



INTRODUCTION



Last year, personally, was a markedly somber year, and not only because of the political situation. There was a lot of sad news, and even more curiously, this is echoed by many people I've talked to. "I'm glad to turn the page away from 2017," I would begin, and you'd say "I know! Wasn't that a crap year?" And none of were talking about Trump, which is its own horror; no, we were all weaving around what felt like a hail of thrown stones, consoling those who were stricken, hoping we'd be spared.

And so I spent what felt like a lot of time last month in Germany (and Champagne) having rather grave conversations with people who'd suffered losses and were still in various states of grief. Sure, there was the normally prevailing quotient of yucking-it-up, but I cannot recall a March visit so personal, connected and serious.

Today is the first day of Walter Strub's retirement. Retired! I met the man 40 years ago this year, and now he's retired?!

"It doesn't mean so much," his wife Margit said. "Only that he might spend a little more time at breakfast, or take a nap in the afternoon; he'll keep working, but the responsibility for the business is now Sebastian's." All of this is making me wistful. But I know the cure! It's sheer basic all-American *hucksterism!* Let's sell some shit!!

Accordingly, and for the very first time in the storied history of this great, dare I say legendary offering of German wines, I submit to you—a list of the best wines in the offering. Yup, a best-of, taking nothing but basic excellence into account. Value-for-money plays no role. Availability plays no role. The usual "Highlights and Superlatives" will still appear in my vintage report, but these are catalogued and categorized and they're situationally relative. This here list of just the freaking *BEST* wines among the 400-500 wines I tasted.

In order of tasting, with the absolute top wines in **BOLD**:

SPREITZER 2017 Wisselbrunnen Riesling "GG"

GOLDATZEL 2017 Winkler Hasensprung
Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

KUNSTLER 2016 Hölle Riesling "GG"

DIEL 2017 Riesling Burg Layen Trocken

KRUGER-RUMPF 2017 Im Pitterberg Riesling Kabinett

DOENNHOF 2017 Felsenberg Riesling "GG"

DOENNHOF 2017 Riesling

**DOENNHOF 2017 Niederhäuser
Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**

SCHNEIDER Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Feinherb

DARTING 2016 Rieslaner Beerenauslese
(Dürkheimer Nonnengarten)

MUELLER 2017 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese

VON WINNING 2016 Sauvignon Blanc "500"

**VON WINNING 2017 Kirchenstück Riesling "GG"
(available 1/2019)**

MEßMER 2017 Michelsberg Riesling Trocken

MINGES 2017 Rieslaner Auslese
 MUELLER-CATOIR 2017 Scheurebe Trocken Mandelring
 DAUTEL 2016 Riesling Steingrüben "GG"
 MERKELBACH 2017 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese #7
 LOEWEN 2017 Riesling Maximiner Klosterlay
LOEWEN 2017 Maximiner Herrenberg "1896" Trocken
 LOEWEN 2017 Ritsch Riesling "GG"
LOEWEN 2017 "1896" Riesling (Feinherb)
 LOEWEN 2017 Longuicher Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett
 SCHAEFER 2017 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese
 SELBACH-OSTER 2017 Graacher Domprobst
 Riesling Alte Reben Feinherb
 SELBACH-OSTER 2017 Riesling Zeltinger
 Sonnenuhr "Uralte Reben" Feinherb
 SELBACH-OSTER 2017 Zeltinger
 Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett
**SELBACH-OSTER 2017 Zeltinger
 Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**
**SELBACH-OSTER 2017 Zeltinger
 Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**
 SELBACH-OSTER 2017 Wehlener
 Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese
SELBACH-OSTER 2017 Riesling Rottay

Now I feel better! And seriously, orders that exclude the above wines will expose you as a poltroon, a doofus and a clod. No one needs that.

To plunge heedlessly into the "matter at hand," whither Germany? And to answer that question I will restrict myself to Riesling and to an ancillary extent to Spätburgunder. I'm aware the German wine marketing poo-bahs (as well as one of my more conspicuous competitors) are trying to mount a case for Pinots Gris & Blanc plus Silvaner among other grapes with which Germany "does well," or sometimes very well. But I feel no need to re-cast Germany as anything other than the greatest Riesling producer on earth, regardless of whatever malaise greets that prospect.

If I didn't hate footnotes I'd put one here, but I do hate them so I'll interject. As regards the aforementioned Pinots, they're quite popular in Germany because the domestic drinker who craves dry wines can obtain wines A) more neutral and B) less acidic than Riesling. And of course, talented growers can create fine wines from these grapes. I offer a few. They're delicious and worthwhile, but they're vinous asides. Riesling rules, always has, always will.

Ah but: Riesling. I know it's the best wine grape of them all. A lot of you know it also. Wine writers have been saying it

for decades. We do well with it, I'm not complaining, but there's a kind of glass ceiling, and it's time to tackle it head-on, as it were.

But, well OK. More good wines for us. When have I ever had "popular" taste? Would I even recognize myself if I did? Still, I often think that people who love Riesling could be a little more helpful. For example, why does Ms. Kriebiehl harp on acidity as she does? The caricature of Riesling lovers as "acid freaks" tends to ghetto-ize us as people with truly geeky taste who ought properly to be marginalized. Many years ago I heard Hans Crusius—Peter Crusius' father and the proprietor of the legendary Crusius estate in Germany's Nahe valley—remark to the effect that "We need to get rid of the notion that Riesling is great *because* of its acidity." My (much) younger self thought the old man had three screws loose. Now I know he was right. Acidity is inherent to Riesling, but that doesn't make it a fetish object. Too much acidity is nasty. If you can taste it blatantly there's probably too much of it, or too little of something else, such as fruit or extract.

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

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

the bearish attitude against wines that are not dry. The result is that top wines with sugar levels of 10-30 grams have become very rare. And that's a shame indeed."

I am fully aware that any statement beginning with words like "The Germans..." Is misleadingly categorical, yet with that caveat I also observe their signal blindness to that which is most unique (and therefore most precious) about their Rieslings, as well as their tendency to dither around the fringes of salience. Considering the basic struggle to give Riesling the stature it deserves, the German wine culture isn't helping. For all its good intentions, it pisses in the pool. We who love the wines, or we who'd like to love the wines, need a quick way through.

THE SHIT YOU GOTTA UNDERSTAND ABOUT GERMAN WINE TODAY

The single most important word on the label is TROCKEN. It means DRY. This isn't because dry wines are better—they aren't—but this one word will tell you the single most salient thing about the basic nature of what's in the bottle. If you do not see "Trocken" on your label, the wine will contain at least some sweetness. If it is just a teensy bit of sweetness, so little you can't even be certain it's there, you'll probably see the word FEINHERB.

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

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

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

A parallel system has arisen, thanks to the activities of a grower’s association called the VDP. It is a group of superior producers. Most of its members are in the top rank, though there are top-rank growers who choose not to join, for reasons of their own. The VDP has recast German wine along a Burgundian model. Pending an entire European Union re-draft of each country’s wine laws (sure to entail a nightmare), the VDP’s innovations are quasi-officially accepted.

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

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

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

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

So, to recap: the most *conspicuous* and progressive system was established by the “VDP,” an association of elite producers,

and it has spread to non-VDP estates also, as its logic and simplicity are tempting. Estate-wine, Village-Wine, Premier Cru and Grand Cru single vineyard wines. Four tiers.

The “classified” sites can be used either for dry wines or for sweet wines labeled in the old Prädikat system. For sweet wines they will carry a symbol such as “Erste Lage” (1er Cru) or “Grosse Lage” (Grand Cru) so that—finally!—the quality of a site is de-coupled from an insistence that its wine is dry.

The VDP keeps tinkering with the system, and creates all manner of viciously illogical mischief in the process. I won’t go into it here, because it’s a lot of insider-y stuff not germane to my current purpose. Very often a committee, of any sort, has to keep “taking action” in order to justify its existence, and having taken useful action at the beginning it doesn’t know when to stop. More ominously, it doesn’t seem to know *how* to stop. “We’ve done fine work here; let’s disband and only meet if needed,” is a thing you will never hear. What you will hear, sadly, is something like “Whew; it felt good to untangle *that* knot. Now let’s tie a *new* one only this time we’ll make the knot so fucking complicated they’ll *never* get it untied!”

Your humble author is skeptical of committees, you will observe....

OLD SITE-NAMES RETURN

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

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

After 1971 the cadaster names were forbidden from use, but a few seditious souls among the growers kept using them, by means of some disguise, such as initials, visual symbols or “fantasy” names. I myself am deeply curious about the origin of my wines, and I’m pleased when they’re designated as specifically as possible. But one can fall down a rabbit-hole with these things, and I don’t need to know that any given wine came from “rows 16-21” or any

such otiose detail. However, given that a large number of post-71 single sites were slovenly in their definitions and flabby in their dimensions, I was heartened when the old names started to show up again. While the EU reviewed the situation the names were “tolerated,” but now it appears they’ll receive explicit approval.

This makes me very glad, and here’s an example of why. Back in 1996 the Strubs bottled two Niersteiner Hipping Spätlesen, one from the steep section and one from the flat section—which blatantly points out the stupidity of the disparate sections having the same name. How would we tell them apart? We couldn’t use the cadaster names. We couldn’t call one “steep” and the other one “flat,” because the law said that whatever wasn’t explicitly permitted was forbidden. In desperation we put the steep one in a green bottle and the flat one in brown. Today Sebastian and Walter can use the old cadaster names (Thal and Flächenhahl in this instance) and now we can see exactly where our wines came from.

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

* THE 2017 VINTAGE *

After an early Spring that was too-warm too-soon, everyone worried about late frosts. And then came late frosts. Before the end of April, nearly all of northern Europe was affected, and the damage ranged from substantial to devastating. Germany was not spared.

Crop losses ranged from 25-30% to nearly 60% in the worst instances. Yet there was a curious phenomenon of second-growth (which the Germans call *Verrieseln*) which, while somewhat reassuring in terms of yields, made for some confusion later on because the second-growth grape bunches could not be eyeball- distinguished from the original bunches. “We really had not one but two vintages,” said Cornelius Dönnhoff, with parallel bunches ripening around two weeks apart from one another.

Frost was universal, but different regions (and even places within regions) also contended with hail and with untimely botrytis, including one luckless corner which suffered a late-August hail storm which brought mildews in its wake. It was not an easy vintage!

But it is a good one, at times a very good one, and at times perhaps a great one, which we will know in the fullness of time.

Low yields correspond to high extract, and certainly a lot of the growers were pleased with the readings. (Extract gives a mid-palate umami that registers as density, stuffed-ness, like a suitcase you have to sit upon in order to shut.) The more candid growers pointed out that botrytis (and excessive moisture) could also create high extracts, and the warning was apt. 2017 isn't a vintage you can "read" from a lab analysis. You have to taste.

And what do you taste? After the nearly perfect lissome and sleek 2016s, 2017 is a marked contrast; it is a serious tasting vintage, by no means unfriendly, but levity does not obtrude upon it. There are certainly some charming wines, and there are loads of delicious wines, but '17 is a vintage of dark character whereas '16 was lyric and bright. "Dark" can be construed either metaphorically or in some cases almost literally—'17 has an iron-like cast, almost always smoky, like burning vine shoots. I used "shoot-smoke" quite often in my notes, and I surprised myself by writing "peppery" from time to time. Compared to the mischievous '16s, the new vintage seems a little earnest.

But if you're a serious kind of person (and a taster who appreciates no-nonsense wines) you'll be richly pleased by these 2017s. And there are many, many wines that everyone will flip over.

The vintage was gathered early almost everywhere, but the Pfalz was *really* early: Many were finished by the first few days of October (about 3-4 weeks ahead of schedule), and what they gathered should make them very very happy. If 2017 is potentially great anywhere, it's in the Pfalz. Three of my producers showed me the best collections I'd ever tasted—Meßmer, Eugen Müller and Darting (and forget any notion you harbored that Darting makes *fun little wines*, because these '17s are *lysergic*), while another one presented a grand and unusual collection (Catoir!), while our pals at Von Winning continue their orbit around the Van Allen Belts (and the "GGs" won't be offered until January 2019, and may be the best they've ever made...), and finally my beloved Minges made the excellent vintage they *always* make, only unusual in the 2017 context where everyone reached new levels whereas Theo and Regine "merely" maintained their prevailing and consistently superb level.

In any case, the smart money says to allocate more of your (mingy and pitiable) German Riesling budget to the Pfalz in 2017.

I found excellent wine throughout the Rheingau and Rheinhessen (and tasted from four estates in the latter region,

though two were newbies under consideration).

If there's a demarcation in 2017, it follows a frequent vein that divides Mosel and Nahe from regions south and east. The Nahe also varies within itself (as indeed it often does, encompassing so many climate and soil zones) so that you can't generalize except to say it is always *good* and sometimes *superb*. Most fascinating for me, the two great estates (Diel and Dönnhoff) seemed to run counter to the vintage's prevailing solemnity, and made stirringly tender, lapidary wines. Don't ask me how, or if you do ask me how, be ready for a fusillade of gibberish as I try fruitlessly to explain the inexplicable.

And finally to the Mosel. First the good news: the very best wines I tasted from 2017 were Mosel wines. At times their profundity made me think of great years like 1971 or 2005, and at other times their serenely perfect harmonies stopped me in my tracks and filled me with wonder and gratitude.

