

terry theise estate selections



GERMANY 2006



IMPORTED BY:

MICHAEL SKURNIK WINES

575 UNDERHILL BLVD, SUITE 216 SYOSSET, NEW YORK 11791
TEL 516•677•9300 WWW.SKURNIKWINES.COM FAX 516•677•9301

these 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.

"Within every effort there has to be calm," she recites for him. "Always, in every pose, you have to stop just before the effort becomes pain."

"Sometimes I think...a bird, for example," he says.

"Yes, what about it?"

"To fly, it has to keep flapping its wings, right?"

"Definitely," she agrees gravely.

"I'm not talking about gliding," he says fussily, and her ear opens a little at the sound of the new word. "There are birds that glide without making any effort, but I'm talking about a bird that has to make an effort to fly up."

"Okay." Nili shrugs, wondering where he himself is flying with this.

"And a bird that lives, say, for a year? Two?"

"Let's say."

"And all that time it has to make an effort with its wings, otherwise it'll fall?"

"Definitely."

"But maybe once, like one time in its whole life, it happens that it can fly up high, the highest — for maybe a whole minute — without making any effort at all with its wings?"

She leans forward, shrinking the crease between her eyes, sensing something approaching. "And how exactly does that happen?"

He takes on a mysterious expression. "It gets it from the air."

"I don't get it."

"Like once in every bird's life, the air lets it fly up without making any effort."

She blinks. What is it with these aerodynamic theories all of a sudden?

But he's very serious and focused. "It's like . . ." He searches for an example, his fingers moving, pulling something from the air. "It's like, say . . . a holiday bonus, like the air is giving it a bonus. A discount. Once in a lifetime."

"Oh." Nili laughs with sudden comprehension. "And does it know, the bird? Does it understand?"

He falters. "That's what I keep wondering. 'Cause if it doesn't understand, then it's like the air's efforts are wasted on it, no?"

"I guess so," she answers, delighted.

"And if it does understand, then . . . No, that can't be . . . No. It must not understand, 'cause it's just a bird, with a bird brain. Sure." He gets excited; now that he's made up his mind, his face lights up. "It's something the air does just for fun!"

From the great relief on his face she guesses how long the question has preoccupied him.

"It doesn't even realize it at all! Just that suddenly it feels light, but it's the air that decides: Okay, now you. Playing with its birds, you see?"

Do I see? Nili wonders, looking at him contemplatively.

"And by the way," he adds gravely after a minute, "it's the same with the sea and the fishes."

From Her Body Knows, by David Grossman

Front Cover Photos: Grapes on the vine and in hand at Selbach-Oster, 2005 vintage.
Photos by Hannah Selbach.

"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?

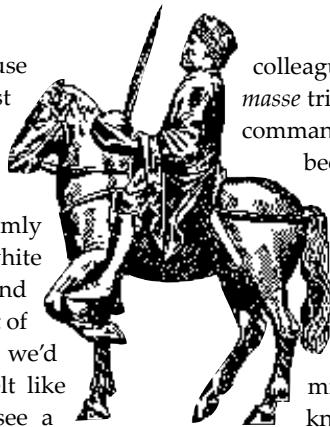


I felt like Charlemagne. That's because it snowed every damn day the whole first half of March, which no one had ever seen before. I happen to love snow, when you can provision the kitchen ahead of time and cozy up to watch it float randomly and coat the world with that sweet white silence. But I had appointments to keep and wines to spit out, so we spent the first part of the month slidin' around wondering if we'd ever see as much as a crocus. But, I felt like Charlemagne. That's because I got to see a thing I almost never see: the vineyards where the snow melts first. This is plain as day and not subject to interpretation. One day I left my hotel in the snow-zone and drove down to see Florian Weingart in Spay. It was maybe 33 degrees when I pulled out and amazingly ten degrees warmer in the Bopparder Hamm, without a sidgeon of snow to be seen.

This is becoming rather less important, some say, because climate-warming is obviating the search for the most favored microclimates. Good modern growers think more in terms of a site's predisposition, such that a Dönnhoff sees his east-facing Leistenberg as "destined" for Kabinett. Yet even so I felt the poetic pull of the old legend of Charlemagne sitting in Ingelheim looking across the river at what we now call the Rheingau, noticing the snow melting first on the Schloss Johannisburg hill. These stories matter; they comprise the texts of myth and poetry, and they help us to remember (as we taste our fourth consecutive vintage of very ripe Auslesen) that growing grapes 50 degrees north of the equator was an improbable act of optimism and resourcefulness. All these years later a few of us realize what remarkable and unique acts of beauty arise from these vines, but in the old days I guess they were just thirsty.

I've been doing this for twenty one years now, but I don't know how that's supposed to feel. I don't discern a bit of nostalgia; it's all as juicy as ever. It might not look like the rah-rah manic eagerness of a gent in his early 30s, but that's misleading; the eagerness is embedded more deeply and plays as a kind of calm. 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 guitar 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. Johannes Geil was Phillip Wittman's roommate at Geisenheim (the important wine-university), Andreas Adam was "Niki" Saahs' (from Nikolaihof) roommate, and has a couple droll stories to tell! 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 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? Hans Selbach said it best (Hans said many

things best . . .): "You can't go into a vineyard and first pull out the cream, then go back and get the milk and then finally the water; you have to leave it be and get all of it if you want to know how the *vineyard* tastes." It is heartening to observe the many young growers exploring this idea.

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.

I used to work with a guy named Anthony Austin. If you knew Anthony I'll bet you remember him; he is a very dear man, as well as the only man I have ever seen land a plug of spat-out-wine into the bucket *while being technically unconscious*. Poor guy was wiped out with jet-lag, but he hit the bucket. Anyway, Anthony didn't say a lot, and was hardly what we'd call "emotive", but one year we were tasting at Christoffel, and Hans-Leo brought out a bottle of his '76 TBA for us. This is an especially sleek and silvery citizen of this sometimes-blowy vintage, and I was so lost in it I barely registered my surroundings. But when I looked up I saw Anthony's eyes were wet. I wanted to hug him. I knew that feeling, the way it steals over you. It doesn't build, it suddenly takes you over. And you wonder *How did it know where to find me? How could I have not known (or forgotten) it was there? What made me think I could live without it?*

Sometimes I want to call this the "Oh so that's what it's about" moment, because it feels both entirely natural and also unequivocal. A couple months ago I sat on the warm terrace of Nepenthe (that most sublime of restaurants) in Big Sur, enjoying a moment of solitude and a badly-needed morning tea. The Pacific was 800 feet below me and as still as a mirror on the windless day. Whales spouted, big-winged birds floated, and the beauty was almost a rebuke: *Don't you dare think you can do without this, Buster*. I felt like I was who I was meant to be, and that feeling always seems to be stunning. But the best thing of all is you don't have to contrive some big vast rapture in order to know this moment: It can live, and lives very easily, in a single sip of wine.

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



View of the Mosel.

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

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

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

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

None of this is valuable if the wines don't taste good.

Josh Greene's interview with me for WINE & SPIRITS suggested that superb quality was a secondary consideration for me, but the truth is I barely consider it at all: It's a *given*. There is a "professional" intelligence that seeks to guarantee every wine tastes good every time. But after all these years 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 context from wine does injury to its being (and if we do love wine, why deliberately injure it?) . . .

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

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 love-making; 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



“Given our enduring attachment to sweet foods, it seems perverse that sugar in wine should so often be judged according to fashion, not flavor. After all, there is no question that sugar and wine can be highly compatible; wine is not like meat or mushrooms in this respect. Moreover, we remain wedded to other forms of sweet drink, even in circumstances where dessert wine would never be considered: we think nothing of serving orange juice with a cooked breakfast or Coke with a burger, yet at more than 100g of sugar per liter (*TT: in fact a whopping 116 g.l. in Coke*), both these ubiquitous beverages are as sweet as Sauternes and three times sweeter than the Riesling Kabinett most likely to raise the sardonic eyebrow of the fashion fascist.”

- Alex Hunt, from “The Foundations of Structure and Texture,” *World of Fine Wine*, Issue #9

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.

Guys like me who like mineral (others call us “rock-heads”, a term I’m quite willing to embrace!) often assume you know exactly what we mean. But maybe you don’t. I’ll try to clarify.

The first thing to know is that some version of this metaphorical idea comes to most wine drinkers spontaneously at some point or other. I remember back in 1988 when I first tasted with Bob Parker and Bob said about one wine *This tastes like crushed rocks*, and in those days he often used the term “wet stones” to depict what we call minerality. It is a flavor of considerable expression — it is quite distinctly there in the wine — but it isn’t fruit.



Stones at Weingart in the Mittelrhein.

Nor is it acidity, nor does it relate to acidity. There’s a prevailing critique that we rockheads use “mineral” to excuse underripe wines, but this is manifestly false. There are many wines of gushingly lavish flavor but whose flavor isn’t delivered on waves of fruitiness, but rather on mineral.

There are wines you could swear had rocks passed through them, or which sat on a bed of rocks at the bottom of the tank or cask. Other “mineral” wines show a more inferential, pebbly profile, while still others seem as

if the rocks were literally pulverized, and the powder strained through the wine. The very finest pass beyond the mere sense of stone into flavors mysterious enough to compel thoughts of jewels. Minerality, I would argue, is a higher form of complexity than fruit, because it doesn't yield to literal associations. It compels the imagination (dare I say the soul?) to ignite. And it will not answer your questions. Search for "fruit" and you'll find it eventually: some combination of apples and pears and melons and limes and there they all are. But search for the *detail* in mineral and you grope fruitlessly. This makes me happy, and it's not as paradoxical as you might suppose. An answered question *halts* the process of thinking, but an unanswered question leaves wonder awake, and this is why I prize minerality highest among wine's virtues. Because these wines pose beautiful mysteries, thoughts of which alert us to the gravity and loveliness and ambiguities of the world.

But I digress. We were making the case for German wines, and here's a way I once made it. 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."



If you like dessert (and who doesn't?), you like dessert wines!

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.



We want our tomatoes ripe, so why not also our wines?



German wines and food: perfect together!

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

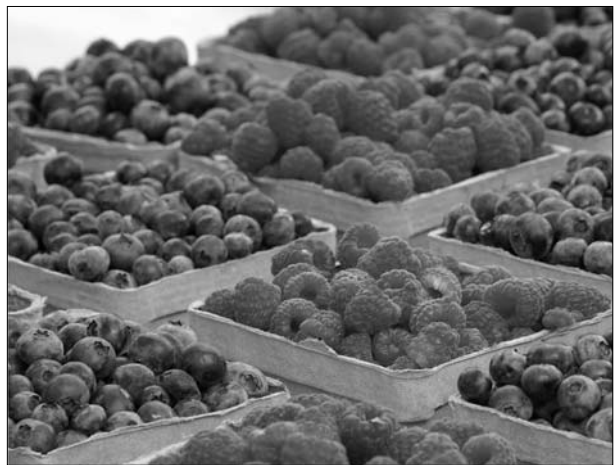


poor because most riesling is planted on mountain-sides, to increase its chance to ripen, and rich soil would be a valanche every time it rained. So the wines are fresh, vibrant and minerally. There. Now you know *everything* you need to know

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.



Unripe berries, anyone? Not!

As such I think Riesling, or indeed any wine with these virtues (Loire Chenins come to mind), can give the "discriminating" palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn't the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We've all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we've all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there's confusion over this issue, and it won't hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn't better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you'll be a better taster, 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 in 2004 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 delicacy 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-ettle 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.



Riesling with acidity and residual sugar pairs wonderfully with many cheeses.

Making the Case for Auslese

I did a little staff-tasting at Charlie Trotter's. Things like these are a dream come true, because I can taste and talk with a group of smart professionals and go to any level I choose. One thing I did was pair the 2004 Kabinett and Auslese from Schmitt-Wagner, and I did it for a purpose. Because when you taste these two wines their *sense of sweetness* is virtually identical. To be sure, you taste the additional ripeness in the Auslese, but in the form of a mid-palate umami that doesn't land sweet. I argued, and they seemed to agree, that matching foods to these two wines was a more sophisticated matter than merely serving "sweeter" food with the Auslese.

We need to make a case for Auslese, because it looks like it's here to stay. Modern vintages have produced it in such numbers there's rather a traffic jam in the market; we don't drink them fast enough, because we don't know when and how we should. I'll try to help.

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.

"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 differ-



ent 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 it's 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 under 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 has to hurl beauty in the wan face of common sense, and it might as well be me!

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

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

There are certain wines with what I'd call iconic status. 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 Johannes Selbach 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 Johannes 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 breached 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. Selbach’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 Selbach 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 Selbach 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.



"Have I got a deal . . . just for 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 happenin' this year, wine **B** will be, and I'll just take the better one. This can perplex or annoy growers who are into "marketing," but that's a dangerous tendency for a vintner in any case and it can lead to ruffled feathers.

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

Last year I wrote this sentence: “There are people who like bitter flavors, but I don’t believe disproportionate millions of them happen to live in Germany.”

This year I am starting to wonder.

The Germans are notoriously averse to their own (perfectly good) tap-water. I don’t recall when I’ve ever seen a German person go to the sink and draw himself a glass of water. What they drink instead is a concoction called *Sprudel*, which is a highly carbonated and (to most non-German palates) aggressively salty beverage. A grower in whose home we stayed gave us a bottle of *Sprudel* for our room, and my wife poured a glass for the bedside. The next morning I reached idly for it, took a sip, and the light-bulb went on above my head. I guess I have magic powers.

The water was significantly bitter, now that it had gone flat and warmed to room-temp. Almost every German drinks such waters from his earliest childhood. And so I find myself wondering whether this might explain their singular attachment to bitterness. Could it be such a deep part of their essential aesthetic imprinting they do not in fact see it discretely?

Because 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 last 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.

Gault-Millau likes to do what they call a Ten Years After tasting. (No, this doesn’t involve Alvin Lee in any way I’m aware of.) Armin Diel told me when they tasted the top-rated Trocken wines of the 1994 vintage “It was striking to see how thin and sour many of them were



Are today’s german wines being “raped into dryness”?

compared to the wines we’re making now.” He is quite correct; modern German dry Rieslings have improved in the last decade. Yet I wonder whether tasting today’s wines in ten years will bring about yet another moment of perspective and clarity.

There’s a certain amount of chatter about increasing U.S. market demand for Trocken Rieslings. Though I offered more of them last year than ever before and will offer even more of them here, I don’t see it. Last year I offered an exquisitely balanced and fascinating “fein-herb” Spätlese from Kerpen, a nearly perfect dry (or dry *enough*) Riesling, and ya wanna know how much y’all bought of it? Two cases, dude. We showed the wine in every DI tasting, including those visited by Martin Kerpen himself, at his own table, commanding your exclusive attention, and I’m sure at least 1000 of you tasted the wine. And two of you ordered it. “Demand”.

I have no doubt there are more successful Trocken Rieslings than ever, though it’s hardly difficult to have produced “more” from such a teensy base. I also agree the ones that do succeed are legitimately world-class dry Rieslings which needn’t shrink from comparison to Austria’s and Alsace’s best. That said, these are still smaller in number than their proponents would have you believe. And the whole matter is rife with group-think and dogma, such that the Pfalz has been suffocated by adherence to an ironclad formula. But let’s take a step back.

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 much of it 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.

Peter Geiben told me a revealing story. He was visited by a trio of consumers who wanted to taste and purchase. What did they wish to taste? *Trocken*, of course. And so a line up of dry wines was duly assembled, along with a single "feinherb" and a "sweet" Kabinett at the end. "It's necessary you taste all the wines," said Peter; "those are the rules!" And when all the wines were tasted, the buyers said "Actually, those last two wines were quite attractive . . ." and when the order arrived the next day, "Not one single bottle of Trocken wine was ordered; only the sweet Kabinett."

So what? So this: such things occur very rarely in modern wine-Germany, where people seem to have lost



Trendy Trocken wines drinkers — too often concerned about image rather than "taste."

any sensual connection they may have had with what actually gives them pleasure. 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 natural residual sugar. And, the dry wines of those days were usually aged in Fuders, not steel, and aged longer before bottling, thus helping to round them. When microfiltration and temperature control became available, most producers opted to use these new technologies to make sweeter wines. Thus "tradition" changed when it **COULD**; changed, you might say, into a new or re-defined "tradition." 100 years from now it's quite possible SWEET wines will be seen as "traditional" and dry wines as an aberration.

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

It's 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 "Troocken".

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

That way the poor deluded clown who absolutely must drink a commodity called "Troocken" 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 Troocken 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 "Troocken" 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 Troocken wines in order to regain market share they were losing to the Alsations and Italians. They invented the whole catechism of theological explanation AFTER THE FACT, as it wasn't too cool to

simply say "Um, we can make dry wines too if that's what you all want to drink." And now an entire generation of wine drinkers in Germany are brainwashed to drink dry. Now comes the irony. The new breed of consumer thirsty for dry wines has discovered *once again* that other countries can produce a more palatable product in that style, and all of Germany is awash in cheap Pinot Grigio! To which I can only say: yay. Serves 'em right. This problem is so pernicious that Stuart Pigott published a wonderfully impassioned book whose stated purpose is to remind the Germans that many of the world's most exquisite white wines grow in their own back yards. Yet I seem to be the only person who sees the whole sorry phenomenon as an inevitable result of the Troocken 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 " s w e e t "

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!

Later on I had this note from Weingart, which is so apropos I reproduce it verbatim: “While “Anarchie” maybe implicates a total abandoning of normal categories that is actually not what I intended. The “Anarchie” is a natural — non-chaptalized — wine and we would like to show this on the label by using the Prädikat. “Anarchie” refers to the fact that it crossed my plans when it stopped fermenting naturally but in doing so revealed a perfect harmony that I would not have found intentionally. It does not fit in the category halbtrocken but should we care if the result is ideal balance? “Anarchie” just likes to say that every wine is an individual, and that this wine taught me to respect that by naturally finding a balance of residual sugar. We don’t want to negate the necessity of regulations and categories but find that life itself and enjoying wine is an experience beyond categories.”

Oh, AMEN!

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.

By rough count I’m offering around 45 wines either Trocken, Halbtrocken, “feinherb” or Grosses (or Erstes) Gewächs), each one of which I believe in and hope you will buy. Please show me this demand you tell wine writers about!



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.

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 one 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 ballgame 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 wonderous 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 2005 Vintage

This, of course, as you know already, is the vintage of the century, everywhere. I mean, the kids can wait another year for college, right? *Daddy needs wine.*

In Germany it started unassumingly enough. Most reports described a normal summer, perhaps a bit cool, certainly drier than they'd have wished (as the vineyards are still not fully recovered from the drought of 2003), though vegetation was, once again, "ahead of schedule". Expectations, to hear it told, were moderate. Johannes Selbach says, "2005 already looked like it was going to be a good if not very good vintage in late August but then, week by week under blue, sunny skies, made astounding but quiet progress to the point the wild boar knew before us how tasty the grapes already were."

But we're ahead of ourselves, and if there's a lesson to learn about 2005 it is that this is a heterogenous vintage, a puzzle of which no two pieces are identically shaped.

It is shaped almost entirely by micro-climactic factors. Generally the further south you go, the more problematic the harvest, as several heavy rainstorms led to a rampant invasion of oogies, which is the technical term for "things we don't want to see in the vineyards and on the grapes." Canopy trimming seemed to be decisive in the southerly regions, and I heard several stories about creative bunch-thinning, including one grower who cut away the *centers* of each bunch so that air would flow to the tops and bottoms. Where rot was in play, the harvest was spectacularly rapid, completing in as little as two weeks, and ending by mid-October. One needs to detail this vintage region by region, and even village by village in certain cases. But one thing is certain: the further north one went, the better the results. And other things being equal, 2005 favored steep slopes. Again in Johannes Selbach's words: "We only realized to the fullest extent that we were dealing with a great vintage when we had started harvesting.

"The summer was not spectacular, just "normal", but the weather from around August 20th throughout early November was textbook weather for Riesling: Long, sunny days with warm but not hot temperatures and nights that cooled off a bit. The grapes were simmered to ripeness, not cooked — ideal for a long hang-

time and lots of flavor. Due to the rather dry year, we experienced smaller sized berries and more loosely packed bunches, particularly in the old vineyards. Rain in the 2nd week of September spurred the first infections of botrytis on the Mosel but not on a broad scale and without any problems of gray rot or penicillium. In fact, foliage and grapes remained astonishingly healthy well into late September though single berries started developing noble rot.

“Almost the entire harvest was done under blue skies and very pleasant, if not too warm, temperatures. We were glad we have the means to chill the juice since the first days of the harvest saw rather warm grapes. Days over 70° were frequent and on October 26th we still had a record 77° during the day. Twice during the harvest we barbecued and ate outside with the vineyard crew, once at the end of October after a day of picking BA and TBA (those memories stick!).



This face tells the story of the extraordinary vintage at Selbach-Oster.

“By the letter of the German Wine Law all of our grapes qualified for QmP, only two batches of grapes were Kabinett and everything else was Spätlese and higher, often much higher.

It was possible to collect shrivelled, botrytised berries from day-1 and, based on past experience, we did. It was also easy to make clearly defined runs through the vineyards for different grapes, with or without botrytis and to easily differentiate even within the botrytised grapes. And, yes, the later in October, better even early November, the more and more beautiful the botrytis.”

Johannes’ portrait of a glorious harvest was echoed by nearly everyone along the Mosel, Mittelrhein and Nahe.

And what of the results?

As a rule 2005 is a vintage of generosity and power, not musclebound, but fit, no flab. If you look at analyses you might wonder whether acids were adequate, but you wouldn’t if you simply tasted the wines. They are big-bodied beings by German Riesling standards — though far from corpulent — but much of their bodies are taken up with a tactile mineral density and (sometimes) a phenolic muscularity which stands in for acidity-as-such. One or two people claimed ’05 was “like a cross of ’01 and ’03” which makes a certain sense, though at best ’05 is better than both earlier vintages. They are marked by a wonderful *solidity*, as if you could just as easily eat as

drink them. Yet again, at their frequent best, their mass does not preclude remarkable detail and intricacy.

MOSEL-SAAR-RUWER. With the Nahe this is the star of 2005. Many were the growers who told me they couldn’t remember a greater vintage, and in one instance I agreed. Comparisons to the Great One of the modern era — 1971 — were made even by those usually reticent. Though I noted small variations (like those in hand-sewn garments) among producers, the least among them offered strikingly expressive, dense, one dares say majestic wines, while the greatest of them (keep reading!) offered the single greatest vintage I have ever tasted from any grower anywhere, any time. The “typical” 2005 Mosel is a wine of staggering ripeness and concentration yet still elegant and transparent. When botrytis occurs it is miraculously clean and almost always integrated perfectly within mineral and fruit. Even more delightful, 2005 doesn’t whomp the growers with its own character so much as let *them* express their particular voices with a text such as they have never spoken. Merkelbach, Schaefer, Loewen, all of them are wonderfully themselves, yet cooking with jet-fuel.

NAHE: Ditto! With no discernible variation between a Hexamer on the upper Nahe and a Kruger-Rumpf on the lower Nahe; it’s fabulous everywhere. If anything Nahe seems even sleeker than Mosel in ’05. Diel thinks it’s the best vintage in his winery’s history. At Dönnhoff all we could do was taste and laugh.

MITTEL RheIN: At times the wines flirt with over-ripeness, such that Weingart had (even) better results from his Fürstenberg than from the (warmer) Bopparder Hamm. Jost’s wines were generous, gorgeously so at the “Kabinett” level, less striking from Auslese on up. Indeed, one is within one’s rights putting *Kabinett* in quotes for every 2005 wine bearing its moniker. Don’t be no such thing as no “Kabinett” in ’05.

RHEINHESSEN: very good closer to the Rhine (Geil and Strub) and extraordinary in the hilly hinterlands near the Nahe (Wagner-Stempel, whose wines are essentially Nahe in all but name anyway). Generous, fruit-driven wines.

PFALZ: This is a true patchwork, You’ve heard the oft-repeated cliché “The next village had rain but not us” (variations abound: maybe the next village *didn’t* get the needed rain, or it had an infestation of toxic spiders or whatever) but everyone in the Pfalz seems to have enjoyed some crucial advantage over the guy





down the road. From what I tasted; from Bad Dürkheim north it was a ripe botrytis vintage, though nothing like the catastrophes of 2000 and 1995. In the “classic” Mittelhaardt (south to Neustadt) I’d describe a very good to fine year with isolated peaks of genuinely stellar wines. The average quality is genial, juicy, forthrightly mineral and animally satisfying. In the Südpfalz my two guys had lovely vintages, perhaps even more lacy and sheer than their northern siblings.

One’s own psychology as a taster has to be accounted for. When *all* you taste are big ripe wines they become an unreasonable baseline, and you pick nits no one else would notice. There’s a sense in which you almost can’t believe what you’re tasting; everything can’t possibly be this good, there’s nothing *not to like*.

Unlike 2003, ’05 is a fine vintage for grapes like Scheurebe and Muscat; all it does is ratchet their ornery selves up a few notches. It seems a better vintage than most for the dry wines based on the number I selected, which include some of the best dry Riesling I’ve ever tasted.

If there are “issues” with ’05 — and when are there not issues? — there’s the occasional bit of volatility (none of which made it into this offering) and the more-than-occasional bit of gnarly botrytis in the southerly regions. There’s also the matter of the short crop, and the paucity of true-Kabinett. I freely acknowledge that two kinds of drinkers will be cool toward many (not all) ’05s; those who enjoy light delicate wine such as cool-vintage Kabinett, and those who like an explicit jab of acidity in their Rieslings. The Kabinett matter is more vexing. It’s prima-facie ridiculous to buy these big fellas of (often) over 90 degrees Oechsle as “Kabinett”, and it tempts you into thinking “why should I buy Auslese if the Kabinetts are actually Ausleses?” The answer to that question, by the way, is because the Ausleses are actually Beerenausleses and no matter what you buy you’re getting a two-class *upgrade*. But still, seekers of the gauzy German Riesling experience will have to wait till next year, when I am already assured they’ll be produced.

Explicitness doesn’t preclude subtlety, you know. There is, you might say, subtle subtlety and obvious subtlety, and even when 2005 sings *fortissimo* it sings a jazz chord of many notes.

Vintage Highlights:

I think I’ll omit the “usual suspects” (Dönnhoff, Catoir, Schaefer) from these groupings lest they dominate them. You already know great estates will have made great wines. Here’s a few things you might not have known.

The Winery Of The Vintage is, with no doubt whatsoever, Selbach-Oster. I have never experienced such a range of masterpieces, all of them, at every level of ripeness and from every different vineyard. Indeed I’d place S-O at the top of the heap even with Dönnhoff et.al. included. I’ll go into detail in Selbach’s text, but in essence: sheesh!

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Selbach-Oster** – Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese 2-star

THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Schlossgut Diel** – Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese

THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Schlossgut Diel** – Scheurebe Spätlese (don’t hate me; there’s only 35 cases!)

THE KABINETT OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Spreitzer** - Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

- ★ **Wagner-Stempel** – Silvaner Trocken (have I ever tasted better wine from this variety?)
- ★ **Koehler-Ruprecht** – Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken
- ★ **Jakoby-Mathy** – Riesling “Balance” (a masterly recreation of an old style of Mosel wine with barely perceptible but absolutely necessary RS)
- ★ **Ansgar Clüsserath** – Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese (a majestically powerful and dignified wine from this emerging star)
- ★ **Hoffman-Simon** – Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling TBA (in . . . barrique! And it *works!*)

THE GREATEST CORE-LIST WINES IN THIS COLLECTION ARE:

- ★ **Kruger-Rumpf** – Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese
- ★ **Eugen Müller** – Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese

THE SINGLE GREATEST VALUE IN THIS OFFERING IS:

- ★ **Strub** – Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett LITERS

SHORT-LIST FOR ROCKHEADS:

- ★ **Dr Deinhard** — Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese
- ★ **Kruger-Rumpf** — Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Kabinett

SHORT-LIST FOR FRUIT-HOUNDS:

- ★ **Weingart** — Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Spätlese
- ★ **Leitz** — Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese

SHORT-LIST FOR CHARM-PUPPIES:

- ★ **Gysler** — Scheurebe Halbtrocken LITERS (just *try* to resist it!)
- ★ **Hexamer** — Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese
- ★ **Schmitt-Wagner** — Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett
- ★ **Merkelbach** — Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #3

THE TROCKEN WINE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:

- ★ **Schlossgut Diel** — Pittermännchen Grosses Gewächs



As to the matter of dessert-wines, there are: a lot of them! They are mostly very ripe (TBAs all well over 200 Oechsle) and I had the anticipated difficulties marching my poor palate through them. I have no doubt egregiously underrated many, but what is one to do with dozens of still-cloudy fig syrups? I tasted for cleanliness (in terms of botrytis) and for clarity and outline; finally for emerging flavors *not* borne of botrytis.

As always, certain associations recur through my notes. That's partly a matter of temporary infatuation following a discovery, like the time I first smelled an infusion of *tilleul* (linden-blossom) and **ah-hah!** That's what I've been smelling in all these Rieslings, and "tilleul" appeared in my notes constantly until I got tired of repeating it. I don't disavow it, mind you; it's there, or it might as well be. This year I caught aloe-vera in everything, sorry. But to the matter at hand.

The "typical" 2005 is a mélange of elements in roughly symmetrical proportions. **Fruit** often refers to an heir-

loom apple fairly common in Europe but only known to insiders and apple-connoisseurs here; the cox-orange pippin. "Cox-orange" is a common descriptor among German-speaking tasters. The apple is small and ripens quite late — does this remind you of a certain *grape-variety*? — and is true royalty among apples, with a keen and balanced flavor tilting a little in the white-nectarine direction. **Minerality** seems omnipresent as a kind of dense powder dispersed through the wines; it is seldom aggressive or edgy but it's softly categorical. **Herbal** flavors also abound, and this is where the aloe-vera comes in. Sometimes you smell pure wintergreen, sometimes balsam, and sometimes a cool greeny savor like a shady Spring forest. Finally, 2005s are marked by their nearly absurd length. We think of a wine's "finish" as a little final shimmer which slowly fades, but these '05s seem to build stadiums and dams on your palate. It is *hard* to taste them quickly. They don't so much end as consent to be abandoned; you will be invaded by a profound solidity which afterward you can almost chew.

So, is 2005 the "great" vintage it has been claimed to be? In the Mosel and Nahe, quite probably yes. In the Rheingau, plausibly (I only hedge because I only tasted my two guys' wines) but in the Rheinhessen and Pfalz I wouldn't go that far. There, '05 is an excellent to remarkable vintage in which certain estates exceeded the norm and made truly great wines, but this is different from proclaiming a "great" vintage.

As regards the Mosel and Nahe then, how great is it? Potentially an all-time great, and certainly the kind of vintage that only comes along 2-3 times in one's drinking life. It's a little awkward as regards the "market" but I have a home-made proverb that says *The best possible thing will always happen at the worst possible time*. I mean, think about it, the last five vintages: 2001: almost uniformly great and classic. 2002: nearly as good, and in some regions even better. 2003: a grand monumental vintage along lines of '76 and '59 (but better than both). 2004: a "typical, classic" vintage of the kind that would have been a standout in the 60s or 80s. 2005: at best perhaps the very best of them all. I'm out of space in my cellar too! But I'll make room, somehow, somewhere, for a huge mess of the best '05s.

Earlier Vintages Revisited — 2004

One is fond, one is *awfully* fond of this vintage, even though many of its wines (Pfalz and Rheinhessen especially) taste as though they contained 10% Sancerre, but tasting them in contrast to the bigger '05s was like splashing ice-water on your face when you've come in from the heat. That said, they are "smaller" than '05, but none the worse for it. Their ripe-green flavors continue to charm — I *like* verbena — and one is delighted by their juicy poise. No vintage-fragrance has really emerged yet, though this is usually takes another couple years. 2004 is a reassuring sort of vintage, showing the true state-of-the-art among quality growers in a "normal" good year, and helping us to prize the essential virtues of *goodness*. I have re-offered '04s whenever they were precious or in cases when the '05 wasn't as good.

