

When less is most definitely more

Whilst the experimentalist Thomas Donatsch was constantly expanding the range of his wines, his son Martin has tended to streamline his offerings instead. 'The era of experimentation was nevertheless important, as without it we would not now know what works best', he says. Today he focuses on Chardonnay, Completer and Pinot Noir. As tastings of the wines show, these are in fact the three varieties which enable the Donatsch winery to compete on a world class level.

Chardonnay Passion 2013 17.5 points | 2015 to 2022

Sophisticated, still reticent aromas of fresh herbs with a hint of citrus. Delicately structured and very clear on the palate. Supported by a wonderfully presented, very juicy and refreshing acidity.

Chardonnay Unique 2013 18 points | 2015 to 2027

Bright, light yellow. An already complex bouquet. Floral aromas together with mineral, chalky notes. Very delicate, only subliminally perceptible spice notes with virtually no hint of the new oak. Complex but very straightforward on the palate. The lively acidity ensures a dance-like finesse.

Completer Malanserrebe 2013 18 points | 2015 to 2030

Light, clear golden yellow. Aromas of ripe grapefruit and other citrus fruit, a touch of quince, but also mineral notes and salty components. Powerful on the palate with a hint of extracted sweetness, but supported

by a wonderfully present, creamy acidity in the finish.

Completer Malanserrebe 2012 17.5 points | 2015 to 2025

Golden yellow colour. Intense bouquet with clear grapefruit notes together with dried fruit, a little apple tart and crème brûlée. Very powerful on the palate yet also refined and complex.

Pinot Noir Passion 2013 17.5 points | 2015 to 2025

Still closed, but offers up elegant aromas of forest berries and fresh, floral notes. Perfectly proportioned on the palate with present, full-bodied tannins and wonderfully juicy acidity. The 2013 Passion is absolutely on a par with previous Unique vintages!

Pinot Noir Unique 2013 18 points | 2015 to 2030

Already proving its class. Aromas of dark forest berries with a touch of liquorice,

herbs, undergrowth and fresh spice. Hugely densely woven on the palate with fine-grained tannins and fantastic structure of acidity.

Chardonnay Unique 2009 17.5 points | 2015 to 2020

Still showing no signs of age. Floral on the nose with distinctly mineral notes reminiscent of chalk and stone. Also salty elements. Clearly structured on the palate, displaying wonderfully creamy acidity.

Pinot Noir Spiger 1998 17.5 points | 2015 to 2020

This wine produced by Thomas Donatsch is the perfect example of the potential for development which Donatsch wines possess. Still sharply youthful on the nose with fresh berry notes developing after aeration. Clearly structured and robustly fresh on the palate. Still plenty of potential for development.



Martin Donatsch

Photo: BMA

Australia and South Africa and with Bordeaux modernist Stephan von Neipperg, more than a few people expected Donatsch wines to develop in a fruitier and fuller-bodied direction under his leadership. However, the opposite was the case: Martin Donatsch also forewent vineyard designations for legal reasons (and thus the Pinot Noir Spiger also always contains grapes from the Michel site), and for his flagship varieties of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir created a three-level quality pyramid consisting of a base wine Tradition (like a Village in Burgundy), the Auslese wine Passion (a Premier Cru in Burgundy) and the top selection Unique (a Burgundian Grand Cru). The Passion and Unique wine lines in particular are now even a little more straightforward, robust and bold than their previous Donatsch compatriots - and for the Chardonnay Unique he has succeeded in developing a dash more minerality through shorter time in oak (generally only nine months) in new barrels without lees stirring. One of the most impressive innovations in recent Swiss winemaking history came from the Donatsch father-son team with their very own interpretation of native Graubünden variety Completer. Previously produced as an oxidative wine with years in barrels to curb the horrendous acidity, in the vineyard the Donatschs cultivated their Completer like a German Riesling Beerenauslese and then vinified it in Burgundian style in used barrique barrels. This created an unbelievably finely chiselled and complex wine of great charisma, displaying

a touch of residual sugar in its youth which then disappears to the senses after a few years in bottle. 'Top chefs like Andreas Caminada immediately recognised the manifold possibilities of this Completer Auslese and recommended it with both lobster and soups, for example made from caramelised onions', Martin Donatsch relates.

The cosy wine tavern 'Zum Ochsen', where in winter the blue tiled stove is still stoked daily with vine roots as it was a hundred years ago, is like a stationary anthesis to global changes in the vineyard and cellar. Here everything has stayed the same. 'Except for the colour of the tablecloths, now as blue as the stove, which were yellow in my mother's time', Thomas Donatsch recalls. The food here has also been the same for decades, consisting of barley soup, homemade sausages and a Graubünden platter. Guests get their wines from the cellar which

contains numerous mature vintages of great wines from the three 'Bs' - Burgundy, Bordeaux and the Bündner Herrschaft. These are wines which always lead to discussion and philosophising at the Ochsen regulars' table. A recent visitor here was a legendary chef who said to Thomas Donatsch upon leaving: 'in fact you've done it better than me. You serve guests a good soup, sit down with them informally at the table and then cook the six-course meal for your family in private'. Sitting at the table and eating and drinking well has always been the foundation for harmonious coexistence in the Donatsch family, which is why Thomas has no issue with passing on responsibility for the winery to his son: it leaves him with more time for cooking and music, as well as for the artwork on the 'Unique' bottles which he has always produced himself, bottle after bottle after bottle...

