

MIGUEL PINA E CUNHA
ALEXANDRE DIAS DA CUNHA
SALVADOR DA CUNHA

SPRING AND PORT WINE (B)

The Keller Family at the crossroads

In the fall of 2018 Michael found himself walking, once again, in Quinta da Roda, absorbed in his thoughts and trying to understand how the 2018 harvest would turn out, when he received an unexpected call. Maybe it was not the call itself that was unexpected, but rather the topic and, above all, the tone.

This summer had been an erratic one. First, there was the mildew, a disease caused by parasites, then the heavy rains and, later, an intense heat or “sunburn”, as it is commonly called by wine farmers.

Michael was not a man to pull himself down. He knew that he had lost much of the grapes, thus making 2018 a very unproductive year, but he still trusted, based on first tastings, that it would prove to be a good year in terms of quality. At least, the situation was still more promising than his family affairs.

In the last year, if something had changed, it had been for worse. Michael and Julia had grown more and more apart, reaching a point where they would hardly be speaking. As for his parents, Michael would only speak with his mother when he absolutely had to, as for example, when picking up his dad to take him to lunch. Michael still cherished these moments with his father, as he thought that they were very good for the old man’s spirits. Gunter’s condition had worsened in the last months, his memory was weak, as was his ability to walk by himself. But Michael thought that, after the first hour out of the house, Gunter would rejuvenate.

Michael’s sons had already entered working life. The eldest one oversaw Michael’s wine joint-venture in Germany, together with his partner, and the youngest one was helping Michael in Portugal, getting to know the business and learn closely with his father. As for Julia’s children, the eldest was working for a big wine importer in the UK (that also imported Keller wines) and the youngest was still studying.

As he was absorbed in his thoughts, trying to understand what to do and where to go, he got a call from his sister Julia. What followed was something that Michael had only dreamt of, but this had been a dream long gone.

- Michael, I want you to know from me first-hand: I have reached my tipping point. I am willing to sell my share in the company, at a certain price. In the next days you will get a proposal from my lawyer. This is a decision that I've made at great cost. When I joined the company, I never imagined that it would be impossible for us to work together. We could have been the first generation of the Keller family to have two members working side by side, but you proved impossible to work with.
- Hi Julia, how are you? If you want sell, let's talk about numbers, I am not interested to discuss what my flaws and what your flaws are. I will get in touch after I see the proposal.
- Ok, bye.
- Bye now.

The call was like hundreds of previous ones in the last years, but this time it seemed different. Michael had lost count of how many informal family meetings he had attended, how many talks and arguments he'd had with his sister, how many discussions he'd endured with his mother, how many meetings with lawyers he had wasted his hours on. This time it seemed that his sister was determined.

Two weeks later, Michael went to his lawyer's office to discuss the terms proposed by Julia for selling her shares. The siblings closed the deal in a couple of weeks and Michael thus became the controlling owner of the Keller vineyards. Once more, history repeated itself: much like a grapevine, the Keller business family was pruned yet again.