

terry theise



estate selections

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Wine Spoken Here



The Three Goals

*The first goal is to see the thing itself
in and for itself, to see it simply and clearly
for what it is.*

No symbolism, please.

*The second goal is to see each individual thing
as unified, as one, with all the other
ten thousand things.*

In this regard, a little wine helps a lot.

*The third goal is to grasp the first and second goals,
to see the universal and the particular,
simultaneously.*

Regarding this one, call me when you get it.

-David Budbill

This year I dedicate this work to Hans Günter Schwarz.

Now that he's officially retired from 42 years at Müller-Catoir, one can begin to glimpse his achievement as a whole. To do so is to step back, nearly awed.

When Schwarz started as Catoir's cellarmaster in 1962, he was an unknown young man working in obscurity. The principles by which he guided his work have since become catechism among virtually all conscientious vintners.

"It is no good being Stradivari in the vineyards if you are Stalin in the cellar," writes Andrew Jefford in his superb *The New France*. "The hardest thing for a cellarmaster is to know the right time to do nothing," said Hans Günter Schwarz on many occasions.

I was nine years old in 1962. Some of you weren't born yet. Everything was technological back then. Snazzy new grape crossings, sizzling new chemicals, nifty new machines (happy new salesmen!)..and soulless, denuded wines. Schwarz was quite possibly the first to smash the technology icon. The results he achieved were magisterial; the wines reached deeper than anything we'd ever expected possible. People started taking notice.

They discovered a dedicated grape-grower with an almost mystic intuition toward the vine. Schwarz is a veritable Dr. Doolittle of viticulture; vines speak to him. (Doolittle is an apt term for his cellar work, as it happens.) "If you're an activist in the vineyard it's only logical to be a minimalist in the cellar," he says. "Each time you handle a wine you remove some of its vitality; it cannot be otherwise." Bizarre and inimical as these ideas seemed in 1962, they are ubiquitous now. Even if you don't *practice* these principles, you'd better say you do.

Hans Günter's wines expressed varietal flavors at a pitch precise enough to astonish. *Who knew wine could do this?*

As he got older his wines became deeper, more Saturnine, tenderer. I asked him if this was deliberate. It wasn't *deliberately* deliberate, he answered; not a conscious decision. Yet he agreed, he had shown how clear, complex and expressive wine could be, had revealed every conceivable fleck of nuance of varietal fruit; where was there to go but deeper down? To hear the murmur of essence and fumble toward it. The wines of Schwarz's last half-dozen vintages are a testament to the possibilities of beauty, and to a strange grave pleasure apart from joy.

Schwarz himself is lusty yet also avuncular. Everyone who knows him is fond of him. And he has never withheld, never guarded his methods, but instead shared them lavishly and generously. No "trade secrets" from this man.

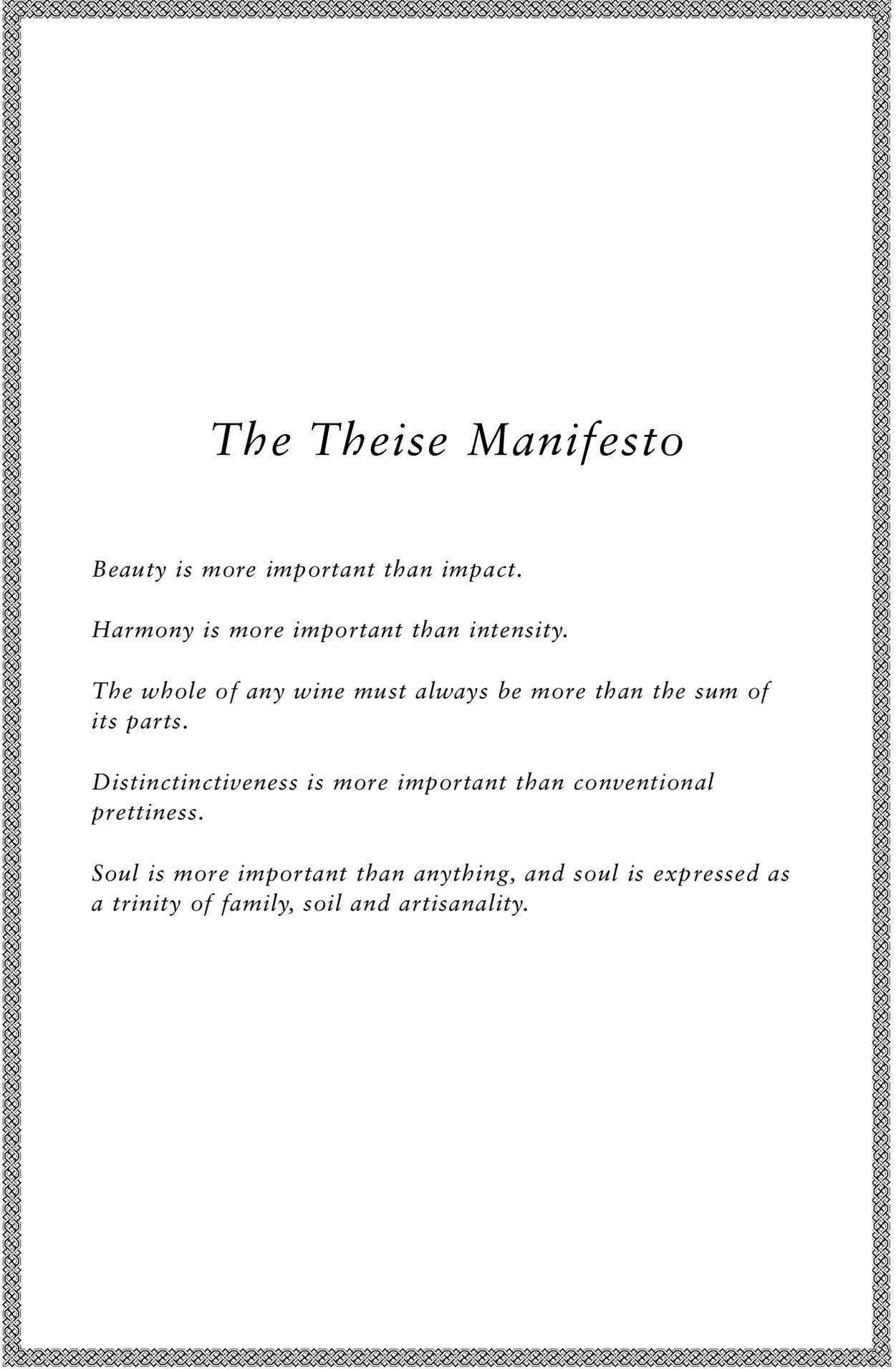
One scans the modern German wine scene and wonders how it could exist without the genial aura of Hans Günter Schwarz hovering overhead. He has gleaned the beauty of the world and added to it the sum of his labor and the warmth of his soul. I am absurdly fortunate to have crossed paths with this lovely man. His spirit and his example inhabit my work and my conscience, and give me hope.

In Memorium to Helmut Mather





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by the incredible Simone White!



The Theise Manifesto

Beauty is more important than impact.

Harmony is more important than intensity.

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

Distinctinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.

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

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LET US WRITE YOUR ORDER FOR YOU!

It's easy! We write the order, you take the wine, we cash the check. What's not to like?

In all seriousness, I have spent the past several years actually writing about 15% of all the D.I. orders I receive, so I thought I'd formalize it. This is for people who want the wines but don't have the time to hack through my Amazonian jungle of quivering prose. Here's what you do:

- Give me a budget, and/or the number of cases you wish to receive.
- Tell me how to proportion the order; Rhines vs. Mosels, what proportions at which price points, how much Kabinett vs. Spätlese vs. Auslese, etc.
- Tell me if you want any Liter wines for floor-stack, any sparkling wines, in fact tell me generally if you want a conservative order or a high-wire order filled with lots of weirdo wines.
- Tell me if there are wineries which have done well for you in the past, or which have not.

And away I go. I will create an order proposal for you, you'll look it over and tweak and twiddle it, and send it back in the form that you wish . . .

I promise this: knowing that you've bought on trust from me, I will make DAMN sure that every wine I send to you is KILLER WINE. I can't risk your being anything less than really impressed with every cork you pull. The last thing I want is for you to think I fobbed something off on you. I will write the HIPPEST possible order within your guidelines.

We call this the E-Z method of flash-buying. It works. If you'd like my help, I'm standing by to give it. If not, I shall pout, and taunt you for the pitiable order you wrote yourself. Who needs that kind of trouble?

I was talking to Helmut Dönnhoff about my lyrical moment with the nightingales. We were in the garden outside the hotel where I'd heard them a year ago. I thought they were haunting and beautiful, but this is apparently not the universal sentiment. "On a hot summer night when we sleep with the windows open, they make such a racket I want to fire a rifle at them," said Helmut. Now there's a vision for you; the arch-wizard of Riesling blasting away in the middle of the night at a bunch of birds.



I've been thinking a lot about Dönnhoff lately. How he goes about things. He has a diligent, even fastidious intelligence yet he's the least phenomenological person with any brains I know. He's determinedly un-self-conscious. He was the first grower I knew to graduate from obsession over wines' analytical values. He was the first to push away from deconstructing the aesthetics of wine's flavor. Because I respect him and he intrigues me, I realize he has influenced me.

But we've seen what he's moved away from, but not what he might be moving toward. I can't help wondering. I probably have too much time on my hands. OK, this all makes sense to me, but what are we trying to do here? Why *shouldn't* we exercise our cerebral cortex rooting around in wine's flavor and structure if that's what floats our boat? Seems innocent enough.

Here's what I think we're after: a point of utter receptivity because we're seeing only the wine instead of seeing *ourselves* seeing the wine. Oh it's all very Zen.

But I'm feeling reflective these days. On May 3rd I'll observe twenty years in the wine business. On May 8th I'll observe the 25th anniversary of my first trip to a wine region. During that trip I first met Willi Schaefer. Shortly afterward I met Walter Strub. It all seems valedictory and it makes me feel not exactly old, but like a person-of-age. And I can't reconcile this with my gluttonous sexual appetites or tolerance for long meandering guitar solos.

Tears are best when they come unexpected. After all, it's moving to be moved; you're already halfway to the weeps, ready for the catharsis. But when it springs on you it's visceral and real. We were at Schmitt-Wagner a couple weeks back. Me, Corrie Malas, Mark Hutchens and Hans Selbach, and the work was done and the old wines started arriving. This is anything but solemn. And the sequence with which they arrive is based on a logic known only to the man who made them. First a 1961 *Kabinett*. Showing quite fresh at 41 years of age. A '69 *Kabinett*, not the best bottle. A '73 *Spätlese*, full of vigor and with time in front of it – at age 30. Then suddenly, out of the blue, an Auslese from 1949. Here I was, frantically trying to scribble fast enough to keep *up* with Schmitt's ratt-a-tatt-tatt tempo (as if he's afraid you'll bolt if another wine doesn't come out in 20 seconds), and I get this wine to my nose and brother, all bets are off. The fur commenced to fly.

Now I sit here trying to understand what happened. Great old wine is evocative, this we know. It has to have

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

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

Someone asked Herr Schmitt, "Did you make this wine?" "Oh my goodness no, I was just a child," he answered. Then he grew pensive and said "But I do remember being a boy of six, picking the grapes alongside my grandma,"

and then I lost it. I was looking at his hands just then, as it happened, the hands of a vigorous old gentleman still ruddy from a life in the open air, and I suddenly saw the child's little hands inside them. And saw the child trotting along at his grandma's side, happy to be included in the general activity, proud to be useful, there among the vines. And now it was sixty four years later. The wine in our glasses was enthralling enough to us, but to our host it was the pure blood of memory, bound to the filaments of his earliest joys, with affection and usefulness. *This is a man of Wine*, I realized. This is what it means to be a man of wine.

This '37 called to us from across a passageway to a world we barely know. But to Bruno Schmitt it called across each of those sixty four years from small sweet memories. I was so lost in my vision of the boy that I registered the 70-year old face of the man to my left with a small shock. He



had passed his life in wine, I thought. He didn't choose it because he thought it was gracious or sexy or romantic. He chose it (if it was indeed what we would call a "choice") because it needed to be done and it pleased him to do it.

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



Vineyards at Schmitt-Wagner

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

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

It's different when you go there; all wine is. Otherwise it's just a bottle and a label (and a flavor you can quantify if you're into such perversions), disconnected from its taproot. I try and have my gang with me as much as schedules allow, because they need to be there too, not to *sell* more, but to better know what they're selling. One of the loveli-

est things about artisanal wines is the imbuing of the grower's spirit. This isn't literal; a slim shy guy doesn't necessarily make slim shy wines. But something of him gets into those wines ineluctably; it can't be helped. It's why you suddenly "get" the wines only when you meet the (wo)man, sit with him, look at the things he looks at every day, dip your feet into his vineyards, listen to the local birds.

None of this is valuable if the wines don't taste good. Josh Greene's interview with me for WINE & SPIRITS suggested that superb quality was a secondary consideration for me, but the truth is I barely consider it at all: It's a *given*. There is a "professional" intelligence that seeks to guarantee every wine tastes good every time. But after all these years (18!) I want you to know *who* you're buying these wines from. And what it all means.

There's an old story about a man who approached three bricklayers. Asking what they were up to, the first replied "Isn't it obvious? I'm laying these damn bricks." The second fellow was less truculent. "I'm making a wall," he said. The third guy seemed nearly beatific. "What am I doing? I'm helping to make a cathedral."

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

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

A few tenets of that truth are that *agricultural wines are always more interesting than industrial wines*. That *doggedness in the vineyard and humility in the cellar are vital to the making of wines of consequence*. That *wine is a context containing soil-borne flavors – their LANGUAGE – spoken with various ACCENTS according to which cellar-work a given grower prefers*. That *removing any PART of this context from wine does injury to its being (and if we do love wine, why deliberately injure it?) . . .*

It is also a sense of *PROPERNESS*, that things are where they belong. After all the years of trial and error along came Riesling, the vine that **belonged** in these thin, minerally soils and this cool, long growing season. And because Europeans are more aware than we Yanks that people actually existed before us, they're aware of the *real* size of their place in the cosmos. They *listen* to the soil and work to do its bidding. They know that the Riesling vine is the poet of their corner of the earth. They want to hear the poem. They want us to hear it. And so they work to bring the words clearly onto the page. And they are aware they do not, themselves, *CREATE* those words. The text is created somewhere else, below the ground.

One risks unleashing a great fury if one insists that soil creates flavor. That fury is worth considering, as I shall do later in these pages, in a little essay called A PRIMER

ON TERROIR. (Miramax is bidding for the movie rights by offering to sign Ned Beatty to play “loam.”)

I live a disphasic existence. The way fine German wines are made makes perfect sense to me. Soils and exposures are complex and variable; therefore the wines are kept separate and produced in small lots. The climate is sometimes iffy, so the wines are categorized by how ripe the grapes were, since you can't presume upon ripeness. The production structure is artisanal, and there's a lot of hands-on by family vintners who literally live above their wines. This means that individual wines come and go; they're different every year. They resist being categorized; it is in their essence to be discontinuous. Superficially they're a pain in the neck. Yet it is even more distressing when a vintner tries to rationalize away the innate character of his type of wine. I think vintners should vint, and marketing people should market and salespeople should sell. And I could, (if I really wanted to) make this all less onerous for accountants, warehouse people, data processing people, all the innocent bystanders for whom I feel great sympathy. I could do it. But only at the price of slaughtering something I feel is even more vital to protect.

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

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

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

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

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

And you think I'm metaphysical?

But why should we care about all this? Isn't it enough

that wine tastes good? Hmmm. Well, why should we care about the loving, tender and passionate feelings that arise during lovemaking; isn't it enough that sex feels good? We should care because it *exists*. And because the capacity inside us to respond also exists.

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

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

Here's the crux of it. Something in us craves diversity. Some creative life-urge seems to be expressed by diversity. It is counter to the life-force to struggle against it, it is literally deadening to live in a standardized world. Along with diversity comes habitat. Diverse members of a specie have diverse



preferences as to where they live and what they eat in order to survive. I feel strongly that the *best* grapes are those which are *fastidious* in their preferences. They may live, technically, away from their natural homes, but they won't thrive. They give boring wines. The world's most fascinating, meaningful and DELICIOUS wines are made from grapes grown *where they belong*, in the soils and climates that suit them. And they are individuals. And they are not common. And they are worth everything, just everything; they are why we care at all about this crazy way we make a living.

CONTINUING NEW APPROACH
TO TASTING NOTES



“At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to [Simone] Weil, requires us ‘to give up our imaginary position as the center . . .’ What happens, happens to our bodies. When we come upon beautiful things . . . they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space . . . or they lift us . . . letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede ground to the thing that stands before us.”

-Elaine Scarry

I used to care a great deal about writing tasting notes as much for my own writer’s ego as for the actual wines. I searched for ever-more esoteric associations so you would be impressed with my palate. I strove for pretty language



so you’d think I was a good writer. Sometimes I actually wrote well, and sometimes the wine actually *did* taste like “polyvinyl siding in direct sunlight on a Fall day with an approaching cold front” (I no longer represent *that* agency), but mostly I fell victim to my own affect.

And of course I still do, because words hold me in a certain sway, and wine acts on my feelings. But I have begun to feel that writing tasting notes is *sometimes* like pausing to describe the giddy ecstatic running of a dog to

whom you’ve just thrown a stick. The grinning beast lopes back to you with some big ol’ drool-covered stick in his slobbery maw, and he’s *looking* at you as if every scintilla of his happiness depends on your *throwing that stick again*, and what are you doing? You’re writing! Put down the pen and **throw the damn stick**, man.

It’s an odd business, this tasting and conveying through words. It makes a wine into a precious object of attention excluding the rest of the world. I have a specific mercantile purpose in telling you how my selections tasted, but it’s been years since I wrote or read tasting



notes for fun. Who bloody *cares* if it’s white peach or yellow peach or peach pit or peach skin or the BARK from the peach tree? That plus it’s *fruitless* (pun intended!) because it’s *tautologous*: when you describe flavors in terms of other flavors you eventually hit a wall. “This wine tastes like peaches.” Fair enough. What do *peaches* taste like???

In fact last year, for the first time in my life, I began to find it wearisome to write notes. It got even worse this year. Many days it seemed merely a burdensome chore. You’ll see my notes are shorter and less literal. I’m pretty sick of the macho business of “getting” more things than the next guy does, not to mention the desperate striving for *original* associations (“The wine boasts a compelling nose of beer-battered kiwi fritters,” that sorta stuff). At one point we thought we’d go entirely non-verbal, and created a sequence of pictures of spontaneous reactions to



wines which really says it all. I'm into atavism. Let's return to those halcyon days of snorts and grunts.

One also has "good-writer-days" and "lousy-writer-days" (I have the latter with distressing frequency); on the good days thoughts and images flow and dance. I read what I'm writing and think "Good; this conveys it," but on the bad days it's just "Oh crap, *must I again* write 'slate and apples' for the umteenth time?"



I want my notes to help you, of course, and I want them to convey how the wine spoke. I'd rather not try to grasp or apprehend a wine. I try to summon a kind of calm. To forget myself. If impressions form words, I record them. If the words are sweet then I'm happy. Tasting at Karlsruhle all I could write about was beauty; that's how the wines were. Dönnhoff was all about explanation-of-mystery with his keen, almost monastic 2002s. But I am in the middle of this process, still fumbling. I'm just starting to know the difference between "flavors" and *Flavor*. Some days I almost get it. Other days I'm shuckin' and jivin'.



If I get to hear the wine, and if it doesn't speak in words then I try to find a way to record whatever language it does speak. Image is fine. Some might think it twee, but I'll happily crawl out on that limb. Feelings of *texture* are fairly easy to describe, and texture is at least as important as actual flavor. And associative language *can* be useful, especially if it's a *genre* of wine we're describing. Signature



flavors are helpful to know.

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

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



MAKING THE CASE FOR GERMAN WINES

One night returning home to my hotel, I turned off the car and got out, and heard something I hadn't heard in many years. Three nightingales were singing their dark and eerily beautiful song. Suddenly the world went silent, and it was the beginning of time. I walked in the hotel's garden and listened to the three tiny birds until it was too cold to



stay out longer. Inside, I opened my windows – they were still singing there in the middle of the night – and snuggled under the comforter, and let them sing me to sleep.

And now I'm writing about making the case for German wines. As if they *need* me to do so; *nature*

makes the case for German wines constantly, with every lark, thrush or nightingale, every snap and crunch of apple, every swooningly fragrant linden tree in full blossom, everything that makes us pause when we are visited by the electric hum of the world. German wine is a small bird that sings in the darkness, a seemingly minute thing that can tingle your pores, and haunt you your entire life.

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

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

German wine is not what most people think it is, because Riesling is not what most people think it is. I once told a woman at a tasting, when she asked if I had any Chardonnays, that all my wines were Chardonnays. "Then give me your best one," she asked, and I think I poured her a Lingenfelder. "Oh this is **wonderful!**" she enthused. "I think this is the best Chardonnay I've ever tasted." That's because it comes from the town of RIESLING, I said, showing her the word on Rainer's label. If you want really good Chardonnay, I continued, make sure

it comes from Riesling. "Thank you," she said. "You've really taught me something." Little did she know.

The paradigm for German wine is pure fruit flavors, faithfulness to the soil, and balance of all structural components so that neither sweetness nor acidity stands out. Most modern well-made German Rieslings with residual sugar tastes DRIER than most new-world Chardonnay. And in place of the wash of slutty oak you get specifically focused flavors that can be hauntingly complex. People who simply taste these wines, will like them and be surprised by how much they like them. It isn't the wine per se that's "difficult," but rather the barriers erected in advance by the drinker.

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

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

"The wines don't work with food." NOT!

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



need to know to “understand” German wine. The rest is fine-tuning. They are maybe complicated but hardly abstruse. There’s some stuff to memorize, like there is everywhere else. If you care, you learn it.

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

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

As such I think Riesling, or indeed any wine with these kinds of virtues (Loire Chenins come to mind), can give the “discriminating” palate its greatest pleasure. I wince at the pompous phrase, yet it is one of Riesling’s great wonders. Wine-beginners who happen onto Riesling discover its miracle, to be at once entirely accessible and endlessly complex. It was once said the beginner would eventually leave Riesling behind in search of something more challenging (and that he’d return to Riesling later on when he realized that *nothing* was really any more challenging!), but I wonder if the 20-and-30-somethings I see drinking these wines will ever find them palling. It doesn’t look that way. What German wine teaches us is it isn’t the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its quality. We’ve all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we’ve all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there’s confusion over this issue, and it won’t hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn’t better in this view of the world: better is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you’ll be a better taster, period, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

MAKING THE CASE FOR AUSLESE

The entire 2001 vintage makes the case for Auslese!

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

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

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

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



PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION IN THIS PORTFOLIO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GRAY-MARKETERS: CONSUMER- CHAMPIONS OR SCAVENGING JACKALS?

How, um, lovely to have arrived at that exalted place where one's selections are imported through "unauthorized" channels.

Merchants who gray-market and the people who defend them like to claim it is the perfection of pure capitalism. "It's just wine reallocating itself based on demand", they point out. "Besides, the monopoly system of representation just gives importers carte blanche to gouge on prices," they add for good measure. The logic seems reasonable, so much so you might wonder how any *contrary* system could have come into being. Was it actually nothing more than the predations of greedy importers, having their ways with poor hapless growers?

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

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

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

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

Is that any way to build a sustainable clientele?

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

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the importer with an exclusivity rubs his filthy hands at the



grotesque markups he plans to take. And all of us children of the radical '60s swallow it whole, since every businessperson is ipso facto guilty. These proponents of pure capitalism neglect to consider one of its basic tenets: If a product is priced beyond its value, people won't buy it. The greedy importer can gouge all he wants; it avails him nothing if he can't sell the wine.

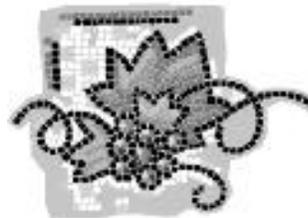
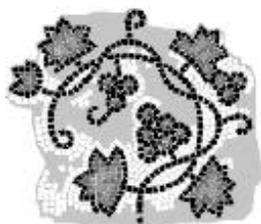
Speaking for myself now, I am delighted, as are most of my fellow importers, to offer *good value* to our customers. We want you to like us. We want you to like our wines. Hey, we want you to *make money* on our wines (radical notion!). I take a standard markup across the board in my portfolio, tweaking here and there if I need to hit a price point. If I ever sniff a whoop-de-do markup opportunity it's because a grower is underpricing his wine. In which case I **tell him so**. I do not wish to profit at his expense; this is what I call loyalty and sustainability. So, fellow wine-dogs, this dog won't hunt. None of us is motivated by profit per se. We are in business to get and keep customers. We all need to live. We all want to enjoy our lives. I want to invest in a grower who's willing to invest in me. And I want to sell his wines without interference.

Anyone who tries to tell you otherwise is lying to serve himself. And preying on your fears that someone's out to screw you.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Poachers can cause unintended mischief by obliging importers to compromise on selections in order to mollify a grower. I'm not a good enough salesman to sell what I don't like, and it sticks in my craw to lie to you. I have always insisted on an absolutely free hand to select what I like *even if* it disappointed the grower.

We have grown large now, larger than I ever envisioned. This is delightful in many ways (and you guys are the best), but it creates a new set of problems. My choice to select-or-not is more consequential than it used to be.

Therefore, in rare instances (3-4 wines per catalog), I will offer a wine I have not selected. This is to a) appease the grower, b) recognize that others may disagree with my impressions, and c) let you taste and make up your own mind. There are some close-calls, and it can seem churlish and egotistical of me to "block" them from getting to you.

These wines will be indicated as offered-but-not-selected. This is so that I don't have to lie to you. Because my explicit position has always and will always be; I will not offer you a wine I don't fully endorse. Amend that to say "except when I do, in which case I'll tell you".

I continually resist seeing my wines as Things or products. That's why I don't care whether the same wine is good every year. If wine A isn't happenin' this year, wine B will be, and I'll just take the better one. This can perplex or annoy growers who are into "marketing," but that's a

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

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

And it would have been easy to yield the point: The wine was perfectly adequate, and I like the guy! And listen, I'm not even *slightly* holy; it boils down to an entirely practical consideration: **SELLING GERMAN WINES IS TOO MUCH TROUBLE TO BE WORTH DOING EXCEPT FOR THE VERY BEST.** Otherwise, good grief! There's easier ways to bang your fool head against a wall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. I never taste the new vintage too early. March is usually the time when the wines are ready for bottling. I still have time to influence blending decisions, but fermentations are long-finished (usually!), and the wines have been racked, fined, spit-shined and turned out. I've tried tasting them earlier but they tasted like must with alcohol and they were either so yummy or so shriekingly raw and immature that I wondered how anyone could judge them at such a stage. Judging for oneself is one thing, but asking your customers to trust you on such a flimsy basis is another. I don't do it.

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

CORE-LIST WINES

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



a new way to measure sweetness

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

9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!



DRY GERMAN WINES

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

Would it were so.

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

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

All too plausible, eh? This much I think is true; notwithstanding the occasional successes amongst the dry wines (and the frequent successes among Halbtrockens), if all German wine were made dry then I doubt if a bottle would ever have left Germany. Wine-people would visit and come back saying "Really pretty scenery, nice people, great food . . . too bad about the wines." In the early days I wanted to make a case for Trocken wines, because they could be good (at times!) and I felt you should see German wine in all its facets. They can still be good, especially in a ripe and muscular vintage like 2001, yet what drives my fury into the red zone is that this culture drinks concepts and trendy-ness instead of sensually enjoying wine because of HOW IT TASTES.

But it makes me sad when growers don't even show me their dry wines, because they're missing the point. They think I simply don't like dry wines, and it's true that I'm far less likely to like their dry wines—but I like wine whenever it is vivid and balanced irrespective of residual sugar or any other isolated analytical component.

In fact the analysis is at best an astigmatic guide to judging the amount of sweetness that a wine should have. Many growers have already made these decisions at the time of picking (a pox on the demand for Trocken-at-all-costs which creates these stillborn wines!), while others look at their must-analyses and go by acidity. The more enlightened taste during fermentation, but unless the grower has a superb palate (and *palate-memory*), what tastes "balanced" in this stormily incomplete state may taste unbalanced later on. The real problem is growers who work according to a formula: Kabinett has 40 grams per liter, Spätlese has 55 grams per liter, etc. Even if the recipe works four years out of five, it's dangerous to make wine on auto-pilot. The best vintners are either palate-geniuses or they permit themselves the flexibility to make adjust-

ments later, either by judicious blending or by *dosage*.

Some growers are more successful than others. Wittmann certainly. Selbach-Oster. Until this year, Müller-Catoir. Koehler-Ruprecht maybe most of all. What do these ones know that the others don't? **I think it boils down to a simple lack of PALATE.** I begin to wonder if the typical domestic German wine drinker (producers included) has lost the ability to discern bitterness and disharmony! I strongly suspect they have. I see it when I taste with them.

It's hard to read where the whole Trocken thing is going these days. For every grower who discerns a tendency away from the bone-dry beasties, another will tell you Trocken is all he can sell. It's especially dreadful in the Pfalz, and a little better on the Mosel. There's also a huge irony at work. Initially the Germans began making Trocken wines in order to regain market share they were losing to the Alsations and Italians. They invented the whole catechism of theological explanation AFTER THE FACT, as it wasn't too cool to simply say "Um, we can make dry wines too if that's what you all want to drink." And now an entire generation of wine drinkers in Germany are trained (brainwashed would be more like it) to drink dry. Now comes the irony. The new breed of consumer thirsty for dry wines has discovered *once again* that other countries can produce a more palatable product in that style, and all of Germany is awash in cheap Pinot Grigio! To which I can only say: yay. Serves 'em right. This problem is so pernicious that Stuart Pigott has just published a wonderfully impassioned book whose stated purpose is to remind the Germans that many of the world's most exquisite white wines grow in their own back yards.

Yet I seem to be the only person who sees the whole sorry phenomenon as an inevitable result of the Trocken madness. The Germans do not automatically despise their home-grown products; far from it. But their wines have somehow become unfashionable. And I argue the *reason* is the dry wines weren't good enough to sustain a claim on the market's attention.

The latest twist to this sorry saga is even more surrealistic. Today's hip young German wine trendy actively dislikes acidity and wants his Trockens as "smooth" as possible. Hence the resurgence of Pinots Blanc and Gris. Hey guys, what about **sour-power**? Maybe I'm too pessimistic, and this little burp of fashion really augurs a time when they'll happily slurp down rivers of neutral innocuous Pinots and *leave the Rieslings alone*; oh wouldn't that be nice.

Wouldn't it just! The reality, alas, suggests otherwise. A Very Famous winery in the Rheingau is hosting an apprentice I happen to know. And this young man reports that the Very Famous winery routinely *de-acidifies* its Rieslings and then *pumps them with carbon dioxide* at bottling in a sad attempt to restore some sense of the freshness it *already removed*. So the wine is manipulated twice in order that the Product shall be satisfactory. Or, *satisfactory*.

One of us is wacko and I don't think it's me. The glaringly obvious answer to this "problem" is to leave a little



sweetness in the wine to balance its acids. No need to manipulate, and the wine is balanced and vital. But no-o-o-o! The wine must be dry A PRIORI.

The fact of lousy Trocken wines is neither here nor there. In the end it doesn't matter; some wines suck and we get on with our lives. The meta-assumption of *necessity*, though, has distorted and threatens to suffocate all that is precious about the Riesling wine culture in Germany. This must not be accepted quietly. It is not inevitable.

Another curious twist in this perplexing (and perplexed) domestic clientele is the sudden craze for anything red. French paradox, you see. The waiting list for Dornfelder clippings is two and a half *years*. All over the Pfalz (and Baden too, I'd imagine) people are planting Merlot and Cabernet. That's what we need: Germany to deliver more boring red wine upon a world catatonic with ennui already.

Perhaps my lil' "SOS" idea will seem so manifestly sensible to the German wine pooh-bahs they'll jettison all their asshole ideas and adopt it. *As if*.

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

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

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

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



MORE PRINCIPLES

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

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

Most important, at least for my romantic side: is the wine distinctive, does it have character? The thing that Matt Kramer calls "somewhereness," the signature of the place the grapes were grown. I won't make bold to posit any Universal Vinous Truth here, but I do believe—*absolutely* and without qualification—that Riesling grown in the Rhineland is a mirror reflecting the soil it grew in, and that different soils give consistently different flavors to its wines.

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

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

HOW I APPROACH WINE, OR LET WINE APPROACH ME

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

-Alexander Pope

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

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

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



*He's tried it both ways and Terry now says:
"It's definitely more **fun** with your eyes open!"*

AN ESSAY ON TASTING BLIND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We'll repeat a few and add one or two in our ceaseless attempt to create a catalogue large enough to squash very large bugs with. I still like my SOMMELIER ALERT! idea. I will change my system of noting favorite wines. Instead of my little font games, you will see pluses (+).

I have noted favorite wines for a few years and have not noticed any of the mischief I feared, the idea seems to have done all the good I hoped and none of the harm. I may even expand on it.

I had feared what could happen if I drew *too* much attention to a few big faves: could I sell anything else? Would it be fair to the other wines, which after all I also adore?

But, I told myself, this entire catalog exists in order to draw attention to the best, in this case the best 350 or so wines I culled from tasting a couple of thousand. What's the harm of codifying a Hors Classe list, first-among-equals if you will. The harm, I think, is focusing a disproportionate degree and TYPE of attention on those wines. Our American obsession with the BEST and FASTEST and MOST POWERFUL of things is something I'd rather not feed. Still, there's some wines in here you shouldn't miss no matter what! Every wine in this offering is elite! Some are simply spectacular. But do remember . . .

- The wines with one plus seemed to shine ON THE DAY I TASTED THEM. You might not have agreed, and I might not agree with myself when I taste them again. What I know is that all these wines, all gazillion of them, are excellent. Separating the hall-of-famers from the mere all-stars is subjective and momentary.

- I was democratic in the identification of special faves. Is a QbA from Leitz a "better" wine than an Auslese from Christoffel? No sir! Did it sing to me at the moment I tasted it and wrote "this is a fabulously successful and lovely wine of its type?" Da!

- There are growers every *one* of whose wines deserved your special attention. In those instances I highlighted those wines which somehow stood out as especially supernal.

It was telling to observe myself singling certain wines out. I have never believed in the idea of a "perfect" wine, 100 out of 100 or 20 out of 20 or what-have-you. Wine, for me is less a Thing than a Being, and I find that kind of reduction to an absolute scale actually diminishes the pleasure I take in it. But David Schildknecht proposes a way out the dilemma: in this world-view of wine, "perfection" is an intuitive certainty that something is being experienced BETTER THAN WHICH CANNOT BE IMAGINED. Not that something "better" might not exist in an absolute sense, nor even that on another occasion something else might be experienced of even more surpassing beauty, but only that sweet flush when you know THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS.

I don't grade on a curve. I couldn't precisely tell you how or why I give a glyph to a wine, but I feel quite certain while it's happening. In effect I register my own response without focusing on it. The problem with scales purporting to precision is they demand too much self-examination. The moment you're trying to decide whether the wine's an "91" or a "92" you are hyper-focused on *your* reaction and not on the wine. It doesn't give a rat's ass how many points you "award" it; it only wants to make you happy and (if it's significant wine) to remind you of the fascination of the world.

Let's get the filthy commercial stuff out of the way first.

If there had been no 2001, this fine new vintage would have taken its cheerful place among the best of the string of warm years beginning with 1988. In that group, only 1990 was clearly superior. '98 and '96 are debatably superior, and certain regional vintages (e.g. '94 Pfalz, '97 Mosel) are in the top class.

In raw terms, 2002 is usually a little less outstanding than 2001, but still excellent. In several cases it's as good as '01. In a few cases it's better. In the Rheingau it seems to be better across the board. In this portfolio, there are the producers whose 2002s are discernibly superior to their '01s: WITTMANN, NECKERAUER, SPREITZER, SCHAEFER, HAAG, KARLSMUEHLE. There are many others as good or nearly so.

I am aware of the many collectors who (correctly) loaded their cellars with 2001s, and who are already skeptical about buying '02s. Or they're out of space, cash or both! For them I have good news and bad news; the same news. (Ulp!) There's a lot of must-haves in 2002. Not quite as many as in '01, but a lot. More than you want to know about. All I can say is it's OK with me if you don't buy any California Cabernet for a few years.

THE REAL SKINNY: re-tasting 2001s I was impressed by their regal carriage. They are royalty, commanding, kingly. The 2002s are also royal, but princesses rather than kings.

Think of the difference between a strong woman and a strong man – not in character or will, but simply musculature. The woman weighs less. She is more lissome, less bulky. Her muscular lines are sleek, not thick. She curves differently than he, and more frequently. She is 2002 and she is far from ordinary.

2002 is often like '97, but more uniformly lovely and with more filigree in its structure. It often suggests Spring flowers, iris, wisteria, hyacinth and lilac, rather like Austrian Rieslings but with more delicacy.

The best '02s build upon this floweriness into a diligent precision and intricacy – the flavors seem to thread needles of detail – with wonderful charm and articulation.

Until October the growers might have had a legendary vintage, a '59 or a '76. October was a changeling, rainy for a day or so, then cloudy and showery, then sunny for a day or so, then sprinkly again, then rain, then sun. It was a frustratingly protracted harvest (expensive too) in which one was pulled by the weather. Alex Gysler told me "We had to pick when the weather allowed, without the luxury of waiting, which meant we had more acidity than we might have wanted," news that was echoed everywhere.

In fact acids weren't uncommonly high, but pH was unusually low in many places. Acidity is often *felt*. This created challenges for blending with *dosage*. I became aware of having bifurcated my palate, as many '02s showed one way on the front and another way on the back. The wines enter very juicy, with a really caressing texture, but sometimes finish with a lash of tartness. If we had enough dosage to extend the fruit and remove the tartness we sometimes had too much for the front-impact.

Tastings were long affairs this year, and many wines were calibrated to within single grams of sweetness.

It was also a vintage unforgiving to some of those who eschew *dosage*. If you had tart wines there was little you could do. Keep them in cask if you have casks, and can afford it. Deacidify if that isn't anathema (as it ought to be). Or, sell tart wines.

Apropos analyses, I saw very few and asked to see none. Long-time customers will acknowledge this as a sea-change. I used to care, and now I don't. The wine tastes good or it doesn't. If it tastes tart and the acids aren't analytically high, so what? It still tastes tart. If there's a sense of high extract yet the extract is low, what's more important: what the palate receives or what the lab report says? The sporadic peeks I took at lab reports were enough to clue me in to the vintage basics. Fixating on analyses is to see the trees and miss the forest. When you listen to music you don't have the players shouting out the chord changes to you!

Another problem, not only with 2002 but with many recent vintages, is the production of Kabinett from over-ripe grapes better suited to Spätlese. If you attempt to bottle Kabinett from material with 95 degrees Oechsle, you have two equally difficult alternatives. Either you give the wine a sweetness "typical" for "Kabinett" but not enough for something with 95 Oechsle, or you adjust the sweetness to the actual *wine*, in which case it's too big and rich for a "Kabinett". The underlying problem is that we insist on a commodity called Kabinett, even from vintages in which it is scarce. We should probably grow up, but don't look at *me*. It took me this many years just to arrive at



adolescence; I ain't growing my ass up no time soon.

One very nice facet of 2002 is there's enough of it, after two tiny crops in a row. Having a lot of excellent wine is a sweet place to be. I was also touched by the number of growers who held off increasing prices (a couple actually dropped them, angels) to offset our plummeting Dollar. They are recovering from two short years, they are paying more for everything, their taxes have been raised, and they question our basic sanity with this Iraqi thing, and yet they worked with their American importer and deferred increasing prices.

These are good people.

There are scant regional distinctions among '02s, except in the Rheingau, which was singularly blessed, it seems. The area between Bad Dürkheim (Pfalz) and Westhofen (Rheinhessen) which suffered under sometimes-dubious botrytis in 2001 was better in 2002. The lower Mosel had a cleaner crop too, as did the Mittelrhein. The Nahe is always hard to read, as one looks first to Dönnhoff, who is really in a class by himself and not necessarily typical. Yet the contrast between *his* '02s and '01s is indeed telling. Where the '01s have the most improbably crystalline depth, the '02s are more explicitly prismatic. Their poetry isn't quite as profound as it was in '01, but it is great poetry read with even greater diction.

Mosel lovers will rejoice to taste many of these wines. Again, less uniformly superlative than '01, but what's good is *real* good, and some growers are frankly better.

To sum up: 2002s are sleek and lithe but ripe and juicy, highly mineral and flowery, lyric rather than Profound. They will age correctly, i.e. there's nothing angular or asymmetrical in their structure to suggest otherwise. It is a Spätlese vintage (yet again!) with virtually no "true" Kabinett. It's a vintage both admirable and likeable.

Continuing a rich tradition of at least, what, 2, 3 years, I herewith designate the HORS CLASSE of 2002 in my portfolio.

Class-By-Himself

Dönnhoff

Terry-Will-Be-Making-Room-In-The-Cellar-For . . .

(in no particular order)

Strub

Meßmer

Dr.Deinhard

Hexamer

Spreitzer

Leitz (another stellar vintage; how does he do it?!)

Christoffel

Schaefer

Karlsmühle

Selbach-Oster

A.J. Adam

2001 REVISITED

Usually the yearling starts to show its adult shape as we taste it alongside the infant; not this time. The 2001s have shape enough, but all they showed was a serene classicism. They have more iron than '02. I doubt they'll ever go through a "difficult" phase as they're so symmetrical. Maybe in another year they'll start to show the thing-by-which-they're-identifiable, which all vintages show eventually, the print of the days in which they grew. None of you will regret a single bottle you own, I promise.

There was some grower-backlash, which one expects, especially from those who didn't fare among the best. "Oh maybe on the Mosel 2001 was grandiose, but here it was nothing special; 2002 is better," I heard from time to time. This might prompt others to start revising 2001 down, just as it disappears from commercial distribution. Imagine that! Count me out of that crowd. I bought up every bit of 2001 I could find, a few of which you'll see for the first time, and I'll say now what I said then: buy them early and often and buy a lot of them.

EARLIER VINTAGES REVISITED

2000 has pretty much been ushered off the stage. Both '01 and '02 are richer and deeper, yet 2000 remains a kind of tragic watershed; tragic because of the egregious effort that went into making it; watershed because with this vintage we gleaned the great Change. No such wines could have been made in those conditions 30, 20, even 10 years ago. The best 2000s are immensely worthwhile wines. In January I sat drinking Riesling one afternoon with Laura and Jay from *House & Garden*, and noted with pleasure how fine the 2001 Leistenberg Kabinett from Dönnhoff was showing. "Um, Terry, the label says 2000," said Jay. Oh *c'mon* Jay; don't distract my flow of rhetoric with anything so mundane as the facts! But this 2000 was indeed lovely, as many of them are.

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

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

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



are, I think how good it is to have been part of such a chain of pleasure.

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

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

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

THINGS I WOULD DO IF I WERE RULER OF ALL THE KNOWN WORLD

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

The Germans are finally starting to adapt, albeit with less celerity than their compadres in Austria. Personally I see no reason why any and all wines up to Spätlese couldn't be closed with fake corks, screwcaps, crown caps or lamb-skin condoms if that's what it takes to replenish the cork supply so that we go back to the days of 1-2%. Can you imagine if *milk* had a spoilage rate of 10-14% because of variations in the *cartons*? Yet we tolerate an equal proportion of spoiled wine with docile indulgence. Grrrr.

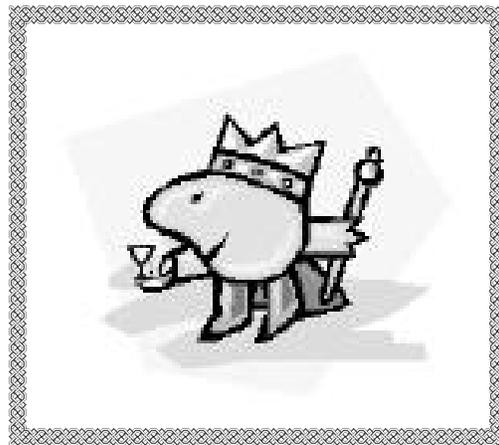
Here's something else I'd do; remove the spurious glamour attending to "flying winemakers." I'm not sure why it's sexy for someone to ride a plane to go somewhere else to make wine. I appreciate wanderlust. But I'm happier when someone chooses a place and makes wine there, ideally the place he was born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

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

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

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

I would decree that the word *HALBTROCKEN* be stricken from the lexicon, thrown in the garbage, fished



out, and thrown back in.

If the Germans insisted on using label nomenclature in their own language, I'd decree that *dry* wines be called TROCKEN and that **bone dry** wines be called SEHR TROCKEN (or, if I were really in command, *Trocken de Sade*).

I would further decree that these determinations not under any circumstances be based on actual amounts of sugar and/or acidity as measured in the lab, but rather on **the taste of the wine**. I know this idea is radical (if not heretical) but perhaps the world is ready for it.

There are certain persons I would prohibit from public discourse. Their voices are simply too dangerous. I shall not name them, but will cite one of their more pernicious ideas to show you what I mean. I am not just a grouch. These guys have to be muzzled. Ready?

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

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

I know the answer, and it is an answer of sorts, but embedded in it lies a subversive question. They'd probably say: "When the consumer buys a bottle called 'Meursault' he knows he is getting a wine that is always dry, but our German wines could be dry or semi dry or sweet, and this confuses him." Well let's not have that! I have an alternate suggestion. LET'S INSIST THAT ALL WINES LABELLED "ERSTES GEWAECHS" BE **SWEET!!!** And let's even do it in fine Teutonic fashion and decree the wines must have "no more than 50.5

grams and no less than 38.623698499 grams (39 if you're married filing jointly)." If we are going to decide, completely arbitrarily, how an entire community of disparate wines will taste, then let's increase the odds they'll taste *GOOD*, what say?

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

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

All in all I'm starting to wonder about the VDP. They seem to opt as if by instinct toward ideological strait-jackets. They frequently fix what wasn't broken while neglecting what is. Low yields, environmentally friendly viticulture, hand-picking, strict ripeness minima, all OK. Good place to stop. Vineyard classification, also OK: I proposed one myself in a DECANTER article back in 1985. Rather blatantly self-serving (e.g. FAR too much Grand Cru land in marginal Rheingau villages which are home to VDP members) but still, it needs doing and any start is better than none.

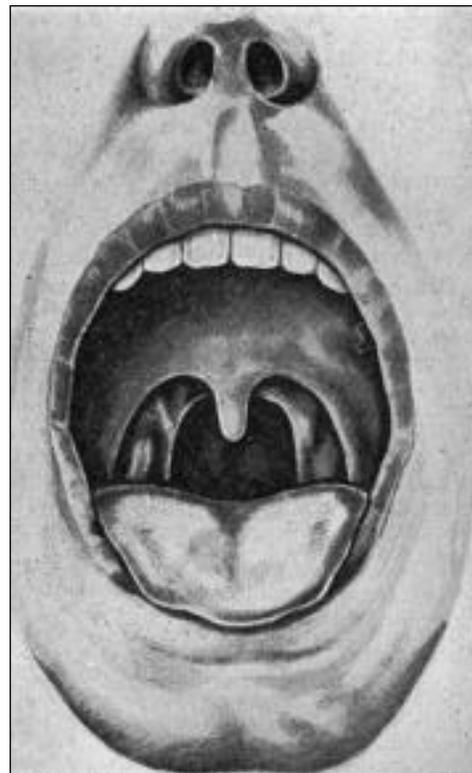
Good place to stop. *Leave well enough alone*. But, alas and inevitably, the dreaded "marketing" guys pull up in the white truck with the jackets and the Procrustian bed and the syringes and scalpels and electrodes. Let's establish *prices*, they insist. Let's decree that only Riesling can be called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

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

WHAT IS A PALATE?

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

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



Say "Abbbb....."



Johannes Leitz pours his wines for tasters in New York

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

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

But mostly we taste without thinking about it. Try this: put three different brands of tortilla chips in three bowls, taste them, and note which of the three you liked best and *why*. Presto taste-o! You’re doing it; you are EXERCISING YOUR PALATE. If you did this for thirty-seven years you would have a *killer* palate for tortilla chips. What you’d do *then* I have no idea.

