

Introduction

My adoration for the authentic wines of Central Europe started in Bordeaux with an insult to a kind host. I was sitting with Anne-Lise Lagnet, proprietor of Château Moulin de Lagnet, in her simple winery below the village of St. Emilion, as we waited for clients to arrive.

She offered me a glass of wine, as she had offered me a glass at every visit for the past two summers. I accepted as I always did, tasted it, and said something indelicate like, "Why do I like your wines so much?"

"We visit First Growths and really prestigious châteaux," I continued. "They make great wines, but every time I drink your wine, I am happy. This is happy wine. Why is that?"

I don't remember her response. There's a chance she just shrugged, unwilling to engage with such a blunt question. There's a chance Anne-Lise repeated what she said every time we visited. She and her husband, Pierre, practiced organic viticulture (a rarity in Bordeaux at that time) on their 9 hectares of fields and let the native yeasts from those fields ferment the grapes. No systemic chemicals in the vines, no additives in the cellar except for a bit of sulfur—they let the wine raise itself.

I had been a bicycle guide for a luxury travel company for about a year and a half; I knew that Bordeaux lived and died by tannic, oak-aged reds, and which châteaux were considered best. I had visited enough of them to know that many of those wines came with an assurance: regardless of how coarse and astringent the tannins were, they would integrate after five, ten, even 30 years. Then those wines would be pleasurable.

The wine Anne-Lise poured had enough tannins to age many years; it merited aging at least ten. But it was happy *now*.

Moulin de Lagnet didn't suffer the fever that afflicted much of Bordeaux in the first decades of the 21st century. Prices for top wines had drastically increased. Billions of dollars invited further speculation, self-aggrandizement, and occasionally fraud. It also invited a certain sterilized homogeneity. With so much money at stake, and top critics

rewarding ever denser, more concentrated wines, who can blame the legion of producers that employed as many "insurances" as possible: harsh pesticides in the vines, a potpourri of new oak, enzymes, industrial yeasts, and chemicals in the cellar—all to vinify big, complicated, but predictable, drinks with a high return on investment.

And here was little Moulin de Lagnet with none of those crutches, making a frank, clean, and correct wine that reflected its terroir of limey clay and sand, and which brought pleasure because of its honesty.

Some years later, in 2013, I remembered this conversation when I moved to Prague, Czech Republic, and chanced upon the bar Veltlin, the locus of natural wine in the city. Some of its wines were outstanding; some were good; more than a few at that time were savage. They were all honest. I could taste the skill. I could taste the errors. They were authentic. These were not wines masked over and corrected for a quarterly report, but created for love of the vineyards and the traditions that produced them.

As years passed, I could taste the learning curve. Today, some makers continue to experiment; many have refined tastes and techniques as their palates shift to value equilibrium above novelty. The honesty has remained. Ten years ago, a handful of makers consistently made very good wine. Now there are dozens, and masters have emerged.

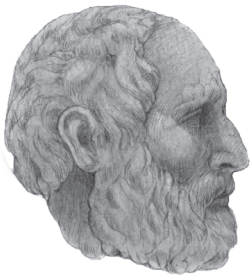
Happily, the fervor of these authentic winemakers has spread, daring Czech and Slovak vintners young and old to eschew the manufactured promises of conventional winemaking, or at least to experiment with a patch of their land and a barrel or two. Quite often, they end up choosing the more involved organic / biodynamic / regenerative agriculture, with less intervention in the cellar. There are too many to be mentioned here, but wineries like Plenér in the Pálava Hills, or Vinařství Kovář near the base of the Bílé Karpaty mountains, are creating inspiring wines as they embrace the rigors of authentic winemaking.

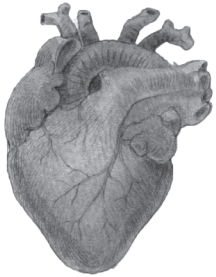
A few comments on the profiles in this book. I received a grant from the Autentisté society, and in return have profiled all 14 of their members, regardless of how long my experience has been with them. I am deeply grateful for the group's generosity, and especially for their long, challenging, and thoroughly enjoyable quest to make beautiful, honest wines.

