles. It’s the homeland of Silvaner, and also includes significant plantings of Scheurebe, Riesling, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc. Many others are creating ripples of excitement.

The region is attracting young, experimental and dynamic winemakers who are thriving alongside more established players who achieve huge followings for more classic styles.

The itinerary included visits to 12 wineries and vineyards and also gave merchants plenty of opportunities to check out how well the wines pair with food.

Kiki Evans of Unwined in Tooting describes the Rieslings as “fab” but adds she was “really excited by some of the more local grapes, such as Scheurebe”. “I must say from what I had been taught at WSET, and previous research, I expected to see much larger scale bulk production, but I was pleased to see such dedicated, small producers creating truly wonderful, unique and terroir-driven wines,” she says.

The business already sells Rheinhessen wines but Evans is “totally inspired to stock more and spread the word – particularly for wines made with local grapes and wines that express terroir. It was a fantastic trip”.

Tom I’Anson was surprised to find himself impressed by all 12 producers. “The real standout highlights I took from the trip were the overall quality of virtually all the wines, from dry to off-dry to sweet; the exceptional value offered even when factoring transport, duty and margins to bring them to the UK; and the variety of styles of wines,” he says.

“There were a large number of grapes and styles, not just Riesling. The drier styles of Riesling were amazing and we were all surprised at how most of these wines never get to the UK.”

He adds: “The new generations are producing beautifully made dry and off-dry wines, with amazing character and depth, and good-looking and easily understood packaging – all at very good prices.” I’Anson admits to “falling in love with
Riesling again” but adds: “I was also very impressed by the quality of some of the Pinot Noir being grown. Given the high prices of Burgundy, the German equivalents can compete on quality for the price.”

The business currently lists two German wines but Anson now intends to bring in another four or five, including some that he experienced on the trip.

Dafydd Morris of Cheers admits to only sketchy knowledge of the region prior to the visit but says he was “completely blown away” by what he experienced.

“The enthusiasm of the winemakers was infectious,” he says.

“The hospitality, friendliness and food we encountered at every winery was also amazing.

“I went expecting to try some nice dry Rieslings – which we obviously did – but I discovered I have a soft spot for Grauburgunder [Pinot Gris] and I was also impressed with many of the Spätburgunders [Pinot Noir]. It was also very nice to try some native grape varieties that are experiencing a revival – we are looking forward to introducing them to our customers.”

Cheers lists five German wines but Morris is now investigating directly importing wines from the Rheinhessen to bolster that figure.

Gregor Donaghy of Donaghy & Sanderson says: “The highlight for me was probably the first evening on top of the Red Slope at sundown, drinking some very nice Riesling.

“In terms of wine style, the Kabinett Rieslings were superb, as were the Spätburgunders, particularly the more oaked versions. However the best wine of the trip for me was probably a rosé Spätburgunder ice wine we had with dinner at the Vinothek in Mainz.”

He adds: “The change in style to drier wines and a higher proportion of red wines was great. What was most intriguing were the lovely easy-going lightly oaked Chardonnays and seeing the use of Bordeaux varieties, white and red. Although for the most part they were a bit green, the future for these varieties looks very promising, especially with climate change.

“We currently do a couple of Rieslings; however, after being blown away by the offering from the Rheinhessen, we are going to be importing some wines with the other merchants and really start showing people here what German wine is really about nowadays.”

**Wineries on the itinerary**

Weingut Wedekind, Nierstein
Weingut Wolf-Deiß, Uelversheim
Weingut Strauß, Uelversheim
Weingut Müsel, Worms-Hernsheim
Weingut Liebfrauenstift, Worms
Weingut Dautermann, Ingelheim
Weingut Espenhof, Flonheim
Weingut Frey, Ober-Flörsheim
Weingut Bernhard-Räder, Flomborn
Weingut Alexander Gysler, Alzey-Weinheim
Weingut Daniel Schmitt, Mettenheim
Weingut Raddeck, Nierstein