

## Pigott's wine - part 2

5 Nov 2009 by Stuart Pigott

*This is the second half of wine writer Stuart Pigott's account of making his own wine. See also [Part 1](#). This very long account is entitled 'The mad harvest, wild fermentation and more IRP'.*

**14 October 2009:** I'm on the express train from Berlin to Würzburg travelling station to station, but I'm also shooting towards a head-on collision with destiny. Later today I'll taste the first wine I ever made for the first time. The journalist's job is to write about what he himself never does, but I've turned the tables, done what I usually write about, and the result will be judged by other journalists. I'm expecting to be ignored more than attacked, but neither prospect worries me.

As the horizontal panorama of Brandenburg flies past the events of the last weeks flash through my mind for the umpteenth time. Of course, I've already told the story of my wine harvest many times to friends and on [www.stuartpigott.de](http://www.stuartpigott.de) in German in my Wine Telegram Nr. 80, but as yet not in English for all to read, so hear we go. Those lacking the back story should first turn to [part 1](#) or just dive into the deep end right here.

In a moment of calm, weeks before the storm, I pencilled in Wednesday 23 September as the day of picking and reckoning, but then the long period of dry sunny weather at the end of the summer looked like it would hold forever. In early September whilst I was on holiday in England, Christian Stahl of Winzerhof Stahl in Auernhofen/Franken emailed me a photo of the grapes in the ten rows of vines in the Hasennest site of Taubertzell which he had loaned me. They looked great, already beginning to turn golden and to develop botrytis, or noble rot. On the basis of this and the weather forecasts I read when I returned to Berlin on 12 September I decided to put back the plan by a full week, then beamed all my potential pickers that they should let me know if they could make Wednesday 30 September, exactly 100 days after the flowering of the vines.

To my amazement everyone, except star winegrower Horst Sauer of the eponymous estate in Escherndorf/Franken, said they could make it - due to a TV crew he was expecting that day, the price of being the region's most famous winegrower - and would be at Winzerhof Stahl in time for dinner the preceding evening. We were on runway and ready for take off, nervously scanning the skies for dark clouds!

Now some of you wine freaks out there will be thinking, 'only 100 days after flowering is far too little hang time for any aroma to develop in the grapes!' That might be the case for the late-ripening Riesling, but we are talking about the early-ripening Müller-Thurgau (M-T) grape. 100 days for M-T is the equivalent of at least 115 days for Riesling in terms of the development of the berries. I'm interested in the truth in wine and find it an effective method of blowing prejudice and dogma out of my mind.

The sugar content of the grapes, expressed in degrees Oechsle, has a seriously bad reputation as an indicator of anything but the sugar content of the grapes. However, the fact is that a lot of the most important substances in the berries (aromas and tannins for example) are so-called glycosides, that is are linked to sugar molecules. That's why ripe wine grapes taste much less aromatic than the wines made from them. Only during fermentation do most of the glycosides get cracked apart, 'freeing' the aroma molecules thereby making them perceptible for the first time. So the increase in sugar content of clean grapes really does tell you something about how the ripening process is going. Thank you Prof Schultz of the wine school in Geisenheim/Rheingau for that surprising, but empowering, piece of the truth in wine!

Then Christian rang me at home on the evening of 23 September to tell me that he had picked his Hasennest M-T that day, '92° Oechsle and 6 grams per litre acidity'; a great result for a grape variety many experts tell you cannot go higher than 85° Oechsle. 'We had to pick it because there was 10% botrytis and I didn't want any more than that. The grapes looked very good, though the crop was only 30 hectolitres per hectare. Your grapes look a tick better than ours.' As usual, the Quentin Tarantino of white wine had shot from the hip with laser-like straightness right at the black point in the middle of the target. I quivered with shock.

Had I made a mistake in planning to wait an extra week? I'd estimated my crop-level to be slightly higher than Christian's, but would the botrytis on my grapes spread and shrivel so fast that I had almost nothing left to pick? On the other hand, picking a full week later than him would be another difference between our wines, and I was, am, desperate that my wine

taste different from his. Maybe this decision was exactly right for exactly that reason, but I wouldn't know for weeks. It would all depend upon the Indian Summer holding until we got the grapes back to Winzerhof Stahl on 30 September, or whenever the harvest actually took place.

I tried, unsuccessfully, not to think too much about all this during the following days as I shot around Germany like the ball in a pin-ball machine promoting my new book *Wein Weit Weg*, or wine far away. Heavy cloud and possibly rain were forecast for Frankfurt on Monday 28 September, but it was a perfect autumn day with brilliant sunshine and warm temperatures. On the Tuesday morning the first light clouds appeared as I shopped in the Kleinmarkthalle in Frankfurt for that evening's dinner - leg of lamb with ratatouille, substantial food from excellent seasonal ingredients to motivate and energise my team - then jumped on the express train to Würzburg and the moment of truth I'd been thinking about for so long.

