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MAGAZINE FOR &
FROM WINE LOVERS





Dear friends & partners!

September and October seem to be the most important months in the viticultural year as harvest is in full swing in the Northern Hemisphere. We expect “our” growers to pick beautiful grapes: balanced, healthy and tasty, the resulting wine is supposed to be nothing less than great. Often, the result is the only thing that counts (for retailers and consumers alike) but we should not forget how important it is to protect vines from diseases and pests throughout all seasons. In many ways, plants “behave” the same as we humans or vice versa. Under certain circumstances, they can be infected (by bacteria, fungi, viruses...), develop symptoms



and must be therefore treated. However, there are many (sometimes contradictory) approaches as how to apply which kind of “medication”. As with people, we can focus on treating symptoms and at times, this will be the only solution. Putting an emphasis on strengthening the immune system and thus taking precautionary measures, however, is an alternative way more and more organic and biodynamic growers have chosen these days. We have interviewed all TOA growers on their methods of caring for their vines – mens sana in corpore sano or let us say: healthy wines from healthy vines.

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A Talk with Axel Caubet

Axel Caubet is based in beautiful Geneva and runs “Pompette”, an import and distribution company which provides a fine selection of organic and biodynamic, family-run estates to restaurants all over Switzerland. A somm by dedication and passion, he not only follows trends, but helps to define and create them himself.

Axel, what’s your business model and how did you come to do what you’re doing?

I’m based in Geneva, but I sell throughout Switzerland. I started as a somm, working seasons in London, in Southern France, etc. This has helped me a lot as the sommelier work is a lot about selling but being in contact with the on-trade and having gained a lot of knowledge has showed me that it could be a great thing to work as a middleman between the wine merchant, the wine producer and the restaurants. In 2011, I started my business by offering my services to restaurants as a free-lance, independent sommelier – to manage their wine lists, brief their staff and to choose wines which fit their philosophy, their cuisine and their customers. It took me some 2-3 years to get established and up until 2014, I did this part-time next to my job as a somm in my own right. After 2014, I switched to a full-time basis. I have since established my own structure and an exclusive selection as an importer and distributor for wine retailers and also for individuals. By the way, we (I get help from Anand who has been working for me since last year) - deliver a lot of wines with a non-electric cargo bicycle! I work with wines from family-run wineries, with organic and biodynamic wines as a focus. For me, what counts is their approach, their way of working, based on personality and my connection to these growers. When I start working with a grower, I tell him that it’s not me, his customer in the end, I’m just a little

link in the chain, who will represent him and speak in his place. That’s why a connection is so important, to believe in what he or she is doing. I don’t need to tell marketing stories, often, it’s the wine which tells its story. And even if it’s small volumes, it’s about placing the right wine at the right place.

Until recently, low-intervention wines were not really common in Switzerland. Did this change?

Yes, but there is still a lot of work to do. However, a lot has changed in the last 3-4 years. There is a higher demand now and the clientele is younger, it’s young customers who do not necessarily have a deep knowledge of conventional wines. They live in the moment and are looking for wines which give immediate pleasure. I believe that the “natural” wine scene really appeals to this generation. The approach is also less complicated, compared to all these stories of appellations and classifications. There’s a label, a name of the wine and appealing, colorful visuals, something more fun, more joyful.

Also, I think that there are many people who simply do not want to drink the wines their parents used to drink. Another reason is the fact that people now seem to care about what they’re consuming – for me it’s somewhat logical that someone who eats organic vegetables and meat from small farms eventually turns to natural wine. Of course, what we see more and more as people who know the business, is that

there are many producers who try to hop on the train of this movement just to make business. This is a bit sad as for us who have paved the way, the movement was always about making a choice for “being free” and I’d rather not see those producers striving for the “conventional” model. I’d love to see them pursuing their freedom, that “rebel” side of life, to keep their identity. Yes, maybe the copycats will offer you a wine without added sulphites but it will still have a bunch of other stuff inside. That’s why it’s so important for us distributors to dig deeper, to see how a grower is working and to tell the consumers about it.

Is there a difference between the French-speaking part of Switzerland and the other regions? Do the French speaking Swiss incline towards French wines?

There is a difference, for sure. You know, there’s the French-speaking part, the Italian part and the German part. There are certain language barriers and it’s a little bit like having 3 little countries within one (little) country. And we must not forget that Switzerland is also a wine producing country! Every region produces its very own styles of wine and obviously, the consumers favor their local stuff. However, the Swiss are very curious, openminded people and they are very knowledgeable: the Swiss market is small but very dynamic and the consumers have access to practically everything that is brought

onto the market within 1-2 years! The Swiss consumer is a connoisseur and an aficionado at the same time. You know, historically, many families have always had some vines, made a little wine or passed it on to a cooperative, etc. The people, they do have a clue and they’re super curious!

