



COMPOSER JEAN-PHILIPPE BAUERMEISTER PLAYS HIS 100-YEAR-OLD GRAND PIANO EVERY DAY.

Aladdin's Cave

Jean-Philippe Bauermeister owns a 30,000-bottle wine cave in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where he regales visitors with piano concertos.

by Vicki Williams photography by Cano Tsang

At number 21, Rue des Moulins in charming Neuchâtel, not visible from outside, is a hallway. At the end of a hallway is what appears to be a wine shop. But J.-Ph. Bauermeister Vins Fins is no typical wine shop, and there is little that is typical about the fascinating owner, Jean-Philippe Bauermeister himself.

The building actually leads into an ancient cave. It was once the home of an aristocrat, built between the 14th and 18th centuries, with the cave being located in the oldest part and the facade the newest.

Bauermeister says it was purely by chance that he discovered it. "In 1972, when I opened, nobody knew of the existence of the cave, because the entry was closed. I discovered it when one of my friends, who lived in the house, invited me to visit. Once discovered I quickly negotiated the lease." After cleaning, installing the electricity and so on, he opened the hallway in the street direction.

This was not the only element of chance in his story. Bauermeister, who was born in Neuchâtel, is a trained composer, and teacher of piano and composing. Prior to opening the business he was working as a music teacher and music critic. "Deciding to open was partly chance, and partly because my wife was French. In the beginning I imported some bottles for friends, and later I thought maybe it would be a good idea to sell some."

He began visiting winemakers, naturally increasing his knowledge. From the beginning the focus for selecting the wines was “wines that sing their terroir and whose supplier is above all a grower, because the wine is essentially made with the vine. Respect of the soil, of the grape and the personality of the wine, are our main criterion of selection.”

Over this 45-year period he has amassed an impressive collection of wines, mostly French. Wine enthusiasts are unlikely to be disappointed, as there are 3,000 bottles in the cave, and approximately another 30,000 in storage.

Music still plays an important part in his life, evident by the 100-year-old grand piano, complete with candelabra, in the cellar. Bauermeister and a friend found and saved it from destruction before restoring it. “I play every day, if possible, but most of my activity is composition.” His catalogue includes around 100 compositions, including for piano, orchestra, chamber orchestra, voice, choir, quartet and chamber music, and one opera.

“When I play piano — for myself mainly — it’s about discovering rarely heard composers, Abel Decaux, Federico Mompou... among others.” The unique experience of Bauermeister giving an impromptu mini concert, on that piano, in that setting, is one that is not forgotten.

Interestingly he prefers to keep his two loves separate. “The composition is made alone, and

the music must be heard in silence. The wine is user-friendly, we discuss, we laugh, we philosophise... it’s a social activity. I think it’s not possible to hear music while drinking and to drink while hearing music.” If the social occasion calls for music and drinking he opts for jazz.

He prefers not to speak in terms of favourite wines. “I drink wine only with someone, and so I choose a wine that pleases my customer or my friend, because we are drinking together and it’s my philosophy to buy and drink only wines that I like and that I know all about.”

For a celebratory occasion it must meet this criteria — authentic, sincere, fragranced and balanced. “It depends on the meal, but my preference is for an old wine, mature and generous, with a great sweet wine to finish.”

Both of these, can be found in his 500-plus references. This includes outstanding wines from Burgundy and Bordeaux, including most good vintages dating back to the late 1940s.

The oldest wine he has is a Malaga 1780; the rarest, a Chinon, Les Varennes du Grand Clos Franc de Pied 1989; and the most expensive, a Château d’Yquem 1897.

“Once a customer finds me he will always return, either for the wine, or the music.” ◇

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