

Germany is creating an ambitious new vinicultural dynamic with a selection of world-class Spätburgunder – a characterful wine to rival the best burgundy. John Stimpfig reports. Illustrations by Chris Burke

BLACK FOREST CHATEAU



Should you ever need to accurately calibrate an oenophile's knowledge of wine, here's a handy question that will immediately expose them as buff or bluffer. Simply ask them what they think about German Spätburgunder, aka Pinot Noir. The bluffer will either stare at you blankly or snort with derision at such a preposterous idea.

In marked contrast, the buff's eyes will immediately light up before he or she enthusiastically acknowledges that Germany's top Pinots are unquestionably giving the best of Burgundy a real run for its money.

In fact, they've been doing so for several years. Now though, it seems that the noise and activity levels are gearing up from a gentle hum to a serious buzz thanks to a growing number of extremely positive press plaudits, most notably in magazines such as *Decanter*, *The World of Fine Wine* and this one.

Much of the buzz has stemmed from some headline-grabbing results in a series of high-profile blind tastings. One of the first came in 2008, when Weingut Mayer-Näkel's 2005 Dernauer Pfarrwingert Spätburgunder Grosses Gewächs stunned many in the wine world by beating all comers to lift the top international trophy for Pinot Noir at the Decanter World Wine Awards. It was no one-off; in 2011, Fritz Wassmer's 2009 Spätburgunder from Baden went on to win the very same trophy.

Then, late last year, at a landmark event in London, German Spätburgunders took seven of the top 10 places in a professional blind tasting of Pinot Noirs from around the world. Yet again, the competition included leading domaines from Burgundy, New Zealand and California.

One German producer, Weingut Ziereisen, managed two wines in the top 10, beating both Felton Road's 2009 Block 5 and Domaine Dujac's 2007 Premier Cru Morey-St-Denis. According to the wine writer Tim Atkin, who co-organised the tasting, "the results were a revelation".

One of the 14 professional tasters was the *FT*'s wine correspondent, Jancis Robinson. "I tended to score the Burgundies higher than most other tasters, but I was impressed by the quality of the German wines," she said afterwards. "The tasting certainly showed that German Pinot Noir belongs in the company of the world's finest."

However, it's not just journalists who are singing the praises of German Pinots.

Even some Burgundians respectfully acknowledge how much progress their neighbour has made. "I have tasted a few German Pinots and some have been genuinely very good," says none other than Aubert

de Villaine of the fine Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. "One of the great things about Pinot is that it is married to burgundy but can sleep in other beds, too," he adds, as only a Frenchman could.

Spätburgunder has largely been a late developer in Germany. First planted by the Cistercians on the banks of the Rhine in the 13th century, serious Pinot Noir was only attempted in the 1980s and 1990s by a handful of passionate and skilled growers.

One of the first was Werner Näkel of Weingut Mayer-Näkel. His quest to make this most challenging of wines can be traced to 1983, when he visited the great Henri Jayer in Vosne-Romanée. It was a huge turning point, not least because he returned to Germany on a mission to produce "Burgundian"-quality Pinot Noir.

Up to that point, the quality of German Spätburgunder was largely execrable. But vintage by vintage, the likes of Meyer-Näkel and Jean Stodden in the Ahr Valley began to show what might be possible. The same was true in the more southerly region of Baden, where the leading lights were (and are) Heger, Keller, Huber and, more recently, Wassmer and Ziereisen. In the Franken and the Pfalz, Rudolf Fürst and Friedrich Becker continue to set the pace.

The Germans were lucky that their efforts coincided with global warming. Up to the end of the 1980s, the Ahr in particular was regarded as simply too cold to ripen Pinot Noir, which is one reason why few took its hitherto thin and anaemic wines seriously. But as average temperatures have risen, so too has the quality of the raw material.

There has also been a dramatic increase in the technical skill that goes into tending the vines and making the wine. After Werner Näkel's pioneering pilgrimage, German winemakers have headed to Burgundy in a constant stream to learn from the masters of Pinot Noir. Wines have been tasted, friendships forged and knowledge and information generously shared. Indeed, these days many of the younger generation of German growers train not just in Burgundy but throughout the New World, too.

"Now we work in much the same way, in both the vineyard and the cellar, as they do in Burgundy – especially on things like oak, clones and pidgeage," says Bernhard Huber. "We are all aiming for the same thing – elegance, complexity and finesse."

As a result, stylistic comparisons with the Côte d'Or are inevitable but not entirely meaningful. "Burgundy is still the benchmark and always will be," adds Huber. "For me, the stars are the great grand cru wines of Gevrey-Chambertin, Chambolle-Musigny and Vosne-Romanée. That is what I aspire to in terms of quality.