What’s more, we are surrounded by wine producing countries, obviously, so there is a lot of influence from all of them and a lot to choose from! I’d even say that French wines sometimes do have a hard time from the business point of view as they tend to be more expensive than others. Just look at Austria: well chosen, well made and fairly priced wines from our neighbors will have a much better price-joy relation than many French ones!

I imagine it’s the same situation when it comes to restaurants?

It depends a lot on the establishment. Whether it’s a high-end place, whether it’s in the city or rather on the countryside, for example. Clearly, in the classic, renowned and starred restaurants you will see 4 pages of Bordeaux and 4 pages of Bourgogne but there is an increasing number of customers who are going to look out for the niche, for sure. This brings a dynamic to the market.

How do you assess the current challenges we’re all facing – energy, rising costs, etc.?

Personally, I believe we should consume locally. As for the export and import business, we need to be coherent, also when it comes to pricing. The wines need to be at justified price points and we need to explain it to the consumer. I don’t think we have to sacrifice quality and go for “cheap”! The costs for bottles, capsules and transport may go up but as long as the wine remains good and the quality level is there, the consumer will be ready to pay a bit more so he can stick to a good wine rather than sticking to a price and drinking worse. I’m sure the consumer will understand that.

Do you see any trends when it comes to certain wine styles?

Yes, we have seen changes here. The consumers are always looking for something new and at ever shorter intervals so it’s important to keep offering new products. Skin macerated whites are for sure trending, people asking for them in bars and restaurants. The producers have done a great job in this regard, releasing very nice wines in the last couple of years. Pet Nats are also working very well (depending on the season, of course) and co-fermentations of reds and white as well. And generally wines with lower alcohol, good freshness and less wood! I also think that higher acidity levels and even some volatile acidity do not bother the consumers anymore.

What do you like personally, speaking of Austrian wines?

I do have my favorites but lately, I have fallen for the reds in particular! There are really beautiful wines out there which have surprised me in a very positive way. I’m talking digestible reds with freshness but complexity at the same time. I really enjoy drinking them, especially when it’s so hot outside! They have it all: fruit, vivacity, spiciness and a great level of drinkability. At comparable price points, it’s these wines that are “hurting” the French a lot!



THE VINE CARE

“We produce wines from healthy vines!” is a statement you’ll often hear from winegrowers. Sounds obvious but it is, more often than not, a long and winding road for the grower to end up with healthy grapes at harvest time as they are exposed to many adversaries along the way.

The vine is a fascinating plant being as we wine lovers are very well aware of. It is resilient (remember that vines have been planted in former times where nothing else could flourish) and fragile at the same time, prone to various dis-

eases and fungi, some homemade, others imported. Protecting the vine is a reoccurring need for every grower and it requires a lot of thought and expertise as the opponents show up in manifold appearances. There are numerous grapevine pests, viruses, parasites and phytoplasmas. The fungi powdery mildew (aka oidium) and downy mildew (aka peronospora) are maybe the most notorious and widely spread threats but there are many other unwanted guests such as some insects (like the grapevine moth), various kinds of rots (botrytis, black rot) or other diseases like Esca and weeds, among others.

Winegrowers have a number of weapons to protect their vines from being attacked or damaged, copper and sulfur being the most widely used ones, but the fight is not a simple one. Whereas organic and biodynamic growers do not spray systemic agents (they apply contact agents which do not enter the plant system) and also make use of alternative methods such as teas, extracts or various flours/powders like baking soda, they still face questions about how often they hop on the tractor as critical voices claim that organic growers spray more often than conventional ones causing soil compaction. And what about the entry of copper into the soil? Are there ways to refrain from using copper and sulfur at all? And if so, at what cost? Producers are not happy about sacrificing (too much) yield and quality, of course...

Is plant protection compatible with biodynamic practices? Biodyn growers, on one hand, cannot skip using copper and sulfur as a general rule even though a

lot of work is done in order to reduce the interventions and to find alternatives. However, their approach is a more holistic one as strengthening the vines’ resistance against pathogens by means of compost and spray preparations is an inherent part of their viticultural work. Many questions arise when discussing this complex topic and more often than not, there are more answers to the same question, depending on many conditions and the personal approach of every producer. Let’s take a look at some of them!

WARGA-HACK

How often and how much do you “spray”?

Up until 20th June, I was out spraying only once while my neighbors have applied their plant protection 4 or 5 times. Nonetheless, my vineyards are looking very good so far. In the last couple of years, we sprayed around 5 times throughout the whole year. In 2021, for example, I needed much less copper as the season was very dry: in total, the output was 900 grams and in a normal year, we need some 1,2 kg. As far as I know, the conventional producers use as much copper in their last round of spraying as I do in the entire year. What's more, they use different – systemic – agents which they have to change every 2-3 years as the plants build up resistances.

