

terry theise

estate selections

GERMANY 2001



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Wine Spoken Here



WHAT IS LEFT TO SAY

The self steps out of the circle;
it stops wanting to be
the farmer, the wife and the child.

It stops trying to please
by learning everyone's dialect; it finds it can live, after all,
in a world of strangers.

It sends itself fewer flowers;
it stops preserving its tears in amber.

How splendidly arrogant it was
when it believed the gold-filled tomb
of language awaited its raids!
Now it frequents the junkyards,
knowing all words are secondhand.

It has not chosen its poverty,
this new frugality.
It did not want to fall out of love
With itself. Young,
it celebrated itself
and richly sang itself,
seeing only itself
in the mirror of the world.

It cannot return. It assumes
its place in a universe of stars
that do not see it. Even the dead
no longer need it to be at peace.
Its function is to applaud.

-Lisel Mueller



FOR SPARKY



Acknowledgement

Liz DiCesare didn't ask to be the guarantor of my peace of mind, but she's become exactly that, by dint of her remarkable caring and talent. She's a fascinating person and a superb professional, and I am absurdly fortunate to work with her.



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.

Distinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.

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

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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?

THE DEADLINE FOR ORDERING FOR
FALL 2001 DELIVERY IS JULY 11, 2001

No martians ate my cables this year, and nobody's putz got stuck, though my wife did happen to spot another truck from that unfortunately named cleaning service. "It really *does* exist", she cried. "Of course it does," I replied. "Did you think I make this stuff *up*?" "Well, knowing *you* . . ." she began, stopped by as dour a glare as a poody-cat like I can muster.

The most interesting thing to happen last year was that I went in front of eleven of my customers and tried not to let them see it. We were tasting at Schmitt-Wagner, and Bruno Schmitt had raided his comprehensive cellar of old vintages. He does it every time I visit, and I can never get over the honor he shows me. Though I also suspect he gets a big ol' kick out of it himself; the wines come out like baseballs at a batting cage and he's always announcing the vintage before you have a chance to guess it, he's so eager and revved up.



This time 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 as always seems to happen, when you *expect* to be moved you're too self-conscious and you sort of 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 1937 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 was indeed what we should call a "choice") because it needed to be done and it pleased him to do it.

When wines come from such people they 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 crystallized out of my experience over the years into something that looks like—ulp—a contribution I might 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.

Things are happnin' big-time with my compadres at casa Skurnik. We have all kinds of young, juicy people. Sorry as we were to see Mark Hutchens leave us (he's back pursuing his first love, music), we're realigning ourselves to accommodate the intellectual-sensual juggernaut that is Mr. KEVIN PIKE. Kevin will contribute all kinds of feral animal prose a few pages from here. Then there's a Mr. ANTHONY AUSTIN "Tony" as he is fondly known (and hates to be called) who is the only person I have ever seen who can spit wine while technically unconscious and *still hit the spit-bucket*. I'd have hired him for this skill alone, but happily he'd done yeoman's time on der street and sold ein bot-löd of German wine and he's a pulsating young professional who enriches us considerably. As if they weren't enough (actually, they aren't) we have the extremely serious Ms. CORRIE MALAS who is so full of vim we have a special closet where she stores it during the day. This year was the first year any of the growers expressed nostalgia for the old days when it was just me and things were quiet and intimate. "We could go back to those days if y'all wouldn't mind going back to those-size *orders* too," I suggested. This reconciled us all quickly to the unwieldy nature of our galumphing juggernaut. FOUR PEOPLE out there selling these wacko wines. Nail down the valuables and lock up the wimmins, there's a plague about the land! We might even have us a web site before too long, and then even the cyber world won't be safe from my ravings. I see (and am glad) you're starting to notice how much more *efficient* things are.

We were all over in Germany at various times last month. I heard they'd had to file an environmental-impact-statement when we got through in the Pfalz. It is important that you know each of my colleagues was with me, did what I did, tasted what I tasted, and will speak from their own experience about the wines, except for Anthony, who will snore. I am convinced you can't really

understand wine—at least not this kind of wine—if you don't *go there*. I remember sitting with Helmut Dönnhoff trying to glean why his 1999s were in another league from all the others, and I heard, perhaps for the first time, a certain urgency about his voice. He doesn't have a breathy voice. He speaks with a kind of closed-throated passion that resonates from his piercing blue eyes. That precise *driven-ness* is the "secret" of those wines. If you haven't been with him you won't—can't—get everything his wines are saying. Nor can they be entirely *seen* without having walked those vineyards, looked into the soils, breathed the air, listened to the local birds.

I am aware of my blessings. I know that many of you can't have this experience as easily as I do, maybe not at all. It is why there is sometimes a chasm between the way I relate to wine and sell it and the ways you relate to wine and buy it. Until recently that chasm was a place I felt lonely and unseen. But I can't change it, and it's self-indulgence to feel the pain of that place when there's so much of fascination to be found there. I like what you can see when no one can see you!

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 (seventeen!) I'm drawn to tell you from *whom* you are buying these wines, and to suggest there are *meanings* beyond the assembling of X-number of wines that tasted good.

Oops, meanings. Dirty word. Can't go there, because what if someone feels *inadequate* because they don't *feel* these "meanings" as I do. Dear reader, I have no hidden agenda; you don't need my permission to approach wine as *your* temperament urges. I have my own subjective lil' truth to speak, and I will because that's how I want to "do business," and you can ignore it or simply observe it for whatever it's worth.

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?)*.

It is a sense of PROPENSITY that things are where they belong. After all the years of trial and error along came Riesling, the vine that **belonged** in these thin, minerally soils and this cool, long growing season. And because 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 cre-

ated somewhere else, below the ground.

One risks unleashing a great fury if one insists that soil creates flavor. That fury is worth considering. I did a tasting once in which I laid out my basic belief that soil is *indeed* responsible for flavor, *at least* in white grapes grown around the 47th-50th degrees of latitude. I don't like to claim what I do not actually know, at least empirically. I thought I was being very reasonable! But I was cornered by a pair of science-types who were quite annoyed with me. If what I said were true, they argued, it would have to be universally true. But I wasn't familiar with *every* wine on earth, I replied, and so I confined my statement to those wines with which I was familiar. Even so, they continued, my claim is unsupported unless it's universally true. Hmmm! Well, I ventured: I don't know that it *isn't* true everywhere, if it comes to that; I only can *demonstrate* that it's true in these places.

At which point my tormentors became even more agitated, until I had to ask them, why the rage? What are you afraid of, if I'm right?

Fear has nothing to do with it!, they yelled in ever-louder voices. No? Am I really so irritating just because my scientific Method isn't pure? Frankly I don't think the burden of proof is on *me!* *I don't have to PROVE that soil creates flavor; I can demonstrate it with literally thousands of wines. How about if you prove to me what ELSE it could be if not soil!*

Then watch. If you think my position is metaphysical, wait 'til you hear its **detractors** advance every other *imag- inable* reason why variegated flavors might exist in neighboring wines.

No, it won't do. You show me your anger, I'll show you your fear. And I will leave this matter for now with one final question: *why should you fear that soil creates flavor?*

I happen to know the answer to this question. It isn't pretty, and I'd rather not say it. I ask you to think about it. That's all.

An aside for those who enjoy minerally, soil-saturated wines: drink them young, at their most expressive. The growers will tell you that the pre-fermented *juice* is even more minerally. After a few years of bottle-age the secondary flavors begin to supercede. The "baby-bacon" (to use the vivid German idiom!) of primary fruit, and the mineral binding in which it's set, are clearest at birth.

I am continually living a disphasic existence. The way fine German wines are made makes perfect sense to me. The 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. Superficially they're a pain in the neck. Yet it is even more distressing when a vintner tries to rationalize away the innate character of his type of wine. I think vintners should vint, and marketing people should market and

salespeople should sell. And I think I could, if I really wanted to or had 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.

That “something” sounds like pretty words until you see it yourself and see how natural and plain it is. 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!”

In a recent SPECTATOR Matt Kramer wrote a provocative column (yes, Matt, provocative, hard as it is to believe!) in which he took issue with aesthetes who were kvetching that certain ugly buildings from the sixties were being considered as architectural monuments. Kramer conceded the buildings were eyesores, but that wasn't the point, as he saw it. The buildings, ugly as they were, REPRESENTED a sensibility which made its mark on the history of architecture, and as artifacts they signified something important even if we felt them to be ugly. Then he applied the principle to wine; he claimed that there is a value in wine deeper than how much sensual pleasure it gives us. Paraphrasing Matt now, he wrote a wonderful sentence to the effect that wine can tell us something about the earth that we can receive no other way, and that this mattered more than how “good” it happened to taste.

Superficially it defies a certain logic. It might appear that wine has *no* reason to exist except to give pleasure. First it has to taste good or why would we drink it? But consider this. Grant me for the sake of argument that Volnay at its best is sublime wine in its perfume and class but also a wine which can be light in body. Nothing wrong with that! Also grant me that the Gevrey type at its best has plenty of body and satisfying meaty depth, but sometimes seems to yearn for more perfume and class. You could, if you wanted to, open a bottle of each and MIX them to create a hypothetically superior Burgundy. Now you'd have body *and* perfume. But *would* you do such a thing? You would in effect OBLITERATE the Beings of Volnay and Gevrey in order to create the Thing you seek.

So I would suggest that we derive *many* pleasures from wine, some sensual, some cerebral, some even mystical, and that we are wise to nurture all of them. If we are

wine freaks, we care about *who* the wine is just as we care about how it tastes.

If you care about where a wine comes from, then you begin to glean something that's never entirely clear, but which beckons to you like those stars you can only see by looking away to their sides. As wine becomes more distinctive, it also seems to become more evocative. Hmmm, “evocative.” What is it wine might be trying to evoke? Is it merely the smells of other things, fruits, spices, flowers, all the wine-jazz we like to throw around? Or is it perhaps the “something about the earth” that Kramer refers to?

When you speculate metaphysically you can easily forget how or when to stop. You get a tiger by the tail and it pulls you into an endless sequence of “whys” and “whats” which eventually become absurd. What happens then is we usually give up. We reach the *point* of absurdity and mistakenly conclude that because we *arrived* at an absurd place, the entire *journey* was absurd. Now *that's* absurd! All that's happened is we've been shown where to stop speculating.

Taking Matt's idea as a starting point. Then I might ask these questions: *what* is wine trying to tell us about the earth? What is it in wine that transmits the message? 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 these kinds of questions. Yet I realize 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 a commercial formula, 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 ultimately utterly meaningless. Wine-like substances. Junk-wine.

Here's the crux of it. Something in us craves diversity. We hunger for it in ways too numerous to cite. Some creative life-urge seems to be expressed by 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 species 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, just 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

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?

A basic exercise in phenomenology is to try and describe the difference in flavor between an orange and a tangerine. Try it! We don't have words. Because we think in words (at least as it pertains to thoughts about thinking) we feel groping, weightless.

I want my notes to help you, of course, and I want them to convey how the wine spoke. I don't try to grasp or apprehend a wine. It's a kind of parlor-trick to be able to string associations together, like you have a better palate if you "find" twelve things the wine smells like and the next

guy only found nine. It's still all about *you*. If I examine the facet of consciousness I use to receive wine, it feels improbable and miraculous. I try, at once, to both be lambent and receptive and to direct a beam of attention and, in truth, I haven't a clue *how* I do it, nor am I conscious of trying to do it. I only know I summon a kind of calm.

Then 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 come up with 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.

Last Fall I took Michael and Harmon Skurnik over to Germany and I hit a hot streak in which I bulls-eyed something like five consecutive old vintages we'd been tasting blind. It's fun to be good at palate-macho, though I know it's mostly a parlor game involving a lot of luck. But it is 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, *lying 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

Happily, one barely *needs* to make the case for German wines any more. We're still far from the mainstream (and I'm not sure I'd want to be there in any case) but I'm sure you've noticed these wines are MAKING THE SCENE in their cool Hugo Boss duds. I am sometimes asked why; I think there's a few reasons: 1) Who knows! I mean, do *you* know, does anyone know? Maybe it was just Time. 2) Many drinkers are suffering debilitating attacks of *Chard-ennui* and are seeking wines that taste more real and complex. 3) Best for last. A whole new generation of sommeliers has arisen, worshipping no false gods, interested only in how wines work with food, more willing to gamble on their passion and experience than were their snooty, ossified forbears.

Thus if I repeat this text it's not to convince *you*; you're very likely smarter about these things than I am. It's to give you some ammo with which to convince *others*. The few holdouts, the recalcitrant, the disparately stubborn, clinging for dear life to those old shopworn faiths, we gotta try to *redeem* these poor souls.

German wine is not what most people think it is, because Riesling is not what most people think it is. 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. People who simply taste these wines, will like them and be surprised by how much they like them. It isn't the wine per se that's "difficult," but rather the barriers erected in advance by the drinker.

"The wines are too sweet." This is just not true, as can be demonstrated. 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."

"The wines don't work with food." Again, simply wrong, as we have demonstrated at least a hundred times over the last ten years with the Chardonnay showdown dinners we've been doing.

"The wines are impossible to understand." Instead they are in fact 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. Comte 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 kinds of virtues (Loire Chenins come to mind) can give the "discriminating" palate its greatest pleasure. I wince at the pompous phrase, yet it is one of Riesling's great wonders. Wine-beginners who happen onto Riesling discover its miracle, to be at once entirely accessible and endlessly complex. It was once said the beginner would eventually leave Riesling behind in search of something more challenging (and that he'd return to Riesling later on when he realized that *nothing* was really any more challenging!), but I wonder if the 20-and-30-somethings I see drinking these wines will ever find them palling. It doesn't look that way. 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

This category of German wine can appear to offer a conundrum. How is it to be used? It's too sweet for savory dishes and not sweet enough for dessert, so the wisdom goes.

The wisdom is not so much wrong as irrelevant. But first I'll address it on its terms. Many Auslesen are far from 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.

MAKING THE WRONG CASE FOR GERMAN WINES

The German Wine Institute, a generic marketing organization, has decreed German wine has no chance in export markets unless it is dry. This is an arguable proposition if one sees German wine in sum, of which Riesling is less than 25% and great Riesling perhaps 25% of that 25%. That said, the idea runs counter to an intuitive truth that one leads with one's best suit. If the great Rieslings are the tip of the quality pyramid, as is generally agreed, then *they* should establish the "market" and let the rest coast in their slipstream.

But Germany can show a perverse knack for utter wrongheadedness disguised by plausible logic. I don't believe dry German Rieslings are successful *often enough* to make them a point on which anyone should focus (including their creators). A few of them beat the odds, and we enjoy them and sell them, but we simply do not NEED Germany to supply us with iffy dry wines (we're swimming in dry wines as it is) when she has something so precious and incomparable to give us with her "sweet" wines. The logic seems so overwhelming I am truly astonished to find another point of view! Perhaps the explanation is that marketing people are ipso facto deranged.

PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION IN THIS PORTFOLIO

Visit everyone, taste everything, select what I liked the best, and then tell why. Nothing new or revolutionary. But seventeen years ago when I started this zany enterprise (at the age of sixteen, I assure you), that wasn't how "fine" German wines were made available.

Once upon a time there was a group of estates that exported their wines from Germany. Many of them made very good wine, but not all, and the ones who didn't were still rather successful simply because people had heard of them. This group of estates was sometimes called "The Great Estates of Germany" as it sounded ebullient and pompous.

They would print lists of all the wines they had to sell: many, many wines. Then brokers would assemble all the lists of all the wines, now thousands and thousands of wines with VERY LONG NAMES and these lists they would collate into one gargantuan magilla-list. For the seething white heat of creativity this involved, they took a markup.

Well, then, they'd send the lists out to all their clients around the globe, including some right here in our town. These clients would receive the list and pass it along to *their* clients. For this committed, impassioned dedication to rigorous selection, they took a markup.

Pretty soon *you* would get one of these lists, and you would get to pick the wines you wanted to buy. It was a real fun game of eenie-meenie-minee-moe. A wine lottery, which for a while sold a lotta wine. Then came trouble. First *you* got more selective. People like Kermit and Bobby and Marco spoiled you. Then a lot of these, um, great estates in Germany started to not make very great wine anymore. But nobody knew about this because all they did was pass paper from desk to desk instead of tasting the wines. And so a lot of the wines were yucky, and the market didn't want yucky wines. So something else needed to happen and that's where I entered the picture.

The production structure of German estate wine is artisanal, like Burgundy. Thus it was incongruous (to say the least) to see the wines marketed along *Bordeaux* lines as commodities passed along a network of brokers. It worked while the wines were fashionable. When they fell from favor there was nobody with any vested interest in defending them. There was barely anyone who knew what the wines *tasted like!* Paper-pushers, most of them.

In the old days most of the growers I knew and introduced were "unknowns," upstarts, *paysannes* who dared to presume their wines belonged astride the Great Ones. I loved being the champion of the underdawg. These days many of my underdawgs have morphed into the established Great Ones. Who heard of Dönnhoff? Or Jost? Or Willi Schaefer? I used to get a rueful chuckle out of the VDP's claim to comprise the *ELITE* of German vintners. Growers among my portfolio who have since been invited to join the lofty ranks of VDP-dom include Messmer, Wittmann, Dönnhoff, Kruger-Rumpf, Leitz, Christoffel, and Schaefer. Others have been asked to join but

preferred not to: Müller-Catoir, Mathern, Selbach-Oster.

At first I believed everyone had a right to an equal shot at the glory. I wanted to show as many facets of German wine's beauty as I could. The wines would be tossed into the rough waters of commerce, and we'd see who sank and who swam. I loved them all and couldn't bear to play favorites. Now it's all these years later, and a few have fallen and many have remained. I get chummy with lots of these families, and it hurts to let anyone go. But eventually I see what you like and what you don't like, and it's senseless even for a utopian clod like *moi* to keep foisting wines upon you which you manifestly don't wish to buy. A few names have been dropped. Others make very good wines but there's no personal chemistry; life appears to be indeed too short to do business with uncongenial people. A few more names are dropped.

And then there's the way we have to sell the wines. 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!'")

Thus in the service of Truth, here's a list of those wineries in this portfolio which do not show well in big-table tastings:

MERZ (too dry, mealy and vinous), **NECKERAUER** (too earthy), **SCHNEIDER** (too woody without enough primary fruit), and **ODERNHEIMER** (too resinous). I wish I could think of another way to show you these wines.

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!

I added two new growers to this year's offering, and dropped one. I'm open to further exploration.

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 grey-markets them. I'm tempted to call such behavior evil, but it isn't. It's just pathetic. Still, the man has taste!

Nor will I use the threat of being "poached" as pressure to compromise on my selections just to keep a grower happy. I am loyal to them, but I'm just a little more loyal to you, as it must be. Most of my growers don't mind how matter-of-factly I choose from among their offerings. After all, you must select without sentiment. I take a sip and listen to hear if the wine talks to me. It must say something compelling, unambiguously and promptly. Ninety percent of my wines are selected within the first few seconds of tasting them. The same proportion of my "rejects" is decided equally quickly. The other ten percent compel, but not quite conclusively, and must be mulled over. Most of those are rejected. Because it is all too easy to make a mistake at this work: no matter how good you are, you're fallible. If you only select the wines you're absolutely *sure* of, you decrease the odds of screwing up. Sure, I end up regretting three or four wines each year. It cannot be otherwise. But I regret even more some of the wines I left behind, when I taste them again months later. I'd rather make a hundred mistakes of omission than one mistake of inclusion, so the little mantra I say to myself when I'm waffling about a wine is: When In Doubt, Don't.

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 happenin' 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. This has happened. Once there was a wine I'd offered for many consecutive vintages. I'd come to expect I'd like it, and the grower came to presume I'd offer and sell it. One could even infer the wine had a *following* of sorts, and that it had proven useful and people would perhaps expect it.

But if I think about any of that **at the moment of tasting** then I am not tasting objectively, and I risk making a *dishonest* mistake. Long story short; I tasted the wine and bypassed it in favor of something I liked more. And the grower was plenty steamed. How could I not offer a wine I'd offered each of all those consecutive vintages? Well why not? After all if it was a forgone conclusion then why bother schlepping all the way to east B.F. to taste it? Well, he said, wouldn't my customers *EXPECT* the wine, indeed DEMAND it? Actually, I answered, what I believe my customers expect is that no wines make it into this offering by rote; that each wine listed *earns* its way in because it is exceptional. Well, maybe, but what about the *price-point*? Surely I needed to have a wine at that *price-point*? Actually I don't *NEED* to have any particular "item" here; what I *NEED* is to maintain the **integrity** of these selec-

tions.

And it would have been easy to yield the point: The wine was perfectly adequate, and I like the guy! And listen, I'm not even *slightly* holy; 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.

2. I select my growers and their wines based on quality alone. No other reason. I say that because there's a certain amount of political gamesmanship afoot in Germany about which constitute the "in" estates. There's a junior-high clicquishness about it which can get pretty nauseating. It doesn't seem to pertain to enjoying wine, understanding wine, loving wine; it's just a game played by people with either some pathetic insecurity or too much time on their hands.

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.

6. 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. Interestingly though I posed the figure I selected no wines to which I actually gave the figure!

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!

DRY GERMAN WINES

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!) and the argument will be: isn't it strange that an entire wine culture, based on a late-ripening grape, naturally high in acidity, grown on the 50th parallel north latitude, should have convinced themselves they craved DRY wine? For a while they even craved dry wine with the highest possible acidity!

"Yes, we can shake our heads in bewilderment now, since the plague has passed and things are normal again," he'll continue. "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." If you've read these catalogues over the years you'll see how my feelings have evolved on this issue. 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.

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.

It occurs to me that I haven't had a "failed" Trocken wine in three years at Müller-Catoir, yet grotesque imbalance is the order of the day among most other Trockens. What does this estate know that the others don't? I don't think there is an answer, certainly none confined to analytical folderol. **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.

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 Alsatians 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 trained (brainwashed would be more like it) 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.

The latest twist to this sorry saga is even more surrealist. Today's hep 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.

Still, of all the world's producers of wine, the Champenoise have it perfectly. They have that word BRUT, which sounds **seriously goddamn dry**, and which in fact includes wine with as much as fifteen grams per liter of residual sugar! In Germany that would be Halbtrocken, and a typical Riesling might have 8.5 to 9 grams of acidity, compared with around six for Champagne. Thus most Champagne is actually a little bit sweet, but it's dry enough for most drinkers! Palates have decided what they like, aided by a little marketing sleight-of-hand.

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 properly 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 we'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**. Stewart 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. I won’t make bold to posit any Universal Vinous Truth here, but I do believe—*absolutely* and without qualification—that Riesling grown in the Rhineland is a mirror reflecting the soil it grew in, and that different soils give consistently different flavors to its wines. Wehlener Sonnenuhr has its distinct signature, different from its neighbors on either side (Josefshöfer and Zeltinger Sonnenuhr). The Münsterer sites Pittersberg and Dautenpflänzer make wines as distinct as two Rieslings

can be from each other. Also neighbors. Any reasonably experienced taster can taste the distinctions blind and amaze the growers! It isn’t metaphysical; it’s matter-of-fact.

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, as I did underrating many of the 1999s I saw last March. 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."

Here's an example to illustrate the point. There's talk these days about machine harvesters, which are used more often than you might think in Germany. One vintner, seeing a horizontal flicker of disapproval cross my face when he mentioned machine harvesting, said to me, "You know Terry, in the 1992 vintage we machine-harvested a Spätlese that had three degrees Oechsle *more* than a wine picked by hand from the same vineyard the same day. The machine shook all the stem-rotten bunches to the ground. Plus in a year with lots of rot and where the rot is spreading quickly, you need to get your fruit in as quickly as you can. I wish we'd had a machine harvester for the 1976 vintage." (This argument, by the way, was firmly disproved by the 2000 vintage. Keep reading.)

Well I mulled it over and got past my squeamishness about things mechanical and actually saw the reason for his argument. A few days later I was discussing it with another grower, who had his own wisdom to add: "It *can* be true about getting higher must-weights with the machine harvester, but the opposite can *also* be true. You know that flowering isn't always uniform, and sometimes in the middle of a grape bunch there are little unripe berries from the late flowering? Well, the machine doesn't sort them out, and sometimes you get *lower* must-weights using the machine." Call me what you want, but this kind of thing just slays me. Not because I have to decide Which Guy Is RIGHT, but because as a mental exercise it **forces me to be reasonable**. To consider and not jump to conclusions and remember that conscientious people may differ in their approaches . . . and most of all to reflect with joy at the multiplicity of temperaments walking our green world.

AN ESSAY ON TASTING BLIND

I can't find a single convincing argument in favor of tasting blind.

Have you heard Keith Jarrett's latest solo piano CD? He's 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 enervation, but the result is nearly sub-

lime, 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? I don't see how it improves the usefulness of our tasting to rob wine of its meaning. 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, and I'll continue to group the wines by style. 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.

So, if you’re accustomed to thinking of things in 100-point scales (a great pity if that’s the case), GIVE EVERY WINE A BASE OF 90 POINTS IN ITS CLASS. That is the point of my offering. Wines listed and noted with two pluses (++) are especially recommended and could be seen as 95-97 point wines. Wines listed and noted with three pluses (+++) are the few, the proud, the insanely fabulous, the 98-99 point wines.

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. And among the 2000s there are fewer highlighted wines in general, and fewer still that reach to the stellar. The benefit of this antic approach for you is you can be confident the highlighted 2000s are as good as these wines are in any vintage. All things may be relative (except for relatives, who are constant) but within these pages, ein spade ist noch ein spade, dude.

THE 2000 VINTAGE

There are two parallel stories of the remarkable 2000 vintage. Both are “true” because both amount to the same whole-truth seen from two perspectives. But first a word about the wines.

When 2000-vintage wines succeed they are splendidly exciting, bracing, taut and vigorous. They are essentially *ripe*, but not what I called “summer-ripe” or yellow-ripe like summer fruits. These wines are ripe like *green* things: lime, apple, melon. They have to be the most minerally young German wines I’ve ever seen; they taste as though

bath-salts were added to the vats. The vintage-character is uniform among regions, with a little body added here or taken away there, and I found the best wines thrilling, jumpy, kinetic.

The vintage is a profound testament to the never-say-die utopianism of the current generation of vintners. The quality of the best `00s is a monument to their passion for beauty-at-all-costs. A generation ago this vintage would have been a disaster. It was a disaster for the ordinary. There are very few mediocre wines in 2000. What succeeds is splendid and what fails is undrinkable. Here’s how it happened.

The vegetation cycle was accelerated by up to four weeks in the Spring and early Summer. I was in Germany with a group in mid-June and we saw grapes the size of peas. It was also stinking hot. Growers know better than to get euphoric so early in the season—unless they don’t! But nature had marshalled her cruelest tricks with which to ambush them. Beginning in July the weather turned cool and rainy, and by September it was even worse, still showery and warmer now, ideal conditions for rot. A rare late outbreak of peronospera swept through the northerly vineyards. “We sprayed, we had to,” said one grower, “and it cost us at least 8-10 degrees Oechsle.” The head start ripening was looking like a curse now. “We were going through the vineyards again and again,” said another grower, “and each time we finished cutting all the rotten berries away the clean ones we left would start rotting; it was endless.” A Nahe grower I know visited the Pfalz in September and came home horrified: “Just driving near the vineyards you could smell the vinegar. I never experienced anything like it.”

For it wasn’t just ordinary grey-rot, but a veritable smorgasbord-o-fungi, penicillin, acetic bacteria, the whole magilla. The harvest was enormously protracted - “We barely had a day without rain after July, and during the harvest it rained every few hours when it wasn’t raining continuously, - and enormously expensive. One grower reckoned his costs at DM 3-5 per Liter. At Müller-Catoir, where selective harvesting is like a religion, even the redoubtable Heinrich Catoir said “You can withstand a vintage like this perhaps only once in your career; a second time would break your spirit.” At his winery, under the prescient guidance of the great Hans-Günter Schwarz, several green-harvests were performed before the first grapes were actually picked. Three teams went down each row cutting away before the final team hand-selected each single bunch to put into tiny 30-kilo baskets. As if this weren’t enough, when the grapes reached the winery they were placed on a slow-moving conveyor belt where **every single bunch** was inspected by hand “and by nose; some grapes looked good but you could faintly detect a hint of rot” before they went into the press. By the mid-point of the harvest even the indomitable optimist Schwarz was beside himself.

That the result of his heroic labors is not only “clean” or “acceptable” but indeed *magnificent and sublime* gives me a satisfaction I am nearly ashamed to feel. They sweated blood to make these wines, and me the aesthete gets to preen over them five months later. Time and again I tried to

convey to my growers that their herculean labors had AT LEAST yielded outstanding wines, not merely flaw-less wines. Most growers mumbled little snuffles of contentment; growers get shy at full-frontal tributes!

One tastes the heat of the early summer in these wines. Only a few of them are “small,” Most are full or ripe swagger. They are a wisp on the high side of average acidity. They have freakish extracts (Kabinetts over 30 grams!) and most are unusually high in pH. As in the 1995 vintage, the acids read high but feel low—the precise opposite of 1999.

I selected firmly away from any hint of botrytis. After the calamity of the tainted 1995s I was taking no chances. I probably rejected a number of wines that’ll turn out O.K., but the *instant* I sniffed that telltale mold I poured the wine into the bucket. I also deliberately left a half-ounce of wine in my glass for a few minutes to check for volatility, and sometimes found it.

“The only creatures who will profit from this vintage are the birds and wild boars,” said one grower. No one - not even the “common” producers - made more than two-thirds of an average vintage and the best ones got perhaps 40%. Some of that wine, harvested in desperation, is destined to never see bottle. What remains is some of the most remarkable wine you will ever see, not only delicious and extroverted but wrested from the vine in a death-before-dishonor struggle against a merciless nature. It will cost me a little more - not a lot, just a little —and if the Dollar stays high we might be able to mitigate those increases before they reach you.

The best growers were able to adapt. The next best stuck to their formulas or to their principles (2000 was unkind to the non-interventionists, let me tell you), and the rest will basically sit this one out. Flexibility was rewarded. Meticulousness was not only rewarded, but reflected in the characters of the wines. 2000 is often lacy and fastidiously delineated in structure.

The best region overall is the NAHE, and the central Nahe was better than the lower Nahe. On the MOSEL it varied from estate to estate. While it was a fine “minor” vintage for Merkelbachs, for example, it was a *great* vintage for Christoffel. In the RHEINGAU the vintage favored the driest microclimates, which benefited my friend Leitz in Rudesheim. RHEINHESSEN is grower-by-grower, while the PFALZ is replete with challenges. Its extra warmth worked against it. Yet several estates made not only “correct” wines, but breathtaking wines (Minges, Biffar, Müller-Catoir).

In fact such is the fortitude necessary to have prevailed in this fiendish vintage, I’d like to nominate the ABSURD GREAT ONES of the 2000 vintage, the growers who made not just one or two good (or even great) wines but who showed a steady hand **across the range**. These heroes deserve your priority. SELL THEM OUT FIRST. It’s the least we can do.

THE GREAT ONES (Group B) excellent across-the-board with many high spots:

BIFFAR
KARLSMÜHLE
MATHERN
MEULENHOF
MINGES
SCHAEFER
SELBACH-ÖSTER

(Group A) virtually nothing BUT masterpieces!

CHRISTOFFEL
DÖNNHOFF
LEITZ
MÜLLER-CATOIR
STRUB

Thus, the two stories: one tells of a great vintage created under appalling conditions, and the other tells of appalling conditions in which a few great wines were miraculously made. I’m curious to see which story the press will choose to tell. You have the luxury of looking forward to wines that will curl your toes.

HOW THEY WILL AGE: I have no idea. I’ll be following this vintage closely because it’s terra incognita and I need to map it. It will teach me things I need to know. I can *speculate* but take it as such: based on its fruit, ripeness and structure there is no reason to expect anything but the normal aging curve for most healthy 2000s. However, the high pH is something to watch, and the mega-extracts will evolve who-knows-what flavors over time. I usually advise German wine lovers to drink 25% of whatever they buy right away and save the other 75%. In 2000 I would suggest the reverse. That’s partly because they’re just so crazy-ass *good* out of the gate. But also because there’s never been a vintage with these characteristics, so all bets are off.

1999 REVISITED

Usually when I taste the new vintage the yearling starts to show glimpses of its eventual adult form. It starts evolving those little fingerprints of nuance by which we identify it. Often it's a highly flattering phase. I have already written of my errors in underrating several 1999s, and there are still wines (Schmitt-Wagner is a dramatic example) just now showing their cards. But with all that said, a curious facet of 1999 is how *featureless* it appeared alongside the 2000s. Not unpleasant, mind you, but rather perhaps excessively *pleasant*—a little bland.

I'd reduce it to this: there were perhaps ten or fifteen wines in which a kind of soul (if I were more concrete I'd call it a "cogent fruit statement," or the like) is only now emerging from a general wash of attractiveness. I grabbed them when I could. The 1999s that seemed great last year still are! The ones that seemed ordinary mostly still were.

The two vintages 1999-2000 present a nearly perfect yin-yang symmetry viewed together. You could blend them into a cuvee and call it Cuvée Tiresias.

1999 remains, at its best, a juicy, forthcoming vintage, with generous wines which have somehow not lost their minerality, though they're relatively "low" in acidity. They are highly flavory and in-your-face and they don't beg to be cellared for decades. Here's the "useful" part: They can be consumed young . . . soon . . . **now**, without that little shudder of committing infanticide. Sommelieres should be extremely interested in this vintage; the wines are jammed with flavor and rarin' to go!