Donatsch family

Peter Donatsch bought the 'Zum Ochsen' tavern with its attached winery in 1897. The wine produced was mostly served to the public in the in-house restaurant. Development into a modern flagship winery began in the early 1970s when Peter Donatsch's great-grandson Thomas Donatsch took the reins. This pioneer cultivated Pinot Noir and Chardonnay according to Burgundian tradition, but also experimented with Pinot Blanc and later with Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Graubünden native variety Completer. In 2001 Martin Donatsch became the fifth generation to join the family business. Today, Heidi and Thomas Donatsch run the wine tavern 'Zum Ochsen' whilst Martin Donatsch is responsible for the winery. The Donatsch winery owns 4.5 hectares of vines and purchases grapes from a further 1.5 hectares. Around 30,000 bottles of wine are produced every year.

Wine legends: Thomas and Martin Donatsch

The Grand Cru MAKERS





66-year-old Thomas Donatsch has liberated Swiss-German winemaking from its isolated provinciality. His Burgundian-influenced philosophy is now being upheld and perfected by his 37-year-old son. A portrait of an inter-generational godsend. **Text: Thomas Vaterlaus**

Those who know Thomas Donatsch say that despite not being able to read a musical note, he can conjure up something astounding within just a couple of days on any instrument you put in his hand. In his younger years he toured half of Switzerland as a multi-instrumentalist with the six-man band 'The Strangers'. Thomas Donatsch also discovered a similarly intuitive touch for refined cooking, but above all for the most important elixir in his life, namely wine. As he speaks today of his life as a winemaker, he seems to be someone from the Middle Ages catapulted to the modern day like in some kind of time-travel film. In the mid 1960s, Burgundy and the the Bündner Herrschaft as yet had nothing more in common than the 'B' beginning their names, despite the fact that Pinot Noir played a key role in both areas. However, whilst Burgundy has been producing world-class terroir wines for laying down since time immemorial, the Bündner Herrschaft offered up predominantly weak, unripe everyday wines for local consumption. The fact that Thomas Donatsch was able to immediately immerse himself in the world of Burgundy wine after completing his training as a winemaker is thanks to a happy accident, as is the case of so many success stories. In the early 1970s he became acquainted with a history professor from Vaduz with a deep passion for French haute cuisine. The pair made a pact: if Thomas Donatsch joined his old mentor to visit the legendary haute-cuisine temples of the era then the professor would in turn accompany him to his chosen wineries. And so, aged just 22 Thomas Donatsch was

in and out of the legendary Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

Turnaround in two barrels of La-Tâche

In 1972, Donatsch took his '71 Malanser Blauburgunder (which he considered particularly successful) with him to Burgundy. André Noblet, then Romanée-Conti's cellar master, tasted the wine and said: 'although the raw material was undoubtedly high-quality, the style of vinification has prevented it from becoming a great wine.' For inspiration, Noblet gave the young Swiss winemaker two used La-Tâche barrels to take home with him, which Thomas Donatsch then used to produce a 1973 Pinot Noir Auslese with more than 90° Oechsle. This marked the beginning of a new era in Swiss-German winemaking, although admittedly one which influential authorities sought to prevent using all available means. When the 'eminence grise of the Swiss wine scene' - a lecturer at the viticultural college in Wädenswil - dropped in on Donatsch in 1974 and saw the barrels, he said: 'you must take the wine back out of these barrels, as Herrschäftler will spoil in the wood'. However, thankfully Thomas Donatsch trusted his Burgundian-influenced intuition over a purely agro-industrial perspective on wine. When Donatsch then planted the first Chardonnay vines in 1975, something which was still forbidden at the time, he run into major trouble. 'Today you wouldn't believe me if I told you that not even 50 years ago you would be treated virtually as a criminal for wanting to try something new in Swiss winemaking', as Thomas Donatsch puts it. An early irony of fate:

'In the 1970s you would still be treated virtually as a criminal for wanting to try something new in Swiss winemaking.'

Thomas Donatsch



'Top chefs like Andreas Caminada immediately recognised the manifold possibilities of this Completer Auslese and recommended it with both lobster and soups, for example made from caramelised onions.'

Martin Donatsch

66-year-old Thomas Donatsch is a man of many talents. Since his son Martin has taken the reins, he has been increasingly occupied as a chef, multi-instrumentalist and painter. He paints each of the 1500 or so bottles of Pinot Noir Unique by hand.



Photos: Siffert / weinweltfoto.ch, BMA

the very first vintage of this in fact forbidden Malans Chardonnay baffled the real (for which read international) expert community at a global Chardonnay tasting at Château Pichon Longueville in 1978 to such an extent that Angelo Gaja, Miguel Torres and Robert Mondavi all then travelled to Graubünden to see how a Meursault-style wine could possibly be bottled here. In just a few years, the self-taught Thomas Donatsch had adapted his Burgundian concept (including site philosophy) as consistently as possible to his Malans terroir. Thanks to his two top selections, namely the Pinot Noir Spiger and Chardonnay Selvenen, this Malans spot for Burgundy lovers quickly became as magical a name as Clos de la Roche or La Romanée in Burgundy's Côte de Nuits. Amid the electrifying optimism of the 1980s, Thomas Donatsch



37-year-old Martin Donatsch has long been in charge of the winery. However, he still draws on his father's photographic memory of wine in fine-tuning the style.

received numerous offers as a both a consultant and partner in prestigious projects - including in Bordeaux. 'The fact that I did not then take off and do something crazy was thanks to my wife Heidi. Fortunately, she kept dragging me back to the reality of Malans soils', confesses Thomas Donatsch. And so he went on his Burgundian way. Even around the turn of the millennium when Herrschäftler wines were becoming increasingly dark, fat and ample, he opted for finesse.

When then 22-year-old Martin Donatsch returned to his parents' winery from abroad in 2001, he found himself in a very well positioned top-level operation. However, he had more in mind than simply resting on laurels already achieved. Since Martin Donatsch's past work was primarily at wineries in