



One signature of German viticulture is steep-sloped vineyards; seen here, vines at Weingut Hermann Dönnhoff (est. 1750) in the Nahe region.

Germany's Wine Buffet

Tired of Their Sweet American Image, German Producers Continue to Broaden Their Offerings

BY ROGER MORRIS

After years of being content to sell Americans a river of elegant, sweet Rieslings, which made the U.S. Germany's #1 wine export customer, German wine producers are now exhorting us to please try their other wines.

Sample the dry and semi-dry German Rieslings. Or try German Pinot Noir, the one with the funny name. Perhaps Dornfelder, Germany's other red wine? And then there's Pinot Blanc with its own funny name (Weissburgunder) and Müller-Thurgau and Silvaner. And don't forget German sparkling wines.

For decades, Germany built a loyal following in the United States by repeating one simple message: We make white wines—the world's most delicious, rich sweet Riesling wines, such as Beerenauslesen, Trockenbeerenauslesen and Eisweins. "Germans spent the majority of the 20th century happily exporting almost exclusively their sweet wine, cementing that identity," explains Julie Swift, U.S. marketing represen-

tative for Valckenberg International, who is now among a growing coterie working to broaden that image.

While the approximately 3 million cases sold annually to the U.S. is certainly dwarfed by numbers posted by European wine-producing giants Italy, France and Spain, Germany's share of the American market has grown slowly but steadily over the past decade, while those of Italy and France have dipped. For decades, it was as if

Europe had one combined marketing strategy: Germany would sell Americans white wines, and France, Italy and Spain would provide us with classic red wines.

So why change now?

For one thing, New World producers have dealt themselves into the U.S. market. Australia, Chile and Argentina all swept past Germany in satisfying America's growing thirst for wine. And, based on value of shipments, even New Zealand has edged ahead, putting Germany at number eight on the American hit list. Additionally, Riesling now accounts for only about one-fifth of Germany wine production, as domestic drinkers have broadened their own wine interests and as global warming and better vineyard management have permitted Pinot Noir and other red grapes to produce better wines. Finally, Germany is making more wine from more places: Production is up about 13% since 1990, the only European country not to decline in volume during that period. German winemaking regions now total 13.

Valckenberg's Undone brand reflects an effort by some suppliers to simplify German wine packaging for the U.S.





Location-location-location may be the key to great wine at its source, but promotion is key to selling through at market. The Wines of Germany trade group has ramped up events, such as their "31 Days of Riesling" in July, aimed at retailers, restaurants and consumers.

Right, Spätburgunder, aka Pinot Noir, now represents the third most planted variety in Germany; thanks to both experience and climate change, the wines are better than ever.



Pinot Revolution

As a result, Germany has taken the calculated gamble of changing its traditional image while hoping that sweet wine drinkers—a clientele that is aging—will stay on board.

To reach its goals, Germany has been trying to tap into two trends—first, the Pinot-philia that has swept the U.S. and, second, the pairing of dry and off-dry Rieslings with Asian food, a courtship that has been slow in gaining traction among restaurant patrons.

As far as Pinot goes, Swift reports, "The sommeliers who have been introduced to high-end Pinot Noirs from Germany have definitely accepted them, and so have the high-end boutique wine shops." And most wine writers have given good reviews to its current-generation Pinots.

Plus, Pinot Noir production in Germany has been skyrocketing. It now represents more than 11% of vineyard area in Germany and trails only Riesling (22% of acreage) and Müller-Thurgau (13%) in that category. Thirty years ago, Pinot Noir was less than 4%, due in large part to the difficulty most red wines had ripening in Germany's northern climate.

"We don't have a problem anymore with ripening Pinot Noir," says Michael Schemmel of the German Wine Institute. "In fact, due to global warming we are the third largest producer of Pinot Noir in the world." With Burgundy's lead, France accounts for 35% of world production, fol-

lowed by the U.S. with 24% and Germany with 14%. Australia is a distant fourth.

Nonetheless, Swift and others point out that while the cognoscenti have given their nods of approval, customer demand has been slower to take off. There are several reasons. Some of the top-scoring Pinot producers do little exporting. Of the wine that is exported, production costs have often resulted in high comparative prices. Plus many potential customers have been reluctant to try Pinots from what they still see as a white-wine region.

Then there is that German name... *Spätburgunder*. "The secret is labeling it as Pinot Noir, not Spätburgunder, and printing where it comes from on the back," Swift says. "We're having success with our Undone brand Pinot Noir this way."

Veteran importer Terry Theise of Michael Skurnik Wines is less optimistic about German Pinot: "As I look around, I hear a lot of sound and fury about German Pinot, but I don't think it signifies much." But he is bullish on drier Rieslings. "The proportion of dry Rieslings I sell each year is growing slowly, and it is growing consistently," he says, "but I think off-dry may be their strongest suit. No one else can make off-dry Rieslings as well."

