FOOD & WINE

LOVE PINOT NOIR? YOU SHOULD BE DRINKING MORE GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN REDS

by Markham Heid | October 10, 2019

Six wines to get you acquainted with the wide world of Spätburgunder, Zweigelt, and Blaufränkisch.

The Pinot Noir grape is notoriously temperamental. If its growing conditions are a bit too hot or too cool—too wet or too dry—it suffers, and so do the wines it produces.

Because of the grape's fickle nature, high-quality Pinot Noir wines have traditionally come from winegrowing regions that fall within narrow latitudinal bands slicing across the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Burgundy in France, for example, and also parts of Oregon and California. But there's evidence that climate change is pulling new regions into the Pinot Noir sweet spot.

Germany is, historically, a prodigious producer of Pinot Noir. It bottles more Pinot Noir than any country except for France and the U.S. But Germany's Pinots have traditionally lacked the depth and complexity of their counterparts from Burgundy. That's changing. As far back as 2000, Germany winemakers were starting to record longer, warmer growing seasons. Since then, these weather trends have accelerated, and they're allowing German winemakers to produce Pinot Noirs of previously unattainable heft and nuance.

"Even six years ago, as we were seeing these warming trends, the wines [from Germany] were a little disjointed because they really didn't know how to make this style of Pinot," says Keith Wallace, founder of the Wine School of Philadelphia. "But now that they've got a handle on it, and they do, they're making some really, really delicious wines."

Other than the whole climate change thing, there's good news for you: German Pinot Noir—which is also known as Spätburgunder—still flies under the radar. And so it's possible to find bottles that cost a fraction of what you'd pay for a comparable wine from France or the U.S. If you appreciate Pinot Noirs that are on the lighter, spicier end of the spectrum, you'll fall in love with German Pinot.

That's also true of several other German red wines. Like Pinot Noir, Lemberger and Trollinger are light-to-medium bodied, fruit-forward red wines that often feature lots of food-friendly acidity. And like German Pinot Noir, these wines have recently benefited from longer, warmer growing seasons. While they can be tricky to find stateside, a good wine shop should carry either or both of them. They also tend to be great values.

The same shifting climate patterns that have helped winemakers in Germany are also benefiting their neighbors in Austria. In that country, the two most-planted red wine grapes are Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch (which is the Austrian term for Lemberger). While Blaufränkisch is still the more esteemed of the two, Zweigelt arguably has the most to gain from the change in climate.

"A good Zweigelt is just a rock star," Wallace says. "It's like a leaner, more acid-driven Syrah." He added that it "kicks ass" with barbecue.

Here are six bottles to get you started.

Rudolf Fürst Spätburgunder Tradition 2016 ($31)
Mellow red fruits and hints of flint and pepper mingle in this delicious, entry-level Pinot Noir from the Franken region of Bavaria. If you're looking for a more elegant (and pricey) bottle of German Pinot, look for the letters "GG" on the label. That stands for "grosses gewächs," and it designates the best-of-the-best German wines—similar to the "grand cru" designation applied to some French wines.



August Kesseler "The Daily August" Pinot Noir 2016 ($26)
Soft and delicate, this medium-bodied Pinot is an alluring mix of cherry and earth with a nice backbone of slate. Drink it with white fish and foods that won't overpower its subtler flavors.

Schnaitmann Lemberger Dry 2015 ($19)
Ripe fruit, minerals, and peppery licorice burst from this juicy, medium-bodied wine. This Lemberger comes from Württemberg, a region that's becoming hip among somms. Even if you can't find this bottle, ask your favorite wine shop what they have from this part of Germany.

Friedrich Becker Pinot Noir 2014 ($20)
This is a fleshier, more layered German Pinot Noir. Ripe berries are prominent, but they're layered over spice and dark fruits. Give this at least 20 minutes to breathe. You won't be disappointed.

Moric Blaufränkisch Burgenland 2015 ($30)
This offering from one of Austria's most well-known producers is a great introduction to Blaufränkisch, and one that quickly converts a lot of people into 'Frankisch fans. Peppery and floral, it's medium-bodied and offers a nice balance of tannin and acid. It's excellent paired with lean cuts of red meat.

Paul Achs Zweigelt 2017 ($20)
Supple and fresh, this wine—like many others from Austria—features alluring notes of smoke and herbs. Give it 30 minutes to open up and pair it with grilled meat. You'll appreciate its many charms. If you love Cabernet Franc, you need to give this Zweigelt a try.

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