

What's Fashionable in Germany - The Pinot Family and the Grand Cru

By Evan Saviolidis

Imagine my surprise when I recently found out that Germany was the third largest producer of Pinot Noir in the world. In retrospect, maybe I shouldn't have been. What with all the demand for red wine these days, especially the heartbreak grape, having been given insane support by that film a few years back-you know, the one about the two guys vineyard trotting, the bachelor party weekend and the gorgeous Virginia Madsen.

Known as Spätburgunder in Deutschland, Pinot Noir has a long history. The grape arrived from Burgundy (via a pit stop in Switzerland) with the Cistercian monk in the 13th (some say 11th) century. The original incarnations were sweet, pale and often tasted of rot. Today, thankfully, the wines are darker, dry and show depth. Many are supported by subtle oak to offer complexity. The philosophy behind its selection amongst the winegrowers is simple- it is a cool climate/early ripening varietal, making it well suited for Germany's northern climate. Personally, I have been stand-offish about the German incarnations. The few good versions have been over shadowed by the many lesser versions. But on a recent trip to Germany, a minor eye and palate opener came to pass.

There are four regions which lay claim to making the best Spätburgunder. The first is the Ahr, named for the river which runs through. Straddling the 51st parallel, it is Germany's most northerly wine region and the second smallest with 1300 acres. One might think it crazy that such a cool region grows 80% red grapes. The unique factor which allows dark varietals to flourish is the terrain. The region is a deep valley protected by Hohe Eifel hills. Coupled with rocky /slate soils, an accumulation of heat occurs. The top producers here are Meyer-Näkel and Kreuzberg.

Until the 1980s, the Rheingau (along with the Ahr) were the pre-eminent Pinot lands. Rheingau might be the spiritual home to Riesling, but two towns, on opposite ends of the Rhine river hold status for best Pinot - Hockheim, and the singularly named Assmannshausen (insert chuckle here.) Seek out the wines from Domdechant Werner from the prior, and Weingut August Kessler from the later.

Across the Rhine river, from warm/dry Alsace, is Germany's most southern and one of its most temperate region, Baden. It is also the country's Pinot Mecca. Fifty five percent of all plantings are of the Pinot family, with 36% (15 000 acres) belonging to Noir. Fortune (or do you think Providence) has elevated its red wine stature due to internal German consumer demand. Personally, I found that most of the Spätburgunders here had a hard edge. The best versions were good, but expensive. That being said, the real gems were the whites; Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc) and Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris). Both Blancs were sublime with a Thai lunch. Producers Weingut Bernhard Huber and Freiherr von Gleichenstein are renowned.

Even though they account for a small proportion of planting (but increasing), in my esteem, the best wines of the Pinot family come from The Pfalz. Germany's second largest wine region is a privileged one. Sheltered by the Haart mountain range to the west, it is sun drenched and dry. Some vineyards even hit

50C. Proof positive is the fact that citrus fruit and figs ripen perfectly. If any of the modestly priced wines of August Ziegler or Wilhemsholf cross your path, do not hesitate to purchase. Of note is Ziegler's entry level Spätburgunder and Grauburgunder. They are both steals. Other quality weinguts (wineries) include Okonomierat Rebholz and Klostergut St. Lamprecht.

Früburgunder

This unknown grape, known in France as Pinot Noir Précoce, was the discovery of the trip. It is a small berried/ early ripening mutation of Pinot Noir, which has seen a minor revival, mostly in southern Germany. Currently, there are 600 plus acres planted. With low yields, it serves up a pleasant dark fruit tinged wine.

Erste Lage (Grand Cru)

In 1971, when the current German laws were created, they placed an emphasis on the ripeness of grapes at harvest, rather than on the quality of the place of origin. Before the law, there were 30 000 Einzellage (single vineyards). After, they were pared down to 2700, grouping together and/or dividing the many, under the names of the more famous few. Or if you will, high quality sites were diluted with lesser ones. Even worse was the creation of the Grosslage (large site), which is a group of inferior vineyards, usually from flat lands. The average size of a Grosslage is 1500 acres (versus 75 acres for an einzellage.)

When presented on the label, both the Einzellage and Grosslage must have a village prefix the name. Imagine the horror when a consumer, who in the past has enjoyed a fabulous bottle of Piesporter (village) Goldtröpfchen (single vineyard), from a top end producer such as St. Urbans-Hof opens a bottle of Piesporter (village) Michelsberg (Grosslage) from a co-op.

Needless to say, the quality producers were not happy. The first inkling of revolt occurred in 1983 when the late Bernhard Breuer organized a small group of like-minded growers from the Rheingau and formed the (now famous) CHARTA group. It was dedicated to making traditional styles of dry and off-dry Riesling according to a much stricter set of rules than the 1971 laws. These included grapes sourced from the original single vineyards (before amalgamation), lower yields, multiple hand pickings, higher minimum sugar levels, and a minimum alcohol content of 12%. These bottles were identified by a trio of Roman arches on the label.

Since this classification was only based in the Rheingau, Charta looked for a way to expand outwards. Their answer was to merge with the VDP (Association of German Prädikat Wine Estates) in 1999. Created over a century ago, the VDP is a group of 200 or so wineries with self imposed higher regulations. Their cumulative holdings account for only 4% of the vineyard area, but they produce a remarkable proportion of Germany's finest wines.

In 2002, Charta's tenants were transformed into Erste Lage, or if you will, Grand Cru. It is an umbrella term for all wine regions for this top category. To qualify, the wines must be made from the very best, narrowly demarcated single vineyard parcels, from low yields, from permitted varieties, and using

traditional viti/vini techniques. Also, at the time of harvest, the minimum sugar amount in the grapes must be at a Spatlese (late harvest) level of ripeness.

If the wines are sweet, they still carry their Pradikat designations (Spatlese to Trockenbeerenauslese.) If dry, Erstes Lage wines are labelled as Grosses Gewachs, or in the case of the Rheingau, Erstes Gewachs.

But because Erste Lage is a VDP designation, and does not comply with the 1971 German Wine Law, these terms are not allowed on a label. Instead, a logo with the number 1 and a grape cluster is used after the vineyard name to denote the classification.

So what is the future for Grosses Gewachs? According to Melanie Stumpf of the VDP “We hope, that our efforts – and we see this already among our peers – will bring all ambitious wine growers together to work in one direction. Putting more stress on the origin and not to the sugar content at harvest time. Our goal is that in the future vineyard sites are only used, when they have an individual character and terroir, which is reflected in the wine. Many producers, even from outside the VDP, are adopting our classification system, which underlines, that we are on the right path.”

I had the opportunity to participate in the annual Erste Lage tasting while in Germany. Having tasted through a catalogue of some 300 wines, most being dry, I was impressed with the quality. My only skip was the lack of sugar. According to Nic Weis of St. Urbans-Hof, “Most Riesling producers of the VDP, outside the Mosel, think that their wines have to be dry. Otherwise the consumer wouldn’t buy them. I don’t think that is necessarily correct. Sweetness does not only belong to Mosel wines, much like bubbles don’t only belong to Champagne. Rieslings from other northern German wine regions can use some sweetness. It makes them more balanced. Also, they don’t taste sweet. Rather they are fruity with the great advantage of lower alcohol content. All this is good, but the knowledge about it hasn’t reached the majority of the consumers, and unfortunately not even the majority of the producers. That’s my personal opinion.”

It is also an opinion I happen to agree with. But with the desire for dry wines with food, this trend will continue.