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A woman's sense of wine

A good wine has no gender. Even the most accomplished wine connoisseur would not be able to distinguish in a blind taste test whether a wine was produced by a male or female winemaker. Nevertheless, the stereotype of winemaking as a men's job still prevails. That being said, the number of innovative and courageous women winemakers is on the rise. In conversations with three renowned female winemakers in three different parts of Europe, *Baltic Outlook* attempted to establish – in this harsh and simultaneously refined profession, which can only be practiced successfully with the heightened use of all five senses – whether the intangible notion of a "woman's sense of wine" truly exists.



Elegant traditionalist

Birgit Eichinger owns a winery in Kamptal, a traditional Austrian winemaking region that is best known for its Grüner Veltliner and Riesling white wines.

She was born into a winemaking family and grew up together with her sister in the town of Strass, where her winery is located. Once they reached adulthood, her sister went off to study in Vienna, while Eichinger entered a wine school. "I think my father sent me there to find the right husband – one who would follow in my father's footsteps and make good wines. However, I married an architect and that confused my father. He is very traditional and the thought of a woman making wine was inconceivable to him."

When Eichinger made her first wine in 1992, she had only four hectares of land to work with. Now she has 15.

"My dad liked the first wine that I bottled, but he never said: 'I'm proud of you.' I know that deep down he is proud, but he cannot say it. He is a man."

At first it was hard for Eichinger to find clients for her wine, but soon enough she managed to break into the export market, which now accounts for 50% of her winery's sales. *Birgit Eichinger* wines have received various prestigious wine awards and have been highly praised by *Gault Millau*, *Decanter*, *Falstaff* and other wine guides. The press also refers to Eichinger as a "constant star among Austria's top wineries."

When Eichinger entered the winemaking business more than 20 years

ago, there were practically no women winemakers in Austria. They later joined up in an association named *11 Women and Their Wines*.

"We wanted to show that women can also make good wines. Now there are many women winemakers, including young girls with a good education who have travelled around the world."

Eichinger estimates that currently there are about 40 women winemakers in Austria.

At a time when such terms as "organic", "biodynamic" and "biodiversity" have become the buzzwords of the day, some winemakers have begun to experiment and to make sulphite-free wines. However, Eichinger remains faithful to classical winemaking traditions.

"I don't like these new wines. 'Biodynamic' is too esoteric a term for me. Also the taste and colour of these wines is different. It's not mine. I know that this concept is very modern and everyone speaks about it, but I think that it's more like a trend."

The grapes in the Kamptal region also have a higher acidity content than in Burgenland.

"That is the reason why we have more white wines. Maybe only 10% of the wines in this region are red. And we have a lot of different soils, which is very important and good for us."

Birgit Eichinger wines are known for their elegance and strong personality. According to Eichinger, perhaps only the Rieslings of Germany's Phalz region are somewhat similar to hers. Compared to German wines, Austrian Rieslings "have less minerality but more spices and herbs in their bouquet, resulting in a more Baroque-style full-bodied wine."

Another challenge that Eichenger faces is keeping up with changing consumer demands. During the past four or five years, for example, the demand for very expensive wines has dropped dramatically. Now most wine drinkers would rather buy moderately priced wines, as these are also of sufficiently good quality.

The harvest season in Kamptal lasts from the end of September until the end of November. Eichenger laughs and says she is glad that "the harvest doesn't last for the whole year. Normally I don't smoke. Maybe one or two cigarettes with friends, no more. But when the harvest season starts, then oh my God, it's horrible. I need one pack a day."

Although every harvest year comes forth with its particular difficulties, Eichenger doesn't recall having a particularly bad winemaking year. One year did turn out to be particularly unusual.

"I was three months pregnant during harvest time in 1996. It seemed to be a horrible vintage, because we had more acidity than sugar in the juice. Every sample that I tried tasted terrible. I asked everyone to taste our produce – my husband, my brother, my father. I felt that we had to remove some of the acidity, but hesitated because I wondered if my pregnancy was making me more sensitive to the acid than usual. In the end, I did what I felt was best."

Eichenger's daughter was born in the summer of 1997, the same year when the winemaker received Austria's most prestigious wine award, the Falstaff Grand Prix, for her Grüner Veltliner Wechselberg 1996.

"I must have done something right after all," Eichenger adds.

Regardless of the constant changes in the wine market and the various new trends, Eichenger goes by the motto that a skilled winemaker faces one continuing challenge – "to make a good wine every year".



Wine as a philosophy

Barbara Widmer is a charming woman from Switzerland. Over the past 16 years, she has managed to turn the Brancaia winery, which her parents had purchased, into one of the best-known and distinctive wine brands in the Chianti region of Tuscany.

“Every day is like a dialog with the grapes. You really have to understand what they need and when. You might believe that they will grow better if you do something to them during the full or the new moon. Not many things are totally wrong or totally right. For me there is a lot of philosophy in winemaking,” she says.

Widmer sees an advantage in the fact that she entered the winemaking business completely by accident. A bit more than 30 years ago, her parents had spent a Christmas in Tuscany and fallen in love with the region, so they decided to buy some real estate there.

“At that time in the 1980s, many estates here were empty. Hardly anyone wanted to invest in the countryside.”

The biggest problem was not in finding a house to buy, but in the fact that the owners also wanted to sell the vineyards that came with the houses. “So, my parents became vineyard owners by accident, not by design.”

When Widmer was a teenager, her parents tried to convince her to study oenology, or the science of wine and winemaking. However, since Zurich was not in a winemaking area, she opted for architecture instead, but failed to obtain a

sense of fulfilment in her studies.

