



AUSTRIA 2008

terry theise estate selections

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"First of all, everything is unified, everything is linked together, everything is explained by something else and in turn explains another thing. There is nothing separate, that is, nothing that can be named or described separately. In order to describe the first impressions, the first sensations, it is necessary to describe all at once. The new world with which one comes into contact has no sides, so that it is impossible to describe first one side and then the other. All of it is visible at every point . . ."

- P.D. Ouspensky

"Either Nature has a kind of consciousness, and therefore a purpose, or it does not. In our present state of development, there's no way to know. It's my experience that Nature — whether metallic (like my car) or organic (like a plant) or neither (like the wind) — behaves differently if one relates to it as though it is conscious; many have experienced consciousness in rocks, flora, fauna, and objects, but our subjective experiences are difficult to demonstrate and impossible to prove. If Nature has no consciousness or purpose, I don't see how humanity can, so I choose to believe we all do. That's my sense of things. Again, impossible to prove, especially when the evidence appears to point the other way."

- Michael Ventura

It was strange to fly into Austria knowing Erich Salomon wasn't there any more. I hardly saw him frequently enough to call him a friend, but he inspired me in many ways, not least as a beacon of civility and affection in a world where these sometimes seem scarce.

One day last December we received the news that Erich had died from the cancer with which he'd struggled for many years. It was the news I dreaded, and couldn't believe would come. Just a few months ago Erich seemed so hale, emerging to greet me and my colleagues, joking about his chemo-baldness: "It's my Bruce Willis phase." He gamely kept us company, almost apologetically, in that heart-rending modesty the ill can display. I wish he had stayed with us forever. Or at least into the evening, damn the next appointment: stayed to watch the stars and to sip wine and gossip.

The evening we heard the news, I opened a bottle of the 1982 Pfaffenberg Riesling to drink with my own sweetheart, and to honor the memory of this sweetest of men. The wine came fresh from Erich's cellar. He and his brother Bert were the only ones to know the value of unearthing these Saturnine bottles. It was like Erich to have kept them, or at least a few of them.

This bottle was good, clean cork, good healthy color. Old wine does a trick, or something that seems like a trick. It starts out almost stale and musty, smelling not of itself but of the cellar in which it lay dormant and beating. In the first instant most old wines smell alike; they smell like "old wines." This one did. So we sat and drank this taciturn herald of time and memory, and thought about the man who made it. Seven years ago Erich renewed the 30-year lease on the vineyard from which it came, a site owned by the monks of the abbey of Passau, who to this day receive a tithe of the production. He told me the story of the ceremony, wondering who would be present for the next renewal, thirty years from now.

The '82 sits in our glasses. And suddenly, miraculously, it transforms itself, it finds the fruit and tenderness with which it was born, it seems to exhale in pure relief, free at last from the confines of glass, and the dark cellar. It sits in the glasses of a man and woman who love each other, and who watch in wonder as it rises from the dead.

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Introduction

It's fifteen years this year, since this quixotic little thing began. Back in 1994 the only thing anyone knew about Austrian wine was something to do with anti-freeze, or that maybe the wines were sort of like German wines—linked by umlauts, I like to say—and so why bother. Fifteen years is a decent chunk of time. When I was hanging around with Peter Schleimer on this trip I tried to remember what he looked like the morning we met, while I was scoping the scene for great growers. Peter's been my guy-on-the-ground in Austria since the beginning. He was freelancing for the Austrian Wine Marketing Board and they sent him to assist me when I was putting the portfolio together. I'd never met the guy, so I sat in the lobby of my hotel and watched a range of guys come in who could have been Peter, and hoped most of them weren't, because they looked like no fun at all. Then this weird lanky guy shows up with a nubby scraggle of beard and a wild-eyed look like an irritated terrapin and I'm thinking *can't possibly be him* and of course it was. To my unending relief and delight, that day and every day since.

Last year he and I and his two little guys had a fun day and evening on my final day, nothing special, just stuff that old friends do. It struck me this year that many of these friends have become "old" friends, and here's something you'll really envy me for if you also loved *The English Patient*: Heidi Schröck took me to meet the actual descendant of Count Almaszy, who lives in an atmospheric castle atop a big green hill with huge views over an airy hillscape, and a garden just scraggly enough to be sincere. This was the pinnacle of a day that started with me being served the largest *schnitzel* I have ever seen, a monster that not only covered the plate but was *folded three times over* and would have fed four adults and a whole Chuck-e-Cheese full of kids. It came with fries! Had I known the meeting with the Count was in my near future (Heidi was surprising me that day) I might have taken a more, shall we say, seemingly approach to the aforesaid *schnitzel*. Instead I said "No damn *schnitzel* is gonna smack me down; I'ma *finish* that thang." And so alas when the Count offered me some late-afternoon *Kuchen* I was too bilious to accept. But at least I remain in touch with my inner glutton.

Last year I got home to a message from a Washington Post writer who wanted to talk to me for a piece she was doing on Georgian wines. I seem to have become the go-to guy for quotes on swimming against the current and seeding the unknown. "How is it done?" I was asked. And I hemmed and hedged and tried to

cook up a quotable quote, but all that came out was *You just keep whacking your head against the wall until the wall starts to yield*. "Why would you do that?" she wanted to know. (Doesn't it, like, *hurt*?)

The answer is: *conviction*.

Because I am categorically certain there is no country on earth making *better* dry white wines than the best of these. Yet as much as we're selling – and we're selling a lot – I get the sense it hasn't really stuck yet. Yes we had our Moment in the late '90s when Austrian wine in general (and Grüner Veltliner in particular) was "trendy" among young sommeliers, and to an extent we were off and running. Then the shine wore off the trend and even younger somms went on to even more *recherché* wines, relegating Austria to the ranks of the merely modish. This is a crime against the cosmos.

One feels at-ease in Austria; the culture is more explicitly youthful, nearly everyone speaks English, and at this point the wine community has discernibly settled

in. After many years of experimentation and testing out, it has assumed its true form. Austria is established now. She is a Player. But what does she bring to the game? The Austrian wine scene is no longer mint, it doesn't have that new-car smell. It's settling in to what it actually is, showing its lines and creases, and what it will sustain.

Also changing is that restless spirit of envelope-pushing, and this is a very

good thing. It might be fun to gun the motor and watch the rpms climb but sooner or later you have to cruise and then you want the motor to hum, not yell. The community of Austrian vintners seems to be saying *We are no longer arriving; we are HERE*. It remains a youthful wine culture, and for every grower entering his thirties there's another 20-something coming along. All the Wachau "names" have grown-up sons working at their sides. A new wave of growers is invigorating the Weinviertel. In contrast to Germany, where many things still seem (charmingly, delightfully) *removed*, Austria feels more connected to the international wine-fraternity. You drive through a town that's like an architectural diamond of the 17th century and arrive at a 21st-century tasting room; you meet a man who can tell you jokes in English and who just came from a tasting of twenty-three vintages of Grange-Hermitage. But when you taste his wines, you taste something quite specific and seemingly eternal. It's a little dysphasic.

If German wine is mystic, Austrian wine is corporeal, even sexual. That is perhaps because Austrian wine is more than "merely" Riesling (her Rieslings are about as



celestially mystic as the variety can ever be), and it might also be that these are the most graceful high-alcohol wines on earth, hence you drink them *as if* they were medium-alcohol wines and pretty soon you get sorta dazed.

It's quite pleasing to see more worthy growers finding American importers. I'm happy to have help raising the tide. The market is healthy but interest is polarized, very strong on the coasts (and in urban restaurant-driven markets everywhere), and still skittish in the less, um, *alert* markets. You know, markets driven by passive retailers who wait for the "call" to create *itself* because they can't, or won't be bothered. So, to any stubborn holdouts, here's the skinny:

Here's what Austrian wines have to give, first commercially, second aesthetically:

- Competitive, snappy, vigorous dry whites at the low end of the market.
- The best values on earth for monumentally structured dry white wines.
- World-class dry Rieslings redolent of soil, unmanipulated, tasting entirely *at home*, and presenting flavors more curly, baroque and slavic than Alsatian wines.
- World-class Sauvignon Blancs along Loire lines, with even more mineral and a sweet-grassy fruit which never spills over into bubble-gum.
- The world's best Pinot Blancs; depth, complexity and age-worthiness without parallel elsewhere.
- Unique red grape varieties such as Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent, from which medium-weight, **food-friendly** wines are made, with rare and wonderful flavors.
- Grüner Veltliner! The last of the great European white-wine grapes. Unique. Adaptable. Food-loving, and delicious.

Here's what you have to get over in order to approach the wines:

- Your fear of the German language . . . *Keine angst!*
- Your presumption that the wines are similar to German wines. They are not. Loire, Alsace, Friuli are the closest cognates.
- The market's preference — abetted by lazy wine merchants and middlebrow journalists — for processed, manipulated, do-all-the-work-for-you wines over wines with uncompromisingly soil-imprinted flavors with which the drinker can *engage*.
- The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes it hard for a lowly Yank to get much of the stellar stuff. Some of you will never get to taste what this country can do. Go there and get down.

You don't have to be any kind of hot-shot wine "intellectual" to get at these wines, to sell them, to enjoy them yourself. You just have to be *curious*, you have to want to know what they're like. The complacent, on the other hand, prefer wines that sell themselves (or which are sold by the wine press) and see any new category with wariness. Customers rise to the level you set for



them. Your conviction creates their curiosity, and most of them will love these wines if **they're encouraged** to approach them. But if you don't care, or if you are opposed to anything that threatens to increase your workload, you'll tell me there's no "call" for the wines. And then of course there *won't* be. Duh.

Even more: I feel there's a sort of yearning among many of us for that which isn't vapid. People want to participate in constructive, enriching experience. Given the choice between a wine made in a factory, made by marketing nabobs and technocrats, with all manner of extraneous flavors *added* in the "production" process, or a wine made by a family who maintain an intimate connection to their land, and whose land *expresses itself* in the taste of the wine, which tastes *purely* of the land and the grape, many people will choose soul and the human touch over a sterile "product." Some of these drinkers are people my age, starting to feel their mortality, wanting richer experience in the time remaining to them—to us—and some of them are young drinkers who don't know "better." Whoever they are, they're out there, and they need what you can teach them, if you choose. Or you can wait till they find you, and be willing to be taught. Put your head in the sand and all you see is dirt.

Most Austrian white wine is dry. (Most Austrian sweet wine is very sweet, in the obvious-dessert-wine manner of Sauternes.) The operating principle is don't interfere with the wine, so in vintages when fermentations go all the way the wines are very dry. Other times a few slovenly grams of sugar remain. It's as it happens.

It needs to happen more often. A few years ago after



Weingut Prieler's Goldberg Vineyard.



Close-up of vine at Schloss Gobelsburg.

tasting through a bunch of samples from prospective newbies, and wondering if I was having a sad-palate day because so many Rieslings tasted so austere, imagine my surprise when two Trocken Rieslings from *Johannes LEITZ* just rang out with beauty and harmony and class. Many of the Germans are making their Trockens at the upward limit—9 g.l. residual sugar—and when it works (as it does in the hands of a master like Leitz) the wines have a shimmering dialectic that is simply *unavailable* in bone-dry versions.

I approve of a wine culture with an aversion to confectioning, but this is an early stage of maturing into a culture which knows when to be rigid and when to relax. But we're ahead of ourselves. Suffice it to say I have never tasted and cannot imagine an Austrian white wine that was diminished by a *small* amount of residual sugar, undetectable as sweetness, but discernable as deeper fruit, more thrilling flavor (and incidentally more flexible at the table). And they could do it if they *wanted* to; Süßreserve (a.k.a. *Dosage*) has been legal for years now, though I know of no one actually using it. They are very squeamish. I understand, since I'm squeamish too, but we're at different spots on the squeam-o-meter. Sure it's a slippery slope, and if you keep sliding down it you open the door to all kinds of manipulations. If! The fact is there's zero reason to



Hillside vines at Nigl.

assume this would happen. People need to trust themselves, and their palates.

After all, it stands to reason that if there are degrees of sweetness there are also degrees of dryness. I appreciate the dryness of Austrian wines, and I suspect it's how they show their best. The issues are two: 1) degree, and 2) flexibility. Most of our palates will not discern sweetness in a typical Austrian Riesling or Grüner Veltliner below 8-10 grams-per-liter, unless we've just tasted thirty wines with zero, in which case we'll notice more *fruit* in the "sweeter" wine and wonder why. A dash of salt in your soup isn't to make it taste salty; it is to awaken flavors, to make it taste more like *itself*. A similar dash of sweetness in a wine both enhances flavor, extends fruit, provides another voice to the dialogue of nuances, reduces alcohol, and in many cases makes for a more elegant finish. To reject such things in order to be "pure" seems puritan to me.

Of course these are matters of taste, or they ought to be, yet often I suspect there are several too many shoulds and gottas going on before the fact. Peter Schleimer is one of the few who comes by his conviction honestly; he simply prefers his Austrian wines dry. But for each guy like Peter there are dozens of people who cling to the *Idea* that sugar is evil, sugar is pabulum, sugar is how bad wines are disguised; therefore sugar is to be avoided on principle *unless it can't be*, in which case you invoke the even more prevalent principle that wines shouldn't be manipulated. In other words, sugar's OK but only when you can't help it. Well, sigh. This is the kind of thing seductive to wine writers but somewhere oblique to the truth.

We sold a ton of Heidi Schröck's 2004s. People loved them. Not a single person found them sweet. No one objected to them on any level. The Austrians liked them too, from all accounts. Most of them were technically off-dry (at around 11g.l. residual sugar), which had the usual benefits: extending the fruit, reducing alcohol, adding fragrance, adding nuance, adding charm, making them more flexible at the table. It seems to me these things are more important than to insist on some Platonic form of "purity."

Each time I raised these issues with growers, I saw them trying to hide their dismay behind a veil of politeness. Some were willing to agree that *Rieslings* could indeed benefit from a mini-dollop of sweetness, but not Grüner Veltliner. That should always be dry; it tastes better that way. I'm suspicious of uniform opinions, but O.K., the world can probably do without GrüVes carrying little bits of sweetness. Or? The next-to-last GV grower at whom I tasted was Hofer, and he's really a non-interventionist, being organic and all. And one of his GrüVes had a few grams of RS—and tasted absolutely wonderful. I think a couple questions are at play here. To one's own taste one should always be faithful. If you truly hate sweetness then you shouldn't consume it. For the rest of

us—the 99.8% rest of us—perhaps a little flexibility is in order. The other question has to do with pleasure. We like to repeat the bromide about wine being a “beverage of pleasure” but we don’t always mean it. We’re very busy obsessing and scoring and having little fun that I can see.

I just read a bunch of tasting notes on ‘05s in an Austrian wine magazine and noted one writer’s use of the term *Trinkspass*, which loosely translates into “joy-of-drinking,” and this was a first. Till recently everyone wrote of the usual things, power-intensity-mass-density-etc, but very few ever asked whether, at some point, wine could also be, a joy to drink. When I finished the work one year, I took myself to the mountains for a couple days to clear my head. Jamek had given me a bottle of Muskateller he saw I adored, and one evening I sat on my little balcony admiring the Alpenglow stealing over the peaks and the fog forming in the valley and even though I had a glass I drank that Muscat straight from the bottle, and every swallow told me, not that the wine had -X-number of “points” or that I was a hotshot because of all the adjectives I could drudge up, but simply that *life was good*, and we humans are meant to be happy.

Austrian wine is making me happier all the time. It is palpably in the process of learning its identity. Please note how I said that. Not “creating” its identity, but rather knowing and understanding the identity *inherently there*. An apogee of experimentalism was reached in the late ‘90s, when white wines were tickling 15-16% alcohol and red wines (from many fashionable international varieties) were struggling to attain ever-more malevolent degrees of color and tannin and oakiness. This hasn’t disappeared entirely — Erich Sattler told me his customers still expected saturated almost black color from his wines (in response to my complimenting him on the clarity and elegance of color in his ‘04s!) — but commentators have noticed the growing number of wines embodying the idea that the “how” of taste is far more important than the “how much.”

You know what I mean! When we’re starting out we often ask “How *much* flavor does this have; that way I’ll know how much I like it (or how many *points* I’m supposed to give it),” but as we gain more experience we start asking “How beautiful does this taste, how fine, how haunting?” And when we finally learn to relax with wine we barely think abstractly about it at all; we just know when our bodies and senses transmit the joy-signal.

And just maybe we quit the useless quest for “perfection” and all the blind alleys down which it takes us. When you make love to another human being, you bring your fallibilities and flaws to hers (or his). Maybe you feel fat, or achy, or preoccupied, or maybe you feel wonderful, but the point is *you can’t predict how you’ll feel*, and you damn sure can’t predict how she’ll feel, but in this collision of imperfections something valid occurs. Alternately you could watch a porn DVD: it’s always per-

fect there, and you can rewind and watch your favorite parts over and over, but you are ineluctably *separate* from the images on the screen. No, it isn’t perfection we need to look for; it is imperfection, because the assumption of imperfection is the precondition for the miracle.

The 2007 Vintage

To cut to the chase: I love 2007. I love it as much as I love 2006, but for very different reasons. This is frustrating to me personally as I’m running out of space to store wine, and I bought lots of ‘06s and figured I’d take a bye on the new vintage. No can do, damn it.

After the giddy heights of 2006 I was prepared for a kind of return to the base-line with the 2007s. I hadn’t heard much about them. The harvest had been difficult. When a vintage is sexy the buzz starts before it finishes fermenting. Not this time.

Put it this way: in 2006 everything was outsized, so that you got a 2-class upgrade on the low-end wines (which had never been so rich), and the top wines were



Harvest at Nikolaihof.

mostly monumental, though at times they boiled over the rim of the pot. In 2007 the wines have their right proportions. The everyday wines are excellent in an everyday-wine way. The top wines, though, are shimmering and sublime, and as a community I predict they’ll give at LEAST as much pleasure as the ‘06s will.

Normally German and Austrian vintages diverge. They’re far apart geographically and macro-climactically. But 2007 is intriguingly similar in both countries; the disparate wines show related virtues. The point of divergence was harvest weather. Germany had a sunny and easy time of it; Austria had intermittent rain and a hard time of it. Both places had very early bud-break, and the vegetation cycle was as early in Austria as in Germany, which means freaky-long hang-times. As the Austrian harvest was continually pushed back by the weather, we saw a large number of wines made from grapes which set in May and were picked in November. Thus the top wines—the latest to be picked—were sleeker in body but positively riven with complexity, especial-



ly extract-driven complexity.

The marker for 2007 white wines is a palpable sense of mineral in a pulverized form, as if the very rocks were crushed. Kevin Pike called this effect “diamond dust,” which was apropos. It was in wine after wine. I hardly recall such an insistent articulation of extract, or mineral or whatever word you prefer to use. (The question is, what becomes of it? I start to wonder whether this isn’t an evanescent component, and if so, what replaces it?) The ‘07s are glowing with fruit, but it became impossible to isolate fruit from the omnipresent extract. The recent vintage which ‘07 most resembles is 2002, though with less prominent acidity and more risible mineral. Willi Bründlmayer feels his Veltliners are equal to the great 1997, and better than any vintage since. Them’s strong words.

Again as in Germany, the textural wonder of Austrian ‘07s is a strong creaminess that isn’t at all fat, but rather sleek and satiny. These rock-powder extracts are the last thing you expect to encounter in wines of such caressing texture. The whole vintage sits on a sweet dialectic; each of its wines is in essence improbable. Tasting them was hard work in the nicest possible way. You couldn’t rush through anything, and each wine threw its flavors around like a juggler. You couldn’t even say “There goes another one,” because in many cases you’d never seen such rapturous terroir expression in a wine with such manic nuance. Tasting notes were full of “yet” and “but” as I kept noticing these delicious paradoxes.

Speaking of terroir, whereas 2006 was a vintage in which everything partook of the noble, 2007 is a year where great land tells. The Grand Crus show their Grand-Cru-ness, and there is no mistaking them.

I’d say it’s an excellent vintage for Grüner Veltliner but arguably a superb or even great one for Riesling. Of the fourteen growers in this offering who offer both varieties, only Bründlmayer’s GrüVes exceeded his Rieslings. This may have to do with Riesling’s ability to better withstand rain late in the season. The defining days of the harvest were three very rainy ones in mid-October, which caused a degree of dismay among the growers the wines do not themselves reflect. They taste great. An

earlier rainfall at the beginning of September was in fact welcomed after a dry summer, but dodging the drops became a theme of the harvest chatter. One grower, who I think is actually on to something, said he thought the October rains benefited the wines, which might otherwise have become too baroque.

Put it this way: whereas the top wines of normal years are often exceptionally fine, the top wines of top years are sometimes just over the top.

All vintages have a shadow-side. Some grapes were hurriedly brought in when the mid-October rainstorm was imminent, and at times the wines can seem small. The reds are occasionally diffident, and certainly not as warm and roasty as they were in ‘06, but again the best of them are maybe even better than the sometimes galumphing 2006s. Overall botrytis was rare, but when it appeared at all it was blatant, against such a glassy-clear backdrop. The few failed ‘07s were charmless and mingy. But the many successes were so gorgeous I’m investigating the air-rights above my home to see if I can add-on a sky-cellar. I cannot imagine a future without them.

WINERY OF THE VINTAGE

Hands down: HIRSCH. I mean, yikes Mikes, I have never tasted Rieslings like these in Austria, or anywhere. Every single wine, even the teensiest little Veltliner #1 is in some sort of beatified glow of ecstatic complexity, mineral density and divine fruit.

COLLECTION OF THE OFFERING

Because it consists of 2007 and also of late-released 2006s, this prize goes—again HANDS DOWN—to NIKOLAIHOF. I admit they’ve sometimes been uneven. I know their subtlety can nonplus the drinker who’s not used to wines of inference. But none of these things apply here: *this is simply an astonishingly expressive and fabulous group of wines* that you will love and understand even if you’re not Meister Eckhart or a member of his family.

GRÜVE OF THE VINTAGE

Here’s a big surprise, as if: *Schloss Gobelsburg’s* RIED LAMM. Sigh, again. C’m on Michi, break it up a little, give someone else a chance. Actually, the runner-up is a remarkable best-ever KÄFERBERG from *Bründlmayer*.

RIESLING OF THE VINTAGE

Hirsch! Um, O.K., but which one? *Doesn’t matter.*



Gaisberg, Heiligenstein, even the kid-brother Zöbing, all are the best they've ever been and the best Austrian Riesling could be. The two Grand Crus are wines of a lifetime; you will never forget them.

VALUE(S) OF THE VINTAGE

Berger Grüner Veltliner Liters!

Hirsch Veltliner #1

Schloss Gobelsburg Grüner Veltliner Renner

THE WINES YOU'D MOST LIKELY OVERLOOK AND SHOULDN'T

Every one of the *Muscats*!

Ecker Roter Veltliner (best wine I've ever tasted from this variety)

Nikolaihof 2002 Riesling "Jungfernelese" Burggarten

THE WINE OF THE OFFERING

Nikolaihof 2007 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel, for its otherworldly expressiveness, serenity and beauty.

And What Of 2006?

There is no question the vintage is grand, and very little question the vintage is great, or will be. That said, I myself comprise some of that very little question, because in the stream of so much certainty, I find I must demur. First of all, there are many, many supernal wines among these 2006s, and as we've already said, the overall quality was pushed up such that even the little wines had stature.

2006's most vocal proponents like to say two things: One, the vintage as a whole carries its high alcohol in balance, and two, it is not compromised by botrytis. Both things are true, but only one will remain true. Botrytis will never come. But balance, I think, might leave. It's easy to suppose a wine manages high alcohol when it's still infantile and chubby, but what happens when the fat melts away? I think some of these wines will then seem stark and heady. And those are the wines that *seem balanced now*; there are others that were awkward and even grotesque to begin with.

You will feel differently if you tolerate high alcohol better than I do. I find I don't very well any more, and



The entire production at Weingut Hirsch is bottled in screwcaps.

I'm drawing my (admittedly arbitrary) line at 14%. It's gotta be drawn somewhere, and 14% is the point at which the odds of my deriving pleasure from a wine fall dramatically. A few somms who know me probably want to spit in my soup, because they bring me bottles of über-cool wines and I send them back unopened. My senses dislike them, my food dislikes them, and my whole somatic system is depressed by them. So bear in mind, this is the frame of reference for my suspicions about some of the ostensibly "great" 2006s.

Cork

I'm happy to report cork is almost a non-issue these days in Austria, as the majority of people with whom I work have moved over to screwcaps with a celerity that should give their German brethren a kick in the pants. Everyone spoke of adjusting SO₂ levels and otherwise monitoring the wines for any signs of distortion in the new regime. But it was such a relief to stop worrying. In January 2009 they'll forbid smoking in restaurants and then Austria will be the perfect-est place in the world.

First Among Equals

Once again I will highlight special favorites by use of one, two and three pluses (+, ++, +++). Call it my subjective short-list. It has to do with a quality of being stunned by a wine, and it can happen with "small" wines or big ones; it has to do with quality of flavor as much as with rendering of flavor.

One plus means something like one Michelin star. Pay particular attention to this wine. Try not to miss it.

Two pluses is like two Michelin stars, getting close to as-good-as-it-gets now, no home should be without it. It's indispensable.

Three pluses almost never appear, because these are the wines that go where you simply cannot imagine anything better. Like three Michelin stars. There are rarely more than a wine or two per year that reach this level, 'cause your intrepid taster has to be virtually flattened with ecstasy.

Here's a baseball metaphor. Any wine in this offering gets a base-hit on a line drive. A one-plus wine does so with runners on base, who are driven in. A two-plus wine is a base-clearing double in the gap that misses being a dinger by inches. A three-plus wine is a 7th-game-of-the-world-series walk-off grand slam home run.

There is sentiment to the effect that using any form of highlighting is invidious, since it damns the wines without plusses as also-rans. Obviously that's not the case, but I agree there's a danger whenever one establishes a hierarchy based on scores, even in such a primitive system as mine. But there's also a pragmatic consideration at play; you can't buy every wine in this offering, and my plusses try to answer the implied question *What should I not miss no matter what?* And of course you'll still pore through the prose for my many jokes and puns, and the Masonic messages I've cannily embedded within it.

GRAPE VARIETIES

Grüner Veltliner

Lately I've heard whisperings of a Grüner Veltliner backlash of sorts, as the young sommelieres who first brought it to prominence are moving onto even more recherche items. The novelty's worn off, perhaps, and we have to scratch new itches of hippitude with albino Petite Sirah from Guam or whatever. Gotta maintain that *edge*.

OK, I'm cool with it; live by the fad, die by the fad and all that, but *if* (and it's a big if) this is true then shame on someone. Because however "trendy" GrüVe may have been, its greatest value is it isn't merely trendy, but rather has a permanent place in the pantheon of important grapes, and a prominent place among food's best friends. Among the many wonderful things Grüner Veltliner is, it is above all THE wine that will partner all the foods you thought you'd *never* find a wine for.

One wishes to be indulgent of the caprices of attention in our ephemeral world. But at some point the last two weeks, tasting yet another absolutely supernal GrüVe, my blood commenced to simmerin'. Where dry white wine is concerned this variety should have pride of place on wine lists. There is simply NO other variety more flexible and none offering better value especially at the high end.

Take any other dry white. Sauvignon Blanc? Lovely, to be sure, but anything SB can do GrüVe can do better. Viognier? Don't make me laugh. Chardonnay? Sure you gotta have it but can you think of a single *particular* dish with which Chardonnay is really the best possible choice? If you can, I swear to you I have a GrüVe – probably *ten* GrüVes – that will partner it better and cost you less. But let's ratchet things up a bit, shall we? *Riesling*? In fact I feel GrüVe is considerably more flexible at table than dry Riesling is, and I can't think of many instances when dry Riesling would be a *better* choice than GrüVe. I love dry Riesling; I drink it because I love it and I resist geeking out over the "perfect" match. But I am constantly running out of GrüVe at home because I'm constantly *reaching for it*, it goes so easily with so many things.

Obviously you're not going to slash away at all your Chards and Sauv-Blancs and all the other easily saleable wines. But if you are who you claim you are, then you have to resist consigning this remarkable variety to the scrap heap of the previously fashionable. In fact you should increase the presence of GrüVe on your lists, and when someone demands to know "What's with the umlauts?" you can bask in the knowledge you're about to RAWK his very world.

Grüner Veltliner is Austria's most populous variety, about a third of all vineyard land. In Italian it would be VALTELLINA VERDE and we'd all sell the *cojones* out of it, but I tried to get Austria to adopt Italian as their official language and they just looked at me funny.

Think for a second of Chardonnay. It makes everything from tingly little Petit Chablis to great whumping Montrachet and nobody kvetches they can't "get a handle" on Chardonnay. GrüVe does the same thing; it can be as sleek as a mink or as big as Babe the Blue Ox and it works in a whole slew of ways. You can hardly imagine a snappier little thirst-quencher to drink outside (or "alfresco" in Italian) and you can hardly ever find a more *grand* (or "grande" in Italian) dry white for those big-wine occasions.

Start with this: if Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc had a baby, it would be Grüner Veltliner. Think of all the things you associate with those two grapes, exotics, flowers, grasses, flint, melon, veggies and . . . read on.

I stress again: *Grüner Veltliner is THE ANSWER to all the foods that supposedly are wine-killers*. Artichokes, shrimp, avocado, every manner of obstreperous veggie, the Veltliner loves 'em. Need a white wine for a wild-mushroom sautee? Step right up. Want a wine for a really **peppery** salad, lots of mizuna, tatsoi, arugula ("arugula" in Italian), I have it for you.

Frankly, if you like it at all, it'll end up in your life in a big way. I guarantee you, within three years of discovering GrüVe you'll be grabbing for it so often you'll say to your drinking companion "*What did we used to drink before we knew about this stuff?*"

Tasting terms: like Chardonnay, Grüner Veltliner has many faces. Unlike Chardonnay, they never need make-up! I needed a whole new vocabulary for this variety, as no amount of rustling down every corridor of my rococo winespeak turned up any precedent for this critter's flavors. So, to start with, there's the "**flowering fields**": by this I mean the dispersed sweetness of warm meadows, not perfumey, with a feral, almost stinky undertone, but earthy and sexual and subtly musky. One of Austria's leading wine writers uses "meadow-flowers" in his notes, so this isn't just a little Terry-peyote thing. "**Hedge-flowers**" is similar, but more specifically floral; oleander is a clear example. Mimosa is another. These flowers are less sweet-smelling than, say, roses or violets; more polleny or roasty. **Smells and flavors of green vegetables** are common. Lentils, green beans, pea-pods or even pureed peas themselves. The metaphorical extension of this are words like "mossy" or "heathery" and I have been known to say "vetiver" when the whole thing blazes into great beauty. **Smells and flavors of sharp greens:** again, common. Mustard-greens like tatsoi, mizuna and arugula have resonant echoes of flavor in GrüVe. Sometimes it smells like boxwood, or in more discreet examples, like watercress. Green things. **Fruit smells:** most common are strawberry and rhubarb, followed by undefined citrusy notes. These are simple literal associations. **Mineral notes:** I use "ore" to describe a sense of minerality so dense it feels *compact-ed*, ferrous. Sometimes the spicy-green aspect combines with mineral to create **peppery** flavors, sharp like white pepper.

Finally, Grüner Veltliner at its mightiest can mimic white Burgundy in its capaciousness, power and viscosity.

Some years ago in a blind tasting whose judges were predominantly non-Austrians and whose wines were either Veltliners or white Burgundies, the TOP wine and three of the top FIVE were Grüner Veltliners, beating up on blue-chip Grand Cru Burgundies costing six times as much. These results have been bracingly consistent regardless of venue and regardless of who makes up the



panel and who chooses the wines. The most recent tasting was held in London; Jancis Robinson selected the Chardonnays and the tasters were overwhelmingly non-Austrians. **Same result.** The preponderant favorites and always the very top wines were Grüner Veltliners—interestingly quite regularly *Willi Bründlmayer's* Grüner Veltliner.

Aging Grüner Veltliner: you gotta be patient! I know of no variety other than Chenin Blanc (in the Loire, of course) which takes longer to taste *old*. All things being equal, Veltliner lasts longer than Riesling, and it never goes petrolly. What it can do is to take on a dried-mushroom character that becomes almost meaty. Mature GrüVe has been a revelation to every taster I've seen. It's a perfect choice for a rich fatty meat course when you prefer to use white wine. Don't think you have to drink them young—though if you catch one at any age short of ten years you are drinking it young. Think of young GrüVe like fresh oyster mushrooms, and grownup GrüVe like dried shiitakes.

Grüner Veltliner is a damn-near great grape variety. Often while tasting it I wonder how dry white wine can be any better, and then the Rieslings start appearing (you taste Veltliner first in Austria) and you see they have just a *little* more dynamism and even finer flavors. Thus the Veltliner is always priced around 10% below Riesling, which is correct. **THE BEST GRÜNER VELTLINERS ARE THE BEST VALUES IN THE WORLD FOR GREAT WHITE WINE.** I mean big **dry** white wine. And Grüner Veltliner is unique and incomparable. It adds to what we can know about wine.

