



20 | TERRY THEISE
17 | ESTATE SELECTIONS

GERMANY



THEISE MANIFESTO

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

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

*Distinctiveness is more important
than conventional prettiness.*

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

*Lots of wines, many of them good wines,
let you taste the noise. But only the
best let you taste the silence.*

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INTRODUCTION



Been tasting a bunch of newbies lately. These aren't random; someone recommended them, usually in print. Figure, you know, it's worth a stab. I looked at three estates, one of which was spotty (but the good wines were good) and the other two of which were, alas, repellant. I noted about one of them: "Drinking these wines is a religious experience inasmuch as now I feel soiled and guilty." Yeah, that bad.

It made me wonder, how did anyone think these wines could be recommended? Has taste really sunk so low? And then I stepped back and looked at the bigger picture in German Riesling. Two quotes spring to mind—I used them last year—and they'll get us launched.

"I am crazy about Riesling. I don't order it all the time because not everybody gets crazy about it. I don't know why. I don't know what's wrong with these people."

— PETE WELLS, *The New York Times*

"As an utter Riesling nut myself, I have come to the conclusion that Riesling remains a minority sport, an obsession for acid freaks with fairly advanced adult tastes."

— ANNE KREBIEHL MW

Let me answer Pete Wells' implied question—what's wrong with... people [who don't like Riesling]. Here's what's wrong with them. They have very poor taste. That doesn't make them bad people, but it creates a bad (or unfortunate) thing; poor taste decides the market for the greatest wine grape of them all. But why isn't Riesling cherished as I think it ought to be? There are many reasons, chief among them that drinkers have decided that any wine with sweetness is infra dig. A wine that shows a fruit or flower-driven aroma must be sweet, or it wouldn't smell that way, they suppose.

One even wonders whether a wine

that merely smells *pleasant* is somehow off-putting in our ass-over-tit world. I mean, the world where sommeliers will present, with straight faces and every expectation of a positive result, wines that smell like cat barf. Have we reached a point where comeliness represents some kind of aesthetic fascism? How long will it be before someone writes a phrase such as "the tyranny of correctness" or "clean wine; is this a micro-aggression?" Aren't we already bludgeoned enough with reality being whatever some twat waffle says it is?

But, <sigh>, well OK. More good wines for us. When have I *ever* had "popular" taste? Would I even recognize myself if I did? Still, I often think that people who love Riesling could be a little more helpful. For example, why does Ms. Krebiehl harp on acidity as she does? The caricature of Riesling lovers as "acid freaks" tends to ghetto-ize us as people with truly geeky taste who ought properly to

be marginalized. Many years ago I heard Hans Crusius—Peter Crusius’ father and the proprietor of the legendary Crusius estate in Germany’s Nahe valley—remark to the effect that “We need to get rid of the notion that Riesling is great *because* of its acidity.” My (much) younger self thought the old man had three screws loose. Now I know he was right. Acidity is inherent to Riesling, but that doesn’t make it a fetish object. Too much acidity is nasty. If you can taste it blatantly there’s probably too much of it, or too little of something else, such as fruit or extract.

And then there are the Germans, and their wine culture. I am not going to hash out the hoary dry-versus-sweet thing yet again. I am going to make one simple point, a point I find to be self-evident. Riesling is very rare among white-wine grapes in that it makes beautiful wines at every point along the continuum of dry to sweet. *Every point*. But the Germans themselves tend to bi-polarize their wines into either very dry or very sweet, ignoring the many points of beauty and usefulness in between. Last Fall the *Wine Advocate*’s Stephan Reinhardt wrote me:

“Terry, I think there is just one really problematic issue: wines that are neither dry nor sweet but something in between (the “neither fish nor meat” wines). These wines (with residual sweetness of, say, 10-20+ g/l) are absolutely delicious for themselves and with food (and the sort we’d choose when we share a bottle one day). They also reflect their origins and are probably the most natural wines (when the fermentation is not forced) but they don’t have a lobby: they don’t have the Trocken brand and they don’t wear a Prädikat which are more and more reserved for nothing but—often excessively—sweet wines. That’s stupid marketing with respect to the nature of wine, to nature at all (though clever with respect to the needs of certain markets).

But you are right: there is something wrong with the knee-jerk German demand for dry wines or rather the bearish attitude against wines that are not dry. The result is that top wines with sugar levels of 10-30 grams have become very rare. And that’s a shame indeed.”

I am fully aware that any statement beginning with words like “The Germans...” Is misleadingly categorical, yet with that caveat I also observe their signal blindness to that which is most unique (and therefore most precious) about their Rieslings, as well as their tendency to dither around the fringes of salience.

Considering the basic struggle to give Riesling the stature it deserves, the German wine culture isn’t helping. For all its good intentions, it pisses in the pool.

We who love the wines, or we who’d like to love the wines, need a quick way through.

THE SHIT YOU GOTTA UNDERSTAND ABOUT GERMAN WINE TODAY

The single most important word on the label is TROCKEN. It means DRY. This isn’t because dry wines are better—they aren’t—but this one word will tell you the single most salient thing about the basic nature of what’s in the bottle.

If you do not see “Trocken” on your label, the wine will contain at least some sweetness. If it is just a teensy bit of sweetness, so little you can’t even be certain it’s there, you’ll probably see the word FEINHERB.

Germany’s prevailing wine law was enacted in 1971. It was a piece of shit then and it still is. Today’s growers observe just enough of it not to expose themselves to prosecution, and they ignore the rest. The law, written before global warming, mandated ripeness as the only factor in quality. A line was drawn between chaptalized and unchaptalized wines. The latter were assumed to be made from grapes ripe enough to go it alone. There was a kind of ladder of increasing ripeness, and as you climbed it you passed Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese and finally the dessert wines, Beerenauslese (a.k.a. BA), Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA) and Eiswein.

Spätlese was riper than Kabinett, and Auslese was riper than Spätlese, and because we associate riper things with sweeter things—think strawberries or peaches; the riper they are the sweeter they are—an Auslese was usually sweeter than a Spätlese, which in turn was usually sweeter than a Kabinett. This is why the “Kabinett” category has remained so popular; it is presumed to be the least sweet of the top category of wines. It also costs the least.

That category of unchaptalized wines is now called “Prädikatswein.” The word appears on the label. That is the old system in essence, and vestiges of it are still used. There’s more—isn’t there always?—but that’s for German-Wine 202.

A parallel system has arisen, thanks to the activities of a grower’s association called the VDP. It is a group of superior producers. Most of its members are in the

top rank, though there are top-rank growers who choose not to join, for reasons of their own. The VDP has recast German wine along a Burgundian model. Pending an entire European Union re-draft of each country’s wine laws (sure to entail a nightmare), the VDP’s innovations are quasi-officially accepted.

VDP’s system is simple. It establishes three or four tiers of quality. You have estate-wine, village-wine, and both Premier and Grand Cru wine, or just Grand Cru alone. This is decided by each wine producing state. (If you’re curious, I personally favor the 4-tier model.)

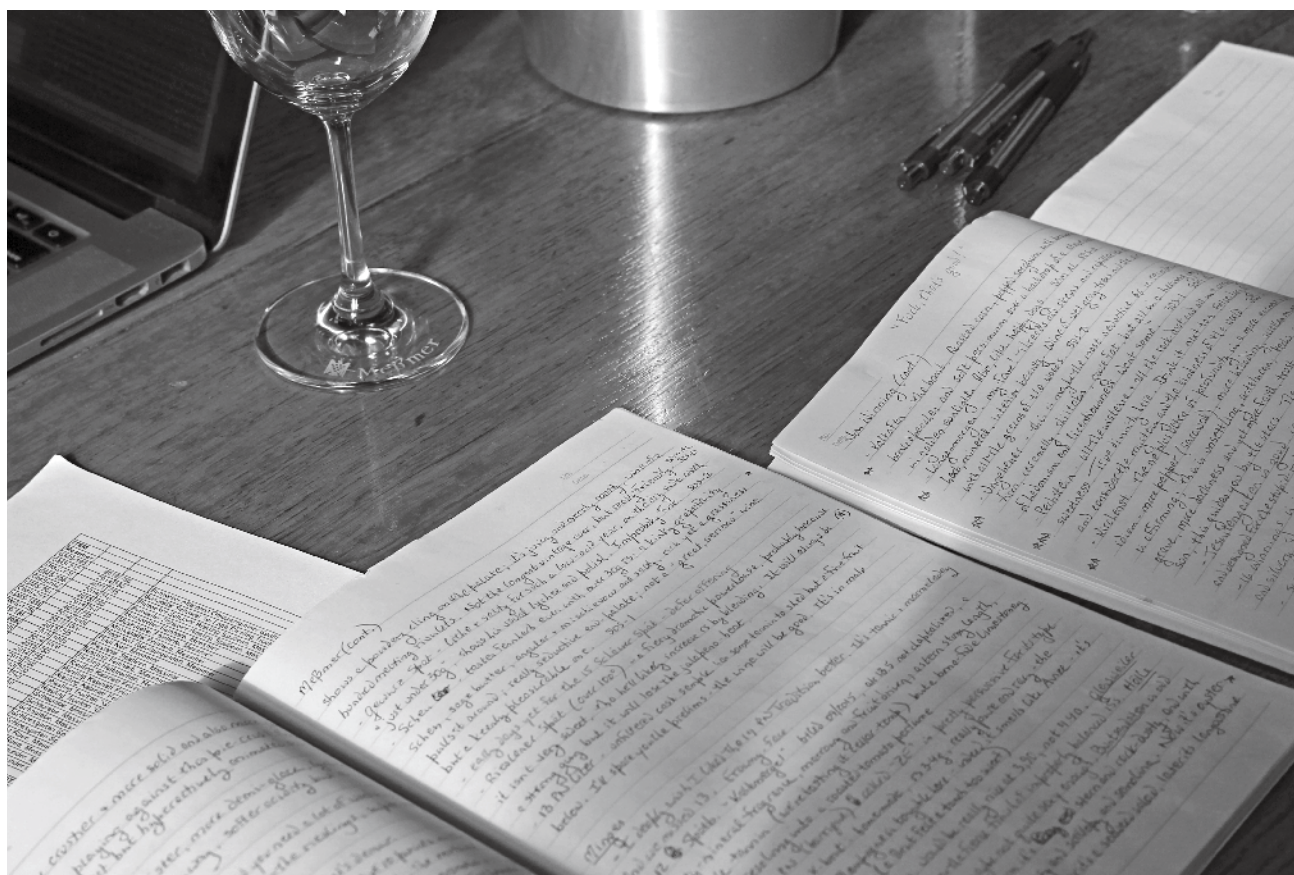
The actual classification of vineyards is inevitably tendentious and controversial, but the system is a huge boon to consumers, because we now can know that if a vineyard site appears on a label it is an important one. Otherwise the wine simply carries a village name or just the estate’s name.

These wines from classified vineyards can be made in different styles. If they are DRY and among that category, the TOP dry wine from the estate, they’re called Grosses Gewächs. (Try “grocer’s g-vex.”) Until this year certain regions called them Erstes Gewächs, which means the same thing and will soon become uniform in any case. If the classified site’s wine has SWEETNESS then it falls into the Prädikatswein quality-ladder.

The Nahe estate Schlossgut Diel is a classic example. They produce a Grosses Gewächs called Goldloch which is serious and dry. They also produce Kabinett, Spätlese and (usually but not inevitably) Auslese from the same site under its full name Dorhsheimer Goldloch, which means “Goldloch of Dorsheim.” All of these wines carry the little insignia for classified sites on the label. So, if you want to be decently professional, I would argue this is all you need to know. There’s a lot more you could learn, were you so inclined, but I promise that if you master what I’ve outlined here, you’ll be equipped to handle 90% of what Germany throws at you.

OLD SITE-NAMES RETURN

Old-timers will recall that the 1971 German wine law collapsed what were some 20,000 single-vineyard names into an ostensibly more manageable 6,000. In so doing they wreaked quite a bit of mischief, blotting out a large number of useful important names and retaining or adding a lot of garbage-names that were either unimportant or misleading.



In many parts of Europe, every piece of land has a name. It's not "block 37" or whatever; it has a name, and having a name, it has an identity, and having an identity it has a validity and an existence as real as that of the person who owns or tills it.

In Germany these are called Cataster names, sometimes spelled "cadaster," and explained on this site: <http://www.fao.org>.

After 1971 the cadaster names were forbidden from use, but a few seditious souls among the growers kept using them, by means of some disguise, such as initials, visual symbols or "fantasy" names. I myself am deeply curious about the origin of my wines, and I'm pleased when they're designated as specifically as possible. But one can fall down a rabbit-hole with these things, and I don't need to know that any given wine came from "rows 16-21" or any such otiose detail. However, given that a large number of post-71 single sites were slovenly in their definitions and flabby in their dimensions, I was heartened when the old names started to show up again. While the EU reviewed the situation the names were "tolerated," but now it appears they'll receive explicit approval.

This makes me very glad, and here's an example of why. Back in 1996 the

Strubs bottled two Niersteiner Hipping Spätlesen, one from the steep section and one from the flat section—which blatantly points out the stupidity of the disparate sections having the same name. How would we tell them apart? We couldn't use the cadaster names. We couldn't call one "steep" and the other one "flat," because the law said that whatever wasn't explicitly permitted was forbidden. In desperation we put the steep one in a green bottle and the flat one in brown. Today Sebastian and Walter can use the old cadaster names (Thal and Flächenhahl in this instance) and now we can see exactly where our wines came from.

This is just one of the ways the garbage-y '71 wine law is chipped away at until it becomes a relic that no one uses any more. And not a day too soon.

* THE 2016 VINTAGE *

I have a bad habit of burying the lead. This time I won't. Nearly every vintage, even good, excellent or great ones, has a shadow side that expresses as a common flaw. It completes the sentence, "When XXXX doesn't work it is usually because

of..." 2016 does not appear to have a dark side. At least where I tasted, it is almost never *not delicious*, almost never ungainly, unbalanced or unappealing. I can hardly remember a more adorable vintage.

I don't know where I'd place it on some grid of profundity or Solemn Importance. Neither do I care. I was too blasted by repeated inputs of joy, sheer joy, and grinning, giddy, animal joy. But, not merely animal. Because this vintage can address the most humane, civilized, decent and grateful parts of us. It never clamors or fusses for our attention. It never preens or puts on some gaudy show. It doesn't get its *freak* on because it doesn't seem to have a freak at all. It is, instead, calmly and serenely delicious. Actually, totally fucking delicious.

It is a medium-weight vintage and its weight is elegantly and gracefully dispersed.

It is graceful overall, and also lithe, limber and lissome. It is strong when it needs to be, but it measures its strength judiciously and with restraint.

It shows every aspect of superb German Riesling, but doesn't emphasize any at the expense of the others. It is neither a fruit driven nor floral driven nor mineral



driven nor acid driven vintage—it is all of these. Whatever you like about these wines, you'll find it in plenitude. Except, perhaps, for brash acidity. If you really are someone who craves a yelping brusque acid profile, you might find 2016 too demure.

But I don't. I find it nearly perfect, with gazelle grace but with the gazelle's sinewy energy when it wishes to leap and run.

If there is a "flaw" (which there isn't) it is one of homogeneity, in which everyone's wines are good in the same way. The same *fine* way, mind you, but if you like quirks and angles and clunky elements you might find 2016 too "correct."

But I don't. I find it wonderful. Ordinary growers made nice wine, good growers made excellent wine, outstanding growers made wonderful wine, and great growers made stellar wine, and none of them sacrificed anything that made their wines unique. The wines are beautiful in their own various ways, but they are almost always beautiful.

The vintage is sweet-natured and generous in the Pfalz and Rheinhessen, and it appears to be really vigorous and expressive in the Rheingau. The Nahe is both serene and piquant; the region shows its best. It was only in the Mosel and Saar (I

don't taste in the Ruwer these days, alas) where there was light-and-shade. This wasn't so much because growers misfired, but rather because the omnipresent silkiness of the vintage worked against a grower whose wines are meant to be crunchy. The consolation prize is that growers whose wines were over-acidic in 2015 were just fantastically balanced in 2016.

You need to cherish qualities of serenity, moderation and grace to appreciate this vintage. In its gentle luminosity it shows everything we look for—it's fervently mineral, markedly salty, replete with fruits and flowers and herbs, and shows a clear and visible intricacy. A taster who'd find it too "smooth" is probably a taster whose sensibilities have been coarsened by wines they feel are "quirky" but which are really imbalanced.

Growers demurred when asked which previous vintage might be comparable to 2016. (Growers dislike that question on principle.) But hell, I'll take a whack at it. In some ways the minerality and saltiness of '16 reminded me of the young 2003s, though with less body and greater acidity. Certain aspects of '16's florals and fruits reminded me of 2002, though with far less botrytis and with less pointed acids. I thought at times of 2011, or of

what '11 may have been with ten degrees less Oechsle. 2016 in general isn't a strikingly ripe vintage, and there is very little botrytis anywhere. I wondered, tasting wine after graceful wine, whether anyone *needs* a Spätlese with over 100° Oechsle or a Trocken wine with more than 13% alcohol. The vintage is almost always bacterially stable (with often extremely low pH – 2.85 was by no means a rarity) and in the few cases where pH was high, growers gently acidified their musts to lower it, using a technique they'd found useful with the 2003s. (They use tartaric acid, which binds to potassium and falls out of the wine as tartrates, leaving no extra acidity but protecting the wine from spoilage. This is bad news to anyone who enjoys spoiled flavors, but I don't understand people like that).

You'll hear that '16 is a "Kabinett vintage" but I'd rather say it's a *proper* Spätlese vintage, i.e. Spätlese with normal ripeness for that echelon.

If I have any hesitancy about 2016 it's to wonder whether the explicit mineral and saltiness I taste now will survive bottling and the first years in-bottle. I rather think it won't, but I'm not sure that would be tragic. My instincts tell me that '16 will develop in a waxy-flowery direction, but

instincts like these are things you sniff in the air. Seekers of wine-GPS devices that will plot a developmental route (that will get you to Grandma's) are gonna be frustrated with wine, cuz it ain't be possible on this earth. Meanwhile, that's my instinct and I could be wrong, and I wouldn't actually mind being wrong because it's more interesting that way.

It was difficult in the vineyards. Early on there was frost, and then a protracted period of too much rain (giving rise to infestations of both downy and powdery mildew), and then, bizarrely, a long stretch in late-Summer early Fall with no rain at all, and by the end of the season there were even reports of drought. But most growers reported timely rains near harvest, and everyone said it was a relaxed time gathering, which helped make up for the frenzy of the rainy period. Crop size is good, which surprised some growers. I heard reports of large numbers of bunches but with small berries, which gave markedly aromatic musts (and wines), and after the early-season frosts and rains, growers didn't green-harvest as aggressively as usual. We have wine.

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

It's the same old problem: what to do with the greatest-of-the-great who would dominate here? Do I retire their numbers, so to speak, or do I leave them in and let them dominate? This year I think I'll try to split the difference. Alert readers will also notice I'm speaking in the plural here, and yes, there is now a second estate who've reached the status of dangerously outstanding, and that estate is of course **Selbach-Oster**. No sane person can plausibly challenge the sheer magnificence of what Johannes is doing here, and 2016 takes its place in a chain of superlative vintages stretching back to 2005 (and further), and encompassing 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012 (especially), 2015 and now this resplendent new crop.

THE WINERY OF THE VINTAGE IS:

(It would be a steel-cage match between Dönnhoff and Selbach were they included, but as they "officially" are not, then...)

Von Winning, who themselves are becoming candidates for number-retiring, but to whom worshipful credit must be given for an incomprehensibly superb and steady group of Rieslings.

OTHER MARKED SUCCESSSES:

(Regardless of whether the wines are plentiful or scarce, based on sheer quality alone...)

Eugen Müller (best-ever vintage for this fine, honest grower)

Goldatzel (which had me struggling to find any wines to *omit*)

Merkelbach (their finest vintage that wasn't in some way extraordinary, as in 2010 and 2015, but which is simply and purely classic)

Loewen (nothing to do but shake your head dazed and grateful)

Schaefer (for me, a considerable improvement even over 2015)

Müller-Catoir (wizard-juice here!)

VINTAGES FAR ABOVE THE RECENT STANDARD:

(That is, most improved performances and/or those that offered the most pleasant shock and surprise)

Meßmer (In many ways the exact vintage Gregor Meßmer was born to make)

Meulenhof (the first proper vintage here since 2009, and a superb and reassuring collection)

A FINAL CONSIDERATION:

No one had an ordinary vintage, and it seems unfair to exclude, for example, **Diel** or **Künstler** (among others) from being highlighted merely because they were predictably excellent.

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Loewen – 1896 Riesling Feinherb. (This pains me no end, because there's hardly a drop of it, so I apologize in advance to you. But really, credit must be given to an astonishing and profound masterpiece.)

THE RIESLING WINE(S) OF THE VINTAGE INCLUDING SELBACH & DOENNHOF:

von Winning Pechstein GG

Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Brücke Spätlese

Dönnhoff Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Spätlese

Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten "Urglück" Spätlese

Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Spätlese #5

Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Spätlese 1-star

Selbach-Oster Schmitt

THE GREATEST NON-RIESLING WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Müller-Catoir Gimmeldinger Schlössel Rieslaner Spätlese

THE GREATEST TROCKEN WINES (AN EVER-LARGER GROUP)

Müller-Catoir both the village (Haardt) and vineyard (Mandelring) **Scheurebe** are high-water marks for this kinkiest of varieties.

von Winning Riesling Pechstein GG, for reasons already adumbrated.

Diel Riesling Schlossberg "Erstes Gewächs" which is a ludicrously delicious and fascinating wine below the lofty heights of "GG."

Goldatzel Riesling "Bestes Fass" (best cask) Goldatzel Spätlese Trocken

Künstler Riesling Hölle Kabinett Trocken

THE GREATEST FEINHERB WINES:

Minges **Scheurebe**

Spreitzer Hattenheimer Engelmannsberg Riesling

THE VERY GREATEST VALUES (ESTATE RIESLINGS, KABINETTS, ETC):

Künstler Estate Riesling Trocken, which punches above its weight and also your weight plus my weight; the wine is ridiculous.

Vols Wiltinger Kupf Riesling Kabinett

Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, which was also WINE OF THE VINTAGE material.

EISWEIN, ALL OF IT ASTONISHING:

Three from **Hexamer** and one from **Selbach** are as good as they get.

A GLANCE BACK AT 2015

A very famous grower asked me, over dinner, near the end of the evening when all of us were loose and unguarded, what I "really" thought of 2015. I replied that I liked the vintage for its virtues but was

alert to its flaws. You have to appreciate such lusty hale fruit, such forthright flavor, such easy companionability and such visible tangible character. The dry and almost-dry wines were very good (except for a few where ripeness got away from them; these were ungainly and crude) and many of the “sweet” wines were fine in their extroverted way.

My interlocutor knew me well, though, and knew there was a “but” hovering in the vicinity. “And?” he asked. Well, I replied, there are a lot of sweet wines with too much acidity. Including, I added, yours. At this point he rose from his seat and stretched out his hand in a high-five gesture, saying “Yes, exactly! And you’re the first person to say so.”

I went back to my notes to see if I’d been seduced by all the ingratiating charms of the ‘15s—but as it happens, I wasn’t. It was clear at the time which wines were balanced and which weren’t, and I suggested the vintage should be drunk young, before those pronounced acids decoupled from fruit, forming a crevasse whose sides, I feared, would never join.

So, I really do like the good ‘15s, and there are plenty of them, and if you’re a taster/drinker who relishes a jabbing acid attack then you’ll lick your lips over the exact wines I furrow my brow about. As a young wine lover I relished high acidity—I don’t really know why—but over time I grew suspicious of any single component that shrieked out from the whole. Hans Selbach (Johannes’ father and a wise man of wine) said “It’s better if the whole chorus sings than if one voice screams,” and it is that exactly.

It’s not too great a digression to observe that no single flavor element matters *at all* unless we notice it missing, or unless it is annoyingly blatant. Nor is this small-t truth obviated by our many different palates. It’s self-evident that we differ in our sensitivities; some tasters do not perceive pyrazine, others don’t pick up the ingredient that confers the black-pepper aroma in many Rhône Syrahs. But every single taster has a sense of proper balance, among the parameters of her subjectivity; she doesn’t need to have mine and I can do without hers, but we both know when a wine feels complete and synergistic, and we both know when it doesn’t.

Who is imparting this to young wine drinkers? Is anyone? From what I observe, too many of them are seduced by some individual quirk that impresses them as novel or “interesting” and no one’s told them that’s all very well, but it isn’t

enough. I count the minutes until they outgrow this callow attitude, and take a wiser view of quality. What makes a wine interesting, ultimately and fundamentally, is that it’s distinctive but not merely weird, and that it’s delicious. And so, returning to 2015, I admire and enjoy its many delicious and interesting wines, and take a gimlet-eyed view of most of the bad-boys.

WHITHER AUSLESE?

2016 doesn’t offer many Auslesen, though there are plenty of leftovers from ‘15. Ah yes, the vinous love that dare not speak its name. Auslese, the wine no one wants (except the Chinese, who are keeping it alive from what I hear) yet everyone adores *while they are drinking it*. Auslese suffers when one approaches it by demanding it prove its utility. “How do I use it??”

And it suffers from being the eternal lost-sheep in the flock, the one in the middle. Buyers who must have only the rare and sublime will gravitate toward the ultra-concentrated dessert wines, the TBAs—and my blood ran cold when several growers complained they couldn’t even sell *Beerenauslese*—compared to which the (mere) Auslese is seen as some sort of thin gruel of not-really-dessert wine.

Dudes, you’re looking at it all wrong. Each angle you’re viewing it from is wrong, and your entire conception of it is also wrong. Yet I sympathize, because there are way too many Auslesen that actually are feeble dilutions of the profound elixirs BA-TBA too many that are kind-of-botrytise wines too many that are both too sweet and not sweet enough.

But there are also miracles of beauty and rapture to be found here, and when you find one you couldn’t care less about how you might “use” it, you’re just glad it found you and will catch you when you swoon.

The secret, maybe, is to see Auslese not as a BA or TBA that “failed” but instead as a Spätlese that stretched to an even higher height. Those are the best kinds of Auslese, because they don’t lose vinosity, they continue to be virile, compact and driven by fruit and mineral. And this is incredibly stirring, because here is an entire wine culture making a kind of wine we greet with a collective yawn, because... why? It seems perverse on its face. Yet what I see is a type of wine that expresses gratefulness for a gift of nature. I also see a noble observance of an aspect

of human culture; you do not spurn nature’s gifts. One grower told me, “I see it as a kind of duty, to make a beautiful thing when nature presents the possibility, and if I don’t sell it then it stays in the cellar and my kids will drink it.”

And here we are, scratching our heads thinking “Waddaya do with this stuff... maybe with a cheese course...” and I propose to you that you have the cart before the horse. The wine is a being of beauty and love. *It comes first*. You pay it the obeisance it deserves, you stop your busy life just long enough to be amazed you have a soul that can melt, you hear yourself saying “People have to taste this,” and then, because you really are a genius, you figure out how to bring that about.

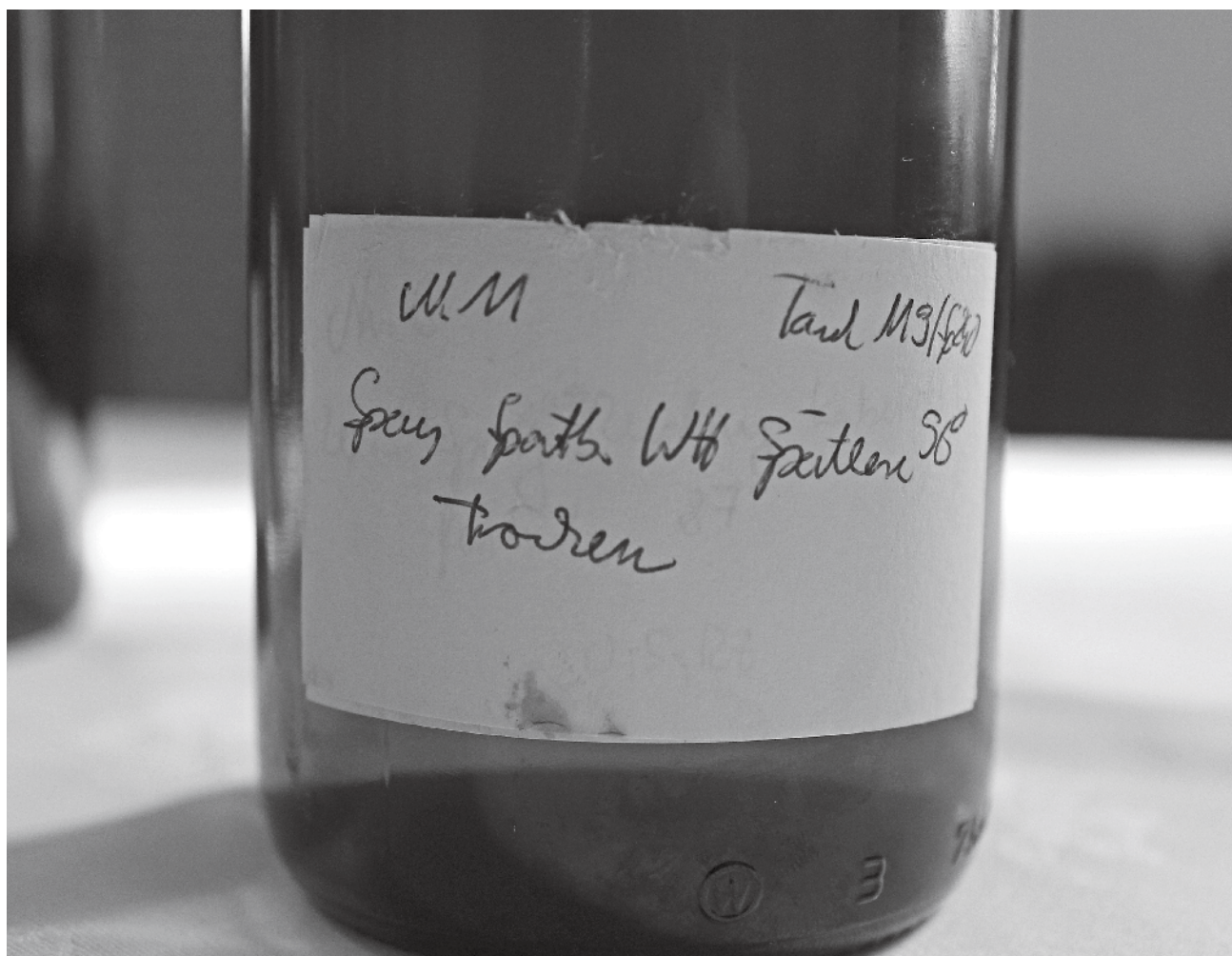
I’ll tell you this. I don’t like very “sweet” wines. Mostly I am bored by them. I want any wine I select, with whatever degree of RS it contains, to show *as a whole* and that sweetness be absorbed, assimilated and in perfect inconspicuous balance. Those are the kinds of Auslesen I select. I override every bit of my mercantile hesitation in the faces of these wines. I probably won’t sell them very much. I’m sad about that, but I also have a debt to the cause of beauty, and my small voice admonished me: How will I live with myself if I walk away from this wine? Have I really become *that guy*?

FIZZ MIT UMLAUTS

Two growers sent me new “Sekt” cuvées over the Winter. *Sekt* is what they call sparkling wine. For most of my life it wasn’t taken seriously, but that is changing. Slowly, but changing.

The issue with both the bubbly I received was the same; good interesting base-wines were (in effect) disrespected by thoughtless conceptualizing and not enough time on the lees. The first issue is one of paradigm; too few growers really consider the parameters of fine sparkling wine. They tend to use a barely ripe high-acid base, run it through *tirage* too soon after the vintage, and disgorge it too soon. (Very few actually do this work themselves; they send their wines to Sekt operations to have it done for them based on the instructions they provide.) There is very little blending, and very little thought is given to the texture of the *vin claire* before it goes into *tirage*. Nor is there much thought given to *dosage*, and very few tasting trials.

