

**Germany 2012 //**  
Terry Theise Estate Selections



# Theise Manifesto

*Beauty is more important than impact. // Harmony is more important than intensity. // The whole of any wine must always be more than the sum of its parts. // Distinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness. // Soul is more important than anything, and soul is expressed as a trinity of family, soil and artisanality. // Lots of wines, many of them good wines, let you taste the noise. But only the best let you taste the silence.*

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# Introduction



Let's begin with inscriptions. One is a quote. Each is a revelation.

The first is a passage from Anthony Doerr's lovely novel *About Grace*, which you should read if you're one of those anachronisms who still reads fiction.

*"I remember reading this pamphlet by Kepler in graduate school, where he mused about why snowflakes each seemed to have their own individual pattern. He said all things in nature appeared to have a key – invisible to us – inside them that contained the blueprint for their exterior, for what they were. The nucleus inside a cell, the germ inside a seed. This was 350 years before Watson and Crick. Kepler went so far as to call it a soul.*

*Standing out there in our little meadow, watching crystals come down, I can't help but admire the idea: every snowflake with a soul. It makes as much sense as genetics, as anything – more sense, I think, than the notion that snow crystals don't have souls."*

My second quote comes from a piece written by Margaret Rand and published in the magazine *World Of Fine Wine*. Her subject was whether climate change would obviate vintage variation as we've come to anticipate it. She writes:

*"Put these points to European winemakers and they look baffled at your idiocy. Of course we want vintage variation, they say; that's what wine is about...but put the question to California's Doug Schaefer, and this is his reply: "I'd actually prefer none. I'd prefer no vintage variation. The challenge is to make wine in a similar style no matter what the vintage throws at me. My customers are customers because they trust Schaefer. They know the style will be this way every year."*

Well that's just peachy, that is. It's hardly amazing that he (and others like him) think such things; it's astonishing that he feels it is safe to say so. On the record. Maybe it's even more astonishing that a person who

holds such a view could ever consider himself a vintner. I don't think I'm being harsh. If the definition of *vintner* is stretched enough to encompass such a belief as Mr. Schaefer's, then it's thinner than a slice of Parma ham.

In most areas of my life I'm a live-and-let-live sorta guy. But I have a dog in this race. I sell what I know to be authentic wines, and they compete in the marketplace against inauthentic but speciously seductive wines, whose clientele delude themselves into believing they are "wine lovers." Mind you, it's fine to like whatever you like, and I guess it's reassuring to know your favorite wines won't ever surprise you. You can now put "wine" alongside everything else you hope won't ever vary; parboiled rice, Doritos, laundry detergent, all the mundane necessities of a mundane life. That wine is a way out of the mundane is something you don't know, because you're pushing away the possibility. That is also your privilege, but it's a waste of opportunity, a waste of wine, and a waste of life – and it's *my* privilege to say these things.

"Things." Oh yes, *things* are what these products are, because they've had whatever life they may have been born with institutionally sucked away. These things, whatever they are, are not wine. At most they are concepts including traces of wine. Wine-like substances. Beverages containing wine. And lest we forget, lifestyle merit-badges of one's financial status. "If you want to know what God thinks of money, look at who he gives it to."

You might think my dudgeon is excessive, or uncalled-for, or that I'm swinging at much too easy targets. You have a point, but I wonder if you've lived nearly thirty years of your life trying to compete against these enhanced leviathans calling themselves wine, especially with the small delicate beings I sell and am fond of. Eventually you come to know the real competition is in the marketplace of ideas, and the first order of business is to identify the bogus, and expose it.

If you're a young wine pro reading this – and thanks if so! – then I wonder who you have to help you find a way through the noise and the tall grass. Everything seems so *equal*, especially in the flattened terrain of the internet. Wine writers these days often want to be democrats, egalitarians, but wine is not that way. Some wines waste our time. Some wines are greater than others. Yes, any wine is worth drinking if it is authentic and true, and chasing after greatness based on some perceived Divine Right Of You is counterproductive. But it's also callow to ignore the centuries of trial and error and the understandings that arose and were codified. Everything is *not* equivalent, not in wine, not in nature, not in life.

I sometimes feel that mere wine isn't cool enough any more. I really hope I'm wrong. But one thing that I don't think I'm wrong about is a trend to grope for the novel and *recherché* at the top of the tree, leaving sweeter and lower-hanging fruit untouched. Please don't misconstrue

me; I'm happy for most new discoveries, especially when they hail from the Old World, but I sometimes wonder why a marginally interesting wine from East-BFistan (from the "Krpfzzg" grape no less) is occupying valuable real-estate on your shelves or wine lists, crowding out the classics you think it's cool to ignore. That's because you conflate "classic" with "stodgy" or dull. I doubt very much you've grown bored with classic wines. The reason they're classic is that their thrall lasts a lifetime. Classic wines are the tantric sex between grape and ground, an explosive pinnacle of pleasure and fascination.

Which leads us to German wines, especially Rieslings, which in turn leads me to admit that the Germans haven't made it easy for me, you, or anyone else. The wines themselves will curl your toes, but the crap you have to suss is annoying, and the identity-crisis of modern Germany (*viz.* its incomprehensible dry-wine dogma) creates a miasma convenient to avoid.

But I'll help. Because no wine is greater than great German Riesling. Because no wine offers better value than good German Riesling. Because no wine is tastier with *most of what you eat* than German Riesling. Each of us finds her own way to these wines, and I'm lucky I found mine early, before my palate was corrupted. I had nothing I needed to un-learn. And what I did learn was worth learning, and was a wise and steady guide as my wine world broadened. All that matters is the quality of the flavor. Every wine will tell you whether it's at home, belongs elsewhere, or belongs nowhere. Grace, balance, clarity and deliciousness are the things to cherish; the rest is shoulder-pads and insoles.

But who has time (or bandwidth) for subtlety, you may demand. People are busy, the wine should get to the point. Well sure, but I don't mean to say that subtlety is a *sine qua non*, even if it happens to be for me. There are superb *obvious* wines; Müller-Catoir comes to mind. You'll find that the virtues I identify are flexible; they can exist in small, medium and large wines, in delicate or direct wines, as needed and as you prefer. If you're busy and don't have time to sink into the rapture, I'm sad for you but I understand. The rapture will be there when you're ready to find it.

Yes, but all that Teutonic mess of a wine law; do you really have to learn it? Oy. (I might point out that you've seemed capable of discerning the distinctions between "Vitovska" and "Schmageggie," but we all think that anything Italian is easy to learn, and if it isn't we'll just whip up some carbonara.)

You don't need to learn the German wine law. In fact, if you're suffering any sort of manic high, or are just in a good mood, I promise that studying this law will plunge you into a black pit of misery. All you need is to suss a few basic facts about the wines and where they grow, plus a kindergarten tutorial on the necessities on the label,

and you're there, in less than five minutes. Test me, man; it's like my party trick, telling you 90% of what's necessary in under 300 seconds. The rest is runoff and bureaucracy.

Here's how my portfolio fits into the general mix of German wine importers.

I have never sought the "elite," though I do assert that right *within* wineries, where I choose my favorites and leave the others. I want of course to have *some*, maybe even lots of "elite" growers, but I also want to have really good, lusty, vital, honest examples of wines in every "echelon" of quality. Not because I'm strutting my egalitarian cred (rather the reverse, since I'm an unabashed elitist) but because *I enjoy the variety*. No one would claim a Schneider is "as good" as a Dönnhoff, but what can I offer you for those times when an *exalted* experience is simply not called for?

That's when it helps to be ecumenical. That's where I think (hope?) my strength lies, because I know there are times, lots of times, more times than you may realize, where an honest, grounded, entirely GOOD wine is called for. You don't always want to go to the opera dude; sometimes you want to go to the ballgame. If the "good" wine is honorable and true, it's like having the best seat in the house at the ballgame.

We are at risk of squandering this capacity to enjoy that which is simple, because we seem to need to insist it is *merely* simple, or that simple isn't good enough for us. And so I wonder whether assembling a portfolio that's all about the "best" wines isn't really about the guy and not the wines. Because life's various pleasures apportion themselves in diverse ways, and wine's pleasures are no different. The "Schneider-pleasure" is not identical to the "Dönnhoff-pleasure." In one case we cultivate an appreciation of the highest refinement of beauty, in the other we cultivate an appreciation of the joys of honesty, integrity, goodness, companionability. We don't have to choose. We get to have them both. As long as we're not cowering inside our dread and insecurity insisting "only the best is good enough for me, or rather, for *me*."

I am constantly tasting new estates. A portfolio is never fully settled. You have to be very careful not to coast, and I often ask myself "If I were coming to this grower for the first time, would I want the wines?" That doesn't mean I go all lord-of-the-flies on my suppliers; even the most talented and caring grower will have a dud vintage once in a while. When that happens you steer customers elsewhere and wait for the next fine year.

But there's an assumption this portfolio is somehow valedictory whereas the small new importers have the real "cutting-edge" hotties. Would it were true. I'm seriously encouraged by any new importer for fine German estate wines: I want them to succeed. But the notion they are sleuthing cool new things out from under my settled old gaze just doesn't wash. In nearly every case, I know of

the new estates coming over, I tasted them and they were either redundant for this portfolio, or they weren't good enough to handle the internal competition.

I find what works best for me is when I can catch the chicken just as it hatches, and follow it as it grows. I am proud of the many "unknown" growers in this portfolio who have since become stars. These days it's hard to do. Anyone with any ambition at all is thrusting himself out there, and unless you stumble over someone, his name's bound to already appear in one of the many guides. Still, one keeps alert.

## \* THE 2011 VINTAGE \*

As I get older – but by no means "old" – I'm less concerned with minutiae by which the tiniest grains of a vintage can be explained. First because they can't, because all we know is that this thing happened with the weather and then that thing happened with the flavor; just because breakfast comes before lunch doesn't mean breakfast causes lunch. So I'm not going into "2mm of rain fell in Oestrich on August 17th, and this gave the wines a more vivid sheen than those of Mittelheim, where no rain fell."

But that doesn't mean there are no salient big-picture climate occurrences. I'll tell you about them to the extent they seem to matter.

First, 2011 is just what the doctor ordered. If we could've scripted the perfect vintage for its moment, we'd have asked for 2011. The wines are hale, sanguine, relatively easy and approachable, the antonym of the loony 2010s. There are certainly a larger number of amazing supernal and great 2010s, but there's also a greater number of evil sadistic creepy ones. 2011 is the kind of vintage you'd call a *nice guy*.

2010, which by the way I can't help loving, was a wild weekend with a lover who took you so far past your limits you can't even remember what those limits ever were. When you fought, plates were thrown. Someone had a knife in hand. The hot wax is still where it dripped onto your body, and the hot shower makes the nail-scratches and tooth-bites sting. It was amazing and wrenching, and part of you is relieved it's over and you survived it.

2011 is a two-week trip you take with a new lover, the first such journey through the familiar crucible of 24-hours together day after day, and you can't believe how well you got along, how un-messy it was, how good you were together. If 2010 was *Yikes Mikes*, 2011 is easy-peasy.

This doesn't mean the '11s are simple wines. They make fewer demands than did the '10s, but most of them are interesting and some of them are markedly complex. Their extracts are normal – not low – and their acids

## 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?

are often gentle. Since German Riesling often attracts drinkers who relish high acidity, some of you might find these wines gentler than you prefer. The rest of us – yes, *us* – will find the wines structured on the smooth side, but acids are not conspicuously absent.

It's a question of how much sheer tension you demand. If it's buzzing energy you crave, you may find the '11s insufficiently mysterious, too transparent and without the guile that fascinates you. On the other hand, if you prefer deliciousness and a diligently articulate complexity, you may have found 2010 admirable and amazing, but not much fun. 2011 is a playground of the senses.

It's a strikingly fragrant vintage, in the sweet-hay and sun-warmed straw directions, not quite the powerful yellow-fruits of an '09 but also less diffident (and less dramatically mineral) than '08. It's less passionate than it is friendly, even chummy – but when it surpasses its willingness to please and shows its terroir hand, it's as exciting and profound as any recent vintage.

A special dispensation was made to allow the addition of acidity for the vintage, as was done in the heat-wave 2003. One grower told me "It was often done but rarely discussed," and so when I asked the question I assured the grower I had no axe to grind and was merely curious. All of them denied they added acidity to Riesling. Those who also grow naturally low-acid grapes (e.g., Gewürztraminer, among others) may have found they needed to ensure their pHs weren't dangerously high. But I gave up asking after a while.

Even with average extracts a great many 2011s showed a tactile rock-dust texture on the mid-palate. You'd naturally conflate it with extract – it seems like what extract should indicate – but I can't insist that it was. Nor do I know whether it will survive bottling. It might; a few of the already-bottled wines I tasted showed it, but the last time I saw the phenomenon was among the 2003s, which don't show it now. In any case, it was enticing, but I'm aware it may have misled me, and I considered it a welcome if probably temporary visitor.

The main weather events of 2011 were the extremely early vegetation cycle, thanks to an abnormally warm April, (as an aside, there's danger of a recurrence this year, as March was bizarrely warm and dry) followed by a dangerous frost in early May which decimated many vineyards but mostly spared the best ones, followed by a rather cool damp Summer ("Thank God," most growers said), and followed again in some regions by a late August storm of biblical proportions, including baseball-sized hail in parts of the Mosel. More on that subject coming up.

The harvest was early and often difficult, requiring many passes and yield controls. Riesling is again riper than the old norms – no "true" Kabinett – and its production is ever-farther from the relic that is the '71

Wine Law.

There are regional variations. Paradoxically, the most northern-tasting wines hail from the **Pfalz**, as this region's Rieslings had higher acidity than many wines from points-north. That said, it is an entirely good-to-very-good vintage here, but stellar moments are rare. Please don't misconstrue this! "I guess I don't need any Pfalz wines this year" is **not** what you ought to be thinking. "This is a year to buy useful tasty Pfalz wines and not fuss over whether they're "great"" is closer to the truth.

**Rheinhessen** and (especially) **Nahe** were steadily excellent. I tasted there first, and my initial impression of the vintage was how much fun I was having. It's hard to give blanket judgments about either the **Rheingau** or the **Mittelrhein**, as I have only markedly high-achieving growers in those places. If guys like Litz and (especially) Weingart had superb years, it doesn't mean their neighbors did; rather the contrary.

The **Mosel** gets interesting. Here is the vintage at its least predictable and most temperamental, and I think it's because of that ferocious storm in the final days of August. There was serious devastation to property (roofs, cars and the like) but strangely the hailstones were so large they fell vertically, such that some grape-bunches were damaged and others spared on the same stalk. But as early September was unusually warm, many growers felt concern for *goût de grêle*, the taste of hail, said to be a form of botrytis that presents as strangely medicinal, as if aspirin tablets were ground up and mixed in water. One grower told me if this was in the wine there was no known remedy. Another special dispensation was granted to spray fungicides later than the standard final date in mid August – the idea being to guarantee an 8-week span between spraying and harvesting such that no residues remain. Growers who felt concern sometimes elected to perform a late spraying, as the lesser of two evils. Nor were those concerns unwarranted. But nature played another tart trick, courtesy of a warm spell in early October during which grapes had to be picked or else fall to the ground for the beasties to gnarf.

Hail as you know is extremely localized. Parts of Erden got it, Kinheim and Kröv were smashed, but Urzig was spared. Wehlen was hit, as were the Zeltingen vineyards on the Wehlen side of the village, but Graach and Bernkastel were largely spared. Adam said there was virtually no damage in Dhron. So the story of the '11 vintage in the heart of the Mittelmosel is, it's spotty. And again, I don't want to *mince* words or sugarcoat the truth in order to preserve your commercial interest, but I need to trust you that "spotty" does **not** mean mediocre. It means that one guy's vintage was great (as a few of them were), the next guy's vintage was way good, and the next guy's vintage was difficult. And sometimes there are ups and down *within* a single grower's collection. One

employed selectivity. Ich hab die cherries gepicked.

The best 2011s should age predictably though not epically and without undue complication. The whole business of forecasting how any given *wine* will age, let alone an entire vintage, is mostly a fool's errand. A few things can be inferred, but the smartest money says: no matter what, prepare to be surprised. The lovely 2007 vintage, which gave every possible indication of aging in a graceful and always-tasty upward climb, is in fact in rather a dour phase at the moment. The leaner more tensile '08s, where tart acids suggested a zig-zag climb, have been reliably wonderful – to date. Still, I'd like to be helpful. So I don't counsel buying 2011s *in order* to age them forever. Only the best will be classics. These do exist, and I'll say where they are, but '11 is a drinker's vintage above all. Collectors and contemplators have been coddled enough the past few years.

An aside apropos aging: a number of 2011s were bottled in a hurry and early because the growers were sold out, with both '10 and '09 being short crops. 2011 is average to a little above average in quantity, thankfully. Early bottling really clips and stunts some wines, and I expect a few will be limping out of the gate, only to find their strides in a couple years.

A number of mega-sweet wines were made, from musts well into the high-200° Oechsle range. One senses the bloom is off this particular rose in many ways. Back in the day, you'd have one or two years per decade when such wines were possible, and they represented a rare pinnacle of German viticulture, and even then not every estate made them. Today everyone makes them seven years in ten. Some growers privately shrug as if to say "They might as well be made as to let the wild boars eat the grapes," hoping that emerging markets are less jaded than we are. But for me, it isn't only jadedness. I actually don't like extremely sugary wine, especially in its figgy raisiny goopy concentration, because they all stick to one another in a queasy fat sweetness. The ones I do select, tiny in number but riveting in beauty, are those that concentrate the clear essence of terroir in an endless slender string stretching to infinity. Yet too many are just botrytis potions tasting more like one another than the particular places they came from.

None of this is true for the beleaguered category of *Auslese*, and yet it too is becoming a waif. I'm not innocent either; I select maybe 10% of the ones I taste, or 30% of the ones I like, simply because we buy so many less of them than we used to. I wish it were otherwise, because this is among the last wines of a type we drank *just-because*, outside of any need to make "use" of them, but only because they are beautiful. Alas, we don't make time for such beauty. Even wine has to multi-task. And it plays havoc with a grower's budgets, because he makes (or used to make) his highest profit on *Auslese*.

## HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

### THE WINERY OF THE VINTAGE IS:

(bearing in mind that Mr. Dönnhoff's number has been retired, as it were)...oh, again it's a bitch to choose just one. It can seem to consign the others to insignificance, but promise me you're smarter than that. OK? So, the winery of the vintage is clearly **Willi Schaefer**, for an astonishingly brilliant collection surpassing anything I've ever tasted from this already stellar domain. Each wine, from the littlest to the grandest, showed an achingly clear line of pure terroir, both specific to Graach and somehow also talking to some ur-Mosel eternity, and no matter how rich the wines became, the clear line was always there.

### OTHER MARKED SUCCESSES:

**Strub** has their second consecutive excellent collection. **Kruger-Rumpf** took a big step up from their normal level, with a strong across-the-board showing from dry and not-dry wines alike. **Leitz** remains steadily superb, establishing a three-peat of great years that started in 2009. **Schlossgut Diel** is outstanding even by their standards, a euphoric collection marked by silky charm and irresistible fragrance. **Weingart**, whose name you'll be reading a lot in this section, seems to have come from another world in 2011. Our hero in Dhron, **Adam**, continues to delight and dazzle. And by no means an afterthought, my most deeply beloved friends at **Selbach-Oster** give us (yet) another steadily delicious and keenly well-crafted group, culminating in the great trio of *en-bloc* picked micro-parcels that now must stand among the Mosel's most important wines.

### THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

**Adam** Hofberg Riesling Spätlese

### RUNNERS-UP INCLUDE:

**Leitz** Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese (yet again)

**Weingart** Spay Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

**Schaefer** Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5

**Selbach-Oster** Riesling Anrecht

### THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

**Schaefer** Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14

### THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

**Kruger-Rumpf** Scheurebe Spätlese, challenging the hegemony of Catoir and Diel, this is the best Scheu I've ever tasted at Rumpf.

### THE KABINETTS OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

**Schlossgut-Diel** Riesling Kabinett (non-vineyard) for its remarkable expressiveness and value vis-à-vis its fellow Kabinetts from the Grand Crus.

**Adam** Hofberg Kabinett – big surprise, right?

**von Othegraven** Kanzemer Altenberg Kabinett (which comes ethereally near to the supernal 2008).

### THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:

**Kruger Rumpf** *in general*, for their ascent to a new level of polish.

**Kerpen** Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese, maybe the most impressive and delicious Graach wine I've yet tasted at Kerpen.

**von Winning** Sauvignon Blanc. *Come again?* Oh yes, a weighty serious wine challenging the top bottlings from Südsteiermark (themselves among the world's greatest SB).

### THE GREATEST DRY WINES ARE:

**Donnhoff** above all, for the jaw-dropping soul-stirring Hermannshöhle GG, perhaps the greatest dry Riesling I've ever tasted from Germany.

**Leitz** He's become a steadily stellar producer of a trifecta of great dry Rieslings from *Katerloch* (in the Roseneck), *Hinterhaus* (Rottland) and *Terrassen* (Kaisersteinfels).

**Schlossgut Diel** Pittermännchen GG is enticingly promising!  
**von Winning** Pechstein GG is an explosive terroir-lover's dream.

**Minges 2010** Froschkönig, still in cask (!), and the closest a German wine has ever drawn to the murmuring depths of the greatest wines of Nikolaihof.

**Kerpen** Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Alte Reben, a model for success in a genre that seldom succeeds – balanced, delicious Mosel Riesling with depth.

### THE ABSOLUTE TOP VALUE:

**Strub** Soil to Soul, which is becoming absurdly good and remains absurdly attractively priced.

### THE BEST CONCEIVABLE FOOD-WINES:

**Weingart**: one after another after another, but none more than the virtually perfect *Spay Riesling Spätlese Feinherb*. Somms: if you only bought one single wine from this entire offering, this is the one I'd suggest. (Whereupon I'd suggest you buy about thirty more, but whatever...)

**Schneider** Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Spätlese Feinherb.

**Hexamer** "Porphyrt" Riesling Feinherb.

### THE MOST DROOLINGLY STUPID-TOTAL-FUN WINES:

**Reuscher-Haart** Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett, which I don't remotely need to "sell," but which is just ridiculously charming in 2011.

**Darting** Dürkheimer Feuerberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken. Drink it and *try* not to grin, I dare you.

## EARLIER VINTAGES REVISITED

**2010** – well hmmm. Each year when I taste in March, two things happen. One is, the yearling starts to take its true shape in the contrast with the infant vintage. And often it seems better than before. But the last couple years have flummoxed that presumption, because ‘11 does not flatter ‘10, and ‘10 wasn’t exactly nice to ‘09. Tasting the relatively gentle 2011 vintage drew out all the sardonic acid profile of the ‘10s, to which one grew acclimated when they were the only wines you were tasting. Reading what I wrote a year ago, I wouldn’t change a word of it. But with even a little perspective, I might *add* a thing or two.

I doubt you can casually quaff the stuff. ‘10 is just too concentrated and stern. Its great wines will pass into legend, and I’m certain they’ll be brought out decades and decades from now to show all those as-yet-unborn wine drinkers. *And here’s the most amazing vintage ever made.*

‘09 is rather more perplexing. It seems too easy. As a baby the wines were certainly fruity but also with a solid core of extract. They’re still fruity, yet the backbone is less visible. Maybe a phase.

## PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION IN THIS PORTFOLIO

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 “peer-group” conditions; i.e., with a bunch of similar wines from other growers. We show the wines in portfolio tastings wherein a big ol’ *slew* of wines are lined up to be tasted alongside one another, exactly *contrary* to how they should be tasted or to any aims their makers had for them. But what choice do we have?

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

From a zenith of over SIXTY growers this little family has been reduced to around thirty, 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. I suspect many of us in the fine wine biz have

to struggle to reconcile our aesthetics with what passes for “common sense” as, *ahem*, businesspersons. For me, unless the businessman’s point is beyond argument, the aesthete usually prevails. Somebody has to hurl beauty in the wan face of common sense, and it might as well be me!

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

I’m delighted by the number of growers I selected long ago who have since become famous VDP estates. Wanna know who? Here’s who!

**Joh. Jos. Christoffel**  
**Willi Schaefer**  
**Florian Weingart**  
**Dönnhoff**  
**Kruger-Rumpf**  
**Josef Leitz**  
**Müller-Catoir**  
**Meßmer**  
**Minges**

And I’ll predict here that Adam will be the next to ascend the lofty ranks of VDP-dom.

## 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. Core-list wines will be clearly indicated in the text (with notes in **bold print**) and I’ll explain why each wine is on the core-list.*

## HARD-CORE-LIST WINES

Here's the basics for the hard-core program. I usually offer around 300 German wines per year, and of those we keep some 44 wines on the core-list. That leaves a lot of wine subject to the caprices of the DI system, where even my fulsome swollen tasting notes will often fail to entice buyers. Last Winter I drank a bunch of wine I'd bought from my growers, which I like to do because it's *drinking* like y'all do as opposed to "tasting" which is only a fraction of any wine's truth. While I drank the wines I got pissed off at how little of them we sold. I decided we had to have a way to draw attention to the most *seriously wacked out wines* that would otherwise disappear into the maw of the pre-arrival offerings.

Thus the HARD-CORE list. It comprises a group of wines, not too many, which are so good they deserve special attention, but which may not be this good again next year (the core-list is about reliability) and which are in short supply (the core-list is about availability). We are going to *buy and stock* these wines, and when they're gone they're gone. They are the gnarliest of the gnarly, the apex of latex, the suppering monkeys of lackey imperialistic capitalism, the *best group of wines to which under normal circumstances you wouldn't pay attention*.

They'll be identified in the text. Here they are:

- 2011 Messmer Scheurebe
- 2011 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken
- 2011 Strub Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Spätlese
- 2011 Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb
  - 2011 Hexamer Schlossböckelheimer In den Felsen Riesling Feinherb "Porphy"
  - 2011 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese
- 2011 Weingart Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken
  - 2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Feinherb
    - 2011 Meulenhof Riesling
    - 2011 Kerpen Riesling
- 2011 Reuscher-Haart Riesling Spätlese Feinherb "ÜberSchwang"

## DADDY'S FUCKED UP TASTING NOTES

I've asked my colleagues to send me their favorite tasting notes they wrote while we traveled together. You'll see them in the text. I'm not sure what to make of my own notes any more. When I want to write about a wine I *want* to write paragraphs, or else nothing at all.

How, after all, do we write about flavor? The March, 2009 World Of Fine Wine had an essay on the subject, which made the trenchant point that associative language, *even when it is accurate*, is only useful if the reader has experienced the association himself. British children eat gooseberries; American children do not. Thus if we read "gooseberry" in a

tasting note we have to imagine or *suppose* what it tastes like. Have you ever eaten something for the first time and likened it to wine? When I first ate actual passion fruit the first thing I thought was "Ah! Ripe Scheurebe."

This happens all the time; you taste or smell something and suddenly there's what all these wines have been tasting like. My wife likes *tilleuil* (linden blossom) honey, so I bought her tisanes and infusions and soaps and all the things doting husbands buy their schnookies, but then I couldn't get the damn thing out of my head when I was tasting Riesling, and it squatted in my notes for about two years. A hotel I stayed in had a shampoo made from aloe vera – same thing, showed up constantly in wine after wine. It's not that these things are inaccurate. They're deadly accurate! But even so, are they especially *useful*?

My friend, the dynamic Boston sommelier Cat Silirie, is getting into green tea, and I asked her to tell me what she was drinking (or "cupping" in the argot of tea geeks) and how she liked it. I didn't know I'd receive an exquisite fusillade of lovely writing about flavor, but Cat's got the gift. Here's something she wrote:

*"Wen Shan Bao Zhong; ethereally delicate, soothing, transportive. HINTS at florals but not heady or overt, calming, pretty, lovely. Associating with perfume Hermes Jardin du Nil for its transportive gently humid green lushness yet delicate effect. Not a single note of dank nori or weedy kelp, its lacy greenness is delicate, ferny."*

See what I mean? You can feel her sense, her whole consciousness drifting among things that are hard to say; she uses "delicate" three times, she keeps referring to the sense-tone of the experience ("soothing, transportive, calming...") and finally she has the adjectives you only find when you're in the Zone (unless you're Ann Lamott, who seems to possess the strategic national reserve of cunning adjectives), things like *weedy, humid, ferny*. I'm absolutely there with her, as if we were both swimming in the same ether. In this case the thing itself, the meditative tea, created the state of consciousness needed to describe it. Wine will do that too, if you let it.

There's an active part of the mind whose very existence is to hide its activities from us. Athletes call it "the zone," as do musicians. When I taught guitar (in my misspent youth) I used to ask my pupils whether there were ever times they played beyond what they thought were their abilities, and they always said yes. I then asked them, since those abilities were *clearly* within them, whether they'd like to know how to tap into the source at will. At this point paths diverged. Some of course said yes, but others, the more interesting ones, preferred to admit the presence of the miracle but not to know its first name. If we adapt the idea to wine, where your palate is

in effect your “instrument,” it starts to seem the point is not to hone your chops but instead to cultivate your *preparedness*. Then watch what happens when you try to write tasting notes...

The problem is, these notes have a specific set of purposes, either to help you choose what to buy (or to actively induce you to buy). Usually I’m just hoping to convey why the wine excited me. Sometimes a wine may seem ideal for a certain discrete use. In any case, I used to have days when I felt like *I’m writin’ some good shit today*, but this year I almost actively discouraged that feeling. Because most of the time it shouldn’t be about me, unless there’s a light I can cast. As I write these words, I haven’t read over a single note I took in the last four weeks. I wonder if they’ll be as wanly self-effacing as I recall.

## PLUSSES AND THE QUEST FOR PERFECTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

But I understand the feeling, the sense of sublimity and the ache it creates, and the desire to convey such an exaltation of emotion in a way equal to its intensity. It is very natural and human, but it doesn’t always do good. David Schildknecht has found a way out; he defines perfection as “better than which cannot, at that moment, be imagined.” Because in the essence of the Moment Of Beauty one is quite certain that all such moments are fundamentally *equal*, and one sees how fatuous it is to catalogue or quantify them.

## 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 (-1)**  
Indicates sugar is discernibly absent but the wine is in balance.
- **MINUS TWO (-2)**  
For lovers of austere wines.
- **ONE (1)**  
Signifies barely discernable sweetness.
- **TWO (2)**  
Signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive..
- **THREE (3)**  
Signifies sweetness important of itself. Remember, I reject any wine of grotesque or vulgar sugariness.
- **FOUR (4)**  
is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put “SOS” into your lexicon today!



## INVASION OF THE YOUNG'UNS

A lot of them I knew when they were kids, an unsettling feeling. The more I myself age, the less I understand “age” abstractly. I feel no loss of vigor or juice, though my needs and priorities have altered and continue to alter. When I began this improbable little crusade on behalf of German wines, most of the growers I bought from were older than I. Often I played with their kids, or dandled them if they were especially bonny. Now these little beings are brusque 20-somethings with all kinds of ‘tude. In fairness, they’re not all brusque and a lot of them are really very sweet. But there’s a breach in social syntax, a sort of crevasse with our respective sets of assumptions eyeing each other from the two sides. Though again, not always.

Most important, I think, is that the young person came of age in his/her particular world, and doesn’t (or can’t) know whence that world derived. His world is just the world. What led into it, how its reality developed from the things that came before, these are abstract, like “history.” This is markedly true with the sweet-dry divide, as the young German vintner sees (what he calls) the sweet-wine era as aberrant, and he can’t perceive how or why *dosage* could ever have been countenanced.

That’s the zeitgeist of this particular moment, but it’s the nature of zeitgeists to be mutable and for trends to come and go in phases. Usually it skips a generation, and you often hear a grower say “I’m going past my father,

back to my grandfather’s practices.”

Here are the estates in which a generational change has taken place, or is somewhere in the process:

- **Stephan Müller (at Eugen Müller)**
  - Sebastian Strub
  - Johannes Geil
  - Alex Gysler
- **Cornelius Dönnhoff**
  - Jakob Schneider
  - Georg Rumpf
  - Caroline Diel
  - Stefan Jakoby
- **Christoph Schaefer**
- **Mario Schwang (of Reuscher-Haart)**

I appreciate all the frisky energy, and while I don’t mind if they see me as some sort of Elder, I’m no one’s loveable Uncle Farty. When it goes well, they bring *esprit* and I bring perspective, and the dialogue is open and respectful. In nearly every case the new blood either maintains or improves the quality of the estate’s wines. Sometimes they just change, and if I don’t like the change as much as they’re sure I ought to, we part ways. And the reason I bring any of this up at all is, someone selling German wines will try to tell you — already has, if I’m to believe what I’m told — that they’re the cutting edge of modern German wine and I have the old guys. It isn’t true.

# Sommelier Alert!

It had to happen, somms: there's a backlash against the whole matter of caring about how wine and food flavors are combined. This strikes me as incoherent philistinism, but I fear we need to pay it some heed, especially you guys, who interact directly with the public.

A justly celebrated and highly talented wine writer who lives in northern California published a piece in one of the wine magazines recently. It was provocative, and I was duly provoked. I wrote a rebuttal, from which I excerpt here.

*In your opening paragraph you assert that "[no]one can be" in the business of matching wine and food.*

*I do understand that to the degree we all become granular and persnickety about creating (or wreaking!) the perfect wine-food match, we are in peril of falling down a rabbit-hole whereby the thing becomes not just impossible, but in some way absurd. Indeed, I think it's more absurd than impossible. We've all had synergies of wine and food in which entirely new and beautiful flavors were created that weren't inherent in the wine or food alone. We've wondered at it, we've been stirred and moved by it, and we've felt the entirely human desire to bring it about again, to find some way for this extraordinary moment to be less haphazard.*

*The mistake — what I'm calling the "absurdity" — is to suppose that we can succeed. Because, as we both know, such moments cannot be replicated, but only (and fitfully) approximated. However, the odds of establishing harmonies of wine and food can certainly be increased if one pays ordinary attentions to the few probabilities in play.*

*That's where the path diverges, I think. One way leads to a kind of geekyness neither you nor I find helpful. But the other path leads to something I'd have supposed you'd cherish as much as I do; a diligent and caring study of flavors, and how they work with one another. After all, we do it all the time when we cook, and wine is just another flavor in liquid form, so why shouldn't we attend to the suitability of a wine with our grub? The question then is, can we relax while doing so? Can this be compatible with ordinary life, common hospitality, warm conviviality?*

*I'm concerned that by painting in broad strokes — however brilliantly and entertainingly*

*— you're at risk of banishing the entire concern with flavor to the realm of the "intellectually messy." There are a lot of sincere flavor pilgrims out there, and just because some of them go too far doesn't mean we should stigmatize the ones who don't. Tell me, would you describe mixology as intellectually messy?*

*I can't agree I've ever had a "thrilling dinner" where wine and food were "antagonistic at best." I've had delicious dinners, I've had lovely times with beloved people over dinner, but if there are serious dissonances on the table then I either choose to ignore them in service of the larger good, or I recognize that they've diminished the enjoyment of the meal. Even if I ignore them, they're still there. There's nothing like a really ugly wine-food match to "[rip] the wonder" out of wine. I'd like to prevent that from happening. If that entails sussing a few basic principles, then I'd better start learning. And I'd better know when enough is enough.*

My writer friend replied, in part:

*If one itzy bitsy piece of parsley can cause you to fret about your glass of pinot noir (excuse me, I meant riesling), then something's wrong.*

*Should pleasure be so tightly scripted? Does food and wine have to be lifted into a stratosphere of near perfect compatibility (not to mention execution) before it can be enjoyed?*

And then I began to see the crux of the meta-message. First of all, I have to ask whether someone living in the very heart of a place where most of the wines are inimical at table has acquired a distorted frame of reference. But even if I'm wrong, or just unreasonable, my friend is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I replied:

*I think — or suppose — that we basically agree that obsessing about getting food-wine matches perfect is fraught and contrary to the spirit of relaxation and pleasure. The question is, where is the line between paying nominal and (I'd argue) necessary attention, versus going overboard?*

*Let's say my glass of Riesling is a 2001 Dönnhoff I've been holding since the vintage, and am finally drinking, and have approached with high expectations of great joy. And let's say the*

*wine fulfilled my expectations and I was indeed joyful, until a bite of raw shallot in the salad dressing both distorted and bludgeoned the wine and also assaulted my palate with raw allium? I can't imagine you'd argue I should ignore these things in order to observe the greater pleasures of relaxation. Would you?*

*Would you suggest hikers hit the trail without a map? "Must everything be so scripted? Can't we just walk and go wherever looks the nicest? It's supposed to be relaxing, remember?" Yes, but I can't relax if there's a risk of getting lost!*

*Scripts don't have to be followed literally, but can be used as guides, where they are quite reassuring. And food and wine compatibility is ABSOLUTELY rooted in reality. It's just flavor! All flavor compatibilities, whether on the plate or between the plate and the glass, are reality based, and if we ignore them we don't get "relaxation," we get anarchy.*

I never set about to sell wines that “go well with food.” It just happened that way, because the kinds of wines I liked spontaneously were precisely those most flexible and useful at the table. Flex and a comradely wish to be helpful are what matter most to me in the wine-food nexus. Clarity, grace, moderate alcohol, good acidity, minerality and a focus on balance and fruit will give the highest odds of a pleasant melding of flavors.

