PINOT NOIR PRÉCOCE

AN ALMOST-IDENTICAL TWIN WITH A DISTINCT PERSONALITY

Photography courtesy of Sebastian Fürst.

This little-known grape variety may be marginal in more senses than one, but it may also be all the more precious for that. As **Anne Krebiehl MW** discovers, climate change and the commitment of a few passionate producers have brought about a dramatic resurgence, and the resulting wines are well worth seeking out

Pinot Noir Précoce is still something of a mystery. When two German wine researchers wrote an essay outlining its historic presence in Germany's Ahr Valley and their hypothesis of its possible origin, they found an apt title: "The Fruit That Came in from the Cold."[1] They accept that Pinot Noir Précoce (which is also known as Pinot Madeleine or Frühburgunder) is a spontaneous mutation of Pinot Noir—a fact also acknowledged in the now standard reference work *Wine Grapes*[2]—and they hypothesize that the mutation is likely to have occurred in Germany during a short ice age in the late 15th century. But since there are also early French mentions of Précoce, we may never know exactly where it first emerged.[3]

What we do know, however, is that Frühburgunder is undergoing a renaissance in Germany, which now boasts a total of 262ha (647 acres). It is championed, for various reasons, in three historic pockets: in the Ahr; around Miltenberg in Franken; and in Rheinhessen's Ingelheim. Fascinating examples can also be found on the Mosel, and there are encouraging results from Hampshire and Warwickshire in England, too.

A labor of love

Since almost everyone who cultivates Frühburgunder in Germany also grows Spätburgunder (*früh* = early; *spät* = late), Précoce (as I will refer to it here), usually appears in tastings of new vintages alongside its far more famous sibling. Its highly aromatic expression is likely to captivate those susceptible to that fragrant, ultimately indescribable amalgam of wilderness, fresh fruit, earth, and florality that is "Pinot-ness." In its youth, this "precocious" sibling can be beguiling indeed. Without a direct counterpart of Pinot Noir in a neighboring glass, and sometimes even with it, the difference between Pinot Noir and Précoce is almost impossible to tell. Because it ripens early, one might think it would make a great proposition for cool, marginal climates—but there is a distinct catch, in that it rarely delivers good yields and is even more of a "heartbreak" variety to work with than Pinot Noir. Growing Frühburgunder in Germany is a labor of love. Yields rarely exceed 35hl/ha and are usually much lower. Its early ripening makes it very attractive to wasps and birds, let alone wild boar. Small clusters of often very small grapes are prone to rot and vinegar flies and, more recently, also to that latest scourge of vineyards, *Drosophila suzukii*, a spotted fruit fly. It can turn from ripe to overripe in no time at all. Sebastian Fürst, of Weingut Rudolf Fürst in Bürgstadt, Franken, laments, "Frühburgunder has yields that are painfully low, but the man-hours required are brutally high. Yields average around 20–22hl/ha. There are years where we are overjoyed to have 25–28hl/ha. In 2014 we had 14–15hl/ha, and it took twice the amount of vineyard work."

But first a little history. Ludwig Kreuzberg, of Weingut Kreuzberg in Dernau, Ahr, muses, "It is something that had almost been forgotten." He remembers that Frühburgunder was always most prevalent around Bachem, a village whose vineyards along the Bachemer Bach (brook) have east/west exposures and are thus cooler than the more favored south-facing vineyards along the River Ahr. Bachem never reached the acclaim of the other Ahr villages or wines. When postwar *Flurbereinigung* (the process of rationalizing and fairly redistributing vineyards split over generations by Napoleonic-style inheritance laws, which was entirely necessary and achieved with more or less success in various regions) restructured vineyard holdings, most of the full-time wine growers replanted Frühburgunder vineyards—usually sites that would not fully ripen Spätburgunder—with varieties that would ensure a far more reliable crop, such as Müller-Thurgau, Portugieser (a formerly widespread, high-yielding red variety), and, later, Dornfelder. Kreuzberg emphasizes that the growers in those days, usually not university educated as they are today, happily followed the recommendations of the local authorities, which were more concerned with economic viability than quality. High-quality clones of Précoce were not available, and few wanted to risk the capital outlay of replanting a variety as cumbersome, fickle, and low-yielding as Frühburgunder.