The ones who do think about these things are able to offer something I think we need. Champagne is becoming a dif-



ficult proposition for by-the-glass, and smart somms are all over the alternatives—other French Cremants (especially and justifiably Jurasien) and to a growing extent, German Sekt. So a few years ago I started to survey the landscape, and I found a few surprises along the way. Even our friends at Dönnhoff have some Pinot-based cuvées *en tirage*.

Which brings me to a second issue; what do they use to make Sekt? Riesling, much of the time, and this makes sense. But more and more of them are working with Pinots (Noir and Blanc, and sometimes also with Chardonnay) to try to make something “toastier.” It’s a good time to be watchful. Meanwhile, these are the ones that excited me, with detailed notes inside each grower’s profile.

Eugen Müller Riesling Sekt Brut, Forster Pechstein. Yes, that Pechstein, the supernal “GG” from Von Winning and source of many of Müller’s best still wines. Once this bubbly had been on the cork about nine months, it came alive. Stefan Müller

only had 25 cases left of this disgorgement, and I bought ‘em all.

Darting 2014 Pinot Blanc Brut, a perfect Brasserie pour.

von Winning gives us a fine duo, a 2014 Riesling Extra Brut that needs to get over a recent disgorgement, and a very impressive Brut Rosé—PN and CH—that bears comparison to all but the upper level of Champagnes.

Meßmer still offers his astonishing 2010 Rosé—he still has some on *tirage*! This is probably the single most fascinating wine in this entire offering, and full proof you can have an entirely singular, unique wine without it having to be dubious and creepy.

Minges 2012 Riesling Brut, in which the curious family thread between Riesling and Blanc de Blancs Champagne is visible.

Künstler 2009 Brut, offered for the first time, and completely credible and interesting.

Selbach-Oster 2014 Riesling Brut, about which I can only say I’ve tasted a whole *slew* of Champagnes that aren’t this good. Johannes only had 50 cases, and I grabbed them with unseemly (but justifiable) greed. This is the best of the category, and you need to know it if you care at all about sparkling wine.

FEINHERB

I’ll define Feinherb. These are classic examples of (yet) another adage I’ve coined: The perfect dry wine is often not perfectly dry.

In practice “Feinherb” can be used for anything from 10 grams/liter of RS (and most palates taste sugar discretely starting at 12g/l. “Brut” goes to 15) to somewhere in the high 20s. It’s the zone where sugar is stealthy and as good as invisible. It’s extending the fruit, increasing the aroma, moderating the alcohol, and dancing with the sweetness already in your food. But you do not taste it. That is, unless

you're that pathologically bitter ghoulish who hates any surmise of sweetness. Put another way, a good dry Riesling is wonderful; a Feinherb Riesling is insanely wonderful, and is more flexible.

I'll list them here. Note that some don't actually say "Feinherb" on the label, but it's how they taste. And if you really want to be the hippest Somm in town, these bottles of liquid perfection will be infinitely hipper with your food than that Micronesian amphora Vitovska you want everyone to be jealous of you for scoring.

SPREITZER Hattenheimer Engelmansberg
Riesling Feinherb

SPREITZER Winkeler Jesuitengarten
Alte Reben Riesling Feinherb

GOLDATZEL Johannisberger Goldatzel
Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

GOLDATZEL Johannisberger Hölle
Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

GOLDATZEL Johannisberger Vogelsang
Alte Reben Riesling Feinherb

HEXAMER Riesling Feinherb "Porphyrt"

SCHLOSSGUT DIEL Riesling Feinherb "Von der Nahe"

MINGES Scheurebe Feinherb

MEßMER Riesling Kabinett Feinherb "Muschelkalk"

MEßMER Muskateller Feinherb

EUGEN MÜLLER Forster Pechstein
Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

GEIL Bechtheimer Riesling Feinherb

WEINGART Mittelrhein Riesling Feinherb

MÜLLER-CATOIR Riesling Feinherb "MC"

MÜLLER-CATOIR Gimmeldinger Schlossel
Rieslaner Spätlese Feinherb

JAKOB SCHNEIDER Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Feinherb

JAKOB SCHNEIDER Spatburgunder Rose Feinherb

MEULENHOF Erdener Treppchen
Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

CARL LOEWEN Longuicher Maximin
Herrenberg "1896" Riesling Feinherb

REUSCHER-HAART Riesling Spätlese
Feinherb "ÜberSchwang"

VOLS Saar Riesling Feinherb

A.J. ADAM Im Pfarrgarten Riesling Feinherb

A.J. ADAM Dhron Hofberg
Riesling Feinherb "In der Sangerei"

SELBACH-OSTER Riesling Feinherb

SELBACH-OSTER Graacher Domprobst
Riesling Spätlese Feinherb Alte Reben

SELBACH-OSTER Zeltinger Sonnenuhr
Riesling Spätlese Feinherb "Uralte Reben"

STRUB Silvaner Feinherb

STRUB Niersteiner Oelberg
Riesling Feinherb "Roter Schiefer"

STRUB Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Feinherb "Thal"
von **WINNING** "The Winnings"

HOW I SELECT

The first principle for me is to tell you the truth.

If I offer a wine it's because I liked it and think you should buy it.

I'm fallible, wine is changeable, and I can make the isolated mistake, but I won't suggest you buy a wine I don't think you should. Period.

This entails a risk with producers, who are correctly proud of their wines and who themselves have favorites they hope will be sold in the States. The risk is exacerbated by my laying everything out in writing, and though this text is written for you, it's also read by them.

Do I pull punches? Never. I may seek to write diplomatically, and I will always be humane and respectful, but I've built a covenant of trust with my customers for 29 years now, and it could be squandered in six months if I started dissembling or broke faith with my core values.

Entering my fourth decade doing this, it's easy—fatuously so—for colleagues/competitors to see this portfolio as "conservative," but I don't think it is. The German Riesling scene in general is "conservative," because there is something of abiding and enormous value to be conserved. The high priests of Riesling, the guardians of its eternal value, are not conservative in social or political terms; they are classicists for whom the very notions of "trendiness" or "cutting-edge" are absurd and irrelevant. The deacons of Riesling, the young growers with their young visions and their willingness to shake things up, are often the ones who get shaken up themselves as years go past and they see the basics of the ground more clearly, and learn to measure time by decade rather than by news-cycle. Certainly I offer growers who are conspicuously *on-the-move*—von Winning, Schneider, Kruger-Rumpf, Adam, Vols come to mind—but they're not moving toward some *recherche* re-imagining of Riesling. Rather the opposite; they're doing what they feel is necessary to create even more profound and classic Rieslings.

I don't really "design" this portfolio, but if I'm true to myself, my values and my tastes, a design becomes apparent. I find myself to be flexible and tolerant within classical perimeters. I won't be interest-

ed if someone does Riesling in Amphorae. That is demonstrably unnecessary. I work with natural yeast guys and with cultured yeast guys, with whole-cluster guys and skin-contact guys, with steel tank and wooden cask, with ambient ferment temperatures and with controlled, and believe me, all of it is fascinating and none of it matters. None of it will ever yield to yours or my wish to form value judgments. What I want, at the very least, is delicious wine, with character, balance and distinctiveness. I try very hard to find and offer such wines at the "low end" of the market, because I see no reason why we should diss people who don't treasure wine enough to spend more than \$25 a bottle for it. They should have the most kick-ass wine that amount of money will buy. Please understand, I'm delighted to contribute to your Hermannshöhle Spätlese verticals, but it's the good cheap wines that let me sleep at night.

Finally, if I satisfy those criteria, I increase my odds of encountering the transcendent, the soul-shakers, and the heart-openers. That experience is never available among the novel or quirky. You find it exclusively among the classics, and then you experience the most evanescent and glorious thing of all: each time a wine shakes you to your core it is happening for the *first time ever*. No matter how many times it's happened before. No matter that you're familiar with "this type of wine." When you encounter a great one, it erases you. You're back to *tabula-rasa*. You are the first human, drinking the first wine. You baptize your soul.

These experiences are profound; there is no other word for them. And when profound experiences accumulate, that becomes what we call "classic." That which is capable of delivering profundity. The highest striving of its kind. So yeah, if you want to call my portfolio "classic," I'll sign on to that.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT TASTING NOTES

My notes are spontaneous. I clean them up a little, mostly for the sake of sense and syntax, but I never juice them to make the wines more seductive. The notes are all, obviously, enthusiastic because these are the wines I liked enough to select.

Most people's notes go down the same few roads. The first of these is **cognates and associations**, i.e. the other things a wine might taste and smell like. I won't write such things unless they come to me immediately; I never grope for them.

This approach has several pitfalls, as you know. Sometimes the cognate is obvious and everyone would agree; certain wines smell like cherry blossoms or licorice or whatever, and we know what those things smell like. The problem is, there are times when wines taste and smell like rare or unusual things, and then the reader is lost if she's never smelled "osmanthus" or "chamomile" even if those are dead-accurate descriptors. It is also tempting to throw a lot of esoteric descriptors around, to impress your reader with how acute your palate and schnozz are. "My God; that man remembers the smell of *everything!* I must lob my panties at him right away!" I really seek to stay clear of this syndrome. If I use, say, flowers in tasting notes I'll usually stay with common ones, violets, iris, roses, wisteria, hyacinth, peony. But my own imagination betrays me. I might discover some new fragrance, and then it squats in my notes because suddenly everything smells like linden or verberna or anise-hyssop or aloe vera.

I like when I use texture words, because I think these are more vivid than to simply recite a noun (raspberry, etc.); things like "creamy," "crisp," "snappy," "gooey" or "rocky" create a more electric connection between writer and reader. It also avoids the scenario of someone not *getting* what you write—"I'm sorry but I do not smell key-lime in this wine!" Who's ever said "I don't find this at all *smooth*." Very rarely, if at all.

The logical continuance of texture-language is to go deeper into image and metaphor. This of course is dangerous. It can become self-indulgent and twee, but I allow myself to do it if it is the most compelling way to depict the wine, and if it comes naturally and instantaneously. It's my truth, it can't be helped, and I hope that you get it but I can't be certain. If I describe a wine as "pensive" I know just what I mean by it, but will you? I fear not, especially if you've come up through the various certification protocols, by which wine is made into a specimen, an object to be mastered instead of a being to be known. So I take the chance that we'll be on different frequencies, so that I can honor the spontaneous impulse and say the most salient and powerful thing about the wine. Or try to....

Lately there's a new thing happening more often to me; I taste a wine and I *get* it immediately, I grok it before I even know it consciously. This is a non-linguistic impulse, and if I have to pause to try and summon up words for what has just happened at light-speed and with no discernible effort, it pisses me off. It's

also difficult, because there are a lot of wines that can quickly be *known* but the condition of knowing them is to banish language. Here's an example: Dönnhoff's Hermannshöhle is a great wine that will yield to description and deconstruction, whereas his Brücke will not. At least, not to me. Brücke is entirely intuitive and imagistic; Hermannshöhle is explicit. Hermannshöhle is a splendid and gorgeous explanation, but Brücke is a Truth.

And so my faith, my probably-unwarranted faith, is that if I write as the spirit moves me and as the wine demands, at least the notes will convey a force even if they don't make sense to someone else.

WHAT'S WITH THE PLUSSES?

Here's what they mean. Every wine in this offering has made the cut; they're all excellent. The plusses draw your attention to what I felt were especially noteworthy. One plus should go on your short list. Two plusses start to tickle the realm of the stellar, and should not be missed. Three plusses, very seldom given, are for the transcendently great wine, the ones that invade you with silence. You can, if you like, compare them to Michelin stars, by which you will understand that non-starred restaurants can also be fabulous places to eat. So, one plus = don't miss. Two plusses = don't miss on pain of death, and three plusses = prepare to be melted down to your primordial soul.

NOTES ON MY SENSE-OF SWEETNESS SCALE (SOS)

All of us know—or ought to know—that the impression of sweetness in a wine has only a little to do with its actual presence as measured in grams-per-liter. Acidity and extract impinge on it, which is why an Alsace Pinot Gris with 15 grams of RS will taste sweeter than a Mosel Riesling with 40.

As a buyer, sommelier or drinker we'd like to know what to expect. The label is a useful clue but isn't always airtight. So I seek to reveal the *actual* sense of sweetness each given wine shows.

The system begins with **ZERO**. This is the absence of any discernible sweetness.

Just as there are degrees of sweetness there are also degrees of dryness. An SOS of **MINUS-1** is a wine wherein you're aware—sometimes painfully so—of the stark absence of sweetness.

Along those lines, and SOS of **MINUS-2** is a truly austere wine. I select almost none of them. Yet even such wines may offer something compelling if you happen to appreciate their particular frequencies—or are a German person—and so they will sometimes appear.

The PLUS numbers are similarly instinctive and empirical. **ONE** indicates a wine with barely perceptible sweetness. Sometimes it occurs in a wine that's actually dry, such is the strength of fruit or the inner richness of physiological ripeness.

TWO signals that sweetness is present and you can taste it, though it isn't obtrusive and is in synch with everything around it. Think apple-sweet, not cupcake-sweet.

THREE indicates that sweetness is a key component in the wine, as it would be in a ripe peach.

FOUR is a dessert wine.

After many years of doing this, it began to feel predictable. And to reduce visual clutter, I am only going to indicate SOS when it is *other than might have been expected*.

Nearly all TROCKEN wines will have an SOS of ZERO. A tiny number may have minus-values, and a few might curiously head up into ONE, for reasons already explained.

Nearly all FEINHERB or HALBTROCKEN wines will have an SOS of ONE. A few will seem dryer; almost none would ever seem sweeter.

As a rule, the average KABINETT wine will have an SOS of TWO. Some will have less; very *very* few would have more. At least today; as recently as 7-15 years ago there were a number of over-sweet Kabinets (a prominent example within this offering is now sporting about 40-45 g/l yet not long ago it was offering as much as *eighty*.) There are also a great many SPAETLESE with SOS of TWO. These wines can (and I would argue, *should*) show more richness but not invariably a greater impression of sweetness than a good Kabinett. 'Least that's how I select them!

Most AUSLESE will have an SOS of THREE. A few—the kind I adore—have less. Those that have more are highly unlikely to appear in this offering.

So, to repeat and conclude, **I will show "SOS" when it is surprising**, and we'll make it as conspicuous as we can within the text.

SOMMELIER ALERT!



Flex and a comradely wish to be helpful are what matter most to me in the winefood nexus. Clarity, grace, moderate alcohol, good acidity, minerality and a focus on balance and fruit will give the highest odds of a pleasant melding of flavors.

I hit upon the SOMMELIER ALERT idea after I found myself on the phone at great length with restaurant buyers, walking through the offering to find the wines I thought were best for your purposes. No one has that kind of time, so I codified it. And the first thing I'd like you to know is, this isn't a list of "the best wines" and also that wines not flashed as Somm-Alert are also going to be nice with your food. In some cases you buy the most exciting wine-qua-wine and worry about the food matching later. That's cool; I'd probably do it too. But, the wines I put on the list are part of a mise-en-scene whereby I envision a big-ish table, a 6-or-8-top, and there's all kinds of food being ordered, and what possible wine will be flexible enough to pivot among the whole unruly circus of tastes? "This'll go with damn near anything," is what I'm thinking.

My criteria, to the extent I even have them (this being more intuitive than anything else) are, vivid up-front flavor—I'm

not convinced the restaurant experience is strictly conducive to subtle wines—a lot of scent, a refreshing and attractive personality that has your guest reaching often for the glass, and most of all a stealthy sense of sweetness. That is, not a taste of sugar that's somehow been disguised, but an actual ration of sweetness that corresponds to the sweetness in many of your savory courses. I offer plenty of bone-dry wines Sommelier Alert! and I know there are times they are perfect, just less often than not-entirely-dry wines.

There's also a sense of embedded sweetness/richness that arises from physiological or phenolic or aromatic ripeness—the seeds and skins are no longer bitter—that can make a very dry wine seem to feint toward sweetness. Mischief can ensue, especially if the wine smells flowery or fruity; some drinkers will infer sweetness that actually doesn't exist, and if they object to "sweetness" then you can insist all you want that it's not there. It won't matter.

Mind you, these are not compromise-wines. They're simply amazingly flexible and accommodating wines. Some of them are quirky, some of them are angular, but all of them arrive at the table asking "How can I help?"

In my continuing and no doubt pathetic efforts to be useful to somms—*pwease WUV me!!*—I'm going to show you a list of what I feel to be the best wines OF ALL for your use. Again, not invariably the "best" wines, but the ones I wouldn't be without, the ones I'd triage down to—the indispensable.

EUGEN MÜLLER Forster Pechstein
Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

MÜLLER-CATOIR Mandelring Scheurebe Trocken

VON WINNING "Winnings" Riesling

HEXAMER Riesling Porphyrr Feinherb

DÖNNHOFF Estate Riesling

MEULENHOF Erdener Treppchen
Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben

MERKELBACH Kinheimer Rosenberg
Riesling Spätlese #2

LOEWEN Longuicher Herrenberg
Riesling Kabinett

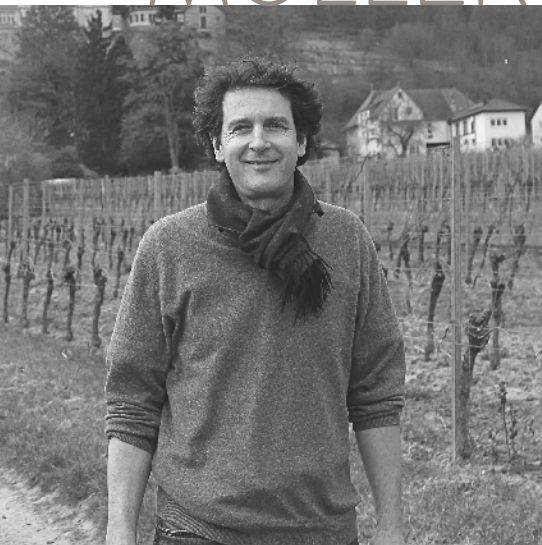
SELBACH-OSTER Zeltinger Sonnenuhr
Riesling Spätlese Trocken

SELBACH-OSTER Zeltinger Sonnenuhr
Riesling Kabinett

PFALZ

The German wine region that most resembles what we call “wine country” gets very busy as soon as the almond blossoms open in mid-March. Many of its visitors are excursions from the close-by cities of Mannheim, Heidelberg, Ludwigshafen and Frankenthal, and for whatever reason these folks insist on dry wines, especially from the Pinot varieties, which have less acidity. So the Pfalz is preponderantly a Trocken wine place, which damages the cause of diversity but which is at least “viable” because the dry wines can easily be good and sometimes are great. Extremely hip in the 90s, Pfalz has settled into its identity as a kind of anything-goes wine region, with plenty of decent to excellent reds and outstanding examples of the “fragrant” varieties such as Muscat and Scheurebe alongside the psychedelic Rieslaner and the (too often) banal Sauvignon Blanc. Still, one of Europe’s *very* finest Sauv Blancs hails from the folks at Von Winning, who have single-handedly proven that great wines can come from this often loutish variety. Pfalz Rieslings are spice-bombs of ginger and pineapple, yet none of that is incompatible with great class and refinement in the top wines, whether dry or not-dry. If you’re a German Riesling buyer, this is what you can expect: *more body and more alcohol. Softer (but not soft) acidity. Overt flavor along spice and tropical lines. Savory character. Generosity.*

MÜLLER-CATOIR



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Haardt

VINEYARD AREA

21 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

12,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog
(sandstone);
Haardter Herrenletten
(loam, clay, marl, limestone);
Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten
(loess, sandstone gravel);
Mußbacher Eselshaut
(gravel);
Bruemel in den Mauren
(sandstone, gravel)

GRAPE VARIETIES

65% Riesling
10% Weissburgunder
5% Grauburgunder
5% Muskateller
5% Rieslaner
5% Scheurebe
5% Spätburgunder

FARMING PRACTICES

Certified Organic

From 1962 to 2002 this estate employed a man who would become the seminal cellarmaster of his era. Hans Günter Schwarz's are the shoulders upon which an entire generation of German vintners stands. And during that time, Müller-Catoir was widely regarded as the best estate in the Pfalz. I myself felt they were the best estate in all of Germany. Schwarz is warm and avuncular and unpretentious, and so he was widely beloved. Anyone who had to fill his shoes started at a serious disadvantage. All the more reason to admire not only what Martin Franzen has done, but the sangfroid with which he did it.

He's about the most agreeable guy you'd ever want to meet, and the students and stagiaires he hosts at the winery are in awe of his knowledge and helpfulness. The chattering classes talk about how the wines have changed. They say that the Mosel-born Franzen makes them to emulate the cooler style of that more northerly region. They are indeed less overt than many of their peers in the Pfalz, because this vintner is most interested in overtone, nuance and penumbra, and he chooses not to make the fleshpots

that would get him "high scores."

2016 is a vintage Franzen could have scripted to play to his very strengths. Wary as I am about judging these wines too early, I did feel that some of the lighter Rieslings were rather a study-in-dryness, but once we hit the aromatic varieties it was fire up the vape and take out the nipple clamps. I do not find Muscat, Scheurebe nor Rieslaner to be trivial varieties, and judged by them alone you'd have to place Catoir at the top of the Pfalz. And after several years of inexplicable critical disregard, I hear murmurings this may be changing within Germany, as fifteen years of such quality and scrupulous vision can't just be written off. Franzen has never wanted to make blockbusters that "show" well in their first year. He is more attuned to overtones of flavor that peal and buzz, more attuned to wines that fascinate rather than wines that shake your shoulders. A shallow taster may see such wines as aloof. A more attentive (or simply introverted) taster will be thrilled that any wine can reach the itch (s)he's never quite been able to scratch. I won't say that Catoir is "the best" estate in the Pfalz, but I will say there's no one better.

RIESLINGS IN ASCENDING ORDER OF SWEETNESS

2016 Haardt Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GMC-239 | SOS: -1

Generous and exotic aromas of malt, persimmon, physalis, wild plum and Nepalese Timut pepper (esoteric enough for you?); the wine has seen some cask (1000 liter old wood) and is open hearted and generous. The finish would have relished 4-5 g/l of RS to extend the richness of fruit, but—this is Germany. What's good is very good.

2016 Herrenletten Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GMC-244

Haardt is the village wine, while *Herrenletten* is a single-vineyard wine from a classified site. If this were Champagne we'd be writing about "blatant naked chalk;" Pfalz joins hands with Mesnil, laughing together atop a quarry of smashed rocks. Cool talc and lemon and white tea. Nigl shows you wines like this in some years. Cerebral? You tell me! I find it generous and overt, but it's not driven by flavors that tickle you.

2016 Bürgergarten "In Breumel" Riesling "GG"

6/750ml | GMC-245 | SOS: -1

Searching, fascinating and accessible in its trigonometry-of-riesling way. Oddly the finish is like the Pyramid black salt from Cyprus, not so much "mineral" as carbonized; burnt herbs like when you throw them into a hot skillet. You're not only drinking the wine, you're eating the earth. But look out: this wild genius madman is DEE-RY.

2016 "MC" Riesling

12/750ml | GMC-234 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

A custom bottling made for me, this is perfect. Perfect Riesling, perfect food-wine, perfectly clear and polished and tasty and interesting. Lemon flavor without lemon tartness; like a meyer, part-way to a peach. I've had a ton of wines that smelled like this and they all cost 2X or 3X more. The "green" umami is almost heart-rending. God what a beauty!

2016 Mussbach Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GMC-243

Apricot parfait and balsam with aloe-herbal notes make for a seductive and buzzingly pleasurable glass of wine. Riesling in the key of bliss...

NON-RIESLINGS

2015 Haardt Spätburgunder

12/750ml | GMC-240

Cool blueberry fruit, dark-sky big-moon fruit; tart berries and a bit of char; the palate is juicy and silky, concentrated but elegantly dispersed so that it shows a light buoyant density. A satisfying PN that doesn't need to seduce.

2016 "MC" Spätburgunder Rosé

12/750ml | GMC-033

You'll have guessed that "MC" is the acronym by which they indicate estate-level wines. I just know you did.

If there's such a thing as an introverted Rosé, it's this. Not *shy*—it's loaded with flavor—yet it's somehow interior. An acme of class and wonderful length, silky and even searching. If you know Diel's superb Rosé, this is a dryer slimmer version of that wine, similarly refined. This will struggle to be heard in our trade tastings, but 1-on-1 and one-at-a-time it's originality is indelible and unforgettable.

A STUNNING SCHEUREBE TRILOGY!

2016 “MC” Scheurebe Trocken

12/750ml | GMC-238

On the money! More cassis, less grapefruit, but loads of manic lime; a jumpy jittery herbal Scheu.

2016 Haardt Scheurebe Trocken

+ +

12/750ml | GMC-241 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is simply fantastic dry Scheu. Soaringly expressive, wildly generous, head-shakingly vivid; woddruuff-y volcanic notes; a salad of 17 herbs and flowers; mint and verbenas and nettles and even chile threads – wake the dead stuff here, like sucking the breath of a Gila Monster.

2016 Mandelring Scheurebe Trocken

+ +

12/750ml | GMC-246

Zero botrytis, so Martin opted to make this dry masterpiece. It's less wiggly than the Haardt but also deeper, more layered; a wine of great, deep humor, an exegesis of cassis, physio-sweet, with a hugely clinging salty finish. If dry Scheurebe can be *grandiose*, this one is.

(THE SMART MONEY SAYS TO BUY ALL THREE, SYBARITES. SOMMELIER ALERT!)

LAST BUT NOT LEAST...

2016 Haardt Muskateller Trocken

+ (+)

12/750ml | GMC-242

Likely the world's best dry Muscat, and certainly irrefutably among a tiny elite group. The '16 is a fetching melody played on the high octaves; exceptionally minty this year; a long and subtly stony palate leads to an endless herbal finish. Allowing for my clearly ridiculous addiction to Muscat, this is still some hot-ass wine.

2016 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner Spätlese

+ + (+)

12/750ml | GMC-247

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

If you crossed Petit Manseng and Muscat—and peppermint—you'd sort of approximate Rieslaner. Or, not really. For a wine that's never inscrutable I find Rieslaner fiendishly hard to describe. Riesling on Viagra maybe? In any case, this masterpiece may very well be great. The top notes sizzle and crackle, the middle notes thrum and croon, and the finish hums and murmurs. Seamless, symmetrical, poised yet galvanic. Drops you to your knees, crying and laughing.

2016 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner Auslese

+

12/375ml | GMC-248H | SOS : 2

Maybe the saltiest wine I've ever tasted. Finest character of desiccated overripe berries. Salt-caramel almost without the caramel. None too sweet.

von WINNING



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Deidesheim

VINEYARD AREA

40 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

23,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Deidesheim Mäushöhle, Paradiesgarten
(loess, loam, red sandstone);

Ruppertsberg Reiterpfad
(sandy loam, red sandstone, marl-lime);

Deidesheim Grainhübel,
Langenmorgen and Kieselberg
(loam, red sandstone, limestone);

Forst Ungeheuer
(loess, loam, sandstone, basalt);

Deidesheim Kalkofen
(limestone, marl, loam);

Forst Kirchenstück
(sandy loam, red sandstone, basalt);

Pechstein
(black volcanic basalt with sandy loam)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc
Weisserburgunder, Chardonnay
Grauerburgunder, Pinot Noir
Muskateller, Scheurebe
Gewürztraminer

I just finished listening to a music mix I made, combining The Unthanks and The Gloaming, two groups who take traditional Scotch/Irish songs and jigs and pivot off them into harmonic sensibilities one could call “modal jazzy” or even “ambient.” The music is amazing; charming, tender, shimmering, miraculous. I came upstairs to the laptop, wondering at the human desire to create beauty, which becomes harder to explain and more obscure the older I get. In many cases it isn't conscious at all. One doesn't wake up saying “Today I shall create beauty, for I am thus roused.” It's more like a force that urges from your body.

I think of it now as I consider what's taking place at Von Winning. As many of you know, this estate was acquired around 2009 by an idealist magnate (named Niederberger), who then installed a wine nut and retailer named Stephan Attmann to go all-out for the utmost quality. Attmann himself is, in the best sense, a wild man, a happy beast, and he is indeed obsessed with greatness in wine and spares no effort to bring it about. He's not an aesthete as perhaps I am. But the effect of what he does is to wring enormous beauty out of his vineyards. I know he is aware of the impact of his actions, but I wonder whether he sees it through a prism of beauty. I don't know. I sense he discerns force, power, and expressiveness, and that these things satisfy him richly. I only ask

to add to the equation, and say the wines are beautiful. It isn't a charming or lyric beauty; the Pfalz is maybe too masculine for that. It has nothing to do with prettiness. It is, rather, a rare thing that arises from determination and enterprise, to wring every bit of passion from one's land, to assume that land can also be passionate, that it wants to be heard, and to say “Right, I get it; let me help.”

I think it's safe to assume the estate has reached cruising altitude by now. I myself tend to like the wines best in the cool-to-moderate vintages (13, 14, 16) while others may prefer them in rowdier years like 12 and 15. One can also shed the entire conversation about Riesling-in-wood, because as the casks age the wood is less prominent, but also because wood is no more inimical to the wines Attmann wants to make than it is to great Chablis—excellent if used wisely and judiciously. I've sometimes said if Dauvissat were making Riesling in the Pfalz instead of Chardonnay in Chablis he'd make wines like these. It still seems apropos, if you need a useful shorthand.

I split up the day. We tasted all the non-Rieslings in the morning, then I took me a big-ass walk in the hills—there's something salubrious about oxygen and birdsong that makes me a better taster, or at least a much more cheerful dude. We reconvened in the mid afternoon and devoted ourselves to Rieslings.

THE MORNING WINES – EVERYTHING EXCEPT RIESLING

2014 Pinot Noir “II”

12/750ml | GDD-133

A truly smart wine, given the “issues” with many ‘14 reds (over-extraction, excessive tannin, “forced” flavors); this is a raspberry charmer, with richness and a savory finish. A lovely alternate Old World PN.

2014 Pinot Noir “I”

12/750ml | GDD-141

If “II” is like a village-wine, this one’s like the 1er Cru, and both are, say, Pernand-Vergelles, violets and a sweet demeanor and lots of fruit and black raspberries that fall into your hands. A late-palate tannin kicks in, but this wine is kid-gloved into existence; not too long on the vine, not too long on the skins, not too long in cask. The result may not be “mighty,” but boy is it delicious.

2016 Pinot Noir Rosé

12/750ml | GDD-138 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

It’s one of the lavish yummy ones, like Diez’s but a bit more robust, a cute little belly of hysterically giggling fruit.

2015 Chardonnay “II”

12/750ml | GDD-143 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

They (and you) let me skate around these “other” varieties; last year I preferred the Weissburgunder and this year the Chardonnay. Given Attmann’s reverence for white Burgundy, this wine shows some of the leesy cream and doughy “sweetness” one might find in, say, a solid St. Aubin. Good firm saltiness, and a flavor of whole-wheat or oat-bread toast.

2016 Sauvignon Blanc “II”

12/750ml | GDD-144

No wines have surprised and confounded me more than these in the past several years. They’re a million miles away from other German SBs, and they never set foot in New Zealand. They’re rather like some unlikely confluence of the Styrian (from volcanic soils) and the ambitious white Bordeaux.

There are three; this is the entry-level. Overt, “sweet” fruit; you can call it *green* but it’s more toward herbs and less toward veggies or brassicas. I’m tasting it warm; one must allow for that. Served cold it’ll be all cucumber, tarragon and dill.

2016 Sauvignon Blanc “I”

12/750ml | GDD-145

+ (+)

More smoky, ambitious; black-salt as if it grew on cold black lava. The palate is juicy and enveloping, again thoroughly green but not vegetal, as though the first shoots to emerge from the cooled-down magma were a leaf of verbena and a leaf of currant.