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

I like detail more than I like size. In fact I instinctively recoil from wines I feel to be bigger than I have room for. When I detect skeins of flavor I am happy. When a wine enters my palate monochromatically and then breaks down into many-colored rivulets of flavor, I am *very* happy. I like wines which show *persistent soft-sell*. The persistence is how I know the wine is serious,

and if it has the *real* goods it doesn’t need to hard-sell.

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

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

I like balance but I will tolerate a fascinating “flaw.” Ideally a wine is both balanced *and* fascinating. In a balanced wine the flavors seem *preordained* to exist in precisely **that** configuration. No knees or elbows poke out. You sit by the stream. The water is clean and cold. The mountain peaks are clear. There are no beer cans or cigarette butts in sight. You’ve been hiking for a few hours and you feel loose and warm and hungry. You unpack your lunch, take the first bite of food, and then you see your sweetheart come up the path. The air is soft and cool under a gentle sun. Things are exactly perfect. Happens, what, once in a lifetime? In balanced wine, it happens with each sip.

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

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



Corrie Malas exercising her palate

HOW GERMAN WINES AGE

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

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

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

Different wines handle bottling differently; Johannes Leitz says that filigree, delicate wines lose the most from bottling, while robust, lusty wines come through better. I’ve seen this at work at Christoffel also; the Erdeners always show better younger than the more delicate, fragile Ürzigers. But generally the dumb state lasts from two weeks to four months after bottling. Then the wine has all its flavor again.

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

So don’t!

The problem is, we are tasting and sampling those wines commercially at *exactly* the most awkward moment. If you encounter such an aroma in a young Mosel Riesling, try swirling the glass for a few minutes;



it will dissipate. The number of minutes it takes to dissipate is roughly the number of *years* it will take to disappear from the wine entirely if the bottle is left undisturbed. It is in NO WAY a flaw; merely an inconvenience. Or you can look upon it as a warning not to drink these wines too young!

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

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

There are also strict chemical reactions wherein acidity softens and sugars polymerize, so that each is less pronounced as the wine ages. In the 1990-vintage zeitgeist the idea was to make “sweet” wines as dry as possible, but many of these wines now seem obdurate and lumpen, with still-prominent acids and not enough fruit; yang, but no yin. Sometimes it’s necessary to allow apparently-excessive sweetness in a baby-wine as a guarantor of great cellaring. A few of the 2002s appear to have more sweetness than they strictly need, but from the right cellar I’m actually glad to see it; it denotes a grower who’s thinking years ahead to the wine’s maturity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT TO DRINK NOW

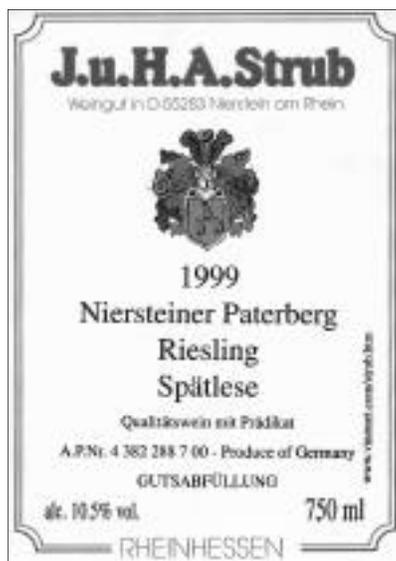
This assumes you acquired the wine in good condition and haven’t abused it yourself! And it also assumes you’re looking for the wines to be at their “peak,” whatever that might mean. Let me tell you what it means to me. I like German wines best when they have a full ration of secondary, bottle-ripe flavors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

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



LABEL BASICS

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



In Germany, ripeness is all. Theoretically, the vineyard doesn't matter, though it is named. The inference *there* is that any plot of land is capable of ripening grapes to this or that level. The "better" vineyards show themselves by offering types of flavors which may be *subjectively* judged superior, but there's no room for interpretation when it comes to specific gravity of grape must. It's there or it's not.

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

Here's what it means: Strub is the producer. If you see the word *Weingut* in any proximity, that's your signal. A *Weingut* is a winery which estate-bottles its wine. Look for that word. Vintage is self-evident. Niersteiner Paterberg identifies the site and locality. Nierstein is a place from which the populace, whether Homo Sapiens or the progeny of *vitas vinifera*, are known as Niersteiners. O.K., New Yorkers? Paterberg is a vineyard. How are you supposed to

know that? It's always the second word in the sequence. Meursault Perrieres. Niersteiner Paterberg. NBD!

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). The phrase *Qualitätswein mit Prädikat* is a bit of bureaucratic puffery. Quality wine with special distinction, right! The distinction in this case is that the wine is not chaptalized. Chaptalized wines can only be labeled *Qualitätswein b.A.*; they aren't subject to predicates. Only Germans have perversely decided that chaptalized wine is ipso facto inferior wine. The French cheerily go on consuming just about all their wines except the most southerly, not caring that sugar was added to the grape must to boost the alcohol a few degrees. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the *Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum standards. That word *Gutsabfüllung* means estate bottled. Think about it: it's actually *shorter* than *mise en bouteilles au domaine*; it's just a single word instead of a seven-syllable phrase. And then finally on the bottom we find Rheinhessen, in this case the *region* of origin. The French wine denies us even this basic courtesy. No "Grand vin de Bourgogne" here. We are thrown upon the dubious mercy of the BATE, which will require "Red Burgundy Wine" to appear on the strip label.

No, there's nothing inherently complex about German wine labels. Long words, sometimes. Yet when a sommelier approaches the table, he seldom recommends the "Sancerre Reserve du Monts Dammes from Cotat;" he suggests the *Sancerre*. Same here. Don't spell it all out in all its excruciating length. Suggest "The Niersteiner for Monsieur's pork 'n beans?" Some of the more arcane ramifications of the label can be interesting to students of logic, or just for a chuckle over some precious bureaucratic geekiness, but you really don't need to know it. Do you *have* to know all the queer codes on an airplane ticket in order to board the plane? But your travel agent can see all kinds of information in those strange little glyphs. Learn it if you care to.



GLOSSARY:

OECHSLE

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

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

GL

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

EXTRACT

This is a word that's nearly always used incorrectly. Most wine people use it as a vague metaphor for who-knows-what virtue they claim to find in a wine, saying that such-and-such is "highly extracted." I don't know what that means. Extract really is simple and tangible. It is everything in wine except sugar, acid, water, and alcohol. You can measure it in the lab, and all German wine carrying an A.P. number has had its extract measured. The average reading would be somewhere in the low 20s—speaking in g.l. now. I'd expect to see a Riesling QbA or Kabinett with 20 to 24 g.l. extract, or 2.2 to 2.4 percent. I'd look for Spätlese to be a little higher, Auslese still higher, and the stickies quite high, up to 40 or even 50 g.l.

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

ACIDITY

I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for

a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine except Riesling has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient. Curiously, it does seem that before the second World War, many German Rieslings underwent partial malolactic fermentation, probably by accident, and the wines of ripe vintages may have been lower in acid than we experience these days. Yet the wines aged fabulously. As a rule, Riesling begins to show its splashy cool freshness around 8 g.l., and at 8.5 or 9 g.l. the wine starts to focus and tighten into a lemony vigor. Above 9 g.l. we start feeling acidity as a major component of the wine's structure. This is usually favorable, but acidity, like every other component, is just a piece in a mosaic that has to look like something. One also learns to distinguish among types of acidity. Tartaric is less sharp, malic more so. There's a thin line between an acid-fueled flavor power and just plain sharpness. Ten years ago it seemed that all I talked about with my growers was this figure or that; nowadays we hardly do it at all.

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

TYPES OF SOIL

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

TROCKEN AND HALBTROCKEN

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

SÜSSRESERVE

This is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a fully fermented wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor is assured—at least in theory. I intervene as often as I can in this process, as I have definite ideas about harmony. Where the story of a blend is interesting I'll share it with you. The practice is nearly universal along the Rhine but uncommon along the Mosel, where sweetness is adjusted by interrupting fermentation. Actually, I have decided that I don't like the word "Süssreserve" any more and I won't use it in this text. It may be silly, but we have a much sexier and more palatable word for a highly similar practice and process: DOSAGE. Since nobody objects to the idea of Dosage in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I'll use the nicer one.

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

FLURBEREINIGUNG

Literally this means the "rectification of the fields." It's actually a process whereby costs of production are diminished by rationalizing land holdings and building roads, paths, and walkways. Formerly the growers' holdings were split into myriad tiny parcels and scattered hither and yon over the hillside. Often there was no easy access. It could take a longer time to *get* to one's vines than to actually *work* them.

In Flurbereinigung, the entire expanse of a vineyard is pulled up. After the new roads are built and the work is completed (sometimes old walls and terraces are rebuilt also), the growers get the same amount of land back, or nearly, but in fewer, larger sections. After replanting, the first commercial crop follows in three to four years. Everyone who's had vineyards through the process reports that it is *much* easier to work the land afterwards. It also levels the playing field, since everybody's vines are now the same age. It does create short-term shortages of wine, and it does diminish the quality of wine from a vineyard until the vines mature again, but it's a small price to pay to help ensure the future of viticulture in Germany.

HOCHGEWÄCHS

Do us both a favor and don't even *try* to pronounce this. Just do what I do and call it "hogwash," for that's what it is. Another perfect example of an idea that started out right and turned into a bureaucratic nightmare. Here's the scenario. You're a conscientious grower; a lot of your wines exceed the legal minimum for their quality levels. Especially your QbA wines, which are near or actually *at* Kabinett ripeness. You don't *want* to make a thin Kabinett from these grapes, so you chaptalize. No problem so far. Except that when you try to sell the wine, now labeled QbA, it competes against *oceans* of mass-produced, cheap, lowest-common-denominator QbA selling for pennies per bottle at the corner supermarket. Nobody will pay your price. Where's your incentive?

Thus the creation of this new term (actually the co-opting of an earlier term with a different meaning, but that's another story). Think of it as a kind of "super QbA," or it you prefer, a chaptalized Kabinett or damn-near Kabinett. Any chaptalized wine with at least x-ripeness can be sold as Hochgewächs. You can even chaptalize Spätlese quality must if you feel like it. Hogwash also has special requirements in terms of how many points the wine needs in order to qualify, and, most significant, **one hundred percent purity of vintage**, grape variety and vineyard site—versus 85% as the general rule in Germany.

So you can see why they needed to do it, but the thing is just so typically *half-assed!* Why don't they show some *courage* and *raise the requirements* for Qualitätswein? Easy answer: because the merchants and co-ops have too much political clout. But hey, no problem, dude! I don't mind struggling my entire career to erase the miserable impression so many people have of German wine because of all the oceans of bilge those wineries turn out!

GUTSABFÜLLUNG

This is a recently permitted term for estate bottling, and *much* preferable to the old *Erzeugerabfüllung* which is now restricted for use by co-ops. This is good for at least two reasons. First the word is shorter. Second, it creates a logical connection between *Weingut* and *Gutsabfüllung*. And third, we'uns can remember it because, after all, it means to fill your gut! 'Bout time the Germans did *something* good with their Twilight-Zone wine law.





The Horny Funk Brothers: Reunited at Last!

"Having travelled extensively with Terry in wine growing regions around the world, I have developed an immense respect for his critical abilities in choosing just the right bottle of Napa Valley Pinot Noir at dinner. Too bad he doesn't have any business interest there. Beyond that, I have never slept in the next hotel room to a man whose headboard slams against the wall so often in the night accompanying muffled, yet girlish squeels of pleasure, only to see Terry emerge alone every morning."

-Mark Hutchens

SOMMELIER ALERT!

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

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

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

Briefly put, if you don't already know, I think you'd be surprised how well German white wine will *work* with your food. It's actually, dare I say it, the best available white wine you could use. When chefs create preps they are usually looking for flavor synergies, sometimes harmonies and sometimes **telling** disharmonies. Nobody deliberately combines *discordant* flavors in a prep. Why stop there? The idea that "anything goes; you should drink what you like" is dangerous, because it isn't true. Why, you start letting people drink what they *like* and the next thing you know they're wearing white before Memorial Day! I don't care about what's Correct, but I do know what tastes good and I have a small idea why.



A bold new concept in wine & food pairings: order the wrong wine, your food attacks you.

sommelier alert

| | | |
|----------|---|-----|
| GDH-133 | 2002 Dönnhoff Estate Riesling | .34 |
| GDH-134 | 2002 Dönnhoff Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Kabinett | .34 |
| GDH-135 | 2002 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett | .34 |
| GDH-136 | 2002 Dönnhoff Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese | .35 |
| GDH-137 | 2002 Dönnhoff Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese | .35 |
| GDH-140 | 2002 Dönnhoff Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese | .35 |
| GHX-009 | 2002 Hexamer Meddersheimer Riesling | .38 |
| GHX-010 | 2002 Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett | .38 |
| GMA-055 | 2002 Mathern Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett | .40 |
| GMA-054 | 2002 Mathern Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Hochgewächs Halbtrocken | .40 |
| GMA-056 | 2002 Mathern Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Hochgewächs | .40 |
| GGA-059 | 2002 Gänz Guldentaler Apostelberg Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken | .42 |
| GGA-061 | 2002 Gänz Guldentaler Sonnenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken | .42 |
| GJS-055 | 2001 Schneider Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese | .47 |
| GST-096L | 2002 Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter | .52 |
| GST-097 | 2002 Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett | .52 |
| GST-098 | 2002 Strub Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese | .53 |
| GMZ-048 | 2001 Merz Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken | .59 |
| GMZ-050 | 2002 Merz Ockenheimer Laberstatt Riesling Auslese Trocken | .59 |
| GMZ-052 | 2002 Merz "Alte Kelter" Chardonnay Auslese | .59 |
| GOH-043 | 2001 P.A. Ohler'sches Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett | .61 |
| GOH-04 | 1998 P.A. Ohler'sches Binger Schlossberg-Schwätzerchen Riesling Auslese | .61 |
| GKR-075 | 2001 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett | .79 |
| GKR-076 | 2001 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese | .79 |
| GKR-077 | 1998 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese "R" | .80 |
| GLI-074 | 2002 Lingenfelder "Bird Label" Riesling | .83 |
| GLI-075 | 2002 Lingenfelder Riesling Spätlese (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg) | .83 |
| GLI-069 | 2001 Lingenfelder Riesling Spätlese (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg) | .83 |
| GNE-084 | 2002 Neckerauer Weisenheimer Goldberg Riesling Kabinett | .88 |
| GKO-002 | 2001 Kassner-Simon Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Kabinett | .90 |

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|----------|---|------|
| GKO-006 | 2002 Kassner-Simon Freinsheimer Schwarzes Kreuz Riesling Kabinett | .90 |
| GKO-004 | 1990 Kassner-Simon Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Auslese | .90 |
| GMS-075 | 2001 Messmer Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken | .92 |
| GMS-087 | 2002 Messmer Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken | .92 |
| GMS-093L | 2002 Messmer Dornfelder Trocken, 1 Liter | .94 |
| GBR-067 | 2002 Biffar Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett | .96 |
| GEM-064 | 2002 Eugen Müller Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett | .98 |
| GTM-069L | 2002 Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter | .103 |
| GTM-071 | 2002 Theo Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett | .103 |
| GSP-010 | 2002 Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken | .112 |
| GRL-027 | 2002 Riedel Hallgartener Hendelberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken | .115 |
| GSO-197 | 2002 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken . . . | .123 |
| GSO-202 | 2002 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett | .124 |
| GSO-203 | 2002 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett | .124 |
| GSO-208 | 2002 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese * | .124 |
| GSO-210 | 2002 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese | .125 |
| GJU-073 | 2002 Meulenhof Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett | .134 |
| GJU-070 | 2002 Meulenhof Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett | .134 |
| GME-111 | 2002 Merkelbach Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett | .136 |
| GME-114 | 2002 Merkelbach Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese (Fuder 2) | .137 |
| GME-110 | 2002 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (Fuder 12) | .137 |
| GJC-112 | 2002 Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett | .140 |
| GKE-079 | 2002 Kerpen Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese | .143 |
| GWS-097 | 2002 Willi Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich Riesling | .146 |
| GWS-099 | 2002 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett #11 | .146 |
| GWS-102 | 2002 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #9 | .146 |
| GHS-017 | 2002 Hoffman-Simon Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese | .153 |
| GAC-005 | 2002 Clüsserath Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett | .154 |
| GCL-023 | 2002 Loewen Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese | .156 |
| GSW-036 | 2002 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett . . | .158 |
| GKM-071 | 2002 Karlmühle Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett | .160 |
| GKM-072 | 2002 Karlmühle Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett | .160 |

nahe wines



It is a joy to labor lovingly on behalf of what I feel to be the loveliest Riesling wines on the face of the earth.

You know, the Rhineland is really quite compact. You can get to the Nahe in a half-hour from the Rheingau, a half-hour from the Rhinehessen, an hour from the Pfalz, and an hour from the Mosel. Yet the Nahe is the forgotten acre just out of view, trilling beyond earshot in its winsome, lonely corner. Especially after the soaring scenery of the Mosel, the dreamy Nahe is almost narcotically soothing. It's still, and intimate, and stirs the soul as it calms the nerves.

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

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

wine interests you in and of itself, these wines will give you as much delight and absorption as wine ever can.

There are four basic soil types in the Nahe. Each gives its own kind of wine. **Slate** does what it always does; the Nahe variant has more middle, almost like a super rich Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but they are more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marbeline feel. **Loam and clay** are the plebians, mostly planted to the commoner varieties, though even these varieties are more fetchingly graceful along the Nahe. Finally the volcanic soils with the exotic names: **porphyry, melaphyr, gneiss, rhyolite**, give the world's most spellbinding white wine, Riesling at an impossible pinnacle of fire and grace. Blackcurrant, honeysuckle, raspberry, a heavenly host of flavors astonishingly differentiated and an almost prismatically filigree.

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a

The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be.

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

But at least there's *one* place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "VISITEZ LES CAVES!" signs. You can hear a breeze rustling through trees in the *next* orchard before it reaches the one in which you're sitting. There's a constant clamor of birds. Signs by the side of the road warn of frog crossings. You wouldn't drive fast even if you could.

The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be: intricate, searchingly complex, with hypnotically shimmering overtones of flavor that can stir you to a point between perplexity and awe. Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted. If the pure *flavor* of

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

walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was

grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

We returned to the group and I beckoned them to follow me. The exercise was repeated, this time with eight of us walking one behind the other—we looked like a chain-gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyr. I turned to the group. “You hear a lot of crap about what makes complexity in wines. Some people would like you to think that winemakers give complexity to their wines. Look at what you’ve just seen here. THAT, and THAT ALONE is complexity.”

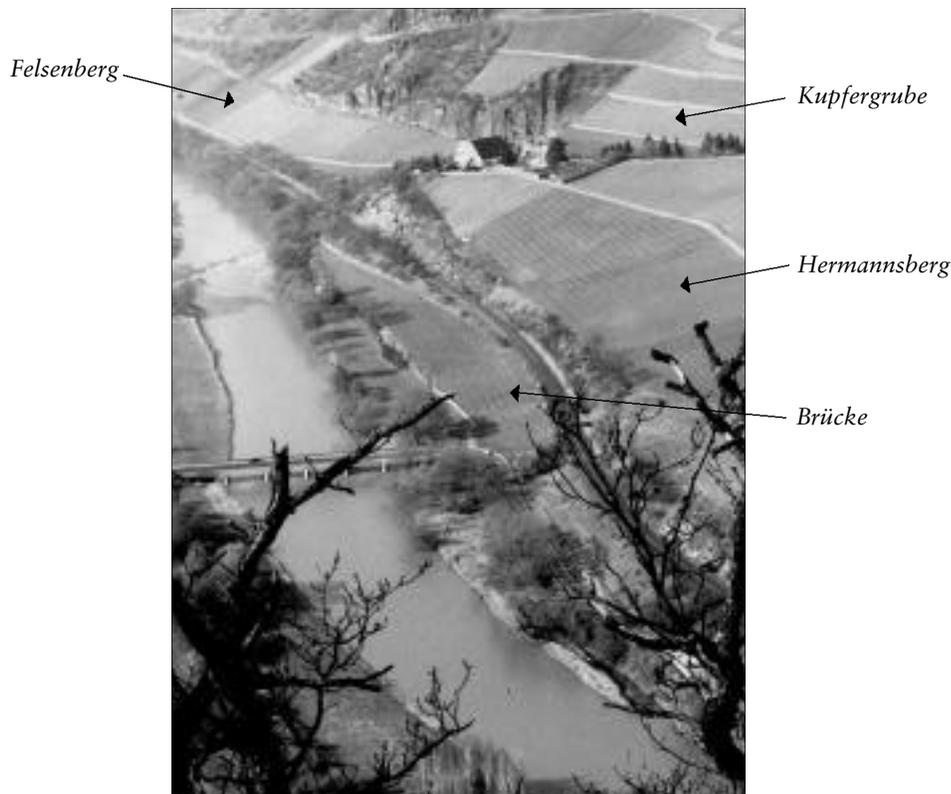
I know of nowhere else in the world of wine where grapes grow on such an intricate confluence of geological currents. No grape except Riesling could do justice to such soil.

Each year I try to hike to the top of the Lemberg, the highest hill in the region. It does me good: the birds, the

world, grateful in my utmost heart for the beauty that lives in the land, but also somehow lost.

In my dream I wished I could bring you here with me, and we could sit out for a few hours in the afternoon light and look down on those miraculous vineyards and listen to the birds. Let that time gestate in our hearts, so that when we taste the wines later on we taste them *with* that heart, relaxed, dilated and ready. And then I think of those wines, arranged in sterile rows on a table somewhere, while I pace nearby and worry about how they’ll “show.” And for a moment it becomes impossible to be both people at once, the hot-shot wine guy and the plain-and-simple me who sits on the hill pensive, calm and grateful.

I happen to believe that wine **means** something. And much of what wine means was visible to me then, and every time since. I also *buy* wine in part because of what it means, which is a more vital question than its simple exterior flavor. Yet if we wish to make a living buying and sell-



View of vineyards from the Lemberg

fresh spermy smell of early spring and the view. At this time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil forming miasmic currents on the exposed ground. Almost all the great Nahe vineyards can be seen below, among the noblest homes for Riesling anywhere on earth, spread out like a necklace of diamonds: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle, Hermannsberg, Brücke. I peer through the spring sunshine, remembering the first time I ever saw this astonishing view, when I suddenly had an eerie sense of something being *shown* to me. I was a million miles from marketing. Looking into a remote hollow on a distant limb of the

ing wine, we often confront a perplexing question: who are we to be? We all let meaning into our lives in *some* way; we thirst for meaning unawares. When you cheer like a banshee for the home team, you’re feeding a need for **meaning**; on the face of it, what does it matter *who* wins the game? We *create* meaning because we *need* to have it in our lives. Wine is one of the things which happens to feed that need in me, and Nahe wine does so in a particularly suggestive, caressing way. “There are mysteries here of the most exquisite sweetness; I will show them to you,” it seems to say.

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

It is a truly weird arrangement of feelings. I drive down the street knowing for the next several hours I'm going to be as roused and moved as wine can make me. I also know I'm going to see an old friend. I also know I'm going to be made considerable fun of, especially if I do or say anything remotely precious. This I receive as a wry prerequisite of Helmut Dönnhoff's approval; he teases me.

The past few years I've felt a subtle pressure to be matter-of-fact, as if Helmut would disapprove if I was still amazed after all these years. Oh I did used to be amazed! And now, ground down and weathered, now I'm not.

I respect Dönnhoff as much as any man I've ever met, thus I want him to approve of me. I tried to be as matter-of-fact as he is. It worked, for awhile, but I can't sustain it, not with wines like these. Yet it taught me something.

By deliberately subduing my emotions, especially that in me which might respond lyrically or with mystic rapture, I became less conscious of how I felt and more conscious of the wine. I am innately a softie when confronted with beauty. I get happy or weepy or exhilarated or pensive but I *respond* as if without volition. Yet having to subdue that response created a silence in which unexpected things were heard.

Helmut Dönnhoff knows his wines are good. He doesn't strut about it but he isn't aw-shucks either. I once asked him if he agreed his goal was to make wines of crystalline texture and precise articulation. "I don't disagree," he replied. Then how do you get there? I had to know. There is, in effect, no "how", was his answer. Wine results from the confluence of a multitude of small choices, which alter as circumstances mandate. There's no recipe. There is ever-more reliance on instinct. Dönnhoff is very respectful of spontaneous instinctive recognition, and has become wary of the intellect's appetite to deconstruct. Last year he spoke with David Schildknecht and said this telling thing:

"I am always asking people who have no technical expertise to assess the taste of my wines. The postman, for instance. I ask him, 'Would you just please taste these three wines and tell me which you prefer.' 'Oh, it's really too early in the morning . . .' he protests, but I pull him in and sit him down anyway. And then he says something quite amazing and insightful that suddenly opens your eyes to the wine. And here is the decisive point: there are a lot of us who know too much about wine to be able to taste."

Precisely.

But funny, when you pass through the stage of delighted incredulity that wine can taste like these wines do, when you simply take it as an unaccountable gift of nature, you pay another kind of attention. Now it isn't about how you're going to feel. It's just about the wine. And you feel that happy absorption in something outside, the freedom of attending to the outer world. And suddenly the wines become more vividly real, even more

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke, Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg and Kupfergrube, Norheimer Kirschheck and Dellchen**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry and weathered volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 75% Riesling, 25% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder**

enthraling, yet it all happens quietly, you have no words for what you see because you've been focused on your own feelings, and you have to start over.

I think this is where Mr. Dönnhoff wanted, in his way, to lead me. One doesn't dare preen. The shrine compresses itself and liquefies, and soon you realize it is inside you now.

My favorite of all those aching drawings of Käthe Kollwitz is called "Prisoners Listening To Music." In it the damned, the wretched, are looking wonderingly at a cloister inside themselves they didn't know was there. The experience of beauty reminds us we are at least partly angels. We must be, if, when they visit us, we understand them. Dönnhoff's wines are quiet and searching, and you hear them from an interior world monastic and still.

Helmut Dönnhoff begins, like his wines, with a certain cordial reserve, unfolding layer by layer. He's a taster who concentrates intensely and doesn't make snap judgments. If he sees *you* concentrating, weighing, sifting, reflecting, he is content. He's less concerned with what

you may have *concluded* than in the *WAY* you go about tasting. He is alert for any disagreements he and I might have (though these are almost unheard-of these days); he stops what he's doing, affixes me with his piercing glare, and man, I gotta *produce*. He is fascinated by the minutiae of wine, the little eyelashes of flavor, the tenderest and most precise articulation of nuances. But he discusses it all matter-of-factly, like a father who's over his first giddy wonder at his newborn and can now study the baby with calm adoration.

Dönnhoff sees his work as craft; such art as may exist in wine comes from nature. "All the real work of the vintage happens before the pressing," he says. "What you do afterwards is repair." He approaches wine respectfully but not reverentially.

As a vintner he takes his duties completely seriously and applies himself calmly and fastidiously to his work. The result is a community of wines as transparent and filigree as spider webs, but the wonder for Helmut lies not in the strange fact of such a thing's existence, but in the beauty of the workmanship. He wants to make wine that is pure and serene in flavor.

My friend Robert Houde has a great way to convey this idea: "People have to get over the idea that *intensity* always means *volume*," he says. Thank you Robert! Think of some yahoo blabbing away behind you in a movie theater. Beyond all patience, you turn to this clod and whisper, "*Would you please SHUT UP?*" You haven't raised your voice above a whisper, but you have spoken with seething intensity. Wine does this too. It is always asking me to shut up.

I loved something Helmut said once: "DAS GANZE DING MUSS KLINGEN!" That is, the whole thing must harmonize; it isn't enough if this *part* or that *part* is interesting or arresting, the *whole* picture has to be balanced. Helmut is unaware of it, but he offered quite a gleaming gift of instruction with that simple little sentence. We'd all be better wine drinkers—and happier liverers of LIFE—if we could somehow remember: the whole thing must harmonize.

Dönnhoff ferments with yeast cultures he creates himself from his own wines, the better to give him the highest common denominator of controlled, slow fermentation without having to resort to commercial yeast. The wines are aged in cask until bottling, but no longer than six months. If the wine isn't bottle-ready after six months it is racked into stainless steel. Low-acid wines are racked immediately after fermentation; wines with healthy high acid may sit on the lees as long as a month. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

"Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality," he says, adding: "You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you're not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology." He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for



Helmut Dönnhoff

acidity as well as ripeness. "It is the concentration of *all* the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its *real* taste and structure," he says. "If you have a barrel that's not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character." Fermentation runs its own course here.

I know a lot of you who regard these wines with an almost religious awe. I watched Helmut (and his wife Gabi) pouring at my New York DI tasting last June. A taster had his epiphany: "Wait a minute," he said, "Are you *Dönnhoff*?" Helmut assented bashfully. "Omgod! *We're not worthy. We're not worthy.*" He cried, waving his arms in the hosanna gesture. I sidled up behind Helmut and winked. "Star-power." I said. "*Verrückt*" (*Crazy!*) he replied.

Well, the 2002 series here will do nothing to quash your ardor, dear friend.

As usual, Dönnhoff has taken that which is loveliest in a vintage and refined it to a point of sublimity. These wines have qualities often ascribed to great Japanese cuisine; a kind of limpid clarity and almost virginal purity as if you are tasting not things but essences. Midway through these wines I felt a shift of consciousness, as if it grasped the wine with ever more delicate tentacles. A kind of meditative calm descends; things are surreally vivid. Certainly their clarity and beauty touches on the mystical, as does the angelic care with which their flavors are etched.

It says something about the Riesling religion that its high priests are so *down to earth*, because great Riesling COMES DOWN TO EARTH. Earth and soil is the reason it *is* great. Welcome then, to many of the greatest soils in the world of wine, and the wry, genial and careful man who midwives them into being for us.

Some Notes On The Vineyards:

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

NIEDERHÄUSER HERMANNSHÖLE is one of those vineyards that gives utterly miraculous wine. You shake your head in delighted perplexity that fermented grape juice can attain such flavors. It is a steep hillside, not very large (8.5 hectares), with ideal exposition and a soil whose complexity is mirrored in its wines. Walk fifty yards through the vineyard and you see a mish-mash of soils, as though this were a geological junction, an Arc de Triomphe-like conflagration. There is slate, porphyry, melaphyr and conglomerates—sometimes all jumbled together. The only possible drawback is drought in the drier years. Its favorable exposure makes Eiswein almost impossible.

Dönnhoff is currently producing the very best wines from HERMANNSHÖLE, and you need look no further to see one of the wine-world's great confluences of a great vineyard and a great proprietor. I don't care what a hot-shot palate you have, the complexities of these wines will tax it to its outermost limits. The fundamental aromas and flavors are a mingling of sharply sweet cherry, sometimes black cherry, and currant-cassis, but there is a hint of anise too, something spriggy, and an undertow of stoniness from the slate. Botrytis brings tropical fruit notes. I would go so far as to claim that NO SINGLE WINE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD IS AS COMPLEX AS DÖNNHOFF'S BEST FROM HERMANNSHÖHLE.

Dönnhoff at a glance:

In this humble taster's opinion, these are the greatest Rieslings on earth. No other wine, anywhere, exceeds the clarity, polish, complexity and sheer beauty of flavor of this grower's finest wines.

how the wines taste:

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

GDH-133 **2002 Estate Riesling** +

Again a blend from the Felsenberg (Porphyry) and the Kieselberg (slate, sand and gravel over loam, and steep); fragrance a foot from the glass; the palate is crystalline and filigree; silker and more piquant than the '01. Very fine. Lovely, wry lady, this. She's almost arch about her complexity, and wise enough to be a little silly.

SOS: 0 (between four and fourteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-134 **2002 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Kabinett**

Introverted as always. Makes a lovely first impression with fine fruit and rivulets of nuance. Has a slight puritanical streak on the finish but I've never seen its fruit so precise. (The wine is usually Halbtrocken though not labeled as such).

SOS: 0 (between five and sixteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-135 **2002 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett**

Pretty nose and a cheerful profile. Leistenberg is a slatey vineyard (not the Mosel devonian slate but the sandy slate called "Tholey") whose wines sometimes recall Trittenheimers. This has the 2002 tick of briskness on the finish, but this is the socially graceful sister who doesn't get the time to read all the books she wants.

SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

The Great Group Of Spätlese

Like many Riesling growers, Dönnhoff believes Spätlese is the perfection of expression of both site and grape. Kabinett is the charming miniature, while Auslese is by definition something “outside” the norm.

In 2002 he has produced a staggering achievement, six Rieslings of remarkably precise articulation, each of them utterly distinctive, speaking their individual languages with the finest, purest diction and pitch.

As a group: **+++**

GDH-136 **2002 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**

At last! The 2001 was the auction-wine, and the vintage before that was 1995, an “accidental” sweet wine from a site he usually reserves for Trocken. This wine has a backward nose which unfolds into immense detail – if such is even possible – superb minerality as if bath salts were dissolved in it; literally salty like Nigl is sometimes, and a spectral breakdown of nuance that’s almost absurd. Slim but endless. The classic urgent whisper. Delicate, almost invisible sweetness. Classically seductive texture of the site. For me, emblematic of great Nahe Riesling. SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty seven years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-137 **2002 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese** **++**

What *is* this? Porcini, caramel, new leather; this is the best wine anyone has made from this site in a least ten years. Prismatic, infinitely delicate interplay of nuance. The Felsenberg goes toward peach and sweet hay, this toward earth and moss. Couldn’t bear to spit it. A prayerful, pensive masterpiece, which made me want to walk among vines all day and ponder what great Riesling wants to say to us. SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty seven years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDH-138 **2002 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese** **+**

Kirschheck (cherry-hedge) is an unheralded Grand Cru, nearly ten hectares of which is 80% steep. The three growers I represent with parcels there all say it’s slatey, but the standard reference book says: “sandy loam on a bed of sandstone-Rotliegend.” Whatever! It tastes slatey. I’ve often found great affinity between these wines and Christoffel’s Würzgartens; this one’s full of cassis and spiced apple; irrepressible gaiety and vitality, less mystery but more *laughter*, though with endless spicy nuance. A sunnier day than the Dellchen, whose own light seems to shine from inside. SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty seven years)

GDH-139 **2002 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese** **++**

Kupfergrube is the Nahe’s most famous vineyard and one of its two or three greatest. It was planted by convict labor between the World Wars on the site of an old copper-mine (hence its name). It is fourteen hectares in size, Mosel-steep and full of an impossibly complicated mish-mash-o-minerals. It is the *sine qua non* of Nahe-ness at its best.

The 2002 has a crazy-pretty nose; the palate’s a twirling little dancer; insanely piquant, as if it blended all three hundred heirloom apples, every kind of pear and quince, a tease of talc and 40 rare minerals. Less a wine than some sort of silvery potion.

SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)

GDH-140 **2002 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** **++**

Brücke is Dönnhoff’s monopole site along the river, in which the soil visibly changes in the space of about 100 yards - four times. The past few years it has given Helmut’s weightiest wines. Amazing: from these 2.5 acres come white wines more noble and complex than any on this earth, and the consumer can buy this wine for not much over \$35, and that from one of the greatest vintners alive!

The 2002 is profound and professorial, judicial, the first of these to feel “masculine”; as for all of them, a sleek shapely body with endless depth of detail.

SOS: 1 (between ten and thirty years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

- GDH-146 **2002 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 Hard act to follow, that 2001.
 This was shy on the nose, then perfect. Then the palate. This shimmers and buzzes with incomprehensible clarity and iridescence, as if it channeled the aurora – sunspot-lese. Vibrant, and delightful and *oops*; I swallowed again.
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GDH-141H **2002 Niederhäuser Herrmannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+**
 I often imagine I underrate the Auslesen. After the half-dozen achingly pure Spätlesen, the introduction of botrytis was striking. Some Auslesen relax, but this one dances faster. Almost hyperactive spice and verve. I managed to actually spit this, though my body was in open revolt.
 SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty five years)
- GDH-142H **2002 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+**
 “Important” botrytis nose; the palate is priapic nearly to the point of discomfort, as some Eisweins are; every component pitched high – fruit, mineral density – a forcible little beast, this.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty two years)
- GDH-143H **2002 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese ***, 12/375ml (Auction)** **++**
 This might well end up being the auction wine, in which case you can compete with a bunch of drooling wine geeks and end up- paying six times more than you’d have been able to before Helmut joined the VDP. It’s got a baby Eiswein nose, a baby Eiswein taste. Eiswein, baby: Eiswein!
 SOS: 3 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GDH-144H **2002 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+++**
- GDH-145H **2002 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein ***, 12/375ml (Auction)** **+++**
 Brücke is predestined for the making of great Eiswein. In the summer it is a heat-trap, but after the first real Autumn chill it doesn’t get sun until late morning, and its position in the middle of a narrow valley causes it to collect cold breezes from the hilltops. And then, of course, Dönnhoff is a genius, so that doesn’t hurt.
- The “regular” Eiswein would be anyone else’s greatest, and indeed only Selbach-Oster and Karlsruhle’s equalled it. It’s the purest Eiswein Ideal. The 3-star is fricking *deranged*, with quite probably the most beautiful fruit I have ever tasted. Ever. You need ten goddamn stars, not three. I’ll be surprised if anyone in Germany made greater wine than this in 2002, though you’ll have to pay through the nose for it once the rabid auctioneers bid up the price to Sultan-of-Oman levels.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)



weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

So I'm sitting at my dining room table running through a bunch of samples. I have three cases from the former Nahe Staatsdomain (stultifyingly mediocre, though I understand help is on the way, in the nick of time), a couple things one of my growers thought I'd underrated and should taste again, and all the sweet wines of Hexamer's I hadn't tasted since they were still fermenting when I visited him.

There I was essaying my way through Hermannsbergs and Kupfergrubes and Hermannshöhles and almost wondering if I was having a mean-palate-day (the kind where you don't like *anything*) and I came to a little wine of Hexamer's he calls "Quartzit", a QbA.

WHAM! Super wine. Nothing wrong with my palate!

Then later when I got up to the Auslesen and Eiswein I was well and truly blown away. I wanted to call him immediately and yell out my delight; wake him up if I had to! We ordered every drop we could get (they're here by the time you read this, unless y'all bought em PDQ), and I'm thinking . . . I *knew* this was a wonderful discovery, but I might really have a tiger by the tail here.

God I wish I could pick him up and place him in Niederhausen. Not that there's anything wrong with his wonderful Rheingrafenberg, but there are virtually NO great producers in many of the Nahe's primo sites, while this young man is off crafting masterpieces in his remote corner.

This arose as a tip from Dönnhoff. The same tip appears to have been given to David Schildknecht, who came back enthusiastic. Samples were procured, and tasted over the winter, with great pleasure. (The man made some of the most *interesting* wines from the rarely-enthraling 1999 vintage.) We squeezed in a visit to Meddersheim, which believe me requires a detour. Harald and Petra Hexamer are all the things one wants a young vintner-family to be. But first let me back up a little.

The melancholy fact is that fewer and fewer 20-some-things are opting to carry on their family's wineries. This isn't entirely bad. The ones who *do* self-select; they're the real idealists, wine-lovers, and I also believe they choose the life because of the example their parents set. It stands to



reason. If the family life growing up was happy and successful, the child connects the career of a vintner with good warm feelings.

But whatever my theoretical musings, Harald Hexamer is about as dear as they come. I have a little ques-

- **Vineyard area: 11.4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Meddersheimer Altenberg, Sobernheimer Marbach**
- **Soil types: Quartz, red weatherbeaten clay**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Riesling, 12% Spätburgunder, 10% Müller-Thurgau, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 2% Gewürztraminer, and 11% others**

tionnaire I hand out to all my growers (the answers from which are often quoted herein) and when Hexamer sent his back he wrote "For some of these questions I could have written a book in response."

He has twelve hectares, and growing. Somewhere between 55-58% is Riesling ("It keeps growing and I can't keep up with it"). as he obtains land given up for sale by the ones who choose against a wine life. He aims to become identified with a genuinely superb vineyard which has an unfortunate name for non-Germans . . . **Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg**. (It is fine with me if you want simply to call it "the Grafenberg spot".)

This is a steep southward hillside crawling off into two lateral valleys. The soil is based on sandy loam but, this being after all the Nahe, it ends up being a complicated melange of various weathered products, slate, sandstone and other conglomerates among them. The first time I sniffed a Hexamer from this site I was immediately delighted: a true *terroir* wine.

In fact these wines have been consistently impressive for their *dicht* (which translates as "density"), delineation, and charm. Think about it. How many wines exhibit all three qualities? Density usually precludes charm. Delineation often presupposes a certain transparent light-

ness. These are rare and wonderful wines, sybarites; I'm not looking to add estates to this portfolio in my advancing decrepitude unless they offer irresistible deliciousness.

Hexamer is emblematic of the best of cutting edge thinking among quality-minded vintners. He's a vineyardist first, only thereafter a cellarmaster. "I can only attempt to optimize in the cellar what I pull from the vineyard; the quality of the grapes is decisive." He often harvests riper grapes from another site (Marbach) but the wines of Rheingrafenberg are "more filigree and better-structured." He handles as little as possible. Doesn't deacidify, doesn't use dosage. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary ("but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit—below 10 degrees—back to the winery.") Yields are controlled by pruning ("We often end up with only six to eight bunches per

vine"). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; "The most filigree wines come from this method." 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

All quite modern, yet Hexamer's not what I'd call a modernist. Rather, he seeks the most neutral cellar-environment so as to preserve the complexities he pulls in from the mountain. He's also a fun guy to drink wine with, and shows ceaseless curiosity and omnivorous glee in all the world's wines.

His '02s are typical of the best of the vintage. He opted to leave acids where they were, and some of the wines will need time and patience. There's an Auslese I'm not offering –yet – with 13.5 g.l. acidity. But the overall range was so skillful and deft I was able to cherry-pick through it. Another facet of delight is the availability of *genuine* Kabinetts, wines that *taste* like Kabinetts.

Hexamer at a glance:

wines of terroir.

Sensational new discovery on the upper Nahe, a young vintner doing everything right; handcrafted fruit-driven

how the wines taste:

Anti-varietal in the best sense, the same way that Condrieu isn't merely viognier; the best from the Rheingrafenberg are wines of deep site-character as rendered by riesling. Splendidly mineral wines into which fruit of great charm is interwoven. Fresh, with exceptional purity.

GHX-009 2002 Meddersheimer Riesling

Silky, lacy, pointillist detail; a coolly lovely riesling; virtually perfect small-scale charmer. SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years) SOMMELIER ALERT!

GHX-010 2002 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

+

This one threads the needle. A wee nip of acidity on the finish (exaggerated by fresh bottling), but incomprehensible detail and fine terroir – and it's *real* Kabinett, not a big plump declassified Auslese; lovely texture like silk and feather-touched with long fingernails. SOS: 1 (between six and sixteen years) SOMMELIER ALERT!

GHX-011 2002 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quartzit"

Rheingrafenberg isn't a single contiguous hillside but rather two parallel hillsides in the same lateral valley; this being the Nahe, the soil changes, and this wine hails from a parcel on quartzite. There's more overt stoniness now; the flavors are written with a thicker pen; not so much mineral as Mineral; more sinew and muscle. A slight chaptalization of Kabinett-quality must, by the way (what would have been called "Hochgewächs" but thank God isn't). SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)

GHX-012 2002 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese

A richer flavor of roses distinguishes this from the Kabinett; it will move out even more in front over time (whole-cluster pressed wines often seem close together at first); exceedingly fine fruit and complex terroir. At this point after tasting 6-7 wines I was starting to take the grace and detail for granted. SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)

GHX-013 2002 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese*

+

An old-style acid-powered dragon which recalls a young '96; riper now, warmer core, but there's almost an Eiswein-lash of intensity. Whatever sweetness there is melts away into the sizzlings acids. SOS: 1 (between 0-1.5 years and again from 16-24 years)

helmut mathern

nahe • niederhausen

Helmut Mathern died on November 24th, from melanoma. He'd had skin cancer twelve years earlier and was in remission until the winter of 01/02. Chemo seemed to be working, and Helmut was optimistic. When he delivered our Fall orders in late August he told Margit Strub he was feeling fine.

His wife Gloria told me he refused to accept it till the very end, and even then. During the harvest he was quite weak, mostly wheelchair-bound. A friend was summoned to get the fruit in. This is Sabine, whom I met and whom I liked immediately. She's a trained enologist who left the wine business some nine years ago, and went to the hills to raise sheep and goats for cheese. It was satisfying but not lucrative, so she took a day-job as a bookkeeper in Bad Kreuznach. Then all of a

sudden she was plunged back into wine again. Mathern supervised the harvest as best he could, but he was fading.

The 2002 vintage here is small but lovely. It's a curious glance back into the past in a sense, back before selective picking was the norm among good estates. There wasn't time to go through the vineyards in successive passes; most sites were picked *en bloc*. I imagine a vintage like, say, 1981, a pleasant little year with good wines, and what it might have been with today's young lions going all-out for glory.

Mathern left two little kids and a wife with her own career. Gloria wants to keep the winery going, and is hoping to persuade Sabine to come back to the land again full-time. "I'd like to keep it going at least long enough for the kids to grow up and decide if they want to continue it," she says. I do hope she succeeds, and I'll do everything I can to help her.

I thought it might be a somber visit but Gloria was quite hale under the circumstances. Grief is grief, of course, and this was some miserably sad news, but I was again struck by the stoicism of people who live deeply with nature. Gloria also told me an encouraging story of support pouring forth from their base of private customers. Most of them knew Mathern. In Germany a winery's private customers like to visit as often as possible,

and they become less a client-base than an extended family. It is almost unbearably touching to think of them rallying around the widow.

Mathern was always loyal to his private customers. As his fame grew, he deliberately abstained from cultivat-

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 9,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Rosenberg, Felsensteyer, Kertz and Roseneck, Norheimer Dellchen and Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Porphyry and slate**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 7% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Dornfelder, 8% other varieties**

ing the trade at large and resisted efforts to recruit him into the VDP.

I never sold as much wine as I'd have liked. This was in part because they often showed sulfury in their first year, just when you tasted them. Those big DI tastings are a necessary evil, but you can't confuse their skim-the-surface nature with a true evaluation. Mathern's wines exemplified what we mean by "racy", in all its forms; high-strung, urgent, bewitching, keen, vamping and erotic.

He had time to complete his new cellar, more spacious, and all stainless-steel. He left the vineyards in good condition. Best among these is an old parcel (46 years now) in the ROSENBERG. Helmut's wines were always firm and zippy, rather like Saar wines, piquantly spicy. We'll see what they become under Sabine's knowing hands.

As I sit here remembering Helmut Mathern I recall an unflappable competence and a cheerful energy. He didn't have a pretentious bone in his body. He was robustly attractive, with the ruddiness of a life lived outdoors. We weren't close, he and I, but each year's visit was more cordial than the last. Now all that's left of that vitality is a deep inside smile when I think of him. And the many wines.

Good bye Helmut. Bless you and thank you.



A Look At The Vineyards:

NIEDERHÄUSER ROSENHECK is a 17 hectare vineyard that is 75% steep, with a southeast exposure and typically complicated soils based on slate (with loess-loam, stony clay and a grayish-brown sandstone: complexity, remember?). I'd classify the site as "1er Cru" for its forthright and satisfyingly lusty style, allied with mineral Riesling finesse. Mathern's certainly the leading grower.

NIEDERHÄUSER FELSENSTEYER is an entirely steep 10 hectare vineyard made most famous by Crusius and more recently by Mathern too. The book says the soil is loamy but you've never seen loam with that color, an almost raspberry-ish purple.

NIEDERHÄUSER ROSENBERG brings us back to porphyry in a steep 12 hectare vineyard you drive through if you exit Niederhausen up the hill. It's probably a 1er Cru but in Mathern's hands it makes Grand Cru wines.

Mathern at a glance:

His nervy, high-bred wines quivered with spice and penetration. The 2002s bear a haunting imprint. I send my love to Gloria and Sabine.

how the wines taste:

They are spicy and then some! Taste one of these keen, shimmering beauties and see what we mean by the word "racy." They're almost always spritzy, with clarity enough to shrink your pupils; specific flavors vary with the site, and the very least of these is quick as a lynx, while the best, from the oldest vines, show a confounding depth and polish beneath their taut nervy energy.