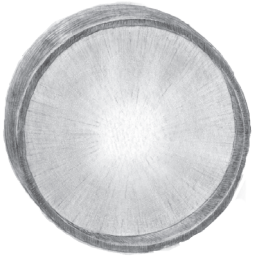
That said, I have interacted with many of the winemakers in this book for as long as 13 years, and I chose to profile them because of that long association. If I were to write of every authentic maker in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, I would never manage to complete this book; more and more promising vinaři seem to sprout up each year. If anything, this points to a bright future for Czech and Slovak wines.

And to Anne-Lise, thank you. I think I get it now.









What is Hand, Head, Heart, Soul?

Hand. Head. Heart. Soul. Four words, four ways to characterize wines without reducing them to a number. Granted, to describe a wine in one word simplifies that wine. However, that word is the start of a conversation, not a quantified end.

Wines in the past 30–40 years have been turned into data points of tannin, alcohol, acidity, and extract, then rated numerically. There have been benefits from this method for consumers, producers, and especially for the market, but most of us don't drink a wine to fill out a chart. And the sentence, "I'm drinking a 100-point wine," rates a six-out-of-ten for elegance and a four for emotional impact.

Instead, we drink wine to be moved, mentally and emotionally. That effect might be in the quiet of evening as shadows lengthen, or in a shared glance over stemware; it might be in the thrill of an expensive bottle bought to impress; it might even be in filling out that chart. But in all these examples, wine is entering into our humanity, mingling with it, expanding and contracting its facets.

Artisans make the wines in this book. Even the largest producers here, Vinné Sklepy Kutná Hora and Milan Nestarec, don't make stagnant products. They make authentic drinks, sensitive, transitive substances that pour their philosophies, soils, grapes, and practices into bottles. Such wines need a more human description, since they are made by humans for humans—not corporations for markets. Hence, here are four parts of the human being reflecting different elements of our lives and different ways that wine can react with them.

"Hand" describes simple wines for uncomplicated drinking. "Hand" implies our life of labor and the weight of its responsibilities. Hand wines should accompany moments of respite from work, or the end of work, without distracting one from further responsibilities. Hand wines generally contain less alcohol, are simpler, and cost less rather than more. All these characteristics do not impinge on the wine's dignity; rather,

they are the source of its dignity. The most menial work done very well and a simple, but harmonious, wine—both are worthy of great praise.

"Head" wines require and / or stimulate thinking. Unlike a Hand wine, a Head wine demands a person's attention. Why do I like this wine? Why do I not like it? Some characteristic of the drink engages the drinker negatively or positively, and that person needs to reflect to understand why. It might be an aroma, taste or texture. For example, flavors caused by volatile acidity or Brettanomyces yeast often cause debate, as does the mouthfeel of new oak. Or, the wine seems to say something about the circumstances through which it came to be, (e.g. the terroir, vintage, equipment, and the predilections of the vintner). It might give an impression of the vintner's goals: Does the drinker think the vintner's winemaking was carefree or thoughtful? A passion or a calculation? As the drinker studies a "Head," they learn something about wine and about their own tastes. Through this learning, they begin to understand.

All "Heart" wines are Head wines, but not all Head wines are Heart wines. That is to say, all Heart wines are worthy of thought and reflection. But Heart wines do more, they make us feel. With a Heart wine, we leave our everyday concerns, put aside ponderous tasks, and begin to sense ourselves and those around us. A Heart wine might cause us to sense something internally, a reflection or an emotion, or it might communicate a feeling to the companions with which one drinks. It will not speak of the circumstances through which the wine came to be, of the terroir, equipment, and the predilections of the vintner. It will sing of them. It may not sing of them perfectly, and all the feelings might not be true, but at least it will communicate the care and passion and travail with which the vintner nurtured the wine.