I hit upon the SOMMELIER ALERT idea after I found myself on the phone at great length with restaurant buyers, walking through the offering to find the wines I thought were best for your purposes. No one has that kind of time, so I codified it. And the first thing I'd like you to know is, this isn't a list of “the best wines” and also that wines not flashed as Somm-Alert are also going

to be nice with your food. In some cases you buy the most exciting wine-*qua*-wine and worry about the food matching later. That's cool; I'd probably do it too. But, the wines I put on the list are part of a *mise-en-scene* whereby I envision a big-ish table, a 6-or-8-top, and there's all kinds of food being ordered, and what possible wine will be flexible enough to pivot among the whole unruly circus of tastes? “This'll go with damn near anything,” is what I'm thinking.

My criteria, to the extent I even have them (this being more intuitive than anything else) are, vivid up-front flavor – I'm not convinced the restaurant experience is strictly conducive to *subtle* wines – a lot of scent, a refreshing and attractive personality that has your guest reaching often for the glass, and most of all a stealthy sense of sweetness. That is, not a taste of sugar that's somehow been disguised, but an actual ration of sweetness that corresponds to the sweetness in many of your savory courses. I offer plenty of bone-dry wines and I know there are times they are perfect, just less often than not-entirely-dry wines. But I like a sweetness that seems to disappear into the gestalt of the wine. We don't eat apples because they are “sweet” but if they weren't sweet we wouldn't eat them. Like that.

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

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

## Sommelier Alert Wines

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<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling "Anrecht"</b>	// 6/750ml // GSO-381	90
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling "Schmitt"</b>	// 6/750ml // GSO-383	90
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken</b>	// GSO-384	89
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett</b>	// GSO-385	89
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett</b>	// 12/375mL // GSO-385H	89
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett</b>	// GSO-386	89
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GSO-388	89
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GSO-389	90
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GSO-391	90
<b>2011 Selbach-Oster Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GSO-394	90
<b>2011 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #19, #23</b>	// GME-183	98
<b>2011 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett</b>	// GME-184	97
<b>2011 Merkelbach Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett</b>	// GME-185	97
<b>2011 Merkelbach Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GME-187	97
<b>2011 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #21</b>	// GME-189	98
<b>2011 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #13</b>	// GME-190	98
<b>2011 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese</b>	// GME-191	98
<b>2011 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Alte Reben"</b>	// GKE-139	105

<b>2011 Kerpen Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GKE-141	105
<b>2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett #16</b>	// GWS-196	107
<b>2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10</b>	// GWS-198	108
<b>2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10</b>	// 1/1500ml // GWS-198M	108
<b>2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett</b>	// GWS-199	107
<b>2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett #3</b>	// GWS-201	107
<b>2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GWS-203	107
<b>2011 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #11</b>	// GWS-205	108
<b>2011 A.J. Adam Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb</b>	// GAD-051	111
<b>2011 Reuscher-Haart Riesling Spätlese Feinherb "ÜberSchwang"</b>	// GRH-072	113
<b>2011 Carl Loewen Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett</b>	// GCL-071	115
<b>2011 Carl Loewen Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese</b>	// GCL-073	115
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# Pfalz

*The Pfalz has completed a transformation. It is now a region for weighty, high-alcohol dry white wines (some Riesling, some Pinots, and far too much Sauvignon Blanc), a token few “dessert” wines (or the occasional oversweet Spätlese), and a lot of reds, a few of them quite good, but all of them overpriced by the domestic demand.*

I would like to explore the region. I like it, always have, and the portfolio would be enlivened by some eager young blood. But every estate with any pretension to “quality” has to twist itself into the prevailing formula. That is, a bunch of self-consciously “serious” dry whites (often named for the soil they come from), a similar queue of (often over-oaked) reds, and a token handful of sweeties. It’s a bit like Austria, except the Austrian Rieslings are more consistent, and her reds are less pretentious (and more sensibly priced).

There’s still a few holdouts from the old school. Let’s make all kinds of mischief and call it the “traditional” school; the Germans will despise that. But the trendiest estates see it as an either-or proposition: over-dry or oversweet, and so the whole thing is...overdone. Thus what used to be my favorite German wine region has sunk into a torpor; it’s the Eden of the unexamined palate.

But I need to repeat that I’ve managed to gather a group for this portfolio who (mostly) will make the wines we need, and in some cases not only because we need them; they’d have made them anyway. That said, there’s an abiding danger of awkwardness if someone bottles, say, 500 cases of Riesling Kabinett for us and we only buy 400. He can’t sell the other 100 in Germany! And I hate selling under pressure to *move inventory*, much as I love selling under self-imposed pressure to *show you to the MOUNTAIN!*

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

It’s of course a bromide to observe that we all have different tastes. But we do. We have different tastes in cars, in food, in clothing, in every single thing on which we act based upon our taste. Yet somehow, in Germany, and especially in this region, *everyone has the same taste in wine*. Don’t you find this odd, even ominous? If taste were really the issue, wouldn’t you suppose there’d be at least a visible minority of people who didn’t like dry wines? Or who liked both styles??? It’s as if suddenly every single

person in Germany wore the same color shirt.

I’m a guy who sniffs for nuance. I was raised to mistrust the categorical. But the categorical insistence that all white wine must be dry creates a categorical response in me. And so, however at-odds it may be to my temperament to issue such a *pronunciamento*, it can’t be helped and has to be said. My friends in Germany, among whom I lived for many years, many of whom are among my most beloved friends, wake the fark up. *You do not* have an absolute monolithic taste for dry wine and only dry wine. You do not. You may think you do, but you don’t. Instead you do what you think is expected of you in order to be fashionable and acceptable. In so doing, you’re at risk of losing your connection to your true sensual preferences. Literally, you quite possibly don’t *know* what you like any more. You wear yellow because everyone wears yellow, and you get used to seeing yourself in yellow and you’re reassured you’re wearing the proper color. Five years from now when everyone’s wearing cobalt, you’ll realize you looked like shit in yellow.

But what if you look lousy in cobalt too? Maybe then you say “You know what, the hell with this; I’m gonna wear red because I like red and red’s my color. I look like the cat’s ass in red. And I don’t care what anyone thinks or how many people stare at me on the street. I believe in red!”

These days the newest darling in the Pfalz (and elsewhere) is Sauvignon Blanc. Most “serious” estates have it and feel they can’t do without it because it’s so trendy. Well hmmm. I think I might just have an opinion about that. First, many of the wines are pretty good, and a few are very good. And the world *does not need* them. Maybe if some clown at EU is bored one night he can issue a decree that for every Sauvignon Blanc vine planted in Germany a Riesling vine has to be planted in Pouilly-Fumé. Stir things up some. But what’s really sad is the gesture of self-loathing the German wine consumer is making. Over-strong language? You do know, right, that they already have a vine giving very similar flavors to those of Sauv-Blanc; many would say quite a bit better. This vine is native and has been in the ground since around 1916. Unlike Sauv-B it gives many different kinds of wines, including magnificent sweet and even dessert wines – and its recent dry wines

## What is a Palate?

A chapter of my book is devoted to this very question, in general terms, but the salient issue here is to describe what *my* palate is, since you ought to know what I like and why.

In fact I think there should be some sort of law that anyone who writes about wine should be able and willing to describe his/her palate, what it likes, what it recoils from, what it's sensitive or insensitive to. I don't believe the reader should need to infer these things. That's unreasonable and even discourteous.

Perhaps we don't perceive this need because we're still chasing the romantic fallacy of "objectivity." This capacity is not present in any human being I know, when confronted by an aesthetic object. Yes, there are certain facets of wine objectively present – degree of fragrance, for instance. We'd all agree, objectively, that Muscat's a big ol' shitload of scent. But I might love it while the next guy loathes it. He either recuses himself from writing about Muscat because it makes his stomach heave, or he tries feebly to be "objective" and produces flaccid useless prose, or he says what he feels and you conclude that Muscat is a yucky sort of thing. Because you're stuck chasing the chimera of objectivity.

It's fine to ask our writers to be as *impartial* as they can. It is fine to demand they surmount their natural preferences when appropriate. I think it's imperative to want writers to be mature enough (and keen enough in their judgment) to know where their subjective palates take over. The line exists in every taster, but not every taster knows where it is. And this is because too few of us ask the question *what is the nature of my particular palate*.

Thus I advocate, not objectivity, but a consistent, visible and informed subjectivity. It is all you can ask of a person.

I do believe there are larger truths – or Truths – about wine, and we can make value judgments about them and argue all night – civilly I hope. But when it comes to scents and flavors of individual

wines, I am much less sure. Here's a blatant example. One thing I know about my own palate is that it grows over-sensitive to tannin if I have tasted a bunch of young astringent whites. If colleagues are present I'll always ask them "Does this wine strike you as extremely tannic?" and when they answer no, I'll know it's just me. Alone, I'll suspect it's just me. I've started to taste the red wines first for just this reason. So this "palate," this part of ourselves that we use to apprehend wine, shouldn't we begin by knowing it, and shouldn't we share what we know with our readers? I mean, just to be minimally *useful* to them?

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

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

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

I like balance but I will tolerate a fascinating "flaw." Ideally a wine is both balanced *and* fascinating. In a balanced wine the flavors seem *preordained* to exist in precisely **that** configuration. No knees or elbows poke out.

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.

are at least as good as those of the imported arriviste. It is, of course, *Scheurebe*. And it is so damn sad to see the Germans squander the opportunity to stand *proudly* behind that which is uniquely theirs, instead of running behind the parade saying "We can do that too."

I suggested to several growers they gave their wines

the name "Scheu-vignon Blanc." Somehow I was taken frivolously.

And don't you go fussing at me if you see a couple Sauvys in this offering, I said the wines could be good. I'm not gonna boycott them. I raise the point at all to show how oddly blind this culture can be to its native treasures.

# Müller-Catoir

Pfalz // Haardt



vineyard area // 21 hectares  
annual production // 12,500 cases  
top sites & soil types // Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog (sandstone);  
Haardter Herrenletten (loam, limestone); Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten (loess);  
Mußbacher Eselshaut (gravel)  
grape varieties // 60% Riesling, 10% Weissburgunder, 5% Grauburgunder,  
5% Muskateller, 5% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 5% Spätburgunder

## *Ten years of Martin Franzen this year. It was duly noted and celebrated.*

For me there's been very little discontinuity in representing Müller-Catoir, other than what I myself created in the early days of the transition. I've maintained a friendship with the former cellar master Hans-Günter Schwarz; indeed our paths seem to orbit around each other's in a tangible nexus. Schwarz's new son-in-law is the right-hand man of von Winning's chief (Stefan Attmann), and during a visit to Schwarz, Hans-Günter was entirely warm in his praise of Franzen's work.

I have wondered at the prevailing opinion within the German critical circle that the wines have changed so radically that a re-evaluation is called for. To me their changes are subtle, and less important than that which continues: it's the same vineyards, after all, the same cellar, and the same family proprietorship with its willingness to do anything necessary to offer aristocratic wines.

If the wines have "changed" at all I sense they've drawn closer to the general temperament of the entire domain. There may have been a disconnect between Schwarz's super-expressive sensory-explosive style and the Gregorian quiet the former owner seemed to wish to preserve. If Franzen's wines are *cooler* and more cerebral — big if, mind you

— then it aligns with Philip Catoir's own temperament, and thus the guiding spirit of his estate. As an ultraviolet introvert myself, I'm responsive to and comfortable with introversion in others, and I wince when such introversion is mistaken for *hauteur*.



The big mistake is to conflate introversion for shyness. The introvert isn't awkward around people; he just prefers to be alone. At worst he may be diffident, but indeed he's quite at ease with his fellow humans, especially in small groups or 1-on-1. "Social" behavior is anathema to him, though he can often contrive a convincing portrayal of ease in social situations. I actually enjoy them, in small doses, but it's a dish that quickly fills me up. I'm actually touched at the mutual respect and regard flowing between Catoir and Franzen. Martin is genial and approachable, but he doesn't seem boisterous.

The same could plausibly be said about his wines, which eschew high-affect for the more interior joys of clarity, diction and precision. The hoary old saw that Franzen, who hails from the Mosel, has tried somehow to fashion Mosel wines in the Pfalz is fatuous. Most Mosels are more extroverted than Martin's calmly and serenely beautiful wines.

**Müller-Catoir at a glance** // *Maybe the greatest estate in the Pfalz and one of the top few in all of Germany. Brilliant primary fruit driven wines of supernatural steely clarity and multi-layered depth. The overused word aristocratic perhaps best describes them.*

**how the wines taste** // *Extremely spritzy and highly leesy—one wine made me think of Gimmonet's Cuvée Gastronome! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.*

**2011 "M-C" Riesling Trocken**

GMC-171

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Delicious this year; clean, fragrant, crystalline and fruity – who makes a basic estate Riesling anywhere near this good? Lively, fresh, herbs and straw and talc, and a lot of length.

**2011 Haardt Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

GMC-174

**SOS : 0**

Filigree and yet packed tight with rock-dust and wet straw, a little phenolic nip, but a clear bead of vinosity all the way into the deliberate finish.

***Gabe Clary writes:***

*"Limestone and dusty minerals right out of the gate, crushed stones and a slight pine-y woody aroma. This is so tight and concentrated while avoiding tasting like concentrate. Ripe apricots and a savory tarragon flavor. Crushed rocks and wow! This is not lacking in acidity at all."*

**2011 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs , 6/750ml (+)**

GMC-173

**SOS : n/a**

Limestone and garrigue aromas lead into a studious, articulate but not especially showy Riesling; rock-dusty texture and a decidedly mineral attack; rather soft dissolve on the finish – a bit radishy like Kögl or Zwerithaler; a spiciness comes on and may eventually carry this into an intensity sufficient to justify its "stature" as a GG.

**2011 Haardt Scheurebe Kabinett Trocken +**

GMC-176

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Catoir was the 3rd-to-last estate I visited, and this was the first truly rabidly foaming Scheu aroma of the vintage, and it's a *marvelous* dry Scheurebe and a haunting dry wine of any type; sage, woodruff, cassis, sharp as kitten teeth yet the palate is juicy and minty and weirdly irresistible.

**2011 Haardt Muskateller Kabinett Trocken +**

GMC-175

**SOS : 0**

Among the world's greatest Muscats, and among those it's certainly the most singular, showing opal basil and spearmint aromas I've scarcely seen from other Muscats, which tend more to either cats or elderflowers. This also dips into white and especially green teas, and the '11 has all its feral beauty and also saltiness, and with a starchiness like pasta-water. It's erotic, hitting erogenous zones you didn't know you had. I love it, the cool keen fever and the ceaseless jabbing intensity.

**2011 Herzog Rieslaner Spätlese Trocken ++**

GMC-177

**SOS : 0**

A polite and even mannerly version of this extravagant beast, though perhaps subdued by very recent bottling. As always the complexity is intimidating – what the *fuck* does this taste like??? Yet in this case the poise and polish are striking given the wines pointed and powerful expressiveness. The finish is intricate and deliberate; the empty glass is a garrison at attention, being reviewed by the General. You'll probably be served it if you come to my house for dinner, so be ready for your mind to bend and your toes to curl.

**2011 Mussbach Riesling Kabinett +**

GMC-172

**SOS : 2**

Also just-bottled, but the plum-blossom aroma is fetching and the balsam, aloe and key-lime create a counterpoint to the peachy richness, yet the palate skews green and the wine seems strikingly green-tea and shady, a departure from its usual extravagance – is it the vintage, the recent bottling? Either way, it's delicious and refreshing.

**2011 Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese +**

GMC-178

**SOS : 3**

Refined focused aromas, and the whole thing is a fine shady stream of sweet green. It's all from the micro-parcel "Aspen" if you recall the dry bottlings of a few years back. Succulent, on the sweet side, with a serenity and delicacy one rarely sees here, where the wines are usually spritzy and buzzing with energy. Lime, mango, verbena.

**2011 Herzog Rieslaner Spätlese +**

GMC-179

**SOS : 2**

Compared to the Riesling this is more starched, proud, drier-seeming, regal. Broader and less sweet than the (amazing) '08. Has that pasta-water starch again. The finish doesn't let go. A beignet with lemon zest, hugely compelling, and not showing all its cards.

**2011 Herzog Rieslaner TBA , 12/375ml**

GMC-180H

**SOS : n/a**

Though I'm personally cool to the very sweet wines, I'd like you to see this and make up your own mind. It's 270° Oechsle (TBA begins at 150°) and the RS is 380 grams/liter. There seems to be no middle-ground; either you surrender, overwhelmed, or you don't like how sticky you feel.

## Rieslaner, The Riesling Viagra

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

# Scheurebe: What Gives?

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

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

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

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

Scheurebe is capable of great finesse and stature. Yet it's becoming an endangered species. Why? Theo Minges told me, "A lot of bad Scheurebe was made from too-high yields. You got cat-piss and sometimes botrytis on top of cat-piss." But times changed, and after a general retreat in acreage, the variety is being rediscovered by good growers sensitive to its manic potential. But you have to respect it. Scheurebe likes vineyard conditions which Riesling likes as well. Scheu will hiss at you if you plant it in the wrong place. This you don't want. But by planting it in good Riesling sites, you have a wine which fetches less money than Riesling. Not good.

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more*

attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes too demure.

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

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

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

Alas, the Scheurebe can be as temperamental as a high-bred feline. Yet when it deigns to accept you it knows some moves you've *never* been shown. Scheurebe satisfies our desire to wallow in lust, which we *spir-chull* guys need so's we don't float away on our wisps of bliss. And so there's little point in *delicate* Scheu, or God help us *subtle* Scheu. If you like it at all you like it writhing and sweaty. Yet: this does not, or *need* not preclude a certain elegance, a certain stature, a certain, dare one say... aristocracy? Scheu may be slutty, but it isn't ignoble, and I wonder whether there's really *any* equivalent in the world of wine. Certainly Scheu can overstate, sometimes blatantly, but the *thing* it overstates is often marvelous and even *fine*. So, sybarites, you can have it both ways. Scheu is almost as noble as Riesling but unlike Riesling it has the naughty bits still there!

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# von Winning / Dr. Deinhard Pfalz // Deidesheim



vineyard area // 40 hectares    annual production // 23,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Deidesheim Mäushöhle and Paradiesgarten (loess, loam, red sandstone); Ruppertsberg Reiterpfad (sandy loam, red sandstone, marl-lime); Deidesheim Grainhübel, Langenmorgen GG and Kieselberg GG (loam, red sandstone, limestone); Forst Ungeheuer (loess, loam, sandstone, basalt); Deidesheim Kalkofen GG (limestone, marl, loam); Forst Kirchenstück GG (sandy loam, red sandstone, basalt)  
grape varieties // Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Weisser Burgunder, Chardonnay, Grauer Burgunder, Pinot Noir, Muskateller, Scheurebe, Gewürztraminer

*The manic energy hasn't abated. But this year we received a list and had an overview of what was made. That said, I still had no idea they make a Muskateller until I read a review of it somewhere. Grrrr.*

Stefan Attmann is the genial culprit.

D'ja ever meet someone and in the first five seconds you're off and running? You can't stop talking, it's as if you've collected things your whole life to say to this very guy? Hours pass and you don't know how? You have to continue the conversation! All life depends on the conversation being continued. It's like that with Stefan. I don't know how I managed to taste anything let alone write notes on what I tasted. It's like riding a TGV train of talk.

If you don't already know, the estate was sold, to a very wealthy gentleman named Niederberger, who owns a Scherezadelike villa in Neustadt (where Hans-Günter Schwarz makes wine from .9 hectares of vineyards) and also Bassermann-Jordan and von Buhl, which, along with Dr. Deinhard, used to be a single huge estate.

In effect the estate will be split in two; the baseline wines sold at excellent prices will still go out under the Dr. Deinhard name. The prestige-line, with all the Grosses Gewächs and their ilk will be sold as von Winning, after the name of a former proprietor.

The handsome old courtyard has a sweet new restaurant, and work proceeds on the hotel-restaurant and the private guestroom they plan to add for the "VIP" visitor (like you, precious! I'm just happy to sleep standing up in the barn...).

There is cause for controversy, as Stefan has bought new casks – not barriques, but 1000-liter Stücks - and he's using them for his dry Rieslings without having steamed

away any wood flavor. In theory I have mixed feelings about this. In the glass the wines are mostly outstanding, with only a couple showing obtrusively woody notes. That said, I'd feel better if Stefan moved away from the notion of marked-woody flavors as signifying seriousness, let alone greatness.

For it's great wine he wants to make. At one point he said to me, "There's no point in working this hard if you're not going all out to make *great* wine. Good wine isn't enough."

And that makes perfect sense. The question arises, what is his *idea* of great wine, what are his paradigms and templates? At one point he told me he loved the likes of Dönnhoff or Egon Müller as much as any wine lover does, but in the Pfalz the wines should be more ruggedly powerful. Thus he eschews cold fermentations in order to avoid amylic aromas. He doesn't want "fruity," he wants manly. The results are so singular they can hardly be tasted aside other Pfalz wines but by themselves as almost their own genre.

I'll hazard a guess that Attmann looks to White Burgundy as his beacon. Not to oak as such, nor to a creamy texture, but rather to the patrician dignity of great old-school examples. Tasting his GGs in a row I found myself dreaming I was tasting 4 Grand Cru Chablis from a single grower.

The estate is an absolute cause *célèbre*, having arrived on the scene with a roar of approval from virtually every important commentator in Europe. No star is rising

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**Dr. Deinhard at a glance** // Big doings at this fine old name, an estate on-the-move, so grab on tight and catch a rising star.

**how the wines taste** // All I can say now is they taste like great Pfalz wines; it's too soon to know what Attmann's "signature" might yet be. The collection of Grand Crus is enticing.

faster, no story more compelling to tell.

Attmann is clear that this is his life's work. He wants every possible *substance* in his wine, to taste as if it were alive. He doesn't fine and won't filter if he doesn't have to. If you're cultured-yeast phobic, all these wines are ambient-yeast fermented (which the Germans call *sponti*, for "spontangärung") and he'd rather never have to rack them off their gross lees until bottling. It's a kind of atavism of the cellar that makes for inspiring contemplation, and for many exciting wines.

These are wines of a type perfectly aligned with the demands of the domestic German market. Their rapid rise to renown is hardly surprising, therefore, and yet we need to ask whether the crevasse between our tastes and theirs is too wide to leap over. If you're thinking "What is he talking about? Good wine is good wine," I need you to trust me; the Germans have a highly specific and particular taste. It is unusually monolithic (which is why I doubt it is actual *taste* at all) and it tolerates a degree of shrillness, sharpness and sourness that many of us find objectionable. When I did my dry-Riesling comparison of Austria and Germany for the SWE in the Summer of 2010, many tasters remarked upon the tartness of the German Rieslings vis-à-vis the juicier Austrians – and these were *good* dry German Rieslings, the least shrill I could find.

Make no mistake: I am convinced by what I see at Von Winning. I think it's a fantastic story, I'm blown away by Attmann's passion and energy, I'm proud to be associated with it, I have unqualified admiration for many of the wines, yet it feels at times like trying to translate

Vietnamese into English. There are few true cognates, and the very foundations of the languages are crucially different.

For example – the prices for Winning's GGs are by no means unreasonable, and at least one German journalist held them up as exemplary values. I also respect the nature and extent of Niederberger's investment! But when the wines get here, we're asking American wine drinkers to pay north of \$100 for a sort of dry Riesling that can be staggeringly impressive but is more cerebral than seductive. Why is great Chablis less expensive than middling Puligny? I ask you. Because the firmness and minerality of the best Chablis are prized less highly than the creamy oily richness and explicit blast of tropical fruitiness of many modern Côte d'Or whites.

*How much do you really care* about great dry Rieslings? Or does it begin and end with Clos Ste. Hune for you? Sales of the great magnificent Austrian examples are mingy compared to their true stature and value. Or are we really stuck in the mire of wanting wines that aren't *sweet*, oh no god forbid, but also not really *dry*, or if they're dry they also have to be *smooth* and juicy? Of course if you're reading this in the first place, you're in the vanguard of taste and these aren't issues for you. And yet I wonder.

So we've created an offering of these superb wines that meets you, me, us, as far as is possible, given the starting point. Attmann is entirely willing to do everything possible to respect and accommodate our market's preferences, short of selling himself out. Bless him! He might have been a diva, but in fact he's the opposite – a guy who just crazily loves wine and wants to share the bliss. Let's see can we help him....

## 2011 von Winning Riesling

GDD-062

SOS : 0

**CORE-LIST WINE.** In Germany the wine's called "Win-Win," and it's also drier. It will be the calling-card wine for this market, and Attmann's willing to give us the tastiest possible critter consistent with his basic principles.

So, it's a *sponti*. Will that be OK with you? Everyone's so weirdly squeamish about yeasts (of all things), and everyone wants funky "natural" aromas – so, well, here you go! After a couple minutes of swirling we get the true lemony-woody fragrance into a balanced, woody and creamy palate. This is smart cellar work and excellent blending, and we have the charm and fruit we need. Just try not to serve it ice-cold.

## 2011 von Winning Deidesheimer Paradiesgarten Riesling Trocken

GDD-064

SOS : 0

Maybe the most impressive among the range of non-GG dry Rieslings in terms of sheer tastiness at its price, about as delicious as the genre can be. It's not a big terroir statement but an awfully fetching dry Riesling.

**2011 von Winning Kalkofen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** GDD-065  
**2011 von Winning Kieselberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** + GDD-067  
**2011 von Winning Pechstein Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** + + GDD-066  
**SOS : 0** ( all three )

Very early days of course for all of these, but 2011 is more amenable to early appraisal than were the '10s. It's telling, by the way, that Stefan Attmann's wild about the '10s – they're the *sine qua non* of the masculine, mineral and acid-driven style his countrymen adore. The '11s are less forbidding.

*Kalkofen* has dried corn and limestone aromas of a certain "size;" it smells like a Big Wine. Subtly woody, like certain oak-made Chablis, which at the moment gets in the way of its Riesling-ness. *Kieselberg*, though, is a Riesling-man's Riesling, high-toned and minerally and bracing, not seductive, but a complex iteration of Riesling's high-mineral notes in a detailed mosaic; sizzle-cymbal wash of action over the tongue, each bud is brushed.

**Valerie Masten writes:**

*"In a way only Von Winning GG's seem to capture: ELECTRIC. The Kieselberg's magnified minerality, at once compact and flinty, evolves to concentrated elegance. Herbaceous, punctuated with lime and chili oil, crushed tea leaf, lavender, and juniper."*

But the great masterpiece here is the *Pechstein*, a serious Grand Cru fragrance, clear from the first instant that it's a magnificent terroir as brilliantly as it's ever been expressed; an almost jalapeño spice and that happy sting, and the manic hyacinth and the digitally clear foresty herb nuances and the sense of internal sweetness and the angular piquant saltiness, all in a giddy swirl of energy.

**2011 von Winning Sauvignon Blanc "I," 6/750ml** + + GDD-068  
**SOS : 0** // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

No *way* did I expect this.

Part cask and part steel, and serious Sauv-Blanc, grasping at stature, and comparable to the best of Styria – as good as any Hochgrasnitzberg I remember; superbly sapid and complex and magnetic, leesy and grown-up and amazing. If this quality can be repeated, I'll drop my objection to German Sauv-Blanc!

**2011 Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberger Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter** GDD-061L  
**SOS : 1**

Shake it a minute, and then a fine clone-90 aroma emerges (tropical, orange-blossomy); the palate is *just* balanced on the tart side; texture is a little bracing yet juicy and the finish is angular. It would have been perfect with 25g of RS, but no German would ever buy it.

**2011 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken (+)** GDD-063  
**SOS : 1**

Swirl again. The charm takes some time to emerge but when it does there's a lovely exhalation of freesia and mirabelle and cherry blossom, and I only hedge the plus because I wonder how it will taste chilled. (We drink at cool cellar temp.)

**2008 Dr. Deinhard Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese + +** GDD-054  
**SOS : 2**

Kudos to them for bottling an Auslese you can *drink* rather than some 130-Oechsle show-stopper with 120 grams of sugar. And what a mortal fucking pity that such things are going the way of the dodo. The wine is completely superb; refined and highly complex fragrance of plum-blossom and meringue and hyacinth; cool and still as the best '08s are, full of lissome tangy fruit, as melodic as bird-song and so juicy you can't wait for the next sip.

# Eugen Müller

Pfalz // Forst

vineyard area // 17 hectares annual production // 14,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Forster Kirchenstück** (limestone, sandy loam, basalt); **Forster Jesuitengarten** (sandstone, sandy loam, basalt); **Forster Ungeheuer** (sandstone, gravel, basalt); **Forster Pechstein** (basalt); **Forster Freundstück** (sandstone, gravel, limestone)  
grape varieties // 80% Riesling, 10% Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, 10% red varieties mostly Spätburgunder



*The estate remains below the trendiness radar – there are bigger “names” in Forst. But I like these forthright honest people, and their wines are excellent values.*

With Müller you can really see the impact of exceptional land.

Allow me a small rant. Admit it, it's entertaining when I rant! My pants are full of rants...O.K., it galls me when people obsessively learn every *lieu dit* in Burgundy but are indifferent to the Grand Crus in Germany except for the few Mosel or Rheingau vineyards they've heard of. These are great classic vineyards for the world's best grape variety, and ignoring them is a form of contempt. You may not know this, but the site with the highest land-value, i.e., the one you pay the highest taxes on, is not Erbacher Marcobrunn or Bernkasteler Doktor or Scharzhofberger: it is Forster Kirchenstück. As a matter of fact.

We're learning of many great and formerly unknown sites throughout the Pfalz today, thanks to the burgeoning of passion and quality among the post-70s generation, but I don't expect you to have memorized these. The long-established great classics though, the wines that have graced many a label from venerable well-known estates (like Bassermann, Buhl and Bürklin), those you should appreciate, and failing to do so is like saying “Well I've memorized the Grand Crus in the Côte de Nuits, so I don't have to bother learning the vineyards in the Côte de Beaune.”

Scold over. I'm here to help. These, at a minimum, are the sites you should know:

**Forster Kirchenstück** (which some feel is the best site in all the Pfalz), **Jesuitengarten**, **Pechstein** (these are the big-3), **Freundstück**, **Musenhang**, and **Ungeheuer**.

**Deidesheimer Hohenmorgen**, **Grainhübel** (the best-of-the-best), **Kalkofen**, **Kieselberg**, **Leinhöhle**, and **Langenmorgen**.

**Wachenheimer Goldbächel** (which I'd put on par with Kirchenstück though the styles are 180° apart), **Altenburg**, **Rechbächel**, **Gerümpel**.

**Ruppertsberger Hoheburg**, **Reiterpfad** and **Nussbien**.

In sketch form, the Ruppertsbergers are strong Premier Crus, but not quite entirely Grand. Wachenheim they say is “feminine,” and these are indeed queenly and sometimes swooningly perfumed. Partisans of Forst/Deidesheim will argue which is “best.” Forst is more Cajun is the way I'd put it. Forst is full-throttle, overtly expressive, yet with breed and finesse – it isn't sloppy. Deidesheim's more grown-up; it's there at the party but it goes home by midnight, after having had a roaring good time. Forst goes on roaring. Wachenheim declined the invitation because it had theater tickets. Ruppertsberg was invited but felt a little out of place. Forst stumbled into bed in the wee hours, but was up promptly the next morning to work against deadline on an article on Latvian interpretive dance.

Weingut Eugen Müller is 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

**Eugen Müller at a glance** // This is a winery on the move, and the next few years will tell a new tale. There's a sensational collection of vineyards and new energy in the cellar. This is what the Germans call an *Aufsteiger*, i.e. one who is climbing.

**how the wines taste** // They used to be rather matte and caramelly as a whole, though the fabulous *Auslesen* from the Kirchenstück showed great fire and breed. The 2004s were harbingers of a change, as they are more “modern,” clear and bright.

in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien.

It bears mentioning that *these* dry Rieslings are among the juiciest and easiest to drink of any German examples I've encountered. And yet they're far from easy. Loads of salty-savory-mineral complexity abound, but they're simply less huffy and a ton more fun. And while Stephan Müller's wines continue to grow more polished and less hearty than his father's wines were, they remain companionable and chipper and unaffected by any need

to be Very Serious Indeed.

I had an interesting bit of palate-juju that day. The first five wines all tasted sharp to me. A second pass through didn't change them. I began to suspect it was me. I asked my peeps. Seemed to be me. And so I rinsed my mouth and ate a few grissini and went back to the wines – which of course all changed. It never hurts to be reminded of the small but decisive changes in your body chemistry. Maybe I was dehydrated, or maybe something from the previous night's dinner was still in the sensorium somewhere – who knows?

### 2011 Forster Jesuitengarten Riesling Kabinett Trocken

GEM-120

**SOS : 0**

Classy and classic Pfalz fragrance; the palate is linear and direct, with surprising rock-dust, a stock-like pheasanty richness and a fennelly tang. This vineyard takes the almost gelatinous richness of its neighbor Ungeheuer and stretches it into a sleeker line, not so much mineral as a more subtle caramel.

#### **Gabe Clary writes:**

*"Pits! Cherry and apricot pits and the fruit just surrounding them. A crunchy apple fleshy acidity. The palate sort of makes a turn towards more red fruits – plum and plum skin. It reminds me of WCW's 'cold plums that were in the icebox'. The flavors are cool. There is a marly, iron-y minerality and the acid really grips the tongue. It seems that if Mosel is green and yellow this year, that Pfalz is more red."*

### 2011 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken

GEM-121

**SOS : 0**

12.5% alc, so equivalent to Nigl's basic Piri – in more than one way, as it's also spriggy, sleek and flowery – early flowers, not roses, more white iris. A lot of relief and complexity and terroir in this. But it rewards quiet attention.

### 2011 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Cyriakus" +

GEM-122

**SOS : 0**

The prime parcel within the Kirchenstück – and there's some reason for optimism the E.U. will permit such names to appear on wine labels again. I'd love to see it, but I'm a drooling dawg of terroir, and I loves me some of them old names.

If the above Kirchenstück were the Federspiel this would be the Smaragd, though not by dint of power or alcohol but by strength of terroir expression. Though determinedly dry, the mineral intensity carries it in lieu of fruit as-such. It's why some of us go to Riesling but also why more of us don't. The rewards are very real, but cerebral.

### 2011 Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese Feinherb +

GEM-123

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

A few measly grams of sugar – still could be *Brut* were it fizzy – give the wines a serene euphoria, and simply more melody, more flower, more salt – altogether more fetching. And the salt creates an angular counterpoint to even the slightest RS; you smack your lips to eke out each little terroir morsel; you can almost lick it off your teeth.

### 2011 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett

GEM-124

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Also Pechstein, but bottled with the Grosslage name as it's become a kind of "brand" for the estate's private customers. This '11 is more horizontal and elliptical than the direct attack of the '10, but the salty syrup slides over the palate; a little gravelly phenolic action stops it from being too smooth. Attractive.

**2011 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**

GEM-125

**SOS : 2**

This always needs a year. Now it's as rugged as new jeans, when you had to break them in. Salty and abnormally high-toned and tangy. Still analog yet still precise, and loaded with Pfalz juiciness. I *always* underrate this.

**2011 Gewürztraminer Spätlese "Reiterpfad"**

GEM-126

**SOS : 2**

Usually a blend of two sites, but one of them was destroyed by frost, so we get a single-site 1er Cru wine. And once again, we get a rare and splendid being – perfect German Gewürz. Impeccable balance, elegant but still forceful, *just* enough sweetness to barely taste sweet; graceful and incense-y and juicy and deft. Is there anywhere in Alsace to find a wine like this anymore? 10% alc but not remotely sugary?

**2010 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml +**

GEM-119H

**SOS : 2**

As was often the case, tasting '11s did not flatter the few remaining '10s, so I'll neither repeat last year's note nor write a new one. I believe in the wine, though, and happily offer it again.

**2011 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml + +**

GEM-127H

**SOS : 3**

Savagely fine vineyard fragrance, a city made of cherry blossom. The palate is literally stunning in the ferocity of its terroir, endlessly salty and flowery, already expressive and integrated, and lashing and electric.

**2008 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling BA, 12/375ml + + (+)**

GEM-112H

**SOS : 3**

A slim, slippery masterpiece; studious, spicy, pure... I know this isn't the language that "sells" such wines. I can only say you lift the glass 20 times and have 50 thoughts, impressions and emotions. It's lamb-y somehow, as if it was grilled over lilac shoots and secreted its own mint. A thrall of detailed ripeness; you have to expand yourself to taste it, physically, and to get it sensually. Price is laughable for such a wine. Go on, do it.

# Herbert Meßmer

Pfalz // Burrweiler



vineyard area // 25 hectares  
annual production // 26,700 cases  
top sites & soil types // Burrweiler Schäwer and Weyhrer Michelsberg (slate);  
Burrweiler Schloßgarten (loam, limestone); Burrweiler Altenforst (sandstone)  
grape varieties // Riesling, Grauburgunder, Weißburgunder, Gewürztraminer,  
Muskateller, Spätburgunder, St. Laurent

*Gregor Meßmer will initiate biodynamic viticulture starting with vintage '11. "I'm the sort of man who deliberates a long time, but once I decide I implement immediately," he says. So let's watch and see what happens. The transition, as you know, is the hard part.*

But when I asked him how it was going, he said "Maybe less difficult than I thought. After all, I had paved the way over many years while I was considering it. So that when we took the final step, it wasn't such a radical change."

While we are all very glad to have found such a happy success with the Meßmer Pinot Noir in Liters, I won't deny it gives us mixed emotions. Gregor's is a rich, complex domain, full of interesting and superb wines from a number of grapes in a number of idioms, and it's a shame when 75% of one's business comes from a single (relatively) everyday wine.