But, there is also not-so-good news. The Mosel vintage has markedly *present* acidity. The best growers managed it. The others...did not. At times 2017—normally a vintage of almost imposing stature and command—seemed rather *small* at certain Mosel estates.

But please be aware, this is *my palate* speaking, and I have arrived at a point whereby if I notice acidity it's because it's too caustic for me. The right acidity is a vibrating but silent partner. The wrong acidity is a sharpness I do not find agreeable—but that's me, and you may well feel differently. In any case, my colleagues Valerie Masten-Bonné and Gabe Clary all agreed it was a yo-yo sort of year along the silvery Mosel.

Even then I was reminded that I have the luxury of tasting only from solid producers, and there is apparently plenty of yucky wine in 2017—but nothing I tasted was objectionable in that way (except for a few potential newbies whose wines helped me appreciate what I already have...) and such issues as I have with some '17s are just my querulous palate throwing a tantrum.

If 2016 is a well-told joke, 2017 is a magnificently constructed argument. If 2016 is a morning in Spring, 2017 is an evening in Autumn.

The small crop and the weakened Dollar will push prices upward, making the remaining '16s quite the bargains. That said, to pay a premium for wines such as the best '17s is a reasonable proposition, in view of the sheer concentration of the wines.

HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

Bearing in mind, as always, that *Selbach-Oster* and *Dönnhoff* are always superlative, and I have struggled how to acknowledge this and still give "emerging talents" a chance. This time I shall attempt another futile means of squaring the circle, for which I invite you to tease me contemptuously, should we ever meet.

THE WINERY(S) OF THE VINTAGE IS (ARE):

CARL LOEWEN is the estate with whom I was most profoundly impressed. They not only ascended to a hitherto undreamt-of level, they seemed to have the Midas-touch, as wine-after-wine-after-wine was almost eerily perfect, gorgeously balanced, and poised not with any great assertiveness but instead with a serene gentle perfect-pitch of the purest harmony. Possibly this is the full flowering of the father-son synergy of Karl-Josef and Christoph, and possibly it's just one of those things. It's also contrary to my commercial interests, because there isn't much wine and we won't be able to entirely fill orders. But credit where it's due—and it is richly due here!

(Not surprisingly, the collections of both **Selbach-Oster** and **Dönnhoff** are replete with masterpieces, and I ask you to accept it as a given, that these two estates will always be "best-of" in every vintage and every category of consideration.)

OTHER MARKED SUCCESSES:

That is first, any estate who have conspicuously exceeded their usual standards, and second, estates presenting a sustained high level of excellence.

Spreitzer, for a steady hand over the whole range, and for many high points.

Goldatzel, for an almost Nigl-like perfection of focus and expressiveness, over and over, to the point it almost physically hurt to leave any wine behind.

Diel, for perhaps the first vintage where Caroline's influence can be tangibly felt. The wines seem to be entering a new era of finesse and a quality I can only describe as melting, yielding, swooning.

Darting, who showed me simply their

best-ever vintage, at least two levels above anything they've produced to date.

Von Winning, with the caveat that we can't yet place the GGs into the mix as they can't be offered before 2019. And yet, if we did....

Meßmer, my "vanity project" has made their best vintage in Gregor's era. He himself concurs, and he is self-critical like few others I know.

Müller-Catoir, for a new departure in style or syntax, and for an insanely good group of Scheurebes.

TO BE CONSIDERED:

If one isn't only taking 2017s into account, estates offering earlier vintages would lunge toward the top. Thus credit where it's due, to **Künstler** and **Breuer**, for wonderful collections across vintages and colors.

THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:

Loewen—1896 Riesling Feinherb (if you don't want to be able to get any), and....

Selbach-Oster—Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese (if you wish to actually have access to some).

OTHER GREAT RIESLINGS:

(please consult the list at the front of the offering.)

THE GREATEST NON-RIESLINGS:

Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese (for which my entire note was "Oh for crying out loud!")

Von Winning essentially any/all the Sauvignon Blancs, especially 2017 "I" and 2016 "500."

Meßmer Rieslaner Auslese (Burrweiler Altenforst)

Minges either Rieslaner, Spätlese or Auslese

Müller-Catoir Scheurebe Spätlese (Haardter Mandelring)

THE GREATEST TROCKEN WINES:

This category is being retired, as I have

included the Trockens among the general scrum of great wines, where they now belong.

THE GREATEST FEINHERB WINES:

Goldatzel has TWO entries, both the Johannisberger Goldatzel Riesling Kabinett Feinherb, and the Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

Dönnhoff Estate Riesling

Schneider Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Feinherb

Selbach-Oster also has TWO, the Graacher Domprobst Riesling Alte Reben Feinherb, and the Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Uralte Reben Feinherb.

THE GREATEST VALUES (AT ANY PRICE):

Spreitzer Estate Riesling Trocken

Kruger-Rumpf Estate Riesling Feinherb

Darting also shows us TWO: the 2017 Pinot Blanc Kabinett Trocken, and the 2017 Riesling Kabinett in LITERS.

Meßmer the Riesling Feinherb in LITERS is the best he's ever made, and three levels above any class existing before.

Minges Scheurebe Feinherb

Müller-Catoir "MC" Scheurebe Trocken

PEERING BACK AT 2016

I feel no need to revise my early sentiment that '16 is a consistently adorable vintage for true Riesling lovers. But at times it is more than merely adorable; it can be profound, but never self-serious. And it has always been, and continues to be a vintage that repels deconstruction. Oh sure, you can taste into its associative nuances and into the fine architectures of its structure, but when you do you will (nearly) always find a seamless quality that seems to ask you "Why are you fussing? I worked it out dude, it's perfect, just sink into it..."

Some tasters, I know, are more into wines with quirks and angles and corners and various sorts of misshapen-ness, and while I agree these are interesting, I think that if you prefer them, your palate is immature. Over time I have grown suspicious of any single component that shrieked out from the whole. Hans Sel-

bach (Johannes' father and a wise man of wine) said "It's better if the whole chorus sings than if one voice screams," and it is that exactly.

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

Who is imparting this to young wine drinkers? Is anyone? From what I observe, too many of them are seduced by some individual quirk that impresses them as novel or "interesting" and no one's told them that's all very well, but it isn't enough. I count the minutes until they outgrow this callow attitude, and take a wiser view of quality. What makes a wine interesting, ultimately and fundamentally, is that it's distinctive but not merely weird, and that it's delicious.

WHITHER AUSLESE?

Johannes Selbach reported, somewhat ruefully during the harvest, that 2017 was producing grapes that were perfect for Auslese. Put another way; grapes for *perfect* Auslese. "I can't do anything else with them," he said, "so we either let the boars eat them or we make Auslese, and if I can't sell it then I'll put it in the cellar and my kids will drink it."

Auslese, the wine no one wants (except the Chinese, who are keeping it alive from what I hear) yet everyone adores *while they are drinking it*. Auslese suffers when one approaches it by demanding it prove its utility. "How do I use it??"

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

Dudes, you're looking at it all wrong. Each angle you're viewing it from is wrong, and your entire conception of it

is also wrong. Yet I sympathize, because there are way too many Auslesen that actually are feeble dilutions of the profound elixirs BA-TBA too many that are kind-of botrytis-y wines too many that are both too sweet and not sweet enough.

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

The secret, maybe, is to see Auslese not as a BA or TBA that "failed" but instead as a Spätlese that stretched to an

beauty and love. *It comes first.* You pay it the obeisance it deserves, you stop your busy life just long enough to be amazed you have a soul that can melt, you hear yourself saying "People have to taste this," and then, because you really are a genius, you figure out how to bring that about.

I'll tell you this. I don't like very "sweet" wines. Mostly I am bored by them. I want any wine I select, with whatever degree of RS it contains, to show *as a whole* and that sweetness be absorbed, assimilated and in perfect inconspicuous balance. Those are the kinds of Auslesen I select. I override every bit of my mercantile hesi-

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



even higher height. Those are the best kinds of Auslese, because they don't lose vinosity, they continue to be virile, compact and driven by fruit and mineral. And this is incredibly stirring, because here is an entire wine culture making a kind of wine we greet with a collective yawn, because... why? It seems perverse on its face. Yet what I see is a type of wine that expresses gratefulness for a gift of nature. I also see a noble observance of an aspect of human culture; you do not spurn nature's gifts.

And here we are, scratching our heads thinking "Waddaya do with this stuff... maybe with a cheese course..." and I propose to you that you have the cart before the horse. The wine is a being of

tation in the faces of these wines. I probably won't sell them very much. I'm sad about that, but I also have a debt to the cause of beauty, and my small voice admonished me: How will I live with myself if I walk away from this wine? Have I really become *that guy*?

FIZZ MIT UMLAUTS

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

The issue with both the bubbly I received was the same; good interesting

very few tasting trials.

The ones who do think about these things are able to offer something I think we need. Champagne is becoming a difficult proposition for by-the-glass, and smart somms are all over the alternatives—other French Cremants (especially and justifiably Jurasien) and to a growing extent, German Sekt. So a few years ago I started to survey the landscape, and I found a few surprises along the way. Even our friends at Dönnhoff have a Pinot-based cuvées *en tirage*.

Which brings me to a second issue; what do they use to make Sekt? Riesling, much of the time, and this makes sense. But more and more of them are working with Pinots (Noir and Blanc, and some-

times also with Chardonnay) to try to make something “toastier.” It’s a good time to be watchful. Meanwhile, these are the ones that excited me, with detailed notes inside each grower’s profile.

STRUB: has a 2016 Niersteiner Hipping Sekt—Hipping is a GG-quality site—but I want to wait for a later disgorgement to let the wine develop more creaminess and verve.

KUENSTLER: The 2010 Chardonnay Sekt is easily equal to “good” Champagne.

DIEL: Here is where the fur flies. The estate 2009 Brut is better than many Champagnes, while the 2008 Goldloch (another “GG”) is even finer. These aren’t cheap, nor should they be, but I promise you if I presented them to you blind, saying only they were “Blanc de Blancs from somewhere you don’t know,” you’d be on dem puppies in a most impatient manner.

DARTING: A 2015 Brut from Pinot Blanc is the perfect brasserie wine except it’s better than 95% of anything you’re ever being offered.

VON WINNING: This year I chose a 2013-based Brut Rosé.

MINGES: It’s a 2012 Riesling Brut, disgorged in late 2017, so 4 years tirage. Exactly what so many such wines need, and don’t get.

DAUTEL: A superb 2014 Pinot Sekt Brut that would create sleepless nights if I showed it to a few of my Champagne growers.

Some of the Sekt-stars from last year’s offering (Messmer and Selbach, conspicuously) are between vintages. Availability is sketchy because these are seen as ancillary items, but many growers realize it’s useful to take the wines seriously, and don’t be surprised if German bubbly is a consistent (and tasty) “thing” in the next decade.

FEINHERB

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

In practice “Feinherb” can be used for anything from 10 grams/liter of RS (and most palates taste sugar discretely starting at 12g/l. “Brut” goes to 15) to somewhere in the high 20s. It’s the zone where

sugar is stealthy and as good as invisible. It’s extending the fruit, increasing the aroma, moderating the alcohol, and dancing with the sweetness already in your food. But you do not taste it. That is, unless you’re that pathologically bitter ghoul who hates any surmise of sweetness. Put another way, a good dry Riesling is wonderful; a Feinherb Riesling is insanely wonderful, and is more flexible.

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

SPREITZER Hattenheimer Engelmannsberg
Riesling Feinherb

SPREITZER Winkeler Jesuitengarten
Alte Reben Riesling Feinherb

GOLDATZEL Johannisberger
Goldatzel Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

GOLDATZEL Johannisberger Hölle
Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

GOLDATZEL Johannisberger Vogelsang
Alte Reben Riesling Feinherb

HEXAMER Riesling Feinherb “Porphyry”

SCHLOSSGUT DIEL Riesling Feinherb “Von der Nahe”

MINGES Scheurebe Feinherb

MESSMER Riesling Kabinett Feinherb “Muschelkalk”

MESSMER Muskateller Feinherb

EUGEN MÜLLER Forster Pechstein
Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

GEIL Bechtheimer Riesling Feinherb

WEINGART Mittelrhein Riesling Feinherb

MÜLLER-CATOIR Riesling Feinherb “MC”

MÜLLER-CATOIR Gimmeldinger Schlossel
Rieslaner Spätlese Feinherb

JAKOB SCHNEIDER Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Feinherb

JAKOB SCHNEIDER Spatburgunder Rose Feinherb

CARL LOEWEN Longuicher Maximin Herrenberg
“1896” Riesling Feinherb

VOLS Saar Riesling Feinherb

A.J. ADAM Im Pfarrgarten Riesling Feinherb

A.J. ADAM Dhron Hofberg
Riesling Feinherb “In der Sangerei”

SELBACH-OSTER Riesling Feinherb

SELBACH-OSTER Graacher Domprobst
Riesling Spätlese Feinherb Alte Reben

SELBACH-OSTER Zeltlinger Sonnenuhr
Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “Uralte Reben”

STRUB Silvaner Feinherb

STRUB Niersteiner Oelberg
Riesling Feinherb “Roter Schiefer”

STRUB Niersteiner Hipping Riesling Feinherb “Thal”
VON WINNING “The Winnings”

HOW I SELECT

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don’t really “design” this portfolio, but if I’m true to myself, my values and my tastes, a design becomes apparent. I find myself to be flexible and tolerant within

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

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

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

A FEW WORDS ABOUT TASTING NOTES

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

Most people's notes go down the same few roads. The first of these is **cognates and associations**, i.e. the other things a wine might taste and smell like. I won't

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

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

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

Lately there's a new thing happening more often to me; I taste a wine and I get it immediately, I grok it before I even know it consciously. This is a non-linguistic impulse, and if I have to pause to try and summon up words for what has

just happened at light-speed and with no discernible effort, it pisses me off. It's also difficult, because there are a lot of wines that can quickly be known but the condition of knowing them is to banish language. Here's an example: Dönnhoff's Hermannshöhle is a great wine that will yield to description and deconstruction, whereas his Brücke will not. At least, not to me. Brücke is entirely intuitive and imagistic; Hermannshöhle is explicit. Hermannshöhle is a splendid and gorgeous explanation, but Brücke is a Truth.

