

## THOMAS STRAKA

In principle, we follow organic plant protection methods: we work with sulfur and very low doses of copper. We do need copper but not more than max. 1,5 kg per year. The conditions in our region are favorable for a limited use of plant protection agents as it is very windy and the mountain range of the Geschriebenstein provides for unique thermal conditions. Thanks to this, we have little humidity on the leaves and thus a lower risk of infection by powdery and downy mildew. As adhesives and depending on the temperature, we use coconut oil



and orange oil which help the leaves to build a firm structure and to support the protection agents. Sometimes, we also apply leaf fertilizers based on magnesium as the Welschriesling grape is susceptible to chlorosis. Like this, we enhance the balance of magnesium and potassium and secure the nutrient supply. We are planning on expanding our range of strengthening and protective methods as from the next year, making use of biodyn preparations (500 & 501) and also teas such as chamomile. I'll just need a little bit more manpower.

### How does your favorite grape Welschriesling react to the various pests and diseases?

In general, Welschriesling is a pretty sturdy grape. In comparison to other whites such as Grüner, its growth is not too vigorous and not too quick. Slow growth also equals less proneness to powdery mildew. Welschriesling really is the perfect grape for our terroir given the interplay of our barren schist soils, the

rather high elevation, the constant winds and its long vegetation cycle resulting in late ripening.



## WABI SABI

At Wabi Sabi, we value freedom and refrain from dogmatics. This is why we take the best from both worlds, so to say, the organic one and the biodynamic one when it comes to protecting the vines. We have tried various methods, also spraying the vines with bacteria only – but we decided not to stop copper and sulfur completely as they proved to provide a sound basis of protection. The organic approach is also the centerpiece of our soil management: in our vineyard sites in the Wachau, for example, the soils have never been ploughed so the flora and fauna could develop in a balanced way over many years which, of course, provides a healthy ground for our vines. We do not open the soil in order not to have an overload of potassium. This reduces the yields, yes, but the quality of the grapes remains at a high level.

