

Pigott's wine - part 1

4 Nov 2009 by Stuart Pigott

Berlin-based wine writer Stuart Pigott, one of the most celebrated in Germany, has just made his first-ever wine. Here's the first part of his account of the process, all a result of his studies at Geisenheim at the ripe old age of 49. He calls it 'Blood, sweat and the truth about IRP' and it is also published, unillustrated and in PDF form at www.stuartpigott.de.

He says of the 2009 vintage in Germany, 'it looks to be an extremely good vintage here, for producers of the white Pinots in the south the first really good vintage in some years. For red Pinot, Silvaner and the early-ripening grapes it's spot on. There was some rain during the latter part of the Riesling harvest, but also a lot of fine weather. The growers I spoke to on the Mosel and Nahe were delighted.'

18 Aug 2009: 'Now there's nothing you can do but wait', young German winegrower Christian Stahl says to me with dry seriousness, 'except, pick the grapes when the time comes'. Where have his normal dangerously wide grin and devilishly glinting eye gone? There's no hint of provocation or iconoclasm, not even a whiff of throwaway irony. In fact, it sounds like solid advice from the voice of experience, which is the last thing I ever expected to hear from the Quentin Tarantino of white wine. Maybe that's the reason that it makes my heart pucker, collapse in upon itself, then sink to the ground like a punctured airship.

Christian and his wife Simone are a pair of young and daring wine entrepreneurs who in the space of very few years have turned an unremarkable family-owned farm in a dot-on-the-map-sized village in Middle of Nowhere Germany called Auernhofen (Franken) into a shooting star in the heavens of the nation's wine producers called Winzerhof Stahl. That's where we are now, 49° 31′ 19.45″ N, 10°, 06′ 18.15″ E.

What makes this dynamic duo remarkable is not what they achieved before reaching 30 though. No, it's the way they did it which makes them so different, even in the context of Germany's many ambitious and creative young winegrowers. Ignoring well-meaning advice to take one of the well-trodden long and winding roads to success, they shot straight in an unexplored direction.

Here at Winzerhof Stahl you'll find no flashy, over-priced new red wines in absurdly heavy bottles attempting to ride the rapidly fading global red wine boom. Nor do the Stahls make any exaggeratedly sweet Rieslings which so many of their ambitious colleagues use to cream off high scores from the critics. The ponderous pseudo-New-World opulence of many fashionable new dry German wines also leaves them cold. Instead, they focus on explosively aromatic dry white wines of dazzling brilliance which burn themselves into your memory like a cattle rancher's brand into an animal's hide. 'Stahl' is German for steel and it fits both them and their wines spot on.

Christian's words deflated me so abruptly, because I expected this moment to be some kind of personal high, even achievement, though I normally despise that word, and he just turned it into a total anticlimax. You see, the grapes he's referring to are mine. I'm a wine journalist, have been for 25 years, but this year, and only this year, I'm also a winegrower. This has nothing to do with money and everything to do with *re-search*. I thought I knew what winegrowing was all about, until I started this experiment.

Gonzo

I call my professional method *gonzo wine journalism*, by which I mean that I'll do anything and everything to get close to my material in order to get at the truth, my own truth. In this case it means literally becoming my own subject; I'm the specimen in the petri dish and the scientist examining it in one. This odd-sounding situation is exactly what I wanted though. Other wine journalists are welcome to more sedate and familiar forms of truth, but I can't believe anything will come of taking the routes marked on all the maps yet again.

Our personalities and temperaments may be chalk and cheese, but the Stahls and I have something far more fundamental than personality in common. We're all on the do-or-die wavelength and can't imagine moving anywhere more cosy or convenient.

During my visits here during the last six months I've been doing something which I should have done a long time ago;



finding out what all the different aspects of winegrowing are really like by doing them myself. Looking back, it was very un-*gonzo* of me to imagine that a quarter of a century of observing winegrowing from a comfortable distance could somehow make up for getting my hands seriously dirty in the vineyard and cellar.

