

Spätburgunder and burgundy compared

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While I am not known for my unbridled enthusiasm for German Pinot Noir, aka Spätburgunder, I jumped at the opportunity to take part in a small blind tasting of top Spätburgunders alongside some well-known and generally highly regarded red burgundies, all from the 2005 vintage, organised by Klaus-Peter Keller of Weingut Keller in Flörsheim-Dalsheim, Rheinhessen. With only 14 wines in total, six German and eight French, tasted in random pairs, this was hardly conclusive but it was certainly a revelation - not of Damascene proportions but extremely impressive nonetheless. Some of the burgundies in the original tasting plan were not available as they were not yet bottled, others, and most of the German wines, had only recently been expelled from the womb of the barrel, so this may have affected their performance, especially when it came to the burgundies.

To give you some background, Germany is now the world's third biggest producer of Pinot Noir, with a vineyard area of 12,000 hectares in 2006. It grows more of this variety than Australia, New Zealand and Austria combined. While Riesling is still far and away the most widely planted grape variety in Germany (c 21,000 ha or nearly 21% of the total vineyard area), Spätburgunder is advancing rapidly and now has 11.6% of the total, up from 7.7% in 1999 and 3.6% in 1970. However, most of the wine is consumed within Germany, so these figures may come as something of a surprise to many consumers.

Baden, the most southerly and therefore generally the warmest German wine region, is the dominant player. In 2005 it had 5,800 ha, ie nearly half the total, but there are also (relatively) substantial plantings in the Pfalz (1,600 ha), Rheinhessen (1,300 ha) and Württemberg (1,200 ha). The Rheingau had only 395 ha, the Ahr 335 ha. Franken has some, but not enough to be included in the German Wine Institute's overview of important varieties by region.

Back to the tasting. We were asked to note which wines we thought were from Burgundy and which from Germany. The very fact that this was not always obvious speaks volumes for the progress that has been made with this variety in Germany. Of the six German wines, I gave only one wine less than 17. Of the eight burgundies, four scored lower than 17. However, there was general agreement among the tasters that even with wines at this high quality level Spätburgunder is likely to show better earlier than the burgundies. Ideally we would repeat the tasting in a few years' time. Bald scores are an impoverished way of communicating one's assessment of a wine. What struck me much more forcibly among the German wines was the virtual absence of overripe jammy fruit or heavy-handed oak - either in terms of too much new oak or too long in barrel for the quality of the fruit. This contrasted sharply with the 19 Spätburgunders tasted at the VDP Grosses Gewächs preview two days later, as you'll see from my [tasting notes](#).

The biggest surprise of all was that my favourite and most highly rated wine was a Spätburgunder. Sitting next to Klaus-Peter Keller during the tasting, I discussed the wine with him and said that I was pretty sure - because of the fruit character, the tannin structure and the beautifully managed oak - that it was a burgundy. But I also jokingly said that it was good enough to be his Bürgel Spätburgunder, which I had tasted in the UK a few weeks earlier. He was equally sure it wasn't his wine. The story would not of course have been related in this way had the wine not turned out to be Keller's **Bürgel Spätburgunder 2005 Rheinhessen**.

My second favourite wine was **Sylvie Esmonin Vieilles Vignes 2005 Gevrey Chambertin**. The tasters who were able to linger at the table and taste the wines again an hour or so later noted that some of the wines that had been disappointing at first, eg Arnoux's Romanée Saint-Vivant, improved considerably over time. My tasting notes are at the end of this article.

I asked Klaus-Peter what he was doing to produce such terrific Spätburgunder in Rheinhessen. He pointed to two keys that he has learned from his observation of the best producers in burgundy: (1) picking early, at around 12 or 12.5% potential alcohol, and then chaptalising (ie adding sugar to the must) to an additional 0.5 to 0.8%; (2) using less and less new oak.

Up to 1993, they picked the Pinot at around 13% and never chaptalised and although he is not generally in favour of chaptalisation, he believes that picking earlier helps to retain the best and quintessential fresh and elegant fruit flavours of Pinot Noir, appropriately fresh acidity and a tighter structure. He likes to compare Pinot to Riesling because of its potential for 'precision, elegance and finesse' - characteristics that I find in all Keller's wines.

