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## RENAISSANCE OF A FORGOTTEN MOUNTAIN

How Neustadt organic winegrowers strive for a top product on the Sonnenweg.

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It began, as so often in life, with a tremendous amount of rumbling. There, where millions of years ago an almost endless plain had spread out, a 3000 meter deep and 300 kilometer long fissure suddenly opened up. The Upper Rhine Graben. To the left and right of the ditch, however, the masses of earth pushed up to a thousand meters into the sky. That was 50 million years ago. And now let's zoom in: In front of us lies the Weinbiet massif on the eastern edge of the Palatinate Forest. And on its south-eastern and southern flank, below the Bergstein, a huge opportunity for viticulture was to arise - of course much, much later. The viniculture of the city of Neustadt.

We make a leap into the present and look from the Hambacher Höhe over Neustadt's old town until our gaze gets caught on the steep mountain hump opposite the city. The Deidesheimer Tempelchen (named after the winery owner Friedrich Deidesheimer) flashes at the top right, on the left there are vineyard terraces up to 260 meters high to the edge of the forest, in between the popular sun path in an east-west direction. So here, on the Sonnenweg, five Neustadt wineries have been getting involved in long-neglected areas for a few years, including three with an affinity for the Kurfürst-Ruprecht-Gymnasium. From their work on the mostly steep slopes, they expect a Palatinate drop that is second to none in the medium term.

Now there are numerous excellent winemakers along the Haardt Mountains, which are characterized by the Buntsandstein, and who have also clearly ventured into the Rhine plain with their estates. It should be added that the rift valley mentioned at the beginning - a weak point in the earth's crust from Basel to Frankfurt - has long since been backfilled to the same level with sediments of Rotliegend, Buntsandstein, shell limestone, Keuper, sand, gravel and the overlying fine-grained, very fertile Loess left behind by the glacier forelands of the Ice Age.

So what is the secret of the countless terraces below and above the Sonnenweg in 2022? It is the renaissance of a valuable urban parcel, which the townspeople have been using for wine-growing since the Middle Ages, but which then lost its importance sometime in the 1960s. Economic life after the war started to flow, people were back in permanent jobs, things were getting better and better, they also became more comfortable, and only very few wanted to bend their backs on the steeply rising Wingertzeile above Sauterstrasse.

Added to this was the decay of the common game fences at the edge of the forest, the purchase of plots by "townsfolk" as leisure properties, the planning of a bypass of the B 39 in the course of the Sonnenweg and partial residential development until the early 1960s and the associated building speculation, such as Klaus Hünerfauth from the city's nature conservation authority knows. As a result, the step formation, which is unparalleled in its complexity, became overgrown. That's not all, the mountain forest that was once kept in check high above the city pushed and pushes down inexorably. The largest surviving historical wine -The cultural landscape on the edge of the Haardt, an invaluable jewel for Neustadt's tourism too, would be destroyed as a result.

There was once a comparable southern terrace slope at the exit of the Isenachtal in Bad Dürkheim ("Sonnenwende"), which was built on or reforested after the war.

But what made the three organic wineries mentioned above, A. Christmann (Gimmeldingen), Müller-Catoir (Haardt) and F. John (Königsbach) get involved in the Sonnenweg? There are two main points: On the one hand it is the so-called terroir that aroused her interest, in this case the excellent interaction of soil, microclimate and topography. On the other hand, there is the desire to

make a contribution to nature conservation in the landscape and bird protection area "Haardtrand - Am Vogelsang" through ecological management.

The year 2018, the beginning of the leasing of the city with A. Christmann and Müller-Catoir, meant a radical break for conventional production in the Vogelsang, Fenichelberg and Ziegelberg areas: a stop to artificial fertilizers and pesticides, less intensive tillage through frequent mulching, plant and destroyed animal habitats. In order to preserve the warmth-loving, local species, clearing and regular pruning is also necessary to avoid excessive shading, as well as the labour-intensive protection of the dry stone walls in the stony cultural landscape.

Clement Heber from the city's nature conservation advisory board points out how important it is to ensure a mixture of open, hot-dry and extensively farmed areas with bushy areas and hedgerows. "This, together with the location at the edge of the forest, is the basis of the high biodiversity." He names hawks, sparrowhawks, kestrel, nightjars, hoopoes, red-backed shrike, green woodpeckers, circl buntings, linnets and - more rarely - the rock bunting as winged residents in the Sonnenweg area the frequently encountered reptiles include smooth snakes and wall lizards. Among the insects there is a rich wild bee fauna. "The walls are an important breeding habitat. The species-rich flowering plant life typical of the location must be promoted and reinstalled. This is the basis for food." Brown-eye and wall fox are representative of the butterflies.

The remarkable thing about the urban vineyards leased by Philipp Catoir (KRG-Abi 1990) and Steffen Christmann (KRG-Abi 1984) is the "gold in the soil", namely an extensive shell limestone plate, which is rarely found in this country. Both VDP wineries grow Riesling and Pinot Noir above the old town in the hope of significantly enriching their portfolio of locations with this project.

It remains exciting to see how the terrain above the Sauterstrasse is developing in a westerly direction due to its reawakened agricultural use while at the same time taking into account the needs of nature.

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