

# terry theise estate selections

GERMANY 2005



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# *The Theise Manifesto*

*Beauty is more important than impact.*

*Harmony is more important than intensity.*

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

*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.*



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

**-Abu Yazid al-Bistami**

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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?





**T**here was a story in the paper about a deer hit by a car, lying near death by the side of the road. A woman pulled over, got out of her car and saw the animal was close to dead. She sat and she stroked the deer and spoke to it, and the deer, she said, "laid his head on my lap and looked me in the eye."

Presently a man came along and wanted to butcher the still-alive animal, in front of several onlookers some of whom were children. And he did.

It wasn't evil, what he did; any other animal would have done the same; where food is concerned, they're opportunists beyond sentiment.

But that woman went through the portal. The image of her with the dying deer's head in her lap will remain with me for all my life.

There are two kinds of people in the world—people who say crap like "there are two kinds of people in the world," and everyone else! Nah, there are actually zillions of kinds of people in the world, but I'll let myself observe this much; there are people who live in sympathy with other lives, and people who live in sympathy with a system from which they can take. Both are good people, or can be. But wine speaks to them in very different ways.

As always I spend March in Germany tasting the new vintage. It was unusually cold (Walter Strub once told me "Spring arrives with you, Terry," which was one of the sweeter things anyone ever said to me . . .) and it always seemed to be snowing and yucky. There wasn't even a crocus. So much for my magic powers. But when it got warm it happened all of a sudden, and the little blackbirds the Germans call *Amseln* were in a terrific hurry to, um, get laid. Foreplay for them involves singing. And my God did they sing; manic, desperate, all hours, driven by tiny bird-hormones to flights of insane creativity.



On our final evening my wife and I went out with Walter and Margit (Strub) to celebrate twenty years of doing bid-nez together. It was dark when we got to the restaurant but even so the amsels were yapping away. Many hours later when we came outside it was starting to drizzle and all the critters with feathers or fur were fast asleep. All but a few tiny high-voiced birds Karen Odessa first thought were the last amsels, but which in fact were



nightingales. A dark little bird chorus had assembled to sing us to our car—*Way to go guys; twenty years!* I was the last one in the car. I stood out there with the rain dripping down my neck enjoying the dark and the birdsong and my friends, buzzing with the eerie beauty and also of course with the Champagne and Riesling and Hermitage we'd consumed!

In many ways the thing has changed. This is year-20, astonishingly, because it still feels new and fresh and anticipatory, but in fact it's altered—the "ceaseless march of time" and all that. When I started it was pleasingly lonesome, because it was pure; it was only about the wines and discovering who made the best ones. It was getting to know people who didn't get many English-speaking visitors. It was about meeting the Merkelbachs of the world, showing you their wines, and carrying their lovely stories back with me like little crystal eggs.

Then came satellite-dishes and computers, and suddenly instead of being younger than most of the growers I was—*ulp*—older. Now babies are being born and I'm, like, avuncular or something. That I can manage; it's actually rather nice. The hard part is the politics, the need to calculate, because in old Europe one is most certainly a Figure, a *personage*. I adore Europe, lived there for ten years, consider myself attuned to European ways, but this part of it doesn't come naturally. Not to a pure-bred roughneck like me. In the Summer of 2003 my esteemed colleagues at Michael Skurnik Wines took an *en masse* trip to Germany together, and at one point we commandeered the stage from a C/W band who'd been hired to play for us. Michael played gee-tar and shook his ass. Harmon (Skurnik) sang and whacked a tambourine. Andrew played drums. I played banshee manic lead guitar. It was so much fun I forgot who was watching us—imagine what Merkelbachs must have been thinking! The mild-mannered wine geek they thought they knew suddenly morphed into a three-headed hydra yowling away on fuzz-whipped guitar. At the same time the younger ones were probably thinking, this might almost have been amusing but what's with the weird boogie crap? In either case, the personage they knew as "Terry" had certainly developed some weird-ass alter ego.

These days the little bastards keep getting younger, damn it, and they all seem to know one another. We're starting with a new estate called Geil this year, and it

turns out Johannes Geil was Phillip Wittman's roommate at Geisenheim (the important wine-university). But the most important seismic shifts took place around two things: The era of the internet, and the advent of an activist wine press.

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

These things coincided with a decline in wine consumption in general. You know the phrase; less-wine-but-better-wine, but I've had a chance to watch it at work in the macro-life of German wine. The marginal were being squeezed out of existence. The elderly retired with no one to continue the wineries. The audience for wine narrowed to a small geekdom of wine-heads who only wanted the best stuff, and who used the press to point them to it. Thus the enterprising grower had to go all out for glory. This meant investment in the newest geegaws for the cellar (especially if the neighbor had them) and in



Rheingau vineyards

some instances it meant having a nose to the wind to catch the prevailing scent. What were the "approved" types of wines, what was the new *Zeitgeist*, and how does one get ones hands on the mojo-du-jour?

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

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

Another grower expanded on this idea: "In the old days you basically grew your grapes, picked them when you could as ripe as you could and made your wine. Nowadays we baby each vine, from pruning to binding

to canopy management to green-harvesting; we pick by hand, we're selecting obsessively, our yields are half what they used to be and our cellar work is more gentle and non-intrusive than ever." I can't help but believe. A year like 2004 would have been an ordinary vintage 20 years ago; now it's excellent. In fact the modern tendency to pluck the sweetest cherries from nature has created a certain curiosity about the alternative. What if one did things old-school and harvested *en bloc*, just swept through the vineyard and picked everything: Wouldn't that tell another kind of "truth" of the soil and weather, different from plucking the chocolate chips from the cookie?

Are your eyes glazing over? Sorry! I find this sort of thing riveting, if you want to know the truth. Is the "essence" of a vintage in fact the generally prevailing strength of the fruit in a vineyard? Or is it the ultra-sweet bits you pluck out? Or, both! You see, it's the difference between asking what nature did and asking how well you yourself can "perform." Again, there's no right-or-wrong here, just two ways of seeing things, and serious people are talking about them. And such conversations were unheard-of when I was getting started.

I haven't looked at lab analyses of my wines for some time now, and fewer people try and show them to me. The modern young grower is more interested in the forest than the trees. It was Helmut Dönnhoff who first graduated away from obsession over wines' analytical values, the first among my crowd to push away from deconstructing the aesthetics of wine's flavor. Because I respect him and he intrigues me, I realize he has influenced me.

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

Here's what I think we're after: a point of utter receptivity because we're seeing only the wine instead of seeing *ourselves* seeing the wine. Oh it's all very Zen. But I am ever-more persuaded it is the way to pleasure and sanity. If we don't see past ourselves, our discrete palates, we can't get past *What am I getting from the wine*. The process starts and ends with "I." What am "I" getting, what do "I" think (how many points will "I" give this wine), and all I can say is if you drink wine this way I sure hope you don't *make love* this way, because your partner's bored.

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

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

“Describing a wine by its analysis is like describing a beautiful woman by her X-ray films.”

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

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

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

Someone asked Herr Schmitt, "Did you make this wine?" "Oh my goodness no, I was just a child," he answered. Then he grew pensive and said "But I do remember being a boy of six, picking the grapes alongside my grandma," and then I lost it. I was looking at his hands just then, as it happened, the hands of a vigorous old gentleman still ruddy from a life in the open air, and I suddenly saw the child's little hands inside them. And saw the child trotting along at his grandma's side, happy to be included in the general activity, proud to be useful, there among the vines. And now it was sixty-four years later. The wine in our glasses was enthralling enough to us, but to our host it was the pure blood of memory, bound to the filaments of his earliest joys, with affection and usefulness. *This is a man of Wine*, I realized. This is what it means to be a man of wine.

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



would call a "choice") because it needed to be done and it pleased him to do it.

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

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

Charles Simic once defined poetry as "three mismatched shoes at the entrance of a dark alley" (thanks to

M o l l y  
McQuade for the quote). The basic enigma that changes the lens by which we receive the world. The more I get into wine the less reducible I feel it to be. Its enigma deepens even as it appears to grow more transparent. It





is helpful to see wine connected to gardening, to making things grow, and it's even more helpful when the person encouraging the growing is companionably connected to the earth; most of all, when he sees the thing through to completion. Which, in wine, means to produce and to bottle it.

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

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

There's an old story about a man who approached three bricklayers. Asking what they were up to, the first replied "Isn't it obvious? I'm laying these damn bricks."

The second fellow was less truculent. "I'm making a wall," he said. The third guy seemed nearly beatific. "What am I doing? I'm helping to make a cathedral."

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

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

We who care about wine often circle that thing we see as True, each in our way. Karen MacNeil wrote these lovely words:

"So what is it about wine?"

Perhaps it is this: wine is one of the last true things. In a world mechanized to madness, a world where you can't do anything without somebody's cell phone clanging in your ear, a world where you can wake up to 67 innocuous emails all of which exude infuriatingly false urgency—in this world of ours, wine remains utterly simple. Pure. Unrushed. Archetypal. The silent music of nature. For seven thousand consecutive years, vines clutching the earth have happily thrust themselves upward toward the sun and given us juicy berries, and ultimately wine. And so it is that wine ineluctably connects us to that earth. We don't have to do anything. We drink . . . and the bond is miraculously there."

When I received her letter I wrote her back, saying, in part:

Your words are true and lovely. I only ask that we remember, not ALL wine fulfills such a noble purpose as you describe. I believe it is important to always distinguish between industrial wine—wine as "product"—and agricultural wines, which are the earth's emissaries of meaning. Maybe even more important, I believe we need to alert readers to beware of wine as "lifestyle accoutrement" or as a badge signifying "gracious living" because, as you so well know, millions of people drink and love wine who don't know or care about living "graciously" as defined by the glossy magazines. Wine has nothing to do with finding oneself gorgeous; it has everything to do with finding the WORLD beautiful, and feeling that little happy shock that it's inside you to feel, and that it matters.

Other goodies in my bag-o-truths 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 con-

text from wine does injury to its being (and if we do love wine, why deliberately injure it?) . . . .

Europeans are more aware than we Yanks that people actually existed before us, they're aware of the real size of their place in the cosmos. They *listen* to the soil and work to do its bidding. They know that the Riesling vine is the poet of their corner of the earth. They want to hear the poem. They want us to hear it. And so they work to bring the words clearly onto the page. And they are aware they do not, themselves, CREATE those words. The text is created somewhere else, below the ground.

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

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

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

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

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

And you think I'm metaphysical?

But why should we care about all this? Isn't it enough that wine tastes good? Hmmm. Well, why should we care about the loving, tender and passionate feelings that arise during lovemaking; isn't it enough that sex feels



good? We should care because it *exists*. And because the capacity inside us to respond also exists.

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

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

## 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



A friend of mine sent me this funny bit of verse:

### *Introduction to Poetry*

*I asked them to take a poem  
and hold it to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out  
or walk inside a poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch  
I want them to water ski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the authors name on the shore  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with a rope  
and torture a confession out of it  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means*



It's kinda funny if you substitute the word "wine" for the word "poem." Try it.

A tasting note can be two things, either a depiction of how it was to taste (or drink) the wine, perhaps including how it tasted, or a mere dissection of flavors. The latter strikes me as useless, unless it's attached to a specific purpose such as giving you some clue about what to buy. Otherwise, sorry; I don't want to read your tasting notes. I don't like reading my own. Think about it: to what purpose are you going to put descriptions-of-flavors? On March 13th at 10:35am a certain wine tasted to a certain person like candied yak spleens dipped in sorghum. What's the value of this information? Will the wine smell and taste identically to you, weeks months or years later?

Put another way, if I'm trying to describe Scheurebe to you, which is the more useful description? 1) Scheurebe has flavors of red and blackcurrant, sage, pink grapefruit, passion-fruit (when very ripe), or . . . 2) Scheurebe tastes like Riesling would taste, if Riesling were a transvestite? Well sure, both of course, but what if you could only have one, and what if you needed to make someone *curious*?

One thing I find utterly impossible is writing notes for intensely sweet concentrated young wines. Even my beloved Eisweins reduce me to an inarticulate funk. *How* does anyone manage it? How do you distinguish among fifteen TBAs, all of which taste more or less like white-raisin and fig liqueur? I find it hard enough to select among them, let alone to froth and spume over them. I key off of clarity and form, and hope you won't notice if my notes are mumbly.



I know you sometimes use me to discern what you want to buy, and believe me I want to be helpful. But do you really buy wine because it tastes "like boysenberrys and pork-snouts?" Wouldn't you rather know the wine "danced like Gandhi would have had there been discos in Calcutta?" Well it's what I'd rather tell you, so get over it. That, or I'll take my cue from shampoo bottles, and if I like a wine just write, "Open, drink, repeat."

I used to care a great deal about writing tasting notes as much for my own writer's ego as for the actual wines. I searched for ever-more esoteric associations so you would be impressed with my palate. I strove for pretty language so you'd think I was a good writer. Sometimes I actually wrote well, and sometimes the wine actually *did* taste like "polyvinyl siding in direct sunlight on a Fall day with an



approaching cold front" (I no longer represent *that* agency), but mostly I fell victim to my own affect.

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

It's an odd business, this tasting and conveying through words. It makes a wine into a precious object of attention excluding the rest of the world. Who bloody *cares* if it's white peach or yellow peach or peach pit or peach skin or the BARK from the peach tree? That plus it's *fruitless* (pun intended!) because it's tautologous: when you describe flavors in terms of other flavors you eventually hit a wall. "This wine tastes like peaches." Fair enough. What do *peaches* taste like???

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



One also has "good-writer-days" and "lousy-writer-days" (I have the latter with distressing frequency); on the good days thoughts and images flow and dance. I read what I'm writing and think "Good; this conveys it,"

but on the bad days it's just "Oh crap, *must* I again write 'slate and apples' for the umteenth time?"

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

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

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



I hit a hot streak once in which I bulls-eyed something like five consecutive old vintages we'd been tasting blind. It's the one time on these trips that I don't have to assess a wine in terms of "does it make the cut?" nor am I obliged to describe it. In other words, I can relax. Wine's a sometimes shy dog; you **grasp** at it, it runs away. You wait patiently for it, it's curiosity gets the best of it, it comes to you. If you're anxious (Oh shit, will I get it right?) it reads your fear and keeps its distance. If you're simply receptive, *there it is, laying at your feet and smiling*. Usually you "get" the wine with the first impression. Your guess is correct. You get all the samolians. The others, well, they get an edition of the "Mosel Wines Of The '60s" board game, plus the bitter memory of having been bested by some zen galoot.

## Making the Case For German Wines

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

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



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

Fashion warps and woofs just like hemlines rising and falling, but I'd like to establish some durable and cogent argument for these uniquely lovely wines. Because I want them to survive. Even now, German wine isn't what most people think it is. It isn't even what many *Germans* seem to think it is. Of course I am *uniquely* gifted with knowing precisely what it is, thanks very

much. And I have only the teensiest little delusions of grandeur . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fair enough, I think, chacun a son gout and all that.



But something gnaws at me, and I finally have to ask:

“Do you like *dessert*?”

“Excuse me?”

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

“Sure,” he says, “Yeah, I eat dessert.”

“So you’ll consume sweetness in solid form but not liquid form?”

“Well, I . . .”

“ . . . or you’ll consume it in liquid form but not when it contains alcohol?” I press.

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

“Well?” I insist.

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

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

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

“The wines don’t work with food.” NOT!

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

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

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

eeked or diddled.

As such I think Riesling, or indeed any wine with these virtues (Loire Chenins come to mind), can give the “discriminating” palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn’t the EXTENT of the fla-



vor 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, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

Of course I can’t “prove” this, but here’s a telling tidbit. Some time last there was this massive thread on the eRobertParker bulletin board—I mean five pages, hundreds of posts—ostensibly over a review of Jefford’s The New France, but which quickly morphed into the age-old tussle over terroir. You can’t love German Riesling and disbelieve in terroir, of course, so most of us take a particular side in these debates.

Somewhere near the end of the whole exhausting debacle, a lone voice chimed in, to the effect that she found the whole thing awfully fascinating, and really didn’t know what “position” she herself would take. But, she observed, there was a striking contrast of tone between the two sides, with the anti-terroir faction tending to argue militantly and brusquely, while the “doves” tended to argue civilly and with good humor.

So I’m not just being facetious. I do believe cultivation of the German Riesling type conduces to civility and courtesy. That is because we cannot enjoy wines of deli-

cacy and finesse without appreciation. And when we *appreciate*, we are calmed and grateful. Might the opposite also be true? That is, when we enjoy those wines of coarser virtues do they also color our approach to life and our fellow humans? If, as they say, wine people are generally convivial and generous, might it also be true that types of wine both attract and form types of people? Hell, I don't know. Nor do I presume that everyone who likes big bruiser wines is a truculent oaf. (Only some of them <wink>.) But I do glean, just a le-e-e-etle bit, a tendency for people who like the shock-and-awe wines to expect the wine to perform for them, to give them a vinous lap-dance; *Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about! That's damn sure 97-point fruit there! Oh yeah, come to papa.* Meanwhile us German wine lovers are reading Tolstoy and drinking cups of jade-oolong tea with our pinkies extended.

I got into a friendly argument with Jennifer Rosen, who is one of my favorite wine writers. Jennifer wants more people to drink wine, and so she wants to make it "safe" for them. But I want there to be more oxygen in that safe world. She wrote me:

"And, yes, the American consumer should be more open, blah, blah, but meanwhile, he'd be more open if it wasn't all so risky and mysterious."

TT: Or if he was trained to relish the mystery instead of fighting it.

JR: It's one thing to relish the mystery if you taste all kinds of things and have a cellar full to play with, as you and I do. It's another when you're blowing your wad on one bottle—restaurant or store.

TT: Well, we're talking about two kinds of consumer. One is a casual, occasional drinker who doesn't care to learn about wine but just wants something smooth on the rare occasion he imbibes. The other is somewhere at or past the threshold of making wine a part of his life, and in my opinion it's futile to try and "simplify" wine for this person. Wine isn't simple; that's part of why we love it. I feel we need to show him how great it feels to surf the complexity.

JR: Ah, that's another story. Artisan vs factory. I contend we need both. Sometimes you just want a coke and don't want to worry if the Milwaukee factory uses more syrup. If we want people to drink more wine and not be afraid of it they need to be able to rely on some wines.

TT: I contend we only NEED artisan agricultural wines. Industrial wines will always be with us as a facet of capitalism, and while I agree they are sometimes useful, we do not "need" them. They contribute to the dumbing-down of the world. They add to the overall blandness of things. They numb our sensitivity to beauty and meaning. Thus they may well be useful, but they are never necessary.

God, am I preachy or what?

## **Making the Case for Auslese**

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

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

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

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



## **Principles of Selection in this Portfolio**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Selecting was easier in the old days. German wine was unpopular and therefore inconspicuous, and it was



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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Gray-Marketers: Consumer-Champions or Scavenging Jackals?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And even if all four can live with the margins the

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

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

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the importer with an exclusivity rubs his filthy hands at the grotesque markups he plans to take. And all of us children of the radical ‘60s swallow it whole, since every businessperson is ipso facto guilty. These proponents of

pure capitalism neglect to consider one of its basic tenets: If a product is priced beyond its value, people won’t buy it. The greedy importer can gouge all he wants; it avails him nothing if he can’t sell the wine.

People also claim that monopoly creates opportunities for greed. Seems very logical, again, especially to us Aquarian-Agers who mistrust merchants innately. But the logic falls apart on closer examination. Say you’re the sole Jim Beam distributor in your state. You gonna crank up the prices? After all, no one else is selling Jim Beam, right? **WRONG**. No one is selling Jim Beam, but someone’s selling Jack Daniels and someone’s selling Wild Turkey, and if your price for Beam is

out of line with the other guy’s price for his bourbon, you’re not taking orders dude. Thus if I even *wanted* to push up my prices for (let’s say) Christoffel, it wouldn’t be long before y’all noticed Fritz Haag was the better value. Ordinary markets suppress the temptation to price-gouge, especially a market as compact and attentive as the one for fine wines.

Speaking for myself now, I am delighted, as are most of my fellow importers, to offer *good value* to our customers. We want you to like us. We want you to like our wines. Hey, we want you to *make money* on our wines (radical notion!). I take a standard markup across the board in my portfolio, tweaking here and there if I need to hit a price point. If I ever sniff a whoop-de-do markup opportunity it’s because a grower is underpricing his wine. In which case **I tell him so**. I do not wish to profit at his expense; this is what I call loyalty and sustainability. So, fellow wine-dogs, this dog won’t



hunt. None of us is motivated by profit per se. We are in business to get and keep customers. We all need to live. We all want to enjoy our lives. I want to invest in a grower who's willing to invest in me. And I want to sell his wines without interference.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do business with them if you like, or if you must. Sometimes you need a swine to lead you to the truffles. Just do NOT let them tell you they're doing it for you, because they care so passionately about great wine and are working toward a Utopia where no one makes too much money at it. If you believe that, I have a golf course on Three Mile Island to sell you.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## a new way to measure sweetness

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

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

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

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

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

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!



## Core-List Wines

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

## Dry German Wines

There are people who like bitter flavors, but I don’t believe disproportionate millions of them happen to live in Germany.

The basic rap against dry German Rieslings is too many of them are shrill and bitter. I detest such wines and don’t select them. Yet I do select good dry German wines whenever I encounter them—rare as that may be. Thus I was interested to see the new Gault-Millau (probably the leading German-language wine guide) and its list of the best dry Rieslings of the 2003 vintage. Tied for 2nd was a Leitz wine I selected. Tied for third was a Spreitzer wine I selected. I know the Trocken wines I’m selecting are literally extraordinary. The prevailing human palate will usually reject that which is inherently unpleasant. Yet with exquisite perversity, The Germans wish to establish their market on inherently unpleasant wines..

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

Would it were so.

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

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

All too plausible, eh? This much I think is true; notwithstanding the occasional successes amongst the dry wines (and the frequent successes among Halbtrockens), if all German wine were made dry then I

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

A journalist in Germany asked me whether I thought Trocken wine lovers were “wrong” in their tastes. A fascinating question. A useless question! I suspect something even more sinister is at work. The German riesling grower is such a captive of the prevailing dogma he has started to identify with his captor. This may also be true of the market at large; people adapt,



make the best of things, go along to get along. Many are the growers who have lamented to me they can’t even get their customers to taste their “sweet” wines. The Trocken Stasi may be peering at you from behind the wall. The monolithic quality of this ideology suggests not that tastes are “wrong” but rather they are *dishonest*.

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

Often even the dogma is supported with dishonest (or at least false) explanation. I am automatically suspicious when a German starts in with the whole “traditional” rap. As I see it, “tradition” is a moving target, usually determined by the time you start from and how far back you look.

Yes, most German wine was dry until the ‘50s, but that is because the technology by which they could be reliably be made sweet didn’t exist. And, every broker knew the best casks were those containing wine with nat-

ural residual sugar. And, the dry wines of those days were usually aged in Fuders, not steel, and aged longer before bottling, thus helping to round them. When microfiltration and temperature control became available, most producers opted to use these new technologies to make sweeter wines. Thus “tradition” changed when it COULD; changed, you might say, into a new or re-defined “tradition.” 100 years from now it’s quite possible SWEET wines will be seen as “traditional” and dry wines as an aberration.

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

It’s recently been suggested (by a writer who ought to know better) that the great dry German wines of yore were swept away by oceans of cheap sweetened swill in the 50s and 60s, when *dosage* could be used to pastiche what were formerly rare and truly precious sweet wines. This argument sounds pretty ideological to me. Sure there were lots of yucky wines made sweet in the 50s and 60s. Which only says there’s plenty of yucky growers and only a few good ones. The same guys are making yucky dry wines now. At least the yucky sweet wines were *palatable*. But for every true wackoloon who really gets *off* on bitterness, there are hundreds who are losing the ability to discern disharmony; consumers and growers alike. Taste with them if you don’t believe me!



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

Actually, I’ve solved the problem. Oh sure, people go on propounding it like it hasn’t been solved, but still. Here’s what they can do. It’s very simple.

Destroy the word “Halbtrocken”. It sucks, it’s not half-dry, it’s half-*assed*. Inasmuch as most Riesling with 9-18 grams-per-liter of sweetness tastes dry to any reasonable palate, let’s call THAT “Trocken”.

The wines they currently call “Trocken”—those snarling beasts with 0-9 grams of sweetness—would henceforth be called “Sehr Trocken” (very dry).

That way the poor deluded clown who absolutely must drink a commodity called “Trocken” will now receive



a *palatable* wine which (s)he will suddenly begin to actually sensually enjoy (and probably wonder why), while the real sour-power guys can have their macho-dry wines. ***Oh I don’t drink those dainty little Trocken wines, not a real wine stud like me: I drink VERY dry wines!***

You know exactly what would happen: within a couple years the overwhelming majority of “Trocken” wines would have more RS, taste much better, and harmony would start being restored to the troubled kingdom. I will even waive my hefty consulting fee and consider this my pro-bono contribution to Universal Beauty.

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 brainwashed to drink dry. Now comes the irony. The new breed of consumer thirsty for dry wines has discovered *once again* that other countries can produce a more palatable product in that style, and all of Germany is awash in cheap Pinot Grigio! To which I can only say: yay. Serves ‘em right. This problem is so pernicious that Stuart Pigott published a wonderfully impassioned book whose stated purpose is to remind the Germans that many of the world’s most exquisite white wines grow in their own back yards. Yet I seem to be the only person who sees the whole sorry phenomenon as an inevitable result of the Trocken madness. The Germans do not automatically despise their home-grown products; far from it. But their wines have somehow become unfashionable. And I argue the *reason* is the dry wines weren’t good enough to sustain a claim on the market’s attention.

A Very Famous winery in the Rheingau is hosting an apprentice I happen to know. And this young man reports that the Very Famous winery routinely *de-acidifies* its Rieslings and then *pumps them with carbon dioxide* at bottling in a sad attempt to restore some sense of the freshness it *already removed*. So the wine is manipulated twice in order that the Product shall be satisfactory. Or, *satisfactory*.

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



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

Florian Weingart had a cask of Spätlese he was hoping would ferment to dryness, but which stopped with 35 g.l. residual sugar. This was an owee, because Florian's "sweet" Spätlese usually has around 60 g.l.—typical of modern German thinking ("If it's dry it should *really* be dry and if it's sweet it should *really* be sweet."). So what was our hero to do? He didn't want to diddle his wine to restart fermentation, nor did he have any dosage in the winery with which to sweeten it. And? He showed me this perfectly balanced wine under the name "anarchy," and all I want to do is change it to SANITY. I tell you I *dream* however hopelessly for a day when growers will make the tastiest wines they can and then figure out how to "position" them or "market" them—as if beauty didn't sell itself!

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

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

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



## **More Principles**

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

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

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

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

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

## **How I Approach Wine, or Let Wine Approach Me**

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

*-Alexander Pope*

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

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



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

At some point last year, prompted by God-knows-what, I had this exchange with my old friend David Schildknecht. It must have been a slow day, though I understand David has none of these. I'll bet it was a ball-

game with a rain-delay. This is some of what we said:

TT: It is, of course, precisely the quality we lose ineluctably, the more we "know" about wine. In my own small way I try to "forget" whatever I may know, to encourage the wine to come to be with some of the early immediacy. Yet this is mostly impossible.

DS: Mostly, perhaps, but not entirely. I have flashbacks sufficiently vivid that I sometimes think I can recall the way, say, Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Beerenauslese *first* came to me, and then can superimpose that somehow over a contemporary taste impression. And then there are those occasions when we find ourselves being reminded "THIS is what got me excited about . . . in the first place," and at such moments too we are close to the old wonder. And then there's just being taken by surprise . . . because if in any relationship you lose the ability to be surprised OR to wonder, then you are—to turn Aristotle's famous dictum on its head—at the end of knowledge.

TT: Yeah, I appreciated being knocked on my (figurative) keister by so many of the 2003s, because the more certainties that topple away, the closer to that Edenic state one returns—yet even this is a kind of wishful dream.

DS: Right: being puzzled or confounded is also something close to that Ur-wonder.

TT: At the very least it reminds you that knowledge isn't so much linear as circular, and much of what one dresses-up as "knowledge" is merely time and inference.

DS: If one gives up trying to wrestle with the issue of returning to a wonderful or pristine state of appreciation, and one gives up in general trying to obtain a variety of perspectives, then one's tasting notes can easily become nothing but a conversation with one's self (or one's circle), a reinforcement of the prejudices contained within that ambit, or even just pleonasm. (And some wine writers have VERY large circles!)

TT: This doesn't worry me, except to the extent we show our notes to others hoping the notes will be useful. My "best" notes are exactly those I write for my own eyes only. But to the larger questions, it's obviously fruitless to try and will oneself to some (probably romanticized) state of innocence, though the yearning for that state is, I think, nourishing. I do think, though, the question remains the same: what will THIS be? ("This" being the wine one's about to drink.) At first we asked it eagerly, even graspingly. Now we ask it more calmly, in a different voice, more genial and lambent perhaps.

DS: And as far as the "wrestling" part is concerned (with apologies if I sound pretentious quoting "great philosophers") what we're talking about here is something like Wittgenstein's "knots in the intellect." It may take a lot of torturous twists and turns and training to remove them, but it's only so that at the end nothing more needs to be said because you are thankfully, almost literally "back at the beginning."

TT: Well put. With wine it seems the discrete intellect is a wonderful servant and an awkward master. But you can't see wine from your 3rd-eye if you're blind out of the other two!

Man, after that exchange you better *believe* I belched loudly and turned on wrestling!

## An Essay On Tasting Blind

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



### The 2004 Vintage

Play a little game with me. Pretend it's early September and the summer's back is finally broken, the first Canadian cold front has swept in with its keening blue skies and cleansing breezes. The air is blissful and cool under a still-warm sun. You're at your local farmer's market, maybe buying the last of the year's tomatoes and basil—they're still there—but you notice the baskets are groaning with the first apples. Someone's offering samples, and you take one.

You bite into the first apple of the Autumn and it is so lovely you nearly weep: juicy, sweet, crisp, almost mineral, and it snaps and crunches in your mouth even as it pours that fresh sweet juice all through your senses.

Imagine all that. And now you know what the 2004 vintage is like in Germany.

The first reports were tentative. After a cool summer there was a seam of good weather in September followed by a changeable October. Picking started very late, but the weather held. The vintage favors those who picked late and selected.

The next reports spoke of acidity, and likened the crop to 1996 or 1994. But a few weeks later came the first indications of something special. Hans Selbach tasted an Auslese from the Sonnenuhr and said it brought the great '75 to mind. Growers reported unusually strong tartrate precipitation. Acidity was looking less and less predominant with each passing day.

I am struck with the homogenous quality of the 2004s. I can scarcely recall a vintage so steadily excellent. Of course I taste only growers in the highest echelon of quality, but I do that every year. Consider: in 2003 there were legitimately great wines and a number of bland dull wines. In 2002 a lot of wines showed marked tartness and unpleasant phenolics. Even the Great One 2001 needed care in selecting, as certain wines showed unwholesome botrytis. Yet in nearly 4 weeks of tasting 2004s I cannot identify any common flaws.

At the very beginning I noted certain *green* flavors, as if every Riesling were blended with 15% Sauvignon



Blanc. I wondered whether gooseberry would be a theme. But after the third or fourth day I didn't notice this any more. Perhaps it was confined to the corner of Rheinhessen with which I'd begun? I retasted some wines at the very end, and the greenness had largely vanished.

I'd formed a theory to explain it: growers told me of uneven flowering which led to uneven ripening within clusters. If one pressed whole-clusters (and didn't nit-pick through them to remove any unripe berries) one had a combination of certain *very* ripe, almost overripe grapes, along with little stunted green grapes. As is my wont, I ran this idea past each subsequent grower I visited, but when few if any confirmed it, I let it drop.

But don't start thinking 2004 is unripe, or even that it's less ripe than 2003: far from it. '04 dramatizes the difference between *summer-ripened* fruit and *autumn-ripened* fruit. But in many instances must-weights were identical, or very close. Yet the 100° Oechsle of 2004 *tastes* different than the 100° Oechsle of 2003. In fact it doesn't taste at all like one expects "100-degree" fruit will taste. This is in the *Vendange Tardive* region, folks, and you have every right to expect intensity and the flavors of superripeness. Only you won't get them. Instead the wines have that wonderful lift and crunch. Those of you for whom the '03s were too massive will be at home again with the '04s.

Though late-picking was the key, you couldn't go too late; many spoke of a sudden onset of overripeness; "dull brown berries," sometimes without botrytis, other times with a "wet" botrytis that didn't concentrate the fruit. 2004s also have a uniformly high color for young Rieslings. I wonder if it's something in the vintage (perhaps the skins?) or if it demonstrates a recent tendency to do away with fining and/or to use less sulfur. Time will tell.

One important aspect of these tastings should be noted: from early February until mid March the weather was unusually cold and snowy. The wines crept along in

a dozy stupor. When I tasted Strub's wines again 24 days later they had opened dramatically. "I spoke with Helmut Dönnhoff," Walter said, "and he said the same; the wines are changing every day. He wishes you could taste them again." Me too!

2004 was the second year when irrigation was permitted. There's quite a schism about it. Most are opposed, others are agnostic, some are in favor. I do not have an opinion, but am tempted by the anti faction.

Some ancillary features of 2004: It is nothing less than a *GREAT VINTAGE* for Scheurebe. Yaaaaayyyyy!!!! I didn't taste a single one I didn't absolutely love. They are arched-back, spittin' and hissin' feral sharp-toothed Scheus, like Rieslings on a peyote binge.

2004 is, astonishingly, a fabulous vintage for a grape the Germans almost never get right: *Gewürztraminer*. (This suggests it'll also be remarkable in Alsace; you read it here first.) "Because they have acidity!" said many growers. But that's not it exactly. It's because they have restraint and outline, and because somehow the *finest* aspects of varietal fruit are emphasized; the roses and the lychee, in a form almost demure and elegant.

2004 is simply a GREAT vintage for Eiswein, the majority of which were gathered either the 10th or 20th of December from perfect clean fruit. These have never been so pure, nor had such gorgeous fruit. A few flirted with excessive acidity, but only a few. Most of them concentrated two signature-flavors of the vintage—lime and plum—into knee-buckling elixirs of haunting beauty.

Time to talk flavor.

Ripe-green. **Ripe-green.** Concentrated lime, quince, apple, mirabelle, balsam, wintergreen; these are the words appearing throughout my notes. Just lip-smacking textures, bracing and juicy; you almost need a bib to get through a glass, cuz these babies will make you salivate. And there's something beyond clarity in them, like one of those days so absurdly clear you can tell the color of a bird's eyes from 100 yards away.

The vintage is, in short, loveable, reliable, charming and good. We rarely speak in terms of good in this business, have you noticed? Everything has to be *great, awesome, riveting, blah blah blah* and suddenly good isn't good enough. It's true, the old saying: the great is the



enemy of the good. 2004 is a vintage as utterly thoroughly good as any I can remember. It contains many great wines, no doubt. But a vintage contains two truths, if you will. One is some theoretical sum of the number of great wines divided by their degree of greatness, while the other is a slower thing to form, like waiting for a photograph in the developing fluid. It's a common denominator, if you will, both of style and of "quality," and you don't average it out from your "scores." By that reckoning I'd have to say *I do not recall a vintage when the lowest-common-denominator was as high as in 2004*. And I want to restore the value of the word good, so that we no longer use it to damn with faint praise.

Again I have to emphasize, all opinions are based on my actual tasting from growers within my portfolio (plus a few others)—I can't presume to speak for the whole magilla. Though this is what I taste *each* year, so I'm able to compare apples to apples.

Which regions are best? All of them. Though if you're a slut for slate you'll be giddy with gaiety over the '04 Mosels.

2004 is also a vintage in which many estates made the best wines I can recall them making. There are many dramatic improvements at many addresses. Maybe it's a happy coincidence, maybe it's the vintage. In any case, here's a list of the most strikingly improved estates in this offering:

KRUGER-RUMPF (Stefan's best vintage, period. Don't miss them!)

EUGEN MULLER

DARTING (their best vintage since 1998)

KERPEN

REUSCHER-HAART

I mentioned 1998 in connection with Darting, and the comparison may be apropos for 2004 in general. I recall similar mineral density in the young '98s, similar "green" tones and clarity. And depending what happens to the mysterious and reclusive '96s, 1998 may turn out to be the 2nd best vintage of the 1990s—so this is high praise.

I want to draw attention to certain remarkable wines, and will indicate them here. I have deliberately eschewed the likes of Catoir (who showed one of the greatest vintages they're ever made) and Dönnhoff (who was Dönnhoff!), because you already know these wines are great. Here are a few I'm pulling out of the shadows:

#### THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Spreitzer** — Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303"

#### THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Selbach-Oster** — Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese "Rotlay"

#### THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Lingenfelder** — Grosskarlbacher Burgweg Scheurebe Kabinett Halbtrocken

#### THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

- ★ **Wagner-Stempel** — Riesling "Vom Porphyr" (has there ever been a greater dry Riesling from Germany???)
- ★ **Mathern** — Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Eiswein (1st-ever Eiswein from this estate, and what a maiden-voyage!)
- ★ **Schlossgut Diel** — every wine from the Dorsheimer Burgberg
- ★ **Koehler-Ruprecht** — Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese (warp-speed torque and insane complexity)
- ★ **Geil** — Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner Spätlese "feinherb" (when has 13.8% alc ever tasted so elegant?)

#### THE KABINETT OF THE VINTAGE IS:

- ★ **Schmitt-Wagner** — Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett



#### THE GREATEST WINES YOU'D LIKELY OVERLOOK ARE:

- ★ **Bernhard** — Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer Spätlese
- ★ **Wagner-Stempel** — Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Auslese
- ★ **Adam** — Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese
- ★ **Dr Deinhard** — Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese

#### AND FINALLY, THE SINGLE BEST VALUE IN THIS OFFERING IS:

- ★ **Minges** — Riesling Halbtrocken LITERS

I am really jazzed with 2004. I can't wait to taste them again!

## **Earlier Vintages Revisited – 2003**

I paid a visit to a producer I hadn't seen for years, whom I used to represent but no longer do. It was a catch-up-with-old-friends sort of visit but of course there were a bunch of wines lined up to taste. Among them 2003s.

Tasting several typically outstanding wines of this most remarkable vintage of my adult life, I mused "You know, at least in my country this vintage was almost universally misunderstood." I was taken aback when my friend stopped dead still, affixed me with a powerful stare and declaimed "*Thank you!* Yes, it does my heart good to hear those words . . ."

OK, here's the scoop. I have very few 2003s left to sell, and thus no mercantile reason to make this claim. I happen to believe it. 2003 is at its best a great vintage, a monument of the German wine culture, and will in the fullness of time become the stuff of legend. Of *course* there are plain dull wines from '03. But think about it: if you've ever been there and visited growers, and if you're lucky enough to be given a bottle from the *sanctorum* to taste, what vintage is it? Very likely a '76, and if you're really inner-circle material, a '59.

Thirty years from now your kids will be given 2003s to accord them just the same honor. Those who pooh-poohed this vintage, affected to despise it, or simply ignored it are guilty of a supreme piece of short-sighted foolishness.

I have a share of blame as well. For twenty years I have inculcated a clientele who prize the ordinary virtues of German Riesling; its lightness, brilliance, minerality and subtlety. Then 2003 comes thumping down the path and I want you guys to like it too, though it sort of flies in the face of everything I've been telling you. But the thing is, it really doesn't. The many great '03s are more explicit than usual, and certainly fuller-bodied, but neither of these facets precludes greatness unless our definition of greatness is very fussy indeed.

G e r m a n Riesling is always musical. Often (perhaps usually) it's like chamber music, pensive, intricate, many-layered and compelling of atten-



tion. In 2003 it was music of the very same composer, only this time symphonic, even anthemic. Look, I'm a baseball purist; I like a pitcher's duel and I don't require a lot of "action" to stay into the game. But I also *love* a slugfest. Provided the thing is essentially fine, I get to choose which way it's fine. And I think 2003 was a beneficence the likes of which we are seldom given. I am quite sure that some of you weren't yet born in 1976. We ignore these monument-vintages at our peril.

It needed relentless selectivity, which I gave it. It has improved every moment since it was bottled, and goes on improving. The only "problem" with 2003 (the good ones, I mean) is it produced a plethora of the kind of wines we don't drink much of—Auslese and TBAs.

This is a modern "problem" brought on as an ironic unplanned consequence of a huge improvement in overall quality. And perhaps climate-change as well. Think back to the '70s and '80s: three Auslese-vintages in the '70s ('71,'75,'76), four in the '80s ('83, '88, '89, and maybe '85), but in the '90s? ALL of them. And in the new century? ALL of them. The new generation of growers are picking better grapes and riper grapes than ever before, and this is, we all agree, a good thing. Except we don't want to drink the results!

I've relisted every 2003 I could lay hands on. I urge you not to ignore them.

## **2002**

It took awhile, but this vintage has started evolving its true fruit, and it now breathes a soul-satisfying lyric fragrance; it is more than "dear and winsome" as I wrote last year. It has certain things in common with 2004, though even now some '02s still show rather spiky acids while the '04s are more balanced and juicy. Still, good 2002s are extremely attractive now; I found myself yearning to be British, since that market tends to appreciate bottle-aged wines more than ours does. Here the

few remaining 2002s will have passed their first half-life and be mostly uninteresting to y'all—except that they taste wonderful. Sigh. Much as I always liked '02, I suspect I may have underrated it.

## “Antiques”

2001 has modestly shuffled off the stage now, and one doesn't get it to taste. Yet every time I did I was reaffirmed in my certainty of its fundamental greatness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

The Germans were—characteristically—slow to adapt at first. I get a chuckle whenever a grower laments the problem of cork—at his neighbor's winery! Most of them are certain *their* corks are of the highest quality. “When was the last time you had a corked bottle of mine?” they'll demand. “Um, does yesterday count?” I reply. But things seem to be changing quickly.

Now the topic is *which* alternative closure to use. One guy worries about stelvins (“I don't like my wine being in contact with aluminium for so many years,” he says.) while another observes “Since you Americans seem to have this *thing* about sulfur, maybe stelvins aren't the best closure . . .” to which I could only reply it isn't all Americans, just two or three, one of whom's half-Euro anyways. There's a very foxy device called Vinolok which is a glass cork and which I like. Rumpf's using crown corks. We do not urge them to change, but we tell them we welcome any change they consider making—except plastic.

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



word makes me wince) in New Zealand or Yunnan province. He is a Moselaner; therefore the wine he makes is Mosel wine.

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

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

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

One thing I'd be sure to do is to protect *true* Eiswein. This genre of sweet wine originated in Germany, and probably happened by accident. Then the growers discovered a chance to make intense sweet wine in years when BA and TBA were impossible. Then they discovered how amazing Eiswein tasted, and came to prize it for itself. Then they learned how to refine it, what to leave hanging, how (or if) to protect the fruit, when to give up on it, and what not to concentrate. This last point is crucial, which you'd appreciate if you remembered any of the '87 Eisweins; this unripe vintage gave Eisweins wherein the *unripeness* was concentrated, and I will never forget tasting a Mittelrhein Riesling Eiswein with over *twenty gum-bleeding grams of acidity* which would probably have removed dog blood from silk.

At this point, good growers in Germany are making some of the most heart-meltingly gorgeous sweet wines on earth. It involves risk. If you leave fruit hanging and the weather turns miserable, that's it; you write it off,

and better luck next year. And even if it works, the grapes keep dehydrating and you only get 1/11th of the juice from a "normal" picking. Plus, it is very hard work. I don't know about you, but I'm loath to get out of bed at 4:30 on a winter morning and run out to the vineyard to pick grapes.

There's a certain utilitarian argument in favor of *confected* Eiswein; what difference does it make how it's made if it tastes good and people can afford it? And you want to cheer *Yeah! People can afford it: that is GOOD*. As of course it is. But what are the consequences of affordable Eisweins made who-knows-how? Simply this: producers risking all to create the real thing won't be able to sell it, and thus will stop producing it. And this is how our world is diminished, step by innocent step, until there is nothing to treasure any more.



I think I would also pass a law forbidding any person with a marketing degree from standing within 500 yards of a winery, and from speaking in any form to a vintner. At least in the old world at the artisan-agricultural level. Marketing persons excrete mischief like cows excrete methane. (That felt good to write!) Here's an especially repulsive example.

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



GEWÄECHS" BE SWEET!!! And let's even do it in fine Teutonic fashion and decree the wines must have "no more than 50.5 grams and no less than 38.623698499 grams (39 if you're married filing jointly)." If we are going to decide, completely arbitrarily, how an entire community of disparate wines will taste, then let's increase the odds they'll taste GOOD, what say?

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

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

All in all I'm starting to wonder about the VDP. They seem to opt as if by instinct toward ideological strait-jackets. They frequently fix what wasn't broken



while neglecting what is. Low yields, environmentally friendly viticulture, hand-picking, strict ripeness minima, all O.K. Good place to stop. Vineyard classification, also O.K: I proposed one myself in a DECANTER article back in 1985. Rather blatantly self-serving (e.g. FAR too much Grand Cru land in marginal Rheingau villages which are home to VDP members) but still, it needs doing and any start is better than none.

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

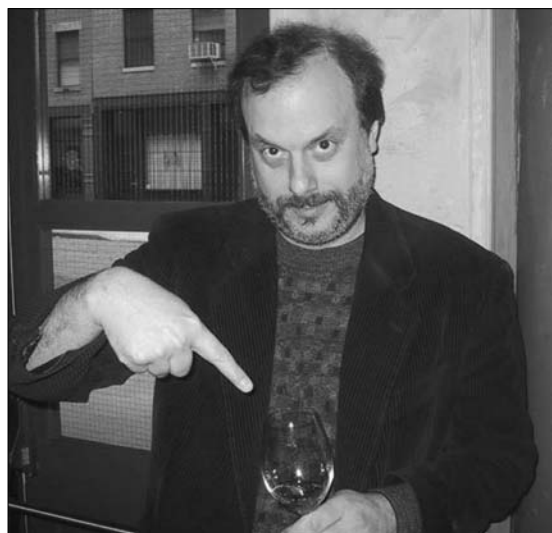
the silliness started, eh guys?

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

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

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

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



## What is a Palate?

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

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

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

I mean, the whole Robotongue business should certainly prompt us to redefine what we mean by palate. The actual physiochemical reception of flavor can be bettered by a machine. Thus a machine can register (and catalog what it registers) but can it be said to actually taste? We are entire human beings tasting wine; we bring our memories and longings and antic-

ipations to every glass. If we're especially fortunate we bring our grateful expectation without fussing over how we'll quantify our pleasure.

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

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

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

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

I like balance but I will tolerate a fascinating "flaw." Ideally a wine is both balanced *and* fascinating. In a balanced wine the flavors seem *preordained* to exist in precisely **that** configuration. No knees or elbows poke out. You sit by the stream. The water is clean and cold. The mountain peaks are clear. There are no beer cans or cigarette butts in sight. You've been hiking for a few hours and you feel loose and warm and hungry. You unpack your lunch, take the first bite of food, and then you see

your sweetheart come up the path. The air is soft and cool under a gentle sun. Things are exactly perfect. Happens, what, once in a lifetime? In balanced wine, it happens with each sip.

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

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



## How German Wines Age

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

It’s a blessing and a curse that German wine tastes so good when it’s young. As my own tastes change over time I’ve grown more sympathetic to drinking these wines early. Our lives are so stressful that a beaming glass of unaffected *delight* is a thing we all deserve. It’s a lovely, unfussy pleasure. But it is not the only pleasure. If we are relaxed enough to engage our full selves—not just our attentions, but our *hearts* as well—the aromas and tastes of mature Riesling can be enthralling.

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

However, with certain young wines, Mosel wines especially, there’s a problem we wine merchants hardly like to discuss at all, and if we do it’s only in furtive whispers after we scan the space to make sure no laypeople are present. This is, you may already have guessed, THE SULFUR PROBLEM. Some young Mosel wines (and in *very* isolated instances non-Mosel wines also) may have a cheesy kind of whiff about them. This is a little unbound hydrogen sulfide that usually comes from the lees and can be present in wines which are racked late. Certain growers *like* to keep their wines on the primary lees after fermentation to give them more stuffing and texture. It’s a great idea and it makes for wines that age splendidly, but that cheesy smell can be a nuisance if you try and drink the wine too soon.

So don’t!

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

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

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



mysteriousness.

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

You should also know the curve by which Riesling ages. The “pinnacle” of its development isn’t a peak so much as a table mesa. Riesling doesn’t reach its narrow summit and suddenly tumble down the other side. It

gets to the top and walks around the plateau awhile, for *years*, enjoying the view, only descending as evening approaches and the air grows chilly. The figures I cite in my tasting notes are A) the number of years at which the summit is reached, and B) the number of years I intuit the descent will begin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TBA: I know you’ll hate to hear this, but these wines aren’t designed to fit into a human lifetime. Unless you started buying TBA when you were, like, seventeen, every bottle you have will outlive you. I drank a bunch of 1953 TBA in 2003 (in honor of my ghastly birthday) and several of them had more improvement ahead of them. So, peaks anywhere between 35 and 55 years, and shouldn’t fade till the Red Sox play the Cubs in the series — and the Cubbies win.

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

My own instincts are to pay heed to the weight of the wine— Eiswein at 135° Oechsle is a different critter than one at 200° Oechsle— and drink it as you would any other hyper-concentrated dessert wine: either very young or very old.

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



## **What To Drink Now**

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

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

## Label Basics

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



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

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

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

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

Now the German departs radically from the French.

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). The phrase *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 Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, in this case the *region* of origin. The French wine denies us even this basic courtesy. No "*Grand vin de Bourgogne*" here. We are thrown upon the dubious mercy of the 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 Zeltinger for Monsieur's pork 'n beans?" Some of the more arcane ramifications of the label can be interesting to students of logic, or just for a chuckle over some precious bureaucratic geekiness, but you really don't need to know it. Do you *have* to know all the queer codes on an airplane ticket in order to board the plane? But your travel agent can see all kinds of information in those strange little glyphs. Learn it if you care to.



# GLOSSARY

## OECHSLE

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

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

## GL

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

## EXTRACT

Extract really is simple and tangible. It is everything in wine except sugar, acid, water, and alcohol. You can measure it in the lab, and all German wine carrying an A.P. number has had its extract measured. The average reading would be somewhere in the low 20s—speaking in g.l. now. I'd expect to see a Riesling QbA or Kabinett with 22 to 24 g.l. extract, or 2.2 to 2.4 percent. I'd look for Spätlese to be a little higher, Auslese still higher, and the stickies quite high, up to 40 or even 50 g.l.

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

## ACIDITY

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

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

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

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

## TYPES OF SOIL

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

## TROCKEN & HALBTROCKEN

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

## SÜSSRESERVE

This is *really* un-trendy now; fewer growers deploy it each year. The zeitgeist is for “purity”, and using *dosage* smacks of manipulation. This is fatuous reasoning, which I’ll explain presently. But for now, a short anecdote:

Stefan Rumpf is one vintner who’d like to do away with *dosage*, but as a practical matter he’s keeping some around until he gets fluent in the new cellar-regime. His residually-sweet 2004s were all made by stopping fermentation (is this not also manipulation???? Oh don’t even get me started). There was a Scheurebe I liked and which needed to be sweeter, so we tried it two ways—one using *dosage* and the other by blending an Auslese into the base wine.

It was unanimous; the wine with *dosage* was clearly superior.

So-called “Süssreserve” (literally sweet-reserve) is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor is assured—at least in theory. I intervene as often as I can in this process, as I have definite ideas about harmony. Where the story of a blend is interesting I’ll share it with you. Actually, I have decided that I don’t like the word “Süssreserve” any more and I won’t use it in this text. Since nobody objects to the idea of *Dosage* in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I’ll use the nicer one.