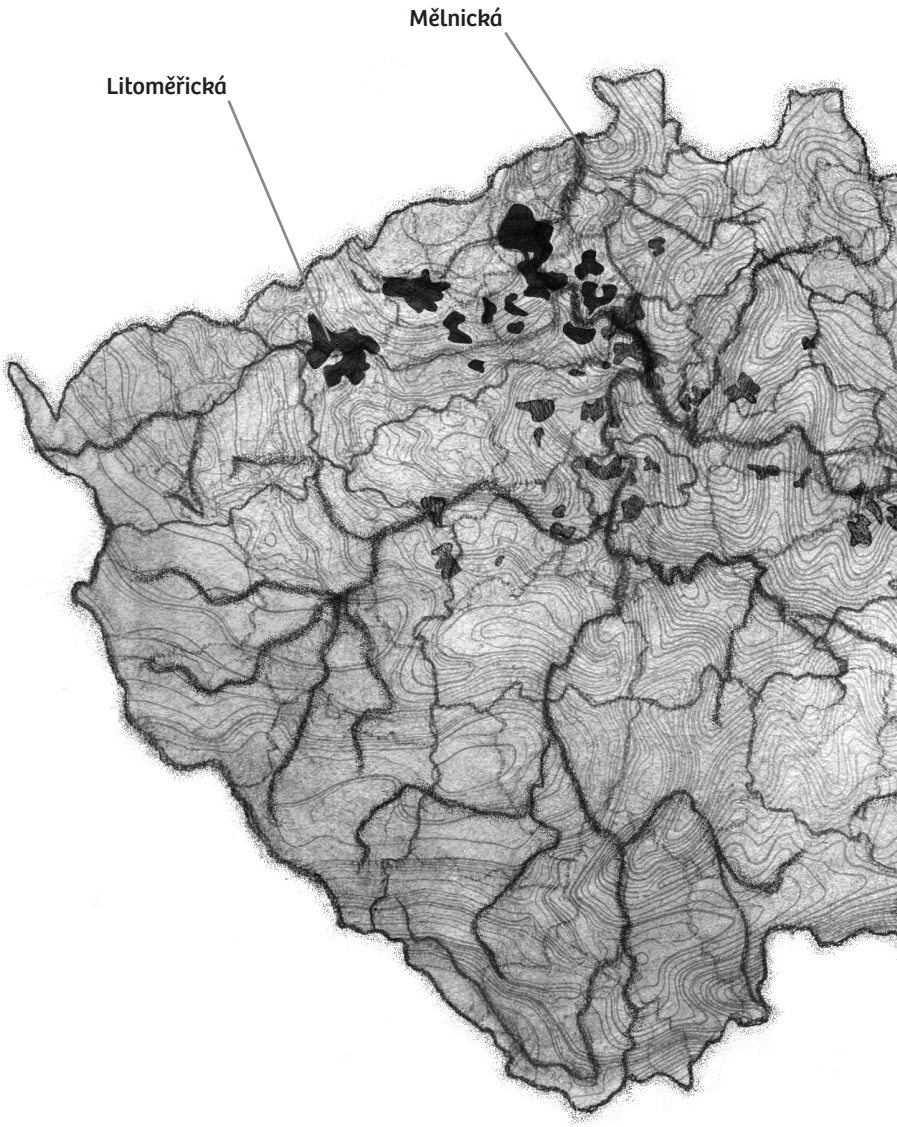
Most of us rarely drink "Soul" wines. They don't have to be the most complex or the most elaborate. Instead, Soul wines clearly and harmoniously sing of their vintner, their terroir, their year. They are the

summations, and beautiful summits, of these sources. But if the parts of the Soul wine are not mysterious, their sum remains a mystery. How does this wine appear "just as it is?" We know it comes from such-and-such year and from such-and-such vintner, and these are the grapes, and this is the soil; but how is this wine just so, just now?

A Soul wine, then, is always a Head, but greater by degree because it inevitably drives the drinker to ponder the wonder of its parts and its whole. A Soul is also a Heart, greater in degree because it sings almost perfectly of its sources and moves the drinker deeply by its beauty.

