

“Bei uns ist immer was los!” Feste im Herbst

SOMMER- und HERBSTWEINFESTE und IHRE GEBRÄUCHE / SUMMER and FALL WINE FESTIVALS and THEIR CUSTOMS

It has long been the custom in wine growing regions of Germany and Austria for the population to elect a wine queen each year to represent them and reign over festivities all summer and fall. Vevey, Switzerland holds probably the most ambitious Festival of the Vintners every twenty-five years, and last summer one such festival took place in the town's market square. Large banks of seats were erected for the thousands of visitors who attended the performances of a pageant which combined Christian, pagan, and mythological symbolic figures and scenes with contemporary customs and vineyard practice. Both simple peasant and elaborate fantasy costumes, all home made, charmed audiences from many parts of the world.

Most German wine-country towns have gay and often spontaneous celebrations each year, especially if the current harvest promises to be good, and last year's already shows hints of being more than worthwhile. Starting in midsummer connoisseurs taste and test last year's product to see how it is developing. The 1976 vintage was watched particularly carefully because it promised to be one of the best in the last couple of decades or more. From the end of July till the end of November people celebrated, worried, and danced in the streets according to the mood of the moment. Wine vats were filled to the brim, but experience told those in the know that the vats would not long remain full. Local singing societies, such as the one in Schnait, Swabia, take the opportunity to provide lusty accompaniment for the goings on that characterize a typical "wine village" as harvest time approaches.

The election of a wine queen in such a region is taken very seriously by the residents, and the girl chosen has reason to be proud, for she has had to compete against many contestants. Her reign is not easy, however, for she and her attendants will be expected to appear at well over a hundred events throughout the area. This year in Wuerttemberg the queen can praise the harvest in good conscience because the result is unusually tasty. It is said that wine from Wuert-

Zum Wohl Wine Time

temberg is little known elsewhere because the population consumes it all at home. *Zum Wohl!*

But wine growing is not all fun and games. Joachim Saenger describes the work and skill that go into the process from the very beginning: The efforts of 100,000 vintners in Germany all year are crowned in October and November by the harvest. Everyone who can goes out early in the morning to the hills along the Rhine, the Saar, the Ruwer, Nahe or Tauber - to name only a few of the wine growing regions - to lend a hand. Both men and women pluck the fruit from the vines, bulging blue or green grapes. Men walk down to large collection vats to dump the juicy burdens they have been carrying on their backs, and which are then transported directly to a wine press. Transforming the juice of the grape into wine has been the job of the *Kellermeister*, master of the cellar, since the days when the Romans settled these regions.

Everyone in western, southwestern and southern Germany who has anything to do with wine follows weather reports and prognoses of the condition of grapes from

the Mosel river to Lake Constance with intense interest, especially during the last few weeks before the fruit reaches its final stage of ripeness. This year, with the exception of the area near Stuttgart which suffered a disastrous hailstorm, the vines were heavily laden. There was no doubt that large quantities of juice would gush from the presses even though a lack of rain plagued much of the region. However, it was feared that the sugar content might not be high because of too little sun; only warmth produces the finest wines, though today, because of the new varieties of grapevines and new methods of cultivation, fine wines may be enjoyed more often than the fabled once in a century.

But it is not all that simple; the harvest is in danger until the very last minute before picking. The fruit that looks so beautiful on the vine today might be ruined overnight by an unexpected frost. For this reason the vintners beg their patron, St. Kilian, for help and protection. Rain, above all, rain was their prayer this year during the last weeks before harvest, for every dry day was a threat. The drought was not entirely detrimental, however, for it prevented the grapes from rotting, which occurs when both rain and heat come together as they did last year and threatened to spoil the harvest. In 1976, for example, picking had to be done with lightning speed, particularly in Baden-Wuerttemberg, and even so growers had a great deal of trouble handling the vintage so that it would not spoil.

This year growers hoped not only for rain in the final weeks, but also for the opposite, for sunshine and warmth, so that their grapes would receive a final polish. In that case even the vintage of '76 might be surpassed, at least by the early varieties, and the later ones could produce acceptable wines.

If the harvests of the last few years have not been bad, at least so far as quantity is concerned, this can be attributed to the many re-plantings of vineyards. Old varieties of vines that were subject to disease and were affected by cold weather were replaced by new and better strains. Besides this, regular sprinkling has made a complete disaster almost a thing of the past. In addition, the land reform that was carried out in many regions, whereby people who owned several scattered small vineyards turned in their titles and received an equivalent amount of land all in one piece, made it possible for owners to renew their stock and handle it according to the latest methods. Independent and individualistic vintners are hard to convince of the advantage of cooperatives, but the land reforms under the supervision of experts and with financial help from the nation and the state showed them what could be done with modern methods and outside help. Persuading vintners to cooperate, and getting them to agree to the methods used