

Clemens Busch

Interview

This interview with Clemens Busch took place in February, 2014 at L'Herbe Rouge.

Can you give us a global introduction of the estate?

We are located in the middle Mosel region of Germany. All our vines are planted on extremely steep terraces, most of them located on the Marienburg vineyard. It's a very special place, with three distinct soil types: red, grey and blue slate. We work predominantly with old vines; most are 40, 50 or older. Their roots go very deep into the mother rock, which is essential for expressing our terroirs.

Your family has a long tradition of winemaking in the village of Pünderich. Can you tell us about the Busch's history?

The Busch family has indeed been making wine in Pünderich for a very long time. In our area, there weren't really any other opportunities outside of agriculture. Most families made wine from the Marienburg, worked fields (potatoes and vegetables) and raised livestock and horses. It was a much more self-contained and self-sustained context than the world we live in today; since most families worked in polyculture, there was no real economic pressure since we could provide food for ourselves.

My grandfather was the first to focus exclusively on wine. He developed a good reputation and had a lot of customers all over Germany. This permitted him to expand by purchasing more vineyards from other growers, and he also had a side business buying and reselling VDP wine in auctions. He started in the early 1920's and became quite successful.

After the second World War, everything collapsed and he had to start from scratch. My father had gotten involved at this point, and the two re-focused solely on their own production.

How did you personally get involved?

I started in 1974, when I was 17 years old. At the time, it was normal to learn everything from father to son in the winery; going to school for viticulture and oenology was unheard of. The first vintage I helped produce was 1975, which was a great vintage, not only in quality but because it was a very easy year to work in the vineyards.

When you started, what was your philosophy towards viticulture and winemaking?

After the WW2, the main focus for many of that generation was to make money. It was a very tough economic time. But over the years, I began to form my own ideas and work philosophy.

By 1976 I had already stopped using herbicides, and this was the first step towards organic production. It was a simple observation on my part: "*Why can't we live with the herbs?*" It just felt completely normal to respect this, and after 3 or 4 years, I started to notice more and more humus in the vineyards, which encouraged me to not use fertilizers.

In the early 80's, I met some local growers from the middle Mosel who were also interested in organic viticulture, and this is when my philosophy became more clearly defined. Once we started using plant based concoctions as fungicides, this pushed us in a new direction.

What about in the cellar?

We work with old oak. My father worked with spontaneous fermentations, so that was always totally normal to me. I've never had a problem with fermentations.

What about sulfur use?

I've been experimenting with sulfur since the 80's. Back then, I knew of only one producer who made sulfur free wine, but they weren't very good. The wine had no sulfur, but it was made with industrial techniques, and only ended up being commercialized for about 2 years.

Still, it served as a motivation for myself and a few other organic producers to experiment. I've been trying for 30 years, and I still haven't figured out a way to make a wine without sulfur that I am satisfied with. As you know, we recently bottled a small amount of sulfur free Riesling Trocken. Some people really like it, but for me it's more about the experiment, to further understand what it tastes like. And this is a strange wine: fermentation took 7 months, it spent two years on the lees and had a long maceration of 48 hours. But it still doesn't work, at least not for me.

I've tasted many sulfur free wines from Italy and France that work. In their cases though, I do feel that their situation is better suited for this choice than mine.

Why do you think that is?

I think it's the Riesling grape and our terroirs. But this will not stop me from continuing my experimentations! For now, I'm happy with promoting low sulfur Rieslings.

Can we talk about the Marienburg? It's quite a place.

The Marienburg is a wonderful vineyard. It's exposed full South, it's very steep and there are multiple terraces with totally different micro-climates and soil compositions. This makes for a very diverse experience both in the vines and with the wines. It's also right in front of our house! I open my kitchen window and there it is! It's very inspiring drinking a bottle of wine in the evening with the lay of the land right there in front of you. It's almost like we live directly in the vines.

It's also worth mentioning that 80% of it is planted in old vines.

As far as the vineyard's history, the multiple terraces within today's Marienburg all have historic names, and in fact Marienburg used to be the name of a specific part of the hill, not the entire thing.

It was decided in the early 70's that these multiple designations were too complicated for the international market, and that a larger, unified vineyard site would be simpler to remember. But for us, the different soils and microclimates of the Marienburg are what make this land so interesting in the first place. We therefore chose to bottle and name our wines based on the parcels' original names (Farhlay, Falkenlay, etc...)

This law also permitted wine from nearby plains to carry the Marienburg designation, correct?

The Marienburg designation covers 80 hectares of vines, and only 25 of those are on the hills. We own 16 of these 25 hectares, and as far as I am concerned, the vines directly across from my house are the only ones I would actually call Marienburg.

So you own over half of the Marienburg?

I started with 2 hectares on the Marienburg spread over 16 parcels! At the time, it was impossible to work organically, because each parcel was too small and isolated. The biggest was 725 meters wide and the smallest 123! So we started buying neighboring bits as opportunities arose, but everything really started changing in the 80's.

Many growers of my father's generation retired without an heir, as their sons were not interested in the hard work involved in maintaining the terraces. Those that did continue making wine began following the trend and high demand for German Pinots (blanc, gris, and mostly noir) and other red grapes, which are more suited to be grown on plains. And also much easier to work!

As the hill progressively got more abandoned, I saw this as an opportunity to get the best vineyards in the best sections. I wanted to focus on my region's traditional grape (Riesling represents 99% of our production), but also the luxury of having 1.5 hectares or more of vines in the same place is a great privilege in the Mosel.

When did you decide to have each bottling's foil be the color of the slate the grapes were grown on (red, grey, blue)?

We changed the labels in 2006, and we started using the color indicators at that time. It was a marketing friend of mine's idea, and it totally made sense to me. This makes it exceedingly easy for sommeliers and the consumer to easily identify the terroir.

What do you like to drink?

I'm a big fan of Burgundy. Another recent favorite is Muscadet. As long as it's interesting, I want to try it. The last ten years have seen an explosion in the amount of estates working with philosophies I align myself with, and it's been very fun discovering all of these!