



The Ahr and the emergence of German reds

CHRISTOPHER BATES, CWE

It is not exactly breaking news that Germany has been making red wines able to stand side by side with many of the world's famous labels. In 2006, a collector traded a bottle of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti for a bottle of Hans-Peter Wöhrwag's 2003 Untertürkheimer Herzogenberg Pinot Noir from Württemberg. A one-off, for sure, but it may also have been a hint of things to come. In 2008, *Decanter* magazine named a German red wine the best in the world for its variety, and again, it was a Pinot Noir: Weingut Meyer-Näkel's 2005 Spätburgunder Dernauer Pfarrwingert Grosses Gewächs.

Actually, nearly a third of German vineyards are planted to red grapes. Spätburgunder, as Pinot Noir is known in Germany, is about

to pass Müller-Thurgau to become the country's second-most-planted grape variety behind Riesling. While Müller-Thurgau production has declined since 1975, the percentage of German vineyard land dedicated to Riesling has remained incredibly stable at around 21%, while the amount devoted to Spätburgunder has risen from 3% to 12%.

Even though the current hype makes it easy to think of Germany as a new red-wine-producing culture, red-grape plantings were documented here as early as 570 A.D., and Pinot Noir was identified as early as 1318. It was not until 1435 that plantings of Riesling were first recorded. In the Ahr, it is commonly believed that vines were grown in Roman times, although the first docu-

Jean Stodden Recher Herrenberg vineyard.



mented plantings were in 893 at the Benedictine Prüm Abbey. Now, after some 1,200 years of obscurity, this *Anbaugebiet* is finally emerging as a premier red-wine producer.

The terroir

The Ahr, located between 50° and 51° north latitude, is the world's northernmost red-winegrowing region. It also happens to be one of the hotbeds of activity in Germany's red-wine renaissance. This tiny region encompasses only 1,300 acres under vine as of 2006 (an increase of 15% since 1992), making it Germany's fourth-smallest winegrowing region—ahead of only the Mittelrhein, Hessische Bergstrasse, and Sachsen.

The Ahr River flows a mere 15 miles from the Eifel hills in the west before running into the Rhine in the northern reaches of the Mittel-

rhein, between Bonn and Koblenz. As the river snakes out of Altenahr (at an altitude of 984 feet), the vineyards are steep enough to be mistaken for those of the Mosel, except that the valley is narrower. In fact, 93% of the vineyard land in the Ahr has more than a 20% grade. The soil changes dramatically over the valley's 15 miles, from decomposed volcanic slate in the narrow upper parts, as in the Mittelmosel, yielding wines with crisp focus, to soils rich in loess and clay with decomposed rock in the lower, wider, flatter parts closest to the Rhine, producing bigger, more full-bodied reds. The combination of these features with the moderating influence of the Eifel mountains and nearly 1,500 hours of sunshine during the growing season results in a terroir that many call “Mediterranean”—a climate that allows for the full ripening of black grapes this far north.

Christopher Bates has been working in restaurants since he was 15, but started cooking much earlier. After studying hotel administration at Cornell University, he worked in wineries in Valpolicella, the Mosel, New York, Oregon, and Washington. He was general manager at The Inn at Dos Brisas in Brenham, Texas, for more than three and a half years, seeing the program through enfranchisement by Relais & Châteaux and Relais Gourmand and a Mobil Five Star award, and is now executive chef and general manager at the Hotel Fauchère in Milford, Pa. His major obsession is German wines.



Village of Dernau from Meyer-Näkel vineyards.

“The wines are unique to me in that they are grown on such steep slopes, similar to the Mosel, and in slate, which is so different from the Pfalz, Rheingau, and Baden, where so many of the Pinot Noirs of Germany come from,” says Jeff Marazoni, operations manager of a leading German-wine importer, Rudi Wiest Selections. “Being the small size that the region is,” he adds, “the idea of growth is very limited, but introducing the Pinot Noirs of the Ahr to the United States is certainly an opportunity; as in most presentations, it is an educational experience for the audience.”

