

Sebastian & Paul Fürst
– Weingut Rudolf Fürst

THE small, red rock looks cold and coarse on your hand, but for Sebastian Fürst, it is his lifeline — a little piece of earth from his vineyard in western Franconia that he carried 10,000km to Singapore for his trade visit.

The 36-year-old is the winemaker of the Burgstadt-based Weingut Rudolf Fürst, which sits near the mountainous territory of Spessart and Odenwald. Dig deep into his vineyards, which carpet the hilly areas of Centgrafenberg, Hundsrück and Schlossberg, and you'll find the Martian-like red stones. The rocks give the iron-rich soil a stony character, providing good drainage and allowing the roots to reach deeper, notes Sebastian.

The winery's main grape, Spätburgunder—Pinot Noir in German—thrives in such conditions, developing the rich perfume and elegant fruit that have become the Fürst badge.

“Our most important vineyard is Centgrafenberg. My father started with Spätburgunder on this site,” says Sebastian, who joined the winery in 2007 and has since taken over winemaking duties from Fürst Senior.

“We now have more than 50 percent of our vineyards in Centgrafenberg, which is why our Centgrafenberg Spätburgunder Grosses Gewächs (German First Growth) is our flagship wine.” The winery also makes Riesling, Silvaner and Frühburgunder (an indigenous red German grape).

BUILDING ON A GOOD FOUNDATION

Rudolf Fürst, however, did not start with grapes. In 1638, the Fürst ancestors started a small farm. Sebastian's parents, Paul



and Monika Fürst, took over the property in 1979, traded the livestock for vineyards and named the winery after Rudolf, Sebastian's grandfather. Paul started with just a modest two and half hectares of vineyards. Today, they have 20 hectares, and a reputation as one of Germany's top Spätburgunder producers. If there's anyone who can pull off an upset at a blind tasting of Burgundian Pinots, Fürst, along with Baden-based Bernhard Huber, are the best bets.

Sebastian credits his father's foresight for the quality vineyards they have today. “When my father started planting [vines] 35 years ago, he understood that good grape genetics were necessary to make fine Spätburgunder. So he chose to plant mainly French Pinot Noir clones. As the vines age every year, their potential continues to grow,” he says.

Having worked at organic and biodynamic wineries such as Buitenverwachting in South Africa and Marc Kreydenweiss in Alsace, Sebastian brings a more natural and organic approach to winemaking. At his family winery, he gradually cut down the use of herbicides, and today they only use sprays like copper and sulphur, which are allowed in organic winemaking. They make their own compost, a mixture of grape skins, seeds and cow manure, which they apply to the soil to build vine health.

The vineyards have returned Sebastian's benevolence by letting him in on little secrets, such as the need to pick a little earlier for Spätburgunder. “The picking window for Pinot Noir is very short, about four days,” he notes. “We used to pick later. But we found that if it gets just a little overripe, you'd get that raisiny, jammy taste, which you don't want. A Spätburgunder that has been picked earlier also has better ageing potential—the acidity is more pronounced—you can expect a more elegant wine after cellaring it.”

Sebastian and his father are also working with more whole clusters (grapes with stems left intact, not destemmed) during fermentation. Maceration is done carefully to ensure the seeds remain inside the fruit when they are pressed, allowing the gentler tannins to be extracted from the skins and stems instead. Whole clusters, with their green freshness and tannins, also help temper vintages that are too ripe or fruity. For this year's Schlossberg Spätburgunder harvest, for example, up to 80 percent of whole clusters was used, reflecting a very warm 2016 vintage. The wine will take an 18-month slumber in oak barrels before it is released.

“Our work with whole clusters is important but it is still vital that we put most of our energy into our vineyards,” says Sebastian. “Once the wine is in the cellar, its quality is largely fixed; you can't improve it significantly anymore.”

Rudolf Fürst wines available from www.weinwin.com

Fathers & Sons

Two second generation winemakers share how they're taking the family business to a higher level with new ideas and old wisdom. Lin Weiwen reports.