

Spätburgunder

Pinot Noir –
Germany's red star



Wines of
Germany

THE RED WINE DIVA

With almost 11,800 ha / 29,100 acres of Spätburgunder under vine, Germany ranks third worldwide after France and the USA in area devoted to this variety. It is the nation's most important red wine grape, accounting for 11.5 % of the total vineyard area and one third of total German red wine production.

Germany's finest red wines are produced from Spätburgunder, or Pinot Noir, grapes. Like its white wine counterpart, Riesling, it is synonymous with top quality. Both grapes are unparalleled in their ability to reflect their origin in the finished wine, and legendary for their food compatibility.

The sensual pleasures of Spätburgunder begin with the warmth of its color in the glass, which can range from light ruby to crimson to garnet. In general, with their softer tannins, Spätburgunder wines are more charming and accessible (less astringent) in their youth than Cabernet Sauvignon.



A panoply of impressions are frequently associated with Spätburgunder: fruit – sweet-fruity aromas of strawberry, raspberry, cherry, currant, blackberry; spice – clove, star anise, cinnamon, nutmeg, nut or vanilla. Other typical associations are floral – violet or rose; caramelized – chocolate or mocha; or organic – mushroom or damp forest floor. With age, the finest Spätburgunder wines can take on tones of leather, tar, and

pronounced earthy (barnyard) or gamy aromas. The velvety texture of the finest Spätburgunder wines, often described as “liquid silk,” is one of its greatest allures.



“Chock full of incredible texture and hedonistic pleasures; it is sex in a glass, so seductive that it’s very hard to say ‘no’ to.”

Master Sommelier Madeline Triffon,
commenting on Pinot Noir

ALLURING BUT DEMANDING

Pinot Noir is temperamental and demanding, both in the vineyard and in the cellar. It makes high demands on climate and soil. Despite the variable weather conditions of cooler climates, and the risk of spring frosts that pose a threat to vines that bud early, this is where Pinot Noir thrives. A cool climate provides the grape with sufficient time to ripen completely without diminishing its fruity aromas or losing too much acidity.

The weather-sensitive grape often suffers from poor or abnormal fruit set at blossoming time. It is also quite susceptible to fungal and viral diseases. The botrytis fungus, for example, damages color compounds in the skins and leads to off colors and odors in the finished wine. Its thin-skinned berries are easily damaged, after which rot can set in quickly, or the skins can break during the journey from vineyard to cellar, leaving the grapes vulnerable to oxidation and setting the juice free.





In terms of soil preference, the success of Pinot Noir in the limestone-rich soils of Burgundy speaks for itself, yet the grape is adaptable and can produce extraordinary wines with good body, color, and flavor intensity in other soils of moderate depth that provide sufficient water reserves as well as good drainage.

Even with a ripe, healthy crop, the outcome in the cellar is unpredictable and requires much fine-tuning in response to vintage conditions. It is an annual challenge to bring forth sufficient color and flavor, and achieve the balance of tannin, acidity and alcohol necessary for good structure. Winemakers have access to many cellar techniques that can be varied by timing and temperature to help the potentially perfect soloist – Pinot Noir – give a great performance, hitting just the right notes to bring down the house. Despite all the difficulties in dealing with this diva, the challenge of producing top-notch Pinot Noir fascinates aspiring winemakers the world over.

“... Pinot Noir is a minx of a vine. ...an exasperating variety for growers, winemakers and winedrinkers alike. It leads us on a terrible dance, tantalizing with an occasional glimpse of the riches in store for those who persevere, yet obstinately refusing to be tamed.”

