

terry theise estate selections

GERMANY 2004



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The Theise Manifesto

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

The whole of any wine must always be more than the sum of its parts.

Distinctinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.

Soul is more important than anything, and soul is expressed as a trinity of family, soil and artisanality.

Praising Spring

*The day is taken by each thing and grows complete.
I go out and come in and go out again,
confused by a beauty that knows nothing of delay,
rushing like fire. All things move faster
than time and make a stillness thereby. My mind
leans back and smiles, having nothing to say
Even at night I go out with a light and look
at the growing. I kneel and look at one thing
at a time. A white spider on a peony bud
I have nothing to give, and make a poor servant,
but I can praise the spring. Praise this wildness
that does not heed the hour. The doe that does not
stop at dark but continues to grow all night long.
The beauty in every degree of flourishing. Violets
lift to the rain and the brook gets louder than ever.
The old German farmer is asleep and the flowers go on
opening. There are stars. Mint grows high. Leaves
bend in the sunlight as the rain continues to fall.*

- Linda Gregg

"This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it."

-Abu Yazid al-Bistami

Front Cover Photo: *Perfect TBA grapes at Toni Jost tell the story of the 2003 vintage.*

Dedication

To Kevin, Liz, Mark, Corrie; colleagues, brothers, sisters, friends.

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LET US WRITE YOUR ORDER FOR YOU!

It's easy! We write the order, you take the wine, we cash the check. What's not to like?

In all seriousness, I have spent the past several years actually writing about 15% of all the D.I. orders I receive, so I thought I'd formalize it. This is for people who want the wines but don't have the time to hack through my Amazonian jungle of quivering prose. Here's what you do:

- Give me a budget, and/or the number of cases you wish to receive.
- Tell me how to proportion the order; Rhines vs. Mosels, what proportions at which price points, how much Kabinett vs. Spätlese vs. Auslese, etc.
- Tell me if you want any Liter wines for floor-stack, any sparkling wines, in fact tell me generally if you want a conservative order or a high-wire order filled with lots of weirdo wines.
- Tell me if there are wineries which have done well for you in the past, or which have not.

And away I go. I will create an order proposal for you, you'll look it over and tweak and twiddle it, and send it back in the form that you wish . . .

I promise this: knowing that you've bought on trust from me, I will make DAMN sure that every wine I send to you is KILLER WINE. I can't risk your being anything less than really impressed with every cork you pull. The last thing I want is for you to think I fobbed something off on you. I will write the HIPPEST possible order within your guidelines.

We call this the E-Z method of flash-buying. It works. If you'd like my help, I'm standing by to give it. If not, I shall pout, and taunt you for the pitiable order you wrote yourself. Who needs that kind of trouble?



So I'm shopping and trying to push through the jet lag of my first day in Germany. The lady in the shop regards me quizzically. "I know you from somewhere," she says. That's impossible, I reply; I've never been here before. "Nonetheless," she muses, ". . . I know your face from somewhere . . . *yes!* From the television!" she cries.

A few hours later I'm back at my hotel unloading the take from the shopping day. Out of the car, bags in hand, I kick the door closed and the damn car starts honking and blinking and honking and blinking and no matter which useless button I press I can't make it stop, and people are looking at me and my frantically yelping rent-a-car and one guy walks by staring at me and I say "It's a rental; I don't know how to make it stop" and I swear he says "You're that wine guy I saw on TV." And all I can say is "Yeah, I know lots about wine but I don't know *shit* about how to make this noise stop." And finally the car puts me (and the prevailing tranquility) out of our respective miseries and shuts up, and I have just been recognized twice in one afternoon, and reader: this is *weird*.

Last year they made a little film about me and my wacko doings. The guy who did it was a friend of Strub's and a wine guy who'd taken an interest. Paul made the thing on spec, as it turned out, and some time before the first showing in late April 2003 he felt he needed to rub some spit on his film so he juiced it up with some spurious controversy. And lo, it was a success, broadcast repeatedly and as recently as a week before I arrived.

I was O.K. with doing it; I thought it would help the growers (it couldn't really help me) and besides, as Gore Vidal famously said, you should never pass up the chance to A) have sex or B) be on TV. But if you ever contemplate a similar choice – the TV part I mean – just remember you're merely a piece of meat they cook according to a recipe they don't think you need to see. So our little film, entitled *Der Ami Kommt* (The Yank's Coming) became an exegesis on the question of *sweetness*, how to create it, whether it should be present at all. And the battle lines were drawn, between those who use *dosage* to "manipulate" their wines to satisfy *Der Ami* and his sucrose-craving clientele, versus the others who'd never dream of such impure machinations.

I love Germany and many of my dearest friends are there, but there is just a le-e-e-dle teensy bit of a tendency to make things ideological which are not (or need not be) ideological, and this is, believe me, tedious. It's part of a healthy regard for ideas as such, but it tends to ignore common sense. Toward the end of this year's trip I was interviewed by a writer for Stern magazine (I'm having my fifteen minutes of fame, which I wish would have happened when I coulda used it to get girls) and of course the subject of sweet vs. dry came up. Inevitably! It is Topic-A, the only apparent matrix for understanding German wines and deciding whether they're Correct. I happen to both greatly respect and *like* this writer, but the line of questioning was wearisome: "Millions of people inside Germany drink these dry rieslings and like them. Do you think these people are wrong?"

Well, I answered; millions of other people outside of

Germany encounter these dry rieslings and are horrified and repelled, and are *these* people wrong? Or is it just maybe possible to examine this matter more deeply than through a prism of right versus wrong? Does everything have to be a Hegelian debate all the time?

But now that I've been on TV I have another kind of existence, in ways both innocuous and existential. Television confers existence on those whom it exhibits. It makes you *real*, this most artificial of media. I am the tiniest of fish, as good as invisible to at-large vox pops, but in my little world I have become a minor personage, and I don't like it. Because there is now a political dimension to many things I used to do thoughtlessly. Now I have to calculate. I hate it. I was ass-deep in it for the last few weeks, and it itches.

Another funny thing has happened. When I started nineteen years ago I was younger than most of my growers. Not any more! Now I'm older than most of them, and they treat me with a certain deference due to my, ahem, age. Oh well, no more groupies. . . .

I became aware of being on the cusp, or even just past the cusp of a sea-change. The German wine scene is nothing like it was even fifteen years ago.

Then it was still a huge number of little growers most of whom worked in obscurity and sold mostly to their private clientele. To find the good ones you had to prospect, keep your ear to the ground and know whose brains to pick. The wines were usually absurdly cheap but somehow the growers managed; their overheads were lower, as were their assumptions of a certain standard of living.

But generations change, economies change, and two seismic shifts also took place, the advent of an activist wine-press and the age of the internet.

As soon as the press became important, it became the short-cut of choice for establishing reputations. Thus prospecting became irrelevant; if you were good and ambitious you were putting yourself out there and not waiting to be found.

These things coincided with a decline in wine consumption in general. You know the phrase; less-wine-but-better-wine, but I've had a chance to watch it at work in the macro-life of German wine. The marginal were being squeezed out of existence. The elderly retired with no one to continue the wineries. The audience for wine narrowed to a small geekdom of wine-heads who only





Rheingau vineyards

wanted the best stuff, and who used the press to point them to it. Thus the enterprising grower had to go all out for glory. This meant investment in the newest geegaws for the cellar (especially if the neighbor had them) and in some instances it meant having a nose to the wind to catch the prevailing scent. What were the "approved" types of wines, what was the new *Zeitgeist*, and how does one get one's hands on the *mojo-du-jour*?

The worst of this syndrome is known to you. People crafted wines with an eye to the reviews they'd get. Everyone knows how, you know.

But there's an immense good side to this too, a heartening presumption of excellence and integrity which rescued a potential debacle like the 2000 vintage, and which made one wise-man among the growers opine "I doubt we'll ever see a truly bad vintage again." Really, I asked? Even if the weather's truly awful? "Even then." He replied. "Everything is different now, yields are lower, vine-husbandry is better, vineyards are healthier, people are willing to green-harvest and pick selectively, and there's more pure competence in the cellar, more people who know what to do and what not to do."

I don't know whether to believe that, I know I'd like to, but I can't help but register the lovely optimism and cheerful derring-do of it all. The excellent are aware of their places in a *community* of excellence; the wine scene is supporting these strivings almost institutionally. These are healthy times for good growers in Germany, and they'd be even healthier if not for the bullshit over residual sugar.

The 2003 vintage was a tempting one to pore over lab reports for wines' analyses, but I seldom did, nor did many growers prompt me to. It was Helmut Dönnhoff who first graduated away from obsession over wines' analytical values, the first among my crowd to push away from deconstructing the aesthetics of wine's flavor. Because I respect him and he intrigues me, I realize he has influenced me.

But even seeing what he's moved away from, we should consider what he might be moving toward. What are we trying to do here? Why *shouldn't* we exercise our cerebral cortex rooting around in wine's flavor and structure if that's what floats our boat? Seems innocent enough.

Here's what I think we're after: a point of utter receptivity because we're seeing only the wine instead of seeing *ourselves* seeing the wine. Oh it's all very Zen. But I am ever-more persuaded it is the way to pleasure and sanity.

If we don't see past ourselves, our discrete palates, we can't get past *What am I getting from the wine*. The process starts and ends with "I." What am "I" getting, what do "I" think (how many points will "I" give this wine), and all I can say is if you drink wine this way I sure hope you don't *make love* this way, because your partner's bored.

Try this. Next time you drink wine, ask *What is this?* Not what "I" get: *what THIS is*. "This," the thing outside you, the not-I.

Perhaps you'll experience the loveliest of ironies; when you relax the "I" and receive the world, the world charges you with its perfect reality and suddenly your "I" becomes larger than you ever imagined. But you have to be calm. Trust your senses. Let the wine in. You might find it becomes more vivid now, and you slowly cease to care about the brain-game of dissecting. Who cares what's on the lab report? Peter Jost put it well. "Describing a wine by its analysis is like describing a beautiful woman by her X-ray films."

I think this is why we love old wines as we do. It isn't only that they're lasted so long; in fact I doubt we truly realize the existential truth of the old vintage on the label. What does "1949" signify? It's absurd, unless we were alive then and remembered. Sometimes even then.

Great old wine is evocative, this we know. It has to have been meaningful wine to start with, nothing industrial or "manufactured," a wine of identity and connection to earth and family. But mere evocation would seem innocuous enough; maybe it could float you into a dreamy mood or make you lambent and warm. But this is more. Great old wine seems to have distilled reality. All of reality, not only itself: old rooms, echoes of the cooking of many meals, smells of worn clothes, the prevailing atmosphere of the time it was made. And like a distillate, it is almost too concentrated to apprehend. Thus we are at once granted entry into a world and a place of soul we never get to see, and it's so sudden and unexpected that we are disarmed and laid bare.

One year when I traveled with a group of customers to Schmitt-Wagner, he brought out a treasure remarkable even by his standards, an Auslese from the great 1937 vintage. I had tasted the wine once before (this is a generous man) and I waited for what I knew would come. As the wine was poured the group inhaled audibly at the color, and I saw many faces grow meditative as they sniffed those first mysterious fragrances. But when you expect to be moved you're too self-conscious and you can't be moved. That was me. My guests had walked through that little tear in the curtain out into the other world. I was happy for them.

Someone asked Herr Schmitt, "Did you make this wine?" "Oh my goodness no, I was just a child," he answered. Then he grew pensive and said "But I do remember being a boy of six, picking the grapes alongside my grandma," and then I lost it. I was looking at his hands just then, as it happened, the hands of a vigorous old gentleman still ruddy from a life in the open air, and I suddenly saw the child's little hands inside them. And saw the child trotting along at his grandma's side, happy to be included in the general activity, proud to be useful,

there among the vines. And now it was sixty-four years later. The wine in our glasses was enthralling enough to us, but to our host it was the pure blood of memory, bound to the filaments of his earliest joys, with affection and usefulness. This is a man of Wine, I realized. This is what it means to be a man of wine.

This '37 called to us from across a passageway to a world we barely know. But to Bruno Schmitt it called across each of those sixty-four years from small sweet memories. I was so lost in my vision of the boy that I registered the 70-year old face of the man to my left with a small shock. He had passed his life in wine, I thought. He didn't choose it because he thought it was gracious or sexy or romantic. He chose it (if it were indeed what we would call a "choice") because it needed to be done and it pleased him to do it.

Wines made by such people glow with the value of human care and enterprise. These vintners don't seek to reinvent Wine. It is enough that the beauty of wine renews, always, that every year threads its way into a great story. It nourishes us to take such wines into our bodies, because by doing so we are connected to the deliberate rhythms of the world, and to our human place in it.

These ideas have started to become my schtick; they've crystalized out of my experience over the years into something that looks like a contribution I can make. Thus I write and talk about them. If you actually read this catalog (you have my sympathies) you might imagine I think about these things a lot, but the truth is I hardly think of them at all. I do if I have to, and I have to now. In my daily life I think mostly about baseball, sex and guitar solos. So, when I all-of-a-sudden am blindsided by an incandescent example of everything I think is important about wine, it wipes me out. And thus, I sat weeping in front of eleven of my customers and tried not to let them see.

Charles Simic once defined poetry as "three mismatched shoes at the entrance of a dark alley" (thanks to Molly McQuade for the quote). The basic enigma that changes the lens by which we receive the world. The more I get into wine the less reducible I feel it to be. Its enigma deepens even as it appears to grow more transparent. It is helpful to see wine connected to gardening, to making things grow, and it's even more helpful when the person encouraging the growing is companionably connected to the earth; most of all, when he sees the thing through to completion. Which, in wine, means to produce and to bottle it.

It's different when you go there; all wine is. Otherwise it's just a bottle and a label (and a flavor you can quantify if you're into such perversions), disconnected from its taproot. I try and have my gang with me as much as schedules allow, because they need to be there too, not to *sell* more, but to better know what they're selling. One of the loveliest things about artisanal wines is the imbuing of the grower's spirit. This isn't literal; a slim shy guy doesn't necessarily make slim shy wines. But something of him gets into those wines ineluctably; it can't be helped. It's why you suddenly "get" the wines only when

you meet the (wo)man, sit with him, look at the things he looks at every day, dip your feet into his vineyards, listen to the local birds.

None of this is valuable if the wines don't taste good. Josh Greene's interview with me for WINE & SPIRITS suggested that superb quality was a secondary consideration for me, but the truth is I barely consider it at all: It's a *given*. There is a "professional" intelligence that seeks to guarantee every wine tastes good every time. But after all these years (19!) I want you to know *who* you're buying these wines from. And what it all means.

There's an old story about a man who approached three bricklayers. Asking what they were up to, the first replied "Isn't it obvious? I'm laying these damn bricks." The second fellow was less truculent. "I'm making a wall," he said. The third guy seemed nearly beatific. "What am I doing? I'm helping to make a cathedral."

I know by now that I'll assemble an excellent group of wines. People will like them, they'll *perform*, they'll get you laid, all that. I like the work and I'm happy I have the talent to do it well. I like selling wine too. It's pleasant to contribute to the material prosperity of good growers. But when my son asks me to explain what I do, it can seem paltry. I'm just another schlub sellin' stuff. Just laying bricks.

But I know better. By telling you how meaningful and lovely this culture is, I'm doing my weensy part to keep it alive. My real job is to nurture this and pass it on intact. *This was good*. People made this, and it was good. Thus I speak my truth.

A few tenets of that truth are that agricultural wines are always more interesting than industrial wines. That doggedness in the vineyard and humility in the cellar are vital to the making of wines of consequence. That wine is a context containing soil-borne



flavors – their LANGUAGE – spoken with various ACCENTS according to which cellar-work a given grower prefers. That removing any PART of this context from wine does injury to its being (and if we do love wine, why deliberately injure it?) . . .

Europeans are more aware than we Yanks that people actually existed before us, they're aware of the real size of their place in the cosmos. They *listen* to the soil and work to do its bidding. They know that the Riesling vine is the poet of their corner of the earth. They want to

hear the poem. They want us to hear it. And so they work to bring the words clearly onto the page. And they are aware they do not, themselves, CREATE those words. The text is created somewhere else, below the ground.



I live a disphasic existence. The way fine German wines are made makes perfect sense to me. Soils and exposures are complex and variable; therefore the wines are kept separate and produced in small lots. The climate is sometimes iffy, so the wines are categorized by how ripe the grapes were, since you can't presume upon ripeness. The production structure is artisanal, and there's a lot of hands-on by family vintners who literally live above their wines. This means that individual wines come and go; they're different every year. They resist being categorized; it is in their essence to be discontinuous. And I could, (if I really wanted to) make this all less onerous for accountants, warehouse people, data processing people, all the innocent bystanders for whom I feel great sympathy. I could do it. But only at the price of slaughtering something I feel is even more vital to protect.

The growers themselves are seldom aware of their roles as protectors of an ancient verity. They just do what they do. But the net *result* of what they do, FOR CIVILIZATION, is to protect and nurture **individuality** against a rip tide of uniformity, to protect **humility** in the face of an arrogance that presumes we have dominion over nature, and to protect **humanity**, the connection of the worker to the work. Their wines aren't Things, but rather **Beings**: the grower knows them, knows each plot of land, each vine in many instances, knows how the grapes looked and tasted when they were picked, knows everything that went into the growing season, knows how the must behaved before and during fermentation, and knows in some inchoate way the connection between the land and the wine because he is steeped within the nexus of that connection all the time. He has absorbed it into his basic experience of reality, it is no longer an abstract idea he thinks about. It is simply how things are.

"Whoever discovered water, it certainly wasn't a fish!"

But you can only know this by paying attention. And you can't pay attention if you aren't close in. Only the artisanal grower has access to "the murmurings of the earth" (in Matt Kramer's phrase) and only his wines permit us to listen in.

Marcel Deiss gave a wonderful quote to Andrew Jefford for The New France:

"What is a man? A man is the network of all his genes; that's his 'possible.' Beyond that, though, a man is all he's learned. Every day he lived, he learned. He suffered; he became enthusiastic; he fell in love; he became disappointed. When I meet someone, what do I want? I want what he has lived (his *vécu*), his humanity; I don't want his genetic material. Why, when I taste a wine, do you want me to taste its genotype and not its *vécu*? A *vin de terroir* is how a vine communicated everything that it has learned beyond its genotype. And this apprenticeship is the cultivation of depth."

And you think I'm metaphysical?

But why should we care about all this? Isn't it enough that wine tastes good? Hmmm. Well, why should we care about the loving, tender and passionate feelings that arise during lovemaking; isn't it enough that sex feels good? We should care because it *exists*. And because the capacity inside us to respond also exists.

But we needn't care if we don't feel like it. Wine will meet you wherever you are. If you only want *some* of what it has to give, that's what it will give you. Yet I believe we are creatures in search of meaning. We crave it, each in our ways according to our temperaments, but we emphatically do NOT wish to live without it.

What is wine trying to tell us about the earth? What is it in wine that transmits the message? (Andre Ostertag has a great line: "With Riesling, all the stones of the world find their unique voice.") Why does the earth want us to hear its message? Why was wine chosen to convey the message? Now I'm not of a particularly speculative bent myself; I don't worry about these kinds of questions. Yet I presume upon a world in which they are LEGITIMATE questions, and I *do* think that wine is a conveyor of meaning. Certainly not all wine, maybe not even *much* wine, but a few wines, those that express a spirit of place and which are uncompromisingly, distinctly, themselves. "Made" wines – wines intended as Products, wines fashioned according to commercial formulas, wines made in very large wineries, wines made by technocrats, wines made without reference to a grape's natural habitat and/or without consideration of a sense of place – such wines have a kind of half-life; they are without *soul*. They might taste good; they often do. They *show* great. They can show the ASS off your palate – but they are meaningless. Wine-like substances. Junk-wine.

Here's the crux of it. Something in us craves diversity. It is counter to the life-force to struggle against it, it is literally deadening to live in a standardized world. Along with diversity comes habitat. Diverse members of a specie have diverse preferences as to where they live and what they eat in order to survive. I feel strongly that the *best* grapes are those which are *fastidious* in their preferences. They may live, technically, away from their natural homes, but they won't thrive. They give boring wines. The world's most fascinating, meaningful and DELICIOUS wines are made from grapes grown *where they belong*, in the soils and climates that suit them. And they are individuals. And they are not common. And they are worth everything; they are why we care at all about this crazy way we make a living.

Continuing New Approach to Tasting Notes

"At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to [Simone] Weil, requires us 'to give up our imaginary position as the center . . .' What happens, happens to our bodies. When we come upon beautiful things . . . they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space . . . or they lift us . . . letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede ground to the thing that stands before us."

-Elaine Scarry



My notes were longer this year, to my surprise. I don't much enjoy writing tasting notes anymore, so what was this about? Looking them over, I saw I was hardly describing the flavors of the wines at all, but rather how they danced and sang. Not so much the text of the flavor but instead the meta-message. Or so I hope! I know you sometimes use me to discern what you want to buy, and believe me I want to be helpful. But do you really buy wine because it tastes "like boysenberrys and porksnouts?" Wouldn't you rather know the wine "danced like Gandhi would have had there been discos in Calcutta?" Well it's what I'd rather tell you, so get over it. That, or I'll take my cue from shampoo bottles, and if I like a wine just write, "Open, drink, repeat."



I used to care a great deal about writing tasting notes as much for my own writer's ego as for the actual wines. I searched for ever-more esoteric associations so you would be impressed with my palate. I strove for pretty language so you'd think I was a good writer. Sometimes I actually wrote well, and sometimes the wine actually *did* taste like "polyvinyl siding in direct sunlight on a Fall day with an approaching cold front" (I no longer represent *that* agency), but mostly I fell victim to my own affect.

And of course I still do, because words hold me in a certain sway, and wine acts on my feelings. But I have begun to feel that writing tasting notes is *sometimes* like pausing to describe the giddy ecstatic running of a dog to whom you've just thrown a stick. The grinning beast lopes back to you with some big ol' drool-covered stick in his slobbery maw, and he's *looking* at you as if every scintilla of his happiness depends on your *throwing that stick again*, and what are you doing? You're writing! Put down the pen and **throw the damn stick**, man.

It's an odd business, this tasting and conveying through words. It makes a wine into a precious object of



attention excluding the rest of the world. I have a specific mercantile purpose in telling you how my selections tasted, but it's been years since I wrote or read tasting notes for fun. Who bloody *cares* if it's white peach or yellow peach or peach pit or peach skin or the BARK from the peach tree? That plus it's *fruitless* (pun intended!) because it's tautologous: when you describe flavors in terms of other flavors you eventually hit a wall. "This wine tastes like peaches." Fair enough. What do *peaches* taste like???

I'm pretty sick of the macho business of "getting" more things than the next guy does, not to mention the desperate striving for *original* associations ("The wine boasts a compelling nose of beer-battered kiwi fritters," that sorta stuff). At one point we thought we'd go entirely non-verbal, and created a sequence of pictures of spontaneous reactions to wines which really says it all. I'm into atavism. Let's return to those halcyon days of snorts and grunts.

One also has "good-writer-days" and "lousy-writer-days" (I have the latter with distressing frequency); on the good days thoughts and images flow and dance. I read what I'm writing and think "Good; this conveys it," but on the bad days it's just "Oh crap, *must* I again write 'slate and apples' for the umteenth time?"



I want my notes to help you, of course, and I want them to convey how the wine spoke. I'd rather not try to grasp or apprehend a wine. I try to summon a kind of calm. To forget myself. If impressions form words, I record them. If the words are sweet then I'm happy. But I am in the middle of this process, still fumbling. I'm just starting to know the difference between "flavors" and *Flavor*. Some days I almost get it. Other days I'm shuckin' and jivin'.

If I get to hear the wine, and if it doesn't speak in words then I try to find a way to record whatever language it does speak. Image is fine. Some might think it twee, but I'll happily crawl out on that limb. Feelings of *texture* are fairly easy to describe, and texture is at least as important as actual flavor. And associative language *can*



be useful, especially if it's a *genre* of wine we're describing. Signature flavors are helpful to know.

Those blasted chefs have discovered a damnably cunning zen concept for elusive flavor; *umami*. As best I can capture the concept, umami is an interior flavor you don't taste as a discrete taste but is deeply present on your tertiary palate, especially as you exhale. Certain foods (such as mushrooms) are generous with umami, and certain kinds of preparations (long slow braising) encourage it. It's present in wine also, especially in wines whose flavors aren't carried on swift currents of acidity. Umami has crept into a few of my notes so you should know what I think I mean by it! It's the taste of yourself tasting.

I hit a hot streak once in which I bulls-eyed something like five consecutive old vintages we'd been tasting blind. It's the one time on these trips that I don't have to



assess a wine in terms of "does it make the cut?" nor am I obliged to describe it. In other words, I can relax. Wine's a sometimes shy dog; you **grasp** at it, it runs away. You wait patiently for it, it's curiosity gets the best of it, it comes to you. If you're anxious (Oh shit, will I get it right?) it reads your fear and keeps its distance. If you're simply receptive, *there it is, laying at your feet and smiling*. Usually you "get" the wine with the first impression. Your guess is correct. You get all the samolians. The others, well, they get an edition of the "Mosel Wines Of The '60s" board game, plus the bitter memory of having been bested by some zen galoot.

Making the Case For German Wines

One night returning home to my hotel, I turned off the car and got out, and heard something I hadn't heard in many years. Three nightingales were singing their dark and eerily beautiful song. Suddenly the world went silent, and it was the beginning of time. I walked in the hotel's garden and listened to the three tiny birds until it was too cold to stay out longer. Inside, I opened my windows – they were still singing there in the middle of the night – and snuggled under the comforter, and let them sing me to sleep.

And now I'm writing about making the case for German wines. As if they *need* me to do so; *nature* makes the case for German wines constantly, with every lark, thrush or nightingale, every snap and crunch of apple, every swooningly fragrant linden tree in full blossom, everything that makes us pause when we are visited by the electric hum of the world. German wine is a small bird that sings in the darkness, a seemingly minute thing that can tingle your pores, and haunt you your entire life.

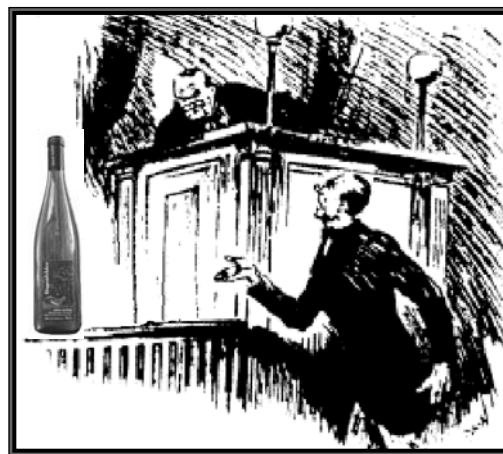
We who love German Riesling love it with abiding delight and passion, but we who sell it have confronted a variety of challenges over the years. Happily these are starting to melt away. The mainstream is still out of reach, luckily, but nearly all of you tell me it's possible to sell German wine again.

Fashion warps and woofs just like hemlines rising and falling, but I'd like to establish some durable and cogent argument for these uniquely lovely wines. Because I want them to survive. Even now, German wine isn't what most people think it is. Even the 2003 vintage isn't what most people think it is, though at this moment in early April as I write, most peoples' assumptions for '03 are based on little or no actual tasting.

Riesling isn't what most people think it is. Riesling is in essence not fruity but rather mineral. Fruit, when present, is woven and stitched into a mineral skeletoneurotic system. It is not the other way around, as many people presume.

I once told a woman at a tasting, when she asked if I had any Chardonnays, that all my wines were Chardonnays. "Then give me your best one," she asked, and I think I poured her a Lingenfelder. "Oh this is **wonderful!**" she enthused. "I think this is the best Chardonnay I've ever tasted." That's because it comes from the town of RIESLING, I said, showing her the word on Rainer's label. If you want really good Chardonnay, I continued, make sure it comes from Riesling. "Thank you," she said. "You've really taught me something." Little did she know.

The paradigm for German wine is pure fruit flavors, faithfulness to the soil, and balance of all structural components so that neither sweetness nor acidity stands out. Most modern well-made German Rieslings with residual sugar tastes DRIER than most new-world Chardonnay. And in place of the wash of slutty oak you get specifically focused flavors that can be hauntingly complex.



"The wines are too sweet." This is just not true. I've poured bone-dry, I mean dry as **dust** Trocken wines for tasters who complained at their **sweetness** because they had seen the shape of the bottle and the words on the label and their brains were flashing the SWEETNESS UP AHEAD sign. The very same wine, decanted into a burgundy bottle and served alongside, met with approval. "Ah that's better: nice and dry."

What people think they taste and what they actually taste are sometimes divergent. What they say they like and what they actually like are often divergent! Nothing new here. Apart from which, it's really tedious to be on the defensive regarding sweetness. *Somebody please tell me what's supposed to be WRONG with sweetness?* When did it become infra-dig? We SNARF down sweetness in every other form, why not in wine? It's in most of the food we eat. What do you think would happen if we *turned the tables*; put them on the defensive for rejecting sweetness?! "Who told you it wasn't cool to drink wines with sweetness?" we could ask. "Man, that idea went out with double-knit leisure suits."

Quick-cut to June 2003, at the Aspen *Food & Wine Classic*. I'm standing behind my table when an incandescently radiant young blonde approaches, boyfriend in tow. Said boyfriend is buff and tanned, a manly man. Woman has spied a bottle of dessert-wine from Heidi Schröck in its clear bottle and inviting gold. May she taste it yes she may. I pour. And you, sir, I ask: some for you? "No," he says, "I don't like dessert wine."

Fair enough, I think, chacun a son gout and all that. But something gnaws at me, and I finally have to ask: "Do you like *dessert*?"

"Excuse me?"

"Dessert," I say, "Do you eat dessert after a meal?"

"Sure," he says, "Yeah, I eat dessert."

"So you'll consume sweetness in solid form but not liquid form?"

"Well, I . . ."

". . . or you'll consume it in liquid form but not when it contains alcohol?" I press.

"Well I never thought of it that way," he says.

"Well?" I insist.

"Oh all right, let me taste the wine," he says peevishly, with woman looking keenly on.

I'm sure I didn't convert the guy, and I probably exploited his good naturedness (plus put him on the spot in front of his date, hahaha), but good grief, the bullshit some people believe about themselves!

I don't know a single human being who doesn't prefer a ripe tomato to an unripe one. Shall we share a basket of unripe strawberries? Even a Granny Smith apple has some sweetness; we'd spit it out otherwise. Somehow the wine world seems to insist we ignore an otherwise routine animal tendency, and affect to despise sweetness. If we were true to our TRUE tastes, we'd fall over one another to get to German rieslings. Then there wouldn't be enough wine, and prices would go up, and it's probably good the way it is. . . .

"The wines don't work with food." NOT!

"The wines are impossible to understand." The *world* is impossible to understand, using that logic. Look, German riesling is absolutely simple in its essence. Late-ripening variety with naturally high acidity grown in the most northerly latitude possible. Long hang-time. Lots of opportunity to leach minerals from the geologically complex sub-soils. Roots have to sink to find water, and roots are able to sink because topsoils are poor. Topsoils are poor because most riesling is planted on mountainsides, to increase its chance to ripen, and rich soil would avalanche every time it rained. So the wines are fresh, vibrant and minerally. There. Now you know *everything* you need to know to "understand" German wine. The rest is fine-tuning. They are maybe complicated but hardly abstruse. There's some stuff to memorize, like there is everywhere else. If you care, you learn it.

"There's too many different wines." This is true, but it's inextricable from the jewel of the German wine experience, just as it is in Burgundy. Comtes Lafon could equalize the casks and produce one white wine and one red wine, as he might were he a Bordelais. It would definitely simplify things. Would you want him to? Would the gain in simplicity outweigh the loss of fascination? You tell me!

Of all the grapes—not just white grapes, but all grapes from which wine is made—the Riesling is the most innately fine and noble. If it's grown in its habitat it can give wines of incomparable vividness and complexity **all by itself**, without having to be tweaked or twiddled or eeked or diddled.

As such I think Riesling, or indeed any wine with these virtues (Loire Chenins come to mind), can give the "discriminating" palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn't the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We've all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we've all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there's confusion over this issue, and it won't hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn't better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you'll be a better taster, period, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.



Making the Case for Auslese

The entire 2003 vintage makes the case for Auslese!

How strange that one never hears a wine-lover say "I just don't get Vendage Tardive. Why even bother producing such a thing? How does one use it?" A restaurant I really like—Luther, in Freinsheim in the Pfalz—ran an appetizer of mache with little strips of venison and a pumpkin chutney. We ordered a Dönnhoff '89 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese for the dish. It was nearly perfect; just not quite sweet *enough*. We drank the rest of the bottle with cheese. Savvy sommelieres have discovered this wicked little secret: *riesling with acidity and residual sugar is the perfect wine for many cheeses*.

But I am falling into the trap of defending Auslese's utility. Let's just finish the job while we're at it. Many Ausleses are not at all too sweet for the multi-culti eclecticism we see on plates all over white-tablecloth land, even in your home town. Have you tried them? So many "savory" courses are quite sweet these days, and a stern, manly Auslese will march in synch. Let's not even go to foie gras.

Next, it's not at all difficult to craft dishes for Auslesen without distorting your usual aesthetic. Norman Van Aiken's menu, to name but one leading chef, is predestined for precisely this type of wine. Make a sweet-salty salad without too much sharpness and that Auslese you've been eyeing for years will realize its destiny.

Are the wines too dry for desserts? Usually, yes. 'Till now I've confined this tirade to the questions of Auslese's *usefulness*. But now I want to ask: WHO CARES?? Does wine really have to prove its utility? Can we accept a world in which it suffices to be (merely!) *beautiful*? I drink Auslesen whenever I want to. Sometimes I make food that will "work" with them, sometimes not. Often nothing matters but the wine, and great Auslese compels my attention, gratefulness and joy. We don't have to fuss over the strict "use" of this or any wine. Perhaps its "use" is to remind us we live in a world streaming with loveliness. And if we pause and appreciate, we contribute to that loveliness. That's all the "use" I require.

Principles of Selection in this Portfolio

Visit everyone, taste everything, select what I liked the best, and then tell why. Nothing new or revolutionary.

The old broker-system is as good as dead now, and most of you don't remember it anyway. The marketing of German estate wines has at last aligned with their small-batch production structure.

My own portfolio is slowly changing to reflect changes on the "scene" and amongst the growers. Generations change, a few people coast on auto-pilot as they get older, new ones come along. I want to be loyal to my growers, and I'm fond of many of them and friends with quite a few. It always hurts to cut an estate, but the person most deserving of my loyalty is you, dear reader and customer.

At first I was deliberately ecumenical. I wanted to show you many facets of German wine and many different ways for it to be good. I still do. I am fond of the quirky. But I'm also realistic about how the wines are sold.

You can't visit each estate one-at-a-time like I do. Such visits have advantages and disadvantages. You see the wines in context, as they should be seen. But you don't see them in what Bob Parker likes to call "peer-group" conditions; i.e., with a bunch of similar wines from other growers. We show the wines in portfolio tastings wherein a big ol' *slew* of wines are lined up to be tasted alongside one another, exactly *contrary* to how they should be tasted or to any aims their makers had for them. But what choice do we have?

The results are predictable. Some wines "show" better than others. Fragrant wines with lots of primary fruit. Spritzy wines. Even (ulp) sweeter wines. If your wine has quirks or tics, if its asymmetrical, earthy and ornery, it will be laid to waste in "peer-group" tastings. (What actual *consumer* ever says "Let's see, tonight we're having a big greasy pizza: let's line up **sixty-two Chianti Classicos** and see how they 'show'!")

From a zenith of over SIXTY growers this little family has been reduced to barely over forty, and it might have gone down as far as it should go. Demand is rising and one remains alert to the eventual demise of estates with no visible heirs. Plus I'm a curious cuss and don't want to sit in my house with the windows closed. It may look quixotic to add agencies to a portfolio already numbering more than forty, but I suspect many of us in the fine wine biz have to struggle to reconcile our aesthetics with what passes for "common sense" as, *ahem*, businesspersons. For me, unless the businessman's point is beyond argument, the aesthete usually prevails. Somebody some time has to hurl beauty right in the wan face of common sense, and it might as well be me!

Selecting was easier in the old days. German wine was unpopular and therefore inconspicuous, and it was a buyer's market. I was at liberty to take only what I wanted. These days, we're selling more and are therefore more consequential to the grower; if I pass on a certain wine it can play havoc with his plans. And bruise his ego. It's all very *Realpolitik*, I suppose, and I sometimes wonder why I care so much about my precious "standards," but always I come to the same answer. **It's because I want to keep faith with you.** We may disagree, you and I, we may not like the same wines, but you deserve to know that I like what I say I like, and I won't ask you to buy a wine I don't endorse.

But how do I reconcile this with the political need to placate a grower?

There are certain wines with what I'd call iconic status. Scheurebe from Lingenfelder is a classic example. These wines belong in the market so you can make up your own mind about them. There are other wines with which I have some small aesthetic cavil or other, some minor but discernible imperfection which might bother me more than it would you. If the wine is otherwise worthy, you should see it.

Thus I will make certain wines available which I do not in fact *select*. These wines will not have my name on the label, and will be clearly identified within this text.

Bear in mind I'm not trying to create a lower-class of Theseis-rejects. Yucky wine is simply yucky wine and you'll never be offered it from me in any form. I am merely allowing you access to important wines with either iconic status or with minor imperfections, and identifying these wines for you.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE: one thing I will not do is to try and seduce agencies from competing portfolios. It isn't right and it isn't even necessary. This year's *Gault Millau* guide—a kind of classification of estates updated annually—shows nearly **150** estates of "classifiable" quality in the most important six regions ALONE who have no American importer. Most of my competitors are honorable people. One dude has been paying heavy court to a number of estates in my portfolio. When he can't get the wines he sometimes gray-markets them. I'm tempted to call such behavior evil, but it isn't. It's just pathetic. Still, the man has taste!



Gray-Marketers: Consumer-Champions or Scavenging Jackals?

There are times the gray-market is helpful and maybe even necessary to the consumer. Big "name" producers sometimes manipulate supply. A few importers gouge on prices. Growers themselves don't allocate their wines to accurately reflect the needs of various markets. And if you're a consumer, you have my blessing to obtain my wines wherever price and convenience compels.

Yet there's a fundamental issue of honor over which a debate is swirling. One wine journal, which markets itself as consumer cham-peen, has openly endorsed the gray market and has complained about "conventional" wine prices through orthodox channels. I wonder how sanguine they themselves would be if challenged to open their books and show customers what they made for their efforts. But that's a topic for another day.

In any case, I seem to have reached that exalted place where one's selections are imported through "unauthorized" channels.

Merchants who gray-market and the people who defend them like to claim it is the perfection of pure capitalism. The logic seems reasonable, so much so you might wonder how any *contrary* system could have come into being. Was it actually nothing more than the predations of greedy importers, having their ways with poor hapless growers?

No, *no* and no again. The system evolved because it was mutually advantageous to importer and grower. It created a sustainable loyalty to and from each party, and promoted coherence in the marketplace.

Let's imagine that Rainer Lingenfelder isn't selling wine in the U.S., and he wants to. Plus, people in the U.S. want his wine. Let's further imagine ol' Rainer wants to sell to four importers; hey, the more the merrier, spread the risk, etc. Maybe he sets up territories, with the predictable result they are broached and everyone's toes are stepped on. Or maybe he just figures it's open season and his four clients should just hit the pavement and sell.

Perhaps *you* want the wine. You get four offerings for it. Who do you buy it from? Be honest, now! Of course; *you buy it from the guy with the lowest price.* So, the guy willing to sell cheapest *sets the bar for the other three.* Fair enough, it would appear. We like cheap wine. But maybe Mr. Discount is independently wealthy and doesn't need to make money in the wine business. Maybe he likes dabbling in wine and has some capital he wants to shelter.

And even if all four can live with the margins the cheaper guy establishes, sooner or later they all realize it's pointless to break your balls to build a Brand that *benefits your own competitors equally.* They might be proud to offer the wines, if the requisite cachet is present, but they're not going any extra lengths. This is simple human nature. And each of the four guys will know he didn't earn enough trust and respect to have Mr. Lingenfelder's wines exclusively, and a part of him will resent it.



Is that any way to build a sustainable clientele?

Thus I argue it is self-evidently in the *grower's* best interests to choose whom he wants to work with and invest in that person. Now the commitment flows both ways. There is a true partnership, without which there can be no loyalty.

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the importer with an exclusivity rubs his filthy hands at the grotesque markups he plans to take. And all of us children of the radical '60s swallow it whole, since every businessperson is ipso facto guilty. These proponents of pure capitalism neglect to consider one of its basic tenets: If a product is priced beyond its value, people won't buy it. The greedy importer can gouge all he wants; it avails him nothing if he can't sell the wine.

People also claim that monopoly creates opportunities for greed. Seems very logical, again, especially to us Aquarian-Agers who mistrust merchants innately. But the logic falls apart on closer examination. Say you're the sole Jim Beam distributor in your state. You gonna crank up the prices? After all, no one else is selling Jim Beam, right? *WRONG.* No one is selling Jim Beam, but someone's selling Jack Daniels and someone's selling Wild Turkey, and if your price for Beam is out of line with the other guy's price for his bourbon, you're not taking orders dude. Thus if I even *wanted* to push up my prices for (let's say) Christoffel, it wouldn't be long before y'all noticed Fritz Haag was the better value. Ordinary markets suppress the temptation to price-gouge, especially a market as compact and attentive as the one for fine wines.

Speaking for myself now, I am delighted, as are most of my fellow importers, to offer *good value* to our customers. We want you to like us. We want you to like

our wines. Hey, we want you to *make money* on our wines (radical notion!). I take a standard markup across the board in my portfolio, tweaking here and there if I need to hit a price point. If I ever sniff a whoop-de-do markup opportunity it's because a grower is underpricing his wine. In which case **I tell him so**. I do not wish to profit at his expense; this is what I call loyalty and sustainability. So, fellow wine-dogs, this dog won't hunt. None of us is motivated by profit per se. We are in business to get and keep customers. We all need to live. We all want to enjoy our lives. I want to invest in a grower who's willing to invest in me. And I want to sell his wines without interference.

Anyone who tries to tell you otherwise is lying to serve himself. And preying on your fears that someone's out to screw you.

Now what about that whole "reallocation of product to market demands" business. Again, it *sounds* fair enough. Let's say Lingenfelder suddenly got boffo reviews in Belgium, and they immediately run out of wine. And let's say I have some excess inventory. Of course it makes sense to "reallocate" that inventory. And here's how it should happen:

I contact Lingenfelder offering him some of my wine if he needs it for Belgium. Would he like to contact his Belgian importer, or would it save him the trouble if I did so directly?

Here's how it should not happen. I broadcast emails to every retailer in Belgium offering them the wine, bypassing the importer my partner wants to work with and ignoring any wishes he has about how his wine gets sold. Some friend I am! "*It's a BRAVE NEW WORLD, BAY-BEE; eat my dust!*" Out of one side of my mouth I'm pontificating about the "free market" and touting my credentials as "consumer-champion" and out of the other side I'm just a hyena scavenging for business because I smelled carrion somewhere, blithely disregarding any norms of courtesy toward a grower whose loyalty I asked for!

And I have the gall to say the other guy's greedy.

There is only one true reason to defend gray-marketing, and it's the one I promise you will never hear. Gray-marketing happens because certain people cannot stand anyone getting between them and the product they want. "Who is the gormless *importer* to tell me what I can and can't get!" ("Um, he is the person the actual *producer* of said wine wants to have selling it exclusively," I might suggest, if I thought it'd be heard.)

There are only two reasons to indulge in gray-marketing. A) ego, and B) profit-motive. Ego, because you have to show at all costs that you have the *cojones* to get the Product no matter whom you have to screw. And profit-motive because nobody gray-markets anything they'll ever have to work to sell. Oh no! The wine's already sold *itself*; all this dog needs is to purvey it.

Do business with them if you like, or if you must. Sometimes you need a swine to lead you to the truffles. Just do NOT let them tell you they're doing it for you,

because they care so passionately about great wine and are working toward a Utopia where no one makes too much money at it. If you believe that, I have a golf course on Three Mile Island to sell you.

I continually resist seeing my wines as Things or products. That's why I don't care whether the same wine is good every year. If wine **A** isn't happnin' this year, wine **B** will be, and I'll just take the better one. This can perplex or annoy growers who are into "marketing," but that's a dangerous tendency for a vintner in any case and it can lead to ruffled feathers.

It boils down to an entirely practical consideration: **SELLING GERMAN WINES IS TOO MUCH TROUBLE TO BE WORTH DOING EXCEPT FOR THE VERY BEST**. Otherwise, good grief! There's easier ways to bang your fool head against a wall.

I mean, my own palate is fallible enough without being false to it. At least you know I went nuts over every one of these wines. *I have to be able to defend the choice, every choice*. That's why I put my name in weensy letters on the back label.

Other than this uncompromising pig-headedness, I actually have a few principles I'd like to share with you.

1. I won't offer you a wine I haven't tasted, nor a wine I don't fully endorse. I make one exception to this rule. If we oversell a wine and a producer offers the new vintage as a substitute, I'll sometimes accept the substitute un-tasted if the grower's track record makes the wine a sure-thing.

2. I select my growers and their wines based on quality alone. No other reason.

3. I am essentially apathetic with respect to growers' associations. Many of them are sincere and they sometimes mean well and do good, but just as often it's a way to strut, and life's too short for that crap. Growers associations can be helpful in prospecting, but all I really care about is what's in the glass, not on the capsule.

4. I buy wines, not labels. Every place is unknown until you know it. Who the hell heard of all those little appellations in southern France until a few years ago? I don't go out of my way looking for the obscure, but I won't be *deterred* by obscurity, and I hope you agree.

5. I never taste the new vintage too early. March is usually the time when the wines are ready for bottling. I still have time to influence blending decisions, but fermentations are long-finished (usually!), and the wines have been racked, fined, spit-shined and turned out. I've tried tasting them earlier but they tasted like must with alcohol and they were either so yummy or so shriekingly raw and immature that I wondered how anyone could judge them at such a stage. Judging for oneself is one thing, but asking your customers to trust you on such a flimsy basis is another. I don't do it.

I don't fuss at all over the amount of sweetness which is or isn't in my selections. The wines are balanced or they're not. These wines are!

a new way to measure sweetness

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between *actual* sweetness and the *sense* of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier

than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

I don't think the standard sugar-pyramid of German wines is Serviceable any more. Thus I started noting each wine I planned to list according to an intuitive scale I tried to apply consistently. I call it the SENSE-OF-SWEETNESS scale—SOS for short—and you'll see it following every tasting note. It should be a more reliable guide to the actual *taste* of a wine than any word on any label. Here's how it goes:

IT STARTS FROM ZERO. Zero is the point of no discernable sweetness.

MINUS ONE indicates sugar is discernibly absent but the wine is in balance.

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

THREE signifies sweetness important of itself. Remember, I reject any wine of grotesque or vulgar sugariness.

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!



Core-List Wines

The core-list, with which we have been very successful, was created to ensure greater continuity and help you build brands. It began as an empirical record of having consistently selected a certain wine over many years. The wine needed to be in “good” supply (by small-batch standards). Yet for all that it’s been fabulously received, it’s created many “candid exchanges of views” (in the parlance of diplomacy) among my staff and me. I want you to know this: *no wine will be offered merely because it’s on the core-list. Every wine will continue to earn its way into this offering. In the (extremely unlikely!) event a core-list wine is yucky in the new vintage, off it goes. If we’ve done our jobs properly, that will almost never happen.*

Dry German Wines

Dry German Riesling is a worthwhile variation of the theme. It would properly occupy about 15% of the total production of German Riesling, and be prized for its particular virtues. At 50-degrees N. latitude, with a late-ripening high-acid grape, it’s thrilling to beat the odds and make a good dry wine.

Would it were so.

I think that fifty years from now some wine historian will write a book about the strange phenomenon that gripped German wine drinkers in the last quarter of the twentieth century. RAPED INTO DRYNESS could be the title (and thanks to Armin Diel for the wonderful phrase!).

“Yes, we can shake our heads in bewilderment now, since the plague has passed and things are normal again,” he’ll write. “But spare a thought for the waste and devastation that walked the land in those sorry years; all the GREAT, RIPE VINTAGES which might have given legendary wines we would still be enjoying, instead of the twisted perversions which now, with historical perspective, we can justly deride.”

All too plausible, eh? This much I think is true; notwithstanding the occasional successes amongst the dry wines (and the frequent successes among Halbtrockens), if all German wine were made dry then I doubt if a bottle would ever have left Germany. Wine-people would visit and come back saying “Really pretty scenery, nice people, great food . . . too bad about the wines.” In the early days I wanted to make a case for Trocken wines, because they **could** be good (at times!) and I felt you should see German wine in all its facets. They can still be good, yet what drives my fury into the red zone is that this culture drinks concepts and trendiness instead of sensually enjoying wine because of HOW IT TASTES.

A journalist in Germany asked me whether I thought Trocken wine lovers were “wrong” in their tastes. A fascinating question. A useless question! Agree for the sake of argument that the rap against Trocken riesling is bitterness. If that is true, we need to remember there are people who *like* bitterness. I do not, but perhaps

you do. I cannot abide, for example, radicchio (about which Dave Barry famously remarked “This word is Italian for ‘that which is so bitter a moderately intelligent goat would spit it out.’”) but I know people who prize it. Do they have “better” taste than I? *Are they right???* Or is it possible we believe they must have superior taste to enjoy something as ostensibly unattractive as bitter greens? The child who eats Ho-Hos grows into the discerning adult who eats chicoree, or he is stuck in some infantile purgatory whereby he can never outgrow his taste for sweetness. Can anyone take such nonsense seriously?



Come to Germany and taste our fine bitter wines, prized by connoisseurs everywhere. There’s a marketing approach in line with the Zeitgeist for you.

But it makes me sad when growers don’t even show me their dry wines, because they’re missing the point. They think I simply don’t like dry wines, and it’s true that I’m far less likely to like their dry wines — but I like wine **whenever it is vivid and balanced** irrespective of residual sugar or any other isolated analytical component.

In fact the analysis is at best an astigmatic guide to judging the amount of sweetness that a wine should have. Many growers have already made these decisions at the time of picking (a pox on the demand for Trocken-at-all-costs which creates these stillborn wines!), while others look at their must-analyses and go by acidity. The more enlightened taste during fermentation, but unless the grower has a superb palate (and *palate-memory*), what tastes “balanced” in this stormily incomplete state may taste unbalanced later on. The real problem is growers who work according to a formula: Kabinett has 40 grams per liter, Spätlese has 55 grams per liter, etc. Even if the recipe works four years out of five, it’s dangerous to make wine on auto-pilot. The best vintners are either palate-geniuses or they permit themselves the flexibility to make adjustments later, either by judicious blending or by *dosage*.

Some growers are more successful than others. Wittmann certainly. Selbach-Oster. Müller-Catoir. Koehler-Ruprecht maybe most of all. What do these ones know that the others don’t? **I think it boils down to a simple lack of PALATE.** I begin to wonder if the typical domestic German wine drinker (producers included) has lost the ability to discern bitterness and disharmony! I strongly suspect they have. I see it when I taste with them.

I suspect something even more sinister is at work. The German riesling grower is such a captive of the prevailing dogma he has started to identify with his captor. This may also be true of the market at large; people adapt, make the best of things, go along to get along. Many are the growers who have lamented to me they can’t even get their customers to taste their “sweet”

wines. The Trocken Stasi may be peering at you from behind the wall. The monolithic quality of this ideology suggests not that tastes are "wrong" but rather they are *dishonest*.

Remember any little feature of fashion from the last ten years. Doesn't matter which one. While it was trendy we had to have it, and thought it looked good, and we looked good in it. A few years later when the new trend came along we adopted it. All well and good. But admit it: you look in the closet at the old stuff, whatever it is, wide lapels, four-button blazers, hip-huggers or bell-bottoms or flowered neckties, and you think *That looks ridiculous; what was I thinking!* Fashion exerts a kind of hypnosis, and if this is true of fashion imagine how true it is of dogma. "Wrong?" I think not. Misled, and therefore dishonest with themselves.

Often even the dogma is supported with dishonest (or at least false) explanation. I am automatically suspi-



cious when a German starts in with the whole "traditional" rap. As I see it, "tradition" is a moving target, usually determined by the time you start from and how far back you look.

Yes, most German wine was dry until the '50s, but that is because the technology by which they could be reliably be made sweet didn't exist. And, every broker knew the best casks were those containing wine with natural residual sugar. And, the dry wines of those days were usually aged in Fuders, not steel, and aged longer before bottling, thus helping to round them. When microfiltration and temperature control became available, most producers opted to use these new technologies to make sweeter wines. Thus "tradition" changed when it COULD; changed, you might say, into a new or re-defined "tradition." 100 years from now it's quite possible SWEET wines will be seen as "traditional" and dry wines as an aberration.

What I'd prefer to see is that we all stop struggling over theory and simply use our sensual wits to produce and consume the loveliest possible wine. This will, I believe, lead to the celebration of riesling's ability to shine in a variety of styles, and it will apportion them naturally and spontaneously. That's my little pipe dream.

It's hard to read where the whole Trocken thing is going these days. For every grower who discerns a tendency away from the bone-dry beasties, another will tell

you Trocken is all he can sell. It's especially dreadful in the Pfalz, and a little better on the Mosel. There's also a huge irony at work. Initially the Germans began making Trocken wines in order to regain market share they were losing to the Alsations and Italians. They invented the whole catechism of theological explanation AFTER THE FACT, as it wasn't too cool to simply say "Um, we can make dry wines too if that's what you all want to drink." And now an entire generation of wine drinkers in Germany are brainwashed to drink dry. Now comes the irony. The new breed of consumer thirsty for dry wines has discovered *once again* that other countries can produce a more palatable product in that style, and all of Germany is awash in cheap Pinot Grigio! To which I can only say: yay. Serves 'em right. This problem is so pernicious that Stuart Pigott published a wonderfully impassioned book whose stated purpose is to remind the Germans that many of the world's most exquisite white wines grow in their own back yards. Yet I seem to be the only person who sees the whole sorry phenomenon as an inevitable result of the Trocken madness. The Germans do not automatically despise their home-grown products; far from it. But their wines have somehow become unfashionable. And I argue the *reason* is the dry wines weren't good enough to sustain a claim on the market's attention.

The latest twist to this sorry saga is even more surrealist. Today's hip young German wine trendy actively dislikes acidity and wants his Trockens as "smooth" as possible. Hence the resurgence of Pinots Blanc and Gris. Hey guys, what about **sour-power**? Maybe I'm too pessimistic, and this little burp of fashion really augurs a time when they'll happily slurp down rivers of neutral innocuous Pinots and *leave the Rieslings alone*; oh wouldn't that be nice.

Wouldn't it just! The reality, alas, suggests otherwise. A Very Famous winery in the Rheingau is hosting an apprentice I happen to know. And this young man reports that the Very Famous winery routinely *de-acidifies* its Rieslings and then *pumps them with carbon dioxide* at bottling in a sad attempt to restore some sense of the freshness it *already removed*. So the wine is manipulated twice in order that the Product shall be satisfactory. Or, *satisfactory*.

One of us is wacko and I don't think it's me. The glaringly obvious answer to this "problem" is to leave a little sweetness in the wine to balance its acids. No need to manipulate, and the wine is balanced and vital. But no-o-o-o-o! The wine must be dry A PRIORI.

The fact of lousy Trocken wines is neither here nor there. In the end it doesn't matter; some wines suck and we get on with our lives. The meta-assumption of *necessity*, though, has distorted and threatens to suffocate all that is precious about the Riesling wine culture in Germany. This must not be accepted quietly. It is not inevitable.

Another curious twist in this perplexing (and perplexed) domestic clientele is the sudden craze for anything red. French paradox, you see. The waiting list for Dornfelder clippings is two and a half *years*. All over the Pfalz (and Baden too, I'd imagine) people are planting

Merlot and Cabernet. That's what we need: Germany to deliver more boring red wine upon a world catatonic with ennui already.

Perhaps my lil' "SOS" idea will seem so manifestly sensible to the German wine pooh-bahs they'll jettison all their asshole ideas and adopt it. *As if.*

Nor am I encouraged by the new tolerance for highly sweet wines in the German market, as again it imposes an idea upon a group of wines regardless of what they might need to attain harmony. I wonder if there's any hope at all that someday they'll return to just tasting wine with our simple wits. I fear not.

It's also time to bury the whole putrid misconception of German wines as sweet wines. Sweet wines, as I see them, are bona fide dessert wines. Their dominant impression is sweetness. In good German wine, sweetness is barely visible in itself; it is, rather, a *catalyst* to the expression of other flavors. Cooks will know what I mean. You use a little nutmeg when you sauté mushrooms, *not* so they'll taste like nutmeg, but so they'll taste *more* mushroomy. Just so with sweetness in German wine. The right amount of residual sugar **makes every other flavor in the wine come to life**. Stuart Pigott says it best: "We don't call wines which have an oak component 'oak wines,' so why should we call wines with a sweet component 'sweet wines?'"

The truly dry wines you're being offered here are wines which did without sweetness and still were perfectly balanced. They're not austere or skeletal, because I don't like them that way. The wines with sweetness have as little as possible and as much as necessary. I detest sugary wines!

There seems to be little ground for hope. *We* in foreign markets are keeping great German wine *alive*. And once again I plead; *listen to the wine*. Look for balance. **WHEN YOU DON'T TASTE SWEETNESS, BUT DON'T NOTICE ITS ABSENCE, THE WINE IS BALANCED.**



More Principles

In the context of my holistic approach to wine, is there any consistent stylistic signature that unites all my selections? Yup! And it goes all the way to the first principle. The first thing I want is CLARITY OF FLAVOR, and the next thing I want is VIVIDNESS OF FLAVOR. That's the beginning of the daisy chain of niceties we all love to discuss. You can't *answer* any of the other questions if the wine is fuzzy, blurry, unfocused, wishy-washy. None of my wines is anything but clear, and I'd rather hear that you *hated* a wine than that it didn't do anything for you either way.

After clarity come the lovelier questions. What is the actual quality of the flavor? To what extent is it beautiful? (Subjective, yes, but not impossible, and not meaningless. After all, I like truffles and I like tortilla chips, but I'm not confused about which flavor is more beautiful.) Next, is there a harmonious interplay among all the flavor components? Are all the parts in balance? Then, is the intensity of flavor *appropriate*? Not *how* intense is it, since sheer firepower doesn't impress me; I'd rather have a delicate but fine and intricate flavor than an intensely *boring* flavor. Then, is the flavor mono-faceted or does it seem to evolve into sentences and paragraphs? Is the finish long, and does it *also* evolve, or does it merely echo the highest note of fruit? Then, is the structure, the architecture, the carpentry — call it what you will — balanced, firm, organized, is there *nuance*, seasoning? This takes a paragraph to delineate, but less than an instant to discern.

Most important, at least for my romantic side: is the wine distinctive, does it have character? The thing that Matt Kramer calls "somewhereness," the signature of the place the grapes were grown. Riesling grown in the Rhineland is a mirror reflecting the soil it grew in, and different soils give consistently different flavors to its wines.

Or, as Johannes Selbach told me once, "when I returned to Germany after being in the States for two years I was totally convinced that all the talk of soil producing flavor was just old wives' tales. But when I started making wines from our grapes I was astonished to find exactly the opposite." He believes it, not from any "romantic" cast of mind, but because it was plainly and concretely proven to be so. Me too.

To this end I tend to work with growers who see themselves as midwives assisting in the birth of the wine. They have their own visions of their soils and the flavors that result, and labor only to protect them. "**We are not winemakers; we do not make wine,**" says Rainer Lingensfelder. "We just prepare the environment in which the wine comes into existence almost by itself. We don't want to polish, to style a wine; we want to allow its natural, original character to shine through." Contrast that sentiment to our odd hero-worship of the new world winemaker who "sculpts" a wine, the master alchemist who by dint of his gifts both technical and mysterious turns mere grape juice into Grgich Hills, and you have paradigms for the ways wine is conceived of in the new and old worlds. Guess which side I'm on!

How I Approach Wine, or Let Wine Approach Me

Some people will never learn anything, for this reason, because they understand everything too soon. -Alexander Pope

It's best when you make a mistake, and the easiest mistake is thinking you've got it *aced*. Because now you're not asking questions any more, you're waiting for each wine to confirm your conclusions. I think that wine will contrive to confuse our assumptions **in order to get us to still our egos and listen**. I don't use "ego" in its typical pejorative as a synonym for our conceits, but rather as that part of us which insists on grasping and apprehending. Wine resists being *grasped*. If you hold it too tightly, it can't dance with you. Hold it just right, and it will glide over the floor with you as if you were a single body.

Wine resists even the compressions of professionals trying to be conscientious. I see cellar practices conscientious growers have in common, and many wines I enjoy share certain analytical features. But there are no litmus tests. I don't need to take absolute stands on questions of winemaking. They're not moral questions, and you have to stretch to make them ethical questions. I see no need to decide once and for all if I like reductive or oxidative wines, or this Riesling clone versus another, or wines left on the lees versus wines quickly racked.



What turns me on the most is the Joyful Noise! The clamor of methods, visions, opinions, the warp and woof of temperaments. The coexistence of all these points of view in my own mind seems to give it energy and vitality, and makes it *more* receptive to pleasure. Most of the time when people turn these into moral questions, they do it *after* the fact. If Mosel growers developed techniques for stopping fermentation to leave sweetness in their wines because they *could* do so—their wines are naturally low in pH—it's only natural they should defend their practice and claim to find it superior to the use of Süssreserve. But that doesn't mean I have to believe them! Not when my own experience tells me otherwise. You learn to listen to someone explain why he does what he does, for it reveals important things about the man (or woman) and the kinds of wines (s)he makes. But that's all, and that's enough. It's a waste of time trying to figure out who's "right."

An Essay On Tasting Blind

Kermit Lynch said it best: "Blind tastings are to wine what strip poker is to love."

Look, the palate is an instrument played by the taster. As you learn an instrument you practice exercises and repetitions until you are facile. Then it comes naturally and you don't have to *think* about "Ah, a C-sharp is 1st string 9th fret." You just grab the note. Blind tasting is the equivalent of playing scales. It's valuable and necessary at a certain stage, but don't confuse it with making music. Sadly, far too many do.

Have you heard Keith Jarrett's solo piano CD, *The Melody, The Night and You*? He'd been suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome for several years, curtailing his performing career and making it all but impossible for him to even play the piano on some days. The CD is a recital of standards and folk songs played very straight, with little embellishment or technical bravura. The approach is said to have been compelled by Jarrett's draining ennervation, but the result is nearly sublime, a tender, deliberate and caressing reading of these songs, essential and pure.

Returning from the phone while the CD was playing I realized if I'd been listening casually I might have thought it was merely cocktail-lounge piano. Knowing the artist, his history, and the conditions under which the recording was made gave it *resonance* and meaning. Context gives meaning. And meaning gives *life*.

Why, then, do we play at reducing wine to a thing without context? What's the *good* of tasting blind? Where's the silver lining of experiencing wine in a vacuum? Yes, it can train us to focus our palates. It can hone our powers of concentration. Then we can discard it! It has served its purpose. If we keep tasting blind we run a grave risk. It is homicidal to a wine's *context*, and wine without context is bereft of meaning, and the experience of meaning is too rare to squander.

Blind tasting will only guarantee your "objectivity" if that objectivity is so fragile it needs such a crude crutch. If you're too immature (or inexperienced) to be objective when necessary, tasting blind won't help you. It will, however, confuse you as to the purpose of *drinking* wine.

I'm not even talking about recreational drinking, *fun* (remember *fun*?); the only genuinely professional approach to wine is to know as much about it as possible! Who made it, under what condition did it grow, what's the maker's track record, where is (s)he in the "pecking order?" Then and only then can a genuinely thoughtful evaluation take place, of a wine in the fullness of its being. Blind tasting? **Done it, done with it**.

Special Features

We'll repeat a few and add one or two in our ceaseless attempt to create a catalogue large enough to squash very large bugs with. I still like my SOMMELIER ALERT! idea. I will change my system of noting favorite wines. Instead of my little font games, you will see pluses (+).

I have noted favorite wines for a few years and have not noticed any of the mischief I feared, the idea seems to have done all the good I hoped and none of the harm. I may even expand on it.

I had feared what could happen if I drew *too* much attention to a few big faves: could I sell anything else? Would it be fair to the other wines, which after all I also adore?

But, I told myself, this entire catalog exists in order to draw attention to the best, in this case the best 350 or so wines I culled from tasting a couple of thousand. What's the harm of codifying a Hors Classe list, first-among-equals if you will. The harm, I think, is focusing a disproportionate degree and TYPE of attention on those wines. Our American obsession with the BEST and FASTEST and MOST POWERFUL of things is something I'd rather not feed. Still, there's some wines in here you shouldn't miss no matter what! Every wine in this offering is elite! Some are simply spectacular. But do remember . . .

- The wines with one plus seemed to shine ON THE DAY I TASTED THEM. You might not have agreed, and I might not agree with myself when I taste them again. What I know is that all these wines, all gazillion of them, are excellent. Separating the hall-of-famers from the mere all-stars is subjective and momentary.

- I was democratic in the identification of special faves. Is a QbA from Leitz a "better" wine than an Auslese from Christoffel? No sir! Did it sing to me at the moment I tasted it and wrote "this is a fabulously successful and lovely wine of its type?" Da!

- There are growers every *one* of whose wines deserved your special attention. In those instances I highlighted those wines which somehow stood out as especially supernal.

It was telling to observe myself singling certain wines out. I have never believed in the idea of a "perfect" wine, 100 out of 100 or 20 out of 20 or what-have-you. Wine, for me is less a Thing than a Being, and I find that kind of reduction to an absolute scale actually diminishes the pleasure I take in it. But David Schildknecht proposes a way out the dilemma: in this world-view of wine, "perfection" is an intuitive certainty that something is being experienced BETTER THAN WHICH CANNOT BE IMAGINED. Not that something "better" might not exist in an absolute sense, nor even that on another occasion something else might be experienced of even more surpassing beauty, but only that sweet flush when you know THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS.

I don't grade on a curve. I couldn't precisely tell you how or why I give a glyph to a wine, but I feel quite certain while it's happening. In effect I register my own response without focusing on it. The problem with scales purporting to precision is they demand too much self-examination. The moment you're trying to decide whether the wine's an "91" or a "92" you are hyper-focused on *your* reaction and not on the wine. It doesn't give a rat's ass how many points you "award" it; it only wants to make you happy and (if it's significant wine) to remind you of the fascination of the world.

The 2003 Vintage

I have friend I'll call Gary, though his real name is Fred. Gary loves German riesling possibly more than any other wine, and at least as much as I do. He loves it with a kind of mystic fervor, and he most appreciates its ability to be subtle and searching, to pull him in with a whispery seductiveness he experiences as exquisite. Dönnhoff is his man; he likes Leitz too. He's a very slow, deliberate taster; he becomes entirely absorbed in the wine, and he craves wines which *can* absorb him, understanding correctly that blatant or obvious wine is often tedious wine.

Gary's heard all the advance hoo-ha about 2003, and he imagines he won't like it. Too ripe, too full-bodied, too emphatic, too gaudy and vulgar.

He's wrong.

And he's far from alone. Most of us were wrong. We imagined if riesling ripened in crazy-ass heat it would lose precisely those things we most loved about it. I wondered too. Our doubts were, in fact, more plausible than the remarkable beauty of the wines. And so the first thing to say about 2003 is that it will *surprise* us.

And it will reassure us, there is a truth in wine irreducible to vagaries of climate. German rieslings in 2003 taste like *German rieslings* grown in a hot season. Land trumps weather, always, if the land is profound.

I remembered many of the old ripe years, and how well their best wines have aged, and how we have learned to see these vintages as classic, not because they are typical, but rather because they express something incipient in the typical, in extraordinary ways. They form a classic tradition of their own; everyone can name them: '76, '71, '59, '53, '49, '47, '45, '37, colossal vintages. 2003 belongs alongside such vintages. It does not often belong with the "fine" classics such as 2001, '90, '75, perhaps even '71, which remains supernal precisely because it straddles the line between classic and colossal so uniquely.

2003 also taught me more than any young German vintage I have tasted. And that is because it demolished so many things I took to be True. It has been disorienting and exciting to have my mind blown around so much, to have so many Truths reduced to truths, to be shown again and again that the difference between "true" and "The Truth" is not a wall but a membrane.

By now it's well known how bloody HOT it was in Europe in 2003. While I was in Germany last month an article appeared in Science News indicating 2003 was the warmest year *since* 1500, and all I can add is that any year which prompts the Europeans to seriously consider air-conditioning had to be a stinker. But even if it was the hottest year, there have been other hot years. 1959 is legendary. "Yes," said many growers, "but the difference is in '59 there was also rain, just a shower or so every two weeks, whereas in '03 we had heat and drought."

Indeed 2003 is the first vintage where irrigation was permitted. There is quite a range of opinion about this, from "We didn't do it and wouldn't do it, because it becomes a crutch to the vines that prevents them from sinking their roots far enough down into the subsoils" to "damn straight: we poured 500 gazillion liters of water



into our vineyards and are glad we did." As is my wont, I register this dialectic with great interest, having neither any idea nor any need to determine who is "right."

2003 is also the first time acid could be *added* to the wines. (It has long been allowed to remove it.) The edict permitting acidification was issued after the harvest had

already begun, which prevented some growers from acting – many preferred to acidify musts rather than wines. One producer told me "Everyone acidified in 2003, but not everyone will admit it. Personally I'd be skeptical of any denial I heard." And so I phrased the question in a deliberately non-judgmental way, and received candid answers, or so I hope.

The issue wasn't so much acidity per se. Most who acidified added tartaric to the musts, which later fell out as tartrates and did little to raise the eventual finished acidity. Many growers were concerned about bacteriological mishap, as their musts were high enough in pH to raise worries about stability. These growers acidified and were quite open about it.

Of course I had my own set of expectations. And in most instances I was completely (and delightedly) WRONG. I'll detail these for you.

I expected the wines would seem structureless. Acidity creates structure, and length, and if it wasn't there the wines would be short and formless.

Wrong. The wines are, as a group, the longest, or rather the l-o-n-g-e-s-t young German wines I've ever tasted. Indeed it became absurd to "time" the finish because it wouldn't fade until you got the *next* wine onto your palate. So, new truth #1: you can have length without high acidity. And the wines were organized and shapely also, in some instances because a phenolic solidity stood in for high acidity, and in other instances just because. So, new truth #2 is: you can have solidly structured wines without high acidity.

Apropos acidity, at a couple stops we actually added acidity on the spot, just to see. This is nothing like organically occurring normal acidity, but it was interesting to observe it added no structure or lift or clarity – it only added sharpness.

I expected the wines would be one-dimensionally fruity, with low extract and little minerality. How could it be otherwise after such heat and drought?

Wrong. This is just about the saltiest and most emphatically mineral young vintage I've ever tasted. It is anything but a quiet minerality, and it's neither implicit nor subtle: this is M-I-N-E-R-A-L writ large, and so new truth #3 is: you can have intensely mineral wines even with low extract.

An aside: 2003 is *far* more mineral and complex than,

say, 1999.

