

Fungus resistant grape varieties - A dream for sustainable winemakers?

Grape varieties that hardly need any pesticides: Sounds utopian, but it's reality. It's just that it is difficult to make good wine from it. We still have recommendations.

By Gero von Randow published on Nov. 6th, 2020 in the German Magazine "Die ZEIT".

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Long finish and a hint of blackberry? Anyone who talks about wine often ends up in the fuzzy area of empty phrases - it doesn't have to be! "[Wein doch](#)" shows that true specialist knowledge about wine often arises from very simple questions. For example, whether white wine is really made from white grapes. Or why Riesling tastes different everywhere in Germany.

Irony and sarcasm aside: I have never struggled with a text about wine as difficult as this. It's because I know from close observation how tough the winemaking trade is. That all the effort is ultimately put into a product that the winemaker hopes the consumer will enjoy. But then comes the public criticism. An easily curved, sharp weapon that can be ruthless.

Large companies or wineries with a lot of money in the background can of course get over public criticism. With small businesses, on the other hand, especially if they dare to do something new, we should treat them carefully and with appropriate humility. If I don't like their wines, I only mention them to my friends and in conversation with the producers.

Now it comes. A reader recently suggested that I write something about Piwis. These are fungus-resistant grape varieties. New breeds that defend themselves against certain diseases, which is why less crop protection is required, ideally none. Such ecological model boys have existed for decades in several countries. They have never caught on in the market, although they deliver good yields and therefore allow moderate prices. What the cause of it might be? The taste, I thought so far after a few unpleasant encounters with Piwis years ago. But the reader's letter piqued my curiosity. Maybe something has changed?

After which I tried piwis for four weeks. Sometimes I bought the bottles, and sometimes they were sent to me as samples, for which I thank you.

To put it bluntly, it was a tough time. With a few exceptions, the overall impression was negative. And no, I didn't make it easy for myself. I kept opening bottles for two or three days and tasted them again and again. In between, and I'm not kidding, I feared something was wrong with my taste buds, which is why I tried to normalize them with other wines or with a glass of apple juice, champagne or cognac. But no sooner was the next Piwi in the glass than it started again and the tongue twisted.

I suspect that most new varieties aim for stability and yield and that it is therefore difficult to make complex, fine wines from them. It often seemed to me as if the winemaker was trying to get the most out of his Piwis through a lot of work. With the result that in the programs of a number of companies it was not the slightly more expensive wines that were better, which were usually presented as hard red or exhausting whites, but the so-called base wines.

The 2019 Cabernet Blanc from the [Wilhelm Zähringer](#) winery in the Markgräflerland caught my eye. Plant manager Paulin Köpfer has been with the company since 1987, a resounding name in the scene; the first specialist book on organic viticulture that I bought decades ago was written by him. The inexpensive Cabernet Blanc is a so-called estate wine, which is considered a simpler category. The scent is a bit austere, but pleasant and fresh, reminiscent

of meadow flowers. If the wine is not too cold, its varietal taste emerges positively. A mouthful of wine, reminiscent of Silvaner. At least that's how I felt.

The 2019 Johanniter from the [Lanz winery](#), which is located on Lake Constance, belongs in the same class. A white, personable all-rounder for around ten euros. It can accompany you for a whole afternoon and evening without being exhausting. I tasted some dried tomatoes, and if there had been fish in the house ... but it wasn't.

Then Kunigunde appeared. This is the name of the attempt by the company [Galler](#) to produce a premium wine with the Satin Noir grape variety. The deep red wine, matured in small oak barrels for 22 months, is spicy and compact, although too aggressive at the moment. Patience! Promising fruit can be found behind the dense tannins. In four or five years, Kunigunde should have found her balance.

However, a wine from Ireland took the cake. You read that right. Ireland. There, the German winemaker Thomas Walk cultivates a grape variety that was originally bred in what was once Czechoslovakia and then further developed by the legendary "Reben-Becker", the vine researcher Helmut Becker at the Geisenheim university location in the Rheingau. The variety is now called Rondo. After several attempts with other varieties, Walk only cultivates these. Rondo's vines could be attacked by so-called "downy mildew", "but we don't have that," says Walk. He does not use any pesticides at all.

What about the wine? I especially liked the [2013 Ruby](#). The bouquet is spicy, almost fleshy, you can also make out some cherries and a cigar box. In the taste black currants, blackberries, sour cherries, sandalwood in moderation, in the aftertaste a nuance of smoked ham. The wine matured in steel tanks is complex, but not a taste bomb, but fine and reserved. Only eleven percent alcohol. Quite old European style, one you could say, and now that I'm writing about it, I would like to open a bottle again.

I have already tried many innovations that wanted to surpass the existing. Heavier, more powerful, more loud. Higher faster further. That was almost never fun. Walks wines are different, they stand for themselves, non-conventional. That's how it should be.