The Stahls made this possible by lending me 10 of their rows of Müller-Thurgau vines on a precipitously steep hillside in the remote Tauber Valley 10 kilometres from here. This site has the almost impossibly cute name of Hasennest, or the hare's nest. Of course, hares don't have nests, instead living in burrows like rabbits, but when it came to German wine names a generation and more ago, facts like that were never allowed to get in the way. With its rocky limestone soil permanently slithering away from under my feet and an exposed position over 1,000 feet above sea level, there's absolutely nothing cute about working there though.

Next to me is my new friend Helmut Reh, a robust and youthful-looking 52-year-old ex-physiotherapist turned winegrowing student from Regensburg. He and I have just completed the last day of the summer work in 'my' vineyard there and were a bit shocked to find that the grapes are now all soft and beginning to yellow, that is they're entering the final phase of ripening. That didn't mean there was any less to do and we both gave it all we had yesterday afternoon and today. Considering my amateur status, I figured it must count for something that I'd got this far without a major setback, much less losing the crop. Now all of this work, 100 hours filled with buckets of sweat, some blood and a few tears, suddenly looks like nothing more than a preamble to the real business of making wine, whose success is entirely dependent upon the weather.

If it remains warm - today it was 30° Celsius and about 50% humidity, yesterday another 2° and 30% more than that - but the hot sunshine of the last days is replaced by heavy rain, then all the grapes will turn to fungus before I can pick them. My goal is to make a powerful dry white that can stand up to the Stahls' own wines, and for that I need grapes which are fully ripe and completely clean. [At the risk of spoiling the suspense, I offer you this picture of Stuart's fully ripe grapes.] Given that goal, there's no way around those requirements.

I heave a deep sigh and wonder what my fate will be. I'd rather have cool weather, though definitely not a return to the ice and snow of late January and early February when I pruned the vines and got my first taste of the continual struggle not to slide downhill close to what felt like the end of the world.

Tarantino of wine

We're standing in the front of the U-shaped group of historical buildings which house Winzerhof Stahl. What was it about the Stahls, their wines and this place which made me ask if they'd hand over 400 of their vines to me to cultivate as I saw fit for a year?

I guess it was that everything looked right to me, but I knew it would look wrong to almost everyone else. I saw the opportunity not just to make a pleasant wine, but the chance to make something startling and maybe extraordinary the first time around. The fact that the Big Wide Wine World could only find my undertaking extreme, just as it does the Stahls' wines, was no less seductive. Sure, it's a risky path and metaphorically I could fall as spectacularly as I have done physically in the Hasennest untold times.

From Christian's first vintage in 2000, the Stahls have been controversial, frequently drawing damning criticism or being damned with the faintest of praise, then scoring spectacular successes in blind tastings and competitions to the consternation (and often annoyance) of the doubters. The one thing which never happens is that someone says, 'yes, that's OK...' - much less, 'oh, what a cute wine'.

Christian never flinched, regardless how harsh the latest setback was or how lavish the most recent praise, as if for him this rollercoaster ride was the inevitable result of their chosen path. Simone took it all in her stride too, which is quite something for a young woman who previously worked in the cosy office of a rural tax consultant. In five years I never saw or heard either of them waver from their eccentric course, in fact I'd say the setbacks only hardened their resolve to show the Big Wide Wine World that in places the experts say are unworthy of anything approaching grand cru status and with grape varieties the same experts regard as third rate you can make dry white wines that blast rows of pretentious, expensive cult wines off the table. That is if you are as steely as the Stahls.

In the final analysis this is what makes the Stahls' dry Müller-Thurgau from the Hasennest like no other wine from this grape variety I ever tasted. *Müller*, German for plain old Miller, is supposed to be the ultimate anonymous softie white wine, not least because during the Bad Old Days of the seventies and early eighties millions of bottles of cheap 'n' sweet Liebfraumlich were filled predominantly with Müller. During the same period a glut of wine from equally innocuous wine



from this grape and a price-cutting war almost led to the complete collapse of the New Zealand wine industry. That was back in the nation's Wine Stone Age before it turned itself into the biggest Sauvignon Blanc factory on Planet Wine and became mega-eco-cool.

