

Beware, Bordeaux

Germany's wines have come a long way

FROM TOP: FAREY & PARTNER, PHOTOGRAPH BY STEFANIE GÖDDE FOR NEWSWEEK



'SICK OF GETTING SNICKERED AT': Huber in his vineyard, some of Germany's well-regarded labels (below)

BY STEFAN THEIL

BERNHARD HUBER'S EPIPHANY was buried in a bundle of dusty old papers. Digging through historical documents in the archive of his home village of Malterdingen, the German wine-making apprentice found a fragile parchment covered in ancient script. Written in the 13th century by Cistercian monks, it praised Malterdingen's elegant and much sought-after wines. What a far cry from recent years, when the town's wine-making cooperative produced swill that in good years was drunk by the locals—and in bad years was hardly drunk at all. "If they made good wine back then, it's got to be possible to make good wine now," Huber says he thought.

He was right. After discovering those papers back in 1984, Huber took his family's vineyards out of the cooperative and set about overhauling their product. Now, 18 years later—and for the first time in generations—Malterdingen wine is again winning plaudits. At professional wine tastings in Paris, London and Copenhagen, Huber's Spätburgunder—a silky, luxurious red made from the pinot noir grape—has consistently scored top notches, beating much more famous (and pricier) French and Californian wines. "Huber's wine is absolutely one of the top in the world," raves Francois Mauss, a Frenchman and the president of

the Grand Jury Européen, a renowned Luxembourg-based tasting panel. "If you'd asked me 20 years ago if the Germans could one day make a wine like this, I would have said never, never, never."

For generations, German wine production was dominated by jug-wine cooperatives and plonk factories. Their "sweet and cheap" specials made for the bottom shelf of the supermarket—Blue Nun, Red Tower, Liebfraumilch—made German wines a joke among oenophiles. But in recent years, thanks to the efforts of ambitious young wine makers like Huber, German wines are on the rise. Now, there's hardly a competition where a bottle of Spätburgunder or Riesling, the country's traditional white-wine grape, doesn't win an accolade; at the closely watched International Wine Challenge competition in London last month, German wines won more trophies than any other country, including France. "We were sick of getting snickered at," says Prince Michael of Salm-Salm, who owns an ancient castle winery and heads the German Classified Wine-makers' Association.

The key for the Germans lay in updating antiquated production facilities. When Hu-

ber built his new, state-of-the-art winery near Malterdingen's ruined medieval castle, he used the architecture and the technology he'd observed in the wineries of Oregon's Willamette Valley. The cellars are built on a hillside, so that the wine can flow naturally and doesn't need to be pumped. Double-walled tanks and aluminum cooling coils carefully control temperatures during fermentation. In Deidesheim, the Reichsrat von Buhl winery now has a microbiologist overseeing the grapes. At the same time, wine makers have sought to return to their roots, limiting the use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides. And high-end producers like Huber and Buhl are replacing low-quality grapevine clones engineered in the 1960s for their high yields with older-stock vines.

They've won critics over, but what about consumers? For now, sales and exports of German wine remain flat. But European chefs and sommeliers are leading the push for Rhenish and hock, the ancient English names for German wine. In London, for example, the wine list at the ultrahip Nobu restaurant puts special emphasis on German vintages. "Riesling is the only wine fruity and aromatic enough to go with just about any food, especially the spicy and salty flavors of Asian cooking," says owner Stephan Guicheteau. In Berlin, the Michelin-starred Quadriga restaurant last month became the first notable German restaurant to do what is de rigueur in Milan or Bordeaux: it banned all foreign bottles from its cellars, offering 850 domestic vintages instead.

Also working to the German vintners' advantage: the boredom factor, or what British wine guru Hugh Johnson calls the "Anything But Chardonnay" movement. Riesling, he says, is likely to find favor with consumers tired of the ever-present chardonnay. Until then, wine makers like Huber are happy to avoid the spotlight. "We're still experimenting, hoping to get better every year," he says. His dream is to make a wine that doesn't merely compete, but is uniquely recognizable as coming from Malterdingen. Just like it was back in the 13th century. ■