EARLIER VINTAGES REVISITED

1998 is entering its trough in many cases. There's still that undertone of grassiness or celeriac in several wines; one wonders how it (and they) will evolve. Others are just enshrouded beneath their acids. A few are hinting at what they'll finally smell like, and this is enticing. I still feel the vintage is outstanding and will justify patience. If you haven't started drinking them, don't. You missed the chance. Now's the time to wait.

1997 is wry and tasty but neither mysterious nor intricate - with several prominent exceptions. It smells like violets and tastes very smooth.

1996 is deep in hibernation. It was fascinating to start tasting the 1996 Champagnes this 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.

It is helpful to understand what makes a vintage taste as it does, and I'm as curious as the next person. Farmers notoriously obsess on the weather and all the little afflictions to which their crop is prone. When you're there a while you get caught up in it. But back home, with a little perspective now, I am mighty relieved I didn't jump on the

bandwagon and declaim 1997 as a GREAT VINTAGE as other merchants and commentators did. What happens, I think, is you acquire a certain emotional momentum after making visits to consecutive estates who did.

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.

I've been kvetching to my growers, but the Germans are slow to change. How would y'all feel if all my wines through Spätlese were sealed some other way? Would you prefer synthetic cork, or screwcaps? I am not even slightly a snob, and would have no objection to screwcaps. *I need to hear from you!*

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!") Couldn't they have used a phrase with international recognition, perhaps? Are they too prideful to permit "Grand Cru" on a German wine label? 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 horridally) 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.

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. 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.

Here's how I'd explain my own palate. Why am I telling you this? Just musing I guess. Let me explain how I see my own palate, and then you might better be able to use me better, since you'll know where we diverge and where we congregate.

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's 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.

I risk repeating material I wrote a few pages back, but I don't think one can overstress these things. I try and make tasting opportunities available to you but in the real world you can't taste every wine every time. So I want you to know what I mean when I tell you what the wines taste like.

NOTES ON GROUPINGS

Placement in one group or another can only be construed as a general statement of the tendencies of the wines to exhibit certain characteristics. Many wineries could plausibly be placed in more than one group. Use this as a guide for general typecasting if you are unfamiliar with my portfolio. If you have limited familiarity, look for wineries whose wines you have enjoyed and chances are you'll like the others in the same group also. Ideally, of course, taste for yourself and see the amazing multiplicity of styles of which German wine is capable.

WEIGHTY CLASSIC WINES:

Hans Crusius, Günter Wittmann, Toni Jost, K. & H. Lingenfelder, Eugen Müller, Christian-Wilhelm Bernhard, Josef Leitz, Selbach-Oster, Schmitt-Wagner, Reuscher-Haart, Josef Biffar, Meulenhof, Spreitzer, Hoffman-Simon

JUCY, TEXTUROUS WINES:

Odernheimer, Jakob Schneider

SLENDER, ZIPPY WINES, REFINED:

Hermann Dönnhoff, Mathern, Kerpen, Jakoby-Mathy, Karlsruhle, Christoffel

WON'T-FIT-IN-A-GROUP!

Weingut Merz

SLEEK, INTENSELY FRUITY WINES:

Adolf Weingart, Kurt Darting, Müller-Catoir, Von Schleinitz, Merkelbach, Strub, Minges, Gysler

FRUITIER, SOFTER WINES:

P.A. Von Ohler'sches, Hubert Gänz

POWERFUL, STRONG WINES, DRY-ISH:

Koehler-Ruprecht, K. Neckerauer, Jakob Riedel,

MINERALLY, STONY WINES:

Willi Schaefer, Herbert Messmer, Kruger-Rumpf, Brüder Dr. Becker, Carl Loewen

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 just by tasting the wine. 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 the drinking of these wines quite early. Our lives are so stressful and the grind is so remorseless 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, and it is not the pleasure we want each time we approach a wine. 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 totally enthralling. And that too is an experience we deserve to have.

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. The smarter among the growers will draw and *retain* cask samples for me if they've bottled their wines within a week or so before I visit. It's invariably fascinating to compare the bottled wine with *itself* at a more Rousseauian state of savage vitality. 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 we're in to make sure no lay-people 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 it 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 of their development; 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.

Let's theorize some specific examples. We'll presume it's a good grower in a good site in a good year. The Riesling Kabinett starts to lose its first fruit at perhaps one and a half years after bottling. It's a little dumb for another two years. Then it begins to open up, and continues to improve for perhaps three years, leveling off for another three to five years before beginning to fade. If the vintage has been poor, giving the wine high acidity and extract, the whole process is slowed down, and the wine has a twenty-year life span even if you figure conservatively.

A Spätlese, too, starts to shut down for its "adolescence" at about three years, emerging at about six or seven, improving for three more years and settling down for many years after. Twenty-five to thirty-year Spätlesen are commonplace.

Auslese is harder to track, if it is sweet. Its dumb phase is camouflaged under a thick foliage of sweetness. At ten years old it's beginning to sing. If it's good it gets better for *another* ten years. BA needs at least fifteen years to lose its early, one-dimensional richness. TBA is monolithic for a generation. If a BA doesn't need twenty years to reach its peak, and if a TBA doesn't need thirty, they're something short of the genuine article.

Eiswein is a mystery, at least to me. It can be hard to drink when young, due to those zany acids. That same acidity can develop vegetal flavors with age if it was unripe to begin with. Though the older wine is smooth, its grassiness is not to my taste. If the acidity is ripe, an Eiswein can age into something beyond any words I can find. There is no parallel in the wine experience. But Eiswein hasn't been made for very long, so we don't know enough about how it ages and what it does along the way.



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.

That being said, KABINETT wines are seldom aged to whatever potential pinnacles they may have, but they could well be. Only the slightest need to be drunk young. In 2001 I am finishing my 1992s and really digging the 1993s. It isn't too early to contemplate 1995 Kabinett either. 1994s should probably start being uncorked too; they won't shed acidity before they lose fruit, at least at the Kabinett level.

SPATLESE is the first category of German Riesling that really begs to be cellared. Finish your 1988s and 1989s. Start in on the 1990s. Drink through any 1991s you may have. Have a party and dispose of your remaining 1992s, not because they're in danger of sudden demise but because they'll never taste **better** than now. It's time to start drinking 1993s in earnest. If you're really smart and have older vintages in your cellar, 1986 is nice and smoky and just past its absolute best. 1985 is fine and going nowhere fast. You might peek in on the occasional 1994.

AUSELESE. Don't drink anything younger than 1993. The 1988s are especially suave right now. Earlier vintages are just fine depending on how they were stored. You can hardly go wrong drinking pedigreed Riesling Auslese at any point between 10 and 25 years after its vintage. Check in on a few 1990s. I've had a couple 1993s showing superbly.

All of these advisories pertain to wines with conventional residual sugar. Halbtrockens and Trockens mature faster.

I didn't hear anyone in Germany talking about how the wines don't age as they did before. A few years ago that notion was all the vogue, possibly because of two vintages (1991 and 1993) whose wines *appeared* to age "prematurely." The question remains: did those wines *indeed* taste too old too soon, or was there **something in the particular vintage make-up** that mimicked the flavor of age? That's what I suspected, and indeed many of the wines suspected of having aged prematurely got a second wind. Their detractors have crawled away in shame.

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.

But lately the Germans are playing with the notion of a vineyard classification. This was a good idea when I first proposed it in 1983 and it remains a good idea now. It remains to be seen whether they'll bog it down in a lot of political game playing, and most of all I hope they resist the urge to get too ambitious. I have always felt the more specific a **guarantee** a classification purports to be, the more misleading it actually *is*. I am personally in favor of determining which are the Grand Cru vineyards and which are the Premier Cru. These and *only* these sites could thereafter be named, and all other vineyard names could be scrapped, along with the entire hideous Grosslage system. We'll see.



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 Rheinhessen, mis en bouteille au domain Strub, viticulteur a Nierstein-sur Rhin, Grand Cru Paterberg du Nierstein, 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: Strub 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. Niersteiner **Paterberg** identifies the site and locality. Nierstein is a

place from which the populace, whether Homo Sapiens or the progeny of *vitis vinifera*, are known as Niersteiners. O.K., New Yorkers? Paterberg is a vineyard. How are you supposed to know that? It's always the second word in the sequence. Meursault Perrieres. Niersteiner Paterberg. 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 *Qualitätswein 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 *Qualitätswein 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 Rheinhessen, 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 BATF, 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 Niersteiner 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

This is a word that's nearly always used incorrectly. Most wine people use it as a vague metaphor for who-knows-what virtue they claim to find in a wine, saying that such-and-such is "highly extracted". I don't know what that means. 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 car-

rying 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. High extract is a thing devoutly to be sought in fine wine, and while I don't focus obsessively on components of flavor, I do look for extract as a frequent harbinger of quality. Wines with high extract have more authority, more length, more interest of flavor.

ACIDITY

Acidity is, once again, a thing I'll point out if it is remarkable. 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. 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. Among my vintners only Lingenfelder is friendly toward malo, and Rainer feels a perfect acidity for his wines is between 7.5 and 8 g.l., making them more typically Alsatian than German. As a rule, Riesling begins to show its splashy cool freshness around 8 g.l., and at 8.5 or 9 g.l. the wine starts to focus and tighten into a lemony vigor. Above 9 g.l. we start feeling acidity as a major component of the wine's structure. This is usually favorable, but acidity, like every other component, is just a piece in a mosaic that has to look like something. One also learns to distinguish among types of acidity. Tartaric is less sharp, malic more so. There's a thin line between an acid-fueled flavor power and just plain sharp-

ness. Ten years ago it seemed that all I talked about with my growers was this figure or that; nowadays we hardly do it at all.

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 (of Müller-Catoir) 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 AND 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.

FEINHERB

This is a new description ushered in with the 1999 vintage. It doesn’t seem to be catching on. “Herb” has long been a German word denoting a wine *on the dry side* but probably not bone dry. Many growers dislike the word “Halbtrocken” (with good reason), but Feinherb may not be the answer. I actually have the answer, if they’d ask me. Technically Feinherb is a Halbtrocken with a higher upward limit on residual sugar, but still leaning discernibly in a dry direction. Lingenfelder’s wines typify.

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 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 shortcut 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 that 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 everybody'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.

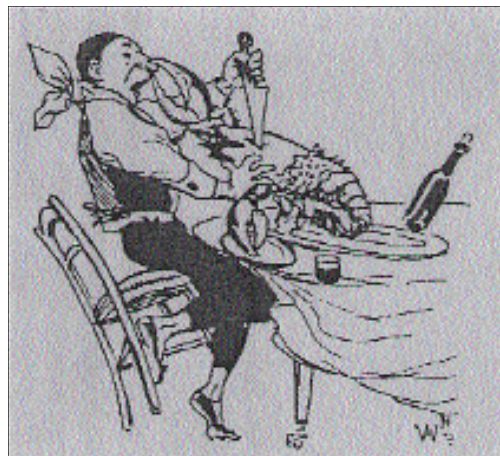
SOMMELIER ALERT!

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. A restaurant is a distracting environment and I want the wines to reach out and talk to you. 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

GDH-115	2000 Dönnhoff Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese.	31
GDH-116	2000 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese	31
GDH-117	2000 Dönnhoff Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese	31
GMA-42	2000 Mathern Niederhäuser Felsensteyr Riesling Kabinett	33
GMA-46	2000 Mathern Niederhäuser Felsensteyr Riesling Spätlese.	33
GMA-47h	1999 Mathern Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese.	34
GKF-65	2000 Kruger-Rumpf Münster Kapellenberg Riesling	37
GKF-69	2000 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Kabinett.	37
GKF-68	2000 Kruger-Rumpf Münster Pittersberg Riesling Kabinett	37
GJS-44L	1999 Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter	41
GJS-46	1998 Schneider Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Auslese	41
GST-87L	2000 Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter.	46
GST-83	2000 Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett.	46
GST-84	2000 Strub Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Kabinett	46
GST-85	2000 Strub Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Spätlese	46
GBK-27	1998 Brüder Dr. Becker Dienheimer Kreuz Riesling Spätlese	48
GBK-34h	1998 Brüder Dr. Becker Dienheimer Tafelstein Riesling Auslese.	48
GGW-63	1999 Wittmann Halbtrocken	50
GMZ-40	1999 Merz Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese	53
GMZ-43	1998 Merz Ockenheimer Laberstatt Riesling Auslese.	53
GCB-46	2000 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett	57
GCB-42	2000 Bernhard Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	57
GCB-38	1999 Bernhard Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Auxerois Spätlese Halbtrocken.	57
GGY-35L	2000 Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken	59
GGY-34h	1999 Gysler Weinheimer Kapellenberg Huxelrebe BA, 500 ml.	59
GTJ-42	2000 Jost Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken.	63
GAW-53	2000 Weingart Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	65

GAW-54	2000 Weingart Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	65
GMC-038	2000 Müller-Catoir Neustadter Mönchgarten Weissburgunder Kabinett Trocken.	71
GMC-029	2000 Müller-Catoir Haardter Herrenletten Riesling Kabinett Trocken	72
GMC-034	2000 Müller-Catoir Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese	72
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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.

It is sad to contemplate what *must* happen here: more hotels, more restaurants, more activity, higher profile. Without these, the Nahe has little future as a viable wine region. There is no relation between costs of cultivation on difficult land and the prices one can fetch for the wines, nor is there tourism enough to at least provide cash flow. There are several reasons why. Other

regions, the Saar for example, have been able to prosper without mass tourism. The Saar is as dreamy as the Nahe. But the Saar has Egon Müller. That may not sound like much (no disrespect to the great keeper of the Schärzhof is intended) but *everybody* has heard of this estate; it is *on* the wine map. Yes, the Nahe has Dönnhoff (vintner of the year in the 2000 *Gault-Millau* and very much an epicen-

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.

ter-o-wine-geekdom) and it has Johann Lafer, Germany's most celebrated chef. Still it's sleepy, nor does it ring with affluence as does the Pfalz.

But 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 "VISITEZ 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 superrich Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but they are more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marble 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 prismatically 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

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

river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after 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 fol-

low 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 the 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

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 question: who are we to be? We all let meaning into our lives in *some* way; we thirst for meaning unawares. When you cheer like



Oberhäuser Brücke

time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil forming miasmic 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.

In my dream I wished I could bring you here with me,

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.

dönnhoff

nahe • oberhausen

I notice that I'm breathing more shallowly as I pull my car into the driveway. I feel a kind of silence settle over me. I ring the bell and wait for Helmut to appear. I hear myself think, "It's like entering a shrine," and wince at the pomposity. Helmut would skewer me if he heard me think it. He comes to the door; there are hugs, jokes, bits of gossipy chirpings about nothing in particular. It is the anti-shrine.

Then come the wines. Slowly it grows quieter. Now and again someone will chuckle when a wine is just ludicrously beautiful. We do keep a steady dialogue going about individual wines. Helmut often tells us their stories; they all have stories. One doesn't dare preen. The shrine compresses itself and liquefies, and soon you realize it is inside you now.

"There is this space, in the air behind my body, that no one can see, a cloister, a silence, closing around a blossom of fire. . ." (James Wright)

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.

These are Rieslings of the very highest order. Behind them is a temperament as warm, rigorous and thoughtful as any I know. Helmut Dönnhoff begins, like his wines, with a certain cordial reserve, unfolding layer by layer. He's a taster who concentrates intensely and doesn't make snap judgments. If he sees *you* concentrating, weighing, sifting, reflecting, he is content. He's less concerned with what you may have *concluded* than in the *WAY* you go about tasting. He is alert for any disagreements he and I might have (though these are almost unheard-of these days); he stops what he's doing, affixes me with his piercing glare, and man, I gotta *produce*. He is fascinated by the minutiae of wine, the little eyelashes of flavor, the tenderest and most precise articulation of nuances. But he discusses it all matter-of-factly, like a father who's over his first giddy wonder at his newborn and can now study the baby with calm adoration.



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; he doesn't preen and would rather you didn't.

- 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

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. That's him in a nutshell. He wants to make wine that is pure and serene in flavor.

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.

Of all the vintners with whom I've worked awhile - and I began with Dönnhoff in 1987 - Helmut has perhaps developed the most conspicuously. He was quite retiring when we first met, but no more. (Bernd Philippi has done his vile part in corrupting poor Helmut.) After being WINZER DES JAHRES in *Gault-Millau* it is hard to hide in your old wee crannies. Helmut knows where his wines fall in the quality continuum. He is a little surprised

that nobody else is making such pristine and exquisite wines. In fact he doesn't really care about rankings or accolades but he is serious about upholding standards. If he is to become a Spokesperson, then he will do cordial honor to that role, all the while wondering if it's strictly relevant.

He has also moved forward as a taster. In the old days we'd taste in a self-consciously "professional" manner, and would analyze and pick apart the wines until they were entirely dissected and we knew just how hip we were. Not anymore. Now we're not hip at all, thank God. 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 liver of LIFE - if we could somehow remember: the whole thing must harmonize.

Most fertilizing is organic. 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. He is determined to maintain the *specificity* of his wines. He is fervent on the subject of individuality; he *hates* to blend. He resists even the blending of separate pickings of similar ripeness from the same site; he is too respectful of each wine's *story*. "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. Süßreserve is occasionally (and somewhat apologetically) used to fine-tune in the lower *prädikat* wines.

I arrived last year with considerable optimism; Mathern's wines, tasted that morning, were lovely, and it looked as if the Nahe would escape the 1999 gnarlies. Even so I was unprepared for what met us here. "Are these really 1999s?" went through all our minds. It is as sleek and piquant a group of Rieslings as I've ever tasted, possibly better than any vintage between 1990 and 1995, and so strikingly above-the-norm. "During the harvest I am a fiend about tasting grapes. I run back and forth throughout the vineyards tasting, tasting, tasting," says Helmut. ("It's true," says his wife Gabi. "I never know where I'll

find him.") "In 1999," he continues, "when you tasted the ripe-looking grapes they often tasted burned, bitter, *hun-gry*, astringent. And these are the grapes that usually give us Auslese; we intuitively assume as much. This was stood on its head in 1999."

It is alluring to take this tidbit and posit a general theory of the 1999 vintage! Do I dare? Is it possible that *too many vintners* never really tasted their grapes? And could this be why so many ninety-nines taste brusque and coarse *despite* their ripeness? They taste tart and sour *despite* their low acidity? Oh, the siren-song of explanation . . . but no. No. Best not to do it. Because the instant I do, fate will hurl in my path a grower who made sensational 1999s *without* tasting his grapes, or another who tasted *obsessively* and still had vulgar wines. We can never *know*; we can only infer cause-and-effect after the fact. I let this information stand as a fiendishly tempting inference. Its greatest value is to demonstrate Dönnhoff's attention to detail. "With the 1999s I looked more than usual at the must-analyses, while there was still time to guide the wine. Later on I don't care any more; either the wine tastes good or it doesn't. But ninety-nine was difficult and needed care."

I'm talking about the 1999s because, thanks to an unusually benevolent providence, we have some *inventory* of Dönnhoff 1999s. Possibly not very much inventory by the time you read this, but it is unprecedented to have ANY. No one made better 1999s, and Dönnhoff has never achieved more.

2000 was unsurprisingly . . . what? Pristine, marvelous, great, I cannot find the right accolade. "We didn't



have such a brutal invasion of botrytis as they had in the Pfalz," said Helmut. "We had more time to sort and select." The 2000s were halfway to the development of the 1999s tasted the same time a year earlier. Most will want more time to resolve their acids. Up to the top Spätlesen many seemed to want a little more sweetness. Helmut and I spoke about it, in view of our agreement that the 1990 wines that looked so great out of the gate were now revealing a paucity of sweetness. He would mull it over. I would list the wines and note what I'd tasted. I am quite sure wisdom will prevail.

Helmut's 2000s are almost savagely chiseled and detailed. Their clarity and beauty is so keenly pleasurable as to approach the painful. There will be far less wine than we received from the 1999 vintage. Be as greedy as you

want.

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 minerally 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 Hermannshöhle 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 complex-

ity 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 Hermannshöhle, 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 HERMANNSHÖHLE**.

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. 2000 is a vintage of surreal cut and brilliance.

how the wines taste:

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

GDH-111 2000 Dönnhoff Riesling

Once again from the porphyry-soil Oberhäuser Felsenberg and once again exceptional class and polish for a "mere" estate Riesling. Zingy and snappy, complex and vivid, almost supernatural grip and splendidly firm and minty.
SOS: 0 (between three and twelve years)

GDH-112 2000 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Kabinett

Dellchen is a Grand Cru by any standards, a wine of Talmudic complexity, sometimes inscrutable in its early years. It is small (7.3 hectares), entirely steep (some terraced sections) and lies on a weathered melange of slate and porphyry and stony loam. The wine is currently Halbtrocken but might not stay that way. It's suave yet still zingy.
SOS: -1 (between four and seventeen years)

GDH-113 2000 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett

Isn't the 1999 just glorious? Grab it if we still have it. This 2000 is slatey, charming, has lots of fruit and has a slightly unyielding nip of acidity on the finish which a bit more sweetness would make gorgeous. As it stands now, the sense of sweetness is zero, but I'd like to have it at plus one.
SOS: 0 (between five and eighteen years)

GDH-114 2000 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, and this baby is the spitting image: very racy with ethereally pretty fruit and a kiwi-grassy finish.
SOS: 0 (between seven and twenty-two years)

- GDH-115 **2000 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 copper-mine (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. This site - and if THIS isn't its best then Dolly Parton doesn't sleep on her back - this puts the KANT in "pikant:" vertical, filigree, less baroque than the fabulous 1999, but with even more detail and a truly haunting finish, as though your palate was picking up radio waves from Alpha Centauri. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0(between seven and twenty-two years)
- GDH-116 **2000 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 \$25, and that from one of the greatest vintners alive! This is richer and displays more definite mineral density than the Kirschheck; it is a more profound wine but a less lissome wine too, yet still complex and mysterious. The 2000 has an imposing nose; an equally imposing juice-bomb texture belies a mineral core of obsidian opacity. The Brücke redux: to the deepest fathom. The finish alone has more flavor than most wines. ++
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1(between eight and twenty-five years)
- GDH-117 **2000 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**
 This is very great wine. I have never seen the mineral, the lattice-work of bone and thread exposed so clearly, yet the filaments of fruit are woven like diamonds through the entire framework; the whole thing is chromatic, enthralling. It is a sixty-year-old vineyard, by the way. +++
 SOMMELIER ALERT
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GDH-118h **2000 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**
 God, I almost hesitate to write these words, because nobody is getting more than a weenie bit of this wine, and some won't get any. But I have to tell you that THIS IS AS GOOD AS WINE GETS. It is the kind of wine you want to drink the moment before you die. It is an irreducible essence of this great cathedral of Riesling: never clearer, never finer. I was trying desperately to keep "cool" but I couldn't stop the tears over this apex of beauty given to us by our earth and our friend who cares for his little piece of it. +++
 SOS: 2 (between eight and thirty years)
- GDH-119h **2000 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**
 The first real botrytis wine at Dönnhoff: salty, profound and masculine with great resonance. Again there is this e-n-d-l-e-s-s-s-s-s finish. +
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-seven years)
- GDH-120h **2000 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein (Friday), 12/375ml**
 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, so that doesn't hurt. The legendary "Monday" Eiswein was THE sweet-wine of the 1998 vintage (I was glad to see *Gault-Millau* agreed with me!), and the ninety-nine was in a class by itself. This 2000 is simply PERFECT Eiswein: the *ne plus ultra* of the celestial sweet-lime of the vintage. Only Leitz hit this pinnacle. And yes, there is a "Saturday" Eiswein, even riper, for which I'm sure someone will bid to the very skies at auction. We do need the rich, if only to really know what the Gods think of money - look who they give it to. ++
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)

helmut mathern

nahe • niederhausen

Mathern is basically a small-town grower committed to his private customer base, wishing to offer them drinkable wines they can afford. It's partly his own talent and partly his great vineyards that raised him above the crowd. The local VDP is eagerly recruiting him, to hear it told, and he's really not sure what's right for his winery. Flattering though it is to be courted, I have the impression Mathern doesn't want to eschew his simple roots, and he also worries he'll *have* to raise his prices!

Personally I think 1998 was his *breakthrough* vintage. 1994 and 1995 were extremely promising, but I wish the 1996s had remained as they were without de-acidification; they were *very* good but might have been supernal. 1997 is who-knows-what! And 1999 was graceful, lithe and

leaping. If you wanted to make people feel good about the 1999s, you would show them these wines *first*. "Wow, nice vintage!" they would say, as you sniggered into your hands. 2000, not surprisingly, is crashing cymbals of happiness.

It bears mentioning, by the way, that 2000 has its best chance of success here in the central Nahe. This family of wines is as wonderful as German Riesling can be.

There's a new cellar finished last year that should ratchet these wines up to who-knows-what level, as Helmut Mathern has more space to work and more wherewithal to produce small lots of peak-wines. Other happy news is his acquisition of three-fourths of a hectare in the **Hermannshöhle**, which gets a geek like me salivating like a Pavlov's dawg.

Mathern put nearly all the 1999 harvest in stainless steel, while the 2000s saw more old wood. Flexibility is good, IF you listen to your wines. And Helmut Mathern is listening and moving forward each year. Helmut can seem almost opaque in his impermeable *capable-ness*, but as the years go by he's looser and comradely with me, which is good because I don't remember *when* was the last time I was on my best behavior, or even what that is any more. When I'm steeped in such rarefied beauty I find I really need to grunt and scratch. I thought everyone did.

Fulsome and extravagant as my notes must seem to many readers, they faithfully record how I felt *at the time*. If you'd been there you might have felt the same way. Great wine still pumps me up, and I guess I'm just an emotional guy. It's O.K. if you think I'm silly. I accept that risk when I write as I do. It would be false to my spirit to *force* understatement. Solemnity has no place near such wines! When you taste really *good* Nahe wines they're so *bewitching* you swear you've never experienced anything so racy, high-bred and fine.

Mathern picks entirely by hand - always a good sign. He considers his best vineyard the Rosenberg ("We have 45-year old vines there, and the microclimate's excellent"). Like most good Nahe vintners, Mathern is a soil proponent; you can't NOT be when the sheer FACT of SOIL =

- 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

FLAVOR stares you in the face all the time. His own wines mimic the Saar and Ruwer, wines he says he likes to drink if he can't get a hold of a Nahe wine. Yet it won't work to force these wines through the zingy-reductive matrix.

What they are at their best is fascinating Riesling, and I'm excited to work with a young man, "The best by far in Niederhausen," according to Helmut Dönnhoff. He has such a bright future ahead of him.

Some notes on the vineyards:

NIEDERHAUSER 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.

NIEDERHAUSER 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.

NIEDERHAUSER 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:

Outstanding 2000s on the heels of great 1999s on the heels of celestial 1998s. These wines are must haves! THE rising star of the region! Still sensible prices!

how the wines taste:

They are spicy and then some! Taste one of these keen shimmery 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.

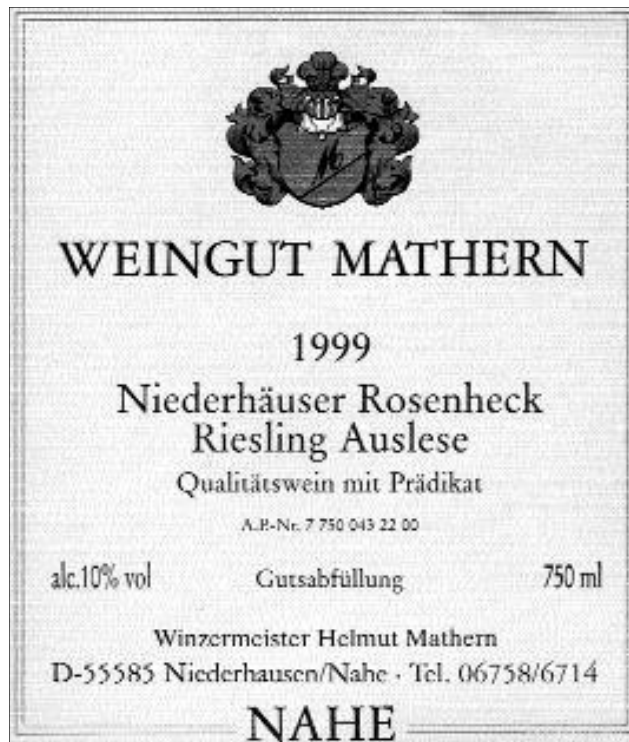
- GMA-40 **2000 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
 Oh this is delicious, a dear lyric poem of slate, winsomely mineral and almost salty; it’s gently dry, diligent and complex. Riesling seldom speaks so carefully or tenderly, or has such a lovely thing to say.
 SOS: 0 (now to eight years)
- GMA-42 **2000 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett**
 Has its usual flower-herb-mineral turbulence (violets, lichis, talc, papaya); like drinking liquefied irises; suave complex and studious; absolutely PERFECT food-wine, barely above halbtrocken. A wine for people who KNOW that baseball is the best sport.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)
- GMA-43 **2000 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Kabinett**
 Barely noticeable 45 grams per liter residual sugar, but a big fanfare of flavor that could pass for a Mosel Spätlese. Again the salty wash, and an undertow of mineral that seems to leach away the sweetness. Sheer delight!
 SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)
- GMA-36 **1999 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Spätlese**
 This is slate-among-orchids and rhododendrons here: at once minerally and perfumed and quite long. Lavender essence poured over hot stones. How many ways can I say it? Iris liqueur napped over an iron statue of a rutting poodle. There, that’s it. +
 SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)
- GMA-44 **2000 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**
 Unfolds an almost primordial complexity in a great sentence of flavor that begins nearly gamey, passes through purple flowers and ends on a swollen note of mineral before rising up into shimmers of spice. All the earth-secrets articulated as this eerie mosaic of flavor. What more can wine possibly do? +
 SOS: 2
- GMA-45 **2000 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**
 Different! Vibrant, extroverted, a chorus of wisteria singing its fragrance; spicy, mentholated cherries; 30% clean botrytis shows but doesn’t dominate, and the finish is a mad dog yelp of feral blossom and salt; you could melt it off and sell the residue as *Sel Gris*. +
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GMA-46 **2000 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Spätlese**
 This is a profound majesty of mineral now: less an exposition of flavor than an emergence of vast energy from vast chaos - a force having nothing to do with brute power but rather an inexorable complexity than swarms and melts over your palate. It’s almost unfathomable. You better be ready. ++
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2

GMA-37 **1999 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Auslese**

A pure slate-essence here - could be a big Auslese from Willi Schaefer: robust, juicy, appley, very long with no confected sweetness. It displays purplish wisteria notes and on the finish it's more an essence (as in some secret formula handed down over centuries by Carthusian monks) than a monument to slate. Thus a progression of flavor wherein the end-point isn't implied by the beginning. I dig that, daddy-o. Rasta be chuffed. +
(between five and seventeen years)

GMA-47h **1999 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**

A liqueur of soil. Can anyone taste such a wine and still deny terroir? An essence of this lavender-drenched violet-y soil-signature. Stupendously solid. No botrytis, only shriveled grapes; one of the GREAT Auslese of the 1999 vintage. Not remotely sugary. Nahe Riesling, dude! Best on earth. ++
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)



Ah, Hubert, he of the purple label . . . you know, his VW van he uses for deliveries is also painted purple, and when he gave me a copy of his very thick (and totally incomprehensible) doctoral dissertation I found to my delighted horror that it **also** had a purple cover. Why doesn't this man own an airline? Imagine, bright violet bratwursts soaring through the sky.

At first it was this deliciously weird Sherryized Silvaner that brought me to this address. Johann Lafer turned me onto it. Well, I still love that stuff but nobody bought any, so I dropped it from the portfolio. What I get from Gänz are a few reliable and bargain-priced wines, the occasional serious Riesling, and the isolated sticky. Last year the serious Rieslings started being more than just "occasional" - they were many and very serious, and I'm actually pretty PUMPED to offer this group of wines to you.



Gänz at a glance:

Value City!

how the wines taste:

They are clean and forthright above all. I do need to cherry-pick here, but when I find something it is usually incredibly well-priced.

- GGA-48 **2000 Guldentaler Apostelberg Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken**
Nose like Coho salmon; if not quite as riotously fruity as the 1999, this is still a racy, vigorous rosé. You could also really *neck* with this wine, 'n case you were wondering.
SOS: 0 (from now to three years)
- GGA-49 **2000 Guldentaler Honigberg Portugieser Rosé**
FRUIT, and how to achieve it, and what it tastes like, and why you should make out with it.
SOS: 1 (now to two years)
- GGA-50 **2000 Bretzenheimer Hofgut Scheurebe Kabinett**
A jolly, raucous Scheu, finely currant-y, jammed with all its zany flavors, brimming with charm; long for its size, more sage and less cotton-candy than usual. Useful, yummy wine.
SOS: 2 (from now to three years)
- GGA-51 **2000 Guldenthaler Sonnenberg Riesling Spätlese**
This has 52 grams per liter of residual sugar yet it's still piquant and minerally; polished red-currant nose; fruit-mineral palate; thick pulp of middle and quite a lash of acidity at the end; the initial echo of fructose quickly gives way to a stern, serious farewell.
SOS: 2 (between three and ten years)
- GGA-52h **2000 Guldentaler Sonnenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**
13 grams of acidity. It's true! It tastes like good Eiswein! Minty, feral, achingly pure nose; hyper-concentrate of jasmine; fire & ice palate, absolutely prototypical and lovely, every piece in place, even the celeriac and menthol on the finish.
SOS: 4 (between ten and twenty-five years)

kruger-rumpf

nahe • münster sarmsheim

I have always liked Stefan Rumpf's wines but until recently that feeling seldom penetrated below the level of admiration. They were (and remain) scrupulously **true**, but they used to be too phenolically gritty in texture for me to get the warm 'n fuzzies. Then three years ago Stefan began to consider this question for himself, largely because his colleagues were getting higher "scores" in the wine rags. Hey, whatever it takes! The 1996 series inaugurated an era of greater friendliness to sweetness and botrytis. 1997 continued the trend. With the minerally and dense ninety-eights

Stefan really turned the corner, and 1999 started to show a serene assurance close enough to tickle the feet of mastery. They were and remain among the most exciting wines from 1999.