GMA-055 **2002 Niederhäuser Felsensteyer Riesling Kabinett**

A tangy tasty little number. Felsensteyer has an umami of its own, involving spices, potpourri, dried flowers, lavender; the wine has all the ground-up mineral of 2002 and a very long finish that's also complex.
SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMA-054 **2002 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Hochgewächs Halbtrocken**

This was the first wine I tasted; it was recognizably a *Mathern* wine, as if he left a soulprint in the vineyards to mingle with the microflora; there's a little pistachio and coriander here; dry, juicy and agreeable, with a little rustic hearty touch.
SOS: 0 (between two and eight years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMA-056 **2002 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Hochgewächs** +

This works, this *rocks*, this sings! The perfect lavender-fennel flavors paired with a deep minerality. It's very long and serious given its sleek prettiness. Virtually perfect little riesling. Which is logical, given that it contains all the best from the vineyard. Had Mathern lived, this would have been 3-4 different wines, maybe a Spätlese and/or Auslese. As it is, it's a sensational VALUE.
SOS: 2 (between two and ten years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMA-049 **2001 Niederhäuser Rosenheck Riesling Spätlese**

This is a slate sandwich, minerally, fibrous and a dead-ringer for a Mosel wine, especially in a massive muscular vintage like '01 when even the Mosels tasted like Nahe wines.
SOS: 1 (between five and sixteen years)

GMA-051 **2001 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese (#2111)**

One gets the impression Mathern was synched-in to this site; it gave him his best wines though it usually played 2nd-fiddle to Hermannshöhle. This comes from 51-year-old vines, and it's a typically wonderful '01; wild lavender, hyacinth and violets on the nose, piquant and girlish palate (albeit a girl who knows judo); well-bound sweetness, great length; this is the wine we dosed with copper-sulfate, so it might well have a reductive nose when you taste it, but be assured below lies a deft and wonderful *Nahe* Riesling.
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)

GMA-053 **2001 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese (#2121)** +

This is a single clone, #500 from the Nahe Staatsdomain, and the wine is just fabulous; spice, piney tang, a liqueur of violet and lavender; deft citric-cassis note (as if it contained 10% Scheu, which it doesn't) but what's amazing here is the endless length and complexity. *A steal* at this price! SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty four years)

subject: why riesling?

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

At first it was this deliciously weird Sherryized Silvaner that brought me to this address. Johann Lafer turned me onto it. Well, I still love that stuff but nobody bought any, so I dropped it from the portfolio. What I get from Gänz are a few reliable and bargain-priced wines, the occasional serious Riesling, and the isolated sticky. Plus the oddest collection of psilocybin-bottles you'll ever see, even if you're actually seeing straight.



Gänz at a glance:

Value City!

how the wines taste:

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

GGA-059 2002 Guldentaler Apostelberg Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken

Two wonderful vintages in a row: this is just way full of fruit; charming and slurp-able; *dry* and long. You have my permission to drink it straight from the bottle.

SOS: 0 (between now and two years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GGA-060 2002 Guldentaler Honigberg Blauer Portugieser Weissherbst

What all wine should be, period. Hell, it's what all things should be. Charm charm charm; it's a big *tax refund* in a glass. To paraphrase Andrew Jefford, wine need not be great provided it is infinitely good.

SOS: 2 (between now and a half-hour from now!)

GGA-062 2002 Bretzenheimer Hofgut Scheurebe Kabinett

This is what you call a big ol' fruity Scheurebe; `nuff said!

SOS: 2 (between now and three years)

GGA-061 2002 Guldentaler Sonnenberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

Classic tangy redcurrant nose; very gentle structure due to deacidification, ergo an attractive wine for young drinking. It has style and length.

SOS: 1 (between now and two years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GGA-057 2001 Guldentaler Sonnenberg Riesling Spätlese

Wonderful. Just alive and vital, solid and direct; incredible nutmeg fragrance, piquant, juicy, hints of stone, fine curranty length. The `01s have *command*. They also have layers but not eensy little tuiles; complex slabs of dough!

SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen years)

GGA-063H 2002 Guldentaler Apostelberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml

This had just been bottled; a radishy and brash young wine, impossible to appraise let alone do the adjective-spew tango, but the fruit will emerge into a gentle evening sipper; unfussy, caramel and salt, about the size of a big Auslese, and *CHEAP*.

SOS: 4 (between eight and seventeen years)

scheurebe: what gives?

Um, I happen to like it, that's what gives.

It was crossed about 80 years ago by a Mr. Georg Scheu (hence its name), after whom Rainer Lingensfelder named his second child. I imagine Scheu was looking for a wine with Silvaner's advantages (big berries and early ripening) paired with Riesling's structure and class. His introduction also claimed the Scheurebe would be a Riesling-like wine suited for sandy soils (which Riesling doesn't especially like, or rather Riesling *growers* don't like, as the yields are mingy).

As often seems the case with crossings, the results are oblique to the grapes crossed, i.e. there's no linear sequence of getting Riesling-flavors-plus-Silvaner-flavors. You end up with new flavors you couldn't have predicted. Scheurebe ripens 7-10 days ahead of Riesling, and has a little less acidity, but it's essentially a Riesling structure, i.e. firm and citrusy. It does indeed like sand but doesn't give its very best results; the wines tend to be 1-dimensionally tangerine-y

Great Scheurebe unfolds a truly kinky panoply of flavors and aromas. Indeed, Scheu is to Riesling what "creative" sex is to missionary-with-the-lights-out. Start with pink grapefruit. Add cassis; I mean pure cassis. Then add sage leaves you just crushed between your fingertips. Then lemon grass. If it's extremely ripe you can talk about passion-fruit and papaya. If it's underripe you will certainly talk about cat piss.

Scheurebe is capable of great finesse and stature. Yet it's becoming an endangered species. Why?

First, it's been lumped together with a genre of crossings to which it is manifestly superior. It's the proverbial baby being thrown out with the bath water. Then, Scheurebe likes vineyard conditions which Riesling likes as well. Scheu will hiss at you if you plant it in the wrong place. This you don't want. But by planting it in good Riesling sites, you have a wine which fetches less money than Riesling. Not good.

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more* attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes too demure.

Scheurebe keeps very well but doesn't age as dramatically as Riesling. Ten-year-old Scheu is only a little different than 1-year-old Scheu.

Tastes differ, of course, and what's sizzling and emphatic to me might be blatant and vulgar to you, but we who love Scheurebe are truly in a kind of thrall to it. It has little of Riesling's spiritual depth, but neither does Riesling have Scheurebe's erotic power. We need both for a balanced diet! Riesling may indeed represent All That Is Fine And Good, but Scheu offers All That Is Dirty And Fun. Scheurebe is bad for you; its fattening and wicked and hair will start growing on your palms as soon as you pull the cork. In other words, there's no down-side...

The grail-keepers of Scheurebe include Lingensfelder, Fuhrmann-Eymael and one hopes Müller-Catoir under the new regime. I look for it wherever I can. Growers who have discontinued Scheurebe include Meßmer (this was really calamitous) and Dönnhoff – yes, Dönnhoff; his last vintage was 1985, in which he made a gorgeous Auslese from a site in Kreuznach.

Scheurebes in this offering:

| | |
|----------|--|
| GGA-062 | 2002 Ganz Bretzenheimer Hofgut Scheurebe Kabinett |
| GOH-043 | 2001 P.A. Ohler'sches Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett |
| GOH-045 | 2002 P.A. Ohler'sches Münsterer (xxxxxxx) Scheurebe Kabinett |
| GCB-053 | 2002 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett |
| GCB-050 | 2001 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Spätlese |
| GGY-041L | 2002 Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter |
| GDR-109 | 2002 Darting Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese + |
| GDR-101 | 2001 Darting Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Auslese + |
| GNE-087 | 2002 Neckerauer Weisenheimer Hasenzeile Scheurebe Kabinett |
| GKO-007L | 2002 Kassner-Simon Scheurebe Kabinett, 1.0 Liter |
| GKO-003 | 2001 Kassner-Simon Freinsheimer Oshelskopf Scheurebe Spätlese + |
| GEM-061H | 2001 Eugen Müller Forster Ungeheuer Scheurebe Eiswein, 12/375ml ++ |
| GDD-010 | 2002 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett |
| GTM-072 | 2002 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese + |



kruger-rumpf

nahe • münster sarmsheim

I have always liked Stefan Rumpf's wines but until recently that feeling seldom penetrated below the level of admiration. They were (and remain) scrupulously true, but they used to be too phenolically gritty in texture for me to get the warm 'n fuzzies. Then Stefan began to consider this question for himself, largely because his colleagues were getting higher "scores" in the wine rags. Hey, whatever it takes! The 1996 series inaugurated an era of greater friendliness to sweetness and botrytis. 1997 continued the trend. With the minerally and dense ninety-eights, Stefan really turned the corner, and 1999 started to show a serene assurance close enough to tickle the feet of mastery. They were and remain among the most exciting wines from 1999. 2000 was a small but correct vintage here, but 2001 is in another league entirely; I *loved* these wines. And '02 isn't more than a half-step behind.

Rumpf's will never be "smooth" wines—I imagine they're quite low in pH. They also need about two years after bottling to shed a rambunctious nippy-ness. With a little more seductiveness of texture these could almost be erotic, they are so perfumed and bewitching. One also needs to remember how large this domain is; it's the largest in my German portfolio and getting larger. This is partly due to sheer opportunity. When the Nahe Staatsdomain fell upon hard times the first thing they wanted to do was jettison all their sites in the lower Nahe, as these were too far from HQ. Thus, good land, way cheap. Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our



hero is making RHEINHESSEN WINES. "We had to take everything out and replant with Riesling." I wondered what had been planted in such an obvious Riesling site. Albalonga! Perhaps this is why the wines of the former proprietor (who shall remain nameless) tasted so much like cherries. 5% of Albalonga with its high acid could marry quite

well with an overcropped Riesling - give that thin little sucka some aroma. Don't think such things aren't done.

The label is the plainest thing about a Rumpf wine (he threatens to change it; none too soon!). Stefan aims to make wines that are tensile but not austere, with dashingly defined mineral and fruit and the utmost aromatic expression. And by the way, if you find yourself anywhere in the Rhineland you owe it to yourself to stop and eat at Cornelia Rumpf's new restaurant-Weinstube. It's a really pretty room and the food's happy and pure.

As a vintner, Stefan is as practical as they come. Ask him how he does things and he often answers, "It

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

depends." Two fairly consistent practices are early racking and early bottling, but for the rest he lets the wine do the talking. "You can't improve wine in the cellar, only make it worse," he says. "At least ninety percent of the quality of a wine comes from the raw material you harvest." He sees himself as a craftsman, a worker, whose goal is to make clean, varietally typical wine that expresses its origins in the soil.



Stephan Rumpf

Kruger-Rumpf at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

They're still built on a sturdy frame of acidity and soil-flavors, but they have opened the floodgates of richness, and heavenly choirs sing. The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the KAPELLENBERGS are still apple-y and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you'll see the truth behind the cliché.

- GKF-077 **2002 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling "Selection"**
 This is essentially an Auslese Halbtrocken being bottled under the new VDP regulations for Grand Cru, i.e. it has to be dry (up to 12g.l.). The front label will only say "Pittersberg Riesling" and the name of the winery. It's all rather silly but the wine's good, and I select what I like whatever fol de rol accompanies it. The wine is quite filigree and piquant with a fine lacy minerality; fragrances of fennel and stones; wonderful shimmery entry, a little peak of tartness in the middle but a long fine finish; shows the elegance of a good site in good hands.
 SOS: 0 (now to two years; again from eight to twelve years)

- GKF-078 **2002 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** +
 Classic example of this unheralded site; asian pear, quince, stones, soy; juicy lively and minerally; long sassafrassy end-palate with almost meyer-lemon & eucalyptus penetration. Fruit, mint-greeny zip, mineral, all in vivid interplay.
 SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)

- GKF-079 **2002 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Kabinett**
 (cask #8) Classic walnut-husk and apple-skin nose; elegant, salty and textured, with a chewy solidity; markedly long; a real terroir-lover's wine.
 SOS: 1 (between five and sixteen years)

- GKF-080 **2002 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 (cask #12) This is remarkable; certainly an elegant Auslese, with clean botrytis and lots of the flavor of golden-ripe berries. 94 Oechsle (and 9.3g.l. acidity, by the way); apple-blossom, apples sauteeing in butter; splendid minerality; high and low tones in lively dialogue. Wonderful wine, and LIMITED.
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty three years)

- GKF-076 **2002 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese**
 (cask #2) This is very round and ample, almost Crusius-like yet with Stefan's customary vividness; botrytis pleasantly bound into fruit; more exotic than the Pittersberg.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and nineteen years)

- GKF-082H **2002 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +
- GKF-081H **2002 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein Goldkapsel, 12/375ml** +
 I had to judge these as raw cask samples. The GK has 175 Oechsle (i.e big TBA), and both wines were hugely promising in his usual acid-drenched sultry way. They're Eisweins with a grand flourish of seductiveness and little pretense to divinity.
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty five years)

jakob schneider

nahe • niederhausen

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

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

This was a man made to talk. And not merely to converse, but to address, to pontificate, to perorate. He seems to have been born unable to speak except in rhetoric. What a character this was.

His may have been the last surviving example of an estate that combined viticulture and agriculture. It seemed to have frozen in time somewhere just after the War. Other growers would speak in pure bewilderment of Schneider's antediluvian techniques: "It's like an open air museum of how wine was made fifty years ago," one grower said to me. No growers' association meeting was complete without Hans Schneider. "If I looked around and didn't see him, I'd try to leave undetected," one guy told me. "The meetings were dull without him."



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

I wonder if we Americans can really understand such a thing. So many of our basic human contexts—enses of

- Vineyard area: 10 hectares
- Annual production: 5,500 cases
- Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle and Rosenheck, Norheimer Dellchen and Kirscheck
- Soil types: Volcanic soils, slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% other varieties

time, of history, of continuity, family and community—lay in tatters. And we ourselves have shredded these things so we could get at other things we imagine we want. Can we actually see someone's wines as representatives of a family legacy? Can we understand how wines become *members* of the family? It is sometimes obscure even for me, and I want to believe it.

So I think of Schneiders, and how they render their wines, those strange songs of the earth who share the house with the family. There's our world, all a-rush and full of clamor. Schneiders have a computer in the house now, and a satellite dish on their roof, and an email address. For all I know they watch more CNN than I do. I'm not into making them adorable peasants. I am just struggling to isolate a slippery little creature, that they seem fundamentally anchored and that we do not. And wine is part of what anchors them, or part of what they're anchored to, or perhaps these are the same thing. And so it seems strange to dissect the wines as though they had no context in human life. It can't be done.

Thankfully the wines are lovely. I'd never have returned otherwise. But they are lovely in *just* such a way, such a particularly *Schneider* way. They shouldn't be served too cold, as it mutes the astonishing perfume that's their *raison d'être*. Also, theirs is a self-contained world; the wines aren't planned, nor are intended to be placed, in gigantic tastings with seventy-five other wines. Schneider is a perfect example of the impossibility of isolating wines from the people who make them. Yet every drinker doesn't have the chance to go there and sit in the parlor and soak up the vibes, and so the wine must have *something* of value purely *per se*. Which harks back, again, to those aro-

mas and flavors. If you can somehow drink a few of these at cellar temperature in circumstances permissive of reflection, I guarantee you'll never be as enthralled by any other wines. Even wines I might agree are "better." They are

intensely *poetic* wines, but not necessarily lyric wines. They are elemental in some way; they have no time for frills or flourishes. They just exhale the earth.

Schneider at a glance:

"Colorful" stories aside, these can be the most hauntingly, intricately perfumed wines I have ever tasted. They are modernizing but still a fair way from modern; great wine-y depth in the best of them.

how the wines taste:

This differs from site to site. The wines are less mealy and more vigorous than they once were, more contemporary now. The 2002s, not surprisingly, are delightful. But you'd be well advised not to even try isolating any single consistent denominator from a village with 52 different soil types (!) That said, it's clear these hail from great land. They're amazingly aromatic.

GJS-053L **2002 Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

Ah me . . . which collection of Grand Cru vineyards will make up *this* year's jug-wine? It's Rosenheck, Klamm and Kirschheck. You have to understand, this is like getting a by-the-glass-priced magnum of white Burgundy consisting of Criots-Bâtard-Montrachet, Bienvenue-Bâtard-Montrachet and Pucelles. The 2002 is a deliberate step away from the juicy simple charm of the 01, though; it's more complex, more forest-floor, more *interesting*; smoky-tangy and herbal (lavender and rosemary. Failure to purchase this wine shall be punished with fine, imprisonment or both.

SOS: 2 (between two and nine years)

GJS-049 **2001 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Kabinett**

Cherries! Tangy and pretty. More *schmalz* than Dönnhoff's. I asked for it a little drier. Wait'll you get a whiff of this beauty.

SOS: 2 (between three and eleven years)

GJS-055 **2001 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**

First offering. Slimmer and more piquant than the Klamm below, more studious and less extroverted. Schneider talks about "peach" but all I see is terroir; it registers soft but is actually well-structured. I love its quiet, balanced complexity; it's the prototypical wine that doesn't make a statement, but instead asks a question.

SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GJS-050 **2001 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Spätlese**

Steepest site on the Nahe, a Grand Cru, porphyry, loam and rotliegend. Yet this smells for all the world like Hermannshöhle, and hails in fact from the parcel *nearest* the Hermannshöhle. Good Auslese at 94 Oechsle; all kinds of yin-yang here, classic Nahe complexity, with the resonance and breed of a Crusius wine. Three-dimensional. Here's why we love riesling. Best of show from '01 in this house. A bit of wood too.

SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)

GJS-054 **2002 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Spätlese** +

This wine heralds a new era at Jakob Schneider; it's a fine Spätlese ennobled with a dollop of 135 Oechsle *Eiswein*, and it's grand stuff, probably the best wine I've ever had at this address; regal, juicy and figgy; a sweet prosciutto note and wonderful fruit complexity; endlessly luxurious feel but with ringent structure. Yowza!

SOS: 2 (between eight and eighteen years)

GJS-056H **2002 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

Picked at minus-12 degrees Celsius at 178 Oechsle (well up into TBA-land), this is the "3-star" Eiswein – there's also a lovely 1-star I'll offer later, but I had to grab this puppy as there weren't much – all I can say now is it's huge and riveting. When you taste it your pen will *spontaneously* spurt out adjectives and associations.

SOS: 4 (between twelve and twenty seven years)

rheinhessen wines



Oh lament the poor Rheinhessen; if there ever were a place with an image problem, this is the one. I must say all my pity for the underdog is roused by this region. It is absolutely perfect for aimless meandering. Its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

Notwithstanding my romantic fantasies, all is far from well here. Nobody can make a living selling simple bulk wine any more, and the economic backbone for the region has been shattered. The emergence of the new generation mitigates here as elsewhere, (and the Keller estate is drawing positive attention to the area with its sexy wines) but you need a really unassailable idealism to

worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the flattish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may just be possible that, after all, *great* wines aren't written into most of this land, no matter how diligently a vintner tries to extract them. And it may be that

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

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

the production of merely (if wholly and soul-satisfyingly) GOOD wine just isn't good enough. Just speculating. I do know that prices remain perilously low throughout the Rheinhessen, even in the isolated peak-areas of Nierstein, Oppenheim, Nackenheim and Bingen (who tried and failed to establish a separate identity for themselves). Indeed, the relative lack of really first-class estates in a place with as much good land as Nierstein bears sad witness to the disincentives for idealists to flourish here.

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



take me to your liter

This is a schizy segment of my portfolio. Some of you report great success with this size. Others report it's impossible to sell. These, in my opinion, are the arguments in favor of the Liter:



- **It doesn't sit around in the fridge as long as a magnum, thereby diminishing the chance of spoilage.**
- **It's the perfect size bottle for three or four people on a casual occasion. It contains eight glasses of wine.**
- **It's the perfect size for the cook who wants or needs a cup or so to cook with. There's the equivalent of a full bottle left over for drinking with the meal!**
- **It nearly always contains a dry, light wine that's low in alcohol and very high on pure refreshment value. It's nearly always estate-bottled.**

It seems to me the only way to sell this size is to floor-stack it. If it stands on the shelf alongside 750s, it won't stand *out* enough as a larger package. If it's floor-stacked, you can always put a sign behind it screaming FULL LITER! Equivalent to just 56¢ per a 750!!!!

But some of you have tried all these bright ideas and you tell me the wines still don't sell. I have one final bright idea. FORGET THEY'RE LITERS. Don't even tell anybody it's a bigger bottle. It's just a bottle of wine for ten bucks. If someone says "My, it's a bit heavy," you say "Oh, yeah, it's a special; they threw in 25% more free." And everyone's happy. It's like the *Super Deal* aisle at your local supermarket. Flex shampoo, 25% more free. Man we love that word *free*. Free wine!

I think I offer the very best jug-wine quality you can find anywhere on the market today. I know of no other merchant offering such a variety of cheap, estate-bottled wine in large bottles. I say this in all modesty, or at least in as much modesty as I can muster! They'll do the job at least as well as—I think better than—anything else in the category. Give them a try if you haven't yet. Here they are, the PICK OF THE LITERS:

- GJS-053L **2002 Jakob Schneider Niederhäuser Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GST-096L **2002 J.u.H.A. Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GMZ-049L **2001 Merz Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-041L **2002 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GGY-042L **2002 Gernot Gysler Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GDR-106L **2002 Kurt Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GKO-007L **2002 Kassner-Simon Scheurebe Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**
- GMS-084L **2002 Herbert Messmer Riesling (Halbtrocken), 1.0 Liter**
- GMS-093L **2002 Herbert Messmer Dornfelder Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GDD-001L **2002 Dr. Deinhard Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GDD-002L **2002 Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-070L **2002 Theo Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GTM-069L **2002 Theo Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Well we made it; twenty five years. Half my life I've known this man.

Walter and Margit are about the sweetest, kindest and most generous people I know, but in the many years I've known them they rarely seemed overtly sentimental. But something shifted this year. There was a sweet moment when Walter and I took turns telling Margit about how we met. I'm sure she heard the story before but we wanted to tell it – we *needed* to tell it. So we told it; we told how Walter was working in a wine shop in Munich for an impossibly haughty Bavarian snob, and I was browsing in the store one day in May 1978, and the snob was Holding Forth and said something so magnificently dreadful that I caught Walter's eye, and between us there flashed a bolt of recognition.

I approached him and we talked about wine. The rest is history.

There are things in one's life to which one appeals when solace is needed. When you're in the thickets and you look to life and ask "Hey, remind me what makes me happy", not the things you have to think about, but the ones that spontaneously console you. I can't think about Walter and Margit Strub and not feel better – even if I was feeling fine to begin with!

This year I tasted Walter's wines on my second day. "Hurry and taste the wines, Terry; you know how he is," said Margit. "He won't relax until you're finished." But interestingly, I'd never seen Walter so (apparently) serene. We were even being *filmed* as we tasted, for a TV documentary being made about my hapless activities in Germany. (I kid you not, God help me.) But there we were, a coupla mellow dudes.

It made sense when I started tasting the wines. 2002 was custom-cut for Walter. It's basic aesthetic is HIS basic aesthetic; clean, detailed, precise articulation, accuracy of character. Walter dislikes vintages with too much botrytis, even "good" botrytis, and he frets over years with low



Walter Strub

- Vineyard area: 18.2 hectares
- Annual production: 8,400 cases
- Top sites: Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping and Pettenthal
- Soil types: Red clay, slate, loess, loam and chalk
- Grape varieties: 68% Riesling, 15% of each Müller-Thurgau and Silvaner, 2% other varieties including Grüner Veltliner!

acids, but he likes shapely wines which explain themselves, and these he has wrought from his 2002s. Despite having harvested no Riesling *below* 90 Oechsle, the wines are bouyant and fresh. So I got to see a sanguine Walter Strub, which made me glad. He's too good to have to worry.

He is good, isn't he! Many of you have noticed how this estate seems to gain more altitude each vintage. For me the watershed was '93 and the ascension-vintage was '96. Since then Strub's wines have *always* been among the best in this collection.

He is oddly unheralded inside Germany. Nor does he seek to be (which may account for his low-profile), and I'd be lying if I said I was entirely unhappy about it; I get more wine this way, plus I get to feel superior toward others who haven't clued-in to this guy yet. A balding curmudgeon such as I takes any chance to feel smart.

On the wall above my desk I have a photograph of an old woman binding and pruning. She's wearing some sort of macadam, as it's cold outside. Her pocket is bulging with all the clippings she's produced. Her hand grasps the stalk with vigor and *insight*, as if it had eyes of its own and could see *inside* the vine. One little stalk is rakishly dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her fine old eyes have seen more than we can imagine; her face is furrowed with the winds of centuries. I keep her there where I can

see her because I need to see the basis for this work I do. It's all well and good for me to compliment my friend on his "achievement," but I'll bet it feels less like an "achievement" to him than a decathlon which he only finished panting and gasping.

Walter's is a restless and questing nature. He wants to see how everything would turn out. He's a pilgrim in the cellar. "The worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision," he says, though certain patterns become evident over time. "I am always the first to start picking and the last to finish." He says. Walter's wine is rarely the ripest in Nierstein, and I think it's because he wants to pick clean fruit above all, and will let go of a few degrees Oechsle if the resulting wine will have the clarity and elegance he seeks. He often rushes to gather his Riesling just when it's "a point," sometimes leaving his Silvaner hanging. The Riesling always has priority, and it *must* be harvested in the best possible condition.

He fertilizes organically, and doesn't get a ton of fruit — just 50 hectoliters per hectare on average over the past five years. His cellar is almost all stainless steel now. He began whole-cluster pressing in 1993 and liked the results (though he has — typically — started to wonder if he should do all his wines that way). With whole-cluster pressing you sacrifice a bit of body, but Niersteiners have all the body they need in ripe years. You obtain remarkable filigree and polish, and you retain high acidity. I have the sense that Walter is finally starting to feel his wines express his *dreams* for them. His Riesling usually ferments from its own yeasts. Lower-acid types are often started with yeast cultures for slower, colder fermentations, so they don't lose the little acid they have. After fermentation, Walter likes to keep his Riesling on the gross lees for several weeks to give it stuffing and nuance, but that's only possible in clean vintages.

But none of this is quite as systematic as I make it sound. In effect, our hero blunders through with good instincts and good will. He has a strong sense of what Nierstein is. He's naturally enamored of its special soil, the sedimentary rust-colored sandstone they call Rotliegend. Dig down a way and you'll come to slate, which prevents the wines from bulking up too much in Nierstein's warm microclimate. In fact Walter has little trays of each of his various soils in the tasting room, in case you want to see what you're drinking and don't have time for a drive among the vines. Rotliegend gives Riesling a smoky sweetness, like something that's been cured over a sweet wood. It's a striking example of a soil signature; anywhere it occurs, in any concentration or in any microclimate, it *always* announces itself in the wine with its unique aroma and flavor. Fruit usually runs to peach. Nierstein is its *sine qua non*, though, and a Nierstein vintner has this paradigm to serve.

"You can't FORM a wine by working with must or mash, or even with the wine itself. It is unalterably formed in the vineyard," says Walter. He won't identify a "best" site (though he has his secret favorites), pointing out quite reasonably that "some years favor the ORBEL if it's damp, as this site is porous; other years the HIPPING is better, as it's a damper and a cooler site." What neither of us can fathom is the perennially excellent wine given by the PATERBERG. "It's not a noble soil," Walter says, shrugging. This is more than an idle question to a German vintner, who sees soil as the DNA of his wine. He had a great success in another replanting project: a parcel of Silvaner was hacked out of the BRÜCKCHEN to replant with Riesling, but it was a rare part of Brückchen, on a chalky soil rather than the usual clay. The wines have been wonderful.

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

Walter Strub continues to be modest and questing, never quite according his wines the same status as the Mosel and Nahe wines he so dearly loves, and yet each year he gets closer and closer to attaining their brilliance and radiance. In the deepest sense, this is all made possible by the cohesion of the family. Margit is cheerfully and thoroughly competent ("She does 93% of the work," Walter says, "And I do the other 7, if I'm not too busy.") and eldest-son Sebastian is expressing interest in the winery and likes to help out. One doesn't want to harp too much on these things — they sometimes wither under direct scrutiny — but I both love and admire this family. They have every important piece in place. Between Walter and Margit there's playfulness and loyalty which I know is a bulwark for Walter to indulge his questing side. But no more testimonials!

Well, one more. This has *nothing* to do with why you should buy the wines, and for all I know you're thinking "Why do I need to know all this" and of course there's no reason. The only reason is that I need to say it. Thinking back, I don't think I have ever *enjoyed* myself as much as I do with Strubs. If it sounds as though all we do is sit and sigh dreamily at one another then I've given a false impression; most of what we do is howl with laughter. Notwithstanding occasional lapses into seriousness (for Walter is a born philosopher) I often leave an evening with Strubs barely able to breathe, I've been laughing so hard.

Here's to the next twenty five years, my dear friends.

Strub at a glance:

Always reliable wines are rapidly becoming stellar - with no increase in price! Availability is always good, so sell like hell! Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to “read” and understand. A truly lovely group of 2002s!

how the wines taste:

They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. We were oversold on Dönnhoff one year, so I half-jokingly suggested we slap some Dönnhoff labels on STRUB wine; the stylistic resemblance is plausibly close. Walter’s recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they’re ripe and lush. They’re very often reductive and spritzy, complex and long.

GST-096L **2002 Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

75% Paterberg, 25% Oelberg; I don’t know the final sweetness but it’s like last year, present but furtive – you’d notice it more were it *absent*. Ripe fennelly nose; lovely, textured palate; grassy but with zaft; lots of mineral underpins those Oelberg notes of air-dried ham. You should be deeply ashamed to get excellent Riesling Spätlese labelled as Kabinett and sold at Liter-wine prices. At least I am.

SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GST-097 **2002 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**GST-097H **2002 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**

Zingy! White peach, chalk, almost a tarragon or caraway note or lemon-grass note; juicy-salty brilliance; wonderful thrust and jab; dynamic and sizzling.

SOS: 1 (between four and fifteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GST-100 **2002 Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Kabinett**

+

This is the Class of the Kabinetts this year but it’s also the lowest quantity. Sybarite alert; BUY. The innate fineness of the site emerges; classy, penetrating; a brilliant farandole of fruit and mineral; juicy and long. Pettenthal, of all the red-soil wines, is the most feline; if it were a car it’d be a Jaguar.

SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)

GST-102 **2002 Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Kabinett**

From the steep section; slaty, juicy and peachy; classic notes of San Daniele; the palate is racy and on-the-dry-side; finish is quite smoky. Wants time, as Hipping always does.

SOS: 1 (between five and fifteen years)

GST-099 **2002 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett**

Why so many choices among Kabinett? Simple, there isn’t a lot of any one of them, and we sell a hunka-hunke-hunke of Kabinett. This one’s like a liquefied slice of Prosciutto di Parma; that almost animal sweetness, the “cured” depth; it’s racy and spicy and almost suggests redcurrants. Orbel’s subsoils are harder and rockier than the other red-soil sites (“You wouldn’t go barefoot in this vineyard,” says Walter) and so the wine, too, is more obdurate.

SOS: 1 (between six and eighteen years)

GST-101 **2002 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese**

+

Wonderfully juicy and chocolatey (milk-chocolate is a signature-flavor of Oelberg, improbably); great length, endless fruit but underlying dryness; almost a soy note. Ample but not voluptuous. Yum yum yum wine.

SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty two years)

- GST-86 **2000 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** +
 The hors classe among the excellent 2000s, and great to still have it available. TOTALLY zingy and racy and quite similar to the 1998; it has splendid tart-berry and grassy tang, juniper-smoky. This is racy to within an inch of its life, and these wines are on your palate longer than you can (almost!) bear to experience them.
PRICED TO MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!
 SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)
- GST-098 **2002 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**
 GST-098H **2002 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml** +
 A shimmering wintergreen, mint, lime-zest and green-tea (Gyokoru, if you must know); spicy as an Altoid, the longest on the palate up to now, as graceful as the skater but as piercing as the skate.
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty three years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GST-103 **2002 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese **** +
 Like the `98 and `01 this is a non-botrytis Auslese from an especially favored parcel; Walter's not sure if it's "3-star" quality so for now we're listing it as "2-star" (!) though this could change. I love it; there's a salty old-vines density; it's big and meaty like a veal chop; esoteric spices, fennel-seed and ginger. I always underrate this wine, by the way; I wish I'd indicated two plusses for the `01.
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty five years)
- GST-095H **2001 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml** ++
 Picked in part by an incredulous Margit, who, beginning to freeze after only just starting, asked "*How* many more rows to we have to pick?" along with a miserable 14-year old who was decidedly not happy to be roused from a warm bed at 4AM. Poor Sebastian. He even looked after the wine when Walter and Margit were in the States in January. This is stunningly great Eiswein, 184 Oechsle, and I swear to you the finish tastes like Cap'n Crunch! A thrall of tropical fruit, an elixir of insanely piquant lavender honey. The greatest sweet wine ever from Rheinstrasse 42; take a bow Wally!
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GST-106H **2002 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/500ml** +(+)
 As of April 1st, there's only 25 cases remaining of 2001 (GST-095H), after which we'll move into a 2002 Paterberg Eiswein at 165 Oechsle which has great promise; I think it'll be more forward and explicable than the `01, though with its own great salty density.



günter wittmann

rheinhessen • westhofen

I was almost a month earlier this year than last, and it won't happen again. The wines of Phillip Wittmann's *regime* appear to need longer than before, and many of these were too immature to judge. Expect supplemental offerings later in the year.

Wittmann was already regarded as an elite Rheinhessen estate, but the last few years they've really stepped things up. They are Players now. And this is important for at least three reasons. 1) They are by far the certified-organic estate with the best wines in Germany, and 2) Philipp Wittman came to visit us in the States last year, with the predictable result he was blown away by the expertise and vitality of our wine community, and he wants to come back, meaning he wants to sell more wine. Meaning first of all, he'll have to let us have more wine. Finally, 3) Wittmann's are becoming

among the most *consistently* successful dry wines in Germany.

As much as I rage against the Trocken machine, I love finding good ones! Great dry Riesling is a good thing, brother. And there are very few German growers who produce them consistently, which is to say very few who *understand* the ingredients of balance in this idiom. Please understand, I am put under *pressure* to be less splenetic about Trocken wines, and to include more of them in this offering. One close friend among the growers outright told me "When we come to America to show our wines it's disconcerting not to have 'every flower in the bouquet' to show customers. We think you should at least give the dry wines a fair shake." Look, Ace, it ain't my fault the Germans are slavishly devoted to wines so bitter that a moderately intelligent *goat* would spit them out. By rejecting them, I AM giving them a fair shake. But these Wittmanns excited me to my very core: I wanted to take them around to everyone who castigated me and say "See? This is how you do it. Start making dry wines like these and I'll select them!"

Phillip takes dry Riesling seriously; he doesn't pose, he doesn't strut, he's *inside* them intuitively, understands



Phillip and Günter Wittman

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Westhofener Morstein, Steingrube and Aulerde**
- **Soil types: Clay with chalky loam, weathered limestone and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 16% Müller-Thurgau, 10% each of Silvaner and Weissburgunder, 8% Huxelrebe, 6% Früh- and Spätburgunder, 6% Chardonnay, 9% other varieties including Scheurebe**

body and structure. He is in fact making Riesling as it used to be in Alsace. The Trocken "issue" is irrelevant here, except to wonder why this quality is the exception and not the rule.

Wittmann is über-trendy in Germany at the moment. Long time coming. I've been kvelling about the wines for at least a decade, and the imperial overlords of the German wine-writing pantheon have seen the light. That's good for my ego but bad for my portfolio, since I have to scrape and claw for the wine. But this is about to change.

It is also a pleasure to see the generations working so well together. Wittmann *père* handles the vineyards, *fils* Phillip holds the reins in the cellar while *mère* does sales and marketing, though as a family enterprise, everyone does a bit of everything. Eventually all three are in the tasting room with you, and you become *aware* you are sitting with a family and the thing is *working*.

I've worked exclusively with family wineries from the beginning; we all do, those of us who import wine from the old world. I'm not unique. For most of those years I took it for granted. Then something happened, I don't

know what. Maybe it was seeing so many wineries simply fold, because the whippersnappers elected to push paper and earn big-Euro. I began wondering why some were inspired to continue and others not. *What* inspired them?

Or maybe it was just getting older. In my thirties and early forties I was serenely confident I'd still have my pick among almost limitless choices. Here in my late forties, I suddenly realize I have *made* my choices, and having made them I grow more aware of how happy they make me. I am setting up house in the things I have chosen. One of them is to work with small family wineries. Now I can consider the meaning of this with all the deliberation I wish; I have plenty of time. I don't have to keep alert for the *next* choices to whiz by. I become attuned to the patience of the earth. And it suddenly strikes me as beautiful, nearly unbearably beautiful, to see kin working together, so that work and love and family are joined, patiently working the patient earth, and making a thing of beauty.

Wittmann belongs to an association of organic farm-

ers. He wanted, he said, to "give my son a healthy soil for his inheritance. We don't make wines organically because they're easier to sell, but because we think it makes better wine." He's a student of soil also, and gives fascinating explanation of the geological factors responsible for Westhofen's various soils. He takes for granted that soil components give specific flavors to wine—nothing noteworthy about that, but I feel the need to hammer the point since so many people seem to think it's specious romance. Wittmann's cellar is as gentle as they come. There are stainless steel tanks and large ovals, and careful thought is given to what wine belongs in which. He loves sleek, racy, filigree wines, but seldom gets them from his soils. Transport him to, say Rauenthal in the Rheingau, (I wish I could!) and he'd immediately be making better wine than 99% of all Rheingau growers.

The wines are a touch on the pricey side, but still less than they're worth. And organic viticulture costs the vintner more than conventional viticulture—a premium worth paying.

Wittmann at a glance:

Another entirely organic winery. Steadily creeping upward in quality each year (and the newest member of the VDP) and now one of the elite agencies in this portfolio. Grail-keeper of the great ALBALOGA grape. Remarkably outstanding 2002s!

how the wines taste:

Wittmann's wines are solid and positive. They radiate good health and well-being. They are firm but not heavy, like a big-boned man with almost no body fat. Their large stature doesn't prevent them being transparent and filigree. In the little mental tally I keep of my growers, Wittmann has edged his way to the top.

GGW-077 2002 Riesling Trocken

Again Phillip shows How It's Done. If you like Trimbach and Josmeyer there's no reason you won't like this. Classic Riesling archetype; the smell of *ripe* mineral; the palate is wonderfully round and dense with no sharp edges; the minerality is oceanic. SOS: 0 (between now and two years; again between eight and twelve years)

GGW-078 2002 Westhofener Riesling Trocken "S"

In effect a selection of the best small lots of estate Riesling; riper, more body and fragrance – really classic Riesling fragrance – rugged, manly stony grip; compacted, almost carbonized terroir finish. SOS: 0 (between now and two years; again between nine and fourteen years)

GGW-079 2002 Aulerde Riesling (Trocken)

This will be labeled according to the Grand Cru system (look, my computer sputters with disgust if I ask it to type "Grosses Gewächs") so the label will simply show the vineyard; the assumption is the wine is dry.

This was one of three Grand Crus, the most forward. All three were just two weeks past fermentation and I can't WAIT to retaste the others; this Aulerde recalls Hengst or Kaefferkopf; Grand Cru resonance and stature; ripe, smoky terroir notes.

SOS: 0 (between now and two years; again between twelve and twenty years)

GGW-080 **2002 Riesling Spätlese****(+)**

This was when I started getting annoyed I'd come so early. This is the smallest in a range of "sweet" Rieslings – if by "small" one means 97 Oechsle (!). About 50% botrytis; which seasons the cheery-ish primary aromas. A clear spiced-apple fruit pierces through, but I needed to peer through the periscope here. I see a jazzy Spätlese on the other end, with an elegantly berried tone like Gaisberg or even Uerz Würz.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)

GGW-076H **2001 Albalonga TBA, 12/375ml****+**

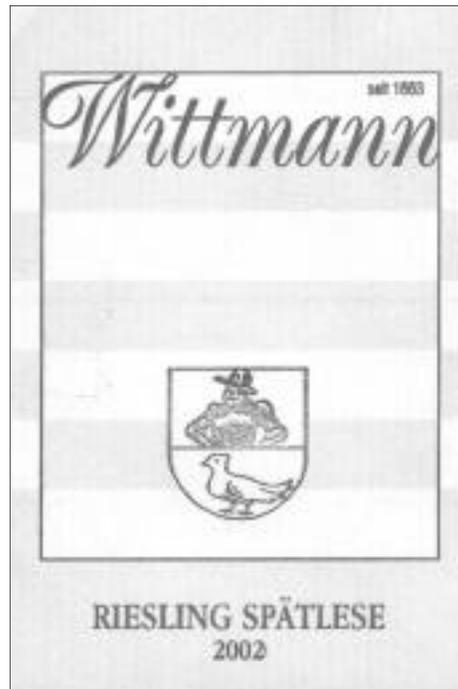
There are people who think my affection for this variety borders on the perverse. I suspect these people wear white briefs they buy at JC Penney. Crossed between Rieslaner (one of God's great grapes) and Silvaner, the Albalonga never fails to make compelling wine and at times ventures well toward the sublime. *There are 32 hectares (70.4 acres) of Albalonga in the entire world.* Various Wittmann stickies over the years have been celestial, and this might well be the best of them since the insane '94. It's a glace-de-viande of quince, with fabulous purity and immense potential. Still embryonic, but hurry; only ten cases remain.

SOS: 4 (historically, between twenty and forty five years)

GGW-081H **1988 Westhofener Steingrube Albalonga TBA, 12/375ml****+**

Call it a library-release, but here's a chance to see one of these beauties *fifteen* years on at a most reasonable price. Do bear in mind this is a "smaller" wine than the 2001. It has the very finest beeswax aromas now, and the palate shows blazing clear varietal fruit; black cherry and ginger and deep smouldering botrytis. Enormous length. It can be approached as *wine* now; its basic vinous shape is clear. Scarce, and absurdly reasonable priced, so c'mon sommelieres; lick dem chops and get freaky with Albalonga.

SOS: 3 (now, and for the next ten to fifteen years)



I have always liked this text. Not to appear immodest, but it's been one of the few times I felt I'd succeeded in conveying a slippery idea. Thus I was distressed when Lyselotte Merz cast me a dubious look. "We thought perhaps what you wrote was a little bit *sad*," she said. "When you wrote that you worried about us." Well I worry about every vintner who does all or most of the work alone and who has no visible heirs who might continue the winery. That said, my friends the Merzes are still plenty charged and show no signs of letting up.

Visits to Merz are special because *they* are special. This is a soulful domain, producing a kind of wine that only they could produce, informed by the two of them and the way they feel about living a good life. Merzes are true wine lovers, not snobs, not what I would call wine fuss-budgets,

but people who feel *affection* for wine, and for whom daily life would be impoverished if not unthinkable without it. That affection shows in the way their own wines are handled, which is to say *not* handled.

Wines make their own decisions here; sugar is neither added nor removed. Whatever's left after fermentation is what goes into the bottle. There's also a distinct house-style, which you'll have noticed if you've tasted the wines.

They taste as though they're barrel-fermented, with the meanness and seamless texture of such wines. Yet they're not. Certain wines are kept in old oak, naturally, but no flavor is imparted by such old wood anymore. The Liter Silvaner, which has the same flavor, has never seen a splinter of oak. Nor is soil the answer, since as Karl Merz points out, "My neighbors have vines alongside mine but their wines don't taste the same." For years, I wondered at this vexing mystery.

Then one year I learned the answer. Merzes have pressurized fermentation tanks, and the wines ferment under a blanket of carbon dioxide.

It's nourishing to hear Merzes talk about their wines.

"You should be engaged to make a *good* wine; let's say a wine of pure and clear nature, with a transparent face and a solid structure. This seems to be the essential base to work on." Amen to that!

"We clean the must before fermentation, which takes place very slowly and gently under pressure of CO₂." After which there's no more fussing. The wines are left in cask until bottling—which is rather later



Lyselotte and Karl Merz

- Vineyard area: 7 hectares
- Annual production: 5,500 cases
- Top sites: Ockenheimer Laberstall and Hockenmühle
- Soil types: Clay and heavy chalky loam
- Grape varieties: 43% Riesling, 22% Silvaner, 8% each Kerner and Chardonnay, 13% other varieties

than earlier. As mentioned before, no Süssreserve. "We think Süssreserve is not a real partner to be married with a wine, but something artificial; it may be a lovely make-up, but most of all it seems like 'lifting' a face to change its character." Now whether you agree with that opinion (and I don't), *there* is a clear exposition of the frame of reference which rejects Süssreserve as a matter of temperament.

"Wine for me is a piece of mosaic, the other pieces of which are friends and conversation and a way of life," says Frau Merz. "I am impressed when I taste wines of purity, clear appearance, elegant vivacity, a pleasant perfume and tempting flavors. I am trying to discover the soul of a wine." Isn't this more fun than discussing yeast cultures?

I asked Herr Merz what he longed to hear a customer say about his wines, in view of the care he takes to help them into existence. His answer expressed the spirit of his domain: "The cultivated wine drinker can obtain the kinds of wines from us he can't find anywhere else any more. I want to hear that he is fond of the wine, that this is the type of wine he was seeking for a long time and that now he feels at home."

I need to emphasize that such temperaments are uncommon among vintners, who, though they produce a thing of poetic beauty, are rarely themselves poetic in nature. The Merzes have a kind of genial urbanity that gives them something of the mien of art collectors or dealers in rare prints. They vacation in a time-share house in Provence.

It's a point I cannot overemphasize. Until you visit a

domain, a bottle of wine, however fine it may be, is just a thing. It's a label without a story attached, without a human context, without a sense of place. When you do visit, see the vineyards in which the grower labors, see the cellar in which his wines are raised, see the books on his bookcases, the tasting glasses he uses, the weight of the sound in the air of his home—some places in Europe have an extraordinarily caressing silence about them - see how he pulls a cork from a bottle, hear his jokes and asides, hear the words he uses to talk about his wines, see, hear, taste, touch it all, now the wine becomes a BEING; it is now **Karl's wine**. Think of what you learn about a friend or lover after the first time you meet his/her parents. It's like that.

Vintages at Merz don't necessarily follow the larger pattern; Karl's wines shine in precisely the conditions when many other German Rieslings do not; ripe years fairly low in acid but with large, expansive fruit. Frau Merz is wary of lengthy cellaring for the Trockens, saying: "Old dry wines are like spinsters." And going on to add "If the sweetness is like a fruit you can't wait to bite into, then it's right." I like to think of her and Karl at the Tourtour farmer's market in early September, buying plums and pulling one out of the bag immediately. It all connects.

It's only in a larger context that I can try to *convey* these unique wines to you. They aren't made to "show" well in comprehensive tasting formats; you want to sit across a table and let someone else answer the phone and look closely at just a few wines. Look, there's nothing wrong with wines that make the scene. It's more that we can't afford to lose the kinds of wines that *don't*, that don't know *how*, that don't *care* to, because these are wines of soul. And maybe you can't *taste* soul but things sure taste *empty* when it's not there.

Lyse and Karl were nearly ecstatic about their 2002s. "If we were younger, with a vintage like this we'd have

jumped up and danced," they said. It's a highly (and unusually) flowery group of wines, with more acidity than usual. I'm eager to see the entire vintage in bottle. I adore the three wines I selected.

Merz is, in effect, a French winemaker on German soil. His wines arise seamlessly from their environment. There are truly no other German wines like them, and I appreciate that.

I appreciate that more than whatever "scores" they might get, more than how they happen to "show" at big tastings, more than how they fare on the hip-o-meter. My two brilliant young colleagues Kevin Pike and Mark Hutchens, whom I love like brothers and respect like the dickens, wonder at my judgement in offering what they must feel are vinous anachronisms. Terry's little quirks.

I offer what pleases me, of course. I like the wines. I don't like them the same *way* I like more modern wines, but I'm sure Kevin doesn't like baseball the same way he likes literature and Mark doesn't like Bartok the same way he likes Björk. They sometimes ask me, if I reject a nearly-successful wine from a great estate, if the controversial wine is "better or worse than wines I do select from Merz" or Riedel or others making quirky old-fashioned wine. The question is a non-sequitur. It's like asking if Mark's least favorite Mahler symphony is "worse" music than the Björk on his CD-player.