Put it this way: I knew I'd be meeting up with Jacqueline Friedrich after my Germany days were finished, and I wanted to give her something she could return to the Loire with, and drink with some of her vintner friends. I picked Meßmer's 2008 Rieslaner Spätlese, because it's a magnificent and profound masterpiece. One that he still has for sale... because no one, neither his German clientele nor his savvy American customers, has bought enough. I'm personally going to wear the cone of shame around my neck all weekend. I'm sure to be the talk of the dog park.

Meßmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the

only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slatey minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

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

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**Herbert 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.

**2011 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

GMS-173L

**SOS : 1**

An outstanding vintage for this wine! Spicy, bright and cheerful, and still lacy and focused.

**2011 Riesling "Buntsandstein" +**

GMS-174

**SOS : 0**

In fact from the Altenforst vineyard, and it's a fetching and almost seductive dry Riesling; mirabelle and white iris; palate-coating juiciness and salt; rock-dust into a spicy talc-y finish. Crazy tasty, with a eucalyptus edge as it slowly dissolves into the interior finish.

**2011 Schäwer Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml**

GMS-177

**SOS : 0**

Maybe my most daring selection, as it's a really smoky cerebral wine, a many-layered delicate being that wants to be studied; it's juicy yet pulled very taut, and the finish is leaf-smoke and plum blossom, with nuances of pepper and allspice. It's nearly anti-sensual, but also clearly excellent.

**2011 Riesling Kabinett Feinherb "Muschelkalk" +**

GMS-168

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** It baffles me most of all that this wine is so hard to sell in the volume I know it deserves. It's hard to conceive of a way it could be better. I had three options and took the least spicy, the one with the most mid-palate weight and juiciness. The fragrance is an inference of fruit and talc, yellow irises, not sultry but smelling of *nature*, and nature includes some earthiness. The palate is rock-dusty and dense, long, handsome and tasty with a racy vivid finish. I wish it were still on the core-list. If you buy it, and especially if you *pour* it, I will luv u 4-evt.

**2011 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese +**

GMS-176

**SOS : 2**

Not creamy exactly, more like liquid silk, and showing all the wild plums, saltiness and smoke of the great site; a tangy length, really a clinging rock-dust length, as impressive as this wine has ever been. I'm currently drinking the still-youthful 2001 vintage, and Gregor says (and I agree) this '11 is fundamentally better.

**2011 Muskateller Feinherb +**

GMS-171

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

I buy it for my cellar each year; I love it that much. The '11 is no slouch with its 13.2% alc, but there's zero botrytis, because Gregor took two entire days with an 8-person crew to remove every dubious berry. It's all cherry-blossom and peppermint and is once again among Germany's (and thus the world's) best Muscats.

**2011 Scheurebe**

GMS-172

**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** From purchased *organic* grapes, and a discreet woodruff-y grapefruity Scheu; neither dry nor Feinherb but tangy and helpful, limey and fresh.

**2011 Gewüztraminer Spätlese**

GMS-175

**SOS : 2**

Again, *just* sweet enough, liches more than roses; an elegant Gewürz, with an ethereal flowery finish. As crafted as can be.

**2010 Pinot Noir, 1.0 Liter**

GMS-170L

**SOS : n/a**

This is cooler, more “blue” than the sweet-roasty ‘09, so allow for it. Pure, into the center of the fruit, very pretty in a more demure way. It’s more Old-World tasting.

**2009 Schlossgarten Spätburgunder Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + (+)**

GMS-160

**SOS : n/a**

This is among the most Burgundian PNs I’ve tasted from Germany. They’re usually either lighter or they over-compensate by being oakier, but this has classic blackberry and sandalwood aromas, quite rich and dense; the palate is a parade of spice and length and depth – *that’s* what tells here, the middle, the evening-long unfolding of history and nuance, the dark sweetness of loss and joy. The wine has gravitas and yet the up-front fruit sweetness; I find it meditative yet also thrilling in some way. It’s always lovely when someone achieves such a thing with Pinot Noir.

**2010 Schlossgarten Spätburgunder Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml +**

GMS-169

**SOS : n/a**

Man’s got The Touch with Pinot. This is both a step forward and a step in another direction, toward the essences of fruit and berry; juicy and still primary (the ‘09 is more vinous), but long and grown up. ‘09 is more manly and savory, but this ‘10 is full of Corton violets.

**2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Spätlese + + +**

GMS-151

**SOS : 2**

If there’s anyone in the crowd who *disputes* my claim that white wine does NOT get better than this, I will buy you a car. I am saying this partly because I actually physically *could not* write a tasting note for this wine. I was overcome. The radiance was overwhelming. I’d try, you know, like “Aromas of—” WHAM! Engulfed. “The structure—” WHAM! Another wave. “It has—” WHAM! So I gave up, and floated in the diamond bliss.

**2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml + + +**

GMS-152H

**SOS : 3**

It’s not that this Auslese is a *lesser* wine; it is a sweeter wine, a riper wine, and its stunning implacable power is comprehensible, whereas the Spätlese shows more fever and buzz than you ever see in its echelon. My elder readers might well recall Norman Mailer’s essay on sex on LSD. They’ll know what I mean when I describe Rieslaners like these as psychedelic eros. This wine puts on fuck-me shoes and dances on your brain.

# Theo Minges

Pfalz // Flemingingen

vineyard area // 24 hectares  
annual production // 16,700 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Flemlinger Zechpeter and Burrweiler Schlossgarten** (loess-loam); **Gleisweiler Hölle** (sandstone, limestone)  
grape varieties // **Riesling, Scheurebe, Muskateller, Gewürztraminer, Grauburgunder, Spätburgunder**



*Theo's now in year-3 of transition to organics. Wish him well. I think it's a logical outgrowth of the way he's always responded to his vines.*

I think if the Buddhists are right about reincarnation, then Li Po has returned as Theo Minges, to make wine. His cellar is like some timeless sanctuary, where the wines meander their way to wherever it is they settle on going.

Minges has become quite the new-ager in his old age. Where Gregor Messmer is a cerebral sort of guy, Minges is constantly talking about *energy* fields and similar arcana. And he often talks about transmitting energy into the glass; there is clearly a sort of vibrant force he's looking for. He's come to the attention of Hans-Günter Schwarz, who has been, not exactly "consulting," but available as an interested friend. Hans-Günter always said there either was or wasn't an ignition of simpatico between him and his many apprentices, and I'm sure as he got to know Minges he felt *This is my kind of man*, and he attended to the estate as a kindly force himself.

I look at the number of wines I'm offering and I can hear the admonishing from my colleagues and from you. Hell, I rebuke myself. But in response I can only say, you weren't there. I chose ten out of about thirty wines, and each one was good, and what I chose was exceptional. Maybe I need a thicker skin. It's hard to sit across from a guy who's worked all year and is showing you the results, and say "This wine is truly excellent and I'm not gonna buy it because people say my portfolio is too large." On the other hand, maybe my skin is just right.

It was a quiet weekday morning when I visited, by myself as it happened. Theo's daughter Regina was on crutches but even this couldn't tamp down her incandescence. She's a cheerful girl, and I believe her

when she says she's old enough to drink. She seems to express her father's hidden giddy side.

Lately I'm finding Minges to be the spirit-kin of Nikolaihof, not because the wines are similar – though some are – but because the ways of life are aligned. There's a kind of respect shown to wine in each house, an assumption that wine is an equally valid being. This isn't the same as the way one might regard wine as an aesthetic object, how good or how great it tastes. That's like judging a dog by how many tricks it can do. I've often thought that people who give their dogs cutesie-poo names are missing some vital thing. I'd never give a dog a name I wouldn't give to a person. In high-school I knew a guy with an Airedale named "John." A perfect name for that dog.

The evening before my visit I was with Hans-Günter Schwarz, who told me I'd like what I tasted – as indeed I did. Another melding of the spirits, those two men. Schwarz was the original vine-whisperer; I always had a vision of vines turning toward him as he entered the vineyard, like sunflowers leaning toward the sun. And Minges is straining to hear the voice of the quarks and the protons in his wines. He was the *only* person to say the vintage was easy. His wines told me it was also excellent.

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**Theo Minges at a glance** // Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying minerally-leesy wines. Extraordinary value across the board. The best, best, best quality large-format wines I have ever tasted ANYWHERE.

**how the wines taste** // Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors.

**2011 Muskateller Trocken “Regine”**

GTM-146

**SOS : 0**

Daughter’s first vineyard entirely in her control. Bless her, she likes Muscat. Nor does she have Grand Ambitions for it, thankfully. This one’s catty and juicy and markedly long; direct, spearminty attack. You could slake your thirst with it if the local waters were brackish.

**2011 Gleisweiler Scheurebe Trocken**

GTM-147

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

A sagey, woodruff-y Scheu, charming and juicy, penetrating even with its light body; long spicy finish.

**2011 Riesling Spätlese Trocken “Pfalz Kalkstein”**

GTM-148

**SOS : 0**

It means limestone, it’s from the best sub-parcel of the Gleisweiler Hölle, and as good as dry German Riesling gets short of the ambitions of the GGs. Firm, stony but beaming with juiciness, long and salty, seriously dry but with authority. It would *be* the GG if he did them.

**2010 Riesling Spätlese Trocken “Froschkönig” ++**

GTM-144

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The “Frog-King” bottlings began as a 1-off in the ‘07 vintage. There was a vineyard whose grapes appeared “so perfect, it was a shame to pick them.” Theo wondered how such grapes would transmit the “energy” he’s attuned to if he did absolutely nothing to them. And so they fermented with no intervention, and lay without sulfur on their gross lees until about 18 months later. They’re bottled when they’re ready and not before. Sometimes they’re dry and sometimes off-dry, but the closest thing to them is Nikolaihof’s Rieslings from Im Weingebirge.

Theo was so happy with those experiments in ‘07 that he hopes to continue with at least one wine from each vintage. This ‘10 is still in cask, and it’s seriously beautiful wine, with a lovely gentle old-fashioned touch, some tantra of oxygen and vinosity; really creamy and long, dried fruits and exotic fruits and a loessy-seeming succulence that suggested GrüVe; saturated with *soul* and earthy complexity. “Dry” but physio-“sweet.”

**2009 Riesling Spätlese “Froschkönig” ++**

GTM-136

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

This is tremendous, 2009 at its best. And I’m so glad Theo wants to continue doing this, as it makes absolute sense for his particular soul, and it’s a cousin to Selbach’s *en-bloc* trilogy. Fragrances of toasted grain, meadow-flowers, brown butter, chamomile; the loveliest interplay of density, clarity and minerality; a chanterelle-y delicate earthiness, and a *perfect* food wine.

**2011 Riesling Halbtrocken**

GTM-145

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** This was always bottled in Liters, but y’all don’t buy a lot of German liters anymore, because the Austrian wines are considerably lower in price. But this wine is excellent – so I asked for a special bottling in 750s, and now we have a virtually *perfect* everyday Riesling at a lower unit-price, and theoretically everybody’s happy. Effulgent with joy. If not, you will be, when you taste this lovely vintage of this lovely wine, limey balsam-y wintergreeny, and fresh and delicious, and markedly long for its level.

**2011 Gleisweiler Riesling Kabinett**

GTM-149

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Riesling as Mesnil – as always. And vibrant, and lovely – as always.

**2011 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese +**

GTM-150

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** He also had a late-bottled '10 on the table. I tasted both of course. The '10 was quite a beast. I admired its amazingness, but would prefer to drink this. Because it's more than firm and pithy enough, silkier and more exotic. The '10 is my-way-or-the-highway whereas this lovely '11 is willing to be delicious, in its ginger and vanilla Pfalz generosity.

**2011 Gewürztraminer Spätlese "Edition Rosenduft"**

GTM-151

**SOS : 1**

I spent a few days in Alsace when I left the Pfalz. I tasted Gewurztraminer, of course. I was lucky to find a few that worked in a characteristically *Alsacien* way, burly and smoky and enveloping, and not over-sweet – which takes some searching. I like them, and now and again I just have the munchies for Gewürz, as it were.

There are fewer excellent German wines from this variety, but the good ones are uniquely good, and they slip down a lot easier; perfect balance here, none too sweet, not over-endowed alcoholically, no finishing bitterness, loaded with roses and litchis and "flambéed bananas" (Theo); salty and useful and not a vinous mascot.

**2011 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml**

GTM-152H

**SOS : 2**

130° Oechsle. Cape gooseberries, rhubarb; powerful but not dessert-y, from dessicated berries with almost no botrytis. Nor is it very sweet. Undeflected intensity and some alcoholic sting. Compelling, but I wonder where it goes in the bottle. Willing to find out!

**2008 Riesling Sekt Brut**

GTM-143

**SOS : n/a**

He does it all himself (many growers send their wines out to be turned into fizz), and this was on the lees three years — disgorged early 2012; it's detailed and graphite-y, like Varnier but drier; stylish and decently long and creamy. An entirely worthy estate-bottled fizz and more than worth its price.

# Kurt Darting

Pfalz // Bad-Dürkheim



vineyard area // 25 hectares  
annual production // 20,800 cases  
top sites & soil types // Spielberg and Herrenberg (limestone-marl);  
Hochbenn (sandy loam)  
grape varieties // Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Muskateller, Scheurebe,  
Burgundersorten, Rieslaner, Pinot Noir, Pinot Menuier, St. Laurent, Dornfelder

*I think Darting has become what I'd call a paradigm of a responsibly commercial winery. The wines are always excellent values and deliver more flavor than one's led to anticipate. They are full of tangy Pfalz charm; they are remarkably useful, and you get the feeling they arrive on your table wanting to help.*

There are in effect two tiers of quality, by dint of the parcels in two Crus called Spielberg and Michelsberg, which are mostly worked by hand and which give concentrated, complex wines. But even the least of the family's wines are addictively drinkable and full of forthright charm.

When I first visited Dartings in 1992 the estate was smaller, and the wines seemed like mini-Catoirs. Helmut Darting had apprenticed with Hans-Günter Schwarz, made friends and gotten religion. I suspect if he'd had a ten-hectare estate in Deidesheim or Forst, he'd have gone all out for elite quality. He knows how. But business

pulled in another direction, with the result that we get to observe the best facet of commercialism, wines we can drink and snuggle up to and still respect ourselves – if of course we ever did.

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.

## 2010 Pinot Meunier

GDR-210

SOS : n/a

I confess I was well pleased at y'all's response to the '09 Meunier from Darting. Take a bow, ye adventuresome sybarites. And approach the new vintage with eyes open, not because it's a step down, but rather a step in another direction, not as round and roasty, cooler and more explicitly berried. It was chaptalized to its 14% alc from 88° Oechsle, and if you're on its blueberry frequency you'll enjoy its toasty echo and reasonable length.

## 2010 St. Laurent

GDR-211

SOS : n/a

This was so dramatically better than the Pinot Noir I had to abandon the obvious commercial decision and offer the better wine. It's riper and more exciting in every way, classy, scrupulously varietal with inviting aromas and a succulent generous palate; smoky and bloody and vinous and gulpable *not* because it's light or simple, but because it's dee-lish.

**Darting at a glance** // 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.

**2011 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

GDR-209L

**SOS : 0**

Shows more ginger and pineapple and less orange and peach. Thus it's drier-seeming, more serious and with greater length than usual.

**2011 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

GDR-212

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

A classic Darting Riesling; juicy, nectarine-y, pure joy-in-drinking here! Not simple but *direct*, focused and violet-like. All easy-going dry Rieslings should be this way; fragrant, complex *enough*, salty and loaded with fruit. Sometimes you don't need to blow people away, but just to make them happy for an hour.

**2011 Dürkheimer Feuerberg Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +**

GDR-214

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Oh boy have we got ourselves a food-wine. And quite the gushing charmer to boot; meyer-lemons and satsumas, nectarines and talc, with a juicy shimmer – it's 13 out of 10 on the suck-me-down-o-meter.

**2011 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 liter**

GDR-215L

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** A teensy tic of botrytis this year, and again the usual spice and spring onion notes. It's entirely tasty and such a no-brainer you can spare your beleaguered brain for other things.

**2011 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**

GDR-208

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** A slight phenolic nubbyness does a lot of good here, as the wine is otherwise allusive and atmospheric.

**2011 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**

GDR-216

**SOS : 2**

Reminds me of Deidesheim in general and Kieselberg in particular, the cool white corn sweetness and plum-blossomy fragrance; there's grip and relief in a charming idiom, a little higher-toned now, a tangy finish, a wee bit on the sweet side.

**2011 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Trocken**

GDR-213

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Well, yes: perfect. Darting has a juicy hand with my beloved Muscat. The purest pleasure and virtue from the purest simplicity, but it isn't short and it's by *no* means mundane.

**2011 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewürztraminer Kabinett**

GDR-217

**SOS : 2**

Ja, ve twist ze tongue, but here's a wonderfully focused purity of the rose profile; it has grip and a good balance of its high and low elements; old-school sweet but not sugary.

**2011 Ungsteiner Honigsäckel Scheurebe Spätlese**

GDR-218

**SOS : 2**

No botrytis; a relatively subtle Scheu, sage and grapefruit, more a Riesling-with-attitude than a full-throttle kink-out Scheu. This sometimes changes, if you're into the kink. If you're more timid but still want to suss what Scheu's about, looky here.

**2010 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese**

GDR-207

**SOS : 2**

Oh man this is a gnarly and downright impolite Scheu, animal and with a small but mordantly pointed botrytis; snarling cassis and culinary lavender. The sex was *amazing* but there's blood running down your back.

## Making the Case for German Wines

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

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

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

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

The first thing to know is that some version of this metaphorical idea comes to most wine drinkers spontaneously at some point or other. I remember back in 1988 when I first tasted with Bob Parker and Bob said about one wine *This tastes like crushed rocks*, and in those days he often used the term “wet stones” to depict what we call minerality. It is a flavor of considerable expression — it is quite distinctly there in the wine — but it isn’t fruit. Nor is it acidity, nor does it relate to acidity. There’s a prevailing critique that we rockheads use “mineral” to excuse underripe wines, but this is manifestly false. There

are many wines of gushingly lavish flavor but whose flavor isn’t delivered on waves of fruitiness, but rather on mineral.

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.

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

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

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

Fair enough, I think, chacun a son gout and all that. But something gnaws at me, and I finally have to ask: “Do you like dessert?”

“Excuse me?”

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

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

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

“Well, I . . .”

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

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

“Well?” I insist.

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

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

I don’t know a single human being who doesn’t prefer a ripe tomato to an unripe one. Shall we share a basket of unripe strawberries? Even a Granny Smith apple has some sweetness; we’d spit it out otherwise. Somehow the wine world seems to insist we ignore an otherwise routine animal tendency, and affect to despise sweetness. If we were true to our TRUE tastes, we’d fall over one another to get to German rieslings. Then there wouldn’t be enough wine, and prices would go up, and it’s probably good the way it is. . . . But if you’re one of those perverse people who is certain you hate sweetness then please come on a picnic with me, so I can eat all the pink ripe strawberries and you can eat all the fucked up little green ones at the bottom of the basket.

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

“There’s too many different wines.” This is true, but it’s inextricable from the jewel of the German wine experience, just as it is in Burgundy. Comtes Lafon could equalize the casks and produce one white wine and one red wine, as he might were he a Bordelais. It would definitely simplify things.

Would you want him to? Would the gain in simplicity outweigh the loss of fascination? You tell me!

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

As such I think Riesling, can give the “discriminating” palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn’t the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We’ve all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we’ve all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there’s confusion over this issue, and it won’t hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn’t better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you’ll be a better taster, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

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

# Rheinhessen

*Today's Rheinhessen is a profile of the right generation in the wrong place at the wrong time.*



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

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

On a bizarrely clear day last month I was walking the plateau west of the red hillside that spills into the Rhine north of Nierstein, and I could see no fewer than three wine regions, or the hills that define them: the Hessische Bergstrasse to the southeast, the Taunus (Rheingau) to the north, the Donnersberg (southern outlier of the Nahe) to the southwest, and even the Haardt hills (Pfalz) peeked through a gap in the trees to the south. For years, the Rheinhessen was a rolling, doughy sort of place, a softening among the more tensile regions that encircled it.

I like driving through it.

You don't drive around thinking "Well it's obvious that great wines come from *here*." Instead its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling

its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

You need a really unassailable idealism to worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the flattish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may be possible that *great* wines just could be written into some of this land, if you're unwilling to assume they aren't, and willing to stake it all on your idealism. And, I'd have to add, willing to sell your wine for something less than it's worth. It helps that much of the vineyard work can be done by machine, but it helps even more that these young people no longer feel alone; they are part of an informal fraternity working for a common good.

The results for us are entirely desirable: We can obtain beautiful wines for very gentle prices. For the time being! Because this too is changing as the region grows more sophisticated. Its prices will always reflect the lower production costs of working in non-steep land, but the many growers who are converting (or have converted) to organics have increased those costs, and need us to pay for them. Will we? However much we may desire – or *say* we desire organic wine, it seems to be we desire even more that bargain prices never change. Please feel free to prove me wrong.

## Recent doings in the VDP

The game is afoot, and things are happening fast.

An emergency meeting (or an “extraordinary general meeting” as the press release called it) took place in late January, for the purpose of untying the various thorny knots the VDP had created.

I have been a vocal kvetch about nearly everything the VDP has done since the establishment of the Grosses Gewächs business. Though I don’t relish that role, a little righteous dudgeon cleans the pipes, as it were.

Yet this time they opened the windows and let some enlightenment in. But in so doing, they also opened a Pandora’s Box I don’t think they’ll be able to close again. The furies are loosed in the world, and are hard to catch and impossible to contain if even you do.

It begins with a simple classification concept, based (as these things so often are) on Burgundy. VDP-member estates would bottle four tiers of wine. 1) Estate wines. 2) Village wines. 3) Premier Cru wines, and 4) Grand Cru wines. Thus if a vineyard appears on the label, it is a significant vineyard. This is a tremendous and long-overdue step. It removes the onus – the *onerous* onus – from the drinker to sift through a zillion site-names in order to glean whether the wine comes from an important vineyard. No one has time for that amount of memorization.

One might complain that the designations of Grand and Premier Cru are contentious and even disingenuous, and there’s a modicum of justice in that argument. Yet the status quo is utterly impossible, unwieldy and unsustainable.

In practice, using (say) Spreitzer as an example, they’d bottle 1) Spreitzer (estate) Riesling, 2) Oestrich Riesling (or Hattenheim, or Winkel, et.al) Doosberg 1er Cru (in my opinion at least!) and Jesuitengarten Grand Cru. It’s hard to convey just how much simpler this is! No longer will we hapless but willing consumers need to wade through all the cha-cha of meaningless site-names – buh-bye to all the “Gau-Schmeckelheimer Clappenberg” and its ilk from every former potato field in every mundane corner of the Rheinhesen.

If a site name is visible, it *means* the site is *worth naming*. Grazie mille!

But the good doesn’t stop here. Rather to my astonishment, the VDP has finally acknowledged that if a site is significant, this is based on its inherent potential to give outstanding wines, *regardless of the style of the wine*, so for almost the first time a wine with **residual sugar** can call itself a Grand Cru. This eliminates an absurdity that existed in the old system, whereby one might see a wine called “Pechstein GG” and then another called “Forster Pechstein Riesling Spätlese,” prompting the entirely natural question, are these the *same* vineyard, and if so then why isn’t the Spätlese also a Grand Cru?

But what of the category “Grosses Gewächs?” This will be retained as a kind of brand-name for those wines from top Crus made to be powerful and dry. Thus we may understand that the site is important, and the dry wines from it may carry the designation “GG” but this is merely descriptive of a certain idiom, not *prescriptive* of a belief that only dry wines can be important.

And now is where the problems begin. Because once you accept the notion of a vineyard classification, you cannot confine it to vineyards that happen to belong to members of your group. If you attempt to do so, you get the weird anomalies of a “Hatzenporter Kirchberg” showing as a Grand Cru because a VDP estate has a holding there, but the supernally great Thörnicher Ritsch doesn’t register because none of its owners are in the VDP. Same for Hexamer and his Rheingrafenberg – at least and undoubtedly a 1er Cru, but Harald’s not in the Club.

For it has indeed happened that VDP members nominated what they felt to be their best sites and these became enshrined as Grosses Gewächs even if they were, let’s say, rather less classy than other vineyards nowhere to be seen. With all respect to my pals the Spreitzers, can anyone credibly claim their (GG) Lenchen is better than the entire Rauenthal hill?

But this threatens to create a *causus belli* in the ranks, because the VDP believes it created and nurtured and marketed the entire *idea* of classifying vineyards, and they don’t want every Hans, Fritz and Herman to have access to terms they sweated and bled and spent buckets-full of *Geld* to bring about. Yet it’s hard to imagine how any legislator could agree. What possible case could be made that great vineyards are the exclusive provenance and privilege of members of a given growers association – even a laudable one? Is Johannes Selbach’s Zeltinger Sonnenuhr *not* a Grand Cru? Don’t make me laugh. Does it become a Grand Cru when Jo signs onto VDP membership? Don’t make me laugh. Does he get to somehow “borrow” its Grand Cru status if some other grower who happens to be in the VDP bottles a GC wine from the site? Don’t make me laugh – I’m out of breath.

But then we could repeat the greatest weakness of the Burgundy system, the bottling of mediocre or unworthy wines from *Grand Cru* vineyards that fetch high prices just *because* they come from famous sites. And of course this is true, and the system isn’t perfect. But the status quo was so much farther from perfect it scarcely occupied the same universe.

As I write it is entirely uncertain what will transpire. But one thing I think is definite: for the first time, the dialogue is about *things that matter*, and not about whether a “GG” is permitted to have 12 grams of residual sugar or only 11.



vineyard area // 15 hectares  
annual production // 7,500 cases  
top sites & soil types // Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping, Pettenthal and Rosenberg (red slate); Niersteiner Paterberg and Brückchen (limestone)  
grape varieties // 85% Riesling, 6% Müller-Thurgau, 3% Grüner Veltliner, 3% Weissburgunder, 3% Spätburgunder

*My annual tasting trip always begins and ends in Nierstein, with the Strubs. Both experiences have imprinted upon me, as tangible feeling and intangible yet affecting spirit.*

Arriving in early March after a year away, things are usually closed, but breathing and urging – Winter is softening, nature is opening her eyes again. Then four weeks later when I return, all that tasting and all those people under my belt (not to mention all them *schnitzels*) it's often full-on Spring, greener and milder.

We drove back into Nierstein on a weirdly brilliant day, the Rhine a fluid blue, the red-slope a gaudy wave of rust. I realized again what a singular place this is. And felt again an old sadness that it isn't as cherished as it ought to be.

Some good things are happening though. The big ugly unused granary is finally being demolished. One blight fewer to look away from, thank goodness. And the commuter road that threatened the great vineyards will now become a tunnel, so the vineyards are spared, and the workers get home to watch the ball game.

It is good that the vineyards are spared. Good also, that some prominent Rheinhessen growers have invested in Nierstein vineyards; it's both an endorsement of their greatness and a source for wines that will demonstrate it. And yet... a walk around the town tells a melancholy tale. One producer has a display of barrel-facings on which are written the names of important Riesling vineyards, yet in his display window are bottles of Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. But give this hack some credit; it's not easy to diss and pander at the same time.

And then there's the really sad tale of the Brudersberg. This small site sits in a south-facing combe between Hipping and Pettenthal. It's sheltered and steep. And for

many years it was the jewel in the crown of the standard-bearer for the region, Freiherr Heyl zu Herrnsheim – their top site, which they owned exclusively. Those days are vanished, the estate went bankrupt, and the Brudersberg ended up in the hands of a proprietor who doesn't really “get” white wine, and so the villain has planted Lemberger and Merlot. In a *great* Riesling vineyard. (His attempt to grow organically has given him stunted little vines about half as developed as they ought to have been after three years in the ground, so maybe the gods aren't through with him yet.)

I stood outside my hotel one morning looking at an elegant placard for another wine estate that's no longer there. In the 60s and 70s Nierstein was full of venerable (and mostly good) growers. But few have survived. In those days, the Heyl estates's proprietor Peter Von Weymarn waged a quixotic campaign to declare the “Rheinterrasse” a region *separate* from the rest of Rheinhessen. He correctly surmised these great vineyards, steep and thus expensive to work, couldn't compete against flat sites growing new crossings selling for pennies on the D-Mark in the supermarkets. I look at all the shuttered estates, and realize he was right.

The few surviving growers, including my dear friend Walter Strub, are members of an association lauding the sites of the “Roter Hang” (as it's now called). They do what they can. They recall Von Weymarn as a visionary, and yet even that had a tragic side. The Heyl estate attempted to grow grapes organically, starting in the Brudersberg, long before it was trendy and long before there was a base of

**Strub at a glance** // Always reliable wines are rapidly becoming stellar—with no increase in price! Availability is always good, so sell like hell! Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to “read” and understand.

**how the wines taste** // They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. 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.



know-how to be drawn upon. They flew blind, and didn't stay aloft for very long.

There's a school of thought that says it's virtually impossible to grow grapes organically in such steep land and with such a humid microclimate. I know of no Nierstein vintner who's tried and managed it, and the Germans are markedly green-oriented and eager to convert to organics – to the extent they actually can. I wonder whether Sebastian Strub, the heir-apparent, will take the estate in this direction.

Sebastian's arrival is important. For many reasons. It's caused Walter to think about what he's actually endowing his young man with, and one rather sweet symptom of this is a new-found (or newly expressed) affection for Nierstein. I remember when Walter called his home village "this ugly place," but a few weeks ago as we discussed what would be built in place of the despised granary, Walter said "Nierstein will become the jewel of the entire Rheinhesen, the most beautiful village of the region," and I was touched to hear the affection in his voice.

Walter is a generous father. He's fundamentally a generous man, but there's another aspect in play; Walter himself had to assume control of the winery somewhat abruptly when his own father took ill, and he wants to give Sebastian all the time and companionship he possibly can. To launch the child with love, into a decent and beautiful world...there's a thing to strive for.

Sebastian's done various *stages* at Dönnhoff, at Glatzer, at Darting, he stayed for several months in New Zealand, and he's applying for a stage in Piemonte. Really, I asked? How is it pertinent for a Riesling grower

in Germany to study at a Nebbiolo grower in Piedmont? Sebastian's answer was, *It's not that I plan to make red wine in Nierstein; it's just to learn as much as I can about many different people and wines.* He's into climbing too, has ascended Germany's highest mountain (the Zugspitze – a taxing if not technically demanding climb, rather like a *via ferrata*, needing stamina, sure-footedness and a head for heights) and he wants to tackle the Watzmann next. The man is thirsty for experience he can gulp in big swallows. I hope he goes to Barbaresco as he wishes.

Meanwhile he's at Geisenheim doing the classical viticulture curriculum, at home most weekends and of course for harvest and bottling. Walter humanely steps out of your gaze if you ask him about the wines. "They're Sebastian's wines now," he might say, and it is loving and respectful and not quite true. Both men's hands, father's and son's, are holding the reins. Soon the son's grip will tighten, soon the father's grip will slip slowly away, soon the routine yet poignant passage will enact itself again, and it is my unearned privilege to witness such love.

The wines are responding with deeper flavors and richer textures. The singular success of 2011 shows that 2010 was no fluke; this is an estate on the move, and these are two vintages of wolfishly delicious lip-smacking wines. The estate is becoming more flexible – Walter actively loves new ideas, and he's always said "the worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision." The wines are more multi-faceted, more serenely animated. The normative goal is still that the Grand Crus on the red slope be made dry – if the wines cooperate, but I think the greater principle is to respond to what each wine seems to want.

**2011 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Trocken**

GST-165

**SOS : n/a**

The 9th crop. Walter's one of the very few to grow the grape in Germany (he says it pre-dates Silvaner, and has at least a modest tradition), and his wines are easy and snappy and tasty. This '11 is juicy though, almost voluminous especially compared to the sinewy '10. 86° Oechsle and unchaptalized; discreetly peppery; when I tasted it 4 weeks later just-bottled it had brightened and focused, but it's still the Billy-Bob of the sequence of GV vintages here.

**2011 Niersteiner Rosenberg Riesling Trocken**

GST-166

**SOS : n/a**

It remains to be seen whether this will take the new nomenclature concept (as shown), or sell as "Niersteiner Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken." In either case it was my absolute *Schnooky* among the dry wines; I wanted to kiss it as much as drink it. Lots of plum confiture, blueberry, minerality, a *courteous* wine, no sardonic snap in the finish, lots of herbal notes, and while not a riot of hedonism, there's a salty satisfaction that compels the next sip, and fast. I tasted this again the day after it was bottled and it was as juicy and tasty as I recalled. The site is on red soil on a gentle slope between Hipping and the plateau. A 1er Cru in my opinion, but a charming one.

**2011 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Feinherb "Roter Schiefer"**

GST-167

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Again, this could be labeled "Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb." Or perhaps one on the main label and the other on the back.

The wine needs a minute to find its equanimity but when it does it's a juicy yet solidly proportioned dry *enough* Riesling, with prosciutto-smoke and a long tertiary finish.

**2011 "Soil To Soul" Riesling**

GST-168

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The best vintage of this, *ever*. And moving steadily in an ever-less-sweet direction. The aromas are euphoric, the thick stones and white corn of Brückchen with the high lemon-grassy buzz of Paterberg; spicy and infinitely berried; compares seriously to Dragonstone; a plummy tangy salt-sweetness – easy to love!

**2011 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett +**

GST-169

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Again the best of these in many years. More flesh, more gloss and polish, more *rondeur* yet it's also satisfyingly tough, not belly-rich, and with a lip-licking spring-oniony sweetness, sweet fish stock, lump crab; it's like a liquid crab cake.

**2011 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese +**

GST-170

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** It fills out the vintage portrait; again juicy and full of stuffing yet with its typical lash of lemon grass, salt, mineral, spearmint; yet on the finish it's as rich as a sea-salt caramel.

**2011 Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Spätlese +**

GST-171

**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** I *really* hope we get this wine. There's only around 400 liters of it, a pain in the neck to bottle alone, but dude I'm on my knees here. The wine is almost nostalgic, a look into a past growing ever-fainter and more precious. Why? It has just 33g/l of RS, like a '90 would have had. Oh, and it's perfect; racy, complex, spicy, with a raspberry tang, and food-lovin' like in the old days; a meyer-lemon citricity and a long delicate finish. And it's just *too* sad to consign this beauty as a blending partner. I'm gonna hold my breath 'til I turn blue – *WAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!* I want it!

# 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 twelve bucks. If someone says "My, it's a bit heavy," you say "Oh, yeah, it's a special; they threw in 33% more free." And everyone's happy. It's like the *Super Deal* aisle at your local supermarket. Shampoo, 33% 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!

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# Weingut Geil

Rheinhessen // Bechtheim



vineyard area // 30 hectares  
annual production // 20,800 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Bechtheimer Geysersberg Rosengarten** (chalky loam, carbonate-rich loess)  
grape varieties // 35% Riesling, 15% Weissburgunder, 15% Spätburgunder, 4% Rieslaner, 4% Scheurebe, 27% other

*“Can I really not persuade you to emigrate to the Rheingau?” I asked. “That land is crying out for a grower like you.”*

It’s a common theme, the great land begging, the ordinary land full of champions. But Johannes Geil had a new thing to say. “You know, in the last few years I’ve let myself be proud of my land,” he said. That’s good to hear.

We seem to have gotten into the habit of coming here first. It works logistically and stylistically; Geil’s wines are ideal wines with which to begin, they are so clean and candid. And Johannes himself is unpretentious and very easy to talk to, which I’m sure came as a relief to my new colleagues, who may have imagined all Germans would be either philosophy professors or Bruno the fashion guy. It wasn’t long before they were off and running on Star Trek ephemera (“I’m still big in the Battlestar Galactica business,” said Johannes.)

I was so delighted to have started with this estate five years ago, and y’all are buying lots of wine. Geil so perfectly exemplifies the new wave in Rheinhessen. Here’s some of the reasons why.

“Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellarmaster is to preserve the available quality and refine it.”

“Vines have it good in Bechtheim. They don’t have to drill through ten meters of rock for a little water. They deal with three meters of permeable loess at which point they can drink as well as the citizens of Bechtheim!”

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

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

“We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is acceptable; we sometimes have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We’re in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We’d prefer any residual sugar in the wines to be natural, but we do keep a little Süßreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO<sub>2</sub>.”

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

## 2011 Bechtheimer Riesling Trocken SOS : 0 // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GGE-055

It’s charming, perfectly dry, calmly giddy Riesling with its happy skip of lady-apple and mirabelle. It’s like a course-template for Riesling, leaving aside its intricate terroir mysteries for a later lecture – saying *this* is why Riesling is great, for this is its basis.

**Weingut Geil at a glance** // Honorable traditional Rheinhessen estate energized with the arrival of a young lion. Outstanding modern white wines (Riesling, Scheurebe, Rieslaner) at wonderfully reasonable prices. An emblem of the quixotic new generation in Rheinhessen.

**how the wines taste** // Firm, delineated, clear, complex, healthy and radiant. I would teach a seminar with them, saying “This is the quality you can now expect from a solid young grower in Germany making wines in unexceptional conditions from good but not great land.”

**2011 Muskateller Trocken**

GGE-055

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

It's charming, perfectly dry, calmly giddy Riesling with its happy skip of lady-apple and mirabelle. It's like a course-template for Riesling, leaving aside its intricate terroir mysteries for a later lecture – saying *this* is why Riesling is great, for this is its basis.