These 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 nippyness. With a little more seductiveness of texture these could almost be erotic, they are so perfumed and bewitching. One also needs to remember how large this domain is; it's the largest in my German portfolio and getting larger. This is partly due to sheer opportunity. When the Nahe Staatsdomain fell upon hard times the first thing they wanted to do was jettison all their sites in the lower Nahe, as these were too far from HQ. Thus, good land, way cheap. Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our hero is about to make RHEINHESSEN WINES. "But it will take some time," he said, "because 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 over-cropped 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. And by the way, if you find yourself anywhere in the Rhineland you owe it to yourself to stop and eat at Cornelia Rumpf's new restaurant-Weinstube. It's a **really** pretty room and the food's just completely happy and pure; you're reminded again just how **wonderful** it is to

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

EAT. You know, I get my share of grand-cuisine meals in Europe, yet if I had just *one* chance to go back and eat just **one** dish again, I'd come here and have a double-helping of the Feldsalat. This is an incredibly sweet and tender green which we call mâche, or mouse ears or sometimes lamb's lettuce, and which is a specialty over here but which grows wild in the vineyards there. All you have to do is serve it plain and pure, dress it discreetly, and then it's the Platonic perfection of salad. I never enjoyed a plate of food more.

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.

The 2000 vintage here is correct but "small," which is better than incorrect and big, I promise you. It recalls 1991. He apologized for "only" having Kabinetts, to which I could only tut-tut. I want Kabinetts.

Kruger-Rumpf at a glance:

Up-and-comer the past few years, making more glamorous wines than ever before. Deft, appley and mineral-ly 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 KAPELLENBERGS are still apple-y and slatey, the DAUTENPFLANZERS 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-69 **2000 Scheurebe Kabinett (Dautenpflänzer)**
 The new Nahe vineyard classification has decreed that Scheurebe is too ignoble to allow a site-name if it should hail from a classified site. Good intentions. Head up its own ass. Suppose somebody, um, TASTES the wine. My quixotic campaign on behalf of Rumpf Scheu continues; this is catty and sagey - reminds me, actually, of Polz's Sauvignon Blanc from the Hochgrassnitzberg. I adore wines like this but I have a very dirty mind. The finish is herbal and long.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (now to four years)
- GKF-65 **2000 Münsterer Kapellenberg Riesling**
 This slatey vineyard gives super-Mosel flavors with just a leetle more body; this is a sassy little slate-imp; juicy, delicious, hugely appealing, gulp gulp gulp, like ice cold spring water. Every facet of great German wine is here in miniature.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (now to five years)
- GKF-66 **2000 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This site ought to be better-known. It's quartzite and loam in various permutations (recalls the Rheingau) and gives Riesling with a pronounced vanilla fragrance. The 1999 Kabinett from here was one of the best wines of the vintage. This has an explosively exotic fragrance, a gripping and vivid palate; solid, excellent, and real Kabinett.
 SOS: 2 (three to twelve years)
- GKF67 **2000 Münsterer Kapellenberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This is a distinctly "fruity" Kabinett with a slightly rustic phenolic touch; enormous charm, apple mineral and flowers and a beautifully spicy finish.
 SOS: 2 (three to twelve years)
- GKF68 **2000 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This is a more grown-up, deeper voicing of the Kapellenberg. The site is a gen-you-wine Grand Cru, slate and loam but it's slate that informs the flavor, and this is a fine rendition; genially dry and evenly poised and balanced, with terroir to the fore.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (four to fourteen)
- GKF52 **1998 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese**
 A quantity of this wine was held back for later release. It's a classic 1998; thick concentrated extract you have to **push** your palate through. The density of fruit and grip is amazing. Sheer class. Curranty, smoky finish.
 SOS: 2 (six to fifteen)
- GKF70 **1999 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese**
First offering. This has basically nothing to do with Nahe-Riesling, what it is, why I love it. Nor is it "the way" I like Auslese to taste. Yet if I abstract away from all the things I think *ought* to be, this is damnably interesting Riesling! It smells as much like whole-wheat toast as the usual fruit-flower-mineral melange. It's masculine and muscular, with an incipient honey emerging from its sturdy body. This honey informs the finish. It's bakey, almost brioche-y. It's essentially Big Riesling from great land, a kind of freak that's strangely engaging.
 SOS: 2 (three to ten years)

Peter Crusius is such a genial guy, always ready to laugh and kibbitz, that the almost theological complexities of his wines come as a shock. You expect the wines to have emerged from an ascetic or a Jesuit, not a guy you'd want to eat a few schnitzels and tell jokes with. It shows how unexceptional the whole terroir question actually is. Peter Crusius simply lives with a prosaic fact; his vineyards produce remarkable and noble flavors. That's his day-to-day world. It shouldn't be an *issue*, and it only becomes one when some defensive nimrod challenges it. In Peter's tasting room I can almost forget the existence of people who deny the truth of terroir. I join in the laughter. Then comes that first wine . . .

These wines very politely demand full concentration. I try to concentrate. The wines are like needlepoint on the palate. I am nearly overcome with joy that Riesling can *taste like this*. That wine can taste like this.

Crusius' wines are intensely *vinous*, conspicuously against the general fashion for reductive wines with brilliant primary fruit. It's fascinating to compare them to Dönnhoff. Though their vineyard holdings overlap in the Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg, I'd say Dönnhoff's wines lean toward the Saar while Crusius' lean toward the Rheingau; the latter has more iron, more mass, but less chiseled detail. Peter Crusius makes wines of great authority, but they're never solemn or huffy. Vineyard distinctions are crucial, but all the wines are generous and solid; they're full wines.

Peter harvests by hand alone and usually ferments with ambient yeasts in order to preserve *terroir*. The wines are racked early to keep them fresh. Crusius wants clarity, purity, ripe fruit and elegance. His wines are rarely slick or dashing. What can make them astounding is the nuance that inhabits that solidity. And such nuance derives from . . . you guessed it: the vineyards.

Prominent among these is one of the most extraordinary Riesling sites in the world: the see-it-to-believe-it vineyard called Traiser Bastei. Between Norheim and Bad Münster rise the highest cliffs in Europe north of the Alps. From across the valley it looks like a sheer wall of stone, but driving beneath it you see the most gothically sharp towers and chimneys; you might almost be on the *moon*. The stone is pure porphyry, and the few feet of crumbling detritus at the foot of the spires make up the Bastei. It's steep, mostly terraced, faces due south and is a heat-trap, with the sun beating down from the rocks onto the vines. It's a tiny site, just three owners. "From the standpoint of microclimate, inclination and age of the vines it's surely our best site," says Peter. It is, however, too small to permit flexible harvesting. It can produce one of the singular great Rieslings on earth. "It's often so smoky and spicy

- Vineyard area: 13.5 hectares
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Top sites: Traiser Bastei and Rotenfels, Schlossböckelheimer Felsensteyer, Norheimer Kirschheck
- Soil types: Volcanic and weathered slate, gravelly loam
- Grape varieties: 70% Riesling, 15% Weissburgunder, 5% each of Müller-Thurgau and Spätburgunder, 5% other varieties

that it's barely a characteristic Riesling at all," says Peter. I'd say it's one of white wine's great winged messengers, always scarce, precious, and welcome. The moment you taste it for the first time you *know* your understanding of white wine has been extended. It's so scarce I don't always have one to show you.

The other great site is the aforementioned Felsenberg; the wines are more elegant and queenly. "We have a larger holding there and can harvest it more selectively," says Peter. Finally there are excellent holdings in the Traiser Rotenfels ("racy and typical Rieslings," says Peter.) and in the lovely Niederhäuser Felsensteyer.

I found it telling that Peter indicates a preference for Wachau Rieslings; his own wines seem to echo the Wachau's fulminant minerality and amplitude. Crusius had no part of the acidity-fetish of the 1980s and early 1990s. The wines have as much acidity as is *good for them*, but this house doesn't preen over components.

Dr. Crusius at a glance:

Aristocratic, venerable Nahe estate producing searching, complex wines from a remarkable collection of vineyards. Pure terroir expression here - almost the anti-fruit! Wonderful quality the past two vintages

how the wines taste:

Especially winey; they're exotic and mysterious and they rarely taste explicitly of primary fruit. They're weighty for Nahe wines, and full of perfume. They are sometimes reflective, as though they are considering some soil-essence and wanted to share their musings with your palate. They can be caressingly fragrant and evocative. What do they evoke? Taste and see.

- GCR-13 **1999 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett**
Lemon and soursop aromas; grainy, a little soft, and a minerally red-beet mid-palate. Works on the dry side and is long for its softness. Like frost-sweetened root veggies. Perfect in its way.
SOS: 1 (between two and six years)

- GCR-17 **2000 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Spätlese**
Sleek piquant nose of peony and jasmine; the palate is silvery, lunar, amazing detail, a whispery soprano of fruit poised over glowing little icicles of mineral. Hint of cherry blossom. +
SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)

- GCR-18 **1999 Traiser Rotenfels Riesling Auslese**
Hedge-flowers, oleander and mimosa-blossom: this is Nahe Riesling! The palate is like chewing potpourri. Not even nearly a dessert wine. Full, extract-corpulent and exotic. +
SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen years)

- GCR-19 **1998 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Auslese**
First offering. There are two great 1998 Auslesen. I wish y'all weren't so scardey-cat about "Auslese" or I'd offer them both. This is a FOOD WINE - "Our customers are people who like to drink wine," says Peter - no chasing those 90-point flavors here. The spice, complexity and sheer gulp-downness of this shimmering porphyry wine are testament enough to the glory of Riesling. +
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)



jakob schneider

nahe • niederhausen

It is all changed. Hans Schneider, the legend, the *Patron* of this remarkable estate, passed away three years ago just as this catalog was in production. He 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."

A few years ago I began to notice the influence of Schneider's son in the winery. Papa started to retreat into the background, becoming more of an entertaining anachronism. This was a good thing; it modernized the wines and made it simpler to do business with the estate. Yet Hans remained, and will long remain, the spiritual compass for this family and their wines.

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.

The Europeans themselves rarely talk about it. You know the great saying, "Whoever discovered water, it certainly wasn't a fish." These people *live these principles from the inside*; they don't even know they are principles, they are tolerantly perplexed at being found exemplary. They'd find it inconceivable that a man could feel his soil existed to serve *him*. They are stewards of their soils for their brief sojourns on this planet, and they know in their bones that those soils contain dark and ancient truths beyond our "knowing."

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

- 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 varieties

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 as 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. The 1998, 1997 tandem made for the best ever offering from this winery. 1999 and 2000 needed more selectivity.

how the wines taste:

This differs from site to site. The wines are less mealy and more vigorous than they once were, without tasting in the least “modern.” They clearly hail from GREAT vineyards. They are faithful to those vineyards. They are incomparably aromatic. The 1998s are superb.

- GJS-44L **1999 Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
 This is a blend of two **Grand Crus**: Kirschheck and Klamm, and even on the heels of the splendid 1998, this has the goods. Perhaps even more mineral now, though with an exquisite blossomy perfume; lovely juicy-stony body. LISTEN UP: to get Riesling of this breed at this price is punishable by fine, imprisonment or both in most counties. **Do not miss this wine!**
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (now to three years)
- GJS-45 **2000 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett**
 Steepest site on the Nahe, a Grand Cru, porphyry, loam and rotliegend. The wine smells like peaches and roses. It is utterly *delightful*, beaming and pretty, but with the thick extract-concentration of the 2000 vintage.
 SOS: 2 (between three and ten years)
- GJS-40 **1998 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**
 Riper, more assertive, suave and complicated; tropical fruit and apple-blossom fragrances; the palate is bright, lilted and **thick** with material. Searching finish. Wonderful wine. We like 1998! This wine continues to consolidate its complexity and improves from month to month.
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GJS-46 **1998 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Auslese**
 Spicy and peachy, with the 1998 firmness and also its slightly grassy undertow; a “food” Auslese with lots of zaft and a pleasing angularity.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between six and fifteen years)



rheinhessen wines



Oh lament the poor Rheinhessen; if there ever were a place with an image problem, this is the one. I must say all my pity for the underdog is roused by this region. It is absolutely perfect for aimless meandering. 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 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.

Notwithstanding my romantic fantasies, all is far from well here. Nobody can make a living selling simple bulk wine any more, and the economic backbone for the region has been shattered. The emergence of the new generation mitigates here as elsewhere, (and the Keller estate is drawing positive attention to the area with its sexy wines) but 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 just be possible that, after all, *great* wines aren't written into most of this land, no matter how diligently a vintner tries to extract them. And it may be that the production of merely (if wholly and soul-satisfyingly) GOOD wine just isn't good enough. Just speculating. I do know that prices remain perilously low throughout the Rheinhessen, even in the isolated peak-

anywhere in Germany. Even the Pfalz has become too exposed; the growers know the value of their wines and the market's willing to pay it. Rheinhessen is still a buyer's market, happy for us in the short term, *if* the growers can survive. Second, to seek out the few die-hards and bring them (and their marvelous wines) to your attention. My world would be a far less pleasant place but for Mr. Wittmann's Albalongas. In fact Wittmann alone stands as a kind of beacon of hope; he's getting prices he deserves, tilling his land uncompromisingly, willing to experiment, able and willing to restrict yields, making a go of it and making exciting wines besides. In common with all my Rheinhessen vintners, he is determined to make **better** wine than the region should rightfully give.

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

areas of Nierstein, Oppenheim, Nackenheim and Bingen (who tried and failed to establish a separate identity for themselves). Indeed, the relative lack of really first-class estates in a place with as much good land as Nierstein bears sad witness to the disincentives for idealists to flourish here.

What, then, is the Rheinhessen's purpose for us? There are several. First, to give us excellent wine where we can find it and at the most favorable prices we can pay



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. Flex 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:

- GST-87L 2000 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett
- GGY-35L 2000 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken
- GDR-86L 2000 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett
- GMS-67L 2000 Herbert Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken
- GMS-72L 2000 Herbert Messmer Dornfelder
- GTM-55L 2000 Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken
- GTM-56L 2000 Theo Minges Riesling
- GJS-44L 1999 Jakob Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett
- GOD-40L 2000 Claus Odernheimer "Rheingau Riesling"

Walter Strub seems to have been an angry bear through most of this young year. His wife Margit tells me he is hard to live with at such times. There is a way that Walter wants his wines to be. He directs all his year's work toward making such wines. As bucolic as we sometimes imagine the life-of-the-vines to be, in reality it is sometimes a struggle *against* nature. I happen to know that Walter likes very racy, squeaky-clean fruit and I imagined his pique at the botrytis-ridden 2000s. But I'm also confident that he'll find a way to prevail; he always does.

Still, I was not prepared for how astounding these wines turned out to be. I did a quick-and-dirty on them the day I arrived but they'd just been filtered and weren't showing their best. A few days later we "worked" on them, did the dosage-blends. The finished wines were by far the

best I'd tasted up to that point. At the end of the month I ran through them again, to confirm my impression. The wines are spectacular, easily Strub's best since 1996 and among the most exciting collections I can offer from the 2000 crop. I told Walter, again and again. I think he was glad to hear it but too shy to let on. Perhaps Margit stroked his cheek one night and murmured "See, I told you the wines would turn out all right." And perhaps Walter answered "Yes, I guess so."

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" in beating the odds and making wonderful 2000s, 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 pil-

Walter asked me once if I thought he was doing the right thing with his whole-cluster pressing. I said yes, I did, but if he had doubts he could maybe experiment with *one wine* next time, and see how it turned out. As it turned out, whole-cluster pressing was indispensable in the dubious 2000 vintage, if you wanted to remove any taint of

- 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 and chalk
- Grape varieties: 68% Riesling, 15% of each Müller-Thurgau and Silvaner, 2% other varieties including Grüner Veltliner!

grim 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 fertilizes organically, and 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. 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 in such wines, 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 HIPPING 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.

After a recent trip to Austria, where I set Strubs up with a few of my chums, Walter came back buzzing about Grüner Veltliner, which he claims "was traditional in Rheinhessen in the 19th century" before being superceded by the plebian Silvaner. The happy upshot of all this is we now have *Strub GrüVe* to look forward to in a few years. Hats off to the man who'll try anything!

Walter cares as deeply as any man I have ever known, but he doesn't wear it on his sleeve and you have to intuit it from his actions. His nature is unvaryingly generous, decent and modest. It would hardly occur to him to crow over his own wines even if he *did* happen to love them. Though I know he *does* love them, for he is gentle and attentive to them, even the orphans, even the homely ones.

The remaining 1999s are winsome and detailed for that vintage, but we all recognized the 2000s were a level better, so Walter graciously reduced prices on the 1999s to reflect their relative quality. With a small crop in 2000 this was unexpected, but typical.

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. I'll go out on a limb now, but I think some of the credit for this has to go to Walter's wife Margit. I can see her reading this for the first time and saying, "What is he talking about now?!" But I see something in her steady genial temperament, her superb competence (she runs the shipping operation by which about half of my German wines get to me), her mischievous sense of humor, and the particular friendly bond she fashions with her husband, and I know what a marriage like that can mean in the work that each of them does. Walter couldn't make the wines he makes if not for Margit, and sitting at their table watching the way they crack each other *up* is one of the sweeter joys of my life.

When I land in Germany in early March the first place I go is to Strub's courtyard, all jet-lagged and excited and glad to see my friends again. Four weeks later, all the wines tasted, all the jokes told, all the meals eaten (and all the pants let out), the last place I stand before climbing into the car for the final drive to the airport is Strub's courtyard. We don't manage to see much of each other, somehow. Things seem to sweep me up. I was desperately homesick but it was still too early to be leaving. I never seemed to do the things I most *needed* to do, never seemed to be where I *should* be. I can't do it in a month any more; I need three. I need a month just to hang out with my friends. Karen Odessa flew over halfway through and the evening she flew her connecting flight was cancelled. Big stress. She might make it or might not. I sat with Strubs and waited for her call. When it came in the news was uncertain. I drove to the airport hotel where I'd reserved a room to be near her early-morning landing. In my room I was stricken with remorse. I didn't know why, but I needed to call Walter. When he answered I updated him and thanked him for taking *care* of me while I fretted. "Oh, you don't have to say that," he said.

But I do. It is just those things, not needing to be said, which have to be. I am blessed in my friend.

Strub at a glance:

Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to "read" and understand. A truly stunning group of 2000s!

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-87L 2000 Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
 This was a complex blend; wanna hear it? 40% Brückchen (tank 15), 30% Brückchen (tank 13) and 30% Paterberg (tank 16), most of which was at or above Spätlese ripeness. This is the BEST bottling of a perennial favorite, and you should be *ashamed* of yourself for getting so much wine for so little money. If anything, even more aroma than the wonderful 1999 had; a fervid chalky nose, racy yet with thick upholstery of fruit; a wine which drives down every byway, cul de sac and digression on your palate; firm and incredibly lingering for a “little” wine. Damnably good. Act fast as there’s 30% less than in 1999 and we sold that one out pronto.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (now to ten years)
- GST-76 1999 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This was offered to wine.com last year, which is why it’s still available this year! It’s the roundest and juiciest of the 1999 Kabinetts here: appley-jasmine nose; the palate’s like the juicy interior of a nice crusty pork chop; the finish lingers and grows smoky and peachy.
 SOS: 2 (now to four years)
- GST-83 2000 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**
GST-83h 2000 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml
 (Tank 12). This is ridiculously good wine. Lemon and mirabelle, corn and chalk with a tangy lemony length; it’s juicy and taut, with an almost mango-y finish. Forceful and convincing. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)
- GST-84 2000 Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Kabinett**
 Greengagey (same as mirabelle but I was tired of repeating the word!), almost slatey nose. We’re letting this be piquant to let the mineral show. At 25 grams per liter sweetness it’s as good as dry. Smoky-peachy, and the sweet mineral grimace adds logorhythms of complexity; with the 2000 firmness you have a slinky little vixen that just won’t quit. Limitless interest here and limitless application. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between three and eleven years)
- GST-79 1999 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Spätlese**
 My favorite of the base wines, and a very classy and filigree wine in *any* vintage; great clarity, and although it’s riper it’s still limber and feline; the innate earthiness of the site anchors and subsumes the sweetness. Re-tasted a few days after it was bottled and I liked it even more. “Hacksaw” Bill Mayer agreed with me, but I had him in a Boston Crab at the time and he didn’t have much choice.
 (between two and eight years)
- GST-81 1999 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**
 This was fermented with a yeast culture Walter got from Willi Bründlmayer; from the site that gave the astonishing 3-star 1998; the soil’s a chalky mix rather like the best Brückchen; penetrating lime-grass fragrance; piquant shimmer on the palate; keen spicy finish.
 (now to six years)
- GST-86 2000 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**
 Yow! TOTALLY zingy and racy and quite similar to the 1998; it has splendid tart-berry and grassy tang, juniper-smoky. What a collection of wines! This is racy to within an inch of its life, and these wines are on your palate longer than you can (almost!) bear to experience them. +
 SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)
- GST-85 2000 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Spätlese**
 A chunky, thick-mouthed Riesling; fine vanilla-bean fragrance; thick as wide-whale corduroy, incipient mineral woven into a thick chromatic chord of . . . what? Not “fruit” exactly. Maybe just WINE. It’s an elegant mass of wine, an utterly splendid.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! +
 SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)

brüder dr. becker

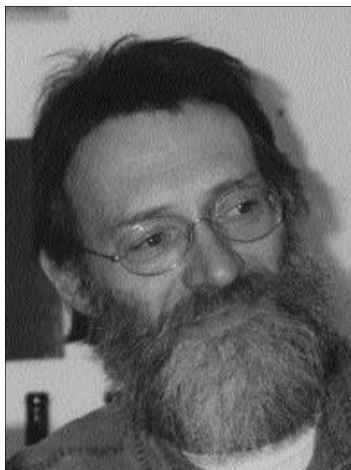
rheinhessen • ludwigshöhe

There's a picture I just love. The book is called *Winzerportraits*, and it's a rather "deluxe" collection of vintner profiles published in a magazine called *Feinschmecker*, which means gourmet, except that the Germans also have use of the word "gourmet" and OH, DON'T ASK ME TO EXPLAIN! Anyway, it's the coffee-table book defined, this thing, and most of the photographs are poses of renowned vintners in their Sunday best, the weight of all their forbears resting lightly but solemnly on their noble shoulders, as they sit on the sofa that Charlegmagne spat up on as an infant; you get the picture. Poor Helmut Dönnhoff, who ended up on the cover, told me that it took them an *entire day* to get the shot. So anyway, you're flipping pages and looking at people whose haircuts cost more than your *car* and suddenly there's Lotte Pfeffer **on her tractor**,

shading her eyes, happily and schmutzily at work in the vineyards. *That's* the scoop on Brüder Dr. Becker!

Lotte Pfeffer is a hearty, radiant woman with absolutely no artifice in her nature. She appears to have spent nine years at wine school because everybody you talk to seems to remember her. She wouldn't know how to fuss or preen, this one. Hans is her hubby and they have two grubby-faced little heathens loping around the house. Tilmann looks like the hero of a Hesse novel, with his hauntingly melancholy face. You'd do anything to make him smile! And when he does his whole face is transformed. Papa has an electric visage and a huge shock of tan beard; he looks like his own Ralph Steadman caricature. I imagine Hans and Lotte looking like the token hippies at the Mainzer Weinbörse.

Lotte took control of the estate from her father. To hear him describe it, the transfer was accompanied by



much fervent prayer to preserve the estate from cosmic nemesis. Lotte had begun a strictly organic regimen and was determined to see it through. Well, the deity cut them some slack: not only are the vineyards in generally good shape, but the wines are better than ever. Most of you know the

attributes of organic viticulture by now; soils are fertilized with grasses and clovers. Pests are eradicated (one hopes) by importing their natural predators. Once the wine is in the cellar it's given *time* to make itself. "We let time see to clarification and fining," says Lotte. "We don't like to agitate the wine." Scheurebe is aged in tank to preserve its primary grape aromas, but Riesling spends time in old

- Vineyard area: 10.5 hectares
- Annual production: 5,900 cases
- Top sites: Dienheimer Tafelstein, Ludwigshöher Teufelskopf
- Soil types: Loess, loam
- Grape varieties: 38% Riesling, 18% each of Silvaner and Scheurebe, 10% Spätburgunder, 7% Grau- and Weissburgunder, 6% Müller-Thurgau, 3% other varieties

cask to round-out and complexify its bouquet, after four weeks on its primary lees. It is rarely bottled before May of the following year.

If "organic" is a sales aid, sure I'll take it, but the wines have to convince before the story convinces. Lotte isn't willing to insist that organic wines are *better* wines; she merely feels a responsibility to her little slice of earth, to leave it better than she found it. We actually had a lengthy chinwag about this issue. At what point, I wondered, did the needs of the *wine* precede the application of the organic treatment? Hans said: "It's the wrong way to ask the question. If you're going to do it you can't only do it when it's convenient. It's not a 'treatment' as such, you see. It's a philosophy."

Brüder Dr. Becker at a glance:

Organic winery through and through, not just “no herbicides, pesticides or chemical fertilizers.” Makers of the best Scheurebe in the Rheinhessen. A stony-minerally style of wine. Exceptionally food-friendly wines. The mildew-ridden vintage 2000 was unkind to this all-organic winery but there is a good assortment nevertheless.

how the wines taste:

They are as slim and rarefied as a Giacometti statue, and just as keenly purposive and expressive. They start with stone and add citrusy fruit if it's Riesling and cassis-like herbal fruit if it's Scheurebe. They are superbly stylish, in the way that really good clothes always look simple and effortless. They're taut, snappy wines with sinew and fabric, line-drive hitters rather than sluggers. They don't make waves in tastings; they just taste good. You get to the end of the bottle much too soon. They cry out for food. They are the way Riesling is SUPPOSED to taste when it's grown at home where it belongs. The fruit-bomb, mawkish Rieslings of most of the New World compare to these as a made-for-TV movie compares to a great novel. The dry words on the plain white page only look boring - until you start to read them . . . Warm, wet years are taxing to the organic producer, and Pferrer's local microclimates don't favor quick dispersal of humidity. Most of the 2000s were botrytisey, nor could I look to the 1999s for relief. But the queer paradox of modern German taste away from balance and harmony in Riesling actually means the best of the 1998s are still available; they sell s-l-o-w over there. Lucky us. These are genuine Riesling pinnacles.

- GBK-32 **2000 Dienheimer Falkenberg Riesling Kabinett**
Botrytis to be sure (Lotte says less than 10%), plus aromas of fresia, stone, hyacinth, woodruff, currant - and botrytis. Palate is lively, not so much pointed as a dispersal of mineral and herb in rivulets of flavor rather than a central current. Bright, shimmering finish.
SOS: 1 (now to two years)
- GBK-27 **1998 Dienheimer Kreuz Riesling Spätlese**
A new encounter with this lovely wine (it was just filtered when I saw it from cask last year; this wine lives in the place where northern European whites are more alike than they are different; this is like the still young Chardonnays from Milan or Gimonnet: jasmine and apple - only the nip of lime says Riesling; it works drier than the Kabinett (though it isn't) and has a redcurranty and piquant finish.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between six and seventeen years)
- GBK-34h **1998 Dienheimer Tafelstein Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
First offering Potpourri, grain, currant, an evocative nose; pithy crunchy wine, tastes halbtrocken; recalls Boxler's Sommerberg 1998; terrific dynamic spicy Riesling.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)
- GBK-31h **1999 Dienheimer Tafelstein Scheurebe Auslese, 12/500ml**
121 degrees Oechsle. This was picked ten days after the harvest was otherwise complete. “We'd long since sent everyone home,” said Lotte. “Our son Tillmann had been tasting a range of old sweet wines from my father's time, and he insisted ‘If you want ME to take over this winery you'd better start making these kinds of wines NOW!’” Lots of botrytis from this 28-year old vineyard. It's a high water mark. For Scheu at this address, the cassis essence; spicy, tangy-piquant, a lashing slice of fruit sizzles across the palate; wicked and erotic. Frickin' Kama Sutra in a glass! LIMITED! +
SOS: 2 (now to six years)
- GBK-35 **1999 SEKT Scheurebe Extra Trocken**
Think you've seen it all? You tell me how many importers can offer you organic Sparkling Scheurebe! It's got this totally improbable elderflower flavor over the Scheu currant and the house-style stoniness. I'm not offering all that much Sekt any more, since I started my Estate-Champagne project, but this amazing bubbly deserves its day in the sun. Can you think outside the box? Step right up. The jazzy 1998 version is drier (15 grams per liter) than the 1996 vintage was, but it is even more fervently varietal.

günter wittmann

rheinhessen • westhofen

This year we tasted in the warehouse. We arrived on time, but an English journalist was running late. Germany was swarming with wine writers following the Pro Wein fair in Düsseldorf (random bits of tasting notes could be seen fluttering in the trees. It was really quite depressing). Well, we don't mind a bit of company, I said to Frau Wittmann, and we know how to behave. But no. This simply would not do. The little tin god needed the entire tasting room all to his imperial self. So we were shunted back to the warehouse, which I didn't mind, because there was a stainless steel sink and you could get a really good THWACK! when you spat into it. I live for these things. I caught a glimpse of the woman from the German Wine Institute who was hauling the twit around, and she shrugged apologetically and I shrugged sympathetically. From now on I

carry a boom-box set to play the Monty Python theme music. Man has to learn from experience.

Another good thing happened: Wittmann was hailed as "Aufsteiger Des Jahres" by *Gault-Millau*, which has an almost Parker-like influence in Germany. An Aufsteiger is one who has Ascended, who has attained a new higher level. I was quite pleased for Wittmanns, and only a little smug that I'd been saying for five years that the estate belonged in the top rank.

Last Summer my group and I sat out in the Wittmanns' garden near the frog pond (they were noisy) in almost tropical heat tasting the 1999s, which had improved since I'd tasted them a few months earlier. I had some concerns about the 2000s, given the mildew problems and Wittmanns being organic, but Günter told me: "There was a small window to pick in 2000; too early and the grapes weren't physiologically ripe, too late and they were rotten." He was able to leave the wines on their gross lees until the end of February, which is only possible with spanking-clean fruit. And these were among the most exciting Rieslings I tasted from the 2000 vintage.



- 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

But, sadly, there's VERY little of them. You will want to act fast, and believe me, you want these wines!

Wittmann belongs to an association of organic farmers. He wanted, he said, to "give my son a healthy soil for his inheritance. We don't make wines organically because they're easier to sell, but because we think it makes better wine." He's 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. 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.

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 ALBALONGA grape. Remarkably outstanding 2000s!

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-63 **1999 Wittmann Halbtrocken**
 Bordeaux bottle. Wittmanns make this wine every year, from an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink blend, but this is the best vintage in 5 years. Compare it to your favorite Viognier (if you *have* one), although this has a grassy facet to balance its floweriness. The palate is vigorous, muscular and spicy. Who will be hip enough to buy this beauty at a lower price than many Mosel QbAs? Maybe *you*?
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (now to three years)
- GGW-64 **2000 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Spätlese**
 This is absolutely ravishing wine. And it is so bloody long you have a full fifteen minutes to groove on how ravishing it is. Exotic aromas, guava, rainier cherries, Asian pear; the palate is so vigorous, spicy and voluptuous; many-layered, transforming, elevating, wondrous. VERY LIMITED! ++
 SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen year)
- GGW-65 **2000 Westhofener Aulerde Riesling Spätlese**
 Wittmanns like this one even more, based on its price, but I wasn't sure it was as GREAT a masterpiece as the Morstein. I am, however, happy to be proven wrong! This one's all lilac, peony, more lissome and curvy, a refinement of fragrance in Nigl territory; winsome mineral, great salty-mineral wash on the sides of the tongue, less overt but more insinuating, and a shimmering finish, as though a tuning fork were struck inside your senses. VERY LIMITED! +
 SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen years)
- GGW-66h **2000 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
 "If I make Auslese, it has to be perfect. I don't believe in 'small Auslese,'" says Wittmann. I'll say! I won't note palate-specifics as it's a pre-filtration sample. It has tremendous density and richness and probably less than 2% body fat. Wish I could say the same. VERY LIMITED!
 SOS: 3 (between six and eighteen years)
- GGW-57h **1999 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
 115 Oechsle now. This recalls the twin giants 1989 and 1994, and it's as lavish and capacious as Auslese ever GETS; enormous peach aroma; lovely fundament of fruit, finish like roses; withal generous and meaty. A rare 1999 that feels like it has a core. Just miraculous. After many hundreds of wines these past four weeks, this is one of the ones I couldn't wait to taste again. And every time I did I remained convinced it's one of the top few wines of the 1999 vintage, and better than a "bigger" Auslese tasted at its side. +
 SOS: 3 (between four and thirteen years)

GGW-67h 1999 Westhofener Steingrube Albalonga TBA, 12/375ml

There are people who think my affection for this variety borders on the perverse. I'd rather call it "kinky!" 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. Various Wittmann stickies over the years have been celestial, and this one just sort of slithers there making lewd and dirty faces at you. It's a big juicy spicy monster. Varietal fruit runs to a kind a fierce cherry and acids are high, and while fragrances are blatant they are never less than fine. Among my little coven-o-wackos there's a modest vogue for this vinous trollop. This won't disappoint you, warlocks. SOS: 4 (between five and twenty years)

GGW-59h 1999 Westhofener Morstein Riesling TBA, 12/375ml

175 Oechsle with 10 grams per liter acidity. I liked this better than either of the two Beerenausleses, though to be fair they've just been filtered, but I know martially crude botrytis when I taste it, filter or no filter. This monster here is an invading army of power, nothing like the ethereal 1997 but rather a monumental flourish of fruit. SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-five years)



merz

rheinhessen • ockenheim

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. Theirs is an oasis of sweetness in our world, and they are people for whom you can feel the deepest affection. 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-style, which you'll have noticed if you've tasted the wines.

