

OF Wine and the River

PART I... An Introduction to German Wines

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THE HISTORY OF WINE in western Europe is almost always linked to that of river valleys. The Po and the Arno; the Rhone and Saône; the Ebro, Guadalquivir, and Douro; the Gironde, Garonne, and Dordogne; the Charente, Loire, and Marne; the Moselle, Nahe, Main, and Rhine—all have their winy tales to tell.

This affinity is due, at least in part, to the easy transport rivers provided in the twenty centuries of viticulture before the advent of the railroad. Wine is heavy and bulky, and a riverboat could carry far more—and carry it faster—than a wagon pulled over muddy roads by oxen. Because of this ease of communication, cultures have developed along watercourses, and, along with them, Western civilization's inseparable companion—wine. In addition to communications and culture, river valleys have had one more factor in their favor for viticulture. Their southward-facing nooks and crannies provide many a sheltered slope to filter out the cold winds of spring and fall, allowing the grapes to develop to their fullest during these vulnerable periods. And in Europe, which embraces areas that are as far north as it is possible for the wine grape to grow, this advantage is not a small one.

Whatever the reasons, rivers and wine—like Gilbert and Sullivan, ham and eggs, or Eloise and the Plaza—seem meant to go together. And the Rhine, in terms of physical grandeur, culture, and certainly wine, is one of the most majestic rivers of all.

The Rhine starts life as a small freshet playfully tumbling down a Swiss mountainside, gradually grows larger, picking up power and size, and is soon ready to bear oceangoing ships as it passes by the port of Basel. By now the river has reached robust youth, as it flows through the French province of Alsace. But when it reaches Germany, it slows down, broadens, and deepens. At ease at last, it grows in authority and beauty as it winds through *Schloss*-crowned slopes—a mature, broad-backed, and sinuous river. Its shoulders are covered with a cape of vines, and hidden within their folds, just perceivable, are those globules of gold, the essence of which will soon be wine.

But age will not let beauty stay, and the river is pushed on, ever northward. It now carries the burden of a hundred barges, its once sleek surface is mottled by industrial wastes, and the viny foliage that once clothed its sides is replaced by the bleak and stygian landscape of the Ruhr.

The Rhine leaves Germany and continues its journey through the placid, flat, gray countryside of Holland. Gradually the river loses shape as it meanders through countless islands, then disappears forever into the formless brine of the North Sea.

In this biography of a river, it is perhaps only proper that the section which is most appealing visually is also the one that produces wine—the substance that elevates the reputation of the Rhine above almost any other river valley. For the Rhine is the vertebral column of a whole body of wine-producing areas.

Attached to the river, like nerves to the spinal cord, are the Moselle-Saar-Ruwer, the Nahe, the Main, the Neckar, and a host of other, smaller wine-producing valleys. Bordering it are such well-known vineyard areas as Alsace, Baden-Wurtemberg, the Rheinpfalz or Palatinate, Rheinhessen, and the lordly Rheingau. The Sylvaner, Traminer, Müller-Thurgau, and Riesling grapes have their homes in these areas.

Thus all great German wines come from the banks of the Rhine or one of its tributaries. In discussing *great* German wines, one means *white* wines. This is not to say that Germany doesn't produce a number of very pleasant little red wines. It does, although most are so light in color that in other countries they would be considered dark rosés. Many were the hours spent during my brief and not very glorious military service quaffing these wines in Assmannshausen, the delightful town where some of them are grown. It is just north of the bends in the river, with *Schlösser* and mountains towering dramatically overhead. The wine drunk there tasted excellent, as did the red wines bibbed in the valley of the Ahr north of and parallel to the Moselle. But one must beware of the seductions of a charming ambiance. Taken away from their native environment (Continued on page 20)



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