Tasting Stahls' Hasennest with a head filled with these expectations would be like going into a movie theatre expecting a Walt Disney animation populated by computer-generated fluffy animals to find Quentin Tarantino's latest blood bath splattered over the screen. The first time I tasted the 2008 vintage back in February was like being attacked with a samurai sword, so pitiless was the sensory overload. Even the fruit aromas had a savage intensity. That's when I realised that Christian Stahl is the Quentin Tarantino of white wine.

Although it's from the 'wrong' place and the 'wrong' grape variety, it makes many of the most expensive white burgundies - according to most of my colleagues, unquestionably the most concentrated and authentic dry whites on Planet Wine - taste rather comfortable and well-behaved.

Helmut's got to head back to Regensburg, where his wife and dinner are waiting for him, so Christian suggests a tour of his new winery, the Stahlwerk, or Steelworks. I'm anxious to see it too, because this is where my grapes will - the Great God of Wine willing! - first become super-sweet juice, then turn into an aromatic and refreshing alcoholic beverage.

To reach the Stahlwerk, Helmut and I follow Christian through the building at the back of the courtyard, which was originally constructed as a pigsty and you can see it was too. Five years ago when I first visited the Stahls, the first room with white tiled walls, which now serves as a packing hall, was the cellar. Back then it was lined with a menagerie of stainless steel tanks, except for one corner where a beat-up old IKEA kitchen was marooned. It served as the lab.

For anyone used to the gleaming architecture of modern cellars, it would have been incomprehensible how clean wines could be made here, let alone exciting ones. Now the tanks have been pushed out back into the open-fronted part of this ramshackle building where they're waiting for the end of the Stahlwerks' construction (seen here) and their move into it.

Helmut is wide-eyed at the no-holds-barred improvisation which enables the Winzerhof Stahl Show to go on under these chaotic circumstances. This is not what his physiotherapy practice looked like! I think he'd be a good deal more shocked if it weren't for the fact that yesterday he saw rather similar scenes at the famous Fürst estate in Bürgstadt/Franken, where a similarly extensive building programme is also nearing completion. Helmut knows the Fürsts well, because he worked there for six months prior to studying winegrowing and winemaking at the famous wine school in Geisenheim/Rheingau.

That's where we met on day four of the winter semester last October. He was the first student to speak to me. I'd just begun two semesters of study at Geisenheim as a guest student in order to prepare myself for this practical initiation into the rigours of winegrowing. Or, to put it the other way around, my work here is an experiment in which I am testing out the strategies and techniques I learnt in theoretical form in Geisenheim. The story of my student days and nights will have to wait for another time.

I point out to Helmut the narrow-gauge caterpillar tractor which Christian uses for much of the cultivation work in his Hasennest vineyards. When Christian agreed to give me and my winegrowing experiment a home I told him that as a non-driver there was no way he'd get me to sit on that thing. Now I reckon he was glad I came to this conclusion myself, because my 10 rows of vines are so steep that he can only drive the caterpillar between them in the downhill direction and that only when the soil is on the dry side.

The last few days are the first dry spell we've had in months, so even if I'd been willing and able to drive the thing, it wouldn't have helped me much. At least rejecting the motorised approach to vineyard cultivation right from the beginning helped prepare me psychologically for recurrent and strenuous tasks like weed control with a hoe. The only thing I haven't been able to do much of was the spraying. The last six weeks conditions were continuously perfect or almost perfect for the spread of Peronospera, or downy mildew, and I couldn't be here the whole time. This meant that Christian and his assistant Hunor had to do the majority of the spraying, and they were busy non-stop preventing a disaster.

We stop at a suitable distance from the now almost complete Stahlwerk in order to get an overall impression of the structure. I'd say it was best described as a highly successful piece of B-movie architecture, since there's nothing fancy or clever about its almost box-like form, but the old bronze coloured exterior walls almost exactly matching the colour of the Stelvin screw caps which all the Stahl wines are closed with.

Christian enthuses to Helmut about how much easier and better he'll be able to work in his new facility and I'm sure he's



right, but the thing which stunned me was how quickly the Stahlwerk went up. One of the standard complaints of the wine industry, so oft-repeated that it's become a mantra of the global wine industry, is that new cellar buildings are never completed either on time or in time for the next harvest. How did Christian pull off the miracle of on time and in time cellar construction? He never worked on a building site, much less supervised a construction project before. Thankfully the people working for the construction company don't know anything about wine', he explains with that wide grin and glinting eye, 'I told them that the harvest would begin in August instead of September and they believed me.'