Classification system

Considering the complexity of the German appellation system, the Ahr is a rather simple region to comprehend (see box). In order from broadest to most specific, a German vineyard is classified by *Anbaugebiet* (region), *Bereich* (district), *Grosslage* (large site), *Ort* (village), and *Einzellage* (individual site). The *Anbaugebiet* known as the Ahr has only one *Bereich*, Walporzheim-Ahrtal, which includes only one *Grosslage*, Klosterberg. Compare this to the eight *Bereichen* of Baden or the 25 *Grosslagen* of the Pfalz. And of Germany’s 2,600 *Einzellagen*, the Ahr has only 43.

The new Grosses Gewächs system, devised by the Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter

(VdP) to create a “grand cru” classification for German vineyards, has taken a firm hold in the Ahr. To qualify for Grosses Gewächs, the winery must be a member of the VdP, and the wine must be produced from a site designated as Erste Lage (“first site”) under a strict set of regulations, which currently include harvesting by hand, a minimum ripeness level equivalent to Spätlese, and a maximum yield of 50 hectares per hectoliter (about 3 tons per acre). The wine must be dry, and the ripeness level may not be indicated on the label. Riesling,

Spätburgunder, and Frühburgunder are the varieties approved for the Ahr, and there are currently 13 approved Erste Lagen. A Grosses Gewächs bottling is embossed with the Erste Lage logo and carries the VdP capsule.

Red grapes

As of 2006, 88% of Ahr vineyards were planted to red varieties. Spätburgunder, literally “late Burgundy,” is the leader with 62% of total plantings. Next is Portugieser at 9%, much of it grown for cooperatives to produce unexciting wines or to stretch other red grapes in blends. When Portugieser is produced with a focus on quality, however, as in Weingut Deutzerhof’s Alfred C. bottling, it can change your perception of the grape. Frühburgunder (“early Burgundy”) ranks as the third-most-planted red grape in the Ahr, at 6%. Although quantitatively less important than Portugieser, it has a greater impact on the region’s reputation. While Portugieser plantings decreased in acreage by 12% from 2004 to 2006, Frühburgunder’s increased by 36%.

Frühburgunder is an early-flowering and early-ripening mutation of Pinot Noir that is known as Pinot Noir Précoce in Burgundy, where it is commingled with other clones. In Germany, on the other hand, Frühburgunder has been grown separately from Spätburgunder

Photo courtesy of Meyer-Näkel

for at least 150 years. Also known as Pinot Madeleine and Clevner in certain areas of Germany, this variety had all but disappeared by 1985. The list of wineries that have since taken an interest in planting Frühburgunder should speak for the grape's potential: Schloss Proschwitz, Fürst, Knipser, and Graf Adelman, not to mention most of the top producers in the Ahr. As of 2006, Frühburgunder occupied about 600 acres in Germany—up from 304 acres in 2001—including 84 acres in the Ahr.

Frühburgunder vines go through most of their maturation phases two to three weeks earlier than Spätburgunder does, which offers advantages in a northern climate, but creates problems of its own. The early budbreak and early flowering make Frühburgunder much more susceptible to spring frosts, the early veraison makes it an obvious target for birds, and bees like it because it is the first to gain sugar content. Its early ripening can also hinder flavor development. Frühburgunder is a low-volume producer that truly shows its stuff at less than 1 ton per acre—the same as grand cru Burgundy. Obviously, producers must see an amazing potential to justify taking these risks. Although the wine is similar to Spätburgunder, it shows lower acidity and finer tannins, with more violet-floral aromatics and more powdered-mineral notes. What vintners give up in structure they make up for in aromatic broadness.

Recent history

Although the Ahr has been making red wines for centuries, they were often denigrated as *Ahrbleichert*—literally, “Ahr bleached”—because of their incredibly thin color from short maceration and hot (often heated), rapid fermentation. They also tended to have a considerable amount of residual sugar, making them much more comparable to *Weissherbst* or rosé than to world-class Pinot Noir. By the 1950s, due to a lack of interest in this style from all but a few tourists and locals, Ahr reds were on a sharp decline. Many vineyards were replanted with white varieties or to the Mariafelder clone of Spätburgunder, which tends to produce inferior wines.