In 1983, however, Kreuzberg's father, always a lover of Frühburgunder, planted a vineyard on Bad Neunahrer Sonnenberg, a privileged, steep, south-facing site. The wines were a success, and Kreuzberg became known for his fine Précoce. Due to climate change, the vineyard no longer exists today; a site like Sonnenberg is already too warm for this early ripener, which was grubbed up ten years ago. Ludwig Kreuzberg has clung to his family tradition, but all his Précoce holdings—a total of 0.8ha (2 acres)—are now in cooler spots. He explains: "Now our Frühburgunder is in marginal, cool sites, closer to the forest on the elevated parts of Dernauer Hardtberg and on the plateau that constitutes Walporzheimer Pfaffenberg and Ahrweiler Silberberg. We have no vines older than 12 or 13 years, so there is certainly more quality potential."

The Ahr

At Weingut Stodden in Rech, also in the Ahr, Alexander Stodden reports that it was his late father, Gerhard, who planted Frühburgunder, to replace Portugieser, as late as the 1990s. Gerhard wanted to make quality wine and knew that in those marginal sites Frühburgunder was the best possible quality option, far outstripping the quality potential of either Dornfelder or Portugieser. He happily accepted the hard work and doubtful yields. His Frühburgunder is in a shaded part of the distinguished Recher Herrenberg site, where Pinot Noir would struggle without any afternoon sun. Stodden explains: "When both Früh- and Spätburgunder are planted in the same top site, Frühburgunder will ripen a good six weeks before Spätburgunder. In marginal sites, Frühburgunder will ripen two weeks before Spätburgunder. This clearly signals that Précoce needs a cooler site to have a long enough ripening period." He also emphasizes that constant canopy work is crucial; that wire trellising helps ventilate the fruiting zone; and that Frühburgunder planted on a single stake, as Spätburgunder is in many of the steepest Ahr sites, would be a "nightmare." "It used to be an unloved variety, but now it is a firm part of the program," he says. "It is the beneficiary of the paradigm shift from quantity to quality." He also believes that even the best Frühburgunder of the past was never as good as it can be today.

The largest private Frühburgunder holding in the Ahr Valley belongs to the Kriechel family, who farm 4.5ha (11 acres) of it in as many as 11 separate parcels. Michael Kriechel, who looks after the vineyards, is clear: "One reason why Frühburgunder is so important to us is that it makes great wines in sites where Pinot Noir would not thrive. You have the possibility of making fine wines from climatically lesser sites. Logistically, it also helps spread the workload across the harvest. It would be inconceivable not to have it." Their holdings are on the same plateau as Kreuzberg's, where Walporzheimer Pfaffenberg borders Marienthaler Rosenberg. One 25-year-old parcel is planted with a whole host of different Ahr-Frühburgunder cuttings. "There is huge genetic diversity here," enthuses Michael. Plans are afoot to make more of this fantastic gene pool. About 10 percent of the vines on this windy, wood-fringed site are marked with white ribbons. Only the fruit of those selected superior vines goes into their top Frühburgunder Rosenberg, which is made only in good years like 2009 or 2012. It was the intensely aromatic, burgeoningly floral 2009 vintage of Rosenberg that inspired this article. "There are tiny clusters of tiny *verrieselte* [*millerandage*] grapes," says Michael, who explains that they try to encourage poor fruit-set during flowering via leaf picking, thus exposing the flowers: "The smaller the berries, the fewer we have to cut out later on, so we have better natural balance in the vine."

In the cellar, Kreuzberg, Stodden, and Kriechel all treat their Précoce the same way as their Pinot Noir, which is to say in the classically careful, small-batch Burgundian way. The only difference is that Précoce gets less time in wood and usually has a higher proportion of used wood. Even so, it is in the Ahr that Frühburgunder comes across as more distinctly different from Spätburgunder than elsewhere. Kriechel says, "Frühburgunder is always the softer Pinot-type; it is smoother, and despite having no analytic residual sugar, there is always a kind of sweetness, something filigree and velvety." Stodden observes its immense charm: "There are dark fruits and they appear immediately—it is up front; the finish is different, too." He also cautions, however, that Précoce can easily topple into overripeness, with jammy fruit. For Kreuzberg, Précoce is marked by forest-fruit notes and charm, whereas his business partner Frank Josten finds darker hints of cherry and blackberry. "For me, due to the different pulp:skin ratio, it is always denser, richer, and more velvety. The wines are just a joy to smell," says Josten. Indeed, the young wines look darker and have an altogether darker aromatic aspect than Spätburgunders do: Ahr Précoce has notions of crushed bilberry, very ripe black cherries, sometimes even overtones of sweet cherries baked in chocolate sponge. The perfume is always intense: Kreuzberg's 2009 Hardtberg Grosses Gewächs has top notes of passion fruit and berry coulis, whereas Kriechel's 2012 Rosenberg blends floral overtones with berries; my tasting note for the 2009 Rosenberg reads, "Total rose-petal ethereal—incredible." Some of the older vintages, like Kreuzberg's 2006 Hardtberg, show signs of smoky meatiness and hints of elderberry.

