

by Eric Asimov

All Too Familiar Name In an Unfamiliar Location

TAGS: [GERMANY](#), [RED WINE](#)



The wine list at Lutter & Wegner, a traditional restaurant in Berlin, includes quite a few spätburgunders, or German pinot noirs. (Photo: Otto Pohl for The New York Times)

I do like coincidences. On Saturday afternoon as I was reading Dave Kehr's [appraisal of the late Richard Widmark](#), my wife was watching a movie, "[Conspiracy Theory](#)," on television. Just as I was reading about Widmark's breakout performance as Tommy Udo in "[Kiss of Death](#)," where he famously ties an old lady to her wheelchair and throws her down a flight of stairs, there on the small screen was Mel Gibson, bound to a wheelchair — don't ask — and actually throwing himself down a flight of stairs. A fitting tribute to an underrated actor — Widmark, not Gibson.

In a much more predictable coincidence, my column in Wednesday's newspaper is about Russian River Valley pinot noirs from the 2005 and 2006 vintages, much cooler years than we've become used to, and so I've had pinot noir on the brain, even more than usual. But not California pinot noir, German pinot noir.

Americans don't have much of an opportunity to taste German pinot noir — or [spätburgunder](#), as it's known in German. In fact, I would guess most Americans would be somewhat surprised at the idea that Germany produces any red wine, much less pinot noir.

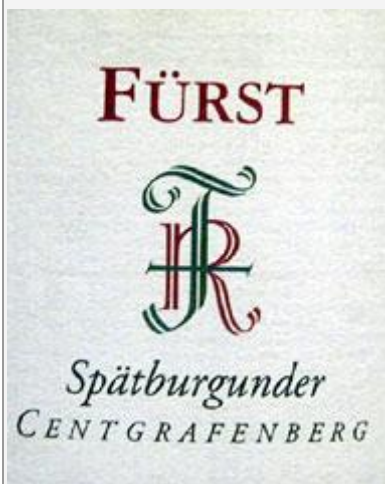
Even those who know something of German wines are primarily focused on riesling, as they should be. Riesling is the great glory of German winemaking without doubt. Still, with all the attention being paid to pinot noir, German spätburgunders deserve far more attention than they get.

I'm thinking about them because my wife and I just returned recently from five days in Berlin, and what struck me most of all about the wines there was how much I enjoyed the spätburgunders. These spätburgunders were about as different as you can imagine from the California paradigm of fat, syrupy, fruit-dripping pinot noirs. Instead they were splendidly light and agile wines that were delicious with food.

At [Lutter and Wegner](#), a traditional Berlin restaurant on Charlottenstrasse right in the center of the city, the excellent wine list included quite a few spätburgunders. I selected a 2005 Von Unserm trocken from a Rheingau producer I had never heard of, [Balthasar Röss](#).

The wine was a pure, pale ruby, so light that the waitress apologized to me as she poured the wine for me to taste. "Please don't apologize," I told her. "I'm relieved!" Pinot noir is not supposed to be particularly dark, and I tend to be suspicious if it is.

The wine was light-bodied and delicate, cherry-scented and slightly bitter. It was young and not complex but absolutely delicious, the perfect weight and flavor for my smoky potato soup and the almost comically huge schnitzel, which even with its ridges and folds dwarfed the plate it came on.



Another night, at the restaurant [Florian](#), I had an even better bottle, a 2006 trocken Bürgstädter Centgrafenberg from the Franken producer [Rudolf Fürst](#).

This wine, too, was unusually light-colored and lively with an aroma of fresh berries, and with my roasted duck it was light and lithe, an excellent match.

German pinot noirs are not so easy to find in the United States but they are worth seeking out if only to sample a very different – and to me, at least, more recognizable — expression of pinot noir than the prevailing heavy style most popular in California. If you're looking for knock-you-over-the-head cornucopias of fruit and oak, these wines are not for you, but if you want graceful wines with lightness and finesse than the word is spätburgunder.