They taste as though they're barrel-fermented, with the meanness 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 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 ferment in an old-fashioned way, one you seldom see anymore. They have pressurized fermentation tanks, and the wines ferment under a blanket of carbon dioxide. The 1992 harvest was generous and all the grapes seemed to ripen at the same time, so Karl ran out of space in his fermenters and had to put one lot of Riesling in an ordinary tank. In the cellar I picked it out immediately as missing the house note. Then I heard the reason, and the light bulb went on over my head! So now I know the cause-effect equation, but I still don't know *how* it all happens, what fermentation byproduct creates this oak-like character and satiny feel. But I don't actually care; I ain't no geek oenologist.

These are nourishing people to be around, and it's nourishing to hear them talk about their wines, too.

"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. As mentioned before, no Süssreserve. "We think Süssreserve 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

- 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 and Chardonnay, 13% other varieties

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 Süssreserve as a matter of temperament.

What I glean from all this is that wine must be respected, not fussed over but handled tactfully, even discreetly. There's a lot of tenderness and affection in this household, and a great deal of wit and laughter. "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 how he relates to his dog, see it all, hear it all, taste it all, touch it all, now the wine becomes a BEING; it is now **Karl's wine**. Think of what you learn about a friend or lover after the first time you meet his/her parents. It's like that.

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. The breadth and power of the 1999 vintage, which warped many Rieslings into unusual shapes, was ideal for this grower. Also inter-

esting, he "allowed" a couple of "sweet" wines to be made. I think they wanted something they could keep for awhile. 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 at a glance:

idioms. Gentle in price!

One-of-a-kind wines, with a woody-mealy flavor very rarely found in German wines. Particularly successful in the drier

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-42 2000 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Trocken

As if Hockenmühle alone weren't a hoot to cluck out, we have not merely Ockenheimer Hockenmühle but a Trocken Ockenheimer Hockenmühle - hey, we're talkin' **Trocken Ockenheimer** . . . you get the picture. This was my favorite among the 2000s, a vintage somewhat at odds with Merz's typical "thing:" bright, maizey nose, even a little like the Vitis cold-pressed grapeseed oil. The palate is snappy and appley and makes me think of a buckwheat crepe stuffed with sauteed oyster mushrooms.
SOS: -1 (now to three years)

GMZ-44 1999 Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling Spätlese Trocken

First offering. This is quite stylish with a fine quality of fruit, a lovely rich consommé of fragrance, fine internal sweetness on the palate, and just a little stern on the finish; wants a chicken and some 'taters!
SOS: 0 (now to four years)

GMZ-40 1999 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese

Corn fritters and vanilla beans, firm and chalky and barely obtruded upon by the ninety-nine roughness. It's charming and essentially dry, though with its white-corn sweet-ripe generosity. Oddly almost Champagne-like, as if a very ripe Blanc de Blancs had gone flat but still tasted great! This is really exceptional wine you shouldn't miss. 9.1 grams of acidity (!!!) in a low-acid year, and crying out for a place of honor at the table. +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (now to six years)

GMZ-37 1998 Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling Auslese

Wines and their phases, sheesh. I offered this two years ago, deleted it last year when the wine was in an adolescent funk and now I'm offering it again because it's just wonderful. It has 32 grams of residual sugar, and is a glossy ripe Riesling; it has the 1998 nose (green even when it's ripe) but on the palate it's slinky, limey, herbal, racy and stylish. Has an almost Veltliner-ish soursop note. Finishes very long and all the green-veggie flavors are gone. Now, it's pure white corn. +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between two and 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. He's really too simple a soul to fit in with the august overlords at the VDP, who are trying to give him the heave in any case (I imagine his prices embarrass them, plus the inconvenience of his making better wine than many of his trendier colleagues). 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.

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

(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.

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. There's good stuff in these here hills.

And prices remain almost embarrassingly low. It is odd; one ferry ride over the Rhine, less than a mile as the crow flies, and 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!



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! Each year I see a few wines in the cellar that I gather our man has simply not gotten around to. Sometimes they're shot, other times they're superb for the extra aging. But there's no systematic method, except to work clean and reduce the Süsreserve when I come around.

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 Rudesheimer Berg

Ohler at a glance:

Value value value. Charming, fruity, uncomplicated, easy-to-like wines at ludicrous prices. As he always seems to do in high-acid years, he's made splendid 2000s, including my first-ever "starred" wine from here.

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 vintage such as 2000 they soar above their class.

GOH-40 2000 Binger Schlossberg-Schwätzerchen Scheurebe Kabinett

It was an odd vintage for Scheu in general. Usually it likes a zingy high-acid year but it ripens seven to ten days before Riesling and this wasn't ideal in the September clam-mies; this, therefore, is one of the few great Scheu success stories. It shows the catty sagey side-o-Scheu and it tastes like sage leaves fried in butter with lime zest. Deft and interesting.

SOS: 2 (now to three years)

GOH-41 2000 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Kabinett

This could be the best wine Ohler has ever made. Whew! Elegant and pretty, a Juliette Binoche of a wine; not just peaches but roses and tropical fruit; rarely seen dialectic, interplay and filigree; wonderful grip, yinyang of fruit and mineral. STYLISH. Be smart and buy the bejeezus out of it. +

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

GOH-42 2000 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 thirty-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 just a touch less fine, a jot more voluminous, a scintilla less polished than the Kabinett, but the basic material of this vintage does these wines a **power** of good, that dense, thick core of extract.

SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

GOH-38 1999 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese

This was outstandingly superior to anything else on the table of 1999s. In fact a healthy non-botrytis Auslese with incredible fragrances of roasted corn, papaya and violets - tres exotique. The palate, of course, follows; a hedonistic wash of tropical perfumes, overripe plantain. This is certainly no aristocrat but *what* flavors!

(between three and seven years)



christian-wilhelm bernhard

rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

Hartmut 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.

It was pure luck that brought me here to this quiet corner and this sweet, tender family. I saw the Bernhards listed in a book of DLG prize winners with a label shot showing an Auxerrois. I like this variety, and you don't see much of it, and you almost never see it unblended.

It's thought to be a genetic mutation of Pinot Blanc; the two marry well in the typical Alsatian blend. Auxerrois all alone is rather like a minerally Traminer with an incense-y note all its own. The Germans rarely grow it; Baden is its most frequent home. Bernhard's is a 52 year-old vineyard on porphyry soil - it's VIEILLE VIGNES time again. You know "Vieille Vignes," it's French for "Raize Ze Price."

The Bernhards are out of the way, just over the hill from Bad Kreuznach and the Nahe Valley. Frei-Laubersheim is in the hillier section of Rheinhessen (they call it "Rhinehessen's Switzerland," which is a hoot). 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 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.

I went looking for my Auxerrois but was delighted to see Bernhard's frequent success with Riesling and Scheurebe. It's a father-and-son team, though Father retreats

from the picture a little more each year. Hartmut's a shy



- 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% other varieties

young 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! Nature sometimes intervenes, as you'll see below. Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had only 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, but it was soul-satisfying to be able to compliment them warmly about their 2000s. This is a sleeper-agency in my portfolio. Anyone looking for plain sheer flavor should start building that addition onto your store to lay these bad boys in.

Bernhard at a glance:

if you like them full-throttle! Steadily improving quality as the son consolidates his "regime." My largest offering from this estate as 2000 was excellent.

Jam-packed flavor bombs from clay soils, tangy-complex wines from volcanic soils. Great success with Scheurebe

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-40 **1999 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**
 Last year's tasting note said "A big, juicy Scheu monster. Actually that's too restrained. A GIBBERING, MANIC SCHEU **BANSHEE** if you want to know the truth. Psychedelic mandarins out the wazoo; a cymbal-crash of aroma and flavor: resplendent, juicy and passionate. Endless tangy finish. Nobody made better Scheu than this in 1999" and that's how it WAS on that March day one year ago. The wine is still lovely but it has undergone quite a change and is more mannerly and spiffy than it was in its savage youth. A shy Scheu.
 SOS: 2 (now to five years)
- GCB-46 **2000 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**
 Tank 11. Here again we have that spicy monster nose. Sage, currant; paper-cut sharp; juicy; a fennelly and dense palate with a fine chalky-mineral mid-palate; extremely long and persistent finish. More *pronounced* and dryer-feeling than the fruit-driven 1999. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**
 SOS: 1 (now to four years)
- GCB-42 **2000 Frei-Laubsheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 You will need this wine to moisten your parched throat after you finish saying its name. On the other hand, full-throttle porphyry-driven flavors are nothing to sniff at. This was all done in steel, and whew! It has a wonderful fragrance. A minerally mealy palate with the salty wash of 2000 at the end; fine balance and a long tangy finish. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**
 SOS: 0 (now to five years)
- GCB-43 **2000 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This is one of those wines that makes you feel "I really don't need anything above Kabinett to be perfectly happy." It has 35 grams per liter of its own residual sugar and it's the best Riesling I've tasted from here; subtle notes of currant, freesia and jasmine; the palate is firm, compact (9.5 grams per liter acidity) and lavishly juicy. With an immense and deliberate finish. Delight in five acts! +
 SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)
- GCB-44 **2000 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**
 If the Kabinett is like chicken this is like turkey: broader and more robust, which you really see mid-palate in the low notes; more currant and pork-cracklings; flavory and meaty and tropical and way-solid-GOOD.
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GCB-45 **1999 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**
 I really thought this was the 1998: it's so curvy, flowery and winsome. Ordinarily I wouldn't offer this for fear it would be redundant alongside the 2000, but the wine compels me: jasmine, orange, melon, peach, but it's all discreet, even piquant. A remarkable achievement!
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GCB-38 **1999 Frei-Laubsheimer Fels Auxerois Spätlese Halbtrocken**
 Done in steel. I was completely surprised by this. Bernard's Auxerois can be schnappsy in hot vintages, but he seems to have learned the secret of taming it; this is sleek and piquant, with polish and elegance. Like a Parma ham in liquid form. Very pretty central core of flavor that lingers into an almost salty finish. Well done!
SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (now to three years)

gernot gysler

rheinhessen • weinheim

Two years ago, Gysler was among several estates I opted not to visit in order to save road-weariness. I confess, I don't have *quite* the stamina I used to (but with *what* finesse do I make up for it!) and there are a few estates I really needn't visit personally each year, as long as I can taste the wines in mint condition.

Then a few weeks before flying I got a fax from Alexander Gysler, son of Gernot, asking if I couldn't possibly make time for a stop-off in Weinheim. His father was ailing and he would assume sole responsibility for the wines now, and he wanted to pick my brains about various paths he might take.

Of course I went to see him. What an odd mixture of emotions it was. Gernot was terminally ill (and would in fact die several weeks later) and I was fond of Gernot, and had been distressed to see him as diminished as he was the year before. His wife and son were either terribly stoic or terribly correct; the Germans find it unseemly to air their private griefs to any but intimates. But I was aware of the hovering sorrows, juxtaposed with a really *exciting* group of wines about which Alexander was justly proud. I was also distracted by one of the most striking dogs I think I have ever seen, a great obsidian patriarch who sat outside a glass door and glared at us with wounded dignity.

Gysler's is a classic example of the advent of a new generation. "My father liked soft wines," says Alexander, "and they were good of their type, but I want to change



things." Among his changes are: grass in every second row (instead of every), renewal of composting, beginning of experiments with whole-cluster pressing and fermentation with cultured yeasts. He uses much less dosage, much less pumping. Alexander will continue to do more work in the vineyard and replant with classic varieties (Gernot never

- 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

met a weird new crossing he was unwilling to grow, bless his soul). With 12 hectares, Alexander has his work cut out. Luckily the youth is so TALL he needs 35% fewer strides just to get around.

Alexander has thrown away the separator, and he's bottling the wines cold. He wanted to know what I needed. "More of things like *these!*" I said.

The maiden-voyage vintage of 1998 has had a stormy adolescence. It was quite superb from cask but after bottling the wines entered a constricted reductive phase from which they're only now emerging. Alexander's learning. A son whose father dies abruptly is terribly exposed, On The Spot. I think this is a winery to watch, especially if the lovely (and unusual) ninety-nines were any sort of harbinger.

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! Eye-opening 1998s and remarkable 1999s augured wonderful things to come. 2000 was a challenge, occasionally risen to!

how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now. Alexander will do good things. His will be a “classified” estate within three years, mark my words!

GGY-35L **2000 Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

The 1999 vintage was the best in years, maybe ever, and I doubt if any importer offered you more class and better value - nobody. How wonderful to report this one's every bit as good! The story: it's 75% one tank with only its own residual sugar (30% of which was whole-cluster pressed . . . following me?), and 25% another tank in which dosage was used. It follows the amazing line of the 1999 - this is exciting “jug” wine, gang. Sleek, streamlined and vivid; bright, with none of the common or earthy flavors of ordinary Silvaner; this is tangy, salty, complex and delightful, better than RIESLING from an ordinary grower. **No smart order should exclude this!**
SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to four years)

GGY-36 **2000 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

This shows some botrytis. Cherry-smoky nose, like a Nahe wine. Only its own residual sugar. Tangy, curranty, racy, snappy and beaming, a sort of darling of a wine. It will VAMOOSE pronto, Tonto, so don't delay.

SOS: 2 (between one and five years)

GGY-34h **1999 Weinheimer Kapellenberg Huxelrebe BA, 12/500ml**

This fermented till February. They often get it just right, this variety: fine nose of vanilla, mango and foie gras fat; palate is thick yet zingy, many rivulets of flavor. Not a high-acid wine, yet still fine. **For foie gras or desserts**, it's a Sommelier Alert.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 4 (now to ten years)

GGY-30h **1997 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml**

A December 17th harvest, the last wine harvested by Gernot before the surgery from which he shall not recover. A gentle Eiswein (8.5 grams acidity with 140-odd grams residual sugar) but pure and true. Not too sugary, but a dear and lovely essence. Finely spicy. You get to see the flavors of real Eiswein and not ruin your teeth.

SOS: 4 (between eight and eighteen years)



mittelrhein wines



The Mittelrhein loses thirty-five hectares a year, as growers abandon the vineyards from which they once eked out a living. Yet the Mittelrhein has also been “discovered.” Serious estates can prosper and get a quality of attention commensurate with their achievements. But the hard truths of economy will not support the marginal. And apart from general tourism, the region seems eerily quiet. As you drive along the majestic Rhine gorge and look at large patches of abandoned vineyards, you just know the people who might have worked those terraces are sitting behind desks in Mainz or Koblenz. I can’t blame them, but those hillsides are good for nothing except viticulture, and wine is inextricably woven into the regional “feel.” It is melancholy to notice the missing piece. So listen up, people: get out of those comfy offices and onto the steep slopes to break your backs so we don’t have to feel wistful! I mean, come on.

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 encountered 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.

At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . .

“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 castle 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, but 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.

toni jost

mittelrhein • bacharach

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.

This gives new meaning to the term "being on a roll," but then Jost has been rolling along for a lot of years now. When Linde came over to the States in 1995 she felt some reluctance to

raid the cellar for older vintages "because our wines have improved so much in the past few years." Indeed they are so delicious when young that one forgets their potential to develop; a 1993 Kabinett we drank with lunch in 1997 was as beautiful as Kabinett - as *Riesling* - could ever be.

It's worth considering why, and I think it has to do with fruit and fructose. Different Rieslings age successfully in various ways, but wines like Jost's start out with fruit complexity that 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 anyway 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.

- 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

The winery is right on the main drag through the almost painfully lovely town of Bacharach. The town has its share of gawkers yet Jost's place remains unaffectedly old-world. 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, are calm and shining. Peter's wines are seldom ostentatious or gaudy. But *what* polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous but never overbearing, underpinned with slatey filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb. I've learned to expect fine things here. Peter's been emphasizing lees-contact the past few vintages and now the wines have a further dimension of stylishness.

There's a school of thought that says Peter's wine are sometimes too play-it-safe; and that even more mineral dimension and expressiveness might be theirs if he'd taken a few gonzo risks with them. I sympathize with that opinion, but could only endorse it if I wanted all great German wines to be great in precisely the same way. I too have wondered why Peter's wines aren't explicitly slatier. But usually I am overcome with even greater wonder at their particular fruit, which is incomparable. As is the special polish with which it's expressed. That polish is quite intentional. 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 ferment technically clean with the cultured yeasts, we can use a third less sulfur.”

Jost was among the last of my visits this year, and I’d heard all the horror stories of the 2000 vintage by then. “Do you need to hear about the vintage or are your ears full of it?” I was often asked. Peter’s wines surprised me through the magisterial Spätlese, and I’m willing to suggest these may be his best since the great 1993s. The riper wines were working through the vintage-botrytis and I don’t know how they’ll come out.

Jost at a glance:

Primo estate with impeccable reputation for top-flight Rieslings. Wines emphasize beauty of fruit rather than mineral. 2000 features one true masterpiece and steady solid quality among the lighter wines.

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-42 2000 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

It’s rare to see the underlying Hahn mineral up so close; redcurranty fragrance (common to many 2000s), racy, delineated fruit; long and balanced. A bit of phenolic chewiness is attractive as a seasoning. Suave useful wine.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to six years)

GTJ-43 2000 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett

GTJ-43h 2000 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml

This might be Peter’s best Kabinett since the supernal 1993 - so silky and mosaically pieced together. Elegant and dreamy, until the wonderfully firm, salty finish. Painstakingly articulate Riesling, as if it needed to be *sure* you understood.

SOS: 2 (between three and eight years)

GTJ-44 2000 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Spätlese

A truly noble Riesling nose of nectarine, plantains, currant, lees, mineral and sweet corn. The palate is sensational; it has fabulous fruit and, man, these minerals taste like an ASTEROID fell into the vat. Extraordinary verve and force. One of the Great Wines of the vintage. ++

SOS: 2 (between four and ten years)



florian weingart

mittelrhein • boppard-spay

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. This 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.

Seeing a vintner once a year is like a time-lapse picture. This year Florian had somehow filled out, and looked more like *Le Patron*. He's really catapulted his estate to the summit of the Mittelrhein in his three years at the helm. A leading wine-pundit placed him on par with Jost. We talked a lot about the vicissitudes of the 2000 harvest and Florian was candid about the degree to which he coped. "The right things we usually do were exactly the wrong things to do in 2000," he said. His collection was emblematic for the vintage: what was good was *really* good, and the rest were, let's say, questionable. Other tasters might enjoy the degree of botrytis in these wines (less onerous here than many other places), but what is most important is this young man's instinctive sense of *gen-uineness*. I wonder if it's because I'm older (oh god, I *hope* not) but Florian has never shown a molecule of affect with me. He isn't uncertain or pseudo-humble, but he isn't "selling"; he's a colleague going over his attainments with a fellow colleague. Oh, I like it.

I brought my June 1999 group to Weingart but Florian was in Wiesbaden receiving the Federal Prize of Honor for his wines and we were fêted by Adolf and Helga like in the old days. 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 tal-

ented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

Indeed, I find myself wondering why some children are moved to take over their family's wineries and others are not. I think it has to do with the life led by the father; if he is whole and fulfilled, if he loves his work and makes wines with joy and love *in* them, he maybe sets an example of a realized human life that kisses the heart of the

- 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 varieties

child. Imagine yourself with me as I visit a place like Weingart. There's dad, proud of his young son's ascension, his energy, idealism, his manhood. He is also *relieved*, for the winery will carry on and his work will be handed down to a caring spirit. Sure the new generation will make some changes - that's the energy of youth. And now imagine the son, eager to make his own way but also eager to impress the father, to assure him his trust was well placed. How delicately he must poise the respect he feels toward his father with the changes and improvements he wants to make. And then I arrive, a customer of long standing, and he walks that sleek little line between effacing himself out of respect to his father and asserting himself in all his youthful pride and vim. It's a human drama commonplace enough, I suppose, but one I find quite moving.

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 physio-

logically 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 rising star on the Mittelrhein with the advent of young Florian Weingart at the helm. Great success among the "lesser" 2000s. Incredible 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-53 2000 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

Long enough name for ya, stud? The wine, too, has a complicated fragrance: apricot, apple and a hint of botrytis. The palate is juicy and mirabelle-like and the botrytis is well integrated, dispersed through all the fruit-flesh. The finish is salty and juicy.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to three years)

GAW-54 2000 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

This is wonderful. Cox-orange apple and lemon soda - even a hint of VA adds to the complexity; the palate is just full-bore yummy; lemon brulee, zippy but not sharp and with a fine tangy-salty finish. +

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to four years)

GAW-55 2000 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett

Every botrytis-berry was selected out, and every different tree in the orchard just blossoms at once in the glass; the purity in the mouth is remarkable! That, plus super-clean fruit and dense salty mineral - a Weingart paradigm. The finish is more complex than most other wines. LIMITED! +

SOS: 2 (between three and eight years)



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 Alsations 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, even at its most dry. One might have small aesthetic cavils with

I love this region, truly I do. I was among the first to proclaim it Germany's most *happening* wine region.

this wine or that, but the *formula* is basically sound. It is just the opposite in the Pfalz. There are successful, even superbly 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.

Thus we have the amazingly talented Ernie Loosen, who's made so many masterpieces at his Mosel estate, falling prey to the specious logic which claims that because Pfalz Rieslings are riper, have more body and more alcohol than Mosel wines, they are better suited to being dry. It makes perfect sense *until you start tasting*.

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. Sadly though, the great and wonderful Scheurebe has been lumped together with a *genre* of vine to which it is manifestly superior, and there's less Scheu every year. I'm not sure I see the logic of yanking out potentially great Scheurebe in order to grow mediocre Pinot Blanc. But logical perversity is the wisdom of the day. All I can say is, be still my Haardt.

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 little 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 the 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 the backwaters. Nobody knows why, but the Pfalz is home to the thriving community of idiot-fringe experiments 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 generos-

ity and elegance; no other wine is at once so expansive and so classy. The ideal 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 wines - and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

From this point the ways diverge. In what other

The wines have a great affinity for food - certainly the most versatile of all German wines - and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

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

WHY DOES PLACE-SPECIFICITY MATTER?

Last September 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.

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 that all this is significant because we are in fact connected (even if we deny it or are unaware), and if we wish to 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.

Big chalk cliffs on a walk in Champagne. I'd been tasting five days and needed a walk to shake out the bubbles. I had one of those accumulated-finish tastes in my mouth that you get when you've been tasting one type of wine for many days. It was September, a week or so till harvest. A little fissure in the hills through which I walked revealed the cliffs, a chalk so white it shrank my retinas. I had a little walking-daydream in which I remembered a producer of California sparkling wine telling me years ago, "You know, we have the exact-same degree-days they have in Epernay," and he was very proud of this, as it showed he had studied the question, done his due diligence, and found the perfect spot to grow grapes for sparkling wine.

I had a totally Hacksaw-Terry-These moment; in my fantasy I took the hapless chap by the face and pressed him right up against the chalk... "But ya don't have this, do ya buster!" I cried, mashing his pitiful face against the powdery rock. "It's the SOIL, stupid!" I added. "Now go clean yourself up."

I calmed down later in the day. Happens eventually! I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating how calm the countryside of Champagne is. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene

countryside. 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.

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? Romantic notions aside, 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 who are 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! OK, here goes, hold onto your hats, it seems to say.

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-makeup 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. It you think it’s only a romance, then your head’s in the sand. Examine why you resist this idea; it will prove useful. 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 other place, only here, 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 the 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.

The best winery in Germany just keeps getting better.

It is certainly the winery of the vintage in 2000. It has never sweated quite such blood to produce a vintage, but the results aren't merely good, or even excellent; they are *sublime*.

There's "competition" now, with the renaissance in quality among the so-called 3-Bs (Buhl, Bassermann, Bürklin), though there's no reasonable disputing Müller-Catoir's place alone at the summit in the Pfalz. And does it matter? I would argue that Müller-Catoir and its legendary cellar-master Hans-Günter Schwarz are indeed *responsible* for the explosion of excellence in the Pfalz. Catoir has **set the standard**. HERE IS WHAT CAN BE DONE. Somebody else do it too!

There is a quality about Hans-Günter Schwarz, something of the bewildered angel, which gets below the skin of everyone who meets him. He is gregarious but fundamentally introverted. In common with the estate's proprietor Heinrich Catoir, Schwarz would just as soon lead a retiring life making his wines. There is little interest in *making the scene*. You won't find them at VIN-EXPO. This gives the winery something of the *mien* of a secular monastery - a self-contained world in which vines are tended and wine made with mystic dedication.

If you don't start with a stoic temperament as a vintner, you acquire one quickly enough. Catoir and Schwarz wrote-off six hectares to hail in 1999. "In all my years here I can't recall such a storm," said Schwarz. Catoir added: "It wasn't only the ferocity of it, but the *size*. Normally hail is isolated to a small area, but this monster was twenty kilometers long and six kilometers wide. We did everything we could to resuscitate the vines, but in the end we knew it was a write-off."

The 2000 vintage was as difficult here as it was everywhere else; *more* so to hear it told. Hans-Günter has such an intimate relationship with his vines I wasn't surprised



to hear tales of his acute distress as the crop began to spoil. My friend is the poster child for Glass-Half-Full-dom! But more than one person told me they had "never seen

- 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

Hans-Günter so dejected," and one mutual friend spoke of a late-night call during which our hero just *unloaded* for nearly an hour about how miserable it all was.

But fast-forward to March 2001. We've heard all the stories and felt for our friends. Hans-Günter said, "The positive aspect of this vintage was *social*. Our pickers, most of whom are neighbors and friends who don't even expect to be paid, could easily have said you deal with this mess, I'm outa here but instead we had such an *esprit de corps*. At the end we said look what WE did, what we accomplished - not me, we." To produce these wines cost an almost deranged insistence in utterly remorseless selection. There were more than *sixty* passes through the vineyards. Everything was hand-inspected before it was accepted, and the "acceptable" fruit was again inspected before going into the press. "We set up a very slow-moving conveyor-belt," Hans-Günter told me, "and my assistant and I stood there with every single bunch, looking at them from every angle, sniffing them in case there was any taint we couldn't see." Believe me, this was *not* the vintage Hans-Günter needed; his year got off to a somber start. Yet he found, somehow, a way to prevail. These angelic wines are some kind of proof that angels' wisdom is

beyond our knowing.

So many of us affect a stoic temperament as a means of avoiding experience. But Hans-Günter is *anchored* to reality - years of tending vines have perhaps attuned him to the more deliberate rhythms of the world. When I taste with Hans-Günter, he talks about his wines and the harvests which produced them in a way that tethers them to something huge and continual. We tend to think of wine as *ephemeral*. For Hans-Günter, individual wines may be ephemeral: wine is eternal. And the loyalty he feels for his vineyards expresses an eternal truth of *tending*, of caring for the earth. This, he seems to say, is our human business, to care as best we can for this world we have been given.

The “reward” for that caring can be tasted in the wines, which respond with pure, celestial flavors. The greater reward, though, is the leading of a fulfilled and integrated life. I long to do the same.

“I am delighted with every good glass of wine, wherever it comes from, my own cellar or someone else’s. And I am distressed with any bad glass of wine because I know what it might have been if the raw material had been respected,” says Hans-Günter. That is Müller-Catoir in a nutshell. These are wines that **respect the raw material**. One wonders if anyone has ever approached the windy summits on which this winery frequently stands. Müller-Catoir’s wines are unique. No other wines attain such a lofty common denominator of clarity, intensity, polish, and elegance. **NO** other wines.

They first came to me in 1980. I gathered some friends to run through the mixed case I’d been sent. Well, there was no *running* through these wines. Every single one of them was a heart-stopper, from the smallest Kabinett to the grandest TBA. They left your soul shaking, and your mind groping. Later I found these sentiments echoed elsewhere. A writer used the phrase “every bottle is an experience,” and Stuart Pigott describes the frustration of confronting a wine that had “almost more depth, fruit, extract and nuances of flavor than the senses can take in.” Oh, I think the *senses* can take it in; that isn’t the problem. The wine RUSHES AT YOU SO FAST AND WITH SUCH A MULTIPLICITY OF NUANCES THAT THE BRAIN CANNOT ORGANIZE THE FRANTIC JUMBLE OF SIGNALS THE SENSES ARE SENDING. That’s when you just have to laugh (or cry) or spend an hour with the wine painstakingly delineating each flavor and threading them into the whole.

I am starting to understand how this all happens. There are two gentlemen responsible. The first is the estate’s owner, Mr. Heinrich Catoir. He is the youngest of nine children, from a family which made its living (and a handsome living, I’m told) in the fine leather business. Mama Catoir was a strong-willed matriarch who ruled with an iron hand. It was “decided” that Heinrich would eventually run the winery, though his own wishes appear not to have been consulted. We now find him at viticultural school, where he meets and befriends a young man from the village of Gleisweiler in the southern Pfalz. His name is Hans-Günter Schwarz. The two talk as students do, and some of the ideas they exchange sound appealing-

ly radical and dangerous. Catoir persuades his mother to hire Schwarz as cellarmaster. Perhaps the wine-thing will be fun after all. But Mrs. Catoir has a habit of replacing cellarmasters every ten years, to prevent them from making themselves too much at home! Schwarz is in his seventh year when young Heinrich arrives to assume management of the estate. Mama is still in the background pulling the strings, however, and in three years she expects Schwarz to be dismissed. She does not reckon on a sudden stubborn streak in her hitherto docile Heinrich. Schwarz stays on.

During Hans-Günter Schwarz’s own apprenticeship, he spent a year at the Stumpf-Fitz Annaberg estate in Kallstadt, which was famous a generation ago for its Scheurebe. Schwarz learned to know and love this variety, taking it with him to Müller-Catoir. Now he is making the best Scheurebe in Germany. But we are ahead of ourselves.

The spirit of those days was technological. When young Hans-Günter emerged from viticultural school, the postwar economical miracle had given the Germans a sense of pride in their technological accomplishments. There was no question that modern grape breeding could



give novel varieties that would ripen each vintage. The newest clones of Riesling would produce huge yields without sacrificing quality. The latest machinery would take every risk out of vinification. Hans-Günter Schwarz came along determined to *smash* this icon of technology.

“We understand winemaking this way,” he says. “You watch over, you guide, you preserve, but you *never alter*. We place the highest emphasis on the inner material of the wine; this means that our wines experience no clarification or fining. We have never, in all my years here, had a wine that needed it. If you take care in the vineyards and during the harvest you can bring in healthy, high-acid fruit which clarifies itself. The first racking from the yeast in the *only* handling of the wine until bottling. The reasons: to preserve the natural freshness of the wine, to allow the particular varietal aromas and flavors to express themselves, and to use the minimum SO₂.”

There’s more: extremely late harvesting, often into December. This means a naturally cold fermentation, with natural yeasts of course. No de-acidification: “Acidity is the *fundament* of fruit and must not be lost,” says Schwarz. There is no second racking. The wines are bottled sur-lie, giving most of them a fine, natural spritziness. There’s virtually

no wood-aging, except in very cold vintages when the wines are too acid-stubborn to take a fully reductive handling. Süßreserve *could* be used, (though it's well over ten years since it was) "provided it is very ripe, at least 90 degrees Oechsle, of the same variety as the base wine, and that it is made and kept by the cold-sterile method. No heating, no sorbic acid, no killer-yeasts."

"Every time you handle a wine you take something out of it which you can never put back . . . we want to make wines which are **incomparable** in fragrance, flavor and varietal expression. As long as I'm responsible for what goes on in these vineyards and this cellar, there will be no compromises."

If Schwarz were American, we'd be subjecting him to all sorts of hype and accolades: A MAGICIAN or A WIZARD IN THE CELLAR. *Nothing* could be further from the truth. Hans-Günter Schwarz is a decent man who loves his work, who has found his calling, who is whole and fulfilled. His touch is not magical: it is *healing*, like that of a good doctor (Or a good masseur, for that matter). Everything he does expresses a core life value: love your work and let that love *show* in the work.

How does love show in the work of making wines? Corrie was sitting to my right this year, making her first visit to Müller-Catoir. As wine followed wine she grew very still. She rose abruptly from the table at one point and walked over to the window. I knew she was weeping. I'd stood at that very window with my eyes streaming. It isn't only the accumulation of beauty that's so moving, but the sense of its binding in human enterprise. As one work of loveliness follows another we sense the guidance of a loving heart. And then we go through that portal and into the mystery. We are not who we thought we were.