2003

I doubt if I tasted more than a few the past several weeks. In a sense growers didn't *need* to show them — 2005 has most of the same virtues but with more grip and typicity — and in another sense those estates with still-unsold '03 Auslesen have given up the fight, at least for now. The really smart ones will hold wine back and re-release them as "library wines" in 2014, at which time we'll suddenly realize how we underrated this amazing vintage.

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.

German Riesling is always musical. Often (perhaps usually) it's like chamber music, pensive, intricate, many-layered and compelling of attention. 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.

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!

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. 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 them 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 Vino-lok 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



Just say no to corks.

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

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

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 *pitiably* aware of foreign markets, these folks; they're the same villians who want all German wines to be DRY.

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

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



If only Terry were "King of the World!" . . .

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 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. If one of you well-



meanings but disastrously wrong-headed 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.*

You will also avoid a bizarre polarization you yourself created with your dogmatic rigidity. For a grower can — and almost always does — bottle a dry wine from his peak-site called *Erstes Gewächs*, and another from the same site called Pudyanker Slugberg Riesling Spätlese, and what's the "market" to make of that? "But wait . . . aren't those from the same vineyard . . . ? Why isn't the Spätlese also *Erstes Gewächs*?" Ah, you see; because the presence of the dreaded *residual-unmentionable* means that it cannot be sold under the banner of a "great growth".

And all this was done in order to . . . simplify?!?!? What it does *in fact* is merely to **stigmatize** the wine with sweetness, and so its effect is to advance a thinly veiled agenda.

People can make any points they want, but I'd prefer they be made openly. By the efforts of these apostles of marketing it becomes clear they seek to brainwash the "market" into despising Rieslings with sweetness (and accepting the so-called "noble-sweet" dessert wines doesn't count, pal!) and it's the sneaky stealthy manner in which it's being done I find so repugnant.

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 "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?

A palate is two things: first and most important, it's the *quality* of attention you pay to what's happening on it. Second, it's experience; both in duration and intensity. Each of us relates to our palates based upon our temperaments, i.e., a geek will have a geeky relationship with his palate; a right-brainer will have an elliptical and inferential relationship with his palate. A linear, cataloguing type will organize his palate like a well-oiled machine. No single system is the "best"; it's most important that we have the relationship *that comes naturally*. If you try to force it, you're doomed to frustration.

These relationships change over time. I was an obsessive note-keeper when I began, and now I barely take notes at all when I'm not working. It used to be quite necessary for me to dissect each wine, partly because I thought it was the best way to learn, partly because I wanted reassurance I *could* do it. Now I know I can, and the delineation of wines' *parts* is less engaging to me than to grasp the *gestalt*, the shape, the Whole.

I've also learned to trust any impulse that emerges spontaneously. I may not share these with everyone (sometimes not with anyone), but I know what I mean by them. The world's greatest guitarist (the astonishing Mr. Allan Holdsworth) doesn't read music, but has a self-developed system which works for him. Lately I've been considering the question of synesthesia, the cerebro-neurological phenomenon whereby certain people "hear" colors or "smell" sounds. I suspect some aspect of this lives in all of us along some sort of continuum. I find myself thinking of wines in terms of colors. Sometimes this has true cognates: If I think "purple" it is usually a wine that smells of iris, violets, lavender and other purple things. If I think green, yellow or orange that has to do with a wine's nature, or what I grok its nature to be.

I do think that those of us who make our livings using our palates would do well to think about what types of palates they are and how we relate with them. Part of why I worry this question is that 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).

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

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 congue.

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 **bind-**

ing 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 lovely, unfussy pleasure we all deserve. 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 minerally; 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 lay-people are present. This is, you may already have guessed, THE SULFUR PROBLEM. Some young Mosel wines (and in *very* isolated instances non-Mosel wines also) may have a cheesy kind of whiff about them. This is a little unbound hydrogen sulfide that usually comes



from the lees and can be present in wines which are racked late. Certain growers *like* to keep their wines on the primary lees after fermentation to give them more stuffing and texture. It’s a great idea and it makes for wines that age splendidly, but that cheesy smell can be a nuisance if you try and drink the wine too soon.

So don’t!

The problem is, we are tasting and sampling those

wines commercially at *exactly* the most awkward moment. If you encounter such an aroma in a young Mosel Riesling, try swirling the glass for a few minutes; it will dissipate. The number of minutes it takes to dissipate is roughly the number of *years* it will take 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 2005s 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 TBAs 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 its 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.

The Question of Tartrates

Now and again we get a pick-up request due to tartrates in the bottle.

When I was starting out some 27 years ago, every grower's pricelist had a disclaimer to the effect that tartrates are a naturally occurring substance and no cause for refund or return. I wish we all could do the same.



After all, haven't we been taught to prize *Vin non filtré*? Don't we feel *great* looking at all that muddy goop in the base of a red-wine bottle? Yet two threads of potassium bitartrate in a bottle of white wine and people start returning bottles. It defies reason.

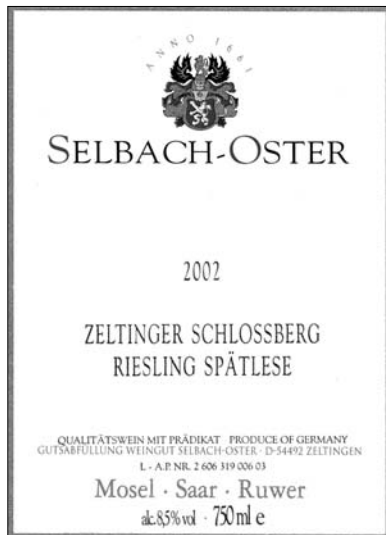
A retailer I know had a case of wine, seven bottles of which were throwing tartrates. He put these alongside the "clean" ones and charged a Dollar more for them! "Special unfiltered cuvee!" I believe he wrote. All seven of those bottles sold before the first clean one was bought.

At worst tartrates are entirely benign. At best they're an active sign of superior quality, because potassium bitartrate won't precipitate without a lot of *ripe* tartaric acid in the wine, the acid from *mature* fruit. Yes, you can eliminate tartrates before bottling by cold-stabilizing, but some growers dislike what they feel (with justification) is an unnecessary handling that can sap a wine's vitality.

Don't get me wrong; we're not urging growers to encourage tartrate formation in bottle. In fact we're not discussing it AT ALL. Nor should we! Nor should you. If you buy a wine with tartrates from me (or anyone else) you have my blessing to hang a sign *WINE DIAMONDS: A SIGN OF SUPERIOR QUALITY!*

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 Seargent 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 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 2005 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. The whole experience of 2005 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 reports 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 shortcut 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.

This was especially apropos in both 2003 and 2005, largely because of the Kabinett “problem”. That is, the paucity of *actual* Kabinett, in favor of wines of (sometimes) legal-Auslese ripeness labeled as Kabinett. Many Mosel growers used what little they picked below 90 Oechsle (weak Auslese but still above the legal minimum) for Kabinett: 90-100 was Spätlese and over 100 was Auslese. Back in 1983 most growers didn't pick *anything* above 100 Oechsle and were happy to bottle Auslese with 90 degrees; times have changed.

But what's to be done about the sweetness? If your Kabinett usually has 80 Oechsle and 40g.l. sweetness, the same 40g.l. will taste deficient with a markedly riper must. If you calibrate the sweetness to the actual *wine*, the result may be too sweet for “Kabinett”. I must have tasted 25-30 wines with misjudged sweetness based on this very conundrum. *Dosage* was either the solution, or would have been.

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 than to actually work them.

In Flurbereinigung, the entire expanse of a vineyard is

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

But here's a curious twist. Every parcel of vineyards in Germany is categorized by quality — categories A, B, or C — so that when the vineyards are reapportioned the grower gets back nearly the same proportions of A B and C land he gave up. Makes sense. But also raises a very sneaky question: Why does anyone still quarrel with the idea of a vineyard classification *when it has already been done??* And is already being used! Show me a grower who fumes that vineyard classifications are undemocratic and I'll show you a grower who'll fuss to **high hell** if he gives up A-land and gets B-land back.

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: There must have been a hole in the ozone layer when they permitted this term to be used. Because they didn't *control* it, and this is most scandalously fungible, sensible and un-Teutonic. In fact *feinherb* means whatever a grower wants it to mean. It always denotes a wine on-the-dry-side, and in practice, as one grower told me, the local wine-inspector tolerates anything up to 30g.l. residual sugar especially if the wines tastes as if it should have 70. For some growers *feinherb* are their dry-ish wines above the limit for Halbtrocken. Others use it in place of Halbtrocken because (correctly) they despise "Halbtrocken".

When I first started seriously with wine, *herb* was the word growers used to indicate their dry (or dry-er) wines. "Trocken" was unknown. So "feinherb" is an attempt to rub a little spit on it and make it sound nice. The word is neither here nor there, but the idea of regulating it *sensorily* is so manifestly sensible I wonder why they don't apply it to all the dry wines instead of obsessing over lab figures. Enjoy this wee glimmer of sanity while it lasts, as I'm sure some constipated twit at E.U. Brussels HQ will wrestle it into his airless little box.

Plusses and The Quest For Perfection

You'll see one, two or three plusses next to certain wines in the following text. They are how I formalize the answer to your oft-asked question "What must I not miss under any circumstances?" That is, they are my short-list of "musts".

Every wine in this offering gets in because I like it a lot. Certain ones are especially striking; firsts among equals, if you will. To these I give a plus.

Less frequently, a wine really stops me in my tracks. It announces its greatness; it is aristocracy. It gets two plusses.

And on very rare occasions a wine is utterly transporting. It stops conversation, it seems to slow time down, it conveys a nearly divine spirit of beauty. To these one or two wines per vintage, I write three plusses.

This "scoring" scale is deliberately vague because I think any attempt at greater definition is misled, misleading and even pernicious. I barely *think* about it at all; it registers immediately, and if I find myself thinking about it I grow very irritated.

Any evaluative scale presumes upon some notion of perfection. For years Gault-Millau refused to award any restaurant more than 19.5 on its 20-point scale, saying, correctly, that perfection was unattainable. Then they relented and gave the full 20 to Marc Veyrat, causing him plenty of indigestion I'm sure, and compelling the question of what they'll do when, inevitably, they find some restaurant they think is *even* better.

But I understand the feeling, the sense of sublimity and the ache it creates, and the desire to convey such an exaltation of emotion in a way equal to its intensity. It is very natural and human, but it doesn't always do good.

David Schildknecht has found a way out; he defines perfection as "better than which cannot, at that moment, be imagined." Because in the essence of the Moment of Beauty one is quite certain that all such moments are fundamentally *equal*, and one sees how fatuous it is to catalogue or quantify them.

I'm wearing two hats when I taste for this portfolio. I'm just a guy who loves wine and I'm also a merchant with a network of obligations to fulfill. When I tasted Spreitzer's "303" this year I was mindful I wrote three plusses for the '04. If I didn't do so again, readers (and buyers) might think the wine had "slipped" — there are meta-messages in all things — but in fact I wrote one plus because that was the truth of that wine on my palate at that moment.

Sometimes I wonder how I receive beauty. I've been corresponding with Jacqueline Friedrich as she prepares her new book, and the notion of "perfection" came up.

Here's some of what we wrote:

JF: *Re Deiss and ZH: I wonder if you agree with me on the following proposition: maybe, just maybe, there are other wines this inspired and heartstopping in the world. But I can't imagine wine being "better" than this. I mean, how much can you demand of a wine? How much can you demand of Bach? Deiss and ZH are making the vinous equivalents of the Mass in B Minor.*

TT: I'd love to see you answer your own rhetorical question "How much can you demand of a wine?" That's the kind of wine-writing I just can't read enough of. I'd also find it fascinating if you identified your own tipping-point, i.e. what exactly is it that finally convinces you a wine is "perfect"? For me, a wine enters my palate and the first thing I notice is its gestalt, followed by its innate flavor — or Flavor — followed by any intricacy it unfolds, followed by a sense of the harmonies of those elements, followed by a sense of their length. And all of these things can amount to a sort of hypothetical "perfection", but my own tipping point is a feeling of sadness. This is an aspect of my own response to beauty — or, again, Beauty — to which I'm especially sensitive. When I feel the wine has sent me somewhere, or perhaps taken me somewhere, larger, older and deeper than itself, then I feel the presence of the sublime. And that is my marker for perfection. It's no accident your analogy was to religious (i.e. divine) music. Or so I suppose.

JF: *One of the problems — as we all well know — is finding the words to describe intensely sensual and subjective experiences. I use the word subjective in a restricted sense. I do believe that there are objective standards -- for painting, music, wine, etc. but once we agree on those, then the value or reaction or whatever becomes subjective. [So] let's ditch the word 'perfect.' it's too loaded and reminds me too much of numbers.*

TT: In a sense I don't care what we call it, and I agree with your wariness about "perfect". But maybe we have to find SOMETHING to call it, I think. And we have to describe it somehow, so that people have a chance to see what we mean. For me it is a quality of incandescence. And you're absolutely right, it isn't like comparing a 100-watt with a 60-watt bulb and saying the 100-watt is X-percent "better" or closer to some notion of perfection. It is something that *suddenly* blazes into light.



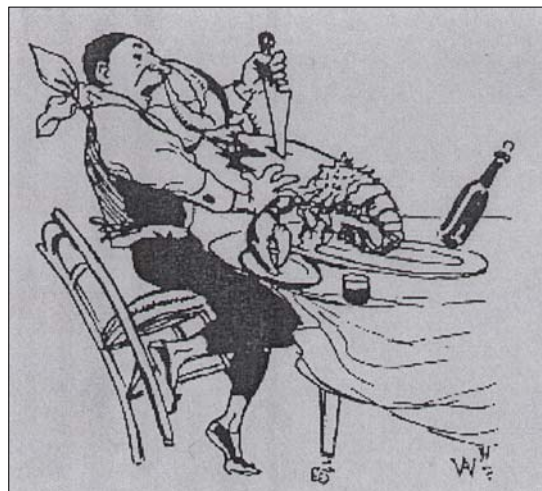
SOMMELIER ALERT!

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-264	2005 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	.49
GSO-244	2004 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett	.49
GSO-265	2005 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett	.49
GSO-266	2005 Selbach-Oster Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Kabinett	.49
GSO-268	2005 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	.49
GSO-270	2005 Selbach-Oster Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese	.50
GSO-263	2005 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese	.50
GJM-051	2005 Jakoby-Mathy Riesling Balance	.54
GJU-089	2005 Meulenhof Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	.56
GJU-090	2005 Meulenhof Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett	.57
GJU-091	2005 Meulenhof Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese	.57
GME-138	2005 Merkelbach Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett	.59
GME-135	2005 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese	.60
GME-137	2005 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #4	.60
GME-139	2005 Merkelbach Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese	.60
GME-141	2005 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese #14	.60
GJC-152	2005 Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**	.64
GKE-098	2005 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett	.66
GWS-133	2005 Willi Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett	.68
GWS-134	2005 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #7	.69
GAD-013	2005 Adam Riesling Kabinett	.72
GAD-010	2003 Adam Dhronhofberger Sängerei Riesling	.73
GAD-012	2004 Adam "Hofberg" Riesling Spätlese	.73
GRH-043	2005 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett	.75
GCL-039	2005 Loewen Leiwener Klostersgarten Riesling Kabinett	.83
GSW-049	2005 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb	.85
GSW-050	2005 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett	.85
GSW-051	2005 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese	.85
GSW-048	2005 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese	.85
GKM-094	2005 Karlmühle Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett	.87
GKM-096	2005 Karlmühle Riesling Spätlese	.87
GAW-079	2005 Weingart Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett	.92
GAW-078	2005 Weingart Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb	.92
GTJ-063	2005 Jost Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett	.94
GDH-174	2005 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett	.102
GDH-181H	2005 Dönnhoff Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml	.103

GMA-064	2004 Mathern Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese	105
GMA-068	2005 Mathern Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese	105
GJS-068	2005 Schneider Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	110
GKF-104	2005 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett	115
GKF-100	2005 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Kabinett	115
GKF-103	2005 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Kabinett	115
GKF-099	2005 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese	116
GKF-105	2004 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Auslese	116
GSD-030	2005 Diel Rosé de Diel	118
GSD-029	2005 Diel Riesling "Classic"	119
GST-126L	2005 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter	125
GST-116	2004 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett	125
GST-124	2005 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett	125
GST-129	2005 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese	125
GWG-013	2005 Wagner-Stempel Siefersheimer Silvaner Trocken	129
GGE-008	2005 Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb	133
GGE-006H	2004 Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml	133
GJL-113	2005 Leitz Rüdesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett	144
GMC-091	2005 Müller-Catoir Haardter Herzog Riesling Kabinett Trocken	155
GBR-077	2005 Biffar Deidesheimer Herrgottsäcker Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	159
GDD-020L	2005 Dr. Deinhard Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter	162
GDD-004	2001 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken	162
GDD-021	2005 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	162
GDD-022	2005 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Herrgottsäcker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	162
GDD-006	2001 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Herrgottsäcker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	162
GDD-023	2005 Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett	163
GDD-015	2004 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett	163
GEM-072	2004 Eugen Müller Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken	165
GEM-081H	2004 Eugen Müller Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml	165
GMS-111L	2005 Messmer Estate Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter	168
GMS-119L	2005 Messmer Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter	168
GMS-113	2005 Messmer Muskateller Kabinett	169
GTM-090L	2005 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter	171
GTM-092	2005 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese	171
GKR-091	2005 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett	175
GKR-092	2005 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken	175
GKR-087	2004 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese	175
GDR-136L	2005 Darting Dürkheimer Feuerberg Portugieser Weissherbst, 1.0 Liter	177

subject: why riesling?



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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. 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 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?

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

For we are in the middle of a sea-change in the Mosel valley, the ramifications of which are starting to make themselves felt.

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

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

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

But two critical things have changed. First, the young person does not wish to work in obscurity. His only chance to prosper lies in spreading the word quickly and widely. So he sends his samples to all the necessary publications. In theory, his wines are noteworthy, he makes his



Treking up the Erdener Treppchen

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 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

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

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 (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 Moselaners, 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. Some Summer I'll take my 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?

mosel regionals

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

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

from growers with whom the bottling firm of J. & H. SELBACH has done business for many years. Nor are they the most expensive regionals you'll be offered, though you can certainly pay less if you don't care what you sell your customers. I've heard all the arguments that the "Piesporter customer" only wants a price. One thing I can promise you. He will never care about quality if you don't. Taste some of that cheap stuff some time, and see if you can look a customer in the eye as you take the money from his hand. Good luck.

I'm occasionally asked why I ship regionals at all. What's a nice guy like me doing trafficking in Piesporters and Zellers, anyway? Well obviously, the category exists and this gives me a choice with a high road and a low road, and I can choose the way that makes me proud. Plus it's tonnage. Oh yeah, that. But a few years ago Johannes Selbach and I began to wonder whether we could create our own wine which would fulfill all these commercial functions, provide easily memorable "brand" identity and fill containers and give us something we could call our own, which wouldn't have to be defended as we must even with our honorable Piesporters.

Thus, the development of what we're certain will prove to have been an epochal event in the history of wine commerce. Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy: I give you TJ Riesling!

And I give you an IMPROVED TJ Riesling! We have completely redesigned the packaging so as to confuse the unwary consumer into thinking it is a bottle of CALIFORNIA WINE, or maybe even ITALIAN wine.

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

The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

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

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

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

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

Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:

- GSR-105 **Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-204 **Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA (Screwcap)**
- GSR-304 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-704 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-805 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-605 **“TJ” Riesling**



selbach-oster

mosel • zeltingen

We tasted on a (rare) bright early Spring day, and when we were done Karen Odessa and I took a walk in the sunlight. We visited Hans Selbach's grave, where all the flowers had been nibbled by some critter or other, probably wild boar, which Hans liked to hunt. "Yes, the boar like to visit him too, and eat the flowers," said his wife Sigrid. "I'm sure he's down there chuckling at them whenever they come."

Four years ago I remember Hans-Günter Schwarz seeing to the harvest of his supernal 2001s while his wife lay in the final stages of terminal cancer. This year I enjoy contemplating the vision of the Selbach family luxuriating in the most clement harvest they have ever known, day after day of perfect weather, while Hans' angel looks on.

It wasn't an easy year for them. Not only did they lose their beloved patriarche, they also lost the work he did (and made look effortless), and they dealt with an audit of Hans' estate (routine but time-draining), but come harvest time it was as if some providence thought to itself "These poor souls have suffered enough for awhile; I'll just square the weather away so they can have an easy vintage." I like to think Hans called in his single favor from the angels — it would be like him to want to alleviate the difficulties of others.

It is Johannes' first vintage without Hans. Yet in that curious way the dead abide with us, Hans' presence imbues everything. It is probably the greatest vintage in the winery's history, and it's melancholy to think Hans wasn't among us to taste it. But, we can tell him of it.

2005 is a fabulous Mosel vintage in general. Great wines were everywhere. Many of my growers had among the greatest vintages they've ever had. Yet even so, the 2005 Selbach-Oster vintage stands out, even from 2005's exalted norm. I'll try and say why.



Barbara & Johannes Selbach

Most if not all of the '05 Mosels are out-sized, with many times their usual density and more layers of intricacy than ever. This is done without altering their basic shape, without obtruding on their slately ornery essence, and without coating their bones with ripe-sauce. Selbach's wines are no different. Yet there is a quality of *serenity* about

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 9,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Zeltinger Sonnenuhr, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst**
- **Soil types: Stony slate, partly with loam**
- **Grape varieties: 98.5% Riesling, 1.5% Weissburgunder**

them that is nearly beatific. They taste as if they'd been gathered by angels. They have a lovely gloss and glow. They are full of muscle but also a skater's grace. They seem to be infinitely strong without ever becoming *powerful*.

And there are so many of them. I can't think of a single wine I "rejected" among the nearly four dozen I tasted. Johannes, who is always antsy and uncertain during these showings, could barely contain his glee. I was the first person to whom the entire range was shown, and I wish you could have been there: my old friend Jo and I couldn't stop looking at each other, mouths agape, just in batshit-crazy bliss as one insane masterpiece followed another. When I got to the Schlossberg Auslese 2-star I thought I'd wrung out all the emotion of which I was capable — there were already several wines of sublime beauty — and I will *never* forget, as I stood there tasting that wine, how it seemed to put its gentle hands on my chest and push me down into the chair, and how I just sat there looking utterly stunned at Johannes and said "*Dude; what is this?*" and he returned my deranged gaze with one of his own and said "I know, can you believe it?" almost as if the wine weren't his at all.

You'll see it in my notes, how by the end of the tasting I'd gotten to that strange wan place where you've numbed the rapture-terminals and you don't "feel" any more. I felt as if I'd been abducted by some alien race who knew arcane forms of beauty and pleasure. They dropped me off when they were done with me and all I



could do was sit there blank and immobile and say *What just hit me?* Sometimes I think that's when soul comes. Not when you're busy feeling, but later when you're tired and done with it. Soul never arrives in an envelope marked "soul", but instead it seems to tickle you when you're trying not to laugh.

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 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 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. 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. 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.

Sigrig 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?

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

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

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

some arbitrary point-system you have chosen.

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

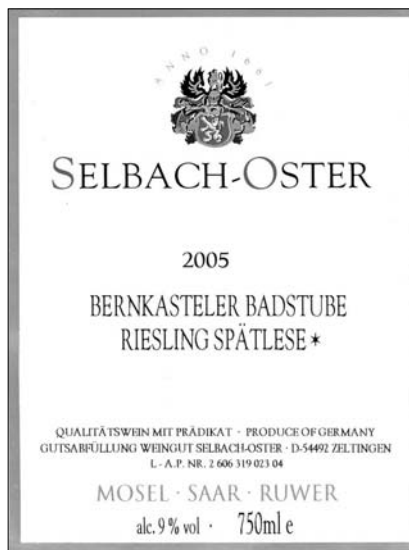
Part of the Selbach's aesthetic is the eschewing of anything *confected* in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its *internal* skeletal makeup, and from that instinct for structure come all the judgements and preferences which constitute a house-style. Thus fruit must also be structured, detailed,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

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

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

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

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



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.

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 2005 is no exception.

how the wines taste:

There is a striking conciliation between brilliant acids and a kind of leesy plushness. There's plenty of minerality, but it seems somehow deeper than a literal depiction of the soil. There can be fruit of almost unbearable purity and loveliness. Finally, they are often among the most **charming** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

DRY WINES AND KABINETTS

GSO-272 **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

This was the finer and more suave and digital of two Trockens; lovely fragrance of peonies; the palate is on the stern side but spicy and long, and no more "austere" than the (few!) remaining truly dry Alsace Rieslings.

SOS-0 (now to 3 years, or 9-14 years)

- GSO-264 **2005 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +
 The first of what will be **very little Kabinett**, so don't dawdle. After the dry Spät this showed more tarragon and zip at first, but then a sneaky-deep finish seems to burrow into some stratum of palate you didn't know was there; sweet-leesy and casky; superbly dry, with serpentine length. Best-ever vintage of this perennially excellent wine.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS-0
 (now to 4 years, again 12-15 years)
- GSO-244 **2004 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**
 GSO-244H **2004 Selbach Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 This is a different bottling than the one we've shipped to date; it was in part the final lots of what was to have been the estate *Spätlese*, so you're getting a **free upgrade**, you lucky so-and-so. The purpose of this wine is first to reduce the skus in the range, and second to have an entry-level Kabinett that's crisper and has lower RS than the "Crus". This wine is a kind of Selbach *tabula-rasa*.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS-1 (4-15 years)
- GSO-265 **2005 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett** +
 GSO-265H **2005 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 This is the only Kabinett we have any volume of, though only about 65% of what we sell in an average year; it is wonderfully aromatic, piercing yet limpid; the palate has a taut yet creamy richness with the merest surmise of sweetness; in the lime and cherry-blossom side of the spectrum.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS- 1 (7-20 years)
- GSO-266 **2005 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Kabinett**
 Man, what expression of flint and kirsch. 100% stainless-steel, a ridiculous 99 degrees Oechsle (not a typo), and the sweetest Kabinett ever at Selbach-Oster, yet nonetheless distinctly *feinherb* with 47g.l. (this is good Auslese, remember); still on the fine lees when I tasted it. "We stirred the lees several times because the frickin' wine didn't want to ferment!" said Johannes; there's a graphite newly-sharpened pencil aroma recalling Avize Champagnes; brilliance and length go without saying!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS- 2 (7-23 years)
- GSO-267 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 Stupendously pure and archetypal Wehlen fragrance; gingersnap, lime, and a dark-chocolate note from spontaneous fermentation; an iron spine of structure, and balanced on the point of a needle.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS- 2 (5-18 years)
- NOTE: this whole "spontaneous fermentation" thing is much the topic of discussion in Germany now. Many growers are returning to it or experimenting with a few of their wines. It's part of the back-to-natural wave. Cultured yeasts were used to encourage predictable fermentations, or to permit fermentations at very low temperatures, or to bring about certain desirable textures (and sometimes flavor nuances) in the finished wines. "Sponties", as they are known colloquially, are certainly more *au naturel* but not necessarily more desirable.
- GSO-268 **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 Oh lord there isn't much of this . . .
 A maple-smoked fragrance; a cold cider poured over hot slate; the most sinewy and firm of the Kabs — excuse me, "Kabs" — with wonderful polish, and a probing lime and slate finish you can almost chew.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS- 2 (7-22 years)

THE SPÄTLESEN

- GSO-262 **2005 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**
GSO-262H **2005 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
Again a fragrance oddly like Dönnhoff's Kirschhecks; this could actually pass for a Dönnhoff wine; flowery and silvery and juicy and yummy. Only problem is it's too good.
SOS- 2 (9-25 years)
- GSO-270 **2005 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese** **++**
And so we arrive at the first of the great masterpieces. We also arrive at the inescapable conclusion that something was UP in Bernkastel, as you'll see. This is the purest most gorgeous Cox-Orange aroma you'll ever see, with subtle nuances of licorice and cherry; the palate is chalky and dry-ish but a lusciously taut fruitiness arrives on the mid-palate; a wonder of gloss, soul, length and echo.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS- 2 (9-25 years)
- GSO-271 **2005 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese*** **+++**
I never saw Johannes high-5 before, but when he asked me what this wine reminded me of and I answered "The 2004 Rotlay" he did the deed. That Rotlay was my Auslese of the vintage last year, and this is another supernal Mosel wine which takes all that we love best about them and distills it to a point almost unbearably beautiful. The perfection-moment came to me here. "How can anything be more sublime?" I wrote; it has every aspect and scintillum of beauty; the palate is in constant motion, not fidgeting but *gliding*; the texture pushes and pulls between juicy and taut; the flavors open in a nimbus of spectral light — there is something of divinity here. I had to wrench myself away from it to taste the next wine.
SOS: 3 (9 to 25 years)
- GSO-263 **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**
GSO-263H **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**
CORE-LIST WINE. Again the best vintage ever for this! The usual herbal deep-woods balsamy complexity; granular, crunchy and juicy - you do not want to spit this; the body revolts. I double-dare you not to fall in love with this frisky cheerful puppy.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS-2 (8-23 years)
- GSO-273 **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** **+**
This is a genial aristocrat, a guy who has to wear a suit but would much rather not. There's a chewy intensity here — old vines, small berries — and a real ancient-tasting wild "heirloom" apple fruit. I'm trying to stay nice and calm; we haven't even started with the Ausleses yet . . .
SOS-2 (10-27 years)
- GSO-274 **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese*** **+++**
Uh-oh; here it comes. Though less mealy and seamless than the Badstube 1-star, this has even more delineation and digital precision, and a back-palate apple-lavender-slate-ROCK that seems to never stop melting; all the while the wine is in ceaseless manic motion - and this from a sample bottled last week! An apotheosis of sweet balsam and aloe and a lime crème-brulée.
SOS-3 (10-27 years)

THE AUSLESEN

- GSO-275 **2005 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Auslese*** **++**
 All from Graben, and a piddling 116 Oechsle. It's a smouldering masculine giant of a Mosel wine – you have my encouragement to snicker knowingly next time someone categorically opines that Mosel wines are always “feminine” or “charming” because this is as serious as a heart attack; incense, cloves, burning-leaf, iris; the palate falls through strata of iron as if the wine had been fermented in a cast-iron vessel; only at the end does an exquisite lick of fruit coat the senses with ripeness. Astonishing.
 SOS-3 (12-30 years)
- GSO-276 **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese** **+**
 I imagined walking into ever-deeper woods, on a sunny day, the new-leaf green getting deeper and still deeper until it was almost liquid and than at last was liquid, and I floated along its chlorophyll-y currents, safe and amazed, gliding in the silvery green.
 SOS-2 (11-28 years)
- GSO-277 **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese** **+**
 Taut, stiffly splendid slate aromas; green apple, lime, star-fruit; while lavishly ripe and brilliant this is also more skeletal; pistachio nuances; the whole thing is standing at starched attention.
 SOS-2 (12-30 years)
- GSO-278 **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese**** **+++**
 This is my wine of the vintage, though in fact Selbach's collection presented several plausible candidates! It seems to cast a greeny phosphorescent glow, vaporous and penetrating; it'll clear your sinuses; the fruit is almost beyond credible description, with the most thrust and torque of anything thus far; it's eerily solid, as if you could roll it into a ball and bounce it; and the finish is a lime and lees parfait of haunting, unforgettable beauty.
 SOS-3 (12-30 years)
- GSO-279 **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese “Rotlay”**
 GSO-279H **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese “Rotlay,” 12/375ml** **++**
 This is firmer than was the '04, more explicitly solid and monumental; statuesque, with great arcs of fruit; solid, chewy and primordially slatey.
 SOS-3 (12-30 years)
- GSO-269 **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese “Schmitt”** **(++)**
 GSO-269H **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese “Schmitt,” 12/375ml**
 This was too soon to judge, but too scarce to risk losing! So: no note for now, but I can't *wait* to see it in its final form.
- GSO-283 **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**** **++**
 GSO-283H **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**, 12/375ml**
 Bear in mind this was the 5th-to-last grower I visited, so when I write “This is the first blatantly botrytis wine that's clearly a masterpiece” it was with most of the precincts reporting. Incidentally, the ripeness here made a **BA** in 1976 but a mere “2-star Auslese” in '05. The nose is exotic and a little ashen, like just-overcooked bacon, but the palate is something else entirely; amazing firm minty fruit just *explodes* in a foam of fennel and caraway and lilac and smoke.
 SOS-3 (15-35 years)
- GSO-280 **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese***** **++**
 GSO-280H **2005 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese***, 12/375ml**
 This is *otherworldly*. A dream of fruit and slate and smoky botrytis poised on a high peak of expression; not just intense but thorough, making sure every voice is heard in the great bright chord.
 SOS-3 (15-35 years)

SCHTICKIES!

