

Changes in viticulture and winemaking in the Czech Republic after 1989 and its influence on wine quality - abstract by Klára Kollárová

The objective of this thesis is to show the major changes in both viticultural and winemaking techniques after the fall of communism in the Czech Republic. The „quality” of wine during communism was strongly opposed to our contemporary idea of it and the major problem was/is in the people’s minds. What are the main changes and is there any evolution in the quality of wine?

The Czech Republic has 17 678 ha of planted vineyards in two wine regions: Bohemia 643 ha and Morava 17 034 ha. The most planted varieties are: Grüner Veltliner, Müller Thurgau, Riesling and Welschriesling, Saint Laurent, Blaufränkisch, Zweigeltrebe and Pinot Noir. The production of Czech wine stands only for 40%! of consumed wine.

The history of wine production dates back to the Romans. Enlargement came with the monks from the 11th century both in Moravia and Bohemia and also under the reign of Charles IV in 14th century. After 1800 the acreage was going down from the top 26 000 ha in Moravia and 3 500 in Bohemia. In 1890 Phylloxera appears and destroys what is left. Some plantings were done afterwards but still after WWII it only was 6 781 ha. In the 60’s the second renaissance of the vineyards started to happen with mostly Moser’s trellis system that stabilized the yields. The base of the winemaking in the ČSSR were big production factories and the winemaking was restricted which established the uniformity of standardized varietal wines. Grapes were purchased from big territories and blended together. This denied any character or terroir.

The changes after the 1989 were dramatic. The wine professionals were in unity in the MORAVÍN organization that required restoration of all confiscated properties. The most important objective to be competitive in a free market was to rise the quality of wine. It was necessary to implement the changes in technologies and philosophy of marketing the wine together with agricultural reform and to create specific wine regions with more or equal climatic and soil conditions. In 1991 there was 15 175 ha of vineyards and 160 different agricultural companies. Family estates formed next to the specialized vine growing companies rising out of the transformation of state institutions.

In 1995 the first wine law no. 115/1995 Sb. has been accepted. In 2000 the Wine Fund was created as the state institution helping the wine projects and taking care of the marketing. The year 2017 has greeted a new wine law no. 26/2017 with many restrictions for everyone in the wine business. It accepts the new rules from EU and brings novelties in labelling, sensorial analyses, evidence of wines also for wine dealers and sales of wines on tap.

The most important quest was to plant new vineyards. Although the age of the vineyards was not more than 15 years most vines were exhausted. The usage of heavy mechanization and overuse of fertilizers led to problems with devastation of the landscape and life in the vineyards, damage of soils and spoilage of underwater sources. More attentive approach towards terroir was necessary. Grape growers start to look for historical information about traditional grape varieties, the new plantings see again rise of Müller Thurgau, Grüner Veltliner and even Neuburger and Blauer Portugieser and Pinot Noir but the most planted variety is the increasingly popular aromatic Pálava (Müller-Thurgau x Traminer). The new plantings are more intense reaching 7500 vines/ha, rarely we can see 1x1m plantings or thickening of the old vineyards or regrafting of old plantings (Doc. Michlovský). A big impact is achieved by right clonal selection, with often several clones on one vineyard with careful selection of the supplier (Stapleton-Springer/Nepraš) and careful choice of rootstock.

The major changes in winemaking are: well done clarification of the must, use of

yeast and controlled temperature and the grape quality. The use of grapes under 15^o ČNM was not an exception. The switch from huge steel tanks and fiberglass from 20 up to 50 hl tanks to smaller stainless containers with controlled temperature was crucial for the better quality as well as change to pneumatic presses. The hunger for quality started from 1995 with international experience and basic knowledge of the international wines mostly thanks to Moravín association.

The ideas about how Czech wine should taste came only much longer after 1989. From the beginning the point was to produce better, meaning clearer and tastier wines. The bad experience with cuvées, blended wines and misused traditional varieties have influenced the development towards international varieties. The strategy of Winemakers Fund was from beginning to promote quickly selling wines like the St. Martin wines or Rosé. The current marketing aim of the Wine Fund is oriented towards education.

In parallel with the concept of quality wine categories is the concept of wines of specific origin – V.O.C. Unfortunately there are very few limitations from the law and nearly everyone can found its own VOC.

Production of sparkling wines is also growing.

Through the spectrum of the winemakers there is finally strong believe that unity is better than individualism. The historically first of such unions was The V8 that still cooperates on the promotion of their wines but we can now see more like the Young Winemakers, The Autentists, Dunajovické Kopce atc.

Lately Czech natural wines are very successful on the markets in Scandinavia, France and USA with leading young winemaker Nestarec and Dobrá Vinice.

The presence on Prowein fair is more and more sought-after; from 4 exhibitors in 2006 – the first exposition with Wines of Czech Republic to 15 in 2017 and masterclasses on Czech wines with MW. The presence on world wine competitions brings a lot of medals for sparkling, dry whites and sweet wines.

Althought the wines are bringing medals from exhibition they are not a challenge to to international wines due to the price. Frank Smulders MW comments on Czech wines also in this way: “Quality wise the Czech Republic currently produces wines at two distinct levels: well-made, ‘modern’, good wines, and the ones that are technically not completely correct, ‘traditional’. You could add to that wines that are from a technical point correct, but stylistically only suitable for the Czech market (for example semi-sweet Sauvignon Blanc).

The international position of Czech wines is at this stage of minor interest. Those that are technically and stylistically acceptable, tend to be rather expensive, suffering at the same time from the fact that the Czech Republic is not known or seen as a wine producing country. Also they lack a clear image, one that is based on a predominant wine style and/or grape variety. All this makes it difficult for the international wine consumer to identify Czech wines with a certain style or quality. “

From personal point of view from Vinograf Wine bar in Míšeňská specialized on Czech wines the visitors are surprised firstly with the fact there is some wine at all, secondly that it is all drank locally and thirdly with higher prices.

The most important for the future are well educated wine drinkers and winemakers and comparison with world wines. Ahead of us we have a long way to concentrate on understanding the conditions and the terroir and most important – find our own style like our neighbors from Austria did with Grüner Veltliner and Blaufränkisch.