By the way, if you still have any of the amazing 2013 (and +++) ‘13 vintage—as I do—I’ve yet to open a bottle that made me question my first judgment. That is sensational wine.

2014 Sauvignon Blanc “500”

6/750ml | GDD-137

+ + (+)

It denotes vinification in hogsheads (double the size of barriques, half the size of a *piece* or a “Stück”), and while I am inherently skeptical of oaky wines, there’s an intricacy here within all the char and smolder, and the wine is wolfishly lip-smacking, muzzle-dripping bliss. A voodoo-wicca SB.

2014 Riesling Sekt Extra Brut

12/750ml | GDD-083

Too stunned from fresh disgorgement to write a useful description, except to say the wine was excellent last year and it’s had longer on the lees now.

Brut Rosé

12/750ml | GDD-134

Based on 2012, it's 40% CH and 60% PN, and comparable to quite decent Champagne in fact—only the very good are better. Fetching fruit and spice, Pfalz lustiness, generous and showing a pleasing spicy-nubby coarseness, like a Jura Rosé but better.

RIESLINGS, UP THE LADDER

2016 Estate Riesling

12/750ml | GDD-146 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

You will note the label does not say “Trocken,” though the wine is dry. They wish to reserve the right to *let the wine find its own balance* rather than to shove it into an ill-fitting box. Some years it's legally “Trocken,” some years it's a little higher. It is never sweet. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW SENSIBLE THIS IS, AND HOW RARE????? I want to weep with joy and relief.

The wine is charming and limpid; oyster, balsam, cucumber, white lilac; spicy and stylish and snappy on the finish, with a lift and lissome-ness that's more Nahe than Pfalz.

2016 Paradiesgarten Erste Lage Trocken

12/750ml | GDD-147

+

Another singular discovery; who even knew that this usually mundane vineyard could give such wines? Since 2012 there hasn't been an “ordinary” wine from here. There's an aroma that tilts in the direction of Sauvignon; redcurrant, woodruff and lemon-balm and resin. Often this spreads out with age and gets more passion-fruity, but for now it's slinky and juicy, pointed and long in its angular herbal way.

2016 Reiterpfad Erste Lage Trocken

12/750ml | GDD-148 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

+

A top cru of Ruppertsberg, just to the east of Deidesheim further into the plain. It's the corn bisque of Pfalz Rieslings, like a croissant stuffed with mirabelle custard; a generous wine that half-walks, half-glides and half-dances over the palate. GREAT VALUE for superb quality of flavor without “power.”

THE GGs

There are four each from Forst and Deidesheim—allowing us to really grok their disparate personalities—and I'll let you contemplate the tasting of eight Grand Crus side-by-side, and the understanding of terroir that arises from so doing. Both are strong communes, but Deidesheim is more sinewy and tensile while Forst is more “Cajun” and roaring. Yet there's all the finesse in creation on display. In essence I will always offer my favorites—(Deidesheim) Langenmorgen and Kalkofen, and (Forst) Pechstein, Kirchenstück and Ungeheuer) and will sometimes supplement with a 1-off that I can't resist, such as last year's Grainhübel.

If there was a motto or slogan we might attach to this sequence of wines, it would be the thing we actually said over and over—“FUCK, THAT'S GOOD!”

2016 Kalkofen Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GDD-149 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

++

This is always the **bomb** of the GGs, the strongest and most voluminous. Roasted corn, popped sorghum with brown butter, broiled peaches and soft persimmon over a backdrop of a stone wall seething in the hot afternoon sun. Also, like happy dogs. My mind works oddly at times....

2016 Langenmorgen Riesling “GG”

+ +

6/750ml | GDD-150

My fave! It's the GG with the nerd glasses. Threads and skeins and capillaries of nuance; herbs, mineral...interior beauty. A wine of wet gray trees, and the air is moist with all the green of the woods. Cerebral need not mean bloodless; this wine is enthralling in its intricate Gregorian purity.

2016 Ungeheuer Riesling “GG”

+ +

6/750ml | GDD-151 | SOS : 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

12/375ml | GDD-151H | SOS : 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

3/1500ml | GDD-151M | SOS : 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Larger production equals lower price equals entry into this rarefied world, affordably. But first you have to pronounce it right. Sorry, it's like the password. So, think *oonga-hoyer*. Got it? Repeat a few times until you nail it. *OONGA-HOYER! OONGA-HOYER!*

The wines can sometimes seem a bit obtuse in their bone-brothy way, but this one has to be the most seductive GG in recorded history; firm and caramelly, shiitakes, goose fat, but all in a heaving jiggling orgy of hedonism and licentiousness. Want some? Sure you do. Oonga-hoyer roolz.

2016 Pechstein Riesling “GG”

+ + +

6/750ml | GDD-153 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

All its wisteria and rock-dust and all in a warmly shimmering sweetness—or, “sweetness,” for there is none on paper but the wine is so flowery you'll swear you taste it. True divinity here. Drink it next to a Felsenberg from Dönnhoff and consider the mystery and the kindness of the world.

2016 Kirchenstück Riesling “GG”

+ +

6/750ml | GDD-152

My plusses are subjective here, because this site is the *hors classe* of the Pfalz, and nearly always gives the most profound wine. As it may yet do in this vintage, but here I delineate between what I “judge” or admire, and what I love and adore. No question this is the *ne plus ultra* of profundity, in a more earnest and determined idiom. More pepper (Sarawak black), more brooding, swollen mineral. Pechstein is affirming; this is unsettling, antelucan. Pechstein is euphoric; this is grave, darker, and yet also conveys more faith, more trust. Pechstein guides you by the sun, Kirchenstück guides you by the stars.

2016 “Winnings” Riesling

+

12/750ml | GDD-159 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Our little harvest of stars is ever so slightly different this year, a little drier, more green and silvery, maybe less exotic—but this is '16.

I asked them for what I thought would be a perfect everyday Riesling, and they created it for me. Not dry, not sweet, highly aromatic, lots of yin-yang, juicy and generous. A ton of heart and friendship went into its making, and even the label was designed by my neighbor across the street, the talented Eric Lewandowski, who knew exactly what I wanted—the sense of absurd good fortune when stars tumble into your outstretched hands—your winnings. That's how it feels when you take the first sip.

EUGEN MÜLLER



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Forst

VINEYARD AREA

17 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

14,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Forster Kirchenstück
(limestone, sandy loam, basalt);
Forster Jesuitengarten
(sandstone, sandy loam, basalt);
Forster Ungeheuer
(sandstone, gravel, basalt);
Forster Pechstein
(basalt);
Forster Freundstück
(sandstone, gravel, limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling
10% Grauburgunder
and Weissburgunder
10% red varieties
(mostly Spätburgunder)

Another world here than up the road at von Winning. Müller is an old-school German estate selling mostly to a base of private customers, and to local taverns and restaurants. They aren't "trendy." But the current proprietor Stefan Müller's father, Kurt, was also cellar master at a venerable Forst estate, long out of business (but whose wines I sold in my early days) called Wilhelm Spindler, and when the old gentleman died his widow leased the best vineyards to Kurt as a reward for his service and loyalty.

It helps to have truly exceptional land. And when you find a grower like this, you can score terroir-saturated wines of impeccable aristocracy, yet the prices are most gentle and the folks are super down to earth.

Thus Müller was able to offer every great Forst Cru—Freundstück, Ungeheuer, Jesuitengarten, Pechstein, Kirchenstück. And still is. So we walk in the door at an unfussy domaine with unfussy prices and are greeted with an array of Crus that boggles the mind—

and at prices that boggle the mind. To me this is more important than what the VDP calls "price-politics," which is a fancy term for Charge whatever you can get—it's how you communicate how Important the vineyards are—but by no means less than—X. Müller, not a VDP member, probably never to be a VDP member, charges what he needs in order to support a family and has no need for "symbolism," and because of that he's a hero of mine and a boon to you.

2016 was precisely the vintage most ideal for Stefan's style and for his wishes. Happily for me, the wines were unusually "present" when I saw them in (very) early March, when they are usually obdurate and unyielding. Many growers are suspicious of wines that are presentable too soon, but not me. The theory is, such wines won't go the distance, but why should every vintage produce wines for decades-long cellaring? Isn't the beleaguered drinker entitled to *something(s)* he can drink early? Even a wine that will improve if we wait? What if we like young Rieslings?

I'm going to interrupt the flow of the listings by inserting a little essay on the nature of "minerality" inasmuch as it interacts with residual sugar. But first:

2016 Forster Jesuitengarten Riesling Kabinett Trocken

12/750ml | GEM-162

This was just the 4th estate at which I tasted, and my view of the new vintage was still clarifying. The elegance, saltiness and silken grace of this wine was something I'd see again and again, but I didn't know it then. It plays to Stefan's strengths. He also showed an Ungeheuer (*oonga-hoyer!*) Kab Trocken that was quite "oloroso," whereas this one is more palo-cortado; juicy and delineated into a conversation between balsam and quince along with a surmise of chestnutty umami. A new level of polish for Stefan's "unexceptional" dry Rieslings.

2016 Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GEM-163

Pure stones and flowers, like wisteria crawling down a hot stone wall. Verbena and mint also—what a vineyard! Spicy and juicy in equal measure; a bone-broth "sweetness" forms an arc to the stony pure dryness, yet this offers an almost gushing welcome.

2016 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken Cyriakus

12/750ml | GEM-164

It's the prime section of the greatest vineyard in the Pfalz, and the wine's almost too expressive and complex for its own good; it feels desperate, as if it's ready to explode with the thing it has to say. Complex almost to the point of inscrutability, a polytonal brooding wine yet with a shatter of spices.

2016 Forster Unhegeuer Riesling Spätlese Trocken Ziegler

12/750ml | GEM-165

This old cadaster name leads us to a section of the (large) vineyard that's markedly stony. I wanted to triage this selection out, but honestly couldn't resist it. I've never tasted a better vintage of this generous and bark-y creature, less stony than *crusty*; burning-leaf; the palate yields to an incredibly intricate stoniness but you don't approach it by a gravel path. A peppery heat sings to be heard. Toward the end of the glass you taste maiitakes and puff-ball mushrooms. It's remarkably diligent for something so robust.

2013 Sekt, Forster Pechstein Riesling Brut

12/750ml | GEM-166

I had a few bottles of this in the cellar and opened them from time to time. I was never impressed. Then I opened the final bottle—it had been in the cellar for half a year by then—and it wasn't just good—it was fabulous. I wrote to Stefan immediately. Same lot? Yes. All disgorged at once? Yup. So it was just a matter of time on the cork? Seems so.

He's down to the last 25 cases. I grabbed them. The aromas are a riot of flowers and herbs, with so much fruit it reads sweeter than it actually is—and in fact it's very dry. It's as if Denis Varnier made a wine with verbena, woodruff and balsam and butter; the finish is like an arugula pesto napped over puff-pastry.

2016 Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

12/750ml | GEM-167 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

You'd find a slew of vintages of this in my cellar if you were snooping around, unless I drunk them all, and I drink this wine often because I completely adore it. As always, it shows the floral complexity of the site, with the minerality present but discreetly. Fantastically angular, salty and basically reeking of hyacinth; also lavishly juicy and essentially *perfect* food-wine. There's a curious bond between this and Loewen's Herrenberg Kabinett, as if they were improbable cousins.

2016 Riesling “Vom Basalt” Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GEM-168

Basalt is the soil of the Pechstein, where this wine comes from. It isn't called “Pechstein” because Müller's private clientele know the (Grosslage) name “Mariengarten,” and I don't want to bother the guy with a custom label—more work, another A.P. number he'd have to get, who needs it? Also, this is a super-aromatic lot fermented with a less vigorous yeast that guarantees an incomplete result, i.e., residual sugar. This is gentler than to intervene to stop a fermentation by chilling, filtering or sulfuring. But if you quake with righteous dread at the very thought of cultured yeast... well, um yes: thinking is hard.

The wine is angular and exotic; lemon-zest and ginger and Basmati and plum blossom. Hedonistic without having to shut your mind down. Kabinett as it should be.

So—as you see I have three wines from Pechstein to show you: dry, not-quite-dry, and sweet. And they came to mind when somebody said that true minerality could not be expressed in a sweet wine. Which only goes to show that even smart people can have dumb ideas. This guy has his own sense of what “mineral” flavors are, and he finds them obscured by what he registers as a fructose blanket. Whereas I don't—yet where does that get us? His data-base is different from mine. I take it in good faith that he's reporting his empirical reality, just as I'm reporting mine, and so it's possible we don't mean the same thing by “minerality.”

*But I'll pretend we do, just to keep the subject alive. It is clear that flavors other than fruits or herbs or spices or flowers are more explicit—at least in very young wines—when little to no sweetness is present. The same wines with enough bottle age to have shed their baby fat, and the same wines with the requisite years in-bottle to be “ready to drink,” will again display those “mineral” flavors in an even more attractive way, as part of a piquant and fascinating dialogue **with** fruits and herbs and flowers and spices. And so the most you can reasonably say is that sweetness **seems to suppress** mineral expression in extremely young wine. But the payoff is an even more lovely gesture of minerality when the wine is less infantile. To make a broad-brush proclamation that “You can't taste minerality in sweet wines” is, in the spirit of charity and civility, obtuse and inaccurate.*

*Please note that I'm addressing minerality by itself in isolation. The question of terroir can encompass what we call mineral flavors, but not only those, and sometimes not even saliently those flavors. To be sure, the terroir elements of Pechstein show as a type of stoniness, but more importantly as blossoming trees, cherry, grape-hyacinth, licorice and many other un-stony flavors. I'd also argue that it's the animated conversation **among** those flavors that can best show the greatness of the terroir—more than just stony flavors alone. Many of the most mineral wines I have ever tasted were wines with sweetness, and so I suspect my “opponent” (who's actually a sweet guy) has an axe to grind about sweetness and thinks the mineral business proves his point.*

Back to the subject at hand!

2016 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GEM-169

Explosively expressive and seductive, and while it's “modernized” it still isn't modern. Salty and silvery, with energetic acidity yet with a clear and limpid texture.

2016 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese

+ (+)

12/500ml | GEM-170H

Perhaps the single greatest legacy wine in this offering, and in my entire career. I have selected it in every vintage from which it was made, and I don't recall when it wasn't made. It was great every time.

Vintages vary from the powerhouses—most recently represented by 2015—and the finesse-driven graceful wines like '16. It was unfinished in March, and may yet see time in old casks, but it's massively fetching and promising.

2016 Gewürztraminer Spätlese “Reiterpfad”

12/750ml | GEM-171 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The vineyard has to pretend to be a fantasy name, as it's registered as a “GG” but only for Riesling.

The wine has tended toward the lychee and away from the rose. The '16 is dry-feeling, and shows a cool finesse, not sultry, not blowsy, and while it's creamy it's also upright and even elegant. Gewürz without the guilt! Alongside excellent wines from Darting and Meßmer, these constitute a rarely seen type for the variety: moderate alcohol, no bitterness, and a sweetness that's light-footed.

HERBERT MEßMER



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Burrweiler

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

26,700 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Burrweiler Schäwer
and Weyhrer Michelsberg
(*slate*) ;
Burrweiler Schloßgarten
(*loam, limestone*) ;
Burrweiler Altenforst
(*sandstone*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling
Grauburgunder
Weißburgunder
Gewürztraminer
Muskateller
Spätburgunder
St. Laurent

FARMING PRACTICES

In conversion to
biodynamic viticulture

Meßmer is the kind of estate I like and no one else cherishes the way I wish they would. The wines are scrupulously clear, perhaps a little cerebral, kind of wire-rimmed-glasses kind of wines. That kind of clarity and judiciousness scratches an itch for me, but others might yearn for more sensuality and hedonism. There's also the problem that you don't know Gregor Meßmer, because he hates to fly and doesn't speak English, so he's never been here. But, if you're a wine lover whose tastes extend past the party-hearty, I know you'll like these and also that you'll find them rare. It takes courage to make such wines, and we who like them are underserved.

Gregor Meßmer initiated biodynamic viticulture starting with vintage '11. "I'm the sort of man who deliberates a long time, but once I decide I implement immediately," he says. So let's watch and see what happens. The transition, as you know, is the hard part. But when I asked him how it was going, he said "Maybe less difficult than I thought. After all, I had paved the way over many years while I was considering it. So that when we took the final step, it wasn't such a radical change."

"What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and

Herbert Meßmer piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be pleasant and usable, wines for drinking." "The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least 'winemaking.'" That's the reductionist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I like wine with the greatest possible number of uses."

No one likes a word such as "cerebral" when you want to sell wine. At least until there's a glass in your hand, and you get blasted away by how impressive the contents are. What would you call wines like these, then? Not "sensual," not "hedonistic," not "gushing fruit-bombs leering seductively at you." Cerebral—which doesn't mean "cold" and doesn't mean "bloodless" and doesn't mean "geeky." It means they taste not only like a smart person made them; they taste as though they themselves are smart. They have a surgeon's calm and poise. Or rather, most of them do. Every once in a while there's a wicked rogue who slips off the leash. There's one of them here, and it has bubbles in it...

Gregor and I had a misfire with our appointment, and he wasn't ready. We tried, at my urging, to vamp our way through, you know, like jazz dudes, tasting make-shift blends and peering through the periscope. My notes were sketchy on purpose.

But Gregor sent polished versions of the wines for me to taste four weeks later, and these were seriously impressive. This

could well be Meßmer's best vintage since 2008. Those notes are also pretty terse, because dinner was on the table and they

were all waiting for me to be finished. But the wines were so compelling it was tough to rush.

2010 Sekt Rosé

12/750ml | GMS-196 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The most original and amazing fizz in this offering, and I wonder whether there's anything like it anywhere. I offered it last year, but this is a new disgorgement (02/17) and bless his heart, he still has more *en tirage*.

It's Pinot Noir, fermented in used barrique and aged six months before tirage. It's nearly six years on the lees by now, and tastes like Vilmart's slightly ungainly brother, not so elegant and polished but full of hibiscus and rhubarb jelly, with echoes of wood and a finishing kiss of rosewater. You get to serve a 3-eyed alien wine that's as eccentric as anything out there yet also *tastes good* and doesn't smell like goat ass.

2014 Spätburgunder

12/1000ml | GMS-216L | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is a vastly better vintage than either the '12 or '13, and it may be the very best PN value in all the market—no joke, hold me to it. A pretty color leads to a lovely fragrance, much more primary fruit this year; dense, vinous, even complex.

2014 Spätburgunder Schlossgarten "GG"

6/750ml | GMS-223 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

It grows on sandstone over a substrate of limestone; only Burgundy clones; one site is 43 years, the other 20. The wine is like a 1er Cru from Vosne, one of the lighter ones that reek of violets; lithe and spicy, with dense complex fruit and sweet tannin; smoky overtones in the middle with a hint of oak char; it's a grown up sophisticated PN.

2016 Spätburgunder Rosé

12/750ml | GMS-222 | **SOS : 0**

I hold on to a fugitive hope that we can enjoy Rosé all year long, when they are rich and interesting and besides, how many of you go on picnics any more? This one is delicious, precise and long, with wonderful fruit and refinement and focus; suave and pretty finish to an articulate and classy wine.

2016 Riesling Feinherb

12/1000ml | GMS-218L | **SOS : 0**

The makeshift blend was lissome, appley, melony and herbal, but the finished item added really striking polish and minerality. This is by *far* the most "serious" Riesling I offer in the Liter format, and in this vintage it outclasses many a "standard" 750ml bottling. On the dry side of Feinherb.

2015 Riesling Trocken "Einzig Undartig"

12/750ml | GMS-220

Gregor's dry Rieslings can be (let's say) somewhat pedagogical, but this baby has tons of yellow fruit and is more accommodating. Something for the genuine dry-Riesling nerd.

2016 Riesling "Muschelkalk" Feinherb

12/750ml | GMS-219 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

When we are sober we know this means "fossil-bearing limestone" but you can tell how shit-faced we are by the alacrity with which we call it...um, ah...the thing it sounds like. If one is juvenile. Not us, except well, you know.

It is always my kind of wine. I consistently love it, and wish you loved it like I do. That said, the '16 is less gingery and pineapple than usual, more spicy and flowery (black pepper and white hyacinth) but also with notes of chervil and caraway and really cracking minerality. The best vintage I can remember!

2016 Muskateller Feinherb

+

12/750ml | **GMS-221** | **SOS : 1** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Second only to Catoir, and the only Muscat I offer which entails any RS, this is another—yet another—masterpiece from Gregor, about the farthest thing from subtle, it's an extroverted beast loaded with mint and verbena, raucous and salty. Look, take the hippest thing you have (or think you have) and this wine will wipe the floor with it.

2015 Scheurebe Feinherb

+

12/750ml | **GMS-213**

This has become ab fab in the last year, and takes its place among the best Scheus I can show you. In the grapefruit/sage/brown-butter style, angular and mischievous and seductive.

2016 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | **GMS-224**

A big rich Spätlese with lots of *Beerenton* (the taste of overripe berries), a great grape as rendered by a diligent scrupulous vintner. Rather than repeating the raft of descriptors—of which there are many, and many of them futile—let's just pause before its gorgeous rampant salty madness.

2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Spätlese

+ + (+)

12/750ml | **GMS-225** | **SOS : 2** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

If you want to see how the variety ages, here's a classic example from a great vintage. There's also an Auslese in the wings which the sweet man offered to give us as *Spätlese*, but in fact that wine is implausibly rich and powerful and it would be a pity to declassify it. Maybe I'll offer it in another year or two, if he still has it.

2016 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese

+

12/750ml | **GMS-227**

I only saw this among the samples sent later, and by then the clamor of dinner had begun and so I only wrote "The 16 Gewürz is superb: use it!"

Meßmer makes the most polished smart version of this variety, as if it has cut a deal with him to behave and "be polite, for once," yet without becoming bland or squandering its juju. It's the same statue, you could say, yet carved in crystal.

THEO & REGINE MINGES



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Flemlingen

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

15,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Flemlinger Zechpeter
and Burrweiler Schlossgarten
(*loess-loam*);
Gleisweiler Hölle
(*sandstone, limestone*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling
Scheurebe
Muskateller
Gewürztraminer
Grauburgunder
Spätburgunder

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture

Last year I didn't see Theo as he was in bed with the flu. This year I arrived a day before his 60th birthday, and the party they'd planned was in doubt as the poor fellow was laid up with a disc problem, and while he hobbled out to say hi (and taste a little) his aura was flickering. Apart from which, "I'm not much for parties," he observed, as the family looked on ruefully. I know how he feels. Theo is a fast talker and he's decidedly intense, but we introverts have a radar by which we know one another.

In the last few years I've had several people tell me, when discussing the "names" of the southern Pfalz, that "The one few people talk about but who is really among the best if not the very best is Minges. Have you heard of them?" Ah yup!

These are also the kinds of wines you say you like. Theo would fit right in with the natural-wine crowd, at least by temperament. He's a practicing Buddhist and is constantly talking about energy fields and how to transmit them from the vineyard to the cellar to the glass. It's part of the reason he doesn't rack the wines, as he feels the gross lees are like "mother's milk". He leaves several wines to age at considerable length, on their gross lees and without sulfur, until bottling. This is all in the quest for a sort of vibrant force; Minges wants his wines to quiver.

But I don't want to imply he's one of the naturalistas, albeit the basic sympathies align. He's my kind of "natural" wine grower, as we agree about the excesses af-

flicting some of that community's wines. "They wanted to go back to the roots, but found themselves in the mud," he said—wisely. He's also one of the very few growers in the southern Pfalz who will still make Rieslings with sweetness. They take their place alongside the dry wines, as they should.

Lately I'm finding Minges to be the spirit-kin of Nikolaihof, not because the wines are similar—though some are—but because the ways of life are aligned. There's a kind of respect shown to wine in each house, an assumption that wine is an equally valid being. This isn't the same as the way one might regard wine as an aesthetic object, how good or how great it tastes. That's like judging a dog by how many tricks it can do. They are both the classicists and the radicals of the region. They hew to a conservative line in their choice of grapes but they're entirely singular in their cellar work, which is based on highly extended gross-lees aging. They'll be certified organic any day now, and Theo is quite the proud and lucky Dad to have a spark-plug daughter like the impassioned Regine.

2016 was as I thought I'd find it, not a markedly good vintage because **all of them are markedly good**. Minges is so steady and so consistent they don't show ups and downs, only small variations of tone. And the general tones of '16 click right into the specific tone of Minges' style, and so it's a simple classic year for this wonderful (and underrated) estate.

2015 St. Laurent

+

12/750ml | GTM-196 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Sorry, but this is *effing delicious* as well as being an insane value. It's ripe and racy, with almost an Etna kind of twang. Obsidian blackberries. The loveliest, most suave finish, a curious aroma of violets; dusty tannin and salts, and a bone-brothy "sweetness" sets up camp.

(By the way, I'm not really into the trendy new term "bone-broth" for what we used to simply call "stock" when we were less affected. But if I say "stocky" for a wine it sounds like the wine is fat. So bone-brothy is convenient, so there.)

2012 Sekt, Riesling Brut

12/750ml | GTM-175

I've toggled between the X-Brut and this one, but I've concluded this is the better wine. More amplitude, more charm and fruit, and in this instance the piddling few grams of additional sweetness make the wine taste *more* chalky/mineral.

2016 Riesling Trocken Buntsandstein

(+)

12/750ml | GTM-198

It's rich across the entire palate—you can't assume this with modern Trocken Rieslings—and long enough to let each nuance appear. I find it, perhaps oddly, to be the German iteration of Pierre Peters' *L'Esprit*, that sort of toasted jasmine, Satsuma, orange blossom, coconut and mineral dust and talc. In the tertiary finish there's even a note of 2nd-flush Darjeeling.

2015 Riesling Kalkstein

+

12/750ml | GTM-197

This limestone-based Riesling is always offered a year late, and once again it demonstrates the keen connection between Theo's Rieslings and Blanc de Blancs Champagne. This one's a lavish, rich limestone pudding but with a greeny lime-like edge; balsam and aloe and white flowers. It compels the question, how can something so dry be so seductive? This will age deliberately and serenely, so don't be in haste to consume it.

2016 Riesling Halbtrocken

12/1000ml | GTM-201L | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

I know that Liters are increasingly passé, and yet this one is markedly excellent and offers ludicrous value, and so I persist. As usual, it's a parfait of lemon-balm, aloe and cucumber, so lively it's almost hyper, and fills the mouth with a wild rush of juiciness but leaves a crisply dry finish that tastes like wood-sorrel.

2016 Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GTM-199

Rather gentle entry, deceptively. Becomes fervently aromatic, and grows more assertively gingery on the palate, finishing with a dry rock-dusty so there!

2015 Riesling Auslese “Goldkapsel”

12/500ml | GTM-204H

This will destroy your template for “Auslese” and upend your assumptions. It’s taut and vigorous, snappy and “green,” like the apotheosis of the style of the Kabinett, and not like some wannabe-dessert wine. It’s actually a TABLE wine, with mustard greens and mint. A perfect pairing wine for a tasting menu.

+

2016 Gleisweiler Scheurebe Trocken

12/750ml | GTM-200 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Superb! Woddruff-y, redcurrant, physalis; high-tones and expressive, juicy and salty and sagey; seems almost demure but is actually really long and shows a shade-herb Sencha-powder finish. It’ll crave the next creamy young chevre you cue up.

+

2016 Scheurebe Feinherb

12/750ml | GTM-202 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

We love this wine so much we’re putting it on the “core-list” so you can snarf it year-round. Can a Scheu be more perfect??

++

2016 Rieslaner Spätlese

12/750ml | GTM-203 | **SOS: 1**

We have the laws of supply and demand to thank for what is a completely bizarre VALUE, because wines like these are the opposite of trendy within Germany. Thus we obtain a masterly and fabulous wine for a fraction of its worth; plantain chips and ginger powder; it leans dry and expresses an astonishing power and mass. It’s not palsy-walsy, this one; it wants to be worshipped, it’s a master and a mystery, though it isn’t enigmatic or allusive. You just don’t fathom how there’s so damn *much* of it, how they got 100 pounds of flavor in a ten-pound bag. Pinpoint balance, and actually finishes dry.

++

KURT DARTING



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Bad-Dürkheim

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,800 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Spielberg and Herrenberg
(limestone-marl) ;
Hochbenn
(sandy loam)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling
Gewürztraminer
Muskateller
Scheurebe
Pinot Noir
Pinot Meunier
Rieslaner
St. Laurent
Dornfelder

If you're new to Darting, then in essence they're the noblest side of (dirty word) commercialism, giving helpful affordable wines that don't demand but also don't insult your intelligence. I both like and respect this estate, because of course great estates make great wines, but when do commercial estates make wines as fine as these?

When I first introduced this estate back in 1992, they were seen as mini-Catoirs, offering a similar primary-fruit-driven vivid style of wine at really low prices, from a young vintner who trained and remained pals with Hans-Günter Schwarz. The wines are still delicious, the prices are still low, but there's nothing else for the hipster to grab on to—as if tasty wines at low prices weren't enough. I'll put it this way: say you'd spent a bunch of consecutive evenings eating cutting-edge food, very edgy and compelling. (Lucky you; I love that kind of food too, and wish I were your BFF and could have joined you.) Then one evening you're in a more mainstream restaurant and you're served a perfect piece of wild turbot, cooked correctly and garnished sensitively. And you take the first bite and think, ah, FOOD. I forgot what FOOD tasted like, and how good it could be.

That's Darting. Everything is delicious in any zone of sweetness, and the wines are charming and arrive at the table eager to be helpful. Perfect wines when the nth degree of complexity isn't warranted. And they are not contrived—just honest!

SPARKLING WINE, REDS, ROSES AND PINOT

2014 Weissburgunder Brut

12/750ml | GDR-279

Balanced, salty, dough and scallops; charm and angles. A super pour for the Brasserie.

2014 Pinot Noir

12/750ml | GDR-280

Actually (and surprisingly) preferable to the '15 at this moment. Earthy and spicy, almost more like Mencia than PN, and it isn't "elegant," but pipe-smoky and rugged. It has vitality and wears its (high) alc quite well.

2015 Pinot Meunier

12/750ml | GDR-273

Gotta say I admire you guys for making this such an *item*, because, I mean—German Pinot Meunier?? But the wine works, it sings, it's attractively priced, and this '15? Man it smells like *FUN*. Just bottled but you sense it's quivering to erupt with bakey-doughy charm.

2014 St. Laurent

12/750ml | GDR-281

Is this the best '14 red I've had from this portfolio? Could well be. The fruit is ripe but not overripe; the texture is almost creamy, not as coarse as many '14 reds, and it's classically charred and smoky. Hats off, lads!

2016 Pinot Noir Rosé

12/750ml | GDR-278

As tasty as can be! Every virtue of deliciousness is here, yet it isn't innocent—it's spicy and knowing and has body and muscle; it's more like Sattler than like Gobelsburg.

2016 Pinot Blanc Trocken

12/750ml | GDR-284

This is Darting at their utter best. The wine is completely yummy, with fragrances of freesia, straw and hay. Only a churl, a damned *knave* could resist such a wine!?

RIESLINGS

2016 Riesling Kabinett Trocken (Dürkheimer Fronhof)

12/750ml | GDR-283

(The site name's in parentheses when I don't consider it decisive, and would prefer it were removed. A conversation is...ongoing.) I wanted to core-list this wine last year, but was blocked temporarily by '15s sometimes-pointed acids. Not any more! This is an *excellent* vintage of the most sheerly agreeable dry Riesling money can buy—and not a lot of money. Herbal and with no edges or corners, yet lively and paradoxically also reposed.

2016 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GDR-277

Best! Ever! Vintage! Not sultry. Lychee, verbena, talc. Quite a leap ahead of any previous year.