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

In any case I applaud purism in most places it is found, but the anti-*dosage* crusade in Germany smacks not of science but of religion. I am quite certain that thousands of growers used *dosage* willy-nilly—still do—but that only demonstrates there’s plenty of hacks making wine. I doubt very much they’d make better wine by stopping fermentation. Hacks are hacks. *Dosage* has been

seized upon by a community of growers a little too eager to polish their halos. It is a convenient symbol of manipulation, but this is silly; all winemaking is manipulation, and the authentic questions are not whether to manipulate (one already does) but rather *how* to manipulate and to what end. What we call “non-manipulation” (with rather an excess of romanticism) is more properly called *minimal* manipulation. We prefer growers whose wines are guided by a wish to *preserve* natural inherent flavor rather than ladling all kinds of cellar-sauce over it.

Wines made sweet by stopping fermentation do have their “own” sweetness, but I’m not willing to presume this is superior, and certainly not as a matter of faith or ideology. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t. True “residual” sugar has a higher proportion of fructose: therefore it tastes sweeter and “heavier”. Stopping fermentation involves either chilling, racking through filters or sulfuring. In fact these more “natural” wines require more sulfur than those made with *dosage*. Andreas Adam insists “Süssreserve **falsifies** terroir!” and I’m delighted by how much he cares about terroir, and if you have to err then it’s damn sure preferable to err on the side of purism. But what he says ain’t necessarily so. And there’s the crux: young growers are also young *people*, and young people like things to be categorical. Then life kicks our ass and we get more humble.

A reasonable compromise is to stop your fermentations but also to keep a little *dosage* around. After all, how can you be sure you stopped at just the perfect point? The wine is turbulent and yeasty. Isn’t it at least prudent to give yourself options? Believe me, every wine is easier to judge several months later.

I wonder whether the anti-*dosage* sentiment doesn’t arise from a puritanical disapproval of sweetness, especially sweetness “added” deliberately. No one would say this outright, but I feel its presence. Thus stopped fermentation, especially if it stops spontaneously, can be excused; *oh well, nature wanted it that way*. And so the argument isn’t really about *dosage*, terroir or purism; it is a shadow-argument about ameliorating the despicable sweetness.



## 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 Erzeugerab-füllung 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.

## THEIR TWILIGHT-ZONE WINE LAW

The 1971 wine law is being neutered by the new generation. Eventually it will become so irrelevant to the way wines are actually produced and labeled it will either be forced to adapt to reality or become a laughable anachronism. Many growers are taking their cue from the Austrians: all the dry wines are ostensibly sold as “QbA” because no one likes “Spätlese Trocken” or “Auslese Trocken”. Many growers are using old micro-site names as a gesture of recognition to their distinctive terroirs. No serious grower cares (nor do some of them even *know*) about the ripeness minima for the various “Prädikat” levels; they name by *taste*, and a “Kabinett” is the wine that *tastes* like one, regardless of must-weight. Indeed there’s never been less concern about must-weight, or more concern about physiological ripeness.

So I asked a few of the wise old sages whether they thought the law could be changed. The consensus is: no. Far too complicated and messy, especially now that the EU is involved. What will happen, they say, is far more growers will take what’s useful in the law and disregard the rest.

## FEINHERB

This is one of those weird terms that both denotes and connotes: it denotes a wine just-above Halbtrocken in residual sugar, but in actual useage it connotes any wine that’s on-the-dry-side, or drier than the drinker might otherwise anticipate! What’s bizarrely remarkable is, there’s no legal definition, no upward limit of RS; it’s all fungible and awfully un-Teutonic and most scandalously un-bureaucratic. And actually quite sensible! So much so I wonder why this idea cannot be applied to all the dry wines, allowing the designations to be based on *taste* and not lab-figures. For our purposes here, please understand “Feinherb” to mean a dry (or dry-ish) wine that’s a little sweeter than the upward limit for Halbtrocken. Young growers seem to like the term, as it doesn’t strait-jacket their wines within the silly and arbitrary limits of Trocken-Halbtrocken. I think the term is neither here nor there, but I like the idea.



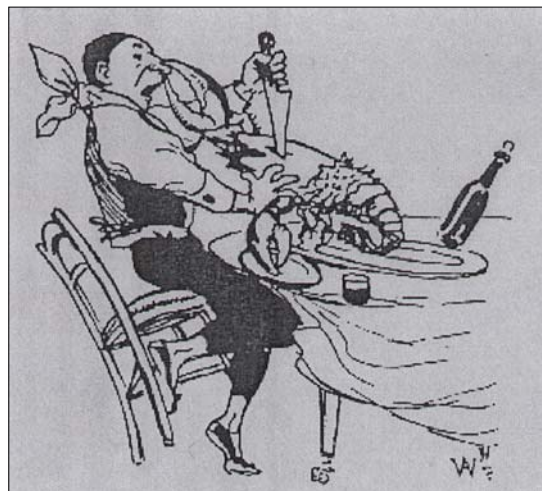
# SOMMELIER ALERT!

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

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

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

Briefly put, if you don't already know, I think you'd be surprised how well German white wine will *work* with your food. It's actually, dare I say it, the best available white wine you could use. Or as Richard Betts writes in Betts and Scholl's Spring 2005 newsletter, "Riesling is an excellent partner to whatever you want to eat (ask any great sommelier what to pair with the most crazy food you can think of, and 10 out of 10 will say Riesling)." 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

GSO-246	2004 Selbach-Oster Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Kabinett	.44
GSO-247	2004 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett	.45
GSO-225	2003 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	.45
GSO-250	2004 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese	.46
GSO-233	2003 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese	.47
GME-128	2004 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #2	.55
GME-127	2004 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #1	.55
GME-130	2004 Merkelbach Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese	.56
GME-126	2004 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese	.56
GJC-134	2004 Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett	.58
GKE-092	2004 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	.61
GWS-121	2004 Willi Schaefer Riesling (#1)	.63
GWS-123	2004 Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett	.64
GWS-124	2004 Schaefer Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	.64
GWS-125	2004 Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett	.64
GWS-126	2004 Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #11	.64
GAD-006	2003 Adam Dhroner Riesling	.67
GAD-011	2004 Adam Riesling Kabinett	.67
GAD-010	2003 Adam Dhronhofberger Sängerei Riesling	.67
GAD-012	2004 Adam "Hofberg" Riesling Spätlese	.67
GHS-025	2004 Hoffmann-Simon Estate Riesling	.72
GCL-035	2004 Loewen Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese	.76
GSW-043	2004 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett	.78
GSW-042	2003 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese	.78
GSW-044	2004 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese	.78
GSW-040	2003 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese	.78
GAW-073	2004 Weingart Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese	.85
GAW-074	2004 Weingart Schmitt-Wagner Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling "Anarchie"	.85
GDH-160	2004 Dönnhoff Estate Riesling	.95
GDH-163	2004 Dönnhoff Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese	.95
GDH-167	2004 Dönnhoff Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese	.95
GMA-064	2004 Mathern Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese	.98
GHX-025	2004 Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese ("Birkenfelder")	104
GKF-092	2004 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Kabinett	.106
GKF-096	2004 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese	.107
GKF-095	2004 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese	.107

GSD-017	2004 Diel Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Spätlese	110
GST-122	2004 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	116
GST-117L	2004 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter	116
GST-116	2004 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett	117
GST-121	2004 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett	117
GGE-001	2004 Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb	125
GGE-002	2004 Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner Spätlese Feinherb	125
GGE-006H	2004 Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner Auslese 12/500ml	125
GGY-056	2004 Gysler Weinheimer Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	130
GGY-050H	2003 Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Spätburgunder Weissherbst BA, 12/375ml	130
GCB-061	2004 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett	132
GOH-050	2003 Ohler Binger Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett	134
GOH-053	2004 Ohler Ockenheimer Klosterweg Silvaner Spätlese Halbtrocken	134
GOH-048	1998 Ohler Binger Schlossberg-Schwätzerchen Riesling Auslese	134
GMZ-054	2002 Merz Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling Auslese Halbtrocken	137
GJL-103	2004 Letiz Rüdeshheimer Bischofsberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken	145
GMC-073	2004 Müller-Catoir Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller Kabinett Trocken	158
GMC-087	2004 Müller-Catoir Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner Spätlese	160
GBR-071	2002 Biffar Gerümpel "Grosses Gewächs"	162
GDD-015	2004 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett	164
GDD-006	2001 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	165
GEM-072	2004 Eugen Müller Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	167
GMS-105L	2004 Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter	169
GMS-098	2003 Messmer Muskateller Kabinett Trocken	169
GMS-097	2003 Messmer Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	170
GMS-092	2002 Messmer Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett	170
GTM-083L	2004 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter	172
GTM-084	2004 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett	172
GKR-085	2004 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	172
GKR-086	2004 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett	173
GKR-087	2004 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese	176
GLI-078	2003 Lingenfelder Riesling "Bird Label"	179
GLI-090	2004 Lingenfelder Freinsheimer Goldberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	179
GLI-080	2003 Lingenfelder Freinsheimer Goldberg Riesling Spätlese	179
GLI-091	2004 Lingenfelder Grosskarlbacher Burgweg Scheurebe Kabinett Halbtrocken	179
GLI-092	2004 Lingenfelder Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe Spätlese Old Vines	179
GNE-089	2003 Neckerauer Weisenheimer Halde Riesling Kabinett	181
GDR-126L	2004 Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter	183
GDR-124	2004 Darting Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett	183

# subject: why riesling?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# mosel-saar-ruwer



The green bottles. The wines we love with a special tenderness, for the essence of spring-time which pours out with each piercing greeny splash. There are as many ways to love them as there are people who love them. But for me, as a merchant, there is only one way to buy them.

I look for *slate*. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness. There are other light and aromatic wines in the world from northern climates: the U.K., Luxembourg, even the Ahr, which is further north than the Mosel. But no other wine expresses this curious permutation of mineral and Riesling. Mosel wines *can* be rich, but flabbiness is simply **out of character**; softness has no place here. I want that malic, granny-apple fruitiness that manages to be so taut and exuberant, set in a binding of minerality you should detect with the first whiff. Mosel wine should never lounge around like a contented feline. It should run like a gazelle, taut and rippling and sinewy.

The valley itself is spectacular but unforgiving; the very steepness of the vine-clad slopes suggest

the precariousness of a vintner's existence there. The wines themselves, beneath their extroverted gaiety, have something quite rigid, unsentimental, as though of a flower-essence distilled to a point of almost unbearable clarity. It is so easy to be charmed into euphoria by these wines that I forget just how intricate and inscrutable they can be. Even the most rustic and uncomplicated vintners are Catholically devout servants of this particular mystery of nature.

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 at little specks of people, pruning, binding, spraying, and you will wonder: "how do they keep from falling?" But

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

even more you will wonder: "who in his right mind would *do* such work?" Who indeed! People who *are* willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer—and older. Much casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but the steep slopes need experienced hands. Families undertake most of the work themselves, *if* they will. Many of the young are opting out. Many venerable names are either up for sale, have already *been* sold, or are

floundering. Vineyard land is available everywhere, giving an anguishing dilemma to those who can afford it. One wants the irresistible bargain, but *who* will work the land? Selbach-Oster, an estate whose size has more than *doubled* in the past five years, faced mutiny from their vine-

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

yard workers if they added more land.

Yet they have added land, and will continue to, as long as great land is available. For we are in the middle of a sea-change in the Mosel valley, the ramifications of which are starting to make themselves felt.

Back in the mid-eighties a guy like me had his pick among literally dozens of interesting growers, who quietly and inconspicuously made honorable Mosel wines—which is to say *fine* Mosel wines. In the case of an estate such as Merkelbach, most of the wine was sold in bulk. Hans-Leo Christoffel and Willi Schaefer were simply below the radar. If one searched diligently enough, eventually one found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But this generation is aging. In many cases their children have moved away to easier and more lucrative careers in the cities. That's why so much good land is available. But what's really shaking things up isn't the ones who left, but the ones who remained.

This isn't easy work! You have to love it in your bones, and so the young generation of Mosel vintners has self-selected its most enterprising and conscientious members; if you're a young guy making wine at *all* along the Mosel, you're probably making *excellent* wine. You wouldn't have chosen the life if you didn't love wine and didn't plan to excel.

But two critical things have changed. First, the young person does not wish to work in obscurity. His only

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

chance to prosper lies in spreading the word quickly and widely. So he sends his samples to all the necessary publications. In theory, his wines are noteworthy, he makes his name, he places himself on the *scene*, and customers ensue. This means a guy like me just isn't going to make the kinds of "discoveries" which were so easy fifteen years ago. If a producer is good, he's not waiting around hoping to be discovered; he's aggressively marketing himself.

The second major change, the more important one, is economical. Until around the late '60s, there was equilibrium between costs of production and prices paid. Few vintners were cash-rich but most did well enough. Their expectations were modest. They defined "affluence" differently than we do.

Then in the '70s costs began to rise, driven by labor, driven by the disinclination of the young to break their balls on the steep-slopes. For a while the growers lived on whatever fat they'd been able to accumulate. By the late '80s—early '90s, they were scraping bone. The young man or woman emotionally committed to assuming the reins was only going to do so if he could make a decent living. These young people were far more cosmopolitan than their parents; they traveled widely, drank other wines, knew other markets, and *saw the prices vintners were getting in other parts of the world*.

All of us who love German wine share a certain guilty secret; we know they are grossly underpriced. They are the last absurd bargains of the wine world. But we cannot expect young people to carry on this beautiful culture, this noble craft, for nothing but the altruistic *glamour* of it all. Glamour don't pay the bills. Prices are going to rise. It is the cost we all must pay to ensure the survival of the people and the wines we love so much.

For everyone along the Mosel plays the same lament; **labor**. It's hard to get, and because it's hard to get it commands a high price. The slopes are forbiddingly steep—it's physically dangerous to work such land—and there's very little feasible machine work. Hand-labor on steep slopes in this satellite-TV world is not consistent with Kabinett wine costing \$10.

As a merchant I am caught in the middle. I want Mosel wine to survive because I love it almost helplessly. My conscience revolts at dunning a producer for *pfennigs* (or *cents* in the brave new Euro-world) while I look out his window at the perpendicular mountains I know he has to work in. But neither do I wish to deliver sticker-shock to you, cherished customer. So we're going to let prices creep steadily upward until equilibrium is restored.

The Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-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. People will show you pictures and show you the water marks in their homes. And the following year saw equally remorseless flooding: how much can these people endure? The new-world winemaker "lifestyle" is the heaven these Mosel vintners hope they'll go to someday.

The Mosel is also a self-contained culture. Despite the length of the river (and its tributaries) there is a certain cultural cohesion there, more so than in other German wine regions. This isn't always good, mind you; there's more than a little Hatfield vs. McCoy chicanery along with the petty jealousies afflicting small village life throughout most of the world. One day Andreas Adam planted a quarter-hectare. When he went out the following day to continue, everything he planted the day before had been vandalized. The young man is sure of himself



*Treking up the Erdener Treppchen*

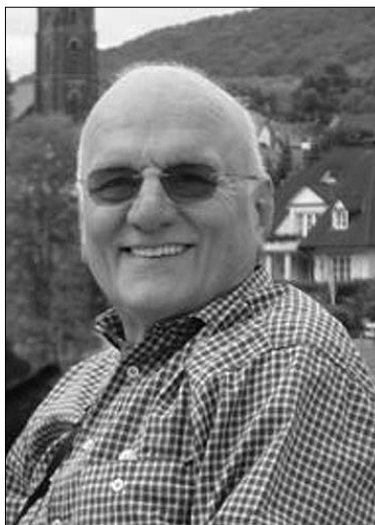
(as he has every right to be), and this infuriated a neighbor. These cultures are not exclusively lyrical! Yet I have rarely seen such a spirit of true neighborliness as I have on the Mosel, at times, among families where there's mutual respect and trust.

At Hans Selbach's funeral I spent a few moments gazing at the faces of the hundreds of mourners, an entire panoply of Moselers, and it was like looking backward in time. Nearly every face could have been carved on a Roman coin, all these fine faces etched in sadness. All those lives for all those years, beautiful and solemn and brief. This Summer I'll take my 18-year old son Max with me to visit the Mosel. He's not a wine-guy (not yet anyway . . .) and we're not going to do a lot of tasting, but there are people I want him to see. Schaefer, Merkelbach, Schmitt, Selbachs of course. I want him to see their faces, and then to walk in their vineyards. At some point I know he'll look down at the steepness in shock—we all do, even when we've been there before—and perhaps he'll ask me *Why do people make wine here?*

What would you have me tell him?

## HANS SELBACH

1928 - 2005



Hans died in early February, of cancer; he died in his own bed surrounded by his family. He died as he had lived, one might say; with grace and with meaning, awash in connections.

One day earlier he and the love of his life, his wife Sigrid, observed the 50th anniversary of the day they had met.

Hans was cheerful, eager, delighted and kind. If he was peevish I never saw it. As befits a Moselaner who made bracingly honest wines saturated with the slate of the steep hills, his body lies deep within the slate in the small terraced graveyard behind the handsome church of St Stephanus in Zeltingen.

I attended the funeral on a bright cold February day. Snow had fallen in the morning, but in the afternoon all was melting and trickly, water dripping off the hedges and trees as if the very earth were weeping.

Hans had asked for his body to be carried through the bottle cellar when it was taken from the house, as if to say goodbye. His son Jochen told me, "Terry, I swear as we carried him through that room I could hear the bottles standing up and applauding." I am very sure they did, for this was a great man of wine, not because he made great wine (though he did) but because he made *true* wine, honest wine, the wine of his place, vivid and candid and without frills.

I saw Hans each year when I visited. He always seemed like one of those angels in the Wim Wenders film *Wings Of Desire*, a being put among us to console us and make us feel happier. Last year I had a cold coming on, a nightmare on a tasting trip, and we made

an appointment to see the Doctor just in case the thing could be nipped in the bud. Hans went with me. As we sat in the waiting room I said "I love your company, but you needn't feel you have to be here if you have things to do; I can manage by myself." Hans only shook his head, and stayed with me. He was waiting when I went in, and waiting when I came back out. He knew very well I could manage on my own, but that wasn't it. This was how one *took care*. One sat even this small vigil, with a friend who had the sniffles.

The family have countless such stories, but these are their stories, not mine to tell. I can say this: For every moment of my life I will think of Hans and know: That is how to be a man.

Father, brother, son, husband, vintner, friend, grandfather (the best who ever was, of this I am sure), worker, and lover of life—Hans.

I have a picture of him and his Sigrid, in which they are toasting each other from a bottle Hans is holding in his hand. She smiles her queenly loving smile; he smiles his mischievous impish smile, ever so slightly naughty and conspiratorial. Sigrid is in a flowing dress, but Hans is wearing *shorts* and his big ol' knees are poking out irrepressibly, like those of a child.

If you visit his grave, you will see everything that mattered to him: Zeltingen, where he made his home and raised his family; The Mosel, and finally the vineyards, always the vineyards, whose lovely and mysterious flavors were the last thing he tasted, before he could taste nothing any more.

# mosel regionals

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Mosel wine is one of the easiest wines in the world to enjoy, yet when the novice has cut his teeth on the usual regional blends, the real thing may be too steely for him. Most regionals come from Müller-Thurgau grown in flat sites on the alluvial side of the river—if they come from Germany at all (hell, if they come from **grapes** at all). Most are bought on the bulk market as grapes, must, or unfinished wine, commissioned through brokers who are ordered to procure X thousand liters at X per liter. It's a market that calls another breed of procurer to mind.

I'd like to encourage people to drink genuine, honest Mosel wine. I think you agree. Therefore it seems to me if we want to trade people up from regionals, we'd better establish a true style among those regionals. That means Riesling. My regionals are 100% Riesling. Even their Süssreserve is almost always Riesling. They are not purchased on the bulk market, but cask by cask

from growers with whom the bottling firm of J. & H. SELBACH has done business for many years. Nor are they the most expensive regionals you'll be offered, though you can certainly pay less if you don't care what you sell your customers. I've heard all the arguments that the "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.

So take another gander at TJ. If it's done well for you, it'll probably do even better. If it hasn't done well I'll bet it will start. If you've never considered it—baby now's the time!

## The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

I heard an unbelievable story. There was some sort of tasting put on by the German Wine Institute, for the purpose of determining a style of German Wine that would **specifically and particularly** appeal to the American market. I guess there were marketing experts present—I wish I'd been the fly on the wall for that one! A bunch of wines were tasted blind, most of them brands already on the market. But here's the punchline: when the votes were tallied, *one* wine stood out. *here* was precisely the perfect wine to appeal to us Yanks. It answered all the necessary Concepts. Maybe they thought it tasted good too. It was TJ Riesling.

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

We wanted to charge enough for it to distance it from the Piesporter genre, and also to give us latitude in choosing excellent base wines for the blend. We wanted a wine that tasted slatey and appley as all the best Mosels do, and we wanted a wine that would accommodate the widest possible variety of foods. That means we wanted just a discreet hint of sweetness, enough so the wine wouldn't taste acid or sharp. Finally we wanted a wine that would be sensitive to vintage, not a product that would always taste the same. We remain committed to the **profile** of TJ as a consistently slatey and crisp Mosel Riesling which should be both *agreeable* and *serious*.

Since the 1992 vintage, TJ Riesling has always been better than its class. I am certain there isn't a superior Mosel regional on the market.



**Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:**

- GSR-103 **Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-203 **Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA (Screwcap)**
- GSR-304 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-703 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-803 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-604 **TJ Riesling**



# selbach-oster

## mosel • zeltingen

Often I have arrived with an *entourage*, but not this year. Only Jonas and me, and the house quiet with bearing-up. I craved every moment with every Selbach, drank them like spring water. And went about the work of the day.

These are good times for Mosel wine lovers, with more fine producers than ever. We all have our share, my colleagues and me, and I hope we all admire all the wines “apolitically.” What I’m about to say isn’t a better-worse statement, but it’s something I deeply believe. *There are no wines along the Mosel more honorable than those of Selbach-Oster.* They are grounded, honest, intelligent and meaningful—like the family who produce them.

Where wine is concerned I trust Johannes as I trust very few other people. He’s not only highly intelligent, he’s also *smart* and judicious. He has found his path. His wines have *identity* and

purpose, yet even so the sustained quality of 2004 is striking. There simply isn’t a dud in the bunch, and we’re talking a lot of Fuders of Mosel wine.

Indeed my challenge is selecting among them, because everything’s worthwhile, and everything speaks a basic truth of its vintage. The 2004s are crunchy, laden with complex interplay, and adamantly expressive of their terroirs. But this is hardly surprising; Johannes’ and Hans’ 2003s rode the finest wave of that misunderstood vintage; the range of Auslesen are as profound a vintage-statement (and as astounding a group of wines) as you can ever find.

Yet Selbach’s wines reward a certain attention. In short they are made to be *drunk*, not “tasted”. They never show off. Other wines, even very good wines, often do: like someone with a brand new BMW driving ostentatiously through town honking at the neighbors. Doesn’t mean the car’s not great. Just means the owner’s got some . . . issues.

It’s tempting, you know, to strut, but Johannes is instinctively immune to sleight-of-hand winemaking. He knows exactly how it’s done, he sees other growers do it, and he simply will not. One year, there were a lot of Auslesen on the table. So much so that I asked Johannes Selbach if there was a 3-star in reserve, as I didn’t see one.

Many people say many things to me during my month in Germany, and I dutifully try and scribble the smart things down. Johannes’ answer stopped me in my tracks. “Terry, the 2-star Auslese was one block picking; that’s how that wine came in from that vineyard on that day,” he said. “We could *concoct* a 3-star Auslese of course; blend together some small lot of botrytis-wine with a little Eiswein and a little BA, but it would be a *contrived* wine, the kind you only create 30 liters of to send to journalists and get big scores. That’s not the business we’re in.”

*Listen to this, people.* This is what wine means, this and only this. The vineyards didn’t create a 3-star Auslese, so there isn’t one. Simple. There’s BA and TBA and Eisweins, but no 3-star Auslese.

It’s easy to blather about *terroir* and facile to claim the vineyard makes the wine. Johannes has acted on a

- **Vineyard area: 16 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**

principle which will cost him valuable PR, but which is the only sustainable relationship a producer can truly have to wine. I am both roused to my core and seething with frustration. Frustration? Witness: a big-Cal-red first-release called . . . oh, I like the guy personally, and it doesn’t matter what it’s called; let’s call it HUBRIS HILL . . . so Hubris Hill goes out for \$125 per bottle. The “producer” doesn’t make the wine, doesn’t even *own a vine*, but he’s sure willing to stake a claim on your Buck-and-a-quarter because he knows the world’s gone **mad** and a whole bunch of suckers’ll pay it, especially if it has oodles of *jammy hedonistic fruit erupting from the glass in sub-atomic orgasms of delirium: 90 points.*

And this, we are led to believe, is wine.

Wine: (n) anything anybody can contrive to make, detached from nature, detached from culture, connected to nothing but our infantile need to be entertained and our adolescent need to be fashionably *correct*, to be sold at the highest price some desperate hipster can be horse-whipped into paying.

If this is the summit of wine’s aspirations then it wouldn’t hurt civilization if it disappeared. But I know better, and I want you to know better, and I know that we can, most of us, return to the knowledge of wine’s true claim on our hearts and bodies and souls. All of which is saturating the very filaments of air at Uferallee 23 in Zeltingen on the Mosel, where Selbach-Oster calls der schotz.

“You may have noticed our wines are a bit drier the

last two vintages than they used to be," said Johannes. "We know how to make reductive fruit-bombs that get high scores and stand out in big tastings," he continued, "but the problem is everyone writes about those wines but nobody drinks them. We want to make wines for food, that people can use in their everyday lives."

One secret is lees. The other secret is casks, the old mellow 1000-Liter casks the Moselans call Fuders. When you ferment in cask and leave the wine in cask on its gross lees for a month or two after fermentation, your wines have wonderful plush texture and rich mid-palates and they *need less sweetness*. They also have what Johannes calls "soul."

I drink plenty of wine with my friend Johannes and I know his tastes are broad. He likes those reductive fruit-brilliant wines. He simply prefers not to make them. He wants his wines more *imbued*. He wants them to make friends with you, to be companionable and useful. I'm reminded of Laurie Coleman's immortal observation "Friendship is impossible between two women, one of whom is very well-dressed." You can't be friends with someone who's showing off all the time. You can win trophies, but what would you rather have, a mantel full of trophies or a life full of friends?

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. "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?

The Selbachs are part of a way of life one encounters far too rarely in our hyped-up cyberworld. Stories like the Eiswein harvest signify more than neighborliness, or

even esprit de corps among fellow vintners. It is simply taken for granted that certain traditions are ennobled by observing them with love and good cheer. When you have a chance to gather an Eiswein it is beneficence from heaven; you CELEBRATE the opportunity.

I have two Mosel producers who are neighbors in the same site; their parcels are contiguous. One producer hadn't quite finished picking when their Polish workers' work-visas expired, which meant the crew had to return to Poland. No problem, said the neighbor; *we'll pick for you*. We'll pick for you. It really is another world. People may know one another for twenty years and still address each other as *Herr-This* and *Frau-That*. But *we'll pick for you*. There is a certain baseline *kindness* here, I find myself thinking, a certain understanding of neighborliness. And it is without affect; it seems to come quite naturally. It strikes my American ears, so used to hearing platitudes and boilerplate about neighborliness, citizenship, fellow-feeling, that *this is the real thing*. Oh believe me, they have their problems and jealousies and all the ratty bullshit which can possibly exist among people, but— *we'll pick for you*.

Being a vintner along the Mosel signifies membership in a human culture much deeper than mere occupation. Nonetheless, there are many ways to be a citizen of this culture; one might be lazy, content with mediocrity; one might be merely diligent, competent and dutiful. Or one might be conscientious and nurturing. And one's wines **flourish** under such nurturing. They are *vital*, for they exhale back the love that's been breathed into them. This may seem abstruse to the "consumer" but there are many ways to consume, and many things to *be* consumed in a glass of wine. You can see the wine merely as an Object, and assess it "against" its "competitors" using some arbitrary point-system you have chosen.

Or you can drink something that tells you it was made by human beings who want to show you the beauty and meaning they have found in their lives. You choose.

Part of the Selbach's aesthetic

is the eschewing of anything *confected* in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its *internal* skeletal makeup, and from that instinct for structure come all the judgements and preferences which constitute a house-style. Thus fruit must also be structured, detailed, and defined, and the overall effect of the wines should be as *bracing* as a leap into a cold pond on a hot day. Hans Selbach once advised a colleague not to select too stringently at harvest. Better to leave



Barbara & Johannes Selbach

a few of the underripe grapes in the bunches. They give *structure* to the wine.

Tasting the wines of *Papa* Hans Selbach's era, one is always struck by how vigorous they are, how ageless. One is also struck by their lack of affect; they never try to seduce with their prettiness. They are upright, firm in posture, correct, impeccable.

Johannes was raised with these wines and he had no desire to alter them. What he did do was to *build upon them*, to add a layer of sensuousness, to give just a little more **warmth**, a wider Julia-Roberts kind of smile. He did this with great tact and love, but I don't suppose he ever deliberately sat down and plotted it all as a STRATEGY, nor ever said "I must do this with great tact and love."

The results are some of the deepest of all Mosel

wines. They refuse to be *merely* aesthetic. They strive for (and often attain) a *sine qua non* of Mosel-ness. They take you through the gift-wrapping of mere flavor and they show you something you *may not know how to see*.

Few wines—few *things*—take us to such places of faith. Selbach's wines take me there frequently. You can't identify that slippery little thing *soul* in wines by how they look, smell or taste. It's how they make you feel. It is how deeply they peal and echo. It is how quickly they leave *themselves* behind and lead you *elsewhere* away from "wine." Johannes told me that he wants "soul" in his wines, but I doubt if we mean exactly the same thing by it. Nor should we. The sincerity of his wish, the assumption of a *value* in wines of soul is part of what puts it there. The rest, I think we are not meant to know, but only to sense.

### Selbach-Oster at a glance:

A large estate by Mosel standards means many wines to choose from. The ambitiousness of Johannes Selbach has made this estate the region's most prominent rising star. Since 1989, always among the very best wines in this collection, and 2004 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 mineral-ity, but it seems somehow deeper than a literal depiction of the soil. There can be fruit of almost unbearable purity and loveliness. Finally, they are often among the most **charming** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

Interestingly, as the vineyard land increases the cellar space does not, nor do the numbers of *Fuders* available. This means a higher proportion of Selbach's 04s were made in stainless steel. I tended to select away from these. Good though they were, they didn't say *Selbach* to me.

## DRY WINES AND KABINETTS

- GSO-224 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 "I am GOING to sell you a Trocken wine this year," said Johannes. Do your worst dude! This was the lightest of three he showed me, but also the smoothest and most comely; a lime-cream vineyard fragrance; very even dispersal of minerality; coolly smooth and subtle, with a long finish extending the nose and palate.  
 SOS: 0 (between now and four years, again from twelve to twenty years)
- GSO-245 **2004 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**  
 Zeltinger's Himmelreich is a site with variable exposures and steepness, but the best offers "1er Cru" quality in a green-apple and kiwi style, driven more by fruit than mineral. This '04 is an excellent dry Mosel Riesling, with a winning tender grassiness and fine harmony; quite fragrant (cherry-blossom, lime); the palate is both spriggy and surprisingly dense.  
 SOS: 0 (between one and four years; again from twelve to eighteen)
- GSO-244 **2004 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**  
 GSO-223H **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**  
 I saw three versions of the '04, and for the first of many times Johannes and I instinctively and promptly agreed which was best. This had the highest-tones fragrance; really minty and tarragon-y; crisp and juicy; Mosel Rieslings meets Menetou-Salon! Perfumey finish. The 2003 is of course richer (though drier), pure, long and slatey.  
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)
- GSO-246 **2004 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Kabinett**  
*Typical!* Crisp, long, flinty, tangy and juicy, with a compacted-mineral, almost ore note entering the finish.  
 SOS: 1 (between five and twenty-two years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!

## A Look At The Vineyards:

*I find my notes are shorter the past two years as I didn't want to repeat the basic adjectives that depict vineyard characteristics. I wish I had a dingbat I could use each time I want to say "slate and apple!" So below are general descriptions of the Selbach sites.*

**BERNKASTELER BADSTUBE** is a small Grosslage; the component single-sites are distinct from one another, but one can organize them thus: LAY stands alone. DOKTOR-GRABEN (at least the good parts of Graben!) stand together, and MATHEISBILDCHEN-BRATENHÖFCHEN stand together, and give us what we see now; heavier understructure, not quite as tensile, due to richer soil, and signature flavors of kirsch and almost Pouilly-Fumé flint; the piquant exotics of the Mosel. Typically, they are medium in body.

**ZELTINGER SCHLOSSBERG** is mineral to the MAX! Now back in production after the catastrophic hail of 1996, I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: I think it's a great Grand Cru site, fully deserving the status of a Wehlener Sonnenuhr or Erdener Prälat. The pity is most of it is worked by the small growers of Zeltingen, among whom standards aren't particularly high. Selbachs have shown time and again the potential of the site. Flavors are a *borealis* of slate, buttressed by lime and grassy aspects. Mosel-apple is present but discreet. Medium bodied. If you love Mosels for their cussed Mosel-ness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

**WEHLENER SONNENUHR** is like Zeltinger Sonnenuhr feminized, slimmed down, and refined. It can show a ravishing elegance. Butter-vanilla, very delicate slate and equally delicate apple, now with a slightly herbal tertiary flavor. I would say light-to-medium body, but the beauty in these wines resides in class and actual flavor, and not in size or fullness.

**GRAACHER DOMPROBST:** I doubt there's a better site on the "great ramp" (as Hugh Johnson terms it) between Bernkastel and Zeltingen. Domprobst is invariably starched and magnificent; its flavors are always standing at attention. It has a particularly emphatic slate statement, with nuances of pistachio or pecan, cassis and quince. Medium-bodied, high-bred and snappy, coltish and itchy to take off full-gallop.

**ZELTINGER SONNENUHR** is the Premier Grand Cru. Basically All Of The Above; slate, lime, apple, butter-vanilla, rich, almost chewy earthiness, great depth. Some parcels are prized by locals as the best sites in the entire Bernkastel-Zeltingen ramp—DOKTOR notwithstanding! These wines are full-bodied. Selbachs are now the primo owners in this great site, and have inaugurated an era of selective harvesting and a quality potential such as we have never before seen. Meanwhile, you'll see by the number I offer that the wines had me in a weak-kneed thrall, and - redundancy be damned—I just couldn't walk away from any of these.

GSO-247 **2004 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett**

Euphoric herbal Mosel fragrances; a rich, salty, fabulously balanced palate; just lip-smacking yummy wine!

SOS: 1 (between five and twenty-two years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GSO-248 **2004 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Deeper now, more grown-up: this is fabulous Kabinett; fruit, lime-leaves, sea-salt; as if you'd taken scoops of air from the Mosel valley and beat it into an emerald; it's juicy, clear and satisfying and soulful.

GSO-225 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** We'll sell this through before moving into the '04: The most stylish of the '03 Kabinetts; great fruit complexity; gracious but still leans toward dryness; the fragrance intensifies with air, a complex melange of fruit and terroir; powdery-slaty finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between five and sixteen years)

## SPÄTLESEN WINES

- GSO-249 **2004 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**  
GSO-227H **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
The '04 contains among other things two casks of *Graacher Domprobst*; it's a crisp and minerally Spätlese which seems almost Halbtrocken; slatey and nut-husky, direct and zippy. The '03 shows ginger and talc on the nose; quite high-toned; Real brilliance now, citrusy and tangy and with subtle spiciness; almost arch or mischievous, a wine that steals a kiss and runs off giggling.  
SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-one years)
- GSO-250 **2004 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**  
CORE-LIST WINE, to be sold when 2003 is gone. This '04 is pure, naked Schlossberg, and has an especially long slatey finish; it exhales the most delighted Mosel fragrance (as do all the '04s from this blessed site), and it's both huge fun and entirely soulful.  
SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty seven years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GSO-238 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**  
GSO-238H **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
CORE-LIST WINE. This started out rather adamant; I felt it needed more sweetness and/or more gras, and a cask of Auslese was blended in to provide both - bless the vintage with a plenitude of Auslese! The wine is now expressive, curranty and complex, more sagey than most 2003 Scheus, in fact.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GSO-251 **2004 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
Starts to show Auslese tones now; very long and regal, noble and deep, and as serene as Dönnhoff's Felsenberg Spätlese. This is clearly the Alpha-Spät among Johannes' 2004s.  
SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GSO-230 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
GSO-230H **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
This'll remove any doubts you might still harbor about which is the great Mittelmosel vineyard. It's effortlessly full and serene. Lime-blossom and roses. Extra-fine tonality; regally Grand Cru expression. Calmly superb.  
SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-six years)
- GSO-229 **2003 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese\*** +  
Here the power is entirely convincing; blazing kirsch and flint; radioactive lime . . . almost, almost a Zind-Humbrecht force and vividness. Long as all get-out. You could fuel a cyclotron with this stuff.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)



## **AUSLESEN WINES**

It's crucial to remember Selbach's Auslesen are (usually) not appreciably "sweeter" than the Spätlesen, only richer, riper and fuller. Any of them with "SOS" numbers below 3 are by NO MEANS too "sweet" for meals. I know of no other producer who so adroitly guides his Auslesen to be so food-friendly. These may of course be cellared but they are not "collectibles", not wines to be trotted out only on particular *occasions*. They are wines you can use, frequently and repeatedly.

- GSO-252 **2004 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese** +  
A lissome, winsome Schlossberg; wonderful, penetrating, piquant nose; flowery slaty palate with a wry nip of acidity at the tail; but then a golden twilight-y finish of ripe grapes. SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GSO-253 **2004 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese "Rotlay"** ++  
**The Auslese of the vintage in this collection.** Because it is a dead-ringer for the finest and most beloved of all Mosel vintages, 1975. "It's a wholesome wine," says Johannes, from an *en bloc* picking (i.e. no selecting) from the primo parcel in the Sonnenuhr. It is serene yet urgent, with sublime fruit, meanness and a fine malty weaving of perfect botrytis; splendid acidity, and a long slaty farewell—the prodigal son of '75, home at last. THIS IS MOSEL. SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-four years)
- GSO-254 **2004 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese "Schmitt"** +  
Another terroir critter, from this fabulously gnarly sub-parcel in Schlossberg; again picked *en bloc*; it smells almost like a Nahe wine; the thing is just *berserk* on the palate, with a dervish of acidity colliding with a fiend of fruit; piquant and hyper and quivering with energy. SOS: 3 (between eleven and thirty-two years)
- GSO-233 **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** +  
**CORE LIST WINE.** Very old vines; much more explicit slate than usual; almost no botrytis; food-friendly, with glorious thrust of keen mineral. The body is lithe and springy. **SOMMELIER ALERT!** SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GSO-232 **2003 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese** +  
Way fragrant and impeccably balanced; cassis-y and nutty to within an inch of its life; piquant and fervidly mineral, a *take-that!* to any remaining doubters of terroir. SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-eight years)
- GSO-235 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese\*\***  
GSO-235H **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese\*\*, 12/375ml** +  
Enter botrytis. It tastes like the Alte Reben compared to the 1-star but in fact it was only picked later. Miles of redcurrant and tremendous saltiness, as if it were strained through the whole periodic table. Massively cogent and contained—no sprawl of flavor here. SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)
- GSO-231 **2003 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Auslese** ++  
Wow! Perfect taut balancing act of all elements; almost a Würzgarten cherry blossom and kiwi; sensational focus and complexity; like buckets of flint, kirsch and lime-blossom attached with *electrodes* to your palate. SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-eight years)
- GSO-237 **2003 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese "Schmitt"** ++  
This, as it happens, is the last wine Hans Selbach drank. It was also served after the funeral when the mourners gathered at a local café for cake, and Auslese. One senses this is more than just a wine for Selbachs, that there is some family-essence, some Mosel plasma in it. It was the first of the micro-crus, again an *en bloc* picking (with 112° Oechsle), and it took a year to squirm out from behind its botrytis. But now! Taste this and tell me 2003 isn't a monumental vintage! Taste this and tell me it is not amazing that a wine with 8% alcohol can taste so TREMENDOUS. Taste this and mutter a prayer of gratefulness for Hans Selbach. SOS: 3 (between fourteen and thirty-five years)

- GSO-239H **2003 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese\*\*\*, 12/375ml** ++  
 Seething verbena and slate; this is not exotic, but rather a demi glace of Sonnenuhr, enormous but shapely and convincing; vertical structure, more Bach than Mahler.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-three years)

### **SCHTICKIES!**

- GSO-255H **2004 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling BA, 12/375ml** ++  
 Lots of TBA-mojo here. Clear, suave, caramelly and sleek for its mass; real plum jelly ladeled over an eggy brioche; long and intricate.  
 SOS: 4 (between twenty-five and sixty years)

- GSO-256 **2004 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein** ++  
 GSO-256H **2004 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 My Karen Odessa arrived in Germany the day we tasted Selbach's wines. She took a nap after her journey, and emerged dozily but intrepidly a couple hours later, asking "What should I taste?" Want to be woken up, I asked? "Oh yes," she replied. So I gave her a sip of this.

The pure existential reality of beauty such as this renders any attempt to "depict" it futile. Yet one tries, and comes up against the limits of language, or perhaps the limits of emotion. Wines like these pass through the membrane of mere feeling. You pause, stop; you almost feel scolded. *How does this square with what you THOUGHT was your life?*

I found a kind of electromagnetic quality here, like the aurora borealis was playing on my palate; the wine was cool, spectral. It was a quintessence of lime and apple, utterly crystalline, lunar, still as snow.

- GSO-257H **2004 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +++  
 Johannes has established himself as one of the few greatest Eiswein producers in existence, and this masterpiece takes its place alongside the '01 and '98 as ne-plus-ultras of the genre. Ethereal cherry and lilac; withal it's massively rich and concentrated it's also serene and almost gentle. How does he do it? *How is it possible?*

NOTE: there are tiny, and I mean *homeopathic* quantities of a couple 2003 TBAs available if you want more hedonism than a person can possibly stand. Please inquire!

### **FISH LABELS**

I didn't like these labels when I first saw them, but everyone else did and you do too. Shows what a marketing hot-shot I am! These are our go-to Mosel wines in the value category, and are certainly wines of the type-no-fridge-should-be-without.

- GSZ-012 The **Dry** wine in the clear bottle comes from Zeltingen, Kinheim and Erden, Kabinett juice gently chaptalized, and it shows satisfying weight, minerality and stylishness. It's really dry-minus 1 on my scale - but no sharp edges.
- GSZ-013 The **Kabinett** comes from 15 kilometres around Zeltingen. A lot of it is Zeltingen, Bernkastel-Kues and Kinheim fruit, some Erden, some Brauneberg. This is bottled in the normal bottle is quite simply delightful; it's a classy riesling, clean, piquantly fruity, the kind of wine people lust like: charming, long, and way better than its price.  
 SOS: 2





# erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

Each year we taste a large range of “various vintners” wines at Selbach; it’s part of their function as commissionaires to scour the region looking for the next new superstars. Plus I do my own sleuthing and send them names from time to time. We always put Erich’s wines among the fracas, just to see if he stands out. AND EVERY YEAR HE DOES. It’s uncanny. His wines are *brighter*, livelier, more animated, more flavory: if this goes on, Erich can’t possibly continue to sell them so cheap. But the getting is good, *really* good right now.

Erich Jakoby started working for the Selbach family at the age of fourteen. He began as a cellar-rat and worked his way up to cellar-master at the tender age of 24; the youngest cellar-master in the state of Rheinland-Pfalz at that time. A grand old man of 41 now, he has had to leave Selbach in order to spend

more time at his own winery; his father is in failing health.

Selbach buys and offers Erich’s wines as part of their estate-bottled program. Normally these carry a J. & H. Selbach label (though estate-bottling is indicated) but as a gesture of respect to Erich he keeps his family’s label. Erich struggled to convince his family to adopt Selbach methods, specifically selective harvesting. The Jakobys appear to have been quite skeptical until they tasted the results! All of which is another way of saying we have a Selbach-trained vintner here, applying what he’s learned to wines which rarely are treated so well.

Kinheim is something on the order of an insider’s Mosel wine. The natives hold it in high regard, though adding the cautionary note that you have to know your grower and that some parcels are much better than others.

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

Erich’s 18-year-old son— whose name I scandalously forget— is active in the estate and plans to take it over. I love his coltish energy, and I loved the 2004s more than any vintage since ‘01.



*Jakoby-Mathy vineyard*

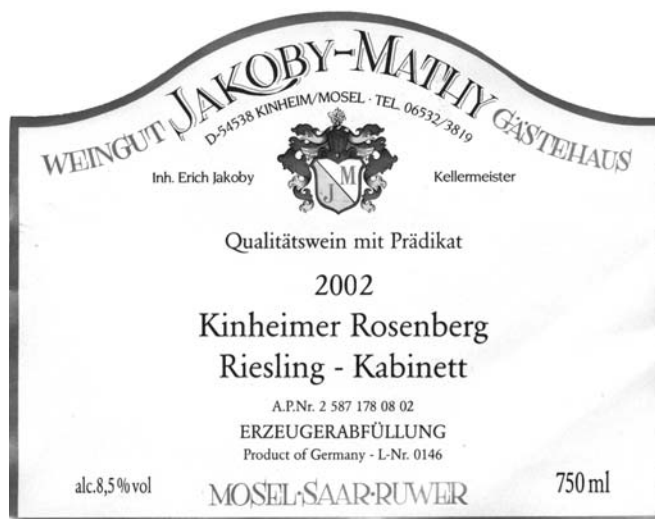
**Jakoby-Mathy at a glance:**

Erstwhile cellar-master at Selbach-Oster until father's illness called him back home. Thus: Selbach methods at off-the-beaten-track prices conspire to create **excellent wines and incredible values**. This is an estate that excels in high-acid vintages: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001. They're always good and always an incredible value, but in years that suit them they become *unbelievable* value. I'm having trouble keeping the wines in stock, and this year will be no exception. There seems to be a *market* for steep-slope Mosels with ravishing vivacity at insanely low prices; go figure!

**how the wines taste:**

As a rule, Kinheimers tend to run light but true, attractive apple 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-048 **2004 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
Bright, crispy nose; almost Ürziger Würzgarten hyssop and sassafras; direct, slaty-limey palate; the best and most vivid wine from here since the '01s.  
SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)
- GJM-049 **2004 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
This is a big step up from the Kabinett; like a whole basket of heirloom apples; rich and dense, with a long deep finish. I mean, apples to the MAX.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)
- GJM-050 **2004 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese**  
Again a big, full, subtly salty wine; recalls the progression at Schmitt-Wagner whereby the wines gain in depth and reverb but not necessarily in sense-of-sweetness. This is the most Mosel wine you can get for this amount of money!  
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-three years)



# meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

## mosel • erden

I always write this text in early Spring, as it happens. And today, April 4th, is opening day for my home-team. A couple years ago I went to my first ball game of the new season one night, alone as it happened. I had seats upstairs, and took the escalator. Riding up, there was a sudden brief glimpse of the field through a gap in the stands, all gleaming under the lights, that impossible emerald. And immediately I was a kid again, looking at the magic of a ballpark, and every time then and every time since my step has quickened and my heart beat excitedly whenever I've entered the ballpark. For it is an experience of *beauty*, you know. Soul doesn't have a fixed address, boss. It lives where it wants to. And each place it pauses to breathe is connected to all the places it has ever paused and breathed.

So today is opening day, and I left this writing for a few hours to watch my home team win their game, and now I'm back. And I am going to risk you rolling your eyes exasperatedly at me, because I'm gonna try to connect two things ostensibly so disparate as to be impossible. Still, away we go.

Each time I arrive at Justen there is always a wine, usually one of the first wines, that sweeps through every bit of experience I've brought with me, that snakes its fingers past everything I think I know and grabs me with its pure Mosel-ness. There is, after all, something singular about these wines! And I am catapulted twenty-seven years backward in time to that first scent of Mosel, whatever it is, and it feels virginal and surprising again. It is partly an alertness—this is something original. And partly a swoon—this is something wonderful.

I'm hardly the first person to liken Mosel wines to Spring. But Spring is of course not a single season, but many.

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 impos-



Stefan Justen and daughter Barbara

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Prälat and Treppchen, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 78% Riesling, 13% Müller-Thurgau, 9% Kerner**

sibly soft and green by the water. This is the season of *Merkelbach*.

The first fragrant blossoms are the cherries, each of the several varieties that grow here, and in sunny spots the perfumed crabapples unfurl their petals. The days begin to feel almost warm in the ripening sunlight. On a damp day the perfume of all these flowering trees can almost intoxicate you. Violets, scilla and phlox carpet the yards. This is the season of *Christoffel*.

Then all hell breaks loose. The first honeysuckle opens, and the stately, lissome dogwoods, and the silly, gaudy azaleas, and the air is emphatically warm, and the trees open their sticky new leaves, and everything sprays upward in a whistling clamor of life.

This is the season of *Justen*.

These may not be the most mysterious or intricate Mosel wines I offer, but they are certainly the most gregarious and extroverted. And yet they have virtues deeper than simple winning personality; they are true-blue Mosels, and I often thought that you, and I, neglected them. Thus it was gratifying to see Justen get the credit he deserves with emphatically flattering reviews of his 2001s and 2002s. I hope he's been "discovered" now and will take his rightful place among important Mosel estates.

(I always refer to the estate as JUSTEN, by the way, though I really should change this habit; I like a family's name more than a property's name if I get to choose. But

it's confusing. Meulenhof (pronounced MOY-LEN-HOFE, not mew-len-hoff) it shall henceforth and forever be.)

The great site here is Erdener Treppchen. There's a good parcel in Wehlener Sonnenuhr, part of Frau Justen's dowry, but Treppchen is identified as *munero uno*. And rightly so. There is a piece of the newly enlarged Prälät, for which a higher price is asked. Justen's piece of Treppchen contains very old vines on their own rootstocks, or did until these venerable vines were cruelly uprooted for *Flurbereinigung*.

In common with most Mosel vintners, 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 these wines have residual sugar. The dry wines are nearly always unsuccessful; his heart isn't in them. His heart leaps, though, at wines of differentiation, interplay of flavors, fruity and full of nuance, and individuality.

Heinz Justen's wines were always, in his own image, discreet, elegant and mannerly, especially in their youth. I often underrated them out of cask; they *gained* in flavor and authority their first year in bottle. When son Stefan took over the winemaking, the young 1990s were brash and aggressive, and I wondered at the change and wondered how the wines would evolve. Interestingly enough, they *lost* much of that youthful ungainliness and developed into typical Justen wines; father's and son's wines started from opposite corners and met in the middle.

Often after making the rounds through the new vintage, a Mosel grower will bring out a few wormy-looking bottles from his Sanctorum. These are always given to taste blind, and one is encouraged to guess the vintage and quality level, all in a spirit of fun. Protocol requires one to make suitably delighted noises, but that rarely presents a problem! No, where I'm concerned the problem is usually how to prevent Terry from babbling like a besotted galoot. Last year we had two wines, a lively and intricate 1979 Spätlese which was sensually all kinds of fun. The second wine, though, had us all silenced with perplexity and awe.

It wasn't a vintage whose signature I knew. I eliminated a range of unlikely choices and finally wrote a plausible

guess. I thought it might be a light, atypically firm 1959. Stefan finally said "This wine is exactly fifty years old, a 1951 Auslese," and we were melted with wonder. This is what I wrote in my notebook: "This 1951 Auslese is flashing a shiny green tooth of acidity and freshness and is gleaming and mysterious and haunting. It's like a shirt that's hung in a fragrant wooden closet, not worn for years, your father's perhaps, and one day you put it on and there it all is, him, his body, the time when he was alive, the boy you were then. We swim without cease in a strange bright ether. Light is gleaming and swaying always near us. If we breathe too deep we will die of a joy we aren't built to bear. Just a tiny gasp."

We say our goodbyes too quickly after such an event. Perhaps someone will show these words to Stefan Justen, so he will know how honored I am to share such a wine with him, and how I remember each drop, always.