**2011 Muskateller Trocken**

GGE-056

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

My my, an actual QbA with 80° Oechsle. It's spicy and less catty than was the '10; quite Styrian in its sappy verdant key-limey way; even a bit of osmanthus flower; stylish and delicious, not whippy or hyper.

**2011 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Grüner Silvaner Spätlese Trocken "S"**

GGE-057

**SOS : 0**

The "S" stands for the village wine, so that the back-label will say "Bechtheim Silvaner (Spätlese) Trocken. Or so I surmise; there's a lot of in-transition about it all. In any case the wine is outstanding this year, and it takes some doing to make excellent Silvaner in a low-acid vintage; it's complex and distinctive in the style of the (few) Alsace Grand Crus for the variety; 12.6% alc (the label will say 13%), loessy almost GrüVe aromas, legume-y – like Weinviertel DAC! Has length and a mid-palate peppery smokiness; the finish is a bit clipped but pretty while it lasts.

**2011 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken "S"**

GGE-058

**SOS : 0**

A big boy (13.3% alc) and a wine with the posture of a Prussian Field-Marshal yet as genial as a picnic basket of apples and plums, held in a balsam-fir forest, with herbal notes of chervil and savory.

**2011 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb +**

GGE-063

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE LIST** for this beauty. For it is a perfect dry Riesling, i.e., with 11g/l RS (about like Vilmart's Grand Cellier) and basically you can't possibly resist it; fennel sweated in butter, cool mutsu apples you ate from the cellar, underlying stones and ciabatta dough. Geils have some push-back from domestic customers – it isn't *dry* enough. Idiots! It's perfectly, beautifully dry enough.

**2011 Bechtheimer Heiligkreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**

GGE-053

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The site name (Bechtheimer Heiligkreuz) will appear only on the back-label. It's a true Kab, 85° Oechsle, tasted in-bottle; it's a Scheu in the sagey direction with lots of pear-blossom; right now it's soft angles and fruity charm and ripe melons. But Scheu often finds its mordant feline self with a few months in bottle, so beware.

**2011 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**

GGE-060

**SOS : 2**

What's left to say? It's the *tabula rasa* of this idiom, drier than before and by design. The simplicity here is just a singing of the melody without flourishes or ad libs. It takes us into the basics of what makes Riesling precious.

**2011 Bechtheimer Hasensprung Riesling Spätlese**

GGE-061

**SOS : 2**

One after the other, you start taking for granted how friendly and competent they are. Nice clean botrytis now, talc, malt and salt, a lot like the '05 but with a more pliant structure. It's a glimpse into a more sensible and calmer past – there was time to linger, one had time for a wine like this.

**2011 Bechtheimer Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml +**

GGE-062H

**SOS : 3**

A classic superb Rieslaner. It may well be impossible to obtain better "dessert" wine anywhere for this money – though I'd still rather drink it with cheez pleez.

# Gernot Gysler

Rheinhessen // Weinheim



vineyard area // 12 hectares  
annual production // 8,000 cases  
certification // Demeter Certified Biodynamic  
top sites & soil types // Weinheimer Hölle and Mandelberg (red sandstone)  
grape varieties // Riesling, Silvaner, Scheurebe, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Huxelrebe

One of the loveliest things I've heard said about organics was something Alex Gysler didn't say, but would I'm sure endorse. "Working organically you get more answers from the vineyard. In conventional work you've already intervened prophylactically before you get a chance to ask the question." What a beautiful way to say it, and what a helpful reminder that organics are not only matters of environmental morality but also matters of beauty.

It is beautiful that Alex decided to convert when his first child was born. Every parent knows that feeling; you want to make the world perfect. "Before I started working organic, I'd felt I'd gone as far as I could in winemaking," said Alex Gysler. "But since I started organic I see the wines have more depth and more soul. How can you talk about terroir if you can't let the vineyard be? If you're forcing it all the time?" But Gysler's changes go deeper than that. "2008 was the first vintage we did absolutely no handling of the juice," he says. "We didn't rack, we didn't fine; the wines sit on their primary lees until three days before we bottle them."

There were two distinctly differing impressions at Gysler this year. I went on my second day tasting, with Leif and Clint, and we were all excited. "A feeling analogous to Ecker," I wrote; "So much joy in these wines."

And then four weeks later I tasted them again, a few days after Kevin, Gabe and Valerie had done so and had rather different sentiments. Many of the wines had been bottled in the interim, so one allows for that. But I find I need to talk about some basic values, aesthetic and environmental, about which we claim very much to care.

Gysler is now fully biodynamic, Demeter-certified and all. He's also gotten decidedly hands-off in the cellar. The wines are left alone from fermentation until bottling, and fermentation is – wait for it – with ambient yeast. Like,

yay, right? It's what many of you say you want. *Spontis!*

But let's consider the question more deeply.

A vineyard that has only recently undergone transition to organic/biodynamic is often still in a phase of nitrogen-depletion – if nitrogen fertilizers had previously been used, of course. They tell me that a nitrogen-depleted soil makes for somewhat feeble wild yeast populations. If that's how you ferment, you may end up with some exhausted yeasts, which in turn means a slow or even sluggish fermentation. Which in turn favors the development of so-called "Böckser" aromas (hydrogen sulfide) along with the naturally caroby sponti note. This may be exacerbated if your wines are done in stainless steel and if you bottle under screw caps. Mind you, it's still a manifestly better world under these regimes, but the wines can show inconveniently funky in the 1-2 years after bottling – just when we're tasting them and deciding whether to buy. Will anyone give these wines the needed 3-4 minutes of swirling? How can we, especially in one of the huge tastings? I can, and did, but I *had* the time.

A vintner can eliminate H<sub>2</sub>S with a copper fining, but maybe he doesn't want to fine at all, or maybe he hesitates to reintroduce copper, as it's all he was permitted to spray in the vineyards. So he sends some stinkers out into the world. Into a world that judges a vintage and makes snap buying decisions when the wines are unruly infants. Fine, I get it: it's our world. But I have a harder time accepting a customer's hesitation for wines like these if that customer is *relishing* all kinds of funky wines from elsewhere – oxidized, repulsively phenolic, borderline unclean (borderline?), and excusing it by citing the wines "naturalness" as if to say "If you don't use deodorant you better expect to smell, and to like the way you smell."

But let's have a look at the wines.

**Gernot Gysler at a glance** // 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.

**2011 Riesling Trocken**

GGY-099

**SOS : 0**

Swirling was necessary, but once it calmed down it became a sweet-natured Riesling on the twiggy anise-y side, forest floor and lentil, a comely and courteous dry wine.

**2010 Weinheimer Riesling Trocken "S" +**

GGY-098

**SOS : 0**

This is the best dry wine Alex has made, and though it's demanding, it's a masterly piece of work. From 30-ish year old vines in the (red soil) Hölle, it was never fined, and sat on its gross lees for ten months, when it received its only filtration at bottling. It's a *cuvée* of three lots, only one of which was de-assed (by double-salt in must, the hardest and best way). The wine is manly, like Alsace wine used to always be; in fact it made me think of Schöenenburg; blown-out candle, quince, hints of Chignin and Furmint; oddly gentle due to malo; a lot of soul and inference here, as if it were part Jurassien; quite an achievement, and a new level of depth and intrigue, a meditative, fascinating wine.

**2011 Scheurebe Trocken**

GGY-100

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

82° Oechsle, chaptalized, 35-year vines from Hölle; a delicate herbal Scheu, like a well-behaved marl-grown Sancerre; addictively juicy, touch of flint and rock-dust, fennel, roasted green beans with marjoram and walnut oil.

**2009 Spätburgunder (Unfiltered)**

GGY-097

**SOS : n/a**

None of that feeble Marienfelder clone stuff; this is Geisenheim clone 2013 in fact, small-berries. And it's excellent Pinot Noir by any standards, ripe (13% alc), 30% new Allier barriques with the rest used to various degrees; suave blackberry aromas, smoky, elegant silky palate with sweet top-notes, a tertiary mid-palate of black-trumpet mushrooms and a finale of wet forest floor. Adult, lovely murmur wine, with an effortless richness.

**2011 Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

GGY-094L

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Less recherché than '10, less exotic than '08, a simple drink-the-living-fuck-out-of-it quality; Clint says pink peppercorn and this is the shady balsam-y side. It goes to the party but is a little diffident, it hardly knows anyone, but when it sees *you* it bursts into an incandescent grin.

**2011 Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

GGY-095L

**SOS : 1**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** A super successful vintage of this, after a rather ungainly 2010; more overtly fruity than the Scheu, but still laden with some of the rock-dust signature of Alex's '11s; mace and pineapple, silky and deliciously direct. If this were your wedding wine you'd be happy. 'Specially if you hired someone to *swirl* it for you and your guests.

**2011 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett**

GGY-096

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** On the money; kirsch and wisteria aromas with top notes of lemon zest and tarragon; the palate veers green, it's less stiff than usual; wintergreen and ozone and Braeburn apples, but the final finish is stone again.

**2010 Weinheimer Hölle Huxelrebe BA , 12/375ml**

GGY-092H

**SOS : 3**

This has 160g RS and 15g acidity. You'd better mean it when you say you like acidity! But I'm sure you do, and the wine is as always markedly good value.

## Questions of Yields & Questions of Organics

In fact, much of the chit-chat about yields risks falling into the category of Great Lies About Wine, since far too many writers have reduced this to a primitive syllogism “Low yields = better wine,” as if this were always true and existed apart from every other parameter. But let’s imagine it was invariably true: Then what?

Does anyone question the economies of the matter? If you lower your yields from (say) 65 hl/ha to 40, there may well be a modest but discernible increase in quality, call it 15% better. But the size of the crop is reduced by 35%. Are you willing to pay that much more for a wine that’s only a little better? And is it really better? Concentration is a virtue but over-concentration makes for opacity and brutishness. I’d rather see a wine whose voice could break a glass than one that takes a hammer to it.

It is also misleading to speak of yields in strict terms of hectoliters-per-hectare (i.e., tons-per-acre) because this figure is very often specious. The best text I have seen on this subject was written by Christina Fischer and Ingo Swoboda from their book RIESLING, and it goes, in part, like this: *“Decisive here is not so much the yield per hectare, but rather, per individual vine. With Riesling, the average value . . . is between 1 and 2.5 liters of must per vine.”* The authors go on to explain new methods of pruning and foliage management to encourage fewer bunches, along with crop-thinning about a month after flowering. Then comes this passage, which everyone in the wine-world should see: *“The so-called green harvest, which normally takes place mid-August, has proved a failure with Riesling. Since nature seeks equilibrium, it shares out the available nutrients to the remaining [bunches] where a reduction of quantity has occurred. There then appear large juicy grapes, whose relatively thin skin can no longer take the strain... squeez[ing] each other and burst[ing]... and particularly liable to rotting.”*

Wine, I think, can be a lovely means of training ourselves to examine a question from all angles, but only if we’re not terribly eager to assert value judgments, or to find any one matrix by which wines are either right or wrong. This isn’t easy. We’re all asking what we should care about, what we should believe in, what positions we should take, and it’s somehow *unsatisfying* to be told the best position is to consider the whole dialectic in all its difficulty. But otherwise we’re liable to become insufferable, smug, simplistic.

I myself have every good reason to favor organics as an absolute Value. My wife’s a doyenne of the “movement” and I believe in its principles.

Yet I also know that if I assert this to my growers in absolute terms, it becomes a purity-test with only pass-fail as a possibility. In fact the whole production-culture of wine is moving in green directions, especially where microclimates allow—the drier it is, the easier to eschew fungicides, for example—and where the lay of the land allows for the extra costs organics entail. Johannes Selbach once said:

*“Many producers here practice what we call sustainable or “integrated” viticulture, with a minimum of treatments, very little fertilization (most of it organic and tight restrictions on nitrogen whether in organic or chemical form). Herbs and weeds are controlled mechanically and only “mild” herbicides permitted. All of this is governed in a program that pays small subsidies for steep-slope farming. The viticultural research stations issue a list of “can-use” treatments and methods AND they make random checks so it’s not just lip-service.”*

So fine, we might respond; it’s better if most of the world is mostly organic than if a tiny part is entirely organic and the rest conventional chemical. But even here one is wary of the use of the “integrated” claim as a way to pretty-up one’s unwillingness to go the extra green mile. Yet there’s no question things are changing for the better.

Still, the Mosel is a real test-case for sustainability versus doctrinaire organics. Its steep-as-all-hell vineyards in a wind-sheltered fjord with high natural humidity augur against strict organic treatments both because it’s in essence too difficult, and even if someone were willing to do the work would the consumer be willing to *pay the price*? Steep-slope production costs are already many times higher than in airy flatter vineyards where mechanization is much easier. So, note to self: Steer a value-weighted way through that, smart guy.

What I won’t do is fuss at any grower to pass my purity test. Nor will I indulge anyone who tells me “We work organic but don’t want to join an organization because the paperwork is too hard and we don’t like the rules.” In that case, I tell them, let the virtue be its own reward. But if you will not certify, you’re not entitled to the organic Brand, and I’m not telling my customers you’re organic.

That organics are a Brand is something about which I have decidedly mixed feelings. Of course it’s desirable. But what is undesirable is to oversimplify the world in order to make our moral choices easier. As doctrines go, the organic doctrine is one of the most attractive, but not as attractive

as eschewing doctrine altogether. I suspect this is closer to the heart of the truly organic sensibility than to reduce the whole complex issue into bulletpoints.

Doctrine is always dangerous. Purism is an especially dangerous doctrine because it *feels* as if we should approve. The best growers are the ones who say, basically, “We have principles and we have arrived at practices that express them, but the greatest principle we’ve learned is flexibility and open-mindedness. Not as an excuse to do any-old-thing, but to avoid getting wrapped within our own dogma. If our principles are durable they will withstand challenge, and the best principles are those which remain aware of the complexities in play.”

## Most Important of All

If I have to know *exactly what I think of this*, then I’m taking experience and wrestling it into my little cerebral meat-grinder and sniffing what comes out the other side. I’m not really living the things I encounter, I’m grabbing them and mauling them. This doesn’t seem helpful. Once I relaxed I found I’d know the things I knew when they were ready to be known, when they were done cooking, then and not before. Knowledge, experience, wisdom, seem to develop best when they can simmer slowly and for a long time.

All this abstract ram-a-lam is just a way of asking you to approach wine with enormous attention and curiosity; listen actively, probe, *enjoy*, and it will give you what you need, or think you need, when all of this wonderful experience is done cooking.

When I was first into wine, all the growers I met believed something so deeply they weren’t aware it was a discrete belief. They knew their vineyards, their land, possessed an existential reality equivalent to their own. And if the land was real, then it too possessed an identity. That is why the lands were named. And why we get to hear their voices.

I had a recent exchange of emails with a hero of mine, Bobby Kacher. I don’t always agree with Bobby but he’s earned the right to his beliefs and he knows more than many who take issue with him. He’d written a piece called *Our Precious Guardians* in which he asserted the importance of the human who makes the wine as the ultimate “guardian” of quality. No sensible person would disagree. The question is *what is he working with?* Bobby wrote, “Maybe a vineyard is like a Gibson Les Paul guitar and cannot express itself, unless stroked, in just the right way.” I think that’s right. And he used the phrase “express itself,” which of course

suggests it *has* a self to express, an identity that belongs to it, not to the player. No question different players will play it differently, some better than others. But something is inherent to a Les Paul, and no matter who plays it, it will never sound like a Stratocaster.

I was struck this year by the number of growers who have little displays of their soils in the tasting room. The message is, this is where it starts, this is what it is, what we do is serve it and honor it. All over Germany there’s a wave of naming wines after the soils they grew from. I asked one grower if he wasn’t concerned to call his wine “Schiefer” (slate) when other growers could also use that name. “I know that,” he replied, “But this is the proper name for my wine and it doesn’t matter if it’s also the right name for the neighbor’s wine.”

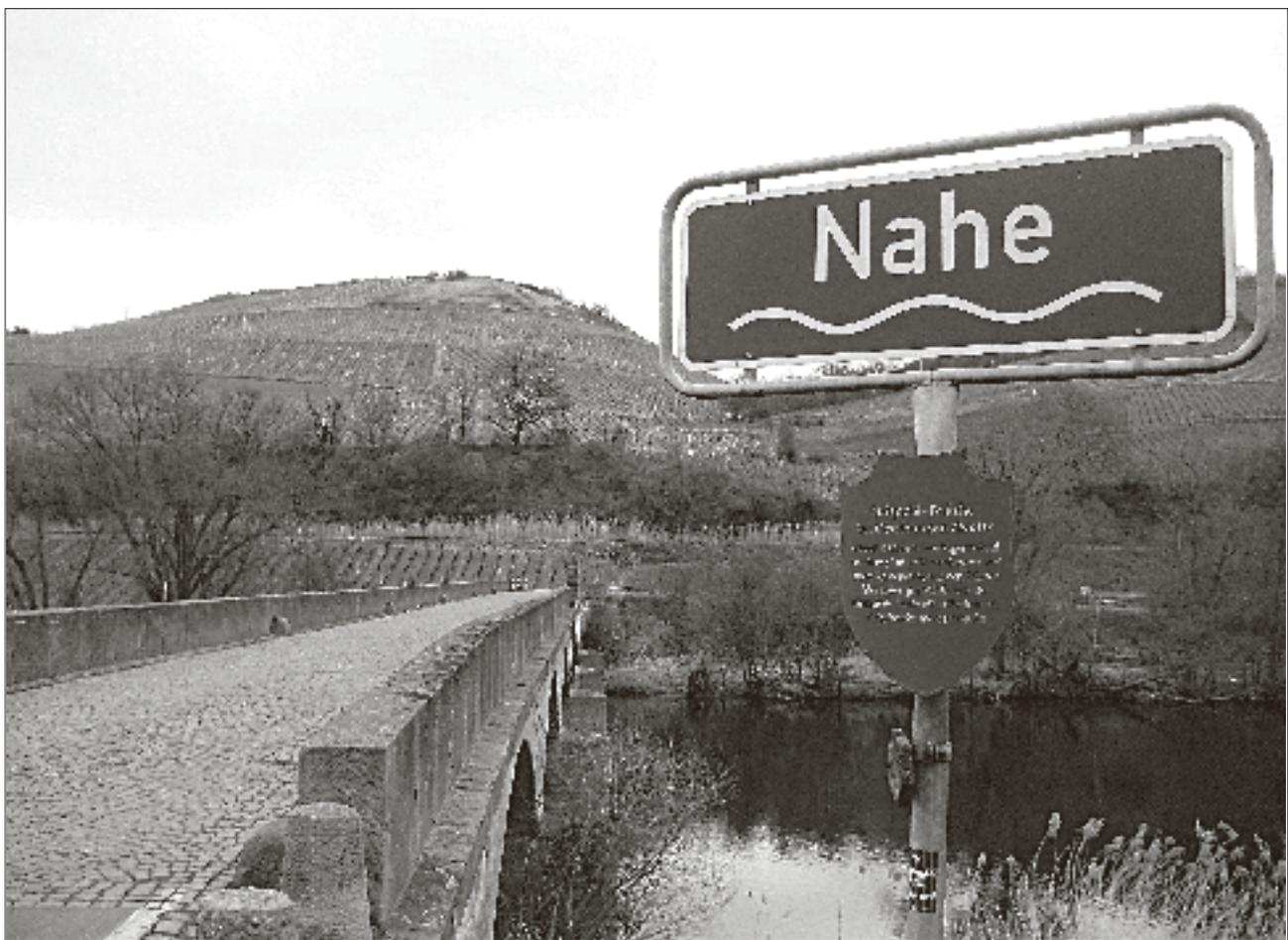
If this seems cloyingly pastoral to you, please know I have no objection to technology *per se*; the crux of the matter is what it’s used for. That said, as a rule most of my growers would tell you the more experience they have, the fewer machines they need.

In essence this becomes a crusade. First for the wines themselves, their particular and incomparable virtues – grace, precision, complexity, food-friendliness. Second for the virtues of the culture in which they are inculcated, which cherishes these psalms of the earth and nurtures them with humility. If you’ve begun to suspect – or have long-since suspected – that much of what passes for viticulture in the NewWorld is the bogus strutting of macho parvenus, then Germany, for all its flaws, is the antidote. At least for now, there’s a place we can go to see a kind of Platonic perfection of how wine should be.

# Nahe

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



Things feel astir on the Nahe these days. Mr. Dönnhoff has brought acclaim to his region, and a number of excellent growers are in the slipstream of that attention; Schönleber, Hexamer, Schäfer-Fröhlich, not to mention Mr. Diel, who is in nobody's slipstream. A case could be made that no other German wine region has the Nahe's concentration of outstanding estates in a similarly small area. The region is also especially lovely for wine pilgrims because it remains quiet and authentic. In contrast to

the Pfalz, where every weekend from Easter to harvest is cram-a-lama with gawkers and slug-it-downers. At least there's *one* place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "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 wine interests you in and of itself, these wines will give you as much delight and absorption as wine ever can.

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

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

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

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

such soil.

Each year I try to hike to the top of the Lemberg, the highest hill in the region. It does me good: the birds, the fresh spermy smell of early spring and the view. At this time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil 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 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.

This year Valerie Masten and I hiked up the long way, from Niederhausen. It was an almost perfect day, a weekday, and we didn’t see a soul along the trail.

The thing is it feels so lonely. You’re really not that high up, but the view is soaring and you don’t hear any car noise. I know very well the sort of spiritual short-cut you take when you look down on the world from a high spot, as if you’re presiding quietly over humanity. It’s something of an illusion, exacerbated by all the endorphins you released with the 90-minute climb. But illusion or no, we still respond. I look out at that land and I am all alone. Even if someone is with me, I am all alone. The quiet is breathtaking, and you hear the breath you take while your soul falls through space.

It looks like a lost kingdom. I wonder, who found it? Unlike the Rhine or the Mosel, it wasn’t an obvious channel for shipping or other human commerce. The entire region feels like someone’s delicious secret. Even now it remains a detour from any direction, and once you arrive you wonder if they speak some new language. The people don’t, but the wines do. A language all their own, like none other, whispery and incantatory. We need a guide, a translator, who knows the words for the flowers and the stones.

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

# Dönnhoff

Nahe // Oberhausen



vineyard area // 25 hectares  
annual production // 17,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle** (grey slate);  
**Oberhäuser Brücke** (grey slate, loess); **Oberhäuser Leistenberg** (slate);  
**Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg** (porphyry); **Norheimer Kirschheck** (slate);  
**Norheimer Dellchen** (porphyry and slate); **Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl** (pebbles, loam)  
grape varieties // 80% Riesling, 20% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder

*I probably write too much about how I respond to Dönnhoff's wines. Maybe it's too I-focused. Yet I'm drawn to do it, to continue doing it, and I think it's because this interaction is at the very core of my engagement with beauty, with meaning, and with life.*

I suspect I will never know why. And it probably doesn't matter. Each of us seems to hold a kind of receiver that's tuned to one slender band of frequency, and when the signal invades us we can't help but respond. Maybe it's unsettling, especially if we envision ourselves as matter-of-fact. Maybe if so we ignore it. And yet it is there.

These wines convey to me an extraordinary beauty. It's not only the *what* of the flavor, the arrangements of nouns by which it might be understood and described; it's also the verb, the how, the mode of expression, and perhaps it is this most of all. I'm at a loss to understand how a wine can be at once so numinous and also so tender. It's the most poignant mystery I'm aware of. And because it is inexplicable, I keep fussing at it, urged into the deep mist, where I try to find some paths or trails, and only get more and more lost.

I mean, one can certainly respond to extravagant beauty with extravagant feeling. A whole genre of wine literature is built on this resonance. But I feel it's too simple. Wow this is gorgeous, wow do I gush at it, wow do I whip my words into a frenzy in order to make you see how powerful this all is. No, it won't do; it feels like a sugar-high. And so I'm drawn to do the opposite, to try and get as quiet as I can, to detach from the ways that I feel and to simply receive and observe.

I question whether this thing I experience is actually irreducible, that is, in short; is it actually really there? Or do I bring it with me by the force of my own expectations? Here I can offer a clue. Because we had Cornelius Dönnhoff at our New York trade tasting in January, and

he (like many others) brought cask-samples of his baby-2011s for us all to taste. It was my first encounter with the new vintage, and I hastened to taste them all, ideally before the room got too crowded and distracting. You've been to these tastings; you know how they are. It's a kind of frenzy, and even if you're highly systematic it ends up being an aesthetic cacophony, and one does one's best to endure it, let alone find some clear way through. So I skimmed my palate over a bunch of the '11s, briefly touching down on this-and-that, and when I got to the Dönnhoff table I was in power-taster mode. *I'll show these wines who's in charge.* We've all been there.

The first Dönnhoff wine was the simple dry estate Riesling. The first thing that went through my mind was "This is different from the others." It was stiller, somehow, like the unperturbed surface of a moonlit pond. Compared to the other wines I'd tasted, nothing here seemed to be on *display*, and I was struck right away with this seemingly affectless coolness, poise, clarity. Yet it never felt like a clarity any person had had to focus, it never seemed as if human effort was engaged in making it as calmly precise as it was. It was simply a vision of reality. And of course it was keenly dissonant with the crashing *drang* of the rest of the room. But there it definitely was. And it compels me, in a way I cannot resist, to stop the noise and let this strange thing in. Or is it really so strange? Maybe these are just introverted wines, and they appeal to the introvert in me. Maybe. Or maybe they let me feel *seen*, as if the very wines understand and approve of me. That really feels true.

**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.*

When I go to the estate I have the joy of seeing my friend Helmut again, a joy that burnishes more warmly as the years pass; we've known each other (and done business) for twenty five years now. And lately I've loved seeing Cornelius too, he is so much his father's son and yet also different, with his own quickness and keen-wittedness. Helmut is imaginative and loves metaphorical talk, but he's not overtly emotional, and I'd be self-conscious if I got all weepy and wild as we tasted. So that's another reason for trying to be matter-of-fact. And so all I can do is be quietly there as the quiet wines find me.

I haven't read my notes since I was there and took them. I recall how it was, but not the details.

It was like this. The wines found me in a place I myself am almost unaware of. It's the place I am most human, most tender, most sad, most forgiving, and most deeply sure that something matters in all this, that we are here for some purpose. You might think it was pleasurable to be roused so deeply, but it is also unnerving. It reminds me how much of my life is unreal. How I tolerate the superficial. How heedless I am of the gifts, of living at all, of the people who are with me, and the love we feel for one another. It's a kind of admonition, and I know I deserve it. But is it really fair? How in the world could one live like this all the time? The ecstasy would kill you.

I hope it's enough to know that such places are there. That each of us walks in an envelope of divinity. Anne Lamott writes that the three prayers are "Help," "Thanks" and "Wow," and yes, that's it exactly. Part of us is divine, and the world is a beauty we need to be happy in and grateful for. Each sip of a wine like this is a drawn breath of beauty, an invitation to remember, a voice from the deep leaves, it is safe to be lost, the forest will hold you, the world will hold you.

I think the very tranquility of the 2011 vintage worked in favor of Dönnhoff's style, for otherwise I can't possibly explain why his vintage, even by his own standards, is so miraculous. I didn't assume it would be, but the wines were beatifically saintly in their kind and mystic loveliness.

This oddly at-peace quality seems to be growing in recent vintages. Or maybe it's just that everyone else's wines are getting more hyper. I've started to drink Helmut's '02s lately, and found a casky note in the Felsenberg I hadn't known was there. Another grower said that Dönnhoff is "the master of casks," that alone among growers he seemed to know precisely how to care for them and work with them for his wines. But I'm sure this isn't all of it.

Nor am I sure I'd want to know all of it. Nor am I convinced there is an "it" I could know. I can hear Helmut saying "Listen, I could take you through the whole process in minute detail and it still wouldn't explain why the wines are as they are."

You're standing by a mountain pond in the early morning. The water is glassy and still, and the reflection

of the mountains is so pristine you can't be entirely sure which is the thing and which is the mirror. Then a little duck paddles slowly across the still water, and you watch the reflection break into ripples and the mountains begin to sway and wiggle. Infinitely slowly the waves recede and the vision of the peaks begins to form itself again. For a moment longer you're in the spell, the ordinary miracle of the world, all of you was there, all the parts you hardly know. You found you had the time to wait, to see the perfect reflection again. You forgot what you were going to do, transfixed and alive by the water.

I want to know what this quiet place is, and I want to know how a wine can bring you there, and I want to know who lives there and why we hardly ever get to see it, and I want to know why we should need to see it at all. Because when we are there we seem to know, immediately, that this is something we cannot actually live without.

This quality of evanescence is one of the most interesting things that can happen to us. We are both out of our lives yet also more deeply immersed in them than ever. Everything seems true here, yet a condition for being inside this truth is being unable to articulate it. And why should that be?

It occurs to me we are all very lucky in Helmut Dönnhoff. Me of course 'cause I represent him, but more than that. First of all we have an unusually intelligent and articulate guy. Good so far. Next we have a guy who's uncommonly happy in his work. Then it happens that this smart, happy guy has some of the greatest vineyards in the world. And that for years the region in which he worked was so sufficiently obscure that he got to do his work in almost monastic purity. He was never in danger of becoming that most queasy and dreadful of creatures: a "wine celebrity." More correctly, when that danger first began to manifest, our hero was old enough to assimilate it and not allow it to disturb the basic integrity of his relationship to the work.

Great wines also arise from people who are at home – or at one – with their landscape. Helmut's been hinting that new vineyards were going to enter the picture, and when he showed me two new wines from sites in Bad Kreuznach called Kahlenberg and Krötenpfuhl (two of the top-3 in this town), I asked if he was at all curious about any upstream sites. "Not at all," came his typically unambiguous answer. I asked why not. "I want the wines I make to contain a story, and the story I can offer them is that of me at home in my landscape. I feel myself a man of the middle-Nahe, that is, the area between Oberhausen and Kreuznach. You have to be at home not only in the vineyard but also in the landscape in which it's contained. Of course, I could make a perfectly nice wine from a "foreign" vineyard, but it would only be a product; it wouldn't contain a story."

"Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality," he says, adding: "You

can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you're not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology." He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. "It is the concentration of all the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its real taste and structure," he says. "If you have a barrel that's not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character."

A recent development is the overall moderation of sweetness in the wines. I suspect it has to do with Helmut's health episode in 2009. "Back to the roots," he repeated. "Not so many different vineyards, less sweetness in the sweet wines; back to basics." It's telling to watch the pendulum swing. In the early 90s we wanted absolutely minimal RS,

and some of the wines could have used more, as it turned out. Having learned that lesson, many of the wines of the late 90s and through much of this decade were quite a bit sweeter; never imbalanced, but balanced on a flowery frequency. It was the zeitgeist, to pimp up the Spätleses so they'd get high "scores," and though Helmut never fell prey to that queasy temptation, he did feel the wines needed "a certain sweetness" to guarantee their aging. And now, having had the tap-tap-tap on the shoulder of mortality, it's back – or rather, forward towards the utmost pure honesty.

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

## Some Notes on the Vineyards

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

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

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

### 2011 Estate Riesling Trocken

GDH-262

SOS : 0

Quiet wine, not reticent but also not chatty; quiet evening, cool, leaves burning not far away, roast is in the oven, and the book is absorbing. Slate-smoke rises in wispy curls. Few words, but all to the point.

### 2011 Tonschiefer Riesling Trocken +

GDH-261

SOS : 0

Overtly stony, and the absolute most suave face of slate in a dry form. That is: *dry*. The finish is strict. But that's after the wine has hypnotized you, going all mysterious upside your head.

**2011 Roxheimer Höllenpfad Riesling Trocken +**

GDH-266

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

I'm not entirely sure what the label will say. It's a new (for Dönnhoff) site in Roxheim, that fulfills a long-held dream, to have each of the top sites from what were the several best wine estates in Bad Kreuznach. It's a sandy loam vineyard, half of which is quite steep.

The wine is juicy, salty and it made me think of the jus from a pork shoulder braise, with caraway seeds, celery, spring-onion, chervil, parsley root; it's leafy but utterly delicious in this case. "Dry" isn't an issue – it happens to have no sugar.

**2011 Felsenberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml ++**

GDH-268

**2011 Felsenberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 3/1.5L ++**

GDH-268M

**SOS : 0**

Enveloping, smoky, quietly grandiose fragrances, animal, sweetly farm-y, rising dough; all atmosphere and mood, a circular embrace, not a direct attack. In other words: Dönnhoff.

**2011 Dellchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml ++**

GDH-269

**2011 Dellchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 3/1.5L ++**

GDH-269M

**SOS : 0**

A serious bomb of fruit, charcuterie, mineral; profound and open; stern, voluminous, statuesque. Quite *martial* for the normally womanly Dellchen. I hedge the second "plus" for concern I'm underrating it.

**2011 Hermannshöhle Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml +++**

GDH-270

**2011 Hermannshöhle Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 3/1.5L +++**

GDH-270M

**SOS : 0**

The best since the legendary 2005, and the best dry Riesling I've yet tasted from Germany. Ridiculous delineation and spice; world-class doesn't begin to describe it; intricacy, a kinetic mélange of dough, fruit, mineral; brilliant but effortless, a virtuoso playing within her ability a fiendishly difficult piece. Searching, endless finish. *This* I think is the result of Helmut's larger holdings in the site – the ability to select with utmost care, and to make a being like this.

**Valerie Masten writes:**

*Etched, focused, pure, harmonious. Here's a haiku:*

*Tarragon, basil.*

*Kaffir lime oil; lovely; wild.*

*Flesh of peach; happy.*

**2011 Mixed Case Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml**

GDH-267

**SOS : 0**

These Grosses Gewächs wines will also be sold in a mixed case of six, two bottles of each.

**2011 Estate Riesling +**

GDH-260

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

I recently took delivery of the 2001 Dönnhoffs I'd bought and laid away in a cellar a friend in Germany let me borrow space in. Among them were six bottles of the gutsriesling, and at first I winced; I should have brought them over sooner.

I needn't have worried. In fact, the '01 and '02 gutsrieslings are drinking like dreams right now. Remember some of the internet silliness about Dönnhoff's wines don't age? Don't make me laugh. Or rather, don't make me puke, since laughing is pleasurable.

I think these wines show a paradox analogous to the thread-count in linens: the more there are, the smoother it feels. Each of these wines has so much sheer material the result is they feel not soft but caressing.

So, as always this is from the porphyry site, Oberhäuser Felsenberg and the gravelly site Oberhäuser Kiegelburg, and so it's a mini-Grand Cru. It's another in a string of beauties, barely perceptible sweetness, literally incredible class, and in my opinion the single greatest white wine value in the world.

And if you want to, you can age it for twenty years or more.

**2011 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett +**

GDH-263

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

It's in the Dellchen family of savory "dark" flavors, though more explicit than the often riddlesome GG. This one is fervidly aromatic, brioche and caramel and maple sap – though the palate is on the dry side.

**2011 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett + +**

GDH-264

**SOS : 1**

Another, higher register now; cool fruit and high-toned mineral; celestial apple, arresting length, surprisingly obdurate acid-drive; tense and quivering with energy.

**2011 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese + +**

GDH-271

**2011 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese, 3/1.5L + +**

GDH-271M

**SOS : 2**

Angular at first, as much wintergreen as (typical) cherry-blossom, but the length of (first) juiciness and (then) solid mineral and earth leads to a crash of intricacy where every cell of flavor seems exposed – yet it isn't at all brash. And a creaminess that isn't at all rich. Basically: Dönnhoff.

**2011 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese "Felsentürmchen" + + +**

GDH-272

**SOS : 2**

The sirloin section of Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg has given us a miracle in 2011. A stop-you-in-your-tracks fragrance. Nahe Riesling – the greatest smell on earth! This is the utter breathing soul of Riesling; salty energy, dreamy echoes, the last vibrations of the pealing bells; it firms up and gets fruitier with oxygen; the finish is primordial, iron and pine. Riesling at its most shamanic.

**2011 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese + +**

GDH-273

**2011 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese, 3/1.5L + +**

GDH-273M

**SOS : 2**

Queenly, powerful but sedate; trails a heavy vinous finish, shows its essential core, coiled yet fluid, massive yet furtive; leaf and quince, gorgeous and calm, and with a little jab of acidity as it finishes.

**2011 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** + + +  
**2011 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese, 3/1.5L** + + +  
**SOS : 3**

GDH-274  
GDH-274M

It's both the giggling daughter of Felsenberg yet also the older poet-sister of Kirschheck. Here its minty face is really digital and explicit, and the wine is as clearly great as it can ever be, rippling with pent-up energy, electric with minty brilliance, yet pliant with its cool smooth texture.

**2011 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml** + + +  
**SOS : 2**

GDH-275H

Dönnhoff is the only vintner I know – let me repeat that: *the only vintner I know*, who understands that Auslese is a refinement of the soul of the Spätlese, not a departure into the genre of botrytis-dessert wine on a miniature scale.

And the moment you taste this, you will know: greater divinity is not to be conceived. The lion lies down with the lamb. All is forgiven, yet no need to forgive any more. Wine – *life* – doesn't offer a grace tenderer, more calming, more grave, and yet more unquiet than this. It is a beacon by which you locate your deepest soul.

**2011 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml** + + +  
**SOS : 3**

GDH-276H

Similarly numinous and serene, but here the impact is kaleidoscopic, a thousand tiny beads of nuance, a fugue of nuance, leading to a fugue-state – it is all there to be seen, everything you thought you were looking for – and yet you wonder. It's not what you thought you would find, and now you're more curious than ever.