Hans-Günter loves grapes. As more vintners adopt his cellar methods it grows ever more apparent that Schwarz distinguishes himself most of all as a **grape grower**. Apprentices who've worked with him will tell you: "It's incredible! NOBODY grows better grapes or harvests more selectively than Schwarz." He wants his wines to be as vividly grapey as they can be. He appreciates winier wines, but says, "This is our way here at this winery. We think German wine is unique in this capability, and we want to bring it to its full potential."

Every one of Catoir's wines will give you an *intensity of specific* varietality such as you have never seen. To call them "generous" isn't enough. The wines seem to BURST, as if they can barely *contain* themselves. You realize what you *miss* in other wines: these seem *realer* than reality. It is *all you can do* to meet them. The concentration you need to apprehend their intensity and complexity is more than you summon for everyday experience. You realize how deeply you can go. The experience is akin to an uncanny harmony of opposites, at once sensually ecstatic and emotionally meditative.

Finally it is not merely the clarity, complexity and intensity of these wines which makes us love them so. Something must exist at a deeper level than mere excitement, and it does. In the best of these there is a quality of tenderness and refinement that finally melts our hearts.

One year before we sat down to taste we took a walk into Hans-Günter's new dream-project. "There's a beautiful parcel of 3.5 hectares directly across the street from the winery which we've been eyeing for years," he said. "Two years ago when it came up for lease we made sure to outbid everyone just to be certain we'd get it. We probably paid too much for it, but Terry, I tell you, this is among the absolute best vineyards in the Pfalz. No other vineyard, not Forster Kirchenstück, nothing in Deidesheim or anyplace else, is any better than this." As we walked through the vineyard I began to see why. It is surrounded on three sides by walls and buildings - in fact we laughingly named it "Clos du Bürgergarten" - giving it both protection from wind and a heat-island radiance of warmth. The exposure is due south; it will receive fourteen hours of sunlight on a sunny Summer day. The soil is "perfect."

It is striking how close the 1999 Rieslings came to the greatest-of-all-time 1998. Growing conditions were quite different, and the wines are structurally disparate. But they were *essentially* similar; scrupulously focused, fruit at an apex of refinement, flavors painted with a fine brush. Speaking with Catoir and Schwarz one senses they are aware of having ascended to another level - Catoir speaks of "refinement" in this context. Hans-Günter has never been more fastidious in the vineyard. But I have an intuition the "causes" of this ascension aren't quite so tangible. Something spiritually mysterious is taking place in these wines.

Hans-Günter would listen tolerantly to my ravings even though I can't imagine he'd agree. But what the hell, I'll say it. I think my friend is nearing sixty, and he's had a hard time of it lately. The past two years have been hard. The wines show a singleness of purpose now. There is no time for frills. They are almost mystically focused on attaining the clear expression of the truth of the soil and the grape. They show a soul in command of its purpose. They are not only full of beauty, but also of *meaning*.

* * *

As some of you know, this is a restricted offering. That's why many of you have never seen it. I used to send it out separately to certain customers to express my gratitude for their loyalty. I'm still grateful! But it has occurred to me that I have Schaefer, Dönnhoff, Christoffel among others within this offering even though I'm forced to allocate their wines. It is perhaps unjust to Catoir's *legacy* to exclude this story from the book. But there still isn't enough wine to offer to everyone.

There is seldom a second chance at these. The 2000s, many though they are, give us just 470 cases for the lower-48 plus Hawaii. The winery allocates also. Sometimes other customers don't buy as much as was planned, and I get another crack, but you can't depend on it.

I'm disgusted that there could possibly be sticker-shock at Catoir's prices. This estate belongs with the ELITE white wine producers on earth: the great Burgundy domains, the great Alsations, the great Austrian—you name it. AND AMONG THOSE PRODUCERS, CATOIR

IS THE **LEAST EXPENSIVE!** This would seem to create a sales **opportunity**: “The best value in the world for absolutely stellar white wine,” or something along those lines. People are paying **much** more than this for wines that *aren't this good*. It's frankly baffling.

Maybe it's partly a German label thing—the “What??? \$18 for a KABINETT???” syndrome. And if such a wine doesn't have 96-point scores floating around all over the place it could well be a hard commodity to sell. *But only if one is limited to selling commodities.*

This is a winery in which virtually every wine is a masterpiece. I am trying to confine my offering to only

those wines most useful to you. I leave a lot of gems behind. Go ahead, pull a cork and get turned on by wine again! Maybe you'll feel as I do: **people have to know these wines, to see the possibilities of wine! Hard sell? FUGEDDABOUTIT!**

Thus, a small change in the rules: we will take open orders for Müller-Catoir until two weeks before the final deadline, (July 11). This means you can place orders for Müller-Catoir until June 27th. We will confirm what we CAN when the dust settles. If this system is too messy we'll return to allocating next year.

So, here they are.



GMC-038 2000 Neustadter Mönchgarten Weissburgunder Kabinett Trocken

Each year I am given some of the loveliest Pinot Blanc on earth to taste here, and each year I triage them out so that I can get more Riesling, Scheu and Rieslaner. This year's example was so remarkable I first thought we'd gone directly to Riesling. Here, sensational flowery nose, like impeccable scallops and orange-blossom and a splendid chalky-minerally “sweetness.” This stunning Pinot has dual citizenship with Riesling: class, complexity, depth, and so tasty you want to **lick** it as much as drink it! + **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

SOS: 0 (now to three years)

GMC-033 1999 Spätburgunder

In the early days Hans-Günter tried to make Pinot Noir as though it were white wine. Impressive as those early efforts were, they didn't quite work. The current “regime” for Pinot Noir is about 60% second-year barrique and 40% new, malo in cuve. The past several vintages have been various degrees of fascinating, but this 1999 heralds a new era of possibility for this grape in Germany. This isn't only their best, it is the best Pinot Noir ever made in Germany. Yields of 30 hectoliters per hectare (reduced by hail), “but one basket more beautiful than the next,” said Hans-Günter. It has a color of deep crimson and a gorgeous, complex perfume of tobacco, damson, violet and spice-box. Lovely cut and richness here and an endless finish. Intense and cling-y but not heavy. Superlative Pinot Noir. +

GMC-029 **2000 Haardter Herrenletten Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

The world's greatest white grape actually lived in the shadow of the Scheurebe and Rieslaner here, but the new vineyard changed that. Here, it's the notorious Neustadt Clone 90, which, in tandem with Schwarz's ultra-reductive handling, gives Rieslings with the most powerful citricity and tropical fruits of any on earth. Recent vintages have displayed a searching minerality, making these as intricate as any Rieslings in existence. I cannot explain why the dry wines work so well! Somehow, they do. This one, from the lighter soil of this site of which I am inordinately fond - that cool chalky complexity - this beauty, is the very emblem of Müller-Catoir; laser delineation, celestial beauty of fruit and a thoughtful articulation of mineral; ravishing finish. +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (now to eight years)

GMC-030 **2000 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

A welcome return to the production of the Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten - fallow from Flurbereinigung - in whose sandy soil Schwarz prefers the Geisenheim clones of Riesling. An almost a garrigue note on the nose, and HAH! - get this - they have in fact herbs planted between the vines. This is Riesling at an apex of its mineral-herbal complexity.
SOS: -1 (now to four years)

GMC-031 **2000 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Kabinett**

This wine had a curious effect on me, one which I've never before experienced. I was, literally, frozen by emotion. "I sit here, loveliness courses through me like waves, or tears of joy - and I want to write what I'm tasting but the pen won't move," I wrote. Taste again. The heart seems to dilate, to receive the beauty. The nose is the **culmination** of blossom. The palate is the fruits of Eden. The finish is a symphony of mineral. I am a very happy man. +
SOS: 1 (between four and twelve years)

GMC-032 **2000 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Kabinett**

I don't imagine I've ever given my "3-stars" to a Kabinett wine before, but! This reminded me of the greatest renditions of Nigl's Hochäcker; the wine is ungodly. It has the complexity and the surreal intricacy of Dönnhoff's great Spätlesen. It has a fiendishly gorgeous tug-of-war between its fruit and herbal elements. It is like lilacs grown in gold. And, it's yours. +++
SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GMC-037h **1999 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**

A lurid mass of botrytisey Riesling aromas, unusually voluptuous and incredibly spicy. Almost pornographic; not that there's anything wrong with that. It's one of the great sweet wines of the 1999 vintage. It was the last wine we tasted and yours truly was well-wrung out. I started to wonder what was happening to me. It was a kind of wide-awake trance. I find a certain quality of soul when I'm here, as if I had to somehow squeeze my soul into a smaller, more golden place. How else do I take in wine after wine, each more achingly beautiful than anything I've ever experienced? I grow smaller and denser, like lead, and silence thickens around me. +
SOS: 4 (between twelve and twenty-eight years)

GMC-034 **2000 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese**

Hans-Günter Schwarz is the *arch-mage* of Scheu, possessing all its wizardly mysteries, able to conjure the gods with it. His Scheurebe is unsentimental and powerful, replete with esoteric secrets, deadly sharp and cunning. But oh, you haven't lived til you've died *this* little death. This rendition recalls the 1993: passion fruit and currant and a hint of botrytis. It's as sleek as a cheetah, very long and it's a dissertation of Scheu: archetypal and simply amazing. How can it have this much cut with such endless, peeling length? +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (now to eight years)

GMC-039 2000 Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller

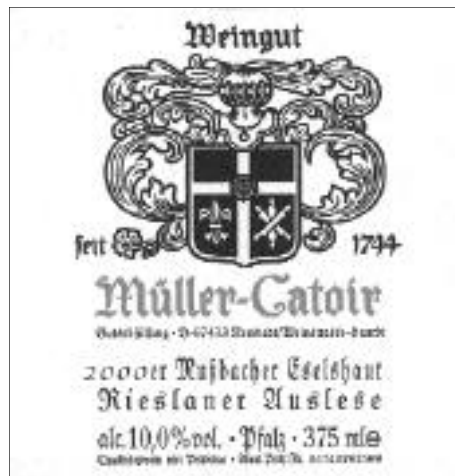
Müller-Catoir makes the best Muscat in Germany, though one has one's eyes on young Minges! The two styles are disparate: Minges is more stabbingly varietal, Catoir's is more herbal and mineral. In fact I'd put the best of these alongside the VERY best there is; that is, Boxler's Brand, Zind-Humbrecht's Goldert, Sorg, Rolly Gassmann. This is another of those varieties one only grows if one's a bit of a nut. It's a fiend in the vineyard and some years it barely yields, but keep your eye on the prize: when it works, watch out! This is a wee little QbA with 83 degrees Oechsle (i.e., a perfectly ripe Kabinett). "We wanted a monument, a big Spätlese," said Hans-Günter, "but we went into the vineyard and saw here and there a bit of botrytis, a bit of mold, and we looked at each other and said, 'tomorrow!'" The wine is, simply, PERFECT. A hot-weather gulper of shimmering clarity and glorious steely cut.
SOS: -1 (now to four years)

GMC-035 2000 Mussbacher Eselshaut 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 anywhere else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Schwarz *loves* 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. In Schwarz's hands it produces 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. "One of the nicest things about a Rieslaner," says Schwarz, "is that the berries will shrivel and dry out *without* any fungus. Our very best Beerenauslesen are from such fruit." ANY RIESLANER FROM THIS ESTATE IS WORTH YOUR UTMOST ATTENTION AND CONSIDERATION. Consider the amazing collection of wines from this estate from this grape over the last ten years, surely one of the great testaments to greatness of any wines on earth. And with new plantings Schwarz wants to increase to 20% Rieslaner within a few years. This Rieslaner is a wine of mystery, theology, even faith; it's an arcane complexity that's articulated so carefully that finally, you see, the blade of intensity, the pillow of fruit, the molten intricacy. But don't worry, if you miss it the first time you have TWENTY MINUTES OF FINISH in which to think about it. +++
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)

GMC-036h 2000 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml

If a touch less etched and chiseled, there's a WHAM! of flavor, of pure ripeness and rapture, and when you think it's a little less enthralling than the Spätlese, it ambushes you with its massive, savage spicy beauty. ++
SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty years)



koehler-ruprecht

pfalz • kallstadt

PFALZ WINES

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. The 2000s were mostly still fermenting last month. By the time they're finished and bottled this catalog will be gathering dust in your back room. By next March the wines will be growing scarce. 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.

After all the commotion over Bernd's legendary dog, I make haste to inquire after the lil' fella's wellbeing upon my arrival. I get an exegesis on the animal's every habit, thought and digestive function. "Oh, he's getting fat, the little bastard," said Bernd. "It doesn't help that I

feed him everything. He eats better than I do." Evidently Bernd took his little friend to dine at Germany's pre-eminent three-star restaurant where the chef (a chum of his, as is, apparently, *tout le monde*) seems to have *cooked a three-course meal* for the animal, which I'm told was served in three consecutive silver doggie-bowls on the kitchen floor. I still haven't been properly introduced to the pampered tyke, as it happens. I did, however, have a remarkable encounter with Lui, the dog belonging to Bernd's brother-in-law, who owns a hotel-restaurant astride the winery. **Lui** is a Bernese Sennhound, and he is indeed quite *zen*. As a puppy he was apt to be, um, amorous, but he's a big ol' grownup now and I figured not so frisky.

I figured wrong. Now Lui is a very large dog but he seemed gentle enough just schlumping there at the base of the stairs, so I went over to pet him. I like dogs under any circumstances, but when I'm apart from my loved ones and homesick I find dogs very soothing. So I murmured little affectionate things to Lui about what a *good* dog he was which he apparently took to be foreplay, because the



next thing I know a creature *almost larger than I am was thrusting his massive haunches against my spindly little leg*. Of course just at that moment one of the other hotel guests had to appear from

out of the breakfast room. I smiled feebly and shrugged my shoulders "Dogs like me." "*Indeed!*" 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

- 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

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) represent; 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 woody, 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 cellarmaster 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. When I was with my colleagues at Haus Skurnik being dragged yelping and bellowing into computer-land, we decided to celebrate my grudging survival by opening a couple Auslesen from 1998, a Lingenfelder and a Koehler-Ruprecht. The wizard of reductiveness and the sorcerer of casks lined up - and Philippi's wine was the more piquant, the more playful, the more buoyant. 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.

I'm happy to offer some SPECIAL LIBRARY-RELEASES. This program is an effort to show German wine beyond the most infantile stage of its development. We're specifically targeting sommeliers now, as you are the group who most need to have these lovely wines at or near the apex of their drinkability. In most cases the wines sell for their original prices, i.e. you pay no upcharge for having them stored perfectly and offered to you in mint condition. You're welcome!

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.

- GKR-70 **2000 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett**
 Cask-sample pre-filtration so I won't grope for fatuous associations. The wine is very 2000: pithy, tight and spicy. If you're reading this, you've just decided to pass it by. Don't. Year-in year-out this is one of Germany's top-20 Kabinetts.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)
- GKR-60 **1999 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese**
 A big, round, succulent, crusty veal chop of a wine, tasting like its own demi-glace, and with a suave carrotty richness.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between three and nine)
- GKR-71 **2000 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese**
 Potential 1-star quality based on a look at its embryonic flavors and splendid structure. There isn't a lot, and there's every reason to believe it'll be one of the best wines of the vintage.
- GKR-57h **1998 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**
 This is a masterpiece among the many great 1998s. Utter jasmine-blossom aroma. Flavors like pureed red roses; exquisite conciliation of transparency, weight and clarity; juicy, with perfect integration of healthy "dry" botrytis. Stellar Riesling. LIMITED +
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-two years)
- GKR-72h **2000 Kallstadter Steinacker Scheurebe Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**
 We got a Scheu-reprieve! Bernd's leasing this site for a few years while he decides whether to keep it. He seems to have reconciled himself to having Scheurebe *some - where* (and he's planting Rieslaner again; I remember a breathtaking 1970 BA) and this wine's a jim-dandy of an argument in favor of my favorite lil' strumpet. It's wonderful! Shimmery and explosive, a passion-fruit ambrosia over a bloody QUARRY of mineral. More detail when the wine's finished, but stunning potential here.
 SOS: 4 (between four and fifteen years)
- GKR-68 **1991 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Trocken "R"**
 The "R" denotes the first of two levels of "reserve" wine, and this is a stunning dry Riesling that could easily be a mature Smaragd from Nikolaihof. Flinty-crackery-mineral fragrance of the 1991 vintage; it shows what y'all call "petrol" (*where d'ya go for gas, anyways??*); DRY, frisky, lots of *spiel*, woody, lush and dense, glycerin and extract. Has only 11.8% Alcohol but I can't remember a Wachau Federspiel in its class.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: -1
- GKR-69 **1990 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Trocken "RR"**
 "RR" is the highest "reserve" designation and this is an absolute masterpiece that you don't want to miss. Tastes like full-throttle Wachau Riesling from one of the big boys and one of the best sites: with the feral herbal qualities of mature Austrian Riesling. It's woody, smelling of spring ramps; the palate is masculine and adamant, and dry, and v-e-r-y long, a drawn-out band of flavor with a huge low echo of finish that vibrates through your senses. VERY LIMITED. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: -1 (drink now and for the next four to six years)
- GKR-65 **1992 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese**
 This is simply a fantastically juicy and powerful mouthful of grown-up Riesling. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (drink now and for another two to three years)

h&r lingenfelder

pfalz • grosskarlbach

We had something to celebrate this year, as Rainer Lingenfelder has purchased his domain (which he had formerly leased) and has at last realized his aim to have something solid to bequeath to his kids. We also celebrated having the kind of relationship where celebration is appropriate! Years pass along, vintages come and go, there are hillocks and uplands and defiles in every relationship, yet after awhile a trust solidifies that's larger and more durable than what ever is happening in any one year.

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.

Everything Rainer does is undertaken with fastidious thought and care. 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 there is, says Rainer, but it isn't the whole truth; it is only the truth if **all other things are equal**. A vineyard well-cared for will give the highest possible yield consistent with qual-



ity 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.

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**.

- 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

When Rainer talks, I listen and shut the hell up. His perspective is so practical and international, and his English so idiomatically fluent, I can often forget just how EUROPEAN he actually is. The Europeans are citizens of a larger world than we Americans. Their perspectives are both broader and reach deeper into the past.

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 (my emphasis) or richness, etc. It is not so important which character it is; the importance is whether the character is clearly expressed."

After a trough in 1995-1996 and a distinct comeback

in 1997, Lingenfelder regained his place near the summit with superb 1998s and even more improbable 1999s. His was one of the few estates that appeared to have dodged the vintage's most common problem; these 1999s simply taste like excellent Lingenfelder wines from a ripe crop. There are, however, "issues" with some of the 2000s. Rainer had certain problems in the 1995 vintage which might have been solved by the kinds of "interventions" he fundamentally opposes. I wondered what 2000 would bring. "Well, we once again preferred not to intervene, and to some extent we're paying the price for it now," he said candidly. The problem, of course, is the rampant botrytis of the vintage, especially in just this part of the Pfalz. Then there's the pronounced acidities of many 2000s, which mitigate against the restrained sweetness Rainer prefers. We spoke collegially about the wines, and I found one I really liked and offer below. Others, we'll see. Many will be sold in bulk.

None of this chat was at all melancholy, as we'd begun by tasting the BEST GERMAN SPARKLING WINE I'D EVER TASTED. The man always seems to have *something* up his sleeve. And our little bird-label Riesling has soared beyond my most fanciful dreams. And Rainer is the *owner* of his domain. We were happy.

Lingenfelder at a glance:

Sensational expressiveness of fruit.

A consistent standout in this portfolio. Perfect pivot-wines away from creamy-Chardonnay types.

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-65 **1999 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. This 1999 is a big ol' thang. The cask-sample is a deeper crimson than any previous vintage; a very ripe, dense, plummy nose; palate is spicy, sandalwood-y and thick; the finish is very promising. Capacious and firm, like the '90 but more so. A little youthful astringency will be tamed by bottling. Thanks to all of you, by the way, for making this wine 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-58s **1999 Lingenfelder "Bird Label" Riesling**
 This 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 Grahm, look the hell out. There's just a surmise of sweetness, but man it's juicy and complex, meyer-lemon lift with ripe papaya fruit, even a little buttery. The only danger is it's TOO GOOD for its market "echelon." There's plenty of 1999 to see us through till the 2001 comes along - "There was some pretty questionable fruit in 2000," said Rainer - Our shy hero has Done The Thing Right. Go Birdman! +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (now to five years)
- GLI-62 **1999 Scheurebe Kabinett old vines (Freinsheimer Goldberg)**
 20 grams per liter residual sugar; fine, perfumey cassis and raspberry fragrance; plenty juicy but spicy and true. It doesn't have the no-holds-barred ferocity of other vintages - at least not YET - but still a fine glowing smoulder of currant, and one of the few outstanding Scheus in 1999.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (now to five years)
- GLI-60 **1999 Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg)**
 Chalky, lemony aroma; juicy and salty in the 1999 manner without quite the papaya honey-creaminess of years like 1992 or 1994, but a more chalky-pollen wash down the sides of the palate.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (now to eight years)
- GLI-61 **1999 Riesling Spätlese (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg)**
 This is all you could ever want from Lingenfelder; Riesling at its most ravishing. +
 SOS: 1 (now to nine years)
- GLI-66 **2000 Riesling Spätlese (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg)**
 I asked for (and got) more sweetness than usual, which was important given the acids of 2000 (and to mitigate some botrytis flavors also), and this fascinating wine is a little outside the "family." It is ripe lime and not-quite-ripe papaya; quite juicy, exotic, and *none-too-sweet* (!) given how much actual residual sugar it's packing; chewier and more explicitly bright than usual. I loved it.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (now to four years)
- GLI-55h **1998 Riesling Auslese (Freinsheimer Goldberg old vines), 375ml/12**
 A resplendent, stylish Auslese; blood oranges, a huge bouquet of sweet flowers; palate is spicy, swanky and elegant, but regal, full-bodied, queenly. It has restrained botrytis but real Auslese concentration, Meyer-lemon crème brûlée: a heavy-curtained, belle-epoque opulence.
 (five to twenty years)
- GLI-64 **1994 Sekt Riesling "Satyr" (Brut)**
 Rainer and his Greeks! But hoo boy, take one taste of this gorgeousness and you'll agree he mythed his calling. This takes Riesling fizz to a new level. It's made from 1994 Kabinett-level juice, five years on the lees, and was made WITHOUT SUGAR. In fact, three times without sugar. No chaptalization. No sugar used in the prise du mousse (he used fresh must instead) and no sugar in the dosage (must once again). It's stylish, delineated, complex, racy, vigorous and fine. Like a cross of Avize Blanc de Blancs and Aubry's Nombre D'Or. Although this is clearly Riesling - *Lingenfelder* Riesling - it's as good in its way as most NV Champagnes. It fully merits its price. This is one Satyr you shouldn't pass over. +

kurt darting

pfalz • bad-dürkheim

It's like a runaway train, this agency. We're already well into 2000s to cover for oversold 1999s, and there's no end in sight. 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 co-op. 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," 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 profundo instantaneoso*. Schwarz even gave permission for his price list 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 that 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. These compare to "normal" wines as compact discs compare to LPs. Which is why certain people don't like this style. They find it *too*

- 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 of Portugieser, Muskateller and Ortega, 3% each of Chardonnay and Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties

digitally clear and somehow lacking in "warmth." I can appreciate that view, but I don't agree with it. These are strikingly exciting wines and the world's a better place for them.

Darting has arrived firmly among the "classified" estates in Germany, yet as 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.

2000 was intriguing here. The lightest wines were glorious. Some of the wines in the middle were obtruded on by botrytis. Then the very richest wines seemed to amalgamate that botrytis and were simply monumental, reminiscent of the amazing 1986s, with ample botrytis-drenched ripeness and tumescent acidities.

Darting at a glance:

reductively brilliant wines. Weird but good in 2000!

how the wines taste:

The numero uno sales success story in my portfolio. Extraordinary VALUE FOR MONEY for superbly made

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. They're kind of like rookie Catoirs (I know tasters who prefer them, but I wouldn't go quite that far) with a frisky mischievous charm.

- GDR-86L **2000 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
 We just can't seem to keep this boy in stock! And the awful truth is: it is actually the best among the 2000 Kabinetts, so there'll be more pressure than ever. It has absolutely amazing perfume, gardenia, orange-blossom and peach; the palate is like a Kir! Snappy, long, currant-bergamot tang. Superb quality, delightful yet still gripping. There are 550 cases - that's it - so take a stand and do it early. LIMITED!
 SOS: 2 (now to five years)
- GDR-88 **2000 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This complexifies the liter wine, with more density and polish (and a hint of botrytis) and a spicy-shimmery finish.
 SOS: 2
- GDR-87 **2000 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**
 Daddy had to play with this one. It was given a pretty hefty slug-o-sweetness but when all was said and done, finally . . . YUM! Orange-orange-orange-orange-PEACH-orange-orange: YUM!
 SOS: 2 (between two and eight years)
- GDR-89 **2000 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese**
 There is an acceptable level of botrytis here, and it is a model for Spielberg Scheurebe: currant and lavender honey.
 SOS: 2 (now to three years)
- GDR-82 **1999 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**
 This was an Auslese we decided to declassify, AFTER I had tasted and accepted it as an Auslese. Thus it's a steal for a ripe, lavish peachy wine, with ten kilotons of charm.
 SOS: 2 (between two and ten years)
- GDR-91 **2000 Forster Schnepflenpflug Huxelrebe Auslese**
 Apple-butter in a glass! The botrytis is cleaner here and this lovely Auslese is the whippiest and sleekest of the three, in addition to being a *crazy-ass* bargain.
 SOS: 3 (between three and twelve years)
- GDR-90 **2000 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Scheurebe Auslese**
 130 degrees Oechsle (way into BA) with . . . ready? . . . over 16 grams of acidity. Over-the-top pink grapefruit. If this is "Auslese" then I am Marlene Dietrich; huge, succulent, caramel-ly; tremendous acid spine; lime-essence finish. Showy but solid! +
 SOS: 4 (between three and fifteen years)
- GDR-92 **2000 Ungsteiner Bettelhaus Rieslaner Auslese**
 Just enormous wine, a veritable statuary of flavor; botrytis is again a factor but, man, this wine builds a CITY on your palate. It has all the complexity inherent in the varietal, this anvil of lime, grass and apple that hits the palate like a boulder hits a pond. Urgent, ringent! You feel lots of frisky flavor electrons buzzing around on your palate. What a GREAT grape this is. +
 SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GDR-84h **1999 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Eiswein, 12/500ml**
 Again, just sheer flavor-bliss. Creamy and delicious, firm but not stern, and far from impossibly acidic. Beguiling wine!
 SOS: 4 (between five and fifteen years)
- GDR-93h **2000 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner TBA, 12/500ml**
 Massive and stentorian, yet detailed and vinous, not liqueurous; dense as titanium. What a wine to watch! ++
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and sixty years)

neckerauer

pfalz • weisenheim am sand

Don't confuse Weisenheim am Sand with Weisenheim am Berg. Yes, there are two Weisenheims in a very small area—you could walk from one to the other, unless someone put gum on your shoes—and you can imagine the confusion. I think they do it on purpose. Every five years there's the renowned "Feast Of The Two Weisenheims" during which whoopie-cushions, dribble-glasses, black-soap and fake dog-doo are lobbed from town to town with little catapults built by Nubian slaves kept out of sight in wormy dungeons below the street. Or perhaps I'm making the whole thing up. That's the essence of Weisenheim; you *never know* if you're being told the truth or if it's just another antic bit of colorful foolery.

Neckerauers are quite at home in Weisenheim, or so I suppose. There's really no way to

know if the people I encounter are really the Neckerauers or celebrity look-a-likes of the Neckerauers. Ah Weisenheim, where every day is April fools day! Except, interestingly, for April 1st itself, which is celebrated as "Be Pissed Off At Everyone Day," during which the townspeople go around muttering threats and imprecations, trampling on flowers, shoving old ladies into the street and drinking Trocken wines. Music provided by the rock group "Phlegmy Cattarh." Start planning now, as rooms go fast.

Neckerauers need a great vintage. The wines have always been, let's say, eccentric, but there was reasonable consensus among y'all that they were within the pale. Last year I got a call from an old friend who'd raided his cellar and found some 1985 Neckerauers: "It really reminded me why we liked those wines so much!" he said. Lately you've become more polarized; the wines continue to sell, but a few of you have cornered me at tastings with remarks like: "Man I just don't get those Neckerauers" and I too have to concede they can have an odd varnish-y tone that certainly makes them *conspicuous* in big-tasting situations. The last splendid year for this estate was 1992, though several excellent wines were made in 1994 also. 1998 was quite good, better than the last three vintages by a considerable measure, but 1999, with two exceptions, was tres mediocre. Drought really dessicates these wines. Klaus and Arnd were always fretting they didn't get enough rain.

Then came 2000, the year the rain wouldn't *die*. It's feast or famine in Weisenheim. Why, I asked Arnd, did Lingenfelder seem to manage O.K. when his vines were just a *ptui!* from yours? "Oh it's totally different!" Arnd insisted. "Just look. See the little hill there between us and Grosskarlbach? That was the beach of the Rhine when this was all under water. He has loess. We have sand."

Arnd had plans. Plans! There's an old saying: "If you want to make the Gods laugh, tell them your plans." Arnd knew the last few years had been, shall we say, dubious. "We've had a lot of upheaval," he said, "and a lot of transposition. Starting this year [2000] we're going to strictly divide our production into ordinary wines that we'll sell in liter bottles and fine wines that we're going to go all out

- 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

to get them into the top level again." Nature appears to have had her own plans. Arnd's still waiting.

I've mentioned this before, but it bears repeating. We should remain aware of the distortion brought about by the big "portfolio-tasting" situation. Wines *weren't made* to be consumed that way. They are made to be consumed more-or-less **one at a time**. When I sit in an estate like Neckerauer I have to force myself to recall how *you* will eventually be tasting these wines. Here at the winery they taste just fine! If I could bring them *and them alone* to your store or restaurant and we sat and tasted them with *deliberation* you might well agree.

Weisenheim's soils are extremely sandy; fossils are common in these vineyards (the BATF is studying whether a warning label needs to be mandated to alert those allergic to fossils and/or fossil by-products. WARNING: THIS WINE MAY CONTAIN FOSSIL EXCREMENT OR OTHER PETRIFIED EFFLUVIA. CONSULT YOUR PHYSICIAN BEFORE CONSUMING THIS PRODUCT OR ATTEMPTING SEXUAL ACTIVITY). This soil is highly porous. If it doesn't rain there won't be much fruit. If it rains *too much*, there's rot. Someone needs to cut these guys a break.

The cellar is all stainless steel, yet the wines them-

selves haven't the particular squeaky style of the ultra-reductivists. Klaus also owns what must be the world's largest library of Süßreserve, hundreds of amphorae covering every inch of spare space in the cellar, and giving him unprecedented latitude and flexibility at blending time. Each picking of each vineyard has a little set aside for Süßreserve, so the collection is continually renewed.

Klaus won't identify a best site, and my experience compels me to agree. Which one you like best depends on what style you prefer. **Halde** has a dry sandy soil with a substratum of chalk, giving gingery, intense wines that sometimes start out austere but which age magnificently. **Hahnen** and **Hasenzeile** have deeper soils with more min-

eral complexity, but that's where their similarities end: Hahnen gives gracious elegant-smoky and doughy wines while Hasenzeile is spicier and firmer. **Goldberg** is the extremist, virtually pure sand. The wines are spicy and complex, yet somehow utterly unfrivolous, almost stern.

Given the challenges of the 2000 vintage, I wasn't sure what I'd find here. What I found were two really good KERNERS, which is two more than I've shown you in the last fifteen years. Klaus then brought out a trio of old Kerners climaxing with a grandiose 1971 Spätlese; he wants me to rethink my indifference to the variety. The man makes a case!

Neckerauer at a glance:

The latest several vintages show the eccentric side of Pfalz wine. Low yields from sandy soils give concentrated wines, regionally exemplary and superb with food.

how the wines taste:

Well, for me they can be the most practical wines in the Pfalz. I own more of them than I do of the others because I find them more useful personally. They're superb with food. They're not as full-bodied as Koehler-Ruprecht, but they share a similar earthy-spicy profile. They're rather more "rural" than the elegant ladies of the classic Mittelhaardt from Forst, Wachenheim and Deidesheim. These are wines loaded with flavor, densely packed in fact, but almost never heavy. They age superbly!

GNE-75 2000 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Kabinett

This is tank 29 (there were two). This one tasted drier with 32 grams of sweetness than the sister-tank did with 25; it's also the closest to a prototypical Neckerauer Riesling of all the 2000s. Hahnen-fragrance of wheat toast and nuts, with more drive and force than the last several years. If you've moved away from this winery, move back at least close enough to give this chap a glance.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between two and seven years)

GNE-76 2000 Weisenheimer Hahnen Kerner Kabinett

Kerner is a cross of Riesling and Trollinger. So much of this is subjective. There's nothing intrinsically offensive about Kerner's personality - at least nothing that couldn't be equally applied to Scheurebe - but I've been cool toward what I feel is a vulgarity about the variety, a kind of gum-droppy fruit and gritty texture. Yet, when it works that fruit is discreet and the texture is pleasantly chalky, and I *like this wine*. It was the best of the Kabinetts, regardless of grape variety. It is taut and chalky and gingery and it's the best Riesling that happens, technically, not to be Riesling!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to six years)

GNE-77 2000 Weisenheimer Hasenzeile Kerner Spätlese

The floodgates are open and there's no stopping me! This wine is carried by its wonderful spice. Lemon and more lemon that leaves the mouth minty-fresh. Crisp and racy with 32 grams per liter of residual sugar.