Again, I don't select these wines *merely* because they're original, but I do prize their originality. I do NOT WANT all good wines to be good in the same way. I love the gleaming-chrome spiffyness of "modern" German riesling, but I also love wines like these, which don't affect and aren't discretely "aesthetic" but which rise from a place of soul which includes *all* of comfort and consolation.

Merz at a glance:

One-of-a-kind wines, with a woodsy-mealy flavor very rarely found in German wines. Particularly successful in the drier idioms. Gentle in price!

how the wines taste:

They're smooth and "oaky." Though there's no new wood used. There's a gentle mealiness about these that makes the dry wines especially successful and give a lot of exotic perfume to the wines with sweetness. The wines from the chalk cliffs of the LABERSTALL show the greatest originality and complexity of fruit. In the heavier blue clay soil of the HOCKENMÜHLE ("The soil is so clayey that if we didn't grow vines we could make pots," says Karl) the wines are spicier and interestingly more chalky-minerally in profile.

GMZ-049L **2001 Ockenheimer St. Rochuskapelle Silvaner Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

This is by far the best vintage ever offered of this lovely wine. It is, as always, snappy, crab-cake crackery; but what body, grip, depth and length – a wonderful value and perfect "jug-wine" drinkability. Snatch this up, goobers; every vintage isn't this good. SOS: 0 (between now and five years)

GMZ-047 **2001 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

Nose like roasted corn and yellow peppers; juicy and voluminous with a finely measured power, though it finishes like a snorting bull; a chunky wine just spurtingly ripe. Forget fine points of finesse and just swim in the satisfaction. SOS: 0 (from one to five years)

GMZ-048 **2001 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

Long and exotic; man, this wants crab cakes or corn fritters or soft-shells and scallions; salty and pancetta-like and herbal like marjoram and a sort of **packed-ness** like you crammed too much in your suitcase and you j-u-s-t barely got it closed but you know if you sneeze it'll burst.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 0 (from two to six years)

GMZ-050 **2002 Ockenheimer Laberstatt Riesling Auslese Trocken**

What a surprise. This is Riesling as if it were Meursault, only smoother and more determinedly mineral – in a way this is the ne plus ultra of Karl's approach; mealy texture, all simmer and umami; no "fruit" or "flower" to speak of, and softly, tenderly dry. Bravo, old friend, for a wine of such soul and friendliness.

SOS: 0 (from now to seven years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GMZ-051 **2002 Ockenheimer Hockenmühle Riesling Spätlese**

Any other grower would fret about a wine like this, which stopped fermenting with 22g.l. residual sugar. "Arrgghh," they'd say, "Not dry enough for Halbtrocken but not sweet enough for 'noble-sweet'".

At Merz, they smile serenely. This is where the wine stopped. What does it have to say? To me it is ideal. Roasted yellow peppers, lump-crab, remoulade, corn on the cob with drawn butter, lobster, shellfish stock, sauteed apple...this is splendidly edible wine! Talc-y, a deep tertiary "sweetness". I can't *wait* to make a saffron-lobster risotto for this darling.

GMZ-052 **2002 "Alte Kelter" Chardonnay Auslese**

"We think there's one more wine you should taste," said Karl, when I thought I was finished. Now let me make plain there's just a homeopathic quantity of this wine, which is good because nobody will be able to figure out how on earth to sell it. Who will buy it and why? Will you, because it's absolutely banshee-ass *delicious*?? I would. I will! It's certainly varietal, distinctly so, has discreet and balanced sweetness; crisp-yet-rounded edges, quite direct and precise; crackly as a perfect cox-orange apple yet with this suave murmuring roundness.

SOS: 2 (between two and eleven years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!



p.a. ohler'sches weingut

rheinhessen • bingen

Just call it “Ohler!”

Bernard Becker is the proprietor here, a bachelor with no airs and a local accent you can cut with a knife. He's really too simple a soul to fit in with the august overlords at the VDP, who are trying to give him the heave in any case (I imagine his prices embarrass them, plus the inconvenience of his making better wine than many of his trendier colleagues). His is one of those almost painfully old-fashioned estates; you can sometimes tell by the grandfather clock. When it *booms* out its chimes with an almost imperious command—“by GOD it's four o'clock!” you do get a sense that things are done the old ways.

Yet even here there are stirrings of change. It's an indication of the *Zeitgeist*, the prevailing view

of quality viticulture, that a man as ostensibly isolated as Becker has now begun green-harvesting, canopy trimming, and has even made his first-ever Eiswein(s) in 2002. It's one thing to go all-out when you're a frisky young pup wanting to make a name for yourself. Quite another when you're a settled being of 50-something.

Becker had a certain sangfroid about his wines which I think I might have done a little to correct. He had bottling problems a few years ago and had to use the local co-op to custom bottle for him. His wines, so vibrant in cask, ended up muted and dull in bottle, and I lost confidence in them. Becker noticed the result in sharply falling sales, and we had a heart-to-heart. The next year I fire-bombed his house. The year after that I had to tie a sixteen-ton weight to his leg and drop him in the Rhine. That got his attention. Now the wines are fine again. Ruthless business, this wine thing.

I do believe he does the whole five hectares all alone. About forty percent of it is on steep slopes; this isn't easy work!

Bingen must be the most undervalued place in Germany for fine Riesling. And having just been through Flurbereinigung, its reputation isn't likely to leap ahead until the new vines get some age. The soils on the Bingen hill, which is directly parallel to the Rudesheimer Berg (only the Rhine lies between) contain a mélange of Rotliegend and porphyry, an amalgam of Nierstein and

- **Vineyard area: 6.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Binger Scharlachberg, Münsterer Dautenpflänzer**
- **Soil types: slate, quartzite, sandstone, porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe, 40% (Silvaner, Müller-Thurgau, Kerner, Huxelrebe, Dornfelder), 15% (Spätburgunder, Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder)**

Nahe which gives the wines Nierstein's smoky savor with the Nahe's curranty succulence.

Becker also has some land across the Nahe, now officially Nahe wine (imagine his paperwork load dealing with *two* sets of bureaucrats) in two excellent sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer and Kapellenberg. All of these wines can be among the very best values I know, and Becker is more accommodating than ever with them. He's tapping into my desire for more transparent wines with lift and relief and not so much sweetness; nowadays he shows me his wines with an air of “Is this how you mean?” Yes, this is how I mean.

And prices remain almost embarrassingly low. It is odd; one ferry ride over the Rhine, less than a mile as the crow flies, and price can differ by 60%. Mind you, Becker makes these wines for all intents and purposes in his basement; he lives in an apartment building on a downtown street that looks like the last place on earth a winery would be. With the right physical space, updated equipment and his own bottling line, a man of Becker's conscientiousness would be making stellar wines. As it is, they're charming and fragrant *enough* and you can own them almost just by *thinking* about them!



Ohler at a glance:

Value value value. Charming, fruity, uncomplicated, easy-to-like wines at ludicrous prices.

how the wines taste:

They're forthright and fruity. The Scharlachberg wines have a peachy lift and fragrance of red roses. The Nahe wines are cooler, slatier or more violet-y and tangy according to site. Sheer charm is their strong suit. Great class or detail of flavors is unusual, but there's plenty of sheer likability for the pittance we're asked to pay. In favorable vintages such as 2001 and 2002, they soar above their class.

GOH-043 **2001 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Scheurebe Kabinett**
 With Riesling *dosage*; a wine of unusual grip and persistence here, discreetly varietal but almost a Pinot Gris deep demi-glacé of fruit; sagey, curranty-spicy salty wash over the sides of the tongue; long nettley finish. Yang Scheu! Down to the final 75 cases here, after which keep reading. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**
 SOS: 2 (from one to five years)

GOH-045 **2002 Münsterer (xxxxxx) Scheurebe Kabinett**
 "xxxxx?" Why yes; the poo-bahs at the VDP have decreed that "classified" vineyards can only be named if the wine is Riesling. This isn't objectionable, provided certain allowances are made for wines such as this one. This 2002 comes from the *exact same plot* as the '01, one of the more interesting locales for Scheurebe anywhere (Rumpf has some too, and often makes fascinating wine from it).
 Whatever! Progress stumbles forward in its earnest myopic way. This 2002 is an especially *charming* variation on the Scheu-Dautenpflänzer theme; less sage, more pink grapefruit and candied ginger and yellow-beet. A perfumey wash over the palate. No great length, but charm and refinement.
 SOS: 2 (now to five years)

GOH-046 **2002 Münsterer Kapellenberg Riesling Kabinett**
 Delicately slatey and deceptively soft; discreet slatey grip and appley fruit; really lingers on the back and is longer than you expect; a pensive wine you don't seem to forget. I kept returning to it.
 SOS: 2 (between three and eleven years)

GOH-047 **2002 Binger Rosengarten Riesling Spätlese**
 Rosengarten is the eastern extension of the Scharlach hill, less steep. For this domain, the Rosengarten is a subtle and *interesting* Riesling with a touch of wild-herb and cassis. It's planted with 34-year-old vines on gravelly soil. I asked about that cassis thing and he told me the former owner had a few Scheu vines mixed in among the Rieslings! This is lovely, a solid mouthful of feminine perfumey fruit; a real splash of citrus as if from clone-90; a charming, winning fruit-driven wine with remarkable grip.
 SOS: 2 (between six and fourteen years)

GOH-044 **2001 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese (#1)**
 At 89 Oechsle this was the lighter of two Scharlachbergs, but I liked it more (the other might be tres grande if he diddles with the sweetness, which he said he might); a fine, classy, discreet aroma in the freesia and papaya direction; palate has fine acid-mineral posture and is a civilized, judicious riesling, careful to say its flavors without gaudiness or flourish. That, plus it tastes good.
 SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GOH-048 **1998 Binger Schlossberg-Schwätzerchen Riesling Auslese** +
 I confess I am utterly melted by wines like these. He kept it in cask till September 2002 – thus it's a **first offering** – and it's a rare glimpse back to the German wines of 75-100 years ago. I adore it; the vinous antonym to fruit *qua* fruit; woody but not "woody"; a little quince and lanolin; on the dry side and with a beautiful intricate finish.
 SOS: 2 **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GOH-049H **2002 Binger Rosengarten Grauer Burgunder Eiswein, 12/500ml** +
 He made two in all – the other is a stiff young Riesling – but how often do you see Eiswein from *Pinot Gris*? 160 Oechsle, and quite good for a maiden-voyage; a wine redolent of gnarly barky old vine-trunks; a graceful Gris, true Eiswein character, ringent length and penetration, yet with all the meaty-smoky facets of the variety; wonderfully salty wash on the finish. He had no idea what to charge for it. I helped!
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty five years)

christian-wilhelm bernhard

rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

German growers had two consecutive short crops in '00 and '01. Their harvesting costs were far more than they estimated. Corks, labels and bottles are sharply more expensive in the last three years. Taxes are also higher, as the Schroeder government tries to claw its way out of economic malaise. The time is rife for price increases. I expected them. I winced to think about them, as our own costs have suffered from the falling Dollar. But I need my growers to survive and prosper, or the thing doesn't work.

So what do Bernhards do? *They LOWER their prices.*

I tell you I nearly wept at this gesture of comradeship and solidarity. There are times when kindness is nearly heroic, and this is one of them. I intend to reward them in turn with big magilla orders, so be prepared.

I'd grown so accustomed to thinking of Hartmut Bernhard as a young pup I was taken aback to see a little gray starting around his temples. There's a photo-essay on the wall in the tasting room showing the 1980 harvest, and Hartmut looks all of eleven years old. Maybe that's why. My fault, though, for these wines and this winery are striding forward each year, and no-longer-"young"—Hartmut Bernhard is entering his prime.

Last year marked the end of the fiberglass and cement tank era in his cellars: all stainless steel and old casks now.

Bernhard seems to take another step forward each year. If you're a musician you go through a period when you're basically grappling with your instrument. It usually sounds good enough, but attentive listeners can tell you're straining. Then, if you're good (and lucky), a day comes when the instrument begins to obey you, and if you're really good it will obey you before you're aware of having commanded it. Now all you hear is music. Hartmut is nearing that stage of secure command over his craft; you feel it in the wines.



Hartmut Bernhard and son

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

- **Vineyard area: 9.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,900 cases**
- **Top sites: Hackenheimer Kirchberg, FreiLaubersheimer Fels, Krichberg and Rheingrafenberg**
- **Soil types: Porphyry, clay and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 28% Riesling, 16% Spätburgunder, 11% Silvaner, 10% Kerner, 9% Müller-Thurgau, 7% Portugieser, 4% Weissburgunder, 15% others**

are not unlike Nahe soils; igneous weathered rock, even porphyry in some places. Others are typically Rheinhessen clay; a hybrid of styles emerges. Some wines show Nahe-like skeins of curranty delineation and do best in damper years. Others are typical Rheinhessen but with a more compact profile, as though their proximity to the Nahe caused them to speak with a Nahe-accent. They're also lighter and more buoyant than many Rheinhessen wines.

It's a father-and-son team, though Father retreats from the picture a little more each year. Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

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

Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had only Riesling dosage. I'm sure this contributes to their ever-increasing polish.

Bernhards make a bigger deal out of my visits than my meager talents warrant. I'm sure they know I like their wines, but I hope they know I *respect* them too. Hoping they're reading these words; gentlemen (and lady), it remains a pleasure to grow in the knowledge of our respective crafts together over the years we've known one another. And it is a joy to know you all. There. It's just the sort of thing I can't say out loud without dying of embarrassment. Now go away, I'm blushing as it is.

Bernhard at a glance:

Jam-packed flavor bombs from clay soils, tangy-complex wines from volcanic soils. Great success with Scheurebe if you like them full-throttle! Steadily improving quality as the son consolidates his “regime.”

how the wines taste:

It depends on the soil. Rieslings from the volcanic porphyry soils taste like Nahe wines under a sun lamp, complex and intricate. The wines from the clayey Kirchberg site are real gob-stuffers; they're not elegant (though far from clumsy) but rather concentrated and chewy. Each year Hartmut inches closer to his pinnacle.

GCB-053 **2002 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**

We tried this with Silvaner *dosage* and then with Riesling, with telling results. Silvaner emphasized the sagey aspect of Scheu, and Riesling the tropical and citric. Then we blended the two and *Yow!* Has it all; sage, bergamot, cassis, meyer-lemon; heaps of fruit and a lavishly long finish.

SOS: 2 (now to six years)

GCB-050 **2001 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Spätlese**

This is quite sweet (stopped spontaneously) but still balanced; mango and passion fruit and malt; not a catty monster but rather a big charming peachy beauty; began gentle but has really found it's id with a year in bottle and is now a goth-metal Scheu more sizzling than your most lurid fantasies.

SOS: 3 (now to nine years)

GCB-051 **2002 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**

Quite tangy and racy for this wine; solid and meaty as always, but lots of polish and gloss this year; demi-glace juice and saltiness.

SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GCB-052 **2002 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**

This is in effect the Kabinett but *more* so; he harvested it more selectively and cleared the must (by gravity) longer and pressed more gently, just to see....and the result is more refined and detailed than any Bernhard Riesling in memory; with no loss of the usual generosity, the wine is somehow *spiffier*.

SOS: 3 (between seven and eighteen years)

GCB-054 **2002 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Auxerrois Kabinett Halbtrocken**

I *like* this variety. It's an elegant Auxerrois, grown on porphyry; good firmness, tres Alsacienne and varietally true; barely noticeable sweetness but a fine internal perfume and lots of umami flavors like veal stock, carrots and saffron.

SOS: 0 (now to three years)



gernot gysler

rheinhessen • weinheim

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

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

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing. He’s moving ever-closer to 100% ambient yeast fermentations. He’s shifted cover-crop to every second row, renewed composting, almost entirely done away with *dosage*, moved almost entirely toward stainless steel. He’s

pulling out the new crossings and replanting with classic varieties (no mean feat with 12 hectares to manage). He’s a member of a pride of young grower-lions called Class In The Glass, and he’s part of what’s waking the Rheinhessen from its somnolence.

And needless to say, he’s been discovered. None of the young can afford to work in obscurity; their only hope is to get on the Map *fast*. So they send their samples to all the necessary reviewers and they make all the necessary scenes.

My only regret is he isn’t in the Rheingau! For this is precisely the kind of fresh young talent that still-ossified region badly needs. A person with Gysler’s determination and program would make superb wines in, say, Raenthal. But one takes talent where it can be found, even in sleepy Weinheim, and one is grateful. Four years ago, Gysler was among several estates I opted not to visit in order to save road-weariness. I confess, I don’t have quite the stamina I



Alexander Gysler

used to (but with what finesse do I make up for it!) and there are a few estates I really needn’t visit personally each year, as long as I can taste the wines in mint condition. Then a few weeks before flying I got a fax from Alex asking if I couldn’t possibly make time for a stop-off in Weinheim. His father was ailing and he would assume sole responsibility for the wines now, and he wanted to pick my brains about various paths he might take.

Of course I went to see him. What an odd mixture of emotions it was. Gernot was terminally ill (and would in fact die several weeks later) and I was fond of Gernot, and had been distressed to see him as diminished as he was the year before. His wife and son were either terribly stoic or terribly correct; the Germans find it unseemly to air their private griefs to any but intimates. But I was aware of the hovering sorrows, juxtaposed with a really exciting group of wines about which Alexander was justly proud. I was

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,900 cases**
- **Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg**
- **Soil types: Rotliegand and mixtures of stone, loam and clay**
- **Grape Varieties: Riesling, Silvaner, Huxelrebe**

also distracted by one of the most striking dogs I think I have ever seen, a great obsidian patriarch who sat outside a glass door and glared at us with wounded dignity.

Alex has settled in since then, and the wonderful dog still gazes dolefully at all the fun from which he feels excluded. What’s happening here is good. Recognition from the German wine press is also good. Soon it will be time to take the next steps. Because it isn’t reducible, after all, to formula, or if it is, you risk making formulaic-tasting wines. Germans have a great word with no English equivalent: “Fingerspitzengefühl”. A long `un, yes, but translated it is “the feeling on the finger tips” and it is the difference between correct wines, even “exciting” wines . . . and great wines.

It’s best when you don’t *know* what the vintner did. I have traveled with tasters who seize upon a single aspect of winemaking and try to determine whether-X-or-Y with each wine they taste. Cultured yeast or wild yeast? Tanks or casks? And when they’re wrong they feel great consternation, while I smile inside. Because that fumbling is how they learn; it’s how I learned and still learn. I doubt if anyone tasting, say, Dönnhoff’s wine could tell you whether they’re aged in casks or tanks. Take Justen and Christoffel: casks or tanks, and which is which? The more you look for cause-effect syllogisms by which wine is “explained” the more frustrated you’ll become. Wine is explained in the feeling of the fingertips. And it takes the time it takes, for the taster and for the vintner.

I really like Alex Gysler and I’m delighted at the fine future I know he’ll have. He is most of the way mastering the externals, and his wines have iridescently polished surfaces. Soon it will be time to go deeper.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in relatively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg. These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without

stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn't infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you're on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren't screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren't any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you'd look at it and think "grapes should grow there."

Gysler at a glance:

Big changes afoot as son Alexander Gysler takes control. The new wines are slimmed down, streamlined and modernized, jazzy and full of crispy, primary fruit. Prices, though, remain un-real for the time being!

how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now. Alexander will do good things.

GGY-041L **2002 Weinheimer Hölle Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Dudes and dudettes, incubi and succubi, lissen up. If there were an international context to determine the single-greatest wine value on earth, I'd enter this wine *with every expectation of winning*. It is that damn good. The 2002 starts out zipper than the '01, with an almost Champgne-like nose; it comes on very sleek and snappy but fills out markedly in the middle. Over 8g.l. acidity (almost freakish for Silvaner), and so vital and vivid you wonder why you'd ever drink anything else. **Shame on you** if you pass this by. SOS: 0 (cries to be drunk now, this minute, but will "keep" at least five years)

GGY-042L **2002 Weinheimer Hölle Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Kevin Pike ordered a few cases on the spot to drink through the summer. This is the elderflower side of Scheu, light but true. Indeed its very lightness is the key to its seductiveness; it is suave and infinitely GOOD; a wine to *drink* in order to forget all the other wines you have to *work* to "taste". It was just two weeks in bottle when I saw it, so it may well be more substantive than I suppose. In any case you're gonna like this so much you'll want to pay us more for it. **Hurry: limited!** SOS: 0 (now, now, now, now...)

GGY-040 **2002 Weinheimer Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

A blend of two lots, one fermented spontaneously and the other with cultured yeasts; it has a pretty nose, cox-orange apples; this is about as good as the '01, but it's very *stiff* on the palate (the pH is 2.6. No that's not a typo.); it's a kind of crystalline minerality with wild-plum aromas (and tannins!). SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GGY-043H **2002 Weinheimer Kapellenberg Huxelrebe BA, 12/375ml**

You'll get this is you fly Lufthansa 1st class, but you can get it from me for a lot less than a 1st-class ticket! It's a varietally faithful wine with a spicy racy elegance. Huxel can be mawkishly raisiny and sweet but Gysler has always had a good hand with it. And look at the price! SOS: 4 (between ten and twenty five years)



mittelrhein wines



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

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

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

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

At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . .

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

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

tle somehow omits the lard-rendering plant across the road, isn't it? At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated though there isn't a flagship site like Scharzhofberger, nor a flagship estate like Eügon Müller. But I'd wager that a generation from now, the Josts and Weingarts will have become the standard "great names."

The vineyards fall into two groups: the riverfront sites (giving the slatiest, most minerally wines) and the side-valley slopes (whose wines are tangier and spicier). Soils are Devonian slate and quartzite, so the wines bear a strong resemblance to Mosel wines, though fuller in body, more "masculine" and sometimes with more lavish fruit. Most Moselans sense a kinship with Mittelrhein wines and would drink them first if they couldn't drink wines from their own region.



Boppard

tasting versus drinking

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

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

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

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

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

Want to hear a story of fortitude? Peter Jost broke his leg in the vineyards just three days before the harvest one year. He was in utter denial. This simply could not be. He didn't go in for X-rays for three days, and when he did he was told "your leg is broken and you'll be laid up for about six weeks." "Um, I don't *think* so!" After three weeks hobbling around on crutches, including picking grapes in vineyards as steep as 60 degrees, his Doctor told him "Look, if you don't get off your feet we'll put you on your back!" The solution? A WHEELCHAIR! "I rolled through the cellar in my wheelchair and made my wines," said Peter.

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

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

It's worth considering why, and I think it has to do with fruit and fructose. Different Rieslings age successfully in various ways, but wines like Jost's start out with fruit complexity that compounds over time, somehow both reducing and billowing into broader bands of nuance. Fructose can evolve a stop-you-in-your-tracks complexity if it's set in a firm enough frame. The best among Jost's wines show the noblest face of Riesling's pure fruit-self.

This is an estate with the lion's share of a single vineyard, with which they are identified, in this case the BACHARACHER HAHN. There are a few other parcels also (along with some Rheingauers), but Jost and Hahn are inextricably linked. I've looked at Hahn from all sides now; from across the river (where it looks impossibly steep), from immediately below it, from above it, within it,



Peter and Linde Jost

and anyway you slice it, this is one special site; steep goes without saying, perfect exposure, large enough to allow selective harvesting. One cannot tell anymore whether its exuberant glory of fruit is innate, as there aren't any other proprietors to speak of. But who cares? It's one of the dia-

- **Vineyard area: 8.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,900 cases**
- **Top sites: Barcharacher Hahn, Wolfshöhle**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 85% Riesling,
15% Spätburgunder**

monds of the German wine world.

The winery is right on the main drag through the almost painfully lovely town of Bacharach. The town has its share of gawkers yet Jost's place remains unaffectedly old-world. Linde has magic hands with food and is quick with a quip; in fact Linde is a paragon of humanity in many and varied ways, and they're a good couple, with three fine daughters, and the house has that purposive calm, even in the face of frenzy, that tells you things are as they should be.

The wines, also, are calm and shining. Peter's wines are seldom ostentatious or gaudy. But *what* polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous but never overbearing, underpinned with slaty filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb. I've learned to expect fine things here. Peter's been emphasizing lees-contact the past few vintages and now the wines have a further dimension of stylishness.

The wines are fermented in stainless steel, using cultured yeasts, with controlled temperatures. "We're particularly careful of how we handle the grapes," says Peter. "All the grapes arrive at the press in undisturbed condition. We press with a maximum of 1.8 bars of pressure; the best wines don't go higher than one bar." Lees contact is "as long as possible, but regularly three months. Actually our wines throw very little sediment since we ferment a very clean must." says Peter. What lees do exist are

stirred. “I want a partnership between primary fruit and the richness of the lees.”

Nary a wine has been de-acidified for the last decade. And Peter is friendly toward the use of Süßreserve if it's produced optimally. “Each wine should have its own Süßreserve,” he says. “It's labor-intensive and it falls just at the busiest time of the harvest, which means working the night shift!” But, he says, the later fermentation stops, the better for the wine. “In any case, at least for our wine which we ferment technically clean with the cultured yeasts, we can use a third less sulfur.”

2002 as another big-un here, with no Riesling below 88 Oechsle (up to 105). Yet this is deceptive; the supernal

1993 vintage was nearly as ripe and those wines seemed sleeker. I believe Jost's wines, with their new leesy profile, are behaving true to type, i.e. leesy wines *always* need a few years after bottling to show their real character. Think of J.J. Prüm for a glaring example.

Yet this was an instance of the name on the label being at odds with the profile of the wine. The “Kabinett” was more correctly a generous Spätlese (and wanted the appropriate sweetness); there was a disconnect between elements. I was there two weeks earlier than last year, which Peter said was decisive. I imagine it was, but I wouldn't mind seeing a vintage of unexceptional ripeness here, just to get benchmarks in order again.

Jost at a glance:

Primo estate with impeccable reputation for top-flight Rieslings. Wines emphasize beauty of fruit rather than mineral.

how the wines taste:

It is the quality of fruit you look for here, and this is about as lovely as it gets; a delicate melange of sweet-apple, white peach, honeysuckle, expressed in a resplendent elegance, always stopping short of mere sultriness.

GTJ-051 2002 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett

Let us study this phenomenon; we have a Kabinett with 90 Oechsle, which means it's really either big-ass Spätlese or the lightest of the Auslesen. As such, it needs a sweetness commensurate with its ripeness. But, if it has that sweetness it will then taste most unlike what the drinker is expecting. What to do? Tiptoe through the fructose and try to finesse it, I suppose.

Peter left 50g.l. residual sugar in the wine, ostensibly more than enough, and certainly at the limit of tolerance for “Kabinett”. I thought the *wine* needed more. Peter felt the wine was less evolved than 2001 at the same stage, and I was two weeks earlier than last year to boot. “But,” he mused, “I think we can do a little something, if you like.” Thus I defer judgement until the wine's more finished. That said, Jost Hahn Kab is a veritable institution and has a superb track record. So . . .

SOS: cannot say. (between five and sixteen years)

GTJ-050 2002 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Spätlese

70g.l. residual sugar (do you discern a pattern? The Kabinett had 50.) Lovely fragrance and an ample, ripe-as-all-get-out palate; sumptuous, even tangy; I like the sweet-smoky salt of it' it is delicious . . . and yet what it really is is a moderate Auslese, in which case nobody would raise an eyebrow at 10g more sweetness. Still there's every chance I'll feel like a dope when the wine's bottled and settled down. Or maybe I should just feel like a dope on general principle.

SOS: 2 (between seven and nineteen years)



florian weingart

mittelrhein • boppard-spay

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

Seeing a vintner once a year is like a time-lapse picture. Last year Florian had somehow filled out, and looked more like *Le Patron*. He's really catapulted his estate to the summit of the Mittelrhein in his three years at the helm. A leading wine-pundit placed him on par with Jost. We speak as always about the vicissitudes of the latest vintage. Yields were a little higher in 2002 – all the way up to 50hl/ha. Florian experimented with longer skin-contact for some wines this year. He's more of an intellectual than many growers. "There is no single True way," he says: "Rather a multitude of possibilities." I sense Florian is delighted to play among them! Florian has always been transparently candid and unaffected with me, which I find unendingly delightful. It's such a pleasure to connect simply as colleagues. I think he is instinctively genuine, as are his wines.

This is another estate which is worked by the whole family. Papa only emerged at the end to greet me, Mama came and went, and Florian's missus mostly tried to keep the kids out of our way (with mixed success, I noted happily).

Florian is improving what were already excellent wines, but I still miss his folks. Papa set a fine example of diligence, fortitude and joy. He suffers from a degenera-

- **Vineyard area: 9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg, Feuerlay, Engelstein and Mandelstein**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 92% Riesling, 8% other varieties**

tive nerve ailment that deprives him of the use of his fingertips, not an easy prospect for a small family-domain on steep slopes. Yet he was invariably cheerful and uncomplaining, and his wines were tensely fruity, and it does the soul good to see a talented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

The wines are more green-fruity than they have been, more explicitly slatey, more Mosel-like. Florian ascribes this to colder fermentations. He also suggests that the big tropical-fruit flavors of earlier Weingart wines resulted to some extent from nitrogen fermentations. He's also leaving his wines longer on their lees, "partly to compensate for the loss of body resulting from our colder fermentation temperatures." And this gives them another dimension of complexity.

But you can't do away entirely with those tropical flavors; they are written into the soil. There's a vein of volcanic residue from eruptions in the old Eifel mountains in the soils of the Bopparder Hamm, and it's (presumably) this soil which accounts for the bigger sweet-fruit expression in these wines. The Ohlenberg has a deeper soil, giving more robust wines, more likely to come from physiologically ripe fruit and therefore better suited to Trocken styling. (Florian's one of the few to make this intuitive connection.)



Weingart at a glance:

A rising star on the Mittelrhein with the advent of young Florian Weingart at the helm. Still-good value for in-your-face fruity-minerally steep-slope wine.

how the wines taste:

They're urgent above all; these are wines that move, that push and pull on the palate. Then tropically fruity, vanilla, papaya, mango in the ripest wines. With the 1996 vintage a new minerality came; you feel it on the sides of the palate, and it sets up a call-and-response of fruit and stone that keeps you returning to the wine just when you were done attending to it. These are smiling, cheerful wines, but now perhaps with a fundamental intelligence that makes you want to spend lots of time with them.

GAW-062 **2002 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

Long enough name for ya, stud? This was the pick of a pretty nice group of dry wines, an instant OUI; silky, balanced dry Riesling with its signature tones of vanilla and mango. SOS: 0 (now to two years; again from eight to sixteen years)

GAW-063 **2002 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett**

A custom-bottling for moi, as there was no "regular" Kabinett. At which I squawked. I'd have yelped buy my throat was tender from growling all morning. I'm a real gross guy. Anyway, what we did here was blend a Spätlese into the small amount of "real" Kabinett Florian had, and which he intended to blend away somewhere else. A sinewy-slatay-stony nose, raspberries too; the palate is spicy and grippy, zingy like Ratzemberger used to be; a little gooseberry tartness shows on the finish. SOS: 2 (between four and sixteen years)

GAW-058 **2001 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese**

Riotously tropical aromas; fabulous grip and berried length; raspberries and greengages; power and torque here, impressive wine. SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty one years)

GAW-059 **2001 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Spätlese**

"Spätlese" my fat white ass! This is *serious* Auslese in any other vintage; 90 Oechsle with some botrytis; classical slate and quartzite aromas, also a little cidery; it wants to be a 70s-style "sweet" Spätlese but keeps being pulled down into its primordial rocky depths. This is from a leased vineyard down near Josts, by the way, with quite dissimilar conditions to the Bopparder Hamm. SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty five years)

GAW-064 **2002 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese**

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One of the great Spätlesen of the 2002 vintage. And the lesser of two (88 Oechsle versus 96), which shows yet again that more isn't always better. A heavenly nose here, and a dreamy, caressing and seductive palate, but it seduces not only with prettiness but with mischief and intelligence. It's like a big-sister to Wehlener Sonnenuhr, with a mineral-laced herbal tone in the middle and back which wafts through the l-o-n-n-g-g finish. **Limited!** SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty four years)

GAW-065 **2002 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Auslese**

The film crew was along for this visit and they got in the way of my adorable prose. Plus the cameraman (a great guy, as the entire crew was) just came back inside from smoking a cigarette and of course he *reeks* of smoke – do smokers really not know? I logged a big, almost BA-type nose, overripe plums, nicotine, clean malty botrytis, and nicotine. The palate was salty-mineral below all that plump fruit. Recalls a 1971. The rest of my sentences were really lame, though they did contain ample nicotine. SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty five years)

GAW-066H **2002 Bopparder Hamm Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**

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This is among the greatest young TBAs I've ever tasted. It is **extremely limited**. "One liter of juice per picker per day" is what they got. Two lots, one at 160 Oechsle and the other at 230. Weingarts didn't register it as "TBA" but only as BA; they are appealing to amend the registration, but the wine *could* end up labeled BA. No matter; this is immense yet tender, a clear masterpiece. SOS: 4 (between twenty five and seventy five years)

why does place-specificity matter?

Once upon a time I sat on a panel discussing spirit-of-place, and a native-American woman to my left said something that lodged on my heart and has not moved since.

The salmon do not only return to the stream, she said, in order to spawn; they also return in order to respond to the prayers and hopes of the people who love them.

That assumption of a unity of living things underlies my own assumption that places have spirit, and wine is one of the ways places convey their spirits to us, and this is significant because we are in fact connected (even if we deny it or are unaware), and if we claim that wine is an important part of life then wine must be bound into and among the filaments by which we are connected to all things. Wines which simply exist as products to be sold must take their places alongside all such commodities, soda, breakfast cereal, vacuum-cleaner bags. They can be enjoyable and useful, but they don't *matter*.

Spirit-of-place is a concept that's like really good soap; it's lovely, it feels good when it touches you, and it's slippery as hell.

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

I had one of my Moments: in my fantasy I took the hapless chap by the face and pressed him right up against the chalk . . . "But ya don't have *this*, do ya buster!" I cried, mashing his pitiful face against the powdery rock. "It's the SOIL, stupid!" I added. "Now go clean yourself up."

Later, and calmer, I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the landscape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and

the cool days of June, and the wan northern sun that seldom seems to roast. And the still wines are not vivid in the way that young Riesling or Muscat is. They are pastel, aquarelle, restrained, gauzy. Add bubbles and they get frisky. But they aren't born that way. Didier Gimonnet told me he'd been pestered by an English wine writer to produce a tiny amount of super-cuvee from an 80-year old vineyard he owns . . . "I'll never do it," he insisted, "because the wine would be too powerful." But isn't that the point, I thought? Isn't that what wine's supposed to do in our skewered age? Density, concentration, power, flavor that can break bricks with its head! "I think Champagne needs to have a certain transparency in order to be elegant," he continued. And then it came to me.

Here was the Aesthetic to correspond with the gentleness of the Champagne landscape. A *pays* of low hills, forested summits and plain sleepy villages isn't destined to produce powerful wines. We have become so besotted by our demand for **impact** that we've forgotten how to discern *beauty*. And who among us ever tilts a listening ear to hear the hum of the land.

One reason the old world calls to us is that these lands do hum, a low subterranean vibration you feel in your bones. It has existed for centuries before you were born. It isn't meant to be fathomed. It is mysterious, and you are temporary, but hearing it, you are connected to great currents of time. And you are tickled by a sense of significance you cannot quite touch. It cannot be the same here. Each of us Americans is the crown of creation. We invented humanity. Nothing happened before us, or in any case, nothing worth remembering. Memory is a burden in any case. We turn to the world like a playground bully looking to pick a fight. Waddaya got TODAY to amuse me, pal? How ya gonna IMPRESS me?" How many POINTS will this day be worth? Maybe our little slice of earth rumbles with its own hum, but if it does, not many Americans want to know how to hear it, and most are suspicious of the value of listening at all.

Does spirit-of-place reside integrally within the place, or do we read it in? The answer is: YES. We are a part of all we touch, see, taste, experience. If we glean the presence of spirit-of-place, then it's there because we glean it, because we are not separate from the things we experience.

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? Romantic notions aside, we need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When some-thing flourishes, it tells us it is at *home*. It says this is

where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste “flourish” when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those who are persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can “exist” elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!

But the same grape will be mute on “foreign” soil. Try planting Riesling where it’s too warm or the soil’s too rich, and it becomes a blatant, fruit-salady wine which most people correctly write off as dull and cloying. Has Chenin Blanc ever made great wine outside Anjou or Touraine? Nebbiolo doesn’t seem to flourish outside Piemonte. I’d even argue that Chardonnay is strictly at home in Chablis and Champagne, since these are the only places where its inherent flavors are complex and interesting; it does easily without the pancake-makeup of oak or other manipulations.

When a vine is at home it settles in and starts to transmit. We “hear” these transmissions as flavors. A naturally articulate grape like Riesling sends a clear message of the soil. Indeed Riesling seems to frolic when it’s at home, it is so playful and expressive. And so we see the lovely phenomenon of detailed and distinct flavors coming from contiguous plots of land. Vineyard flavors are consistent, specific, and repeated year after year, varied only by the weather in which that year’s grapes ripened. Graacher Himmelreich and Graacher Domprobst are useful cases in point. Domprobst lies right above the village, and is uniformly steep and very stony. Mosel slate can either be bluish-grey, battleship grey or rusty-grey according to other trace minerals which may be present. Some soils are more weathered than others. The harder the rock, the harder the wine. (The locals tell you the very best wines grow on *feinerd*, or fine-earth, a slate already pre-crumbled. But such soils often settle at the bottoms of hills, where sun-exposure can be less than optimal. The parameters are complex.) Domprobst always gives thrilling wines, with “signature” flavors of cassis, pecans and granny-apples. I get Domprobst from three different growers, and its particular fingerprint is absolutely consistent whichever the cellar.

Right next door to the southeast is Himmelreich. This is an undulating hillside with sections of varying steepness. In Domprobst you hit rock six inches below the surface; in Himmelreich

it’s often a foot or more. This gives the wines more fruit, and makes them less adamantly fibrous and mineral, more forthcoming, and just a little less superb. If you’re a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don’t have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the *grapes*.

You wouldn’t have to sermonize to *these* people about spirit-of-place. They are steeped within that spirit as a condition of life. Their inchoate assumption that Place contains Spirit is part of that spirit.

Let’s step back a little. The Mosel, that limpid little river, flows through a gorge it has created, amidst impossibly steep mountainsides. Its people are conservative and they approach the sweaty work on the steep slopes with humility and good cheer. They are people of the North, accustomed to a bracing and taut way of life. Is it an accident that their wines, too, are bracing and taut? Show me someone who is determined to prove otherwise, and I’ll show you someone who has never been there.

I’ll go further. I believe the Catholic culture of the Mosel produces wines themselves catholically mystic. You see it in the wines when they are mature; sublime, uncanny flavors which seem to arise from a source not-of-this-earth.

I need wines which tell me in no uncertain terms: “I hail from THIS place and this place alone, not from any other place, only here, where I am at home.” Because such wines take us to those places. If we are already there, they cement the reality of our being there. We need to know where we are. If we do not, we are: *lost*.

I don’t have the time to waste on processed wines that taste like they could have come from anywhere, because in fact they come from *nowhere* and have no place to take me. We crave spirit of place because we need to be reassured we belong in the universe. And we want our bearings. We want to know where home is. We can deny or ignore this longing, but we will grow old wondering at the ceaseless scraping nail of anxiety that never lets us feel whole. Or we can claim this world of places.

And when we do, we claim the love that lives in hills and vines, in trees and birds and smells, in buildings and ovens and human eyes, of everything in our world that makes itself at home and calls on us to do the same. The value of wine, beyond the sensual joy it gives us, lies in the things it tells us, not only its own hills and rivers, but the road home.

pfalz wines



Every year I take a few days in Alsace for a little R & R. It's nice to get a break and I love Alsace. I love the wines, too, and try to make time for visits to a few of my favorite growers. What a wine-geek does on his day off: taste more wine. Lately the Alsatians have started doing what the Germans did fifteen years ago, showing analytical values for their wines on pricelists. I never knew how many Alsace wines were so LOW in acidity, nor did I know (though I did suspect) how much residual sugar was in so many wines. Rieslings too.

Now, I have no objection to this at all. *Sweetness is your friend!* I know the purists yearn for a return to the old style Alsace wines; dry, manly, stern. I have a suggestion for them.

They can go to the Pfalz.

In the last generation there's been a 180-degree about-face in these two close-by regions. Today it is PFALZ WINE that will satisfy the demand for uncompromisingly dry wine in the Rhineland style. There is, however, one small problem. Most dry Pfalz wine absolutely and totally sucks.

I love this region, truly I do. I was among the first to proclaim it Germany's most *happening* wine region. But in the last few years it has become an Eden of the Unexamined Palate.

I used to think that notions like "kilocalories of sunlight" were specious, but now I'm starting to wonder. I suspect there is indeed a difference between the sun-warmth in Alsace and that of the Pfalz, an hour or two North. Because most Alsace Riesling basically works, even at its most dry. One might have small aesthetic cavils with

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

this wine or that, but the *formula* is basically sound. It is just the opposite in the Pfalz. There are successful, even superb dry Rieslings there, but the *essential* basis is seriously flawed. That is, unless you like (or *think* you like) shrill, meager, sharp and bitter wines.

The Pfalz is besieged with local tourism from the big cities Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Frankenthal and Heidelberg. Summer weekends are wall-to-wall swirl & hurl. For some reason (perhaps chemical emissions from the heavy industry near Frankenthal?) these fine denizens of taste have embraced masochism as their aesthetic *tabula rosa*. The poor growers, who have to sell their wines, after all, have not only to comply, but also to *appear* enthusiastic, and to embrace a guiding philosophy of dryness. It goes emphatically against common sense, but livings must be made.

I don't know why the wines don't work. I drink plenty of honestly dry Riesling from Austria and Alsace. Indeed, I like dry Riesling. I'm not sure why a wine with 13% alcohol would taste thin and fruitless; I only know that almost all of them do. I have tried and tried to like them. It's tiresome and frustrating to kvetch.

Another lamentable tendency in my beloved and endangered Pfalz is to plant more and more Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris (and Chardonnay, for which they will writhe eternally), the better to produce (mostly) neutral and softer dry wines. A lot of old dubious vines have been hacked up—Optima, Siegerrebe, Ortega, Morio-Muscat - and one is duly grateful; that land was probably unsuitable for Riesling.

These days it's likely to be used for (sigh) red varieties, since the Germans are convinced they'll keel over from heart attacks unless they slam down the *vino rosso*. The waiting list for Dornfelder clippings is two to three years. You see Cabernet and Merlot crawling like a plague over the land. The Pfalz seriously wishes to establish itself as a red-wine region. Yes, several among the red wines are very tasty - I sell a couple of them with great pride - but let's not forget to resist this ominous urge to homogenize. If we allow it to grow malignantly the next thing you know we'll insist on ripe raspberries all year round.

Oh shit; we already do.

The *reducto ad absurdum* of all this is the truly ghastly set of rules applying to the "Erstes Gewächs" (Grand Cru) program. Everything is perfectly enlightened—low yields, old vines, hand-harvesting, minimum necessary ripeness—until the ideologues began vomiting their ghastly ideas and insisted the wines must either be DRY (up to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar) or "NOBLY" SWEET (above 50 grams per liter). It is distressing to be asked to

accept these (mostly) brutally hot and bitter wines as arguments for Grand Cru status. It is distressing to see an entire community of wines strait-jacketed to squeeze into a marketing person's convenience. If anyone knows a stealthy little munchkin who needs a job I'd like to hire him to break into all these deluded wineries and drop Süsreserve into the tanks.

And yet . . . and yet! When Pfalz wines are good, they're uniquely good. And there are so many ways for them to be good. When you think of the sheer number of interesting people in the Pfalz, it makes other regions (like the ossified Rheingau?) seem like backwaters. Nobody knows why, but the Pfalz is home to a thriving community of idiot-fringe experimenters who are real wine *nuts*, who collect it, talk about it, read about it, probably even *dream* about it. And these are the *least* snobby of any wine people you can imagine; people who really know how to tuck in and *live*, with the quality the Germans call "Lebenlust," a gargantuan appetite for life. And where else could you find such a prolific mix of temperaments? And so *many* great growers? To spend the morning at, say, Koehler-Ruprecht, and the afternoon, at, say, Müller-Catoir, is to taste two amazingly great but COMPLETELY MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE families of wines. How, then, do we determine what real Pfalz wine is like?

Well, we need a definition broad enough to encompass most of the various styles, but more important we need to isolate what the wines have in common. Let's start

with this: Pfalz wine shows a unique marriage of generosity and elegance; no other wine is at once so expansive and so classy. The idea of "class" usually suggests a certain reserve: NOT HERE! The typical Pfalz wine has big, ripe fruit, lots of literal spice (cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg), a kind of lush savor, a keen tang of pineapple, a splendid tautness of acidity under that frothing stock pot of fruit. The wines have a *great* affinity for food—certainly the most versatile of all German wines—and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

**The wines have a great affinity for food—
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wines—and yet they have an indefinable
elegance.**

From this point the ways diverge. In what other region could you superimpose the laser-etching of a Darting with the big burly power of a Koehler-Ruprecht, with the fiery-yet-satiny persistence of an Eugen-Müller with the tingly mineral gleam of a Messmer with the leesy chewiness and compactness of a Minges with the sheer stunning **expression** of fruit of a Lingenfelder with the little-bit-of- all-of-those-high-flying-you'll-break-your-crazy-neck-daredevil-gee of a Biffar? NFW, that's where!



Pfalz

Naturally it's very different now.

If things had been the same, or even similar, and if the wines had been all that they were, I would have told you, even if I thought you'd doubt me.

There is a transition at Müller-Catoir and it is the foggiest point, right now, and hard to see the horizon from here. The two gentlemen I was introduced to last year by Hans-Günter Schwarz as his hand-groomed successors are both gone. (Both are at Meßmer, interestingly enough; one ended up there via a stint at Lingenfelder.)

In their place is about the most likeable human being you could ever meet. Martin Franzen arrives from Baden Baden's Nägelsförst estate (and from Schlossgut Diel before that) with big shoes

to fill. Yet with wicked wisdom, he declines to fill them, but instead sets about staking his own claims.

Meanwhile, the administration of the winery is shared between Heinrich Catoir, who seems willing to cede more of it to his son Phillip, an architect by trade.

Schwarz's name is not spoken, which of course means it is shouted continually, between each word and breath. It is all somewhat obscure to American eyes, accustomed as we are to plain dealing and open speaking.

Franzen – whose hair you want to tousle – radiates affability and competence. He claimed (at my prompting) to have established his *regime* 99% of the way. “We only have a few refinements, a few things to further perfect,” he said. Catoir smiled approvingly.

Franzen likes extended lees-contact, ultra-reductive vinification, and when he says “dry” he means *dry*. What the Germans now call “modern-Trocken” i.e. up to the legal limit of 9g.l. residual sugar is not his style.

His “official” start-date at Catoir was January 1st, yet he claims to have divided his time between both estates (old and new) for the 2002 harvest. He also has 20 hectares at Catoir to find his way around in, plus new varieties like Rieslaner and Scheurebe with which he's unfamiliar. I'm certain Schwarz left things in tip-top shape, but it was his shape, a logic Franzen may not have

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,250 cases**
- **Top sites: Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog, Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten, Mussbacher Eselshaut**
- **Soil types: Loamy gravel, clay**
- **Grape varieties: 58% Riesling, 13% Rieslaner, 9% Scheurebe, 8% Weissburgunder, 4% Muskateller, 3% Grauburgunder and Spätburgunder, 2% other varieties**

found self-evident.

For all these reasons it's really impossible to freeze the winery and say “This is the new status of Müller-Catoir.” The *now* is shape-shifting. It is possible, indeed necessary, to appraise the 2002 vintage and respond accordingly. This I have done.

I selected many fewer wines than I did before. I liked what I did select – very much – but I'd describe it as a vintage clouded by issues of transition. Even a great musician has to adapt his playing to a new unfamiliar instrument. He's going to miss a few notes.

I found most of the dry wines too dry. Some of the sweet wines seemed to screech a bit – and I lament the loss of 80% of the Scheurebe crop, which fell to the ground when it's perfect harvest-moment was bypassed in favor of gathering some Riesling. But even great cooks are in the weeds sometimes.

I am very curious to follow Martin Franzen's progress, because I think he's yet to find his true stride here. I'm really cheering for him 'cause he's such a great guy. I will continue to sniff the air for miracles.