**2011 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 6/375ml**  
**SOS : 4**

GDH-277H

*Note: there was a BA from the Hermannshöhle that might be sent to auction, and the now-famous "Skype" Eiswein picked from the Brücke on the 18th of January when Helmut was in Singapore and Cornelius was in NY with us, which was promising but had only just finished fermenting. But there was one final 2011 that sent me back to school, not just wine school, soul school. Rather than "cleaning up" my spontaneous notes, I reproduce them verbatim.*

**2010 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling TBA, 6/375ml** + + + + + + + + + +  
**SOS : 4**

GDH-278H

Ten plusses on a scale of three. So far out past perfection one needs an hour to explore its wonders. I only had five minutes. But I did, for the first and only time, swallow.

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

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

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the importer with an exclusivity rubs his filthy hands at the grotesque markups he plans to take. And all of us children of the radical ‘60s swallow it whole, since every businessperson is ipso facto guilty. These proponents of pure capitalism neglect to consider one of its basic tenets: If a product is priced beyond its value, people won’t buy it. The greedy importer can gouge all he wants; it avails him nothing if he can’t sell the wine.

People also claim that monopoly creates opportunities for greed. Seems very logical, again, especially to us Aquarian-Agers who mistrust merchants innately. But the logic falls apart on closer examination. Say you’re the sole Jim Beam distributor in your state. You gonna crank up the prices? After all, no one else is selling Jim Beam, right? *WRONG*. No one is selling Jim Beam, but someone’s selling Jack Daniels and someone’s selling Wild Turkey, and if your price for Beam is out of line with the other guy’s price for his bourbon, you’re not taking orders dude. Thus if I even *wanted* to push up my prices for (let’s say) Christoffel, it wouldn’t be long before y’all noticed Fritz Haag was the better value. Ordinary markets suppress the temptation to price-gouge, especially a market as compact and attentive as the one for fine wines.

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.

Speaking for myself now, I am delighted, as are most of my fellow importers, to offer *good value* to our customers. We want you to like us. We want you to like our wines. Hey, we want you to *make money* on our wines (radical notion!). I take a standard markup across the board in my portfolio, tweaking here and there if I need to hit a price point. If I ever sniff a whoop-de-do markup opportunity it’s because a grower is underpricing his wine. In which case **I tell him so**. I do not wish to profit at his expense; this is what I call loyalty and sustainability. So, fellow wine-dogs, this dog won’t hunt. None of us is motivated by profit per se. We are in business to get and keep customers. We all need to live. We all want to enjoy

our lives. I want to invest in a grower who’s willing to invest in me. And I want to sell his wines without interference.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Jakob Schneider

Nahe // Niederhausen

vineyard area // 19 hectares  
annual production // 10,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle** (volcanic soil, gray slate); **Niederhäuser Felsensteyer** (melaphyr); **Niederhäuser Klamm** (porphyry); **Norheimer Dellchen** (gray slate)  
grape varieties // 90% Riesling, 10% other varieties



Some of you know I moved from the DC area to Boston. No diss to the District, but my wife's raised in New England and always wanted to get back. Anyways, we had a lot of wine to move, including many half-bottles of rather long-in-the-tooth dessert wines that had been in boxes at the bottom of the pile in the back of the closet. So we pulled a bunch of corks to try and glean which bottles were worth moving. Among these were a few halves of 1989 Auslese from Jakob Schneider, made in the old way (as they were in those days), and of course you know where this is going. These were among the freshest and best-preserved of any of my cellar, easily "beating" wines of greater stature, pedigree and even youth. I can't explain it but was glad to drink it.

By rights this creature should have been DOA, as primitively made as it was. But there's a lot we don't know about wine, and it always, always has the last word.

Schneiders are decidedly on the move. They were promoted to three (of a possible five) "stars" in the opinion-leading Gault-Millau guide. And Jakob's in a group of young Nahe growers that also includes Georg Rumpf.

For all its famous vineyards, Niederhausen itself is strangely sleepy, the kind of town you can hear a kitchen alarm go off when your neighbor's egg is finished boiling.

When Schneiders know we're coming they put a little wreath on the door with a sign saying Welcome! They always have, and I think it's sweet. But everything else is changing, and for the better. I remember first coming here, and tasting out of these really weensy little Pokal glasses, each of which held about a tablespoon of wine if it was filled to the brim, and you kept having to ask for re-pours and snorting like a bull just to get any smell from the wines. Today we taste from perfect Schott-Zwiesel "Riesling" tulips. And we can inhale like the cultured ladies and gentlemen we truly are, or imagine ourselves to be, fruitlessly in my own case.

Young Jakob did a stage at Knoll in the Wachau.

Coincidence? Two estates cut from a similar cloth in their respective hommages to the old ways. But Schneider plans to modernize — there was no other direction in which to go — and he's a fast-talkin full-of-beans young 'un whose best wines are ahead of him.

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

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

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

And it has also to do with the circles in which one wishes to move. We all want to hang with the popular kids, but you know, after a point I don't care what parties I'm invited to. I do care, though, about Mama Schneider throwing her arms around me when I arrived, and pressing upon me a bottle and a card to give to my wife, and it is very good to represent all kinds of wines from all kinds of people, as long as the people are good and the wines are honest.

**Jakob 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 depth in the best of them.

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

**2011 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Trocken**

GJS-104

**SOS : 0**

Among the many dry wines with attractive facets from Schneider in 2011, this was the one that compelled and succeeded most as a complete picture. It has a tiny dollop of *dosage* but it's still Trocken, and quite a bit better for it; slimmed down, focused, more defined, piquant and angular, and with greater length; paradoxically it is also less creamy than the base wine alone. A classic Nahe, on the rugged smoky side.

**2011 Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Feinherb +**

GJS-105

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

I absolutely adore this tiny vineyard, which ought to be a Grand Cru; it sits between Klamm and Rosenheck on a mélange of slate and porphyry, tastes like a psychedelic Kirschheck, and is among the Nahe's most bewitching wines.

This one has an invisible 25g/l of RS; it's a curvaceous lyric blossoming grove of wildflowers, salt, smoke and raspberry, with white chocolate and a hint of cloves; pithy and juicy and boy do you want to *slug* it down, but the complexity won't let you.

**2011 Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter +**

GJS-103L

**SOS : 2**

After Dönnhoff's estate Riesling this is certainly the best value in the offering – year after year.

Why? It always hails from what we'll soon call "classified" vineyards – the '11 comes from Rosenberg, Felsensteyr and a little Kirschheck – and it's like getting a cuvée from Pucelles, Folatières and Bâtard and calling it Bourgogne Blanc. The '11 is more volcanic than it's sometimes been; absurdly complex, deft, slinky and salty, refined and long as all hell; a stern dry smoky finish with an echo of blueberries and even a tiny phenolic nip.

**2011 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett**

GJS-102

**SOS : 2**

The next-door neighbor to Hermannshöhle, among the steepest vineyards on the Nahe, on a conglomerate of porphyry and rotliegend. This wine has a freaky 9.4g/l of acidity, markedly high for '11, and it's less overtly peachy than usual; rather more berried and tangy, and with a stern pebbly finish. More RS might have balanced its fruit but also made it too "confected" and so we have a lusty chewy tasty Riesling.

**2011 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese ++**

GJS-106

**SOS : 2**

Mostly from 70+ year-old vines. The '11 is all incense and hyssop and 5-spice; full, almost enveloping in the mouth; all tertiary, leathery and almost soy-like – a braise of Riesling from sweet roasted bones; a down-quilt lightness yet it's cozy and warm, and has the ease of a citizen of the deepest most eternal mysteries. You do not "make" a wine like this. If you're smart enough, you let it make you.

**2011 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese +**

GJS-107

**SOS : 2**

Please remember, every Auslese I offer had to *overcome my assumption* that I wouldn't offer any Auslese. This seems cooler and keener than the Spät, as if it came from higher up or was picked on a cooler day, yet it's seriously ripe at 115° Oechsle. This depicts the Auslese "culture," you could say. It's why we can still cherish them, or ought to, because it walks with the goddesses in a living history of beauty.

**2011 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling BA, 6/375ml ++**

GJS-108H

**SOS : 4**

Here is where we see the amazing progress Jacob is making. Because I don't suppose such a wine could have existed five or even three years ago. It might have been too ripe, too heavy, too syrupy. Yet this wine is: *YES*. Squeaky-clean; no V.A., or botrytis-funk, and it still tastes like Hermannshöhle. Miraculous. Take a deep deep bow, young 'un.

# Weingut Hexamer

Nahe // Meddersheim

vineyard area // 18.5 hectares  
annual production // 10,800 cases  
top sites & soil types // Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg (red slate with a high content of quartzite); Schloßböckelheimer In den Felsen (volcanic, porphyry)  
grape varieties // Riesling, Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder, Spätburgunder, Frühburgunder, Sauvignon Blanc



*As a rule my annual visits are happy times. They also are happy-times; everybody's chipper, expectant, here's the vintage, a year's worth of work. Spring is coming and who has any better professions than we do? Yet a month's worth of happiness and I start to feel starved in some way. So I very much enjoyed my time with Harald last month.*



He had every reason to be *extremely* happy with his 2011s – it's exactly the kind of year he excels in – and indeed he was. But he's brooding over a dilemma, a good one to have, as it happens, but still a decision that will maybe change his life. I looked at his distraction and struggle and somehow felt at home. It's not that I like it when people are struggling; it's more that it feels natural

to me, that I maybe can help, that it returns me to reality after the all-pervasive cheerfulness. I know, I'm fricking perverse.

Hexamer's crossroad is something I'll stay discreet about, except to say it is typical of a general phenomenon in the German wine world today, and it asks a crucial and essential question about the life a vintner wants to have.

**Weingut Hexamer at a glance** // Sensational discovery on the upper Nahe, a young vintner doing everything right; handcrafted fruit-driven wines of terroir.

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

I don't know how Harald will answer it, and I don't have an opinion about how he should. I tried to help frame the question in such a way as to bring the answer into focus. I felt with him; my sweet friend!

Hexamer is another study in success for a modern on-the-move young vintner in Germany. He's growing his property because good vineyards are available cheaply, and the deals are hard to resist. His dry wines are (mostly) too dry and his sweet wines are (sometimes) sweeter than they need to be—because these are the shapes the German market insists they take. What is salient about Harald Hexamer's winery is imperiled as he fits himself into the mainstream. And those things are, first, his identity as the keeper of the Rheingrafenberg vineyard, an outstanding site of which he is by far the biggest owner; second, his rare ability to make consistently gorgeous dessert-wines – few if any have the gift of keeping them sleek and racy even when they're massively concentrated. And finally, the diamond-like cut and clarity of his wines overall, as if he refined them beyond refinement.

Hexamer's wines are balanced in the ultraviolet spectrum; they're steely, almost antiseptically clean and transparent, acid-driven, and because of that they've tended to be equally high-toned as regards to RS. A balance of two extremes is still a balance, but I find Harald's wines are getting deeper and moderating their extremes into something more drinkable, and even, dare I

say, more wholesome.

Or else I'm full of shit; who knows. I liked the fact the new wines were less marked by their attack and more by their inside-flavors, so I probe for the hidden meaning, I'm such an earnest goofball.

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. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary ("but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit — below 10 degrees — back to the winery.") Yields are controlled by pruning ("We often end up with only six to eight bunches per vine"). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; "The most filigree wines come from this method." 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

Acidity has been a theme here, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer's wines are (if you like them) "brilliant" and (if you don't like them) "tart." Mind you, I don't actually know if the wines are high in acidity; they just taste that way.

### 2011 Spätburgunder Weissherbst Halbtrocken

GHX-077

SOS : 1

This wine was a sheer delight in '10 and now again; a sleek and super-pretty wine, a lyric rosé.

### 2011 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Trocken

GHX-075

SOS : 0

Please remember, Hexamer has essentially two families of vineyards, the sandy-marly ones near where he lives, and the volcanic ones in the central Nahe he's been obtaining the past few years. *In Den Felsen* ("among the cliffs") is a strong 1er-Cru, a conglomerate of rhyolite, sandy loam and sandstone.

This '11 is part *spongi*, and shows all the smoky spicy doughy quince jazz of the site; redolent of yellow fruit and papaya; classy and almost satiny; it announces its superb terroir with a candid goodness.

### 2011 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Trocken "#1"

GHX-076

SOS : (minus) -1

#1 in this case equates to "goldkap" or "reserve" (or to "XXL" as Harald called it a couple times.) He is justly proud of this. There's complexity and regal carriage; sophisticated and aristocratic, and a foamy texture with finely intricate malic fruit. That said, for me there's a sardonic snap I may overstate because I'm so weirdly sensitive to bitterness. Still, benefit of the doubt, because what's good here is seriously good.

**2011 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Feinherb “Porphy” +**

GHX-074

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** It's from In Den Felsen, and it is superb and masterly, in the realm of Dönnhoff's gutsriesling; seductive alluring fragrance; a perfect *stealth* sweetness, piquant and slinky and with marvelous saltiness; cool-y sunny and verdant; a complex *mélange* of wisteria and wintergreen, and a perfect food-wine.

**2011 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling “Quarzit”**

GHX-078

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Back to the roots, with RS in the high-30s, so if this has been tempting but too sweet for you, look again. Cucumber and dill, salty and tangy, roses and rhubarb; works basically Feinherb; cox-orange pippins and vanilla powder, but dense and dryish.

**2011 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett**

GHX-079

**SOS : 2**

Lilac and kirsch aromas, barely sweet at all but with a luscious texture on entry, after which it *clamps* onto every part of the palate, a whomp of mineral on the back, a sweet-sour snap on the front. Charming, useful wine. More appley and forthrightly fruity than Rheingrafenberg.

**2011 Schlossböckelheimer Königfels Riesling Spätlese + +**

GHX-080

**SOS : 2**

What, another vineyard in Schlossböckelheim? Ja, and it's arguably a “minor” Grand Cru or an overachieving 1er-Cru; again a conglomerate of rhyolite, porphyry, sandstone and loam, and I seem to be a drooling *dog* for these volcanic-soil Rieslings. It's the most spellbinding face of the world's best grape, and this is a lurid potpourri of smoke and dried flowers, vivid and salty and with an evanescent echo of pollen dusty florals and quince. Any short-list should include this.

**2011 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese +**

GHX-081

**SOS : 2**

Utter mirabelle, and a lovely tug or warm and cool elements; apple sautéed in butter with cinnamon and clove, yet also a balsam-y limey shady deep-greenness – but above all it's a wine of celestial *fruit*.

# Kruger-Rumpf

Nahe // Münster Sarnsheim



vineyard area // 22 hectares  
annual production // 13,750 cases  
top sites & soil types // Münsterer Dautenpflänzer (slate with sandy loam);  
Münsterer Pittersberg (slate); Münsterer Rheinberg (weathered quartzite and sandy loam); Binger Scharlachberg Rheinhessen (Rotliegend and porphyry)  
grape varieties // Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Scheurebe

*2011 is a huge step up here, following on the heels of similar improvements the last several vintages. Here's an example of the symbiosis between generations creating a whole greater than the sum of its parts.*

Yields were lower than the (generous) vintage norm, and because of that extracts were higher. But that isn't the whole story. What impressed me most here was *texture*, a palpable richness and dustiness that made even the dry wines delicious and attractive – look how many I selected.

And as large as this offering *appears* to be, it is barely capacious enough to do proper justice to all the splendid wines I tasted.

It's also worth pointing out the wines are improving in matters of texture, of polish and gloss and a finer mouthfeel. Fruit was always there, but the tones have improved. In fact everything is improved yet the prices have stayed the same. Hmmm...

I do think a small tribute is in order for Rumpf's geniality. Many producers, especially young studs in their twenties, can be quite the divas. "I make the wines I like and he takes them or leaves them" is a typical sentiment. And it's reasonable enough on its face; it only locks a door whereby collegial interaction might benefit grower and buyer alike. But hey, I understand, having been an insufferable twit in my twenties, and I didn't have to deal with boffo reviews before I was old enough to handle them gracefully. All of which is to say that Stefan Rumpf's collegiality is becoming rare, which makes its



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

**how the wines taste** // They're as sturdy as before but there's more flesh on the bones. There's more mineral density, more complexity of texture, and they are invariably site-specific: The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and 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.

underlying gesture of respect and friendliness even more precious. I am also delighted to see their willingness to still use dosage as a means of fine-tuning, which is part of a larger willingness to eschew dogma and surf all possible options according to the needs of the wine. I'd like to hire a plane and fly a banner over the Mainzer Weinbörse—DOSAGE IS NOT EVIL, BUT DOGMA IS. A good

dosage from top-site Riesling, used to finetune just before bottling, nearly always works better—which is to say tastes better—than throwing in a BA or other sweet wine, which often muddies the waters. This is out of tune with the Zeitgeist but the zeitgeist is full of shit. Buncha smug young twits with their holier-than-thou posturing and their purity tests...

## A Profile of the Sites

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

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

**Rheinberg** is the steepest of the three, on weathered quartzite and dusty loam – “similar to Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck,” according to Stefan. It's flavors are indeed virtually identical, though the Nahe wine has a grace and curvaciousness the more stoic Rheingauer lacks. Sweet apples and yellow fruits are paramount here, though the minerally terroir notes give a firm foundation. These are wines of true charm, not merely winning ways. I'd categorize it as a 1er Cru.

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

### 2011 Riesling Trocken “Quarzit”

GKF-168

#### SOS : 0

A cuvée of Rheinberg and Kapellenberg, and lots of mojo for a “basic” dry Riesling; apple-cellar and sorrel fragrances could almost be GrüVe; the wine's both juicy and angular and shows lots of *spiel* (friskiness and interplay of flavors); the finish is a bit nippy but bottling will tame it.

#### **Gabe Clary writes:**

*“Tangy and orange, tangerine and cut herbs. A ripe green savory note, like cut kitchen herbs. There is that kind of crunchy acidity that I associate with 2010 here. The fruit kind of revolves around this dense core of malic acidity.”*

**2011 Pittersberg Riesling Trocken +**

GKF-170

**SOS : 0**

In effect the “2nd-wine” of the GG, and I’m not entirely sure this isn’t even better than its big-bro (offered below); it’s certainly more of-a-piece, but this is often true of the lighter wines that show well early – so we’ll see. It’s cerebral, complex, internally and externally harmonious, but it’s for the drinker who loves tons of flavor but doesn’t insist on *fruit* – call it the mineral-man’s masterpiece, with perfect length of smoky slatey apple-skin fibrous chewiness – yet it’s not remotely austere.

**Valerie Masten writes:**

*"Delightfully delicious, like crunching into apple flesh with cinammon stick aromas wafting under nose, and an underlying slate-y smooth mineral current pulsing through. Red Bing Cherries, and peony, bright tree fruits: this wine is at once crystalline, high toned, and fresh."*

**2011 Pittersberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml ++**

GKF-177

**SOS : 0**

Now the leviathan growl, more profound, a cream-of-slate soup. As rich as walnut oil, and as handsome as a Baron. The high-flying spice of another GG (Dautenpflänzer) seemed bitter to me, but here is perfect harmony of a gravelly masculine type. Do you *really* like dry wines?

**2011 Riesling Feinherb “Schiefer”**

GKF-169

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This stopped fermenting with 12g/l RS (still *Brut*) and to me it’s a strong argument for why perfect dry Rieslings should rarely be perfectly dry! This is just an ideal slatey Riesling more than dry enough for a huge range of foods and for any sensible person.

**2011 Dautenpflänzer Riesling Feinherb +**

GKF-171

**SOS : 1**

OK, so watch carefully. *Way* more fruit, perfume, exotics than the bone-dry version. It’s 97° Oechsle, so not a “small” wine, but it’s jammed with adjective-juju – you’ll go nuts groping for associations, *but* in its angles and edgy spiciness there are some tartly minty corners the Pittersberg GG doesn’t show. Do you accept a little sarcasm of acid to get the massive fruit and spice this guy delivers? Tell me.

**2011 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett**

GKF-166

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** It’s the mid-palate here; lime and empire-apple and wintergreen and a little white chocolate; a lovely mélange of leaf and flower and herb and berry whirling almost too fast to keep up with. More a “true” Kab after the outsized ‘10. Orchid, lilac, strawberry.

**2011 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese ++**

GKF-172

**SOS : 2**

We removed this from the core list in favor of Scharlachberg, first because it’s easier to say “Scharlachberg” and also because y’all were responding so well to it. Yes, I suppose “Dautenpflänzer” from an estate called “Kruger-Rumpf” might could seem a bit clunky. But oh, if only the wine weren’t so fucking good! *This* is why Nahe Riesling is the greatest on earth. Where else does this absurd intricacy ever live, this magic equipoise of lightness and richness, the firmament of exotic spices and flowers, the surreal clarity. A masterpiece from a great Grand Cru.

**2011 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese +**

GKF-173

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This is all a swell, a wave that rises below feeling, yet then you feel it lifting you, pushing you up, on a foamy breaking froth of roses; the palate is all cox-orange pippins and sweet pine-resin. A little flesh doesn't hurt a bit.

**2011 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Auslese + +**

GKF-174

**SOS : 2**

A first. "We have more holdings here now." 115° Oechsle, less than 10% botrytis, so really shriveled gold berries, a *sponti* done in steel, and a vinous, drinkable Auslese. Seeming actually *less* sweet than the Späts; in fact seeming like a big, regal Roseneck, serious and salty, lilac and blackberries and spring-onion and lavender – where oh where is the market for a wine like this?

**1998 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese**

GKF-178

**SOS : 1**

A little something grown-up. I did a trio of Rumpf '98s at a tasting at the Meadowood resort in St. Helena a few months ago, and this showed best, though all showed well and lustily. There's a little tuile of tartrates I know you won't mind, and all kinds of lovely 2nd-stage Riesling beauty.

**2011 Scheurebe Spätlese + +**

GKF-175

**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE-LIST.** A gorgeously sweaty sexual Scheu; not quite ripe passion fruit, sage and woodruff and redcurrant and cassis; an explosively brilliant palate, deep into Hans-Günter Schwarz territory here (the greatest Scheus ever made); the taser-jolt buzzing brilliance, maybe not *quite* the malty melting of those great Schwarz wines, but the salty sage here is writhing, horny, beseeching you open-armed, your skin is tingling and your breath is hoarse – sink down, sink down, yes here into the heart of the spell. The wine was so good, I got us a room.

**2011 Scheurebe Auslese, 12/375ml + +**

GKF-176H

**SOS : 3**

The same but even more sultry. The *fond* of sage and cassis is deeper, the consommé is more concentrated, gelatinous, meatier; it doesn't seem sweeter until the final finish and hardly even then. It's amazingly kinky to get this ripe and preserve this wry tart greenness. Caligula in a glass.

# Schlossgut Diel

Nahe // Burg Layen



vineyard area // 22 hectares  
annual production // 12,500 cases  
top sites & soil types // Pittermännchen (slate); Goldloch (gravel);  
Burgberg (quartzite)  
grape varieties // 70% Riesling, 25% Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc

*After I wrote that Caroline Diel's "schmutzy vineyard boots should attain iconic status, like Marc Veyrat's hat," she now thinks she needs to wear them for me or else I'll be dismayed. She even said so: "I put them on for you!" I'll bet she never wears them otherwise.*

I'll bet she has a totally different pair of much nicer vineyard boots that she usually wears. She would have thrown the schmutzy ones away except now she puts them on for me. I think that is very touching.

The very-pregnant (and almost indecently glowing) Caroline was moving into a new house the day we visited, so she only stopped by to say hi. The baby will be about 6-7 weeks old when I go back with the film team in June. I know, I haven't told you about the film team. I'm taking a film team to Germany, to make a film. I already know that one of the loveliest moments of the film will be the footage with Caroline in the vineyards, baby slung in its snugly while Mom takes us through the fine points of terroir.

So we tasted with Armin, who was justly delighted with their 2011s, which are indeed an unusually forward, fragrant and charming vintage here.

It's one of those rare moments when things are as they should be. Each thing is where it fits, and everything fits together into a happy continuance. I sometimes feel that way when I look at grazing critters. They're doing what they were made to do, surely they *have* to be happy. You drive (or walk) along and the slopes or meadows are full of munching beasts and all is well with the world. And you see a family wine estate where babies are being born, and the young mother is embarked upon her life's work as a vintner, and everything fits into everything.

I wrote about Caroline in *Reading Between The Wines*.

Tasting at Diel reminds me of tasting at Bründlmayer, because both estates do a remarkable range of things remarkably well. You grow certain of a strong guiding intelligence and craftsmanship. These are smart wines, through and through.

Caroline Diel is settling in. She's a very rare and special person; intelligent, disarmingly charming and friendly, the kind of person who could have done anything, anywhere, and lived a life of "glamour." She chose instead to continue the winery. That takes some heart, baby! Caroline is my hero, and no wonder Armin is humming.

The Rieslings hail most importantly from a trio of contiguous Grand Crus: **Goldloch** on thin loam and gravel over a rocky subsoil, **Burgberg** on quartzite, and **Pittermännchen** on Hunsrück slate. "The age of the vines are similar in the three sites, the microclimates are similar in the three sites, only a few meters separate them from one another, yet they are entirely different based on terroir," says Armin.

In my book I wrote on the subject of evanescence and the unsayable, and it deals in part with a comparison of Diel's and Dönnhoff's wines, not to determine which is "better" but rather to try and explicate their disparate existential lives. In short, Diel's wines "add up" and Dönnhoff's do not. In the many vintages I have tasted in

**Schlossgut Diel at a glance** // Elite blue-chip estate on the lower Nahe, producing scintillating terroir-driven rieslings ranging from tingly slaty to baroque. Attentive viticulture and intelligent craftsmanship in the cellar make this one of Germany's leading estates.

**how the wines taste** // The temptation is to compare them to Dönnhoff, he-to-whom- all-Riesling-producers-aspire and all that, but I think Diel's wines are too different to tolerate direct comparison. These are more studiously brilliant, more explicit; they're no less pure, but it's another kind of purity. I'm tempted to wonder whether Diel's are the Nahe wines Hans-Günter Schwarz might have made had he not made Pfalz wines.

their entireties at Diel, I've never seen a wine askew. Please don't misunderstand; I am not saying the wines are too perfect to have soul. They have plenty of soul.

But it's a kind of soul that has its shirt tucked-in, and the shoes match the purse. They are visible and depictable. With Dönnhoff there is always something para-sensual

that resists compressing into language. Not everyone loves this quality, just as many people prefer baroque and classical-period music to that of the impressionists, with their greater tonal ambiguity. I'm fascinated by the differences between these two types of wine, and relieved I don't have to choose only one.

**2004 Goldloch Sekt Brut +**

GSD-130

**SOS : n/a**

4 years and 8 months *en tirage*, and very much Avize in its pencilly note, just as it's Oger in its peachiness; vinous, complex, balsam-fir notes especially in the finish; stylish and aristocratic but not huffy. I should carry a bottle to Champagne and wreak some havoc in the Côte des Blancs.

**2011 Rosé de Diel, 6/750ml**

GSD-118

**SOS : n/a**

Already on the market as I write, it's leaner and drier than the '10; spritzy, full of transparent fruit, "cooler" than the ultra-vinous '10; charming, breezy wine. All Pinot Noir of course

**2010 Pinot Noir "Caroline," 6/750ml +**

GSD-119

**SOS : n/a**

I wondered whether this could live up to the warmth and generosity of the '09, but in fact I find this new vintage to be a high-water mark, the most murmury and Burgundian, least assertive, least *look at me!* of any. Serene, dreamy, classic soy-sandalwood-shiitake and silk. We'll see how it is after bottling, but this has a last-man-standing confidence, when all the showier ones are tired and done.

**2011 Riesling Trocken "Nahestein," 6/750ml +**

GSD-122

**SOS : 0**

The littlest dry Riesling, and the minute my nose was near the glass I sighed uncontrollably, causing Armin to announce a "Uh-huh, see how good the 2011 vintage is?" Well yes *sir*, because this has amazing fragrance, surging meyer lemon and mirabelle that exhale like a choir of sopranos; lower notes of sweet talc; the palate is a slip of a thing, like an evanescent ghost of ethereal fruit and rock-dust, and he finish yields to mineral. What a dry Riesling to drink young: it's innocence in a glass.

**2011 Dorsheim Riesling Trocken, 6/750ml +**

GSD-123

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

More weight and fruit now, more *fond*; longer and with a richer alto register of flavor; still melodic, still rock-dusty, but more dialectic and more to consider; peach and hyssop, stone and caraway, creamy yet nubby in texture.

**2011 Pittermännchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + +**

GSD-133

**2011 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml +**

GSD-131

**2011 Burgberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml + +**

GSD-132

**2011 Mixed Case Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml**

GSD-124

**SOS : 0 (all three)**

*NOTE: These Grosses Gewächs wines will also be sold in a mixed case of six, two bottles of each.*

These were uniformly thrilling and relatively precocious, especially *Pittermännchen*, which is an energetic frisky sort of boy, stupendously mineral and slate-smoky, yet rich and without edges; into Nigl-land here. Even the normally fruit-driven *Goldloch* is a mineral puppy in '11, a consommé of stones and vanilla, long and stretchy; it outweighs *Pittermännchen* and peals more deeply, though without quite the spit-crazy brilliance. But *Burgberg* is the gravity of the petals, iris sprinkled over boulders, like an Emil Nolde expressionist canvas of Riesling's most saturated brooding side; it's passionately seductive and compelling and not a *bit* pretty.

**2011 Riesling Kabinett +**  
**SOS : 2**

GSD-125

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Could this be more perfect? Just a surmise of sweetness, into a lemon-blossom and talc-y mid-palate into a dry yet fetching finish; feminine, early Spring, cool air and a grove of trees in bloom.

*NOTE: I actually think that's important, and something we don't consider nearly as often as we should. That is, what is the nature of our emotional response to a wine. It's healthy to do this, because it connects us to how we feel, and reminds us how irrelevant scoring systems are in terms of feeling. I was greatly struck by something David Schildknecht wrote – coincidentally apropos of a wine from Diel – in his recent report.*

**With all respect due to the best dry German Rieslings – and Diel renders some of the best – this little, sweet Kabinett offers genuine intrigue, not to mention a set of virtues whose like you cannot remotely approach with any other grape or in any other country on earth. Furthermore, I'm waiting to taste the Grosses Gewächs that has the energy, agility, or elegance to challenge this flyweight Riesling after 15 years in the bottle.**

*Now David's not the most explicitly emotive guy in print, but he has several high-chi words floating through that passage – “intrigue,” “agility,” “flyweight,” – and I know he's feeling some dee-light, and contrasting it to the cooler admiration one feels for the self-consciously “important” Big Dry Guys.*

*And this is part of why I am sure the world will be diminished if we stop appreciating these charming, useful and affectionate “little” Rieslings with their lilac frivolities and fluting lyric melodies.*

**2011 Goldloch Riesling Kabinett, 6/750ml +**  
**SOS : 2**

GSD-126

Withal it is rich – though not baroque – it has a crispness that makes “Kabinett” plausible – a Pittermännchen went too far into Spätlese for me. Lots of guava and soursop and ginger and malt, yet stony and with even a phenolic finish.

**2011 Goldloch Riesling Spätlese, 6/750ml + +**  
**SOS : 3**

GSD-127

More cream, parfait, but not really “sweeter” as-such, but this is fruit to the ends of the world – it recalls a great Rheingau wine of the 70s, Marcobrunn or Pfaffenberg. Banish all talk of mineral; this is a riot of fruit firmly anchored to a solid structure; *pêche-de-vigne* in an iron band.

**2011 Scheurebe Spätlese, 6/750ml +**  
**SOS : 3**

GSD-128

Cassis now; has the malty richness of the vintage, more a Riesling-with-attitude than a fervid Scheu; the passion fruit is here, and it's *delicious* wine though missing the sour edge that makes Scheu as itchy and galvanizing as it is at its writhing best. Still, Scheu emerges from the shadows at times, and this is so good I'm willing to watch it.

**2011 Pittermännchen Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml + +**  
**SOS : 2**

GSD-129

This seems less overtly sweet than the Scheu. What a vintage for this site! Kiwi and sassafrass and blackberries, with the carbonized “broiled” slate of Christoffel's 1-star Auslese; I don't know how this fits into the metaphysical concept “Auslese” but it's a superb Riesling in the sweet idiom.

Last night we roasted a pork-shoulder with some carrots and parsnips, and Karen Odessa glazed it with miso. We drank a Christoffel Auslese, in fact, the '99 1-star, and it was perfect, and I could see a wine like this 2011 doing yeoman-service with the most succulent pork-roast in your future, Schnooky.

*NOTE: we have a small amount of two 2002s to make available to aficionados of mature (or at least no longer infantile) Rieslings, a GOLDLOCH KABINETT and PITTERMÄNNCHEN SPÄT, though the latter's volume will be reduced by my predations, as that wine is insanely good.*

# Rheingau

*Eventually, in the business and marketing curriculum at some wine university or other, we'll see a course called "How To Squander An Impeccable Reputation," and the subject of study will be the Rheingau.*

30 years ago the Rheingau and Mosel were considered the two great classic Riesling regions. Pfalz and Rheinhessen were outliers, and no one knew from Nahe. But the Rheingau rested on its laurels, and quality began to slip. This was obscured by its ready local clientele, as the region sits astride a little megalopolis of three cities (Frankfurt, Mainz and Wiesbaden) and everyone can get there within thirty minutes – can and did. Alas, most of those customers seem to have been content with any-old wine as long as it came with an imprimatur—the Germans love those.

These days one hears an equal number of tales of great “name” estates still making mediocre wine from supernal land as well as lordly estates who seem to be fitfully improving. One also hears of former names going under, which is sad. What one doesn't hear is any stories of an ambitious young generation determined to make the most from the great vineyards they were endowed with. This is even sadder. And when I taste the splendid wines of my two suppliers I have profoundly mixed emotions, grateful for them and despondent at how few of them there are.

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

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

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

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Nahe 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. 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?

# Josef Leitz

Rheingau // Rudesheim



vineyard area // 40 hectares  
annual production // 30,000 cases  
top sites & soil types // Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg and Kaisersteinfels (red slate with quartzite); Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck (quartzite); Rudesheimer Berg Rottland (grey slate); Rudesheimer Dragonstone (loess-loam and quartzite); Rudesheimer Klosterlay (loess-loam); Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz (sandy loess)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

*Johannes Leitz, or “Yo-zee” as many of you know him, is an emotional guy, and he is always in love with his latest vintage; a crush on the crush, if you will. “When I am honest, this is my best vintage ever,” he is wont to say, and he hasn’t an insincere bone in his body. He means it. I love that he means it.*

Just as I love being able to agree with him. Though I can’t insist that 2011 is his “best” vintage yet, it makes one thing very clear; the new level of stellar quality that began with the ‘09 vintage has been sustained in each year since, and 2011 is a soul-stirring collection, at times electrifying and at other times magnificent.

Some of it can be explained, perhaps; a new spacious winery allows him the technical wherewithal to do what he’s always wanted to do. And the “Oscar” he won last year (Gault-Millau “Vintner Of The Year”) puts him under the microscope – not that Josi needed prompting to take every possible care. And some of it has to do with kismet.

In the candid daylight of the tasting room, I see the first few gray hairs peppering the temples of my friend Johannes. He wasn’t much more than a boy when I met him. Riding around the courtyard on a cute little tricycle...

Do I even need to write a profile on Leitz for you

any more? He’s here all the time; y’all know him as well as I do! Ah, but you didn’t know him back in 1990 when I first paid a visit to a baby-faced young man with all of 5 hectares to his name. Who could imagine what would ensue in the last 15 years?

He’s up to a whopping 40 hectares, in large part in order to supply us with enough “Dragonstone,” but also because success accrues to success and good growers often find access to good land. Johannes has secured parcels in two fascinating sites hovering just above Rudesheim as well as the Erbsloh estate in Geisenheim, with its scarcely known Grand Crus. If he obtains any more important land, he oughta split the estate in two and put one of those passionate young Rheinhessen guys in charge of part of it, just to shake things up.

I must say I like best of all to see him there, at home, lord-of-the-manor, because being an international-

**Josef Leitz at a glance** // Universally regarded as one of the three stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

**how the wines taste** // His wines are like he himself is, a mixture of serious and playful, finesse and earthiness, open and robust but also earnest and commanding. 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. 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.



wineguy can obscure some of what gets you there — any clod can climb on a plane — and what got Johannes Leitz there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire.

My favorite single moment of the trip happened on our Rheingau evening. As we've traditionally done, we had dinner with Leitz and Spretizer, at Zum Krug in Hattenheim. The list of mature Rheingau wines is enticing, and many were duly ordered, to be shared with Leif and Clint, for whom such things are newer experiences than they are for silverback geezer me.

The *coup de grâce* was meant to be a '53 Steinberger Spätlese. The bottle was ordered, and pulled from the bin, but when the cork was pulled, the proprietor received an interesting surprise.

The cork said "1942."

A review of the old inventory documents suggested the wine was indeed a Steinberger, of equivalent category to today's "Kabinett," i.e., unexceptional but unchaptalized.

The wine was almost shockingly green and fresh — god knows how much SO<sub>2</sub> they used in those days — and stunningly complex and also *delicious* to drink. And as we were drinking it, Bernd Spretizer murmured that it was his first taste of any wine from the war years. "I think for me too," Leitz agreed.

And so, moved by the wine and by the kismet of having received it, I offered a toast, both in remembrance of that hideous time but even more that we were drinking it together, nearly sixty years later, Germans and Americans, partners and friends.

