

Diego Mathier

Visionary vintner

By Carina Scheuringer



Amongst Swiss winemakers, few names command more respect than that of the Mathier family. Diego Mathier certainly looks the part. His face is round, his smile is content, his cheeks are chubby – and his tummy is proudly corpulent. “Nature has been kind to me,” the *gourmand* chuckles, “because you cannot *really* tell that I am a man who knows how to indulge in life’s simple pleasures.” Renowned for his fine palate and his expertise in all things wine, the 42-year-old from Salgesch in Canton Valais is Switzerland’s reigning vintner. For the second time in his 12-year career, the entrepreneur was hailed *Swiss Winemaker of the Year* last autumn, after being the first to claim the prestigious title in 2007.

Growing up a Mathier

Tradition and innovation are the key pillars of the family business. With a lineage originating in France, the Mathiers have been closely linked to the sun-kissed slopes of Salgesch for 600 years. They initially worked the land as farmers, growing a variety of crops and herding cattle, and only specialised in wine a century ago. “My grandfather Ferdinand was a vineyard inspector and drew on his insider knowledge to acquire prime winegrowing land with preferential soils and micro-climates,” Mathier explains. Once the foundations were laid, each generation advanced the business with progressive thinking and their own bit of innovation. “My parents, for instance, built a new – and rather visionary – cellar and made their produce available to the end-consumers,” Mathier recalls proudly.

Growing up, the vineyard was “like a big sister” to the Mathier children. “‘She’ was always a topic at the dinner table, and even when we were little, my brothers and I were involved in all decisions.” Today, people often respond with disbelief when the vintner refers to events that happened nearly thirty years ago – “as when in 1983, hail destroyed the entire crop!” Mathier is quick to provide an example.

Information
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Living and breathing viticulture, the fourth generation of Mathier vintners complemented their insights with plenty of practical training. “The rule was that you got paid if you worked,” says the entrepreneur. “And there was always plenty of work to go around.”

Spilling the grapes

Although enamoured by the profession of his forefathers, Mathier did not immediately join the family business upon finishing school, but instead opted for a stint at Hochschule St Gallen to acquire “a backpack of skills and experiences.” A degree in the subjects he felt he “was lacking in the most,” economy and finances, opened the door to a career in Recovery Management at UBS in Basel, Zurich and Berne. Soon after, a lucrative job offer in New York was on the cards for the young man. It was at this point that Mathier’s father stepped in and offered his son a role in the family business – the role of Manager for German-speaking Switzerland.

Back at Salgesch, the St Gallen ‘backpack’ proved useful. “My experiences confirmed my belief that less can be more – especially when it comes to viticulture. If you leave fewer grapes on the vines, your success is certain. If you leave more, you may get more yield, but you are at the mercy of the weather,” he explains. “That is why good winemakers differentiate themselves in bad years. If you do things right, the weather is more or less irrelevant – unless it is extreme of course.” Building on the family tradition and adding his own learnings and ideas, Mathier took to the helm of *Adrian & Diego Mathier & Co.* – *Nouveau Salquenen AG* in 2000.

A nose for winemaking

Two *Winemaker of the Year Awards* (2007, 2011), a *Valais Entrepreneur of the Year Award* (2011) and 400+ wine gold medals later, the entrepreneur ponders over his secret for success – “it is a tall order to step into the footsteps of successful parents,” he argues. “The pressure to live up to their legacy was certainly a driving force and I was blessed with an incredible wife and team who shared my passion for innovation and perfection.” In twelve years, Mathier has enriched the family repertoire of outstanding whites, reds, rosés, sparkling and sweet wines (to name but a few!) with a staggering ten new creations – such as his award-winning “sweet solitaire” GEMMA, which is stored inside the Rhône Glacier.

As much as he agrees that winemaking is a science – the interpretation of what is happening in the vineyard – he also considers it to be an art: “For me, each wine starts with an idea of how to achieve the ultimate pleasure. Like a piece of art, each creation is unique and has a distinct personality. For example, my own wine, the Syrah Diego Mathier AOCV, tastes exactly how I look – it has broad shoulders, a beautiful body and a long finish!” Mathier laughs heartily.

When it comes to taste, Mathier is his own biggest critic. Even after his great successes, he claims he has yet to find perfection. “You get one chance each year – so I have maybe another 20 to 25 chances,” he states as a matter of fact. Does he hope that one day one of his five daughters will continue the family tradition? “Absolutely,” he replies, “but there is no pressure. They are only young and have to go out into the world first – plus I am not done yet!”