Jancis Robinson MW. *Vines, Grapes and Wines*,
Mitchell Beazley 1986







ORIGIN

It is impossible to pinpoint the time and place of Pinot Noir's origin, but plant geneticist Dr. Carole Meredith, University of California, Davis, has used DNA fingerprinting to help identify the origins of some of the world's greatest old wine varieties. In her opinion, "Pinot Noir was already being grown in Burgundy when the Romans arrived there 2,000 years ago. The Roman agricultural writer Columella described a grape variety [in Burgundy] in the 1st century that was most likely Pinot Noir. So we're pretty sure that Pinot is at least 2,000 years old...Pinot Noir probably arose from a wild grapevine in Burgundy (or nearby in Champagne or southwestern Germany). Its parents or grandparents were likely wild vines." This might be the final word on Pinot's parentage. Given the age of Pinot, its parent cultivars might never be traced because they no longer exist.



If not “born” in Germany, Pinot Noir has long been a traditional grape there. Records show that in the late 9th century, German Emperor Charles III brought cuttings of “Clävner” from north-eastern France to Lake Constance, where today’s Baden region borders on Switzerland. In Baden, “Clevner” remained in use for hundreds of years thereafter as the local designation for Pinot Noir. As of the 12th century, in the course of their medieval missions to establish monasteries and convents east and north of their Burgundian homeland, the monks and nuns of religious orders fostered the expansion of Pinot Noir in Germany.

By 1136, Bernhard of Clairvaux in Burgundy and 12 of his Benedictine brothers had journeyed to a remote spot in the forested hills of the Rheingau to found the monastery Kloster Eberbach. They probably brought with them the vines from which they could make sacramental wine. We know neither which grapes these were, nor precisely when or where they were planted, but Pinot Noir might have numbered among them. The oldest written mentions of “Klebrot,” a Rheingau synonym for Pinot Noir, are from the 15th and early 16th century. It is listed in an entry from 1442 in the guild book of the “barrel rollers” (medieval stevedores who rolled barrels of wine to the riverfront for shipping) in Hattenheim on the Rhine, a wine village adjacent to Eberbach monastery. In 1507, “Klebrot” appears again, this time in conjunction with the monastery’s vineyards in Assmannshausen that were tended by the Benedictine nuns of Kloster Marienhausen, a convent under the supervision of Eberbach.





For centuries, the grape was known as Morillon Noir in northeastern France. The first documented mentions of “Pinot” date from the late 14th century. Pinot Noir derives from the French words “Pin,” or pine cone, alluding to the conical-cylindrical shape of its clusters, and “Noir,” or black, referring to the dark color of its grapes’ skins.

Today, wine-growers in Germany cultivate a number of Pinots, most of which include the German word “Burgunder” in their name – in deference to their Burgundian origin. First and foremost is Spätburgunder, the German synonym for Pinot Noir, and its ca. two-week earlier ripening form, Frühburgunder, known in France as Pinot Noir Précoce or Pinot Madeleine. The German names simply reflect the difference in ripening time: “spät,” meaning late, and “früh,” meaning early. Despite its name, Spätburgunder is a relatively early ripening grape.



Extremely susceptible to mutation, the Pinot grape also exists in other color forms with the same DNA profile, e.g., Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc, which are known in Germany as Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, respectively. The dark-skinned Pinot mutation, Pinot Meunier, is also cultivated in Germany under the synonyms Müllerrebe (miller's grape), so named for its downy leaves that look like they've been sprinkled with flour, and Schwarzriesling (literally, black Riesling, but not related to the true white Riesling grape).

In the Middle Ages, up to about 1550, red grape varieties predominated throughout Germany, after which a period of poorer, more variable weather and cooler temperatures set in until the 19th century. During this "Little Ice Age," plantings of red grape varieties declined and were gradually supplanted by white varieties, such as Riesling. Yet, in the course of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, temperatures have continuously risen, creating increasingly favorable conditions for red grapes to ripen sufficiently to produce great red wines in Germany that are on a par with their international counterparts throughout the world. This, coupled with the quality-oriented vineyard management and winemaking techniques of Germany's contemporary wine generation, bodes well for the future of German Spätburgunder wines.