## Rüdesheim Vineyards

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

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

### 2011 Riesling Eins Zwei Dry “3” (+)

GJL-192

SOS : 0

**CORE-LIST WINE.** I just heard about the pun I should have thought of: no *vier*. Funny, and apropos, because this is the safe-zone for dry German Riesling. And of course Litz was the man to do it. I don’t know *how* he understands that dry Riesling needs to be *tasty* and juicy and not just cerebral and spiky. But he does.

It helps that the fruit comes from a Grand Cru in Geisenheim called Rothenberg. In effect a mini-GG at an everyday price. Mind you, the lease is soon up on that *climat* and the wine will revert to Rüdesheim in another couple years. But I’m sure it won’t miss a beat. Meanwhile this is another classic, with its plum, rhubarb and redcurrant fruit, juicy spicy mid-palate, and sappy rock-dust finish, which was clipped from very recent bottling (hence my hedging the plus), but this wine’s always better in the Summer, and remember – *no vier*.

### 2011 Rüdesheimer Riesling Trocken +

GJL-199

SOS : 0 // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Actually a Roseneck, and a super-fine elegant, solid silky wine, both serene and somehow also hyperactive on the palate; this is stunningly good dry Riesling – it’s virtuosic, plays an amazingly intricate music and makes it look effortless.

### 2011 Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling “Katerloch,” 6/750ml + (+)

GJL-201

SOS : 0

A micro-parcel in the Roseneck, this is the “Alte Reben” of the past vintages; Johannes is tired of the frequency with which Alte Reben is used. This is the Big Boy of the dry Rosenecks, steelier but not steely; vertical, firmer, more taut, more overtly mineral, and more dry-feeling; its complexity is (currently) more inscrutable; there’s greater length, more *fond* and spiciness, and more power in general.

### 2011 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling “Hinterhaus,” 6/750ml +

GJL-202

SOS : 0 // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Micro-parcel in the Rottland. Johannes admits he underwent a time he wanted to make a big seething Wachau wine from here, you know, one of those 15% alc beasts. Thankfully he’s outgrown this (as for the most part have the Austrians), and he’s now doing an even more difficult and wonderful thing: showing how much stuffing and intensity one can cram into a wine with *moderate* alcohol.

This is like a veal chop brined in porcini jus, leathery and robust, big-boned and horizontal and loaded with torque; like some Ukrainian body-builder pulling a 737 with a shoulder-rope. Yet after hours the guy dances brilliantly. Maybe Germany’s most improbable dry Riesling, or at least spirit-kin to those heroic Saumagens from Koelher-Ruprecht.

**2011 Rudesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Riesling "Terrassen," 6/750ml + +**

GJL-197

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is the old vines from Kaisersteinfels, and it doesn't say "Trocken" because it missed the criteria by a few grams of RS. But the last few vintages it's been one of the world's most splendid and compelling dry Rieslings – and I mean *dry* as a wine *tastes*, not as it's categorized by a bureaucrat. For I find this to be the perfect stone and lime-driven dry wine, insanely complex, wolfishly delicious.

**2011 Riesling "Dragonstone" +**

GJL-194

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Around 90° Oechsle, homeopathic chaptalization, very late picked and pure single-site Drachenstein; the wine is exceptionally delineated and kinetic (thanks maybe to its 9.2g/l acidity); it lunges across the palate to a pithy firm core or mineral and licorice and a vivid dry bite, into a kirsch-y grappa-ish finish. Length is double-take striking.

**2011 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett**

GJL-195

**SOS : 1**

This at times is so high toned it sizzles into celeriac and spearmint – "the Altoid effect," as I've called it. (Not *that* Altoid-effect; it's always about sex with you, isn't it.) This just-bottled wine was in an herbal phase, which always yields to slate and fennel and mint – so wait on it.

**2011 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese**

GJL-196

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Call it "Maggie" as we all do. This is the most tensile, limey version since the '04; sleek, spicy and with cut; it takes the apple aroma a little time to come on, and when it does it's holding hands with tart key-lime; this Maggie is an angular high-cheekboned lass, even with her velvet voice.

**Gabe Clary writes:**

*"This is so red, it tastes like strawberries with a bit of lime juice and a spoonful of sugar. The sweetness heightens the flavors here, doesn't cover them up. It is also glimmering and cool, with a wintergreen flavor and cut acid. Wow."*

**2011 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese + + +**

GJL-204

**SOS : 2**

Oh, again.

Steadily miraculous for three years now; a melting serenity, an endless length, and a firm pith of quartz and apple leading toward the deliberate finish, and an ether of apple-blossom breathes back to you; your *Mom* doesn't love you like this loves you. And if you ever lost your soul, it comes smiling back to you here. For this gentle divinity, this focus and spiritual purpose, no "rating" can really apply – including mine. Hale, focused, diligent, of sweet good cheer. Not merely giddy, but calmly, wonderfully *happy*.

# Spreitzer

Rheingau // Oestrich



vineyard area // 17 hectares  
annual production // 8,500 cases  
top sites // Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen  
soil types // deep tertiary loam and loess  
grape varieties // 96% Riesling, 4% Spätburgunder

*I wrote myself a note in my tasting book. “It’s getting to the point the wines are the wines – why grope for associations year after year?” The blank page glowers at you, and you feel compelled to write “apples, violets, crawdads moldering on a humid pier...” And then you see you wrote the same thing a year ago. I guess you could do the tasted twice, consistent notes trope, but that always seemed pompous to me.*

I mean, this is a good thing; it shows how consistent the wines are, and in the Rheingau this is no small matter. The list of estates one can rely on is not exactly huge.

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

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

Spreitzer has ascended to the top rank in the Rheingau. No one is better, and few are as fine. Yet the German press is likely to feel otherwise, in large part because of the emphasis they lay on the dry wines. This is reasonable enough. For my part I simply don’t consider a German grower’s dry wine. If they are good I am delighted, and offer them. But this is an extra, not the thing I come looking for. They could cease producing them altogether



and I wouldn’t mind. Nor would the wine-world be discernibly the poorer.

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

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

**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.*

**2011 Hallgartener Hendelberg Riesling Trocken**

GSP-078

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This arose because I was explaining to Clint Sloan that Spreitzers owned land up the hill in Hallgarten, where the soils were slatey, and that we seldom tasted those wines because they were blended into estate-Rieslings or into our “101.” Andreas offered to draw us a sample, which I accepted eagerly.

One assumes Spreitzer equals the juicy charming syntax of Oestrich, and so I wanted to see *their* take on an entirely different terroir. And I did like this wine! Charming; quince and slate fragrances, almost touching on Furmint; 98° Oechsle, so no blushing girl, this; very late-picked, shows an agreeable iris-y note – call it flower-funk; gentle but discernible minerality.

**2011 Lenchen “Rosengarten” Riesling Erstes Gewächs, 6/750ml +**

GSP-081

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!****2011 Wisselbrunnen Riesling Erstes Gewächs, 6/750ml +**

GSP-082

**SOS : 0 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Both excellent and entirely different from each other. Rosengarten, you may recall, is a filet-piece in Lenchen, and so it is crammed with Oestrich fruit; a lovely mélange of juice and solidity and as fine and tasty as it’s ever been; long and fruit-driven but riven with salty stone and even a hint of 5-spice and apple compote. This is how dry is *done*, and it’s a SOMMELIER ALERT! With an SOS: 1.

Wisselbrunnen is firmer and more nutty, with a toasty kind of mineral and high notes of plum blossom; firm and spicy. You slurp the Rosengarten but you chew this.

**2011 Riesling “101” +**

GSP-076

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This was mind-bogglingly good at the January tastings, and time hasn’t been cruel to it. With RS at 24-25g/l it’s an especially fetching vintage, with a lilac-y top note and a rich chewy mid-palate into a finish like apple-pulp. The issue of discrete “sweetness” doesn’t apply, or shouldn’t, because I can’t imagine a more perfect basic everyday Riesling.

**2011 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett**

GSP-077

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Riotous and extravagant and juicy; Riesling hedonism to the n-th degree, 11 out of 10 on the drink-my-pretty-ass-*down*-o-meter.

**2011 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese +**

GSP-079

**SOS : 2**

A rarely seen Rheingau paradigm, solid no-nonsense alpha-Riesling as it used to be. Vanilla bean and candied violet yet the wine itself isn’t at all “candied,” albeit it is more lithe and ripply than its normally stoic heavy-footed self. It’s a tall ballerina up on tiptoes to sniff the wisteria, standing on her powerful legs.

**2011 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese “303,” 6/750ml +**

GSP-080

**SOS : 2**

From a sub-parcel called “Eisenberg,” from which a TBA was picked in 1921 with the then-record must-weight of 303° Oechsle. Often there’s a little botrytis in this wine, as there is here, along with the usual ferrous minerality; the sweetness ducks and dives, salty and tangy, with almost a porphyry note.

# Mittelrhein

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

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

# Florian Weingart

Mittelrhein // Boppard-Spay

vineyard area // 6.5 hectares  
annual production // 3,300 cases  
top sites & soil types // Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay (devonian slate);  
Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg (devonian slate with small amounts of loess);  
Bopparder Hamm Engelstein (loess with variable contents of lime, slate,  
and volcanic ashes)  
grape varieties // 93% Riesling, 5% Spätburgunder, 2% Grauburgunder



*This was the visit where I was most happy. Last year had been awkward; most of Florian Weingart's wines were still fermenting, and so my offering was clipped, and it doesn't matter how much I try to explain such things: you see an abbreviated offering and infer I didn't like the wines. Fair enough.*

I was happy for three reasons. The wines were just gorgeous. That would have been reason enough. Also, and amazingly, Florian committed commercial hari-kari by only making *two* Trocken wines the entire vintage. The rest is mostly in the Halbtrocken/Feinherb nexus, as he prefers them. (As most of the growers personally prefer them, but are constrained from admitting.) And finally, we had one of the most candid and meaningful conversations I've had with a vintner in years.

Florian will turn 40 on his next birthday. Taking-stock time. (I have my own stock to take, based on having known him when he was a little kid, but that's another story....) And he is beginning to think he should do something almost no one else would have the nerve to do....

Shrink his estate. That's right, make it smaller. Fail in his blind obeisance to the all-demanding Gods of Perpetual Growth. I can't tell you how much I admire the stand this man is taking. His estate is about 6 hectares, just on the cusp of being too large for him to do alone or with only the family (and a few part-time workers). He doesn't want to lose touch with the vines, doesn't want to have to delegate cellar or vineyard to an employee, doesn't want a layer of "middle-management," doesn't want, in short, to *lose touch* with the things that make him happy to live a vintner's life. So he's looking, with his analytical

mind and careful temperament, for the sweet spot where it's big enough to feed the family and small enough to feed the soul.

It means resisting the temptation to buy excellent vineyards for low prices. Florian will also let the lease lapse on the Schloss Fürstenberg vineyard near Bacharach. Six hectares of killing-steep land is enough for a guy. A guy with ambitions, to build a new cellar, to upgrade home and winery in several ways, but most of all to preserve himself and stay connected to his joy and purpose.

Florian is unusually intellectual, and his demeanor is sweet and humble. He seems pensive, at least when I'm there. It takes time to taste, because we're always off on some side-track conversation that fascinates us both.

And he's a quiet revolutionary, our hero. He allows himself the occasional heretical wine, and he's willing – at least with me – to say some unusually radical and provocative things. Let's talk about dry German Rieslings, shall we? Most growers accede to the style as a matter of commercial survival. It's all they can sell to other Germans. It's hard to know how they actually feel about the wines, and I often suspect they've made a virtue of necessity. "<Sigh>....if we must produce such wines then of course we'll do our best, both to make the wines and to pretend we like them...." Now no one has actually said

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

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



that, and I have an axe to grind, but I'd bet serious money it's how many of them feel.

Florian makes unusually consistent dry Rieslings. He understands the basics of the beast. And yet one year, as we both reached the place on the table where the sweet wines began, he mused – with no prompting from me – “One day I will only produce sweet wines, sell what I can and drink the rest myself.” I'll come by and help!

It's not enough for Florian Weingart to be considered the “top” estate in his region and one of the elite Riesling estates in Germany. He is inherently modest and restless. His is a mind that chews things over. We were talking about the reduction-aromas which often attend the early stages of wines fermented with wild yeasts. This came up not only because we're a bunch of pencilnecked geeks – he isn't but I probably am – but because Florian has returned to “spontis” and ambient-temperature fermentations after a decade using more modern (I dare say trendy) approaches. “After ten years I've come back to many of the things my father did,” he observed.

A few weeks later, back in the States again, I had this email from him. He had continued to mull the question over – typically! How can you not be fond of such a guy?

“I just thought about your question concerning the volatile S-compounds in spontaneous ferments: In many spontaneous yeast societies there are types that are more capable [of] break[ing] up proteins

and amino-acids that contain Sulfur than in cultured yeasts (which have been selected especially not to produce offflavors). Those released S-bindings can react to  $H_2S$  (and so on) in the reductive climate of the fermentation. I have probably just been lucky that the right [yeasts] are at work. Another reason – [which has] proved to be the most important S-source in volatile-S-compounds (USresearch) – is elementary S from late crop protection treatments with Sulfur. This is probably more important than the differences in reductivity of the fermenting wine (barrels or stainless; small or large cell numbers) but again I don't really know. I think though that reductivity during fermentation and after has not been given the right attention for white wines [in terms of] their aroma development and their aging abilities.”

The Bopparder Hamm is one of the few due-south exposures in the Mittelrhein, and one of the few hillsides with almost no abandoned vineyards. Boppard and its neighbor Spay are an isolated warren of activity in a region that's grown ominously sleepy. The sites are slaty of course, but there's also a residue from the volcanic activity of the Eifel hills to the north, which imparts a certain ripe tropical note. Florian may have missed it, I don't know. But it is singular, and maybe unique.

So, now to an exciting and revolutionary group of wines, the wines I'm most impatient to taste again, the wines I'm most excited by this year, and as perfect a group of food-wines as you will ever consider.

**2011 Bopparder Hamm Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

GAW-107

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

It's the lightest wine of his vintage; deft and vigorous yet with a taut richness; toasted-grainy sweetness is a sort of vapor enclosing this dusty dryness. Another paradigm of ideally dry Riesling in its most food-loving form

**2011 Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +**

GAW-108

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

*HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.* From purchased fruit from a site near the Bopparder Hamm, and a beautifully elegant Riesling in a warm plummy profile; suave, malty tangy mid-palate into a pebbly salty finish. Again, food baby!

**2011 Spay Riesling Spätlese Feinherb + +**

GAW-111

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

***SOMMELIERS! IF YOU ONLY BUY ONE WINE FROM ME THIS YEAR – MAKE IT THIS ONE.***

Wow! He is *in the zone* for food-snugglers this year. Again the grainy-toasty “sweetness” and hint of banana in a sold open-armed, firm and plum-tangy frame. And, utterly delicious.

**2011 Bopparder Hamm Riesling Spätlese Feinherb + +**

GAW-110

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

*How* is he doing it??? One beauty after another. This one's slatier and “cooler,” more malic and shade-green and green tea, more detailed and filigree, but with uncanny balance and clarity.

**2011 Bopparder Hamm Riesling Kabinett (+)**

GAW-109

**SOS : 2**

In the sweeter idiom there's more plum-gelée and even an attractive botrytis maltiness; it seems both creamy and unknit, though we're tasting a just-bottled wine at room temp. Spicy length and 5-spice exotics.

**2011 Riesling Spätlese +**

GAW-112

**SOS : 2**

This feels better integrated than the Kabinett, its sweetness less overt, its complexity more vivid. It's full of paradox, leek and mint and apple and stone; juicy and firm, adamantly so; green tea again, wintergreen. I've seen Graacher Domprobst show this way; lime, cashews, mango.

# Mosel-Saar-Ruwer

*I don't know why, but I was homesick the first couple weeks I was in Europe. That doesn't happen, or hasn't happened; after all, I'm connected to my taproot, fully engaged, with people I like and love, doing the part of my work I love the most. Yet still, I couldn't stop thinking of home. And I supposed it had to do with being happy here in Boston and really liking our house and our neighborhood, but it didn't happen last year, and we were already settled in here.*



So it was just one of those things. I was homesick, no big whoop. About midway through the month-long trip, I drove to the Mosel from Champagne with Valerie and Gabe. Gabe has the fortunate ability to sleep in any moving conveyance, so he dozed away in the back seat – poor guy slept completely through Luxembourg – and Val and I made fun of him. I don't recall whether Gabe had ever seen the Mosel or had only seen it briefly, but I said I'd wake him as we drew close.

Back before they built the tunnel under Bernkastel, the old road brought you to an abrupt and jaw-dropping view of the steep slopes. You descended down through the slatey woods, streams and trees and the curvy road, and then wham, it hit you: perpendicular goddamn vineyards, rows of vertical stakes in a straight line up unbelievably to the sky. One year I drove a few colleagues to the Mosel, on a low spitty sort of gloomy November evening, and a guy who'd never indicated an emotional bone in his body couldn't stop exclaiming. *It's like a religious experience.* And now my young colleague Gabe, looking upon the steep slopes for the first time, shaking his head in disbelief.

I took a small detour so we could drive over the little Wehlen bridge, where the view in front to the Sonnenuhr looks literally impossible; it can't be, no one could ever work in those mountains, *what were they thinking?*

In a few minutes when we pulled up at Selbach's in Zeltingen, my homesickness was forgotten. I have hardly ever been so happy to be somewhere. I wanted to kiss every stranger on the sidewalk. Now sure, I was seeing close friends again, the weather was perfect, I'd get my walks in the vineyards each morning – at last – and my Karen Odessa would arrive in a few more days. But I know those things don't explain it. The simple truth is, I was plugged in to a source of irrepressible joy. I love it there, I can't help myself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

Speaking of sustainability, some of you have heard of an *Autobahn* bridge that's being built over the valley near Ürzig-Rachtig. It's terribly important, you see, to get truck traffic moving efficiently, along with getting discount-fliers to the airport at Hahn, the old U.S. Air Force base. These are useful things, but at what cost? One might similarly argue for the demolition of a wing of an art museum in order to build a parking garage. After all, how many people look at paintings? But everyone's gotta park!

It was in fact agreed to by the *Mayors* of Erden, Rachtig and Ürzig, who argued it would assist local tourism. I don't know if it will be the debacle some claim, but I'm very sure it risks blighting the landscape, and no matter what it's a shameful choice to have made.

When I wrote my book I found myself talking a great deal about the Mosel valley. It's one of the few remaining places that demonstrate such cohesion. You know you have entered a very singular culture, which is valuable enough, and *then* it's also so beautiful.

But not exclusively lyrical! A well-known grower filed suit seeking redress for vineyards he said he "lost" as a result of *Flurbereinigung*, and which ended up in the hands of a nearby neighbor with whom relations had always been cordial. The courts determined the case was frivolous and baseless, but what struck me was that it was filed at all, in such a narrow valley, such a fishbowl culture, in whose narrow perimeters it wouldn't seem prudent to roil the waters. Yet I have rarely seen such a spirit of true neighborliness as I have on the Mosel, at times, among families where there's mutual respect and trust.

# Mosel Regionals

*Many years ago, when I learned I'd have access to the usual "Mosel-regionals" through J&H Selbach, it was a no-brainer to make them available. They were (and still are) obtained through a network of small suppliers with whom the Selbachs have done business for years, and whom they trust to deliver honest authentic Mosel wine. The wines – Piesporter, Zeller, Bernkasteler, that crowd – are actually Rieslings, unlike a lot of the schlock.*



That market is slowly declining, and of course it's a commodity market, and thus hard to make much money in. Most buyers of commodities simply want them for the lowest possible price. How much does the "Piesporter customer" care, after all, that the wine is Riesling?

So Selbachs and many others like them have moved into own-brand wines, which I think is a healthy development. The old-guard are still here for those who still want them, but the future belongs to the items one *owns*, not merely participates in.

My own approach I'm sure strikes Johannes Selbach

as annoyingly laissez-faire, but in fact what I want from these wines is that they are honest, and above their class. As indeed they are, and so I offer them happily. A wine like the "Incline" is a perfect wedding-reception wine if most of the guests aren't "wine people." It's tasty, doesn't cost a lot, it's easy-drinking, and someone somewhere will probably have cause to think *This wine is unusually good; I wonder what it is*. Why should those people drink crummy plonk? Show me what you give to your least pretentious customer, and I'll show you your integrity.

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.

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.

### **J. & H. SELBACH**

#### **2011 Bernkasteler Kurfurstlay Riesling**

GSR-111

#### **2011 Zeller Schwarze Katz Riesling**

GSR-211

#### **2011 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling**

GSR-311

#### **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**

GSR-711

#### **2011 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**

GSR-811

### **SELBACH**

#### **2011 Riesling "Incline"**

GSZ-039

#### **2011 Riesling Dry (Fish Label)**

GSZ-040

#### **2011 Riesling Kabinett (Fish Label)**

GSZ-041

## The Question of Tartrates

Now and again we get a pick-up request due to tartrates in the bottle. When I was starting out some 30 years ago, every grower's pricelist had a disclaimer to the effect that tartrates are a naturally occurring substance and no cause for refund or return. I wish we all could do the same.

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

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

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

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

# Selbach-Oster

Mosel // Zeltingen



vineyard area // 21 hectares  
annual production // 13,300 cases  
top sites & soil types // Zeltinger Himmelreich, Schlossberg and Sonnenuhr;  
Wehlener Sonnenuhr; Graacher Himmelreich and Domprobst; Bernkasteler  
Badstube (All blue devonian slate. In Graach with a layer of loam underneath)  
grape varieties // 98.5% Riesling, 1.5% Pinot Blanc

*Johannes says he's challenged by others in the family that he makes too many different wines. I think that's such a hoot. Even in Germany they all want to be rational.*

What brings this to mind is my mulling over the “landscape” of Selbach’s 2011s, a lot of different wines to be sure, a lot of very *good* wines, a handful of amazing wines, but most of all, again: the Whole. Following on the hot heels of the outstandingly successful and exciting 2010s, these ‘11s are calmer, as if to say “Well that was thrilling but it’s a relief to be cruising again.”

Of course *cruising* in Selbach’s context means a steady hand over a large delightful family of perfectly wonderful, pure, helpful, interesting and delicious Mosel Rieslings. Several of them are blow-you-away wines, and most of them are like a kindly force that builds and consolidates, into something that feels like depth and even love.

Three things have to be present: Intelligence, memory and desire. Intelligence to steer a sensible way through all the noise about how-wines-are-made, the incoherent dialectic in which the strongest opinions are held by the dumbest people. Memory, to hold in your soul the vision of Mosel-Riesling as a being of a special nature, a beacon of meaning toward which you steer. And desire, to get there, because even if you are already there, even if you have to do is *get out of the way*, it never feels

like you’re arrived, it always feels like you’re traveling.

“We don’t do all casks or all stainless steel; we don’t do all cultured yeasts or all *spontis*,” he says. “We do some of each, so that we can respond to the fruit during the crush, and also blend afterwards if it seems to suit the wines.” This may seem like heresy to certain kinds of people who like to make religions out of cellar practices. Can’t the feckless man *take a stand*?? But you see, he has. He’s taken the wisest stand, the only sustainable stand. Take the best from all methods and approaches. Listen to what the fruit asks for. Tilt as needed. Flexibility and pragmatism are not excuses for lack of principle; they are principles.

We were a group in the little parlor Selbachs still use as a tasting room. We had gotten up to the *en-bloc* trio of Anrecht, Rotlay and Schmitt, parcels I’d pointed out to Gabe and Valerie during a vineyard walk the day before. Johannes was asked where the idea had come from.

This is the spirit of what he said.

*When I arrived at the estate I was convinced all this talk about terroir was mumbo-jumbo.*

**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.

**how the wines taste** // Johannes’ explicitly stated wish is to makes wines for people to drink and not for geeks and writers to preen over. If he says (and I agree) “The best bottle is the first one emptied,” it can sound mercantile, but it isn’t. The useful wine is the friendliest and most companionable wine, not the most “impressive” one. But Johannes earns the right to claim this value by making many of the most impressive wines you can drink – depending on what exactly impresses you. If you want bombast and primary-fruit perfume and excess sweetness, look somewhere else. These are meant to drink with food up to and including Auslese in most vintages. 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.

*What mattered most was how you made the wines. Well after about two years I had no choice but to change my mind, just by tasting the juice. We were doing the same things in all the vineyards but the wines were simply different, and there was no other way to explain it.*

*Then I wanted to push the wines forward a little. Everyone was pushing more and more ripeness, lowering yields and harvesting selectively, and we started doing that too. We still were making relatively moderate wines for the table, not the fruit bombs that some of our colleagues offered, but I certainly got seduced by the idea of micro-picking for 2-star and 3-star lots. My father went along.*

*After a while I remember he said to me, it's a little silly to talk about "terroir" when you're going out into the vineyard three times to select what aspect of terroir you're going to push forward. It's like picking two or three voices out of the chorus and saying "Now you three shout." What you want is for the entire chorus to sing. He went on to say that in his day a grower waited as long as he possibly could, taking all the risks that this entailed, and then picked the whole vineyard in one pass. The botrytis grapes, the shriveled dry ones, the golden ones and also the green ones. And then you really saw what that vineyard gave in that vintage, the whole picture, the real terroir.*

*So I thought yes, we could try that. And Papa and I discussed it and we thought we'd try it with one of our best parcels, a part of the Schlossberg originally called Schmitt. The first vintage we did it was 2003. The wine was an Auslese, though now we don't use the Prädikat names any more. As soon as we tasted it we knew we had something. It was alive, multifaceted.*

*So we added the Rotlay to the program with the 2004 vintage, and a couple years ago we started with Anrecht. And I came to see that Papa had been right; you can't respect the vineyard if you're trying to manipulate the vineyard. He brought me around to seeing what terroir really could mean. I owe this all to him...*

*...And you know, the last wine he ever drank, the day before he passed, was that 2003 Schmitt... I'm sorry, men aren't supposed to cry...*

What Johannes is doing here is closest to the very soul of what I hope to do with my working life among these people and their wines. It seems simple. It's an ongoing search for authenticity. And in these beautiful wines there's an existential and spiritual reality that can't be reduced away. The truth of a vintage is in them. The truth of a vineyard is



in them. The courage and love of a vintner is in them. They are all of the things that true wine can be.

Having written at such fulsome length about Selbach so many times, and wanting to shorten this unwieldy beast of a catalogue, what is the absolute *pith* of the message?

It starts with a simple declaration: Johannes Selbach, his family, their wines, embody every virtue I hold dear. Not just virtues pertaining to Mosel Riesling, but virtues that touch upon questions of honor and even morality.

Sometimes Johannes and I have co-presented seminars about this & that, and I've lost count of the number of times I've sat and listened to him and thought "That is exactly the right thing to say and the best way to say it." He has no dogma except the inherent mistrust of dogma. He instinctively steers his wines toward honesty and integrity. He is a *shaman* of terroir. Given a choice between making a wine more ostentatious or more genuine, he always chooses the latter. His wines have an incomparable mid-palate depth, so that you start by dancing on their polished surfaces before you fall slowly through the cloud-like substance below, and then you finally get to taste the essence of slate on the clean dry finale.

The word "gravitas" comes to mind except that it suggests solemnity, and Selbach's wines are never solemn, just serious.

I spend the best part of a whole day tasting Johannes' vintage. Not only because there are a lot of wines – and variations of many – but because I find it important to taste these with nowhere else I have to go. There is something in them that builds, which you don't find if you're in a hurry. They take you inexorably toward wordlessness. The more you know, the less there is to say, or that needs to be said. Reality, after all, is simple – it's just real. There it is. It is

simple, but man is it elusive. Because when we encounter it, we're often confused or even annoyed.

Often I go through the membrane into a mystic zone when tasting at Selbach. The wines consolidate into a great chord of beauty, and they do so in an especially allusive way; they crawl in your windows while you're running to get the door. Selbach's wines aren't like books of poems, where you can dip in here and there or dog-ear your favorites; they're more like novels, where you can certainly indicate passages you like especially, but where you can't just start reading any old where. Any given vintage is a whole story of which individual wines are scenes or sometimes chapters. This is also true, I think, for the progression of vintages. For as the Mosel is a weave, the Selbachs are woven through the weave, and the wines are woven through the family which is woven in the big tapestry called Mosel. They are so connected it is hard to see them in the isolation we insist upon when we judge them merely aesthetically. And yet we must, of course; they are bottles of wine we buy and sell—and drink.

One morning I came in from my daily tromp and I must have been glowing. Johannes' wife Barbara met me at the door, saying "Well look at you!" and I said something about how beautiful it was up there in

the vineyards, and Barbara said something sweet and memorable; when Johannes returns from his many travels he is often renewed and heartened by having such a lovely place to call home. I have a range of producers along the Mosel, and I love all their wines, but none of them embodies a sense of home with more purity than Selbach. As much and as often as Johannes flies hither and yon selling wine, he has somehow managed to remain more profoundly anchored to Home than anyone I know. Not just to his particular dwelling, but to the holistic being of Zeltingen and the Mosel valley. Do his wines express this anchoring? Of course they do. It is why they themselves are so grounded. Can I explain how this occurs? Not really. I doubt if even Jo can.

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

## A Look at the Vineyards

**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! I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: 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. 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 Moselness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

**WEHLENER SONNENUHR** is like Zeltinger Sonnenuhr feminized, slimmed down, and refined. If Zeltinger Sonnenuhr is oaken, Wehlener Sonnenuhr is willowy. 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 fullbodied. 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.

**2011 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

GSO-387

**SOS : ( minus ) -1**

The most forceful character among a range of generally successful Trockens; not the most "agreeable" but certainly the most interesting from the terroir standpoint. You just have to accept a sorrel-y tartness.

**2011 Riesling Feinherb**

GSO-380

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** Boy was this an easy decision. Salty and sweet-straw and lime zest and tarragon and eleven tons of salty charm. Next year we may also see an old-vines bottling.

**2011 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken +**

GSO-384

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This wine always kicks ass, but this is the best in many years, with all the zingy minty spice it always shows plus a lot of body (98° Oechsle!) and yet it's not ungainly; Johannes says the site itself gives suppleness, elegance and mid-palate, and the wines are never coarse. This is markedly pure, spicy and balanced.

**2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**

GSO-385

**2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**

GSO-385H

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This might as well be Feinherb; there's no perceptible RS. It's less outsized than the wacked-out '10, but contained and wholesome and balanced on the studiously dry side.

**2011 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett +**

GSO-386

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Y'know what? I freakin' *love* this vineyard. And here it is in a dewy, virginal form, the single gleaming instant of innocence that isn't naïve, hope that isn't defeated, kindness unconscious of reward, sweetness that can't help itself.

**2011 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett (+)**

GSO-378

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** A still-cloudy cask-sample, but solid and rich, on the dry side, yet not overstuffed – I mean, sure we *like* them overstuffed, but it's great to have a truly plausible Kabinett, with a cool delicate syrup of balsam-y green.

**2010 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese +**

GSO-365

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Exceptionally expressive this year; Himmelreich spearmint and tarragon. It has a deliciously weird sort of lusty restraint; you feel it both settled-in and straining forward. Best vintage ever of this wine; from steep 30-year old Himmelreich.

**2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**

GSO-388

**2011 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

GSO-388H

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

More slate-liqueur now, a creamy-salty texture that isn't at all sweet, but speaks directly to the Mosel soul.

**2011 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese +**  
**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GSO-394

A cool demure edition of this wine, discreet and introverted and dewy, the fresh morning of a warm day; hints of botrytis salt and woodruff-y herbal notes.

**2009 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese +**  
**SOS : 2**

GSO-375

It's fun to see this ripe yet elegant *comme il faut* classic in contrast to the crack-high '10s; this is streamlined with the finest possible fruit; subtle botrytis, polish and grace; will go all cox-orange and beeswaxy with age.

**2011 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese +**  
**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GSO-389

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Somewhat masculine and stern this year, almost adamant; some stainless steel in the vinification. But it has the '11 slaty dissolve and the fresh sweet-straw finish, which encompasses an archly pointed minerality.

**2011 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese +**  
**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GSO-391

A palsy-walsy version of this, with minerality at a point so fine it feels as if it were traced in calligraphy, snaking its way among the skeins of fruit, subtle botrytis and herbs; inferential as these all have been.

## The En-Bloc Harvested Micro Parcels

**2011 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling "Anrecht," 6/750ml + +**  
**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GSO-381

This wine pinned my pathetic ass to the matt. I surrender! What gorgeous limey-malic fruit, what blazing dramatic expression, what clarity and brilliant delineation, what a haunting greeny-creamy spicy finish. *What* a wine.

**2011 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling "Schmitt," 6/750ml + +**  
**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GSO-383

This is almost demure after the hyperactive Anrecht; all its flavor – all its *amazing* flavor – coming as a taut minerality yet also a fluid herbal savor in the middle and back palates. The almost sedate attack doesn't prepare you for the onslaught of flavor to follow, yet it's all gentle and companionable.

### **Gabe Clary writes:**

*"The power of this is amazing. It is a force, but not even remotely heavy, crystalline and sparkling. The sensation of tasting this is almost equal to the flavors — cold, pressed apples and peach pits, and dense minerality."*

**2011 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling "Rotlay," 6/750ml + +**  
**SOS : 2**

GSO-382

Here's a little *cinéma vérité*; we had three lots, of which "B" gave the most funky old-school Mosel. Everyone loved it. But a blend of all three pieces gave a more symmetrical, more complete dialogue, a "better" wine, at the cost of civilizing the beast that was "B." And the wine is superb. But...but "B" is just so gloriously ornery – let's do it!

So we did.

**2011 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese +**

GSO-392

**SOS : 2**

Vinous, herbal, green-shady oolong and Sencha and verbena, a welcome botrytis, snappy-minty length, quite “green” for Schlossberg yet also unusually yummy.

**2010 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese \*\* + + +**

GSO-372

**SOS : 3**

Another scintillating masterpiece to follow the amazing ‘09. Jo’s in the zone with this vineyard lately. Somehow this still conveys a silky clarity given its richness, as if it grows taller but not thicker. All Fuder; all gorgeous.

**2011 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Auslese \*\* +**

GSO-393

**2011 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml \*\* +**

GSO-393H

**SOS : 3**

Picked in January and intended for Eiswein, but Johannes wisely opted to bottle it as a sexy-pants Auslese with nuances of Eiswein. X-treme verbena here. Acid-arrow shoots straight; fruit quivers with icy intensity. Not too spiky. Mighty fine!

**2010 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese \*\* + + +**

GSO-373

**SOS : 3**

This is probably the very finest mega-rich Auslese Johannes has made; it has a clear stream of lime and pêche-de-vigne; a perfectly streamlined yet huge Auslese, from below the sundial, 80+ year vines; it’s juicy and addictively tasty yet entirely proud and serious and yet with no *affect* of seriousness; it’s not huffy.

**2010 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml + +**

GSO-374H

**SOS : 4**

Total batshit minty madness! Wonderfully derangedly over-the-top, so vital I wonder if a mere bottle can contain it. This is a *seethe* of nature – strange to think it came from frozen grapes picked out of a moribund world. It’s like a pagan orgy encased in ice.

# Jakoby pur.

Mosel // Kinheim



vineyard area // 4.5 hectares  
annual production // 2,500 cases  
top sites // Kinheimer Rosenberg (blue devonian slate);  
Kinheimer Hubertuslay (grey-blue devonian slate)  
grape varieties // Riesling, Pinot Noir

*The estate changed its label and its name to Jakoby pur., which translates to “Just-Jakoby.” The label is stark, almost denuded, as if to say Here we are. No frills. Onward!*

Lots of fresh wind in Kinheim. I know I’ve said this elsewhere, but it’s one thing to take the reins of an estate in a glam-location, and quite another to do so in an out-of-the-way place like here. Stefan and Peter Jakoby are obliquely within the Selbach nexus, but that doesn’t automatically mandate their claiming the hardscrabble life of the steep slopes. Wine is a singular passion.

Kinheim is a village stuck between Kröv on one side – much beloved of tourists for its Nacktarsch (bare-bottom) bottlings – and Erden on the other. In early editions of Johnson’s Wine Atlas this standard reference says “Kinheim begins a decline,” as indeed it does. There are no Grand Crus (though there are micro-parcels of near-GC quality and well-known as such by Mosel insiders) because the soils are lighter. Thus prices for Kinheimers are low. And low prices don’t stimulate thoughts of increasing production costs. It’s one thing to make higherich ly visible grand Quixotic gestures like the outstanding Daniel Vollenweider estate is doing – if you can ask (and receive) stratospheric prices in return. It’s quite another to labor in modest obscurity on behalf of an idea that isn’t remotely sexy, but every bit as passionate.

If you go downstream from Ürzig-Erden you first come to Lösnich and then to Kinheim. Immediately behind the village there’s a crazy-steep hump of hill formerly known as Eulenlay which was considered first class land in the famous 19th-century classification for tax-assessments. Behind it the slope undulates, sometimes steep, sometimes gentle. The soil is



lighter. Yet good Kinheimers are scrupulously pure Mosel Rieslings on an everyday scale. Overachievers such as Merkelbach and Jakoby will give us some incredible values.

**Jakoby pur. 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.**

**how the wines taste** // As a rule, Kinheimers tend to run light but true, attractive apple flavors with typical minerality. Other than a small section of the Rosenberg, directly behind the town, there isn’t a Grand Cru slope here. But Erich’s wines excel by sheer **vitality**; they’re upbeat, vivid wines, exuberant and Spring-y.