Every time we spray, we also bring out teas made from: horsetail (which contains silicon the fungi don't like), nettle (strengthens the plant on a general basis), willow bark (contains salicylic acid which helps against downy mildew) and



yarrow (intensifies the effect of sulfur). Also, we apply protection alternately on every second row so to minimize soil compaction – like this we're having only 8 half-sprays in certain vintages.

How particular is the Sausal when it comes to plant protection?

As for parasites, we do not have many issues in our region: we see hardly any grapevine moths and there's no need

for us to fight parasites as a general rule. The overall precipitation has remained stable or has even increased despite climate change – however, we have increasing issues with torrential rain and subsequent periods of drought. At our estate, we have more troubles with powdery mildew than with downy mil-

dew which is a more “traditional” pest in Styria. I feel that the vines can handle downy mildew better, that you can, so to say, “train” them to cope with it. Since our vineyards have barren soils and we only spray a little, the sulfur evaporates rather quickly. We therefore started to use kaolin as an adhesive agent which seems to work pretty well and also keeps the vines more vital.



Rösler is one of the disease-resistant varieties gaining in popularity

MARTIN OBENNAUS

As with others, my focus lies on copper and sulfur but I strive to reduce the frequency and the amounts. My go-to helpers in doing so are molasses and stone powder. In combining them, I get a “glue” which helps the agents to stick on the surface longer and better so I need less copper and sulfur in the end. My “glue” covers all gaps and even helps heal injuries. We started converting to molasses and stone powder a couple of years ago: as compared to 6 years ago, we now apply some 40% less copper and sulfur. As you know, compost tea is one of my favorite vineyard helpers. It is not a plant protection agent per se but by supporting

all microbiological processes, it has beneficial effects on the vine's powers of resistance. Maybe I can't reduce the intervals of spraying in a difficult year but for sure the concentration of the protective agents.

A part of your area is planted with disease-resistant varieties. How do they do?

I like disease-resistant grapes, yes! I have Donauriesling and Rösler. I have not sprayed one of my Rösler vineyards at all this year and it's looking very good indeed. Another one, I have treated the classic way one time when I saw the downy mildew and I'm sure it's gonna be enough. What's more, it's a young vineyard so it's not a big deal if I lose a little bit of yield. Of course, we also apply teas (such as yarrow) and biodyn preparations in our disease-resistant vineyards. With Rösler, you only have to pay attention so to pick it at the right moment as it is prone to powdery mildew. If you miss it, you're going to lose all of it, within a couple of days! There is one fact we have to take into consideration when working with disease-resistant varieties: they are



crossings between American and European varieties, so one day, phylloxera could find a way to adapt and to harm the American root stock as well. We have to watch the developments closely...

JULIE & DANIELA HOCH

Your Pure Joy Botanicals are wines blended with herbs and blossoms. How do you protect those?

As for the botanicals, the plant protection is very basic – we apply the biodynamic preparations 500 (horn manure) and 501 (horn silica), we bring out our own compost as well as grape seeds and grape seed flour from our vineyards. They act as a natural, highly effective compost. Common opinion states that herbs love barren soils but our herbs grow on nutrient-rich soils and they thrive spectacularly! Other than that, we do not spray them, we rather pay attention to which herbs “help” each other so we can plant them side by side. Lavender, for instance, is a repellent for many bugs, flies and lice so we plant it around our roses. However, as compared



to vines, herbs can be harvested several times per year, thus their life cycle is shorter and they are not exposed to disease pressure the whole year long!

You use herbs for your products but also as helpers in the vineyard, correct?



In general, vine protection with herbs is something rather new and there are no official guidelines, nor many empirical experiences over the years. In any case, we believe we should stick to and explore our local herbs - in our view, local vineyards don't need “foreign” input. Besides yarrow and nettle, we have started using a valerian tincture which has calming and stress relieving effects after a drought or hail. Vermouth is another great herb for the vines. We macerate and ferment its leaves (it's crucial to keep the fermentation short!) and apply it twice a year as a support against various diseases. We would also like to try marjoram as it gives us humans self-confidence and we believe it would do the same with vines, similar to horn silica. There's a lot more to discover in this fascinating field!



Carefully drying nettle for tea



An example of symbiosis: herbs and vines

GRUBER-RÖSCHITZ

How do cover crops and plant protection depend on each other?

Our cover crops play an important part in reducing the risk of infections as they also absorb water. We have planted a mix of mustard and phacelia: the mustard has grown very high and we did not mulch it, we just folded it. Like this, the plants do not rot straight away and protect the soil while regulating the water supplies. If the soil remained open, we would have much more humidity which would evaporate above the soil and cause even more dew in the mornings!

Do you experience problems with deer?

In some vineyards, especially in those near forests, a little bit, yes. Our way to deal with this is to convert them to minimal pruning. This way, there is enough for everyone: the deer feed on some of the young shoots but as we have many of them, it's less of an issue. This is a method which allows us to cooperate with nature. We even see much more other animals in these vineyards (partridges, rabbits, pheasants) as they provide more shadow and cooler air.