I expected the fruit of 2003 Rieslings would be gaudy and possibly cloying; passion-fruit and peach and dried apricot and canned nectarines, and yet, I cannot fathom why or how, the fruit of 2003 is remarkably *cool*; it is all apples (Cox-orange, Fuji, Empire, strong-flavored critters), pears (comice and asian, the ones tilting almost toward melons) and the small yellow plums the French call Mirabelle and the English call Greengage. It is, to be sure, an amplitude of fruit in 2003, but nothing like the fruit I expected.

This seems to be due to the stringent yield reductions necessary for the vine to cope with the heat and drought. But whatever the cause, new truth #4 is that: cool fruit is possible after a hot summer.

I expected 2003 would be quite rich in texture, a triple-cream kind of vintage. It isn't. It is *generous* but more granular than syrupy. Often it tastes as if grain – corn, barley, maize – had somehow caught a seam of sweetness and attained an apotheosis of expression. None of my old cause-effect assumptions can account for this. What might explain it are those phenolics. Riesling grapes in 2003 were on the small side and thick-skinned.

I expected the Trocken wines could well be unusually successful since they wouldn't have high acids with which to deal.

Wrong. In many cases the dry wines struggled against excessive alcohol, and in fact I'd say a higher proportion of dry wines showed the blurry coarse muscle-bound qualities we feared all the wines would show. There was no shortage of big dumb bruisers among the dry rieslings, yet there were several which worked beautifully.

In fact working with the '03s revealed an interesting facet of residual sugar; it slims and tones a wine's body, and adds its own fragrance. Often I noticed if a wine had, say, 35 grams per liter of sweetness and the finish was a little clunky, adding 5-10 grams more removed the ill-grace without adding any perceptible sweetness. Such questions became typical. In certain wines the balance became three-sided: alcohol, acidity, sweetness, and sometimes we could only balance two of the three parameters.

I thought the 2003s would be ripe and ready, sprinters, full of torque and raring to go. In fact the vintage is less evolved than either '02 or '01 at the same stage. I suspect this is due to their great material density.

I also intuit that bottling will help many '03s, in contrast to '02, which suffered from bottling and is only just emerging. This is partly because of the many fine wines I saw post-bottling (and the few I saw both ways, sometimes side-by-side), and also because the '03s enjoy anything which cools them off – much as their makers did during the brutal summer.

What, then, is the headline for the vintage? I'd say 2003 is an astonishing vintage in which many fantastically great wines were produced. It's perhaps too soon to say whether it is a "great" vintage, though it might well be. I think we need five years or so under its belt to deter-

mine whether it is essentially great. But it is giving a community of ravishing and improbable wines the likes of which we have never seen from Germany, wines whose enormous generosity is allied with astounding purity, length and grandeur.

There's more. 2003 is also a vintage of the finest cleanest botrytis most growers have ever seen, and cellars are replete with gargantuan stickies. The old record must-weight (327° Oechsle in 1971, from a Siegerrebe grown by one Emil Bauer in Nußdorf in the Pfalz) has been beaten by no fewer than FOUR rieslings from 2003. Most of which will still be fermenting in 2023, no doubt.

The harvest began early, of course, often before October 1st even for riesling. These pre-harvests often took the form of selecting the botrytis grapes (and making insane TBAs from them) while leaving the others to hang. Here a demarcation took place. Growers of unexceptional imagination measured their musts, saw they were high, saw acids perilously low, and picked. The results were often unpleasant wines, as the grapes were bitter and physiologically unripe. "We knew we needed to leave them hang especially over the cold nights, or we wouldn't have aromas or true ripeness," I was often told. And so it was. Sugar-ripeness was simply not the point in '03. You had to taste the grapes and you had to attend to their entire flavors.

The vintage breaks down on soil lines, but the usual wisdoms were often stood on their heads. Water-retaining soils gave exceptional results in 2003, and you will hear many growers and merchants say "The best 2003s often came from the 2nd best sites" and this, while oversimplified, has a basis in truth.

At the end of the harvest another clump of megamust rieslings was gathered, and the amount of TBA produced would, in the old days, have sufficed for twenty years. And not *just* TBA: hu-freaking-MONGous TBA, mostly over 240° Oechsle (TBA starts legally at 150°) without a scintilla of dubious botrytis.

Almost every grower had them. Many were still fermenting. A couple had only just *started* fermenting. We'll be tasting these wines for years. And yet they presented me with rather a quandry. I wonder if I really *like* these huge sweet wines any more. Maybe it's a function of age. Maybe I've tasted so many of them I'm a little jaded. I hope not, but I've reached a point where massive sweetness and concentration doesn't entertain me, unless the wine is 50 years old and has started to show its soul. I felt guilty to not approach these wines with the gratitude I want to feel. Then I tasted at Meßmer and was laid bare. It isn't just me; few of these wines show any shape or tenderness; the omnipresent mass and sweetness and botrytis (even great botrytis) becomes much of a muchness, becomes a *genre* unto itself. Those Meßmers were everything I love about dessert-wines, a quintessence of the quality and clarity of the Auslese, retaining its form and angle. For me a great TBA is a glace de viande of Auslese, but many TBAs seem to me to be glace de viandes, reductions of reductions, too far removed from that which is being reduced.

After all the BA and TBA the vintage gave it seems perverse for growers to wait for Eiswein, yet some did, sometimes with delightful results. Late October was cold enough in some regions, and a couple nights in December capped it off. One such wine was (quoting myself!) "The most beautiful flavor I have ever had in my mouth" (who else? Dönnhoff.) and there were others whose virginal purity was refreshing after the many TBAs.

A few people were stymied by the vintage, and one or two wineries offered really bland collections, less vulgar than vapid.

And I also noticed a schism between those who relaxed into the vintage and others who fundamentally resisted it. At times I felt "Wow, these taste nothing like '03s, they're so crisp, racy (etc.)" but then I felt a certain *triste*. Why *should* a vintage not taste like itself? But I also understand why a grower wants to steer toward his aesthetic preference regardless of vintage. It's just a wee metaphysical debate I conducted with myself, especially late at night if there weren't any porn movies on TV.

So what would I say to my friend "Gary," who is sure he won't like the 2003s? "Yo, Gar," I'd begin, "Whyn't you use your real name, huh??" But seriously, what can I tell him, or any of you who fear the 2003 German rieslings won't give you the exquisite pleasure you prize?

First, I prize it too, and if every vintage were like this one I'd mourn the loss of something precious from the world. But every vintage isn't. And these wines answer my need for purity, balance, structure, distinctiveness and beauty in a confident and extroverted form, less the eerie gorgeous singing of the nightingale than the lusty happy blast of the blackbird. And we are fools if we shut ourselves off from a variety of pleasures, and we are wasting a rare gift of the world if we condescend to despise these vivid splendid wines merely *because* they show their cards. "If I can't have mystical pleasure then I don't want any pleasure at all" does not seem like a recipe for joy in this life. Pleasure is not diminished by its explicitness; it is merely different, not less. The best 2003s, and there are many of them, are as great as German wine can be. Period.

I have one small caveat, not about the wines but about their development. Usually one makes an educat-



ed guess about the length and type of aging a young vintage might attain. One works from experience and precedent. But with 2003 there is no precedent. Peer into my brain. Insert another quarter if you want to see more. "Hmmm, well the wines really are "low" in acid yet they have so much density they should age normally, but what if they're just being propped up by their baby-fat but come on, other low-acid vintages have aged splendidly and it isn't just about acid it's also about concentration and symmetry and I sure hope I don't look like an idiot if I say they'll age great but why should I worry about that, the wines are incredible and classical and I'm tying myself in knots here . . ."

Thus: I see no reason the best 2003 Rieslings of unexceptional ripeness (Spät and Auslesen) won't age quite well, perhaps less deliberately or serenely than 2001, but still on the near edge of classical pattern.

The NAHE has it best in '03, every collection a winner, and as a group the highest sustained level as well as the loftiest peaks.

My two MITTEL RHEIN guys did great, and I suspect their success is reflective of a good year for the region.

MOSEL wines varied from (often) gorgeous to (sometimes) just O.K.

RHEINGAU is hard for me to extrapolate as I have just three producers, each of whom made excellent wine. Others will have done the same, or had the potential to.

RHEINHESSEN was v-e-r-y good. It bears mentioning that regional differences in quality were to some degree obliterated by the omnipresent heat-draught. Yet a couple folks (from northerly regions) warned me "We managed, but there's bound to be a lot of trouble in the . . . PFALZ," and even in the Pfalz the ones in the northern Pfalz said they were O.K. but the southern guys got body-slammed by heat, and guess what? None of it is true. Other than the NAHE, whose success is striking, each region has peaks and valleys, and the Pfalz was home to some of the very best and very worst collections I saw.

Prices and Quality Levels

Prices will be higher, mostly because of the crap-weak Dollar and also because the crop was very short. The amount of canopy work and crop thinning (see Corrie Malas' piece) was daunting, and no one reported anything more than 50% of an average harvest. Taxes and costs are rising sharply also. It hurt me to talk about price concessions in this climate; the growers have a great, small vintage and deserve to make a little hay from it. But we're all pulling together and being creative and looking for ways to mitigate the Dollar's free fall. AT LEAST THE HIGHER PRICES ARE OFFSET BY SOME OF THE MOST CONCENTRATED WINES EVER MADE IN GERMANY.

Apropos of which, can we talk about "Kabinett?" Specifically can we talk about "Kabinett" at or near 100 degrees Oechsle (Smaragd in the Wachau, Vendage



Tardive in Alsace), of which there are many from 2003, because you/we need to have something with "Kabinett" on the label? Can we talk about growers who virtually empty their pockets for us so we can have this "Kabinett" thing we require? *There are NO Kabinetts from 2003.* But there will be plenty of wines with the magic word on the label. Just know you're getting the smallest Spät or Auslese and if everybody's 6'10" then the guy who's 6'3" looks short.

Hors Classe among the growers include:

Top of The Top:

Dönnhoff
Müller-Catoir (reborn!)

Also Supernal:

Schlossgut Diel
Loewen
Willi Schaefer
J.J. Christoffel
Selbach-Oster (for sheer breadth)
Meßmer

Kick-ass Through and Through:

Strub
Wagner-Stempel
Lingenfelder
Weingart
Mathern
Hexamer
Jost
(Karlsmühle) (potentially)
Minges
Spreitzer
Leitz

Remember this is anything but an official classification, but rather my sense of the stature of various collections at the end of tasting them. There are great wines scattered throughout, even in estates not named above. Meulenhof, to name but one, had an admirably fine and intelligent group of wines; Leitz's best were as good as anything from anywhere. I responded to *preponderance* of excellence, and I ask you to watch the web site for updates. I can change my mind, and often have.

2002 Revisited

I liked most of the '03s, but in nearly every instance it was a refreshing relief to taste a few 2002s alongside them or afterward. The vintage is taking on a limpid charm I feel quite tender towards. Poor fella; bookended by the twin titans, 2001 as the profound classic and 2003 as the all-bets-are-off wackaloon vintage, and between them . . . the dear, winsome 2002s. In fact I'm offering several of them for the first time and find this to be an adorable and valuable vintage.

Part of what happens is, when I first write a vintage report, I am mindful of the whole spectrum of wines I tasted, from the wonderful to the mundane. Since my portfolio consists of just the wonderful, I start to forget the mundane, and a nice vintage like 2002 grows in desirability. '02 is just starting to evolve its vintage aroma, and very bonny it is too.

There's quite the yin-yang if you taste the two side by side; '03 with its ample body and gentle acids, '02 with its sleek body and piquant acids. I sometimes felt each would benefit from a splash of the other. But basically I like 2002. It's more feminine than 2001 and takes itself less solemnly. Its silvery stillness and cirrus clarity are wonderful. I'm happy to own it, happy we still have it to sell, and happy for all the great **Scheurebe** it brought, especially as 2003 was a mostly useless year for Scheu.

The 2001 Vintage

This, predictably, is shutting down, which has prompted some commentators with short attention spans to start revising it downward. The vintage is plain splendid, and I continue to seek it out and suggest you do the same. We bought everything we could lay hands on, and here's a list of what we can still offer, as we go to press: (the online version will be up-to-the-minute)

- '01 **Mathern** Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese (#2121)
- '01 **Strub** Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/500
- '01 **Merz** Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 L
- '01 **Merz** Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Trocken
- '01 **Gysler** Weinheimer Scheurebe Sekt Brut
- '01 **Lingenfelder** Spätburgunder
- '01 **Messmer** Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett
- '01 **Eugen Müller** Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml
- '01 **Dr. Deinhard** Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken
- '01 **Dr. Deinhard** Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese
- '01 **Dr. Deinhard** Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese
- '01 **Reuscher-Haart** Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese, 12/500

Earlier Vintages Revisited

2000 has pretty much been ushered off the stage, yet it remains a kind of tragic watershed; tragic because of the egregious effort that went into making it; watershed because with this vintage we gleaned the great Change. No such wines could have been made in those conditions 30, 20, even 10 years ago. The best 2000s are immensely worthwhile wines. In January I sat drinking Riesling one afternoon with Laura and Jay from *House & Garden*, and noted with pleasure how fine the 2001 Leistenberg Kabinett from Dönnhoff was showing. "Um, Terry, the label says 2000," said Jay. Oh *c'mon* Jay; don't distract my flow of rhetoric with anything so mundane as the facts! But this 2000 was indeed lovely, as many of them are.

But do drink them soon. They are fragile and they won't make old bones, most of them. Also, drink them up when you open a bottle. This is not a vintage you can keep for days in the fridge. They have high pH and are subject to volatile acidity.

1999 is as good as forgotten, bland creature that it was, yet again it's often just these vintages that return to amaze us in 20 years. Think of '86, '79, '73.

Something I enjoy is to pull an old bottle of a TT-Selection from my cellar, and enjoy it like a "civilian," like in the old days before I was a professional swirl 'n hurler. I can't remember then individually any more (a lifetime of rock and roll and those days are *gone*, man) and I could look them up in an old catalog, but I usually don't. When they're singing, as they almost always are, I think how good it is to have been part of such a chain of pleasure.

1998 continues its perplexing journey to who-knows-where. I started noticing a vegetal grassy tartness creeping into some of them, but this year it seemed to have disappeared. The quality of fruit and aroma in the young wines was captivating, the loveliest of the three best years of the 1990s ('90, '96, '98), and hints of that charm begin to re-emerge. So we'll see. Many sage old growers insist the greatest wines zigzag their way to maturity and often have truculent stages.

1997 is the most surprising of recent vintages. The wines have slimmed down and found a lyric fruit that has built on its early prettiness. It's a better vintage than I thought it to be in general; the great wines were apparent at the start. If you own them it's a fine time to visit them. 1997 should always be an unfussy fruit-driven vintage, but it's more than merely pretty. I suspect it will age gracefully, and be consistently graceful *while* aging.

1996 is deep in hibernation. It was fascinating to start tasting the 1996 Champagnes last year just at the time the German wines of that vintage were at their least forthcoming. To some extent the evolution of many 1990s is a harbinger for the development of the 1996s, though 1990 has more density and body. My guess as of today: there will be more great 1990s than 1996s, but the best 1996s will be the best wines of all. Call me out on this foolhardy forecast when I'm an old coot. Indeed 1996 can be seen as a test case for acidity, and we'll see how those spiky acids resolve in the fullness of time.

Things I Would Do If I Were Ruler Of All The Known World

First, either do away with cork or find a way to neutralize its damage. I am *fed up* with the number of corked bottles of German wine I encounter. Yes, outright stinkers are rare, but these aren't as scary as the subtly corked wine, where something indistinct is making the wine taste mute, furry, stale.

The Germans are finally starting to adapt, albeit with less celerity than their compadres in Austria. Personally I see no reason why any and all wines up to Spätlese couldn't be closed with fake corks, screwcaps, crown caps or lamb-skin condoms if that's what it takes to replenish the cork supply so that we go back to the days of 1-2%. Can you imagine if *milk* had a spoilage rate of 10-14% because of variations in the *cartons*?? Yet we tolerate an equal proportion of spoiled wine with docile indulgence. Grrrr.

Here's something else I'd do; remove the spurious glamour attending to "flying winemakers." I'm not sure why it's sexy for someone to ride a plane to go somewhere else to make wine. I appreciate wanderlust. But I'm happier when someone chooses a place and makes wine there, ideally the place he was born and raised. He then becomes linked to his place and his wine expresses the connection. The connection gives it significance. Otherwise wine becomes a plaything (a *thing*, period). Johannes Selbach certainly racks up as many frequent-flier miles as any human I know, yet I cannot imagine him starting a wine "project" (the word makes me wince) in New Zealand or Yunnan province. He is a Moselaner; therefore the wine he makes is Mosel wine.

Don't misunderstand; there's nothing morally wrong about making any wine anywhere you please. I just don't think it's inherently fascinating or desirable. It rather adds to the incoherence of the world. And whatever it is, it ain't glamorous.

I'm even starting to wonder about professional cellar masters. I'm such a fussy spot. But look, I know everybody isn't lucky enough to have a winery all ready to inherit from Mom and Dad, and wineries of a certain size need someone to simply handle the work. But in most cases a cellar master, even one with all the "right" ideas, cannot make 3-dimensional wine. (S)he can make very good 2-dimensional wine – I ship some of it – but the cellar master needs to stay put long enough to feel as *if* he were at home, to evolve a familial/familiar relationship to the land; to want its story heard. Otherwise it is merely application of skill. A jobber at the job, even if it's the right job. Any good itinerant cellar master should yearn to buy an estate and make himself at home.

I think I would decree that new vintages could only come along every eighteen months. Once a year is getting to be too often. David Schildknecht gave me this idea, and because of that I would appoint him



Minister Of Wine Writing.

I would decree that the word *HALBTROCKEN* be stricken from the lexicon, thrown in the garbage, fished out, and thrown back in.

If the Germans insisted on using label nomenclature in their own language, I'd decree that *dry* wines be called TROCKEN and that **bone dry** wines be called SEHR TROCKEN (or, if I were really in command, *Trocken de Sade*).

I would further decree that these determinations not under any circumstances be based on actual amounts of sugar and/or acidity as measured in the lab, but rather on **the taste of the wine**. I know this idea is radical (if not heretical) but perhaps the world is ready for it.

There are certain persons I would prohibit from public discourse. Their voices are simply too dangerous. I shall not name them, but will cite one of their more pernicious ideas to show you what I mean. I am not just a grouch. These guys have to be muzzled. Ready?

An idea has been promulgated whereby certain vineyards shall be classified and those sites can stand alone on a label, without reference to a village name. Think of Burgundy. Musigny. It makes sense. The problem commences with the nomenclature. These apostles of vinous wisdom have arrived at **Erstes Gewächs** to denote the Grand Crus, and even for a German-speaker like me that's, like, an OWEE! (It's also an ironic pun, inasmuch as "Gewächs" sounds like "Geh' weck!" which means "Go away!") For they are *pitiably* aware of foreign markets, these folks; they're the same villains who want all German wines to be DRY.

Which brings me to the blood-boiling ne plus ultra of the whole matter. For a wine to carry the **Erstes Gewächs** banner, *it must be TROCKEN*. Somebody help

me understand this!

I know the answer, and it is an answer of sorts, but embedded in it lies a subversive question. They'd probably say: "When the consumer buys a bottle called 'Meursault' he knows he is getting a wine that is always dry, but our German wines could be dry or semi dry or sweet, and this confuses him." Well let's not have that! I have an alternate suggestion. LET'S INSIST THAT ALL WINES LABELLED "ERSTES GEWAECHS" BE SWEET!!! And let's even do it in fine Teutonic fashion and decree the wines must have "no more than 50.5 grams and no less than 38.623698499 grams (39 if you're married filing jointly)." If we are going to decide, completely arbitrarily, how an entire community of disparate wines will taste, then let's increase the odds they'll taste *GOOD*, what say?

Ah but this isn't P.C., you see! In a topsy-turvy world where Trocken = Proper it follows rationally (if horrifically) that the potential quality inherent in a site has only to do with the goddamn *residual* sugar in a given wine from that site. Too bad it's nothing less than the imposition of an ideology disguised as a "helpful" classification for the consumer.

It is also a dreadful violence to individual wines. Doesn't *anyone* in Germany actually taste wine any more? Never mind what might be *suitable* for this wine or that! They MUST be dry. Let's LOBOTOMIZE these wines. Abandon *fruit*, all ye who enter here. These clowns are murdering great German wines; they must be stopped. If one of you well-meaning but disastrously wrongheaded people are reading this, please, forget all your abstractions, "the market," "consumer taste," "the modern drinker" and just taste wine! If you make wines that taste *balanced* and taste *delicious* you will — imagine! — *find a market for them*. I'm a barely sentient galoot and even I have found a market, so don't tell me that a suave guy like Guradze can't do the same.

All in all I'm starting to wonder about the VDP. They seem to opt as if by instinct toward ideological strait-jackets. They frequently fix what wasn't broken while neglecting what is. Low yields, environmentally friendly viticulture, hand-picking, strict ripeness minima, all OK. Good place to stop. Vineyard classification, also OK: I proposed one myself in a DECANTER article back in 1985. Rather blatantly self-serving (e.g. FAR too much Grand Cru land in marginal Rheingau villages which are home to VDP members) but still, it needs doing and any start is better than none.

Good place to stop. *Leave well enough alone*. But, alas and inevitably, the dreaded "marketing" guys pull up in the white truck with the jackets and the Procrustian bed and the syringes and scalpels and electrodes. Let's establish *prices*, they insist. Let's decree that only Riesling can be called Grand Cru (or "Erstes Gewächs" and other such lingual abominations), and let's further decree the precise parameters of residual sugar **a priori**. Time to REWIND the tape to just before the silliness started, eh guys?

Look, it's always dangerous to force a wine to fit an idea. Better force the idea to fit the wine, because the wine exists in nature, it is *there*, real and immutable. And if we respect its being and let its needs be heard we'll make something beautiful from it. Yet a certain kind of person feels safer among abstractions. Maybe he's a whiz-bang conceptual thinker, and it's O.K. to let him play with his toys, until he wants to turn them into everybody's toys. It's always healthy to maintain a distance between marketing people and wine, especially so when the marketing people are conceptual-intellectual Germans. "Hmmm, let's see; we have determined that all wines in this discussion should fit into round holes, because the "market" *needs* round-holed wines." But what if the wine is square shaped? "No! This doesn't fit the concept!" Even if the wine is more beautiful that way? "No. If it's square shaped then we will just pound the living crap out of it until it fits in the round hole!"

They will howl I am being unfair. All Chablis is understood to be *dry*, they will say. All "Erstes Gewächs Gerümpel" should also be thus simplified; the "market" demands it. Really? Is the Chablis really as predictable as all that? Is it one of them with malo or no malo, with oak or no oak, lees or no lees, all-stainless or all cask in the cellar? Shall we legislate every conceivable variable out of our wines?

Ah but you see, the only variable that matters is *residual sugar*, because we are obsessed with residual sugar, because we have for some perverse reason turned it into the sole aesthetic CRUX of the matter. *Sugar doesn't matter, folks*, except as an agent of harmony, one among many, an especially helpful one at table, but finally just one of many facets. Yet singled out for special villainy in a world gone gaga.

In full view of the good being done by the VDP, I sadly conclude they are doing even more harm. For the member growers they do provide a marketing platform, but at perilously high cost — beyond the hefty dues the grower pays. The estates I like best are the non-aligned, the intuitively sensible and flexible, the Selbachs of this world.



What is a Palate?

I confess I have been worrying this question, because I can't apprehend how differently we seem to taste things. I mean, most of us agree on what red or yellow look like, and most of would agree that minor chords sound sad and major chords sound happy. It is manifestly obvious to me that low-alcohol white wine with happy acids and a certain amount of sweetness taste superb with an enormous range of food, and yet it's not only that you haven't experienced it. You have, and you disagree! I sat in *Chinois on Main* in Santa Monica once and watched someone eat shrimp in a pineapple sauce and drink 1986 Gruaud Larose. To my palate, that would be like a bowling ball dropped on my already-infected toe. I'm unwilling to believe that people **want** discordant (and thus ugly) flavors on their palates, and so I have to conclude they don't perceive them as discordant.

I'm not talking about aversions. We all have those. My Karen Odessa doesn't like pine nuts (so I make a *pesto* myself!) and I don't like cumin and you don't like bleu cheese. No, I'm talking about flavors we can all tolerate but respond to at times so disparately you wonder if we're actually tasting the same thing. Are there no objective standards of any kind?

I suspect there *are* objective truths out there, to which we are each more or less sensitive. And then we add our individual subjectivities to the mix. Body chemistry plays a part, as do personal habits (such as smoking). But most of what we call "palate" seems to reduce to the quality of attention you pay to the things you taste, and to simple experience.

I mean, the whole Robotongue business should certainly prompt us to redefine what we mean by palate. The actual physio-chemical reception of flavor can be bettered by a machine. Thus a machine can register (and catalog what it registers) but can it be said to actually taste? We are entire human beings tasting wine; we bring our memories and longings and anticipations to every glass. If we're especially fortunate we bring our grateful expectation without fussing over how we'll quantify our pleasure.

But mostly we taste without thinking about it. Try this: put three different brands of tortilla

chips in three bowls, taste them, and note which of the three you liked best and *why*. Presto taste-o! You're doing it; you are EXERCISING YOUR PALATE. If you did this for thirty-seven years you would have a *killer* palate for tortilla chips. What you'd do *then* I have no idea.

Let me explain how I see my own palate, and then you might better be able to use me, since you'll know where we diverge and where we congrue.

I like detail more than I like size. In fact I instinctively recoil from wines I feel to be bigger than I have room for. When I detect skeins of flavor I am happy. When a wine enters my palate monochromatically and then breaks down into many-colored rivulets of flavor, I am *very* happy. I like wines which show *persistent soft-sell*. The persistence is how I know the wine is serious, and if it has the *real* goods it doesn't need to hard-sell.

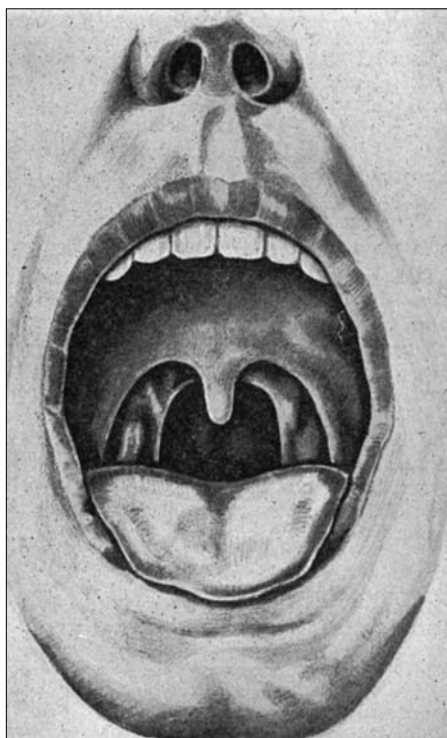
I am highly partial to stone and mineral flavors. I like fruit-flower flavors but not as much. Ideally I like to see a strong **binding** of mineral inside which discreet fruit is set.

I love kinetic flavors, the sense that a wine is in constant motion on my palate. I don't like a wine that just **whomps** there in a big lump of flavor. I adore a sense of *urgent movement*, of activity.

I like balance but I will tolerate a fascinating "flaw." Ideally a wine is both balanced *and* fascinating. In a balanced wine the flavors seem *preordained* to exist in precisely **that** configuration. No knees or elbows poke out. You sit by the stream. The water is clean and cold. The mountain peaks are clear. There are no beer cans or cigarette butts in sight. You've been hiking for a few hours and you feel loose and warm and hungry. You unpack your lunch, take the first bite of food, and then you see your sweetheart come up the path. The air is soft and cool under a gentle sun. Things are exactly perfect. Happens, what, once in a lifetime? In balanced wine, it happens with each sip.

I like clarity and firm discernable lines of flavor. I also **hate** driving with a dirty windshield. These things are related!

I'm tolerant of high acidity but I don't **relish** it. Acid has to be in *balance* with all other flavor and structural components.



How German Wines Age

To define a term: when I say **age**, I mean more than simply preserving a youthful freshness. I use the word “keep” to describe wines that stay young for a long time. To “age” is to develop remarkable and desirable flavors over time, which evolve from the primary youthful flavor but **cannot be inferred from that flavor**. An inexperienced taster cannot possibly know what a young, fine Riesling will taste like in ten years. He has to have experience, to have seen those flavors



himself, ideally as they develop in a wine whose progress he's been able to follow.

It's a blessing and a curse that German wine tastes so good when it's young. As my own tastes change over time I've

grown more sympathetic to drinking these wines early. Our lives are so stressful that a beaming glass of unaffected *delight* is a thing we all deserve. It's a lovely, unfussy pleasure. But it is not the only pleasure. If we are relaxed enough to engage our full selves—not just our attentions, but our *hearts* as well—the aromas and tastes of mature Riesling can be enthralling.

Young German Riesling is almost indecently explicit and brilliantly mineral; indeed it will never be *more* expressive of terroir than at this stage. The wines are wild and effusive from cask, and naturally more subdued and retiring immediately after bottling.

Different wines handle bottling differently; Johannes Leitz says that filigree, delicate wines lose the most from bottling, while robust, lusty wines come through better. I've seen this at work at Christoffel also; the Erdeners always show better younger than the more delicate, fragile Ürzigers. But generally the dumb state lasts from two weeks to four months after bottling. Then the wine has all its flavor again.

However, with certain young wines, Mosel wines especially, there's a problem we wine merchants hardly like to discuss at all, and if we do it's only in furtive whispers after we scan the space to make sure no laypeople are present. This is, you may already have guessed, THE SULFUR PROBLEM. Some young Mosel wines (and in *very* isolated instances non-Mosel wines

also) may have a cheesy kind of whiff about them. This is a little unbound hydrogen sulfide that usually comes from the lees and can be present in wines which are racked late. Certain growers *like* to keep their wines on the primary lees after fermentation to give them more stuffing and texture. It's a great idea and it makes for wines that age splendidly, but that cheesy smell can be a nuisance if you try and drink the wine too soon.

So don't!

The problem is, we are tasting and sampling those wines commercially at *exactly* the most awkward moment. If you encounter such an aroma in a young Mosel Riesling, try swirling the glass for a few minutes; it will dissipate. The number of minutes it takes to dissipate is roughly the number of *years* it will take to disappear from the wine entirely if the bottle is left undisturbed. It is in NO WAY a flaw; merely an inconvenience. Or you can look upon it as a warning not to drink these wines too young!

After a couple of years, many Rieslings enter a rather neutral phase in which they seem to have lost their early vitality. I see this as the chrysalis stage; they *are* enclosed, they *are* hard to get at—but be patient, for soon emerges a butterfly.

The mature flavor begins as a kind of singe around the edge of the fruit. Finally that singe—as though the fruit had been flambéed—seems to *encompass* the fruit, to subsume it. The fruit is not devoured, but it has chrysalized into a brighter and richer thing. An entire panoply of secondary flavors begins to appear, and the wine becomes truly *vinous*; it is born as wine, leaving the placenta of grapiness behind. If it is a fine wine, especially a wine with botrytis, these flavors constitute a real elixir, the effect of which is completely seductive. But even smaller wines take on a patina of poise and mysteriousness.

There are also strict chemical reactions wherein acidity softens and sugars polymerize, so that each is less pronounced as the wine ages. In the 1990-vintage zeitgeist the idea was to make “sweet” wines as dry as possible, but many of these wines now seem obdurate and lumpen, with still-prominent acids and not enough fruit; yang, but no yin. Sometimes it's necessary to allow apparently-excessive sweetness in a baby-wine as a guarantor of great cellaring. A few of the 2003s appear to have more sweetness than they strictly need, but from the right cellar I'm actually glad to see it; it denotes a grower who's thinking years ahead to the wine's maturity.

You should also know the curve by which Riesling ages. The “pinnacle” of its development isn't a peak so much as a table mesa. Riesling doesn't reach its narrow summit and suddenly tumble down the other side. It gets to the top and walks around the plateau awhile, for *years*, enjoying the view, only descending as evening

approaches and the air grows chilly. The figures I cite in my tasting notes are A) the number of years at which the summit is reached, and B) the number of years I intuit the descent will begin.

The whole “petrol” matter stirs some controversy. Some growers accept the adjective sanguinely, but others detest it. All I can say is I wish I knew where some guys go to tank up, ‘cause *I’ve* never smelled refined oil products that smelled like Riesling.

But, I know what y’all mean by it, and I want to correct a misconception. That “petrol” flavor is not a signal of maturity, but rather of adolescence. It will vanish when the wine is truly mature. By which time we’ll all be driving electrical cars anyway.

Here are my rules-of-thumb, with all the usual provisos; your mileage may vary, etc. It presumes on good Riesling from a good grower and a good site in a good vintage.

KABINETT: peaks from 4-6 years (if it’s *true* Kabinett and not declassified Auslese) and shouldn’t fade till about age 15. Again, it’s not an abrupt demise, but rather a deliberate twilight slide. That said, I have in mind that 1961 Kabinett I drank at Schmitt-Wagner a couple weeks ago – 42 years old and going strong.

SPATLESE: peaks from 7-10 years and shouldn’t fade till about age 25.

AUSLESE: peaks from 12-15 years and shouldn’t fade till about age 35.

BEERENAUSSLESE: peaks from 25 years or so, and shouldn’t fade till about age 50.

TBA: I know you’ll hate to hear this, but these wines aren’t designed to fit into a human lifetime. Unless you started buying TBA when you were, like, seventeen, every bottle you have will outlive you. I drank a bunch of 1953 TBA this year (in honor of my ghastly birthday) and several of them had more improvement ahead of them. So, peaks anywhere between 35 and 55 years, and shouldn’t fade till the Red Sox play the Cubs in the series – and the Cubbies win.

EISWEIN: No one knew how these would age, but some theories are starting to gell. It depends on the wine, on it’s essential balance. If the acidity is too high, and if it’s too dominated by malic “green” acid, this will oxidize into vegetal flavors not to everyone’s taste, though the wine is strictly still “intact”. Such wines compel a theory to drink Eiswein young. This makes little sense to me. The correct theory would be to ignore such wines entirely. They are unbalanced and will give little joy. Eiswein with balanced, ripe acidity will age splendidly, if unpredictably. Dönnhoff served me an ‘83 Brücke Eiswein this year, whose caramel color took us aback. “Actually, Terry, the wine took on that color at three years old, and has held it since,” he said.

My own instincts are to pay heed to the weight of

the wine – Eiswein at 135° Oechsle is a different critter than one at 200° Oechsle – and drink it as you would any other hyper-concentrated dessert wine: either very young or very old.

We do see a wiser approach being taken, though, as many growers realize “You have to pay attention to *what it is* you’re concentrating.” The best of them want ripe fruit – ideally Auslese-quality – with a little dusting of botrytis (not too much or the grapes won’t freeze). Nor are they chasing deranged acid readings. We have come to realize that more than 16 grams of acidity is an *issue*, not a thing one brags about.

What To Drink Now

This assumes you acquired the wine in good condition and haven’t abused it yourself! And it also assumes you’re looking for the wines to be at their “peak,” whatever that might mean. Let me tell you what it means to me. I like German wines best when they have a full ration of secondary, bottle-ripe flavors *but still show some of their original fruit*. My good friend and primo California distributor Hiram Simon, being typically British at least in this respect, would prefer to drink the wines a few years later when they tasted more antique. But for me what happens is the wine takes on a kind of generic old-wine taste which subsumes its original character. I like some of that but I look for the highest common denominator between freshness and maturity.

Beyond that, all I can say is do the math, know the vintages, and err on the side of caution. It is always better to catch a wine on the way up than on the way down.



Judy Skurnik knows what and how to drink now!

Label Basics

German labels are similar to Burgundy labels. Both tell you who produced the wine and where it was grown. The Burgundy label asks you to infer the grape variety (which isn't difficult), and the ripeness level (which is difficult) and further asks you to accept that a wine's quality is, for legal purposes, solely determined by the plot of land on which the grapes grew. The most miserable vintage or the most wretchedly over cropped vineyard *can* still be labeled Grand Cru.



In Germany, ripeness is all. Theoretically, the vineyard doesn't matter, though it is named. The inference *there* is that any plot of land is capable of ripening grapes to this or that level. The "better" vineyards show themselves by offering types of flavors which may be *subjectively* judged superior,

but there's no room for interpretation when it comes to specific gravity of grape must. It's there or it's not.

The common complaint is the German label is too verbose. Here's a nice terse response: bullshit. If this were the label of a French wine, we'd be subjected to "Grand Vin du Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, mis en bouteille au domain Selbach-Oster, viticulteur a Zeltingen, Grand Cru Schlossberg du Zeltingen, Vendage Tardive, Riesling . . ." get the picture? The difference is that you feel urbane and seductive speaking the French words. In German you feel like Sergeant Schulz. I was on a little warpath in Germany last month, correcting my colleagues' mispronunciations until I was sure they'd spit in my soup. I don't object to our mangling the complicated diphthongs, but any drooling idiot can say Zone-en-ur (Sonnenuhr). So please, gimme a break about the German label.

Here's what it means: Selbach-Oster is the producer. If you see the word *Weingut* in any proximity, that's your signal. A *Weingut* is a winery which estate-bottles its wine. Look for that word. Vintage is self-evident. **Zeltinger Schlossberg** identifies the site and locality. Zeltingen is a place from which the populace, whether Homo Sapiens or the progeny of *vitas vinifera*, are known as Zeltingers. O.K., New Yorkers? Schlossberg is a vineyard. How are you supposed to know that? It's always the second word in the sequence. Meursault Perrieres. Zeltinger Schlossberg. NBD!

Now the German departs radically from the French.

It makes the grape variety explicit, Riesling in this instance. And it specifies the ripeness of the fruit at harvest. I'm not prepared to go through the whole "this is Kabinett, this Spätlese" thing again. It's tiresome and you know it anyway.

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). The phrase *Qualitätsswein mit Prädikat* is a bit of bureaucratic puffery. Quality wine with special distinction, right! The distinction in this case is that the wine is not chaptalized. Chaptalized wines can only be labeled *Qualitätsswein b.A.*; they aren't subject to predicates. Only Germans have perversely decided that chaptalized wine is ipso facto inferior wine. The French cheerily go on consuming just about all their wines except the most southerly, not caring that sugar was added to the grape must to boost the alcohol a few degrees. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the *Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum standards. That word *Gutsabfüllung* means estate bottled. Think about it: it's actually *shorter* than *mise en bouteilles au domaine*; it's just a single word instead of a seven-syllable phrase. And then finally on the bottom we find Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, in this case the *region* of origin. The French wine denies us even this basic courtesy. No "*Grand vin de Bourgogne*" here. We are thrown upon the dubious mercy of the BATE, which will require "Red Burgundy Wine" to appear on the strip label.

No, there's nothing inherently complex about German wine labels. Long words, sometimes. Yet when a sommelier approaches the table, he seldom recommends the "Sancerre Reserve du Monts Dammes from Cotat;" he suggests the *Sancerre*. Same here. Don't spell it all out in all its excruciating length. Suggest "The Zeltinger for Monsieur's pork 'n beans?" Some of the more arcane ramifications of the label can be interesting to students of logic, or just for a chuckle over some precious bureaucratic geekiness, but you really don't need to know it. Do you *have* to know all the queer codes on an airplane ticket in order to board the plane? But your travel agent can see all kinds of information in those strange little glyphs. Learn it if you care to.



GLOSSARY

OECHSLE

A scale by which grape ripeness is measured. The French use the so-called Beaume scale, while our brethren in the Golden State are wont to yammer on about Brix. Mr. Oechsle was a chemist and his scale is ludicrously simple. It takes the specific gravity of must and shoves the decimal point around to get a reading. Thus a must with a specific gravity of 1.085 has an Oechsle reading of 85 degrees. One degree Brix equals roughly four degrees Oechsle.

You'll hear me mention Oechsle if a wine displays remarkable ripeness for its quality level. Most of my growers are contemptuous of the lenient standards for minimum ripeness. And you need to know if, for example, I'm offering you a Kabinett with near-Auslese ripeness because you might be looking for a light wine and you won't get it. Each grower sets up his own schemata, and if the baseline level is, say, equivalent to Spätlese, then the lightest wine could be called "Kabinett" even with Spätlese-level ripeness. Better to be remembered for a superb Kabinett than to be forgotten for a run-of-the-mill Spätlese. German wine in general is riper than it was fifteen years ago (it's a global-warming thing), even though I have stopped using aerosol deodorants personally.

GL

GL means grams-per-liter, and is the method by which most wine things are measured in Germany. We prefer to think in percents, so here's how to transpose. A thing measuring 8.5 g.l. has .85% of whatever thing it is.

EXTRACT

Extract really is simple and tangible. It is everything in wine except sugar, acid, water, and alcohol. You can measure it in the lab, and all German wine carrying an A.P. number has had its extract measured. The average reading would be somewhere in the low 20s—speaking in g.l. now. I'd expect to see a Riesling QbA or Kabinett with 20 to 24 g.l. extract, or 2.2 to 2.4 percent. I'd look for Spätlese to be a little higher, Auslese still higher, and the stickies quite high, up to 40 or even 50 g.l.

I'll bring extract to your attention if it's noteworthy. High extract corresponds with low yields, old vines, moist soils, and generally with high acidity. Can you taste extract? Not as a specific flavor, but as a largeness of flavor, especially mid-palate flavor—the second wave of taste that comes on after the initial burst of fruit. Extract is also a buffer, ameliorating both acidity and sweetness.

ACIDITY

I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine except Riesling has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German

Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient. Most riesling acids in 2003 ranged between 6.5 and 8.5 g.l., with the lion's share between 7 and 7.5, i.e. low by German standards but interestingly typical for Austria. In many instances one noticed the lower acid but didn't miss it. Sometimes a wine would seem denuded, as if you'd turned the color off your TV and were watching in black and white. The whole experience of 2003 will cause a re-examination of the importance of acidity, the value of which will emerge over time and perspective. Curiously, it does seem that before the second World War, many German Rieslings underwent partial malolactic fermentation, probably by accident, and the wines of ripe vintages may have been lower in acid than we experience these days. Yet the wines aged fabulously.

The Germans have lurched backward from their acid-obsession. Now the pack has moved too far in the opposite direction. The poor grower! The ones who try to "gauge the market" end up being whipped around, dupes to fashion. The Good Guys just go on making the best wines they can and look for people to sell them to. I would never advocate a return to the days of Trocken wines with 11 grams of acidity (you could disfigure your own face if you let any of that stuff dribble down your chin), but it concerns me to hear so many vintners talk about adjusting acids downward to make their young dry wines palatable.

It signals an inappropriate focus on acidity as such, rather than on the entire flavor of the wine. As Hans-Günter Schwarz so wisely puts it: "Acidity is the fundament of fruit."

TYPES OF SOIL

Soil plays a decisive role in determining specific flavors in German Riesling. I will often make mention of soil if a wine has expressed it with special brilliance. Examples of the more striking soil/flavor rapports include the mineral, wet-stone flavor from slate soil, the curranty, spectral complexities from porphyry soil, and the fiery savor from potassium-rich basalt soils. Oh, and let's not forget the unique smokiness from the red slate-sandstone mélange the Germans call Rotliegend.

TROCKEN & HALBTROCKEN

These are legally defined measures of residual sugar. Trocken literally means "dry" but in reality means very dry, between 0 and 9 g.l. residual sugar (or .9%, but you've figured that out by now!). Halbtrocken literally means "half-dry" but actually means just-plain-dry, denoting between 9 and 18 g.l. sweetness. The average German Riesling, say with 8.5 g.l. acidity, would begin to display detectable sweetness at around 12 g.l., beneath which it would seem fuller as the sugar increased, without actually tasting sweet. If the amount of sugar is noteworthy I will share it with you. Please remember that the impression of sweetness is created not by sugar alone, but the interaction of sugar, acidity and extract.

SÜSSRESERVE

This is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a fully fermented wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor is assured—at least in theory. I intervene as often as I can in this process, as I have definite ideas about harmony. Where the story of a blend is interesting I'll share it with you. The practice is nearly universal along the Rhine but uncommon along the Mosel, where sweetness is adjusted by interrupting fermentation. Actually, I have decided that I don't like the word "Süssreserve" any more and I won't use it in this text. It may be silly, but we have a much sexier and more palatable word for a highly similar practice and process: DOSAGE. Since nobody objects to the idea of Dosage in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I'll use the nicer one.

Another interesting digression (I am full of these, or at any rate, full of something): when you're blending with Süssreserve, you first produce a makeshift blend based on an intuition of what the base wine seems to need. It's often wrong, so you add or subtract in the direction you wish to move. Much of the time the wine seems sweet-sour, with sugar unknit and detached from fruit and acidity, standing out like a sore thumb. You'd be tempted to conclude you'd used too much sweetening. You'd be wrong. Most of the time you don't need less sweetness; you need more. And as you inch upward in increments you'll find when you've got the blend perfect the sweetness seems to VANISH! Now it's part of a balanced, whole picture. I'm tempted to believe that most of the anti-Süssreserve crap you hear results from poorly blended wines from vintners who didn't respect their material and were only interested in the quickest short-cut to a saleable product.

FLURBEREINIGUNG

Literally this means the "rectification of the fields." It's actually a process whereby costs of production are diminished by rationalizing land holdings and building roads, paths, and walkways. Formerly the growers' holdings were split into myriad tiny parcels and scattered hither and yon over the hillside. Often there was no easy access. It could take a longer time to get to one's vines than to actually work them.

In Flurbereinigung, the entire expanse of a vineyard is pulled up. After the new roads are built and the work is completed (sometimes old walls and terraces are rebuilt also), the growers get the same amount of land back, or nearly, but in fewer, larger sections. After replanting, the first commercial crop follows in three to four years. Everyone who's had vineyards through the process reports that it is much easier to work the land afterwards. It also levels the playing field, since every-

body's vines are now the same age. It does create short-term shortages of wine, and it does diminish the quality of wine from a vineyard until the vines mature again, but it's a small price to pay to help ensure the future of viticulture in Germany.

HOCHGEWÄCHS

Do us both a favor and don't even try to pronounce this. Just do what I do and call it "hogwash," for that's what it is. Another perfect example of an idea that started out right and turned into a bureaucratic nightmare. Here's the scenario. You're a conscientious grower; a lot of your wines exceed the legal minimum for their quality levels. Especially your QbA wines, which are near or actually at Kabinett ripeness. You don't want to make a thin Kabinett from these grapes, so you chaptalize. No problem so far. Except that when you try to sell the wine, now labeled QbA, it competes against oceans of mass-produced, cheap, lowest-common-denominator QbA selling for pennies per bottle at the corner supermarket. Nobody will pay your price. Where's your incentive?

Thus the creation of this new term (actually the co-opting of an earlier term with a different meaning, but that's another story). Think of it as a kind of "super QbA," or if you prefer, a chaptalized Kabinett or damn-near Kabinett. Any chaptalized wine with at least x-ripeness can be sold as Hochgewächs. You can even chaptalize Spätlese quality must if you feel like it. Hogwash also has special requirements in terms of how many points the wine needs in order to qualify, and, most significant, one hundred percent purity of vintage, grape variety and vineyard site—versus 85% as the general rule in Germany.

So you can see why they needed to do it, but the thing is just so typically half-assed! Why don't they show some courage and raise the requirements for Qualitätswein? Easy answer: because the merchants and co-ops have too much political clout. But hey, no problem, dude! I don't mind struggling my entire career to erase the miserable impression so many people have of German wine because of all the oceans of bilge those wineries turn out!

GUTSABFÜLLUNG

This is a recently permitted term for estate bottling, and much preferable to the old Erzeugerabfüllung which is now restricted for use by co-ops. This is good for at least two reasons. First the word is shorter. Second, it creates a logical connection between Weingut and Gutsabfüllung. And third, we'uns can remember it because, after all, it means to fill your gut! 'Bout time the Germans did something good with their Twilight-Zone wine law.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

I'm highlighting the wines I think are the best candidates for restaurant use. That's bound to be arbitrary to some extent, but I care a lot about how these wines are used, and I pay close attention to flavor synergies. That plus my wife is a chef and I've had my consciousness raised. You'll see all the wines listed here along with the page number where you'll find it in the general text. Also, those wines will say SOMMELIER ALERT!

I don't really have scholarly criteria; it's more intuitive. I do look for bold, forthright flavor. I also look less for specific associations than for general flexibility. If I have, say, a dry wine that I know would be great with, I don't know, conch tempura, I won't put SOMMELIER ALERT there. I'm looking for wines that will dance with persons of varying heights and body types, if you catch my drift.

I get the intuitive yes-sound when the wine's packed with **taste**, and when it's got a whisper of sweetness but not too much, and when the range of nuance is wide enough that the wine has potential to sing with a lot of different flavors. I'm firmly on the match-by-structure bandwagon, as I see how reliably it works. And that's why I think we need white wines to be a little bit sweet, because most of your food is also a little bit sweet. And bone-dry wines can end up tasting mean and ornery at such times. Nor have I ever considered a wine-food tandem and wanted the wine to have more alcohol. So all things being equal I opt for lower-alcohol wines, as they don't tire the palate, and besides, low-alcohol wines are usually high in other desirable thingies like aroma and acidity. Finally I do prefer wines that taste like food. I mean, grapes are food, and yeast is food, and food goes with food. Oak, to my knowledge, is not food, unless one is a termite, and so I tend to avoid it. Unless I have saffron or mustard in my food, both of which seem to cozy up to casks.

Briefly put, if you don't already know, I think you'd be surprised how well German white wine will *work* with your food. It's actually, dare I say it, the best available white wine you could use. When chefs create preps they are usually looking for flavor synergies, sometimes harmonies and sometimes **telling** disharmonies. Nobody deliberately combines *discordant* flavors in a prep. Why stop there? The idea that "anything goes; you should drink what you like" is dangerous, because it isn't true. Why, you start letting people drink what they **like** and the next thing you know they're wearing white before Memorial Day! I don't care about what's Correct, but I do know what tastes good and I have a small idea why.



A bold new concept in wine & food pairings: order the wrong wine, your food attacks you.

sommelier alert

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nahe wines



It is a joy to labor lovingly on behalf of what I feel to be the loveliest Riesling wines on the face of the earth.

You know, the Rhineland is really quite compact. You can get to the Nahe in a half-hour from the Rheingau, a half-hour from the Rhinehessen, an hour from the Pfalz, and an hour from the Mosel. Yet the Nahe is the forgotten acre just out of view, trilling beyond earshot in its winsome, lonely corner. Especially after the soaring scenery of the Mosel, the dreamy Nahe is almost narcotically soothing. It's still, and intimate, and stirs the soul as it calms the nerves.

Things feel astir on the Nahe these days. Mr. Dönnhoff has brought acclaim to his region, and a number of excellent growers are in the slipstream of that attention; Schönleber, Hexamer, Schäfer-Fröhlich, not to mention Mr. Diel, who is in nobody's slipstream. A case could be made that no other German wine region has the Nahe's concentration of outstanding estates in a similarly

small area. The region is also especially lovely for wine pilgrims because it remains quiet and authentic. In contrast to the Pfalz, where every weekend from Easter to harvest is cram-a-lama with gawkers and slug-it-downers. At least there's *one* place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "VIS-

The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be.

ITEZ LES CAVES!" signs. You can hear a breeze rustling through trees in the *next* orchard before it reaches the one in which you're sitting. There's a constant clamor of birds. Signs by the side of the road warn of frog crossings. You wouldn't drive fast even if you could.

The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be: intricate, searchingly complex, with hypnotically shimmering overtones of flavor that can stir you to a point between perplexity and awe. Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted. If the pure *flavor* of wine interests you in and of itself, these wines will give you as much delight and absorption as wine ever can.

There are four basic soil types in the Nahe. Each gives its own kind of wine. **Slate** does what it always does; the Nahe variant has more middle, almost like a super rich

Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marbeline feel. **Loam** and **clay** are the plebians, mostly planted to the commoner varieties, though even these varieties are more fetchingly graceful along the Nahe. Finally the volcanic soils with the exotic names: **porphyry**, **melaphyr**, **gneiss**, **rhyolite**, give the world's most spellbinding white wine, Riesling at an impossible pinnacle of fire and grace. Blackcurrant, honeysuckle, raspberry, a heavenly host of flavors astonishingly differentiated and an almost prismatic filigree.

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after

Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted.

having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

We returned to the group and I beckoned them to follow me. The exercise was repeated, this time with eight of us walking one behind the other— we looked like a chain-

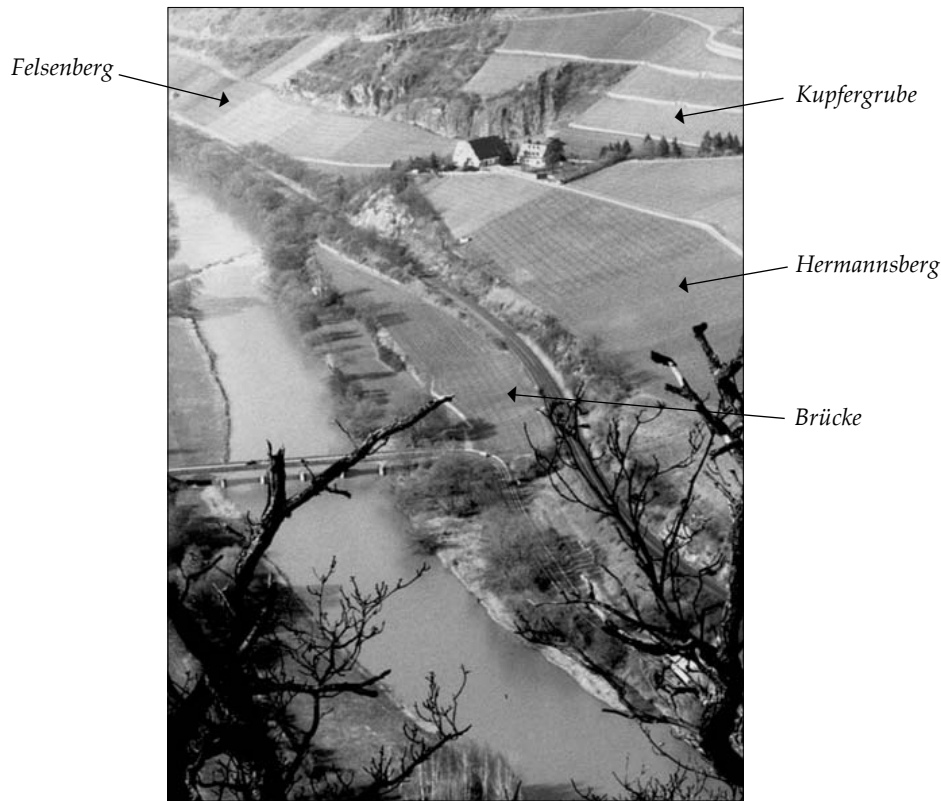
gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyr. I turned to the group. "You hear a lot of crap about what makes complexity in wines. Some people would like you to think that winemakers give complexity to their wines. Look at what you've just seen here. THAT, and THAT ALONE is complexity."

I know of nowhere else in the world of wine where grapes grow on such an intricate confluence of geological currents. No grape except Riesling could do justice to such soil.

Each year I try to hike to the top of the Lemberg, the highest hill in the region. It does me good: the birds, the fresh spermy smell of early spring and the view. At this time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil

In my dream I wished I could bring you here with me, and we could sit out for a few hours in the afternoon light and look down on those miraculous vineyards and listen to the birds. Let that time gestate in our hearts, so that when we taste the wines later on we taste them *with* that heart, relaxed, dilated and ready. And then I think of those wines, arranged in sterile rows on a table somewhere, while I pace nearby and worry about how they'll "show." And for a moment it becomes impossible to be both people at once, the hot-shot wine guy and the plain-and-simple me who sits on the hill pensive, calm and grateful.

I happen to believe that wine **means** something. And much of what wine means was visible to me then, and every time since. I also *buy* wine in part because of what it means, which is a more vital question than its simple exterior flavor. Yet if we wish to make a living buying and selling wine, we often confront a perplexing ques-



View of vineyards from the Lemberg

forming miasmatic currents on the exposed ground. Almost all the great Nahe vineyards can be seen below, among the noblest homes for Riesling anywhere on earth, spread out like a necklace of diamonds: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle, Hermannsberg, Brücke. I peer through the spring sunshine, remembering the first time I ever saw this astonishing view, when I suddenly had an eerie sense of something being *shown* to me. I was a million miles from marketing. Looking into a remote hollow on a distant limb of the world, grateful in my utmost heart for the beauty that lives in the land, but also somehow lost.

tion: who are we to be? We all let meaning into our lives in *some* way; we thirst for meaning unawares. When you cheer like a banshee for the home team, you're feeding a need for **meaning**; on the face of it, what does it matter *who* wins the game? We *create* meaning because we *need* to have it in our lives. Wine is one of the things which happens to feed that need in me, and Nahe wine does so in a particularly suggestive, caressing way. "There are mysteries here of the most exquisite sweetness; I will show them to you," it seems to say.

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

"The soul does not supply solutions. It sends messages. It beckons." -Michael Ventura

Helmut Dönnhoff likes, as he puts it, to "speak through the flowers", to use metaphor and image. He is quicker even than I am to carry wine into that realm, yet he is also the most matter-of-fact person I think I know. I respect him and want him to approve of me and for a while I wondered whether I was holding my ground, or trying to be like him. It was confusing until I realized I actually was like him in many ways, and we had developed similar relationships to wine.

Similar aesthetically, of course; I don't grow grapes or make wine. But very often when I'm translating Helmut for the non-German-speakers present, I find myself thinking "this is exactly

how the thing should be said" and I want almost to applaud as I translate.

It's best if I don't think about the wines until they're in the glass. I try to subdue any pleasure of anticipation. I just want the wines to come to me. I want the awe to live in them, and come to me; I don't want to bring it. I tasted the wines twice this year, about two weeks apart, as I made a second visit with Kevin Pike. The latter run-through was a brisk affair - we hadn't much time - and it lubricated a somewhat delicate conversation which engaged most of my attention. I found it fascinating to scroll through these wines, which I love like none other, with only a sideways glance. In one particular moment I was groping to say something subtle in my inadequate German, concentrating entirely on finding words I didn't know, and suddenly the wine in my glass found a seam and soaked through it, and I realized I was near tears. It was shockingly beautiful. I was closed to the world, and the world opened me. And what of this? it seemed to say.

I like to hike in high mountains, it is huge and stirring, but this was different, this was anything but overwhelming. This was quiet, it was the underside of a leaf, it was hoar frost on a branch, the kind eye of an old dog, a small thing standing simply in my sight as if by accident, and I was alight with it. *And what of this?* And I wondered, what of it? Yes it is beautiful, but what of it? .

It is always here.

My wife is someone who likes to remember her dreams and consider their meaning. I find this lovely, but do not share it. It seems ordinary enough that our subconscious hums and buzzes all the time, and that we only see it when our waking consciousness gets out of the way, just as we only see stars in a dark sky. I thought of this suddenly. *It is always here.* Yes, just as the stars are always there, even when we can't see them. Just as the dreams are always there even when we don't dream them.

This is a long way to venture out from a single sip of wine. But any single sip of wine can show us the whole world, can show us the reality we usually ignore, the thing that is always there, and which we see through

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke, Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg and Kupfergrube, Norheimer Kirschheck and Dellchen**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry and weathered volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 75% Riesling, 25% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder**

angel-eyes. Wine can remind us to pause, notice and appreciate. It is always here. *Beauty* is always here. This strange, sad, beautiful world is always here in all its gravity and gorgeousness, ready to unfold us. Colin Wilson once said "What if we aren't risen apes, but instead fallen angels?"

Think about when you make up after a quarrel. Think of the moment you realize *I love her, she is beautiful, why are we fighting?* You are suddenly inside the deeper truth, the one which abides below all your politics and power struggles, the truth that is *always* there. Sometimes a great wine will deliver all of wine - all of beauty - to you, and for a moment you are inside the slower, deeper truth, and you know that all your fussing, over adjectives and associations and quantification of your pleasure and dissecting of flavor is all a bagatelle, a waste of time. A waste of wine.

I envision Helmut reading these words and thinking "Hey, don't hold me responsible for this!" I imagine any instruction he might wish to impart would boil down to not losing the forest for the trees. Which is true enough, yet on we go.

From the top of the Lemberg you look out not merely on vineyards, hills, rivers; you don't even look out on

"scenery". You look out on *landscape*, that thing which is larger than scenery or the parts of scenery. Just as the idea of "forest" is different in *essence* from the fact of trees. And when you see landscape you are quite sure it *means something*, though you can't say just what. Great wines arise from landscape as much as from vineyards. Great wines arise as much from civilization as they do from people or cultures.

And so we might define great wine as wine which is incandescent with *reality*, that is somehow larger and more eternal than its mere ostensible self, and which speaks to that thing in each of us. But don't go looking for it. Be calm and prepared, and it will find you.

My favorite of all those aching drawings of Käthe Kollwitz is called "Prisoners Listening To Music." In it the damned, the wretched, are looking wonderingly at a cloister inside themselves they didn't know was there. The experience of beauty reminds us we are at least partly angels. We must be, if, when they visit us, we understand them. Dönnhoff's wines are quiet and searching, and you hear them from an interior world monastic and still.

Helmut Dönnhoff knows his wines are good. He doesn't strut about it but he isn't aw-shucks either. I once asked him if he agreed his goal was to make wines of crystalline texture and precise articulation. "I don't disagree," he replied. Then how do you get there? I had to know. There is, in effect, no "how", was his answer. Wine results from the confluence of a multitude of small choices, which alter as circumstances mandate. There's no recipe. There is ever-more reliance on instinct. Dönnhoff is very respectful of spontaneous instinctive recognition, and has become wary of the intellect's appetite to deconstruct. Last year he spoke with David Schildknecht and said this telling thing:

"I am always asking people who have no technical expertise to assess the taste of my wines. The postman, for instance. I ask him, 'Would you just please taste these three wines and tell me which you prefer.' 'Oh, it's really too early in the morning . . .' he protests, but I pull him in and sit him down anyway. And then he says something quite amazing and insightful that suddenly opens your eyes to the wine. And here is the decisive point: there are a lot of us who know too much about wine to be able to taste."

Precisely.

Dönnhoff sees his work as craft; such art as may exist in wine comes from nature. "All the real work of the vintage happens before the pressing," he says. "What you do afterwards is repair." He approaches wine respectfully but not reverentially.

As a vintner he takes his duties completely seriously and applies himself calmly and fastidiously to his work. The result is a community of wines as transparent and filigree as spider webs, but the wonder for Helmut lies not in the strange fact of such a thing's existence, but in the beauty of the workmanship. He wants to make wine that is pure and serene in flavor.



Helmut Dönnhoff

My friend Robert Houde has a great way to convey this idea: "People have to get over the idea that *intensity* always means **volume**," he says. Thank you Robert! Think of some yahoo blabbing away behind you in a movie theater. Beyond all patience, you turn to this clod and whisper, "Would you please SHUT UP?" You haven't raised your voice above a whisper, but you have spoken with seething intensity. Wine does this too. It is always asking me to shut up.

I loved something Helmut said once: "DAS GANZE DING MUSS KLINGEN!" That is, the whole thing must harmonize; it isn't enough if this **part** or that **part** is interesting or arresting, the *whole* picture has to be balanced. Helmut is unaware of it, but he offered quite a gleaming gift of instruction with that simple little sentence. We'd all be better wine drinkers—and happier liverers of LIFE—if we could somehow remember: the whole thing must harmonize.

Dönnhoff ferments with yeast cultures he creates himself from his own wines, the better to give him the highest common denominator of controlled, slow fermentation without having to resort to commercial yeast. The wines are aged in cask until bottling, but no longer than six months. If the wine isn't bottle-ready after six months it is racked into stainless steel. Low-acid wines are racked immediately after fermentation; wines with healthy high acid may sit on the lees as long as a month. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

"Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality," he says, adding: "You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you're not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology." He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. "It is the concentration of *all* the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its *real* taste and structure," he says.

"If you have a barrel that's not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character." Fermentation runs its own course here.

I know a lot of you who regard these wines with an almost religious awe. I watched Helmut (and his wife Gabi) pouring at my New York DI tasting last June. A taster had his epiphany: "Wait a minute," he said, "Are you *Dönnhoff*?" Helmut assented bashfully. "Omigod! *We're not worthy. We're not worthy.*" He cried, waving his arms in the hosanna gesture. I sidled up behind Helmut and winked. "Star-power." I said. "*Verrückt*" (*Crazy!*) he replied.

Well, the 2003 series here will do nothing to quash your ardor, dear friend.

I sense Helmut relaxed into the vintage and didn't seek to resist it. I have no earthly idea what acids or extracts his wines might have. They are somewhat fleshier than '01 or '02, and they are not at all mysterious or coquettish. They are simply amazingly beautiful, sometimes achingly so, the way exquisiteness can almost be painful to experience. I said to Helmut at one point: "Your '02s are like making love to an exquisite young partner without much experience, but the '03s are like having a lusty partner your own age who knows exactly what she's doing and loves it."

"Hmmm," he replied, "if you say so!"

I should explain why we don't offer any Trocken wines. Years ago Helmut and I agreed, interesting as it might be to offer dry wines here and there, if it would reduce the quantities of the "sweet" wines he gave me, it made no sense. Helmut has to allocate too, you see, and he has a gross figure in mind representing a proportion of his harvest he'll send to America. I could get 50 cases of a Trocken wine but would then have to sacrifice 50 cases of something else, and I may be dumb but I ain't stoopid. That said, I tasted through a few of the dry 2003s, of which the best was the Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Spätlese Trocken.

I also asked Helmut whether he irrigated in 2003. Many of his colleagues did. "I didn't irrigate," he said, "I'm against it in principle. I'd never buy a vineyard anywhere in the world that had to be irrigated."

Well, I wondered, what of the great Wachau rieslings, which only exist because of irrigation?

With a grin he said: "The exception proves the rule!"

It says something about the Riesling religion that its high priests are so **down to earth**, because great Riesling COMES DOWN TO EARTH. Earth and soil is the reason it is great. Welcome then, to many of the greatest soils in the world of wine, and the wry, genial and careful man who midwives them into being for us.

Some Notes On The Vineyards:

In essence the BRÜCKE is a mineral wine; it shows a more masculine profile, it's more fibrous and nutty than many other Nahe wines, but just at the moment you think you're tasting everything in it, it comes at you with even more nuance, yet another facet of flavor. If new-world-oaky-creamslut wines are like basic addition and subtraction, these wines are like integral calculus—except that any ragamuffin palate (even mine!) can grok them.

NIEDERHÄUSER HERMANNSHÖLE is one of those vineyards that gives utterly miraculous wine. You shake your head in delighted perplexity that fermented grape juice can attain such flavors. It is a steep hillside, not very large (8.5 hectares), with ideal exposition and a soil whose complexity is mirrored in its wines. Walk fifty yards through the vineyard and you see a mish-mash of soils, as though this were a geological junction, an Arc de Triomphe-like conflagration. There is slate, porphyry, melaphyr and conglomerates—sometimes all jumbled together. The only possible drawback is drought in the drier years. Its favorable exposure makes Eiswein almost impossible.

Dönnhoff is currently producing the very best wines from HERMANNSHÖLE, and you need look no further to see one of the wine-world's great confluences of a great vineyard and a great proprietor. I don't care what a hot-shot palate you have, the complexities of these wines will tax it to its outermost limits. The fundamental aromas and flavors are a mingling of sharply sweet cherry, sometimes black cherry, and currant-cassis, but there is a hint of anise too, something spriggy, and an undertow of stoniness from the slate. Botrytis brings tropical fruit notes. I would go so far as to claim that NO SINGLE WINE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD IS AS COMPLEX AS DÖNNHOFF'S BEST FROM HERMANNSHÖLE.

Dönnhoff at a glance:

In this humble taster's opinion, these are the greatest Rieslings on earth. No other wine, anywhere, exceeds the clarity, polish, complexity and sheer beauty of flavor of this grower's finest wines.

how the wines taste:

Simply, like the most perfect Riesling that can ever be.

GDH-147 **2003 Estate Riesling**

Again a blend mostly from the Felsenberg (Porphyry) and a little Kieselberg (slate, sand and gravel over loam, and steep); the first sample I saw was good enough, but after offering the gentlest of critiques, Helmut affixed me with his penetrating glare and disappeared into the cellar to fetch a sample from a different cask. This I liked much more; it has 22 grams per liter residual sugar (versus 16), and is sleeker and silkier, more polished, but with spice in a sharp brilliant arc. It's very much in the family of the past several vintages even with its 90° Oechsle ("I looked for ways to make it worse!" said Helmut).

SOS: 0 (between four and fourteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-148 **2003 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett** **+**

Leistenberg is a slatey vineyard (not the Mosel devonian slate but the sandy slate called "Tholey") whose wines sometimes recall Trittenheimers. A fabulous Cox-orange apple and comice pear nose here; brilliant entry but some mid and end-palate severity. Again I told him and again he looked at me with unnerving penetration, and again a second cask's sample was fetched, and *again* I liked it more; it was lighter and more pure, in every way finer, with a pear-like granularity; flavors spoken with exquisite diction, and its lyric lightness is more typical for something called "Kabinett", though this has striking length.

SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-150 **2003 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese**

A stern yet creamy performance of this great site, massive shimmer but seemed rather starkly exposed at the end. Admirable rather than loveable. Helmut suggested certain wines were unfinished, and this could well change by the time it's bottled.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)

GDH-151 **2003 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese** **++**

GDH-151M **2003 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5 Liter** **++**

The second consecutive masterpiece from the Dellchen, and I asked Helmut if the vines were finally old enough. "Not so much that, though they are," he said. "What's more important is my own relationship with the vineyard, which takes time to evolve. You need to spend years in a vineyard to understand it, what it needs and can give." The 2003 crop was thinned both by hail (two days before flowering) and green-harvesting, but this is masterly wine, with sensational density and juiciness; has the sweet meaty aroma of a great butcher's shop; this is just an explosive '03, radically mineral and eruptingly vinous and endlessly long; you'll need to gargle with Listerine to make the finish go *away*. . . . Dellchen typically shows an improbable range of flavors for riesling: porcini, caramel, new leather. By the way, we're trying to get **MAGNUMS** of this; watch this space.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-149 **2003 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese** **+**

Kirschheck (cherry-hedge) is an unheralded Grand Cru, nearly ten hectares of which is 80% steep. The three growers I represent with parcels there all say it's slatey, but the standard reference book says: "sandy loam on a bed of sandstone-Rotliegend." Whatever! It tastes slatey. I've often found great affinity between these wines and Christoffel's Würzgartens; this seems to be an unusually happy vintage in Norheim! Pretty and piquant with swollen minerality and a kind of introverted power, wonderfully salty; this one perturbs nature as she moves through the world. Arresting depth of mineral; Helmut's best-ever wine from this site.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!



GDH-152 **2003 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese**

Kupfergrube is the Nahe's most famous vineyard and one of its two or three greatest. It was planted by convict labor between the World Wars on the site of an old coppermine (hence its name). It is fourteen hectares in size, Mosel-steep and full of an impossibly complicated mish-mash-o-minerals. It is the *sine qua non* of Nahe-ness at its best.