Riesling

Riesling makes virtually every one of Austria's greatest dry white wines, which is to say many of the *world's* greatest dry whites. GrüVe comes close, but Riesling always stretches just that little bit higher. That's because Riesling is the best wine grape in the world, of either color. And because Riesling enjoys life in Austria.

Ah, but the market for dry Riesling is "limited" to a few cerebral wine dweebs and their nerdy friends, right? "We do Alsace," you point out; "How many dry Rieslings do I need?" I have your answer! *About ten more than you currently have, and for which you can easily make room by eliminating these ten redundant Chardonnays.*

Great Austrian Riesling is unique. Austrian growers won't plant it where it doesn't thrive. It's almost always grown in primary rock, a volcanic (metamorphic/igneous) derivative you rarely see in similar form or concentration elsewhere in Europe. These soils contain schist (fractured granite) shinola (just checking you're actually paying attention), mica, silica, even weathered basalt and sandstone. Riesling's usually grown on terraces or other high ground.

It's about the **size** of Alsace wine, but with a flower all its own. And there's no minerality on the same **planet** as these wines. And there's sometimes such a complexity of tropical fruits you'd think you'd accidentally mixed

Lingenfelder with Boxler in your glass.

I noticed immediately that Riesling was at *home* here. You can tell by how it tastes, a certain serenity that allows it to *broadcast* with perfect clarity and conviction. Every great grape variety is particular about where it's planted, and will not make interesting wine anywhere else. Nebbiolo, Chenin Blanc, Tempranillo, that crowd. Riesling!

Gelber Muskateller

Only in Austria (and Germany) are they required to distinguish between this, a.k.a. *Muscat a Petit Grains* or *Muscat Lunel* and its less refined but more perfumey cousin the Muscat Ottonel. Most Alsace "Muscat" blends the two, and usually Ottonel dominates.

"Yellow" Muscat has become sehr trendy in Austria, much to my delight, because I dote on this variety. It ripens late and holds onto brisk acidity; it isn't easy to grow, but oh the results it gives! In good hands the wines are something like the keenest mountain-stream Riesling you ever had from a glass stuffed with orange blossoms.

I love Muscat, and I realize that love is subjective and irreducible and that you might not love it as I do, or maybe not at all. I won't *understand* you, but there it is. But even knowing my slobbering little Terry-luv of Muscat is just me being me, I think there's a claim to stake for this variety.

Muscat can restore us to an almost primordial innocence of the senses. I was watching a young father wheeling his little boy in a stroller. He picked a dandelion and handed it to his son, who was just transfixed, who grinned and beamed at the common little flower, his entire being numinous with pure delight. It doesn't take a great thinker to observe we lose this capacity as we grow up, just as it doesn't require a remarkable soul to miss it. But we don't have to just surrender it with a knowing sigh. Muscat can bring it back.

When I drink good Muscat it is always one of those almost pre-cognitive moments of recovering an embedded and inaccessible memory of just how *wonderful* a

AHS-097 2007 Muscat, Heidi Schrock
ABG-093 2007 Gelber Muskateller, E & M Berger
AFN-144 2007 Gelber Muskateller, Nigl
ABY-190 2006 Gelber Muskateller Auslese, Bründlmayer
ABY-205 2007 Gelber Muskateller, Bründlmayer
AEC-011 2007 Gelber Muskateller, Ecker
ASB-011 2007 Gelber Muskateller, Schwarzbock

thing can taste. It's almost inhuman. It's the needful gulps of sweet cold water when you're really thirsty. It's going into the butterfly house and suddenly all these colorful little guys are flittering around and you're dumbstruck by how almost comically gorgeous nature can be. It is a limbic transmission of pure delight we barely get from wine any more – from *life* any more.

I'm offering every single one I could get my greedy hands on. Here's what I have. Unscrew that cap, splash the greeny gurgle of wine into the nearest glass; sniff and salivate – drink and *be HAPPY*.

Pinot Blanc

a.k.a. WEISSBURGUNDER. Austria makes the best wines I have ever tasted from this variety. Nuttier and tighter-wound than in Alsace, which may be due to the Auxerrois that the Alsatiens are permitted to use in their "Pinot Blanc" wines. At the mid-range in Austria the wines consistently surprised me by their stylishness, fine nuttiness and many facets. At their best they were just utterly golden; brilliant, complex, delicious. You oughta buy more.

RED VARIETIES

As most of you know I am predominantly a white-wine merchant, and because of that, I'm reasonably serene about my good judgment selecting them. I'm drinking them all the time, and know my shinola. But where wines of the rouge stripe are concerned, I'm just a talented amateur.

Thus as Austrian reds become more important to my business, I thought I'd do a little self-exam just to ensure my hippitude. So I assembled me a few cases of old-world reds, specifically chosen to be fruit-driven medium-weight, and under \$25 retail. There were Italian wines and Spanish wines and French wines, and last winter was cold and austere and I couldn't wait to slop those bad boys down. I'd have been pleased to be merely competitive with my Austrian reds. I expected nothing more. I was absolutely shocked with what I found.

Dollar for Dollar, Austrian red wines were markedly superior to everything else I tasted. So many of those other wines were over-alcoholic, prune-y, weedy, rustic, palling and just not very pleasant to drink. Who knew? Not me.

Emboldened by my discovery, I had samples assembled from a bunch of red-wine growers in Austria, thinking I'd find bunches of great wines with which to expand and deepen my portfolio.

As if. Most of what I tasted ranged from mediocre to downright objectionable. When I stopped being bummed, I realized I had a lot to be happy about; my red-wine guys were already the hippest of the hip, and all I had to do was quit apologizing for them, quit the self deprecation, the "Hey I know y'all know much more about red wine than I do, but these are actually not too disgusting if you'll just taste them please" thing.

Now of course, between the two poles the truth crouches somewhere. And I'll try to delineate it here, in my Solomonic fashion. Austrian red wine is to be taken seriously, that much is beyond dispute. Yet for every truly elegant grown-up wine there are many others that are silly, show-offy, insipid, even flawed. Trust me, we're spitting those out and driving hastily away. What I am selecting are just what I like best, medium-weight, fruit-driven wines with poise, grace and elegance but also with length and density. Neither I nor my growers are into shock-and-awe wines; we all know how facile it is to make those inky dull creatures. Even the biggest wines from my producers—what I call their super-Tuscans—never let the flavor-needle lurch into the red.

A few Austrian reds can stand with the great wines of the world; not the greatest, but certainly the great. But for each of these few, there are many others who reach but do not grasp, who affect the superficial attributes of the wines they model themselves on, without grasping

the soul of such wines. Still one applauds them for trying, and it's all very new, and they're learning-by-doing. What is truly heartening is Austria's frequent success at the stratum just below the great — the very good, the useful, the satisfying and delightful.

Indeed it is gratifying to note a growing appreciation within Austria for reds with attributes of grace instead of mere brute power. Anyone can make such wines if you grow grapes in a hot enough climate, and they all have a pall about them, something withering and obtuse. Yet this singularly prevalent idiom is becoming less attractive to many Austrian

vintners, who seem to have discovered what makes their wines unique and desirable, and who've set about to nurture it. Good for them! One symptom of this growing enlightenment appears among the Sattler offering. Erich is gradually discontinuing his "super-Tuscan" wine (which he called *Cronos*) and using that fruit for single-varietal bottlings of stellar-class Zweigelt and St. Laurent. I'd like to see others follow suit.

About twenty years ago, when Austria was still deciding whether it wanted to be Bordeaux, Burgundy or Tuscany, the growers planted the usual suspects, and you'll still find them here and there: Pinot Noir, Cabernet, Merlot, plus someone has Zinfandel planted somewhere. One really fine thing that's happening now is a general retreat away from Cabernet. "We have the climate to ripen it but our subsoils are too cold," one grower told me. Thus our ubiquitous friend gives rampant veggies except in the steamiest vintages. "But hey," the same grower continued; "we tried it, it didn't take, recess over, back to work!" There's a discernable and laudable return to the several indigenous varieties, of which there are three types to interest us, each unusual, and each offering something we cannot find elsewhere.

The first of these is **SANKT LAURENT**. This is a très hip grape, folks. It's Pinot Noir-ish with a "sauvage" touch, and it can do nearly all the things fine Pinot Noir does, but with added bottom notes of sagey wildness. More growers would plant it, but the vine itself is prone to mutation and it can rarely be left in the ground for more than twenty years or so. It won't flower unless the weather's perfect. It produces a tight cluster of thin-skinned berries, and is thus subject to rot if conditions aren't ideal. "You have to be a little crazy to grow this grape," said one grower. Yet such vines become litmus tests for a vintner's temperament; like Rieslaner, when you see it you know, ipso facto, you're dealing with the right kind of lunatic.

And all kinds of growers are stepping up to the challenge; St. Laurent has become the trendy grape, and I gotta tell ya, I absolutely love it. If you love good Burgundy but can't afford to *drink* good Burgundy, this variety will satisfy you all kinds of ways.

The other of the hip red varieties is called



Blaufränkisch grapes

ABG-094 2006 Blauer Zweigelt Haid, E & M Berger
 ABG-095 2006 Blauer Zweigelt Leithen, E & M Berger
 ABG-088L 2007 Blauer Zweigelt, E & M Berger
 ABY-163 2004 Cecile (Pinot Noir), Brundlmayer
 ABY-204 2003 St. Laurent Ried Ladner, Brundlmayer
 AEC-015 2006 Zweigelt 'Brilliant', Ecker
 AEC-016 2006 Zweigelt 'Tradition', Ecker
 AEC-018L 2006 Zweigelt, Ecker
 AEP-056 2005 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, Prieler
 AEP-048 2006 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshohe, Prieler
 AEP-055 2006 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, Prieler
 AEP-051 2006 Pinot Noir, Prieler
 AEP-047 2005 Schutzner Stein, Prieler
 AEP-054 2006 Schutzner Stein, Prieler
 AFN-146 2006 Blauer Zweigelt, Nigl
 AGL-112 2006 Blaufränkisch 'Reserve', Glatzer
 AGL-111 2006 Blaufränkisch, Glatzer
 AGL-113 2006 Pinot Noir, Glatzer
 AGL-114 2006 St. Laurent Altenberg, Glatzer
 AGL-123 2007 St. Laurent Altenberg, Glatzer
 AGL-122 2007 St. Laurent, Glatzer
 AGL-121 2007 Zweigelt 'Dornenvogel', Glatzer
 AGL-108 2006 Zweigelt 'Riedencuvee', Glatzer
 AGL-120 2007 Zweigelt 'Riedencuvee', Glatzer
 AGL-109 2006 Zweigelt 'Rubin Carnuntum', Glatzer
 AGL-117 2005 Gotinsprun, Glatzer
 AHF-026 2005 Zweigelt "Vom Kleinen Eichenfass", Hofer
 AJJ-077 2006 Zweigelt Mittelbergen, Jamek
 APL-064 2006 Blaufränkisch Durrau, Paul Lehrner
 APL-053 2006 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger, Paul Lehrner
 APL-061 2007 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger, Paul Lehrner
 APL-059 2006 Blaufränkisch 'Steineiche', Paul Lehrner
 APL-054 2005 St. Laurent, Paul Lehrner
 APL-052 2006 Claus, Paul Lehrner
 APL-060 2007 Claus, Paul Lehrner
 APL-063 2006 'Cuvée Paulus', Paul Lehrner
 ASB-008 2005 Zweigelt Pocken, Schwarzbock
 AST-018 2006 St. Laurent "Reserve", Sattler
 AST-022 2006 St. Laurent 'Brother My Cup Is Empty', Sattler
 AST-013 2006 St. Laurent, Sattler
 AST-020 2007 St. Laurent, Sattler
 AST-019 2006 Zweigelt "Reserve", Sattler
 AST-023 2006 Zweigelt 'Where The Wild Roses Grow', Sattler
 AST-015 2006 Zweigelt, Sattler
 AST-021 2007 Zweigelt, Sattler
 ASZ-028 2007 Zweigelt, Setzer
 AZZ-118 2006 Zweigelt "Gobelsburger", Gobelsburg
 AZZ-127 2005 'Cuvée Bertrand', Gobelsburg

ZWEIFELT. The last word in red wine! Rolls right off the tongue, eh? Well it rolls right off *my* tongue and down my happy throat, because at its best this is oh-so-drinkable. It's best cropped close, and ordinary Zweigelt can show more size than depth, seeming big but hollow. But even then, it smells great. It always smells great! It's a cross of St. Laurent with Blaufränkisch and its most overt fruit note is sweet cherry, but there's more to the best wines. Imagine if you could somehow skim the top notes off of really ripe Syrah, so that you had the deeply juicy fruit and could leave the animal-herbal aspects behind. That might be Zweigelt.

Finally there's the **BLAUFRÄNKISCH**, a variety I like more each year. It's of the cabernet type, a little bricky and capsule-y, and when it's unripe it's slightly vegetal. But lately I've seen much better stuff from this grape. In fact I think the quality-spread is widest here. Most of Austria's greatest red wines are made entirely or mostly from Blaufränkisch, yet weak Blaufränkisch is less pleasing than weak Zweigelt. (I've yet to taste a truly crummy St. Laurent.) I'd still put it in the Malbec-y school (whereas the Zweigelt is Syrah-y and the Sankt Laurent is Pinot-y). Zweigelt is for spaghetti, Sankt Laurent is for duck or squab, and Blaufränkisch is for lamb chops. A perfect three-course meal!

Burgenland is Austria's leading red-wine region; all of the stars are there. In my portfolio Prieler and Lehrner take their place among the elite, while Sattler makes his way into the kindly group below. But I'm heartened by the changes in Austria's reds outside her red-wine regions. When I began most of my growers offered one or two pretty anemic reds, but these have become quite lovely and sometimes even quite serious. When you think of estates like Gobelsburg or Berger you're probably thinking *white* and would rather give your Austrian-red business to growers who stake a claim on them. I understand; I might do the same. But – I'm left with the wines, and the wines are wonderful.

Below the echelon in which red wine is Earnestly Great, I need it to be delicious. It bores me when it affects the attributes of "greatness" (which usually means overextraction, overoaking and too much alcohol) and does not deliver. Just because you wear a muscle shirt don't mean you got muscles. I am a great lover of tasty reds, which usually fall at or below 13% alc and which just seem to *drain* out of the bottle, you drink them so fast. For me, a red wine is truly great when it gladdens the senses and flatters the food. That's the baseline. You can add mystery and complexity and atmosphere, you can add length, power and concentration, but you reach a point where an excess of pleasure becomes a kind of soreness. I ordered a bottle of Allegrini's big-boy, and couldn't finish it. Could barely start it. The Palazzo Della Toro is all the wine I require; that I could drink for days.

Austrian Wine Laws

No great detail here, as this stuff bores me as much as it does you. The headline is, this is the toughest and most enlightened (or least *unenlightened*) wine law in the world, as it had to be in the slipstream of the glycol matter.

There's a discernable trend away from the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. Most growers don't seem to care whether it's a Kabinett or a Qualitätswein or whatever; they think in terms of regular and reserve, or they have an internal vineyard hierarchy. So I follow their lead. I am possibly a bit *too* casual about it all. But I don't care either. The dry wines are all below 9 grams per liter of residual sugar, so you can tell how ripe the wine is by its alcohol. If there's a vineyard-wine it's because the site gives special flavors. And old-vines cuvées are très chic.

Austrian labels have to indicate the wine's residual sugar. They're actually a bit off-the-deep-end on this issue. There's a grower in my portfolio almost all of whose wines have a little RS. This is deliberate. The wines are fabulous-

ly successful, and nobody finds them “sweet.” But another wise sage voiced a note of caution. Other growers (said the voice) notice this man’s success, and they imitate his style so they too can be successful. But they do a facile imitation of the most *superficial* aspect of the style, i.e. the few grams of residual sugar, and the next thing you know our Austrian wines are once again headed in the wrong direction. Don’t get me wrong (he continued), I like the wines; they’re not my style but they’re good wines. But everyone doesn’t have this man’s talent. And so in a sense his wines are dangerous. Such are the terms of the debate!

Here’s my take on it. To focus on a vision of absolute purity as an Ideal will create unintended mischief. Will do and *has* done. Every grower’s goal should be to produce the most delicious, harmonious and characterful wine he can. If that means zero sugar some years, 3 grams in others and 6 grams in others then that’s what it means. “Oh but then we’d have to manipulate the wine,” they retort. But this is fatuous. Winemaking is *ipso facto* manipulation. We are talking about degrees of manipulations, and which are acceptable under which circumstances in the service of what. “We would prefer an unattractive wine than one which we have confected into attractiveness by manipulating its sugar” is a reasonable case to make, provided one has the courage to accept the consequences of making unattractive wines. What too many do, sadly, is to sell unattractiveness as virtuous, in a fine example of Orwellian double-speak.

Remember, I’m not advocating the *addition* of flavor, but rather the preservation of flavor *already there*. A modicum of sweetness does not obtrude upon a wine’s character—it was in the grape, after all—provided the producer guarantees this with his palate. Most of us know how much is too much. So, while I respect the underlying scruple the growers espouse, they err in making this an ethical issue. It is instead either a pragmatic or an aesthetic issue, or both.

The grower’s association in the Wachau has a special dispensation to use their own terms to categorize their wines. I’ll explain them when I introduce Wachau wines in the offering.

DAC

It stands for *Districtus Austriae Controllatus* but what it should really stand for is DUMB-ASS CONCEPT. I know several marketing people and socially they are lovely guys. I even respect their conceptual intelligence. I just think they should be barred from acting upon wine in any way.

Schildknecht did a wicked piece for VINARIA taking the DAC concept to task. I stole a few of his arguments here, and added some of my own.

The initial motivation was innocent enough, as they all seem to be; create something analogous to the French system whereby a wine carrying the DAC is *understood* to be made from a certain variety (or varieties) in a certain idiom. They started with the Weinviertel and its GrüVes. So now you see growers selling “Weinviertel DAC” in place of whatever they used to call those Veltliners. But did you know that only those wines can use the regional name “Weinviertel” on the label? Explain THAT to the poor consumer – if you can. Now we’re asking the consumer to not only understand and memorize wine data but also to crawl inside the bureaucratic mind and suss out the “system.”

The only valid system is that which arises organically and empirically from sustainable logic and experience. Codify *that* if you must; I’ll forgive some of the mischief that inevitably ensues. But imposing any sort of conceptual system on wine growing seems to always end up putting growers in strait-jackets and consumers in con-niptions trying to figure it out.

They’ll always cite the “market” to justify their actions, but even the “market” is a mere abstraction consisting of a lot of flesh-and-blood human beings who buy wine. What makes them want to buy wine, i.e., what are we actually offering them (or “marketing” to them)? Let’s take a Weinviertel GrüVe as our test case.

First we’re offering them *Grüner Veltliner*. Then we’re offering them *wine from this particular grower, in a*



particular vintage. Then (and only then, and maybe not even then) we’re offering them something from the *Weinviertel*, which perhaps is known as a region whence good values hail. Just maybe over here we’re offering my name as a kind of imprimatur. Does anyone imagine a buying decision would ever hinge on whether a wine is “DAC?” There are plenty of laws in place to guarantee minimum quality levels. Trocken means dry. Alcohol can’t vary by more than a half percent. The wine has to be 100% varietal. I am drawn ineluctably to conclude the DAC was less an impulse to clarify things for the “market” than to let the marketing guys play with their conceptual toys.

I’m not gonna boycott the wines or nuthin’; I’ll ship them when I like them. But I’ll be relieved to see this thing fizzle out. And I don’t suggest you waste a *New York MINUTE* of your precious time trying to figure the whole thing out.

Austrian Wine Culture

For a while it seemed to mellow; Germany’s economic doldrums dried up the major export market for

Austrian wines, and the market relaxed. Then Germany woke up, and now it's a seller's market again. I got to Austria April 24th and was distressed to see wine lists already full of '07s. "But Terry, you forgot," Peter Schleimer told me, "The wines have been on lists since *January*." Sadly, this is true. One fashionable grower told me his customers start asking in *late NOVEMBER* when the new vintage will be available. Come December, he *cannot sell* the current one. December! Small wonder some of the growers simply can't comprehend the challenges we still face marketing this "difficult" category (difficult-by-dint-of-umlauts is how I like to put it; the same wines from any other country would be demanded like Viagra), and I try and balance the obstacles of buying AND selling the wines, and believe me my legs weren't meant to bend that way.

But there *is* a kind of steadiness that's more sustainable — and agreeable — than the overheated climate of yore. Icarus, one might say, is cruising at a sensible altitude.

It can be odd to deplane into this lovely country for the first time, climb into your car and head off to your first winery. Along the way you are deep within old Europe in all its stately handsome antiquity, yet when you ring that first bell you're entirely likely to met by a dashing young person who speaks fluent English and knows more California winemakers than you do. His office is chock-a-block with gizmos, he's using a rabbit corkscrew and fancy stemware and his cell phone is programmed to ring with Tarzan's voice. But as soon as you taste his wine you're immersed again into a kind of abiding Good. They are "wines as they've always been, only with better machines". They begin with soil, to which they are determinedly faithful, and they eschew confections at all cost. It is quite stirring, these slow, deep wines coming from such cosmopolitan creatures. It is even more encouraging to catch the occasional glimpse of the deeply anchored values which lie below the surface. It says, we don't have to give those up in order to be 21st-Century men and women; it says maybe we can figure out how a person should live.

There are other reasons to be encouraged. A few growers are taking principled stands against this silly faux-urgency whereby a vintage is kicked off the stage while the new one is still fermenting. More of them are doing what Hannes Hirsch began three years ago, and holding (at least some of) their wines back until they're *ready* to taste and sell. This takes *huevos* of brass my friend. There are risks. First you diminish your cash-flow; you could easily have sold that wine between April and November, but you're waiting 9-12 months to release it. When you finally do, will customers

still want it? After all, there's an even *newer* vintage already soiling its diapers. Last, how much disappointment will your customers accept? Will they come back after you tell them "Sorry, that wine isn't for sale till January of next year?" That growers are willing to contemplate this at all is an immensely healthy sign. We should applaud the idealism that does what's best for the wines, and assumes one's customers have long attention spans.

Growers and writers alike are (mostly!) in retreat from the idea of ripeness-at-all-costs and concentrating instead on balance and elegance. Even mature growers, who might have known better, were saying things like "We want to see how far we can push (ripeness)," but when they pushed it to yowling, brutal and bitter wines, enough was more than enough. After all, who's to say if 13% potential alcohol is enough that 14% is necessarily better?

This is a slippery matter in any case, because all ripeness isn't equal. A Wachau wine at 11.5% can taste undernourished. Its Kamptal counterpart tastes just fine. Certain Kamptalers with monster-ripeness (14% and up) can taste scorched, but many Wachau wines carry such alcohol in balance. The wise sage of Nikolaihof, Nicolaus Saahs, feels that "wine is a food-stuff and should be above all comely." He also believes by farming biodynamically his grapes are physiologically ripe at below 13% potential alcohol, and many of his masterpieces have 1.5% less alcohol than wines from Hirtzberger or F.X. Pichler. "There is a difference between wines you *drink* and wines you *taste*," he adds. Haven't you also noticed the difference between what you professionally evaluate as "great" or whatever, and what you *actually enjoy drinking*? My cellar is full of wines whose flavors I enjoy and which accommodate my meals and don't pall. I'm too old for all those big flavor-jerk-offs that leave me feeling hollow.

When to Drink the Wines

You can drink GrüVe either very young if you enjoy its primary fruit, or very old if you like mature flavors. GrüVe seems to age in a steady climb. Naturally the riper it is the longer it goes, but in general

it doesn't start showing true tertiary flavors till it's about 12 years old. Even then it's just a patina. Around 20-25 it starts tasting like grown-up mature wine—but still not *old*. Wait a little longer.

Riesling, amazingly, ages faster. In certain vintages it takes on the flavor-known-as "petrol," which it later sheds. Great Austrian Riesling will certain-



ly make old bones—30-40 years for the best wines—but all things being equal GrüVe tastes younger at every point along the way. So: young is always good. If you want mature overtones wait about ten years. If you want a completely mature wine, wait about twenty.

Even more improbable; Pinot Blanc can make it to fifteen or even twenty years quite easily. If you want to wait, you'll end up with something recalling a somewhat rustic white Burgundy. Mr. Hiedler has shown me more than a few striking old masterpieces, but then, he has The Touch with this variety.

A Note on My Use of the Word "Urgestein":

I have tended to use this term as the Austrians do, to refer to a family of metamorphic soils based on primary rock. While it's a useful word, you should bear in mind Urgestein isn't a single soil but a general group of soils. There are important distinctions among it: some soils have more mica, silica, others are schistuous (fractured granite), still others contain more gneiss. (It's a gneiss distinction, I know.) Hirsch's twin-peaks of Gaisberg and Heiligenstain are both classed as Urgestein sites, yet they're quite different in flavor.

A Note on My Use of the Phrase *Secret Sweetness*:

This emphatically does not denote a wine with camouflaged residual sugar; in fact it doesn't refer to sugar as such at all. It attempts to describe a deeply embedded ripe-tasting flavor that *suggests* sweetness but which is in fact the consequence of physiological ripeness. Most of us know by now there are two things both called "ripeness": one is the actual measure of sugar in the grape (or must), which can be ostensibly "ripe" even when other markers of underripeness (e.g. bitter seeds or high malic acids) are present; the other is a fuller ripeness when both seeds and skins are sweet. Austrian whites from physiologically ripe fruit often *convey* a kind of sweet echo even when they contain little or no actual sugar. I like my little phrase "*secret*" sweetness, because it's a sweetness that seems to hide from you, though you're sure it is there. But if you look straight at it, *poof*, it's gone. Look away and there it is again. It only consents to let itself be inferred. This I just love.

Styria, Interruptus

My hiatus from the Styrian wine business continues. I hope to return to it some day, but that day is not yet in sight. My former supplier (the excellent Weingut Polz) had reached such a size (well over 60 hectares) that they understandably wanted more business than seemed feasible, given the problems with Styrian wines in our market. I want to figure this thing out, because I absolutely love Styria and her wines.

Styria has become rather a southern cousin of the Wachau; the wines are so popular the growers live in lala land and get any price they desire. Unlike the Wachau, though, the important Styrian estates have gotten huge (by my piddling standards), with almost all of them topping out over 50 hectares and growing like fungi. The region itself is insanely beautiful, everyone goes there, gapes at the landscapes, and loads up the trunk with wine. Styrian wines are *tres* chic inside Austria. None of this augurs well for bargain-seekers.

Those high prices are quite the *ow-eee* when competing toe to toe with those demure little Sauvignons

from New Zealand. Let alone entirely honorable Sauv Blancs from some remote place called France. This needs thought. If for no other reason than the whole thing works so well there. Styria could so easily have succumbed to honky-tonk but instead it's the most alluring place on earth. The "story" needs to be told, but the Styrians will, I fear, need to subsidize it being told.

The Question of Organics

First, I'm not going to politicize this issue, because I don't grow grapes or make wine for a living, and thus it would be fatuous of me to preach to people who *do*, about living up to my precious standards. What's I'll do instead is say what I see on the ground, and suggest what I hope will be useful positions.

Austria has the largest proportion of agricultural land organically farmed of any nation in the EU, and certainly more than in the U.S. Among vintners it is a larger and more frequent theme than amongst their colleagues in Germany, but this is not because Austrians are more conscientious than Germans, but rather because they receive less rain than German growers do.

The consensus among serious growers is to go as far as prudence will allow toward organic growing. Few of them use chemical fertilizers, or pesticides or herbicides, but many of them either use or *reserve the right* to use fungicides. Nearly every grower I know (or with whom I've discussed these issues) is mindful of the need for sustainability. Some of them just do their thing and answer only to their own conscience. Others belong to various organizations certifying and controlling what's called "Integrated" growing, wherein the allowable spraying compounds are detailed and enforced. There are two ways to look at this. One says these growers are just lazy or risk-averse and "integrated" growing is just a green-wash for something not much better than conventional/chemical. I doubt many people who hold that opinion have ever had to support a family as winery proprietors, but their ferocity is at least well meant. The other opinion—the one I myself hold—is that any step in the right direction is to be encouraged, and it's very likely the world is more improved if most people are taking those steps than if only a few are, because when forced to choose between all or nothing, they choose nothing.

The truly organic or biodynamic estates can choose whether to certify by various means, and most of them do. I have one certified-organic estate in this assortment, one bio-dynamic estate, and one in transition to biodynamic. The political issues around certification can be thorny, especially if one's a lone wolf by nature. But what's the alternative? If you won't certify, do you really have a right to the claim of "organic" or "biodynamic?" After all, anyone can *talk* whatever he pleases, but the ones who endure the paperwork and the politics ought to be the only ones with rights to the power of the organic "brand." That said, what if you simply do the work because you feel it's worth doing, but you don't broadcast it? Fair enough, it would seem, but how do you answer the inevitable questions?

My position is to encourage the growers with whom I work to take whatever steps they can in an organic direction. I don't think it improves their wines in ways you can taste discretely, though conscientiousness in one thing often implies conscientiousness in all things. Most important, I don't subject my growers to any sort of purity test with only pass/fail as options. There are reasonable approaches other than mine, and I respect them, but this one works for me.

Map of Austria



hirschmann

styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

It was on my first trip to Austria. In the achingly beautiful region of South Styria, I was sitting in a sweet little country restaurant waiting for my food to arrive. Bread was brought, dark and sweet, and then a little bowl of the most unctuous looking oil I'd ever seen was placed before me clearly for dunking, but this stuff looked **serious**, and I wasn't going to attempt it till I knew what it *was*. Assured by my companion that it wouldn't grow hair on my palms, I slipped a corner of bread into it and tasted.

And my culinary life was forever changed.

Since then everyone, without exception, who has visited Austria has come back raving about this food. It's like a sweet, sexy secret a few of us share. Once you taste it, you can barely imagine how you ever did without it. I wonder if there's another foodstuff in the world as little-known and as intrinsically spectacular as this one.

What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

At its best, it tastes like an ethereal essence of the seed. It is dark, intense, viscous; a little goes a long way. In Austria it is used as a condiment; you dunk bread in it, drizzle it over salads, potatoes, eggs, mushrooms, even soups; you can use it in salad dressings (in which case you may *cut* it with extra-virgin olive oil, lest it become *too* dominant!); there are doubtless many other uses which I am too big a food clod to have gleaned. If you develop any hip ideas and don't mind sharing them—attribution of course—I'd be glad to hear from you.

THE FACTS: this oil is the product of a particular kind of pumpkin, smaller than ours, and green with yellow stripes rather than orange. The main factor in the quality of the oil is, not surprisingly, the QUALITY OF THE SEEDS THEMSELVES. Accordingly, they are hand-scooped out of the pumpkin at harvest time; it's quite picturesque to see the women sitting in the pumpkin patches at their work—though the work is said to be arduous.

Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

1. Seeds of local origin. Imported seeds produce an inferior oil.
2. Hand-sorting. No machine can do this job as well as attentive human eyes and hands.
3. Hand-washing of the seeds. Machine-washed seeds, while technically clean, lose a fine silvery-green bloom that gives the oils its incomparable flavor.
4. Temperature of roasting. The lower the temperature, the nuttier the flavor. Higher temperatures give a more roasted taste. Too high gives a course, scorched flavor.
5. Relative gentleness or roughness of mashing. The seeds are mashed as they roast, and the more tender the mashing, the more polished the final flavor.

To make a quick judgment on the quality of the oil, look at the color of the "rim" if you pour the oil into a shallow bowl. It should be virtually opaque at the center, but vivid green at the rim. If it's too brown, it was roasted too long.

After roasting and mashing, the seeds are pressed and the oil emerges. And that's all. It cools off and gets bottled. And tastes miraculous.

Storing and Handling

The oils are natural products and therefore need attentive treatment. Store them in a cool place; if the oil is overheated it goes rancid. Guaranteed shelf-life if stored properly is twelve to eighteen months from bottling. Bottling dates are indicated on the label.

The Assortment

In the early days I tasted a wide variety of oils and selected the three millers whose oils I liked best. Typical wine-geek, eh! I couldn't confine it to just one; oh no, there were too many *interesting* distinctions between them. Well, time passed by and I began to see the sustainable level of business the oils would bring. If we were in the fancy-food matrix we'd be selling a ton of these oils (they really are that good and that unique) but we're wine merchants, not to mention **Horny Funk brothers**, and we don't have the networks or contacts. So I'm reducing the assortment to just one producer, my very favorite: HIRSCHMANN.

Leo Hirschmann makes the La Tâche of pumpkin seed oil. It has amazing polish and complexity.

Bottle sizes

The basic size is 500 ml. Liter bottles are also available, which might be useful for restaurants who'd like to lower the per-ounce cost. Finally we offer **250 ml** bottles, ideal for retailers who'd like to get the experimental-impulse sale; the oil can be priced below \$20 in the lil' bottle.