All that began to change in the 1980s, largely because of the foresight of a few of today's best-known producers. In 1982, the young Werner Näkel left a career in education to return to the family vineyards of Weingut Meyer-Näkel. When he began experimenting with extended macerations, cooler fermentation temperatures,



Gerd and Alexander Stodden.

and barrique aging, he was virtually alone in the Ahr—until the press started tasting his wines. The same could be said for another trendsetter, Jean Stodden's Gerd Stodden, who was the first to begin green-harvesting in the early 1990s.

The top-quality wines are now aged largely in new French and German oak barrels. Although they still show a strong sense of terroir in their perfume and relatively light color, and their structure still leans more toward acidity than tannin, the intensity of oak can range from complementary to overbearing. Spätburgunder is the clear leader, but many growers are equally excited about their Frühburgunders. The former wines are defined more by their intense, slaty minerality and fine balance and structure; the latter's small, thick-skinned berries produce darker wines with more voluptuous and velvety tannins.

While cooperatives still produce about 70% of the wines in the Ahr, this percentage has dropped drastically from the mid-century mark of roughly 95%. No longer are cooperatives necessarily associated with inferior quality. In particular, the Mayschoss-Altenahr cop, which controls nearly 25% of the vineyards, is producing solid wines in a broad range of styles. With a tasting room boasting nearly every style of wine made in the Ahr, this is a great place to start a tour of the region. In addition, the Staatliche Weinbaudomäne Marienthal also produces high-quality wines from some of the Ahr's best vineyards, located primarily in Marienthal. This property was recently acquired and is being rehabilitated by a group of local producers including Meyer-Näkel, Brogsitter, and the

KEY PRODUCERS

Jean Stodden

Rotweinstrasse 7-9
53506 Rech
+49-2643-3001
www.stodden.de
Not yet imported

Staatliche Weinbaudomäne Marienthal

Klosterstrasse 3
53507 Marienthal
+49-2641-98060
Not yet imported

Weingut Deutzerhof

Cossmann-Hehle
Deutzerwiese 2
53508 Mayschoss
+49-2643-7264
www.deutzerhof.de
Not yet imported

AHR CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Anbaugebiet: Ahr	Stiftsberg
Bereich: Walporzheim-Ahrtal	Trotzenberg Walporzheim
Grosslage: Klosterberg	Alte Lay
Ort	Domlay
<i>Einzellage</i>	Gärkammer*
Reimerzhoven	Himmelchen
Eck	Kräuterberg*
Altenahr	Pfaffenberg
Eck*	Ahrweiler
Übigberg	Daubhaus
Mayschoss	Forstberg
Burgberg	Riegelfeld
Laacher Berg	Rosenthal*
Lochmühlerley	Silberberg*
Mönchberg*	Ursulinengarten
Schieferley	Bachem
Silberberg	Karlskopf
Rech	Sonnenschein
Blume	Steinkaul
Hardtberg	Bad Neuenahr
Herrenberg*	Kirchtürmchen*
Dernau	Schieferlay*
Burggarten	Sonnenberg*
Goldkaul	Heppingen
Hardtberg	Berg
Pfarrwingert*	Burggarten
Schieferlay	Heimersheim
Marienthal	Burggarten*
Jesuitenberg	Landskrone*
Klostergarten	Ehlingen
Rosenberg	Kapellenberg

*Erste Lage

RECENT VINTAGES

2003: As in the rest of Europe, it was a hot summer. Extreme ripeness and low acidity made for a challenging vintage, but growers with experience in hot climates were at the top of their game.

2004: A season capped by moderate weather and a long ripening period yielded wines with a certain austerity. Balanced acidity and tannins will make these wines perfect for medium-to-long-term cellaring.