Yet I wonder if the topsy-turvy 2003 was sparing with the Schlossbockelheimers. This, like the Felsenberg, is rather a powerhouse. It's very fine Nahe riesling but not particularly *Kupfergrube*, and it has a steely kick at the end. Still, its shimmery power is striking. Conclusion deferred.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)

GDH-153 **2003 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** **+(+)**

Brücke is Dönnhoff's monopole site along the river, in which the soil visibly changes in the space of about 100 yards – four times. The past few years it has given Helmut's weightiest wines. Amazing: from these 2.5 acres come white wines more noble and complex than any on this earth, and the consumer can buy this wine for not much over \$55, and that from one of the greatest vintners alive!

The 2003 has a superb nose, as expressive as I can recall; the palate is a brooding mass of flavor, vinosity, mineral, a dark Kantian power. Two weeks later the wine had opened explosively.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-six years)

GDH-154 **2003 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** **++**

One approaches with held breath. . . This is overt in the 2003 idiom, very spriggy and plum-blossomy; tickly high tones, penetrating, wry and piquant, with a theologically intricate finish. All you can do is laugh with disbelief and wonder.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-six years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-155 **2003 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Auslese** **++**

Gloriously extroverted nose; resplendently musical palate; crashing cymbals of mineral and fireworks of fruit; opulence reined in by a lovely, pulling swoony stony grip.

SOS: 3 (between nine and thirty years)

GDH-156 **2003 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Auslese** **+++**

"Oh *come on*" I wrote. Go on, count 'em. I'll save you the trouble: there are six 3-star wines in this offering, three of which are on this page, and this is the first. Again a meaty nose, like pork-belly (!); it's more Serious than Leistenberg but with miasmic depths and incredible density of vinosity; Literally incredible, impossible complexity; length over a thousand horizons.

SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)

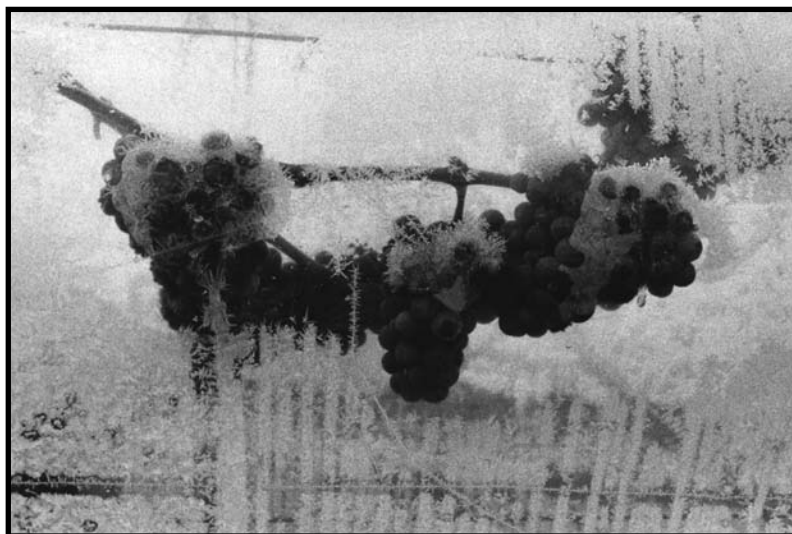
GDH-157H **2003 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **++**
 Class class class, a doctoral thesis in minerality with lovely noble texture; one of those polychromatic Gorecki-chords of flavor, so glowing and so sleek.
 SOS: 3 (Between eleven and thirty years)

GDH-158H **2003 Niederhäuser Herrmannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+++**
 This was the first time I wanted *more* than three stars. It's virtually impossible to take in: the brilliance and complexity are lysergically explicit. What more can wine give? Every imaginable fascination and all the sensual pleasure one can stand. Almost tastes as if Hans-Günter Schwarz had a hand in it. . . .
 SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)

GDH-159H **2003 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 12/375 ml** **+++**
 Brücke is predestined for the making of great Eiswein. In the summer it is a heat-trap, but after the first real Autumn chill it doesn't get sun until late morning, and its position in the middle of a narrow valley causes it to collect cold breezes from the hilltops. And then, of course, Dönnhoff is a genius, which doesn't hurt.

It bears mentioning there's a BA from the Brücke and TBAs from both Brücke and Hermannshöhle, all of them still fermenting, though the last of these tasted quite compelling even cloudy and with 3% alc. Helmut promises them "next year" but that's what he said about the 1989 Hermannshöhle TBA every year for umpteen years until I stopped asking about it.

Meanwhile there's this. In many ways it is the quintessence of the vintage. "Oh for Christ's sake, what fruit" I wrote. No cherry or peach or apple ever tasted like this. Nothing ever tasted like this. This is the most beautiful flavor I have ever had in my mouth. It may not have the elixir-voodoo of the '01 or '02 (yet, at any rate) but what it does have is some insane orgasmic beauty of pure fruit unlike anything I have ever known.
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty-five years)



Grapes frozen on the vine at Dönnhoff

weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

What a reception these wines have received. Glad you like 'em!

So I'm sitting at my dining room table running through a bunch of samples. I have three cases from the former Nahe Staatsdomain (stultifyingly mediocre, though I understand help is on the way, in the nick of time), a couple things one of my growers thought I'd underrated and should taste again, and all the sweet wines of Hexamer's I hadn't tasted since they were still fermenting when I visited him.

There I was essaying my way through Hermannsbergs and Kupfergrubes and Hermannshöhles and almost wondering if I was having a mean-palate-day (the kind where you don't like anything) and I came to a little wine of Hexamer's he calls "Quartzit", a QbA.

WHAM! Super wine. Nothing wrong with my palate!

Then later when I got up to the Auslesen and Eiswein I was well and truly blown away. I wanted to call him immediately and yell out my delight; wake him up if I had to! We ordered every drop we could get (they're here by the time you read this, unless y'all bought em PDQ), and I'm thinking . . . I *knew* this was a wonderful discovery, but I might really have a tiger by the tail here.

God I wish I could pick him up and place him in Niederhausen. Not that there's anything wrong with his wonderful Rheingrafenberg, but there are virtually NO great producers in many of the Nahe's primo sites, while this young man is off crafting masterpieces in his remote corner.

This arose as a tip from Dönnhoff. The same tip appears to have been given to David Schildknecht, who came back enthusiastic. Samples were procured, and tasted over the winter, with great pleasure. (The man made some of the most *interesting* wines from the rarely-enthralling 1999 vintage.) We squeezed in a visit to Meddersheim, which believe me requires a detour. Harald and Petra Hexamer are all the things one wants a young vintner-family to be. But first let me back up a little.

The melancholy fact is that fewer and fewer 20-



Harald, Petra, and Fido Hexamer

- **Vineyard area: 11.4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Meddersheimer Altenberg, Sobernheimer Marbach**
- **Soil types: Quartz, red weatherbeaten clay**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Riesling, 12% Spätburgunder, 10% Müller-Thurgau, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 2% Gewürztraminer, and 11% others**

some things are opting to carry on their family's wineries. This isn't entirely bad. The ones who *do* self-select; they're the real idealists, wine-lovers, and I also believe they choose the life because of the example their parents set. It stands to reason. If the family life growing up was happy and successful, the child connects the career of a vintner with good warm feelings.

But whatever my theoretical musings, Harald Hexamer is about as dear as they come. I have a little questionnaire I hand out to all my growers (the answers from which are often quoted herein) and when Hexamer sent his back he wrote "For some of these questions I could have written a book in response."

He has twelve hectares, and growing. Somewhere between 55-58% is Riesling ("It keeps growing and I can't keep up with it"). as he obtains land given up for sale by the ones who choose against a wine life. He aims to become identified with a genuinely superb vineyard which has an unfortunate name for non-Germans . . . **Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg**. (It is fine with me if you want simply to call it "the Grafenberg spot".)

This is a steep southward hillside crawling off into two lateral valleys. The soil is based on sandy loam but, this being after all the Nahe, it ends up being a compli-

cated melange of various weathered products, slate, sandstone and other conglomerates among them. The



Rheingrafenberg Rock at Hexamer

first time I sniffed a Hexamer from this site I was immediately delighted: a true *terroir* wine. In fact we took a PICTURE of a big ol' rock from the Rheingrafenberg Harald keeps in his tasting room. It looks like something the

Mars rover might have found. If you're reading the on-line version of this text the color shot should be nearby.

These wines have been consistently impressive for their *dicht* (which translates as "density"), delineation, and charm. Think about it. How many wines exhibit all three qualities? Density usually precludes charm. Delineation often presupposes a certain transparent lightness. These are rare and wonderful wines, sybarites; I'm not looking to add estates to this portfolio in my advancing decrepitude unless they offer irresistible deliciousness.

Hexamer is emblematic of the best of cutting edge thinking among quality-minded vintners. He's a vineyardist first, only thereafter a cellar-master. "I can only attempt to optimize in the cellar what I pull from the vineyard; the quality of the grapes is decisive." He often harvests riper grapes from another site (Marbach) but the wines of Rheingrafenberg are "more filigree and better-structured." He handles as little as possible. Doesn't deacidify, doesn't use dosage. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary ("but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit—below 10 degrees—back to the winery.") Yields

are controlled by pruning ("We often end up with only six to eight bunches per vine"). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; "The most filigree wines come from this method." 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

All quite modern, yet Hexamer's not what I'd call a modernist. Rather, he seeks the most neutral cellar-environment so as to preserve the complexities he pulls in from the mountain. He's also a fun guy to drink wine with, and shows ceaseless curiosity and omnivorous glee in all the world's wines.

He added acidity (tartaric) to his musts before fermentation, as most growers did in 2003, but this man's wines were perhaps the least typical group of '03s I tasted. Which is to say they were quintessentially *Hexamer* wines whose basic profile appears to have been unperturbed by all the heat and drought. I thought they were superb, and I have to admit there were a couple 2002s whose acids flirted with sharpness (and a couple wines I did not offer you for precisely this reason). Interesting; ten years ago I would have crowed about a riesling Kabinett with over 10 grams per liter of acidity, but now it is often too much.

In fact I only ever ask to see analyses to confirm an impression or to have a starting point for dosage blends. My favorite growers hardly look at all. Dönnhoff told me last summer he never looks at analyses once the grapes are in the press. "I'll check during harvest for Oechsle and acidity, but once the press is running how can it possibly help me to know the figures? I can't *do* anything about them; all they do is cause me to worry needlessly." For better or worse - in his case, better - he trusts his palate. And he's influencing a young generation who are blessed with his encouragement to trust their wits and senses.

Hexamer at a glance:

en wines of *terroir*.

Sensational new discovery on the upper Nahe, a young vintner doing everything right; handcrafted fruit-driven

how the wines taste:

Anti-varietal in the best sense, the same way that Condrieu isn't merely viognier; the best from the Rheingrafenberg are wines of deep site-character as rendered by riesling. Splendidly mineral wines into which fruit of great charm is interwoven. Fresh, with exceptional purity.

GHX-022 2003 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

Superbly expressive nose, intricate and *terroir*-saturated - even a note of bouquet-garni - the palate is a poem of soft stones, wonderfully compact and granular, with a great long finish. Even at 93° Oechsle he's still gotten it sleek and deft.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS:1 (between four and fifteen years)

- GHX-016 2003 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese +**
 Extra fine rendering of terroir here. A little stunted from bottling, but length and saltiness are there, and an intricate fragrance with ginger, thyme blossoms, grape-hyacinth; a kind of consomme of rocks. Articulate, clear and diligent, yet flavors riding and riding this long cool stream of vinity.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-three years)
- GHX-015 2003 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit"**
 I show these in the sequence I tasted them, and it's telling he places the Quarzit, ostensibly a "QbA," with or after the Spätlese. In 2003 this was not chaptalized, and I don't know about you but my ol' snout was dilating at the scent of *VALUE*. Rheingrafenberg isn't a single contiguous hillside but rather two parallel hillsides in the same lateral valley; this being the Nahe, the soil changes, and this wine hails from a parcel on quartzite. There's more *wucht* and salt than in the Spätlese; has the highest acids of his '03s, yet again, these have such length, and this has almost intimidating precision and persistence. He contemplates making this a tad sweeter, which will add grace and elegance.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: (1?) (between five and eighteen years)
- GHX-017 2003 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese* +**
 A kind of demiglace of the regular Spätlese; the low notes are swollen and thickened, the high notes are lyric and appley and quince-y and asian-pear; the structure is so clear it's as though your palate were poring over its blueprint. It refuses to fade.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)
- GHX-018 2003 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Auslese**
 40% shriveled raisins without botrytis. This has electric acidity and dead-eye precision, a bullet-train of torque and some sort of fruit-mineral tango; this is radically expressive wine. Mirabelle and brioche and all in all a kind of closing-argument for the Rheingrafenberg. I find the defendant: superb.
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GHX-021H 2003 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Auslese*, 12/375ml +(at least)**
 It's huge, salty and unevolved, but it's a kind of pinnacle and I don't want us to miss it. As you can see there's more than one (like everywhere!) but this grower has a track record for *getting* sweet wines, i.e. not letting them get out of hand. The price is VERY reasonable.
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-two years)
- GHX-019H 2002 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml ++**
 We've offered this and its sibling below, and they've been fabulously reviewed, but we've never been in print with them. Having said that, any tasting notes I may have taken cannot be found. Relieved, are you? Well eat my Scharz, and go write your own damn notes . . . (grrr grumble grrr)
 SOS: 4 (between seventeen and forty-five years)
- GHX-020H 2002 Sobernheimer Marbach Riesling Eiswein 12/375m +**
 Just ten cases left of each of these. This is less fine but more intense.
 SOS: 4 (between eighteen and forty seven years)



helmut mathern

nahe • niederhausen

After last year's elegiac visit I was unsure what awaited me this year.

After this year's visit I was on a cloud of happiness. Yes, Gloria Mathern will carry on the winery until one of the kids decides (one hopes) to take it over. Yes, the wonderful and talented Sabine will stay on to make the wines.

Yes, the 2003s were scintillating. But I wasn't ready for the bonhomie and easy cheer that attended this visit. We laughed and laughed as if we were old friends with a lifetime of private jokes behind us. If I'd known I'd have never scheduled another appointment later in the day! It was a level of ease and informality I found rare and touching, not to mention I was jonesin' to PAR-TAY with these people.

And still the wines are recognizably *Mathern* wines, and led to frequent reminiscences about Helmut, whom you may remember died in November 2002 from melanoma. I gather the winery's base of private customers remain loyal. Most of them knew Mathern. In Germany a winery's private customers like to visit as often as possible, and they become less a client-base than an extended family. It is almost unbearably touching to think of them rallying around the widow.

Mathern was always loyal to his private customers. As his fame grew, he deliberately abstained from cultivating the trade at large and resisted efforts to recruit him into the VDP.

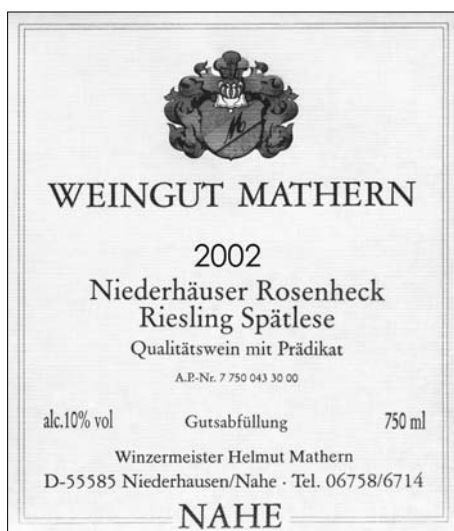
I never sold as much wine as I'd have liked. This was in part because they often showed sulfury in their first year, just when you tasted them. Those big DI tastings are a necessary evil, but you can't confuse their skim-the-surface nature with a true evaluation. Mathern's wines exemplified what we mean by "racy", in all its forms; high-strung, urgent, bewitching, keen, vamping and erotic.

He had time to complete his new cellar, more spacious, and all stainless-steel. He left the vineyards in good condition. Best among these is an old parcel (47 years

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 9,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Rosenberg, Felsensteyer, Kertz and Roseneck, Norheimer Dellchen and Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Porphyry and slate**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 7% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Dornfelder, 8% other varieties**

now) in the ROSENBERG. Helmut's wines were always firm and zippy, rather like Saar wines, piquantly spicy. I wonder if, when and how they will change under Sabine's knowing hands. I do believe there is some ethereal print of Helmut among his vines; he spent many a contented and watchful hour with them. Sabine will breathe that ether for a while. But not forever. Even if she wants to, even if she tries to maintain the "style" of Helmut's wines for the private clients, eventually she will merge with his aura and subsume it, and they will be her vineyards, responding to her as she does to them.

She did an acidification (tartaric) of any must below 7.5 grams per liter natural acidity, which she raised to 8. I was dee-lighted with these '03s, which show all the vamping sexiness of great Nahe riesling.



A Look At The Vineyards:

NIEDERHÄUSER ROSENHECK is a 17 hectare vineyard that is 75% steep, with a southeast exposure and typically complicated soils based on slate (with loess-loam, stony clay and a grayish-brown sandstone: complexity, remember?). I'd classify the site as "1er Cru" for its forthright and satisfyingly lusty style, allied with mineral Riesling finesse. Mathern's certainly the leading grower.

NIEDERHÄUSER FELSENSTEYER is an entirely steep 10 hectare vineyard made most famous by Crusius and more recently by Mathern too. The book says the soil is loamy but you've never seen loam with that color, an almost raspberry-ish purple.

NIEDERHÄUSER ROSENBERG brings us back to porphyry in a steep 12 hectare vineyard you drive through if you exit Niederhausen up the hill. It's probably a 1er Cru but in Mathern's hands it makes Grand Cru wines.

Mathern at a glance:

Fine estate with super vineyards bouncing back from the death of its proprietor a year and a half ago. Charismatic, racy wines and an easy confident atmosphere give hope for even better things to come.

how the wines taste:

They are spicy and then some! Taste one of these keen, shimmering beauties and see what we mean by the word "racy." They're almost always spritzy, with clarity enough to shrink your pupils; specific flavors vary with the site, and the very least of these is quick as a lynx, while the best, from the oldest vines, show a confounding depth and polish beneath their taut nervy energy.

GMA-057 **2003 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett**
 None of these wines had been fined when I visited, so I can't refer to texture in any meaningful way (as if I ever can . . .), and I want you to know this was a compromise-selection: it needs to be sweeter. There's a quasi-formula for this wine wherein the sweetness is barely above Halbtrocken, but with the mass of the '03s this was a dubious proposition. I said so, and was taken seriously enough for the question to remain open; we'll see what the finished wine looks like. The aromas are high and piercing and the palate is zingy and spicy and tastes of wisteria.
 SOS: (?) (between four and fourteen years)

GMA-058 **2003 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Spätlese**
 This has the sweetness the Kabinett needs, which makes it sleeker, more refined and more piquantly complex. Nahe-riesling at its raciest and most jewel-like.
 SOS: 2 (between five and twenty years)

GMA-059 **2003 Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Spätlese** +
 This tiny site is an absolute gem, one of the great unknown Nahe vineyards. Dönnhoff and I sometimes play a game of make-believe where we imagine what his wines might be like from sites he doesn't own. I always think of Kertz. The vineyard is a *cauldron* of terroir, giving wines of sublime tart-berry and a rippling tautness, berserk with complexity and with something haunting, wolfish and feral. Mathern's holding is small and sometimes the wine was (weeeeeeeep) Trocken, but not THIS year. It's utterly *brilliant*: these berries ripened in afterglow; all lilac and blueberry; exquisitely precise tang and juicy-smoky length. Try [this](#) to see why the Nahe makes the world's finest rieslings.
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-two years)

GMA-060 **2003 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** +

Whenever I am tempted to think we've Made It selling German wine, I consider this: were this a French vineyard offering such staggering quality people would be breaking down doors to buy it from *any source they could*. But other than Dönnhoff's - which has commodity-value thanks to the reviews - there's a general indifference. Consider: riesling is the best grape. Hermannshöhle is without a doubt one of the 15-20 greatest sites in which it is planted. The price is ludicrously reasonable for such pedigree. How many should I send you, smart-guy!

There's one more layer now, vis-à-vis the Kertz; this echoes and peals more deeply. Start with the Kertz, remove the blueberry, add a dash of cherry tobacco, new leather and sandalwood, add the fragrance of Iris (there's almost a Piri or Kögl profile), and you have a serene complexity with an inner power ultimately more profound than a hundred displays of fireworks.

You aren't really going to pass this by, are you??
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)

GMA-061H **2003 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**

One is barely surprised any more, how stunning these are. It's a dead-ringer for Christoffel's two-star Würzgarten Auslese; a va-va-voom raciness supports its prominent sweetness.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-four years)
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)

GMA-053 **2001 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese (#2121)** +

This is a single clone, #500 from the Nahe Staatsdomain, and the wine is just fabulous; spice, piney tang, a liqueur of violet and lavender; deft citric-cassis note (as if it contained 10% Scheu, which it doesn't) but what's amazing here is the endless length and complexity. A *steal* at this price!

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty four years)

subject: why riesling?



A) Because if you grow it where it's at home, Riesling comes out of the ground already perfect. Don't need no face-lift, depilating, tummy-tucks or pancake-makeup. Not like some other grape variety we could name that rhymes with "hard-on-YAY"

B) Because Riesling exists to make food taste better. Compare with adolescent narcissistic grape varieties that only want to draw attention to their adorable SELF.

C) Because Riesling knows soil more intimately than any other grape, and because Riesling is more articulate than any other grape in conveying soil right into your palpitating palate. Go on, SOIL YOUR PALATE with Riesling.

D) Because Riesling attracts the kinds of vintners who do NOT need to prove to you what throbbing hot-shots they are by how neatly they can diddle technology. With Riesling, nature RULES. In the cellar, less is more.

E) Because Riesling is genuine, organically linked to the ground, whole in itself, resistant to fancy-pants machines, because it survives frost, because it ripens late in the Fall when everything is taut and crisp and golden, because Riesling wines are the afterglow of the contented world.

F) Because YOU will be a deeper, happier person when you drink these wines. There's no ego and no affect between them and you. They simply display their uncanny complexities in a manner so infectious you can't HELP responding with your OWN complexity; suddenly your mind-heart-soul expands and the world seems like a far more intricate and fascinating place than it was just moments before.

G) Because, take it from me, a lifetime of Riesling drinking will make you a nicer person, a better-informed citizen, a finer lead guitarist, a better hitter with an 0-2 count, a MUCH better lover; you'll balance your checkbook, avoid Jury duty, change the oil on your car every 3000 miles, never dawdle in the left lane, root for the home team and make bread from scratch. The real question isn't "WHY Riesling"? It's WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU WAITING FOR????

scheurebe: what gives?

Um, I happen to like it, that's what gives.

It was crossed about 80 years ago by a Mr. Georg Scheu (hence its name), after whom Rainer Lingensfelder named his second child. I imagine Scheu was looking for a wine with Silvaner's advantages (big berries and early ripening) paired with Riesling's structure and class. His introduction also claimed the Scheurebe would be a Riesling-like wine suited for sandy soils (which Riesling doesn't especially like, or rather Riesling *growers* don't like, as the yields are mingy).

As often seems the case with crossings, the results are oblique to the grapes crossed, i.e. there's no linear sequence of getting Riesling-flavors-plus-Silvaner-flavors. You end up with new flavors you couldn't have predicted. Scheurebe ripens 7-10 days ahead of Riesling, and has a little less acidity, but it's essentially a Riesling structure, i.e. firm and citrusy. It does indeed like sand but doesn't give its very best results; the wines tend to be 1-dimensionally tangerine-y.

Great Scheurebe unfolds a truly kinky panoply of flavors and aromas. Indeed, Scheu is to Riesling what "creative" sex is to missionary-with-the-lights-out. Start with pink grapefruit. Add cassis; I mean pure cassis. Then add sage leaves you just crushed between your fingertips. Then lemon grass. If it's extremely ripe you can talk about passion-fruit and papaya. If it's underripe you will certainly talk about cat piss.

Scheurebe is capable of great finesse and stature. Yet it's becoming an endangered species. Why?

First, it's been lumped together with a genre of crossings to which it is manifestly superior. It's the proverbial baby being thrown out with the bath water. Then, Scheurebe likes vineyard conditions which Riesling likes as well. Scheu will hiss at you if you plant it in the wrong place. This you don't want. But by planting it in good Riesling sites, you have a wine which fetches less money than Riesling. Not good.

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more*

attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes too demure.

Scheurebe keeps very well but doesn't age as dramatically as Riesling. Ten-year-old Scheu is only a little different than 1-year-old Scheu.

Tastes differ, of course, and what's sizzling and emphatic to me might be blatant and vulgar to you, but we who love Scheurebe are truly in a kind of thrall to it. It has little of Riesling's spiritual depth, but neither does Riesling have Scheurebe's erotic power. We need both for a balanced diet! Riesling may indeed represent All That Is Fine And Good, but Scheu offers All That Is Dirty And Fun. Scheurebe is bad for you; its fattening and wicked and hair will start growing on your palms as soon as you pull the cork. In other words, there's no down-side . . .

The grail-keepers of Scheurebe include Lingensfelder, Fuhrmann-Eymael and one hopes Müller-Catoir under the new regime. I look for it wherever I can. Growers who have discontinued Scheurebe include Meßmer (this was really calamitous) and Dönnhoff – yes, Dönnhoff; his last vintage was 1985, in which he made a gorgeous Auslese from a site in Kreuznach.

Alas, the Scheurebe can be as temperamental as a high-bred feline. It mostly sulked in the 2003 vintage, showing a bland sort of ripeness and little of its particular kinkiness. The exceptions (few though they are) are listed here. Several growers told me they've seen Scheurebe pull through, showing its character later on even when it seems mute at first. I recall a superb 1993 Auslese Hans-Günter Schwarz made at Müller-Catoir which I rejected at first (and which he showed me two years later with delight at my enthusiasm: "Yes young fella, this is the very wine you thought was *too bland* the last time you tasted it!" So we'll see, but I erred on the side of caution.

Scheurebes in this offering:



GKF-087	2002 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese
GKF-088	2002 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Auslese
GOH-045	2002 P.A. Ohler'schesMünsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett
GCB-053	2002 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett
GCB-057	2003 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Auslese
GGY-046	2001 Gysler Weinheimer Scheurebe Sekt Brut
GGY-042L	2002 Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter
GMC-068	2003 Müller-Catoir Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese
GLI-082H	2003 Lingensfelder Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe TBA, 12/375ml
GLI-083	2003 Lingensfelder Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe Spätlese Old Vines
GDR-119	2003 Darting Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese
GNE-087	2002 Neckerauer Weisenheimer Hasenzeile Scheurebe Kabinett
GWM-011	2003 Scheurebe Trocken
GWM-017H	2002 Weegmüller Haardter Herrenletten Scheurebe BA, 12/375ml
GWM-017H	2002 Weegmüller Haardter Herrenletten Scheurebe BA, 12/375ml
GDD-010	2002 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett
GTM-079	2003 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese

kruger-rumpf

nahe • münster sarmsheim

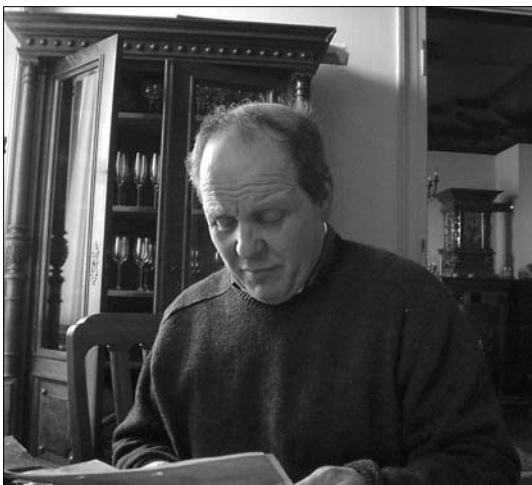
It's quite the decathlon, tasting the young vintage here. I'm pretty sure Rumpf is over 20 hectares now, and there are often up to four dozen wines on the table, some of which are tasted many times as we work the *dosage* blends. My rough notes from the cask-samples look like an engineer's diagram for a cyclotron. I've also noticed I get fatigued by the last 10% of the lineup, the sweet wines and the Scheurebes. To concentrate like this is a kind of fever that's hard to sustain for more than a couple hours.

Stefan's wines are also on the rough side at this stage, more so than many other growers'. They dress up nice after bottling, yet these are never quite impeccable; they're like a smartly dressed man with some mud he doesn't notice on his shoe. Twenty hectares is a lot-o-property,

not to mention a busy restaurant under the same roof. It is useful to be selective. And bless him, Stefan encourages it.

I do think a small tribute is in order for his geniality. Many producers, especially young studs in their twenties, can be a little haughty. "I make the wines I like and he takes them or leaves them" is a typical sentiment. And it's reasonable enough on its face; it only locks a door whereby collegial interaction might benefit grower and buyer alike. But hey, I understand, having been an insufferable twit in my twenties, and I didn't have to deal with boffo reviews before I was old enough to handle them gracefully. All of which is to say that Stefan Rumpf's collegiality is becoming rare, which makes its underlying gesture of respect and friendliness even more precious.

By now it's old news the wines turned a corner around 1996, when they embraced greater sweetness and greater polish. Yet even now they are less glossy than they are bracing. Rumpf's will never be "smooth" wines—I imagine they're quite low in pH. They also need about two years after bottling to shed a rambunctious nippy-ness. With a little more seductiveness of tex-



Stephan Rumpf

- **Vineyard area: 19.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer, Pittersberg & Rheinberg, Dorsheimer Goldloch & Burgberg**
- **Soil types: Slate and volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 10% each Silvaner & Weissburgunder, 5% each Chardonnay, Grauburgunder & Spätburgunder**

ture these could almost be erotic, they are so perfumed and bewitching.

Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our hero is making RHEINHESSEN WINES. "We had to take everything out and replant with Riesling." I wondered what had been planted in such an obvious Riesling site. Albalonga! Perhaps this is why the wines of the former proprietor (who shall remain nameless) tasted so much like cherries. 5% of Albalonga with its high acid could marry quite well with an overcropped Riesling - give that thin little sucka some aroma. Don't think such things aren't done.

The label is the plainest thing about a Rumpf wine (he threatens to change it; none too soon!). Stefan aims to make wines that are tensile but not austere, with dashingly defined mineral and fruit and the utmost aromatic expression.

As a vintner, Stefan is as practical as they come. Ask him how he does things and he often answers, "It depends." Two fairly consistent practices are early racking and early bottling, but for the rest he lets the wine do the talking. "You can't improve wine in the cellar, only make it worse," he says. "At least ninety percent of the

quality of a wine comes from the raw material you harvest." He sees himself as a craftsman, a worker, whose goal is to make clean, varietally typical wine that expresses its origins in the soil.

Stefan's modesty extends to his very reasonable pricing-less than the wines are worth. His 2003s are quite good (he has no fewer than four TBAs in the wings), but

what really blew me away was re-tasting his 2002s, which I seem to have underrated early on. I asked abjectly for every driplet of 2002 remaining, including two hot-mama Scheus wicked enough to be ladled over your prone sweaty body in a Thai bordello . . . not that such a thing has ever happened to *me*. . . .

Kruger-Rumpf at a glance:

Up-and-comer the past few years, making more glamorous wines than ever before. Deft, appley and minerally wines from the greatest sites of the lower Nahe. Priced quite reasonably for blue-chip quality.

how the wines taste:

They're still built on a sturdy frame of acidity and soil-flavors, but they have opened the floodgates of richness, and heavenly choirs sing. The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you'll see the truth behind the cliché.

GKF-084 **2003 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett**

We *reduced* the sweetness, and the result is far more sleek and piquant; picked in early October at 95 Oechsle, there's the vintage-typical Cox-orange apple; another tasty little number from this reliable old standby.
SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GKF-078 **2002 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett**

Classic example of this unheralded site; asian pear, quince, stones, soy; juicy lively and minerally; long sassafrassy end-palate with almost meyer-lemon & eucalyptus penetration. Fruit, mint-greeny zip, mineral, all in vivid interplay.
SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)

GKF-085 **2003 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese**

(Cask #80) Another 2003 archetype, a magnetic generosity with a core of individual mineral rendering which emerges strongly on the long finish. Cox-orange (yet) again; juicy, bright, pure, lots of lift and saltiness.
SOS: 2 (between six and nineteen years)

GKF-083 **2003 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese**

A tangy dragon of terroir and fruit power; real Grand Cru smoke and violets; great dignity and length, a billowing cumulonimbus of expressiveness.
SOS: 2 (between six and twenty years)

GKF-087 **2002 Scheurebe Spätlese**

+

The sage souls of the VDP won't permit a Grand Cru site name on the label if the wine isn't riesling. Do you think that makes sense? I do not think that makes sense. Here's a better idea: if the wine isn't riesling, the grape name **MUST** appear on the label so that the consumer is warned. Now that makes sense, and I will waive my usual 2,500 Euro consultation fee and give it to 'em for nothing. Jeez! Some VDP ideas seem like cribs from a Charlie Kaufman screenplay only without the wit.

Scheurebe makes me think of Woody Allen's immortal quip: "Sex without love may be meaningless, but it's still the most fun meaningless thing a person can do." Yup. Scheu isn't as sacred as riesling, but it's the greatest profane wine on earth. In this instance it hails from a bona-fide Grand Cru (Dautenpflänzer) and *expresses* the site, albeit differently than riesling does, but how dare you condescend to this uncanny liquid-pancetta, smoky-fatty spare-ribby and sagey, carraway thing? It's a splendidly feral Scheu with an extraordinarily salty finish of essentially endless length. THIS IS FUSION-CUISINE IN A GODDAMN GLASS.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (now to six years)

GKF-088 **2002 Scheurebe Auslese** +

In essence this is more-of-the-same only more concentrated, with more (even more) length but no more impression of sweetness; woodruff now, and redcurrant; the wine blazes and crackles, with limpid crystalline texture and Arabian-nights exotica. It's a STEAL for the real deal.

SOS: 2 (now to eight years)

GKF-089 **2003 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese**

This has 30% of a "small" Eiswein (125 Oechsle, puny critter), and carries considerable sweetness with graceful ease. Incredibly gripping for a 2003, with keen piquant fruit; in essence Eiswein flavors in a slim and shapely form. Utterly embryonic today; I can't wait to see what emerges after bottling.

SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-five years)

GKF-090H **2002 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** +

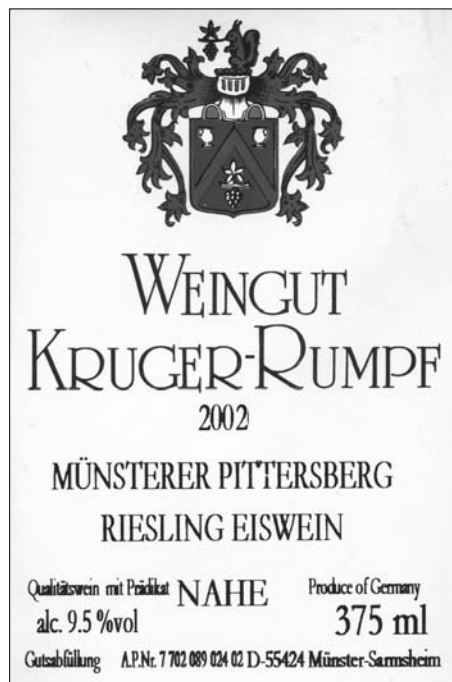
This is as seductive a botrytis flavor as I can recall; a fine plum confiture with apple and soursop; sizzling spine of acidity and the loveliest glow of finish you can possibly imagine.

SOS: 3 (between nine and thirty years)

GKF-091H **2003 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

Picked January 4th 2004 (by his young 'uns, who also crushed it) at 153 Oechsle; it's obviously much too early to wax adjectival but it seems clear and serene.

SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)



Schneiders got double-whammied in 2003; hail and drought, which reduced their crop to 28 hl/ha and gave them unusually high extracts for the vintage (around 25). They acidified-tartaric-to reduce pH.

It could seem incongruous for this (or any) portfolio to present the likes of Dönnhoff and Schneider cheek-by-jowl, one the arch-mage of polish and poetry, the other almost rustic by comparison.

And yet it was Dönnhoff himself who urged me to stay with Schneider when I considered dropping them a few years back. It is a superb, incomparable collection of vineyards, he said,

and a feet-on-the-ground relationship to them. And with the influx of the new generation, there's reason to expect fine things to happen. All of which is true-and persuasive. But there's another layer of truth which isn't easy to get at.

We all know the difference between bad wine and good, good wine and fine, fine wine and great. And we prize the splendors of great wine, as we should. Yet I am wary of the tendency to reach *only* for great wine. Anaïs Nin warned: "Beware of the esoteric pleasures, as they will blunt your appreciation of the normal ones." And in the Pfalz there's a proverb: "There is nothing better than that which is good," and we all know the saying "The great is the enemy of the good," and it has to do with outgrowing the insistence that only the best is good enough for *moi*.

And it has also to do with the circles in which one wishes to move. Great growers everywhere form a kind of fraternity, an in-crowd (in Germany this would be a Brat-pack of the wurst kind) and we all want to hang with the popular kids, but you know, after a point I don't care what parties I'm invited to. I do care, though, about Mama-Schneider throwing her arms around me when I arrived, and pressing upon me a bottle and a card to give to my wife, and it is very good to represent all kinds of wines from all kinds of people, as long as the people are good and the wines are honest.

It's five years now since Papa Hans Schneider left us. His son Jacob and grandson (whose name I shamefully

- **Vineyard area: 10 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle and Rosenheck, Norheimer Dellchen and Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Volcanic soils, slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% other**

forget, and who looks about fourteen years old but who's in fact the heir-apparent) make the wines now. Things are changing. Much more stainless steel in the cellar, in emulation of contemporary idioms. One senses they're feeling their way, but certain of the wines showed compelling promise. It is odd to think I am closer to Papa's age than to the age of this fresh-faced youth. Odder still to see the winery crawl out from under its particular rock. Personally I liked the rustic 19th-century touch of a lot of the old wines. They didn't make wines like that anymore. And now, they don't. But progress lurches on in its blithe heedless rush.

It is indeed all changed. But Papa Hans still casts a giant shadow. I met him in May 1978 when I made my first-ever foray to the Rhineland. He'd have been in his fifties then, more vigorous but every bit as cussed and opinionated as he was to the end. When I visited just a few weeks before his death, it turned out, he only greeted me briefly before attending to a group of visitors in the next room. Every now and again we'd hear him through the wall, yammering away, worrying one of his many pet themes, and his son and I made eye-contact and exchanged knowing smiles.

This was a man made to talk. And not merely to converse, but to address, to pontificate, to perorate. He seems to have been born unable to speak except in rhetoric. What a character this was.

His may have been the last surviving example of an



estate that combined viticulture and agriculture. It seemed to have frozen in time somewhere just after the War. Other growers would speak in pure bewilderment of Schneider's antediluvian techniques: "It's like an open air museum of how wine was made fifty years ago," one grower said to me. No growers' association meeting was complete without Hans Schneider. "If I looked around and didn't see him, I'd try to leave undetected," one guy told me. "The meetings were dull without him."

The young are indeed grabbing the reins now, but there is a legacy they carry even as they change and modernize it. I wonder if we Americans can really understand such a thing. So many of our basic human contexts—senses of time, of history, of continuity, family and community—lay in tatters. And we ourselves have shredded these things so we could get at other things we imagine we want. Can we actually see someone's wines as representatives of a family **legacy**? Can we understand how wines become *members* of the family? It is sometimes obscure even for me, and I *want* to believe it.

So I think of Schneiders, and how they render their wines, those strange songs of the earth who share the house with the family. There's our world, all a-rush and full of clamor. Schneiders have a computer in the house now, and a satellite dish on their roof, and an email address. For all I know they watch more CNN than I do.

I'm not into making them adorable peasants. I am just struggling to isolate a slippery little creature, that they seem fundamentally **anchored** and that we do not. And wine is part of what anchors them, or part of what they're anchored to, or perhaps these are the same thing. And so it seems strange to dissect the wines as though they had no context in human life. It can't be done.

Thankfully the wines are lovely. I'd never have returned otherwise. But they are lovely in *just* such a way, such a particularly *Schneider* way. They shouldn't be served too cold, as it mutes the astonishing perfume that's their *raison d'être*. Also, theirs is a self-contained world; the wines aren't planned, nor are intended to be placed, in gigantic tastings with seventy-five other wines. Schneider is a perfect example of the impossibility of isolating wines from the people who make them. Yet every drinker doesn't have the chance to go there and sit in the parlor and soak up the vibes, and so the wine must have *something* of value purely **per se**. Which harks back, again, to those aromas and flavors. If you can somehow drink a few of these at cellar temperature in circumstances permissive of reflection, I guarantee you'll never be more enthralled by any other wines. Even wines I might agree are "better." They are intensely *poetic* wines, but not necessarily lyric wines. They are elemental in some way; they have no time for frills or flourishes. They just exhale the earth.

Schneider at a glance:

"Colorful" stories aside, these can be the most hauntingly, intricately perfumed wines I have ever tasted. They are modernizing but still a fair way from modern; great wine-y depth in the best of them.

how the wines taste:

This differs from site to site. The wines are less mealy and more vigorous than they once were, more contemporary now. The 2003s, not surprisingly, are delightful. But you'd be well advised not to even try isolating any single consistent denominator from a village with 52 different soil types (!) That said, it's clear these hail from great land.

GJS-057L **2003 Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

Ah me . . . which collection of Grand Cru vineyards will make up *this* year's jug-wine? It's Klamm and Kirschheck. You have to understand, this is like getting a by-the-glass-priced magnum of white Burgundy consisting of Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet and Bienvenues-Bâtard-Montrachet. The 2003 was shown to me in three variations, with 30, 34 and 38 grams per liter of residual sugar, and the sweeter had the finest nose, *boucherie* and cherry blossoms; the palate is creamy and piquant, slim and charming. The most pedigree of anything I offer in Liters.
SOS: 2 (between two and nine years)

GJS-058 **2003 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese**

Boy does this seem like Norheim's vintage! Oh so pretty and with exquisite etching, almost angular. But for the fervor of fruit it could have come from any fine vintage. Long flowery finish. Amazing value.
SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)

- GJS-059 **2003 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** +
 Fortright and vigorous but full of kinetic mineral interplay, and with 2003's length. Over 65-year-old vines. The site's complexity is very clear; if anything it's the volcanic profile (whereas Dönnhoff's is slatier). For deftness, length and shimmer this is some wine. It has 8.6 grams per liter acidity, thanks to (psssst!) a few drops of 2002 Eiswein. SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-one years)
- GJS-060H **2002 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese "Junior," 12/375ml**
 This has the ripest belly-rich aspect of Hermannshöhle-fragrance, and there's quite a sense of Eiswein here-it's nearly ringent. In effect you can purchase Eiswein flavors at Wal-Mart prices. With acres of free parking!
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-two years)
- GJS-061 **2002 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese**
 First offering. One needs this: honesty matters, and this is an honest portrayal, nothing confected, nothing modern or arch, but neither at all rustic or archaic. Dried flower and lavender, striking length, with a suavely complex finish. By no means too sweet for the table. Though the chairs might have their own opinions.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)
- GJS-056H **2002 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Eiswein "Magnus," 12/375ml**
 Picked at minus 12 degrees Celsius at 178 Oechsle (well up into TBA-land), this is the "3-star" Eiswein-there's also a lovely 1-star I'll offer later, but I had to grab this puppy as there weren't much-all I can say now is it's huge and riveting. When you taste it your pen will *spontaneously* spurt out adjectives and associations.
 SOS: 4 (between twelve and twenty-seven years)

schlossgut diel

burg layen • nahe

I don't deal in a priors, and I'm a lousy tactician. I never sat down and said "I will make a specialty of catching the rising stars before anyone knows them," yet in many cases this is what I've done. Dönnhoff, Hexamer, Rumpf, Wittmann, Weingart, Catoir, Meßmer, Leitz, Spreitzer, Christoffel, Schaefer, Adam (if he opts to continue!), Karlsmühle; all were relatively "obscure" when I began importing their wines, and all are Big Names now. This is satisfying because I share-at least a tiny part-in the achievement.

Thus my representing Schlossgut Diel constitutes a departure, and will ramify in unpredictable ways. For it's the first time a superstar-estate has entered this portfolio with its reputation already established.

The decision was anything but abrupt. I visited Armin Diel several times in the early to mid '90s. We were scoping each other. And I always loved the wines; indeed I passed samples through to the Great Man of Monkton to ensure he'd be exposed to them, though these were the years in which German wine did not officially exist for this particular journal. Meanwhile I stayed in loose touch with Armin, following Dostoyevski's dictum "It is always worthwhile talking with a clever man" and in the last several months we seem to have both felt the time was *now*.

The first thing to tell you is: the wines are stellar. That's not a word I casually throw around. Schlossgut Diel belongs in the class of the elite. The wines will wow you.



Armin occupies an unprecedented position in the wine world. He is proprietor of his estate on the Nahe, and he is perhaps the most influential wine writer in Germany. Imagine if Bob Parker owned one of the 1st-Growth Bordeaux: just like that. Needless to say neither Armin nor his colleagues writing for the same books or magazines *review* the wines of Schlossgut Diel, which is why the name doesn't appear on the various lists of estate "classifications." But of course there's a meta-message: "The man is such an expert, imagine how good his own wines must be." The ethics of the situation are quite sophisticated to American sensibilities, yet behind it all are the wines themselves.

They come from a 16 hectare property producing several parallel ranges of wines: simple table wines (of excellent quality), a group of Pinots Blanc, Gris and Noir, most without oak and mostly skillful and intelligent, a sparkling wine standing with the best of its kind from

- **Vineyard Area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual Production: 7500 cases**
- **Top Sites: Dorsheimer Goldloch, Pittermännchen and Burgberg**
- **Soil Types: loam and gravel over rocky subsoil, quartzite and slate**
- **Grape Varieties: 70% Riesling; 30% Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc**

Germany, and the rieslings.

The rieslings hail most importantly from a trio of contiguous Grand Crus: Goldloch on thin loam and gravel over a rocky subsoil, Burgberg on quartzite, and Pittermännchen on Hunsrück slate. "The age of the vines are similar in the three sites, the microclimates are similar in the three sites, only a few meters separate them from one another, yet they are entirely different based on terroir," say Armin and his cellar-master Christoph Friedrich. These two have an admirably close working relationship.

Indeed it's a pleasure to see the penetration and flexibility of their mutual intelligence. Of course we rapped about the usual wine stuff, but at one point Armin interrupted to say "We do this and we do that, but most important is that all indications are in question every year, there is no monolithic recipe to 'make' wines year by year. Each vintage asks different questions than the previous one. I'm really thrilled to have a sensible guy like Christoph who can play in both major and minor keys." Quite so. In effect there is very little in the "hard" viti-and-viniculture data that stands out from the norm among top estates; what does stand out is a certain deftness of intuition, the thing whereby a pasty-chef alters the puff-pasty prep depending on the humidity. It isn't even a matter of responding to conditions: that's an I-thou thing. It's more that one lives at ease within conditions, moving naturally as they mandate.

There's a great German word "Betriebsblind" which is one of those neologisms you need an entire phrase to translate into English. In essence it denotes the tunnel-vision that results from being too close to your own wines. Armin describes it as "sadly the rule" in the wine profession. Yet he of all people can escape it, he tastes so many wines constantly, and I sense the air is bright and clear with perspective at his estate. The wines are both beautiful and *smart*. You might notice I never use the phrase "well-made"; it's eyewash, it means nothing, but

in a larger sense Armin and Christoph's wines are well-guided by their perspective and intuition. It's true across the board, even among the wines I did not select.

I chose to emphasize the rieslings. These are the cat's ass. Notwithstanding the "political" aspects of my representing Armin-and there are many - the larger truths are in the bottles. And each of them bears witness to a profound and serious dedication, not to one's "place" in the socio-political hierarchy or even the TOP THIS-OR-THAT list, but to the land and the grape. That which abides, and prevails.

schlossgut diel at a glance:

Elite blue-chip estate on the lower Nahe, producing scintillating terroir-driven rieslings ranging from tingly slatey to baroque. Attentive viticulture and intelligent craftsmanship in the cellar make this one of Germany's leading estates.

how the wines taste:

The temptation is to compare them to Dönnhoff, he-to-whom-all-riesling-producers-aspirate and all that, but I think Diel's wines are too different to tolerate direct comparison. Armin's and Christoph's wines are more studiously brilliant, more explicit; they're no less pure, but it's another kind of purity. I'm tempted to wonder whether Diel's are the Nahe wines Hans-Günter Schwarz might have made had he not made Pfalz wines.

Bear in mind I am fantasizing here, commenting from the outside, purely aesthetically. Neither Diel nor Dönnhoff would necessarily endorse these comments-I rather expect they'd each think I had a screw loose. But I sense that clarity, for Dönnhoff, is less an end than a means; he doesn't strive for clarity per se but attains it en route to that which he *does* strive for. Which I'd describe as a limpid crystallinity of texture which permits mystery and suggestion and interplay, but only by inference; the Whole of his wine is as complete as if it were ordained. With Diel I sense the interplay itself is front-and-center. But ask them both if you ever meet them. I imagine they'll say "Terry's certainly *interesting*, albeit quite wrong." Armin's wines are more digital and cooler, more thrilling but perhaps less stirring. But after a point it isn't about mores or lesses; these are major-league rieslings and it's fun to try and say how.

DRY AND VERY DRY RIESLINGS:

- GSD-001 **2003 Goldloch Riesling "Grosses Gewächs"**
I liked this best by far of the 3 Grand Crus in the dry idiom; it is the juiciest and seems to have the greatest potential; it's a lavishness of apple and lemon custard, graceful, deep and stylish.
SOS: 0 (between two and eight years, but again between fourteen and twenty)
- GSD-008 **2003 Riesling "Classic"**
This is the dry-riesling basis, if you will, an everyday sipper (or if you're really enlightened, gulper) based on fruit more than terroir. It's certainly 2003 enough! Monster-ripe and quite salty, but loaded with sautéed apple, granular; deft and long. I tasted a lot of clunky wine of this type from '03, which makes Diel's achievement all the more striking here.
SOS: 0 (now to four years)
- GSD-011 **2002 Pittermännchen Riesling "Selection"**
Armin tells me these 2002s haven't been shipped to the U.S. hitherto, and I want you to see what hails from a "normal" vintage at Schlossgut Diel. I didn't take a note because I thought I couldn't list the wine, but I recall true Grand Cru quality in a slatey, lacey style.
SOS: 0 (now to five years, again from twelve to eighteen years)
- GSD-009 **2002 Burgberg Riesling "Selection"** +
Again Grand Cru quality, more masculine now, more *charcuterie*. The slender profile of 2002 gives this wine a rare grace.
SOS: 0 (now to seven years; a second-wind is likely but I need more experience in order to forecast it.)

"CLASSIC-FRUITY" and "NOBLE-SWEET" RIESLINGS

- GSD-002 **2003 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Kabinett** +
All the tropical vanilla the Goldloch can give, but it's the deep-grained minerality beneath it which impresses here, not to mention its endless length and serene balance; there's something stern below the explosive fruit which I just love. By the way, don't you love the modern German wine scene? If the wine's dry it's just "Goldloch" but if there's residual sugar it's "Dorsheimer Goldloch" (Kabinett, et. al.), and this is so the consumer will not be . . . confused. I see.
SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)
- GSD-003 **2003 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese** ++
This has it all, folks: enthralling detail, a vixen-kiss of salty sweetness and jade-oolong greenness; high-toned slatiness and fabulous interior precision and power, with a haunting ether of orchid and narcissus; imagine a green-tea Granny Smith apple sorbet you taste for hours. . . . When Armin asked me which were my favorites among his wines, I promptly said *this one* and he just as promptly said "Of course; we Mosel-freaks always go for the slatey wines." But this isn't simply Mosel slate, this is slate with an attitude.
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-three years)
- GSD-004 **2003 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese** +
This is more of-a-piece than the multi-dimensional Pittermännchen; it also seems drier (it probably isn't); a splendidly chewy thing with power and panache, and sheer *fruit*.
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GSD-005 **2003 Riesling Auslese**
A cuvée of young vines offering Auslese concentration at an attractive price; it's again salty-sweet in the '03 style, this time almost explicitly prosciutto di Parma; a sweet cured flavor with a smoky herbal note, and considerable grip and length.
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GSD-006 **2003 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Auslese** ++
Almost lurid cherry tones above fervent apple and slate; the palate is a stunning exegesis of mineral, with endless slatey depth.
SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-seven years)
- GSD-007 **2003 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Auslese** +
Armin shows Goldloch after Pittermännchen, I imagine because Goldloch is fuller-bodied and more ample, and it has a certain grandeur, but Pittermännchen is chromatic and intricate, my kinda wine. That said, this is massively expressive stuff, strong rather than powerful (real strength needn't resort to mere power), serenely opulent and majestic; the flavors extend the Spätlese with even more minerality. This quiet confidence-without-bombast is quite stirring.
SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-seven years)
- NOTE: There will be a range of "Goldcap" Auslesen, plus Goldloch BA and Pittermännchen TBA (which appears to *rock*), none of which was ready to taste and besides who says we have to offer the whole magilla in the first year? But: one little sticky was ready to appraise, and it was. . . .
- GSD010H **2003 Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++
This is exactly the kind of Eiswein I like best, slim and piquant with marvelous purity and a truly haunting quality of flavor, as if a parfait of cherry blossoms. Delightfully approachable now (indeed, acidified), and remember, how *much* it tastes is no more important than *how* it tastes.
SOS: 4 (now to three years, and again between fifteen and thirty years)

rheinhessen wines



I think I'll have to delete my "lament the poor Rheinhessen" phrase. In the past several years, this is emerging as one of Germany's *most* interesting regions.

And it isn't only happening along the Rheinfront by Nierstein. Last year at Gysler I noticed a poster for a tasting featuring growers in a group called Class In A Glass. Any group to which Alex Gysler belonged was ipso facto intriguing, and I asked Alex whether any of his colleagues might be interesting to me. You'll see the results of his answer a few pages hence. The *real* story is that of an advent, of a bunch of young lions going all-out for quality, perhaps inspired by the acclaim attaching to Wittmann and Keller, who are making stellar wines from vineyards *no one* heard of ten years ago.

Sure the Rheinhessen remains home to a great deal of dross (Liebfraumilch has to come from somewhere, I guess) but there's no equivalent buzz in, oh, say the *Rheingau*, where mediocre



wine from great land remains the status quo. Indeed the Rheinhessen seems to invert that melancholy formula, making excellent wine from (ostensibly) nondescript

morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

You need a really unassailable idealism to worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the flattish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may be possible that *great* wines just could be written into some of this land, if you're unwilling to assume they aren't, and willing to stake it all on your idealism. And, I'd have to add, willing to sell your wine for something less than it's worth. Yes, most of the land can be worked by machine, but if I were starting over and looking for *value* among hot young growers still below the radar, this is where I'd prowl.

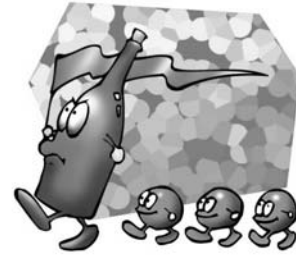
Rheinhessen is still a buyer's market, happy for us in the short term, if the growers can survive.

land. You don't drive around thinking "Well it's obvious that great wines come from *here*." Instead its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring



take me to your liter

This is a schizy segment of my portfolio. Some of you report great success with this size. Others report it's impossible to sell. These, in my opinion, are the arguments in favor of the Liter:



- **It doesn't sit around in the fridge as long as a magnum, thereby diminishing the chance of spoilage.**
- **It's the perfect size bottle for three or four people on a casual occasion. It contains eight glasses of wine.**
- **It's the perfect size for the cook who wants or needs a cup or so to cook with. There's the equivalent of a full bottle left over for drinking with the meal!**
- **It nearly always contains a dry, light wine that's low in alcohol and very high on pure refreshment value. It's nearly always estate-bottled.**

It seems to me the only way to sell this size is to floor-stack it. If it stands on the shelf alongside 750s, it won't stand *out* enough as a larger package. If it's floor-stacked, you can always put a sign behind it screaming **FULL LITER!** Equivalent to just 56¢ per a 750!!!!

But some of you have tried all these bright ideas and you tell me the wines still don't sell. I have one final bright idea. FORGET THEY'RE LITERS. Don't even tell anybody it's a bigger bottle. It's just a bottle of wine for ten bucks. If someone says "My, it's a bit heavy," you say "Oh, yeah, it's a special; they threw in 25% more free." And everyone's happy. It's like the *Super Deal* aisle at your local supermarket. Shampoo, 25% more **free**. Man we love that word *free*. Free wine!

I think I offer the very best jug-wine quality you can find anywhere on the market today. I know of no other merchant offering such a variety of cheap, estate-bottled wine in large bottles. I say this in all modesty, or at least in as much modesty as I can muster! They'll do the job at least as well as—I think better than—anything else in the category. Give them a try if you haven't yet. Here they are, the PICK OF THE LITERS:

- GJS-057L **2003 Jakob Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GST-107L **2003 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GMZ-049L **2001 Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GWG-001L **2003 Wagner-Stempel Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-046L **2003 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-042L **2002 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-116L **2003 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-123L **2003 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Feuerberg Portugieser Weissherbst, 1.0 Liter**
- GMS-095L **2003 Herbert Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-075L **2003 Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-074L **2003) Theo Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

In the late Winter of 1983 I made one final trip to the Rheinland to say goodbye to some close friends. I'd be heading back to the States a few weeks later, after ten years in Germany. One of those friends was Walter Strub, who asked if I'd have some time to taste his young vintage 1982 with him. I agreed readily; I wasn't in the wine trade then, and had no experience tasting pre-bottled wine.

The samples were lined up when I arrived. Most of the wines were bone-dry or nearly so, and the question arose how sweet they should ultimately be. The Trocken fetish was only incipient in those days. Well yours truly had no earthly idea how sweet the wines should be; I'd never

looked at an analysis and had no *idea* how many grams-per-liter of sweetness equaled what impression of sweetness on the palate. Walter gave me an '81 to taste and told me how sweet it was, and I tried using that wine as a benchmark.

The work came easily to me - to my great surprise-but this was another order of tasting, different in essence from anything I'd tasted or drunk as a "civilian." It was one thing to have tasted finished wines analytically, that was recreation, but this was intuition, inference, imagination, peering through a periscope into the future, not to mention the finished wine depended on making the right choice now.

Even after doing it for twenty-plus years now, it's still hard to articulate what it entails. I'm afraid it's very Zen. You receive a wine which may or may not be *incomplete* (some of them are instantly perfect just as they are)



Walter Strub

and you infer what it will take to complete them. In so doing you are required to examine flavor components under a palate-microscope. But it happens in a flash, it takes longer to explain it than to do it, and it isn't consciously cognitive. You relax, so the wine can come to you, and when it does you flash a beam of super-attention on it. Then you judge and cogitate. And I think I'm

- **Vineyard area: 18.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping and Pettenthal**
- **Soil types: Red clay, slate, loess, loam & chalk**
- **Grape varieties: 68% Riesling, 15% of each Müller-Thurgau and Silvaner, 2% other varieties including Grüner Veltliner!**

good at it, but still I am often wrong. I like being wrong. Because if I'm wrong (i.e., if my initial guess doesn't pan out), I get to keep at it till I get it right, and I get to see my error, and it's the best way to learn.

I've learned a few things over the years. More sugar doesn't always taste sweeter. Often it's the opposite. What tastes perfect in the lab needs more sweetness at bottling, because bottling constricts fruit and body and emphasizes acidity, and because sugars begin to polymerize immediately. If a wine's a bit too sweet, time will see to it. If it's too dry, ain't nuthin' you can do.

Here's why I'm going on about this in a text about Walter Strub. Because of the many layers of trust he showed me, out of the goodness of his heart. He invited me behind the scenes, allowing me to see his wines au naturel, and to taste as I'd never tasted before. And to my astonishment, he took my ideas seriously. But that's Walter: no secrets, no artifice, full of the spirit of sharing. Many of the hippies of the sixties turned into the very people they despised, but Walter, who was never a hippie, embodies all the virtues they espoused. Giving, trusting, sharing, no games, nothing to hide, sometimes even a little naïve, but actually, remarkably, *Good*. It is good, the collegial trust he shows me; it has helped me grow professionally and personally. It is good he invites me in to the wines, doesn't do the take-it-or-leave-it thing

(no disrespect intended to those who do; each is entitled to his own approach) and fosters a mood of easy comradeship. In short, he treats me as a friend. And I am touched and gratified. Finally it doesn't matter how much wine you sold, which pack you belonged to, or whether yours was the fashionable position on the issues of the day. What matters are the faiths you kept, and how you treated other people. By those measures, Walter is leading a good life.

Walter was working in a wine shop in Munich for an impossibly haughty Bavarian snob, and I was browsing in the store one day in May 1978, and the snob was Holding Forth and said something so magnificently dreadful that I caught Walter's eye, and between us there flashed a bolt of recognition.

I approached him and we talked about wine. The rest is history.

There are things in one's life to which one appeals when solace is needed. When you're in the thickets and you look to life and ask "Hey, remind me what makes me happy", not the things you have to think about, but the ones that spontaneously console you. I can't think about Walter and Margit Strub and not feel better – even if I was feeling fine to begin with!

I taste Walter's wines early in the trip. Often they're the first great collection I encounter, and I like to revisit them at the end of the trip when all has been tasted, and see them now, knowing what I know. Walter, the silly man, is often uncertain about the wines; I am generally the first from outside the house to taste them, and he knows I'll be honest. His 2003s surprised me. I expected blockbusters-everything was picked between 90 and 110 Oechsle-but the wines were lissome and curvaceous. We just spoke on the phone moments before I sat down to write this text, and Walter said "Guess what? I really like the wines now," and I said "It's about time, stud." I know why he hesitated. There's a tendency in certain 2003s to show a nip of phenolic bitterness on the back palate. It registered but didn't bother me with Walter, but it bothered *him*. And now it's gone, and he's at peace again.

He has a thoroughly solid vintage in 2003. It reminds me of Merkelbach in 2001; no towering home runs but a series of sharp line drives that whack against the outfield wall. We were also less cautious regarding *dosage* this year. Some of the '02s, fine though they were, flirted with severity, and I wanted '03 to be enveloping; that is its character.

Walter Strub is a classic example of the prophet unknown in his own land. That's partly because he's retiring, partly because he sends a lot of wine over here. But it seems to have gone unnoticed just what a consistent level he's attained since 1993.

On the wall above my desk I have a photograph of an old woman binding and pruning. She's wearing some sort of macadam, as it's cold outside. Her pocket is bulging with all the clippings she's produced. Her hand grasps the stalk with vigor and *insight*, as if it had eyes of its own and could see *inside* the vine. One little stalk is rakishly dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her fine old eyes have seen more than we can imagine; her face is

furrowed with the winds of centuries. I keep her there where I can see her because I need to see the basis for this work I do. It's all well and good for me to compliment my friend on his "achievement," but I'll bet it feels less like an "achievement" to him than a decathlon which he only finished panting and gasping.

Walter's is a restless and questing nature. He wants to see how everything would turn out. He's a pilgrim in the cellar. "The worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision," he says, though certain patterns become evident over time. "I am always the first to start picking and the last to finish." He says. Walter's wine is rarely the ripest in Nierstein, and I think it's because he wants to pick clean fruit above all, and will let go of a few degrees Oechsle if the resulting wine will have the clarity and elegance he seeks. He often rushes to gather his Riesling just when it's "a point," sometimes leaving his Silvaner hanging. The Riesling always has priority, and it *must* be harvested in the best possible condition.

He doesn't get a ton of fruit – just 50 hectoliters per hectare on average over the past five years. His cellar is almost all stainless steel now. He began whole-cluster pressing in 1993 and liked the results (though he has – typically – started to wonder if he should do all his wines that way). With whole-cluster pressing you sacrifice a bit of body, but Niersteiners have all the body they need in ripe years. You obtain remarkable filigree and polish, and you retain high acidity. I have the sense that Walter is finally starting to feel his wines express his *dreams* for them. His Riesling usually ferments from its own yeasts. Lower-acid types are often started with yeast cultures for slower, colder fermentations, so they don't lose the little acid they have. After fermentation, Walter likes to keep his Riesling on the gross lees for several weeks to give it stuffing and nuance, but that's only possible in clean vintages.

But none of this is quite as systematic as I make it sound. In effect, our hero blunders through with good instincts and good will. He has a strong sense of what Nierstein is. He's naturally enamored of its special soil, the sedimentary rust-colored sandstone they call Rotliegend. Dig down a way and you'll come to slate, which prevents the wines from bulking up too much in Nierstein's warm microclimate. In fact Walter has little trays of each of his various soils in the tasting room, in case you want to see what you're drinking and don't have time for a drive among the vines. Rotliegend gives Riesling a smoky sweetness, like something that's been cured over a sweet wood. It's a striking example of a soil signature; anywhere it occurs, in any concentration or in any microclimate, it *always* announces itself in the wine with its unique aroma and flavor. Fruit usually runs to peach. Nierstein is its sine qua non, though, and a Nierstein vintner has this paradigm to serve.

"You can't FORM a wine by working with must or mash, or even with the wine itself. It is unalterably formed in the vineyard," says Walter. He won't identify a "best" site (though he has his secret favorites), pointing out quite reasonably that "some years favor the ORBEL if it's damp, as this site is porous; other years the HIPPIING is better, as it's a damper and a cooler site." What neither

of us can fathom is the perennially excellent wine given by the PATERBERG. "It's not a noble soil," Walter says, shrugging. This is more than an idle question to a German vintner, who sees soil as the DNA of his wine. He had a great success in another replanting project: a parcel of Silvaner was hacked out of the BRÜCKCHEN to replant with Riesling, but it was a rare part of Brückchen, on a chalky soil rather than the usual clay. The wines have been wonderful.

Walter Strub continues to be modest and questing, never quite according his wines the same status as the Mosel and Nahe wines he so dearly loves, and yet each year he gets closer and closer to attaining their brilliance and radiance. In the deepest sense, this is all made possible by the cohesion of the family. Margit is cheerfully and thoroughly competent ("She does 93% of the work," Walter says, "And I do the other 7, if I'm not too busy.") and eldest-son Sebastian is expressing interest in the winery and likes to help out. One doesn't want to harp too

much on these things – they sometimes wither under direct scrutiny – but I both love and admire this family. They have every important piece in place. Between Walter and Margit there's playfulness and loyalty which I know is a bulwark for Walter to indulge his questing side. But no more testimonials!

Well, one more. This has *nothing* to do with why you should buy the wines, and for all I know you're thinking 'Why do I need to know all this' and of course there's no reason. The only reason is that I need to say it. Thinking back, I don't think I have ever *enjoyed* myself as much as I do with Strubs. If it sounds as though all we do is sit and sigh dreamily at one another then I've given a false impression; most of what we do is howl with laughter. Notwithstanding occasional lapses into seriousness (for Walter is a born philosopher) I often leave an evening with Strubs barely able to breathe, I've been laughing so hard.

Here's to the next twenty five years, my dear friends.

Strub at a glance:

Always reliable wines are rapidly becoming stellar - with no increase in price! Availability is always good, so sell like hell! Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to "read" and understand. A truly lovely group of 2003s!

how the wines taste:

They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. We were oversold on Dönnhoff one year, so I half-jokingly suggested we slap some Dönnhoff labels on STRUB wine; the stylistic resemblance is plausibly close. Walter's recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they're ripe and lush. They're very often reductive and spritzzy, complex and long.

GST-107L **2003 Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

Complex blend this year - a Hipping with 91 Oechsle, an Orbel with 92 , and a Paterberg with 103 , and we used no *dosage*. The only problem is there isn't much of it; we tried to extend it by introducing other wines into the blend, but this was clearly the superior wine. It's a tic sweeter than '02 or '01 but you need it with this vintage. Lusty and tangy with a hint of star-fruit, more red soil than usual; zingy finish. You should be deeply ashamed to get excellent Riesling Spätlese labeled as Kabinett and sold at Liter-wine prices. At least I am.

SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GST-097 **2002 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**

GST-113 **2003 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett** +

GST-113H **2003 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml** +

This is our CORE-LIST wine, and we'll sell through the 2002 before we start shipping the 2003. It won't take long. The 2002 is zingy, a wine for those of you who relish lots of acidity White peach, chalk, almost a tarragon or caraway note or lemon-grass note; juicy-salty brilliance; wonderful thrust and jab; dynamic and sizzling. The 2003 (all the halves will be 2003) is another thing entirely; a "Kabinett" at 100 Oechsle is *prima facie* ridiculous, and this is corpulent and thick; corn and tilleul aromas, power and torque on the palate, with fabulous length and head-shaking sinew; just a meaty riesling yet with melody and a big ol' lusty major-chord of flavor.

SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

- GST-111 **2003 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Kabinett**
 I had selected this wine as a *Spätlese*-it has a mingy 100 Oechsle, after all-but on reflection Strubs felt we didn't have enough Kabinett and offered to declassify this. How very kind! The wine has 8.6 grams per liter acidity, freakish for 2003; curranty and "green" aromas (woodruff, rosemary); a spicy and robust palate, long and minty.
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-three years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GST-110 **2003 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Kabinett**
 From the steep section; the wine is racier on entry than the analytical acidity foretells; this is basically apples sautéed with tarragon in brown-butter; fine snap, spice and juiciness.
 SOS: 2 (between four and eighteen years)
- GST-102 **2002 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Kabinett**
 From the steep section; slaty, juicy and peachy; classic notes of San Daniele; the palate is racy and on-the-dry-side; finish is quite smoky. Wants time, as Hipping always does.
 SOS: 1 (between five and fifteen years)
- GST-099 **2002 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett**
 Why so many choices among Kabinett? Simple, there isn't a lot of any one of them, and we sell a hunka-hunka-hunka of Kabinett. This one's like a liquefied slice of Prosciutto di Parma; that almost animal sweetness, the "cured" depth; it's racy and spicy and almost suggests redcurrants. Orbel's subsoils are harder and rockier than the other red-soil sites ("You wouldn't go barefoot in this vineyard," says Walter) and so the wine, too, is more obdurate.
 SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)
- GST-109 **2003 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 From the flats; less red-soil flavor than unmitigated ur-mineral - reminded me of Mambourg or Altenberg Grand Crus from Alsace-redcurrant and plum; a scrupulous portrait of riesling's mineral essence; salty, garrigue and fennel and oyster-shell; shimmer and taut without severity. This is what I'd *hoped* the 2003 Trockens might be like; alas, very few were.
 SOS: 0 (now to five years, but try again between 12-15 years)
- GST-112 **2003 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 From the steep section, 100 Oechsle, unsullied by *dosage*; the wine is essentially perfect; a chocolate melt-o-rama sprinkled with fleur de sel; power-palate that dances; bananas sautéed in butter; astounding length; visceral and lingering.
 SOS: 2 (between five and twenty years)



- GST-101 **2002 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 Wonderfully juicy and chocolatey (milk-chocolate is a signature-flavor of Oelberg, improbably); great length, endless fruit but underlying dryness; almost a soy note. Ample but not voluptuous. Yum yum yum wine.
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-two years)

THE PATERBERG SERIES

I think we need to highlight this unlikely vineyard because no one suspects how good it is, and Walter always seems to pull something remarkable from it. In fact, over the years I think he's actually more synchronous with Paterberg than with his Grand Crus from the red slope. Yet no one else has even hinted at the beauty which lies inside this land. It's like a shy dog who only obeys one master. Paterberg is a large site, covering the entire limestone plateau south of Nierstein on the way to Oppenheim. I'm sure other growers don't see it as predestined for riesling; the site is wuthering and windswept, and botrytis is extremely rare. I don't even know that I'd call it a Grand Cru, though I'd argue its best sections are 1er Cru and the whole thing is a fascinating lieu dit. Walter has several parcels, the best (and oldest) of which gives us the "starred" wines. This is lower down and more sheltered. The signature-flavors run to lemon-grass and the minty herbs; mint itself, tarragon, Japanese green teas (Sencha and Gyokoru), spicy apples (Empires) and lime-zest; wintergreen too-you get the picture. Peachy it's not. But there's a kind of density of spice, as if set alight on the palate. These are iridescently scintillating wines, ultra-violet and **fabulous** at the table. Here goes. . .

