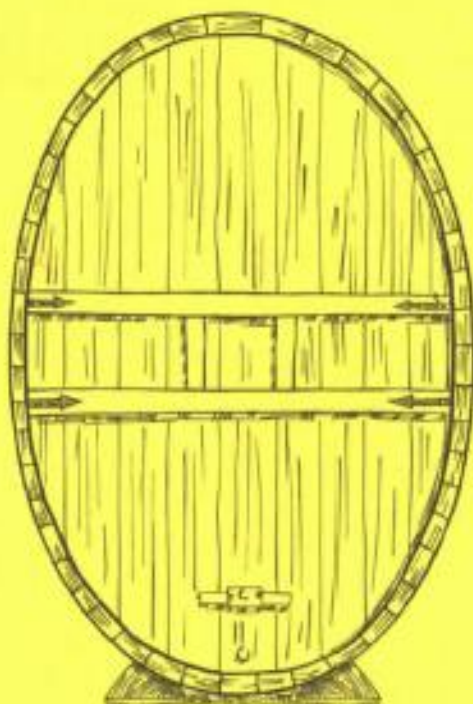


CUVÉE

WINE MAGAZINE



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DOMAINE ROLLY-GASSMANN | RORSCHWIHR

TROPICAL ISLAND IN THE NORTH OF FRANCE

Story: Stefanie Köhler



DID ANYONE SAY ANYTHING ABOUT THE COLD CLIMATE OF NORTHERN FRANCE AND AUSTERE WINES? WELL, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU'VE HEARD, YOU'RE WELCOME TO EXPERIENCE THE CONTRARY AT DOMAINE ROLLY-GASSMANN IN RORSCHWIHR. DON'T LET THE HARMLESS TRADITIONAL CHURCH FOOL YOU WHEN YOU KNOCK ON THE DOMAIN'S WOODEN ENTRANCE DOOR; IF SOMEONE OPENS, YOU'LL WIN A FIRST-CLASS TICKET TO A TINY TROPICAL ISLAND IN RORSCHWIHR, ALSACE.

Marriage has created the domain's double-barreled name, uniting the Rolly family from the granite soils of the village of Rodern with the Gassmann family from the calcareous soils of Rorschwihr. Both families set foot in viticulture a long time ago and their roots reach back to the 17th century. Passionate winemaker Pierre Gassmann runs the domain today, along with his parents Marie-Therese Rolly and Louis Gassmann, who still actively help out at the domain despite their age.

Working with 52 ha spread out over three villages, the domain has an enormously vast variety of soils and different terroir expressions. "Our specialty is that we vinify every type of soil separately, so we make 40 different wines every year," Pierre Gassmann, in charge of the domain today, explains. Most likely ranking at number one in the competition of wine list length, the number of individual cuvées in itself isn't the most astonishing fact about Rolly-Gassmann.

The most northerly plots of the domain are located in Rodern, where blue granite reigns, a very rare type of soil which can only be found in five places in France: Pomerol, Pibarnon, and three places in Alsace – Ottrott, Marlenheim and Rodern. The southernmost plots of the domain are situated in Bergheim, on clayey-marly-calcareous-sandstone soils. In between the two lies the heart of their vineyards, which also is the home to their domain: Rorschwihr. "Here, the vineyards of the whole village extend over 147 ha, with 21 different soil types. They date back to the Primary, Secondary, Tertiary as well as Quaternary eras, but the majority are from the Secondary and Tertiary," Pierre Gassmann says.

BEING A GEOLOGY GEEK WITH GREAT PASSION FOR THE TINIEST DETAIL AND EVERY FACET OF THE DIFFERENT SOIL FORMATIONS, HE LOVES TO SHARE ALL THE INFORMATION ABOUT HIS PRECIOUS TERROIRS.

"We can find all kinds of types of limestone here, for example, so of course every wine has its own identity," he points out.

Although the domain doesn't own any Grand Cru plots, the quality of the wines aren't short of being mistaken for such. The lieux-dits such as Silberberg, Muenchreben and Plaenzerreben create excellent wines, and under the direction of Pierre Gassmann they turn into outstandingly exuberant demonstrations of why a Grand Cru title isn't the final answer to everything.

Working with a team of 22 people in the vines all year round, Domaine Rolly-Gassmann takes care of their vineyard sites and follows sustainable farming techniques. "Our domain is neither certified for organic nor for biodynamic farming due to the fact that in some places we deweed 1 cm under the rootstock, because we have many marly soils from the Lias and Trias era which are very delicate to manage," Pierre Gassmann explains about his vineyards. Besides this exception, they largely apply biodynamic treatments and follow the moon calendar to find the optimal date and time for the most important tasks in the vineyards and cellar.