**2011 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**

GJM-085

**SOS : 2**

This took some work with a range of potential blending partners (various *fuders*) but when we were done we had a very good, magnetic Mosel, a bit on the rich side for “Kabinett” but still a tasty drink.

**2011 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**

GJM-086

**SOS : 2**

I took the less sweet less over-glossy of the options I tasted, though this is still made-to-impress; lots of slate, flowers, a bit of Auslese styling, ambitious and polished, and with vivid interplay.

**2011 Kinheimer Hubertuslay Riesling Spätlese “Goldkapsel”**

GJM-087

**SOS : 3**

It has the sassafras of Würzgarten, funky iris, iron slate, woodruff, *weight*, a fruity spice like wild Madagascar peppercorns; a rich dense wine, on the sweet side but serious and with attitude.



vineyard area // 7 hectares  
annual production // 4,200 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Erdener Treppchen** and **Prälat** (devonian slate with *Rotliegend*); **Wehlener Sonnenuhr** (devonian slate)  
grape varieties // 85% Riesling, 10% Rivaner, 5% Kerner

*These wines are analogue, and they have big fruit and a lot of warmth. They're a little like Hiedler's wines in that respect. Not "fat" but ample. If you're looking for neurosurgical detail and lacy intricacy, try Christoffel (among others), but ideally you're not looking for just one single thing.*

There've been times when I wondered whether Stefan steered his wines toward the utmost fruit and let the other questions fall where they might. When his and my opinions diverged it was always right there: I liked the firmer more structured wines even if they had less fruit – because they all had enough fruit. He wondered at my coolness toward some of his bigger wines. But I can't recall the last time this happened, actually. I'm walking out of his place grinning like a dope these days, "Wow, did he nail it... people are gonna love these wines!"

Stefan is still acting mayor of Erden, so y'all let him know if you need a parking ticket fixed. He's also the curator of the Roman press house that was unearthed when Treppchen had *flurbereinigung*. And he was instrumental in creating the amazing hiking path that goes from Ürzig to Erden far above the cliffs. His phone rings a lot. (I still forgot to ask him if he could pass a law making dry Mosel wines illegal.) He remains a model of what a loyal, nice man should be. Which is why we have done business together for twenty five years, first with Stefan's dad, and now with him.

Honesty compels me to share that I'm not sure just what to make of some of Justen's 2011s, which seem to have been compromised by hail, as I understand that situation. The storm was highly localized, as hailstorms are, and this one hit the downstream side of Erden (away



**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.

from Prälät and Würzgarten) so that some of Stefan's wines were peculiar and others were classic. We couldn't tell if what we were tasting (which we shorthanded into "the ground-up-aspirin thing") came from the hail itself or from the later that usual spraying of botryticides to avoid fungally damaged grapes. One of the most affected wines was bottled very early, possibly before whatever it was had a

chance to dissipate in cask. A lot of interlocking mysteries.

Stefan was entirely transparent and collegial about it all – he really is an honorable (and super-nice) guy. But please do read the notes if you're a regular Justen buyer. I'm pulling no punches, but you should know that the only wines I'm certain of, I'm certain are excellent. I'll share my process and my concerns about the others.

### 2011 Meulenhof Riesling

GJU-132

**SOS : 2**

*HARD-CORE-LIST WINE*, because this pure, healthy beauty is the perfect fresh easy Mosel wine, tasty and appealing. Much of the fruit came from the Busslay, on the other side of the river, which saw no hail.

### 2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

GJU-131

**SOS : 2**

*CORE-LIST WINE*. This is the second lot of Trepp-Kab, bottled in early March. The December bottling gave us pause, and we carried two bottles back to taste with Stefan. This one was better; thus my theory that this "thing" we're tasting is a phase that dissipates if given sufficient time before bottling. The wine has its cox orange pippin fruit tending toward nectarine, a little phenolic snap and an acid-influenced finish. It too needs more time to knit, but here the pieces seem sound.

### 2011 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

GJU-135

**SOS : 2**

*CORE-LIST WINE*. Hail in Wehlen also; the wine has the fruit and fragrance I expect – or most of it – but the slate and lime are subdued, and this cask-sample is phenolically pronounced. I'm going to trust the richness of fruit, but will be eager to taste it again.

### 2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #22

GJU-133

**SOS : 2**

No issues here; this is a full-bore classic Justen wine, a rich fruit blanket over a discreet skeleton of slate. Has some red-soil Prälät maple juju and a pêche-de-vigne finish.

### 2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #11

GJU-134

**SOS : 2**

Perhaps even better; certainly brighter and crisper, more chipper and euphoric, as Stefan's wines are; there's an edge of woodruff and "green" but the wine is about clarity and charm.

### 2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese Alte Reben +

GJU-136

**SOS : 2**

I know, Auslese, but it's his best wine of 2011, and it's profound. Pancetta, maple, smoky peach, all in a solid ample and also firm frame; not obtrusively sweet, all sorts of interplays – a wine of consequence.

# Alfred Merkelbach

Mosel // Ürzig



vineyard area // 1.9 hectares  
annual production // 1,700 cases  
top sites // Ürziger Würzgarten; Erdener Treppchen; Kinheimer Rosenberg  
(blue devonian slate)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

*After the monument that was 2010 – from which a small amount remains – it was sweet to return to the normal world again. But “normal” in this case describes something that’s more and more abnormal as time goes by, these Edenic pure essence-of-Mosel beauties, given to us for prices that haven’t changed in thirty years.*

In last year’s catalogue I wrote: “Next year they can return to the adorable fluting Rieslings we’ve loved for so many years now.” As indeed they have.

It can’t last forever; the brothers are hitting their late seventies now, and life in the steep slopes will put the hurt on a man’s joints. At one point I asked Alfred if, in the next life, he wasn’t hoping for flat vineyards. I was partly facetious, but his reply was dead serious: *What? Oh my heavens no, of course not.* And you know, all of us who visit and grow amazed by the Mosel are usually stuck thinking how bizarrely improbable it must have been to decide to grow grapes on perpendicular mountainsides, and we admire (and don’t quite believe) the dedication entailed by such viticulture. I wonder how often it crosses our minds that people might actually enjoy it? Find it fulfilling. Wouldn’t change a thing.

I remember a woman in her eighties working for Kerpen in the vineyards. She took a spill and injured a leg, and when she came back from disability leave Martin sent her into the lower slopes to ease her re-entry. But she came storming in at lunchtime: *How DARE you send me into the kiddie-slopes with the children!?! Get me back where I belong!*

Eighty. Years. Old.

2011 is a curious vintage here, only because acids are relatively low (and pH values relatively high), yet the wines taste crisp and innocent, as they always do. That said, a certain selectivity was mandated as a couple fuders showed evidence of hail. And yet as I write this I feel a disconnect between the ordinary behavior of a wine professional and the proper nature of encountering an estate like this. It doesn’t mean one jettisons normal judgment, but it does mean one is aware that “normal judgment” bounces off the membrane of beauty one witnesses within these walls. Because this is wine at its most *real*. We are as far from falsity as it is possible to travel in this world.

I have long felt the presence of a divine kind of dignity here. I write at length about it in my book. It has always been poignant in light of the girlish innocence and purity of the wines. But in 2010 it had its apotheosis; these wines speak a death-bed message, the last pure words, not even sad any more. Just the final simple truth. I found myself thinking, what would my message be? I was too often afraid. I might have given more. I found life to be remarkably mysterious. You should try harder than I did, to understand it. Such thoughts.

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**Alfred Merkelbach at a glance** // *The clearest imaginable look into pure Mosel. Vivid, toe-curling clarity of fruit and terroir make this my most beloved Mosel agency.*

**how the wines taste** // *These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of structure supports a fruit so clear, so sharply rendered that the entire experience is so vivid it makes your toenails laugh! Who can possibly dislike wines like these??? Oh, I suppose there’s someone somewhere whose temperament is so embittered he’s closed all the normal pleasure receptors. I imagine him leaving a tasting where I’ve poured these wines, kicking a puppy as he walks to his car.*

## About the Vineyards

**KINHEIMER ROSENBERG:** this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It's the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg's wines often seem to actually smell of roses, so that one wonders which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the apple fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years they can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

**ERDENER TREPPCHEN:** this is a completely different expression of Treppchen from Justen's or Christoffel's. The site is broad; the upstream sections lean in the Prälat-Würzgarten direction: bergamot, spice, peach. The downstream section is more classically slatey, with nuances of hyssop, walnut and green apple. Now that Flurbereinigung is complete and everyone's vines are young one sees the importance of parcel. I was delighted by the absolute Treppchen fingerprint I saw in even these brash new wines.

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

**2011 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett +**  
**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GME-185

My atypically short note read: “ur-Mosel perfection.” And now I have *nothing* to add.

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett +**  
**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GME-184

For newcomers to Merkelbach, these wines are vinified cask by cask, and each (so-called) *fuder* is numbered, and the wines are presented by fuder-number. The largest blending/holding tank in the cellar can only hold two fuders (each contains about 112 cases worth of wine), so there's never a blend of more than two individual wines. *Yes, such a thing still exists in our world.*

This Kabinett was dramatically the better of two options, complex and long, hyssop and blackberries.

**2011 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
**SOS : 2**

GME-186

Is that all the Kabinett? Yup, but no worries, because Spätlese at this address *tastes* like the over-endowed Kabinett's at other addresses. (And costs less.) This is almost like a delicate Scheurebe, all pink grapefruit and cassis. A so-called “Jungfernein” (first crop from a new vineyard, thus highly concentrated), exotic and pretty and cool, with all its spicy tropicality.

**2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese +**  
**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GME-187

Again my favorite among three fuders; this is an extravagance of slate! Granny Smith crunch, and this apple bites back. Again the sagey-cassis element. Wonderful, and check this out: 102° Oechsle and 29.2g/l. dry extract. Not so “little” after all.

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #19, #23**

GME-183

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** There were six fuder of U-W Spät, and so our task became to see which would blend well together for our core-list wine, and which (if any) were distinctive enough to warrant separate bottling. You'd have enjoyed being with us!

So, there are two lots of this wine: the first unites fuders #23 and #19 – #23 was as detailed as needlework, darkly slatey, black-walnut, licorice, almost a Nigl in its carbonized minerality. It combined well with #19, which was fleshier and more juicy.

The subsequent lot will combine fuders #20 and #10, and will be a little stonier. But the two are more alike than different, and no one will be shocked.

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #21 +**

GME-189

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

These single-cask bottlings don't get enough of your attention. Maybe if we called them "1-star" or put some fancy capsule on the bottle? For this wine is dramatically complex, refined and salty.

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese #13 +**

GME-190

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The loveliest, juiciest and fruitiest of them all, wonderful texture of strawberry mousse, and beautifully integrated botrytis.

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese**

GME-191

**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This reminded me of the young '89s; smoky and juicy and pagan, apples from a coven; still *none* too sweet; if you could strain the fresh out of strawberries and drink the "water" and then add pasta-water and powdered slate, then you'd be close to this.

**2010 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese +**

GME-179

**SOS : 2**

Sensational fragrance, both amazing fruit and a magma of slate; seriously, this is a monument of terroir, chiseled from a cliff-face of slate, with more sheer gravitas than in many self-important "old-vines" bottlings. 118°, RS an extremely moderate 61g – acidity and extracts off the charts.

**2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese +**

GME-181

**SOS : 2**

A delirium of spice here! Peppermint and kiwi and scorched slate, a surmise of strawberry beneath an iridescent avalanche of spice and mint and slate.

**2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling BA +**

GME-182

**SOS : 3**

I noticed that "#5" on the list. "How much did you make of this?" I asked Alfred. No one ever makes a lot of this kind of wine; usually you hear about "60 liters" or "120 liters," but Alfred looked at me quizzically and said, as if it was self-evident *MMMM, a Fuder, (naturally)*. Ohh-kay. The first BA they've made since 1976, and they made an entire barrel of it – 1200 liters! And this is because they wouldn't *make* such a wine unless they could make a barrel of it!

It was picked *en bloc* from two parcels, the great Lang Pichter and the equally great Sonnenuhr (downstream between the sundial and the road, perfectly sited and sheltered). The wine is amazingly gauzy and even refreshing, though with concentrated but refined, even noble fruit. When has a wine with 137° ever been so lithe, so bewitchingly spicy? Pure apple compote and cinammon. This really is exotic yet classic, not at all *recherché*. And you can drink a couple glasses! And open *another* bottle – there's a fuder!

## Dry German Wine

Florian Weingart told me an interesting story. “When my father’s helping out our private customers, he always asks them what they want to taste, and of course they invariably answer *Trocken*. So he shows them the dry wines, and they taste and write their orders. Then when he goes to the cellar to pack the wines, he leaves an unmarked bottle for them to taste while they’re waiting. When he returns the customers always say *My God, what was that, it was wonderful! Can we add a case to our order?* And of course this is a Spätlese with residual sugar.”

You do, I hope, know what this means. In today’s Germany, no one will even taste a wine they think will be “sweet.” You have to trick them and hope their simple senses and wits take over. One year we were at Theo Minges’ on a Saturday, and observed the parade of customers tasting and carrying wines away, and I didn’t hear a single one ask for anything but *Trocken* wine – not to mention few of them asked even to taste Riesling. (Theo makes Pinots also, and a bunch of reds.)

As I get older I find I drink a rather higher proportion of dry wines than before. I key it to my food, of course. It’s good that options exist, and I can enjoy a dry Riesling when it’s called for and an off-dry one when it’s called for. As it so often is in your fusion-y restaurants. Those options are in mortal peril in today’s Germany, which seems to wish to insist on a sort of divine right of dryness.

I did a dry Riesling seminar for the Society Of Wine Educators. Germans and Austrians, not as a contest but as a contrast. The stated theme of the tasting was “If these are so good then why doesn’t anyone buy them?” Because they are, and you don’t, or don’t often enough. This experienced roomful of professionals couldn’t enlighten me either. My German friends are bewildered. Even my Austrian business skews heavily to Grüner Veltliner, which outsells Riesling by a factor of four to one.

Here’s what I think. We like to say we like to drink dry wines. Even if we really don’t. Also, we like to drink dry wines as long as they’re not especially dry. They have to be smooth, round and generous. You’ll be outraged if you’re an exception to these rules, but all I can say is I wish there were multitudes of dudes like you.

The Germans, though, are quite another matter. They’re much of the way to suffocating their Riesling culture.

David Schildknecht recently wrote a column in the Austrian magazine VINARIA in which he

said German Riesling was quickly becoming an either-or proposition, either up-to-9-grams of RS or 60-grams-and-above. He’s absolutely right. “You know how Germans are,” said one (German!) grower. “They like things in boxes, categories, and they’re very absolute.” It doesn’t matter that **most** Riesling tastes best **BETWEEN** 9 and 60 grams RS. Taste is not the issue. I’ll repeat that: Taste is not the issue. The issue is concept, and the Germans will tell you “If it’s dry then it should be really dry and if it’s sweet then really sweet. What’s this stuff in between?”

This stuff in between is the golden mean, the realm of truth that almost always lies between the extremes. But actual spontaneous sensual experience doesn’t matter if the wine doesn’t fit inside the concept YOU have determined beforehand. David also wrote (brilliantly!) “This is like a pianist sitting down to play and saying *I won’t play the octaves immediately above or below middle-C, but only the two extreme ends of the keyboard.*”

That the wines are getting better is actually beside the point. They are improving – they had nowhere to go but up – but the doctrines and dogmas accompanying them are the same ones they used when the wines were almost all yucky. It’s good that quality is gaining on ideology, but it’s far from certain they’re running neck and neck. Ideology will always win such races, because ideology cheats.

Nor is this a mere squabble of ideas. It affects me constantly, because many of the “sweet” wines I offer are effectively bottled for me, and if I don’t sell them out the poor grower has no one else *who’ll buy them*.

But let’s give credit where it’s due. I am tasting a larger number of excellent and worthwhile Trocken Rieslings than I ever did before. I have little doubt that top producers are making sure their Grand Cru dry Rieslings are superb, as many of them are. Regardless, there are two difficult questions that need to be addressed. First, what about the number of foully bitter and grotesquely unbalanced Trocken wines at lower echelons of quality? The ceiling may have been raised but the floor is still awfully damn low. Second, even if the wines are improving, do we need Germany to be yet-another-source for dry Rieslings when she is the *only possible* source for Rieslings of the type she used to make? Let’s put it another way. Suppose the earth passed through the tail of a comet or some such thing, with the result the dry German Rieslings suddenly became

## Dry German Wine ( continued )

uniformly good. Hard to believe, I know, but work with me. Now they're all good, and the Germans rejig their entire production to them. Nothing but very good dry wines, just what you want, or what they think you want. My question: would the world gain more than it *lost*?

Because what's happened is we've gained another source for something we already had. But lost the one and only source for something astonishing and miraculous, because we didn't know how to cherish it.

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

Then I started to wonder.

*Gault-Millau* likes to do what they call a Ten Years After tasting. (No, this doesn't involve Alvin Lee in any way I'm aware of.) Armin Diel told me when they tasted the top-rated Trocken wines of the 1994 vintage "It was striking to see how thin and sour many of them were compared to the wines we're making now." Yet oh, the passion with which they were extolled! Is it really dignified to be reduced to saying "To be sure, we were overplaying the virtues of those 'thin, sour' wines, but now we're not!" This is fatuous, and the melancholy irony is that the best of today's dry German wines deserve better, but the tastemeisters spent too long crying wolf.

When an idea appears monolithic it's productive to challenge whether it's a true idea instead of a truism or dogma. It seems self-evident that wine styles would apportion themselves spontaneously based on taste if actual taste were guiding them. It is less credible to suppose that, for some reason, an entire generation of wine drinkers has suddenly learned that only dry wines are acceptable. In fact it's only dry wines that are permissible if one wishes to be *au courant*.

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

What I'd prefer to see is that we all stop struggling over theory and simply use our sensual

wits to produce and consume the loveliest possible wine. This will, I believe, lead to the celebration of riesling's ability to shine in a variety of styles, and it will apportion them naturally and spontaneously. That's my little pipe dream.

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

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

The wines they currently call "Trocken" — those snarling beasts with 0-9 grams of sweetness — would henceforth be called "Sehr Trocken" (very dry). After all, if there are degrees of sweetness it stands to reason there are also degrees of dryness. The Loire has its "Sec Tendre" designation. There is ripe-dry and smooth-dry and rich-dry and there is also austere-dry and batteryacid dry. I mentioned this idea to Helmut Dönnhoff who was visibly intrigued. "That's the first time I've heard such a proposal," he said, and I could see the wheels-a-turning.

The poor deluded clown who absolutely must drink a commodity called "Trocken" will now receive a *palatable* wine which (s)he will suddenly begin to actually sensually enjoy (and probably wonder why), while the real sour-power guys can have their macho-dry wines. ***Oh I don't drink those dainty little Trocken wines, not a real wine stud like me: I drink VERY dry wines!***

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

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

tastiest wines they can and then figure out how to “position” them or “market” them—as if beauty didn’t sell itself!

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

Oh, *AMEN!*

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.

I keep waiting for things to right themselves. I look for any little sign that reasonableness is returning. I collect anecdotes, I sniff the air, but this year I started to feel a kind of despair. I asked myself, if I were only now discovering this wine culture, would I find it as magical as I did 30 years ago? Would I want to work with the wines as *they’re actually being made*, not as they’re customized for me? Would I approve of the wine culture in toto? And I must wearily acknowledge, no, I don’t think I would. I might pick and claw at this thing here or that thing there. I imagine I’d find my way to congenial pockets of resistance to the prevailing dogma, to beautiful and *variegated* wines. But overall I think I’d glean something the opposite of vitality, a dark and airless thing, dumb and stuffy.

These things are sad to say. Sadder still to experience.

# Joh. Jos. Christoffel

Mosel // Ürzig



vineyard area // 4 hectares  
annual production // 3,200 cases  
top sites & soil types // Ürziger Würzgarten (red slate); Erdener Treppchen (blue slate)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

*Will you understand me if I say the wines from here have been unnervingly consistent for the past ten years? One wonders by which remarkable device they have avoided the vintage-variations that swing in wider arcs at other wineries.*



I don't know, won't surmise, and certainly won't remotely accuse; after all, the same thing can be said of J.J. Prüm, and it's patently absurd to criticize consistency. But I'd be perversely reassured to taste something ornery or clunky here once in a while.

Hans-Leo Christoffel's wines are vinified separately from Mönchhof's, as has been the case from the beginning of the two estates' association. They're whole-cluster pressed (hence their filigree crystalline textures), with some *sponti*, some steel and *some* fuder, fermented cold, quickly drawn off the lees, and bottled early. It's the approach you'd take if you wanted digitally clear wines, fruit/terroir driven, as unfunky as possible. And this is what we get, and have gotten

without fail for many years now.

Schildknecht is correctly bemused at the German critical establishment's apparent (and manifestly false) belief that quality has declined here. This is so far from the truth that you start to wonder how many other things they're missing, how far you can trust them at all.

In general the wines continue to present with polish and brilliance and digital focus. (Eymael's own Mönchhof wines are rather more baroque.) They are certainly more masterly than Merkelbach, and at many points in each vintage they are wines that raise your eyebrows and send a flush of pleasure through your senses. They're high-bred and racy, and at their best they touch upon mystical qualities.

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

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

**2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**

GJC-198

**SOS : 2**

It's aromas peek out, retreat, peek out again less shyly; then you have spiced apple and guava and a late coda of slate and a tactile saltiness; the finish is taut and carbon-slatey. A bit stingy out of the gate – maybe bottled a bit *too* early?

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett +**

GJC-196

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** If you think it's a "normal" Kabinett again, don't be shocked to learn it's over 100° Oechsle. I guess 100 is the new-normal or something, yet the wine tastes wonderful and not at all over-endowed. Feline and curvy, and the core of fruit is delicious and impressive, and sometimes it can be about *fruit*, you know?

**2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese ++**

GJC-199

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This was the best Erdener I'd tasted in the hail-vintage 2011, and in any vintage it's an exceptional wine; beautifully poised and *all there*, a core of dense old-vines fruit, clarity; spicy slate, heirloom apples, amazingly deft for 112° Oechsle (!), with an ethereal power and a magnetic storm of slate.

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese +**

GJC-197

**SOS : 2**

Like the two Kabinetts, this is less taut but is actually just differently coiled; lavender and wisteria, a real séance of herbs and spices, darker flavors.

**Gabe Clary writes:**

*"This smells savory and spicy. To someone (like me) who is not familiar with Ürz Würz, here is a wine that tastes like its name suggests. It's so spicy! Capcasium, with roasted grilled pineapple, a green kiwi flavor, and acidic snap. It's energetic without trying to run me over. Mineral, crushed slate finish on the second and third sips."*

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese \*, 6/750ml ++**

GJC-200

**SOS : 2**

Neon-sleek and buzzing, and curiously dry-seeming; the aroma is amazing even if you're prepared to be amazed; the palate is truly "spicy" and the whole effect is strangely insistent and curiously ethereal. I assume it still hails from the little terraces high above the river, which seem to give some para-sensual saber-dance of slate.

**2011 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese \*\*, 6/750ml ++**

GJC-201

**SOS : 3**

From the Herzlay, and this is an avalanche of slate; stunningly solid; its feet are so deep in the soil, the apple fruit is so pure, the slate becomes so delicate in the finish, and the thing lingers endlessly yet vaporously, amazing equipoise of firm and gauzy, ethereal and vivid. Pity we've stopped caring about wines like this, and lucky for the continued existence of beauty that the Chinese are buying them like crazy.

**2011 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese \*\*\*, 6/750ml ++**

GJC-202

**SOS : 3**

Earlier sentiments apply! The tender restraint here is heart-rending. It's softer than its forbears, the first truly "sweet" wine.

**2010 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese \*\*\*, 6/750ml ++**

GJC-195

**SOS : 3**

Botrytis shows but doesn't obtrude. 2010 was some kind of electric charge here in Ürzig/Erden, as if the stone itself were zapped. This amazing wine is almost gauzy but incandescent with spice and fruit, and with an elegant restraint that conveys a kind of melting, a swoon of fennel and lavender. Truly a *vino di meditazione*.

# Heribert Kerpen

Mosel // Wehlen



vineyard area // 7.5 hectares  
annual production // 6,250 cases  
top sites & soil types // Wehlener Sonnenuhr (blue devonian slate);  
Graacher Himmelreich and Domprobst (blue devonian slate with loam)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

*Martin, Martin, old friend; you're making me meshugga, you know that? I'm goin' nuts here. I never know what I'll find when I taste your wines, and in 2011 I fell in total slobbery love with two wines I've never liked before.*



And was a little cool toward two other wines I've always liked. My brain hurts.

So with you, valued customer, I'm gonna testify to what I saw, and I hope I don't create a kerfuffle over in Wehlen. They have enough sturm und drang with the *flurbereinigung* hacking the Sonnenuhr to slatery bits.

My old friend Martin Kerpen's wines fall into two groups. Up to and including most Auslesen, they are what I'd call "shady" wines. They refresh the way sudden shade does on a warm day, and they have a cool kind of glow, they are woodsy and leafy and dapply. Once botrytis

enters the picture they seem to about-face, and become much more overt.

All the wines are done the old-school way, in Fuders, as I like them best. But that is as far as I think one can go in describing them. It's as much as you can be certain of getting in every vintage. But compared to, say, Christoffel or Schaefer, whose wines are to some extent predictable – delightfully so – with Martin you'll sometimes be surprised. You can taste everywhere else, you can reach any conclusions you like about the nature of a vintage, but you can't quite guess what Kerpen did until you're in his winery tasting.

**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.

**2011 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken “Alte Reben” +**

GKE-139

**SOS : 1** ( correct; it tastes “sweeter” than it is ) // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The best dry wine ever from here? Could well be, and for damn sure one of the few most delicious and balanced I have *ever* tasted. A fruit-loaded apple-y dancer, charming and springy, slatey and wintergreeny, and a perfect food wine, and a superb wine period.

**2011 Kerpen Riesling**

GKE-138

**SOS : 2**

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** Again a lissome yet lusty charmer, hale yet refined yet gregarious; as good as the QbA genre gets.

**2011 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**

GKE-137

**SOS : 2**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** It showed a green catty aroma that recalled what I’ve come to think of as the ladybug smell. What’s below it is good, if a little tannic; I allowed for a freshly-bottled wine, but this is one to watch warily if hopefully, I’d say. I’ll taste it again when you do, in late June.

**2011 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese + +**

GKE-141

**SOS : 2** // **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Many of you may not even have known Kerpen made Graachers, as I usually don’t select them. But this is the *class* of the Spätleses this year – Wehlen having gotten hailed on – and it’s sensational Mosel wine in any vintage; euphoric old-school Mosel aromas, mutsu-apples and nutty slate; the palate is a lyric poem of Mittelmosel beauty, long and insanely delicious, a traditional creamy *spongi* at its warmest analog best. You want to cuddle it.

*NOTE: I could not appraise our usual core-list Wehlener Sonnenuhr Spät, or rather I couldn’t suppose the sample I tasted actually represented what the wine would ultimately be. Thus for now I demur, and hope to be proven over-cautious.*

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese \* +**

GKE-142

**SOS : 2**

It seems to favor Graach, ‘11. The soul is serene in this wine, yours and its own; it breathes a tranquil spirit, its energy is hale, not twitchy. Lilac and black cherry into a quince-y fruit in turn into a tactile wash of slate, and finally into a piquant wink of cool leafy liquid forest.

# Willi Schaefer

Mosel // Graach



vineyard area // 4 hectares  
annual production // 2,900 cases  
top sites & soil types // Graacher Himmelreich and Domprobst  
(devonian slate)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

One nice thing about a home office is I get to make myself a pot of tea most afternoons, and what I like at this time of day are oolongs and green teas. I have a pot of Lishan Winter 2012 in the cup as I write. This kind of tea – this whole genre of teas – seems to exist in order to steady a person. They're beautiful but unemotional, magnetic but unexciting. Some of the "morning" teas, the top Darjeelings and gold-tip Yunnans, offer a sensual thrill-ride akin to drinking wine. These afternoon guys, though; they're like zoning out to gorgeous footage of coral reefs, or fronds undulating in the water.

There's a valley behind Partenkirchen in the Bavarian Alps called the Reintal, and in the Reintal there's a spectacular waterfall. As you hike up-valley you hear it before you see it, a sudden distant thunder of water, after which it comes into glorious view. Then a funny thing happens. At a corner of the trail you are abruptly sound-sheltered, yet you can still see the falls, so that you look at this massively powerful plunging of water, in utter silence.

These of course are metaphors for the behavior of Willi Schaefer's miracle-vintage 2011. The wines have the calm yet electric quality of a person contemplating an absorbing question. They're beautiful but *interior*, and their lack of affect is poignant, and seems to include some manner of oblique and elusive truth. They offer an energy so kinetic it is almost intimidating, yet they seem enveloped in silence. They're incandescent with beauty yet judicially deliberate. They are galvanizing to taste, yet also contemplative. They pose the most wonderful of all questions: *How does such a thing exist?*

For as many years as I've known and loved Schaefer's wines, and as much as I love them, I don't remember a vintage like this one. Some kind of music is playing through them. It's calm but not dreamy. It is so still it slows your very cells down, yet it is full of *content*. And it inhabits the vintage entirely; there are no "exceptions" to the tender shady stream of clarity and motion and repose. And now, sitting here as I drink this lovely inexplicable tea, I wonder how I could ever embody its virtues, to be entirely energetic and in no hurry at all.

Some wines' flavors are urgent. *Hurry, grab it all, it's ephemeral, it only lasts a couple seconds, but WOW.* Not these. These wines seem to tell you "Take your time, meander your way through these flavors, they're going nowhere, you can relax..." You reach a point you almost can't believe what you're tasting, not just the "things" you put in your notes, but the silken envelope of quiet, that shows you what you never knew was there to see.

Maybe there's a fourth prayer to go with Lamott's three (Thanks. Help. Wow.), and it would be – *Ah*.

I didn't get a tour of Christoph's new digs, but the transition is complete, the young family has renovated the house, and Schaefer's *senior* have "retired" to the house up the hill. Yet Willi remains active – how could he not when your 4-hectare estate is divided into some 100 parcels. And at one point over dinner we heard the giggling voice of a little boy in the next room, and I had the moment I call the "happy-family-moment" where you see the connective tissues of love and work and unity.

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

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

**2011 Willi Schaefer Riesling Feinherb**

GWS-200

**SOS : 0**

The perfect dry Riesling; super-slatey and precise, charming and crisp and hyssop-y. It's actually Himmelreich, and *what* a pure slate smell in the empty glass.

**2011 Willi Schaefer Riesling**

GWS-195

**SOS : 2**

**SOLD OUT.** A Schaefer you can swill!

**2011 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett +**

GWS-199

**SOS : 2**

A taut, tight wine for this site (whose wines are normally more pliant and granular), but oh how adorable and pure, lighter than the last few vintages; a "plus" for the incredibly focused fruit aromas and the monastic chanting articulation of slate on the finish.

**Gabe Clary writes:**

*"This is the +++ version of the QBA. Ripe green aromas, tarragon and peach skin, red Anjou pear and a delicate florality, wisteria and sweet pea. This was as close as I've come to having a religious experience while tasting. Each wine seemed to build on the previous one, and a powerful narrative strand wound its way through each wine, connecting them all. When we finally reached the BA I had run out of words. And there was Christoph sitting next to me, smiling and humble. When we finished I was sort of emotionally wiped. These wines are so intellectually and emotionally powerful for me."*

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett #16 +**

GWS-196

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The pistachio side of Domprobst, but focused to a point so fine it's like you took a laser pointer to the terroir, and yet it's limpid and lapidary and shady. Amazing.

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett #3 +**

GWS-201

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Now spicier, with more exotic fruit especially soursop but still with a nut-husk core and salty walnut-oil savor; the wine both crescendos *and* sheds superfluous notes as it does so, becoming a Cirque du Soleil of slate on the finish.

**2011 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**

GWS-202

**SOS : 2**

Curvy, lithe, typical; juicy limes and plum blossom; this is about delicacy of fruit and an exquisitely savory finish.

**2011 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese + +**

GWS-203

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Amazingly sleek and filigree this year, but then comes the nutty-creamy finish that rolls like a film of a slow-motion river, seeming to palpably reduce to its deepest slatey core, but it's a warm sort of powder, not brittle, like a psalm of slate.

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10** + +  
**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10, 1/1.5L** + +  
**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GWS-198  
GWS-198M

The contributing parcels are *Ferbert* and *Gertzgrub*, mid and low slope, and of course Schaefer's knew and could show me on the satellite map.

We're sleeker now, but again this tumbling swelling into an absurdity of mineral nuance and lip-licking saltiness; a doctoral thesis in slate.

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5** + + +  
**SOS : 2**

GWS-204

A little botrytis now, contributing to a truly celestial fragrance; here the whole thing goes incandescent, as the fruit goes all tantra upside the mineral; it is getting terribly hard to spit these. The pointillist detailing of the dialogue of elements is so tender and pure, it seems to cleanse the very world.

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #11** + +  
**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

GWS-205

A remarkable creature! It brought Dönnhoff to mind; it concentrates the fruit-mineral essence *without* adding perceptible sweetness; if anything it's just saltier, more air-cured; this is a series of miracles that shake the soul and ease the way, and all of them demure, tactful, and lighter than air.

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14** + + +  
**SOS : 2**

GWS-206

Ever-more exquisitely refined fruit, to a point one can only call "divinity." It doesn't lose its slate, though it's a narrower seam now. It's the first wine I'd call flowery – wisteria and white hyacinth – it sings in the most heart-rending falsetto, ever softer and breathier – but what a melody! Beauty in a zero-gravity borealis of wonderful endless floating.

**2011 Graacher Domprobst Riesling BA, 6/375ml** ( + + )  
**SOS : 2**

GWS-207H

The wine was still fermentation-cloudy, and my affect was nearly spent, but the fruit orbits some planet in the outer reaches, salt-caramels and white flowers, and if past is prologue this should be exquisite.

# A.J. Adam

Mosel // Dhron

vineyard area // 3.7 hectares  
annual production // 1,250 cases  
top sites & soil types // **Dhroner Hofberg** (weathered devonian slate with quartzite);  
**Piesporter Goldtröpfchen** (blue slate)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling:



*OK, I'll admit it; I feel a little smug. I've been saying for what, ten years now, that Andreas Adam would be a stellar estate, and already was making remarkable wines. And now he's done caught on.*

Here's what Jon Bonné, San Francisco Chronicle Wine Editor, had to say when he placed Adam's '08 Kabinett among his top-10 wines of the year (at #5):

**2008 A.J. Adam**

**Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Spatlese**

(around \$40;

Importer: Terry Theise / Michael Skurnik Wines)

*Andreas Adam, from the tiny Mosel town of Dhron, makes fewer than 1,000 cases a year, and his Rieslings burst with absolute purity. They are made with indigenous yeasts (a rarity in German Riesling) and no additions beyond a bit of sulfur dioxide.*

*In a lean vintage that left some bottles too nervous and fragile, Adam's wines feature electrifying fruit and dense minerality.*

*I had plenty of great Rieslings to choose from this year, including a 1937 Steinberger Trockenbeereenauslese from the Rheingau's Staatsweinguter Eltville. But now I understand why Riesling lovers become giddy at seeing Adam's ornate label.*

Yuh, giddy, that's me; giddy and smug. I'd like to be a better person, if only I could. Smug, baby!

As Andreas grows his estate (and his American importer watches smugly), he has options where he can buy land. It's heartening the degree to which he seeks to be identified with his home village of Dhron. He's picked up some parcels in Piesport also, but he was intrigued when I said I was unsure those vineyards were suited to his style. "What would be better?" he asked. "Well, I know it's farther away, but I'll bet you could get some vineyards in the Thörnicher Ritsch," I said. "Oh yes, that's a damnably good vineyard..." he answered. Perhaps I have set something in motion...?

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

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

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

**A.J. Adam at a glance** // Tiny, grower making some of the longest, most exotic, most old-school Mosel wines in existence. Stellar across the board, and for the quality, far from expensive.

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

Well-said!

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

Hofberg is one of those sacred spaces, I think. It isn't merely symbolic that it faces away from the river-current. One has a 180° view from it, but it isn't a grand aspect – rather a sweet, almost intimate one, of little valleys and old houses with slate rooftops. It is also very quiet, except for the many birds. A perfect place for a thoughtful introvert to work, I think. And what flavors come from this ground! Andreas says: “Even young it often shows a striking exotic fruit, subtle spice, wild slate aromas and a finesse of acidity.”

Next I ask about terroir.

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

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

“Actually we do nearly nothing differently than did our forefathers in the '20s: small yields of late-harvested Riesling grapes are gently handled and pressed (we still press some in an old wooden press); after an open

mustoxidation the wines fall bright at cool temperatures in stainless steel, and later ferment in old wooden Fuders. **Finito!** That's all, nothing else, just wait for the wild yeasts to begin their work. No must or mash sulfuring, no enzymes, no gelatin, no added vitamins, no bentonite — **pure nature!**

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

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

These basics are:

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

## 2011 Riesling Trocken

GAD-050

**SOS : ( minus ) -1**

Only just bottled, and Andreas didn't have the analysis back and couldn't say whether it hit or exceeded the nine-gram limit for “Trocken,” so if you buy Adam estate-Riesling and the label says Halbtrocken, the wine's the same.

Whole-cluster pressed (which Andreas did in 2011 instead of acidifying), this is assertively dry (and done in steel), mineral and ferrous; recalls Dönnhoff's Tonschiefer, sleek and salty and lapidary – but you need to adapt to the snap.