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

WHAT'S WITH THE PLUSSES?

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

NOTES ON MY SENSE-OF SWEETNESS SCALE (SOS)

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

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

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

Just as there are degrees of sweetness there are also degrees of dryness. An SOS of **MINUS-1** is a wine wherein you're



aware—sometimes painfully so—of the stark absence of sweetness.

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

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

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

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

FOUR is a dessert wine.

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

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

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

seem sweeter.

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

Most **AUSLESE** will have an SOS of **THREE**. A few—the kind I adore—have less. Those that have more are highly unlikely to appear in this offering. So, to repeat and conclude, I will show “SOS” when it is surprising, and we'll make it as conspicuous as we can within the text.

SOMMELIER ALERT

Look, I'm happy when y'all buy German wines at all, ideally these ones of course, so I don't want to fuss over *which* ones you buy, and I found myself forgetting to indicate “sommelier alert” after tasting notes when I felt it was called for. Every now and again I'll visit a restaurant and it's clear the buyer has read my text because she has all the wines I myself would have bought had I been she. This makes me happier than any number of cute-puppy vids on the internet.

I'm going to go back now, as I put this catalogue together, and add the *sommelier alert thing* in where I think it's warranted.

There won't be that many, only because I want them to stand out. They are what I feel to be perfect food wines and moreover, perfect restaurant wines.

My criteria are:

Nothing particularly subtle, because most restaurant environments are noisy and distracting, with happy food smells and all the business of conviviality.

Nothing either so dry or so sweet as to reduce the number of potential matches. **What I look for most of all is flexibility**. I wish for inclusive wines.

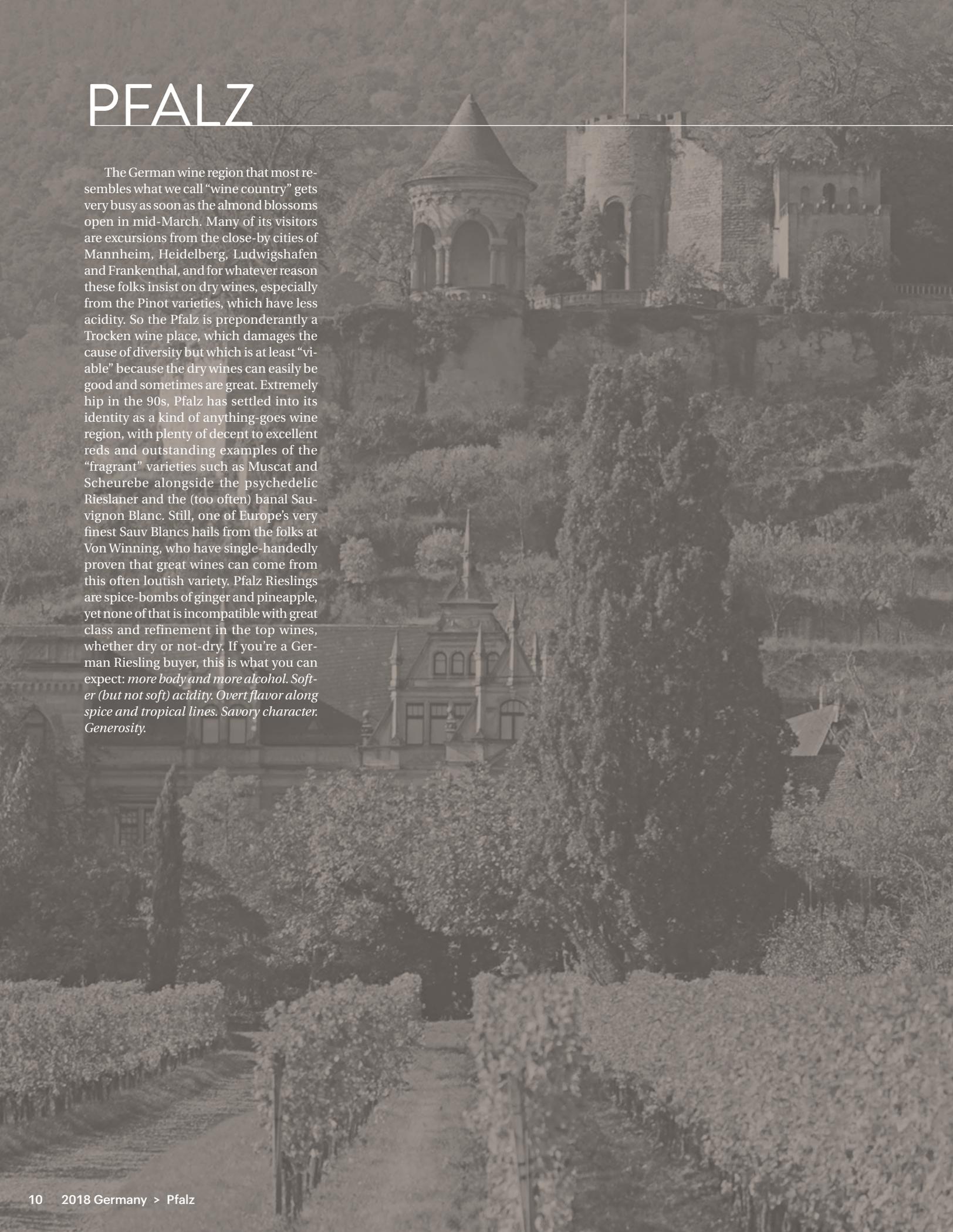
Nothing too high in alcohol, and freshness in the forefront. I want to sell the second bottle, in which case the first one had better empty fast.

Fragrance!

I've spent my working life finding and offering center-of-attention wines, but how often do we want the *wine* to be the center of attention in a restaurant? I'm a wine geek and all my friends are wine geeks and even *we* don't always want the evening to be all about the fucking wine. In those cases I want a wine with a ton of **yum**-factor, so that each time you take a sip it kisses you and retires discreetly.

Beyond that, far be it from me to fuss over your choices. I'm just grateful you're choosing actual *clean, competent* wine, small-batch estate-bottled characterful wine, and if I can just edge out one pondscum cat-puke wine from a list, I've done a good days work.

PFALZ



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

MÜLLER-CATOIR



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Haardt

VINEYARD AREA

21 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

12,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog
(sandstone)

Haardter Herrenletten
(loam, clay, marl, limestone)

Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten
(loess, sandstone gravel)

Mußbacher Eselshaut
(gravel)

Bruemel in den Mauren
(sandstone, gravel)

GRAPE VARIETIES

65% Riesling

10% Weissburgunder

5% Grauburgunder

5% Muskateller

5% Rieslaner

5% Scheurebe

5% Spätburgunder

FARMING PRACTICES

Certified Organic

After many years (16!) of making keen, “cool,” ethereal wines, I wondered what Martin Franzen would make of the stern, definite material of 2017. It’s not a vintage that lends itself to delicate wines, and even if you wanted gossamer Rieslings that needed 2-3 years to express their deep fruit, 2017 wouldn’t offer those ingredients.

But it turns out Franzen was already considering a change of emphasis—call it a new syntax or a new accent—whereby his Rieslings would be less high-toned and shimmery and more overtly expressive out of the gate. This has to do with the elements you’d expect: fermentation temperatures, storage vessels (more cask and less steel) and all the other “font” questions that determine how our palates “read” the flavors. So along comes 2017 and it’s perfectly aligned, so that when you ask “Is this change of focus a question of the vintage or of your own development as a cellarmaster,” the answer is YES.

For newbies, this estate was under the serene guidance of the greatest cellarmaster in German wine history, one Hans-Günter Schwarz, who made the wines from 1962 to 2002 and upon whose shoulders an entire generation of German vintners are still standing. (I sat next to Hans-Günter last month, and drank the last wine he made at Catoir, a 2001 Scheurebe Eiswein, and if anyone’s

eyes were dry they weren’t mine.) During those years it was not at all outlandish to claim that Müller-Catoir was the greatest estate in Germany. And so Mr. Franzen had shoes to fill.

Franzen is a smart fellow, and he opted to make his own shoes and fill them, not to try and be Hans-Günter 2.0. The vineyards didn’t change and the cellar was the cellar, so the wines weren’t dissimilar, but the domestic wine press seemed to succumb to a strange kind of *schadenfreude* that had nothing to do with what I was tasting year after year. Martin’s *sang froid* is admirable, or else he knows he’ll have the last laugh.

Pfalz estates seem to be evaluated through one narrow prism: how good are the “serious” dry Rieslings? (Yes, there are estates specializing on grapes other than Riesling, but if you’re claiming some Riesling stature then your dry wines had better hit all the notes.) If you take the *entirety* of Müller-Catoir into account, if you include the Muscat (one of the best in the world), the astonishing Scheurebes (none better in all of Germany), the astonishing sweet wines from the great Rieslaner, you have to wonder—seriously—why any other Pfalz estate is considered superior.

And if you’re a buyer looking for *kinky* wines without sacrificing basic cleanliness, can you really do better than Muscat or Scheurebe from Catoir? *Nah*.

RED

2016 Spätburgunder Haardt

12/750ml | GMC-255

Partly it's the lissome 2016 and partly it's that Franzen isn't trying to make an *oodles-and-scads* PN fruit-bomb, but this wine is substantive in a slim line of flavor, elegant, buoyant, spicy and precise, vinous and clear. Very much a "northern" style of PN, but neither lean nor ungenerous.

RIESLING, IN ASCENDING ORDER OF SWEETNESS

2017 Riesling Haardt Trocken

12/750ml | GMC-252

"Haardt" is the village wine. And quite the wine it is; dense and salty, an excellent Pfalz Riesling and an atypical Catoir wine, more suede than silk, but generous and solid and pineappley.

2017 Herrenletten Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GMC-256

Single (classified) site wine, and this borders on stunning; scintillating high tones of minty brilliance yet with a curious *substance* behind it. Chalky and grainy as always, the wine gave me goose-flesh!

2017 Bürgergarten "In Breumel" Riesling "GG"

6/750ml | GMC-262

A eucalyptus angularity and a chile-thread bite—not heat, as it only has 13% abv, but simply expressiveness. It's rather a wild ride, not (at least now) "elegant" but splashy and energetic; not quite "mineral" but rocky, a clamber up a rocky chute in a bear-claw scratch landscape. It's a departure for this wine, which has always been more *comme il faut*.

2017 "MC" Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GMC-250 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The wine is made for me, in fact, as it falls in the not-dry-not-sweet zone the Germans can't make sense of, yet which is Riesling's zone of *perfection* as I see it. The '17 is an explosion of key-lime, with unheard-of substance and length. The best it *can* be and the best it will ever be, this ungodly beautiful and impeccably balanced Riesling is an enthusiastic...

2017 Mandelgarten Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GMC-259

The more interesting of two rather sweet Späts, the sandy soil of this Gimmeldingen site always emphasizes a grainy herbal wildness; hyssop adds to a dialogue among savories with only discreet "fruit." A classy, tasty and interesting Riesling.

IS THERE BETTER SCHEUREBE ANYWHERE????

2017 "MC" Scheurebe Trocken

12/750ml | GMC-251 | **VALUE ALERT!**

Almost delicate but entirely typical of Scheu's sage-like profile; but what mineral focus this has! Even more than the Rieslings, improbably, the salty etching of sage, ginger, quince and mineral is lovely. Incredibly expressive for a wine so light on its feet.

2017 Haardt Scheurebe Trocken

+ (+)

12/750ml | GMC-253

A gooseberry note feints towards Sauvignon Blanc but pink grapefruit pulls it back; finely angular, with a sort of woodruff-like charred-leaf thing; obdurate length; the finish is like the embers of a campfire in your mouth.

2017 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Trocken

+ +

12/750ml | GMC-257

Over 50-year vines now, and this is outsized Scheu, dense and grand, spiciness to the intersection of space and time; salty and regal, and in its delightfully gnarly way gorgeous, erecting a megalith on your palate. Forget spitting; you can't get rid of it.

2017 Haardter Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GMC-260

This year they had enough to make a sweet wine from the desiccated and botrytised grapes, and this is a rapture of flowers and greengage plums and Meyer lemons; the palate arrives surprisingly dark and spicy, seeming drier than the Riesling (Spät); it's like a concoction of tarragon and blood-orange, a rich and stirring masterpiece. It's the **SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE** in this collection, and a new high-water mark in Franzen's era.

