

The Prince and his White Knight

The owner of the Prince of Hesse Estate did not really understand much about winemaking in the beginning, however he gave his Winery a revamp and it is now reaping rewards.

The news of the 1.36 billion dollar takeover of Californian wine-tycoon Robert Mondavi's prized business by the Constellation Brands, the world's largest wine group, was announced in December 2004. This marked the end one of the most legendary wine businesses in America, as well as redundancies in its Frankfurt-based European importing arm, led by Lenz Moser, fifth Generation of the Austrian wine estate dynasty of the same name. A number of the ex-Mondavi sales team stayed in Frankfurt to join Lenz Moser to form the wine company "TxB" – short for "Thanks Bob"; a sign of appreciation to the late Robert Mondavi, who died in May of this year aged 94. The new sales team is Bob's Praetorian guards – professional, bustling and experienced – simply the best.

Around the same time, Prince Donatus of Hesse was deliberating about what he should do with his Estate in Johannisberg, which has been in his family since 1957 and had been suffering from a poor quality image. Shortly afterwards, the Prince and Lenz Moser met up and both soon recognized the problems, and this formed the basis of a great business partnership, reminiscent for Moser of Mondavi's joint-venture with Baron Philippe de Rothschild in 1978 with the birth of the cult wine "Opus One".

"I don't have wine in my blood", admits Prince Donatus of Hesse, "as Chairman of the Board for my family's trust, I manage property, hotels and museums, as well as the Stud in Panker, Schleswig-Holstein, where I was brought up". Meanwhile he takes a different, more personal view on wine. It was less of a question of oenology, more about capping the yield; "we had a lot of rough edges to file out, and that cost money".

Right from the beginning, he drafted in the talented Dr Clemens Kiefer, 35 years old, as new Director, empowered with the operating responsibilities of the estate as well as its vast, ongoing improvements and refurbishment, the first of which was to lease off vineyard sites that were not situated within a reasonable distance from the Estate. "We pay particular attention to the alcohol levels in our Rieslings as well", explains Kiefer. The Prince adds that "maybe we used to produce wines of a good quality", however earlier vintages were perhaps not consistent in quality; but now they shall be.

When Lenz Moser, the White Knight from TxB, came onto the scene, he made sure that at least 95 per cent of the harvest was sold in bottles. The cellar is empty – and the Prince beams like a Cheshire cat. Lenz is more reserved, but is clearly content with the way things are developing, “our partnership is based on a handshake, we don't have a contract or anything, right Don?” The Prince confirms this knowingly, “Now we can finally let the professionals sell our wines”.

This is not usual practice for a German winery, where the owners still deliver cases of wines in the boots of their cars, and even the Barons and Counts are no different.

Smaller wine estates can react more quickly than larger operations. “They sell their wines, of course, but not often at the right price” states the Prince, and judging by the quality his wines, he is still too cheap. “Our goal is to be in the Top Ten Estates in Germany.”

Big words are one thing, but how do the wines match up to such stiff competition? Accordingly, the trio of Moser, Kiefer and Hessen conducted a benchmark tasting with twelve wines served blind under the grand crystal chandeliers of Schloss Hotel Kronberg, incidentally also part of the Prince's family trust: Twelve Rieslings from the Rheingau. The range of styles was staggering, from the technical and cold, temperature controlled examples to a riesling that had been fermented spontaneously with skin maceration. Robert Weil from Kiedrich had established the cold-fermented, fresh style of Riesling back in the 1990s – but now with so many styles available, it is difficult for an estate to create a new style whilst reinventing itself as well.

During the tasting, the Prince exclaims, “It is the sixth, isn't it Dr Kiefer, that's our wine, right?”. The Estate Director refrains from comment, politely mentioning that the tasting is not yet completed. He later reveals the wine number six as being a Riesling by Robert Weil.

Two weeks later, on the terraces of the Johannisberg we are once again met by the trio, who this time present us with tank samples of three 2007 Erstgewächs Cru Rieslings. Animated by the good moods of our hosts, the single-vineyard ‘Winkeler Jesuitengarten’ is delicate and lacy, with opulence and a richness of texture on the palate with flavours of ripe fruit characters. The next Cru wine is the ‘Hasensprung’, which by comparison is intense, weighty and vigorous with complex aromas. Dr Kiefer's third bottle stems from the exposed, higher altitude single site called the ‘Winkeler Dachsberg’. Contrary to traditional white winemaking, this Riesling is fermented on the skins like a red wine. The results are uncanny, beginning with the bright golden colour, intense aromas of apricot and silky tannins. With wines like these, the future of the new Prince of Hesse Estate is guaranteed:

Needless to say, thanks to an increasing demand for the wines from established and emerging foreign markets, with interest from as far afield as Bangalore, Singapore, Shanghai or Boston, let us just hope that enough remains over here for the German connoisseur.

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