Helmut looks like somebody just slapped him in the face right out of the blue. In the vineyard this afternoon as the heat and the toil were driving us both close to the edge he told me he thought that Christian and Simone Stahls were totally crazy. It was both a compliment and an expression of shock and awe.

Of course, the fact that the Stahlwerk is an entirely above-ground structure made its construction a simpler undertaking than a subterranean cellar would have been. On the other hand, big trees had to come down to make way for it and the Stahls have packed a huge array of solar panels onto its south-facing roof. In spite of that, it will be finished in just days over three months after the first earth movements back at the beginning of June. Each time I came here for the next round of battle with the thistles in my vineyard, construction of the Stahlwerk had taken another mind-bending leap forward. Last time I was here, just under three weeks ago, the steel frame was up and nets were being hung from it to ensure the safety of the workmen put the roof on.

'The roof-fitters have got the nets to save them, but what was there to save the net-hangers?' Christian quipped sarcastically pointing his finger at one of the logical inconsistencies endemic to Germany's safety-obsessed culture. Foreigners rarely realise that the great majority of German rules are there to protect the Germans from their own senses of ambition and imagination. Christian is a one man, hard-core opposition movement to the predictable sterility which this obsession with risk-reduction leads to.

Inside - shade from the burning sun at last - he explains that a lot of technology still has to be installed, most importantly the cooling system for the wine tanks. Only then can he start moving them and everything else in here to prepare for the coming harvest.

I feel a whiplash-quiver run through me at those words, because this will be my harvest too and I've only got that one shot. One of those stainless steel tanks will be the one in which my grapes either turn into wine or vinegar. It's like a bizarre variation of Russian Roulette in which with one shot I have to try and make a wine that blows my and as many other people's brains out as possible. What made me pick up that damned gun?

But now Helmut says that he really must go and we say our goodbyes. I thank him profusely and as I do so I know which bottle I have to send him as a thank you: a mature vintage of Spätburgunder 'R' from Fürst, one of the best Pinot Noir reds made in Germany or anywhere else. If he hadn't turned up yesterday afternoon and stayed for the whole of today I wouldn't have been able to knock the foliage back from an almost jungle-like state into some kind of order and do the fine-tuning.

That means making sure the grape bunches aren't touching one another or any of the leaves, contact points where rot could easily start if it rains. I also cut some bunches off weak shoots that were too heavily laden for them to ripen fully. That's fiddly work, since each bunch has to be looked at individually, and with 400 vines there are several thousand bunches. The heat and the hillside which felt like it was collapsing under our feet only added to the fun.

The Doktor and IRP

As we make our way back to the driveway and Helmut's car I spot the corner where the 'Dr' has all his equipment stashed, which I guess are all connected with his interest in the soil, bedrock and something he calls IRP. Since Helmut has to be on his way I decide not to point them out to him, though he's heard plenty about the Stahls' new vineyard manager and yesterday he met the stocky, dark-haired guy, who, as usual, remained monosyllabic. My guess though is that Dr Leonard B Schwarz, to give him his full name, was full of respect for Helmut's hard work. The Dr may be reticent, but he knows all too well how arduous winegrowing can be.

It took me months of regularly appearing here before I got beyond the grunts and nods and was treated to a full exposition of IRP, or Infinite Root Penetration. Because a lot of nonsense is circulating about IRP I feel sure the Dr won't object to my putting the record straight. I have to warn you that to a lot of people this ends up sounding like some kind of 'the path is the goal' spiritualism, but for the Dr it's a scientific theory of the greatest importance for the future of winegrowing. He rightly points out that many radical scientific ideas which changed the world were laughed at or



misconstrued when they first entered the public domain. Not that this means the Dr is right, but I have to say that it sounds to me as if he's got an important point. Otherwise I wouldn't bother to make this effort.