"But the crucial difference is that I am not making burgundy," adds Huber. "I am making Malterdinger Pinot Noir from the foothills of the Black Forest. It's a different terroir and climate and that is what we have to reflect in our wines. It's no good trying to copy burgundy – partly because we can't and partly because we shouldn't. We need to create our own identity."

Today, some German growers are still trying to "copy" burgundy as best they can. "That's understandable," says award-winning German sommelier Markus del Monego. "But with experience, you learn what works and what doesn't. So you develop your own style. Ten years ago, the wines were much closer to burgundy because that was the direction of travel. But today, more growers have the confidence to develop their own expression."

Equally, other growers have leaned towards a more New World style of Pinot Noir, which has been popular in Germany but has drawn criticism from outside. According to Richard Rotti, winebuyer for Caprice Holdings and the Birley clubs, these wines can be too alcoholic and oaky and they lose their definition and sense of place. "To me, that's not what great Pinot is all about."

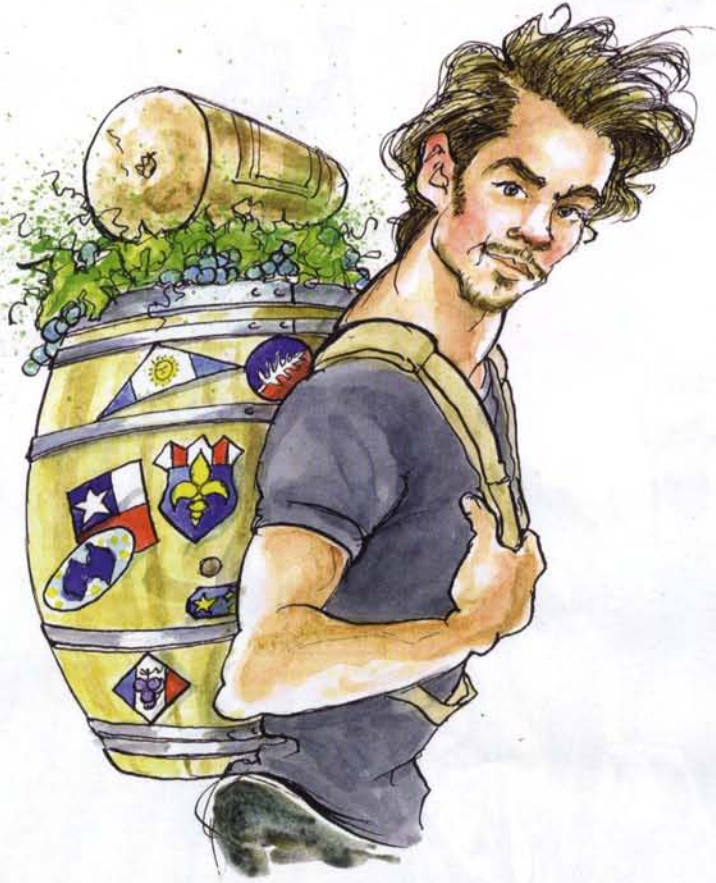
Undoubtedly, one of the rising stars of German Spätburgunder is the intensely likeable and irrepressibly

enthusiastic Hanspieter Ziereisen. Ziereisen is entirely self-taught, and his early 1990s vintages of Spätburgunder were pure and delicate, with a delicious filigree character.

Unfortunately, the wines failed to inspire German critics. "We were told our low-alcohol wines wouldn't do well in competitive tastings," says Ziereisen. "So in 2000, we started to make them heavier and more alcoholic."

As a result, Ziereisen did better in blind tastings and garnered national recognition. "But I didn't like the wines, which didn't age as well as the earlier, lighter vintages," says Ziereisen. "So in 2007, we changed back and now we are making wines that transmit our unique terroir."

Ziereisen isn't alone: many believe that this is the correct path for German Spätburgunder. But as Monego diplomatically points out: "Compared to burgundy, we've only just reached Everest base camp, so there's still a long way to go. German Pinot is a work in progress and there



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are many different routes to the summit." What everyone can agree on is that there's now a much greater recognition of German Spätburgunder beyond its home territory. But before you rush out to stock up on the latest must-have vintages, there are a couple of things you need to know. The first is that some are even harder to find and buy than burgundy. The other is that they're often just as expensive.

It's not all bad news on the supply side. Plantings have risen exponentially in the past few years, and Germany is now the third-largest Pinot Noir producer in the world (after France and the US). Nonetheless, the tiny volumes of the crème-de-la-crème producers are quickly snapped up by a loyal domestic market, which is more than happy to pay high prices for the privilege.