- OAT-003 - 12/250ml
- OAT-007 - 12/500ml
- OAT-010 - 6/1 Liter



weingut prieler

neusiedlersee-hügelland • schützen

I love Silvia Prieler, and not only because she served me unlimited schnitzels. (And didn't deride me when I ate, like, five . . .) She told me a remarkable fact about their 2005s; the grapes were physiologically ripe before they were sugar-ripe. No one could remember that happening ever before. So naturally I asked Silvia how it happened. "We don't know!" she answered. And for that answer, for its honesty and friendship, I loved her. The schnitzels came later.

Silvia's really settling in, with her baby and her baby-brother Georg. Considering they are one of the red-wine names in Austria, the whole family is wonderfully down to earth and sweet. It turns out Silvia owes it all to you. Not you literally, but to people such as you. For she wasn't planning to be a vintner.

"I really just didn't enjoy the work," she said. "Either we spent the whole day in the vineyards binding or in the cellar sticking labels on bottles when the machine was balky. Not fun." And so she started University with, let's say, *other* plans. "But my father had started exporting, and needed someone to represent him at tastings and such who spoke English. And that was me."

And the rest is as they say history. Enough conversations with fascinating people (like *you* sexy-pie) held over dinners with fabulous wines and our heroine was hooked.

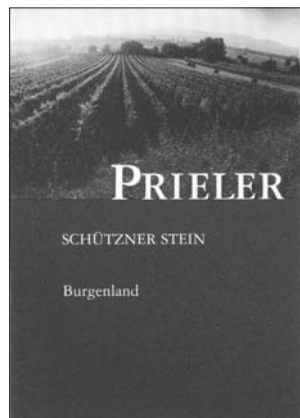
First she wanted Pinot Noir, after a practicum at Domaine Dujac. Papa demurred, but it so happened he'd purchased a half-hectare parcel intended for another purpose entirely, but which was planted with 35-year-old Pinot

Noir vines, and which Silvia successfully convinced him to leave to her diabolical intentions.

She now runs the estate along with her brother Georg, while Papa oversees the vineyards, from which she seeks to make wines of patience and memory. It's not difficult to fashion what she calls "Hey-here-I-am!"

wines, but Silvia prefers wines which may be nervy and angular in their youth but which knit together over time into deep seamless beings.

Prieler are people of what the new-agers would call "good energy," hale and cheerful, even Ronny the schnauzer who always seems to be hovering near the tasting room (where there's bound to be *food* sooner or



- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,250 cases**
- **Top sites: Goldberg, Seeberg Ungerbergen**
- **Soil types: slate, loam, calcareous sand stone, sand**
- **Grape varieties: 40% Blaufränkisch, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Pinot Blanc, 10% Zweigelt, 10% Welschriesling, 10% Chardonnay**

later) and who is a fine noble animal.

I'd like to do more with this estate, because here is a family doing everything *right*. Not least that Papa gets to spend more time in the vineyards, where his heart lies. Ask him any question about the wines and he says "Oh don't ask me; I'm just a simple farmer now . . ." He does, however, claim all the credit for the *quality* of the wines. Every wine, no matter which one. Offer a compliment of any sort and he grins and twinkles and says "Yes, the quality here was the result of scrupulous viticulture," or "Indeed, it goes to show what is possible when you have a genius working the vines," until finally I got it, and whenever I liked a wine I turned to Dad and said "Wow, there was really some bloody fabulous vineyard work here," and he'd reply "Yes, wasn't there!"

But you know, I find it all quite sweet. I've often noticed father seeming to *return* to the vineyards when Son (or daughter) takes over the winery. The older man likes being outside among the vines he's known his whole life, by himself in the fresh air. It isn't so fast out here. He can pay the kind of attention he's learned how to pay, without which one doesn't hear the earth's deliberate hum. I am happy to think of these happy men.

Prieler at a glance:

An estate both admired and beloved within Austria, for hearty yet focused whites and sumptuous deeply structured reds, both of which are undergoing certain deft transitions; the whites more primary (i.e., less malo) and the reds more succulent (i.e., fewer gravelly tannins).

AEP-049 2007 Pinot Blanc Seeborg

This starts out spicy but comes on all scallopy and hedge-flowery; wonderfully bright, vibrant and clear—almost brilliant—yet with all its mid-palate richness; the finish is almost like good tortilla chips!

AEP-053 2007 Chardonnay Ried Sinner

Prieler had to endure very deliberate fermentations with their '07 whites. The potentially splendid Leithaberg white (the 2006 was wine of the vintage in last year's catalogue) is still fermenting in early May, and this fella stopped with residual sugar. Not a lot, but you don't expect any in Chardonnay unless you're a KJ lover, and this teeny bit made a substantial impression—a *fabulous* one to me, which came as no surprise to Prieler or to Peter Schleimer since they know of my predilection for harmonic perfection. There is so much grace and fragrance here, and the very slight sweetness accents the apple nature of Chardonnay and lifts up its innate stoniness.

AEP-052 2007 Rosé vom Stein

Fragrant and elegant; laden with fruit but not "fruity," rather silky and discreet, a wine of cheer and geniality, and chipper enough to handle a summertime thirst.

AEP-048 2006 Blaufränkisch Johanneshöhe

CORE-LIST WINE. I wanted an everyday Blaufränkisch that would be both substantive and in the best sense *elemental*, an ur-Blaufränkisch. This used to be more tannic—as all Prieler's reds once were—but Silvia seems to have seen the wisdom of letting this wine gush in its satiny gurgle, as there's just a liquid spill of fruit over pepper, mint and herbs, and the palate is a big squeezing hug of simple generous fruit. When it's undeflected by oak or any other need for pretense, you really see the Sarawak-pepper, lovage and balsam side of the variety; I sometimes think it's what Sauvignon Blanc would be if it were red.

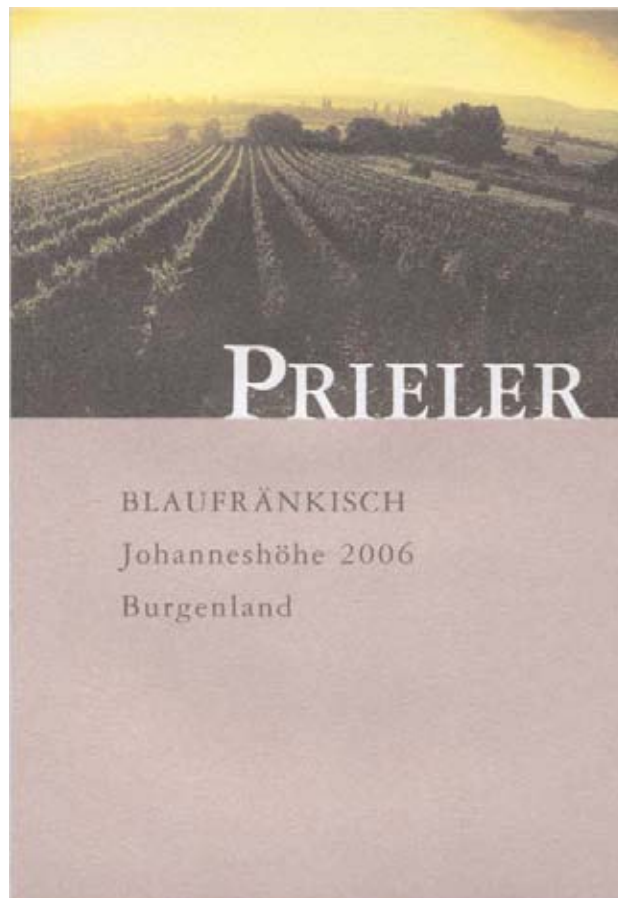
AEP-047 2005 Schützner Stein**AEP-054 2006 Schützner Stein****(+)****AEP-054M 2006 Schützner Stein, 6/1.5L**

The 2006 will be offered in January 2009, and it's potentially superb; a very serious fragrance to a warmly tasty spicy ripe wine; at the moment densely black-purple but likely to flesh out into more mid-palate sweetness between now and bottling.

As always 85% Blaufränkisch and 15% Merlot. Allowing for the serving temp (on the cool side) this was carob-y and chocolatey with firm tannin; the fruit is ripe and sumptuous, the empty glass smells wonderfully flowery and the wine will be pretty and perhaps a little stern in its youth.

AEP-055 **2006 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, 6/750ml** +
 AEP-055M **2006 Leithaberg Blaufränkisch, 6/1.5L** +
 Impressive volume of sweet fruit in a currently somewhat brooding form, though coaxing brings out a compelling and complex fragrance almost like Sangiovese; this will just sing in 8-12 years, but this preview makes you really want to see the movie.

AEP-056 **2005 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, 6/750ml** +
 AEP-056M **2005 Blaufränkisch Goldberg, 6/1.5L** +
First offering of one of Austria's iconic reds, but not only iconic; this is one of the few that can truly be called world-class. It hails from a schisty hillside (both are rare in this vicinity, the slops and the soil) and is Serious Business that needs at least 6-9 years to show its soul. This '05 is almost too passionately expressive, so that all it can do is murmur—for now. It's hugely minty and tannic but there's a 1st-growth finish and almost some Pomerol iron. I don't want to read too much in, knowing the origin and track record. What's showing now is the steam leaking from the vents before the volcano erupts.



weinbau heidi schröck

neusiedlersee-hügelland • rust

Our whole afternoon was surreal, Heidi's and mine. We drove amongst a whole gaggle of those new and weirdly beautiful windmills in an otherwise deserted field. She drove me through Hungary for my first time, and we saw the many dentists in the border town of Sopron, and then we crossed back over into Austria en route to the unseemly schnitzel orgy with which this catalogue began, and then we met Heidi's extremely charming friend Friedel who took us to see *his* friend the descendant of Count Almaszy, and as if this weren't enough, on our way back we spotted two huge wild boar grazing in a small grove of trees not ten yards from the road. And to think I might have been home watching baseball on TV. . . .

Last year we had some confusion about our appointment, and when we arrived Heidi's father told us she was out planting vines. I reached her on the cell, and she returned just pitifully contrite and gave me a huge hug. I wasn't angry; I couldn't be angry at Heidi. I offered to come back later in the day, but she'd left one of her twin sons Georg in charge of the planting and all should be well. It was nice seeing Heidi in her schmutzy boots and wind-blown hair.

Later while we were still tasting, Georg and the gang came back from the vineyards for lunch. He was very much the guy-in-charge. Heidi was thrilled; "See, you never know what can happen when something *seems* like bad luck; if I hadn't missed the appointment Georg would never have gotten to be the boss. See how proud he is?"



Heidi Schröck and Some Guy

- **Vineyard area: 10 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Vogelsang, Turner, Ruster**
- **Soil types: Eroded primary rock, mica slate, limestone and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Weissburgunder, 10% Furmint, 10% Muscat, 10% Grauburgunder, 10% Welschriesling, 20% Zweigelt, 10% Blaufränkisch**

Heidi seemed to expect me to cajole her to grow the domain so we could get all the wine we could sell. Instead I did the opposite. I mean, why? She *likes* it the way it is. It's the proper dimension to let her pay the quality of attention she enjoys and the wines need. I'm just glad to know her and be part of such a clearly successful life. I want the whole world to be like Heidi and her winery.

If you've ever met Heidi you'll know why. She makes it look easy. Much easier, in fact, than it has been for her. But that's how it is with certain people, and Heidi's one of them. Though she's as lusty and earthy as anyone I know, she doesn't seem to know how not to be graceful. She is one of those very few people who appear to have figured out how to live. She possesses an innate elegance and sweetness. I have no idea what effort this might entail—none, I suspect—but she is naturally conscientious and thoughtful without being at all self-effacing. She invites affection with no discernible effort. Because all she has to do is offer it.

Austrian growers often have impressive estate brochures, with pretty pictures and atmospheric prose,

but see enough of them and your eyes glaze over. Typically I glance through them to see if there's a picture we can crib for this catalog, but Heidi's contained a statement which made me pause.

"The vineyard doesn't just bring grapes for my wine," she says; "It teaches me to wait, absorb nature, and to understand my own boundaries."

Says it all, doesn't it.

There are certain people from whom not only good but also *important* wines issue. It's because of who they are and how they care, that is, not only how much they care but also what they care *about*. I felt instantly that Heidi's was an important spirit. She's so tenderly conscientious, so curious, so attentive, so intuitive, so smart and also so extremely droll and funny.

Her wines are continually improving, but not because she's chasing points; rather, she seems to be probing ever deeper into the Truth of her vineyards and the core characters of her grape varieties. A sort of calm settles over such people and the work they do, the calmness of absorption in a serious purpose.

Being a wine-girl is a bigger deal in Europe than here, as I've said elsewhere, yet I don't think of Heidi as a "woman-vintner" but simply as a vintner. That said, I like how it is to taste with her. She looks for accord and contact more than she insists on making her point. I know it's all very Mars-Venus, but it does seem reasonable to suggest women have their own ways of relating to that which they grow. She belongs to two girl-vintner groups, one of which I think she founded. She doesn't make a huge deal about it; it's largely a matter of creating a matrix for mutual sisterly support. Yet another guy I represent regaled me with a story of how he gave her a hard time. What about all the women who work hard with their husbands, and who are every *bit* as crucial to the making of wine as all these marquee females with their groups and their brochures? Who's speaking for *them*? Not an unreasonable point (and bless him, the guy's loyal to his wife!), but it points out an adage I'm about to coin: it doesn't matter what you do, you'll piss somebody off. Hmmm, not bad, but I

can do better. How's this; no matter how good you try to be, someone will hate you. That's more like it. You read it here first. Or, maybe . . . They'll hate you anyway, so you might as well be bad. This is fun! Maybe if the wine thing doesn't work out I can get into the fortune-cookie business. "Even if you put the seat down you still won't put it down *right*." "The food on your companion's plate always looks better."

A NOTE ON AUSBRUCH: Ausbruch is an old term, recently reinvigorated, to refer to a dessert wine with must-weights between Beerenauslese and TBA (138 degrees Oechsle to be precise). The Ruster Ausbruch of old gave the town its renown and Heidi is one of several vintners looking to revive both the term and the sensibility behind it.

Leaving must-weights aside, as I understand it, Ausbruch isn't intended to have the golden sheen of the "typical" BA or TBA. It used to be made by taking the dehydrated grapes and kick-starting fermentation by adding some fresh grapes to the must. Then the fermented wine was aged in wood until it began to develop a slightly Tokay-like, "rancio" character. These days tastes have evolved away from that kind of thing, though I'm told vintners who make Ausbruch are a wild and crazy bunch, and no two of them make their wines precisely the same way.

Ausbruch can somehow taste more **ancient** than BA or TBA, certainly Eiswein. I don't mean that it tastes like old wine, but rather that it is redolent of antiquity. It is not a wine of polish or sheen; it is a wine of leathery, animal depth. It is a rural wine. The silence of the centuries seems to sit upon it. For a long time there was no Ausbruch — phylloxera effectively wiped it off the face of the wine-world. Now it is revived.

Heidi tells me that these days there's nothing to distinguish the vinification of Ausbruch from ordinary BA or TBA. It seems to be more an aesthetic (or metaphysical) idea for the wine, that it should taste more **baroque** and burnished than BAs and TBAs, have more alcohol and therefore less sugar. Sometimes I imagine they decide after the fact which name the wine will take.

AHS-092 **2007 Weissburgunder**

I love how this wine bobs and weaves between vintages, never quite the same. The '07 shows far more exotic aromas than did the 2006; scallops, orange-peel, *batonnage*, and some of this is due to the presence of a homeopathic amount of: *Auxerrois*, which Hans-Günter Schwarz suggested she plant as a fine seasoning for Pinot Blanc. My own suggestion would be to vinify them separately, in case Heidi's reading. This wine is broad, ripe, oyster-shell-y and mouthfilling, with a markedly long saline finish. Bold and flavory, and it does that 2007 enter-one-way-and-leave-another thing.

AHS-093 **2007 Furmint** +

I ADORE Furmint. And if Loire Chenin is high on your list-o-goodies then you'll adore Furmint as much as I do. Indeed with wines like this it's as if Mosel Riesling and Vouvray were blended in your glass. The variety, famous of course for Tokay, was reintroduced to Burgenland (once a part of Hungary, after all) in the early '90s by Heidi and others of similar mind. It ripens late and holds onto its acidity and is as graceful as storks in flight and as evocative as the nightcalls of strange birds and frogs wafting darkly over the reeds.

The '07 is slow to unfold, but gorgeous once it does. Classic rosewater and quince aromas lead into a marvelously silky and spicy palate; both yielding and firm; peony notes to an atmospheric and sweet-toned wine. By the way, here's a fun fact to know and tell: Heidi's 0.8 hectare of Furmint is almost exactly 10% of the total planted in Austria. Now I need to suss who I can bribe using this information. . . .

AHS-097 **2007 Muscat**

OK, so I'm in New York with my then 18-year-old who was looking at colleges, and instead of taking him for the usual pizza or whatever I thought I'd buy him a "nice" meal. The place I took him had Heidi's '04 Muscat, so we ordered it. I figured the staff could taste whatever we didn't finish. Because Max isn't any sort of wine drinker — not *yet* anyway. So imagine my surprise when the bottle was tipped over to pour us the last drops. "Dude, you really held your own," I said to him. "So?" he replied. "Well I've never seen you drink so much wine," I insisted. "That's because they don't always taste this good!" he sensibly countered.

"Muscat" isn't a grape variety in Austria; those are either Gelber Muskateller (a.k.a. *Muscat a Petit Grains*) or the more come-hither Muscat-Ottonel. Heidi uses "Muscat" as a brand-name for a spicy wine which in '06 consists of 40% Gelber Muskateller, 20% of Ottonel and 40% Sauvignon Blanc.

A multi-faceted spicy aroma and a lively and precise palate; juicy and salivating and again that oyster-shell finish. In some way this is an *adult* Muscat, not giggly or frivolous.

AHS-094 **2007 Ried Vogelsang** +

It turns out someone else had registered "Vogelsang" as a trademark, so Heidi's choices were either to call it "Ried Vogelsang" (i.e. "Vogelsang-vineyard") or to invent another name. At least this year there's a noisesome little bird yapping away on the label. Vogelsang means bird-song. The 07 is 25% each of Welschriesling, Weissburgunder, Gelber Muskateller and Furmint, and is again Halbtrocken (with 12 grams rs); the spice in the Welschriesling and Muskateller give an almost BA-type aroma, but the palate is dry and chipper and insistently fresh, charming and gregarious.

AHS-096 **2007 Grauburgunder**

Pinot Gris of course. I'm starting to wonder whether Pinot Gris and not Chardonnay is the white variety best suited to oak, because the last several vintages of this wine have all *worked*, and I love serving them to people who imagine I detest any wine with oak, whereas in fact I simply detest vulgarity and affectation and falsity. There are lovely sweet ripe caramel and new leather aromas, noble and baroque; the palate is a big baritone singing in an echoey room, but this vintage is more contained and judicious than its recent forbears, drier and less assertively orotund. I rather prefer its more chiseled profile, because its lightness means I can drink *more* of it.

AHS-098 2007 Furmint Selection “Milli” 6/750

Pinot Blanc and Welschriesling again. Clean botrytis saltiness and brioche with a little scrape of thyme-honey; it's an easy drink given its concentration; warm, meadowy and polleny, graceful and suave.

AHS-099H 2007 Beerenauslese, 6/375ml

As always Pinot Blanc and Welschriesling; the purest and most refined of any Heidi-BA aroma I've encountered; the palate is spicy and solid, drier-seeming than the above Auslese; a certain mineral saltiness; the finish is a wee bit clipped if you study it, but you'll be too busy *loving* it.

AHS-095H 2006 Ausbruch “On The Wings Of Dawn,” 6/375ml**+**

Heidi has climbed into the top rank of sweet-wine growers in Austria, which is how she came to Kracher's attention and why he wanted to collaborate on a dessert wine with her. That, and he was eager for access to the more complex soils of the opposite shore of the lake. The project will go on, and I'm sure Seth and I will cooperate in bringing the wine to y'all.

This is in effect Heidi's “basic” Ausbruch, from a mélange of varieties, and this 2006 is wonderfully sleek given its concentration; the palate is vigorous and complex, not merely thick and rich, with lovely anchoring structure and loads of animation—these wings are flapping and beating—sweet key-lime, ultra-ripe peach and a finish like a moonglow-pear nectar.

AHS-100H 2006 Ausbruch “Turner,” 6/375ml**++**

This single-vineyard 100% Furmint wine is *hors classe*; immensely rich Furmint aroma, and the palate is a dense salty elixir, even more profound, more warmly ripe than the more coolly exquisite 2005, more extravagant and gushing.



weinbau sattler

neusiedlersee • tadten

I'm writing this at my dining room table, looking out the window, and a cold front just passed through. Until a few minutes ago it was gray and misty outside, and suddenly the air has cleared and I can see individual leaves and everything's outlined in a silvery blue light.

I have always loved clarity, in every way and every form. I can't always attain it, as these things are subject to the mitigations of talent or emotional courage, but looking outside at this *cleaned* air all I can do is exult. It is so fine.

If you wear reading glasses; i.e., if you're a decrepit geez like me, remember when you first put them on? *I can see!* All this time squinting at menus and instructions, putting brighter bulbs in all your lamps, wondering why all of a sudden your arms weren't long enough any

more, and then *wham, presto*: vision again. If you remember that feeling, you might indulge me my love of things clear. I don't need them tidy or pat, and I positively relish them when they're ambiguous or evanescent, but without clarity I feel frustrated. Which is why I love wines like those of Erich Sattler. They show us that wines don't need size in order to contain *vista*.

These were the last wines I tasted. Erich Sattler very graciously saved me the tedious and lengthy drive around the lake from Rust to Tadten, so we sat on my small balcony on



a cool morning listening to the blackbirds and thrushes and watching a sleek graceful stork fly by with a plump meaty frog in its mouth. Stork babies, man; they get hungry. I thought to ask Erich to explain a vexing mystery — if the stork

brings the baby, who brings the baby stork? — but he didn't look like he'd know.

Sattler is one of the few young growers I know who isn't out to get your attention but instead seeks merely to bring you pleasure. I love these kinds of wines, as you know. You take the first sip and think "Well sure, OK, it's clean and pleasant and all, but . . ." and then the glass is suddenly empty and you barely know why. I could tell you why: it's because the wine *tastes* good and invites you to keep sipping.

Erich Sattler is emblematic of the new generation of Austrian vintners, a wine-school grad, 4th generation in the family, taking over as recently as 1999. "We make wine as my grandfather did," he says, "only with better

- **Vineyard area: 10 hectares**
- **Soil types: rich in minerals, gravel and sometimes light sand**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Zweigelt, 25% St. Laurent, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Welschreisling, 10% Pinot Blanc, 5% Muscat**

machines." My colleagues discovered him at the ProWein fair in February 2004 and brought me samples, which unfortunately traveled through Europe for three weeks in the trunk of my car by the time I tasted them. So we asked Erich to meet us in Rust with his wines.

We got better acquainted and I also got to meet brother Kurt, whose wife is American and who lived in L.A. for awhile plying his trade as an architect. In many ways it was like seeing



Erich Sattler

the wines for the first time; I got to taste the (promising) whites and found to my great surprise I liked the Zweigelts even more than the St. Laurents. I was explaining the latter variety to a colleague traveling with me, saying how hideously difficult it was to manage, when Erich chimed in, saying "Yes, it's a diva, but we wouldn't love it so much if it weren't such a bitch to grow."

Erich has also changed the label format so it reads horizontally and you don't have to wrench your neck reading it sideways. Small thing, but I like my neck.

AST-013 **2006 St. Laurent**AST-020 **2007 St. Laurent**

CORE-LIST WINE, as it is our only St. Laurent that's both available and *affordable* enough to be able to offer it to you year-round. We'll ship the 2006 through this year, and the '07 starting in January, 2009. The '06 is showing the Mourvèdre face of St-L, sumptuous and sweet with ripe dusty tannin and generous fruit. The 2007 is more explicitly fruity (plums) but just as round. This is an excellent intro to this fetching little diva.

AST-015 **2006 Zweigelt**AST-021 **2007 Zweigelt**

CORE-LIST WINE, and same deal; lots of it, gently priced, and *tay-steeeee!* The '06 will last the year out and the '07 will follow in January, 2009; the wines are similar, quintessential Zweigelt in their black-cherry and violet characters along with the juicy almost peppery side; both are fresh, invigorating warm-weather reds you can serve cool, but on those first cold Fall nights just warm the wine to room temp and decant it 2 hours out and you'll be amazed at the round plummy depths.

AST-018 **2006 St. Laurent "Reserve"**

+

Ripe aromas like un-modern Burgundy; plummy, sweet and ducky; the palate is wonderfully sweetly roasted and caramelized—Osso Bucco in a glass!—it's a charmer, extravagant rather than contained; 2005 was more complex, this one's more affectionate.

AST-019 **2006 Zweigelt "Reserve"**

+

Marked *structure* after the enveloping St. Laurent; oh this is a *really* delicious wine, graceful and many-faceted; a little lick of ripe cherry, roasted beet and sea-salt flows into the finish of this sweetheart of a wine.

AST-022 **2006 St. Laurent "Brother My Cup Is Empty," 6/750ml**

+

Well if you *have* to do the silly-name thing it might as well be names of Nick Cave songs I guess . . . though I myself am waiting for wines with names like "Hot For Teacher" or even a few I could make up like "No Known Cure" or "Belch On A Quiet Night." I mean, why can't any of these guys be into *Zappa* or something? There's some wine names for you. "Don't You Ever Wash That Thing?" I'd buy the wine, wouldn't you?

The good news here, in case you skipped the catalogue intro, is that Erich wants to discontinue his "super-Tuscan" CRONOS bottling in favor of single-variety wines at the outer limit of their possibility. I always liked the Cronos, both in itself and in its particular idiom, but this new/old idea is *MUCH* better. Instead of imitating the Italians, why not take one's own varieties and see what they can do while also asserting their individuality and distinctiveness? I hope others follow. I'd rather drink something that tastes like *something* and not like everything. Anything can taste like everything. And usually does, and bores the crap out of me.

So, what have we here. Best casks. French oak. That drill. The wine is like a *demi-glace* of the "Reserve," meatier and more solid, earthy even, like those tiny black Morels that are so smoky; markedly long, and this is the best part: still *fruit-driven*.

AST-023 **2006 Zweigelt "Where The Wild Roses Grow," 6/750ml**

(+)

This is from an isolated old-vines parcel on an unusual soil of iron-rich gravel; for all its chocolatey richness it is, bless its heart, still fruity and loaded with raspberry, as if it had 5% liqueur-de-framboise in it; right now it's so concentrated I'm unsure what will emerge—either a rich chewy concentrate at best (and more likely), or a rather lumbering heavy-fruited geezer. Wait and see.

weingut paul lehrner

mittelburgenland • horitschon

Paul was full of beans when we visited. He had an opinion about everything, and we compared our various terms of derision for the popular kids — his was “Cabernitis” and mine (as you know) is “Chard-ennui,” which he approved of. He said “If you haven’t learned independence in your thirties you’ll never learn it,” and he railed, as he often does, against the kinds of wines we both despise.

When I first selected Lehrner, I’d staged a tasting of six or seven of the top estates in Mittelburgenland, among whom Lehrner’s were my favorite. There were bigger wines in the room, darker wines, wines with more “points” in store, certainly more ostentatious and tannic

wines. But there were none as adult, as balanced and as elegantly graceful as Paul Lehrner’s. <Sigh>, I figured . . . yet again Terry selects the second-“best” wine.

Thus it’s been wonderful to watch Lehrner’s star rise ever higher in the Austrian press, especially in the current *Gault-Millau*, in which no other red-wine estate scores higher than does Lehrner. Maybe the tortoise really does overtake the hare, eventually, if you have long enough to wait!

Thank God for an honest man. And with Lehrner it seems less like a choice he makes than an imperative of his temperament. He makes wine of candid fruit without embellishment, and he talks to me about them candidly and without embellishment. So when he says he’s happy with his 2005s, I know he means it, and I know *what* he means. Lehrner’s style doesn’t *require* super-saturated ripeness. It’s an adult style of red wine emphasizing fruit over tannin and structure over everything else.



Paul Lehrner

This aesthetic doesn’t preclude concentration and it positively invites complexity. It does insist wine must be refreshing, not fatiguing, and it is bored by bombast or opacity. Personally if something (or someone) is screaming at me I’m barely interested in what it has to say; I just

- **Vineyard area: 18 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Hochäcker, Dürrau**
- **Soil types: Sandy loam and clay loam**
- **Grape varieties: 72% Blaufränkisch, 15% Zweigelt, 10% St. Laurent, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, and Merlot, 3% Chardonnay and Grüner Veltliner**

want to get the hell away. Wines which speak in moderate voices immediately compel my attention. All of which is to say I am very happy to have discovered Paul Lehrner and his wines.

He’s a vintner who wants, avowedly, to make “wines for drinking and not for winning awards.” Makes good sense! “Light,” red wine has a function and usefulness—and rarity—that make it precious. How often is red wine both light and dense, with enough flavor and length to fill its frame? Lightness doesn’t have to denote under-nourishment. It is sometimes precisely appropriate.

I really like Paul. He’s so much of what I love in a vintner, giving us beaming honest wines at modest prices, and I really hope you buy the hell out of these.

Two final points. It’s somewhat misleading to call these wines “light,” as in fact they have considerable depth. What they are *not* is inky, tannic obsidian dragons which bellow 600% new oak at your schnoz. They have a sort of black-belt surety, a calm contained power that doesn’t have to be *demonstrated* every five minutes. Second, Lehrner’s wines are usually a year behind the current vintage. Most of these are from 2006.

It bears mentioning that a stylistic shift is in the

works here. Paul is permitting more tannin in his wines so that they'll live longer. "Yes, they were delicious in their youth," he said, "but they faded abruptly. And I want wines the drinker can keep seven, eight, nine years or longer." Well yes, I see. I do see. And on the face of it, I can agree. But I only hope that Paul hasn't acted from any sort of worry his delicious wines weren't taken "seriously" enough *because* they were delicious. That would be a travesty.

I have to bear in mind I always visit him at the worst

possible time. He tends to bottle in April and I'm always showing up 2-3 weeks later when the wines are in a tantrum of bottle-sickness. The lighter 2006s, about which I was so uncertain last year, have come around perfectly. *Any* minor increase in astringency will show against a backdrop where fruit has been temporarily suffocated. Thus I'm not exactly skeptical of Paul's revised approach, only vigilant. I hope he remembers to trust in *flavor*.

Lehrner at a glance:

Fruit-driven reds at sensible prices from a down-to-earth vintner who'd rather quench thirst than win medals.

APL-052 **2006 "Claus"**

APL-060 **2007 "Claus"**

CORE-LIST WINE, because it's a perfect example of a cheeseburger red from a country where they don't even *have* cheeseburgers. They do have pizza; that would work. Claus is always a field-blend of roughly 80% Zweigelt and 20% Blaufränkisch, and it tastes like a good robust Côtes-du-Rhône. The 2007 is better now than the '06 was a year ago (though that wine turned out just lovely and I was silly to have doubted it) though it's perhaps a little lighter in body. We'll offer the 2006 through the Fall and then move onto the 2007.

APL-053 **2006 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger**

APL-061 **2007 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger**

Same issue here as the "Claus." We'll offer the the 2006 through the Fall and then move onto the 2007. The 2007 was tasted from cask: firm and chocolatey/caroby and crusty; a solid forthright wine with tight spicy fruit and length; old school old world tasty stuff but not even remotely come-hither. *VALUE!*

APL-059 **2006 Blaufränkisch "Steineiche"**

+

This is a brand-name denoting the top "reserve" quality. We were talking about harmony, specifically as related to a 2000-vintage of this we opened to see the effect of bottle-age, and Paul said "Wines cannot become harmonious if they don't start out that way. I've not seen this miracle myself, and I wasn't alive in the time of Christ!" Though this is just two weeks in bottle, it's the smart complex wine it's always been; crusty and "sweet" and long and spicy with oak in balance; the cask sample (from a second lot to be bottled later) was sappier and juicier but not better. Modern-day Cahors is a good cognate, along lines of du Cedre.

APL-063 **2006 "Cuvée Paulus"**

+

65% BF, 25% Cab-Merlot, 10% St-L (and a tiny bit of Zweigelt); you guys buy very little of wines like this, since there's really no hook by which to sell it. But I think if you tasted it alongside other reds of its price you'd agree this is particularly fine; there's a glam dramatic fragrance; mint, tar and violets; the palate is brooding yet also quite minty; arterially thick but far from opaque.

APL-064 **2006 Blaufränkisch Dürrau, 6/750ml**

To be offered January 2009, and likely to change by then, but what I tasted two weeks ago had a super-spicy fragrance and an outsized power-palate; crazy long and both seethingly concentrated and also brilliant; Blaufränkisch at its stubborn crazy-ass best. From a top single vineyard, by the way.

weingut walter glatzer

carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

These are the wines — the only kinds of wines - you actually want to drink after a big day of tasting. They're as soul-satisfying as a steaming bowl of spaghetti; they seem to offer unconditional love. And they're cheaper than therapy!