GSO-281 **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling BA** ++
 GSO-281H **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml**
 Balls-to-the-wall power here, an enveloping BA that's elegant and not voluptuous, with creamy-malty flavors but even more lovely, with *slatey-apple* flavors; almost tenderly vinous primary fruit-slate notes that don't have to impress you since you're already *melted*. One of the greatest sweet wines of the vintage.
 SOS-4 (20-40 years)

GSO-282 **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling BA*** ++(+)
 GSO-282H **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling BA*, 12/375ml**
 Even more torque, more horsepower, more intensity; a louder roar and possible eventually even more force and drama – but now, today, I can't possible choose between them.
 SOS-4 (25-45 years)

Final notes: There are no fewer than four TBAs in various states of fermentation. There will be MAGNUMS offered of many of the "collectibles", so watch for our offering. Last, the 3-star Auslese and both BAs will be bottled in 750s also; please inquire if you're interested.

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-017 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-019 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; the '05 is equal to many Späts from good estates; it's on the dry side; it is *loaded* with fruit and plum-blossom and has amazing length and depth; JUMP ON THIS, as this great-vintage quality may never be equaled again. As fruity as a key-lime pie and as long as The Brothers Karamozov.



erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

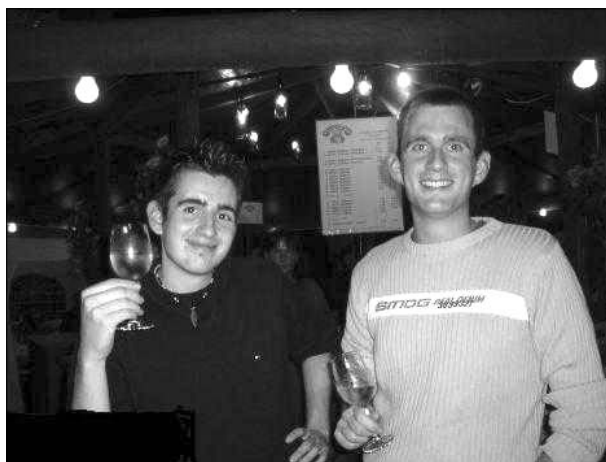
I really want you to meet Stefan Jakoby, but you have to fly over there to do it. He'd gladly come over here to present his wines; problem is, the lad ain't old enough to *drink* in These Unites States.

At the moment he divides his time between the estate, where he works alongside his father Erich, and a day-job in the Selbach office. But the young man's absolutely nuts about wine, and he has that infectious puppy energy some of us might remember from our own distant pasts.

Normally I taste Jakoby's range in the tasting room at Selbach, but this year I was struck enough by their ambitiousness that I scheduled a visit to Kinheim. Far too much was made of this; it was my honor to visit, not theirs to receive me. But I was quite impressed and even roused by what I tasted.

Long-time readers will know the connection between Selbachs and Jakobys: Erich was cellar master at Selbach for many years, until his father's failing health compelled a full-time return to the family winery. But even then he stayed on with Selbachs on an ad-hoc basis, and went on over-achieving in Kinheim.

If you go downstream from Uerzig-Erden you first come to Löslich and then to Kinheim. Most commentators would say Kinheim constitutes a "decline" from the Grand Cru continuum running from Bernkastel to Erden, and I agree it does. Immediately behind the village there's a crazy-steep hump of hill formerly known as *Eulenlay* which was considered first-class land in the famous 19th-century classification for tax-assessments.



Stefan and Peter Jakoby

Behind it the slope undulates, sometimes steep, sometimes gentle. The soil is lighter. Yet good Kinheimers are scrupulously pure Mosel Rieslings on an everyday scale. Overachievers such as Merkelbach and Jakoby will give us incredible values.

One almost grows nostalgic. When I started out, my *modus operandi* was to unearth just these kinds of things; values from high-achievers in locales others had overlooked. A then-competitor referred derisively to

- Vineyard area: 4.3 hectares
- Annual production: 4,000 cases
- Top sites: Kinheimer Rosenberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Spätburgunder

"Theise's little growers", many of whom have since become the superstars of the modern scene. Erich Jakoby's wines were already very good — he took Selbach methods and applied them to wines which seldom receive such exalted care (much to his father's consternation) — but Stefan seems determined to take it even farther. And why not? Who knows what Kinheim can show when a young hottie is hellbent on *letting* it show? Not to mention what is possible from a **great** Mosel vintage . . .

The very first wine he gave me was a wackoid Pinot Noir from '05 with 14% alc (from the frigid little Mosel) and two months in American oak. He then showed me two wines that, without exaggeration, amazed me.



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-051 **2005 Riesling Balance** **+**
 This is a mix of a big Spätlese and a barely chaptalized "Hochgewächs", with 30g.l. residual sugar. The name says it all: it's the revival of a creature one feared was doomed to extinction, a wine of unerringly perfect balance with stealth-sweetness you don't taste discretely but which brings the wine alive. Classic slate and lime aromas; fine snap and length and as juicy as all get-out. What a triumph — the wine and the idea. My plus is for sheer chutzpa.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS-1 (now-8 years)
- GJM-052 **2005 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**
 This was the most "Kabinett" of three available options, full of briskness and slaty lift; fuji-apples and apple-sauce and lime zest; wonderfully *cool* and bright. Wintergreen-y, with all the crazy length of the '05s.
 SOS-2 (4-15 years)
- GJM-053 **2005 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**
 A big leap up from the Kabinett; this is sensationally rich and juicy, with a glaze of perfect botrytis, yet it keeps pulling you down to a minty swollen depth of slate; a concentrate of balsam and a vaporous penetration; in every sense outsized — Schmitt-Wagner could have made these wines.
 SOS-2 (7-19 years)
- GJM-054 **2005 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese "Eulenlay"** **+**
 A key-lime pie in a glass! Malty botrytis and so long and juicy you need to strap a feed-bag under your neck to catch the drool. Yet for all that it's barely "sweet", it has so much muscle and viscera, only really showing sweetness in the endless finish.
 SOS-3 (9-23 years)
- GJM-055H **2005 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese***, 12/375ml**
 No need to trade up to BA if you can buy this monster as "Auslese"; in fact it is quite sweet and dense (like me!) but still light on its feet (not like me . . .). A BA tasted alongside added another layer of immensity I wasn't sure I required. But ask me again in 25 years, when these guys are ready to drink.
 SOS: 4 (10-27 years)
- GJM-056H **2005 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **+(+)**
 We were all jazzed by this wine; talked about it for days. It's amazingly silky and tender given its mass; sheer and vinous.
 SOS: 4 (25-45 years)
- GJM-057H **2001 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+**
 We held this one back for a year where Eiswein was scarce, and I have to tell you what a *pleasure* it was to taste it alongside of all those malty-monsters in the botrytis zone. A gorgeous '01 fragrance of cherry tobacco and cassis; piercing-perfect fruit and wasabi-penetration; fabulous purity and drinkability. What an utter STEAL for this beauty!
 SOS: 4 (12-28 years)

meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

mosel • erden

I always write this text in early Spring. 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-eight 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: 4.25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Prälat and Treppchen, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 11% 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 recent vintages. 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. 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*.

Maybe that's why Stefan Justen was almost comically distraught about his '05s; he remembers how the wines were from old vines. I visited with Johannes Selbach who said afterward "He's too honest," but I find it refreshing. I quite unequivocally *disagree* with Stefan about his '05s, mind you, but it's such a relief to not be "political" and to just talk as colleagues. In fact 2005 seems to me to be Stefan's best vintage since '01. He will shake his head ruefully when he reads this, as it's become a running joke between us that we never agree about his wines. Stefan seems to like them bigger and fruitier while I like them slatier and cooler.

In fact his '05s are atypical for the vintage and atypical for Justen: they have unusual restraint and polish for '05, and they are remarkably *consistent* for this grower whose other vintages have shown more peaks and valleys. 2005 is the first vintage where every single cask was good, and in some instances I truly couldn't "select" among them. "Ah, just ship us numbers 14 and 21, or you know, 8 or 11, or well any of them really . . ."

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. One 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.

Last 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:

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

how the wines taste:

In general Justen's wines are more lush and peachy than, say, Merkelbach; not as stern as, say, Christoffel. They are comparatively straightforward and "easy" to understand because the fruit is overt and in-your-face. Even a cursory glance into that fruit, though, will reveal the proverbial Coat of Many Colors: interplays of flavor and texture that can be absorbing and rewarding. And the wines both keep and age.

GJU-089 2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

Shows its usual sleek, pretty fruit, even a little diffident in the context of all these (sweetly!) pounding '05s; the classic herbal-balsam fruit is there, and the mid-palate sends an echoey coating of woody cask tones; it grows finer and richer with each sip. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:2 (8-22 years)

- GJU-090 **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**
CORE-LIST WINE. This is a blend of three Fuder (33, 37 and 4 if you *must* know); it has a crackery nose like Kavli rye-crisps (!) and redcurrant; slatey char; the palate is silky and bright, even minty; underlay of wet straw and spiced apple; crystalline and yet generous. Almost tastes like a Kabinett!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (8-22 years)
- GJU-091 **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** +
 Cask #36; the best, by a nose, of three possible casks by dint of its vividly appley-slatey brilliance and remarkable length; like a scarf of flavor you pull one end of and never reach the other; extends clear and unbroken until an echoey finish that slowly fades to slatey vapor.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GJU-092 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**
CORE-LIST WINE. A cask of Auslese was sacrificed into this. Unusual rose and quince aromas with freesia and honeysuckle; palate is forthrightly fruity and a little phenolic; on the cool forest-shade end of the spectrum; another wine that expands, not metaphorically but *actually* on the palate.
 SOS: 2 (9-25 years)
- GJU-093 **2005 Erdener Prälät Riesling Spätlese** +
 Could be Justen's best-ever wine from the Prälät; a smouldering fragrance of garrigue and quetsch; this is a very serious and solid rendering, with profundity and grip; it's sometimes-sultriness has been ennobled into a kind of splendor; a Rheingauer in Mosel clothing.
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GJU-094 **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese** +
 Cask 28. A tangy, vibrant wine of amazing brightness and lift; aromas of tangerine and peche-de-vigne; gorgeous spicy length and lip-smacking acidity — *there's* a word you won't see often in notes for '05s. Leaves a minty, almost mentholated finish.
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)
- GJU-095 **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese** ++
 Cask 12. The most profound wine from Justen in some years; a wonderfully deep, almost inscrutable nose, apple-lime embedded in woodruff and burning-leaf; palate shows thunderous intensity and nimbus-depth but also a high note of celestial apple rides in on a gust front of freshness, so the palate whipsaws up and down and is finally amazed that a chord plays in so many registers.
 SOS: 3 (12-34 years)
- GJU-096H **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling TBA 12/375ml** ++
 Young TBA folks. But full of grace, elegance and clarity. I know I ought to froth and spume to justify the plusses, but come on; it's young TBA, we know the flavors. It's the elegance and clarity that make me sure. Taste and see.
 SOS: 4 (25-60 years)



alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

They gave me three pictures. We'll use one of them, I'm not sure which. I'm looking at them now. At first I took the "cutest" ones, because if there's one thing about Rolf and Alfred Merkelbach, it's their adorableness. Everybody says so. I've said so. And when you meet them they are always shy and smiling and giggling. So you want a picture that captures it.

The first of the pictures is of Rolf's face peering out from among yellow leaves during harvest. Everyone was giddy during the '05 harvest. Rolf's entire being is suffused in Fall light, as if he is asking "Does it get any better than this?" The second picture is of a Summer day, and the boys are posing in front of the big URZIGER WURZGARTEN sign in the vineyard. They're squinting a little into the sun, and Rolf sports an unusually jaunty smile. This is the one we really should use.

The last of the three pictures they are back at the winery, in what looks like the press house. They're standing a little apart, looking into the camera — it's actually a lovely composition. I don't know quite why it's making me weepy, but it is.

I've known Rolf and Alfred for twenty-one years now, but "known" isn't really the word. When I'm there we taste the wine and I enthuse and they giggle, and unless a Selbach is present there's hardly any schmoozing — sometimes even then. I'm sure Merkelbachs are glad of me but I have no idea what they make of me. Nor I of them, if I'm entirely candid. I mean, of course I adore them — they're adorable, after all — but as I look at this picture I find myself inside a warm mystery. Who are they, *what are their lives?*

We say they're the "last of a vanishing breed", which is certainly true. They do the whole thing themselves (with a little help at harvest) and they live a modest life, and they don't appear to have raised their prices for at



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

least a decade. They give every appearance of perfect contentment, and I believe they are. I hope they are; it's part of a faith I hold. Theirs are lives reduced to a degree of simplicity and integration we wouldn't tolerate. But they are happy, picking grapes, posing in front of the big sign, smiling into the camera. When I let myself really

- Vineyard area: 1.9 hectares
- Annual production: 1,600 cases
- Top sites: Ürziger Würzgarten, Erdener Treppchen
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

think about them I sniff a kind of unknowable goodness, and it both stirs and rebukes me. A voice challenges me: *Look at those faces, and now tell me just how valuable all your hip, arch post-modern affects are.* But also, *feel the divinity in these simple mysterious lives.*

In my tasting notebook I see I wrote "Man, when they nailed it they nail it," because they really aced the '05s. Theirs was like the sorbet course in a degustation dinner you're starting to wonder if you have the stamina to finish. Every wine an awakening splash of purity.

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: *Merkelbachs!* 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*

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

reason I love Mosel wine. This only seems to happen here.

It's self-evident to them that the vineyard is responsible for “at least eighty percent” of the quality of their wines, especially the “Lang Pichter” section of the Ürziger Würzgarten directly behind the winery. Mosel wine for them is like a dear old friend. “We like to hear that you can drink a little more of our wines without any health problems,” says Alfred. I asked Alfred what his favorite type of wine was, purely theoretically, without respect to his own wines. “The flavors I look for are hard for me to describe,” he replied. “A good white wine should be identifiable by its nose, *must* be, in fact. A young wine may be a little acidulous, but a wine that's two, three years old has to have all its pieces working together: the acidity, the sweetness, the fruit and the vinosity.”

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.”

One year 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.

merkelbach at a glance:

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

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! 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-138 2005 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett +

If my mouth were by law zippered shut (hmm. . .) I'd buy this from its nose alone. It's simply the perfect slate-wine, crisp and vivid, primordial and wonderful Mosel, with a sublime and candid directness. It is also, alas, the **ONLY** Kabinett available, as the small amount of Uerz Würz Kab is already sold out (as of 4/4 as I write).

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-18 years)

- GME-135 **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +
CORE-LIST WINE. This will be two consecutive 2-cask blends, the differences among which were immaterial. And, it bears stating that Merkelbach's Spätlesen are in fact *other growers' Kabinetts*. Rolf and Alfred don't really do the whole "declassification" thing. But this sizzly frisky bundle of Mosel joy will grab you and schwing your palate around the dance floor!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-23 years)
- GME-136 **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #3** +
 There was talk of including this in the core-list blend but at last I couldn't, because this is the purest possible portrait of strawberry you can ever hope to taste from anything that isn't in fact strawberry. Amazing.
 SOS: 2 (7-20 years)
- GME-137 **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #4** +
 Heavenly nose, and on the palate a screaming blast of slatey Moselness; complex *spiel*, fibrous, with even a hint of celeriac; but wow, what *sting*.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (7-23 years)
- GME-139 **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**
 Best to ignore the label: it tastes like a Spätlese and is priced like a Spätlese and I'd use it as if it were a Spätlese; serenely crisp and dry; asian pear, lime, sea air; clear and precise; it's absolutely a table wine despite 55g.l. residual sugar and an acidity of 5.9! Indeed it could almost pass for Halbtrocken.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:2 (8-19 years)
- GME-140 **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese #18**
 This is lean and smoky and also rather on the "feinherb" side of things; you get a finely raw nubby granular sort of Mosel wine that might as well be dry; it's a kind of apogee of the currant-leaf sassafrass thing and awfully good if you drop any notion of what the genre "Auslese" should taste like.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (8-23 years)
- GME-141 **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese #14** +
 The brothers sprayed late against botrytis in Uerzig, and produced neither BA nor TBA —they don't want to. This wine certainly is Auslese, albeit in the old-school: a classically perfect slate aroma with flinty cherry highlights — almost feints toward Bernkastel — palate is precise and finely spicy; no enormous grip but nonetheless a charming powder-puff finish of lime and wintergreen.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (9-25 years)



why fuss about “connections”?

I woke up this morning thinking about Hans Selbach, Johannes' father, who died a year ago February. Karen Odessa and I stopped by his grave, and observed his “view” of Zeltingen, of the Mosel, and of the vineyards. Indeed if the steep hill behind St Stephanus wasn't a cemetery it would certainly be planted with vines, and Hans rests deep within the slate.

He died at home, surrounded by family. His body was carried through the house, through the bottle cellar, before it was placed at last in the ground, perhaps three hundred meters from the house. It is not only his spirit which lingers genially amongst his survivors; his body itself is near at hand.

My father died abruptly. I came home one afternoon from my summer job and he was slumped over the kitchen table. He died six hours later in a hospital room while I waited at home with my small sister. He is buried in an enormous cemetery in Queens, NY; I doubt if I could even find the gravesite.

My story may not be typical, but neither is it all that unusual. We were suburban folk, and a certain existential disconnect was a defining parameter of our experience. Nor do I claim this is necessarily tragic. Disconnection has its silver linings.

But when I contemplate the connectiveness the Selbachs nurture and presume upon, it becomes clear that their wines, also, are connected, that *they* are a defining parameter in a complex of connections, and finally that this is as invisible and categorical as oxygen to Selbachs and people like them.

Those of you who know Johannes know he speaks nearly perfect English. In fact he gets along in French and for all I know he can mumble articulately in Chinese. What I didn't know, or had forgotten, is along with his native German he also speaks *Platt*, or regional dialect. I heard him speak it when we visited Merkelbachs together. It struck me what a piece of social glue this was; it was Johannes' way of reassuring Rolf and Alfred *We are brethren*, another marker of connection and identity. One might almost claim Mosel Riesling is what it uniquely is because of the dialect *it* speaks.

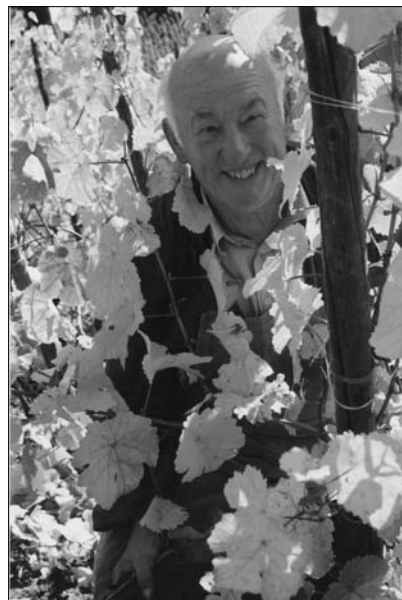
They say no one romanticizes blood-connections like an adoptee, and I am one. But it is perhaps part of *our* identity to sound a note of appreciation for that which others are too deep inside to consider

abstractly. I find I am *satisfied* in some essential way by *connected* wines. It doesn't even matter whether I like them. I happen to have never met a Priorat I enjoyed, but I respect Priorat for its authenticity — it is manifestly the wine of a *place*, speaking the dialect of that place. I may not like it, but I'm glad it exists.

I can't summon up much of anything for the so-called “international” style of wine, since it's either connected to things I don't care about or it's connected to nothing at all. I've had more than enough disconnect in my life. Many of us have. When I consider a Mosel family like Selbachs — like *any* of the people with whom I work — everything I see expresses an identity rooted in connection; they themselves, their wines, you cannot *disconnect* these things even if you tried.

And it salves a kind of loneliness. Though it isn't my home, it is at least *a* home, and the people are particular people, and the wines are particular wines. I spend too much of my life driving among strip-malls and their numbing detritus, and so when I descend the final hill over the Eifel and the village of Zeltingen comes into view I have a momentary thrill of *arriving*. Here is *somewhere*. I see it, I know it, I will soon embrace people who embody it — and, I also get to taste it.

I will not settle for less from any wine. Nor need you.



Rolf Merkelbach

OK: how to tell *this* story . . .

There is no doubt the market is perturbed for this estate. When Robert Eymael leased it back in 2002, he had the not-unreasonable idea of increasing the “production” of “Joh. Jos. Christoffel” (hereafter **JJC**) by reassigning certain of his own parcels from the **Mönchhof** estate over to the JJC “brand”. After all, we were perennially short of wine, and the “new” JJC wines would in fact be made and guaranteed by Hans-Leo Christoffel.

At least in theory.

The production increases were to be confined to the Kabinett and Spätlese echelons. And at first the thing was a roaring success. The year 2003 was a monster year for everyone selling

German wines. Then the Dollar tanked and along came the 2003 vintage, with its cavalcade of expensive Ausleses, and the market took a brief little hiatus.

But meanwhile Mr. Eymael, produced a lot more Auslese under the JJC “brand”, and when orders didn’t reach his expectations, he needed to deplete a whole lot of wine.

Meanwhile we were gamely trying to remain plausible as agents for JJC, and Hans-Leo continued to insist that he stood behind the wines. Even so, we started to wonder how; the quantities seemed so fungible and subject to manipulation.

Eymael might have gotten rid of the “excess” JJC ‘03s in myriad ways. Alas he elected to do so in the worst possible way; he sold it at rock-bottom prices to a Dane who promptly gray-marketed it to the U.S. Many of you saw the offerings. JJC-becomes-Two-Buck-Chuck.

Clearly things were coming to a head. I needed to know exactly what guarantee Hans-Leo Christoffel could offer that he and he alone stood behind his name. We needed to re-establish the JJC “brand” along its original lines as a 2.2ha estate producing fewer than 2000 cases per year. His good name had already been damaged, through no fault of his except perhaps naïvete.

- **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**

I am unconcerned with any of the details or machinations between Christoffel and Eymael; they are none of my business unless they disturb my business. But I am bedrock-loyal to Hans-Leo, for whom I’d go to the ends of the earth. I simply need to know it is indeed for *him* we all are laboring.

Talks were had. Agreements were reached.

I don’t know how long the market will require to return to reality. But we will do what we can for the gentleman we’ve loved and advocated for 20 years.

I can’t remember the last time I tasted cask samples here. 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. 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 felt less *stylized* and more true and animate. It was indeed a comeback.

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.

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

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

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

christoffel at a glance:

With Schaefer and Selbach-Oster, the "big three" among the Mosels I offer. Everything one can wish from great wine is lavished on these: depth, clarity, complexity, buoyancy, purity and ineffable beauty.

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-144 2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

CORE-LIST WINE. In bottle two weeks when I tasted, and it's bloody difficult if you want to know the truth. The Auslesen manage OK, they have the density, and another grower making wines with more *stuffing* has less to fear from bottle-sickness. But these very keen silky digital wines just go into a biting tantrum of petulance. The outer *surface* of the wine looked spicy, high and glossy, with the expected slatey berried tartness. But who knows what lies below?

GJC-145 2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

Used to be the Erdeners showed better early on, but then Flurbereinigung came along and now all the vines are young. It's a little fleshier on the palate, and there's fruit and length to be discerned. Yo, guys: either bottle the wines in early February or can I please taste cask-samples?

- GJC-146 **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese** **+(+)**
CORE-LIST WINE. At last — flavor! A lovely nose, refined, nutty and appley; this is a wine of carriage and posture; the sleekest conceivable granular slate notes tied to mandible-grip and length; even bottling can't quiet this feller down. It finishes as if you'd chewed a wintergreen leaf.
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GJC-147 **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 Now here's a Grand Cru nose! Hypnotic and alluring; the palate seems to vibrate on a frequency only dogs can hear — *shimmering* hardly does justice to it — it's slate speaking with a King's diction, precise and commanding; a regal silky being. This won't whomp you upside the head, but you won't be able to get it out of your head.
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GJC-148 **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese*** **+**
 Dramatically more mass now, and even more mineral, even more fruit; blackberry and mint; the palate swims through parallel channels of menthol and lime, with a fluffy but warming quilt of extract; tangy and long.
 SOS: 2 (12-33 years)
- GJC-149 **2005 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. The '05 has the anticipated searching fragrances. It flirts with sternness (but its fruit is doubtless subdued by bottling); it seems fervidly violet-y; a wine with no time to waste on fools or frills, but with something definite to say, something it has earned, a truth of which it is quite certain. There's a kind of buzzing, pulsing terroir that expresses each fleck of mineral, each drop of rain, each beam of sunlight, each second of history.
 SOS: 2 (13-35 years)
- GJC-150 **2005 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 one's a riot of strawberry and cherry, with glorious extravagant fruit; it's markedly sweeter (or seems so) now but just so bright and silky; here's the spice from the spice-garden!
 SOS: 3 (12-27 years)
- GJC-152 **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**** **+(+)**
 More overtly fruity and explicitly slatey; fiendishly concentrated but barely sweet-tasting, and stubbornly long; this deep, clear-headed virtuoso is only just tuning up.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (12-30 years)
- GJC-151 **2005 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. Botrytis is explicit now, though the wine surprises with a pliant tenderness and a cashmere elegance; it seems to refer back to the ur-fruit with affection; I'm roused by its gentleness and purity, and I'm sure there's more in store.
 SOS: 2 (13-32 years)
- GJC-153H **2005 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling TBA**
 There may or may not be a TBA depending on whether they'd rather sell it or drink it! It was sleekly honeyed and still *showed* fruit, and I'd offer it if they let me.

heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

Everyone in Wehlen stands to some extent in the shadow of Manfred Prüm, yet I don't really see anyone trying to emulate the style. There are good wineries making splendidly steely-mineral wines — you know who they are — and then there is Kerpen, who stands stylistically off to the side. The wines, in fact, resemble Selbach's more than any neighbors in Wehlen; verdant, shady, woody, vinous, mid-palate density, lots of soul.

Martin Kerpen has been variously described as "gentle" and "modest," but he seems to know quite well how good his wines are and to feel the appropriate pride. He is very funny and he loves to laugh. He is the most genial of hosts, and he wife Celia is a substantive and lovely woman with whom I always wish I had more time to talk. They lay a bountiful and happy table.

Some of what's happened at Kerpen reveals the prosaic truths which lie beneath much wine romance. The quality of his wines improved significantly when Martin bought his new house along the Mosel, and completed the cellar. He used to have to make the wines in weeny widdle crannies in several different locations; now he's not only all under one roof but he's got ample space besides.

So tell us, Martin, how is it done? "I don't know, exactly! You have to work *clean*. My wife wishes I were as clean in the house as I am in the cellar. Your quality is

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*.



- Vineyard area: 5 hectares
- Annual production: 3,400 cases
- Top sites: Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

Martin's made his second outstanding vintage in a row; his '05s are remarkably limpid and charming for wines of such density, and his dessert wines have *never* been better.



Martin Kerpen

kerpen at a glance:

Sleek, feminine, elegant and soulful wines with silky fruit of exceptional beauty. Prices reflect the “Wehler 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-098 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**
 GKE-098H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 CORE-LIST WINE. There’s one bottling already being shipped to cover Spring-DI orders. This is a different wine, noted as such. It’s (obviously) very ripe, and shows two profiles: one pristine and *cool*, the other a little more musky; it’s dense and long, gentle yet determined, pliant yet chewy. Yummy yet yummy!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-13 years)
- GKE-099 **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**
 Y’all tasted the ‘04 at Martin’s tables during our DI-shindigs; you told him you liked it, told me you liked it, tell any writer who asks you that there’s “more demand” for dry German wines, and then you, um, didn’t order it. I’m perplexed. This ‘05 is even *better*, with a fascinating terroir-drenched nose – woodruff, balsam, Mirabelle – the palate is sinewy and masculine but the complexity of berry-flower-fruit-slate interplay is striking, as is the gracious ripeness.
 SOS: 0 (now to 5 years, again 12-15 years)
- GKE-100 **2005 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese** +
 GKE-100H **2005 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
 Man what lovely quality of fruit! A complex basket of ten heirloom apples; the palate has such a powdery dispersal of slate it’s almost creamy; once again firm, even phenolic, but the spiciness and length are fabulous; this is Grand Cru stuff from a site that doesn’t always give it.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GKE-101 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* (Artist Label)** +
 CORE-LIST WINE. And the only core-list wine with a label with a bird in a boat! We did an unusual thing with this wine; blended it *down* with a “lesser” cask to improve it! The first cask was opaquely sweet, but this one has a lusty breeze of Mirabelle and vanilla atop the usual peony-scented *cool* Sonnenuhr fruit; it’s hauntingly long, with amazing grip, with a yin-yang of fruit and slate (you can almost hear them *talking* to each other), and this is outstanding in any context.
 SOS: 2 (9-24 years)
- GKE-102 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**
 A little botrytis and a lot of “gold-ripe” fruit, and even a pretty pointed jab of acidity allied to a wonderful quality of fruit, coming almost to seckel-pear in its refined malic ripeness and granular texture.
 SOS: 3 (10-26 years)
- GKE-103 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**** ++
 GKE-103H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese**, 12/375ml**
 A masterly performance, both from nature and vintner; Kerpen has rarely shown such a sure hand with explicit botrytis; there’s wonderful malty-salty fruit, great solid structure, and the lingering, searching finish is pure Sonnenuhr.
 SOS: 3 (12-30 years)
- GKE-104H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese***, 12/375ml** (+)
 GKE-105H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling BA*, 12/375ml** ++
 GKE-106H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling TBA*, 12/375ml** ++
 These are by far the greatest dessert wines Martin has made. The 3-star Auslese has 145 Oechsle (TBA starts at 150!), and is polished and clear with lovely gentle power. The BA is a wonderfully delicate, winsome elixir, and the TBA somehow continues to be astonishingly sleek and clean despite a throbbing *250 Oechsle*, maintaining form, outline and clarity throughout.

I have no idea what I did to deserve it (maybe they were expecting someone else and I rang the doorbell) but there was a '59 ready to be opened when I arrived.

After we finished drinking it I commiserated with Willi. "I feel for you when I drink a wine like this," I said. Willi knows I can't be trusted to ever say anything sensible, so he smiled wryly and said "Comiserate? Why so?" and I answered "Well, it has to be frustrating when you feel like drinking an old wine and every damn thing in your cellar tastes so *young*."

In fact I have never once had an "old"-tasting bottle from Willi, and this lovely '59 was no exception: *It is Graacher Himmelreich Auslese, the same parcel from which the best '76 Auslese came, directly next to Domprobst. As always, eerily green still, a few flecks of yellow but no gold; fresh aromas*

of lime and slate dance with beeswax and balsam. The palate is sappy with a lovely undertone of grain, pine, tilleul at its highest form; almost unnervingly limpid and fresh. Willi says "You taste the heaviness of the vintage," but all I taste is this comely transparent grace. The finish is searching but the wine is Spring-gentle and sparrow-voiced. BLESS this culture, who brought and still bring the world these gentle, helpful, self-effacing works of beauty.

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



Will Schaefer and Terry

was sublime. We were nearly in tears. Then suddenly a tenor voice started singing, some chipper little lied about Spring. My friend stared at me and we both laughed. "No!" he said, "You staged this, right? It isn't actually happening, right?"