THE PEYOTE BRIGADE

2017 Haardt Muskateller Trocken

+

12/750ml | GMC-254

I've often said you have to go to the Grand Cru Goldert from ZH to find a Muscat equal to Catoir's, but lately the Alsace wine's been flirting with overripeness, while the Catoir never does. Clearly I adore Muscat, but if it has a claim to stake on greatness, this is where. The '17 is clean, brisk, shimmering, salty and gigglesome. Forget the sleek salty substance; just suck on the Thai-basil leaf while you wiggle your toes....

2017 Bürgergarten Muskateller Trocken

+ (+)

12/750ml | GMC-258

Again crop-size allowed a single-vineyard wine to be made from the oldest vines, and from "such beautiful grapes," Martin said, "Just like a picture book." The wine has a distance to unfurl. The finish is you swooning while its vampire bite draws blood. Boulders of vinosity, intense and serious. And, Muscat!

2017 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner Auslese

+ +

12/750ml | GMC-263

Rieslaner is a crossing bred in Franken, presumably to create a grape which would give Silvaner expression in Franken soils and bring Riesling acidity and frost-resistance along. It does seem to make the best Franken wines and good to stunning wine anywhere else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Hans-Günter Schwarz loved it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives more acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. It can produce the most singular great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would never himself do such a thing... If you crossed Petit Manseng and Muscat—and peppermint—you'd sort of approximate Rieslaner. Or, not really. For a wine that's never inscrutable I find Rieslaner fiendishly hard to describe. Riesling on Viagra maybe? This one's a molten salt-bomb, a fierce concentration of Rieslaner's rock-and-smoke cauldron-of-vinosity riff. Not so much "intense" as *stupefying*.



2016 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner BA

+ +

12/375ml | GMC-265H

First offering. The remarkable trio of 2016 Rieslaners got the attention (finally) of the *Panjandra* in the domestic wine press, who bestowed the lofty “scores” such wines deserve.

The issue with dessert wines, and the reason I have come to feel not just indifferent but sometimes annoyed by them, is that they're often volatile and syrupy. So when I tasted this wine, and the one below it, I was immediately struck with their clarity, form and outline. You can *drink* this! The aroma is all fresh-baked pumpernickel and irises; it's a ridiculously beautiful and amazingly sleek wine, intense but clearly focused and made to be drunk. It has rhyme and meter. Martin wants it to be “lively,” and, astonishingly, it is.

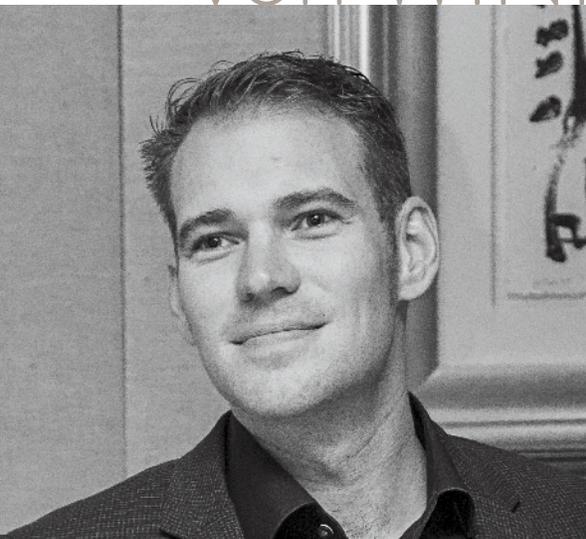
2016 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner TBA,

+ + (+)

12/375ml | GMC-266H

This maintains the thread of clarity and organization. As savory as sandalwood and Vermont maple syrup, and you are in another universe from the high-acid goo with which these wines often blanket you. You don't need a demi-tasse spoon. You can *grok* the wine, and if you're lucky and patient you can wait 25-30 years, and then kiss the gods on the lips.

von WINNING



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Deidesheim

VINEYARD AREA

40 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

23,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Deidesheim Mäushöhle,
Paradiesgarten**

(loess, loam, red sandstone)

Ruppertsberg Reiterpfad

(sandy loam, red sandstone, marl-lime)

Deidesheim Grainhübel,

Langenmorgen und Kieselberg

(loam, red sandstone, limestone)

Forst Ungeheuer

(loess, loam, sandstone, basalt)

Deidesheim Kalkofen

(limestone, marl, loam)

Forst Kirchenstück

(sandy loam, red sandstone, basalt)

Pechstein

(black volcanic basalt with sandy loam)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc

Weisserburgunder, Chardonnay

Grauerburgunder, Pinot Noir

Muskateller, Scheurebe

Gewürztraminer

We were eating dinner at “LA Jordan,” the Michelin 1-star in the Ketschauer Hof in Deidesheim, down the street from the winery. The place is everything you hope a 1-star would ever be; not fussy (the staff are in jeans), full of panache and creativity, fun food, the kind that makes you swear pleurably (“Damn, this shit’s good!”) and moreover, they have a yummy wine list, from which we ordered a horizontal of Pechstein Riesling, same vintage, from Bassermann, Buhl, one of the Spindlers (in Forst), and Andreas Hutwohl ran off and returned with a Pechstein from Von Winning, and our lineup was complete.

It was something like having Les Clos Chablis from four or five of its makers, and coming to the Raveneau, and finding it not exactly “better,” but ineluctably *different*. Scanning among these wonderful Rieslings, most of them offered what I’d call a delicious explication of Pechstein, spoken in clear diction and grammatically proper sentences. But when the Von Winning was tasted, it was another thing entirely. It was more like Pechstein in the form of music or of poetry; it was indirect, allusive; the terroir was *all there* but it presented through a lovely veil of cellar-sweetness, breathy cask and fresh lees, peeling like big bells, offering a shimmer by which the divine is addressed.

Was this the aim of Stefan Attmann back in 2008 when he was tasked with creating a *great* winery from what was the honorable but unexceptional old “Dr. Deinhard” estate? Stefan, never at a loss for affect (and rarely for words) would probably agree: he set about to make no-

effort-spared world-class wines, with the great White Burgundies as his paradigm, and where he has ended up is probably not quite where he imagined himself and his wines living. Some of the wines are grand, certainly, but as a whole I find them wines of atmosphere, visible and intangible the way *light* is visible and intangible. And for me it is Raveneau, not Coche-Dury, who is the spirit-animal for these Rieslings.

There are a lot of wines and it doesn’t do to power through them, so we take the better part of a day, doing the non-Rieslings in the morning and the Rieslings in the afternoon. The 2017 Rieslings put us all in a curiously pensive state. We had time to let them exhale; we had time to let *ourselves* breathe. And we saw again the old, old truth, that “tasting” is a contest but “drinking” is a companionship. Even if we weren’t quite drinking (though no one had to drive afterwards, and I myself took the occasional furtive sip, if by “occasional” you mean “20 or 30 times.”)

I do, though, have a point to raise—not a bone to pick but more like a gentle remonstrance, over something I find myself questioning. You will notice we are not offering the 2017 “GG” Rieslings herein—though I’ll share my impressions of the cask samples. They will be available in early 2019, and the reason for that, ostensibly, is that the wines “need time” and shouldn’t be hastened into the market prematurely. I’ve gnawed at this issue in Austria also, and there’s something about it that I can’t completely take on faith. Is it, really and truly, that the wines need “time” or is it that they need *aura*? The

aura of Great-And-Solemn-Wine-For-Which-We-All-Must-Wait? For I cannot accept, *a priori*, that such wines will always benefit from being held back from the market another 6-7 months. I'm sure that some of them will, and I'm equally sure that others won't, or that it won't matter either way. I'd agree with a policy to decide wine-by-wine, which can be offered now and which must be offered later; I do not insist on early release. I do, though, sound a note of caution: What seems like a due and proper gesture to-

ward these "important" wines is dangerously close to being an act of symbolism based more on "marketing" concerns than on vinous ones.

I also have to ask, has anyone challenged the notion that wines are "superior" to the degree they are difficult to taste young? Because I'm not sure it holds up, and it certainly is not a capital-T Truth. Nor does it prove anything about the wine's ability to age, or for how many years. I rather think there's something puritanical about it, as if the syllogism is "If

it tastes too good too soon, it won't age." This sounds to me like insisting that a really *good-looking* person can't possibly be intelligent. To reverse the statement, a wine that tastes unpleasant early is a wine that will go the distance, such is its solemn and noble intent. Oh really? *What* distance, I wonder?

Yet all concerns are allayed and all sins forgiven as soon as the first Sauvignon Blanc hits the palate in all its writhing spasms. Who knew I would ever say that?

EVERYTHING BUT RIESLINGS

2015 Pinot Noir "II"

12/750ml | GDD-133

Was there ever a PN vintage with more sheer glossy fruit? This wine sure demonstrated it, along with the length of a fine year; ample but "cool," a classical Old World PN, with a lingering finish, a bit dusty, a lot of *griotte*.

2014 Pinot Noir "I"

12/750ml | GDD-141

Sweeter now, yet even so it's more slender than "II" with riper tannin; I tasted it cellar-cold and it might be more lush as it warms. These internal quality designations are made cask by cask; this one isn't that-much-riper or older-vines; it's just thought to be better!

(+)

2014 Pinot Noir "Violette"

6/750ml | GDD-175

The best PN cask(s) in the cellar, and in this case it's from a cadaster site called *Acht Morgen* in the "classified" site *Reiterpfad* in Ruppertsberg. It will become a Pinot Noir "GG" in the next few years. It's not vinified differently than "I" or "II" but the raw material is superior; the wine is more sophisticated and buffed and sweet, quite feminine and dusty (the cognate might be *Bonnes Mares*); it has some of the 2014 rusticity, but this soars above nearly any '14 PN I've yet tasted from Germany.?

Brut Rosé

12/750ml | GDD-142

2013-base, 60-40 PN-CH, deg. late 2017; refined fruit, a bit lighter than last year but has a silky salty vinosity and an evanescent length; impressively pretty; demure but not aloof.

2017 Pinot Noir Rosé

12/750ml | GDD-162

You know, I have *kick-ass* Rosé in this portfolio. Because I don't seek it out, and only take the ones that strike me with character and originality. And this one's impressive, fine and generous, slimmer and yet more penetrating and particular than last year's. It's along *Künstler* lines, more vinous than "pretty," splitting the difference between finesse and generosity; long finale to a fine sophisticated pink.

+

2016 Pinot Blanc "II"

12/750ml | GDD-176

Can't resist this; such pretty fruit, such a beauty of fragrance, so lyric and graceful, feinting toward Burgundy but ultimately coming back home, to straw and hay and crayfish yet with a toasted-lees sweetness. But it's the clarity and loveliness that affect me most.

+

2016 Sauvignon Blanc “II”

12/750ml | GDD-144

2017 Sauvignon Blanc “II”

12/750ml | GDD-177

We'll sell '16 until it's gone and then haul ass to '17—the '16 is wonderful, by the way, streamlined and exotic, while the '17 is bigger and riper, closer to the nature and richness of the next-one-up (“I”), smoky, sexy, a wine with sass and wiggle.

2017 Sauvignon Blanc “I”

12/750ml | GDD-178

I've taken to drinking these wines with lamb, when I don't feel like Blaufränkisch or when it's hot outside. In general I don't know how I did without Von Winning Sauv Blanc for all those years. It seems indispensable now. This '17 is somewhat like the 2012, a cauldron in which twelve viziers are compiling an aphrodisiac that also restores lost hair, and makes you see Elvis.

2016 Sauvignon Blanc “500”

6/750ml | GDD-179

Named for the 500L cask it's raised in, and the '16 vintage mitigates the tendency for this wine to warp toward voodoo; indeed it shows the intensity of this cuvée paired with the shapeliness and articulation of 2016, and may be the *finest* SB they have made. If you loved the 2013 “I” (as I did and still do) this is its rightful descendent.

RIESLINGS WE CAN SELL YOU NOW

Riesling Extra Brut

12/750ml | GDD-083

2015 base, and too freshly disgorged to write an accurate note. I'm offering it on trust and track record. *note* this was called “Dr. Deinhard” for the last few releases, but later this year it will be labeled as “von Winning.” The fruit is all Estate grown as always. Nothin' changes but the name!

Estate Riesling

12/750ml | GDD-163

It's a corn bisque in the form of wine. The 9 g.l of RS does nothing but good—too good, actually, but '17 does like handing out upgrades especially in the Pfalz; it has some of the peachiness of Reiterpfad and the greeny twang of Paradiesgarten; rich, grainy and lush, and honestly kind of absurdly too good. Just don't hate on me when the 2018 returns us to earth-orbit.

2017 Paradiesgarten Erste Lage Trocken

12/750ml | GDD-164

The vintage seems to underscore the green citric-herbal edge of the site; focused and almost peppery, cilantro, cress and wood-ruff, and with the thick vinosity of '17.

2017 Reiterpfad Erste Lage Trocken

12/750ml | GDD-165

Again the ludicrous upgrade of '17—this would be a “GG” in any other vintage—tortillas, guava and lemon rind; spicy, firm, a demi-glace of ginger and Tasmanian pepper (especially floral); tastes drier than it smells. Huge finish.