- GST-108 **2003 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 GST-108H **2003 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml** +
 Blend of two lots (317 & 319) with 100 Oechsle, and lime-lime-lime, a margarita of riesling; the most seductive imaginable *tartness*, this almost manic wackoid thing like lime-scented veal stock with twenty Altoids dissolved in it. Sheesh!
 SOS: 2 (between six and nineteen years)
- GST-114 **2003 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese***** +
 Old-vines density; granular nose, spice-cake, soursop and allspice; density hardly describes it; the wine swallows its sweetness and finishes like 100 icicles of mint and chalk. Galvanic and saturated.
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GST-103 **2002 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**** +
 Like the 1998 and 2001 this is a non-botrytis Auslese from an especially favored parcel; Walter wasn't sure it was "3-star" quality so he docked a star, and regrets it now! I love it; there's a salty old-vines density; it's big and meaty like a veal chop; esoteric spices, fennel-seed and ginger. I always underrate this wine, by the way; I wish I'd indicated two plusses for the 2001.
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-five years)
- GST-095H **2001 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/500m** ++
 GST-106H **2002 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml** ++
 GST-115H **2002 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +
 The 2002 is pretty crazy; it tastes like a syrup carried back from another galaxy. The 2001, more "classical" was picked in part by an incredulous Margit, (who, beginning to freeze after only just starting, asked "How many more rows to we have to pick?") along with a miserable 14-year-old who was decidedly not happy to be roused from a warm bed at 4:00 a.m. Poor Sebastian. He even looked after the wine when Walter and Margit were in the States the following January. This is stunningly great Eiswein, 184 Oechsle, and I swear to you the finish tastes like Cap'n Crunch! A thrall of tropical fruit, an elixir of insanely piquant lavender honey. The greatest sweet wine ever from Rheinstrasse 42; take a bow Wally!
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)

günter wittmann

rheinhessen • westhofen

When I first started representing Wittmann no one had heard of them and young Philipp hadn't begun to shave. Now they're regarded as elite players in Rheinhessen and producers of some of the best dry Rieslings in Germany. Both reputations warranted! And they are by far the leading certified-organic winery in Germany. It's nice to be vindicated.

This isn't an easy estate to represent. They are so popular in Germany they don't have very much wine available to export. Because we know we can't get much, we don't push the wines. Which means we don't sell what we'd *like* to be selling, even though we can't get much wine! A second problem is the crummy dichotomy between Germany's domestic and foreign markets. Dry versus not-dry. Wittmann is about as good as it gets making dry Rieslings, but I doubt anyone

will build a robust American market from this category. We all know riesling is royalty wherever it appears (in the old world, I hasten to add), but the fact is we sell more Grüner Veltliner from Austria and I'm sure everyone sells more Pinot Blanc from Alsace. So we're looking at a certain disconnect between Wittmann and me as regards what's basically possible.

Boy, when Wittmann's dry rieslings are on, they are *good*. As much as I rage against the Trocken machine, I love finding good ones! Great dry Riesling is a good thing, brother. And there are very few German growers who produce them consistently, which is to say very few who *understand* the ingredients of balance in this idiom. Please understand, I am put under *pressure* to be less splenetic about Trocken wines, and to include more of them in this offering. One close friend among the growers outright told me "When we come to America to show our wines it's disconcerting not to have 'every flower in the bouquet' to show customers. We think you should at least give the dry wines a fair shake." Look, Ace, it ain't my fault the Germans are slavishly devoted to bitter wines. By rejecting them, I AM giving them a fair shake. But Wittmanns can excite me to my very core: I wanted to take them around to everyone who castigated me and say "See? This is how you do it. Start making dry wines like these and I'll select them!"

It is also a pleasure to see the generations working



Phillip Wittmann

so well together. Wittmann père handles the vineyards, fils Phillip holds the reins in the cellar while mère does sales and mar-

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Westhofener Morstein, Steingrube and Aulerde**
- **Soil types: Clay with chalky loam, weathered limestone and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 16% Müller-Thurgau, 10% each of Silvaner and Weissburgunder, 8% Huxelrebe, 6% Früh- and Spätburgunder, 6% Chardonnay, 9% other varieties including Scheurebe**

keting, though as a family enterprise, everyone does a bit of everything. Eventually all three are in the tasting room with you, and you become *aware* you are sitting with a family and the thing is *working*.

I've worked exclusively with family wineries from the beginning; we all do, those of us who import wine from the old world. I'm not unique. For most of those years I took it for granted. Then something happened, I don't know what. Maybe it was seeing so many wineries simply fold, because the whippersnappers elected to push paper and earn big-Euro. I began wondering why some were inspired to continue and others not. *What* inspired them?

Or maybe it was just getting older. In my thirties and early forties I was serenely confident I'd still have my pick among almost limitless choices. At fifty I suddenly realize I have *made* my choices, and having made them I grow more aware of how happy they make me. I am setting up house in the things I have chosen. One of them is to work with small family wineries. Now I can consider the meaning of this with all the deliberation I wish; I have plenty of

time. I don't have to keep alert for the *next* choices to whiz by. I become attuned to the patience of the earth. And it suddenly strikes me as beautiful, nearly unbearably beautiful, to see kin working together, so that work and love and family are joined, patiently working the patient earth, and making a thing of beauty.

Wittmann is a student of soil also, and gives fascinating explanation of the geological factors responsible for Westhofen's various soils. He takes for granted that soil components give specific flavors to wine—nothing noteworthy about that, but I feel the need to hammer the point since so many people seem to think it's specious romance. Wittmann's cellar is as gentle as they come. There are stainless steel tanks and large ovals, and careful thought is given to what wine belongs in which. He loves sleek, racy, filigree wines, but seldom gets them

from his soils. Transport him to, say Rauenthal in the Rheingau, (I wish I could!) and he'd immediately be making better wine than 99% of all Rheingau growers.

The wines are a touch on the pricey side, but still less than they're worth. And organic viticulture costs the vintner more than conventional viticulture—a premium worth paying.

Though I went later this year, I found the 2003 vintage troublesome, especially for the dry wines. I had a colleague with me who was more positive. Philipp correctly observes his wines need time, and I never engrave my impressions in stone. But I can only tell you how it tasted on the day. It may just be Wittmann's wines, already among the most muscular in the Rhineland, weren't destined for a vintage such as 2003. So I will say what I felt, you will taste the wines, and you will decide. I'd be very glad to be wrong.

Wittmann at a glance:

Another entirely organic winery. Steadily creeping upward in quality each year (and the newest member of the VDP) and now one of the elite agencies in this portfolio. Grail-keeper of the great ALBALOGA grape.

how the wines taste:

Wittmann's wines are solid and positive. They radiate good health and well-being. They are firm but not heavy, like a big-boned man with almost no body fat. Their large stature doesn't prevent them being transparent and filigree. In the little mental tally I keep of my growers, Wittmann has edged his way to the top.

GGW-083 **2003 Wittmann Riesling Trocken**

(This wine is available but it is not a Terry Theise Estate Selection)

This is a CORE-LIST wine, awkwardly; I liked the 2002 as much as I've ever liked a basic quaffing dry riesling-he absolutely nailed it-thus it was perplexing to be cool about this. But I have been wrong before and will be again, and we'll see whether the wine gains grace and polish with bottling.

SOS: minus 1

GGW-084 **2003 Aulerde Riesling Trocken "Grosses Gewächs"**

(This wine is available but it is not a Terry Theise Estate Selection)

This will be labeled according to the Grand Cru system so the label will simply show the vineyard; the assumption is the wine is dry. It's rather massively endowed, but had the most discernible spine and minerality among the three Grand Crus. It's like a big pinot gris dressed in riesling clothes; only deep in the tertiary finish does a nice limey minerality emerge. Again I emphasize, the 2003s are slow to unfurl sometimes, and I can easily misread these wines, but I can't lie to you, and my instincts are wary.

SOS: minus 1

GGW-080 **2002 Riesling Spätlese**

This carries rather more sweetness than it strictly needs, ironically enough. Though it's indicative of the *Zeitgeist* in Germany: *dry* wines dry, sweet wines goddamn sweet, and balance irrelevant if it creates an "item" one can't "position" in the "market." But I do like this wine; there's fragrance, elegance and shapeliness with a nice piquant edge and fragrance of cherry-blossom.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-four years)

GGW-085 **2003 Huxelrebe Spätlese**

Here's a test of whether we drink the wine or the label! For this actually has more form and minerality than do the rieslings; it's the best wine on the table thus far, with *spiel*, lift and cut. It's also a very fine value and I recommend it highly.

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

GGW-090 **2003 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Spätlese****(This wine is available but it is not a Terry Theise Estate Selection)**

After a sterling performance with the splendid 2002, this one seemed muscle-bound, sprawling and formless. I worked with it for a good ten minutes, and eked out a hint of white raisin and good length, very large plum aromas and a mouth-filling spread of ripeness. Maybe bottling will subdue its unseemly extravagance. Philipp asked me to trust his assertion the wine would justify his faith. And others were more impressed than I.

GGW-086H **2003 Westhofener Kirschspiel Riesling Auslese "S," 12/500ml**

Now we're talking; this is much more shapely and piquant than any wine thus far; there's more specificity and precision on the nose, with lots of wisteria and candied cherries; it's BA-sweet but there's true *class* here, a yin to reconcile all the yang. This is the happy-face of '03, generous and overt but still organized, structured and long.

SOS: 4 (between twelve and thirty years)

GGW-087H **2003 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Auslese "S," 12/500ml**

Leap-of-faith here; this has the most length and grip of them all, but is shrouded behind fermentation aromas. Lime and a kind of blunt minerality peek through. The length and nuance *should* herald a big, fine Auslese, but we'll see in time how smart I was.

SOS: 4 (between fourteen and thirty-three years)

GGW-088H **2003 Westhofener Morstein Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**

Again peering through a translucent screen. The inner-ness of the wine seems right; a potentially sensational power of plummy sweetness and mineral salt played on a lofty stage. Bottling, time and serving temperature will reveal.

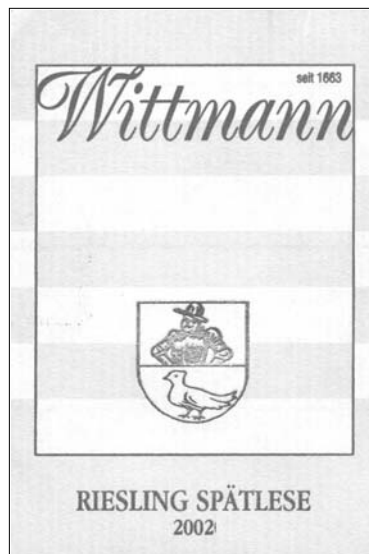
SOS: 4 (between twenty-five and sixty years)

GGW-089H **2003 Albalonga TBA, 12/375ml****++**

This was like another creature entirely. Sensational varietal lysergic-cherry aromas lead to a purring seductive palate with silky skin and long fingernails (!): never loses its basic shape, entirely sweet but not *washed-over* with sweetness; like all the best TBAs it seems to concentrate the Auslese; this even has a pepperiness like Tuscan olive oil. Endless finish. Gorgeous wine, completely convincing.

There are people who think my affection for this variety borders on the perverse. I suspect these people wear white briefs they buy at JC Penney. Crossed between Rieslaner (one of God's great grapes) and Silvaner, the Albalonga never fails to make compelling wine and at times ventures well toward the sublime. *There are 32 hectares (70.4 acres) of Albalonga in the entire world.* Various Wittmann stickies over the years have been celestial, and this 2003 takes its place among the very best.

SOS: 4 (between twelve and forty-five years)



These lovely old-school wines have started disappearing from view, so I leapt at the chance to feature one of them (the 2002 Auslese Halbtrocken) at a wine dinner a few months back. We paired it with Hiedler's 2002 Heiligenstein Riesling and I waited for the two wines to duke it out.

Hiedler's was the wine of greatest pedigree—a great Grand Cru from a top producer—and the wine was predictably grandiose, but I was delighted by Merz's less flashy but even more graceful wine.

These were the first 2003s I tasted, the first estate I visited. Karl did not acidify his rieslings: "On average we had 1 gram per liter more acid than in 1976, so why add acid?" he observed. Looking back, it's striking how this dry-wine specialist avoided many of the problems that afflicted a couple "name" estates.

I have always liked this text. Not to appear immodest, but it's been one of the few times I felt I'd succeeded in conveying a slippery idea. Thus I was distressed when Lyselotte Merz cast me a dubious look. "We thought perhaps what you wrote was a little bit *sad*," she said. "When you wrote that you worried about us." Well I worry about every vintner who does all or most of the work alone and who has no visible heirs who might continue the winery. That said, my friends the Merzes are still plenty charged and show no signs of letting up.

Visits to Merz are special because *they* are special. This is a soulful domain, producing a kind of wine that only they could produce, informed by the two of them and the way they feel about living a good life. Merzes are true wine lovers, not snobs, not what I would call wine fuss-budgets, but people who feel *affection* for wine, and for whom daily life would be impoverished if not unthinkable without it. That affection shows in the way their own wines are handled, which is to say *not* handled.

Wines make their own decisions here; sugar is neither added nor removed. Whatever's left after fermentation is what goes into the bottle. There's also a distinct house-



Lyselotte and Karl Merz

style, which you'll have noticed if you've tasted the wines.

They taste as though they're barrel-fermented, with the mealiness and seamless texture of such wines. Yet they're not. Certain wines are kept in old oak, naturally, but no flavor is imparted by such old wood anymore. The Liter Silvaner, which has the same flavor, has never

- **Vineyard area: 7 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Ockenheimer Laberstall and Hockenmühle**
- **Soil types: Clay and heavy chalky loam**
- **Grape varieties: 43% Riesling, 22% Silvaner, 8% each Kerner & Chardonnay, 13% other**

seen a splinter of oak. Nor is soil the answer, since as Karl Merz points out, "My neighbors have vines alongside mine but their wines don't taste the same." For years, I wondered at this vexing mystery.

Then one year I learned the answer. Merzes have pressurized fermentation tanks, and the wines ferment under a blanket of carbon dioxide.

It's nourishing to hear Merzes talk about their wines.

"You should be engaged to make a *good* wine; let's say a wine of pure and clear nature, with a transparent face and a solid structure. This seems to be the essential base to work on." Amen to that!

"We clean the must before fermentation, which takes place very slowly and gently under pressure of CO₂." After which there's no more fussing. The wines are left in cask until bottling—which is rather later than earlier. Lyse does the bottling, based on *taste*, at various times over a 4-week period depending on availability of personnel. "If there are 'ready' aromas, it's already too late," she observes. "You want to capture them just before." As mentioned before, no Süsreserve. "We think Süsreserve is not a real partner to be married with a wine, but something artificial; it may be a lovely make-up, but most of all it seems like 'lifting' a face to change its character." Now whether you agree with that opinion (and I don't), *there* is a clear exposition of the frame of reference which rejects Süsreserve as a matter of temperament.

"Wine for me is a piece of mosaic, the other pieces of

which are friends and conversation and a way of life," says Frau Merz. "I am impressed when I taste wines of purity, clear appearance, elegant vivacity, a pleasant perfume and tempting flavors. I am trying to discover the soul of a wine." Isn't this more fun than discussing yeast cultures?

I asked Herr Merz what he longed to hear a customer say about his wines, in view of the care he takes to help them into existence. His answer expressed the spirit of his domain: "The cultivated wine drinker can obtain the kinds of wines from us he can't find anywhere else any more. I want to hear that he is fond of the wine, that this is the type of wine he was seeking for a long time and that now he feels at home."

I need to emphasize that such temperaments are uncommon among vintners, who, though they produce a thing of poetic beauty, are rarely themselves poetic in nature. The Merzes have a kind of genial urbanity that gives them something of the mien of art collectors or dealers in rare prints. They vacation in a time-share house in Provence.

It's a point I cannot overemphasize. Until you visit a domain, a bottle of wine, however fine it may be, is just a thing. It's a label without a story attached, without a human context, without a sense of place. When you do visit, see the vineyards in which the grower labors, see the cellar in which his wines are raised, see the books on his bookcases, the tasting glasses he uses, the weight of the sound in the air of his home—some places in Europe have an extraordinarily caressing silence about them - see how he pulls a cork from a bottle, hear his jokes and asides, hear the words he uses to talk about his wines, see, hear, taste, touch it all, now the wine becomes a BEING; it is now **Karl's wine**.

Vintages at Merz don't necessarily follow the larger pattern; Karl's wines shine in precisely the conditions when many other German Rieslings do not; ripe years fairly low in acid but with large, expansive fruit. Frau Merz is wary of lengthy cellaring for the Trockens, saying: "Old dry wines are like spinsters." And going on to add "If the sweetness is like a fruit you can't wait to bite into, then it's right." I like to think of her and Karl at the Tourtour

farmer's market in early September, buying plums and pulling one out of the bag immediately. It all connects.

It's only in a larger context that I can try to *convey* these unique wines to you. They aren't made to "show" well in comprehensive tasting formats; you want to sit across a table and let someone else answer the phone and look closely at just a few wines. Look, there's nothing wrong with wines that make the scene. It's more that we can't afford to lose the kinds of wines that *don't*, that don't know *how*, that don't *care* to, because these are wines of soul. And maybe you can't *taste* soul but things sure taste *empty* when it's not there.

Merz is, in effect, a French winemaker on German soil. His wines arise seamlessly from their environment. There are truly no other German wines like them, and I appreciate that.

I appreciate that more than whatever "scores" they might get, more than how they happen to "show" at big tastings, more than how they fare on the hip-o-meter. My two brilliant young colleagues Kevin Pike and Mark Hutchens, whom I love like brothers and respect like the dickens, wonder at my judgement in offering what they must feel are vinous anachronisms. Terry's little quirks.

I offer what pleases me, of course. I like the wines. I don't like them the same *way* I like more modern wines, but I'm sure Kevin doesn't like baseball the same way he likes literature and Mark doesn't like Bartok the same way he likes Björk. They sometimes ask me, if I reject a nearly-successful wine from a great estate, if the controversial wine is "better or worse than wines I do select from Merz" or Riedel or others making quirky old-fashioned wine. The question is a non-sequitur. It's like asking if Mark's least favorite Mahler symphony is "worse" music than the Björk on his CD-player.

Again, I don't select these wines *merely* because they're original, but I do prize their originality. I do NOT WANT all good wines to be good in the same way. I love the gleaming-chrome spiffyness of "modern" German riesling, but I also love wines like these, which don't affect and aren't discretely "aesthetic" but which rise from a place of soul which includes *all* of comfort and consolation.

Merz at a glance:

One-of-a-kind wines, with a woodsy-mealy flavor very rarely found in German wines. Particularly successful in the drier idioms. Gentle in price!

how the wines taste:

They're smooth and "oaky." Though there's no new wood used. There's a gentle mealiness about these that makes the dry wines especially successful and give a lot of exotic perfume to the wines with sweetness. The wines from the chalk cliffs of the LABERSTALL show the greatest originality and complexity of fruit. In the heavier blue clay soil of the HOCKENMÜHLE ("The soil is so clayey that if we didn't grow vines we could make pots," says Karl) the wines are spicier and interestingly more chalky-minerally in profile.

GMZ-049L 2001 Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter

This is by far the best vintage ever offered of this lovely wine. It is, as always, snappy, crab-cake crackery; but what body, grip, depth and length—a wonderful value and perfect "jug-wine" drinkability. Snatch this up, goobers; every vintage isn't this good. SOS: 0 (between now and five years)

- GMZ-047 **2001 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
Nose like roasted corn and yellow peppers; juicy and voluminous with a finely measured power, though it finishes like a snorting bull; a chunky wine just spurtingly ripe. Forget fine points of finesse and just swim in the satisfaction.
SOS: 0 (from one to five years)
- GMZ-048 **2001 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
Long and exotic; man, this wants crab cakes or corn fritters or soft-shells and scallions; salty and pancetta-like and herbal like marjoram and a sort of **packed-ness** like you crammed too much in your suitcase and you j-u-s-t barely got it closed but you know if you sneeze it'll burst.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (from two to six years)
- GMZ-050 **2002 Ockenheimer Laberstatt Riesling Auslese Trocken**
What a surprise. This is Riesling as if it were Meursault, only smoother and more determinedly mineral-in a way this is the ne plus ultra of Karl's approach; mealy texture, all simmer and umami; no "fruit" or "flower" to speak of, and softly, tenderly dry. Bravo, old friend, for a wine of such soul and friendliness.
SOS: 0 (from now to seven years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GMZ-051 **2002 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese**
Any other grower would fret about a wine like this, which stopped fermenting with 22 grams per liter residual sugar. "Arrgghh," they'd say, "Not dry enough for Halbtrocken but not sweet enough for 'noble-sweet.'"

At Merz, they smile serenely. This is where the wine stopped. What does it have to say? To me it is ideal. Roasted yellow peppers, lump-crab, remoulade, corn on the cob with drawn butter, lobster, shellfish stock, sautéed apple . . . this is splendidly **edible** wine! Talc-y, a deep tertiary "sweetness." I can't *wait* to make a saffron-lobster risotto for this darling.
- GMZ-053 **2003 Ockenheimer Laberstatt Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
This was barely the better of the two single-site Spät H-Ts from 2003, with a lush creamy authority, mealy and sandalwoody and nutmeggy; subtle amontillado tones; seductive juiciness into a long finish almost like honey-mushrooms.
SOS: 0 (between now and five years)
- GMZ-054 **2002 Ockenheimer Laberstatt Riesling Auslese Halbtrocken**
I quite preferred this to a musclebound 2003; this is a filigree and salty thing; almost a pumpnickel aroma like Meunier; a satiny body with a tiny mineral explosion on the finish; a wine to diligently pick your way through in a happy exploration.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between now and seven years)
- GMZ-055 **2003 Ockenheimer Laberstatt Riesling Auslese**
Big ripe grapey aromas; a Sousa-march of fruit here; mirabelle is the story, almost as if a few drops of liqueur were added; the finish is chewy and utter clay-grown riesling.
SOS: 2 (between two and eleven years)



wagner-stempel

rheinhessen • siefersheim

Ladies 'n gents; sybarites of every stripe, inccubi and succubi, pointers and setters, Mars' and Venus,' step right up, for I have a prediction:

This estate will be the next superstar in the Rheinhessen.

I owe the discovery to Alex Gysler, and his "Class in a Glass" poster, and his answer to my question "Is there anyone in this group of particular interest to me?" A few months later I sat at home tasting through a half-dozen samples, and with the first sip of the first wine (the 2002 "Riesling from Porphyry") I had the *AH-HA!* moment.

The estate is 12.5 hectares, in the westernmost district of Rheinhessen, near Bernhard. Soils vary, but there's a significant vein of porphyry like the great soils of the Nahe (which is just a hop

skip & jump over the hill), and there are times I think the world's greatest rieslings grow on volcanic soil in general and porphyry in particular. And young Mr. Wagner has baskets of various soils in his tasting room, and has all his riesling-comprising 50% of his vineyards-is planted on porphyry.

There were times I thought I was drinking the very *best* of Crusius' wines.

Wagner's first vintage was 1993. He arrived at the apex of the dry-wave and has only recently started making any rieslings with sweetness - I hope to provide encouragement in this direction!

The land is steeper here than in much of the Rheinhessen, and Wagner does 95% of his harvest by hand. Most musts are clarified by gravity, though some are fermented as-is. His basic-quality wines are made in stainless steel, but like many young vintners he's leaning toward more old oak for the top rieslings. Similarly he ferments with cultured yeasts for the basic wines and with natural yeasts for the best rieslings. Most wines sit on the gross lees till February. All of this reveals a characteristic degree of thoughtfulness and flexibility for a young quality-minded vintner.

He's a self-described acid-freak, but also prizes minerality and "tannin in a subtle form," indicating this vintner prizes structure above all things. He has the luxury to do so, because the wines from his beloved Heerkretz (the steepest and highest-elevated site in Rheinhessen) and Höllberg show astonishing natural *fruit* in a stirring melange of Nahe complexity with Rheinhessen muscle.

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5800 cases**
- **Top sites: Siefersheimer Höllberg, Heerkretz and Goldenes Horn**
- **Soil types: Volcanic material (porphyry) and Loess with chalk**
- **Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 60% other**

Wagner-Stempel at a glance:

Dynamic young vintner making weighty, sensational Nahe-like porphyry-wines, already among the very best in Rheinhessen, and certain to be THE next superstar-estate in the region.

how the wines taste:

Generous, complex and polished, serene graceful strength and exotic haunting flavors.

GWG-001L 2003 Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken, 1 Liter +

Yes, a star for a Liter bottling, for this was *mind-bending* quality for this category. "Our youngest vines" but with striking length and grip; minerally nose, classy fruit-it could pass for an Alsatian Grand Cru, with an almost Hengst-like note; perfectly dry but voluminous and authoritative. I'm stunned and delighted this "little" wine just wipes the floor with so many dry '03s of far greater pedigree. Do NOT miss it.

SOS: 0 (between now and eight years)

GWG-002 2003 Siefersheimer Riesling Feinherb +

"Feinherb" extends the permissible sweetness somewhat higher than Halbtrocken but still on-the-dry-side. Bad word, great wine. In fact, sensational wine, from an early picking; almost majestic salt and blackberry; long and complex, not so much fat as visceral. Dead-ringer for Crusius' Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg, and yes, high praise! SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (between one and nine years)

GWG-003 2003 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese ++

Jeez Louise; this has 100° Oechsle and 8 grams per liter acidity, also picked relatively early; explosively lemony nose and kinetically active palate; sweet on entry (lemon-custard) but an immediate salty wash down the sides, like some salt mined from a lost world; then a spicy finishing power, sandalwood and cinnamon; utter talc and malt on the final finish. This could be a masterpiece.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-three years)

GWG-004 2002 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese +

Very little left! This is just ravishingly piquant-smells like a Brücke. It's lavish yet acid-driven, with Talmudically complex fruit and an amplitude of flavor belying its electricity. Pretty in a compellingly angular way.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-five years)

GWG-005H 2002 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml +

November harvest. I liked this vastly more than its sibling from 2003; it's another explosion of piquancy-utter plum and currant, swashbuckling acidity and zingy length; the finish clings for dear life, with a deeply embedded minerality; crystalline yet translucent, such is its concentration.

SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty-two years)

GWH-006H 2003 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling BA, 12/375ml

From an early picking with perfect botrytis. A meyer-lemon and jasmine malted milkshake with passion-fruit syrup. Just plain *yummy* wine.

SOS: 4 (between thirteen and thirty-eight years)

p.a. ohler'sches weingut rheinessen • bingen

Just call it "Ohler!"

Bernard Becker is the proprietor here, a bachelor with no airs and a local accent you can cut with a knife. His is one of those almost painfully old-fashioned estates; you can sometimes tell by the grandfather clock. When it *booms* out its chimes with an almost imperious command—"by GOD it's four o'clock!" you do get a sense that things are done the old ways.

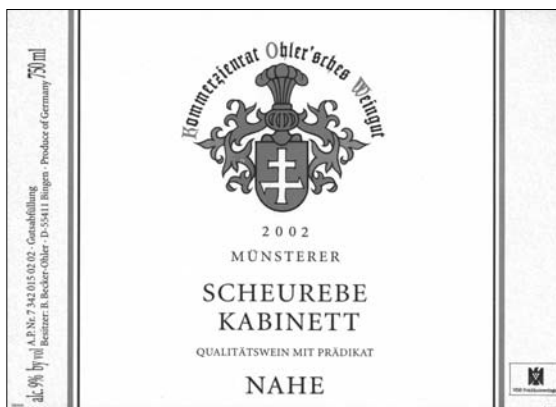
Yet even here there are stirrings of change. It's an indication of the Zeitgeist, the prevailing view of quality viticulture, that a man as ostensibly isolated as Becker has now begun green-harvesting, canopy trimming, and has even made his first-ever Eiswein(s) in 2002. It's one thing to go all-out when you're a frisky young pup wanting to make a name for yourself. Quite another

when you're a settled being of 50-something.

Becker had a certain sangfroid about his wines which I think I might have done a little to correct. He had bottling problems a few years ago and had to use the local co-op to custom bottle for him. His wines, so vibrant in cask, ended up muted and dull in bottle, and I lost confidence in them. Becker noticed the result in sharply falling sales, and we had a heart-to-heart. The next year I fire-bombed his house. The year after that I had to tie a sixteen-ton weight to his leg and drop him in the Rhine. That got his attention. Now the wines are fine again. Ruthless business, this wine thing.

I do believe he does the whole five hectares all alone. About forty percent of it is on steep slopes; this isn't easy work!

Bingen must be the most undervalued place in Germany for fine Riesling. And having just been through Flurbereinigung, its reputation isn't likely to leap ahead until the new vines get some age. The soils on the Bingen hill, which is directly parallel to the Rüdeshheimer Berg (only the Rhine lies between) contain a mélange of Rotliegend and porphyry, an amalgam of Nierstein and Nahe which gives the wines Nierstein's smoky savor with the Nahe's curranty succulence.



- Vineyard area: 6.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,000 cases
- Top sites: Binger Scharlachberg, Münsterer Dautenpflänzer
- Soil types: slate, quartzite, sandstone, porphyry
- Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe, 40% (Silvaner, Müller-Thurgau, Kerner, Huxelrebe, Dornfelder), 15% (Spätburgunder, Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder)

Becker also has some land across the Nahe, now officially Nahe wine (imagine his paperwork load dealing with *two* sets of bureaucrats) in two excellent sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer and Kapellenberg. All of these wines can be among the very best values I know, and Becker is more accommodating than ever with them. He's tapping into my desire for more transparent wines with lift and relief and not so much sweetness; nowadays he shows me his wines with an air of "Is this how you mean?" Yes, this is how I mean.

And prices remain almost embarrassingly low. It is odd; one ferry ride over the Rhine, less than a mile as the crow flies, and price can differ by 60%. Mind you, Becker makes these wines for all intents and purposes in his basement; he lives in an apartment building on a downtown street that looks like the last place on earth a winery would be. With the right physical space, updated equipment and his own bottling line, a man of Becker's conscientiousness would be making stellar wines. As it is, they're charming and fragrant *enough* and you can own them almost just by *thinking* about them!

Ohler at a glance:

Value value value. Charming, fruity, uncomplicated, easy-to-like wines at ludicrous prices.

how the wines taste:

They're forthright and fruity. The Scharlachberg wines have a peachy lift and fragrance of red roses. The Nahe wines are cooler, slatier or more violet-y and tangy according to site. Sheer charm is their strong suit. Great class or detail of flavors is unusual, but there's plenty of sheer likability for the pittance we're asked to pay. In favorable vintages they soar above their class.

- GOH-045 **2002 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett**
 Now that the poobahs at the VDP have finally managed to expel this grower he is once again at liberty to use a site-name for this Scheurebe. Thus does progress stumble forward in its earnest myopic way. This 2002 is an especially *charming* variation on the Scheu-Dautenpflänzer theme; less sage, more pink grapefruit and candied ginger and yellow-beet. A perfumey wash over the palate. No great length, but charm and refinement.
 SOS: 2 (now to five years)
- GOH-046 **2002 Münsterer Kapellenberg Riesling Kabinett**
 Delicately slatey and deceptively soft; discreet slatey grip and appley fruit; really lingers on the back and is longer than you expect; a pensive wine you don't seem to forget. I kept returning to it.
 SOS: 2 (between three and eleven years)
- GOH-050 **2003 Binger Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett** +
 Becker insisted he did not acidify any riesling in this vintage. I kept saying I didn't mind and he kept saying "I added acid to other varieties but not to riesling," and all I know is this may be the best riesling he's ever made; it has both volume and grip and an almost grassy-herbal undertone improbable with all those yellow-fruits jumping around; a lovely cassis-y snap and fennelly finish; extra quality from 43-year-old vines. He gave it just 30 grams per liter residual sugar and the result is all this crazed verberna acid-jazz. Some stuff be up here.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between three and eleven years)
- GOH-047 **2002 Binger Rosengarten Riesling Spätlese**
 Rosengarten is the eastern extension of the Scharlach hill, less steep. For this domain, the Rosengarten is a subtle and *interesting* Riesling with a touch of wild-herb and cassis. It's planted with 34-year-old vines on gravelly soil. I asked about that cassis thing and he told me the former owner had a few Scheu vines mixed in among the Rieslings! This is lovely, a solid mouthful of feminine perfumey fruit; a real splash of citrus as if from clone-90; a charming, winning fruit-driven wine with remarkable grip.
 SOS: 2 (between six and fourteen years)
- GOH-051 **2003 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese**
 This is balanced on the head of a pin; again what impresses are the unlikely "dark" tones, some arterial black-cherry you don't anticipate from the peachy attack. Lots of terroir working here; our hero read the vintage well.
 SOS: 2 (between three and fifteen years)
- GOH-048 **1998 Binger Schlossberg Schwätzerchen Riesling Auslese** +
 I confess I am utterly melted by wines like these. He kept it in cask till September 2002, and it's a rare glimpse back to the German wines of 75-100 years ago. I adore it; the vinous antonym to fruit *qua* fruit; woody but not "woody"; a little quince and lanolin; on the dry side and with a beautiful intricate finish.
 SOS: 2
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GOH-049H **2002 Binger Rosengarten Grauer Burgunder Eiswein, 12/500ml** +
 He made two in all-the other is a stiff young Riesling-but how often do you see Eiswein from *Pinot Gris*? 160 Oechsle, and quite good for a maiden-voyage; a wine redolent of gnarly barky old vine-trunks; a graceful Gris, true Eiswein character, ringent length and penetration, yet with all the meaty-smoky facets of the variety; wonderfully salty wash on the finish. He had no idea what to charge for it. I helped!
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty-five years)

christian-wilhelm bernhard

rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

German growers had two consecutive short crops in '00 and '01. Their harvesting costs were far more than they estimated. Corks, labels and bottles are sharply more expensive in the last three years. Taxes are also higher, as the Schroeder government tries to claw its way out of economic malaise. The time is ripe for price increases. I expected them. I winced to think about them, as our own costs have suffered from the falling Dollar. But I need my growers to survive and prosper, or the thing doesn't work.

So what do Bernhards do? They LOWER their prices.

I tell you I nearly wept at this gesture of comradeship and solidarity. There are times when kindness is nearly heroic, and this is one of them. I intend to reward them in turn with big magilla

orders, so be prepared.

I'd grown so accustomed to thinking of Hartmut Bernhard as a young pup I was taken aback to see a little gray starting around his temples. There's a photo-essay on the wall in the tasting room showing the 1980 harvest, and Hartmut looks all of eleven years old. Maybe that's why. My fault, though, for these wines and this winery are striding forward each year, and no-longer-"young" — Hartmut Bernhard is entering his prime.

2002 marked the end of the fiberglass and cement tank era in his cellars: all stainless steel and old casks now.

Bernhard seems to take another step forward each year. If you're a musician you go through a period when you're basically grappling with your instrument. It usually sounds good enough, but attentive listeners can tell you're straining. Then, if you're good (and lucky), a day comes when the instrument begins to obey you, and if you're really good it will obey you before you're aware of having commanded it. Now all you hear is music. Hartmut is nearing that stage of secure command over his craft; you feel it in the wines.



emerges. Some wines show Nahe-like skeins of curranty delineation and do best in damper years. Others are typical Rheinhessen but with a more compact profile, as though their proximity to the Nahe caused them to speak with a Nahe-accent. They're also lighter and more buoyant than many Rheinhessen wines.

The Bernhards are out of the way, just over the hill from Bad Kreuznach and the Nahe Valley. It's one of those curious little corners of Germany. The soils are not unlike Nahe soils; igneous weathered rock, even porphyry in some places. Others are typically Rheinhessen clay; a hybrid of styles

- **Vineyard area: 9.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,900 cases**
- **Top sites: Hackenheimer Kirchberg, Frei-Laubersheimer Fels, Krichberg and Rheingrafenberg**
- **Soil types: Porphyry, clay and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 28% Riesling, 16% Spätburgunder, 11% Silvaner, 10% Kerner, 9% Müller-Thurgau, 7% Portugieser, 4% Weissburgunder, 15% others**

It's a father-and-son team, though Father retreats from the picture a little more each year. Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

I do wish, though, that I could persuade Hartmut to give me his Riesling from the porphyry vineyards with residual sugar; they need it, I want it, but I can't get it. Why? His private customers expect it Trocken!

Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had their Riesling dosage. I'm sure this contributes to their ever-increasing polish.

Bernhards make a bigger deal out of my visits than my meager talents warrant. I'm sure they know I like their wines, but I hope they know I *respect* them too. Hoping they're reading these words; gentlemen (and lady), it remains a pleasure to grow in the knowledge of our respective crafts together over the years we've known one another. And it is a joy to know you all. There. It's just the sort of thing I can't say out loud without dying of embarrassment. Now go away, I'm blushing as it is.

Hartmut was happily surprised at the glass-clear riesling aromas of his 2003s, as were many growers, as was I. He had no botrytis at all, and acidified his musts with tartaric. The vintage, while monumental and wel-

come, was understood to be, shall we say, exceptional. "If 2003 were to become the norm," he said, "We'd eventually have to start selling cases containing 11 bottles of wine

and one of water!" Bernhards make pretty gob-stuffing wines in any case, and I feared they might just crumple under the mega-ripeness of 2003. But no. Somehow, no.

Bernhard at a glance:

Jam-packed flavor bombs from clay soils, tangy-complex wines from volcanic soils. Great success with Scheurebe if you like them full-throttle! Steadily improving quality as the son consolidates his "regime."

how the wines taste:

It depends on the soil. Rieslings from the volcanic porphyry soils taste like Nahe wines under a sun lamp, complex and intricate. The wines from the clayey Kirchberg site are real gob-stuffers; they're not elegant (though far from clumsy) but rather concentrated and chewy. Each year Hartmut inches closer to his pinnacle.

- GCB-053 **2002 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**
We tried this with Silvaner *dosage* and then with Riesling, with telling results. Silvaner emphasized the sagey aspect of Scheu, and Riesling the tropical and citric. Then we blended the two and *Yow!* Has it all; sage, bergamot, cassis, meyer-lemon; heaps of fruit and a lavishly long finish.
SOS: 2 (now to six years)
- GCB-051 **2002 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**
Quite tangy and racy for this wine; solid and meaty as always, but lots of polish and gloss this year; demi-glace juice and saltiness.
SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GCB-055 **2003 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Trocken**
This is a porphyry vineyard which I usually have to bypass, as the dry wines aren't typically successful, but this is what one *hoped* for from '03 (and seldom got); the wine is broad and open, dry and smooth; bacony like the smell of a good *charcuterie*; salty porphyry complexity in a ripely juicy forthright style.
SOS: 0 (between now and four years)
- GCB-056 **2003 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett**
Avec du sucre! 25 grams of it, by accident, it wouldn't ferment any further, and hey, Terry was coming and who *else* would be crazy enough to buy such a wine? There's another kind of aroma here, apple-smoked bacon and candied violets; the palate has splendid salty density, saturated with terroir; spice-cake fruit and a balanced, gentle body.
SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)
- GCB-057 **2003 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Auslese**
The Scheu emerges deep in the tertiary finish. First it's all vanilla-papaya-passion fruit. Not surprisingly it's lavish and juicy, and I sense that Scheu cat will expose its claws before long.
SOS: 3 (between three and thirteen years)
- GCB-059 **2003 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Auslese**
Superfruit! Iris and wisteria on a damp warm evening, almost lurid; thickly muscular body and lemon-pudding fruit. VALUE.
SOS: 3 (between four and fifteen years)
- GCB-058H **2003 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer BA, 12/375ml** +
Another volcanic site. 140 Oechsle, and colorful adjective-bop flying around the table. "Rose-petal jam" said someone. "Lichee-liqueur." Corrie said "ginger," and I said a tropical fever of Gewürz; it's incredibly scrupulously varietal from pure raisins with zero botrytis. A ginger-lychee sorbet served with a bergamot-papaya flan; look, it's a circus for the body, so cozy up and fall in love or lust, as you prefer.
SOS: 4 (between now and eight years)

gernot gysler

rheinhessen • weinheim

Gysler is how you can see the enormous changes in German wine in just the past ten years.

Alex assumed control of the estate abruptly due to the untimely death of his father Gernot. Father was a man of his times, an honorable and honest vintner who came of age in the post-war years, and was seduced by both technology and by all the new crossings which promised Auslese every year. "My father liked soft wines," said Alex, "And they were good of their type, but I want to change things."

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing. He's moving ever-closer to 100% ambient yeast fermentations. He's shifted cover-crop to every second row, renewed composting, almost entirely done away with dosage, moved almost entirely toward stainless steel.

He's pulling out the new crossings and replanting with classic varieties (no mean feat with 12 hectares to manage). He's done away with herbicides entirely, and is using all-organic copper and sulfur. He's in the stage the organic organizations would call "transitional," and indeed he wants to join the Naturland group (Wittmann is a prominent member) and be certified-organic as soon as he can. This was in large part motivated by his wife's pregnancy, beautifully enough. The baby was born just a week before my visit, and I know the feeling; you want to make the world perfect.

Yet even as Alex turns the cellar completely around, in even deeper ways he is his father's son. You see it in his kindness and care and lack of artifice.

And needless to say, he's been discovered. None of the young can afford to work in obscurity; their only hope is to get on the Map *fast*. So they send their samples to all the necessary reviewers and they make all the necessary scenes.



Alexander Gysler

My only regret is he isn't in the Rheingau! For this is precisely the kind of fresh young talent that still-ossified region badly needs. A person with Gysler's determina-

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,900 cases**
- **Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg**
- **Soil types: Rotliegend and mixtures of stone, loam and clay**
- **Grape Varieties: Riesling, Silvaner, Huxelrebe**

tion and program would make superb wines in, say, Rauenthal. But one takes talent where it can be found, even in sleepy Weinheim, and one is grateful.

Alex has settled in, and his wonderful dog still gazes dolefully at all the fun from which he feels excluded. What's happening here is good. Recognition from the German wine press is also good. Soon it will be time to take the next steps. Because it isn't reducible, after all, to formula, or if it is, you risk making formulaic-tasting wines. Germans have a great word with no English equivalent: "Fingerspitzgefühl". A long `un, yes, but translated it is "the feeling on the finger tips" and it is the difference between correct wines, even "exciting" wines . . . and great wines.

It's best when you don't *know* what the vintner did. I have traveled with tasters who seize upon a single aspect of winemaking and try to determine whether-X-or-Y with each wine they taste. Cultured yeast or wild yeast? Tanks or casks? And when they're wrong they feel great consternation, while I smile inside. Because that fumbling is how they learn; it's how I learned and still learn. I doubt if anyone tasting, say, Dönnhoff's wine could tell you whether they're aged in casks or tanks. Take Justen and Christoffel: casks or tanks, and which is which? The more you look for cause-effect syllogisms by

which wine is “explained” the more frustrated you’ll become. Wine is explained in the feeling of the fingertips. And it takes the time it takes, for the taster and for the vintner.

I really like Alex Gysler and I’m delighted at the fine future I know he’ll have. He is most of the way mastering the externals, and his wines have iridescently polished surfaces. Soon it will be time to go deeper.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in relatively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which

takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg. These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn’t infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you’re on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren’t screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren’t any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you’d look at it and think “grapes should grow there.”

Gysler at a glance:

Big changes afoot as son Alexander Gysler takes control. The new wines are slimmed down, streamlined and modernized, jazzy and full of crispy, primary fruit. Prices, though, remain un-real for the time being!

how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now.

GGY-046 **2001 Weinheimer Scheurebe Sekt Brut**

Boy do I love this fizz. We’ve been talking about calling it “Bundle of Scheu” after the baby, though I don’t know if we can bring it off label-wise on time. It has wonderful focus and cassis tones and is just crazy-charming - it was an effort of will to spit-there’s elegance and complexity and admirable varietal purity, and pink grapefruit and bergamot tones, refinement and I’d give it 163 points on my 150-point gulp-o-meter. I do very little Sekt any more, having been spoiled by everyday access to great Champagne, but this wine is incomparable, and a GREAT VALUE.

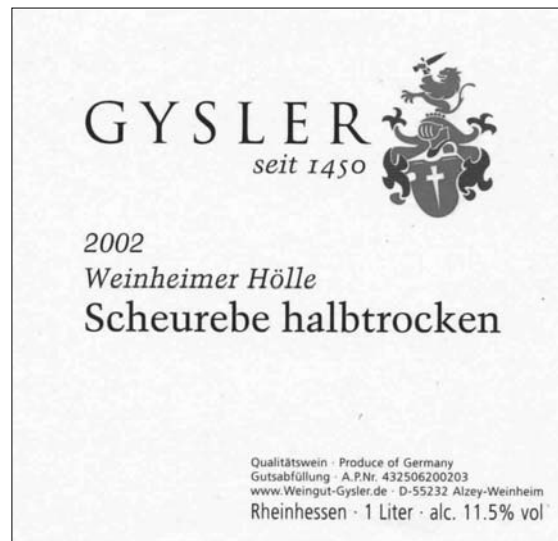
GGY-045L **2003 Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Dudes and dudettes, lissen up. If there were an international contest to determine the single-greatest wine value on earth, I’d enter this wine with every expectation of winning. It is that damn good. The 2003 is naturally lustier, more baritone than the amazing ultra-violet ’02, but its generosity is persuasive; sweet-hay now but with a lime overtone and a full-throated finish. To be drunk happily and often.
SOS: 0 (between now and two years)

GGY-042L **2002 Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Kevin Pike ordered a few cases on the spot to drink through the summer. This is the elderflower side of Scheu, light but true. Indeed its very lightness is the key to its seductiveness; it is suave and infinitely GOOD; a wine to *drink* in order to forget all the other wines you have to *work* to “taste”. It was just two weeks in bottle when I saw it, so it may well be more substantive than I suppose. In any case you’re gonna like this so much you’ll want to pay us more for it.
SOS: 0 (now, now, now, now...)

- GGY-044 **2003 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett** +
 As lovely as expected, but atypical for 2003-8.6 grams per liter acidity with a pH of 2.65! These were Alex's lowest must-weights in '03 (two lots, 88 and 90 Oechsle respectively) and "I was thrilled to have some rieslings with acidity-we added none to this." A complex fruity aroma, melon and mirabelle, meyer lemon and papaya; this is really superb for an 2003-for any vintage. Other growers (often in far more pedigreed land) were astounded that such a wine could be made.
 SOS: 2 (between four and sixteen years)
- GGY-047 **2003 Weinheimer Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 This is what one inferred from '03; good dry wines without sharp corners. There's just 12.5% alcohol, so no end-palate heat; classy riesling fragrance and a typically juicy-granular-salty 2003 riesling palate. Just, you know, dry.
 SOS: 0 (between now and four years)
- GGY-048 **2003 Weinheimer Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
 If you want more sheer overt fruit (or if your food calls for it) choose this one; in fact the tiny sweetness creates even more firmness of structure; fine rendering of redcurranty Rotliegend fruit.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between now and eight years)
- GGY-049 **2003 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Auslese**
 This is saltier than a Spätlese that I didn't select, with more length and cogency. Has 2003's juiciness and generosity; lots of lime and tilleul on the mid-palate, and a candidly sweet apple-buttery finish. It's easy to simply be with this wine.
 SOS: 3 (between five and seventeen years)
- GGY-050H **2003 Weinheimer Hölle Spätburgunder Weissherbst BA, 12/375ml**
 Rosé-of-Pinot-Noir Beerenauslese, gang. It's very sweet but with fantastic purity of varietal fruit; a kind of ether of Vosne-Romanée; no botrytis but raisins picked at the very end at 150 Oechsle; a confiture of Pinot Noir, all wild-strawberry and dew.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 4 (now to ten years)



mittelrhein wines



In 1900 there were 2000 hectares of vineyards planted in the Mittelrhein. In 1970 this had sunk to 1000. In the next thirty years it reduced again by half; as the new century began there were just 500 hectares remaining, a loss of 75% in a single century. 50 more hectares were abandoned last year alone. What's to become of this region?

In most but not all cases the best sites remain. In most cases the most impassioned vintners will continue. We're seeing a possibly beneficial herd-thinning, but we're also seeing a changing world, and would do well to consider how it will look and how happy we'll be to live in it.

Because the Mittelrhein is so rife with tourism, a lot of ordinary plonk was made to be sloshed down by heedless gawkers misty-eyedly sailing past the Loreley. I'll bet the boat-lines and taverns bid prices down to below subsistence for the poor growers. The vineyards are steep, Mosel-steep, and costs of production are high. The system was basically unsustainable. But what will take its place?

This point was driven home while I drove downstream to dinner with Linde Jost. We passed the beautiful vineyard site Kauber Rosstein (whose wines I used to represent via Heinrich Weiler until the domain encoun-

At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . .

tered some problems and I opted out) and Linde noted wistfully that its days appeared to be numbered. "But it's one of the great sites of the region," I protested. "Why is that?" "Well look at it," Linde replied. "It's all old terraces, too steep to work by machine. You can't get to it. Do you realize what you have to do to bring the harvest in from that vineyard?" she continued. "First you have to carry all the grapes on your back as there are no pathways for tractors or wagons. Then you have to cross a busy road, **and then you have to cross the railway line**, and *then* you have to get into a boat and row across the Rhine!" Well, I dunno; sounds like a day in the park to me. I mean, it's not like there's man-eating *fish* in the river or anything. In any case, it turned out the vineyard's sole proprietor was merely leasing the winery and had no incentive to invest in it. And so the thing goes to seed, and one of Riesling's finer habitats shall be no more. A specie of beauty is extinct. That makes me a little sad.

Still, go if you can. Along with the Mosel valley, the Rhein between Bingen and Koblenz is one of the few places left in Europe that actually looks like the tourist brochures. Amazing how the usual picture of the old cas-

tle somehow omits the lard-rendering plant across the road, isn't it? At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated though there isn't a flagship site like Scharzhofberger, nor a flagship estate like Eügon Müller. But I'd wager that a generation from now, the Josts and Weingarts will have become the standard "great names."

The vineyards fall into two groups: the riverfront sites (giving the slatiest, most minerally wines) and the side-valley slopes (whose wines are tangier and spicier). Soils are Devonian slate and quartzite, so the wines bear a strong resemblance to Mosel wines, though fuller in body, more "masculine" and sometimes with more lavish fruit. Most Moselans sense a kinship with Mittelrhein wines and would drink them first if they couldn't drink wines from their own region.



Boppard

tasting versus drinking

I once got invited to one of those mammoth vertical tastings of some Bordeaux, I think it was Las Cases. Fifty vintages, back to the Punic wars. Me! I never get invited to those things.

It took me all of five seconds to reply; no, I wouldn't be attending. "Oh, that's too bad. Is there a scheduling conflict?" "No," I replied, "I don't choose to attend. But I hope everybody else has a great time!"

I really do not enjoy sitting in some chillingly well-lighted room in a row with many other people as if we were taking the written segment of a driver's test, with ten glasses in geometric patterns on the table in front of me, little bitty bits of wine in each glass, sippin' and spittin' and combing my mind for adjectives. I don't enjoy it because I think it's a waste of wine, and even worse it is a sin against the spirit of wine, and I would just as soon not participate.

Give me any one or two of those mature vintages, along with a mellow evening, a rack of lamb, and the company of people I'm fond of, and I am a very happy man. A great old wine is such a gift of providence that it begs to be savored, to soak into your heart. Sitting in some creepy banquet room and "tasting" fifty old wines not only dilutes the aesthetic experience, it's a macho snub of the nose to the angels.

Apart from which I respect the hard work of the vintner. If he knew his/her wine would end up, fifty years later, being opened in a "tasting" alongside forty nine other wines for a bunch of earnestly scribbling geeks, he'd probably hurl a grenade at the winery and run away sobbing. I have enough on my poor conscience without contributing to that.



I was delightedly astounded with the quality of 2003 at Jost. The last several vintages have sometimes seemed to tote more weight than they could elegantly carry, a problem I thought might be exacerbated in 2003. But no, and far from it.

Mind you, Jost's wines have been famously tardy since Peter began his regime of long lees-contact, and I have sometimes underrated them out of the gate-I and other tasters also. They have appeared to slip down a notch from the elite position they held, but 2003 should set things right.

Want to hear a story of fortitude? Peter Jost broke his leg in the vineyards just three days before the harvest one year. He was in utter denial. This simply could not be. He didn't go in for X-rays for three days, and when he did he was told "your leg is broken and you'll be laid up for about six weeks." "Um, I don't think so!" After three weeks hobbling around on crutches, including

picking grapes in vineyards as steep as 60 degrees, his Doctor told him "Look, if you don't get off your feet we'll put you on your back!"

The solution? A WHEELCHAIR! "I rolled through the cellar in my wheelchair and made my wines," said Peter.

Different Rieslings age successfully in various ways, but wines like Jost's start out turbulent, only slowly unfolding to show their fruit complexity, which compounds over time, somehow both reducing and billowing into broader bands of nuance. Fructose can evolve a stop-you-in-your-tracks complexity if it's set in a firm enough frame. The best among Jost's wines show the noblest face of Riesling's pure fruit-self.

This is an estate with the lion's share of a single vineyard, with which they are identified, in this case the



BACHARACHER HAHN. There are a few other parcels also (along with some Rheingauers), but Jost and Hahn are inextricably linked. I've looked at Hahn from all sides now; from across the river (where it looks impossibly steep), from immediately below it, from above it, within it, and any way you slice it, this is one special

site; steep goes without saying, perfect exposure, large enough to allow selective harvesting. One cannot tell anymore whether its exuberant glory of fruit is innate, as there aren't any other proprietors to speak of. But who cares? It's one of the diamonds of the German wine world.

The winery is right on the main drag through the almost painfully lovely town of Bacharach. Linde has magic hands with food and is quick with a quip; in fact Linde is a paragon of humanity in many and varied ways, and they're a good couple, with three fine daughters, and the house has that purposive calm, even in the face of frenzy, that tells you things are as they should be.

The wines, also, can be calm and shining. *What* polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They can attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous

- **Vineyard area: 8.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,900 cases**
- **Top sites: Barcharacher Hahn, Wolfshöhle**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 85% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder**

but never overbearing, underpinned with slaty filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb.

The wines are fermented in stainless steel, using cultured yeasts, with controlled temperatures. "We're particularly careful of how we handle the grapes," says Peter. "All the grapes arrive at the press in undisturbed condition. We press with a maximum of 1.8 bars of pressure; the best wines don't go higher than one bar." Lees contact is "as long as possible, but regularly three months. Actually our wines throw very little sediment since we ferment a very clean must." says Peter. What lees do exist are stirred. "I want a partnership between primary fruit and the richness of the lees."

Nary a wine has been de-acidified for the last decade. And Peter is friendly toward the use of Süßreserve if it's produced optimally. "Each wine should have its own Süßreserve," he says. "It's labor-intensive and it falls just at the busiest time of the harvest, which means working the night shift!" But, he says, the later fermentation stops, the better for the wine. "In any case, at least for our wine which we fer-



Peter and Linde Jost

ment technically clean with the cultured yeasts, we can use a third less sulfur."

"We didn't acidify in 2003 because our fruit was dry

and clean," said Peter. It's the best vintage from here in many years.

Jost at a glance:

Primo estate with impeccable reputation for top-flight Rieslings. Wines emphasize beauty of fruit rather than mineral.

how the wines taste:

It is the quality of fruit you look for here, and this is about as lovely as it gets; a delicate melange of sweet-apple, white peach, honeysuckle, expressed in a resplendent elegance, always stopping short of mere sultriness.

- GTJ-053 **2003 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett**
A lovely fragrance, and the palate is pure apple and mineral, and I can't fathom how the hottest vintage since Genghis Khan could have produced such cool fruit from a heat-trap vineyard. The palate shows lovely shimmer and purity; it tastes essentially dry but is generous and pure. Did I remember to say "pure?" A wonderful achievement, the best Kabinett for many years.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)
- GTJ-056 **2003 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**
This is a different lot than the regular Kabinett, not just that wine with less residual sugar; it's a subtle and mealy thing, with mirabelle and apple aromas; a generous pulpy texture, more explicitly leesy; a charming dry riesling with lots of umami.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS 0: (between now and four years; and again from eleven to fifteen)
- GTJ-052 **2003 Rheingau Riesling Spätlese**
We're looking for a kind of "House" riesling. Inside Germany Josts have a wine called "Jodocus" they sell dry, but that isn't quite the thing in these parts. We want a Gutsriesling to place alongside Christoffel's and Dönnhoff's (among others), and in 2003 it's actually a *Spätlese* from a Rheingau vineyard called Wallufer Walkenberg. Do consult the pricelist . . . !

It's salty and tangy; again lots of *charcuterie* aromas; it asked for somewhat more sweetness than such a wine "should" have; in that sense 2003 is a weird vintage with which to introduce it; it's gracious and salty on the palate, with a redcurranty sort of smokiness.
SOS: 2 (between six and seventeen years)
- GTJ-055 **2003 Bacharacher Riesling Spätlese** +
From a side-valley heading west into the hills, but ZOWIE! This wine has the goods. Apple and quartz-y stoniness lead into a billowing minerality; dry-seeming, with nearly imposing length; you want to talk about *profound* terroir in a ju-ju-juicy framework? Well then!
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GTJ-054 **2003 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Spätlese** +
Asian pear and cherry blossom; again lavishly juicily mineral; a little more plum and salt than the regular Spät; somehow there's more sunshine in this one . . . in essence this is just irresistible, all the way to its haunting lavender finish. Bravo!
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-four years)
- GTJ-057H **2003 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** +
This is the wine whose grapes adorn the front cover of this offering, a wee thing of 275 Oechsle, and yes I know it's pricey but it's a Cecil B. DeMille of TBA; all sultanas and figs, a Roman orgy of ripeness; a wine for endless cellaring yet already bewitchingly delicious.
SOS: 4 (between thirty and seventy-five years).

florian weingart

mittelrhein • boppard-spay

Florian Weingart seems self-conscious about the accolades regularly heaped upon him, like putting on a tux and looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking "Who is this guy?" Last year he was "promoted" to top estate of the Mittelrhein by *Gault-Millau*, in a class by himself, but he only blushed when I hailed him as "Mr. 4-Stars!" Nor do I think this is mere modesty. Florian is exceptionally thoughtful and driven, constantly cogitating, guessing and second-guessing, always trying to improve. All the praise is nice, but distracting.

The praise ain't going away any time soon, not when these 2003s start being tasted. Florian seems to have resisted 2003's tendency to excess while embracing its tendency to lavishness. He added tartaric acids to musts over 3.4 pH, and the dry wines were rather more constricted than

I expected to find them, but otherwise I don't remember a superior group of wines from this estate - ever.

These are very happy visits. The wines are full of melody, and Florian's kids keep coming into the room, shyly at first and then like wound-up little sprites. I like tasting wine with young vintners whose kids are sitting in his lap. It stops me from getting too precious about the wines. It puts the work in context. Context is good. It helps me define a thing I need to remember: the connection of the family, the land, and the wine. Somehow I doubt I'd be tasting with Mr. Kendall or Mr. Jackson in a little living room with kids peering shyly around the corner and the simmer-fragrance of lunch cooking. One year both girls seized upon my Karen Odessa, who amused them for two hours with her laptop. She recorded the two girls very shyly singing "Ten Little Indians" and every time she played it later I felt happy.

Florian is more of an intellectual than many growers. "There is no single True way," he says: "Rather a multitude of possibilities." I sense he's delighted to play among them! Florian has always been transparently candid and unaffected with me, which I find unendingly delightful. It's such a pleasure to connect simply as colleagues. I think he is instinctively genuine, as are his wines.

This is another estate which is worked by the whole family. Papa only emerged at the end to greet me, Mama came and went, and Florian's missus mostly tried to keep the kids out of our way (with mixed success, I noted happily).

- **Vineyard area: 9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg, Feuerlay, Engelstein and Mandelstein**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 92% Riesling, 8% other**

Florian is improving what were already excellent wines, but I still miss his folks. Papa set a fine example of diligence, fortitude and joy. He suffers from a degenerative nerve ailment that deprives him of the use of his fingertips, not an easy prospect for a small family-domain on steep slopes. Yet he was invariably cheerful and uncomplaining, and his wines were tensely fruity, and it does the soul good to see a talented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

The wines are more green-fruity than they have been, more explicitly slatey, more Mosel-like. Florian ascribes this to colder fermentations. He also suggests that the big tropical-fruit flavors of earlier Weingart wines resulted to some extent from nitrogen fermentations. He's also leaving his wines longer on their lees, "partly to compensate for the loss of body resulting from our colder fermentation temperatures." And this gives them another dimension of complexity.

But you can't do away entirely with those tropical flavors; they are written into the soil. There's a vein of volcanic residue from eruptions in the old Eifel mountains in the soils of the Bopparder Hamm, and it's (presumably) this soil which accounts for the bigger sweet-fruit expression in these wines. The Ohlenberg has a deeper soil, giving more robust wines, more likely to come from physiologically ripe fruit and therefore better suited to Trocken styling. (Florian's one of the few to make this intuitive connection.)



Weingart at a glance:

A risen star on the Mittelrhein with the advent of young Florian Weingart at the helm. Still-good value for in-your-face fruity-minerally steep-slope wine.

how the wines taste:

They're urgent above all; these are wines that move, that push and pull on the palate. Then tropically fruity, vanilla, papaya, mango in the ripest wines. With the 1996 vintage a new minerality came; you feel it on the sides of the palate, and it sets up a call-and-response of fruit and stone that keeps you returning to the wine just when you were done attending to it. These are smiling, cheerful wines, but now perhaps with a fundamental intelligence that makes you want to spend lots of time with them.

- GAW-067 **2003 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 This was my favorite among the dry wines; generous all around; lavish nose and a ripely juicy palate; classic meyer lemon, mango, plantain.
 SOS: 0 (between now and four years, again from twelve to sixteen)
- GAW-068 **2003 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken** +
 This hails from vineyards near Bacharach, quite another terroir, and quite a different face of Weingart; more in the apple and quince and quartzite direction now; a really haunting quality here; cherry blossom fragrances like Norheimer Kirschheck; just crazily juicy yet sleek and firmly knit; very long. A "star" for its sheer charm.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between now and seven years, again from thirteen to eighteen)
- GAW-063 **2002 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett**
 A custom-bottling for moi, as there was no "regular" Kabinett. At which I squawked. I'd have yelped buy my throat was tender from yowling all morning. I'm a real gross guy. Anyway, what we did here was blend a Spätlese into the small amount of "real" Kabinett Florian had, and which he intended to blend away somewhere else. A sinewy-slatey-stony nose, raspberries too; the palate is spicy and grippy, zingy like Ratzenberger used to be; a little gooseberry tartness shows on the finish.
 SOS: 2 (between four and sixteen years)
- GAW-069 **2003 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 This had just had its first racking (on March 4th) no a preliminary note, but this is a pretty wild critter; sizzly lilac nose; splendid spice and flower on the gloriously mineral palate; a little sweet but built for the long haul; haunting almond-blossom and taffeta finish leading into wild feral notes. The reputation of 2003 will be built on wines like this.
 SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-one years)
- GAW-071 **2003 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Auslese** +
 Imagine blending Brücke and Kirschheck. Stunning length and sinew; tastes more like a 1990 than a 2003; the palate swims through a miasma of ripeness (dodging stones along the way!) arriving finally in this exotic garden of orchids. Amazing!
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-six years)
- GAW-070 **2003 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Auslese** +
 Back to vanilla and tropical fruit now, but what's gorgeous here is the *restraint* and spiciness; polleny and penetrating, a whole grove of flowering crabapple on a moist Spring evening; splendid length and all the spine it needs.
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-three years)
- GAW-072 **2003 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Auslese**** +
 Seethingly expressive aromas of perfect botrytis and lemon cream; the palate is RICH, not so much thick as **dense**, and this clean botrytis will go all malty with age. True profundity here; one drinks the liquid extract of an entire viticultural civilization, beyond mere terroir, but all the way to the place terroir exists to take you.
 SOS: 3 (between nine and thirty years)

why does place-specificity matter?

Once upon a time I sat on a panel discussing spirit-of-place, and a native-American woman to my left said something that lodged on my heart and has not moved since.

The salmon do not only return to the stream, she said, in order to spawn; they also return in order to respond to the prayers and hopes of the people who love them.

I thought that remark was innocuous enough, so I was taken aback when someone responded it was "pretentious New Age bullshit" (or words to that effect). I recognize there are sensibilities other than mine, more linear, more prosaic. Yet with all respect, most thoughts along the "mystical" continuum are reducible to linear equations if one wishes to frame them thus.

No, the salmon aren't actually thinking "let's go back to the river guys, cause the Indians are waiting for us." No one means to say that. There is, though, among certain peoples, an immersion into nature different from our I-thou relationship, an inchoate assumption of *unity* among living things. The idea of the salmon "responding" is poetic, but the notion of interconnectivity is entirely reasonable.

That assumption of a unity of living things underlies my own assumption that places have spirit, and wine is one of the ways places convey their spirits to us, and this is significant because we are in fact connected (even if we deny it or are unaware), and if we claim that wine is an important part of life then wine must be bound into and among the filaments by which we are connected to all things. Wines which simply exist as products to be sold must take their places alongside all such commodities, soda, breakfast cereal, vacuum-cleaner bags. They can be enjoyable and useful, but they don't matter.

Spirit-of-place is a concept that's like really good soap; it's lovely, it feels good when it touches you, and it's slippery as hell.

It isn't announced with billboards, you know. *Spirit Of Place, five miles ahead, bear right to access*. Not like that. Nor is it necessarily beautiful. The northernmost section of the New Jersey Turnpike is full of spirit-of-place, however repugnant it may be. I'd say it comes at the moment of ignition between your soul and that place, and a condition of that union is that it happens aside from your awareness. It is an inference, as all soul things are.

I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the landscape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and the cool days of June, and the wan northern sun that seldom seems to roast. And the still

wines are not vivid in the way that young Riesling or Muscat is. They are pastel, aquarelle, restrained, gauzy. Add bubbles and they get frisky. But they aren't born that way. Didier Gimonnet told me he'd been pestered by an English wine writer to produce a tiny amount of super-cuvee from an 80-year old vineyard he owns . . . "I'll never do it," he insisted, "because the wine would be too powerful." But isn't that the point, I thought? Isn't that what wine's supposed to do in our skewered age? Density, concentration, power, flavor that can break bricks with its head! "I think Champagne needs to have a certain transparency in order to be elegant," he continued. And then it came to me.

Here was the Aesthetic to correspond with the gentleness of the Champagne landscape. A *pays* of low hills, forested summits and plain sleepy villages isn't destined to produce powerful wines. We have become so besotted by our demand for **impact** that we've forgotten how to discern *beauty*. And who among us ever tilts a listening ear to hear the hum of the land?

One reason the old world calls to us is that these lands do hum, a low subterranean vibration you feel in your bones. It has existed for centuries before you were born. It isn't meant to be fathomed. It is mysterious, and you are temporary, but hearing it, you are connected to great currents of time. And you are tickled by a sense of significance you cannot quite touch. It cannot be the same here. Each of us Americans is the crown of creation. We invented humanity. Nothing happened before us, or in any case, nothing worth remembering. Memory is a burden in any case. We turn to the world like a playground bully looking to pick a fight. "Waddaya got TODAY to amuse me, pal? How ya gonna IMPRESS me? How many POINTS will this day be worth?" Maybe our little slice of earth rumbles with its own hum, but if it does, not many Americans want to know how to hear it, and most are suspicious of the value of listening at all.

Does spirit-of-place reside integrally within the place, or do we read it in? The answer is: YES. We are a part of all we touch, see, taste, experience. If we glean the presence of spirit-of-place, then it's there because we glean it, because we are not separate from the things we experience.

I want to emphasize that point. The soul records, but does not transcribe. Because we are a part of nature, what happens to us also happens *in nature*. This is self-evident. From this point one ventures into cosmology or does not, according to one's preferences. I prefer to believe spirit-of-place registers in our soul because *nature wants it to*. Because everything that happens in nature is part of a design, which we humans discern. You may believe or disbelieve in the purposiveness of that design. Myself, I feel if one chooses to presume there is no purpose, then what is there left to think

about? It's all senseless and random, la di da, what's on TV? Assuming it is not mere chance is at the very least an opening for more thinking.

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? We need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When something flourishes, it tells us it is at *home*. It says this is where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste "flourish" when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can "exist" elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!

But the same grape will be mute on "foreign" soil. Try planting Riesling where it's too warm or the soil's too rich, and it becomes a blatant, fruit-salady wine which most people correctly write off as dull and cloying. Has Chenin Blanc ever made great wine outside Anjou or Touraine? Nebbiolo doesn't seem to flourish outside Piemonte. I'd even argue that Chardonnay is strictly at home in Chablis and Champagne, since these are the only places where its inherent flavors are complex and interesting; it does easily without the pancake-make-up of oak or other manipulations.

When a vine is at home it settles in and starts to transmit. We "hear" these transmissions as flavors. A naturally articulate grape like Riesling sends a clear message of the soil. Indeed Riesling seems to frolic when it's at home, it is so playful and expressive. And so we see the lovely phenomenon of detailed and distinct flavors coming from contiguous plots of land. Vineyard flavors are consistent, specific, and repeated year after year, varied only by the weather in which that year's grapes ripened. Graacher Himmelreich and Graacher Domprobst are useful cases in point. Domprobst lies right above the village, and is uniformly steep and very stony. Mosel slate can either be bluish-grey, battleship grey or rusty-grey according to other trace minerals which may be present. Some soils are more weathered than others. The harder the rock, the harder the wine. (The locals tell you the very best wines grow on *feinerd*, or fine-earth, a slate already pre-crumbled. But such soils often settle at the bottoms of hills, where sun-exposure can be less than optimal. The parameters are complex.) Domprobst always gives thrilling wines, with "signature" flavors of cassis, pecans and granny-apples. I get Domprobst from three different growers, and its particular fingerprint is absolutely consistent whichever the cellar.

Right next door to the southeast is Himmelreich. This is an undulating hillside with sections of varying steepness. In Domprobst you hit rock six inches below the surface; in Himmelreich it's often a foot or more. This gives the wines more fruit, and makes them less adamantly fibrous and mineral, more forthcoming, and

just a little less superb. If you're a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don't have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the *grapes*.

You wouldn't have to sermonize to *these* people about spirit-of-place. They are steeped within that spirit as a condition of life. Their inchoate assumption that Place contains Spirit is part of that spirit.

Let's step back a little. The Mosel, that limpid little river, flows through a gorge it has created, amidst impossibly steep mountainsides. Its people are conservative and they approach the sweaty work on the steep slopes with humility and good cheer. They are people of the North, accustomed to a bracing and taut way of life. Is it an accident that their wines, too, are bracing and taut? Show me someone who is determined to prove otherwise, and I'll show you someone who has never been there.