By the time I lugged my heavy bags onto the platform of Würzburg's main railway station at 13.25 the sky was a dark metallic grey and looked heavy with rain. Christian's father, Albrecht, who picked me up, insisted that it was only overcast and was not going to rain at all. He's got generations of farming experience in his genes, so he can read the sky, but I continued to worry, maybe out of habit, it being one of the things we middle class Brits do really well. In retrospect that was pretty crazy, because I was light years away from Middle Class Great Britain. Thank God!

Cooking dinner in the Stahls' kitchen gave me something to do that at least partially distracted me from the ugly colour of the sky. I'd just got the ratatouille on the stove when Katharina Pierroth arrived from Mainz and Helmut Reh rolled in from Regensburg. I met both of these mature students of winegrowing and making during my two semesters as a guest student at the Geisenheim wine school. Just as dusk fell there was Christian with a bottle of his 2008 Hasennest M-T. All-smiles Gwen Goedecker from Rheinhessen with an unexpected companion in the form of curly-wirly Nico Espenscheid, two much younger student friends from Geisenheim, were the next arrivals. It was dark by the time young wine merchant Anja Schröder and middle-aged but dangerous photo artist Vuk Karadzic appeared from Berlin, making the group look even more crazy, but something like a rock-n-roll-band-on-the-road-buzz developed at the table, just as I'd hoped.

I shoved the lamb in the oven and a bottle of 2007 Hasennest M-T was cracked, not only for comparison, but more importantly to further promote bonding within the team. I mean not much more than 12 hours later we'd all be sliding around together on the 68% slope of the Hasennest vineyard! We moved to the Stahls tasting room for dinner to have more space and as I carved the meat our photographer Andreas Durst bowled in his usual whirlwind. 'Sit down and eat!' I commanded, as my mother used to do to me when I was child in Middle Class Great Britain.

I lost count of how many bottles of red wine made it onto the table, but it was enough to knock everybody out for at least half a dozen hours and to make me forget what we talked about except for a few banal words from me trying to prepare them for the next day's exertions. 'I expect it to take us about three hours. Each picker only has to go up one row and down another', I concluded with fatal naivety.

The next morning the sky looked exactly the same as the day before and I expected to feel the first raindrop on my face at any moment. At least this weather pattern meant none of the morning fog, which had encouraged the development of the botrytis during the previous weeks. Would we get the grapes into the cellar dry? And what did they look like now?

The team trickled into the tasting room for breakfast, which gave me and Gwen time to scour the fridge for something, anything edible, to put on the big bag of rolls Christian had organised for us and hunt through the cupboards for any kind of cup-like vessel to serve tea and coffee in. Winzerhof Stahl normally doesn't serve breakfast. Gwen explained that when she left their pension there was a long queue for the bathroom, which is why it was well gone 9.00 when we finally sat down together.

The previous evening I'd told Christian we'd head off for the vineyard around 10.00 in order to be picking by 10.30. However, when we'd finally stepped out with our hangovers into the abruptly refreshing air around 10.15 there was no sign of either Christian or his wife Simone. The note he'd left me on the stairs before he'd set out with his own pickers that morning said simply, 'see you later'. I went back to the Stahlwerk, the young winemaking desperado's new above-ground cellar, but all the orifices in its aged bronze coloured metallic skin were closed tight.

Where were the buckets and secateurs we'd need to pick? There was no sign of them anywhere. Had Christian deposited the two half-ton plastic bins in which we planned to collect the grapes at the bottom of the vineyard as promised the night before? I had no idea whatsoever. We all stared blankly around us wondering what to do, then the team all stared at me

expectantly. All dressed up with no place to go!

After some minutes of awkward hesitation I decided to hell with it and told the team that we'd head out to the vineyard anyway. Probably everything was there already. I left a note in the office to this effect and just a moment before we drove off there were the young and wild Stahls in the over-sexed Audi estate-car they christened Rocket Nr 2 on account of its outrageously high horsepower complete with new buckets and secateurs.

Helmut, Nico and I rinsed out the buckets to remove any plastic odour whilst the others helped Christian load the two bins onto a covered trailer and hitch it up to a car. Then we really were off. Somehow I didn't feel excited only a bit worried about the rain and about how the chaotic events of the day would further unfold.

'Look out, a pregnant cat!' Gwen called out as we turned one of the last corners on the road to Taubertzell. The plump tabby was nowhere near the wheels of Katharina's car though.

'I feel like a pregnant cat myself,' I said feeling overloaded with hopes and anxieties. As a Buddhist those are things I should be doing all I can to banish from my mind. Events would soon brush them callously aside ignoring my wishes giving me a practical exercise in Buddhism; perfect patience is just one of the requirements to achieve nirvana.

11.00 and the team approached my ten rows in the Hasennest under a heavy grey sky, and just as they made their first appreciative comments about the grapes - most of the clean berries a golden yellow in colour, the rotten berries I could see all purple-brown and raisined - came a sharp shock.

