

The magic of Laurence Faller (1967–2014)

The winemaking community in Alsace, and wine lovers around the world, were greatly saddened by the sudden death in May of one of the region's best and best-loved winemakers. Tom Stevenson pays tribute to the doyenne of Domaine Weinbach

One of Alsace wine's greatest shooting stars has fallen to earth. Laurence Faller, winemaker at Domaine Weinbach in Kaysersberg, died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack at her home in Colmar on May 12, 2014. She was found by her elder sister Cathy. The brilliance of Laurence shone so brightly from such a young age that it seems inconceivable for anyone who knew her that her flame could flicker out after just 47 years.

Laurence was born on April 28, 1967, the daughter of Théo and Colette Faller. Théo Faller had been injured during the war and occasionally convalesced in Italy prior to his untimely death in 1979, when Laurence was just 12 years old. There was a hole in her life where her father should have been, which could not have been easy for her or, indeed, her mother. After Théo passed away, Domaine Weinbach was in very good hands as Colette already had considerable experience running the estate. She was assisted by Jean Mercky, one of Théo's friends; and Cathy, Laurence's older sister, who helped her mother run the business from the age of 16. Colette is a most remarkable woman, and Cathy is every bit as formidable as her mother, but no mother expects to outlive her youngest child. As Cathy told me, "Colette is very courageous, but our hearts are broken."

Laurence Faller: A dispenser of magic dust, her brilliance shone brightly from a young age



Laurence was naturally gifted at mathematics, graduated in chemical engineering at the Laboratoire de Génie Chimique in Toulouse, enology at the University of Toulouse, and obtained an MBA at Lyon Business School. In 1993 she took up winemaking duties at Domaine Weinbach, initially under the guidance of Jean Mercky, but by 1996 she had taken over most of the responsibilities for winemaking and vineyard management. In 1998, when Colette gave her full control, she began converting the vineyard to biodynamic farming. In July 2010, Laurence went on parental leave to take care of her children; she returned to work in January 2013.

The Wines of Alsace was published in 1993, so I did not get to know Laurence or her wines until after my research for that book. Tasting the young wines coming out of Domaine Weinbach, I was puzzled how such sleek and classy wines could be so complete and ready to drink so early. I remember discussing this with the late Johnny Hugel. "How does she do it?"

I asked, to which Johnny immediately responded, "Oh, that's easy. Every night, she goes down to the winery when nobody is around and she sprinkles a little magic dust into every vat!" Playing along, I asked, "And what is in the magic dust?" Johnny looked at me in mock amazement and said, "Now if I knew that, don't you think I would be bottling that, too?"

Laurence captivated not only Johnny. I think in those early years most of the young winemakers in Alsace were half in love with her. Year after year, as she honed her style, even those who hankered after something bigger could not help but be seduced by the purity and poise of the Faller wines. Laurence was able to do the impossible: increasing a wine's length without increasing its weight. She was at the top of her game with Riesling, but she could also elevate Sylvaner into a class of its own, and she made exquisite Muscat.

Laurence leaves two children she adored, Armand (6) and Amalia (4).