This year, as if to up the ante, Stefan brought out a '51 *Spätlese*. The wine was dry, forest-floor, birchy, shellfish-stock, leathery and avuncular, juicy, *long* and delicious and with a deep soulful complexity. You get a shock to the soul with a wine like this. A *good* shock, of course. But there you are, being a Wine Professional, doing bizniz, assigning item codes and securing quantities, and out comes a wine like this and suddenly you're plunged from the brittle surface on which you've been skating into the deep warm waters below. You need soulbones made of rubber—a kind of spiritual Gumby—to manage the transition.

Stefan brings out not just a lovely old wine, but also a wine his father made before Stefan himself was born. As such it's part of the family's history and legacy, part of the vineyard's history and legacy, and ultimately part of the *earth's* history and legacy. It's almost intimidatingly meaningful. If you go where it takes you, you won't get any more work done that day! And you're already late for your next appointment . . .

But, there is always the wine itself. When all our glasses were empty, I saw another few fingers of wine down in the dark bottle. "May I . . . ?" I asked. *Certainly; help yourself*. So I did something I doubt I could have done 10 or even 5 years ago. *I just drank the wine*. It was beautiful wine. I knew damn well how spiritually meaningful it was, but I opted to merely *love* the wine and let it love me back.

### Meulenhof at a glance:

ate for impeccable quality.

Full-throttle fruit and serious stature characterize these ripe Mosel wines. Prices have remained moder-

### how the wines taste:

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.

In general Justen's wines are more lush and peachy than, say, Merkelbach; not as stern as, say, Christoffel. They

### GJU-084 2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling

This lets you slam down a blue-chip Mosel—and you'll want to—for a most gentle expenditure. Spicy and honest and robust.

SOS: 2 (between two and ten years)

- GJU-083 **2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
 Creamy, spicy and absolutely typical Wehlener, with all its herbal, balsam notes, along with 2004's length and texture.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)
- GJU-082 **2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** We are aware there were certain problems with certain bottles of the 2003; not exactly TCA but an unspecific mustiness. When I detected this again (smelling more like TCA this time) from cask-samples, we suggested Stefan have the samples analyzed. I need you to know he's all over the problem, and I'm sure will get it solved. Meanwhile, this "Kabinett" is actually two lots of Spätlese, one of which was destined to be declassified and the other of which Stefan offered to declassify so we could have a thrillingly good Kabinett. Isn't integrity a pleasure?  
 It has a hugely wintergreen-y nose, and a big, open, juicy and spicy palate; crisp slate, lots of talc, heirloom apples; lush, direct and slaty.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)
- GJU-085 **2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Elegant and spicy but also shows the *significant* acidity of 2004; the mid-palate breadth and texture are impressive, and a lot of you mordant sybarites like high acidity; again a long finish in the 2004 idiom.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-seven years)
- GJU-086 **2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #14**  
 Slate and tangerine in the Prälat direction, but this has a wonderfully direct attack and lavish but not gaudy fruit; a cracker-y apple-butter finish; an in-your-face wine but it's in your face with *wit*. It's a lot from an old parcel (over 60, ungrafted) that survived *flurbereinigung*, and fermented with its own yeast (most of Stefan's wines use cultured yeast) "because we just forgot to add yeast to it!"  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-seven years)
- GJU-087 **2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #106** +  
 In effect this is the "1-star" Spätlese; arresting peach and orange fragrances; fabulous intensity and determination; from a very late picking after a green-harvest; many-hued interplay of fruits; definitive and powerful wine.  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GJU-088H **2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +  
 60% BA at 135° Oechsle and 40% TBA at 156 Oechsle. I don't often love Stefan's dessert wines, but thanks to the 2004 focus and torque this has wonderful *shape* to counter its richness. If I don't do the adjective-gush it's because it seems facile to slather such verbiage on big rich dessert-wines. But this is a good `un!  
 SOS: 4 (between twenty-five and sixty years)



# alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

One night I was at the ball park. I'm a purist; I like to arrive early and watch the guys take batting practice and shag fly balls while the stands slowly fill up and the players pause to sign autographs. So there I was watching some rookie who barely had a beard take b.p. and he was really **whacking** the ball, line-drive after line-drive, just sizzling bullets hitting the outfield fences, slapped to all fields with a satisfying crack! And I was reminded of something . . . but what?

And then I opened this text in the computer and there it was: *Merkelbach's!* Not a towering home-run in the bunch, but screaming line-drives that'd take your freakin' head off and bruise your hand through your glove if you were lucky enough to spear one.

After greetings are exchanged, we sit at the rather small round table in the parlor where Rolf

or Alfred bring out the wines one by one. The first wine was poured and I took an idle sniff and *there it was: every reason I love Mosel wine.* This only seems to happen here.

Because the wines, you see, they provoke such giggling lunacy. They have to be the most absurdly VITAL and clear of any wines I know on the Mosel. These are the best-loved of any wines I sell. It's all here: a pretty label, a style of wine that gushes charm enough to enthrall even the casual drinker, but contains more than enough cut and complexity to engage the wine lover, all that plus reasonable prices. No wonder they do so well for us all.

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



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

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

- 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

young wine may be a little acidulous, but a wine that's two, three years old has to have all its pieces working together: the acidity, the sweetness, the fruit and the vinosity."

Again the wines were presented first by cask number, then by name. Merkelbachs probably refer to the old local names for their various tiny parcels when they speak among themselves, and the cask separation corresponds to those parcels. Just think of it for a second. We're dealing with a less-than-5-acre estate here, all ungrafted vines, tended and harvested and vinified *bit by bit*. And Rolf and Alfred know these vineyards the way you and I know our children, and wine isn't something they *do* or something they *WORK AT*; wine is in the very pores of their skins, in their veins and capillaries. Nobody punches a clock. There aren't any meetings to discuss marketing. No computers in sight. Just the seamless weaving of work into life. Just wine.

Sigrid Selbach asked Alfred if he ever took a vacation. Alfred answered: "Where would we go? When I'm on the slopes standing among my vines on a sunny day with a view of the Mosel behind me, I have everything I need to be happy."

Because the brothers are in their late sixties now (though with every appearance of ruddy good health), there's some speculation how the future will look. "We'll continue as long as we can; we have no notion of 'retiring'," said Alfred, which was heartening. Merkelbachs

have become somewhat conspicuously the “last of a dying breed”; their scale, the fact they do it all themselves, their crazily low prices, the sense of time frozen in place 40 years ago. Estates such as these were common when I started tasting wine 27 years ago, and hardly infrequent when I began professionally. Now they are almost gone.

As we walked over to Christoffel – our next appointment – I suddenly felt very sad. Sigrid Selbach and I were walking side by side, and I told her “I haven’t always been as good as I wanted to be, and there are things in my life of which I am ashamed . . . (pause) . . . and times I feel the weight of many regrets . . . (pause) . . . but something with which I can console myself is that I brought appreciation and prosperity to Rolf and Alfred during these years of their lives . . . (pause) . . . I sometimes think of that.” Sigrid, perfect friend that she is, looked into my face and said nothing.

It seems logical to arrange this offering by site instead of *pradikat*, so that the basic style of each site can be described, and I won’t need to repeat the same stale adjectives in each tasting note. “But we love your stale adjectives, Terry!” Oh right, like I believe that.

**KINHEIMER ROSENBERG:** this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It’s the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg’s wines often seem to actually smell of roses, so that one wonders

which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the apple fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years 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 Prälat-Würzgarten direction: bergamot, spice, peach. The downstream section is more classically slatey, with nuances of hyssop, walnut and *green* apple. Now that Flurbereinigung is complete and everyone’s vines are young one sees the importance of parcel. I was delighted by the absolute Treppchen fingerprint I saw in even these brash new wines.

Finally the great site **ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN**, which gives Merkelbach’s most memorable wines. A vein of red clay running through the soil gives them their eponymous spice—the name means “spice garden”—but it isn’t just the extra zingy cut of spice that marks these wines; such a strong flavor could pall if not for their redeeming **class**. Their feel is feminine and lithe; their aspect is springtime blossomy, and their underlying flavors of slate and mineral attain an apex of refinement. Wines of baroque opulence can be made from here, but Merkelbach’s are the most **primary** and fundamental of all Ürz Würz., as though you are tasting ur-Würzgarten.

**Merkelbach at a glance:**

most beloved Mosel agency.

The clearest imaginable look into pure Mosel. Vivid, toe-curling clarity of fruit and terroir make this my

**how the wines taste:**

These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of electric, splashing acidity supports a fruit so clear, so sharply rendered that the entire experience is so vivid it makes your toenails laugh! How many wines have ever just made you LAUGH OUT LOUD, they were so happy and irrepressibly gorgeous? Who can possibly dislike wines like these??? Oh, I suppose there’s someone somewhere whose temperament is so embittered he’s closed all the normal pleasure receptors. I imagine him leaving a tasting where I’ve poured these wines, kicking a puppy as he walks to his car.

GME-128 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #2** +

This blends two casks, nos. 12 and 8, and it has that primordial Ur-Mosel quality; very zippy, full of kiwi and sassafrass, with clarity, density and cut; very limey and utterly iridescently brilliant; flavor cut by diamonds.  
SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-127 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #1** +

This blends casks 16 and 11. I’m not sure what the small print on the label will say— you can distinguish them by the code— this one’s more strawberryed, finer, but just as bright, long and dense. These are the best wines from here since 2001; really 3-dimensional.  
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-one years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!

- GME-129 **2004 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 Euphoric nose; a really complex minerality with an almost blueberry note; concentrated, shimmery and apple-y; forthright and crunchy.  
 SOS: 2
- GME-130 **2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**  
 This was dramatically the better of two Erd Trepps; this is rounder, with more done-ness, though the two wines were nearly identical analytically (which shows the uselessness of lab analyses . . .); it's slatey and fibrous and granny-apple skin. To say it's "merely" typical is true, though unjust; it's the type itself that's so wonderful.  
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-two years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GME-126 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** This blends three casks, and it's just about perfect: lovely strawberry nose; tangy, slatey, penetratingly beautiful palate with a fine crackle of slate. Mo-mo-mo-mo-MOSEL!  
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-four years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GME-131 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #19**  
 Just 60 cases of this thanks to the predations of the British, who no matter how early I arrive here always seem to beat me by a week. So why not blend this into the other Spätlese? Because this is too different; it's saltier and shows discernible botrytis, though the penetration and length are in line with Merkelbach's '04s.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-one years)
- GME-132 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese #18**  
These are Auslesen you can— actually, should— drink with food. Merkelbachs are old-school, remember, and wines of this ripeness are now "1-star" Spätlesen elsewhere. This one goes into Nahe territory (think Norheimer Kirschheck), with cherry-blossom and a hint of hyacinth; again a bit of botrytis and its salty trickle down the sides of the palate, though the wine feels very sleek and pointed.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-seven years)
- GME-133 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese #15**  
 Lots of botrytis and concentration here; you have to accept the slate being blanketed by the salty-smoky tang of botrytis, but it has much to say in its exotic way, and mineral does indeed blast through on the finish.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-seven years)





I can't remember the last time I tasted cask samples here. Perhaps Robert Eymael doesn't like to show them. The last few vintages I've had to hedge my notes on account of bottle-sickness, and this is a most inexact science. For each year the wines come alive (like 2002) there's another where they stay the same (like 2003). Hans-Leo's style had been growing more and more calligraphic, as if each year he wrote his flavors with a finer-tipped pen. Last year I came to see he had determined this would be his *style*, as his 2003s were quite atypical for '03, but entirely typical for Christoffel. I also sense, but cannot state as fact, that Eymael cherishes the stylistic distinction between Christoffel's wines and his own from Mönchhof, which are rather more

baroque. Speculation aside, the '04s feel less *stylized* and more true and animate.

There's somewhat more wine now, as Eymael has shifted a couple compatible parcels over to the Christoffel stable, mostly for the Kabinetts. These seemed most diminished by bottling, with their acids exaggerated, but the whole vintage appears drier than its predecessors. Though it actually is not. That's the 2004 structure for you.

Both Eymael and Christoffel are very funny men, and you want to be alert to not miss a quip, of which there are many and one wickeder than the last. But as we moved into the Auslesen I had to withdraw. I didn't *want* to, I heard everyone laughing, but no matter how jaded I fear I've gotten, wines like these have the power to rouse me. They're dangerous, these silky vixens. Yet as filigree as they are, after the fifth or sixth one they begin to consolidate into an impression of remarkable depth and solidity. Their flavors may fall like little flakes, but they settle like big snow.

You lost your chance to acquire a winery in Ürzig. I would have helped. You'd have been introduced to Hans Leo Christoffel's daughter (who speaks English) and done your queasy little number. But no, you thought you had better things to do. You missed the chance to have the coolest father-in-law. Hans Leo's as droll as Winnie the Pooh.



- **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**

He'd also been visited by Mortality in the form of some chest pains lately, and wondered for some time if the taxing life on the steep slopes was sustainable. Having no heirs on the horizon, he 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!

Apparently I need to emphasize this point because, the facts notwithstanding, there seems to be some internet buzz about the "demise" of Joh. Jos. Christoffel. Guys – and have you noticed it's always guys? – it just isn't true. The "brand" JJC is alive and well, *guaranteed by Hans Leo Christoffel just like always*. They're the same vineyards he always managed (augmented by some choice parcels Eymael has shifted over to the "Christoffel" side of the operation); he isn't up there pruning and binding but the vineyards are worked under his direct supervision, he's the boss at harvest time, and *he makes the wine*.

This indicates no disrespect to Robert Eymael; far from it. Robert was sensible enough to see the value of the Christoffel "brand" and to wish to preserve it. All that's changed is the name on the title deed, plus Hans Leo's

quality of life has taken a decided turn for the better.

It's always a challenge to taste here, especially if it's the final appointment that day. There are simply *too many* great wines. Early in the sequence the palate becomes alert; it sniffs beauty in the air. Later as you ascend through realms of richness, the sensitized palate feels as if its nerve-endings are tingling. Suddenly it isn't just wine anymore. It's as though ALL OF BEAUTY is flooding into your heart. As you grope for words to convey this strange experience you find the only words are mushy, and maybe you feel a little embarrassed. But don't. There's a rigor beneath all that showering loveliness that you can trust. Beauty is real, and has nothing to do with sentiment.

"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 root-stock. "I have two parcels of grafted wines," Hans-Leo told me, "which is two too many!"

THE MATTER OF STARS: the whole star thing came about because Mosel growers had to find a way of distinguishing the pecking orders of their various casks of Auslese. You can't describe them in terms like "Feine Auslese" or "Feinste Auslese" any more, and that makes sense; there are already too many rungs in the quality ladder. The stars — or any other glyph a grower might care to employ — are a quasi-legal expedient, and a better alternative than asking consumers to memorize A.P. numbers or capsule designs.

For many of us this presents a problem. As soon as you establish a hierarchy you inadvertently push people toward the "best," or the perceived-best. That's because we seem to see things from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. Nobody wants to tell his customers "I have the second-best cask!" No, you can't hold your head up unless you have the big kahoona. It's a truly shitty way to look at wine. It has in fact nothing to do with wine, only with a commodity that *happens to be wine*.

#### Christoffel at a glance:

With Schaefer and Selbach-Oster, the "big three" among the Mosels, I offer Christoffel has been constantly stellar, not just "often" or "regularly," but EVERY SINGLE TIME, EVERY SINGLE WINE stellar since the 1992 vintage. Everything one can wish from great wine is lavished on these: depth, clarity, complexity, buoyancy, purity and ineffable beauty. The more I get, the more you want; sorry, but I still must allocate. The estate is tiny, and has been discovered!

#### how the wines taste:

Dashingly aromatic, brilliant luster of flavor, inchoate depth which begs for study. The kinds of wines you keep adding to your notes on; each sip reveals another facet, the second glass differs from the first, the very last sip is still saying fresh new things. There's a jewel-like firmness here; these aren't leesy or plush. In general, the Erdeners are thicker and more thrusting; they show better younger. The Ürzigers are refined, fastidious and sleek.

#### GJC-133 2004 "J.J." Riesling

Bottling had pounded down the fruit (as of 3/13 when I tasted) but the finish indicates the *stuff* of this wine; powerful strawberry, an extroverted personality and a keen silky texture. SOS: 2 (now to ten years)

#### GJC-134 2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

Total caraway-seed walnut apple-skin classic Treppchen nose; digital precision and salty length; a studious, diligent and responsible wine; striving for honesty and clarity. SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!

#### GJC-135 2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

CORE-LIST WINE. Keen kiwi aromas; wonderful salt and mineral shimmer; dry-seeming (allowing for fruit subdued from bottling); withal an almost pedagogical insistence on the integrity of the text, i.e. the slate. I'm curious to see how much fruit emerges! SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

- GJC-136 **2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese (+)**  
 CORE LIST WINE. Again, making allowances for bottling. It's like the Kabinett but with richer deeper fruit and a more pointed acidity; I appreciate the clarity of slate and the sense of restrained sweetness.  
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty- two years)
- GJC-137 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese +**  
*Ooooooh boy*; we're talking serious shimmer here; a mineral, almost blackberry tang; it's like a basket with 20 kinds of berry, not to mention most of the periodic table of elements. This seething little critter shows the irreducible quality of great wine— the "how can it possibly taste like this??"  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GJC-138 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese\* +**  
 I know I shouldn't tell you this, but this is the wine formerly sold as the "no-star" Auslese. Then it was the bottom of the totem-pole and no one wanted it. Now it's the top of a different totem-pole and maybe people will simply drink the wine. Maybe? It's a wonderful, rich, lavish, firm Mosel wine of remarkable depth; a dynamic masterpiece with waves of fruit over an iron spine of slate.  
 SOS: 3 (between eleven and thirty-two years)
- GJC-139 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\* ++**  
 As always, this adds some indescribable quality of *purpose*, as if there is something other than fruit or mineral or acidity, something para-sensual, some un-sayable truth we're meant to view, consider and absorb. Yes, one can talk about fruits and kiwi and caraway and almost a quality of *toasted* slate, but past all that one is invited to pause and attend. Drink this with a loved one— the loved one. Or else alone.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-four years)
- GJC-140 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\* ++**  
 As always this is the hedonist antonym to the 1-star, and I'm getting tired of saying each new vintage is the best one yet: somehow starting with 2001 Hans-Leo cranked this wine up a few notches. The consistent differences, by the way, have nothing to do with the cellar and everything to do with the parcels from which the grapes come. This '04 is full of slate-lime shimmer and a piquant back-palate lift I've (truly!) never seen before, along with all that FRUIT. My own "two stars" may come to seem stingy.  
 SOS: 3 (between fourteen and forty years)
- GJC-141 **2004 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese\*\* ++**  
 An otherworldly sorcerer's play of fruit, rye, walnut and slate; I mean, this thing is crazy; I can't see how the genre improves on it; the '04 is less dense but more intricate than ever. Just do not miss it if you care at all about Mosel wine.  
 SOS: 3 (between thirteen and thirty-eight years)
- GJC-142 **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\*\* +(+) +**  
 "This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than forty hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from this site in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in." It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it. Right now the botrytis is calling louder than the slate or fruit, but this is swirling, translucent and turbulent, and offers teasing glimpses of something grand.  
 SOS: 3 (between thirteen and thirty-eight years)
- GJC-143H **2004 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 I have to defer judgement; it's a bit of a fire-breathing slately dragon just after bottling. Watch the website during the summer.  
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and sixty years)

# heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

It's a huge pleasure to tell you this is Martin's best vintage ever, I think, and it absolutely stands with his highest echelon—2001, '98, '94, '90. I've gone back and re-read my notes on those vintages and, well—'04 is awfully good!

You take a vintage as complex and texturous as '04, and it seems to really shine in the estates whose wines aren't already *arch*. Martin makes old-school Mosel wines, mealy and woodsy and evocative, and along comes '04 to shine the light through a prism, and wines like these have never been so intricate. Yet that doesn't explain how the DRY wines were so good here. No, this is just one of those angel-dust years for Mr. Kerpen; his whole collection was worthwhile. I'll bet all his house-plants thrived even if he forgot to water them!

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, woodsy, vinous, mid-palate density, lots of soul.

Martin Kerpen has been variously described as "gentle" and "modest," but he seems to know quite well



Martin Kerpen

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

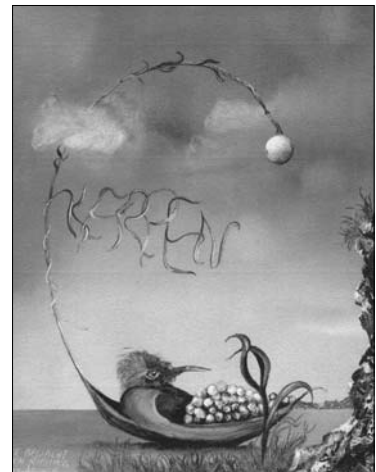
how good his wines are and to feel the appropriate pride. He is very funny and he loves to laugh. He is the most genial of hosts, and he wife Celia is a substantive and lovely woman with whom I always wish I had more time to talk. They lay a bountiful and happy table.

Some of what's happened at Kerpen reveals

- **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**

70% the vineyard, 25% the cellar. The other 5% is luck." I would agree, but the proportion of luck can be (and has been) diminished by the most stringent possible selection in the vineyard. Martin likes clear-tasting wine, therefore he labors to make clear-tasting wine. Some have said that he makes wine in his own image—Martin is a tall, wiry sort of fellow—I said it too, but I've changed my mind. His wines are sleek (and long!) enough, but what impresses me most

about them is the multi-layered *depth* beneath all that finesse. It's an almost magical mingling of super-fine clarity with a remarkable chordal richness that takes the wines from very good to great. These are wines towards which you feel both admiration *and* tenderness; they are dear, winning wines. They needn't strain to be *great* wines; their beauty is their *beauty*.



**Kerpen at a glance:**

Sleek, feminine, elegant and soulful wines with silky fruit of exceptional beauty. Prices reflect the “Wehlen premium” but are still below the levels of many of the richer and more famous!

**how the wines taste:**

They are clear and lithe in structure but with juiciness which gives them a haunting charm. Leesy along Selbach lines, with even more flowery perfume. Unabashedly pretty but not vapid, not *just* pretty.

GKE-092 **2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**GKE-092H **2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett 12/375ml**

CORE-LIST WINE. This year our old friend (a wine I’ve selected every year for twenty years) is remarkably herbal and slatey; beautifully tenderly dry; again it’s naked, a real sense of peering directly into the skin and bones of Wehlener Sonnenuhr; though it’s beautiful it’s not all gussied-up, and it’s articulate but it *weighs* its words. Very, very loveable wine.

SOS: 1 (between four and twelve years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GKE-091 **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**

I find this wine original, admirable and compelling; though there’s a little sleeve of tartness just on the first finish, which, paradoxically, leads to a beautiful and long tertiary finish; the fragrance is naked Domprobst and the fruit on entry is taut, tart-berried and limey, and there’s a generous shimmer of mineral. So: what’s good here is really good, and you’ll see how you feel. One thing’s certain— it’s a Mosel *Shaman*, this wine.

SOS: 0 (now to two years; again from eight to twelve years)

GKE-094 **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** +GKE-094H **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

This just roars along on a cold current of slate and complexity; it could almost be a Schaefer wine, so exotic and heirloom-apple-y; vanilla bean and lavender, with endless evocation of ur-mineral. I just adore it.

SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)

GKE-093 **2004 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Spätlese**

Prototypical kirsch and flint but man, what slate and what kinetic, sizzling clarity! A dynamic potion of hypnotic loveliness.

SOS: 2 (between six and seventeen years)

GKE-095 **2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese\*** +

**Artist label.** CORE-LIST WINE. You know this; it’s the little bird-in-the-boat. And there has never been a better vintage; comparisons to 1975 are not unwarranted; the sublime fruit, the firm structure, the palpable sense of dissolved slate; spicy and long and just fantastic.

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

GKE-096 **2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** ++

He only made one Fuder (110 cases) and I didn’t get all of it, so: don’t delay, for this is a poem of slate, with one of those deliberate dreamy finishes you remember for days. Classic aromas, cool on entry but explodes into many-colored streams of mineral iridescence and a haunting quality of fruit. Sheer breed here.

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

GKE-097H **2004 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Eiswen, 12/375ml**

A pretty deranged concentrate of cherry, flint and gooseberry; pure fruit and markedly high acidity; like a *gastrique* of wild plum, at the outer limits of expression, but your palate-id won’t have partied like this for a lo-o-o-ng time.

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

My colleague Jonas has the great misfortune to have been born in a truly execrable vintage: 1965. This was a legendary wash-out, and hardly anyone kept what piddling wine it produced. Anyone, that is, but Willi Schaefer, whom I think has examples of every vintage down there in his secret cellar.

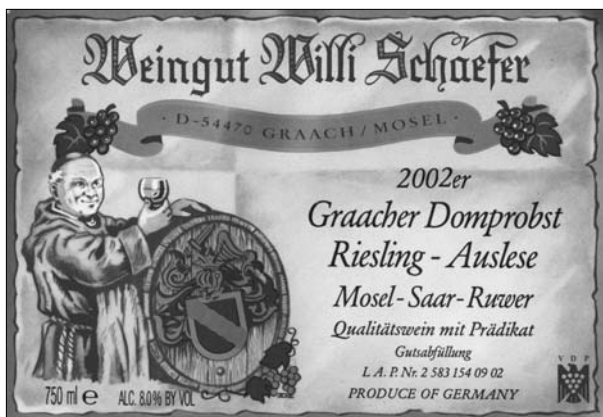
We drank it with dinner after we were done tasting. It was one of the last two bottles, “Probably the one and only Kabinett we made in ‘65,” and I expected one of those tart thin grassy wines from underripe years.

No! The wine was gracious and full of charm, all beeswax and chamomile and an absolute delight to drink. It was the first in a string of “forgotten” vintages we drank that evening, with

which I shall not bore you. I only find myself wondering—has this estate ever made a poor wine? An ordinary wine?

I do find it curious that Schaefer's seem to reach their pinnacles in fruit-driven years: think of '97, '99, '02, '03, when they refine a vintage's fruit into flavors you'd have never expected to find. In the racy mineral-driven vintages they are sometimes really bracing, sometimes oddly gentle, but always clear and refined. And now that Willi's son Christoph is a full partner in the estate, I sense a lovely relaxed feeling about the wines, a settledness.

It was May 1978 when I first visited and met with him. I loved his wines and went whenever I could. I'll never forget one time I took a friend who was just getting into wine. It was a perfect Spring day, and Willi's garden looked inviting. “Would you like to sit in the garden with a bottle and relax awhile?” he asked. There were other visitors and his father was entertaining an old client. “Sure,” I said. I purchased a half-bottle of '75 Domprobst BA, and we sat in the shade listening to the birds, looking straight up at the impossibly steep Domprobst. The air was sweet with blossom. The wine was sublime. We were nearly in tears. Then suddenly a tenor voice started singing, some chipper little *lied* about Spring. My friend stared at me and we both laughed.



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

“No!” he said, “You staged this, right? It isn't actually happening, right?”

At this point Willi and I are so boisterous together I'm sure we'd absolutely freak out my teenager (Oh God dad, *ICK*) and in fact it's pretty silly I must admit. But this is truly the world's nicest guy and I'm just giddy to see him, and we laugh and laugh. But laughing isn't all we do. We've known each other 27 years now, and one respects the dignity of such a clump of time. One year Willi announced that our occasion deserved to be commemorated with something a little special. He disappeared for a few minutes, and returned with a 1953, which he knew was my birth-year. “Twenty five years for us, and fifty for you,” he said; “It seems appropriate, I think!”

It was Willi and his son Christoph, me and Corrie Malas and Mark Hutchens and Bill Mayer, and Willi's wife Esther joined us (though it was a little early in the day to drink wine; still, it was a '53...). And the wine was poured. It still tasted *primary*, still had fruit and architecture, still had some chlorophyllly green flecked in among the gold. It was limpid and essentially ageless. (Like me!) The wine was in fact astonishing, yet the experience of sharing it in friendship with Schaefer's was beyond description.

“Willi, let me take a glass to your mother,” said Esther. “She'll enjoy drinking a wine her husband made.”

Well, this day was off to a good start! Barely 10am, and I had a '53 in my glass in the company of the family who made it, and who seemed to like me.

Eventually, Willi tells me, the holdings will be enlarged and there'll be more wine for us greedy sybarites. As it is Willi *could* easily choose to grow, but he elects not to. "The estate is the right size for me to work and give the proper attention to the wines," he says. How's that for capitalism! Willi could make, say, 50% more wine and **sell it instantaneously**, thus obtaining kid-leather seat covers for his zippy new Porsche, but instead he knows in his bones what the proper size for his estate must be, if he is to preserve his relationship to his wines, to his work. Hopeless Willi, just hopeless; where's your ambition, man; where's your **can-do spirit? DON'T YOU WANT TO MAKE MORE MONEY???**

Most businesses confront this conundrum eventually. What is the *ideal* size to which to aspire? I would define it as the most robust volume consistent with maintaining the original motivating spirit of the enterprise. You know you've passed that point when it isn't as much fun as it used to be. Growth, in itself, is the siren song that dashes our souls against the rocks unless we insist on balancing our *whole* lives. This sermon will be rebroadcast at eleven.

When we finished tasting one year, Willi brought out a bottle of the celestial 1975 Domprobst Auslese, which is about as good a Mosel wine as has ever been made. Christoph appeared in the doorway to say hi in his raffish sideburns. I recalled that the first time I drank this Domprobst was in 1980, in Willi's living room. His kids were little then. Willi left the room to take a phone call and I sat there with my glass of Auslese while the kids sat on the floor playing with a little top which

hummed as it spun. The humming and the playing and the beauty of the wine and the friendliness and hospitality of my host became a single thing. I often recall that moment when I hear someone defend the idea of giving point-scores to wines.

Schaefer grows only Riesling and only on steep slopes. The best is the Domprobst, though there's no scoffing at his Himmelreich (fruitier), or his Bernkasteler Badstube (actually Matheisbildchen, and typically rich and flinty) or his little bit of Wehlener Sonnenuhr (light but true to form). Vinification isn't unusual, 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 capabilities. As a taster he responds to "character above all. The finesse of fruit is also important to me, and the harmony of sweetness, fruit and acidity. Apart from that, the wine should embody its vineyard and grape variety."

Christoph's decision to carry on the winery is quietly momentous. Schaefer's 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 contentment in this household, the bedrock joy when one's heart is at home in one's work. Different vintners have said this to me at different times: Hans-Günter Schwarz is always saying, "you have to love it." Helmut Dönnhoff repeats almost as a mantra, "It has to be FUN." And Willi Schaefer has the glow of a man doing exactly what he was put on earth to do.

I am fortunate to be a part of it, and to know this kind, honorable, modest and lovely man as a friend.

### Schaefer at a glance:

For many tasters, these are the *Ne Plus Ultra* of Mosel wine, and they have attracted an almost religious following. Thus my most frustrating agency, as there is never enough wine.

### how the wines taste:

It is hard to put a finger on exactly what it is that makes these wines so precious. There is a candor about them that is quite disarming. They are polished too, but not brashly so. They are careful to delineate their vineyard characteristics, and they offer fruit of sublime purity. They are utterly soaring in flavor yet not without weight. What many of you seem to have warmed to is their clarity, precision and beauty of fruit, so maybe I'll leave it at that!

#### GWS-121 2004 Willi Schaefer Riesling (#1)

Has "QbA" ever been better than this? I wrote "a tangy, slately (hey, a combo of "slatey" and "stately"; I made up a word!)" appley creature with an absurdly long finish. It's from Himmelreich, and it's stylish and complex.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

#### GWS-122 2004 Willi Schaefer Riesling (#2)

More feminine now, the Wehlener Sonnenuhr type, much more fruit and spice on the nose; real wintergreen brightness here; shimmering transparent play of flavors, a lyric of fruit. Himmelreich and Domprobst in fact.

SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)

+

- GWS-123 **2004 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett**  
 This is in every way exemplary— as `04, as Mosel Riesling, as Graacher Himmelreich. It's nutty and juicy with a cox-orange-pippin fruit, and on the dry side.  
 SOS: 1 (between six and twenty years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GWS-124 **2004 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
 Fragrance! Delicate, herbal, spicy; a lovely slate elixir on the finish; just fine slatey bones for your palate to jump on.  
 SOS: 1 (between six and twenty-one years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GWS-125 **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Jeez Louise, the nose alone of this offers more than most of what we drink in a *month*; I can't fathom how it's at once so zingy and so tender, so evanescent yet so long, so serene yet so kinetic, so limpid and delicate yet so salty and complex. Not "great" but an apotheosis of *goodness*.  
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-three years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GWS-126 **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #11** +  
 Cool and high-tones, as much lemon as apple; a haunting piquant angularity, but graceful and articulate. The only way to quash the finish is to taste the next wine. "That's the best way to do it!" says Willi. There's still this lovely malic tartness, none of these is yet marked by "sweetness".  
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-seven years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GWS-127 **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #9** +  
 Riper now, less virginal. "Plumper," more *Spätlese* style, but also with 50% more complexity; the same note played by a deeper instrument. (You know, you can play the same note at the bottom of a violin's range and the top of a cello's, and one sounds breathier and the other more belly-rich.) Riper fruit here, and even spicier slate; it's really bringing me back to `75 again, the volume of fruit and the silvery purity.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GWS-128 **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10**  
 This is much more rugged, uncompromising; more an exegesis of slate and with less overt fruit: more yin but it's by no means unfriendly; in fact this guy will roll up his sleeves and fix your car while #9 swans around in the passenger seat waiting.  
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty- six years)
- GWS-129 **2004 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese** ++  
 Early days for this— it was picked in December, and was less evolved (and thus harder to "describe") than the others, but all-to-easy to *appraise*: it will be brilliant and headshakingly vivid, fruit-complex and penetrating, with mirabelle and comice pear.  
 SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty-six years)
- GWS-130H **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14, 12/375ml** +  
 It seems all Willi's and Christoph's `04 Auslesen were from grapes left hanging for Eiswein— this one has 110° Oechsle and more than a little Eiswein flavor; it's very dense and unusually BIG for Schaefer, yet even with its iron-intensity and *glace-du-viande* concentration it's nowhere near sugary.  
 SOS: 2 (yup!) (between fifteen and forty years)
- GWS-131H **2004 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #8, 12/375ml** ++  
 This really is in effect a "little" Eiswein, such is its implacable concentration, steely purity and ringent fruit. Like a parfait of white lilacs, asian pears and wet stones, and time will further open its texture and this wine will SOAR.  
 SOS: 3 (between eighteen and forty-five years)



It took me (too) many years to learn there'd never be enough time to have the kind of soul-searching conversations about wine philosophy I wanted to have with my growers. Also, that such conversations couldn't be contrived, but needed to happen spontaneously. Yet I wanted to know what made a grower tick, and so I created a little questionnaire which I leave behind for the grower to answer at his/her leisure. The results go into my catalog text, augmented by *bon mots* which actually do arise in conversation.

Andreas Adam is an *intense* young man, and meeting him for the first time it was subdued by his old-world politeness. But answering my written questions in solitude seems to have

unleashed the beast. Adam is both his own man—very much so—yet also emblematic of the new wave in German wine-think. I don't agree with everything he espouses, but his bedrock passion is stirring. I think of that instant of ignition when I tasted my first Adam wine, and it all starts to make sense.

Here's some of what he wrote:

"The hardest work of vinifying a great wine takes about nine months, from February till the beginning of November—rather like a pregnancy—during which time we let what happens happen, without disturbing or perturbing nature, but rather we watch over and work in harmony with nature's larger power.

"An aside: I'm sitting here writing on our terrace under a blue sky. Nearby sits a fallow vineyard, to which a vintner is carrying chemical fertilizer. . . .

"I renounce any and all such treatments. I sustain my vineyards by intensive soil-work (I was ploughing this morning; it smells so wonderfully of fresh earth and slate) to bring the essential nutrients up from the primary rock, the natural compost of a vineyard. This completion of the bond between the elemental soil and the work of the vintner is another piece in the puzzle of terroir."

Well-said!

I then ask the grower, which is his peak-site. And why; is his choice due to specific terroir/microclimatic factors, or other circumstances such as vine-age or vine-material?

"We love our Dhronhofberger, in its lovely quiet side-valley, which leaves stress behind and is out of the stream of all which is trendy in German wine-growing; today Cabernet, tomorrow Sauvignon Blanc.

What makes the vineyard great is of course its flavors; even young it often shows a striking exotic fruit, subtle spice, *wild* slate aromas and a finesse of acidity."

I agree. The only reason this site isn't front-and-center among Mosel Grand Crus is the lack of a flagship-estate—until now. Hofberger is one of those Mosel sites with *complex* slate, in this case with a vein of clay and with a measure of the sandy slate-variant of the Nahe. It is both archetypal Mosel yet also extra-Mosel; it sometimes makes me think of Dönnhoff's Brücke.

- **Vineyard area: 1.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 560 cases**
- **Top sites: Dronerhofberg, Piesporter Goldtröpfchen**
- **Soil types: Hofberg - weathered slate with clay; Piesport - slate and clay with sandstone**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

Next I ask about terroir. Of course! Not for nothing have I been anointed *terroir-lama*. My question is specific: do you believe that components in your soil create flavors in your wines?

"I think in Germany we see terroir as a unity of grape, climate, soil, and the mentality of the person who works the vineyard. But the essence of that mentality is a knowledge that the geology of his terrain indeed creates the flavors in the grapes which grow there. Thus if you consider Riesling from blue-gray slate from the Goldtröpfchen, in its youth it's herbacious, with delicate lime fragrance and mineral-salty on the palate. Contrast the Dhronhofberger Tholey, with its brittle blue clay-slate mixed with quartz and *Klimmer*, whose riesling tastes almost as if it emerged from a tropical garden; maracuja, papaya, pineapple and with a slight breeze of honey and caramel. Here on the Mosel we have lovely variations of slate and exposure."

And vinification, I ask? Anything which separates you from the prevailing norm?

"Actually we do nearly nothing differently than did our forefathers in the 20s: small yields of late-harvested Riesling grapes are gently handled and pressed (we still press some in an old wooden press); after an open must-oxidation the wines fall bright at cool temperatures in stainless steel, and later ferment in old wooden Fuders. **Finito!** That's all, nothing else, just wait for the wild yeasts to begin their work. No must or mash sulfuring,

no enzymes, no gelatin, no added vitamins, no bentonite—**pure nature!**

To the extent we employ technology it is only in the service of cleanliness.”

I’m curious to know what kinds of wines a grower drinks at home in private, i.e. what he drinks for pleasure. Adam says, “A wide range of Grüner Veltliners, which I prefer to Grand Crus in white Burgundy; Rieslings from great sites in our region whether dry or sweet; vintage Champagnes; the occasional rose-scented Muscat from Südsteiermark or a smoky-flinty Loire Sauvignon from someone like Dageneau.” Nice to know if I were ever quarantined at Adam’s there’d be plenty to drink.

He has a telling comment to make about deacidification: “A great Riesling with a rather high level of acidity is no catastrophe on the palate; it just needs time. But if we ever needed to deacidify, we’d have done it before the grapes ferment, via reduced yields, intensive soil and leaf work, air-flow management, sun-exposure management, and finally a selective harvest where we only pick ripe fruit. I can get aromas from the skins in the press-house, and also reduce acids by must-oxidation, which also eliminates undesirable tannins and phenols.”

Or, one might add, you can take it easy and just dump in some chemicals.

Finally, as I run through the basics of his vineyard and cellar work, I need you to understand the extent to which this is emblematic of the new thinking in quality-minded German vintners, a thinking which has undergone a 180-degree turn in the last twenty years. These basics are:

- Exclusively organic fertilizing
- Green-harvest to reduce yields
- Hand-harvesting only
- Must-clarification by gravity (no centrifuges or filters)
- Ambient wild-yeast fermentations (There are many shades of opinion on this question.)
- Long lees-contact (4 months, followed by another 6 weeks on the fine-lees)
- No dosage (I happen to disagree with this but applaud the purism which prompts it)



Andreas Adam

Thus our young hero, and thus my great good fortune to have encountered him. I look forward to every glass we will raise together.

He had a practicum at Heymann-Löwenstein, a celebrated estate in Wittingen who was the first to break free of the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. I gather he’s worked at Van Volxem too, and Roman wants him back. “You can’t have him!” I said. “I want him to continue his winery.”

But the truth is, it isn’t easy. His father was a co-op member; I think the estate only has five rows more than a hectare, and if young Mr. Adam wishes to continue, it will cost many Euro. We are hoping he will, and standing by to help. All kidding aside, what I actually told him was “I won’t pressure you, but I *will* say if you *do* decide to continue you will have a highly committed customer in me.” He’ll probably do a little of each; work for one of his kindred spirits while growing his own estate incrementally.

Friend, if you’ve tasted any of the first wave of Adam wines, you’ll know why I care so much.

With the first taste of the first wine I knew it; here was someone to be reckoned with. There was simply more going on here, more weight, more expression, more seriousness, more drive. How was this estate under the radar?

As we tasted through his range (7 wines) it was unequivocally clear to me: *This is a star in the making*. I decided to list the wines before I knew their prices!

As I mentioned, Adam’s caught the wave started by Löwenstein and continued by Roman at Van Volxem. (Though I think he’s making better wines than both his “mentors.”) For these growers, the ripeness pyramid of the German wine law is irritatingly irrelevant. They’re especially annoyed by the whole “Spätlese Trocken” thing. For them, their dry wines will all be QbA (ostensibly!) and they’ll identify them by site-name, often by site-names more specific than the law recognizes. You and I are familiar with this sensibility from Austria, of course. And it makes sense. Wines with significant residual sugar will be bottled with Prädikat designations, though most of these guys really don’t like “Kabinett,” which is inconvenient because, of course, y’all really *do*. The Germans are victims of their own logic here; Kabinett is positioned as both the driest and most affordable of the “top” level of production.

But you can always see when a wine law needs changing; enterprising growers simply pay it little mind, until it becomes a relic which no longer pertains to how wines are actually produced and described. Then, when everyone is laughing at the pathetic anachronism it has become, it is changed. You have my permission to start tittering now.

Still, I need Kabinett, pragmatically, and Adam agreed to custom-bottle one for me.

I also did another unlikely thing and asked for the old Gothic script to be *restored* to the label. It looks better, and conveys the wines more accurately.

**Adam at a glance:**

Tiny, still part-time grower making some of the longest, most exotic, most old-school Mosel wines in existence. Stellar across the board, and for the quality, far from expensive.

**how the wines taste:**

They taste *deep* and leesy, and they never seem sweet and almost never seem *dry*, even when they are in fact either sweet or dry. Flavors are both thick and opalescent, and one is aware of a sense of stature: this is immediate. It's self-evident these are wines of profound terroir; it's their *raison d'être*. And for me it's a great pleasure to *finally* offer you Dhroners which embody the greatness of that land.

I have a powerful connection here, because the first wine I ever drank which fascinated me was a 1971 Dhronhofberger Kabinett. Till then I'd been drinking fruity wines which were more or less sweet or polished or balanced, but it was supermarket cheapies. The Dhroner was the first wine with a haunting flavor, something more than grapey, something that didn't pander, something that just *was*. So I always looked for Dhroners, and for awhile I found them from the Bischöflichen Weingüter, vintages from the '60s and '70s. Then quality slipped, and there weren't any other sources. Dhron itself is sleepy and the land is steep and no one seemed to come along - till now.

We drove in through the Hofberger vineyard—the view is wonderful—past the house where Sigrid Selbach was born. I thought of the baby in her cradle behind those thick walls, and of the lady sitting beside me in the car, all the memories and all the years, along the silvery Mosel.

GAD-006 **2003 Dhroner Riesling**

His basic wine is anything but basic. It has the thick leesy texture of his wines, and 2003's occasional brusqueness of finish is here engulfed by that creamy-lesy "sweetness"—this is a physiological sweetness apart from sugar. Indeed this wine is a *model* for dry German riesling.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between now and three years; again from twelve to sixteen years)

GAD-011 **2004 Riesling Kabinett**

+

This is absolutely wonderful; made from the first-picked grapes from Hofberg and Goldtröpfchen; a superb rich leesy nose; juicy rich palate shimmering with winter-green; delightful slatiness, perfectly dry (with 40 grams of sweetness!) and with a note of burning-leaf into the finish.

SOS: 1 (between four and seventeen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GAD-010 **2003 Dhronhofberger Sängerei Riesling**

Funny story here: the fermentation stopped at 40 grams per liter and he wanted it dry. What to do? He hates to manipulate—did nothing with his 2003s, no acidification. We all tasted it, we all loved it, we all said "Please, do nothing to this wine; it's perfect!" And so it is offered *provided* the fermentation didn't resume! What I tasted was fine-grained and racy; it *tastes* dry, and it's articulate and full of terroir. As-is, I'd say:

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

GAD-007 **2003 Dhronhofberger Sängerei Riesling**

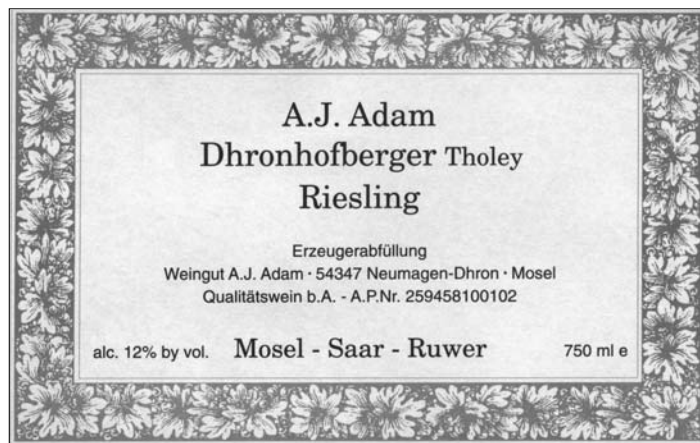
Mirabelle and cherry blossom fragrances; astounding salty sweetness and high-toned fruit; has charm, dignity and generosity; reminded me of an Erdener Treppchen from near the Prälat. No botrytis in this one.

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

GAD-008 **2003 Dhronhofberger Tholey Riesling Spätlese**  
 This compares to the Sängerei as Scharzhofberger compares to Kanzemer Altenberg, and yes, John Trombley is the only person who'll know what the hell I'm talking about. This one's higher-toned, more lime and tarragon, slimmer and more brilliant; almost a kiwi note, or star fruit; clean botrytis; this recalls a Christoffel wine.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)

GAD-012 **2004 "Hofberg" Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 The best wine from here since the '01s; mass and complexity and wonderful density and depth— in short, authority— a wine that looks for all the right things, the imprint of the soil, the true fruit and not merely its pastiche, and a Whole that includes every scintilla of flavor, presented to the great big world that makes it possible. Astonishing wine you should absolutely not miss.  
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-five years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!

GAD-009 **2003 Dhronhofberger Tholey Riesling Auslese** **++**  
 Twice in January at our various DI tastings I was aksed by one of you, in a hurry to leave, to name one final wine you absolutely had to taste. In both instances I named THIS one. It is one of the greatest Auslesen from a vintage of great Auslesen. This is *complete* wine. Precision, depth and length; superb talc and sweet lees and plantain fragrances; the palate is medium-weight and gentle with explicit yin-yang of sweet and salt, finishing with a sigh of prettiness.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-four years)



Something seems to be up at Reuscher Haart. Maybe it's the influence of Bernd and Mario Schwang, Dad Hugo's two sons (who look like members of Limp Bizkit) or maybe it's just one of those things. In any case, the past two vintages reminded me of the majestic 1990s and brilliant 1993s. Even the 2003s, about which I was dubious at first, have firmed up wonderfully with bottling, and I now feel my first impressions were misleading. Now along comes the stunning 2004, and this estate is really showing me something.

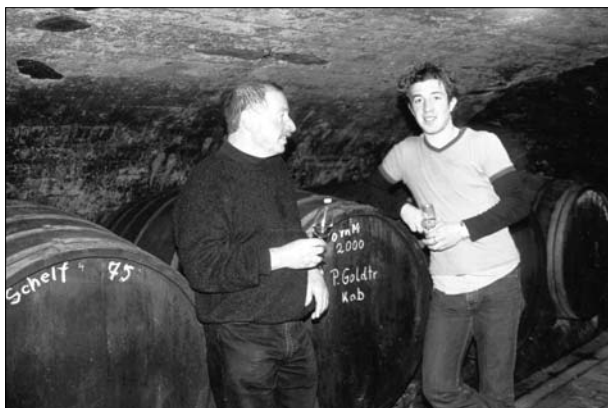
These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but these wines

aren't really made for our frantic world.

SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT'S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations who'll live in microwave-time. It really isn't conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there's an incipient movement toward a more *attentive* mode of living? Not ouiji-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to *notice* stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

I have a stormy relationship with Piesporters. A few years ago when I first encountered Reuscher-Haart's wines, I thought I had found my Piesport pie-in-the-sky. In their acid-drenched, thick, leesy style I found for the first time stunningly detailed and authoritative wines from these maddening slopes **that didn't need to be archly modern in order to succeed.**

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



Hugo & Mario Schwang

- Vineyard area: **4.3 hectares**
- Annual production: **2,100 cases**
- Top sites: **Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr and Falkenberg**
- Soil types: **Slate**
- Grape varieties: **90% Riesling, 10% Müller-Thurgau**

racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. "I'd personally say that these are the most important factors for high quality," he says. "First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don't use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make."

This year the talk was all about organic. In essence, said Schwang, the estate is nearly all the way there, so why not take that small final step? What did we think? I said we applauded organic viticulture as a matter of principle, but we could offer no commercial incentive. "I hope you'll do it," I said, "because it's *worth doing*. But that doesn't mean I'll think less of you or your wines if you don't."

In fact the Mosel is among the most difficult regions to work strictly organically, yet the so-called *lutte raisonnée* of France, known as "integrated" agriculture in Germany, has taken a firm hold. In essence this stops short of certifiably organic but encourages organic as a preference as much and as often as possible.

I had a moment during the conversation wherein I realized, Hugo Schwang isn't the most voluble heart-on-his-sleeve producer in my portfolio, but I have probably underestimated how thoughtful and passionate he really is.

**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-039L **2004 Piesporter Treppchen Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

For some reason my Mosel producers don't show me their Liter wines; perhaps they think I'm too up-market (and perhaps I disabused them of this notion with the gee-tar party in Zeltingen!) but somehow my California distributor tasted and loved this wine, and we special-ordered it for him. Thus it was shown to me. And dude, I LOVED it. This is just the ticket; nice green aromas; bright, fresh and apple-peachy fruit; forthright and lip-smacking and priced oh-so right.

SOS: 2 (from now to five years)

GRH-035 **2003 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

In 1979 or '83 or '85 or even '88 this is an *Auslese*; it has tremendous ripeness, like over-ripe mirabelle, and lovely wafts of white chocolate and talc; it's big and juicy as '03s are but also long and focused as the best '03s are. If you want, it's a "secret" Auslese, offering Auslese flavors at Kabinett prices. Weak Dollar, bargains scarce—up to you pard!

SOS: 3 (between six and eighteen years)

GRH-040 **2004 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett** +

(lot 4404) I do like the "green" influences in these '04s; like bergamot and asian pear and then wintergreen; naturally there's more brightness and lift and relief now—it's almost true Kabinett (at 90 degrees Oechsle!)—and it fulfills the requirements and then some; but it's above all the complexity, the dialectic that I love here. The best Kabinett ever from this winery.

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

GRH-041 **2004 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese** +

(lot 4804) A big flourishing '04 that craves time and will be sensational; profound aromas of a warm forest in Springtime, sweet sticky new leaves and herbs and flowers and lindens in blossom; this is as good a wine as I've had from Piesport since the great 1990s; both brilliant and profound with an astonishingly intricate salty finish. Wow.

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

GRH-037 **2003 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese**

A huge creamy wine (at 112° Oechsle); smells like an entire *pâtisserie*; palate is like liquefied plum-blossom; believe me, this will go all malty and beeswaxy in 15-20 years, whereupon you'll say "Who knew?" and regret not having bought more. Or any, if you drink it at my house.

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



I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year *stage* with Carol Sullivan at the German Wine Information Bureau, where he says he met me once, and maybe he did. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs. These were strikingly vivid wines, and I heard myself thinking a new star was on the horizon.