'Look out, vinegar rot!' Nico called out from a couple of rows away. He was right too and for a moment I felt distinctly sour myself. Grapes with this highly undesirable form of rot turn pale brown colour and smell of vinegar, which at least makes them rather easy to spot. The question was how much of the rot here was noble and how much was evil? There was nothing for it but to sort the grapes, rigorously separating the clean berries from the suspiciously rotten ones. They would have to be crushed and pressed separately, then I'd taste the resulting musts and decide what to do with them. If either smelt of vinegar it would have to be dumped.

The team gathered around me and I showed them what I wanted them to do by example, picking the rotten berries out of a bunch one by one and depositing them in another bucket to the golden rest of the bunch. In retrospect I'm amazed how they immediately accepted this procedure, since it made their job not only much more time consuming, but also far more taxing. Each of them got a pair of secateurs and two buckets from Christian, and we were off.

This is what most normal people, as opposed to wine professionals, think about when they think of vineyards. The toil that is winegrowing by hand on steep slopes like this hasn't registered in their consciousnesses, because it's physically demanding, often dirty and makes the winegrower work up a mighty sweat, so there's nothing romantic about when you get close up to it, particularly on a brutal incline like this.

On top of this they'd definitely prefer not to hear about how the vines are sprayed somewhere between half a dozen times and a dozen times during the growing season. The fact that organic winegrowers have to do this too (though with different substances to conventional winegrowers) doesn't make it any better in the eyes of the True Believers in the utter goodness of nature. I mean, cancer is also part of nature, but we don't hesitate to have it cut out of our bodies or blast it with poisonous chemicals and/or radiation, so why let rot destroy the grapes before they ripen? Why do so many people want live in a dream world which is complete bullshit? What went wrong to make them long for what they know can't exist?

We'd been working for just an hour when the first journalist appeared, Fabian Hähnlein of the regional *FLZ (Fränkische Landeszeitung)*, and it was already obvious that the exercise was going to take much, much longer than the expected three hours. Everything was different from expected just as winegrowing always is.

In a jeans and baseball boots he was ill-prepared to scramble up and down the hillside and I was amazed when he made it up to where I was working to take some photos. His questions were astonishingly intelligent, he'd taken the trouble to read my thoughts about gonzo wine journalism on the website and made the effort to speak to Christian, Simone and several other pickers. It almost felt as if he were part of the team.

13.00 the chimes of the Taubertzell church clock said to us, but nobody mentioned the idea of taking a break as we crawled our way up the slope painstakingly sorting through the bunches berry by berry. Once or twice I saw a member of

the team stand up to stretch strained muscles and tendons, then look back over the Tauber Valley. Since I'd described this scene to friends in Berlin as looking like an etching from the time of Goethe, I could hardly criticise them taking in the time machine we were in.

After several calls to my mobile to ask for directions, the wine journalist brothers Fabian and Cornelius Lange arrived and clambered up to join us. Like Hähnlein, they looked a tad over-dressed, and they had a completely different kind of excitement to ours, for they were observers with a commission from the Sunday edition of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to write about this for a theoretically sophisticated national audience. Their questions were therefore probing, but they seemed to grasp that these were super-ripe grapes and a super-motivated team.

Vuk was the slowest, but also the most precise about avoiding putting anything resembling vinegar rot in either of his buckets. As the others finished their rows they came over to help him. 14.30 and we'd finished six of the ten rows. By this time everybody was counting the chimes of the church clock and trying to figure out when we ought to be finished. Each of them heaved a sigh of relief when they finally reached the luxury of level ground which was the road at the top of the slope.

The Stahls had disappeared to the nearest supermarket and returned with a bounty of white rolls and German sausage for lunch and everybody's eyes lit up when they saw this buffet spread out on the bonnet of Rocket Nr 2 though it was as simple as my lunches had been when I worked here through the spring and summer.

Fabian Hähnlein asked me if he could do an interview and I was relieved to wash the sticky grape juice from my hands with some mineral water, then sit down next to him at the side of the road. As we spoke I saw the Cornelius Lange unpack a compact video camera, put it on a tripod and start to shoot Fabian Lange's commentary on the day. And it sounded like television, rather than YouTube or the outer limits of cyberspace.

'So you wanted to be the world's best wine journalist, now you want to make the best wine in the world?' Fabian asked provocatively.

'I always tried to tell a good story, now I'm trying to make a good wine', I replied drolly, trying not to rise to the bait.

The Langes and their camera followed us back into the vines for the next four rows and after they'd shot me picking, sorting and describing what we were doing they asked for secateurs in order to help us. This was like the answer to a prayer, because Helmut had to drive Vuk and Anja to Uffenheim station to catch their train back to Berlin, so now I could just pass on their secateurs to Fabian and Cornelius and almost maintain the team's strength. The sight of the bottom of the slope approaching and with it the end of our toils spurred us on and by the time Helmut returned we were close.

17.00 and after six hours of slithering around, trying not to lose a bucket full of grapes and to keep working at the same time, we stood at the bottom looking back up at the grape-less vines. Andreas Durst insisted that before Katharina headed off home to Mainz we must do one of the clichéd pickers' group photos, and in order to be in it himself it was one of those old-fashioned jobs with the timer.