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

- Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares
- Annual production: 2,600 cases
- Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

see him, and we laugh and laugh. But laughing isn't all we do. We've known each other 28 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, expect for the *very* gentlest of pressings, which leaves few bitter phenols in the wines, and gives them their strikingly pale colors. Willi knows his vineyards like he knows his children, all their quirks and foibles and capabilities. As a taster he responds to “character above all. The finesse of fruit is also important to me, and the harmony of sweetness, fruit and acidity. Apart from that, the wine should embody its vineyard and grape variety.”

Christoph’s decision to carry on the winery is quietly momentous. Schaefer said, with characteristic 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-133 **2005 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett** **+**
 Shy at first. Then what fruit-quality; partly exotic (a’la ‘97) and also serenely appley; then an adorably woody mid-palate; with air the stayman and cox-orange starts to exhale, and there’s a granular salty spiciness that leaves a wintergreeny finish.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GWS-132 **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett** **++**
 I damn sure didn’t taste a better Mosel Kabinett than this; the nose is immediately 3-dimensional. The palate is stiffer, with a longer spine of front & center minerality; this is utterly generous and expressive, more piquant and wry than the Himmelreich, compelling even more attention. It’s hard to fathom how any wine could give more beauty and *satisfaction*; for all its virtues it asks to be drunk, not preened over.
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

- GWS-134 **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #7** +
 This is the slate-boy; drier-seeming than the Kabinett, with an almost gaudy minerality woven into a cool lemon-blossomy profile. But really it's all there in every one of these in various emphases and configurations. What they all have is expressiveness and balance and just crazy length.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GWS-135 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +
 Celestial, otherworldly aromas; tilleul, wintergreen, balsam, lime, cox-orange; the palate is coolly aloof, flavors you see when you look sideways, but the finish is encompassing and endless; this little wine builds a city of beauty on your palate, and the sun is out, and apples are so ripe they swoon drunkenly from the tree into your waiting hands.
 SOS: 2 (9-26 years)
- GWS-136 **2005 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese**
 Jeez, how does a guy stand it? Running out of words. Many apples here: fuji, cox-orange, mutsu. For the first time botrytis stands out. Salty and tangy, more explicitly weighty.
 SOS: 2 (9-25 years)
- GWS-137 **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #8** +
 More serious and determined now; this is the fork in the road. Fibrous, apple-skins. Willful thrust of spicy slate. Starts fainting toward Nahe. More corpulent and wild-flowery. This wine is soberly beautiful, not euphorically beautiful – but beautiful it surely is.
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GWS-138 **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #6** +
 Botrytis is escorted by a mass and piquancy of fruit, still feminine but grown-up, not at all girlish; carbonized slate and grape-hyacinth echo the best Austrians (you could easily imagine this coming from Nigl); Mirabelle and lime and a fruity finish.
 SOS: 3 (12-33 years)
- GWS-139 **2005 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese #9** +
 Here the botrytis is engulfed by big ripe fruit; most so on the palate, which really blasts a volley of spice and yet a sleek line of fruit, becoming almost raspberried now. I'm remembering young '76s, though these '05s have more stuffing and structure.
 SOS: 3 (12-33 years)
- GWS-140 **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #10** ++
 This might be the most massive wine Schaefer's have made, not (obviously) in alcohol but in breadth and depth and force; the nose is pure slate underlined by botrytis; the fruit is stirringly many-faceted yet contained within a tight salty kernel of intensity. Others will grab more associations than I can (or want to), but there's *brass* in this, not only strings and cor anglais.
 SOS: 3 (14-36 years)
- GWS-141H **2005 Graacher Domprobst Riesling BA, 12/375ml**
 Embryonic, of course. It was the first picking of the harvest. Beyond saying *clean, creamy, malty, almost streamlined* I can't yet penetrate the seductive caramelly richness.
 SOS: 4 (20-45 years)



You want a garagiste? Here's a garagiste! The guy makes about 600 cases of frickin unbelievable wine in his spare-time from Grand Cru vineyards.

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.



Andreas Adam

"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!

- **Vineyard area: 1 hectares**
- **Annual production: under 500 cases**
- **Top sites: Dronerhofberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with clay**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

I then ask the grower, which is his peak-site. And why; is his choice due to specific terroir/microclimactic 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.

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)

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 Winningen who was the first to break free of the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. I gather he’s worked at Van Volxem too, and Roman wants him back. “You can’t have him!” I said. “I want him to continue his winery.”

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

Friend, if you’ve tasted any of the first wave of Adam wines, 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 (ostensi-



bly!) 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-013 **2005 Riesling Kabinett**

All the '05s I tasted were still (in late March) on their fine lees, scheduled to be bottled by May 1st. This was an early harvest both for clean fruit and to attempt to gather a Kabinett that tastes like one. The wine is smoky and wintergreeny with sweet green grip; it seems less leesy than earlier vintages, but has a clearer more streamlined profile and finish. It grows dramatically in the glass, becoming a lyric poem of slate, with a brilliantly complex interplay of herbs and lime. "I'm actually proudest of this than of anything else in the cellar," he said. I see why.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

NOTE: We're investigating the possibility of having future vintages of this become a **core-list wine**. It should be.

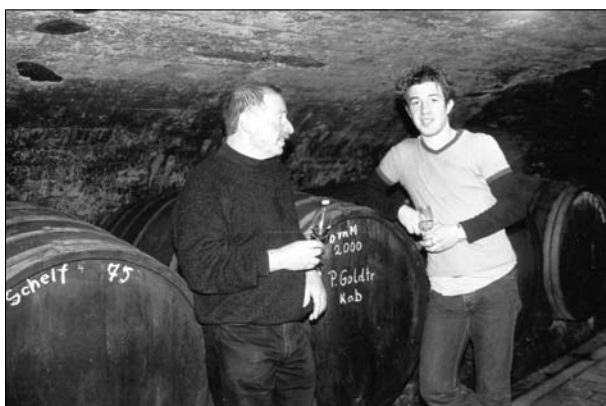
- GAD-010 **2003 Dhronhofberger Sängerei Riesling**
 Funny story here: the fermentation stopped at 40 grams per liter and he wanted it dry. What to do? He hates to manipulate—did nothing with his 2003s, no acidification. We all tasted it, we all loved it, we all said “Please, do nothing to this wine; 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-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-014 **2005 “Hofberg” Riesling Spätlese** +
This is Adam: it’s his wine as archetype. The nose is *ur*-Mosel. The quality of fruit is piercingly brilliant, and the underlying herbal and sweet-lees flavors pull the palate around like a team of dray-horses. Clean salty botrytis (at 105 Oechsle), a thoroughly lovely wine.
 SOS: 3 (9-23 years)
- GAD-017 **2004 “Hofberg” Riesling (Feinherb)** +
 First offering. I tasted this after the ‘05 BA and it’s still perfectly balanced; ripe (12%), snappy, verbena-drenched Riesling of lusty vitality and ruddy good health; it has penetration, richness and lovely slatey complexity; essentially *perfect* Riesling.
 SOS: 0 (now to 3 years, again 9-14 years)
- GAD-015 **2005 “Hofberg” Riesling Auslese “Goldkapsel”** +(+)
 Smells eerily like a young ‘71; dark aromas and also lavender and iris; 125 Oechsle, it’s really a magma of young big Mosel; not showing all its cards, but what a primordial mass of slate, salts and fruit. It’s like a 747; gigantic but it can glide. The sweetness is sucked into the mass of vinosity.
 SOS: 3 (15-35 years)
- GAD-016H **2005 “Hofberg” Riesling BA, 12/375ml** ++
 “I had to go out and buy a small basket-press to make this wine,” he said. It has the smell I call “marigold”. With all its botrytis this remains a clear portrait of Mosel-fruit and the finish is like a honey you fined with slate. A mere 180 Oechsle, by the way. There’s the sublime fruit of a ‘75 but the amber-weight of ‘71.
 SOS: 4 (20-45 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. Then along came the stunning 2004, and this estate is really showing me something yet they haven't abandoned their fundamental style, Mosel wine in the form of a heavy suede jacket; if anything they've renewed it in even stronger form.

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. 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.**



Hugo & Mario Schwang

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-

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr, Falkenberg, and Treppchen**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Müller-Thurgau, 2% Regent**

yeast wines can display. He leaves his wine on its primary lees for a remarkable length of time: two to three months is common, though less-ripe wines will be racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. "I'd personally say that these are the most important factors for high quality," he says. "First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don't use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make."

Last 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. Mario's settling in seems to have turbo-charged the energy here, and this looks like an estate on the move.

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-046L **2005 Piesporter Falkenberg Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

This is a true single-site, in fact the highest slopes of the Goldtröpfchen; it's unchaptalized (indeed a "legal" near-Auslese at 87 Oechsle), and it's all kinds of appley flowery charm. Here's an instance of the sweetness-conundrum, by the way; no one wants too much sweetness in the "simple" Liter wine, because then you couldn't just gulp it down, but the "simple Liter wine" isn't usually a near-Auslese. I wonder whether this is *too* dry — you tell me.

SOS: 2 (now- 6 years)

GRH-043 **2005 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

Quite malty and curranty on the nose; amazing tactile solid mass on the palate; it works almost *feinherb* (as it's much riper than its "Kabinett-sweetness" would entail) but it's a real thick guava pudding unique among '05 Mosels I tasted.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (5-18 years)

GRH-044 **2005 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

+

This is like a big ol' Thanksgiving-day parade float of a Mosel wine; you can't believe how huge it is, and yet it floats. Almost lurid rose, plantain, mango, but held just short of overstatement by its tight cool solidity; again doesn't seem, especially "sweet", and with all its outsized fruit it finishes with a demure kiss of wintergreen and herb.

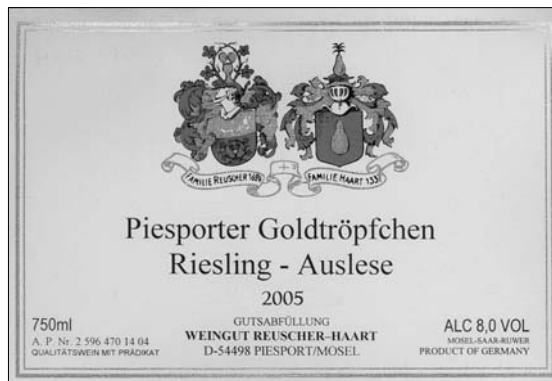
SOS: 2 (8-23 years)

GRH-045 **2005 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Auslese**

(+)

Heaven alone knows how ripe this is; I do know there's a TBA with 230 Oechsle that'll probably ferment till we pull troops out of Iraq; this fella is massively concentrated and spicy; masculine and chewy (seems to be their vintage signature); too early to apply adjectives but looks awfully promising.

SOS: 3 (12-30 years)



I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year *stage* 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 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.

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-033 **2005 Estate Riesling**

"We picked nothing under 90 degrees Oechsle," and this is unchaptalized, and, well: here goes. Far too good and too *serious* for its category — we'll need to wait at least a year for another arms-open come-hither *drink me* wine, but this dryish, solid chewy Riesling is the least '05 will do from good growers. You'll have to be serious for a little while!

SOS: 1 (now-6 years)

GHS-030 **2005 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

Even with 43 g.l. RS it tastes *feinherb* — like **Auslese** feinherb — the wine is really a *tarte au quetsch* in liquid form; the plums, the buttery crust, the slight agreeable hint of tartness; half-a-ton of mineral shimmer here; all the '05 solidity, and a kindly vaporous apple-minty finish.

SOS: 1 (7-19 years)

GHS-031 **2005 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

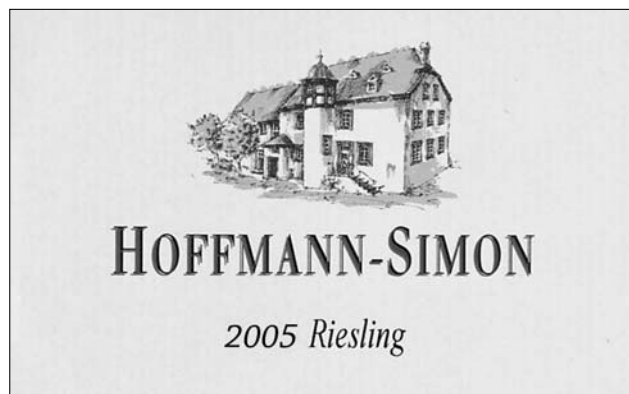
105 Oechsle, and it underwent partial malo, though I shouldn't have told you because only a bloodhound could discern it; it's the first of these to *display* its sweetness, as well as some clean botrytis; this is gaudy and extravagantly fruity with a finish, odd as this sounds, of really ripe cherry tomatoes.

SOS: 3 (9-25 years)

GHS-032H **2005 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling TBA, 12/375ml****++**

I have no idea what possessed him to do this in a new barrique, but I love the result! Call it a quirk, but as much as oak irritates me in most white table wines, I have a drooling slutty lust for it in very sweet wines — it gives them *yin*, somehow. This smells almost like Jurançon, and drinks like a dream. DRINKS! It isn't a syrup; it's a multi-faceted wine; it's for those who, when faced with a dessert choice of chocolate, caramel or fruit — always choose fruit. Tropical-malt, panna cotta, I adore it. It's almost like those incredible Bründlmayer stickies.

SOS: 4 (any time!)



weingut ansgar clüsserath

mosel • trittenheim

Eva Clüsserath is featured (with a totally happenin' pic) in a lovely new book called RIESLING, co-written by the charming Christine Fischer, who's kinda like the German Andrea Immer except she's still a floor-working somm. Eva has a wonderful quote: "Riesling is really just fun, because it can be so heart-refreshingly uncomplicatedly complicated!"

Not too many people know how to say that, and I myself struggle with it. Wine is complicated – agricultural wine, at any rate – and if you wrestle against it, it will pin you. Yet the instant you relax, the very second you say *OK, it's complicated, it will always be complicated, and I'm going to quit trying to master it and just let complicated-ness be FUN*, well guess what? Wine becomes your best friend.

Size 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.



Eva Clüsserath

This year I had a telling conversation with Eva. We're not selling what deserves to be sold from here, and 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 H₂S 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-kayyy: 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

- **Vineyard area: 4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Trittenheimer Apotheke and Altärchen; Mülheimer Sonnenlay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling; 10% other**

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 . . .

The estate is on-the-move; they've just obtained parcels in Piesporter Goldtröpfchen (from Adam, I wonder?) and Dhron Hofberger, partly for curiosity's sake and partly to have alternates from which to make wine while the Apotheke is in flurbereinigung. Yet I think Eva would have bought the vineyards regardless; it's like her. A young, curious vintner doesn't want to be associated exclusively with one site.

2005 is a superb Mosel vintage, to be sure, yet even so the quality of Eva's wines was striking. It was only the second Mosel visit we made yet even at the end when everything had been tasted we still talked about these wines. They have a rare authority and dignity. As you will see if you *swirl them critters* for a minute or two. Just note I am indemnified from any claims for wrist injuries. It's in the small print, man.

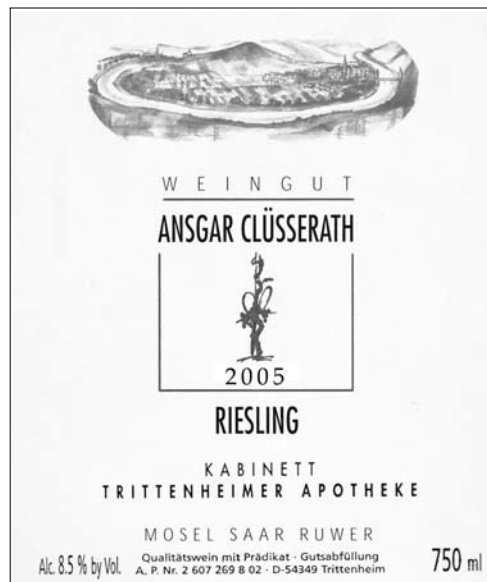
clüsserath at a glance:

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-015 **2005 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett** +
Swir-r-r-r-r-rrllll . . . but at last it shows that 75-ish fruit with the usual "dark" mineral tones, becoming almost profound in its amazing Autumn-y portrayal of burning-leaves and cidering; it is nothing but absurd to obtain *this* as "Kabinett".
SOMMELIER ALERT (DECANT!) SOS:1 (7-23 years)
- GAC-016 **2005 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese** ++
I think this is the best wine Eva has made; more iron-rich and masculine now, and when it emerges it comes as almost a shock, it has such salty mass of fruit; the wine is saturated with *saturation*, ridiculously, riotously "green", an extravagance of woodruff, lime, verbena, balsam. Sheesh! I haven't even started telling you about the insanely long essence-of-slate finish. Amazing wine.
SOS: 2 (9-27 years)
- GAC-010H **2003 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Auslese 12/500ml**
I know, this is my little quixotic cluelessness, there was an '05 Auslese (you better believe it) but we tasted this one alongside and in fact it is **the more attractive wine**, and will remain so for the next several years. It has emerged from its youthful turbulence into a food wine of wonderful purity; glass-clear apple and slate nose; golden ripeness without explicit botrytis; rich and grand but fresh, like big white sails flapping in a cool blue wind; lovely balsam finish. I know it barely has a commercial chance – it just happens to be the best option I could offer you!
SOS: 3 (10-35 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)



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 *garrigue* flavor imparted to certain wines from grapes grown near actual garrigue. Yet one hears many groupings 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.

Here at These selections we like to say *We ain't no spinning cone zone!* Hey, come to our office and you'll hear us say it all the time, at the water cooler, in the company kitchen, in the parking lot. We hate spinning cones and everything they imply. Instead we like growers like Carl Loewen who say lovely true things like "A good wine is always made first in the mind." Here are some other things he 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. Our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence. When I first listed the wines I did so on the basis of some hugely impressive samples I'd tasted at Selbach; it was the tail-end of my Mosel week and I couldn't *squeeze* another appointment in—but I had to have these wines. David Schildknecht happens to have visited Loewen before I met him but after the wines were in my book. "I'm not sure Terry knows what a tiger he has by the tail," David said to Bill Mayer. I do now.

Loewen is another grower who'd rather not know the analytical figures for his wines, preferring to make any necessary decisions based on taste and intuition. "When you have the figures in your head you can't taste the wine any more," he said. And he's right, provided he can absolutely trust that intuition.



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

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

- 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

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 didn't pick a grape with less than 93 Oechsle. "The vintage in fact was made by a rainy August," he says. "Otherwise we'd have had another '03. It's amazing to actually be grateful for a rainy August, but that's how it was." The rain restored the aquifer so the vineyards could withstand the very dry 60 days that fol-

lowed, and gave the wines their very high extracts. That said, it's an atypically powerful vintage for Carl — I sense he's more at home amongst the virtues of an '04 — but many of these wines tickle the limits of slatey expressiveness.

Loewen's wines also have a quality of *companionability* which can't be isolated or quantified but which deter-

mines 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-045 2005 Riesling Trocken "Varidor"

There is every reason to like this wonderful dry Riesling; it's an eerily dead-ringer for Vertus-Mesnil Champagne; it's crisply dry but far from sharp; it's oystery and mineral-ly and jasmine-y and it has a ripe power. 20% botrytis adds complexity. SOS: 0 (now to 3 years, again 9-13 years)

GCL-039 2005 Leiwener Klostersgarten Riesling Kabinett

CORE-LIST WINE. 41 year old vines. As always this has the *Vertus* fragrance, a cool "chalkiness" and powdery mineral. Clearly this '05 is a freak: 93 Oechsle and all that. Talc-y fragrance with aloe vera, mitake, verbena and *patisserie*; a powerhouse-palate, a real gob-stuffer; shoulder-shaking, tangy, mirabelle-y monster — and important: none too sweet. It's super Riesling, and they tell me normal life will return eventually. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (6-17 years)

GCL-041 2004 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

First offering. That's because last year I selected the Ritsch instead; both were good but I wanted to tidy the offering by only showing one. Now I choose this over its '05 sib, because I like it more. In fact it's quite adorable, thank you very much; I love its fresh Mirabelle and white peach and verbena aromas, and the palate is silky, crisp and salty, with a fine nap of malty botrytis. The '05 is impressive, and will be offered when this sells out (as item # GCL-044), but I am seduced by the sheer agreeableness of this charming '04. SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

GCL-040 2005 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Auslese **+**

This has become one of my poster-children for *terroir*, and a wine I'm buying every year for my cellar. "I wanted to make a Spätlese from this," Carl said, "And as you'll see the sweetness is quite moderate, but the problem is it doesn't *taste* like a Spätlese. So instead it's an Auslese to *drink* and not to win prizes."

A mere 102 Oechsle. And you are perhaps too modest, my friend. Correct, it's none too sweet, but if this can't win prizes then they aren't worth having. A fabulously beautiful nose, about as gorgeous as slate Riesling can smell, with complex herbal balsam notes; the palate is piquant and wry, with tart-sweet limey fruit leading into a finish that **clamps** onto the palate. My single plus is perhaps a mite stingy . . . SOS: 2

GCL-042H 2005 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling BA, 12/375ml **++**

This was less rich and sweet than a Laurentiuslay BA by its side, but it's a *quintessence* of the great site and not overwhelmed by botrytis; it's fervidly salty and lime-like, and the sweetness is tweaked by a verbena-edge creating an uncanny call-and-response among unexpected parameters; *green* (lime), *black* (compacted mineral) and a kind of leaf-shade coolness. This wine will not seduce you, but it will haunt you. SOS: 4 (20-40 years)

GCL-043H 2005 Leiwener Klostersgarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml **+**

Picked December 11. You won't see many of these from '05 (I only have one other) and this doesn't do the crampons-of-acidity thing, but it *smells* like Eiswein, mango and lime; whereas on the palate it feints toward BA with a soupcon of healthy botrytis; a *fine* quality of fruit; comice pear, talc and balsam. SOS: 4 (7-22 years)

carl schmitt-wagner

mosel • longuich

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*, slaty and solid. A gorgeous wine followed: '69 *Spätlese*, ethereal,

long, evocative and tender.

The next wine was obviously younger, a '92 *Auslese*, just emerging from its adolescence; then a 1997 *Auslese*, not my type (too much botrytis); then an improbable and obscure wine; I thought maybe a 1966 but as it grew in 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



Bruno Schmitt

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

I only wish I could show it to you, because all you get to see is this "drink now to four years" crap by wine

- **Vineyard area: 4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Blue Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

writers who've never set foot in a German winery. I also love the ceremony with which the new wines are presented. Wine is significant not only as a provider of livelihood, but also as a filament connecting us to a human continuity.

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



schmitt-wagner at a glance:

This was a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio, but the 2001s changed that. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 109-year-old ungrafted vines—some SIX THOUSAND OF THEM. Makes among the two or three best Kabinetts along the Mosel.

how the wines taste:

Of course this varies a little from parcel to parcel, but as a rule the wines show remarkably expressive lime and licorice, almost sassafrass. Sounds a little like Ürziger Würzgarten, right? Both have red clay and sandstone mixed with the slate. Schmitt's is an old style, cask-aged and leesy. The wines *seem* quite open and scrutable yet they age endlessly. One unusual feature here is the rather narrow span between Kabinett and Auslese in recent vintages, but I think this has less to do with undernourished Auslese than with overnourished Kabinetts; after all, a Kabinett from 109-year old ungrafted vines is gonna have some *taste*, one might suppose!

GSW-049 **2005 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb +**
36 g.l. of virtually undetectable sweetness, and this masterpiece is a last hurrah from an endangered species, a perfectly balanced dry-ish Riesling: smoky slate and wisteria aromas; palate shows superb Mosel fruit in a tenderly dry form. Absolutely perfect food-wine! Pour it and see.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now to 4 years, again from 17-28 years)

GSW-050 **2005 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett +**
A little waif of 90°. Fragrances of fennel, lilac, white iris, tarragon, apple; palate is a creamy fantasy of spice and fruit with wonderful shimmer and length; generous, solid and charming. The Nth degree of Mosel here! Like a young '75 Auslese (not too far off the mark in terms of ripeness, in fact).
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (8-24 years)

This is important, so I'm gonna say it **loud**. HERE'S A WINE FROM 109 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??**

GSW-051 **2005 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**
CORE-LIST WINE. We'll slide into this when the '04 has sold through. Spearmint and candy-cane aromas; higher-toned than the Kabinett, more sassafrass and slate; minty spiced-apple finish.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (10-30 years)

GSW-048 **2005 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese +**
102° Oechsle, and another of his *perfect* food-Auslesen — it has 59g.l. residual sugar, about HALF that of Coke; tastes in essence *feinherb*. Amazing nose! Sweet lees, wintergreen, black walnut, sassafrass; glorious spicy power and a cymbal-crash of sheer vitality; finishes like a wintergreen Altoid. Don't dare tell me you "can't drink Auslese with food."
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:2 (10-35 years)

karlsmühle-geiben

ruwer • mertesdorf

“This is the best vintage in the history of our winery,” says Peter Geiben, a man not usually given to bold emotional statements. “We had the most beautiful botrytis I’ve ever seen in my life. We picked up to 120° Oechsle *from the vine* without selection! The acidity was absolutely optimal. We basically had no Fall; we went from Summer till the end of October to *snow* the first week in November.”

When I first started visiting the Ruwer (well before you were born) it was a secretive little valley you hardly knew how to find; you turned off from a markedly bland village-suburb of Trier and suddenly everything was green, pastures, vineyards, and if you were attentive you might catch a glimpse of the tiny Ruwer stream hissing and gurgling its way to the Mosel. These

days the turnoff is still there but the valley is compromised; it’s become quite the bedroom-community for commuters to Trier. I guess they gotta live somewhere, but they went and spoiled my bucolic fun.

You can almost forget they’re close by when you sit by the little stream at Geiben’s hotel-restaurant, eating a trout so fresh it’s almost quivering, drinking the most exquisite Rieslings you could ever have imagined.

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



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 refus-

Grünhaus’s, then maybe, just maybe, y’oughta be paying more attention, squire. Huh? W a d d a y a think?

The wines sometimes have that Mosel-yeasty stink their first year in bottle, and they’re

- Vineyard area: 14 hectares
- Annual production: 4,200 cases
- Top sites: Kaseler Nies’chen, Lorenzhöfer
- Soil types: Clay and slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 2% each of Weissburgunder, Spätburgunder, Dornfelder, Müller-Thurgau and Elbling

ing to pay more for Côtes-de-Nuits Burgundies than for Côtes-de-Beaune—“Hey it’s all Burgundy, man.” Who cares about a piddling matter like where the wine comes from! Oh don’t mind me: I’ve got rants in my pants.

Peter Geiben is a gentleman of rather brusque temperament, yet he’s fiercely dedicated to every detail involved in making great wine. I both respect and like him, but my response to his wines is uncolored by any warm ‘n fuzzies. Peter doesn’t have a poetic temperament. He’d brush away any wine faery who happened to alight on his shoulder. Peter speaks tersely, if at all, about such things. He’d rather talk about the trellising method he’s developed, and he’d *far* rather talk about hunting. A friend convinced him to stop de-acidifying. He experimented with natural yeast fermentation and was pleased with the results. He’s done away with wood in the cellar and is now making everything reductively in tanks. Wood is too rustic, and too dangerous in his view.

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets there from Trier. 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 Lorenhöfer hillside are positive and adamant, they walk with a firm tread, and they have a slight and pleasing earthiness. The wines from the Kasel sites are nominally lighter but utterly ravishing in polish and beauty of flavor. It's like the difference between the top part of Clos Vougeot near Musigny and the parts lower down toward the route nationale.

In fact I learned one year that the **Nies'chen** is fine-stoned; i.e. lots of crumbled slate and thus superior drainage, plus a certain filigree quality in the wines, and **Kehrnagel** is more coarse-stoned, thus less porous, and the wines are less elegant. Peter took us for a walk through the vineyards. He also gave us various *spring-waters* to taste; the region is gifted with subterranean streams. We

tasted from springs beneath the Nies'chen, Kehrnagel and Felslay, and of course they all tasted different.

The best Ruwer wines seem to *distill* the essence of Mosel-ness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said 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: There's a spiffy new label, which gives Peter's name pride of place over "Karlsmühle." 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!

karlsmühle 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, Karlsmühle has become a serious landowner and very important producer of green-bottle Rieslings.

how the wines taste:

Ruwer wines can be the *ne plus ultra* of refinement, with their own keenly slicing flavors of cassis and sometimes cinnamon.

GKM-094 **2005 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE. There are comments to the effect Ruwer Rieslings can show improbable spice notes; well, this one could easily be mistaken for a really exquisite Scheurebe; cassis, apple-blossom, cinnamon and sage abound in a fragrance of amazing refinement; the palate is crazy-long and solid as a paperweight; the sweetness is perfectly balanced, and this is 10lbs of flavor in a 5-lb bag. **SOMMELIER ALERT!** SOS: 1 (6-22 years)

GKM-095 **2005 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Spätlese** **+**

"Ten years ago we'd have bottled this as an Auslese Goldkap," said Peter, and so it is. It fermented till late February, bottled the 1st week of March; it's the big brother to the Kabinett, missing perhaps the gauzy brilliance of an '04 but delivering a whomp of solid vinous rama-lama that'll roll your foxy bones. It's like a quince *confiture* over a bed of smoky slate; again, an immovable length. Never tasted Ruwer wines like these . . . **SOS: 2** (10-30 years)

GKM-096 **2005 Lorenhöfer Riesling Spätlese** **+**

"In '75 this would have been Beerenauslese!" said Peter, when I compared the fragrance of this wine to the legendary older vintage. I know I need to reduce my skus but man, how do you leave something like this behind? More sheer *fruit* than the Nieschen, less earth and skeleton; a real apple *compote* on the nose; botrytis brings its saltiness, and the sheer **mass** of the wine is just *sick*, a tangy-earthly miasma of fruit leading to an astonishing dry peal of finish that settles into your very sinuses. **SOMMELIER ALERT!** SOS: 2 (10-26 years)

GKM-097 **2005 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Auslese** **++**

Amazingly picked from the vine at 120° Oechsle, and it's absolutely sensational: a malty botrytis nose with baked apple and plum-blossom; the palate is like a cumulo-nimbus lit with dusk-gold; peche-de-vigne, an astounding conciliation of shimmery explosive fruit with profound weight and solidity. The stuff of legend here! **SOS: 4** (14-35 years)

GKM-098H **2005 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **++**

"Clearly," I wrote, "this will be great, or something . . . I can't see into it." But then I waited, and waited....and with air the cassis and cherry emerged, and the wine began to soar. I'll spare you the preening over the sleeping infant, except perhaps to say I know I'm in the presence of a miracle. **SOS: 4** (20-45 years)

Is all taste equally valid?

Sure it is! There's a feel-good, all-American democratic answer for you. One man's opinion's as good as another's and all that. It is self-evidently the right answer to the question.

It's the *question* that's bogus.

One evening at the ballgame I had the good fortune to sit next to one of the advance scouts who attend every game, gathering intel on the players. It was a slow night, and I asked if he could "think out loud" for me, tell me what he saw. And what he saw was an entirely different ballgame from the one I saw. I sat in admiration of his trained eye.

Similarly, if I take my car to the mechanic he hears different things in the engine's hum than I do. A piano tuner hears minute tonal variances to which I am effectively deaf. A massage therapist discerns muscle tensions of which I'm not consciously aware.



All these are examples of expertise we take for granted. And yet if someone asserts expertise in *wine*, we are promptly suspicious; we sniff for snobism, we get defensive and put up our dukes — and I have always wondered why.

Wine writers such as my friend Jennifer Rosen feel a degree of responsibility to "demystify" wine, to make it accessible to everyman. That way, they reason, more people will drink it and the world will be improved. Other wine writers want to reassure you there are no "rules" and that you should always drink what you like; reasonable advice on the face of it. If you like drinking young Barolo with a dozen

raw oysters I won't stop you (though I'll shudder to think what's going on inside your mouth). If you like a beer with five sardines steeped in it for 20 minutes, go on and drink it that way. No one wants to keep you from the consequences of your perverse taste. No one denies your "right" to it.

Some of us, however, like to call things by their proper names. Not from snobism, sadism or any other ism, but because it helps to order the world of experience. It fends off the chaos.