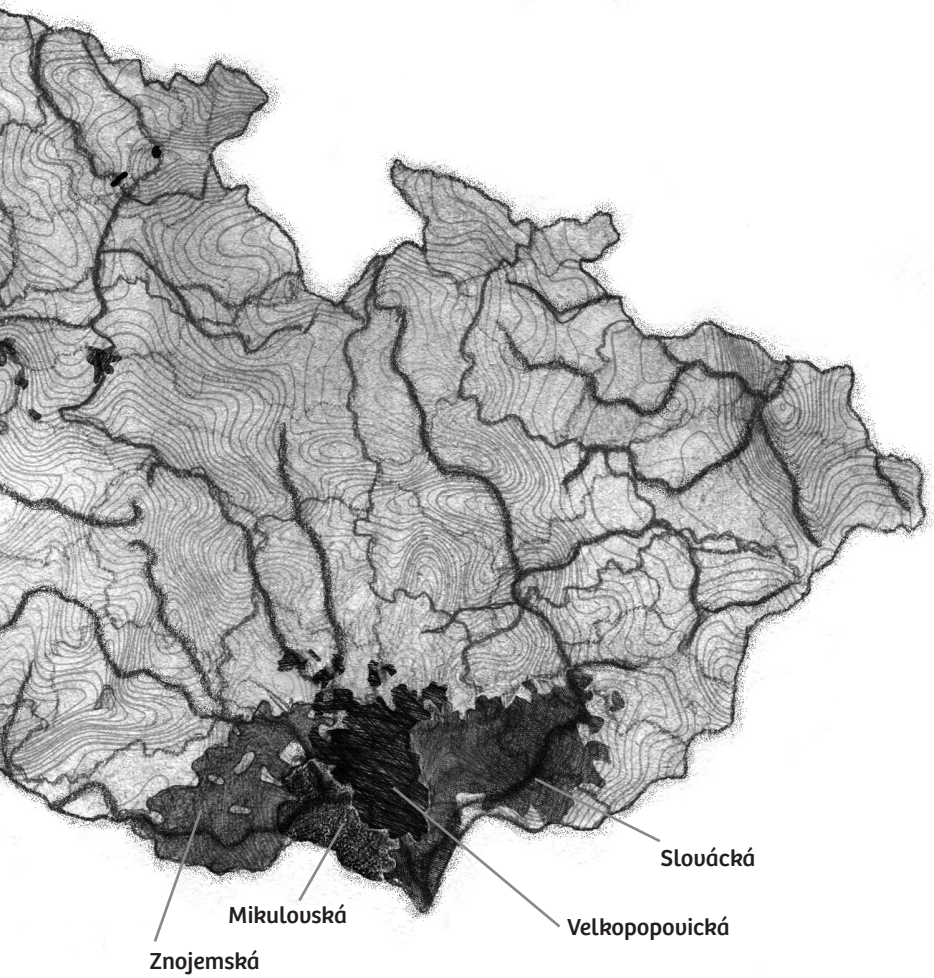
Because a Soul wine is the finest expression of all its parts, it could conceivably be a Hand wine too. Together, a very weak terroir and a mediocre grape farmed well and used by a sensitive winemaker could ferment into something small, and lovely for its honesty. The souls of things are created to be beautiful … but there are larger and smaller souls. Thus, smaller and larger Soul wines exist too.

Hand. Head. Heart. Soul. Living words for living wines.


Mělnická
Litoměřická

Part 1 Czech Republic

Wine Subregions



A Quick Look at Czech Geology

Czechs often go to Croatian seasides for lack of their own. Throughout history, they've managed few opportunities to rule beachfronts, and those possessions have been short-lived. Geologists might say they missed their chance: 150-90 million years ago, the Czech lands had oceans and seas.

In those days, what is now Bohemia (the western region of the Czech Republic) was an island of metamorphic and igneous (crystalline) rocks we call the Bohemian Massif, and the prehistoric Tethys Ocean comprised its shores. On the southeast shore, countless sea creatures over millions of years lived and died, their calcareous remains drifting to the ocean's bottom where they were compressed and became limestone.

The landmasses of what are now Europe and Africa squeezed together; their tectonic pressure created the Alps and the Western Carpathian Mountains while helping the ocean incrementally recede. In Southeast Moravia, the limestone, hard and bright white, was thrust up above the surrounding landscape. However, on the northern borders of the island, between 100 and 90 million years ago, a sea called the Bohemian Cretaceous Basin formed, connecting deeper areas of the Tethys as it retreated to the north and south. In the basin, one often finds layers of pure white limestone under large metamorphic boulders tossed and rounded by cataclysmic movements of water, but the most ubiquitous feature is marlstone lounging on the top of them both. In some areas of the basin, the marlstone (a grey to buff-coloured rock of high calcium content mixed with smaller ratios of silt and mud) is many meters deep.

By 50 million years ago at the latest, the ocean and seas once covering Central Europe had receded, even if some areas remained low and swampy. Around 35 million years ago, the north-central Bohemian Massif, just such a swamp, felt pressure from beneath rather than water weight from above. Magma found its way to the surface and over the course of 15 million years created a small mountain chain, the České středohoří, The Central Bohemian Uplands.

Back in the southeast, all that former seabed experienced ice ages and, more recently, prevailing winds that prevailingly deposited dust in the same places until large hills formed. The large hills still exist, but the older, white limestone plateau remains much taller.

This quick summation describes the major geologic events that formed most of the Czech vineyards of today.