I felt a bit stunned that after eight months of work my struggle with gravity and the vines overly-vigorous growth on that slippery slope was at an end. I kneeled and give silent thanks to the Great God of Wine who had smiled on me enough that I could harvest one half-ton bin full of clean grapes plus another one-third full with rotten berries which might still be usable. It hadn't rained a single drop either in spite of the threatening sky. Albrecht Stahl had been right all along.

I hitched a ride with Helmut, who, knowing the route back to the Stahls' place, took the lead with his car, followed by Andreas in the Volvo pulling the trailer full of grapes, but a false turn resulted in us ending up behind the grapes watching them shake down into the bin as we bumped our way home. Helmut's gaze was fixed on them for a long moment and I guessed this harvest might mean more to him than the most of the others, since he has no vineyards back home in Regensburg, but still gave up a successful physiotherapy practice in order to study winegrowing. Will he one day make Regensburg's first world-class wine? I hope so.

'I'll stay to see the grapes crushed', Helmut told me, his voice full of expectation, as we swung into the driveway leading to the Stahlwerk.

Christian was high up on the stand he built with his own hands for guiding the grapes into his crusher-destemmer by gravity with a little gentle encouragement from a long-handled rake. 'Shall we crush them right away?' he called out to me

rake in hand and I called back that we were ready to rock. With Fabian Lange filming he jumped down, leapt on the forklift, unloaded the bins from the trailer in a flash, then lifted the bin full of the clean grapes high above the stand and tipped its contents on its table-like top. 17.30.

Hunor, the muscular Hungarian-Rumanian worker I got to know when I came here for the first day of pruning at the end of January, climbed up onto the stand as Christian moved over to the crusher-destemmer.

'Switch it to the slowest speed it can go', I told him. I wanted to crush the grapes as gently as possible and to hell with how long it took. He nodded and I moved into position to fish anything undesirable like leaves or larger fragments of stem out of the bin into which the grapes would fall after their passage through the humming machine. Christian put two plastic containers full of frozen water into the bottom of the bin; a primitive method of cooling the crushed berries down from the present 19° Celsius. Then Hunor began easing my grapes towards the funnel leading into the crusher-destemmer and within seconds green and golden berries plus some juice were plunging into the bin. It took less than a two minutes.

Christian appeared with a refractometer in his hand, an instrument for measuring the density of the must and thereby its sugar content.

'Plunge your arm deep into the mass of berries, then let the juice run off your fingertips onto the refractometer', Christian commanded and I followed his orders though it felt pretty disgusting, much to cameraman Fabian's delight. Christian looked through the eyepiece of the refractometer, then handed it to me.

'92 degrees Oechsle!' I called out with childish delight. This meant that even if the rotten grapes gave a must tainted with vinegar or off-aromas, I had the basis for a powerful dry wine with around 13% natural alcohol.

Christian moved the bin containing the clean berries out of the way and replaced it with a clean one.

'Now the rotten berries!' he called out to me. 'Can you get up on the stand, Hunor just got another job to do?' He gestured towards a trailer stacked with 12 half-ton bins of grapes, Silvaner from Marktbreit which the Stahls' own harvest team had picked today. So I clambered up and grabbed the rake. Christian forklifted the bin of rotten berries up next to me and tipped the contents almost directly in front of me. They were either good or garbage, but I still couldn't tell for sure.

The crusher-destemmer hummed again and I slowly pushed the purple-brown mass towards the funnel. This time it was all over in a single minute, then I jumped down, Christian put a drop of liquid from the reception bin onto the refractometer, looked through the eyepiece and passed it to me.

'125 degrees Oechsle', I called out more cautiously. It might turn out to be a wonderful demonstration of the fact that an enormous sugar-content in the grapes alone is no guarantee of quality. 18.00.

We agreed that we'd sprinkle some powdered sulphur over the surface of each bin of crushed berries and add some Panzym clair rapide enzyme to the rotten berries to help us clear the juice after we pressed them.

When would that be? Early the next morning, which Stahl told me meant 6.00, that is after exactly 12 hours' maceration.

Helmut, Niko, Gwen and Andreas all looked pleased as they gathered their things to head off home. It had indeed been an adventure. After they departed I struggled to manoeuvre myself into the shower cubicle due to the same kind of muscle cramp I'd experienced every time I was here to work in the vineyard. Why should this time be an exception?

I'm not really a beer-and-pizza-man, but by the time I got to bed I had a bellyful of both, plus some kind of dry white wine, I couldn't remember anything more about when I crawled out of bed early in the morning of 1 October, then clumsily pulled on my clothes. As quietly as possible - I figured Simone and Christian's octogenarian grandmother would still be slumbering - I made my way across the courtyard under the stars and through the improvised ex-winery in what originally was a pigsty. When I got out to the winery everything was dark and locked up though. 6.00.