“I was 22 when I decided to take a year off and figure out if wine could be my thing. I went to the French part of Switzerland and worked for six months in vineyards, then six months in a cellar. Every day.”

By the end of that year, wine had become her passion, obsession and profession all in one. She then got a diploma in oenology at the technical college of higher wine education at Wädenswil (Switzerland). Currently *Brancaia* produces half a million bottles of wine per year, which means that although the winery is not small, it is not among the largest either. *Brancaia's* red wines have been highly rated and placed near the top of annual wine lists by *Wine Spectator*, *Decanter* and Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate*. The winery's pride and joy is *Il Blu*, which has already become a wine-lovers' classic. Widmer's architect's background, for its part, manifests itself in the atypically bright paints on the walls of her winery's cellars.

“When I compare *Brancaia* with other estates, the fact that my family is not Italian and that I don't come from a traditional winemaking dynasty gives me the opportunity to see the things in a new way. I didn't have a grandfather to tell me what

to do. Of course, not having a background can be difficult because you have to recreate everything from zero, but for me it was an advantage. As long as the product is good, I don't see any limits for doing things in a different way.”

In order to grow superb quality grapes, one has to spend an average of 300 hours working in a European vineyard. In *Brancaia* they spend 450 hours, because all of the work is done by hand.

“We have no difference in the way that we are treat our vineyards. Our philosophy is that every vineyard has the potential to make its best crop and produce our best quality wine. Of course, that doesn't always happen, but it's a challenge. For example, we have one vineyard which we do not consider to be our best. It's not bad, it's about average. But during a rainy year, I will get some of the best Sangiovese grapes there. How can I know in January if it will rain or not in the summer? By keeping all of my options open, I always have enough grapes to make my wines.”

While the Tuscan climate is ideal for grape-growing, the weather remains unpredictable, turning each day on the job into a challenge.

“Even after 16 years, there is always something new and I have to think: 'Oh, how should I do that?' It is only after the fact that you can say 'OK, I did it right the way' or 'Maybe I could have done it better this way'.”

While Widmer is usually open and very communicable, it is best not to disturb her during the harvest.

“Harvest time is very strange. I walk through the vineyards and try to understand what's going on. I check the leaves to see if they are still bright green or if they are already tired. Does the berry still stick to the vine or does it detach easily? Is the skin thick or already very thin? There are a lot of small details that you can only get on the spot in the vineyards. I don't speak with anybody during the harvest and concentrate on my work. We don't send our grapes for analysis too often. An analysis can't tell you what you have to grasp with your eyes, your nose, and with all of your five senses.”



Wine senses

Maria Elena Jiménez is one of two female winemakers who has managed to turn one of the oldest wineries in the Spanish region of Penedès – Parés Baltà – into a truly innovative company.

The winery was founded back in 1790 and from the very beginning its grapes have always been grown organically, as testified to in modern-day times by a certificate. The winery has been operated by the Cusiné family for four generations. The men are in charge of running the company, while the important winemaking process is handled by their wives, one of whom is a pharmacist. Jiménez, for her part, is a chemical engineer. Having worked for several years as a consultant, she entered the winemaking business through her husband and enrolled in university a second time to study oenology. Although an increasing number of innovative and courageous women are studying in this field, the stereotype of winemaking being a men's job has not entirely disappeared.

"The challenges of a woman winemaker are the same as the ones that any working woman finds during her professional career. The difficulty in reaching a certain level of responsibility, the lack of confidence in a woman's opinion. Many women work in the wine industry, but very few have a leading role."

Jiménez belongs to a new and radical generation of winemakers who have travelled extensively, have worked in various parts of the world and who are

very open-minded. They experiment with winemaking techniques from various parts of the world, while heralding local traditions and adapting them to the present day. They are ready to try out new grape varieties and blends, while not forsaking local varieties.

"Our winemaking strives to reflect the personality of our vineyards in an honest way, achieving the maximum potential

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of our grapes, without using any kind of unnatural manipulation."

Like other winemakers, Jiménez sees harvest time as the most challenging and unpredictable period of the winemaking process:

"I do not know if it is the most difficult, but definitely a key aspect is the decision of the harvest time. It is important to ensure that not only the pulp, but also the seeds are completely ripe to achieve the best quality. During harvest time, which lasts about two months in our winery, we visit

the vineyards every day, try the grapes and look up at the sky, as weather and timing are crucial."

Jiménez still doesn't know how this year's harvest will turn out:

"We still have to wait and see. It has been a strange year, and we are finding that the development of the vineyard is different from one field to another, so we will be adapting the winemaking to each case."

One prevalent view is that women make better wine-tasters than men because their senses are sharper. Jiménez agrees to a certain extent:

"As a general rule this could be, because women are usually more aware of all their senses, while men tend to focus on the visual part. However, if we talk about those in the wine industry, then we are talking about people trained in sensing tastes and aromas, so this difference disappears. This is something more cultural than genetic."

In Jiménez's opinion, people taking a blind taste test would find it very hard to determine if a wine was created by a male or female winemaker. She says that her main goal is "to transmit the sensations and feelings I sense in the vineyards into the glass of a person who may enjoy them from far away – that my wines bring a special moment to those who drink them."

Jiménez adds that no matter how highly rated a wine is, the way it will taste comes down to one's emotions and be connected to special events in one's life. Among the best wines that she has ever tasted, Jiménez recalls a 1996 Cheval Blanc red wine that she tried together with friends in St. Emilion, France; and a 1997 Hayne Vineyard Petite Sirah from Turley Wine Cellars of Napa Valley, California, which Jiménez tasted together with her newlywed husband during their honeymoon in St. Helena. **BO**