Dieter returned to the winery in 1994 and assumed full control in ninety-seven. His father stays on and the two generations do the usual dance! Father is a font of wisdom in this case, not least for having adjusted to several of son's more outre ideas, such as vigorous declassifying in 2001 and scrupulous adherence to vineyard purity, so no legally-allowed 15% of "Piesporter Who-knows-what" is gonna stretch the supply of Goldtröpfchen.

Dieter wants to produce wines of fruit and fullness. The clean must (gravity-settling, twice) sits on the skins 2 hours before pressing and after fermentation the wine sits on its lees until February/March "because you get the most optimal aging-potential when the wine has time on the gross lees."

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft.



*The Hoffmanns*

All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fermentations but not all. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. The cellar's all stainless steel now, and dad's getting busier and busier watching over a toddler who's just as charming as he was as a baby last year.

- **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**



**hoffmann-simon at a glance:**

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart. Charming 2004s.

**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-025 **2004 Estate Riesling**

Bright and lively; apples and mirabelle, and much more true charm than the sometimes come-hither panderings of the riper years; this is something truly delightful and straightforward, but far from simple. Drink it by the pool or out on the deck or up on the roof on a Summer night, when nothing could possibly taste so perfect.

SOS: 2 (now to four years)

SOMMELIER ALERT! (pour this and they'll kiss you on the lips!)

GHS-026 **2004 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE LIST WINE.** A little more *earnest* now; apple, malt, bergamot; also more green (woodruff and balsam) and slate, of all things; one doesn't often taste slate explicitly in Pies Gold. Again this is the best of its kind since the '01s.

SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GHS-027 **2004 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

This is more the sultry side of Goldtröpfchen; tangy and exotic.

SOS: 3 (between six and eighteen years)

GHS-028 **2004 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese**

Hey, another vineyard you haven't heard of; it's the upstream extension of Leiwener Laurentiuslay (which you also haven't heard of; leave it to me to *scour the globe* to bring you exotic primates with three heads, plus undiscovered Mosel wines). This is actually better than the Piesporter, so we'll make it a *test-case* of whether y'all buy labels or wines! It's more transparent and playful, more grain and wintergreen, brighter and with a slatier texture, like apricot juice strained through powdered slate. 100 Oechsle, by the way.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)

GHS-029H **2004 Piesporter Treppchen Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

About the mintiest example of this genre I can recall; all licorice and eucalyptus and wild-plum: Eiswein for extremists!

SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty years)





# weingut ansgar clüsserath

## mosel • trittenheim

Philipp Wittman has a main-squeeze whom he met when they were both students at Geisenheim. Eva Clüsserath is the daughter (and heiress-apparent) of a Mosel estate in Trittenheim. Would I like to taste the wine? Sure, O.K. I'm always interested in undiscovered good `uns among the steep slopes. If the wines turned out to be ordinary I could hem and haw.

At first I couldn't believe what I was tasting. These were utterly lovely. Two months later I tasted them again, this time in the delightful company of Eva Clüsserath, and once again they thrilled me to the balls of my feet. Somehow, even with the intrepid Selbach team scouring the countryside for hidden gems, this potentially superb estate was beneath our collective radar. But <whew>, if these wines are anything to go by, not for long!

Size (3.5 hectares in over 60 parcels), vineyard and cellar work are unremarkable in the context of conscientious Moselans. The cellar is virtually all wood fuders. "We work with little influence from technology," says Eva. She ferments with natural yeasts, filters only once, leaves the wines on the lees till March or April. No one will ever improve on these old ways.

What is significant, I think, is Eva's palate. She's more cosmopolitan than her parents were, I'm sure, and her relationship with Phillip Wittmann gives her a drinking-sweetie in another region plus a comrade with whom to explore the wine-world. They love Burgundy. But Eva herself wants "our wines to be minerally and individual, even more; unmistakable." Good for her! You can always trust a Riesling palate that *starts with mineral*. That's what Riesling is.

The estate has a wonderful future. And I love working with girl-vintners, and with the Daddies who flew in the face of all that old-world silliness and *nurtured* their daughters to carry on the estate.

This year I had a telling conversation with Eva. We're not selling what deserves to be sold from here, and



Eva Clüsserath

- **Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Trittenheimer Apotheke and Altärchen; Mülheimer Sonnenlay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 85% Riesling; 15% other**

part of the reason why is that ol' Mosel-stink problem. If you didn't read my intro to this catalog, this is the smell of H<sub>2</sub>S resulting from the lees; it vanishes with something between seconds and 2-3 minutes of swirling, and it will vanish in bottle in a couple years. It's not a "flaw"; it's a marketing nuisance. And it tends to be exaggerated in big-tasting situations, where you have 20 Kabinetts lined up on a table and suddenly one of them is stinky, and it's *oh-kayy*: *NEXT!* Even if you know such tastings almost demand that you form the most superficial impressions, you still can't help it.

I said as much to Eva, and she agreed. She's been to the tastings and she's no one's fool. But, she says, it's crucial for her to make what she feels are honest wines; she does not wish to "form" them for commercial considerations, and so she'll continue on her grounded old-fashioned way and what we sell, we sell. Curiously, the "problem" appears solve-able by using cultured yeasts to ferment, but for a certain mentality this is tantamount to diluting terroir. However awkward this may be for me, I must say I applaud anyone who's striving for *truth* in her wines, and I am proud to show you these inconvenient little stinkers! Maybe we'll put a stack of pennies next to Eva's bottles . . . .

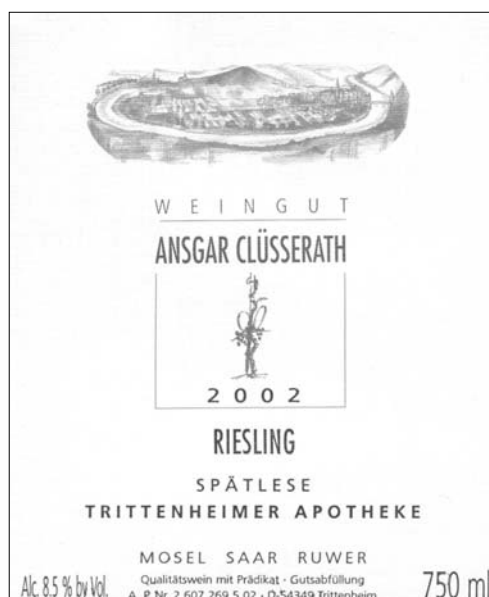
**Clüsserath at a glance:**

Mid-sized Mosel estate making old-school slatey-leesy classics and selling them at fair prices. Under the careful eye of a smart young woman, these have nowhere to go but up.

**how the wines taste:**

A charming amalgam of Trittenheim's charmingly pliant fruit (less stiff than say Graacher Domprobst) with striking minerality.

- GAC-012 **2004 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett**  
 Green slatey nose; tarragon, mint; honeydew and spice also, and salt and lime; lovely salty wash on the finish. An archetype of the un-modern, a wine made for time, community, identity – and not for points.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)
- GAC-013 **2004 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 Even more the lime-elixir now, and really alluring, but it seduces with its piquant intelligence; it's leesy and as esoteric as Chartreuse, and I adore its wry fruit and great integrity.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-three years)
- GAC-008 **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese**  
 (A.P. #24) This was the more backward of two, with higher tones and a more piquant slate; in fact really pure *naked* slate; power, mineral, taut fruit-focus and salt. 2003 as *genre*.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-two years)
- GAC-010H **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**  
 A frothing ripe vinosity spills beautifully over your palate, or at least it will if you *experience* the wine. Good underpinning of slate, 80% botrytis gives a seductive saltiness.  
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty-six years)
- GAC-011H **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling BA, 12/375ml**  
 Bananas Foster in a glass! A malty nectar of pure fine botrytis.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty-five years)
- GAC-014H **2004 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**  
 12/21 harvest, and an unexpectedly huge wine; perfect yellow frozen grapes at 165° Oechsle (i.e. TBA) and another entrant in a great family of beauties.  
 SOS: 4 (between twelve and thirty-three years)



Carl Loewen says: “In the modern world of winemakers there are hitherto unimagined possibilities to form the tastes of wines. The grape-breeders send us ever-new varieties, in my region there are people using barriques, using the most current techniques to concentrate natural musts; special cultured yeasts aim to form the characters of wines, and special enzymes to form bouquets.

Is this the brave new wine-world?

I have a different philosophy. Wine is a product of nature, the badge of its origin. And anyone who thinks this way views terroir as the defining important point.”

Pretty words, even good words, but only words— until you taste.

And dear friend and reader, since the 2001 vintage Loewen is the unheralded superstar in this assortment.

What with family members’ health problems, there were a couple of tough years for Loewens. But our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence. When I first listed the wines I did so on the basis of some hugely impressive samples I’d tasted at Selbach;



Carl Loewen

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.

Leiwen is just upstream from Trittenheim, and its best site, the Laurentiuslay, is one of several unheralded Crus along this stretch of the Mosel. A lot of the renown a site may or may not possess is dependent on a flagship estate. To cite a somewhat absurd example, if J.J. Prüm happened to have been a resident of Pölich and not of Wehlen then the Pölicher Held would enjoy the renown of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr. There are great vineyards we don’t know because there hasn’t been a great vintner

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

to do them full justice.

At least till now. Loewen claims the Laurentiuslay stands “among the best the Mosel has to offer. And it was a stroke of luck for us the *flurbereinigung* was voted down here because it was too expensive. The vineyard shows its original profile with countless little terraces and walls.” Another great site, he says, is the *Thörnicher Ritsch*. Many years ago I went to Thörnich with Hans and Sigrid Selbach, on a prowl for a vintner who would do the vineyard justice. Hans knew well the old-timer’s



wisdom; Ritsch was a great site. Well we didn’t find its champion then, but we know him now. Finally there’s the awkwardly-named Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay, from which Loewen makes a “tribute to the old proprietor of this vineyard, the cloister of St Maximin in Trier.” Mercifully he calls this wine simply *Maximiner*, describing an “extreme terroir,” a 65% mountain falling directly into the river, hard un-weathered blue slate, with an open west flank that catches every moment of afternoon

and evening sun. Its position right up against the river moderates nighttime temperatures and the soil retains water so that “even in a Summer like 2003 we had enough moisture for the grapes.”

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 slatey. 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-034 **2004 Leiwener Kloostergarten Riesling Kabinett**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. 40-year-old vines. As always this has what I call the *Vertus* fragrance; very Champagne-like without the specific minerality of the Grand Crus. The ‘04 is as fragrant as always, maybe even more brilliant than usual; more salt, winter-green and verbena—less cream; but this is a vamping long-legged lady, and the wine gives you a big wolf-grin of satisfaction.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GCL-033 **2003 Maximiner Riesling Spätlese** +  
 I held this back so as not to bludgeon y’all with three options among ‘03 Späts. Carl says “I’ve never harvested fruit from here with more than 92° (Oechsle) but also never less than 85°.” Last year this was the saltiest and most minty among the ‘03s, high-toned, sweet-grassy and granular; an utter genius-wine from the vintage, piquant and lilac-y, with a hugely long finish tasting almost of cloves. Wanna taste a clearly GREAT Mosel that’s great in a completely different way from, say, Wehlener Sonnenuhr?  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-one years)
- GCL-035 **2004 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Piquant, smoky, a little char; zingy green aromas; amazing waxy-quince-wicky thickness; 3 layers of flavor here, the deepest of which feels like the palate’s on an architectural dig through prehistoric terroir. So much crazy flinty spicy apple-y fruit, and flavors cut with a sushi-knife.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GCL-036 **2004 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Auslese**  
 This is so minerally he must have fined it with bath salts. The nose is a little crazy at the moment (March 14); there’s lots of Eiswein character, tarragon and spearmint aromas, but really galvanic energy; Riesling as *wasabi*. Let’s watch what happens.  
 SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty-seven years)
- GCL-037H **2004 Leiwener Kloostergarten Riesling BA, 12/375ml**  
 GCL-038H **2004 Leiwener Kloostergarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 On one December morning frozen grapes were picked; the botrytis berries (for the BA) went into one bucket and the clean (for the Eiswein) into another. The Eiswein has almost 200 Oechsle and it’s a seethingly intense dessert-wine, with pulsingly intense wild-plum flavors. Again, it’s foolish to deploy the dithyrambs; one is just so wiped out by the wine. The BA isn’t quite so sweet, and full of botrytis saltiness; it’s rather adamant right now but I love its specificity and thrust.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-five years)

# carl schmitt-wagner

mosel • longuich

Very good news here: the estate will continue because Carl the son has decided to return to Germany. Papa Bruno Schmitt is so hale it was easy to forget he is, after all, in his early seventies, and there were no heirs on the horizon. It is always moving when a son (or daughter) chooses to carry it on. Imagine the Mosel without its cloak of vines! Imagine the world without these uncannily beautiful slatey rieslings, whether young and chirrupy or old and searching. Finally imagine the hard bloody work of sweating and straining out a living on the perpendicular slopes.

The half-bottles come out when we're through with the young wines. I have almost lost count of the number of old wines this remarkable man has shared with my friends and me. But he hasn't! I think he remembers each and every one.

I think I'll share what we drank one year, not to rub your nose in it (well maybe a little) (O.K. a lot) but rather as a *tribute* to his generosity and avid spirit.

We started with a 1963 *Kabinett*, very much alive and leafy. I thought it was a '62, and was abashed. One of my traveling companions had surely never dreamed of a 40-year-old "Kabinett" with barely 8% alcohol even making it, let alone drinking like a dream. Next came an elegant, fine '62 *Spätlese*, slatey and solid. A gorgeous wine followed: '69 *Spätlese*, ethereal, long, evocative and tender.

The next wine was obviously younger, a '92 *Auslese*, just emerging from its adolescence; then a 1997 *Auslese*, not my type (too much botrytis); then an improbable and obscure wine; I thought maybe a 1966 but as it grew in the glass it seemed too stern and "important" for '66. "Could be a 1971 *Spätlese*," I wrote. Bulls-eye! Then a rather old-tasting '71 *Auslese*; "We should have used more sulfur," said Bruno. The next wine was easy; nothing tastes like this magic-Mosel vintage: '75 *Spätlese*. Corrie Malas was happy; it's her birth-year. Next up came a 1971 *BA*, 145° Oechsle, superb, but I still loved that '69 best. Then the *coup de gras*, a '71 *TBA*, about



which I wrote "It's an adult but it hasn't been wounded yet; it's still perfectly confident the world is splendidly beautiful and safe. It needs fifteen more years to find its way to kindness and tenderness; right now it's all happy malt and orange." This at 32 years old! So remember when I write "25-75 years" for a drinking envelope for such wines, this is based on many such experiences.

And all this took place over maybe 45 minutes! Nor was it in any way worshipful; quite the contrary. You get the sense this is how Bruno Schmitt likes to PARTY DOWN. I'll bet he looks forward to the chance to ram-

- **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**

page through a bunch of old vintages. Happy to oblige, squire. Though forgive me if I get a little *emotional*, you know. I know these wines literally live in your basement and all, but for a guy like me this is a sanctum of beauty.

I only wish I could show it to you, because all you get to see is this "drink now to four years" crap by wine writers who've never set foot in a German winery. I also love the ceremony with which the new wines are presented. Wine is significant not only as a provider of livelihood, but also as a filament connecting us to a human continuity.

It's interesting to note that the Herrenberg was classified category "A" — the *best* category — during the world's first official vineyard classification, undertaken by the Prussian land office during the early nineteenth century for the purpose of — you guessed it — *tax assessment!* The original document, published by Stuart Pigott as a vineyard map, is remarkable in its fidelity to current notions of the best vineyards.

This year the young family seems more settled-in, and there's plenty of playful affectionate sparring between papa and son, not to mention an impossibly adorable granddaughter on whom to dote. I arrived directly from the soul-shaking experience at Loewen, late in the afternoon and cranky 'cuz I hadn't had any tea. But the first taste of the first Kabinett sent a blast of the purest happiness all through me. Man these wines are good! Yes it's "meaningful" and yes Bruno Schmitt is one of wine's Great Men, but the wines, all by themselves, are feasts for the senses.

**Schmitt-Wagner at a glance:**

This was a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio, but the 2001s changed that. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 108-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.

GSW-043 **2004 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett** **++**

This is the Kabinett of the vintage in this offering. Simply perfect, fabulously delicious, an Ideal for Schmitt-Wagner Kabinett. The two plusses don't denote any sort of supernatural greatness, but rather an inexhaustible *vitality*, a deeply satisfying complexity, and a perfect expression of each facet of this family's wines; the less, the lime, the sassafrass.

This is important, so I'm gonna say it **loud**. HERE'S A WINE FROM 107 YEAR OLD UNGRAFTED VINES, HAND-TENDED AND HAND-HARVESTED AND VINIFIED IN SMALL BATCHES AND ESTATE BOTTLED, AND YOU CAN OWN IT, DEAR CONSUMER, FOR AROUND TWENTY DOLLARS. **WHY THE HELL ARE YOU STILL PAYING** 75-100 DOLLARS FOR SOME NEW-WORLD FLASH-IN-THE-PAN FROM SOME VINTNER-WANNABE WITHOUT A VINE TO HIS NAME??

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between five and twenty years)

GSW-042 **2003 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Rounder and longer than the Kabinett; low layers and saltier mineral, but every bit as racy and brilliant; snappy, extroverted stuff.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-eight years)

GSW-044 **2004 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This will follow the '03 in January 2006; a deep, old-vines character (though of course they're all old vines, and this simply hails from a "sirloin parcel"); drier and more pensive than the Kabinett, with an almost carob note, subtle slate and mint.

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

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GSW-045 **2004 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese** **+**

(lot #7); there were several Auslesen one finer than the next; what to do? This beauty comes first, to be followed, eventually, by lot #6; this was almost brash, trumpet-y, high-toned and brilliant; he speaks of cassis, and whatever it is it's a double-take sort of wine as it billows its crepuscular beams of flavor on, and on, and on . . .

At one moment on this trip I was driving through snow-squalls when suddenly the sun came blasting out and I saw a thing I'd never seen: a rainbow through snow. A *snow-bow*. I'm reminded of that now, thinking of the *impression* of this shimmering Auslese.

SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty-five years)

GSW-040 **2003 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese** **+**

This is stunning. No increase in perceptible sweetness, but again, as if up from below comes a welling of exquisite ripeness and saltiness; iris again, splendid length and one of the best food wines you could *ever* want.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)

# karlsmühle-geiben

ruwer • mertesdorf

It's March 15th, and the first true Spring evening, at last, and the birds, after waiting out the snow, are going crazy, rushing and flapping and chirruping, almost comically urgent in their silly birdy way. Then, I notice two ducks floating languidly over the valley and the suddenly green meadows. These wines seem to invite the sap to rise. See if you can taste them and not hear the beats of countless tiny hearts, or the squirmings of the seeds.

I don't know if this is true, but there's an awful lot of people saying that Maximin Grünhaus has come down a notch, and Karlsmühle has ascended to the very top of its region. I love Grünhaus and I'm not terribly into the popularity contest or tip-sheet mentality. But I'm telling you this for a reason, and it is:

Given the near-religious awe in which Grünhaus is held, and given that Karlsmühle's damn near as good—maybe just as good; maybe better—and given that Karlsmühle's wines cost significantly less than Grünhaus's, then maybe, just maybe, y'oughta be paying more attention, squire. Huh? Waddaya think?

The wines sometimes have that Mosel-yeasty stink their first year in bottle, and they're more expensive than Mittelmosel wines. We Yanks don't have time to distinguish between Mosel & Saar & Ruwer because we're too busy to take German wine as seriously as other wine. Put it this way: can you imagine us refusing to pay more for Côtes-de-Nuits Burgundies than for Côtes-de-Beaune—“Hey it's all Burgundy, man.” Who cares about a piddling matter like where the wine comes from! Oh don't mind me: I've got rants in my pants.

Karlsmühle is one of those pleasant country hotels



Peter Geiben and Hans Selbach

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

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

like his father's: serviceable, pleasant enough to do what they needed to do, supply the hotel-restaurant with home-grown product. It was back in 1987 that Peter started to wonder . . . it was, after all, a lot of work to make wine on these slopes—among the steepest in the Ruwer Valley. And there *was* a lot of wine taking up space in the cellar. What might happen if he dedicated himself to making *less* wine but *excellent* wine?

This wasn't entirely idealistic. Peter doesn't have a poetic temperament. He'd brush away any wine faery who happened to alight on his shoulder. His interest was that of a *worker* who knows he can do better with his tools, and decides to see how *much* better. Peter speaks tersely, if at all, about such things. He'd rather talk about the trellising method he's developed, and he'd *far* rather talk about hunting. A friend convinced him to stop deacidifying. He experimented with natural yeast fermentation and was pleased with the results. He's done away with wood in the cellar and is now making everything reductively in tanks. Wood is too rustic, and too dangerous in his view.

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets

there from Trier. That imposing hillside to your left, behind the hotel, contains Peter's monopole vineyards. The upper section is the **Felslay**, the steepest section, with the lightest soil. Just below is the **Mäuerchen** on its deeper soil. Around the corner facing due south is the great **Kaseler Nies'chen**, in which Geiben now has two fine parcels. There's some Kehrnel from the Patheiger holdings. Peter has enough to do.

His wines from the Lorenzhöfer hillside are positive and adamant, they walk with a firm tread, and they have a slight and pleasing earthiness. The wines from the Kasel sites are nominally lighter but utterly ravishing in polish and beauty of flavor. It's like the difference between the top part of Clos Vougeot near Musigny and the parts lower down toward the route nationale.

In fact I learned one year that the **Nies'chen** is fine-stoned; i.e. lots of crumbled slate and thus superior drainage, plus a certain filigree quality in the wines, and **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.

The best Ruwer wines seem to *distill* the essence of Mosel-ness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said 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 Karlmühle and receive Patheiger, don't worry, it's correct, no one screwed up, be happy. There's also a spiffy new label altogether, which gives Peter's name pride of place over "Karlmühle." I always prefer the name of a family to that of a place, but we want to introduce the new label with as little clerical disruption as possible!

#### Karlmühle at a glance:

Of the "big three" in the Ruwer (Grunhaus and Karthäuserhof, the other two) this is the least expensive. Ruwer wines are prized in general for their astonishing spiciness and delicacy. Since the acquisition of great Grand Cru sites in Kasel, Karlmühle 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-089 2004 Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett

A perfect wine to whet one's appetite for '04s; pure boskop apple; a pleasing hint of earthiness but an almost feral saltiness and just *explosively* flavory; shimmeringly green and herbal, seductive, yummy and very long. Taste this and gimme a HELL YEAH!  
SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-four years)

#### GKM-079 2003 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett

**CORE-LIST WINE.** A typically glorious Nies'chen with the creamy seductive profile of 2003. This is what's meant by *fine*, and why beauty is so important.  
SOS: 2 (between four and nineteen years)

#### GKM-088 2004 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett

**CORE-LIST WINE.** To be offered January '06 unless the 2003 sells out sooner. It's entirely true to form; apple-blossom and lime-blossom nose of great class and crystalline finesse; the palate is wonderfully salty and transparent, with a schwingin' juicy finish. Another teeny Riesling miracle.  
SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-one years)



- GKM-090 **2004 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 Whew! This classy nose stops you in your tracks; I doubt I tasted more beautiful pure FRUIT in any 2004; if these were Dönnhoff (as this could be) it'd be Kupergrube; and you'd be crazy to miss this serene, gracious masterpiece.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)
- GKM-091 **2004 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Auslese "Long Goldkapsel"** **++**  
 Kee-rist, this is gorgeous! It takes the cashmere-fine purity of the Spät and turbo-charges the mid-palate; orange-blossom and cox-orange pippins; heart-melting low tones of juicy ripe fruit; classic gossamer delicacy; astonishing yet of course this is how it is, as too few appreciate: strength of flavor, beauty of flavor, yet utterly *sheer*.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-three years)
- GKM-092H **2004 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Auslese "Long Goldkapsel", 12/500ml** **+**  
 More substance now, more butterfat in the ice cream, the sweet kaffir-lime ice cream, the one with the malt-flavored whipped cream and the rich mirabelle crème . . . and all I have are these damn M&Ms . . . but you can buy this bliss in a bottle, you lucky cuss.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-five years)
- GKM-093H **2004 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **(++)**  
 Deacidified from 18 g.l., and still cloudy, no no note possible, but if it fulfills its promise it will take its place among the best wines of the vintage.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty-eight years)



# mittelrhein wines



In 1900 there were 2000 hectares of vineyards planted in the Mittelrhein. In 1970 this had sunk to 1000. In the next thirty years it reduced again by half; as the new century began there were just 500 hectares remaining, a loss of 75% in a single century. 50 more hectares were abandoned last year alone. What's to become of this region?

In most but not all cases the best sites remain. In most cases the most impassioned vintners will continue. We're seeing a possibly beneficial herd-thinning, but we're also seeing a changing world, and would do well to consider how it will look and how happy we'll be to live in it.

Because the Mittelrhein is so rife with tourism, a lot of ordinary plonk was made to be sloshed down by heedless gawkers misty-eyedly sailing past the Loreley. I'll bet the boat-lines and taverns bid prices down to below subsistence for the poor growers. The vineyards are steep, Mosel-steep, and costs of production are high. The system was basically unsustainable. But what will take its place?

This point was driven home while I drove downstream to dinner with Linde Jost. We passed the beautiful vineyard site Kauber Rosstein (whose wines I used to represent via Heinrich Weiler until the domain encountered

## At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . .

some problems and I opted out) and Linde noted wistfully that its days appeared to be numbered. "But it's one of the great sites of the region," I protested. "Why is that?" "Well look at it," Linde replied. "It's all old terraces, too steep to work by machine. You can't get to it. Do you realize what you have to do to bring the harvest in from that vineyard?" she continued. "First you have to carry all the grapes on your back as there are no pathways for tractors or wagons. Then you have to cross a busy road, **and then you have to cross the railway line**, and *then* you have to get into a boat and row across the Rhine!" Well, I dunno; sounds like a day in the park to me. I mean, it's not like there's man-eating *fish* in the river or anything. In any case, it turned out the vineyard's sole proprietor was merely leasing the winery and had no incentive to invest in it. And so the thing goes to seed, and one of Riesling's finer habitats shall be no more. A specie of beauty is extinct. That makes me a little sad.

Still, go if you can. Along with the Mosel valley, the Rhein between Bingen and Koblenz is one of the few places left in Europe that actually looks like the tourist brochures. Amazing how the usual picture of the old cas-

tle somehow omits the lard-rendering plant across the road, isn't it? At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated though there isn't a flagship site like Scharzhofberger, nor a flagship estate like 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.



# tasting versus drinking

I once got invited to one of those mammoth vertical tastings of some Bordeaux, I think it was Las Cases. Fifty vintages, back to the Punic wars. Me! I never get invited to those things.

It took me all of five seconds to reply; no, I wouldn't be attending. "Oh, that's too bad. Is there a scheduling conflict?" "No," I replied, "I don't choose to attend. But I hope everybody else has a great time!"

I really do not enjoy sitting in some chillingly well-lighted room in a row with many other people as if we were taking the written segment of a driver's test, with ten glasses in geometric patterns on the table in front of me, little bitty bits of wine in each glass, sippin' and spittin' and combing my mind for adjectives. I don't enjoy it because I think it's a waste of wine, and even worse it is a sin against the spirit of wine, and I would just as soon not participate.

Give me any one or two of those mature vintages, along with a mellow evening, a rack of lamb, and the company of people I'm fond of, and I am a very happy man. A great old wine is such a gift of providence that it begs to be savored, to soak into your heart. Sitting in some creepy banquet room and "tasting" fifty old wines not only dilutes the aesthetic experience, it's a macho snub of the nose to the angels.

Apart from which I respect the hard work of the vintner. If he knew his/her wine would end up, fifty years later, being opened in a "tasting" alongside forty nine other wines for a bunch of earnestly scribbling geeks, he'd probably hurl a grenade at the winery and run away sobbing. I have enough on my poor conscience without contributing to that.



# florian weingart

## mittelrhein • boppard-spay

If you're still thinking "Oh 2004 is back-to-reality after the mega-ripe '03s" consider: at Weingart 2004 gave the highest average must-weight in the history of the winery. But: with lots of acidity and very low pH (around 2.95) across the board.

Florian Weingart seems self-conscious about the accolades regularly heaped upon him, like putting on a tux and looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking "Who is this guy?" He was "promoted" to top estate of the Mittelrhein by *Gault-Millau*, in a class by himself, but he only blushed when I hailed him as "Mr. 4-Stars!" Nor do I think this is mere modesty. Florian is exceptionally thoughtful and driven, constantly cogitating, guessing and second-guessing, always trying to improve. All the praise is nice, but distracting.

These are very happy visits. The wines are full of melody, and Florian's kids keep coming into the room, shyly at first and then like wound-up little sprites. I like tasting wine with young vintners whose kids are sitting in his lap. It stops me from getting too precious about the wines. It puts the work in context. Context is good. It helps me define a thing I need to remember: the connection of the family, the land, and the wine. Somehow I doubt I'd be tasting with Mr. Kendall or Mr. Jackson in a little living room with kids peering shyly around the corner and the simmer-fragrance of lunch cooking. One year both girls seized upon my Karen Odessa, who amused them for two hours with her laptop. She recorded the two girls very shyly singing "Ten Little Indians" and every time she played it later I felt happy.

Florian is more of an intellectual than many growers. "There is no single True way," he says: "Rather a multitude of possibilities." I sense he's delighted to play among them! Florian has always been transparently candid and unaffected with me, which I find unendingly delightful. It's such a pleasure to connect simply as colleagues. I think he is instinctively genuine, as are his wines.

This is another estate which is worked by the whole family. Papa only emerged at the end to greet me, Mama came and went, and Florian's missus mostly tried to keep the kids out of our way (with mixed success, I noted happily).



- Vineyard area: 9 hectares
- Annual production: 7,500 cases
- Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg, Feuerlay, Engelstein and Mandelstein
- Soil types: Weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 92% Riesling, 8% other

Florian is improving what were already excellent wines, but I still miss his folks. Papa set a fine example of diligence, fortitude and joy. He suffers from a degenerative nerve ailment that deprives him of the use of his fingertips, not an easy prospect for a small family-domain on steep slopes. Yet he was invariably cheerful and uncomplaining, and his wines were tensely fruity, and it does the soul good to see a talented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

The wines are more green-fruity than they have been, more explicitly slatey, more Mosel-like. Florian ascribes this to colder fermentations. He also suggests that the big tropical-fruit flavors of earlier Weingart wines resulted to some extent from nitrogen fermentations. He's also leaving his wines longer on their lees, "partly to compensate for the loss of body resulting from our colder fermentation temperatures." And this gives them another dimension of complexity.

But you can't do away entirely with those tropical flavors; they are written into the soil. There's a vein of volcanic residue from eruptions in the old Eifel mountains in the soils of the Bopparder Hamm, and it's (presumably) this soil which accounts for the bigger sweet-fruit expression in these wines. The Ohlenberg has a deeper soil, giving more robust wines, more likely to come from physiologically ripe fruit and therefore better suited to Trocken styling. (Florian's one of the few to make this intuitive connection.)

I'd like to sell more of these wines, but Florian's one of those young growers who isn't really into "Kabinett." There was an '04 on the table, made from a pre-harvest of botrytis grapes, but the botrytis annoyed and distract-

ed and I walked away from the wine, though it was the *product* I needed. Still, Florian Weingart takes his rightful place among the most important growers of steep-slope Riesling in all of Germany.

**Weingart at a glance:**

A risen star on the Mittelrhein with the advent of young Florian Weingart at the helm. Still-good value for in-your-face fruity-minerally steep-slope wine.

**how the wines taste:**

They're urgent above all; these are wines that move, that push and pull on the palate. Then tropically fruity, vanilla, papaya, mango in the ripest wines. With the 1996 vintage a new minerality came; you feel it on the sides of the palate, and it sets up a call-and-response of fruit and stone that keeps you returning to the wine just when you were done attending to it. These are smiling, cheerful wines, but now perhaps with a fundamental intelligence that makes you want to spend lots of time with them.

GAW-073 **2004 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese**

Many-layered fruit here; orange, mango, asian pear; fine, rich minerally middle; works *as-if dry* ( this should be a new category, as-if dry ) wonderful grip and mid-palate solidity; a wine you can chew.

SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-six years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GAW-074 **2004 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling "Anarchie"**

This is the wine intended as Trocken but which stopped fermenting with an awkward 35 g.l. RS—awkward as regards "positioning", mind you. So he wryly calls it *anarchy*, because it doesn't fit into the usual and customary boxes. Alas, it just tastes great! It's a Spätlese (the label might indicate as much; this was still being discussed), and friends, this is the most endangered specie in German Riesling today. It's so quince-y and wicky (the smell when you blow out a candle), precise, spicy and dry—no reasonable palate would perceive it otherwise - with a minty, zingy spice and minerality. Exciting stuff. Let some anarchy into your life!

SOS: 0 (between five and twenty years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GAW-075 **2004 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Spätlese** +

From vineyards upstream near Bacharach, quite different from the Bopparders; this is haunting and adorable; cherries and cox-orange pippins and lilac and mineral; a carousel of intricacy and twenty painted ponies of interplay; piquant yin-yang of flower and stone; with serenely firm grip and a zen authority, as if the vines had been doing tai chi.

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

GAW-076H **2004 Boparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Auslese\*, 12/375ml**

This recalls a Karlsmühle wine: the stinging Eiswein acidity pulling the fruit like a locomotive; it's like a caramel without sugar, somehow; it finishes like rye-toast dabbed with heather-honey; incandescent power but not at all seductive.

SOS: 3 (between eleven and thirty-three years)

GAW-077H **2004 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +

An essence of lime, with piranha-teeth of grip. I love the take-it-or-leave-it integrity of this whole collection, which culminates here. There's no need to describe "flavors"—they shimmer like St Elmo's fire, they fill your whole field of vision.

SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)

Jost's wines have been famously tardy since Peter began his regime of long lees-contact, and I have sometimes underrated them out of the gate-I and other tasters also. They have appeared to slip down a notch from the elite position they held. I had hoped the 2003s would arrest this trend, but there was a strange Kabinett which evolved odd beery notes after bottling. Josts are aware of this, but disagree with my intuition it has something to do with lees. In any event, 2004 was wonderful, and I hope it will *remain* wonderful in bottle.

Peter's lowest must-weight was 90 degrees (hardly a "little" vintage), and he reports assimilation well into November, "Though we really don't know why." He imagines it is a sort of slow fading of the "sunburn" of 2003, as if the vines were reconditioned from that year's extreme heat and draught, and took time to learn again how to behave in ordinary years. This is the kind of

idea I like, though I have no idea if it's "true." But characteristically, physiological ripeness was four weeks later in '04 than in '03. And it's just the flavors which built in those four weeks that tell the tale.

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 is an estate with the lion's share of a single vineyard, with which they are identified, in this case the BACHARACHER HAHN. There are a few other parcels also (along with some Rheingauers), but Jost and Hahn are inextricably linked. I've looked at Hahn from all sides now; from across the river (where it looks impossibly steep), from immediately below it, from above it, within it, and any way you slice it, this is one special site; steep goes without saying, perfect exposure, large enough to



Peter and Linde Jost

- 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

allow selective harvesting. One cannot tell anymore whether its exuberant glory of fruit is innate, as there aren't any other proprietors to speak of. But who cares? It's one of the diamonds of the German wine world.

The wines can be calm and shining. *What* polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They can attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous but never overbearing, underpinned with slaty filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb.

The wines are fermented in stainless steel, using cultured yeasts, with controlled temperatures. "We're particularly careful of how we handle the grapes," says Peter. "All the grapes arrive at the press in undisturbed condition. We press with a maximum of 1.8 bars of pressure; the best wines don't go higher than one bar." Lees contact is "as long as possible, but regularly three months. Actually our wines throw very little sediment since we ferment a very clean must." says Peter. What lees do exist are stirred. "I want a partnership between primary fruit and the richness of the lees."

Nary a wine has been de-acidified for the last decade. And Peter is friendly toward the use of Süßreserve if it's produced optimally. "Each wine should have its own Süßreserve," he says. "It's labor-intensive and it falls just at the busiest time of the harvest, which means working the night shift!" But, he says, the later fermentation stops, the better for the wine. "In

any case, at least for our wine which we ferment technically clean with the cultured yeasts, we can use a third less sulfur.”

Josts report a likelihood their oldest of three daughters will take over the winery. I remember her and her

sister when they were little girls, producing something like one liter of “TBA” which they bottled in 200ml bottles and offered for sale to their Uncle. For ten Marks! I’d say the estate will be in good hands, and I love any example of Frau-power in old Europe.

**Jost at a glance:**

Primo estate with impeccable reputation for top-flight Rieslings. Wines emphasize beauty of fruit rather than mineral.

**how the wines taste:**

It is the quality of fruit you look for here, and this is about as lovely as it gets; a delicate melange of sweet-apple, white peach, honeysuckle, expressed in a resplendent elegance, always stopping short of mere sultriness.

GTJ-058 **2004 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett (+)**

In essence this is a perfect vintage for this wine: ripe, minerally and vivid in its acidity. Lime joins the usual nectarine aromas, and the palate is wonderfully splashy and fresh; has the tensile muscle of a basketball player. I hedge the “plus” only because of the odd showing of the `03 after bottling.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)

GTJ-061 **2004 Rheingau Riesling Spätlese**

Josts own land in and around Walluf in the Rheingau. Taste this and see how 52g.l. RS can be absolutely sucked away by extract and acidity, because this tastes virtually dry, herbal and stony. A typically stoic Rheingauer. For those who take green tea without sugar.

SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-three years)

GTJ-059 **2004 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Spätlese +**

This is aristocracy of Riesling—serenely regal and wickedly witty; again largely green aromas (twenty flowering lindens in a row!), and guava, and when Riesling does these things you wonder why you ever drink anything else . . . that glowy, almost creamy entry and then the firm slap of structure. Just as a good massage requires both strength and tenderness, so does great Riesling.

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

GTJ-060 **2004 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Auslese, 500ml**

Botrytis arrives on its malty rivulets; the wine is both sultry and salty; bergamot and sweet lime; spicy 2nd flavors in the Sencha direction; striking dialectic here; a truly stylish creature.

SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)



## the matter of “globalization”

The matter of globalization in wine seems to put certain people on the defensive. This is regrettable, not least because defensive people often lash out, and a dialogue which ought to be able to be conducted civilly ends up being conducted evilly. Robert Parker’s recent essay, posted on his website, contained many reasonable and persuasive points, the value of which was diminished by an intermittent tone of invective. All intellectuals aren’t “pseudo-intellectuals” (I wonder how he tells them apart) and all persons taking views contrary to his aren’t guilty of membership in the “pleasure-police.”

I’ll try to summarize the positions of the two camps. Critics of globalization in wine are actually suspicious of a uniformity of wine-styles they perceive has arisen over the past roughly-20 years. For the sake of brevity, let’s call these people “romantics.”

Proponents of globalization—let’s call them “pragmatists”—argue that wine in the aggregate has never been better, and that good wines are hailing from a larger number of places than ever before. They do not perceive a problem, and think a bunch of fussbudgets are trying to rain on their parade.

Romantics would counter that the sense of multiplicity is misleading, because it’s actually the same *type* of wine hailing from all these new places.

I cannot reasonably deny the validity of the pragmatist’s argument. There are certainly many more competent and tasty wines (and concomitantly fewer rustic, dirty or yucky wines) than there were twenty years ago. Yet I can’t help but wonder; certainly the floor has been raised on overall wine quality. But has the ceiling been lowered? That, I interpret, is the romantic’s argument. But not all of it.

Baseball fans are cruelly aware of the steroid scandal threatening the basic integrity of the sport. We are sometimes less aware of the role we ourselves have played in bringing this about. We seem to want to wish it all away. We enjoy the prospect of herculean demi-gods bulked up on chemicals hitting baseballs 500 feet. This is

becoming our Ideal, and players embodying this ideal put butts in the seats and command the largest salaries. They are also the envy of other, less “enhanced” players, some of whom seek to climb on board the gravy train.

I see a metaphor here. There is no doubt that the prevailing recipe for modern wines with commercial aspirations effectively seems to *churn them out*; ripe, sweet, softly embedded tannins, large-scaled and concentrated. The pragmatists care less about how such wines *get* that way than they do about being entertained and thrilled by juiced-up sluggers hitting the ball 500 feet.

I’ll yield this argument is properly conducted in shades of gray. Parker has often expressed his esteem and admiration for moderate, elegant, temperate wines. He typically scores them in the high 80s, and has told me he wishes more people prized and drank such wines. Yet he must be aware the commodity called a “Parker-score” in fact damns such wines with faint praise. And though he admires these wines well enough, he reserves his love and expressive emotionality for their bigger, more hedonistic cousins.

Thus a particular idiom becomes the prevailing idiom, because everyone wants the scores and the financial success they engender. It is the singular persuasiveness of this monoidiom against which the romantics struggle. They—we—are innately wary of uniformity, as it is contrary to nature. We are also alert to an insidious effect such uniformities can create. We risk becoming passive, infantilized, dulled. When all things are one single way there’s less need to pay *attention* to them, for they no longer can surprise you.

Pragmatists will claim I am overstating the case; none of them argues that all wines should taste the same. Fair enough. Yet they themselves often accuse romantics of wishing to return to some imagined Eden of dirty, weird and rustic wines (which, they sneer, we excuse by citing *terroir*). The dialogue threatens to reduce to a war of straw men.



I would ask the pragmatists to consider this question. How, in a world of wines made by an indisputably prevailing set of practices in pursuit of a given result, will there still be room for the quirky, the asymmetrical, the evocative? Or, are we content to permit such wines to disappear? Is this the wine-world—is it the *world*—in which we wish to live? If not, how do we prevent it?

I am not placing value judgements on “modern” methods. Many of them are benign. Nor is this the time to argue against the falsifications. Some people think it’s fine for ballplayers to use steroids! I am asking for consideration of the *consequences* inherent in a belief system. It is certainly true that regions such as, say, Priorat, were unknown and unavailable twenty years ago. Yet to my palate this signifies very little, for Priorat’s wines join an international *glom* of hot-climate reds whose wines are, in the old phrase, much of a muchness. Yes, there is another (*yet* another) source of big-ass reds. I’m not sure why I should care.

In cuisine there comes a point of ennui when all one sees are the same luxury ingredients in nearly interchangeable preparations. Monday it’s squab stuffed with foie gras in a truffle *nage*; Tuesday it’s squab stuffed with truffles in a foie emulsion; Wednesday it’s truffle-cruste foie gras in a squab jus, and eventually it becomes a meaningless farandole of dishes constituting the *luxury-dining-experience*, which you could have in Hong Kong or Los Angeles or Las Vegas or New York or Kuala Lumpur. It becomes a membrane separating you from the world, swaddling you in a specious bliss, seducing your senses. I imagine this when I taste yet another big wine indistinguishable from myriad other Big Wines, and yes, it might well be superior to the weird little wine that grew there before—*might* be—but what does it signify? That people in many different places can suss the formula and apply it? I’m not sure why I should care.

And yet we romantics *must* yield the point: the floor has risen, and this is a good thing. Our struggle is to applaud this while protecting the ceiling. And the “ceiling” isn’t merely new stratospheres of hedonism (even *more* ripe fruit, even *more* intensity: more *more* MORE) but rather those wines *uniquely* great. What other great wine is great as the best Loire Chenins are

great? As the best Barolos are great? As the best Jurançons, the best Mosel Rieslings, the best Grüner Veltliners, the best Grand Cru Chablis? Ultimately it isn’t greatness we must protect—it is uniqueness. Preserve the unique, and greatness will take care of itself.

The pragmatists need to realize there are risks inherent in their aesthetic.

And we romantics need to realize certain things too.

We *have* misapplied the concept of *terroir* to excuse flawed wines. This concept is precious. We need to respect it, and use it with care.

We *have* been guilty of a form of puritanism; if it tastes unpleasant it must be virtuous.

The pragmatists ought in turn to acknowledge theirs isn’t the only form of pleasure. There are worlds alongside the sensual, and wine can be intellectually and spiritually nourishing, and people can desire these experiences, and the *true* hedonist isn’t threatened by them.

I wonder if we cannot all unite behind the value of diversity. I would like to think so. From my high-rise window I can often see raptors soaring and swooping through the sky, and I love these big graceful birds. But I could never imagine myself feeling “I sure love these big hawks, and other big birds too, eagles, buzzards, and I sure wish all birds were like these because they give me such pleasure.” What of the assertive red cardinal? The graceful heron? The silly woodpecker? The pensive dove? I want to live in a world of thousands of different wines, whose differences are deeper than zip-code, each one of which shows me the unending variety and fascination of this lovely bit of green on which we walk.



# nahe wines



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

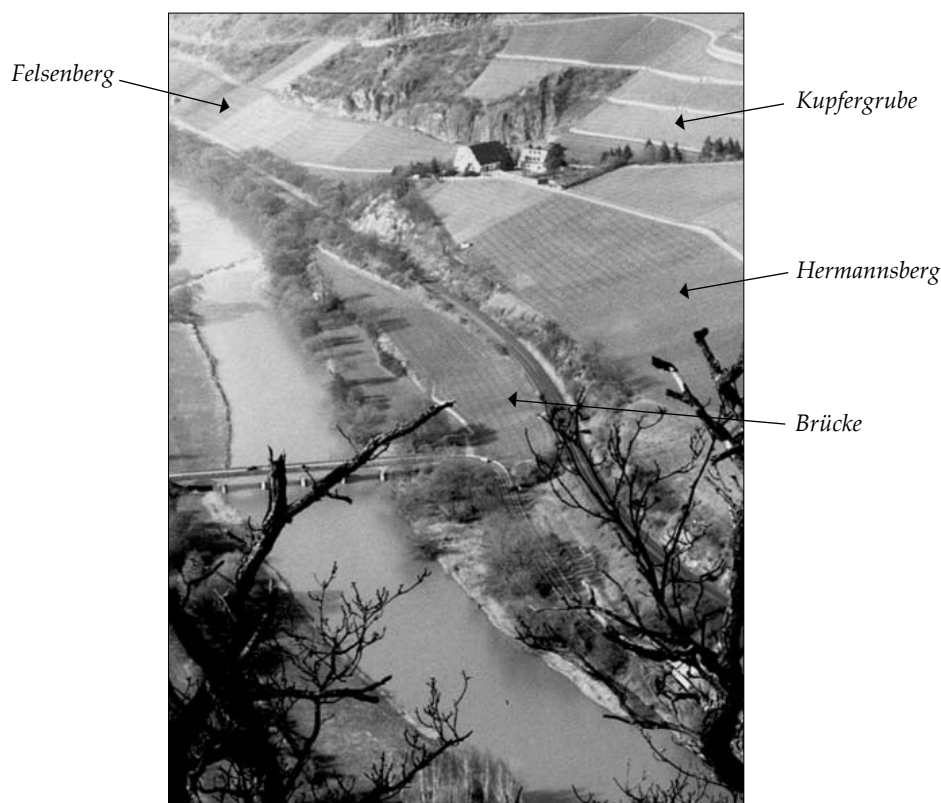
gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyr. I turned to the group. "You hear a lot of crap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

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

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

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

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



*View of vineyards from the Lemberg*

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

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

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

“The soul does not supply solutions. It sends messages. It beckons.” —Michael Ventura

It’s easy to stake a claim for the mystic when talking about Dönnhoff’s wines. They are beautiful in just such a way as to stir these kinds of thoughts, even in people whom such thoughts seldom visit.

Temperament is irreducible, and we don’t acknowledge it nearly enough. We think we’re discussing the subject but often we’re really asserting the validity of our temperament and it’s view of the world. When people ask me how I got into wine, the pathetic but true answer is I’m the kind of guy who would be into wine. If they ask me why German wine (or Austrian wine or

Champagne) I can only say the same: I’m that kind of guy. And for me, Helmut Dönnhoff’s wines are the culmination of a certain longing, for a kind of beauty we try always to discern, to sniff out. I browse the world alert for it.

Yet with Dönnhoff one finds one’s way to the end of the rainbow, after what feels like a lifetime of searching and longing, and sure enough there’s the pot of gold, just like they said, and you approach it and it doesn’t shoo you away, and you draw near with held breath, open the lid of the pot of gold, and inside it . . . is another tiny rainbow.

These wines don’t answer any questions; they only pose even more inscrutable ones. That is because they are rarely what we’d call “intense”; they seldom land on the palate with huge impact. Theirs is a quality of tenderness you cannot identify, isolate or explain. But you know it is there. And it stills you, if you let it, in that eerie way that beauty has.

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

Similar aesthetically, of course; I don’t grow grapes or make wine. But very often when I’m translating Helmut for the non-German-speakers present, I find myself thinking “this is exactly how the thing should be said” and I want almost to applaud as I translate.

It’s best if I don’t think about the wines until they’re in the glass. I try to subdue any pleasure of anticipation. I just want the wines to come to me. I want the awe to live in them, and come to me; I don’t want to bring it. I tasted the wines twice last year, about two weeks apart, as I made a second visit with Kevin Pike. The latter run-through was a brisk affair — we hadn’t much time — and it lubricated a somewhat delicate conversation which

- **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**

engaged most of my attention. I found it fascinating to scroll through these wines, which I love like none other, with only a sideways glance. In one particular moment I was groping to say something subtle in my inadequate German, concentrating entirely on finding words I didn’t know, and suddenly the wine in my glass found a seam and soaked through it, and I realized I was near tears. It was shockingly beautiful. I was closed to the world, and the world opened me. And what of this? it seemed to say.

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

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

there, even when we can't see them. Just as the dreams are always there even when we don't dream them.

This is a long way to venture out from a single sip of wine. But any single sip of wine can show us the whole world, can show us the reality we usually ignore, the thing that is always there, and which we see through angel-eyes. Wine can remind us to pause, notice and appreciate. It is always here. *Beauty* is always here. This strange, sad, beautiful world is always here in all its gravity and gorgeousness, ready to unfold us. Colin Wilson once said "What if we aren't risen apes, but instead fallen angels?"

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

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

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

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

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

Helmut Dönnhoff knows his wines are good. He doesn't strut about it but he isn't aw-shucks either. I once asked him if he agreed his goal was to make wines of crystalline texture and precise articulation. "I don't disagree," he replied. Then how do you get there? I had to know. There is, in effect, no "how," was his answer. Wine results from the confluence of a multitude of small choices, which alter as circumstances mandate. There's no recipe. There is ever-more reliance on instinct. Dönnhoff

is very respectful of spontaneous instinctive recognition, and has become wary of the intellect's appetite to deconstruct. One year he spoke with David Schildknecht and said this telling thing:

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

Precisely.

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

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

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

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

Dönnhoff ferments with yeast cultures he creates himself from his own wines, the better to give him the highest common denominator of controlled, slow fermentation without having to resort to commercial yeast.



Helmut Dönnhoff

The wines are aged in cask until bottling, but no longer than six months. If the wine isn't bottle-ready after six months it is racked into stainless steel. Low-acid wines are racked immediately after fermentation; wines with healthy high acid may sit on the lees as long as a month. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

"Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality," he says, adding: "You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you're not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology." He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. "It is the concentration of *all* the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its *real* taste and structure," he says. "If you have a barrel that's not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character." Fermentation runs its own course here.

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

Well, the 04s aren't gonna change your mind dude.

Though I tasted them in the middle of the coldest of the cold snap (there was ice skating on the lake in Niederhausen the day before; it looked like a canvas of Breughel's) and they were unusually unevolved. Helmut told my colleague Jonas, who visited ten days later, he wished I could taste them again. Me too. My notes record what I experienced on the day, and what I expect to experience down the road.

It's lonely at the top, of course, and when you're perceived to be "Number 1" all you can do is fall. Wine writers looking for a story have been known to hasten that

process—it's hardly news when the number 1 guy made the best wines yet again. But I can't say I see the slightest sign of this happening with Dönnhoff. No revisionism, no nitpicking for "flaws" just because someone else lauded the wines to the skies. And I think I know why. It's because we don't just admire these wines—we *love* them. Helmut is content to do the smallest, most elusive thing of all with his wines—to tell the simple truth.