I'll go further. I believe the Catholic culture of the Mosel produces wines themselves catholically mystic. You see it in the wines when they are mature; sublime, uncanny flavors which seem to arise from a source not-of-this-earth.

I need wines which tell me in no uncertain terms:

"I hail from THIS place and this place alone, not from any o t h e r place, only h e r e , where I am at home."



Because such wines take us to those places. If we are already there, they cement the reality of our being there. We need to know where we are. If we do not, we are: lost.

I don't have time to waste on processed wines that taste like they could have come from anywhere, because in fact they come from *nowhere* and have no place to take me. We crave spirit of place because we need to be reassured we belong in the universe. And we want our bearings. We want to know where home is. We can deny or ignore this longing, but we will grow old wondering at the ceaseless scraping nail of anxiety that never lets us feel whole. Or we can claim this world of places.

And when we do, we claim the love that lives in hills and vines, in trees and birds and smells, in buildings and ovens and human eyes, of everything in our world that makes itself at home and calls on us to do the same. The value of wine, beyond the sensual joy it gives us, lies in the things it tells us, not only its own hills and rivers, but the road home.

pfalz wines



Every year I take a few days in Alsace for a little R & R. It's nice to get a break and I love Alsace. I love the wines, too, and try to make time for visits to a few of my favorite growers. What a wine-geek does on his day off: taste more wine. Lately the Alsatians have started doing what the Germans did fifteen years ago, showing analytical values for their wines on pricelists. I never knew how many Alsace wines were so LOW in acidity, nor did I know (though I did suspect) how much residual sugar was in so many wines. Rieslings too.

Now, I have no objection to this at all. *Sweetness is your friend!* I know the purists yearn for a return to the old style Alsace wines; dry, manly, stern. I have a suggestion for them.

They can go to the Pfalz.

In the last generation there's been a 180-degree about-face in these two close-by regions. Today it is PFALZ WINE that will satisfy the demand for uncompromisingly dry wine in the Rhineland style. There is, however, one small problem. Most dry Pfalz wine absolutely and totally sucks.

I love this region, truly I do. I was among the first to proclaim it Germany's most *happening* wine region. But in the last few years it has become an Eden of the Unexamined Palate.

I used to think that notions like "kilocalories of sunlight" were specious, but now I'm starting to wonder. I suspect there is indeed a difference between the sun-warmth in Alsace and that of the Pfalz, an hour or two North. Because most Alsace Riesling basically works,

I love this region, truly I do. I was among the first to proclaim it Germany's most *happening* wine region.

even at its most dry. One might have small aesthetic cavils with this wine or that, but the *formula* is basically sound. It is just the opposite in the Pfalz. There are successful, even superb dry Rieslings there, but the *essential* basis is seriously flawed. That is, unless you like (or *think* you like) shrill, meager, sharp and bitter wines.

The Pfalz is besieged with local tourism from the big cities Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Frankenthal and Heidelberg. Summer weekends are wall-to-wall swirl & hurl. For some reason (perhaps chemical emissions from the heavy industry near Frankenthal?) these fine denizens of taste have embraced masochism as their aesthetic tabula rosa. The poor growers, who have to sell their wines, after all, have not only to comply, but also to *appear* enthusiastic, and to embrace a guiding philosophy

of dryness. It goes emphatically against common sense, but livings must be made.

I don't know why the wines don't work. I drink plenty of honestly dry Riesling from Austria and Alsace. Indeed, I like dry Riesling. I'm not sure why a wine with 13% alcohol would taste thin and fruitless; I only know that almost all of them do. I have tried and tried to like them. It's tiresome and frustrating to kvetch.

Another lamentable tendency in my beloved and endangered Pfalz is to plant more and more Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris (and Chardonnay, for which they will writhe eternally), the better to produce (mostly) neutral and softer dry wines. A lot of old dubious vines have been hacked up—Optima, Siegerrebe, Ortega, Morio-Muscat - and one is duly grateful; that land was probably unsuitable for Riesling.

These days it's likely to be used for (sigh) red varieties, since the Germans are convinced they'll keel over from heart attacks unless they slam down the vino rosso. The waiting list for Dornfelder clippings is two to three years. You see Cabernet and Merlot crawling like a plague over the land. The Pfalz seriously wishes to establish itself as a red-wine region. Yes, several among the red wines are very tasty – I sell a couple of them with great pride – but let's not forget to resist this ominous urge to homogenize. If we allow it to grow malignantly the next thing you know we'll insist on ripe raspberries all year round.

Oh shit; we already do.

The reducto ad absurdum of all this is the truly ghastly set of rules applying to the "Erstes Gewächs" (Grand Cru) program. Everything is perfectly enlightened—low yields, old vines, hand-harvesting, minimum

necessary ripeness—until the ideologues began vomiting their ghastly ideas and insisted the wines must either be DRY (up to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar) or “NOBLY” SWEET (above 50 grams per liter). It is distressing to be asked to accept these (mostly) brutally hot and bitter wines as arguments for Grand Cru status. It is distressing to see an entire community of wines strait-jacketed to squeeze into a marketing person’s convenience. If anyone knows a stealthy little munchkin who needs a job I’d like to hire him to break into all these deluded wineries and drop Süsreserve into the tanks.

And yet . . . and yet! When Pfalz wines are good, they’re uniquely good. And there are so many ways for them to be good. When you think of the sheer number of interesting people in the Pfalz, it makes other regions (like the ossified Rheingau?) seem like backwaters. Nobody knows why, but the Pfalz is home to a thriving community of idiot-fringe experimenters who are real wine *nuts*, who collect it, talk about it, read about it, probably even *dream* about it. And these are the **least** snobby of any wine people you can imagine; people who really know how to tuck in and *live*, with the quality the Germans call “Lebenlust,” a gargantuan appetite for life. And where else could you find such a prolific mix of temperaments? And so *many* great growers? To spend the morning at, say, Koehler-Ruprecht, and the afternoon, at, say, Müller-Catoir, is to taste two amazingly great but COMPLETELY MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE families of wines. How, then, do we determine what real Pfalz wine is like?

Well, we need a definition broad enough to encompass most of the various styles, but more important we

need to isolate what the wines have in common. Let’s start with this: Pfalz wine shows a unique marriage of generosity and elegance; no other wine is at once so expansive and so classy. The idea of “class” usually suggests a certain reserve: NOT HERE! The typical Pfalz wine has big, ripe fruit, lots of literal spice (cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg), a kind of lush savor, a keen tang of pineapple, a splendid tautness of acidity under that frothing stock pot of fruit. The wines have a *great* affinity for food—certainly the most versatile of all German

The wines have a great affinity for food—certainly the most versatile of all German wines—and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

wines—and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

From this point the ways diverge. In what other region could you superimpose the laser-etching of a Darting with the big burly power of a Koehler-Ruprecht, with the fiery-yet-satiny persistence of an Eugen-Müller with the tingly mineral gleam of a Messmer with the leesy chewiness and compactness of a Minges with the sheer stunning **expression** of fruit of a Lingenfelder with the little-bit-of- all-of-those-high-flying-you’ll-break-your-crazy-neck-daredevil-glee of a Biffar? NFW, that’s where!



Pfalz vineyard view

Müller-Catoir is reborn.

These words may jar with the estate's proprietor Heinrich Catoir, but I wasn't the only one to note a time of transition last year. One of the German wine journals docked a "star" from the rating. Another declined to rate the winery at all, pending some view of how the land lay now.

Yet Catoir's sentiments are not mere peevishness. While I was tasting the 2003s—the most exciting and encouraging group of wines I saw in Germany—I became aware that such wines do not exist in a vacuum. To be sure, the achievement of cellar master Martin Franzen is formidable, but the climate in which such achievement can occur is inculcated and maintained by a proprietor, one who assumes his wines should be stellar and aristocratic. And who finances it! And who sets the tone.

When Hans-Günter Schwarz retired last year after 42 years as cellar master, during which time he and Catoir had revolutionized German wine, there was a certain degree of *weather*. 42 years is a long time. Schwarz is gregarious and has many friends, while Mr. Catoir is retiring. Martin Franzen came on midway through the season, attempting to divide his time between Catoir and Nägelsförst, two hours away, to whom he'd promised to work till the end of 2002. Everything at Catoir was topsyturvy; Martin needed to create and establish a new team of his own (which takes time to gell) and then the poor man was hit with the deranged summer of 2003 and the relentless vineyard work it entailed. And he was under the gun, all eyes affixed on him, some of whom were awaiting his crashing and burning, and he was an outsider in the Pfalz (having come from Baden and before that, the Nahe, and being a Moselaner by birth) and knew no one.



Martin Franzen

And all he did was craft a stunning vintage against nearly insurmountable odds. And again, *he* did it because Catoir made *it* doable.

My friendship with and admiration for Hans-Günter Schwarz are no secret. Franzen, along with

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,250 cases**
- **Top sites: Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog, Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten, Mussbacher Eselshaut**
- **Soil types: Loamy gravel, clay**
- **Grape varieties: 58% Riesling, 13% Rieslaner, 9% Scheurebe, 8% Weissburgunder, 4% Muskateller, 3% Grauburgunder and Spätburgunder, 2% other varieties**

everyone else, stands on his shoulders and basks in the sunlight of Schwarz's achievement. But he makes his own wines, both fascinatingly similar and different from Hans-Günter's. Similar because the vines, the vineyards, the cellar and the proprietor giving context do not change. Different because of course he himself is different. The hard part is to try and explain how.

But first you should know these are also atypical 2003s, far more focused and firm than many others; more backbone, more explicit clarity, less pure warmth but more pure brightness. No rieslings were acidified.

Indeed the vintage reminds me of a Catoir vintage from the era between 1986 and 1990, the same contained intelligent power and almost seething clarity. It is somewhat less like the most recent vintages—1996 to 2001—wherein the power retreated a little, the fruit became tenderer and a new leesy dimension arrived. Franzen's 2003s are more spectacular than tender, but this is very likely due to the vintage itself.

Franzen likes extended lees-contact, ultra-reductive vinification, and when he says “dry” he means *dry*. What the Germans now call “modern-Trocken” i.e. up to the legal limit of 9g.l. residual sugar is not his style. It is really too soon to identify his style here in the Pfalz. Even the more typical 2002 vintage can't constitute a signpost, though my ever-increasing regard for those wines was

publicly acknowledged with a mea culpa for having underrated them out of the gate. What is discernible is the man's poise and sheer talent. Not to mention his drive, and agreeable personality. I shall follow his work absorbedly for many years, and remain awed by the accomplishment of the 2003 vintage.

Müller-Catoir at a glance:

At its best the greatest estate in the Pfalz and one of the top few in all of Germany. Brilliant primary-fruit driven wines of supernatural steely clarity and multi-layered depth. The overused word *aristocratic* perhaps best describes them.

how the wines taste:

Extremely spritzzy and highly leesy-äone wine made me think of Gimonnet's Cuvée Gastronom! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

DRY WINES

GMC-058 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

The lovely fragrance is pure *Catoir*. Lemon and orange-blossom. I love the calm geniality of this, not to mention its amazing length and playfulness. Truly super dry riesling. SOS: 0 (between one and six years, again from eleven to fourteen)

GMC-059 **2003 Hambacher Römerbrunnen Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

This was the easiest and most agreeable among the dry wines; plantain, soursop and spice cake aromas; happy-to-see-you palate with raw-silken texture and lots-o-lees; agreeable phenolic grip and a Cox-orange/apple brightness. Schwarz usually made his Liter riesling from this site; it's nice to see Franzen probing to see if it has more to give. SOS: 0 (now to five years, again from ten to thirteen)

GMC-060 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Breumel" +**

GMC-061 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Aspen"**

GMC-062 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Gehren"**

These are the old site-names, many of which were used before the 1971 wine law wiped them off the map. Every piece of ground in Germany has a name, even if it only grows potatoes, and Franzen is making a terroir statement here. This is part of an intriguing wave in Germany right now; back to the old *true* single-site names. These can't be used legally, but they can be used (ostensibly!) as brand-names.

This is a fascinating trio; I like the **Breumel** best; it hails from the so-called Clos, a heat-trap walled site Catoir purchased some years ago; it has great force and power; clarity, precision, minerality, thrust; bergamot, lees and powdered stones. There's some finishing heat that didn't fret me because the overall wine is so wonderfully expressive. I liked the **Aspen** and **Gehren** marginally less, but feel it's important you should see all three. **Aspen** is sensationally juicy and mineral but there's a citric tartness Franzen says will age out; I hope so. The **Gehren** has the thickest mid-palate mineral but also the most bitterness. Yet something tells me all three wines will unfurl splendidly.

SOS: 0 to minus 1, depending on development. (between one and eight years, again between fourteen and nineteen years)

- GMC-063 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller Spätlese Trocken**
 A splendidly feral Muscat; total Thai basil you left in a hot car; lots of mineral mid-palate; long and no-nonsense. Does *not* show its 14.5% alcohol.
 SOS: 0 (now to three years)

THE NOT-DRY WINES!

- GMC-064 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** ++
 Oh it's getting wa-a-a-ay good now; I mean this wine has really insane penetration and length, a wonderfully fluffy mid-palate mineral; again I thought of my cloud-image, enormous mass yet transparency. Interesting too; as good as even these very successful Trockens are, the minute any sweetness creeps into the picture the wine becomes brighter, more complex and musical.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between one and eight years, again between thirteen and seventeen)
- GMC-065 **2003 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Kabinett** ++
 As if from another country, all bouquet-garni and lavender and flowering rosemary; the palate is a polychromatic swirl of intricacy, every sweet herb and mineral charged with magic, as if any single component could cure diseases.
 SOS: 2 (between three and thirteen years)
- GMC-066 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** +
 This is candid and clear and direct, an almost mathematical exposition of beauty and charm; lovely lemony bouyancy; a truly *delightful* wine, with playfulness and lots of yin-yang of mirabelle and lime.
 SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)
- GMC-067 **2003 Haardter Herrenletten Riesling Spätlese** +++
 One of the wines of the vintage. An enormous, almost epic swelling of fruit and terroir; endless shimmer and echo and just *heavenly* fruit; complex on each of endless levels; mineral, fruit, dialectic. Wow.
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GMC-068 **2003 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese**
 "So are you getting comfy with Scheurebe?" I asked Franzen, who smiled wryly and answered "Trying to!" This is super wine but only obliquely hints at Scheu, though this could easily change. Just a tease of sage at this point, but très sexy stuff trying to get in touch with its inner tomcat.
 SOS: 2 (between two and nine years)
- GMC-069 **2003 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner Spätlese** ++
 Rieslaner is a crossing bred in Franken, presumably to create a grape which would give Silvaner expression in Franken soils and bring Riesling acidity and frost-resistance along. It does seem to make the best Franken wines and good to stunning wine anyplace else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Schwarz *loved* it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives *more* acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. It can produce the most *singular* great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as-is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would *never* himself do such a thing . . .

At this point there was another wonderful wine I left on the sidelines for each one I took, a true embarrassment of riches. This is explosive, martial; an artillery-crack of flavor, *absurdly* mineral, lysergic lime, white-hot force, mass and delineation. Yet with all that implacable thrust the wine is intelligent, even graceful. Amazing.
SOS: 2 (now to ten years)

GMC-070H **2003 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml** **+**
Splendid aromas of overripe and shriveled grapes; mass and grandeur here; a wine you can truly call *majestic*, with endless depths and fathoms.
SOS: 3 (from two to fourteen years)

GMC-071H **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml** **+++**
Be discreet; this pleasure is illegal in many states and territories . . . scrupulous varietality with this degree of concentration is rare-this is a Zeus of Rieslaner, has maintained its shape even as it grows to omniscient proportion, and the almost refreshing wintergreen shimmer on the finish is just mind-boggling. Sell your car to pay for this wine if you have to.
SOS: 4 (between twelve and twenty-eight years)

GMC-072H **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **(++)**
Ask me later! It wasn't ready, but I will be.



Koehler-Ruprecht

pfalz • kallstadt

NOTE ON KOEHLER RUPRECHT OFFERING 2004:

Bernd Philippi suffered an accident that left him hospitalized, a few days before my scheduled visit. Thus I didn't get to taste the wines. Samples of the 2002s (which would, for him, be the currently available vintage) are en route to me but I won't get them before this catalogue goes to press. Nor do I know which of the previously offered wines are still available. This being the case, we'll produce an offering the moment we actually can, and will post it on the web site and send out hard copies to you as a supplement.

Last I heard Bernd was O.K. - "stable" in medical parlance - but his return date was still uncertain. It goes without saying I wish him well; Germany wasn't the same without him.

Here is the "standard" text on the estate.

I remember when I started to "get" the dry wines. Not how or why, but certainly *when*, and when it happened it was both thrilling and disconcerting. I have strong opinions about certain things but I really try not to be pulled around by them. So I didn't used to like Bernd Philippi's Trocken wines, but now I did, some of them at least, and maybe we were just ready for each other. That, or I used to be a doofus.

This amazing winery's production rhythms don't, alas, congrue with my commercial rhythms, and so I never really get to show you a vintage the way I'd like. Business is brisk at this very trendy winery, and Bernd Philippi doesn't bottle many "sweet" wines any more. His dry wines are surely among the best in Germany . . . but really. Don't even get me started again.

Bernd-Philippi—pardon me: The LEGENDARY Bernd-Philippi—is the master of this establishment and lord of all he surveys. He has taken what was always a successful estate and turned it into one of *THE* estates in Germany. His wines, like his own Falstaffian persona, are larger-than-life. He's been allocating for years now; he's been raising his prices consistently with nary a murmur of protest from his loyal clientele, who are happy just to obtain the wines and who know the value they (still) rep-

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Kallstadter Saumagen, Steinacker and Kronenberg**
- **Soil types: Limestone detritus, sandy loam, partly with gravel**
- **Grape varieties: 56% Riesling, 19% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% each of Chardonnay and Grauburgunder, 2% of each Dornfelder and Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% other varieties**

resent; he's been a wine writer's **dream**, such is the dimension of his character and his readiness with a maverick opinion. He probably stops bullets in his **teeth** for all I know.

Bernd is the archetypal Pfalzer lion. He's one of those guys you can really **capture** in a photograph, as his every expression and gesture is imbued with Bernd-ness. He's become aware that it's his experimenter persona that's most appealing to journalists, and he's seen the need to stress his role as Keeper of the Saumagen. "Eighty percent of what I do is Saumagen, O.K.—that's my main thing. The other twenty percent is my games, you know, the stuff I do for fun."

There probably isn't another great vineyard in Germany as unknown over here as the Saumagen. It's a limestony, rocky soil in a bowl-shaped heat trap that gives some of the ripest Riesling grapes in Europe.

But all its parcels are not created equal. Used to be there were three small sites (Nill, Kirchenstück and Horn) which made up a GROSSLAGE called Saumagen. Now it's the single-site name, encompassing a fair range



of exposures and soils. Bernd's parcel is probably the finest, south-facing terraces right in the heart of the bowl. Bernd has *never* failed to harvest Spätlese from this site, even in the wettest, most miserable years. I'm sure that a ready supply of ripe fruit contributes to Philippi's serenity as a vintner. But don't let that calm exterior fool you; this man is as proud and dedicated as they come.

I remember an old Charlie Parkerism (when asked how to go about being a great jazz musician): "First master your instrument," he said. "Then forget about all that shit and just PLAY." There you go! Bernd makes his way through the cellar like a virtuoso who no longer has to *think* about technique. And his wines are saturated with personal expression. His "voice," deep, resonant, gravelly, comes through in all his wines. Often remarkable, sometimes astonishing, sometimes *undrinkable* but always original, these wines are not for the faint of palate, and no one feels lukewarm about them. They represent the purity of an old style you almost don't see anymore.

Bernd has no fear of oxygen; indeed, these wines' profound acid-extract structure seem to *relish* extended aging on the lees, frequent rackings, and lengthy storage in wood. I've known cellar-rats here who've told me privately that Bernd's winemaking breaks most of the modern rules, that by all reckoning they shouldn't work at all. Well, guess again. Other Philippi principles include no cultured yeasts, and none but the "classical" Geisenheim

clones of Riesling. He likes alcohol and body and Nietzschean *thunder* in his wines. He doesn't like sweetness, and even his wines with residual sugar are on the dry side. Left to his own devices he'd drink nothing but dry wines.

Which is a pity, at least to me, because good though many of the dry wines are, even a modicum of sweetness often elevates them; really **profound** now, not *just* voluminous, with gut-grabbing flavors of ginger, dough and maize. These stand as the antonym of the current trend toward reductive vinification which—you may have noticed—I happen to like. But the world would be a *much* poorer place without wines like these, great charging bears, with all manner of woodsy, animal secondary flavors, yet supported by a rigid acid skeleton and capable of amazing aging.

I don't think Bernd would quarrel with any of that, yet I do detect a change of sorts in these wines, and I don't know if it's the recent vintages, the current cellar-master or a change Bernd himself desires and has brought about. The wines have all the **weight** they always did, yet they seem silkier somehow, less rugged. Even as Bernd himself continues to chart new territory in egregious debauchery his wines become more and more refined. I like to tease Bernd—he's such an easy target—but in fact I respect him hugely for not becoming his own caricature, and for steering his wines to ever-deepening finesse.

Koehler-Ruprecht at a glance:

In many opinions the leading estate of the Pfalz - certainly among the top five. Of those estates, these are the biggest, most massively scaled wines. Extraordinarily old-style approach to vinification: no stainless steel. On an incredible roll the past several vintages, and currently making some of the best dry Rieslings in Europe.

how the wines taste:

They are uncompromisingly stony-gingery, dense, wine-y, not at all grapey. They tend to polarize tasters; if you love them they give you something you almost can't get anywhere else: a warmly satisfying old-fashioned *bigness* of flavor that's masculine and lusty. Other tasters just don't "see" them, as they lack the modern steely brilliance. Bernd's grudgingly willing to concede that the reductive style makes friends but in his heart he finds that type of wine too sterile and simple, and lacking the capacity to age. That being said, in recent vintages I sense a slow movement toward a more classical profile for many of Bernd's wines, perhaps as his own palate becomes more demanding. Bernd routinely makes elite-quality wines; in most tastings of Pfalz wines his are in the top group. I myself reach for them frequently and find they give that little **extra** that great wines give. If you don't know these you owe it to yourself to check them out, **ESPECIALLY IF YOU BUY FOR A RESTAURANT**, as these are among the *most* food-friendly wines of any in this vast universe of possibility.

Offer Pending

You gotta love this guy. Once he replied to an email from someone who'd seen his website, and who was inquiring about Pinot Noir. Rainer was arguably the first to make serious Pinot Noir in the Pfalz, perhaps in Germany. He wrote: I want to emphasize that I don't want to make a 'Burgundian style' nor a 'New World style.' I want to 'help deliver' what 'naturally grows' in our Burgweg vineyard and what also reflects at least in part our history, our tradition and our heritage. I acknowledge that wine is not all nature (probably never really has been) – the vine, I am sure, is one of the oldest 'domesticated' plants we have – wine is nurtured no doubt, but it depends how far you are prepared to 'break it in'. I find a bronco more admirable than a Lipizzaner . . . a Lipizzaner is not a horse, it's a court-fool! Do you understand what I mean to say?"

I do. And I know these aren't mere words to Rainer Lingenfelder. They sometimes cost. They all-but-ruined two of his past ten vintages, when intervention to avoid mildews was urgently needed. But Rainer would rather not intervene, and if this principle costs him from time to time, so be it. He's printed up some nifty black tees saying "Lingenfelder: the Age of Post-Chardonnism" but when he does the next run I want to suggest putting "Walking The Walk" on the back.

Rainer Lingenfelder's "tasting" room is actually in the dining room of his and Elisabeth's house. It's one of the best places I know to taste wine. There's a pure, creamy light napped over everything, thanks to the north exposure. The walls are pearly-opaline in color, the tablecloth is white, the curtains are magenta—as though to refer to the red wines you're also given to taste. It's peaceful enough to hear a sparrow clear her throat outside the window, but it's not one of those stifling Temples of Tasting where all you want to do is giggle. It is typical of the care taken by Rainer, a care that goes beyond simple diligence.



Rainer Lingenfelder

Everything Rainer does is undertaken with fastidious thought. Everything he thinks and feels also; when you speak with him there aren't any knee-jerk opinions casually tossed off (except *mine*, if I happen to be in the vicinity). One year we were talking about the influence of yield-restrictions on wine quality. Rainer's cousin happens to be the vineyard manager at Chalk Hill, and he's been able to increase yields with no diminishment of wine quality **by any objective standard of measurement**. "This is a favorite hobbyhorse for wine journalists," says Rainer, "because it's simple and dramatic; low yields equals high quality, and if you're any good you must be working with low yields." But surely there's a great deal of *truth* in this, isn't there? Oversimplified as

it might be? Of course, says Rainer, but it isn't the whole truth; it is only true if **all other things are equal**. A vineyard well-cared for will give the highest possible yield consistent with quality and with the long-term health of the vine. The next guy's yields might be lower on paper, but that could well be due to sloppy vineyard management and poor husbandry; HIS WINES WON'T NECESSARILY BE BETTER. Not a very sexy opinion, but it has the texture of verisimilitude: things aren't, after all, reducible to ironclad formulas.

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Grosskarlbacher Burgweg and Osterberg, Freinsheimer Goldberg**
- **Soil types: calcareous soil over limestone, loess, sand**
- **Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 20% Spätburgunder, 10% Scheurebe, 10% Dornfelder, 5% Silvaner, 15% other varieties**

And it would be one thing if Rainer's wines were run-of-the-mill and all this was nothing more than an elegant rationalization after the fact. Well, most of you have tasted Rainer's wines; what do *you* think? I'll tell you what I think: I think Mr. Lingenfelder is capable of making some of the *very* best wines in the Pfalz and indeed all of Germany.

His wines *always* have something EXTRA: more concentration, more drive and purpose, more **expressiveness**.

Rainer got around in his wild heedless youth; he migrated to Australia to get work as a bush pilot, he says, but ended up in a winery. He moved to New Zealand and California, to the Médoc, to EGYPT, where he consulted at a winery—the winery—then back to Germany where he made the wines at Sichel for several years; yes, Rainer made BLUE NUN for a living. Finally he realized

he couldn't do the justice he wanted to do to his own wines, and returned to Grosskarlbach full time.

"The quality of our wine is determined in the vineyards; one cannot *make* outstanding wine in the cellar," says Rainer. "The vineyard factor is especially important when one talks about the grape grower's wines such as Riesling, Pinot Noir, Scheurebe, etc. versus the winemaker's wines such as Chardonnay. I am interested in primary, grape-borne flavors, not so much in secondary flavors introduced by man such as oak or yeast. We don't bentonite fine because it strips too much away, not just protein but also color and flavor. You probably noticed our wines are deeper in color than the wines of many other growers. We'd rather leave all the natural components in the wine, the proteins, the minerals, the acidity, the tannin. We don't want to 'polish' or 'style' a wine; we want to allow its original, natural character to shine through."

Rainer is equally cogent on the contentious subject of Süsreserve: "It's perfectly O.K. to use Süsreserve. It's no more 'unnatural' to add grape juice to a wine than to stop it from fermenting dry by 'artificial' means such as refrigeration, centrifuging or the addition of sulfur dioxide. I'm not much in favor of sulfur dioxide, and wines whose fermentations were stopped *bind* much more sulfur dioxide than wines where Süsreserve was added." Rainer's yields are low and he uses natural yeasts to ferment. He's a believer in the Neustadt Clone 90 for regionally typical Rieslings. His Pinot Noir goes through malolactic fermentation and spends about eighteen months in barriques of varying

type and age.

"I look for *expression of character* [his emphasis]. Character could be many things depending on the style; it could be depth of flavor, or complexity, or fruit, or elegance, or lightness or richness, etc. It is not so important which character it is; the importance is whether the character is clearly expressed."

Rainer's 2003 are literally amazing.

He's a producer who normally makes relatively big-bodied wines, lower in acid than the modern fashion, and in average vintages they stand out as unusually creamy and lush; I've often thought them perfect pivot-wines for Chardonnay escapees. I approached the '03s with a certain trepidation; would the wines be too lush and too flat? Anything but! Rainer picked earlier and more quickly than many of his colleagues, and did not acidify (one would hardly have expected him to. . .) and has produced an almost heart-rending group of wines, surely his loveliest vintage since 1994.

He and I have agreed I will make available a couple wines I did not select, provided I can indicate why I hesitated. Notwithstanding his gentle demeanor, Rainer is as Alpha as I am, and we've butted heads from time to time, as friends do. So you get to taste the wines and tell us which one's the loony.

Do NOT, under any circumstances, write an order excluding a big ol' chunk of these deliriously pretty and glossy 2003s.

Lingenfelder at a glance:

A consistent standout in this portfolio. Perfect pivot-wines away from creamy-Chardonnay types. Sensational expressiveness of fruit.

how the wines taste:

Lingenfelder's wines have a unique and magical harmony of elements: superb clarity of flavor with distinctly aristocratic fullness of expression. "An advantage we have with German wines is that you feel the power, the intensity of flavor, but you don't feel the heat," he says. That's part of it. Rainer's wines sometimes show a pleasing hint of earthiness which supports their fluted brilliance. If Catoir's wines sing in a pure, piping soprano, Lingenfelder's are a mellow alto. His Scheurebe, on which he lavishes so much tender affection, is a riot of tropical opulence yet somehow contained within a disciplined clarity.

GLI-076 **2001 Spätburgunder**

A shade less color than the (itself pale) 2000, but man I like its forward plummy juiciness; Rainer understands *style* and texture. In its modest way this slides gracefully over the palate and leaves a sandalwoody finish. There's a kind of *gras* here despite its lightness.

GLI-086 **2002 Spätburgunder "Ganymed"**

Rainer's taken to calling his "reserve" cuvée "Ganymed" after the god of legend. The original label depicts the Pompeiian chap in a state of, how to say this, anatomical correctness, which would run afoul of the BATF if we ever let them see it. I tried to explain this to Rainer. "You'd first have to tell them it is a bona-fide (no pun intended) work of art, hung (again no pun intended) in a museum somewhere." Too much trouble, he agreed. "Why not put a little sticker over the naughty bits?" he offered. I like this idea! In fact, we could have one in, say, 500 labels depicting our hero in a condition of tumescence, and the lucky recipient could win a prize! Joe Marketing. Or we could lop off the offending member. "Then he'd be pee-no-more!" I said with a shriek of glee. I love it when I pun.

The schlong is gone but the melody lingers on. . . .

The '02 has a kind of Jayer-Gilles smoky-oaky sheen; there's a high-toned leafiness, the palate isn't as fleshy as the nose suggests; a little char, barky; it's more orderly than the prune-y '99 but I yearn for a bit more middle, a little *gras*. It does sweeten in the glass, encouragingly, and the finish gets more marrowy. Let's watch this fella.

Thanks to all of you, by the way, for making Lingenfelder Pinot Noir a success. There was, one might say, some residual skepticism back when I first introduced a "serious" German Pinot Noir, and now everyone's making them. Some are good. Others are dreadful, overwrought, over-oaked, astringent, inky and ratty and vulgar. You sometimes feel each guy is trying to out-extract his neighbor. Lingenfelder keeps steering his steady course through it all, making his moderate, elegant, adult red wines. Yay on him.

GLI-074 **2002 Lingenfelder "Bird Label" Riesling**

This will remain 2002 as long as we can, ideally till we can introduce the 2004 vintage. There's essentially no suitable fruit from the ga-ga '03s. Bird is a merchant-bottling, partly from Lingenfelder fruit and partly purchased fruit. The label, "which was expensive," is absolutely wonderful, droll and dear and full of whimsy. It started as an experiment for Oddbins, and the wine was well received and Rainer thought-knew!-I'd like it. Why wouldn't I like it? It tastes like a LINGENFELDER wine in miniature, and I'll tell you right now THERE ISN'T ANOTHER RIESLING ON THE MARKET WITHIN MILES OF THIS QUALITY AT ITS PRICE. With all my love and esteem for the good Herr Gramm, look the hell out. The 2002 is true to its vintage, i.e. its acids are more pointed, and therefore it *needs* more actual sweetness to convey a consistent sense of sweetness. We're looking for an almost furtive surmise of sweetness-is it or isn't it?-with a finish that's graciously dry. 2002 shows its typical wisteria-slimness but here Rainer's amplitude of style is wonderfully pretty. It's more flowery than the plumper 2001, with more overt mineral-saltiness, but it's our little Bird and it will sing its happy song. The only danger is it's TOO GOOD for its market "echelon," but this doesn't seem to bother y'all since we're selling the huevos out of this Bird. Why? Because it's cheep cheep cheep. SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to four years)

GLI-087 **2003 Freinsheimer Musikantenbuckel Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

More redcurrant and applewood smoke on the nose; juicy and succulent and essentially dry, with fine balance. The gloss and silk of texture is striking, as is the push-pull of sweet and tart elements; these are the *finest* wines from here in 10 years.

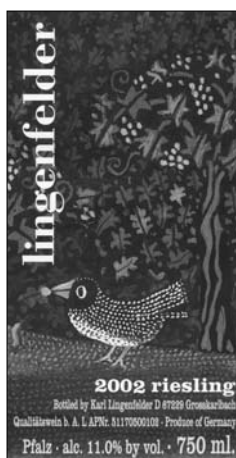
SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between now and five years, again from eleven to fifteen)

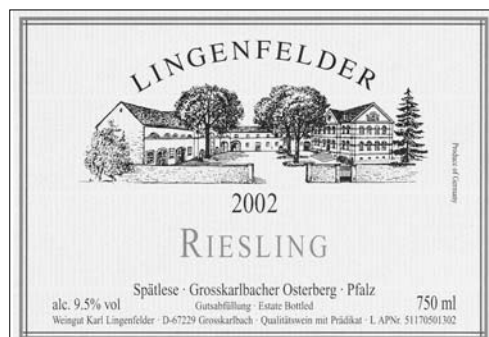
GLI-079 **2003 Grosskarlbacher Osterberg Riesling Spätlese**

This is quite chewy and dense, with an almost lobstery texture and sweetness; beurre blanc with orange zest; lovely articulation of flavors; a kind of moistness and limpidity yet with solidity; muscular but curvaceous.

SOS: 2 (between two and eleven years)



- GLI-085 **2003 Freinsheimer Goldberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 A *very* fine and quintessential Lingenfelder fragrance, in a sense his aromatic touchstone; silky entry onto the palate; pure *fruit* complexity; polychromatic tactile activity on the palate; Clone-90 ripe citric jazz with high lemon tones. An interesting model for good dry German riesling - with 6.2 grams per liter acidity.
 SOS: 0 (now to seven years)
- GLI-080 **2003 Freinsheimer Goldberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 The sheer tenderness here melts the heart. Pure silk and the finest imaginable fruit. A piquant restraint that haunts you. The Osterberg emerges from the material world: this Goldberg emerges from the *mystery*.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GLI-081H **2003 Grosskarlbacher Burgweg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** +
 Grown on limestone. This extends the Spätlesen in refinement and length rather than sheer ripeness or density. A delicate botrytis maltiness now, and even more mineral salt, but this is a poem of grace alongside a groaning-board of fruit bounty.
 SOS: 3 (between five and sixteen years)
- GLI-082H **2003 Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe TBA, 12/375ml**
 With a mere 247° Oechsle, this is a wildly exotic syrup, with scents of pork-belly and caramel flan, apple butter and streusel; it flirts with volatility (young unsulfured cask-samples of stickies often do) but it flirts with all kinds of delicious perversions. Drink if you *dare*.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)
- GLI-084 **1996 Riesling Sekt "Satyr" (Brut)**
(This wine is available but it is not a Terry These Estate Selection)
 The superb 1994 1st-release took German sparkling wine to a new level. He keeps these wines five years on the lees, and makes them WITHOUT SUGAR. In fact, three times without sugar. No chaptalization. No sugar used in the prise du mousse (he uses fresh must instead) and no sugar in the dosage (must once again). I'm sure at the time the young '96 seemed predestined for fizz, such were its acids, and no one could have predicted the odd gnarly phase the vintage is passing through. It's an open secret that *very* few growers will show you their 1996s now. I find this particular wine more obdurate and fruitless than I prefer, but the basic principle Rainer's working on is not merely sound: it is fascinating and valuable. See for yourself.
- GLI-083 **2003 Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe Spätlese Old Vines**
(This wine is available but it is not a Terry These Estate Selection)
 Sometimes when I despair the future for my beloved Scheurebe I am consoled that there's at least one other wacko who loves it as much as I do. Lingenfelder Scheurebe is an ICON, and my cellar is full of the many masterpieces he's made. It was a challenge few could surmount in 2003, though I am ever-mindful of Scheu's sometimes-tendency to only reveal itself after some bottle-age. Thus I reserve judgment on this one, which seemed to lack varietal *oomph* and was rather coarse in texture-a few grams of sweetness might have helped despite the low acidity. Bear in mind almost no one managed with Scheu in 2003.



kurt darting

pfalz • bad-dürkheim

Inside Germany they sometimes sniff huffily that Darting makes little sweet-ums for the export markets but cannot be taken deeply seriously as a fine producer, blah-de-blah. Me, I mutter to myself several times a day, thank God for Darting, thank God for Darting

I do believe the estate tends to ride the vintage, i.e. they are spectacular in years which suit them ('94, '96, '98) and sometimes withdrawn in vintages which don't suit them—the soft ones like '99 and '97 or the dubious ones like the rot-compromised '95s and 2000s. That we sell them marvelously regardless testifies to their drinkability and basic lip-smack-o-rama. Which pretty much characterizes the 2003s here. We're talking pure unashamed hedonism. One might cavil some of the wines are one-dimensional but man, it is one *foxy-looking* dimension. And somehow,

counter-intuitively, many of Darting's '03s are defter and less overtly sweet than they've been recently.

It's like a runaway train, this agency. When things work this well it always seems so easy; why can't everybody do it? The ingredients are simple. Outstanding wines at attractive prices. Flexibility in the working relationship. Collegiality in tasting and evaluating the wines. Basic and spontaneous friendliness. Tasting with Helmut you are instantly aware he likes wine, likes making it, likes tasting it, likes thinking about it, is entirely FOND of it. Even with the growers, I'm never entirely sure how much of my heart to reveal when I taste their wines, but with Helmut Darting I can giggle or weep or dance the shimmy.

Until a few years ago the estate was divided between husband and wife, one of whom belonged to the local cop. With Helmut Darting's arrival, the two estates were combined and all the wines estate-bottled. Helmut had an interesting year of apprenticeship as part of his wine schooling: at Müller-Catoir! Now, plenty of young dudes spend time at Catoir, a few each year. The estate is an official "Meisterbetrieb" meaning that students and apprentices may be sent here. I once asked Hans-Günter Schwarz if it wouldn't be possible (theoretically!) to track down all the up-and-coming new superstars by following his various apprentices. His answer surprised me. "Actually, no,"



Helmut Darting

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Spielberg and Hochbenn, Ungsteiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Heavy chalky loam, sandy gravel, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 44% Riesling, 8% Weissburgunder, 6% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 4% each Portugieser, Muskateller & Ortega, 3% each Chardonnay & Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties**

he said, "because I don't always develop a rapport or sympathy with the young men. It seems to take a special type to want to do things this way!" With Helmut Darting it appears to have been a case of simpatico instantaneoso. Schwarz even gave permission for his pricelist text to be used, in which he describes his rules of vinification, which is how, when I saw it reproduced verbatim on Darting's list, I knew Something Was Up.

If you're unfamiliar with the reductivist's creed, it goes a little like this: every time you handle a wine, you diminish it; therefore minimal "winemaking" above all! The most important thing is to grow superb grapes and let their flavors sing out in the wine. You ferment as slow and cold as possible, with natural yeasts. You rack once and once only, after fermentation. You keep the wine away from oxygen at all costs. After the first racking, the next time you handle the wine is to bottle it.

No fining, no clarification, no de-acidification, Süsreserve only when no alternative avails, and then only a high-grade Süsreserve, itself made reductively. All of this results in wine in which the original grape

character is preserved with an almost unreal clarity.

Darting has arrived among the "classified" estates in Germany, yet wonderful as this is, I can't help but wonder what

kind of wines they'd make if they owned land in the classic sites of Deidesheim, Forst and Wachenheim. We need someone sensible there to yawp against the dry-at-all-costs insanity.

Darting at a glance:

reductively brilliant wines.

The numero uno sales success story in my portfolio. Extraordinary VALUE FOR MONEY for superbly made

how the wines taste:

Depending on the vintage, either spicy-gingery and firmly bracing, or flowery-polleny with a candied spice and more talc and malt. Basically reductive, as indicated above, yet with the acquisition of certain Grand Cru sites purchased from Basserman Jordan, one sees how classical Darting's wines can be from outstanding vineyards. All wines intensely, fundamentally varietal.

GDR-116L **2003 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

We just can't seem to keep this boy in stock! It'll be in the market by the time you read this, and man is it tasty. God knows what we'll do if there's ever a normal vintage. Ripe Spätlese aromas; class Pfalz grapefruit, lemon-blossom and ginger; *wonderful* charm and outline; none too sweet, with a limey-salty dimension.

SOS: 2 (now to six years)

GDR-123L **2003 Dürkheimer Feuerberg Portugieser Weissherbst, 1.0 Liter**

Step right up if you need a big-bottle of just screaming *yummacious* Rosé.

SOS: 2 (now to two years)

GDR-115 **2003 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

We were sipping this with some nibbles on the table after the tasting, and I did a double-take. *Huh?* This is *Trocken*? But my good sir, this is an example of *how to get it RIGHT!* People must know about it; that all dry German Rieslings are not inevitably sadistic and mordant. "Well Terry, you could sell it, you know," said Heike Darting. 'Deed I could, ma'am. That was last year. This year the wine was on the table for me to taste, having already been bottled. And it's all grain and ginger and fresh-cut wood; juicy and generous and lavish and wraparound; stylish and evenly balanced. Drink young, in big happy gulps.

SOMMELER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (paradoxically!) (between now and four years)

GDR-113 **2003 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**

This "Kabinett" has . . . 104 degrees Oechsle; that's an *Auslese*. Look at its price. No, you are not hallucinating. (Well you might be, but not about this.) As always, it's the class of the Kabinetts; it's the restraint and the non-fruit flavors that elevate this above its peers; it's tilleul more than citrus; juicy lick of salts, verbena and lime. Make hay while the sun shone, pard!

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

GDR-114 **2003 Ungsteiner Bettelhaus Riesling Kabinett**

Bettelhaus is usually more riotously flowery and exotic-fruity, but in the glam-vintage 2003 it sings in a lower register than usual; bergamot rather than peach; virtual *Auslese* aromas; the palate is all freesia and hyacinth, almost like a white-corn chowder with ginger.

SOS: 2 (between three and thirteen years)

GDR-122 **2002 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**

We reserved this wine before we could have imagined how remorselessly the Germans would sacrifice their '03 *Auslesen* (and the prices they might have charged) to give us "Kabinett" wines. Many of you bought it for the Spring '04 DI; there's a little more if you want it. There is none from the 2003 vintage.

GDR-118 **2003 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

Shows the granular side of 2003; really massive body (by German wine standards) and quite passion-fruity and caramelly. Helmut bought the vineyard from Basserman-Jordan and now feels it should be replanted with Mosel clones. Yes, we're tasting at room-temp, and also cask-samples, but the richness here is almost imposing and I see why he instinctively looks to slim things down.

SOS: 3 (between four and fourteen years)

- GDR-108 **2002 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**
 Still a bit of this to be had if you'd prefer a Spätlese that tastes at least remotely like a Spätlese. Some botrytis now, along with classic Pfalz ginger; the palate really billows and expands into thick density of fruit; serious length, grip and echo.
 SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)
- GDR-119 **2003 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese**
 This is less a "true" Scheu than a sharp dialect of Riesling; the herbal notes express not as sage but as lavender; it's also Auslese in essence, but this is a black suit with a bright pink shirt; splash after splash of fruit.
 SOS: 3 (between two and six years)
- GDR-120 **2003 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese** **+**
 With 115° Oechsle, this climbs to a new level, not of structure or even multi-facetedness-even with 9 grams per liter acidity-but there's a sort of rumble of volcanic *gravitas* here compared to the rieslings; it seems less sweet, and I've never seen rieslaner express so darkly; a wine with an old soul, and the mysterious dignity of a Galapagos tortoise. WHAT a vintage for rieslaner!
 SOS: 3 (between four and seventeen years)
- GDR-121H **2003 Huxelrebe BA, 12/375ml**
 From Forster Schnepfenflug, but the site-name may not be used. Let's hope it's not. Helmut said: "We picked after a light frost. There were some botrytis berries, some frozen berries and some under-ripe berries from a second flowering, which gave acidity." This is all Huxel-honey but with a good spine of structure. Tasty and not sluttly.
 SOS: 4 (between seven and twenty-five years)
- GDR-117 **2002 St. Laurent Trocken**
 St. Laurent is to red what Rieslaner is to white; both are fussy difficult vines no one could justify from a commercial standpoint; both offer holy-grail flavors a certain type of vintner yearns towards; both can make supernal wine of a not-unfamiliar type but an un-dreamed of expressiveness. St. Laurent is like a Peyote-drenched Pinot Noir; Rieslaner a lysergically charged Riesling.
 Doesn't it make perfect sense Darting would have both!
 This has a generous lashing of sweet oak like a Crianza Rioja, along with varietal plum and tobacco; the palate is velvety, caressing and quite long; violet notes emerge; it's the wine you wish other mid-weight wines were; oak in proportion, juicy and seductive, complex and moderate in alcohol.
 Over the winter I've been scrolling among a bunch of red wines I asked to be fruit-driven, un-oaked (or subtly oaked) and food-friendly. What I often got were grotesque monsters over 14%, some with jammy or volatile flavors, and I suppose this is what passes for medium-weight wines these days!?!? Nein danke.



neckerauer

pfalz • weissenheim am sand

The papers were signed last summer. Which means this is now TWO wineries; through the 2002 vintage it's Klaus Neckerauer, and starting with 2003 it's Arnd Neckerauer.

For several years now, I'm quite aware many of you thought I was crazy, stubborn or both for continuing to represent Neckerauer. My colleagues, I know, were embarrassed. I took some flak, Jack. Still do.

Of course I saw the wines decline. The estate was undergoing an extremely awkward (and public) transition between father and son's regimes, exacerbated by climactic difficulties almost malevolently implacable.

I began with the wines at the very beginning, in 1985. They were splendid back then, larger-

than-life, from an utterly loveable family for incredible prices, and over the years Neckerauers proved themselves to be perfect suppliers; generous, cooperative and uncomplicated. The decline began in 1995. An Uncle had passed away and left more land than Neckerauers had time to till.

Father's health was (and is) delicate. Son was just starting out. Other than the catastrophe-vintages of '95 and 2000, the wines were good in an earthy old-fashioned way, and I could select the best of them and soft-pedal them, which I did.

Arnd Neckerauer was quite aware of my strategy; I as much as told him. And his stated goal was to take over the proprietorship of the winery, have a friend oversee the majority of the vineyards (from which Liter wines would be made) while devoting himself to going balls-to-the-wall for top quality from the best sites. Since I *knew* the potential from these sites, I had every reason to stay the course. Up to a point.

Last year was THE year. I'd done what I could. I'd



Arnd Neckerauer

risked my own reputation in order to stay loyal; I did it calculatedly and I don't regret it. I believed in Neckauers, but man, Godot needed to like show up and pronto.

Deep breaths as I walked in the door. No eye-contact with anyone, not even Kevin Pike (with whom I

- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Hahnen, Hasenzile, Halde**
- **Soil types: Sandy soil with clay, chalky soil with sand**
- **Grape varieties: 32% Riesling, 28% Portugieser, 11% Dornfelder, 6% Müller-Thurgau, 4% Spätburgunder, 3% each of Kerner and Scheurebe, 16% other varieties**

was traveling).

FINALLY, '02 WAS THE VINTAGE WE'VE NEEDED!

It was like another winery entirely. And different even from the old glory-days of Klaus' era. The 2002 vintage at Neckerauer shows a *modern* profile of Pfalz wine, emphasizing ginger, mineral and brilliance, with high-toned fruit and clear clean flavors.

This is only the beginning. It's the basic setting-right of the basics, so that truly great things are possible. The future looks bright at Neckerauer. I dare hope that Arnd, Klaus and I may yet sit with one another a few years from now and feel good that we were loyal to one another during the difficult years.

I ask you to forget any negative impression you may have formed toward this estate and taste the 2002s and 2003s without prejudice.

My real long-time customers are also asked to remember those lavish, generous wines with their robust vitality and lovely rustic Pfalz profiles; the things for which we loved Neckerauer in the first place. These wines are different, updated, refreshed.

Weisenheim sits on sand, the original beach of the Rhine. It suffers in dry years, and flourishes in damp ones. Sometimes a single timely thunderstorm makes the difference between a fair and great vintage. The sites are large and impossible to distinguish as you drive by. But Altenberg is exotic and spicy, Goldberg is firm and lemony, Hahnen is doughy and caramelly, Halde is chalky and firm, and Hasenzeile is animal and sultry.

I'm sure Arnd is modernizing the cellar also; I hope he's retired all the old süsreserve his father kept around, which I think was responsible for certain odd varnish-y flavors the wines sometimes showed. I didn't ask for

details; I think I was too relieved the wines were good. We'll suss it out over time. Now that we have time.

Arnd is also aware his reputation needs to be re-cussitated, and he's set his prices accordingly. He has my fullest respect for being realistic and egoless.

Arnd did not acidify his rieslings in 2003, but I still wish he'd gotten another kind of vintage for his first year as owner. The wines are *good*, mind you, but we're trying to revive a reputation here, and along comes 2003 with all its weird weather. I chose three wines (including one love-ly red) and will repeat the best among the cheerful '02s.

Neckerauer at a glance:

Renaissance of quality at a once-moribund estate; modern zingy wines worth a fresh look!

how the wines taste:

This is a work-in-progress. The 2002s are authoritatively within the modern Pfalz idiom: mineral, vivid, spicy and firm.

GNE-089 **2003 Weisenheimer Halde Riesling Kabinett**

This is my favorite site in Weisenheim, and the wine's in character; brisk, tight and chalky-it reminds me of Margaine's N.V. - subtle gardenia fragrance, "white" aromas; lively snap on the palate, a nice chalky zing and citric lift. By the way; this is what 27 grams per liter sweetness tastes like; i.e., barely noticeable, and perfectly balanced; what the Germans call a "serving" sweetness, one that supports the other flavors. This is precisely the endangered species the Grosses Gewächs ideologues want to kill off entirely. Let's kill them off instead.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between three and ten years)

GNE-085 **2002 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Kabinett**

(Cask #66) This is *Forst* in spirit; the salty caramel depth, elegant but still thrusting; lots of umami; mystic echo, far-off smell of a fabulous stew cooking, wet salt, veal and shi-itakes; Riesling with deep savor.

SOS: 2 (from four to twelve years)

GNE-087 **2002 Weisenheimer Hasenzeile Scheurebe Kabinett**

Oh, a vixen here, utterly lurid and slinky; sweet-salty like olive-oil ice cream; give this to kids trick-or-treating, it probably wards off evil spirits; seductive cherry and sage; wonderfully deep herbal finish.

SOS: 2 (between now and four years)

GNE-088 **2003 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Spätlese**

Sandalwood and spice-cake aromas; suave juicy and salty palate; smooth texture but surprising grip; a pretty finish like honey-mushrooms. Has again 27 grams per liter sweetness with its own *dosage*.

SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GNE-086 **2002 Weisenheimer Halde Riesling Spätlese** +
 With this wine I knew Neckerauers were back. A lemony-chalky nose and a ripe, detailed, precise palate; classic Pfalz profile (pineapple, ginger, white corn); white lilac; juicy, chalky and vigorous-like all the best 2002s, vivid, happy, wonderful stuff. Great penetration and length here.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)

GNE-090 **2003 Weisenheimer Hasenzeile Dornfelder Trocken**
 Oh so velvety; canaiolo aromas, purple plums; light-bodied with sappy grip and firm structure; violets on the mid-palate. I love its modesty and honesty; for me these constitute both charm and integrity.

TEASER: Arnd was contacted by a collector customer of theirs who was getting on in years and wanted to sell some old wines back to the estate. The cellar is reportedly haphazard, and Arnd hasn't had a chance to dig in and do an inventory. But he did bring a few samples back with him, one of which he thought might be obtainable to the tune of ten cases or so. I emphasize this remains to be seen, BUT: we tasted a fabulous **1959 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Spätlese** (++) , which was as splendid an old riesling as I have ever drunk: profound, malty and estery; monumental, stunning old-wine complexity; tilts between varnish and toasted brioche; lemon-jasmine panna-cotta, an astonishingly complex liqueur; power with exquisiteness, full of echo and evocation, and endless length, growing even more complex and fresher in the glass. You need an hour and I only had ten minutes. But jeez; let's hope this pans out!

Even more remarkable was another 1959, a **Morio-Muscat** Spätlese. You've probably never heard of this grape variety because I've never offered it. It's one of the most egregious of the wave of post-war new crossings, in this case Silvaner with Pinot Blanc, which gave an unlikely aroma strongly reminiscent of Muscat. But it compares to true Muscat as truffle-oil compares to fresh truffles, or as those dreadful car air-freshener things compare to the actual scent they're imitating. Yet this '59, which ought to have been dead since about 1963, was paler and fresher than the riesling, albeit nowhere near as deep, rich and interesting. Who'd a guessed?



I had been hearing about Weegmüller for years, as they are long-time friends of Hans-Günter Schwarz, who has always touted them highly. It's typical of his generosity of spirit, to recommend what could be construed as a "competitor." But he's an old friend of the family, and a sentimental guy besides. This has given rise to some misunderstanding of what his true role is at Weegmüller, so I'll clarify it here. They are friends who both make wine. Weegmüller has been influenced - as has much of Germany-by Hans-Günter's work, and he's a generous man who shares ideas generously. He is not any kind of "consultant" and I erred in suggesting he was. He's a friend with people of common philosophy, and he endorses their wines.

It's easy to see the basis for the friendship. Weegmüllers are lovely down to earth Pfalzers, with whom it is possible to have much fun and eat many schnitzels. Yet Steffi is a lady of some

determination.

It wasn't an accident she wanted to come to the States and see for herself only months after we started working together. It's not about control; it's about knowledge, and I sense a wise guiding hand throughout the wines.

"There's no debate," says Steffi Weegmüller: "The



quality is in the vineyard. In the cellar less is more." Indeed.

"Personally I love Mosel and Saar wines," says Steffi.

"When I drink wine I look for fruit, clarity, depth and elegance, and it's got to be fun."

This I found revelatory, because growers

will often steer their wines toward their palate-ideals. And Weegmüller's wines do seem to feint toward a racy-elegant Mosel style.

I was also pleased with her attitude toward dosage; "I ask myself why Süsreserve has gotten such a negative image. A high-grade Süsreserve used in homeopathic amounts can be a positive influence. But these days with temperature-control technology you see fewer people

- **Vineyard Area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual Production: 9,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Haardt Herrenletten and Bürgergarten; Mussbacher Eselshaut**
- **Soil Types: Loamy gravel, clay**
- **Grape Varieties: 80% Riesling, 6% Scheurebe, 5% Grauer Burgunder, Weisser Burgunder, Gewürztraminer, Kerner and Dornfelder, 9% other varieties**

using Süsreserve." True. And too bad, because who's to say you'll stop fermentation at precisely the right moment?

Chances are you won't, unless you have a genius-palate. Dosage permits a judicious "correction" later on in quiet when the wine's settled down and it's real structural outlines are clear.

So, a hearty New York welcome to Weegmüller and their fabulously exciting wines. The instant you taste them, the only mystery will be why you didn't order more.

the wines:

GWM-010 **2003 Mussbacher Eselshaut Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +

This is a perfect example of why the 2003s need sweetness (as both Steffi and Hans-Günter asserted): lemon-blossom and *peche-de-vignes* (wild vineyard peaches); here the sweetness, which you don't taste as discrete flavor, does only good and does much good, slimming the body, extending and focusing the fruit, providing interplay and exposing the minerality. A beauty, a bargain, a must-have!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (between one and eight years)

GWM-011 **2003 Scheurebe Trocken**

A relatively delicate Scheu, with just a hint of sage and currant, but a beautifully *balanced* wine, as if 20% Sauvignon Blanc were cut into a ripe riesling; just a fine spicy mineral tangy dry wine.

SOS: 0 (between now and six years)

GWM-012 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Kabinett**

Yes! Tangy powder-puff of peach, orange-blossom and pure mango; this is immensely charming with a wry piquant edge, and so orange-y you'll be jonesin' for pancakes 'n bacon.

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

GWM-008 **2002 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Kabinett**

First offering. And decidedly another critter; finer, sleeker, with tarter acids and more quince. A lovely Kabinett if the sheer bigness of the '03s is palling and you want to return to a classic.

SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)

GWM-009 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Gewürztraminer Trocken Alte Reben**

This is already a minor legend, having caused Ulli Mell (superstar cellarmaster currently at Basserman) to "fall off his chair" on first encounter with this monster. The wine is a dragon, schnapps and seethingly varietal and long; as dense as if it were blended with its own grappa. It has considerable focus for its size. It's not really my kind of wine but shee-it, it's such a total *freak*.

SOS: 0 (now to three years)

Don't ask me "What's the Prädikat?" because there is none, deliberately. The Austrians are starting to influence a few of the Germans who, with their dry wines, are simply ignoring the irrelevant sugar-pyramid and bottling everything as "QbA."

GWM-014 **2003 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese**

This is a 21-gun salute of riesling, and I am quite sure they steeped some earl grey tea, I here, as well as several bags of malted milk balls; it arrives on the palate like 20 bright red Rolls Royces at a wedding; just a happy blast of flavor stopping just short of gaudy.

SOS: 3 (between four and twelve years)

GWM-013 **2003 Haardter Herrenletten Riesling Trocken Alte Reben**

(a.k.a. Spätlese Trocken) This was the most filigree of three dry rieslings here; the finest and most subtle. Crab-cakes, mirabelle and spring onions; the palate is mineral and slinky, and there's an overtone of bitterness you note on the tip of the tongue, along with the satisfying grainy minerality of '03. Steffi says (echoing others) the bitterness will fade in a few months, as it derives from phenols. Let's hope.

SOS: minus 1 (between one and five years)

GWM-015H **2002 Haardter Herzog Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**

++

Well well . . . one of the best wines of the 2003 vintage is an 2002: This **first offering** is very, very fine; picked in December after several green-harvests, it shows incredible interplay of piquant Eiswein notes with a seductive murmur of botrytis. And god what flavor! Like some buttery liqueur of Mt. Rainier cherries, plantains and limes. Pointed, fresh splash of liveliness. Please let's *don't* forget the best of this lovely vintage, and *don't miss* this wine.

SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-six years)

GWM-016H **2003 Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml**

120° Oechsle, and here the extra firm bones of Rieslaner snap the vintage to full attention; there's a good underlying spine below the considerable sweetness and varietal mass.

SOS: 4 (between five and seventeen years)

GWM-017H **2002 Haardter Herrenletten Scheurebe BA, 12/375ml**

This has tamed and grown since last year but is still a cassis demi glace with a lemon reduction; it isn't seductive so much as commanding, but the grip and dialectic are reassuring after all the 2003 extravagances.

SOS: 4 (between thirteen and thirty years)

herbert messmer

pfalz • burrweiler

Gregor Meßmer won't get on an airplane. That's why you haven't met him. But he has a brother who's just arrived to help at the estate, and this gentleman will fly, and speaks English, and man I hope he comes over because something has to happen to get this estate front-and-center in your attention.

As far as I'm concerned, Meßmer is second only to Catoir in the Pfalz.

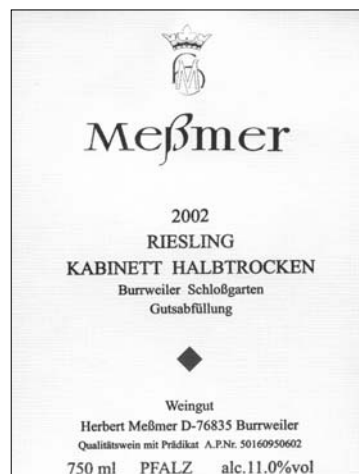
Too bad Gregor doesn't like to fly, though god knows I understand. During our last two encounters he's been about the wittiest and most fun guys I know. And y'all are to be congratulated for bouncing sales nice 'n up the past year. Believe me, it's nothing less than this stellar estate deserves, and I'll be working to make them even more conspicuous. Inside Germany

there's a consensus Meßmer has ascended to the top rank.

As such I fall in line with the received wisdom of the German wine community. That's O.K., but our *reasons* for appreciating Meßmer are diametrically opposed. Inside Germany he's lauded for his dry wines. He sells them like loco, and this year I liked them too, some of them.

I've represented this estate since almost the very beginning, and nothing would please me more than to get chummier and to keep showing you wines like these. Gregor Messmer is an almost comically serious man. He would be comic if he didn't conduct himself with such quiet dignity, but really, you want to tickle him! I'll bet he'd tickle you back. But first he'd have studied *The Tickle Points Of The Human Body* and he'd be deadly accurate.

Two prominent points to make. The first is that Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the



Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slatey

minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

The second point is the Schwarz connection. Hans-Günter Schwarz hails from neighboring Gleisweiler. Schwarz and Messmer senior have been friends for years and young Gregor had the precious opportunity to form his own friendship. The results show in his wines.

Having said that, Gregor has emerged decisively

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Burrweiler Schäwer, Schlossgarten and Altenforst**
- **Soil types: Slate, sandy loam loess, red sandstone and heavy chalky clay and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 45% Riesling, 13% Spätburgunder, 10% Weissburgunder, 6% St. Laurent, 5% Grauburgunder, 21% other varietals including Scheurebe**

from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz world is the love of reductive viticulture. "What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. "Our Süsreserve comes only from the healthiest grapes and we use no preservatives to treat it. We never de-acidify. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking."

"The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least 'winemaking'."

That's the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I

like wine with the greatest possible number of uses.”

Messmers use only organic fertilizers. All the white wines are made and aged in stainless steel. They receive their single racking early after fermentation and are left undisturbed until bottling, usually in March. This is a recipe for noninterventionist winemaking of remarkable purity. And Messmer’s wines, indeed, are remarkably pure. They’re as clear as glass, etched as sharply as etched glass, transparent as the thinnest glass, but firmly constituted.

He did a "homeopathic" acidification in 2003, both in

must and in wine, based on pH issues as well as flavor. I think his '03s are stunning, and his sweet wines are in a class of their own. Only the very best from Dönnhoff, Selbach-Oster and Müller-Catoir are equivalent. The articulation and clarity of Meßmer’s sweet wines, their discretion and tenderness and tact, are infinitely more precious than syrupy richness. I really started to wonder whether I actually *liked* dessert wines at all anymore, and Gregor restored my heart to me; tasting his wines is stirring and profound.

Messmer at a glance:

Superbly made wines, exceptional clarity and polish in a keenly etched and chiseled style. Has soared ahead to take its place among the best estates in the Pfalz the last few years. Sure-handed with a multitude of grape varieties.

how the wines taste:

What unites them is CLARITY and SPECIFICITY. Gregor’s careful, diligent style seems to allow us to examine the fruit of his wines as though under a microscope. This must be the most honorable way to make wine. Everyone knows how to make bombshells—it’s facile and plausible—but the tender, delicate rendering of varietal fruit denotes a **respect** for the grape which only shows when you’re nature’s humble servant and not concerned with being a hot-shot. Gregor’s wines have an exactitude that satisfies my desire for seeing things clearly.

GMS-095L **2003 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Sporting a pretty new Bründlmayer-ish label, and now for the first time 100% estate-bottled (Gregor purchased a 6 hectare winery in Gleisweiler, half of which is planted with Riesling); this is quite generous and long and lip-smacking; salty and tangy and smooth. Here the '03 vintage is your best friend, as this hasn't a scintilla of bite.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to five years)

GMS-096 **2003 Riesling Schärer Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

+

Not often I give a star to a dry German wine, but this is a dead-ringer for a high grade Nigl riesling from a fruit-driven vintage; a fascinating terroir-drenched wine; complex and smooth, determinedly long; flavors run in the charred slate direction but juicy and lush; just great dry Riesling folks. Like many such wines it tastes *sweeter* than it actually is.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between one and six years, again from twelve to eighteen)

GMS-098 **2003 Muskateller Kabinett Trocken**

+

So last year I lifted the glass to my nose and I'm *sure* it's the Gewürz and I'm yammering on to Gregor about how I think his Gewürz is the best in Germany yada yada yada, and he's smiling bigger and bigger and I'm thinking "It's just so great to see how happy my compliments make him" and finally he tells me "This is all very gratifying, Terry, and I appreciate it. Only this isn't the Gewürztraminer in your glass." *Um, it isn't?* "No, it's the Muscat." *Oh yeah, the Muscat; that's what I MEANT to say!*

Hails of derisive laughter from Kevin. Some frickin' expert I am. Vanquished, utterly vanquished. Last time I open my fool mouth. . . .

24 hours later we were at Weegmüller and there was a Gewürz in our glasses. "Boy, do I love the aroma of Muscat," said Kevin. **Hah!** Ze tables are türned, eh stud! I don't even know why you buy wines from guys like us at all, man. A decently trained ape could do as good a job.

This 2003 has lovely flowery aromas that could have been mistaken for Gewürz and believe me I tried, but it smells so much like Rolly-Gassmann's Muscat I stumbled into the right guess. The palate is just gorgeous; fine and dense, pointed and complex, and again crazily long.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to five years)

GMS-097 **2003 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

Yow: this just *rocks!* It's like some wickedly salty plum compôte with just enough clove and star-fruit to perfume the finish; again absurdly long, and with a touch of lees and hyssop.

SOMMELIER ALERT! CORE-LIST WINE

SOS: 1

GMS-087 **2002 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +

This is juicier and more seductive than the 2001. That impeccably stylish high cheek-boned lady has removed her glasses, shaken her hair loose and unbuttoned her two top buttons. Va va Voom. Ravishing spice, and that salty lick at the end is irresistible. One of the prominent reviewers wrote "Why can't all Halbtrockens be this good?" Because not all growers have the talent and palate of our shy hero, that's why.

SOS: 1 (now to three years; again from nine to thirteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT! CORE-LIST WINE

GMS-076 **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett**

I don't recall the last "regular" Kabinett from Gregor; perhaps he decided to soothe my soul from the dreadful blow of having pulled his Scheurebe out. Lime and banana aromas here, and it is tangy, pineapply and Scheu-like. Long, as all the 2001s are. Baked apple. Currant. Fine grip. Incredible to still be able to get this: thank the myopic German domestic market, which has no use for beauties like these.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

GMS-099 **2003 Rieslaner Spätlese**

There were two lots of which this was the sweeter. It's a death-before-dishonor dance of Rieslaner, missing its usual iron backbone but blasting out wave upon wave of super-sized fruit. Bottling ad time will urge it out from under the blanket.

SOS: 4 (between five and eighteen years)

GMS-079 **2001 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese** +

There are VERY few Gewürztraminers in this offering, because every other one is held up to it, and if it ain't as good as Gregor's, it don't get in. 108^o Oechsle. Why can't anyone else come remotely near this man's sure hand with Gewürz? Here it's all wild rose and lichi, sleek and deft and almost ladylike. Absolute varietal purity, and nothing crude or palling.

When it's gone we'll move into a 2002, which is oh-so fine, juicy and almost piquant with great finesse and purity; less solid but more lissome than the 2001. There's also a 2003 of "+" quality, which is pretty crazed, with unfathomable varietal focus in spite of its amplitude.

Every order from this portfolio should include these astonishing Gewürztraminers.

SOS: 3 for 2001, 2 for 2002 and 2003. (between now and four years)

GMS-100 **2003 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese** ++

I mean, gadzooks. Gad-freaking-zooks. This has all the obsidian smoke of the dry version but with pure *quetsch* (purple-plum) liqueur; seemingly taut yet infinitely lavish, with a splendid finish of ore and plum and malt. There are denser 2003s but few that simply *taste* this good.

SOS: 3 (between six and nineteen years)

- GMS-089H **2002 Burrweiler Altenforst Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/500ml ++**
 This was a not-cold-enough-to-freeze-solid Eiswein, thus a stunningly concentrated Auslese. Too infantile to emote over, but ravishing potential.
 SOS: 3 (forecast pending tasting of finished wine)
- GMS-090H **2002 Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml +**
 First crop from a new vineyard. Just sulfured the day before my visit; thus the nose was inscrutable and it was impossible to delineate its many facets. There's strength, and a profound texture, and every reason to expect this will be superb.
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-one years)
- GMS-091H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Spätburgunder Weissherbst Auslese, 12/375 +**
 I was peering nervously at the assortment we'd already selected. Very big. Please don't let there be any more masterpieces, Daddy please. Oh no; this is just *celestial*. 120° Oechsle rosé of Pinot Noir! WHAT a nose, the purest possible Pinot fruit, like the Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Française; exotic blueberries, ethereal, dewy, wild strawberries; any Pinot Noir lover NEEDS this wine.
 SOS: 4 (will "keep" for many years, but drink it soon to catch that magic fruit)
- GMS-081H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller BA, 12/375ml +**
 135° Oechsle. This has ravishing purity; picked November 10th from the fruit left hanging after the "little" Muscat was gathered. Riotous psychedelic flower-fragrance; seductive botrytis, quite sweet, but as pretty as a purple pony.
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GMS-101H **2003 Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml +++**
 This, along with the Catoir, was the best BA I tasted among the 2003s. It's a quintessence of the Auslese; indeed even more focused than the Auslese, with a hauntingly lovely fruit melded with perfect botrytis; ringent penetration, serenely poised intensity; a papaya crème Anglaise flavor that lingers tantrically, like an endless afterglow. Gregor Meßmer is one of a small handful of the best dessert-wine-makers in the world.
- GMS-102H **2003 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling TBA, 12/375ml ++**
 Perfection. No one else, or very few, make sweet wines with this purity and focus. A wine that returns you to your soul. Like looking at a loved one asleep, the fathomless tenderness, the inaccessible mystery, the tidal pull of longing. The wine itself has exquisite form and outline and more than mere richness; it has a kind of nubby surface to which the palate adheres. And it has something beyond itself; it has *you*, has your heart in its hands.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and sixty years)
- GMS-083H **2001 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling TBA, 12/375ml ++**
 A patriarch; all smoke and slate char; smells like essence-of-Schäwer. Quite masculine after the BA and Eiswein, but will ultimately surpass them in sheer compelling breed and will. Its sleek shape is scintillating, even as its ethereal-essence fruit melts your heart. You could fill a page with nuances. A craggy, deep-etched dignity. It's the most winery of them all, has uncanny balance and clarity, and you know, this is like Clos Ste.-Hune or Nikolaihof's Steiner Hund: *Serious Business*. **Extremely limited.**
 SOS: 3 (between twenty-five and seventy-five years)
- GMS-103 **2002 St. Laurent Trocken**
 This is one of my favorite red grapes, but it's hard to find because it's finicky and most growers don't like its uncertain yields and unstable genetic makeup. In a way, St. Laurent is the same kind of litmus test Rieslaner is; if a grower has it planted he's ipso facto a lunatic. My kinda guy, in other words. St. Laurent, at its best, tastes like really good Burgundy that has 15% Mourvèdre in it, a compelling mixture of signals that makes the wines haunting and complex. Gregor's bottling is always among the best German reds. This is why I continue to list it although it's a hard-sell at its (justifiably high) price; *you should know* that such reds can be made in Germany.