You can approach IRP from several angles, one of which is the *terroir* angle, that is with the thought in mind that if the vineyard soil and bedrock beneath it is part of what gives the wine which grows there a taste of the place, then the more root penetration of that soil and bedrock by the vine the more intense that character should be. The Dr pushes this argument to its logical conclusion suggesting that the closer you get to the maximum possible root penetration of vineyard soil the nearer the *terroir* character of the wine will approach the maximum intensity possible, then adds that since we often don't know what the maximum root penetration would be, then the open-minded position is not to set any *a priori* limit on this, ie to accept at least the theoretical possibility of infinite root penetration.

Persuading the vines in the Winzerhof Stahl vineyards to get as close to IRP as possible is the goal in what the Dr regards as a vast IRP-experiment. Next spring he plans to begin boring deep into the Hasennest and a couple of other sites to see how far the roots of the Stahls' vines have penetrated since he began work in earnest early this year, but we'll see if Christian and Simone can find the funds for this ambitious scheme. When they got to know the eccentric Dr and saw the results of some test digging he did in their vineyards, it was only wine quality they had in mind, not proving a controversial scientific theory.

The Dr's ideas were shaped by the way he switched to winegrowing mid-career when he suddenly found himself looking for work in the vineyards of Romania, thousands of miles from the mineral riches of Central Asia. With the questioning mind of an outsider he began doubting the accepted wisdom of the winegrowers for which he felt there was scant basis in scientific fact. He's now completely convinced that when it comes to vine root growth, which is almost completely invisible to the winegrower and wine scientist alike, assumptions are being projected onto reality. This conviction is of an almost religious intensity and once he's climbed on this hobby horse he invariably gallops off into the sunset leaving most people staring blankly at his trail of dust.

That's what would have happened to me if I hadn't paid proper attention in Professor Löhnertz's lectures on soil science and plant nutrition at Geisenheim and was therefore able to follow at least some of what the Dr was going on about. It strikes me that except for IRP, his thinking about vine growth and terroir is completely in line with conventional thinking on these subjects. Every winegrower and wine scientist will tell you that if there's a layer of pure clay a foot under the soil surface, then that will be the limit of vertical root penetration. Of course, the Dr says, everybody with any idea about how winegrowing knows that.

Vineyards of this kind don't interest him at all. Instead he's fascinated by places like the Hasennest where there's no such obvious limit to root penetration in the vertical dimension. In the hillside where my vines grow, their roots can easily enter the limestone bedrock through cracks and penetrate deep into it, according to Schwarz, far deeper than has hitherto been supposed. That the Stahls' vines in the Hasennest didn't even suffer from drought stress during the Summer of the Century back in 2003 was the factor which attracted him to this location, since it suggested that root activity there could already be moving in the IRP direction.

The Dr contends the only reason most experts set that five, six or slightly more meters' limit is because they never really looked any deeper in the right places. Research on vine growth has tended to focus on the above-ground situation, since it is here that the great majority of the substances in the grape are synthesised. Research on the below-ground situation has focused on the mechanism of plant nutrition, but was largely unconcerned whether this took place in the top 30 centimetres of the soil or much deeper.

In addition, there's the simple fact that studying what happens far below the ground is laborious, time-consuming and damned hard work. I mean, who wants to spend untold hours sifting through tonnes of soil to see how many roots are where? That's an in important reason why we don't know where the vine roots actually are in many vineyards, but this is no excuse for pretending that we do.

Hence his determination to find out what is happening deep beneath the surface of the Hasennest and to exhibit the cores he extracts from deep beneath the Hasennest as proof. That would be quite a coup for him and for Winzerhof Stahl!

Christian excuses himself, some of the workmen need his help in order to get on with installing the cooling system in the Stahlwerk. Helmut thanks him profusely, he was warmly received though he joined me at very short notice. Then Christian bounds off, in a hurry as always.



'When is the harvest?' asks Helmut excitedly, 'when should I return?' It's an answer to my prayers. I pull out my notebook and put his name and mobile number on the list of potential pickers. I reckon he'll be one of the small handful who'll actually turn up.

'I don't know, but I'd be surprised if we have to wait much more than a month', I say, feeling another whiplash quiver of excitement rush through. The day of reckoning! The moment of truth!