

Motivation:

The topic of this thesis is about the characteristics and the future of the old local grape Frühburgunder. Plantings are very small, although the grape is traditional relevant to the Ahr valley in Germany. Frühburgunder is a grape which is used by almost every producer in the Ahr but is often called a “diva”, although many growers praise its wines. Because of this contrast, the subject for this investigation arose. The main question of this research was: *A SWOT analysis of the Frühburgunder grape variety; is there a future for this early ripening, old mutation from Pinot noir in Germany?*

Methodology:

To investigate the subject, an analysis of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is written. For this objective a qualitative research has been done. In a literature study, the history and tradition of the grape have been investigated. As well as the strengths and weaknesses of the grape. In the second phase the first results have been verified in 14 interviews with a broad group of people. Interviews have been done with growers, the people who know the grape in the vineyard and wine cellar. Furthermore, specific experts like a Master of Wine, specialists from e.g. Geisenheim University and journalists have been interviewed to find out about the potential for the future and his relevance in Germany. A semi structured method is chosen to be able to ask similar questions to the interviewees. But they should also have the chance to answer about the possibilities and threats seen from a local and national perspective. During the interviews two possible uncertainties came up and they should be investigated in a future research:

Does Frühburgunder have a real distinctive character in comparison to Pinot noir? There are many similar characteristics and differences can be very small.

What are the possibilities outside of Germany? Could the grape be appropriate for countries with a cooler climate? What could be done to make the grape appropriate for other regions and countries?

Content:

Frühburgunder is an old, natural mutation of Pinot noir. The grape arose during the little ice age and was first mentioned in 1824. Frühburgunder vanished almost completely in the 20th century but was saved by winegrowers from the Ahr valley and Rheinhessen. Still the most important region is the Ahr valley because of its historical and traditional connection.

The grape has small bunches and small berries and ripens at least 14 days earlier than Pinot noir, in August or September. The vine delivers very small yields partly due to coulure, grape vine leafroll virus and all kinds of animals which are a threat in the last phase of grape ripening. Due to those reasons, a lot of labour is needed to protect the grapes and harvest a healthy crop.

Differences between Frühburgunder and Pinot noir are not always clear. In general Frühburgunder is seen as the more feminine type. Its wines have a little less acidity, less tannins, pure red fruit flavours which can be combined with a smoky or herbaceous tone and a velvet mouth feeling. Expression of those differences can be heavily influenced by vinification. Wines are suitable for wood ageing and can mature in the bottle.

The grape has several strengths. Because of its early ripening it is able to ripen almost everywhere. In this way the grape is able to make less good vineyards better as the wines from those lesser places can be of a very good quality. Furthermore the grape is able to produce charming and approachable wines. Because of small berries and bunches, the vine provides a natural concentration of flavours enhanced by the small yields. The very early ripening makes the grape less susceptible to botrytis bunch rot and provides a logistical advantage to growers. Because harvest and vinification can start before other grapes come in.

Weaknesses are its susceptibility to coulure which reduces the amount of bunches already during flowering. Because of early ripening, the grapes are prey to many kinds of animals like insects. Due to its ripening in the warmest part of the year, the harvest comes very narrow and grapes should be protected intensively. Furthermore it can be hard to start with the harvest on time as labour is not common available at this time of the year. All this increases costs significantly. Combined with a natural small yield, the wines are businesswise difficult. A higher price should be calculated but is not possible due to its unfamiliarity.

The early ripening provides also an opportunity. Grapes can be planted in cooler regions and even other countries like Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia.

But the early ripening is also a threat as climate change brings harvest forward even more. In this case it is not sure whether the grapes will be able to develop enough flavour and aroma compounds. Changing weather patterns can threaten the grapes during this time of the year heavily. This makes Pinot noir a competitor as the grape ripens easier, can provide at least as good wines, and those wines are easier to sell due to its fame. Furthermore Frühburgunder is not suitable for white or sparkling wines. There are not many ways to combat all those threats yet. Grape ripening can be delayed in the vineyard and several protection methods are possible. But this will lead to an increase of costs. Furthermore there is not a lot of clonal diversification which could help the grape in specific circumstances.

Frühburgunder is hardly not relevant to the German wine scene. Only 0,2% of plantings in Germany are Frühburgunder. They produce only 0,1% of total amount of German wine. PR activities of marketing organisations are not dedicated to Frühburgunder except for local initiatives.

Conclusion:

Frühburgunder is able to produce quality wines in cool vineyards but is suffering of many threats and disadvantages. It is likely that plantings will decline. The grape provides too small yields, needs too much intensity of labour and the grape is too unknown. Frühburgunder is of local and historical relevance and has its enthusiasts, especially in the Ahr valley. There are some initiatives to keep and promote the grape but many growers expect a difficult future. Those difficulties are mainly related to climate change and the early ripening of Frühburgunder. For winegrowers there are many alternative varieties in several segments of the market. But because of early ripening Frühburgunder could have some potential in other cool climate countries. Although Frühburgunder is also very sensitive regarding soils. To save the grape for the future, an investigation to the distinctive character is important. Otherwise it is unlikely that Frühburgunder will earn a competitive place in the wine market. A way to delay grape ripening and harvest higher yields is important to make the grape businesswise attractive. An investigation to proper clones is beneficial.