In Bohemia, few vineyards rest on rock not derived from the Tethys Ocean, notably many of the vineyards of Prague. These include even St. Václav's vineyard below the Prague castle, reportedly planted by the good duke himself. This saintly figure probably wasn't thinking, "Oh, the soils overlaying the sedimentary rock derived from volcanic activity roughly 450 million years ago brings a great freshness to the wines," but he chose a good location. A plot owned by the Russian Orthodox church, near the highway leading from Prague to Plzeň, also sits on old, old ground.

In Moravia, Znojmo enjoys the largest amount of ancient rock. This city, a Mesozoic beach town had such a thing existed, claims sand from rock older than 500 million years, but this often kisses and mingles with the sediments of the edge of the Tethys Ocean and the loess that blew over long after the sea had disappeared. Andrea Nejedlíková's, Vladimír Lojda's and Martin Vajčner's wines express these different facets well.

The presence of the Tethys appears most dramatically around the town of Mikulov at the base of the Pálava Hills, those plateaus of white limestone that give the area the nickname, "The Provence of the Czech Republic." Many of the rosés here are better than in Marseille. The wines benefit from the nourishment calcium-rich soils bring, showing tighter body and complexity than many wines grown solely on loess.

Loess, that wind-blown soil from the last few million years, much of it derives from Tethyan limestone and marlstone, and also crystalline dust from the Bohemian Massif; it can have many of the same chemical

properties as they do, but more easily provides nutrients to the plants. Many of the Moravian vineyards rest on this loess, which is a soil best adapted to making good and very good, and, only occasionally, great wines. It cannot make grandiose red wines (though some have tried); its greatest expressions of red are bright and fruity, round in the mouth. Any endurance they have generally comes from acidity rather than tannins, and some bottles do endure. A 1990 bottle of Frankovka (Blaufränkisch) uncorked in 2018 tasted of cherry and green olives and even retained a little charm. Wines on loess should communicate cheer. That is all, and that is wonderful enough.

Returning to Bohemia, loess makes its appearance as well. Vinné sklepy Kutná Hora's vines rest partly on these soils, but the depth and vigor of their Rulandské modré (Pinot Noir) and Svatovavřinecké (Saint Laurent) seem to imply that the roots go deeper, entering cracks in the marlstone and maybe even touching those metamorphic boulders.

Marlstones of the Bohemian Cretaceous Basin dominate the soils of Mělník, all the way past the noble vineyards of Roudnice nad Labem to just beyond Litoměřice, where the České středohoří meet the Labe (Elbe) river. Marl provides enough calcium for vines to be happy. The resulting wines can be pleasant and straight-forward and occasionally very good.

Even in the volcanic range of the České středohoří, soils derived from erosion-exposed marls seem to dominate the vineyards. However, wines from vineyards with a degree of volcanic soils, like some with an admixture of basalt around Velké Žernoseky, generally seem more delicate. Maybe the iron and magnesium in the basalt help create wines that tend towards clarity and purity in their flavours. They can contain fantastic energy, as if within resided echoes of a joyous song.

Czech vineyards communicate the stories of oceans, winds, volcanoes, even the gnashing of continents. They're worth investigating enough to skip Croatia this year.



Bogdan Trojak

Silence

"It is said that in a foreign country impressions are sharp and accurate for a month, and then they become blurred, and the reactions are not accurate again for five years, so that one should stay either one month or five years in a country."

—John Steinbeck, *A Russian Journal*

I've been in the Czech Republic for over a decade, enjoying a culture that does not care much if I stay or go, just that I do either quietly. That I often respect the culture, and value its appreciation of long walks, soft landscapes, and practicality, pleasantly surprises the Czechs.

In my first months here, I saw a collage of photos, mostly straightforward shots, of men in plaid shirts in the vineyard or before barrels. But one made my eyes roll, a man leaning under the leaves of a tall vine, bloused, maybe in lederhosen, a dreamer, a conjurer, a balladeer resting after song. The men called themselves Autentisté (Authentics), winemakers that signed their names on a parchment charter dedicating themselves to the traditional varieties of the Austro-Hungarian empire and swearing to labor in their vineyards and cellars much as their forefathers had done a century ago. Their creator, that troubadour, was Bogdan Trojak.