It was less ceremonial, too, this year: just me and Corrie Malas. Even Gabi was elsewhere, laid up with the flu. Very quiet, just old friends with no one looking on. Though I'll admit it's helpful having others there, who can carry on conversations with Helmut while I try and grasp the stunningly complex wines. So we tasted, discussed (in imagery, as usual) and schmoozed.

I think I'll give the last word to my friend Tara Thomas, who visited Dönnhoff last year, and wrote this to me:

*Donhoff was, no surprise, my favorite. At first, his wife talked to me while he stayed in the background; he seemed busy, suspicious, and above all, shy. But then he seemed not to be able to help himself; he'd hear something his wife said and just have to add on, and then get a little embarrassed after the fact. Eventually, we settled into taste and taste and taste. At one point while he was out of the room, his wife told me how they'd met while taking dance lessons. Later, as we tasted the wines, he'd fill in my useless attempts to describe the feel of the wine by saying, "Dancing. The wine is dancing." I left with an image of him falling in love while dancing, and never stopping dancing, or making things dance, again.*

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

### Some Notes On The Vineyards:

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

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

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

**Dönnhoff at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

- GDH-160 **2004 Estate Riesling** +  
 It's a quiet glory this year; silvery cool clear fragrances from the porphyry with delicate notes of lemon and guava; it's an unchaptalized Spätlese in fact; it enters most seductively and ends with an arch little wink of angularity - which I like, because it's a double-take complexity grabbing you, if you consent to be grabbed—and fascinated. As usual the lion's share from the porphyry Oberhäuser Felsenberg with a little of the gravelly Kieselberg.  
 SOS: 1 (between five and nineteen years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GDH-161 **2004 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 A Mosel-type, grown on sandy slate—the so-called Tholey—and it's silky, cool and dry-seeming; bosc pears, a little granular and snaggy like a cuticle on raw silk, but these are just the textural issues that time most alters; an almost mathematical explication of flavor; modal rather than melodic; spicy also, but pink-cheeked and vital, like coming back inside from a walk on a winter day.  
 SOS: 1 (between six and twenty-one years)
- GDH-162 **2004 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese**  
 These are the delicate little pin-bones of Kirschheck; like a liquid text of its geology, because even with the *invisible* 60 g.l. residual sugar it tastes dry—all the '04s taste *much* less sweet than the numbers read—and if this had the 70-75 grams it "needs" (or could use) it doesn't explicate any more—it charms. As it is, a long sentence of flavor one has to concentrate in order to follow.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GDH-163 **2004 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 "There's no reason to the sequence," Helmut said. "I just show them in the usual way." But <whew!>, this is just superb this year; ultra-fine and clear site aromas (the classic porphyry mix of violet, maize, brine-smoke and dried fruits); seductive fruit with a limey spine of structure; really *insanely* long, and it will not let you surrender, it shoves you awake with its wonderful limey lift. But what noble, complex fruit! Helmut has added land in the Felsenberg giving him more latitude to select at harvest, and if this is the result there may be a challenger to the preeminence of the Hermannshöhle . . .  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GDH-164 **2004 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Still subdued and unevolved (as of March 8th) but five minutes of patient coaxing shows what's ahead: its high notes are digitally clear and show a leafy, herbal side of Dellchen I hadn't expected to find.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-two years)
- GDH-165 **2004 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese** (+)  
 Very early days for this skritchey little vixen. Judgement delayed, but based on the very tail end, where its usual piquancy is hauntingly evident, compelling potential.
- GDH-166 **2004 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** (++)  
 I predict now I'll be writing a report for the website in June after I taste these again, raving like a banshee. My first impression must remain a surmise, but this shows every sign of growing into a Riesling of staggering intricacy.  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-seven years)
- GDH-167 **2004 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 Astonishing nose; cherry blossom and spearmint; arrestingly herbal and salty; tensile and jumpy, almost absurdly spicy and brilliant—you need sunglasses for your palate here. In fact isn't that one of the keys to German Riesling? They're like being outdoors with your sunglasses on and then suddenly taking them *off*, and the world is suddenly so much brighter . . .  
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty-six years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-168 **2004 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Auslese** ++  
 Less murmur and more racy than the Spätlese, and not at all a “dessert” styled Auslese, yet if you love Riesling this will shake rattle and roll your poor bones; winter-green and balsam, violets and *quetsch* (purple plums); vivid, almost grassy note; wonderful lift and length. A big clamoring D-maj chord of Riesling.  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)

GDH-169H **2004 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** ++  
 Another euphoric fragrance; oh good *grief*, this is like Zeus throwing the thunderbolts just to show he could ; it’s as if Riesling, frustrated with our lack of understanding, says *OK guys, here’s what I can do; do you get it now?!* A sort of ur-Riesling here, with serene stiff length, and the firmest finish I think I tasted among all the ‘04s. If Felsenberg is a bright D-maj, this Brücke is a big belly-rich E-maj.  
 SOS: 2 (between eleven and thirty-three years)

GDH-170H **2004 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** +++  
 Magnificent fragrance! Riotously tropical and mirabelle-y; it’s one explosion after another here, this one showing its typical fruit and crack-of-the-whip stinging vividness; salt, fruit, torque, and a sideways minerality take this into a rare territory, not riper or sweeter or even *finer*, but with more purpose and determination. This is, in fact, the true descendant of the legendary 2001 Hermannshöhle Spätlese.  
 SOS: 2 (between eleven and thirty years)

GDH-171H **2004 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +++  
 There are two, of which this is the less ripe; each is masterly and heart-rending. I’ll spare you my effusions. You will never taste better dessert wine than this. Fatter, yes. Sweeter, probably. But nothing with a fruit so precise or a flavor so sublime; some kind of Eden-innocence to which none of us is entitled, but which, speaking for myself now, I’ll accept!  
 SOS: 4 (between eighteen and forty-five years)

**Available in MAGNUMS are:**

GDH-163M **2004 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese**

GDH-166M **2004 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese**

**(psssst!!!) SNEAK-PREVIEWES . . .**

**2003 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling BA**

**2003 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling TBA**

(We’ll see these . . . some day. After all, I’m still waiting for my allocation of the 1989 Hermannshöhle TBA (!). The Brücke is a strong 2 or even 3-star wine, with astonishing raciness and high-toned spice and a heart-melting pretty finish. The TBA (3-stars) is a wine of astonishing clarity and tenderness. It really is a swoon of bliss, yet the beauty is matter-of-fact somehow, an earthly sort of kindness yet also seeming divinely merciful and infinitely forgiving. O.K. tough guy: YOU try and stay unemotional when you drink this.)





# helmut mathern

## nahe • niederhausen

Gloria Mathern soldiers on, gamely keeping the winery alive until . . . when? One hopes one of the kids will want to take it over. But regardless, I feel this estate is being continued in tribute to Helmut Mathern's legacy.

The wonderful and talented Sabine tends the vineyards and makes the wines. She's been there nearly three years now, and I wondered if the wines were slowly morphing into *hers*. I loved the look she gave me, as if to say "Well yes, that would be the question!" Yet her actual answer was sensible. "The vineyards haven't changed," she said, "And the cellar hasn't changed. I'm sure there might be several very small shifts but nothing of a fundamental nature. How could there be?"

These wines always tasted as if incense were burned in the cellar. They still do.

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

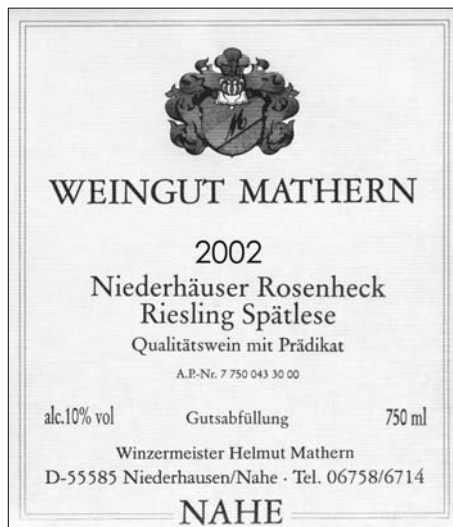
Mathern was always loyal to his private customers. As his fame grew, he deliberately abstained from cultivating the trade at large and resisted efforts to recruit him into the VDP.

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

- **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**

strung, urgent, bewitching, keen, vamping and erotic.

He had time to complete his new cellar, more spacious, and all stainless-steel. He left the vineyards in good condition. Best among these is an old parcel (47 years now) in the ROSENBERG. Helmut's wines were always firm and zippy, rather like Saar wines, piquantly spicy. I wonder if, when and how they will change under Sabine's knowing hands. I do believe there is some ethereal print of Helmut among his vines; he spent many a contented and watchful hour with them. Sabine will breathe that ether for a while. But not forever. Even if she wants to, even if she tries to maintain the "style" of Helmut's wines for the private clients, eventually she will merge with his aura and subsume it, and they will be her vineyards, responding to her as she does to them.



## A Look At The Vineyards:

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

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

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

### **Mathern at a glance:**

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

### **how the wines taste:**

They are spicy and then some! Taste one of these keen, shimmery beauties and see what we mean by the word "racy." They're almost always spritzzy, 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-063 **2004 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Kabinett**

A dead-ringer for a Graacher Himmelreich; a nutty, fibrous, apple-skin thing; sleek and tangy like a 1993 Champagne; crescendo-effect into the finish. Acidity shows here. SOS: 1 (between four and fourteen years)

#### GMA-064 **2004 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**

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

The *purest* cassis aroma—very rare for Hermannshöhle, but this smells for all the world as if 20% Scheurebe were involved; also white iris and cherry blossom; it enters very glossy and smooth and then a jet-blast of salt and iron on the finish. Not very sweet. SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

#### GMA-066 **2003 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese** **+**

**First offering.** This is one of those Nahe-moments where the wine has too many nuances to fit onto a single human palate. And I was rebuked—correctly—for having said last year this was a "botrytis monster," so mea *freakin* culpa; it has a celestially pure nose of lavender and wisteria; astonishingly precise and "cool"—even the color is shot with silvery green—blind I'd have been sure this was an '02, couldn't *possibly* be an '03: too fresh, too lively—indeed one could imagine Willi Schaefer making a wine like this, with all its grip, focus, phosphorescent *life*, complexity, bouyancy, and stunningly fine fruit. SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty-eight years)

#### GMA-065H **2004 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml** **++**

Here's a change Sabine made; the first-ever Eiswein from Mathern. "Helmut didn't like getting out of bed on an ice-cold morning!" Gloria told me. And this maiden voyage into ice-nectar land is just about perfect: A fabulous ultra-pure bouquet of celestial lime, orchid, osmanthus, jade-oolong, narcissus; it isn't huge, but has a gossamer transparency and a fiendish intensity; electromagnetic shimmer on the finish; almost a virginal purity. Eiswein SO rules.

SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)

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

And yet it was Dönnhoff himself who urged me to stay with Schneider when I considered dropping them a few years back. It is a superb, incomparable collection of vineyards, he said, and a feet-on-the-ground relationship to them. And with the influx of the new generation, there's reason to expect fine things to happen. All of which is true-and persuasive. But there's another layer of truth which isn't easy to get at.

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

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

It's six years now since Papa Hans Schneider left us. His son Jacob and grandson (whose name I shamefully forget, and who looks about fourteen years old but who's

- **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**

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

#### Schneider at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### GJS-063L **2004 Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

You have to understand, this is like getting a by-the-glass-priced magnum of white Burgundy consisting of Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet and Bienvenues-Bâtard-Montrachet. Ah me, which collection of Grand Cru vineyards will make up *this* year's jug-wine? It's Klamm and—for heaven's sake—*Hermannshöhle*. Really euphoric nose (as one might surmise!), more Hermannshöhle than Klamm; juicy and refined; comes on fruity but ends with an arch minerality and orchid-like floweriness; an amazingly esoteric prettiness. This has the most sheer BREED of anything I (or anyone else) offer in Liters, as a few of you are starting to discover.

SOS: 2 (between two and eight years)

- GJS-062 **2004 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**  
 Klamm is next door to Hermannshöhle, the steepest vineyard in the Nahe, on a (typically) complicated soil based on Rotliegend. Its wines are the charmers of the region, and this was my favorite among three H-Ts; it has the '04 virtues of thick yet transparent mineral paired with the loveliest juiciness. Site-typical nose (prosciutto and peach), delicate palate; mineral-fruit interplay is demure and winsome but the finish is arrestingly snappy; a studious but determined dry Riesling.  
 SOS: 0 (from now to five years)
- GJS-064 **2004 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Kabinett**  
 Yes, Kabinett. From an old parcel, low down, on pure porphyry, picked at 96° Oechsle (legally good Auslese) but after fining (to remove botrytis) it seemed lighter than its sibling Spätlese which had 91° Oechsle. It really exhales a remarkably fine nose and consolidates its mintiness on the palate. Not grand but oddly compelling, and it is kind of like getting Richebourg for \$19.99.  
 SOS: 2 (between three and ten years)
- GJS-065 **2004 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Spätlese**  
 The cleanest fruit, the highest acidity; tasted from a 1-week-in-bottle sample, the fruit is naturally subdued, but the sweet *charcuterie* nose is there along with the '04 lime-zest, and this will be way charming when its fruit comes home.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)
- GJS-066 **2003 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Auslese**  
**First offering.** Needed three minutes in the glass and then *exploded* into a fanfare of clean botrytis with Dellchen's almost lemon-Parma ham notes; the table was buzzing with chat (and I made this visit alone and could not withdraw to write notes), but the Auslese is very fine even *without* my toots and hollers.  
 SOS: 3 (between seven and twenty years)

# weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

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

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

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

**WHAM!** Super wine. Nothing wrong with my palate!

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

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

The melancholy fact is that fewer and fewer 20-somethings are opting to carry on their family's wineries. This isn't entirely bad. The ones who *do* self-select; they're the real idealists, wine-lovers, and I also believe they choose the life because of the example their parents set. It stands to reason. If the family life growing up was happy and successful, the child connects the career of a vintner with good warm feelings.



Harold, Petra, and Fido Hexamer

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

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

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

This is a steep southward hillside crawling off into two lateral valleys. The soil is based on sandy loam but, this being after all the Nahe, it ends up being a complicated melange of various weathered products, slate, sandstone and other conglomerates among them. The first time I sniffed a Hexamer from this site I was immediately delighted: a true *terroir* wine. In fact we took a PICTURE of a big ol' rock from the Rheingrafenberg Harald keeps in his tasting room. It looks like something the Mars rover might have found. If you're reading the on-

line version of this text the color shot should be nearby.

These wines have been consistently impressive for their *dicht* (which translates as “density”), delineation, and charm. Think about it. How many wines exhibit all three qualities? Density usually precludes charm. Delineation often presupposes a certain transparent lightness. These are rare and wonderful



Rheingrafenberg Rock at Hexamer

wines, sybarites; I’m not looking to add estates to this portfolio in my advancing decrepitude unless they offer irresistible deliciousness.

Hexamer is emblematic of the best of cutting edge thinking among quality-minded vintners. He’s a vineyardist first, only thereafter a cellar master. “I can only attempt to optimize in the cellar what I pull from the vineyard; the quality of the grapes is decisive.” He often harvests riper grapes from another site (Marbach) but the wines of Rheingrafenberg are “more filigree and better-structured.” He handles as little as possible. Doesn’t deacidify, doesn’t use dosage. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary (“but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit—below 10 degrees—back to the winery.”) Yields are controlled by pruning (“We often end up with only six to eight bunches per vine”). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; “The most filigree wines come from this method.” 95% of all Rieslings are made in

stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

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

After making atypically brisk and crispy ‘03s, Hexamer made typically brisk and crispy ‘04s! His was one of the few collections of wines where acidity stood out—not always objectionably, mind you, but it was a “theme.” This is a by-product of his exceptionally chiseled crystalline style but on one or two occasions he asked me “What about the acid: too high?” Now you won’t see those wines, because I didn’t select them, but the answer was *yes*: too high. And the solution is not to deacidify such wines, but to adapt vinification to extract more *fruit* from high-acid musts.

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

**Hexamer at a glance:**

sensational new discovery on the upper Nahe, a young vintner doing everything right; handcrafted fruit-driven wines of terroir.

**how the wines taste:**

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

**GHX-023 2004 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett**

A delicate, intricately articulate Riesling with a keen curranty length; though it enters with an almost soy-shiitae low note, it quickly shows a quince-rosewater high note; it is a perfection of perhaps the most unique and precious facet of German Riesling; this gossamer lightness and laser-etching of flavor, but with endless length. SOS: 2 (between six and seventeen years)

- GHX-024 **2004 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling “Quarzit”**  
 CORE LIST WINE. I show these in the sequence I tasted them, and it’s telling he places the Quarzit, ostensibly a “QbA,” with or after the Spätlese. Rheingrafenberg isn’t a single contiguous hillside but rather two parallel hillsides in the same lateral valley; this being the Nahe, the soil changes, and this wine hails from a parcel on quartzite. This ‘04 is a knockout; more currant and roasted-beet aromas, also talc and some goddamn kind of flowers ; great thrust and jab of flavor and zizzling acidity (NOT a typo!); this is easier than the Kabinett to “read” by dint of its impact; it is quite literally *impressive* but also less fine than the Kab.  
 SOS: 2 (between three and thirteen years)
- GHX-025 **2004 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese (“Birkenfelder”) +**  
 I don’t yet know whether the label will say “Birkenfelder”—I hope it does, as I like this whole micro-cru thing, but in any case this is a separate tank from this particular sub-parcel, and it was wonderful: a lovely pure stoniness aside the tangy terroir; it works almost dry, with great salty minerality and fine, deliberate articulation. Stylish, good grip, the apple-skin fibrous length of a Mosel wine; lime and woodruff and gravelly mineral.  
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty-three years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GHX-026 **2004 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Auslese**  
 From a mid-November picking at 98° Oechsle with 30% botrytis; at this point a stirring amalgam of salt and malt; almost buttery, as if a quince were slow-sauteed in butter with a few vanilla beans. Tenderer acids now; charming wine.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-six years)
- GHX-027H **2004 Sobernheimer Marbach Riesling Auslese “Minus 7,” 12/375ml**  
 You guessed it: picked at minus 7° Celsius, thus a “small” Eiswein with true Eiswein character, huge concentration, nearly mordant exactitude; an entrée to an exalted world at a very modest price.  
 SOS: 3 (between thirteen and thirty-eight years)
- GHX-028H **2004 Sobernheimer Marbach Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 Here’s the big boy: a lychee sorbet in a lemon soup with candied lemon zest!  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)





# kruger-rumpf

## nahe • münster sarmsheim

I confess I don't know *what's* up here, but 2004 is the best vintage they've ever made. Maybe it's the vintage, or maybe it's the reviving presence of Stefan's oldest son Johannes. It could also be the sacking of last year's assistant, who, according to Stefan, "made a few mistakes." Maybe it's all of these things. But I suspect it's actually Stefan's ambition to climb, to emerge from the middle rankings of the important estates. These '04s show a complexity of texture I've never seen here before, and since texture carries flavor it stands to reason this is a remarkable group of wines.

It used to be quite the decathlon tasting the young vintage here, but Stefan showed me his '04s in nearly-finished form, and the vintage was far less bracing and phenolic than any of its predecessors. We were done remarkably fast (my rough notes from the cask-samples used to

look like an engineer's diagram for a cyclotron) and we used much less dosage.

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

Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our hero is making RHEINHESSEN WINES. "We had to take everything out and replant with Riesling." I wondered what had been planted in such an obvious Riesling site. Albalonga! Perhaps this is why the wines of the former proprietor (who shall remain nameless) tasted so much like cherries. 5% of Albalonga with its high acid could marry quite

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

well with an overcropped Riesling—give that thin little sucka some aroma. Don't think such things aren't done.

As a vintner, Stefan is as practical as they come. Ask him how he does things and he often answers, "It depends." Two fairly consistent practices are early racking and early bottling, but for the rest he lets the wine do the talking. "You can't improve wine in the cellar, only make it worse," he says. "At least ninety percent of the quality of a wine comes from the raw material you harvest." He sees himself as a craftsman, a worker, whose goal is to make clean, varietally typical wine that expresses its origins in the soil.

Stefan's modesty extends to his very reasonable pricing—less than the wines are worth.



Stephan Rumpf

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

**how the wines taste:** Hm, how do they taste, like they used to taste or like the '04s taste? They're as sturdy as before but there's more flesh on the bones. There's more mineral density, more complexity of texture, and they are invariably site-specific: The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you'll see the truth behind the cliché.

GKF-097 **2004 Dautenpflänzer Riesling "Grosses Gewächs"**

This would have been called Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken (and still could be) but times are, ah, simpler now. Yet the wine is just lovely, in fact the better of two *very* good dry Rieslings; I've never tasted such slatiness from this site (and the wine was in fact picked from a parcel "two-thirds slate" according to Stefan); this is a real shower of mineral, with empire-apple and soursop, wisteria and hyacinth; the palate has great thick clouds of slate and a fine spicy flower; if you know the Grand Cru Grasberg Riesling from Kientzler (in Ribeauville in Alsace) you'll be at home here.  
SOS: 0 (between one and three years and again from eight and twelve years)

GKF-092 **2004 Scheurebe Kabinett**

Also from the aforementioned Dautenpflänzer but the VDP poo-bahs won't let a "Cru" name be used for such tommyrot as Scheu, but no matter: This is a lovely, lovely wine, all sage and elderflower, pears and cloves, and even if you don't like Scheu (or think you don't) you'll have a hard time not suckin' up to this.  
SOS: 1 (between now and six years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GKF-093 **2004 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** **+**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Very mineral this year, seriously textured and long, less of the bursting-fruit and more of the nubby chalky-slatey texture; like many '04s the mineral is carried on foamy waves of juiciness. The 50 g.l. sweetness might as well be 20, it's so engulfed by extract. Often this wine has been my German Riesling poster-child (*This is German Riesling*, I say) and I'm sure I'll do it again with this archetypal '04.  
SOS: 2 (between four and eighteen years)

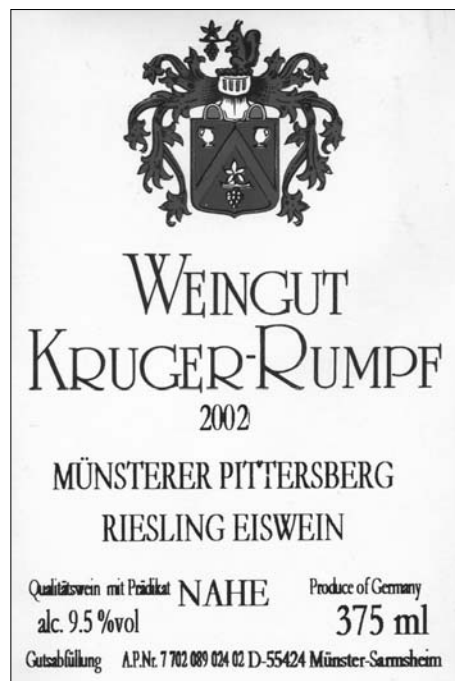
GKF-084 **2003 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett**

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

GKF-098 **2004 Scheurebe Spätlese** **+**

Another sizzler; the Story Of O in a glass! Like a quince studded with cloves, boiled in water mixed with redcurrant juice and sage leaves. Superb length and grip and almost Riesling minerality. You spent a debauched night with a horny Goth girl, and the next morning you learn she not only read all the books you read, she understood them better. You pathetic dog.  
SOS: 2 (between two and nine years)

- GKF-096 **2004 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 A monument to minerality! A masculine, powerful, manly man's Riesling; quite *Alsacien*, these are Stefan's most profound Rieslings ever.  
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty-one years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GKF-094 **2004 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
**(Rheinhessen)** The first "sweet" wine from Stefan's new vineyard in this unheralded Rheinhessen Grand Cru, which has long needed a champion to establish its well-deserved reputation; Lovely charming aromas sing from the glass; sauteed anjou pears and cinammon; this has great power, shimmer and scope; it's really elegant, it's what "Spätlese" ought to be about.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and seventeen years)
- GKF-095 **2004 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Seems like a lotta Spätlese but you couldn't have left any behind; this has a wonderful intricate nose of slate and exotica; very high toned (the pH is 2.95!); the palate has almost brash high-notes, but lovely rich mid-range notes of pulverized mineral and murmury low notes of pear syrup. About as fine an expression of German Riesling as a man and his dog can score.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GKF-091 **2003 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Auslese**  
**First offering.** Another world, a different world, and you almost can't live in both worlds, the arch-mineral '04 and the almost gaudy fruit-drenched '03, but this is truly the stuff of legend, and yes, I like the style of '04 better, as most of you do, but in 25 years you will taste '04s through the evening, leading up to this, because this man behind the curtain actually IS the Great and Powerful OZ.  
 SOS: 3 (between eight and thirty-five years)



# schlossgut diel

## burg layen • nahe

This year we had lots of time. And you *need* lots of time at Diel, because every wine requires time to study and appreciate. Indeed Schlossgut Diel reminds me of Bründlmayer in this way; it is laudable how deft a hand Armin Diel and Christoph Friedrich have across so many styles. If I choose to focus on Rieslings it is only because there are more than *enough* of them to give you more options than you probably want. But due credit should be given to the categories I don't select: the malo & cask-driven wines which attain a seamless elegance and moderation rare for this genre, not just from Germany—from anywhere.

But, we already have fourteen thousand-million examples of that *type* and probably don't need five more bearing German passports. Riesling, that's another story.

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

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



Armin Diel

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

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

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

expert, imagine how good his own wines must be." The ethics of the situation are quite sophisticated to American sensibilities, yet behind it all are the wines themselves.

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

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

even a matter of responding to conditions: that's an I-thou thing. It's more that one lives at ease within conditions, moving naturally as they mandate.

There's a great German word "Betriebsblind" which is one of those neologisms you need an entire phrase to translate into English. In essence it denotes the tunnel-vision that results from being too close to your own wines. Armin describes it as "sadly the rule" in the wine profession. Yet he of all people can escape it, he tastes so many wines constantly, and I sense the air is bright and clear with perspective at his estate. The wines are both beautiful and *smart*. You might notice I never use the phrase "well-made"; it's eyewash, it means nothing, but in a larger sense Armin and Christoph's wines are well-guided by their perspective and intuition. It's true across the board, even among the wines I did not select.

I chose to emphasize the rieslings. These are the cat's ass. Notwithstanding the "political" aspects of my repre-

senting Armin-and there are many—the larger truths are in the bottles. And each of them bears witness to a profound and serious dedication, not to one's "place" in the socio-political hierarchy or even the TOP THIS-OR-THAT list, but to the land and the grape. That which abides, and prevails.

Armin continues to believe 2003 was the greatest vintage in Schlossgut Diel's history. I don't know them all, but it's hard to imagine how a vintage could be *better* than these incandescent beauties. And yet I look at my notes for the '04s and there are as many "starred" wines, and I'm tempted to claim the achievement is even *greater* because 2004 is an ordinary vintage. Except of course what passes for "ordinary" in today's Germany would have been show-stopping twenty years ago. Maybe the problem's one of ontology: if a "great" vintage is indicated by the presence of "great" wines, can another vintage with a similar number of "great" wines be anything *but* great? You tell me, smarty-boots.

**schlossgut diel at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

**DRY RIESLINGS:**

GSD-013 **2004 Riesling "Classic"**

*Classic* is in affect a new designation whereby a grower can bottle a normal wine with more residual sugar than "Trocken" would permit. It's a sad but typical example of the German genius for "simplifying" things by muddling them even more - but the wine is good. Very good, in fact, though I saw it just two weeks after bottling. Picked early November at Spätlese ripeness; zippy with the "ripe-green" quality of '04; brisk but balanced; a precise and stylish dry Riesling.

SOS: 2 (yes, I noted a strange but compelling sense of "sweetness" in this dry wine) (drink now to five years)

GSD-014 **2004 Burgberg Riesling "Grosses Gewächs"**

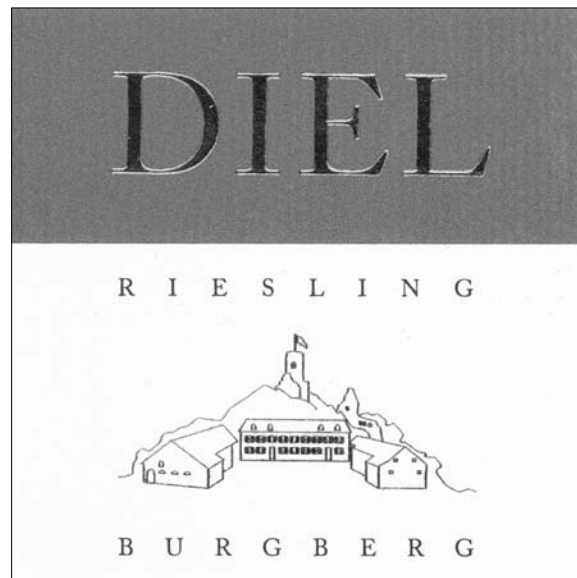
Burgberg had been my least favorite of the Crus, until this year. Perhaps I needed to grow into it. It's not the most flattering of the three, and this is a masculine, stony and adamantly dry Riesling, but it also shows how LAVISH a "mineral" wine can be; balanced albeit stern, with a note of sweet salsify and a whiff of wisteria, a hint of flint (and a little nip of po-ta-to chip!); not for hedonists but rather for purists of the stones, and I don't mean Fred and Wilma. It reminds me of certain Vom Stein bottlings at Nikolaihof.

SOS: 0 (from now to three years, and again from eleven to fifteen years)

**“CLASSIC-FRUITY” AND “NOBLE-SWEET” RIESLINGS:**

- GSD-015 **2004 Riesling Kabinett**  
 Again the 2004 green (lime, tarragon); a genre-defining wine, permitting entry into a rarefied world for an affordable price. Clean, frisky everyday Riesling.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and sixteen years)
- GSD-016 **2004 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 This would almost be lurid if it weren't so zippy and solid; like a garden of geology beneath a flowering wisteria tree; elegant, expressive, bordering on quirky, with a wry piquant charm.  
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-two years)
- GSD-018 **2004 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE LIST WINE.** Here's a hint of the Menetou, but this is quickly overcome by a wash of Ürziger Würzgarten (when I mentioned this to Armin he replied "Yes, they've been copying us for decades!"); it's really silky and cirrusy—not a typo, I do mean clouds—but full of kiwi and cherry blossom; it's a sorbet of the terroir.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)
- GSD-017 **2004 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 The very antonym of the Pittersberg: a resplendent C-maj chord of Riesling; endlessly juicy and with a spicy minerality; sweet fennel juice passed over oyster-shells. Impressive and original.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-five years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GSD-019 **2004 Scheurebe Spätlese**  
 I gather there's only a little of this, and that I'm, the only person wacko enough to want to show it to, but there can never be too much Scheu, can there! Botrytis appears here, and the wine's pointed, feral and sagey; curranty but with top notes of pure apple. It's as focused and pointed as a Riesling; a strong, definitive finish to a wonderfully crafted yet full-blooded animal wine.  
 SOS: 2 (from now to ten years)
- GSD-020 **2004 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Auslese** ++  
 A high keening brilliance here; iridescent clarity and the raciest top notes of spice and apple you've ever seen; it smells like Christoffel's 3-star but has a heart-melting low note of lime blossom; a wine of truly ethereal perfume and a borealis shimmer. I hated leaving a fabulous Burgberg Auslese behind, but this is Riesling at 50 degrees N latitude, dude.  
 SOS: 3 (between nine and thirty years)
- GSD-023 **2003 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese “Goldkap”** +  
**First offering.** Another regal '03 of luscious solidity, with complex maize and salt, perfectly integrated sweetness and a haunting sort of lilac liqueur; flowering-field, milk chocolate; a wine of solid form and un-pandering deliciousness.  
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty-eight years)

- GSD-021H **2004 Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**  
 This tickles the face of perfection. Harvested December 21st-22nd, it shows every great flavor of which Eiswein is capable; especially the essence of sweet lime. Regrets to the (very good) Canadians, and an affectionate rebuke to a guy I know in CA who does the deep-freezer thing, this is why those things are so dangerous, because they threaten the existence of this, and there's nothing to remotely compare to: THIS.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GSD-022H **2004 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+++**  
 No notes: I *refuse* to vacate this ecstasy for one single second. Serene, celestial perfection.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GSD-024H **2003 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+**  
**First offering.** An elegant salty BA (young clean botrytis often tastes like that); a site-quintessence with the *prettiest* papaya and malt and botrytis flavors you ever saw!  
 SOS: 3 (between twenty and fifty years)
- GSD-025H **2003 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **++(+)**  
 The chit-chat around the table is of the clarity, elegance and power of 1971, which has become the gold-standard for "recent" vintages. This is caramel, fleur-de-sel, white raisin, an intelligently seductive wine (like its maker!); one is almost intimidated by its beauty. A monument in a monumental vintage.  
 SOS: 4 (between thirty-five and seventy-five years)



# rheinessen wines



A few of you may recall my saying, some seventeen years ago, that the Pfalz was the region to watch; it was creative, hyper-oxygenated and full of vitality—and so it was. And the press took notice, and the Pfalz was and remains established as an attractive and important wine region.

But there's a settled-ness in the Pfalz now, and this was inevitable. Eventually the up-and-coming being finally up-and-comes. And there's a clear and present danger the Pfalz will be suffocated by the ideologies of its movers and shakers, if this hasn't already happened. Am I overstating? Try and find a single Riesling Kabinett with residual sugar on any significant restaurant in the region! You needn't bother: you can't do it. The fetish for dry wine has cast a pall over the land.

But all is not lost. In fact the spirit of inquiry still lives. The sense of community still lives. The heady feeling of youthful energy and idealism still lives. The sense of a region *awakening* still lives. Only one thing has changed—it has migrated a few miles northward, to the RHEINHESSEN.



At this very moment Rheinhessen is Germany's most interesting wine region. And this is entirely due to its *people*, because its terroirs remain unremarkable. Indeed one laments the cruel irony; if only these young

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

lions had grown up in the *Rheingau*. But we take passion where we can find it, and we're finding it here.

And it isn't only happening along the Rheinfront by Nierstein. Last year at Gysler I noticed a poster for a tasting featuring growers in a group called Message In A Bottle. Any group to which Alex Gysler belonged was ipso facto intriguing, and I asked Alex whether any of his colleagues might be interesting to me. You'll see the results of his answer a few pages hence. Perhaps these

guys were inspired by the acclaim attaching to Wittmann and Keller, who are making stellar wines from vineyards *no one* heard of ten years ago.

Sure the Rheinhessen remains home to a great deal of dross (Liebfraumilch has to come from somewhere, I guess) but there's no equivalent buzz in the *Rheingau*, where mediocre wine from great land remains the status quo. Indeed the Rheinhessen seems to invert that melancholy formula, making excellent wine from (ostensibly) nondescript land. You don't drive around thinking "Well it's obvious that great wines come from *here*." Instead its landscape is lullingy 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.

You need a really unassailable idealism to worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the flattish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may be possible that *great* wines just could be written into some of this land, if you're unwilling to assume they aren't, and willing to stake it all on your idealism. And, I'd have to add, willing to sell your wine for something less than it's worth. It helps that much of the vineyard work can be done by machine, but it helps even more that these young people no longer feel alone; they are part of an informal fraternity working for a common good.

The results for us are entirely desirable: We can obtain beautiful wines for very gentle prices. I only added a single new estate to the portfolio this year, and



# take me to your liter

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



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

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

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

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

- GRH-039L **2004 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Treppchen Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GJS-063L **2004 Jakob Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GJS-057L **2003 Jakob Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GST-117L **2004 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GWG-007L **2004 Wagner-Stempel Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-052L **2004 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-055L **2004 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GMZ-049L **2001 Merz Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GDD-014L **2004 Dr. Deinhard Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GMS-105L **2004 Herbert Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GMS-106L **2004 Herbert Messmer Scheurebe, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-083L **2004 Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-082L **2004 Theo Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-126L **2004 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-126L **2004 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

I called Walter Strub to tell him I'd be arriving for Hans Selbach's funeral. I'd stop off in Nierstein for tea and breakfast, drive on to the Mosel, and return in the evening to hang out.

A few days later, on the even of my departure Walter called to say he'd drive me to the funeral. I was so touched I could hardly bear it. First that he wanted to pay his own respects. Second that he wanted to spare me the jet-lagged drive. Third that he created an occasion where we two could be alone together to talk.

Walter is shy at full-frontal emotionality, so I have to say these things here, to you, knowing he'll read them on the couch some evening by himself, and not be embarrassed. *This is a friend.*

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

The samples were lined up when I arrived. Most of the wines were bone-dry or nearly so, and the question arose how sweet they should ultimately be. The Trocken fetish was only incipient in those days. Well yours truly had no earthly idea how sweet the wines should be; I'd never looked at an analysis and had no *idea* how many grams-per-liter of sweetness equaled what impression of sweetness on the palate. Walter gave me an '81 to taste and told me how sweet it was, and I tried using that wine as a benchmark.



Walter Strub

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

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

Even after doing it for twenty-plus years now, it's still hard to articulate what it entails. I'm afraid it's very Zen. You receive a wine which may or may not be *incomplete* (some of them are instantly perfect just as they are) and you infer what it will take to complete them. In so doing you are required to examine flavor components under a palate-microscope. But it happens in a flash, it takes longer to explain it than to do it, and it isn't consciously cognitive. You relax, so the wine can come to you, and when it does you flash a beam of super-attention on it. Then you judge and cogitate. And I think I'm good at it, but still I am often wrong. I like being wrong. Because if I'm wrong (i.e., if my initial guess doesn't pan out), I get to keep at it till I get it right, and I get to see my error, and it's the best way to learn.

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

Here's why I'm going on about this in a text about Walter Strub. Because of the many layers of trust he showed me, out of the goodness of his heart. He invited me behind the scenes, allowing me to see his wines au

naturel, and to taste as I'd never tasted before. And to my astonishment, he took my ideas seriously. But that's Walter: no secrets, no artifice, full of the spirit of sharing. Many of the hippies of the sixties turned into the very people they despised, but Walter, who was never a hippie, embodies all the virtues they espoused. Giving, trusting, sharing, no games, nothing to hide, sometimes even a little naïve, but actually, remarkably, *Good*. It is good, the collegial trust he shows me; it has helped me grow professionally and personally. It is good he invites me in to the wines, doesn't do the take-it-or-leave-it thing (no disrespect intended to those who do; each is entitled to his own approach) and fosters a mood of easy comradeship. In short, he treats me as a friend. And I am touched and gratified. Finally it doesn't matter how much wine you sold, which pack you belonged to, or whether yours was the fashionable position on the issues of the day. What matters are the faiths you kept, and how you treated other people. By those measures, Walter is leading a good life.

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

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

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

In the old days I'd get off the plane, drive the 25 minutes to Nierstein, down a pot of tea and start tasting Walter's wines. Then I got older and needed more recovery time. I tasted them the next day. Now I wait a few days; these are serious wines and I want to bring to them the highest quality of attention I can summon. And finally, I want to taste them twice. About three days into the trip Walter asked me plaintively, "How are my wines?" I answered "Good, maybe better than good; let me taste them again at the end." Much as I wanted to flatter, my friend has every right to depend on my honesty. And the '04s were tardy in any case.

I tasted the range again three weeks later, according to the "blends" we created. I wrote new notes. The wines are marvelous, the most *charming* vintage Walter has perhaps ever made. This time we talked about them in detail. Walter likes a lot of feedback, saying "When you work in the cellar you get crazy and blind", and because, unlike many other growers, he is not afraid to show that he cares what you think.

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

On the wall above my desk I have a photograph of an old woman binding and pruning. She's wearing some sort of macadam, as it's cold outside. Her pocket is bulging with all the clippings she's produced. Her hand grasps the stalk with vigor and *insight*, as if it had eyes of its own and could see *inside* the vine. One little stalk is rakishly dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her fine old eyes have seen more than we can imagine; her face is furrowed with the winds of centuries. I keep her there where I can see her because I need to see the basis for this work I do. It's all well and good for me to compliment my friend on his "achievement," but I'll bet it feels less like an "achievement" to him than a decathlon which he only finished panting and gasping.

Walter's is a restless and questing nature. He wants to see how everything would turn out. He's a pilgrim in the cellar. "The worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision," he says, though certain patterns become evident over time. "I am always the first to start picking and the last to finish." He says. Walter's wine is rarely the ripest in Nierstein, and I think it's because he wants to pick clean fruit above all, and will let go of a few degrees Oechsle if the resulting wine will have the clarity and elegance he seeks. He also detests botrytis. This year we wondered aloud whether he tended to spray a little too



*Strubs have a new puppy in the family!*

late, which retards ripening. This is typical of Walter. He knew precisely what he was doing—going all out to avoid the merest taint of rot—but was willing to consider the ramifications of that choice with a colleague.

He doesn't get a ton of fruit—just 50 hectoliters per hectare on average over the past five years. His cellar is almost all stainless steel now. He began whole-cluster pressing in 1993 and liked the results (though he has—typically—started to wonder if he should do all his wines that way). With whole-cluster pressing you sacrifice a bit of body, but Niersteiners have all the body they need in ripe years. You obtain remarkable filigree and polish, and you retain high acidity. I have the sense that Walter is finally starting to feel his wines express his *dreams* for them. His Riesling usually ferments from its own yeasts. Lower-

acid types are often started with yeast cultures for slower, colder fermentations, so they don't lose the little acid they have. After fermentation, Walter likes to keep his Riesling on the gross lees for several weeks to give it stuffing and nuance, but that's only possible in clean vintages.

But none of this is quite as systematic as I make it sound. In effect, our hero blunders through with good instincts and good will. He has a strong sense of what Nierstein is. He's naturally enamored of its special soil, the sedimentary rust-colored sandstone they call Rotliegend. Dig down a way and you'll come to slate, which prevents the wines from bulking up too much in Nierstein's warm microclimate. In fact Walter has little trays of each of his various soils in the tasting room, in case you want to see what you're drinking and don't have time for a drive among the vines. Rotliegend gives Riesling a smoky sweetness, like something that's been cured over a sweet wood.

"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.

Walter Strub continues to be modest and questing, never quite according his wines the same status as the Mosel and Nahe wines he so dearly loves, and yet each year he gets closer and closer to attaining their brilliance and radiance. In the deepest sense, this is all made possible by the cohesion of the family. Margit is cheerfully and thoroughly competent ("She does 93% of the work," Walter says, "And I do the other 7, if I'm not too busy.") and eldest-son Sebastian is expressing interest in the winery and likes to help out. One doesn't want to harp too much on these things—they sometimes wither under direct scrutiny—but I both love and admire this family. They have every important piece in place. Between Walter and Margit there's playfulness and loyalty which I know is a bulwark for Walter to indulge his questing side. But no more testimonials!

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

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

#### Strub at a glance:

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

#### 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 spritzy, complex and long.

#### GST-122 2004 Niersteiner Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

Rosenberg is the upper section of Pettental, at least the best part of it is: the wise sages who drew the vineyard's boundaries allowed it to spill out onto the plateau, a travesty! Completely different soils and microclimates. What were they thinking?!

Walter's is a small parcel (on the good part) and is often blended into our Liter wine, but this '04 was so perfect I craved to show it to you. It has 11 g.l. of its own residual sugar, to which we added a few; there are *explosive* aromas of redcurrants, roasted beets and fatback; very gentle acids; spicy and penetrating with black cherry and blueberry notes; hints of lime and woodruff; long finish given its easy grip.

SOS: 1 (between now and three years, again from nine to thirteen)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

#### GST-117L 2004 Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter

CORE-LIST WINE. A fine "dry" wine with around 40g.l. RS! A 50-50 blend of Brückchen and Paterberg; it's mineral and juicy with that slight celeriac note of some of the Rheinhessen '04s (Geil showed me a Silvaner that tasted for all the world like Sancerre . . .); toasted caraway seeds, forthright and crackery. Heaven alone knows what the must-weight was: "Spätlese" for sure.

SOS: 1 (from four to thirteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT! (perfect pouring wine)

- GST-116 **2004 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**  
 GST-116H **2004 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. You'd kill me if you knew how "sweet" this was, because you will not taste it; it has about the finest most pure apple fruit you'll ever taste, though; it's like a juice extracted from limestone run over oyster shells, or like roasted *sel gris*, and if this sounds compelling doing that yin-yang thang with apple—bingo!  
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GST-121 **2004 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett** +  
 A red-soil site but harder and rockier ("You wouldn't go barefoot in this vineyard," says Walter), and this '04 has an exceptionally fine minerality; smells almost like a lower-Mosel wine; has lovely tangy length and firm fruit, yet with a tender mineral note along with great balsam-y brightness.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GST-110 **2003 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Kabinett**  
 From the steep section; the wine is racier on entry than the analytical acidity foretells; this is basically apples sautéed with tarragon in brown-butter; fine snap, spice and juiciness.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and eighteen years)
- GST-118 **2004 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Spätlese** +  
 I think this is the single most charming and delicious wine Walter has ever made. Yellow roses and white nectarine fragrances, with mirabelle and elderflowers; shimmering and juicy palate; a kind of *so THERE!* of Riesling; hints of char and even a tic of balancing astringency (low pH) but the sheer fruit bursts out all over you like a summer peach.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)
- GST-119 **2004 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 From the sirloin-parcel, and fermented with ambient years (Walter's experimenting, successfully I think); explosive nose of milk and white chocolate; tropical also (guava); humongously juicy palate, like a smoked peach-and-bacon sandwich, even a hint of *true* maple syrup; seductive and convincing.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-one years)



- GST-112 **2003 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 From the steep section, 100° Oechsle, unsullied by *dosage*; the wine is essentially perfect; a chocolate melt-o-rama sprinkled with fleur de sel; power-palate that dances; bananas sautéed in butter; astounding length; visceral and lingering.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and twenty years)

### THE PATERBERG SERIES

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

- GST-120 **2004 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 GST-120H **2004 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. Untouched, unblended, with 65 g.l. of its own RS; a pure parfait of lime and tarragon; seductive fructose-y note against this icy blade of spice; there hasn't been a better vintage of this.  
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty years)
- GST-108 **2003 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 Blend of two lots (317 & 319) with 100° Oechsle, and lime-lime-lime, a margarita of riesling; the most seductive imaginable *tartness*, this almost manic wackoid thing like lime-scented veal stock with twenty Altoids dissolved in it. Sheesh!  
 SOS: 2 (between six and nineteen years)
- GST-114 **2003 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*\*** +  
 Old-vines density; granular nose, spice-cake, soursop and allspice; density hardly describes it; the wine swallows its sweetness and finishes like 100 icicles of mint and chalk. Galvanic and saturated.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GST-123H **2004 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++  
 Picked on the last day of school, 12/22, but Walter's Japanese friend Hideki and ten of his banker friends helped with the picking and they got done so early the kids had to go to school anyway! It came in at 140° Oechsle with a sensible 10.7 g.l. acidity, and it is THE great Strub Eiswein; just a pure lime and plum candy-cane; absurdly beautiful: a syrup of linden-blossom, blueberries and wintergreen, and this is why there's nothing like the greatest Eisweins.  
 SOS: 4 (between twelve and thirty years)

# günter wittmann

## rheinhessen • westhofen

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

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

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

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

It is also a pleasure to see the generations working so well together. Wittmann *père* handles the vineyards,



Phillip Wittmann

*fils* Phillip holds the reins in the cellar while *mère* does sales and marketing, though as a family enterprise, everyone

- **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**

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

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

Or maybe it was just getting older. In my thirties and early forties I was serenely confident I'd still have my pick among almost limitless choices. At fifty I suddenly realize I have *made* my choices, and having made them I grow more aware of how happy they make me. I am setting up house in the things I have chosen. One of them is to work with small family wineries. Now I can consider the meaning of this with all the deliberation I wish; I have plenty of time. I don't have to keep alert for the *next* choices to whiz

by. I become attuned to the patience of the earth. And it suddenly strikes me as beautiful, nearly unbearably beautiful, to see kin working together, so that work and love and family are joined, patiently working the patient earth, and making a thing of beauty.

Wittmann is a student of soil also, and gives fascinating explanation of the geological factors responsible for Westhofen's various soils. Wittmann's cellar is as gentle as they come. There are stainless steel tanks and large ovals, and careful thought is given to what wine belongs in which. He loves sleek, racy, filigree wines, but seldom gets them from his soils. Transport him to, say Rauenthal in the Rheingau, (I wish I could!) and he'd immediately be making better wine than 99% of all Rheingau growers.

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

It hardly seems to matter how late I go—and I made this visit on my 2nd-to-last day—Phillip's wines always surprise me when I retaste them a few months later. I was *really* unsure about the 2003 basic Riesling dry but by summer it had knitted together and was showing truly lovely fruit and snap. Good thing, then, that the '04s seemed unusually precocious; in fact this is the best vintage from here for many years, if one takes the entire collection as a whole—sweet and dry wines alike. It conveyed a sense of uncomplicated good health; vital and ruddy.

#### Wittmann at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

Wittmann's wines are solid and positive. They radiate 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.

#### GGW-091 2004 Scheurebe Trocken

This is one of those ostensible "QbA" although it has 12.5% natural (unchaptalized) alcohol; I saw it three days in bottle but even so there was a gregarious redcurrant and woodruffy nose; the palate is very spicy but it, and the finish, are clipped from bottling. Phillip said it was quite the bombshell in cask, so hey; organic big-boy Scheu from 2004? *I'll take the chance!*

SOS: 0 (from now to five years)

#### GGW-092 2004 Riesling Trocken

CORE-LIST WINE. This was a week off the filter, frustratingly, because I wanted to like it since I'm almost sure I will eventually, based on my utter misappraisal of the '03. Thus I defer judgement, and will only say this: if the wine does indeed come around, as it very likely will, it will offer the *perfect* easygoing dry Riesling experience for reasonable money, organically grown and made. That's why it's on our core-list.

SOS: 0 (between now and eight years)

#### GGW-093 2004 Kirchspiel Riesling "Grosses Gewächs"

This was quite Kögl or Piri in style; *sauvage*, feral and spicy; a bit of char, ferrous, fennelly and wild black cherry; a determined wine not for everyone's palate, but compelling for lovers of ultra-violet Riesling. At least, based on tasting at the end of March.

On the other hand, my first impressions of the Grand Crus have usually been accurate here (much to Phillip's frustration); these are large-scaled wines which can be ungainly or bitter, or capacious and powerful, as it happens. The 2004 Morstein seemed irredeemably bitter, and I'd be surprised were it to change. Another Cru (Aulerde) was still fermenting.

SOS: -1 (now to three years, and again from nine to twelve years)

#### GGW-094 2004 Riesling Spätlese

Wittmann does not produce a Riesling Kabinett, "because to do so we'd have to harvest unripe grapes—at least here where we are," according to Phillip. This Spätlese hails from the Grand Cru Aulerde; it's in effect the fraternal twin of the dry Estate-Riesling above—and it's a charmer: peach orange malt spice wisteria piquant lissome charm. Could you just *pretend* the label said "Kabinett"?

SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)



GGW-095 **2004 Westhofener Morstein Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This is the best “regular” Spät from here in many years; high “green” notes (linden-blossom and cox-orange pippins) along with “brown” aromas (leather, morels); suave and salty palate with lotsa Santa Rosa plums; a hint of gooseberry (Rheinhesse `04!)— it was the earliest picking from Morstein— and as you see you get 750ml of wine and a veritable lexicon of meaningless associations!  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-one years)

GGW-096H **2004 Albalonga Auslese, 12/500ml** ++  
 There are people who think my affection for this variety borders on the perverse. I suspect these people wear white briefs they buy at JC Penney. Crossed between Rieslaner (one of God’s great grapes) and Silvaner, the Albalonga never fails to make compelling wine and at times ventures well toward the sublime. *There are 13 hectares (32.5 acres) of Albalonga in the entire world.* Various Wittmann stickies over the years have been celestial, and this 2004 takes its place among the very best.