Franken

Differences between these two Pinot siblings are much harder to tell in Franken's Pinot-pocket around Miltenberg, where Früh- and Spätburgunder have traditionally been grown in cool soils of weathered sandstone. At 49.7°N, Bürgstadt may be farther south than the Ahr (50.5°N), where exposed sites and warm slate soils moderate the effects of latitude, but it is a cool corner. Here, Christoph Walter, of Weingut Josef Walter, makes wines of immense elegance from both varieties. Just 0.24ha (0.6 acres) of his total 3.5ha (8.6-acre) vineyard are planted to Frühburgunder. Of his long-established winemaking family he says, "We've always had Frühburgunder vineyards but not always wine. There were many years in which you could carry the grapes of a whole vineyard home in your cap. It is a variety that can be brutal." Bitter experience notwithstanding, he perseveres. For him, it is simply part of his heritage.

Walter is at pains to harvest at around 12% potential alcohol, and in his younger, late-released wines it is almost impossible to tell the two Pinots apart. Walter is candid: "It is really difficult, and I would not even say with any certainty that I could tell them apart when well made. Frühburgunder is maybe a little spicier, has a touch less acidity, is a little rounder. Frühburgunder is often described as lighter, but that's not something I have observed." It is only in the more mature vintages that aromas start to diverge; in his 2007 Précoce, notes of smoked, cured meat appear alongside that dark, aromatic hit of elderberry. The 2004, conversely, seems younger, and bursts with redcurrant fruit and peppery, savory edges. Without a control sample of Spätburgunder from the same vintages, you would not know that they were not Spätburgunder. To have such dazzling wines side by side is mind-boggling—a bit like looking at identical twins with distinct personalities. Both are grown on the Centgrafenberg, a mainly south-facing 57ha (140-acre) site of weathered sandstone. (This is the *Einzellage* under German wine law; the area classified by the Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter, the association of some 200 leading German producers, is smaller.) Along the same street, at Weingut Stich im Löwen, a much riper Précoce style is produced. It is full of easy charm and quite sumptuous; again, it is the aromatic intensity that arrests attention.

At Bürgstadt's most famous address, Weingut Rudolf Fürst, Frühburgunder is also an integral, if small, part of the production. Sebastian Fürst explains: "Frühburgunder really is a

Photography by Anne Krebiehl MW

Previous page: (left) Pinot Noir Précoce and (right) Pinot Noir (clone 777), both picked on August 12, 2014, in the vineyards of Weingut Rudolf Fürst, Bürgstadt. Right: Sebastian Fürst: "Frühburgunder should never be in the warmest spots."

[1] P Gieler and H Konrad, "Die Frucht die aus der Kälte kam. Die Ahr als Heimat der Rebsorte Frühburgunder?" *Deutsches Weinbau-Jahrbuch* (Verlag Eugen Ulmer, 2011).
[2] J Robinson, J Harding, and J Vouillamoz, *Wine Grapes* (Allen Lane; London and New York, 2012). [3] Ibid.

frustrating, taxing variety that demands the fullest attention. Some years, two weeks before harvest it looks gorgeous. Then just a little moisture appears, which would not even register with Spätburgunder, but Frühburgunder simply implodes." Site selection is important, too: "Frühburgunder needs stony, rocky soils and should never be in the warmest spots, where it would just rot away. Bürgstadt is probably the only village in Franken that can take Frühburgunder seriously; Klingenberg [7.5 miles (12km) away and famous for Pinot Noir] would already be too warm." And remember, while these villages may be Franken's warmest, they are still in a cool region. The central, prime part of the Centgrafenberg—now again officially recognized as Hundsrück (Fürst labels his bottles without the "d")—is also too warm. Fürst's Précoce is therefore planted in the lower reaches, below the mid-section of the slope. Interestingly, the entire vineyard is almost bare; the leaves are gone by early November, while the neighboring rows of Pinot Blanc are still in full leaf, which dramatically illustrates the shorter vegetative cycle of Précoce. The astonishingly low-yield 2014 Frühburgunder was already heady when I tasted it from barrel, with notions of bay leaf, tobacco, and edges of cinnamon amid the pure red fruit. "Frühburgunder simply has incredibly rich and opulent aromas," Sebastian says. When it comes to telling the siblings apart in the glass, however, he is equally clear: "You can't do it. One should really look upon Frühburgunder as a very close brother of Pinot Noir—actually as a variation of it. You have to approach it just as you would Spätburgunder." All the same, he admits, "It is true that Frühburgunder is a touch milder when it comes to acidity and opens up sooner. It also comes with all these aromatics. In a way, it is easier to understand for non-Pinot drinkers—not because it is less complex but because it comes toward you with darker fruit, more herbal notes, more opulence, whereas Spätburgunder can leave some people baffled and at a loss."