Müller-Catoir at a glance:

In transit between the 42-year regime of Hans-Günter Schwarz and the new regime of the agreeable Martin Franzen, who has great credentials, a style of his own, and nerves of steel.

how the wines taste:

Extremely spritzy and highly leesy – one wine made me think of Gimmonnet’s Cuvée Gastronomer! And from the little one can truly discern, somewhat brash. This is likely a function of the newness of it all, as Franzen made wonderful wines at Diel. I can’t wait to see the next vintage.

GMC-053 **2002 Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller Trocken**

This was the very first wine we tasted. Well hel-lo! I wanted to shout. It’s a lovely mineral Muscat, typical for the estate, impeccable and crispy and with the usual Thai-basil notes. Modest in scale but perfect in its way.
SOS: 0 (now to four years)

GMC-054 **2002 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

(cask #1) This was dramatically the best of the dry Rieslings; it’s looser and more crackery than the others; made me think of Meunier, actually. It’s not like an MC wine from what’s-his-name’s era, but it’s awfully good, and acceptably dry, not austere. Has some of the smoky terroir and spicy iris-y flower of Nigl’s Privats, though it’s even more needle-y than Nigl.
SOS: 0 (now-two years; again from nine to fourteen years)

GMC-055 **2002 Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese**

Quite good; limey and kirsch-like aromas, good plump fruit and playful *spiel* (interplay). Again, the Class among the sweet Rieslings.
SOS: 2 (between six and eighteen years)

GMC-056H **2002 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml** +

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

2002 was a fiendishly difficult year for Rieslaner, which suffered stem-rot in the October rains. All the more reason to be intrigued by what Franzen pulled off here, and moreover from a variety unfamiliar to him. There’s another Rieslaner Auslese, from Meßmer, which this resembles – both seem monolithic now, but this is *interesting* wine, even militant – but that’s OK for Rieslaner. Admirably brassy varietal statement; most impressive. A “plus” for its adamant complexity.
SOS: 3 (from seven to twenty three years)

GMC-057H **2002 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml** +

This has a truly SPLENDID nose; refined and detailed; banana panna cotta, asian pear, lime-grass; the palate shows massive botrytis and sweetness but also a creamy solidity and a *detailed* mass.
SOS: 4 (between twelve and twenty seven years)

koehler-ruprecht

pfalz • kallstadt

I remember when I started to “get” the dry wines. Not how or why, but certainly when, and *when* it happened it was both thrilling and disconcerting. I have strong opinions about certain things but I really try not to be pulled around by them. So I didn’t used to like Bernd Philippi’s Trocken wines, but now I did, some of them at least, and maybe we were just ready for each other. That, or I used to be a doofus.

This amazing winery’s production rhythms don’t, alas, congrue with my commercial rhythms, and so I never really get to show you a vintage the way I’d like. Business is brisk at this very trendy winery, and Bernd Philippi doesn’t bottle many “sweet” wines any more. His dry wines are surely among the best in Germany . . . but really. Don’t even get me started again.

Bernd-Philippi—pardon me: The LEGENDARY Bernd-Philippi—is the master of this establishment and lord of all he surveys. He has taken what was always a successful estate and turned it into one of *THE* estates in Germany. His wines, like his own Falstaffian persona, are larger-than-life. He’s been allocating for years now; he’s been raising his prices consistently with nary a murmur of protest from his loyal clientele, who are happy just to obtain the wines and who know the value they (still) represent; he’s been a wine writer’s dream, such is the dimension of his character and his readiness with a maverick opinion. He probably stops bullets in his teeth for all I know.

Bernd is the archetypal Pfalzer lion. He’s one of those guys you can really capture in a photograph, as his every expression and gesture is imbued with Bernd-ness. He’s become aware that it’s his experimenter persona that’s most appealing to journalists, and he’s seen the need to stress his role as Keeper of the Saumagen. “Eighty percent of what I do is Saumagen, O.K.?—that’s my main thing. The other twenty percent is my games, you know, the stuff I do for fun.”

There probably isn’t another great vineyard in Germany as unknown over here as the Saumagen. It’s a limestony, rocky soil in a bowl-shaped heat trap that gives some of the ripest Riesling grapes in Europe.

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Kallstadter Saumagen, Steinacker and Kronenberg**
- **Soil types: Limestone detritus, sandy loam, partly with gravel**
- **Grape varieties: 56% Riesling, 19% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% each of Chardonnay and Grauburgunder, 2% of each Dornfelder and Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% other varieties**

But all its parcels are not created equal. Used to be there were three small sites (Nill, Kirchenstück and Horn) which made up a GROSSLAGE called Saumagen. Now it’s the single-site name, encompassing a fair range of exposures and soils. Bernd’s parcel is probably the finest, south-facing terraces right in the heart of the bowl. Bernd has *never* failed to harvest Spätlese from this site, even in the wettest, most miserable years. I’m sure that a ready supply of ripe fruit contributes to Philippi’s serenity as a vintner. But don’t let that calm exterior fool you; this man is as proud and dedicated as they come.

I remember an old Charlie Parkerism (when asked how to go about being a great jazz musician): “First master your instrument,” he said. “Then forget about all that shit and just PLAY.” There you go! Bernd makes his way through the cellar like a virtuoso who no longer has to *think* about technique. And his wines are saturated with personal expression. His “voice,” deep, resonant, gravelly, comes through in all his wines. Often remarkable, sometimes astonishing, sometimes *undrinkable* but always original, these wines are not for the faint of palate, and no one feels lukewarm about them. They represent the purity of an old style you almost don’t see anymore.



Bernd has no fear of oxygen; indeed, these wines' profound acid-extract structure seem to *relish* extended aging on the lees, frequent rackings, and lengthy storage in wood. I've known cellar-rats here who've told me privately that Bernd's winemaking breaks most of the modern rules, that by all reckoning they shouldn't work at all. Well, guess again. Other Philippi principles include no cultured yeasts, and none but the "classical" Geisenheim clones of Riesling. He likes alcohol and body and Nietzschean *thunder* in his wines. He doesn't like sweetness, and even his wines with residual sugar are on the dry side. Left to his own devices he'd drink nothing but dry wines.

Which is a pity, at least to me, because good though many of the dry wines are, even a modicum of sweetness often elevates them; really **profound** now, not *just* voluminous, with gut-grabbing flavors of ginger, dough and maize. These stand as the antonym of the current trend

toward reductive vinification which—you may have noticed—I happen to like. But the world would be a *much* poorer place without wines like these, great charging bears, with all manner of woody, animal secondary flavors, yet supported by a rigid acid skeleton and capable of amazing aging.

I don't think Bernd would quarrel with any of that, yet I do detect a change of sorts in these wines, and I don't know if it's the recent vintages, the current cellar-master or a change Bernd himself desires and has brought about. The wines have all the **weight** they always did, yet they seem silkier somehow, less rugged. Even as Bernd himself continues to chart new territory in egregious debauchery his wines become more and more refined. I like to tease Bernd—he's such an easy target—but in fact I respect him hugely for not becoming his own caricature, and for steering his wines to ever-deepening finesse.

Koehler-Ruprecht at a glance:

In many opinions the leading estate of the Pfalz - certainly among the top five. Of those estates, these are the biggest, most massively scaled wines. Extraordinarily old-style approach to vinification: no stainless steel. On an incredible roll the past several vintages, and currently making some of the best dry Rieslings in Europe.

how the wines taste:

They are uncompromisingly stony-gingery, dense, wine-y, not at all grapey. They tend to polarize tasters; if you love them they give you something you almost can't get anywhere else: a warmly satisfying old-fashioned *bigness* of flavor that's masculine and lusty. Other tasters just don't "see" them, as they lack the modern steely brilliance. Bernd's grudgingly willing to concede that the reductive style makes friends but in his heart he finds that type of wine too sterile and simple, and lacking the capacity to age. That being said, in recent vintages I sense a slow movement toward a more classical profile for many of Bernd's wines, perhaps as his own palate becomes more demanding. Bernd routinely makes elite-quality wines; in most tastings of Pfalz wines his are in the top group. I myself reach for them frequently and find they give that little **extra** that great wines give. If you don't know these you owe it to yourself to check them out, **ESPECIALLY IF YOU BUY FOR A RESTAURANT**, as these are among the *most* food-friendly wines of any in this vast universe of possibility.

GKR-075 **2001 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett** +

This tastes like many other growers' Auslese; a wonderful nose, jasmine, tapioca, semolina; unheard-of density and solidity and delightful charm, a kind of lovely dense cloud of vinosity.

SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 1 (between four and twelve years)

GKR-076 **2001 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese**

The first true note now; just as you'd expect, gingery, solid, on the dry side, bready and spicy. Long as my . . . arm.

SOS: 1 (from seven to twenty two years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GKR-080 **2001 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese** +
First offering. Glorious nose; very fine honey and “Beerenton” (the flavor of golden-ripe berries such as contributes to BA); the palate surprises! All middle and low tones; clean botrytis; again on the dry side; heathery, implied sweetness; a remarkable and characteristic achievement. **Limited!**
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)

GKR-077 **1998 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese “R”** +
 “R” is Bernd’s *reserve* designation. **First offering.** When has there ever been a Riesling that tasted like this? Like brioche and pumpkin! Super-fine fruit, perfect botrytis, none too sweet, fine length; wonderful food-wine. I couldn’t help myself: *swallowed!* (one of just three times during the entire trip)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty five years)

THE DRY WINES:

GKR-073 **2000 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 An incredible wine from 2000; grip and fruit and mineral, and a fennel-frond aroma, and clean fruit, and sinewy-spicy but not *sauvage*, and perfectly dry. All of its generous volume of flavor derives from **fruit**, which is what so many dry German wines are disastrously missing.
 SOS: 0 (now to two years, or again from eight to fifteen years)

GKR-078 **2001 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese Trocken**
 Mineral density and muscle; wonderful tang and saltiness; very dry but complex and fascinating; ripe, maizey fruit bouncing off a corrugated stone wall.
 SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between nine and fifteen years)

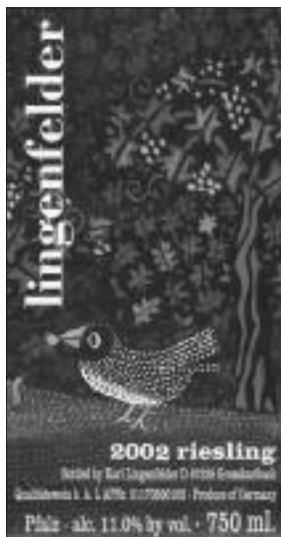
GKR-079 **1996 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese Trocken “R”**
First offering. Bernd sensibly leap-frogged his ‘97 ahead of the ‘96, but oh lord, it seems to be time; and this is all ‘96, all the way; intensely doughy nose, like dark rye rolls, even a little char around the edges; the palate is somehow steely but not stiff, an entire un-fruit wine that’s jammed with saltiness and flavor; obdurate length, amazing wine.
 SOS: 0 (now; or wait ten *more* years and see what happens!)

You gotta live this guy. A few months ago he replied to an email from someone who'd seen his website, and who was inquiring about Pinot Noir. Rainer was arguably the first to make serious Pinot Noir in the Pfalz, perhaps in Germany. He wrote: I want to emphasize that I don't want to make a 'Burgundian style' nor a 'New World style.' I want to 'help deliver' what 'naturally grows' in our Burgweg vineyard and what also reflects at least in part our history, our tradition and our heritage. I acknowledge that wine is not all nature (probably never really has been) – the vine, I am sure, is one of the oldest 'domesticated' plants we have – wine is nurtured no doubt, but it depends how far you are prepared to 'break it in'. I find a bronco more admirable than a Lipizzaner . . . a Lipizzaner is not a horse, it's a court-fool! Do you understand what I mean to say?"

I do. And I know these aren't mere words to Rainer Lingenfelder. They sometimes cost. They all-but-ruined two of his past ten vintages, when intervention to avoid mildews was urgently needed. But Rainer would rather not intervene, and if this principle costs him from time to time, so be it. He's printed up some nifty black tees saying "Lingenfelder: the Age of Post-Chardonnism" but when he does the next run I want to suggest putting "Walking The Walk" on the back.

Rainer Lingenfelder's "tasting" room is actually in the dining room of his and Elisabeth's house. It's one of the best places I know to taste wine. There's a pure, creamy light napped over everything, thanks to the north exposure. The walls are pearly-opaline in color, the tablecloth is white, the curtains are magenta—as though to refer to the red wines you're also given to taste. It's peaceful enough to hear a sparrow clear her throat outside the window, but it's not one of those stifling Temples of Tasting where all you want to do is giggle. It is typical of the care taken by Rainer, a care that goes beyond simple diligence.

Everything Rainer does is undertaken with fastidious thought and care. Everything he thinks and feels also; when you speak with him there aren't any knee-jerk opinions casually tossed off (except *mine*, if I happen to be in the vicinity). One year we were talking about the influence of yield-restrictions on wine quality. Rainer's cousin happens to be the vineyard manager at Chalk Hill, and he's been able to increase yields with no diminishment of wine quality by any objective standard of measurement. "This is a favorite hobby-horse for wine journalists," says Rainer, "because it's simple and dramatic; low yields equals high quality, and if you're any good you must be working with low yields." But surely there's a great deal of *truth* in this, isn't



- Vineyard area: 15 hectares
- Annual production: 11,700 cases
- Top sites: Grosskarlbacher Burgweg and Osterberg, Freinsheimer Goldberg
- Soil types: calcareous soil over limestone, loess, sand
- Grape varieties: 40% Riesling, 20% Spätburgunder, 10% Scheurebe, 10% Dornfelder, 5% Silvaner, 15% other varieties

there? Oversimplified as it might be? Of course, says Rainer, but it isn't the whole truth; it is only true if **all other things are equal**. A vineyard well-cared for will give the highest possible yield consistent with quality and with the long-term health of the vine. The next guy's yields might be lower on paper, but that could well be due to sloppy vineyard management and poor husbandry; HIS WINES WON'T NECESSARILY BE BETTER. Not a very sexy opinion, but it has the texture of verisimilitude: things aren't, after all, reducible to ironclad formulas.

And it would be one thing if Rainer's wines were run-of-the-mill and all this was nothing more than an elegant rationalization after the fact. Well, most of you have tasted Rainer's wines; what do *you* think? I'll tell you what I think: I think Mr. Lingenfelder is capable of making some of the *very* best wines in the Pfalz and indeed all of Germany.

His wines *always* have something EXTRA: more concentration, more drive and purpose, more **expressiveness**.

Rainer got around in his wild heedless youth; he migrated to Australia to get work as a bush pilot, he says, but ended up in a winery. He moved to New Zealand and California, to the Médoc, to EGYPT, where he consulted at a winery—the winery—then back to Germany where he made the wines at Sichel for several years; yes, Rainer made BLUE NUN for a living. Finally he realized he couldn't do the justice he wanted to do to his own wines, and

returned to Grosskarlbach full time.

“The quality of our wine is determined in the vineyards; one cannot *make* outstanding wine in the cellar,” says Rainer. “The vineyard factor is especially important when one talks about the grape grower’s wines such as Riesling, Pinot Noir, Scheurebe, etc. versus the winemaker’s wines such as Chardonnay. I am interested in primary, grape-borne flavors, not so much in secondary flavors introduced by man such as oak or yeast. We don’t ben- tonite fine because it strips too much away, not just protein but also color and flavor. You probably noticed our wines are deeper in color than the wines of many other growers. We’d rather leave all the natural components in the wine, the proteins, the minerals, the acidity, the tannin. We don’t want to ‘polish’ or ‘style’ a wine; we want to allow its original, natural character to shine through.”

Rainer is equally cogent on the contentious subject of Süsreserve: “It’s perfectly O.K. to use Süsreserve. It’s no more ‘unnatural’ to add grape juice to a wine than to stop it from fermenting dry by ‘artificial’ means such as refrigeration, centrifuging or the addition of sulfur dioxide. I’m not

much in favor of sulfur dioxide, and wines whose fermentations were stopped *bind* much more sulfur dioxide than wines where Süsreserve was added.” Rainer’s yields are low and he uses natural yeasts to ferment. He’s a believer in the Neustadt Clone 90 for regionally typical Rieslings. His Pinot Noir goes through malolactic fermentation and spends about eighteen months in barriques of varying type and age.

“I look for *expression of character* [his emphasis]. Character could be many things depending on the style; it could be depth of flavor, or complexity, or fruit, or elegance, or lightness or richness, etc. It is not so important which character it is; the importance is whether the character is clearly expressed.”

Rainer had an atypical vintage in 2002, Rieslings between 8.3-8.5 g.l. acidity versus the 7.5 he sees as his ideal. Back in the mid-90s he seemed tempted to adjust acids by permitting malo, but not any more. “Not even a little tempted?” I asked. “I can assure you, we’re doing nothing!” he answered. I liked the vintage, as does Rainer, but we have differing views on how to superimpose his aesthetic over its character. Details below!

Lingenfelder at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

Lingenfelder’s wines have a unique and magical harmony of elements: superb clarity of flavor with distinctly aristocratic fullness of expression. “An advantage we have with German wines is that you feel the power, the intensity of flavor, but you don’t feel the heat,” he says. That’s part of it. Rainer’s wines sometimes show a pleasing hint of earthiness which supports their fluted brilliance. If Catoir’s wines sing in a pure, piping soprano, Lingenfelder’s are a mellow alto. His Scheurebe, on which he lavishes so much tender affection, is a riot of tropical opulence yet somehow contained within a disciplined clarity.

GLI-076 **2001 Spätburgunder**

A shade less color than the (itself pale) 2000, but man I like its forward plummy juiciness; Rainer understands style and texture. In its modest way this slides gracefully over the palate and leaves a sandalwoody finish. There’s a kind of *gras* here despite its lightness.

GLI-073 **2000 Spätburgunder**

There’s only one in 2000 (no reserve “Ganymed”), and it’s almost cedary, a little looser-stitched than the `01, less fruit-forward but awfully stylish and roasty. The sandalwood-soy side of Pinot Noir (not to be confused with soy-rebe); charming, with a hint of Pernand violets. Won’t make old bones but will charm with its grace and length within the 2-4 years it should be drunk.

GLI-65 **1999 Spätburgunder “Ganymed”**

Rainer’s taken to calling his “reserve” cuvée “Ganymed” after the god of legend. The original label depicts the Pompeiian chap in a state of, how to say this, anatomical correctness, which would run afoul of the BATF if we ever let them see it. I tried to explain this to Rainer. “You’d first have to tell them it is a bona-fide (no pun intended) work of art, hung (again no pun intended) in a museum somewhere.” Too much trouble, he agreed. “Why not put a little sticker over the naughty bits?” he offered. I like this idea! In fact, we could have one in, say, 500 labels depicting our hero in a condition of tumescence, and the lucky recipient could win a prize! Joe Marketing. Or we could lop off the offending member. “Then he’d be pee-no-more!” I said with a shriek of glee. I love it when I pun. The schlong is gone but the melody lingers on....

The `99 is in rather an ungainly funk at the moment. It’s almost prune-like and it makes a tannin statement – it wants a fatty crusty veal chop or magret du canard; the aromas are fetchingly pretty and I think this wine is cranky because it wants us to *wait* 5-8 more years for its bones to loosen. That’s what I think.

Thanks to all of you, by the way, for making Lingenfelder Pinot Noir a success. There was, one might say, some residual skepticism back when I first introduced a “serious” German Pinot Noir, and now everyone’s making them. Some are good. Others are dreadful, overwrought, over-oaked, astringent, inky and ratty and vulgar. You sometimes feel each guy is trying to out-extract his neighbor. Lingenfelder keeps steering his steady course through it all, making his moderate, elegant, adult red wines. Yay on him.

- GLI-074 **2002 Lingenfelder “Bird Label” Riesling**
 This is a merchant-bottling, partly from Lingenfelder fruit and partly purchased fruit. The label, “which was expensive,” is absolutely wonderful, droll and dear and full of whimsy. It started as an experiment for Oddbins, and the wine was well received and Rainer thought - knew! - I’d like it. Why wouldn’t I like it? It tastes like a LINGENFELDER wine in miniature, and I’ll tell you right now THERE ISN’T ANOTHER RIESLING ON THE MARKET WITHIN MILES OF THIS QUALITY AT ITS PRICE. With all my love and esteem for the good Herr Grahm, look the hell out. The 2002 is true to its vintage, i.e. its acids are more pointed, and therefore it *needs* more actual sweetness to convey a consistent *sense* of sweetness. We’re looking for an almost furtive surmise of sweetness – is it or isn’t it? – with a finish that’s graciously dry. 2002 shows its typical wisteria-slimness but here Rainer’s amplitude of style is wonderfully pretty. It’s more flowery than the plumper `01, with more overt mineral-saltiness, but it’s our little Bird and it will sing its happy song. The only danger is it’s TOO GOOD for its market “echelon”, but this doesn’t seem to bother y’all since we’re selling the huevos out of this Bird. Why? Because it’s cheep cheep cheep. **SOMMELIER ALERT!**
 SOS: 1 (now to four years)
- GLI-075 **2002 Riesling Spätlese (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg)**
 Exceptionally crystalline texture and almost Austria-like iris fragrances; the palate started out tangy and tart, but the 3 grams of sweetness we added wiped out the tartness and made the wine purr; snappy, salty and seductive.
 SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GLI-069 **2001 Riesling Spätlese (Grosskarlbacher Osterberg)** +
 The first of the 2001s to show the silky, more filigree face of Lingenfelder, whose wines are commonly juicy and yielding, but who wisely went with the flow in `01 and made these sprightly charmers. This riesling is just so vigorous and animated; beautifully piquant, with an operatic dialog of fruits and salts. Almost haunting. Has flavors so elegantly draped over its structure, with such supple assuredness. More than mere wine. Bird-song, skater-grace, melody.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)
- GLI-070 **2001 Riesling Spätlese old vines (Freinsheimer Goldberg)**
 Controversy over this wine, which is now showing more botrytis than I like. With that proviso, I’ll list it again; many of you have bought and sold and loved it, and I’m quite the fussy budget when it comes to botrytis. So we’ll call this **offered but not selected** to keep me honest. Reasonable palates will differ, and my own opinion has changed since a year ago, and could well change again. Last year I wrote: “Much more muscle than the Osterberg, with correspondingly less transparency. The nose is all bergamot and tangelo and tropical razzmatazz; palate is on a bigger frame, turkey versus chicken if you will. Still wonderful grip and great roasty ripeness – essentially a dryish Auslese. A very long wine with plenty of *plenty*.”
 SOS: 2 (between five and fourteen years)
- GLI-64 **1994 Sekt Riesling “Satyr” (Brut)** +
 Rainer and his Greeks! But hoo boy, take one taste of this gorgeousness and you’ll agree he mythed his calling. This takes Riesling fizz to a new level. It’s made from 1994 Kabinett-level juice, five years on the lees, and was made **WITHOUT SUGAR**. In fact, three times without sugar. No chaptalization. No sugar used in the prise du mousse (he used fresh must instead) and no sugar in the dosage (must once again). It’s stylish, delineated, complex, racy, vigorous and fine. Like a cross of Avize Blanc de Blancs and Aubry’s Nombre D’Or. Although this is clearly Riesling - *Lingenfelder* Riesling - it’s as good in its way as most NV Champagnes. It fully merits its price. This is one Satyr you shouldn’t pass over.

kurt darting

pfalz • bad-dürkheim

Inside Germany they sometimes sniff huffily that Darting makes little sweet-ums for the export markets but cannot be taken deeply seriously as a fine producer, blah-de-blah. Me, I mutter to myself several times a day, *thank God for Darting, thank God for Darting*

I do believe the estate tends to ride the vintage, i.e. they are spectacular in years which suit them ('94, '96, '98) and sometimes *withdrawn* in vintages which don't suit them—the soft ones like '99 and '97 or the dubious ones like the rot-compromised '95s and 2000s. That we sell them marvelously regardless testifies to their drinkability and basic lip-smack-o-rama. The 2002s will flip you out, jefe.

It's like a runaway train, this agency. When things work this well it always seems so easy; why

can't everybody do it? The ingredients are simple. Outstanding wines at attractive prices. Flexibility in the working relationship. Collegiality in tasting and evaluating the wines. Basic and spontaneous friendliness. Tasting with Helmut you are instantly aware he likes wine, likes making it, likes tasting it, likes thinking about it, is entirely FOND of it. Even with the growers, I'm never entirely sure how much of my heart to reveal when I taste their wines, but with Helmut Darting I can giggle or weep or dance the shimmy.

Until a few years ago the estate was divided between husband and wife, one of whom belonged to the local cop. With Helmut Darting's arrival, the two estates were combined and all the wines estate-bottled. Helmut had an interesting year of apprenticeship as part of his wine schooling: at Müller-Catoir! Now, plenty of young dudes spend time at Catoir, a few each year. The estate is an official "Meisterbetrieb" meaning that students and apprentices may be sent here. I once asked Hans-Günter Schwarz if it wouldn't be possible (theoretically!) to track down all

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Spielberg and Hochbenn, Ungsteiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Heavy chalky loam, sandy gravel, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 44% Riesling, 8% Weissburgunder, 6% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 4% each of Portugieser, Muskateller and Ortega, 3% each of Chardonnay and Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties**



Helmut Darting

the up-and-coming new superstars by following his various apprentices. His answer surprised me. "Actually, no," he said, "because I don't always develop a rapport or sympathy with the young men. It seems to take a special type to want to do things this way!" With Helmut Darting it appears to have been a case of *simpatico instantaneoso*. Schwarz even gave permission for his pricelist text to be used, in which he describes his rules of vinification, which is how, when I saw it reproduced verbatim on Darting's list, I knew Something Was Up.

If you're unfamiliar with the reductivist's creed, it goes a little like this: every time you handle a wine, you diminish it; therefore minimal "winemaking" above all! The most important thing is to grow superb grapes and let their flavors sing out in the wine. You ferment as slow and cold as possible, with natural yeasts. You rack once and once only, after fermentation. You keep the wine away from oxygen at all costs. After the first racking, the

next time you handle the wine is to bottle it.

No fining, no clarification, no de-acidification, Süßreserve only when no alternative avails, and then only a high-grade Süßreserve, itself made reductively. All of this results in wine in which the original grape character is preserved with an almost unreal clarity.

Darting has arrived among the “classified” estates in Germany, yet wonderful as this is, I can’t help but wonder what kind of wines they’d make if they owned land in the classic sites of Deidesheim, Forst and Wachenheim. We need someone sensible there to yawp against the dry-at-all-costs insanity.

Darting at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

Depending on the vintage, either spicy-gingery and firmly bracing, or flowery-polleny with a candied spice and more talc and malt. Basically reductive, as indicated above, yet with the acquisition of certain Grand Cru sites purchased from Basserman Jordan, one sees how classical Darting’s wines can be from outstanding vineyards. All wines intensely, fundamentally varietal.

GDR-106L **2002 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

We just can’t seem to keep this boy in stock! It’ll be in the market by the time you read this, and man is it tasty. A little dwarf-Kabinett in Liters with 89 Oechsle . . . this works a little drier than the `01 (those zippy `02 acids); lemon-candy and papaya aromas; nice salty palate, more brilliance and shimmer than any vintage since `98.
SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GDR-111 **2002 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

We were sipping this with some nibbles on the table after the tasting, and I double-taked it. *Huh?* This is *Trocken?* But my good sir, this is an example of *how to get it RIGHT!* People must know about it; that all dry German Rieslings are not inevitably sadistic and mordant. “Well Terry, you could sell it, you know,” said Heike Darting. `Deed I could, ma’am. It smells wonderfully like carrot cake, is loaded with fruit and a sweet lick of mineral on the finish; lovely basic thirst-quenching Riesling that’s anything but simple.
SOS: -1 (now to two years)

GDR-107 **2002 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**

This “Kabinett” has . . . 102 degrees Oechsle Auslese. Look at its price. No, you are not hallucinating. (Well you might be, but not about this.) As always, it’s the class of the Kabinetts; stylish, fine foundation of stone, with a lime-zest note in lieu of the tropical fruit thing.
SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)

GDR-105 **2002 Ungsteiner Bettelhaus Riesling Kabinett**

“Only” 95 Oechsle, but Bettelhaus is always more riotously flowery and exotic-fruity. Quite *patisserie* and sleek and a little on the sweet side but it was necessary for the ripeness.
SOS: 3 (between four and thirteen years)

(NOTE: there’s a third Kabinett, Hochbenn, in the wings when one of these sells out, as they will soon.)

- GDR-108 **2002 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**
 Shows some botrytis now, along with classic Pfalz ginger; the palate really billows and expands into thick density of fruit; serious length, grip and echo; best of show thus far. SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)
- GDR-109 **2002 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese** +
 Um, check out the price. A steal. You'll be stealin' Spielberg. "Spätlese" with 108 degrees Oechsle, at this price; close encounters of the *absurd* kind. Wonderful Scheurebe; all sage and garrigue and bouquet-garni; splendid spice and solidity; herbal and kinky. I love its power, angularity and refusal to yield. *Drink me down, dog!* SOS: 2 (now to seven years)
- GDR-101 **2001 Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Auslese** +
 120 Oechsle now. Bigger, more brooding; all cassis, dense and meaty; tangy, salty and gorgeous. Most impressive wine! **Not much remaining.** SOS: 3 (between three and fifteen years)
- GDR-103 **2001 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese** ++
 The shining hour of Darting? Could very well be. Perfection of varietal nose. Monumental solidity, implacable (bit not opaque) density, thunderous complexity; look, this is nearly the apex of possibility for this supernally great variety. It's almost more than you can absorb. Like magma, or some kind of volcanic salt. 130 Oechsle. They trumped the master at Müller-Catoir in this vintage! SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty seven years)
- GDR-110 **2001 St. Laurent Trocken**
 St Laurent is to red what Rieslaner is to white; both are fussy difficult vines no one could justify from a commercial standpoint; both offer holy-grail flavors a certain type of vintner yearns towards; both can make supernal wine of a not-unfamiliar type but an undreamed of expressiveness. St. Laurent is like a Peyote-drenched Pinot Noir; Rieslaner a lysergically charged Riesling.

Doesn't it make perfect sense Darting would have both!

This maiden-voyage spent a year in wood (used barriques and new 3,500 liter ovals). Medium-garnet; classy roasty carob Pinot leathery jazz; interesting, complex and stylish; silky-sweet fragrances; ripe, soft tannins, suave and shapely and just a little countrified on the finish; still, excellent stuff and the price is right.



neckerauer

pfalz • weisenheim am sand

For several years now, I'm quite aware many of you thought I was crazy, stubborn or both for continuing to represent Neckerauer. My colleagues, I know, were embarrassed. I took some flak, Jack.

Of course I saw the wines decline. The estate was undergoing an extremely awkward (and public) transition between father and son's regimes, exacerbated by climactic difficulties almost malevolently implacable.

I began with the wines at the very beginning, in 1985. They were splendid back then, larger-than-life, from an utterly loveable family for incredible prices, and over the years Neckerauers proved themselves to be perfect suppliers; generous, cooperative and uncomplicated. The decline began in 1995. An Uncle had passed away and left more land than Neckerauers had time to till.

Father's health was (and is) delicate. Son was just starting out. Other than the catastrophe-vintages of '95 and 2000, the wines were good in an earthy old-fashioned way, and I could select the best of them and soft-pedal them, which I did.

Arnd Neckerauer was quite aware of my strategy; I as much as told him. And his stated goal was to take over the proprietorship of the winery, have a friend oversee the majority of the vineyards (from which Liter wines would be made) while devoting himself to going balls-to-the-wall for top quality from the best sites. Since I *knew* the potential from these sites, I had every reason to stay the course. Up to a point.

This year was THE year. I'd done what I could. I'd risked my own reputation in order to stay loyal; I did it calculatedly and I don't regret it. I believed in Neckauers, but man, Godot needed to like show up and pronto.

Deep breaths as I walked in the door. No eye-contact with anyone, not even Kevin Pike (with whom I was traveling).

THIS, AT LAST, IS THE VINTAGE WE'VE NEEDED!

It was like another winery entirely. And different even from the old glory-days of Klaus' era. The 2002 vintage at Neckerauer shows a *modern* profile of Pfalz wine, emphasizing ginger, mineral and brilliance, with high-toned fruit and clear clean flavors.



Arnd Neckerauer

This is only the beginning. It's the basic setting-right of the basics, so that truly great things are possible. The future looks bright at Neckerauer. I dare hope that Arnd, Klaus and I may yet sit with one another a few years from now and feel good that we were

loyal to one another during the difficult years.

I ask you to forget any negative impression you may

- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Hahnen, Hasenzile, Halde**
- **Soil types: Sandy soil with clay, chalky soil with sand**
- **Grape varieties: 32% Riesling, 28% Portugieser, 11% Dornfelder, 6% Müller-Thurgau, 4% Spätburgunder, 3% each of Kerner and Scheurebe, 16% other varieties**

have formed toward this estate and taste the 2002s without prejudice.

My real long-time customers are also asked to remember those lavish, generous wines with their robust vitality and lovely rustic Pfalz profiles; the things for which we loved Neckerauer in the first place. These wines are different, updated, refreshed.

Weisenheim sits on sand, the original beach of the Rhine. It suffers in dry years, and flourishes in damp ones. Sometimes a single timely thunderstorm makes the difference between a fair and great vintage. The sites are large and impossible to distinguish as you drive by. But Altenberg is exotic and spicy, Goldberg is firm and lemony, Hahnen is doughy and caramelly, Halde is chalky and firm, and Hasenzeile is animal and sultry.

I'm sure Arnd is modernizing the cellar also; I hope he's retired all the old süssreserve his father kept around, which I think was responsible for certain odd varnish-y flavors the wines sometimes showed. I didn't ask for details; I think I was too relieved the wines were good. We'll suss it out over time. Now that we have time.

Arnd is also aware his reputation needs to be resuscitated, and he's set his prices accordingly. He has my fullest respect for being realistic and egoless.

After three weeks and forty five visits in Germany, this was the happiest. Keep it up, friends, and welcome back!

Neckerauer at a glance:

Renaissance of quality at a once-moribund estate; modern zingy wines worth a fresh look!

how the wines taste:

This is a work-in-progress. The 2002s are authoritatively within the modern Pfalz idiom: mineral, vivid, spicy and firm.

GNE-083 **2002 Weisenheimer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

Spicy Thai-basil nose; the palate is mentholated and eucalyptus, like Muscat without the peaches and lemon-blossom; long chalky finish to a seriously *dry* Riesling.

SOS: -1 (now to two years; again from seven to ten years)

GNE-084 **2002 Weisenheimer Goldberg Riesling Kabinett**

Lemony-chalky nose; wonderful length and penetration; juicy mid-palate with mineral saltiness; zingy Riesling. With 25g/l. sweetness, this is exactly the kind of perfectly-balanced Riesling very few Pfälzers are making any more.

SOS: 1 (between four and twelve years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GNE-085 **2002 Weisenheimer Hahnen Riesling Kabinett**

(cask 66) This is *Forst* in spirit; the salty caramel depth, elegant but still thrusting; lots of umami; mystic echo, far-off smell of a fabulous stew cooking, wet salt, veal and shiitakes; Riesling with deep savor.

SOS: 2 (from four to twelve years)

GNE-086 **2002 Weisenheimer Halde Riesling Spätlese** +

With this wine I knew Neckerauers were back. A lemony-chalky nose and a ripe, detailed, precise palate; classic Pfalz profile (pineapple, ginger, white corn); white lilac; juicy, chalky and vigorous – like all the best 2002s, vivid, happy, wonderful stuff. Great penetration and length here.

SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)

GNE-087 **2002 Weisenheimer Hasenzeile Scheurebe Kabinett**

Oh, a vixen here, utterly lurid and slinky; sweet-salty like olive-oil ice cream; give this to kids trick-or-treating, it probaly wards off evil spirits; seductive cherry and sage; wonderfully deep herbal finish.

SOS: 2 (between now and four years)



weingut kassner-simon

pfalz freinsheim

I saw the name constantly on the wine list at Luther, probably my favorite restaurant in Germany, down the street in Freinsheim.

Johannes Selbach had tasted the wines and was impressed. Was I interested? Yes I was, but I couldn't find a moment on the schedule to make a visit.

Luther had a half-bottle of a Trocken Riesling Spätlese from the 1999 vintage on his list. We ordered it.

And I could not believe what I was tasting. Here was a *perfect* dry Riesling—not a perfect dry “German” Riesling, but a perfect dry Riesling *period*—superbly balanced, jammed with fruit, utterly

delicious. Utterly unexpected!

I found time in the schedule for a visit.

Kassner-Simon is the work of two generations, parents Willi and Rosemarie, and son and heir-apparent Thomas, who—inevitably—spent a year at Müller-Catoir.

The estate is 14 hectares, with Riesling comprising between 30-40%. The nearest comparison stylistically might be Lingenfelder—they have sites in common—but these wines seem silkier than Rainer's, more lissome in body, rather more in a Wachenheim direction.

The cellar-work is unsurprising in the modern idioms of the conscientious, especially among the Schwarz acolytes. When I asked Thomas Simon if he did anything particular or unusual in the winery he answered “Yes; the avoidance of any unnecessary handling of the young wines, and temperature-controlled fermentations.” These occur exclusively with cultured yeasts.

“What's most important for us is that regardless of which terms are on the label, Trocken or Halbtrocken or otherwise, the wine tastes harmonious, that is to say it has a balance of acidity, alcohol and residual sugar . . .”

Most white grapes (including Riesling) are whole-cluster pressed, with the exception of the aromatic sorts

- **Vineyard area: 14 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Freinsheimer Schwarzes Kreuz, Goldberg & Musikantenbuckel**
- **Soil types: Loamy sand**
- **Grape varieties: 36% Riesling, 17% Portugieser, 10% Spätburgunder, 8% Dornfelder, 6% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 5% Scheurebe & Kerner, 7% other varieties**

Gewurztraminer and Scheurebe, which have 2-6 hours on the skins. White musts are chilled, filtered and fermented. All the whites are reductively made in stainless steel, and lie on their lees “according to taste” between two and five months.

The peak-site is the Oschelskopf. This is in Flurbereinigung and won't return to production for a few years. Apparently the drainage was asymmetrical owing to a slope so faint as to be undetectable.

Kassners are cautious with sweetness, except for their bona-fide stickies and the occasional sensation like the '01 Scheurebe. This is very much the prevailing frame of reference in the Pfalz, especially their corner. If you taste a Kassner Kabinett with 24g.l. sweetness after a Darting with 50g.l. sweetness you'll wonder where the fruit is. In effect you should consider all Kassner wines Halbtrocken.

This is also a winery where '01 and '02 draw so close together as to be basically equal.



Kassner-Simon at a glance:

Wonderful new discovery in a mid-sized estate with two generations working together and a young man with every hope of a glittering career.

how the wines taste:

Above all, full of fruit, silky, complex, stylish, refined, and harmonious regardless of the amount of sweetness.

GKO-007L **2002 Scheurebe Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

(not estate-bottled); this is all woodruff, red currant and elderflower; lovely Scheu tang and subtle cassis on the finish; a darling wine, full of affection.

SOS: 2 (now to three years)

GKO-002 **2001 Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Kabinett**

This is a special bottling for us, signifying A) their willingness to work with a persnickety export customer, and B) the bizarreness of the domestic German market in believing it has no *place* for wines like this. We gave it 24g.l. residual sugar – “feinherb” – but all it tastes is balanced just like all Simons’ wines. This has an amazing vanilla-papaya fragrance, really powder-puffy; fabulously pretty fruit, silky texture, still on the dry side, but *sweetly* so; long, fastidious delineation.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GKO-006 **2002 Freinsheimer Schwarzes Kreuz Riesling Kabinett**

The site is loamy sand; the wine has the same 24g.l. rs as the ’01; this is what many Halbtrockens *ought* to be; attractive orange-lemon fragrances; polished texture with slight rustic-earthy notes; a nice hint of kirsch; fine useful Kabinett.

SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GKO-008 **2002 Freinsheimer Musikantenbuckel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

2002 was Kassner’s first Rieslaner vintage, and as I’ve written before it was a stinker for the variety, which ripened suddenly and dropped from the vine. The small amount they harvested went into this, about 8%, and it’s absolutely **turbo-charged** by even that little bit of Rieslaner; this is power-mineral, seriously dry but not severe; I love the drive and complexity here and even the chewy kick in the finish, but beware; this is as dry as I can stand.

SOS: -2 (now to two years)

GKO-003 **2001 Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Scheurebe Spätlese** +

Scheurebe needs all the cham-peens it can score, and this is a winning performance – one of Simons’ wines of which he’s proudest – a zowie-Scheu nose, a riot of sage and grapefruit, spicy and clear and jam-packed with kilotons of Scheu charm. Virtually perfect Pfalz Scheu; great length; soy and tarragon.

SOS: 2 (between one and eight years)

GKO-004 **1990 Freinsheimer Oschelskopf Riesling Auslese** +

So! How ’bout this still being available!! Don’t, I mean DO NOT miss this; it’s a down-right *steal* for gorgeous mature riesling. Estery nose, peach, maize, lime, fresh-cut wood; palate is wonderfully precise, virtually dry and prismatically broken down into little silken filaments of nuance. Long and lovely.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (hmm! Between nine and seventeen years. Eleven gone already...)

GKO-009H **2002 Freinsheimer Schwarzes Kreuz Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +

Just bottled when I saw it. 160 Oechsle with a sane 11g.l. acidity. Very high-toned, lemon and turnip nose; shimmery palate with phosphorescent mineral salts on the phinish; green tea, verbena, that stuff. Yowling from bottling, but impressive; will be even more so when *you* taste it.

SOS: 4 (between thirteen and twenty eight years)

herbert messmer

pfalz • burrweiler

Gregor Meßmer won't get on an airplane. That's why you haven't met him. And it's part of why we've schlumped along selling middling quantities of wine from an estate that's inched its way to the top of the heap. Meßmer might not be an Everest – yet – but it's a Lhotse or Annapurna. Hell, I even saw Reinhold Messner scaling the outside wall of the house *without oxygen*. At least I think it was Messner; it might have been some bearded American trying to escape the Trocken wines.

This is a big winery and Gregor is just one guy – an energetic guy, but still. His affable Dad wants to think about retiring. Gregor is now the *Patron* of two full-time helpers, both of whom I first met at Müller-Catoir where they were being groomed as Schwarz-successors. Gregor was visibly relieved to have two skilled professionals whom he could rely on: Herr Leibrecht helps in the

cellar and Herr Sebastian in the vineyards. Now maybe Gregor will have time to go to one of those schools that conquers fear of flying.

We need him here. You need to meet him. And you really need to know these are among the VERY best wines in the Pfalz.

No fewer than three people, none of whom knew I represented the wines, offered spontaneously their belief that Meßmer had ascended to the top rank.

And my unassuming yet confident friend did this in his discreet and sinuous way, like some silent meteor floating across the skies. As I sat tasting through the 2001s I had an unmistakable sense of experiencing the superlative. 2002 is in the same class.

As such I fall in line with the received wisdom of the German wine community. That's O.K., but our *reasons* for appreciating Meßmer are diametrically opposed. Inside Germany he's lauded for his dry wines. He sells them like loco, and this year I liked them too, some of them.

Gregor has been very droll lately, revealing a sense of humor as wickedly incisive as his wines. I've represented



Gregor & Linde Messmer

this estate since almost the very beginning, and nothing would please me more than to get chummier and to keep showing you wines like these. Gregor Messmer is an almost comically serious man. He would be comic if he didn't conduct himself with such quiet dignity, but really,

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Burrweiler Schäwer, Schlossgarten and Altenforst**
- **Soil types: Slate, sandy loam loess, red sandstone and heavy chalky clay and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 45% Riesling, 13% Spätburgunder, 10% Weissburgunder, 6% St. Laurent, 5% Grauburgunder, 21% other varietals including Scheurebe**

you want to tickle him! I'll bet he'd tickle you back. But first he'd have studied The Tickle Points Of The Human Body and he'd be deadly accurate.

Two prominent points to make. The first is that Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slaty minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

The second point is the Schwarz connection. Hans-Günter Schwarz hails from neighboring Gleisweiler. Schwarz and Messmer senior have been friends for years and young Gregor had the precious opportunity to form his own friendship. The results show in his wines.

Having said that, Gregor has emerged decisively from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz world is the love of reductive viticulture. "What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small

parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. “Our Süsreserve comes only from the healthiest grapes and we use no preservatives to treat it. We never de-acidify. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It’s also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking.”

“The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least ‘winemaking’.”

That’s the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes

to drink: “Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn’t make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it’s dry. Finally I like wine with the greatest possible number of uses.”

Messmers use only organic fertilizers. All the white wines are made and aged in stainless steel. They receive their single racking early after fermentation and are left undisturbed until bottling, usually in March. This is a recipe for noninterventionist winemaking of remarkable purity. And Messmer’s wines, indeed, are remarkably pure. They’re as clear as glass, etched as sharply as etched glass, transparent as the thinnest glass, but firmly constituted.

Messmer at a glance:

Superbly made wines, exceptional clarity and polish in a keenly etched and chiseled style. Has soared ahead to take its place among the best estates in the Pfalz the last few years. Sure-handed with a multitude of grape varieties.

how the wines taste:

What unites them is CLARITY and SPECIFICITY. Gregor’s careful, diligent style seems to allow us to examine the fruit of his wines as though under a microscope. This must be the most honorable way to make wine. Everyone knows how to make bombshells—it’s facile and plausible—but the tender, delicate rendering of varietal fruit denotes a **respect** for the grape which only shows when you’re nature’s humble servant and not concerned with being a hot-shot. Gregor’s wines have an exactitude that satisfies my desire for seeing things clearly.

GMS-084L **2002 Riesling (Halbtrocken), 1.0 Liter**

Sporting a pretty new Bründlmayer-ish label – this is the best vintage of this wine in years, perhaps ever. Fresh, vivid, appley-citrusy, hint of cloves; tasty and long. SHORT-LIST this wine if you haven’t bought it before; the 2002 is a knockout.
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again from seven to ten years)

GMS-085 **2002 Burrweiler Altenforst Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

A dead-ringer for Nigl’s Dornleiten (his entry-level adorable riesling I love but don’t ship); winsome, tender, juicy and mineral; quite dry but gently so; lacy detail, lovely stuff.
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between eight and twelve years)

GMS-086 **2002 Rieslaner Spätlese Trocken** **+**

My poor Gregor, having to deal with both Rieslaner and St. Laurent, truly the Vines From Hell. This is 12th-year Rieslaner which Gregor used to blend into either Pinot Gris or Riesling, but the siren-song ensnares. And we are blessed. The more champions of this great variety the greater its renown will be.

A stunningly expressive nose, both varietal yet also eerily like 10-year-old Riesling; super penetration, power and elegance. Given its utter strength, it dances gracefully and has a deft restraint. Awesome, dude!

SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between ten and fifteen years)

GMS-075 **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

Just as you’d expect in `01; long, solid, explicit mineral texture; detailed – his wines seem to want to explicate: “Do you understand? Can I make it any clearer?” never gaudy, they’re always judiciously direct and explicit. Another wine whose flavors are etched in calligraphy. SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between three and eleven years)

GMS-087 **2002 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** **+**

This is juicier and more seductive than the `01. That impeccably stylish high-cheek-boned lady has removed her glasses, shaken her hair loose and unbuttoned her two top buttons. Va va Voom. Ravishing spice, and that salty lick at the end is irresistible. SOMMELIER ALERT!

