
MÜLLER-CATOIR IN THE PALATINATE WINE THRILLER

Paul Grote | Burnt vines | Crime novel | Murder in the Palatinate

Paul Grote is Germany's best-known wine crime writer. As a reporter in South America, he discovered his interest in wine and viticulture and made it his subject. Since then, he has traveled to the most important European wine-growing regions and published 18 wine crime novels. His latest work (publication date: August 15, 2024) is set in the Palatinate. The main protagonist Philipp Achenbach visits Müller-Catoir, among other things...

Chapter 18

Land grabbing

[...] Philipp could hardly or not at all appreciate what it meant to be a ninth generation winegrower. He and the two boys were the first generation at the Achenbach & Stern winery. The Catoirs had probably already worked with the vines and made wine in France. The Huguenot Catoir family could not have guessed that the Catholic king would then have his followers, or rather the Guisen clan, take up knives to kill the Protestants and prevent Henry IV from succeeding to the throne. How could they? Fleeing to Germany was the only chance to save their lives.

Times have not changed, nor have people, thought Philipp as he visited the Müller-Catoir winery. Some flee here, others across the Mekong, others across the mountains, others across the Mediterranean...

The Catoirs had their estate built above Neustadt in the 18th century. The neoclassical extension was made at the end of the 19th century using red sandstone, which was mined in quarries here and, in its yellow variant, shaped the taste of the wines from the first and great locations alongside sandstone gravel and shell limestone.

Philipp reached the front door of the main building facing the street via the spacious courtyard and was greeted by Philipp Catoir after ringing the bell. It was the first time for Philipp that he had been invited to a conversation and a wine tasting in the Palatinate in an almost princely hall under a chandelier with dignified furniture. A wine tasting in this setting was completely different to one in a small farmhouse parlor. Every wine here gained lightness and volume in the spacious room, which should not be confused with fullness. Even though the quality of his wines had led him to the VDP, the boss was less princely than collegial - ready and open to a conversation.

Much of what Philipp Catoir said fell on receptive ears with Philipp Achenbach. There was the move towards organic viticulture, as well as the early greening of the rows of vines and the insight to bring the vineyard system into harmony and thus return to natural cycles. This leads, so to speak, to the awakening of the vine, with a living root system opening up the individual soil life and structure. And the absence of chemicals makes working in the vineyard healthier for people.

Twenty-five hectares were cultivated, a size that also met Philipp's expectations. Twenty-five hectares were fairly easy to oversee and could be worked with a small number of workers, and the work of cellar master Martin Franzen was of course essential here. Grapes had been bought in a long time ago, but that no longer fit in with the current philosophy of the house. The relocation of the vineyards from flat to better slopes above Neustadt had already been completed years ago.

Since its beginnings in 1744, the winery had specialized in white wine, the Scheurebe grape variety was important, as were Muscat and Sauvignon Blanc. Seventeen years ago, Pinot Noir was added. Here, too, vines were imported from Burgundy and the Marsal selection was practiced. It was a pleasure to discuss the methods of tilling the soil rather than worrying about the threat posed by Russel and the like. Although the visit to the vineyard was tiring and required concentration, it was also relaxing for Philipp to discuss the advantages of organic farming, even though it required three times as much work as conventional farming. And in the breaks between rain showers, mildew was not fought with chemicals, but with baking powder and sulphur, to which so-called solubility agents were added to promote solubility and wetting. Only minimal amounts of copper were then permitted.

The advantage of organic farming was that the vine produced fewer berries and the green harvest, the cutting out of too many

grapes, became unnecessary. The vine limited itself. The harvest quantities were deliberately kept low; at Müller-Catoir they ranged from sixty hectolitres per hectare for estate wines to thirty-five hectolitres for grapes for Grand Crus. It was not the quantity that was important, it was the concentration of the ingredients in fewer berries.

The nine wines that were offered to Philipp for tasting ranged from the Riesling estate wine with a wonderful bouquet to the Pinot Blanc from the first location with an ideal combination of wine and the wood from the barrel aging. Added to this was the scent with the aroma of ripe pears and quince and a nutty tone. The Scheurebe, a demanding grape variety, showed a wealth of aromas ranging from mirabelle to peach even in the one and a half year old estate wine. The Haardter Scheurebe was again a completely different wine, of pleasant volume with a delicate scent and, despite its discreet acidity, of beautiful juiciness. Philipp clearly preferred the late harvest from the Mandelring below the estate, whereby the sweetness of the wine remained in the background, but at the same time it had an unobtrusive fullness in the mouth and showed clear aromas of pineapple and grapefruit.

Two Pinot Noirs rounded off the tasting, both were two and a half years old, but they came from different locations, one from the Muschelkalk of the Vogelsang location, which was classified as a Große Lage, the second Pinot Noir was grown on the sandstone of the Herzog location, a Erste Lage in the VDP hierarchy. This wine had more density and maturity, but had similar aromas to the Muschelkalk, which seemed much younger to Philipp. There was elderberry, sour cherry and blackberry, but it did not have the strength and clarity of aroma as its predecessor.

But what was the point? He did not have to separate two great wines. That would be ridiculous. He was here to learn what was available and what was possible under certain conditions. He remained enthusiastic without being jealous of the success or the Große Lage. He had recognized his limits early on, and pushing them was Manuel's job in the future. He could rely on Thomas' advice and willingness to lend a hand.

Müller-Catoir was a quietly run winery, Philipp took this feeling with him after he said goodbye and went to his car, which was parked on the lawn opposite the imposing main building, right next to the vines. He paused, looking at the building - there was a lot to see on the facade alone, decorations that were pleasing to the eye in a world that was far too smooth.

He turned around and looked at Bad Dürkheim, at a town that, seen from this distance, seemed to be from another century, peaceful and pleasant in its tranquility. [...]

