

For the Best Nonalcoholic Wines, Look to Germany

The country has a long history — more than a century — of making nonalcoholic wines. It's no wonder they're good.



By Florence Fabricant

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As interest in nonalcoholic wines grows, some of the best in the genre are being made in Germany, which started producing nonalcoholic wines more than 100 years ago.

“Germany does it best,” said Roman Roth, the winemaker at Wölffer Estate, a winery in Sagaponack, N.Y., on Long Island, which sells a nonalcoholic sparkling rosé made in Rheinhessen for the winery. “They have the vacuum equipment for the most gentle, least aggressive means of removing alcohol.” Similarly, wines under the Noughty label, from Thomson & Scott in London, are dealcoholized in Germany.

There are about 100 German companies with nonalcoholic wines in their portfolios, according to Steffen Schindler, the director of marketing for the German Wine Institute, a trade group. They're often rieslings, the dominant German varietal, but are also made from müller-thurgau, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, gewürztraminer, Grenache, shiraz, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir and red blends with labels like Carl Jung, Leitz and Kolonne Null among those sold in the United States.

Removing alcohol from wine is tricky as the alcohol is more volatile than the juice that contains it, so it evaporates at a lower temperature. The first patent for dealcoholized wine was registered by Dr. Carl Jung (no, not that Dr. Jung) in the Rheingau region in 1907. A year later, his Wine Estate Carl Jung in Rudesheim am Rhein, which was founded in 1868, was producing dealcoholized wines using a gentle vacuum extraction method at temperatures lower than 90 degrees Fahrenheit. This same method is still in use at most wineries, though other techniques, including reverse osmosis and centrifuge extraction, are also deployed.



Bernhard Jung, a grandson of Dr. Jung, and his daughter Teresa Jung, who is the marketing director for the winery, shown behind them. Daria Ziske

Bernhard Jung, a grandson of Dr. Jung, who is now the owner of the winery, said that for the last seven years it has produced only nonalcoholic wines for its own labels and for dozens of other wineries as well. He said the winery's output is now some six million bottles a year.



The winemaker Dr. Carl Jung, left, next to a sign advertising his nonalcoholic wines to drivers. Archiv Carl Jung GmbH

Sparkling wines, like Noughty and Wölffer Estate's Spring in a Bottle, are successful as the carbonation compensates for the lack of alcoholic bite on the palate, forming a nice base for a buzz-free Bellini. Carbonation clearly accounts for the success of many nonalcoholic beers, like those made by Athletic Brewing.

White wines yield good results more easily than reds because of their acidity and do not involve delivering the complexity of tannins to the end result. A well-chilled nonalcoholic sauvignon blanc from Germany or from other areas like New Zealand, South Africa and California can be a pleasing partner for ceviche, risotto with fresh peas or asparagus, salade niçoise or summer's steamed lobster.

"Full-bodied reds with a lot of alcohol are harder to replicate because when you remove the alcohol you're taking out the backbone of the wine; having a little oak and some tannins helps," Mr. Jung said. Pinot noirs and the red blends from Kolonne Null, Carl Jung and Misty Cliffs from South Africa are pleasant choices. But the base line comparison is young Beaujolais, not aged Burgundy or Barolo. Reds without alcohol benefit from being served cool, always with food.

The Jung process, as he described it, involves more than just removing the alcohol. First, using a different patented technique, the aromas, which are even more volatile than alcohol, are released and captured. Then the alcohol is removed, the aromatic components are restored and the wine is bottled at a cold temperature. Often the wine is also sweetened with a little grape must. "You need the sweetening to have the proper mouth feel but our level of sugar is lower than many others," he said.

For decades Weingut Carl Jung was alone in producing nonalcoholic wines. In the

1920s the winery began shipping its nonalcoholic wines to the United States, a market that dried up with the repeal of Prohibition. But there's a new demand for beverages without buzz; for the last five years or so, Mr. Jung said he has seen continued growth, amounting to about a 35 percent increase annually in domestic and international sales for his company.

The consumers are mostly older wine drinkers cutting back for health reasons, combined with young people who are avoiding alcohol for a number of reasons, including driving. Having a glass of nonalcoholic wine eliminates much of the social pressure, Mr. Jung noted. At her new Manhattan restaurant, Lola's, Suzanne Cupps offers a number of nonalcoholic choices on the wine list. "I want them and I'm sure some of my customers do," she said.

But even in Germany, nonalcoholic wines are far from mainstream. They account for less than one percent of total German wine sales, Mr. Schindler of the trade group said. These days, in other wine-drinking countries, consumption of nonalcoholic wines could probably be measured by the spoonful though according to Fact. MR, a research company, by 2033 the market for nonalcoholic wines is expected to grow by 10 percent with 40 percent of sales in North America.

"Now that nonalcoholic wine is becoming more mainstream, there will also be a lot more investment and research into further increasing the quality of these wines, thus increasing its attractiveness," Mr. Schindler said.

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Florence Fabricant is a food and wine writer. She writes the weekly Front Burner and Off the Menu columns, as well as the Pairings column, which appears alongside the monthly wine reviews. She has also written 12 cookbooks. More about Florence Fabricant