Walter Glatzer's doing a smart thing: holding stocks back so as to have 18 months worth of wine in the cellar, which in most cases means two vintages. This is especially good for the reds, which always bulk up with a year in bottle — even the “wee” ones. I discovered a low-fill bottle of Glatzer's '97 GrüVe Dornenvogel buried away in an out-of-the-way case, and thought I'd better drink it. The wine was wonderful, and now I wish I'd kept it! One gets used to seeing Glatzer as a supplier of “useful” white wines to be pounded through and hardly thought about, but this

'97 was every bit as good as an entry-level Smaragd from the Wachau — at a third of the price.

Walter Glatzer is a miracle. An amazingly nice guy, making sensational wines and offering them at way down-to-earth prices; this isn't, you know, an everyday occurrence! He's also obsessively motivated to keep improving the wines, which he seems to do annually.

I also want to sing a paen of praise to this man's red wines. He makes them to be drunk and loved, not admired and preened over. He could easily make each of the prevailing mistakes: too much extraction, too astringent, too tannic, too oaky, reaching beyond their grasp. But year-in and year-out these are absolutely *delicious* purring sex-kitten reds.

He is the son of the mayor of his village, which perhaps accounts for the poise and easy manner in which he articulates his every notion of grape growing and wine-making. He's installed two fermenters, one for reds and one for whites, the second of which is kept underground in a newly-built cellar in order to keep fermentation temperatures down. He has 16 hectares of vineyards, from which he aims, like all the young lions, to grow the best possible grapes. He'll green-harvest when necessary, not only to increase dry extract but also to guarantee physiological ripeness. Glatzer does all his harvesting by hand, though he could, if wished, work much of his land by machine.

He's one of those people who wants to make *sure* you're content. “All the prices O.K.?” he kept asking. “Is everyone having a good time?” he asked me during a group's visit. “You bet,” I assured him. “There's enough food, isn't there?” he persisted. “Oh, plenty!” I replied. “There isn't **too much**, is there?” he wanted to know. “No, there's just EXACTLY THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOOD, WALTER. *Relax*, man! Everybody's in the pink.”

There's also two little kids, and an omnipresent buzz of conversation which makes it hard to take tast-

- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rosenberg, Haidacker, Rote Erde**
- **Soil types: sandy loam, gravel with clay & sand**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Zweigelt, 15% St. Laurent, 15% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Blaufränkisch, 10% Merlot, 10% Weissburgunder, 5% Pinot Noir, 5% other varieties**

ing notes. Yet in a sense these hardly seem necessary; to delineate the minute vintage-variations of wines which are always varietally True and scrupulous is more trouble than it's worth. And, I can now proclaim, after truly painstaking diligent research, that Blaufränkisch is better than Zweigelt with Schnitzels.



Glatzer at a glance:

Along with Berger these are the best values in this offering. And with steadily increasing quality, especially among the reds. Tight, reductively brilliant whites that should be poured by the glass at every restaurant in the universe!

AGL-119 **2007 Grüner Veltliner**

CORE-LIST WINE, and indeed this wine really is the core of the variety; you'd use it as a tabula rosa if you were teaching a class. After the amazing 2006 (which soared wildly above its "echelon") the 2007 is zippy and yet creamy as the '07s are, with a Tuscan olive-oil pepperiness, and it's true-true-TRUE, and what else is there to say?

AGL-118 **2007 Grüner Veltliner "Dornenvogel"**

"Dornenvogel" (meaning thorn-bird) is Glatzer's term for his best lots, because these marauding lil' tweeters like to eat the ripest grapes. It's regularly the best-value GrüVe I offer. I think I'll just repeat that: THIS IS ALWAYS THE BEST VALUE GV IN THIS OFFERING! After the topsy-turvy 2006s, where this wine wasn't discernibly better than the regular bottling, we're back to normal again, because this is very different than the above; pepper and opal basil in an incisive and rich fragrance; the palate is zingy and dense, minty-spicy with really *direct* white pepper, a juicy and also forceful GrüVe that's far from delicate!

It was also the final GrüVe I tasted on this buying trip, as it happened, and a fitting farewell.

AGL-116 **2007 Weissburgunder "Classic"**

Glatzer reported a challenging harvest in '07, requiring an insane amount of selection and in some cases picking before he'd ideally have liked; this wine is cracklesome and spritzy, not as doughy or scallopy as the riper '06; a snappy and light summertime Pinot Blanc.

AGL-120 **2007 Zweigelt "Riedencuvée"**

Sappy and violet fragrance and a silky and spicy palate, with almost Blaufränkisch herbal and capsuley notes; not-entirely-ripe blackberry nuances; feints towards being sinewy but then fruit *lunges* into the juicy finish, where it interacts with mineral for what seems like forever. A superb vintage of this perennially lovely wine.

AGL-111 **2006 Blaufränkisch**

CORE-LIST WINE. Same story; we'll ship this when the '05's gone. For all its quintessential varietal angularity, this is the most *agreeable* idiom of Blaufränkisch of any I know. The nose has that capsuley-metallic twang, and the palate is so full of lamb and mint jelly and rosemary and spice rub and szechuan pepper it's almost silly. There is grown-up ripe tannin and a structure like torn silk.

AGL-122 **2007 St. Laurent**

First time I think I've offered Walter's "regular" bottling of this, but I loved it; it's a cool, blueberried Pinot Noir type but with a little hint of the crust on a good sparerib; firm, solid and very long for its sleek body; compact, sappy, with implosive fruit.

- AGL-112 **2006 Blaufränkisch “Reserve”** +
Huge burning-leaf-smoke fragrance, with chocolate and stewed plums; the palate just sings in many-part harmonies, seeming to thicken like a reducing stock; it's almost as much beef as lamb this year. I think at anything below the most stellar qualities, Blaufränkisch is far more interesting than Cabernet; this wine is like mint on a sun-roasted boulder.
- AGL-109 **2006 Zweigelt “Rubin Carnuntum”** +
 It's a sort of ad-hoc “DAC” thing, a voluntary region-wide concept to create the *essential* Zweigelt. And this 2006 is an utter sweetheart; gushingly ripe fragrances of cherry and plums (in contrast to the violet and blackberries of the Blaufränkisch); lots of cinnamon and soy; a lovely mid-palate sweetness, and the endless clamoring finish peals sweetly, starting with mint and ending with porcini and duck fat and nutmeg.
- AGL-123 **2007 St. Laurent Altenberg** +
 Riper and roaster than the basic SL; like Australian lamb; the palate really shimmers in luscious rivulets and leads to a spicy finish; solid, palpable vinosity and structure; air-dried steaks; it's a juicy wine but it feels like you're *squeezing* the juice out of this dense concentrate.
- AGL-110 **2006 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”** +
 Exceptionally dense, almost opaque, but if past is prologue it should be fabulous, already showing a profound dark-chocolate and carob-y spice. It's Glatzer's genius – and it IS genius – to make generous wines that are never garish or *cheaply* intense; they never grope for affect, but show an authentic animus and meatiness – they *earn* their intensity and lay a valid claim on our attentions.
- AGL-121 **2007 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”** +
 Redundant maybe, but these are so different you should see them both. The '06 is explosive and ripe, the 2007 is like the '04 was, fibrous and chewy and *marinated* with flavor; it has its own kind of power, not as sumptuous as '06 (or 2005) but just as long, not as enveloping but more solid, more old-world; it's not ungiving, it's just starched. I like it just as much in the abstract, and find it more useful in practice.
- AGL-117 **2005 “Gotinsprun”** +
 This is the archaic name for Göttlesbrunn, Glatzer's home town, and it's his brand-name for his top reds, in this case a blend of mostly Blaufränkisch, a bit of Syrah, a smaller bit of (gulp!) Merlot and the balance St. Laurent. It is all done in (double-gulp!) *new wood*. But this is a very RARE example of a show-off *oakster* that works; you're paying three times more for Priorat that's no better than this - rather worse! Because here is How To Do It; **First offering:** a *schwe-e-e-et* fragrance, damsons and iron and braised lamb; the palate is thick and serious and meaty; the cool 2005-fruit is still there even with all this power; it's like a mouthful of lamb shank and the tomato you braised with it.



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.

weinviertel

The “Wine-Quarter” is in fact a disparate region containing more-or-less everything northeast, north or northwest of Vienna that doesn’t fit in to any other region. You can drive a half-hour and not see a single vine, then suddenly be in vineyard land for fifteen minutes before returning to farms and fields again.

Vines occur wherever conditions favor them; good soils, exposures and microclimates, but it’s anything but what we’d call “wine country.” Which is in fact rather charming, since it doesn’t attract the usual glom of wine-people.

As you know, wine folks descending monolithically upon a region (for whatever good reason) have a salubrious effect on prices if you’re a grower. Thus the quiet Weinviertel is a primo source for *bargains*. With the Dollar in the shithouse, now seemed like a good time to prowl for values.

But if I’m honest there’s more to it than even that. I don’t seem to be much of a pack animal. I tend away from the crowd, even when I appreciate what that crowd is crowding toward. It’s easy to go to the established regions and find excellent wine if you have a fat wallet. It’s too easy. I find I enjoy going somewhere alone and finding diamonds in the rough. Alas, Austria is a wine culture in which one is hardly ever alone. The new man in this offering is on the local radar or I’d never have known of him. The entire Weinviertel is known, as Germany’s Rheinhessen is known – as the up and coming new region, DACs and related nonsense notwithstanding.

This started maybe ten years ago, when the first wave of young growers applied modern methods and made far better wines than the innocuous plonk which came before. Attention was duly paid. But with repeated exposure one began to want something the wines weren’t giving. They were certainly “contemporary” enough, all cold-fermented stainless-steel yaya yada, but most of them were lacking animus and soul. With the entrance of another wave of young vintners, it began to change.

It needs a certain

drive, a kind of urgency to want to endow one’s wines with something more than simple competence. The formula for that is unexceptional, and lots of C-students can do it. And make perfectly decent wine. But certain people ask certain questions: How can I unlock what’s in this land? How do I make imprinted wines that people will remember? Why do it at all if it won’t be wonderful? For someone like this, wine isn’t just a formula or recipe; it’s a matter of anguish and relief and mystery and frustration and delight, it is so dimensional as to be virtually human. The more you live with it, the less you need what you “learned” and the better you hone and hear your intuitions. You can always spot such people because they’re much happier in the vineyards than in the cellar. After all, the cellar is full of machines, but the vineyard is full of life. Surprises are few in the cellar but constant in the vineyard. Talk to your land and your vines for long enough and soon you will know when they answer you

back. Every grower like this will tell you he was taught all wrong. “They teach you to act before they show you how to listen.” And in the end their wines become like they themselves are; alive, alert, attuned, questing.



weingut schwarzböck

weinviertel • hagenbrunn

Rudi Schwarzböck assumed control of the winery from his father in 1994, though he says 1997 is really the first vintage I was happy with,” before proceeding to blow my freakin’ mind with an insanely fabulous Riesling from that great vintage. His wife Anita took her share of the reins in 2003, and the two function as a seamless team.

If I don’t go into detail about vineyard or cellar work it’s not because I’m short of data, but instead because none of it would surprise you. Most of the really good ones do things a certain way, and I’ll need several years of hangin’ out time with these good folks before I’ll know what lives between the tick and the tock.

Hagenbrunn is virtually at the city-line of Vienna – you’d expect the trams to run out there. Some of the vineyards are on not-insignificant slopes, and most soils are loamy loess, with Riesling being grown in sandstone covered over with loess. They have a modern tasting room where you can buy – I swear I’m not making this up – bars of milk-chocolate filled with Riesling and dark chocolate filled with GrüVe. Now I know where my allocations are going. Rudi and Anita seem in every sense to be a typical young vintner-couple, but even on first acquaintance I sense something more. Rudi seems just a little bit shy, as if he’s more at home in the world of the vines than in the tasting room. His seeming uncertainty reminds me of Walter Strub’s, in that it reflects less a hesitancy than a modesty built on knowing there’s always more information and you’re never done experiencing. I’m eager to know this guy better.

Schwarzböck was one of the two best among five potential new estates I tasted. But it happened we visited the other guy first. That guy’s wines were so good we basically knew we’d grab him (assuming he’d grab us back...) and I wasn’t at all sure I wanted two new suppliers, good though this Schwarzböck stuff was. But with the first sip of the first wine I knew I needed them.

But *how* to describe them? Theirs is a silky substance not unlike Gobelsburg, in fact. They’re not as creamy as Berger or Setzer; theirs is a more up-front palate dance.

- **Vineyard area: 21 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Aichleiten, Hölle, Kirchberg, Sätzen-Fürstenberg**
- **Soil types: Loess, partly with sand or marl for Veltliner, flysch-rock riesling**
- **Grape varieties: Grüner Veltliner 40%, Riesling 15%, Zweigelt 15%, Welschriesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Gelber Muskateller**

They make a quick and delightful impression. Oh just taste them.

These were the first wines I tasted this year, and most of them were bottle-sick. One wine we tasted a week later as part of a blind-flight to nominate a new core-list item was significantly improved in only a week. The wines are all arch and modern but not *only* arch and modern; there’s an earthy substance to them also, and boy are they good value.

ASB-014L **2007 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

We asked for a vintage date and Rudi agreed, though you, dear drinker, will have to tolerate an '07 that's 10% 2006 if you want to be my friend or his. It's also estate-bottled (which you can't presume upon for Liter wines even from top estates), and shows the grassy grilled zucchini side of GrüVe; snappy, fresh and peppery, with a subtle hyssop note; it's close to Hofer's in style, with that little bite of rosemary.

ASB-012 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Vier Gärten**

Oh bless it, 12% alcohol, and this is some *happy* stuff; classic sorely-lentilly loess-grown GrüVe, green apple and marjoram; lots of spicy length given its sleek, streamlined body.

ASB-009 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Sätzen-Fürstenberg**

+

Now there's perfume, not just fragrance; oleander and vetiver; the palate is zippy and peppery with lots of cling; creamy and minty and adamantly full of character.

ASB-010 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Kirchberg**

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CORE-LIST WINE. Thereby hangs a tale. We wanted a new core-list GrüVe at this price-point, and auditioned six potentials, all wines I'd already selected and liked. We tasted them blind, just to see. Two of them were easy to identify. Two more were similar to each other but I crossed them. Process of elimination led me to the final two. Notes were both "consistent" (as the writers like to reassure us) and disparate; after all, there's a difference between tasting within an estate and tasting across estates—both are "true" but they are different and coexisting truths. Both Kevin and I were surprised when our mutual favorite was this one, because the wine was significantly better than it had shown the week before. And Stelvin eliminated the possibility of cork variation.

At first I noted a classic loess GrüVe; fava and fennel; again this fervid spice of the 2007s; toasted rhubarb; expressive and with all the ripeness it needs. Yet somehow a week later it came on very full and ripe, creamy and full of secret-sweetness, with the most mojo, texture and seductiveness of the six wines we considered.

ASB-013 **2007 Riesling Pöcken**

This has seven grams of RS and a lot of acidity for Austrian Riesling, and the wine has a hint of roasted red pepper and stone-fruits along with tarragon and jasmine; it's cool but not aloof, full of charm, especially the intricate lilac-y finish. It's also a remarkable *value*.

ASB-011 **2007 Gelber Muskateller**

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This stands with the Nigl as second only to the Bründlmayer Muscat, at a *fraction* of the price of either, and it is *insanely* delicious wine, scratching itches you didn't know you had until they were scratched; it's utterly loveable with tons of "inside"-sweetness and a whole mouthful of liquid potpourri; gorgeous shimmery spice and length and all of 11.5% alc; it swells on the palate and finishes with a whole fruit-basket of nuance.

weingut h.u.m. hofer

weinviertel • auersthal

First, the small “u” in “H. u. M. Hofer” stands for “und” (and). Please don’t refer to the estate as “Hum Hofer,” however tempting it may be to do so. I know whereof I speak, as I heard many a reference to “Joo-Ha Strub” until Walter replaced the “u” with an “&.”

Auersthal is just barely beyond Vienna’s northern suburbs, in a dead-still little wine village. It’s rather odd to drive there and see lots of wee little oil derricks, but such little oil as Austria produces comes from these parts, deep below the loess. I had either forgotten or had never known the estate was organic; they belong to a group called Bio-Ernte which has standards above the EU guidelines. In speech, by the way, “bio” is pronounced to rhyme with “B.O.” which can lead to some drollery as you hear references to “B.O. wine”

unless, unlike me, you have left behind your adolescence.

The vineyards lie in a rain-shadow and have to endure hot summers. In fact Hofer plants his Riesling in a fog-pocket as he gets so little rain. The wines are pressed conventionally (no whole-cluster) with skin-contact, and all whites are done in stainless steel.

The wines have a quality of moderation and intelligence; they are clear and reasonable. In “normal” vintages such as ‘02 and ‘04 they are exceptionally deft and even charming. In warm years they can flirt with extravagance. They have a kind of firm smoothness that’s cool like marble. There are some lovely reds to show you.

So, great wine, amazing value, and certified-organic viticulture? Help me make this lovely man a star!

- **Certified-Organic Estate**
- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Top sites: Freiberg, Kirchliszen**
- **Soil types: Sandy loam, with loess-loam and some clay; light soils**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Grüner Veltliner, the balance Riesling, Zweigelt, Welschriesling, and Blauburger**

AHF-020L **2007 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter - SOLD OUT!**

We may have sold this out by the time you read these words. This wine is going to become one of those once-a-year things where it’s only available for three months and then you have to wait til the next vintage. We ship all the estate-bottled wine he’ll give us. We used to continue with another cuvée from *purchased* organic fruit, but the problem is this fruit has taken such sharp price increases that we couldn’t hold our own line. Thus the choice is to have less wine, more expensive wine, or a less good wine.

Easy choice.

There’s plenty of excellent GrüVe in Liters elsewhere in this offering, so please check them out. Prices are more closely aligned too, in contrast to a few years ago when this one was by far the lowest. Still, the wine is scrupulous, correct, herbal, maybe just a little lean but with good peppery spice and decent length.

AHF-023 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Weinviertel DAC**

This “DAC” was the better of two possible “DACs”—it rhymes with “flak”—and is a wonderful value for a sleek, clear and lentilly-peppery GrüVe; some phenolic nip, lila-cy and apple-y, the graceful finish is the most delicate part of the wine, full of finesse.

- AHF-024 **2007 Grüner Veltliner DAC (Freiberg)** +
 CORE-LIST WINE, and what a vintage this is! It's the classic Freiberg fragrance, straw and meadow-flowers and vetiver leading to a *kick-ass* palate that's focused and spicy, ample yet filigree; very long, even with apricot notes and *pêche de vigne*; a salty and complex finish with tertiary notes of marjoram and boxwood. The best wine at this price in the entire offering.
- AHF-025 **2007 Riesling**
 We were discussing whether to core-list this when I noticed I was still tasting it 6-7 minutes after the last sip. Maybe we shoulda. It's liquid wisteria and minerality with a whomp of clinging length and grip; this is both very dry and charming, and loaded with classic Austro-riesling apricot.
- AHF-019 **2006 Riesling**
 Whatever will they do, oh dear oh dear! For this wine is "Lieblich" with 30 grams of that vile fructose thing, only you see my darling, the problem is: *the wine tastes WONDERFUL*. It doesn't taste like whatever you thought "30 grams" would taste like; just a gorgeous fragrance of quince and mirabelle and moonglow pear; lovely spice and length; not mineral – this is a fruit-essence of head-turning prettiness, and with a long vaporous finish of talc and lime-blossom. NO botrytis. So all you manly men, bust out those petticoats you *know* you yearn to wear, bake up some petit-fours, draw the blinds and drink a **real man's** wine.
- AHF-022 **2007 Zweigelt Rosé**
 It's lighter than the 2006—what isn't?—but *really* fruity (strawberry and raspberry) and with that "Austrian" finish, at first seemingly vacant and then suddenly clinging for dear life; the palate is gauzy and breezy and the wine is what the wine is for!
- AHF-026 **2005 Zweigelt "Vom Kleinen Eichenfass"**
First offering. A satiny red, with lovely plummy fruit; oak as a seasoning but not dominant; Hofer's own note is accurate; here it is—"Open-hearted, black cherries, light nougat, caramel, fine spiciness; a survey of fruits, rather juicy, murmuring tannin. . . ." Trust me, he nailed it.



weingut setzer

weinviertel • hohenwarth

By now I know I'll be happy here. Thirsty, delighted and happy. These are my kinda wines, and my kinda folks.

In a paragraph or two I'll write a small disquisition on the aesthetics of charm, but there are other things to say about this endangered virtue. Endangered? I think so. We have a little carousel at our county's regional park, and I like to pause there midway through a long walk and watch the little kids zoop around on the painted horses. Last week I noticed they'd given up the usual calliope music in favor of, god help me, disco. And it was just so damn *wrong*, all these 3-and-4-year olds riding along to "I Will Survive"; is calliope music supposed to be too *goofy* or unhip or some stupid thing? *THERE'S* someone with a tin ear for charm.

It's also hard to make charming wines. It's easy, really, to make "intense" wines or "powerful" wines; all you have to do is pick overripe grapes. Charm requires you to pay attention to texture. And even harder, you need to attend to flavor in a different way: not how much of it



Hans & Uli Setzer

there is, but how *pleasing*, even delightful it is? I wonder how many courses on charm are taught at U.C. Davis.

Now maybe you're thinking come on, it's not all that impossible; just ferment with aroma-yeasts at cold temps to get those sweet banana aromas and leave a little RS behind and maybe throw a little Muscat into the GrüVe and *POOF* there's your charm. Not so. Lovers of true charm are not seduced by the specious or formulaic. But we know very well the difference between growers asking *How strong can I make the wine?* versus *What is the quality of the fruit?*

Though Setzer was a discovery for me four years ago, the estate is conspicuously successful, exporting to three continents and showing up on many of the top wine lists inside Austria, not to mention being a sort of house-estate for the Vienna Symphoniker orchestra.

The moment I tasted these I was thrilled to the toenails with their charm.

I feel charm is among the highest aesthetic virtues. In people it denotes an effort of behavior whereby you

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares (plus 6 hectares of contracted grapes)**
- **Top sites: Eichholz, Laa, Kreimelberg**
- **Soil types: loess over alluvial gravel and limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 40-50% Grüner Veltliner, 20-30% Roter Veltliner, plus Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Portugieser, Zweigelt, and Merlot**

feel appreciated and cared for. In wine or music it creates a response of palpable delight. I find this feeling more pleasant than many other feelings which seem to have greater *prestige*. Don't get me wrong; there's a place in me for being knocked out, blown away, stunned, impressed, but I find none of these as exquisitely pleasurable as feeling delighted or charmed. Also, charm is a flexible virtue. Charm can exist in big wines or medium wines or little wines. I also appreciate this virtue because it seems less reducible to recipe: any grower of unexceptionable talent can make *intense* wine. It seems much more intuitive to craft wines of charm, less a matter of formula than of constant attending to tiny details. And knowing all the while that your wine won't be the biggest, boldest, loudest rock-em sock-em wine on the table. But it will insinuate, will crawl inside a certain temperament and sing its siren-song, and this is the pleasure for which we live.

Hans and Uli Setzer are a husband-wife team of wine-school grads maintaining a winery imbued with intelligence and purpose. I was surprised how close they were to the Kamptal and Kremstal (15 minutes from Berger or Gobelsburg) and wondered why Hohenwarth was banished to the lowly Weinviertel. Hans pointed out to me Hohenwarth sits at the same altitude as the sum-

mit of the Heiligenstein, thus essentially different from the more sheltered Kamptal. Nor does it have the pure loess terraces of the Kremstal or even the neighboring Wagram. Yet I feel the wines are spiritual cousins of Kremstal wines, and Setzer belongs to a group also containing Erich Berger (who wholly endorsed my choice to offer his “competitor,” bless him) called *Vinovative*.

But I don’t want to leave you with the impression this is a “modest” winery producing the kinds of wines

that happen to charm me. Indeed, Setzer is serious and Important, having won many accolades (Vintner Of The Year in a major wine magazine, to cite a conspicuous example), and the GrüVe “8000” has been given VINAR-IA’S three stars. It’s just that I’ve come to discern the difference between “appraising” a wine and “loving” a wine, and it’s a huge blast when you can do both. These wines are *good company*; you could take a cross-country trip with them.

ASZ-023L **2007 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

Fragrant! The most sheer perfume of any GrüVe I offer in Liters. The palate is light and transparent yet oddly long and flowery; there’s the stirrings of breed here—just because you’re light doesn’t mean you can’t have class.

By the way, this wine, like all Hans’ wines, is bottled with an artificial cork, which Hans prefers to glass stoppers or screwcaps. He conducted experiments and these were the results. He isn’t convinced by screwcaps, hates the glass stoppers, and claims these faux-corks are the highest quality available and will not cause his wines to age too fast.

ASZ-024 **2007 Grüner Veltliner “Vesper”**

The lightest lil’ critter, and this is sure a cuddlesome wine, full of sorrel and sugar snaps.

ASZ-027 **2007 Grüner Veltliner “Die Lage”**

+

This is the artist-formerly-known-as-Eichholz (which will appear on the back-label), and it’s become one of my absolute favorite mid-weight GrüVes for drinking at home. It leaves no wish unfulfilled, neither for weight, complexity, tastiness or food-friendliness; and this ‘07 is as lovely as always; all sweet herbs and balsam fir; rich, gracious and spicy; you know, we take these things for granted when we taste at good estates, but just pause and consider: Fetching fragrance, a texture silky yet ample, a palate with penetration, spiciness and secret-sweetness—what more can we insist a wine should do? There’s even a nuance of sly angularity and a classy interplay of flavors. *This is fine wine.*

ASZ-025 **2007 Grüner Veltliner “8000”**

+

Hans and Ulli’s concept is to plant the vines exceptionally densely (8000 vines per hectare, as oppose to the normal 6000 or so) but to have very few bunches per vine, with a goal of attaining exceptionally high physio-ripeness without excessive alcohol. The site itself is rich in limestone and the vines are pre-clonal, i.e., original GrüVe genetics.

At times this bottling has almost seemed to leave the particular varietality behind, and to become Semillon-like; we’ve often thought of white Graves while tasting. I have sometimes demurred at the alcohol, which can scorch in ripe years like 2006, and even this ‘07 shows just a little crust of warmth (it’s 14%) but far more grace than the more bombastic ‘06; this has a cooler power, oleander and vetiver and warm rice pudding; there’s somewhat more volume than there is depth, but man is it ever *tasty*, and it brings off a rare grace for its mass.

ASZ-026 **2007 Riesling**

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Oh yummy the hell out of my big ass, this is Hans’ best Riesling ever; it is all here, salty and bursting with ripe apricot, jasmine and lemon blossom; it’s incisive yet creamy, full of berries and spices and smoky tertiary notes; ultra-fine insanely sexy wine. It may well be the single best Riesling *VALUE* in this offering.

ASZ-028 **2007 Zweigelt**

Mid-weight, fruity and dusty; it enters all black-cherry, the mid-palate is almost cedary, the end palate is pure damson; soft tannin; a friendly, useful and perfumey wine.

The Wagram

The road from Vienna northwest to Krems is probably the only boring country road in all of Austria. It follows the flood plain of the Danube, and is dead-flat. About half way along, you notice little hills to your right about 5 miles in the distance. These are the loess terraces of the WAGRAM. Nearing Krems, the terraces draw closer and you're in the Kremstal, while directly ahead the dramatic hills of the Wachau beckon.

The loess hills of the Wagram are said to be unique in Europe for their depth, up to twenty meters (65 feet) in places. Wagram's the loess leader har har har. But the sandy-loamy ground is so thick that vintners can dig cellars in it without joists, yet this same soil is amazingly porous. This is ideal soil for GrüVe, and where it changes to red gravel or primary rock the vine changes to Riesling or Sauvignon Blanc. Vineyards are mostly on terraces or gentle slopes, facing south,

far enough from the river to avoid botrytis in most years.

Can you taste it? I can't, at any rate. I am certain I couldn't identify any flavor markers for "Wagram" per se. The wines resemble Kremstal wines to me, at least

those nearer the Danube and also grown on loess. Still, they had to call it something, and "Wagram" does sound like one of the bad-guys from Lord Of The Rings.



weingut ecker

wagram • kirchberg-mitterstockstall

This is “modern” wine at its very best. And I’m willing to understand feeling defensive about deploying a word like “modern,” because I agree we should be wary; too many times modern wines are simply denuded and clinical. Yet we should also be wary of being too precious about what we’d call “traditional” wines. It takes a degree of discernment to distinguish their true virtues from the ones we ourselves *like* to make out of their flaws.

I liked every single wine I tasted here. I liked their exceptional clarity, their incisive detail, their high-definition obsessive nuance, their fresh vitality, and most of all I loved their charm and deliciousness. It’s not the same sort of charm we see in Setzer, whose wines are more cashmere-textured, but it is something of great good humor that elevates the wines from mere correctness. I don’t want all wines to be modern as these are, but I want all *MODERN* wines to have the animation and soul I taste here.

When we introduced this estate last year I was dismayed to find most of the wines I wanted were *already sold out* in late April. You may think this estate is “obscure” but inside Austria it is gulped away with hyperactive haste, and I feel very lucky to have scored it. In this weak Dollar era (a 41% loss of value since “W” took office), but not only in a weak-Dollar era, a grower offering *this* much value has got to be cherished.



- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,250 cases**
- **Top sites: Schlossberg, Mordthal, Steinberg, Berg Wagram**
- **Soil types: mainly Loess, partly with gravel, primary rock in Steinberg vineyard**
- **Grape varieties: Grüner Veltliner 50%, Zweigelt 20%, Riesling, Weißburgunder, St. Laurent, Blauburgunder, Roter Veltliner, Sauvignon Blanc, Gelber Muskateller**

Don’t be misled by the paucity of plusses. Every single one of these wines will offer you such delight as you rarely taste, at astonishingly gentle prices, and they are honest gleaming thirsty-for-more wines, the kind you can’t believe the bottle is empty *already*.

Ecker was one of the two best (of five) new growers I tasted, and he was the best of three very good Wagramers. Apparently I was not the first person to have remarked upon this, for when we made our bid for this portfolio I learned that three of the wines I really wanted were sold out – in May! I mean, this is not FX Pichler here, but it is Austria; everyone knows where the best stuff is.

- AEC-017L **2007 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**
Slim and racy, spring water strained through herbs; a wine to drink, not “taste,” to gulp, not sip, a wine which embodies every known virtue of lightness.
- AEC-012 **2007 Roter Veltliner**
This may be the best wine I’ve tasted from this fascinating variety, which is in essence a GrüVe cousin, making a fuller-bodied wine that’s sometimes more bell-peppery and sometimes muskier—young RotVe tastes like 5-year-old GrüVe. These are *50-year-old vines*, and the wine is replete with “sweet” aromas leading to a palate that’s playful, herbal and minty and full of charm; salty, leafy, not as soy-like as they sometimes are, but more *scintillating* than any I’ve ever had.
- AEC-007 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Von Stockstal**
This is why I wanted the agency; there’s such a generosity of nuance here, a sort of limpid kindness; the wine has *wit* and laughter in it, it’s silly and happy with *sweetheart* aromas, clear and detailed, lacy and fine, light but long. Perfect.
- AEC-008 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Schlossberg**
One of the Wagram Grand Crus on pure loess; it isn’t as desperately filigree now—more of-a-piece and quieter, though long and creamy, studied and salty and dense; consolidates into a swollen, stubborn finish, with lentilly grip. Funnily enough, tasted a week later I wrote “super-pretty! Bright, spicy, mouthfilling.” Odd business, tasting notes. . . .
- AEC-013 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Berg Wagram** +
The soil is made up of alluvial Danube stones, and this is a really beautiful ripe GrüVe; creamy and dense, fennel-leaf and caraway; generous and long, a textbook light-heavy-weight GrüVe for about *half* the price of a similarly ripe wine from the Wachau.
- AEC-009 **2007 Grüner Veltliner “Premium”** +
From his oldest (46) vines from the top-site of Mordthal; a smoky burning-leaves fragrance; the palate is remarkably dense with an oblique power and pepperiness; it’s both stern and yet full of secret-sweetness.
- AEC-014 **2007 Riesling Im Wasn**
Juicy and fruity and bright; all tarragon, pear and wintergreen, a perfect small-scale dry Riesling full of green-sweetness with a zingy salty finish. Grown on loess at relatively high altitude.
- AEC-011 **2007 Gelber Muskateller**
Ecker himself describes “elderblossoms and nutmeg” but I was impressed with the cool chrome of this silvery, zingy Muscat; it has less stuffing than Schwarzböck’s but more zip and torque, and a spice that goes without saying. You know, *notes* go without saying for a wine like this: you need a glass-scale—1 to 5, according to how many you want within a 30-minute period. I give it an 8.
- AEC-018L **2006 Zweigelt, 1.0L**
Who knows if any subsequent vintage will equal the “low-end” ‘06s. This offers absurd substance for a “basic” Zweigelt; it isn’t sappy or gushing but rather winery, dusty and plummy; it’s light by modern standards (12.5%) but man you *need* it in warm weather if you have meat on the grill or pizza on the plate.
- AEC-015 **2006 Zweigelt “Brillant”**
Ripe, lithe and plummy; rich fruit in the St. Laurent idiom; all done in steel, amazingly; full of spice and substance and a kind of roasted-tomato savor.
- AEC-015 **2006 Zweigelt “Tradition”**
Done in large neutral casks now; a very sexy fragrance of violets and cassis and blackberry; juicy and spicy on the palate, lively and friendly—this is what’s meant by *tasty*, and it’s almost weightless even with 13.5% alc.

kremstal and kauptal

These two regions used to make up one region called Kauptal Donauland—but no more. I'm sure someone had a very good reason for the change! The regions are now named for the particular valleys of the little streams Krems and Kamp, and I'll just obediently organize them that way.