There's a smoky and tobaccoey kind of miasma happening here; roasty low notes like blood-sausage, and a sweet long finish. Major-league grown up red wine.

They used dry ice to cool the fruit during the harvest, both in the harvest-buckets and in the cellar. They did a small (and to hear it told, hesitant) acidification of musts with tartaric. And they made an improbable vintage: utterly smooth and entirely *darling* wines. There were estates whose 2003 were flat and dull, but that isn't what I mean here. These wines were refined and articulate and elegant *without* any sense of structural urgency. They are gentle.

The new cellar master is a sweet young guy, a wine *amateur* who decided to make a profession out of his passion, thus bringing a different sensibility to the mix. I like him; he's cheerful and candid and hasn't left his days as a wine aesthete entirely behind.

I sometimes refer to "Grand Cru" aromas or flavors, and this is what I mean. The words spring

to my mind when I sniff a wine of clearly profound aroma *not derived from fruit*, where varietality *per se* is absorbed into larger, deeper non-primary characteristics. In Grand Cru wines, the land is the *text* and the grape is the *speaker*. You might say the vineyard trumps the variety. Except of course the variety is the means by which the vineyard is heard.

Grand Cru lands are the earth's erogenous zones, some confluence of nerve endings which tingle at the touch of sunlight. The old ones didn't even *put* the variety on the label. If it was Grainhübel or Steinberger or Sonnenuhr it was presumed to be Riesling, just like Corton Charlemagne is presumed to be Chardonnay.

"We want to have fruit," said Braun. "We like mineral, but with low enough yields we get it as a matter of course; we seek to preserve fruit and to differentiate the fruit of various sites." Very revealing, this. Minerality is the Given when you work with Riesling in great vineyards. Fruit needs to be nurtured.

Braun's *regime* featured some changes; less green in the vineyards, more canopy trimming, more emphasis on clean un-botryrised fruit, and harvesting based on tasting the grapes instead of chasing X-or-Y must-weight, but Biffar's wines were more filigree the past two years, with more silken texture, subtle solidity and inference.



Biffar's is a baronial place (I don't think there's any actual barons in residence but the *mien* suggests they're hiding away in a tower somewhere), certainly one of the Gentleman's Estates of the Mittelhaardt. They have marvelous land, with many of the greatest riesling sites in all of Germany. And they have an unusually flexible approach to

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg and Mäushöhle, Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad, Wachenheimer Gerümpel**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and basalt or limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 17% Spätburgunder, 15% each Riesling & Weissburgunder, 10% each Grauburgunder & Portugieser, 8% Gewürztraminer, 5% each Müller-Thurgau, Chardonnay and Silvaner, 10% other varieties**

cellar work. There are both stainless steel tanks and large old casks in the cellar, both of which can be chilled. The wines are fermented with cultured yeasts at controlled temperatures, but they are not strictly reductive. The goal is to give them just enough oxygen to promote secondary aromas; in effect their architecture mirrors the estate's actual architecture.

The harvest is also worked in various ways according to grape variety and to the condition of each picking. One absolute is long lees contact, up to three weeks on the gross lees and another 4-8 weeks on the fine lees. But apart from all this wine-geek stuff, I have always enjoyed my visits here emotionally, perhaps even spiritually.

It was cold this March, and the blackbirds came late, and when they finally arrived they seemed to want to make up for lost time, singing with an almost manic extravagance. I always seem to hear them from Biffar's tasting room. Tender young riesling and birdsong thus merge, and I can barely separate them any more. One year I was there when the noon bells rang; in some small villages this is still done. A happy clamor of sound. And I sniff the wine and I *know* it is all the same, because fine wine weaves itself throughout all song, all blossom, all

beauty. It seems to say "Oh forget me, but here, let me show you this!" And it calmly leads you through all the things that have ever made you happy, ever made you pause, notice, and be delighted, and finally at the end of all those things, fine wine leads you back to yourself, back home, to the little shining place in your soul which reminds you, always, how glad you are to be alive.

I'm not telling you this so you'll admire what a sensitive hombre I am, but only to suggest that wine *wants* something of us, *wants* us to become more of who we are, larger, less hidden, more grateful, kinder.

I see no reason, absolutely none, why I can't remember those things even as I swim in the waters of mercantilism. If this book—this work amounts to anything it isn't because it contains a few hundred good wines. It's because it insists on integrating the practical realities of earning a living with the more abiding realities of being a full human being. And because it asks you to think about the people who make beautiful wines; they are your companions and neighbors on this little green world. They bless us with their work, and it's only fitting we bless them in return with our gratitude and kindness.

Biffar at a glance:

Stellar, first-growth quality estate since the 1992 vintage. Excellent collection of many of the top vineyard sites of the Pfalz. Brilliantly fashioned wines with eye-popping clarity and penetration.

how the wines taste:

The taste of these wines is incredibly rich in mineral complexity and incredibly specific in fruit and soil flavors. They are on the rich side. They're brilliant but not squeaky-reductive. They have a noble glow about them; they realize the greatness inherent in the superb vineyards from which they come.

- GBR-070 **2003 Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Trocken**
 You get two umlauts for one low price! The wine has a euphoric fragrance; smooth, round and pretty, like sweet crab or langoustines; nice mineral kiss on the mid-palate; grainy finish.
 SOS: 0 (now to eight years)
- GBR-071 **2002 Wachenheimer Gerümpel Riesling Spätlese Trocken** ++
 (a.k.a. Gerümpel Grosses Gewächs)
 Quite possibly the best dry German riesling I have ever tasted.

Fantastic nose! Quince, rosewater, star-fruit, sweet smoke, redcurrant, malt; the palate is a dream of grace and prettiness; as massive and as vaporous as a cloud; long and complex; nothing stern or pointed here; just a satiny parfait of plum-blossom, balsam, malt and exquisitely understated mineral. A stunning achievement.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (now to five years, again from eleven to fifteen)
- GBR-067 **2002 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett** +
 GBR-069 **2003 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**
 We'll ship 2002 as long as we can, then move into 2003.
 The 2003 has a ver-r-r-ry spicy gingery fragrance but the palate spreads in talc-y rivulets of salt, gently but deftly, with the strange clinging length of 2003. Pure fruit. Somehow has finesse and grip-with 6.5 grams per liter acidity!
 SOS: 2 (now to eight years)

 The 2002 has 90° Oechsle, and was distinctly superior to the 2001 (which was good enough!); very finely chalky and mineral; apples and corn and ginger; the densest and thickest of any vintage I remember; this has the detail, elegance and fascination of Catoir wines in the Hans-Günter Schwarz days, the endless sense of edges and echoes.
 SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT! **CORE-LIST WINE**
- GBR-072 **2003 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese**
 This seems drier than the Kabinett; has more peach and honey tones, and the fine-fruited finesse of the entire range; there's more power and spine now; meyer lemon and talc dance in the deliberate finish. A slightly tighter fist than the Kabinett.
 SOS: 2 (between three and fourteen years)
- GBR-073H **2003 Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml**
 Here I side with the hedonists. It a baby BA, another of 2003's salty syrups, but there's grip enough plus it's just plain hard to dislike. Call it a guilty pleasure.
 SOS: 4 (between ten and twenty-five years)

Kurt Müller is an extremely nice guy: hearty, generous and gregarious, as are his wines! They don't have the sheet-metal brilliance of someone like Biffar, but then I already *have* Biffar and don't need to repeat that style. I want this portfolio to be ecumenical. Plus I have a certain tender affection for a wee touch of the bumpkin in a wine. I respond to its honesty. A little earthiness is a good thing, sometimes. Nature's tooth and claw, that stuff.

Müller has become an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück, plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien. But back to the Kirchenstück for a moment. The official land assessment value of this site places

it at the top of the pile, not just in the Pfalz, but in all of Germany! If you own land here, you are paying higher taxes than owners in Doktor or Marcobrunn or Baiken or Scharzhofberger. What is it about the Kirchenstück? As usual with great vineyards, the "what" isn't always so explicable, but let's try and explic-it!

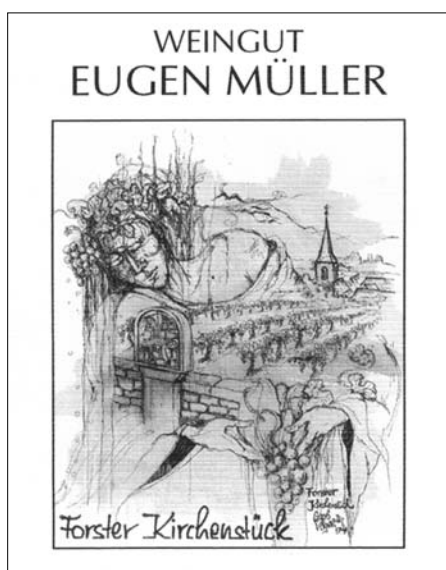
It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines. Still, not *this* kind of spice; this sharp, nipping concentration. Then there is a flavor of black-cherry which I've never seen elsewhere in the Pfalz. Then there is a minerality which again seems *packed*, as though it had been *pounded* together, carbonized. The whole effect is penetratingly expressive, yet, here's the genius of it: it's also, somehow ELEGANT AND REFINED, and the palate keeps whipsawing back and forth between "ZOUNDS! This is spicy!" and "Oooooohh, this is gorgeous!"

The Jesuitengarten, in comparison, is quite a bit less high-toned and zingy, more lush and caramelly: heavy

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Forster Kirchenstück, Jesuitengarten, Ungeheuer, Pechstein and Musenhang**
- **Soil types: Calcareous loam, sandstone detritus, partly with basalt and clay**
- **Grape varieties: 76% Riesling, 10% Grauer and Weisser Burgunder, 14% red varieties**

satin versus raw silk. What makes **Jesuiten-garten** tick is the solidity of its structure, the innate fineness of its flavors and the stylishness of its complexity. Kirchenstück has more **genius** in it, but also more arrogance. Jesuitengarten is a *little* less brilliant but a little more accommodating; it's more diplomatic.

Kurt Müller considers his wines run in a reductive direction, but I don't find them as explicitly grapey as that implies. He ferments with cultured yeasts and gets the crystalline polish he wants in his wines. He started whole-cluster pressing with the 1998 vintage but somehow his wines don't have the *sheen* such vinification often produces. Otherwise the cellar work is run of the mill; what counts here is the sheer BREED of these wines at their best. This is benchmark Mittelhaardt Riesling at without-a-doubt the most REASONABLE prices you can possibly be asked to pay. *Look* at any of the three B's and then look at these!



Müller at a glance: The best possible array of the top sites of the Pfalz, including the very best vineyard. Mouth-filling, fruity wines, direct and approachable. Astoundingly reasonable prices for wines of such pedigree.

how the wines taste: In two words: juicy and caramelly. They aren't "modern" in their insistence on vinosity, and they seem to aim for power rather than brilliance. I often underrate them because they need six to nine months after bottling to really come forward. These are showy wines, full of flavor, and they do stand out in tastings.

- GEM-063 **2002 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**
 Actually from the "Grand Cru" Pechstein, one of the very greatest Pfalz vineyards, but Müller has brand recognition for the Grosslage name, though he kindly offered to get me a *separate A.P. number* if I wanted "Pechstein" on the label; THIS is a nice guy! He doesn't need the hassle, much as my purist heart prefers the single-site name. The wine has sleek lilac-y Pechstein aromas and just beautiful charming fruit-it's markedly better than the 2001; lime, fressia, lilac and wintergreen; as pretty a wine as has ever been made at Müller. SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GEM-070 **2003 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**
 This is already showing its fruit along with the sandalwood vineyard thing; balsam aromas; palate is rich and plump but not flabby; curranty yet with that baritone-blast of vinosity. SOS: 2 (between three and nine years)
- GEM-069 **2003 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett "Terra Cara"**
 This is gentle and for 2003 quite mineral; works virtually Halbtrocken and has a spriggy, wisteria-like flavor along with notes of crab meat and scallion. The palate is gentle with a finishing minerality. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now to seven years)
- GEM-065 **2002 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**
 First offering. I like the minerality and the tautness, on which this salty-sweet lick of vinosity is so seductive because the body is so fine-grained and slim. SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-one years)
- GEM-066 **2002 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Auslese** **+**
 He nailed it! Got all the fire of the site with no heaviness and with moderate sweetness and wonderful minerality. The finest wine from here other than a Kirchenstück in many a moon. SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)
- GEM-067H **2002 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **++**
 Wonderful juicy length and pure divine fruit. Perhaps the most charming and seductive vintage yet, with a hauntingly sweet-salty endless contrail of flavor, bewitching spice, and a finish absolutely saturated with terroir. Starting with vintage 1990 I have shipped this wine every year. Even the least of them has been wonderful, and the sustained beauty across the years has been nothing short of thrilling. This wine has become a touchstone for Riesling's profundity, and the best vintages-1991, '93, '96, '98 and 2001-are some of the greatest rieslings on earth. SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-three years) **CORE-LIST WINE.**
- GEM-062H **2001 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **++**
 We brought this in when the 2000 and '99 both sold through. It is the masterpiece one would expect; certainly the best vintage since '98, and standing with the all-time great ones ('91, '93, '96, '98, now '01); it is all the Kirchenstück can be, complex, noble, very long; a poem of the secret soil.
- GEM-068H **2002 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+(+)**
 Picked December 11th; the first-ever Kirchenstück Eiswein! Too young to note, but staggering potential. Celestial cherry aromas already showing. If you're serious about your German-wine cellar you must have this. Though it is unfolding at glacial speed, and seems to have wanted more sweetness. Still, there's no responsible evaluation inside of at least three years, by which time it'll be gone. SOS: 4 (between thirteen and thirty-six years)

Back when I was a young pup I lived in Germany and fancied I might establish a career as a wine writer. (Hey, before that I wanted to be a rock critic and before that I yearned to be a guitar-God. So ease up on me.) Well, I was writing for the Friends Of Wine magazine, which commissioned me to do a piece on Deinhard, to whom I'm sure they hoped to sell lots of advertising. Deinhard, as many of you know, used to be a Name in the American market.

So I spent three days knocking around with the charming Karl Liebetrau, touching down in Bernkastel, Oestrich and Deidesheim. It was then I first visited "Dr. Deinhard" and met the memorable Heinz Bauer, who makes the wines there. My arrival coincided with a kid's birthday party, and the

final impression I carried with me as we drove off was of Bauer hobbling on stilts around the cobblestone courtyard.

His hair's a little whiter than I remember, but the piercing blue eyes remain, as does the angelic mien. Bauer is a soul-twin of Hans-Günter Schwarz (they know each other, of course, and each speaks fondly of the other), typical sweet-hearted Pfälzers making wine in which you can *taste* the affection with which they are lavished.

Indeed affection can be understood to be the Point. I asked Bauer if his cellar-work was different from the prevailing-usual among quality estates. He answered, in effect, by claiming I'd asked the wrong question. "Quality results from what one does in the vineyard," he said. "There are no wonder-winemakers. Intensity, flexibility, knowledge and intuition are the things which bring quality."

The Deidesheim estate is now in the hands of the Koch family, yet is called Dr. Deinhard after its founder, who moved from Koblenz to Deidesheim in the middle of the 19th century, before you were born. Deinhard has leased a proportion of the property from Kochs; in effect the wines were/are custom-made for Deinhard from the X-hectares of vineyard they lease. That number is falling sharply now.

Deinhard used to stipulate that no other wine from the "Dr. Deinhard" estate could be exported to their markets. This is no longer the case.

I made an exploratory visit. One can never have too many great Pfalz wines, and I'd been told quality was extremely high – the estate took a key prize for the best

- **Vineyard area: 30.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg, Langenmorgen & Mäushöhle; Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad & Linsenbusch; Forster Ungeheuer & Jesuitengarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and basalt or limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% others including Scheurebe, Rieslaner, Weissburger, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir**

Halbtrocken wine in Germany from the 2001 vintage (Bauer has a touch with H-Ts I suspect because he himself likes them best of all) – and prices were very reasonable.

The estate is rather large by my standards; over 30 hectares outside of the Deinhard lease, with a high proportion of Riesling and a gratifying proportion of Grand Crus. Bauer seems to be both jovial and sensible. He has both steel and casks in the cellar and can control fermentation temperatures.

I went there on spec, but grew more and more impressed as the tasting progressed. There were a lot of wines, yet there was a deftness and tenderness across the board; these were the wines of a mature vintner who sought honesty and expressiveness. I found myself wishing I could stay longer and go deeper. My notes are scribbled in an inexplicable shorthand onto the tasting sheet he provided. At some point I knew I was hooked. I looked over at Kevin Pike and said, *Hey Kev; it isn't just me is it? These are really wonderful.* He grinned and nodded. "I was already filling out the forms, babe."

Inconveniently enough, this is an estate that didn't seem to have a grip on the 2003 vintage. It's the smallest harvest in Bauer's time (58 hl/ha), despite having irrigated ("We were alone responsible for 4 million liters of



water in the ground."), and most of it was gathered late, and acidified by tartaric in the musts. I gather Bauer likes to make wines on-the-dry-side, and may have been too

formulaic in 2003. Luckily I still had plenty of '02s and '01s from which to select, so I did, augmented by my favorite among the 2003s.

Dr. Deinhard at a glance:

1st-quality Pfalz estate available in the U.S. at last; big range of Grand Cru sites rendered in a genial and intelligent way, AND (yay!) enough wine.

how the wines taste:

Dense and minerally, with focused fruit and with almost unerring BALANCE in a range of styles. Gentle and charming more than forceful and shoulder-grabbing. Imagine a cross between Minges and Biffar!

- GDD-011 **2003 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
Quite successful for this genre; interesting toasted wheat or maize aromas; evenly balanced with a nice horizontal spread of structure; slightly abrupt finish as the fruit falls away (10 more grams of sweetness would have solved this!); but the tertiary finish is long and doughy, firm and balanced. This could almost be a vin claire from Mesnil.
SOS: 0 (between now and five years)
- GDD-004 **2001 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
Great polish and detail; a fine smoky Grand Cru with more cut than the 2002; this is not at all unlike a Nigl Privat.
SOS: 0
- GDD-009 **2002 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**
Perfect clone-90 Riesling, with a slim 95° Oechsle (!!!); fresh, lively, serene, long; how on earth could it be any better? We bought every drop he'd give us. A year later I still think it's perfect Pfalz riesling.
SOS: 2
- GDD-010 **2002 Scheurebe Kabinett**
From Ruppertsberger Linsenbusch (the best parts of which are legitimate 1er Cru); reticent nose but explosive palate; fine, citric and curranty; wonderful; exquisite cassis finish. Bauer likes Scheurebe. You can trust a man who likes Scheurebe!
SOS: 2
- GDD-007 **2001 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese** ++
This is a masterpiece. Sensational nose and magnificent palate; recalls one of Catoir's great Herrenlettens from the Schwarz era; endless cool minerality and ultra-refined fruit. It's like tasting the chalk of heaven. It's wines like these which establish: a) the sheer supernal greatness of 2001; and, b) the majesty and subtlety of the best Pfalz Rieslings. Don't dare miss it.
SOS: 2
- GDD-012 **2002 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese**
I was all ready to select a good 2003 until Bauer asked almost casually whether I'd have any interest in tasting the '02. As if the 2002 were somehow obsolete. Well! The wine is piquant and complex and highly recommended.
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-four years)
- GDD-008 **2001 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese** +
Extravagant complex aroma; sweet clay, kirsch, oat bread, brown sugar; a masculine Ven-dage Tardive style; determinedly, resplendently serious wine; endlessly filigree and subtle.
SOS: 3

SOS

A NEW WAY TO MEASURE SWEETNESS

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

I don't think the standard sugar-pyramid of German wines is Serviceable any more. Thus I started noting each wine I planned to list according to an intuitive scale I tried to apply consistently. I call it the SENSE-OF-SWEETNESS scale—SOS for short—and you'll see it following every tasting note. It should be a more reliable guide to the actual taste of a wine than any word on any label. Here's how it goes:

IT STARTS FROM ZERO. Zero is the point of no-discernable sweetness.

MINUS ONE indicates sugar is discernibly absent but the wine is in balance.

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

THREE signifies sweetness important of itself. Remember, I reject any wine of grotesque or vulgar sugariness.

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!

I had some yucky chest-cold thing while I was in Germany; it didn't hit the schnoz, luckily - I could still work - but it made me wonder what I'd do if I was KO for a few days and couldn't taste: what then? I'd hope I was laid-out on a day I was scheduled to visit Theo Minges, not because I don't like to see him (I do!) but because I know with this grower as with few (if any) others I could say "Sorry to have missed you; just send what you sent last year." He is that reliable.

He himself was laid up with some awful back debilitation, from which he'd only recently recovered. The pain-pills had him wondering if his palate was affected, so Hans-Günter Schwarz stopped by and spent five hours tasting through the cellar, to confirm and corroborate and suggest. I spoke to Hans-Günter after his visit but before mine. And? "You'll have fun, young 'un," he replied.

Theo was chatty. And he talks *fast*, as if he were on a game-show where you had to speak 25,000 words in five minutes to win the trip to Maui, and you . . . start . . . NOW! (*tickticktickticktick*. . .) So I've learned to listen fast, because he keeps spouting out these gems. I asked him as I asked everyone, whether he acidified. "Almost not at all," he said. "You know, there are growers who usually de-acidify, and who added acidity this year-who in effect fight against nature, but I see it differently. We are part of the whole; we don't stand apart from nature."

This is a crux of the matter, isn't it! To one sort of vintner, a vineyard is a mere production-unit, a thing which is used like any machine, to bring about a result he's already decided upon. To another sort of vintner, a vineyard is teeming with life. He goes out among his vines, his soils, his breezes, his birds, and listens. None of them speak his language but all of them speak their own, and this he tries to hear. He nurtures his vines and gathers the fruit they give, and follows the will of that fruit all

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Gleisweiler Hölle, Flemlinger Vogelsprung**
- **Soil types: Limestone, heavy chalky loam, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 10% each of Grauer Burgunder and Dornfelder, 5% each of Weissburgunder, Chardonnay and St. Laurent, 20% other varieties**



Theo Minges

the way to the alchemy of wine. Sure he knows what *font* he likes, but he knows he doesn't write the text; the text is larger than he but includes him. Indeed he is crucial; he

takes the inchoate and urges it alive.

At one point Theo described a new vineyard he had purchased: "These are old, solid, proud vines." He said. A vine isn't a mere *thing* you manipulate: it is a *being* alive as you are. A fellow-being, a companion.

Minges himself is an old fashioned guy in an old fashioned house; he only just got a fax machine and doesn't own a computer ("Though my daughter has one; I can give you her email address if you want to send me emails," he offered. Somehow I'd rather call. . .) By the way, you always apologize for your German pronunciations, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

Theo Minges was "thrown in the cold water early" at the tender age of twenty. His father came latterly to viticulture, having originally been a painter, a sensibility which made the transition to viticulture rather comfortable, in Theo's opinion. During the period of euphoria over the new crossings, Minges stayed a classical course,

planting only Scheurebe and Kerner, the two most similar to Riesling. Minges was an island of classicism and must feel prophetic now, as so many of the crossings are being hacked out of the ground.

Theo told me something that made me glad. He's planting more and more Riesling each year, thanks to me (of all people), as I've been a good customer for them. Ain't that sweet? I never pause to consider my patronage might actually make things possible for the growers. Because of me and *you* a great guy like Theo Minges is literally *en-couraged* to produce more Riesling; that makes me feel useful and happy.

Most of the vineyards are on gentle slopes of deep loess-loam, though all Riesling is planted on chalky, stony ground. Unusually, the Flemlinger Zechpeter site is planted in Riesling from MOSEL clones, planted 38 years ago by Theo's father. Everything is hand-harvested—not a necessity here, as the land isn't steep—and many separate passes are made through the vineyards. The grapes are pressed in a pneumatic press with very little pressure. Musts are rarely centrifuged; Minges prefers to let them sit overnight to clarify. Natural yeasts are usually used, though Minges has no ideolog-

ical objection to using cultured yeasts *if necessary*. Fermentations are quite slow, at least four weeks, and no wine is *ever* racked before January; each wine spends at least a month on its primary lees to help them clarify and build complexity. "You have to leave the wines on their lees patiently," he says. "Otherwise, they become too reductive, too smooth; all their structure comes from acidity alone."

The more I get to know Minges the more I like him. He's bright and imaginative, a careful taster, indeed a WINE GUY, which isn't invariably the case among vintners. Many of them, you know, are essentially farmers, not aesthetes—nothing wrong with that! But it's unsafe to assume a grower has a "palate" as you and I use the term. Sometimes they only know their own wines, and don't always see *those* with great clarity. Sometimes it works, if the grower's talented and has integrity; I think of a Merkelbach for example. Theo Minges cares about wine in the abstract, likes to taste and describe and ruminate and I am always very, very happy to sit down with him.

It's hardly surprising the 2003s are as good as they are. *ALL* Minges' vintages seem to be wonderful.

Minges at a glance:

Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying minerally-leesy wines. Extraordinary value across the board The best, best, best quality large-format wines I have ever tasted ANYWHERE.

how the wines taste:

Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

GTM-075L **2003 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

"The liter wine should be fresh and light, spring-water with fruit," says Theo. And so it is, though I'm afraid to say the wine's often too interesting to be gulped down quite so casually. The 2003 is quite firm and chalky; tastes drier than the dry Spätlese offered below; this was not chaptalized, picked early, and exactly as he likes it to be; fresh, spring water brilliance and purity, uncomplicated, yet with plenty of length and complexity. SOS: 0 (between now and five years)

GTM-074L **2003 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Complex nose of verbena and lime; this has all the scintillating liveliness and minerality it usually has; just without the acid spine. I miss it a little, but to tell the truth, not a lot.

GTM-077 **2003 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

This is all fennel-frond and hyssop and meadow-herbs, and imagine you'd make a "sandwich" of two slices of empire-apple with a couple leaves of wintergreen in between; the wine has verve and snap, and basically, just YES. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (between three and eleven years)

- GTM-076 **2003 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 Fragrance like a super-ripe Cramant; osmanthus, narcissus, jasmine and Asian pear; palate is a twirling dance of interplay, with a remarkable inside-sweetness-what in Austria I call "secret-sweetness"-with generosity and fruit and grace and ease; some talk on the finish. Taste the Liter Halbtrocken right after this and you'll see how more sweetness can make the wine taste drier.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between now and eight years)
- GTM-078 **2003 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese**
Comme il faut, with lovely tilleul and lime-blossom and a fluffy center of perfumey lees and salty length; just huge charm.
CORE-LIST WINE
 SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)
- GTM-079 **2003 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese** +
 A remarkable achievement: the only Scheu I tasted from 2003 that actually smells and tastes like Scheu; hails from a 40-year-old vineyard he bought last year-"a cultural monument" he says-and the wine is just a dream of cassis and lavender; the palate is tangy and spicy and just screams for something, *anything* in a plum sauce.
 SOS: 2 (Between one and seven years)
- GTM-080 **2003 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese "Goldkapsel"** +
 Quite some nose; plantain, guava, jasmine and talc; picked at 108° Oechsle and took four weeks to *begin* fermenting ("We seek to trust the wine," Theo says, and this is more than word-noise when you have a wine that won't start for a month!) and stopped when it wanted to, like this. Hugely delightfully charming with refined and lovely fruit, a parfait of meyer lemon, and the slightly overt sweetness heralds a long and happy arc of development.
 SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GTM-081H **2002 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/500ml** ++
 First offering. It was still blooming away a year ago, but man, am I glad he still has some. 125° Oechsle, an attempted Eiswein, with a purity and beauty of fruit such as one rarely sees; heart-rending restraint and yet this itchy buttery complexity. I give up trying to describe each and every scintilla of nuance; your palate is kissed by an angel.
DON'T MISS THIS WINE!
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-seven years)



POINTS: what's the point?

I had a fascinating conversation with Pierre Rovani, who defended point-systems with compelling logic. "Why isn't it enough," I asked, "to simply have groups, fair-good-very good-excellent-superb, and rank the wines in order of preference within those groups?" "Good question," answered Pierre. "So what you're proposing is a 5-point scale." Ah ha! Hoist on my own petard.

My mistake was to debate the issue on the terms of the point defenders. Their logic is self-enforcing and circular. Critics have a responsibility to take a definite stand, and point scores force them to do so. No longer can they hide behind vague or nebulous language. The wine is an 88 and that's all there is to it. Please read my prose too, they say, because that's where I get to use all my flavor associations and groovy locutions, but the score's the Mojo.

Wine is, after all, a consumer commodity, and as such it can be compared within its type. The role of the critic, in this *Weltanschauung*, is to handicap the entrants and tell you who won the race and by how many lengths. It's all very clear, and well-intentioned.

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

First, I am intuitively quite certain that a point-system misleads in direct proportion to its affect of precision. We all know that wine is a moving target. Even industrial wine is a moving target. Why? Because we are a moving target: we feel differently on different days, at different times of day, our bodies are changeable, our palates are changeable, the over-tart salad dressing we ate at lunch will affect every wine we taste all afternoon, and it doesn't matter how responsible we try to be; the moment we assign an absolute value to a wine, we have misled. And the more specific we purport to be, the more we mislead.

And the consequences of training readers to consider wine in terms of how many "points" to "give" it are mischievous at best. Even if I yield the point that scores are a necessary evil—and I don't, by the way—how many innocent consumers of wine journals are savvy enough to know that the *writer* may have to use points but the *reader* doesn't? Sadly, the meta-message of point-obsession is that "scoring" wines is the *sine qua non* of wine appreciation.

Oh lighten up! I hear you say. What's the harm?

The harm is subtle because its symptoms appear benign, but the long term effects are pernicious.

Here's a quote I like:

"The aesthetic moment offers hope that we are less alone, we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe." (John Berger, from "The White Bird")

Wine, I submit, is just such an aesthetic moment. It doesn't even have to be great wine. It only has to be significant wine, connected not to the factory but to the earth. Such wines invite us to respond with our souls. They open doors by which we enter a larger world than we normally inhabit. All we need is to be *available* for the experience.

We cannot be available if, in that single moment, we are scrolling through our egos to see how many *points* we're going to "give" or "award" the wine. The very language is suspiciously pompous: "We *awarded* Chateau Bleubols XXX-points on our 100-point scale." That's nice. How many points did the wine give *you*, Ace? Is the whole thing really about you? Does the cosmos give half a rat's ass how many "points" you gave a wine? That wine was a *gift* to you. And all you can do is "evaluate" it as if it were a DVD player or a Dustbuster.

One gentlemen with whom I debated this topic wrote (I'm paraphrasing) that he grew *into* using the 100-point scale when he felt his palate was mature enough. This poor lamb is running blindly toward the cliffs.

Ah, maybe he's right. After all, I've been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom's soliloquy at least a 94. That ranks it among the great-literary-scenes-of-all-time, along with Stavrogin's confession (95), Levin's day with the threshers (97), Gerald's walk to his death in the mountains (94+) and the death of Ben Gant (99). I didn't used to give scores to great scenes in literature. But eventually I came to realize ALL pleasure was in effect a commodity and I OWED it to myself to quantify the little suckers. So now, when I read novels, I'm constantly thinking "how many points is this scene worth?" I judge on imagery, diction, overall rhetoric, whether it advances the plot-line and/or develops the characters, and finally on how close to tears it brings me. Eyes-barely-moist gets 90. Eyes-barely-moist-and-catch-in-the-throat gets 91-92. Eyes full of tears but no drippage gets 93-94. Between 1-3 tears slipping down my face is 95-96, and full-bore blubbering earns the very highest scores. Since I started doing this I have just gotten so much MORE from all these great books!

"Was it good for you, baby . . . ?" *Oh, 89 maybe 90.*"

Shall we eventually declare all our pleasures subject to a precise analysis of their *extent* on an absolute scale? What's 100-point joy all about? "I cannot possibly feel happier than this!" Really? *How do you know?*

Sure, we can let the critics play with any system they wish. I use in effect a 4-point system to indicate my sense of a wine's "stature," but I deliberately leave it loose because I don't want to think about it. It is a fraction-of-a-second of *ignition*: I register it and move on. I think reviewers might be better employed trying to *deepen* our love of wine, but they do what they can and what their readers want and are trained to expect. Nor is this any sort of slam of the Great Man of Monkton. I rather think Bob Parker has done the wine world enormous good over his storied career. But I also believe, as St Peter opens the pearly gates to admit Mr. Parker, he'll peer through Bob's valise, pull out the folder marked "The 100-point Scale" and say; "I'll just hold on to this; you won't be needing it here."

rheingau wines



Recently Jancis Robinson included the Rheingau in a group of regions which had become “less interesting” since the last edition of Hugh Johnson’s *Wine Atlas*. They say by the time Hollywood picks up on a trend it’s already passé. Similarly perhaps, by the time an idea gains general currency in the wine-world it’s already growing outdated. No disrespect to the wonderful Ms. Robinson, who’s one of the Greats of our time! But when I first wrote about the Rheingau’s malaise it was, what 1985? And now, finally, there are the first little stirs and twitters heralding, dare one hope, a comeback.

What an irony. There’s almost no call any more for “Rheingau” as a commodity. It took a generation of indifferent and downright crummy wines from most of the erstwhile Great names of the region to throttle its reputation to death. I find I have to defend my selections, of which I am as proud and happy as I am with all my offerings. And some of the Great Names are staging a comeback! Prinz von Hessen is said to be much improved. Von Simmern’s getting there. We have quite

a way to go still, but one can no longer simply write-off the Rheingau.

The tragic suicide of Erwein Matuschka-Greifenclo (erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a

Though things are discernibly better now, there’s still distressingly little buzz about the region.

wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had been naked long enough, and the pathetic spectacle

could no longer be ignored.

A certain prevailing hauteur may have prevented the truth from being heard. But the financial ruin of a 600-year old business could no longer be ignored, and a regional epidemic of denial was drawing to a close. Now, we may hope, the idealists will no longer be suffocated. Or so we may hope!

We still gotta do something about those prices. I’m just not sure what. Perhaps Mr. Leitz will consent to being cloned. There’s an historic precedent for Rheingau wines to price themselves, *ahem* “aristocratically,” which might have been justified thirty years ago but which has zero bearing on their real value or cost of production vis-à-vis other German wines. Of all the habits that die hard,





Berg Roseneck

greed must surely die hardest.

Though things are discernibly better now, there's still distressingly little buzz about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is still no shortage of fussy polemicizing on behalf of some rusty, encrusted *concept* of the sacred Rheingau, not as a paradigm but almost a freemasonry whose runes and arcana need to be protected, lest the whole region lose its sacrosanct air. One hopes, wistfully, for a day when no more energy need be expended in Hegelian debates over what constitutes a "true" Rheingau wine, as though such a thing could be defined by its chemical analysis! Perhaps, dare one hope, we might return to some innocent *sense* of wine?

One does wish for a little more spirit of *fun* here. I get the impression when Leitz, Spreitzers and my gang are whooping it up, our laughter can be heard from Rudesheim to Eltville.

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau's real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Pfalz and the Mosel, but the truth is there's no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly *different* from one another's as Rauenthal's are from Winkel's, as Erbach's are from Hallgarten's—all of them. Taste *any* of these as they should be, and you'll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The "classic" wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is *not*: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it's not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence

of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an age of leisure. They are wines for "experts" who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like *polished, impeccable, aristocratic* sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them *big scores*? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he's less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more

The classic wine of the Rheingau is firm, contained, dignified.

pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the *cheapest guy in town!*—that a wine content to merely make a "statement" seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for mystically intricate wines. And I'm quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

We're looking at the beginnings of a renaissance now, thanks to one Johannes Leitz, and it heartens me to see you embrace the wonderful wines of a manifestly Good Guy. Johannes offered to scout for me. He found someone superb. You'll see!

The Rheingau wines I offer you aren't merely honorable, they are EXEMPLARY. And they are worth the prices asked for them, and much as I join you in snubbing our noses at all those butt-heads who disgraced the region, we shouldn't punish the good and honorable for the sins of the lousy and dishonorable. *These* growers, at least, deserve your support.

Ah me, another year, another film-crew at Leitz. This year it was two gentlemen writing for Stern. They needed me to pose for pictures. Sniffing, tasting, considering, standing, sitting, with sweater and without sweater, but not actually doing these things but rather *portraying* myself doing these things. It wouldn't have been fun at all except the two guys were really smart and interesting. Later we all had dinner, and Spreitzers come over and Leitz's darling wife and hyper kids were there (Luckily I love hyper kids; kids are *supposed* to be hyper), and in a corner of the tasting room/kitchen/dining room there stood about twelve glass balloons containing the assembled multitudes of TBA, all five of them doing their quiet thing while we ate and laughed.

There is no single human being with whom I work who deserves your support more than

Johannes Leitz. With each passing year I find him more remarkable.

The local German press started taking notice, and Leitz won just about every major kudo there was to win last year: up to 4-stars in *Gault Millau* (no one better in the Rheingau), Collection Of The Vintage, the top-“scoring” wine in virtually every category. I am very happy for my friend! More so because I know Johannes Leitz is the kind of man who'll remember how many years ago I started telling him he was top dawg.

Gault Millau wonders aloud if Johannes' new pneumatic press (used first for the 2000 vintage) catapulted his quality upward to their lofty realms. It certainly contributed. But even more, Leitz is the kind of man who doesn't stop surging ahead, doesn't stop exploring, doesn't stop trying to outdo himself, and doesn't stop *growing*.

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire. Johannes Leitz has visited us a few times now, and as often happens he is



Johannes Leitz

- **Vineyard area: 18 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland and Berg Kaisersteinfels**
- **Soil types: Weathered gray and red slates, sandy loam and loess, chalk and quartzite**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

blown away by our market. “My god, such people; great palates, incredible cuisine, incessantly sexually active!” —well, I made up that last bit: Johannes didn't say it. He was thrilled by you guys, though. And his sales took a sprightly leap forward, which made me very happy.

When I made my first approach to Johannes Leitz (12 years ago!) I found a sober young man still not out of his twenties, running a 5.8 hectare estate. His father had passed away when Johannes was a year old, and his mother resolutely maintained the winery until Johannes was old enough to hand it over to. He accelerated his studies by doing the basic courses at Eltville rather than the grand chi-chi at Geisenheim. He got home in the nick of time. The winery had survived, but barely. And it was frozen in time 18 years earlier. Johannes would need to invest, soon, a lot. Johannes was determined to make great wine.

He's a man with a passion for **aroma**. “I almost prefer inhaling to actual tasting,” he says. “I can't really love a wine regardless of how it tastes if it doesn't excite me on the nose. I want my own wines to seem more fragrant than the norm, fruitier and more harmonious. They should simply be *better!*” Leitz insists that “Wine grows in the vineyard; it isn't made in the cellar. There's no question that different soils give different flavors. Anyone

who tastes a Berg Schlossberg, with its high proportion of slate, alongside a Bischofsberg, will taste the importance of soil in a hurry!"

It's a reductive cellar, though most of the wines are held in casks. "I work very clean," he says, echoing the *one* refrain you hear in every good estate. "My friends call me finicky about cleanliness," he continues. "I also try to disturb the wine as little as possible, pumping for instance." On the subject of Trocken wine, Johannes can speak with authority, having earned the right by making many of the *greatest* dry German wines I have ever tasted. "I'm of the opinion that during the dry wave a lot of wines were made dry that weren't in any way suited for dry wine. You really need a certain kind of base wine to make a good Trocken. If you're honest about it, there's probably no more than, say, thirty percent of any cellar that fits. The rest would be better with a few grams or more of sweetness." He also practices what he preaches, which takes unusual courage in the topsy-turvy modern German wine market.

One wonders how Leitz's clear-headed honesty sits with the high priests of the VDP.

Johannes is done with his various building projects; the press-house is finished, the tasting room's there (and I'm sure the jacuzzi and the twin skee-ball lanes won't be

far behind), the family's out from under a range of health-related challenges . . . and then there's you, dear reader. You have been buying these wines with great vim, and this is a good thing! Though we are selling the wines about 33% faster than Johannes can actually produce them. It's all rather giddy but you know, it makes me happy. Because Johannes Leitz has it all. He's a perfect expression of my holy trinity of value: soil, family, artisanality. His connection to his vines is a priori and intimate. His scale permits – *relishes* – a degree and type of attention any industrial wine producer (and many other artisans) would think insane. He's close to every part of it; the wine he drinks with you in your restaurant, having fun (and studying your response, believe me!), is the wine he nurtured *himself*, from pruning to binding to trimming to canopy-thinning to green-harvesting to selective multiple hand-harvesting to inspecting the fruit to fermenting in individual small lots to monitoring to aging on the lees to tasting again and again to determine the best moment for bottling, and finally . . . to doing it all again.

Don't forget, when you see him he's also seeing *you*. There's a whole other life Johannes lives among his vines, by himself, which you and I don't see. Until we taste. And even then, we only see it if we think to look.

Leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three rising stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

how the wines taste:

They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. "A lot of people talk about 'yeast-contact' but I think I'm the only one who actually does it." And it's not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz's lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. I drank the 2000 Schlossberg Spätlese H-T the other night, and it was like semolina dumplings in a sweetly fragrant mix of veal and vegetable broth. No other wines are like them. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type—when it's true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes' wines taste "sweet." They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are **intensely** fragrant, as though they wished to **convince** you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they crave oxygen, and they don't show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn't get there with bazillions of yen or with mega-technology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

Again by the time you read these words Leitz will be sold out of his "Dragonstone" and his Rudesheimer Klosterlay Kabinett. We might still have a little, as might you, but the cellar is empty, pillaged and plundered, barren and melancholy. The wines vamoosed in the night. I'll share out-lines of notes in case you need to see them, however outlandish and unlikely this may seem.

The **Dragonstone** was gathered at 90° Oechsle and chaptalized to 100°, and there's one contingent picked at 95° and unchaptalized. Bottled mid-March, and more mannerly than the cask-samples we all tasted in January; loads of kirsch, and the sweetness is wonderfully stitched; fine length and unusually high extract for 2003 (26 grams per liter) SOS: 2.

The **Rüdesheimer Klosterlay Kabinett** has a lovely fragrance, zingy and peppery, rosemary; wonderfully focused palate with lots of tilleul and wintergreen and jade oolong; lovely yin-yang of texture and zip. SOS: 2

Leitz has many more vineyards than he did a year ago but made less wine in 2003 than in 2002. (See Corrie's piece for a first-hand portrayal of green-harvesting in Leitz's vineyards.) He didn't add acidity and says he's very pleased with acids and extracts in his 2003s. It would hardly surprise me; Leitz often seems to disprove any negative generality one has formed over a vintage. It's also quite possible the innate superiority of the Rüdesheimer Berg to the rest of the Rheingau is beginning to be revealed. It's no accident that three of the very best producers-Leitz, Breuer, Kessler-have major holdings in Rüdesheim.

- GJL-089 **2003 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 The 2002 was considered the best dry Riesling in Germany, and Johannes is avowedly "Taking on the Wachau" with this formidable wine. It's less the silken style of Alzinger than the 0-to-60-in-5-seconds style of FX Pichler, rather a bruiser, though like FX there's wonderful gloss and depth over all that power; this has sensational torque and sinew; it's a mastiff of riesling with deeply embedded mineral and a kind of lamby, rabbity bakey core below all those fathoms of vinosity.
 SOS: minus 1 (between now and five years, again from thirteen to twenty years)
- GJL-088 **2003 Rüdesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese** +
 The *intent* is for this vineyard to give Kabinett, but not in vintages like 2003 (and 2002 and 2001); this is all Cox-orange apples and cinnamon; long and encompassing, even-keeled and elegant. There's a gentle persistence I just love. An effortless complexity that seems simple, it is so seamless.
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GJL-090 **2003 Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** (+)
 By the way, do you know the skinny on the Rüdesheimer Berg? They're the steepest slopes in the Rheingau "proper" and with Hochheim produce the Rheingau's highest mustweights unless there's drought. The wines are big and pulled tight. They're among the most minerally of Rheingauers, with slate flavors and stony quartzite grip. ROTT-LAND is the lowest down and gives the most adamant, powerful wines. It's the body-builder of the trio; ROSENECK, since it's higher, has a "keener" flavor, more appley, more aromatic. When it works, its head-shakingly vivid malic perfume conspires with a stony grip to give unforgettable wines. SCHLOSSBERG is the slatiest of the three, almost a breath of Mittelrhein coming into it now, but with more power. These are steep mountains falling directly into the Rhine; only a two-lane road and train tracks can squeeze along the riverbanks. Anyone who cares about Riesling should know these vineyards, and should see them if possible; they're quite spectacular to look upon and even more spectacular to hike through.

 Euphoric fragrance of pure Roseneck; the palate is endlessly gentle and fine, with a low buttery tone that would announce Auslese in any other vintage. Dreamy, salty length, and will crisp up with bottling and normal serving temp (we tasted room-temp).
 SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GJL-091 **2003 Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 There's that clean-botrytis saltiness in spades here, and paradoxically the wine works drier because of it, and there's a greater sense of grip. It's a 2003 with all that implies: ostensibly soft yet shapely and structured, and with massive yet serious fruit.
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-three years)
- GJL-092H **2003 Rüdesheimer Kirchenpfad Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
 130° Oechsle-"Sorry it wasn't more!" said Johannes. Painfully young but all caramelized fennel, soft bones but just lovely fruit and perfect botrytis and surpassing charm.
 SOS: 4 (between ten and thirty-five years; BTW, this needs two years in bottle to show its cards)

THE TBA SERIES: There are five, as you see, ranging between Magdalenenkreuz at 240° Oechsle to Rottland at 280°. Don't forget TBA officially begins at 150°. Only the Kirchenpfad is remotely "ready," but I tasted them all and to my astonishment one was more appley than the next, especially the extraordinary Berg Kaisersteinfels. All were completely pure; not a dubious flavor among them. In the old days these wines wouldn't have been offered for sale till 2-3 years after the vintage, and they'd have remained available for ten years thereafter. Not anymore, all you ADD-sybarites! I'll list these wines now, even though as I write these words none of them is actually *wine* yet, because I don't want us to miss any of them.

- GJL-093H **2003 Rudesheimer Kirchenpfad Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
- GJL-094H **2003 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
- GJL-095H **2003 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
- GJL-096H **2003 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
- GJL-097H **2003 Rudesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
- GJL-081H **2002 Rudesheimer Kirchenpfad Riesling BA, 12/375ml**
 This is surely the ne plus ultra of Kirchenpfad, all violets and garrigue and bouquet-garni; the palate is juicy and salty and burning-leaf; it's not unlike the few great 2000s, and not at all demanding. You want less to sip it than to lap it.
 SOS: 4 (between seventeen and forty years)
- GJL-082H **2002 Rudesheimer Kirchenpfad Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **+**
 First, you should know that I frequently underrate BA and TBA when they're very young. I'm personally more of an Eiswein-hound because I sometimes feel uneasy around large amounts of botrytis. This takes the above BA and adds three dollops of heather-honey. It's less a quintessence than it is an elongation and deepening of the BA. It is masterly but not masterful. I loved it, and everyone else will love it even more.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and sixty years)
- GJL-098H **2002 Rudesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **++**
First offering. Now I just know there's gotta be a sommelier in Vegas somewhere who can *clean up* this untidy and unsightly clump-o-stickies, so, for the sake of graphic clarity and feng shui, c'mon; order that container! What you don't sell at dinner you can pour over pancakes at breakfast.



Harvest at Leitz

by Corrie Malas

On August 4th, 2003, my first day working in the vineyards of Johannes Leitz, it was well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Johannes had just returned from vacation and the rows in the Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg resembled the maverick hairdo of a fifteen year-old kid with a rock-and-roll agenda. From where I was perched steeply above the confluence of the Rhine and Nahe rivers (both of which were lower than anyone could remember) the water barely managed a glimmer through the haze of the heat. As Johannes demonstrated how to go about green harvesting, I was crouched in the slightly less scorching shadow that the vines offered, mindfully cautious not to lose my footing on the dry red slate as I followed along down the precipitous vineyard slope which at times felt more like a precipice. You see, looking at the Rudesheimer Berg vineyards, driving through them, even walking through them cannot prepare you for actually attempting to work in them for the first time (the incredible heat of 2003 notwithstanding).

As Johannes established the guidelines for how to tackle the vines, I realized immediately that I was at a great disadvantage. Not only does this man have a fourteen foot arm span (thus needing to adjust his footing far less than I, which is a not insubstantial consideration when the majority of one's time is spent trying to navigate the precarious balance between remaining upright and the backward-downward pull of gravity) but his hands are at least twice the size of the average man and are seemingly capable of doing three things at one time. Remember how fascinating it was when the Tasmanian Devil would go whizzing through the forest on Saturday morning cartoons? Johannes moves nearly as fast, definitely with as much precision, and with all the calm of a person knitting wool hats for the village orphans. Meanwhile (and I'm ashamed to report that this is not a joke) I was completing one row to his every four. I tried to keep up for about the first fifteen minutes. . . .

The process of green harvest is pretty common sense: pull away excessive leaf growth, clean out anything either dry or rotting and, most importantly, inspect the grapes. Johannes' instructions were to leave only two perfectly healthy bunches per vine shoot which sounded fine until I quickly discovered

that this meant that no less than 50% (and in many cases much more) of the what the vine had yielded was left on the "floor." I was shocked by this and almost a little scared. Would my friend have anything left to harvest if we were this rigorous in our green harvest selection? The Farmer replied, "No Corrie, when I am honest I must say that you are not cutting away enough..." Everyone talks about selection at harvest but the amount of selection



Corrie amongst the vines

that took place in these vineyards months before harvest was positively mind-bending. And as it has since been revealed, the vintners who worked this way in 2003 have wines that share the same mineral intensity, brilliant length and overall concentration that I so admire in Leitz's collection this year.

On the following days we worked Leitz's other Rudesheimer Berg vineyards: Roseneck (the steepest portion where I finally did fall, helplessly skidding down the quartzite slope until I figured out how to use my elbows as breaks), Rottland, Bischofsberg and Drachenstein. I got a little faster in my work. Johannes followed along after me less and I learned how to agreeably drink sparkling water by the liter. Each vineyard was left looking tidy and serious, well-prepared for the last portion of Germany's hottest summer in 500 years. Every day seemed hotter than the one that preceded it, perhaps because it was hotter or perhaps because there was no escaping the heat in the 95 degree nights, where I would lay exhausted, the heat like an immovable - almost smothering - blanket, without air conditioning or fans, drifting off to sleep feeling the weight of the grapes in my hands.

spreitzer

rheingau • oestrich

Here is the classic example of the 2003 paradox wherein the second best vineyards could (and often did) give the best wines. The deep water-retaining soils of Oestrich were perfectly suited to manage the drought conditions of 2003; Spreitzers didn't acidify, and had no particular issues around drought-stress. The rich-soiled middle Rheingau often suffers in moist vintages. It handles dry ones with aplomb.

There are yet more monster TBAs here; one with 201° Oechsle (which I tasted or rather, licked) and another at close-to-300° Oechsle which God knows how long it will ferment.

Spreitzer's wines became known to you last year with their superb 2002s. I knew they would and it feels good. The wines do require a certain understanding, because they are never fined

and they often show reduced aromas. As always these vanish with swirling, if you remember to swirl, and have the time to wait.

The fur it be flyin' at Spreitzer. Not only have they been lionized by every major German wine commentator (another "cluster" in *Gault-Millau*, another "F" in *Feinschmecker*, another "star" in *Mondo*, and another placement on DM's 100-best list) but with 2002 they had an absolute king-hell banshee of a vintage, with '03 hot on its heels.

Spreitzer was introduced three years ago to clamorous success, especially among my woman-customers, for reasons which will become apparent when you look at the picture. There's a couple Feinschmeckers for ya.

All harvesting is by hand. The must is cleaned by gravity for 24 hours before whole-cluster pressing. After fermentation (in wood or jacketed stainless steel, partly with ambient yeasts partly with cultured yeasts, depending on the vintage) the wines rest on their gross lees for some time before receiving their only filtration, with racking. They are bottled off the fine lees.

In 1997 Andreas and Bernd Spreitzer leased the estate from their father, who remains active. Johannes Leitz tipped me off. He's friendly with Andreas and wanted to help. I really don't think it crossed his mind he was creating a competitor. Leitz is a guy whose friends will also be sweethearts, and I was intrigued to taste Spreitzer's wines.



Andreas & Bernd Spreitzer

I did, and liked what I

- Vineyard area: 11.5 hectares
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Top sites: Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen
- Soil types: Deep tertiary loam and loess
- Grape varieties: 92% Riesling, 8% Spätburgunder

saw. First opportunity, I was making the scene in Oestrich. I want to pause a second to draw attention to Leitz's touching gesture of friendship, both to me and to Andreas & Bernd. He brought us together, and he's *still* scouting around in the Rheingau for young new growers still below the radar. He isn't concerned – nor should he be – with handing me a "competitor." He wants to do what's best for his friends and his region. Would there were more like him.

Apart from which the two styles are entirely different: Leitz has his casks and his lees and his deeply vinous old-style wines with their embedded leesy sweetness, while Spreitzers are more 21st-century with their primary fruit and polish.

Oestrich seems to have gotten short shrift when the 1971 wine law re-drew the vineyard boundaries. The two main sites are Doosberg and Lenchen, each among the largest single-sites in the region and each embracing a wide range of soils and exposures. The top of Doosberg borders the Hallgartener Jungfer, while Lenchen touches the Schönhell. Nearer the Rhine the wines are fruitier.

Oestrich seldom shows the nery vigor of other Rheingauers, and the keen finesse of spiciness is often absent here. Oestrich is about *fruit*. Fruit is about *pleasure*. Pleasure is about *life*.

Still, I'd like you to see what Spreitzers can do in Hattenheim and Winkel ("Let's Go To Winkel With Spreitzer!" Now *there's* a slogan one can work with.) Read on . . .

Spreitzer at a glance:

Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of greatness in store.

how the wines taste:

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

- GSP-022 **2003 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This is actually very good Spätlese, not chaptalized, which they were going to sell me as *QbA*, and I simply wouldn't let them. I insisted they sell it as Kabinett and price it accordingly. And don't you dare fuss with me. It is absurd to ask growers to empty their pockets just so I can get the same words on the label every year, and besides, I needed a concession elsewhere and got it. I also reduced the sweetness by one-third, and improved the wine, which is now hugely charming; absolute iris and wisteria and hyacinth and *quetsch*; the palate is juicy and tangy and long with lots of lift. It's much different from the peachy Lenchen.
 SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)
- GSP-021 **2003 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 I usually found Lenchen the juicier of the Oestrichers; Doosberg was firmer and spicier, but Spreitzers believe the reverse. So much is determined by the particular parcels one has! This sample was still yeasty, but the fruit and balance seem right, albeit a slight jab of tartness that likely will be solved with racking et al.
 SOS: 0 (likely) (between two and thirteen years)
- GSP-023 **2003 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett** +
 In-your-face nose (where else would it be?) of malt and Cox-orange apples; absolutely screaming beautiful fruit; no cosmic mysteries here, just wave upon wave of prettiness.
 SOS: 2 (between four and sixteen years)
CORE-LIST WINE
- GSP-019 **2003 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 A little nippy, but with length and fruit; almost Austrian iris and wisteria notes minus the red-pepper; has the 2003 juiciness and may well outgrow its sharpness-plus it might receive a few driplets of sweetness. We'll see.
 SOS: minus 1 (at the moment) (between one and seven years)
- GSP-020 **2003 Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 This was intended as Grosses Gewächs or Erstes Gewächs or whatever damn thing they call it in the Rheingau, but I wanted it, didn't want to wait, and didn't want to pay the artificial premium the VDP demands. Very Dumb People! This wine *rocks*; it's an example of how to do dry German riesling right; it's got weight, dignity, complexity and length. Plus it's a legitimate Grand Cru and has all those extra-fruit flavors. And something indefinable: CLASS.
 SOS: 0 (between now and five years, again between twelve and eighteen years)
- GSP-024 **2003 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese** +
 See? I'm scorin' all the Grand Crus for ya. I have to say it's fascinating to see Spreitzer's "speak" in a different idiom. For too long I have associated them exclusively with the fruit-driven Oestrichers, but here are archetypal violet aromas in a classically stern framework; plum and lingonberry; the palate shows aristocratic solidity and depth; it seems to sink *roots* through your palate and linger endlessly, with the force and sturdiness of classic Rheingau. This site is the Corton of the region.
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-two years)

- GSP-025 **2003 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303"** **+**
 It hails from a hillside separate from the rest of the vineyard, from which a legendary TBA with 303 degrees Oechsle was gathered in 1920, the highest-ever must weight for Rheingau Riesling. There is also a lovely "regular" Lenchen Spätlese which tastes like "303" from an ordinary vintage, but this one is actually less malty; the sample was still cloudy but suggests a meyer lemon crème brûlée, with lots of tangy grip, less a botrytis-mama than an apple essence spiked with orange zest; great yin-yang of butteriness and firmness.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GSP-026H **2003 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**
 The first really salty wine on the table, picked early with perfect botrytis; solid and dense, a kind of syrup of mirabelle with a foaming tide of fruit.
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GSP-027H **2003 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml**
 148° Oechsle with approx. 13 grams per liter acidity; a big muscular bunch of clean botrytis and massive fruit; maizy and granular rather than peach and patchouli. I'm being stingy with stars for the stickies until I see them as finished wines, but for *you* I'm selecting on cleanliness, complexity and quality of fruit.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)
- GSP-028H **2003 Mittelheimer St. Nikolaus Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **(+)**
 This should be sublime. Picked January 4th 2004, so it's (duh) very young days, but it's full of lithci and wintergreen, the fruit is sung by a thousand small birds; it's stylish and keening and probably picks up VHF waves.
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-five years)



My fine young colleagues don't like these wines and don't know why I do. In fact they don't seem to know that I do. They seem to imagine my connection to Riedels is merely sentimental or perhaps some arcane "soul" thing that's part of my overall weirdness. I sympathize with them, actually, because these are certainly not the kinds of wines with which they came of age. The wines are odd, rustic, they don't "show" well in big tastings.

The wines are indeed ambassadors of a vanished world, yet I like them for reasons beyond nostalgia. Seen purely aesthetically, I enjoy their waxy-wicky rosewater flavors, almost like Furmint, certainly *old-world* and rural. I like the quince thing they do, and the bitter-almond business doesn't fret me.

But it is impossible to see these wines *purely* aesthetically. Oh you can do it all right, but you're wasting both the wines and yourself. These wines have a *human* story to tell, one with which

I am roused to my core. It goes something like this . . .

Riedel's is a tiny estate, all of three hectares, parcelled out among the four important sites of Hallgarten. Wolfgang likes the Jungfer best, betraying his preference for adamant, stony wines. I'd vote for Schönhell, but Jungfer will do! Reductive winemaking is the order of the day: the first racking is as early as possible. After a single egg-white fining the wines are bottled. Riedel is after clean, full-flavored wine of great intensity. He wants a big middle where the extract can be tasted. He intensely dislikes botrytis (and makes very few Auslese), saying the best wines come from "green, ripe grapes." He is a true Trocken freak, since long before Trocken was trendy.

Riedels sell their wines to private customers—98% of whom they know personally. No wines are sent to competitions, nor do Riedels visit wine fairs or exhibitions. Wolfgang won't have it. "I'd feel like a whore on a street corner at one of those fairs," he says. "All we can do is offer our customers perfectly honest wines."

This is a man of soul, a creature of eternity. He makes me think of Ivan Karamazov, as every flicker of emotion passes across his mobile face. I was not surprised to learn Wolfgang had studied for the priesthood. One sees the capacity to be *devout*, but his brimming delights and enthusiasms mandated an earthly path for this man.

Lately, though, Wolfgang seems ever more serious about returning to his first love, art history. As Riedels do not play the PR game, there are few opportunities to widen their base of private customers, and it's getting harder to make a living from one's old standbys. The new generation of wine buyers aren't as brand-loyal as their parents were. They skip around, buy a little bit here and a little bit there. You need a lot of them to stay afloat if that's how you market your wines. Riedels are paying a price for their purism.

The house containing the winery belongs to



Wolfgang's mother Christine Riedel. She's quite a *personage* in her own right. I have only heard sketchy details of her autobiography, but I gather she was widowed quite young and basically ran the winery and the household on her own. This amazingly resolute woman, who's lost none of her irascible spirit and drive in her late eighties was once regarded as "the best cellar master in the Rheingau" according to the administrator at one of the noblest of the noble estates. "The soul of the winery," said **Alles Über Wein**. A great story is told (and retold: Mrs. Riedel leaps at the chance to tell it). It seems there was a tasting to honor the old Count Matuschka-Greifflenclau on the occasion of his birthday. Riedels were showing the then-young 1959 Beerenauslese, which attracted the notice of the birthday boy. Thinking, I am sure, that he was offering the most cordial remarks from a blue blood to a commoner, he permitted himself to observe to Frau Riedel how remarkable it was that a wine of such quality could come from a small vintner. Frau Riedel, whose entire life had been building to just such a

moment, was having none of it. "You know, Count," she replied, "our vineyards are less than two kilometers apart. Do you imagine we receive the same sunshine, or does God in His wisdom hang a curtain between your vines and ours?" Ah, bless her!

These days she gets around on crutches; she has bad knees and a hip that's been broken a time or two. "Below the neck I'm a mess, but above I'm 110 per cent!" says she, adding: "Better that than the reverse." Still, it is hard for a self-described "bundle of energy" to accept an infirmity, and I was touched by her self-deprecation. She seemed sure we wouldn't want to be "bothered" by her joining us, but we practically begged her to stay! I later found out she had personally, without any help, boxed and labeled my most recent (and largest) order. "If I don't pack, you don't get any wine!" I'm not sure how to say how this makes me feel. We all live our busy lives, in our stores, or restaurants or offices, and it is easy to lapse into the fallacy of thinking *our* life is *all* of life. Yet by the time our orders get to Riedels, all of our clamor and noise reduces to an eighty-eight year old woman, on crutches, hand-packing and labeling her family's wines to send to America. I think of the things those hands have known. I think of the life that has passed across those girlish blue eyes, an entire human life.

A very tall dark-green bottle was brought out for us one year. **Heavy** thick glass. The cork was eased out of the bottle with great care. The wine was poured. Deep greeny-gold. Whatever it was, all that chlorophyll was still there. Oh, a *great* bouquet, enthralling, complex, orchids, leafy, tapioca, a cathedral of fragrance. As I was trying to imagine what it could *possibly* be, Wolfgang could no longer hold it in. It was a 1937 Jungfer *Spätlese*, fermented *dry* as was the rule of the day. 1937. Christine was married that year. I couldn't remove my eyes from her face. The wine was majestic, dignified, theologically mysterious. It had a sagey high note on the back of the palate, and a weeping evening of burning leaf. It had power and verve - still vigorous! It was full of ivy and grain. It told of a time when people dressed for dinner in their own homes. The room fell silent, as we all opened our hearts to this winged messenger of Time.

The wine *qua* wine was lovely enough, about as profound as wine can be. But the *experience* of drinking it with the woman who helped make it over sixty-one years ago, and her son, and my friends, was overwhelming. I felt as though I'd received the tablets on which were carved the answer to every human riddle, but they were written in a language I did not speak. I heard the roar of an aircraft outside the window, on its takeoff climb out of Frankfurt, 20 miles to the east, flying over Hallgarten and our silent room.

It feels jarring to return to the subject of wine *strictly* as wine, strange to think of wine as an isolate discreet *thing* again. Wine flows like blood through these lives. And that world is vanishing. What do any of us do that has a meaning so deep we don't even *see* it as meaning? Why are we living so *little* of our lives?

I sometimes feel the only way to show these wines to

you appropriately would be to invite you over for lunch and play Gregorian chant.

We were also treated to a spirited disquisition regarding what makes a vintage GREAT, the cause of which was the opening of a bottle of 1959 BA. Wolfgang feels - and this is telling - that no vintage in which an Auslese is made by *selective* picking can ever be considered great. A truly great vintage is one in which all the force of nature is arrayed in each grape such that Auslese can be picked *everywhere* right off the vine. To do otherwise is an attempt to "outdo" nature, a kind of sleight of hand. This flies precisely in the face of the current wisdom, and I happen to disagree with Wolfgang, but most important this is a glimpse into his *Weltanschauung*, and thus, into him. His wines are so inseparable from Wolfgang the man, one suddenly understands why he often produces "only" QbA wines in years when others produce Auslesen. It isn't mere laziness. It is a unison with nature he seems to be seeking.

But that isn't really true either. I doubt Wolfgang Riedel is consciously seeking "unison with nature" or indeed seeking anything except a few days to explore cathedrals and monasteries. He simply opts to live with nature by accepting what She gives in its entirety.

But only up to a point. As we drank the amazing 1959 again, I asked Wolfgang why he didn't opt to produce its natural descendant in 2003. After all, everyone else did, with no "selecting" required. He merely sighed. "I picked in mid-September," he said, "before any botrytis." Any regrets, I asked? Another sigh. "Oh no, no . . . we could have made a BA, but what's the point of making such a wine any more. Our customers come to us for dry wines they can drink every day." There's something sad and stirring in these words. The '59 is established as the family's pinnacle, as the apex of a *lifetime* in wine; a finite lifetime.

Wolfgang has sold some vineyards (one good parcel to Fred Prinz; remember him?) and is angling to sell more to one of the middle-Rheingau's Great Names. Christine had a fall over the winter and is diminished from it, though she rallied, touchingly, for our visit. Yet as we bade farewell she said, "This may be the last time you see me," and this wasn't at all lachrymose, but matter-of-fact. All I could say was "I hope not." Yet many things here are drawing to a close.

I think almost every time I see Christine Riedel we are drinking that '59. And each time she begins almost shy, then starts to blush and speak more warmly. Then finally she looks quite youthful. This was a formidable girl! And her vitality lives in Wolfgang, who clasps my face and kisses both cheeks as if I were his blood-kin.

Christine showed me a picture of her late husband. I had never seen one. He was round-faced and benign. "He looks very happy," I said to her. "Of course he was happy," she said emphatically, "I took good care of him!" But who has taken care of you all these years? I wanted to say. Life has been lived stoically and with determination. Not lyrical, but necessary.

Thus, the wines. Not lyrical, but necessary.

Riedel at a glance:

This isn't a winery that can be encapsulated into bite size wieners, so forgive me, but I won't. Please read the text!

how the wines taste:

They're adamant and resonant, with the specific stoniness of this site that is chiseled into the very face of the wine, a fast-disappearing style of pure dry white wine in which the signature of the land combines with the best expression of the human touch. Lately Wolfgang's wines have consistently shown a kind of cherry-pit or almondy tone reminiscent of Italian whites in the old style. This is rustic, but it's redeemed by another waxy-quince-y almost Loire-Chenin profile. Each of the wines offered below share this character.

GRL-026 **2002 Hallgartener Jungfer Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

He de-acidified this year, "against my every instinct," because the German customer for bone-dry wine won't tolerate acidity. Masochism is O.K. as long as you don't get a tummy-ache I guess. This wine has a fine nutty-slatey aroma and is salty and round on the palate. It works. It's the fleshiest of three dry 2002s; has the most middle, juice and substance. At 13.5% alcohol, it's hardly a "Kabinett" but the authorities felt it wasn't a "typical" enough Spätlese. It is a wine from Wolfgang Riedel.

SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between eight and eleven years)

GRL-027 **2002 Hallgartener Hengelberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Has a little of its own residual sugar; this is quite some wine; quince and almond and apple; wonderful body, weight and succulence; Riedel's most generous and hedonistic wine since I started coming here. Many-layered given its thickness.

SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GRL-029 **2003 Hallgartener Jungfer Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

The wine stopped fermenting naturally with about 12 grams per liter residual sugar; nutty appley nose; palate is ripe, grainy and tasty; lots of woodruff.

SOS: 1 (between one and eight years)

GRL-028 **1998 Rheingauer Landwein Riesling Halbtrocken**

It's actually Jungfer. He didn't want an AP number, and indeed the wine is loaded with rosewater, almond and quince. The tasters would have rejected it as untypical, and it's certainly very much Riedel with all that implies; these wines don't make the diddy-boppers shimmy, but *my* old bones squirm gladly and knowingly.

SOS: 0 (now to four years)



mosel-saar-ruwer



The green bottles. The wines we love with a special tenderness, for the essence of spring-time which pours out with each piercing greeny splash. There are as many ways to love them as there are people who love them. But for me, as a merchant, there is only one way to buy them.

I look for *slate*. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness. There are other light and aromatic wines in the world from northern climates: the U.K., Luxembourg, even the Ahr, which is further north than the Mosel. But no other wine expresses this curious permutation of mineral and Riesling. Mosel wines *can* be rich, but flabbiness is simply **out of character**; softness has no place here. I want that malic, granny-apple fruitiness that manages to be so taut and exuberant, set in a binding of minerality you should detect with the first whiff. Mosel wine should never lounge around like a contented feline. It should run like a gazelle, taut and rippling and sinewy.

The valley itself is spectacular but unforgiving; the very steepness of the vine-clad slopes suggest

the precariousness of a vintner's existence there. The wines themselves, beneath their extroverted gaiety, have something quite rigid, unsentimental, as though of a flower-essence distilled to a point of almost unbearable

brusque. You know, until you actually *see* these vineyards, you cannot imagine—even the best pictures cannot convey —just how steep this ground is. Our forbears were stoically accustomed to a certain physical travail as a con-



Treking up the Erdener Treppchen

clarity. It is so easy to be charmed into euphoria by these wines that I forget just how intricate and inscrutable they can be. Even the most rustic and uncomplicated vintners are Catholically devout servants of this particular mystery of nature.

I look for slate. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness.

Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly. But leave the best-known sites and drive just a few miles and there are seismic shudders of a dubious future. However searching the wines may be, the work of producing them is sweaty and

Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly.

dition of being. But not us. Sometimes you will look up at little specks of people, pruning, binding, spraying, and you will wonder: "how do they keep from falling?" But even more you will wonder: "who in his right mind would *do* such work?" Who indeed! People who *are* willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer—and older. Much casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but the steep slopes need experienced hands. Families undertake most of the work themselves, *if* they will. Many of the young are opting out. Many venerable names are either up for sale, have already *been* sold, or are floundering. Vineyard land is available everywhere, giving an anguishing dilemma to those who can afford it. One wants the irresistible bargain, but *who* will work the land? Selbach-Oster, an estate whose size has more than *doubled* in the past five years, faced mutiny from their vineyard workers if they added more land.

Yet they have added land, and will continue to, as long as great land is available. For we are in the middle of a sea-change in the Mosel valley, the ramifications of which are starting to make themselves felt.

Back in the mid-eighties a guy like me had his pick among literally dozens of interesting growers, who quietly and inconspicuously made honorable Mosel wines—which is to say *fine* Mosel wines. In the case of an estate such as Merkelbach, most of the wine was sold in bulk.

Hans-Leo Christoffel and Willi Schaefer were simply below the radar. If one searched diligently enough, eventually one found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But this generation is aging. In many cases their children have moved away to easier and more lucrative careers in the cities. That's why so much good land is available. But what's really shaking things up isn't the ones who left, but the ones who remained.

This isn't easy work! You have to love it in your bones, and so the young generation of Mosel vintners has self-selected its most enterprising and conscientious members; if you're a young guy making wine at *all* along the Mosel, you're probably making *excellent* wine. You wouldn't have chosen the life if you didn't love wine and didn't plan to excel.

