

Uncorked:

Watchmaking & Winemaking

in Napa Valley with

A. LANGE & SÖHNE

BY JASON HEATON

Despite having already quaffed six glasses of wine, the connection between fine wine and fine watches was not lost on me as I watched a row of nimble hands pick unsatisfactory grapes from a conveyor belt inside the cellar at the Napa Valley Reserve.

“The same people who pick the grapes do their own quality control, and the hand-sorting is just part of what makes this wine great,” said master sommelier Gilles de Chambure. “There’s a real pride in workmanship.”

I was with a small group of journalists invited by A. Lange & Söhne to the luxurious Meadowood resort in Napa Valley, California, to learn more about what makes Lange’s watches so special — and also to learn a little bit about wine. The trip’s

organizers were clearly proponents of the “learning by doing” pedagogical model. This meant spending a morning trying our hands at engraving a German-silver balance cock and setting tiny screws in a gold chaton, then drinking copious amounts of wine in the afternoon. Fortunately, they had the good sense to schedule the drinking after the fine-motor-skill activities.

I knew that we would spend our first morning attempting some watchmaking, so I went light on the French roast and made my way to the classroom Lange had set up in a “barn” at the vineyard adjacent to Meadowood. At the front of the room were two desks where Lange master engraver Peter Lippsch and watchmaker Martin Jonas sat, their steady work captured by high-definition cameras and magnified for us on flat-

panel monitors. Soon, it would be my turn.

As I struggled to fit my fingers into latex finger cots (German silver is affected by the skin’s oils), I watched Martin effortlessly pick up an impossibly small blued screw and guide it into the threaded holes on a gold chaton. When it was my turn to step up, I awkwardly pushed a loupe into my eye socket and hunched over the baseplate. “Rest your arms on the desk for support,” Martin said encouragingly. Using a pair of tweezers, I collected one of the screws, which is almost invisible with the naked eye, and, after a few tries, managed to drop it into the chaton — upside down. Trying again, the screw flipped out of the tweezers and bounced off the desk, lost forever. My profuse apologies were met with a knowing smile. Finally, on my third try, I was able



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The secret to screwing a tiny gold chaton in place is a set of steady hands and vast amounts of patience; the author, at work on a movement plate; examples of engraving by Lange’s craftsmen; the author finds a kindred connection between fine wine and fine watchmaking; casks of Californian cabernet; engraving a Lange balance cock — slightly oversized to accommodate unpracticed hands

to get the screw where it needed to be and carefully tightened it down. My pride in the accomplishment was quickly quashed, though, when I glanced at a 636-piece chain from a fusée and chain, which, Martin informed us, is hand-assembled.

Next up was the engraving station. Before I got to work on the balance cock, Peter set me up with a soft brass block on which to practice. “Engraving” is not exactly what I would call the results of my efforts; “gouging” would be more appropriate. But Peter seemed to think I was ready to move on to the real thing. Well, almost the real thing. Our practice balance cocks were oversized — probably twice as big as the ones Lange uses in its watches. But at least they looked like watch components.

The balance cock was locked into a heavy, spool-shaped form, which I gripped with one hand while working a small, sharp chisel across

the metal, careful to keep it moving and rocking my wrist as I pushed. To make a curved line, one has to slowly and evenly turn the apparatus while continuously chiseling. My attempt at engraving my initials was passable. And since I managed to not slip and puncture my hand, I was pleased. Peter congratulated me, quickly picked up a chisel, and in half the time it took me to carve two letters, perfectly engraved the date on the balance cock — a souvenir for me to take home.

After a well-deserved lunch and more wine, we got to view the collection of Lange watches. From the innovative and distinctly modern Zeitwerk “Luminous” to the simplest Saxonia, the entire lineup is exquisite in form and function. But above them all are the quartet of “Pour le Mérite” watches: the Richard Lange, the Richard Lange Tourbillon, the Tourbograph and the original Tourbillon. All four pieces are distinguished by their use of the aforementioned

fusée-and-chain mechanism, which was developed for pocket watches, but first used in wristwatches by A. Lange & Söhne. And this was the first time all four were displayed together in the United States.

When we were done fondling the timepieces, sommelier Gilles bounded into the room, rakish in his linen jacket and fedora, and beckoned us to follow him out into the warm California sun. Glasses of blanc de noirs were distributed and we strolled through the vines, learning about the history of viticulture in Napa Valley, the biology of grapes, and the nuances of California weather. The finicky work of watchmaking done, it was a pleasure to be outside, glass in hand.

As I drained the last drop from my glass, my mind went back to something Gilles had said earlier: “A great wine is the result of attention to detail and all the little steps along the way being done perfectly.” Just like a great timepiece.★



From left : the Richard Lange Tourbillon, the original Tourbillon, the Tourbograph, and the Richard Lange