Austria's best values are coming from the Kamp and Kremstals. This doesn't mean the cheapest wines; it means the lowest available prices for *stellar* wines. Austria is often paradoxical in that the more you pay the better the value, e.g., the top Kremstal/Kauptal Grüner Veltliners seem to provide more quality than *any* other white wine the same money would buy. This may be partly due to the giant shadow cast by the neighboring Wachau, and the determination of the best Kampers and Kremsters to strut their stuff. For the price of really middling Federspiel from a "name" estate in the Wachau you can get nearly stellar quality in Kammern or Langenlois, and

the absolute best from a Nigl or a Bründlmayer is substantially less expensive than their Wachau counterparts. And, every single bit as good. Other than the profound individuality of certain sites (Heiligenstein comes first to mind) there's little of regional "style" to distinguish these wines from Wachau wines. In fact Willi Bründlmayer told me all three regions were once one big

I really don't know whence the greater sense of amplitude of Wachau wines originates. For me it's a difference in weight dispersal; Kauptal and Kremstal wines seem more sinewy and tall—basketball players—while Wachau are the body-builders. You might say that Wachau compares to Hermitage as Kauptal-Kremstal does to Côte Rôtie. It would need another two importers of Austrian wine to get all the deserving growers into our market, there are so many of them. I could actually see myself becoming identified with this region exclusively—The CHAMPEEN of the KREMSTAL!—because I strongly feel it's the most accommodating source in Austria (therefore among the most in the world) for utterly **great** wines. I won't, because I'm attached to my suppliers all over the place. But if I had it to do again, knowing what I know now . . .

Austria's best values are coming from the Kamp and Kremstals.

region called WACHAU. Ludwig Hiedler points out Langenlois is warmer than anywhere in the Wachau, and he believes his wines need even more time than theirs do.



weingut erich & michaela berger

kremstal • gedersdorf

Berger's wines are wines of humor in the classical sense (not that they're funny-ha-ha), wines of grace and pleasure, gregarious and celebratory. Please consider: Often when we drink a wine for "celebration" we forget what we're actually celebrating and end up celebrating the wine. Be honest now, you know it's true! But whatever it is, your novel got published, you have an anniversary, your biopsy came back negative, your disposal is fixed, you finally got laid, don't you really need a wine that won't draw attention away from the reason you opened it in the first place? If you want to drink a great wine, or Great Wine, then celebrate THAT. Otherwise, drink a wine in which celebration lives. Reach for Berger. His wines exist to do nothing but make you happy.

Erich and his father always made charming tasty wines, cool, "sweet", feminine and alluring — never big or show-offy or obvious. Then Erich told me he wanted to make a small change, toward a more overt style, less inferential and aloof and more positive and definite. I liked these new wines and told him so, but lamented the passing of another proponent of *charm*; there are never enough of these.

But the last few vintages have seemed to *compelled* Erich back to the old style. He couldn't help make creamy charming wines from that material. I'm sure he'll revert to his old-new idiom next year, and I won't be sad to see it, but for now this gushing group of '07s is about as delightful as wine can be.

Look, I am a man with greying temples. I'm in the



wine-biz and drink wine very often. For those reasons and possibly others of which I'm unaware, I'm starting to place my highest premium on *drinkability*

and *beauty* when I select wines, not just for you but also for my personal sloppin' down. A few years ago I began to see the occasional dichotomy between what I offered to you as Great Wine and what I actually *bought* for the private stash; what I need at home are wines I can drink *any time* and which taste good with my meals.

And I would stake this claim; if you buy wine for **practical** reasons, not simply to have "nothing but 90+!!" on your shelves or wine-list, you *must* pay attention to the *quality*, the *loveliness* of the flavors of the wines you choose. Any clod can buy and sell BIG-ASS wines. Show-reserves, wines for the tasting room. I want to sell you wines for FOOD and LIFE. Berger's wines are delightful and affordable. 'Nuff said?

- **Vineyard area: 18 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Gebling, Steingraben, Zehetnerin**
- **Soil types: Loess, stony clay, gravelly loess**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Riesling, 10% Welschriesling, 20% Zweigelt, 10% other varieties**



Erich Berger

how the wines taste:

This is changing, and like many changes it may not happen all at once. What used to be cool and leesy in the wines is now warmer and more magnetic. Berger's wines had those amylic (banana) aromas from cold fermentations (and cultured yeasts) but these are mostly gone, replaced by wilder more specifically varietal notes. Interestingly the change seems greater with GrüVe than Riesling. And even more interesting, the wines seem more explicitly mineral. I'm sure Bergers will continue to modify their course as the new wines evolve. And if they do conclude they've found a new path, they'll just have to be stuck with the same old importer; I like the wines!

ABG-087L **2007 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

CORE-LIST WINE: This is the best of the GrüVe liters in '07, and please don't ignore it just because it's been around the longest. It has the most density, fruit and substance; it is *interesting* and delicious and well above its class.

ABG-092 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lösssterassen Kremstal DAC**

This rocks. This is rocks; ultra-minerally GrüVe and more overtly peppery than loess-grown GrüVe usually tastes; it's one of those wines that could have been fined with bath salts; esoteric ripe clinging GrüVe with more character than Al Pacino. When Al was good, of course.

ABG-090 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Gebling Kremstal DAC Reserve**

One very spicy mutha; without being over-endowed it is massively concentrated; a lentilly green-bean fennel-leaf GrüVe; earnestly dry (some might find it austere); Madagascar-pepper and eucalyptus and tansy; dense and self-confident and certainly impressive, though perhaps also an argument for the value of a few grams of RS. . . .

ABG-091 **2007 Riesling Steingraben Kremstal DAC Reserve** **+**

This is superb, and quite a bit better than the "great" vintage '06; again there's a roasted red-pepper note along with almost overripe apricot; it focuses almost to a fever of spiciness and a minty heat but finishes like a salty parfait of blackberry.

ABG-093 **2007 Gelber Muskateller**

Sleek, straight-lined and almost thirst-quenchingly dry; mineral and *catty*; direct but not simple—this is Muscat to gulp, with no redeeming social value!

ABG-088L **2007 Blauer Zweigelt, 1.0 Liter**

It's the same as just-plain Zweigelt in case you wondered. This isn't as plump as the 2006 though it's still totin' 13% alc., unchaptalized; it's hyper-fragrant and varietally true; it's what Dolcetto used to be until it got "ideas," not to mention 14% and more alcohol; this is a slimmer straight line of spicy fruit than the opulent '06 showed but it's full of character and *imprinted* with cherry.

ABG-094 **2006 Blauer Zweigelt Haid**

Unbelievably delicious! As pretty as a bride. A bringer of sheer joy. Streamlined fruit, and then more fruit and I don't care how many red wines you "scored" higher or admired more, you never had one you'll LIKE more than this.

ABG-095 **2006 Blauer Zweigelt Leithen** **+**

2nd and 3rd-use barriques here, but the wine isn't markedly oaky; indeed an almost Burgundian aroma, complex and almost overwhelmingly fruity; the palate is a whip-crack of spice but also deep juicy texture that *begs* to be swallowed; this is a sexy wine in the modern idiom but it isn't overwrought or pornographic; it's true body, true fruit, real flavor you can use.

weingut familie nigl

kremstal • priel

The good news is this is Martin Nigl's best vintage since . . . what, 2002? It's maybe even better than '02, so the best vintage since 1999. It also marks a return to form after several years in which certain wines didn't seem very Nigl-like, whatever other virtues they may have possessed. In fact the year this most recalls is 1993, a superb vintage for Nigl and one that's aged famously.

It's no secret I had issues with some of the top 2006s, which took ripeness to a level with which I wasn't comfortable. Nigl's wines at best have an eerie clarity that's something between monastic and psychedelic. Theirs is a penumbral or spectral sort of beauty, around the edges of which is something invisible, like radio waves, and this is absent when the wines are too corpo-

real and explicit. These same rarefied characteristics keep me from reaching for Martin's wines very often at home; at the end of a day I usually look for something rather less demanding, and it was entirely revelatory to get to drink a slew of old vintages with him over dinner this year, in his homey lovely restaurant.

Nigl's wines are the vinous equivalent of molecular cuisine; you feel neural pathways firing as you taste them, but in his own establishment the food is what I'd call country-traditional with unusual respect for ingredients and everything from scratch. It was dysphasic drinking these keen ultraviolet wines with a big ol' plate of noodles with morels and sweetbreads, but it showed me something. As otherworldly as they sometimes can appear, with food they snuggle right up as all good wines do.

Nigl's '07s are also marked by absolutely pure consistency. Every one of them is true to its sublime form, and every one of them is brilliant.



Martin Nigl

When Martin is on form as he is here, his wines answer questions we never thought to ask. How far can refinement be taken? What do we find there? Clarity reveals flavor, as we know, but what is on the far side of clear flavor? I also wonder how wines like these make me feel, because they don't generate a volume of emotional affect. They are too searching. Perhaps what they generate most is curiosity. If I haven't imagined that wine can offer such pure refinement, what else haven't I

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Piri, Hochäcker, Goldberg**
- **Soil types: Mica slate, slate and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 40% Grüner Veltliner, 4% Sauvignon Blanc, 4% Weissburgunder, 10% Chardonnay, 2% other varieties**

imagined?

I think Nigl's wines inculcate an appreciation of detail and design. They're like dew-covered webs you see in the morning, when you pause to contemplate the craft of the weaver, the little being all curled up into a nugget waiting for the sun to strike her. Or the winter morning you have hoar-frost on your window, and you study the amazing structures of the crystals. When I was a kid I had a microscope, just a little one but more than a toy, and I loved to look at my slides. And now, flavors under a microscope, showing the many tiny worlds within worlds, all below our vision.

This is not to say Nigl's wines have left all sensual life behind; far from it. They are feasts for the senses, but theirs is an esoteric cuisine that will satisfy both the hunger you know and the hungers you're unaware of. But you have to be available for this experience, and to listen in a different way. It won't leave you happier but it does leave you wondering, because there is somehow more of you on the other side.

When I first met Martin Nigl I had tasted his wine the day before and been completely blown away. So I tracked him down at his little estate in the very sleepy village of Priel, above the Kremstal. It was as unpretentious as a little former farm could be; chickens still clucked and mumbled in a coop, a little rabbit chomped away on some veggies in a fragrant hutch, and there were no vineyards to be seen anywhere. Priel sits on a plateau with the diminutive Krems valley in one direc-

tion and the Danube valley in another, and it's so quiet you'd swear you could hear the bars let out in Krems, six miles away.

Now it has all changed, and Martin Nigl is the Patron of his new hotel-restaurant in Senftenberg, just below the castle ruin in about the most lyric idyll you could imagine. It's piquant to think of him being Master Of The Manor now; the rooms are sexy, there's a modern tasting-room, a sweet regional restaurant, and basically, you should hurry up and go. On a Fall evening you can open your window and look up at the old castle and hear the leaves whisper in the Piri, just outside.

I'm always warring within myself at Nigl, because along with everything else I still have to "do business" with Martin, whom I enjoy doing business with, but I'd rather be doing Jungian therapy than discussing prices and allocations when I taste wines like these.

The Krems valley has a climate rather like that of the western Wachau. "During the ripening season we get oxygen-rich, cool breezes in the valley," says the Nigl price list. "Therefore we have wide temperature spreads between day and night, as well as high humidity and often morning fog. These give our wines their spiciness

and finesse. Another secret for the locally typical bouquets and the elegant acids of our wines is the weathered urgestein soils, which warm quickly."

Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are racked twice, never fined, and bottled—as I once saw—first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles are wines with a high, keening brilliance and with an amazing density of mineral extract which can leave an almost salty finish on the palate, as though an **actual** mineral residue were left there.

It's all well and good for wines to be filigree; refinement is good. But too much refinement can be arch or precious. *What* are we refining, that is the question. What impresses me about Nigl is his depth of texture. There are layers upon layers of the loveliest raw-silken fruit-mineral jazz, a little nubby and not so smooth the palate can't adhere, and just as you fall happily *through* all those cirrussy layers, you notice how crystalline it all is. I remember a music reviewer praising a pianist's delicacy of touch by saying "You can hear his fingerprints on the keys." It's like that.

Nigl at a glance:

No one would deny this estate's inclusion among the absolute elite in Austria, and many observers wonder if there's anyone finer. Extraordinarily transparent, filigree, crystalline, mineral-drenched wines of mind-boggling clarity. Prices remarkably sane for world-class great Rieslings (compare to the best in Alsace!) Do please note the continuing contraction of the range offered. This is not a statement about the wines; it's a desire to focus.

AFN-147 2005 Nigl Brut de Brut (Sekt)

Nigl fizz! It's 80% Chardonnay and 20% GrüVe, very dry, and a very pretty fruit and wet-straw type bubbly; round and easy yet with all his usual refinement; long, nothing pointed or ungainly about it; to quote Bill Mayer it "goes down and stays down."

AFN-137 2007 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit

CORE-LIST WINE: This is the wine by which most of you know Nigl, and if you still have the astonishing 2006 be grateful, as it soared above its class. This '07 is back to its very fine reality; when I tasted it in January, 2008 it was the most *apple-y* GrüVe I'd ever had, and three months later it still is, though there's more tertiary notes of sorrel and green bean (it's grown on loess and these flavors are typical); it's more incisive than the 2006; in place of that wine's density there's now a mid-palate buzz of mineral and spice.



- AFN-148 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri** **+**
 I'm so attuned to thinking of this as the entry-level Grand Cru that I forget it's a wee slip of a lass with 12.5% alc—though what Federspiel *ever* offers this clarity in such perfectly realized form? Super-complex aromas here, Sencha and shade-growing forest herbs; some pepper as an accent but not center-stage; really *terroiré*, almost meditative; somehow both pointed and deliberate, assertive *and* searching, like some curative potion made of every green thing.
- AFN-138 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** **++**
 The best vintage of this wine in at least 8-10 years, and a superb masterpiece. Bless the "normal" vintage! Toasted greens in a pointed, clinging palate; caraway, marvelous precision and focus, not as sapid as the Piri but more roasted; cracklings from a pork-roast, the crisp slices of 'tater in the *gratin*; everything scalpel-keen and with such penetration of rosemary-mint you swear it clears your sinuses.
- AFN-139 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Privat, 6/750** **+(+)**
 AFN-139M **2007 Grüner Veltliner Privat, 6/1.0L**
 AFN-139H **2007 Grüner Veltliner Privat, 12/375ml**
 Only bottle-sickness causes me to hedge the second plus (and maybe the third . . .), but on the day this was juicier and more vinous than the old-vines, more capacious, resinous and sauce-like; there's a juicy finish with vetiver and mint, but there's much more in this wine than it shows at this moment.
- AFN-140 **2007 Riesling Senftenberger Piri** **+**
 Tarragon-y, green tea aromas; wonderfully focused, cogent and classy; crystalline texture—these are the wines I fell in love with at the beginning, fifteen years ago, this otherworldly clarity and caressing texture.
- AFN-141 **2007 Riesling Kremsleiten**
 CORE-LIST WINE: We wanted the Nigl Riesling to show all the *fruit* possible, and the loess-y site closer to the Danube usually gives it. In 2007 the wine shows more herbs and less apricot—allowing for such distortion as is caused by recent bottling; the palate is *very* juicy, and the wine is fun, open-armed, gregarious, amenable; the subtle botrytis makes sense; there's a salty vein but none of this is blatant; this wine is just plain good company.



- AFN-142 **2007 Riesling Hochäcker** ++
 Again the best Hochäcker in *years*; high-toned terroir and quince fragrance; this is in the Gaisberg/Steinertal family, and the piddling few grams of RS give it a wonderful charm, spice, and a regal elegance; indescribable cool fruit and complex interplay of nuance, and the serene stillness of this eerily beautiful wine is utterly haunting, yet it's so *charged* it seems to shoot sparks from its fingertips.
- AFN-143 **2007 Riesling "Privat," 6/750** ++
 AFN-143M **2007 Riesling "Privat," 6/1.0L**
 AFN-143H **2007 Riesling "Privat," 12/375ml**
 Just as in the GrüVe, this is juicier and more warmed-tasting than its predecessor; rampant purple (iris, wisteria) and mineral aromas, as boxwood-y as some GrüVes; this is untamed, fierce, spicy and yet utterly classic, though it lives a more physical, sensual life than the more ethereal Hochäcker.
- AFN-144 **2007 Gelber Muskateller** +
 Nigl Muscat! And it's nigh-on perfect Muscat, full of fruit and cut and length and charm, and it builds to a fabulous cymbal-crash finish.
- AFN-145 **2007 Zweigelt Rosé**
 Nigl pink! A judicious, smart and elegant Rosé; a wine of class and easy style.
- AFN-146 **2006 Blauer Zweigelt**
 Excellent fruit-and-berry-saturated Zweigelt; silky and zippy; lively yet ample and crammed full of bursting-ripe blackberries, the kind that swoon off the bush as your hand approaches.
- AFN-135H **2006 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml**
 A 12/28 harvest from the Freiheit; not really typical based on the German idiom, yet an undemanding, tasty and varietally scrupulous thing, a sweet (and salty) wine but not quite a "dessert" wine, except for savory desserts or when cheese is eaten in lieu of dessert.
- AFN-133H **2006 Grüner Veltliner Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml** +
 This is in effect the liqueur of the Alte Reben with clean botrytis and enormous firm intensity. I wasn't going to offer it at first but there are so few of these, and this one really sings.



I had pretty much all but decided to add Austrian wines to my portfolio based on their quality alone, but meeting Erich Salomon sealed it. Anyplace from which such an angelically decent man could hail was a place I wanted to extol.

In those days Erich's brother Bert was still at the Wine Marketing Board, so it was Erich whom I went to visit at the Undhof. I looked forward to seeing him every year, and always tried to allow plenty of time for schmoozing; Erich was a sweet guy with whom to schmooze, and also unusually generous with older vintages, party as a gesture of friendship and hospitality and also because he himself was curious about them. He like to chat about the "scene," what I'd tasted, who I liked, and he was unfailingly generous toward those he "competed" against. In short, a

gentleman. But my sense of Erich was that his basic decency was innate, was an ineluctable facet of his temperament, not a choice he made after cogitating.

He was also very funny. He said clever things, yes, but what made him funny was his quivering willingness to laugh. He was one of those people who seem to urge jollity from the air around him, and he made you happy too.

Bert left the Board and came to Stein to help Erich out, and he gradually received the Torch. This entire family embodies a rare sweetness. It is always striking to see how they greet one another, always with embraces, even between parents and *teenagers*, and Bert signs all his emails with "Big hug." I'm sure they get as ratty and truculent as we all do, but they start from somewhere closer to beatific, at least closer than I.



Erich and Berthold Salomon

slack-jawed amazement at its youthfully pale color, we linked hands for a small moment before sipping, and thought of our beloved, and then we tasted, and then came the dream, of eternal youth, and ceaseless life.

In the late '90s, Erich decided to modernize his wines and to bring them into the prevailing idiom of

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Kögl, Undhof-Wieden, Pfaffenberg**
- **Soil types: Eroded primary rock, loess, sand**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Grüner Veltliner, 50% Riesling**

vinification, which meant stainless steel, and whole-cluster pressing. I wish he were still here, so we could talk about the stirrings of a movement to go *back* to the old methods. I wonder what he would have thought. Salomon's wines are now squarely in the scrupulously up-to-date camp, yet there was that astonishingly young '43. . . .

Other than my particular affection for Erich, I was always reassured to think such a man could exist at all.

The earth will do its thing regardless of who observes it, yet I myself feel more complete when there's an Elder acting as a kind of priest or mage. The analogy is only partly apt, since vintners such as these only explicate the mysteries inadvertently — few vintners are especially mystical; their work is too brusque — yet they are the souls-which-observe-and-record, and they bring a resonance which gives significance to their wines.

I think of Selbachs. Johannes is the driving force behind the **superb**-ness of the wines, but it was Hans his father who was the spiritual and ethical compass for the family, just as it's Sigrid his mother who makes such things morally explicit. Selbach's wines *quiver* with meaning, as Salomon's do also, and I am happy and grateful to drink *through* the wines and into that place which hums and glows. It doesn't have to be a Big Deal (and yes I am a stupid-head, I know) but there is meaning in this nexus of human, earth and wine. It feels good and solid to partake of it — in however small a way.

One year we chatted as wine-guys do, looking for reasons for flavors, cause/effect equations. I did this and therefore got that. But I've had a little ornery voice that wondered if this wasn't after-the-fact truisms, and Erich said something quite casually that made me grin. "You never really know why wines turn out the way they are. You just do your best. The secret is kept by nature."

I remember—I will always remember—the last time I saw Erich. He'd come out to say hello when I visited him last year. Bert had warned me he'd be weaker than I recalled, but out he bounded, looking thin but not peaked. We sat and chewed the breeze a few minutes, and I hoped he'd stay, but he excused himself with that poignant modesty. It must have taken more effort than he let on, to come out and say "hi." I watched him retreat back across the courtyard.

This is a good man, I heard myself think. How many times in our lives do we think those words? It seems like a small enough thing, to be a good man. But when you meet one you realize it is both rare and no small thing at all. I want some day to be a good man myself. Erich made it look like the easiest thing a person can do.

Bert will, I hope, forgive me for not talking more about the present, the new vintage (which is lovely), and of course life goes on, we beat on as we can. Salomons are such a loving family, such a remarkable set of people; they got more than their share of the stuff of human kindness, and all of us who encounter them are invited to the feast with them. Bert's loss is greater than mine, and he carries on with dignity and a kindly grace. And the wines go on shining.

how the wines taste:

Since 1997 these are modern wines, more filigree than juicy (except perhaps the Riesling Pfaffenberg), and with delicate transparent textures. This is how they RENDER what are often highly expressive fruit-terroir statements, falling somewhere between the demure and the ostentatious.

- ASU-095 **2007 Grüner Veltliner "Hochterrassen"**
CORE-LIST WINE: This 2007 is extraordinarily aromatic, with generous fruit, snappy structure, beany and lentilly, forthright and generous. The best vintage yet, albeit lighter than the '06.
- ASU-102 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Wachtberg Kremstal DAC**
Dense and loess-y, with really swollen mid-palate minerality—markedly and strikingly so—serious intensity in its *echelon*, and one of the best values in this offering, though it's for lovers of very dry wine.
- ASU-098 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Wieden Kremstal DAC**
Looser stitching here, more creamy fluidity, but still a ton of mid-palate mineral dustiness; this one's more charming and winning—the good-cop of the duo—but its more elegant refinement isn't necessarily *superior* to the chewy robustness of the bad-cop!
- ASU-099 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lindberg Kremstal DAC Reserve, 6/750ml**
The tight, furious just-bottled sample was actually better than the more dried-mushroom soy-like cask sample; a lot of spicy depth in this assertive GrüVe that goes in the lentil and legume direction, sesame seed and chewy stone, long and prototypical.
- ASU-103 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Von Stein Kremstal DAC Reserve, 6/750ml** +
The few grams of RS are a tremendous help, elevating the wine in an *essential* way; woodruff, redcurrant and pink peppercorn and key-lime; the palate is gorgeous in a way a zero-gram-of-sweetness wine can never be; the cherry and subtle pepperminty spice is compelling, and the joy-in-drinking factor is logarithmically expanded. Why are they all so pissy about RS? This wine isn't "sweet;" it's just more *sensibly* dry!
- ASU-096 **2007 Riesling "Steinterrassen"**
CORE-LIST WINE: Again a beautifully dense mid-palate in a snappy, precise and charming dry Riesling with a few gravelly phenolics; it's limey, tight and oyster-shelly, and finishes like tart apples.

- ASU-097 **2007 Riesling Kögl Kremstal DAC**
 CORE-LIST WINE: We decided to upgrade a core-list Riesling from Salomon so as to offer one of the Crus, and Kögl is *pure-Austria*, and this is pure Kögl: spicy, full of lilac and wisteria, minty and almost basil-oil notes; snappy texture and sharp contrasts among its elements; it does the '07-crescendo of extract density but also has, let's say a *resolute* dryness that will appeal to lovers of such.
- ASU-100 **2007 Riesling Pfaffenberg Kremstal DAC Reserve** +
 ASU-100H **2007 Riesling Pfaffenberg Kremstal DAC Reserve, 12/375ml**
 The greatest Pfaffenberg from here in many years: semolina, oatmeal, brown sugar aromas; the palate is *soaked* with character, a hint of botrytis spice and paprika and cardamom and allspice; a dramatic mélange of cream and mineral and lusty untamed flavor.
- ASU-101 **2007 Riesling Kögl "Reserve," 6/750ml** +
 Altogether more gravitas now; lemon-ginger aromas are high toned and pointed; there's a tarragon-y, incisive intensity; implied physio-sweetness and a liquid ripeness behind the whip-crack of spice; impressive and high-spirited, even jumpy.
- ASU-105 **2006 Undhof Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** ++
First offering. This was picked on weekends "by the kids and their friends," said Bert; there's a lovely caramel with sea-salt aroma that still has green aspects despite its patisserie richness; ripe Riesling combines with perfect pure clean botrytis; a warm inviting spiciness and a milk-chocolatey earthy savor.
- ASU-104 **1996 Riesling Pfaffenberg "Library Reserve," 6/750ml**
 The last vintage from the old cellar-regime; I thought it might be "difficult," being a 1996 and all, but it's a lovely grown-up Riesling, old-school, murmur and herbal, with a juiciness as if you'd squeezed the sap from herb leaves; salty and brothy and atmospheric; dried apricot—preserved things in general—potpourri; a rare chance at a 2nd-stage Riesling that's sanely priced.



I started to write this on Sunday, and it was fine. I was jet-lagged,

but a little unreality seems to work for me. Any therapists who may read those words are encouraged to send diagnoses . . .

Yesterday I went to the office, where I needed to dig out from a 2-week absence. There were calls to return, mail to read, bills to pay, reports to submit, and all day the steady clamor of phone and email. I tried to write, but never really got wood on the ball; I fouled off pitches and knocked the dirt off my cleats. There was too much going on. Now they tell us that guys don't multi-task as well as women, and this feels true. I suppose I can manage it well enough, in terms of not making mistakes, but it makes me grumpy. I care about what I write here. By which I mean, it makes me happy if it's good. By which I mean, if it's honest then it's good, or good enough. This is true even if no one reads it.

For years I wrote as if no one read it, and I wasn't far from the truth. Lately I've learned of a few readers, but forgive me; it's best if I ignore you. Yesterday left me jangly, as if a different piece of music were playing in each ear. Today I decided to write from home, where I can get a little more white-space around my words. Where I can hear my little editor who lives wary and subcutaneous. He doesn't correct my syntax (and I'm sure someone should) but he's always right when he insists something isn't good enough. He knows I'm vulnerable, because I need it to be good.

In a few minutes I'll start writing about Willi Bründlmayer and his wines. Sure, I want you to want the wines, because I was there and they convinced me. I also want you to know what a remarkable and singular fellow Willi is. I also want to weave some kind of flavor among the words. I also want to convey a feeling I have at Bründlmayer and places like his, that these are *authentic* places to be. I think we move through the world in a fog sometimes. And when we alight on someplace *real* it's like putting on eyeglasses that suddenly reveal all that's blemished and bogus around us. To me it is urgent we recognize those things, and avoid them. The bogus isn't *good* for us. It's like a sugar-high that leaves us crashed and wretched later. It confuses us, and we lose our bearings.

Yes I want to tell you about the wines so that

you'll buy them, but it isn't merely about this Veltliner or that Riesling; it's also a dispatch from someplace true in the world, a reminder that such places are here. If you're bludgeoned with stimulus and noise and crave a kindly silence, such places are here. If you're flat and wan and drifting on auto-pilot, such places are here. If you're sinking into ennui as yet another corporate type presses his marketing strategies on you, as yet another former dermatologist or veterinarian lords his milk-and-honey *lifestyle* on you, and you wonder what any of it has to do with wine, with why you loved wine at the beginning — I have places to show you. If you're weary of reading about grape-skin



concentrates and oak chips and spinning cones and must-concentrators and debt service and consultants who guarantee you'll get any given "score" — if you're weary of even *thinking* about "scores," I have places to show you.

If you read a passage of poetry, in a book review perhaps, and if you feel that sudden invasion of silence, so still you can hear yourself wonder *I used to have this thing in my life; where did it go?* and if that has ever happened, I have places to show you. They are why I do this work. They are what I wish to capture in this writing. Because the world keeps grinding us down to the nub until we forget we are even hungry or alive. But *these places are still here*. They are still here. You can go to them whenever you want. You can live the life they offer. You can remove the thorn from your paw. You can know — why.

Now let's talk about Willi.

weingut bründlmayer

kamptal • langenlois

Though Bründlmayer is by far the largest estate I represent — at a whopping 80 hectares, I find it lovely that we still taste in the cozy little tasting room. I'm sure there's somewhere in the vast Willi-nexus where *delegations* are entertained, but we still taste in this small room off the equally unassuming winery on a quiet *Gasse* in Langenlois. It's nice, and familiar.

I'm also impressed by Willi's decision to hold his biggest wines back from release until he feels they're more ready, a principled choice with financial consequences, that only a market "leader" could make. But our thoughtful and charming friend is deceptively mild in his social persona. Beneath the surface lies courage and a bedrock integrity.

"Why work against the vintage?" Willi Bründlmayer says. "We put it on the label, after all, so its

personality should be in the bottle." Well, yes; that's a Talk a lot of folks talk. But Bründlmayer believes it in his bones and acts accordingly and decisively. The nature of any given vintage is a perquisite of the cosmos, and the vintner's job is to help it say its truth. Even if that truth is unflattering, churlish or ungainly, it is what it is, and the grower has no business distorting it to produce a more attractive product.

All I can do with such a vision is admire it. It's the "correct" stance for a man to take toward nature, or whatever you want to call that which is larger-than-we. But my admiration can quickly grow precious if I'm unwilling to accept the consequences of acting on these ideals, which sometimes isn't convenient and sometimes is even quite uncomfortable. Damn it, this isn't one of those shining white Truths, but rather a sloppy ol' bag of conflicting truths which my poor conscience has to muck around in.

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry, but stern as iron about his core principles. He's one of the best people you could meet. He's sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a button and very alert. He follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely interested and ever curious. One wag of a journalist dubbed him the "Wine Professor" because of his thoughtful mien, but these wines, serious as they are,



Willi Bründlmayer

- **Vineyard area: 75 hectares**
- **Annual production: 23,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Heiligenstein, Steinmassel, Berg-Vogelsang, Lamm, Käferberg, Loiser Berg**
- **Soil types: Primary rock with mica slate, calcarous loam, gneiss desert sandstone with volcanic particles**
- **Grape varieties: 33% Grüner Veltliner, 25% Riesling, 15% Pinot Noir, 10% Chardonnay, 17% other varieties**

come from someone who knows WIT—and how to brandish it!

Bründlmayer's is a large domain yet his range of wines is kept within sensible limits. Soils are rocky and dry in the hills, fertile and calcareous in the lower areas. That's according to Willi's estate brochure, from which I'll quote a little.

"All different wines are aged by the classical method in oak and acacia casks in deep vaulted cellars. In the vineyards the family apply organic principles (no chemical fertilizers, herbicides and chemical sprays)." Bründlmayer neither crushes nor pumps 90% of his musts; the other 10% is macerated overnight and crushed to emphasize varietality. Nor is this formulaic; for example in the 2007 vintage the proportions changed to 50-50 as Willi wanted more skin-contact to accent the extract. Willi was also the only producer I saw who claimed '07 was a Veltliner vintage above all, a claim justified by his superb collection, which he feels to be his best since the classic 1997s.

Bründlmayer is universally revered and respected. Partly it's the wines, of course, their outstanding success in a variety of idioms over so many years, and from a

winery of such size. It's also because of Willi himself, who combines a piercing intellect with such halcyon demeanor you can't help but be fond of him.