Today, Spätburgunder is grown in all 13 German wine-growing regions, above all in Baden, where half of Germany's plantings are cultivated, followed by the Pfalz, Rheinhessen, and Württemberg, which jointly account for an additional one third of national acreage. As in the Côte d'Or, many



of the sites that yield Germany's finest Spätburgunder are rich in limestone. Yet, in Baden alone, the grape thrives in shell-limestone and/or mixtures thereof; weathered granite; weathered gneiss; and in the Kaiserstuhl district, weathered volcanic soils covered with loess and/or interspersed with veins of limestone. In the Pfalz and Rheinhessen, some form of limestone is a leitmotif, in conjunction with loess, loam, clay, marl or sand-based soils. In Württemberg and Franken, the Triassic trio (colored sandstone, shell-limestone, keuper) prevail in the best Spätburgunder vineyards. For centuries, highly prized Spätburgunder has also been grown in two smaller regions, the Rheingau and the Ahr, in steep sites of weathered slate, with quartzite / phyllite or graywacke deposits, respectively.

Despite the steady increase in acreage in recent years, demand exceeds supply. In 1980, it accounted for a scant 4 % of Germany's vineyard area; in 2000, 9 %; and in 2015, 11.5 %. Frühburgunder is a rarity. Although only 254 ha / 628 acres were planted as of 2015, these wines have a dedicated following.

“Pinot Noir with an Umlaut...TODAY'S word, people, is spätburgunder. Let's say it slowly: SHPAYT-bur-GUHN-der. That's German for pinot noir, and the time has come to say it out loud. Trouble is, in the United States at least, hardly anybody has tasted it, much less heard of it. Most people don't even realize that Germany produces any red wine at all, let alone some very good pinot noir...
...Among the barriers to finding spätburgunders in the United States, I forgot to mention one: It's so popular in Germany, they drink most of it up.”

Eric Asimov, The New York Times, January 2010





TYPES, STYLES & FOOD AFFINITIES

The Spätburgunder grape can be vinified as a still or sparkling wine in a fascinating array of colors ranging from fairly deep red to golden red to salmon pink and clear white. The juice of the grape is clear; the color lies in the pigments in the skins; and the degree or depth of color derives primarily from the length of skin contact and methods used to extract color from the skins.

In addition to Spätburgunder red or rosé wine, there are a number of variations on this theme. Weissherbst is a rosé made from grapes processed to produce a light-colored, single variety wine, i.e. Blanc de Noir(s) literally means “white wine made from red grape(s).” Often, a Weissherbst is referred to as a Blanc de Noir if it is a light-colored, single variety wine.



There are Spätburgunder wines for all tastes and budgets, starting with uncomplicated, pleasantly fruity wines for everyday enjoyment. They are best enjoyed while fresh and young (up to five years). Serve the red wines at 14 – 16 °C/57 – 61 °F, the rosés at 9 – 13 °C/48 – 55 °F, and “Sekt” (sparkling wine) at 8 – 10 °C/46 – 50 °F.

At the other end of the scale are the complex, individualistic dry wines that are often produced in limited quantities from top-quality, selectively picked grapes grown in the very best vineyards or parcels thereof. Producers of the finest Spätburgunders strive to bring forth site-specific characteristics in their wines. Views on expression vary among winemakers: some aim for powerful wines that are rich in alcohol, others prefer more delicacy and finesse. There are also differences in fruit intensity. In contrast to the Spätburgunder wines marked by bold or even opulent fruit are those in which a more subtle fruitiness underlies distinctive spicy or herbal notes.



Wines of this caliber usually spend considerable time in cask or bottle prior to their market debut. In order for their layers of aromas and flavors to unfold, they can benefit from additional aging (5 – 15 years or more). Highly sought after, particularly by leading restaurateurs and connoisseurs, these wines have their price. Serve at 16 – 18 °C/61 – 64 °F.