As was once the case with Australian Shiraz, it is taking a solid retail commitment to dry German Rieslings to fire up consumer acceptance. David Moore of Moore Brothers, which has retail stores in

New York City, Camden, NJ, and Wilmington, DE, says, "Just in New Jersey alone we sold nearly 1,200 cases last year," including growing numbers of dry and semi-dry wines.

Modern Message

There certainly is a corresponding optimism among growers I talked with on a recent trip to Germany, where winemaker after winemaker stayed on message by touting their Rieslings as great matches, not for local food, but for Indian, Chinese and Japanese fare.

"My father was in the old style and made wine in oak barrels," says Markus Berres of C.H. Berres in Ürzig in the Mosel valley, the 21st generation of his family to make wine there. "I want to produce modern wine." His "Impulse" blended Riesling and his Ürziger Würzgarten Kabinett, along with a fascinating Pinot Gris, bear witness to his success.

Many growers have also bonded together into marketing groups. One is the 11-year-old Message in a Bottle assembly of 28 young Rheinhessen producers. Another is Talents of the Nahe, a group of similarly young winemakers in the Nahe, the small region where some of the best dry and off-dry Rieslings are now being produced.

There, the well-regarded Dönnhoff estate now makes more than half of its production in the dry style. "I want wine my wine to be clean, like spring water, and

Trocken or Not to Trocken...

BY JEAN K. REILLY MW

AN
UPDATE
ON
GERMAN
LABELING
STANDARDS

I must have turned around. I know this because the Germans have changed their label standards and I have found they change them every time I turn around.

The VDP—the quality wine producers union whose members make up the vast majority of premium German wines sold in the United States—has instituted several new regulations for its members. As of the 2012 harvest, members of the VDP may only use the terms Kabinett, Spätlese and Auslese on bottles of off-dry wines. For many years, producers wanting to highlight the natural ripeness of their wines would use these terms in combination with the German word for dry, “trocken,” on labels of dry wines that had achieved higher levels of alcohol without the benefit of chaptalization.

Meanwhile, in other German wine label news, the vineyard designation scheme of the VDP has also taken another evolution. Wines from officially-recognized top vineyards may be labeled Grosses Gewächs if dry and Grosse Lage if off-dry or sweet. Just below this level are wines entitled to be labeled Erste Lage, a classification equivalent to a Premier Cru from Burgundy, the appellation scheme that the Germans have taken as a model. These may be labeled Trocken if dry or Kabinett, Spätlese, etc. if sweet.

Raimund Prüm of SA Prüm in the Mosel is a strong

supporter of the new system. He points out that in addition to the higher level of residual sugar, there are other stylistic differences between a traditional, off-dry Spätlese and a Spätlese Trocken: “Grapes for a top-class dry wine need to be absolutely healthy and without any botrytis infection.” By contrast, grapes for traditional Spätlese will show a certain level of desirable botrytis, resulting in a very different aromatic profile. Although many in the industry are arguing for the change to become a national regulation, the general feeling is that there are too many large-volume producers using the Spätlese Trocken designation who would oppose the legislation.

Other members of the German wine industry, including U.S. importer Derek Vinnicombe, object to the change. He believes that the Spätlese Trocken term is an important category for dry wines that aren’t entitled to the Grosses Gewächs designation. Moreover, it highlights that the wine has not been chaptalized. (Grosses Gewächs wines can be chaptalized.)

Others, including Rainer Lingenfelder of Lingenfelder Estate, remain skeptical: “In Germany, we say, ‘The French have it so good. If we adopt their system, we’ll make all that money too.’ I’m not so sure.”



very focused,” says Cornelius Dönnhoff. Up-and-coming Hermannsberg says that 90% of its Rieslings are now dry. A third producer, Jakob Schneider Jr., says, “In general, I like only about 3-5 residual sugar, but it depends on the vintage.”

Of course, the story of the expansion of the German offerings doesn’t end with dry Rieslings and increasingly hearty Pinot Noirs. Müller-Thurgau producers continue to push sales, as do Silvaner and Pinot Blanc (Weissburgunder) advocates. Another red, Dornfelder, is gaining some traction, and Champagne-style sparkling wine producers such as Raumland are rekindling interest in the sparkling wine, or *sekt*, market.

Meanwhile, the Wines of Germany trade group continues promotional efforts in the United States via its agency, RF Binder. One of its major events is “31 Days of Riesling” with retailers, restaurants and consumers during July. Additionally, there have been promotions in New York of “The Three Pinots”—Noir, Gris and Blanc. Trade and media trips to Germany are also conducted on a regular basis. Every little bit of effort counts. ■

Riesling, in multiple styles, remains Germany's most acclaimed variety.