2017 Riesling “Winnings”

12/750ml | GDD-173

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

2013 Forster Pechstein Riesling Auslese

12/750ml | GDD-174

+ +

If you’d like to see Pechstein in an other-than-dry idiom, this slender lovely Auslese is the perfect way. Let’s look at the *other* face of Pechstein; lilac and lilac and lilac, and white hyacinth and the sapid grace of 2013, like a chlorophyll so liquid you can squeeze it from the leaf; curvy and sleek and rich and vinous, not a dessert-wine. Ravishing wintergreen finish. I (too) well know the Auslese-malaise, but it is *wine* after all, and it’s sensorially beautiful, and you really shouldn’t miss it.

RIESLINGS I CAN ONLY SELL YOU IN 2019

(but you can reserve them now!)

It was as stirring a group of white wines as I’ve ever tasted at one sitting. Next to impossible to “select” among them, though I try to. Do you want an offering of eight “GGs”? I like to cull it to five, when I can, but in this instance I wonder whether that’s possible. And since I can’t actually offer them now, I think we’ll see what y’all reserve and maybe we *will* offer them all.

So without further delay—the 2017 Riesling “GGs” of von Winning:

Grainhübel (Deidesheim) is insane! A great vintage. **(++)**

Langenmorgen (Deidesheim) is breathtaking, full of grip and this kind of salty rye-crust on a blistering pizza; no fruit or flower but *everything else*, every herb and every leaf and a precise peppery power. **(++ or more)**

Kieselberg (Deidesheim) is impressive, gingery, pointed. **(+)**

Kalkofen (Deidesheim) is typically “sweet” and capacious but with brothy silky length, less intricate but more *tissue*, more flesh to grab. **(+ or more)**

Ungeheuer (Forst) is beautifully untamed, like a big man whose belly is all muscle. **(+)**

Jesuitengarten (Forst) is rarely offered because there’s so little of it; as always it is elegant and juicy, dispersed power, aristocratic, finesse. **(+ or more)**

Pechstein (Forst) is the most beloved perhaps of all Pfalz vineyards, and ’17 is...well...stonier and spicier than 2016s masterpiece; more zing, with a voice that could shatter a glass. **(++)**

Kirchenstück (Forst) After being overtaken by Pechstein in 2016, this supernal vineyard reasserts itself, and creates a sublime dry Riesling that stands with the greatest I’ve ever encountered. Sublime, the only word that suffices. Seizes you gently but doesn’t let go. Visits every cell in your mouth and leaves you coated with flowers and stones. Great wines take you into the ground, but you don’t have subterranean eyes, and so you are blind and blissful and still and surrounded, and all the world below is present for you. **(+++)**

EUGEN MÜLLER



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Forst

VINEYARD AREA

17 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

14,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Forster Kirchenstück

(limestone, sandy loam, basalt)

Forster Jesuitengarten

(sandstone, sandy loam, basalt)

Forster Ungeheuer

(sandstone, gravel, basalt)

Forster Pechstein

(basalt)

Forster Freundstück

(sandstone, gravel, limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling

10% Grauburgunder
and Weissburgunder

10% red varieties
(mostly Spätburgunder)

The offering is larger—a lot larger—this year because it is his best vintage to date, and in special circumstances I violate my intention to be tidy. There's no being tidy here, not when the 2017s are bellowing out of the glass.

But why? Why is this vintage so curiously aligned with this grower's idioms? It has to do with two things, I think: one, the burliness of '17 emphasizes the already robust nature of Pfalz Riesling, especially dry Pfalz Riesling, and two, the vintage's high extracts buffer such acidity as is there, and dry Riesling does best when acids aren't too spiky. Whatever the cause, I have two witnesses who will swear oaths that I tried to be "selective" but in the end *what could I leave on the table?*

Another world here than up the road at von Winning. Müller is an old-school German estate selling mostly to a base of private customers, and to local taverns and restaurants. They aren't "trendy." But the current proprietor Stefan Müller's father, Kurt, was also cellar master at a venerable Forst estate, long out of business (but whose wines I sold in my early

days) called Wilhelm Spindler, and when the old gentleman died his widow leased the best vineyards to Kurt as a reward for his service and loyalty. It helps to have truly exceptional land. And when you find a grower like this, you can score terroir-saturated wines of impeccable aristocracy, yet the prices are most gentle and the folks are super down to earth. Thus Müller was able to offer every great Forst Cru—Freundstück, Ungeheuer, Jesuitengarten, Pechstein, Kirchenstück. And still is. So we walk in the door at an unfussy domaine with unfussy prices and are greeted with an array of Crus that boggles the mind—and at prices that boggle the mind. To me this is more important than what the VDP calls "price-politics," which is a fancy term for Charge whatever you can get—it's how you communicate how important the vineyards are—but by no means less than—X. Müller, not a VDP member, probably never to be a VDP member, charges what he needs in order to support a family and has no need for "symbolism," and because of that he's a hero of mine and a boon to you.

THE REMARKABLE SEQUENCE OF DRY RIESLINGS

2017 Forster Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GEM-177

Either/both young vines or early-picked grapes from the “GG” sites, it’s salty, mineral and firm in ‘17; pungent but smartly contained in a tidy rock-dusty frame; finish is chiseled and stony, a little fennel-frond; reminds me of Brand or Rosacker, but then I’m a weirdo who still loves Alsace Riesling.

2017 Forster Ungeheuer Ziegler Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GEM-178

The cadastral named parcel denotes an unusually stony segment of the (large) vineyard Unheheuer—and remember, it’s OONGA-HOYER! —the wine starts as a big belly-rich umami-driven Pfalz “GG”, until the smashingly mineral final act, which lingers into the deliberate finish which in turns seems to exhale rock-dust and cardamom and even a note of spicy paprika.

2017 Forster Pechstein Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GEM-179

This shows a small impact from the 600-liter 6th-use cask. It’s a super Pechstein, salty and wild.

2017 Forster Jesuitengarten Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GEM-180

This is DA BOMB, hugely juicy and concentrated yet still elegant and gracious. It’s curiously reminiscent of White Burgundy. How is a wine so strong and solid and creamy, all at once?

2017 Forster Kirchenstück Cyriakus Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GEM-181

It seems a little strict at first but quickly yields a blast of salty juiciness containing an almost intimidating intricacy. It’s more than a mind can wrestle, and when you yield to it you sense a dark sad peal of beauty, leading into an echo-y probing finish that doesn’t so much tell a story as speak a poem, in a warm faltering whisper.

2017 Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

12/750ml | GEM-182 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Essentially dry, and only the more overtly floral notes (wisteria and lilacs) are different from the drier wine. The stoniness of Pechstein still points and laughs.

2017 Riesling “Vom Basalt” Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GEM-183

Basalt is the soil of the Pechstein, where this wine comes from. It isn't called “Pechstein” because Müller's private clientele know the (Grosslage) name “Mariengarten,” and I don't want to bother the guy with a custom label—more work, another A.P. number he'd have to get, who needs it? Also, this is a super-aromatic lot fermented with a less vigorous yeast that guarantees an incomplete result, i.e., residual sugar. This is gentler than to intervene to stop a fermentation by chilling, filtering or sulfuring. But if you quake with righteous dread at the very thought of cultured yeast... well, um yes: thinking is hard. So—as you see I have three wines from Pechstein to show you: dry, not-quite-dry, and sweet. And they came to mind when somebody said that true minerality could not be expressed in a sweet wine. Which only goes to show that even smart people can have dumb ideas. This guy has his own sense of what “mineral” flavors are, and he finds them obscured by what he registers as a fructose blanket. Whereas I don't—yet where does that get us? His data-base is different from mine. I take it in good faith that he's reporting his empirical reality, just as I'm reporting mine, and so it's possible we don't mean the same thing by “minerality.”

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

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

To the matter at hand, this '17 Kabinett is so pretty and polished, perhaps the best vintage ever (“perhaps” only because I've said this before); flowers, stones, *brine*, like the residue, the indirect flavor of something you marinated.

2017 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GEM-184

Another once-in-twenty-years vintage of this; concentrated umami and a bone-broth saltiness render a rare beauty. It's a type of Pfalz wine that wears heavy boots but's still light on its feet.

2017 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese

+ + (+)

12/500ml | GEM-185H

If I have a legacy-wine in this offering, this is it; I've never failed to offer it and it's never failed to be at least wonderful, and at best—such as now—profound. It joins the great vintages, 91, 93, 02, 08, and it may be better than all of them; it's on the dry side, the word “magnificent” isn't too grandiose; the wine defines complexity; salt, spices (cloves, nutmeg, cardamom) mint, dried flowers, some lovely wistful potpourri of fragrant reverie. Kirchenstück is a tender noble dream of mystery in 2017, and the more it's explained, the more obscure it becomes.

Put it this way: If you don't love Pechstein you don't have a heart, and if you don't love Kirchenstück you don't have a soul.

2017 Gewürztraminer Spätlese “Reiterpfad”

12/750ml | GEM-186

The vineyard has to pretend to be a fantasy-name since it's only registered as a “GG” for Riesling. In any case, it follows its typical thread, more lychee and banana than rose, and classy, solid and typical, but not at all sultry.

HERBERT MEßMER



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Burrweiler

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

26,700 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Burrweiler Schäwer
and Weyhrer Michelsberg**

(slate)

Burrweiler Schloßgarten

(loam, limestone)

Burrweiler Altenforst

(sandstone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

Grauburgunder

Weißburgunder

Gewürztraminer

Muskateller

Spätburgunder

St. Laurent

FARMING PRACTICES

**In conversion to
biodynamic viticulture**

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

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

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

fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and 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."

No one likes a word such as "cerebral" when you want to sell wine. At least until there's a glass in your hand, and you get blasted away by how impressive the contents are. What would you call wines like these, then? Not "sensual," not "hedonistic," not "gushing fruit-bombs leering seductively at you." Cerebral—which doesn't mean "cold" and doesn't mean "bloodless" and doesn't mean "geeky." It means they taste not only like a smart person made them; they taste as though they themselves are smart. They have a surgeon's calm and poise. Or rather, most of them do. Every once in a while there's a wicked rogue who slips off the leash. 2017 is unsurprisingly outstanding here, and even the normally stoic Gregor had to concur; this year is rockin' good. And again, the assortment expands accordingly...

REDS AND PINKS FIRST

2014 Spätburgunder

12/1000ml | GMS-216L

2015 Spätburgunder

12/1000ml | GMS-234L

This will last until some time this summer, after which it shifts to a surprisingly dark and serious 2015. Both are good, with '14 being the better drink for right now and '15 being the inherently better wine.

2015 Spätburgunder *Auf Der Hohl 1er Lage* +

6/750ml | GMS-235 | SOS :? | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is also available in **HALF-BOTTLES** in case you'd like a serious ambitious German Spätburgunder in a small container. The wine shows a huge embrace of sweet fruit; it's a '15 after all (when are they not seductive??) This will impress, it's capacious, easy to love, yet dense and solid for all that.

2016 Spätburgunder Rosé

12/750ml | GMS-222

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

2017 Spätburgunder Rosé *Feinherb*

12/1000ml | GMS-263L

This, simply, is completely delicious!

RIESLINGS, MOSTLY DRY

2017 "Buntsandstein" Riesling *Trocken* +

12/750ml | GMS-237

Gregor makes a 3-part series of soil-derived dry Rieslings (there's also a slate and a fossil-bearing limestone), which I find to be moving targets from year to year, but in 2017 this was clearly the beauty of the bunch, a riotous, hugely aromatic, juicy salty beast, with classic sandstone earthiness. If you know the GC Altenberg (In Bergheim, Alsace) it's similar. Corn bread and candy-cap mushrooms, which I know sounds preciously esoteric, but the guy at the mushroom shop in the Ferry Building in San Francisco sells them and they have a weird kind of maple flavor, especially when dried, that lets you introduce maple to a dish *without* introducing sweetness. Anyway, this is the best such wine I've tasted at Meßmer, and one says that often tasting '17s...

2017 Riesling *Feinherb* +

12/1000ml | GMS-238L | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

Hear this: it's the best Riesling I've ever tasted offered in a Liter bottle. The *best*. It's incomprehensible for it to exist at all. Massive aromas of hyssop, fennel and pea-shoot; fabulous length and grip, unbelievable fruit and perfect balance. This has been blessed with grace and strength.

2017 Michelsberg Riesling *Trocken* + +

6/750ml | GMS-239

WTF is going on here?? This is a regal, gorgeous dry Riesling of the seductive-fruit type; mirabelle and rock-dust, salty but also jumping and spurting with fruit; notice the echo of persimmon in the finish, and the shimmering stony intricacy.

2017 Muschelkalk Riesling Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GMS-240 | SOMMELIER ALERT!

It's a test of ones sobriety—OK, of ours—how quickly we call this....um, the thing it sounds like, as opposed to “fossil-bearing limestone” which it actually is. On my author-bio it says “Technically, an adult.”

But oh, the wine! These 17s! Amazing, the sheer weight of viscosity, not so much “intense” as rich and less “rich” than *loaded*, crammed with everything; fruit, extract, mineral; it even has the Veltliner meadow-flower thing going.

2017 Burrweiler Schärer Riesling Spätlese “Grosser Lage”

+

12/750ml | GMS-241

The only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Anldau in Alsace, which is catnip for rock-heads and which can make you wonder if you're tasting some Mosel-refugee all the way down here in the sultry Pfalz. Gregor agreed to reduce the RS as we agreed the wine was more *terroiré* without the wash of fructose. It recalls the excellent 2007, only riper. Slate! Energy, spice, vitality, dialogue of smoke and rocks and tarragon and ginger; zip and zing but rich and dense; salty, with some mint between wintergreen and spearmint. Sensational!