SOS: 2 (let's say between four and twelve years)

GNE-78 2000 Weisenheimer Hasenzeile Scheurebe Spätlese

The sagey beast untamed! The wine has **36 grams of dry extract** and the highest acid in Neckerauer's vintage. Totally **wacko** orange-papaya-sage nose, a deranged, spicy palate and about as subtle as a flying hammer. But if you have any ya-yas y'ain't got out, take two hits of this and call me in the morning.

SOS: 2 (now to six years)

herbert messmer

pfalz • burrweiler

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. He's now at the helm of the best estate in Burrweiler and one of the best in all the Pfalz.

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 Rheinpfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Anldau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slaty minerality. If not you'll just discover the

wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

The second point is the Schwarz connection. The legendary Hans-Günter Schwarz, winemaker at Müller-Catoir, hails from Gleisweiler, the neighboring village to Burrweiler. 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 from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz view of the world is the love of completely 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 Süssreserve comes only from the healthiest grapes and we use no preservatives to

- 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



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. You'll see me repeat it often because I'm in sympathy with it. It is very compatible with the style inherent in the Schäwer. 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.

That being said, Gregor and I have a frustration in our dealings with each other. His winery is remarkably successful selling fashionably dry wines; and success is fun. So I make grand claims for the quality and polish of Gregor's best wines, and then cannot support them with evidence!

A second issue arises from the actual *finesse* of Gregor's wines. In common with Brüder Dr. Becker, these

wines *can* be seen as cerebral - as though that were any sort of flaw. But we tend to sell wines, all of us, in settings that encourage the most ostentatious and bombastic to make the abiding impression on our customers. What happens to wines of **care**, of diligently etched and chiseled nuance? They get lost. I see these wines as models of purity and honor. I also love the way they taste. I beg you simply not to reflectively turn away from them. They are certainly priced sensibly, and they are as well-made as wines can be.

Messmer at a glance:

Superbly made wines, the best of which we don't see because an incomprehensible domestic market demands them dry. 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-67L **2000 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

This is Halbtrocken, but works drier (and drier than usual), due to those 2000 acids; but it also works thicker and with more complexity. It's a tarragon-gingery Pfalz Riesling with a murmur of caramel in the finish.
SOS: 0 (now to four years)

GMS-72L **2000 Dornfelder, 1.0 Liter**

Vin **Rouge**. Dornfelder is like carbonically macerated Grenache. Here's a little multiple-choice quiz. Most Beaujolais today is made by: A) carbonic maceration; B) galvanic masturbation; C) bionic perspicacity; or, D) atomic perspiration. Answer found on page 203! Now that's out of the way, I WANT YOU TO POUR THIS WINE BY THE GLASS. If you don't own a restaurant, you know, I still want you to pour this wine by the glass. That is Its Destiny. Why? Because It Is Good. Fruit. Dee-lish-ness up the yingyang. Polite tannins. And you can gargle it like mouthwash. That's why! SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMS-68 **2000 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

Until brother Minges' Schäwer is in production we have to content ourselves with gnarly dry versions from Messmer. But I didn't hesitate even a little over this beauty: it could almost be a Piri from Nigl; knife-edge focus to the almost carbonized minerality; fragrance like mint and tarragon; salty, balanced palate, with a really palpable mineral shimmer on the finish.
SOS: -1 (now to four years)

GMS-69 **2000 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

This amazing vintage confers improbable authority on even "ordinary" wines; this has juice, shimmer, sinew, persimmon-y fruit, superb balance, polish, and an incipient honey note that's just captivating.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (now to eight years)

- GMS-63 **1999 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 This man's Muscat is always one of the high points of a vintage; a heavenly rose-petal fragrance; the palate is soft, lithe and supple, nowhere near as id-driven and deranged as the yowling 1998, but still quite shapely and charming.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (now to five years)
- GMS-70 **2000 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller**
 This is a pie with every sweet nectarine in it, but it isn't a sweet pie; even with 35 grams per liter residual sugar it has a blast of "green," the sticky saturated green of new leaves somehow liquefied; chervil and lime; long, sweet-grassy finish. You know, wine is capable of giving great and profound pleasure, but we need to resist the pursuit of that experience as a *sine qua non*. There is much to be said for the frivolous pleasures, such as Muscat. It is hard to take yourself too seriously when you're slopping a wine like this down. But oh it's just so *lovely*. When I drink great Riesling I am a serious man doing a serious thing. But when I drink perfect Muscat I am swimming in vivid waters of pure delight and gratefulness.
 SOS: 2
- GMS-71 **1999 Burrweiler Altenforst Scheurebe Kabinett**
 First offering. This appears to be the swan-song of Scheu here. When I start whimpering uncontrollably, Gregor gives me a look with just a flicker of **doubt**; perhaps he was hasty and capricious pulling the Scheu out? Perhaps? In any case it's a torment to taste this wine. It could easily be Catoir, and in fact this is better than Catoir's (wonderful) 1999 Scheu. This wine is both sweeter and more yowlingly varietal than Messmer's 1998 and 1997 were. Superb cassis nose. Big-ass sweet sex-bomb Scheu but still shimmering and scrupulous. Damn it, how could he have pulled these vines out! It makes me want to step on a sparrow. +
 SOS: 3
- GMS-64 **1999 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese**
 Vigorous, honest and true, and very long and creamy and spicy and even a little salty on the finish and in fact I'm starting to think that Gregor's in his own league with this variety in Germany. +
 SOS: 2 (now to four years)
- GMS-73 **1999 Flemlinger Herrenbuckel 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 complex, quite stylish, very long, round and almost velvety. It is a classic explanation of the variety. Serious yet seductive, like old-style Burgundy. There's a teeny lick of that bricky Midi thing. Black cherries; dense blueberry fragrances; generous and saftig, and the oak, thank the lord, is IN ITS PLACE. Long, tobacco-leaf finish. Possibly a masterpiece.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! (between four and fifteen years)
- GMS-65h **1999 Burrweiler Altenforst Scheurebe Eiswein, 12/375ml**
 By the time this was poured the general level of jocularity was verging on the cacophonous. We do somehow seem to enjoy ourselves occasionally. So I didn't do the lyrical chain-of-pretty-associations tasting note thing. I did note I thought it was one of the best few Eisweins of the vintage, on par with Dönnhoff. That's what I said. +
 SOS: 4

josef biffar

pfalz • deidesheim

At some point while we were tasting, a thrush started to sing its heart out near our window. The birds were very lusty this year. Usually they sing only mornings and evenings (their evening song can be quite haunting if the particular bird is an artist) but now they seemed to sing all the time. This one was really belting it out. Then the noon bells. In certain small villages they still ring the luncheon bells. A happy clamor of sound.

German Riesling should always be tasted within range of a singing bird, I think.

Biffar's is a mid-sized estate, by Pfalz standards, with 12.5 hectares, 80% of which is planted to Riesling. They have a little fact-sheet. I'm scouring it looking for something germane to share with you, but it says nothing remarkable *for estates of a certain quality*. "Ecologically compatible

viticulture (officially controlled)," selective harvesting, limited yields, higher-than-minimum ripenesses in each quality level - you know the sequence.

Inside Germany there's a sentiment that a point should be knocked off from Biffar's "ranking" until Dirk Roth proves himself, or consolidates his *regime* or whatever. As far as I could see he hit the ground running and had nothing left to "prove" within his first two years. He's leaving in July to make the wines at Langwerth von Simmern (his girlfriend is in the Rheingau), and will be replaced by the superstar cellar-master currently at Christmann. Those are gristly words; "superstar cellar-master," but it happens Gerhard Biffar doesn't have anyone in the family to make the wines (he's far from alone in this). I believe Biffar has essentially found its voice; the wines have remained silky yet strong as they become when Ulrich Mell took the cellar-master's post in 1990. I don't see them changing, but rather refining, fine-tuning.

I agree there's an unaccountable *genius* involved in making great wine; Hans-Günter Schwarz has it, Dönnhoff has it. But I also believe that 99% of it is no secret, just insistence on doing things the hard way. Or as David Schildknecht once wrote, utopianism, inefficiency and poor business sense! I am suspicious of the *gun-for-hire* aspect of the hot-shot cellar-master. Great wine comes from an intricate confluence of elements, some of which cannot be quantified.

I always enjoy tasting here, but this year's was an especially stirring group of wines; the 2000s were singing and the 1990s remained among the very best of that vin-

- 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 of Riesling and Weissburgunder, 10% each of Grauburgunder and Portugieser, 8% Gewürztraminer, 5% each of Müller-Thurgau, Chardonnay and Silvaner, 10% other varieties

tage. Plus - and it's awfully nice to be able to say this - many of the dry wines in 1999 and 2000 are just outstanding. Why can't they all be like these? I get almost wrathful on this subject in the Pfalz and I have a hard time keeping my thoughts to myself (something about potentially great wines twisted into egregiously disgusting wines seems to tick me off, go figure!), but I have to keep backpedaling at Biffar: "Now these extremely vituperative opinions don't pertain to your wines." Like, oops.

As the wines accumulate one gleans the presence of a wise and guiding hand. As one lovely wine follows another I feel a strange heart-link with the person who made them. He *knew* something. One great wine can happen by accident, but a great range results from a kind of wisdom, intuition.

What happens to *you* when you taste a series of wines from a winery, every one of which is a thing of rare beauty? I start to feel a sense of absurd privilege, that providence is showering beauty over me out of any proportion to whatever I may have done to "deserve" it. I also feel the futility of attempting to be discriminating; something is



happening that's bigger than my little judgments. I also feel a distinct and positive **love** for each person who helped to bring such wines into existence. I also hear my heart being asked to open and expand, to relax its defenses, to melt away the crust inside which it usually sits. (This always seems to happen when you don't expect it, as though unpreparedness is a precondition for it happening). Finally I become softened and reflective and want to speak warmly about things I'm usually too constrained to bring up. 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. 2000 marks the fifth consecutive outstanding vintage here.

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-57 **2000 Sauvignon Blanc**

A couple years ago Biffar made a wonderful little Sauvignon. I remember Roth telling me "My predecessor planted it and first I wondered what he must have been thinking. But you know, the wine (the first crop) isn't bad!" This yummy 2000 was two weeks in bottle, and my notes refer to a discretion it will probably leave behind. It is like Quincy or Reuilly, slinky and fine with a pretty ripe cassis note; quite a seductive murmur of fruit but also a gulper; practical and tasty. LIMITED!

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0

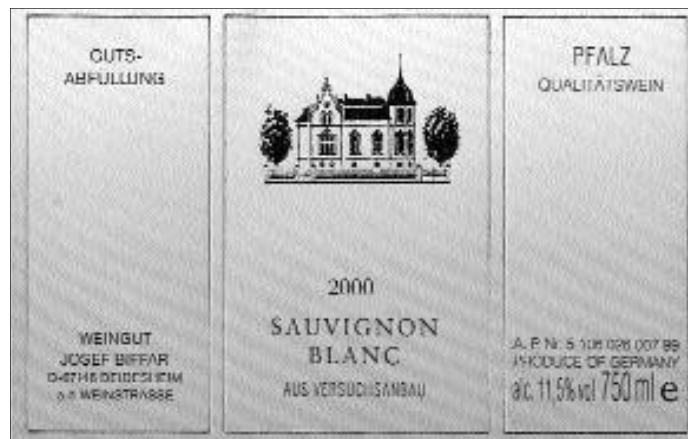
GBR-55 **2000 Ruppertsberger Nussbien Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

Oh, would they were all like this! It is disarmingly *pretty*; still on the gross lees, but all peaches and peony and comely Pfalz ginger; thick-textured, and very promising.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to five years)

- GBR-59 **2000 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**
 Here's one of the very few wines I'd ship blind if I had to. It has never not been outstanding, and it has never been better than this masterpiece. It unites the pupil-shrinking brilliance of the great 1998 with a fundament of muscle and power and absolutely ravishing fragrance; the palate is at once dense and slicing, a thin leaf of lime-blossom, perfuming the adamant finish. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)
- GBR-51 **1999 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 This has decisively overtaken the Mäushöhle after a year in bottle - the Grand Cru will show itself! Fuller and more resonant, a different, denser structure, more "noble" profile; terribly long and authoritative (indeed recalls the Altenberg Bergbieten from Alsace) but shows fine mineral saltiness; WHEW! What successes these are! I'm noting this as a Sommelier Alert by virtue of its thrust.
 SOMMELIER ALERT
 SOS: 0 (between three and seven years)
- GBR-58 **1999 Wachenheimer Gerümpel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 First offering. Do you like dry Riesling? If so, this has The Goods and you don't wanna miss it. WHAT a fragrance! Peaches and freesia; recalls Nigl's Kremleiten in its back-drop of mineral; the palate is sleeker and more penetrating than the nose suggests, spicy and gingery, but the siren-song of fruit is always there, a farandole of almost smoky white peach and sizzling mineral. Lyric and splendid.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! +
 SOS: 0 (between one and five years)
- GBR-60 **1998 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Spätlese**
 This is a vineyard whose borders were hyper-extended with the 1971 wine law. "Sections of the original Herrgottsacker are truly Grand Cru land," says Biffar, "but some of the 'new' Herrgottsacker was lucky to be given the name." I've always thought the site was reliably mediocre, but this wine hails from a "clos" across the street from the winery, sheltered and babied, and this **first offering** deserves your attention. It's a ripe and chewy wine from perfectly healthy grapes (no botrytis!), on the dry side (26.8 grams per liter); maize and grain, spice and thrust; suave honeyed finish to an adamant wine.
 SOS: 1 (between five and fourteen years)



eugen müller

pfalz • forst

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.

Back when I first started doing this, I worked with a grower in Forst named Wilhelm Spindler. He had no descendants to whom to leave his winery, and he was getting on in years; quality started to suffer, and I had to drop the agency. Of course, even when *coasting* he was still making noteworthy wines, as he had an astonishingly fine collection of land in the best sites of

Forst, which are believed to be the best sites in the Pfalz. He also had the *oldest* stand in the *very* best site, the Forster Kirchenstück. Being somewhat detached from the vineyard "proper," it escaped the Flurbereinigung a few years ago, and is now the *only* stand of old vines in this site. But what has that to do with Eugen Müller?

Simple! Spindler sold or leased (I don't know which) all of his vineyards to Kurt Müller - and this is where I come in. I screened a few of Müller's wines one year and liked what I saw. I couldn't believe his prices. Müller is doing *full* justice, to his land.

Moreover, he has become an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück (average age of his parcel is 35 years), 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

- 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

high-toned and zingy, more lush and caramelly: heavy satin versus raw silk. What makes **Jesuitengarten** 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. I always place them among the "classics" whenever I have to group them. 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!

Eugen Müller at a glance:

The best possible array of the top sites of the Pfalz, including the oldest vines in the *very* best vineyard. Mouth-filling, fruity wines, direct and approachable. Astoundingly reasonable prices for wines of such pedigree. Surprisingly successful 1999s and fine 2000s.

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. I approached the 1999s with some concern, worried that

the vintage's broad, sprawling profile would flatten them. But the **power** of Müller's 1999s defied the vintage's characteristics, carrying them. The 2000 wines really sing the riper they get, but there isn't much wine.

- GEM-51 **2000 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 is Pechstein all the way, twiggy and spricky-clickety, unusually minerally for this cellar, and entirely different from the other two Kabinetts; piquant, a determined terroir statement.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between three and ten years)
- GEM-49 **1999 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**
This is quite a bit drier than the 1998, and also rounder, more salty and less flowery, with a sneaky length of its own. Also 100% Pechstein; thus a *steal* for a Grand Cru wine.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
(from now to five years)
- GEM-50 **2000 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**
Classically fiery vineyard nose; shiitakes; palate follows, not great penetration but a fine honeyed reach and capaciousness.
SOS: 2 (between three and ten years)
- GEM-45 **1999 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**
Well aren't you a plummy happy thing! Tangerine and pêche-de-vigne. Full-o-spunk and oh so clean. (Spit the wine in your latrine); it really is a shimmery, happy glass of wine.
(from now to five years)
- GEM-53 **2000 Forster Stift Rieslaner Auslese**
Boys and girls, if I have you trained right you should be excited by the news of Müller's sure hand with Rieslaner, which is a great and rare variety, and one which, like the Petite Manseng of Jurançon, gives incomparable and resplendent wine. This is just a spice-bomb of density, firm, jammed with material; a paperweight of extract with a classically varietal profile, like radioactive Riesling; goes off in the mouth like a 4th of July sparkler; a wine of REAL intensity abstract from body - all force and penetration - the V.U. meter of flavor is in the red and there to STAY. +
SOS: 3 (between four and thirteen years)
- GEM-52h **2000 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
Restrained (50 grams per liter) sweetness completely subdued by massive extract (33 grams!); bottle-sick but when four of the last nine were masterpieces and the others were PFG one grabbest whilst one can; a profound, spicy, spicy terroir statement with a warm lick of seductive honey and cherry, but none too sweet for the table; salty wash on the finish. +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between seven and seventeen years)
- GEM-42h **1998 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
He does it again. This is built like a basketball player, with all its strength and bulk dispersed over a vertical frame; classic **char** and cherry - picked at 112 Oechsle - intensely vigorous and spicy on the palate; a real steel-toed boot-kick of lift here; the youngest-tasting (at this stage) of the nine vintages I've tasted. INTRODUCING IN THE CORNER TO MY RIGHT, IN THE BASALT TRUNKS, COLD-BLOODED "JACKHAMMER" KIRCHENSTÜCK, the undefeated pacifist from Madison, WI. +
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-three years)
- GEM-48h **1998 Deidesheimer Nonnenstück Ruländer BA, 12/375ml**
Well: an Alsatian S.G.N. from Pinot Gris at a bare fraction of the price; a round, caramel and leather nose; touch of chestnut honey; palate is actually firmer and more smartly structured than a Riesling we're tasting alongside. It's a chestnut-mocha crème brûlée in a glass. +
SOS: 4 (between four and fifteen years)

theo minges

pfalz • flemlingen

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!

I was and am interested in the southern Pfalz. It's the region with the smallest renown, though it's now considered "up and coming" among hipsters. Until twenty years ago it was certainly the most egregious overproducer in Germany, and most of the wine was Müller-Thurgau or other marginally awful new crossings. Most of the wines ranged from coarse to bizarre. All that started to change as the general level of wine-consciousness was raised, and now the region is full of freshness and new faces.

Minges, however, wasn't one of them! This estate was always considered remarkable, one of those exceptions-that-prove-the-rule. Theo Minges himself 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.

The estate is a smidgen under 8 hectares in size. 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 ideological 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

- 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

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.

He had good news this year. After many years of trying, he finally received permission to plant in the Burrweiler Schäwer. A terraced section of the vineyard had lain fallow for many years, and had become an ecological-

ly protected preserve. Theo and Gregor Messmer are good friends, so I didn't hesitate to say how happy I was to anticipate tasting **non-Trocken** Rieslings from this great site.

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. Superb Rieslings in a vintage like 2000 goes without saying!

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. The Muscats are laugh-out-load wonderful. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

GTM-55L **2000 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

This seems drier than the past several vintages, though it isn't. It has its customarily glorious electric blade of clarity and verve. For all its lightness it has a gigantic core and ridiculous mineral-citrusy complexity. Rich but not "ripe," with a long-as-hell finish. This is how you make it snappy!
SOS: -1 (now to eight years)

GTM-56L **2000 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Listen, this would be many people's best wine and here it's the intro-wine! I haven't seen acids like this since 1996, and the wine just crackles and buzzes. Melon, lime, racy and penetrating. +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between two and ten years)

GTM-60 **2000 Böchinger Rosenkranz Chardonnay Kabinett Trocken**

I know, I know; lay off. I Hamletized over it a couple minutes, but maybe there's a few psychos out there who want to taste what Chardonnay could be if it weren't farted around with and grown in a cool climate and good soil. This is better than 98% of Macons; grown on limestone; this is lissome with lemon-apple-mineral flavors; clear, discreet and stylish.
SOS: -1 (now to three years)

GTM-57 **2000 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

A mineral masterpiece with a subtle orange note. This is the site in which every available clone of Riesling is planted cheek-by-jowl. This wine is the full glory of German Riesling, friend; a delicate fennelly note below a foaming wave of fruit and mineral. Stunning. ++
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between three and twelve years)

GTM-58 **2000 Flemlinger Zechpeter Muskateller**

Good grief, what a nose! I drink plenty of Muscat and it almost always smells good, but this?? This is SICK. It has grace, it's nearly haunting; it has melody and delicacy, and the palate is a great chalky blast of fruit and mineral and the finish is like some dewy perfect lemon you took directly from the hands of Aphrodite. Come over to my house any time the next couple years and you're bound to get THIS to drink. +
SOS: 1 (now to five years)

GTM-59h **1999 Flemlinger Zechpeter Muskateller Eiswein, 12/375ml**

Patisserie, orange, peche-de-vignes, crème-anglais; it has the correct Eiswein flavor (which many 1999s did not), quite enough acidity, TBA-quality with over 10 grams of acidity and fine pure fruit, all of which adds up to a whole barrel-o-monkeys in Theiseland.
SOS: 4 (between five and fifteen years)

rheingau wines



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! Vollrads is 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-Greifenclau (erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a 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.

I told this dreary tale for more than ten years. 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!

**Though things are discernibly better now,
there's still distressingly little buzz about
the region.**

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, 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 pro-



Berg Schlossberg



Berg Roseneck

tected, 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?

The Rheingau is truly a singularly blessed piece of earth. 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 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

**The classic wine of the Rheingau is firm,
contained, dignified.**

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.

josef leitz

rheingau • rüdesheim

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. His 2000s, which were the very last wines I tasted, are beyond the pale. If you knew the conditions under which they were harvested you would probably shed tears.

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drib 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 blown away by our market. "My god, such people; great palates, incredible cuisine, incessantly sexually active!" - well, I made 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.

Thus when I visited him last year in March, he invited me and my *entourage* (Hacksaw Bill Mayer, the notorious poet, wine merchant and pro wrestler always travels with a trainer, nutritionist, photographer, astrologist and a professor of medieval manuscripts named "Crusher" Kowalski) to dinner at a very cool restaurant he knows. He pulled out all the stops; seven courses, way too much wine, you know; all the ingredients for a great night. Johannes has a way of being very *earnest* when he talks about his work, as if to say "I know you hear this stuff from *everybody*, but in my case it's really, really true, I swear to god!" And suddenly it came to me. I looked my friend in the eye and told him he had nothing left to "prove" to me. I knew what lay in his heart: I'd found a brother-in-arms. We were *family* now. Relax: nothing more to prove. I don't know if it sunk in. I hope it did,



because I love the guy. He cares with a purity that's almost heroic. What happened to being flip, ironic, sophisticated? Yeah, what!

Thirty-six years old, two little kids, Gravititas pays a visit. Johannes knows his wines are good, (how could he

- Vineyard area: 5.5 hectares
- Annual production: 3,400 cases
- Top sites: Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg, Roseneck and Rotlland
- Soil types: Weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 91% Riesling, 9% Spätburgunder

not? Such wines don't happen accidentally), and he digs them as though they were someone else's! He's also one of those people you wish you had a *transcript* of your conversation to read later - quick with a quip. We look at one another like "oh man, did you get that one down?" each time Johannes launches another salvo.

One German wine writer whose path I crossed in the Rheingau told me he had a problem with what he called the "tannin" in Leitz's wines. This is great! Rheingau wines have gotten so **spineless** in the past fifteen years that when you taste a REAL example you can't get past its properly hard shell. (Leitz himself was derisive when told of this critique: "Typical wine journalist know-nothing-garbage. It's one thing for someone not to like the wines; that's everybody's right. But to concoct a criticism that's the opposite of the facts, that's the limit." Leitz, you see, labors to keep tannin *out* of his wines by every means consistent with his minimal-intervention philosophy. But I digress.)

When I made my first approach to Johannes Leitz 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. Leitz's wines show us a maddening glimpse of

what greatness we might find *elsewhere* if so many wines weren't RAPED INTO DRYNESS.

One wonders how Leitz's clear-headed honesty will sit with the high priests of the VDP. Yes, our hero is the newest member of this marketing organization, that has laudably added several outstanding new names to their ranks in the past several years. I get the impression Johannes joined because he was flattered to have been asked. He sells all the small quantity of wine he makes quite easily, and has no wish to participate in any of the sundry tastings, auctions or marketing activities. We'll just get a black eagle somewhere on the label or capsule. But oh, I'd *love* to have been a fly on the wall the first general meeting Johannes attended. He has the gift of the wisely naïve, to see what others cannot see or will not acknowledge, and to express himself with no minced words.

His triumph in 2000 is virtually complete. "In fact we had to start harvesting earlier than normal (for personal reasons) but this turned out to be a blessing," he says. The majority of Leitz's 2000s are untainted with the vintage's botrytis. "But Terry, you know I always have to say the truth to you. We got a new French press this year, one of the best ones; it presses very soft. I think that 20% of the quality of my 2000 vintage is in this press!" The local scutlebutt says that Rudesheim had it best in the Rheingau in 2000; its microclimate discouraged the rampant mildews that invaded the rest of Germany. That's probably true. And *if* it's true, I will be very surprised if anyone in Rudesheim made better wines than Johannes Leitz.

Leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three rising stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Kuntler and Weil). Small estate of 5.8 hectares. Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage. Way above-the-pack 1999s. On another PLANET in 2000!

how the wines taste:

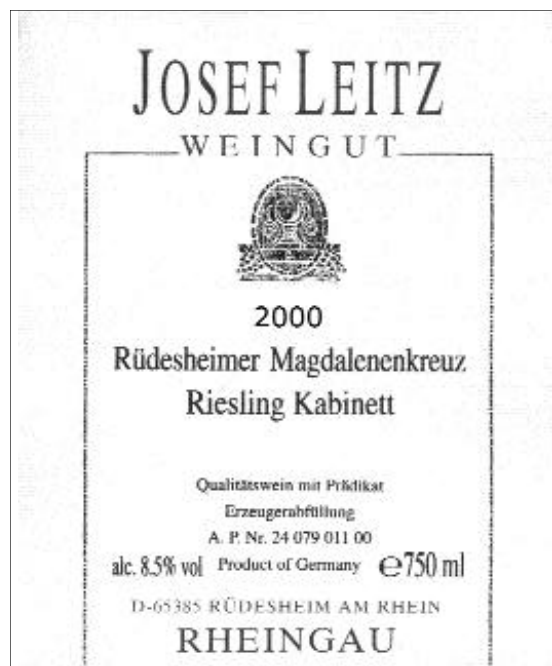
They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. "A lot of people talk about 'yeast-contact' but I think I'm the only one who actually does it." They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. 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.

GJL-52 2000 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling

This was supposed to have been Trocken but it tasted so good when the fermentation stuck that Johannes asked Kevin and me to make an unscheduled stop to comment. "Yeah HUH!" we said, or words to that effect. "Don't touch this, man; we want it." The wine is *brilliant*; spicy, very snappy and man, wass-UP with this man's QbA?? What power, what galvanic drive, what a cool-minty finish. SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

- GJL-53 **2000 Rudesheimer Drachenstein Riesling**
 There's Drachenstein and there's Drachenstein. Johannes' parcel is essentially an enclave of Berg Roseneck without the slate. For the past three years he's made honestly stellar quality and I think the 2000 is the best yet. You'd freak if I told you how much residual sugar it has, three times more than any experienced palate would guess. It has a gorgeous redcurrant and sweet-cured nose; shimmering-spicy palate with wonderful length, grip, and an endless tangy finish. This has a 2 on the sense of sweetness scale. Yes, 2: the 10 grams per liter of acidity just leaches the fructose away. +
 SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)
- GJL-45 **1999 Rudesheimer Drachenstein Riesling**
 There's a fair amount of this still around; the 1999 vintage was generous, so Johannes is offering a special price. Much as I hate to cite the press in this offering, I just gotta tell you how happy I was to see David Scildknecht give it "Potential(ly) two stars" after giving two stars outright to the 1998. (I suspect David will need more stars when he tastes the 2000). Bless him; he knows how good a "mere" QbA can be. This 1999 has gentler acids, but a long palate of sautéed apple; ripe, generous, round and persistent, with a pleasantly rustic touch. It's probably a must-weight Spätlese or something; everything else was. (now to five years)
- GJL-46 **1999 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Kabinett**
 This is only still available because it was offered last year to wine.com and you know what came of those poor guys. "It was the last vineyard I harvested in 1999," said Johannes. "People actually called me up and said 'hey, you forgot your Magdalenenkreuz!'" It's very pure, fruity, on the dry side. A prototypical Rheingau Riesling with a silky texture and lots of playful, interweaving nuances. Like twenty heirloom apples.
 SOS: 1 (between four and twelve years)
- GJL-56 **2000 Rudesheimer Bischofsberg Riesling Kabinett**
 A lamb-y bacony nose; fluffy velour-like texture on the palate; a touch phenolic, a kirsch note; juicy and vinous, smoky and almost garrigue-like.
 SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)
- GJL-57 **2000 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Kabinett**
 This is Spätlese at any other address: pronounced appley nose, Cox-orange. It displays a remarkable capacious force and spice, incipiently peachy. It has a stainless-steel reductive storminess and will reward patient cellaring. Impressive scope and power.
 SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)
- GJL-58 **2000 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Kabinett**
 By the way, do you know the skinny on the Rudesheimer Berg? They're the steepest slopes in the Rheingau "proper" and with Hochheim produce the Rheingau's highest must-weights 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. This Berg Roseneck displays the rose-bouquet and finesse characteristic of this great site. Picked November 10th - "healthy golden grapes" - it has perfect polish and the Grand Cru flavor - restrained and gracious and simply delicious. +
 SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)

- GJL-54 **2000 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This is an absolute masterpiece. Fabulously slatey with a Cox-orange and apple nose. It's etched, chiseled, delineated, driven by a wolverine-determination. It has a soil-imprinted finish: digital detail with a fine leesy generosity. LIMITED! ++
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)
- GJL-51 **1999 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
 This is great: we all thought this was Trocken, and I wrote "This is a model for how Trocken wines should be." Only it's actually a *Halbtrocken* (though just barely) with 10.5 grams per liter of residual sugar. I guess that IS how Trockens should be: halbtrocken! A fine lacy-slatey nose with a hint of wood; tingly and salty and full of stuffing; complex, virtually Alsatian in style.
 SOS: 0 (between three and ten years)
- GJL-55 **2000 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**
 Well HALLELUJAH! This may be the only 2000 I tasted with clean botrytis, so there's a passion-fruit, mango glaze over the minerality we saw in the Kabinett. Very juicy and queenly. 100 degrees Oechsle with 35 grams (!!!) of dry extract. +
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GJL-59h **2000 Rudesheimer Drachenstein Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**
 This certainly constitutes a miracle. This was picked December 22nd at 140 degrees Oechsle from clean fruit (people will be asking Johannes for years how he did it); the finished wine has 11 grams per liter acidity, and it's not only a miracle but a profound masterpiece. Just bottled when I tasted it, so the fruit was subdued at first, but the Eiswein tone was pristine; the wild, spicy, flowery palate completely disarmed me. It reminds me of the supernal 1998 Zeltinger Himmelreich Eiswein from Selbach - just an id-abandon of hysterically expressive fruit. And as it sat in the glass it started to smolder this gorgeous essence-of-papaya thing. What an achievement! ++
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-five years)



spreitzer

rheingau • oestrich

Check it out! A NEW GUY. And not just any new guy, but the *Gault-Millau* DISCOVERY OF THE YEAR new guy. Andreas Spreitzer is a close chum of Johannes Leitz, who unselfishly steered me to the estate.

Here are the stats: 11.5 hectares, producing about 6,500 cases per year. 92% Riesling, 8% Pinot Noir. 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.

I did, and liked what I saw. First opportunity, I was making the scene in Oestrich.

This commune 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

- Vineyard area: 11.5 hectares
- Annual production: 6,700 cases
- Top sites: Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wechselbrunnen
- Soil types: Deep tertiary loam and loess
- Grape varieties: 92% Riesling, 8% Spätburgunder



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 nervy 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*.

We've agreed to start deliberately, so there isn't a ton of wine available, but Andreas seems eager to visit the States, and he's easy on the eyes and speaks English, and I'll tell you what I think: I can't *wait* to spend the rest of my career representing these beautiful wines and the family who makes them.

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-1 **2000 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling**
Cask #9. Oh what fruit! Fermentation stopped spontaneously (all in wood); spiced apple and corn bisque; long, pithy, muscular; empire-apple spice on the finish. Lovely. SOS: 2 (between two and ten years)
- GSP-2 **2000 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett**
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 is an awfully winning wine: spice and apple but also a warmed flowering field, a kind of giddy blossomy sweetness like sun on blossom, but a fine salty minerality spills down the sides of the tongue and the finish is like pink lilac. SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)
- GSP-3 **1999 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese**
This was a serious leap up from a very good Lenchen Kabinett (as Spätlese *should* be but isn't always); a real glory of fruit here, but firm and not even slightly sentimental; the wine has carriage, its flavors move with elegance and authority. Andreas says it realizes their aims. Good things to aim for! LIMITED!
SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GSP-4 **2000 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. Some day when Andreas Spreitzer and I are old geezers we'll have known each other long enough for me to actually get some of a wine like this; it has fantastic authority, mineral and berry and tangy and spicy and stony and great explicit breed and all the right kind of richness. "This is almost slaty" I observed, and lo - there IS slate on this here hill. I'm smirking now because then I couldn't. LIMITED! +
SOS: 1 (between six and twenty years)



claus odernheimer

abteihof st. nicholas

rheingau • johannisberg

This is an estate where you know where you are. There's often a signature-flavor in the wines, something herbal or resinous. Interestingly, you don't notice it so much while there, but it stands out in tastings with other wines. In great warm years it confers a profundity on the wines which can lift them to some exalted heights.

