

SPATIUM PINOT BLANC

Europas Weißburgunder in Eppan
Pinot Bianco d'Europa ad Appiano

Down from the Niche: How can a soft-spoken grape raise its voice in the marketplace?

David Schildknecht

Talk at the Spatium Pinot Blanc, 2018

Revered sponsors and guests: The honor of speaking to you gives me great pleasure. But I take even greater pleasure in knowing that there exists such a thing as a Spatium Pinot Blanc, and accordingly I'd like to thank all of those responsible for the genesis of this event and its perpetuation.

How can we help Pinot Blanc down from its largely overlooked niche?

Or perhaps I should first consider whether such a helping-down is even desirable? The concept of a "niche" surfaces regularly in conversations with Pinot Blanc winegrowers, but often in a positive context. Asked, for instance, how he pictures the future of Pinot Blanc in his winery after forty-four years of efforts on its behalf, Traisental vintner Ludwig Neumayer replies affectionately that Weissburgunder will retain "the status of a very exquisite niche grape variety." I can completely concur with "exquisite." Shouldn't that suffice?

Maybe I just have a bug up my ass because this niche-existence offends my sense of justice. To quote my colleague Ian d'Agata: "Only rarely does Pinot Grigio reach the levels of refinement that Pinot Bianco is capable of". And yet Pinot Gris – largely precisely as Pinot Grigio – is familiar to every wine lover the world over. Jason Lett of Eyrie Vineyards in Oregon is of the opinion that the tiny amounts of Pinot Blanc that he and a few of his winegrowing neighbors in the Willamette Valley produce "are not successful commercially because it's too hard to differentiate the variety in people's minds from Pinot Gris." My own bottom line is: Having once been convinced by my palate of the virtues and superb potential of Pinot Blanc, I won't permit myself to be dissuaded from acting as a megaphone in the service of this by nature soft-spoken grape. If at the end of the day that makes me a provocateur or a proselyte, then I shall wear those descriptions badges of honor.

What's in a Name?

As is well known – well, amongst us here, anyway – the difficulties of the unjustly neglected Pinot Blanc grape begin with its name, or rather, with its various names. When eight years ago I first determined to engage in a bit of agit-prop on behalf of Pinot Blanc, I titled the



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corresponding column in Austria's *Vinaria* "Unter Zwei Namen Unterschätzt," i.e. "Undervalued under two Names." (Actually, I wanted to write "Misunderstood." My editor wanted that softened.) But already numerically speaking, this title in itself incorporated an under-evaluation – and I'm not referring to the fact that Pinot Blanc also surfaces as Pinot Bianco, a translation that's obvious to everyone. No, I'm referring to the fact that "Weisser Burgunder" by no means has the same sense – though it's every bit as misleading – as "Weissburgunder." Hearing the former, most halfway informed oenophiles are bound to assume that what's meant is Chardonnay, since the overwhelming majority of white wines in Burgundy are rendered from that grape (and by contrast, incidentally, a vanishingly small smidgeon from Pinot Blanc). But if you try to translate either one of these German names into most foreign languages, the distinction that exists between them in German collapses and the result is not at all the plausible name of a grape but rather that of a certain sort of French wine, namely "White Burgundy."

At the latest in 2015, though, when I undertook a survey of growers in preparation for a long-hoped-for Pinot Blanc Seminar in connection with Austria's *Vievinum*, I was forced to realize that the majority of Austrian winegrowers cling tightly to "Weissburgunder" not just because this name is traditional but also – many who answered by questionnaire made an express point of this – because it sounds so lovely, and, more fundamentally, because using it stakes Pinot Blanc's claim as a native. I soon discovered that Pinot Blanc growers in the Pfalz and Baden were of the same opinion. I could point out that the resilience of "Weissburgunder" is only explicable insofar as the overwhelming majority of production is destined for domestic sale. And I would also maintain that it is hardly a coincidence that in the few instances of international success with Weissburgunder, this has taken place under the name "Pinot Blanc" or "Pinot Bianco." The Prielers in Burgenland, for instance, executed a name change already in 1981 – long before export of pure Pinot Blanc, let alone huge success with it, was thinkable. And even in sales among German-speakers, the designation "Pinot Blanc" is hardly without advantages. Mosel grower Markus Molitor claims the following: "In the local market we filled a gap with 'Pinot Blanc,' since nearly all wines from Burgundian grapes are sold here under Pinot Blanc's German name. Besides, the international sound to 'Pinot Blanc' offers consumers some clue as to the style of the wine."