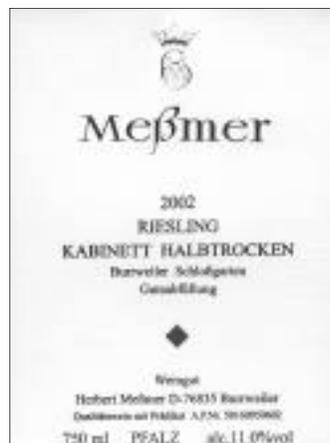
SOS: 1 (now to three years; again from nine to thirteen years)

- GMS-076 **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett**
 I don't recall the last "regular" Kabinett from Gregor; perhaps he decided to soothe my soul from the dreadful blow of having pulled his Scheurebe out. Lime and banana aromas here, and it is tangy, pineapple and Scheu-like. Long, as all the '01s are. Baked apple. Currant. Fine grip. *There's a wonderful 2002 in the wings, which we'll seamlessly move into when this '01 is sold out.*
 SOS: 2 (between four and fourteen years)
- GMS-092 **2002 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett**
- GMS-088 **2002 Muskateller Kabinett Trocken**
 So I lift the glass to my nose and I'm sure it's the Gewürz and I'm yammering on to Gregor about how I think his Gewürz is the best in Germany yada yada yada, and he's smiling bigger and bigger and I'm thinking "It's just so great to see how happy my compliments make him" and finally he tells me "This is all very gratifying, Terry, and I appreciate it. Only this isn't the Gewürz in your glass." *Um, it isn't?* "No, it's the Muscat." *Oh yeah, the Muscat; that's what I MEANT to say!*
 Hails of derisive laughter from Kevin. Some frickin' expert I am. Vanquished, utterly vanquished. Last time I open my fool mouth . . .
 24 hours later we were at another vintner and there was a Gewürz in our glasses. "Boy, do I love the aroma of Muscat," said Kevin. **Hah!** Ze tables are türned, eh stud! I don't even know why you buy wines from guys like us at all, man. A decently trained ape could do as good a job.
 So, my notes: "juicy and perfect; almost a Gewürz lychee and wild rose; streamlined, dense, basil-y." Look, it's yum fun Muscat, so stop howling at me and order some.
 SOS: 0 (now to four years)
- GMS-077 **2001 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese** +
 There's gotta be a hole in the ozone layer over Meßmer's house; a *sweet* Schäwer Spät? I have the impression this wine just stopped. "That's it, no more fermentation and you *can't make me!*" For at 100 degrees Oechsle and 8.5g/l. Acidity, this little dickens has 91g/l. residual sugar. Gregor wanted us to guess. Mostly we guessed in the 30s-40s. That's rock and roll! It has ultra-clean, almost Eiswein flavors; smells like a Saar wine; has an iridescent interplay between salty mineral and piercing piquant fruit, lemon and freesia; plays a cymbal-crash of spice on the palate. This will go the distance.
 SOS: 3 (but on the finish it dries to a low 2!) (between nine and twenty seven years)
- GMS-079 **2001 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese** +
 The only Gewürz in this offering, because every other one is held up to it, and if it ain't as good as Gregor's, it don't get in. 108 Oechsle. Why can't anyone else come remotely near this man's sure hand with Gewürz? Here it's all wild rose and lichi, sleek and deft and almost ladylike. Absolute varietal purity, and nothing crude or palling.
 SOS: 3 (between now and four years)
- GMS-089H **2002 Burrweiler Altenforst Riesling Auslese Goldkapsel, 12/500ml** (++)
 This was a not-cold-enough-to-freeze-solid Eiswein, thus a stunningly concentrated Auslese. Too infantile to emote over, but ravishing potential.
 SOS: 3 (forecast pending tasting of finished wine)
- GMS-090H **2002 Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** +
 1st crop from a new vineyard. Just sulfured the day before my visit; thus the nose was inscrutable and it was impossible to delineate its many facets. There's strength, and a profound texture, and every reason to expect this will be superb.
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty one years)
- GMS-091H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Spätburgunder Weissherbst Auslese, 12/375ml** +
First offering. I was peering nervously at the assortment we'd already selected. Very big. Please don't let there be any more masterpieces, Daddy please. Oh no; this is just *celestial*. 120 Oechsle rosé of Pinot Noir! WHAT a nose, the purest possible Pinot fruit, like the Bollinger Vieille Vignes Française; exotic blueberries, ethereal, dewy, wild strawberries; any Pinot Noir lover NEEDS this wine.
 SOS: 4 (will "keep" for many years, but drink it soon to catch that magic fruit)

- GMS-081H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller Beerenauslese, 12/375ml** +
 135 Oechsle. This has ravishing purity; picked November 10th from the fruit left hanging after the “little” Muscat was gathered. Riotous psychedelic flower-fragrance; seductive botrytis, quite sweet, but as pretty as a purple pony.
 SOS: 4 (between eight and twenty five years)
- GMS-082H **2001 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +++
 155 Oechsle. A bit of botrytis. And roses, my god what roses. Swallowed! As fine and charming as Eiswein can be, accepting the smooth caress of botrytis. **Extremely limited!** Don't miss it. *We reserved the final 15 cases; GRAB THEM!*
 SOS: 4 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GMS-083H **2001 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml** ++
 A patriarche; all smoke and slate char; smells like essence-of-Schäwer. Quite masculine after the BA and Eiswein, but will ultimately surpass them in sheer compelling breed and will. Its sleek shape is scintillating, even as its ethereal-essence fruit melts your heart. You could fill a page with nuances. A craggy, deep-etched dignity. It's the most winey of them all, has uncanny balance and clarity, and you know, this is like Clos Ste.-Hune or Steiner Hund: *Serious Business*. **Extremely limited.**
 SOS: 3 (between twenty five and seventy five years)
- GMS-093L **2002 Dornfelder Trocken, 1.0 Liter**
 Reminds me of Gobelsburg's Zweigelt; sappy but with substance. Violet-y; on the Claret end of the Dornfelder spectrum. Sensational quality for a Liter wine from an often dull grape. **SOMMELIER ALERT! POUR THIS BABY!**
- GMS-080 **2000 Flemlinger Herrenbuckel St. Laurent Trocken**
 This is one of my favorite red grapes, but it's hard to find because it's finicky and most growers don't like its uncertain yields and unstable genetic makeup. In a way, St. Laurent is the same kind of litmus test Rieslaner is; if a grower has it planted he's ipso facto a lunatic. My kinda guy, in other words. St. Laurent, at its best, tastes like really good Burgundy that has 15% Mourvèdre in it, a compelling mixture of signals that makes the wines haunting and complex. Gregor's bottling is always among the best German reds. This is why I continue to list it although it's a hard-sell at its (justifiably high) price; *you should know* that such reds can be made in Germany.

 Here is oak in service to fruit; the wine is stylish, avuncular and cedary; juicy and actually just wonderfully delicious. Fruit, man! Sweet tannins. Long finish. Sleek body but penetrating and elegant.
- GMS-094 **2001 Spätburgunder Trocken**
 Immensely seductive nose, and the palate, um, consummates the act. Think Chambolle or Volnay; juicy, detailed, spicy soft tannins; acceptably oaky . . . (here I was interrupted and have no idea what I might have written . . . oh well, it's probably better this way!)

 Thus ends the **largest** assortment ever of Meßmer. Yes, we are MAKING A STATEMENT. Time to pay attention to this great estate!



Rumor has it that Mr Braun, the cellar master whom I met in March 2002, will be moving on. I hope not. I like him and I really like his wines. Mr. Biffar does seem to have a talent for recruiting talent, so we can hope for continuity, as this has become an important supplier of Grand Cru wines for us all.

Grand Cru lands are the earth's erogenous zones, some confluence of nerve endings which tingle at the touch of sunlight.

I sometimes refer to "Grand Cru" aromas or flavors, and this is what I mean. The words spring to my mind when I sniff a wine of clearly profound aroma *not derived from fruit*, where varietal-ity *per se* is absorbed into larger, deeper non-primary characteristics. In Grand Cru wines, the land

is the *text* and the grape is the *speaker*. You might say the vineyard trumps the variety. Except of course the variety is the means by which the vineyard is heard.

But the old ones didn't even *put* the variety on the label. If it was Grainhübel or Steinberger or Sonnenuhr it was presumed to be Riesling, just like Corton Charlemagne is presumed to be Chardonnay.

"We want to have fruit," said Braun. "We like mineral, but with low enough yields we get it as a matter of course; we seek to preserve fruit and to differentiate the fruit of various sites." Very revealing, this. Minerality is the Given when you work with Riesling in great vineyards. Fruit needs to be nurtured.

Braun's *regime* featured some changes; less green in the vineyards, more canopy trimming, more emphasis on clean un-botryrised fruit, and harvesting based on tasting the grapes instead of chasing X-or-Y must-weight, but Biffar's wines were more filigree the past two years, with more silken texture, subtle solidity and inference. They seemed relatively introverted, and I liked it; they looked inward because there's so much to see there.

Biffar's is a baronial place (I don't think there's any actual barons in residence but the *mien* suggests they're hiding away in a tower somewhere), certainly one of the Gentleman's Estates of the Mittelhaardt. They have marvelous land, with many of the greatest riesling sites in all of Germany. And they have an unusually flexible approach to cellar work. "We're not only reductive," says Braun; "We also have 1200 and 2400 liter casks, which we can also chill. We ferment with cultured yeasts and we control temperature, but the wines get more oxygen, have fewer primary aromas; they're more baroque."

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

At some point while we were tasting, a thrush started to sing its heart out near our window. The birds were very lusty this year. Usually they sing only mornings and evenings (their

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg and Mäushöhle, Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad, Wachenheimer Gerümpel**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and basalt or limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 17% Spätburgunder, 15% each of Riesling and Weissburgunder, 10% each of Grauburgunder and Portugieser, 8% Gewürztraminer, 5% each of Müller-Thurgau, Chardonnay and Silvaner, 10% other varieties**

evening song can be quite haunting if the particular bird is an artist) but now they seemed to sing all the time. This one was really belting it out. Then the noon bells. In certain small villages they still ring the luncheon bells. A happy clamor of sound.

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

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

What happens to *you* when you taste a series of wines from a winery, every one of which is a thing of rare beauty? I start to feel a sense of absurd privilege, that providence is showering beauty over me out of any proportion to whatever I may have done to "deserve" it. I also feel the futility of attempting to be discriminating; something is happening that's bigger than my little judgments. I also feel a distinct and positive *love* for each person who helped to bring such wines into existence. I become softened and reflective and want to speak warmly about things I'm usually too constrained to bring up. I'm not telling you this so you'll admire what a sen-

sitive hombre I am, but only to suggest that wine *wants* something of us, *wants* us to become more of who we are, larger, less hidden, more grateful, kinder.

I see no reason, absolutely none, why I can't remember those things even as I swim in the waters of mercantilism. If this book—this work amounts to anything it isn't because it contains a few hundred good wines. It's because it insists on

integrating the practical realities of earning a living with the more abiding realities of being a full human being. And because it asks you to think about the people who make beautiful wines; they are your companions and neighbors on this little green world. They bless us with their work, and it's only fitting we bless them in return with our gratitude and kindness.

Biffar at a glance:

Stellar, first-growth quality estate since the 1992 vintage. Excellent collection of many of the top vineyard sites of the Pfalz. Brilliantly fashioned wines with eye-popping clarity and penetration.

how the wines taste:

The taste of these wines is incredibly rich in mineral complexity and incredibly specific in fruit and soil flavors. They are on the rich side. They're brilliant but not squeaky-reductive. They have a noble glow about them; they realize the greatness inherent in the superb vineyards from which they come.

GBR-065 **2002 Deidesheimer Mäuschöhle Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

You get two umlauts for one low price! The wine is piquant and sly, with its mirabelle and Jarlsberg aromas (cheese is what you'd expect to find in a mouse-hole after all); this was cask-fermented and shows it with a dear, old-style roundness; though always waving its fronds of mineral, especially on the finish.
SOS: 0 (now-two years; again between eight and twelve years)

GBR-066 **2002 Wachenheimer Altenburg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

Grand Cru aromas; roasted beets, even a hint of balsam; ripe round and spicy, almost minty, a kind of laser-phosphorescence that threatens to be brusque but isn't; instead it's 1001-nights exotic, like a potion of improbable components you'd drink on a sambuk to Zanzibar.
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between nine and fourteen years)

GBR-067 **2002 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**

+

90 Oechsle, and this is distinctly superior to the 2001 (which was good enough!); very finely chalky and mineral; apples and corn and ginger; the densest and thickest of any vintage I remember; this has the detail, elegance and fascination of Catoir wines in the Hans-Günter Schwarz days, the endless sense of edges and echoes.
SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)
SOMMELIER ALERT!

GBR-068 **2002 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese**

+

We added another 10g rs and created a spicy and penetrating wine; has the juicy mass of the vintage along with masses of Pfalz ginger; endless thrust and jab; uncanny conciliation of juice and spice; gleaming iridescent fruit. Vintage highlight-reel stuff . . .
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)



Kurt Müller is an extremely nice guy: hearty, generous and gregarious, as are his wines! They don't have the sheet-metal brilliance of someone like Biffar, but then I already *have* Biffar and don't need to repeat that style. I want this portfolio to be ecumenical. Plus I have a certain tender affection for a wee touch of the bumpkin in a wine. I respond to its honesty. A little earthiness is a good thing, sometimes. Nature's tooth and claw, that stuff.

Müller, he has become an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück, plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (*every* great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg *and* Nussbien.

But back to the Kirchenstück for a moment. The official land assessment value of this site places it at the top of the pile, not just in the Pfalz, but in all of Germany! If you own land here, you are paying higher taxes than owners in Doktor or Marcobrunn or Baiken or Scharzhofberger. What is it about the Kirchenstück? As usual with great vineyards, the "what" isn't always so explicable, but let's try and explic-it!

It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines. Still, not *this* kind of spice; this sharp, nipping concentration. Then there is a flavor of black-cherry which I've never seen elsewhere in the Pfalz. Then there is a minerality which again seems *packed*, as though it had been *pounded* together, carbonized. The whole effect is penetratingly expressive,



Kurt Müller

yet, here's the genius of it: it's also, somehow ELEGANT AND REFINED, and the palate keeps whip-sawing back and forth between "ZOUNDS! This is spicy!" and "Oooooohh, this is gorgeous!"

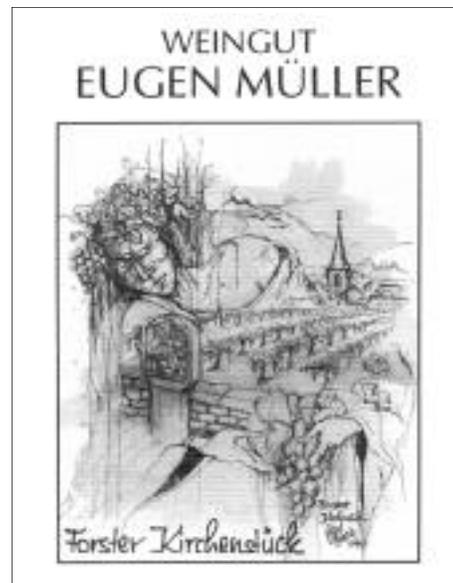
The Jesuitengarten, in comparison, is quite a bit less high-toned and zingy, more lush and caramelly: heavy satin versus raw silk. What makes **Jesuitengarten** tick is the solidity of its structure, the innate fineness of its flavors and

the stylishness of its complexity. Kirchenstück has more **genius** in it, but also more arrogance. Jesuitengarten is a *lit-tle* less brilliant but a little more accommodating; it's more diplomatic.

Kurt Müller considers his wines run in a reductive direction, but I don't find them as explicitly grapey as that implies. He ferments with cultured yeasts and gets the crystalline polish he wants in his wines. He started whole-cluster pressing with the 1998 vintage but somehow his wines don't have the *sheen* such vinification often pro-

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Forster Kirchenstück, Jesuitengarten, Ungeheuer, Pechstein and Musenhang**
- **Soil types: Calcareous loam, sandstone detritus, partly with basalt and clay**
- **Grape varieties: 76% Riesling, 10% Grauer and Weisser Burgunder, 14% red varieties**

duces. Otherwise the cellar work is run of the mill; what counts here is the sheer BREED of these wines at their best. This is benchmark Mittelhaardt Riesling at without-a-doubt the most REASONABLE prices you can possibly be asked to pay. *Look* at any of the three B's and then look at these!



Eugen Müller at a glance:

The best possible array of the top sites of the Pfalz, including the very best vineyard. Mouth-filling, fruity wines, direct and approachable. Astoundingly reasonable prices for wines of such pedigree.

how the wines taste:

In two words: juicy and caramelly. They aren't "modern" in their insistence on vinosity, and they seem to aim for power rather than brilliance. I often underrate them because they need six to nine months after bottling to really come forward. These are showy wines, full of flavor, and they *do* stand out in tastings. There are—big surprise—plenty of stellar 2001s here along with fine 2002s.

GEM-063 **2002 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**

Actually from the "Grand Cru" Pechstein, one of the very greatest Pfalz vineyards, but Müller has brand recognition for the Grosslage name, though he kindly offered to get me a separate A.P. *number* if I wanted "Pechstein" on the label; THIS is a nice guy! He doesn't need the hassle, much as my purist heart prefers the single-site name. The wine has sleek lilac-y Pechstein aromas and just beautiful charming fruit – it's markedly better than the '01; lime, fressia, lilac and wintergreen; as pretty a wine as has ever been made at Müller. SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GEM-064 **2002 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**

This might just augur a new era here; it's more detailed and more emphatically mineral; nose of boudin blanc, non-fruit fruit one might say, but lots of shimmer and aromas of good charcuterie; the parcel abuts the Jesuitengarten, which could account for the extra class. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (between four and thirteen years)

GEM-057 **2001 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese** +

"As always, brooding and opaque in its first year" I wrote last year. No more! It's now expressive and serious, with almost Kirchenstück-like cherry and carbon along with bacony and caramel flavors; an impressive terroir-critter with a long umami finish. We'll slide into a typically backward 2002 when the final 50 cases of this are gone. *So don't delay: a great 2001 still available at a fab price.* SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

GEM-065 **2002 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**

GEM-066 **2002 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Auslese** +

He nailed it! Got all the fire of the site with no heaviness and with moderate sweetness and wonderful minerality. The finest wine from here other than a Kirchenstück in many a moon. SOS: 2 (between seven and eighteen years)

GEM-062H **2001 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** ++

We brought this in when the 2000 and '99 both sold through. It is the masterpiece one would expect; certainly the best vintage since '98, and standing with the all-time great ones ('91, '93, '96, '98, now '01); it is all the Kirchenstück can be, complex, noble, very long; a poem of the secret soil.

Starting with vintage 1990 I have shipped this wine every year. Even the least of them has been wonderful, and the sustained beauty across the years has been nothing short of thrilling. This wine has become a touchstone for Riesling's greatness. The 2002, which may appear before year's end, has power and potential. SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty three years)

GEM-067H **2001 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**

GEM-061H **2001 Forster Ungeheuer Scheurebe Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++

161 Oechsle. Great stiff acidity. Oh boy . . . do not, not miss this! Varietally true and even more lively and complex than the riesling; fabulous salty-crazy interplay against the tangy-sagey sweetness. It's not ethereal but it is addictively drinkable and you will drink the whole bottle if you take even one sip. Two stars for sheer tastiness. Down to the final 20 cases. SOS: 4 (from twelve to twenty seven years)

GEM-068H **2002 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +(+)

Picked December 11th; the first-ever Kirchenstück Eiswein! Too young to note, but staggering potential. Celestial cherry aromas already showing. If you're serious about your German-wine cellar you have to have this. SOS: 4 (between thirteen and thirty six years)

Back when I was a young pup I lived in Germany and fancied I might establish a career as a wine writer. (Hey, before that I wanted to be a rock critic and before *that* I yearned to be a guitar-God. So ease up on me.) Well, I was writing for the *Friends Of Wine* magazine, which commissioned me to do a piece on Deinhard, to whom I'm sure they hoped to sell lots of advertising. Deinhard, as many of you know, used to be a Name in the American market.

So I spent three days knocking around with the charming Karl Liebetrau, touching down in Bernkastel, Oestrich and Deidesheim. It was then I first visited "Dr. Deinhard" and met the memorable Heinz Bauer, who makes the wines there. My arrival coincided with a kid's birthday party, and the final

impression I carried with me as we drove off was of Bauer hobbling on stilts around the cobblestone courtyard.

His hair's a little whiter than I remember, but the piercing blue eyes remain, as does the angelic mien. Bauer is a soul-twin of Hans-Günter Schwarz (they know each other, of course, and each speaks fondly of the other), typical sweet-hearted Pfälzers making wine in which you can *taste* the affection with which they are lavished.

Indeed affection can be understood to be the Point. I asked Bauer if his cellar-work was different from the pre-vailling-usual among quality estates. He answered, in effect, by claiming I'd asked the wrong question. "Quality results from what one does in the vineyard," he said. "There are no wonder-winemakers. Intensity, flexibility, knowledge and intuition are the things which bring quality."

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



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

I made an exploratory visit. One can never have too many great Pfalz wines, and I'd been told quality was extremely high – the estate took a key prize for the best

- **Vineyard area: 30.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg, Langenmorgen and Mäushöhle; Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad and Linsenbusch; Forster Ungeheuer and Jesuitengarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and basalt or limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% others including Scheurebe, Rieslaner, Weissburgunder, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir**

Halbtrocken wine in Germany from the 2001 vintage (Bauer has a touch with H-Ts I suspect because he himself likes them best of all) – and prices were very reasonable.

The estate is rather large by my standards; over 30 hectares outside of the Deinhard lease, with a high proportion of Riesling and a gratifying proportion of Grand Crus. Bauer seems to be both jovial and sensible. He has both steel and casks in the cellar and can control fermentation temperatures.

I went there on spec, but grew more and more impressed as the tasting progressed. There were a lot of wines, yet there was a deftness and tenderness across the board; these were the wines of a mature vintner who sought honesty and expressiveness. I found myself wishing I could stay longer and go deeper. My notes are scribbled in an inexplicable shorthand onto the tasting sheet he provided. At some point I knew I was hooked. I looked over at Kevin Pike and said, *Hey Kev; it isn't just me is it? These are really wonderful*. He grinned and nodded. "I was already filling out the forms, babe."

More details on philosophy and a deeper portrayal of the winery will come. I also need to taste more old vintages to see how the wines age, so no drinking-envelopes till then. For now, DIG IN. You'll be *very* glad you did.

Dr. Deinhard at a glance:

1st-quality Pfalz estate available in the U.S. at last; big range of Grand Cru sites rendered in a genial and intelligent way, AND (yay!) enough wine.

how the wines taste:

Dense and minerally, with focused fruit and with almost unerring BALANCE in a range of styles. Gentle and charming more than forceful and shoulder-grabbing. Imagine a cross between Minges and Biffar!

- GDD-001L **2002 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
 There was also a lusty Trocken Riesling in liters, but this was rounder, finer and more filigree; the finest lime and mango aspects of clone-90; a very classy wine here (not surprising as it hails from a super site Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad)
 SOS (from memory): 1
- GDD-002L **2002 Ruppertsberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
 Again Reiterpfad. An almost luridly scented nose, but a fine vigorous spicy Pfälzer, more robust than the QbA. I think Bauer was surprised we wanted his “mere” liter wines, but I love finding great cheap Riesling.
 SOS: 1
- GDD-003 **2002 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +
 Superb! Magnificent, complex, mineral, long.
 SOS: 0
- GDD-004 **2001 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
 Great polish and detail; a fine smoky Grand Cru with more cut than the `02; this is not at all unlike a Nigl Privat.
 SOS: 0
- GDD-005 **2002 Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**
 Tender, winsome and delicious.
 SOS: 1
- GDD-009 **2002 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**
 Perfect clone-90 Riesling, with a slim 95 Oechsle (!!!); fresh, lively, serene, long; how on earth could it be any better? We bought every drop he’d give us.
 SOS: 2
- GDD-010 **2002 Scheurebe Kabinett**
 From Ruppertsberger Linsenbusch (the best parts of which are legitimate 1er Cru); reticent nose but explosive palate; fine, citric and curranty; wonderful; exquisite cassis finish. Bauer likes Scheurebe. You can trust a man who likes Scheurebe!
 SOS: 2
- GDD-006 **2001 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**
 This is the one that took the Grand Wazoo for best H-T of the `01 vintage. Amazing he still has any, but he doesn’t have much and we took all he had. It’s round and detailed, what the French would call *fondue* (i.e. amalgamated or “married”), entirely smooth and winsome; an utterly elegant, granular Riesling. Indeed superb.
 SOS: 0
- GDD-007 **2001 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese** ++
 This is a masterpiece. Sensational nose and magnificent palate; recalls one of Catoir’s great Herrenlettens from the Schwarz era; endless cool minerality and ultra-refined fruit. It’s like tasting the chalk of heaven. It’s wines like these which establish A) the sheer supernal greatness of 2001 and B) the majesty and subtlety of the best Pfalz Rieslings. Don’t dare miss it.
 SOS: 2
- GDD-008 **2001 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese** +
 Extravagant complex aroma; sweet clay, kirsch, oat bread, brown sugar; a masculine Vendage tardive style; determinedly, resplendently serious wine; endlessly filigree and subtle.
 SOS: 3

SOS

A NEW WAY TO MEASURE SWEETNESS

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!

theo minges

pfalz • flemlingen

You always apologize for your German pronunciations, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

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

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

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



Theo Minges

objection to using cultured yeasts *if necessary*. Fermentations are quite slow, at least four weeks, and no wine is *ever* racked before January; each wine spends

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Gleisweiler Hölle, Flemlinger Vogelsprung**
- **Soil types: Limestone, heavy chalky loam, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 10% each of Grauer Burgunder and Dornfelder, 5% each of Weissburgunder, Chardonnay and St. Laurent, 20% other varieties**

at least a month on its primary lees to help them clarify and build complexity. "You have to leave the wines on their lees patiently," he says. "Otherwise, they become too reductive, too smooth; all their structure comes from acidity alone."

The more I get to know Minges the more I like him. He's bright and imaginative, a careful taster, indeed a WINE GUY, which isn't invariably the case among vintners. Many of them, you know, are essentially farmers, not aesthetes—nothing wrong with that! But it's unsafe to assume a grower has a "palate" as you and I use the term. Sometimes they only know their own wines, and don't always see *those* with great clarity. Sometimes it works, if the grower's talented and has integrity; I think of a Merkelbach for example. Theo Minges cares about wine in the abstract, likes to taste and describe and ruminate and I am always very, very happy to sit down with him.

It's hardly surprising the 2002s are as good as they are. *ALL* Minges' vintages seem to be wonderful, and the '01s were quite literally not outstanding here. '02 has its acid-prominence here as elsewhere, but as Theo says: Without acidity the wine loses its music and its well-being."

Minges at a glance:

Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying minerally-leesy wines. Extraordinary value across the board The best, best, best quality large-format wines I have ever tasted ANYWHERE. Superb Rieslings in a vintage like 2002 goes without saying!

how the wines taste:

Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

GTM-070L **2002 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

"The liter wine should be fresh and light, spring-water with fruit," says Theo. And so it is, though I'm afraid to say the wine's often too interesting to be gulped down quite so casually. The '02 is zesty, limey, bright and cheerful, like an apricot sorbet; detailed, even complex in its playful way; very lively and pretty.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (now to four years)

GTM-069L **2002 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Oh is this ever tasty. I mean, just tasty. More lime-parfait than the H-T, subtle lees, zingy balance, leafy "greenness" . . . oh forget it; just *buy* it.

SOS: 2 (between one and six years)

GTM-071 **2002 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett**

Very leesy still – I'm two weeks earlier than I was last year – but this fits the consistent theme, perhaps even slightly drier than usual; but almost a Cramant lime and oolong-sencha tones; lovely and loveable.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between four and eleven years)

GTM-068 **2001 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese** +

A huge jump up from the Kabinett. White nectarine, wintergreen, vanilla, coconut milk, and an electric spine of intensity; amazing amalgam of exotica and classical Riesling firmness.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

GTM-072 **2002 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese** +

An exquisite, refined, almost delicate nose, from which emerges the finest possible cassis. How he got the cassis up his nose I can't imagine. This is a generous, elegant, queenly Scheu, the silky perfection of all that's best about the variety. 35-year-old vines from a newly bought parcel. "We picked this wine under the watchful eyes of the birds," Theo said. Clear lemon finish; this is a meyer-lemon chutney in a glass.

SOS: 2 (now to six years)

GTM-073H **2002 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** +

More middle and viscera than the Spätlese; one doesn't register additional sweetness per se, but rather a greater thickness of fruit; a warm lick of crème anglais; scents of egg bread and maple syrup; prettiest possible finish.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty years)



POINTS: what's the point?

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

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

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

The logic isn’t so much false as incomplete.

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

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

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

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

Here’s a quote I like:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

rheingau wines



Recently Jancis Robinson included the Rheingau in a group of regions which had become “less interesting” since the last edition of Hugh Johnson’s Wine Atlas. They say by the time Hollywood picks up on a trend it’s already passé. Similarly perhaps, by the time an idea gains general currency in the wine-world it’s already growing outdated. No disrespect to the wonderful Ms. Robinson, who’s one of the Greats of our time! But when I first wrote about the Rheingau’s malaise it was, what 1985? And now, finally, there are the first little stirs and twitters heralding, dare one hope, a comeback.

What an irony. There’s almost no call any more for “Rheingau” as a commodity. It took a generation of indifferent and downright crummy wines from most of the erstwhile Great names of the region to throttle its reputation to death. I find I have to defend my selections, of which I am as proud and happy as I am with all my offerings. And some of the Great Names are staging a comeback! Prinz von Hessen is said to be much improved. Von Simmern’s getting there. We have quite

a way to go still, but one can no longer simply write-off the Rheingau.

The tragic suicide of Erwein Matuschka-Greifenclau

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

(erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had been naked long enough,

and the pathetic spectacle could no longer be ignored.

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

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



Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg



Berg Roseneck

must surely die hardest.

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

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

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage like 2001, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau's real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

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

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence of

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

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

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

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

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

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

There is no single human being with whom I work who deserves your support more than Johannes Leitz. With each passing year I find him more remarkable. His 2000s, which were the very last wines I tasted, are beyond the pale. If you knew the conditions under which they were harvested you would probably shed tears. His 2001s stand with the absolute pinnacle in this great vintage. Johannes was almost comically torn early on; he *knew* how exceptional his wines were, but could he say it credibly? “Terry, you know I am honest,” he pleaded, “I wouldn’t say it if it weren’t true, and I know I have said this to you before, so I beg you to believe me, but I really think 2001 is my best vintage ever, please believe me . . .” The refrain was repeated again this year; “You have to believe me, when I say this is probably my best vintage,” and it would be easy to scoff affectionately

except damn it; *it’s true*. It’s also true that 2000 marked a new level of quality at an already-superb estate. The local German press started taking notice, and Leitz won just about every major kudo there was to win last year: up to 4-stars in *Gault Millau* (no one better in the Rheingau), Collection Of The Vintage, the top-“scoring” wine in virtually every category. I am very happy for my friend! More so because I know Johannes Leitz is the kind of man who’ll remember how many years ago I started telling him he was top dawg.

Gault Millau wonders aloud if Johannes’ new pneumatic press (used first for the 2000 vintage) catapulted his quality upward to their lofty realms. It certainly contributed. But even more, Leitz is the kind of man who doesn’t stop surging ahead, doesn’t stop exploring, doesn’t stop trying to outdo himself, and doesn’t stop *growing*. What he accomplished in 2000 was miraculous, a great collection in a difficult vintage. His 2001s were supernal, the Rheingau summit that year, which was not a uniformly great year in the region. 2002 is certainly a great



Johannes Leitz with outlaw son Antonios

Rheingau year, and Leitz’s wines are almost more expressive than one can absorb, like when you’re so excited to say something you can’t get the words out.

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

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire. Johannes Leitz has visited us a few times now, and as often happens he is blown away by our market. “My god, such people; great palates, incredible cuisine, incessantly sexually active!”—well, I made up that last bit: Johannes didn’t say it. He was thrilled by you guys, though. And his sales took a sprightly leap forward, which made me very happy.

When I made my first approach to Johannes Leitz (11 years ago!) I found a sober young man still not out of his twenties, running a 5.8 hectare estate. His father had passed away when Johannes was a year old, and his mother resolutely maintained the winery until Johannes was old enough to hand it over to. He accelerated his studies by doing the basic courses at Eltville rather than the grand chi-chi at Geisenheim. He got home in the nick of time. The winery had survived, but barely. And it was frozen in time 18 years earlier. Johannes would need to invest, soon, a lot. Johannes was determined to make great wine.

He’s a man with a passion for **aroma**. “I almost prefer inhaling to actual tasting,” he says. “I can’t really love a wine regardless of how it tastes if it doesn’t excite me on

the nose. I want my own wines to seem more fragrant than the norm, fruitier and more harmonious. They should simply be *better!*” Leitz insists that “Wine grows in the vineyard; it isn’t made in the cellar. There’s no question that different soils give different flavors. Anyone who tastes a Berg Schlossberg, with its high proportion of slate, alongside a Bischofsberg, will taste the importance of soil in a hurry!”

It’s a reductive cellar, though most of the wines are held in casks. “I work very clean,” he says, echoing the *one* refrain you hear in every good estate. “My friends call me finicky about cleanliness,” he continues. “I also try to disturb the wine as little as possible, pumping for instance.” On the subject of Trocken wine, Johannes can speak with authority, having earned the right by making many of the *greatest* dry German wines I have ever tasted. “I’m of the opinion that during the dry wave a lot of wines were made dry that weren’t in any way suited for dry wine. You really need a certain kind of base wine to make a good Trocken. If you’re honest about it, there’s probably no more than, say, thirty percent of any cellar that fits. The rest would be better with a few grams or more of sweetness.” He also practices what he preaches, which takes unusual courage in the topsy-turvy modern German wine market.

One wonders how Leitz’s clear-headed honesty sits with the high priests of the VDP.

Johannes is done with his various building projects; the press-house is finished, the tasting room’s there (and

I’m sure the jacuzzi and the twin skee-ball lanes won’t be far behind), the family’s out from under a range of health-related challenges . . . and then there’s you, dear reader. You have been buying these wines with great vim, and this is a good thing! Though we are selling the wines about 33% faster than Johannes can actually produce them. The so-called “Dragonstone” (formerly Rudesheimer Drachenstein) is cleaned out, gone, vamoose, epuise; we’ve shipped it all and we don’t have many cases at-large. It’s all rather giddy but you know, it makes me happy. Because Johannes Leitz has it all. He’s a perfect expression of my holy trinity of value: soil, family, artisanality. His connection to his vines is a priori and intimate. His scale permits – *relishes* – a degree and type of attention any industrial wine producer (and many other artisans) would think insane. He’s close to every part of it; the wine he drinks with you in your restaurant, having fun (and studying your response, believe me!), is the wine he nurtured *himself*, from pruning to binding to trimming to canopy-thinning to green-harvesting to selective multiple hand-harvesting to inspecting the fruit to fermenting in individual small lots to monitoring to aging on the lees to tasting again and again to determine the best moment for bottling, and finally . . . to doing it all again.

Don’t forget, when you see him he’s also seeing *you*. There’s a whole other life Johannes lives among his vines, by himself, which you and I don’t see. Until we taste. And even then, we only see it if we think to look.

Leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three rising stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Small estate of 5.8 hectares. Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

how the wines taste:

They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. “A lot of people talk about ‘yeast-contact’ but I think I’m the only one who actually does it.” And it’s not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz’s lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. I drank the 2000 Schlossberg Spätlese H-T the other night, and it was like semolina dumplings in a sweetly fragrant mix of veal and vegetable broth. No other wines are like them. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type—when it’s true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes’ wines taste “sweet.” They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are *intensely* fragrant, as though they wished to *convince* you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they *crave* oxygen, and they don’t show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn’t get there with bazillions of yen or with megatechnology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

The 2002 “Dragonstone” will be gone when you read this. It was completely sold out on the Spring DI. It had 85 Oechsle and was deftly chaptalized. Bottled at the end of February, when I tasted it three weeks later it showed all the rose-liqueur and kirsch-y fruit I remembered from cask. I emphasize this is just a new NAME for the SAME WINE David Schildknecht called “the best Riesling value anywhere”. Now it has a name you can pronounce too.

GJL-074 **2002 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett**

I suspect this might have vanished also. It's another skimpy Kabinett with 95 Oechsle, showing about a *third* of its actual sweetness. Has its prototypical zingy-minty nose, wild-plum flavors and almost savage spiciness. Even more length than the remarkable '01.
SOS: 2 (between six and nineteen years)

GJL-075 **2002 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese**

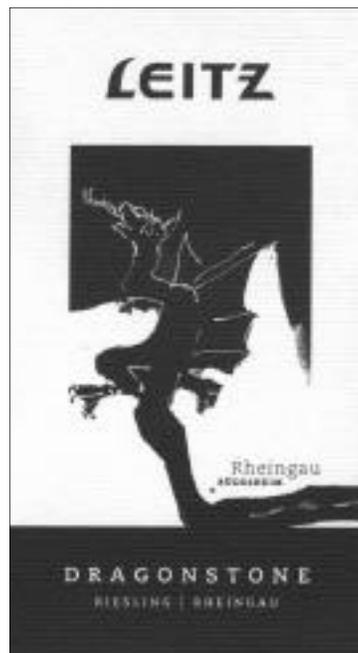
The *intent* is for this vineyard to give Kabinett, but not in the monster-truck 2002 Rheingau vintage; over 100 Oechsle; a super nose! Lovely hint of mealy wood and lees; fine nip of apple, wonderful tangy density; again shows kirsch on the finish but this is lush despite its flinty minerality.
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)

GJL-078 **2002 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** +

By the way, do you know the skinny on the Rudesheimer Berg? They're the steepest slopes in the Rheingau "proper" and with Hochheim produce the Rheingau's highest must-weights unless there's drought. The wines are big and pulled tight. They're among the most minerally of Rheingauers, with slate flavors and stony quartzite grip. ROTTLAND is the lowest down and gives the most adamant, powerful wines. It's the body-builder of the trio; ROSENECK, since it's higher, has a "keener" flavor, more appley, more aromatic. When it works, its head-shakingly vivid malic perfume conspires with a stony grip to give unforgettable wines. SCHLOSSBERG is the slatiest of the three, almost a breath of Mittelrhein coming into it now, but with more power. These are steep mountains falling directly into the Rhine; only a two-lane road and train tracks can squeeze along the riverbanks. Anyone who cares about Riesling should know these vineyards, and should see them if possible; they're quite spectacular to look upon and even more spectacular to hike through.

Whew! The nose. Utter Roseneck, with the delicate woodsiness and the leesy semolina sweetness; first thing on the palate is really laughing mineral – it needn't be earnest all the time – and an animated interplay of fruit and stone; restrained-seeming sweetness; this is lyric, melodic, almost rapturous. Deeper and deeper apple-Calvados aromas in the empty glass. Wow.

SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty six years)



- GJL-079 **2002 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**
 Johannes harvested a small lot of BA insufficient to bottle by itself, but which he nobly agreed to sacrifice to make this a *killer*, and I mean *KILLER* Spätlese. Again there's a flint-kirsch almost Pouilly Fume tone, but the wine is piquant and playful and wonderfully harmonious. Flip through this catalog; you'll find few if any Spätlesen from 2002 with two "plusses". Now call someone and *buy* some.
 SOS: 3 (between ten and thirty years)
- GJL-080H **2002 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
 100% healthy botrytis, and recently bottled when I saw it; nose of szechuan spareribs, salt and duck sauce. The botrytis is somewhat blatant but there seems to be material enough to support it. Botrytis is volatile; after bottling it's often all you can smell. Johannes recalls the wine from cask and says I'll hate myself if I pass it by. Why on earth would I doubt him?
 SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty six years)
- GJL-081H **2002 Rudesheimer Kirchenpfad Riesling BA, 12/375ml**
 This is surely the ne plus ultra of Kirchenpfad, all violets and garrigue and bouquet-garni; the palate is juicy and salty and burning-leaf; it's not unlike the few great 2000s, and not at all demanding. You want less to sip it than to lap it.
 SOS: 4 (between seventeen and forty years)
- GJL-082H **2002 Rudesheimer Kirchenpfad Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** **+**
 First, you should know that I frequently underrate BA and TBA when they're very young. I'm personally more of an Eiswein-hound because I sometimes feel uneasy around large amounts of botrytis. This takes the above BA and adds three dollops of heather-honey. It's less a quintessence than it is an elongation and deepening of the BA. It is masterly but not masterful. I loved it, and everyone else will love it even more.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and sixty years)
- Two killer dry wines from Letiz:
- GJL-083 **2002 Rudesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
- GJL-084 **2002 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**



spreitzer

rheingau • oestrich

The fur it be flyin' at Spreitzer. Not only have they been lionized by every major German wine commentator (another "cluster" in *Gault-Millau*, another "F" in *Feinschmecker*, another "star" in *Mondo*, and another placement on DM's 100-best list) but with 2002 they have an absolute king-hell banshee of a vintage that's exponentially beyond anything I've tasted there till now.

Spreitzer was introduced two years ago to clamorous success, especially among my woman-customers, for reasons which will become apparent when you look at the picture. There's a couple Feinschmeckers for ya.

We have *already* reserved more 2002s here than we sold in the first two years combined. It takes a while for a new agency to gain a foothold, I know, but the time is NOW. We're going to urge and

froth and spume and cajole till you give us the orders these wines deserve, because I absolutely know what will happen when you start pulling corks – not to mention what'll happen when the writers start pulling corks.

Trust me guys. I won't BS you because I'm gonna have to ask you to trust me again down the road. These wines are gorgeous.

Here are the stats: 11.5 hectares, producing about 6,700 cases per year. 92% Riesling, 8% Pinot Noir. All harvesting is by hand. The must is cleaned by gravity for 24 hours before whole-cluster pressing. After fermentation (in wood or jacketed stainless steel, partly with ambient yeasts partly with cultured yeasts, depending on the vintage) the wines rest on their gross lees for some time before receiving their only filtration, with racking. They are bottled off the fine lees.

In 1997 Andreas and Bernd Spreitzer leased the estate from their father, who remains active. Johannes Leitz tipped



me off. He's friendly with Andreas and wanted to help. I really don't think it crossed his mind he was creating a competitor. Leitz is a guy whose friends will also be sweethearts, and I was intrigued to taste Spreitzer's wines.

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

Oestrich. I want to pause a second to draw attention to Leitz's touching gesture of friendship, both to me and to Andreas & Bernd. He brought us together, and he's *still* scouting around in the Rheingau for young new growers still below the radar. He isn't concerned – nor should he be – with handing me a "competitor." He wants to do what's best for his friends and his region. Would there were more like him.

Apart from which the two styles are entirely different: Leitz has his casks and his lees and his deeply vinous old-style wines with their embedded leesy sweetness, while Spreitzers

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

are more 21st-century with their primary fruit and polish.

Oestrich seems to have gotten short shrift when the 1971 wine law re-drew the vineyard boundaries. The two main sites are Doosberg and Lenchen, each among the largest single-sites in the region and each embracing a wide range of soils and exposures. The top of Doosberg borders the Hallgartener Jungfer, while Lenchen touches the Schönhell. Nearer the Rhine the wines are fruitier.

Oestrich seldom shows the nervy vigor of other Rheingauers, and the keen finesse of spiciness is often absent here. Oestrich is about *fruit*. Fruit is about *pleasure*. Pleasure is about *life*.

Still, I'd like you to see what Spreitzers can do in Hattenheim and Winkel ("Let's Go To Winkel With Spreitzer!" Now *there's* a slogan one can work with.) and Andreas tells me that wines from those Grand Crus witrs are "not unthinkable" in the future.



Bernd Spreitzer

Spreitzer at a glance:

Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of greatness in store.

how the wines taste:

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

- GSP-011 **2002 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling**
88 Oechsle, chaptalized to 92 (i.e. barely at all), and as you may have noted, *Spätlese* quality by law. The wine's very big, spicy and tangy; boistrous, gregarious and charming. SOS: 2 (between three and twelve years)
- GSP-010 **2002 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +
I usually found Lenchen the juicier of the Oestrichers; Doosberg was firmer and spicier, but Spreitzers believe the reverse. So much is determined by the particular parcels one has! This, in any case, is *just about perfect dry Riesling*. Charm, lush yet still crisply malic; long and many-layered; spicy, gracious and memorable; cox-orange, white nectarine, asian pear; lots going on.
SOMMELIER ALERT! Don't miss this.
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between eight and thirteen years)
- GSP-012 **2002 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett** +
(A.P. 6) A week in bottle when I saw it, so the aroma was subdued. The palate was a veritable PAR-TAY! of Riesling; what sheer loveliness these show. You've never tasted a better Rheingau Kabinett.
SOS: 2 (between five and seventeen years)
- GSP-009 **2002 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**
Wonderfully pretty aromas of crabapple blossom and white peach; smooth, refined and delicious; just a tic of sharpness on the finish but withal a charming expression of the dry style. SOS: -1 (now to two years; again between ten and thirteen years)
- GSP-013 **2002 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese**
Broader, juicier and more malty. If the Kabinett shines, this one glows; a resplendent fruit-bomb with a fruit-driven finish. Forthright and delightful.
SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty three years)
- GSP-014 **2002 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303"** +
It hails from a hillside separate from the rest of the vineyard, from which a legendary TBA with 303 degrees Oechsle was gathered in 1920, the highest-ever must weight for Rheingau Riesling. This has a truly *grand* aroma; reminded me of great Erbacher Siegelsberg; more cox-orange and real orange on the palate. A Significant Spätlese from a fine vintage, the kind of wine which will later be called Classic. Again, fruit-driven and lusty.
SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty seven years)
- GSP-015H **2002 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml** (++)
Too early for notes, but remarkably pure and with splendid potential.
SOS: 4 (between eighteen and forty five years)
- GSP-017H **2002 Mittelheimer St. Nikolaus Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++
This will be sublime. The same note as the BA, played on a higher string; more tensile and brilliant; again, still cloudy (unfiltered when I tasted it) but the purity here puts it in a class with Dönnhoff, Selbach, Christoffel, Karlsruhle, Hexamer, A.Rod, Giambi and Bonds.
SOS: 4 (between sixteen and forty years)
- GSP-016H **2002 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** +++(+)
205 Oechsle. Continues the aching purity and clarity of this entire astonishing range. As fabulous a group of stickies as I've ever experienced.
SOS: 4 (between twenty five and seventy five years)

“2002 is a great wonder, the likes of which no amount of gratitude to the Gods is too much,” said Wolfgang Riedel. He feels it is his best vintage since 1983. He is a hard man to please.

My fine young colleagues don’t like these wines and don’t know why I do. In fact they don’t seem to know that I do. They seem to imagine my connection to Riedels is merely sentimental or perhaps some arcane “soul” thing that’s part of my overall weirdness. I sympathize with them, actually, because these are certainly not the kinds of wines with which they came of age. The wines are odd, rustic, they don’t “show” well in big tastings.

The wines are indeed ambassadors of a vanished world, yet I like them for reasons beyond nostalgia. Seen purely aesthetically, I enjoy their waxy-wicky rosewater flavors, almost like Furmint, certainly *old-world* and rural. I like the quince thing they do, and the bitter-almond business doesn’t fret me.

But it is impossible to see these wines *purely* aesthetically. Oh you can do it all right, but you’re wasting both the wines and yourself. These wines have a *human* story to tell, one with which I am roused to my core. It goes something like this . . .

Riedel’s is a tiny estate, all of three hectares, parcelled out among the four important sites of Hallgarten. Wolfgang likes the Jungfer best, betraying his preference for adamant, stony wines. I’d vote for Schönhell, but Jungfer will do! Reductive winemaking is the order of the day: the first racking is as early as possible. After a single egg-white fining the wines are bottled. Riedel is after clean, full-flavored wine of great intensity. He wants a big middle where the extract can be tasted. He intensely dislikes botrytis (and makes very few Auslese), saying the best wines come from “green, ripe grapes.” He is a true Trocken freak, since long before Trocken was trendy.

Riedels sell their wines to private customers—98% of whom they know personally. No wines are sent to competitions, nor do Riedels visit wine fairs or exhibitions. Wolfgang won’t have it. “I’d feel like a whore on a street corner at one of those fairs,” he says. “All we can do is offer our customers perfectly honest wines.”

This is a man whose soul can still agonize; he’s a creature of eternity. He makes me think of Ivan Karamazov, as every flicker of emotion passes across his mobile face. I was not surprised to learn Wolfgang had studied for the priesthood. One sees the capacity to be *devout*, but his brimming delights and enthusiasms mandated an earthly path for this man.

Lately, though, Wolfgang seems ever more serious about returning to his first love, art history. As Riedels do not play the PR game, there are few opportunities to widen their base of private customers, and it’s getting harder to make a living from one’s old standbys. The new generation of wine buyers aren’t as brand-loyal as their parents were. They skip around, buy a little bit here and a little bit there. You need a lot of them to stay afloat if



that’s how you market your wines. Riedels are paying a price for their purism.