2016 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GDR-285

This one's the powder-puff, all talc, riotously floral; almost indecently seductive.

2016 Ungsteiner Weilberg Riesling Kabinett Trocken

+

12/750ml | GDR-284 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The site is a “GG” for some of its other producers; it sits right above the Spielberg, on limestone terraces. Darting’s parcel is along a terrace wall, thus warmer and more sheltered.

Yet this wine hasn’t the effect of Proud And Solemn Purpose of many GGs. And it is not chaptalized. While the VDP inveighs against the terms “Kabinett Trocken” or “Spätlese Trocken”—and in fairness they are confusing—they permit their precious GGs to be chaptalized, which directly contradicts the very name “VDP.” (Take my word for it; you don’t have enough time for the VDP acronym to be spelled out!) Their reasoning? “They chaptalize in Burgundy, and other places too!” Well that’s dignified....

And this utter *beauty* with its lissome 12.5 Alc puts many affected GGs to shame. We needn’t adduce the rape-of-the-wallet entailed by participating in the GG market....

It’s complex, with lime and herbal notes (balsam, sorrel), pink peppercorns and star fruit and subtle ginger, but all in a creamy texture that only seems yielding but is actually spicy and frisky.

2016 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett

12/1000ml | GDR-276L | **SOS : 1**

This continues its upward arc, and also the recent trend toward diminished RS (yay!). It’s clean, drier, spicy and yummy and stylish. Some exotic fruit flavors from the clone-90 used.

AROMATIC/EXOTIC VARIETIES

2016 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Trocken

12/750ml | GDR-274

In essence—yes yes yes yes! Spice, resin, charm, these can now be seen as givens. As sure a bet as there is in wine, this perfect vivid critter.

2016 Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Spätlese

12/750ml | GDR-286

Angular, herbal and sagey, with even a note of Weisswurst. Not kinky—or not yet, anyway—but it’s perhaps, I don’t know... bi-curious?

2016 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewurztraminer Kabinett

12/750ml | GDR-287

Correct and none too sweet. Shows up on time and does the job perfectly!

2015 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese

++

12/750ml | GDR-267

This is unsurprisingly superb—’15 is a killer vintage for Rieslaner—and it’s the best single wine Dartings have made in many years; complex and adamant and fantastically salty, as if some wall of jewels and minerals were dissolving in your mouth. What sweetness it actually has just sizzles away like a drop of water in a hot skillet. Stiletto precision, and the implied threat that it will compel you to obey.

2015 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Beerenauslese

+

12/500ml | GDR-268H

125° now with botrytis, not a gigantic acidity but still snappy below its fabulous richness; a persimmon marmalade fined with titanium, gorgeously decadent yet entirely contained and structured. Massive but smart.

2015 Huxelrebe TBA

+

12/750ml | GDR-289H

This is everything such wines ought to be and too seldom are. No gnarly botrytis, no excess of sweetness, no volatility, and no need to take wee dainty sips; this deliciously honeyed wine is something you can *drink*. Classic white-raisin straw blah-blah. The point is it’s a grown up vinous wine, sidestepping nearly everything objectionable about many “dessert-wines.”

RHEINHESSEN

The young growers—most of them anyway—are energetic and idealistic and passionate about producing high-quality wines, and ridding the region of its reputation for mediocrity. To a large extent they've succeeded, thanks in great measure to Messrs. Keller and Wittmann, who've made and justified bold claims for Rheinhessen's potential to give great wines.

One wishes for three things. One, that we could somehow superimpose this fraternity of fine vintners over the Rheingau, where under-achieving from great land is still the general rule. Two, that we could wrest the mentality of today's young Rheinhessen grower away from the schizoid and rigid division of his production into wines-too-dry and wines-too-sweet. And three, that we could somehow restore the tarnished reputation of the Rhine-front, i.e., Nierstein and Oppenheim.

There's an opinion to the effect that Rheinhessen, with its limestone and clay soils and its mild climate, is somehow predestined to give dry wines, or at least dry Rieslings. My answer is as always empirical and pragmatic: It should give dry Rieslings when they taste good, off-dry Rieslings when they taste good and full on RS-Rieslings when they taste good. If one insists that dry and only dry Rieslings are this region's manifest destiny, one must argue that off-dry and full-on RS-Rieslings never taste good, which is patently ridiculous. One also needs to get

one's nose out of the lab analyses. You'll hear that these (relatively) low acid Rieslings don't require sweetness to balance them, but that seems to be a blinkered narrow view. It says that the only reason RS might be desired in Riesling is because it's "needed" to balance acidity, and such arguments derive their obtuseness from a kind of self-administered blindness. There are indeed wines in which sweetness confers an otherwise unobtainable balance, among the many ways RS acts to a wine's advantage: reducing alcohol, adding nuance, lengthening the finish, providing the perfumes of fructose, extending aging capacity—to name a mere few.

If I were you, dear reader, I'd be suspicious immediately if a person was in a "camp" of some kind, a dry-wine camp or a sweet-wine camp, because that person is anxious to stake out a POSITION on an abstract issue, which he then warps a universe of wines to fit within. What can possibly be more sensible than to treasure the many different ways Riesling can taste beautiful? Sometimes dry, sometimes dry-ish, sometimes sweet-ish and sometimes sweet, each as best suits that wine, chosen by the drinker to best suit the occasion, the mood, the grub. Such a posture seems at least humane and grateful. So enough with the Diktats and the dogmas; get them the fuck away from my wine.

STRUB



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheinhessen / Nierstein

VINEYARD AREA

15 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

7,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg,
Hipping, Pettenthal and Rosenberg
(red slate);
Niersteiner Paterberg
and Brückchen
(limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

85% Riesling
6% Müller-Thurgau
3% Grüner Veltliner
3% Weissburgunder
3% Spätburgunder

As always I taste these wines twice, nearly four weeks apart. They are late-developers, and when I taste them on my jet-lagged dehydrated 2nd-day, I can read them wrong. Mind you, I'm aware of that very risk, and allow for it. It's rare that a Strub wine strikes me as radically different on the second visit.

Nierstein, as you may know, includes the famous Rhein-front sites under the rubric of *Roter Hang* (the red hillside) because of an unusual soil structure, red sandstone over a base of slate. The wines are generous, classy and refined, with charming fruit over a firm yet lacy structure. The site *Pettenthal* most exemplifies this. *Hipping* is more robust, *Oelberg* is the yummiest and juiciest one, and *Orbel* is the most sere and rocky. Lately Walter and Sebastian have been making Feinherb wines here, which I think is perfect. They'll make dry wines when the fruit is sufficiently generous, but the truly sweet wines come from across the valley on limestone vineyards. The estate-Riesling they call *Soil to Soul* is a mélange of the two.

Sebastian's influence is really starting to be tangible, though Walter isn't the kind of father he'd have to struggle against. It comes out in small ways; new wines such as the Rosé and the Silvaner, and in even smaller ways like which man answers my questions. I was also present for Sebastian's 30th birthday and such landmarks leave a kind of wave in their wakes. Strub's 2016s are lovely and fine, but the wine that really spoke to me was a 2012 dry Riesling from *Taubennest* that I liked but seriously underrated when it was younger.

2016 Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken

12/750ml | GST-207

This comes from red-slate (“Rotliegend”) at the top of the slope in a site called *Findling*. This wine had been bottled in the four weeks between my first and second encounters, but it was actually fruitier the second time. That said, it’s a serious sort of Rosé, has some teeth, isn’t a charm-gusher, but is vinous and chewy, smells like tomato-water and shows a solid mid-palate.

2016 Grüner Veltliner Trocken

12/750ml | GST-208

It’s no longer a novelty that a German grower makes GrüVe, and this ’16 is light and snappy; tatsoi and mizuna, crisply spicy summer time GV, though it’s the wine that *most improved* the second time around.

2016 Silvaner Feinherb

12/750ml | GST-209 | SOS : 1 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

Whither Silvaner? Time was, it was the most ubiquitous vine in Rheinhessen (and Walter says it supplanted the Grüner Veltliner that preceded it), until it was grubbed out in favor of the even easier blander Müller-Thurgau, which everyone despises today, and which has lost enormous ground to Pinots Blanc and Gris, and also to....Silvaner. Young growers are certain that excellent wines can be made from Silvaner if it’s planted where it belongs and treated with respect. I agree, and while I think Silvaner is a plebian variety in Rheinhessen, it’s an honorable one.

What’s in the glass now is tasty, focused, charming and easy-drinking, with character, spice and balance. I’d love to be served this in a wine bar. It’s as-good-as-dry.

2015 Niersteiner Oelberg Im Taubennest Riesling Trocken

(+)

12/750ml | GST-201

Built for the long haul; it’s starting to shed its phenolic cast, and the youthful reduction is fading; there’s an impressive minerality, pancetta-smokiness; it’s sold and complex, and the empty glass smells like a *pomade* of fennel. Very much the “GG” in its serious profile, it stands with all but the highest level among them.

“Taubennest” is the cadaster name for Oelberg’s best parcel and arguably the single best parcel in the whole red slope.

2016 Niersteiner Oelberg Roter Schiefer Riesling Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GST-210 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

In this case “Roter Schiefer” (red slate) is a kind of brand-name, not the name of a parcel. Some vintages (12 for example) favor it while others (’15) are less approachable. 2016 is clearly one of the happy ones; lushly mineral but its yielding silky texture belies the citrusy angles, textured apple-skin and minerality. The minty finale should ease over time—it was just racked and filtered the first time I saw it, and just bottled the next time.

2016 Niersteiner Hipping Thal Riesling Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GST-211 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

More relief than the Oelberg; empire-apple, yellow roses, tastes like a cousin to Rumpf’s Rheinberg or even a Berg Roseneck. Limpid and dry-feeling, frisky and with mirabelle and salty flavors.

2016 “Soil To Soul” Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GST-212

A fine year for this! As in the past it’s a cuvée of Brückchen (clay and limestone), Paterberg (limestone) and Oelberg Schlagenberg (a cadaster parcel on red slate). A lively wine, flavors of quetsch, blueberry and rose-hips; a firm acid melts away the sweetness; stylish, with both the apple-energy and the elegant repose of the ’16s.

2016 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett “Herzstück”

12/750ml | GST-213

It denotes both the heart of the vineyard and also the heart of the free-run juice—like a Coeur-de-cuvée. An addicting lemony brightness, almost bracing, leads into a minty finish. This wine grows more classy every year.

2015 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GST-205

2016 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GST-215

We'll move to the '16 when the '15 is gone; old (50+) vines on a high windy plateau (so there's never botrytis) on pure limestone, these wines are balanced on a buzzing wire of steel. Lemon-grassy, neon brilliance; the wine seems to quiver even apart from its acidity. I felt the '15 was exceptionally successful, and the '16 will equal or even surpass it.

2016 Niersteiner Hipping *Flächenhahl* Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GST-214

This is one of two small lots from prime parcels in the red slope. The other is a piece of Pettenthal so small it's normally used as a blending partner or topping-up wine. I think this is Strub at their best, but it entails a custom-bottling for me as it is "unsalable" elsewhere. Doing business in Germany can often be as attractive as a root-canal, let me tell you.

This is the best-ever vintage for this wine, and it alone would establish an argument for the *greatness* of this slope. It makes me nostalgic too, because it recalls the great Niersteiners made in the 60s and 70s by the old Freiherr Heyl estate, in those days the best in Nierstein.

I mean, I have recently located a stash of '70s and '71s from another well-reputed Nierstein estate, top sites and ripe wines, and all of them in fine fettle, but I paid a pittance for them, because Nierstein was undervalued then and it still is.

Taste it! You might feel the echo of a Dönnhoff wine, the Krötenpfuhl, and you will definitely feel the peach, saltiness and even a chocolate flavor red-slope Riesling sometimes shows.

2015 Niersteiner Hipping *Flächenhahl* Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GST-206

This wine's in an adolescent funk right now, more or less right on schedule. It may turn out to be equal to the '16—even better if you like a strong adamant wine—but today its brooding and truculent. Recommended for purists who'll lay it down.

GEIL



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheinhessen / Bechtheim

VINEYARD AREA

30 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,800 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Bechtheimer Geyersberg
(limestone) ;
Bechtheimer Rosengarten
(carbonate-rich loess)

GRAPE VARIETIES

35% Riesling
15% Weissburgunder
15% Spätburgunder
4% Rieslaner
4% Scheurebe
27% other

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture,
working towards certification

This laudable estate would be much more conspicuous on our trendiness radar if they'd do the usual things, such as raise prices, put their wines in stupidly heavy pretentious bottles, create a label effulgent with high solemnity, and make all their wines dry, except for a token couple of cloying over-sweet sweeties. If, in other words, if they became like nearly every other Rheinhessen estate. I sometimes hear myself thinking, "Why can't any of these deluded clowns be sensible once in a while; why can't they bottle wines in various balance zones, why can't they charge prices commensurate with their lower production costs, why are they all so rigid and doctrinaire...?" and then I realize: oh wait a minute, one of them is already doing all those smart things, and they're not rigid nor doctrinaire.

That's what I want Geil to mean to you. The ne-plus-ultra of complexity is not to be encountered here. What you'll find are classy and delicious wines, wines of the country but also with polish; juicy wines but also with clarity and focus, and all from one of the few young Rheinhessen vintners to have his head on straight. They're a kind of Riesling tabula-rasa, before the perquisites of terroir.

Here's some of what this sensible chap has to say about his vineyards and winery: "Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellarmaster is to preserve the available quality and refine it."

"Vines have it good in Bechtheim. They don't have to drill through ten meters of rock

for a little water. They deal with three meters of permeable loess at which point they can drink as well as the citizens of Bechtheim!"

"No year is like another, and wine-making by recipe doesn't bring the best results. Naturally modern techniques such as cool fermentations are generally advisable. The question of whether less is more should be asked!"

"For me aroma is the most important factor; it's the first impression, and should be clear, varietally typical and express its origin."

"We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is acceptable; we sometimes have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We're in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We'd prefer any residual sugar in the wines to be natural, but we do keep a little Süßreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO²."

Bechtheim lies just where the hills begin, on the west flank of the Rhein plain. The key sites for Riesling are Geyersberg—the best one—made up of chalky loess and tertiary marl. The Rosengarten is above the village, on gravelly sand and clay, and the Hasensprung rolls off to the west on similar soil.

RIESLINGS

2016 Riesling Bechtheim Trocken

12/750ml | GGE-112

Which is true, the richness and stylish interplay on the palate, or the rather abrupt finish? Or the fascinating aromas?! The peril of tasting young Riesling, I guess.

2016 Hasensprung “GG” Trocken

6/750ml | GGE-114

Different vintages favor different sites among the three “GGs” Geil can lay claim to. As dry Riesling goes, this goes easy; reminded me of the Kremstal's *Pfaffenberg* in its suave oatmealy richness. Not a grand dialectic here but a wine of energy and momentum. Bottling should smooth its edges, but I think the charming herb-leaf edge will stay, or so I hope.

2016 Bechtheimer Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GGE-113 | SOS:0 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

How many more years does this have to be perfect? Before it “catches on,” I mean. Plantain and guava; a hyper-animated dialogue of grass and grain, racy and spry; ginger and heirloom-apple. All the melody the dry wine *cannot give you*.

2016 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GGE-117

Sleek, forthright yet sophisticated, this has both polish and soul.

2015 Riesling Beerenauslese

12/375ml | GGE-107H

This was the inverse of a Geyersberg “GG,” all the fruit that didn’t go into the dry wine. It’s a soaring anvil of Riesling, and pure, almost zero botrytis. Just a joyous mass of primary fruit with muscle and capaciousness. It’s very rare for wines like this to be made!

+ +

NON-RIESLINGS, REDS AND AROMATIC VARIETIES

2015 Spätburgunder

12/750ml | GGE-109

Grown on loess and limestone, one-third small oak and the rest in *Stück*. A winsome and stylish PN, smoke and blueberries; firm and rather Cru-Beaujolais in profile; tight and cool. Don’t serve it too warm, and splash it into a carafe.

2016 Silvaner Bechtheim Trocken

12/750ml | GGE-110

Done in wood yet it’s concentrated and even minerally. The 2nd-use hogsheads give a fetching note to the finish to go with a suave saltiness. Not a gushing chummy wine but rather firm even with low acidity.

2016 Scheurebe Trocken

12/750ml | GGE-115 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Character! Spices and woodruff—ohannes says it was explosively grapefruity in tank—but it’s the best wine on the table so far; edible herbs and fir-woods; wonderful polish and thrust and yet not crude.

+



2016 Muskateller Trocken

12/750ml | GGE-116

This is untamed but not garish; radishes and summer savory; has the twang of a Sicilian white; at this stage less a riot of fresh grapes and more a sort of Caligula's *bouquet-garni*.

2016 Scheurebe Kabinet

12/750ml | GGE-118 | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

A tangy wine not (yet) expressly *Scheu*, but angular and herbal whereas the Riesling is more apples and peaches. Slinky and salty, with a sneak-attack of sweet gooseberry. Maybe it isn't kinky, but it knows how to writhe.

+

GYSLER



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheinhessen / Weinheim

VINEYARD AREA

12 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

8,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Weinheimer Hölle and Mandelberg
(red sandstone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

85% Riesling
6% Müller-Thurgau
3% Grüner Veltliner
3% Weissburgunder
3% Spätburgunder, Riesling, Silvaner,
Scheurebe, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc,
Pinot Noir, Huxelrebe

FARMING PRACTICES

Demeter Certified Biodynamic

The estate has undergone an 180° transit under Alexander's wise and caring hand. They're now Demeter certified, as you know, and Alex has a kind of holistic, poetic sensibility allied to a desire to make articulate, judicious wines. He gives them evocative names, and it isn't his fault that Americans don't clamor for wines called "Feldgeflüster."

His is a curious corner of Rheinhessen. If you drive down from the north you descend off a plateau down into an impressive bowl of vines, facing south and giving every impression of being clement and mild and sheltered. But Weinheim is actually among the coolest microclimates in Rheinhessen, and the wines can have the low pH and high acids of Mosel wines. As Alex makes mostly dry wines, this isn't a recipe for attractiveness as I interpret it. So, while I very much applaud his transit to Bio-D, and while I support cerebral wines on principle, I've sometimes wondered whether this chiseled ascetic quiet style offers even a small compromise with sensuality.

So I visited this year with a wish to really *receive* the wines on their own frequencies, because I truly do respect and admire (and like) Alex Gysler, and he deserves an importer who "gets" him. This is what I found.



2015 Silvaner Halbtrocken

12/1000ml | GGY-126L | SOS : 0

This wine was quite the mover at one time, but of late it has been rather neglected. Alex would rather make more serious (and drier) wines than this, so I suspect this is the final vintage. It's a very good one, on the dry side, racy and vigorous and mineral, with flavors of sorrel and fennel and brassicas.

2016 Scheurebe Trocken "Sonnentau"

12/750ml | GGY-129 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

In his diligent, notched and etched way this is an expressive and even generous Scheu, generous in a sort of cerebral lavishness, as though a professor of philosophy made a little wine on the side. It's salty, not completely dry (8g/l) but addictively tasty. I think this is Alex Gysler at his best.

2016 Riesling "GG" Hölle "Klangwerk"

12/750ml | GGY-130 | SOS : minus-1

An even-keeled articulate wine that expresses its many nuances of flavor in a deliberate and orderly sequence. Smells like wet straw, tastes rather more like an *explication* of a wine rather than a wine. But it's balanced, albeit on a razor's edge, and its rye-spelt umami stands in for fruit.?

2016 Riesling Kabinett "Feldgeflüster"

12/750ml | GGY-131

Acidity over 9g/l and RS over 45g/l but this is juicy with a good rich middle, not as spiky as it's sometimes been; smoky and engaging and not entirely in repose—it jiggles its leg.

2016 PET-NAT

12/750ml | GGY-132

Well well. It's 50-50 Scheurebe and Huxel and it's all kinds of purple-hair tat-covered copiously-pierced man-bunned hairy-mole funky—but also vibrant and earthy and a bit too eager to burst into song, maybe. Four atmospheres, by the way. It's ecstatic and uncontained and invites you to do indecent things.

NAHE

The Nahe isn't really "obscure" any more, thanks in large part to the Dönnhoffs as well as the Diels and (Schaefer)-Fröhlichs, but you may not know where it is or why it's so remarkable.

You get there quickly from most other German wine regions, and yet it is really a corner, a little spot of peace. There isn't an obvious artery such as RN74 in Burgundy. All the roads are narrow and the landscape is steeply hilly and gently chaotic. Even if you're stressed when you get there, you won't be for long. You feel enclosed in a cool green peace.

The region is the center of production of semiprecious stones, which suggests its intricate geology. It's also the secret of the wines. A little village like Niederhausen—which despite its renown is dead-still and silent—has over sixty distinctly different soil types, which can change every few steps. And which, obviously, are reflected and conveyed in the wines. It is an inhospitable place for a person who denies the truth of terroir, or even the skeptic who insists there are no "minerals" to be tasted in wine.

In essence all Nahe soils are conglomerates with different points of emphasis. So if you say so-and-so vineyard is on "porphyry" it means it is predominantly thus, but may also contain slate or other primary rock. Hermannshöhle is an interesting case in point; the upper parts are visibly slatier and the lower parts visibly more volcanic, but lower down it's all mashed together. Dönnhoff's Brücke, actually the bottom-slope detritus from the slate-dominated Hermannsberg, is a mélange of four or five soil types you can see with the naked eye as you stroll a hundred yards along the rows, as they change every few steps. If a wine is complex, it is because of its basis in the ground; not for any other reason.

The upper Nahe (where we find Hexamer and Schönleber) really feels like the end of the earth, it's so quiet. Soils here are mostly marls and red sandstones, but

a site like the Rheingrafenberg is in fact sandy loam yet also with a pathway of weathered byproducts of Tholeyer slate, sandstone and conglomerates.

The middle Nahe—Schlossböckelheim, Niederhausen, Norheim, Traisen—is more volcanic: porphyry, melaphyr, granites, rhyolite, and produces the most bewitching wines. Hexamer has land in both sections, so you can compare.

The town of Bad Kreuznach is the border between the middle and lower Nahe, below which we find the floodplain running eventually into the Rhine at Bingen. The vineyards occupy small lateral valleys moving towards the west, into the Hunsrück hills. One of these is the "Trollbach Tal" where we find the Diels, whose three Grand Crus occupy undulations in one single hillside, on three entirely different soils. As a rule there's more quartzite in these parts, as we're closer to the Rhine and to the Rudesheim mountain, but volcanic traces and sandy slates can still be seen.

The best Nahe Rieslings seem to give us everything we could possibly ask for in white wine; brilliance, complexity, freshness and lightness, and a sense that they form a flavor hologram on our palates, that shifts and alters with each instant of thought and of time. You feel like you're eating food cooked by someone who has every spice in the world in the kitchen and knows exactly how to use them.

For me the place is entirely mystic. It's the Galapagos Islands of wine, some place where strange birds and turtles roost and peer out from heavy-lidded eyes. It casts a theta spell and changes what we know about the world. You feel like if you stay there long enough your hair will start growing in another color. The wines can have an odd shamanic force, and in those cases it's helpful to have a person who can explicate them, both in words and in flavors.

Which is where a certain Messrs. Dönnhoff enter the picture...

DÖNNHOFF



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Oberhausen

VINEYARD AREA

28 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

17,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle
(grey slate) ;
Oberhäuser Brücke
(grey slate, loess) ;
Oberhäuser Leistenberg (slate) ;
Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg
(porphyry) ;
Norheimer Kirschheck (slate) ;
Norheimer Dellchen
(porphyry and slate) ;
Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl
(gravelly loam) ;
Roxheimer Höllenpfad
(red sandstone) ;
Kreuznacher Kahlenberg
(loam and quartzite)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling
20% Weissburgunder
and Grauburgunder

FARMING PRACTICES

Fair'N Green Certified Sustainable

I should acknowledge that I'll never really understand these remarkable wines. I can reach the point of explaining how (and why) I fall short. But Helmut's and Cornelius' wines are ultimately inexplicable. They do not quite add up. And so they fill me with longing, and render me mute.

Long-time readers and drinkers will perhaps be familiar with what I'm talking about, and with a certain shimmer of spirit that imbues the wines. Younger readers only need to know this: the wines of this miraculous domaine show an incomparable purity allied to unfathomable expressiveness. They are tender but not demure, or another way to say it is, they are forceful but always tender. As a rule, if you have wines of this kind of galvanic intensity, they are textured so as to pierce your palate. But Dönnhoff's wines have a more silken profile; they seem to want to make you sigh, to loosen your shoulders and take a deep breath, to return a caress. They are themselves caressing, but you don't know how this can be, and there's no one you can caress in return.

So then, maybe, you look for words to explain this phenomenon, or merely to register and remember it. If you're like me, you won't quite find them. The wines are as close to the nature of *music* as any wines can be. You can identify the

mechanics of melody and harmony, and you can feel the skill and sensitivity of the player(s), but you can never build a logical chain between those sounds and your emotions. There is a small sleeve of space and energy in which this inexplicable thing lives, and though it is unendingly generous, it does not want to be known.

It isn't relevant whether Dönnhoff's is the "best" estate or where it sits in the rankings, because it is existentially apart from the norm. One sees this quality in a small number of other wines; Raveneau, Alzinger, maybe even Lopez de Heridia, citizens of their own worlds. You can visit but you'll sometimes feel like something's happening without you, on some street or avenue that doesn't appear on your map.

I've spent a million words on Dönnhoff's wines over the years, and many of those words were probing's into the significance of having no words. Even my tasting notes are starting to resist me, and so I leave them shorter. But when you drink these wines, you join them in a nexus of the very purest beauty. They are sometimes "intense" but that isn't crucial. They are almost always "incredibly complex" but that also doesn't matter. They are, quite simply, divine. If they find you in a quiet moment, you will know that the world is holy, and that beauty is not what you thought it was.

THE DRY WINES

2016 Riesling “Tonschiefer”

12/750ml | GHD-437

The dry wine from the sandy slate hillside *Leistenberg* (from which we also see a Kabinett later on), this was rather adamant as a cask sample but will gentle-up after bottling. It showed a black char of slate and a gravelly mineral finish, somewhat straitlaced.

2016 Kreuznacher Kahlenberg Riesling Trocken 1er Lage

12/750ml | GHD-450

This wine is oh so pretty and has such a calm tranquil demeanor that you don't notice its complexity at first. There's fragrances of plum and fresh ocean fish leading to a slightly singed spice note that even harkens to paprika. An endearing and interesting dry Riesling showing the clement nature of the site.

2016 Roxheimer Höllenspfad Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GDH-451

The red sandstone parcel is called *Im Mühlenberg* and is considered a “GG” though Cornelius (sensibly) doesn't wish to bottle all his dry wines as GG—the Kahlenberg could also have enjoyed the sobriquet. The site seems to make a stern wine; 2015's big ripe fruit was kind to it. The '16 is masculine and sinewy, and it's noticeably dry. A small swizzle of mineral crawls into the finish, but I'm almost certain this will be far less austere after filtration and bottling.

2016 Felsenberg Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GDH-452

Perhaps the apex of porphyry (though it contains decomposed melaphyr also), and I would argue this is the finest expression of what I deem to be Riesling's most noble home.

I could write at *great* length about the flavor of porphyry-grown Riesling, among wine's greatest miracles. Suffice it to say, these wines taste as though they were made by a vizier with a boiling cauldron and a set of a hundred spice boxes. It's hard to fathom such wines coming from prosaic grapes and dirt, and yet they do. And while any solidly competent grower lucky enough to have Riesling sites on this soil will make fascinating wine, Dönnhoff is like Bach, another order of being.

This '16 is a euphoric thrall of porphyry aromas, and the palate is an entire quarry or pulverized mineral with edges of sorrel and dandelion greens. It's both limpid and energetic.

2016 Dellchen Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GDH-453

A conglomerate of slate and porphyry, the site entails the little hollows between cliff-sides; it's very steep and terraced and quiet, which may account for the wines' riddlesome nature, wines of pure inference and umami that need several years not just to blossom, but simply to say what they taste like. This is especially true of the dry wines. This '16 is relatively overt and smoky, but no sequence of descriptors will be useful—it's just too soon. The texture seems more lush than usual, and there's an earthy note, and as compelling as it is, I respect the shroud and will wait patiently.

2016 Hermannshöhle Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GDH-454

Cornelius describes this as a “grand dry wine with a Mona-Lisa smile,” but I usually find it less enigmatic, and in 2016 it is clearly, definitely and obviously fantastic. Intense yet filigree. Focused, and directed towards the conclusion of a complex argument, letting you follow the logic and the beauty of the thoughts, and then you perceive the grace of the language and you wish you could read it out loud to someone—to anyone. It's not as electrifying as the '15 was, it's more deliberate. But that very sense of careful unfurling seems born of love.

NOT-DRY RIESLINGS

2016 Riesling

12/750ml | GDH-434 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

+

An excellent vintage of the world's greatest wine value. Not "Riesling value" or even "white-wine value;" the greatest value among wine, period. For it is impossible to otherwise obtain such beauty and complexity (and ageworthiness) for such a price. The '16, as always a mélange of (mostly) porphyry and gravel soils, shows mirabelle and iris and persimmon aromas; the mid palate is swollen with mineral, it's almost hefty, and then the finish snakes and curls like the smoke from a burnt-out candle.

2016 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GDH-455 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

+

Essentially Feinherb in profile, this is a cool sleek edition of this often dark-bready wine, fetchingly delicious and saltier than usual.

2016 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GDH-436 | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

++

All previously used adjectives apply! Slatey and smoky, a glory vintage of a great beauty. A 2008 we drank last Fall brought us to our knees, and Helmut's been presenting unwary visitors with a **1990** vintage, which is a stunning wine from this "unexceptional" vineyard.

2016 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GDH-456

+

As always, cherry-blossom and lime and apple; an elegant cool melony vintage of a wine so pretty we take it for granted. Dönnhoff at their most virginal and giddy, and if you're a drinker especially fond of this wine, I'm especially fond of you.

2016 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GDH-45

+++

Spring frost reduced the yields, though not as much as had been feared; perhaps you saw pictures of the night-lit vineyard as Cornelius worked on warming things up.

It's a vivid fantasy, a scrutable and visible depiction of this ur-Riesling; guava, salts, fervent spiciness (ginger, lemon-candy) and a stunning finish of herbs, apple-skin and mineral. Both approachable, ethereal and quietly magnificent, if you possess an inner mystic, this wine speaks its language.

2016 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GDH-458

+++

For many people this is a *ne plus ultra* of Riesling, and they'll be happy to hear that '16 is a firm and herbal version of a classic for which the typical descriptors apply.

But what you can't describe is the moment – and there's always a moment—when the love overcomes your resistance, your doubt or your fear, and you let yourself fall; finally someone sees you, your cells are urging toward her, and hoo boy, this could be bliss; watch out... here goes.

2016 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese

12/375ml | GDH-471H

++

More fruit-forward than usual, though with many gleaming green angles; it's numinous and almost minty, juicy, not terribly sweet, a cherry-candy rendering of botrytis; not clamorous but an unusual and compelling Auslese.

2016 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese

12/375ml | GDH-459H

+(+)

It's like that one incredible quince, the one you put in the kitchen and it perfumes the whole home. Acidity blazes now. Botrytis is exotic and large. Sweetness is more marked. The middle-palate, where the fundament lies, waits to emerge. Let's watch and see. ***This wine will only be available at the VDP Nahe Auction this year.***

JAKOB SCHNEIDER



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Niederhausen

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

18,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle
(volcanic soil, gray slate);
Niederhäuser Felsensteyer
(melaphyr);
Niederhäuser Klamm
(porphyry);
Norheimer Dellchen
(grey slate);
Niederhäuser Kertz
(slate and porphyry);
Norheimer Kirschheck
(grey slate and sandstone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

90% Riesling
10% other varieties

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

It's really been Jakob's year. The awards he's won don't mean much in the English-speaking wine press, but believe me when I tell you he won a life-altering distinction in the most important German guide. And of course I'm hugely proud of him, of the entire family (whom I've known through three generations now), and of their fundamental groundedness and decency.

