

# SPRECHEN SIE SPÄTBURGUNDER?

## How German Pinot Noir learned to speak for itself

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Benedikt Baltes is proud of his car. But it's not the fat Mercedes of most Germans' dreams. It's a boxy Renault Kangoo. What he loves about it is the massive solar panel bolted to the roof. It's rigged so that when he drives up to his vineyards, he can extract maximum efficiency from every hour of daylight. This inventive pragmatism typifies Benedikt and Weingut Bertram-Baltes, the estate he and his wife Julia Bertram started in 2019. The couple are natives of the Ahr, a rugged canyon of slate and vines that has long pushed the limits of where red wine can ripen in Germany. Benedikt made his name when, in his twenties, he struck out on his own to take over an old domaine in another Pinot stronghold, Churfranken, a few hours' drive southeast. Julia remained in the Ahr, working a lengthening necklace of old vine parcels – some famous, others forgotten – mostly on terraces high above the river. Both quickly gained acclaim for the ambition and precision of their wines.

Pinot has a long history in Germany: at least 200 years of documented presence. Today, 11% of the world's Pinot plantings grow here,

third after France and the United States. In certain parts of Baden, Franken, the Mosel, Pfalz, Württemberg and – above all – the Ahr, it is *the* grape. But only in the last decade or so have the wines become compelling. Before that, Spätburgunder, as the grape is known here, was first a thin, cold wine and then, in the 1980s and '90s, a 'we too' wine – 'we, too, can make big, alcohol-rich reds', German growers fell over themselves to prove.

In the early 2000s, however, German Pinot Noir reached a tipping point. A warming climate delivered more reliable ripeness. Growers leaned into more attentive farming, higher-quality vine material, new ideas about vine training and canopy management, pinpoint harvests, and a far more refined understanding of Pinot's demands in the cellar. Finesse replaced power. Cool, filigree fruit, subtle savouriness, elegance, complexity and transparency to terroir became the new grails. Today, it feels as if Spätburgunder has shed its clunky accent and awkward syntax and learned to speak in verse.



In July 2021, a catastrophic flood swept the Ahr. When the waters receded, Julia and Benedikt doubled down on future-proofing Pinot Noir. Their ideas are broadly holistic but resist labels. Out in the vineyards, most of which are steep, handworked terraces, they experiment relentlessly with ways to cultivate restraint. In the cellar, delicate pressing, mostly destemmed grapes, warm, native yeast fermentations, and long *élevage* in large, neutral casks of local oak and cooperage are the keys.

“We think Pinot Noir is like a red white wine: the deepness, the elegance, the feeling of lightness, but great and long,” says Benedikt. Joh. Jos. Prüm, an iconic house of long-lived Riesling, is a model. “I think what we sometimes miss with Pinot producers in Germany is that not everybody is focusing on long-term ageing potential,” says Benedikt. “With J.J. Prüm, take a bottle, it’s good. Wait ten or even 30 years, it’s better. This, for me, is something that belongs to quality.”

Like Prüm, Bertram-Baltes wines are known for early reduction. It takes time, or judicious decanting, for them to emerge from behind it. “Reduction is what we work on the most in our winemaking,” says Benedikt, without apology. “It’s a perfect way to do a natural conservation. Sometimes it stinks, of course. But this goes out quickly when you know how to handle it.” Last autumn, Klaus-Peter Keller, godfather of German wine, came to the Ahr and visited Bertram-Baltes. “Pinot from the Ahr belongs in the cellar of every serious wine lover!” he later wrote. “The whole Keller team immediately fell in love with it. Pinots were so pure, so focused and precise.” Tasting wines going back to 2018 (most of them miraculously rescued from the

flood), those from the broad, open vineyards of Ahrweiler are brightly charming and mineral, those from the stony terraces of Dernau are darker with more umami, while those from Mayschoss are seductively finessed.