Oh well, time for breakfast, I thought and made my way back to the kitchen for tea, bread and jam. Then around 7.00 I could just as well wait for Christian on my bed, climbed the stairs to my room again, lay down and conked out almost instantly. Dreams of mountains in mist...

'Stuart! Stuart!' Christian called to me urgently from the other side of my bedroom door. It was light and my alarm clock

said just before 8.00. Dazed and confused I threw myself out of bed and decided not to say anything. Why cause trouble when he's put up with all kinds of crazy stuff from me the last months? Maybe 15 hours' maceration was better than 12 and this was the Great God of Wine's way of telling me?

As we inspected the two bins of crushed grapes in a corner of the Stahlwerk I spotted a huge hornet on the windowsill next to them, but it looked sleepy. We quickly prepared the press for action, removed the cooling canisters from the bin of clean grapes, then Christian tipped them into it. We closed the press up, then hit the button to begin the press cycle and quickly juice with the appearance of pale unfiltered apple juice was flowing into the collection bath beneath the press. The refractometer gave a disappointing reading though, just 90° Oechsle. Christian shook his shoulders. *Good news, bad news, who knows?*

We pumped the must into a small stainless steel tank where a thermometer resembling those cooks use to measure for roasting meat told us it was 14° Celsius, so the primitive cooling had worked!

Christian guessed it was about 180 litres; a meagre quantity for all my toils if this turned out to be all I could use to make my wine. I reminded myself that a good Buddhist accepts everything and tries to make the best out of it whatever it is.

The sun came out as we moved onto the rotten berries and I couldn't help thinking, well you could have picked one day later, but that's the hindsight and the weather report predicted rain for today. When the darker coloured must flowed from the press the refractometer had better news for me: 132° Oechsle. During the night-long maceration crystallised sugar had gone into solution just like when you soak raisins before using them to cook.

Christian disappeared in search of a container for this much smaller quantity of juice and returned with a large clear glass carboy which had previously been used to store schnapps.

'This will enable us to see what's going on whilst it settles. That's not necessary for the juice from the clean grapes, but we don't know what we've got here', he explained, then passed it to Hunor to clean out. Pumping the juice into the carboy was easy enough, but much of it remained in the hoses and carefully extracting all of this was a fiddly job. In the end we had to add a large bucket covered with cling-film to the carboy to accommodate all the juice. Buckets and cling-film, we were having to improvise seriously. 11.30.

'If you're lucky we'll get 50 litres, which together with the other must would give 100° Oechsle', Christian enthused.

If, if, if...

'Stuart! Stuart!' Christian called to me urgently from the other side of my bedroom door. Dazed and confused I rolled over, saw it was still light and my alarm clock said 16.30. What was he doing waking me after the must had only had five hours to settle. In Geisenheim I'd learnt that this process usually takes 12 to 24 hours. 90 minutes of coma was less than I'd hoped for, but even before I started out on this wine adventure I'd decided I would always take Christian seriously regardless of the circumstances.

As I followed him out to the Stahlwerk he explained that this was definitely the moment to decant the 'clear' must from the rotten grapes, since a scum of wild yeast was forming on top of it and this might start fermentation with possibly disastrous results, since it was still in contact with the solids which had already dropped out of it.

Though it was greatly removed from what I'd call crystal clear, the brownish must in the carboy certainly looked very different from that morning and the scum on top of it was beginning to move about. With a metal tipped plastic length of hose thinner than my little finger and a lot of trouble we extracted the 'clear' juice from the carboy and the plastic bucket.

I guessed we had about 50 litres of the trick or treat stuff. Christian grabbed a wine glass and poured some of the brownish must into it. The moment of truth! To my amazement it smelt and tasted absolutely clear without a whiff of any off odour, much less vinegar.

'I think you could put the two together, but you have to decide', he said, looking pleased with himself that all the fiddling about with this tiny quantity had worked.

'Let's do it!' I replied, feeling enormously relieved, then I wondered how far the must from the clean grapes would have clarified. However, as we pumped it into another small stainless steel tank bearing the number 37, I could see that it was

astonishingly clear for the short time we'd allowed it to settle out. In the bottom of the tank were only a few litres of solids.

Everything was going so much better than I had hoped, even if I had only 230 litres of must, or a crop level of 23 hectolitres per hectare. M-T has the reputation of being capable of five or even 10 times that figure, which meant I had pushed the envelope about as far as it can go. 17.30.

'It would be best if you could add the yeast culture as soon as possible', Christian said, clearly anxious that my must should start fermenting as quickly as possible to avoid the danger of microbiological spoilage. After all, it was hard to imagine that not one cell of that wild yeast scum was in tank 37. He also had 12 bins of Silvaner from Marktbreit.

At exactly that moment, as if the Great God of Wine had commanded him to appear, there was Albrecht Stahl announcing he had to go and collect the 'sledge' the Stahls use to pull the grapes out of their steepest vineyards in Marktbreit. Within seconds Christian persuaded his father that it would be no great detour if also took me to Weingut Luckert in Sulzfeld so I could pick up 10 litres of fermenting M-T with which yeast I was hoping to turn my juice into wine. This idea was all about wanting to ferment my wine with something completely different from Christian's choice of dried yeast out of the packet: Oenofrance Synergy.