Granted then: For the foreseeable future, we who aren't native German speakers will no doubt have to live with the designation "Weissburgunder" But would it be too much to ask that from now on "Pinot Blanc" or "Pinot Bianco" appear on all wine labels and price lists, even if written in small print alongside "Weissburgunder"? And also that the yet more misleading "Weisser Burgunder" would simply disappear.

Not that even the designation "Pinot Blanc" is unproblematic, mind you. Just as many grape varieties have historically been described as "Pinot" or "Pineau" of one sort or another, so too the designation "Pinot Blanc" has often been used for grape varieties whose origins or genetic make-up were unknown, such as was long the case with California's once widely-



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planted Melon de Bourgogne. (After the statutory order that the name be changed, this grape variety appears within a few years to have totally disappeared – surely no mere coincidence.) More recently, the somehow permitted renaming of what used to be “Pinot d’Alsace” has caused the worst trouble. That most wine lovers only think – mistakenly – that they are personally familiar with the taste of Pinot Blanc is not merely due to that name sounding familiar, but rather because at some point they tasted a wine so-labeled from Alsace – a wine that consisted for the most part if not exclusively of Auxerrois. (Legally speaking, it could also contain Pinot Gris.)

Everybody’s darling and yet unfamiliar?

Widespread unfamiliarity and confusing nomenclature are however by no means the most bewildering peculiarities of Pinot Blanc. Its unusual manner of origin makes for much misunderstanding – but I think scrutinizing that peculiarity can also facilitate a better understanding of Pinot Blanc on the part of growers as well as wine lovers.

Without the slightest hesitation, even we wine professionals are wont to refer to “the grape variety Pinot Blanc,” which we assign to a “Burgundy family.” From the standpoint of a geneticist, though – which means, in accordance with the current state of science – this manner of speaking (as most of us have meantime become aware) is not merely misleading but outright false. Pinot is Pinot namely, whether Noir, Gris (i.e. purple) or white. Pinot Blanc, and Pinot Gris as well, is an instance of somatic mutation of Pinot Noir – more precisely, an instance of bud mutation, a regularly occurring phenomenon by no means restricted to Pinot Noir. (Incidentally, this fact – even though it was only postulated and scientifically accepted six years ago – found implicit support here and there in tradition. For instance, it was understood at the 1936 inception of the Champagne Appellation that mention there of “Pinot” as a permitted grape variety not just in practice but legally speaking encompassed both Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris.)

And what has all this to do with my theme today? For starters, it bolsters my recommendation to employ the name “Pinot Blanc,” since only in that way can it literally be made halfway clear what we’re talking about. And what *are* we talking about? Why, everybody’s darling the world over: Madame Pinot. Don’t you think that represents some promotional capital? And why is it that wine growers and oenophiles are completely in love with Pinot? Let me count the ways. When contemplating Pinot Noir, one avers that it is a grape variety whose wines exhibit exceptional floral perfume and textural refinement, a wealth of singularly mineral and animal notes, as well as an extraordinary sensitivity to terroir. Besides that, the wines retain animation and primary juiciness. And Pinot Blanc? It too checks all of the above boxes. Characteristic above all of Pinot Blanc – in nearly every



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stylistic variation – is a unique combination of buoyancy with richness and of liveliness with natural (not human-generated) creaminess of texture.

What's Burgundy got to do with it?

So: Pinot Blanc is Pinot. Is it (or is she ;-) a Burgundian? The peculiarity of this “grape variety” that in fact isn't one clarifies that question. Madame Pinot's homeland and best-known address may indeed be Burgundy. And like all autonomous grape varieties, Pinot (Noir) has an identifiable place of origin. Because what the geneticists tell us – as extraordinary as this appears at first glance – is that in every such case we are dealing with the one-time sexual dalliance of two already existing grape varieties whose offspring on that occasion, a single vine, is statistically speaking virtually incapable of ever being repeated, so that it owes its spread and eventual establishment as a new grape variety solely to intentional and consequential propagation by humans. The mutation through which Pinot Blanc arises, on the other hand, can repeat itself frequently. In some instances one can even date the origination of a Pinot Blanc, and the best-known example of this took place precisely in Burgundy, when in 1936 Henri Gouges discovered white grapes on one of his Pinot vines and propagated its buds through grafting.