I had a conversation on an airplane recently, with a cellist in her 20s. We talked about music, naturally, and it became clear to me her tastes were wider than my own. (I'm an ossified old geez in his early 50s.) I remarked upon her ecumenical listening habits. "Well," she said, "don't you think one should search for the virtues in everything?" Much as I wished to say yes, to do so would have been false. Instead I said: "No, I think you should seek the good in everything; that's where you are in your life. But what I need to do is identify that which annoys or wounds me, and avoid it."

Stuart Pigott once wrote: "We should . . . start making wines with balance, elegance and originality sound so astonishing that our readers feel they've just got to try them," and this of course is true. A critic must stand for something; otherwise he is merely pusillanimous. And so our first task is to find the good and praise it. But any time we take a stand FOR something, we imply the thing's shadow, i.e. the thing we love suggests, ineluctably, the thing we don't love. And we *cannot* shrink from naming both things, especially not for fear of wounding the delicate sensibilities of the philistines (who, by the way, are both robustly insensitive and also have no scruples about insulting us with labels such as "snob", "elitist" et.al.).

God knows we'd prefer to be everyone's best friend, and we feel humane and generous telling anyone with unformed (or simply atrocious) taste that his taste is as good as anyone else's. But it's a lie we tell so that we can feel noble, and furthermore it is unfair to the recipient, who, if he's being patron-

ized, is entitled at least to know it.

Pigott went on to claim that any wine anyone likes is ipso-facto “good” wine, and this is just the slippery slope we can’t help sliding down when we try to be “democratic”. It is manifestly impossible to support a definition of “good” as “wine that someone, regardless of who they are, finds to taste good.” This is irresponsible, it ducks the question. Once at a presentation I was terribly busy and opened bottles without a chance to screen them. A punter remarked that a particular wine was “fantastic; I never had anything that tasted like this, wow, how was this made . . . ?” and his enthusiasm infected me and I poured myself a taste. CORKED! What should I have done, based on Pigott’s definition of “good”? The gentleman liked a patently flawed wine. He has every “right” to like it; no one disputes this. But I felt honor-bound to (discreetly and tactfully!) correct him.

Thus I can’t endorse a definition of “good” that is as “inclusive and democratic” as some desire. I do not believe nature has any use for our democracies; she is in essence heirarchical. Some things *are* better than others, and one of *our* functions is gently to guide our readers toward appreciation of these distinctions.

If we take these democratic principles and apply them to any other thing about which aesthetic or cultural criticism is warranted, do they stand up? Shall we endorse a statement such as “All art is good art as long as someone likes it”? Does this sentiment apply equally to architecture, poetry, cuisine? Or is wine somehow “special” because too few people drink it? And should we pander to every sort of unformed or misguided taste because we’re trying to get more people to drink wine?

Let me be clear: no one has to like wine the way I like it, or the way any “expert” likes it. If wine is a casual beverage for you, then the discussion ends. Wine is complicated and therefore intimidating to people, but I’ll make you a deal: you promise not to lash out at me for what I know because *you* feel intimidated, and I’ll promise not to guilt-trip you into acquiring “expertise” over a subject you don’t care that much about. Deal?

The truest reason to write humanely is because it is good to be humane. Any professional who uses

words does well to shade them so as not to deliver gratuitous insults to people with dubious or uneducated taste. But that doesn’t mean he abrogates his entire judgmental faculties — which by the way are why we *hired* him — in search of some romance about inclusion or democracy.

There are no “invalid” moments of pleasure in wine. But, there are higher and lower pleasures. Once you have graduated from the low you can always return. It’s fun to return! If you’re somewhere in the process of honing your wine taste and you want to continue, no one helps you if he fails to delineate the distinctions between inadequate, ordinary, good, fine and great — or between “industrial” and “agricultural” wines. Maybe there is a thin line between this and Pigott’s “attach[ing] an imperative” but the way through involves nurturing one’s own kindness and honing one’s craft with words.

I feel it is indeed unkind to flatten all taste to a specious equality, made even more pernicious by encouraging the philistines to set the level.

Me, I have a powerful aversion to wines that gush and scream, they annoy me, and I tell you why, and you make up your own mind. MY imperative isn’t everyone’s, self-evidently: but I strive to send clear signals, to advocate what I think is worthy and to identify and explain what I think is unworthy, and if my tone is “superior, even dictatorial” then the fault lies with ME. I have failed to communicate my point. But, the POINT remains.



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.



florian weingart

mittelrhein • boppard-spay

Florian Weingart seems self-conscious about the accolades regularly heaped upon him, like putting on a tux and looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking “Who is this guy?” 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.

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 nitro-

- **Vineyard area: 22 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Engelstein, Feuerlay & Ohlenberg, Schloss Fürstenberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Spätburgunder, 2% Grauburgunder**

gen 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.)

We’d sell more of Florian’s wine if, ironically, the Bopparder Hamm were a lesser vineyard. “The problem with trying to produce Kabinett from the Hamm is we’d have to pick unripe grapes,” he says. You’ll see there’s a Kabinett below, from the vineyards around



Adolph Weingart

Bacharach, but these lie 35km distant, and Florian's wondering whether to renew their lease. I *really* hope he does, and I really *really* hope you'll help me by buyin' a *BUNCH* of that gorgeous wine, so we can get it every year and put it on the core-list.

Weingart is another who went into rapture over the quality of 2005 fruit. "It was the best botrytis we've ever seen in the last 10 years, especially in the first half of picking," he said.

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-079 **2005 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett** **+**
It shows its prototypical kirsch fragrance, with slate and wisteria; the palate is a giddy mineral display, snappy and fine-boned, as if hyacinths are opening in your mouth; a shower of *terroir*, spice and blossom on the long, gripping finish.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-25 years)
- GAW-078 **2005 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**
A classy and elegant fragrance, mutsu apples and Mirabelle and clean-botrytis talc; the shimmering palate blends asian pear, mineral and white nectarine; charming finish of slate and vanilla; it's another wine that stopped fermenting with low-30s residual sugar, so it's the descendant of last year's *Anarchie*, a really ideal Riesling and/or a Riesling Ideal.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (now-3 years, again 15-22 years)
- GAW-080 **2005 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**
I'm not sure that pure *fruit* can improve on this! A fervid minerality is engulfed by cherry-blossom and wisteria; the wine is as firm as a steel rod and as perfumed as a golden dream. A haunting, delicate ecstasy; unforgettable.
SOS: 2 (9-27 years)
- GAW-081 **2005 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Auslese***
This year I took the riper toastier one. I often don't. 2005 is partly about this warm, sweet malt, morel, smoky old-bush tea thing with the salty iron below. No sense trading down! This is partly normal fruit at 96° with 25% BA at 152°!
SOS: 3 (15-35 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, 2005 was wonderful, and I hope it will *remain* wonderful in bottle.

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 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 cul-



Peter and Linde Jost

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Wallufer Walkenberg, Barcharacher Hahn**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate in Hahn; loess and loam on gravel sub-soil in Walkenberg**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 17% Spätburgunder, 3% Weissburgunder**

tured 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 Süsreserve if it's produced optimally. "Each wine should have its own Süsreserve," 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-062 **2005 Bacharacher Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**

Unusually for Jost, this wine is all mineral; dry but *gently* so; a fine dark slatiness, birchy and burning-leaf; it has 16.2g.l. RS and is a little snappy at the very end, but the attack and middle are so sinewy and dense the wine works, especially for those who enjoy a dramatically mineral profile.

SOS: minus-1 (now- 3 years, again 9-12 years)

GTJ-064 **2005 Wallufer Walkenberg Riesling Spätlese**

As often with this Rheingau wine there's a sort of cherry-tobacco and earthy note; the '02 adds lime and empire apple; lovely lush fruit with a solid earth & stone note which most tasters will like and a few will read as "sour"; count me among those delighted with its balsam barkly charm.

SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

GTJ-063 **2005 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett** +

The 2nd year of drip-irrigation in this famously dry site, and a serene harvest "without stress, and plenty of time to select," said Peter. A gorgeous fragrance of cox-orange, nectarine and mineral dust; seems drier than usual (I'll bet it isn't) thanks to its leesy-mineral mass; a great swirl of green (herbs and balsam) and yellow (nectarines, roses); end-less spicy length and a lashing snap of slate on the finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-22 years)

GTJ-065 **2005 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Spätlese**

Take the Kabinett and add a spoonful of Tasmanian leatherwood honey, a dash of malt and a slim square of milk-chocolate — even a bit of cardamom and ginger *et voila*: you have it. Of course "it" is merely my string of associations, and your antic self might say "Ecuadoran tobacco, turbinado sugar cubes and kielbasa," and the punters will decide which of us is right, or more pathetic. But there *are* certain honeys where you can smell the meadows and the fields, and this wine is like that.

SOS: 2 (9-24 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!

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**, **melaphyre**, **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-

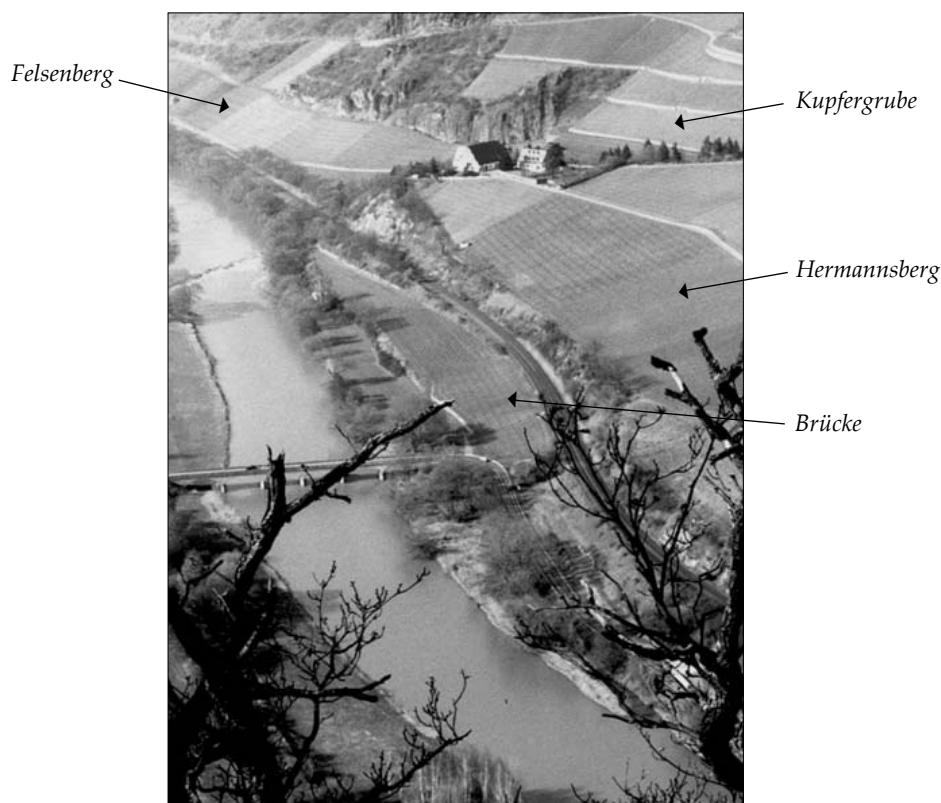
gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyre. I turned to the group. "You hear a lot of crap 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.

About the *wines*, mind you, but not about Helmut himself. He's entirely down to earth, remarkably so for someone on whom such superlatives are routinely lavished. Someone posted a note on one of the internet boards a few months ago: they were touring the Nahe and saw a guy on a tractor in a riverside vineyard just as they were approaching a bridge. They stopped

their car and approached, and of course it was Helmut. Now I don't imagine my friend suffers fools gladly, but if you've traveled a long way and you seem to care and be curious, he has all the time in the world for you. He took the impromptu visiting party on a tour through his vineyards, and the posted report was full of amazement that such a "superstar" of wine was so generous and *normal*. As indeed he is.

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 its 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

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

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, weathered volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder**

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 through the flowers," to use metaphor and image. He is quicker even than I am to carry wine into that realm, yet he is also the most matter-of-fact person I think I know. I suppose he's heard his share of tasters wishing to impress him with all the stuff they "get" in his wines, but Helmut's had enough of it. It's 180 degrees different from tasting with Aubry (in Champagne), who only *wants* to add to his ongoing catalogue of associations. Helmut is rather the *shaman* who doesn't explicate but simply creates the environment for the thing to be known. What *does* amuse him, and clearly exasperates his wife Gabi, is metaphor, especially anthropomorphizing.

I mean, let's face it: wine works upon the imagination, especially great wine. This we know. So if the imagination is stimulated, what is it to do if not *IMAGINE*? That is, after all, its job. And it seems like an enormous waste if in that moment we're pitifully lost in "grabbing" the wine so we can dissect it to show how cool our palates are. It's like ignoring the rainbow while you balance your checkbook.

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 one year, about two weeks apart, as I made a second visit with Kevin Pike. The latter run-through was a brisk affair—we hadn't much time—and it lubricated a somewhat delicate conversation which engaged most of my attention. I found it fascinating to scroll through these wines, which I love like none other, with only a sideways glance. In one particular moment I was groping to say something subtle in my inadequate German, concentrating entirely on finding words I didn't know, and suddenly the wine in my glass found a seam and soaked through it, and I realized I was near tears. It was shockingly beautiful. I was closed to the world, and the world opened me. And what of this? it seemed to say.

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

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

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

This year it was just me and Karen Odessa; no colleagues. It was snowing and sleeting and low and miserable. After small-talk we surveyed the vintage. I already knew it was a great Nahe year, and others had told me that Helmut was (rarely!) “willing to be pleased” with his collection. He said “It was one of those years when thunderstorms were decisive. You had certain vineyards which seem to have pleased God, and others that seem to have ticked Him off.” Was it clean, I asked? “The botrytis itself was clean, but a certain amount of it was always there; you couldn’t get over 95° without it.” And so we began to taste.

My sense is that Helmut’s ’05s are less *sizeable* than others’, less hewn-from-iron. Many of them were pretty lithe and curvy. Yet what strikes me most is their astonishing tactile density, a minerality that leaves all thought of metaphor in the dust: it is so tellingly present you think the wines were strained through the entire periodic table of elements. With their rapture of fruit, this makes for some soul-rending glasses of wine! Yet I was most of all provoked to *laugh*, and why shouldn’t laughter be a soul’s response to astonishment?

This is a thing I find very hard to say. Yet I am moved to try. With Dönnhoff I rarely if ever sense the wines are in any way *crafted*. That implies a guiding intelligence such as, for instance, I find (and love) at Diel. Dönnhoff’s

Some Notes On The Vineyards:

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

NIEDERHÄUSER 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, melaphyre 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 HERMANNSHÖHLE.

wines are different texturally, and they *feel* different existentially; they indicate a divine serenity, they seem to have emerged fully formed. Of course it's my conceit to imagine so, for I know well what year-long *schwitzty* work goes into them. But if any companion said that a Dönnhoff wine was "well-made" I'd be taken aback. "But they're not . . . oh, well yeah sure, I guess someone makes them," I'd mumble.

Maybe it's because they seem so effortless that I feel I hear something *speaking* through them. As I said, these things are hard to put into words.

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.

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 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.

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:

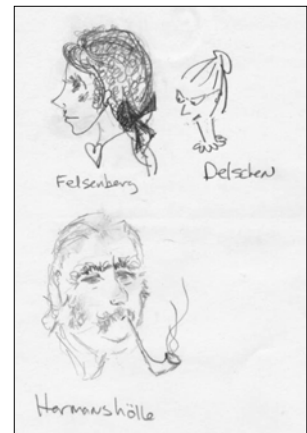
Simply, like the most perfect Riesling that can ever be.

GDH-173 **2005 Hermannshöhle Grosses Gewächs**

+(+)

I always taste the dry wines, and have usually accepted the wisdom of leaving them in Germany for the Trocken-freaks, so as to get larger allocations of the, ahem, *sweet* wines. This year I asked Helmut if he'd like one of his top dry wines exposed to Americans, and he agreed he would.

So we tasted the Big-3 GGs, Felsenberg, Dellchen, Hermannshöhle, and we were off and running. Felsenberg was the kindly librarian, Dellchen was the stern disciplinarian, Hermannshöhle was the retired old professor of philosophy, sitting in his favorite chair contemplating lofty principles while enjoying his old pipe. Next thing I knew my darling Karen Odessa revealed a hitherto unknown talent for caricature, whose lovely results are here.



Dry, you really notice how smoky the Hermannshöhle can be; this is from a 60-year old parcel Helmut prefers to make his dry wine from (the higher and slatier one gives us our beloved *sweet*); this smells like burning cuttings and blackberry; the mid-palate is wonderfully mineral and dignified; the wine has the repose of one who needn't suffer fools, yet the finish wafts an echo, a smile of blossoms.

SOS: 0 (now - 3 years, again 12-15 years)

- GDH-172 **2005 Estate Riesling** **++**
 The most amazing vintage of this wine! There are years when Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg isn't this minerally and haunting; pensive, with a sort of yielding firmness; the empty glass smells of guava. Classic porphyry intricacy — one gropes for the word that would sum this up — “cherry” or “lime” or “grassy” or “peppery” — but porphyry Rieslings are the wordless ones, the yearning for the unsayable. This again is from Oberhäuser Felsenberg (porphyry) and Kieselberg (gravel), and has soared insanely beyond its class.
- GDH-174 **2005 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett** **+**
 A Mosel-type grown on the sandy so-called “Tholeyer slate”, this is just like a Schmitt-Wagner wine in its keen sassafrassy spice; it's a mischievous little girl you forgive for anything, she is just so beautiful. Image aside, it's a cox-orange and meyer-lemon panna cotta with white chocolate and talc. The endless finish reveals yet another layer of density. This is roughly as good as the 2001 *Auslese*.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (6-22 years)
- GDH-175 **2005 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 The perfection of porphyry but with a swollen stony tang, a little jabbing reminder of the rocks below the fruit; the finish is at the outermost limits of salty complexity.
 SOS: 2 (9-25 years)
- GDH-176 **2005 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 Not merely cherry blossom but also hyacinth, almond, and a sort of *wicked* lime; the mineral density almost goes without saying. It gets almost frustrating wanting to rise to meet these. The wines float somewhere free of gravity, but me, I'm just a guy.
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GDH-177 **2005 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese** **+++**
 This is becoming one of Helmut's most important wines; a highly refined bouquet of cox-orange and *boucherie* does not even remotely prepare you for the gleaming fruit-salt interplay on the palate; the wine is elegantly *manic*; the flavors — all 100 of them — are so glowy and serene but they blast around the palate like popcorn in a hot skillet. Yet the whole thing is somehow mysterious and irreducible, like an old sofa that's absorbed all the ethereal fragrances of the many generations who lay there reading, sat knitting, made love while the giggling servants peeked from around the corner.
 SOS: 2 (9-28 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE
- GDH-179 **2005 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese** **+**
 This is the “lesser” of two casks (the other will likely go to auction); it's a dancing, limby Spätlese, the gauziest of these, with soursop and lemon-blossom aromas; classy piquant tasty lift; if it were music it would be Poulenc or Satie, a melody you can't get out of your head. You taste them, they taste you, you taste them tasting you, you *are* the world, drinking the taste of being. Plus it tastes *mighty* fine!
 SOS: 2 (9-26 years)
- GDH-178 **2005 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 Here it's more than “depth”. The *deep* has depth; the tentacles of flavor seem to reach back to the origin of beauty. It isn't “pretty” at all. It mines a rare dark diamond, it shows a sort of *ur*-fruit that isn't “fruity”; it occupies the palate with all the truth of the world, sometimes obscure, sometimes strangely nourishing, as if it wants to sweep away all the ephemera and leave you there, not really stunned, just for once knowing who you are, and what it is.
 SOS: 1 (10-30 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

GDH-180 **2005 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** **+++**

Very deep cherry-tobacco fragrances; once again there is the clearest, tenderest explanation of this whole gorgeous dialectic — cherry, lime, maple, smoke, apple-skin, wintergreen; has the cat-claws and also the soft fur; as murmur as otters but then suddenly as springy as a gazelle.

SOS: 2 (9-27 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

GDH-181H **2005 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **++**

Less a leap to another level than a widening and deepening of the Spät. Botrytis brings an iris note, but it extends the minerality and lengthens the string of nuances; it's firmer, more determined, but *not* sweeter.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (12-32 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE.

GDH-182H **2005 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+++**

Juicier, more explicitly *flavory* and brilliant; more thrilling than the Spät, and a perfect genially playful flinging together of all possible elements. It's also *not* "dessert-wine" sweet. I realize this note isn't as rapturous as the three plusses would suggest. THEY are true, and I was wrung out!

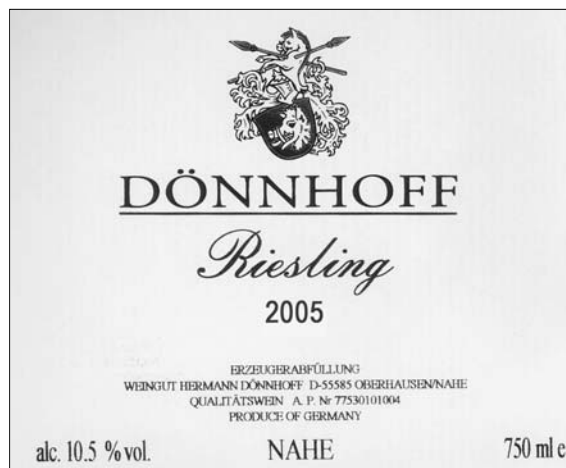
SOS: 2 (15-40 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS; PLEASE INQUIRE

GDH-183H **2005 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+++**

Almost a savagely beautiful nose; this is the wine equivalent of a tantric orgasm. At this point nothing more need be (or can be) delineated — you are slammed into a wall of bliss, and nothing ever prepared you to be so happy.

SOS: 3 (13-37 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE.

FINAL NOTE: there are **three** TBAs (Dellchen, Brücke, Hermannshöhle) I hope to taste in June when (maybe) they'll actually have become wine. They're destined for auction but maybe one critter will be spared for we whose incomes fall short of the Buffets' and Soros'. If we get any I'll let you know.



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 four 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: 10 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Kertz, Rosenberg, and Norheimer Dellchen**
- **Soil types: Grey and red slate, porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 12% Müller-Thurgau, 10% Weissburgunder, 10% Dornfelder, 3% Würzer**

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 (48 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 spritzy, with clarity enough to shrink your pupils; specific flavors vary with the site, and the very least of these is quick as a lynx, while the best, from the oldest vines, show a confounding depth and polish beneath their taut nervy energy.

GMA-067 **2005 Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Kabinett** +

This is one of the great unknown Nahe Grand Crus— because it is so small. A conglomerate of porphyry and slate, it makes Rieslings that taste like they were hewn from jewels. This wine is exactly what is meant by piquant; an orchid-y complexity defying description; Riesling as ultra-violet light. Don't think of missing it.
SOS: 2 (from 4-16 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-068 **2005 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese**

Classic site-aromas of lavender and wisteria, with a sleek minerality; a spicy porphyry palate with botrytis, but still a food-Auslese for any dish with even modest sweetness.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-23 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-crusting 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.



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

And yet it was Dönnhoff himself who urged me to stay with Schneider when I considered dropping them a few years back. It is a superb, incomparable collection of vineyards, he said, and a feet-on-the-ground relationship to them. And with the influx of the new generation, there's reason to expect fine things to happen. All of which is true – and persuasive. But there's another layer of truth which isn't easy to get at.

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

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

It's seven 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

- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Klamm & Felsensteyer, Norheimer Dellchen & Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry, melaphyre; 52 different soil types**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Pinot varieties**

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

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

This was a man made to talk. And not merely to converse, but to address, to pontificate, to perorate. He



seems to have been born unable to speak except in rhetoric. What a character this was.

His property 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. 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-069L **2005 Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

This is THE sleeper-wine in this portfolio, like getting a by-the-glass priced big-format of Criots, Chevalier and Batard-Montrachet! So let's see; which collection of Grand Crus make up this vintage's Liter . . . ah, it's merely *Kirschheck*, *Klamm*, and *Kertz* (hoo boy, a K-K-K wine; we should put white sheets and hoods on the bottles...oh ouch). But the wine shows, ah, grand wizardry . . . ? Well it does. There are extra fine aromas (three Grand Crus!), cherry-blossom and *boucherie*; the palate is just superb, with endless elegance and charm, wonderful backbone and length.

SOS: 2 (now to 8 years)

- GJS-067 **2005 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Kabinett Trocken**
 A lovely *slate* wine with a charming old-school touch of wood; it's perfectly gently dry (I hate `em when they're all raspy), actually recalling Merz's wine (but from better land) or even some of Kerpen's woodsier bottlings. Just yummy.
 SOS: 0 (now to 5 years)
- GJS-068 **2005 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 100% clean fruit (noteworthy in a botrytis vintage), and has also seen some wood; spontaneous fermentation; a superfine spicy nose, malt and tea; palate is shimmery, dense and juicy, with fine minty grip; it has a vegetable *demi-glace* sweetness; a wholly satisfying wine.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now - 3 years, again 8-11 years)
- GJS-070 **2005 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett**
 He gave me samples from cask and bottle; the cask wine is very fluffy and salty, with all the gushing charm of this Grand Cru (which grows on *Rotliegend*, similar to Nierstein's red-slope, giving smoky-maple and peach aromas); indeed this does show that maple-smoke, with papaya and comice pear; the palate surprises with determined grip and embedded rockiness, and resolves in a chestnutty finish that reminds me of Formosa "brown" oolongs.
 SOS: 2 (4-12 years)
- GJS-073 **2005 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**
 I struggled a bit with this; it was young and turbulent and the fruit was trying (and not yet succeeding) to force its way through botrytis, but there's an earthy forest-floor burning-leaf profile and the mid-palate was almost eucalyptus. I have a feeling this will come along.
 SOS: 1 (6-15 years)
- GJS-071 **2005 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Auslese**
 124° Oechsle, 9 grams of acidity, so it's a BA in sheep's clothing; malt and chestnut-honey heathery fragrance; palate is deep and cidery, with a coffee ice-cream nuance and a HUGE malty finish. A lot of bang for the buck here.
 SOS: 3 (8-21 years)
- GJS-072H **2005 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +
 170°; this is a massive syrup of wintergreen, morels, bacon, and yes it's *all* that, odd as it sounds; but there's a chewy bone-rich solidity here, less power than *purpose*; too early (maybe it's always too early) for the adjective dance, but this feels as ancient as a cathedral.
 SOS: 4 (15-30 years)



weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

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

So last night I did a class for the Smithsonian lecture series on regional distinctions among German Rieslings. You could have heard a pin drop, but nobody had one. I tried dropping a stapler, but people were just annoyed. So we started with a trio of Mosels to get that benchmark in place. Then we tasted two Nahe wines, the first of them Hexamer's '04 Spätlese.

This was revelatory even to me. Harald's wines have all the attack and snap one associates with Mosel wine, so there was no surprise at first glance, but the mid-palate was suddenly flooded with another kind of *substance*, something less direct and more allusive, more exotic. Nahe wines always taste as though they were fined with bath-salts and jewels. Hexamer's wines are a

vivid demonstration of the Nahe's uniqueness, precisely *because* they're so steely and pristine.

His '05 vintage was curtailed by hail, but fortunately for him (and for us) he'd bought a parcel in the Grand Cru (and painfully named) Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen from a Kreuznach estate selling off vineyards. The site is virtually unknown except to Nahe-fiends; it's small (6 hectares altogether) and the soil is sandy-stony loam over sandstone and conglomerates based on rhyolite. Most important, it's the first time we've seen what Hexamer can do aside from the particular context of his Meddersheimers. This is keenly enticing, for when I consider the many tired old growers making dull wines from great sites in, say, Niederhausen, I yearn to see what a guy like Hexamer could do. Now, we begin to glean it.

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.



Harold, Petra, and Fido Hexamer

- **Vineyard area: 14.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Schlossböckelheimer In den Felsen, Sobernheimer Marbach**
- **Soil types: Quartz, red weathered sandstone with high percentages of quartzite, conglomerates and porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 62% Riesling, 12% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 11% Spätburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 12% others**

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.

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.



Rheingrafenberg Rock at Hexamer

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 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.

Acidity has been a theme here the past three vintages, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer’s wines are (if you like them) “brilliant” and (if you don’t like them) “tart”. This was also the case in the generally low-acid 2005s. 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:

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:

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-029 2005 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

There’s very little of this, and we won’t begin selling it until the ’04 is gone — probably late Winter. It’s a no-quarter-given Riesling with a piercing flower and mineral fragrance; one of his first-picked, with 93°, from the *Eisendell* parcel, which is “not one of the best, but look at the ripeness!” It shows really zippy acids and a minty finish, like a verbena infusion poured over smashed rocks. You know you want it!
SOS: 1 (6-23 years)

- GHX-030 **2005 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling “Quartzit”** +
CORE-LIST WINE. Absolutely *euphoric* apple nose; the palate is as fibrous as appleskins; picked at 96°; the whole thing unites an irrepressible bubbling-over fruitiness with a high-relief stoniness; this is the Dragonstone of the Nahe. It has almost lashing snap without actually high acidity. In short: WOW.
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GHX-032 **2005 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese** +
 An amazing maiden-voyage from a vineyard that was in some disrepair when our hero took it over; from near the end of the harvest, and a classic middle-Nahe fragrance, straw and sweet hay, Chinese 5-spice and star fruit, lavender; really, is there any greater soil for Riesling than these? This is fiendishly charming stuff, all the pulverized mineral juju of '05 with plummy fruit; great focus with gentle acids and balanced botrytis; stylish and complex.
 SOS: 2 (6-19 years)
- GHX-031 **2005 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese***
 Here is '05 Nahe! Slim, fine fruit, botrytis concentration, talc, mint and salt. Final notes pending as he's considering whether to add 10g or so of sweetness. I hope he does.
- GHX-033 **2005 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Auslese**
 106°; a winsome, elegant feminine Auslese; penetrating iris and botrytis aromas; an elixir-like redux of mineral and malt; misses the sheer *torque* of a high-acid year, but shows a kind of repose and tenderness.
 SOS: 3 (7-20 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)
- GHX-034H **2005 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling BA*, 12/375ml**
 Part raisined, part botrytis; and I like this clean malt flavor, I like how slim and spicy it is, and I love imagining what it will become.
 SOS: 4 (18-40 years)



kruger-rumpf

nahe • münster sarmsheim

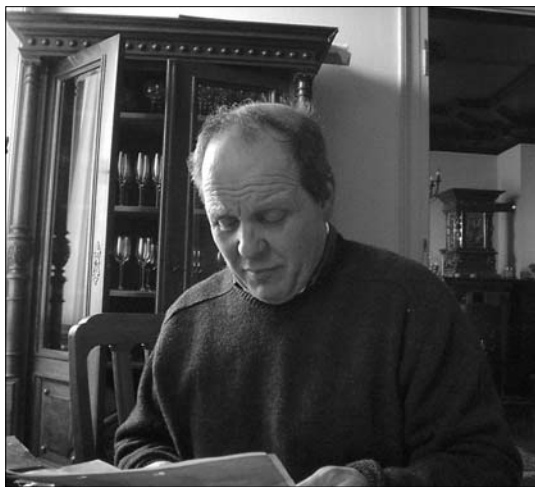
Something's sure up at this winery. Maybe it's because his children are growing up and helping out (kids have a way of giving their dads a kick in the pants, don't they . . .), and maybe it's just simple ambitiousness, but there's no doubt Stefan Rumpf has taken a significant step forward the last two vintages. I'm just guessing here, but I intuit a subtle kind of *competition* between Stefan and son Johannes. Dad has an audience now, and he wants to show off a little, to earn the boy's respect. I saw them spur each other on while we were tasting, and felt the frisky new energy.

It used to be quite the decathlon tasting the young vintage here, but Stefan showed me his '05s 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



Stephan Rumpf

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Münsterer Dautenpfläner, Pittersberg & Rheinberg, Dorsheimer Goldloch**
- **Soil types: Grey and red slate, quarzite, loess**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe; the rest mostly Weissburgunder, 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.