2005: The summer was generally as warm as in the Mosel, but the fall did not linger: harvest time was dominated by rain, and sorting was mandatory. The wines are soft and fruit-driven, for relatively early consumption.

2006: August rains let up in time for a perfect September, producing wines of length, concentration, and balance for medium-to-long-term aging.

2007: A full-bodied vintage, showing forward fruit at the onset, but with noticeable acidity and slatey minerality.

2008: Another more moderate year, reminiscent of the 2004 vintage—a description echoed by growers all over Germany.

cooperatives of Mayschoss and Bagernova. Although a broad range of wines is made, Spätburgunder accounts for 60% of the total production.

Among the smaller wineries, Meyer-Näkel continues to achieve new levels of recognition for the Ahr year after year. Werner Näkel has been joined by his two daughters, Meike and Dörte, who seem more than capable of continuing the legacy of this great estate. The “G” label is its introductory line, followed by the Blauschiefer (“blue slate”) and “S” labels. At the top of the quality pyramid are single-vineyard bottlings from Walporzheimer Kräuterberg, Bad Neuenahr Sonnenberg, and Dernauer Pfarrwingert.

In a different style, the wines of Jean Stodden can be characterized as being hard as nails and uninviting in their youth. While most of the Ahr’s red wines are consumed young and therefore have little track record for aging, Stod-

den demonstrates the cellaring potential of the terroir. Its vineyards are 83% Pinot Noir, with the best wines sourced from Recher Herrenberg and carrying the initials “JS.” A recent tasting of two bottlings from 1990, both dry—a Recher Herrenberg Spätburgunder Auslese No. 1, aged in Allier barriques, and a Recher Herrenberg Spätburgunder Beerenauslese, aged in large uprights—showed both the brilliance and the longevity that Spätburgunder can achieve here.

Weingut Deutzerhof seems poised to challenge Meyer-Näkel for the top reputation in the region; in addition to some of the Ahr’s most voluptuous Spätburgunders and Frühburgunders, under a range of fantasy names, sommeliers should pay attention to the rest of Deutzerhof’s lineup, including Sekt, Riesling, Dornfelder, and Portugieser. Other key producers include Weingut Nelles, whose wines may be the best from the more gentle landscape of the eastern Ahr; Weingut J.J. Adeneuer; and Weingut Kreuzberg.

Availability

Wines of the Ahr are finally earning a reputation worldwide, but their availability is lagging behind. Situated between two major cities in a country awash with white wine, the Ahr enjoys a voracious local demand that consumes most of its reds. Those that do make it to the global market tend to come with price tags reflecting their limited availability, extreme viticulture, low yields, and high production costs. Expect these wines to retail for \$25-150.

Even though only a handful of producers are currently being imported into the United States, they generally represent the pinnacle of



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Weingut Meyer-Näkel Frühburgunder 2005 \$45

Light-ruby color. The nose is forward, with rose and violet notes and a scent reminiscent of strawberry cream cheese. A hint of tomato water blends with powdered mineral, green tobacco, and white pepper. The palate displays sour red fruits and cherrystones, with fairly high acidity and tannins. The finish is a bit short.

Weingut Meyer-Näkel Spätburgunder 2006 \$30

Pale pink with a clear meniscus and high viscosity. Charcoal and earthy, woody notes of mulch and tree bark emerge, like working in a garden. A bit of reduction gives way over time to black fruits and air-dried timber. The palate shows verve, with the soft, plush black fruits from the nose gaining a complementary green-stem, leafy tinge that turns them into wild, sour cherries and cranberries. Although the wine has high acidity and a lactic finish, the balance is perfect.

Weingut Meyer-Näkel Spätburgunder S 2007 \$80

Pale ruby with hints of garnet. Intense, brambly fruit notes are followed on the nose by baking spices, iris, and violets. Aromas of black-cherry soda, sweet-tea leaf, and green tobacco leaf are supported by the rich, creamy texture, with reductive, leesy notes adding complexity. The palate is electric in its balance: full-bodied and flavorful, revealing ripe currants, wet earth, and slightly lactic notes on the finish. A bit of greenness helps keep the wine lively on the palate, but obvious wood tannins linger.