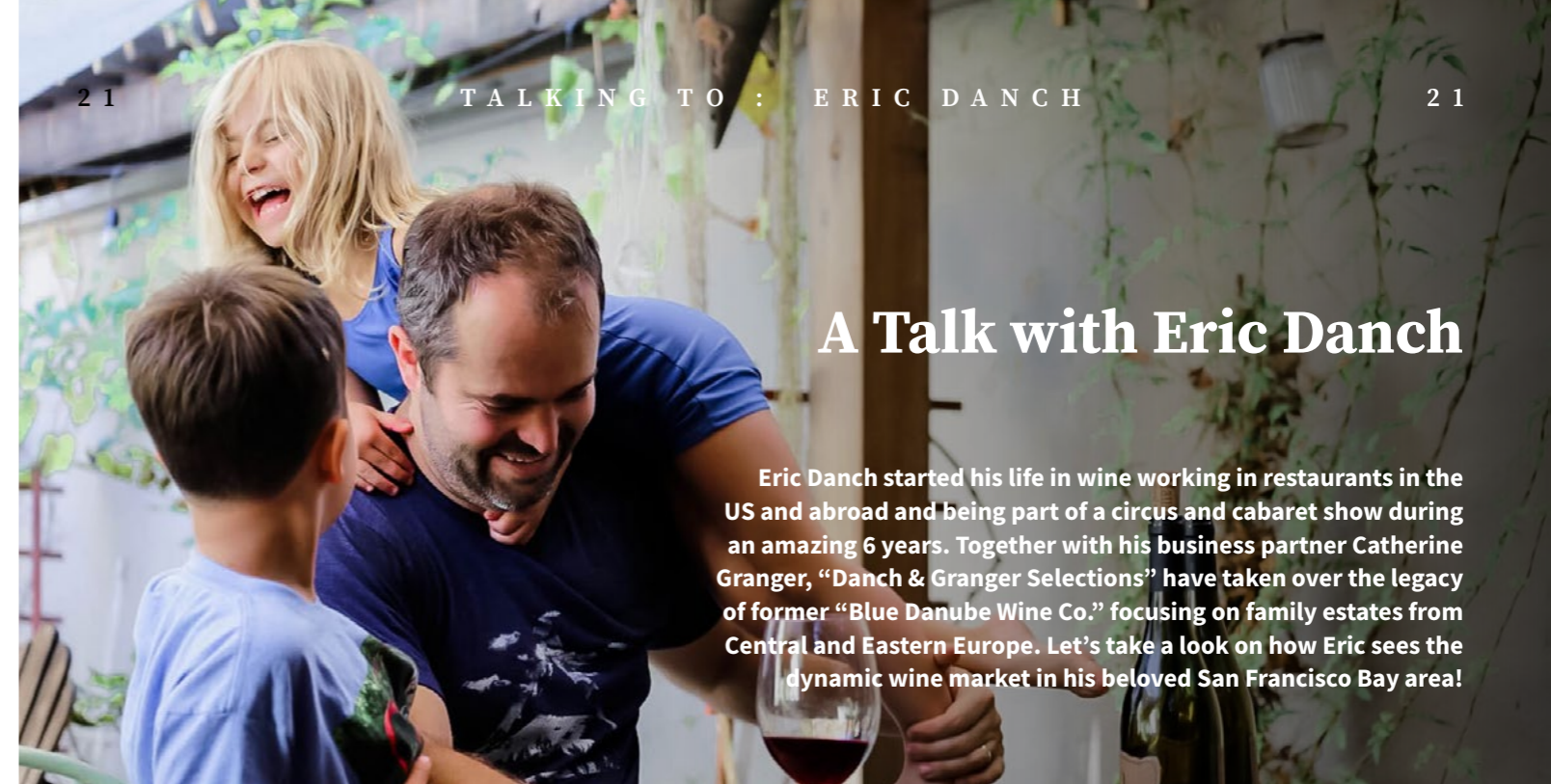


### Which measures do you take against disease pressure?

We use copper and sulfur against powdery and downy mildew (which has been an issue in this 2022 vintage as May was rainy and warm for a couple of weeks), but we bring it out by hand using a portable spraying device. This way, we can avoid soil compaction and apply the protection very precisely. It's a lot of work though, for sure. We also make use of biodyn preparations (500 & 501) as we want to balance out events of stress and prepare the vines for drought periods or heavy rain. Managing cover crops is equally important as they grow between all our vines and pretty vigorously, indeed! We mow the grass and herbs by hand several times per year which helps us getting rid of excess water and prevents fungi from reaching the bunches and the canopy!

## A Talk with Eric Danch

Eric Danch started his life in wine working in restaurants in the US and abroad and being part of a circus and cabaret show during an amazing 6 years. Together with his business partner Catherine Granger, "Danch & Granger Selections" have taken over the legacy of former "Blue Danube Wine Co." focusing on family estates from Central and Eastern Europe. Let's take a look on how Eric sees the dynamic wine market in his beloved San Francisco Bay area!



### Danch and Granger has been on the block for roughly 3 years now. How were the beginnings?

It was a wild ride, to be honest. After Blue Danube ended its operations, we only had little time to set up the company. So, we had the company going for a couple of months and just imagine this: our very first container with wines from the Balkans was frozen to -40 °C because they misread the documents and thought it was meat! They destroyed 100% of the wine and it was nearly all of the money that we had at the time. We eventually ended up with just a little loss of money but you know, it's not about buying wine but about selling it and we had none...and a few months later, Covid hit so it was a really "sweet" beginning. The fact that we're still here, alive and kicking, is somewhat miraculous. Luckily, we had a decade worth of relationships and people to support us, and of course Catherine, my business partner!

### What is special about the wine market in the Bay Area?

Even though we are in a big metropolitan area, it's really kind of small at the same time. The greater Bay Area includes 6-7 million people but it's spread over 7000 square miles. San Francisco has less than 1 million people, so it's relatively small compared to LA or NY but we live

in the proximity of regions like the Foot Hills, Napa, Sonoma and many more so we have wine all around us. And it's definitely more a part of the table than in many other places in the US. Many of my friends did grow up with wine on the table! So I guess that people here are more culturally "fluent" in wine whereas the idea of having a glass of wine for lunch is still pretty new to most Americans. The Bay Area is not anywhere near Europe in this regard, but it's common to walk around and see bottles of wine on tables everywhere, so we have that going for us. There's also a big organic food movement here and a lot of the produce is grown right here! People have a sense of knowing a farm or a farmer's market.

Then again, it's all about the story. When I compare it to my time in the circus, there were plenty of better or equal performers but it was the story that made the show fantastic. The performers were mostly from Central Europe, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, etc., basically people who historically wanted to get the hell out of Communism. After the shows, we would sit under the tent and eat and people would pull out jars of pickles, vodkas, sweet wines; things that would travel well. There was this Ukrainian juggler and he pulled out some honey-peppered vodka and some whole pickled tomatoes, played the accordion, and told stories from home. I was like:

"That's it right there!" I'm always trying to recreate that kind of pairing sensation with the wines we import.

### Do people in your area have an image of Central or Eastern Europe when it comes to wine? And do you see a difference between those for yourself?