Thus I'm perplexed to tell you the '16s were the most backward I encountered in Germany. Normally the vintage is presentable, and I tasted at the usual time. Nor do I assume I got a look at the wines in anything like their ultimate form. They improve markedly between March and June when I taste them again, perhaps more than anyone else's wines. But, to the extent I can, I'm comparing apples to apples.

I have decades of experience tasting through the periscope, and my guesses are as informed and educated as my abilities allow. But I won't sugarcoat what I tasted. I will report my impressions faith-

fully, and I will theorize as responsibly as I can about where I think the wines will go.

In general Schneider's wines are what I'd call rural gentry. They're not as spiffy and turned-out as sophisticated "city" wines, but they aren't *paysannes* either. While they're tending to be more polished over the last several years—and I think this direction will continue—you'll find them lustier than Diel, Hexamer or Dönnhoff. What's striking is the greatness of the land, which confers a potential I can't ignore and you shouldn't either. I'm gonna rant a little now, so skip ahead if you don't want to be hectored by silverback-me, but if you were offered wine from terroirs of this stellar quality from *anywhere else in the world*, you'd be on it like white on rice. "Damn! I can get *Richebourg* for this price?? Where do I sign?" I truly do get weary of how few fucks anyone gives about these greatest of vineyards, and so I think I'll open some moonshine, hitch up my overalls, blow the dust off the shotgun and blast some holes in the freaking walls.

2016 Riesling “Melaphyr” Trocken

12/750ml | GJS-146

There are two definitions for Melaphyre (the English spelling): “a porphyritic rock consisting of phenocrysts of feldspar in a dark groundmass; broadly: a porphyritic igneous rock with dark-colored aphanitic groundmass and phenocrysts of various kinds.” Or, a Mesozoic basalt. I myself have been called a “Mesozoic basalt,” though never to my face. It’s one of the several volcanic soils the central Nahe contains, and it usually gives wines scented and flavored of soursop, lemon-balm, violets and ginger. This year there’s more *sponti* (for “spontangärung,” or wild-yeast fermentation. The Germans like making words up like “sponti”) and also more lees contact. The wine is predictably tangy and spicy and while it was clamped down from having just been bottled, it has length plus that conjurer’s bewitching volcanic soil vibe.

2016 Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GJS-148 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

+

The pick among Jakob’s ‘16s, and one of my own personal must-buys, I find this to be a miracle of Riesling. Kertz is like an exceedingly rare and difficult orchid, that blooms every nine years but when it does there’s nothing on earth so beautiful. The slate/porphyry mélange isn’t unique in these parts, but there’s a sleek tangy piquancy I don’t find in any other wine. This ‘16 is polished and full of exotic berries. A gorgeous heirloom lilac aroma – and the (local to me) Arnold Arboretum has over 100 different lilac bushes, so I’m being literal here – spicy length, petrichor and flowers, a lively giggling interplay of stone and gold raspberry. This wine alone would establish Riesling’s right to enter heaven.

2016 Riesling Kabinett

12/1000ml | GJS-149L

This year it’s Rosenberg (melaphyr) and Steinwingert (loess, loam and gravel) so something along lines of Dönnhoff’s estate Riesling. It’s less exotic than it has been but also more winsome and mineral; white flowers, salty, and an attractive angular edge makes it almost Feinherb in nature.

2016 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GJS-150

A juicy smoky entry leads into a curiously taut finish. Really peachy aromas, plus talc and malt and juniper; the structure’s pulled shoelace-tight; it’s showy and overt, and the RS is perfect, but this is one of the rare ‘16s to *display* acidity. Again—this may change through normal vinification.

2016 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GJS-151

From a pre-filtered cask sample, anything I write would mislead. The point here is the *track record*, a wine that’s been marvelous for the past several years. I am also not the only buyer/merchant who knows this—so I can’t afford to wait or he’ll sell it all.

2016 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese

12/750ml | GJS-152

(+)

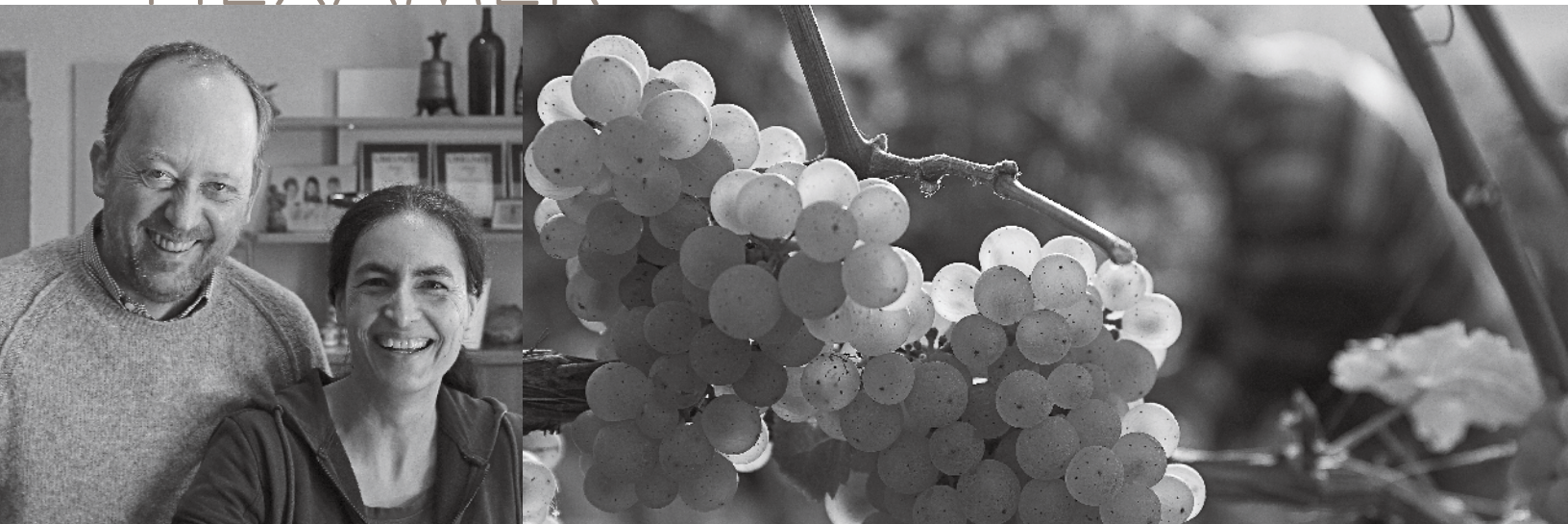
Hugely promising! He pressed whole-clusters, and so the wine is clear and limpid, though embryonic.

2016 Spätburgunder Rosé Feinherb

12/750ml | GJS-147 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Also just bottled, and this time it’s from (Roxheimer) Höllenspfad as made famous by Dönnhoff and some of the slatey Rosenheck from Niederhausen. It’s a savory Nahe wine with refined earthiness; melon, tomato water and sassafrass. An entirely original Rosé, and heaven knows how lavish it’ll be when it’s over bottle-sickness.

HEXAMER



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Meddersheim

VINEYARD AREA

18.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

10,800 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg
(red slate with a high
content of quartzite);
Schloßböckelheimer In den Felsen
(volcanic, porphyry);
Sobernheimer Marbach
(volcanic, porphyry);
Meddersheimer Altenberg
(slate and quartzite);
Schlossböckelheimer Königfels
(volcanic, porphyry);
Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg
(volcanic, porphyry)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling
Weissburgunder
Grauburgunder
Spätburgunder
Frühburgunder
Sauvignon Blanc

It's curious how this portfolio circumnavigates the Nahe; Hexamer is nearly as far upstream as you can go, and Kruger-Rumpf is as far downstream. It's cooler in Meddersheim and Hexamer's wines embody it, but I suspect Harald would make the wines brilliant in any case, cuz that's how he likes them.

It's an estate that won't hold still. It keeps adding vineyards because great land is available at irresistible prices. If you probe you discover there are old stocks of back-vintages you never heard about, including one that never was sold. Even the wine style is adapting to the new terroirs, and while Harald's wines will always be on the ultraviolet side, the middle-Nahe wines are less high-strung than the (often) scintillating wines from his home-village of Meddersheim. What is salient about Harald Hexamer's winery is first, his identity as the keeper of the Rheingrafenberg vineyard, an outstanding site of which he is by far the biggest owner; second, his rare ability to make consistently gorgeous dessert-wines—few if any have the gift of keeping them sleek and racy even when they're massively concentrated. And finally, the diamond like cut and clarity of his wines overall, as if he refined them beyond refinement. A balance of two extremes is still a balance, but I find Harald's wines are getting deeper and moderating their extremes into something more drinkable, and even, dare I say, more wholesome.

He's a vineyardist first, only thereafter a cellarmaster. "I can only attempt to optimize in the cellar what I pull from the vineyard; the quality of the grapes is

decisive." He handles as little as possible. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary ("but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit—below 10 degrees—back to the winery.") Yields are controlled by pruning ("We often end up with only six to eight bunches per vine").

Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; "The most filigree wines come from this method." 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor. Acidity has been a theme here, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer's wines are (if you like them) "brilliant" and (if you don't like them) "tart." Mind you, I don't actually know if the wines are high in acidity; they just taste that way. Hexamer continues his ongoing bifurcation into two wineries. Not deliberately or by design, but de-facto, because as he adds more land in the central Nahe (with its volcanic soils) it becomes an important facet of his total production. It also stands apart from the upper-Nahe sites he's always worked, and which are so well suited to his zingy ultraviolet style. Harald and I talked about whether that cellar regime was really perfectly suited to the more exotic, smoky wines of Schlossböckelheim, and he agreed that he'd been thinking along similar lines. Meanwhile, the Meddersheimers maintain that winter-sun-on-icicles brilliance they've always shown.

2016 and Hexamer are perfectly syn-

chronous, all the way to the most stunning sequence of Eisweins (which he loves to make) he's shown in years, and one of the most impressive I have ever seen.

2016 Grauburgunder “vom Porphy” Trocken

12/750ml | GHX-131 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

3rd-use oak from local forests—1200-liter cask, in which about one-third of the wine was aged—but the headline here is *PINOT GRIS ON PORPHYRY*; Harald bought the vineyard thinking to plant Riesling, but wondered what sort of wine those P-Gris vines might give on such an unusual soil. What a gesture of terroir this is! It's a fascinating refutation of the theory that terroir is only transmitted (or rendered, or narrated, pick your metaphor) by grape variety—and if you want further examples of the fatuousness of this idea, I direct your schnoz to Steinertal or Achleiten in the Wachau, whose soil-signatures are such as to supersede the variety planted.

This wine comes from the site *In Den Felsen* (Among-The-Cliffs) and has all the smoky Chinese 5-spice mojo of porphyry. You have never tasted a Pinot Gris like it, and you really shouldn't be without it.

2016 Spätburgunder Weissherbst Halbtrocken

12/750ml | GHX-130

It's a TRUE white PN, not a Rosé. A bona-fide Blanc de Noir, brisk and vivid and full of charm. It's attracted a wee sort of vogue, and ye who have loved it shall verily love it still.

2016 Riesling *Eisendell* Trocken

12/750ml | GHX-132

A cadaster name for a sweet parcel in the Rheingrafenberg, it starts out salty and with a fragrance of greengages and then gets *really* pretty, with maize and hay notes; stylish and racy but lissome and demure.

2016 Riesling *Eisendell* Trocken “#1”

12/750ml | GHX-133 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

In the dry idiom this is really the wine of the upper Nahe. It's half-half cask and steel, and “#1” denotes the best dry wine of the vintage. It's a beaming giddy beast, wonderfully structured yet with a piquant quince and balsam and wet hay flavor, angular yet somehow without edges. Long yet discreet, and supremely elegant.

+

2016 Riesling Feinherb “Porphy”

12/750ml | GHX-134 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is a perfection of terroir-driven German Riesling, and in this case “terroir” denotes not some gnarly scratch of pebbles and scree, but smoke, cherries, violets and cloves. Dry Riesling is a recitation, but feinherb Riesling is a melody. *Anyone* who loves and cares about wine should cherish this.

And so to '16. What's left to say? It exhales its terroir in a perfectly balanced matrix of great salty length. Think you know Riesling inside out? You ain't know this.

+

2016 Riesling “Quartzit”

12/750ml | GHX-135 | **SOS: 1** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

From a sub-section of Rheingrafenberg where the soil changes to quartzite, this is our calling-card wine, and the '16 is sensational. Sweated fennel and tarragon engage with the usual spicy apples; the balance is so seamless it subsumes whatever sweetness actually may be present; the finish is taut, herbal and dry, and so long your palate has to serve it with eviction papers to make room for the next wine.

2016 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GHX-136

A classic upper Nahe Riesling that's only stunted from bottling, but seems to be all wild plum and plum blossom.

(+)

2016 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GHX-137 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Harald's finest Spät in a long time... it's "cool" and pure, flavors sung by a chorus of sopranos; lithe, crystalline, talc and ginger and verbena; enveloping fruit like being covered by a cool silk blanket. More pure than purity, and as classy as wine gets.

2016 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GHX-138

This is a bit sweeter, but it has all the porphyry exotica one could crave, and for a Hexamer wine it's quite gliding and cuddlesome.

A STUNNING AND RARE TRIO OF EISWEINS

2016 Sobernheimer Domberg Riesling Eiswein

+ + +

12/375ml | GHX-139H

2016 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Eiswein

+ +

12/375ml | GHX-143H

2016 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Eiswein

+ + +

12/375ml | GHX-140H

One of my colleagues—who take more professional notes than I do—will have recorded the must-weights and harvest temperatures for these wines. Please ask us if you'd like to know. They were all picked not especially late, and all were picked clean. I do not like syrupy sweet wine no matter how high in acidity, and as you can see, I found these to be perfect or damn near.

I'm listing them this way because it makes sense to order all three. Eiswein has become an endangered species in our climate era, and many of those one *does* see are picked too late and too dirty and the results are oogy.

The *Domberg* is savory, with pancetta and caraway notes floating through the silvery ether of purity. The *Altenberg* is fruitier, more of a marmalade, easier to grok. It's gorgeous, but earthbound.

The *Rheingrafenberg* has even more of the buzzing gorgeous steely icicle purity; the most concentrated, the greatest torque and the richest internal fruit.

OLD WINES!

2005 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken

+

12/750ml | GHX-142

Malty and suave and remarkably luscious (but dry!), and completely delicious and at its peak.

2005 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

+ +

12/750ml | GHX-141

If you buy all of this before I get my hands on any, I will send a Dachshund to your house to bite you on the ankles. It is astonishing perfect Riesling, lush, grainy and smoky, a young adult going nowhere fast.

2005 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GHX-032

This is less developed, naturally (fructose preserves fruit), and it'd somewhat marked by its RS—as was the case at the time—but if you can wait 6-8 years you'll have a stunner on your hands.

KRUGER-RUMPF



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Münster-Sarmsheim

VINEYARD AREA

29 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

15,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Münsterer Dautenpflänzer
(*slate with sandy loam*) ;
Münsterer Pittersberg
(*slate*) ;
Münsterer Rheinberg
(*weathered quartzite and sandy loam*) ;
Binger Scharlachberg Rheinhessen
(*Rotliegend and porphyry*) ;
Bingerbrücker Abtei Ruppertsberg
(*slate*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling
Pinot Blanc
Pinot Gris
Pinot Noir
Scheurebe

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

A PROFILE OF THE SITES

Dautenpflänzer is one the leading Grand Crus of the lower Nahe, with a typical mélange of soil types within its borders. Rumpf claims some of it is slatey and some of it is “sandy loam,” which agrees more with the standard references. It is in any case singular and immediately significant, giving a sometimes damnably complex set of aromas and flavors including coconut, violet, soursop, leaf-smoke—it is a very long list even if you’re sober. In any case it belongs with the vamping exotics of the Nahe.

Pittersberg is the other of the top Crus, and this site is more classic and less mischievous than its neighbor. Stefan refers only to “slate” and very often the wine smells just like Mosel wine—in fact just like Graacher Himmelreich. “In parts dusty loam over slate,” according to the textbook. Pittersberg is related to the Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, which is just over the Rhine less than two miles north, though without the Taunus-quartzite of the Rheingau site. Diel’s great Pittermännchen is also on slate; I’m sure the similar names are not coincidence. Pittersberg gives firm, nutty Rieslings.

Rheinberg is the steepest of the three, on weathered quartzite and dusty loam—“similar to Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck,” according to Stefan. Its flavors are indeed virtually identical, though the Nahe wine has a grace and curvaciousness the more stoic Rheingauer lacks. Sweet apples and yellow fruits are paramount here,

though the minerally terroir notes give a firm foundation. These are wines of true charm, not merely winning ways. I’d categorize it as a 1er Cru.

Scharlachberg is a Grand Cru, but in fact a Rheinhessen Grand Cru, as it sits across the (mighty!) Nahe from Münster-Sarmsheim; it’s a serious prow of hillside acting as a kind of warm-up to the Rüdesheimer Berg just to its north over the Rhine—though on a radically different soil; a mélange of rotliegend and various volcanic derivatives (e.g., porphyry). The wines are, or can be, superb, seeming to mingle the succulence of Hipping or Peltenthal with the exotics of Felsenberg or Dautenpflänzer.

The notes will tell you how steady-eddy the ‘16s are, and this is hardly surprising. Georg Rumpf is also refreshingly willing to work with me on cuvées, a marked contrast to certain other growers who approach it as a take-it-or-leave-it equation. Georg wants me (and you) to be happy, and the results are everyday wines that over-deliver.

The consensus is that the estate is “improving” year to year. I think this is true but it also isn’t obvious. It’s a sizeable winery, and has a restaurant attached, and there’s a lot to do, plus Georg is on the move with new plantings and new vineyards and manifold other projects. He’s what we’d call “dymanic.” What I myself see in the wines is a process of continual refinement, imparting greater finesse and clarity, but I think it’s old news that Kruger Rumpf is getting better. They’ve *gotten* (even) better, and the driving force is a push to be excellent.

FIRST THE RIESLINGS

2016 Estate Riesling Trocken

+

12/750ml | GKF-242

A makeshift cuvée was assembled from various lots of “estate” level wines, and it ended up being entirely good. But Georg affixed me with a gestalt eye-lock and asked “Could this be better?” Of course it *could* be, I replied....depending on the quality of what’s put into it. “We could use village-level wine if you wanted,” Georg said, “to give it more depth and fruit.”

Well sure! If you want to declassify some Meursault to boost your Bourgogne Blanc, I won’t refuse. So: what’s in here now is mostly from quartzite soil (70%) because the fruit is more voluminous, and we have 15% each of village wines from Dorsheim and Münster—and *this* is a fantastic estate Riesling! It has fruit, grip, length, minerality and complexity; it’s grainy and salty, and the pebbly finish is like fresh grass.

2016 Riesling Trocken Abtei

12/750ml | GKF-243

This is a new vineyard for Georg; it’s the site closest to the Rhine, with a phyllite soil (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllite>) similar to that of the supernal Rheingau vineyard Rauenthaler Baiken. It’s a *sponti* from old vines on steep slopes, and to me it tasted a little like (Kamptal’s) Gaisberg. A bit clipped in its infant-stage, the palate vibrates between slate and exotics, and the wine is potent and promising.

2016 Dautenpflänzer Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GKF-244

? All of the GGs were pretty stormy back on March 11th, but this one was most approachable and most intriguing. No note offered, as the final wine will include a lot still fermenting when I visited.

2016 Estate Riesling

(+)

12/750ml | GKF-245 | SOS : 0

As we also see at Dönnhoff, this is the not-dry alternative in the estate-riesling idiom. The base for this cuvée was actually blended to make it *drier* (but also richer), and the result is a juicy, dry salty wine with a hint of plum gelée. Alas the chatter was distracting at this moment, and the luckless world shall never know what other things this wine tasted like.

2015 Riesling Kabinett Im Pitterberg

+

12/750ml | GKF-248 | SOS : 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

First offering for a wonderful new-old technique reminiscent of Gobelsburg’s “Tradition” bottlings; frequent rackings, unfined, *sponti*, and decidedly on the dry side. “Im Pitterberg” is the cadaster name for the best parcel in the “GG” Pittersberg. The aroma alone merits the plus, crackery and nutty with an angular piquancy, a countrified and vinous old-school Riesling that you can lay down for decades.

2016 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GKF-249 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Sponti, old cask-aged, moderate RS, and wonderful! Lime, cox-orange pippins, even chocolate; this is the best-ever vintage of a wine that actually is improving dramatically, and heralds a new era—back to the old ways. This is wine. The modern style can sometimes seem paint-by-numbers in contrast.

2016 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GKF-249 | SOS: 2 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

For me this was the pick among the Späts, especially if you like Saar Riesling's grapefruity tang; limey yet rich and extract-dense; the mid-palate recalls the "Uralte Reben" from Selbach, with perhaps more heft and a harder backbone. Soul in spades!

2016 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GKF-250

It's a rippling vamping version of this exotic beauty—the most exotic Riesling I know that doesn't grow on basalt or porphyry—showing "dark" spice and soursop (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soursop>), and scratches an old itch you were never quite able to reach. Like herbs you found on Mars, or even a mint you wish you'd eaten just half of!

NOT-RIESLINGS!

2016 Sauvignon Blanc

12/750ml | GKF-246

A wood-fermented wine from Rheinberg (quartzite) and Kapellenberg (slate), the wine starts encroaching on von Winning's territory; smoky, woody, incense-y, violets; savory and salty, with a slightly singed herbal finish.

2016 Estate Pinot Noir Rosé

12/750ml | GKF-241

A sleek, fresh, dry Rosé that's silky and smartly made.

Pinot Brut Rosé N.V.

+

12/750ml | GKF-247

Moderate dosage, 36 months on the lees, this is arrestingly delicious; it's 90% PN and 10% Riesling both wood-fermented, no malo in the Riesling, and the *disgorgement* date is on the label. This is racy, sea-spray, rose-hip; a fine richness here, jammed with flavor; less meaty than (some) pink Champagnes, and of course no chalk, but otherwise a serious contender with deftly balanced wood. Surprise!

2016 Scheurebe Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GKF-252

Top-3 mangling's of the word "Scheurebe:" *Shuh-roob*. *Shooby-rooby*. *Sha-boomy*. I made none of these up.

In German the eu sound is always like this: OY. Like boy-toy. Here's a mnemonic: when you think of the EU, you want to say "Oy!" OK? For shit's sake, if you can pronounce "Mourvèdre" you can pronounce Scheurebe.

This is all from the "GG" Dautenpflänzer (whose name can only be used for Riesling, thanks to the wisdom of the VDP trilateral commission poobahs), it has zero botrytis and was picked "extremely" late. Sage and lime as always, woodruff too, the wine is driven by spice and acidity; this vampire filed her teeth before she bit into your neck. Go on and dig the sting....

SCHLOSSGUT DIEL



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Burg Layen

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

15,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Pittermännchen
(slate);
Goldloch
(gravel);
Burgberg
(quartzite);
Dorsheimer Pittermännchen
(slate);
Dorsheimer Goldloch
(gravel);
Dorsheimer Burgberg
(quartzite)

GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Riesling
25% Pinot Noir,
Pinot Gris and
Pinot Blanc

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

A bit of context for anyone recently arrived....

Until not very long ago, Armin Diel was what my New York friends would call a *Macher*, influential, a personage, a man of consequence. He was the author of several books and the editor of the leading German wine guide, the *Gault-Millau*. He is also the peer of many leading European wine estate proprietors, and is also connected to people we'd call "movers and shakers." You'd not be surprised, when tasting one of his wines at the estate, to learn it had been served at the wedding of the daughter of the CEO of Mercedes-Benz—that sort of thing.

Armin has eased back into a more private life, and his daughter Caroline has assumed control of the estate. She is a great hero of mine, because with her connections (not to mention looks and charm and smarts) she could have done any number of Dolly-girl jobs, but she chose instead to get her hands dirty working as a vintner. When you see her in my film, you'll know right away why she inspires me so.

Slowly it's easier to approach and discern the wines *qua* wines, without the "omigod-DIEL" star-struck-ness one may have felt before. These wines indeed have quite a lot of aristocratic polish, but so do other wines, and these are also delicious and not the least bit haughty. Ten years from now Caroline will be sailing along on a reputation for which she is primari-

ly responsible, and so I encourage you to look ahead.

There are a few murmurs that Caroline Diel is changing the style of the wines, and there's a little truth behind it, but not a lot. People look for these things and find them when they expect to, even if they're actually just figments of their expectations. But Caroline has her own taste, of course, and the wines will slowly shape-shift to align with her preferences—but not a lot of shifting is called for. The wines were already fine, classy and articulate.

Diel's were the first Nahe wines I tasted. I'd been in the Pfalz and loved the wines, and I kept thinking "These '16s all taste like Nahe wines; I wonder what actual Nahe wines will be like..." and I can only say, these wines were blissful. They were also *available* to the palate, in contrast to other vintages when most of the "serious" wines were still opaque. The vintage is confident and somehow both sedate and alert.

Apropos states-of-readiness, I'd never want wines to be "formed" in order to show prettily when I come around in March. That's no way to make wine. And yet, I sometimes do wonder at a certain machismo I infer from growers who seem proud of how *unready* their wines are, as if this is some noble atavism we should honor as a durable virtue. Please don't hasten the wines, but neither delay them; let them lead.

2016 Rosé de Diel

+

12/750ml | GSD-189

Beautiful and intelligent, both sophisticated and also “drinky,” a word Caroline uses that should be enshrined in the all-time-great wine-words hall of fame. But really, you could get dressed up to drink this. You can also *consider* it, think about it. You feel wittier (and happier) when it’s in your glass. It’s in the glory-zone between “casual” and “serious,” and it’s as smart and fun as a New Yorker cartoon.

2014 Pinot Noir “Cuvée Caroline”

6/750ml | GSD-172

First time tasted in-bottle, and it’s a highlight from a difficult vintage, whose gravelly tannin wasn’t to my liking, but here the fruit is sumptuous, not over-extracted (as was often the case); somehow she preserved the usual silky texture, and there’s only a hint of oak-char.

2016 Riesling Trocken Dorsheim

+

12/750ml | GSD-193 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Oh boy, this is charming. Blueberry and lilac and grape hyacinth and lime blossom; salty and oh so silky, it seems to glide and swoon into a searchingly mineral finish, lissome and lingering.

2016 Riesling Trocken “Eierfels”

12/750ml | GSD-194

This is the young-vines “GG” and it’s more overtly stony than Dorsheim; a gravel-quarry with wild herbs and even *garrigue*; the palate is pretty juicy for such a “gray” kind of wine, starchy like pasta water, and the finish is literally salty.

2016 Riesling “Erstes Lage” Schlossberg

+ +

6/750ml | GSD-195

So, the 1er Cru. I approve! If you’re going to classify at all, then delineate between the excellent and the truly great sites. Normally this fruit goes into other cuvées but this ‘16 proved to be irresistible, and we are therefore truly blessed. It’s an utterly wonderful dry Riesling! A lithe, demure and lucid rendering of slate, like the pith of a green apple, but also with wheatberry and grain and caraway and white tea; the finish is an ovation of slowly sizzling mineral.

2016 Riesling “GG” Pittermännchen

+ (+)

6/750ml | GSD-196

Also slate, but this is a more angular, kinky kinda slate, and the wine isn’t quite as well-behaved as Schlossberg, at least at this early stage. It comes in on a unicycle, juggling flavors and chuckling, but then it grows calm and articulate, loaded with lime and balsam; digital precision into a smoky-slatey finish.

2016 Riesling “GG” Goldloch

+ +

6/750ml | GSD-197 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Goldloch can lean in an apricotty baroque direction, but willowy vintages show another facet, and just when you think this will be a seductive fruit-bomb it glides around the palate in a tingling stream of mineral. A superb Goldloch, it has complexity and proportion, seamless harmony but salty energy.

2016 Riesling “Von Der Nahe”

+

12/750ml | GSD-190 | **SOS : 1** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

It's all from (Burg-Layen) Schlossberg, unchaptalized, and it's almost too good; refined and classy, iris and lavender aromas, excellent minerality, a rich extract-dense mid-palate. This echelon cannot offer greater precision and articulation. It is, in case you didn't know, a custom Theise-cuvée, and only a churl or poltroon would object to its homeopathic RS.

2016 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GSD-198

It's like the “GG” but sleeker (and of course with RS), it delivers the same mind-melt of yellow fruit and talc and white-starchy mineral; more overtly floral (gardenia) and a lovely oblique entry of lime, balsam and wintergreen.

2016 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GSD-199

Here the green profile leads the parade. The wine is more sedate and murmury, the fruit is more purring, the mineral less overt; the entire wine is more meditative. It's like a slimmer version of the 2005.

TEN-YEARS-AFTER

2007 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GSD-200

2007 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GSD-089

THE RHEINGAU

It's always dispiriting to consider all the good land in the Rheingau and all the complacent growers who seem to have resisted the healthy competitiveness of growers in other regions. I wonder if this will ever change. Of course it makes me grateful for the few really superb growers who swim against the current of mediocrity, because I've always revered the great Rheingau wines. Always and still. But every time you hear that one of the old Great Names is reviving its old reputation, you either don't see it when you taste, or it turns out they've been doing illegal and unsavory things, as was the case with one conspicuous Great Name who was so corrupt there hardly seemed to be an illegal practice they omitted.

We have a new grower to offer you whom I think is truly exciting. What I don't know is whether he is a herald of better things to come, or just an exception that proves the rule. Still, I was struck by the keenness of the thrill, to discover an under-the-radar family estate making *typical* firm RG-Riesling showing the sort of abiding dignity that makes those wines unique.

I have four suppliers here now, the most I've had in many years. Perhaps because of these outstanding wines, I've

been willing to consider a little rustling I've been hearing in the leaves, a few green shoots that may be poking out of the ground in the Rheingau. I've heard these things before and the region has come up empty, and yet a forsaken hope stirs to be revived. I was among the first to suggest that all was unwell in this benighted region, and I wouldn't mind being early to the news of a renaissance, but I won't read one in if it's not actually there.

Young readers won't remember the old days, when all of German Riesling was divided into "Mosel and Hock," with *Hock* indicating the Rheingau. In those days the Pfalz was an outlier, the Rheinhessen was considered trivial, and no one had heard of the Nahe. And so our lamentations over the demise of a classic region are based on both great memories and also on a paradigm of Rhine Riesling that was profound and even magnificent, and was consistently justified by splendid wines. Today we have either forgotten the Rheingau or we suppose it to be moribund and unimportant. Yet I have four estates to share, all of them peerless, and all of them keepers of a grail, and when you taste their wines it comes as a kind of shock—*Oh yes, this was the Rheingau.*

SPREITZER



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheingau / Oestrich

VINEYARD AREA

21 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

12,500 cases

TOP SITES

Oestricher Lenchen
(*gravel, clay*) ;
Oestricher Doosberg ;
(*gravel, clay, marl, loess, quartz*) ;
Oestricher Rosengarten
(*tertiary marl, loess, shell-limestone*) ;
Winkeler Jesuitengarten
(*sand, loess, gravel*) ;
Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen
(*marl, loam*) ;
Hattenheimer Engelmansberg
(*loess, loam*) ;
Hallgartener Hendelberg
(*clay, marl, colored-slate*)

SOIL TYPES

deep tertiary loam and loess

GRAPE VARIETIES

96% Riesling
4% Spätburgunder

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

Because they're in Oestrich, where the wines tend to run fruity, one can forget this is a Rheingau estate. But one taste of the astonishing Jesuitengarten Spätlese brought home reminded me why this region attained its reputation for aristocracy. It is, however, a bastard to put into words.