## 2011 Dhroner Riesling +

GAD-049

**SOS : 0**

This village-wine is technically “Trocken” but the label won't say, as it could contain more RS in higher-acid years. It's 50-50 cask and steel, and seriously impressive in a puristically dry manner; fantastically brilliant and complex aroma, smoky slate and psilocybin-green – resin, mint, balsam; the wine is wild and stern and patrician; it's penetration is almost unimaginable. Again, you have to accept that dry means *dry*, but the absurd expressiveness warrants the surmounting of any doubt. Just don't serve it over-chilled.

**2011 Goldtröpfchen Riesling “GG,” 6/750ml +**

GAD-055

**SOS : 0**

“GG” in quotes because Adam isn’t a member of the VDP, though of course that whole situation is in flux at the moment. The wine was done in steel and is entirely lovely, a parfait of plum-blossom, pink peppercorn and lily-of-the-valley. Another dialect of PiesGold.

**2011 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb +**

GAD-051

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

As lovely, lacy and detailed as the senses could thirst for, but also as much flesh and savor as the appetite could demand. Essentially perfect wine; lilac and wisteria aromas, angular and tangy on the palate, a tense interplay of slate and (hardly perceptible) sweetness, focused to an almost ridiculous clarity.

**2011 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett ++**

GAD-048

**SOS : 1**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The flowery aromas again. This is the truest “Kabinett” in several years; almost slim, certainly slatey and wintergreeny and by no means thin; it feels drier than usual, it’s long and gripping, but when the dark slate fades an exquisitely delicate and juicy florality stays and haunts you.

**2011 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese +++**

GAD-052

**SOS : 2**

**MY WINE OF THE VINTAGE,** and Andreas’ greatest achievement to-date. It’s a cuvée of a “regular” and a “1-star” Spät he decided to blend, and whew – *what* a fragrance! It’s the quintessence of Hofberg, and as great a Mosel wine as you’ll ever taste; shimmeringly brilliant, fantastically vivid dialogue of slate and herbs and taut but resplendently ripe fruit; long beyond any thoughts of “length,” and acutely painful to spit – but *you* don’t have to, you lucky cuss.

**2011 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml +**

GAD-053H

**SOS : 3**

Andreas calls this his “drinkable” Auslese, and I’d like to encourage him to consider dialing his “big sweet” wines back so they’re all drinkable. Just my two cents. This was 50-50 shriveled to botrytis berries, and the wine might indeed be “drinkable” in 15-20 years! The botrytis is the clean malty kind; the fruit is less vivid now, but all the vinosity is concentrated; lime and salt-caramels abound; length to spare. To the extent you love these *Auslese* flavors you’ll like this (even) more than I do.

**2011 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling BA, 6/375ml**

GAD-054H

**SOS : 4**

There were two BAs, of which this was the glossier and more focused; it’s massive and syrupy but there’s some wine in there somewhere, and a few decades should reveal the maps to it!

# Reuscher-Haart

Mosel // Piesport



vineyard area // 6 hectares  
annual production // 4,200 cases  
top sites & soil types // Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr, Falkenberg, Günterslay and Treppchen (blue devonian slate)  
grape varieties // 90% Riesling, 5% Regent, 5% Riavner

*You can't imagine how happy you feel when you leave a winery who just showed you a delightful vintage. The world seems enveloped in cheer. Nor do I recall a young vintage that showed so well – these wines are famously stubborn and tardy. But '11 is frisky and chipper out of the gate.*

This comprises a two-fer for Reuscher-Haart, as 2010 was also superb.

Everything about that vintage was good for this grower. The high acid gave the wines a shapeliness and outline they sometimes lack, the fruit ripeness didn't run toward their usual exotic direction but remained green-appley, and most of all the density of the vintage gave these wines a marvelously swollen mid-palate that I really don't recall since the '90 vintage.

We had a talk about ripeness, because I have often found Piesport at its best in less ripe vintages, when its voodoo fruit is more anchored to some tangible structure. This came up because the father Hugo Schwang can remember periods when underripeness was the norm, whereas his son Mario can not. "Do you ever think yields may have gotten too low?" I asked.

"Perhaps," said Hugo, "But I think even more important is the trend away from the old heart-binding we used to do here on the Mosel." (n.b. this binding method can still be seen; it consists of two stalks curving away and back toward the trunk from opposite sides, in the shape of a Valentine-heart.) He went on; "The new system keeps more leaves, which increases assimilation."

The Moselaners describe the citizens of this village as "rich kids" because everyone wants their wine and will pony

up accordingly. And here's an estate giving their wines all the time they need, not caring to make wines that will flatter the palate five months after the vintage. This I think is known as integrity. These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. I really shouldn't do the casktasting 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.

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.

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**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!

**2011 Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “ÜberSchwang” +**

GRH-072

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**HARD-CORE-LIST WINE.** The name is a pun on the family’s surname (Schwang) which means both “pregnant” and also, in this context, “over the moon” as our British friends would say when they were really... ah, stoked.

The wine reminded me of Weingart’s ‘11s, in that it is perfect. Yellow fruit and mango and butterscotch aromas; the palate is lithe and snakey, it waves and curves, rippling between a lime-slate side and a peach-vanilla side; animated and thread-the-needle balanced; fruit, *spiel*, energy.

**2011 Piesporter Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

GRH-070L

**SOS : 2**

Delightful, gulpable. Simple in the best way, not ordinary but not demanding; just a slip ‘n slide of lime and peach.

**2011 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett +**

GRH-071

**SOS : 2**

*What* a charming vintage here! This is pure cox orange pippins, nothing sultry at all; beaming white-nectarine and an exceptionally fine caramel savor into the finish. This isn’t about slaty tension, it’s about fruit.

**2010 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese +**

GRH-069

**SOS : 3**

Smells like an entire apple cellar. Remarkable density, and below the tightly coiled malic fruit is equally tightly coiled malic acidity. The ‘10 saltiness is very strong here, and it has that uncanny paperweight density.

**2011 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

GRH-073

**SOS : 3**

It was the rounder and more vinous of two options, partly because the ‘10 is so tense and jammed; there’s more depth and weight than the Kabinett, but not a radically different fruit; key limes and dark plums in a matrix of lushness.



vineyard area // 12 hectares  
annual production // 8,300 cases  
top sites & soil types // Leiwener Laurentiuslay and Klostergarten;  
Thörnicher Ritsch (grey slate); Longuicher Maximin Herrenberg (red slate)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling

*Our hero's on the move again. This time he's removing all village names from his labels, so that "Thörnicher Ritsch" will become, simply, "Ritsch." With abject apologies to my colleagues who do label-compliance work, I do think removing superfluous words from labels is a good thing.*

As you may know, Carl Loewen leased the Schmitt-Wagner estate beginning with the 2008 vintage. Bruno Schmitt remains active – if you know Bruno you couldn't imagine him anything but active – but Loewen's making the wines.

One of my colleagues felt a bit of triste that Schmitt-Wagner's wines had changed. (Lucky for him old vintages Bruno made are still available.) I didn't share that opinion, though. Loewen's own wines are riper than Schmitt's were, but they are more similar than different, sponti-type wines made in Fuder, old-school Mosels, the way I adore them.

Carl Loewen knew full well the legacy he was carrying on. Not just in human terms, but in the monumental value of the 6,000 vines Schmitt possesses which were planted in 1896. This is possibly the largest-oldest stand of ancient ungrafted vines in Germany, perhaps in Europe. The vineyard – Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg – has various sub-sections and exposures, but it's all steep and there's a lot of red slate that gives the wines the sassafrassy garrigue we also find in Ürzig. As Carl is a terroir-iste of the first order, I can only imagine how it feels to have three equally great and entirely different Grand Crus to play with.

Loewen claims the Laurentiuslay stands "among the

best the Mosel has to offer. And it was a stroke of luck for us the flurbereinigung was voted down here because it was too expensive. The vineyard shows its original profile with countless little terraces and walls." Another great site, he says, is the Thörnicher Ritsch. Many years ago I went to Thörnich with Hans and Sigrid Selbach, on a prowl for a vintner who would do the vineyard justice. Hans knew well the old-timer's wisdom; Ritsch was a great site. Well we didn't find its champion then, but we know him now. Finally there's the awkwardly-named Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay, from which Loewen makes a "tribute to the old proprietor of this vineyard, the cloister of St. Maximin in Trier." Mercifully he calls this wine simply Maximiner, describing an "extreme terroir," a 65° mountain falling directly into the river, hard unweathered blue slate, with an open west flank that catches every moment of afternoon and evening sun. Its position, right up against the river, moderates nighttime temperatures and the soil retains water so that "even in a Summer like 2003 we had enough moisture for the grapes."

I don't at all mind that Carl's wines are bigger than Bruno's were – I miss that nearly extinct light style, but times change and everyone's wines are bigger now. But you can't just pick them riper and have done with it. If the raw material is markedly more intense than every other

**Carl Loewen/Schmitt-Wagner 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.

aspect of the wines must change along. Where Bruno's wines had a delicate licorice note, Carl's have a peppery intensity.

I'm also going to make a kind of legacy offering of some back-vintages they still have at Schmitt-Wagner. Carl has mixed emotions about this. He appreciates Bruno's desire to liquidate his cellar, but is wary of being too closely associated with the close-out prices, as his

current prices could appear usurious. I assured him we were all experienced enough to know close-out prices when we saw them, and Carl of *all* people doesn't need to worry about looking expensive. Just the opposite.

2011 was a sweetie-poo vintage here, and Carl's son Christoph, currently studying in Geisenheim, reportedly wants to meet with me to discuss "The perfect wine for the American market." I mean, *ulp*.

### 2011 Loewen Ritsch Riesling Grosses Gewächs

GCL-072

**SOS : ( minus ) -1**

I love this vineyard so much that I *wanted* to like this powerhouse dry wine, though I continue to insist it's the wrong idiom for Mosel wine in general and Ritsch in particular. Still, there's something to ponder here. It's a cerebral sort of wine, for those who will study and consider such a being. It is honestly profound in its way, and I mean that – not damning with faint praise. It's a dry Grand Cru Riesling, fervidly green and spicy, almost creamy over the mid-palate, slaty on the finish. A wine of amplitude and rectitude, firm yet generous, professorial and even pointed, but neither sour nor severe. You know right away it's a wine of consequence, and you accept or reject it according to your demand for hedonism above all else.

### 2011 Schmitt-Wagner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett

GSW-074

**SOS : 1**

This is *not* the Maximiner Herrenberg, but a contiguous vineyard a little higher up and less exotic tasting. The 35g.l. of RS make it taste Feinherb, i.e., old-school, though the old school was never this ripe. Still, a noble attempt that works on a very special frequency; fragrances of licorice, blackberries and slightly scorched onions; the palate is all juicy tart apple, and the finish is balsamy and smoky.

### 2011 Loewen Leiwener Kloostergarten Riesling Kabinett +

GCL-071

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** Boy does *this* smell good. Does this taste good! And that's really all the note one needs to write.

### 2011 Schmitt-Wagner Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese +

GSW-075

**SOS : 2**

A sensational wine Bruno would never have made. Riper, ten tons more mojo; leaf smoke, the sultry side of lavender; the palate is a javelin of spiciness; adamantly expressive, almost not sweet enough, but crammed with zip and mass.

### 2011 Loewen Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese + (+)

GCL-073

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

If there were a *Pantheon* of Great Wines in this portfolio, Carl's Laurentiuslay would occupy a privileged place. For most of the past ten years, it has been, reliably, among the most profound Mosel Rieslings I (or anyone) can offer.

You have been... inattentive, let's say, to that fact. But there's a lot coming at you. It's my fault more than yours. Still, it keeps me humble; when I'm asked how it feels to have wrought an entire New World Order for grower-Champagnes, I can remember the mingy amount of *this* wine I sell, and shrink into a creepy little shell again.

It tastes drier than '10 or '09 – though of *course* it's actually sweeter. I know these things and *still* haven't learned them! But let's forget for a moment about sugar, what say. This wine is majestic and dignified, the noble rib-cage of slate, the very bones of vinosity; lavishly juicy, dried fruits and kaffir and sternness, an amazing almost rugged Mosel wine.

**SOS : 3**

A pure parfait of lime. Uncanny. Lime, oolong, Gyokoru; it's almost springy it's so ridiculously fresh, *and* with nearly 100% botrytis and some 140g.l. RS. But this is a total *freak* of green, and it takes a lot to get me jazzed about Auslese these days.

## Older Vintages of Carl Schmitt-Wagner Wines

Bruno is liquidating his cellar, at least in lots large enough to offer you. These range between five and ten cases, sometimes a little more. They are priced to *move*, as it were.

The questions are these. One, how much do we really care to offer our customers wines that are no longer infantile, or does “the newest vintage” trump all other concerns? The second and for me deeper question is, what will happen to the world when wines like this are gone? For they will be, within the next generation and maybe even sooner. And then what? A whole community of wines like display pieces? They look cool on your mantle but they have no actual *use* except to look cool?

Yes, a few holdouts will swim against the tide – if they can compete – but I want to pause here just a minute and enumerate these endangered virtues.

Tact. The idea that a wine exists in order to *assist*, to keep you company and wash your food down and make people happy *without* having to be the center of attention.

Delicacy. The quality of flavor is apart from the amount of flavor. Lightness is a virtue to be cherished. It is not an excuse for lack of ripeness or overlarge yields (as if 115 year old vines could provide them!).

Harmony. Specifically the kind of harmony where you don't attend to sweetness because the wine is such a perfect entirety you don't need to fuss over the pieces.

These wines are disappearing along with the generation who gave them to us. The world will be a poorer place. More entertaining for sure, but the soul doesn't feed on entertainment. So here are a few voices from a civilized and gentle era. As I tasted them all I kept writing was the word: *perfect*.

**SOS : 2**

Not a misprint; this is actually a higher section of the vineyard called simply “Herrenberg.” The wine's in mint condition and will be perfect at the table. It's fuller and richer and shows less caraway than the Maximiner.

**SOS : 1**

All I wrote was “This is fun!” So, this was fun.

# von Othegraven

Saar // Kanzem

vineyard area // 16 hectares  
annual production // 5,500 cases  
top sites // **Kanzemer Altenberg** (devonian slate); **Ockfener Bockstein** (grey slate);  
**Wiltinger Kupp** (slate)  
grape varieties // 100% Riesling



*It was quite the Topic when this estate was purchased by a gentleman who's a TV star in Germany, more or less as if Alex Trebek bought, I don't know, Diamond Creek or something like that. The genial and talented cellarmaster Andreas Barth is staying on, thus guaranteeing continuity, and the wines ought not to change except perhaps to get even better, with the influx of new capital.*

One lovely development is the acquisition of a new site, the *Wawerner Herrenberg*, a true Grand Cru you may not have heard of, but bought from a fellow whose name you know *quite* well. The wines are (potentially) wonderful, and stylistically different from the existing vineyards in the estate's portfolio. Another development is an upward creep in prices. This always splits my brain in two. One part says "How do you expect to sell wine if all you do is raise prices?" while the other, wiser part looks at the killing-steep land, tastes the wines, and thinks "The only reason wines this good would encounter customer resistance is that everyone assumes German wines are trivial and can never be *worth* such prices." Sad but true – true but sad. Especially for wines like these, not only intrinsically remarkable, but imbued with every overtone of soul a person could ever find.

I believe deeply that wine carries an echo of the place it was grown. Call it a *context* if you're less mystic-minded than I am. The Saar valley is singular in many ways. Close as it is to Trier, it seems entirely removed. Unlike the fjord of the Mittelmosel, the Saar is more open country, and vineyards mix with forests and pasture. It is deliciously relaxing. Quiet and verdant and birdy. In massage they talk about the cleansing breath, the exhale that sends the tension away. Coming to the Saar is like taking cleansing

breaths, one after another.

And so when I taste the wines, something in them speaks of this place where they grow, both its serenity and its drama. It can't be helped, or at least I can't help it. At the same time, though, I am evaluating each of them as wine *qua* wine. However much I may love it because it speaks to my soul, the wine has to work by itself, has to have something convincing to say to you in your shop or restaurant, and to *me* when I taste it months later in the throb and crash of a trade tasting.

It's the only way I know how to respond – how to be alive – by combining a strict professional appraisal with whatever arises spontaneously from within, impulses or impressions or dreams or just emotion. I can't transfer that to you, but we're both human beings and I want you to know it is there. Something is there. These wines offer an opportunity to pass through a curtain.

Hugh Johnson says that great wine demands to be talked about. I used to agree, but now I'm not so sure. Something of the miracle of great wine is amplified in the echo-chamber of conversation, among people who share this love and are fond of one another. But I am really beginning to wonder about the experience of drinking wine by oneself, alone and calm, answering to no one, no need to produce affect or to "contribute" to

**von Othegraven at a glance** // Venerable estate on the Saar, making intense soil-imprinted wines which are true Saar-archetypes.

**how the wines taste** // They fall between the fruit-oriented style typified by Egon Müller and the more *recherché* antique style practiced by Van Volxem; on the dry side but explosive with terroir and with ever-unfolding depth. Kupp is the keenest and most piquant; Bockstein the most extrovertedly fruity, Altenberg the most profound.



a conversation. This I think is valid too. Not always, and maybe not even very often, but just as a way to sound the inner voice from time to time.

I also think there are gregarious wines and also introspective wines, and I love those autonomous little beings who don't look up when you enter the room. I have an amazingly clear rapport with wines like that.

Saar wine seems to take an essence of Mosel wine and concentrate it, but this isn't something one can isolate as a flavor or flavors per se. Saar soils are a little different from Mosel soils, but only a little; there's more so called Grauwacke here intermixed with the slate. Almost every Mosel wine has an herbal profile and a citric profile, and it is these two things that are seemingly intensified in Saar wines. They are also rather more earthy than Mosel wines. They convey an even more palpable solidity. When they show the expected apple-y fruit they prompt you to imagine the apples were smaller and more dense, or had been picked later, when the fruit-sugars were concentrated by a light frost. Indeed one could say Saar wines taste like Mosel wines from grapes that slightly froze, not deep enough for Eiswein, but just enough for a tangy little jab of concentration. They are also shadier than Mosel wines, with more silvery flavors. Not bad for a guy who basically has no idea what he's talking about!

Egon Müller is, obviously, the standard-bearer for the Saar. He is, if not the very "best" grower there, indisputably the first among equals. In the same class are a few excellent growers making classically fruit-driven wines, and every German wine lover cherishes them, as do I although I do not sell them. Then our friend Mr. Niewodnicanski came on the scene at Van Volxem and really shook things up, opting to make extremely dense, concentrated old-school wines mostly chewy and dry (or dry-ish) which are consistently compelling.

Somewhere between these two poles is von Othegraven, neither as *outré* as Volxem nor as keenly fruity as Müller, et al., but instead hewing to a classical line, making scrupulously honest terroir-drenched Saar wines of admirable depth and form. If you like Josmeyer best of all Alsace producers you'll probably like Othegraven best of all Saar producers.

The estate is 16 hectares, with 7.5 in the great Kanzemer Altenberg which looms spectacularly above the manor. It's almost comical to open the front door and have this immense mountain of vines occupy your entire field of vision. It beats the view out my front door, in any case.

The wines are *spontis*, done in tank since the 2005 vintage, with very long aging on the fine lees, and only racked once *during* fermentation, and not again. Musts clarify by settling. There are three great sites: WILTINGER KUPP on highly weathered gray slate with lots of crumbled earth, making compact brilliant wines with a whole basket of heirloom apples. These are what you'd call *keen* or *penetrating* wines. OCKFENER BOCKSTEIN is famous of course, blue-ish silvery slate, a real Saar archetype. Finally the KANZEMER ALTENBERG on pure Devonian slate with rusty flecks from weathered iron oxide, making the most primordially concentrated wines, almost meaty, with such depth as to be almost inscrutable when young, as if they have so much to say they can only stutter.

I adore wines like these. If you look at a tree from the top down, first you see the thready little branches and then as the eye travels down it gets thicker and thicker until you come to the big round trunk. That's how the palate registers these wines, first the nuances and then the deep-grounded solidity. And they have the innate kindness of trees.

**2011 Wawern Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage +**

GOG-027

**SOS : 2**

First vintage for Othegraven, from an old vineyard, and it's just a beautiful Saar wine, shimmeringly green aromas especially wintergreen and key-lime; mega-malic on the palate, slinky and tangy, and a long finish of Sencha and spearmint.

**2011 Wiltingen Kupp Riesling Kabinett**

GOG-026

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The site is highly weathered gray slate with lots of crumbled earth, and the wines are cooler, with more “white” in them; peony, white lilac, white tea; jonagold apples now, a little lighter and drier than Herrenberg; sleek and slatey, graceful and demure; piquant, and compared to the gushing charm of the above, pleasingly diffident.

**2011 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage + +**

GOG-028

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Pure Devonian slate with rusty flecks from weathered iron oxide; these are the Saar's most primordial, masculine, almost inscrutable wines.

The '08 Kabinett was my wine of the vintage that year, and this isn't far behind; it's serious, as is typical for this site, and splendidly salty; somehow at once gentle yet lively, lapidary yet intricate – it's the texture that Dönnhoff is the master of. Roses and maple, but really only a short flash of sweetness before a rock-slide of minerality, so the wine seems dry until the tertiary finish of flowers and maple again. Gorgeously complex, exquisitely delicate, a power-pack of intensity in a tiny gossamer frame. No wine in the world can do such a thing.

**2011 Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Spätlese Erste Lage +**

GOG-029

**SOS : 2**

Lots of *sponti* funk here – it's what happens when you do ambient yeast in tank. Behind it is fervid plum blossom and lily of the valley; the palate is sleek and “blue,” tautly malic and with a mineral wash foaming into the finish, which goes into woodruff before settling back into slate.

**2011 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Erste Lage +**

GOG-030

**SOS : 2 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is wonderfully earthy and, like the Kabinett, delivers a wink of sweetness before a palpable wash of salty slate. Stockier than the curvaceous Bockstein, with an entirely different palate form, a more immediate horizontal spread over the sides rather than forming a single detailed point.



vineyard area // 6 hectares  
 annual production // 4,000 cases  
 top sites // Aylar Kupp, Schonfels, Wiltinger Kupp, Wiltinger Braunfels,  
 Wiltinger Schlangengraben  
 soil types // weathered grey slate, red slate, quartzite  
 grape varieties // Riesling

*These outstanding Saar wines came to Johannes Selbach's attention, who quickly wrote me about them. "You'll like them; they're not cookie-cutter wines."*

Not only is he correct, he's also zeroed in on a guiding beacon for this portfolio; to the extent anyone is added, the wines can't merely be clear, modern, effective or *viable*. They need to be original in some essential way, to offer something we don't already have, and ideally, something *no-one* already has.

Enter and welcome Helmut Plunien, and his beautiful new/old estate on the Saar.

He comes from a recent background as the administrator of big "noble" estates, first in Würzburg, and more recently closer to his native Saar – in Trier, at the Bischöflichen Weingüter, which us old-timers will remember as one of the venerable Great Names in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer. Though Plunien didn't go into detail, I surmise his stint in Trier was frustrating, and I further surmise his efforts to innovate and improve quality at the now-moribund property were resisted. At the same time (and maybe to blow off steam) he founded a tiny estate in Wiltigen, and called it "Vols" after a micro-parcel name in the great Wiltinger Braunfels, better-known before the 1971 wine law wiped it (and far too many other names) off the map.

But the real breakthrough came in 2009, when he was able to buy the estate Altenhofen in Ayl. Though barely known to Americans, this was a "name" among Saar *amateurs*, both for its superb holdings in the (Aylar) Kupp but also its holdings in the partly abandoned but still fascinating Schonfels.

Plunien, a genial and unpretentious guy you like immediately, calls his cellar philosophy "concentrated doing-nothing." He'd rather not fine or filter and will

avoid doing so if at all possible. The wines are *spontis*, done partly in fuder and partly in steel. In the vineyards he's close to organic, precluded both by the steepness of the terrain and the helicopter spraying. The estate is "6-something" hectares, with plans to grow "but not beyond ten."

I first tasted three vintages ('09 – '08 – '07) here at home. It's the best way to do what Jacqueline Friedrich wisely calls "slow-tasting," where you follow a wine over a period of days, seeing how it morphs and twists into other forms, and whether its first impression is accurate. For the current mercantile purposes, of course, the first impression is *all* that matters, but we shouldn't forget that final drinker, who actually *will* consider what those final sips were like.

The wines intrigued me. They were indeed unique, they showed personality, they were fingerprinted with it; not as atavistic as Von Volxem, not as polished as (say) Zilliken, but something that was specifically theirs, including a remarkably deft sense of balance, as though they'd spontaneously found their ways to the perfect non-sweetness-sweetness – you don't see it and you also don't *miss* it. So a visit was warranted, and arranged.

The result is the offering you see here. And I am one excited dude, to show you these.

The '11s were all still cloudy barrel-samples, so my notes might seem tentative. But this is only because of the periscope you have to look through to infer what the final wines will show. Another work-in-progress has to do with Plunien's labeling system for the "VOLS" wines, i.e., the Braunfels wines. When the estate was tiny he called them

**VOLS at a glance** // Up and coming star-estate on the Saar, begun as a "hobby" project but growing to ambitious proportions.

**how the wines taste** // Old-school not-sweet-not-dry Saar Rieslings, *spontis* but less blatantly so than some, and also less delicate and flowery than many top Saar estates. Peter Lauer's is the style that comes closest.

simply “VOLS 1” and “VOLS 2” with “2” being (counter-intuitively?) the lesser wine. The optics of the actual label/bottle were also obscure at first glance, so we’re seeing what

be done. Still, the *last* thing I wanted to do was to dither over packaging and let some lean hungry competitor zoom in and grab the estate. So, y’know, work with me here.

**2011 Riesling Feinherb**

GVL-001

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is studiously diligent and doesn’t broadcast its prettiness, though it is pretty; sleek and flowery and with the moderate sweetness of early season corn, and a wholesome blast of slate at the end.

**2011 Schonfels Riesling**

GVL-002

**SOS : 1 // SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The site is on the opposite side of the valley from Ayler Kupp, with a SE-S-SW exposure and very steep. He clearly feels it is noble – based on its price alone – and I’m willing to agree, though this particular cask-sample was hard to see into. It seemed to be a front-palate wine, angular and piquant and explicitly slatey, with aromas of white hyacinth; tensile and salty and birch-smoky. It could well become one of those *perfect* dry-enough Rieslings.

**2011 Ayler Kupp Riesling Kabinett +**

GVL-003

**SOS : 1**

SAAR, baby! Barely sweet, fervidly slatey, sleek and crisp but long and suavely mineral. Delicious, interesting, refreshing, blue slate and green apple, honest and perfect, modest and tactful, but not humble! Too vivid to be humble.

It completes a circle for me, too, as one of the very earliest estates I represented, all the way back in the mid-80s, was a tiny Ayl grower named Gebrüder Kramp, whose old-school wines I loved – they were the Merkelbachs of the Saar. The old fellow passed away and the vineyards went to Lauer.

It’s good to be back.

**2011 Ayler Kupp Riesling Spätlese**

GVL-004

**SOS : 1**

10 grams more RS but it tastes drier. One thought such wines had vanished – one is happy to have been wrong! A bit *darker* now, perhaps a little botrytis. A wine of the honest country. With air a burning-shoot smokiness comes on, and carbonized slate... but this is far less developed than the Kabinett, and needs to be watched.

**2011 VOLS Riesling Auslese 1 +**

GVL-005

**SOS : 2**

Exact labeling TBD, but it’s all Braunfels – which by the way is Scharzhofberger’s next-door neighbor. And this is a glory-hallelujah of Auslese; ripe and fresh and gulpable; gravelly-slatey, lovely botrytis and lots of cool lift; baskets of smiling shiny apples. This is an Auslese a person can *drink*.

# Reference



## EARLIER VINTAGES REVISITED

**2009** is turning into the mannerly, attractive and substantive vintage I thought it would. Its only visible problem is the ladybug-band stretching east-west from Nierstein into some of the Nahe, and you won't think it's a problem if you like grassy wines. The vintage is so sanguine and even-tempered it's easy to underrate it, as I suspect I might have a year ago. It does not assert itself, but instead feels relaxed and confident. I think its fruit will head in the beeswax and chamomile direction over time, much as the '99s did – though '09 is far better and more concentrated – and much as the best '03s have done. A handful of Pfalz wines can seem somewhat heavy-footed, but overall this is a graceful and articulate vintage. After 2007, it's the most reliable year of the past decade.

**2008** In the last decade the vintage takes its place among the “smaller,” but in the '90s it would have stood among the best and in the '80s among the very best. It's a Riesling-lover's vintage, less of a crowd-pleaser than '09. For drinkers on the delicate silvery wavelength, '08 gives a pleasure that's growing all the more uncommon.

In our topsy-turvy climate, we have to ask when

we'll get another true “Kabinett” vintage, exactly the inverse of twenty years ago when it was *Auslese* that was scarce. I remain certain that '08 will offer lovely early term pleasure. That said, my instincts regarding its aging curve are to expect periods of leanness and asymmetry between the end of the primary phase and the start of the tertiary. I have another notion I can't explain and couldn't begin to defend, that 2008 will drink fantastically when it's *really* old, i.e., 30-40 years old. I gleam a germ of complexity in these wines that's buried under their young energy.

## THE BEST OF THE LAST DECADE

Looking at the period 2000-2010, it seems to me the very best German wines are the *2005 Mosel and Nahe wines*, which remain a highwater mark of my entire life with these things, bearing serious comparison with the great 1971.

A close 2nd are the *2001 Mosel and Nahe wines*, which are aging classically and justifying their early promise.

The best vintage overall is *2007*. If it failed to reach quite the gleaming summits of the best of '05 and '01, it was a vintage with no weaknesses and with the highest average level. The most misunderstood vintage was, of

course, 2003. There were lots of flabby wines, I know, but the best '03s are monumental and will age as splendidly as the '59 Spätlese I drank last week in the Rheingau. I think we insisted on misunderstanding this vintage because we were loaded up on '01s and '02s and were looking for reasons not to buy. Or maybe we were just inexperienced, or obtuse. I sometimes wonder what room there really is for *profundity* in these times. It seems to almost annoy us. It is too demanding. No matter; the best '03s will have the last laugh.

The most perplexing vintage seems to be 2002. It seemed to be the smaller sibling of '01 at first, or '01 was mammalian and '02 was avian. We knew '02 was better in the Saar, Ruwer and Rheingau, and arguably better in the Pfalz. As time passed and '01 went into its retreat, '02 came ablaze; it was certainly the most exquisitely *fragrant* family of Rieslings I could recall. But then '02 underwent a sudden gain in color and began to show secondary flavors sometimes botrytisey and sometimes varnishy, and at this point all I can say is it's a fascinating changeling.

2000 and 2006 were marked by vineyard challenges mostly having to do with mildews, rot and vinegar. The many fine wines actually made in those vintages were testament to the skill and determination of the growers. 2004 was relatively light and often vividly green, which you either like or dislike.

What's becoming clear is that modern vintages favor the more northerly regions. The Mosel and Nahe haven't had a difficult vintage in at least a decade, whereas the Pfalz had tough times in at least three of the last ten years, and was the weak sister in a few others. The northerly trend makes me personally happy because those regions are not so hostile to wines with sweetness. And curiously, those vintages where the Pfalz shone were also good Mosel years, such as 2002, 2007 and 2008. Armin Diel told me (perhaps facetiously) that I had too much Mosel wine in my portfolio (which led one Moselaner to riposte that I had far too many Nahe producers in an area much smaller than the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer), but I'd favor the Mosel even if it weren't the most popular region over here, because they haven't abandoned the endangered virtues of balanced sweetness and low alcohol – yet.

## HOW GERMAN WINES AGE

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.

The author Tom Stevenson of whose scholarship I stand in near-awe, summed up the petrol thing neatly. “The so-called petrol aroma is a well-known varietal characteristic of a classic... Riesling wine of some maturity. The active chemical compound has been identified as trimethyldihydronaphthalene, or TDN for short. TDN develops during the bottle aging process through the degradation of beta-carotene, an antioxidant that is itself derived from lutein, another antioxidant. The ratio of beta carotene to lutein is higher in Riesling than in any other white grape variety. Studies show that the lower the pH of a wine, the higher its potential for developing TDN. The longer it takes for the petrol aromas to emerge, the more finesse they have. Interestingly, cork absorbs 40 percent of TDN, thus screwcaps preserve more petrol aromas.”

In next month's edition, Tom will demonstrate how you can use this information to get all the girls you want, so don't miss that issue!

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. It's not an abrupt demise, but rather a deliberate twilight slide. That said, I have in mind a 1961 Kabinett I drank at Schmitt-Wagner; 42 years old and going strong.

**Spätlese:** peaks from 7-10 years and shouldn't fade till about age 25.

**Auslese:** peaks from 12-15 years and shouldn't fade till about age 35.

**Beerenauslese:** peaks from 25 years or so, and shouldn't fade till about age 50.

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

**Eiswein:** No one knew how these would age, but some theories are starting to gel. It depends on the wine, on its essential balance. If the acidity is too high, and if it's too dominated by malic “green” acid, this will oxidize into vegetal flavors not to everyone's taste, though the wine is

strictly still “intact.” Such wines compel a theory to drink Eiswein young. This makes little sense to me. The correct theory would be to ignore such wines entirely. They are unbalanced and will give little joy. Eiswein with balanced, ripe acidity will age splendidly, if unpredictably. Dönnhoff served me an ‘83 Brücke Eiswein last year, whose caramel color took us aback. “Actually, Terry, the wine took on that color at three years old, and has held it since,” he said.

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

### LABEL BASICS



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

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

The common complaint is the German label is too verbose. Here's a nice terse response: bullshit. If this were the label of a French wine, we'd be subjected to “Grand

Vin du Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, mis en bouteille au domain Selbach-Oster, viticulteur a Zeltingen, Grand Cru Schlossberg du Zeltingen, Vendange Tardive, Riesling...” get the picture? The difference is that you feel urbane and seductive speaking the French words. In German you feel like Seargent Schulz. (I was on a little warpath in Germany last month, correcting my colleagues' mispronunciations until I was sure they'd spit in my soup. I don't object to our mangling the complicated diphthongs, but any drooling idiot can say Zone-en-ur (Sonnenuhr). So please, gimme a break about the German label.)

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

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). Beginning in 2009, a wine is either a *Qualitätswein* (if it was chaptalized) or a *Prädikatswein* if it wasn't, i.e., if it was ripe enough to do without adding sugar to the must to bulk up the body. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the *Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum standards. That word *Gutsabfüllung* means estate bottled. Think about it: it's actually shorter than *mise en bouteilles au domaine*; it's just a single word instead of a seven-syllable phrase. And then finally on the bottom we find Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, in this case the region of origin. The French wine denies us even this basic courtesy. No “Grand vin de Bourgogne” here. We are thrown upon the dubious mercy of the BATF, which will require “Red Burgundy Wine” to appear on the strip label.

No, there's nothing inherently complex about German wine labels. Long words, sometimes. Yet when a sommelier approaches the table, he seldom recommends the “Sancerre Reserve du Monts Dammes from Cotat;” he suggests the *Sancerre*. Same here. Don't spell it all out in all its excruciating length. Suggest “The Zeltinger for Monsieur's pork 'n beans?” Some of the more arcane

ramifications of the label can be interesting to students of logic, or just for a chuckle over some precious bureaucratic geekiness, but you really don't need to know it. Do you *have* to know all the queer codes on an airplane ticket in order to board the plane? But your travel agent can see all kinds of information in those strange little glyphs. Learn it if you care to.

## GLOSSARY

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Germans have lurched backward from their acidobsession. 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. 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.

**Feinherb:** There must have been a hole in the ozone layer when they permitted this term to be used. Because they didn't *control* it, and this is most scandalously fungible, sensible and un-Teutonic. In fact *feinherb* means whatever a grower wants it to mean. It always denotes a wine on-the-dry-side, and in practice, as one grower told me, the local wine-inspector tolerates anything up to 30g.l. residual sugar

especially if the wine tastes as if it should have 70. For some growers *feinherb* are their dryish wines above the limit for Halbtrocken. Others use it in place of Halbtrocken because (correctly) they despise “Halbtrocken”.

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

**Flurbereinigung:** Literally this means the “rectification of the fields.” It’s actually a process whereby costs of

grower gets back nearly the same proportions of A, B and C land he gave up. Makes sense. But also raises a very sneaky question: Why does anyone still quarrel with the idea of a vineyard classification *when it has already been done??* And is already being used! Show me a grower who fumes that vineyard classifications are undemocratic and I’ll show you a grower who’ll fuss to **high hell** if he gives up A-land and gets B-land back.

**Gutsabfüllung:** This is a recently permitted term for estate bottling, and much preferable to the old Erzeugerabfüllung which is now restricted for use by coops. 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.



production are diminished by rationalizing land holdings and building roads, paths, and walkways. Formerly the growers’ holdings were split into myriad tiny parcels and scattered hither and yon over the hillside. Often there was no easy access. It could take a longer time to get to one’s vines than to actually work them.

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

But here’s a curious twist. Every parcel of vineyards in Germany is categorized by quality — categories A, B, or C — so that when the vineyards are reapportioned the

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

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

# Core List Wines

## Hard Core List

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## THE MAN THE MYTH THE LEGEND

If its true that the road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom, Terry Theise has been there and back. A brief perusal of his writing makes it quickly apparent that the man has no reservations about conveying his thoughts and feelings on wine, life, sex, philosophy and general cosmology.

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