The '05s are so consistently outstanding one grows tempted to deploy the s-word: stellar. Stefan bought a leaf-trimmer "which paid off!" Canopy work, remember, was decisive on '05. This is clearly a superb vintage from a grower on the move.

kruger-rumpf at a glance:

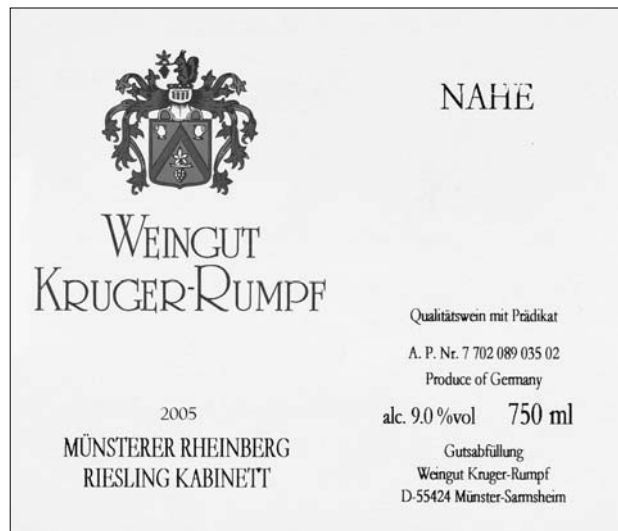
Up-and-comer the past few years, making more glamorous wines than ever before. Deft, appley and minerally wines from the greatest sites of the lower Nahe. Priced quite reasonably for blue-chip quality.

how the wines taste:

They're 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 slaty, 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-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-slaty 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-104 **2005 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** +
CORE-LIST WINE. And boy am I glad. This Rheingau-like quartzite vineyard (making wines keenly similar to Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck) is fast becoming a must-have in my household; this wine was perfect just as it was, no blending or dosage required; a beaming, friendly nose of iris and cherry; the palate so deftly balances mineral, spice and apple it seems ordained to exist in precisely this configuration; just a glowing potion of cox-orange. Does it get any yummiier?
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:2 (6-19 years)
- GKF-107 **2005 Pittersberg Riesling "Grosses Gewächs"**
 The most probing and interesting of the dry wines, with Pittersberg's usual nutty-slaty notes paired with the vintage's powdery mineral density and grape-hyacinth aromas. Palate is salty, juicy and balanced; made me think of a Grasberg Grand Cru from Kientzler.
 SOS: 0 (now 3 years, again 11-14 years)
- GKF-100 **2005 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Kabinett** +
 Do you perhaps glean an *editorial* comment whereby the almighty *Grosses Gewächs* doesn't receive a plus and the piddling little residually sweet Kabinett does? Well, I'm just a humble country wine merchant with no axe to grind, and they're both very good wines. This lil' fella (with 93°) is smooth and elegant; a pure gray-slate fragrance like a lower Mosel wine; the palate is serious, densely mineral, very long; real Grand Cru stature and endless interplay of mutsu-apple, lilac and slate nuances. I hardly "needed" another Kabinett but the wine was too exciting!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (6-21 years)
- GKF-103 **2005 Scheurebe Kabinett**
 a.k.a. Münsterer Dautenpflänzer, or in the lingua franca of Grosses Gewächs, "Dautenpflänzer", but in either case the Cru name dare not be used for such tommyrot as Scheu. Poo on them. This is a monstrously spicy Scheu, utter cassis and sage and spearmint and wintergreen and pineapple and pickled ginger; it's feral, dense and zingy, with a writhing feline vitality.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (now - 8 years)

- GKF-099 **2005 Scheurebe Spätlese** +
 Dautenpflänzer again. This is actually a little drier than the Kabinett but the ripeness umami brings a creamy mass to the middle. 98°; ferociously expressive; sage and star-anise; a burbling drool of salty spice; Scheu lovers, line up! This is wine as make-up sex. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (now - 10 years)
- GKF-101 **2005 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 It is so good that someone's making wine that does this Grand Cru justice. This has *wild* fragrances of cherries, roses, wisteria; the palate is a wackoid madness of mineral, Mirabelle, and pink peppercorns; spicy as all get-out, with a maple-salty finish. The snow melted here first, by the way.
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GKF-102 **2005 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** ++
CORE-LIST WINE. AND THE BEST CORE-LIST WINE OF THE 2005 VINTAGE.
 102° (*good* big Auslese); this is an absolute masterpiece of cellar and soil; wildly exotic aromas — wintergreen, cox-orange, star fruit; palate is again dense, with a wizardly swirl of smoky mineral; *brilliant* minty shimmer and chewy length; just sensational, complex, superfine Riesling.
 SOS: 2 (9-26 years)
- GKF-105 **2004 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Auslese** +
 GKF-105H **2004 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**
First offering. Just what we need, right: more Auslese? But man, this wine is close to perfect. It's more lissome and deft and verbena-scented than the '05s, but what complexity, transparency, and all with this slippery dancing *lift*; a sweet-lime perfume bewitches the senses; the finish is intricate and long. Don't DARE tell me you can't drink this with food.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (9-25 years)
- GKF-106H **2005 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling BA, 12/375ml** (+)
 Selected, like many '05 BAs, at the beginning of the harvest. A slim, lissome BA that's recognizably Dautenpflänzer (in contrast to a TBA that isn't), and it's toe-curlingly minty and spicy, more salty than 'sweet'; a concentrate of *terroir*.
 SOS: 3 (18-38 years)



schlossgut diel

nahe • burg layen

This year I want to broaden the offering. Some of the new items are still awkwardly priced in this weak-Dollar era (can't Armin Diel use his considerable influence and resourcefulness with the central banks?? I mean, after all . . .) but I'm showing more of the range as a kind of *tribute*. It is very rare indeed to encounter a domain whose work is marked by such consistent intelligence across a variety of styles. It brings Bründlmayer to mind, actually, and not at all because Diel's cellar-master Christof Friedrich has a voice *identical* to Willi Bründlmayer's.

Armin Diel believes 2005 is the greatest vintage in his estate's history. Yes, he said the same about 2003. So OK, '03 becomes the *2nd-best* vintage in the estate's history. Ten, fifteen, twenty,

thirty years from now I'll meet you there and we can see which one *really* delivers the goods. Me, I just hope I get to drink plenty of both. And I sense 2005 will, at every point of its life, show just a little more vinosity and *thickness*, and that 2003 will evolve an even more exquisite, pure *fruit*.

I don't deal in a prioris, 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, Weingart, Catoir, Meßmer, Leitz, Spreitzer, Christoffel, Schaefer, Adam (if he opts to continue!), Karlmühle; 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.



Armin Diel

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

The 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

- **Vineyard Area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual Production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top Sites: Dorsheimer Goldloch, Pittermännchen and Burgberg**
- **Soil Types: loam and gravel over rocky subsoil, quartzite and slate**
- **Grape Varieties: 65% Riesling, 20% Grauburgunder, 10% Spätburgunder, 5% Weissburgunder**

writing for the same books or magazines *review* the wines of Schlossgut Diel, which is why the name doesn't appear on the various lists of estate "classifications." But of course there's a meta-message: "The man is such an expert, imagine how good his own wines must be." The ethics of the situation are quite sophisticated to American sensibilities, yet behind it all are the wines themselves.

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.

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.

NEW TO THE OFFERING

GSD-032 **2003 Goldloch Riesling Sekt Brut (sparkling!)**

It took a wine this great to get me back into the Sekt business. Champagne spoils you, and the darlin' little Scheu from Gysler doesn't count; it's another world. This is very serious sparkling wine, the best I have tasted from Germany, as indeed it needs to be selling for more than the price of NV Champagne. It was cask-fermented and spent two years *en tirage*, and it's a dead-ringer for Milan's Carte Blanche (showing that all northern European whites are essentially cousins); herbal, flowery nose, wet hay; palate is creamy, complex, spiced-apple, stylish, with a silky green-tea finish. Think of it as a "vintage" bubbly from a Grand Cru vineyard and the price starts to make sense.

GSD-030 **2005 Rosé de Diel**

A slight little pinkster for the garden, you suppose? Um, no: this substantial Rosé was picked at 100% Oechsle and is all Pinot Noir; some was fermented in stainless steel and some in very old barriques; it is wonderfully gracious (just like its maker); smells like Champagne from Verzy; heirloom tomatoes and strawberries, but frilly and opulent; both substantive and as indulgent as a 4pm pastry.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years)

GSD-031 **2005 Diel de Diel**

The winery produces an expert range of Pinots in the "traditional" style (barriques, batonnage et.al.) of which this remarkably satisfying wine is the entry level. Riesling is added to the mix here. It's hard to convey just how lip-smackingly *delightful* this wine is; it seems to unite Riesling's brightness to Pinot Blanc's melon to Pinot Gris' butter; it's ripe, creamy and dry, with a grip and finish that brought 1st-rate white Graves to mind. One might cavil the wine speaks a kind of vinous Esperanto, but this world-citizen happens to taste so good it felt churlish to deny you access to it on "principle".
SOS: 0 (now - 5 years)

DRY RIESLINGS:

- GSD-029 **2005 Riesling “Classic”** +
 Arresting fragrance! Like a thousand cox-orange pippins in an airless room; the palate is like acupuncture, endless tiny jabs of flavor; an iridescent Winter-sun brilliance; perfectly balanced; a semolina-“sweetness”; in every way — fragrance, texture, flavor, structure — a puppy-energy and playfulness. 95° and unchaptalized, by the way. But BRAVO for this amazing “starter” wine.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now - 3 years, again 9-14 years)
- GSD-033 **2005 Pittermännchen Grosses Gewächs** ++
 The most celestial of a very strong trio of GGs, and stunning Riesling by any standard. It’s my DRY RIESLING OF THE VINTAGE though inside Germany they’d fuss it “isn’t really *dry*”. No, all it is is stunning: slate and blackberry fragrance; it has the still, silvery clarity and focus of the best of Nigl, with a serenity of fruit stopping just short of exotic; the high-definition structure shows every pore of flavor. If this is the new world of dry German Riesling then my arms are open. But — if!
 SOS: 0 (now - 4 years, again 12-18 years)
- GSD-034 **2005 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs** +
 My intent was to pick my one favorite of the three. Made sense. In fact a case could easily be made for *all* three, and I simply had to show you this. I think Goldloch is Armin’s secret favorite, maybe because it’s so solidly baroque and lavishly fruity; in any case this is a baroque cathedral of Riesling; swollen aromas of apricot; the palate is all kinds of rich and pitted-fruity, but the solidity is striking — you eat it as much as drink it, and the powdery minerality pours into the finish; yet another dimension.
 SOS: 0 (now 5 years, again 15-22 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-035 **2005 Scheurebe Spätlese** ++
 After stringent selection there were only 30 cases of this amazing Scheu, so hurry. And excuse my intemperate language, but this is just a total mind-fuck Scheurebe; so pungent, with massive sage and grapefruit aromas; it’s as subtle as a runaway train; there’s a vixen-lick of salt and lavender leading into an immense finish. Hans-Günter Schwarz’s spirit lives on: GOD SAVE THE CAT.
 SOS: 2 (now-6 years)
- GSD-036 **2005 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese** ++
 This is about as regal as an utterly seductive wine can be; a heart-rending, love-baby, soul-expanding wine; talc, white peach and lemon-balm aromas; a murmuring woody touch on the mid-palate; spicy jasmine grip, and a sort of arch sideways grin — the seducer knows she’s snagged you — but most moving is the sweet-lees relaxed woodiness; a wine of adult, knowing beauty.
 SOS: 2 (12-29 years)

THE AMAZING TRIO OF AUSLESEN:

Again, abandon any thought of selecting among these; the sensible thing is to buy them all. That is how you understand them singly, and how you appreciate the astonishing achievement they represent. They are:

- GSD-037 **2005 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Auslese** ++
- GSD-038 **2005 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese** +++
- GSD-039 **2005 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Auslese** ++

Pittermännchen is the slimmest of the three, with its ravishing lilac and blackberry notes, gauzy as cirrus clouds, piquant, talc and salt, wonderfully transparent. *Goldloch* is the lemon éclair, all aglow with mid-palate mineral; maltier now, with a thyme-honey finish. *Burgberg* is the heartbreaker; bigger stones than Pittermännchen; iris and blown-out candle, moonglow pear; length enough to defy credibility, and a riveting dialogue between stones and honey.

SOS: 3 (for all) and (15-45 years) for all.

- GSD-040H **2005 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml** ++

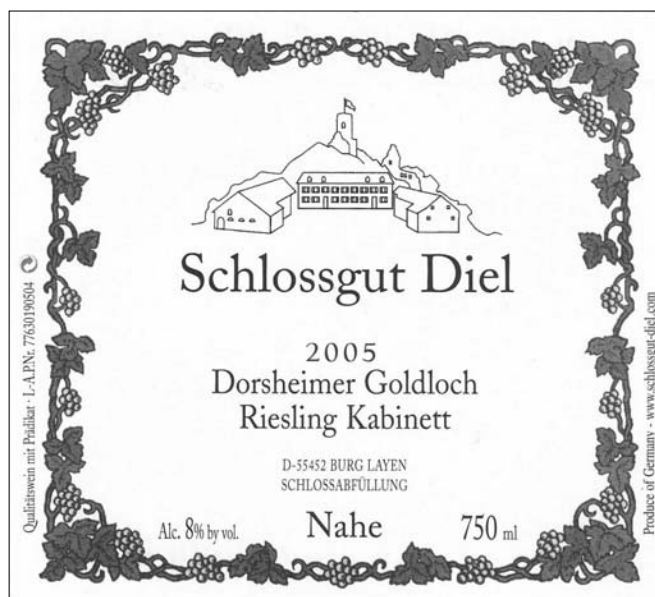
BAs exist from all three Crus; this, in an admittedly *very* preliminary stage, seems to be the most precious. It is very rich but tall and sleek. The site-expression is almost erotic. Adjectives must wait.

SOS: 4 (20-50 years)

- GSD-041H **2005 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** ++(+)

On the 6th of March this was almost still fetal, but there's a shapely clarity and transparency that augur a masterpiece, potentially one of the supernal wines of this supernal vintage.

SOS: 4 (30-75 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 ups-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 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 lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

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 flat-



tish, 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

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

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 it came from Rheinhessen.

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 eve 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.

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 drank as a “civilian.” It was



one thing to have tasted finished wines analytically, that was recreation, but this was intuition, inference, imagination, peering through a periscope into the future, not

to mention the finished wine depended on making the right choice now. Even after doing it for twenty-plus years now, it's still hard to articulate what it entails. I'm afraid it's very Zen. You receive a wine which may or may not be *incom-*

- Vineyard area: 15 hectares
- Annual production: 7,500 cases
- Top sites: Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping and Pettenthal
- Soil types: Red clay, slate, loess, loam & chalk
- Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 13% Müller-Thurgau, 3% Grüner Veltliner, 2% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder

plete (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.

So imagine my surprise when I descended into Walter's cellar and found he'd outfitted all his tanks with chilling units. He has joined the new wave of German growers who'd rather stop fermentation than use *dosage*. Obviously that's entirely OK by me, though I do miss the blending work and do not agree with the anti-*dosage* crusaders. But Walter told me "It's always been my dream to be able to do this; it makes the wines more pure." A few years ago a guy named Paul Weber made what he said would be an innocuous TV-film about me and my doings, but which he was asked to sexy-up a bit, so he turned it into an ideological war between the pro and anti dosage camps, and Walter was (as was I) on the unfashionable side of the issue. (Idiots! It shouldn't even be an issue.) Walter says he wasn't spurred on by the film, but I know it annoyed him; correctly so.

In any case 2005 is his first vintage using the technology, and whether coincidental or not, his entire cellar wouldn't ferment to completion: he doesn't have a dry wine! This is inconvenient for him, though meaningless to me, though there's an irony in that '05's softness might have favored drier renderings. But, we'll never know.

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 final-

ly, I want to taste them twice. In fact 2005 is what one might call a courteous vintage at Strub, giving direct fruit-forward wines that make you feel welcome. I don't know their analyses — he says acids aren't especially high — but when we were done we had a range of finely balanced wines without having broken a sweat. Walter's past few vintages (especially his '03s) seemed at times almost studiously tart, and we wanted to show some



Walter Strub

charm again. He absolutely hates botrytis and sprays as late as the law allows against it. This can retard ripening, and the wines can seem clipped. And sometimes *your* humongous orders (which Strubs help consolidate and load) were so time-consuming he bottled the wines later than he'd have liked. So we decided it was time to do the *dee-LISH* thang again.

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 doesn't get a ton of fruit — just 50 hectoliters per hectare on average over the past five years. His cellar is 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 HIPPIING is better, as it's a damper and a cooler site." What neither

of us can fathom is the perennially excellent wine given by the PATERBERG. "It's not a noble soil," Walter says, shrugging. This is more than an idle question to a German vintner, who sees soil as the DNA of his wine.

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 spritzzy, complex and long.

GST-131 2005 Niersteiner Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Feinherb

No you're not reading the wrong catalogue. Walter visited Austria some years ago (stimulated by meeting many of my producers when they all toured around the States together) and brought back GV clippings from Willi Bründlmayer. He claims there was a time Grüner Veltliner was traditional in Rheinhessen, after which it was supplanted by Silvaner. He's planted it in a warm parcel on limestony clay, and '05's is the third crop.

Now it's a little *recherché*, this wine; it tastes somewhat like Glatzer's Kabinett in a normal vintage, though this little dickens wouldn't go dry, and ends up with around 20g.l. RS. Young vines notwithstanding, it is varietally true; I tasted it twice (before and after fining) and it's a charming delicate wine, almost Riesling-like: sugar-snaps and peppermint, just off dry, with a snappy kind of charm and a hint of licorice on the finish. As the vines age I know Walter wants to make lusty dry GrüVe, but I invite you to welcome this excellent first stab at German GV, and hats off to the man who'll try anything! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

- GST-126L **2005 Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter** +
 CORE-LIST WINE. This is an amazing crazy-ass value! Usually we “create” this wine at the tail end of the vintage-tasting; I want, after the big-boys, to work with the “simple” wine and see how it holds up. In `05 there was an amazingly good tank of wine from a site you don’t know called *Findling*, which is on the plateau above Hipping but still on *rotliegend*. I suspect Walter usually sells it in bulk, but 2005 was . . . 2005. So it went into this wine, a third of the blend, and believe me it is ludicrous to be offered this wine as “jug” wine; the finest texture and most refined fruit of any vintage thus far; milk-chocolate aromas from the Findling, white corn and crab-cake aromas from Brückchen, butter and spring-onion aromas from Paterberg; it has clarity, focus, fruit, mineral and spice, and a keen brisk finish. If every restaurant on earth poured this wine there would be no more wars.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (4-13 years)
- GST-116 **2004 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**
 CORE-LIST WINE. Offered while it lasts; then `05. 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-130 **2005 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**
 GST-130H **2005 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 CORE-LIST WINE. A sleek, almost Scheurebe-like herbal nose; the palate is starched and spiffy, mintier than usual; white corn, hay, apricot, toasted malt. By the way, you can see from my string of associations that this was tasted near the start of the trip; later on I accessed my inner Timothy Leary. I see *Rasputin, plucking his nose-hairs* . . .
 SOS: 2 (4-13 years)
- GST-128 **2005 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Kabinett**
 Entirely from the steep section, and a classic steep-slope Hipping though showing exceptionally well already (Hipping is often tardy). In the vintage-context this is almost Halbtrocken. *Psssst*: we put 10% of the Findling in it. *Shhhh* . . . it opens the fruit without diluting the red-slate character, plus adds a sheen of pancetta-saltiness and herbal notes.
 SOS: 1 (5-15 years)
- GST-124 **2005 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett**
 A red soil site but harder and rockier (“You wouldn’t go barefoot in this vineyard,” says Walter.) The `05 is quite the exotic: meat-skin aromas; szechuan spare-rib and oxtail; it’s solid, a wine you eat as much as drink; it’s Riesling as Lustrac or Moulis, not the Nth degree of refinement but it makes the *jaws* feel good; at the end there’s a hazelnut-praline crunch.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (5-18 years)
- GST-129 **2005 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 Over 100^g Oechsle; massive milk-chocolate aromas with *pêche-de-vignes*; the palate is thick and dense, as thick-textured as braised meat; all sorts of viscera and muscle with a laquered caramelly sweetness; Peking duck in a glass!
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-24 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)

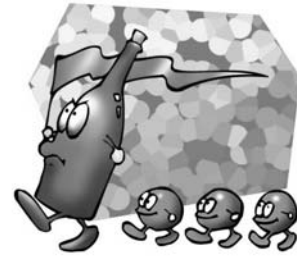
THE PATERBERG SERIES

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-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-125 **2005 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**
CORE-LIST WINE. In '05 there's less lemon-grass and more a sort of sweet celery or celeriac; it's *very* long and adamantly spicy, with an inside-sweetness like roasted beets; picked very late with a hint of botrytis; crunchy and tasty.
 SOS: 2 (7-19 years)
- GST-127 **2005 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese***** **+**
 Just one tank that was perfect as-is. 40-year old vines, the wine is sweet on paper but the very low pH (2.9!) makes for another tactile impression entirely: it's quite rococo, but also cherubic and playful; incredibly minty fragrance; electrically spicy entry, so much buzz and zing it would crimp your hair, yet the tertiary finish suggests a grand core of fruit concentration and a regal future.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 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)

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-046L	2005 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Falkenberg Riesling, 1.0 Liter
GJS-069L	2005 Jakob Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter
GST-126L	2005 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett 1.0 Liter
GWG-012L	2005 Wagner-Stempel Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter
GGY-059L	2005 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter
GGY-058L	2005 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter
GDD-020L	2005 Dr. Deinhard Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter
GMS-111L	2005 Herbert Messmer Estate Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter
GMS-119L	2005 Herbert Messmer Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter
GTM-089L	2005 Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter
GTM-090L	2005 Theo Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter
GDR-136L	2005 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Feuerberg Portugieser Weissherbst, 1.0 Liter
GDR-137L	2005 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter

wagner-stempel

rheinhessen • siefersheim

We had dinner with Daniel Wagner and his charming wife Catherin, and after dinner Daniel pressed a bottle into my hand. It was his 2003 Spätburgunder, which he suggested I open at some point. Then it was three weeks later, the final evening with Strubs, and we were hanging out in the kitchen and I found the bottle on the back seat of the car; it had been heated and chilled and bounced to Champagne and back and all over the Rhineland, but what the hell, I said I'd taste it. It was the damn *best German red wine I'd ever tasted*, elegant, grown-up, balanced, loaded. And I found myself wondering, *CAN THIS GUY MAKE AN ORDINARY WINE?*

Ladies 'n gents; sybarites of every stripe, incubi 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.



Daniel Wagner

- **Vineyard area: 13 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Siefersheimer Höllberg and Heerkretz**
- **Soil types: Volcanic material (porphyry and melaphyre)**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Riesling, 25% Burgunder, 15% Silvaner, 10% Spätburgunder**

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

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

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

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 a baby on the way! 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-012L **2005 Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

This offers absurd quality in its *echelon*, but it isn't always an "easy" wine. Still, you say you want dry German Rieslings and here's one at its austere best! A pointedly stony Riesling nose, with even a little birch-sing of botrytis; the palate is stern and fervent and adamantly dry; a real granite-powder of mineral, and though dry it's not at all sharp; just spring-water snappy, like Badoit. By the way, Daniel doesn't exclude the possibility of making the wine nominally "sweeter" (i.e., less dry but hardly sweet) before bottling; I tasted it as it came from the cask.

SOS: minus-1 (now-3 years, again 8-11 years)

GWG-013 **2005 Siefersheimer Silvaner Trocken**

WOW.

This is crunchier and brighter than many growers' *Rieslings*. Super-clear nose like heirloom potatoes; the palate is juicy and as savory as grilled zucchini; keen enough to quench thirst yet just crammed with *spiel* and substance. Sommelieres looking for the unusual and tasty should glom onto this baby.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-4 years)

THREE DRY RIESLINGS

GWG-014 **2005 Siefersheimer Estate Riesling Trocken**

+

GWG-015 **2005 Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken "Vom Porphyr"**

(++)

At first I didn't think I'd offer the "basic" Riesling, preferring to present the more "important" porphyry; then I tasted the little guy and was blown away — I mean, it tasted like Hengst from Josmeyer — a ton of boucherie and a cellar-full of heirloom apples; the texture is pure crystal and satin with full physio-"sweetness"; lime and moonglow pear. One tingles with satisfaction!

The *Porphyr* was unfinished, not even filtered yet, a hasty *assemblage* from a bunch of casks, and it seemed overstated and heady, with a schnapps finish. But if I'm wrong it will be ridiculously great! The wine's playing with fire, but for all I know it may end up lighting a votive candle, and I'm into giving this great vintner the benefit of the doubt. SOS: 0 (for both) (now-4 years, again 12-16 years)

GWG-016 **2005 Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs**

100% in cask, and an utterly fulfilled ideal of Grand Cru; profound and ancient. As if it were anchored to a history of soils and people; below the vinosity is a fine sting of tarragon and a smoky morel-like earthiness. The empty glass is seductively intricate; the whole thing is a perfect example of oak as *servant*, not master.

SOS: 0 (now- 5 years, again 13-17 years)

SCHVEEEEEEEEEEEET WINES

GWG-018 **2005 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Spätlese**

+

This is animally satisfying stuff, all plum and plum-blossom, redcurrant and chocolate caramel; exotic and savory. It doesn't just have depth, it has deep depth.

SOS: 3 (9-24 years)

GWG-017 **2005 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese**

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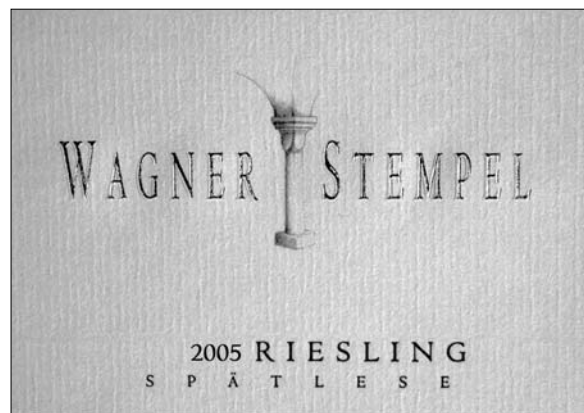
Well so-called Spätlese anyway, with 105° Oechsle and 30% botrytis, and this is astonishingly like a Traiser Bastei in its aromas; wild herbs, smoke, tea, tarragon, spearmint and Mirabelle eau-de-vie and fennel-seed and wisteria and raspberry panna cotta and botrytis and, at long last, a delicate finish of thyme-honey; a genuinely noble being, this little Rheinhessen wine!

SOS: 3 (10-30 years)

GWG-019H **2005 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

Too early to judge in detail, and I'm probably underrating it, but there's an explosion of candied lemon and peach nectar, ginger and vanilla; almost no botrytis as such; it tastes like a hot-from-the-oven beignet with an apple *compote*; almost Jurançon-like in its shriveled richness.

SOS: 4 (20-40 years)



POINTS: what's the point?

I had a fascinating conversation with Pierre Rovani, who defended point-systems with compelling logic. "Why isn't it enough," I asked, "to simply have groups, fair-good-very good-excellent-superb, and rank the wines in order of preference within those groups?" "Good question," answered Pierre. "So what you're proposing is a 5-point scale." Ah ha! Hoist on my own petard.

My mistake was to debate the issue on the terms of the point defenders. Their logic is self-enforcing and circular. Critics have a responsibility to take a definite stand, and point scores force them to do so. No longer can they hide behind vague or nebulous language. The wine is an 88 and that's all there is to it. Please read my prose too, they say, because that's where I get to use all my flavor associations and groovy locutions, but the score's the Mojo.

Wine is, after all, a consumer commodity, and as such it can be compared within its type. The role of the critic, in this *Weltanschauung*, is to handicap the entrants and tell you who won the race and by how many lengths. It's all very clear, and well-intentioned.

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

First, I am intuitively quite certain that a point-system misleads in direct proportion to its affect of precision. We all know that wine is a moving target. Even industrial wine is a moving target. Why? Because we are a moving target: we feel differently on different days, at different times of day, our bodies are changeable, our palates are changeable, the over-tart salad dressing we ate at lunch will affect every wine we taste all afternoon, and it doesn't matter how responsible we try to be; the moment we assign an absolute value to a wine, we have misled. And the more specific we purport to be, the more we mislead.

And the consequences of training readers to consider wine in terms of how many "points" to "give" it are mischievous at best. Even if I yield the point that scores are a necessary evil—and I don't, by the way—how many innocent consumers of wine journals are savvy enough to know that the *writer* may have to use points but the *reader* doesn't? Sadly, the meta-message of point-obsession is that "scoring" wines is the *sine qua non* of wine appreciation.

Oh lighten up! I hear you say. What's the harm?

The harm is subtle because its symptoms appear benign, but the long term effects are pernicious.

Here's a quote I like:

"The aesthetic moment offers hope that we are less alone, we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe." (John Berger, from "The White Bird")

Wine, I submit, is just such an aesthetic moment. It doesn't even have to be great wine. It only has to be significant wine, connected not to the factory but to the earth. Such wines invite us to respond with our souls. They open doors by which we enter a larger world than we normally inhabit. All we need is to be *available* for the experience.

We cannot be available if, in that single moment, we are scrolling through our egos to see how many *points* we're going to "give" or "award" the wine. The very language is suspiciously pompous: "We *awarded* Chateau Bleubols XXX-points on our 100-point scale." That's nice. How many points did the wine give *you*, Ace? Is the whole thing really about you? Does the cosmos give half a rat's ass how many "points" you gave a wine? That wine was a *gift* to you. And all you can do is "evaluate" it as if it were a DVD player or a Dustbuster.

One gentlemen with whom I debated this topic wrote (I'm paraphrasing) that he grew *into* using the 100-point scale when he felt his palate was mature enough. This poor lamb is running blindly toward the cliffs.

Ah, maybe he's right. After all, I've been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom's soliloquy at least a 94. That ranks it among the great-literary-scenes-of-all-time, along with Stavrogin's confession (95), Levin's day with the threshers (97), Gerald's walk to his death in the mountains (94+) and the death of Ben Gant (99). I didn't used to give scores to great scenes in literature. But eventually I came to realize ALL pleasure was in effect a commodity and I OWED it to myself to quantify the little suckers. So now, when I read novels, I'm constantly thinking "how many points is this scene worth?" I judge on imagery, diction, overall rhetoric, whether it advances the plot-line and/or develops the characters, and finally on how close to tears it brings me. Eyes-barely-moist gets 90. Eyes-barely-moist-and-catch-in-the-throat gets 91-92. Eyes full of tears but no drippage gets 93-94. Between 1-3 tears slipping down my face is 95-96, and full-bore blubbering earns the very highest scores. Since I started doing this I have just gotten so much MORE from all these great books!

"Was it good for you, baby . . . ?" *Oh, 89 maybe 90."*

Shall we eventually declare all our pleasures subject to a precise analysis of their *extent* on an absolute scale? What's 100-point joy all about? "I cannot possibly feel happier than this!" Really? *How do you know?*

Sure, we can let the critics play with any system they wish. I use in effect a 4-point system to indicate my sense of a wine's "stature," but I deliberately leave it loose because I don't want to think about it. It is a fraction-of-a-second of *ignition*: I register it and move on. I think reviewers might be better employed trying to *deepen* our love of wine, but they do what they can and what their readers want and are trained to expect. Nor is this any sort of slam of the Great Man of Monkton. I rather think Bob Parker has done the wine world enormous good over his storied career. But I also believe, as St Peter opens the pearly gates to admit Mr. Parker, he'll peer through Bob's valise, pull out the folder marked "The 100-point Scale" and say; "I'll just hold on to this; you won't be needing it here."

weingut oekonomierat joh. geil i. erben rheinhausen • bechtheim

(hereafter referred to as, simply, "Weingut Geil")

"Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellar master 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 CO₂"

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 Mathern, Biffar and Spreitzer); what 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 capturing, and rarely captured.