Let's try anyway. Rheingau Rieslings are alpha. They assume the right to be in command. They have the natural bearing of the born leader, including the geniality that makes the best leaders. Yet behind it is an essential indifference to the impression they make on you. This isn't haughty, but they aren't going to preen for you. They have no desire nor need to ingratiate themselves. You'd seldom use a word like gushing or seductive to describe a classic Rheingau wine, but you'd use words like splendid or impeccable. And all of this is entirely compatible with deliciousness, just as all leaders display an irresistible magnetism.

Spreitzer is really flourishing now, especially since they've solved the reduction problems associated with wild yeast ferments. It gives us a clearer look into the wines, and they're revealed to be juicy but terroir-driven critters.

2016 Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GSP-128

Just what it should be; less fleshy than the '15, and actually *Spätlese* quality; silk and violets and lilacs—a flowery and decorous wine overall—it really skips across the palate, more petals than minerals.

2016 Riesling “101”

12/750ml | GSP-135 | SOS:0 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

The “other” estate Riesling, and it’s the best vintage since 2011. Because of the residual-unmentionable it uses different raw material, and the wine is snappier, more vivid and mineral than its dry sibling. More animated and bouncy.

2016 Oestricher Riesling Trocken “Muschelkalk”

12/750ml | GSP-129 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

In fact hailing from the single (classified) site Doosberg, I imagine they had to omit its name owing to some arcane VDP *Diktat*. The wine itself is lovely, quite silvery and mineral; white lilac and reminiscent of certain Kremstal Rieslings. Taste, and see that polish and class are quite compatible with clarity and minerality.

2016 Hallgartener Hendelberg Riesling Alte Reben Trocken

12/750ml | GSP-130

High-elevation hillside Rheingau Riesling—there is in *general* a distinction to be made among riverfront, mid-slope and upslope vineyards, both in soil type and also in disposition. The slatey soil typically gives woodsy, angular and nutty wine, and this one’s seriously long and salty and slinky; discreetly mineral, balsam and woodruff; cerebral but not aloof; an articulate high-cheekboned wine.

2016 Wisselbrunnen Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GSP-132

Markedly open and almost brashly mineral, this has the most cut and relief of any vintage I recall. It’s less nutty and more mustard-green and nettle; crackery, rusky, an almost peppery finish; a karate-chop of Riesling. But it’s obviously early days, so this note is provisional.

2016 Rosengarten Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GSP-131

An unusual “GG” in that it isn’t rendered as a Delphic Column of eternal Riesling classicism—it’s actually *fruity*. The ‘16 shows a concentrated herbal lushness, and the appley fruit has an unusual solidity for all that. The wine is juicy but not exactly supple.

2016 Hattenheimer Engelmansberg Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GSP-133 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

The pick of the vintage here, and one of the most buttery and calm and savory and complex Rieslings in this *entire* offering; the Rheingau at its most genial, as one would expect from loess-y soils (with tertiary marl and loess-loam also); loess gives what I call “wet-cereal” aromas to Riesling and GrüVe. This being ‘16 there’s a toothsome herbal crunch giving a vibrant *yang* and snap to the prevailing ripple, sway and glide.

2016 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Alte Reben Feinherb

12/750ml | GSP-134 | SOS:? | SOMMELIER ALERT!

On the rich side of the designation, but this obdurately solid wine needs it. This is Rheingau at its chewiest, and so dignified it is almost haughty. It smells like violets but isn’t “flowery.” The kind of wine we find *impressive*.



2016 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSP-136

Again we reduced the RS (by 8g/l in fact) in a wine we've been wanting to be less sweet than the pinnacle it reached 5-6 years ago. Bear in mind this isn't simple. The wine was picked at 98° Oechsle (*big Spätlese*) and such wines need more sweetness than one wants in a "Kabinett" and so it's a task to obtain balance.

We got a taut and snappy version, which bears its weight as though it was gossamer, and shows a curious mélange of apples and toast on the finish.

2016 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GSP-137

2016 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303"

12/750ml | GSP-138

(no note-taking possible here, as these were just-fermented unfiltered cask samples.)

KÜNSTLER



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheingau / Hochheim

VINEYARD AREA

42 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

Between 250,000 and 320,000 bottles total

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Hochheimer Domdechane (calcareous clay marl with pebbles from the river Main);
Hochheimer Kirchenstück (heavy limestone with loamy loess);
Hochheimer Hölle (heavy clay with limestone sediment);
Hochheimer Herrnberg (limestone debris with layers of sand);
Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland (Tanus quartzite and loess);
Rüdesheimer Bischofsberg (loess, loam);
Rüdesheimer Drachenstein (Tanus quartzite and loess)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling
12% Spätburgunder
8% Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Grüner Veltliner and Silvaner

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

There aren't many more sure-things in the wine business than a new vintage at Künstler. And as good as 2015 is here, the chief revelation from this visit was the amazing quality of the late-released 2014s. Gunter's is a guiding hand overseen by a calm intelligence that reminds me of Johannes Selbach. And man, he was born to make dry Riesling...

Künstler is now essentially bracketing the Rheingau, with land in Hochheim and Rüdesheim. (Yes I know there's other villages "technically" part of the Rheingau but actually and properly part of the Mittelrhein.) The Rüdesheim thing is fairly new, and gives this vintner a chance to speak a radically different language than that of his native Hochheim. The latter is also "attached" to the Rheingau because the wines kind-of resemble Rheingau wines, plus where else could they put it? The river Main, which defines the wines of Franken, empties into the Rhine at Mainz, and the very last vineyards on its north bank are those of Hochheim. The great site is Domdechane, followed closely by Kirchenstück—both Grand Crus—followed by Hölle and Stielweg which I think are 1er Crus, though I suspect Gunter would disagree. Soils run to loams, marls and clay, and the microclimate in Hochheim is rather more humid than its environs. This can complicate Gunter's urge to move in an organic direction, though he says "Generally we are working without any herbicides since 1992 and we grow on 11 hectares (TT: of 42 in total) organically. Here we have three blocks of about 3.5 hectares. In the future we will move step by step to 100 % organic, but this,

in our warm and humid microclimate, is not easy. Finally I have to make ends meet and to pay my employees. In order to produce dry Rieslings we have to protect against botrytis in every production step." Cellar work is generally in line with the norms among elite producers. Musts settle by gravity and are pressed clear. He ferments with cultured yeast, because it's often still warm when grapes are being picked ("Which means flies and bees...") and to work sponti would mean a greater risk of volatile acidity. The cellar orients toward cask as opposed to steel, though each is used. Wood gives the ideal low tech micro-oxygenation. The overriding goal is to produce wines with "heart and soul," and here I think is where these new Rüdesheimers are especially interesting. Of course it will take several more years for these vineyards to improve to Gunter's prevailing standard, but it's already apparent how much more unruly the Rüdesheimers are compared to the rather more comme il faut Hochheimers.

In the ADVOCATE reviews, Stefan Reinhardt used the German term "Vollprofi" to describe Gunter, and he's exactly right; the term means (sort of like) "the pro's pro." There's a palpable intelligence across the range, and the craftsmanship that results from that intelligence, plus vision, perspective and know-how. In the next life when I'm king, I'll give this guy a bunch of vineyards from across the Rheingau—most of which are in under-performing hands—and let him show what this region can do. Just looking at the great land he does have—Domdechane and Kirchenstück in Hochheim, and Berg

Rottland in Rüdesheim, gives a teasing glimpse of supernal possibility. The first year's offer was unruly, I admit, because there was so much wine available. This time I tried to rein myself in, with fitful success as you'll see. I know these aren't inexpensive wines, but you do say you want great dry Riesling, and you won't

find anything more expressive, solid and delicious than these.

It was here that I started feeling vindicated about whatever small hesitation I've felt about the 2015s. Not that Gunter's wines aren't excellent—they are—but his biggest wines, the “GGs” and especially the Rüdesheimers are wont to be “pow-

erful” if you're into that sort of wine, and “ungainly” if you're me, or someone like me. He seems to really shine in moderate years like '13, '14 and '16, and the pre-views of the less lofty '16s I'm offering are heralds of perhaps his best vintage in the last ten years.

NON-RIESLINGS

2016 Spätburgunder Rosé

12/750ml | **GKU-045**

An ambitious Rosé but not a muscular one; rather, it has wonderful fruit and a demure, pellucid vinosity. It's as stylish as Diel's but it's earthier, mossier, less strawberry and more candy-cap mushroom. It's a solid step better than the '15.

2015 Spätburgunder “Tradition”

12/750ml | **GKU-047**

A riotous black-cherry aroma that's almost more St. Laurent than PN; “dark” tones and more fruit-euphoria than the '14, with a snappy spicy finish written in **BOLD CAPS**.

2016 Sauvignon Blanc

12/750ml | **GKU-048**

From really rocky limestone soil, it's a smart and chic SB. Not subtle – but what SB is really ever “subtle?” It's grassy rather than vegetal and it isn't blatant. Tasted from two glasses—the dreaded Zalto “Universal” (which lays to waste 4 out of 5 wines poured into it) and some archaic Riedel tulip—it was infinitely nicer in the smaller Riedel, showing nice rivulets of currant and flowers.

2009 Sekt Chardonnay Brut

12/750ml | **GKU-046**

Dosage-zero. This could be a Sezannais Champagne; it's 6 years *en tirage* and is quite stylish and biscuity, with its own minerality but one that's tangible and definite, like a cousin to chalk.

2016 Alvarinho

12/750ml | **GKU-049**

Um, what? Here's one of a kind! Gunter brought it back with him from a vacation in Portugal (“I liked it!”) and it's a kind of bizarre classic. Fennel-frond and walnut oil; it's bone dry and less snappy than this variety in its cheap-&-cheerful versions, but there's infinite character, density and clarity; the back-palate is raspy and rock-dusty. A jet-blast of Albariño. So!

THE WEED'S WEARING OFF; BACK TO RIESLING

2016 Estate Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | **GKU-055** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Yes, it's that good, alas, because it disincentives y'all from trading up to the next levels. But truth is truth; this has entirely *stunning* aromas, and I think it's the best vintage of the best *dry* estate-Riesling in this portfolio. Loads of sweet fruit on entry and snappy mineral and grasses on the finish. Not only admirable; this is a wine to adore.

+ +

2016 Hochheimer Kirchenstück Riesling Kabinett Trocken

+

12/750ml | GKU-050

One of the best two sites in Hochheim—the other being Domdechaney—this is in fact a “GG,” and it’s not supposed to be offered as a “Kabinett.” Why then is it? The answer is so logical it calls the entire wisdom of the VDP into question. Gunter picks when the grapes are ripe and clean, because if he waits he runs the risk of having overripe and/or botrytis material, neither of which he desires. The result of his eminently sensible decision is a wine with alcohol around 12.5% that tastes like the site. Such thinking is anything but radical, yet it runs afoul of the “system” and thus our hero is a calm and reasonable outlaw.

Allied to all the buzzing and earthy minerality and rock-dust of the site is all the silkiness of ‘16, and the buoyant, shady, Sencha-snap.

2016 Hochheimer Hölle Riesling Kabinett Trocken

++

12/750ml | GKU-051

I really wonder if the VDP will chuck our hero out, or otherwise admonish him in some inane way. Not that I wish for it—though I did encourage another VDP estate to “quit the fuckers” or words to that effect. That *any* set of strictures, however ostensibly logical, might have prevented the production of a wine like [this](#) is *prima-facie* wrongheaded.

For it is a masterpiece, a GREAT vintage for a Cru that’s sometimes too sultry. It’s like a semolina dumpling cooked in a light chicken stock and napped in a starchy, salty *nage*, served with a mint and coconut meringue. A deliberate fennely finish shimmers in your neon-fresh mouth.

2016 Domdechaney “Erste Lage” Riesling Trocken

+(+)

12/750ml | GKU-052

Just bottled when I arrived, so you needed to root around a bit, but the reward is an earthy and refined complexity that announces this splendid vineyard. Soursop, vetiver and hyacinth; it shows an almost stentorian demeanor.

2015 Berg Schlossberg Riesling “GG”

+

6/750ml | GKU-053

Savory and juicy on entry and an insurrection of nutty mineral on the finish. Lots of aerial floating flavor for a warm year. It’s like a nut-butter or a virgin grapeseed oil.

2015 Weiß Erd Riesling “GG”

+

6/750ml | GKU-054

I think this wine is marvelous though I wonder whether the site is more correctly seen as a 1er Cru. Its white-marl soil creates unusual Champagne-like aromas, and this one could easily be mistaken for a *Coteaux Champenoise* white. Puff-pastry, oleander, oat-bread toast; medium-bodied and with a flashing white zing around every edge and corner.

WEINGUT GOLDATZEL



REGION/SUB REGION

Rheingau/ Johannisberg,
Winkel and Geisenheim

VINEYARD AREA

12 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

Between 60,000-75,000
bottles in total

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Johannisberger Goldatzel
(loam, loess, quartzite) ;
Johannisberger Vogelsang
(gravel, sandy loam) ;
Johannisberger Hölle
(loam, quartz and
some iron rich earth) ;
Winkeler Hasensprung
(deep loess, loam with chalk,
quartz and slate) ;
Geisheimer Kläuserweg
(loam, marl, chalky clay)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling
15% Pinot Noir
5% other varieties

I doubt if any other visit in Germany made me happier than this one. That's partly because a really nice guy had a stunningly good vintage—which makes four in a row—and partly because my first enthusiasms were amply justified. But it's more than that. It's because it turned out there was someone making splendidly classical Rheingau Rieslings whom I didn't know about. And if there's even one such producer, there could be more. It's also cool to get to introduce a new producer to the market, because this is always more fun than assuming something from another person's portfolio. So I am jocund, halcyon, even dare I say jo-cose with happiness. And I can't wait to drink these wines again.

This is a 12-hectare estate that's recently gotten an infusion of energy from young Johannes Gross, who is in his third year post-university (Geisenheim), and who is working seamlessly alongside his parents. I emphasize that; he isn't taking a moribund estate and “rescuing” it, but he is guaranteeing its healthy future and making any number of small impacts.

I was tipped off. I went to visit, and met Gross Seniors, and tasted a lot of wines and really liked what I was tasting. So I bought a mixed case and shipped them to myself and *drank* them over a period of months, just like you guys do, just to see if the wines were truly attractive and interesting as opposed to merely “showing” well. The truth of *any* wine is not how the first sip tastes, but rather the last. And these were '14s and '13s, two difficult vintages, and every single bottle was delightful, fascinating or both, and all of

them kept tasting lovely after days open in the fridge.

To the facts at hand. These are what I'd call *CLASSIC* Rheingau Rieslings, which is to say they are spicy, stoic and firm. The true RG-Riesling is almost never ingratiating, though they are delicious in their cordial ways. They possess another kind of charm; the kind that doesn't care what you think of them. Traditionally this kind of Riesling has always skewed dry, or dry-ish, and these wines are no exception. Nothing here is what any normal taster would call “sweet,” even the wines with residual sugar. But they are *saturated* with personality and with the easy command that makes such wines aristocratic.

There's a bevy of great vineyards: in Geisenheim the supernal *Kläuserweg*, probably that commune's best site: in Johannisberg the great *Hölle*, giving rampantly powerful wines from its steep slope, as well as the *Goldatzel* and its crystalline wines with such fastidious chiseled clarity: finally the (Winkeler) *Hasensprung* shows as it *truly* should show and all too rarely does, as its boundaries were absurdly extended by the numbnuts '71 wine law.

The family operates an informal restaurant up the hill from Schloss Johannisberg, with a commanding view over the vineyards to the Rhine, and it would have sufficed for the wines to be decently competent, to be consumed by weekenders and gawkers. All the more impressive, therefore, just how serious and impeccable these wines are.

The facts of the matter are, they ferment with both neutral cultures and with

ambient yeasts. In principle the wines are whole-cluster pressed, which accounts for their polish and transparency. Wines are made and developed in tanks or casks according to their characters. Fermentation temperatures can be controlled but very seldom are. The family has no “formula” regarding lees-contact, preferring to judge it wine by wine. They bottle on the young side, to preserve primary fruit. Ecologically the estate is classic “sustain-

able,” which means (among other things) that spraying is usually done between 2:00-3:00 *in the morning*, so as to inhibit unwanted dispersal. “We do not use copper, insecticides, botyticides. If Herbicide is used, it is only underneath the vines and [no more than] once a year; the use is more and more declining.”

As someone who has long lamented the dearth of new talent in the Rheingau, this was a momentous discovery for me.

It is all the more heartening to see them respecting and fulfilling the paradigm for these unique Rieslings, and not seeking to “reinvent” the recipe. I can’t wait to taste them with you.

It’s a lot of wine(s) but I’m a lot of excited. In time we’ll cull away into a steady and sensible assortment. For now, nothing is wasted, everything belongs, and everything is *rockin’*.

THE DRY RIESLINGS

2016 Johannisberger Vogelsang Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GDZ-015

You know it’s gonna be good when the first wine they pour you smells as enticing as this one does. A juicy, grainy, almost luscious dry Riesling, silky and markedly long.

2016 Geisenheimer Kläuserweg Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GDZ-016

A seething beast of vetiver and wet hay; juicy and freaky-long; mineral shimmers in there somewhere; force and torque pulling a big carriage that almost tastes like Veltliner.

2016 “Bestes Fass” Johannisberger Goldatzel Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GDZ-017

This “best barrel” of dry Riesling is gorgeous, so perfumed it could even be Nahe wine and so mineral it could be a Mosel. There’s also a gleaming green herbal flash that seems to light your palate from inside. This wine is all-in: spice, polish, and a compelling *keen-ness*. I wonder how this fine, fine vineyard remains so underrated.

2016 Kläuserweg Riesling Trocken “Erstes Gewächs”

12/750ml | GDZ-018

In “quotes” for two reasons: first they insisted this was only a candidate for the designation, and second they couldn’t presume they would receive it from the dauphins and martinets who determine such things.

Regardless, the wine is profound, and different from its fraternal twin. This is pure mineral! It’s from his best parcel, and this wine is sleek and quivering, with all its energy directed to explicating every nuance of the soil, and yet it’s also serene and articulate, with notes of balsam, hay and straw. Use this to refute the bonehead notion that “mineral” is just a pretty term for unripeness.

NOT-DRY RIESLINGS

2016 “Wie Im Flüge” Riesling

12/750ml | GDZ-020

A new idea—it means “as time goes by”—it’s intended as a quaffing wine for those evanescent summer evenings when you’re sitting in the evening light looking out over the vineyards. The wine fulfills that purpose and then some; it’s charming, simple, yummy warm-weather Riesling. In the future I might try getting it here with our April/May arrivals, but for now, check out this wine that doesn’t demand your intelligence but won’t insult your intelligence!

2016 Johannisberger Goldatzel Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

(+)

12/750ml | GDZ-019 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

"Feinherb" from this estate is actually *drier* than Halbtrocken often is, so bear in mind, these are fashioned to be barely above the legal limit for dryness. I hedged the plus because the wine was just bottled and in a sulfur-blanket, but the pieces are all there and all balanced, and if I'm right it will remind you of Dönnhoff's *Kirschheck*; cool, blossomy and piquant, with a lime-flower finish

2016 Johannisberger Hölle Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GDZ-021 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Brassy and roasty (the site is warm, hence *Hölle* which means hell) and yet compact, salty and spicy; it's generous and juicy and satisfying, ample and warm-hearted but less "hearty" than a Pfalz wine would be. The shoes are shined and the wine is buff, man.

2016 Johannisberger Vogelsang Riesling Alte Reben Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GDZ-022 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Oh come on now! This hails from an 80-90 year old vineyard that avoided *Flurbereinigung* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flurbereinigung>) and the wine is so splendid and juicy and doughy and yet it makes a sharp turn and grows firm and ferrous and resolves into singed and smoky finish.

2016 Johannisberger Hölle Riesling Kabinett

(+)

12/750ml | GDZ-023

Silky and old-school, slim and silvery, moderate RS and a kind of aspect of puff pastry. Had to hedge for fresh bottling.

2016 Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GDZ-024

This is Riesling aristocracy my friend. Again, that cool almost Nahe-like profile, with the typical key-lime and wisteria aromas from the site; a serene energy, and a tertiary perfume like a riot of flowers in your mouth; shady, melodic and chipper, not overtly mineral but full of vim and panache.

2015 Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling TBA

6/500ml | GDZ-025H

It's senseless to write notes for infantile sweet wines, but please know that *I won't select them unless I find them clear, balanced and free of volatility.*

GEORG BREUER



REGION/SUB REGION

Rheingau/Rüdesheim and Raenthal

VINEYARD AREA

33 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

Between 150,000 and
175,000 bottles in total

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg
(predominantly slate and quartzite) ;
Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland
(rich loess, loam with some
slate and quartz) ;
Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck
(Tanus quartz and loess soil) ;
Raenthaler Nonnenberg
(Monopole—phyllite soils—slate with
white mica and gravel deposits

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling
Pinot Noir
Pinot Gris

We sat there at the round tasting table in the basement, me and my gang, and Theresa Breuer and her mega-cool cellar master Marcus, and it was the first time we did this when we were already working together. (Last year that was still being decided.) Theresa told me I'd been "poker-faced," which kind of took me aback. I always figured I was transparent and chill. Also in the interim we'd become pals, like pretty much tout le monde does when they meet Theresa. So, we were all more relaxed. We'd gotten off to a good start, and now we could really taste, melt into the wines.

I had begun to form an idea about Breuer's wines, from tasting and also from a few encounters with bottles here and there, most interestingly in the Dolomites on a hiking trip last September. I can only approach this idea from the side, so bear with me.

When I taste (or drink) a wine, first impressions are telling. They don't constitute the entire truth of a wine, but the truth they do tell is pure. Each time I had a Breuer Riesling I found myself, for want of a better word, stilled. There's a thing some wines can do; they get you to stop what you're doing and just quiet down and listen. This is different from the beam of attention you direct toward a wine you're trying to "get." It's a reminder of the presence of silence. Not many wines deliver this and it has little to do with how "good" a wine may be. It bounces right off your wish to evaluate or assess the wine. It won't let you. If you insist on trying, it will confound you with a distorted signal. If you can just listen, the wine will draw

you in and you can be friends together.

I don't have any idea how this is brought about. And I suppose if anyone had any idea, there'd be a lot more wines like these. But there's a corollary element, and that is texture. More saliently, there is a studied, meditative texture; the wine can't be too buffed or brilliant. It needs to have something gentle, needs to convey a tenderness. And tenderness is a curious thing. It takes time. Early in love we may be ravishingly affectionate or exquisitely gentle, but tenderness takes years; it's the sum of all the things we've forgiven and been forgiven for. When I sense it in a wine, it feels beautifully old, burnished and glowy. It feels like you slipped through a seam in the hillside and found some eternal stream of kindness, some place where the world always loves you.

It's a lot to ask of a wine, so I don't ask. Asking is futile. But when it comes to me, I know how to hear it. And I'd begun to wonder if I was hearing it in these remarkable wines. (Often when I drank them I thought of Alzinger, another family of "loving" wines.)

Theresa may read this and think "Well, I certainly had no idea *that* was what we're doing," and I wouldn't blame her. Because it's not something you set about to do. Instead it arises slowly and organically from your basic relationship to wine. You're not aware you are steering toward anything like this, yet you find yourself there.

There are clues, but not explanations. Theresa and Marcus are in aligned in an intuitive certainty that the wine will always lead the way. They don't have a "regime" in the cellar; rather, they have

flexibility among many possibilities, and the wine says where it wishes to go. The two of them work together as seamlessly as an old couple who don't need a GPS to find their ways around.

Yet even while I doubt whether the existential life of these wines can be deconstructed, I do think it's fair to ask whether Theresa could identify if and how her wines are different from those of her peers. Growers can squirm under a question like that, but Theresa approached it head-on. , *"I don't want to divert with wine making techniques, I don't want to produce overloaded fruit bombs... I don't*

want the wines to be everybody's darlings; we try to produce wines with a character and a life line..." and this answer went part of the way. I asked her a bunch of other questions about basic cellar practices, and her answers were as I hoped—basically, it depends. That's always the best answer.

I found the wines to be uniformly soulful, whether I liked them a little or a lot. I felt I was in the presence of wines with beating hearts, not merely wines with "superb" flavors.

Three families of wine emerge from the estate: Pinot Noirs from in and around

Rüdesheim, Rieslings from Rüdesheim, and most compelling for me, Rieslings from Rauenthal, from a *monopole* holding called Nonnenberg. This commune can give the most heart-rending Rheingau wines of all, and has suffered more than anywhere else in the region from underachieving among its landowners. A single taste of Breuer's wines—any of them—from this village and you'll know immediately; these are wines not only to respect, admire or appreciate—these are wines to wonder over. Wines of gratitude and contemplation.

2016 GB Spätburgunder Rosé

12/750ml | GGB-011 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

An earnest and vinous rosé; in weight it's part way to a red wine (though the color is pale); it's very dry and stately, rose-hips; rosé for people who normally dislike rosé for being too "fruity," and it is emphatically a *year-round wine*.

2015 GB Spätburgunder "Rouge"

12/750ml | GGB-012

A compact, ripe, almost mineral PN, whose tannin oscillates between gravel and smoothness. It's on the earthy side, it's not a *charmeur*, but it's honest and full of character. Like a mushroom sauté, with buckwheat and bone broth. Many German Pinot Noirs can seem to overreach, but this one is as concentrated as need be and no more, and while it's tasty as all get out, it isn't seductive

2015 GB "Charm" Rheingau Riesling

12/750ml | GGB-013 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

You will perhaps notice two things. One, that the wines are all from last-year's vintage, which is deliberate, because they don't believe in hurrying them. Two, that the word "Troocken" doesn't appear, because it's a box, and these wines aren't made to fit within boxes. Fermentations go as far as they go, and most of them go dry, but this grower values organic flexibility above all.

"Charm" seems to designate a fragrant wine that's at least not adamantly dry, and so the '15 phenolics come as a bit of a surprise, yet the fragrances lean toward mystics and orchids, with a walnutty nuance recalling wines from Hallgartener Jungfer. It's dry but balanced and juicy, suave and allusive. Like all these Rieslings, it should be served cellar temp, not over-chilled.

2015 Rüdesheim Estate Riesling

12/750ml | GGB-008 | **SOS : ?** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is a *mélange* from all sites except the Berg, and it's soulful yet heartily chewy; avuncular and woodsy, not soft but *gentle*, a companionable and even comforting wine. I'd even call it "healing." It's really hard to think of it as an "object with flavors," because it feels like such a friend.

2015 Rauenthal Estate Riesling

12/750ml | GGB-009

You need patience as you plow through some reduction aromas. But then—*then!* Brilliant, silvery, exotic and mineral; the finish is more an atmosphere than a taste. But if you insist, there's some yellow fruit, some purple flowers, some cool aloe, and some fine terroir.



2015 Nonnenberg Rauenthal Riesling

+ +

6/750ml | GGB-014

Last June at our Chicago DI tasting I made a beeline for Breuer's wines, eager to taste them again because of the rather cursory encounter I'd had with them at the estate. The room was noisy, and I had to be alert not to miss greeting anyone who might otherwise feel I had "snubbed" them. So my attention was fractured. Yet the moment I tasted this wine (vintages 2013-14) I felt the room fall away, felt the entire world fall away. I love that moment—*there is something you need to hear*—but it's inconvenient when it shows up with a hundred customers at my elbow.

Then I got to drink the 2012 last Fall in Italy, alongside a '12 Riesling from Alzinger (Höhereck if memory serves) and that was calmer. Then it grew clear, these wines were kin.

Rauenthal is what I'd call a paranormal terroir, like Steiner Hund or Hermannshöhle, druidic and erogenous. This wine has the most searching aromas, not scents so much as ethers. It's a wine of urgings, not "statements;" minerality not expressed as dust or powder but as a single huge stone with a thousand flecks and seams, as if it contained fossils of vineyard flowers. I doubt I've tasted another Riesling quite like it. It's like an incense of minerals; not "salt" but some primeval salinity. I sat there absorbed and interior. It felt like love at its most relaxed.

2015 Berg Schlossberg Rüdesheim Riesling

+

6/750ml | GGB-015

Slate and dough and walnuts and leaves; something savory from the cask and bready as though it had exhaled a sweet raw dough; it's more tense than the Rauenthaler but still not at all anxious, and the first explicit mineral notes appear in the very dry finish.

MITTEL RheIN



The Rhine valley between Bingen and Koblenz is a UNESCO World Heritage Zone, and if you're a tourist "doing" Germany you're bound to see it. Yet for all the visitors it receives, it's become rather sleepy as a wine region.

That's actually due to the tourism, because the taverns and steamship lines drove the prices down to the point the grower couldn't make a living in such steep land. Marginal vineyards were abandoned—and not only marginal vineyards. But there's signs it may have bottomed out, as Weingart told me the vineyard acreage had actually increased of late.

It's a wide sort of gorge the river cuts between the Taunus hills on its right bank and the Hunsrück hills on its left. There are riverfront vineyards and others snaking off into lateral valleys heading for the hills. Soils run to slate and quartzite in general, and the wines taste like fuller-bodied Mosels. There are very few "names" here, and the ones that do exist need to charge prices commensurate with their costs, which are quite high in the perpendicular land. But I'm glad I went, because otherwise I'd never have met my hero—about whom you're about to read...

WEINGART



REGION / SUB REGION

Mittelrhein / Spay

VINEYARD AREA

4.3 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay
(devonian slate) ;
Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg
(devonian slate with
small amounts of loess) ;
Bopparder Hamm Engelstein
(loess with variable contents of
lime, slate and volcanic ashes)

GRAPE VARIETIES

93% Riesling
5% Spätburgunder
2% Grauburgunder

We're a couple of salmons, him and me; we never met a stream we wouldn't try to swim up, against every sensible current. Florian's little revolution takes two forms. One, he's resisting the urge to grow the estate, and wants in fact to shrink it down to about 4 hectares (10 acres) because then he can do much of the vineyard work himself. Not for him, the task of being "winery sales manager," schlepping hither and yon to this fair and that, hawking his wares. Nor is he eager to be an "estate administrator" giving people orders to do things he'd prefer to do himself. He is, in his unassuming way, enacting an example of the world he wants to live in. I love this.

Construction on a new winery and cellar has been expensive and frustrating, but I think he's far enough in to persevere. He's planted fruit trees in some old terraces in Spay. The guy even has llamas. He's also a fan of the cadaster names and will start using them next year. This will probably give him the longest wine-names in the world, which I just know you're looking forward to.

Though Florian is markedly successful with dry wines, he didn't make very many in 2016, because that's just how those fermentations proceeded. This blessed man wants only to be truthful to his wines, which can create inconveniences for him and me, but which I am happy to support regardless. Here's Florian on the subject of long names: "I received a sub-site "appellation" (sort of) for the Bopparder Hamm Engelstein which is called "Am Weissen

Wacke" because of the large Quartz boulders found there. I plan to use it together with the site name. Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Am Weissen Wacke. I know it is something like Polterdorfer Rüberberger Domherrenberg but still—it has a Story. Since both Katasterlagen (that is actually the thing that was eliminated by the wine law of 1970) contain slate and loess soils (and mixtures of both partly combined with varying amounts of volcanic ashes) we should plan for further sub-sub-appellations and sub-sub-sub-appellations..." Look, I get it: the names are long, the wines aren't cheap, they're off-the-track, and they slip-slide around. The problem is, for me, they are superb, and I'm blown away by Florian's integrity, idealism and by the example he's setting on how to live a good life. Finally, please bear in mind, some of these steep slopes have a layer of loess atop the slate, and the wines can seem to mimic the rich tropicality of Pfalz wine. They actually are seductive, like Pfalz wines with a firm "northern" spine.

I'm well aware it is somewhat self-indulgent and Quixotic to continue to offer these wines, but I always will, because I find Florian to be remarkably thoughtful and independent and I also love his wine. I don't *mind* not knowing what I'll find when I go to taste. I don't *need* his wines (or anyone else's) to be predictable. I'm kind of relieved that he resists producing "salable items." His wines are imbued with his gorgeous stubborn soul, aside from which they are bloody *delicious*.