I met Bogdan soon after at his wine bar, Veltlin. Standa Soukup, the store manager, introduced us. I wielded the caché of having lived and guided in France for many years, counting a couple plaid-clad farmers in Burgundy as friends. That was enough for a friendly conversation

with the spectacled, sartorial owner, a person much less wistful than his photograph had suggested. His reserve turned to animated, articulate discussion. The short stop he had made at the bar went long; and then he rushed on, already late to the call of family, a dinner date, a literary gala, the arrival of an old friend from Japan.

We would run into each other at Veltlin or at his natural wine festival, *Praha Pije Víno* (Prague Drinks Wine). At the latter, he revelled in wines from Moravia, Levice, Somló, and the Wachau flowing together in the cellar of the Troja château. At the former, he would explain his absence from the bar—a family trip to Croatia or Italy, later the first explorations of Georgia—and then we'd delve into the excesses of the orange wine craze, or the search for balance.

Occasionally, a bottle of Rulandské modré (Pinot Noir) or Frankovka (Blaufränkisch) from his own vineyards in Moravia would appear. With or without his presence, its praise rang out after a glass. The appraisals were much louder than the wine itself. These glasses communicated the pensiveness of Rulandské modré, the juicy vivacity of Frankovka, not to mention their terroir, Moravia's seemingly ubiquitous loess. It showed what loess could be and almost never is. That soil favors aroma over flavor, generosity over elegance. Bogdan's wines were elegantly generous, and their nose introduced one to the fruits that filled one's mouth when drunk. Were someone to pour a glass of his 2017 Frankovka onto Moravian loess, the ground itself would exclaim, "I never knew my beauty!"

And then there was the silence that followed these wines, almost inevitably, as a coda … not a shortness of flavor, a silence. Does that all sound poetic? Well, they were a laureled poet's wines, but their poetry was that which exists before the words are written, swirling in the glass as in the heart, before thoughts mold and mouths misshape.

They were darn good wines. A joke circulated that Bogdan made such great wines in Moravia because he was so busy in Bohemia.

By this reasoning, he missed some rough patches in the barrels' development, and therefore was never tempted to correct them. The wines had to correct themselves. I can smile along with this idea. Nevertheless, he knew well enough when he did visit to leave the barrels alone, resting quietly for years upon years in their deep cellars in Vrbice and Bořetice.

In 2018 Bogdan planted his first vineyard in Bohemia, on the first undulations of the České středohoří, the Central Bohemian Uplands, on a slope above the village of Velké Žernoseky. History, proximity, complexity, and extremity drew him there. Velké Žernoseky's vineyards were some of the northernmost in Europe, "on the periphery," he liked to say, and some of the oldest in Bohemia, reaching back to the 11th century. In the 19th century they were feted in nearby Dresden. From Prague, the vineyard was just 50 minutes away … fifty minutes to escape the city's ballyhoo, step onto a slope above the Elbe River, and work in the presence of ancient, volcanic peaks.

The moderately steep .75 ha here had been a vineyard long ago, planted on a layer of basalt resting on marl. The man who sold the land to him was very old and remembered the village as a child before World War II. He saw in Bogdan someone who would treat the land well. When Bogdan started preparing the soil for planting, he removed large boulders from the lower half of the vineyard by back hoe. In the churned sandy clay that remained, Bogdan planted Ryzlink rýnský (Riesling). Above, in unmodified soil, he planted Rulandské modré.

During the first summer of Covid (2020), I helped Bogdan and his partner, Salome Kardzeishvili, harvest the grapes. A small yield but of great quality, Bogdan pressed the Ryzlink must into a new qvevri buried in the vineyard, where the wine rested until the 2021 harvest. The pale yellow-green of a just ripe lemon, the liquid tasted of white flowers and honey and the quiet of an early autumn evening.

The winter of 2020 they invited me to work in the vineyard full-time. A few days later, we tramped up a deer-trail through calf-deep snow, a low arch of branches bending us until we reached the vineyard gate with a milky sun almost shining through the clouds. Bogdan taught well, showing me how to prepare the vines for (Half) Mosel Arch training and trim just so to minimize the chance of later infection. We fitted a stove into their modern hut for breaks to warm our fingers and toes. The risk of frostbite and cuts, being paid 50 percent in muscle and joint pain, 50 percent in money – few things make a person feel more alive. And few things have made me happier than shaping a vine in the dim days of February.

The Žernoseky vineyard was a dalliance for Bogdan, but he took his pleasures very seriously. Our work in the vineyard was deliberate, but like any diversion, important details had been overlooked. The Rulandské modré remained stunted, unable to break through the hardpan of clay that lay over the basalt and marl. The first harvest, after five years, was so small that he let me have it to make my own wine. I could make two liters from the collected grapes.

