

## The Rise of Terry Theise Estate Selections

Despite occasional swells in consumer interest during the 1960s and 1970s, beyond the work and widely-disseminated wine selections of Frank Schoonmaker – who, besides importing, in 1956 literally wrote *the* book on German wines of its time – American merchants looking to promote that genre, faced a daunting, discouraging task. Interest in new names was tepid, and a radical 1971 German Wine Law with its confusing welter of terminology didn't help matters. Myriad German brokers happily made their country's wines available, but this was routinely done by circulating enormously long lists of estates and wines, for choosing among which U.S. wholesalers or retailers had little to go on other than hunch or the awarding of one of Germany's ubiquitous medals. Large though the average annual number of wines per grower still is, in the 1980s twice that number was de rigueur, the new law and changing tastes combining to make separate bottlings representing every combination of vineyard designation, so-called *Prädikat* and level of dryness or sweetness appear to producers as a viable or even essential option. And despite the length of lists circulated by brokers, the estates represented were overwhelmingly giants whose reputations were founded quite literally on the nobility of their owners' lineage, as signaled by the "von"s in their names.

Enter Terry Theise, back in the Washington DC area since 1983 after five years spent working in Germany while utilizing every minute of his free time visiting French and German vineyards and cellars. The basic notion behind Terry Theise Estate Selections was no longer novel, as Terry readily admitted in the first paragraph of his inaugural 1986 catalog. What was novel, was the notion that German wines would be subject for the first time to assiduously-pursued *selection* in the field, like that being carried out by importers or agents representing French and Italian wine, many of them relatively new to the U.S. wine scene, including the four that Terry cited on that occasion: Robert Kacher, Kermit Lynch, Lou Iacucci and Becky Wasserman. Many American talents resident at home and abroad were being incubated at the time (Joe Dressner, Marc de Grazia, Jorge Ordóñez, Neal Rosenthal, Peter Weygandt) or were about to achieve greatly enhanced exposure (Robert Chadderdon, Martine Saunier, Eric Solomon, Peter Vezan). But with the exception of Rudi Wiest (whose crusade on behalf of German wine was focused on brand- building and portfolio streamlining) over the next three decades no other importer achieved prominence as a German wine specialist, let alone followed the model of selectivity that has guided Terry's work.

And Terry offered from the beginning something that these other importers, for all of their inspiring work and rigorous principles of selection to achieve high quality and terroir character never did – or, at least, not beyond boilerplate: a distinctive set of aesthetic principles embedded into an entire world view that laid bare how he selected the wines on offer as well as the enormous significance he placed on the appreciation of wine and the work of the individual wine grower. As remarked in his 1986 introduction, Terry found German wine growers' "responses ranged from a kind of bemused disbelief to a warm gratification" as they witness an American importer tasting barrel by barrel, and with an expertise that amazed them. They would learn that making the cut as a Terry Theise Estate Selection could involve heated discussion, seldom about what would sell to Americans but instead about which wines were most expressive of their place of origin and of Terry's aesthetic ideals. Sometimes it was a matter of convincing a grower not merely what tweaks in a wine's upbringing might enhance its expressiveness but what might best exemplify that grower's own self-image. Twenty-one estates – not a "von" among them – and three co-ops informed that first offering, and although some of them were amazed to learn from Terry that their wines had been circulated on lists by brokers who had never visited let alone tasted, most of their

names were completely unknown in the U.S. A year later, Terry was representing 36 wine growers, eight of whom were still with him in 2020.

Already in the autumn of 1986, Stephen Tanzer published interviews with Terry, recognizing his work as a new point of departure and a godsend for lovers of German wine. But there were not enough of those, and the next breakthroughs in publicity for Terry These Selections would become no less important for the stateside appreciation of German wine. In July, 1987, Howard Goldberg authored the first of several *New York Times* "Wine Talk" columns to feature Terry's work. In late 1989, his portfolio by then representing more than four dozen producers, Terry made the first of numerous pilgrimages to nearby Monkton, Maryland to taste with Robert Parker, who candidly confessed his lack of experience with German wines, but for that very reason had a completely open mind, not to mention a sympathy for vinous underdogs and an appetite for "new discoveries." The laudatory *Wine Advocate* reviews that followed enormously boosted Terry's international standing. In July 1991, Barbara Ensrud, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, profiled Terry alongside Kermit Lynch and Robert Kacher as importers whose names "three clues that can help the wine drinker branch out with a mere glance at the label." "His name on a label is a guarantee of quality" soon became a meme. Five months later, Parker celebrated Terry as a "wine importer of the year."

In 1993, Terry took up a new cause: convincing Americans of the vinous excitement on offer from Austria, a country whose growers had staged a remarkable comeback from a 1985 scandal but were virtually unrecognized outside of the German speaking world. While Terry's Austrian portfolio remained much smaller in sheer number of growers or wines than his German one, Austria soon overtook Germany in sales, and the huge surge in export success that Austrian wine experienced at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century owes a great deal to Terry's advocacy.

When the "Terry These Estate Selections Premiere Offering [of] Estate-Bottled Champagne" appeared in autumn 1997, it took most of his many partisans among merchants, restaurateurs and critics, not to mention his German and Austrian growers, by surprise. Even Kermit Lynch – that pioneer of hard field work, rigorous selectivity, and the championing of small growers – had represented only the same two all but one of whom was still with Terry twenty-three years later – embedded in an appreciation of Champagne as no different from any other great wine: a representation less of the blender's art or house style than of place and vintage, one whose apex, little though wine lovers anywhere in the world including France recognized this, was the work of people rendering wine from their own vines. It was a radical echo of 1986: the novelty of treating Champagne like any other fine wine. To a far greater extent and more rapidly than in the case of Germany and Austria, Terry's advocacy of "farmer fizz" ignited a worldwide perceptual transformation. Ironically, the prestigious image that had been built by generations of large commercial houses insured that, unlike with German or Austrian wine, a great many other importers soon swam in Terry's slipstream. Today, dozens of Champagne growers are lionized and their total share of that appellation's exports – but more so, of its reputation – has reached a point where Champagne's *grands marques* feel genuinely threatened, and diligent, visionary ones goaded into thinking like growers.