How do you see the interaction between plant protection, yield and quality?

Protecting the plants is crucial in order to guarantee good yields, that's a fact. Obviously, having unhealthy grapes is bad for the quality but less yield does



not necessarily equal higher quality! I can only achieve higher quality when my grapes are healthy – then I can eventually reduce the yields manually. It is important to maintain the nutrient supply, that's why we work with straw in order to build up humus and we bring out manure. Balanced nutrient supply means balanced growth: every year has its particular fruit set and we have to make sure that all these grapes stay healthy.



MICHAEL GINDL

I spray between 4 and 6 times per year, using the usual copper/sulfur organic methods. In my view, one can reduce the spraying quite a lot for powdery mildew but you have to be active when downy mildew hits. During 2 or 3 years, I have been protecting my vines without using copper or sulfur but in the third year, they were affected by Phomopsis (a fungus causing black spots and weakening the vine) and you can fight in (organically) only with copper and sulfur. When I was not using copper and sulfur, I was still out there quite often and applied my other plant protection substances. They help a lot but their adhesive ability is much lower than with copper and sulfur – those allow me to stretch the gaps between sprayings significantly. I simply did not want to go out and spray that often.



What part do your horses play in protecting your plants?

In one of my vineyards, I have only sprayed the outer rows as they boarder with a another grower's vineyard. I didn't spray the inner rows (the grass is really high there!) and have not had any problems there. Why is that so? I'm sure

that a plant whose roots are exposed to stress caused by soil compaction and lack of oxygen is more vulnerable to fungi and insects. When I started working with the horses, I told myself that I'd start using copper and sulfur again but I would only go out like 5 times per year, as little as possible. I salute growers who refrain from using copper and sulfur



but I keep asking myself whether it makes sense to bring out preparations like compost teas using a 5 ton tractor. What's more? The damage caused by the tractor or the benefit of the compost? Soil compaction does not only occur directly beneath the wheels of the tractor but spreads further out and impacts the tiniest roots of the vine. I really try to avoid compacting the soils, it's my main focus and I even reduce the use of preparations if I can't bring them out with my horses! Working with horses is my way towards not spraying any more at all – or only in extreme situations which I can handle with my horses.



ERICH MACHHERNDL

Is plant protection in the Wachau different due to its many stone terraces?

I do not believe the terraces have a great impact when it comes to disease pressure, they rather provide for higher temperatures. In general, there are various more or less contradicting approaches: my father, for instance, thinks that we should keep the cover crops low as high grass results in more evaporation, thus humidity, fungi and botrytis. I do understand the point but high cover crops do help me regulate the humidity in the soil better, on the other hand. When we have a lot of rain, I can mulch the grass and

the new grass will extract the excess water from the soil. However, plant protection is a bit more difficult in the terraces as the vines right next to them are more affected by drought. There's no need to remove leaves in the grape zone in those rows. In the current warm vintages, the terraces' higher capacity to store heat is rather a curse and less of a blessing as this can reduce acidity levels which are very important to me.

Which other pests or diseases do you see here in the Wachau?

Next to powdery and downy mildew, we also encounter botrytis at a too early stage and black rot in some locations. The grapevine moth is under control in our region. And Esca is a general issue for the entire viticulture, in my opinion. Our "brave new world" does put the vine under stress, I believe. We're nowhere near a normal comfortable environment: first, there's no rain for a long time, then we have too much of it in a short period of time. This kind of stress makes the vines more vulnerable, to Esca, for example. Naturally, I hope that gentle pruning will be a remedy for problems with Esca but I think we can say goodbye to the

concept of homogeneous vineyards with vines of the same age. We have to replant up to 5% of the vines per year meaning that we have a completely new vineyard every 20 years. Exciting times ahead, that's for sure!





Chamomile has calming effects on humans and vines



CLAUS PREISINGER

I have been working biodynamic since 18 years and I have been having the same problems for 18 years, for example with powdery mildew. The science has been investigating a lot into copper and

downy mildew, how to avoid copper, etc. but rather less when it comes to our issues. There are calculation models for downy mildew (how many degrees, how much humidity, duration and so on). This does not work for powdery mildew! The infection can happen in the beginning of May but it can take until the end of June until I really notice it. Nonetheless, I have to protect my vines in the meantime relaying a lot on my senses. There's no pattern for the thunderstorms: I can have 20 mm of precipitation in one location and the dust will blow a few km's farther. Thus, we will probably always have some infections here and there. On the other side – is Nature healthy at 100%? No. We have to learn to accept that there will always be diseases, that vines will be affected. Yes, it hurts as we invest a lot of work, time and money but it's part of our life.

What about Blaufränkisch, the standout red in your region?