The brooding aromas of elderberry make an appearance in his seamlessly elegant wines. There is also a glint of smoked meat in the 2009; black cherries and a deliciously paradoxical, slender fleshiness in the 2008; while the 2003 still has a velvety tannic grip and the first signs of dried fruit. The aromatic progression of the still deeply colored 1997 is the least Pinot-like so far, with roasted chestnuts, earth, caramelized pumpkin, dried cranberry, salted nuts, wet oak-leaf, and a highlight of ripe cherry fruit on the surprising finish. Sebastian and his father Paul make Früh- and Spätburgunder in exactly the same way, always with a proportion of whole bunches. "We cannot really say that we can always tell them apart in the glass," Sebastian confesses. "I find that the site comes through far more strongly than variety." He concludes: "We accept its difficulty because it is something traditional, something incredibly precious. We make neither an estate nor a village wine from it—that would be impossible given the necessary input—but it is worth all the work that goes into it."

Rheinhessen

The third historic spot for Frühburgunder is Ingelheim in Rheinhessen. Yet again, this is a village famed for Pinot Noir, apparently brought here by Charlemagne to his *Kaiserpfalz* (palatinate). Julius Wasem, together with his brother Philip, represents the eighth generation of the family to head Weingut Wasem. They have 3.5ha (8.6 acres) of Frühburgunder, and it is thanks to the Wasem family that Frühburgunder is an officially recognized variety in Germany, registered with the *Bundessortenamt*, the federal registry of crop species. Their old papers show that "Früher Blauer Burgunder" was a permitted variety on the official species list in 1949, but after a 1953 revision it fell by the wayside. It was their great-grandfather Julius who applied for its reinstatement in 1967 and who assumed the heavy responsibility for measuring, record keeping, and selecting, to say nothing of the high administrative cost required. In June 1971, the variety was once again officially listed as "distinct, sufficiently homogenous, and stable." Philip Wasem stresses that his ancestor made sure that the aromatic qualities of the variety were noted—even if it had to be in the horrendously staid civil-servant German of the time: *ein milder, samtiger, gehaltvoller Wein mit feiner Blume* ("a mild, velvety, rich wine with a fine flower"—that is, bouquet). The paper also notes that due to the substandard yields, the variety would only ever be of local importance.

According to (the younger) Julius, however, anecdotal evidence suggests that large parts of Ingelheim were once planted to Précoce. And it is certainly here that its raison d'être and former importance become clear. Documents list both must weights and must acidities for the years 1946–49, 1955–58, and 1964–70. Précoce achieved must weights of up to 110° Oechsle/25.3° Brix or 14% potential alcohol in 1949. Julius explains: "No other variety would have achieved this; and this, notably, was in Ingelheimer Pares, our top site. There are years when Spätburgunder was harvested with 14–15g/l of must acidity, while Frühburgunder had must acidity of 8–10g/l." Before climate change, Frühburgunder meant drinkable, palatable red wine in average years. "Frühburgunder always has less acidity," continues Julius, "and in those days it was the more pleasant variety. It was used for blending into Spätburgunder, while those who had sufficient Précoce to make a pure varietal wine had it made."

By registering the variety, the Wasem family also became official breeders—Kreuzberg's father in the Ahr, for instance, planted Wasem clones. Today, Ingelheim is getting a little warm; the Wasems have only old vines in Pares. Newer plantings are in higher, windier sites. In 2014, the Précoce harvest started as early as August 25. Their 3.5ha (8.5 acres) took three full weeks to be hand-harvested; yields were just below 30hl/ha. Julius, who wrote his Geisenheim bachelor thesis on clonal selection, is still involved in the tectonically slow process of clonal development of Frühburgunder. He characterizes the variety thus: "It is always less marked by tannins than Spätburgunder; it is velvety, round, and pleasant right from the very start. Apart from fruit, there also are smoky, bacon-like, darker, peaty notes."