Visitors to Austria are encouraged to enjoy a meal at Bründlmayer's *Heurige*, especially in outdoors-weather where the smokers won't shorten your life by ten years. The food's great, the wines are wonderful, the vibe is genial and you'll have a great time provided you are able to breathe.

I also think Willi's wines are changing somewhat from the time I first encountered them, or perhaps it is I who have changed. They are like an extremely good-looking woman (or man!) who wears very understated clothes. They are almost completely without affect, but with great candor and transparency. I also appreciate the willingness to risk, even when I'm unconvinced by the results. I'm sure Willi would say "It keeps things interesting."

Bründlmayer at a glance:

Generally considered Austria's best winery, based on steadily outstanding wines across the entire range. Remarkable attention to detail for a large (by my standards at 80 hectares) winery.

how the wines taste:

The wines are quite unlike any wines I know, not in their actual flavors, but rather the way flavors are *presented* to the palate. They are, it might be said, the Stradivarius of wines, distinguishable (and made precious) by the beauty of their **tones**. Indeed, I always seem to think in sonorous terms for Willi's wines: "THE ACOUSTICS of the fruit are perfect," I wrote at one point. You taste **class** immediately. Stuart Pigott described them as "silky." I find them either lovably impressive or impressively lovable or who knows? Both.

ABY-199

2005 Bründlmayer Sekt

+

I splurged my final night in Austria and stayed in one of Vienna's grandest hotels. I felt like a Sultan. At breakfast there was this deranged buffet from which I gnarfed an unseemly amount of food. What to wash it down with? Ah! There were two fizzies, one was a Champagne you've heard of and which I probably shouldn't name (though it rhymes with "hurts" if you say it right) and Bründlmayer Sekt at its side. And there, boys 'n girls, I did prove in front of several witnesses that Willi's fizz is INDEED better than middling commercial Champagne. Last year I asked Willi how he felt about Michi Moosbrugger's splendid bubbly at Gobelsburg; he said he loved it, of course, but was himself seeking another kind of wine. "I am actually looking for a certain neutrality," he said. "Not lack of character, but a kind of discretion that will make the wine work well at the table. It should be elegant but not draw attention away from the food."

Maybe it's the '05 vintage, and maybe it's the little bit of Grüner Veltliner Willi's put in the assemblage for the first time, but this is the best bottling of Willi-fizz I've tasted, and seriously comparable to good Champagne, with the most expressive fruit yet encountered.

ABY-179

Bründlmayer Brut Rosé

+

We owe the existence of this lovely wine to Willi's equally lovely wife Edwige, who likes pink fizz it seems. In fact it's all 2005 though the label won't say; one-third each Pinot Noir, St. Laurent and Zweigelt. It's very likely *one of a kind*, for those in search of the unique, and it has absolutely lovely Rosé aromas closest to Lallement in its fervent blackberry and violet nuances; it's quite racy and Champagne-like with tight bright fruit, a pleasing tartness, good length, and a texture like torn silk. Dosage is 9.5 g.l. from a mix of wood-aged still Rosé plus St. Laurent grappa! The new "vintage" is gloriously beaming, chipper and witty, more overtly fruity than last year's.

GRÜNER VELTLINERS

- ABY-192 **2007 Grüner Veltliner “Kamptaler Terrassen”**
CORE-LIST WINE: as always a cuvee from various small parcels and from young vines in the Grand Crus—Willi won’t use their names unless the vines are old enough to convey their characters. This textbook GrüVe is lentilly and limpid and sleek, with the palpable mid-palate extract of the vintage, growing more white-peppery toward the finish. Polished and judicious and layered.
- ABY-200 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang** +
ABY-200H **2007 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml**
Certain vintages are exceptionally kind to this primary-rock site, and this 07 is the best I can recall; spicy peppery aromas and enormous powdery extract; the mineral is like a *mille-feuille* of 20 scarves waving in silky undulant layers; this is classy, classy wine.
- ABY-182 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** ++
Last chance at this symphony of mineral density and peppery brilliance; a wine with sensible power and intelligent strength.
- ABY-195 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** ++
Available January 2009. Subjectively, I like this even more than the splendid 2006, betraying my preference for detail over mass; oh this has *plenty* of weight but also wonderful clarity and concentration; stirring ripeness but nowhere near overripe; flavors in a lusty baritone yet with a creamy, even whispery side, especially in the luminous, searching finish.
- ABY-198 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Käferberg, 6/750ml** ++
Has there ever been a better Käferberg? It’s not as buttery as usual, but conveys stunning transparency for its power; endlessly spicy, grandiose ripeness; feverish intensity but still graceful and deft; finish like green beans cooked in a rich veal-stock.
- ABY-201 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lamm, 6/750ml** +
This is great wine, no question, and my preference for Käferberg was a minority view. And I may well feel foolish when this king among wines unfurls its entire beauty. For it is royalty, one of the great icons of GrüVe, regularly among the 2-3 greatest in any given vintage. This intense 2007 is virtually *serene*; it’s focused, incisive, adamantly detailed, full of flavor-endorphins; high-toned buckwheat-y middle and finish; temperate and lingering.
- ABY-189 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg Auslese, 6/750ml** ++
Friends, Willi doesn’t make dessert-wine very often, but starting with his jaw-dropping ’98 series, when he does, he makes some of the *best sweet wine on EARTH*. And this wine is one of those “doesn’t get better than this” experiences; verbena and lime blossom aromas; the palate is snappy, spritzy and exotic – almost brings Loewen’s *Thörnicher Ritsch* to mind – Crenshaw melon, minty spice, not at all “sweet”, but neon-brilliant and full of rare flowers, and it all leads to a dry finish. This is certainly the greatest non-dry GrüVe table wine I’ve ever tasted.
- ABY-183H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Käferberg BA, 12/375ml** ++
In essence it really isn’t possible to make better sweet wine than this, in Austria or maybe anywhere. It’s perfect GrüVe and wonderful “dessert” wine, not remotely creamy but pointedly focused and varietal and adamantly spicy. Actually this is a wine for cheese rather than dessert.

- ABY-184H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg TBA, 12/375ml** +++
 Oh, um, well maybe it is possible to make even better sweet wine. My bad. This is the kind of wine that both melts me and galvanizes me, because it shows what is *possible*; you can make sweet wine that isn't just another honeyed figgy syrup, but instead a wine that is the quintessence of the Auslese, with all of its clarity and minerality intact and visible, not hidden under a same-old same-old botrytis blanket. Indeed this wine is all *green*, all Loiser Berg, all streamlined, focused and ecstatic. You need this in your life, but please don't buy it all until my dibs are in.

RIESLINGS

- ABY-193 **2007 Riesling "Kamptaler Terrassen"**
 Snappy, light and true; a buoyant, dancing wine.
- ABY-196 **2006 Riesling Steinmassel** +
 CORE-LIST WINE: From these high windy slopes on schisty granite comes one of Austria's great *unexceptional* Rieslings, showing instead the basis for their greatness. And this is the best vintage in many, many years; pure wisteria and less "mineral" than precious stones. This morning at my breakfast buffet they had three carafes of water with various semi-precious stones in the bottoms; I had water over amethyst and it was....just water. This on the other hand is just saturated with petals and minerals.
- ABY-196 **2007 Riesling Steinmassel** +
 CORE-LIST WINE *available January 2009*: Elegantly stony, a persuasive terroir wine, more yielding than the '06 but every bit as determined; '06 is the alto and this the soprano; 2006 is redcurrant and 2007 is white lilac, jasmine and peony.
- ABY-202 **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein** +
 ABY-202H **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**
 There's a restaurant I absolutely love, a scant hour northwest of Strasbourg deep in the hills of the northern Vosges; it's called L'Arnsbourg, has three Michelin stars and costs less than an average 1-star in Paris. The list is heavy in Alsace, as one might suppose, but I was struck by the presence of a '99 *Heiligenstein Riesling* from Bründlmayer, and ordered it pronto. The wine was in every way stunning, and I shared it with the many somms cruising the floor, most of whom issued variations on the theme of "My goodness, they make Riesling like this in *Austria*?" Yupsters!
- The 2007 is markedly spicy and "volcanic," with the limpid flowery vintage profile along with pink peppercorn and roasted yellow peppers.
- ABY-197 **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein "Lyra," 6/750ml** +
 The name refers to Bründlmayer's trellising method, a Y-shaped system that looks "as if the vine is throwing its arms up toward the heavens," says Willi. This system also more than doubles the leaf-surface exposed to sunlight and encourages quick drying of leaf and grape alike after a rain. Willi also wants to demonstrate you don't *need* old vines to make great wine.
- But there's more. "Lyra is the wine of the sun," Says Willi, "the brainchild. Whereas Alte Reben is the wine of the soil, the darker underground. You drink each wine with a different part of yourself."
- What a lovely thing to say.

Empirically, I seem to be favoring this over the old-vines bottling in most of the recent vintages (and I ended up reversing my appraisal of the two 2006s after tasting them in bottle); this has really striking fragrance—“expressive” doesn’t begin to describe it; the palate is shimmering with diamond-gleam; an almost perfect mélange of cream and spice; it’s at the limit of power and penetration but finally rescued by its astonishing perfume.

- ABY-203 **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein Alte Reben, 6/750ml** +
 Again spicy and pointed, rich and solid, liquefied stones and a serious, almost pedagogical terroir; the white-flower finish is lovely, the whole wine is enormously impressive, and would have been *great* with 12-15 g.l. of RS in place of the high alcohol it actually carries. My humble opinion, with which the producer firmly disagrees!

THE BEST OF THE REST

- ABY-163 **2004 Pinot Noir “Cecile”**
 I have “permitted” some of Willi’s reds to be shipped though I myself have been cool toward them, but if you tasted and liked them then I won’t stand in your way. THIS one I like! There’s a superb Burgundian nose like the old Pousse d’Or Santenays; in fact this is super Pinot Noir, juicy and long, a *little* bell-pepper (like some Beaunes) and a lot of leek and crispies from the fat-cap of a pork-roast; almost a licorice note; nubby, thready tannin and wonderful length. For me the best Willi-red I’ve tasted; less aloof, more amenable.

By the way, what’s with the common plural in “tannins?” Is there more than one? *How* many are there? Isn’t “tannin” just as apropos a usage as “tannins?” Yes I know about grape versus wood tannin, but it seems to me someone thinks “tannins” sounds *smarter* than just-plain “tannin.” Why stop there? How ‘bout *fruits* instead of boring old “fruit?” *Vinosities* instead of “vinosity?” We can all sound like geniuses of palate and prose if we just make plurals out of everything.

- ABY-205 **2007 Gelber Muskateller** +
 At dinner a couple nights after our visit to taste, Willi brought along a wine clearly entirely mature but still markedly limpid and pale. It was, amazingly, a 1962 *Gelber Muskateller* from his cellar, and it blew us all away. This in case you think of Muscat as “merely” a simple wine for young drinking.

This one is out-of-this-world; a fragrance as complex as Muscat can be; currant, bergamot, wisteria; the palate is cooler and spicier than the aroma suggests, with an opal-basil face almost like Müller-Catoir’s Muscats; there’s a stubborn length and a refusal to yield to simplicity; in fact there’s *bouquet-garni* and some serious minerality here.

- ABY-190 **2006 Gelber Muskateller Auslese**
 Not “Auslese” in the German idiom; more *feinherb* – but wonderfully zingy, spicy, varietal and balanced, as if you took Moscato d’Asti and threw in some dry Alsace Muscat – albeit with botrytis (or even better, *botrytises*) – herbal, balsam, charming and gorgeous.

NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

We've already seen Heiligenstein from Bründlmayer, and we're about to consider it again along with its next-door neighbor Gaisberg from Schloss Gobelsburg, Ludwig Hiedler and Johannes Hirsch. That might look redundant, but these are two sites equivalent to Chambertin and Clos de Bèze and if *you* had three suppliers with parcels in *both* sites, you *wouldn't* offer them? C'mon now!

These are the preeminent Riesling Grand Crus of the Kamptal, and they stand among the greatest land on earth in which Riesling is planted. They're contiguous hillsides, each the lower slopes of the Mannhart-hills, but they're dissimilar in crucial ways. Heiligenstein is higher and broader-shouldered (thanks to Peter Schleimer for that image), and probably just the slightest bit warmer. Soils differ also - this is Europe, after all, cradle of terroir. Gaisberg is crystalline, a soil type the Austrians call "Gföhler Gneiss" which you'll hear the Wachauers talk about also. It's granitic in origin, containing the so-called *Glimmerschiefer* ("gleaming slate") which is essentially fractured granite or schist containing little flecks of silica or mica which sparkle in the sun.

Gaisberg is the type of site wherein Riesling feels inherent, as if neither culminates without the voice of the other. It gives highly *Rieslingy* Rieslings. Slim in body, brilliant in berried and mineral nuance, on the "cool" side of the spectrum. German Riesling lovers, think Würzburg, Kertz, Schäwer, Nies'chen.

Heiligenstein's soil is said to be unique; so-called Zöbinger Perm, a sedimentary sandstone-conglomerate from the late Paleozoic Age, also containing fine sand and gleaming slatey clays. The site is too steep to have collected loess. The wines of this astounding vineyard are clearly profound, though more "difficult" and temperamental than Gaisberg's. Great Heiligenstein contains an improbable conciliation of ostensibly disparate elements: citrus-tart against citrus-sweet (lime against papaya), herbal against pitted fruit (woodruff against nectarine), cool against warm (green tea against roasted beets). The wines are more capacious than Gaisberg's, yet not as entirely brilliant; they have more stomach, they are tenors or altos when Gaisberg are sopranos. German aficionados, think Hermannshöhle and Brücke, Hipping, Jesuitengarten, Weingart's Ohlenberg or Feuerlay.

Which is the better vineyard, you ask? Yes, I answer.



Heiligenstein vineyard

weingut schloss gobelsburg

kamptal • gobelsburg

Peter Schleimer and I were having dinner the night I arrived, and we ordered Gobelsburg's 2005 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition," and it struck me I've *tasted* the wines many times but never yet drank a bottle. It was lovely, and got us talking.

Peter loves it too, as do many of his colleagues at VINARIA (the excellent wine magazine he heads up), and so we wondered why the idea hadn't seemed to spread to other estates. A few days later Hannes Hirsch was thinking out loud, wondering what it might be like to return to the old cellar instead of the brand-new one he built a few years ago, and there's a general sense somewhere between curiosity and yearning about the old ways—or the Old Ways—but best I can tell Michael (or "Michi" as he's known) Moosbrugger's the only man to actually make a wine

along those lines. (Except of course for Nikolaihof, all of whose wines are this way.)

It's important to say the *Tradition* bottling is neither a pastiche nor even really a tribute. It arises from a wish to enter the spirit of the vintners of 100 years ago, before the possibilities of technology created choices they couldn't have imagined. What was their relationship to their land, to their grapes? And how did they conceive of wine?

"The prime motivator for these thoughts arose during the tasting of the old wines in the estate's cellar," Michi begins. Though this was done in order to determine what these old wines might be worth, the experi-



Michael Moosbrugger

ence set a range of thoughts in motion. "Afterward I grew curious about the winemaking practices of the '50s and '60s, and spoke with Father Bertrand as well as the cellarmaster of those days. I felt that to understand those practices would help me better to understand what we're doing today."

"I began to form the theory that, as more technological possibilities existed and were used, the wines became more uniform. The opposite possibility was also to be considered; less technology meant more variable wines. But these were just my starting-out hypotheses, and I'm not at all certain absolute answers are to be found. I think in order to begin to understand the wines of the pre-technological era, you have to try and understand the ideas behind them.

"The purpose in those days was to "school" the wines, what the French still call *elevage*, to raise the wines, or bring them up. It thus followed that for each wine there was an Ideal, and the job of the cellarmaster

was to realize these Ideals in the pure Platonic sense. Only when the Ideal is reached is the wine ready to be appreciated and sold. Naturally there was no recipe, but there was a sense of finding the proper moment in time and in the wine's natural oxidation, and these things were determined empirically and by feel. It's a highly dynamic system, with differences from cask to cask, vintage to vintage, grape to grape. Those people presumed that wine had to develop and expand in oxygen, entirely contrary to what we think today, that we have to protect it from oxygen at all costs."

- **Vineyard area: 40 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Heiligenstein, Gaisberg, Lamm**
- **Soil types: Volcanic sandstone, mica slate, and alpine gravel**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Grüner Veltliner, 25% Riesling, 5% Zweigelt, 8% Pinot Noir, 7% Merlot, 5% St. Laurent**

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But *what* is this Ideal? And is it something *a priori*, or is it of necessity limited by the contingencies of possibility? In order to go deeper into these questions, Michi set about to make a wine as it would have been made between the end of the Franco-Prussian war and the start of World War 1. The results are offered below, and the wines themselves are delicious simply as objects. What compels me, though, is what I'd call the search for *soul*. To be as clear as I can, I think we all suspect that soul is, or can be, crowded out by technology, if only because we surrender to its sterile exactitudes that which we used to know in our fingertips. Every single good vintner I know wants to maintain *animus* between himself and his wine. Hey, I like to make meat balls, and I could easily do them in a food-processor, but I like doing it with my

hands because I like how it feels and I like that my hands know when the mixture is ready. So I can see how a vintner might feel denuded by ennui if all he did was flick the switches and the machines did the rest.

I read once "The point of departure for creativity is the obstacle," and it follows that the more obstacles you face the more creative you *can* be, provided there is at least some way through. I'm not making any sort of Luddite case for pre-technological wines, nor do I suppose they have a nostalgic value. But I share Michi's fascination for how it must have been for the *people* who made wines as best they could in those times, just as I share his intuition that something of soul, something we may have misplaced, is there to be found. I know that hunger, and the rare thing that feeds it.

Moosbrugger is an introverted man, and one who, when he laughs, laughs all of a sudden. Yet a year ago when I thought to draw him out by asking what music he was listening to, expecting to hear of Mahler and the like, he threw my whole game off by telling me he was bopping to *Fatima Spar und die Freedom Fries*. Um, what?!?! It turns out someone gave him the disc because the bass player's name is Moosbrugger (which is an uncommon surname) but now he couldn't get the disc off his player. I'm here to tell you this music is THE SHIT, and no matter how bummed out you think you are this gaudy clamorous noise will grin you *out*. The record is called "Zierzop," and its manic mélange of klezmer, whorehouse jazz and gypsy stomp is irresistible.

We're sitting in the tasting room and the windows are thrown open on the mild Spring day. The omnipresent birds are trolling for mates (thrushes and blackbirds all day and half the night; I got to the point I hoped to be awakened at dawn by them) and a brisk Spring wind is enchanted with flowers, all forming an aural backdrop to the verdant young wines in our glasses.



But soon we heard a new sound, voices, little-kid voices to be precise, and we wandered over to the window and saw Michi's little daughter giggling away with her tiny friend. Remember, a Spring day, breezes and birds, and now this impossibly beautiful little girl in her cotton frock and

bonnet, chirping and laughing and scolding. I watched Michi gaze at his girl. He was in the middle of serving me the greatest collection of Grüner Veltliner I've ever experienced, and he's very

much The Guy right now in Austria – FALSTAFF cover-portrait as vintner of the year, everyone saying his estate is top of the rock...but for a moment he was just a dad gazing on his tiny daughter trilling away to her friend in the enormous Spring.

There is certainly no one *better* in this offering. I am awed by the dedication and long-term idealism of Michael — Moosbrugger, and I am keenly thrilled by his wines. But perhaps even more, I am touched by the grace and kindness of Willi Bründlmayer's gift to us all.

Bründlmayer? Explain.

Schloss Gobelsburg has a centuries-old monastic tra-

dition, during which, as Michi puts it, "There were periods when the wines were great and periods when they weren't; after all, not every generation of monks had the same passion or skill. But what was always true was the quality of the land." When Willi first told me the story he too pointed to the vineyards. "Terry, it is some of the absolute best land in the Kamptal," he said.

But the property was drifting, and as no relief was in site from within, the monks considered summoning the cavalry from without. Willi was approached and his advice sought.

Bründlmayer had a customer, a young man in the opposite end of Austria. Michael Moosbrugger was a restless wine lover, just barely thirty years of age, who had visions of making wine someday. Potentially great winery needs new blood. Young, energetic and visionary wine-lover seeks winery. Put the two together and **whoosh!**

Moosbrugger and Bründlmayer leased the winery and Willi consulted in all aspects of vineyard and cellar until our young hero could stand on his own two feet — which happened pronto.

Michi's wines excel by precision and polish now. Their texture is truly silken, and their "temperament" is as pensive as that of their maker. Gobelsburg has entirely shed the skin of the Michael-Willi association and has arrived at its own place in the firmament.

Gradually, one step at a time, Moosbrugger has added new categories of excellence to his roster, until it seems everything he touches blazes into brilliance. His dessert wines are unsurpassed anywhere in Austria. His sparkling wine is fabulous. His *reds*, from a region not known for great reds, are sensible and lovely. This doesn't result from any sort of alchemy, you know. It *looks* easy when you're sitting in the tasting room and the wines are so good you start taking their excellence for granted. But in fact it involves gradual and painstaking work you do when no one is watching. Choices of vine-material and replanting when necessary. Re-design in the cellar — including an innovation so brilliant you can't believe no one thought of it before. Knowing that large cellars such as Gobelsburg's have varying temperature zones, and wanting to move wines among different zones without having to pump them, Michi invented a system of casks-on-wheeled-platforms, so that entire *casks* can be wheeled hither and yon.

Michi is aware of the gravity of a Great Tradition, but rather than weigh him down it seems to prod him on. If he is aware of occupying a place in history, I imagine it's to hope that, hundreds of years from now, someone will read a chronicle of Schloss Gobelsburg and cite his era as one of enlightenment. He is certainly an example of leaving the world better than you found it!

Feeling awed yet? That's not my intent. Michi's a rather quiet guy (as guys go) but he and Eva are actually Just Folks, and my visits here are warm and relaxed. In fact I've left a couple soul-prints at Schloss Gobelsburg. I was there with colleagues and customers on 9/11/01. And one Summer I was there with the whole gang of Michael Skurnik Wines, and we had a party, with a band, and we commandeered the stage at one point, and Michi sang "New York State Of Mind" in our honor, and we played "Smoke On The Water," and the police were called and a splendid time was had by all.

how the wines taste:

It's beginning to look like Martin Nigl is Moosbrugger's aesthetic soul-brother, though Michi's wines are just a little more fluid in texture. But they're both diligently precise in their detailing of flavor; they both speak flavor with careful diction. His special genius seems to lie in the making of very pretty fine-grained wines at the "low" end of his range—no small gift. And some of the wines offered below are some of the finest in all this offering.

AZZ-070 **NV Brut Reserve**AZZ-070M **NV Brut Reserve, 6/1.5L**

I have enjoyed bamboozling my friends when I serve them this blind; they are certain I'd be serving them Champagne, me being me and all, and they wrack their brains trying to figure out varieties and sub-districts but they are *sure the wine in their glass is Champagne*, i.e., they don't promptly conclude "This can't possibly be Champagne." In fact I think it's the best non-Champagne fizz I've tasted, and wonderfully it is nothing like Champagne – it's 15% Riesling, 15% Pinot Noir and 70% Grüner Veltliner thank you very much. Riesling and GrüVe derive from pre-harvests in the Grand Crus like Lamm and Gaisberg (!). The new disgorgement (2/08) is mostly 2004 with some 2003-2002 seems rounder and fruitier than last year's, but it's snappy with lots of GrüVe raciness; more plush lees, leafier and it shows its sweetness less; even some *batonnage* aromas; articulate and lacy—Nicolas Chiquet could have made it.

GRÜNER VELTLINERSAZZ-116 **2007 Grüner Veltliner "Gobelsburger"**

"Gobelsburger" is in effect a 2nd-label, partly from purchased fruit, intended as a price-point wine for the retail trade. Alas, in Michi's hands, it's much more than that.

You've sussed what an *astonishing* value this is, smart guy. I keep looking intently at Michi as if to ask "You can't really keep offering me this quality at this price can you? I mean really?" And he looks bemusedly back. This '07 is an alarm clock that wakes you up with the songs of a thousand birds; wonderfully sorrely and nettle-y and spearminty; less body and more brilliance than '06, and still absurdly fine in its class.

AZZ-120 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz**AZZ-120H **2007 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz, 12/375ml**

CORE-LIST WINE. The first of the great GrüVes at Gobelsburg, from a high plateau south of the palace, on tertiary gravel along with huge rocks from the original Danube, all blanketed below a layer of loess. The wine was bottle-sick, but showed lime, pepper and wintergreen; transparent and incisive, acupuncture of GrüVe; no possible Wachau Federspiel comes close to this; it doesn't seem incomplete but rather *culminates* here, this is its entirety; it has a "sweet" spiciness like mint jelly.

AZZ-121 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Renner****++**

The site lies at the foot of the Gaisberg where the stony gneiss soil is deeper and contains loess; the vines were planted in the 50s, from old original plant material — this is significant in Austria, where the post-war years saw the plantings of various modern garbage-clones whose only function was to yield like crazy. Starting with the 2001 vintage this has been a highlight of this assortment, a big-scaled Grüner Veltliner of amazing value and contained elegant weight and power, with detail and economy. And this is the best vintage yet for this always astonishing value; all the oleander and flowering-fields but with a pixilated brilliance, a crescendo of spiciness and a stinging freshness that's arresting in contrast to its almost tropical ripeness.

AZZ-122 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** +++

AZZ-122M **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lamm, 6/1.5L**

AZZ-122H **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lamm, 6/375ml**

This is becoming one of the supernal and monumental GrüVes in Austria.

Great wine always indicates a contrast between strength and delicacy, between intensity and precision. That's why great wine doesn't come along very often. With all its power, this wine is melting and elegant; with all its digital specificity it's still *creamy*; for all its determination it is still charming, almost winsome; for all its length it's still discreet. The scale is smaller than the magnificent '06, but it was never about the scale. . .

AZZ-109 **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition," 6/750ml** +

AZZ-109M **2006 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition," 6/1.5L**

This is a deliberate attempt to replicate the style of 50 years ago—conventional pressing on the skins, no must-clarification, no temperature control, and 18 months in old casks with frequent rackings to encourage secondary flavors. It's not a pastiche so much as an *homage* to an old dialect of white wine disappearing from the modern world.

He's done it six vintages now with GrüVe and I admire the *gratitude* these wines embody. If you wish to contrast, this wine is always from the Renner. I think if Bernd Philippi made wine here they'd be like this; vinous, gravelly, woodsy—it smells like wine, not like "a grape variety" though in '06 there's loads of vetiver and roasted red pepper, and the mineral comes on at the end; there's *soul* here, conveyed by the necessities of patience and the cultivation of inference; you see secondary flavors of rye and sorghum, but Michi said it best when he mused, almost to himself "It's not only a wine, it's a prayer. . ."

AZZ-128H **2007 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml** +

Stunning, an ethereal essence of Grüve, still varietal and snappy, plus with this roasted corn firmly structured sweetness that continually melts back to its steely herbal spine; not as stinging as a German Eiswein, but mining a nearby seam.

AZZ-129H **2007 Grüner Veltliner TBA, 12/375ml** +

Refined, salty, lemon-ginger candied, a pecorino or even provolone saltiness; a masterpiece here, of salt and ginger and varietal identity—if wasabi were sweet it would be like this.



RIESLINGSAZZ-117 **2007 Riesling “Gobelsburger”**

This has some pretty schnoz! The palate is racy and dry and zippier than ‘06; lime, spearmint, chartreuse and apricot; tingly focus and *ten-HUT!* posture.

AZZ-119 **2007 Riesling vom Urgestein**AZZ-119H **2007 Riesling vom Urgestein, 12/375ml**

CORE-LIST WINE: From young vines in the Grand Crus Gaisberg and Heligenstein; often this wine seems like a perfect miniature, but it’s really complex on a scale of its own. Abstract from body or alcohol, there’s a symposium of flavor happening here, the tropical-mineral Heligenstein, the berry-mineral Gaisberg. In effect it’s like a *bonsai* of Riesling; it isn’t supposed to be “big” but instead to enthrall you with its detail. It’s so pretty and sleek this year, so classy and limpid, so mineral in that *crushed* ‘07 way; iris and juniper, and a vaporous, minty finish.

AZZ-124 **2007 Riesling Gaisberg**

+

The lovely hush of fragrance doesn’t prepare you for the gorgeous palate, at once resplendently flowery yet also a little arch, even aloof; then the aromas come on; *pure Austria* Riesling, wisteria in the form of diamonds, and an esoteric finish that’s an essence of terroir.

AZZ-123 **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein**

++

If you’re serious about Riesling then you should be buying this every year alongside your Clos Ste.-Hûne and your Dönnhoff Hermannshöhle and all the other iconic must-haves—it is that great, and that important. An *insanely* complicated fragrance leads to a magnificently cool symposium of terroir; really the aromas are hyperactive yet the palate is so luminous and serene; a great wine full of ease and confidence, not an eye-lash out of place.

AZZ-125 **2007 Riesling Alte Reben, 6/750ml**

++

AZZ-125M **2007 Riesling Alte Reben, 6/1.5L**

From 60-year old vines in the Gaisberg, and among the greatest vintages yet, it takes the innate coolness of Gaisberg and renders it incandescent; an ecstasy of every component, not only minerality but also berry and fruit and mint; more thrust and torque—this is not serene—this is pronouncedly dense and succulent and purposively long.

AZZ-126 **2006 Riesling “Tradition,” 6/750ml**

+

AZZ-126M **2006 Riesling “Tradition,” 6/1.5L**

Also from Gaisberg, again a chance to compare the old dialect with the new. Linguists are lamenting the extinction of languages because of the thought-systems they embody, and here is a vinous language and a man preserving it as a dynamic thing, not as a museum curator, and the wine murmurs its minerality in a long, granular vein.

BEST OF THE RESTAZZ-118 **2006 Zweigelt “Gobelsburger”**

Lovely dusty-bricky aromas; the palate seems to default to the St. Laurent side of Zweigelt; stewy, tomatoes, juicy soft and winning, plummy and generous, yet moderate and kindly—12.5% alc., happily.

AZZ-127 **2005 “Cuvée Bertrand”**

+

Pinot Noir and St. Laurent, and yeah, yeah, I know, no one can sell it if it doesn’t have a varietal tag. But *taste* it and then tell me it can’t be sold. A wonderful truffley fragrance plus leather and very fresh sandalwood; the palate follows in a juicy, elegant and endlessly “sweet” form, waves of caressing fruit, graceful and deft and offering pure *deliciousness*.

weingut ludwig hiedler

kamptal • langenlois

Ludwig was pensive this year, at least by his normally voluble standards. A close family member was in ailing health. But not only that. Things are astir at Weingut Hiedler, and in the loveliest possible way: They are slowing down.

The first organic experiments are happening, in the sites Thal and Kittmannsberg. And for the past several years now Ludwig was done only spontaneous fermentations without enzymes or even SO₂, and without temperature control. The '07s fermented very slowly and all seem to have undergone malo—at least the wines show no detectable malic acidity in the lab—yet none have the buttery aromas or satiny textures we associate with malo. Part of this is

Ludwig's innate restlessness, and another part is his desire to eschew the established orthodoxies. I'd like to hope it is also a signal that Austrian vintners in general are retreating from internationalism. When they arrived on the world stage they were, naturally, eager to join the prevailing currents; they spoke with colleagues from all over and returned home full of notions and ideas. This of course is harmless, and has its good side. But not as good as stepping away from the prevailing norms from any-old-where in order to learn what is *uniquely* one's own.

"We want to return to our cussed individuality!" said Hiedler, laughing. Ya gotta love the guy. And his 2007 vintage is markedly *better* than 2006. It also marks the second consecutive vintage of supernal Rieslings from Ludwig, who is himself a "Pinot Blanc man," and

who has sometimes seemed almost surprised by the class and complexity of his Rieslings. Not now. "These 2007 Rieslings, this is my soul," he said.

We were sitting at dinner one night. Maria-Angeles Hiedler was to my left with Ludwig at the head of the table to my right, talking animatedly to Peter Schleimer. I

caught Maria looking pensively

Maria & Ludwig Hiedler

at her husband. "What first attracted you to Ludwig?" I asked her.

"Believe it or not, it was his ears," she replied thoughtfully. "Look at those proud powerful ears." I did,



- **Vineyard area: 26 hectares**
- **Annual production: 14,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Thal, Losierberg, Spiegel, Heiligenstein, Gaisberg**
- **Soil types: Sandy loess and loam, gravel, eroded desert sandstone**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Riesling, 7% Weissburgunder, 10% Chardonnay, 3% Frühroter Veltliner, 17% Zweigelt, Pinot Noir and Sangiovese**

and agreed they were impressive. "Then it was the scar on his cheekbone, and after that it was a sense I had that this man had both his feet not only *on* the ground but even *in* the ground, that he wouldn't be blown away by every little breeze."

