

Theme: Time to mature

Man proposes, nature disposes

In 1990, Thomas Bär began to smooth the way for his exit from his previous world as a Zurich lawyer and banker, and his gradual transformation to a Tuscany-based wine producer. Twenty years later, one can see it was a good decision, as it has not only made Thomas Bär's life more colourful but also given him a new understanding of time and nature.

We meet, as arranged, in the law firm of Bär & Karrer in Zurich. Here, in this modern, functional building, some 120 lawyers are at work. Starting in 1969, Thomas Bär helped build up the firm, one of the most prestigious and largest law firms in Zurich, with his childhood friend Robert Karrer. But it is not this part of his life's work that we are meeting to discuss. Nor about his previous functions at the bank with the same name, with which this offspring of the famous banking family is closely tied. No, at the heart of our conversation is a less well-known aspect of the many activities of Thomas Bär – that of a wine-maker.

Paradise has a name: Gagliole

For the past two decades, the tall 73-year-old has been operating the Gagliole winery in Tuscany, located in the middle of the Chianti Classico region, halfway between Florence and Siena. The estate comprises ten hectares of vineyards. Carefully constructed stone walls stand witness to the fact that vineyards have been planted on this land for centuries. Atop the hill, encircled by row after row of Sangiovese grapes, shimmering silver olive trees and stately cypresses, are estate's residence and production facilities. There can be no doubt that Gagliole is one of the most beautiful wineries in the region, thanks to this preferential location. Is it any wonder that already in the year 994 AD, it was so considered so lush that the Lombard king Berengarius decided that this property would make the perfect wedding gift for his son Hildebrand?

Today, Thomas Bär regards the winery as more than a personal hobby for himself and his wife Monika. For him, it is a cross-generational project. Running a winery, he believes, would only make sense if one can be sure that the next generation will also be committed to it. "What I'm doing today at Gagliole," he says, "I'm also doing for my descendants. It would not be satisfying to be doing this all for myself." And yet it was he who decided in 1990 to purchase Gagliole when, after a few failed attempts, the opportunity arose.

When and where did the attraction to wine making begin for this city dweller? Bär explains that as a young lawyer, he was looking after a South African client for the firm and had to travel now and then to the Cape to see him in person. This client would often take him to tour the area's wineries, arousing in the attorney a nascent interest in the culture of wine growing. On several occasions, the client encouraged his Swiss visitor to take the plunge and buy a vineyard in South Africa. "It was too far away from Zurich for me," says Bär. "I love challenges, but they have to be in a reasonable proportion to my other professional responsibilities."

In 1990, with the acquisition of Gagliole, the moment had arrived when this made sense: As it was much closer geographically, running the Italian winery could still fit into Bär's portfolio of professional activities. True, his many family and work commitments in Zurich still made intensive claims on his time, but he could see that a gradual withdrawal would be possible. And so began his entry into a new field of activity.

The discovery of a new world

Comparing his work in Zurich with that in Gagliole, Thomas Bär observes at least three differences. First, his relationship to time has changed. As a lawyer, he says, he was a seller of time, and he consequently had to master his agenda. As a wine maker, however, it is just the opposite: "It's not I that dominates time, but time that dominates me." In Gagliole, the pace of things is determined by the natural passage of time. For example, it is nature, not Bär as a vintner, that decides how long the maturation period lasts and when the grape harvest can begin.

Thomas Bär (73) produces about 70,000 bottles of wine and 2,000 liters of olive oil each year at the Gagliole winery in Tuscany. Red wines predominate, but a few thousand bottles of white are also produced. On the estate, the former Zurich lawyer and banker takes things into his own hands wherever it is necessary - in the morning mostly outdoors, and afternoons mostly in the office, where he looks after marketing and sales. Clamouring for the Gagliole estate's exclusive products are avid clients in Switzerland, Germany, America and Russia.

Bär sees a second difference in that, as a wine-maker, he had to get used to very long time horizons. "If you want to accomplish something in the field of law," he says, "you can often manage it in a very short time." Not so in his new field, agriculture. It is necessary to think in terms of much longer periods. "Here, too, it is nature that determines what will happen."

The Zurich native sees the third difference in the fact that, in his vineyard, his focus is on dealing with very concrete tasks and objects. "As a lawyer, I was living in a virtual world. It was not often that you could see the exact impact of your work. In the winery, this is different – I can feel and see the effect of every decision I make, very quickly and very directly."

How does a lawyer and banker who is accustomed to success deal with the fact that as a wine producer, he is subject to influences that he can affect only minimally – or

✓ As a lawyer, Thomas Bär could finish tasks in a very short timeframe. Now, in the wine business, he has learned to think in terms of much longer periods.

not at all? "The older I get, the better I am able to accept that," says Bär. "Today, I even believe that it is good that we humans don't have control over everything."

The longer the conversation with Thomas Bär lasts, the more the impression is formed that, over time, the quiet strength and tranquil harmony of the old Tuscan estate has been passed on to its resident – so relaxed and satisfied does he seem to a visitor.

One final question for Thomas Bär: If he had the chance to undertake the Gagliole adventure all over again, knowing about all the disappointments and setbacks that occurred in the past 20 years, would he do it a second time? "Definitely," says Bär without hesitation. "I would certainly take the chance again. It's true, there were disappointments, but there were even more moments of joy and happiness." After a pause, he adds, laughing: "And in any case, my family believes that working in the vineyard has had a positive influence on my development." ■

More information: www.gagliole.com