ALL OF THE WINES OF THE DOMAIN ARE INSTANTLY RECOGNIZABLE BY THEIR DISTINCT HANDWRITING: THEY ARE UTTERLY RICH AND HIGHLY CONCENTRATED, WITH AN INSANE FRUIT COMPLEXITY. DRY ISN'T ANYWHERE NEAR THE GOAL OF THIS DOMAIN; OFF-DRY IS KING!

The reason why these wines are so sought-after, despite the increasingly low demand for sweet wines, is simple and complex at the same time: the magic of these voluptuously ripe wines lies in their unique balance of acidity, sugar, concentration and mineral saltiness. "What we look for in our terroirs is the best grape quality possible, which for us is the most extreme quality we can achieve, depending on the soils

and vintage." Pierre lays out his approach. "Once we have a grape with ripe brown pips, we'll naturally have the complexity of the acids and a harmonious balance between minerals, acids and sugar."

What this means can be tasted in 40 acts at the domain. And don't think you can leave before the play is over. If Pierre Gassmann hosts the tasting, the sensory experience will be extensive and complete, from the eye-opening beginning until the palate-exhausting finish. One thing, however, is guaranteed: every episode of the tasting will be utterly delicious, making it nearly impossible to choose a favorite wine at the end. No wonder his clients usually leave with a case instead of a bottle.

THE WINES ARE ALTOGETHER JUICY BOMBS CAPTURING DELICIOUS IMPRESSIONS OF FARAWAY PLACES, EXOTIC FRUITS AND TROPICAL GARDENS.

They undergo extensive aging before they are released – a habit that has existed in the village for a long time and which the domain has decided to preserve. "This is an extremely old tradition in our village. Before the French Revolution, the wines were kept for 25 to 50 years in the cellars before they were drunk. In contrast, the wines in Rodern, from granite soils, were usually consumed at a young age. Here at the domain we try to keep this heritage alive, and try to keep the wines for about 15 or 20 years depending on the grapes and the vintages. At the moment the oldest wine that we have not yet released is the 1990 vintage," Pierre points out.

With a stock of over one million bottles, roughly equaling five vintages, the domain chooses only those wines for commercialization that have already revealed their unique character. "It's simply time that allows a wine to find its natural balance," he states, explaining the immensely high acidity levels and thick sugar coating the wines have when young. Of course tasting the wines regularly, he decides when the time for a wine has come. Just reading through his wine list, consisting of a few younger and many older vintages, is the official cloud nine for all old vintage wine lovers who have forgotten to start a collection in their cellar.

Describing the wines of Rolly-Gassmann isn't enough to understand the magic and uniqueness of this domain. The only thing that can measure up is knocking on the door in Rorschwihr to let your palate travel to the foreign climes of this tropical island.





MUST TRY

Moenchreben de Rorschwihr Muscat Vendanges Tardives 2003

Peppermint and eucalyptus surprise the nose, followed by an abundance of herbal notes that catch the naive taster off guard: dried rosemary and sage, and hints of medicinal notes reminiscent of Spanish Hierbas liqueur, all integrated into a thick sugar coating. The most delicious medicine one can think of!

Cuvée Yves 2011

Highly concentrated, packed with exotic notes of honeydew and cantaloupe melon, ripe pineapple, star fruit and lime confit, highlighted by a striking, racy acidity that citrates on the palate and doesn't stop until the very long finish with roasted almond notes has faded away.

Rotleibel de Rorschwihr Auxerrois 2003

Can this be a tarte aux mirabelles in a glass? Abundant but not exuberant in its mirabelle expression and creamy notes, with hints of banana mash and underlined by generous spiciness of vanilla, tonka bean, black pepper and cloves. Great freshness hidden inside a thick, well-structured wine.

Silberberg de Rorschwihr Riesling Sélection des Grains Nobles 2009

Attention: fruit explosion! Lots of lemongrass and lemon confit on the nose. Abundant mango, sweet apricot and nectarine on the palate, followed by hints of wild fennel, lemon zest, lemongrass and honeydew melon. All structured and kept in place by a high and very lively acidity.

Rotleibel de Rorschwihr Pinot Gris Vendanges Tardives 1996

Oh, what a Pinot Gris! White truffle notes, bonito flakes sprinkled over soba noodles, brown algae and smokiness. This wine has an insane depth and a unique profile. Can a Pinot Gris really taste like a Japanese dish? It obviously can!

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