Lusciously sweet Spätburgunder wines are rare. The usual catalyst for grapes to shrivel and their sugars to concentrate is the botrytis fungus – desirable in ripe, healthy white grapes, but disastrous in thin-skinned red grapes. Yet, in some years, warm temperatures can have the same effect. Spätburgunder Beeren- or Trockenbeere-*nauslese* and *Eiswein* fetch high prices...not only at auctions.

“I am tempted to believe that smell and taste are in fact but a single composite sense, whose laboratory is the mouth and its chimney the nose.”

Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*
French expert on foods and cooking
(1755 – 1826)



VERSATILE PARTNER FROM EUROPEAN ROOTS TO BROADER HORIZONS

Given the wealth of aromas and flavors associated with Spätburgunder, it comes as no surprise that it pairs well with so many foods. Lean cuts of beef, pork, lamb, and smoked sausages are traditional partners, as are roast chicken or duck. In autumn and winter, earthy wild mushrooms or truffles and game or game birds – and pâtés thereof – make for flavorful matches, particularly with fuller-bodied, mature Spätburgunder. The currants, cherries or cranberries often used in rich, wine-based sauces for meat or game nicely complement the fruity notes of a Spätburgunder wine.

The wine is equally versatile as a cooking liquid or as an ingredient in sauces or marinades. Spätburgunder plays a leading role in hearty Old World dishes, such as sauerbraten (spicy braised beef),

hasenpfeffer (spicy braised hare), beef Burgundy, coq au vin, fish stew or eggs poached in red wine sauce. Like the grape itself, these dishes have made their way far beyond their homelands, as have many cheeses of European origin.

On its own, in sauces, and as raclette or fondue, cheese is a great partner with Spätburgunder. These basic types of cheese are promising candidates for a pleasing match: piquant blue-veined or cheddar cheeses; hard cheeses with fruity or nutty aromas and flavors; and creamy cheeses with a velvety texture. Apart from the cardinal rule –neither partner should overwhelm the other – bear in mind that the aromas and flavors of many cheeses change with age, usually progressing from mild to more pungent.

Across the ocean(s), North American food and wine fans rave about light-style Pinot Noir with grilled or smoked salmon, as well as raw tuna sashimi or grilled tuna steaks, while Singapore-based Ch'ng Poh Tiong, publisher of *The Wine Review*, suggests that Pinot Noir is the best of any wine to bring forth the flavors of Asian cuisines. Among his recommendations: Cantonese dim sum or roast goose or pork; Indian chicken or lamb tandoori; Korean beef bulgogi; Japanese tempura or teppenyaki; and the many versions of the fragrant basmati rice and spicy meat, fish or vegetarian biryanis (stews) of the Indian subcontinent.

“In most Asian meals, it is impossible to think of matching one wine with one dish...An array of dishes often complement each other...Whether we choose a dry Riesling or a perfumed Pinot Noir, the beauty of German wines is in their ability to pair with a wide range of ingredients and intense Asian spices.”

Jeannie Cho Lee MW, Hong Kong
Perfect Pairings • German Wines and Asian Flavours

A RISING STAR

German Spätburgunder fared exceptionally well at two international tastings, 2011 in London and 2013 in Hong Kong, in which 40 Pinot Noir wines (20 from Germany and 20 from around the world) were tasted blind and rated by an impressive lineup of wine experts. Both tastings were designed to call attention to the high quality of Germany's leading red grape variety and its ability to successfully compete with its international counterparts. Today, Germany is the third-largest producer of Pinot Noir in the world after France and the USA.

QUOTES

Have you tried German pinot noir yet?
You should (22.06.2018)

The Telegraph

Burgundy beware – Germany ist the
rising star for pinot noir. (13.01.2019)

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Germany: Pinot Noir's Sleeping Giant
(October 2018)

BEVERAGEMEDIA

Spätburgunder: Germany's
Answer to Burgundy (01.11.2018)

Wine Spectator





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