The Luckert brothers let all their wines ferment with the *ambient yeast* in the cellar. In the German wine scene this is usually called 'Spontangärung', or spontaneous fermentation, sometimes referred to as a fermentation with 'wilde Hefe', or wild yeast. Theoretically this means a great genetic diversity of yeasts from the vineyard fermenting the wine, but something else I learnt at Geisenheim was that whichever strain multiplies the fastest will ultimately dominate the others. This means that in a cellar where no dried yeast is used one strain of ambient yeast will almost certainly achieve dominance at the beginning of the harvest and if the yeast actually comes from the vineyard is by no means certain.

Minutes later I was in the Stahls white Ducato minivan next to Albrecht Stahl on the way to Sulzfeld. Did I know exactly where we were going? Yes, I insisted, I would find the Zehnhof of Sulzfeld which is Weingut Luckert's HQ, since it is a beautifully preserved 16th-century building in the centre of the old town. Then I suddenly realised that the old town of Sulzfeld is full of such historical monuments. I said nothing to Albrecht and hoped that when we got close my memory wouldn't fail me.

Just after we'd turned off the main road and through one of the ancient stone gateways to Sulzfeld I lost all sense of direction. Albrecht jumped out to ask someone for directions, but then I spotted the lean figure of Ulrich Luckert in a combat camouflage jacket which seemed to say, 'go ahead, make my day!' But he gently suggested we park in his rear driveway directly ahead of us. The battle - against doubt and hesitation? - only takes place in his mind.

Down in the cellar he showed me a graph on which two curves were plotted and explained that the one which dipped steeply first showed the declining sugar content of a tank of 2009 M-T fermented with dried yeast out of the packet.

'We always ferment just one tank of wine that way at the beginning of the harvest to compare with the others', he explained, 'but if you compare that with the second, which is for a barrel of M-T from the same lot of grapes, you'll see that just a couple of days later it was fermenting just as fast. That's the spontaneously fermenting M-T I'll give you 10 litres of.'

I followed him clutching the two empty five litre plastic canisters selected for transporting the active yeast culture to the Stahlwerk. With Albrecht's help Ulrich drew off the 10 litres whilst I photographed the operation. Then our host insisted we drink a glass of wine with him upstairs.

Albrecht wanted to pick up the sledge as soon as possible and I wanted to get that yeast into tank 37, but there was no alternative to a glass of the dry 2008 Silvaner 'Gelbkalk'. Modern Franken Silvaner is typically a fresh yet round, fruity dry white, but in this wine's flavour salty mineral notes, delicately toasty yeast-aromas and discrete yellow fruits were seamlessly interwoven. A wonderful wine, which I'd be in seventh heaven if I came close to matching.

'What does Gelbkalk mean?' Albrecht asked. 'That's the name of the last layer of limestone before you reach the sandstone above it and we have one vineyard where the soil is only Gelbkalk', Ulrich explained, 'that gives the wine a special note every year, so we started bottling it separately.' Albrecht nodded thoughtfully, we thanked Ulrich and headed off.

It was raining and dark by the time we returned, so maybe having picked yesterday wasn't such a bad choice. I felt

pleased that everything had moved with incredible speed since my grapes arrived at the Stahlwerk, since that surely reduced the danger of any microbiological accident destroying the ripe fruit of all my toils. Christian grabbed a large plastic funnel in one hand and an aluminium stepladder in the other. We poured the cloudy, yeast-laden 10 litres into tank 37, then replaced the rubber bung with its clear plastic air-lock. All around me carbon dioxide was bubbling visibly, audibly out of the air-locks on the other tanks. 19.00.

I managed to get a normal night's sleep and the next morning I was washed, dressed, packed and breakfasted ready to go at 9.00.

'Before you go you have to see!' Christian enthused and I followed out back to tank 37. Hesitantly a bubble of carbon dioxide pushed its way out of the airlock, there was a pause of almost half a minute, then came the next one. Fermentation was commencing; *it was alive!*

Christian and Simone just picked me up at Weingut Horst Sauer. They arrived just in time to join the mercurial Horst and I tasting about a dozen fermenting wines in the gleaming all stainless steel cellar which is the Aladdin's Cave of modern Franken wine. Not that there was anything precious or refined about this experience. The whole time a filter was running next to us and one of Horst's team was cleaning around our feet with the aid of a high-pressure hose.

The wine which interested me the most was that from tank 32, the small blackboard hanging from which said: F MT 99° 6,0. This code was easy to decipher as referring to a wine from Fürstenberg site of Escherndorf from the Müller-Thurgau grape harvested with 99 degrees Oechsle and 6 grams per litre of acidity in the must. It had the most amazing pineapple and mango aromas, power, ripeness and freshness, but still had plenty of grape sugar to convert into alcohol before it would become the dry 2009 Müller-Thurgau Spätlese. I suddenly felt very, very small. How can my wine possibly come even close to this beautiful blonde bombshell?