Rheinhausen's where the action is, as I said, and I asked for samples from two estates, of which these were



- 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% other

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



Johannes Geil-Bierschenk

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 grav-

elly 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-007 **2005 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
Vital, almost minerally nose with a hint of Clone-90 mandarin; limpid and winsome and full of fruit, more *Alsatian* than “typically” German; this has juicy length without real acid-grip; its focus is phenolic.
SOS: 0 (now - 3 years, again 9-12 years)
- GGE-008 **2005 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**
Quite like its drier sibling; forest-herbs and plum-blossom and toasted brioche; juicy, curvy and forthright; exotic and pliant, with good fruit-mineral shimmer.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years, again 12-16 years)
- GGE-009 **2005 Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**
This is the herbal grapefruit side of Scheu; elegant and refined; wonderfully kinetic and tactile play on the palate; a Scheu bed with silk sheets; euphorically aromatic (lime-zest); a gulper!
SOS: 2 (now-5 years)
- GGE-012 **2005 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**
Tighter and spicier than the dry wines, with more pronounced (though hardly shrill) acidity; a juicily chewy wine with spiced-apple; really a tabula rasa of Rhineland Riesling.
SOS: 2 (4-13 years)
- GGE-011 **2005 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese**
A big jump in ripeness umami from the Kabinett; ginger and candied lemon, gold berries and clean botrytis; quince and woodruff; a clean, charming old-school Riesling that's no sweeter-seeming than the Kabinett.
SOS: 2 (7-20 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!
- GGE-013H **2005 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml** +
Refined but massive fragrance; maple and vanilla; the palate is a bacchanale of passion fruit and papaya, almost overwhelmingly cake-like but anchored by varietal grip and power; really TBA in style.
SOS: 4 (15-32 years)

gernot gysler

rheinhessen • weinheim

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

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

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing 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 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 in 2004 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.

Alex has settled in, and his wonderful dog still gazes dolefully at all the fun from which he feels excluded. What's



Germans have a great word with no English equivalent: "Fingerspitzengefühl". A long 'un, yes, but translated it is "the feeling on the finger tips" and it is the difference between cor-

- Vineyard area: 12 hectares
- Annual production: 8,000 cases
- Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg
- Soil types: Reddish weathered soils with stone, loam and clay
- Grape Varieties: 30% Riesling, 30% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder, 10% Silvaner, 10% Huxelrebe, 8% Scheurebe

rect 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 mastering the externals, and his wines have iridescently polished surfaces. Soon it will be time to go deeper.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in relatively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg.

These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn't infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you're on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren't screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren't any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you'd look at it and think "grapes should grow there."

Alex picked a difficult first year to go organic, but once the commitment is made there's no turning back.

His 2005 crop is *very* small even in this famously short vintage's context. "2005 was really a vintage where you could tell who worked hard in the vineyards and who didn't," he said. "It's seldom so dramatic." Weinheim is just far enough south in Rheinhessen that the difficult face of '05 started to show. Not in his wines, far from it. But the sudden heavy rain and warm temperatures that followed in early October made for a quick harvest of stringently selected grapes — and not much wine. The Auslese you see below was the *entire* crop from a little over an acre of vineyard: *800 bottles!*

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"**

I was having lunch at The Slanted Door in San Francisco when who should walk in but a quartet of Austrian growers who proceeded to sit at the neighboring table. Well this called for something or other! So I sent them a bottle of this wine and watched their faces. Austrians aren't too fond of Scheurebe, and I saw a lot of politely bemused looks at the table — until they tasted the thing with their food. Then it was perfect. *Perfect*. 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-059L **2005 Weinheimer 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. A return to the form of the great '02, more density and focus than '03 and riper than '04; this is high-toned and perfumed, but juicy and charming, and it tastes more firm and upright than its on-paper acidity says it should. SOS: 1 (now - 5 years)

GGY-058L **2005 Weinheimer Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Oh-KAY! This takes the elderflower charms of previous vintages and adds a jet-blast of sage and grapefruit and violet; palate is a dynamo of lusty spicy charm, dense and fluffy but pointed and focused, as if you'd blended Sancerre with Furmint; rosewater and gooseberry. THIS IS AN INSANE VALUE!!!
SOMMELIER ALERT: POUR THIS KITTEN! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

GGY-057 **2005 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE. As usual bright and snappy, an old-style wine with upfront sweetness, but loads of smoky kirsch-y charm and mid-palate saltiness; a playful whirl of activity; sweet entry, salty middle, dry finish; hints of malty botrytis — in fact a Spätlese-Auslese blend, and why yes, we are spoiled. SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GGY-060 **2005 Weinheimer Mandelberg Riesling Auslese**

A very flowery Auslese, plum and cherry blossom; more berry than fruit; uncomplicated and tasty. SOS: 3 (8-18 years)

GGY-061H **2005 Weinheimer Kapellenberg Huxelrebe TBA, 12/375ml**

160° Oechsle (so not gargantuan, which is actually a bit of a relief), 9g.l. acidity (not bad!); classic Huxel nose of sweet-hay and white raisin; a *lot* of botrytis and some of it "exotic" but I'm fussy that way and you'll probably like it; certainly lavish and juicy and more *vinous* than many "dessert" wines. SOS: 4 (8-28 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.

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.

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.

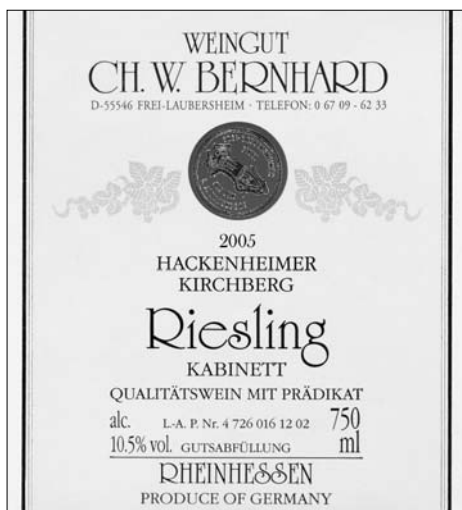
Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

- **Vineyard area: 10.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Hackenheimer Kirchberg, Frei-Laubersheimer Fels**
- **Soil types: Porphyry, weathered volcanic soils, clay and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 25% Riesling, 21% Spätburgunder, 11% Silvaner, 6% Grauburgunder, 5% Auxerrois, 3% Scheurebe, 3% Gewürztraminer, 22% other varieties**

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

Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had 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:

Though I went at first looking for Auxxerois, this has turned out to be a Riesling and Scheurebe agency, offering excellent value especially for Scheu.

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-068 **2005 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Spätlese**

It starts out all grapefruit and papaya and ends up like a custard of meyer-lemon; tasted colder it showed more mint and herb, but at every temp it has wonderful length and it's a citric circus on the finish, all the little Scheu clowns performing their bumps and pratfalls. Laughing is good.

SOS: 2 (1-5 years)

GCB-064 **2005 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Trocken**

Unchaptalized "QbA"; super quality and a whole lotta breed ("I'm gonna give you every inch of my breed . . .") for everyday Riesling; classic porphyry tang, aromas of cracklings, with fine structure and length.

SOS: 0 (now - 4 years)

GCB-065 **2005 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**

The 2005 density makes this even chewier than in most vintages, when it's already plenty chewy; what Riesling would be if it were trying to be a lamb-shank.

SOS: 2 (4-13 years)

GCB-066 **2005 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**

Firmer and even smokier; indeed this is like liquefied bacon and toast, with Mirabelle and stayman apple; the finish shows receding smoke and an oolong-narcissus flower; the overall effect is enormously charming.

SOS: 2 (7-20 years)

GCB-067 **2005 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer Spätlese**

As a rule the Germans don't do Gewürz very well, and so I thought the successes among 2004s were a fluke of the vintage. As indeed they were — except here. Hartmut's Gewürzes used to be earthy and blatant, but the last two vintages he seems to have accessed their inner-feminine, and this '05 is surprisingly graceful. He blended two casks, one of them dry and vigorous and the other rich and creamy: the resulting wine has 30g.l. RS, and it's typically rose and lychee; the palate is all freesia and talc, and markedly long; the finish really clings; the wine is elegant and fine but with substance.

SOS: 2 (now- 5 years)

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.

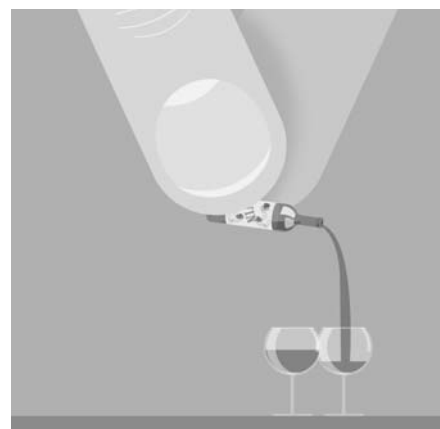
Apart from which I respect the hard work of the vintner. If he knew his/her wine would end up, fifty years later, being opened in a "tasting" alongside forty nine other wines for a bunch of earnestly scribbling geeks, he'd probably hurl a grenade at the winery and run away sobbing. I have enough on my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



special offering on half-bottles

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 f'rinstance) 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-244H **2004 Selbach Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
- GSO-265H **2005 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
- GSO-262H **2005 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
- GKE-098H **2005 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
- GKE-100H **2005 Kerpen Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
- GST-130H **2005 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett, 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-Greifenclo (erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a

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

wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had been naked long enough, and the pathetic spectacle

could no longer be ignored.

A certain prevailing hauteur may have prevented the truth from being heard. But the financial ruin of a 600-year old business could no longer be ignored, and a regional epidemic of denial was drawing to a close. Now, we may hope, the idealists will no longer be suffocated. Or so we may hope!

We still gotta do something about those prices. I’m just not sure what. Perhaps Mr. Leitz will consent to being cloned. There’s an historic precedent for Rheingau wines to price themselves, *ahem* “aristocratically,” which might have been justified thirty years ago but which has zero bearing on their real value or cost of production vis-à-vis other German wines. Of all the habits that die hard,





Berg Roseneck

greed must surely die hardest.

Though things are discernibly better now, there's still distressingly little buzz about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is still no shortage of fussy polemicizing on behalf of some rusty, encrusted *concept* of the sacred Rheingau, not as a paradigm but almost a freemasonry whose runes and arcana need to be protected, lest the whole region lose its sacrosanct air. One hopes, wistfully, for a day when no more energy need be expended in Hegelian debates over what constitutes a "true" Rheingau wine, as though such a thing could be defined by its chemical analysis! Perhaps, dare one hope, we might return to some innocent *sense* of wine?

One does wish for a little more spirit of *fun* here. I get the impression when Leitz, Spreitzers and my gang are whooping it up, our laughter can be heard from Rudesheim to Eltville.

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau's real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Pfalz and the Mosel, but the truth is there's no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly *different* from one another's as Rauenthal's are from Winkel's, as Erbach's are from Hallgarten's—all of them. Taste *any* of these as they should be, and you'll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The "classic" wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is *not*: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it's not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence

of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an age of leisure. They are wines for "experts" who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like *polished, impeccable, aristocratic* sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them *big scores*? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he's less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more

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

pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the *cheapest guy in town!*—that a wine content to merely make a "statement" seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for mystically intricate wines. And I'm quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

We're looking at the beginnings of a renaissance now, thanks to one Johannes Leitz, and it heartens me to see you embrace the wonderful wines of a manifestly Good Guy. Johannes offered to scout for me. He found someone superb. You'll see!

The Rheingau wines I offer you aren't merely honorable, they are EXEMPLARY. And they are worth the prices asked for them, and much as I join you in snubbing our noses at all those butt-heads who disgraced the region, we shouldn't punish the good and honorable for the sins of the lousy and dishonorable. *These* growers, at least, deserve your support.

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 (15 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! 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.

Often I go to Spreitzer in the morning, and then 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 I could taste them all together, dry with dry. 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.

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, 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.

THE DRY RIESLINGS:

This year I decided to concentrate on the uppermost level of Leitz's dry wines. There's plenty of competition for everyday-priced Riesling, but Leitz is one of the few in Germany who regularly makes world-class dry wines from Grand Cru sites. These may be expected to be *quite* meaty in 2005, and my notes are doubtless conservative.

GJL-115

2005 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Trocken

A delicate slate wine, fragrance of lilacs; palate is sinewy and spring-oniony; a mannerly, winsome wine.

SOS: 0 (1-5 years, again 14-19 years)

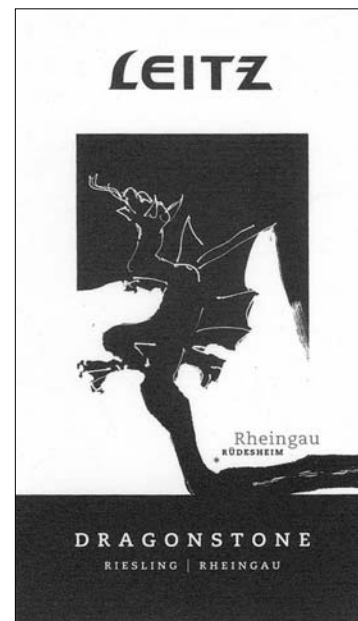
Rüdesheim Vineyards:

Usually the Taunus hills sit back from the Rhine about two miles, with vineyards carpeting their lower slopes. Only at Rüdesheim do the hills advance almost to the river — all the way to the river beneath the Schlossberg. The so-called Rüdesheimer “Berg” is one of Riesling’s most remarkable homes, an imposing mountainside facing due south, sometimes brutally hot and dry. It should be a UNESCO zone. The three great sites are SCHLOSSBERG, from which the most delicate minerally wines issue, from slatey soil with quartzite, like a Mosel-Rheingau marriage. ROSENECK is the fruit euphoria, with lyric and gracious aromas from quartzite with flecks of slate. ROTT-LAND is lower down; the wines are massive and brooding and earnest; Riesling as Serious Business.

Above these Grand Crus lie the DRACHENSTEIN (above the Roseneck) and the recently reclaimed BERG KAISERSTEINFELS (above the Schlossberg). To their east, rising imposingly behind Rüdesheim itself, sit a range of sites on richer soils ranging from limestony loess in the MAGDALENENKREUZ to a similar soil but mixed with slate in the KLOSTERLAY. Rüdesheim is an open-air living museum of *terroir*!

- GJL-116 **2005 Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Trocken “Alte Reben”**
Real Grand Cru complexity now, yet still showing delicacy and melody; these ‘05s have a winning pliant acidity and a floweriness like goldenrod; curiously this recalls certain *Grüner Veltliners*, the ones on the cool stony side. Rare to call a dry German Riesling adorable, but this one is.
SOS: 0 (2-6 years, again 13-19 years)
- GJL-117 **2005 Rüdesheimer 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. The ‘05 really does show a sense of the Klaus or the Kellerberg; it has the rocket-motor thrust of big-boy Wachau Riesling; aromas of lilac and carob; *heady* ripeness, a slight scallion-y bite in the finish, but fascinating stuff!
SOS: 0 (2-6 years, again 13-22 years)
- GJL-112 **2005 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 “Rüdesheimer 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 ‘05 was picked at 90° and chaptalized to 95; the nose is prototypically caraway, fennel and kirsch; a bright, happy vintage of this happy little dragon; a juicy spurt of malic fruit anchored by significant acidity. If you loved it before, you’ll love it even more.
SOS: 2 (3-12 years)
- GJL-113 **2005 Rüdesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett**
Mint and slate as always, but this is really riotously mineral, utterly smashed-rocks and spearmint; tangy to within an inch of its life; I love its cat-claw ferocity and paper-cut clarity.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-18 years)
- GJL-114 **2005 Rüdesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese** +
CORE-LIST WINE. This is a luminous Riesling Ideal; serenely glowing; apple flesh and skin, a little fibrous sweet-leesy texture anchors what might have been too “fruity”; talc aromas, and a subtle tamped-down minerality until the finish, which is stony, silky and texturous. Notwithstanding the Grand Crus coming up, this “Magda” (Leitz’s own term for the tongue-twister) gives as much sensual pleasure as great Riesling can.
SOS: 2 (8-24 years)

- GJL-118 **2005 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** +
 The Grand Cru character is instant, categorical. It's a matter of stature, of force; this isn't just apple: it's a dozen different heirloom apples; not only *mineral* but an articulate expression of every nuance of quartzite and slate; there are fresh rose aromas as always, and finally a palate crescendo that explodes tenderly into a serenely endless finish.
 SOS: 2 (8-26 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-119 **2005 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 100% clean botrytis (the non-botrytis fruit went into the dry wines); this is far more baroque now; another kind of spice, even more explicitly mineral and talc-y, but all the botrytis in the world can't subdue the fine slate and spicy apple; all the Schlossbergs are especially caressing in '05.
 SOS: 2 (9-27 years)
- GJL-120H **2005 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** ++
 From a great parcel originally called *Hinterhaus* ("A dream come true," said Johannes, when he obtained this parcel from Groensteyn); picked at 120°; a wildly exotic nose, less "mineral" or even "stone" – this is **ROCK**. A sort of balsamic apple and peach; a profound, solid, muscular wine, an Alpha-male of Rheingau Riesling; big-boned, magnetic and powerful.
 SOS: 3 (15-36 years)



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.

When one considers the past four vintages, culminating in the sensational collection from 2005, 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

two years ago. 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 each of the last three vintages has exceeded what are increasingly high expectations, but alas in a style the Germans do not seem to cherish.



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**

The wines certainly speak in the prevailing "syntax" of the times: crystalline, refined, perfumey and polished. These are Rheingau wines as Armin Diel might make them, as Peter Geiben might make them. Indeed it could be their diametrically opposed personalities to Leitz's wines which allows the two to coexist so benignly, without "competition" (the close friendship between the two helps I'm sure!). Where Johannes' wines are ruggedly individual, Andreas and Bernd's wines are, in the best sense, fashionable, spiffy, well turned-out. Thankfully the two of *them* are plenty unpretentious.

The wines do require a certain understanding, because they are never fined and they often show reduced aromas. As always these vanish with swirling, if you remember to swirl, and have the time to wait.

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 first 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.

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 . . .

In fact I keep urging Andreas, only half-jokingly, to grab any available land in Grand Crus with nothing but underachievers working them; this pretty much covers all of Rauenthal, to cite but one melancholy example. To be sure, Oestrichers can be delightful and in certain cases remarkable, but no serious observer would place these among the top sites in the Rheingau. All the more striking what Spreitzers make from them. Yet when I'm having trouble sleeping and I've replayed the entire 1986 World Series through in my mind, I'm likely to catalogue all the great sites whose wines would blossom in Spreitzer's hands: Hölle, Mannberg, Siegelsberg . . . Wülfen . . . Gehr . . . Baiken . . . Rothenberg . . . <zzzzzz>

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-037 2005 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Kabinett

This is a superb value for those who want an alternative to the core-list Kabinett: a lissome, piquant, flowery wine; cox-orange again, and plum-blossom; it is a slender high-cheekboned pretty wine, defined and intelligent, a wine you *want* and which grins right back at you.

SOS: 2 (5-20 years)

GSP-038 2005 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

++

CORE-LIST WINE. And it is the *KABINETT OF THE VINTAGE* in this offering. Oh, sing to me baby! A fragrance you want to *bathe* in; freesia, quince, pêche-de-vigne, and the palate just showers a blessing over you; *such* juicy bursting fruit and such fine penetrating mineral, leading to a saturating balsam-lime-wintergreen finish that goes on for days. *Vulgarism-alert ahead*, but there is no better way to put it: this is a complete and total fuck-me wine! (We will heartily approve if you order it by that name.)

SOS: 2 (6-23 years)

GSP-039 2005 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese

Sections of this rather generously-drawn vineyard are true Grand Crus, and Spreitzer's last few vintages have been splendid; this one very probably is too, except for a translucent veil of sweetness at the moment: lavish *purple* aromas, grape-hyacinth and lavender plus wintergreen and empire-apple; deeply embedded spice and mineral; made for the long haul; apple lingers into the finish.

SOS: 3 (10-30 years)

GSP-036 **2005 Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

The more minerally and saturated of two dry Späts; guava and hazelnut and warm bread; this site always seems carrot-y and oaty, and '05 adds a limey minerally powdery fidgety kind of mid-palate leading to a brash mineral finish.

SOS: 0 (1-4 years, again 12-16 years)

GSP-040 **2005 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303"** +

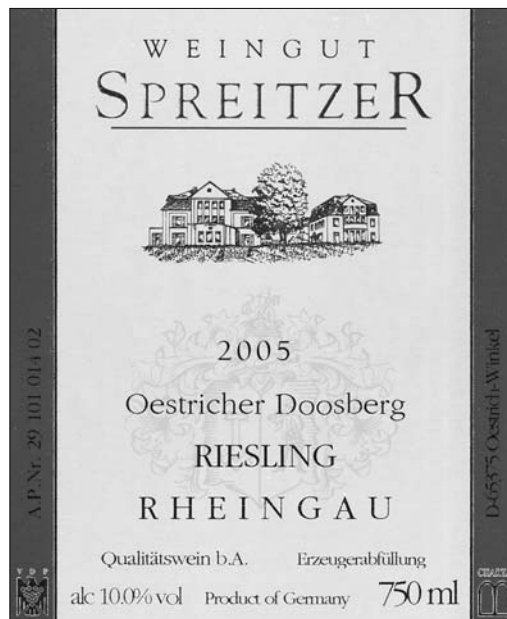
It hails from a micro-cru called Eiserberg, from which a TBA with 303° Oechsle was gathered in 1920 by Spreitzer's great-great grandfather, and which was the record must-weight for Rheingau Riesling until 2003 came along. A wonderful spice, a vivid brilliance; fabulously ripe (105°) with improbable grip; palate is fibrous and *purple*, racy and with a hugely flowery finish; a really amazing fragrance in the empty glass; chicken-stocky and carrot-y and lavender.

SOS: 3 (12-28 years)

GSP-041H **2005 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml**

An ultra-violet brilliance here; white nectarines, peaches and lilacs; spicy clean botrytis, a little of what (I think) Schildknecht would call "cyanic"; a yummy, juicy extroverted Riesling.

SOS: 3 (15-33 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-makeup of oak or other manipulations.

When a vine is at home it settles in and starts to transmit. We "hear" these transmissions as flavors. A naturally articulate grape like Riesling sends a clear message of the soil. 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.

pfalz wines



In the pretty walled town of Freinsheim my favorite German chef Dieter Luther has a restaurant and a few charming rooms. I've been staying and dining there for many years now. Luther's a very droll guy; when you tell him your meal was fabulous he practically laughs at you, like *Oh come on now, gimme a break*. He's a wine-guy too and he often asks me how my days go and how the wines are.

His list is naturally heavy into Pfalz wines, and he's both a creature of his times and a businessman serving a clientele, so all the wines are, < sigh >, Trocken. This year he said something that stunned me. He was "unhappy", he said, with modern Pfalz wines. Really? Yes, because they had become too sweet. "Too sweet?" I asked, astonished. Yes, too sweet he said; he didn't like all these supposedly dry wines with six-seven-eight grams of residual sugar. Say *WHAT?!?!* If there's the *slightest* sensible thing about the whole Trocken fetish it's that most of the Rieslings tickle the legal limit of 9 grams of (believe me, *untasteable*) residual sugar.

I left that conversation more depressed than even a Luther meal could relieve. The Pfalz, once my favorite region, once a hyper-oxygenated anything-goes playground of wine's manifold possibilities, has become suffocated by a pathological aversion to as much as a grain of sugar. I get the sense if these pathetic dupes could somehow get into **negative numbers** ("My wine is so dry it has MINUS-5 grams of sugar!") they still wouldn't be satisfied. Perhaps they should simply evaporate their wines and suck on the ash.



Pfalz vineyard view

Far from the wonderfully *human* playfulness of twenty years ago, the Pfalz these days feels positively robotic. It is sad sad sad. All this potential, laid to waste; an Eden of the Unexamined Palate.

I used to think that notions like "kilocalories of sunlight" were specious, but now I'm starting to wonder. I suspect there is indeed a difference between the sun-

warmth in Alsace and that of the Pfalz, an hour or two North. Because most Alsace Riesling basically works, even at its most dry. One might have small aesthetic cavils with 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 template. 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 most 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 (often) 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.

The Pfälzers are terribly proud of their dry Rieslings and will draw your attention to any competitive blind tasting when the wines held their own (or even *defeated*) competition from Austria or Alsace. There's also internal competition to see who can outdo his colleagues in the Grosses Gewächs category, and this has brought about a general improvement in quality. Clearly they had nowhere to go but up, and any improvement is both welcome and conspicuous. Certain of the VDP-poobahs in the Nahe have been heard wondering whether the *insistence* on only-dry Grosses Gewächs might have been ill-advised; I heard no such *thoughts* uttered in the Pfalz. I hardly heard thoughts at all.

Let's suppose for argument's sake they start really getting it right; they learn whatever magic trick is necessary to create consistently and sustainably viable dry Rieslings. Then what? Then there's one *additional* region from which fine dry Rieslings come. What has been sacrificed, however, is just the thing which makes German Rieslings *unique*. Other places make good dry Riesling, lots of them. But NO other place anywhere on earth

makes these miraculously beautiful Rieslings with sweetness. Thus even *if* — and it's a big if — Pfalz dry Riesling was abruptly consistently excellent, I don't think I'd take the trade-off. Something one-of-a-kind in return for an also-ran? No thanks!

THIS IS NOT A SCREED AGAINST DRY WINES. I LIKE DRY WINES! This is a screed against sheep-think and dogmatic uniformity. I want there to be excellent dry Riesling from the Pfalz, and I want it alongside Rieslings with sweetness (and I don't mean "noble-sweet" Ausleses) and I want growers and their customers to be flexible and ecumenical and *honest* in their tastes.

What is he talking about, you wonder: after all, there's plenty of "my" kind of Riesling in my Pfalz offering. Yes, because my existence as a client *creates* these wines, which would otherwise be bottled Trocken and sold in Germany. And because I've whittled it down to producers willing to continue making such

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

wines. I look very much forward to visiting them; I love them personally and their wines thrill me to the toenails. But I feel stifled in their environment, and it's a relief to get away again.

Still, what little "sweet" wine one does fine is uniquely precious. Pfalz wine shows a unique marriage of generosity and elegance; no other wine is at once so expansive and so classy. The idea of "class" usually suggests a certain reserve: NOT HERE! The typical Pfalz wine has big, ripe fruit, lots of literal spice (cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg), a kind of lush savor, a keen tang of pineapple, a splendid tautness of acidity under that frothing stock pot of fruit. The wines have a *great* affinity for food — certainly the most versatile of all German 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 little-bit-of-all-of-those-high-flying-you'll-break-your-crazy-neck-daredevil-glee of a Catoir? NFW, that's where!

This was my final stop, and it was just Karen Odessa and me. Both Heinrich and Phillip Catoir stayed with us for the entire tasting — I think it was their first run-through the entire vintage. Martin Franzen was his usual genial self, and the wines were unsurprisingly gleaming. 2005 was a troublesome vintage in the Pfalz, but you wouldn't know it to taste these.

That said, they are quite a bit more *strong* and correspondingly less *chiseled* than the supernal 04s. Boy, we sold out of them in a hurry (though you might still find a bottle here or there in the gray-market). Things are shifting somewhat at Müller-Catoir, one senses. They joined the VDP. They cultivate the press now — in the past they sometimes seemed like a Carthusian cloister to which only the privileged gained access. Their private-customer business is a smaller proportion

of the total. Whereas they once appeared unconcerned with any publicity they got, they're now quite pleased. Franzen's "Wine Personality Of The Year" blurb was delightedly received. And finally, the two of us have reached a kind of ease which only arrives after many years.

My long-time customers are aware of my regard for (and friendship with) Hans-Günter Schwarz, who was Catoir's cellarmaster for 42 years and who is nearly single-handedly responsible for an entire generation of enlightened German wine growers. He retired in 2002, and Martin Franzen had *some* kind of shoes to fill. For a while Schwarz's name wasn't spoken out loud, but now the estate has made available small quantities of Hans-Günter's swansong-vintage 2001. These were tasted alongside Franzen's '05s with respect and appreciation.

A couple people I know share my very high regard for the new era at Müller-Catoir, yet they often say "Of course the wines are different now . . ." and this I don't entirely see. Naturally, Martin is his own man, but the wines are recognizably Müller-Catoir wines. The vineyards, after all, haven't changed. The striving for the



Martin Franzen

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.

If the new wines are different these are delicate differences, and it

- **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**

requires memory and imagination to delineate. After all, we can't know what wines Schwarz *might* have made from the last few vintages; we can only infer theoretically. Martin hails from the Mosel, and he's certainly more oriented to *Riesling*. His 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 is: Müller-Catoir has resumed its position at the top of the Pfalz and thus— at least— among the greatest wineries in Germany.

Perhaps the stunning beauty and consistency of the 2004 collection was a sign of Martin's settling in, or perhaps it is a vintage whose parameters suited him. In either case it is an achievement of great magnitude. One can argue Martin's performance in 2005 is even greater; the vintage is so much more difficult. I think I'll leave you with a little anecdote. At dinner one evening at Luther, we ordered a bottle of dry Riesling Spätlese from the '04 vintage from the most currently-fashionable estate in the Pfalz. The wine was middling, and on a lark I ordered Catoir's dry '04 Bürgergarten Spätlese — the "regular" one, not one of the micro-Crus — just to see if I was being

a Trocken fusspot. Ah NO: the Catoir was dramatically finer in every imaginable way: sleeker, clearer, more elegant, better balanced, longer; a perfect dry Riesling, in

fact, though Luther might have kvetched about whatever pittance of RS it contained.

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 Gimonnet's Cuvée Gastronome! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

DRY WINES

- GMC-091 **2005 Haardter Herzog Riesling Kabinett Trocken**
The most charm and texture of three dry Kabinetts; brioche aromas; the silkiest possible structure; herbal wash of saltiness with refined fruit; wonderful length: an elegant lady! SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 9-12 years)

- GMC-092 **2005 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +
This is a fiery redhead of a wine; as always it's a little *untamed*, as if sachets of *bouquet-garni* were dangled in the tank; it's a glowing ultra-violet sort of palate, resolving into a gentle sorrel-y finish; even a nip of *urgestein* ore.
SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 10-14 years)

- GMC-093 **2005 Bürgergarten Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs** +
Starting with the 2003 vintage Martin offered three micro-Cru variations of Bürgergarten, different parcels based on subsoils and exposure. I offered all three, *terroir-lama* that I am. Then Catoir joined the VDP, and had to reduce the offering to one, which is now included in the "Grosses Gewächs" rubric. Luckily it was the best one.

This is becoming one of Germany's most reliably-great dry Rieslings; expressive mineral nose; the palate is shining proof that "mineral" can be lavish and explosive; this is an anvil of intensity compared to the filigree '04.
SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 12-15 years)

- GMC-077 **2004 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Breumel"** ++
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 maizy mid-notes, and stony demi-glance-y low notes. Less a "finish" than a seemingly endless peal of mineral.
SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 12-18 years)

- GMC-094 **2005 Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller Spätlese Trocken** +
Here is how you see the contrast between '04 and '05: the '04 had 12.5% alc and was silvery-clear and detailed. The '05 is, shall we say, not-without alcohol! It is still one of the world's greatest Muscats (I took a bottle to Jean Boxler, whose occasional Brand Grand Cru is another), but this time with a roaring bellow of expressiveness allied with the most *finicky* clarity of flavor; the finish is like sucking Thai-basil leaves.
SOS: 0 (now-9 years)

THE NOT-DRY WINES!