“OTHER” VARIETIES (YEAH-HUH!)

2017 Muskateller Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GMS-242

As I write it is very gray out my window. Rainy, no leaves yet, my neighbor's house is painted white and gray, and all the cars on the street are black or white or gray, as if it had been assembled that way for me. Even a huge gull floating by is white and gray. But suddenly a lone cardinal perches on the phone-wire leading to the house right below my window, and quickly—color.

And quickly—Muscat! I wonder what it will take to make these wines “happen.” It's wilder and crazier and infinitely more interesting—let alone agreeable and *flawless*—than nearly everything you're creaming your jeans over. This wine is, obviously, spicy and absurdly grapey, but you don't expect the powdery minerality, and the length and charm of the finish will make you smile.

2016 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GMS-227

I only saw this among the samples sent later, and by then the clamor of dinner had begun and so I only wrote “The 16 Gewürz is superb: use it!” Meßmer makes the most polished smart version of this variety, as if it has cut a deal with him to behave and “be polite, for once,” yet without becoming bland or squandering its juju. It's the same statue, you could say, yet carved in crystal.

2017 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Auslese

+ +

12/750ml | GMS-243

I like to hang around the high-priests of Rieslaner, because we have a secret that almost nobody else knows. Good Rieslaner is like having sex when you're *stoned*. It expands the limits of “reality” and increases the parameters of complexity until you notice more things than you can assimilate, let alone describe. It's like you've been lit on fire. Rieslaner isn't usually spiritual; it is para-sensual.

You follow the thread from Hans-Günter Schwarz from his Müller-Catoir days (and he himself discovered the grape in Franken), linking it to the current regime at Catoir, and to Minges (who apprenticed there), Darting (ditto), and Meßmer (whose father was close friends with Schwarz) and now I have four Deacons-o-Rieslaner to share with you, and a variety which, if you only knew it, would change any idea you ever had about what was possible in wine.

Meßmer's '17 Rieslings are so explosive the Rieslaner doesn't detonate as vividly as usual in contrast—at least at first. Actually, it's just coiled, and with a few minutes in the glass it seems to burst, almost impossibly detailed and complex; it's sweet but doesn't feel “sugary.” Just grandiose.

THEO & REGINE MINGES



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Flemlingen

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

15,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Flemlinger Zechpeter
and Burrweiler Schlossgarten**

(loess-loam)

Gleisweiler Hölle

(sandstone, limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

Scheurebe

Muskateller

Gewürztraminer

Grauburgunder

Spätburgunder

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture

Regine was getting ready to have her baby daughter. In fact I was told the due-date was the very day of my visit, and I was ready to talk her out of tasting Scheurebe or Rieslaner for fear they would induce labor. But I was misinformed, and her due date was a couple weeks hence. Theo was there, though, after having been laid up the past two years, and he was full of beans about his energy fields and about some obscure vitality he steers his wines by. But “obscure” is probably unreasonable. For Theo, these things are tangible and even tactile. He has the Buddhist’s affectionate assumption that all life is united, and it’s from that frame of reference that he approaches his vineyards. It’s actually simple: he wants to glean, honor and nurture the vines’ expressive force, and transmit it into his wines.

A magpie approached the window just outside the tasting room. Funny how such a striking illustrious bird can also be so obstreperous, I observed, but Theo didn’t agree. “My mother had a magpie as a pet,” he said, “And the bird was so tame it would fly into her room in the morning while she was still sleeping, and lift her eyelids to wake her so she’d feed it. And when she was out in the vineyards, pruning or binding, the bird would trot alongside her.”

This family, I dare say, is different from mine or yours....

But I don’t want to imply he’s one of the naturalistas, albeit the basic sympa-

thies align. He’s my kind of “natural” wine grower, as we agree about the excesses of flicting some of that community’s wines. “They wanted to go back to the roots, but found themselves in the mud,” he said—wisely. He’s also one of the very few growers in the southern Pfalz who will still make Rieslings with sweetness. They take their place alongside the dry wines, as they should. Lately I’m finding Minges to be the spirit-kin of Nikolaihof, not because the wines are similar—though some are—but because the ways of life are aligned. There’s a kind of respect shown to wine in each house, an assumption that wine is an equally valid being. This isn’t the same as the way one might regard wine as an aesthetic object, how good or how great it tastes. That’s like judging a dog by how many tricks it can do. They are both the classicists and the radicals of the region. They hew to a conservative line in their choice of grapes but they’re entirely singular in their cellar work, which is based on highly extended gross-lees aging.

They are certified organic but it seems we don’t officially recognize the certifier so it doesn’t show on the label. As I wrote earlier, Minges’ 2017s are uniformly excellent but not *markedly* so; they had their normally prevailing beautiful vintage. And there were so many excellent whites that I demurred from offering reds, only to avoid clutter.

2012 Riesling Brut

12/750ml | GTM-175

Deg 11/2017, so 4 years *tirage* which is laudable but unusual for German sekt. It's a stylish tasty Pfalz Riesling; crispy lemon fritters, fruity and fine, but there's also (at least now) a Riesling "edge," it's not too elegant.

2017 Riesling Buntsandstein Trocken

12/750ml | GTM-211

Fine, tangy salty and mineral, long and savory, focused and articulate. A cool style, but it's thawing around the edges.

2016 Riesling Schärer "GG"

6/750ml | GTM-212

This will be a litmus test for your taste. Because this wine is subtle, quiet, even interior; it transmits itself on the end of a knitting needle; it has zero grams of RS, so it doesn't meet you half way—it doesn't meet you at all, if it comes to that. It stands at the end of a silver hallway, having left the door ajar, should anyone care to nudge it open. It lives with silent, silver stones, and it doesn't hold them out for you to see. But if you stand close enough to shake hands, you'll see them. So, if you believe yourself to cherish really dry, cerebral wine, you will find infinite fascination here. Or you'll want more sensuality. I live there, in the sensual place, but have a *pied a terre* in the cerebral.

2016 Riesling Halbtrocken

12/1000ml | GTM-201L

The wine is being discontinued—this is the final vintage—and it's being offered at a special price. I've always believed in the wine and this is a worthy swan-song.

2017 Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GTM-214

Another wine I have never not offered, it is an ideal and true Kabinett, i.e., not too sweet and correctly brisk and light. There's also a curious chalky flavor that recalls Blanc de Blancs Champagne. This '17 is only different from the norm by dint of its rich salty mid-palate. Bravo to them for still *producing* a classic Riesling Kabinett!

2017 Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GTM-215

This really tastes like a '17; richly dense palate underscored by a steely acidity. Father and daughter are affectionately fussing over whether it's mango or passion fruit, but regardless of who prevails in this little skirmish, the wine's not very sweet but it's extract-thick and blasted by that needle-jab of acidity.

2017 Scheurebe Gleisweiler Trocken

12/750ml | GTM-216

Pure laurel-leaf! Otherwise the accustomed sage and salt and even Madagascar pepper, the wild ones. Lovely mid-palate density.

2017 Scheurebe Feinherb

12/750ml | GTM-209 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

It's an essentially perfect wine and a basically perfect vintage of it. Tangelo and fennel but don't worry about that jazz, just drink, smack your lips, repeat.

2017 Rieslaner Spätlese

12/750ml | GTM-217

No surprise, this is bombalicious and extravagantly pulchritudinous. It seems to be swollen with flavor and groaning with bliss; plantain and dried fruits (if you must know), solid and huge but still not sugary.



2017 Rieslaner Auslese

+ +

12/500ml | GTM-218H

Actually picked before the Spät, and it doesn't present as "sweeter," just more ample, more magnificent. Deep into plantains and pears and with a galvanic power and a peppery kind of backbone, standing in for acidity as-such. With air a rich internal sweetness emerges, but it never really reads *sugar*.

KURT DARTING



REGION / SUB REGION

Pfalz / Bad-Dürkheim

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,800 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Spielberg and Herrenberg

(limestone-marl)

Hochbenn

(sandy loam)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

Gewürztraminer

Muskateller

Scheurebe

Pinot Noir

Pinot Meunier

Rieslaner

St. Laurent

Dornfelder

This was the first Pfalz estate I visited, before I knew how great the vintage would be, and so I only knew this was the best *Darting* vintage I'd seen in many years, and perhaps ever. It's a question not of flavor per se, but rather of substance and density. We have gotten used to thinking of Darting's wines as commercial or "effective," but they have always been more than this, and in 2017 they are of another order entirely.

That said, I'll repeat what I wrote last time, which in essence is a defense or a re-imagining of "commercialism" as it pertains to Darting. I don't disavow it. It is just too faint a level of praise for this year's collection, and it's incumbent on anyone who's been buying the wines to buy basically a shit-ton more of them this year, because they are just that fantastic. If you're new to Darting, then in essence they're the noblest side of (dirty word) commercialism, giving helpful affordable wines that don't demand but also don't insult your intelligence. I both like and respect this estate, because of course great estates make great wines, but when do commercial estates make wines as

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

FIZZ, REDS, PINKS

2016 Pinot Meunier

12/750ml | GDR-295

Having heaped all manner of praise on the '17 whites, here I gotta pick a bone. This wine has attracted something of a following—I guess the notion of “German Pinot Meunier” is sufficiently *recherché* to attract the hipsters—and for several years the wine has been irresistibly yummy. I had it myself in the home stash.

But for this wine to “work” it needs to offer a forthright deliciousness, and in my opinion the 2016 stumbles over its excess of alcohol, which is effectively an excess of ripeness. These are light northerly reds, and they have no damn business trotting around 14% abv, and yes of course I'm a fussy budget about alcohol, but you tell me if this wine still works for you. Maybe it will! The fruit is good, the tannin is smooth, the wine is by no means appalling—it just isn't as friendly as it has been, and ought to be.

It's an “issue” with Darting's reds in general these days, and if it stays that way then I'll stop offering them. And yet...

2015 Spätburgunder (Dürkheimer Nonnengarten)

12/750ml | GDR-298

This too has 14% abv, but in the context of 2015 it works better. It doesn't not work; the nature of '15 PN is to gush with glossy fruit and be richly textured and fleshy, and while this wine's robust and chewy, its dark fruit and air-dried beef flavors make it the best among this year's reds here.

2017 Pinot Noir Rosé Trocken

12/750ml | GDR-294

Yes, a “plus” for Darting Rosé, and yes, it's just that fricking good. It's down-the-middle and perfect; rich and spicy, not a terroir rosé but the ideal tasty bottle that empties immediately yet has ample substance. This is where '17 really shows; when has this wine ever had this much sheer material?

2015 Pinot Blanc Brut

12/750ml | GDR-297

After a tiny reduction disappeared, this became a toasty Pinot Blanc bubbly, more crusty and less doughy than the '14 was; utterly delicious, basmati rice and bay scallops. If you have any sort of “bistro” this or that, you need this wine; it will make your customers happy. Happy!

WHITE WINES FROM VARIOUS VARIETIES

2017 Pinot Blanc Kabinett Trocken

12/750ml | GDR-299 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

I kept trying not to love this as much as I did. It's always delicious but in 2017 it is also *serious*; very long, with aromas of skate wing and white corn; fluffy and doughy-sweet on the palate, with a deliberate and attractive finish that's saline enough to be almost Riesling-y.

2017 Riesling Trocken Dürkheimer Fronhof

12/750ml | GDR-291

The best ever vintage for this; just a generous, thrusting mouthful of Riesling, almost chewy, with phenolic-driven structure and length. And yet it remains the friendliest possible dry Riesling.

2016 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken

+

12/750ml | GDR-301

I do adore '16! The wine smells like 2nd-Flush Darjeeling among other non-wine aromas (such as raw pretzel dough); the palate is sleek and focused and the nutty finish is complex and slim.

A 2017 is waiting in the wings; it's smokier and more concentrated, differently good. I'd grab this precious '16 while it's there to be had.

2017 Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

+

12/1000ml | GDR-296L | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

How can this possibly be better? Can we ask for more from a large-format wine? A whole house full of flowers, sweet smoke; a late-palate mintyness with endless grip and verve.

2017 Muskateller Trocken Dürkheimer Hochbenn

12/750ml | GDR-302L

Spice-bomb. Mint and elder-blossom. Precise. The mindless bliss of the mindful drinker.

2017 Riesling Kabinett Dürkheimer Nonnengarten

12/1000ml | GDR-293L

Sultry aromas are 75% of the way to Scheurebe. Amazing richness and command; salty and honestly the concentration is absurd! This may be the single most-improved wine of the last 5 years in this offering.

2017 Scheurebe Spätlese Ungsteiner Honigsäckel

12/750ml | GDR-303

Sage and grapefruit and only a surmise of cassis. Salty, angular, tangy—absolute Scheu!

2017 Gewürztraminer Kabinett

12/750ml | GDR-304

May be the best they've made. A riot of fading roses. There's a strange kind of perfection at work here in 2017.

2016 Rieslaner BA Dürkheimer Nonnengarten

+ +

12/750ml | GDR-305H

This is Helmut Darting's modern masterpiece; jack-fruit, plantain, musk-melon, and a *drinkable* "dessert" wine (10g/l acidity with 150g/l RS, perfect symmetry); like a flan made from meyer lemons and *pêche-de-vignes*; the finish is Eiswein-like, and almost dry.