That leaves little for export and doesn't deter producers from charging burgundian prices. Late last year, Bernhard Huber caused a minor stir by raising the price of his 2009 Wildenstein Spätburgunder to a whopping €120 a bottle, of which just 1,900 were produced. It was almost double the cost of the 2008 Wildenstein. "I wanted to show my confidence in the wine, which is the best I've ever made," he says.

Such prices are clearly a step too far for many UK merchants. "We're very open to the idea of German

Pinot Noir," says Charles Lea of Lea & Sandeman. "But would the wines sell? The problem for most traditional UK drinkers is that they're not prepared to fork out that kind of money on a bottle of unknown Spätburgunder. Instead, they'd much rather spend it on a more familiar burgundy grand cru. Given how little the Germans export, I think it's always going to be a very niche market."

Fortunately, there are specialist importers and merchants such as The Winebarn, Howard Ripley and The Winery, which are happy to bring the wines in and sell them to a small but growing clientele of German Pinotphiles. Indeed, at The Winery in Maida Vale, German Pinots have become "much more mainstream", says owner David Motion, who now has no fewer than 36 different Spätburgunders on his shelves – all of which are selling well.

Arguably, one of the reasons for this is that Pinot Noir drinkers, by nature, often tend to be more adventurous and open-minded. "As a grape, Pinot probably elicits more passion and curiosity in wine aficionados than any other variety," says Motion. "But that doesn't explain why they keep coming back for more."

"I think it is down to two reasons. The first is that people are simply struck by how hauntingly sensual and delicious these wines are. The other, surprisingly perhaps, is price – or rather value. And, while it's not a like-for-like experience, I personally think that a £50 bottle of German Spätburgunder generally delivers much more bang for your buck than premier cru red burgundy. Significantly, so too do a lot of our customers."

In restaurants, it's a similar hand-sell story and most sommeliers simply don't have room for such rare and esoteric wines, however good they happen to be. But fortunately, there are always exceptions, among them Texture, La Trompette, The Ledbury, Lutyens, Pearl and The Vineyard at Stockcross, where you can at least find the merest handful of Germany's finest Spätburgunders, usually next to a legion of great red burgundies and New World Pinots.

Most encouraging of all, perhaps, is that there are tentative retail signs that German Pinot is finally beginning to break away from its hitherto niche, almost nonexistent image. Berry Bros & Rudd took on three German Spätburgunders earlier this year, while Fortnum's, Selfridges and Harvey Nichols have all dipped their toes into top German Pinot.

Indeed, Middle England's favourite retailer, Marks & Spencer, stocks a Spätburgunder. Such news will come as no surprise to the serious cognoscenti. But it may cause the bluffers to temporarily choke on their Côte de Beaune. ♦

PINOT FILES

Berry Bros. & Rudd, 3 St James's St, London SW1 (0800-280 2440; www.bbr.com). **Fortnum & Mason**, 181 Piccadilly, London W1 (0845-300 1707; www.fortnumandmason.com). **Harvey Nichols**, 109-125 Knightsbridge, London SW1 (020-7235 5000; www.harveynichols.com). **Howard Ripley**, 18 Madrid Rd, London SW13 (020-8748 2608; www.howardripley.com). **Lea & Sandeman**, 170 Fulham Rd, London SW10 (020-7244 0522; www.leaandsandeman.co.uk). **The Ledbury**, 127 Ledbury Rd, London W11 (020-7792 9090; www.theledbury.com). **Lutyens**, 85 Fleet St, London EC4 (020-7583 8385; www.lutyens-restaurant.com). **Marks & Spencer**, 458 Oxford St, London W1 (020-7935 7954; www.marksandspencer.com). **Pearl**, 252 High Holborn, London WC1 (020-7829 7000; www.pearl-restaurant.com). **Selfridges**, 400 Oxford St, London W1 (0800-123400; www.selfridges.com). **Texture**, 34 Portman Square, London W1 (020-7224 0028; www.texture-restaurant.co.uk). **La Trompette**, 5-7 Devonshire Rd, London W4 (020-8747 1836; www.latrompette.co.uk). **The Vineyard at Stockcross**, Stockcross, Newbury, Berkshire RG20 8JU (01635-898 722; www.the-vineyard.co.uk). **The Winebarn**, Clump Farm Barn, Farleigh Lane, Dummer RG25 2AF (01256-391 211; www.thewinebarn.co.uk). **The Winery**, 4 Clifton Rd, London W9 (020-7286 6475; www.thewineryuk.com).