

## **In Blind Taste Tests, German Pinot Noirs Are Topping the List**

By Stephen Quinn

(Jan 24, 2013) Germany is one of the most northerly wine-growing nations in the world. It has a long growing season, which means grapes ripen slowly and wines retain good natural acidity and flavors.

Warm days and cool nights produce aromas that are unique around the world, especially for white grapes like riesling.

The world loves and respects German riesling, and previous columns have focused on that classic grape variety. But in recent years pinot noir has performed well in Germany, producing some remarkable wines.

Global warming over the past 40 years has increased the average temperature in Germany by 1.4 degrees Celsius, meaning the country can now ripen red grapes.

In 2010, spaetburgunder, the German name for pinot noir, accounted for 11.1 per cent of grape production in Germany. That percentage is increasing. Indeed, Germany is now the world's third largest producer of pinot noir, after France and the United States. It has appropriate terroir, old vines (which produce more concentrated grapes than young vines) and traditional wine-making skills.

In November 2011 the German Wine Institute, or Deutsches Weininstitut, hosted the first "Pinot Noir Challenge" in London.

Forty pinots from around the world were tasted blind. Seven German pinots featured in the top 10. This unexpected result caused many wine-lovers to reassess pinots from Germany.

The Deutsches Weininstitut chose Hong Kong as the venue for the second Pinot Noir Challenge.

All but three of the 22 judges were from this city's Hong Kong Wine Judges Association.

Jeannie Cho-Lee was the best known of the judges in Hong Kong. The overseas guest judges were Tan Ying Hsien, a wine journalist from Singapore, Huang Shan, a wine journalist from China and Katsuyuki Tanaka, a wine educator from Bunkyo Gakuin University in Japan.

The Deutsches Weininstitut selected 20 German pinots out of the 40 tasted, the rest coming from France (eight), the United States (five), New Zealand (five), Australia (one) and Argentina (one). No explanation was given for the

small number of pinots from Australia and Argentina.

The high number of German pinots would naturally influence the number of Germans in the top 10. By the law of averages they should get five of the top 10 positions.

Each panel member announced their mark out of 20, the judge holding aloft a piece of paper with the number. Scores from the panel were put into a spreadsheet and an average score allocated to each wine.

Peter Kwong, founder and director of the judging panel of the Hong Kong Wine Judges Association, was MC for the event. After each wine was scored he asked the people who had allocated the highest and lowest marks to explain their choice.

After these speeches, Kwong asked judges if they would like to modify their mark, presumably based on the eloquence of the speeches. Some judges refined their scores. Wine media were invited to take part as observers. We got to taste the wines after the panel.

The bulk of wines were from the 2009 and 2010 vintages. Three were from 2008, with two from 2006 and one from 2004.

The inclusion of three older wines seemed odd, given they would naturally stand out due to their maturity. Interestingly, one of the 2006 pinots received one of the lowest marks because it had been badly stored.

The tasting took place in Felix, a restaurant on the 28th floor of the Peninsula Hotel with spectacular views of the harbor. The organizers should be commended for such a stunning venue.

And the results? Eight German pinots appeared in the top 10 results of the blind tasting, with one each from New Zealand and the United States.

The top wine was the 2006 Weingut Furst Centgrafenberg from the Franken region, with an average score of 17.25 out of 20.

The second top pinot was the 2009 Weingut Villa Heynburg grande reserve from the Baden region, with an average of 17.04 out of 20.