“There is no such thing as ‘German Pinot Noir,’” says Sebastian Fürst of Weingut Rudolf Fürst. This is a provocative statement because if one family embodies German Pinot Noir, it’s his. The Fürsts have had vineyards in Churfranken since the 1600s and Sebastian’s father Paul has dedicated his life to realising Spätburgunder’s full potential here. The open valley around Bürgstadt, where the family has most of their 21 ha, feels worlds away from the craggy Ahr. The handsome, understated winery is surrounded on three sides by one of Germany’s true grand crus: the Centgrafenberg. It’s a rolling slope of iron-rich red sandstone soils, sporadically shot with limestone. After a wet winter, the Odenwald forest above and patchwork farm fields below glow with saturated

shades of green. The Fürsts’ art is their ability to distil the poetry of this landscape into wine.

Paul Fürst was far ahead of his time. In the 1980s he started assembling the best Pinot parcels he could lay hands on. In the 1990s he focused on better-quality old German clones and French massale selections. Gradually, he dialled into a resolutely old-school, Burgundian winemaking style. He passed all this on to Sebastian during the decade they worked together, allowing a seamless stylistic continuity when his son took over in 2017. If anything, Sebastian has further refined his father’s sensibility. Theirs is a tightly closed loop of organic farming, with extremely dense (up

to 17,000 vines per ha) plantings for very low yields (20ha/hl for the single vineyards) and rigorous selection.

Sebastian looks and sounds more like a kindly professor than an nth-generation farmer, and is thoughtful about Spätburgunder’s evolution. “In Germany, we are building up our own identity for Pinot. Sometimes I have the feeling that if you learn and work with Burgundy techniques, then someone might feel that this is not a way to work out a German identity. But I am sure that our ways of vinification were quite similar in the past.” These ways include up to 100% whole cluster, foot treading, basket pressing, and open-top native yeast fermentations. The wines spend 16 to 18 months in a carefully managed mix of new and used French oak 228L barrels. Sebastian wants the wines to give drinkers a sense of where they are headed in the first year or two after release. Then he advises laying them aside for four to six years.

Tasted young, the Bürgstadt Pinots are coolly slender, with delicate fruit and floral aromatics. The Centgrafenberg is fine-boned and mineral, with ethereal fruit and light stem spice. Hundsrück is elegant, firm and concentrated, with darker and more perfumed aromatics suggestive of superb ageing. Maybe because Sebastian’s first love was food – he nearly became a chef – Fürst Pinots feel satisfyingly gastronomic.

A short drive from Bürgstadt, the Klingenberg Schlossberg (where Benedikt Baltes had vineyards when he was making wine in the region) looks like it was torn from a medieval illustration: tight rows of red-brown dry wall terraces step steeply above the town to meet a crumbling fortress and forest of chestnuts. The Fürsts have 1.8ha here and the wines are open knit and charming. A third site, Grossheubach, where terraces are chiselled from a forested hill, gives a darker expression that retains the fine Fürst mineral detail.

When Sebastian said “there’s no such thing as German Pinot Noir,” he meant that there are too many different interpretations for a single identity. Whether from Baden’s sun-baked volcanic soils, the Mosel’s cool, slate pitches, Rheinhessen and Rheingau’s historic sites along the Rhein, the limestone of southern Pfalz or Württemberg, there are many places to take the measure of German Pinot. They are, more than anything else, wines that now know exactly where they come from.

## Rotters’ Spätburgunder

1

2022 Bernhard Huber,  
Malterdingen ‘Malterdinger’, Baden

2

2017 Daniel Twardowski,  
Neumagen-Dhron ‘Ardoise’, Mosel

3

2022 A Christmann, Neustadt  
‘Gimmeldinger Biengarten’, Pfalz

4

2021 Keller, ‘Dalsheimer Bürgel’  
Grosses Gewächs, Rheinhessen

5

2021 Aldinger, Fellbach  
‘Untertürkheimer Gips’, Württemberg