Helena is set to take SWEDISH WINE to the next level

She is the winemaker who moved back to Sweden from Italy to start a whole new chapter in her career at the award-winning Kullaberg. Meet Helena Lindberg, who now leads the production of Sweden's most acclaimed wines.

Text and photo | Claes Löfgren

The Swedish Wine Tasting 2024, where Kullaberg Winery sensationally beat international giants, has put Sweden on the international wine map. Winery sales and the tourism industry are new terms that cast a positive glow over this relatively new phenomenon.

The timing for Helena Lindberg, who has been the head winemaker at Kullabergs Vingård for the past year, is therefore absolutely perfect. One could easily call it Sweden's hottest gig in the wine world, as Kullaberg is on everyone's lips following the unexpected victory.

I've known Helena since 1997, when we met in New Zealand while she was working for Nautilus. I took some photos and wrote an article about her for the magazine Vi. When she started at Biserno a few years later, it was only natural to visit her. This resulted in a previous article for Allt om Vin, and we've stayed in touch ever since.

The first meeting for this article takes place at Kullaberg. When we meet, the harvest has just ended and the tanks are full. The newly built facility gleams, and there's activity everywhere.

What were your thoughts on returning to Sweden?

– When I decided to leave Italy, it was because I felt I was done there, Helena explains. Lodovico and his brother Piero had started collaborating more, and as a result, the massive Antinori organization took control. From working independently and only having Michel Rolland and Lodovico to bounce ideas off of, there were suddenly a bunch of "bosses" who had to weigh in on everything. It didn't feel as fun anymore. And I was longing for Sweden and a slightly cooler climate! But I didn't really know what I was going to do. I'm a technician, not a salesperson at heart, which does limit my options a bit. And I felt too young to retire, so when this opportunity came up, it was something I absolutely couldn't turn down," says Helena as we chat in the break room for a while before it's time to taste the wines from the estate.

To tell the story of Helena Lindberg's success as a winemaker, we have to go back to the mid-1990s. With a degree in chemical engineering from Chalmers, Helena began working at Åkerlund & Rausing in Lund.

A growing interest in wine, partly thanks to Munskänkarna, led her to start thinking about her life choices and the future.

Her acquaintance with Hans Åström and Håkan Nilsson, the hottest sommeliers of the time, helped her apply for a job at the Australian winery Yalumba. Leaving Sweden in 1994 and traveling to the other side of the globe was a big step. But Helena did well, was given more responsibility, and two years later she was on her way to New Zealand. There, Yalumba was a partner in Rapaura Vintners,

which produced the Nautilus wines. A big responsibility but a fantastic learning experience where she learned to be pragmatic and to improvise.

By the turn of the millennium, however, she was longing to return to Europe.

This time, the move was to France and a job at Domaine de la Baume, followed by work for major producers such as Jean Paul Mas and JF Lurton.

To gain more formal qualifications, she spent a year at D.U.A.D. in Bordeaux, one of the world's leading wine education programs in sensory analysis. Through her teachers, she came into contact with Stéphan Derenononcourt, whose network of contacts opened many doors. And in 2004, this led to Lodovico Antinori, who at the time had sold his share of Ornellaia in Bolgheri to start a new project, initially called Campo di Sasso, in Alta Maremma outside Bibbona. Helena received an offer she couldn't refuse and was hired as a winemaker. It was a demanding position with responsibility for a vineyard that was still in its early stages of development. As a consultant, Antinori had hired the world-renowned Michel Rolland, who visited the estate about four times a year. They also sent all samples to Bordeaux, where the tasting took place once a year. Helena traveled there instead of him coming to Bibbona. The project was later renamed Tenuta di Biserno, where the prestige wine consisted of Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Petit Verdot.

Helena stayed for nineteen years and made a name for herself as meticulous, with a sure palate, and technically skilled. She was also responsible for Antinori's venture in New Zealand, which involved many trips there.

BACK TO KULLABERG, a job she thus landed after a series of chance events. To begin with, she was offered a spot on the jury by Mikael Mölstad, the wine expert behind the competition, and there she came into contact with Björn Odlander, Kullaberg's owner. Around the same time, winemaker Felix G Åberg decided to move to Austria with his family. An important position thus became vacant, and Helena didn't need much time to think before accepting.

How would you describe your first year at Kullabergs Vingård?

– It's really fun; here at Kullaberg, it feels good to work in a smaller setting with a great team. Everyone is carried along by the successes. But it's been a steep learning curve. Both the climate and the grape varieties are new to me. Solaris isn't quite the same as Cabernet Franc and Merlot. But my years in New Zealand have given me extensive experience in white wine production, which is a huge help today.

Helena continues:

– It's not just different climatic conditions; it's a completely different soil. But the collaboration with Nicola D'Agostini, who is from Italy and is in charge of viticulture, works really well! His knowledge from northern Italy, where it's cooler, and his expertise in sparkling wines complement my knowledge of red wines. I'm not the "chief winemaker"—we're two winemakers who work well together. So I'm not a threat, and since I'm nearing the end of my career, he respects my experience. I didn't know anything about Swedish wine, and hybrid grapes were completely new to me, but now I feel confident after a little over a year.

Do you miss anything from your time in Italy?

– I do miss the Italian bars where you can pop in and grab a quick cup of coffee for just 1.20 euros (about 13 Swedish kronor). But that's balanced out by Swedish nature and getting back to some kind of normality, says Helena.

– And most importantly, I haven't had to throw away my experience. I can't really say I miss Italy; I knew for years that I wanted to return to Sweden before I got old. I file my taxes here and avoid the Italian mess!

You also live at Kullabergs Vingård—how does that work?

– It works out fine; it's close to everything, so when, for example, the cooling system breaks down on a Sunday, I can easily pop in and tinker a bit. I've been behind malfunctioning tanks many times in my life, so I'm stubborn, and with the help of a colleague, we figured out what the problem was in that particular case. It was pretty helpful to have done my boot camp at Rapaura Vintners in New Zealand in that situation.

When you look back on your life, is there anything you've regretted?

– No, I've made my choices; I can't blame anyone. Maybe I could have focused more on my personal life, but that's not how it turned out. It's been a fantastic adventure in Italy, and now I'm in the middle of a new adventure here in Sweden. Coincidence is amazing!

When we meet a second time in Stockholm, the news that the French oenologist Michel Rolland has passed away has just reached us.

You worked with Michel Rolland for 19 years. How does that feel?

– I'm sad. It's a sorrow, a void.

I learned so much more from him than I realized at the time. When he came a couple of times a year, I was always a little nervous, but his friendly manner was reassuring, and we always got along well. He didn't lecture or explain, but he knew how to select the right components to create a cohesive whole. It was truly fascinating to work with him. He had started to wind down and let go of many projects. But he left at the top of his game.

Which do you personally think is the best wine you've made?

– Hopefully, I haven't made it yet, but so far I'd say the 2007 Pino di Biserno. It was so early in my career, yet it turned out so well.

Helena continues:

– Cabernet Franc is probably my favorite grape in that climate; it ripened perfectly and turned out wonderful.

Do you think there's a future for red wines in Sweden?

– Kullaberg's Himmelstorp, made from Pinot Nova, is probably the wine I've tasted most often and which shows there's potential. We have more experience with white grapes like Solaris, which have proven to be very well-suited to the Swedish climate and soil. But there's a lot of experimentation going on right now, and things are developing very quickly. So why not world-class red wines eventually? l

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