Play can lead to more serious commitments. Bogdan discovered a 6 ha section of land for sale between the old city of Litoměřice and Radobýl, a volcanic cone with an exposed basalt peak revered since prehistoric times. In the early 1800s the celebrated Czech poet Karel Hynek Mácha climbed Radobýl and wrote his last poem before dying. He would have hiked over the stretch of land that Bogdan wanted to replant with vines. Working this plot, Bogdan would literally be walking in Mácha's footsteps.

Clearing the plot of brush and boar, the soil revealed itself to be a rare clay that faded into rhyolite clay and sand as the vineyard descended. Altogether, Bogdan cleared 3 ha to add to his vineyards. He planted them with mustard and other plants to increase viable nitrogen.

That winter he won his second Magnesia Litera, the top Czech literary award, for his children's novel *Safíroví ledňáčci a Gluteman (The Kingfishers and Gluteman)*. Maybe a defining moment for someone else, but Bogdan's focus rested on his plots in Northern Bohemia. His writing was falling to the earth and sprouting vines. Preparations took quite a bit of time, but the shoots went in in May – Sylvánské zelené (Silvaner), Tramín (Savagnin), Tramín kořenný (Gewürztraminer), Rulandské modré, Ryzlink rýnský, Furmint– followed by posts, wires and poles to train those spindly sticks into durable trunks … hard and good labor.

A hot, dry summer threatened the 3 ha of new plantings, so Bogdan devised an irrigation system with his chief of construction. With nothing but gravity, we watered the vines with a system of tanks, PVC piping, and hoses. The vines responded well, and the Tramín kořenný even produced a few grapes in that first year (which we left on the soil).

Planting, watering, attaching some of the vines to poles to guide them straight and true, these were my last actions at the vineyards. Bogdan told me I had three months to find a new job, nothing personal or professional, just a lack of money to pay a full-time employee. Loans were coming due; a tractor had just been purchased.

Three years have passed since I have seen the vines, though Bogdan and Salome share their progress when we meet. He's looking good when I arrive in Litoměřice; at 50 he has honed his muscle with the copious vineyard work. These last years he has experienced the vicissitudes of a farmer more than those of a writer (though he did manage a collection of poems, *Uhrwerk*). The previous vintage practically ended before it began; what could have been the first large harvest for the Radobýl vineyard ended in the spring with a deep frost that destroyed 95 percent of the buds. Bogdan and Salome's response was epicurean: When life gives you low yields, make something like Champagne.

He's wearing lederhosen, which he defends as eminently practical, "They last forever and you don't wash them." I defer to him and centuries of Germanic culture; I've lived here too long to think them silly or cute.

A short drive over hilltops to pick up his youngest son and his friend, then we go to his new sklep (cellar), which dates back at least to the 17th century. No vines grow nearby, but it doesn't sit far from the base of Hrad (castle) Kamýk. In the 1600s, vineyards might have surrounded this small, arched tunnel half-hewn into rock, but the Thirty-Year War and a chilling climate ended viticulture this high on the České Středohoří. However, if this were the castle's cellar, it might have kept wine yielded as tax.

In any case, Bogdan is prolonging its vinous pedigree. Beyond the front section housing a press and tools, an insulated wall bisects the tunnel, guarding the chill where the youngest wines rest in a row of Stockinger barrels (seven, 500 l barrels will soon join them to prepare for Radobýl's first major harvest). Beyond the partition, the filled barrels and bottles glow dimly, lit by two golden yellow neon ovals. The pair represents yeast cells, and by proxy Bogdan and Salome, sharing a vinous alchemy, guiding the life of these wines. The light submerges us in the mystical color of an old white but even more in the last ray of the sun setting on the Žernoseky vineyard.

We return to the front half of the cave, and he opens his 2024 sekt; the lees stir and the liquid pours cloudy into our glass. It is one of about 700 bottles, the blend of two vineyards and 6 varieties. The terroirs, the vines, they are still fighting each other, though under that struggle a strong saltiness has appeared. **[Heart]**

By contrast, 2023 grew happily, and Bogdan fermented his Žernoseky Ryzlink rýnský in a qvevri before transferring the wine to restored, 500 l barrels with untoasted staves where it rested roughly a year. It only