In my portfolio, there are 2 classes when it comes to handling diseases: all kinds of grapes and then there is Blaufränkisch, Chardonnay and Furmint. In our climate, Blaufränkisch is really a bad boy! When we spray, one team takes care of

Blaufränkisch (and Furmint) only – they drive at a slower pace and bring out more protection substance, especially in the grape zone. Yes, maybe I could focus on PIWI's, the disease-resistant varieties (no stress, no spraying, easy-cheesy) but frankly, I have never tasted a wine from such grapes that blew my mind. I rather make wines that touch the soul, that make people say, "Yes, that's it!".



JOHANNES TRAPL

In general, the Carnuntum is rather dry and warm – however, this year, we have had quite some rainfall in the beginning of June, thus during flowering. Just like most of my colleagues, we combine plant protection (copper & sulfur) with teas: already at bud break, we start applying nettle which remains in use even throughout June as it supports "blood" circulation and in wet periods, it helps remove excessive water. Horsetail is next after nettle: we like its dehydrating impact, especially in events of powdery mildew. Other herbs include yarrow and we have now applied ivy leaves for the first time as they have

an impact on downy mildew. In case we will be seeing a hot spell in the weeks to come, we will also make use of chamomile as it has a calming and cooling effect and promotes balance.

How much copper do you use and what about alternatives to classic plant protection?

In the course of the last 3 years, we have been spraying approx. 7 times – maybe it's going to be 8 times this year due to that rainy period in a delicate time of the season. We apply roughly 1,3 kg of sulfur/ha and very little copper, 280 – 350 grams of pure copper per hectare, per year. Often, we do not spray more than 30-40 grams per drive, purely as a precautionary measure. In general, we have reduced the amount of copper and sulfur significantly since working biodynamic. There are more approaches to plant protection we growers could envision for the future: I can also imagine myself integrating copper and sulfur into a homeopathic regime or even try globules – I know colleagues who are doing that already!





JOHANNES ZILLINGER

You work a lot with ethereal oils and extracts.

Yes, we use these oils and extracts a lot and combine them with the other protective agents after flowering. Before that, we spray in a “classic” way – as much as necessary and as little as possible, the crucial factor being the right timing. I don’t have any general recipe for applying the ethereal oils, I use them whenever I feel good about it. When the temperature is 37° outside and I see that everything is under stress, I take lavender oil or mint extract, for example, something that has a cooling effect. It re-

laxes me as a person as well! Thyme oil is one of my favorites I produce myself and I start to apply it (adding it to copper and sulfur) as early as when the berries are as big as peas. Thyme is antiseptic and antibacterial, it has a disinfecting effect directly on those surfaces where we spray it. There is another beneficial effect. You know, fungi like to grow in badly aerated zones and they only have a short time window, usually in the morning, to really infect the plants (there is no infection at 30°C during the day). As ethereal oils are extremely volatile, the thyme brings a lot of fresh aromatic compounds into those areas and thus helps to reduce the time window and the risks of infection.

You’re a fan of aromatic varieties? How do they do with respect to plant protection?

Obviously, it’s impossible to put all of them into the same basket as each of them is unique. Muskateller, for example, has pretty thick skins so botrytis is a virtually impossible or very rare event for this grape. Scheurebe, another aromatic varietal, is extremely sensitive when it comes to powdery mildew and is thus a great indicator for the fungus – it just “flies by” and the grape will be

infected, no doubt! As for Sauvignon blanc, I think that the entire family of Cabernet, Cab Franc or Sauvignon is relatively robust. They have small, firm berries, at least until a certain point of ripeness when powdery mildew is not an issue anymore. They do possess a certain resilience on their own.



Grape bunch affected by downy mildew

ERWIN TINHOF

We treat our various sites pretty much in a similar way, there are no big differences when it comes to protecting vines in different locations. If you’re asking for something unique in our protection methods, it would be chalk we are using increasingly. It’s granulated chalk and we use it as an addition to copper and sulfur as it acts like a “sun cream”. This rather “whitish” cloth of chalk reflects the sun, reduces the intense light and allows the leaves not to heat up so much. It also protects the skins from drying up too quickly so the plant protection substances can remain longer on the surfaces. This is a benefit for us especially during the hot summer days that have become so frequent in our region.

What about Neuburger, your local hero?

Neuburger can be a diva but it’s a great grape for our climate because of its resistance to draught and heat. During very warm periods, Neuburger does not stop the ripening process (unlike Pinot



keeping it aerated. Obviously, the grapes need to be ripe and conditions good to harvest a Beerenauslese or a Trockenbeerenauslese!



This vineyard tractor recycles a major part of sprayed substances

blanc or Blaufränkisch, for example). The grape does not like “fat”, heavy soils and a humid climate as its tight bunches are prone to fungal diseases, it prefers dry, barren limestone locations like in the Leithaberg region. Other than that, Neuburger is a little bit sensitive to botrytis during flowering which can lead to loss of yield – on the other side, this results in loose-berry bunches and better quality. Furthermore, the Neuburger’s skin is relatively thick and thus protects it better with regard to sunburn. As for botrytis, yes, we love to produce sweet wines as well but it depends on the vintage and on the vineyard. We do not fight it actively, only by taking care of our canopy,



Biodynamic cultivation provides for a stronger immune system

CHRISTOPH HOCH

You have been experimenting a lot with alternatives to “classical” plant protection. Tell us more!