2015 Huxelrebe TBA

+

12/500ml | GDR-289H

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

RHEINHESSEN

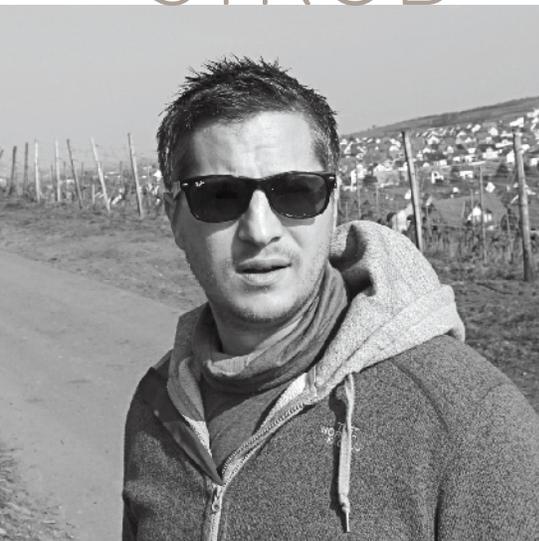
The young growers—most of them anyway—are energetic and idealistic and passionate about producing high-quality wines, and ridding the region of its reputation for mediocrity. To a large extent they've succeeded, thanks in great measure to Messrs. Keller and Wittmann, who've made and justified bold claims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

One wishes for three things. One, that we could somehow superimpose this fraternity of fine vintners over the Rheingau, where under-achieving from great land is still the general rule. Two, that we could wrest the mentality of today's young Rheinhessen grower away from the schizoid and rigid division of his production into wines-too-dry and wines-too-sweet. And three, that we could somehow restore the tarnished reputation of the Rhine-front, i.e., Nierstein and Oppenheim. There's an opinion to the effect that Rheinhessen, with its limestone and clay soils and its mild climate, is somehow predestined to give dry wines, or at least dry Rieslings. My answer is as always empirical and pragmatic: It should give dry Rieslings when they taste good, off-dry Rieslings when they taste good and full on RS-Rieslings when they taste good. If one insists that dry and only dry Rieslings are this region's manifest destiny, one must argue that off-dry and full-on RS-Rieslings never taste good, which is patently ridiculous. One also needs to get

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

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

STRUB



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheinhessen / Nierstein

VINEYARD AREA

15 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

7,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping, Pettenthal and Rosenberg

(red slate)

Niersteiner Paterberg and Brückchen

(limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

85% Riesling

6% Müller-Thurgau

3% Grüner Veltliner

3% Weissburgunder

3% Spätburgunder

So, Walter has retired. I mean *huh*. Is he trying to make me feel old or what?

Plus now I have young Sebastian Strub to deal with, and I gotta figure *his* palate out. What next? Actually, it won't be that hard to figure his palate out, and I got a huge clue a couple weeks ago when, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of meeting Walter, I showed up from Beaune with a stinky hunk of *Ami du Chambertin* plus two bottles of high-ticket Chambertin-ish wine. One was a satellite Grand Cru (2012 Mazoyères) and the other a 2014 Cuvée Alexandrine from the wonderful domain Marc Roy. The '12 was perfect bloody Burgundy, not entirely "polite" and seriously carnal, but Sebastian much preferred Alexandrine's lovely '14. "That wine is clear, with intensity but also a straight line of flavor, and more vitality," he said.

And when I consider his own wines, that judgment makes complete sense. In this way he is his father's son; he likes his wines to be not only polished but buffed to a high sheen of brilliance—when conditions permit. I wonder whether 2017 will go the way the '12s did, toward a full-mouthed richness and analogue depth, and whether he will cherish the two vintages as I myself do.

Nierstein, as you may know, includes

the famous Rhein-front sites under the rubric of Roter Hang (the red hillside) because of an unusual soil structure, red sandstone over a base of slate. The wines are generous, classy and refined, with charming fruit over a firm yet lacy structure. The site Pettenthal most exemplifies this. Hipping is more robust, Oelberg is the yummiest and juiciest one, and Orbel is the most sere and rocky. Lately Walter and Sebastian have been making Feinherb wines here, which I think is perfect. They'll make dry wines when the fruit is sufficiently generous, but the truly sweet wines come from across the valley on limestone vineyards. The estate-Riesling they call Soil to Soul is a mélange of the two. Sebastian's influence is really starting to be tangible, though Walter isn't the kind of father he'd have to struggle against. It comes out in small ways; new wines such as the Rosé and the Silvaner, and in even smaller ways like which man answers my questions. I was also present for Sebastian's 30th birthday and such landmarks leave a kind of wave in their wakes. Strub's 2016s are lovely and fine, but the wine that really spoke to me was a 2012 dry Riesling from Taubennest that I liked but seriously underrated when it was younger.

2017 Grüner Veltliner Trocken

12/750ml | GST-221

I saw this too early, but when the youthful reduction shook loose it revealed a fervently herbal GrüVe, fennel-frond, ice-lettuce, chervil and hyssop and celtuce (this is an actual *thing*: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtuce>) even if spell-check doesn't recognize it. The wine is focused and particular and will probably be improved by bottling.

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GST-222

They didn't used to show me this wine, but when I drank the '16 I was miffed and bemused, if not irked or even chagrined. I demanded (well OK, I begged) to taste the '17, and they relented just to stop me from mewling and sniveling.

The wine is actually from the limestone parts of the Brückchen vineyard (from which we also obtain a "sweet" Kabinett). The aroma is super-pretty and the palate is juicy and satisfying.

2017 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Trocken *Im Taubennest*

+ (+)

12/750ml | GST-230

This is the cadaster name for Oelberg's best parcel (which some say is the best parcel of the entire "Roter Hang") and it stands in for the "GG" in Strub's assortment. The '17 is a master class of mineral—even the '16 was distinguished by greater stony intricacy than by power as-such—but this is minerality in its juiciest and most delicious form; a salty and nubby meringue with nibs of crunch and texture.

2017 Silvaner Feinherb

12/750ml | GST-224 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

The '16 was one of the sleepers of last year's offering; I have it in my cellar and drink it happily and often. The '17 has more body; it's more overt, a little softer, but still a wonderful wine with insane hipster cred—if y'all knew about it. *Intense* chervil, a herbal bacchanal, salty as hell, altogether original and yet not self-referentially "quirky."

2017 Niersteiner Hipping *Thal* Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GST-231

A racy, fine-grained wine from the heart of the red slope; a zingy stretch of terroir-driven fruit (Hipping tends to show a curious amalgam of underripe peach and *salumeria* aromas); indeed this is really zippy for a '17, almost as aerial as a Mosel wine.

2017 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling "Roter Schiefer" Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GST-225

Lavish and savory, with classic Oelberg dark-chocolate notes; the mingy sweetness it actually carries is irrelevant; it's salty and gingery with a big dark shoot-smoke fragrance and umami; dark bread crusts, a serious gravel-voiced Riesling.

2017 Riesling Kabinett "Soil To Soul"

12/750ml | GST-226

This wine has now assumed its adult form, a savory wine with moderate RS, impregnated by red-soil elements. There's nothing in this portfolio that's quite like it; it feels halfway to food itself.

2017 Niersteiner Pettenthal Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GST-227

Strub's small holding can give as little as half a tank, especially in low-yielding vintages. The wine is almost routinely superb, and this '17 is on the dry side, replete with red-slope poise and finesse and savor; a searching intricate aroma; juicy with perfect silky texture and seamless balance; a paradigm for Kabinett from a Grand Cru.



2017 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GST-228

As often is the case, this gingery high-toned wine presents a balance of extremes, a high expression of acidity and sweetness poised over a kind of DMZ of ostensible symmetry, two tensions, poised and quivering. The site is mostly on limestone and clay, in a heat-trap (which gives the ripeness) but with a slow-warming soil (which preserves the acidity).

2017 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GST-229

Old vines in pure limestone on a windy plateau, which means late harvesting with no risk of botrytis, which means a years-long history of shimmeringly brilliant wines with a lemon-grassy tingle. The '17 is lovely and classic; maybe the mid-palate is richer and maybe the taste of tarragon is less overt, but ye who have loved it shall verily continue to love it.

+

GEIL



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheinhessen / Bechtheim

VINEYARD AREA

30 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

20,800 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Bechtheimer Geyersberg

(limestone)

Bechtheimer Rosengarten

(carbonate-rich loess)

GRAPE VARIETIES

35% Riesling

15% Weissburgunder

15% Spätburgunder

4% Rieslaner

4% Scheurebe

27% other

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture,
working towards certification

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

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

Here's some of what this sensible chap has to say about his vineyards and winery: "Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellar master is to preserve the available quality and refine it." "Vines have it good in Bechtheim. They don't have to drill through ten meters of rock for a little water. They deal with three

meters of permeable loess at which point they can drink as well as the citizens of Bechtheim!"

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

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

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

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

2017 Bechtheimer Silvaner Trocken “S”

12/750ml | GGE-122

“S” denotes a special selection of a superior lot. There was a “basic” wine I also liked, but this one makes a point. It’s mouth-filling, generous honorable Silvaner that splits the difference between weedy and pebbly; a long lingering finish; an easy-going chummy kind of dry wine.

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GGE-123

Riper than the ‘16 and actually so generous it impedes your impulse to trade-up; it has a nice wet-cereal loessy-ness—some is from 25-30 year vines with yields of 50hl/ha, it’s the best-ever edition of this wine, with a nuance of banana; radiant and chipper.

2017 Riesling Hasensprung “GG”

6/750ml | GGE-124

A parfait of limestone, with almost blatantly expressive aromas; a little phenolic nip on the palate and a firm sense of chomping through rock-powder. This is a *dry* Riesling.

2017 Riesling Geyersberg “GG”

6/750ml | GGE-125

This often seems to feint toward Austria, and the ‘17 shows an herbal, chervil and boxwood and summer-savory profile; lots of momentum, torque and vigor, and while this is *green* it is a shady kind of green, tea-leafy, rosemary (arnica, even), yet nothing is pungent, everything is cunningly poised, orchid and iron on a see-saw, and all you want to do is gulp and think...

+

2017 Estate Scheurebe Trocken

12/750ml | GGE-126

This K/CKS ASS. Ripe and gnarly and herbal-woodruff-y plus pine-sap and marjoram; angular but not kinky, with a savory herbal wash into an addictively tasty finish.

+

2017 Bechtheimer Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GGE-128

Lively and spicy, a little angular at this stage (seems to want either less or more RS, hard to tell) but its wintergreen-ish and (heirloom) apple-y, but this is a work in progress and I wonder which way it will go.

2017 Scheurebe Kabinett

12/750ml | GGE-127

Plummy, herbal, very nice and rather diffident for Scheu, which is usually so horny—but it was just filtered, so that’s probably why it seems quiet; it’s curiously long and seems to suggest a lewd awakening somewhere down the road.

(+)

2017 Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GGE-129

Also freshly filtered (and sulfured) but quite hale and tasty and open-armed; sweet hay and apples, balsam and ginger, the taste of honesty, basically. Geil without guile.

NAHE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DÖNNHOFF



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Oberhausen

VINEYARD AREA

28 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

17,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle

(grey slate)

Oberhäuser Brücke

(grey slate, loess)

Oberhäuser Leistenberg,

Norheimer Kirschheck

(slate)

Norheimer Dellchen

(porphyry and slate)

Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg

(porphyry)

Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl

(gravelly loam)

Roxheimer Höllenspfad

(red sandstone)

Kreuznacher Kahlenberg

(loam and quartzite)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling

**20% Weissburgunder
and Grauburgunder**

FARMING PRACTICES

Fair'N Green Certified Sustainable

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

Long-time readers and drinkers will perhaps be familiar with what I'm talking about, and with a certain shimmer of spirit that imbues the wines. Younger readers only need to know this: the wines of this miraculous domaine show an incomparable purity allied to unfathomable expressiveness. They are tender but not demure, or another way to say it is, they are forceful but always tender. As a rule, if you have wines of this kind of galvanic intensity, they are textured so as to pierce your palate. But Dönnhoff's wines have a more silken profile; they seem to want to make you sigh, to loosen your shoulders and take a deep breath, to return a caress. They are themselves caressing, but you don't know how this can be, and there's no one you can caress in return. So then, maybe, you look for words to explain this phenomenon, or merely to register and remember it. If you're like me, you won't quite find them. The wines are as close to the nature of music as any wines can be. You can identify the

This is never more dramatic than in our big trade tastings, in which these wines are placed in the awkward context of the whole magilla. It's more than sweet that Cornelius comes over so often, as he hardly needs to do it in order to "sell

more wine." I sense he does it because it's fun, collegial with the other growers, and that it satisfies a kind of professional ethic of standing behind your work even when you don't "have" to. Yet for me, as I approach his table (or more likely sidle up behind it) I'm aware that, in a certain sense, I have to banish the rest of the room. Either that, or I have to just skim the surfaces of these remarkable wines. Because they are different, not better or worse, just different, in the way that poetry is different from prose, or that music is different from speech. And apropos of music, composers (and careful listeners) know that certain key signatures and modes possess a shimmer that others don't have. Dönnhoff's wines are full of such overtones; theirs is a peeling chiming resonance, and its effect—for me at least—has always been to make me quiet, to urge reverie and repose, and none of that is consistent with the big-tasting vibe where a wine has to declare itself to you. These wines, on the contrary, seem to invite you to declare yourself to them, or even lovelier, to listen within yourself to your one true voice. Not so easy in the clamor and the crush.