This was a winery I bought from when I lived in Germany. Some of the most memorable Rheingau Rieslings in all my experience came from here. Odernheimer is an intense but steady man, not easily blown by the prevailing breeze. His style hasn't changed much in the past twenty-

two years, and I like it just fine. The key to that style was found in Claus's answer to a fairly innocuous question: when he tastes wine, are there attributes that consistently impress him? If so, what are they? "Yes, I like a fruit that's still fresh even when the wine has become mature," he said. Odernheimer accepts that texture and spice are *givens* in his soils (as they are), and will be present in the wines as a matter of course. He chooses to emphasize *fruit*,

- Vineyard area: 7 hectares
- Annual production: 4,600 cases
- Top sites: Johannisberger Vogelsang, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen
- Soil types: Loam, loess and sandy loam
- Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 17% Spätburgunder, 3% Müller-Thurgau



and in so doing gives us wines which unite Rheingau weight and profundity with remarkable body and succulence.

"Rheingau Riesling is a creature between 14 and 20 grams per liter of sugar, 8 and 9 grams of acidity, and three years old," he says, only a little facetiously. Vigorous pruning gives him small yields but riper grapes than his neighbors in the same vineyards. He rather reluctantly believes in machine-harvesters: "Qualified harvesters are getting almost impossible to find, and the machine-harvester brings us higher must-weights by separating the stem-sick berries. They fall to the ground from the agitation of the machine," he points out. Still, much of Odernheimer's land is too steep for the machine, so hand-picking continues. Hand-picking was the only way to go in 2000, when the vineyards were too muddy to take machines into.

The goal is to make wines that are "typical and clean." Every year there is *something* not only classical but wonderful here, and if I'm ever tempted to forget just *what* our hero can attain, he opens something like a Kabinett from the 1958 vintage, in perfect condition at thirty-eight years old - a **Kabinett** wine! Or a *Müller-Thurgau QbA* from 1963 (1963!) that was drinking like a dream.

Odernheimer at a glance:

Value, value, VALUE for big-flavored Rheingauers, only occasionally stellar, but always very GOOD.

Plush, fruity style for drinkers who might find many Rheingauers too austere.

how the wines taste:

They're broader and more horizontal in structure, but with the underlying firmness of typical Rheingau Rieslings.

Mouth-filling fruit they're sensual rather than cerebral wines. Odernheimer is a practical man, and he's conceded a great deal to make his wines attractively priced. If you're looking for healthy, clean, voluminous Rheingau wines at astounding prices, look no further.

GOD-40L 2000 Rheingau Riesling, 1.0 Liter

I have asked to have the Grosslage name (Johannisberger Erntebringer) removed from this, as I disapprove of Grosslagen on principle and wish to *expunge* them whenever possible. This wine is actually Johannisberger *Vogelsang Kabinett*. This is like Jaques Seysses offering a "jug" wine made from Gevrey "Les Gruenchers." It has a fragrance of warmed maize and sautéed apples; it's fruity and spicy, deft, and, as always, above its class. The 1999 was juicier but the 2000 has more pith and pure fruit.

SOS: 2 (between one and five)

GOD-39 1999 Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling Kabinett "Feinherb"

It's a first offering and its a cask-sample - still! It is soft and juicy with the violet and tarragon spice and his resinous house style. Almost an Austrian lilac-y note, as if you were chewing the petals.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to five years)

GOD-37 1999 Johannisberger Vogelsang Riesling Spätlese "Feinherb"

Remember what "feinherb" means? Sure you do! It means Herb is lost again and you have to go find him. Poor Herb! Or, it means the wine was *fined* with *herbs*. Where have Basil and Tara gone? To score some "feinherb" if they're smart, because this is Odernheimer's best 1999: a remarkably tight, convincing core of Riesling flavor. Ripe, un-evolved nose of sourdough toast and maize; it's a little toppy like many 1999s, but a suavely compact finish suggests a fine "career" for this Riesling.

SOMMELIER ALERT! (between three and twelve years)

GOD-41 2000 Hattenheimer Wechselbrunnen Riesling Spätlese

Juicy nutty and masculine; it tastes effectively halbtrocken (despite 30 grams residual sugar); a liquid beignet here; long, tight kernel of structure and grip.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)



jakob riedel

rheingau • hallgarten

I've been writing "colorful prose" about Wolfgang for years now; he lends himself to it. He's his own caricature, with his elastic face, grand gestures, declamatory locution and brimming vitality. Eccentric perhaps! His wines, also, are eccentric, if not anachronistic. But the man and the culture from which he emerges are somehow both stunning and mystifying. There is a *value* here, something to which we must attend. Instinctively I know if I don't *enter in* to Riedel and his experience, I will squander something precious in my own soul.

His is a personality that could only exist in the old-world. It isn't that time has passed him by so much as *he* has passed *through* time, at least the kind of time we measure by the dross and ephemera of modern living. He's a creature of eternity. You can easily imagine him living in any historical

epoch without being different from the man in front of you. He's also funny, excitable, and grandly affectionate. I, in response am, oh so fond of *him*, but beyond my little sentiments I am just *ticked* that a man like Wolfgang exists at all!

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! Nothing but Riesling, natch. Reductive winemaking is the order of the day: the first racking is as early as possible. After a single-egg 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 whose soul can still agonize; 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 that side of his spirit, the capacity to be *devout*, but his brimming delights and enthusiasms mandated an earthy path for this man.

Lately, though, Wolfgang seems ever more serious about returning to his first love, art history. As Riedels do not care to 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 (assuming they buy German wine at all and not someone's mass-produced Pinot Grigio) 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, I sense, are paying a price for their purism, and Wolfgang's heart is divided.

In fact the 1998 vintage speaks to that basic schism in Wolfgang's heart. He spent much of the year in a scholar-

ly project and, in his own words, "neglected my vineyards such as I have never done. Good thing ninety-eight was a poor vintage!" Wolfgang *cares* very deeply about his wines, but not *aesthetically*; he is not one of those fanatical vintners who will go to any length to cope with a harvest like the rainy, uneven 1998. So he sold all but a single wine off in bulk. The one wine deemed worthy of keeping was shown to us with great ceremony and pride! This is in fact a pattern here. A vintage is pilloried until the wine's ready to be shown, at which point it is presented with an air of "Eh? Eh? How about this? Not so bad after all, eh?"

The house containing the winery belongs to Wolfgang's mother Christine Riedel. She's quite a *person - age* 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 at eighty-plus 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-Greifenclau 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-six 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 where a wine older than any of us had been given to us to drink.

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. We may be the last people who ever see it. 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?

We taste all the wines here at cool room temperature, in quiet, deliberately, against a white tablecloth; we peer into them with absorption, we have time to hear their secrets (and oh, what secrets they have.) 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 TBA. 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.

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! We ring the bell, wait through a dramatic pause and suddenly: “Ah HA!!” beams Wolfgang Riedel as he throws open the door, face incandescent, arms outspread.

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.

GRL-21 1998 Hallgartener Jungfer Riesling Trocken

There’s just one wine in 1998, in two versions. I liked them both! This Trocken wine is really fine; all kinds of nutty-quince-y, appley notes, a bit of burnt-wick (the smell when you blow out a candle) - like a delicate Vouvray Sec, with a huge nutty finish. It is unique and remarkable among German wines.

SOS: -2 (between two and eight years)

GRL-23 1999 Hallgartener Schönhell Riesling

This wine amazed me; a fine, piquant violet-y nose; a great peal of echo here; in like a lamb, out like a lion! The “finest” wine from here in many years. Plum-blossom. Gripping and classy all the way. How did he do it? “Oh, even a blind chicken will peck a piece of corn eventually.” What’s beautiful about this wine are all the most beautiful among things of beauty. Plus, he somehow got robust acidity and extract in a low-acid low-extract vintage. Yo GO guy! +

SOS: 1 (between three and thirteen 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.

You can buy softer and sweeter Mosels than the ones I sell. That style has every right to

exist, I suppose, but it goes against the regional grain. If you were a grower in Chateauneuf-du-Pape, why would you want to make a wine that tasted like Beaujolais? If

I look for slate. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness.

you're looking for softish, sort of vaguely appley Riesling, buy it from some other place and let the Mosel be its inimitable self.

The valley itself is gorgeous and it can also be cruel. It 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 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 among the vintners are Catholically devout servants of this particular mystery of nature.

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 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 condition of being. But not us. Sometimes you will look up there 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! The people who *are* willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer - and older. Much of the casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but the steep slopes need experienced hands. Finding labor and paying the laborer what he's worth are serious problems for a Mosel vintner. Yes, 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 floun-

Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly.

dering. 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 nearly *doubled* in the past five years, faced mutiny from their vineyard workers if they added more land.

Yet the strong survive quite well, though their numbers grow fewer. The Mosel is generally considered the

region from which the noblest wines come. Hitherto untapped export markets are flourishing. There are plenty of high-achieving growers-and the region will never want for tourism, such is its ravishing natural beauty. The wines, when they're in character, are like nothing else on earth.

But the Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-wracking 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. The emotional consequences are still being played out. People will show you pictures, show you the water marks in their homes, tell you tales of heroic measures necessary to protect their young wines-most of which were miraculously, unharmed. And the following year saw equally remorseless flooding: how much can these people endure? The new-world wine-maker "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 lives in a feeling that lies deeper than human eyes can see. 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

But the Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-wracking flood during the harvest of 1997.

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. And I call that heroism.

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.



Erdener Prälat

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 Süsreserve 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. I've done everything in my power to abuse these wines; I've given them to customers from bottles opened for days and even weeks, I've stuck them in tastings among estate Mosel wines; they always shine! 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 "Piesport 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. This is because, as you know, most people like the taste of Riesling, but they just don't like the thought of actually *drinking* this thing they think is "Riesling." Let me describe the bottle to you, in case you are one of the eleven Americans who haven't seen one: clear glass, Bordeaux shape, punted base. Rectangular label, two-thirds of the way up. Very clear graphics, highlighting the word RIESLING (I am honest to a fault, I guess), and spelling out who the "T" and "J" in "TJ" actually are. While this is far

more conventional than a Randall Grahm label (though I have better ties than Mr. Grahm, and not as many really bad hair days), it is buckets better than the old TJ label.

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. Perhaps there were some makeshift blends in there too - I'm a little hazy on the details. But here's the punchline: when the votes were tallied, *one* wine stood out. It created a consensus that *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.

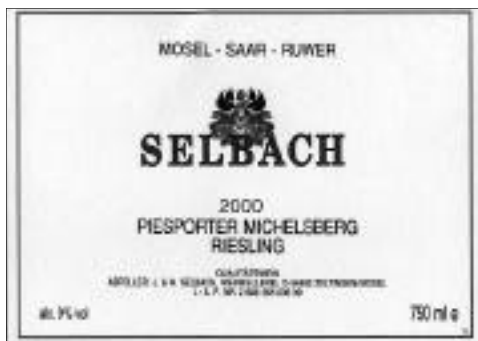
Ah, beginner's luck! I am proud of being a marketing-bonehead. When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

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 2000 vintage is wonderful!

Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:

- GSR-100 Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA
- GSR-200 Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA
- GSR-300 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA
- GSR-119 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett
- GSR-129 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese
- GSR-600 TJ Riesling



selbach-oster

mosel • zeltingen

“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.”

The secret is lees. *Please lees me, oh yeah, like I lees you.* 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*.

Selbach’s wines need a lot of time. Oh they’re tasty enough young, but they *reward* patience with a panoply of flavors only incipient in the early days. I have them in my cellar but don’t often reach for them, since I’m always thinking: “Wait for it, wait for it,” but one night I just didn’t give a shit. I **wanted** A Selbach wine and that was all there was to it. I found a bottle of 1989 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Spätlese with a slightly bulging cork, and figured that was all the excuse I needed.

1989 was Johannes’ breakthrough vintage in many ways; it was the first young vintage I tasted thinking “*What’s going on here?*” God, what a joy it was to drink this Wehlener. So expressive and so impeccable.



The tasting of the young vintage of Selbach-Oster is a workmanlike half-day’s task. There are a lot of wines, and damn it, they’re all good. You yearn for a dud once in awhile, a wine you don’t have to concentrate on, something you can spit and forget. Not at Uferallee 23! Toward the end of the tasting I slow down, partly from ordinary fatigue, partly because I become aware of something significant taking place. A group of wines like these accumu-

- 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

lates and creates a crescendo of meaning. It doesn’t want to be grasped and *apprehended*, but I stubbornly try to explain it to you. I must be an epiphany-junkie.

Sometimes a vintage like 1999 (many of which are still available) can shine a very bright light on the Good Guys. Johannes “*got*” *this vintage*. He read it precisely perfectly. He and a small handful of others made the best wines the vintage could produce, and not just one or two of them (which can be a fluke): ALL OF THEM. Next time you see him you should kiss him on the lips.

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.

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 that makes me pause. I’ll repeat it as though in her voice, but please understand I’m not quoting verbatim. “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 seize the opportunity, you CELEBRATE the opportunity.

I recall also a time a few years ago when I was tasting at Merkelbach. I had someone with me who hadn't been to Germany before, and when we were done with the new vintage we tasted a few older wines, as is the local custom. Hearing the way Merkelbachs recalled each aspect of each wine's story - when it was picked, from which parcel, in which condition, aged in which cask - our new arrival remarked upon this remarkable recall. And Sigrid said, "Yes: can you see what wine *means* to these people?" And I felt a sap rise in my soul. Yes, I think I see what wine means to these people, and also I see how it moves Sigrid and how tenderly she wants me to see it.

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.

Don't forget to distinguish between J. & H. Selbach, which is the *negociant* arm of the business, and **Selbach-Oster**, the estate. Though both businesses are imbued with the same soul, and both sets of wines express a certain aes-

thetic. Part of that aesthetic is the eschewing of anything *confected* in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its *internalskeletal* 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." Tact and love are in this family's blood.

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*. When you try to find words you grope and flail and sound silly. Like me.

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.

In both 1999 and 2000 the Selbach style of long lees contact was crucial. But for opposite reasons. In 1999 it gave a *gravity* to the wines in a vintage which elsewhere was merely pleasant. In 2000 it provided a ravishing counterpoint to the vintage's signature flavors of lime, laurel and mineral salts. The wines are indeed a little drier now, but this is neither here nor there - Selbach wines are always balanced, and always especially food-friendly. No other Mosel wines in my portfolio are more flexible at table.

To some extent I have always taken Johannes Selbach's guiding intelligence as a given. Yet over the years I have come to consciously admire it. He knows just what he wants to do, and knows what to do to make it happen. Few vintners have such precise vision. But more than that - and yes, I'm writing this for Jo's eyes, the spirit which guides him, the thing he is trying to serve, is valuable and beautiful, and for this I don't admire him; I love him.

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.

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 2000 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 **charm-ing** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

GSO-175 2000 Selbach-Oster Riesling

This I tasted at the breakfast table! It went good with rolls and ham. It's just about a perfect "entry-level" Selbach-Oster: robust, leesy and tasty. A happy price-point item here.

SOS: 2 (between one and eight years)

GSO-165 2000 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett

GSO-165h 2000 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). For the 2000-vintage I selected a blend which contained a cask of Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Kabinett; I wanted slate-brilliance. GOT IT! The palate is tight, vivid, dense, salty, type-defining.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)

- GSO-166 **2000 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett**
 Herbal nose like a springtime glade near a stream where cress and woodruff grow; starched, grainy, salty, absolutely ideal at the table, or on the couch, or on your kitchen counter - *anywhere near food!*
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between four and fifteen years)
- GSO-167 **2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**
 This had just been bottled when I tasted it: stunted and subdued. It seemed silkier and more purely slatey, but the mid-palate was bruised; the external mannerly profile was lovely and Johannes told me it was his favorite Kabinett from cask.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between four and sixteen years)
- GSO-168 **2000 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**
 An out-of-control troika of slate and limey brilliance, with the snap of the whip, yet also a lascivious wink of seductive possibility on the mid-palate; this is simply as good as Kabinett can be. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)
- GSO-156 **1999 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 Weight and mineral in this excellent dry Spätlese; herbal, long, spriggy, mineral, and sweet lime. Drink this from now to four years and then *again* in thirteen to seventeen years.
- GSO-163 **1999 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**
 Oops, no tasting note! It wasn't on the table with the others but sort of zoomed past me with Johannes saying "You've been shipping this wine, thought you might want to taste it." which I did and remember thinking *Well this is yummy!* And boyz 'n gurls - thassal I gots. From memory:
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)
- GSO-169 **2000 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese**
 This is the "token" wine done in steel; Johannes likes to make at least one such wine per vintage just to prove a point! I like it; it's streamlined and kirschy; spicy and toppy; frisky, energetic wine.
 SOS: 2 (between six and seventeen years)
- GSO-151 **1999 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**
 More fundament than usual; a stentorian, masculine profile for this usually winsome wine. Sneaky mid-palate length. This has come on enormously with a year in bottle and gained stature and depth. Don't miss it; we're down to the final 50 cases. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between five and thirteen years)
- GSO-170 **2000 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese**
 The aesthetic opposite of the 2000 Badstube Spätlese; a mealy-woody old-style wine with simmer and smolder; evocative, even descriptive; it conveys something, it's the medium by which a larger story is told. It refers not merely to itself, but to all of life. Please, please: listen. +
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

- GSO-171 **2000 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**
 GSO-171h **2000 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
 This is a very murmury, suave version of that Mosel *thang*: flavors sung in a purring baritone. On the dry side but with swelling chords of flavor on the finish.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between six and fifteen years)
- GSO-164 **1999 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**
 Substance and soul in this un-flashy but wonderful Auslese; lovely mid-palate plushness; subtle beerenton, fine dialogue of lime and peach. Decidedly a table wine and not an adorable item of worship.
 SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)
- GSO-159 **1999 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese ***
 This one reminds me of a Christoffel wine; it is more refined and filigree than the regular Auslese, not any richer, riper or sweeter. Superb detail here; lime-blossom and tilleul; stylish, long palate, transparent and minerally. +
 SOS: 3 (between six and seventeen years)
- GSO-172 **2000 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese ***
 This is about as lovely and noble as they come. Glorious fragrance; it has silky, caressing fruit and a salty mineral wash on the finish. Hint of botrytis; lofty stuff.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)
- GSO-155 **1999 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese ****
 Oh, a murmuring, throaty richness to this vixen! Suave and subtle caramel. More grown-up and carnal. Purrrrrrr.... +
 SOS: 3 (between six and eighteen years)
- GSO-173h **2000 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese *** 12/375ml**
 One of the few botrytis monsters I really liked in the 2000 vintage, because the botrytis is: A) clean, and B) clean, and C) not the predominant flavor, and D) clean. The fruit and mineral are equally massive. LIMITED and . . . E) clean.
 SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GSO-174h **2000 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**
 An utter triumph in a difficult year, stunningly perfect fruit-concentrate. Zero discernible yucky-botrytis; pure as a mountain stream. All the salty green-fruit flavors of 2000 concentrated to an ambrosial degree. The young 1975s were like this. It is HIGHLY LIMITED, so be a Friend of Selbach-Oster before ordering it. One of the very greatest 2000s. ++
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-five years)



freiherr von schleinitz

mosel • kobern

Perhaps we got lulled into complacency with the string of fine vintages starting in 1988. For awhile it looked like I'd found a motherlode of reliably superb Mosel wine, and then it didn't want to rain any more, and then it rained too much. Nature needs to be much kinder to these people, because they care and you can't *conceive* of how hard they work in these austere terraces.

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 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 Weisenberg site produces the ballerinas.

Konrad Hähn is a serious, thoughtful man. He 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

- 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

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 is also a rarity among Mosel growers; he's a defender of Süssreserve. "Completely fermented wines have the lowest amount of fermentation by-products. Süssreserve doesn't add such things, because it never fermented. Süssreserve has a bad image because people were sloppy with it, but we use only Riesling, we make it only by cold filtration, and it's at least the same or better quality than the wine." Since 1989 all fertilizing has been organic, and will continue as long as it works. The cellar is reductive: only tanks. Now and again a wine's fermentation is spontaneously interrupted, particularly at the Auslese level. Konrad accepts this, but grudgingly. Wines with their own sweetness have a certain creaminess he finds troublesome. He likes sleek, snappy wines, and that's the sort of wine he makes.

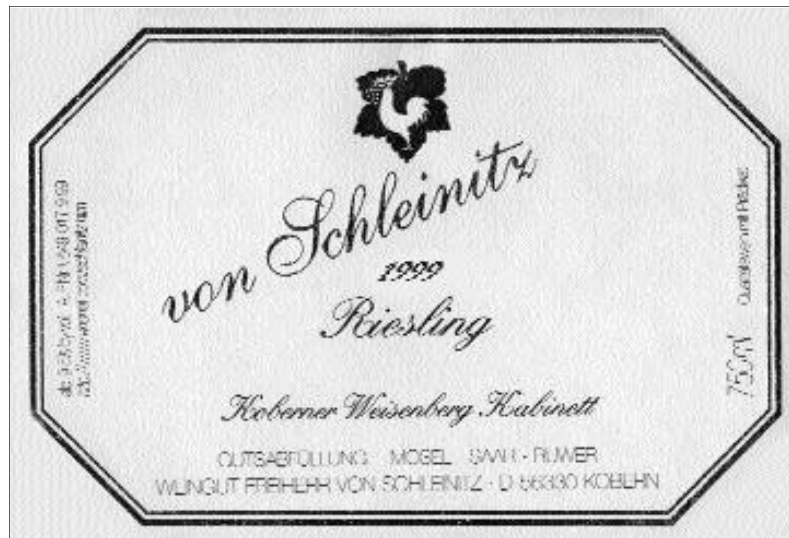
von Schleinitz at a glance:

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 spritzzy, and are piquantly charming; very easy wines to snuggle up to!

- GFS-40 **2000 von Schleinitz Riesling**
This would once have been known as Koberner Weisenberg but everybody wants to simplify. We added a bit of dosage to increase the wine's body and set up a piquant interplay; the wine is light but true, a discreet useful gulper.
SOS: 1 (now to four years)
- GFS-37 **1999 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Kabinett**
Oh yum! True Weisenberg: spritzzy, high-toned, zingy and vertical. This one is shimmering. It's also spicy and none too sweet, and leaves a brisk, grassy finish. Stands up to the great 1998. (between two and eight years)
- GFS-38 **1999 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese**
Toasty-grainy, ripe and maize-y; confiture, soft but minerally. Typically gentle 1999.
SOS: 2 (now to five years)
- GFS-36 **1998 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Auslese**
This was the "lesser" (in ripeness) of two, but I liked it more; a real spice-bomb, penetratingly minty-fennelly, a dark ore-ish note of botrytis, a real scythe of spice running through. It's not markedly sweet. An exciting wine for young drinking. If we sell through this there's an impressive 1999 Auslese in the wings.
SOS: 3 (between two and seven 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 40 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

- Vineyard area: 3.6 hectares
- Top sites: Kinheimer Rosenberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

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.

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, now the 2000s. 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-32 2000 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett

Yessir! Back in classic form after the atypically soft 1999: slaty and sassy, racy and true. Light and vigorous.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between three and twelve years)

GJM-33 2000 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese

Like the Kabinett, but more chewy, juicy and substantive.
SOS: 1 (between five and fifteen years)

GJM-34 2000 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese

It could *not* have been easy to get THIS Auslese in THIS vintage, and we were all shaking our heads at Erich’s achievement. A half-Fuder is all there is; I bought it all. Compact and brilliant, wonderful fruit, mirabelle and alisier, positive botrytis; this is better and cheaper than a Scharzhofberger Kabinett we had just tasted. And it’s none too sweet.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)

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. *Hey, glad to see ya!* 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!

I had failed to take into account the amount of *time* these wines need. I can be forgiven for having been seduced by their youthful veneer of charm. At least I think I can! This year I'm going to show you what I mean; you'll find an older vintage wine below that will show you (if you're enlightened enough to buy them) what even a few years in bottle will do to these wines: compound them, anchor them, reduce them ever-closer to their mysterious slaty essence.

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 the Erdener Treppchen. The estate has a good parcel in the Wehlener Sonnenuhr, part of Frau Justen's dowry, from which they make periodically outstanding wine, but Treppchen is identified as the giver of the estate's peak wine. 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 root-



- 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

stocks, or did until these venerable vines were cruelly uprooted for *Flurbereinigung*.

In common with most Mosel vintners, the Justens 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 this grower's 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. Learn the wine that makes a vintner excited and you begin to understand the vision he has for his own wines.

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.

At the end of the last two years' tastings, I've wanted to hug Stefan Justen. He really understood the 1999 vin-

tage. He didn't try to outdo or undo it. He relaxed his desire for extravagant fruit and made a range of fine gentle wines, drier than usual, with surprisingly explicit minerality. His 2000s were equally deft and fine, and included one bona-fide masterpiece I feel the presence of a steady hand. These are the wines of a *mature* vintner.

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 being mawkish and babbling like a besotted galoot. This 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."

Justen at a glance:

Full-throttle fruit and serious stature characterize these ripe Mosel wines. Prices have remained moderate for impeccable quality. **Outstanding success in 2000.**

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-50 1999 Estate Riesling

I usually assume the first wine on the table is just a foil, a little prelude (or Quaalude, in the case of really dull wines) to the "serious" wines to come. This wine stopped me in my tracks. A pretty, fragrant, appley, *dear* little wine. *Attractive, slatey, forthright young charmer ISO cultivated palate for tactile games involving the mouth and tongue.* Wanna reply? A slatey texture belies the gentle acidity. (now to four years)

GJU-58 2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Hochgewächs

One sip and selected! This is almost as zingy and vivid as Minges' Liters, but with even nobler fruit. Just about perfect Mosel wine, with all its quintessential fruit and mineral; racy, long, more elegance than most chaptalized German wine; just a happy drink. + SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GJU-59 2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

Hard act to follow! But still lovely. Demure, minerally, drier than the Hochgewächs, more thoughtful and measured. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)

GJU-60 2000 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

Exceptionally expressive nose with every Treppchen facet: nut, peach, apple, slate; very long, perfumed finish. Between the two is a mannerly, minerally wine with a tinge of botrytis. It's yummy, don't worry, but lots of the fun is observing the clarity with which Treppchen is explicated. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)

- GJU-61 **2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**
 About the dreamiest fruit you could ever imagine. And it's so long you feel it in your pores. Graceful, many-layered, transparent, fervidly mineral - the best wine from here since the supernal 1998 Treppchen Spätlese. ++
SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between six and twenty years)
- GJU-55h **1999 Erdener Prälät Riesling Auslese #25, 12/500ml**
 Complex, suggestive nose; herbal, redcurrant, empire-apple; thick-textured fruit and mineral interplay; great tangy length.
 SOS: 3 (between six and seventeen years)
- GJU-62 **1990 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**
 LIBRARY RELEASE. There's no more wondering how the 1990s are holding up! Here's a chance to see one perfectly stored. This is in many ways the argument for the 1990 vintage, that something extra in the nose, almost a note of mature Veltliner (which could be the development of those mighty 1990 acids) along with truly wild limey spice-apple fruit. It's Big (if you can use that word for a wine with 8.5% alcohol!) and translucent: you don't see clearly *into* the wine but it makes a strong impression on the finish. A salty, chewy wine that tastes ripe but not explicitly *sweet*. I remember this fuder as a wine I bypassed in favor of another which had more articulation - why he still has it! - but this wine has its own thing it urgently needs to say; it just hasn't found words. It speaks in a kind of mineral-mime. It makes a serious *gesture* with that remarkable finish, but this weighty wine isn't going to spell it out for you. Thus, here is a ten-year-old Auslese still on its climb UP, still needing another five, six, seven years to know what to say with its big deep voice. We should be there when it does. It is, intriguingly, a food-wine!
 SOS: 2



alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

Every now and again I'll get a little stab of pleasure that good things happen by dint of my labors. I was talking about Merkelbach with another grower, and was told "You know Terry, your business is really a significant part of their total existence. Without you they'd be selling 75% of their wines in bulk." (They still sell a little, and even my TJ Riesling has a few drops of Merkelbach wine from a Fuder sold to Selbachs.) At this news I was both elated and chastened. I'm glad that many dozens of glorious wines exist because I was there to love and receive them. But Ulp! I'd better look both ways *whenever* I cross.

But 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.

Rolf and Alfred Merkelbach must wonder at how a big giggling dope like me can sell the quantity of wine I do. I wonder it myself, actually. But the brothers M. are in a more-or-less constant state of vague wonder about the big world. Old Europe flows through their very veins.

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 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."

Something sweet happened during our visit one year. Rolf and Alfred had a lady come in to cook us a little soup for our lunch, and this lady had a small child with her. This curly-haired little sprite gurgled in and out of the room chirping her little-kid nonsense and flirting with her

- 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

"uncles," whom I had never seen with a kid before. *This* was a new perspective (I think if I were a little kid again I'd want an uncle like Rolf and Alfred). I asked her at one point if she liked wine. "Of **course!**" came her piping reply. Would she like to taste something? "No! It's *too early.*" All right, sweetheart. Bye! (as she vanished off into the kitchen). It couldn't have been FIVE MINUTES before she reappeared, "O.K., I'll have some wine now!"

We tasted in the "parlor" again this year, and 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 joined us for this visit and a sweet little supper we had afterwards. She and Hans had just returned from vacation in South Africa, and many were the anecdotes. She 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.”

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.

I liked 2000 a good deal more than 1999 here. It's a solid honest vintage through and through, reminiscent of the 1991s. A few of the wines are “small” but I have no objection to smallness if the flavors are clear and proper and the wines are balanced. Merkelbachs purchased a device to control fermentation temperatures “though we're not sure it was needed after all last Fall.” There seems to be a tendency toward even greater flavor precision and a little less sweetness. The crackling piercing spring-water aspect of Mosel Riesling reaches an apex here.

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 appley 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? - they 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 Prälatur-Würzgarten direction: bergamot, spice, peach. The downstream section is more classically slatey, with nuances of hyssop, walnut and instinctly *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-92 2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling

The spriggiest among the QbAs; a dear little thing of kiwi - a kiwi pee-wee; slinky and penetrating; correct, spicy and hyper.
SOS: 2 (between two and ten years)

GME-93 2000 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett

This will be two Fuders, numbers 1 and 4. They are both fragrant, stylish with juice and cut and remarkable length for their lightness. The unbearable lightness of Riesling!
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between four and fifteen years)

GME-94 2000 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett (Fuder #18)

This has more mineral old-vines density and the most physiological ripeness of the four casks of Kabinett.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between four and fifteen years)

- GME-95 **2000 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**
 Two Fuders: numbers 21 and 19. Pure, true Treppchen in both casks. Number 19 had slightly less focus. You could teach a terroir class with these three sites Rosenberg-Treppchen-Würzgarten. P'raps I will!
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between four and fifteen years)
- GME-96 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**
 Number 12 is light, spicy and true. Number 7 is scintillating and very pretty. Both are SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between four and thirteen years)
- GME-97 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**
 Number 9 was the first cask to jump ahead of the pack. More whey in it, more core of ripeness. Number 23 was similarly juicy but snappier and had a longer finish. Again, both are SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between four and sixteen years)
- GME-98 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #14)**
 Pure, serene, classical.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between six and eighteen years)
- GME-99 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #17)**
 This was appreciably more salty and minerally, so I opted to keep the two Fuders separate, though we're offering them at the same price.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 0 (between six and eighteen years)
- GME-100 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese**
 This is Fuder #10 with a half-cask of #13; both were higher-toned. Number 10 is quite the lady-about-town, built like a runway model. More polleny and vanilla-apple here. And yes, still SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between six and twenty years)



joh. jos. christoffel

mosel • ürzig

MOSEL WINES

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.

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. You start thinking of music, poetry, *love*; you're softened, roused, grateful. It feels larger to be human. You feel the breeze of an unseen grace. 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.



observation. They do not discern a watershed in 1992 or any other time. The wines are what they've always been.

Perhaps they're right after all. Maybe the vintages

With the 1992 vintage came a great awakening. This was the first of a succession of vintages where Christoffel seemed to have **forgotten** how to make an ordinary wine! Mosel insiders, and Hans-Leo himself, don't know quite what to make of my

- 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

between 1992 and 1998 were just *easier to taste young*. Consider that I have never had an old bottle of Christoffel wine and thought "Oh, this wasn't one of the 'good ones'." They're all excellent!

Tasting them young these days, it doesn't take long before you realize the futility of attempting to be "discriminating." O.K., I GIVE UP! you think to yourself, as one masterpiece after another washes over your now-helpless palate. And he is pouring the wine casually, cracking jokes with us, a mild serenity reposing over his fine features.

The press has noticed also. And here is a fine irony; Stuart Pigott wrote that it was like a composer who's been writing great music all his life, suddenly "discovered" at the age of sixty. Christoffel was also invited to join the VDP, another symbol of recognition (and a pain in the ass for me, as they have their silly auction system which renders some of the best wines egregiously expensive).

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!"