The basic concept of these alternatives is about minimizing the use of plant protection measures and not to spray “killing” or “life suppressing” agents. We want to use something that promotes life and deteriorates the conditions for fungi at the same time. Something that creates competition and has strengthening effects for the plant’s health. We follow 2 approaches: the first one is a compost extract or compost tea which focuses on its aerobic bacteria cultures. The second one are anaerobic “ferments” producing various kinds of malolactic fermentations (some of them display very low pH levels) which affect the environment of the fungi. Those ferments also impart freshness into the game – they are made of herbs for example and do not include any composted elements.

Currently, we apply our methods in 2 trial vineyards – in one of them, we only apply the bacteria

& ferment mix and in the other one, we combine them with copper and sulfur. The two of those, we apply precisely in the grape zone as I feel that the leaves are not as sensible after all. If I’m to chose between 10% downy mildew on the leaves and 2-3 times of additional spraying, I absolutely rather go with downy mildew and have less compaction, expenses and efforts! In my view, it’s like with humans: we should learn to recover by ourselves instead of swallowing medication as a preventive measure. In the end, the medication approach makes us and our immune system weak-



er. Just imagine: the old growers in the 50’s and 60’s, they have been spraying 4 times per year. Today, people go out twice as much and I’m sure half of that is not necessary at all. More awareness is what we need!



KARL FRITSCH

Biodynamic cultivation also requires copper and sulfur, it’s the main goal of plant protection. Obviously, we need to enhance in our vines balance and powers of resistance so to keep the pressure at a minimum. →→Working biodynamic for 16 years, we have had, of course, our share in positive and negative experiences. We have seen a couple of more critical vintages during which we probably



relied too much on the impact of teas and preparations when it comes to the self-protective ability of our vines. It is a naked truth: we can apply measures to reduce copper and sulfur but we cannot refrain from its use totally. In order to reduce soil compaction we have also purchased “classic” portable spraying devices and we plan to bring out our teas and preparations using them – also in order to be more attentive and focused during this important work in our yearly cycle! I do believe in the biodynamic way of working but this does not mean for me to accept everything unconditionally, to follow every “recipe” without digging deeper. I believe that I can only act in a positive way when I understand myself, without prejudice, the basic principles of the cycles and rhythms of our world. There are ways of analyzing and measuring the various parameters and deficiencies (such as leaf diseases, for example) but when I walk through my vineyards, I simply aim to sense their “vitality” – which does not equal excessive growth, mind you!

How do you see the future of plant protection?

The erratic weather and its extremes of too little or too much does not make things easier, for sure. We should take



Balanced vineyards yield healthy grapes



all viticultural measures to ensure ideal conditions for our current varieties and the only way to do this on a long-term basis is to keep our soils vital and fertile. We are going to need innovations also in the future, no doubt, in order not to lose our cool climate aromas. However, it is not set in stone that we will continue working with Grüner and Riesling. They have been favored as the climate was getting warmer but we see them gradually reaching their limits. Maybe, disease resistant varieties are meant to be the way out but I’m not sure yet – eliminating a problem by human interference can possibly create new problems... Also, we should rethink the way we see the nature: we speak of beneficial insects and parasites but it’s all just insects, each of them playing its particular – and important - role in this complex system! The first step is the hardest but all we can and we should do is to keep the balance and support the natural flora and fauna of our lands.

THOMAS STRAKA

In principle, we follow organic plant protection methods: we work with sulfur and very low doses of copper. We do need copper but not more than max. 1,5 kg per year. The conditions in our region are favorable for a limited use of plant protection agents as it is very windy and the mountain range of the Geschiebenstein provides for unique thermal conditions. Thanks to this, we have little humidity on the leaves and thus a lower risk of infection by powdery and downy mildew. As adhesives and depending on the temperature, we use coconut oil



and orange oil which help the leaves to build a firm structure and to support the protection agents. Sometimes, we also apply leaf fertilizers based on magnesium as the Welschriesling grape is susceptible to chlorosis. Like this, we enhance the balance of magnesium and potassium and secure the nutrient supply. We are planning on expanding our range of strengthening and protective methods as from the next year, making use of biodyn preparations (500 & 501) and also teas such as chamomile. I'll just need a little bit more manpower.

How does your favorite grape Welschriesling react to the various pests and diseases?

In general, Welschriesling is a pretty sturdy grape. In comparison to other whites such as Grüner, its growth is not too vigorous and not too quick. Slow growth also equals less proneness to powdery mildew. Welschriesling really is the perfect grape for our terroir given the interplay of our barren schist soils, the

rather high elevation, the constant winds and its long vegetation cycle resulting in late ripening.