I glanced over at Ludwig and all I could do was smile. It was all so true. He is a very beautiful man. And lately I feel his relationship to his wines has somehow culminated, so that human soul and wine are aligned in a unity of being. You can't separate them; he *is* this wine; it *is* him.

"I am a restless spirit," said Ludwig Hiedler; "I always want another angle to improve the wines." Hiedler likes extract most of all. "It's the single most important facet of wine," he says. "That's why I don't believe in the whole-cluster pressing, because you lose too much extract."

"Plus," he added with a merry gleam, "I like to be different from the others!" I remember holding one of my gala tastings one year in New York, and Johannes Selbach happened to be there. He had a moment before the teeming hordes arrived, so he made his way through the Austrians, a big ol' buncha Veltliners. So wadja think, boss? I asked him. Very good, very good, he said . . . only there's one wine I don't understand, this Hiedler. Why

not? “Well, compared to the others it has so much *schmalz*,” Johannes answered.

“That’s perfect! *Schmalz*,” said Hiedler when I told him this story. “Yes, I *want* my wines to have this *schmalz*; that is the extract!” This whole encounter made me so happy, much as I feel when I go from Catoir to Koehler-Ruprecht; there’s so many ways for wine to be beautiful, and we *don’t have to choose*. We get to have them all! So, if you’re looking for a more approachable kind of Austrian wine (one with *schmalz*!) with a big thick comforter of

fruit and vinosity, you’ll like these and they won’t wreck your budget.

Hiedler’s wines are both intense and genial. He’s informal, open, transparent. Even his tasting room is clear, a modern, white room under a tempered-glass sun-roof. He feels the wines of Kamptal need a full year to begin to show, perhaps even longer for his wines. Wachau wines show earlier. This is especially true of the loess-grown Veltliners, which have less minerality but a bigger belly of fruit.

Hiedler at a glance:

Don’t like squeaky-clean, reductive wines? Step right up! Amazing values for chewy, ample wines with old-fashioned meat on ‘em. They are among the highlights in every vintage.

how the wines taste:

Satisfying, is how they taste! Look, I adore those filigree delineated wines, you know I do, but after five days of tasting them it starts to feel like work. They demand study. With the first hit-o-Hiedler the palate sits up with a jolt: “Is there a party? Sure feels like it!” Yet within their succulent density is all the complexity you could wish for. They’re the thinking-man’s wine porno!

AHL-131 2007 Grüner Veltliner “Loess”

CORE-LIST WINE: Highly fragrant in the yellow-bean and pea-pod direction; typically creamy and dry and moving toward pepper in the slim and delicate finish. Back to “normal” with a gulpable 11.5% alc.

AHL-132 2007 Grüner Veltliner Thal

CORE-LIST WINE: I never get the same answer twice when I ask about the soil here; this time it’s *urgestein* and the next time it’s *loess* and Ludwig’s fact-sheet refers to “red sand,” so maybe it’s simply “weathered triceratops dandruff from the Paleozoic age” or something. In any case the wine is always juicy and exotic — the Viognier cognate is usually vivid here. Old vines (around 70), and the wine is cooler and more vertical than usual, more inside-the-lines and less exotic; dandelion greens, walnut oil; racy and deliberate and dryer-seeming, less succulent and more upright, thin-lipped and almost angular, birch-smoky. I like this *very* much.

AHL-135 2007 Grüner Veltliner “November”

+

AHL-135M 2007 Grüner Veltliner “November,” 6/1.5L

This is always the neoclassical GrüVe, the one with the Grecian columns; this year it’s toasty and has a jet-blast of intensity, smoldering embers; what’s remarkable is the stentorian firmness and impeccable organization of the palate; both white irises and the stone wall they grow up against.

AHL-136 2007 Grüner Veltliner “Maximum,” 6/750ml

+

AHL-136M 2007 Grüner Veltliner “Maximum,” 6/1.5L

The color is almost goldenrod; the nose is lavish roasted red pepper; the palate has the mineral of the ‘06 but also a riot of lovage, stewed tomatoes and basil and eucalyptus; it’s fiery but not apoplectic; long, spicy, lovely and with a focused intensity, not just a bellowing yawp of extravagance.

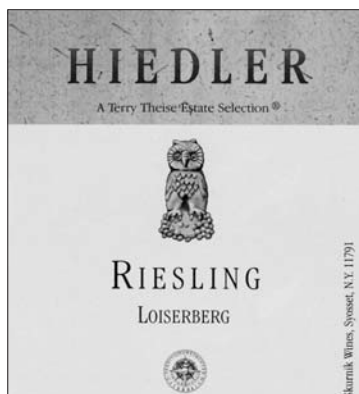
AHL-142 1994 Grüner Veltliner Thal “Reserve”

++

This was a knockout when I first shipped it, and all it’s done is get better; a gorgeous grown up GrüVe with 11g.l. RS (so “Halbtrocken” but really tasting as-good-as-dry at this stage); total vetiver; crazy-spicy GrüVe; pulpy, tarragon, smoky, like a liquid from bacon-wrapped dates. VERY limited, and liable to be more so after I score *my* share for the cellar.

- AHL-133 **2007 Riesling “Urgestein”**
This replaces the old *Loiser Berg* because now it contains 15% from a new parcel in our friend *Steinmassel*. Iris and lilac; hi-def focus and lacy detail; woodruff and balsam; super basic Riesling jammed with crushed-rocks extract.
- AHL-137 **2007 Riesling Steinhaus** +
Ludwig calls this a “rampant” vineyard; it has amphibolite and gneiss in the higher terraces and loess in the lower, and it always gives him a singular Riesling that hints at Sauvignon. This is a potion of herbs and esoteric meadow-plants that only the monks and shepherds know; fennel and caraway and juniper and chartreuse; a Riesling for people who get Riesling, with an almost pepperminty finish.
- AHL-134 **2007 Riesling Gaisberg** ++
Can wine smell better than this? I mean really? Freesia and blackberry; oh man, dry Riesling hardly improves on this; a neon buzz of brightness, iridescent and ultra-violet and stony; starched and turned out; snappy and superb.
- AHL-138 **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein** ++
AHL-138M **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein, 6/1.5L**
Absolute Grand Cru aromas; another dimension here, a bigger echo-chamber of complexity; this is magnificent, symphonic, epic; capacious and nuanced; stern and smoky; interstellar overdrive!
- AHL-139 **2007 Riesling “Maximum,” 6/750ml** ++
AHL-139M **2007 Riesling “Maximum,” 6/1.5L** ++
A *cuvée* from Heiligenstein, Kogelberg (gneiss and amphibolite) and 50-year old vines from Dechant (loess); insanely exotic and long, and every possible bite of ripeness despite “only” 100° Oechsle and 13.5% alc; minty to the end of time, and absurdly long, as expressive as a kick to the shins, yet enveloping, almost gushing.
- AHL-141 **2006 Pinot Blanc Spiegel** +
First offering: and the best Spiegel ever, ever! I don’t normally offer this, as the small trade-up to the iconic Pinot Blanc Maximum tends to make you lose interest in the kid brother, but wow, this is excellent Pinot Blanc; almost as juicy and capacious as a normal vintage of Maximum; toast and roasted corn; alive and beaming; acacia and ginger and tarragon, meyer lemon and langoustine and allspice.
- AHL-140 **2007 Weissburgunder “Maximum,” 6/750ml** ++
AHL-140M **2007 Weissburgunder “Maximum,” 6/1.5L**
You want to see how good Pinot Blanc can *be*?

52-year old vines, and I do not recall a better vintage than this one of what I would argue is the best Pinot Blanc in the world. Articulate, wonderful ripe fruit but no brute power; delineated and filigree, spicy and penetrating; like a perfect *crepe* with ham and béchamel; nubby and silky. Yes Virginia, Pinot Blanc does *this*.



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

weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

He finished the harvest before many others started, on October 8th, and with “perfect, clean fruit.” Johannes Hirsch is nearly finished his conversion to bio-dynamics, which might perhaps explain how his grapes were ripe earlier than his neighbors’. In any case, the process fascinates him, and the politics . . . well, the politics are an evil perhaps on the far side of necessary.

These ‘07s are derangedly superb, especially the Rieslings, which are the greatest Austrian Rieslings I think I’ve ever tasted. Peter Schleimer had hinted I might like them, and he watched my face as I took the first sip of Gaisberg, which assumed control of my body and was a rush of beauty that almost flattened me—and he sat there grinning insanely like “See? See? I knew you’d like them!”

We tend to like to party with ‘Hannes, ‘cause he’s crazily witty and likes to have fun, but when the party’s over he’s a man with an active and probing mind. And he seems to have no fear. He was the first in Austria to go 100% Stelvin, the first to delay bottling and releasing his Grand Crus, and now that the politics of the bio-dynamic conversion are apparent, I have little doubt he’ll find some novel way through.

Sometimes when you have your kids they lead you back to your soul, and the Johannes Hirsch I know now



Johannes Hirsch

is rather different from the one I met ten years ago, still fun and witty, but entirely more probing and curious, even restless. He seems to want to go back and rethink choices that seemed simple when he made them the first time. He seems to want to decelerate in general. His wines, always *exciting*, are becoming profound.

My wife, who’s a doyenne of the sustainable agriculture movement for some thirty years now, says you gotta tough it out. I’m sure she’s right. But my heart goes out to the lone wolves of the world. Politics always reduces to a lowest-common-denominator. If I were ever asked to join

- **Vineyard area: 24 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Lamm, Gaisberg, Heiligenstein**
- **Soil types: Loess, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles**
- **Grape varieties: 60% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling, 5% Other**

some Riesling conclave (like *that* would ever happen . . .) I’d politely decline, even if I agreed with the principles and supported the work. Because my work is *living* the principles, at least I hope it is, and it’s pleasant to consider a world of *individual* people each trying to do the right thing. As opposed to the grim spectacle of a bunch of people quarreling about how much cubic zirconia has to go into the cow horn.



Hirsch at a glance:

Zoom! Went this agency, from out-of-nowhere to the top. Stellar-quality wines from a star-quality vintner at reasonable prices. AND AVAILABILITY IS GOOD.

how the wines taste:

For such great wines these are comparatively “easy” to understand: they’re juicy and spicy and their flavors are candid and animated. Specific nuances are, as always, determined by the vineyard. Frau Selbach would say they have CARAMBA! I, in an uninhibited moment, could imagine myself saying they HAVE BOOTIE AND CAN SHAKE IT.

AWH-065 **2007 Grüner Veltliner “Veltliner #1”**

CORE-LIST WINE: The first of what became a wave of cheap & cheerful GrüVes now rampaging through the market like the bulls in Pamplona. I remember Hanes and I “conceptualizing” this wine; we knew we wanted something fetching and aromatic, we knew we didn’t mind a few grams of sugar you can’t taste but which elevates the wine, and we knew we’d pay the little bit more it would cost to whole-cluster press it. I didn’t know how witty the wonderful sequence of labels would be, but I love them changing each year. And this is by far the best vintage yet, with ripe, even complex aromas, stylish and classy; acacia blossoms, vetiver, meyer lemons; not just ‘Hannes’ best but maybe the best cheap Grüve of any I’ve offered; certainly stands with the 2006 Gobelsburg, and with many years’ Heiligenstein; the length of texture and solid finish are amazing for a wine so light—11.5%!

AWH-066 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein** +AWH-066H **2007 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml** +

CORE-LIST WINE: *really* gorgeous aromas . . . wassup here? This was the first clue that these ‘07s would assume hitherto unknown forms. A real swoon of blossom, euphoric and sultry; wonderful mid-palate leesy length and finesse; this has such cool spice and the breezy fragrance of blooming fruit trees in a sunny grove.

AWH-061 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** +AWH-061M **2006 Grüner Veltliner Lamm, 6/1.5L**

Quite different from Gobelsburg’s, and actually more like his *Grub* in its sweetness and clotted-creaminess; black-bready, minty finish and an oddly elliptical length, almost angular; it *seems* clipped until you realize it isn’t. I suspect this may be one of the tardier 2006s.

AWH-067 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** +(+)AWH-067M **2007 Grüner Veltliner Lamm, 6/1.5L** +(+)

This was from a hastily blended cask sample, from lots that had finished fermenting. Johannes’ wines take time. This vintage looks ripe, “sweet” and stylish, even-tempered, classy and refined, and it seems thick and long but by no means *heavy*. That’s as definitive as I’m willing to get, except to say Hirsch is the most *drinkable* of the grand trilogie-o-Lamms I offer. By the way, though lamb is a signature flavor of the site (along with rosemary, buckwheat and rye) its name derives from a dialect word for “loam.” I’ll take obscure vineyard names for \$400, Alex. . . .

AWH-068 **2007 Riesling Zöbing** +

Best vintage ever for this starter-Riesling; pure aroma of iris and hedge-berries, smoky and sleek; *what* grip in these wines across the board; this is what *substance* means; it isn’t connected to weight or even power, it’s a palpable sense of *material*, not to mention in this case it tastes fricking great.

- AWH-063 **2006 Riesling Gaisberg** **+**
 AWH-063M **2006 Riesling Gaisberg, 6/1.5L**
 Oops, I seem to have used a naughty word in my notebook. “Not just stunning nose but *fucking* stunning nose,” I seem to have written. Oh dear, that’s just so not me. Tightly packed mineral and wisteria, molten silver; the palate is almost constricting, crazily tight, ultraviolet; also leesy, and weirdly also chocolate and jasmine and taragon; it’s a wild ride of neon and flower and mineral; it seems to attach jumper-cables from the glass to your palate.
- AWH-069 **2007 Riesling Gaisberg** **+++**
 AWH-069M **2007 Riesling Gaisberg, 6/1.5L**
 CORE-LIST WINE. By this time I’d learned both the ‘07 Rieslings had some . . . <whisper> . . . *residual sugar*, not a lot, but more than is legally allowed for “Trocken.” What can I say? This wine has an *insane* aroma! Lost for words. The greatest wine I’ve tasted from this Grand Cru. Ultimate Gaisberg; no point in dissecting this ecstasy; you will never meet a sexier or more substantive wine.
- AWH-064 **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein** **++**
 AWH-064M **2006 Riesling Heiligenstein, 6/1.5L**
 The first vintage where this has shown better earlier than Gaisberg, and one of the greats in the community of Heiligensteins in this offering. It’s almost pathologically exotic, animal-exotic; peppers and (again) mint; dense, stormy; the palate is haunted, obsessively spicy, incense-y and mineral; a tremendous showing for this usually tardy wine; it takes your palate and slams it against a wall of smoky minerality; it doesn’t finish since it *won’t* LEAVE.
- AWH-070 **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein** **+++**
 AWH-070M **2007 Riesling Heiligenstein, 6/1.5L**
 The aroma is so dripping with sex and voodoo it could almost be Hiedler. It’s certainly a site archetype, crammed with roasted beets and incense. And the palate is *out of control*! Crazy sorcery of smoke and spice, physio-sweet yet with a lunge toward stone and primordial terroir below an avalanche of fruit, key-lime, orchid and narcissus; astonishing interplay of buoyancy and density; the finish peals like an enormous bell, an echo-chamber of fruit and flowers and “soft” mineral—Riesling does not improve on this: WINE does not improve on this.
- AWH-058 **Riesling Gaisberg “Library Vintages” (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004)**
 Here you’ll get three bottles each of Riesling Gaisberg 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2004.
- 2004:** *This is a devilishly complex thing; spicy-salty aromas, ferrous and showing some of the ‘04s charred smoky notes; a sizzling spicy palate, thickly juicily mineral—don’t ever let anybody tell you “mineral” is a euphemism for “unripe,” because this (and hundreds of wines like it) is about as lavish as wine gets, only its flavor dialect is mineral, not “fruit.” There’s a note of not-quite-fully-ripe blackberry; the palate really swells and billow and sweetens, reaching a crescendo of lavish iridescent intesnsity.* ++
- 2003:** *Always one the great Rieslings in this offering. The 2003, one of the top-few Riesling of the vintage, has a stunningly expressive nose; wisteria and blackberry and Gyokoru; the palate is just absurd, psychedelically vivid, phosphorescent shimmer, mint and wintergreen and fruit and some sort of stone you’d lick to restore eyesight to the blind; lavish fruit yields to pure ore and spice on the finish.* ++
- 2002:** *The 2002 is just screaming with great sizzling depth of mirabelle and raspberry. High-toned minerally nose and the palate has the usual sizzling precision and wonderful saltiness.* ++
- 1999:** *Greater swell than the 1998 and more undertow of power. Deep internal rich pikant ripeness and the potential for profundity in the muscle underlying the mineral.*

wachau

I think my favorite thing of all about the Wachau is the idyllic Landhaus Bacher in Mautern, where I like to stay when I'm there. You feel very cared-for. The rooms are dear without being either stultifyingly luxurious or too adorably precious. The restaurant is just a perfect joy; lovely, radiant food, nothing show-offy, just purity, vitality. The amazing Johanna, who never seems to sleep, sets the tone for utterly exquisite service, and is somehow there the next morning to coax you into reluctant consciousness with her almost unbearable gaiety.

The restaurant's wine list is an Aladdin's cave of treasures from the Wachau and its neighbors. And yet, as I perused it night after night I found myself more drawn to the wines of the Kamptal and Kremstal, which simply offered more quality-per-Dollar than the magnificently unreasonable Wachau. Why magnificent? Because the region is stupendously beautiful and the best wines are the pinnacles of Austrian wines. Why unreasonable? Because there's too much business chasing too little truly great wine. The Wachau is a wonderful place to be a tourist, a gourmand, a wine-geek, but it's an awkward place to do business.

The greatest Wachau wine will distinguish itself from its neighbors in the Kamptal or Kremstal the way great Côte de Nuits does from Côte de Beaune; all things being equal, Wachau wines are simply weightier. The best of them, though, are distressingly scarce, and prone to be pricey, especially at lesser levels of ripeness. The great wines are worth whatever one can afford to pay for them, but the smaller wines often strike me as dubious values. And one must be quite selective. There's a large disparity between a few superb properties and the gen-

eral run of rather ordinary vintners who seem content to coast in the slipstream of the region's renown.

that can truly be called rugged. Vineyards are everywhere the sun shines, along valley floors on loamy sand soils, gradually sloping upward over loess deposits and finally climbing steep horizontal terraces of Urgestein—once again, the primary rock soil containing gneiss, schist and granite, often ferrous (which may account for the “ore” thing I often use in tasting notes).

The locals talk of a “climate fiord” brought on by the gorge-like configuration of the landscape and the collision of two climactic phenomena; the Pannonian current from the east with the continental current from the west, all of which make for extreme variations of day and nighttime temperatures. The autumns, particularly, are clement and usually dry, enabling growers to harvest quite late with little fear of botrytis. Early November picking is routine. (Though one sly grower said: “There's nothing romantic about picking in November.”) The western section of the regions is said to give its finest wines, due in part to cooler nighttime temperatures as the breezes blow down from the hills. The wines become fuller-bodied and more powerful as you move down-

This tiny region (fewer than 1,500 hectares) can give Austria's mightiest and most profound wines.

eral run of rather ordinary vintners who seem content to coast in the slipstream of the region's renown.

Indeed this problem is getting worse, not better. Even if one yields the point that the best Wachau wines are the best Austrian wines of all, the second level of Wachau wines are nothing out of the ordinary and they're highly overpriced. I begin to wonder if Wachau wines don't really reach their sweet-spot of ripeness below the “Smaragd” level. Below 12.5% alcohol a great many taste malnourished and incomplete. We threw a Wachau-ringer into a tasting of wines from the “lesser” region of Donauland, and the two Smaragds were—appropriately—among the very best wines. But the three Federspiels were among the limpest and least interesting. No importer only wants to buy a grower's few best wines; we want good quality across the range.

The Danube cuts a gorge through a range of hills

The Danube cuts a gorge through a range of hills that can truly be called rugged.

stream, reaching their utmost force and expression in Loiben and Dürnstein.

Most of the growers in the Wachau have banded together to form the VINEA WACHAU growing association. I tend, as you know, to be rather curmudgeonly on the subject of growers' associations, but there's some

good sense at work in this one. You're going to have to take that on faith, though, because you will be asked to LEARN SOME TERMS.

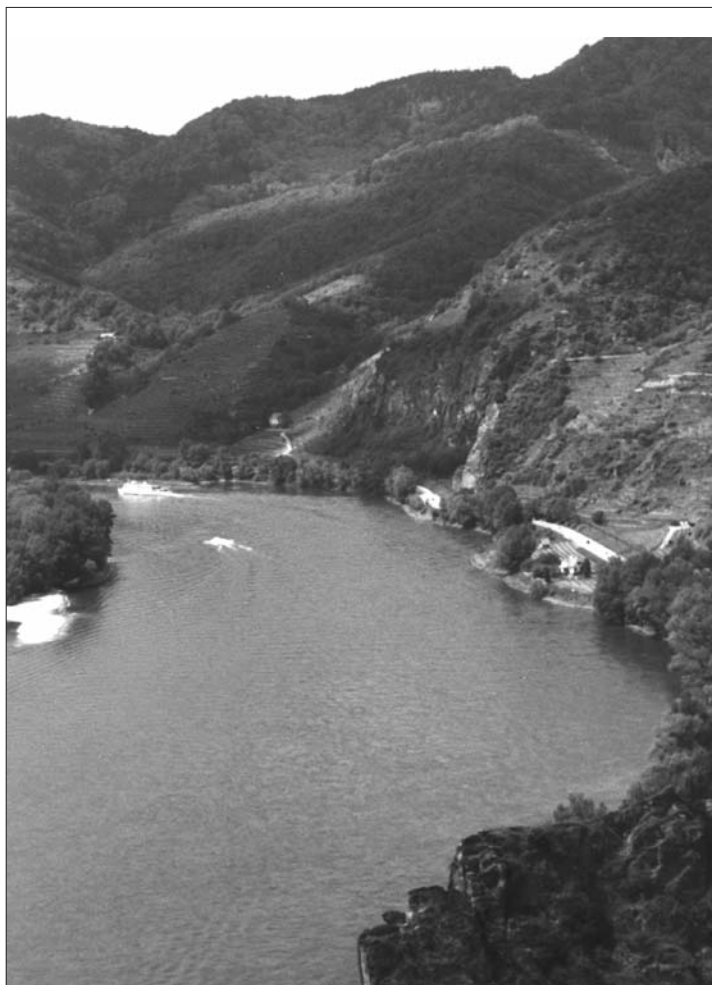
Members of the Vinea Wachau have a nomenclature all their own to describe their wines. The least of them (referred to as "dainty" in the promotional brochure) is

Finally comes the most fanciful name of all, for the best class of wine. Get to know Smaragd! Put a little LIZARD in your life!

called **Steinfeder**, (after a local strain of grass), for musts between 73° and 83° Oechsle, always, dry and never higher than 10.7% alcohol. Steinfelder wines *can* be very attractive if they are physiologically ripe. Sometimes they seem misguided. Good ones, though, are little miracles, fresh and innocent, though too slight to ship abroad.

Next up is **Federspiel**, equivalent to Kabinett. Also dry. Can be quite good! Often isn't. Can be overpriced. Usually is.

Finally comes the most fanciful name of all, for the best class of wine. Get to know **Smaragd**! Put a little LIZARD in your life! For that's what it means; "Smaragd" is the German word for "emerald," referring to the brilliant colors of the lizards who like to sun themselves beneath the vines on a summer's day. I actually think there's some poetry here; lizard, sunlight, hot skin, basking, ripe grapes, big wine, you get the picture. Smaragd begins at 90° Oechsle, i.e. Spätlese quality, thus relatively limited and sometimes (in rare, crummy vintages) not available at all. It must be fermented as far as possible but if there's more than 9 grams of residual sugar you can't call it Smaragd. Even the length of the corks is regulated. This is where Wachau wine seems to culminate, and the best of these not only stand easily with the world's great white wines, they put many of them firmly in the shade.



The Danube

leo alzinger

wachau • unterloiben

Peter and I drank a bottle of F.X. Pichler's 2002 Steinertal Riesling one night, and it was as marvelous as we expected it to be. I've long admired the glossy power of those wines at their best. Yet when I looked at the words I was using to discuss it—it was showing well, it *performed* beautifully—I realize I felt like I was an *audience* for the wine, that I was separate from it in some crucial way. Perhaps this has everything to do with me, and it's by no means a slam on a highly laudable wine, but when I drink Alzinger's wine I have no such feeling. With them I feel included, roused, affectionate; I feel a thing akin to love.

Alzinger's wines are no more forceful than any of the other Wachau greats. They aren't longer, or riper.

What they do is take the serenity with which they're endowed and pass it upward through a kind of apotheosis, beyond which they are beatific and glowing. You wouldn't be surprised if the cellar master were the Dalai Lama. Alzinger's wines almost never push and assert; they are instead amazingly sanguine and calmly lovely.

Regardless of one's view of the various wines from the Names of the region, there's an unchallenged consensus that Alzingers themselves are the sweetest people. Indeed, if they were more pushy and ambitious I'm sure they would have shoved their way to the top of the masthead.

Leo Alzinger Sr. and Hans-Günter Schwarz (ex-Müller-Catoir) are friends. This news didn't surprise me in the least; both men are strangely angelic. "He is such a dear man," said Schwarz. "He called me one evening and said he had a question for me. Might it be possible for his



Alzinger, son and father

- **Vineyard area: 8 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Loibenberg, Steinertal, Liebenberg**
- **Soil types: Eroded primary rock, sandy soils with loam**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Grüner Veltliner, 40% Riesling, 5% Chardonnay**

son to do a little practicum here with me? And he asked his question and then was silent, and I wasn't sure if he was finished speaking. But then came, many seconds later, like a little peep . . . 'please'?"

I grinned in recognition. That's Alzinger. Of all the overlords of the almighty Wachau (with whom he indisputably belongs), Alzinger *must* be the sweetest and humblest guy. His wines, too, are loving and kindly, more like Knoll or Prager than like Hirtzberger or Pichler, but possibly the *silkiest* wines in all the Wachau. Slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y, I'm getting more of them to share with you.

I happened to be sitting next to a buyer for one of Austria's major wine retailers one evening over dinner. We were schmoozin'. I asked him: "Apart from a *professional* appraisal, which Wachau wines do you personally most *enjoy*?" He thought for an instant and answered: "Alzinger and Prager." When I repeated the story to Peter Schleimer he agreed; it's a virtual consensus. There are more impressive wines, perhaps . . . *perhaps*, but there are none more loveable.

Alzinger is a retiring, sweet and gentle personality; which may be why he gets fewer wreaths and garlands, but those In The Know *Know*, and Alzinger's best are just as scarce and sexy as any Austrian wine.

I noticed the wines as soon as I made my first visit

to Austria; they made for some unforgettable drinking if you could find a mature vintage. The young wines I saw were stormy and closed, but that's changed in the last bunch of years.

I mentioned why I hadn't been to see him sooner. Was it possible the wines were now being made to be more approachable younger, I asked? Flushing as though I'd uncovered a guilty secret, he answered yes. More space in the winery, a new press, more stainless steel, more whole-cluster pressing, a lot of reasons.

This is the only winery I visit where I taste a lot of cask-samples. Alzinger bottles quite late by Austrian standards. He seems to think early bottling suffocates some wines, and he's gently wry about the Austrian frenzy for little baby-wines still splooshy and goopy. The

beauty of his 2006s came as no surprise, but their purity of tone grows more striking with each passing year. It hurts how little wine we get, hardly enough for one *restaurant*, let alone an entire fire-belching behemoth of a **country**. But, but . . . patience. Others were there first. I must humbly wait. Existing clients have their rights too. Rat-bastards.

Botrytis was a factor in the Wachau '07s, far more so than in the Kamptal, which is further from the Danube. Everyone got the mid-October rains ("We were lucky it was cold during and after the rain or things would have been worse," said Leo) but Alzinger's Federspiels were all picked beforehand. Some of the Smaragd show botrytis notes, though none objectionably.

Alzinger at a glance:

Sleek, clear, winsome yet authoritative wines from the kindly hands of the newest Wachau superstar! Every vintage since 1995 is amongst the best collection in Austria.

how the wines taste:

Alzinger's wines are uniformly threaded into skeins of nuance and even when they're at their biggest they're always shapely and lissome. They aren't delicious because they're great; they're great because they're *delicious*.

ALA-073 2007 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel

This is unusually spicy and pointed and *alive* for Federspiel; almost as zingy as Gobelsburg's Steinsetz; it begins beany and ends peppery.

ALA-074 2007 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd, 6/750ml

Markedly riper and creamier, but also more stormy and swirling, less straight-lined; it's really potent and adamant and peppery, a strong willful wine, more assertive than usual from this estate.

ALA-078 2007 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml

+

Hints of botrytis on the nose and a groundswell of sultry minerality on the palate; it's baroque, ceremonial, an incense-y, chanting GrüVe, stern and long and mysterious. You'd serve it at your next coven, witches. (Gotta maintain that Wicka market. . .)

ALA-079 2007 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd, 6/750ml

+

It has its customary (and sublime) aroma in a lower register in 2007—botrytis plays a role—but the palate is assertively juicy and shows the pounded-mineral thing of '07, but this is *huskier* than any vintage since 2001.

ALA-075 2007 Riesling Dürnsteiner Federspiel

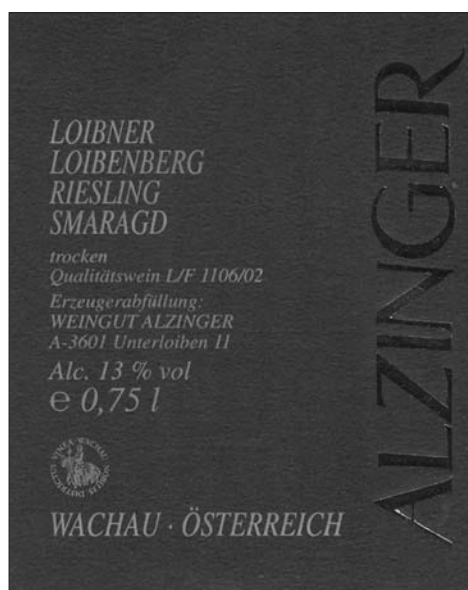
Ah, a sea-change into the Rieslings, which are more melodious; this has a superb fragrance, aloe vera, balsam, white iris; the palate is serene, herbal-flowery, mineral; raw-silk texture and quite complex, with a hyssop nuance; it's at once yielding and strong-willed.

ALA-080 2007 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml

+

A soil like the Gaisberg's, mica-schist and gneiss, and this shows its typical radish, spring-onion and scallion fragrances, with some botrytis; the palate has that beatific, sweet Alzinger texture; how *does* all that spiciness get into this cashmere softness. The wine likes you, it conveys affection.

- ALA-076 **2007 Riesling Hollerin Smaragd, 6/750ml** +
 Had to beg a few years to get this (and still haven't been able to score any of the supernatural Höhereck, which was the best of Alzinger's 2007 Rieslings damn damn damn) and it's such a joy to show you Alzinger in fruit-bomb mode; apricot and mirabelle aromas; wonderful grip and serenity, and an animated dialogue among its pitted-fruit, herbal and stony components, and also between aspects in its temperament, its sharply stated will against its Zen calm. In the Kremsleiten/Freiheit family of fruit-forward Rieslings.
- ALA-077 **2007 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd, 6/750ml** ++
 Botrytis diminished to a mere hint. Strikingly complex and fine aromas, high-bred roses and papaya and aloe and wisteria; the palate is sublime, dewy, meltingly complex; afterglow but not somnolent, still awake; the divinity that lives in this is loving and restless; it walks through deep Spring woods, lost in thought, walking fast.
- ALA-081 **2007 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd, 6/750ml** ++
 You grin as its manifest greatness greets you. It leaps and frolics. It's all about puppy-energy, and the wisdom of the rocks and leaves. So bright it's almost garish—almost—and then you're pulled under a silky blanket of forest herbs and lime and flowers; it indicates what sweetness would be like if you could take away the *sugar*.



weingut josef jamek

wachau • joching

One year this was my first visit of the trip, and I was alone. It was a pretty Spring midday (“The first day we’ve set up tables in the garden,” they told me) and I had that super-attentiveness you have when you’re at-table alone. At Jamek you taste somewhere in the restaurant, as if to emphasize the connections among wine, food, regionality. The garden slowly filled up with people pausing to enjoy their lives on a soft Spring day among the flowers and blackbirds and trees. Some of them brought their dogs, who lay cooperatively under the table as well-behaved Euro-dogs do. I watched food and wine being served and wondered; *What role does wine play here?* To what does it pertain? Do we ever think about how wine fits into other aspects of our lives, or is it just wine-*qua*-wine for us? There was an old golden retriever who lay pensively near his family; he’s known for untold years he won’t

be fed from the table, but still he lies there pensively gazing at us all with doleful tolerance. How does wine pertain to *him*?

It is something to see wine drunk without fuss in a Spring garden as the world sings and blossoms and people eat their salads and pike-perch and schnitzels. (Yes I know they do it in California too, but what does Spring have to do with big-ass oaky wines with 15% alcohol?) It makes wine one among many joy-companions in a life lived appreciatively.