Well, it's slow going still, for sure. Geography, culture, language and food are still largely unknown or over simplified. California, like the rest of the US, has a big immigrant story, as you probably know. We've had massive waves of Italians, French, Spanish, and Germans in terms of European wine culture. We have the restaurants, street names, and in some cases entire neighbourhoods that reflect these influences. For some reason Central Europe isn't often considered in the same breadth. Hungarians for example, where my grandfather emigrated from, were more of an assimilation generation: "learn English, become American", there's no "little Budapest" so to say. They're here - you see Austrians, Hungarians, Slavs, Ukrainians, Poles, Bulgarians and so around but we don't really have dedicated restaurants in this regard, at least nothing that highlights and drives quality wine. We hope that's going to change since a lot of "Central European style" products are very popular these days (fermented/cured food, pickling, rye bread, etc.). The ethnic market scene

is great but they expect super low prices and styles, like wine should be at pre 1990 COOP prices... However, we are able to carve it out and find customers. You'd be surprised, we can sell to a corner store and a Michelin star restaurant from the same bag of wine, for example! When you look at the "natural" wines (high acid, low alc. or lightly macerated white wines and chillable reds) which started being popular in the mid 2000's, well, Central Europe was doing this before the trend even started!

As for the difference between Central and Eastern Europe, the problem for most Americans is that their geography ends at the iron curtain so anything east of Italy is somehow Eastern Europe. We spend a lot of time educating people that most of what we import is in fact from Central Europe. You know, some of the leading natural wines we've sourced from Hungary are more from the eastern and southern regions or where the land was relatively cheap. This is still the dead center of Europe. It's the same story in California: the first natural wines did not come from Napa or Sonoma, they came from less prestigious and unknown Foothills or Mendocino where land was relatively accessible. Same for Austria. Many of the iconic natural producers started in Styria and not in the Wachau for instance.

#### Are certifications important in your market?

Increasingly so. There is of course the idea of "practicing organic" and so on, but the problem is that when you're in France or Spain or Germany, you've got wine writers who evaluate that. People will trust Alice Feiring or Eric Asimov here but very few are visiting our places, so certifications are important and we do want to have them on my website, so there's no risk of perceived greenwashing. We also think that especially in Europe, there's no real excuse for not finding the money to be able to do it - although it can be difficult. We have a Croatian grower who wants to go biodynamic but they require greenery in between the vines for certain times of the

year. Well, this guy is on nearly pure rock near the ocean and there has never been green here to begin with... There will always be a couple of exceptions when you have to explain what a grower is doing. Austria, by the way, is so far ahead in that respect with more certified growers (relatively) than anywhere else.

#### How do you see the importance of social media like Instagram?

At least in our market, when we look at the Austrian producers, a lot of the natural wine is still driven by Instagram and a little group of producers - for whatever reason - dominate the scene here. We also see a lot of allocations in this regard. Many times, people might get 6-12 bottles for the shop and the shop owner never tastes it. But how are these wines? Partly, it's due to the supply chain, partly because of how vast our market is. To tell the truth, I'm somehow flattered not being a part of this game (and wildly jealous at the same time). But I'm really focused on California (and New York) and don't want to sell in 25+ states, we don't really have a big distribution model. Imagine someone importing a pallet and distributing 2 cases all over the country. It's of course fine, the wines sell fast and become allocated, but you cannot pour them by the glass, you cannot open them and show them to the people! We feel they just go in and go out and you don't have the foundation to build the brand on. Maybe our model is financially less successful in the short term, but as I recently explained to one of our producers, they might not be a hot shot on our Instagram but people in California and New York will have their wines multiple times, get to know them, the vintages, and be able to share them etc. It's a constant juggle but we plan to go on with this approach.

#### What's your take on the current challenges we're all facing? (energy, rising costs, climate change...)

The biggest issue we're facing right now is shipping logistics, it's staggering! It's the biggest threat to our business, no

question. Catherine has been the lead on this for years now. Without her perseverance and drive we'd never have product to begin with. We used to be able to get a 40 foot container out of Central Europe for maybe 9000-10000 \$. Now, it's hard to find one below 25000-30000! A few years ago a container took around 2-3 months to get here, now it's taking 6-8 months. So when we order wine, we might not get it for half a year let alone have time to sell it. Understandably the producers want to get paid much earlier. A larger importer doing 50 - 100 containers can spread it around, but we're not importing tens of thousands of bottles from one producer. We want to grow and show strength in the market but a big impediment to small businesses like ours is lack of cashflow. And of course, we still have to sell the wine - it's not like the container unloads and all is sold, we're competing against hundreds of other importers and thousands of local wineries. I've been to bigger wine shops in Vienna, Budapest and Zagreb. There are wine shops we sell too with thousands of SKUs across every wine producing country in the world. In one of these, you might have 3000 individual labels! It's an amazing market to be in, it's thrilling and there's a lot of community, but this does not sell your wine automatically!

#### What do you like to drink - which are your go-to wines?

I'm getting a little bit bored with generic natural wine - especially when my time to drink is limited with 3 little kids and work and everything - of these straight kind of glu-glu wines, they're less and less appealing to me, I must admit. I prefer right now something that has more teeth to it. Maybe I'm getting a little bit older but I feel I'm more yearning for something that is not carbonic, not overly macerated, or not picked too early for SO2 rather than deliciousness. I often want a wine with a tannin and acid ratio that goes with food. Or maybe wines that are better on day 2 and that can age. A wine that makes me want to learn the story and the people behind it.