WABI SABI

At Wabi Sabi, we value freedom and refrain from dogmatics. This is why we take the best from both worlds, so to say, the organic one and the biodynamic one when it comes to protecting the vines. We have tried various methods, also spraying the vines with bacteria only – but we decided not to stop copper and sulfur completely as they proved to provide a sound basis of protection. The organic approach is also the centerpiece of our soil management: in our vineyard sites in the Wachau, for example, the soils have never been ploughed so the flora and fauna could develop in a balanced way over many years which, of course, provides a healthy ground for our vines. We do not open the soil in order not to have an overload of potassium. This reduces the yields, yes, but the quality of the grapes remains at a high level.



Which measures do you take against disease pressure?

We use copper and sulfur against powdery and downy mildew (which has been an issue in this 2022 vintage as May was rainy and warm for a couple of weeks), but we bring it out by hand using a portable spraying device. This way, we can avoid soil compaction and apply the protection very precisely. It's a lot of work though, for sure. We also make use of biodyn preparations (500 & 501) as we want to balance out events of stress and prepare the vines for drought periods or heavy rain. Managing cover crops is equally important as they grow between all our vines and pretty vigorously, indeed! We mow the grass and herbs by hand several times per year which helps us getting rid of excess water and prevents fungi from reaching the bunches and the canopy!

A Talk with Eric Danch

Eric Danch started his life in wine working in restaurants in the US and abroad and being part of a circus and cabaret show during an amazing 6 years. Together with his business partner Catherine Granger, "Danch & Granger Selections" have taken over the legacy of former "Blue Danube Wine Co." focusing on family estates from Central and Eastern Europe. Let's take a look on how Eric sees the dynamic wine market in his beloved San Francisco Bay area!



Danch and Granger has been on the block for roughly 3 years now. How were the beginnings?

It was a wild ride, to be honest. After Blue Danube ended its operations, we only had little time to set up the company. So, we had the company going for a couple of months and just imagine this: our very first container with wines from the Balkans was frozen to -40 °C because they misread the documents and thought it was meat! They destroyed 100% of the wine and it was nearly all of the money that we had at the time. We eventually ended up with just a little loss of money but you know, it's not about buying wine but about selling it and we had none...and a few months later, Covid hit so it was a really "sweet" beginning. The fact that we're still here, alive and kicking, is somewhat miraculous. Luckily, we had a decade worth of relationships and people to support us, and of course Catherine, my business partner!

What is special about the wine market in the Bay Area?

Even though we are in a big metropolitan area, it's really kind of small at the same time. The greater Bay Area includes 6-7 million people but it's spread over 7000 square miles. San Francisco has less than 1 million people, so it's relatively small compared to LA or NY but we live

in the proximity of regions like the Foot Hills, Napa, Sonoma and many more so we have wine all around us. And it's definitely more a part of the table than in many other places in the US. Many of my friends did grow up with wine on the table! So I guess that people here are more culturally "fluent" in wine whereas the idea of having a glass of wine for lunch is still pretty new to most Americans. The Bay Area is not anywhere near Europe in this regard, but it's common to walk around and see bottles of wine on tables everywhere, so we have that going for us. There's also a big organic food movement here and a lot of the produce is grown right here! People have a sense of knowing a farm or a farmer's market.

Then again, it's all about the story. When I compare it to my time in the circus, there were plenty of better or equal performers but it was the story that made the show fantastic. The performers were mostly from Central Europe, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, etc., basically people who historically wanted to get the hell out of Communism. After the shows, we would sit under the tent and eat and people would pull out jars of pickles, vodkas, sweet wines; things that would travel well. There was this Ukrainian juggler and he pulled out some honey-peppered vodka and some whole pickled tomatoes, played the accordion, and told stories from home. I was like:

"That's it right there!" I'm always trying to recreate that kind of pairing sensation with the wines we import.

Do people in your area have an image of Central or Eastern Europe when it comes to wine? And do you see a difference between those for yourself?

Well, it's slow going still, for sure. Geography, culture, language and food are still largely unknown or over simplified. California, like the rest of the US, has a big immigrant story, as you probably know. We've had massive waves of Italians, French, Spanish, and Germans in terms of European wine culture. We have the restaurants, street names, and in some cases entire neighbourhoods that reflect these influences. For some reason Central Europe isn't often considered in the same breadth. Hungarians for example, where my grandfather emigrated from, were more of an assimilation generation: "learn English, become American", there's no "little Budapest" so to say. They're here - you see Austrians, Hungarians, Slavs, Ukrainians, Poles, Bulgarians and so around but we don't really have dedicated restaurants in this regard, at least nothing that highlights and drives quality wine. We hope that's going to change since a lot of "Central European style" products are very popular these days (fermented/cured food, pickling, rye bread, etc.). The ethnic market scene

is great but they expect super low prices and styles, like wine should be at pre 1990 COOP prices... However, we are able to carve it out and find customers. You'd be surprised, we can sell to a corner store and a Michelin star restaurant from the same bag of wine, for example! When you look at the "natural" wines (high acid, low alc. or lightly macerated white wines and chillable reds) which started being popular in the mid 2000's, well, Central Europe was doing this before the trend even started!