- GMC-095 **2005 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Kabinett** ++
 Grand Cru aromas; wild herbs and six kinds of blossoming trees; the palate careens between high and low tones; key-lime, spices; manic energy, and obviously no kind of “Kabinett”!
 SOS: 2 (5-18 years)
- GMC-096 **2005 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese** ++
 Picked both later and from a lower-lying parcel, and the wine *has* lower notes; more cherry-pie; a very clean-botrytis saltiness and an old-school sweetness; entirely long and ethereally vaporous. 103°, by the way.
 SOS: 3 (9-26 years)
- GMC-097 **2005 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** +++
 In fact from Breumel (but the label can’t identify this because it’s too “sweet”; oh just don’t even get me started . . .); the fragrance alone here is more complex than most wines in their entirety, and no I don’t think I *will* string together all the nuances; the palate just melts into a hundred rivulets you won’t live long enough to delineate, yet the *gestalt*, the basic shape, is alluringly beautiful and thoughtfully shaped and structured, playing a polychromatic chord in three octaves. German Riesling at its most trigonometric complexity!
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GMC-104 **2001 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** ++
 The first of two re-releases of Hans-Günter’s final vintage, touchingly. The wine is an utter dream; it has more stomach and has left its first youth, and it offers a quality of experience for which no equivalent exists in wine. If you’re new to these wines, I’m happy for you ‘cause you’re in for a rare treat. If not, buy it again; I did!
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GMC-098H **2005 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** +
 From a mid-November harvest (“involving insane selection!”) and showing a ton of (healthy) botrytis, and a splendid high vaporous spiciness; it hardly seems *sweeter* than the Spät, but the BA-fig-caramel mid-palate tells the true tale.
 SOS: 4 (12-30 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)

SCHEUREBE!

- GMC-099 **2005 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese** +
 Hoo boy; a powerhouse, huffing and snorting; part of it is like chewing currant leaves, licking rocks and spooning butter-fried sage leaves from the skillet (not to mention popping a couple mirabelles and a forkful of pineapple); it’s forceful and stony and not all that sweet, and sage lingers into the finish.
 SOS: 2 (now-13 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-100H **2005 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Auslese, 12/375ml** +
 Oh I didn’t *wanna* like this, but I mean come *on*, what fruit. Yes of course botrytis but CASSIS! QUINCE! Crazy salty length and OK I give up — more please.
 SOS: 3 (1-15 years)

RIESLANER, THE RIESLING-VIAGRA

Rieslaner is a crossing bred in Franken, presumably to create a grape which would give Silvaner expression in Franken soils and bring Riesling acidity and frost-resistance along. It does seem to make the best Franken wines and good to stunning wine anyplace else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Schwarz *loved* it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives *more* acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. It can produce the most *singular* great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as-is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would *never* himself do such a thing . . .

- GMC-101 **2005 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner Spätlese** ++
 Archetypally monumental Rieslaner! Both the stewed-peach of the site and the fierce complexity of the variety. Power, spice, scintillating juiciness yet so solid and resolute it never palls. This is a masterpiece.
 SOS: 2 (3-16 years)

- GMC-105 **2001 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner Spätlese** +
First offering. (In 2002 I shipped the Schlüssel.) Like the '01 Riesling, this seems drier, more of a "table-wine" though this could be simple age and not a fundamental difference in winemaking; where the '05 motor **roars** this motor *hums*. Insane complexity goes almost without saying. Cherry tobacco, old *armoire*. What a TREAT to be offered it again. Thanks Hans-Günter, for the soul you put into these wines — as if you could have done otherwise.
 SOS: 2 (3-16 years)

- 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-102H **2005 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml** +(+)
 Too early to note, except to say it's like you were lying in bed some morning while breakfast was cooking in the house; bacon, French toast, coffee. Eventually someone brings it to you. Some fig jam for the French toast? Why *yes*.
 SOS: 4 (14-27 years)

- GMC-103H **2005 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner TBA, 12/375ml** ++
 230 little degrees Oechsle. Clean and clear despite its mass and creamy richness.
 SOS: 4 (20-50 years)



josef biffar

pfalz • deidesheim

Lily Biffar has returned to assume control of the winery after the sudden death of her father. 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 cellar master Heiner Salaton is 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 Biffar. "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 it; they looked inward because there's so much to see there.



Biffar's is a baronial place (I don't think there's any actual barons in residence but the *mien* suggests they're hiding away in a tower somewhere), certainly one of the Gentleman's Estates of the Mittelhaardt. They have marvelous land, with many of the greatest riesling sites in all of Germany. And they have an unusually flexible approach to cellar work. There are both stainless steel

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg Leinhöhle and Mäushöhle, Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad & Nussbien, Wachenheimer Gerümpel, Altenburg & Goldbächel**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and granite, basalt or limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 79% Riesling, 14% Weissburgunder, 3% Spätburgunder, 2% Auxerrois, 2% Sauvignon Blanc**

tanks and large old casks in the cellar, both of which can be chilled. The wines are fermented with cultured yeasts at controlled temperatures, but they are not strictly reductive. The goal is to give them just enough oxygen to promote secondary aromas; in effect their architecture mirrors the estate's actual architecture.

The harvest is also worked in various ways according to grape variety and to the condition of each picking. One absolute is long lees contact, up to three weeks on the gross lees and another 4-8 weeks on the fine lees. But apart from all this wine-geek stuff, I have always enjoyed my visits here emotionally, perhaps even spiritually.

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) 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-081 **2005 Kalkofen Riesling Grosses Gewächs**
 Now we’re talking! This is just what you want GG to be; a seriously fine nose of roasted corn, chalk and aloe; palate shows wonderful force and spice – it’s along lines of Mambourg, Furstenturm – mouth-fillingly generous and long.
 SOS: 0 (now-4 years, again 11-14 years)

GBR-077 **2005 Deidesheimer Herrgottsäcker Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +
 Zingy and lush at once; typical aromas of straw, lime and pineapple; it fills the mouth *juicily* and shimmers slowly into a talc-y gripping finish of laurel, lime and good consommé. This is wholly satisfying and perfect at table.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (2-6 years, again 13-16 years)

GBR-074 **2004 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**
 GBR-078 **2005 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**
 CORE-LIST WINE. There’s only 75 cases of this, so we’d prefer to ship ‘04 as long as it lasts.

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)

This ‘05 is . . . an ‘05, clearly big-Spätlese, and the most enveloping and generous of any of the thirteen vintages I’ve shipped.
 SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

GBR-079 **2005 Wachenheimer Altenburg Riesling Spätlese** +
 The sample was freshly sulfured so the aromas were muted, but the structure is wonderfully solid and firm; really limey-gingery with aristocratic flowery echoes; the finish is as deep as *demi-glace*.
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)



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). 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 (espe-

cially 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. 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-103 **2005 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GKF-099 **2005 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GSD-035 **2005 Diel Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GGE-009 **2005 Bechtheimer Heiligkreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GGY-046 **2001 Gysler Weinheimer Scheurebe Sekt Brut "Bundle Of Scheu"**
- GGY-058L **2005 Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GCB-068 **2005 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GMC-099 **2005 Müller-Catoir Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GMC-074 **2004 Müller-Catoir Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GMC-100H **2005 Müller-Catoir Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Auslese, 12/375ml**
- GDD-015 **2004 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GTM-093 **2005 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GKR-093 **2004 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Scheurebe BA**
- GKR-093H **2004 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Scheurebe BA, 12/375ml**
- GDR-130 **2004 Darting Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Auslese**



Sometimes I'm not so sure about these plusses. I recall being entirely happy with the '05s from Dr. Deinhard, and now I look back at the notes and . . . only one lonesome "plus". So I need to repeat, there are many and varied wines of supreme attractiveness without plusses, wines that will give great pleasure and be wonderfully useful, wines which, in short, are not great but are *wholly GOOD*. It bears remembering: not every occasion calls for "great" wine. In fact few of them do. And I take every bit as much care with the simply-good.

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



Heinz Bauer

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

- **Vineyard area: 35 hectares**
- **Annual production: 20,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Kalkofen, Grainhübel, Herrgottsacker, Kieselberg, Paradiesgarten, & Mäushöhle**
- **Soil types: Weathered calcareous, new red sandstone, basalt**
- **Grape varieties: 77% Riesling, 9% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 2% Gewürztraminer, 1% Scheurebe, 2% Spätburgunder**

called Dr. Deinhard after its founder, who moved from Koblenz to Deidesheim in the middle of the 19th century, before you were born. Deinhard has leased a proportion of the property from Kochs; in effect the wines were/are custom-made for Deinhard from the X-hectares of vineyard they lease. That number is falling sharply now.

Deinhard used to stipulate that no other wine from the "Dr. Deinhard" estate could be exported to their markets. This is no longer the case.

I made an exploratory visit. One can never have too many great Pfalz wines, and I'd been told quality was extremely high – the estate took a key prize for the best 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-020L **2005 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Unchaptalized. Friends, this is a completely agreeable wine. You want to slurp it from a bucket. No adjectives required!
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-6 years)

GDD-019 **2005 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

Complex fragrance of mitake and porcini – clean, fresh earth. The palate is elegant and moderate, filigree and pointillist; there is little to fascinate but much to *satisfy*; a lovely companionable wine.
SOS: 0 (now-4 years, again 11-14 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. And it is wonderful to see it with a few years on its fine bones; sommeliers especially should grab the chance to offer a Riesling out of diapers (the wines, not the somms).
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years, again 12-15 years)

GDD-021 **2005 Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

Lovely nose of Jarlsberg and Mirabelle; palate is endlessly juicy and charming, with palpably thick extract and a gardenia sort of floweriness; but sheer refinement and tastiness is paramount here. 100/100 on the *yum-o-meter*.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now - 5 years, again 12-16 years)

GDD-022 **2005 Deidesheimer Herrgottsäcker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Brilliant, zippy mineral density; rye-toast and, oddly, white-corn tortilla chips! (Will this survive bottling? I hope so.) Spice and vitality and complete and utter goodness.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (1-6 years, again 12-17 years)

GDD-006 **2001 Deidesheimer Herrgottsäcker 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. A final crack at a great 2001.
SOS: 0 (now to nine years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDD-009 **2002 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**

Perfect clone-90 Riesling, with a slim 95° Oechsle (!!!); fresh, lively, serene, long; how on earth could it be any better? We bought every drop he'd give us. A year later I still think it's perfect Pfalz riesling. I'll show it as long as it exists!
SOS: 2

- GDD-023 **2005 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**
 This is a little more curtailed and less detailed than the Forst-Deidesheim wines, but has a more smoky, *fatty* attack; more eclaire and less powdered rock though there's plenty of minerality; it's a virtually perfect food-Riesling.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-16 years)
- 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-024 **2005 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese** **+**
 Tremendous torque and grip, with adamant mid-palate concentration and mineral; fruit-cocktail, sweet corn, lemon blossom fragrances; palate is full of talc and density and refined fruit; this is from special land, and shows it.
 SOS: 2 (8-23 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)
- GDD-025 **2002 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Eiswein** **++**
 GDD-025H **2002 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**
 With the paucity of Eiswein from '05 I thought to revisit earlier vintages, and this **FIRST OFFERING** is miraculous, as refined (and drinkable) a honey as you could ever imagine; full of thyme-blossom and linden flowers, it's regal and still completely exquisite, with the 2002 *quetsch* reaching sublime heights.
 SOS: 4 (12-28 years)



In 20+ years of making my rounds in March, I never saw more than a dusting of snow, and even that was rare. The day we excursed to the Pfalz from Nierstein the forecast was for snow-changing-to-rain but it never did. In the three hours we sat tasting at Müller I think 6 inches of heavy wet snow fell. And the road-crews were on strike! Getting home was interesting that night. Good thing we had bellies-full of *Bach-Mayer's* fabulous schnitzels to reassure us.

Müller's was the first visit in the Pfalz, and thus the first vintage-tales we heard. It was Stephan Müller who told us of bunch-thinning by cutting the *center*-berries away "These are the ones most vulnerable to rot," he explained., "and it also increases air-flow to the remaining berries."

Müller continues the climb he began with his superb '04s; indeed his performance in the difficult '05 is even more ambitious and laudable. This is no longer *merely* a "value-agency" with high spots;

it's now an entirely lovely agency which still offers fantastic value.

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!



Stephan and Kurt Müller in the vineyard.

- **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: 80% Riesling, 10% Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, 14% red varieties mostly Spätburgunder**

It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines. Still, not *this* kind of spice; this sharp, nipping concentration. Then there is a flavor of black-cherry which I've never seen elsewhere in the Pfalz. Then there is a minerality which again seems *packed*, as though it had been *pounded* together, carbonized. The whole effect is penetratingly expressive, yet, here's the genius of it: it's also, somehow ELEGANT AND REFINED, and the palate keeps whip-sawing 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 **Jesuitengarten** tick is the solidity of its structure, the innate fineness of its flavors and the stylishness of its complexity. Kirchenstück has more **genius** in it, but also more arrogance. Jesuitengarten is a *little* less brilliant but a little more accommodating; it's more diplomatic.

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 were be harbingers of a change, as they are more "modern", clear and bright.

GEM-077 **2005 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**

"Mariengarten" was an old single-site name which still has a certain brand-value among old-timers. Now it's a "prestige" *Grosslage* consisting only of the primo sites in Forst. This wine is entirely from the Grand Cru *Pechstein*, in fact, and the wine is almost dainty (not a characteristic typical of '05); certainly it's front-and-center flowery, and a refined orchid-y sort of flower; even what the French call *Dore*, or wild lavender; palate is a blast of talc-y charm; lemon-blossom; leads into a finish like a fruit liqueur ladled over warm stones.

SOS: 2 (5-14 years)

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-078 **2005 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**

This is a big belly-rich Riesling, like caramel with fleur de sel; a new-leather animal sweetness, simmery and root-veggies, a carrot-bisque with orange zest. It's food dude.

SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

GEM-079 **2005 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese** +

Oddly this is finer, slimmer and more elegant than the Kabinett, as if it were Jesuitengarten; exceedingly fine focused slender-boned wine, selected from a higher parcel richer in limestone; for sheer Grand Cru breed and refinement, this is so satisfying. The Kabinett is delicious: this is *beautiful*.

SOS: 2 (8-22 years)

THE GREAT FORSTER KIRCHENSTÜCK SERIES

GEM-084 **2005 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

A really carbonized sort of "black" minerality; could almost be a Piri, it's so leafy and *singed*; a juicy attack with nearly mentholated penetration and plenty of grip and echo; it oscillates between stern and charming, and regardless of which profile it displays it is damned serious Riesling!

SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 12-16 years)

GEM-081H **2004 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese 12/500ml** +

CORE-LIST WINE. This is a first-cousin to Alsace's great *BRAND* vineyard; it could be a V.T. with just a jacket of RS but still basically a *TABLE*-wine; fiercely herbal and carbonized mineral on the nose, almost Chartreuse; palate is starched and snappy, lime-y and salty and *absurdly* spicy; spearminty and wintergreen finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

GEM-080H **2005 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese 12/500ml** **++**

CORE-LIST WINE. It's still fleshy and dimpled but what salty-sweet power here! Fragrances of cherry and flint, Szechaun spare ribs, lime and gardenia, *boucherie* and jasmine; palate washes over you with piquant tangy sweetness but ambushes you with salt, like tapioca pudding with maple-smoked bacon.

SOS: 3 (8-25 years)

GEM-082H **2004 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+**

First Offering. This is everything the dragon-angels want it to be; massive and muscular, vinous and not syrupy, wonderfully satisfying and complex; chestnut honey and malt with quintessential roaring spicy power; as caramelly as 5-year-old Gouda, and about as far as German Riesling gets from *Mosel*-ness.

SOS: 3 (17-40 years)

GEM-083H **2004 Forster Stift Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+**

First Offering. Another of those achingly plummy Eisweins from '04 (God *what* an Eiswein-vintage that was . . .), a salty lime-liqueur, not celestial or mystic but completely sensually *delightful*; firm and piquant, ferally salty and like a green-tea essence. **FABULOUS VALUE.**

SOS: 4 (13-29 years)



herbert messmer

pfalz • burrweiler

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 there's a consensus Meßmer has ascended to the top rank.

As such I fall in line with the received wisdom of the German wine community. That's O.K., but our *reasons* for appreciating Meßmer are diametrically opposed. Inside Germany he's lauded for his dry wines. He sells them like loco, and 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 (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slatey minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.



Linde & Gregor Messmer

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.

The southern Pfalz suffered from draught in '05, partly as a residue of the parched summer of '03. Irrigation is now permitted in Germany, and I asked Gregor if he was ever tempted to deploy it. "Actually, I am fundamentally opposed to irrigation," he replied (rather to my delight), "It isn't the solution. I'd rather deal with draught by adjusting yields lower."

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-111L **2005 Estate Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

This is now 100% estate-grown, and remains the *class* among my Liter offerings; it's articulate, minerally and long, a calligraphy of Riesling, amazingly filigree and delineated. And a STEAL for such a carefully made wine.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-8 years)

GMS-119L **2005 Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter**

Tasted from a pre-filtered cask sample, the wine is hugely promising; it should be pretty, and quite concentrated for its *echelon*. A perfect pouring wine!

SOMMELIER ALERT! (now-5 years)

GMS-112 **2005 Burrweiler Altenforst Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

Creamy and charming — yes, this is dry German Riesling we're talking about! Aromas of cherry and *boucherie*; palate-coating jasmine and mineral richness; a suave finish that's almost tea-like.

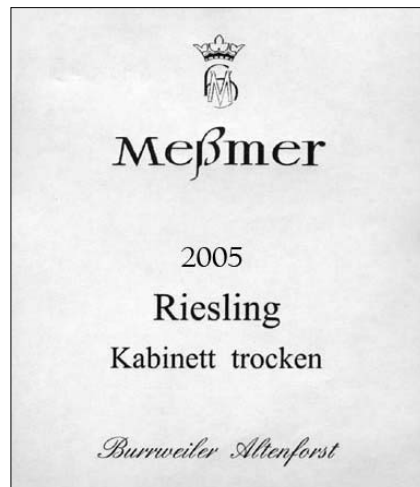
SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 11-15 years)

GMS-114 **2005 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett**

Tangelo and malt aromas; bright, citric and zingy but it's in no way *green*, but rather *yellow-orange*, as if an orange-blossom honey had most of its sweetness removed. We're contemplating this as a CORE-LIST wine but have to determine whether he can produce it every year for us. Know why? He can't sell such a wine at home! It has the dreaded sweetness you see . . .

SOS: 2 (5-14 years)

- GMS-113 **2005 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. This is in fact Halbtrocken, and it is also in fact simply *wonderful*; perfect serene aromas, starting out roses, then lime, wintergreen, tarragon, mineral; the palate seems to scratch a deep, deep itch with knowing sharp nails; it’s a shower of fruit and salty minerality, and it lights up the body with sheer animal joy.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-7 years)
- GMS-118 **2005 Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese Grosses Gewächs**
 The site belongs to the village of Weyher; it’s just north of Altenforst; the soil includes slate along with mineral-rich sand; it is certainly Gregor’s most compelling dry Riesling; a gorgeous aroma of quince, linden and cold-cuts; the palate is wonderfully dense with a kind of creamy minerality, and for the first 67% it gives you everything you can ask from dry Riesling – whereupon, despite its 9g.l. residual sugar (the limit for GG), it becomes apparent the wine screams for more; the fruit abruptly stops, you feel the alcohol, and an endive-bitterness clamps down. What’s good is so good you deserve to learn of it. Tell me if you like it more than I do.
 SOS: minus-1 (now-4 years)
- GMS-115 **2005 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese**
 Mr. Midas-touch with this variety does it again, this time with ‘05’s form and grip. There is no Gewürz in Germany as consistently superb as Meßmer’s.
 SOS: 3 (now-6 years)
- GMS-116 **2005 Burrweiler Schärer Riesling Spätlese** +
 Again this is serene and luminous; rather on the sweet side; a lovely nose of violet, hyacinth, mirabelle and *tilleul*; a caressing refined and satiny palate leads into a spicy perfumey finish that’s all flowers. For the long-haul.
 SOS: 3 (12-27 years)
- GMS-117 **2005 Rieslaner Auslese** ++
 This is quite the critter here! 116° Oechsle; it tastes like a bunch of clotted cream poured over a Sherman tank; penetrating lime-grass spice and wintergreen leads to an amazing palate at once poundingly intense yet bubble-bath voluptuous, and the fruit is astoundingly clear and candid; the botrytis was pristine. I mean, *YOW*; one of the great wines of the vintage.
 SOS: 4 (8-22 years)
- 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)



It was like a time-warp walking in here. Theo Minges reported ZERO problems with rot (was there a hole in the ozone layer above Flemlingen?) and he picked till the 10th of November, long after most other Pfalz growers had finished. The crazy dude even made Eiswein. *True* Eiswein. Minges has always been exceptional, but this strains credulity. However, a clue was offered.

It seems Minges has become good chums with Hans-Günter Schwarz, who uses his retirement to consult, sometimes officially and sometimes as a matter of comradeship and to keep his hand in. It hardly surprises me he took a liking to Theo, who had his *Practicum* at Müller-Catoir. Clearly the two are *tres simpatico*, and I suspect the occasional bit of wisdom from Hans-Günter was happily received by his former student.

Minges has also begun with Rieslaner and Muscat, two of my favorite varieties, and an already fab estate is becoming almost *intolerably* wonderful!

One 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*. So I've learned to listen fast, because he keeps spouting out these gems. One 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."



Theo Minges

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 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**

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. A vine isn't a mere *thing* you manipulate: it is a *being* alive as you are. A fellow-being, a companion.

Minges himself is an old fashioned guy in an old fashioned house; he only just got a fax machine and doesn't own a computer ("Though my daughter has one; I can give you her email address if you want to send me emails," he offered. Somehow I'd rather call. . . .) By the way, you always apologize for your German pronunciations, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

Theo Minges was “thrown in the cold water early” at the tender age of twenty. His father came latterly to viticulture, having originally been a painter, a sensibility which made the transition to viticulture rather comfortable, in Theo’s opinion. During the period of euphoria over the new crossings, Minges stayed a classical course, planting only Scheurebe and Kerner, the two most similar to Riesling. Minges was an island of classicism and must feel prophetic now, as so many of the crossings are being hacked out of the ground.

Theo told me something that made me glad. He’s planting more and more Riesling each year, thanks to me (of all people), as I’ve been a good customer for them. Ain’t that sweet? I never pause to consider my patronage might actually make things possible for the growers. Because of me and *you* a great guy like Theo Minges is literally *en-couraged* to produce more Riesling; that makes me feel useful and happy.

Most of the vineyards are on gentle slopes of deep

loess-loam, though all Riesling is planted on chalky, stony ground. Unusually, the Flemlinger Zechpeter site is planted in Riesling from MOSEL clones, planted 38 years ago by Theo’s father. Everything is hand-harvested—not a necessity here, as the land isn’t steep—and many separate passes are made through the vineyards. The grapes are pressed in a pneumatic press with very little pressure. Musts are rarely centrifuged; Minges prefers to let them sit overnight to clarify. Natural yeasts are usually used, though Minges has no 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 mineral-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-090L **2005 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

“You could easily offer this as a Spätlese *feinherb*,” he says, with ample justification. As always it’s Champagne-like, but with more yellow elements in 2005; superbly balanced, brilliantly clear, spring-water crisp; the wine is even *complex* — at this price! Schwarz tasted through the entire collection a few days before I did, and said “Super vintage; only one problem: the Liter wines are too good!”
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now - 5 years)

GTM-089L **2005 Riesling, 1.0 Liter** +

Interestingly the more sweet wine tastes *greener*; this is scintillating, digital; has a *hiss* of brilliance like sizzlers on a ride-cymbal; mineral and lime and spearmint and all resolved into an apple-skin finish that threads the needle.
SOS: 2 (now - 10 years)

GTM-091 **2005 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

Really Champagne-like now; Vertus fruit with Cramant oolong and lime-blossom; waves of fruit breaking over waves of mineral breaking over waves of foamy plum-blossom; has a seductive saltiness on the adamantly mineral finish.
SOS: 2 (5-16 years)

GTM-092 **2005 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese** +

Orange-blossom now, mirabelle and balsam; palate is fervently *cool* and exquisitely jasmine-y with a discreet talc and white chocolate note, but the surging force stops you in your tracks, the fidgety interplay, the sense of chords of flavor constantly inverted. Amazing wine.
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-20 years)

- GTM-093 **2005 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese**
 Over 100°, and a riot of lavender, sage and banana; it's on the tangy side — I don't know what ungoldly sweetness it has, but it isn't *quite* enough — 50-year-old vines, and a harpoon-jab of spicy power. "When customers ask why I haven't planted Sauvignon Blanc," says Theo, "I pour them this and the deal is sealed." Yup!
 SOS: 2 (now-7 years)
- GTM-094H **2005 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml** +
 It's certainly a botrytis-wine, but it's ultra-fine and spicy, chocolatey and talc-y, minty and long. There's a baroque opulence along with a gothic purity; the structure is gentle but the quality of fruit will melt you.
 SOS: 3 (10-25 years)
- GTM-096H **2005 Flemlinger Zechpeter Muskateller Auslese, 12/375ml** +
 This has the icicle-sharpness I crave in Muscat; botrytis is present but there's an iron spine of varietality; lime and peppermint; it has *radical* spice, untamed expression; a dark, rock-drenched, almost *sere* finish, a sirocco of wild mint blowing through it.
 SOS: 2 (now-8 years)
- GTM-097H **2005 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml** +
 A fine, young-vines Rieslaner, rather more buoyant and transparent than is usually the case; toasted brioche with quince *confiture*; it's the typical Rieslaner solid-syrup, silkier than Meßmer's if not entirely as creamy, but varietally not-just "true" but *absolute*. What a maiden-voyage.
 SOS: 3 (2-12 years)
- GTM-095H **2005 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**
 This was picked in December; it was filtered the morning I tasted it, so no definitive note is possible, but to have had such clean fruit in this vintage speaks to a grower who understands vines and nature. In terms of structure and sweetness this should be lovely.
 SOS: 4



koehler-ruprecht

pfalz • kallstadt

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. 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;

- **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 Chardonnay & Grauburgunder, 2% each Dornfelder & Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% other varieties**

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-094 **2001 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese Trocken “R”** +
First release, and in fact it won’t be released until 2007, but ten cases are allocated to the United States, and may I suggest you sign up for them *now*? This is one of Germany’s most remarkable dry Rieslings; a wonderfully smoky, root-veggie nose . . . campfire, toasted pine-nut; many-dimensional intricacy; as limey-minerally as Alzinger’s Steinertal and as dense and bready as Jamek’s Klaus, yet racy as the ‘01s are. It does quite a textural dance: stone, gelatin, snap, muscle.
 SOS: 0 (8-25 years)

- GKR-090 **2005 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 This tasted drier than a Trocken estate-Riesling we'd just tasted — sweetness doesn't always register as sweet, does it! The wine is really stony and gingery; it has the roasted-beet note of the Höllberg from Wagner-Stempel; an old-school dry stony Riesling with lots of torque and power. Lavishly dry, you might say. Oh go on, say it.
 SOS: 0 (3-12 years)
- GKR-091 **2005 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett**
CORE-LIST WINE. Now more red beet and cinammon, and less pure stone; soy and honey-mushroom aromas; thickly dense and tannic; barely off-dry; it finds a talc-y jasmine-y mineral as it finishes. Remarkable.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)
- GKR-092 **2005 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken** ++
 I confess I expected *nothing* like this. I'd wondered whether Bernd's big wines would collapse under their botrytis, but this has a seductive creaminess like I've never seen: it smells exactly like *Mesnil*, in fact: apple-blossom, jasmine, chalk, honeysuckle; the palate is a creamsicle of *terroir*, a masterly weaving of mineral, sweet lees and endless winter-green length. There is no other Riesling like it, and EVERY order should include it.
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years, again 13-18 years)
- GKR-087 **2004 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese** ++
 There's a very fine '05 in the wings but this wine is so good I want to sell it out first. 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-093 **2004 Kallstadter Saumagen Scheurebe BA** +
 GKR-093H **2004 Kallstadter Saumagen Scheurebe BA, 12/375ml**
 A Philippi wine to the very marrow; fiercely spicy and brash; where anyone else's BA would be sweet this is pupil-shrinkingly minty, a wasabi-Scheu; crazed ginger and lime, phosphorescent brilliance; I mean we're talking babbling-loony wine here folks!
 SOS: 3 (now- 13 years)

kurt darting

pfalz • bad-dürkheim

Here's a paradox: in the whomping-ripe 2005 vintage, Dartings had a difficult time getting grapes *above 90°*, "because we couldn't let them hang long enough." The Dürkheim area was especially prone to (not always noble) rot in the warm weather that followed the big early October rains. Botrytis is therefore a factor in Darting's '05, yet one senses they've learned a great deal since 2000, as these wines were cleaner and purer than the last similar vintage.

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 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



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**

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, Süßreserve only when no alternative avails, and then only a high-grade Süßreserve, 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:

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

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-136L 2005 Dürkheimer Feuerberg Portugieser Weissherbst, 1.0 Liter

The instant I tasted this I wanted to ship it right away: we hurriedly added it to Spring-06 DI shipments and I hope you'll see the wine about the time you see this catalogue. The wine just sings Summer. It's oh-so-pretty, with aromas of watermelon and strawberry, and the palate is a charming fruit-basket, a picnic in a bottle. As slight as a little bird, yet it sings and sings and sings.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (now to 2 years)

GDR-137L 2005 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter

This is either drier or drier-*seeming* than many previous vintages; it's slim and piquant, with lilac and hyacinth notes; fine clarity and charm; discreet vintage mineral; a flowery finish anchored by delicate phenolics.

SOS: 2 (now - 6 years)

GDR-135 2005 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken

A small vogue has developed for this tasty little Trocken. Sweet hay, apple, ginger and subtle botrytis aromas; the always-juicy palate has '05s minerals on display. A winning dry Riesling.

SOS: 0 (now - 5 years)

GDR-138 2005 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett

Again the sweetness is more restrained; the wine is malty and powdery; botrytis shows on the nose; the palate is tangy, like a meat stock flavored with tangelo.

SOS: 1 (now - 8 years)

GDR-134 2005 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett

This one made it to nearly 100° — pineapple and botrytis aromas; the palate is a real ginger-pudding you dipped a plantain-chip in! The 60g.l. RS is swallowed by all that ripeness; the finish is talc-y and snappy; overall this is an Annick Goutal sort of wine, spicy and redolent of the pastry shop.

SOS: 2 (3-10 years)

GDR-139 2005 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese

+

This wine shows that all must-weight isn't equal: this is nearly the same as the Michelsberg Kabinett but the palate here is pronouncedly richer and thicker; simply, it tastes riper; white corn and guava fragrances; palate is high-toned, jasmine-y and fine; it shows botrytis and has a chewy tropical fruit and mineral finish that softens into caramel.

SOS: 2 (5-17 years)

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 - 3 years)

- GDR-143 **2005 Dürkheimer Steinberg Muskateller Kabinett Trocken** **+**
 A TRIUMPH of the '05 vintage *chez* Darting: an arrestingly pretty fragrance; palate is crystalline, dense, bright and long ; it's on the lime and herbal side of the variety but with the glorious '05 crushed-rock chewy mineral density. I tasted this AFTER the TBA and it just rang out with beauty and grace.
 SOS: 0 (now - 5 years)
- GDR-140 **2005 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese** **++**
 You need *two* mouths to taste this wine; it's too huge to fit into one. I checked carefully for V.A. (a sometimes-issue with '05 Rieslaners) and found none. Cherry and toasted brioche; gigantic, implacable mass and force; cashing cymbals of ginger and pepper and yet it rumbles like an 18-wheeler over the palate; the finish is like one of those wild skies dotted with angry clouds but sunny with crepuscular beams. Oh man, *Rieslaner!*
 SOS: 3 (3-16 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 - 12 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-141H **2005 Huxelrebe TBA, 12/375ml**
 Still cloudy and not-yet-wine when I tasted it, but excellent potential.
 SOS: 4 (12-28 years)
- GDR-142 **2004 Pinot Noir**
 This is quite a triumph in its understated way; a lovely "light" Pinot Noir that's very much old-world; sweet aromas like a Santenay; soy, shiitake, spice-box; palate is surprisingly positive and long; oak (all local and new-ish) is present but well behaved, and the wine really compounds, seeming to expand and flex its muscles. I'm hugely impressed by this elegant pure Pinot.



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.

Back Cover Photo: *Deer resting in the vineyard at Florian Weingart.*