2015 Spätburgunder Spay In Der Zech

12/750ml | GAW-138 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

There's only one PN, so don't fret if you see words on the label that aren't in this title.

This is the most original German PN of my acquaintance, and only Herr Ziereisen's great Baden wines have ever given me a similar feeling: *THIS is something you don't see every day*. Aromas go to sweet violet and blackberry; the palate is salty with a nuance of wild lavender; it's markedly pure and long, stylish and delicious. Unchaptalized.

2016 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Kabinett Trocken

12/750ml | GAW-134

Lot # 1 was the fruitier of two and the more refined in texture. This can be served quite cold (we taste at room temp); it shows typical plum blossom and carob notes; it's not animated but nor is it sedate, it's somewhere in between, loads of juju but somewhat discreet.

2016 Mittelrhein (MR) Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GAW-135 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Florian buys grapes from down near Bacharach to supplement his own, and to offer a radically different sort of wine; the bought fruit gives tensile zippy wines whereas Boppard offers a more southerly generosity. This wine includes some of Florian's Engelstein Feinherb (Spät) to mitigate the higher acidity of the Bacharach juice, and the result is superb. Almost vehemently aromatic—wisteria and mirabelles—and the palate is racy and vividly herbal, aloe vera and linden blossom, all into a snappy tasty finale. Florian's soul is redolent here.

+

2016 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

12/750ml | GAW-136 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

For Weingart "Halbtrocken" is drier than Feinherb, and this wine is taut and racy; sweet hay aromas suggest loess (though this site is almost entirely slatey), and the palate is zingy with a slatey twang of sassafras and *perfect* balance; delineated and delicious and with firmly rendered charm.

+

2016 "Anarchie" Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GAW-137 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Florian uses "anarchy" for wines that slip away from the ideas he had for them, but which find a balance of their own. Some wines don't *want* to go to college!

It smells like what pound-cake would smell like if minerals were added and it was served with an aloe vera sorbet. It smells like the heart of Spring, basically. I'm surprised by the tiny jabs of mineral. It's a charming, firm, classy Riesling loaded with personality.

+

MOSEL

Back before they built the tunnel under Bernkastel, the old road brought you to an abrupt and jaw-dropping view of the steep slopes. You descended down through the slatey woods, streams and trees and the curvy road, and then wham, it hit you: perpendicular goddamn vineyards, rows of vertical stakes in a straight line up unbelievably to the sky.

One year I drove a few colleagues to the Mosel, on a low spitty sort of gloomy November evening, and a guy who'd never indicated an emotional bone in his body couldn't stop exclaiming. It's like a religious experience.

This love, though, is not unclouded. The Mosel is a narrow valley with a highly cohesive culture, which sometimes isn't pretty. In a couple days we heard about a vintner who'd had a break-in in his cellar, in which a cask of precious wine was vandalized. Narrow, spiteful, vindictive, all the things that grow when the air isn't as fresh as it might be; the shadow-side of the admirable cohesion.

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

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

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

But two critical things have changed. First, the young person does not wish to work in obscurity. His only chance to prosper lies in spreading the word quickly and widely. So he sends his samples to all the necessary publications. In theory, his wines are noteworthy, he makes his name, he places himself on the scene, and customers ensue. This means a guy like

me just isn't going to make the kinds of "discoveries" which were so easy fifteen years ago. If a producer is good, he's not waiting around hoping to be discovered; he's aggressively marketing himself.

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

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

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

Here's something I'll bet only a few of you knew. There are very likely some *half-million* ungrafted vines on the Mosel, about 10% of the total. The proportion is shrinking, as the law stipulates you must plant grafted vines whenever you re-plant. Meanwhile, I know you're into ungrafted vines and willing to pay a premium for their wines, if the wines are French or Spanish or Italian. Right? Yet a few pages hence I will offer you a wine from vines planted in **1896** which costs the consumer some \$25, and sorry but y'all aren't clamoring the way you might be.

It's just another example of un-told stories emerging from Germany, because no one examines the place as carefully as they do other places they actually care about. In the interim this is a good thing for the few and proud partisans of Mosel Riesling, because we can own it for a pittance. But is it sustainable?

SELBACH-OSTER



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Zeltingen

VINEYARD AREA

21 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

13,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Zeltinger Himmelreich,
Schlossberg and Sonnenuhr
(*blue devonian slate*) ;
Wehlener Sonnenuhr
(*blue devonian slate*) ;
Graacher Himmelreich
and Domprobst
(*blue devonian slate with loam*) ;
Bernkasteler Badstube
(*blue devonian slate*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

98.5% Riesling
1.5% Pinot Blanc

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

Selbach's are certainly in a class by themselves in this portfolio—Merkelbach was perhaps equally profound but they have fewer than two hectares, whereas Selbach has 21—and I wonder whether anyone else on the Mosel is quite in this league. This isn't just partisanship. There are obviously a great many stellar Mosel wines from producers I don't represent (that goes without saying) but when I taste most of them I find them to excel in brilliance and explicit complexity, which of course are wonderful! Selbach's wines, though, seem more inferential, in some ways quieter; they seem to be looking for truths deeper than the sensual and visible. This doesn't mean they are more "honest" than other wines. It means they are perhaps *true*, more anchored in depth of foundation, and less eager to show us their curlicues and gables and gargoyles.

They are certainly drier and richer than many of their peers' wines. This includes growers whom I *do* work with. This can make them seem sedate, but that is a superficial reading. It takes more than a cursory glance to appreciate the fullness, depth, balance and usefulness of

Johannes' wines, but when you glean it you'll be tied into Mosel Riesling in a rare and numinous bond.

The amount of guidance needed to steer some fifty wines in a common direction, and the finesse of understanding needed to confer a consistent character on them, these are the attributes of a virtuoso. I shouldn't be amazed anymore; after all, Johannes had great vintages in '05, '07, '12 and '14, but each time I am somehow erased and when the wines compound into a shining sequence of warmly satisfying loveliness, I find a great chord is sounding, and in 35 years of drinking wine this has very seldom happened.

The offering only *seems* large. In fact I culled relentlessly. What remained were the wines I had the hugest crush on. Slobbering, useless, doomed like all the crushes I ever had, but these wines actually do love you back. And I feel a strong and durable faith that when you get tired of wines that put on a big show for you, you will find your way to these and discover a hunger you didn't know you had, and how it is fed.

DRY WINES, MOSTLY RIESLINGS

2016 Pinot Blanc Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-554

This is being used by a restaurant group (with impeccable taste!) and for a while Johannes was worried we'd gobble up the supply and leave the group gasping and flopping on the beach. Nah, I'm only a little greedy.

The '16 is a beauty, toasty and mineral, a super vintage for a wine with some *qui* behind it. It's steep-slope grown and made in discreet wood, so you get "recognizable" PB flavor but with the mineral energy of slate. There's a long finish of really *clean* shrimp-stock, and the salty mid palate suggests just-caught monkfish.

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-553 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Nothing "basic" about this basic wine; it is shockingly good. "The best we've made so far," says Johannes, perhaps because it's in fact 100% Zeltinger Himmelreich, so it has character, a green spicy spine and all kinds of juicy jazz.

2016 Zeltinger Riesling Kabinett Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-555

Wonderfully balsamy, spicy, leesy-creamy texture; another lesson in How-It-Should-Be-Done; herbal and exotic enough to pass as Schlossberg.

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-557 | SOS:1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Stern and salty, peachy and beaming; a virtually perfect dry Mosel. Flecks of mineral like a shattered jewel; elegant, a sighing kind of fruity dryness you sink back into like a comfy sofa. Bravo! I liked this even better than a "GG" type cuvée that was effulgent with its own grand dignity, but not as tasty.

+

RIESLINGS WITH TEENSY SWEETNESS, INCLUDING BUBBLES

2014 Selbach-Oster Riesling Brut

12/750ml | GSO-547

I bought all 50 cases he could spare me, but that's all there'll be.

I bring Johannes a bunch of Champagne every year, as we drive from Champagne directly to the Mosel, but we drank this fizz along with a pedigreed NV from a fine producer in great terroir, and the Champagne wasn't this good.

I said something similar last year. This '14 is like that stunning 2013, but richer. If you know the wines of Lancelot-Pienne in Cramant you'd find Selbach's to be their spirit-kin, the sweet yeasitiness and banana-smoothie fruitiness. This wine is charming and classy and has all the finesse of good BdB, but with slate instead of chalk.

++

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GSO-558

A wonderful vintage for this; on the dry side and balsamy, an *interesting* wine with plummy salty length, and another over-delivering wine.

2016 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

12/750ml | GSO-551 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Entirely superb! 100% *sponti*, combo of Fuder and stainless steel; the outstanding mid-palate offers a salty-soft cushion for the typical tarragon sting and the almost *Urgestein* pepper and nettle—but it's also mannerly, precisely rich enough, and really alive.

+

2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben

(+)

12/750ml | GSO-559

One of a pair of ancient-vines cuvées entirely *sponti* and old-school. This has crunch and a deep bready herbaciousness; even for 2016 it's markedly salty; high-toned and spicy; a jabbing forceful wine.

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese "Uralte Reben"

(+ +)

12/750ml | GSO-560

Many vines well in excess of 100 years old in this always-amazing bottling. Compared to the Domprobst this is more plush and concentrated, more spherical, oblong; a rich *demi-glace*, showing '16's nettle and verbenas; it's not really even "depth" we're talking about any more, but rather *silences*, pauses...the diver on the board, legs bent, about to leap into the sudden dancing air.

"SWEET" WINES THAT AREN'T VERY SWEET

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSO-561 | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett

12/375ml | GSO-561H | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Loads of detailed texture this year, and wonderfully long. The Zeltinger Himmelreich shows in the leafy-green apple-herbal snap; *gyokoru* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gyokuro>) and verbenas, zippy and spicy.

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

+ +

12/750ml | GSO-561 | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This was a serious finalist for wine of the vintage. It's rich and resplendent and entirely dazzling, with all the greatness of this supernal vineyard in a "miniature" portrait. Don't think of missing this!

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GSO-562 | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese

+

12/375ml | GSO-562H | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Starts out murmur and juicy and then surges forward with a vivid lashing of green. It's in another league in '16.

2016 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GSO-564 | SOS: 2 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Often this is the outlier among the Späts, and it is again in '16. Classic flint and kirsch, with a minty brilliance. Insanely delicious. Silex Riesling! This is stainless steel and with brightness to shrink your pupils.

2016 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GSO-565

Was there ever a more elegantly textured yet briskly animated vintage of this ever-great wine? The yummy herbal complexity is encompassing and addictive.

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GSO-566

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese 1-star

+ + +

12/750ml | GSO-567

The basic Spät has a form, it's stunningly tasty; it has outline, narrative, it's in three classic acts; you can repeat what it says, who the hero is, and how he beats the bad guy. Then the 1-star comes, and it envelopes you as if it were an ambience or an entire environment; you can't say what the story was because you're *inside* it, a wall of gauze you can see through but not swim through. It entails the sublime now. You use the first wine, but the second wine uses you.

2016 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese 1-star

+ + +

12/750ml | GSO-568 | SOS:2

The Edenic perfection of Schlossberg and an entirely magnificent yet *vinous* Auslese. It's both absurdly elegant and shapely and strong but also "drinky," nor does it come off as sweet. Instead it feels culminated; it got to sing with its whole, full voice.

THE 3 EN-BLOC MASTERPIECES (introduced by Johannes)

"The soil in all three is obviously blue Devonian slate though **Rotlay** has the rockiest, shallowest and therefore driest soil as can be seen by the massive cliffs that hang over the vineyard and partially to its side. Rotlay also benefits the most from the wide water surface of the Mosel, especially since the river is dammed some 500 meters downstream from Rotlay and provides a mirror effect for the sunshine back into the slope, plus some humidity from morning dew, which helps induce botrytis during autumn.

Schmitt is almost as steep at Rotlay, and also has a perfect southern exposure, but a deeper subsoil of crumbly, broken slate mixed with organic matter and loam. The vineyard is farther back from the Mosel and gets less of the river's cooling effect. Instead the warmth radiated from the village houses and church beneath warm the vineyard (a privileged situation akin to that of Bernkasteler Doctor.)

Anrecht, while equally steep and also on a perfect southern angle, has the deepest subsoil of broken slate mixed with organic matter (humus) and loam. It is further away from river and village compared to Rotlay and Schmitt, hence a tad cooler but nonetheless excellent.

What I mean to translate with a mix of organic matter and loam is the German word "Feinerde" which literally translates into "fine earth" and that is a very valuable finely crumbled soil that combines the ability to warm up quickly, lets roots penetrate quickly and has good water storage capacity. In other words, "Feinerde" is a highly desirable component of the soil structure, especially if you have rocky soils."

Terry here again. These wines harken back to an earlier sensibility of waiting until the last possible moment and then picking the entire vineyard. You discarded the dubious fruit at picking, or you'd already done so in a "negative" harvest, if you had the means and the people. Later it was in vogue to make multiple passes through the vineyard, selecting the bunches or grapes you wanted for a wine you wished to make. It gave you certain bragging rights. But you'd pivoted away from pure terroir; you'd picked out the parts of terroir you wanted, but the old ones assumed that terroir resided in the *entire vineyard* and not in the chocolate chips you plucked from the cookie. Picking *en-bloc* you get a mix of green berries, just-ripe berries, ripe and overripe berries and even a few botrytis berries. You get the WHOLE THING. And then you learn to know what that thing is.

Selbachs identified their best parcels for what was at first an experiment – in 2003 with the Schmitt (in Schlossberg)—and which has continued and grown to the three wines you see below. I find this all very moving, because what I see in it is a search for authenticity—to actually do what so many others only pay lip service to doing.

(As an aside, this mentality can also be seen at Merkelbach, all of whose wines are picked en-bloc, because they're old school and that's just how it's done. There are others also.)

2016 Riesling Anrecht

+ +

6/750ml | GSO-569

2016 Riesling Schmitt

+ + +

6/750ml | GSO-570

2016 Riesling Rotlay

+

6/750ml | GSO-571

Anrecht is a gorgeous beast, not very sweet, even-keeled and deep but judicious even while it osmoses its vetiver oleander charge. My two plusses don't convey how "drinky" it is. It's ecstatic, like those still-frame shots of the leaping dog who just caught the Frisbee. *Schmitt* is supernal, for the pure, clear and divine psalm to its essential terroir. Sweets and salts in perfect poise; the eye-lock of the dancers in the instant before the music starts. Carrot, fennel, starch-salt like pasta water, all of that, yes, but the truth lies in the things you can't describe. *Rotlay* is more botrytis-y and primordial, ancient; earthy and smoldering and warm.

2016 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein

+ + +

12/375ml | GSO-572H

Unsurprisingly—perfect Eiswein.

J&H SELBACH REGIONALS

Tasting these, I witnessed the most stirring gesture of integrity I'd seen in many years.

These are commodity wines. For coastal hipsters they mean almost nothing, but vestiges of this market persist and are important. I can prove it in two words: *Schmitt Söhne*. This firm ships more wine to the States than any other, and nearly everything they ship is bulk commodity plonk. In earlier times they'd have borne labels like "Piesporter (this) and Bernkasteler (that)" whereas now they've got some German person's idea of a colorful "contemporary" name like Koala Nipple-Clamps or Skid Mark Pink, but it's the same bulk juice just prettied up for the hep young wine purchaser.

The small négociant firm of J&H Selbach are minor players in this market. Because they're small, they're more sensitive to blips in the cost of grapes or juice, but they're also able (and willing) to pay a hands-on attention that's otherwise unheard of. For example, nearly 100% of their grape supply is under contract with growers they know and trust, and they're making the wines with more lees contact

and with spontaneous fermentation. And so I wanted to taste the wines this year with the same attention I give to the wines I take "seriously," just to be sure they wouldn't tarnish my own hippitude.

Friend, they do honor to me, to you, and to Johannes, because taking this kind of care over these kinds of wines does not win you medals. It's just the things you do that no one sees, the manifold choices you decide to make with care and integrity because it's who you are. Every single one of these wines is sophisticated and has vinosity and most important, moderate residual sugar for the genre.

Good as they all are, the firsts-among-equals are the Piesporter Michelsberg, the "Fish-Label" Trocken and the "Incline." Which warrants a small explication.

Just know but don't be concerned with those old "generic" names that looked like actual vineyards but weren't. Thank the wise elders who wrote the 1971 wine law for this abomination. Thus a wine called "Zeller Schwarze Katz" is in effect bulk wine grown vaguely in the area of Zell. Same with "Bernkasteler" or

"Piesporter." The big companies often use Müller-Thurgau for this category—Selbach uses only Riesling.

Because no one has a monopoly over these names, it ends up being a race to the bottom who flogs the stuff at the lowest price. (We are not, by the way, those guys.) This is why people want to create their own "Brands" and why these have proliferated. In fact when Selbach introduced their "Fish-Label" I felt a certain dismay; the whole critter label thing was getting wearisome, and I thought it was beneath their dignity. Alas, the wines are very good, and if you buy them you'll receive a wine that's better than even decent-to-good estate wine.

A wine like the "Incline" is a perfect wedding reception wine if most of the guests aren't "wine people." It's tasty, doesn't cost a lot, it's easy-drinking, and someone somewhere will probably have cause to think This wine is unusually good; I wonder what it is. Why should those people drink crummy plonk? Show me what you give to your least pretentious customer, and I'll show you your integrity.

2016 J&H Selbach Saar Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSR-765 | SOS:0 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

I actually like the reticent aroma, in contrast to the sometimes-gushing '16s. As always this wine vibrates with tension; grapefruity tang and you know, what other grape can possibly do this? Stand on the tightrope, trembling?

2016 J&H Selbach Saar Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GSR-758

Wry and green-green-green, with green tea, hyssop, and so animated it feels hyperactive, like the corn when it's popping like a madman.

+

MEULENHOF / ERBEN JUSTEN EHLEN



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Erden

VINEYARD AREA

7 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,200 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Erdener Treppchen and Prälat
(devonian slate with Rotliegend) ;
Wehlener Sonnenuhr
(devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

85% Riesling
10% Rivaner
5% Kerner

Once again, it's not "mew-len-hoff" but MOY-LEN-HOFE. Remember the mnemonic, if it's "EU" the only response is OY.

I think the 2015s got away from Justen somewhat, or at any rate they got away from me, because a few of them had reduction notes after bottling. When I went back to my original notes I saw I'd given some wines the benefit of the doubt. And so I approached the '16s with some wariness, firm and resolved: no more benefits-of-doubts.

The wines were superb, almost without exception, and anything about which I had *any* hesitation was omitted from this offering, including a "core-list" wine we normally need to include.

When Justen's at his best, the wines are generous and analogue, yet they are true-blue Mosel wines in a slightly old-style dialect. And they offer truly outstanding value. The loyal following they attracted has been somewhat frayed by a sequence of difficult vintages—none of them through any fault of the estate. (You can't control hailstorms or rampant invasions of untimely botrytises.) Old friends are encouraged to come back. Young customers who don't know the wines are encouraged to explore them. A healthy Meulenhof making consistently classical and delicious Mosel wines is a welcome friend in my world.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GJU-158 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Immediately this was the best (i.e., the most normal and typical) Justen wine in several years; clean, slatey and rusky; I wrote it was “like a smoothie from sweet carrots and anise” and felt quite silly writing “carrot” as a cognate, but one of my colleagues said “I can’t believe I’m tasting carrots in this wine,” and I felt less silly. There’s a tasty lick of slate and a green edge (tarragon, woodruff) to an animated and a seriously tasty wine, full of yummy angles and corners.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett Alte Reben

+

12/750ml | GJU-159 | **SOS : 1** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Lots of people have *Alte Rebens* in the Mittelmosel, but here in Erden it signifies something more. When the commune had Flurbereinigung some 15-20 years ago, the upstream sections of Treppchen among the cliffs were physically impossible to restructure, and so we have young-ish vines from the “normal” steep slopes from the bridge downstream, and very old ungrafted vines from the redder soil in the more rugged terrain. The difference is manifest and vivid.

This is the most masculine Kabinett I ever tasted from Justen, an almost chewy blast of terroir; bergamot and cherry blossom; slices of slate and a whomp of boulders; key lime and maple-glazed ham; the overall effect is *Feinherb* and the finish is slate and sassafrass. This is close to thrilling.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #16

12/750ml | GJU-160

The first of what are certainly too many Spätlesen, but the wine lover won this little skirmish against the “responsible wine professional,” hee-hee-hee. This was another best-in-years Justen wine, with an enticing vein of hyssop and lemon-grass; wonderfully firm and zingy and washing into a minty finish, like slate embedded in the flesh of a Macoun apple. None too sweet.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben

+

12/750ml | GJU-161 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The most brazenly *sponti* wine I remember from here; it’s a big, fine lovely being that tastes like a Loewen wine. A powerhouse emphasizing carob, mint, slate and Serrano ham. The finish is a mass of naked slate and fennel with its frond. The empty glass smells like *quetsch*. Mosel with an old soul.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #7

+

12/750ml | GJU-163 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

I looked, in vain, for a reason—any reason—to leave this behind. Not possible! Yes it’s one too many Späts. Yet it’s such a regal, perfect shining Mosel Riesling, a true classic. Restrained yet numinous, it has such a pulsing glowing charge it doesn’t need to shout. Elegant and rich, with balanced, brilliant acidity. Big, graceful, indelible.

2016 Erdener Prälat Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GJU-162 | **SOS : 3**

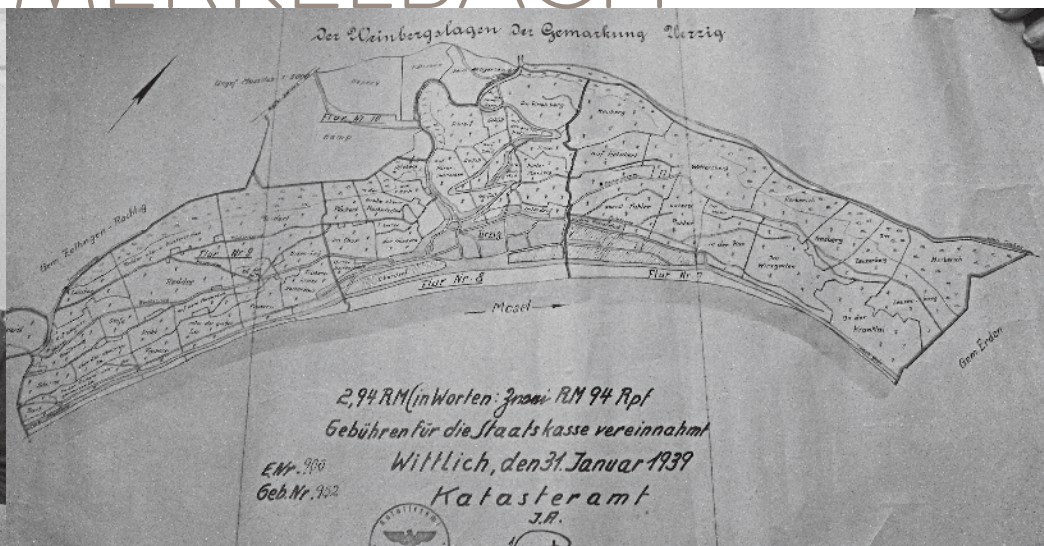
You go to Treppchen for slate and to Prälat for *fruit*. Yet unlike many Prälates, this one doesn’t sprawl; it pains within the frame but splashes a hundred colors into the picture. Riotously floral and relentlessly vivid.

2016 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese

12/750ml | GJU-164

Firm, lively and classy, all the ingredients for a classic Mosel Auslese that’s not very sweet. Indeed the Prälat “reads” sweeter. Classic Wehlen “blue” slate, quince. Vigorous and whippy; Valerie Masten called it a “gateway drug to Auslese.” (Girl has some wicked chops for verbiage...) This is not a baby liqueur—this is WINE.

ALFRED MERKELBACH



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Ürzig

VINEYARD AREA

1.9 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

1,700 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Ürziger Würzgarten
(blue devonian slate);
Erdener Treppchen
(blue devonian slate);
Kinheimer Rosenberg
(blue devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

Sigrid Selbach came with us for this visit, and when we were done she said to the Brothers, "It's very simple; Terry would like them all."

"All of them?" Aldred asked with some dismay.

"All of them," we both replied.

"Even the Halbtrocken?" he peeped plaintively.

"Even that," I said. "You can't wiggle free. All you can do is to stop making such excellent wines," I added, grinning fiendishly.

2016 is a Platonic perfection of a Merkelbach vintage. Both 2010 and 2015 were outsized, extravagant and monumental vintages here, and I most definitely don't disavow them, but '16 is a truly great *normal* vintage. I have never been so happy when I finished a tasting. Great vintages here are like *VAPING* Mosel Riesling.

Yet it's a suggestive kind of greatness, partly because it's become so rare in a world in which people want their wines to "make an impression." And partly because we don't really know what to do when we're faced with the *ur* of a thing. The origin point, the purity that's not only unspoiled, it's never been trammelled at all. Merkelbach's wines are like the world before anyone wrote poems about it.

This is the estate, and these are the people, by whom I am most moved, who touch me most deeply, and whom I am proudest to represent. They live deep inside my heart.

Alfred is the older brother. He's 82. Rolf had just had his 79th birthday this year. The brothers would sell their estate, rather than let it go to probate, or whatever

the German equivalent is for probate. But there are two problems. One, they want to keep working, and the new owner would understandably want to install his "team." Two, they can't establish a price, because they don't need money. This isn't because they're so honking wealthy, but because they live simple lives. Until I started buying wines in-bottle, they sold most of their production in cask. These days they make more, but don't appear to spend it.

Merkelbachs have become conspicuous of late, as various media have been able to package them as "The Last of a Bygone Age." This is superficially true. The nostalgia we're made to feel is also superficial. But I don't despise these things; they just stop where they ought to keep going.

In fact I seem to have played a small role in making them "famous," as they're now being sought-after by merchants who knew nothing about them for the last thirty years. When I arrived I learned of an inquiry from a retailer in Köln, who wrote for an appointment to come and taste the new vintage in cask. "You can taste," he was told when he arrived, "But we can't offer you anything until Terry's made his selections." I am touched by their old-school loyalty. Yet every time they thank me for the many years of doing business and the comfort it has brought them, I feel—truly—that I've received more than I gave, or could ever give. And not only the wines.

Are they slowing down? Yes and no. They reduced the size of the estate, by releasing their Erden vineyards, which had been leased, so now it's just Uerzig

and Kinheim. They still do the vineyard work themselves, and wish to continue.

These 16s are not merely pared-away; they seem to even pare away their pared-

away-ness, so that what remains is a kind of delicious divinity. Taste them and know why the Buddha is smiling. If you had a tail it would wag. You float between giddy

rapture and still-framed wonder. It won't be too many more years now, so please, join me, join *them*, and let's rejoice at the honor and the beauty of the world.

2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken (fuder 7)

12/750ml | GME-236 | SOS : 0

Can't resist—a dry Merkelbach that works! Wonderful, gravelly, detailed, a mosaic of sassafrass and slate; balanced and savory and fibrous; lithe and slim but long and transparent.

2016 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GME-236

The only Kabinett this year. It's perfect. Nothing else needs to be said. Slate-slate-slate-slate-apple-slate-slate-slate. Salty too, and sweeter than usual, until the final drying blast of slate.

2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (fuder 5)

12/750ml | GME-237 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

+ +

An incredible portrait of Uerzig slate, in a salty kiwi-wash that defines the very soul of the being. The parcel is called *Vor das Pichter*, and everything about slate and Riesling seems to quiver and buzz.

2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (fuder 6)

12/750ml | GME-238

+ +

A sweeter fragrance is entirely euphoric. Out of words again. More fruit here. Salty-slatey-limey. Gorgeously piquant on the finish, like kiwis in a slate quarry that explodes into an all-permeating dust.

Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (fuder 8)

12/750ml | GME-239

+

This is precisely the aroma commonly ascribed to Würzgarten, and that we also see in Christoffel. It's slimmer and spicier now; the mineral is not so fulminant; the funky iris florals wouldn't shock you to find at Nigl. It's more refined than its brother fuders; the acidity shows more (but is hardly blatant) and it's a bit more vampy.

2016 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese (fuder 1)

12/750ml | GME-241

+

The Mosel tabula rasa. I thought of my friend Karen MacNeil and the classes she teaches, and beamed a bat-signal to her: KM! You need only one wine to show *Mosel* to your students, and this is it.

2016 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese (fuder 2)

12/750ml | GME-242 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

+

This is cooler, even slatier, finer now—this is classy Riesling and not just “for Kinheim.” The purest apple! Swollen slate is almost smoky on the finish.

2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese *Urglück*

12/750ml | GME 240

+ + (+)

This could be the greatest Merkelbach wine ever, from a “normal” vintage. A searching, almost unfathomable fragrance does not prepare you for the miraculous palate; fruit and botrytis recall the 2005 but this is slinkier and more incisive, more resinous and herbal and even tropical; tender and powerful.



2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese (fuder 11)

12/750ml | GME-243

+

Suddenly exotic, a parfait of black cherry and gold raspberries; the texture is creamier but the wine's not patently sweeter, it's just an alternate profile driven less by slate per se and more by fruit compote.

2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese (fuder 10)

12/750ml | GME-244

++

Do you know those Autumn strawberries, the *mara de bois*? This wine smells exactly like those little sweeties, at least until the kiwi and licorice rushes in, and the slate and lime blossom, or rather something like a floating pollen of lime blossom. The wine isn't riven with acidity but the flavors are like an agglomeration of spores that create a flavor layer that quilts the palate.

A SMALL CLOSING NOTE

The Brothers brought out a lovely 1985 Auslese to conclude our work with. '85 was the first vintage I tasted in total from cask, back in 1986—so 31 years ago. The wine is still “green” and with vigorous acidity that’s aged into an almost gooseberried grip. It’s in far better shape than I am, though I too might be preternaturally youthful if I could have stayed in one place lying down for three decades...

JOH . JOS . CHRISTOFFEL



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Urzig

VINEYARD AREA

4 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,200 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Ürziger Würzgarten

(red slate) ;

Erdener Treppchen

(blue slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

It's hardly surprising to taste another finely etched, crystalline and transparent vintage at Christoffel. The wines are super-fine, glossy and full of class. I confess I find it a little unnerving how every vintage seems to be like this, but when I hear myself thus observe I feel a little churlish, and certainly ungrateful. I suspect it takes a decade or longer for the wines to emerge from this youthful uniformity, and the 2002s and 2004s I'm drinking at home are definitely distinct from each other and both are stellar.

This year we had both bottled wines and cask samples. Robert Eymael has always hesitated to show cask samples ("I want you taste exactly the wine you will receive," he said, reasonably) and yet often they'd just been bottled and were showing very little at all.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GJC-232

Case in point; the wine is entirely correct but too bottle-sick to describe except to say it's properly walnuty, plummy and salty, with the calmness and flow of '16. Potentially lovely wine.

2015 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GJC-227

I liked the '16, and we'll move to it when this sells out—but today this is the better wine. It's simply more vinous and has plumper fruit (that's '15 for you) but still with its garrigue-y spice and a curious element of Zierfandler, radishes and spring-onions. A real tongue-dancer, with a slinky herbal farewell.

+

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GJC-234

In a good way, this is wholly what one expects; glossy, slinky, turned-out and glittering.

+

2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GJC-235

Ibid. But there's more tangible refinement and complexity here, and a more articulate dialogue among its flavors.

+

2015 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese Herzlay

12/750ml | GJC-230

This has come a long way since last year, and shows the degree to which these wines need to shed a kind of over-polished anonymity when first released. Now it's solid, walnuty and tastes like ginger snaps, and it seems to live an actual sensual life, not merely spun into a cotton-candy of fruit and slate.