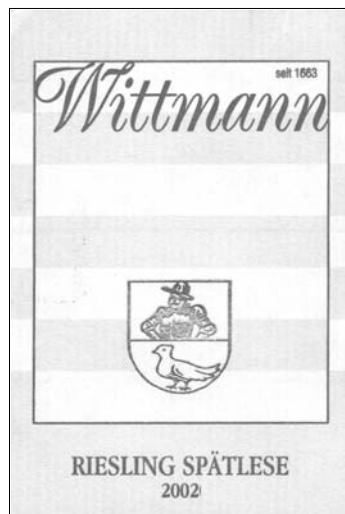
At 127° Oechsle this is the “run-off” from the BA (keep reading), and what a stunning critter it is too; all kinds of tropical fruit, peach and malt; flavors just overcome you, they zoom around so crazily; and there’s this asian-pear thing . . . look, this wine brings you *home*, to that world we always forget, of squirming urgent ripeness and the joy of all things that culminate, sweeten and blossom.  
 SOS: 3 (between now and three years and again from twelve to thirty)

GGW-097H **2004 Albalonga BA, 12/500ml** ++  
 Less a bouquet than a narcotic swoon of intensity; sultry voodoo stuff; almost a Creole spiciness and a lobster-in-Sauternes salt-cream thing going, and you know what? Who wants to write notes at a time like this? Time to get naked and dance!  
 SOS: 4 (between fourteen and thirty years)

*(psssssst! There’s a freakin’ **deranged** 2003 TBA “S” coming down the pike eventually — a TT ++, and one of the GREAT sweet wines of a lifetime, with massive richness but also form, transparency and fruit. Sign up now!)*

GGW-098H **2004 Westhofener Morstein Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** +  
 Despite its mass and sweetness it’s sleek and gripping and elegant and still tastes of the vineyard— my type, in short.

GGW-099H **2003 Chardonnay TBA, 12/375ml**  
 Aged in a custom-made tiny new oak cask from Austria, and the weird thing is I like oak in big schweeet wines, and this is fun extroverted stuff, malty and maple-syrupy, and I guess the moral is there’s nothing wrong with sweet oaky Chardonnay as long as it’s really goddamn sweet.  
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and thirty years)



# wagner-stempel

## rheinhessen • siefersheim

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

*This estate will be the next superstar in the Rheinhessen.*

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

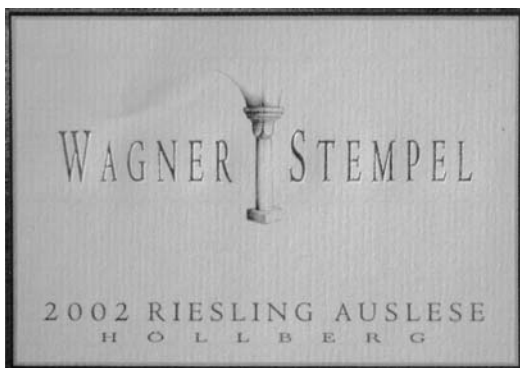
The estate is 12.5 hectares, in the westernmost district of Rheinhessen, near Bernhard. Soils vary, but there's a significant vein of porphyry like the great soils of the Nahe (which is just a hop

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

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

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

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



He's a self-described acid-freak, but also prizes minerality and "tannin in a subtle form," indicating this vintner prizes structure above all things. He has the luxury to do so, because the wines from his beloved

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

Heerkretz (the steepest and highest-elevated site in Rheinhessen) and Höllberg show astonishing natural *fruit* in a stirring melange of Nahe complexity with Rheinhessen muscle.

Daniel picked till November 14th and reported over-ripeness but no botrytis. He's clearly the rising star—I would say the *risen* star—of his region, and he has a lot coming at him not least of which is having married last summer! His wines, while obviously great, are not easily great; they remind me of Jamek in a sense—they reward your full attention, they ask to be studied, and they reveal themselves deliberately. Indeed they often seem to carry more complexity than they can physically hold.

Sometimes I am extremely emotional, so much so I cannot summon language of sufficient power to convey it, and I regret the times I squandered such language on undeserving occasions. All I can manage at these times is an inarticulate yammer, not because there's too little to say, but rather too much. Daniel Wagner's wines (you knew I'd tie this together didn't you?) can remind me of the wines Hans-Günter Schwarz made at Müller-Catoir, seeming to almost *stammer* with complexity. You wonder how a mere wine can contain so much *information*. I urge you to approach these wines with the quality of attention you reserve for the elite: They deserve it.

**Wagner-Stempel at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

**GWG-007L 2004 Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

Again as last year, perfect dry Riesling. I'd wondered whether the '03 was an aberration (given the vintage), but the porphyry nose is extra fine and there's plenty of stoniness and lift, though you do need to accept Riesling as *naked* at it can be.

SOS: -1 (between now and three years)

**GWG-008 2004 Siefersheimer Riesling "Vom Porphyr" ++**

A summit for dry German Riesling. Fermented with natural yeast, is never racked, bottled off the gross lees; stunning porphyry aromas; the palate has fabulous grip and juiciness; palpable, almost chewy extract; *sel gris*, oyster-shell; just killing length. Deep into Nigl territory with its clarity and power; no quarter given, but dry Riesling lovers: please know there's little on earth to improve on this.

SOS: 0 (between now and three years; again from twelve to eighteen)

**GWG-009 2004 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Spätlese +**

Yo, acid heads! All you guys who sat out 2003, here's a wine to rattle your teeth; lovely *quetsch* aromas lead into a keenly refined and delineated palate, with wild-plum acidity and phenolic grip, and again, no compromise; the 80g.l. RS is devoured by extracts and acids.

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

**GWG-010 2004 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese +**

Picked November 18th at 100 Oechsle, a dead-ringer for Nahe wine (in fact for Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg); lower but not low acidity; seductively salty and juicy with flavors like a liqueur of pancetta and white iris; dreamy long finish; classic, winey and evocative.

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

**GWG-011H 2004 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml ++**

116 Oechsle, picked berry-by-berry with some botrytis and overripeness; it's a *demi-glace* of the Spätlese, with thick, almost malty plum aromas, even a bit of Turbinado sugar; the palate is purringly wicked like those fiendish caramels with fleur-de-sel; a cherry-tobacco note settles into the finish. Striking and amazing.

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

**GWG-006H 2003 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling BA, 12/375ml +**

**First offering.** There's no way, reasonably, to consider this anything but a monument; it simply has the carriage of great wine; it's regal and long and deep, with a serene capacious glow; very creamy and salty; like peaches sauteed in brown-butter and put into a crumble served with malted whipped cream. Save room for dessert!

SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)

# weingut oekonomierat joh. geil i. erben bechtheim • rheinhessen

(hereafter referred to as, simply, "Weingut Geil")

"Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellarmaster is to preserve the available quality and refine it."

"Vines have it good in Bechtheim. They don't have to drill through ten meters of rock for a little water. They deal with three meters of permeable loess at which point they can drink as well as the citizens of Bechtheim!"

"No year is like another, and winemaking-by-recipe doesn't bring the best results. Naturally modern techniques such as cool fermentations are generally advisable. The question of whether less is more should be asked!"

"We have done away with deacidification; at least we haven't even confronted the question for many years now. We'd prefer to regulate Riesling's acidity with later harvesting at higher ripeness."

"When I think of my favorite among our wines I spontaneously reach for the 2002s; they have a wonderful fruit aroma and acidity."

"For me aroma is the most important factor; it's the first impression, and should be clear, varietally typical and express its origin."

"We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is acceptable; we sometimes have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We're in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We'd prefer any residual sugar in the wines to be natural, but we do keep a little Süßreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO<sub>2</sub>"

This is such a wonderful discovery I only wish I'd made it myself. In fact I have Gault-Millau to credit, thanks to their heralding Geil as their DISCOVERY OF THE YEAR 2004. That alone didn't hook me (though previous year's discoveries include Mather, Biffar and Spreitzer); what



Johannes Geil-Bierschenk

hooked me was seeing Rieslaner planted. This variety is a litmus test for the craziness-quotient of a vintner. It creates, or can create supernal wines, but it is a sonofabitch to grow, and if you grow it then you are chasing something well worth

- **Vineyard area: 27 hectares**
- **Annual production: 18000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bechtheimer Geyersberg, Bechtheimer Rosengarten**
- **Soil types: heavy chalky loam, carbonat-rich loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 4% Rieslaner, 4% Scheurebe, 35% Others**

capturing, and rarely captured.

Rheinhessen's where the action is, as I said, and I asked for samples from two estates, of which these were dramatically superior. I paid a visit at the very end of my trip, and all was confirmed. Tasting samples at remove is only partially useful: you have to go there, see the folks, pet the dog, taste a range of vintages and taste *together* with the family.

There are two generations in the house. The family's full name is Geil-Bierschenk; mama and papa are Monika and Karl, and the son is Johannes, who was Phillip Wittmann's roommate at Geisenheim. We two seemed to have met before we met, if you see what I mean. And when they gave me a dry Riesling from the difficult 2000 vintage to taste I thought "These folks have moxie" and when the wine was outstanding I thought "Man am I lucky I got here before anyone else did..."

Bechtheim lies just where the hills begin, on the west flank of the Rhein plain. The key sites for Riesling are **Geyersberg**—the best one—made up of chalky loess and tertiary marl. The **Rosengarten** is above the village, on gravelly sand and clay, and the **Hasensprung** rolls off to the west on similar soil. It's a somewhat large estate—28 hectares, about 30% Riesling—and I infer that young Johannes came home from Geisenheim full of the restless idealistic spirit of these times: lower yields, tenderer cellar work. And the results are dramatic, and the prices still humane.

**Geil at a glance:**

Honorable traditional Rheinhessen estate energized with the arrival of a young lion. Outstanding modern white wines (Riesling, Scheurebe, Rieslaner) at wonderfully reasonable prices. An emblem of the quixotic new generation in Rheinhessen.

**how the wines taste:**

Firm, delineated, clear, complex, healthy and radiant. I would teach a seminar with them, saying "This is the quality you can now expect from a solid young grower in Germany making wines in unexceptional conditions from good but not great land."

- GGE-001 **2004 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**  
 (see Glossary) This is snappy, wintergreen-y and very long; has a wisp of flintiness and grass (Rheinhessen '04, remember!), but it delightfully bright, juicy and minty. Virtually perfect food-Riesling.  
 SOS: 1 (now to three years; again from ten to fifteen)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GGE-002 **2004 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner Spätlese Feinherb** +  
 108° Oechsle, 13.8% alc, and yet as graceful as a ballerina; a huge varietal nose which could almost be 1er Cru Chablis ("Yes but only if we raised the price!" they remarked); explosively flavory and vivid; fantastically ripe yet juicy and balanced; a balsam bath! Wait 'til you wrap your palate around this.  
 SOS: 1 (now to nine years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GGE-003 **2004 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**  
 A charming redcurrant-y Riesling; I saw it both before and after bottling; the 2nd time it was naturally a bit subdued but showed lots of friendliness and grassy charm; clean as a hound's tooth; long, modern wine— just plain tasty, and there's more to it than this note suggests.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)
- GGE-004 **2004 Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett** +  
 Superfine, detailed Scheu; flowery cassis and *quetsch* and papaya; lovely salty length to a fascinating wine.  
 SOS: 2 (now to eight years)
- GGE-005 **2004 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 A sort of ur-Riesling here; state of the art for what it should be from great hands in a good year; *tilleul* and mineral and stony and etched; discreet asian-pear fruit, lots of mirabelle, beautifully firm; long, complex finish. Couldn't be better.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and nineteen years)
- GGE-006H **2004 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** +  
 A classic: it's like 12-tone music here, eerily beautiful and viciously complex; it plays on every papillae and cell of your palate and has a wizard-lash of pepper and solidity, as if it were fined with Titanium; imposing granular power; smoky and mirabelle and almost a grappa note; actually a *food-wine* despite its iron-mass and richness. Bravo!  
 SOS: 2 (between now and two years; again from nine to fifteen)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!



# A Primer on Terroir

Does this self-evident truth really need to be defended any more?

It seems not. I glean a willingness to agree the phenomenon known as terroir actually exists. Where opinions appear to diverge are on two related questions: 1) the definition of terroir, and 2) the significance of terroir beyond its existence as a simple fact.

First, a definition. "Terroir", as I see it, is the entire micro-environment in which a vine grows, beginning with soil, and then beginning with soil's components. The structure of soil especially in terms of porosity is critical, but it doesn't come first. What the soil *consists of* comes first.

Terroir gives wine its DNA. Riesling in northerly climates is the most vivid demonstration, because the vine happens to like poor soils, the grape happens to ripen late, the growers happen to need to plant it on slopes to maximize the odds of ripeness and therefore the soils need to be porous and thin or else they'd wash down the mountain every time it rained.

I suspect the Truth of terroir is universal, but this is intuition. The phenomenon of Riesling in Germany is its most compelling evidence, but not the only proof. And what exactly is this thing I'm calling "proof"? It is, very simply, a cause and effect relationship, repeated dozens-of-thousands of times in every vintage, between soil components and wine flavors *for which no other explanation is possible*.

Even those willing to consider the truth of terroir might balk at my literal insistence that dirt = flavor. A famous importer of French wine once said "I can walk into a vineyard in Pouilly-Fumé and pick up a fistful of caillou and cram it in my mouth, but I can't taste that flavor in the wine." But this is not what I argue. I don't know of any place where you can literally "taste the soil" (my Mosel growers might well demur!), but I know of many places where you can taste what the soil *does*.

I've been challenged that soil's expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine's DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine's identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was sometimes drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or cornball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it's safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

Nor do I wish to suggest that all of wine's fla-

vors derive from soil components. There are of course macro-factors; an obvious example is the *garigue* flavor imparted to certain wines from grapes grown near actual garrigue. Yet one hears many gropings for *other* explanations for how wines taste, and many of them are futile. There's a site called Kauber Roßstein in the Mittelrhein, which sits just above a railway tunnel. For years the smoky flavors of the wines were presumed to derive from actual smoke, as the trains blew their whistles before entering the tunnel. Then the lines were electrified - and the smoky flavor remained.

I've also heard it said the notion of terroir has no practical value unless it constitutes a guarantee. "A great winemaker will make better wine from "ordinary" soil than a lazy winemaker makes from "great" soil". Again, true, but beside the point.

For years the Plettenberg estate made mediocre wines from its holding in Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. This is regarded as one of the top-2-or-3 sites in the Nahe region. But the wines were rarely better than ordinary. Meanwhile, Helmut Dönnhoff made sensational wines from his Oberhäuser Leistenberg, manifestly the lesser vineyard. Surely this proved the point that terroir was not the decisive component of wine quality?

Sorry, it doesn't. For when Dönnhoff *obtained* the old Plettenberg parcel in Kupfergrube (and when he upgraded the husbandry in what had become a run-down straggle of vines) it became clear immediately which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

I know that all things are rarely equal in the world of wine, but I am not arguing that terroir is any kind of guarantee for the consumer. I am arguing that it is the *first* among many criteria, the basic reality that one encounters and accounts for before one truly understands what wine is.

It is certainly impinged upon by the variegations of weather and of human temperament, but this signifies very little; some days I'm alert, some days I'm dozy, sometimes I'm tender and sometimes I'm gruff, but I am always...fat Elvis.

But can we really be sure of this syllogism? Because this-or-that is in the soil, such-and-such a flavor is in the wine? Ah, we want to be sure. Everything in great wine argues against such sureties, but we want what we want. It does appear that Science has taken notice; in the January 2000 issue of Science News, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

"German researchers recently studied 165 wines

from six grape-growing regions. The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminium and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy (my emphasis) testing for just three elements – barium, silicon and vanadium – and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested.”

A little further down the page: “From his work at the National Institute of Agronomical Research near Angers, France, Gérard Barbeau concludes that wines made from the same kinds of grapes, grown in the same region using identical practices but in slightly different terroir, harvested at exactly the same time, and made into wine in exactly the same ways, can still be remarkably different. These underlying differences, he says, must be due to terroir.”

More pseudo-scientific piffle from Europeans eager to defend their turf? One hears such arguments. “The Europeans like to point to soil because it gives them a competitive advantage”, the argument goes. “They have something we don’t have and can never get,” it says.

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motivation to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of terroir is afraid he doesn’t have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound terroir do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

Eventually science may or may not create an experimental matrix within which this hypothesis can be “proven.” But I’m not certain it matters. As long as science cannot prove an *alternate* explanation, I am willing to trust empirical logic. It *might as well* be true. It appears to be demonstrated time and time again.

We are all people of varying temperaments, which dictate *how* we approach wine. I am clear about my own approach. There are sensibilities I’d call “engineering,” people who are most fascinated by the *how* of things. These people love the *making* of wine, and tend to believe that great wine is possible from just about anywhere, provided there’s a human with sufficient skill to *make* it. This is a clear, concrete sensibility, and I share some of it myself.

There are also hedonistic sensibilities, who tend to delight in their own delight, and who crave that which is *sensually* delightful. For someone like me, this isn’t so much a bad place to be as a bad place to *stop*. The sensual is just one of many possible delights. Often the engineer and the sensualist overlap. And they tend to struggle against what they’d call the “mystic” for the same reasons we all strug-

gle: they fear we’re a threat to the existence of the wines they cherish.

Others might be willing to agree, albeit hypothetically, in the idea of terroir, but argue its usefulness to them is limited. “If a crappy grower can waste a great terroir,” they say, “then what good is it to me?”

No good at all, if you’re looking to terroir as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won’t do that. Not because it doesn’t like you, or because it’s just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn’t understand our need to avoid disappointment. This is the crux of my argument for the *so-what?* of terroir. I will ground it as simply as I can, in one single person. Let it be Willi Schaefer, though it could as easily be Hans-Leo Christoffel, Carl Loewen, any of hundreds of German (or Austrian) riesling growers. When Schaefer goes about his work, he does so with the *certainty* that Domprobst will taste one way and Himmelreich another. He doesn’t think about it abstractly, but if you asked him he’d say he *liked* it, liked that the earth expresses itself in *various* ways. He is also aware of his place in a continuum of generations who work the land that existed before and after each of them, and which always gave the same flavors in the same way. He takes his place within nature, caring for his land; he would never dream he had *dominion* over nature. Flavors of terroir come into his wine because he gets out of the way and *lets* them; why would he do otherwise? The land was there before him. When he tastes his wines he is fascinated with these flavors, and because of him we also can be fascinated. Indeed we are linked to him, to his fascination. Think about it: he is linked to his land, we are linked to him; we are, therefore, *also* linked to his land. None of this is “mystical!” Wines of terroir are wines which ground us in a nexus of meaning. Humility before nature is meaningful. Connection to our fellow folks is meaningful. Connection to places *we don’t know* is meaningful, as it stimulates dreams and longing.

The “so-what” of terroir is just this; it creates a community of vintners and those who drink their wines, walking on this earth and through this life with appreciation and caring. It’s the difference between *Let me show you how groovy I am or let me entertain you*, and *let me bring you here and show you this wonderful land, this wonderful place*.

Alas, some of us are too busy. And others prefer to ignore the spiritual invitations streaming all around us because we have to be sure we don’t buy any wine below a 90. But wine doesn’t care. It just invites. And the soil remains.

# gernot gysler

rheinhessen • weinheim

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

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

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing now up to 70%. He's shifted cover-crop to every second row, renewed composting, entirely done away with dosage, moved almost entirely toward stainless steel.

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

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

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



Alexander Gysler

Alex has settled in, and his wonderful dog still gazes dolefully at all the fun from which he feels excluded. What's happening here is good. Recognition from the

- **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**

German wine press is also good. Soon it will be time to take the next steps. Because it isn't reducible, after all, to formula, or if it is, you risk making formulaic-tasting wines. Germans have a great word with no English equivalent: "Fingerspitzgefühl". A long `un, yes, but translated it is "the feeling on the finger tips" and it is the difference between correct wines, even "exciting" wines . . . and great wines.

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

I really like Alex Gysler and I'm delighted at the fine future I know he'll have. He is most of the way to mas-



tering the externals, and his wines have iridescently polished surfaces. Soon it will be time to go deeper.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in relatively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg. These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the

red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn't infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you're on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren't screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren't any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you'd look at it and think "grapes should grow there."

#### Gysler at a glance:

**Big** changes afoot as son Alexander Gysler takes control. The new wines are slimmed down, streamlined and modernized, jazzy and full of crispy, primary fruit. Prices, though, remain un-real for the time being!

#### how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now.

#### GGY-046 **2001 Weinheimer Scheurebe Sekt Brut, "Bundle Of Scheu"**

Boy do I love this fizz. It has wonderful focus and cassis tones and is just crazy-charming—it was an effort of will to spit-there's elegance and complexity and admirable varietal purity, and pink grapefruit and bergamot tones, refinement and I'd give it 163 points on my 150-point gulp-o-meter. I do very little Sekt any more, having been spoiled by everyday access to great Champagne, but this wine is incomparable, and a GREAT VALUE.

#### GGY-052L **2004 Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Dudes and dudettes, lissen up. If there were an international contest to determine the single-greatest wine value on earth, I'd enter this wine with every expectation of winning. It is that damn good. And the '04 is charming, bright and lively (like you'd want a blind date to be . . .); it's not as explosive as the '02 but it's infinitely fresher than the '03; just innately loveable stuff.

SOS: 1 (now to five years)

#### GGY-055L **2004 Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Scheu to the max! All cat pee and steel, though he's considering a fining which would, ahem, tame these brash aromas. Well, O.K., maybe . . . I admit I'm a hawg for this grape, but I'm gonna be guzzlin' this fella with every damn bit of Dim Sum I eat in 2005. Yang Scheu Fun!

SOS: 1 (now to seven years)

#### GGY-053 **2004 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Hard to note as this was suffering from recent bottling; it showed the cyanic woodruffy undertow of many Rheinhessen '04s; the juicy nectarine notes are present but tamped down by bottling, but the finish was quite long and solid. It'll be excellent by summer but we're shipping some now—so wait a few months on it if you can.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

GGY-054 **2004 Weinheimer Mandelberg Riesling Trocken "S"**

This *really* works; it's almost Alsatian, from red soil over a volcanic base; snappy yet mouthfilling; spriggy and fennelly; gentle structure but lots of sheen and clarity; almost a garrigue or marjoram note.

SOS: 0 (now to five years)

GGY-056 **2004 Weinheimer Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Perfectly balanced, juicy dry Riesling; pure lime aromas, pure tarragon-lime-Sencha palate; shimmery and alive; exemplifies a kind of Ideal of dry Riesling. Not the outer limits, but the tabula rosa.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to eight years)

GGY-049 **2003 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Auslese**

This is saltier than a Spätlese that I didn't select, with more length and cogency. Has 2003's juiciness and generosity; lots of lime and tilleul on the mid-palate, and a candidly sweet apple-buttery finish. It's easy to simply be with this wine.

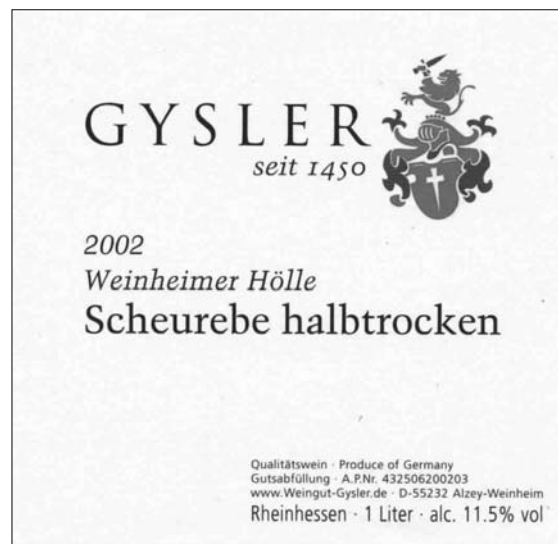
SOS: 3 (between five and seventeen years)

GGY-050H **2003 Weinheimer Hölle Spätburgunder Weissherbst BA, 12/375ml**

Rosé-of-Pinot-Noir Beerenauslese, gang. It's very sweet but with fantastic purity of varietal fruit; a kind of ether of Vosne-Romanée; no botrytis but raisins picked at the very end of 150° Oechsle; a confiture of Pinot Noir, all wild-strawberry and dew.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to eight years)



# christian-wilhelm bernhard

## rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

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

Bernhards *senior* were on vacation when we visited, and for the first time we tasted with Hartmut *und Frau* just us. Much as I missed his folks (and they're truly lovely people) this felt like crossing over. 2002 marked the end of the fiberglass and cement tank era in his cellars: all stainless steel and old casks now.

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



Hartmut Bernhard with sons Justus & Vincent

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

Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

I do wish, though, that I could persuade Hartmut to

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

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

Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had 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. I'm sure they know I like their wines, but I hope they know I *respect* them too. Hoping they're reading these words; gentlemen (and lady), it remains a pleasure to grow in the knowledge of our respective crafts together over the years we've known one another. And it is a joy to know you all. There. It's just the sort of thing I can't say out loud without dying of embarrassment. Now go away, I'm blushing as it is.



**Bernhard at a glance:** Jam-packed flavor bombs from clay soils, tangy-complex wines from volcanic soils. Great success with Scheurebe if you like them full-throttle! Steadily improving quality as the son consolidates his “regime.”

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

- GCB-061 **2004 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**  
 For those of you who comprise this wine’s following: yee-ha! It’s another Scheu lover’s Scheu; smoky and birchy (the smell of burning birch); picked very late at 91° Oechsle; mandarins, plum sauce and kirsch; the longest of any `04 here, with a wonderfully limey finish.  
 SOS: 2 (now to six years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GCB-060 **2004 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 Pure, pure mirabelle, most unusual for this normally meaty-salty wine; meyer-lemon and subtle talc; a pulpy sort of mouth-feel, like a semi-solid; less “length” than *thickness*; a smokiness emerges deep into the finish. An honest, giving wine.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GCB-063 **2004 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 Like the Kabinett only more so: a hint of gooseberry moderates with air; there’s a granular texture not present in the Kabinett, and it’s even more wild-flowery, and my note kept changing as the wine inhaled oxygen. “My father always told me I should give the wines more oxygen,” said Hartmut, “but I was taught to work reductive. Plus I hated to consider the old man might actually know something! Turns out he knows quite a bit . . . .”  
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GCB-062 **2004 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer Spätlese** +  
 This absolutely amazed me. It’s the finest Gewürz Hartmut has made and one of the finest I’ve ever tasted from Germany; pure varietal HAPPINESS; violets and roses, astounding elegance and length; spicy and almost crisp, with a lovely dark smokiness; not a hint of flab or overripeness. *Wow*. The site is loam over a bedrock of porphyry.  
 SOS: 2 (now to seven years)
- GCB-059 **2003 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Auslese**  
 Superfruit! Iris and wisteria on a damp warm evening, almost lurid; thickly muscular body and lemon-pudding fruit. VALUE.  
 SOS: 3 (between four and fifteen years)
- GCB-058H **2003 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer BA, 12/375ml** +  
 Another volcanic site. 140° Oechsle, and colorful adjective-bop flying around the table. “Rose-petal jam” said someone. “Lichee-liqueur.” Corrie said “ginger,” and I said a tropical fever of Gewürz; it’s incredibly scrupulously varietal from pure raisins with zero botrytis. A ginger-lychee sorbet served with a bergamot-papaya flan; look, it’s a circus for the body, so cozy up and fall in love or lust, as you prefer.  
 SOS: 4 (between now and eight years)

# p.a. ohler'sches weingut

## rheinhessen • bingen

Just call it "Ohler!"

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

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

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

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

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

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. And prices remain almost embarrassingly low. It is odd; one ferry ride over the Rhine, less than a mile as the crow flies, and price can differ by 60%. Mind you, Becker makes these wines for all intents and purposes in his basement; he lives in an apartment building on a downtown street that looks like the last place on earth a winery would be. With

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

the right physical space, updated equipment and his own bottling line, a man of Becker's conscientiousness would be making stellar wines. As it is, they're charming and fragrant *enough* and you can own them almost just by *thinking* about them!

### Ohler at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

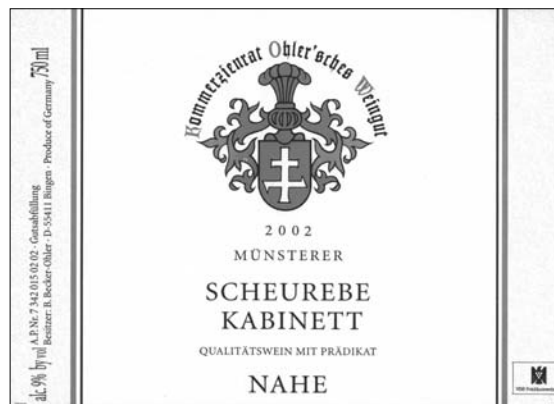
They're forthright and fruity. The Scharlachberg wines have a peachy lift and fragrance of red roses. The Nahe wines are cooler, slatier or more violet-y and tangy according to site. Sheer charm is their strong suit. Great class or detail of flavors is unusual, but there's plenty of sheer likability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

### GOH-045 2002 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett

Now that the poobahs at the VDP have finally managed to expel this grower he is once again at liberty to use a site-name for this Scheurebe. Thus does progress stumble forward in its earnest myopic way. This 2002 is an especially *charming* variation on the Scheu-Dautenpflänzer theme; less sage, more pink grapefruit and candied ginger and yellow-beet. A perfumey wash over the palate. No great length, but charm and refinement. By the way, this was simply the best Scheu he offered this year, vintage be damned, since I know the artist-known-as-"2002" is dead in the water. But the wine doesn't care, and the wine is good!

SOS: 2 (now to five years)

- GOH-050 **2003 Binger Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Becker insisted he did not acidify any riesling in this vintage. I kept saying I didn't mind and he kept saying "I added acid to other varieties but not to riesling," and all I know is this may be the best riesling he's ever made; it has both volume and grip and an almost grassy-herbal undertone improbable with all those yellow-fruits jumping around; a lovely cassis-y snap and fennelly finish; extra quality from 43-year-old vines. He gave it just 30 grams per liter residual sugar and the result is all this crazed verberna acid-jazz. Some stuff be up here.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 1 (between three and eleven years)
- GOH-054 **2004 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 Hyacinth aromas; all the Rheinhessen '04s have shown a peach-pit note recalling the '98s; this is pleasingly angular with a charming asymmetry.  
 SOS: 2 (between three and ten years)
- GOH-053 **2004 Ockenheimer Klosterweg Silvaner Spätlese Halbtrocken**  
Very old customers may perhaps remember earlier vintages of Ohler Silvaner, which were among my first offerings from here, and about which Bob Parker wrote that one example was "the best Silvaner I have ever tasted." It turns out 2004 is a superb vintage for this plebian variety—go figure—and this wine is shockingly good, in some ways the best of Ohler's current crop. Fragrances of corn, jasmine, freesia; the palate is juicy and charming, only hinting at Silvaner's sometimes-weediness; in a weird way this recalls *Grüner Veltliner* in its delicate wild-herb finish.  
 SOS: 1 (now to four years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GOH-052 **2004 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 I liked the brawn of the 2003 but I like the winsomeness of this even more. Asian pear and quince notes; almost like Furmint or Chenin; lots of grip and snap but as juicy as ripe mirabelles.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)
- GOH-048 **1998 Binger Schlossberg-Schwätzerchen Riesling Auslese**  
 I confess I am utterly melted by wines like these. He kept it in cask till September 2002, and it's a rare glimpse back to the German wines of 75-100 years ago. I adore it; the vinous antonym to fruit *qua* fruit; woodsy but not "woody"; a little quince and lanolin; on the dry side and with a beautiful intricate finish.  
 SOS: 2  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GOH-049H **2002 Binger Rosengarten Grauer Burgunder Eiswein, 12/500ml**  
 He made two in all-the other is a stiff young Riesling-but how often do you see Eiswein from *Pinot Gris*? 160° Oechsle, and quite good for a maiden-voyage; a wine redolent of gnarly barkly old vine-trunks; a graceful Gris, true Eiswein character, ringent length and penetration, yet with all the meaty-smoky facets of the variety; wonderfully salty wash on the finish. He had no idea what to charge for it. I helped!  
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty-five years)



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

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

I have always liked this text. Not to appear immodest, but it's been one of the few times I felt I'd succeeded in conveying a slippery idea. Thus I was distressed when Lyselotte Merz cast me a dubious look. "We thought perhaps what you wrote was a little bit *sad*," she said. "When you wrote that you worried about us." Well I worry about every vintner who does all or most of the

work alone and who has no visible heirs who might continue the winery. That said, my friends the Merzes are still plenty charged and show no signs of letting up.

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

Wines make their own decisions here; sugar is neither added nor removed. Whatever's left after fermentation is what goes into the bottle. There's also a distinct house-style, which you'll have noticed if you've tasted the wines.

They taste as though they're barrel-fermented, with the mealiness and seamless texture of such wines. Yet they're not. Certain wines are kept in old oak, naturally, but no flavor is imparted by such old wood anymore. The Liter Silvaner, which has the same flavor, has never seen a splinter of oak. Nor is soil the answer, since as Karl Merz



Lyselotte and Karl Merz

points out, "My neighbors have vines alongside mine but their wines don't taste the same." For years, I wondered at this vexing mystery.

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

It's nourishing

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

to hear Merzes talk about their wines.

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

"We clean the must before fermentation, which takes place very slowly and gently under pressure of CO<sub>2</sub>." After which there's no more fussing. The wines are left in cask until bottling—which is rather later than earlier. Lyse does the bottling, based on *taste*, at various times over a 4-week period depending on availability of personnel. "If there are 'ready' aromas, it's already too late," she observes. "You want to capture them just before." As mentioned before, no 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 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.

"Wine for me is a piece of mosaic, the other pieces of which are friends and conversation and a way of life," says Lyse. "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 Karl what he longed to hear a customer say about his wines, in view of the care he takes to help them

into existence. His answer expressed the spirit of his domain: "The cultivated wine drinker can obtain the kinds of wines from us he can't find anywhere else any more. I want to hear that he is fond of the wine, that this is the type of wine he was seeking for a long time and that now he feels at home."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I offer what pleases me, of course. I like the wines. I don't like them the same *way* I like more modern wines, but I'm sure Kevin doesn't like baseball the same way he likes literature or Bartok the same way he likes Björk.

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

#### Merz at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

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

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

(note: there's a crackery, fragrant 2004 vintage in the wings (GMZ-056L) we'll move to when this amazing '01 is sold out.)



- GMZ-053 **2003 Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**  
 This really is seductive, especially if you'd like a juicy dry Riesling almost half way to ripe Chablis . . . the better of the two single-site Spät H-Ts from 2003, with a lush creamy authority, mealy and sandalwoody and nutmeggy; subtle amontillado tones; seductive juiciness into a long finish almost like honey-mushrooms.  
 SOS: 0 (between now and five years)
- GMZ-058 **2004 Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 Surprisingly round and suave for an '04; an affordable dry Riesling, with dark-bread aromas, fine fruit and purity.  
 SOS: 0 (now to five years)
- GMZ-054 **2002 Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling Auslese Halbtrocken**  
 I quite preferred this to a musclebound 2003; this is a filigree and salty thing; almost a pumpernickel aroma like Meunier; a satiny body with a tiny mineral explosion on the finish; a wine to diligently pick your way through in a happy exploration.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 0 (between now and seven years)
- GMZ-055 **2003 Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling Auslese**  
 Big ripe grapey aromas; a Sousa-march of fruit here; mirabelle is the story, almost as if a few drops of liqueur were added; the finish is chewy and utter clay-grown riesling.  
 SOS: 2 (between two and eleven years)
- GMZ-057H **2004 Ockenheimer Laberstall Riesling TBA, 12/500ml**  
 They are rightly very proud of this, their first Riesling TBA for almost thirty years. Yet it's more of an SGN from Germany, with nearly 14% alc and only moderate sweetness; the color of goldenrod; fragrances of crab-cake and lemon zest; the palate, as expected, is powerful and vanilla-like without being at all syrupy— rather like a hard candy— finally it's both a fine value and a perfect gesture of *identity*: this is TBA as made by Karl and Lyselotte Merz, and by no one else.  
 SOS: 3 (between now and three years, again from twelve to twenty-five years)



# why does place-specificity matter?

Once upon a time I sat on a panel discussing spirit-of-place, and a native-American woman to my left said something that lodged on my heart and has not moved since.

The salmon do not only return to the stream, she said, in order to spawn; they also return in order to respond to the prayers and hopes of the people who love them.



I thought that remark was innocuous enough, so I was taken aback when someone responded it was “pretentious New Age bullshit” (or words to that effect). I recognize there are sensibilities other than mine, more linear, more prosaic. Yet with all respect, most thoughts along the “mystical” continuum are reducible to linear equations if one wishes to frame them thus.

No, the salmon aren’t actually thinking “let’s go back to the river guys, cause the Indians are waiting for us.” No one means to say that. There is, though, among certain peoples, an immersion into nature different from our I-thou relationship, an inchoate assumption of *unity* among living things. The idea of the salmon “responding” is poetic, but the notion of interconnectedness is entirely reasonable.

That assumption of a unity of living things underlies my own assumption that places have spirit, and wine is one of the ways places convey their spirits to us, and this is significant because we are in fact connected (even if we deny it or are unaware), and if we claim that wine is an important part of life then wine must be bound into and among the filaments by which we are connected to all things. Wines which simply exist as products to be sold must take their places alongside all such commodities, soda, breakfast cereal, vacuum-cleaner bags. They can be enjoyable and useful, but they don’t matter.

Spirit-of-place is a concept that’s like really good soap; it’s lovely, it feels good when it touches you, and it’s slippery as hell.

It isn’t announced with billboards, you know. *Spirit Of Place, five miles ahead, bear right to access*. Not like that. Nor is it necessarily beautiful. The northernmost sec-

tion of the New Jersey Turnpike is full of spirit-of-place, however repugnant it may be. I’d say it comes at the moment of ignition between your soul and that place, and a condition of that union is that it happens aside from your awareness. It is an inference, as all soul things are.

I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the landscape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and the cool days of June, and the wan northern sun that seldom seems to roast. And the still wines are not vivid in the way that young Riesling or Muscat is. They are pastel, aquarelle, restrained, gauzy. Add bubbles and they get frisky. But they aren’t born that way. Didier Gimonet told me he’d been pestered by an English wine writer to produce a tiny amount of super-cuvee from an 80-year old vineyard he owns . . . “I’ll never do it,” he insisted, “because the wine would be too powerful.” But isn’t that the point, I thought? Isn’t that what wine’s supposed to do in our skewered age? Density, concentration, power, flavor that can break bricks with its head! “I think Champagne needs to have a certain transparency in order to be elegant,” he continued. And then it came to me.

Here was the Aesthetic to correspond with the gentleness of the Champagne landscape. A *pays* of low hills, forested summits and plain sleepy villages isn’t destined to produce powerful wines. We have become so besotted by our demand for **impact** that we’ve forgotten how to discern *beauty*. And who among us ever tilts a listening ear to hear the hum of the land?

One reason the old world calls to us is that these lands do hum, a low subterranean vibration you feel in your bones. It has existed for centuries before you were born. It isn’t meant to be fathomed. It is mysterious, and you are temporary, but hearing it, you are connected to great currents of time. And you are tickled by a sense of significance you cannot quite touch. It cannot be the same here. Each of us Americans is the crown of creation. We invented humanity. Nothing happened before us, or in any case, nothing worth remembering. Memory is a burden in any case. We turn to the world like a playground bully looking to pick a fight. “Waddaya got TODAY to amuse me, pal? How ya gonna IMPRESS me? How many POINTS will this day be worth?” Maybe our little slice of earth rumbles with its own hum, but if it does, not many Americans want to know how to hear it, and most are suspicious of the value of listening at all.

Does spirit-of-place reside integrally within the place, or do we read it in? The answer is: YES. We are a part of all we touch, see, taste, experience. If we glean

the presence of spirit-of-place, then it's there because we glean it, because we are not separate from the things we experience.

I want to emphasize that point. The soul records, but does not transcribe. Because we are a part of nature, what happens to us also happens *in nature*. This is self-evident. From this point one ventures into cosmology or does not, according to one's preferences. I prefer to believe spirit-of-place registers in our soul because *nature wants it to*. Because everything that happens in nature is part of a design, which we humans discern. You may believe or disbelieve in the purposiveness of that design. Myself, I feel if one chooses to presume there is no purpose, then what is there left to think about? It's all senseless and random, *la di da*, what's on TV? Assuming it is not mere chance is at the very least an opening for more thinking.

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? We need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When something flourishes, it tells us it is at *home*. It says this is where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste "flourish" when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can "exist" elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!

But the same grape will be mute on "foreign" soil. Try planting Riesling where it's too warm or the soil's too rich, and it becomes a blatant, fruit-salady wine which most people correctly write off as dull and cloying. Has Chenin Blanc ever made great wine outside Anjou or Touraine? Nebbiolo doesn't seem to flourish outside Piemonte. I'd even argue that Chardonnay is strictly at home in Chablis and Champagne, since these are the only places where its inherent flavors are complex and interesting; it does easily without the pancake-make-up of oak or other manipulations.

When a vine is at home it settles in and starts to transmit. We "hear" these transmissions as flavors. A naturally articulate grape like Riesling sends a clear message of the soil. And so we see the lovely phenomenon of detailed and distinct flavors coming from contiguous plots of land. Vineyard flavors are consistent, specific, and repeated year after year, varied only by the weather in which that year's grapes ripened.

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 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.

# POINTS: what's the point?

I had a fascinating conversation with Pierre Rovani, who defended point-systems with compelling logic. "Why isn't it enough," I asked, "to simply have groups, fair-good-very good-excellent-superb, and rank the wines in order of preference within those groups?" "Good question," answered Pierre. "So what you're proposing is a 5-point scale." Ah ha! Hoist on my own petard.

My mistake was to debate the issue on the terms of the point defenders. Their logic is self-enforcing and circular. Critics have a responsibility to take a definite stand, and point scores force them to do so. No longer can they hide behind vague or nebulous language. The wine is an 88 and that's all there is to it. Please read my prose too, they say, because that's where I get to use all my flavor associations and groovy locutions, but the score's the Mojo.

Wine is, after all, a consumer commodity, and as such it can be compared within its type. The role of the critic, in this *Weltanschauung*, is to handicap the entrants and tell you who won the race and by how many lengths. It's all very clear, and well-intentioned.

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

First, I am intuitively quite certain that a point-system misleads in direct proportion to its affect of precision. We all know that wine is a moving target. Even industrial wine is a moving target. Why? Because we are a moving target: we feel differently on different days, at different times of day, our bodies are changeable, our palates are changeable, the over-tart salad dressing we ate at lunch will affect every wine we taste all afternoon, and it doesn't matter how responsible we try to be; the moment we assign an absolute value to a wine, we have misled. And the more specific we purport to be, the more we mislead.

And the consequences of training readers to consider wine in terms of how many "points" to "give" it are mischievous at best. Even if I yield the point that scores are a necessary evil—and I don't, by the way—how many innocent consumers of wine journals are savvy enough to know that the *writer* may have to use points but the *reader* doesn't? Sadly, the meta-message of point-obsession is that "scoring" wines is the *sine qua non* of wine appreciation.

Oh lighten up! I hear you say. What's the harm?

The harm is subtle because its symptoms appear benign, but the long term effects are pernicious.

Here's a quote I like:

*"The aesthetic moment offers hope that we are less alone, we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe."* (John Berger, from "The White Bird")

Wine, I submit, is just such an aesthetic moment. It doesn't even have to be great wine. It only has to be significant wine, connected not to the factory but to the earth. Such wines invite us to respond with our souls. They open doors by which we enter a larger world than we normally inhabit. All we need is to be *available* for the experience.

We cannot be available if, in that single moment, we are scrolling through our egos to see how many *points* we're going to "give" or "award" the wine. The very language is suspiciously pompous: "We *awarded* Chateau Bleubols XXX-points on our 100-point scale." That's nice. How many points did the wine give *you*, Ace? Is the whole thing really about you? Does the cosmos give half a rat's ass how many "points" you gave a wine? That wine was a *gift* to you. And all you can do is "evaluate" it as if it were a DVD player or a Dustbuster.

One gentleman with whom I debated this topic wrote (I'm paraphrasing) that he grew *into* using the 100-point scale when he felt his palate was mature enough. This poor lamb is running blindly toward the cliffs.

Ah, maybe he's right. After all, I've been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom's soliloquy at least a 94. That ranks it among the great-literary-scenes-of-all-time, along with Stavrogin's confession (95), Levin's day with the threshers (97), Gerald's walk to his death in the mountains (94+) and the death of Ben Gant (99). I didn't used to give scores to great scenes in literature. But eventually I came to realize ALL pleasure was in effect a commodity and I OWED it to myself to quantify the little suckers. So now, when I read novels, I'm constantly thinking "how many points is this scene worth?" I judge on imagery, diction, overall rhetoric, whether it advances the plot-line and/or develops the characters, and finally on how close to tears it brings me. Eyes-barely-moist gets 90. Eyes-barely-moist-and-catch-in-the-throat gets 91-92. Eyes full of tears but no drizzle gets 93-94. Between 1-3 tears slipping down my face is 95-96, and full-bore blubbering earns the very highest scores. Since I started doing this I have just gotten so much MORE from all these great books!

"Was it good for you, baby . . . ?" *Oh, 89 maybe 90."*

Shall we eventually declare all our pleasures subject to a precise analysis of their *extent* on an absolute scale? What's 100-point joy all about? "I cannot possibly feel happier than this!" Really? *How do you know?*

Sure, we can let the critics play with any system they wish. I use in effect a 4-point system to indicate my sense of a wine's "stature," but I deliberately leave it loose because I don't want to think about it. It is a fraction-of-a-second of *ignition*: I register it and move on. I think reviewers might be better employed trying to *deepen* our love of wine, but they do what they can and what their readers want and are trained to expect. Nor is this any sort of slam of the Great Man of Monkton. I rather think Bob Parker has done the wine world enormous good over his storied career. But I also believe, as St Peter opens the pearly gates to admit Mr. Parker, he'll peer through Bob's valise, pull out the folder marked "The 100-point Scale" and say; "I'll just hold on to this; you won't be needing it here."

# special offering on half-bottles

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I'm talking not about the usual half-bottles of expensive dessert wines, but half-bottles of normal, everyday wines. The industry cliché was always "Everyone asks for halves and no one buys them" but this appears to be changing. Retailers like having an interesting array of halves for people who need them (he likes white, she likes red for instance) and sommelieres tell me that halves are starting to supplant wines by the glass. The diner gets a closed container of wine that's "his" alone, and the house has less spoilage and waste. Not to mention, what if it's a deuce and they only need a small amount of a particular kind of wine. I've lost count of the times I've been unable to finish the red I ordered and which only partnered one course. A half-bottle would have been perfect.

So, we wish to offer you a reasonable array of unexceptional (i.e. Kabinett and Spätlese) wines in halves. Because no one knows how many are needed, and because growers have a hard time selling what we don't deplete, quantities will be limited. I can't ask a grower to bottle 100 cases and then buy 32 of them. So they bottle what we know we'll need, which at this point isn't a ton. But it's more all the time!



## HALF-BOTTLES AVAILABLE:

- GSO-223H **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
- GSO-227H **2003 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
- GSO-238H **2003 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
- GSO-230H **2003 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
- GKE-092H **2004 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett 12/375ml**
- GKE-094H **2004 Kerpen Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
- GST-120H **2004 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

# rheingau wines



Recently Jancis Robinson included the Rheingau in a group of regions which had become “less interesting” since the last edition of Hugh Johnson’s *Wine Atlas*. They say by the time Hollywood picks up on a trend it’s already passé. Similarly perhaps, by the time an idea gains general currency in the wine-world it’s already growing outdated. No disrespect to the wonderful Ms. Robinson, who’s one of the Greats of our time! But when I first wrote about the Rheingau’s malaise it was, what 1985? And now, finally, there are the first little stirs and twitters heralding, dare one hope, a comeback.

What an irony. There’s almost no call any more for “Rheingau” as a commodity. It took a generation of indifferent and downright crummy wines from most of the erstwhile Great names of the region to throttle its reputation to death. I find I have to defend my selections, of which I am as proud and happy as I am with all my offerings. And some of the Great Names are staging a comeback! Prinz von Hessen is said to be much improved. Von Simmern’s getting there. We have quite

a way to go still, but one can no longer simply write-off the Rheingau.

The tragic suicide of Erwein Matuschka-Greifenclau (erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a

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

wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had been naked long enough, and the pathetic spectacle

could no longer be ignored.

A certain prevailing hauteur may have prevented the truth from being heard. But the financial ruin of a 600-year old business could no longer be ignored, and a regional epidemic of denial was drawing to a close. Now, we may hope, the idealists will no longer be suffocated. Or so we may hope!

We still gotta do something about those prices. I’m just not sure what. Perhaps Mr. Leitz will consent to being cloned. There’s an historic precedent for Rheingau wines to price themselves, *ahem* “aristocratically,” which might have been justified thirty years ago but which has zero bearing on their real value or cost of production vis-à-vis other German wines. Of all the habits that die hard,





*Berg Roseneck*

greed must surely die hardest.

Though things are discernibly better now, there's still distressingly little *buzz* about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is still no shortage of fussy polemicizing on behalf of some rusty, encrusted *concept* of the sacred Rheingau, not as a paradigm but almost a freemasonry whose runes and arcana need to be protected, lest the whole region lose its sacrosanct air. One hopes, wistfully, for a day when no more energy need be expended in Hegelian debates over what constitutes a "true" Rheingau wine, as though such a thing could be defined by its chemical analysis! Perhaps, dare one hope, we might return to some innocent *sense* of wine?

One does wish for a little more spirit of *fun* here. I get the impression when Leitz, Spreitzers and my gang are whooping it up, our laughter can be heard from Rüdesheim to Eltville.

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau's real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Pfalz and the Mosel, but the truth is there's no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly *different* from one another's as Rauenthal's are from Winkel's, as Erbach's are from Hallgarten's—all of them. Taste *any* of these as they should be, and you'll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The "classic" wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is *not*: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it's not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence

of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an age of leisure. They are wines for "experts" who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like *polished*, *impeccable*, *aristocratic* sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them *big scores*? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he's less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more

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

pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the *cheapest guy in town!*—that a wine content to merely make a "statement" seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for mystically intricate wines. And I'm quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

We're looking at the beginnings of a renaissance now, thanks to one Johannes Leitz, and it heartens me to see you embrace the wonderful wines of a manifestly Good Guy. Johannes offered to scout for me. He found someone superb. You'll see!

The Rheingau wines I offer you aren't merely honorable, they are EXEMPLARY. And they are worth the prices asked for them, and much as I join you in snubbing our noses at all those butt-heads who disgraced the region, we shouldn't punish the good and honorable for the sins of the lousy and dishonorable. *These* growers, at least, deserve your support.

I think Johannes Leitz should grow a beard or something, so he can start looking his age. I first met him as a “big baby” of about 25 and now he’s a man of 40. A big baby of 40!

He’s also up to a whopping 26 hectares, in large part in order to supply us with enough “Dragonstone,” but also because success accrues to success and good growers often find access to good land. Johannes has secured parcels in two fascinating sites hovering just above Rüdesheim, which he will see through an entire cycle this year. The first wine, a Kabinett, was a promising maiden-voyage, somewhat Geisenheimer Rothenberg in style, with lovely fragrance. Look for “Rüdesheimer Rosengarten” in future offerings.

Some of you know Johannes better than even I do; he visits us regularly and makes friends

wherever he goes.

And *parties* wherever he goes . . . Yet I must say I like best of all to see him there, at home, lord-of-the-manor, because being an international-wine-guy can obscure some of what gets you there—any clod can climb on a plane—and what got Johannes Leitz there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire.

When I made my first approach to Johannes Leitz (14 years ago!) I found a sober young man still not out of his twenties, running a 5.8 hectare estate. His father had passed away when Johannes was a year old, and his mother resolutely maintained the winery until Johannes was old enough to hand it over to. He accelerated his studies by doing the basic courses at Eltville rather than the grand chi-chi at Geisenheim. He got home in the nick of time. The winery had survived, but barely. And it was frozen in time 18 years earlier. Johannes would need to



Johannes Leitz

- **Vineyard area: 26 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland and Berg Kaisersteinfels**
- **Soil types: Weathered gray and red slates, sandy loam and loess, chalk and quartzite**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

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!”