“I have analyzed the DNA profile of Gouges Pinot Blanc myself and I can tell you that it is Pinot,” geneticist José Vouillamoz assured me. But let's suppose,” he continued, “that Gouges' Pinot Noir vineyard constituted a massale selection [as in fact, back then, it almost surely did]. In that case, the single Pinot Noir vine in question had particular and distinct characteristics, whereas a Pinot Blanc that theoretically might have arisen from a neighboring vine would have had its own distinctly different characteristics.” To be sure, Pinot Blanc vines, just like genuinely distinct, autonomous grape varieties, are subject to continual change through mutation or epigenetic rearrangement. But there can be new appearances of Pinot Blanc at one or another place or time, each nearly identical, but marked by genetic peculiarities of the Pinot Noir vine that has mutated.

Entirely typical of the reaction if you ask a grower about the reason for his or her planting of Pinot Blanc is that of Markus Molitor: “The cultivation of Pinot,” he insists, “has a long tradition on the Mosel. It's a part of our culture, and these varieties, along with Riesling characterize our winegrowing.” By contrast, there is no traceable Chardonnay tradition whatsoever on the Mosel or Rhine. The oldest German plantings of that arch-Burgundian variety only go back to the most recent post-War era (just as in Alsace, where in the meantime planting Chardonnay is no longer permitted). So a strong suspicion arises that in these as well as other instances we are dealing with a tradition that arose spontaneously – i.e. through local mutation and in that sense isn't at all connected to Burgundy.



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But here's the kicker: The total surface area of Pinot Blanc in the Côte d'Or is vanishingly small, and as is a significant portion of that constitutes vines that were planted thanks to Gouge's largesse with his material. In all of Burgundy, including Beaujolais and the Auxerre, the totality of minor varieties – i.e. Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, César, Sacy, Melon and Sauvignon (to which an appellation of its own, Saint-Bris, is even dedicated) – make up less than one percent of total vine surface, Pinot Blanc by some estimates maybe 250 hectares. If one asks whether Pinot Blanc ever occupied a significant place in Burgundy, one is at best thrown back on sheer hunch. Because historically speaking there's nothing on which to grab hold. Perusing the wine literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, one finds seemingly interchangeable references to "Pinot Blanc" as well as to "Chardonnay" as the principle grape variety of Burgundy and Chablis. Only in 1868, thanks to the research of ampelographer Victor Pulliat, did it become clear at all that in Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay we are dealing with two fundamentally different grapes, and although this distinction was officially recognized and promulgated four years later at the *exposition universelle et internationale de Lyon*, it will no doubt have taken a long while before it became common knowledge among growers. After all, Austria only officially recognized the difference in 1986, after which it took 23 years before "Weissburgunder/Chardonnay" was actually broken-out statistically, while for sure many Austrian growers still believe themselves in possession of Chardonnay although in fact they have Pinot Blanc, or vice-versa. (For example, Austria's best-known and perhaps finest Chardonnay, the Tigrat of Weingut Velich, was a case of vine material purchased and planted under the description "Weissburgunder.")

So when Hans Terzer recently explained to me that locals say "Weissburgunder has found a second homeland in the Südtirol" I was tempted to ask "So what is supposed to be its first homeland?" In the sense applicable to an autonomous grape variety, Pinot Blanc has no homeland, but instead just diverse addresses where it is at home and was either brought from outside or arose locally. And whoever claims that Pinot Blanc on account of its Burgundian origins or "Burgundian character" – whatever that is supposed to mean – is destined for a certain sort of vinification and upbringing in the cellar will accordingly find no support in history. To keep this fact in mind is important if we wish to find further ways of conferring greater recognition on Pinot Blanc.

When one is not enough

Those few wine growers who have had commercial success with Pinot Blanc or have perhaps even been able to enlarge their acreage in recent years all have one thing in common in my experience: they bottle more than one Pinot Blanc; whereby that did not represent an initial response to rising demand but rather a gamble that ultimately paid off. By now, there are a number of growers who pride themselves on producing four different Pinot Blancs; and in the case of at least one prestigious grower, Hansjörg Rebholz, five even.



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Producing a premium-version of Pinot Blanc – whether to showcase old vines, a particular vineyard, or the fertile imagination of the winegrower – is thus clearly an entirely reasonable endeavor and a means by which one can direct greater attention to Pinot Blanc. Among zealous oenophiles, there are many that only take a wine seriously when it's a bit expensive. And a grower's ostensibly simpler bottling thereby functions in the literal sense as “entry level wine,” namely for entering the fascinating realm of Pinot Blanc.