The house containing the winery belongs to Wolfgang’s mother Christine Riedel. She’s quite a *person-age* in her own right. I have only heard sketchy details of her autobiography, but I gather she was widowed quite young and basically ran the winery and the household on her own. This amazingly resolute woman, who’s lost none of her irascible spirit and drive in her late eighties was once regarded as “the best cellar master in the Rheingau” according to the administrator at one of the noblest of the noble estates. “The soul of the winery,” said *Alles Über Wein*. A great story is told (and retold: Mrs. Riedel leaps at the chance to tell it). It seems there was a tasting to honor the old Count Matuschka-Greiffenclau on the occasion of his birthday. Riedels were showing the then-young 1959 Beerenauslese, which attracted the notice of the birthday boy. Thinking, I am sure, that he was offering the most cordial remarks from a blue blood to a commoner, he

permitted himself to observe to Frau Riedel how remarkable it was that a wine of such quality could come from a small vintner. Frau Riedel, whose entire life had been building to just such a moment, was having none of it. “You know, Count,” she replied, “our vineyards are less than two kilometers apart. Do you imagine we receive the same sunshine, or does God in His wisdom hang a curtain between your vines and ours?” Ah, bless her!

These days she gets around on crutches; she has bad knees and a hip that’s been broken a time or two. “Below the neck I’m a mess, but above I’m 110 per cent!” says she, adding: “Better that than the reverse.” Still, it is hard for a self-described “bundle of energy” to accept an infirmity, and I was touched by her self-deprecation. She seemed sure we wouldn’t want to be “bothered” by her joining us, but we practically begged her to stay! I later found out she had personally, without any help, boxed and labeled my most recent (and largest) order. “If I don’t pack, you don’t get any wine!” I’m not sure how to say how this makes me feel. We all live our busy lives, in our stores, or restaurants or offices, and it is easy to lapse into the fallacy of thinking *our* life is *all* of life. Yet by the time our orders get to Riedels, all of our clamor and noise reduces to an eighty-eight year old woman, on crutches, hand-packing and labeling her family’s wines to send to America. I think of the things those hands have known. I think of the life that has passed across those girlish blue eyes, an entire human life.

A very tall dark-green bottle was brought out for us one year. Heavy thick glass. The cork was eased out of the bottle with great care. The wine was poured. Deep green-gold. Whatever it was, all that chlorophyll was still there. Oh, a *great* bouquet, enthralling, complex, orchids, leafy, tapioca, a cathedral of fragrance. As I was trying to imagine what it could *possibly* be, Wolfgang could no longer hold it in. It was a 1937 Jungfer *Spätlese*, fermented *dry* as was the rule of the day. 1937. Christine was married that year. I couldn’t remove my eyes from her face. The wine was majestic, dignified, theologically mysterious. It had a sagey high note on the back of the palate, and a weeping evening of burning leaf. It had power and verve - still vigorous! It was full of ivy and grain. It told of a time when people dressed for dinner in their own homes. The room fell silent, as we all opened our hearts to this winged messenger of Time.

The wine *qua* wine was lovely enough, about as profound as wine can be. But the *experience* of drinking it with the woman who helped make it over sixty-one years ago, and her son, and my friends, was overwhelming. I

felt as though I’d received the tablets on which were carved the answer to every human riddle, but they were written in a language I did not speak. I heard the roar of an aircraft outside the window, on its takeoff climb out of Frankfurt, 20 miles to the east, flying over Hallgarten and our silent room.

It feels jarring to return to the subject of wine *strictly* as wine, strange to think of wine as an isolate discreet *thing* again. Wine flows like blood through these lives. And that world is vanishing. What do any of us do that has a meaning so deep we don’t even *see* it as meaning? Why are we living so *little* of our lives?

I sometimes feel the only way to show these wines to you appropriately would be to invite you over for lunch and play Gregorian chant.

We were also treated to a spirited disquisition regarding what makes a vintage GREAT, the cause of which was the opening of a bottle of 1959 BA. Wolfgang feels - and this is telling - that no vintage in which an Auslese is made by *selective* picking can ever be considered great. A truly great vintage is one in which all the force of nature is arrayed in each grape such that Auslese can be picked *everywhere* right off the vine. To do otherwise is an attempt to “outdo” nature, a kind of sleight of hand. This flies precisely in the face of the current wisdom, and I happen to disagree with Wolfgang, but most important this is a glimpse into his *Weltanschauung*, and thus, into him. His wines are so inseparable from Wolfgang the man, one suddenly understands why he often produces “only” QbA wines in years when others produce Auslesen. It isn’t mere laziness. It is a unison with nature he seems to be seeking.

But that isn’t really true either. I doubt Wolfgang Riedel is consciously seeking “unison with nature” or indeed seeking anything except a few days to explore cathedrals and monasteries. He simply opts to live with nature by accepting what She gives in its entirety.

We had the TV crew with us, which caused Frau Riedel great consternation until she relaxed eventually, abetted by the astonishing ‘59. “I wish I had a neck like a giraffe,” said Wolfgang, “and a spiral staircase in it for this wine to trickle down, ever deeper, drop by drop . . .”

Christine showed me a picture of her late husband. I had never seen one. He was round-faced and benign. “He looks very happy,” I said to her. Of *course* he was happy,” she said emphatically, “I took good care of him!” But who has taken care of *you* all these years? I wanted to say. Life has been lived stoically and with determination. Not lyrical, but necessary.

Thus, the wines. Not lyrical, but necessary.

Riedel at a glance:

This isn't a winery that can be encapsulated into bite size wieners, so forgive me, but I won't. Please read the text!

how the wines taste:

They're adamant and resonant, with the specific stoniness of this site that is chiseled into the very face of the wine, a fast-disappearing style of pure dry white wine in which the signature of the land combines with the best expression of the human touch. Lately Wolfgang's wines have consistently shown a kind of cherry-pit or almond tone reminiscent of Italian whites in the old style. This is rustic, but it's redeemed by another waxy-quince-y almost Loire-Chenin profile. Each of the wines offered below share this character, the 2000 in a sleek style and the '99 in a fruitier rendition.

GRL-026 2002 Hallgartener Jungfer Riesling Spätlese Trocken

He deacidified this year, "against my every instinct," because the German customer for bone-dry wine won't tolerate acidity. Masochism is O.K. as long as you don't get a tummy-ache I guess. This wine has a fine nutty-slatey aroma and is salty and round on the palate. It works. It is a wine from Wolfgang Riedel.

SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between eight and eleven years)

GRL-027 2002 Hallgartener Hendelberg Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken

Has a little of its own rs; this is quite some wine; quince and almond and apple; wonderful body, weight and succulence; Riedel's most generous and hedonistic wine since I started coming here. Many-layered given its thickness.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (between three and twelve years)

GRL-028 1998 Rheingauer Landwein Riesling Halbtrocken

First offering. It's actually Jungfer. He didn't want an AP #, and indeed the wine is loaded with rosewater, almond and quince. The tasters would have rejected it as untypical, and it's certainly very much Riedel with all that implies; these wines don't make the diddy-boppers shimmy, but *my* old bones squirm gladly and knowingly.

SOS: 0 (now to four years)



mosel-saar-ruwer



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

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

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

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

Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly. But leave the best-known sites and drive just a few miles and there are seismic shudders of a dubious future. However searching the wines may be, the work of producing them is sweaty and brusque. You know, until you actually *see* these vineyards, you cannot imagine—even the best pictures cannot convey—just how steep this ground is. Our forbears were stoically accustomed to a certain physical travail as a condition of being.

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

But not us. Sometimes you will look up at little specks of people, pruning, binding, spraying, and you will wonder: "how do they keep from falling?" But even more you will wonder: "who in his right mind would *do* such work?" Who indeed! People who *are* willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer—and older. Much casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but

the steep slopes need experienced hands. Families undertake most of the work themselves, *if* they will. Many of the young are opting out. Many venerable names are either up for sale, have already *been* sold, or are floundering.

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

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

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

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

who left, but the ones who remained.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-wracking flood during the harvest of 1997. ("In the next life," Sigrid Selbach told me, "I don't think I'd buy a house along the river.") On Christmas day 1993 the highest water in two hundred years poured

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

through villages and into cellars. As it had ruptured several underground fuel-storage tanks, the floodwaters were also slick and smelly. You can't get insurance for flooding and the economic consequences of the flood of 1993 were devastating. People will show you pictures and show you the water marks in their homes. And the following year saw equally remorseless flooding: how much can these people endure? The new-world winemaker "lifestyle" is the heaven these Mosel vintners hope they'll go to someday.

You can't help but wonder why they do it, even if you love the wines, and the answer is elusive. It can be divined, perhaps, but never witnessed. Someday when my son is a little older I plan to take him to the Mosel, because I want to show him my heroes. If heroism is the heart's courage, then the fortitude of Mosel growers is one of the most meaningful declarations of love a person can ever see.

Which makes it all the more galling to see the stuff that masquerades as Mosel wine from some of the schlock merchants. I have nothing at all against regionals per se - far from it, if it's honest and *respects* the region. But most of it bears little resemblance to Mosel wine (hell, some of it is only remotely *wine*) and every cork that's pulled serves to cheapen something fine and fragile.



Erdener Prälat

mosel regionals

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

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

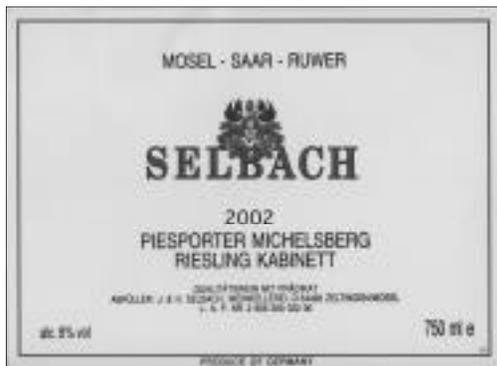
Ah, beginner's luck! I am proud of being a marketing-bonehead. When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

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

Since the 1992 vintage, TJ Riesling has always been better than its class. I am certain there isn't a superior Mosel regional on the market. The 2002 vintage of TJ is considerably better than many estate-Mosel wines I tasted and rejected, and it's the driest blend we've ever produced, though it's addictively full-bodied and juicy.

Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:

- GSR-102 **Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-201 **Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA**
- GSR-302 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-702 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-801 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-602 **TJ Riesling**



selbach-oster

mosel • zeltingen

Good guy alert! This was one of the few estates to lower prices to help us offset the weakened Dollar.

Johannes Selbach and I are the classic pair who agree 99.75% of the time and bicker endlessly about the other .25%! We're also both eldest-children. We were also born in power-vintages, '53 for me and '59 for him. Mine was the elegant one, though, and his was the muscular one

I tell you this because I don't want to sound mawkish when I say I trust Johannes as I trust very few other people. He's not only highly intelligent, he's also *smart* and judicious. So when I asked him if a certain grower's statement that 2002 was comparable to '71 was merely the usual early euphoria, he considered, smiled his gioconda smile, and said yes, it was.

2002 is a fascinating year here. It is far from uniformly good along the Mosel. Some normally excellent estates stumbled. Others actually soared above their 2001s. I wrote more "stars" in my notes for Selbach-Oster than I did a year ago, though I agree with Johannes that '02, while excellent, isn't epochal.

But you know, there are many ways to feel about wine. 2001 was clearly Great. One loved and admired them. One addressed them as Sir and Ma'am. That is love, but it's a particular *type* of love. 2002 inspires greater *affection* because it is more charming. It's also the kind of vintage one has a crush on because it's so pretty. I can't say I love it "more" or "less" than 2001. Professionally I judge '01 to be more Significant and profound. Personally I want to *make out* with '02.

Johannes has found his path. His wines have *identity* and purpose, yet even so the sustained quality of 2002 is striking. There simply isn't a dud in the bunch, and we're talking a lot of Fuders of Mosel wine.

Last year, there were a lot of Auslesen on the table. So much so that I asked Johannes Selbach if there was a 3-star in reserve, as I didn't see one.

Many people say many things to me during my month in Germany, and I dutifully try and scribble the smart things down. Johannes' answer stopped me in my tracks. "Terry, the 2-star Auslese was one block picking; that's how that wine came in from that vineyard on that day," he said. "We could *concoct* a 3-star Auslese of course; blend together some small lot of



Johannes & Barbara Selbach

- **Vineyard area: 11.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Zeltinger Sonnenuhr, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst**
- **Soil types: Stony slate, partly with loam**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

botrytis-wine with a little Eiswein and a little BA, but it would be a *contrived* wine, the kind you only create 30 liters of to send to journalists and get big scores. That's not the business we're in."

Listen to this, people. This is what wine *means*, this and only this. The *vineyards* didn't create a 3-star Auslese in the 2001 vintage, so there isn't one. Simple. There's BA and TBA and no fewer than three Eisweins, but no 3-star Auslese.

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

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

Wine: (n) anything anybody can contrive to make, detached from nature, detached from culture, connected to nothing but our infantile need to be entertained and our adolescent need to be fashionably *correct*, to be sold

at the highest price some desperate hipster can be horse-whipped into paying.

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

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

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

I drink plenty of wine with my friend Johannes and I know his tastes are broad. He likes those reductive fruit-brilliant wines. He simply prefers not to make them. He wants his wines more *imbued*.

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

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

Many of you have met Johannes on his travels. He's always on the road with his wares! Yet for me, his winery is perhaps *the* fundamental example of the difficulty of removing wine from its contexts of family and locality. From the very first, the Mosel makes an impression on you; it's so improbable and so beautiful. And from the very first, the Selbach family made an impression on me, as they do on everyone.

In my case I fell rather dazedly in love with them, or at least with an *aura* I had some role in reading into them. In the years that followed I have tried to reduce that infatuation to whatever unblinking truth lies beneath it. It isn't easy.

Sigrid Selbach told me a story one year. "We picked our Eiswein last year on Christmas Day," she began. "The day before, when we realized the weather might permit us to gather the grapes the morning of Christmas, we were hesitant to call and ask for help with the picking. But you know, we called twelve people, and they all agreed to help us, and they were all **cheerful** to do it. We went out into the vine-



yard before dawn to check the temperature, then phoned them at 6:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, and they all came, and all of them were in a good mood. Afterwards they gathered here at the house for soup and Christmas cookies. And when they left they were all singing out "MERRY CHRISTMAS!" as they went home to their families. Isn't that wonderful?"

It's more than wonderful. It literally amazes me that people would *cheerfully* agree to get out of their warm beds before dawn on Christmas morning, leaving their families, to go out and gather enough fruit for a few cases of wine that nobody makes any money on. Can you hear such a story and *still* doubt that angels walk among us?

Here's why I insist in capturing and conveying the experience of meaning I feel in this house: the Selbachs are part of a way of life one encounters far too rarely in our hyped-up cyberworld. Stories like the Eiswein harvest signify more than neighborliness, or even esprit de corps among fellow vintners. It is simply taken for granted that certain traditions are ennobled by observing them with love and good cheer. When you have a chance to gather an Eiswein it is beneficence from heaven; you CELEBRATE the opportunity.

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

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

Part of the Selbach's aesthetic is the eschewing of anything *confected* in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its *internal* skeletal makeup, and from that instinct for structure come all the judgements and preferences which constitute a house-style. Thus fruit must also be structured,

detailed, and defined, and the overall effect of the wines should be as *bracing* as a leap into a cold pond on a hot day. Hans Selbach once advised a colleague not to select too stringently at harvest. Better to leave a few of the underripe grapes in the bunches. They give *structure* to the wine.

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

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

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

Few wines—few *things*—take us to such places of faith. Selbach's wines take me there frequently. You can't

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

I have written before about the self-consciousness that visits me when I return to the site of an experience that moved me. I've often been put into a kind of trance after tasting Selbach's vintage, and often been moved to tears. Now I am so hyper-aware that a Great Experience is about to take place that it *can't* take place. Which, I think, is good. Now I'm just calmly receiving the wines and what happens happens. And so about 75% of the way through these 2002s I started to feel very *lucky*. I realized "I am in the very beating heart of what I do, this is what wine means to me, and all around me are people I love and respect who embody every core value I hold dear." Months later I'll be ripping through the pages of some magazine to see what "scores" these wines got (such are the duties of what we call the "real world"), but now I'm here.

Helping With The Harvest at Selbach-Oster

- by Siobhan Thomas

Typically, most days we traveled as a group from vineyard to vineyard, and the instructions were usually to take 2 buckets, and in varying degrees, pick selectively. Johannes gave instructions at the winery, and also in the field. Otherwise, Philipp told us what to do in the vineyards. At first, and in some vineyards later, J. or P. would show us the difference in the grapes we were selecting- Botrytis being the main thing. For any of us neophytes, stem rot, etc. was explained. The Poles know exactly what they are looking for, so I looked to them with a ? when Philipp wasn't near. Many vineyards had the same instructions, so it wasn't necessary to demonstrate the selection each time.

There were plenty of vineyards we went through more than once. We usually were preselecting the botrytis grapes, often separating them out individually, and leaving the clean grapes to ripen further. We cleaned dead leaves when it frosted, and made sure there was ventilation for the remaining grapes. We also cleaned the vines for eiswein this way, and the grapes and vines were kept immaculate in those vineyards. I believe there were places we covered at least twice, though I can't be sure, as the geography of the vineyards is pretty insane in places.

We were very very selective in most vineyards. Often, a crew of the Poles, who have been doing this for 10 yrs+, went ahead to select the total botrytis bunches, and the rest of us broke the remaining bunches into our 2 buckets, one for clean, one for botrytis. This often required splitting the individual bunches to be sure. In the evening we would stand around great barrels of botrytis grapes, scoop them into smaller buckets, and pick out each of the not-botrytis-enough grapes, until we had barrels of only beautiful mold.

One of the quintessential experiences to understand the amount of care that goes into these wines, is to spend the evening separating the botrytis. It is amazing to me how many times how many pairs of discerning eyes select and reselect for the various wines. Clinging to the slopes like a mountain goat all day is definitely an integral part of the Mosel experience! Working the presses also gives one an appreciation for the quality of the grapes, as batches are determined and selected. You also realize how much of the work continues in the dark, still with a sense of urgency. And it is cold, hard work, forking grapes into the crusher, piling them into the press, cleaning the press, doing it all again, and then again, and to top off the night, taking the wagon load of stems and skins out the the field, and forking it back out to store for mulch. I'd be willing to pay much more for these wines, now that I know what all is involved in the making, and I've got to say, on the romantic artistic side, the view from the top of the vineyards when the sun finally breaks through the clouds is enough to make your feet warm again!

A Look At The Vineyards:

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

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

ZELTINGER SCHLOSSBERG is mineral to the MAX! Now back in production after the catastrophic hail of 1997, I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: I think it's a great Grand Cru site, fully deserving the status of a Wehlener Sonnenuhr or Erdener Prälat. The pity is most of it is worked by the small growers of Zeltingen, among whom standards aren't particularly high. Selbachs have shown time and again the potential of the site. Flavors are a *borealis* of slate, buttressed by lime and grassy aspects. Mosel-apple is present but discreet. Medium bodied. If you love Mosels for their cussed Mosel-ness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

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

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

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

Selbach-Oster at a glance:

A large estate by Mosel standards means many wines to choose from. The ambitiousness of Johannes Selbach has made this estate the region's most prominent rising star. Since 1989, always among the very best wines in this collection, and 2002 is no exception.

how the wines taste:

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

GSO-197 **2002 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

Zeltingen's Himmelreich is a site with variable exposures and steepness, but the best of it offers "1er Cru" quality in a green-apple and kiwi style, more fruit driven than mineral. Amazing the murmuring depths of this. "There's nothing amazing about it," said Johannes, "It has 91 degrees Oechsle." Is it any wonder I love the guy? He sacrificed an *Auslese* so the Kab H-T would have some *huevos*; it's dignified, serious wine; mineral but not angular; spicy but not sharp, and as good or better than its namesake in '01. SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between twelve and twenty years) SOMMELIER ALERT!

GSO-218 **2002 Estate Riesling**

A snappy forthright chap, this; natty and energetic.

- GSO-198 **2002 Riesling Kabinett**
 GSO-198H **2002 Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**
 The whole estate-Riesling thing has many advantages: 1) to remove two superfluous words from the label, 2) to give latitude in blending, i.e. to be flexible in choosing which parcels of wine will make up this one, and 3) to provide continuity for a market that asks for it (you'd have to be an even bigger fusspot than I actually am to object to this little concession to commercialism). Lots of body and amplitude here; house-style juice in the middle; excellent length; refreshing snap on the finish. Last year I asked Johannes to flesh this wine out a bit. "We can do that but I won't make it sweeter."
 SOS: 1 (between five and seventeen years)
- GSO-202 **2002 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett**
 The driest-seeming of the Kabinetts; herbal, spritzy brilliance here; forest-y woodruffy terroir; as always my subjective favorite. **Limited.**
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 1 (between five and eighteen years)
- GSO-201 **2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 Textbook-pretty vineyard fragrance; hauntingly *aloof*, cool and deep; glances at you sideways with arched brows, laughing eyes, moist lips . . .
 SOS: 1 (between five and eighteen years)
- GSO-203 **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 GSO-203H **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml** +
 A lovely graceful version of this Grand Cru, all its depth and complexity yet cooler and more transparent than riper versions; absurdly long; a true Mosel classic. Don't miss it.
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty years)
- Note: If/when we sell out of these Kabinetts, there is a lovely Bernkasteler Badstube to which we will move. As it was 75% made in steel it wants a little more time. Consider it a delayed-release.*
- GSO-205 **2002 Riesling Spätlese**
 GSO-205H **2002 Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**
 A snappy brisk wine, lush middle with vigorous outlines.
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty one years)
- GSO-206 **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese**
 Pure terroir nose; tilleul, pistachio; wonderful density cloaks but doesn't hide its fervent mineral.
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty six years)
- GSO-200 **2002 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**
 Prototypical Schlossberg, spicy, herbal and unusually vigorous.
- GSO-207 **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +
 This'll remove any doubts you might still harbor about which is the great Mittelmosel vineyard. For depth, for soul, for *reverb*; it's just regal, complex, wonderful Spätlese.
 SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)
- GSO-208 **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese *** +
 Oh way deep. Way way way. Bigger darker more intense way way way way deep.
 SOS: 1 (between ten and thirty years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!

- GSO-209 **2002 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese ***
 GSO-209H **2002 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese *,12/375ml** **+**
 Like an ancient Linden tree in full blossom – there is a connection to Nikolaihof, actually, in depth and gravitas and clear terroir – and this has amazing *shimmer*. Sensational wine!
 SOS: 2
Note: there is a very fine “regular” Zeltinger Schlossberg Spätlese that’s spicy, herbal and vigorous. We’ll ship it when the Domprobst is sold out.
- GSO-210 **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** **+**
 This almost works Halbtrocken. Pure naked slate. Utter *MOSEL* wine.
 SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty five years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GSO-211 **2002 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese** **+**
 Maybe now this unheralded Grand Cru will get the credit it deserves. Wonderfully spicy and salty. Hint of Eiswein? Johannes merely crinkles his eyes and smiles.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty two years)
- GSO-212 **2002 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese *** **+(+)**
 (pre-filtered cask sample) but a chewy and intense rendition, drenched in terroir, adamant and sinewy.
 SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty two years)
- GSO-214 **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese ***
 Tilleul honey, and a clean graceful folding of botrytis into an almost obdurate solidity. “Star” potential but a little reticent in this early stage; seems to be determinedly serious wine.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty six years)
- GSO-215 **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese ****
 GSO-215H **2002 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese **, 12/375ml**
 Outstanding potential but too early to note. Very little of it and I didn’t want to miss it just because it wasn’t “ready” to taste.
- GSO-213H **2002 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Auslese **, 12/375ml** **+**
 This is clearly the “baby” Eiswein, and man it’s pure Badstube (or Matheisbildchen as the case may be); still, gleaming, brilliant.
 SOS: 3 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GSO-216H **2002 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**
 In the last 5-6 years I know of no grower other than Dönnhoff who so consistently “gets” Eiswein, that it needs to be the ripe quintessence of what’s already in the vineyard; thus it should identify the vineyard to a sublime degree. As this does! It is the clarification of a quintessence of Badstube.
 SOS: 4 (between eighteen and forty five years)
- GSO-217H **2002 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+++**
This is a summit of the 2002 vintage. It showed up as if it were an afterthought, and I wasn’t sure whether Johannes was being theatrical or had simply forgotten it. Most likely he has little of it and feared, correctly, that I’d crave it all. This is a wine of sublime fruit, like the legendary ‘98 Z.Himmelreich Eiswein. It has spice and verve; it is a perfection of Riesling and a perfection of Eiswein.

Maybe it “releases endorphins” or something, but all I know is it feels like love. It seems to dilate one’s soul, somehow, the way love can. You feel stilled; life seems more tender, grave and miraculous than you knew. All the dross we think is so important has to find its way into this new design. What are we so busy doing, while beauty streams by around us? Alas, we’re busy deciding how much wine the American importer gets to buy.

This is Johannes' newest project, in effect a 2nd-label Selbach-Oster. You see the label is quite different.

The wines are made by Johannes Selbach, but until a new winery is built they are not made under the same roof as *Selbach-Oster*. Even when that day comes, do not confuse the two; Selbach-Oster will always be the premium range, exclusively estate-bottled from vineyards *owned* and worked by Selbach.

"Selbach" *tout court* will be made from leased vineyards, supplemented when necessary from purchased grapes. Never purchased wine; Johannes wants to make the wine and be responsible for it.

Nor is it to be confused with ordinary Selbach regionals. These are either regional or brand-

name Grosslage blends, but the *Selbach* line will be single-site wines standing below the level of the Selbach-Oster estate wines.

Why?

The Mosel regionals market is starting to unravel. Many of the vineyards from which the wines come were planted on unsuitable land in the wine-craze of the 50s, and in some cases the vineyards are being abandoned, while in other cases the growers are starting to bottle and sell their own wines. In short, there's reason to question the long-term survival of the bulk market. Nose ever to the wind, Johannes is starting to feel the need to gradually morph the J & H Selbach business in a new direction.

Most important, I tasted the first wines from the fledgling business and was most impressed and delighted. They have completely realized Johannes' desire to offer honest Mosel Rieslings bearing the Selbach stamp at highly attractive prices.

So, once more to repeat and clarify: the SELBACH world consists of three entities, all under the executive direction of Grand-Master Johannes "Killer Joe" Selbach (or "cell-block"), and these entities are:

1) J & H Selbach

For Mosel-regionals at their most honorable, made from riesling, bottled and labelled by Selbach. Includes our TJ-Riesling.

2) Selbach

For Mosel rieslings from leased vineyards worked under Selbach supervision, producing in effect a 2nd label or *négociant* line with the Selbach *imprimeur*. The wines are made by Johannes Selbach.

3) Selbach-Oster

The estate, from which the Grand Vins come; the pinnacle of the company's production.

The Wines:

GSZ-005 **2002 Selbach Riesling Dry**

GSZ-006 **2002 Selbach Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

Well done! Winsome fruit and perfect balance.

SOS: 0 (now to two years!; again between eight and twelve years)

GSZ-008 **2002 Selbach Riesling Kabinett**

Melodic, high-toned and tarragon-y.

SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

GSZ-009 **2002 Selbach Riesling Spätlese**

Classy textbook Mittelmosel wine.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty one years)

freiherr von schleinitz

mosel • kobern

Finally, two good vintages in a row!

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

Konrad Hähn and his estate have garnered a following over here. I don't really need to tell the "how-I-ended-up-in-*this-east-b.f.-place*" story any more, now that y'all know they make good wine this far downriver. But viticulture along the lower Mosel has challenges of its own, and it's worth at least a cursory glance at this sub-district.

The first challenge is the sheer ridiculous steepness of most of these sites. They put the *perp* in *perpendicular*! Plus they're on centuries-old terraces and can never be *flurbereinigt*. The local expedient has been to build the monorack, which is basically a little set of wagons run by a diesel engine mounted to a rack, which coughs and sputters its way up the vertiginous slopes. You ride facing *down* (i.e. backwards as you ascend) so you can buttress your feet against the back of the cart. When the rack traverses a wall the angle is nearly vertical and your heart is in your shoes. You wonder (when you're not gawking at the views) *why* did our forbears decide to grow grapes in such forbidding conditions when it would seem to have been equally plausible to plant vines on the valley floor. Probably because they didn't have TV.

These are the furthest downstream of all Mosel vineyards. Any further and you're in the suburbs of Koblenz. It may be the heat-island effect from the nearby city that



Konrad Hähn

makes these the warmest vineyards on the Mosel. The average must-weights are higher here, and regional co-ops pay a premium for these grapes. Or it may be that only the best sites are tilled anymore, and most of the vines are ungrafted. It's worth the journey just to see the terraces. The wines from these sites taste inimitably like great Mosel wines, with an extra expression of minerality that recalls licorice or lemon-grass.

There's a vein of red clay running through the Uhlen vineyard, giving those wines a redcurranty, earthy richness. The Weisenberg site produces the ballerinas.

Konrad Hähn seems to take little for granted; doesn't

- Vineyard area: 7.5 hectares
- Annual production: 4,200 cases
- Top sites: Koberner Weisenberg and Uhlen
- Soil types: Slate and Rotliegend
- Grape varieties: 97% Riesling, 3% Spätburgunder

do things merely because that's how Things Are Done. His fruit is cleaned and gently pressed, then fermented with cultured yeasts and vitamin B, in order to keep sulfur levels down later on. Fermentation is as slow as possible: "High temperatures destroy aroma molecules," say Konrad. Also, "if you have too much carbonate evaporation you take aroma out of the wine. We never bottle with sorbic acid. First you don't *need* to do it if your vivification is clean; second, we feel that despite all advertising you *do* taste it." Konrad's also evolving away from his early aversion to wines with stopped fermentations. He's still 100% stainless steel.

I liked the vintage. I even liked the Slatestone this year, and am glad of its success even though I chose not to be involved.

This estate is one of the very few with a bona-fide Tasting Room, complete with gifts and a guest-book. The guest-book is lots of fun. It's a European custom for people to sign the guest book, and some make little drawings, and everyone writes a cheery little message about how much fun they had. I was idly flipping through it, and suddenly my writing hand was twitching as if it had a mind of its own, and the next thing I knew I was writing:

"I hope my hosts can forgive me for the most unfortunate chain of events attending to my visit to the fine Von Schleinitz. I have told Von how dreadfully sorry I am (I wonder why he looked at me so quizzically!) But indeed, how could I have known, when I opened the bathroom door (in, I might add, a state of some perturbation) that Von's nubile 16 year old daughter would already be occu-

pying the room, let alone what she might be doing. Her piercing scream shall haunt me for years to come, I assure you. Nor could I have foreseen, when, as I was backing my car into a parking space and felt a crunch beneath my tyres, that it was not the gravel I presumed it to have been, but rather Von's small dog, whose unfortunate and tiny

head was quite unequivocally crushed. As regards the incident wherein my pocket-knife's blade intersected with the leg of Von's Dutch importer (Mr Gobs Van Fruijt), I understand they shall not have to amputate. I really am most fearfully contrite about all this. But: tally ho! On to the next appointment!"

von Schleinitz at a glance:

Unique yet classic Mosel wines from impossibly steep slopes and the warmest vineyards along the entire river. Especially lemon-grassy, Granny-apple flavors. Excellent value for steep-slope wines.

how the wines taste:

They taste subtly of licorice and spiced apples. Lemon-grass also. Acids tend to taste brilliant and iridescent without being analytically exceptional. The wines are almost always spritzzy, and are piquantly charming; very easy wines to snuggle up to!

GFS-050 **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Kabinett**

GFS-050H **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**

Salty, precise, detailed, typical, charming; clean fruit, no botrytis. One of them DIGITAL critters which seems to "read" your palate. Or for my more elderly readers, a wine which etches flavors as if written with a fountain pen.

SOS: 2 (between 3 and nine years)

GFS-051 **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese**

GFS-051H **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

More "done" on the inside but seemingly no sweeter; baked apple, spiced apple or Empire apple; salty like the Kabinett but this is dark bread now, a larger resonance.

SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)

GFS-052 **2002 Koberner Weisenberg Riesling Auslese**

Well, this is riper still, like *dub* – and very tangy; it might have used more sweetness but some Eiswein's already in it and there's no more to be sacrificed, so the wine turned out "masculine" and big and generous.

SOS: 2 (between seven and fifteen years)

GFS-053H **2002 Koberner Uhlen Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

Like `em spiky? Well fasten the nipple clamps and close your eyes; 150 Oechsle, 15g.l. acidity, 170g.l. rs; purest pear-williams fragrance along with the licorice Uhlen signature; wonderful purity and minerality, but you must enjoy marked acidity. Doesn't cost much, though . . .

SOS: 3 (I'd drink this now with foie gras, or "goose-liver" if we're not using French words these days . . .)



erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

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

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

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

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

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

2002 was “interesting” here. The prototype-blends Erich sent over weren’t uniformly successful, and we asked to taste the component casks to make blends of our own. This we did, though poor Erich looked awfully grave. “Don’t worry, we’ll get it right,” I said, also thanking him for his flexibility.

It did make me think about something Willi Bründlmayer told me: “Your catalog would be more interesting, Terry, if all the wines weren’t uniformly praised.” But that’s the *point*, I responded. “Nevertheless,” he continued, “some negative comment would give it more texture.” Willi is a truly civilized gentleman, but I somehow doubt my growers would be pleased to have me spitting venomous prose about the wines I didn’t like.

Still, it might be fun! We could have a negative point-scale, maybe 1 to 6. Perhaps it would look like this:

- 1: O.K. if you can’t find water.
- 2: Fit for soaking your false teeth in overnight.
- 3: Animal and foul.
- 4: Redolent of urine.
- 5: A potent emetic.
- 6: Possibly poisonous.

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

One could write notes like: *I like this wine; it’s full of dead bugs*. Or maybe *A stealth-wine; just when you think it doesn’t have much flavor, you discover it doesn’t have any at all*. Or how ‘bout *Oh boy! This gushing wad of vinosity is as juicy as dog spit!* I say let’s go for it and produce a Goofus shadow-version of the catalog that’s full of hate and contempt. It’s aligned with the zeitgeist, after all.

On that note, here are five honestly repulsive wines, whose only act of mercy is to be quickly forgettable. (You do know I’m joking, right? Or do I have to use online shorthand like “lol” or a little smily-face? You know what? *I piss on the smily-face!* Smug little shit. The smily face can *kiss my ass* (or “kma”). It’s fun to be furious!



Jakoby-Mathy vineyard

Jakoby-Mathy at a glance:

Erstwhile cellar-master at Selbach-Oster until father's illness called him back home. Thus: Selbach methods at off-the-beaten-track prices conspire to create **excellent wines and incredible values**. This is an estate that excels in high-acid vintages: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, now the 2002s. They're always good and always an incredible value, but in years that suit them they become *unbelievable* value. I'm having trouble keeping the wines in stock, and this year will be no exception. There seems to be a *market* for steep-slope Mosels with ravishing vivacity at insanely low prices; go figure!

how the wines taste:

As a rule, Kinheimers tend to run light but true, attractive appley flavors with typical minerality. Other than a small section of the Rosenberg, directly behind the town, there isn't a Grand Cru slope here. But Erich's wines excel by sheer **vitality**; they're upbeat, vivid wines, exuberant and Spring-y.

GJM-039 **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**

We ended up with a blend of 2 and a half Fuders (nos. 9 and 2b if you must know, you sick freak), and the wine is, as usual, forthright, fruity and tasty. There just isn't much of it, so don't delay.

SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GJM-040 **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**

Well it's a truly individual vintage here; this wine tastes as if it contained 25% Sauvignon de Touraine, all catty and redcurranty; almost not Mosel at all, but tasty for all that.

SOS: 2 (I'd drink this young, as its malic acid might vegetal-ize with age)

GJM-041 **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese**

This is very tasty and as always a *steal*; vigorous, spriggy, racy and clear; citrusy and green-fruits; snappy and vivid.

SOS: 3 (between seven and eighteen years)

GJM-042H **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese *, 12/500ml**

This is another Auslese-cut-with-Eiswein, but it does give us a chance to glimpse the style at an affordable price. And the wine is really lovely and important; big and jazzy.

SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty one years)

GJM-043H **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

Very exotic; tarragon and lemon-grass and spiced apple and lime-zest; ringently zingy and snappy palate.

SOS: 4 (between thirteen and thirty years)



A Primer on Terroir

Why on earth does this self-evident truth need to be defended?

First, a definition. “Terroir”, as I see it, is the entire micro-environment in which a vine grows, beginning with soil, and then beginning with soil’s components. The structure of soil especially in terms of porosity is critical, but it doesn’t come first. What the soil consists of comes first.

Terroir gives wine its DNA. Riesling in northerly climates is the most vivid demonstration, because the vine happens to like poor soils, the grape happens to ripen late, the growers happen to need to plant it on slopes to maximize the odds of ripeness and therefore the soils need to be porous and thin or else they’d wash down the mountain every time it rained.

I suspect the Truth of terroir is universal, but this is intuition. The phenomenon of Riesling in Germany is its most compelling evidence, but not the only proof. And what exactly is this thing I’m calling “proof”? It is, very simply, a cause and effect relationship, repeated dozens-of-thousands of times in every vintage, between soil components and wine flavors for which no other explanation is possible.

Even those willing to consider the truth of terroir might balk at my literal insistence that dirt = flavor. A famous importer of French wine once said “I can walk into a vineyard in Pouilly-Fumé and pick up a fistful of caillou and cram it in my mouth, but I can’t taste that flavor in the wine.” But this is not what I argue. I don’t know of any place where you can literally “taste the soil” (my Mosel growers might well demur!), but I know of many places where you can taste what the soil does.

I’ve been challenged that soil’s expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine’s DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine’s identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was some-

times drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or cornball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it’s safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

I’ve also heard it said the notion of terroir has no practical value unless it constitutes a guarantee. “A great winemaker will make better wine from “ordinary” soil than a lazy winemaker makes from “great” soil”. Again, true, but beside the point.

For years the Plettenberg estate made mediocre wines from its holding in Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. This is regarded as one of the top-2-or-3 sites in the Nahe region. But the wines were rarely better than ordinary. Meanwhile, Helmut Dönnhoff made sensational wines from his Oberhäuser Leistenberg, manifestly the lesser vineyard. Surely this proved the point that terroir was not the decisive component of wine quality?

Sorry, it doesn’t. For when Dönnhoff obtained the old Plettenberg parcel in Kupfergrube (and when he upgraded the husbandry in what had become a run-down straggle of vines) it became clear immediately which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

I know that all things are rarely equal in the world of wine, but I am not arguing that terroir is any kind of guarantee for the consumer. I am arguing that it is the first among many criteria, the basic reality that one encounters and accounts for before one truly understands what wine is.

It is certainly impinged upon by the variegations of weather and of human temperament, but this signifies very little; some days I’m alert, some days I’m dozy, sometimes I’m tender and sometimes I’m gruff, but I am always....fat Elvis.

But can we really be sure of this syllogism? Because this-or-that is in the soil, such-and-such a flavor is in the wine? Ah, we want to be sure. Everything in great wine argues against such sureties, but we want what we want. It does appear that Science has taken notice; in the

January 2000 issue of Science News, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

“German researchers recently studied 165 wines from six grape-growing regions. The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminium and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy. (my emphasis) testing for just three elements – barium, silicon and vanadium – and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested.”

A little further down the page: “From his work at the National Institute of Agronomical Research near Angers, France, Gérard Barbeau concludes that wines made from the same kinds of grapes, grown in the same region using identical practices but in slightly different terroir, harvested at exactly the same time, and made into wine in exactly the same ways, can still be remarkably different. These underlying differences, he says, must be due to terroir.”

More pseudo-scientific piffle from Europeans eager to defend their turf? One hears such arguments. “The Europeans like to point to soil because it gives them a competitive advantage”, the argument goes. “They have something we don’t have and can never get,” it says.

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motiva-

tion to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of terroir is afraid he doesn’t have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound terroir do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

Others might be willing to agree, albeit hypothetically, in the idea of terroir, but argue its usefulness to them is limited. “If a crappy grower can waste a great terroir,” they say, “then what good is it to me?”

No good at all, if you’re looking to terroir as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won’t do that. Not because it doesn’t like you, or because it’s just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn’t understand our need to avoid disappointment. Wine, or the soil, or the earth, something somewhere has a thing it has to say, or else why would flavors arise so? Why else would nature have contrived this way for the earth to be tasted? We are meant to hear something, to know something. Wines of terroir may be portals into the mysteries of Place, its meaning and spirit. Even more inscrutable, wines of terroir are portals into the fundamental Mystery.

Alas, some of us are too busy. And others prefer to ignore the spiritual invitations streaming all around us because we have to be sure we don’t buy any wine below a 90. But wine doesn’t care. It just invites. And the soil remains.



Neiderhauser Kertz in the Nahe

meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

mosel • erden

First come the snowdrops, as early as mid-February, and then the crocuses. The first daffodils begin sprouting. The air is softer now, but below there's still a keen scent of frost. Things gurgle, the first cress arises impossibly soft and green by the water. This is the season of *Merkelbach*.

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

Then all hell breaks loose. The first honeysuckle opens, and the stately, lissome dogwoods, and the silly, gaudy azaleas, and the air is emphatically warm, and the trees open their sticky new leaves,

and everything sprays upward in a whistling clamor of life.

This is the season of *Justen*.

These may not be the most mysterious or intricate Mosel wines I offer, but they are certainly the most gregarious and extroverted. And yet they have virtues deeper than simple winning personality; they are true-blue Mosels, and I often thought that you, and I, neglected them. In the past three vintages Stefan Justen has made such gorgeous Mosel wines that none of us could neglect them!

Thus it was gratifying to see Justen get the credit he deserves with emphatically flattering reviews of his 2001s. I hope he's been "discovered" now and will take his rightful place among important Mosel estates.

(I always refer to the estate as JUSTEN, by the way, though I really should change this habit; I like a family's name more than a property's name if I get to choose. But it's confusing. Meulenhof (pronounced MOY-LEN-HOFE, not mew-len-hoff) it shall henceforth and forever be.)

The great site here is Erdener Treppchen. There's a good parcel in Wehlener Sonnenuhr, part of Frau Justen's



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

In common with most Mosel vintners, Justen frown on the use of Süssreserve. "Wines made with Süssreserve are often uniform, not distinct from one another," they say. (True enough, but one mustn't forget the many estates that produce a

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

Süssreserve for each parcel they harvest.) And in opposition to the prevailing fashion, most of these wines have residual sugar. The dry wines are nearly always unsuccessful; his heart isn't in them. His heart leaps, though, at wines of differentiation, interplay of flavors, fruity and full of nuance, and individuality.

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

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

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

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

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

This year, as if to up the ante, Stefan brought out a ‘51 *Spätlese*. The wine was dry, forest-floor, birchy, shellfish-stock, leathery and avuncular, juicy, *long* and delicious and with a deep soulful complexity. You get a shock to the soul with a wine like this. A *good* shock, of course. But there

you are, being a Wine Professional, doing bizniz, assigning item codes and securing quantities, and out comes a wine like this and suddenly you’re plunged from the brittle surface on which you’ve been skating into the deep warm waters below. You need soul-bones made of rubber – a kind of spiritual Gumby – to manage the transition.

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

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

Meulenhof at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

GJU-073 **2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**

One sip: one selection. Lovely, fruity and slatey Kabinett with moderate sweetness; winsome and prototypical. Stefan often gets a kind of smokiness out of Wehlener Sonnenuhr and it’s here; also quite long.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)

GJU-070 **2002 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett** +

I love the Mosel! Stefan is an Erdener, and although he produces Wehlener Sonnenuhr he seems to view it as a “foreign” terroir. Hans-Leo Christoffel is the same way about his Uerzigers; *he’s* an Uerziger and therefore he prefers those wines to his own (incredibly good) Erdeners. Stefan told us he gets higher must-weights from Erden and also wines with more depth, and he’s right, but I had to point out there was a little matter about *how* the wines tasted. Their actual *flavors*. And one had to treasure Sonnenuhr on that basis, without insisting on preferring it to his beloved Treppchen.

All well and good, but this is the class of the Kabinetts; delightfully emphatically slatey; perfect expression of the green-apple skin and nut-husk aspect of Treppchen; the “plus” is for sheer expressiveness. We start with A.P. 8, by the way, and move to a slightly riper A.P. 9 when it’s gone

SOS: 2 (between five and twenty one years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GJU-071 **2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**

Stefan’s Spätlesen were very *big* in ‘02. This one has a spicy slate spine that prevents it from spilling over its lines; it grew on me, getting more convincing with each sip. Not as impeccable as was the ‘01, but there’s no denying that *fruit*.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty five years)

GJU-072 **2002 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**

(from bottle) A classic fruit-driven Treppchen. Nothing to add!

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)

alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

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

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

After greetings were exchanged (amidst much laughter and bonhomie) we sat at the rather small round table in the parlor where Rolf or Alfred bring out the wines one by one. The first wine was poured and I took an idle sniff and *there it was: every reason I love Mosel wine*. This only seems to happen here.

2002 is a very fine vintage here. Indeed it tells the story of the vintage, from the early-picked wines with high acid and low pH to the later picked wines, riper but nearly 2g.l. less acidity and sometimes almost sultry. There were five (out of 25) fuders I opted not to offer. I loved everything else. 2002 reminds me of '98 here; this is high praise. And we finally have true Kabinett – though not a lot of it.

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

It's self-evident to them that the vineyard is responsible for "at least eighty percent" of the quality of their

- **Vineyard area: 1.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Ürziger Würzgarten, Erdener Treppchen, Kinheimer Rosenberg**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

Rolf is a happy man. I asked Alfred what his favorite type of wine was, purely theoretically, without respect to his own wines. "The flavors I look for are hard for me to describe," he replied. "A good white wine should be identifiable by its nose, *must* be, in fact. A young wine may be a little acidulous, but a wine that's two, three years old has to have all its pieces working together: the acidity, the sweetness, the fruit and the vinosity."

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

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

Because the brothers are in their late sixties now



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

wines, especially the "Lang Pichter" section of the Ürziger Würzgarten directly behind the winery. Mosel wine for them is like a dear old friend. "We like to hear that you can drink a little more of our wines without any health problems," says Alfred. Alfred does most of the talking. Rolf is pleased with everything his brother says, as well as everything *you* say; evidently everything *everybody* says.

(though with every appearance of ruddy good health), there's some speculation how the future will look. "We'll continue as long as we can; we have no notion of 'retiring'," said Alfred, which was heartening. Merkelbachs have become somewhat conspicuously the "last of a dying breed"; their scale, the fact they do it all themselves, their crazily low prices, the sense of time frozen in place 40 years ago. Estates such as these were common when I started tasting wine 25 years ago, and hardly infrequent when I began professionally. Now they are almost gone.

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

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

KINHEIMER ROSENBERG: this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It's the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg's wines often seem to

actually smell of roses, so that one wonders which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the appley fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years—remember the superb 1990s?—hey can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

ERDENER TREPPCHEN: this is a completely different expression of Treppchen from Justen's or Christoffel's. The site is broad; the upstream sections lean in the Prälatt-Würzgarten direction: bergamot, spice, peach. The downstream section is more classically slatey, with nuances of hyssop, walnut and *green* apple. Now that Flurbereinigung is complete and everyone's vines are young one sees the importance of parcel. I was delighted by the absolute Treppchen fingerprint I saw in even these brash new wines.

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

Merkelbach at a glance:

most beloved Mosel agency.

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

how the wines taste:

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

GME-111 **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**

Oh man, with the first sniff my whole heart leapt – it is Mosel, just exactly the thing we love. The palate doesn't disappoint! Absolute benchmark Mosel. Winsome girlish fruit. There were three fuders; we took them all. So the total quantity of Merkelbach Kabinett is between 300-325 cases. You know what to do.

