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Germany Seeks to Move Beyond Riesling

The wine industry is courting younger drinkers with lighter styles, low-alcohol bottles and new grape varieties.

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Germany’s wine industry is trying to move beyond a long-standing dependence on Riesling and reach younger drinkers with lighter styles, low- and no-alcohol wines and grape varieties that fit a warmer climate, according to the German Wine Institute, which is preparing a new marketing push for 2026.

The shift is already visible in Britain, where Wines of Germany renamed its annual “31 Days of German Riesling” campaign to “31 Days of German Wine” in 2025. The change was meant to widen the message beyond the country’s best-known grape and reflect growing interest from retailers and importers in wines made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc, as well as sparkling wines and alcohol-free bottlings.

Melanie Broyé-Engelkes, who became managing director of the German Wine Institute last July after working in perfume, cosmetics and whisky, said the industry needed to keep its heritage while adapting to changing tastes. She described Riesling as the “wise family leader” of German wine, a variety that built the country’s reputation abroad and opened the door for other grapes. But she said Germany now had to communicate in a simpler way and speak more directly to consumers who are less interested in technical wine language.

That effort is being shaped by research. The institute has already run focus groups in Germany with Gen Z consumers aged 18 to 24 and Gen Y consumers aged 25 to 34. The first target will be Gen Y, which Broyé-Engelkes called a quicker route into wine because many in that group are more open to switching from spirits and ready-to-drink beverages. The strategy is designed to present lighter, fruit-forward and slightly sweeter wines as approachable options for younger drinkers while still keeping older consumers at the center of the market.

The institute plans to test the campaign in Germany throughout 2026 through social media and retail-media promotions before deciding whether to expand it into export markets such as Britain. The goal is not to replace existing wine drinkers but to broaden the base at a time when producers are facing changing consumption habits and pressure from climate change.

Germany’s climate is also helping reshape what the country can produce well. Light white wines now account for roughly two-thirds of production, according to Broyé-Engelkes, which gives Germany an advantage as consumers increasingly choose fresher whites and sparkling wines over heavier reds. Producers are also investing more in PIWIs, or fungus-resistant grape varieties, along with natural wine and low- and no-

alcohol categories.

In Britain, retailers are already using familiar grapes as entry points for younger buyers who may find Riesling intimidating. Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon Blanc are being used to make German wine feel more accessible on shelves and lists. Modern packaging and the Generation Riesling initiative are part of the same effort to update the country’s image.

The results are beginning to show up in mainstream retail. German Sauvignon Blanc has been added to Sainsbury’s Taste the Difference range, a sign that some buyers now see room for German wines outside the traditional Riesling lane. Nicky Forrest, managing director of Phipps, which has represented German wine in Britain for decades, said the rebranding of the campaign reflected trade demand for broader participation.

German producers are also leaning into Burgundy varieties as climate conditions improve their prospects. Wine educator Shane Jones said Chardonnay and Pinot Noir could become major categories for Germany because vineyard sites in places such as the limestone-rich Pfalz are now producing wines that can compete with international benchmarks. He said German sparkling wines made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir often offer strong value compared with entry-level Champagne, while German Pinot Noir tends to be softer and more immediately approachable than many Burgundian examples.

Jones said German Chardonnay is often marked by precision, freshness and restrained oak rather than richness. He noted that Chardonnay was only officially approved in Germany in 1991, but producers have embraced it more fully in recent years. For British consumers already familiar with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, he said Germany now has an easier route into premium segments.

The broader message from producers and marketers is that German wine no longer needs to rely on Riesling alone to define itself. It can sell freshness, sustainability, lower alcohol levels and modern styles across multiple price points. That includes de-alcoholized wines such as Richter Zero from Mosel, which was highlighted at a recent tasting as one of the stronger examples in the category because Riesling’s acidity helps

preserve balance after alcohol removal.

PIWIs are also gaining attention. Wines made from crossings such as Riesling Cabernet Blanc are being positioned as part of Germany’s future because they combine freshness with disease resistance, which can reduce vineyard treatments and support sustainability goals.

For buyers and retailers, the shift means Germany is trying to answer more briefs than before: supermarket Sauvignon Blanc, premium Pinot Noir, sparkling wine made from Chardonnay or de-alcoholized Riesling. The country’s challenge now is not proving that it can make serious Riesling. It is showing that its wine industry has enough range to stay relevant as consumer tastes continue to change.