Ultimately, too, the question of earnings is decisive. In this venue, there is no need for me to rehearse the sensitivities of Pinot Blanc and the demands it makes viticulturally. Numerous growers, independently of one another, have employed the same description: “A diva in the vineyard.” The efforts attendant on tending to a diva have to be paid for, something that the relatively low prices of many bottlings (when compared with those of a Riesling, Pinot Noir, Grüner Veltliner or whatever is the principle grape of a given estate) scarcely permit. Little wonder, then, that Urban Perkmann, in his presentation at the last Spatium Pinot Blanc summarizing the results of an extensive questionnaire that he circulated among growers in 2016, identified “stronger positioning in the premium price segment as the greatest challenge for the marketing of Pinot Blanc.”

The task of creating an upper-level Pinot Blanc can in my experience easily end up lost in the woods – at times literally so. Pinot Blanc never overpowers, but is itself that much more easily overpowered by oak or by winemaking of whatever sort. Its fineness of aromatics and texture easily get lost. The argument “Burgundian grape variety, therefore ‘Burgundian’ vinification and élevage, in part using new barriques,” should be confined to the scrap heap. One also often hears the argument – analogous to one offered in Germany with Riesling – that in the handling of grapes, fermentation and élevage one needs to suppress primary fruitiness and the corresponding aromas in order to confer on Pinot Blanc “minerality,” “structure,” depth and vineyard character. In my experience, that represents a false dilemma. There are grape varieties – Sauvignon or Traminer, for instance – that are so aggressively aromatic that sublimation is a sensible aim. And there are varieties like Grüner Veltliner whose tenacity of herbal, vegetable, and spice flavors is robust. None of the above applies to Pinot Blanc, which one by no means wants to rob of the charm that contributes so significantly to its appeal. That depth is entirely compatible with fruitiness and charm is something in fact proven by many Pinot Blancs that were intended as entry-level or simple wines, but after some years of bottle maturation proved extremely multi-faceted.

The most obvious thing that strikes one about the taste of Pinot Blanc – abstracting from specific frequently-occurring markers such as apple, sweet corn and almond – is doubtless, paradoxically, its soft-spoken subtlety and discretion [in one word, albeit an infrequently-utilized German word, *Dezentheit*], a characteristic that we are perhaps only from our present perspective – after decades of stylistic exaggeration and volume – in a position to recognize as a great virtue and to successfully demand. I emphasized this state of affairs in announcing my 2016 VieVinum Seminar, while unbeknownst to me Herr Perkmann also



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mentioned it in his 2016 Spatium presentation. The combination of natural creaminess with mineral nuances and discreet but highly efficacious, animating acidity led Willamette wine grower Bill Hooper, incidentally, "to explain Pinot Blanc to consumers as a sort of a bridge between Riesling and Chardonnay." If Pinot Noir is the most ardently loved red wine grape, then Riesling and Chardonnay are surely the top contenders in the realm of white wine. "The best of both" must therefore count as a strong selling point.

The sensitivity of Pinot Blanc – whether to winemaking or terroir – might be usefully, even if of course metaphorically, conceptualized as transparency. To work toward transparency would in no way be amiss as a mission statement when vinifying Pinot Blanc, because this grape can manage uncannily to marry clarity and detail with softening and melting-together of flavors. At the same time, the laid-back manner of Pinot Blanc should not be allowed to disguise from a prospective vintner that one must always bear in mind the following: you will scarcely be able to wipe-away let alone cover-over the traces of any false step or even putative improvement you make. (In this connection, I once, ten or twelve years ago, employed the expression *Aquarellenartig* – "watercolor-like." My editor at the time thought there was no such word. But thanks to Google I was able to point to 19th century precedent ;-)

Further Prospects

In Burgenland, as in Südtirol, no other white wine grape has a decisive lead over Pinot Blanc or a superior image. And although Sauvignon is today widely viewed as the principle grape of Styria, its place is really more that of a *primus inter pare* with strong competition. These facts clearly contribute to these three growing regions being able to boast numerous success stories with Pinot Blanc. In the Pfalz, though – as could be the case in other German growing regions as well – an inevitable overshadowing by Riesling is by no means accompanied by a niche fate, seeing that Pinot Blanc, alone among non-Riesling white wine grapes – is considered equally worthy of Grosses Gewächs status. Even here, though, and even in the ranks of growers who really do right by Pinot Blanc, one too often notices a slight undertone of doubt that can too-easily become self-fulfilling. "We're giving this grape a chance," explains VDP-Chairman Steffen Christmann, who thanks to the experimental interests of his daughter will soon be offering a fourth Pinot Blanc, "even though currently we anticipate that in 20 years we'll only be growing Riesling and Pinot Noir," I hope – and shall be working toward that end – to be able to confound his prognosis!



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