

A GERMAN ARISTOCRAT

FRANK CORR MEETS PRINZ DONATUS VON HESSEN

Wine has an egalitarian characteristic both in itself and among those who produce it. The vast volume of wine made around the world comes from grapes grown by small farmers who sell them to co-operatives or larger winemakers, if they do not have a winery themselves. These wines tend to be comfortably 'ordinary' in terms of quality and the price they achieve.

At the other end of the spectrum is a small elite group of aristocratic families who tend to produce high quality wines which are rare, and sell at very high prices. And of course there is a lot in between.

Donatus von Hessen resides in the aristocratic/elite sphere, albeit within the democratic environment of modern Germany. Together with his father, Landgrave Moritz von Hessen, he runs a diverse family business whose revenues go largely to the upkeep of several castles and estates which the family retained through various wars and revolutions.

The von Hessens have been around the Rheingau region of Germany since the 13th century, occupying prime land and sturdy castles. They were left with most of the castles and some of the land by the Prussians who, Prinz Donatus remarks with wry humour, 'also left us the costs'.

Like some landed gentry here and in England, the von Hessens responded to their new situation with pragmatism and creativity. They converted some of the castles into luxury hotels or visitor attractions, and got stuck into agricultural enterprises ranging from forestry to horse breeding, golf courses to wine. 'All things on which you can potentially lose money,' says

the Prince, when we meet in The Merrion Hotel.

So far however the businesses have been going pretty well and the wine estates which have been developed since the 1950s have been producing some very high quality award-winning rieslings.

'Germany is at the Northern limit of where you can grow grapes, but we have been making wine for around 2,000 years,' the Prince says. Reislung, with its ability to thrive in cool climates, has been their saviour and Germany continues to account for 62% of all the reislung grown throughout the world. It involves a lot of careful planning and hard work however as the grapes must be planted on south-facing slopes and often worked on terraces overhanging the steep banks of the Rhine or Mosel. The von Hessens have been fortunate in owning some of the most prized of vineyards at Johannisberg, in Rheingau, and over the years have paid close attention to both 'terroir' and winemaking. They were rewarded in 1999, when wines from the estate qualified for the classification 'Erstes Gewachs' (First Growth) which is awarded to only the best wines in the region.

Since then the estate has moved up a further notch with the appointment of Dr Clemens Kiefer as director. A former 'German Young Winemaker of the Year' who also has business management qualifications, he is the son of Professor Wilhelm Kiefer, a legendary viticulturalist in Rheingau.

His first project was to closely examine every square metre of the vineyards, increasing planting in some and selling off others. Plantings of Mueller Thurgau and Scheurebe grapes were pulled up and the estate was devoted entirely to reislung. He also convinced the family to invest heavily in the winery and cellars.

'We are now in the middle of a learning process and within the next five to 10 years we want to become one of the absolutely top wineries in the Rheingau,' says Prinz Donatus. 'We also want to offer wines that are easy to understand.'

And easy to understand they are, although aromas and flavours are complex. We tasted the Dachsfilet (fillet of badger) Riesling 2007, a pale yellow, soft and gently spicy wine, made from grapes grown on the 'Hill of the Badger', a Winkeler Jesuitgarten which had a nice balance of fruit and acidity and other rieslings from Hasensprung and Johannisberg Klaus vineyards.

These are rieslings of exceptional quality placed at the upper end of the market which will appeal to diners with a detailed knowledge of German wines. They will also pleasantly surprise others who are adventurous enough to opt for them on a wine list.

Distributed here by Classic Drinks, they are already featured on wine lists in The Merrion Hotel; The Farmgate, Midleton; the Hotel Kilkenny; The Morrison; La Bouche in Cork; Gleeson's Townhouse, Roscommon; Café Sol in Kilkenny and Midleton Park House.

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Below: Prinz von Hessen
Inset: The von Hessen Winery