Apropos old wines: Hans-Leo drolly asked if we wouldn't "mind" tasting something back a few years, having worked so hard to essay his new vintage. We could be persuaded, we supposed. The wine had a greeny nose with gold glints; I thought it couldn't be more than 25-30 years old, with that color. A quite *heavenly*, mature Mosel fragrance that grew smoky as it sat in the glass. The palate was long and dry with delicate smoke in the finish; just lovely in a calm, meditative way. Guessing the vintage would be difficult, but the balance of probability pointed me toward 1966. Wrong. The wine was a **1959**, an Auslesen, *not* one of the huge ones for which the vintage is famous, but from the parcel that the current three-star hails from. I had never tasted such a youthful and pensive 1959, and while I was wondering at the beauty of this thing, I glanced over at Sigrid Selbach, who was with us for this visit. She was chuckling with Hans-Leo, just as these two friends have done since the first time I saw them together, twelve years ago. Sigrid first brought me here, and now here we were again, drinking this 1959. The year Johannes, her eldest, was born. I started to cry because I didn't deserve to be there. I had too many hands in too many cookie jars in my life. I didn't belong there. Silly, isn't it. In order to try and *be* worthy, and because I felt so sentimental, I rather ceremonially thanked Sigrid for bringing me here and for all the things that led to this moment, trying desperately to keep my voice from breaking. "Oh, now; it's too early in the day for such compliments!" she sang out. And, perfectly, the moment dissolved.

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 2000s are almost surrealistically crystalline and intricate. The more I get, the more you want; sorry, but I still must allocate. The estate is tiny, and has been discovered!

After a superb and still somewhat inscrutable vintage in 1999, Hans Leo's come back with an almost agonizingly complex and filigree vintage in 2000. These are scintillating wines with gossamer fruit built on a frame of titanium needles. It is a fitting swansong for him, though he resists sentimentalizing 2000 as his "final" or last "real" vintage.

I was there with Kevin and Anthony this year, and when the old wine came out I watched them both fall into the trance. There were some very moist eyes in that room as we drank one of the absolutely greatest of all 1976s, a haunting Beerenauslese. One of them said it was the greatest sweet wine he'd ever tasted. Anthony was In The Zone, a place I knew very well. We drink plenty of wines that impress us, but few that restore our tenderest souls to us.

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.

Do me a favor and set up another paradigm, just for a moment. Start from the BOTTOM, and observe that the first Auslese is a **beautiful** wine that is **worth its price**. Then the one-star is a different, in some ways even more beautiful wine that sells at a higher price, but is worth it. And then the three-star wine is a really exalted wine that costs so much more it's really best reserved for very special occasions. This paradigm doesn't deny the hierarchy, but it puts the wines on a **level table**, each is a valid experience WITHIN ITS LEVEL AND AT ITS PRICE, and it's fatuous and irrelevant to think in terms of having to grab the BEST. EVERYTHING'S THE BEST: the no-star is the best \$20 Auslese, the one-star is the best \$26 Auslese, and so on.

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-94 **2000 Estate Riesling**
Honey I'm home! Key-lime pie on a coulis of *fraise des bois*.
SOS: 2 (between three and eleven years)
- GJC-95 **2000 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**
Especially nutty fragrance. A frisee salad with walnuts, a few nuggets of bacon, a pinch of fleur de sel. Incredible extract - "more than the 1999 Auslesen," Hans Leo observed - Hans-Günter Schwarz (Müller-Catoir) would make a wine like this on the Mosel. Simply fabulous! +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between five and twenty-one years)
- GJC-96 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**
Different from earlier years, less jazzy, more fundamentally Mosel; pure naked terroir. +
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 0 (between five and twenty-one years)
- GJC-97 **2000 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**
A more swollen, billowing version of the Kabinett; the same sense of TRENDIOUS density in a structure so lacy and brilliant like diamonds. Ravishing finish. "This is a wine for eternity," said Hans Leo. ++
SOMMELIER ALERT! LIMITED!
SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-five years)
- GJC-98 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese**
Gregorian chant of slate. Hildegard of Ürzig. The acidity is more visible (though hardly obtrusive); a silvery moonlit pool of fruit, starry and tingly. +
LIMITED!
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GJC-99 **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese ***
I tasted all of these within a week of bottling, but this was the first of them to seem stunted. O.K., but it's perfect! And it hasn't even unfurled its fruit. +
LIMITED!
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GJC-100h **2000 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese *** 12/375ml**
"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 is different from preceding vintages, though. There's Eiswein in it, and it's so concentrated it's almost opaque. Though far from monolithic. It's fierce just now, and its botrytis is pronounced. I know I'll wish I'd given it a star. Slap my face when you see me.
LIMITED!
SOS: 3 (eight to twenty-five years)

heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

I have imported Martin Kerpen's wines since the very beginning, through a marriage, three kids (his) and a label change. I've started to recognize the flavors of individual casks in his cellar. We had a few very fat years, thanks to some fulsome and conspicuous reviews, but more recently things have coasted back to a steady cruise. When I tasted through the 2000s I was curious to see the sales figures, and I felt that these wines are too good for these numbers. So, Madames et Messieurs, you're gonna be hearing a lot about Kerpen from me.

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.

I was so excited by the 2000s I wanted to hug Martin, which is somewhat weird since I come about chest-high on him and I feel like a jockey. I did it anyway. So would you; the wines aren't only good, they're evocative and considerate.

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 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

- 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

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! Outstanding success in 2000!

how the wines taste:

They are clear and lithe in structure but with juiciness which gives them a haunting charm. Less leesy-fluffy than Selbach, with even more flowery perfume. Unabashedly pretty but not vapid, not just pretty.

- GKE-63 **2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**
GLORY-nose, both 2000 lime and Sonnenuhr’s herbal savor; the palate is lithe, zingy and penetrating, gorgeous fruit carried on a fast icy stream of acid and extract; long, spicy finish, salty and suave. The best W.S. Kab in years from here - and if you want a lot . . . talk to me.
SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)
- GKE-64 **2000 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Kabinett**
This is where the Pouilly-Fumé flint is most explicit; kirschy too; works drier and more masculine than the Wehlener and seems more marked by ripeness (“It was a small Spätlese,” said Martin); without quite the fruit dialectic of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr, it’s the more practical at table.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)
- GKE-65 **2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese (artist label)**
You know this: it’s the little bird in the rowboat. And the wine is just lovely, a cask-y nose, a nice old-fashioned touch. Shows a lot of lees on the palate, but ah, I see I am tasting one component of a four part blend. Well let’s taste the finished product, eh Doc? Oh boy! The final blend has a ravishing complex Grand Cru nose; it’s high-toned and wild like laurel; wonderfully firm and detailed: sleek, feline, delicious.
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GKE-66 **2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese ****
This is one of the wines of the 2000 vintage. HOW on earth did he do it? This much ripeness and concentration without even a breath of the 2000-gnarlies! A touch of subtle mealy woodsiness gives a ravishing note of complexity. The palate is 2000 at its best, both juicy and firm. This is an ecstatic dream of pure Mosel beauty. LIMITED!++
SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GKE-67h **2000 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**
The final note is pending the wine’s maturing. What I tasted on the day was in the phase where the horseradishy aspect of fierce young Eiswein was just all over it, but a swelling wave of fruit really began to glow on the finish and there’s just a tiny bit I don’t want to miss by delaying
- GKE-68h **2000 Graacher Domprobst Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
Far too early to note, but it seems to have The Stuff; should be caramelly and savage. LIMITED!
SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty years)

willi schaefer

mosel • graach

As far back as last November Willi was already grimacing over the teeny amount of wine he'd have for me. He never has **much**, but tries to do his best for me, like the old friend he is. When we'd gone through the wines in March 2001 we got to the moment of truth: what could I have. I have never seen a man virtually squirm with remorse. Most, even the warm 'n cuddly ones, are matter-of-fact, as I am. Vintages come in varying sizes, and I don't expect the same quantity of wine year-in year-out. But this dear-hearted man was so *stricken* I had to console him! And I realized as I was doing so that I was speaking a Truth of my heart: I am grateful for every drop.

Willi has given us more 1999s in compensation, and we took them greedily. I tell you all this because I was so *touched* by his caring. How often, really, do you encounter a truly tender heart?

The bad news is we only have 135 cases of wine, total. I toyed with the idea of removing Schaefer from this catalog, as I don't want to frustrate you. But to do so would have been unfair to Willi. Thus, please accept my abject apologies in advance. Each of you who get some will deserve more. Those who get none will deserve some.

Eventually, Willi tells me, when his son Christoph is a full-time player in the winery, 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

- Vineyard area: 2.7 hectares
- Annual production: 2,200 cases
- Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

our souls against the rocks unless we insist on balancing our *whole* lives. This sermon will be rebroadcast at eleven.

Christoph sat with us again this year; at least I think he was sitting. He's, like, 9 ft. 3 inches tall or something, and him sitting is like me standing. I still can't get over that Christoph has *grown up*. I remember him as a toddler, and unless this is an acid flashback I can't quite accept him as an adult; I want to tickle him under the chin and make funny faces so he'll giggle. You can see him in the picture. He is going to make excellent wines; I feel it in my bones.

Although I enter Willi and Esther's house in a state of almost religious anticipation, what actually happens is we laugh and laugh. Maybe laughter is the catechism of this religion. 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.

I don't know a more decent, honorable, kinder or more conscientious man than Willi Schaefer. It's wonder-

ful to be his friend and to sit at his and Esther's table. I hope he'll visit the States again so he can sit at mine. Everybody who knows Willi loves and respects him; he's never so serious that he loses his calm geniality, but his caring is woven into the fabric of his character; it simply becomes a way to live, not for fussing or testimonializing such as this one. Sorry, Willi! Actually, my buddy Willi revealed a new, gonzo side of his character during an evening together, showing a hitherto unsuspected talent at what I'll call "oral party tricks." Somewhere along in there I had one of those keen moments of cognitive dissonance. I was laughing nearly to the point of tears at Willi's latest antic, and suddenly I remembered that the wine in my glass was that celestially pure 1975 Auslese, and I realized the angel over my shoulder, stroking my cheek; I was drinking a great wine with a dear friend and I had the luxury to be silly and goofy instead of solemn and worshipful. Life was a gleam with kindness.

He was one of the first vintners I ever met. First I just liked his wines and thought he was a nice guy. His wines in those days were just like him: honest, pure, unfussy, with a certain delicacy, not at all showy. But that youthful understatement matured into the most *impeccable* Mosel purity. You have to go a *long* way back to find a Schaefer wine that tastes fully ready to drink. I've never tasted one that was over the hill, and I've gone back as far as 1959 on several occasions. Starting in the 1989 vintage Willi's young wines seemed to become more expressive. These days they are about as vivid and racy and transparent as German wine can be. You put the first glass of the first wine to your nose and think: "There it is!" The soul of the Mosel is being *revealed* to you.

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, except 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 also their special capabilities. As a taster he responds to "character above all. The finesse of fruit is also important to me, and the harmony of sweet-

ness, 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 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 deep contentment in this household, the bedrock joy taken when one's heart is at home in one's work. Different vintners have said this to me at different times: Hans-Günter Schwarz at Müller-Catoir 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.



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. 2000 is a splendid light vintage but smaller-than small.

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! 2000 was the fine vintage of a humble vintner. Willi knew if he harvested as selectively as looked necessary, he wouldn't get much wine and he might not get glamor-wine, but he'd get *quintessential SCHAEFER wine*. The new vintage recalls 1991, and have you opened any of those little gems lately?

- GWS-85 **2000 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling (Fuder #5)**
It's snappy, crystalline and apply with pure, compact fruit.
SOS: 1 (between four and sixteen years)
- GWS-86 **2000 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett (Fuder #10)**
This is a kind of ether of Domprobst, the highest notes of its flavor sung in a shimmering far-away chord, only it's quite definitely present as a sweet-sharp crunch of mineral. Remarkable length. Flavors expressed as electro-magnetism. A "light" wine but absolutely serious, and beautiful. +
SOS: 0 (Between five and sixteen years)
- GWS-87 **2000 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett**
Willi's one of the very few Mosel growers who'll permit Dosage to be used; he keeps a little on hand to adjust a wine that fermented too far. I applaud this flexibility, and employed it to give this lovely little Kabinett the balance it asked for.
SOS: 0 (between five and sixteen years)
- GWS-88 **2000 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett (Fuder #4)**
Stunning expressive nose, complex and pure; zingy, sleek, streamlined palate, more forthright and chewy than #10: "I don't use all them big words but I guess I make myself understood pretty good . . ."
SOS: 0 (between five and sixteen years)
- GWS-89 **2000 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #7)**
This has a little Auslese in it (he picked a miniscule amount and "sacrificed" it into this Spätlese), and a very large fragrance almost Eiswein-like; the palate, though, is dense and clean and crystalline. These wines are Bach-like, they have a reverence for the unalloyed purity of the soil. They're glossy not in order to impress but rather, simply, to convey. Ye shall see the terroir verily with great clarity, and it shall engage they gratitude, and cause thee to piss with great vigor. ++
SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-five years)



willi haag

mosel • brauneberg

This was the happiest visit I made last year, and this year's consolidated those optimistic vibes. 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. How improbable it all is! It took the 1999 vintage, certainly the most "difficult" of any vintage in Marcus' "era," for the young man to demonstrate his ascension. In a year when many estates with outstanding track records appeared to stumble, this vintner got it all right. 2000 is if anything even better.

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

- 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

was earlier on. Plus I always seem to arrive a week after bottling, just as the wines are shutting down. All the more reason to celebrate these 2000s; even the TROCKEN wines were good. Marcus was another vintner I wanted to congratulate with ceremony, but all I could mutter was a quick "*Rock on, dude*" as we were saying goodbye.

So I'll do it here. The Haags had it rough, and they came through. They should be very proud of their 2000s. I respect their determination and courage. Buy the wines and contribute to the happy ending of a hard story.



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 mineral. Excellent 2000s; Marcus' second consecutive triumph under difficult circumstances.

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, mineral 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-47 **2000 Estate Riesling Halbtrocken**
Quite the charming nose! The palate shows plenty of fruit, mineral, smoothness and charm. A perfect Wine By The Glass. 100% Juffer, by the way.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (now to four years)
- GHA-48 **2000 Estate Riesling**
Again 100% Juffer. Interesting sweet cherry note. More outgoing and buoyant than the Halbtrocken, and also more muscle than the Kabinett offered next; more marked by fructose; it's an easy-going gulper for the old-school German wine drinker.
SOS: 3
- GHA-49 **2000 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Kabinett**
A gentle dispersed structure somehow firms into a long mineral finish that's quite pointed. The wine is leesy and none too sweet. It's limpid and gentle, yet the acidity is normal and the extract very high.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)
- GHA-50 **2000 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Spätlese**
It's the Kabinett reduced and concentrated by a third! Same pure fruit, mineral fervor, sense of structure consolidating. Thoughtful wine, but not pensive; it *parties* on your palate, tough guy!
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GHA-51 **2000 Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**
As always, more polished and "finished" than Juffer, as though it were graduated from an academy.
SOS: 3 (between six and twenty years)
- GHA-52h **2000 Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**
This is actually a Brauneberger Mandelgraben Eiswein that fell a few degrees Oechsle short of the bar; it has 34 grams of dry extract though, and a tingly keening fruit, concentrated but without an ounce of fat; lovely little touch of marzipan; a sleek little bird of Riesling, more haunting than seductive. LIMITED! +
SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty-eight years)

reuscher-haart

mosel • piesport

MOSEL WINES

Hugo Schwang makes the kinds of wines that demand time. I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all (and I did in fact skip it this year). The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present here. Even his basic 1995 Auslese was still a stinker in March of 1998. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with the 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

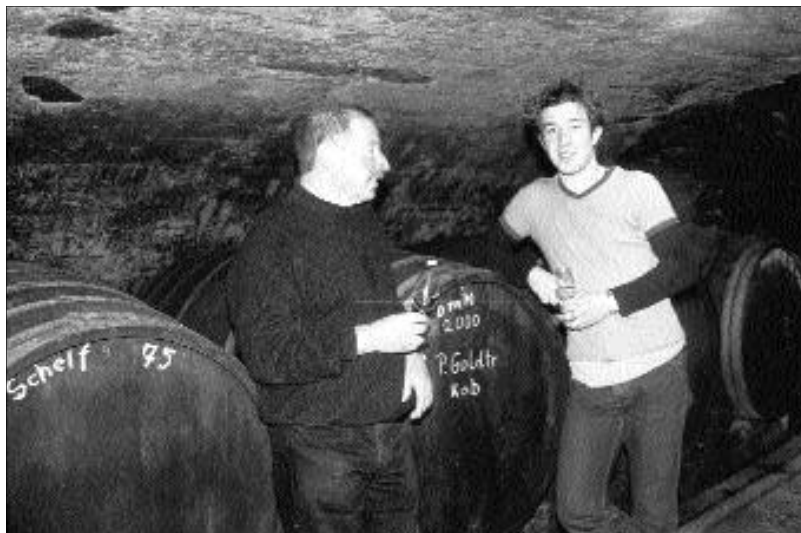
know it is doomed.

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. Other times I find them diffuse and blurry and I wonder if it's me or the wines.

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 qual-

- 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

ity," 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-30 **2000 Piespoeter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

Below some young yeast-aromas (which you, dear reader, won't have to smell) lies a very fine Kabinett; savory, old-style and salty.

SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GRH-29h **1998 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese, 500ml/12**

You can hold a séance with this wine, it's so sultry: dried apricot and bergamot on the palate. Fine honey-finish, yet the wine isn't too sweet at all. A complex, concentrated beignet of a wine.

SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)



hoffmann-simon

mosel • piesport

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. Meeting him for what I thought was the first time last month, I had that *déjà vu* thing. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs last November. 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 *outré* ideas. The truth is in the wines . . .

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating



- 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

sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. Musts settle by gravity for 48 hours. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fermentations but not all; the wines age without SO₂ on their gross lees. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. What is irreducible is a feeling in the tips of the fingers, an intuitive relationship to vines and wine. That can't be taught. But it can be discerned.

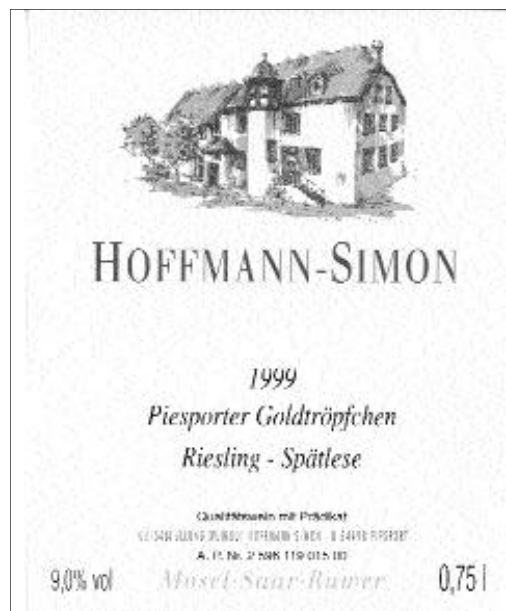
Hoffmann-Simon at a glance:

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart. Remarkably successful 1999s and a bona-fide masterpiece in 2000.

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-1 **1999 Estate Riesling**
 A fine lusty 1999!
 SOS: 2 (now to three years)
- GHS-2 **1999 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**
 Authoritative and complex, a remarkable ninety-nine: many-layered and not as come-hither as so many are. Again, 1999 grain but with real seriousness and resonance here. Grab it! LIMITED!
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)
- GHS-3 **2000 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**
 There's more of this, and you won't be sorry you have it! Suave and lingering. The structure is dispersed rather than pointed, but it's not at all sultry, but instead racy and focused.
 SOS: 1
- GHS-4 **1999 Maringer Honigberg Riesling Spätlese**
 Maring is off the Mosel in a side valley, reputed to make light but true wines with especially pretty fruit. It's been years since I saw one, but this little charmer stole my heart; it has the sweetness to lend a winsome piquant note to the slim high-toned fruit of the site. Very long for a 1999 and with a mirabelle-flowery authority. Unbelievable value.
 SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)
- GHS-5 **1999 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**
 Full-blast passion fruit aromas; it's as detailed as Pies Gold ever gets: luxurious but specific. Genial, fine, distinctive.
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GHS-6 **2000 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese**
 Redcurrant, woodruff, passion fruit, very salty, really seizes up on the finish to proclaim itself - "Don't you dare underestimate me!" - Force, length, a kind of savage majesty. LIMITED! +
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)



carl loewen

mosel • leiwen

What with family members' health problems, it's been a couple of tough years for Loewens. Somehow he made amazingly successful 1999s, among the best wines of the vintage. In 2000 he made the wines he seems to have wanted to make, but with the exceptions you see below, I liked them less. 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. It may be that it didn't serve him well in 2000, or it could easily be that we simply disagree, and I'm not entirely "right." But I felt many of the wines were just too savage in their acids (i.e. not sweet enough), and of course this being the Mosel there's no *dosage* lying around to correct such things.

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 to scrawny is the most common. 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



Sü s s r e s e r v e .
This rant will be available on audio-cassette, read by "The Rock." He u s u a l l y Leiwens things up.

Leiwen is just upstream from Tritenheim, 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. Yes that stretches the point — but there's still a **point**; there are great vineyards we don't know because

- Vineyard area: 6.2 hectares
- Annual production: 4,200 cases
- Top sites: Leiwener Laurentiuslay, Thörnicher Ritsch, Detzemer, Maximiner Klosterlay
- Soil types: Devonian and light weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 98% Riesling, 2% Müller-Thurgau

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 offered below, is his championing of great unheralded 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-14 2000 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett

There were two, and he gave me the one he had more of. I didn’t like it - un-knit and angular. I went for broke and told him how I felt. He considered, and brought up another wine from the cellar, “I thought it was too little to offer you,” he said. But I liked this one much more; it had the necessary sweetness and a spiky acidity, plus an intriguing smoky note, mirabelle and ginger and quinine; quite salty in the 2000 style. SOS: 0 (between three and thirteen years)

GCL-15 2000 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

This is less ripe and beaming than the 1997, 1998 or 1999, but here the extra fruit-enamel tames the bitterness, and you really see the peach-blossom and mineral tones of the site without the fructose blanket. It has a tart balance of its own. SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)



carl schmitt-wagner

mosel • longuich

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. Herr Schmitt often shows the oldest wine first; last year it was a 1961 Spätlese, in astounding condition for a nearly 30-year old wine of unexceptional ripeness. But I fear I have lost the capacity to be *taken aback* any more by the stamina of Mosel wines. 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. The atmosphere is festive and the wine chat moves briskly around the table. I 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.

“They are very **old-fashioned**,” is how Mrs. Selbach describes this estate. It's an averagely small (3.5 hectare) operation which first came to my attention a few years back. I saw their name among Bernkasteler Ring members (an organization which contains a number of my Mosel suppliers), and Stuart Pigott made a point of tipping me off to some evidently stunning 1989s. So I went and had a look.

I found a spicy, baroque style of wine. But that was the vintages available at the time. *Fruit* is the dominant characteristic, rendered with an almost glaring, spicy clarity. 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 vine-

- 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

natural tendency of these wines to taste sleek with minty spiciness. They remind me most of all of Merkelbach in their eye-popping clarity and persuasive spice. I also have the sense they are basically ageless; there seems to be a general deceleration of time in small European villages. I wonder if wines, too, learn to take it easy and not rush to reach wherever it is they think they're going.

By the way, a word about his item numbers, which we adopted here; this is a system begun by Schmitt's father in which each wine produced is numbered sequentially, ad infinitum! Therefore, wine number 1204 is the one thousand twelve hundred and fourth wine produced since the system began. As there are often multiple casks of wines with the same name, I thought it best to indicate which ones I wanted by using his own system. Now you know.



yard map, is remarkable in its fidelity to current notions of the best vineyards. What you're being offered is on the order of an insider's tip for excellent Mosel wines from a first-class site and a top rank estate, both relatively unknown. You heard it here first.

There's been a fine run of vintages here, showing the



Schmitt-Wagner at a glance:

This is a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 100-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-24 **1999 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett**
First #1337, which is quite compact, zingy and lively for a 1999, with penetrating saffras and tarragon; full-bodied, slatey, lots of spiel and yet powerful given its fine point of focus. In common with many 1999s from here, this has developed into quite some wine. Slate really blasts through now. Second #1332, which is fuller-bodied and riper, will be shipped if this one sells out. +
SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)
- GSW-27 **2000 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett**
Schmitt lost half his crop to a rare thunderstorm in 2000. "It was just as well," he said, "because all the bunches with stem-rot were knocked to the ground, so only the best was left hanging." A natural pruning, one might say. There are two good casks, of which #1361 is slightly more expressive, zingy, with a realized core of fruit. Both have a faint hint of botrytis.
SOS: 1 (between five and eighteen years)
- GSW-25 **1999 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**
#1336; it was the most ardently slatey of three casks, also the most piquant and long, with penetrating spice. (between six and seventeen years)
- GSW-28 **1999 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese**
#1357. First offering. These wines taught me something. Last year when I tasted them as cask samples I wrote them off as clunky. Time in bottle has revealed the emergence of something possibly profound. This one isn't a showy Auslese (92 degrees Oechsle) but what a fine kernel of fruit is has! Spicy, concentrated, not at all *sweet*. What happens is he's concentrated the flavor of the Kabinett without *increasing* its sense of sweetness. **What a food wine.**
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)
- GSW-29 **1999 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese**
#1353. First offering. This is riper than #1357 and it has more of the classic Mosel greengage and apple, and another kind of plump fruit; quite seductive.
SOS: 2 (between five and twenty years)

karlsmühle

ruwer • mertesdorf

1999 year was the year-of-Peter-Geiben; his winery was named VINTNER OF THE YEAR by *Gault-Millau* and the general scuttlebutt was his wines were the best in the Ruwer in 1998. That's some heavy company, between Karthäuserhof and Grünhaus. Hard, though, to imagine how one could *improve* on Karlsmühle's 1998s, which are about as celestial as Riesling can be.

We do well with these wines but not as well as they deserve. 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.

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 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 fairy 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 de-acidifying. 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. You can't imagine how abrupt it all is; you turn toward the south from an especially prosaic corner in the village of Ruwer, and within a single minute you're immersed in this narrow, secretive, bucolic valley with wind whooshing through the trees and the tiny Ruwer stream hissing and gurgling. If you blink you'll miss it. 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 Kehrnel from the Patheiger holdings. Peter

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares
- Annual production: 5,500 cases
- Top sites: Lorenzhöfer Felslay and Mäuerchen, Kaseler Nies'chen and Kehrnel
- Soil types: Clay and slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 3% Spätburgunder, 2% each of Müller-Thurgau, Weissburgunder and Kerner, 1% Elbling

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.

I used to put these Ruwer wines at the front of a flight of Mosels as I thought their lighter bodies were correctly placed before the richer Mittelmosels. Not any more! Now I put these Ruwer wines near the **end**, because they're just so damned lovely there's little that can follow them.

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 **Kehrnel** 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, Kehrnel and Felslay, and of course they all tasted different. I told the group that *these are the waters the vines drink*, and of course this helps to create the wine's flavor.

Metaphysics? Old-wives tales? Unable to be scientifically verified? Please don't ask me *why* I believe in these

things. Instead, tell me why you'd **rather not**.

1999 was certainly a bit of a curio here. All the acids were between 6.5 and 7.8 grams per liter in this, of all places, where acids are often the *highest* of any important German wines. Everything was ripe. There are German wine observers who compare the vintage with 1959, but I wonder if they'll have the monumental stature of the Great One.

I can't imagine any controversy over 2000: it is a GREAT VINTAGE at this address. Or, more correctly, the wines are uniformly superb, what few of them there are! The best Ruwer wines seem to *distill* the essence of Moselness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing

smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said Sigrid 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 Karlsmühle and receive Patheiger, don't worry, it's correct, no one screwed up, be happy.

Karlsmühle 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, Karlsmühle 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-60 **2000 Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett**
After the "exotic" 1999, back to a classic. And what an essence-of-Riesling this is at its best. Apple-blossom, mirabelle, cassis, tilleul; lacy, pinpoint detail, so micro-surgically delicate. +
SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)
- GKM-61 **2000 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett**
Astoundingly, an even finer aroma: all blossom now. Exceptional filigree, even for Karlsmühle. It is a little drier than the Mäuerchen and somehow both finer and earthier. Amazing clinging finish. Utterly lovely in an angular way, but the smartest ones know: the most beautiful thing is that which contains the telling flaw.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)
- GKM-62 **2000 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Spätlese**
I was AWOL for a full five minutes in the spell of this wine's fragrance. When I finally snapped out of it I remembered I got to taste it too! The wine has astounding solidity and iron-weight density but it's simultaneously buoyant and transparent. Incredible almost fleur de sel wash on the finish. +
SOS: 1 (between six and twenty-two years)
- GKM-63h **2000 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Auslese, 500ml/12**
Quite a bit of Eiswein in here, Tonto. Frozen grapes, taste heap good, break tooth, head hurt for days. There's a searing and magnificent intensity here; it's hungry and feral. Undeflected penetration. I know you guys; you'll be in my face in tastings saying "Hey, that Karlsmühle Auslese, what's that about?"
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)
- GKM-64h **2000 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Eiswein, 375ml/12**
140 degrees Oechsle, 13.3 grams per liter acidity, 200 grams per liter residual sugar; just what you need for little Jason's next birthday party! It isn't so much that words fail - I could find them if I had to - as that these flavors are said in extravagant and fulsome language which I hesitate (yes, even I) to transcribe. You'd think: "Oh lord, Theise is frothing again." So: let's just say an icy blade of piquantly brilliant structure and a thick wave of fruit and sweetness meet on the palate, fall in love, have babies, and all these babies become children who grow up playing cowboys and Indians, and therefore . . . heap great frickin' Eiswein. +
SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-five years)

van volxem

saar • wiltingen

This was a rush job. Some years ago I visited a winery in the Saar named Jordan & Jordan. They had a splendid array of vineyards and had every appearance of being real go-getters. Sadly, the wines were coarse and rustic.

I heard last year that the estate had been bought by an ambitious young couple who planned to restore both its original name (Van Volxem) and its former glory.

I tasted two really fabulous wines, looked at the prices, winced, tasted again (to try and persuade myself the wines were salable at the asking price), loved the wines again, winced again. No could do.

Yesterday, after the rest of the 2001 catalog was written and filed away, came news the proprietors had lowered their prices and wanted their wines in the market.

So, here's the skinny: I haven't been there, (but will go ASAP), haven't met them (but look forward to), and all I know is there are two excellent wines that I think you should buy. Here they are:

GVV-1 2000 Scharzhofberger Riesling Kabinett
GVV-2 2000 Scharzhofberger Riesling Spätlese

The Kabinett is winsome and serene in that quintessentially Saar way, and the Spätlese is also on the money. Compare to any other source for Scharzhofberger and these look like good values now. I recommend them both highly, and can't wait to delve deeper into this winery, which has the potential to be the next Great name in the Saar.

- Vineyard area: 13 hectares
- Top sites: Scharzhofberger, Wiltinger Kupp and Gottesfuss
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling



franken wines



I actually rather like Franken wine. If you wanted me to, I could offer you really great ones, but you don't want to pay their prices. Nor *should* you, quite honestly. Those prices are inflated because Franks are the lowest-acid of all German wines (some Baden wines may be even lower, but they're also frequently clumsy and overblown) and *thus they work well DRY*. The German can get his blasted dry wine without having to put up with all that pesky acidity. In fact I sometimes see the Franken wine as an Austrian wine *wannabe*; the soils are more like the Wachau than the Rhineland.

So, after a few attempts to offer you blue-chip Franks, I've settled back into our friend Gebhart. This is a merchant operation selling predominantly co-op wines (with whom they have an exclusivity deal, I think) plus a few of their own estate bottlings. The wines are invariably clean and typical, though seldom thrilling. But if you only want to get a reliable *Bocksbeutel* on the shelf for the lowest possible price, you came to the right place. That said, I picked what I

liked best regardless of price. And Selbachs showed me samples from a winery I represented eons ago, Schloss Sommerhausen, one of which I offer you.

Franks are the lowest-acid of all German wines and thus they work well dry.

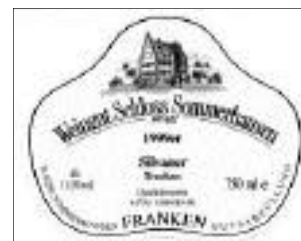
I swear I tasted the wines. I actually tasted a bunch MORE wines to get to these, and they were in some cases pretty dubious stuff. It was fascinating, though, to observe how disparately we all responded to them. The great French wine commentator Claude Bols wrote "This little

chap positively waltzes into the room in his gairly decorated pantalons, trailing many-colored scarves of fruit, scented with an exotic melange of angelica, dog rose, oak moss and pomade. Ah! He skitters around the perfumed chamber of your palate in a twinkling espadrille, before elegantly drooling a buttery internal effluvium into the chamber-pot of finish." Our British colleague Sir Enid Crotchworth merely said "Jolly nice smell, good fruit, long, bit short, quite good, perhaps quite good plus-plus." Thankfully we had a distinguished gentleman from the Netherlands, the famous wine expert Gøbs Von Fruijt, who "broke the tie" as it were with this trenchant observation: "Eek moerk een wijn vom broodjes met heerings ond skøonk toerdjs." After this, what else could be said?

- GEG-30 1998 Gebhardt Volkacher Kirchberg Kerner Kabinett
- GEG-31 1998 Gebhardt Sommerhäuser Steinbach Riesling Kabinett



- GSS-1 1999 Schloss Sommerhausen Silvaner Trocken



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. Interestingly though I posed the figure I selected no wines to which I actually gave the figure!

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!

