Wine & Whiskey GLOBE

THE EXCELLENT SPÄTBURGUNDERS OF AUGUST KESSELER

In the Rheingau, a storied operation continues a pinot tradition

by Renee Wilmeth | July 22, 2020



Some of the Kesseler range, with handsome contemporary labeling. (photo by Renee Wilmeth for Wine and Whiskey Globe)

PINOT WEEK

Spätburgunder. Say it out loud: "Shpayt-ber-gun-der," with a long "a" sound. There you go. The "burgunder," like Burgundy, is no coincidence. This German name for Pinot Noir, a little odd looking, the term is becoming more and more widely known.

Germany is of course best known for its Riesling, but in some pockets of the nation like the Rheingau, a smallish region in the country's southwest quadrant, you'll find German pinot production is alive and well. And when it comes to the pinots from August Kesseler, they're doing better than "well;" they're quite simply spectacular.

Assmanshausen is one of those spa towns on the Rhine River that was the see-and-be-seen place around the turn of the 20th century. On a grey November morning, from our faded rooms at the once-famous Krone Hotel with its turrets and gables, we can see two different Rhine castles as well as barges cruising the river. Before our appointment at Kesseler, we trek a few hundred yards up the hill through town, across the railroad tracks, and to the bell in front of the eponymous August Kesseler. Under the name is the gold plaque with the letters "VDP" signifying they're one of only 200 or so winemakers with the prestigious Verband Deutscher Pradikatsweinguter designation.

"Pinot from Assmanshausen was always the best," says Simon Bartaseh, who shares oenology duties with veteran winemaker Max Himstedt. "The grapes benefit from the reflection off the river and the cool temperatures. We're in a bit of a red wine island in Riesling-land." Over time, though, with phylloxera and other problems in the 1970s and 80s, the winemaking changed. "The commercial style was to make light and fruity pinots, treated like white wines but with no tannins, no time, no punch down, no natural fermentation, and no maturation," Bartaseh says. "They could be sold and consumed right away."

But Kesseler was a traditionalist, wanting to keep the reputation of excellence for pinot from Assmanshausen, so he replanted, replaced vines, and paid attention to clones. And he began making some of the best Pinot Noirs in Germany.

Over time, he has purchased additional vineyards with established Riesling vines, so these days Pinot Noir only accounts for about 35 percent of the operation's overall production. They make several pinots from single vineyard sites that don't produce every year.

We tasted the 2015 Hellenberg Pinot Noir GG—Grosses Gewächs, the closest the German classification system has to grand cru. Soil differences make the hills above this village perfect for Pinot Noir and the quality shows. Hand harvested and 100% destemmed, this wine was tight on the nose, soft in the mouth, with good fruit and great spice on the finish. My note starts with "Wow."

While the high end pinots like that one can be quite hard to find, and are generally not available in the U.S., try looking for the 2017 Daily August Pinot Noir. (The 2018 was just released.) Made to be an affordable weeknight drinker and available stateside with a little effort, a bottle will set you back about $21. And that's a great price for dipping your toe in the best of German pinots, right from the banks of the Rhine River.

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