“I work very clean,” he says, echoing the *one* refrain you hear in every good estate. “My friends call me finicky about cleanliness,” he continues. “I also try to disturb the wine as little as possible, pumping for instance.” On the subject of Trocken wine, Johannes can speak with authority, having earned the right by making many of the *greatest* dry German wines I have ever tasted. “I’m of the opinion that during the dry wave a lot of wines were made dry that weren’t in any way suited for dry wine. You really need a certain kind of base wine to make a good Trocken. If you’re honest about it, there’s probably no more than, say, thirty percent of any cellar that fits. The rest would be better with a few grams or more of sweetness.” He also



practices what he preaches, which takes unusual courage in the topsy-turvy modern German wine market.

One wonders how Leitz's clear-headed honesty sits with the high priests of the VDP.

Johannes is done with his various building projects; the press-house is finished, the tasting room's there (and I'm sure the jacuzzi and the twin skee-ball lanes won't be far behind), the family's out from under a range of health-related challenges . . . and then there's you, dear reader. You have been buying these wines with great vim, and this is a good thing! Though we are selling the wines about 33% faster than Johannes can actually produce them. It's all rather giddy but you know, it makes me happy. Because Johannes Leitz has it all. He's a perfect expression of my holy trinity of value: soil, family, artisanality. His connection to his vines is a priori and intimate. His scale permits – *relishes* – a degree and type of attention any industrial wine producer (and many other artisans) would think insane. He's close to every part of it; the wine he drinks with you in your restaurant, having fun (and studying your response, believe me!), is the wine he nurtured *himself*, from pruning to binding to trimming to canopy-thinning to green-harvesting to selective multiple hand-harvesting to inspecting the fruit to fermenting in individual small lots to monitoring to aging on the lees to tasting again and again to determine

the best moment for bottling, and finally . . . to doing it all again.

Don't forget, when you see him he's also seeing *you*. There's a whole other life Johannes lives among his vines, by himself, which you and I don't see. Until we taste. And even then, we only see it if we think to look.

Often I go to Spreitzer in the morning, and than to Leitz, which means I'm tasting Johannes' dry wines right after tasting Spreitzer's sweetest ones. Not good. So this year I asked if Johannes could bring his dry wines to Spreitzer so I could taste them all together, dry with dry. Of course he did, and the results were revelatory. Spreitzer's wines are perfectly in line with the prevailing modern idiom: super-clean, transparent, elegant, keenly chiseled wines, of a kind we all love. But with the first sniff of a Leitz wine it was as if the windows were thrown open and all the "standard references" hurled out onto the ground. Leitz is such an original he'll either create a "school" of his own or simply be 1-of-a-kind.

His '04s show an acidity that's pointed but not spiky. At least the "sweet" ones do. With deadly accuracy, Johannes knew precisely which casks should go dry, and I simply do NOT recall a better collection of dry Rieslings from any German grower—ever. They are so serenely, steadily harmonious you can be sure they were guided by a knowing hand. You owe it to yourself to experience them.

#### Leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three rising stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

#### how the wines taste:

They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. "A lot of people talk about 'yeast-contact' but I think I'm the only one who actually does it." And it's not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz's lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. I drank the 2000 Schlossberg Spätlese H-T the other night, and it was like semolina dumplings in a sweetly fragrant mix of veal and vegetable broth. No other wines are like them. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type—when it's true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes' wines taste "sweet." They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are **intensely** fragrant, as though they wished to **convince** you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they crave oxygen, and they don't show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn't get there with bazillions of yen or with mega-technology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

GJL-103

#### 2004 Rudesheimer Bischofsberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken

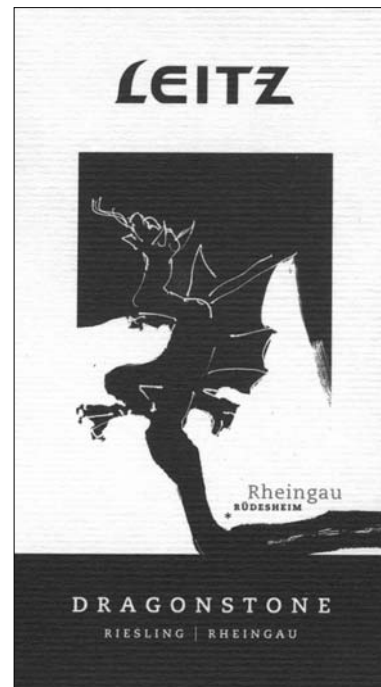
Fluffy-leesy and spicy and splendidly well-balanced; typical brine-smoky aromas, along with the '04 wisteria and iris; this has length and salt and a caressing fruit. Virtually perfect dry Riesling.

SOS: 1 (yes, this tastes *sweeter* than it is) (now to five years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

- GJL-104 **2004 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 Agreeably cask-y, woody, yet also slatey and with lovely liling fruit; super nose! Juicy, fruit-forward, leesy-minerally, wonderfully extroverted palate; nice underlying stoniness. Wow: dry Rheingau Riesling never tasted this forthcoming.  
 SOS: 1 (now to three years; again from twelve to twenty)
- GJL-105 **2004 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Trocken “Alte Reben”** +  
 This is a deliberate attempt to “respond” to the top Wachauers, F.X. Pichler especially. Not to pastiche their style, mind you, but to match power to power. And this Riesling seems to be acting out a fantasy to be Kaiserstuhler Pinot Gris! Huge bready nose; thumping Sumo-palate; flavors blasted out by the sub-woofer— you feel `em in your guts— and through its *basso profundo* there come hints of mineral and fruit and salt, and it’s early days yet for this extraordinary creature. Decant it and swirl like HELL if you approach it within the next year. Otherwise I predict a masterpiece, in due time.  
 SOS: 0 (from one to four years; again from fourteen to twenty)
- GJL-099 **2004 Dragonstone Riesling**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Finally we have *enough* of this wine to sell; indeed some of you will have received it before you read these words. Of course it’s the wine we used to call “Rudesheimer Drachenstein” and it’s the wine David Schildknecht said was the best Riesling value in the world, which is because Johannes sells it to us for much less than it’s worth. For a large-production wine (by our piddling standards) this receives the same care in the vineyards and cellar that every Leitz wine receives. The `04 is quite a bit more *typical* than was the succulent `03; the customary cherry nose, with hints of Serrano or Bayonne ham; the palate is `04 to the max; the underlying grassiness is the perfect foil to the big generous fruit; a limey jab of acidity, a chewy amplitude of vinosity, and as jumpy as a sparrow.  
 SOS: 2 (between three and eleven years)
- GJL-100 **2004 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett**  
 Hyacinth and flowering-fennel aromas; snappy and very firm, a real clamp of acidity and mint; lime and wisteria, and this is just a little out of control— in the best way! Not well-behaved, but incandescent and passionate.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)
- GJL-088 **2003 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese** +  
**CORE-LIST WINES.** The *intent* is for this vineyard to give Kabinett, but not in vintages like 2003 (and 2002 and 2001); this is all Cox-orange apples and cinnamon; long and encompassing, even-keeled and elegant. There’s a gentle persistence I just love. An effortless complexity that seems simple, it is so seamless.  
 SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)
- GJL-101 **2004 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** You have our permission to do what Leitz himself does and shorten it to “Magda.” There’s a creamy, strawberry fragrance, empire-apples too; oh this wine schwings— a classically Rheingau melding of fruit and firmness, with notes of hyssop and violets; it’s not as creamy as the `03 but if it’s less seductive it’s more dynamic and kinetic, with a vivid push-pull between its “green” and “yellow” elements; the palate seems *impatient*, like a hungry puppy.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-two years)

- GJL-106 **2004 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 This is remarkably exotic for an '04; sauteed apples, cinammon, talc, mirabelle and nutmeg; this wine encapsulates Johannes' sweet-lees and bacony tang; it's a wine of landscape, of the outdoors not the parlor, a lovely dark tangy sweetness, full and echoey and *significant*.  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-six years)
- GJL-107 **2004 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 These were the botrytis grapes; the clean ones went into a good dry version; this has a heavenly fragrance; it smells like euphoria: white chocolate, semolina, wintergreen; just absurdly beautiful palate; what perfect botrytis! Along with a Selbach-Oster Auslese this is the most 1975 in style; it's like a streusel with a few flecks of the underlying apple; hauntingly fine, echoey finish.  
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-seven years)
- GJL-108H **2004 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **+**  
 I know it's expensive, but there's only 300-400 bottles in existence. *Half*-bottles. And after the crazy ripeness of the '03s, this is almost sleek- white raisins, malt; wonderful clarity and detail; in fact this could be called *charming*; chiseled and pretty; pure deliciousness with no haughty affect to "profundity," though perhaps even more profound for all that.  
 SOS: 4 (between twenty five and sixty-five years)
- GJL-093H **2003 Rudesheimer Kirchenpfad Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
- GJL-094H **2003 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**
- GJL-095H **2003 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**



## Harvest at Leitz

by Corrie Malas

On August 4th, 2003, my first day working in the vineyards of Johannes Leitz, it was well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Johannes had just returned from vacation and the rows in the Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg resembled the maverick hairdo of a fifteen year-old kid with a rock-and-roll agenda. From where I was perched steeply above the confluence of the Rhine and Nahe rivers (both of which were lower than anyone could remember) the water barely managed a glimmer through the haze of the heat. As Johannes demonstrated how to go about green harvesting, I was crouched in the slightly less scorching shadow that the vines offered, mindfully cautious not to lose my footing on the dry red slate as I followed along down the precipitous vineyard slope which at times felt more like a precipice. You see, looking at the Rudesheimer Berg vineyards, driving through them, even walking through them cannot prepare you for actually attempting to work in them for the first time (the incredible heat of 2003 notwithstanding).

As Johannes established the guidelines for how to tackle the vines, I realized immediately that I was at a great disadvantage. Not only does this man have a fourteen foot arm span (thus needing to adjust his footing far less than I, which is a not insubstantial consideration when the majority of one's time is spent trying to navigate the precarious balance between remaining upright and the backward-downward pull of gravity) but his hands are at least twice the size of the average man and are seemingly capable of doing three things at one time. Remember how fascinating it was when the Tasmanian Devil would go whizzing through the forest on Saturday morning cartoons? Johannes moves nearly as fast, definitely with as much precision, and with all the calm of a person knitting wool hats for the village orphans. Meanwhile (and I'm ashamed to report that this is not a joke) I was completing one row to his every four. I tried to keep up for about the first fifteen minutes. . . .

The process of green harvest is pretty common sense: pull away excessive leaf growth, clean out anything either dry or rotting and, most importantly, inspect the grapes. Johannes' instructions were to leave only two perfectly healthy bunches per vine shoot which sounded fine until I quickly discovered

that this meant that no less than 50% (and in many cases much more) of the what the vine had yielded was left on the "floor." I was shocked by this and almost a little scared. Would my friend have anything left to harvest if we were this rigorous in our green harvest selection? The Farmer replied, "No Corrie, when I am honest I must say that you are not cutting away enough..." Everyone talks about selection at harvest but the amount of selection



*Corrie amongst the vines*

that took place in these vineyards months before harvest was positively mind-bending. And as it has since been revealed, the vintners who worked this way in 2003 have wines that share the same mineral intensity, brilliant length and overall concentration that I so admire in Leitz's collection this year.

On the following days we worked Leitz's other Rudesheimer Berg vineyards: Roseneck (the steepest portion where I finally did fall, helplessly skidding down the quartzite slope until I figured out how to use my elbows as breaks), Rottland, Bischofsberg and Drachenstein. I got a little faster in my work. Johannes followed along after me less and I learned how to agreeably drink sparkling water by the liter. Each vineyard was left looking tidy and serious, well-prepared for the last portion of Germany's hottest summer in 500 years. Every day seemed hotter than the one that preceded it, perhaps because it was hotter or perhaps because there was no escaping the heat in the 95 degree nights, where I would lay exhausted, the heat like an immovable – almost smothering – blanket, without air conditioning or fans, drifting off to sleep feeling the weight of the grapes in my hands.

# spreitzer

## rheingau • oestrich

When one considers the past three vintages, culminating in the sensational collection from 2004, one is drawn to a single, inescapable conclusion.

Spreitzer has ascended to the top rank in the Rheingau. No one is *better*, and few are as fine. Yet the German press is likely to feel otherwise, in large part because of the emphasis they lay on the dry wines. This is reasonable enough. For my part I simply don't *consider* a German grower's dry wine. If they are good I am delighted, and offer them. But this is an extra, not the thing I come looking for. They could cease producing them altogether and I wouldn't mind. Nor would the wine-world be discernibly the poorer.

You might recall a Spreitzer wine finished among the top ten dry Rieslings in all of Germany

last year. I loved it too, and selected it, and was delighted to show it to you. Our reviewers' enthusiasms extended to the "high 80s"—maybe a little too low. Yet the reverse is also true, as Stuart Pigott wrote in a recent article for WEIN EXTRA. Noting the difference between the monster scores (high 90s) certain Dönnhoff wines received over here, in contrast to the around-90 the same wines received in Germany, he said: "Whereas across the sea tasters everywhere stood and cheered these great examples of German Riesling, inside Germany they were met with *Hm, well . . . yes, I suppose . . .*"

So it's the silly culture-wars between them and us which prevents them from recognizing how freakin' marvelous these Spreitzers have become. Help me 'splain it to them! Oh they get praise enough; (another "cluster" in *Gault-Millau*, another "F" in *Feinschmecker*, another "star" in *Mondo*, and another placement on DM's 100-best list) but with 2002 they had an absolute king-hell banshee of a vintage, with '03 hot on its heels.

Spreitzer's wines became known to you with their superb 2002s. I knew they would and it feels good. The



Andreas & Bernd Spreitzer

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

wines do require a certain understanding, because they are never fined and they often show reduced aromas. As always these vanish with swirling, if you remember to swirl, and have the time to wait.

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. I want to pause a second to draw attention to Leitz's touching gesture of friendship, both to me and to Andreas & Bernd. He brought us together, and he's *still* scouting around in the Rheingau for young new growers still below the radar. He isn't concerned – nor should he be – with handing me a "competitor." He wants to do what's best for his friends and his region. Would there were more like him.

Apart from which the two styles are entirely different: Leitz has his casks and his lees and his deeply vinous old-

style wines with their embedded leesy sweetness, while Spreitzers are more 21st-century with their primary fruit and polish.

Oestrich seems to have gotten short shrift when the 1971 wine law re-drew the vineyard boundaries. The two main sites are Doosberg and Lenchen, each among the largest single-sites in the region and each embracing a wide range of soils and exposures. The top of Doosberg borders the Hallgartener Jungfer, while Lenchen touches

the Schönhell. Nearer the Rhine the wines are fruitier.

Oestrich seldom shows the 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*.

Still, I'd like you to see what Spreitzers can do in Hattenheim and Winkel ("Let's Go To Winkel With Spreitzer!" Now *there's* a slogan one can work with.) Read on . . .

### Spreitzer at a glance:

Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of greatness in store.

### how the wines taste:

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

#### GSP-035 **2004 Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

The '03 was one of the best dry German Riesling I ever tasted, but '04 has another structure entirely. This note must be considered preliminary; the wine was still cloudy, and a small *dosage* adjustment was under consideration, but the guava aromas were lovely, as was the site-typical nuttiness (like toasted pignoli); there's lush fruit and firm body and lovely flavors and breed.

SOS: 0 (one to three years; again from twelve to eighteen)

#### GSP-022 **2003 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Kabinett**

This is actually very good Spätlese, not chaptalized, which they were going to sell me as *QbA*, and I simply wouldn't let them. I insisted they sell it as Kabinett and price it accordingly. And don't you dare fuss with me. It is absurd to ask growers to empty their pockets just so I can get the same words on the label every year, and besides, I needed a concession elsewhere and got it. I also reduced the sweetness by one-third, and improved the wine, which is now hugely charming; absolute iris and wisteria and hyacinth and *quetsch*; the palate is juicy and tangy and long with lots of lift. It's much different from the peachy Lenchen.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

#### GSP-023 **2003 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett** +

#### GSP-030 **2004 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett** +

**CORE-LIST WINE.** We'll ship 2003 while it lasts and segue into '04. The 2003 is of course fruit-driven, but what beauty of fruit! Cox-orange pippins (if you don't know these they are the best apples on earth); no cosmic mysteries, just wave upon wave of prettiness. The '04 has a very spicy nose, less gushy peach and apple than usual, but scintillating brilliance of spice; racy and flowery and with perfect zingy acidity. A fine cool aloofness that compels attention: in its inferences are more messages than in all the braying of the brusque and clumsy. Charm wins every time.

SOS: 2 (between five and nineteen years)

#### GSP-031 **2004 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese** +

Wines like this make the Rheingau uniquely great: theologically complex flowery aromas; on the palate it's a Rheingau archetype; serious, determined, powerful but not bellicose; fabulous spice and ringent acidity which utterly quashes the 82g.l. RS—one of those *I am what I am* wines.

GSP-032 **2004 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese “303”** **+++****THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION**

It hails from a micro-cru called Eiserberg, from which a TBA with 303° Oechsle was gathered in 1920 by Spreitzer’s great-great grandfather, and which was the record must-weight for Rheingau Riesling until 2003 came along.

It will seize up a little after bottling, and will likely show Spreitzer’s typical reduced aromas when you encounter it a few months from now. But believe me, this is deep into Dönnhoff territory, and I haven’t had a Rheingau Riesling this great in many years. There’s isn’t much, so don’t be mad at me if you miss it.

Finest ripe aromas; mirabelle, guava, balsam, cox-orange pippins; it has a Dellchen-like quality of polish and just heart-rending beauty. This week there was a piece in the NY TIMES food section about molés, in which the writer spoke about taking a taste and experiencing a “sudden infusion of silence” and yes, that is it. The flavors and interplay of sweets and salts here stretch from alpha to omega; the finish is never-ending. The finish almost seems to *tickle* the palate.

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

GSP-033H **2004 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+**

Shimmery, spectral brilliance here; lighter-seeming than the 303 but with wonderful clean integrated botrytis; fine cool fruit and gauzy transparency; as limber as a gazelle and every bit as fine.

SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)

GSP-034H **2004 Hallgartener Jungfer Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+**

Another in the ravishing family of plummy, buzzing Eisweins from 2004: this is discernibly Jungfer in its discreet slate, granny-apple fruit and delicate nuttiness; truly a sharp little icicle of gleaming stinging brilliance.

SOS: 4 (between fourteen and thirty years)



# SOS

## A NEW WAY TO MEASURE SWEETNESS

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

**MINUS TWO** is for lovers of austere wines.

**ONE** signifies barely discernable sweetness.

**TWO** signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

**FOUR** is bona-fide dessert wine.

**Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!**



## A Little Essay About Nothing Much

As a junior in high school I took honors-English. Figures, right? I must admit I had no great love of reading; I rather had great love for the young woman who taught honors English, Jane Stepanski. Every year I realize how much Jane forgave us, and every year it seems like more.

I wasn't actually a nerd; I was a freak exactly two years before everyone else was. It was painfully solitary for awhile, and I craved a pack, any pack, and honors English helped satisfy the craving. Oh I read some, but mostly I was earnest and clueless. I recall a time when my classmates were especially derisive at what they called "truth-and-beauty poems." I went along with the prevailing contempt; truth-and-beauty poems: *pfui!* Only ignorant clods liked those. What kinds of poems did I like? Um, er, ah . . . well—*ahem*—um, y'know, all kinds of poems as long as they are not truth-and-beauty poems.

It might appear as though I look back on all this with disdain. Far from it. I see it as pitiable; we were so needy, we hungered for any scrap of certainty, any piece of solid floor we could stand on. And so we struck our fatuous attitudes and somehow Jane Stepanski didn't spit at us.

I got into wine as a man of twenty five. I was like every fledgling wine geek; it consumed me every hour of the day. Alas it also consumed anyone in my proximity for a couple years, for I was as great a wine-bore as has ever trod the earth. But I was greedy for knowledge, or rather for *information*, and I did as every young person does: I sought to subdue the subject by accumulating *mastery* over it. Ignorance was frustrating, and uncertainty was actively painful. And lo, there came a day when I felt I had at least as many answers as I had questions. I started, mercifully, to relax.

I was amazingly lucky to get my basic wine education in Europe, where I lived the first five years of my drinking life. It gave me a solid grounding in the "Classics" of the wine world. I still believe it does the novice nothing but good to drink somewhat aloof, cool wines to start. (S)he is thus encouraged to approach a wine, to engage it, to have a kinetic relationship with it. This is substantially less possible (If not outright impossible) with most new-world wines, which want to do all the work for you, which shove you prone onto the sofa saying "You just watch, and I'll strut my stuff."

Eventually, I came to see wine as the mechanical rabbit that keeps the greyhounds running along the track. No matter how much "knowledge" I hoarded, the ultimate target was the same distance away—if not further. The "truth" of wine, it seemed, was a sliding floor . . . and even then you had to first gain access to the room. This frustrated my craving for certainty, for command, for *mastery*. And for a period of time I was angry at wine.

Now I rather think wine was angry with me. But, as patiently as my old honors-English teacher, wine set about teaching me what it really wanted me to know.

First I needed to accept that in wine, uncertainty was an immutable fact of life. "The farther one travels, the less

one knows." There was no sense struggling against it; all this did was retard my progress toward contentment. But it is a human desire to *know*, to ask why. Would wine always frustrate that desire as a condition of our relationship?

Far from it. But I was asking the wrong *why*. I was asking *why* couldn't I know everything about wine? I needed to ask why I *couldn't*, why none of us ever can. The essential uncertainty exists ineluctably, or so it seemed, and the most productive questions finally became clear. *What purpose does this uncertainty serve? What does it want of me?*

One answer was immediately clear: there would be no "answer." There would, however, be an endless stream of ever-more interesting questions. And questions, it began to seem, were indeed more interesting than answers. In fact it was answers which were truly frustrating, for each answer precluded further questions. Each answer quashed, for a moment, the curiosity on which I'd come to feed. It seemed, after all, to be questioning and wondering which kept my *elan vital* humming.

The less I insisted on subduing wine, the more of a friend it wanted to be. Now that I know that wine is an introvert which likes its private life, I don't have to seduce away its secrets with my desire to penetrate. The very uncertainty keeps it *interesting*, and wine has grown to be very fine company. I'm inclined to guess that the uncertainty wants to remind me to always be curious, always be alert to the world, always be grateful that things are so fascinating, and to remember to be grateful for the hunger. Because the hunger is *life*. Accepting the irreducible mystery of wine has enabled me to immerse myself in it more deeply than I ever could when I sought to *tame* it.

Immersion has come to be the key. I am immersed in the world, the world is immersed in me. There are filaments and connections, always buzzing and always alive. The world is not a commodity destined for my use; its cells are my cells, its secrets are my secrets. And every once in a while, usually when I least expect it, wine draws its mouth to my ear and says things to me. *Time is different than you think. A universe can live inside a spec of flavor. There are doors everywhere to millions of interlocking worlds. Passion is all around us always. The earth groans sweetly sometimes, and small tears emerge, and tell us everything. Beauty is always closer than it seems. When you peer through the doorway, all you see is desire.*

You hear these words and it all sounds like gibberish, a stream of sound which doesn't amount to anything and only confuses things more. But if you've ever held a restive infant, there's a little trick you can do. Babies like to be whispered to; it fascinates them. They get a far-away look on their little faces, as if angels had entered their bodies. And so I do not need to know what wine is saying to me; it is enough that it speaks at all, enough that it leaves me aware of meanings even if these don't fall neatly into a schemata, enough how sweet it feels, the warm moist breath of beauty and secrets, so soft and so close to my ear.

# scheurebe: what gives?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more* attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes too demure.

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

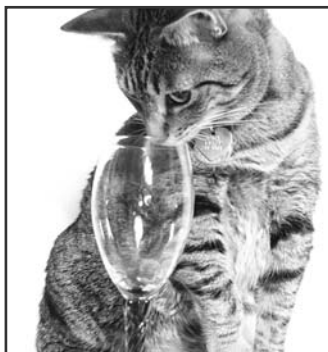
Tastes differ, of course, and what's sizzling and emphatic to me might be blatant and vulgar to you, but we who love Scheurebe are truly in a kind of thrall to it. It has little of Riesling's spiritual depth, but neither does Riesling have Scheurebe's erotic power. We need both for a balanced diet! Riesling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

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

Alas, the Scheurebe can be as temperamental as a high-bred feline. Yet when it deigns to accept you it knows some moves you've *never* been shown. In 2003 it sulked in the heat. But in 2004 it came snarling back in full kinky regalia—indeed I don't recall a more perfect vintage. Of course Scheurebe satisfies our desire to wallow in lust, which we *spir-chull* guys need so's we don't float away on our wisps of bliss. And so there's little point in *delicate* Scheu, or God help us *subtle* Scheu. If you like it at all you like it writhing and sweaty. Yet: this does not, or *need* not preclude a certain elegance, a certain stature, a certain, dare one say . . . aristocracy? Scheu may be slutty, but it isn't ignoble, and I wonder whether there's really *any* equivalent in the world of wine. Certainly Scheu can overstate, sometimes blatantly, but the *thing* it overstates is often marvelous and even *fine*. So, sybarites, you can have it both ways. Scheu is almost as noble as Riesling but unlike Riesling it has the naughty bits still there!

## **SCHEUREBES IN THIS OFFERING:**

- GKF-092 **2004 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GKF-098 **2004 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GSD-019 **2004 Diel Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GGW-091 **2004 Wittman Scheurebe Trocken**
- GGE-004 **2004 Geil Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GGY-046 **2001 Gysler Weinheimer Scheurebe Sekt Brut, "Bundle Of Scheu"**
- GGY-055L **2004 Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GCB-061 **2004 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GOH-045 **2002 P.A. Ohler'sches Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GMC-074 **2004 Müller-Catoir Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GDD-015 **2004 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GMS-106L **2004 Messmer Scheurebe, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-086 **2004 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GLI-091 **2004 Lingenfelder Grosskarlbacher Burgweg Scheurebe Kabinett HT**
- GLI-092 **2004 Lingenfelder Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe Spätlese Old Vines**
- GLI-082H **2003 Lingenfelder Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe TBA, 12/375ml**
- GDR-130 **2004 Darting Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Auslese**



# pfalz wines



Every year I take a few days in Alsace for a little R & R. It's nice to get a break and I love Alsace. I love the wines, too, and try to make time for visits to a few of my favorite growers. What a wine-geek does on his day off: taste more wine. Lately the Alsatians have started doing what the Germans did fifteen years ago, showing analytical values for their wines on pricelists. I never knew how many Alsace wines were so LOW in acidity, nor did I know (though I did suspect) how much residual sugar was in so many wines. Rieslings too.

Now, I have no objection to this at all. *Sweetness is your friend!* I know the purists yearn for a return to the old style Alsace wines; dry, manly, stern. I have a suggestion for them.

They can go to the Pfalz.

In the last generation there's been a 180-degree about-face in these two close-by regions. Today it is PFALZ WINE that will satisfy the demand for uncompromisingly dry wine in the Rhineland style. There is, however, one small problem. Most dry Pfalz wine absolutely and totally sucks.

I love this region, truly I do. I was among the first to proclaim it Germany's most *happening* wine region. But in the last few years it has become an Eden of the Unexamined Palate.

I used to think that notions like "kilocalories of sunlight" were specious, but now I'm starting to wonder. I suspect there is indeed a difference between the sun-warmth in Alsace and that of the Pfalz, an hour or two North. Because most Alsace Riesling basically works,

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

even at its most dry. One might have small aesthetic cavils with this wine or that, but the *formula* is sound. It is just the opposite in the Pfalz. There are successful, even superb dry Rieslings there, but the *essential* basis is seriously flawed. That is, unless you like (or *think* you like) shrill, meager, sharp and bitter wines.

The Pfalz is besieged with local tourism from the big cities Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Frankenthal and Heidelberg. Summer weekends are wall-to-wall swirl & hurl. For some reason (perhaps chemical emissions from the heavy industry near Frankenthal?) these fine denizens of taste have embraced masochism as their aesthetic tabula rosa. The poor growers, who have to sell their wines, after all, have not only to comply, but also to *appear* enthusiastic, and to embrace a guiding philosophy

of dryness. It goes emphatically against common sense, but livings must be made.

I don't know why the wines don't work. I drink plenty of honestly dry Riesling from Austria and Alsace. Indeed, I like dry Riesling. I'm not sure why a wine with 13% alcohol would taste thin and fruitless; I only know that almost all of them do. I have tried and tried to like them. It's tiresome and frustrating to kvetch.

Another lamentable tendency in my beloved and endangered Pfalz is to plant more and more Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris (and Chardonnay, for which they will writhe eternally), the better to produce (mostly) neutral and softer dry wines. A lot of old dubious vines have been hacked up—Optima, Siegerrebe, Ortega, Morio-Muscat - and one is duly grateful; that land was probably unsuitable for Riesling.

A few years ago the Germans had their French-paradox moment and everyone was planting Dornfelder. For awhile the world was crazy; prices were higher for Dornfelder vines than for Riesling; Dornfelder was more expensive than Riesling in bulk, and now . . . now? Now the bloom is off the rose, Dornfelder was not the second-coming, there's dreadful overproduction, you can buy the wines for under 2 Euro in every supermarket, and all those poor dupes of fashion are bleeding by the side of the road saying "What *hit* me?" And I hardly feel the tiniest bit of *schadenfreude*!

But Dornfelder notwithstanding, the Pfalz takes itself seriously as a red-wine region—rather more seriously than is warranted by the wines, good though many of them are. I was heartened when Müller-Catoir told me they'd hacked out their Pinot Noir and would make only white wines from now on. The Pinot Noir was good, but

it is even *better* when someone claims an identity instead of trying to be all things to all people. Let's not forget to resist this ominous urge to homogenize. If we allow it to grow malignantly the next thing you know we'll insist on ripe raspberries all year round.

Oh shit; we already do.

The reducto ad absurdum of all this is the truly ghastly set of rules applying to the "Erstes Gewächs" (Grand Cru) program. Everything is perfectly enlightened—low yields, old vines, hand-harvesting, minimum necessary ripeness—until the ideologues began vomiting their ghastly ideas and insisted the wines must either be DRY (up to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar) or "NOBLY" SWEET (above 50 grams per liter). It is distressing to be asked to accept these (mostly) brutally hot and bitter wines as arguments for Grand Cru status. It is distressing to see an entire community of wines strait-jacketed to squeeze into a marketing person's convenience. If anyone knows a stealthy little munchkin who needs a job I'd like to hire him to break into all these deluded wineries and drop Süssreserve into the tanks.

And yet . . . and yet! When Pfalz wines are good, they're uniquely good. And there are so many ways for them to be good. When you think of the sheer number of interesting people in the Pfalz, it makes other regions (like the ossified Rheingau?) seem like backwaters. Nobody knows why, but the Pfalz is home to a thriving community of idiot-fringe experimenters who are real wine *nuts*, who collect it, talk about it, read about it, probably even *dream* about it. And these are the **least** snobby of any wine people you can imagine; people who really know how to tuck in and *live*, with the quality the Germans call "Lebenlust," a gargantuan appetite for life. And where else could you find such a prolific mix of temperaments? And so *many* great growers? To spend the morning at, say, Koehler-Ruprecht, and the afternoon, at, say, Müller-Catoir, is to taste two amazingly

great but COMPLETELY MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE families of wines. How, then, do we determine what real Pfalz wine is like?

Well, we need a definition broad enough to encompass most of the various styles, but more important we need to isolate what the wines have in common. Let's start with this: Pfalz wine shows a unique marriage of generosity and elegance; no other wine is at once so expansive and so classy. The idea of "class" usually suggests a certain reserve: NOT HERE! The typical Pfalz

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

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 region could you superimpose the laser-etching of a Darting with the big burly power of a Koehler-Ruprecht, with the fiery-yet-satiny persistence of an Eugen-Müller with the tingly mineral gleam of a Messmer with the leesy chewiness and compactness of a Minges with the sheer stunning **expression** of fruit of a Lingenfelder with the little-bit-of- all-of-those-high-flying-you'll-break-your-crazy-neck-daredevil-glee of a Biffar? NFW, that's where!



*Pfalz vineyard view*

LENGTH is paramount in the 2004s here, along with remarkable detail and bouyancy. The wines vibrate to a rare frequency.

They are in fact so beautiful they seem to subdue an emotional response, as if you know you cannot meet them where *they* are even with all the feeling you could muster. They are stunning with a kind of super-reality. If you approach them quietly, they seem to reach inside you and flick a switch, activating some organ of perception you didn't know you had. And you are so surprised to find this thing within you you forget to emote.

I've been telling people about this amazing group of wines, and of course the first question is how they compare to Hans-Günter Schwarz's wines. This isn't easy to say, or isn't easy for me to

say. I became friends with Hans-Günter, in whose angelic company it was easy to feel about the wines. This year there was an eerie disconnect, almost wonderful, between the celestial wines and the matter-at-hand. I'll explain.

In a sense we're starting from scratch together. I'm just getting to know the charming Martin Franzen, cellar-master since Schwarz's departure. Mr Heinrich Catoir is now the owner of a somewhat different estate, if only because different people work there now. And I am barely acquainted with his son Phillip, who is the heir-apparent. Thus a certain best-behavior is mandated, which isn't easy when tasting wines of such incandescent beauty all you want to do is weep or laugh out loud.

The wines are recognizably Müller-Catoir wines. The vineyards, after all, haven't changed. The striving for the outer limits of expressiveness hasn't changed. Martin Franzen stands, like his entire generation, on the shoulders of Schwarz and Catoir and the pioneering work they did in the '60s, '70s and '80s. But he is also his own man making his own wines, and they are—subtly—different.

I can't really tell you how. It's too soon. Some of what I *think* might distinguish Martin's wines from Hans-Günter's could just be the vintages he's had to work with.



Martin Franzen

I cannot *know* that Schwarz would have made significantly different wines from 2004 than Franzen did. Martin's dry wines are a little drier. His wines are a little leesier than Schwarz's. His style seems more fluorescent, but I sense I am finding these things only because I'm peering so intently for them.

The larger truth

- **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**

is: Müller-Catoir has resumed its position at the top of the Pfalz and thus—at least—among the greatest wineries in Germany.

When Hans-Günter Schwarz retired in July '02 after 42 years as cellar-master, there was a certain degree of *weather*. 42 years is a long time. Schwarz is gregarious and has many friends, while Mr. Catoir is retiring. Martin Franzen came on midway through the season, attempting to divide his time between Catoir and Nägelsförst, two hours away, to whom he'd promised to work till the end of 2002. Everything at Catoir was topsy-turvy; Martin needed to create and establish a new team of his own (which takes time to gell) and then the poor man was hit with the deranged summer of 2003 and the relentless vineyard work it entailed. And he was under the gun, all eyes affixed on him, some of whom were awaiting his crashing and burning, and he was an outsider in the Pfalz (having come from Baden and before that, the Nahe, and being a Moselaner by birth) and knew no one.

And all he did was craft a stunning vintage against nearly insurmountable odds. And again, *he* did it because Catoir made *it* doable.

Perhaps the stunning beauty and consistency of the 2004 collection is a sign of Martin's settling in, or perhaps

it is a vintage whose parameters suit him. In either case it is an achievement of great magnitude. The wines are so keenly and precisely beautiful you'd expect them to have been made by a brain surgeon, yet Martin is rather more hearty and down to earth than his wines. I had a colleague with me who'd discovered the question of yeast, and who

wanted to know at each winery whether cultured yeasts were used. Martin very deftly put the question to rest:

"With all the chatter about yeasts, it's really a small factor in quality—maybe 2, 3%—but it's something to talk about; still I doubt many people could taste 20 wines and identify which were made with what yeast."

**Müller-Catoir at a glance:**

The greatest estate in the Pfalz and one of the top few in all of Germany. Brilliant primary-fruit driven wines of supernatural steely clarity and multi-layered depth. The overused word *aristocratic* perhaps best describes them.

**how the wines taste:**

Extremely spritzzy and highly leesy — one wine made me think of Gimmonnet's Cuvée Gastronom! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

**DRY WINES**

- GMC-073 **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller Kabinett Trocken** +  
A great vintage of Germany's greatest Muscat! Serenely mineral and dry; caraway and basil; microsurgically precise and vivid nose; this is very Goldert, with astonishing length, a narrow rope of flavor stretching into infinity. "Definition" doesn't begin to capture it. It seems to adhere to the palate with millions of teeny toenails. I think David Schildknecht's definition of "perfect" (itself perfect!) comes into play: better than this cannot be imagined! SOS: 0 (from now to ten years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GMC-075 **2004 Mussbacher Eselshaut Riesling Kabinett Trocken**  
A doctoral dissertation of minerality! Pure pulverized liquefied stone. SOS: 0 (now to thirteen years)
- GMC-076 **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
Of three dry Spätlesen this was the best-balanced: long, fragrant and elegant, its usual exotica is gracefully discreet; a salty, violet and cressy mid-palate; has the deepest finish and absolutely gleaming purity. SOS: 0 (now to fifteen years)

**THE MICRO-CRUS**

- GMC-077 **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Breumel"** ++
- GMC-078 **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Aspen"**
- GMC-079 **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Gehren"** +  
2003 began the practice of separating the wines from these sub-crus in the Bürgergarten, and terroirist that I am I applaud this and will always offer all three, even when I dislike one or more of them. Because you should see them. Indeed, I was dismayed (though not surprised) by the dichotomy between my opinions of the '03s versus that of the German press.

In '03 it was dramatically obvious to me the greatest of the trio was Breumel; it had the most length, complexity and elegance. Aspen, while far less scintillating, was at least balanced. Gehren was overstated and clunky, with a vulgar alcoholic finish (Franzen says this will ameliorate over time, and perhaps he's right), and *of course* this is the one the German writers loved!

The whole trio is a notch better in 2004. BREUMEL was a late harvest with much lower yields; it has significantly more solidity than the "regular" Bürgergarten, and true Grand Cru character; focused and resolute, playing in several levels; lemony-minty top-notes, bouquet-garni and maizey mid-notes, and stony demi-glacé-y low notes. Less a "finish" than a seemingly endless peal of mineral. ASPEN has more simple charm, more candor of fruit, and it's so damn juicy it makes you drool! It's less digitally precise, but also less "work" to drink. GEHREN smells like walking into a *Boucherie*; it has the greatest density and volume; thick, bready and juicy, yet still fibrous and grainy. What was overmuch in '03 is just-enough here, though this will be the crowd-pleaser of the trio. You really should buy them all! SOS: 0 (in all cases) (between now and fifteen years)

**THE NOT-DRY WINES!**

- GMC-081 **2004 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Kabinett** **++**  
 Firm, almost ringent length and torque; lavish fruit in the lime-verbena direction, with iridescent wintergreen and a billowing minerality on the finish.  
 SOS: 2 (between four and sixteen years)
- GMC-080 **2004 Mussbacher Eselshaut Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
 This, while simpler and more fruit-forthright (peach, *quetsch*) and perfumey (bergamot) and juicy, is also very racy and by no means simple. The shimmery clarity is almost a given now.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

**THE THREE GREAT SPATLESEN:**

- GMC-082 **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 GMC-084 **2004 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese** **+++**  
 GMC-083 **2004 Haardter Herrenletten Riesling Spätlese** **+++**  
 Again, the point here is to BUY ALL THREE. Because nowhere in this (I doubt in any) offering is there an equivalent to this astonishing achievement.

The **Bürgergarten** is citric, mineral, tangy and about 10-dimensional, with a push-pull of salt-green and blossom-orange— even a little malt. **Mandelgarten** is roasted beets and wisteria, with achingly beautiful fruit-citrus-mineral-back-to-fruit interplay; it has that cool ethereal quality of divinity that stills the soul, seems to compel it to pause, and just for a moment, to *attend*. The **Herrenletten** has the “coolest” and most complex mineral; it enters demurely and undergoes a deep tantric crescendo into a resonance of flavor that’s virtually unbelievable (and damn near unbearable); raspberry blackberry malt tarragon white peach mineral and all of it buzzing and clinging for dear life to the palate.

Any one of these will rock your world. But all three of them will change your world.  
 SOS: 2 (between five and twenty-two years)

- GMC-074 **2004 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese** **++**  
 Fennel, fennel-seed, a rare overtone of Scheu aroma at first. Then it becomes absolutely hypnagogic and kinky, with all the ore and pepper of '04 Scheu; the palate shows classic cassis, and shimmers and twinkles into a dry finish, part a confiture of bergamot and cassis, part a wild verbena-like penetration. If you gargled with this your breath would leave 100 colors of confetti on the air.  
 SOS: 2 (now to twelve years)
- GMC-085H **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **++**  
 Despite 130 degrees Oechsle (! Yeah sure, Auslese . . .) this is, amazingly, more keenly lemony and still than the Spätlesen; perfect botrytis, a little sweet-seeming but the underlying tartness rushes to the scene; here is *true* impact, by the way, not just a gormless whomp of brute strength, but an arrow of flavor that aims through the target.  
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-six years)
- GMC-086H **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**  
 170° Oechsle. This is a lower and more caramel-y version than many '04 Eisweins, but splendid all the same; a concentrate of stone and wisteria and lily-of-the-valley, with saltiness and penetration.  
 SOS: 4 (between thirteen and thirty-two years)

## THE RIESLANERS

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 *loved* it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives *more* acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. It can produce the most *singular* great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as-is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would *never* himself do such a thing . . . .

- GMC-087 **2004 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner Spätlese** +  
 110° Oechsle. Elegant yet martial; a fine proud wine that cuts a figure; smoky bacony wild-herb aromas; lime-grass melts into mineral with great transparency, serenity; a stylish, bouyant, complex wine.  
 SOS: 1 (now to fifteen years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GMC-088H **2004 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml** +  
 An early December harvest, 140° Oechsle, and has a surmise of Eiswein tone, but a fine complexity here with lovely exotic notes; has mass without heaviness, and never seems "sweet", but if you could somehow grind out some liquid from lilacs and stones (and salami!) you'd get this. The finish is staggering.  
 SOS: 3 (from one to seventeen years)
- GMC-089H **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml** ++  
 Extroverted, monstrously flavory Rieslaner with massive fruit and truss-rod acidity (sorry all you non-guitarists), along with finely measured power and perfect poise and harmony. Length goes without saying, but the malt and white chocolate are gonna make your day, your week . . . your year?  
 SOS: 4 (between eight and thirty years)
- GMC-090H **2004 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner TBA, 12/375ml** ++(+)  
 230° Oechsle. This was still cloudy (just finished fermenting but not yet racked or filtered) so no note— but ought to be stunning!





Lily Biffar has returned to assume control of the winery after the sudden death of her father last Summer. Though the wines were always good, especially from 1991 onward, the estate was basically treading water until the inheritance issues could be settled. Now they are, and I expect dynamic action to come. Look for the Biffar-blimp over Super Bowl 2006.

The new cellarmaster is a sweet young guy, a wine *amateur* who decided to make a profession out of his passion, thus bringing a different sensibility to the mix. I like him; he's cheerful and candid and hasn't left his days as a wine aesthete entirely behind.

I sometimes refer to "Grand Cru" aromas or flavors, and this is what I mean. The words spring to my mind when I sniff a wine of clearly profound aroma *not derived from fruit*, where varietality

*per se* is absorbed into larger, deeper non-primary characteristics. In Grand Cru wines, the land is the *text* and the grape is the *speaker*. You might say the vineyard trumps the variety. Except of course the variety is the means by which the vineyard is heard.

Grand Cru lands are the earth's erogenous zones, some confluence of nerve endings which tingle at the touch of sunlight. The old ones didn't even *put* the variety on the label. If it was Grainhübel or Steinberger or Sonnenuhr it was presumed to be Riesling, just like Corton Charlemagne is presumed to be Chardonnay.

"We want to have fruit," says Biffars. "We like mineral, but with low enough yields we get it as a matter of course; we seek to preserve fruit and to differentiate the fruit of various sites." Very revealing, this. Minerality is the Given when you work with Riesling in great vineyards. Fruit needs to be nurtured.

There've been various changes over the years; less green in the vineyards, more canopy trimming, more emphasis on clean un-botryrised fruit, and harvesting based on tasting the grapes instead of chasing X-or-Y must-weight, Biffar's wines were more filigree the past two years, with more silken texture, subtle solidity and inference. They seemed relatively introverted, and I liked



actual barons in residence but the *mien* suggests they're hiding away in a tower somewhere), certainly one of the Gentleman's Estates of the Mittelhaardt. They have marvelous land, with many of the greatest riesling sites in all of Germany. And they have an unusually flexible approach to cellar work. There are both stainless steel tanks and large old

it; they l o o k e d i n w a r d b e c a u s e there's s o much to s e e there.

Biffar's is a baronial place (I don't think there's any

- **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: 79% Riesling, 14% Weissburgunder, 3% Spätburgunder, 2% Sauvignon Blanc, 2% Auxerrois**

casks in the cellar, both of which can be chilled. The wines are fermented with cultured yeasts at controlled temperatures, but they are not strictly reductive. The goal is to give them just enough oxygen to promote secondary aromas; in effect their architecture mirrors the estate's actual architecture.

The harvest is also worked in various ways according to grape variety and to the condition of each picking. One absolute is long lees contact, up to three weeks on the gross lees and another 4-8 weeks on the fine lees. But apart from all this wine-geek stuff, I have always enjoyed my visits here emotionally, perhaps even spiritually.

Back in 1995 I overnighted in the house. It's quite a place, a living museum-piece of the ornate decoration that could be bought with old money. I had just fallen love with Karen Odessa, and we were in the middle of an excruciatingly long separation. I woke early, found a beautiful old writing desk, and wrote her a card, before the house awoke.

Every year (except this one, which was a cold bastard till March 16th) there've been birds singing clamorously while we tasted. I don't know why the blackbirds make me so happy, but they do, and somehow I leave a heart-print at Biffar. The Pfalz is terribly active, starting Easter weekend, cars and pedestrians and cafes

spilling out onto the sidewalk— for a number of city-folk in the Mannheim-Heidelberg axis the Pfalz is “wine country”. But when I’m there in March it’s all asleep in

the buds and seeds, and you can hear the soil talk. Here’s some of what it has told me.

**Biffar at a glance:**

Stellar, first-growth quality estate since the 1992 vintage. Excellent collection of many of the top vineyard sites of the Pfalz. Brilliantly fashioned wines with eye-popping clarity and penetration.

**how the wines taste:**

The taste of these wines is incredibly rich in mineral complexity and incredibly specific in fruit and soil flavors. They are on the rich side. They’re brilliant but not squeaky-reductive. They have a noble glow about them; they realize the greatness inherent in the superb vineyards from which they come.

GBR-069 **2003 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**

GBR-074 **2004 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The `03 will be sold throughout this year, and the `04 will follow in January 2006.

The 2003 has a ver-r-r-ry spicy gingery fragrance but the palate spreads in talc-y rivulets of salt, gently but deftly, with the strange clinging length of 2003. Pure fruit. Somehow has finesse and grip-with 6.5 grams per liter acidity!

SOS: 2 (now to eight years)

The 2004 is a classic in a very fine string of wines; there’s the customary ginger and pineapple, with the underlying grassiness of `04; a hint of verbena; taut and spicy; basically Pac-Rim cuisine in a glass!

SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)

GBR-071 **2002 Gerümpel “Grosses Gewächs”**

**++**

Quite possibly the best dry German riesling I have ever tasted.

Fantastic nose! Quince, rosewater, star-fruit, sweet smoke, redcurrant, malt; the palate is a dream of grace and prettiness; as massive and as vaporous as a cloud; long and complex; nothing stern or pointed here; just a satiny parfait of plum-blossom, balsam, malt and exquisitely understated mineral. A stunning achievement.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (now to five years, again from eleven to fifteen)

GBR-075 **2004 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese**

**+**

Very classy Pfalz wine from the “chalk-oven”; sweet corn, nectarine, scallion, crenshaw melon, verbena; has the creamy yin-yang fruit of a Lingenfelder with the pupil-shrinking brilliance of a Catoir; great textural and fruit complexity, and a long and charming finish.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty three years)

GBR-076 **2004 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Auslese**

Fascinating stuff: again a grassy note to the nose; the palate consolidates a fine juicy mintiness, almost eucalyptus, but the *demi-glace* of Auslese shows in the deepest low notes - watch for them 30 seconds after the swallow. Unusual and compelling wine, and actually better “food-wine” than the Spät.

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

Back when I was a young pup I lived in Germany and fancied I might establish a career as a wine writer. (Hey, before that I wanted to be a rock critic and before that I yearned to be a guitar-God. So ease up on me.) Well, I was writing for the Friends Of Wine magazine, which commissioned me to do a piece on Deinhard, to whom I'm sure they hoped to sell lots of advertising. Deinhard, as many of you know, used to be a Name in the American market.

So I spent three days knocking around with the charming Karl Liebetrau, touching down in Bernkastel, Oestrich and Deidesheim. It was then I first visited "Dr. Deinhard" and met the memorable Heinz Bauer, who makes the wines there. My arrival coincided with a kid's birthday party, and the

final impression I carried with me as we drove off was of Bauer hobbling on stilts around the cobblestone courtyard.

His hair's a little whiter than I remember, but the piercing blue eyes remain, as does the angelic mien. Bauer is a soul-twin of Hans-Günter Schwarz (they know each other, of course, and each speaks fondly of the other), typical sweet-hearted Pfälzers making wine in which you can taste the affection with which they are lavished.

Indeed affection can be understood to be the Point. I asked Bauer if his cellar-work was different from the prevailing-usual among quality estates. He answered, in effect, by claiming I'd asked the wrong question. "Quality results from what one does in the vineyard," he said. "There are no wonder-winemakers. Intensity, flexibility, knowledge and intuition are the things which bring quality."

The Deidesheim estate is now in the hands of the Koch family, yet is called Dr. Deinhard after its founder, who moved from Koblenz to Deidesheim in the middle of the 19th century, before you were born. Deinhard has leased a proportion of the property from Kochs; in effect the wines were/are custom-made for Deinhard from the X-hectares of vineyard they lease. That number is falling sharply now.

Deinhard used to stipulate that no other wine from the "Dr. Deinhard" estate could be exported to their markets.



Heinz Bauer

- **Vineyard area: 30.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg, Langenmorgen & Mäushöhle; Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad & Linsenbusch; Forster Ungeheuer & Jesuitengarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and basalt or limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% others including Scheurebe, Rieslaner, Weissburgunder, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir**

This is no longer the case.

I made an exploratory visit. One can never have too many great Pfalz wines, and I'd been told quality was extremely high – the estate took a key prize for the best Halbtrocken wine in Germany from the 2001 vintage (Bauer has a touch with H-Ts I suspect because he himself likes them best of all) – and prices were very reasonable.

The estate is rather large by my standards; over 30 hectares outside of the Deinhard lease, with a high proportion of Riesling and a gratifying proportion of Grand Crus. Bauer seems to be both jovial and sensible. He has both steel and casks in the cellar and can control fermentation temperatures.

I went there on spec, but grew more and more impressed as the tasting progressed. There were a lot of wines, yet there was a deftness and tenderness across the board; these were the wines of a mature vintner who sought honesty and expressiveness. I found myself wishing I could stay longer and go deeper. My notes are scribbled in an inexplicable shorthand onto the tasting sheet he provided. At some point I knew I was hooked. I looked over at Kevin Pike and said, *Hey Kev; it isn't just me is it? These are really wonderful.* He grinned and nodded. "I was already filling out the forms, babe."

**Dr. Deinhard at a glance:**

1st-quality Pfalz estate available in the U.S. at last; big range of Grand Cru sites rendered in a genial and intelligent way, AND (yay!) enough wine.

**how the wines taste:**

Dense and minerally, with focused fruit and with almost unerring BALANCE in a range of styles. Gentle and charming more than forceful and shoulder-grabbing. Imagine a cross between Minges and Biffar!