England

Today, apart from the Wasem-clones, there is also a selection of more yield-stable Geisenheim clones, which were registered in 1994 and are based on cuttings from the Ahr. Michael Kriechel remembers that when he needed some more Précoce seedlings a few years ago, his nursery had run out because 18,000 vines had just been shipped over to England. One wonders whether some of these were destined for the Hattingley Valley vineyard in Hampshire.

In 2013, 20.2ha (50 acres) of Précoce were planted in England. Hattingley Valley, which took over an already planted Précoce vineyard and has been using the fruit since 2011 in its award-winning sparkling rosé, is a huge fan of the variety. It has a total of 1ha (2.5 acres) in northeast Hampshire. Emma Rice, Hattingley's winemaker, confirms the clone as GM4 (Geisenheim) and explains, "Précoce ripens about three weeks earlier than all the other Pinot Noirs. That means we stand a chance of ripening it. It also ripens to about 11–11.5% of potential alcohol, which is 2% more than the standard Pinot Noirs. We get ripeness and good color. Because it ripens so early, we avoid the botrytis risk, because we can harvest before the big autumn rains. That's one of the big advantages." Surprisingly, there are no complaints: "No, it's very easy," smiles Rice. "For us, it is the most reliable Pinot Noir we have. It's no more of a problem at flowering than any of the other varieties. The resulting juice and then the wine is bursting with red fruit. It just seems to like the English climate, which seems to suit it very well."

Moreover, there does not seem to be the usual trade-off between quality and quantity. Owner Simon Robinson comments, "I think it's that we don't get the quantity anyway, so when it does produce, you get the quality. But Précoce seems to be able to deliver good quality more reliably than other varieties." He adds, "In fairness, the current site for our Précoce is very, very good. It'll be interesting to see, if we do plant more Précoce elsewhere, if it does as well." The site, explains Emma, is "an old chalk quarry, about 70m [230ft] above sea level, with the River Test running around the bottom. It's sheltered and on a gentle south-facing slope, with about 10cm [4in] of topsoil." Should Hattingley decide to plant more vines, Précoce will definitely be in the running. Despite its susceptibility to *millerandage*, Précoce in England, unlike Précoce in Germany, performs above average. Nor are birds a problem, since ripening coincides with an abundance of hedgerow fruit.

Currently, says Emma, all the Précoce is made into red wine for blending with white base Pinot Noir to make a rosé. Précoce is also used for *tirage* to add a final touch of color and a dash of fresh fruit. The red base wine gets a four-day cold soak to give maximum color with minimal tannin extraction. Fermentation temperatures do not exceed 29°C (84°F), and the wine matures in used, neutral barrels. It never undergoes malolactic fermentation, the better to preserve its freshness and beautiful fruit. The very young barrel sample tastes intensely fruity; the aromatics are opulent, but the body is slender. It could easily be mistaken for a super-fresh, young Gamay in its exuberance, and it is totally palatable. Emma rightly says that it tastes just like English summer pudding: tart and berryish. Farther north, in Warwickshire, Kieron Atkinson, owner of the English Wine Project, echoes these views: "Précoce has great potential. It can produce an English wine that has all the characteristics of classic Pinot Noir, with lovely fruit and complexity. It crops well and within the right parameters."

The 2014 Précoce harvest at Hattingley started on September 25—a critical whole month later than in Ingelheim. So, has Précoce found in England a place where it can excel without quite as much heartbreak as in Germany? Will it become a pillar of English viticulture? Does it thrive at the very margins of possibility? On German soil, it is barely economically viable, but it is also undeniably a part of a wine culture that always defined itself in climatic terms. Despite its recent success, it may remain a minority interest. Nonetheless, its different expressions are clearly capable of delivering those heart-stopping Pinot epiphanies that so many of us seek. Pinot Précoce is a fascinating member of a fascinating family, and it characteristically offers contradictions both teasing and wonderful: Its irresistible allure seems firmly rooted on the continent, but its heat-shy sensibilities seem perfectly suited to cool and temperate England. ■

Right: The Pinot Précoce plateau in the Ahr, playing a crucial role in its resurgence

Photography by Anne Krebiehl MW