Jean Stodden Frühburgunder Recher Herrenberg 2006 \$170

Orange color fading to a brick rim, with low concentration and moderate viscosity. Light, floral aromatics mingle with sour cherry, violet, powdered minerals, cola, pencil lead, and sweet spice. The palate shows more floral components and a creamy blue-fruit character (like a blueberry milkshake), indicative of oak aging. The acidity and tannins are fairly balanced, although the alcohol is a bit high. Zesty notes keep the wine lively on the long finish.

Jean Stodden Spätburgunder JS 2006 \$30

Very light ruby, with a shallow pink rim, low concentration, and moderate viscosity. The nose is marred by hints of nail-polish remover that quickly blow off, to be replaced by vibrant, brambly red and black fruits and crushed leaves. This wine displays subtle notes of briar, cherry-infused demi-glace, cedar, and cocoa, but tight tannins and sour fruits, such as unripe plum, close down the finish.

Jean Stodden Spätburgunder Recher Herrenberg Grosses Gewächs 2006 \$80

Pale ruby with moderate concentration. The almost feral nose is immediately full of musk and sandalwood, as well as overripe fruits, roasted meat, five-spice, black Bing cherries, milk chocolate, and cream, with hints of *crème fraîche*. The palate adds bright fruits and red-purple flowers. In addition, there is a reserved side of this wine that begins to reveal briary, more earthy smells. The tannins, acidity, and alcohol are perfectly integrated.

Weingut Nelles Pinot Noir Trocken 2005 \$100

Light-ruby color, with bricking around the rim. The nose is floral and earthy, with notes of fresh humus and compost. Bright, fresh red fruits, cola nut, and crushed green leaves are all apparent, along with alcohol. The palate is light and delicate, with just enough fruit—cherry pits and wild strawberries—to stand up to the structure. The body is medium-light, with a finish that ends a bit hot. Now displaying mature notes, the wine is ready to be enjoyed.

Weingut Nelles Spätburgunder Ruber 2007 \$27

Very light, pale ruby with a pink band. Fresh fermentation notes, even a bit carbonic, are evident: banana and red-apple candy and cider. Fermenting Bing cherries and orange liqueur blend with a Cognac aroma, indicating some wood presence. The palate again offers cherrystones and ripe, pulpy red fruits. This medium-bodied wine has moderately high acidity and alcohol and a balanced finish, promising the potential for development.

Prices are estimated retail.



Kreuzberg harvest.

KEY PRODUCERS

Weingut J.J. Adeneuer

Max-Planck-Str. 8
53474 Ahrweiler
+49-2641-34473
adeneuer.de
Not yet imported

Weingut Kreuzberg

Schmittmannstr. 30
53507 Dernau
+49-2643-1691
www.weingut-kreuzberg.de
Not yet imported

Weingut Meyer-Näkel

Friedenstrasse 15
53507 Dernau
+49-2643-1628
www.meyer-naekel.de
Importer: Rudi

Wiest Selections
www.rudiwiest.com

Weingut Nelles

Göppingerstrasse 13a
53474 Heimersheim/
Bad Neuenahr
+49-2641-24349
www.weingut-nelles.de
Importer: Northwest
Wines, Ltd.
San Francisco, Calif.

**Winzergenossen-
schaft Mayschoss-
Altenahr**

Ahrrotweinstrasse 42
53508 Mayschoss
+49-2643-93600
www.winzergenossenschaft-
mayschoss.de
Not yet imported

quality. But because the reputation of the Ahr is not yet appreciated by the average American consumer, it may be difficult to convince a diner that a \$75 bottle of German red wine can actually be a value. Still, to the shrewd sommelier, the Ahr is another opportunity to distinguish

a wine list. By educating ourselves about this up-and-coming region, we'll be better equipped to answer our guests' questions and apprehensions about its wines. 🍷