But two critical things have changed. First, the young person does not wish to work in obscurity. His only chance to prosper lies in spreading the word quickly and widely. So he sends his samples to all the necessary publications. In theory, his wines are noteworthy, he makes his name, he places himself on the *scene*, and customers ensue. This means a guy like me just isn't going to make the kinds of "discoveries" which were so easy fifteen years ago. If a producer is good, he's not waiting around hoping to be discovered; he's aggressively marketing himself.

The second major change, the more important one, is economical. Until around the late '60s, there was equilibrium between costs of production and prices paid. Few vintners were cash-rich but most did well enough. Their expectations were modest. They defined "affluence" differently than we do.

Then in the '70s costs began to rise, driven by labor, driven by the disinclination of the young to break their balls on the steep-slopes. For a while the growers lived on whatever fat they'd been able to accumulate. By the late '80s—early '90s, they were scraping bone. The young man or woman emotionally committed to assuming the reins was only going to do so if he could make a decent living. These young people were far more cosmopolitan than their parents; they traveled widely, drank other wines, knew other markets, and *saw the prices vintners were getting in other parts of the world*.

All of us who love German wine share a certain guilty secret; we know they are grossly underpriced. They are the last absurd bargains of the wine world. But we cannot expect young people to carry on this beautiful culture, this noble craft, for nothing but the altruistic *glamour* of it all. Glamour don't pay the bills. Prices are going to rise. It is the cost we all must pay to ensure the survival of the people and the wines we love so much.

For everyone along the Mosel plays the same lament; **labor**. It's hard to get, and because it's hard to get it commands a high price. The slopes are forbiddingly steep—it's physically dangerous to work such land—and there's very little feasible machine work. Hand-labor on steep slopes in this satellite-TV world is not consistent with Kabinett wine costing \$10.

As a merchant I am caught in the middle. I want

Mosel wine to survive because I love it almost helplessly. My conscience revolts at dunning a producer for *pfennigs* (or *cents* in the brave new Euro-world) while I look out his

But the Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-racking flood during the harvest of 1997.

window at the perpendicular mountains I know he has to work in. But neither do I wish to deliver sticker-shock to you, cherished customer. So we're going to let prices creep steadily upward until equilibrium is restored.

The Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-racking flood during the harvest of 1997. ("In the next life," Sigrid Selbach told me, "I don't think I'd buy a house along the river.") On Christmas day 1993 the highest water in two hundred years poured through villages and into cellars. As it had ruptured several underground fuel-storage tanks, the floodwaters were also slick and smelly. You can't get insurance for flooding and the economic consequences of the flood of 1993 were devastating. People will show you pictures and show you the water marks in their homes. And the following year saw equally remorseless flooding: how much can these people endure? The new-world winemaker "lifestyle" is the heaven these Mosel vintners hope they'll go to someday.

You can't help but wonder why they do it, even if you love the wines, and the answer is elusive. It can be divined, perhaps, but never witnessed. Someday when my son is a little older I plan to take him to the Mosel, because I want to show him my heroes. If heroism is the heart's courage, then the fortitude of Mosel growers is one of the most meaningful declarations of love a person can ever see.

Which makes it all the more galling to see the stuff that masquerades as Mosel wine from some of the schlock merchants. I have nothing at all against regionals per se - far from it, if it's honest and *respects* the region. But most of it bears little resemblance to Mosel wine (hell, some of it is only remotely *wine*) and every cork that's pulled serves to cheapen something fine and fragile.



Graacher Himmelreich, above the banks of the Mosel River

mosel regionals

Mosel wine is one of the easiest wines in the world to enjoy, yet when the novice has cut his teeth on the usual regional blends, the real thing may be too steely for him. Most regionals come from Müller-Thurgau grown in flat sites on the alluvial side of the river—if they come from Germany at all (hell, if they come from **grapes** at all). Most are bought on the bulk market as grapes, must, or unfinished wine, commissioned through brokers who are ordered to procure X thousand liters at X per liter. It's a market that calls another breed of procurer to mind.

I'd like to encourage people to drink genuine, honest Mosel wine. I think you agree. Therefore it seems to me if we want to trade people up from regionals, we'd better establish a true style among those regionals. That means Riesling. My regionals are 100% Riesling. Even their Süssreserve is almost always Riesling. They are not purchased on the bulk market, but cask by cask

from growers with whom the bottling firm of J. & H. SELBACH has done business for many years. Nor are they the most expensive regionals you'll be offered, though you can certainly pay less if you don't care what you sell your customers. I've heard all the arguments that the "Piesporter customer" only wants a price. One thing I can promise you. He will never care about quality if you don't. Taste some of that cheap stuff some time, and see if you can look a customer in the eye as you take the money from his hand. Good luck.

I'm occasionally asked why I ship regionals at all. What's a nice guy like me doing trafficking in Piesporters and Zellers, anyway? Well obviously, the category exists and this gives me a choice with a high road and a low road, and I can choose the way that makes me proud. Plus it's tonnage. Oh yeah, that. But a few years ago Johannes Selbach and I began to wonder whether we could create our own wine which would fulfill all these commercial functions, provide easily memorable "brand" identity and fill containers and give us something we could call our own, which wouldn't have to be defended as we must even with our honorable Piesporters.

Thus, the development of what we're certain will prove to have been an epochal event in the history of wine commerce. Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy: I give you TJ Riesling!

And I give you an IMPROVED TJ Riesling! We have completely redesigned the packaging so as to confuse the unwary consumer into thinking it is a bottle of CALIFORNIA WINE, or maybe even ITALIAN wine.

So take another gander at TJ. If it's done well for you, it'll probably do even better. If it hasn't done well I'll bet it will start. If you've never considered it—baby now's the time!

The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

I heard an unbelievable story. There was some sort of tasting put on by the German Wine Institute, for the purpose of determining a style of German Wine that would **specifically and particularly** appeal to the American market. I guess there were marketing experts present—I wish I'd been the fly on the wall for that one! A bunch of wines were tasted blind, most of them brands already on the market. But here's the punchline: when the votes were tallied, *one* wine stood out. *here* was precisely the perfect wine to appeal to us Yanks. It answered all the necessary Concepts. Maybe they thought it tasted good too. It was TJ Riesling.

Ah, beginner's luck! I am proud of being a marketing-bonehead. When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

We wanted to charge enough for it to distance it from the Piesporter genre, and also to give us latitude in choosing excellent base wines for the blend. We wanted a wine that tasted slatey and appley as all the best Mosels do, and we wanted a wine that would accommodate the widest possible variety of foods. That means we wanted just a discreet hint of sweetness, enough so the wine wouldn't taste acid or sharp. Finally we wanted a wine that would be sensitive to vintage, not a product that would always taste the same. We remain committed to the **profile** of TJ as a consistently slatey and crisp Mosel Riesling which should be both *agreeable* and *serious*.

Since the 1992 vintage, TJ Riesling has always been better than its class. I am certain there isn't a superior Mosel regional on the market. The 2003 vintage of TJ is considerably better than many estate-Mosel wines I tasted and rejected, and it's the driest blend we've ever produced, though it's addictively full-bodied and juicy.

Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:

- GSR-102 **Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-202 **Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA**
- GSR-302 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-702 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-803 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-603 **TJ Riesling**



selbach-oster

mosel • zeltingen

I was hackin' till my ribs hurt. Johannes had a cold coming on too, plus he was woozy from treatments for his bum back. His mother Sigrid had an upset stomach and would soon get the cold Johannes and I had. I mean, we were as *pathetic* a bunch of gimps as you could ever imagine, gathered at the old tasting room at the house along the Mosel to taste the 2003s—all four dozen of them.

Good long friendships need a certain amount of weather, and Johannes and I are headstrong guys. We're the classic pair who agree 99.75% of the time and bicker endlessly about the other .25%! We're also both eldest-children. We were also born in power-vintages, '53 for me and '59 for him. Mine was the elegant one, though, and his was the muscular one

What we do is complex, and when you add our individually complex issues you get a big

old mess of complexity you sometimes can't solve automatically. Then you see how strong your friendship is. A curious thing happens in the wake of such crises; you realize how mysterious a friendship can be when you're not on auto-pilot. I have a tremendous respect for the flexibility and durability of ties between people. And I also realize you don't choose just anyone with whom to navigate all the turbulences to which friendship is prone. For a day or two I'd catch myself gazing at one Selbach or another and thinking, *Look what we just did together: that stuff isn't easy.* I felt a new admiration of them and a new appreciation of it, this thing we've made together.

I tell you this because I don't want to sound mawkish when I say I trust Johannes as I trust very few other people. He's not only highly intelligent, he's also *smart* and judicious. He has found his path. His wines have *identity* and purpose, yet even so the sustained quality of 2003 is striking. There simply isn't a dud in the bunch, and we're talking a lot of Fuders of Mosel wine.

If you read between the lines of Johannes' vintage report (which we may still have on the web-site) you'll



Barbara & Johannes Selbach

see he wasn't convinced at first, but became convinced later on. I'd always imagined the vintage would favor growers with an Elder in the house, who would remember years like 1976 and 1959, and offer perspective. Growers' memories are truly astounding; they recall each year, each rainstorm, every quirk and

- **Vineyard area: 11.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Zeltinger Sonnenuhr, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst**
- **Soil types: Stony slate, partly with loam**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

wrinkle. Johannes has his father Hans as a harbor and touchstone, but he was still dubious, all that heat and ripeness.

Yet his wines are still intrinsically *Selbach* wines, even while adapting the vintage's musculature. This is not one of those estates where I thought "What remarkable wines *for* 2003" but rather "What *fabulous* '03s." And I suspect I've underrated them, based on Kevin Pike's response when tasting them two weeks later, not to mention in good health.

This doesn't surprise me. Johannes is instinctively immune to sleight-of-hand winemaking. He knows exactly how it's done, he sees other growers do it, and he simply will not. One year, there were a lot of Auslesen on the table. So much so that I asked Johannes Selbach if there was a 3-star in reserve, as I didn't see one.

Many people say many things to me during my month in Germany, and I dutifully try and scribble the smart things down. Johannes' answer stopped me in my tracks. "Terry, the 2-star Auslese was one block picking; that's how that wine came in from that vineyard on that day," he said. "We could *concoct* a 3-star Auslese of course; blend together some small lot of botrytis-wine with a little Eiswein and a little BA, but it would be a *contrived* wine, the kind you only create 30 liters of to send to journalists and get big scores. That's not the business we're in."

Listen to this, people. This is what wine means, this

and only this. The vineyards didn't create a 3-star Auslese, so there isn't one. Simple. There's BA and TBA and Eisweins, but no 3-star Auslese.

It's easy to blather about *terroir* and facile to claim the vineyard makes the wine. Johannes has acted on a principle which will cost him valuable PR, but which is the only sustainable relationship a producer can truly have to wine. I am both roused to my core and seething with frustration. Frustration? Witness: a big-Cal-red first-release called . . . oh, I like the guy personally, and it doesn't matter what it's called; let's call it HUBRIS HILL . . . so Hubris Hill goes out for \$125 per bottle. The "producer" doesn't make the wine, doesn't even *own a vine*, but he's sure willing to stake a claim on your Buck-and-a-quarter because he knows the world's gone mad and a whole bunch of suckers'll pay it, especially if it has oodles of *jammy hedonistic fruit erupting from the glass in sub-atomic orgasms of delirium: 90 points*.

And this, we are led to believe, is wine.

Wine: (n) anything anybody can contrive to make, detached from nature, detached from culture, connected to nothing but our infantile need to be entertained and our adolescent need to be fashionably *correct*, to be sold at the highest price some desperate hipster can be horse-whipped into paying.

If this is the summit of wine's aspirations then it wouldn't hurt civilization if it disappeared. But I know better, and I want you to know better, and I know that we can, most of us, return to the knowledge of wine's true claim on our hearts and bodies and souls. All of which is saturating the very filaments of air at Uferallee 23 in Zeltingen on the Mosel, where Selbach-Oster calls *der schotz*.

"You may have noticed our wines are a bit drier the last two vintages than they used to be," said Johannes Selbach. "We know how to make reductive fruit-bombs that get high scores and stand out in big tastings," he continued, "but the problem is everyone writes about those wines but nobody drinks them. We want to make wines for food, that people can use in their everyday lives."

One secret is lees. The other secret is casks, the old mellow 1000-Liter casks the Moselans call Fuders. When you ferment in cask and leave the wine in cask on its gross lees for a month or two after fermentation, your wines have wonderful plush texture and rich mid-palates and they *need less sweetness*. They also have what Johannes calls "soul."

I drink plenty of wine with my friend Johannes and I know his tastes are broad. He likes those reductive fruit-brilliant wines. He simply prefers not to make them. He wants his wines more *imbued*.

Many of you have met Johannes on his travels. He's always on the road with his wares! Yet for me, his winery is perhaps *the* fundamental example of the difficulty of removing wine from its contexts of family and locality. From the very first, the Mosel makes an impression on you; it's so improbable and so beautiful. And from the very first, the Selbach family made an impression on me, as they do on everyone.



Johannes Selbach & Michael Skurnik on the River Mosel

In my case I fell rather dazedly in love with them, or at least with an *aura* I had some role in reading into them. In the years that followed I have tried to reduce that infatuation to whatever unblinking truth lies beneath it. It isn't easy.

Sigrid Selbach told me a story one year. "We picked our Eiswein last year on Christmas Day," she began. "The day before, when we realized the weather might permit us to gather the grapes the morning of Christmas, we were hesitant to call and ask for help with the picking. But you know, we called twelve people, and they all agreed to help us, and they were all **cheerful** to do it. We went out into the vineyard before dawn to check the temperature, then phoned them at 6:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, and they all came, and all of them were in a good mood. Afterwards they gathered here at the house for soup and Christmas cookies. And when they left they were all singing out "MERRY CHRISTMAS!" as they went home to their families. Isn't that wonderful?"

It's more than wonderful. It literally amazes me that people would *cheerfully* agree to get out of their warm beds before dawn on Christmas morning, leaving their families, to go out and gather enough fruit for a few cases of wine that nobody makes any money on. Can you hear such a story and *still* doubt that angels walk among us?

Here's why I insist in capturing and conveying the experience of meaning I feel in this house: the Selbachs are part of a way of life one encounters far too rarely in our hyped-up cyberworld. Stories like the Eiswein harvest signify more than neighborliness, or even esprit de corps among fellow vintners. It is simply taken for granted that certain traditions are ennobled by observing them with love and good cheer. When you have a chance to gather an Eiswein it is beneficence from heaven; you CELEBRATE the opportunity.

I have two Mosel producers who are neighbors in the same site; their parcels are contiguous. One producer hadn't quite finished picking when their Polish workers' work-visas expired, which meant the crew had to return to Poland. No problem, said the neighbor; *we'll pick for you*. We'll pick for you. It really is another world. People may know one another for twenty years and still address each other as *Herr-This* and *Frau-That*. But *we'll pick for you*. There is a certain baseline *kindness* here, I find myself

thinking, a certain understanding of neighborliness. And it is without affect; it seems to come quite naturally. It strikes my American ears, so used to hearing platitudes and boilerplate about neighborliness, citizenship, fellow-feeling, that *this is the real thing*. Oh believe me, they have their problems and jealousies and all the ratty bullshit which can possibly exist among people, but - we'll pick for you.

Being a vintner along the Mosel signifies membership in a human culture much deeper than mere occupation. Nonetheless, there are many ways to be a citizen of this culture; one might be lazy, content with mediocrity; one might be merely diligent, competent and dutiful. Or one might be conscientious and nurturing. And one's wines **flourish** under such nurturing. They are *vital*, for they exhale back the love that's been breathed into them. This may seem abstruse to the "consumer" but there are many ways to consume, and many things to *be* consumed in a glass of wine. You can see the wine merely as an Object, and assess it "against" its "competitors" using some arbitrary point-system you have chosen.

Or you can drink something that tells you it was made by human beings who want to show you the beauty and meaning they have found in their lives. You choose.

Part of the Selbach's aesthetic is the eschewing of anything *confected* in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its *internal* skeletal makeup, and from that instinct for structure come all the judgements and preferences which constitute a house-style. Thus fruit must also be structured, detailed, and defined, and the overall effect of the wines should be as *bracing* as a leap into a cold pond on a hot day. Hans Selbach once advised a colleague not to

select too stringently at harvest. Better to leave a few of the underripe grapes in the bunches. They give *structure* to the wine.

Tasting the wines of *Papa* Hans Selbach's era, one is always struck by how vigorous they are, how ageless. One is also struck by their lack of affect; they never try to seduce with their prettiness. They are upright, firm in posture, correct, impeccable.

Johannes was raised with these wines and he had no desire to alter them. What he did do was to *build upon them*, to add a layer of sensuousness, to give just a little more **warmth**, a wider Julia-Roberts kind of smile. He did this with great tact and love, but I don't suppose he ever deliberately sat down and plotted it all as a STRATEGY, nor ever said "I must do this with great tact and love."

The results are some of the deepest of all Mosel wines. They refuse to be *merely* aesthetic. They strive for (and often attain) a *sine qua non* of Mosel-ness. They take you through the gift-wrapping of mere flavor and they show you something you *may not know how to see*.

Few wines—few *things*—take us to such places of faith. Selbach's wines take me there frequently. You can't identify that slippery little thing *soul* in wines by how they look, smell or taste. It's how they make you feel. It is how deeply they peal and echo. It is how quickly they leave *themselves* behind and lead you *elsewhere* away from "wine." Johannes told me that he wants "soul" in his wines, but I doubt if we mean exactly the same thing by it. Nor should we. The sincerity of his wish, the assumption of a *value* in wines of soul is part of what puts it there. The rest, I think we are not meant to know, but only to sense.

Selbach-Oster at a glance:

A large estate by Mosel standards means many wines to choose from. The ambitiousness of Johannes Selbach has made this estate the region's most prominent rising star. Since 1989, always among the very best wines in this collection, and 2003 is no exception.

how the wines taste:

There is a striking conciliation between brilliant acids and a kind of leesy plushness. There's plenty of minerality, but it seems somehow deeper than a literal depiction of the soil. There can be fruit of almost unbearable purity and loveliness. Finally, they are often among the most **charming** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

DRY WINES AND KABINETTS

GSO-224 2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken

"I am GOING to sell you a Trocken wine this year," said Johannes. Do your worst dude! This was the lightest of three he showed me, but also the smoothest and most comely; a lime-cream vineyard fragrance; very even dispersal of minerality; coolly smooth and subtle, with a long finish extending the nose and palate.

SOS: 0 (between now and four years, again from twelve to twenty years)

GSO-236 2003 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

Zeltingen's Himmelreich is a site with variable exposures and steepness, but the best of it offers "1er Cru" quality in a green-apple and kiwi style, more fruit driven than mineral. I had some doubts about this wine, which was in the worst phase of bottle-funk when I tasted it. Thus I will spare you my specific complaints and only allow myself to observe I hope the wine knits and shows more kindness of fruit when it recovers.

A Look At The Vineyards:

I find my notes are shorter the past two years as I didn't want to repeat the basic adjectives that depict vineyard characteristics. I wish I had a dingbat I could use each time I want to say "slate and apple!" So below are general descriptions of the Selbach sites.

BERNKASTELER BADSTUBE is a small Grosslage; the component single-sites are distinct from one another, but one can organize them thus: LAY stands alone. DOKTOR-GRABEN (at least the good parts of Graben!) stand together, and MATHEISBILDCHEN-BRATENHÖFCHEN stand together, and give us what we see now; heavier understructure, not quite as tensile, due to richer soil, and signature flavors of kirsch and almost Pouilly-Fumé flint; the piquant exotics of the Mosel. Typically, they are medium in body.

ZELTINGER SCHLOSSBERG is mineral to the MAX! Now back in production after the catastrophic hail of 1997, I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: I think it's a great Grand Cru site, fully deserving the status of a Wehlener Sonnenuhr or Erdener Prälat. The pity is most of it is worked by the small growers of Zeltingen, among whom standards aren't particularly high. Selbachs have shown time and again the potential of the site. Flavors are a *borealis* of slate, buttressed by lime and grassy aspects. Mosel-apple is present but discreet. Medium bodied. If you love Mosels for their cussed Mosel-ness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

WEHLENER SONNENUHR is like Zeltinger Sonnenuhr feminized, slimmed down, and refined. It can show a ravishing elegance. Butter-vanilla, very delicate slate and equally delicate apple, now with a slightly herbal tertiary flavor. I would say light-to-medium body, but the beauty in these wines resides in class and actual flavor, and not in size or fullness.

GRAACHER DOMPROBST: I doubt there's a better site on the "great ramp" (as Hugh Johnson terms it) between Bernkastel and Zeltingen. Domprobst is invariably starched and magnificent; its flavors are always standing at attention. It has a particularly emphatic slate statement, with nuances of pistachio or pecan, cassis and quince. Medium-bodied, high-bred and snappy, coltish and itchy to take off full-gallop.

ZELTINGER SONNENUHR is the Premier Grand Cru. Basically All Of The Above; slate, lime, apple, butter-vanilla, rich, almost chewy earthiness, great depth. Some parcels are prized by locals as the best sites in the entire Bernkastel-Zeltingen ramp—DOKTOR notwithstanding! These wines are full-bodied. Selbachs are now the primo owners in this great site, and have inaugurated an era of selective harvesting and a quality potential such as we have never before seen. Meanwhile, you'll see by the number I offer that the wines had me in a weak-kneed thrall, and - redundancy be damned—I just couldn't walk away from any of these.

GSO-223 **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**

GSO-223H **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**

The whole estate-Riesling thing has many advantages: 1) to remove two superfluous words from the label, 2) to give latitude in blending; i.e., to be flexible in choosing which parcels of wine will make up this one; and, 3) to provide continuity for a market that asks for it (you'd have to be an even bigger fusspot than I actually am to object to this little concession to commercialism). Snappy and classy; essentially dry; very forward fragrances; fine purity and length; slatey finish. Defines the genre doesn't it!

SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)

GSO-226 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett**

"This is the year for Schlossberg," says Johannes, and you'll see I agreed. Again it's snappy and virtually dry; there's more power here, plus its customary herbal complexity. It had 93° Oechsle and it's balanced with 38 grams per liter: this is not easy to do.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between five and sixteen years)

- GSO-201 **2002 Wehleener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 Textbook-pretty vineyard fragrance; hauntingly *aloof*, cool and deep; glances at you sideways with arched brows, laughing eyes, moist lips. . . .
 SOS: 1 (between five and eighteen years)
- GSO-225 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**
 GSO-225H **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 The most stylish of the Kabinetts; great fruit complexity; gracious but still leans toward dryness; the fragrance intensifies with air, a complex melange of fruit and terroir; powdery-slatey finish.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! **CORE-LIST WINE (we will sell 2002 before moving to this)**
 SOS: 1 (between five and sixteen years)
- GSO-203 **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 A lovely graceful version of this Grand Cru, all its depth and complexity yet cooler and more transparent than riper versions; absurdly long; a true Mosel classic. Don't miss it.
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!

SPATLESEN WINES

- GSO-227 **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**
 GSO-227H **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
 Ginger and talc on the nose; quite high-toned; Real brilliance now, citrusy and tangy and with subtle spiciness; almost arch or mischievous, a wine that steals a kiss and runs off giggling.
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-one years)
- GSO-238 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**
 This started out rather adamant; I felt it needed more sweetness and/or more gras, and a cask of Auslese was blended in to provide both - bless the vintage with a plenitude of Auslese! The wine is now expressive, curranty and complex, more sagey than most 2003 Scheus, in fact.
CORE-LIST WINE
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GSO-206 **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese**
 Pure terroir nose; tilleul, pistachio; wonderful density cloaks but doesn't hide its fervent mineral.
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-six years)
- GSO-228 **2003 Wehleener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**
 Very cool and silvery. Expressive aromas from the site; salty minerality; long and piquant.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)



GSO-229 **2003 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese*** +
 Here the power is entirely convincing; blazing kirsch and flint; radioactive lime . . . almost, almost a Zind-Humbrecht force and vividness. Long as all get-out. You could fuel a cyclotron with this stuff.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)

GSO-230 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +
 This'll remove any doubts you might still harbor about which is the great Mittelmosel vineyard. It's effortlessly full and serene. Lime-blossom and roses. Extra-fine tonality; regally Grand Cru expression. Calmly superb.
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-six years)

AUSLESEN WINES

Of which there are *many* in this vintage, constituting a valuable and collectible group of wines. It is a staggering experience to taste them as a group, and remember: Selbach's Auslesen are not too sweet for meals.

GSO-231 **2003 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Auslese** ++
 Wow! Perfect taut balancing act of all elements; almost a Würzgarten cherry blossom and kiwi; sensational focus and complexity; like buckets of flint, kirsch and lime-blossom attached with *electrodes* to your palate.
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-eight years)

GSO-234 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese*** +
 This is what Rangen would taste like as a Mosel wine. Twenty-five wild forest herbs (yeah I counted them, smart guy) and a mineral miasma; wonderfully untamed, slate on Spring-break! A noble savage of the Mosel, this.
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)

GSO-235 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese**** +
 Enter botrytis. It tastes like the Alte Reben compared to the 1-star but in fact it was only picked later. Miles of redcurrant and tremendous saltiness, as if it were strained through the whole periodic table. Massively cogent and contained - no sprawl of flavor here.
 SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)

GSO-237 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese "Schmitt"** (+)
 112° Oechsle, from an *en bloc* picking from the best of the best section called "Schmitt." Exotic, tremendous, endless; unusual for Selbach but this is how it emerged from the vineyard. Immense botrytis blankets the fruit now, so my final note is deferred.
 SOS: 3 (between fourteen and thirty-five years)

GSO-232 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese** +
 Way fragrant and impeccably balanced; cassis-y and nutty to within an inch of its life; piquant and fervidly mineral, a *take-that!* to any remaining doubters of terroir.
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-eight years)

GSO-233 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** +
 Very old vines; much more explicit slate than usual; almost no botrytis; food-friendly, with glorious thrust of keen mineral. The body is lithe and springy.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)

GSO-239H **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese***, 12/375ml** **++**
 Seething verbena and slate; this is not exotic, but rather a demi glace of Sonnenuhr, enormous but shapely and convincing; vertical structure, more Bach than Mahler.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-three years)

FINAL NOTE: There, that's eight Auslesen, the ones I feel you must have. There were others, a "basic" Schlossberg, a dee-lish Zeltinger Himmelreich, a very pretty Wehlener Sonnenuhr I'd have selected in any other vintage, a Zeltinger Sonnenuhr 1-star, a Domprobst 1-star . . . just in case you thought I had selected extravagantly. Which ones should you buy? Let me answer that question by asking another: ya got any *Merlots* you don't need?

GSO-240H **2003 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**
 By now you know-or should know-that Selbach's is always one of the few greatest Eisweins in any vintage. Right? This came in at 171 Oechsle (TBA) and, as in previous vintages, it's the ambrosial quality of the fruit that distinguishes this from other (spiker) examples of Eiswein, yet it shows all the iridescent jazz of the genre, along with a tenderness that's anything but typical.
 SOS: 4 (between twelve and thirty-eight years)

GSO-241 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+(+)**
 Again ambrosial and honeyed, but more seductive now, very generous, and clearly a concentrate of the site. Forgive my relatively "tepid" prose here, but this was a marathon, and there are also a Schlossberg BA and a Zeltinger Sonnenuhr TBA, and there's only so many times you can whip up a froth in one sitting. You'll flip over this BA and wonder why I was so restrained in my praise.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and sixty years)

FISH LABELS

I didn't like these labels when I first saw them last year, but everyone else did and you do too. Shows what a marketing hot-shot I am! These are our go-to Mosel wines in the value category, and are certainly wines of the type-no-fridge-should-be-without.

GSZ-011 The **Dry** wine in the clear bottle comes from Zeltingen, Kinheim and Erden, Kabinett juice gently chaptalized, and it shows satisfying weight, minerality and stylishness. It's really dry-minus 1 on my scale - but no sharp edges.

GSZ-010 The **Kabinett** comes from 15 kilometres around Zeltingen. A lot of it is Zeltingen, Bernkastel-Kues and Kinheim fruit, some Erden, some Brauneberg. This is bottled in the normal bottle is quite simply delightful; it's a classy 2003 riesling, clean, piquantly fruity, the kind of wine people lust like: charming, long, and way better than its price.
 SOS: 2



freiherr von schleinitz

mosel • kobern

I confess I expected less. 2003 is a low acid vintage and the lower Mosel regularly has a gram less acid than the Mittelmosel. Konrad Hähn hadn't always managed these low-acid years; thus I was delightedly taken aback at the purity and articulation of his 2003s. And this *despite* truly low acids—lower than in the Pfalz. He opted, by the way, not to acidify; courageous fella.

Konrad Hähn and his estate have garnered a following over here. I don't really need to tell the "how-I-ended-up-in-*this-east-b.f.-place*" story any more, now that y'all know they make good wine this far downriver. But viticulture along the lower Mosel has challenges of its own, and it's worth at least a cursory glance at this sub-district.

The first challenge is the sheer ridiculous steepness of most of these sites. They put the *perp* in *perpendicular*!

Plus they're on centuries-old terraces and can never be *flurbereinigt*. The local expedient has been to build the monorack, which is basically a little set of wagons run by a diesel engine mounted to a rack, which coughs and sputters its way up the vertiginous slopes. You ride facing *down* (i.e. backwards as you ascend) so you can buttress your feet against the back of the cart. When the rack traverses a wall the angle is nearly vertical and your heart is in your shoes. You wonder (when you're not gawking at the views) *why* did our forbears decide to grow grapes in such forbidding conditions when it would seem to have been equally plausible to plant vines on the valley floor. Probably because they didn't have TV.

These are the furthest downstream of all Mosel vineyards. Any further and you're in the suburbs of Koblenz. It may be the heat-island effect from the nearby city that makes these the warmest vineyards on the Mosel. The average must-weights are higher here, and regional co-ops pay a premium for these grapes. Or it may be that only the best sites are tilled anymore, and most of the vines are

- **Vineyard area: 7.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Koberner Weissenberg and Uhlen**
- **Soil types: Slate and Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 97% Riesling, 3% Spätburgunder**

ungrafted. It's worth the journey just to see the terraces. The wines from these sites taste inimitably like great Mosel wines, with an extra expression of minerality that recalls licorice or lemon-grass. There's a vein of red clay running through the Uhlen vineyard, giving those wines a redcurranty, earthy richness. The Weissenberg site produces the ballerinas.

Konrad Hähn seems to take little for granted; doesn't do things merely because that's how Things Are Done. His fruit is cleaned and gently pressed, then fermented with cultured yeasts and vitamin B, in order to keep sulfur levels down later on. Fermentation is as slow as possible: "High temperatures destroy aroma molecules," say Konrad. Also, "if you have too much carbonate evaporation you take aroma out of the wine. We never bottle with sorbic acid. First you don't *need* to do it if your vivification is clean; second, we feel that despite all advertising you *do* taste it." Konrad's also evolving away from his early aversion to wines with stopped fermentations. He's still 100% stainless steel.



Konrad Hähn

von Schleinitz at a glance:

Unique yet classic Mosel wines from impossibly steep slopes and the warmest vineyards along the entire river. Especially lemon-grassy, Granny-apple flavors. Excellent value for steep-slope wines.

how the wines taste:

They taste subtly of licorice and spiced apples. Lemon-grass also. Acids tend to taste brilliant and iridescent without being analytically exceptional. The wines are almost always spritzly, and are piquantly charming; very easy wines to snuggle up to!

- GFS-058 **2003 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
Exceptionally clear, deft, slaty fragrance; perfect gentle dryness. An immensely *agreeable* wine, with classic Jonagold and lemon-grass, delicate and tactful.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between now and five years)
- GFS-055 **2003 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Kabinett**
The vintage really is an achievement. I don't know how he retained such clarity, detail and tenderness; albeit in a gentle, easy structure, without exceptional length. But there's a piquant hyssop-y finesse here; to reject such a wine for lack of acidity seems churlish.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between one and six years)
- GFS-050 **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Kabinett**
GFS-050H **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
Salty, precise, detailed and charming; clean fruit, no botrytis. One of them digital critters which seems to "read" your palate. Or, for my more elderly readers, a wine which etches flavors as if written with a fountain pen.
SOS: 2 (between three and nine years)
- GFS-056 **2003 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese**
This was an experimental cuvée, with a half-gram of citric acid added, and I liked it. It's in essence a thicker and riper version of the Kabinett, with even more terroir, more fennel-frond.
SOS: 2 (between now and seven years)
- GFS-051 **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese**
GFS-051H **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
More "done" on the inside but seemingly no sweeter; baked apple, spiced apple or Empire apple; salty like the Kabinett but this is dark bread now, a larger resonance.
SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)



erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

Each year we taste a large range of “various vintners” wines at Selbach; it’s part of their function as commissionaires to scour the region looking for the next new superstars. Plus I do my own sleuthing and send them names from time to time. We always put Erich’s wines among the fracas, just to see if he stands out. AND EVERY YEAR HE DOES. It’s uncanny. His wines are *brighter*, livelier, more animated, more flavory: if this goes on, Erich can’t possibly continue to sell them so cheap. But the getting is good, *really* good right now.

Erich Jakoby started working for the Selbach family at the age of fourteen. He began as a cellar-rat and worked his way up to cellar-master at the tender age of 24; the youngest cellar-master in the state of Rheinland-Pfalz at that time. A grand old man of 41 now, he has had to leave Selbach in order to spend

more time at his own winery; his father is in failing health.

Selbach buys and offers Erich’s wines as part of their estate-bottled program. Normally these carry a J. & H. Selbach label (though estate-bottling is indicated) but as a gesture of respect to Erich he keeps his family’s label. Erich struggled to convince his family to adopt Selbach methods, specifically selective harvesting. The Jakobys appear to have been quite skeptical until they tasted the results! All of which is another way of saying we have a Selbach-trained vintner here, applying what he’s learned to wines which rarely are treated so well.

Kinheim is something on the order of an insider’s Mosel wine. The natives hold it in high regard, though adding the cautionary note that you have to know your grower and that some parcels are much better than others.

2003 was uncomplicated, though I did worry I preferred the wines Erich himself seemed to like best, based on how he labeled them. I didn’t want to disappoint him, and considered expanding the offering and including the wines I liked less, or not at all.

It did make me think about something Willi Bründlmayer told me: “Your catalog would be more interesting, Terry, if all the wines weren’t uniformly praised.” But that’s the *point*, I responded. “Nevertheless,” he continued, “some negative comment would give it more texture.” Willi is a truly civilized gentleman, but I somehow doubt my growers would be pleased to have me spitting venomous prose about the wines I didn’t like.

Still, it might be fun! We could have a negative point-scale, maybe 1 to 6. Perhaps it would look like this:

- 1: O.K. if you can’t find water.
- 2: Fit for soaking your false teeth in overnight.
- 3: Animal and foul.
- 4: Redolent of urine.
- 5: A potent emetic.
- 6: Possibly poisonous.

- **Vineyard area: 3.6 hectares**
- **Top sites: Kinheimer Rosenberg**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

One could write notes like: *I like this wine; it’s full of dead bugs. Or maybe A stealth-wine; just when you think it doesn’t have much flavor, you discover it doesn’t have any at all. Or how `bout Oh boy! This gushing wad of vinosity is as juicy as dog spit!* I say let’s go for it and produce a Goofus shadow-version of the catalog that’s full of hate and contempt. It’s aligned with the zeitgeist, after all.

On that note, here are five honestly repulsive wines, whose only act of mercy is to be quickly forgettable. (You do know I’m joking, right? Or do I have to use online shorthand like “lol” or a little smily-face? You know what? I *piss* on the smily-face! Smug little shit. The smily face can *kiss my ass* (or “kma”). It’s fun to be furious!



Jakoby-Mathy vineyard

Jakoby-Mathy at a glance:

Erstwhile cellar-master at Selbach-Oster until father's illness called him back home. Thus:

Selbach methods at off-the-beaten-track prices conspire to create **excellent wines and incredible values**. This is an estate that excels in high-acid vintages: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001. They're always good and always an incredible value, but in years that suit them they become *unbelievable* value. I'm having trouble keeping the wines in stock, and this year will be no exception. There seems to be a *market* for steep-slope Mosels with ravishing vivacity at insanely low prices; go figure!

how the wines taste:

As a rule, Kinheimers tend to run light but true, attractive appley flavors with typical minerality. Other than a small section of the Rosenberg, directly behind the town, there isn't a Grand Cru slope here. But Erich's wines excel by sheer **vitality**; they're upbeat, vivid wines, exuberant and Spring-y.

- GJM-044 **2003 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**
Fragrances of lime, grain, scallion; the palate is, to be sure, unique and original; star fruit, lemon cookies. Not hardly classical but darn sure tasty.
SOS: 2 (between three and nine years)
- GJM-045 **2003 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese***
This is a down-the-middle 2003, perhaps a tic on the sweet side (but that's best for aging, as sugar is the best of all preservatives in wine), but pretty lemon-custard and sweet-corn fragrances; the palate is creamy and grainy; the wine has charm and drive, and a pretty, fruit-driven finish.
SOS: 3 (between five and fifteen years)
- GJM-046 **2003 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese**
Again this is fruit-forward but contained within firm outlines; not sprawling; there's even a nice low register of minerality which gives dimension to an easy, charming wine.
SOS: 3 (between five and sixteen years)



A Primer on Terroir

Does this self-evident truth really need to be defended any more?

It seems not. I glean a willingness to agree the phenomenon known as *terroir* actually exists. Where opinions appear to diverge are on two related questions: 1) the definition of *terroir*, and 2) the significance of *terroir* beyond its existence as a simple fact.

First, a definition. “*Terroir*”, as I see it, is the entire micro-environment in which a vine grows, beginning with soil, and then beginning with soil’s components. The structure of soil especially in terms of porosity is critical, but it doesn’t come first. What the soil *consists* of comes first.

Terroir gives wine its DNA. Riesling in northerly climates is the most vivid demonstration, because the vine happens to like poor soils, the grape happens to ripen late, the growers happen to need to plant it on slopes to maximize the odds of ripeness and therefore the soils need to be porous and thin or else they’d wash down the mountain every time it rained.

I suspect the Truth of *terroir* is universal, but this is intuition. The phenomenon of Riesling in Germany is its most compelling evidence, but not the only proof. And what exactly is this thing I’m calling “proof”? It is, very simply, a cause and effect relationship, repeated dozens-of-thousands of times in every vintage, between soil components and wine flavors *for which no other explanation is possible*.

Even those willing to consider the truth of *terroir* might balk at my literal insistence that dirt = flavor. A famous importer of French wine once said “I can walk into a vineyard in Pouilly-Fumé and pick up a fistful of caillou and cram it in my mouth, but I can’t taste that flavor in the wine.” But this is not what I argue. I don’t know of any place where you can literally “taste the soil” (my Mosel growers might well demur!), but I know of many places where you can taste what the soil *does*.

I’ve been challenged that soil’s expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine’s DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine’s identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was sometimes drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or comball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it’s safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

Nor do I wish to suggest that all of wine’s fla-

vors derive from soil components. There are of course macro-factors; an obvious example is the *garrigue* flavor imparted to certain wines from grapes grown near actual *garrigue*. Yet one hears many gropings for *other* explanations for how wines taste, and many of them are futile. There’s a site called Kauber Roßstein in the Mittelrhein, which sits just above a railway tunnel. For years the smoky flavors of the wines were presumed to derive from actual smoke, as the trains blew their whistles before entering the tunnel. Then the lines were electrified - and the smoky flavor remained.

I’ve also heard it said the notion of *terroir* has no practical value unless it constitutes a guarantee. “A great winemaker will make better wine from “ordinary” soil than a lazy winemaker makes from “great” soil”. Again, true, but beside the point.

For years the Plettenberg estate made mediocre wines from its holding in Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. This is regarded as one of the top-2-or-3 sites in the Nahe region. But the wines were rarely better than ordinary. Meanwhile, Helmut Dönnhoff made sensational wines from his Oberhäuser Leistenberg, manifestly the lesser vineyard. Surely this proved the point that *terroir* was not the decisive component of wine quality?

Sorry, it doesn’t. For when Dönnhoff *obtained* the old Plettenberg parcel in Kupfergrube (and when he upgraded the husbandry in what had become a run-down straggle of vines) it became clear immediately which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

I know that all things are rarely equal in the world of wine, but I am not arguing that *terroir* is any kind of guarantee for the consumer. I am arguing that it is the *first* among many criteria, the basic reality that one encounters and accounts for before one truly understands what wine is.

It is certainly impinged upon by the variegations of weather and of human temperament, but this signifies very little; some days I’m alert, some days I’m dozy, sometimes I’m tender and sometimes I’m gruff, but I am always...fat Elvis.

But can we really be sure of this syllogism? Because this-or-that is in the soil, such-and-such a flavor is in the wine? Ah, we want to be sure. Everything in great wine argues against such sureties, but we want what we want. It does appear that Science has taken notice; in the January 2000 issue of *Science News*, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

“German researchers recently studied 165 wines

from six grape-growing regions. The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminium and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy (my emphasis) testing for just three elements – barium, silicon and vanadium – and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested.”

A little further down the page: “From his work at the National Institute of Agronomical Research near Angers, France, Gérard Barbeau concludes that wines made from the same kinds of grapes, grown in the same region using identical practices but in slightly different terroir, harvested at exactly the same time, and made into wine in exactly the same ways, can still be remarkably different. These underlying differences, he says, must be due to terroir.”

More pseudo-scientific piffle from Europeans eager to defend their turf? One hears such arguments. “The Europeans like to point to soil because it gives them a competitive advantage”, the argument goes. “They have something we don’t have and can never get,” it says.

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motivation to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of terroir is afraid he doesn’t have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound terroir do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

Eventually science may or may not create an experimental matrix within which this hypothesis can be “proven.” But I’m not certain it matters. As long as science cannot prove an *alternate* explanation, I am willing to trust empirical logic. It *might as well* be true. It appears to be demonstrated time and time again.

We are all people of varying temperaments, which dictate *how* we approach wine. I am clear about my own approach. There are sensibilities I’d call “engineering,” people who are most fascinated by the *how* of things. These people love the *making* of wine, and tend to believe that great wine is possible from just about anywhere, provided there’s a human with sufficient skill to *make* it. This is a clear, concrete sensibility, and I share some of it myself.

There are also hedonistic sensibilities, who tend to delight in their own delight, and who crave that which is *sensually* delightful. For someone like me, this isn’t so much a bad place to be as a bad place to *stop*. The sensual is just one of many possible delights. Often the engineer and the sensualist overlap. And they tend to struggle against what they’d call the “mystic” for the same reasons we all struggle:

they fear we’re a threat to the existence of the wines they cherish.

Others might be willing to agree, albeit hypothetically, in the idea of terroir, but argue its usefulness to them is limited. “If a crappy grower can waste a great terroir,” they say, “then what good is it to me?”

No good at all, if you’re looking to terroir as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won’t do that. Not because it doesn’t like you, or because it’s just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn’t understand our need to avoid disappointment. This is the crux of my argument for the *so-what?* of terroir. I will ground it as simply as I can, in one single person. Let it be Willi Schaefer, though it could as easily be Hans-Leo Christoffel, Carl Loewen, any of hundreds of German (or Austrian) riesling growers. When Schaefer goes about his work, he does so with the *certainty* that Domprobt will taste one way and Himmelreich another. He doesn’t think about it abstractly, but if you asked him he’d say he *liked* it, liked that the earth expresses itself in *various* ways. He is also aware of his place in a continuum of generations who work the land that existed before and after each of them, and which always gave the same flavors in the same way. He takes his place within nature, caring for his land; he would never dream he had *dominion* over nature. Flavors of terroir come into his wine because he gets out of the way and *lets* them; why would he do otherwise? The land was there before him. When he tastes his wines he is fascinated with these flavors, and because of him we also can be fascinated. Indeed we are linked to him, to his fascination. Think about it: he is linked to his land, we are linked to him; we are, therefore, *also* linked to his land. None of this is “mystical!” Wines of terroir are wines which ground us in a nexus of meaning. Humility before nature is meaningful. Connection to our fellow folks is meaningful. Connection to places *we don’t know* is meaningful, as it stimulates dreams and longing.

The “so-what” of terroir is just this; it creates a community of vintners and those who drink their wines, walking on this earth and through this life with appreciation and caring. It’s the difference between *Let me show you how groovy I am or let me entertain you*, and *let me bring you here and show you this wonderful land, this wonderful place*.

Alas, some of us are too busy. And others prefer to ignore the spiritual invitations streaming all around us because we have to be sure we don’t buy any wine below a 90. But wine doesn’t care. It just invites. And the soil remains.

meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

mosel • erden

First come the snowdrops, as early as mid-February, and then the crocuses. The first daffodils begin sprouting. The air is softer now, but below there's still a keen scent of frost. Things gurgle, the first cress arises impossibly soft and green by the water. This is the season of *Merkelbach*.

The first fragrant blossoms are the cherries, each of the several varieties that grow here, and in sunny spots the perfumed crabapples unfurl their petals. The days begin to feel almost warm in the ripening sunlight. On a damp day the perfume of all these flowering trees can almost intoxicate you. Violets, scilla and phlox carpet the yards. This is the season of *Christoffel*.

Then all hell breaks loose. The first honeysuckle opens, and the stately, lissome dogwoods, and the silly, gaudy azaleas, and the air is emphatically warm, and the trees open their sticky new leaves,

and everything sprays upward in a whistling clamor of life.

This is the season of *Justen*.

These may not be the most mysterious or intricate Mosel wines I offer, but they are certainly the most gregarious and extroverted. And yet they have virtues deeper than simple winning personality; they are true-blue Mosels, and I often thought that you, and I, neglected them. In the past three vintages Stefan Justen has made such gorgeous Mosel wines that none of us could neglect them!

Thus it is gratifying to see Justen get the credit he deserves with emphatically flattering reviews of his 2001s and 2002s. I hope he's been "discovered" now and will take his rightful place among important Mosel estates.

The '03 vintage will quash no one's ardor. Justen's was another surprising collection; his wines tend to be fruit-driven and weighty and I feared they might collapse under the prevailing weight of 2003. But no: they are steady and glossy all the way through. This achievement impresses me even more than the highlights Stefan offers from "correct" vintages. These can be circumstantial. But steering a balanced course through a year like 2003 required a deft hand and an attentive intelligence.



Stefan Justen and daughter Barbara

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Prälät and Treppchen, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 78% Riesling, 13% Müller-Thurgau, 9% Kerner**

(I always refer to the estate as JUSTEN, by the way, though I really should change this habit; I like a family's name more than a property's name if I get to choose. But it's confusing. Meulenhof (pronounced MOY-LEN-HOFE, not mew-len-hoff) it shall henceforth and forever be.)

The great site here is Erdener Treppchen. There's a good parcel in Wehlener Sonnenuhr, part of Frau Justen's dowry, but Treppchen is identified as *munero uno*. And rightly so. There *is* a piece of the newly enlarged Prälät, for which a higher price is asked. Justen's piece of Treppchen contains very old vines on their own rootstocks, or did until these venerable vines were cruelly uprooted for *Flurbereinigung*.

In common with most Mosel vintners, Justen's frown on the use of *Süssreserve*. "Wines made with *Süssreserve* are often uniform, not distinct from one another," they say. (True enough, but one mustn't forget the many estates that produce a *Süssreserve* for each parcel they harvest.) And in opposition to the prevailing fashion, most of these wines have residual sugar. The dry wines are nearly always unsuccessful; his heart isn't in them. His heart leaps, though, at wines of differentiation, interplay of flavors, fruity and full of nuance, and individuality.

Heinz Justen's wines were always, in his own image, discreet, elegant and mannerly, especially in their youth. I often underrated them out of cask; they *gained* in flavor and authority their first year in bottle. When son Stefan

took over the winemaking, the young 1990s were brash and aggressive, and I wondered at the change and wondered how the wines would evolve. Interestingly enough, they *lost* much of that youthful ungainliness and developed into typical Justen wines; father's and son's wines started from opposite corners and met in the middle.

Often after making the rounds through the new vintage, a Mosel grower will bring out a few wormy-looking bottles from his Sanctorum. These are always given to taste blind, and one is encouraged to guess the vintage and quality level, all in a spirit of fun. Protocol requires one to make suitably delighted noises, but that rarely presents a problem! No, where I'm concerned the problem is usually how to prevent Terry from babbling like a besotted galoot. Last year we had two wines, a lively and intricate 1979 Spätlese which was sensually all kinds of fun. The second wine, though, had us all silenced with perplexity and awe.

It wasn't a vintage whose signature I knew. I eliminated a range of unlikely choices and finally wrote a plausible guess. I thought it might be a light, atypically firm 1959. Stefan finally said "This wine is exactly fifty years old, a 1951 Auslese," and we were melted with wonder. This is what I wrote in my notebook: "This 1951 Auslese is flashing a shiny green tooth of acidity and freshness and is gleaming and mysterious and haunting. It's like a shirt that's hung in a fragrant wooden closet, not worn for years, your father's perhaps, and one day you put it on and there it all is, him, his body, the time when he was alive, the boy you were then. We swim without cease in a strange bright ether. Light is gleaming and swaying always near us. If we breathe too deep we will die of a joy we aren't built to bear.

Just a tiny gasp."

We say our goodbyes too quickly after such an event. Perhaps someone will show these words to Stefan Justen, so he will know how honored I am to share such a wine with him, and how I remember each drop, always.

This year, as if to up the ante, Stefan brought out a '51 Spätlese. The wine was dry, forest-floor, birchy, shellfish-stock, leathery and avuncular, juicy, *long* and delicious and with a deep soulful complexity. You get a shock to the soul with a wine like this. A *good* shock, of course. But there you are, being a Wine Professional, doing bizniz, assigning item codes and securing quantities, and out comes a wine like this and suddenly you're plunged from the brittle surface on which you've been skating into the deep warm waters below. You need soul-bones made of rubber – a kind of spiritual Gumby – to manage the transition.

Stefan brings out not just a lovely old wine, but also a wine his father made before Stefan himself was born. As such it's part of the family's history and legacy, part of the vineyard's history and legacy, and ultimately part of the *earth's* history and legacy. It's almost intimidatingly meaningful. If you go where it takes you, you won't get any more work done that day! And you're already late for your next appointment . . .

But, there is always the wine itself. When all our glasses were empty, I saw another few fingers of wine down in the dark bottle. "May I . . . ?" I asked. *Certainly; help yourself.* So I did something I doubt I could have done 10 or even 5 years ago. *I just drank the wine.* It was beautiful wine. I knew damn well how spiritually meaningful it was, but I opted to merely *love* the wine and let it love me back.

Meulenhof at a glance:

Full-throttle fruit and serious stature characterize these ripe Mosel wines. Prices have remained moderate for impeccable quality.

how the wines taste:

In general Justen's wines are more lush and peachy than, say, Merkelbach; not as stern as, say, Christoffel. They are comparatively straightforward and "easy" to understand because the fruit is overt and in-your-face. Even a cursory glance into that fruit, though, will reveal the proverbial Coat of Many Colors: interplays of flavor and texture that can be absorbing and rewarding. And the wines both keep and age.

GJU-078 2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

Refined fragrances of freesia and Delicious apples with a discreet underpinning of slate; elegant for an '03; full of delicate fruit. Completely lovely.

SOS: 2 (between four and seventeen years)

GJU-074 2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

I love the Mosel! Stefan is an Erdener, and although he produces Wehlener Sonnenuhr he seems to view it as a "foreign" terroir. Hans-Leo Christoffel is the same way about his Uerzigers; *he's* an Uerziger and therefore he prefers those wines to his own (incredibly good) Erdeners. Stefan told us he gets higher must-weights from Erden and also wines with more depth, and he's right, but I had to point out there was a little matter about *how* the wines tasted. Their actual *flavors*. And one had to treasure Sonnenuhr on that basis, without insisting on preferring it to his beloved Treppchen.

All well and good, but this is the class of the Kabinetts; delightfully and surprisingly compact, fibrous and nutty; in the high-sited appley direction (certain parcels of Treppchen are peachier and more lush); great spurt of juiciness in the middle. We played with this wine, blending this cask and that into it - we need volume here - and finally a certain cask of Spätlese emphasized the apples and added a walnutty generosity. Charming Mosel classic here.

SOMMELIER ALERT! **CORE-LIST WINE**

SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)

GJU-075 **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**

This is in some sense even "cooler" than the Kabinett-one of the two casks was acidified, and has some acid snap that isn't yet entirely integrated. But it's early days yet. I recommend it without hesitation, especially for those for whom most 2003s are too blatant. **CORE-LIST WINE**

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)

GJU-076 **2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** **+**

A blend of two casks and the best of both worlds; the cherry blossom and peach of one with the slate and apple of the other; has impressive gloss and pitch and leaves a pure slaty finish; indeed if one could speak of *ripe* slate this wine would embody it.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)

GJU-077 **2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**

(Cask #15); the "1-star" or "goldkap" Spätlese (I don't know what he plans to call it); it's full of malt, botrytis and apricot; a pure fruit-bomb here, but consoles with palate-clinging length and salty minerality.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-seven years)

GJU-080 **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**

(Cask #13), the richer of two. The other one was pure naked slate and lime, and I suspected y'all wouldn't get it as "auslese." This is pure Wehlen lemon-blossom and butter, and the palate has that haunting almost-aloof thing; certainly wry, and coquettish rather than seductive; but it gets saltier as it warms. The endless finish is a sermon of Sonnenuhr.

SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)

GJU-081 **2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**

(Cask #10). O.K. kids, this is blatantly good wine! Slate, walnut in the red-zone; finely stitched botrytis; mirabelle jelly rather than peach; masculine structure and depth but not corpulent; almost an olive-oil note. Remarkable stuff.

SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-two years)

GJU-079H **2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

The best Justen sweetie since the 1991 Eiswein. A kind of leathery *gelee*, mostly low tones and saltiness in the forefront; a ne plus ultra of '03 salts; imagine malt and acacia honey and fleur de sel. Sounds like a Puck pizza. . . .

SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)



alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

One night I was at the ball park. I'm a purist; I like to arrive early and watch the guys take batting practice and shag fly balls while the stands slowly fill up and the players pause to sign autographs. So there I was watching some rookie who barely had a beard take b.p. and he was really **whacking** the ball, line-drive after line-drive, just sizzling bullets hitting the outfield fences, slapped to all fields with a satisfying crack! And I was reminded of something . . . but what?

And then I opened this text in the computer and there it was: *Merkelbach's!* Not a towering home-run in the bunch, but screaming line-drives that'd take your freakin' head off and bruise your hand through your glove if you were lucky enough to spear one.

After greetings were exchanged (amidst much laughter and bonhomie thanks in large part

to the presence of the fetching Ms. Corrie Malas, on whom both Rolf and Alfred appear to have a huge crush), we sat at the rather small round table in the parlor where Rolf or Alfred bring out the wines one by one. The first wine was poured and I took an idle sniff and *there it was: every reason I love Mosel wine.* This only seems to happen here.

Because the wines, you see, they provoke such giggling lunacy. They have to be the most absurdly VITAL and clear of any wines I know on the Mosel. These are the best-loved of any wines I sell. It's all here: a pretty label, a style of wine that gushes charm enough to enthrall even the casual drinker, but contains more than enough cut and complexity to engage the wine lover, all that plus reasonable prices. No wonder they do so well for us all.



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

It's self-evident to them that the vineyard is responsible for "at least eighty percent" of the quality of their wines, especially the "Lang Pichter" section of the Ürziger Würzgarten directly behind the winery. Mosel wine for them is like a dear old friend. "We like to hear that you can drink a little more of our wines without any health problems," says Alfred. Alfred does most of the talking. Rolf is pleased with everything his brother says, as well as everything *you* say; evidently everything *everybody* says. Rolf is a happy man. I asked Alfred what his

- **Vineyard area: 1.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Ürziger Würzgarten, Erdener Treppchen, Kinheimer Rosenberg**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

favorite type of wine was, purely theoretically, without respect to his own wines. "The flavors I look for are hard for me to describe," he replied. "A good white wine should be identifiable by its nose, *must* be, in fact. A young wine may be a little acidulous, but a wine that's two, three years old has to have all its pieces working together: the acidity, the sweetness, the fruit and the vinosity."

Again the wines were presented first by cask number, then by name. Merkelbachs probably refer to the old local names for their various tiny parcels when they speak among themselves, and the cask separation corresponds to those parcels. Just think of it for a second. We're dealing with a less-than-**5-acre** estate here, all ungrafted vines, tended and harvested and vinified *bit by bit*. And Rolf and Alfred know these vineyards the way you and I know our children, and wine isn't something they *do* or something they *WORK AT*; wine is in the very pores of their skins, in their veins and capillaries. Nobody punches a clock. There aren't any meetings to discuss marketing. No computers in sight. Just the seamless weaving of work into life. Just wine.

Sigrid Selbach asked Alfred if he ever took a vacation. Alfred answered: "Where would we go? When I'm on the slopes standing among my vines on a sunny day with a view of the Mosel behind me, I have everything I need to be happy."

Because the brothers are in their late sixties now

(though with every appearance of ruddy good health), there's some speculation how the future will look. "We'll continue as long as we can; we have no notion of 'retiring'," said Alfred, which was heartening. Merkelbachs have become somewhat conspicuously the "last of a dying breed"; their scale, the fact they do it all themselves, their crazily low prices, the sense of time frozen in place 40 years ago. Estates such as these were common when I started tasting wine 25 years ago, and hardly infrequent when I began professionally. Now they are almost gone.

As we walked over to Christoffel – our next appointment – I suddenly felt very sad. Sigrid Selbach and I were walking side by side, and I told her "I haven't always been as good as I wanted to be, and there are things in my life of which I am ashamed . . . (pause) . . . and times I feel the weight of many regrets . . . (pause) . . . but something with which I can console myself is that I brought appreciation and prosperity to Rolf and Alfred during these years of their lives . . . (pause) . . . I sometimes think of that." Sigrid, perfect friend that she is, looked into my face and said nothing.

It seems logical to arrange this offering by site instead of *pradikat*, so that the basic style of each site can be described, and I won't need to repeat the same stale adjectives in each tasting note. "But we love your stale adjectives, Terry!" Oh right, like I believe that.

KINHEIMER ROSENBERG: this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It's the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg's wines

often seem to actually smell of roses, so that one wonders which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the apple fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years—remember the superb 1990s?—hey can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

ERDENER TREPPCHEN: this is a completely different expression of Treppchen from Justen's or Christoffel's. The site is broad; the upstream sections lean in the Prälat-Würzgarten direction: bergamot, spice, peach. The downstream section is more classically slatey, with nuances of hyssop, walnut and *green* apple. Now that Flurbereinigung is complete and everyone's vines are young one sees the importance of parcel. I was delighted by the absolute Treppchen fingerprint I saw in even these brash new wines.

Finally the great site **ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN**, which gives Merkelbach's most memorable wines. A vein of red clay running through the soil gives them their eponymous spice—the name means "spice garden"—but it isn't just the extra zingy cut of spice that marks these wines; such a strong flavor could pall if not for their redeeming **class**. Their feel is feminine and lithe; their aspect is springtime blossomy, and their underlying flavors of slate and mineral attain an apex of refinement. Wines of baroque opulence can be made from here, but Merkelbach's are the most **primary** and fundamental of all Ürz Würz., as though you are tasting ur-Würzgarten.

Merkelbach at a glance:

most beloved Mosel agency.

The clearest imaginable look into pure Mosel. Vivid, toe-curling clarity of fruit and terroir make this my

how the wines taste:

These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of electric, splashing acidity supports a fruit so clear, so sharply rendered that the entire experience is so vivid it makes your toenails laugh! How many wines have ever just made you LAUGH OUT LOUD, they were so happy and irrepressibly gorgeous? Who can possibly dislike wines like these??? Oh, I suppose there's someone somewhere whose temperament is so embittered he's closed all the normal pleasure receptors. I imagine him leaving a tasting where I've poured these wines, kicking a puppy as he walks to his car.

GME-117 **2003 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**

This is just exactly what it should be; pure slate and apples. Simply, Mosel wine. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)

GME-118 **2003 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**

+

This was by far the best of the Kinheimers and one of Merkelbach's best wines of the vintage; brilliant slate, finely chiseled fruit and clarity, from a flat parcel at the foot of the hill; i.e., the usual wisdom stood on its head. In any case, sushi-knife precision here, great length and mineral.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty years)

- GME-119 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**
Highly spriggy and kiwi-fruity. This is bonsai of Würzgarten.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and seventeen years)
- GME-120 **2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**
(Fuder #7) Oh so salty and expressive; wonderfully vivid and pure. When this sells out we'll move to Fuder #9 under the same item code; Fuder #9 is more exotic, sweeter, and just a little less deft.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GME-121 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese**
This is in fact fuders 11 and 12 combined; it's the most seamless of the U.W. Späts, stylish and precise with generous fruit and a tart-apple fullness on the mid-palate; great salty lick of spice, grip and length.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)
- GME-122 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese**
(Fuder #17) Some miserable feckless Brit (just kidding J.M.!) just got here a week ago and plundered 50 cases of this beauty; a limey (appropriately, I guess) greeny thing with impeccable lift and cut; spearmint and strawberry.
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-three years)
- GME-125 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese**
(Fuder #19) More demi glace now; much more. Lovely Mosel aroma. The palate still needs to assimilate its sweetness, but it will; it even begins to with the second sip. Now an appley note comes in; this is less chiseled than poured with a ladle onto the palate.
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-two years)
- GME-123 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese** +
(Fuder #18) Altogether ratcheted up now; urgently vivid and refreshing. From the "Urglück" parcel. Perfect synergy of lime, apple, sassafras and slate. I wonder what you'll make of this. It *feels* hair-trigger taut yet it has just 6.6 grams per liter acidity. What do you believe: the figures or your own palate?
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-one years)
- GME-124 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese**
(Fuder #14) A wonderfully odd duck, this. One senses an excess of sinew on the mid palate yet it knits perfectly on the finish. Maybe this Fuder didn't manage the acidification as well? Penetrating fragrance and slightly inelegant thrust on the palate, then an utterly lovely finish. It's from the Lang Pichter, by the way.
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-two years)



I'd been to the Doctor in Zeltingen the day before (Hans Selbach took me and waited for me while I was examined just as if he were my dad) to try and forestall my cold getting worse. I got two prescriptions for homeopathic remedies, and it was time to take them as we arrived at Mönchhof to meet Hans-Leo Christoffel and Robert Eymael and taste the wines. "What are these?" thundered Robert. I showed him the two little jars. "Homeopathic shit!" he cried. "PLACEBOS! Wait, I'll get you what you need," and five minutes later there appeared-as if by magic-a packet of antibiotics.

"But don't you need a prescription for these?" I began. "*Never mind that, just take them!*"

"But what if it's just a virus - *TAKE them!*" So I did, with his eyes boring into me. Once I took

one I was committed to take them all. I did get better. Doctor Robert, we now call him.

2003 Christoffels taste like another vintage entirely, as if he'd hung onto a cellar-full of 1997s until just this kind of occasion. He did add acidity (tartaric to musts) by he has freaky extracts (27, 28), and I'm sure I've underrated them because they were in bottle two weeks on the day I visited. Just like *all* of you underrated the 2002s: scold, scold, scold. Two-thirds of their spritziness has already disappeared and they've found their glory; they just needed time. They were picked so late they were in effect bottled nearly a month "early" and they needed extra time to recover. I leaped at the chance to get a couple of them for this offering.

Both Eymael and Christoffel are very funny men,



Hans Leo Christoffel

- **Vineyard area: 2.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Treppchen, Ürziger Würzgarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

and you want to be alert to not miss a quip, of which there are many and one wickeder than the last. But as we moved into the Auslesen I had to withdraw. I didn't *want* to, I heard everyone laughing, but no matter how jaded I fear I've gotten, wines like these have the power to rouse me. They're dangerous, these silky vixens. Yet as filigree as they are, after the fifth or sixth one they begin to consolidate into an impression of remarkable depth and solidity. Their flavors may fall like little flakes, but they settle like big snow.

You lost your chance to acquire a winery in Ürzig. I would have helped. You'd have been introduced to Hans Leo Christoffel's daughter (who speaks English) and done your queasy little number. But no, you thought you had better things to do. You missed the chance to have the coolest father-in-law. Hans Leo's as droll as Winnie the Pooh.

He's also been visited by Mortality in the form of some chest pains lately, and has wondered for some time if the taxing life on the steep slopes was sustainable. Having no heirs on the horizon, he has leased his vineyards and winery to Robert Eymael (from Mönchhof). This does not signal the demise of Weingut Joh. Jos. Christoffel. Eymael intends to keep the two sets of wines strictly separate, harvested separately (even pressed in

Christoffel's press and vinified in *his* casks) and marketed under the current label to me, with Hans Leo as consulting something-or-other! We sat together just the two of us and Hans Leo told me "Terry, you have absolutely nothing to worry about; this is a good thing." And I believe him.

Apparently I need to emphasize this point because, the facts notwithstanding, there seems to be some internet buzz about the "demise" of Joh. Jos. Christoffel. Guys – and have you noticed it's always guys? – it just isn't true. The "brand" JJC is alive and well, *guaranteed by Hans Leo Christoffel just like always*. They're the same vineyards he always managed (augmented by some choice parcels Eymael has shifted over to the "Christoffel" side of the operation); he isn't up there pruning and binding but the vineyards are worked under his direct supervision, he's the boss at harvest time, and *he makes the wine*.

This indicates no disrespect to Robert Eymael; far from it. Robert was sensible enough to see the value of the Christoffel "brand" and to wish to preserve it. All that's changed is the name on the title deed, plus Hans Leo's quality of life has taken a decided turn for the better.

It's always a challenge to taste here, especially if it's the final appointment that day. There are simply *too many* great wines. Early in the sequence the palate becomes alert; it sniffs beauty in the air. Later as you ascend through realms of richness, the sensitized palate feels as if its nerve-endings are tingling. Suddenly it isn't just wine anymore. It's as though ALL OF BEAUTY is flooding into your heart. As you grope for words to convey this strange experience you find the only words are mushy, and maybe you feel a little embarrassed. But don't. There's a rigor beneath all that showering loveliness that you can trust. Beauty is real, and has nothing to do with sentiment.

Christoffel's and Merkelbach's are two almost diametrically opposed renderings of Ürzig/Erden. Merkelbach is slicing and sleek, Christoffel is profound, serious, more opulent, polished—bigger wine. Simply more vinous. Certainly more temperamental and more mysterious. I love them both dearly and differently.

"The vineyards, the grapes, play the decisive role in determining quality," says Christoffel. "Our vinification isn't so different from the norm. We lay high emphasis on freshness and raciness. At home we drink everything from dry to sweet, from QbA to Auslese; it only has to be *good!* It should be spicy, fruity and lively, with noticeable acidity. I'd like to think our customers like to return to our wines after drinking others, and that they feel good the next morning even if they've peered a little too deeply into the glass the night before!" Christoffel identifies the section of the Ürziger Würzgarten that lies among the rocks as his best.

This is a matter of exposure, and of the very old

vines he has planted here. There's no question that soil has its own role to play. "The higher the slate proportion, (therefore more porous) the finer and more elegant the wines are. Sometimes even *too* delicate. "What's ideal is a slate soil with enough fine-earth to hold water and give the wines more extract."

Most of the vineyards are "Würzelecht," literally root-genuine, i.e. not grafted onto North American rootstock. "I have two parcels of grafted wines," Hans-Leo told me, "which is two too many!"

THE MATTER OF STARS: the whole star thing came about because Mosel growers had to find a way of distinguishing the pecking orders of their various casks of Auslese. You can't describe them in terms like "Feine Auslese" or "Feinste Auslese" any more, and that makes sense; there are already too many rungs in the quality ladder. The stars – or any other glyph a grower might care to employ – are a quasi-legal expedient, and a better alternative than asking consumers to memorize A.P. numbers or capsule designs.

For many of us this presents a problem. As soon as you establish a hierarchy you inadvertently push people toward the "best," or the perceived-best. That's because we seem to see things from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. Nobody wants to tell his customers "I have the second-best cask!" No, you can't hold your head up unless you have the big kahoona. It's a truly shitty way to look at wine. It has in fact nothing to do with wine, only with a commodity that *happens to be wine*.



Robert Eymael

Christoffel at a glance:

With Schaefer and Selbach-Oster, the “big three” among the Mosels, I offer Christoffel has been constantly stellar, not just “often” or “regularly,” but EVERY SINGLE TIME, EVERY SINGLE WINE stellar since the 1992 vintage. Everything one can wish from great wine is lavished on these: depth, clarity, complexity, buoyancy, purity and ineffable beauty. The more I get, the more you want; sorry, but I still must allocate. The estate is tiny, and has been discovered!

how the wines taste:

Dashingly aromatic, brilliant luster of flavor, inchoate depth which begs for study. The kinds of wines you keep adding to your notes on; each sip reveals another facet, the second glass differs from the first, the very last sip is still saying fresh new things. There’s a jewel-like firmness here; these aren’t leesy or plush. In general, the Erdeners are thicker and more thrusting; they show better younger. The Ürzigers are refined, fastidious and sleek.

- GJC-122 **2003 "J. J." Riesling**
Cherry bomb!
SOS: 2 (between three and thirteen years)
- GJC-123 **2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**
Curiously the 2003 Erdeners were more backward than the usually reticent Uerzigers; this has lovely poise and moderation; slatey as all get-out but benign and calm; high tones of anise, mirabelle and walnut emerge, plus the '03 muscle. But this normally wide-open baby is in a pensive sort of mood today.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-two years)
- GJC-113 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett** +
This year, atypically, the Ürzigers are showing better younger than the Erdeners. This is scintillating stuff; iridescent clarity, length, gloss and balance; classic spice of the site. Superb "Kabinett" (89° Oechsle, well into *Auslese*).
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)
- GJC-124 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**
Kiwi, kiwi and more kiwi; a wonderfully enveloping expressiveness almost like a *glace* of cherry and kiwi; swollen minerality on the finish. Impressive complexity, though bottling has pulled the stitches out of the structure today. Just wait.
CORE-LIST WINE
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GJC-125 **2003 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** +
Emphatic slate fragrance; real complex heirloom-apple; iridescently brilliant palate, as if from some heavenly mint and *oh*, such apple, as if you'd ground up slate and mint and put the paste between two slices of Granny-apple.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-four years)
- GJC-115 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +
Exquisite nose, utterly silky and racy. These are seeming like a cross between 1993 and '96, but this is likely distorted by bottling; limey and salty.
SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GJC-126 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +
Zingy racy and spicy; a granita of Stayman apple and lemon grass; spice to the Nth degree; a suave lime-gelée and slate in an endless echoey finish.
SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-seven years)

- GJC-127 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese** **+**
 Ah, the no-star Auslese, the poor waif that no one wants. Except for the very wise . . . it seems to well up from some aquifer of magic ripeness, giving more low notes and an even deeper finish. Utter wild-strawberry now. Still shimmery and brilliant, with even *more* grip. There was some talk about declassifying this into a 1-star Spätlese, but it *tastes* like Auslese. SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-eight years)
- GJC-128 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese*** **++**
 Darker, more iron-like slate tones and more intricate greeny flavors; in every sense more ethereal and exquisite. Somehow a *happy* intricacy; I don't know how. Both meditative *and* cheerful; the flavors seem to travel astrally, on beams of silver. There is something here, whatever you call it, that's suddenly magnetically irreducible, a joining of two hands - one warm, sensible and physical, the other a dancing hint of light and fragrance, something from the world beyond the curtain. And, as always, each time you glimpse it you are absolutely sure it is always there-as indeed it is. SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)
- GJC-129 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese**** **+**
 Absolute bulls-eye here, a concentrated mass of fruit and vinosity. The refutation, if you will, of the mystic statement of the 1-star; the material world is more than enough, it says: check *this* out! Puts the "scru" in "scrutable," a definitely rich, enveloping grin of pure lecherous beauty. SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)
- GJC-130 **2003 Erdener Trepchen Riesling Auslese**** **(+)**
 Well we're entirely back to the corporeal world here; a Sousa-march of slate, brash and brilliant. Bottle-shock is a factor here. I reserve final judgment, as the acid's rather blatant today.
- GJC-132 **2003 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese***** **++**
 "This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than forty hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from this site in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in." It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it. This 2003 has the extra note, the Grand Cru flavor, now glazed with the finest botrytis maltiness. As always what amazes here is the density and delicacy, and here, in 2003, the siren-song of minerality. SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)



heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

Everyone in Wehlen stands to some extent in the shadow of Manfred Prüm, yet I don't really see anyone trying to emulate the style. There are good wineries making splendidly steely-mineral wines—you know who they are—and then there is Kerpen, who stands stylistically off to the side. The wines, in fact, resemble Selbach's more than any neighbors in Wehlen; verdant, shady, woody, vinous, mid-palate density, lots of soul.