+ (+)

WILLI SCHAEFFER



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Graach

VINEYARD AREA

4 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

2,900 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Graacher Himmelreich
(devonian slate) ;
Graacher Domprobst
(devonian slate) ;
Wehlener Sonnenuhr
(devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

I wonder whether Willi and Christoph would agree, that Schaefer wines are often at their best in next-to-best vintages. I'm thinking of 2002, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2011 (*especially*) and now these consistently gleaming '16s. I had found the 2015s rather mind-bending, and was somewhat bemused at the enormous praise they garnered, but I think it shows my diminished relish for ultra-dramatic acidity. There are wines my brain tells me are "sensational" but my body doesn't seem to thirst for. A lot of 2015s limned this distinction dramatically, and while I concur that Schaefer's 2015s are out of this world, I personally like the '16s even more. (And I part company with tasters who prefer more spiky visceral acids.)

This was another of those estates, tasted near the end, to which I brought a high level of expectation. I sensed that 2016 would bestow every possible beauty upon this family's wines, as indeed it did. Schaefer's wines are polished but not persnickety about it. Their refinement of texture leaves a space for the meditative in a year like '16, and they are as calm and numinous as consummated love. I further wonder whether the wines are best in years with above average yields. You'll have less frustration with cutbacks to your orders, as they'll be fewer and less severe. It sets me to wondering, again, whether we look at yields all wrong.

2016 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GWS-261

It shows the calm euphoria of my most beloved vintages at Schaefer, a long wave-form of energy, flow and “feminine” expressiveness; a glowing kind of wine, yet even in this soft kind light it is wonderfully articulate and detailed.

2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett

++

12/750ml | GWS-262

The apex of Domprobst Kab! Crisp, even snappy; pistachio, quince. *This* wine is (gorgeously!) twitchy and kinetic, yet it's still poised and showing its Buddha-face.

2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10

++

12/750ml | GWS-263 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

For a while I thought these “numbered” cask bottlings were parcel specific, but it isn't so; they are stylistic “types” whereby #10 (for example) is the crunchiest most mineral one, while #5 is the one with the noblest fruit; thus “#10” becomes a kind of brand-name for a certain type of wine.

This smelled like a roomful of hyacinths and one quince with attitude. Stones and salts and a vein of iron.

2016 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GWS-264

Really tart-apple at first, but now we have depth *and* relief and an energy directed toward grace and not just torque. Like a cold plishing stream with fragrant plants along its silvery banks. All these wines flow, some slowly and bubbling and others faster and hissing, but all of them clean and cool.

2016 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GWS-265

It's lighter than the Graachers (having to do with the siting of Schaefer's parcels there) but it's easy to underrate this wine. It's more ethereal, lemony and vaporous, like morning light on frost-covered trees, and it's as evanescent and exquisite as apple blossoms. Yes it's “lighter” but *look at how it tastes*.

2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5

++ (+)

12/750ml | GWS-266

Even in this lordly context this wine has a *remarkable* fragrance, like the apples of Paradise. This is where Schaefer and Dönnhoff seem to overlap in a sort of palimpsest, as if Kirschheck were draped over Domprobst like a transparent shawl—slate and wintergreen and lime blossom here, cherry blossom and balsam there.

2016 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Auslese #4

++

12/750ml | GWS-267

Actually seems sleeker and drier than the Spät #5, and for sure it's more agile and vertical, aerial and soaring. Entirely amazing fruit that seems to wash over yet not encompass you, and the internal saltiness is so enticing you want to lick it.

2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #11

++

12/750ml | GWS-269

2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #11

++

12/375ml | GWS-269H

Lyric slate in a gossamer melody that swells in intensity until it carries you along. It's the most zig-zaggy wine on the table, and it is my kind of Auslese, deeping the Späts without lapsing into a coma of botrytis.



2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14

12/750ml | GWS-271

+ (+)

2016 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14

12/375ml | GWS -271H

+ (+)

Now we get the slimmest little vein of malty botrytis along with the more vivid taste of dessicated berries and the concentration of old vines. But amazingly, you can taste the thread linking this back to the Kabinett. It's the first wine with flavors of peaches.

These are like wines you'd summon in a séance. And the spirit has a consoling message. Fido actually did go to a farm upstate!

A . J . ADAM



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Dhron

VINEYARD AREA

3.7 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

1,250 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Dhroner Hofberg
(*weathered devonian
slate with quartzite*) ;
Piesporter Goldtröpfchen
(*blue slate*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

A note on pronunciation. Should be simple, right? It's actually simpler than you think. It's exactly the way we pronounce "Adam" and not, as I often hear *ah-DAHM*. You can compromise and say *AH-dahm* if you like, but accent the first syllable please.

It was a quiet visit, because Mom and twins were away, and so Andreas and Barbara had a little peace, or would have if not for our slurping spitting invasion. And it was one of the few confounding visits I made to taste 2016s. The wines are excellent, no worries, but they're different than I expected to find. I thought they'd be rather gentle and flow-y but they were actually insistently salty and their acids were on display. Could be I saw them in a truculent moment, and I am less secure in these judgments than I am at other wineries. Something tells me I'll feel foolish when I taste them again in a few months, and they'll gleam and shine and I'll want to crawl in a hole.

The place is a true idyll, sitting along the reedy shushing *Dhronbach*, and I am poignantly aware it's a peace not easily won. Andreas started nearly from scratch,

was a hair away from packing it in on more than one occasion, and has prevailed by determination and sheer talent.

The man is a master of dry and almost dry Mosel Riesling. That is to say, a master at a genre that was barely tolerable until not very long ago. To do this, you have to have an excellent palate, plus the know-how to enact your vision. Mosel Trockens will never have the generous bodies and amenable acids of, say, Pfalz wines, and they have to locate a fullness and a mid-palate buoyancy that's not so often found. Johannes Selbach is the only other vintner I know who seems to have The Touch with dry Mosels. Indeed Adam's touch is so sure with those wines, it is striking how much sweetness he permits in his "sweet" wines, which can seem quite baroque alongside their dry siblings. Such wines certainly have their partisans, among whom would be a younger version of myself, but these days I have less relish for a lot of sweetness. It's a big ol' offering, but there was basically no dross. I swear I try to be selective, really I do.

2016 Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken

12/750ml | GAD-114

I thought the '15 was the most delicious and fascinating Rosé I'd ever offered—maybe ever tasted—and it could easily have been mistaken for a slate-grown Riesling if tasted blind. The '16 is less overtly slatey, but it's only 3 weeks in bottle (the worst possible time to taste) and what seems demure now may well be less innocuous when the beast awakens.

2016 Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GAD-115 | SOS : minus-1

All steel, just 10.5% alc (yay!) without chaptalization; dark slate and marjoram; it's good and juicy but still a wine for real dry-drinkers, albeit there's intricacy and balance in its particular frequency.

2016 Dhroner Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GAD-116

50-50 steel-cask; a fine classic '16, nice fluff of cask, and (yet) again what was brash and vulgar in the Zalto was creamier in the Riedel—simply nicer to drink. The wine has verve and zip but is still companionable.

2016 Hofberg Riesling Trocken

(+)

6/750ml | GAD-117

Serious *quetsch* and wild plum notes; fervently slatey and with ferrous nettle notes; crusty and masculine—whatever is the opposite of “supple,” this is it. With air a truly wild fruit arrives. It's serious stuff, but not dour.

2016 Goldtröpfchen Riesling Trocken

+ (+)

6/750ml | GAD-118 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

It's the first vintage where Piesport seems to have an edge over Dhron. “Seems” to! This wine is outstanding, and clearly so. Super-mineral; capaciousness and dignity, an intricate dialogue of fruit (and loads of it), classic “blue” flavors, strength in every direction, power flowing through its veins, unrelenting lushness in a matrix of firm, rocky power.

2016 “Im Pfarrgarten” Riesling Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GAD-119 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

Now the 3rd vintage from a 52-year old vineyard planted in a flat-ish site by the stream; it means “the garden of the rectory” and suggests a contemplative temperament. And, miracle of miracles, it was better from the Zalto! (Though it was excellent from both glasses and would probably have been excellent lapped from the dog's water dish) It's curvaceous and has a pleasing tangy edge, like sorrel; aloe and balsam and an exceedingly fine-grained minerality, a little fresh-cut grass. Fantastically tasty, and priced to pour.

2016 In der Sängerei Riesling Feinherb

(+)

12/750ml | GAD-120

A cadaster parcel from within the Hofberg, this is often among my most beloved Mosel wines. On this occasion it seemed rather edgier than usual, with more attitude; it also seemed less creamy and it was asking for less sweetness by *adding sweetness*. (The *right* amount of sweetness will ALWAYS disappear into the wine, but too little sweetness stands out like a sore thumb.) I was hugely intrigued: where will this go? It's usually a (truly) noble wine, and it hadn't had its first racking yet—so let's see.

2016 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GAD-121 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

A really perfect PiesGold; you dream of a wine like this, that actually justifies the renown of the site. It's slatey, even taut, plummy and herbal, *perfectly* balanced, salty and wicked.



2016 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett

(+)

12/750ml | GAD-122

It's the sexiest among three Kabs (one of which I didn't select) and there's more visible acidity than in any '16 I've seen. The incipient aromas are tantalizing, but it's too early to unpack the adjective sack.

2016 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese

(+)

12/750ml | GAD-123

More juice here, but like the Kab this has a tense rope linking acidity and fruit; meyer lemon and mango, herbs and even Timut pepper. This was the most backward and reticent of any '16s I'd tasted, but the texture made me optimistic.

2016 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Auslese 1-star

+

12/375ml | GAD-124H

2016 Dhron Hofberger Riesling Eiswein

+ (+)

6/375ml | GAD-125H

I'll describe these together because the Auslese is actually the final juice from the Eiswein pressing. You measure the must-weight every ten liters or so – it falls as the grapes thaw—and when you reach a certain point you use any remaining juice in some other way. Thus the Auslese had 110° Oechsle (without botrytis) and so it's the "baby" Eiswein, a less concentrated version of (many of) those flavors. The Eiswein itself—Adam's first-ever—is quite the cherry-pie, less racy or transparent than Hexamer's, but a lovely maiden voyage into the frozen essences.

REUSCHER-HAART



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Piesport

VINEYARD AREA

6 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,200 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Piesporter Goldtröpfchen
(blue devonian slate) ;
Piesporter Domherr
(blue devonian slate) ;
Piesporter Falkenberg
(blue devonian slate) ;
Piesporter Günterslay
(blue devonian slate) ;
Piesporter Treppchen
(blue devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

90% Riesling
5% Regent
5% Rivaner

They can be forgiven for stumbling in 2014, as they suffered a death in the family, not to mention almost everyone on the Mosel had “issues” in 2014. So it was lovely to see them roaring back with their ‘15s, a typical solid muscular vintage for this estate.

I’ll honestly cop to underrating these wines. It’s because their cellar regime (*sponti* in tank) can make for some heavy reduction aromas when I’m there in March, which entails my peering through the periscope, which entails me hedging my notes so I don’t hype.

The estate is decidedly on-the-move now, the generational transfer now complete. I wonder to what degree (if any) the wines will change. They were quite rococo and sturdy when I first encountered them—in the early 90s, before you were born—and they still seem basically immortal, which is somewhat unaccountable for wines that “read” so horizontal

and gentle when young.

This year we had a “talk” about the wines. It was time. I have enough experience to know that you can do *sponti* wines without issuing violently reduced-smelling stinkers to the world. No one’s a bigger purist than I, yet I don’t think it’s reasonable to demand that customers keep a wine for 3-4 years—or swirl it for 3-4 minutes—in order that it be drinkable. Mind you, it isn’t a “flaw;” it is a choice a grower can make. (Prüm’s been making it for decades!) Mario Schwang grew up with these wines, and he says he likes the wildness of *sponti* aromas. Thus it is also not reasonable for me, as his importer, to insist he alter his family’s wine. I can only report the issues that arise from his choice.

I approached 2016 somewhat warily, and yet of course the ‘16s, clement as they are, were reassuring. Here is exactly what I found.

2016 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “Überschwang”

12/750ml | GRH-092 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The name is a pun on the family name, which is Schwang, and the term “überschwang” describes someone being over-the-moon with excitement. The wine is nice this year, well balanced, salty and floral—violets and white hyacinth; slimmer than usual, it has lots of “blue” slate flavors and the cool green ‘16 thing.

2016 Piesporter Riesling

12/750ml | GRH-093

This used to be the Liter wine. It was awarded the prize as *best Liter wine of the 2015 vintage* in the leading domestic wine guide. It’s always been good. This one is also good, once the reduction clears up.

2016 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GRH-094

This is just what it should be (and often hasn’t been); passion fruit and Ceylon tea; it has verve, *spiel* and even raciness. I hope it survives bottling, because the ‘15 was also good as a cask sample but it’s now a cheesy black-hole of reduction.

2015 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese

(+)

12/750ml | GRH-090

A ‘16 seemed better-behaved, but this ‘15 is actually better wine, and recalls some of the great vintages of the early 90s here. This solid dignity and honor, and the sheer disciplined power here – it’s like one of those Ukrainian athletes who can pull a Boeing 737 on a shoulder harness—are evidence of what lies below the *spongi* funk.

*And you know? I’ve been served far too many wines that were **much worse** than this, wines that were basically dirty and which no amount of swirling would ever clean up. Somebody somewhere tasted those foul wines and thought they were acceptable. Or more than acceptable; they deserved real-estate on a wine list. So maybe I’m coming down too hard on wines that are merely inconvenient. Ya think?*

CARL LOEWEN



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Leiwen

VINEYARD AREA

12 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

8,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Leiwener Laurentiuslay
and Klostergarten
(grey slate);
Thörnicher Ritsch
(grey slate);
Longuicher Maximin Herrenberg
(red slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture

In effect we get to reinvent this agency, because many of you don't know their history; you only know that Christopher is passionate and charismatic, and that the wines are outstanding.

From my standpoint I see this as a long-delayed recognition, that Loewen is a stellar producer who has long been undervalued. This is one of the FIVE MOST INTERESTING ESTATES IN MY OFFERING, and among them it's the one you know the least about. And that is gonna change.

A couple decades ago an idealistic young couple realized there were great vineyards—not “good” or “interesting” vineyards, but truly great ones—along this stretch of the Mosel, and that no one knew of them because of the lack of a flagship estate. If J.J. Prüm had been a citizen of Leiwen and not of Wehlen, we'd be giving all that Sonnenuhr luv to Laurentiuslay and Ritsch. This is clear, and obvious.

Karl was also convinced of the old Mosel verities; spontis in cask with no fussings or tweakings.

When the estate Schmitt-Wagner had to fold its tent, as there were no children willing to carry it on, we were all very fortunate that Loewens could buy it. Carl now has every great site on this section of the Mosel. These are:

Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg
Thörnicher Ritsch
Leiwener Laurentiuslay

They are every bit as important as Graacher Domprobst, Wehlener Son-

nenuhr and Zeltinger Schlossberg, only you don't know them, and therefore they **COST LESS.**

Karl-Josef's son Christopher is now fully installed and brings his own vision and infusion of vim. They are discontinuing the name *Schmitt-Wagner* for wines from the vineyards they bought from Bruno Schmitt when that venerable estate had to sell, for want of heirs. This consisted of some 9,000 ungrafted Riesling wines, planted in 1896 and 1903, which constitutes as great a legacy as one could hope for, and cemented Loewen's position as the great holder of every noble Riesling vineyard on the Mosel upstream from Leiwen. This won't matter to you if you're too young to remember Schmitt-Wagner. Older Riesling lovers may join me in a moment of gratefulness and sadness, first that Bruno Schmitt existed—he was the only reason to attend to Longuich at all—and second that the gentle tactful style of wine he made is a quickly vanishing species.

Last March I was a little hesitant about the young '15s—at least the dry ones—but when I retasted them in June I was seriously blown away, and contrite about having so underrated them. I pulled Christopher aside to tell him, “No wines have improved as much in the last three months as yours,” and he very graciously agreed that the dry wines need time. They attracted a lot of attention, and these charming and complex '16s will build on our mutual awakening.

I was aware of the risk of *overrating* them, in fact, and so I tasted them, let's say, very quietly. I was really digging hard,

trying to suss what was ordinary youthful reticence and what was likely to be a basic imbalance. My opinions of a few of the wines changed over the course of the

few hours I was there. Sometimes for the better, sometimes not. But the selection you see here represents some of the most exciting, interesting and even profound

Rieslings of which the Mittelmosel is capable, and this is true across the dry-sweet continuum.

2016 Riesling Alte Reben

(+)

12/750ml | GCL-099

Another dry wine that won't say "Trocken" on the label, because "We don't want to be confined. Some years it may be under the limit and other years a little above, but what matters is the way it tastes." If you know me, you know how my heart leaps to hear such words.

In March the wine seems a bit charred and smoky, but if the '15 was predictive it will blossom dramatically. It was only ten days in bottle when I visited. With coaxing it became fabulously salty and herbal, and a delicate fruit-sweetness played peek-a-boo. It's a cuvée of old ungrafted vines from various sites, and I think it will balance on a rope of sinew and power. It's also a *superb* VALUE.

2016 Maximiner Klosterlay 1er Lage Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GCL-100

An east facing vineyard directly on the Mosel, it's for lovers of the mineral face of Riesling. I'm gazing into the periscope with this one, because it was opaque in March, and yet two things gave me hope: the finish (its flavor and length) and the smell in the empty glass. So, no descriptors, but a great deal of optimism.

2016 Ritsch Riesling "GG"

+

6/750ml | GCL-101

Well aren't *you* outstanding! All the steely herbal juicy jazz of the site is coursing through every little vein of this wine in a buzz of verberna and anise. You need to be able to receive this signal—Riesling at its piercing, minerally, acupuncture-y best. A "sweet" sorrelly finish to a still-evolving wonder.

The (Thörnicher) Ritsch is among my VERY favorite Mosel sites, and as Loewen's new plantings begin bearing fruit, they're considering reintroducing a Spätlese (or even a Kabinett). I've been kvetching that to polarize the production into a "GG" from clean fruit and an Auslese from botrytised fruit isn't doing full justice to the vineyard.

You should see it some time. It's a forbidding, dour and spectacular terraced gray mountainside, a real jaw-dropper, and as you gape at it you are categorically sure that great wines come from it. And you're right.

2016 Riesling

12/750ml | GCL-104 | SOS: 1 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

A Theise exclusive! (Similar to the wines I get from Catoir and Diel.) It's a *dry-enough* Riesling at an attractive price, and it's fine old-school Mosel, and a lot more joy is about to arrive on your doorstep. And I know this because every single prototype-blend we tasted was *good*. That is rare, and shows the quality of the base wine.

2016 Longuicher Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett

+ (+)

12/750ml | GCL-098 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Ungrafted vines planted in 1903. The '16 has a gorgeous salty growl of concentration, with the silvery juiciness of the vintage and the tactile licorice-y saltiness from the old vines. You get to see how *much* concentration is attainable with how *little* alcohol—often 9% or less—and you also get an ancient-vines bottling you don't have to pay a **shit-ton** of money for—because this is Germany, not France or Italy. You're welcome!

2016 Maximin Herrenberg Riesling Trocken 1896

+ +

6/750ml | GCL-102

2016 Maximin Herrenberg Riesling Feinherb 1896

+ + +

6/750ml | GCL-103

The wine makes me think more than anything of Michi's "Tradition" bottlings at Schloss Gobelsburg; it's atmospheric and inferential; analog, soulful, more peeling, bell-like overtones, more poetic and secretive. Even in its animation it shows repose, and a complexity you don't subdue, but simply and calmly allow it to guide you to the mystery. Here's what Christopher had to say about this amazing wine: "Our Maximin Herrenberg, which was planted in 1896, is the oldest Riesling vineyard in the world of this dimension (more than 6,000 vines). Planted 1896. This is an incentive to us. I have asked myself over weeks: How did they produce wine in that period, in a time when Mosel Riesling was one of the most important wines of the world? In the Maximin Herrenberg we still have the single post training system with 10.000 vines per hectare, which was common in those days. No chemical fertilizer is used, everything, even the hardest work is done by hand. Never has the Maximin Herrenberg seen a machine! The adventure started in the harvest. The handpicked grapes were being transported to the trailer with the help of a hotte (a hotte is something like a rucksack, with which you can transport about 60kg of grapes in it; it was used before tractors made the vineyard work easier). The grapes, which were collected in a basket, were being stamped by foot, which had been common then. Through that procedure the maceration starts directly in the vineyard. On the evening of the picking day, the press process started. For the 1896 we used a very old wooden basket press, which we found in a small dusty corner at the lower section of the Mosel valley and which we restored with a lot of love. Pressing was done by brawniness, the juice is guided without any sedimentation or pumping directly into the Fuder. The fermentation, of course, is spontaneous, without any added yeast. The result is a wine, which shows perfectly the strength of Riesling. It is a unique statement of consistency in a fast moving world. Due to the small scaled 1896 vineyard, we are just able to do one Fuder of the 1896 Riesling."

Obviously these are not only great wines, they're also meaningful wines. The inverse is also true; they're not only "meaningful," (which you may or may not be able to taste) but also, and dramatically, great.

The dry wine, I wrote, is the song of the ancient plants, in this case a haunting threnody of things lost but not abandoned, something more mysterious than what we think of as "depth." It addresses the whole world of the silex and the pebbles and the richly breathing leaves. The truly important wines don't seem to need to try. They coalesce into a vapor that rises from the ground and forms a tangible being in the air. Forget for a moment what it "tastes like," because if you still your mind, the gray-green ghosts gather around you.

The Feinherb, not very much "sweeter" than the Trocken, is my **wine of the vintage**. I wish it weren't because we hardly have three drops of it.

But with that wine, we start drawing near to eternity, through layers of bliss and amazement into a fragrant shady glade, cool and fresh, and there's a strange ethereal mosaic seeming to hover in the air, and you make for it but never get closer. And the moment you realize that the sweetness lives in the longing and not the arriving, then you arrive.

2016 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GCL-105

Consistently and for many years one of the very GREAT wines in this offering, and among them, the least celebrated. Again, very old vines (at least 80, some over 100, all ungrafted) from an old terraced vineyard, because the wise citizens of Leiwen rejected the Flurbereinigung.

Think Wehlener Sonnenuhr on steroids. (Or wait a minute; that's Zeltinger Sonnenuhr. OK, think *Zeltinger Sonnenuhr* on steroids...)

In essence this is weighty, extravagant fruit anchored to profound and almost chewy earthiness. The '16 is solid and quintessential, maybe a little more lilac and wisteria than usual, but it's swollen and salty and queenly.

2016 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Auslese

+ +

6/750ml | GCL-106

I commented the wine showed "perfect botrytis" and was told it had *none*. "Well, none actually is perfect botrytis," I said, to gales of laughter as I tried pitifully to rescue myself. In fact this was picked at 100° Oechsle with some dehydration but otherwise pristine fruit. It has its signature flavors of citrus skin and verbena on crack, plus tropical herbs and spices and Matja powder. It's not sugary but instead a sideways angular sweetness. It's amazing wine, almost as good as the supernal 2012.

SAAR

The Saar valley is singular in many ways. Close as it is to Trier, it seems entirely removed. Unlike the fjord of the Mittelmosel, the Saar is more open country, and vineyards mix with forests and pasture. It is deliciously relaxing, quiet and verdant and birdy.

In massage they talk about the cleansing breath, the exhale that sends the tension away. Coming to the Saar is like taking cleansing breaths, one after another.

And so when I taste the wines, something in them speaks of this place where they grow, both its serenity and its drama. It can't be helped, or at least I can't help it. At the same time, though, I am evaluating each of them as wine qua wine. However much I may love it because it speaks to my soul, the wine has to work by itself, has to have something convincing to say to you in your shop or restaurant, and to me when I taste it months later in the throb and crash of a trade tasting.

It's the only way I know how to respond—how to be alive—by combining a strict professional appraisal with whatever arises spontaneously from within, impulses or impressions or dreams or just emotion. I can't transfer that to you, but we're both human beings and I want you to know it is there. Something is there. These wines offer an opportunity to pass

through a curtain.

I also think there are gregarious wines and also introspective wines, and I love those autonomous little beings who don't look up when you enter the room. I have an amazingly clear rapport with wines like that.

Saar wine seems to take an essence of Mosel wine and concentrate it, but this isn't something one can isolate as a flavor or flavors per se. Saar soils are a little different from Mosel soils, but only a little; there's more so called Grauwacke here intermixed with the slate. Almost every Mosel wine has an herbal profile and a citric profile, and it is these two things that are seemingly intensified in Saar wines. They are also rather more earthy than Mosel wines. They convey an even more palpable solidity. When they show the expected apple-y fruit they prompt you to imagine the apples were smaller and more dense, or had been picked later, when the fruit-sugars were concentrated by a light frost. Indeed one could say Saar wines taste like Mosel wines from grapes that slightly froze, not deep enough for Eiswein, but just enough for a tangy little jab of concentration. They are also shadier than Mosel wines, with more silvery flavors. Not bad for a guy who basically has no idea what he's talking about!

PIEDMONT



REGION/SUB REGION

Mosel / Saar

VINEYARD AREA

4.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

30-40,000 bottles

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Filzener Pulchen
(grey weathered Devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

This estimable VDP estate has been absent from the American market for more than a decade. There is a daughter arriving from Wine-University in the next year or so, and they'd like to be exporting a little. In the "quiet years" they'd let some vineyards go fallow, and had shrunk from 6 to 3 hectares, but there's room to expand to 10, and plans to do so.

The estate and vineyards are in Filzen, which is the first village you come to as you leave the Mosel and head upstream on the Saar. It's vineyards face southeast, which in the old days before climate change was presumed to be a liability. Today it's actually a guarantor of Saar prototypes.

I have a producer of crunchy Saar Rieslings (Helmut Plunien at Vols) and didn't need another, and so I came to Piedmont thinking *OK fella: convince me*. I had the wines in my cellar and drank them over the winter, just like a regular person—you can't overemphasize the value of *drinking* whole-bottles of wine, sometimes over several days, as opposed to merely "tasting" them. That hoary old ad slogan *Good to the last drop* contains many grains of truth.

I liked the wines. The young wines were smokin'! The back-vintages were either precisely what they ought to have been, or *better* than they ought to have been. A visit to the estate confirmed the impressions. These are Saar classics for super-reasonable prices, and yet they are slim but not *thin*, polished but not *turned out*, graceful but not *bland*. They are never very sweet. And they aren't quite like anything else we are offered from the Saar.

We send a little questionnaire along to new growers, in order to collect the "usual" information, and Piedmont's answers are so admirable and clear I'm going to reproduce them verbatim.

What are your ecological practices?

We operate under the guidelines of sustainable farming. To protect the predator mites we only use fungicides but no insecticides and no herbicides. The mineralization of the soil is given by Humus—and Chalk supply and soilwork. We do not use mineralic fertilizer but exact dosed foliar fertilizer 4 times while vegetation period.

Do you ferment with wild yeast, cultured yeast, or both?

Only with wild yeasts.

Do you do whole-cluster pressing, regular pressing or both?

We do whole-cluster pressing for healthy grapes and the basic dry Saar Wines. All other wines are getting crushed and regular pressed. No maceration and grapes do not get destemmed due to the juice channels in the grape press.

Do you ferment and age your wines in tanks, casks or both?

Half steel half wood

Do you control fermentation temperatures?

Yes. Temperature is permanent controlled to 12 – 14°C while fermentation.

Do you perform the first racking quickly after fermentation, or do your wines remain on their primary lees for a period of time, or both?

First racking happens 6 - 8 weeks after fermentation. After that the wines stays on the fine-yeast until end of March until it gets bottled.

Do you ever use reverse osmosis, or must concentrators?

No.

Do you bottle early to preserve primary fruit, or later to bring about more "wine-like" aromas—or both?

We traditionally bottle about 6 Month after harvest, so mostly in April each year.

Will you intervene to re-start a fermentation in order to have a fully dry wine?

We do no re-start of fermentation, no staggered enrichment and no later enrichment to have a later fermentation. Typical Saar Riesling wines should be light and fruit based.

I'll say!

2016 Saar Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GPT-001 | SOS : 0

A classic Saar on the dry side; quince and grapefruit aromas; it was just bottled two days prior but the basic balance is fine. Polished but not buffed, with a soft Chenin-y glow. Old-school but not atavistic.?

2015 Filzener Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GPT-002 | SOS : 1

Another effectively-dry wine, with perfect poise. It has some of '15s phenolics but this is subsumed into a rich texture in general. I like its cut and edge, but these are too analogue to be "sharp."

2015 Filzener Pulchen Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GPT-003

A lovely Saar archetype; "cool", spiced apple, angular and piquant beneath a fine rich fruit; malic, herbal, complex and long, an equipoise of richness and coolness with a blown-out-candle finish.

2016 Filzener Pulchen Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GPT-004

This is excellent, with a Domprobst-like fruit and exotic brightness.

ONE MATURE MASTERPIECE

*He was kind enough to bring out several old vintages, to show the development of the wines, and all of us were captivated by a **2004 Pulchen Spätlese**, which showed that vintage at its very best, and we grabbed all the bottles he'd permit us to plunder.*

VOLS



REGION / SUB REGION

Saar / Ayl

VINEYARD AREA

6 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Ayler Kupp
(*weathered slate*) ;
Ayler Schonfels
(*weathered slate*) ;
Wiltinger Kupp
(*weathered slate*) ;
Wiltinger Braunfels
(*weathered slate*) ;
Wiltinger Schlangengraben
(*weathered slate*)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture

2016 is a lovely and atypical vintage here. As a rule Helmut Plunien makes wines you really crunch and snap in to, sort of ur-Saar, as if Merkelbach made Saar wines. Yet 2016 rather imposed itself, not in a bad way (at all!) but rather as a variation or departure from Vols' prevalent style. The wines are smoother and more flowery.

Plunien, for those who don't know the back-story, had a couple executive jobs in a couple very-well-known big wineries, the last of which he left when he could no longer tolerate their shoddiness and dishonesty. At that point he and his family realized he wouldn't be happy unless he could do his own thing. It began with some vineyards in Wiltingen (including the excellent *Braunfels* and has since grown to encompass sites in the Ayler Kupp. These are not (in Johannes Selbach's words) "cookie-cutter wines;" they are loaded with character and are determinedly individual. The estate is named "Vols" after a cadaster parcel in Braunfels.



2016 Vols Riesling Saar Feinherb

12/750ml | GVL-029 | SOS:0

This is all steel, and surprisingly deft and tasty. It's effectively dry, taking the acid-sugar balance into account. Crisp green-apple aromas; sleek salty-tart juice; bracing lemon-quince elements, all into a high-toned finish. This may succeed *because* it's '16.

2016 Riesling Feinherb "United Slates"

12/750ml | GVL-030 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

I kind of like the label, which my colleagues find a little corny. Helmut contrived it after his first American visit, and the idea is to combine wines from four disparate slate types into one cuvée. The '16 is nice and crisp! A granita in a glass. Thirst-quenching dry Riesling.

2016 Ayler Kupp Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GVL-031

This is quite mannerly and fruity for a Vols wine, but it's a classic '16; salt and plum blossom; smoother than usual for him; you could even call it "silky."

+

2016 Wiltinger Kupp Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GVL-032

Really pretty aromas lead into a crisp exotic wine that again (see Piedmont) reminds me of Domprobst; vamping fruit so high-toned it probably picks up radio signals from the Van Allen Belt. Not a typical Vols wine, but pretty ravishing all the same.

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2016 Riesling Spätlese "Vols I"

12/750ml | GVL-033

The top wine from Wiltinger *Braunfels* and its immediate neighbors, it stands apart from the lean directness of the Ayler; this smells as much like *Margaine's* Champagnes as it does like Saar Riesling. Lily of the valley, apple blossom, jasmine, kirsch.



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