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ON WINE

How German Winemakers Are Quietly Conquering the World

While they wait for their native varieties to catch on globally, they're priming the export market with stellar expressions of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and other international favorites



ILLUSTRATION: JAMES GULLIVER HANCOCK



By

Lettie Teague

Updated July 19, 2018 4:34 p.m. ET

The third in a three-part series on German wine.

“**THE SAUVIGNON BLANC** opened the door for the Riesling.” It was the last thing I expected to hear from a winemaker in Germany, a country whose vinous reputation rests almost entirely upon Riesling. And yet that’s what I heard from Andreas Hütwohl, deputy general manager and a winemaker at Weingut von Winning, as we tasted the first of three Sauvignon Blancs at his winery in Deidesheim a few months ago.

Mr. Hütwohl explained that von Winning chose Sauvignon Blanc as its lead grape for the export market because, unlike Riesling, it’s won world-wide recognition and acceptance. With Germany’s signature grape still a tough sell abroad, German producers are counting on other varieties to grow the fan base for all the country’s wines.

It’s not that German producers don’t believe in their indigenous variety, Mr. Hütwohl added. Indeed, 80% of his winery’s production consists of Riesling, from some of the best vineyards in the Pfalz region—but most of it stays in Germany.

Only 5% of von Winning’s vineyards are planted to Sauvignon Blanc grapes, but the wine produced from them has proven a worthy emissary abroad. I’ve found it on wine lists and in stores stateside more readily than the Rieslings. The Sauvignon Blanc II was my first encounter

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with the von Winning estate four years ago, when I selected it from the wine list at Jockey Hollow Bar & Kitchen in Morristown, N.J. It's the most basic of the winery's three Sauvignon Blancs—a crisp, lively wine fermented in stainless steel—while the von Winning Sauvignon Blanc I is a bigger, richer wine fermented in oak barrels. And the von Winning

Sauvignon Blanc 500, made from the best of the winery's 500-liter barrels, is the biggest and richest, reminiscent of a Pouilly-Fumé from the Loire Valley of France.

Sauvignon Blanc is only one of the many grapes that grow well in the Pfalz (aka Palatinate), just west of Heidelberg and bordering Alsace, France. Most of the wines are dry, and while Riesling is a very important grape in the region, others planted there include Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc (Weißburgunder), Pinot Gris (Grauburgunder), Pinot Noir (Spätburgunder), Gewürztraminer, St. Laurent and Dornfelder.

Pinot Noir grows all over Germany and does particularly well in the Baden and Rheingau regions as well as the Pfalz. This delicate grape even thrives in the Mosel, historically a cool-climate region, a success some attribute to global warming. Germany is now the third-largest Pinot Noir-producing country in the world. According to the latest figures from the Deutsches Weininstitut, over 11% of Germany's vineyards are planted to the grape.

Germany is also the world's leading producer of Pinot Blanc, accounting for some 30% of global production. Confusingly, some producers use its German name, Weißburgunder, while others use the French moniker and still others use both. A white grape native to Burgundy, Pinot Blanc is often considered a cheap cousin to Chardonnay—a bit lighter, more fruity and less complex—but it can be a refreshing if undemanding wine. German producers frequently offer several different styles of Weißburgunder, from light and fruity to half-dry (halbtrocken), dry (trocken) and sparkling.

The Darting winery makes Weißburgunder, but the rest of its portfolio is practically a study in the varietal diversity of the Pfalz. Winemaker and owner Helmut Darting also produces Riesling, Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir), Pinot Meunier, Grauburgunder (Pinot Gris), Gewürztraminer, Dornfelder and St. Laurent, among many others. "In our region, the harvest takes 10 weeks because we have so many different varieties," said Heike Darting-Gerstenhöfer, the winemaker's sister, when I stopped by the cozy Darting tasting room in the town of Bad Dürkheim. "The amount of Pinot Gris we sell is unbelievable," said Ms. Darting-Gerstenhöfer. "It's an easy-drinking wine. People say it's very hard to drink Riesling."

Many Darting wines, including the Pinot Gris, are not sold in the U.S., though its Pinot Meunier was a sommelier favorite for a while. When Juliette Pope, former wine director of Gramercy Tavern in New York, bought 16 cases, it provoked a bit of a stir, according to Darting's importer, Boston-based Terry Theise. "Sommers are terribly cognizant of any other somm who might be setting a trend," he noted in an email.

'The harvest takes 10 weeks because we have so many different varieties.'

No stateside
sommelier I know
has championed
Silvaner. This

grape has been cultivated in Germany for centuries, notably in Franken (Franconia), in the state of Bavaria, a region known for its very dry wines. Silvaner can produce wonderfully dry, minerally wines reminiscent of Chablis, but it has yet to crack the U.S. market. Kirk Wille, vice

president of Loosen Bros. USA, a wine importing company based in Oregon, wrote in an email, “Our little company already [has] enough work to do with our Riesling crusade, still a struggle. So we couldn’t also sustain a Silvaner crusade.”

When I went shopping in the greater New York area for Silvaners I found only three, two of them quite good: the minerally and textured 2016 Hans Wirsching Iphöfer Kalb Silvaner (\$22) and the 2016 Rainer Sauer Silvaner Escherndorfer Lump (\$27), which was bright and lively (if possessed of an unfortunate name). Both came in the classic Franconia *Bocksbeutel*, the squat bulbous green bottle used for the region’s top wines.

A source of pride for Franconia’s winemakers, the bottle tends to put off American wine drinkers, as it recalls a famous (or infamous) sweet wine once popular in the U.S. “Did you bring Mateus?” my friends asked when I produced the two Silvaners. Once they tried the wines, they were pleased—and relieved to find they were quite dry.

I don’t know when the larger world will embrace German wines beyond Riesling—or even give Riesling the attention it deserves. At the very least, I look forward to the day when Germany is thought of much like Italy and France: a great wine country with more than one grape.

OENOFILE / 5 Outstanding German Wines, 0 Rieslings



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

1. 2016 Weingut Ökonomierat Rebholz Pinot Blanc Dry Pfalz (\$22) The winery, long considered one of the Pfalz’s best, may have a name that’s hard to pronounce, but the wine is happily quite easy to drink: crisp and clean with bright citrus notes.

2. 2017 Leitz Pinot Noir Rosé Dry Rheingau (\$17) Light in body as well as color, with pretty floral and red-berry notes, this toothsome Pinot Noir rosé from a well-known producer of Riesling is an ideal wine for summer drinking.

3. 2016 Enderle & Moll Pinot Noir “Basis” Baden (\$23) Partners Sven Enderle and Florian Moll have a devoted following for their full-of-character Pinot Noirs. This well-crafted Pinot is an earthy, savory red that could easily be mistaken for a good Bourgogne rouge.

4. 2016 von Winning Sauvignon Blanc II Pfalz (\$22) Little wonder von Winning made Sauvignon Blanc its lead grape internationally. This stainless steel-fermented white is juicy, with notes of citrus and herb—like a Loire Valley Sauvignon crossed with a New Zealand one.

5. 2016 Hans Wirsching Iphöfer Kalb Silvaner (\$27) The Hans Wirsching winery—“Silvaner Wine Estate of the Year” per a leading German food magazine—draws many accolades. This old-vine Silvaner is full bodied and complex, a first-rate example of the grape.

Email Lettie at wine@wsj.com.