

Pinot Noir With an Umlaut

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

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. Few wine shops carry a selection of spätburgunders, and even those in on the secret may have only one or two bottles at a time. A strong restaurant culture provides a natural setting for showing off a nation's wine, but German restaurants in the United States have gone the way of the Victrola, beyond a few beer-oriented rathskellers and old-fashioned oompah joints.

Of course, the Germanic names and nomenclature work against the wines in the usual way.

So I had good reason to be excited last month when two of Germany's best pinot noir producers, Klaus-Peter Keller of Weingut Keller and Caroline Diel of Schlossgut Diel, came to New York with 19 different spätburgunders from the 2007 vintage. The wines were to be served with dinner at Seasonal, an excellent Austrian restaurant in Midtown Manhattan, in the absence of a German alternative. Now, 19 wines are a lot to think about with dinner, too many, really, for proper evaluation and appreciation. But faced with a drought, a man can't complain about a deluge.

To call Keller and Diel pinot noir producers is a misnomer, I suppose. [Riesling](#) is far more important at both houses. By comparison, they make microscopic amounts of spätburgunder, though that may change in the future. Pinot noir production and consumption in Germany has risen sharply in the last 30 years. In 2008, roughly 11.5 percent of Germany's vineyards were planted with pinot noir, up from 3.8 percent in 1980.

German pinot noir may seem like a new idea, but it has existed for hundreds of years, ever since the 13th century when, just as they did in Burgundy, Cistercian monks planted pinot noir vines along the Rhine. If spätburgunder is not spoken of with the same reverence as Burgundy, it's not surprising. While pinot noir was perfectly suited to the Côte d'Or, it struggled to ripen in the cooler German climate. Until recently, most German pinot noirs were lean and pale. The tangy refreshment they offered was not without charm, but far from the depth and complexity of good Burgundy.

You can still find those leaner spätburgunders, and I must admit I enjoy them. But [climate change](#) has made it easier for pinot noir to ripen, and not just in Baden, the southernmost [German wine](#) region and long the leading producer of German red wines.

Ahr, northwest of Koblenz, and one of the northernmost fine wine regions in Europe, specializes in spätburgunder.

Even the Mosel, south of Ahr but paradoxically cooler, which did not permit the planting of red grapes until 1986, is now a source for some exceptional pinot noirs. The biggest surprise for me at the Seasonal dinner was a Mosel spätburgunder produced by Markus Molitor from the Graacher Himmelreich vineyard, famed for its wonderful rieslings. This was a lovely, delicate, balanced wine with gorgeous fruit and smoke flavors.

“The past few years have definitely become warmer,” Ms. Diel said before the dinner. “I’ve personally never had a bad vintage, like they talk about in the ’60s and ’70s.”

The dinner was organized by Stephen Bitterolf, wine director at Crush Wine and Spirits on East 57th Street, who is one of New York’s leading proponents of spätburgunder. Mr. Keller chose a sample of German pinot noirs to serve at the dinner. The list was by no means complete — one of my favorite spätburgunder producers, Rudolf Fürst of Franken, was not in the tasting, nor was Meyer-Näkel, one of the best-known producers of the Ahr, whose wines I’ve unfortunately never tried.

These were high-end pinot noirs, which, if they were available in the United States, might retail for \$70 to \$140. They were selected to illustrate the various styles of German pinot noir today. Aside from the Molitor, memorable wines from the evening included the J. J. Adeneuer Ahrweiler Rosenthal from the Ahr, a chiseled wine tasting of minerals and flowers, and the pure, balanced Diel Cuvée Caroline from Nahe, named for Ms. Diel by her father, Armin Diel.

August Kessler of the Rheingau is one of the few German producers as well known for pinot noir as for riesling, and the power of the two Kesslers in the tasting showed a fascinating contrast to the laserlike focus of the Molitor. Of the two, the Assmannshäuser Höllenberg seemed far more structured and substantial than the disjointed Rüdesheimer Schlossberg. They both will need a few years to come together.

Some of the spätburgunders indicated a dismaying preference for oakiness and power over purity and finesse. Two of the more popular wines at the dinner were Hommage from Friedrich Becker in the Pfalz, which I found far too oaky, and the Wildenstein Reserve from Bernhard Huber in Baden, which I found overly powerful and unwieldy. These wines will have their partisans, though.

I had no such reservations about the two Keller wines served at the dinner, which included the remarkably precise and luminous Frauenberg and the rounder Dalsheimer Bürgel. I was not surprised to learn that among the many places Mr. Keller trained before taking over his father’s domaine in Rheinhessen were two Burgundy estates, Hubert Lignier and Armand Rousseau, renowned for their pure, focused wines.

Mr. Keller told me that he conceived of his spätburgunders as red rieslings. “The most elegant grape we have in Germany is the riesling, and pinot noir is its sister,” he said. “Either you love their finesse or you miss the concentration, it’s very easy.”

The proof that Germany is now making some exceptional pinot noirs is there for the tasting, if only more people in this country could taste it. 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.