I'm not saying this, but then I don't need to say much as we shoot through empty fields in Rocket Nr 2, because Christian is in full-blooded verbal flow. I ought to have my notebook out to get down all these arrows of outrageous fortune he's shooting into the air, because just like his winemaking they almost always seem to hit the target even if it's invisible when he lets them fly. He's blessed with a dangerous intelligence and has no scruples at all about letting it out to do what it will in and with the world.

This is an aspect of Germany - young, rural, sharp and daring - which the Big Wide World hasn't begun to hear about, though it's not wholly new. Horst Sauer also belongs in this category, even though he's ten years ahead of Christian with his own daredevil programme to turn a small No Name Winery into an internationally renowned superstar. Is there a prize which Horst hasn't won yet? There can't be many left, but the great thing is that it hasn't left a mark on his psyche. The Horst Sauer Ego? I've looked everywhere, but as soon as I think I've found it it slips away.

Instead whilst he gave me a tour of the vineyards and let me taste the grapes he still had to pick I got the feeling that the only thing which really counted for him was the here-and-now-and-in-this-vineyard. I don't envy his daughter Sandra having to establish herself as a winemaker and a public personality next to this charismatic, but breathtakingly modest genius.

That's one point on which Christian has it easier, which is probably the reason that he says things like, 'when it's politically incorrect and in horribly bad taste, but you still laugh, then you know it's Stahl Humour!' We swung into the driveway and I clamber slightly dazed out of Rocket Nr 2 and into the cool dusk. 18.15.

'First we'll go and taste,' he announced, possibly sensing my impatience to discover what had really happened to the contents of tank 37 in the last two weeks, 'we won't start with your wine though, even if it is good'.

I followed him into the brightly illuminated Stahlwerk where the only sound was that of carbon dioxide bubbling out of the air-locks of dozens of stainless steel tanks. I stare at the air-lock on my tank and have to wait half a minute before a bubble hesitantly pushes out with a 'blupp'; after all the action which I missed it's fallen back to the same pace as when I last saw it.

Christian grabs tasting glasses and the aluminium stepladder and we start to make our way around the cellar from tank to tank beginning with simplest wine in the cellar, dry Bacchus from the first day of picking in Tauberzell. The still cloudy wine from tank 35 is bursting with grapefruit aroma and has a sweet vegetal note that reminds me of Sauvignon blanc, crisp acidity and great liveliness.

'Due to climate change this is one of the few places where the Bacchus grape still makes sense, and this year it's turned out particularly well', he concludes.

Christian's M-T von Tauberzell - from the rows of vine next to mine, but picked that whole week earlier - smells of passion fruit and lemon, but this embryo out of tank 33 is still very yeasty, though the racy acidic freshness is already as obvious in the 2008 version.

'Next is the Silvaner from Marktbreit which came in the same day as your grapes, and this is definitely no light wine', he explains whilst drawing a sample off from tank 29. What was 12 half-ton boxes of plump green-gold grapes two weeks ago is now an embryonic wine rippling with muscles.

The anticipation is building as he passes me a glass of still cloudy Scheurebe, which was a very successful addition to his range of wines last year. It's even more succulent than the previous wine with a mix of warm and cool flavours that makes me think of a dessert my wife used to serve in which ripe melon and mango were offset by chopped fresh mint. This indecently young wine also has some grape-sugar it needs to convert into alcohol.

Finally Christian moves the stepladder over to tank 37, inserts a narrow-gauge plastic hose and draws off a sample so cloudy it is almost milky with yeast. In spite of this the green-gold colour is still unmistakable, shines through the clouds. Suddenly without any nerves - 'it is as it is!' as the Dalai Lama says - I raise it to my nose and inhale an enveloping exotic bouquet which is nonetheless subtle. I take a sip and it is as expansive in flavour as in aroma, a mouth-filling wine, powerful, concentrated, persistent in flavour.

'I can taste the alcohol a little', I say, picking on the only slightly negative aspect of the wine I can find. That's the way I was brought up though; always look for the faults instead of the highlights; Anti-Buddhist.

'We'll sort that out by stirring the yeast several times, no trouble', he says to me, and who am I to doubt the Quentin Tarantino of white wines? Even as it is it is so much better than I dared to hope for.

*Killer-Müller-Tauber-Turbo!*

**15 October 2009:** My embryonic wine, at once yellow and milky pours from a hose into the bottom of a 300-litre stainless steel 'Immervolltank' or always full tank, so named because the lid floats on the wine enabling it to be full to the brim regardless of the quantity of wine it contains.

'How has Mr. Pigott's wine turned out?' Ushi Schmidt from the Nürnberg studio of BR, or Bavarian Broadcasting, probes Christian in front of the rolling TV camera.

'Well it is completely free of any faults or problems, which is quite something considering it's his first wine', he replies. 'It smells of coconut and clove', he adds, inhaling deeply.