SOS: 1 (between five and twenty years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GME-112 **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #4)**

The most explicitly slatey, with a high-toned sassafrassy zing. *When these 110 cases sell out we'll move into the riper but still archetypal fuder #3, with the same item code.*

SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty two years)

- GME-113 **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #5)** +
 This one had to stand alone. More brilliant, and a wee bit sweeter, with a shimmering salty mineral.
- GME-114 **2002 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #2)**
 Pure and lovely, though there's a bit of young-vines stiffness; it's pedagogically slatey. *We'll move into a juicier fuder 23, which is quite salty and mineral, when this sells out.*
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty one years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GME-110 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese (Fuder #12)** +
 This is in fact fuders #6 and #12 combined; it's fragrant, just about perfect; snappy, light and loaded with kiwi. It's like the car smells if you left a pound of fraises du bois in the back seat in the sun. *This will be followed by fuder #11 and then fuder #14. Each is "+" quality, though they differ slightly in style, one a little more spicy, another a little more slatey. This way we get 400 cases under a single item code.*
 SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty two years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GME-115 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese (Fuder #19)** +
 This is really "Gold Cap Spätlese" quality but it's priced below most of them so I don't care. It's a blend of fuders #19 and #20, the latter being more brilliant; very pretty wine; gently slatey and kiwi, with yielding acidity; long and lissome.
 SOS: 2 (between nine and twenty seven years)
- GME-116 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese (Fuder #15)**
 Unusually, this was aged in stainless steel; it's a real parfait of strawberry, spicy and zippy. *We will move into fuder #16 (from the famous "Lang Pichter" parcel) which has a little more honey and is just slightly softer, when this sells out. Same item code.*
 SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)



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

He's also been visited by Mortality in the form of some chest pains lately, and has wondered for some time if the taxing life on the steep slopes was sustainable. Having no heirs on the horizon, he has leased his vineyards and winery to Robert Eymael (from Mönchhof). This does not signal the demise of Weingut Joh. Jos. Christoffel. Eymael intends to keep the two sets of wines strictly separate, harvested separately (even pressed in Christoffel's press and vinified in *his* casks) and

marketed under the current label to me, with Hans Leo as consulting something-or-other! We sat together just the two of us and Hans Leo told me "Terry, you have absolutely nothing to worry about; this is a good thing." And I believe him.

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

- **Vineyard area: 2.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Treppchen, Ürziger Würzgarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**



Hans Leo Christoffel

the vineyards are worked under his direct supervision, he's the boss at harvest time, and *he makes the wine*.

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

Fast-forward two years. I am sitting with my obsequious *entourage* in the rococo splendor of Mönchhof in Ürzig, and the wonderfully droll Mr Eymael, whose sense of humor should be licensed as a potentially lethal weapon, is at one end of the table, Hans-Leo at the other. Hans-Leo shows his wines and wisecracks like always. They are (and shall deliberately remain) stylistically different from the more opulent style of Mönchhof – indeed together they make a symmetrical pistil-stamen kind of tandem – because Eymael sensibly discerns the advantage of having them thus. Why be redundant? And why mess with a good thing?

The 2002s were in bottle a week when I tasted them. I had rarely seen Hans Leo this excited. For him these are even better than 2001. This indicates less a statement of relative quality, but rather of the style Hans Leo himself

prefers. 2002 is insanely spicy and filigree, with a little less body than '01 but with a sheet-metal brilliance and almost ludicrous detail.

Yet as filigree as they are, after the fifth or sixth one they begin to consolidate into an impression of remarkable depth and solidity. Their flavors may fall like little flakes, but they settle like big snow.

2001 was the vintage of a lifetime, the single finest collection of wines of any one year I had ever tasted at a Mosel estate.

2002 is at least in its class. The wines, ravishing though they were (as you'll see from my many "plusses"), were muted from bottling.

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

Christoffel's and Merkelbach's are two almost diametrically opposed renderings of Ürzig/Erden. Merkelbach is slicing and sleek, Christoffel is profound, serious, more opulent, polished—bigger wine. Simply more vinous. Certainly more temperamental and more mysterious. I love them both dearly and differently.

"The vineyards, the grapes, play the decisive role in determining quality," says Christoffel. "Our vinification isn't so different from the norm. We lay high emphasis on freshness and raciness. At home we drink everything from dry to sweet, from QbA to Auslese; it only has to be *good!* It should be spicy, fruity and lively, with noticeable acidity. I'd like to think our customers like to return to our wines after drinking others, and that they feel good the next morning even if they've peered a little too deeply into the glass the night before!" Christoffel identifies the section of the Ürziger Würzgarten that lies among the rocks as his best.

This is a matter of exposure, and of the very old vines he has planted here. There's no question that soil has its own role to play. "The higher the slate proportion, (therefore more porous) the finer and more elegant the wines are. Sometimes even *too* delicate. "What's ideal is a slate soil with enough fine-earth to hold water and give the wines more extract."

Most of the vineyards are "Würzelecht," literally root-genuine, i.e. not grafted onto North American rootstock. "I have two parcels of grafted wines," Hans-Leo told me, "which is two too many!"

THE MATTER OF STARS: the whole star thing came

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

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

Do me a favor and set up another paradigm, just for a moment. Start from the BOTTOM, and observe that the first Auslese is a **beautiful** wine that is **worth its price.** Then the one-star is a different, in some ways even more beautiful wine that sells at a higher price, but is worth it. And then the three-star wine is a really exalted wine that costs so much more it's really best reserved for very special occasions. This paradigm doesn't deny the hierarchy, but it puts the wines on a **level table**, each is a valid experience **WITHIN ITS LEVEL AND AT ITS PRICE**, and it's fatuous and irrelevant to think in terms of having to grab the **BEST. EVERYTHING'S THE BEST:** the no-star is the best \$30 Auslese, the one-star is the best \$36 Auslese, and so on.



Robert Eymael

- GJC-117 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese *** **+(+)**
 Tightly closed. Exaggerates its bones and mutes its fruit; can't properly assess. What is here is beautiful, and lord I know the track-record. I'll regret hedging my bets here. Hell, I give it a ♪♫♬♭♮♯ on the ♪♫♬♭♮♯-point scale.
 SOS: 2 (between twelve and thirty five years)
- GJC-118 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese **** **+**
 The best 2-star Auslese Hans Leo has ever made. Yes I said that last year too. This has a highly expressive nose, I mean highly, unusually, more pointed and riper than I can remember; lavish, salty and extroverted.
 SOS: 3 (between thirteen and thirty six years)
- GJC-119 **2002 Erdener Trepchen Riesling Auslese **** **++**
 !!!!!!!!! Fruit bomb, salt bomb, slate bomb; literally incredible. As if it were prodigious or virtuosic. It may just be this was handling bottling well and all the *others* will be this good too, in which case all I can say is, Mommy I'm scared.
 SOS: 3 (between fourteen and forty years)
- GJC-120 **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese ***** **++(+)**
 "This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than forty hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from this site in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in." It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it. This has quite some nose. Great depth of fruit and almost Eiswein acidity. Gossamer transparency and singing lusty ripeness. I underrate this wine every year.
 SOS: 3 (between fifteen and forty years)
- Psssst! By the way, the 4-star "auction" Auslese is magnificent. Get it if you find it (and can afford it).*
- GJC-121H **2002 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **++**
 This is clearly a notch above the (great!) 2001; actually lithe and charming; a wine for drinking and smiling rather than admiring and studying; extends the Ausleses rather than lurching into "dessert" out-of-body richness.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and forty five years)



heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

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

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

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

So tell us, Martin, how is it done? “I don't know, exactly! You have to work *clean*. My wife wishes I were as clean in the house as I am in the cellar. Your quality is 70% the vineyard, 25% the cellar. The other 5% is luck.” I would agree, but the proportion of luck can be (and has been) diminished by the most stringent possible selection in the vineyard. Martin likes clear-tasting wine, therefore he labors to make clear-tasting wine. Some have said that he makes wine in his own image—Martin is a tall, wiry sort of fellow—I said it too, but I've changed my mind. His wines are sleek (and long!) enough, but what impresses me most about them is the multi-layered *depth* beneath

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

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



Kerpen at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

GKE-076 2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

The first blend didn’t speak to me; it was five casks and I suspected one or two of them were muddying the water; we tasted the components and asked to omit two fuder and make the resulting blend a touch sweeter. You’ll taste the results of our “consultation,” which bless him, Martin tolerated genially. This is an important wine, after all, and I want it to be full of residual deliciosity.

SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)

GKE-080 2002 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett

Martin always observed I didn’t select his Graachers. But that’s because he usually made them Trocken or Halbtrocken. This one is a sweetie-poo though; all woody and mealy and mutsu-apple, even apple butter. Forthright and charming.

SOS: 2 (between four and twelve years)

GKE-079 2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese

The Graach invasion is complete. This is crunchy and nutty, typical for the vineyard, tart-apple and pure. More countrified than Schaefer’s but a lovely old-style Mosel.

SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GKE-078 2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**GKE-078H 2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

This has those attractive cider-y notes we saw in the ’01; spicy woody and firm. Tasty, somewhat “correct” Riesling with good length.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)

GKE-077 2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese * (artist label)

You know this: it’s the little bird in the rowboat. This 2002 is a big salty critter, a slightly-too-friendly dog whom you love but who jumps on you with big wet paws. Yet you just adore him.

SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty three years)

GKE-081 2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese

This must come from the same parcel each year because it’s always exceptional; it’s the class of Martin’s 2002s; almost archetypal old-school Mosel, the sort of wine that relaxes you; things your soul cherishes in its deliberate wordless way still exist; something to soothe the clamor. I not only love, I *appreciate* wines like this. Who cares what food you eat with it!

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty three years)

GKE-082H 2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese *, 12/375ml**

Offered but not selected. I was in a minority of one who was unsure about this wine. I thought it was merely botrytis, though it hinted at more. My colleagues felt the fruit would emerge. Structurally all is as it should be. If I’m wrong I’ll blush before a masterpiece. If I’m right at least I didn’t lie to you.

Willi remembered our anniversary. It was May 1978 when I first visited and met him. I loved his wines and went whenever I could. I'll never forget one time I took a friend who was just getting into wine. It was a perfect Spring day, and Willi's garden looked inviting. "Would you like to sit in the garden with a bottle and relax awhile?" he asked. There were other visitors and his father was entertaining an old client. "Sure," I said. I purchased a half-bottle of '75 Domprobst BA, and we sat in the shade listening to the birds, looking straight up at the impossibly steep Domprobst. The air was sweet with blossom. The wine was sublime. We were nearly in tears. Then suddenly a tenor voice started *singing*, some chipper little *lied* about Spring. My friend stared at me and we both laughed. "No!" he said, "You *staged* this, right? It isn't *actually* happening, right?"

After hugs and jokes – there are always jokes at Schaefer – Willi announced that our occasion deserved to be commemorated with something a little special. He disappeared for a few minutes, and returned with a 1953, which he knew was my birth-year. "Twenty five years for us, and fifty for you," he said; "It seems appropriate, I think!"

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

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

The wine was searching and lovely, but I can't discuss it aesthetically, because the resonances are too golden and



Willi Schaefer

full of love. Love isn't the metaphor for wine. *Wine* is the metaphor for love, for celebration, for solace, for every filament which binds us to all for which we care most deeply.

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

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

Then came Willi (and Christoph's) best vintage since 1997.

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

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

Although I enter Willi and Esther's house in a state of almost religious anticipation, what actually happens is we

laugh and laugh. Maybe laughter is the catechism of this religion. When we finished tasting one year, Willi brought out a bottle of the celestial 1975 Domprobst Auslese, which is about as good a Mosel wine as has ever been made. Christoph appeared in the doorway to say hi in his raffish sideburns. I recalled that the first time I drank this Domprobst was in 1980, in Willi's living room. His kids were little then. Willi left the room to take a phone call and I sat there with my glass of Auslese while the kids sat on the floor playing with a little top which hummed as it spun. The humming and the playing and the beauty of the wine and the friendliness and hospitality of my host became a single thing. I often recall that moment when I hear someone defend the idea of giving point-scores to wines.

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

Schaefer grows only Riesling and only on steep slopes. The best is the Domprobst, though there's no scoffing at his Himmelreich (fruitier), or his Bernkasteler Badstube (actually Matheisbildchen, and typically rich and flinty) or his little bit of Wehlener Sonnenuhr (light but true to form). Vinification isn't unusual, expect for the *very* gentlest of pressings, which leaves few bitter phenols in the wines, and gives them their strikingly pale colors. Willi knows his vineyards like he knows his children, all their quirks and foibles and capabilities. As a taster he responds to "character above all. The finesse of fruit is also important to me, and the harmony of sweetness, fruit and acidity. Apart from that, the wine should embody its vineyard and grape variety."

Christoph's decision to carry on the winery is quietly momentous. Schaefer said, with characteristic understatement, "we really didn't pressure him at all, he came to the decision entirely on his own," and there was something even more stirring than Willi's and Esther's quiet pride and gratification. How can I put it? I hope that Christoph observed the contentment in this household, the bedrock joy when one's heart is at home in one's work. Different vintners have said this to me at different times: Hans-Günter Schwarz is always saying, "you have to love it." Helmut Dönnhoff repeats almost as a mantra, "It has to be FUN." And Willi Schaefer has the glow of a man doing exactly what he was put on earth to do.

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



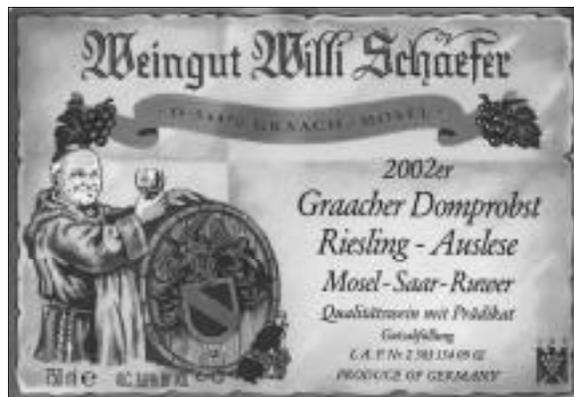
Schaefer at a glance:

For many tasters, these are the *Ne Plus Ultra* of Mosel wine, and they have attracted an almost religious following. Thus my most frustrating agency, as there is never enough wine. This year we got about the same quantity as usual, but augmented with a decent clump of QbA.

how the wines taste:

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

- GWS-097 **2002 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling**
 (cask 2) Deft, fragrant, slate and nut and apple; a summer gulper par excellence.
 SOS: 1 (between six and twenty years) (damn straight!)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GWS-101 **2002 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +
 Incandescently aromatic; feminine; wonderful expression of fruit; queenly and cool, a Grace Kelly kinda wine; fine-boned, charming and perfect.
 SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty two years)
- GWS-098 **2002 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett**
 Oh don't even ask. Limpid, delicate, snappy but not brittle; essence-of-Mosel at its lightest. Bless this tiny masterpiece.
 SOS: 1 (between six and twenty years)
- GWS-099 **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett #11** +
 This is virtually perfect. Delicious, piquant, complex, in sublime balance, amazing length. *God this is good.*
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty three years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GWS-100 **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett #7**
 Tighter, slatier, more elemental; seems steeper in some way. More skeletal. Willi will use a little *dosage* to extend the fruit (yay!) but this will remain a look into the solid bones of Domprobst.
 SOS: 1 (between seven and twenty one years)
- GWS-102 **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #9** +
 An exegesis of Domprobst. All the mineral complexity you could want in a scintillating (or titillating) matrix. Not to mention all the damn *flavor* you could cram into 8% alc.
 SOS: 1 (between ten and thirty years)
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
- GWS-103 **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #12** +(+)
 This too will benefit from a judicious dosage. The fruit quality is striking – it was the last parcel harvested, on November 20th (!) – and tastes like 30 varieties of heirloom apples. Final note determined by the final wine, but masterpiece potential is surely here.
- GWS-104 **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #10** +
 This is the shimmering one, an elongation of the Spätlese #9 with riper fruit and even more grip. Exceptionally graceful even for Schaefer. Long and searching on the finish.
 SOS: 2 (between fifteen and forty years)
- GWS-105H **2002 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14, 12/375ml** ++
 And more, more and more yet. The fruit reaches a pitch of sublimity, the structure is still glass-clear, the minerality is still gloriously expressive; a diligent, communicative, articulate masterpiece.
 SOS: 3 (between seventeen and forty five years)



Many of you know that young Marcus Haag was wrenched from his studies to assume control of the winery when his father died suddenly and much too soon. With the family in mourning, the winery had to go on. It took Marcus a few years to find his stride—with wine you only *get* one chance per year—and I had to tiptoe through some awkward wines to find things I liked.

Mother and son are happily ensconced in a shiny new house up on a hill above the village (and away from the danger of flooding) with a glam-view of the great Dusemond ramp and the great vineyards. You could bring starlets there.

Haag's wines were never easy to taste young, even in Dieter's time. The first time I was ever there I froze my patooties off in his cellar, so I 1) asked to taste the wines upstairs in a warm room

and 2) realized the wines would be backward *because* the cellar was so cold. Still, being a professional and all, I made allowances for a certain brusqueness in the young Haag wines, especially as the emergence of all that fruit in bottle showed how *hidden* it was earlier on. Plus I always seem to arrive a week after bottling, just as the wines are shutting down.

Yet no vintage I've ever tasted here was as inscrutable as 2001. The wines had a consistent note I call "stavey" because it makes me think of rusty cask-staves; it's a metallic smell which puts me off. Unlike the usual young-Mosel yeast, this doesn't dissipate easily. We took a few of the more vexing bottles back to Zeltingen with us to see how they'd evolve with a few days oxygenation, and also



Marcus Haag

to give Johannes Selbach a chance to taste them and perhaps identify the cause of the smell. Johannes believed it was a simple over-concentration of freshness, an über-reductiveness if you will, caused by Haag's icy cellar. If so, I'd charge several thousand Euro to consult, and recommend a space-heater.

This year Johannes came with us. And there was that

- Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares
- Annual production: 2,500 cases
- Top sites: Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr and Juffer
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

smell again, in the first few 2002s. We struggled to determine its cause. Then came a couple of wines that didn't have it. Here was something to grasp; was there, I asked, anything different about vineyard treatment or vinification between these wines and those? Well yes, it turned out; those wines (the ones with the smell I didn't like) were fermented with cultured yeast, while *these* (the good ones) were fermented spontaneously.

Was this it? We tasted through the rest of the range. And it seemed consistent. The cultured-yeast fermented wines all had that rusty celery fragrance. The others didn't. What struck me was the degree to which I needed to stand my ground. "I don't assume it's a 'flaw' nor do I especially care what it signifies; all I know is it's objectionable, and it *only started with the 2001s*, so don't tell me it's his "cold cellar" or whatnot because the cellar hasn't suddenly gotten *colder* the past two years." And look, I'm no "expert"; I'm just a diligent student with reasonably good judgement who gets to taste around. Growers can *always* be forgiven for not seeing their own wines clearly. So, problem solved. That'll be 12,000 Euro please.

I do think 2002 is substantially better than '01 is here. And there are teasing glimpses of what Marcus will eventually do.

Haag at a glance:

The estate is no longer in transition as young Marcus Haag has TAKEN command after the shocking and untimely death of his father, Dieter Haag. Bright, elegant wines with silky fruit. JUFFER is more minerally.

how the wines taste:

These are elegant Braunebergers with an agreeably countrified touch; they seldom have an “urban” slickness or finicky refinement. The JUFFER vineyard tends to give chunky, minerally wines with juiciness and grip and a bosc-pear fruit; JUFFER-SONNENUHR is creamier and more buttery, more the commice pear or even a butter-sauteed pear. Structure isn’t so explicitly cogent, but many tasters prefer the gracious elegance of this site to the more blunt charms of the Juffer.

GHA-056 **2002 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Kabinett**

There is the merest hint of “rust” here – I believe one of the four or five contributing fuders was cultured-yeast fermented. But it’s subtle, and the wine’s lovely, expressive, with pretty fruit and that granular Juffer thing; adorable, forthright and yummy.
SOS: 2 (between five and fifteen years)

GHA-057 **2002 Willi Haag Riesling Spätlese**

This comes from vineyards in Veldenz, part of Inge’s dowry, and so it’s a departure from the usual Haag-Brauneberg association; I liked this again as I did last year; exotic nose of cloves and vanilla beans steeped in poire williams and cream (!); slatey and strawberried; this is really delightful, and a ridiculous bargain. Insane Value Alert!
SOS: 2 (between seven and twenty years)

GHA-058 **2002 Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**

This is *seriously* good stuff, among the noblest wines Marcus has made; toasty, creamy, loaded with salty slate, like warm cream with linden honey and ground up stones. Elegant and weighty.
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)

GHA-059 **2002 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Auslese**

A satisfying, chunky Auslese, a giver of pleasure-without-complication . . . what we all wish *marriage* would be!
SOS: 3 (between nine and twenty five years)

GHA-060 **2002 Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** +

This extends the Spätlese, with more honey and more stone; supersized everything, basically. Somehow both extravagant and *cool*, a shapely tall lady in a brightly colored formal dress; the Juffer is the same lady in jeans and a sweater.
SOS: 3 (between ten and twenty seven years)

GHA-062H **2002 Brauneberger Mandelgraben Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +

Marcus’ finest-ever Eiswein. perfect pure almond tones; flavors sung by a chorus of sopranos; transparent, shimmery and drinkable; lime and jasmine notes. Dee-lish!
SOS: 4 (between twelve and thirty years)



Selbachs scour the region looking for new star agencies before they're generally discovered. Samples are assembled and we taste them together. Often it's the first time Selbachs taste. Usually the wines are at least good. This year there was a guy from Enkirch with a couple very pretty wines, plus a small estate in Graach whose wines were somewhat rustic.

And then, suddenly, there was Adam.

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

Adam, it turns out, is a part-timer! He works full-time at Heymann-Löwenstein and is from all reports a total wine freak, a 22-year old guy who's full of beans and who's been influenced by fascinating style-ideologues like Löwenstein and our friend Niewo at Van Volxem. He's passionate and he can afford to go all-out.

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

Adam is in line with Niewo in eschewing the German wine law's sugar pyramid. Though he'll start custom-bottling a Kabinett for us with the '03 vintage, since <sigh> we need it. But instead of the whole Pudyanker Spurtgarten Riesling Kabinett thing, all you get is the site-name; the wine will be dry-ish unless it's the one "Spätlese" bottled each year.

My notes are just my scribble from the tasting room;

- Vineyard area: 1 hectare
- Annual production: 560 cases
- Top sites: Throner Hofberg, Piesporter Goldtröpfchen
- Soil types: Hofberg - weathered slate with clay; Piesport - slate and clay with sandstone
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

I didn't actually know whether he'd supply us. I'm eager to meet this passionate young chap, but most of all I'm *eager for you to meet his WINES*.

The PACKAGING, by the way, is stunning!

the wines:

- GAD-001 **2002 Dhroner Riesling**
His basic wine, expressive and sleek, balanced and tasty.
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between seven and eleven years)
- GAD-002 **2002 Hofberger Tholey Riesling**
Not sure whether "Tholey" is a single-parcel or a reference to the sandy-slate variant, or both. In any case the wine is Big Stuff; tastes Halbtrocken; hints at severity but its sheer size makes it work. Don't think *delicate little Mosel wine* but rather **big-butt Alsace or Austrian wine**.
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between ten and fifteen years)
- GAD-004 **2001 Hofberger Riesling**
Dignified, almost Alsatian. Suberb!
SOS: 0 (now to two years; again between ten and fifteen years)
- GAD-003 **2002 Hofberger Tholey Riesling Spätlese** +
Lush, dignified, creamy, splendid. Great terroir statement. Now maybe we'll have a champion for the great Dhron Hofberger! Remember the incredible wines from the Bischöfliches Weingüter in the '60s and '70s? Of any Mosel wine I know, the Hofberger comes closest to Dönnhoff's Brücke.
SOS: 1 (between eight and twenty two years)
- GAD-005 **2001 Hofberger Riesling Spätlese** +
Even more resonant and dignified.
SOS: 1 (between nine and twenty five years)

reuscher-haart

mosel • piesport

Something seems to be up at Reuscher Haart. Maybe it's the influence of Bernd and Mario Schwang, Dad Hugo's two sons (who look like members of Limp Bizkit) or maybe it's just one of those things. In any case, the past two vintages reminded me of the majestic 1990s and brilliant 1993s.

These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. In the right vintages they have profound stature and grip. Other times they're a little formless.

In any case these wines demand time and patience. I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but these wines aren't really made for our frantic world.

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

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

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. "We use no cultured yeasts," he said. "If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character." This made sense; Schwang's wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured-yeast wines can display. He leaves his wine on its primary lees for a remarkable

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

length of time: two to three months is common, though less-ripe wines will be racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. "I'd personally say that these are the most important factors for high quality," he says. "First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing

of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don't use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make."



Hugo & Mario Schwang

Reuscher-Haart at a glance:

Leesy, old-fashioned Piesporters that need time. Great resonance and depth in the best examples.

how the wines taste:

At their best one can see why they're held in such renown. Schwang's wines can have impressive, almost majestic corpulence without being fat, plus a positive depth and stuffing from the lees. When that happens the Piesport fruit shows its *raison d'être*; an almost lurid court bouillon of bewitching fragrances and flavors; patchouli, passion fruit, bergamot, mango. And all in a voodoo voluptuousness that's the wine equivalent of an erotic trance. We should have to get our PARENTS' permission before drinking them. My parents would have refused!

GRH-031 **2001 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

(#43) This has developed wonderfully the past year; full of focus and complexity; superb Pies Gold Kab; has Spätlese mass and all kinds of grip. 2001 is exactly the kind of vintage in which this grower excels – remember the magnificent 1990s? So I'm lurching in to buy, and so should you.
SOS: 2 (between four and thirteen years)

GRH-033 **2002 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

(#42) Some serious action here; lots of grip and exotic fruit even by Piesport standards; tastes like acacia blossoms and sweet lees and malt; grip and length, and again, recalls those great '90s.
SOS: 2 (between five and thirteen years)

GRH-034 **2002 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

I preferred this to the '01. It's just a single fuder. I won't note the fruit-associations as these may change, but there's grip and solidity here along with clarity and delicacy which lingers into the finish.
SOS: 2 (between ten and twenty three years)



It's year-3 now, sales are good, and all's right with the world.

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

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

is gonna stretch the supply of Goldtröpfchen.

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

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. Musts settle by gravity for 48 hours. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fermentations but not all; the wines age without SO₂ on their gross lees. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. The cellar's all

- **Vineyard area: 9.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Maringer Honigberg**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 67% Riesling, 28% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Regent**

stainless steel now, and dad's getting busier and busier watching over a toddler who's just as charming as he was as a baby last year.



Dieter Hoffman & family

Hoffmann-Simon at a glance:

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart. Charming 2002s.

how the wines taste:

They're not as leesy-plump as Reuscher-Haart but more so than, say, Kesselstatt. Not as squeaky-clean as Kesselstatt, but more so than Reuscher-Haart! In Piesport there are two ways you can go. You can make lavish, sensual voodoo-wines that barely taste like Riesling at all, or you can make wines as compact as this terroir will give—which isn't very. Hoffmann's wines lean in the compact direction, focusing the Piesport fruit but not resisting it.

GHS-014 **2002 Estate Riesling**

Flowery, delightful and gulpable.
SOS: 2 (now to five years)

GHS-015 **2002 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

Orange-y and malty, slim and fresh. Useful Pies Gold.
SOS: 2 (between four and ten years)

GHS-016 **2002 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese**

Hey, another vineyard you haven't heard of; it's the upstream extension of Leiwener Laurentiuslay (which you also haven't heard of; leave it to me to *scour the globe* to bring you exotic primates with three heads, plus undiscovered Mosel wines); this has fine clean botrytis; all malt and talc; it's really a "small" Auslese (95 Oechsle) or 3-star Spätlese; spicy, ripe and extravagant. It's forthright, delicious, maybe a tic too sweet right now but you're far too smart to drink it right now.
SOS: 3 (between seven and eighteen years)

GHS-017 **2002 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

Veal demi-glace with orange zest, wine reduction and malt powder; no botrytis now and seems drier than the Köwericher. There is Grand Cru stature and resonance here; depth and grip and length, and a nice mineral saltiness.
SOMMELIER ALERT!
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty years)

GHS-018 **2002 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Auslese**

97 Oechsle and no botrytis, or less overt botrytis; more grip and slate than the Spätlese, and more length. It's a pity "Auslese" doesn't sell, as this is even better wine and *tastes drier* than the Spätlese.
SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty one years)



weingut ansgar clüsserath

mosel • trittenheim

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

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

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

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



Eva Clüsserath

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

We did what we could to get the amazing 2001s around, but not many of you saw them, as they were selected too late to go into this catalog. The raw material of 2002 was equally impressive but I had the impression Eva may have mis-read the vintage's acidity. That, or my palate was tired at the end of a 4-appointment day. I selected conservatively.

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

clüsserath at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

GAC-005 2002 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett

We played with blends here to increase the sweetness without using *dosage*; Eva doesn't object on principle, but didn't have any around. Clarity and slate and Jonagold fruit are distinctive; the wine's high-bred and racy. With the edges softened this will be sensational.

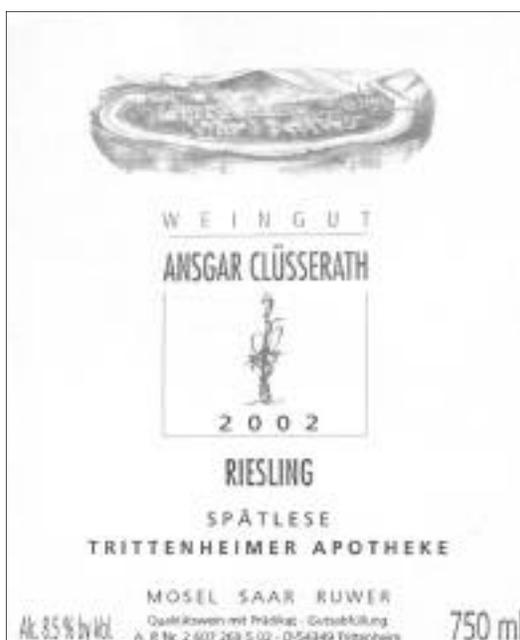
SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 1 (probably) (between six and twenty one years)

GAC-006 2002 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese

Wonderful expression of vineyard fruit; finest clearest slate, but this slate isn't as spicy as Wehlener Sonnenuhr but seems rather more dispersed throughout the wine; picked at the end of November with 20% botrytis; impressive length and integrity.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)



Loewen has a wonderful vintage in 2002, at least as good as 2001 and I'd say a notch better. It's *cleaner* than '01, when botrytis was an issue.

What with family members' health problems, it's been a couple of tough years for Loewens. But our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence. When I first listed the wines I did so on the basis of some hugely impressive samples I'd tasted at Selbach; it was the tail-end of my Mosel week and I couldn't squeeze another appointment in—but I had to have these wines. David Schildknecht happens to have visited Loewen before I met him but after the wines were in my book. "I'm not sure Terry knows what a tiger he has by the tail," David said to Bill Mayer. I do now.

Loewen is another grower who'd rather not know the analytical figures for his wines, preferring to make any necessary decisions based on taste and intuition. "When you have the figures in your head you can't taste the wine any more," he said. And he's right, provided he can absolutely trust that intuition. Luckily his intuition permitted him to accept an informal consultation from Hans Selbach, which really benefited a couple of his 2000s; they ended up among the best Mosel wines I shipped. I imagine some big juicy sweet wine was employed to flesh out the Kabinett and Spätlese. Nothing wrong with that. But I am bemused by what feels like a certain rigidity some Moselers display on the subject of *dosage*.

Let me rant for a second. I have seen all *kinds* of contrivances to adjust an imperfect wine on the Mosel. Blending a big sweet wine into a small wine either deficient in sweetness or just too scrawny is the most common. Plenty of "failed" Eiswein ends up being used this way. Auslese too. If you have some teensy bit of BA too mingy to bottle and sell, you might use some to bolster a few casks here and there and bottle the rest for the family to



Carl Loewen

drink. Few Mosel growers blink at such "adjustments"—nor should they. Why, then, is the idea of *dosage* such anathema to them? They are already using *wines* in lieu of Süßreserve. This rant will be available on audio-cassette, read by "The Rock." He usually Leiwen's things up.

Leiwen is just upstream from Tritenheim, and its best site, the Laurentiuslay, is one of several unheralded Crus

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

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

Leiwen is apparently a warren of activity these days. I am told of the existence of a group of young producers eager to make names for themselves, their home village and its vineyards. Among these seething young hot-heads is Carl Loewen, who is sensible as regards pricing. What interests me about Loewen, apart from the wonderful wines offered below, is his championing of great unheralded sites such as the Thörnicher Ritsch, Pölicher Held, Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay and the already-mentioned Leiwener. Natural fertilizing, reduced yields, slow fermentations, minimal handling—they only rack the wines once, for instance, It's an all-cask cellar. "I'm dubious about wines made in steel," says Loewen. "The summer after the vintage they're highly presentable, but I doubt they have the stature to age well."

Loewen's wines also have a quality of *companionability* which can't be isolated or quantified but which determines how friendly you feel toward them. Some wines seem to want to take you to a world where *all there is is wine*. Others, no less absorbing or delightful, seem content to meet you in *your* world. Whenever I drink or taste Loewen's wines I always want to curl up with a book, ideally by an open window near a singing thrush.

Loewen at a glance:

Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! “Cool” chalky-minerally style, as if the wines were blended with 15% Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

how the wines taste:

All that’s stony is not slate. Loewens have some wines on sand or gravel, and these have a “northern” coolness without being explicitly slatey. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: “I don’t like ‘old-wine’ flavor and I definitely don’t like this petrol taste,” he says.

- GCL-021 **2002 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett**
 39-year-old vines; this `02 is demure and pretty, very fine-boned this year. You love this wine because it’s demure, even a little aloof. It has its usual Mesnil-like fruit and a lovely lick of salt and sweetness, and a delicately long, perfumey finish.
 SOS: 2 (between four and fifteen years)

- GCL-022 **2002 Maximiner Riesling Spätlese**
 This actually hails from “Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay,” a site on “pure blue slate, 50-60 degrees steep, pure west exposure which gets every last second of evening light plus all the reflection off the Mosel” says Loewen. The wine is really piquant and chiseled, as if a carver had etched its flavors; very pretty and wickedly long; all lilac and hyacinth; outstandingly fine and polished to a brilliant gleam.
 SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty two years)

- GCL-023 **2002 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese** +
 At last, I am a Ritsch man. The site is dour and spectacular, ancient-looking steep terraces rising directly from the Mosel. And the wine is a slate Statement of the first order; the 2001 became one of the best Mosel wines I shipped last year; this is minerality, boyz `n gurls; and again almost a Wachau ore-like concentration; 40% botrytis yet the wine seems impeccably clean; enters delicate but billows on the palate into a shower of complex terroir as if it were raining jewels in your mouth. Wonderful wine. Only 75 cases; don’t miss it!
 SOMMELIER ALERT!
 SOS:2 (between seven and twenty years)

- GCL-024 **2002 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Auslese** +
This is good botrytis. Meyer-lemon, coconut, sweet talc, a luxury of lushness here, *very* 75-like; firmly structured and long; hyperactive interplay of fruit, salt and woodsiness (one of the 3 contributing casks imparted it) – a genuinely ravishing wine.
 SOS: 3 (between eight and twenty three years)



carl schmitt-wagner

mosel • longuich

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

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

We started with a 1961 *Kabinett*, a typical '61, fresh, nutty and wonderful. Then a 1969 *Kabinett*, not one of the better '69s I've tasted here. Then 1973 *Spätlese* which was shockingly young and had still-stiff acidity. Then the astonishing 1949 *Auslese* I wrote about in this book's introduction. Then a youngster; 1983 *Spätlese*, juicy and yummy. A superb 1979 *Spätlese*, a true

joy to drink. A majestic 1971 *Auslese*. A curiously antique-tasting 1979 *Auslese* ("We should have used more SO₂," he observed). Then an incredibly fresh and deft 1976 *Auslese*, followed by a breathtaking 1975 *Auslese* (which was quite stirring for Corrie, whose birthyear it is); now a still brashly youthful 1975 *BA*. And finally, a 1976 *TBA*.

And all this took place over maybe 45 minutes! Nor was it in any way worshipful; quite the contrary. You get the sense this is how Bruno Schmitt likes to PARTY DOWN. I'll bet he looks forward to the chance to ram-page through a bunch of old vintages. Happy to oblige, squire. Though forgive me if I get a little *emotional*, you know. I know these wines literally live in your basement and all, but for a guy like me this is a sanctum of beauty.



Bruno Schmitt

But I fear I have lost the capacity to be taken aback any more by the stamina of Mosel wines. I only wish I could show it to you, because all you get to see is this "drink now to four years" crap by wine writers who've

- **Vineyard area: 3.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg, Longuicher Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Blue Devonian slate, weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

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

"They are very *old-fashioned*," is how Mrs. Selbach describes this estate. It's an averagely small (3.5 hectare) operation, producing a spicy, baroque style of wine. *Fruit* is the dominant characteristic, rendered with an almost glaring clarity.

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

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

Schmitt-Wagner at a glance:

This was a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio, but the 2001s changed that. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 106-year-old ungrafted vines—some SIX THOUSAND OF THEM. Makes among the two or three best Kabinetts along the Mosel.

how the wines taste:

This is an old-fashioned winery and so the wines are individuals with all that implies. If I taste across the range I find a certain clarity and purity in every wine, as well as a keen spiciness I assume comes from the soil. Certain casks are cranky like certain folks are cranky, but many casks are **miraculous**, they hum and glow with vitality, they speak the plain truth of the land with the clearest possible voice. At their best they stand easily with the VERY best anywhere on the Mosel. It was Schmitt who kicked off this year's catalogue, and I like the symmetry of seeing him near the end again. He's a vigorous man who has lived his life in wine. Each wine is an aspect of his story. When he brings the old ones out to share with us, he is saying "this is how I have lived."

GSW-036 2002 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett

2002 is softer than 2001 but entirely pure and honest. This is spriggy and sassafrassy, archetypal, with good deep fruit.

This is important, so I'm gonna say it **loud**. HERE'S A WINE FROM 106-YEAR-OLD UNGRAFTED VINES, HAND-TENDED AND HAND-HARVESTED AND VINIFIED IN SMALL BATCHES AND ESTATE BOTTLED, AND YOU CAN OWN IT, DEAR CONSUMER, FOR AROUND EIGHTEEN DOLLARS. **WHY THE HELL ARE YOU STILL PAYING 75-100 DOLLARS FOR SOME NEW-WORLD FLASH-IN-THE-PAN FROM SOME VINTNER-WANNABE WITHOUT A VINE TO HIS NAME??**

Shit, if you *want* to squander your money I'll sell you a pair of Orioles bleacher tickets for \$125 each.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between five and twenty years)

GSW-037 2002 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese

Lot 4. Rich, deep, demi-glace and kirsch; fragrant, exceedingly fine depth and length; pretty jazzy stuff.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty five years)

GSW-039 2002 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese +

Lot 5-6. This is extra-classy, with brilliance and leesy depth; great cherry-blossom and kiwi; shimmery finish which won't let go but just grows deeper. There's little to distinguish this from the legendary 2001.

SOS: 2 (between nine and thirty years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GSW-038 2002 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese

Not a big Auslese (93 Oechsle versus 86 for the Spätlese) and it's decidedly on the dry side, but super-dense and positive, with a solid leesy middle. Exotic, baroque and long.

SOS: 2 (between ten and thirty years)



This is the best vintage at Karlsmühle. No qualifiers. Not the best since blah-de-blah. It's the most thrilling and hauntingly beautiful collection of wines Peter Geiben has ever made. It's also one of the most heart-melting group of Mosel wines I've ever offered you; that anyone could offer you. You do NOT want to miss these, and you don't want to order too cautiously. I guaran-damn-tee you, the first thought in your head when you pop the first cork will be "Did I order enough of this?"

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

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

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

Karlsmühle is one of those pleasant country hotels near enough to a big city (Trier) to attract lots of weekenders. (Hell, if you took a long lunch you could drive there from a



Peter Geiben

downtown office and still get back in time to do a good afternoon's work.) The wines Peter made were like his father's: serviceable, pleasant enough to do what they needed to do,

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

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

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

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets there from Trier. That imposing hillside to your left, behind the hotel, contains Peter's monopole vineyards. The upper section is the **Felslay**, the steepest section, with the lightest soil. Just below is the **Mäuerchen** on its deeper soil. Around the corner facing due south is the great **Kaseler Nies'chen**, in which Geiben

now has two fine parcels. There's some Kehrnagel from the Patheiger holdings. Peter has enough to do.

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

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

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

The best Ruwer wines seem to *distill* the essence of Mosel-ness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said Sigrid Selbach. They have that and more; they are the *acme of the genre*. If you love Mosel wines - and based on my sales it appears you do—this is as fine as they can be.

A FINAL NOTE: Geiben has enlarged his vineyard holdings with leased sites from the old PATHEIGER estate. As this property had its own reputation, Peter has opted to employ A DIFFERENT LABEL. So if you order Karlsmühle and receive Patheiger, don't worry, it's correct, no one screwed up, be happy.

Karlsmühle at a glance:

Of the "big three" in the Ruwer (Grunhaus and Karthäuserhof, the other two) this is the least expensive by far. Ruwer wines are prized in general for their astonishing spiciness and delicacy. Since the acquisition of great Grand Cru sites in Kasel, Karlsmühle has become a serious landowner and very important producer of green-bottle Rieslings.

how the wines taste:

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

GKM-071 2002 Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett

Oh boy, we're in for it now I wrote. This is perfect; sleek, salty, silky gauzy fruit, lace-fine structure; recalls the grace of the '97. Like so many great 02s, great length in a wine that's lighter than air. Wonderful.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between five and sixteen years)

GKM-072 2002 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett

+

Grand Cru nose; adds a cool tapioca and cream note along with ravishing spice – oh baby whatever you're doing don't stop. This has the keen haunting resonance of a happy dream. High-frequency flavors vibrate in an endless urging whisper. This is what "exquisite" means. Miracle-wine.

SOMMELIER ALERT!

SOS: 2 (between five and eighteen years)

GKM-073 2002 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Spätlese

+

What on earth can I say? It's early Spring light outside, bare branches and buds swelling, and gold shining on the bushes and twigs. The soil is murmuring. The air is cool under a warm sun. A tiny finch twitters its day away. The world is busy and mostly unseen. The wine is coiled with the surmise of blossom, an equinox-creature, stretching its twiggy warm limbs, ready to sing. Then, the song.

SOS: 2 (between eight and twenty five years)

- GKM-074 **2002 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Auslese "Long Goldkapsel" ++**
 It's hard to fathom the deranged miracle of this. Perfect enfolding of all its components, fruit blossom, botrytis, spice; juicy yet as bouyant as a brilliant kite in a stiff wind; utterly seductive vixen-lick of honey on the finish.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty years)
- GKM-075H **2002 Lorenhöfer Riesling Auslese "Long Goldkapsel," 12/500ml ++**
 Bit-o-Eiswein here. Indeed it is a perfect baby Eiswein, like the incredible '98. Insane sweet-salt almost tortures the senses with pleasure. Everyone who cares about German wines – these are must-haves.
 SOS: 3 (between twelve and thirty years)
- GKM-076 **2002 Lorenhöfer Riesling Eiswein +**
 GKM-076H **2001 Lorenhöfer Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml +**
 Like melting apples and cinammon and something like rubies and bergamot and peche-de-vignes. Everything clean and pure. Delivers, if you will, the closing argument for the 2002s, the one that finally convinces you.
 SOS: 4 (between eighteen and forty years)
- GKM-077 **2002 Lorenhöfer Riesling Eiswein ***, 12/500ml +++**
 GKM-077H **2002 Lorenhöfer Riesling Eiswein ***, 12/375ml +++**
 Even more fervently apple-y. Well, this is as good as it gets. Refined overwhelm! Deadly seductiveness; override mirabelle and bosc pear; concentrated to the Nth degree yet in effortless balance.
 SOS: 4 (between twenty and fifty years)



van volxem

saar • wiltingen

I confess I don't know quite what to make of this estate. Either Roman Niewodniczanski (mercifully known as "Nevo") is a visionary genius who will revolutionize the Saar, or time and circumstance will erode his vision into something more sustainable.

What a man! He's a complete Borg, nearly seven feet tall, looking unsettlingly like Klaus Kinsky in *Aguirre, Wrath Of God*, and he is driven. He loves wine with all the deranged passion of a convert. He has traveled the wine world as if he were independently wealthy. (Wait a minute; he is independently wealthy, scion of the Bitburger beer empire.) He is nobody's fool, and he has the courage of his convictions. Time will tell whether they are too *outré* for fate to sustain. He is also quite charmingly earnest and thoroughly convincing.

In effect he wants to make Wachau wine in the Saar. He bristles at this because he takes me too literally. "Our wines have much less alcohol" he correctly observes. But that's not what I mean. He's looking for a similar kind of masculinity; he's more interested in dark flavors than, say, Zilliken. His wines taste as if they wished to suck flavor from the soil and then leave it out in the sun to dry. It begins with pitiless yield restrictions, proceeds to old vines (average of 40 years), continues with a program to acquire any bit of good land available—and plenty is in the new millennium in Germany—and all of this is bold, to be sure, but hardly radical, you're thinking. The final touch is stylistic: Nevo wants to produce what he calls "harmonious dry" wines, by which he means wines with a consistently dry profile whatever residual sugar they actually carry. In practice this usually precludes the kinds of wine which make the Saar famous, typified by, say, Egon Müller. Nevo wants more body, more alcohol, less sweetness (albeit not analytically bone-dry, unless that happens to work) and the powerful inner concentration deriving from old vines and low yields. He also wants to make rooted, soulful wines; he's resolutely anti-technology and works almost entirely in cask.

He's landed with a flourish on the German wine landscape. "Discovery of the Year" in both *Gault Millau* and in the Wine-Salon in Hamburg, and many other laudatory notices. At the very least he's breathing fresh air not only into (what was) the moribund Van Volxem estate, but into the entire sleepy Saar valley. At most he will succeed in recalibrating our assumptions of what's possible with Saar Riesling.

Also, what *prices* are possible with Saar Riesling. As far as I'm concerned, given his investment and die-hard passion, I hope he gets any price he needs for the wines. But I also ask him to remember; it only takes one. As soon as someone cracks the barrier, others follow. If Nevo attains his goals, other wineries will ask "Why not *me*? Are my

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

wines, what, chopped liver?" and then prices will be as silly in Germany as they are everywhere else. The growers will probably build a statue in his honor in downtown Trier, but the consumer will lose. So, with great respect, I sound this note of caution.

He walks the walk, our hero. On the day of my visit in mid-March *not a single wine was finished fermenting*. We shivered our way through the icy cellar (4 degrees Celsius) and I made a selection based solely on promise, and that based on internal concentration, outline of structure, and such "melody" as could be gleaned. It was silly to write "notes" except a scribble here and there as an *aide memoire*.

With another year under his belt Nevo is visibly settling in. His neighbors in the Saar know he's there to stay, and he is beginning to remake the region. No one, not even Nevo, wants all Saar wines to taste like his. But he is at least taking what would have been mediocre wine from some small impecunious grower and turning it into something important. And he's raising the bar for yields and uncompromising vineyard care.

GVV-008 2002 Saar Riesling

This is the calling-card, the volume-potential wine, partly from estate grapes and partly from purchased, though Nevo won't purchase just any-old-grapes from any-old-grower; he has a *regime* he wants followed, and he wants this wine to be on every table because it is so patently delicious. I tasted five or six lots (including a gorgeous Serriger Würzburg he bought from Bert Simon that I wanted to buy the whole cask and bottle it in Syosset); I know what he's after from hangin' out with the '01, and it takes its place among the very BEST "branded" dry Rieslings on earth.

GVV-009 2002 Wiltinger Braunfels Riesling

GVV-010 2002 Wiltinger Braunfels "Vols" Riesling

This is the sirloin-parcel in the great site, with the oldest vines. I saw cask #72, which had roundness, salt and texture.

GVV-011 2002 Scharzhofberger Riesling

GVV-012 2002 Wiltinger Kupp Riesling

GVV-013 2002 Scharzhofberger "Pergentsknopp"

The best and oldest parcel. Cask 81 was rich and glorious.

GVV-014 2002 Wiltinger Gottesfuss Alte Reben

Ungrafted *120-year-old* vines.

GVV-015 2002 Scharzhofberger Riesling Spätlese

Yes, this is the one we'll want!

GVV-016H 2002 Scharzhofberger Riesling Eiswein

Probably halves or 500s, but you never know. The still-blooming syrup I tasted was yummy!

Just to round out your impression, there is also Wiltinger Kupp in two versions, regular and old-vines, as well as a regular Gottesfuss, as well as a Wiltinger Braunfels from the ancient parcel called VOLS. As we are just beginning to work together, we're still exploring how we can best be useful to each other. I look forward to a continuing fascinating dialog, and many important and wonderful wines.



SOS

A NEW WAY TO MEASURE SWEETNESS

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

MINUS TWO is for lovers of austere wines.

ONE signifies barely discernable sweetness.

TWO signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

FOUR is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!



Terry travels, tastes and selects on his 2003 spring trip to Germany