As for the difference between Central and Eastern Europe, the problem for most Americans is that their geography ends at the iron curtain so anything east of Italy is somehow Eastern Europe. We spend a lot of time educating people that most of what we import is in fact from Central Europe. You know, some of the leading natural wines we've sourced from Hungary are more from the eastern and southern regions or where the land was relatively cheap. This is still the dead center of Europe. It's the same story in California: the first natural wines did not come from Napa or Sonoma, they came from less prestigious and unknown Foothills or Mendocino where land was relatively accessible. Same for Austria. Many of the iconic natural producers started in Styria and not in the Wachau for instance.

Are certifications important in your market?

Increasingly so. There is of course the idea of "practicing organic" and so on, but the problem is that when you're in France or Spain or Germany, you've got wine writers who evaluate that. People will trust Alice Feiring or Eric Asimov here but very few are visiting our places, so certifications are important and we do want to have them on my website, so there's no risk of perceived greenwashing. We also think that especially in Europe, there's no real excuse for not finding the money to be able to do it - although it can be difficult. We have a Croatian grower who wants to go biodynamic but they require greenery in between the vines for certain times of the

year. Well, this guy is on nearly pure rock near the ocean and there has never been green here to begin with... There will always be a couple of exceptions when you have to explain what a grower is doing. Austria, by the way, is so far ahead in that respect with more certified growers (relatively) than anywhere else.

How do you see the importance of social media like Instagram?

At least in our market, when we look at the Austrian producers, a lot of the natural wine is still driven by Instagram and a little group of producers - for whatever reason - dominate the scene here. We also see a lot of allocations in this regard. Many times, people might get 6-12 bottles for the shop and the shop owner never tastes it. But how are these wines? Partly, it's due to the supply chain, partly because of how vast our market is. To tell the truth, I'm somehow flattered not being a part of this game (and wildly jealous at the same time). But I'm really focused on California (and New York) and don't want to sell in 25+ states, we don't really have a big distribution model. Imagine someone importing a pallet and distributing 2 cases all over the country. It's of course fine, the wines sell fast and become allocated, but you cannot pour them by the glass, you cannot open them and show them to the people! We feel they just go in and go out and you don't have the foundation to build the brand on. Maybe our model is financially less successful in the short term, but as I recently explained to one of our producers, they might not be a hot shot on our Instagram but people in California and New York will have their wines multiple times, get to know them, the vintages, and be able to share them etc. It's a constant juggle but we plan to go on with this approach.

What's your take on the current challenges we're all facing? (energy, rising costs, climate change...)

The biggest issue we're facing right now is shipping logistics, it's staggering! It's the biggest threat to our business, no

question. Catherine has been the lead on this for years now. Without her perseverance and drive we'd never have product to begin with. We used to be able to get a 40 foot container out of Central Europe for maybe 9000-10000 \$. Now, it's hard to find one below 25000-30000! A few years ago a container took around 2-3 months to get here, now it's taking 6-8 months. So when we order wine, we might not get it for half a year let alone have time to sell it. Understandably the producers want to get paid much earlier. A larger importer doing 50 - 100 containers can spread it around, but we're not importing tens of thousands of bottles from one producer. We want to grow and show strength in the market but a big impediment to small businesses like ours is lack of cashflow. And of course, we still have to sell the wine - it's not like the container unloads and all is sold, we're competing against hundreds of other importers and thousands of local wineries. I've been to bigger wine shops in Vienna, Budapest and Zagreb. There are wine shops we sell too with thousands of SKUs across every wine producing country in the world. In one of these, you might have 3000 individual labels! It's an amazing market to be in, it's thrilling and there's a lot of community, but this does not sell your wine automatically!

What do you like to drink - which are your go-to wines?

I'm getting a little bit bored with generic natural wine - especially when my time to drink is limited with 3 little kids and work and everything - of these straight kind of glu-glu wines, they're less and less appealing to me, I must admit. I prefer right now something that has more teeth to it. Maybe I'm getting a little bit older but I feel I'm more yearning for something that is not carbonic, not overly macerated, or not picked too early for SO2 rather than deliciousness. I often want a wine with a tannin and acid ratio that goes with food. Or maybe wines that are better on day 2 and that can age. A wine that makes me want to learn the story and the people behind it.





Editor's office
TOA – Tastes of Austria
1020 Vienna – Austria
Palais Rohan, Praterstraße 38/30
toaworks@outlook.com