Not being particularly good at identifying aromas, I'm always glad when someone else does so with confidence. I always note their opinion. Why must I, the 'expert', be the only one whose opinion counts? Of course, in this special case his opinion is extremely welcome. Though my opinion still counts when it comes to the decisions that have to be made about the handling of the wine between now and the bottling next spring, from the moment I start presenting it as a bottled wine everybody else's opinions will be the ones that count.

I'm going to collect them all with the goal of drawing a balance. It's inconceivable that everyone will like my wine, not least because it seems to have a strong personality and strong personalities always result in a parting of the ways. It's hard to believe that won't happen.

As soon as the cameraman feels happy with his shot of my murky wine flowing by gravity from the fermentation tank down into the Immervolltank, he brings the camera down from his shoulder, asks Ushi Schmidt if she has got everything she wants for the report scheduled for the evening news next Monday and when she nods both of them and the soundman start packing up. The fact that Christian and I still have to finish the job is ignored, but that's the way TV constructs its highly-edited, perfectly-illuminated version of reality.

This was a good team though, because all her questions were intelligent though her wine knowledge can't be great. This morning both the camera and soundman slithered around gamely on the scree-like surface of the Hasennest whilst I pruned a few vines for the camera. Normally this would be too early for pruning, but the vine wood was already well-ripened, that is had a hard reddish-brown sleeve of lignin to protect it from frost damage. I was a bit worried about having to prune vines after eight months with no practice following my very first experience. Thankfully, I managed reasonably well.

'Open the door of the fermentation tank so we can get the last of your wine out', Christian instructs me and I turn the wheel that releases the oval stainless steel door with its rubber seal. With the help of the narrow-gauge plastic hose he then siphoned out the last litres of wine into a stainless steel bucket, then poured them into the Immervolltank.

'You have to decide if you want to take any of the lees, the heavy deposit of yeast at the bottom,' he adds and I chose to leave it where it is. I figure that the wine has enough yeast floating in it already to keep it fresh without adding any sulphur dioxide for maybe a month, which ought to be enough time for the aromas to unfurl and though stirring of the yeast to better 'integrate' that alcohol in the wine.

'It looks like you've got a bit more volume than we thought', Christian adds looking at the Immervolltank, 'I'd say you've got 270 litres. Now let's get the lid on.' I hand it to him, he carefully lays it on the wine and with the small hand-pump attached to it he inflates up the plastic 'tyre' which forms the seal preventing air from coming into contact with the wine.

'Let's take down the fermentation tank and you can clean it', he suggests and together we manoeuvred the dumpy meter-wide tank down from the larger tank it was sitting on, placing it on the polished concrete floor of the Stahlwerk. Christian goes out to pack up some wine for the team and leaves me with a high-pressure hose to clean the creamy yellowish deposit of yeast out of the tank. This is quite a messy business, but it comes with the territory. I'm finished just in time to thank the team and say goodbye.

'Now your wine is in the Immervolltank and is cold nothing can happen to it', Christian says to me with a grin as we wander back inside. By 'nothing' he means malolactic fermentation, or the conversion of fresh tasting malic acid into softer tasting lactic acid. That would be unhelpful given the enormous body and considerable alcohol which the acidity must balance if the wine is to taste harmonious, at least harmonious to those who take one of the paths where they divide.

15.30. If I'm going to catch the express train back to Berlin an hour and make it home for dinner, then I've got to grab my things and we have to head off to Würzburg main station in Rocket Nr 2 within a quarter of an hour.

As we make our way to the house Christian explains that the 'Dr', his new vineyard manager, has been taking a lot of flak recently because of IRP, or Infinite Root Penetration, the theory he is attempting to provide evidence for through his work here at Winzerhof Stahl.

I tell him that I've also encountered some people who seem to have a fundamental problem with IRP, as if it were fishbone which they're frightened might get stuck in their throats if they even put it in their mouths for just a moment. Again and again I've amazed by the stoicism with which the Dr has taken seemingly endless criticism, also many personal jibes and the odd word of naked abuse. If I could match him then I'd be a good deal closer to achieving nirvana than I am now!

What frustrates me are the responses along the lines of 'yes, but everybody knows vine roots can only go down five or six meters', as if this were the first law of thermodynamics and there was absolutely nothing to discuss! That's not at all the case.

Recently I stumbled upon a fascinating statement from the late Jules Chauvet, one of the greatest French wine scientists, in a book of interviews with him by the recently deceased Hans Ulrich Kesselring called *Le vin en question*, or 'Wine in question': 'It is known that there is a direct relationship [between soil type and wine character]...but study of the soil has not been made, and probably never will be, why? because the vine plunges its roots into the soil to very great depths, so that one does not know what is going on. One cannot, one cannot, one cannot say anything.'

That makes me feel sure the Dr is on to something and that the activity deep down in the soil which so fascinates him had as much influence upon my wine as all the hard work I did keeping the canopy of leaves and shoots in some kind of order. Next time I bump into him I must thank the Dr for his inspiration, but first I've got to catch that train.

