

Stylistic diversity of Polish traditional method sparkling wines — a blessing or a curse?

Abstract to the Weinakademiker Thesis

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Motivation for choosing the topic

With a favourable climate and vineyard plantings increasing from 36 ha to over 1,000 ha in the last 15 years alone, Polish winemaking is booming. With it, traditional method sparkling wines are similarly on the rise. However, unlike established and well-recognized regions or emerging ones already influenced by PDO specifications (e.g., England's PDO English or Denmark's PDO Dons), drafting some stylistical boundaries, Poland's sparkling wines have no clear regional or stylistic definition in sight. An array of grape varieties, winemaking choices, and stylistic variations between vintages bring diversity to the glass, which is not necessarily reflected on the labels or understood by customers of this relatively young category of wines. My motivation for selecting this topic stems from my personal experience of tasting Polish sparkling wines over the past decade and observing their diversity and evolution from both a wine writer's and a casual drinker's perspective. Sharing these wines with friends and family and noticing how different the same brand label can taste from year to year, and how varied a flight of Polish several sparkling wines can be, I grew interested in understanding the reasons behind the diversity and how it influences the perception of Polish traditional method sparkling wines on the market.

Objective

This thesis evaluates the current stylistic landscape of traditional method Polish sparkling wines. It assesses their strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of producers and trade experts. It examines the impact of diversity on market competitiveness and consumer perception across various sales channels, including restaurants, wine bars, and retail, and offers insights into the future outlook. Finally, it provides insights into the overlapping and diverging views between wine producers and trade experts.

Methodology

With the first sparkling wines of the modern era released only in 2013, published literature is too sparse to draw conclusions on style and its evolution. As a consequence, the thesis follows a series of personal interviews with producers and trade experts working in retail, restaurants, wine bars, and journalism instead. To establish a level ground for contrasting different opinions, the following key questions about traditional method sparkling wines have been addressed with all participants:

- *How is the style diverse or uniform?*
- *How does the style evolve, and what are possible reasons for the changes?*
- *Can the emergence of regional styles be observed?*
- *What are the strengths and opportunities?*
- *What are the weaknesses and threats?*

Contents

The first section presents an overview of the history and recent developments in traditional method sparkling wine production in Poland, from historical vineyards in the 10th century to the rise of Zielona Góra's prominence in the 20th century, followed by an almost total demise and a slow resurgence of winemaking that we see today.

The second section provides an overview of other emerging cool climate wine regions known for producing traditional method sparkling wines, with a focus on history, grape varieties, industry size, and legislation.

In the third section, current stylistic variety and labeling practices across different regions in Poland are reviewed and summarized.

In the fourth section, reasons leading to the diverse landscape of the current market are established through interviews with winemakers, highlighting the challenges faced by the young and relatively inexperienced industry, as well as climatic vintage variations.

The fifth section examines the strengths and weaknesses, as perceived by winemakers and trade experts operating in various sales channels.

Finally, a summary of findings and a commentary on the future outlook are presented in the conclusion.

Conclusion

The variety in style observed in traditional method sparkling wines of Poland can be partially attributed to the grape varieties and specific winemaking choices. In the majority, however, key differences are driven by strong vintage variation and its impact on the base wines, as well as the duration of lees aging and variations in quality influenced by the young industry's emerging experience. With consumers eager to give Polish sparkling wines a chance and open to trying new flavours, the diversity of styles should be seen in a positive light. It is a sign of much-needed experimentation by the burgeoning industry to find its way, rather than mindlessly following a set recipe that worked elsewhere. The quality has taken a giant leap in the last couple of years, and increased consumer expectations as well as critical scrutiny can only help push the envelope further.