We had worked through the Veltliners and Pinots, and we may even have tasted the Muscat, and when the first Riesling was poured, one of us—it might have been me—heaved a happy sigh. Hans Altmann, owner and cellar-master of Jamek for several years now, grinned at the spontaneous happiness inspired by his Riesling. “Sometimes,” he mused, “I think that every sip of wine that isn’t Riesling is wasted.”

I know the feeling! But many years earlier, in the summer of 1992, I sat in the garden behind the restaurant



winery I ever visited, and I was as entirely happy as I have ever been with a glass of wine in my hand. So this was Veltliner; this was Austria! My wine life was about to change for the better.

Jamek did so many things first it’s impossible to imagine the entire modern Austria wine scene without him. “For decades he has produced wines of invariably high quality,” wrote *The World of Wines* in a recent book on top producers in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Jamek was the first to glimpse the Wachau’s potential to

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Achleiten, Klaus, Pichl and Freiheit**
- **Soil types: Gföhl gneiss, eroded primary rock, gravel and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Riesling, 30% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Weissburgunder and Chardonnay, 10% Zweigelt and Pinot Noir**

give profound and serious dry wine, and he revolutionized the entire region; none of the current crop of master-vintners could exist without Jamek’s shoulders to stand on. He is universally called the “doyen” of Wachau growers. He was even the first to recognize the significance of proper stemware; after the Brussels World’s Fair at the end of the fifties he commissioned (from Claus Riedel) a glass designed for his Rieslings from the Grand Cru Ried Klaus.

Jamek was also among the first to eschew chaptalisation, preferring to make natural fully fermented wines. “Alcohol in and of itself is no measure of quality,” he says. Full physiological ripeness is more important than high must-weight. Rudolf Knoll quotes him saying, succinctly and perfectly: “My recipe? Work clean and leave the wine in peace.”

One has to understand Jamek’s restaurant as a kind of compass guiding the style of the wines. It seems to be the fulcrum, not the winery. “We have a winery and also a little restaurant where we serve the wines,” is decidedly not the case. “We have a restaurant and also a winery which supplies it” is closer to the truth. Altmann agreed when I said I thought his wines were deliberately fashioned to be useful at table. This doesn’t preclude them being profound—they have their own noble tradition to observe—but it does suggest they’re not chasing those 90-point scores. Good for them! The wines are profound *anyway*.

The doyen handled his holster on to a new generation, specifically to his youngest daughter and her hus-

band, who assumed responsibility for the cellar with the 1995 vintage. The vineyards constitute as fine a collection as exists in all of Austria.

Altmann's is a curious mixture of modern and traditional approaches—all shiny new equipment in the press-house, and nothing but casks in the cellar. They ferment in stainless steel and can control temperature if necessary. No cultured yeasts, minimal SO₂. The wines are not fined.

They practice integrated viticulture, organic fertilizers, no insecticides. Most of the good ones do.

Money is always a vexing question in the Wachau. Jamek's is an estate where the Federspiel-level wines can put the hurt on your *geldtasche*, but neither do I want to give Mr. Altmann the impression all I want are his cherries.

Opinions differ as regards the results of his taking over. Some observers believe the wines have reestablished themselves among the Wachau elite, while others *expected* this to happen and are still waiting. I hear the chatter and try to stay focused. In my own view there's no doubt—none—that GrüVe Achleiten and Riesling Klaus (at Smaragd levels) are among Austria's great monuments.

There's also little doubt that Jamek's style is *sturdier* than the graceful transparency of a Prager or the high-wire balance of gloss and force of an FX Pichler. One can read that sturdiness as prosaic, but I prefer to see it as anchored to a deeper sense of history. No wines are more meaningful than Jamek's best.

Jamek at a glance:

Renaissance in quality from this most venerable of Wachau estates. Remarkable array of Grand Cru sites.

how the wines taste:

Jamek's wines appeal to drinkers who like wine-y flavors. They are very grown-up kinds of wines, without the sparrowy quickness of reductively spritzzy grape-bombs. They taste solid and durable and authoritative, and sometimes it's hard to read them just because they aren't sheet-metal brilliant.

- AJJ-074 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Stein Am Rain Federspiel**
The best among the GrüVe Federspiels (unless your botrytis tolerance is greater than mine); a pungent GrüVe with lots of mineral density; lentilly, with nubby soft phenolics; a complex meaty finish with hints of marjoram.
- AJJ-070 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Achleiten Smaragd, 6/750ml**
Here the botrytis is a useful seasoning, creating a warmth and "sweetness," and it underscores the complex terroir; pheasant, fennel, summer truffle, less "mineral" than *rocks*, the smell of rain bouncing off sun-heated rocks.
- AJJ-075 **2007 Riesling Jochinger Pichl Federspiel**
Another Riesling-lover's Riesling, with classically lovely fruit, though warmer tasting than usual; ripe cooked banana, orange zest, beurre blanc; creamy and salty, notes of lilac and peony; straightforward and classy.
- AJJ-071 **2007 Riesling Ried Klaus Federspiel** +
AJJ-071H **2007 Riesling Ried Klaus Federspiel, 12/375ml**
The past two years the iconic Klaus Smaragd has broached its banks, understandable maybe in the *very* ripe 2006 vintage, but when the '07 comes in sporting 15% alcohol, the Federspiel looks very attractive indeed. As in fact it is; a complicated old soul. Rocky, very long, animated and forceful but not at all playful; a disciplined all-business Riesling that is utter naked terroir.
- AJJ-076 **2007 Riesling Freiheit Smaragd, 6/750ml** +
No botrytis—yay. But all apricot, except when it shows a key-lime side; a plump and amply fruity Riesling with an underlay of stone, excellent grip and length, and a clinging, densely perfumed finish.
- AJJ-077 **2006 Zweigelt Mittelbergen**
Ripe, satiny and rectilinear, with a come-hither aroma that's berserk with seductiveness, especially if you like violet and cherry; the palate is spicy and juicy and the finish is surprisingly long and *not* surprisingly pretty. 100/100 on the tasty-mutha meter.

nikolaihof-wachau

wachau • mautern

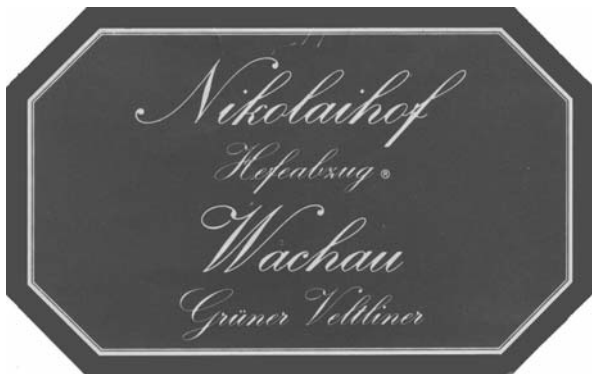
It was storming all day, gloomy and rumbling. It was April 20th and outside here in Maryland the trees were just leafing, that raw and unbelievable green that is like no other—none. The leaves were still curled and modest, and from my 18th-floor balcony the trees looked like a lace-curtain of emerald. It was coming up on dusk, and we had a break in the storms, and a moment of sunlight, crepuscular rays against the black of a storm that's passed us as it blows to the north. Sun against a black sky, sun on the new leaves, the whole sky is a drama, a tragedy, a miracle that played for a few seconds that the hero didn't see.

I didn't plan it, but the wine in my glass was an obdurately youthful 1990 Riesling from my friends at Nikolaihof: the Weingebirge Smaragd, all of 12.5% alc., and so pale and limpid I almost couldn't accept the ripe balsamic sweetness of the fragrance. I won't tell you how it tasted,

because I don't know; at least I can't say how the taste assumes the form of a "tasting note." I just know that when I stood on my balcony and looked at the sun-on-black of the departing storm, at the sun-on-emerald of that instant when its rays struck those wet new leaves, dark, light, green, all at once, I knew there was no other wine that could possibly make liquid this moment of the world.

Wines like these don't seek to be included in the world, or even in your world, because they already are. They didn't ask your permission, any more than the rain does or the leaves do. When you drink them, they *include* you. This is so unusual, this feeling of being invited and included, when so much of our experience is confined to being indulged or entertained.

Is there really enough time to waste on the unreal? But who am I to know what is real and what is false? Nobody. I have no authority. I only report what I experience. You are free to ignore me. But, I know what I know, and there is no doubt in it. And I know that every time we accept the flashy in place of the true, we starve a being who lives inside us. A modest being, who won't



even say when he is hungry, but late in your life you will see he is there, and there's no time left to know him, and he had so much to say to you.

I believe Nikolaihof is one of the greatest wine

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Im Weingebirge, Vom Stein, Steiner Hund**
- **Soil types: Primary rock topped with humus or gravel, and eroded primary rock**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Riesling, 35% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Weissburgunder, Malvasier, Neuburger, and Chardonnay**

estates on earth, and among them there are none more meaningful. This sets me something of a quandary each year as I sit to write this text. I want it to be my text-to-end-all-texts, and of course that pressure makes me self-conscious and I strain to rise to the exalted level I set myself – and fall short.

Once we were seated one year, I asked Christine Saahs, the matriarch of the family and the property, "When are you happiest in your work?" I thought the question was straightforward. Others to whom I've posed it have said things like I like it best in the vineyards, or I really enjoy the blending, it fascinates me to taste so analytically, or things of that nature. Christine seemed quite undone by my innocuous-seeming query. Oh I don't know how to answer a question like that, she said, and "No one has ever asked me that question." She was so shy I was unbearably touched.

Finally she said she enjoyed the times when she felt *useful* because at such times she was aware of the gift given her – the power to be useful. Whether in the family or in the vineyards or the garden or in the restaurant they also run, she liked to feel she could put her providentially endowed power to good use. It suddenly struck

me she embodies the Buddhist idea of enlightenment; to be cheerful and useful. It is certainly the least neurotic approach to one's life!

Since everything is unified within these walls (and outside them also) it is very clear to me that Nikolaihof's wines *also* embody that enlightenment. "Cheerful and useful" would be a perfect way to describe them. Even at their most profound, and they attain such profundity quite regularly, theirs is never an intimidating or haughty Greatness, but rather a sapid companionability that's almost affectionate. The wines talk not only to your senses, they talk to your *life*.

They are biodynamic, and they live by the biodynamic calendar. It's typical for Saahs to integrate their lives within a matrix of principles; they hardly seem to consider their wine as an abstract object but rather as an ingredient among many which grow in nature and transmit a life-energy of their own.

This can be confusing to a certain kind of wine-freak who obsesses on the wine-object as such, but in the end I am comforted by the desire to integrate wine into all the things that emerge from creation and give us pleasure.

Saahs' preference for the bio-dynamic life doesn't seem to hail from a concern we'd call "environmental" in the political sense. It rather arises from their overall approach to sharing life with other *forms* of life, and also from their sense of time. There's an enveloping patriarchal linden tree in their courtyard which is a pretty nifty symbol of time; thick, slow, sturdy, gentle, ultimately patient. I'm fond of this tree, all the more so because of those before and after me who'll have enjoyed its tolerant friendship.

Nikolaihof-Wachau (this is the full name preferred by the vintner, but for brevity's sake I'll call it just "Nikolaihof") is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first Demeter-certified wine in the world. They have farmed and made wines organically for over three decades; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible. Mr. Saahs, is a believer in organic production as a guarantor of **superior** quality. He's one of the only ones to say this. I myself am often asked whether I believe organic or bio-d creates *superior* wines, which is both a loaded question and an irrelevant one. Frankly I don't care if the wines are "better." Organic or bio growers are seeking a certain relationship with their land. Very often these sensibilities conduce to the making of excellent wines, but not necessarily. They are, however, quite healthy for both land and the humans who work it. Do we need to ask for more?

A study has been published which appears to prove the salubriousness of Biodynamic wines in general and Nikolaihof's wines in particular. Christine is very proud of this, and I'm happy for her. Yet somehow I'm less touched than she is, and I think I know why. I recall seeing a story in one of the magazines which said scientists had isolated the health-giving compounds in wine and could make them available in pill-form. At which point it became very clear to me; we don't drink wine *because* it is (merely) "healthy;" we drink it because, in an holistic way, it is *good for us*. Not only for our discrete bodies, but

for our whole lives and souls. That wine is in fact harmless and probably even healthful is something we already knew intuitively; it's a bonus, but it ain't *why*. I am sure Christine knows this too.

Everything about Nikolaihof is determinedly PERMANENT (when you say "old fashioned" you create images of something either anachronistic or cute, and Nikolaihof is neither). "I've never 'styled' a wine," says Herr Saahs. Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average age of forty-seven years), low yields, natural farming, and unmanipulative cellar work are the **secrets**, so to speak, but to quote Dr. Helmut Rome: "The secret of these wines lies not so much in cellar technology — which in any case barely exists — as in the special care of the vines." He quotes Herr Saahs as saying, "You shouldn't shove a wine along; just give it a controlled peace so it can develop itself." Fermentation (natural yeasts,) and all aging is in old wood. The wines spend a long time — up to 4 months — on the lees. Nor is Saahs chasing the blockbuster icon or pushing the ripeness envelope. Remember his admonition that *wine is a foodstuff*. "I like to **drink** wine, not study it," he says. "We pick when the grapes are ripe, we don't wait for overripeness." His wife inserts; "There's nothing charming about harvesting in November."

It takes more people to farm organically; the Saahs employ 10 workers for 20 hectares. They claim a conventional winery could do the work with four or five. They



are happy, they say, to give employment to more people; "We are not in this world just to make money," says Frau Saahs. Among the 20 hectares of land are two meadows allowed to grow wild. "We learned if we didn't control the vegetation in these meadows that the most predatory of the plants would eventually overcome the weaker plants, so each year we mow the meadow twice. It levels

the playing field," she added, looking thoughtfully into the distance. "We don't drive a big car, we don't take world cruises . . . but we do mow our meadows twice a year," she said, as if to herself. "We simply occupy this little form of skin and bones for a few years, but we *need* to nourish our hearts and souls by finding a home in our parts of the world and caring for this home."

It's a little sad to subject these young wines to the rough waters of commerce. The truth of Nikolaihof wines emerges in the fullness of time, not before. Tasting them in their mature form is as profound an experience as one can ever have with wine. Something in them seems to weave itself into the fabric of eternity.

Or perhaps their simple rootedness appeals to something lonely in us Americans. We are such spiritual and emotional nomads. We seem hesitant to lay claim to this world, perhaps for fear of having to surrender to it. When I am with the Saahs' I always feel a jolt of recognition; this is the anchoring I seek, or imagine myself seeking. But *could* I live as they do? I don't know.

Again we sat in the chapel and began the tasting. Again they sat me (embarrassingly) at the head of the great table, and again the spell stole over me, and I was glad the others were there to chatter away so I could write and wonder. Believe me, I don't arrive *waiting* for this to happen; I rather think it won't. But it does, somehow. I wonder if it begins with the hug Christine gives me, which is just two seconds too long to be merely polite, an embrace containing kinship, an embrace that welcomes and accepts me. It is no small thing to be accepted by such a woman.

Some of these wines are as still as silent ponds, and each nuance of flavor is like a small pebble dropped in the silvery water, and you watch the tiny silent ripples flow slowly toward shore. They seem utterly without *affect*, but instead serenely themselves. They are numinous in their very lack of thrusting and pushing. The wines we taste are not merely meditative; they tell truths you cannot see in the lab; they speak calmly of unnamable sureties. They are candid and modest. They are all the reasons we *should* love wine but few of the reasons we actually do. We are very busy measuring our pleasure, locked away in our self-conscious cells. These wines don't so much meet you halfway as *show you a third place* that's neither You nor Them, but somewhere you meet in truth only by dissolving your respective walls. The *wines* have done it; now it's your turn. I cannot tell you *how* these wines stir such a calmness of spirit. Other wines are perhaps more poignant, or more exciting. But I have never tasted wines more *settling* than these. Each of them is like a slow centering breath, a quiet breath, the breath of the world, unheard almost always beneath the clamor.

It's a shame that words like "sublime" can lose their music and force through squandering, and I know I'm part of the problem. But the quality of sublimity in Nikolaihof's wines has to do with their basic characters; hale, trustworthy, unaffected, substantive but never tiring, explicitly *connected* and numinous with a gentle force. A force of loving kindness. It isn't about making you love *them*; it's about what they can do to ease your



Christine Saahs

way, by whispering their tender steady reminder of the sweet secrets of the world we share.

It was Klaus who met us when we arrived this year. My "entourage" was off with his son to look at the new guest-house they're about to open down the street (biodynamic rooms!), and Christine was nowhere to be seen. He asked my impressions of the vintage, and told me "We stopped picking when the others had just started," i.e., in mid-October before the rains. I wondered when he told me '07 was better than '06, but of course I hadn't tasted yet.

In the chapel the wines were poured. Christine was in Brazil, as it turned out, but she managed to phone me toward the end of the afternoon. It was different without her, as she's the spiritual mainspring of the family and of the domain. I missed her. On the other hand, the astonishing collection of wines spoke for itself, and my regard for them had nothing to do with any spell which might have been cast.

Last year I received a note from a colleague of mine at Skurnik, Clarke Boehling, who manages the French portfolio. Clark wrote: "I just wanted to express my giddy enthusiasm for a wine of yours that stunned me three times, each time more so than the last: the '06 Hefeabzug GV from Nikolaihof. What a Zen wine. . . . The depth, the clarity, the sense of calm it evokes—not just the overall balance, but the sense that the wine is completely comfortable in its own skin, is not striving or compensating or doing anything except being its own bad self."

It is exactly that lit-from-within serenity that makes these wines so singular, and so precious.

- ANK-070 **2007 Grüner Veltliner “Hefeabzug”**
 CORE-LIST WINE: and this is the *sur-lie* bottling that has become a Nikolaihof icon; never racked, and redolent of sweet lees and fresh oysters; this is slimmer of course than the ‘06, but it’s peony all the way; white lilac, less toasty, more winsome aromas—I like it best of any vintage I’ve had.
- ANK-071 **2007 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Federspiel** ++
 It’s my *wine of the vintage*, and extraordinary in many ways; first, when has a *Federspiel* ever been this sublimely expressive? For this is unbelievably good wine; focused, snappy, straight-lined; rhubarb and jasmine aromas; the palate is smiling and energetic but not hyper, rather lively with an inner calm; long, “sweet,” luminous, all white flowers and asian pears; it’s entirely *Riesling-like*, and unlike any GrüVe I’ve ever had.
- ANK-066 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd** +++
 First offering of a second bottling (December 2007) of a wine offered last year, and one of the all-time great GrüVes I have ever tasted: it seems riper, woodsier, more murmur than the early bottling, which was more whispery and shade-cool; it has an enveloping embrace of sweetly beaming intensity, and the serene clamor of great wine; it has stomach *and* backbone, and it is one complex and rich stockpot of flavor.
- ANK-074 **1993 Grüner Veltliner “Vinothek,” 6/750ml** ++
 By now you know this singular estate has been holding certain wines back, *in cask and without sulfur*, until they are deemed ready to bottle. There have been Rieslings (the supernal 1990) and GrüVes (the amazing ‘91), and now this.
- The 1993 in the glass was bottled in early April 2008, directly from the cask in which it lay since fermentation. It begins by tasting woody, and then becomes roasty and protein-y and fatty, like the cracklings of a suckling-pig roast. It then gets leafy and the teensiest bit root-y, like celeriac; it’s a novel, this wine, not a *bon mot*; not even a scene but an entire delicate story not barely finished being told. Yes it’s great wine—or “great wine”—but it is great that this wine *exists*.
- ANK-072 **2007 Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel**
 First a note about these sites, which aren’t exactly *climats* but rather brand names registered to Nikolaihof and which correspond to certain vineyards. Vom Stein is always more rugged, meatier, more cooked, whereas Im Weingebirge is more dainty, flowery, more finesse, such that even its GrüVes can speak in a Riesling dialect.
- This Riesling is snappy and herbal in the ‘07 way, breezy and fragrant, with a capacious enveloping flavor, a little minty, marjoram, focused and lovely.
- ANK-077 **2006 Riesling Vom Stein Smaragd, 6/750ml** ++
 First offering: remarkable herbal-balsam fragrance; spicy and finely flowery; violet, lily of the valley, but also meaty, gelatinous like a veal shank; you taste the stock and the carrots and the celery and parsley, you taste the simmer and the satisfaction. It’s a wine of appetite.
- ANK-073 **2006 Riesling Im Weingebirge Smaragd, 6/750ml** +++
 First offering: entirely more winsome and dear; an extraordinary aroma, absolutely *green*; verbena, wintergreen, Sencha, but also green as in rest and shade, yet it’s also, what, fierce? Not really: *fervent*, convincing though it doesn’t *set about* to convince; the mid-palate is all barley and rusks; the wine is more than bones and gleam, it’s welcome and solace, it’s furry and companionable, yet with every objective facet of greatness. Don’t even entertain the notion of missing it.

- ANK-053 **2004 Riesling Steiner Hund “Reserve,” 6/750ml** ++
First offering: two things . . . first, “reserve” because the vineyard is technically in the Kremstal, thus no *smaragd*. Second, this tiny site is doubtless one of the 5-10 greatest bits of land on which Riesling grows. And oh good god, what a *magnificent* fragrance; utter pungent profound terroir, with nippy, persnickety focus; woodruff and redcurrant, and an almost Maplewood smokiness; shimmering minty brilliance, just ridiculously fabulous!
- ANK-076 **2002 Riesling Burggarten “Jungferlese,” 6/750ml** ++
First offering: it means the “virgin” vintage. Haunting 2002 aromas sing sweetly from the glass—*what* fragrance this vintage has developed! The wine is dry—(Christine calls at this very moment from Brazil to say hi, and my note resumes thereafter . . .) although unbelievably shimmer and brilliant; white tea, plum blossom, a ghostly mineral—the 2002 *Champagnes* are like this. Otherworldly juiciness and a flowery smokiness; just a great ‘02, wonderful now and from now on.
- ANK-075 **2007 Gewürztraminer**
 Again I think a first for them, and I’m surprised how much I like this; almost no one in Alsace makes a wine like this any more, truly dry and smelling more of violets than roses; a big billowing mid-palate juiciness, but shapely, not sultry, with a varietally typical nip of bitterness in the finish.



hans reisetbauer

The best eau de vie in Austria? In the world?

I'm an occasional imbibor of fruit distillates, usually for their express purpose as digestive aids. I'm no expert. I do know the great names in Alsace and their spirits. In Germany and Switzerland I only know that great names exist. In Austria, which is an epicenter of "schnapps" production and consumption, I lucked into something almost unbelievable. Martin Nigl brokered the meeting. "He's a fanatic like we all are, Terry; you'll like him," he said.

As we repeated the news to various growers they were all agape with disbelief. "You got Reisetbauer?" they all cried. "How'd you do that? You got the best." I'm going to quote liberally from an article in the Austrian magazine *A La carte*, in which Reisetbauer gave a detailed interview

to Michael Pronay, the greatest narcoleptic journalist I've ever known. "With Reisetbauer we see a unity of man and occupation such as one seldom sees. The friendly



Hans Reisetbauer and his stills

bull lives schnapps, speaks schnapps, makes schnapps and loves it like nothing else."

Some facts and factoids I culled from the article: Reisetbauer is on his fourth distiller in seven years, in an ongoing quest for the utmost cleanliness and fruit expression. He grows more and more of his own fruit. "We buy also, no question, but we want to be self-supplying in apple, pear and plum in two, three years." He knows nearly all of his suppliers personally, and he won't use any fruit that doesn't grow in his native land, though in some cases he can't get enough domestic product and needs to import. Inasmuch as all eaux de vies are diluted with water, the quality of the water is all-important. "We tried using water we distilled ourselves, but the schnapps were great at the beginning but died quickly thereafter. In 1995 we discovered a man who'd discovered a source for well-water from the Bohemian massif. I called him one day and had his water the next. The water

was analyzed and was approved for consumption by babies. So I figured if it's good enough for babies it's good enough for our schnapps."

Blind tastings were done comparing schnapps made with the two waters and the results were decisive.

Reisetbauer makes a full range of fruit-spirits but doesn't go in for the bizarre. "I've been tending myself to four types," he says. "Quince, Elderberry, (because I like that marzipan tone), Pear-Williams (because it's the most difficult technically to distill, and whatever's difficult is best!) and Rowanberry because you have to be crazy to make it at all."

It's a whole sub-culture, just like wine. The same fanaticism, the same geekiness, the same obsessiveness over absolute quality. Reisetbauer wants to start vintage-dating his eau de vie because "the fruit quality is far from identical from year to year." I seem to have a tiger by the tail here!

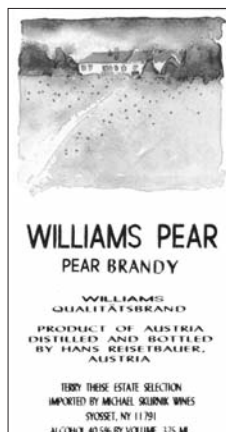
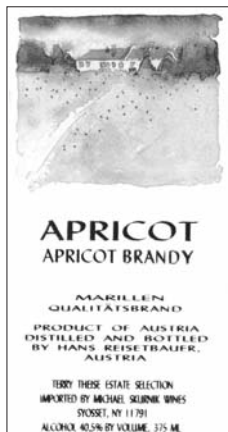
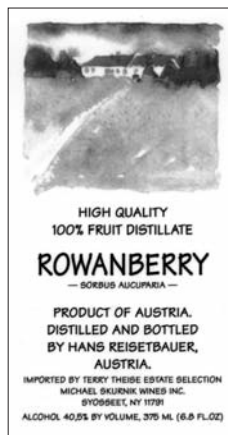
I'm just an *amateur*, I must stress, and I'm not especially well-informed, but that said, what strikes me about these spirits is their honesty and power. They're not especially seductive. If they were Wachau wines they'd be F.X. Pichler rather than Alzinger.



Young pear trees at Reisetbauer

Reisetbauer offerings:

- XHR-012 **Sparkling Apple Cider, 12/750ml**
- XHR-001 **Plum Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-002 **Williams Pear Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-003 **Apricot Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-004 **Cherry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-006 **Rowanberry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-009 **Raspberry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-011 **Wild Cherry Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-013 **Carrot Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-014 **Ginger Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
- XHR-010 **Mixed Case Eau de Vie, 6/375ml**
(Pear, Apricot, Plum, Rowanberry, Raspberry, & Wild Cherry)
- XHR-015 **Whiskey, 6/750ml**
- XHR-023 **Blue Gin, 12/750ml**



ASPECTS OF FLAVOR:

THE ONES THAT MATTER MOST:

CLARITY: since without clear flavors, none of the others aspects can be easily discerned. Clarity also suggests the work of an attentive vintner with a desire for candor.

DISTINCTIVENESS: call it what you will; taste-of-place, “somewhereness,” terroir, but whatever you call it it’s the thing that says this is this wine and no other, from this place and no other. Only such wines are valid and unique.
GRACE: this attribute can apply to wines of various degrees of strength, body or ripeness, and it can be found in both polished and “rustic” wines.

BALANCE: and its siblings Harmony and Proportion. Balance is not to be confused with symmetry, as there are asymmetrical wines of balance. Balance is nothing more or less than a palpable sense that no single component appears garish or inappropriate.

DELICIOUSNESS: It is strange to have to mention this, but it is hardly ever spoken or written about. A wine can meet every other criterion by which we judge it successful yet not taste good. Then what?

COMPLEXITY: and its siblings, Ambiguity and Evanescence. There is explicit complexity wherein all components of a wine can be discerned and we are delighted by their multiplicity. There is also *implicit* complexity in which we sense there is *something* present but not directly in our view. Finally, in some wines, not very many, there is a haunting sense of *something being shown to you* that has nothing to do with discrete “flavor.” This is the noblest of all wine’s attributes, but the one most impossible to *bring about* by recipe or design. It seems to be a by-product of certain mentalities and the practices they engender, but neither formula nor recipe exists; this aspect is found when it is found, and often when you aren’t looking for it.

MODESTY: This denotes a wine which seeks to be a companion, to your food, your state of mind, your social occasion, as opposed to a wine which needs to *dominate* your entire field of attention. Some wines deserve your entire field of attention, but these are almost never the ones which need to scream in order to get it.

PERSISTENCE: and its siblings Depth and Intensity. These attributes properly come after those cited above, since a persistent unpleasant wine is no one’s idea of fun. A good wine is elevated by persistence, a bad wine diminished. Nor does persistence have to do with *volume*; indeed the best wines are those which *whisper* persistently.

PARADOX: Again this component is in the hands of the angels, and doesn’t appear reducible to human contrivance, but when it is found it conveys a lovely sense of “How can these things coexist in a single wine?”

ASPECTS OF FLAVOR:

THE ONES THAT MATTER LEAST:

POWER: This only matters insofar as menu planning is concerned. Power in itself is an aspect neither desirable nor undesirable; it needs only to *justify* its existence by combining with grace, distinctiveness and deliciousness.

SWEETNESS: Though I'm known to rail on the subject of sweetness, that is only because it matters *too much* to too many people on too many occasions. In itself, sweetness only matters in terms of menu planning and forecasting the way a wine might age. The prevailing (and I'd say *pathological*) aversion to sweetness has diminished many wines. Sweetness, like acidity, tannin or any other single facet of flavor only matters when there is too much or too little of it.

RIPENESS: especially *physiological* ripeness. The singular pursuit of this as an Absolute has wrecked many wines by damning them to a power they can't support, and it has removed the nuance possible when wines are made from grapes of *variegated* ripeness.

CONCENTRATION: only matters after this question is answered: *What* are we concentrating? In itself, concentration is merely an adjective, not a virtue.



TAKING A STAND:

WHAT IS NOT IMPORTANT:

YIELDS: Our obtuse insistence that low yields will *always* give better wines has given rise to a community of clumsy, opaque and joyless wines. Our obtuse insistence on measuring yields in terms of hectoliters-per-hectare (or tons per acre) is laughed at by even serious vintners, who know how those numbers can be fungible and manipulated. Yield per-vine, and vines-per-hectare get us closer to the truth. Seeing the question as an interface of economic sustainability for a vintner along with an appropriate degree of concentration in his wines is more flexible and realistic. For proof that “high” yields can give lovely wines, see *Gimonnet, Pierre*.

YEASTS: I only know of a few so-called “aroma-yeasts” —hack growers use them to endow their wines with a spurious (and short-lived) perfume—which can be argued are inherently objectionable. The argument that only ambient vineyard yeasts can convey terroir is otiose. Each choice a producer can make to start fermentations has advantages and disadvantages, and with very few exceptions none is “morally” preferable to another.

VINIFICATION METHODS: Of course these are significant in descriptive terms, but rarely in value judgments. Oxidative or reductive, which is “better?” Steel or cask, which is “better?” Whole-cluster pressing or conventional crush-and-press, which is “better?” The answer—*always*—is IT DEPENDS.



TAKING A STAND:

WHAT *IS* IMPORTANT:

ARTISANALITY: if for no other reason than to create a beachhead against the seductions of industrial, “product”-driven winemaking. This leads to. . .

ATTENTIONS AND CONNECTIONS: the connection of the vintner to his land, first (and the connection of *flavor* to land that follows ineluctably from it); then the connection of the worker to the work, then the connection of the family to the culture of family estates, and finally our own connection as drinkers to something we know is true and significant. When we insist on these things as preconditions for attending to wine, we will know when they are absent and the thing will lose its savor, and its claim on our attention. See *industrial wine, world of*. . .

SOIL TREATMENTS: this one’s sticky. It is manifestly important, but from this it doesn’t invariably follow that a continuum exists against which each vintner can be measured according to his “purity.” Between the total hack working with any and all chemicals, and the bio-dynamic grower, there lives a complex world of values and possibilities. We need to attend, but we do not need to assign points on some green-o-meter. What we really need to do is *look and listen*, to each grower’s ambient conditions (dry vs. humid, flat vs. steep, among others) and to the values by which he works. Absolute judgments on our parts are liable to be fatuous. We need only attend with good will and conscience. The rest will follow.

TRUE FLAVOR: this comes from the land, not from the cellar or from any of the bazillion possible treatments. Bearing in mind that all viniculture is “manipulation,” it follows that we’d be better served attending to *agitation*, or to anything that diminishes a wine’s inherent vitality, or which adds flavor not inherently there. To the extent a wine culture exists *where it should* and *as it should*, these things tend to clarify. A simple example is Mosel Riesling; the vine clearly belongs in the land, the wines are holistically appropriate. If in order to make potable wine, it must be subject to manipulations bordering on *falsifications*—or indeed crossing that border—then something is askew.

Say I like Golden Retrievers, and say I live in a very hot climate, and say this breed of dog is extremely uncomfortable in very hot climates. Obviously I should get a different breed of dog. What I shouldn’t do it to shave the poor bastard bald or give him some drugs to make his coat fall out. See *Zinfandel, California*. . .