For the 2007 vintage, Keller plans to use 20% new oak, 80% used, and is very excited about the source of his used barrels: they were the nursery for the infant 2005 vintage of La Tache at the Domaine de la Romanée Conti. Not a bad pedigree!

We also talked about clones and while this is important, he believed that the age of the vines was perhaps more significant in Germany at the moment:

'Becker's Pinot Noir [the Tafelwein] is an old clone originating in Switzerland - the Auer clone - grapes are not very compact and ripen slowly. His Sankt Paul Grosses Gewächs instead is a French clone PN 777, which has very compact, small berries and you really need good, dry years to get it in healthy. Our Bürgel are old German Ritter clones, our Frauenberg is a selection massale from Burgundy.

'But I also think the age of the vines is extremely important - better old German or Swiss clones than young Burgundian clones, but in 15-20 years we will have those French clones at a good age and then they could be superior to the Germans.

On the subject of terroir: 'I think we have great Pinot terroirs in Germany - the rocky limestone and the mussel chalk is ideal for Pinot with finesse. And the climatic changes could really be perfect for great Pinot in Germany. We must be careful with too high alcohols, overripe grapes and too much wood influence; for me a good Pinot should really show elements of a great Riesling.

'The big gift in Burgundy is the age of the vines (the low yields) and the big tradition and experience with Pinot. Moreover they get the best barrels...'

Reflecting on this particular tasting, he explained that they did the same tasting with similar wines in 2003, 'and the Germans did not have any chance - so I remember I said "Perhaps we should stop with Pinot, only grow Riesling and buy what we want to drink as red wine in Burgundy'.

Thank goodness Keller has not followed his own advice. The real downside is that in 2005 he produced around 200 cases of Bürgel, about 50 cases of the Frauenberg and 100 cases of the 'S', a selection from old vines. That's not much to go around. Writing about these wines is a bit like advertising your favourite quiet holiday location - you want to talk about it but you just don't want everyone else to go there!

The tasting notes

The wines are grouped by country but otherwise not in any particular order.

Schlossgut Diel, Cuvée Caroline Spätburgunder 2005 Nahe 17- Drink 2007-10

Keller, Bürgel Spätburgunder 2005 Rheinhessen 18.5 Drink 2008-17

Very youthful purple-edged crimson, medium density with a pale rim. Meaty sundried tomato and some spicy oak notes but these do not overwhelm the fine red and black fruits. Lovely classy oak - a very classy wine altogether. Firm fine tannins. Very fresh. Very very long. (JH)

Scherner-Kleinhanss Turmalin Spätburgunder 2005 Rheinhessen 16- Drink 2007-08

Keller Frauenberg Spätburgunder 2005 Rheinhessen 18- Drink 2008-16

Youthful medium crimson. Lovely fine sweet red and black fruit, mainly black, with plenty of spice but too much. Very fine, fine grained tannins. Lovely fruit weight. Fresh and spicy and just a baby but with a great future. (JH)

Becker Sankt-Paul Spätburgunder 2005 Pfalz 17+ Drink 2008-12

Becker Pinot Noir Tafelwein [2005] Pfalz 17 Drink 2008-14

Perrot-Minot, La Riotte Premier Cru 2005 Morey-Saint-Denis 16.5 Drink 2008-12

Rouget 2005 Vosne Romanée 16+ Drink 2008-13

Sylvie Esmonin Vieilles Vignes 2005 Gevrey-Chambertin 18 Drink 2008-18

Sylvie Esmonin, Clos Saint-Jacques Premier Cru 2005 Gevrey-Chambertin 17 Drink 2008-18

Coillot Vieilles Vignes 2005 Gevrey-Chambertin 16 Drink 2008-09

Robert Arnoux Grand Cru 2005 Romanée St-Vivant 17 Drink 2008-18

Rouget Grand Cru 2005 Echezeaux 16 Drink 2008-14

Liger Belair, Clos du Chateau 2005 Vosne Romanée 17.5+ Drink 2008-18

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