Martin Kerpen has been variously described as "gentle" and "modest," but he seems to know quite well how good his wines are and to feel the appropriate pride. He is very funny and he loves to laugh. He is the most genial of hosts, and he wife Celia is a substantive and lovely woman with whom I always wish I had more time to talk. They lay a bountiful and happy table.

Some of what's happened at Kerpen reveals the prosaic truths which lie beneath much wine romance. The quality of his wines improved significantly when Martin bought his new house along the Mosel, and completed the cellar. He used to have to make the wines in weeny widdle crannies in several different locations; now he's not only all under one roof but he's got ample space besides.

So tell us, Martin, how is it done? "I don't know, exactly! You have to work *clean*. My wife wishes I were as clean in the house as I am in the cellar. Your quality is

- **Vineyard area: 5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**



Martin Kerpen

70% the vineyard, 25% the cellar. The other 5% is luck." I would agree, but the proportion of luck can be (and has been) diminished by the most stringent possible selection in the vineyard. Martin likes clear-tasting wine, therefore he labors to make clear-tasting wine. Some have said that he makes wine in his own image—Martin is a tall, wiry sort of fellow—I said it too, but I've changed my mind. His wines are sleek (and long!) enough, but what

impresses me most about them is the multi-layered *depth* beneath all that finesse. It's an almost magical mingling of super-fine clarity with a remarkable chordal richness that takes the wines from very good to great. These are wines towards which you feel both admiration *and* tenderness; they are dear, winning wines. They needn't strain to be *great* wines; their beauty is their *beauty*.



Kerpen at a glance:

Sleek, feminine, elegant and soulful wines with silky fruit of exceptional beauty. Prices reflect the “Wehlen premium” but are still below the levels of many of the richer and more famous!

how the wines taste:

They are clear and lithe in structure but with juiciness which gives them a haunting charm. Leesy along Selbach lines, with even more flowery perfume. Unabashedly pretty but not vapid, not *just* pretty.

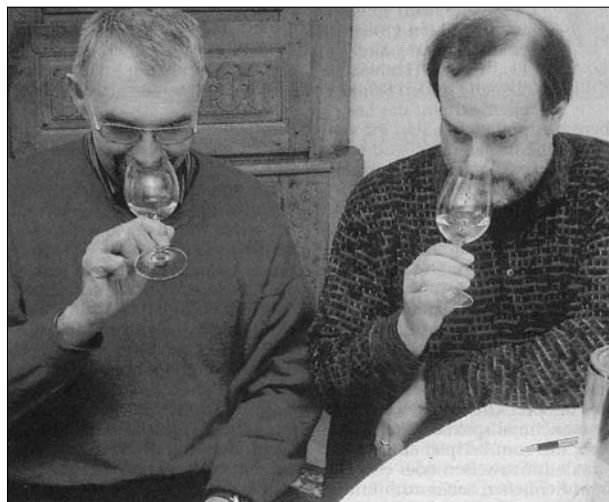
- GKE-083 **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**
 GKE-083H **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 Totally! Back in fighting form after stumbling somewhat in '02; this is dimpled and charming, cool and elegant, with a long limey finish. Perfect, glowing Mosel Kabinett. SOMMELIER ALERT! CORE-LIST WINE
 SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)
- GKE-084 **2003 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese**
 Martin always observed I didn't select his Graachers. But that's because he usually made them Trocken or Halbtrocken. This has wonderful length of Fuji-apple and is entirely charming; I mean really striking length; the fruit could seem demure until the thing starts stretching and expanding, like an accordion of flavor.
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GKE-078H **2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese 12/375ml**
 This has those attractive cider-y notes we saw in the '01; spicy woody and firm. Tasty, somewhat "correct" Riesling with good length.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GKE-085 **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* Artist Label**
 You know this: it's the little bird in the rowboat. This is what you thought 2003 would be: superfruit and in-your-face. Discernible clean botrytis; high yellow frits; Cox-orange apples and vanilla and butter. Yes it's lavish but do observe its purity.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)
- GKE-086 **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**
 This must come from the same parcel each year because it's always exceptional; this 2003 is all suave and mineral and this cunning lick of *brûlée*; again a kind of applesauce fruit and malty length; less overtly sweet than the Spätlese but more stylish and long.
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-one years)
- GKE-087 **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**** +
 Now paradoxically more compact and spritzly with cooler, higher tones of fruit; a fine core of really striking prettiness. No great minerality but there's complexity within its single octave. Did I remember to say fruit?
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-four years)
- GKE-088H **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling BA, 12/375ml**
 I often pass on Martin's sweet wines when they have a botrytis flavor that troubles me, but this '03 is a smorgasbord of clean botrytis; all hawthorn, orange marmalade, tilleul-honey; it's a rather forwardly pretty wine but does have a certain charm, especially if you prize hedonism and voluptuousness.
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GKE-089H **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
 At 240° Oechsle this is the *lesser* of two TBAs. At this point it's essentially concentrated grape-syrup. Better palates than mine shall have to write associations and assign values!
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and seventy years)

Willi asked if a reporter he knew could pop in and take a few pictures while we tasted. The wrote for a newspaper in Trier which everyone along the Mosel reads. Sure, why not? Since I'm so notorious and all. Then we started tasting, and promptly forgot. As I think you'll see, this is the collection of the vintage among my Mosel producers, and I was in a state of some euphoria and didn't even hear the doorbell ring.

I think I've told you that Willi and I spend most of our time laughing. We laugh even harder now that Christoph Schaefer's there adding his own *bon mots*. So there we were, two giggling fools, and the door opened and the most dour and constipated looking guy I think I'd ever seen walked in. He looked like a character from a Tintin book. We tried with no luck to make him

smile. He snapped away and then asked some questions, which I tried to answer without losing it in a fit of giggles. Somehow we got through it. But when the article appeared, the photo cracked us up all over again; you can absolutely see Willi trying desperately not to laugh. I'm sure I was kicking him under the table, but still. Grown men ought to be able to keep it together, don't you think?

Mind you, it would be hard for anyone to contain his euphoria after tasting a vintage like 2003 at Schaefer. It's a vintage of paradox, tranquil yet *teeming* with flavor. Limber yet serene. I left not a single wine behind, and there wasn't an ordinary wine among them. It was May 1978 when I first visited and met him. I loved his wines and went whenever I could. I'll never forget one time I took a friend who was just getting into wine. It was a perfect Spring day, and Willi's garden looked inviting. "Would you like to sit in the garden with a bottle and relax awhile?" he asked. There were other visitors and



Willi Schaefer and Terry taste the 2003s.

- **Vineyard area: 2.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

his father was entertaining an old client. "Sure," I said. I purchased a half-bottle of '75 Domprobst BA, and we sat in the shade listening to the birds, looking straight up at the impossibly steep Domprobst. The air was sweet with blossom. The wine was sublime. We were nearly in tears. Then suddenly a tenor voice started singing, some chipper little lied about Spring. My friend stared at me and we both laughed. "No!" he said, "You staged this, right? It isn't actually happening, right?"

After hugs and jokes Willi announced that our occasion deserved to be commemorated with something a little special. He disappeared for a few minutes, and returned with a 1953, which he knew was my birth-year. "Twenty five years for us, and fifty for you," he said; "It seems appropriate, I think!"

It was Willi and his son Christoph, me and Corrie Malas and Mark Hutchens and Bill Mayer, and Willi's wife Esther joined us (though it was a little early in the day to drink wine; still, it was a '53...). And the wine was poured. It still tasted *primary*, still had fruit and architecture, still had some chlorophyll green flecked in among the gold. It was limpid and essentially ageless. (Like me!) The wine was in fact astonishing, yet the experience of sharing it in friendship with Schaefer's was beyond description.

“Willi, let me take a glass to your mother,” said Esther. “She’ll enjoy drinking a wine her husband made.”

The wine was searching and lovely, but I can’t discuss it aesthetically, because the resonances are too golden and full of love. Love isn’t the metaphor for wine. *Wine* is the metaphor for love, for celebration, for solace, for every filament which binds us to all for which we care most deeply.

Well, this day was off to a good start! Barely 10am, and I had a ‘53 in my glass in the company of the family who made it, and who seemed to like me.

Eventually, Willi tells me, the holdings will be enlarged and there’ll be more wine for us greedy sybarites. As it is Willi *could* easily choose to grow, but he elects not to. “The estate is the right size for me to work and give the proper attention to the wines,” he says. How’s that for capitalism! Willi could make, say, 50% more wine and **sell it instantaneously**, thus obtaining kid-leather seat covers for his zippy new Porsche, but instead he knows in his bones what the proper size for his estate must be, if he is to preserve his relationship to his wines, to his work. Hopeless Willi, just hopeless; where’s your ambition, man; where’s your **can-do spirit? DON’T YOU WANT TO MAKE MORE MONEY???**

Most businesses confront this conundrum eventually. What is the *ideal* size to which to aspire? I would define it as the most robust volume consistent with maintaining the original motivating spirit of the enterprise. You know you’ve passed that point when it isn’t as much fun as it used to be. Growth, in itself, is the siren song that dashes our souls against the rocks unless we insist on balancing our *whole* lives. This sermon will be rebroadcast at eleven.

When we finished tasting one year, Willi brought out a bottle of the celestial 1975 Domprobst Auslese, which is about as good a Mosel wine as has ever been made. Christoph appeared in the doorway to say hi in his raffish sideburns. I recalled that the first time I drank this Domprobst was in 1980, in Willi’s living room. His kids were little then. Willi left the room to take a phone call and I sat there with my glass of Auslese while the kids sat on the floor playing with a little top which hummed as it spun. The humming and the playing and the beauty of the wine and the friendliness and hospitality of my host became a single thing. I often recall that moment when I hear someone defend the idea of giving point-scores to wines.

Schaefer grows only Riesling and only on steep slopes. The best is the Domprobst, though there’s no scoffing at his Himmelreich (fruitier), or his Bernkasteler Badstube (actually Matheisbildchen, and typically rich and flinty) or his little bit of Wehlener

Sonnenuhr (light but true to form). Vinification isn’t unusual, expect for the *very* gentlest of pressings, which leaves few bitter phenols in the wines, and gives them their strikingly pale colors. Willi knows his vineyards like he knows his children, all their quirks and foibles and capabilities. As a taster he responds to “character above all. The finesse of fruit is also important to me, and the harmony of sweetness, fruit and acidity. Apart from that, the wine should embody its vineyard and grape variety.”

Christoph’s decision to carry on the winery is quietly momentous. Schaefer said, with characteristic



Christoph Schaefer

understatement, “we really didn’t pressure him at all, he came to the decision entirely on his own,” and there was something even more stirring than Willi’s and Esther’s quiet pride and gratification. How can I put it? I hope that Christoph observed the contentment in this household, the bedrock joy when one’s heart is at home in one’s work. Different vintners have said this to me at different times: Hans-Günter Schwarz is always saying, “you have to love it.” Helmut Dönnhoff repeats almost as a mantra, “It has to be FUN.” And Willi Schaefer has the glow of a man doing exactly what he was put on earth to do.

I am fortunate to be a part of it, and to know this kind, honorable, modest and lovely man as a friend.

Schaefer at a glance:

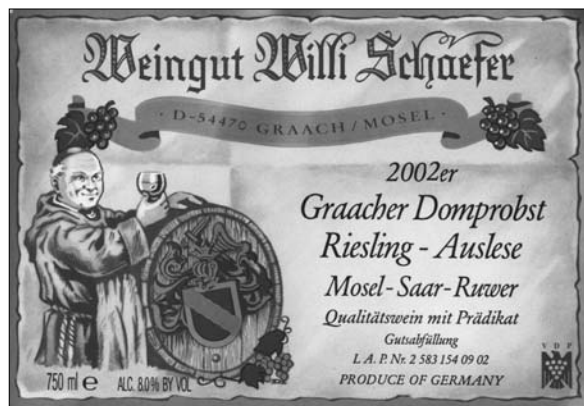
For many tasters, these are the *Ne Plus Ultra* of Mosel wine, and they have attracted an almost religious following. Thus my most frustrating agency, as there is never enough wine.

how the wines taste:

It is hard to put a finger on exactly what it is that makes these wines so precious. There is a candor about them that is quite disarming. They are polished too, but not brashly so. They are careful to delineate their vineyard characteristics, and they offer fruit of sublime purity. They are utterly soaring in flavor yet not without weight. What many of you seem to have warmed to is their clarity, precision and beauty of fruit, so maybe I'll leave it at that!

- GWS-106 **2003 Estate Riesling**
Nutty, fibrous like the skin on a Granny Smith apple; pure clear fruit.
SOS: 2 (between four and seventeen years)
- GWS-108 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett**
(Fuder #2) Diligently expressive; on the dry side, a kind of stony explanation of the Domprobst; pure, complex, articulate riesling; crazily long finish for such a "light" wine.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between six and twenty years)
- GWS-107 **2003 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett** +
Apple and applesauce; a really stunning melange of fruit and slate; insane depth and quality for "Kabinett"; a thousand apple blossoms against a wall of mineral; squeaky-clean, brilliant mirabelle and white peach. Whew!
SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-four years)
- GWS-109 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett** +
(Fuder #5) A choir of sopranos sing these flavors! A sharper-clawed grip than the Himmelreich; more explicit mineral, more piquant and salty, but there's a kind of slate elixir on the finish that really gives pause-what's being *conveyed* here? It isn't often the earth speaks so clearly; usually it is inchoate. I think the message is deliberately obscure, so that we'll pause, listen and consider.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between six and twenty-three years)
- GWS-110 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** +
(Fuder #11) Fragrance like 50 heirloom apples; palate is a fugue of sweetness, tartness and mineral; fibrous texture; textbook Mosel cut and needle-threading precision; finishes spicy like Empires or Staymans. Jeez!
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-eight years)
- GWS-111 **2003 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese** +
It's quite the vintage for the heavier soil of Himmelreich, yet even so such verve and expressiveness are rare. Pure Lady-apple fruit. Lavish and generous. *This is MOSEL wine.*
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-seven years)
- GWS-112 **2003 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +
Absolutely ravishing fragrance. Cox-orange apple to white peach to lime to tarragon, to an almost heart-rendingly restrained palate emphatically mineral, yet with a mystic dimension rare in this flourishing vintage, and a slowly enveloping interplay of fruit and salt; like an apple sorbet with four grains of Maldon sea-salt per scoop.
SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-eight years)
- GWS-113 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** +
(Fuder #9) Now we're getting into deep-terroir, as if it were clawed from the ground; an obsidian slateyness and wonderfully bracing attack.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-seven years)

- GWS-114 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 (Fuder #10) Now a lemon-blossom fragrance; a cool, almost aloof palate I have the shorthand "Deneuve" for (!); a thrall of complex fruit, a lashing of mineral, an unforgettable cool beauty; a glance, a promise. . . .
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GWS-115 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 (Fuder #15) At the end Willi asked which were my favorites. I said this wine and the one before it. "Of course," he said. "They're mine too." This one has Auslese fragrances; jasmine, freesia, lily of the valley; the palate shows breathtaking density and purity; enveloping gorgeousness yet serene; racy yet calm, bewitching yet peaceful and lambent; a keen and mysterious beauty that weaves its tentacles through you, saying things you've never heard, never even dreamed. . . .
 SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty-two years)
- GWS-116 **2003 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese** **+**
 (Fuder #16) Again a sense of calm here, of purpose fulfilled. Again spice and cherry and apple and salt-it palls to repeat it. Animate but not jumpy, serene yet kinetic.
 SOS: 2 (between thirteen and thirty-three years)
- GWS-117 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese** **+**
 (Fuder #14) Finally, a wine that smells like an 2003. What a fine botrytis! Apple and mirabelle confiture; talc; juicy and with really glorious fruit.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty years)
- GWS-118 **2003 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese** **(+)**
 (Fuder #12) Again a fine botrytis and a more "typical" 2003 profile. Picked in late October after a frosty night-thus an Eiswein touch, more pointed acidity, and a concentration of fruit needing time to integrate. Still, what flavors!
 SOS: 3 (between fourteen and thirty-seven years)
- GWS-119 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese** **+**
 (Fuder #18) Big resonant nose; the most masculine wine of the group, with almost masterful poise and authority; more like a Brücke than a Domprobst; exquisite balance in such a full-bodied style; mostly shriveled grapes, with concentrated acidity and penetrating saltiness.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-five years)
- GWS-120H **Graacher Domprobst Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+**
 This is likely the most voluminous wine Willi has ever made. It'll have a place at the table of great 2003 dessert-wines. 155 Oechsle; everything wound tight and spring-loaded; balance on a high plain of richness; racy and grand.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)



Many of you know that young Marcus Haag was wrenched from his studies to assume control of the winery when his father died suddenly and much too soon. With the family in mourning, the winery had to go on. It took Marcus a few years to find his stride—with wine you only *get* one chance per year—and I had to tiptoe through some awkward wines to find things I liked.

Mother and son are happily ensconced in a shiny new house up on a hill above the village (and away from the danger of flooding) with a glam-view of the great Dusemond ramp and the great vineyards. You could bring starlets there.

Haag's wines were never easy to taste young, even in Dieter's time. The first time I was ever there I froze my patooties off in his cellar, so I 1) asked to taste the wines upstairs in a warm room

and 2) realized the wines would be backward *because* the cellar was so cold. Still, being a professional and all, I made allowances for a certain brusqueness in the young Haag wines, especially as the emergence of all that fruit in bottle showed how *hidden* it was earlier on. Plus I always seem to arrive a week after bottling, just as the wines are shutting down.

Yet no vintage I've ever tasted here was as inscrutable as 2001. The wines had a consistent note I call "stavey" because it makes me think of rusty cask-staves; it's a metallic smell which puts me off. Unlike the usual young-Mosel yeast, this doesn't dissipate easily. We took a few of the more vexing bottles back to Zeltingen with us to see how they'd evolve with a few days oxygenation, and also to give Johannes Selbach a chance to taste them and perhaps identify the cause of the smell. Johannes believed it was a simple over-concentration of freshness, an über-reductiveness if you will, caused by Haag's icy cellar. If so, I'd charge several thousand Euro to consult, and recommend a space-heater.

Last year Johannes came with us. And there was that smell again, in the first few 2002s. We struggled to determine its cause. Then came a couple of wines that didn't have it. Here was something to grasp; was there, I asked, anything different about vineyard treatment or vinification between these wines and those? Well yes, it turned

- **Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr and Juffer**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

out; those wines (the ones with the smell I didn't like) were fermented with cultured yeast, while *these* (the good 'uns) were fermented spontaneously.

Was this it? We tasted through the rest of the range. And it seemed consistent. The cultured-yeast fermented wines all had that rusty celery fragrance. The others didn't. I have since detected this fragrance at other wineries, and am working on the hypothesis it derives from a yeast called Cruarom. What struck me was the degree to which I needed to stand my ground. "I don't assume it's a 'flaw' nor do I especially care what it signifies; all I know is it's objectionable, and it *only started with the 2001s*, so don't tell me it's his "cold cellar" or whatnot because the cellar hasn't suddenly gotten *colder* the past two years." And look, I'm no "expert"; I'm just a diligent student with reasonably good judgement who gets to taste around. Growers can *always* be forgiven for not seeing their own wines clearly. So, problem solved.

2003 has its peaks and valleys here. Marcus did a must-acidification (tartaric), but so did most growers. It shows, I think, in gestures. Marcus is jumpy and slapdash, while Willi Schaefer is orderly and calm. But relentless selectivity on the part of your intrepid importer yielded these worthy Mosel wines.



Marcus Haag

Haag at a glance:

The estate is no longer in transition as young Marcus Haag has TAKEN command after the shocking and untimely death of his father, Dieter Haag. Bright, elegant wines with silky fruit. JUFFER is more minerally.

how the wines taste:

These are elegant Braunebergers with an agreeably countrified touch; they seldom have an "urban" slickness or finicky refinement. The JUFFER vineyard tends to give chunky, minerally wines with juiciness and grip and a bosc-pear fruit; JUFFER-SONNENUHR is creamier and more buttery, more the commice pear or even a butter-sauteed pear. Structure isn't so explicitly cogent, but many tasters prefer the gracious elegance of this site to the more blunt charms of the Juffer.

- GHA-063 **2003 Willi Haag Riesling**
This is not, in fact, chaptalized, and it's an agreeable pup; fragrant, limey and tasty; mirabelle and salt. Simple and simply *good*.
SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GHA-064 **2003 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Kabinett**
(A.P. #8) This is a later bottling, and as expected it's a forthright, fruity and chewy Kabinett, which I liked much more than the other bottling. There is a slight touch of the stavey aroma but not objectionably so.
SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen years)
- GHA-057 **2002 Willi Haag Riesling Spätlese**
This comes from vineyards in Veldenz, part of Inge's dowry, and so it's a departure from the usual Haag-Brauneberg association; I liked this again as I did last year; exotic nose of cloves and vanilla beans steeped in poire williams and cream (!); slatey and strawberried; this is really delightful, and a ridiculous bargain. Insane Value Alert!
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)
- GHA-066 **2003 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Spätlese**
This is not A.P. #4, but rather a cask-sample, which was richer and slinkier, tending toward the Sonnenuhr in style; it has depth and class and is riper, with longer low-notes. Haag does have other importers, but I'm the only one with the wines I select. So there.
SOS: 2 (between six and twenty years)
- GHA-065 **2003 Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**
This I like wholeheartedly; suave, elegant and juicy; poised and balanced and creamy. It has the serene generosity I like best about the '03s.
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-three years)
- GHA-062H **2002 Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +
Marcus' finest-ever Eiswein. Perfect, pure almond tones; flavors sung by a chorus of sopranos; transparent, shimmery and drinkable; lime and jasmine notes. Dee-lish!
SOS: 4 (between twelve and thirty years)



I finally met Christian Adam this year, an intense young man but lamentably well brought-up; I had to ask him not to call me "Mr." He's still at Geisenheim, finishing up (Geisenheim is their U.C. Davis), and unsure what he'll do afterwards. Far be it from me to put pressure on anyone, but I think I did hear myself say "If you continue the winery we'll make you an *international SUPERSTAR!!!!*"-or words to that effect.

He had a practicum at Heymann-Löwenstein, a celebrated estate in Winningen who was the first to break free of the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. I gather he's worked at Van Volxem too, and Roman wants him back. "You can't have him!" I said. "I want him to continue his winery."

But the truth is, it isn't easy. His father was a co-op member; I think the estate only has five rows more than a hectare, and if young Mr. Adam wishes to continue, it will cost many Euro. We are hoping he will, and standing by to help. All kidding aside, what I actually told him was "I won't pressure you, but I *will* say if you *do* decide to continue you will have a highly committed customer in me." He'll probably do a little of each; work for one of his kindred spirits while growing his own estate incrementally.

Friend, if you've tasted any of the first wave of Adam wines we shipped last year, you'll know why I care so much.

Selbachs scour the region looking for new star agencies before they're generally discovered. Samples are



Christian Adam

assembled and we taste them together. Often it's the first time Selbachs taste. Usually the wines are at least good. This year there was a guy from Enkirch with a couple very pretty wines, plus a small estate in Graach whose wines were somewhat rustic.

And then, suddenly, there was Adam.

With the first taste of the first wine I knew it; here was someone to be reckoned with. There was simply more going on here, more weight, more expression,

more seriousness, more drive. How was this estate under the radar?

As we tasted through his range (7 wines) it was unequivocally clear to me: *This is a star in the making.* I decided to list the wines before I knew their prices!

As I mentioned, Adam's caught the wave started by Löwenstein and continued by Roman at Van Volxem. For these growers, the ripeness pyramid of the German wine law is irritatingly irrelevant. They're especially annoyed by the whole "Spätlese Trocken" thing. For them, their dry wines will all be QbA (ostensibly!) and they'll identi-

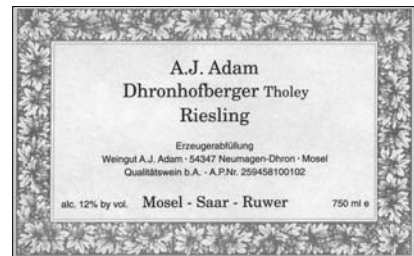
- **Vineyard area: 1 hectare**
- **Annual production: 560 cases**
- **Top sites: Dronerhofberg, Piesporter Goldtröpfchen**
- **Soil types: Hofberg - weathered slate with clay; Piesport - slate and clay with sandstone**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

fy them by site-name, often by site-names more specific than the law recognizes. You and I are familiar with this sensibility from Austria, of course. And it makes sense. Wines with significant residual sugar will be bottled with Prädikat designations, though most of these guys really don't like "Kabinett," which is inconvenient because, of course, y'all really *do*. The Germans are victims of their own logic here; Kabinett is positioned as both the driest and most affordable of the "top" level of production.

But you can always see when a wine law needs changing; enterprising growers simply pay it little mind, until it becomes a relic which no longer pertains to how wines are actually produced and described. Then, when everyone is laughing at the pathetic anachronism it has become, it is changed. You have my permission to start tittering now.

Still, I need Kabinett, pragmatically, and Adam agreed to custom-bottle one for me, until the 2003 vintage came along and scuttled *those* plans. Wait till next year.

I also did another unlikely thing and asked for the old Gothic script to be *restored* to the label. It looks better, and conveys the wines more accurately.



how the wines taste:

They taste *deep* and leesy, and they never seem sweet and almost never seem *dry*, even when they are in fact either sweet or dry. Flavors are both thick and opalescent, and one is aware of a sense of stature: this is immediate. It's self-evident these are wines of profound terroir; it's their *raison d'être*. And for me it's a great pleasure to *finally* offer you Dhroners which embody the greatness of that land.

I have a powerful connection here, because the first wine I ever drank which fascinated me was a 1971 Dhronhofberger Kabinett. Till then I'd been drinking fruity wines which were more or less sweet or polished or balanced, but it was supermarket cheapies. The Dhroner was the first wine with a haunting flavor, something more than grapey, something that didn't pander, something that just *was*. So I always looked for Dhroners, and for awhile I found them from the Bischöflichen Weingüter, vintages from the '60s and '70s. Then quality slipped, and there weren't any other sources. Dhron itself is sleepy and the land is steep and no one seemed to come along - till now.

We drove in through the Hofberger vineyard - the view is wonderful-past the house where Sigrid Selbach was born. I thought of the baby in her cradle behind those thick walls, and of the lady sitting beside me in the car, all the memories and all the years, along the silvery Mosel.

GAD-006 **2003 Dhroner Riesling**

His basic wine is anything but basic. It has the thick leesy texture of his wines, and 2003's occasional brusqueness of finish is here engulfed by that creamy-lesy "sweetness"-this is a physiological sweetness apart from sugar. Indeed this wine is a *model* for dry German riesling.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between now and three years; again from twelve to sixteen years)

GAD-002 **2002 Dhronhofberger Tholey Riesling**

"Tholey" is a single-parcel named after the abbey of Tholey. The wine is Big Stuff; (the 2003 was almost dour and I strongly prefer this 2002) tastes Halbtrocken; hints at severity but its sheer *size* makes it work. Don't think *delicate little Mosel wine* but rather big-butt Alsace or Austrian wine.

SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between ten and fifteen years)

GAD-007 **2003 Dhronhofberger Sängerei Riesling Spätlese**

Mirabelle and cherry blossom fragrances; astounding salty sweetness and high-toned fruit; has charm, dignity and generosity; reminded me of an Erdener Treppchen from near the Prälat. No botrytis in this one.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)

GAD-008 **2003 Dhronhofberger Tholey Riesling Spätlese**

This compares to the Sängerei as Scharzhofberger compares to Kanzemer Altenberg, and yes, John Trombley is the only person who'll know what the hell I'm talking about. This one's higher-toned, more lime and tarragon, slimmer and more brilliant; almost a kiwi note, or star fruit; clean botrytis; this recalls a Christoffel wine.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)

GAD-009 **2003 Dhronhofberger Tholey Riesling Auslese** **+**

This is *complete* wine. Precision, depth and length; superb talc and sweet lees and plantain fragrances; the palate is medium-weight and gentle with explicit yin-yang of sweet and salt, finishing with a sigh of prettiness.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-four years)

GAD-010 **2003 Dhronhofberger Sängerei Riesling**

Funny story here: the fermentation stopped at 40 grams per liter and he wanted it dry. What to do? He hates to manipulate-did nothing with his 2003s, no acidification. We all tasted it, we all loved it, we all said "Please, do nothing to this wine; it's perfect!" And so it is offered *provided* the fermentation didn't resume! What I tasted was fine-grained and racy; it *tastes* dry, and it's articulate and full of terroir. As-is, I'd say:

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

reuscher-haart

mosel • piesport

Something seems to be up at Reuscher Haart. Maybe it's the influence of Bernd and Mario Schwang, Dad Hugo's two sons (who look like members of Limp Bizkit) or maybe it's just one of those things. In any case, the past two vintages reminded me of the majestic 1990s and brilliant 1993s. I'm more dubious about the 2003s, though they'll maybe tighten up with bottling. Schwang's wines need time in any case, but the vintage's tendency to brutishness doesn't fit his style.

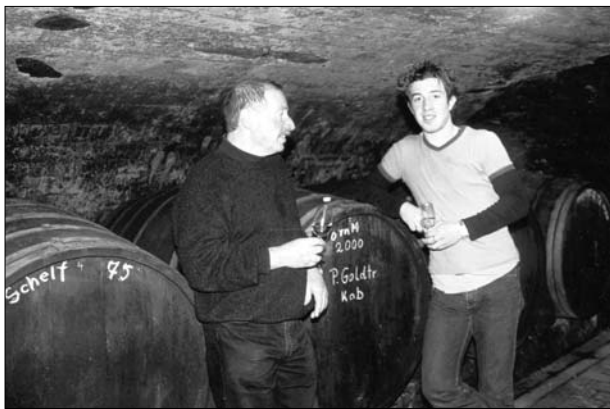
These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. In the right vintages they have profound stature and grip. Other times they're a little formless.

I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but these

wines aren't really made for our frantic world.

SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT'S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations who'll live in microwave-time. It really isn't conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there's an incipient movement toward a more *attentive* mode of living? Not ouiji-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to *notice* stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

I have a stormy relationship with Piesporters. A few years ago when I first encountered Reuscher-Haart's wines, I thought I had found my Piesport pie-in-the-sky. In their acid-drenched, thick, leesy style I found for the first time stunningly detailed and authoritative wines from these maddening slopes **that didn't need to be archly modern in order to succeed**. And each year there are a couple of wines that take me back to that original epiphany. But only a couple.



Hugo & Mario Schwang

- **Vineyard area: 4.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,100 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr and Falkenberg**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Müller-Thurgau**

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. "We use no cultured yeasts," he said. "If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character." This made sense; Schwang's wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured-yeast wines can display. He leaves his wine on its primary lees for a remarkable length of time: two to three months is common, though less-ripe wines will be racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. "I'd personally say that these are the most important factors for high quality," he says. "First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don't use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make."

Reuscher-Haart at a glance:

Leesy, old-fashioned Piesporters that need time. Great resonance and depth in the best examples.

how the wines taste:

At their best one can see why they're held in such renown. Schwang's wines can have impressive, almost majestic corpulence without being fat, plus a positive depth and stuffing from the lees. When that happens the Piesport fruit shows its *raison d'être*; an almost lurid court bouillon of bewitching fragrances and flavors; patchouli, passion fruit, bergamot, mango. And all in a voodoo voluptuousness that's the wine equivalent of an erotic trance. We should have to get our PARENTS' permission before drinking them. My parents would have refused!

GRH-033 **2002 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

(Fuder #42) Some serious action here; lots of grip and exotic fruit even by Piesport standards; tastes like acacia blossoms and sweet lees and malt; grip and length, and again, recalls those great 1990s. We'll offer this as long as we can, then move into the pick of the '03 Kabinetts, Fuder #7.

SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)

GRH-034 **2002 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

I preferred this to the 2001. It's just a single fuder. I won't note the fruit-associations as these may change, but there's grip and solidity here along with clarity and delicacy which lingers into the finish. Again, we'll move to 2003 (Fuder #12) when this sells out.

SOS: 2 (between ten and twenty-three years)

GRH-037H **2001 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**

First offering. This is an earnest, almost pedagogical 2001; spicy fragrances of violets, iris and passion fruit; firm structure, on the dry side; chewy and plummy; not for hedonists but rather for those who love more studious wines. Mind you, it tastes *good*- this isn't an elegant rationalization for an unpleasant-tasting wine - it merely is neither frivolous nor gushing.

SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)



We had to rush here, to get me back to Zeltingen for a Doctor's appointment. I hate power-tasting. Dieter Hoffmann was very much the gentleman about my haste but it felt really shitty to me, and he seemed to look rather melancholy as we were zooming off. Thus I apologize to him publicly here.

We did give the wines plenty of attention, but there's a social component to these once-a-year visits and this is very important, to them and to me. Otherwise, it's year four now, sales are good, and all's right with the world.

I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year *stage* with Carol Sullivan at the German Wine Information Bureau, where he says he met me once, and maybe he

did. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs. These were strikingly vivid wines, and I heard myself thinking a new star was on the horizon.

Dieter returned to the winery in 1994 and assumed full control in ninety-seven. His father stays on and the two generations do the usual dance! Father is a font of wisdom in this case, not least for having adjusted to several of son's more outre ideas, such as vigorous declassifying in 2001 and scrupulous adherence to vineyard purity, so no legally-allowed 15% of "Piesporter Who-

knows-what" is gonna stretch the supply of Goldtröpfchen.

Dieter wants to produce wines of fruit and fullness. The clean must (gravity-settling, twice) sits on the skins 2 hours before pressing and after fermentation the wine sits on its lees until February/March "because you get

the most optimal aging-potential when the wine has time on the gross lees."

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-



- **Vineyard area: 9.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Maringer Honigberg**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 67% Riesling, 28% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Regent**

cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fermentations but not all. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. The cellar's all stainless steel now, and dad's getting busier and busier watching over a toddler who's just as charming as he was as a baby last year.



The Hoffmanns

Hoffmann-Simon at a glance:

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart. Charming 2003s.

how the wines taste:

They're not as leesy-plump as Reuscher-Haart but more so than, say, Kesselstatt. Not as squeaky-clean as Kesselstatt, but more so than Reuscher-Haart! In Piesport there are two ways you can go. You can make lavish, sensual voodoo-wines that barely taste like Riesling at all, or you can make wines as compact as this terroir will give—which isn't very. Hoffmann's wines lean in the compact direction, focusing the Piesport fruit but not resisting it.

- GHS-020 **2003 Estate Riesling**
Not chaptalized, and lots of gulp-me-big-guy in here; clean fruity and tangy, and excellent value.
SOS: 2 (now to five years)
- GHS-019 **2003 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**
This turns out to be nicely solid and serious; restrained, almost mineral, with its usual plumminess in discreet reserve.
SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)
CORE-LIST WINE
- GHS-021 **2003 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese**
Hey, another vineyard you haven't heard of; it's the upstream extension of Leiwener Laurentiuslay (which you also haven't heard of; leave it to me to *scour the globe* to bring you exotic primates with three heads, plus undiscovered Mosel wines); this is wonderfully granular and talc-y; generous and opulent, with a tertiary note of star-fruit and plum. Highly yummy.
SOS: 3 (between five and fifteen years)
- GHS-022 **2003 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**
This is deeper; more bergamot now, even chocolate: identical residual sugar to the Köwericher but *tastes* drier, with an entirely deeper welling of under-flavors; some clean botrytis here; good length and lots to ponder.
SOS: 2 (between six and seventeen years)
- GHS-023 **2003 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese**
We are talking bo-try-tis bay-bee! Lots of depth and a suave malty charm, yet with solidity and purpose; the somewhat prominent sweetness will melt into the whole over time. A big-vintage kind of swagger.
SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-one years)
- GHS-024H **2003 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
A fine, clean, malty TBA, and a chance at these flavors for a sort-of affordable price; very pure and nectarous and with a seductive play of low sweetness (caramel) mid (malt) and high (white raisin and apricot), plus salty esters from botrytis. It's not profound but it's deliriously pretty.
SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)



weingut ansgar clüsserath

mosel • trittenheim

Philipp Wittman has a main-squeeze whom he met when they were both students at Geisenheim. Eva Clüsserath is the daughter (and heiress-apparent) of a Mosel estate in Trittenheim. Would I like to taste the wine? Sure, O.K. I'm always interested in undiscovered good `uns among the steep slopes. If the wines turned out to be ordinary I could hem and haw.

At first I couldn't believe what I was tasting. These were utterly lovely. Two months later I tasted them again, this time in the delightful company of Eva Clüsserath, and once again they thrilled me to the balls of my feet. Somehow, even with the intrepid Selbach team scouring the countryside for hidden gems, this potentially superb estate was beneath our collective radar. But <whew>, if these wines are anything to go by, not for long!

Size (3.5 hectares in over 60 parcels), vineyard and cellar work are unremarkable in the context of conscientious Moselers. The cellar is virtually all wood fuders. "We work with little influence from technology," says Eva. She ferments with natural yeasts, filters only once, leaves the wines on the lees till March or April. No one will ever improve on these old ways.

What is significant, I think, is Eva's palate. She's more cosmopolitan than her parents were, I'm sure, and her relationship with Phillip Wittmann gives her a drinking-sweetie in another region plus a comrade with whom to explore the wine-world. They love Burgundy. But Eva herself wants "our wines to be minerally and individual, even more; unmistakable." Good for her! You can always trust a Riesling palate that *starts with mineral*. That's what Riesling is.

We did what we could to get the amazing 2001s around, but not many of you saw them, as they were selected too late to go into this catalog. The raw material

- **Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Trittenheimer Apotheke and Altärchen; Mülheimer Sonnenlay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 85% Riesling; 15% other**

of 2002 was equally impressive but I had the impression Eva may have mis-read the vintage's acidity. That, or my palate was tired at the end of a 4-appointment day. I selected conservatively.

Eva did not acidify her 2003s, which all in all were very good. After enjoying some of the dry wines from 2001 I'd hoped this would be an address for them, but most of the 2003 dry wines were, let us say, less than pleasing. The "sweet" wines were nice and dry!

The estate has a wonderful future. And I love working with girl-vintners, and with the Daddies who flew in the face of all that old-world silliness and *nurtured* their daughters to carry on the estate.



Eva Clüsserath

clüsserath at a glance:

Mid-sized Mosel estate making old-school slate-leesy classics and selling them at fair prices. Under the careful eye of a smart young woman, these have nowhere to go but up.

how the wines taste:

A charming amalgam of Trittenheim's charmingly pliant fruit (less stiff than say Graacher Domprobst) with striking minerality.

GAC-007 **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett**

Eva does it again, makes a Kabinett with swollen minerality and restrained sweetness; lovely fragrance of mirabelle and slatey iron; indeed this is an essay of slate, with a lavender piquancy. Utterly admirable.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

GAC-008 **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese**

(A.P. #24) This was the more backward of two, with higher tones and a more piquant slate; in fact really pure *naked* slate; power, mineral, taut fruit-focus and salt. 2003 as *genre*.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-two years)

GAC-009H **2002 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **+**

First offering. This is a great highlight of 2002; so slim and lissome; all hyacinth and wisteria in a jaw-droppingly pretty bouquet; the palate is sleek and slatey with a superb botrytis; as deft and pretty an Auslese as I can remember; meyer lemon and plantain and vanilla and asian pear. . . .

SOS: 3 (between nine and thirty years)

GAC-010H **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**

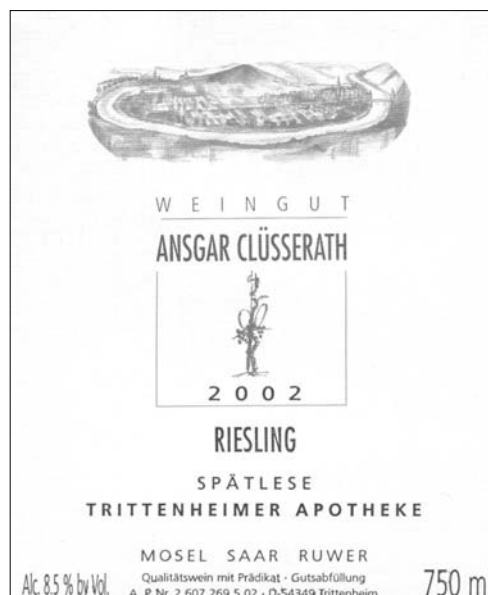
A frothing ripe vinosity spills beautifully over your palate, or at least it will if you *experience* the wine. Good underpinning of slate, 80% botrytis gives a seductive saltiness.

SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-six years)

GAC-011H **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

Bananas Foster in a glass! A malty nectar of pure fine botrytis.

SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty-five years)



It's a superstar-performance for Carl Loewen this year, a strikingly remarkable vintage that should finally earn this great guy the kudos he deserves.

He says they got the rain they needed, thanks to a few well-placed thunderstorms. Yeah yeah, I know; that's what they all say. But I recall a tidy little storm breaking over Boppard last July, and when we got to Zeltingen later in the day they hadn't seen a drop. So sometimes it's true. I also believe Carl when he says he didn't acidify. Show me wines like these and I'd believe many things.

What with family members' health problems, it's been a couple of tough years for Loewens. But our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence. When I first listed the

wines I did so on the basis of some hugely impressive samples I'd tasted at Selbach; it was the tail-end of my Mosel week and I couldn't *squeeze* another appointment in—but I had to have these wines. David Schildknecht happens to have visited Loewen before I met him but after the wines were in my book. "I'm not sure Terry knows what a tiger he has by the tail," David said to Bill Mayer. I do now.

Loewen is another grower who'd rather not know the analytical figures for his wines, preferring to make any necessary decisions based on taste and intuition. "When you have the figures in your head you can't taste the wine any more," he said. And he's right, provided he can absolutely trust that intuition. Luckily his intuition permitted him to accept an informal consultation from Hans Selbach, which really benefited a couple of his 2000s; they ended up among the best Mosel wines I shipped. I imagine some big juicy sweet wine was employed to flesh out the Kabinett and Spätlese. Nothing wrong with that. But I am bemused by what feels like a certain rigidity some Moselers display on the subject of *dosage*.

Let me rant for a second. I have seen all *kinds* of contrivances to adjust an imperfect wine on the Mosel. Blending a big sweet wine into a small wine either deficient in sweetness or just too scrawny is the most com-

- **Vineyard area: 6.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Leiwener Laurentiuslay, Thörnicher Ritsch, Detzemer, Maximiner Klosterlay**
- **Soil types: Devonian & light weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 98% Riesling, 2% Müller-Thurgau**

mon. Plenty of "failed" Eiswein ends up being used this way. Auslese too. If you have some teensy bit of BA too mingy to bottle and sell, you might use some to bolster a few casks here and there and bottle the rest for the family to drink. Few Mosel growers blink at such "adjustments" — nor should they. Why, then, is the idea of *dosage* such anathema to them? They are already using *wines* in lieu of Süsreserve. This rant will be available on audio-cassette, read by "The Rock." He usually Leiwens things up.

Leiwen is just upstream from Trittenheim, and its best site, the Laurentiuslay, is one of several unheralded Crus along this stretch of the Mosel. A lot of the renown a site may or may not possess is dependent on a flagship estate. To cite a somewhat absurd example, if J.J. Prüm happened to have been a resident of Pölich and not of Wehlen then the Pölicher Held would enjoy the renown of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr. There are great vineyards we don't know because there hasn't been a great vintner to do them full justice.

Leiwen is apparently a warren of activity these days. I am told of the existence of a group of young producers eager to make names for themselves, their home village and its vineyards. Among these seething young hot-heads is Carl Loewen, who is sensible as regards pricing. What interests me about Loewen, apart from the wonderful wines, is his championing of great unheralded



Carl Loewen

sites such as the Thörnicher Ritsch, Pölicher Held, Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay and the already-mentioned Leiwener. Natural fertilizing, reduced yields, slow fermentations, minimal handling—they only rack the wines once, for instance, It's an all-cask cellar. "I'm dubious about wines made in steel," says Loewen. "The summer after the vintage they're highly presentable, but I doubt they have the stature to age well."

Loewen's wines also have a quality of *companionability* which can't be isolated or quantified but which determines how friendly you feel toward them. Some wines seem to want to take you to a world where *all there is is wine*. Others, no less absorbing or delightful, seem content to meet you in *your* world. Whenever I drink or taste Loewen's wines I always want to curl up with a book, ideally by an open window near a singing thrush.

Loewen at a glance:

Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! "Cool" chalky-minerally style, as if the wines were blended with 15% Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

how the wines taste:

All that's stony is not slate. Loewens have some wines on sand or gravel, and these have a "northern" coolness without being explicitly slaty. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: "I don't like 'old-wine' flavor and I definitely don't like this petrol taste," he says.

GCL-026 **2003 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett**

40-year-old vines. As always this has what I call the *Vertus* fragrance; very Champagne-like without the specific minerality of the Grand Crus. There's good cut and liveliness here, and high-extract from water-retaining soils; all kinds of charm and salty fruit, and a long chalky finish. Obviously it's absurdly ripe, but as we were rappin' about it a funny thing happened: the must-weight was such-and-such, and that's *Auslese* isn't it? And someone said yes and someone else said no and it turned out neither Loewens nor Selbachs actually knew the legal minima for *Auslese*: "Who ever thinks of such things any more?" said Loewen. *That's* how seriously a serious grower takes the wine law; *that's* how much things have changed in Germany. I wonder what they'll do if there's ever another cold vintage.

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

CORE-LIST WINE

GCL-023 **2002 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese** +

The reviews of this were funny, I thought: 78 points in one journal and 90 in another. For the record the 90 guy was, like, right. The site is dour and spectacular, ancient-looking steep terraces rising directly from the Mosel. And the wine is a slate Statement of the first order; this is minerality, boyz 'n gurls; and again almost a Wachau ore-like concentration; 40% botrytis yet the wine seems impeccably clean; enters delicate but billows on the palate into a shower of complex terroir as if it were raining jewels in your mouth. Wonderful wine. Only 75 cases; don't miss it!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)

GCL-028 **2003 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese** +

Man he's just been *nailing* this wine the past few years: the low grumble of black slate has never been more fulminant: the wine ladles pots of fruit and slate on the back palate; it has size and dimension and a deep peel of vinosity and terroir, yet full of intricate interplay.

SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)

- GCL-027 **2003 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 I'd already selected the "Maximiner" yet when I tasted *this* I knew I had to triage, albeit reluctantly. But the opulence here is just enveloping; the wine is baroque, the slate is pounded finer here and stirred through a nimbus of fruit and salt; a mass of wry lemon-vanilla juiciness immensely seductive and complex. Truly, great wine.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GCL-029 **2003 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Auslese** **+**
 LIMITED! One selection through the entire vineyard gave this insane slate monster, that plus a little dollop of BA. This wine *ROCKS* - lime, banana, mirabelle, and a quarry of slate. Superbly uncompromising, intelligent power, undeflected intensity. And, I walked *away* from two excellent Laurentiuslay Auslesen just to keep some moderation in this offering!
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-six years)
- GCL-031H **2003 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **(++)**
 It's senseless to froth and spume over something so un-evolved, but Carl said "I tried to preserve the typicity of the site, and as we had 30% botrytis and the rest clean golden grapes here I saw no need to go over 135° Oechsle," and friend, this is *just* as it should be, and I think this wine will be ravishing.
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GCL-030H **2003 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **++**
 No hesitation here: this is a perfect botrytis masterpiece. Just absurdly delicious. You'd be a fool to miss it but you may well miss it because there's VERY little to be had.
 SOS: 4 (between seventeen and forty-two years)
- GCL-032H **2003 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **(+)**
 148 Oechsle, without huge acidity but with classic clean Eiswein flavors (none of the celery-horseradish thing they sometimes do); a sublime liqueur of Mt. Rainier cherries, slinky and seductive.
 SOS: 4 (between twelve and thirty-two years)



carl schmitt-wagner

mosel • longuich

Very good news here: the estate will continue because Carl the son has decided to return to Germany. Papa Bruno Schmitt is so hale it was easy to forget he is, after all, in his early seventies, and there were no heirs on the horizon. It is always moving when a son (or daughter) chooses to carry it on. Imagine the Mosel without its cloak of vines! Imagine the world without these uncannily beautiful slaty rieslings, whether young and chirrupy or old and searching. Finally imagine the hard bloody work of sweating and straining out a living on the perpendicular slopes.

The half-bottles came out again when we were through with the young wines. I have almost lost count of the number of old wines this remarkable man has shared with my friends and me. But he hasn't! I think he remembers each and every one.

I think I'll share what we drank, not to rub your nose in it (well maybe a little) (O.K. a lot) but rather as a *tribute* to his generosity and avid spirit.

We started with a 1963 *Kabinett*, very much alive and leafy. I thought it was a '62, and was abashed. One of my traveling companions had surely never dreamed of a 40-year-old "Kabinett" with barely 8% alcohol even making it, let alone drinking like a dream. Next came an elegant, fine '62 *Spätlese*, slaty and solid. A gorgeous wine followed: '69 *Spätlese*, ethereal, long, evocative and tender.

The next wine was obviously younger, a '92 *Auslese*, just emerging from its adolescence; then a 1997 *Auslese*, not my type (too much botrytis); then an improbable and obscure wine; I thought maybe a 1966 but as it grew in



Betsy Schmitt

the glass it seemed too stern and "important" for '66. "Could be a 1971 *Spätlese*," I wrote. Bulls-eye! Then a rather old-tasting '71 *Auslese*; "We should have used more sulfur," said Bruno. The next wine was easy; nothing tastes like this magic-Mosel vintage: '75 *Spätlese*. Corrie Malas was happy; it's her birth-year. Next up came a 1971 *BA*, 145° Oechsle, superb, but I still loved that '69 best. Then the *coup de gras*, a '71 *TBA*, about which I wrote "It's an adult but it hasn't been wounded yet; it's still perfectly confident the world is splendidly beautiful and safe. It needs fifteen more years to find its way to kindness and tenderness; right now it's all happy malt and orange." This

- **Vineyard area: 3.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg, Longuicher Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Blue Devonian slate, weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

at 32 years old! So remember when I write "25-75 years" for a drinking envelope for such wines, this is based on many such experiences.

And all this took place over maybe 45 minutes! Nor was it in any way worshipful; quite the contrary. You get the sense this is how Bruno Schmitt likes to PARTY DOWN. I'll bet he looks forward to the chance to rampage through a bunch of old vintages. Happy to oblige, squire. Though forgive me if I get a little *emotional*, you know. I know these wines literally live in your basement and all, but for a guy like me this is a sanctum of beauty.

I only wish I could show it to you, because all you get to see is this "drink now to four years" crap by wine writers who've never set foot in a German winery. I also love the ceremony with which the new wines are presented. Wine is significant not only as a provider of livelihood, but also as a filament connecting us to a human continuity.

It's interesting to note that the Herrenberg was classified category "A" — the *best* category — during the world's first official vineyard classification, undertaken by the Prussian land office during the early nineteenth century for the purpose of — you guessed it — *tax assessment!* The original document, published by Stuart Pigott as a vineyard map, is remarkable in its fidelity to current notions of the best vineyards.

Schmitt-Wagner at a glance:

This was a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio, but the 2001s changed that. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 107-year-old ungrafted vines—some SIX THOUSAND OF THEM. Makes among the two or three best Kabinetts along the Mosel.

how the wines taste:

This is an old-fashioned winery and so the wines are individuals with all that implies. If I taste across the range I find a certain clarity and purity in every wine, as well as a keen spiciness I assume comes from the soil. Certain casks are cranky like certain folks are cranky, but many casks are **miraculous**, they hum and glow with vitality, they speak the plain truth of the land with the clearest possible voice. At their best they stand easily with the VERY best anywhere on the Mosel. It was Schmitt who kicked off this year's catalogue, and I like the symmetry of seeing him near the end again. He's a vigorous man who has lived his life in wine. Each wine is an aspect of his story. When he brings the old ones out to share with us, he is saying "this is how I have lived."

GSW-041 **2003 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett**

This is '03 at its best; ripe, explicit, full of playfulness, radiantly glowing with well-being; fervent iris aromas; spritzzy slately attack; as vigorous and convincing as the gentleman who made it.

This is important, so I'm gonna say it **loud**. HERE'S A WINE FROM 107 YEAR OLD UNGRAFTED VINES, HAND-TENDED AND HAND-HARVESTED AND VINIFIED IN SMALL BATCHES AND ESTATE BOTTLED, AND YOU CAN OWN IT, DEAR CONSUMER, FOR AROUND TWENTY DOLLARS. **WHY THE HELL ARE YOU STILL PAYING 75-100 DOLLARS FOR SOME NEW-WORLD FLASH-IN-THE-PAN FROM SOME VINTNER-WANNABE WITHOUT A VINE TO HIS NAME??**

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between five and twenty years)

GSW-036 **2002 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett**

First offering. I'm concerned there won't be enough '03 Kabinett. This one is a clear, light and pure wine with classic kiwi and sassafras.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between five and twenty-five years)

GSW-042 **2003 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

Rounder and longer than the Kabinett; low layers and saltier mineral, but every bit as racy and brilliant; snappy, extroverted stuff.

SOMMELIER ALERT! **CORE-LIST WINE**

SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-eight years)

GSW-040 **2003 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese** +

This is stunning. No increase in perceptible sweetness, but again, as if up from below comes a welling of exquisite ripeness and saltiness; iris again, splendid length and one of the best food wines you could *ever* want.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)



karlsmühle

ruwer • mertesdorf

A year ago it was an early Spring day and we drank coolly sublime wines. Today we drove through the snow across the Hunsrück, and a few desultory flakes sink aimlessly down, and the wines are somewhere hidden. I don't recall whether they're bottle-sick or just-filtered sick, but they'd hung out the Go Away sign, only I couldn't go away.

This didn't apply to all the wines, and I do need you to know I think the vintage is basically fine. Some of these notes are highly speculative; I'll say which ones.

I don't know if this is true, but there's an awful lot of people saying that Maximin Grünhaus has come down a notch, and Karlsmühle has ascended to the very top of its region. I love Grünhaus and I'm not terribly into the popularity contest or tip-sheet mentality. But I'm telling

you this for a reason, and it is:

Given the near-religious awe in which Grünhaus is held, and given that Karlsmühle's damn near as good—maybe just as good; maybe better—and given that Karlsmühle's wines cost significantly less than Grünhaus's, then maybe, just maybe, y'oughta be paying more attention, squire. Huh? Waddaya think?

The wines sometimes have that Mosel-yeasty stink their first year in bottle, and they're more expensive than Mittelmosel wines. We Yanks don't have time to distinguish between Mosel & Saar & Ruwer because we're too busy to take German wine as seriously as other wine. Put it this way: can you imagine us refusing to pay more for Côtes-de-Nuits Burgundies than for Côtes-de-Beaune - "Hey it's all Burgundy, man." Who cares about a piddling matter like where the wine comes from! Oh don't mind me: I've got rants in my pants.



Peter Geiben and Hans Selbach

Karlsmühle is one of those pleasant country hotels near enough to a big city (Trier) to attract lots of weekenders. (Hell, if you took a long lunch you could drive there from a downtown office and still get back in time to

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Lorenzhöfer Felslay and Mäuerchen, Kaseler Nies'chen and Kehrnagel**
- **Soil types: Clay and slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 3% Spätburgunder, 2% each of Müller-Thurgau, Weissburgunder and Kerner, 1% Elbling**

do a good afternoon's work.) The wines Peter made were like his father's: serviceable, pleasant enough to do what they needed to do, supply the hotel-restaurant with home-grown product. It was back in 1987 that Peter started to wonder . . . it was, after all, a lot of work to make wine on these slopes - among the steepest in the Ruwer Valley. And there *was* a lot of wine taking up space in the cellar. What might happen if he dedicated himself to making *less* wine but *excellent* wine?

This wasn't entirely idealistic. Peter doesn't have a poetic temperament. He'd brush away any wine faery who happened to alight on his shoulder. His interest was that of a *worker* who knows he can do better with his tools, and decides to see how *much* better. Peter speaks tersely, if at all, about such things. He'd rather talk about the trellising method he's developed, and he'd *far* rather talk about hunting. A friend convinced him to stop decacidifying. He experimented with natural yeast fermentation and was pleased with the results. He's done away with wood in the cellar and is now making everything reductively in tanks. Wood is too rustic, and too dangerous in his view.

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany

right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets there from Trier. That imposing hillside to your left, behind the hotel, contains Peter's monopole vineyards. The upper section is the **Felslay**, the steepest section, with the lightest soil. Just below is the **Mäuerchen** on its deeper soil. Around the corner facing due south is the great **Kaseler Nies'chen**, in which Geiben now has two fine parcels. There's some Kehrnagel from the Patheiger holdings. Peter has enough to do.

His wines from the Lorenzhöfer hillside are positive and adamant, they walk with a firm tread, and they have a slight and pleasing earthiness. The wines from the Kasel sites are nominally lighter but utterly ravishing in polish and beauty of flavor. It's like the difference between the top part of Clos Vougeot near Musigny and the parts lower down toward the route nationale.

In fact I learned one year that the **Nies'chen** is fine-stoned, i.e. lots of crumbled slate and thus superior drainage, plus a certain filigree quality in the wines, and **Kehrnagel** is more coarse-stoned, thus less porous, and

the wines are less elegant. Peter took us for a walk through the vineyards. He also gave us various *spring-waters* to taste; the region is gifted with subterranean streams. We tasted from springs beneath the Nies'chen, Kehrnagel and Felslay, and of course they all tasted different.

The best Ruwer wines seem to *distill* the essence of Mosel-ness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said Sigrud Selbach. They have that and more; they are the *acme of the genre*. If you love Mosel wines - and based on my sales it appears you do—this is as fine as they can be.

A FINAL NOTE: Geiben has enlarged his vineyard holdings with leased sites from the old PATHEIGER estate. As this property had its own reputation, Peter has opted to employ A DIFFERENT LABEL. So if you order Karlsruhle and receive Patheiger, don't worry, it's correct, no one screwed up, be happy.

Karlsruhle at a glance:

Of the "big three" in the Ruwer (Grunhaus and Karthäuserhof, the other two) this is the least expensive by far. Ruwer wines are prized in general for their astonishing spiciness and delicacy. Since the acquisition of great Grand Cru sites in Kasel, Karlsruhle has become a serious landowner and very important producer of green-bottle Rieslings.

how the wines taste:

Ruwer wines can be the *ne plus ultra* of refinement, with their own keenly slicing flavors of cassis and sometimes cinnamon.

GKM-078 **Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett**

SPECULATING. In essence this tastes Halbtrocken; a sinewy and somewhat earthy chap, with a clingy and rather obdurate finish. Fruit is surely subdued. I'll update on the web-site as soon as I taste a true sample.

GKM-079 **2002 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett**

SPECULATING, though even this is impossible, the wine is so closed, seeming overcome with its own sheer force. Again check on-line around June-July and I'll have updated notes.

CORE-LIST WINE

GKM-080 **2003 Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Spätlese**

The first wine possible to appraise-though there's a Kaseler Nies'chen Spätlese, one of whose two tanks is still fermenting, and which alas couldn't be approached. This one is a pointed and penetrating 2003, with its usual cinnamon and hyssop tones almost but not quite overwhelmed by all that apple and greengage. Charmingly balanced and salty and even with 60 grams per liter residual sugar it finishes with a steel-toed kick. SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-eight years)

- GKM-084 **2002 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Auslese "Long Goldkapsel" +**
 Picked October 23rd at minus 7° Celsius at 110° Oechsle; an intended Eiswein, natch, and it's just what you'd anticipate: WONDERFUL. It offers a teasing glimpse into what the rest of the vintage might yet be. Again plum and star-fruit, massively rich yet linear and firm (acid-heads, this is about 9.5 *grams per liter*) and even with all its "cool" notes there's a voodoo-lick of honey.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty years)
- GKM-081 **2003 Kaseler Nieschen Riesling Auslese "Long Goldkapsel"**
 This I admit is stark, but it's just pure naked Nies'chen, almost a *Vendage Tardive* in profile; utter plum blossom and star fruit; a kind of savage gorgeousness that isn't strictly sensual but in its own way spectacular. Here the relation to 1959 is visible.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty years)
- GKM-085H **2003 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Auslese "Long Long Goldkapsel," 12/500ml ++**
 At some point the capsule will get so long you can't see the frickin' bottle. But this is staggering wine; fruit is left entirely behind in this cinnamon liqueur full of *groseille*; a massively seductive creature, enthralling depth and keen concentration; a huge canvas painted with a thin brush. Death-before-dishonor finish of malt, white chocolate and *peche-de-vignes*.
 SOS: 3 (between seventeen and forty years)
- GKM-083H **2003 Lorenzhöfer Riesling BA, 12/375ml +(+)**
 The same; even more implacable. Chewy, and as concentrated as an anvil.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)
- GKM-082H **2003 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml ++**
 Here's some cinema-verité for you. I tasted first a piercingly clear and piquant December picking which was a poem of quince and ginger; incredible ultra-violet brilliance without stinging acids. But there is also an October picking that's more plummy and seductive. We see a fair number of wines like it, whereas the December wine is unique. We played with blending the two, and all of us enjoyed the result. But Geiben finally decided to bottle only the December, and the October will be used as *dosage* here and there. Smart man! The December is precious; even the smell of the empty glass is worth more than whole bottles of many other wines.



van volxem

saar • wiltingen

Many things are growing clearer now. First of all Roman Niewodniczanski (whom I shall henceforth refer to as "Roman") came over and schlepped around with us in January. It's important that he meets you guys, you know. Answers your questions, eats in your restaurants, sees how German wine fits into it all. And makes his own impression, which in his case is considerable. It helps to be almost seven feet tall, strikingly handsome and charming, and basically a normal guy like me just wants to be somewhere nearby trolling in his slipstream.

Roman's already revolutionized the Saar, and it's barely four years since he started. He's passionate and intense - you get the impression his mind is always whirring and clicking-and he's learning and adapting to what he learns.

In effect he wants to make Wachau wine in the Saar. He bristles at this because he takes me too literally. "Our wines have much less alcohol" he correctly observes. But that's not what I mean. He's looking for a similar kind of masculinity; he's more interested in dark flavors than, say, Zilliken. His wines taste as if they wished to suck flavor from the soil and then leave it out in the sun to dry. It begins with pitiless yield restrictions, proceeds to old vines (average of 40 years), continues with a program to acquire any bit of good land available—and plenty is in the new millennium in Germany—and all of this is bold, to be sure, but hardly radical, you're thinking. The final touch is stylistic: Nevo wants to produce what he calls "harmonious dry" wines, by which he means wines with a consistently dry profile whatever residual sugar they actually carry. In practice this usually precludes the kinds



Roman Niewodniczanski

- **Vineyard area: 13 hectares**
- **Top sites: Schartzhofberger, Wiltinger Kupp and Gottesfuss**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

of wine which make the Saar famous, typified by, say, Egon Müller. Nevo wants more body, more alcohol, less sweetness (albeit not analytically bone-dry, unless that happens to work) and the powerful inner concentration deriving from old vines and low yields. He also wants to make rooted, soulful wines; he's resolutely anti-technology and works almost entirely in cask.

Yet even this is a work-in-progress. He's aware his fermentations were running *too* long, and is installing a system to heat the cellar. And as he adds land he's started to wonder whether a parallel line of old-school "sweet" wines might not make sense alongside the (harmonious) dry series. I of course applaud this; I favor harmony wherever it occurs but most of the time in Germany it needs a certain sweetness. Roman and I may disagree over individual wines once in a while, but I'm sensing he's as impatient with the Trocken-establishment as I am.

He's landed with a flourish on the German wine landscape. "Discovery of the Year" in both *Gault Millau* and in the Wine-Salon in Hamburg, and many other laudatory notices. At the very least he's breathing fresh air not only into (what was) the moribund Van Volxem estate, but into the entire sleepy Saar valley. At most he will succeed in recalibrating our assumptions of what's possible with Saar Riesling.

With another year under his belt Roman is visibly settling in. His neighbors in the Saar know he's there to stay, and he is beginning to remake the region. No one, not even Roman, wants all Saar wines to taste like his. But he is at least taking what would have been mediocre wine from some small impecunious grower and turning it into something important. And he's raising the bar for yields and uncompromising vineyard care.

There are in effect three groups of wines, and the total is a bit unwieldy. I'm still trying to find a way through it, a sustainable culling of wines I can offer every year. It doesn't help that everything is entirely unfinished when I'm there in March. But, the three groups of wines are:

1. Basic Saar-riesling. The entry-level wine. Until now there has been just one of them, but soon there may be two, one drier than the current wine, and another sweeter. I hope to offer both.
2. The vineyard-wines, "harmonious" dry. In prac-

tice this has stood for sweetness anywhere between 7 to 8 grams per liter (legally Trocken) and 23 to 34 grams per liter ("feinherb," that is, just above Halbtrocken but still on the dry side), and these will all be *QbA* and be labeled with the site-name alone. In some cases with the *parcel* name-even more specific than the single-site- as a kind of "brand" name in order to finesse the legalities.

3. The residual-sugar wines. These will increase or decrease, I have the impression, according to the vintage, so that 2003 will give more of this type of wine and next year could give less.

What's in this offering is a combination of our STOCK of the 2002 vintage plus our reservations from tasting the young 2003s.

Of one thing we may all be certain: with any man as singular, intense, passionate, determined, ravenously curious and basically civilized as Roman, there will never be a dull moment!

the wines:

GVV-008 2002 Saar Riesling

This is the calling-card, the volume-potential wine, partly from estate grapes and partly from purchased, though Roman won't purchase just any-old-grapes from any-old-grower; he has a *regime* he wants followed, and he wants this wine to be on every table because it is so patently delicious. I tasted five or six lots (including a gorgeous Serriger Würzburg he bought from Bert Simon that I wanted to buy the whole cask and bottle it in Syosset); I know what he's after from hangin' out with the 2001, and it takes its place among the very BEST "branded" dry Rieslings on earth. This '02 delivers the goods and then some; it has verve, richness, complexity and stylishness.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)

GVV-021 2003 Saar Riesling

(Available after the 2002 is gone) High color and even a wisp of sherry tone, but this is an unsulfured cask-sample and all that can change. The palate is distinctly dry and salty, but there's a semolina-like leesy sweetness of texture (think Leitz) and a long finish. Still, compared to the mannerly 2002 this is a sailor on shore-leave.

SOS: 0

GVV-017 2003 Saar Riesling Alte Reben

Juicier and denser, still with a tease of sherry, as if he's blended a bit of Savignin into it; juicy and full of terroir but with a dried-zucchini vegetable-concentrate thing and a long, granular 2003 finish.

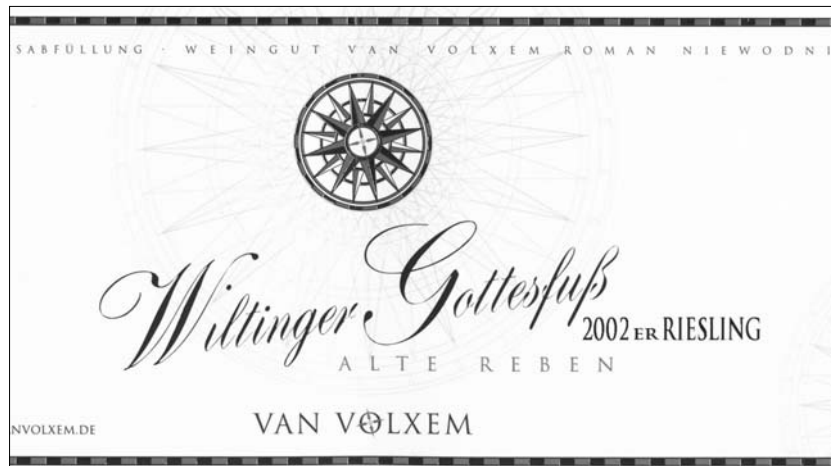
SOS: 0

GVV-018 **2003 Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling** (+)
 The parcel came from the Bischöfliches Weingüter, who spelled (K)Canzem with a "C" and Roman wanted to use the traditional spelling, though the powers that be wouldn't allow it. The wine is potentially superb; great smoky weight and thickness of slate and iron, but with stern masculine fruit; depth and salt and really swollen vinosity.
 SOS: 0

GVV-019 **2003 Kanzemer Altenberg Riesling Spätlese** (+)
 A higher octave but the same note, with a slinkier fruit, more wry and arch; you're tempted to call it 4-square until this sweet-salty rivulet of fruit (or whatever it is) starts spreading over your tongue.
 SOS: 1

GVV-020 **2003 Scharzhofberger Riesling Spätlese** (+)
 Much limier and higher-toned; almost a tarragon note; more melody and lilt also into the finish; this will be tasty, if rather too monumental to truly be called "delicious"-but it's early days yet.
 SOS: 1

Ultimately I envision something broad enough to encompass all the Saar's various terroirs; the valley isn't uniformly slatey, there's red slate and grey slate and iron-rich and iron-poor slate and there's another kind of stone called Grauwacke and one wants to do justice. Look out for **(Wiltinger) Braunfels "Vols," (Wiltinger) Kupp, Scharzhofberger "Pergentsknopp," (Wiltinger) Braunfels Alte Reben** as soon as I can taste and appraise them.



SOS

A NEW WAY TO MEASURE SWEETNESS

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

I don't think the standard sugar-pyramid of German wines is Serviceable any more. Thus I started noting each wine I planned to list according to an intuitive scale I tried to apply consistently. I call it the SENSE-OF-SWEETNESS scale—SOS for short—and you'll see it following every tasting note. It should be a more reliable guide to the actual taste of a wine than any word on any label. Here's how it goes:

IT STARTS FROM ZERO. Zero is the point of no-discernable sweetness.

MINUS ONE indicates sugar is discernibly absent but the wine is in balance.

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

THREE signifies sweetness important of itself. Remember, I reject any wine of grotesque or vulgar sugariness.

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!