GDD-014L **2004 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Fascinating story here: there was also a Halbtrocken version of this wine, which was the first thing we tasted. I could have sworn it was Scheurebe. A little while after we started Johannes Selbach arrived. The wine was poured, I said nothing. Jo looks over at me, eyebrows raised. *Is there some mistake . . . ?* Nope; it's just a really blatant clone-90 Riesling!

I haven't told you about this vine for a few years. It was bred in the Pfalz specifically to be extremely fragrant, which is surely is, in a citric and peachy vein. It enjoyed quite a vogue for several decades, and helped make the reputations of estates like Lingenfelder and Müller-Catoir. It's starting to fade from fashion now, as the new generation pursue a more classical model, and it's also starting to mutate all by itself, and according to Bauer, "Even if we still have clone-90 the wines aren't as fragrant as they used to be."

All the more striking the sultry scents of this mama. It's a riot of pink grapefruit and peach, and the palate is citric, long and giddy, a slurp-o-rama of sheer gushing delight. For pure mindless dumb-animal pleasure THIS is the Liter to buy.

SOS: 2 (now to three years)

GDD-004 **2001 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

Great polish and detail; a fine smoky Grand Cru with more cut than the 2002; this is not at all unlike a Nigl Privat.

SOS: 0

GDD-013 **2004 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

A lovely, gently dry, stony-gingery Pfalz Riesling; exceptionally long; guava and roasted corn; in fact overall a bit roasty, like squash or polenta; more stony on the finish.

SOS: 0 (now to eight years)

GDD-006 **2001 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

This won an important prize as the Halbtrocken wine of the vintage for 2001. It's round and detailed, what the French would call *fondue* (i.e. amalgamated or "married"), entirely smooth and winsome; an utterly elegant, granular Riesling. There will be a 2004 vintage which is also dear, juicy and charming, when this sells out. For now, a final crack at a great 2001.

SOS: 0 (now to nine years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDD-009 **2002 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE. Perfect clone-90 Riesling, with a slim 95° Oechsle (!!!); fresh, lively, serene, long; how on earth could it be any better? We bought every drop he'd give us. A year later I still think it's perfect Pfalz riesling. I'll show it as long as it exists! 2004 is in the wings.

SOS: 2

- GDD-015 **2004 Scheurebe Kabinett** +  
 How would this taste after that Scheu-scented Riesling? Incredibly, it tastes more like Riesling than the Riesling does! Grilled fennel, kiwi and hyssop; the palate shows the mineral intricacy of Riesling with a haunting and classy overtone of lavender. The 2004 length goes without saying.  
 SOS: 2 (now to seven years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GDD-018 **2004 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Bright aromas, guava and mutsu or fuji apples; firm, spicy palate, impressively precise and pointed; pure Pfalz ginger and wintergreen as the finish comes on. Remarkably long even for '04.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-three years)
- GDD-016 **2004 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Gewürztraminer Spätlese**  
 Wow, these '04 Gewürztes are lovely! Every attractive thing about the variety but with structure and without bitterness or belly-fat.  
 SOS: 2 (now to five years)
- GDD-008 **2001 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese** +  
 Extravagant complex aroma; sweet clay, kirsch, oat bread, brown sugar; a masculine Vendage Tardive style; determinedly, resplendently serious wine; endlessly filigree and subtle.  
 SOS: 3
- GDD-017 **2004 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese** ++  
 Yikes Mikes! This is superb; again a pink-grapefruit fragrance with *quetsch*; the palate is an out-of-control riot of saltiness and yowling-ripe fruit; perfect clean botrytis, and shock-and-awe power—but all of it with class and verve, and a sweet note of Mt. Rainier cherries at the endless end.  
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty-five years)



For many years I have considered Eugen Müller a “value-agency”, offering (with one or two striking exceptions) clean tasty wines from excellent soils at very attractive prices.

If the 2004 vintage heralds things to come, I’m gonna have to change my approach! For this was a thrilling group of wines with much more transparency and playfulness than anything I’d tasted here before.

There are possible reasons “why”; temperature-control in the cellar began last year. No more harvesting by machine. A new air-exchange system for the cellar makes things even cleaner and focuses the ambient temperature. Things are astir with the settling-in of Kurt Müller’s son, and the 2004s zoom up into strata of seriousness hitherto unattained.

I ran into Müller by coincidence a couple weeks after my visit; we were chowin’ down in the

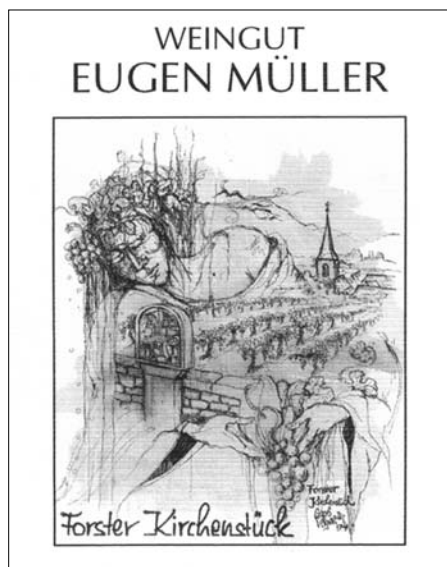
same tavern in Deidesheim. I said “You know, I don’t think I had a chance to tell you: your ’04s are really superb.” “I know!” he replied. Damn straight.

Müller has become an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück, plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien.

But back to the Kirchenstück for a moment. The official land assessment value of this site places it at the top of the pile, not just in the Pfalz, but in all of Germany! If you own land here, you are paying higher taxes than owners in Doktor or Marcobrunn or Baiken or Scharzhofberger. What is it about the Kirchenstück? As usual with great vineyards, the “what” isn’t always so explicable, but let’s try and explic-it!

It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines.

- **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**



Still, not *this* kind of spice; this sharp, nipping concentration. Then there is a flavor of black-cherry which I’ve never seen elsewhere in the Pfalz. Then there is a minerality which again seems *packed*, as though it had been *pounded* together, carbonized. The whole effect is penetratingly expressive, yet, here’s the genius of it: it’s also, somehow ELEGANT AND REFINED, and the palate keeps whipsawing back and forth between “ZOUNDS! This is spicy!” and “Oooooohh, this is gorgeous!”

The Jesuitengarten, in comparison, is quite a bit less high-toned and zingy, more lush and caramelly: heavy satin versus raw silk. What makes **Jesuiten-garten** tick is the solidity of its structure, the innate fineness of its flavors and the stylishness of its complexity. Kirchenstück has more **genius** in it, but also more arrogance. Jesuitengarten is a *little* less brilliant but a little more accommodating; it’s more diplomatic.

**Müller at a glance:**

This is a winery on the move, and the next few years will tell a new tale. There's a sensational collection of vineyards and new energy in the cellar. This is what the Germans call an *Aufsteiger*, i.e. one who is climbing.

**how the wines taste:**

They used to be rather matte and caramelly as a whole, though the fabulous Auslesen from the Kirchenstück showed great fire and breed. The 2004s could be harbingers of a change, as they are more "modern", clear and bright.

GEM-072 **2004 Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

A fervidly spicy nose! Cherry, ore and pepper; yet the palate is juicy and yielding, with mineral focused to a point of spice; brilliant clarity and almost chili-pepper sizzle on the palate yet with the most satiny body; absolutely uncanny wine.

SOS: 0 (between two and nine years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GEM-073 **2004 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. And this is the best Kabinett I've ever tasted here. Fascinating to contrast these two Pechsteins! This one is all lilac and lime-blossom, winsome and comely; charming, precise, piquant and lady-like; whereas the H-T is remarkable and fascinating, this is beautiful.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

GEM-074 **2004 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**

**+**

I had no intention of offering a third Kabinett—until I *tasted* this masterpiece: something's up here! This wine perfectly combines '04's green lime-y notes to Ungeheuer's thickly fiery body and fruit; it's not only "firm," it's downright *hyper*, as if it were driven to express itself.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

GEM-075 **2004 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**

Now it's a big flapping flag of Ungeheuer fire. A classic, big meaty Pfalz wine; like carrots sauteed in ginger-flavored butter and finished with reduced veal stock—yet with the 2004 brightness. Again, uncanny: spicy and pointed yet meaty and succulent: superb!

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

GEM-067H **2002 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**

**++**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Wonderful juicy length and pure divine fruit. Perhaps the most charming and seductive vintage yet, with a hauntingly sweet-salty endless contrail of flavor, bewitching spice, and a finish absolutely saturated with terroir. Starting with vintage 1990 I have shipped this wine every year. Even the least of them has been wonderful, and the sustained beauty across the years has been nothing short of thrilling. This wine has become a touchstone for Riesling's profundity, and the best vintages-1991, '93, '96, '98 and 2001-are some of the greatest rieslings on earth.

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

GEM-076H **2004 Weissburgunder Eiswein, 12/375ml**

Here's an original! Over 200° Oechsle, over 15g.l. acidity, yet still smells absolutely varietal, and offers an intense Eiswein experience. When to drink? NOW, if you have something alkaline nearby. Flavors in the fig and leek direction, hugely powerful, no-quarter-given wine.

SOS: 4 (now-three years, and try again at around fifteen)

# herbert messmer

## pfalz • burrweiler

Gregor Meßmer won't get on an airplane. That's why you haven't met him. But he has a brother who's just arrived to help at the estate, and this gentleman will fly, and speaks English, and man I hope he comes over because something has to happen to get this estate front-and-center in your attention.

As far as I'm concerned, Meßmer is second only to Catoir in the Pfalz.

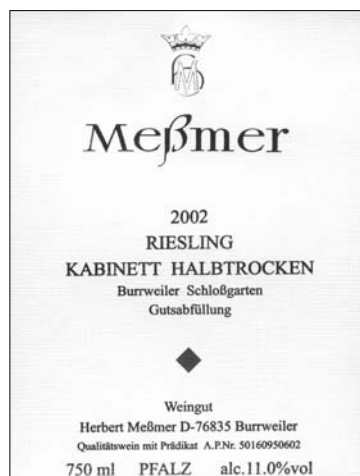
Too bad Gregor doesn't like to fly, though god knows I understand. During our last two encounters he's been about the wittiest and most fun guys I know. And y'all are to be congratulated for bouncing sales nice 'n up the past years. Believe me, it's nothing less than this stellar estate deserves, and I'll be working to make them even more conspicuous. Inside Germany

ther's a consensus Meßmer has ascended to the top rank.

As such I fall in line with the received wisdom of the German wine community. That's O.K., but our *reasons* for appreciating Meßmer are diametrically opposed. Inside Germany he's lauded for his dry wines. He sells them like loco, and sometimes I like them too, some of them.

I've represented this estate since almost the very beginning, and nothing would please me more than to get chummier and to keep showing you wines like these. Gregor Messmer is an almost comically serious man. He would be comic if he didn't conduct himself with such quiet dignity, but really, you want to tickle him! I'll bet he'd tickle you back. But first he'd have studied *The Tickle Points Of The Human Body* and he'd be deadly accurate.

Two prominent points to make. The first is that Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (elec-



tric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; 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 slatey minerality. If not you'll just discover

the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

The second point is the Schwarz connection. Hans-Günter Schwarz hails from neighboring Gleisweiler. Schwarz and Messmer senior have been friends for years and young Gregor had the precious opportunity to form his own friendship. The results show in his wines.

Having said that, Gregor has emerged decisively from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking

- **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**

claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz world is the love of reductive viticulture. "What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. "Our Süsreserve comes only from the healthiest grapes and we use no preservatives to treat it. We never de-acidify. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking."

"The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least 'winemaking'."

That's the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I like wine with the greatest possible number of uses."



Messmers use only organic fertilizers. All the white wines are made and aged in stainless steel. They receive their single racking early after fermentation and are left undisturbed until bottling, usually in March. This is a recipe for noninterventionist winemaking of remarkable purity. And Messmer's wines, indeed, are remarkably pure. They're as clear as glass, etched as sharply as etched glass, transparent as the thinnest glass, but firmly constituted.

His sweet wines are in a class of their own. Only the very best from Dönnhoff, Selbach-Oster and Müller-Catoir are equivalent. The articulation and clarity of Messmer's sweet wines, their discretion and tenderness and tact, are infinitely more precious than syrupy richness. I really started to wonder whether I actually *liked* dessert wines at all anymore, and Gregor restored my heart to me; tasting his wines is stirring and profound.

**Messmer at a glance:**

Superbly made wines, exceptional clarity and polish in a keenly etched and chiseled style. Has soared ahead to take its place among the best estates in the Pfalz the last few years. Sure-handed with a multitude of grape varieties.

**how the wines taste:**

What unites them is CLARITY and SPECIFICITY. Gregor's careful, diligent style seems to allow us to examine the fruit of his wines as though under a microscope. This must be the most honorable way to make wine. Everyone knows how to make bombshells—it's facile and plausible—but the tender, delicate rendering of varietal fruit denotes a **respect** for the grape which only shows when you're nature's humble servant and not concerned with being a hot-shot. Gregor's wines have an exactitude that satisfies my desire for seeing things clearly.

GMS-105L **2004 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Often this is the *classiest* of my selections in Liters; the '04 is pretty serious stuff: articulate, judicious and mineral; gentle and gently dry, but perfect balance and clarity.

SOS: 0 (now to four years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMS-106L **2004 Scheurebe, 1.0 Liter**

This is from purchased grapes. By the time I tasted this I'd tasted several Pfalz Sauvignon Blancs—the variety is recently modish—and all I can say is why on earth do they even *grow* Sauv Blanc when they have Scheu? This wine is all sage and gooseberry and could pass for Sancerre; an honest light Scheu for perverts and for any Sommelier to pour with pan-Asian jujū in all forms.

SOS: 1 (now to three years)

GMS-098 **2003 Muskateller Kabinett Trocken** +

So last year I lifted the glass to my nose and I'm *sure* it's the Gewürz and I'm yammering on to Gregor about how I think his Gewürz is the best in Germany yada yada yada, and he's smiling bigger and bigger and I'm thinking "It's just so great to see how happy my compliments make him" and finally he tells me "This is all very gratifying, Terry, and I appreciate it. Only this isn't the Gewürztraminer in your glass." *Um, it isn't?* "No, it's the Muscat." *Oh yeah, the Muscat; that's what I MEANT to say!*

Hails of derisive laughter from Kevin. Some frickin' expert I am. Vanquished, utterly vanquished. Last time I open my fool mouth. . . .

24 hours later we were at Weegmüller and there was a Gewürz in our glasses. "Boy, do I love the aroma of Muscat," said Kevin. **Hah!** Ze tables are türned, eh stud! I don't even know why you buy wines from guys like us at all, man. A decently trained ape could do as good a job.

SOS: 1 (now to five years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMS-109 **2004 Muskateller Kabinett** +

No site-name. Gregor observes "I think you should only have on the label what you can taste in the glass," so he reserves place-names for Riesling, which always conveys where it's planted.

As good as this smells (and it smells ree-e-ally good!) it tastes even better; actually Riesling-like; minerally, playful, firm; definitely but discreetly Muscat. Perfectly, gently dry with a natural RS of 19g.l..

- GMS-097 **2003 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Yow: this just *rocks!* It's like some wickedly salty plum compôte with just enough clove and star-fruit to perfume the finish; again absurdly long, and with a touch of lees and hyssop.  
**SOMMELIER ALERT!**  
 SOS: 1
- GMS-092 **2002 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Do you dare to get behind a wine two vintages old??? All it does is taste fabulous, pathetic creature that it is. This is slim and piquant and feminine, with a gentle smokiness, adorable fruit and great finesse; bit of the *charcuterie* on the finish. It's wines like this one which cause me to worry I underrated the 2002s.  
 SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)  
**SOMMELIER ALERT!**
- GMS-107 **2004 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 Zingy and iris-y; salty and piquant; it seems markedly sweet until the spicy-minerally mid-palate pulls it down; ethereal finishing perfume. Gregor agrees about the sweetness but says to wait twenty years. I would!  
 SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty-seven years)
- GMS-099 **2003 Rieslaner Spätlese**  
 There were two lots of which this was the sweeter. It's a death-before-dishonor dance of Rieslaner, missing its usual iron backbone but blasting out wave upon wave of super-sized fruit. Bottling and time will urge it out from under the blanket. This has grown far better integrated with a year in bottle; juicy and tasting more Riesling-y than Rieslaner.  
 SOS: 3 (between five and eighteen years)
- GMS-110 **2003 Gewürztraminer Spätlese**  
 First offering. An amazing piece of skill and grace from this Sumo-vintage for Gewürz; it's certainly strong but also winsome and charming, and just plain tasty given its ripeness; a wine to drink with happiness.  
 SOS: 2 (between now and four years)
- GMS-108 **2004 Rieslaner Auslese** **++**  
 From the Altenforst site, though I don't know whether the label will indicate. This is majestic, mighty stuff; seems to emit a glow, with Wagnerian scope and power and flourishing; granular, maize-y fragrances, and a flavor that parades over your palate like an army of heroes.  
 SOS: 3 (between seven and nineteen years)
- GMS-091H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Spätburgunder Weissherbst Auslese, 12/375** **+**  
 I was peering nervously at the assortment we'd already selected. Very big. Please don't let there be any more masterpieces, Daddy please. Oh no; this is just *celestial*. 120° Oechsle rosé of Pinot Noir! WHAT a nose, the purest possible Pinot fruit, like the Bollinger Vieilles Vignes Française; exotic blueberries, ethereal, dewy, wild strawberries; any Pinot Noir lover NEEDS this wine.  
 SOS: 4 (will "keep" for many years, but drink it soon to catch that magic fruit)
- GMS-081H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller BA, 12/375ml** **+**  
 135° Oechsle. This has ravishing purity; picked November 10th from the fruit left hanging after the "little" Muscat was gathered. Riotous psychedelic flower-fragrance; seductive botrytis, quite sweet, but as pretty as a purple pony.  
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty-five years)
- GMS-083H **2001 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **++**  
 A patriarch; all smoke and slate char; smells like essence-of-Schäwer. Quite masculine after the BA and Eiswein, but will ultimately surpass them in sheer compelling breed and will. Its sleek shape is scintillating, even as its ethereal-essence fruit melts your heart. You could fill a page with nuances. A craggy, deep-etched dignity. It's the most winery of them all, has uncanny balance and clarity, and you know, this is like Clos Ste.-Hune or Nikolaihof's Steiner Hund: *Serious Business*. **Extremely limited.**  
 SOS: 3 (between twenty-five and seventy-five years)

# theo minges

## pfalz • flemlingen

Last year I had some yucky chest-cold thing while I was in Germany; it didn't hit the schnoz, luckily—I could still work—but it made me wonder what I'd do if I was KO for a few days and couldn't taste: what then? I'd hope I was laid-out on a day I was scheduled to visit Theo Minges, not because I don't like to see him (I do!) but because I know with this grower as with few (if any) others I could say "Sorry to have missed you; just send what you sent last year." He is that reliable.

Theo was chatty. And he talks *fast*, as if he were on a game-show where you had to speak 25,000 words in five minutes to win the trip to Maui, and you . . . start . . . NOW! (*tickticktickticktick. . .*) So I've learned to listen fast, because he keeps spouting out these gems. Last year I asked him as I asked everyone, whether he acidified. "Almost not at all," he said. "You know, there are growers

who usually de-acidify, and who added acidity this year—who in effect fight against nature, but I see it differently. We are part of the whole; we don't stand apart from nature."

This is a crux of the matter, isn't it! To one sort of vintner, a vineyard is a mere production-unit, a thing which is used like any machine, to bring about a result he's already decided upon. To another sort of vintner, a vineyard is teeming with life. He goes out among his vines, his soils, his breezes, his birds, and listens. None of them speak his language but all of them speak their own, and this he tries to hear. He nurtures his vines and gathers the fruit they give, and follows the will of that fruit all the way to the alchemy of wine. Sure he knows what *font* he likes, but he knows he doesn't write the text; the text is larger than he but includes him. Indeed he is crucial; he takes the inchoate and urges it alive.

At one point Theo described a new vineyard he had purchased: "These are old, solid, proud vines." He said.



Theo Minges

A vine isn't a mere *thing* you manipulate: it is a *being* alive as you are. A fellow-being, a companion.

Minges himself is an old fashioned guy in an old

- **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**

fashioned house; he only just got a fax machine and doesn't own a computer ("Though my daughter has one; I can give you her email address if you want to send me emails," he offered. Somehow I'd rather call. . . .) By the way, you always apologize for your German pronunciations, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

Theo Minges was "thrown in the cold water early" at the tender age of twenty. His father came latterly to viticulture, having originally been a painter, a sensibility which made the transition to viticulture rather comfortable, in Theo's opinion. During the period of euphoria over the new crossings, Minges stayed a classical course, planting only Scheurebe and Kerner, the two most similar to Riesling. Minges was an island of classicism and must feel prophetic now, as so many of the crossings are being hacked out of the ground.

Theo told me something that made me glad. He's planting more and more Riesling each year, thanks to me

(of all people), as I've been a good customer for them. Ain't that sweet? I never pause to consider my patronage might actually make things possible for the growers. Because of me and *you* a great guy like Theo Minges is literally *en-couraged* to produce more Riesling; that makes me feel useful and happy.

Most of the vineyards are on gentle slopes of deep loess-loam, though all Riesling is planted on chalky, stony ground. Unusually, the Fleminger 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 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."

### Minges at a glance:

Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying minerally-leesy wines. Extraordinary value across the board The best, best, best quality large-format wines I have ever tasted ANYWHERE.

### how the wines taste:

Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

#### GTM-083L **2004 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter** +

This is nearly unbelievable; such quality, complexity and stylishness for so little money; powdery minerality, limey bite, juicy extroverted length; believe me, there's plenty of wine with more *affectation* to quality that's nowhere NEAR this good.

SOS: 0 (now to four years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!

#### GTM-082L **2004 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Hardly "sweeter" in any discrete way, but thicker and riper-seeming; it has only its own natural sweetness; it was the first Riesling he picked, and has over 10g.l. acidity you do not taste, engulfed as it is by fruit and a corn-fritter vegetable sweetness. Yummy!

SOS: 1 (between one and eight years)

#### GTM-084 **2004 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

My colleague Jonas asked about Hölle's soil. "It's a multi-cultural soil," Theo answered: I love it. The fragrance is hauntingly like Avize Champagne when it's about ten years old and starts showing jasmine; a lovely palate with much nuance brilliantly *explained*; woodruff and Sencha notes; a peacock's-tail effect on the palate, with pointed acidity buffered by palpable extract.

SOS: 1 (between three and thirteen years)  
SOMMELIER ALERT!

#### GTM-085 **2004 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese**

**CORE LIST WINE.** This is different than I thought it would be—more solid, implacable, powerful. Meyer-lemon fragrance—"quince, linden-blossom, pineapple" says Theo. From a low-lying terrace in a fog pocket, and thus prone to botrytis and dehydrating; a stony papaya-like wine with huge length and grip and a 3-dimensional finish which starts our rocky and ends up like white chocolate!

SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)

- GTM-086 **2004 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese** **+**  
 Given that Minges made the only 2003 Scheu I knew that actually smelled and tasted like Scheu, I approached this wine with bated breath. And it's *superfine* Scheu; a delicate nose in the pink-grapefruit direction; the first wine on the table with marked sweetness; great class and distinction, and again, length; a garden of irises blooming in the glass. Perhaps the finest Scheu in this offering, in part because of that elegant sweetness.  
 SOS: 2 (now to nine years)
- GTM-087 **2003 Gewürztraminer Spätlese "Edition Rosenduft"**  
**First Offering.** Perhaps the single most remarkable wine in this offering. This was picked in October 2003 and bottled in November 2004; in the interim it sat on the gross lees without sulfur, without fining, without acidification—no *NUTHIN'*, dude. And you Turley-hounds will love the 15% alc—but the wine is *crazy*, like flambeed bananas in a glass; it has neither bitterness nor the anticipated schnapps-y finish; it is, literally, amazing! "I was told over and over, you have to acidify it, you have to bentonite-fine it, get it off the lees, add sulfur etc etc, and instead I just let it be."  
 SOS: 2 (now to three years)
- GTM-088H **2003 Böhlinger Rosenkranz Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 First offering. If you like Eiswein but quake at the out-of-control id-crazy zippyness of the '04s, here's a fine, creamy, pure and charming dessert wine for early drinking, perfect for restaurants seeking an accessible rendition of the Real Thing.  
 SOS: 4 (between five and fifteen years)



# koehler-ruprecht

pfalz • kallstadt

We sort of missed the boat last year on Koehler-Ruprecht. Bernd Philippi was in the hospital when I came for my usual March visit (he's fine now, thankfully), which meant I didn't taste till his samples arrived in July, which meant he didn't "make" the catalog, which meant we hardly sold wine. Which is a minor calamity, because these are some of the most original wines in all of Germany.

And Bernd's 2004s are phenomenally good!

This amazing winery's production rhythms often don't congrue with my commercial rhythms, and so I never really get to show you a vintage the way I'd like. Business is brisk at this very trendy winery, and Bernd Philippi doesn't bottle many "sweet" wines any more. His dry wines are surely among the best in Germany . . . but really. Don't even get me started again.

Bernd-Philippi—pardon me: The LEGENDARY Bernd-Philippi—is the master of this establishment and lord of all he surveys. He has taken what was always a successful estate and turned it into one of *THE* estates in Germany. His wines, like his own Falstaffian persona, are larger-than-life. He's been allocating for years now; he's been raising his prices consistently with nary a murmur of protest from his loyal clientele, who are happy just to obtain the wines and who know the value they (still) 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.

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.

- **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**

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 cellar-master or a change Bernd himself desires and has brought about. The wines have all the **weight** they always did, yet they seem silkier somehow, less rugged. Even as Bernd himself continues to chart new territory in egregious debauchery his wines become more and more refined. I like to tease Bernd—he's such an easy target—but in fact I respect him hugely for not becoming his own caricature, and for steering his wines to ever-deepening finesse.

**Koehler-Ruprecht at a glance:**

In many opinions the leading estate of the Pfalz—certainly among the top five. Of those estates, these are the biggest, most massively scaled wines. Extraordinarily old-style approach to vinification: no stainless steel. On an incredible roll the past several vintages.

**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-085 **2004 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

The first dim sense that '04 would be amazing here; woody and zingy and smoky and toasty; original, burly and remarkable.

SOS: 0 (between three and eleven years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

- GKR-089 **2002 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
 GKR-086 **2004 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett** **++**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** We'll ship 2002 while it lasts and then move into 2004. You'll be glad, because the '02 has that wonderful vintage-bouquet, but if you miss it the 04 is an ass-kicker! An original and astonishing nose; it's food as much as wine, like toasted honey-oat bread; a compelling masterly palate with an incomparable melange of disparate elements; lees, balsam, wintergreen, mirabelle, dried peach, orange blossom, yet all in his woody, deep-voiced way. The finish recalls a malty brioche-and-saffron old-school Champagne.  
 SOS: 1 (between three and thirteen years)  
**SOMMELIER ALERT! (PUT THIS ON YOUR SHORTEST-OF-THE-SHORT LIST!)**
- GKR-087 **2004 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 This takes the palate past the speed-of-taste; I've never seen such a crazed interplay of elements; all of the above plus salts and mineral and wild-plums, with glass-clear vivid splashy lift. Without sacrificing his house-style, these '04s take it places it has never gone.  
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty-five years)  
**SOMMELIER ALERT!**
- GKR-082 **2003 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese**  
 Ah, back to the Koehler-Ruprecht I'd come to know . . . and a fine performance from '03: a solid, peony-scented wine with good saltiness and shape and fine, smoky fruit; like prosciutto with mirabelle confiture; rounder and juicier than the '04—more "old-school."  
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty-two years)
- GKR-088 **2004 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese** **+**  
 Naturally, thicker aromas now; candied lemon, lime blossom, spearmint; the palate his the same torque and power, though not quite the hummingbird buzz of the Spätlese; instead this is lavish and seductive and talc-y and even a little chocolatey. What a vintage here!  
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty-seven years)
- GKR-080 **2001 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese** **+**  
 Glorious nose; very fine honey and BA notes, and then the palate surprises: all middle and low tones; clean botrytis; on the dry side; heathery, implied sweetness; a remarkable and characteristic achievement.  
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)



You gotta love this guy. Once he replied to an email from someone who'd seen his website, and who was inquiring about Pinot Noir. Rainer was arguably the first to make serious Pinot Noir in the Pfalz, perhaps in Germany. He wrote: I want to emphasize that I don't want to make a 'Burgundian style' nor a 'New World style.' I want to 'help deliver' what 'naturally grows' in our Burgweg vineyard and what also reflects at least in part our history, our tradition and our heritage. I acknowledge that wine is not all nature (probably never really has been) – the vine, I am sure, is one of the oldest 'domesticated' plants we have – wine is nurtured no doubt, but it depends how far you are prepared to 'break it in'. I find a bronco more admirable than a Lipizzaner . . . a Lipizzaner is not a horse, it's a court-fool! Do you understand what I mean to say?"

I do. And I know these aren't mere words to Rainer Lingenfelder. They sometimes cost. They all-but-ruined two of his past ten vintages, when intervention to avoid mildews was urgently needed. But Rainer would rather not intervene, and if this principle costs him from time to time, so be it. He's printed up some nifty black tees saying "Lingenfelder: the Age of Post-Chardonnism" but when he does the next run I want to suggest putting "Walking The Walk" on the back.

Rainer Lingenfelder's "tasting" room is actually in the dining room of his and Elisabeth's house. It's one of the best places I know to taste wine. There's a pure, creamy light napped over everything, thanks to the north exposure. The walls are pearly-opaline in color, the tablecloth is white, the curtains are magenta—as though to refer to the red wines you're also given to taste. It's peaceful enough to hear a sparrow clear her throat outside the window, but it's not one of those stifling Temples of Tasting where all you want to do is giggle. It is typical of the care taken by Rainer, a care that goes beyond simple diligence.

Everything Rainer does is undertaken with fastidious thought. Everything he thinks and feels also; when you speak with him there aren't any knee-jerk opinions casually tossed off (except *mine*, if I happen to be in the vicinity). One year we were talking about the influence of yield-restrictions on wine quality. Rainer's cousin happens to be the vineyard manager at Chalk Hill, and he's been able to



Rainer Lingenfelder

increase yields with no diminishment of wine quality **by any objective standard of measurement.** "This is a favorite hobbyhorse for wine journalists," says Rainer, "because it's simple and dramatic; low yields equals high quality, and if you're any good you must be working with low yields." But surely there's a great deal of *truth* in this, isn't there? Oversimplified as it might be? Of course, says

- **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**

Rainer, but it isn't the whole truth; it is only true if **all other things are equal.** A vineyard well-cared for will give the highest possible yield consistent with quality and with the long-term health of the vine. The next guy's yields might be lower on paper, but that could well be due to sloppy vineyard management and poor husbandry; HIS WINES WON'T NECESSARILY BE BETTER. Not a very sexy opinion, but it has the texture of verisimilitude: things aren't, after all, reducible to ironclad formulas.

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 have something EXTRA: more concentration, more drive and purpose, more **expressiveness.**

Rainer got around in his wild heedless youth; he migrated to Australia to get work as a bush pilot, he says, but ended up in a winery. He moved to New Zealand and California, to the Médoc, to EGYPT, where he consulted at a winery—the winery—then back to Germany where he made the wines at Sichel for several years; yes, Rainer made BLUE NUN for a living. Finally he realized he couldn't do the justice he wanted to do to his own wines, and returned to Grosskarlbach full time.

“The quality of our wine is determined in the vineyards; one cannot *make* outstanding wine in the cellar,” says Rainer. “The vineyard factor is especially important when one talks about the grape grower’s wines such as Riesling, Pinot Noir, Scheurebe, etc. versus the winemaker’s wines such as Chardonnay. I am interested in primary, grape-borne flavors, not so much in secondary flavors introduced by man such as oak or yeast. We don’t Bentonite fine because it strips too much away, not just protein but also color and flavor. You probably noticed our wines are deeper in color than the wines of many other growers. We’d rather leave all the natural components in the wine, the proteins, the minerals, the acidity, the tannin. We don’t want to ‘polish’ or ‘style’ a wine; we want to allow its original, natural character to shine through.”

Rainer is equally cogent on the contentious subject of Süssreserve: “It’s perfectly O.K. to use Süssreserve. It’s no more ‘unnatural’ to add grape juice to a wine than to stop it from fermenting dry by ‘artificial’ means such as refrigera-

tion, 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 Süssreserve was added.” Rainer’s yields are low and he uses natural yeasts to ferment. He’s a believer in the Neustadt Clone 90 for regionally typical Rieslings. His Pinot Noir goes through malolactic fermentation and spends about eighteen months in barriques of varying type and age.

“I look for *expression of character* [his emphasis]. Character could be many things depending on the style; it could be depth of flavor, or complexity, or fruit, or elegance, or lightness or richness, etc. It is not so important which character it is; the importance is whether the character is clearly expressed.”

Rainer’s 2003 were literally amazing and his 2004s are just as good, maybe even better. This makes me very happy, because Rainer-Riesling is one of my favorite things to drink, and when he aces a Scheurebe it becomes the proudest peacock in the garden.

**Lingenfelder at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

I’ve often thought them perfect pivot-wines for Chardonnay escapees. 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.

NOTE: We are between vintages of Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir) but will resume offering them ASAP.

GLI-078 **2003 Lingenfelder Riesling “Bird Label”**

**CORE LIST WINE.** You might say this took off. Or, I might say it, and you could beat me up. Bird is a merchant-bottling, partly from Lingenfelder fruit and partly purchased fruit. The label, “which was expensive,” is absolutely wonderful, droll and dear and full of whimsy. It started as an experiment for Oddbins, and the wine was well received and Rainer thought-knew!-I’d like it. Why wouldn’t I like it? It tastes like a LINGENFELDER wine in miniature, and I’ll tell you right now THERE ISN’T ANOTHER RIESLING ON THE MARKET WITHIN MILES OF THIS QUALITY AT ITS PRICE. With all my love and esteem for the good Herr Graham, look the hell out. We’re looking for an almost furtive surmise of sweetness-is it or isn’t it?-with a finish that’s graciously dry. The only danger is it’s TOO GOOD for its market “echelon,” but this doesn’t seem to bother y’all since we’re selling the huevos out of this Bird. Why? Because it’s cheep cheep cheep.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to four years)

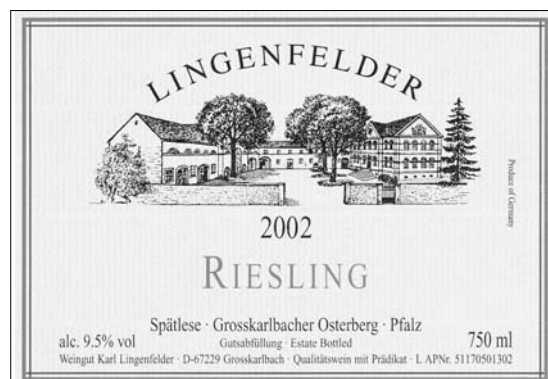
NOTE: The 2003 vintage shows more lemon-pie and nectarine aromas, and it’s (appropriately) drier and more masculine than was the `02. AND, there are other critters in the Lingenfelder menagerie, of which I tasted a wonderful Pinot Gris (with an owl) and a promising Gewürztraminer (with a hare— I guess no half-bottles of that wine, since one hates to, um, split hares . . .), and we may very well offer more animals in due time. Might I propose a wine suitable for lengthy bottle-age with a SLUG on the label? “Have another slug tonight!” is a ready-made marketing slogan. O.K., back to real life.

GLI-093 **2004 Freinhshemer Goldberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

Tank “H3” if you must know. Man, when Rainer hits the dry-wine target he absolutely bulls-eyes it; lovely talc and ginger; the palate is luminous and stately; *peche-de-vignes* dancing with lemon and freesia; nice nubby raw-silk texture; fine salty char on the juicy finish.

SOS: 0 (now to eight years)

- GLI-090 **2004 Freinsheimer Goldberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**  
 (tank M2) (this won't appear on the label; I just wanted to reassure you I actually tasted and made selections!) This is slimmer and more lissome, and as jasmine-y as 10-year-old Blanc de Blancs; the palate is precise and articulate, spicy-gingery with a fruit much like Catoir's Herrenletten, cool, lunar and delicate.  
 SOS: 0 (now to nine years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GLI-089 **2004 Grosskarlbacher Osterberg Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE LIST WINE.** Carries a whopping 8.8 g.l. acidity, unusual at Lingenfelder; indeed this is almost more Meßmer than Rainer, perhaps the most piquant Riesling ever from here; we saw it in three variations and watched the various colors in the hologram of flavor; a curious amalgam of wodruff, lime-grass and malt; redcurranty and brisk, finishing clean and quiet.  
 SOS: 2 (between six and twenty years)
- GLI-080 **2003 Freinsheimer Goldberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 The sheer tenderness here melts the heart. Pure silk and the finest imaginable fruit. A piquant restraint that haunts you. The '04 emerges from the material world: this one emerges from the *mystery*.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!  
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)
- GLI-081H **2003 Grosskarlbacher Burgweg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** +  
 Grown on limestone. This extends the Spätlesen in refinement and length rather than sheer ripeness or density. A delicate botrytis maltiness now, and even more mineral salt, but this is a poem of grace alongside a groaning-board of fruit bounty.  
 SOS: 3 (between five and sixteen years)
- SCHEUREBE TIME!**
- GLI-091 **2004 Grosskarlbacher Burgweg Scheurebe Kabinett Halbtrocken** +  
 Serene, classic Scheu aromas alongside really funky wisteria and purple lilac; this is just about perfect German white wine—forget the grape variety—the lift and brightness and melody here are amazing; almost as mysteriously mineral-fruity as a Nigl Piri; has an irresistible gripping cassis-y finish with lime and spearmint. You hope you will never reach that final sad drop....  
 SOS: 1 (now to six years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOMMELIER ALERT! SOMMELIER ALERT! SOMMELIER F@\*!@!G ALERT!!!!
- GLI-092 **2004 Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe Spätlese Old Vines** +  
 Nose like a marl-grown Sancerre from a ripe vintage: almost lurid (delightfully!); the palate is happily ripe and solid, with real clotted-cream old-vines substance; you want as much to *suck* it as to drink it; splendid length and sheer tastiness given its wry angular essence.  
 SOS: 2 (now to ten years)  
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GLI-082H **2003 Freinsheimer Goldberg Scheurebe TBA, 12/375ml**  
 With a mere 247° Oechsle, this is a wildly exotic syrup, with scents of pork-belly and caramel flan, apple butter and streusel; it flirts with volatility (young unsulfured cask-samples of stickies often do) but it flirts with all kinds of delicious perversions. Drink if you *dare*.  
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)



# neckerauer

## pfalz • weisenheim am sand

This is now TWO wineries; through the 2002 vintage it's Klaus Neckerauer, and starting with 2003 it's Arnd Neckerauer.

For several years now, I'm quite aware many of you thought I was crazy, stubborn or both for continuing to represent Neckerauer. My colleagues, I know, were embarrassed. I took some flak, Jack. Still do.

Of course I saw the wines decline. The estate was undergoing an extremely awkward (and public) transition between father and son's regimes, exacerbated by climactic difficulties almost malevolently implacable.

I began with the wines at the very beginning, in 1985. They were splendid back then, larger-than-

life, from an utterly loveable family for incredible prices, and over the years Neckerauers proved themselves to be perfect suppliers; generous, cooperative and uncomplicated. The decline began in 1995. An Uncle had passed away and left more land than Neckerauers had time to till.

Father's health was (and is) delicate. Son was just starting out. Other than the catastrophe-vintages of '95 and 2000, the wines were good in an earthy old-fashioned way, and I could select the best of them and soft-pedal them, which I did.

Arnd Neckerauer was quite aware of my strategy; I as much as told him. And his stated goal was to take over the proprietorship of the winery, have a friend oversee the majority of the vineyards (from which Liter wines would be made) while devoting himself to going balls-to-the-wall for top quality from the best sites. Since I *knew* the potential from these sites, I had every reason to stay the course. Up to a point.

2003 was THE year. I'd done what I could. I'd risked my own reputation in order to stay loyal; I did it calculatedly and I don't regret it. I believed in Neckauers, but man, Godot needed to like show up and pronto.

Deep breaths as I walked in the door. No eye-contact with anyone, not even Kevin Pike (with whom I was traveling).

*FINALLY, '02 WAS THE VINTAGE WE'VE NEEDED!*

It was like another winery entirely. And different even



from the old glory-days of Klaus' era. The 2002 vintage at Neckerauer showed a *modern* profile of Pfalz wine, emphasizing ginger, mineral and brilliance, with high-toned fruit and clear clean flavors.

This is only the beginning. It's the basic setting-right of the basics, so that

- **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**

truly great things are possible. The future looks brighter at Neckerauer. I dare hope that Arnd, Klaus and I may yet sit with one another a few years from now and feel good that we were loyal to one another during the difficult years.

I ask you to forget any negative impression you may have formed toward this estate and taste the recent vintages without prejudice.

My real long-time customers are also asked to remember those lavish, generous wines with their robust vitality and lovely rustic Pfalz profiles; the things for which we loved Neckerauer in the first place. These wines are different, updated, refreshed.

Weisenheim sits on sand, the original beach of the Rhine. It suffers in dry years, and flourishes in damp ones. Sometimes a single timely thunderstorm makes the difference between a fair and great vintage. The sites are large and impossible to distinguish as you drive by. But Altenberg is exotic and spicy, Goldberg is firm and lemony, Hahnen is doughy and caramelly, Halde is chalky and firm, and Hasenzeile is animal and sultry.

I'm sure Arnd is modernizing the cellar also; I hope he's retired all the old süssreserve his father kept around, which I think was responsible for certain odd varnish-y flavors the wines sometimes showed. I didn't ask for details; I think I was too relieved the wines were

good. We'll suss it out over time. Now that we have time. Arnd is also aware his reputation needs to be resuscitated, and he's set his prices accordingly. He has my fullest respect for being realistic and egoless.

**Neckerauer at a glance:**

Renaissance of quality at a once-moribund estate; modern zingy wines worth a fresh look!

**how the wines taste:**

This is a work-in-progress. The 2002s are authoritatively within the modern Pfalz idiom: mineral, vivid, spicy and firm. '03 and '04 are, yet again, draught years, and many of the wines seemed denuded, weary. Again I selected the best of what was available.

GNE-089 **2003 Weisenheimer Halde Riesling Kabinett**

This is my favorite site in Weisenheim, and the wine's in character; brisk, tight and chalky—it reminds me of Margaine's N.V.—subtle gardenia fragrance, "white" aromas; lively snap on the palate, a nice chalky zing and citric lift. By the way; this is what 27 grams per liter sweetness tastes like; i.e., barely noticeable, and perfectly balanced; what the Germans call a "serving" sweetness, one that supports the other flavors. This is precisely the endangered species the Grosses Gewächs ideologues want to kill off entirely. Let's kill them off instead.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between three and ten years)

GNE-091 **2004 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

A surprisingly chalky fragrance, toasted rye bread, lemon zest; leads into a juicy, firm, gingery palate; again a hint of spearmint into the solid firm finish.

SOS: 0 (now to seven years)

GNE-088 **2003 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Spätlese**

Sandalwood and spice-cake aromas; suave juicy and salty palate; smooth texture but surprising grip; a pretty finish like honey-mushrooms. Has again 27 grams per liter sweetness with its own *dosage*.

SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GNE-086 **2002 Weisenheimer Halde Riesling Spätlese** +

With this wine I knew Neckerauers were back. A lemony-chalky nose and a ripe, detailed, precise palate; classic Pfalz profile (pineapple, ginger, white corn); white lilac; juicy, chalky and vigorous-like all the best 2002s, vivid, happy, wonderful stuff. Great penetration and length here.

SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)

**TEASER:** Arnd was contacted by a collector customer of theirs who was getting on in years and wanted to sell some old wines back to the estate. The cellar is reportedly haphazard, and Arnd hasn't had a chance to dig in and do an inventory. But he did bring a few samples back with him, one of which he thought might be obtainable to the tune of ten cases or so. I emphasize this remains to be seen, BUT: we tasted a fabulous **1959 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Spätlese (++)**, which was as splendid an old riesling as I have ever drunk: profound, malty and estery; monumental, stunning old-wine complexity; tilts between varnish and toasted brioche; lemon-jasmine panna-cotta, an astonishingly complex liqueur; power with exquisiteness, full of echo and evocation, and endless length, growing even more complex and fresher in the glass. You need an hour and I only had ten minutes. But jeez; let's hope this pans out!

Even more remarkable was another 1959, a **Morio-Muscat Spätlese**. You've probably never heard of this grape variety because I've never offered it. It's one of the most egregious of the wave of post-war new crossings, in this case Silvaner with Pinot Blanc, which gave an unlikely aroma strongly reminiscent of Muscat. But it compares to true Muscat as truffle-oil compares to fresh truffles, or as those dreadful car air-freshener things compare to the actual scent they're imitating. Yet this '59, which ought to have been dead since about 1963, was paler and fresher than the riesling, albeit nowhere near as deep, rich and interesting. Who'd a guessed?

# kurt darting

## pfalz • bad-dürkheim

Thank you Helmut Darting, for your best vintage in six years.

Inside Germany they sometimes sniff huffily that Darting makes little sweet-ums for the export markets but cannot be taken deeply seriously as a fine producer, blah-de-blah. Me, I mutter to myself several times a day, thank God for Darting, thank God for Darting . . . .

I do believe the estate tends to ride the vintage, i.e. they are spectacular in years which suit them ('94, '96, '98) and sometimes withdrawn in vintages which don't suit them—the soft ones like '99 and '97 or the dubious ones like the rot-compromised '95s and 2000s. That we sell them marvelously regardless testifies to their drinkability and basic lip-smack-o-rama.

It's like a runaway train, this agency. When things work this well it always seems so easy;

why

can't everybody do it? The ingredients are simple. Outstanding wines at attractive prices. Flexibility in the working relationship. Collegiality in tasting and evaluating the wines. Basic and spontaneous friendliness. Tasting with Helmut you are instantly aware he likes wine, likes making it, likes tasting it, likes thinking about it, is entirely FOND of it. Even with the growers, I'm never entirely sure how much of my heart to reveal when I taste their wines, but with Helmut Darting I can giggle or weep or dance the shimmy.

Until a few years ago the estate was divided between husband and wife, one of whom belonged to the local cop. With Helmut Darting's arrival, the two estates were combined and all the wines estate-bottled. Helmut had an interesting year of apprenticeship as part of his wine schooling: at Müller-Catoir! Now, plenty of young dudes spend time at Catoir, a few each year. The estate is an official "Meisterbetrieb" meaning that students and apprentices may be sent here. I once asked Hans-Günter Schwarz if it wouldn't be possible (theoretically!) to track down all the up-and-coming new superstars by following his various apprentices. His answer surprised me. "Actually, no," he said, "because I don't always develop a rapport or



*Helmut Darting*

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Spielberg and Hochbenn, Ungsteiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Heavy chalky loam, sandy gravel, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 44% Riesling, 8% Weissburgunder, 6% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 4% each Portugieser, Muskateller & Ortega, 3% each Chardonnay & Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties**

sympathy with the young men. It seems to take a special type to want to do things this way!" With Helmut Darting it appears to have been a case of simpatico instantaneoso. Schwarz even gave permission for his pricelist text to be used, in which he describes his rules of vinification, which is how, when I saw it reproduced verbatim on Darting's list, I knew Something Was Up.

If you're unfamiliar with the reductivist's creed, it goes a little like this: every time you handle a wine, you diminish it; therefore minimal "winemaking" above all! The most important thing is to grow superb grapes and let their flavors sing out in the wine. You ferment as slow and cold as possible, with natural yeasts. You rack once and once only, after fermentation. You keep the wine away from oxygen at all costs. After the first racking, the next time you handle the wine is to bottle it.

No fining, no clarification, no de-acidification, Süsreserve only when no alternative avails, and then only a high-grade Süsreserve, itself made reductively. All of this results in wine in which the original grape

character is preserved with an almost unreal clarity.

Darting has arrived among the “classified” estates in Germany, yet wonderful as this is, I can’t help but wonder what kind of wines they’d make if they owned land

in the classic sites of Deidesheim, Forst and Wachenheim. We need someone sensible there to yawp against the dry-at-all-costs insanity.

**Darting at a glance:**

reductively brilliant wines.

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

**how the wines taste:**

Depending on the vintage, either spicy-gingery and firmly bracing, or flowery-polleny with a candied spice and more talc and malt. Basically reductive, as indicated above, yet with the acquisition of certain Grand Cru sites purchased from Basserman Jordan, one sees how classical Darting’s wines can be from outstanding vineyards. All wines intensely, fundamentally varietal.

GDR-126L **2004 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

When this is good there’s no better Riesling value in all of Germany. And, 2004 is *go-o-o-d*. Exotic pineapple fragrance; burst upon burst of gregarious flowery profusions, and as wonderfully sweet-tart as a perfect lemon pie. Nice DRY finish. Come git it!

SOS: 1 (now to five years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDR-125L **2004 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Portugieser Weissherbst, 1.0 Liter**

As always, charming, fresh and lively, with the transparent sweet-grassiness of ’04.

SOS: 2 (now to three years)

GDR-133 **2004 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

I’m happily surprised by the success of this fella, as dry German Riesling doesn’t often compel this much confidence— thanks in part to my own polemics. Well, would they were all as juicy and gulpable as this one!

SOS: 0 (now to three years)

GDR-127 **2004 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**

+

This is really crazily expressive; a pure elixir of orange, tangelo, bergamot; but the raciness of 2004 takes all this sultriness out for a gallop through the snow. Not unlike a Forster Ungeheuer in its caramelly fire, but with this savage energy . . .

SOS: 2 (between two and ten years)

GDR-124 **2004 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**

Exceptionally mineral and with fine, bright acidity; the fruit runs in the grainy-maizey direction and the wine just explodes with vividness.

SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDR-129 **2004 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewürztraminer Kabinett**

Another unusually refined and focused Gewürz from ’04: finely perfumed with the highest and loveliest varietal notes (lychees, roses) and charm out the wazoo. Where the hell is the wazoo? By the way, this demure little “Kabinett” has a mere 102 degrees Oechsle— legally, big Auslese.

SOS: 2 (now to three years)

GDR-128 **2004 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

+

Voluminous and lush, with maize, ginger and lemon; solid and spicy and full of snap; real spice-cake fruit with great length and clarity.

SOS: 2 (between six and fourteen years)

- GDR-130 **2004 Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Auslese**  
 122° Oechsle. “We waited, and waited, and waited, and then we had a night at minus-4 (about 25 Fahrenheit) and said let’s grab it in.” The wine is *massive* and not—or not yet—especially varietal; lavender and purple iris aromas; billowing spicy power, smoky and fiendish and smoldering: a lot of juju for the money.  
 SOS: 3 (now to twelve years)
- GDR-120 **2003 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese** **+**  
 With 115° Oechsle, this climbs to a new level, not of structure or even multi-facetedness—even with 9 grams per liter acidity—but there’s a sort of rumble of volcanic *gravitas* here compared to the rieslings; it seems less sweet, and I’ve never seen rieslaner express so darkly; a wine with an old soul, and the mysterious dignity of a Galapagos tortoise. WHAT a vintage for rieslaner!  
 SOS: 3 (between four and seventeen years)
- GDR-132H **2004 Ungsteiner Bettelhaus Rieslaner BA, 12/500ml** **(+)**  
 Very early days yet for this still-yeasty cask sample, so none of my pinpoint-accurate nailing of each minute scintilla of nuance, but it’s clear this will show typical complexity and authority and power.  
 SOS: 4 (between thirteen and twenty-eight years)
- GDR-131H **2004 (Wachenheimer Mandelgarten) Weissburgunder Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 We’re sort of hoping they omit the (meaningless) vineyard name, so we can concentrate on the very groovy fact this is a *Pinot Blanc Eiswein*. It’s relatively (compared to Riesling) simple in the sense of forthright and direct, but it’s also dee-lish and satisfying, and . . . (*psssst!*) . . . cheap.  
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty years)







