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Spätburgunder: Germany's Answer to Burgundy

A treasure trove of Pinot Noirs lies in store for wine lovers willing to hunt down these German gems



Centgrafenberg is a prime source of Spätburgunder for Rudolf Fürst. (Courtesy of Rudolf Fürst)



By Aleks Zecevic

Nov 1, 2018

Germany is so closely identified with Riesling that you may be surprised to learn that the country is the third-largest producer of Pinot Noir in the world, behind France and the United States, according to the Wines of Germany trade organization.

Germans call the grape Spätburgunder, which means late-ripening (*spät*) Pinot (Burgunder). Nearly all of the 13 German winemaking regions grow Pinot Noir, most notably Ahr (where Spätburgunder accounts for more than 50 percent of plantings), along with Baden, Franken and Württemberg.

I first tasted Germany's Spätburgunders while working in retail a decade ago. At that time, there were few great examples, with some struggling for balance. But times have changed, for the better.

In my recent blind tastings in *Wine Spectator's* New York office, the best of the new releases of Spätburgunder are perfectly ripe, with lively acidity as the hallmark feature. They show individuality and a sense of place. The use of new oak barrels has been dialed back, adding structure without masking the *terroir*, distinctive fragrance, lovely fruit and vibrant acidity.

A visit to the [Rudolf Fürst](https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Rudolf+F%C3%BCrst) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Rudolf+F%C3%BCrst] estate in Franken in late May showed me these wines' potential for greatness. Sebastian Fürst polished his learning of Pinot Noir winemaking in Burgundy, training at Simon Bize & Fils and Domaine de l'Arlot. He and his father, Paul, have mastered the understanding of their iron-rich, red sandstone soils, dry climate, [native yeasts](https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=native+yeast&commit=Find+it) [<https://www.winespectator.com/glossary?page=1&submitted=Y&word=native+yeast&commit=Find+it>] and barrel aging.

They farm almost 50 acres of land, of which 60 percent is planted to Spätburgunder, and have plots in three Grosse Lage sites, Germany's equivalent of *grand cru* vineyards. (Dry wines made from these sites are called Grosses Gewächs, or GGs.)



Courtesy of Rudolf Fürst Hundsrück vineyard yields rich, aromatic Spätburgunders.

In Bürgstadt, where the winery is located, they work in two adjacent vineyards, Centgrafenberg and Hundsrück, totaling 27 acres. Even though next to each other (in fact, 6 acres of Hundsrück used to be part of Centgrafenberg), the two sites produce different wines. Centgrafenberg is filled with loam, sandstone and clay, and Pinot Noir is planted in the rockier plots. Hundsrück, on the other hand, is extremely stony, with poor topsoil that is perfect for drainage. As a result, the former site produces a wine with more finesse, while a powerful and aromatic red comes from the latter.

The third vineyard, Schlossberg, where the Fürsts farm just 3 acres, is located in the town of Klingenberg, about a 30-minute drive from Bürgstadt. Here the soil is mostly colored sandstone, and the Spätburgunder is sophisticated and elegant, with vibrant acidity.

Over the past 20 years, German vintners haven't had to struggle to get their grapes to the desired levels of ripeness before harvest. As a result, some people credit climate change for the recent success of Spätburgunder. However, for the Fürsts, it is the vintners' know-how that took the wines to the next level.

"In the '90s, we focused on ripeness and concentration, as we thought that alcohol and tannic structure help with aging," said Paul. "Nowadays, we realize that our wines have an incredible acidity, which keeps them fresh and elegant for years."

Fürst's Trocken Schlossberg GG 2008 testified to his success with Spätburgunder. At age 10, it's still youthful, showing only hints of maturity—cherry flavors and aromas of violet and eucalyptus prevail, held together by a vivid structure. Even the village-level wine, the Trocken Klingenger, from the ripe and lush 2005 vintage, showed a substantial amount of fruit, mixed with loamy earth and savory herbs.

Another notable Spätburgunder producer is [Bernhard Huber](https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Bernhard+Huber) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Bernhard+Huber].

I recently tasted a range of his wines, and the Spätburgunder Trocken Baden Wildenstein GG 2010 stood out. Wildenstein is a vineyard rich in red shell-limestone. With its deeper color, riper fruit and firmer tannins, the wine illustrated how the warmer Baden region's *terroir* differs from Franken's.



Courtesy of Rudolf Fürst Nets protect Schlossberg from Pinot Noir-loving birds.

While the GG wines sell for a premium, even the Pinots priced at less than \$30 can deliver fine character and quality. A good example is Enderle & Moll Pinot Noir Baden 2015; I recently bought it for \$25 and was awestruck by the amount of fruit and perfume coming out of the glass.

The supply of Spätburgunder in the United States is limited—typically only a few dozen to a few hundred cases of each of these wines makes it to the U.S.—but it's also on the rise. Here are some other noteworthy producers to seek out:

- Ahr: Meyer-Näkel [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Meyer-N%C3%A4kel]
- Baden: Salwey [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Salwey]
- Pfalz: Friedrich Becker [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Friedrich+Becker], Brand [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Brand], Ökonomierat Rebholz [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=%C3%96konomierat] and Koehler-Ruprecht [<https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?>]

[submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Koehler-Ruprecht\]](#)

- Rheingau: [J.B. Becker](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/detail/source/search/note_id/447975] and [August Kessler](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=August+Kessler]
- Württemberg: [Schnaitmann](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Schnaitmann] and [Wachtstetter](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&search_by=exact&text_search_flag=winery&winery=Wachtstetter]

In Spätburgunder, lovers of Pinot Noir can find a different, distinctive expression of the variety—fresher, leaner and more aromatic. As the winemaking improves, in part due to Germans' passion for these wines, we can expect more high-quality Pinots to come out of the country.

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