You'd probably be surprised, after reading all this fol-de-rol, to see how jolly it is when I show up at the winery. Mostly we kibbitz and banter. A few wines pierce the membrane and then I do my best to take a pause. Helmut knows when it happens because I go quiet and often grin like an idiot. Cornelius just thinks I'm nuts. He's a matter of fact guy, and he's probably right. Still, I am somehow tolerated.

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GDH-475

(Volcanic soil). It's classic Dönnhoff, sedate but intense, with a clarity of information that defies understanding, even here at this "basic" level.

2017 Riesling Trocken "Tonschiefer" +

12/750ml | GDH-477

(Slate soil) From the Leistenberg, in effect the inverse of the Kabinett; this has a markedly wonderful fragrance in '17, and a solid smoky-slatey palate; expressive but not giddy, with a curiously sweet-seeming mid-palate, a little physio tease amidst an almost brash minty-dusty envelope.

2017 Kahlenberg Riesling Trocken +

12/750ml | GDH-479

The gentle one among the Trockens, it's from a slightly warmer microclimate in the town of Bad Kreuznach, on gravelly loam, and considered a "great" vineyard from which Cornelius could make a "GG" if he insisted. In any case, here we get *fruit*. In 2017, we get euphoric fruit, seductive fruit, we seem to get the taste of relief, or prevailing, of healing and of calm.

2017 Höllenspfad Riesling Trocken +

12/750ml | GDH-480

A steep vineyard on sandy loam and weathered sandstone; this '17 represents the third vintage where this wine has left its old austerity behind, though it's still the antonym to the sweet-natured Kahlenberg. Salty and smelling like a good *salumeria*, it has flavors of—I know this sounds deranged—beef jerky and pine needles. That's my note and I'm sticking with it.

2017 Krötenpfuhl "GG" Riesling

12/750ml | GDH-481

Offered for the sake of complete-ism, it's the first time Cornelius has made a dry wine from this (excellent) site.

2017 Höllenspfad Im Mühlberg Riesling "GG" +

12/750ml | GDH-482

A cadaster parcel in the Höllenspfad, it's registered as a "GG" and thus it's been made—again for the first time. I found it a sort of *tabula rasa* dry Riesling, without the micro-explication of terroir of the supernal crus. Balanced and juicy and entirely agreeable, and everything needn't be fascinating: Some wines can simply satisfy!

2017 Felsenberg Riesling "GG" + +

6/750ml | GDH-48

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

I could write at great length about the flavor of porphyry-grown Riesling, among wine's greatest miracles. Suffice it to say, these wines taste as though they were made by a vizier with a boiling cauldron and a set of a hundred spice boxes. It's hard to fathom such wines coming from prosaic grapes and dirt, and yet they do. And while any solidly competent grower lucky enough to have Riesling sites on this soil will make fascinating wine, Dönnhoff is like Bach, another order of being. This '17 is precisely what this wine is in its best vintages.

2017 Dellchen Riesling "GG" +

6/750ml | GDH-484

A conglomerate of slate and porphyry, the site entails the little hollows between cliff-sides; it's very steep and terraced and quiet, which may account for the wines' riddlesome nature, wines of pure inference and umami that need several years not just to blossom, but simply to say what they taste like. This is especially true of the dry wines.

The '17 is allusive, as usual. It's like a brilliant man, mumbling. But it was also less developed than the other GGs, and perhaps it will find its voice before we know it.

2017 Hermannshöhle Riesling "GG" + +

6/750ml | GDH-486

What can I say about this Icon anymore? The '17 is a great beauty, with stuffing and detail, seeming to unite the depth and muscle of 2012 with the filigree detail of 2013.

2017 Brücke Riesling (Auction) "GG" +

6/750ml | GDH-487

Surprised to see this, as I'd have thought the short crop would have precluded two wines from this small (1.4ha) vineyard. But the wine is impressive, albeit as inscrutable as Brücke often is. It's strict but juicy, with a Gregorian dignity and mystery. While it's far from forbidding, it carries a certain rectitude.

2017 Estate Riesling + +

12/750ml | GDH-476

A PERFECT VINTAGE OF THE BEST WINE VALUE IN THE ENTIRE DAMN WORLD, any color, any grape, any country, any price-point. This year for the first time it also contains fruit from a new acquisition, a hectare in the (Niederhäuser) *Klamm* (see also Jakob Schneider; the site is a mélange of Rotliegend and weathered porphyry, and has both steep and flat sections.)

2017 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett + +

12/750ml | GDH-488

I'm truly sorry to blather, but lord help me, it's another masterly vintage of this savory dark-doughy wine, effectively *Feinherb*, invariably delicious and even *better* than usual in '17.

2017 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett + (+)

12/750ml | GDH-478

In ancient times, before you were born (shit, before my primeval ass was born), Leistenberg was the top site of Oberhausen. "Brücke" didn't yet exist; the vineyard was part of Niederhäuser Hermannsberg, and Helmut hadn't begun to acquire his necklace of Grand Crus in Niederhausen, Schlossböckelheim and Norheim. Though its exposure is less than perfect (southeast rather than due south), this is favorable in the modern climate era, as it permits longer hang-time, which enables wines like these Kabinetts to be made, and to be outstanding. I sense my old friend Helmut was feeling wistful about Leistenberg, as though it was the child who doesn't get enough attention.

I have long loved the wines. The 2017, as it happens, really embodies the idea of two-vintages, as the fruit from the 2nd flowering creates an acidity that's, let's say, "expressive" yet the mineral detail and dialogue of fruits is also striking. On the dry side, the wine is potentially great according to how it ultimately reconciles its factions.

2017 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese + (+)

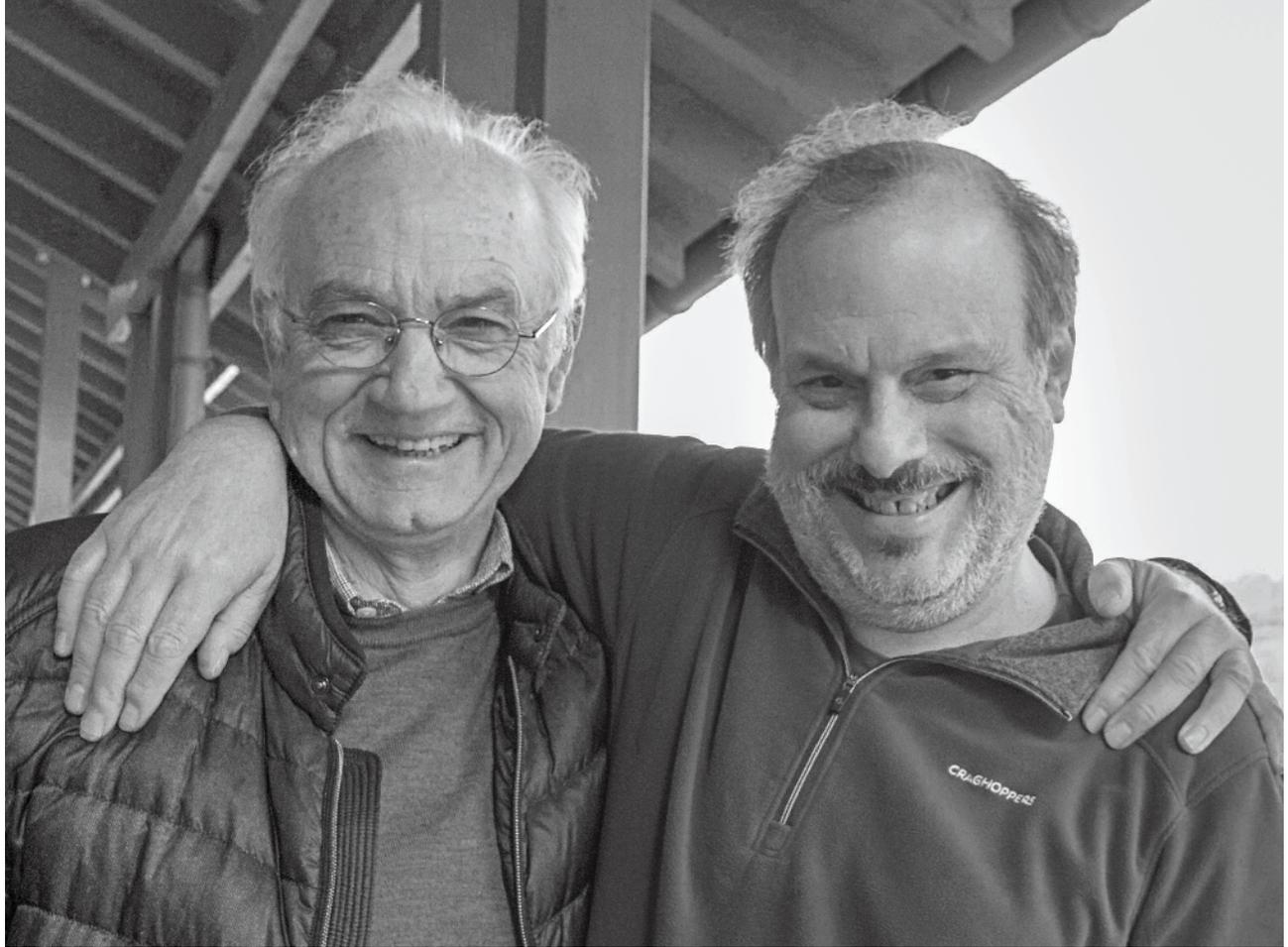
12/750ml | GDH-489

It's one of the high-achieving vintages of Kirschheck, though one watches the acidity a bit warily, a caution that won't register with drinkers who *relish* vivid acidities, who will think I have entered my dotage and gone all soft. Whatever, when I tasted it the first tartrates hadn't fallen out, so the wine may well soften. One is unduly fond of Kirschheck, after all, because it doesn't care about being "serious" and so it is both rapturously pretty and *also* serious.

2017 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese + (+)

12/750ml | GDH-490

Unusually open and available at this early stage, but also with quite the *buzz* of acidity, so that I can't fathom where exactly it goes.



2017 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese

+ + +

12/750ml | GDH-491

Believe me, I know it doesn't matter what I write about this wine. It's an Icon, one of the few truly indispensable German wines, and I've written 25 years worth of tasting notes for it and am still nowhere close to sussing the creature. (There were a few good turns of phrase en route, though, don't you think?)

So, but, in contrast to its fellow '17s, this gave every impression of brilliance and balance, a filigree sleek profile with anise-hyssop notes, embedded muscle of the '17s, and as always a morse-code of distance and mystery.

2017 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese

+ +

12/375ml | GDH-492H

Their Ausleses are *never* baby-BAs but rather *culminated* Spätlesees, as though they were the bursting into flower of the tight little bud. This wine is salty and ever-graceful, and it's still finding its guide-beacon, but the tiny hint of (healthy) botrytis is awfully poignant.

2017 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese

+ + (+)

12/375ml | GDH-494H

The fruit is for all intents and purposes unbelievable. Now let's watch what the acidity does.

FINALLY...

...let me repeat: these are by no means notes of any authority. I am tasting the wines much too early. Granted, I bring 2-3 decades of experience to the task, but all that does is mitigate the likelihood I am utterly wrong. My guess is good, better than the next guy's, as long as you remember that it is a guess. And again, it can't be repeated often enough: **If you're a person who really loves high acidity, you will love the very aspects of these wines by which I myself am rather bemused.** Please understand that.

JAKOB SCHNEIDER



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Niederhausen

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

18,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle

(volcanic soil, gray slate)

Niederhäuser Felsensteyer

(melaphyr)

Niederhäuser Klamm

(porphyry)

Norheimer Dellchen

(grey slate)

Niederhäuser Kertz

(slate and porphyry)

Norheimer Kirschheck

(grey slate and sandstone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

90% Riesling

10% other varieties

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

There are many things for Jakob to be proud of, and he deserves all the praise he's had heaped upon him recently. For me, though, it makes for something of a frenzy because I'm somewhere in the queue clamoring for a few wines that are selling fast to—*ulp*—other people. I mean, right? Who are these “others?”

I myself observed precisely forty years since my first-ever visit to this estate, back when I was a feckless young gee-tar player with a thing for wine. My first-ever portfolio included Schneider, who are one of a *tiny* list of people I've done business with since the beginning. I have also known three generations of the family, four if you count the babies whose coos and giggles ring out through the house. Get me garrulous some night, and I'll tell you some tales about Jakob's grandfather....

I like 2017 here. I never quite surmounted my perplexity over the '16s, which certainly improved a lot after they were bottled, but which ought to have been just his kind of vintage yet were

somehow not, quite. '17 is more hale.

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

2017 Riesling “Melaphyr” Trocken

12/750ml | GJS-154

There are two definitions for Melaphyre (the English spelling): “a porphyritic rock consisting of phenocrysts of feldspar in a dark groundmass; broadly: a porphyritic igneous rock with dark-colored aphanitic groundmass and phenocrysts of various kinds.” Or, a Mesozoic basalt. I myself have been called a “Mesozoic basalt,” though never to my face. It’s one of the several volcanic soils the central Nahe contains, and it usually gives wines scented and flavored of soursop, lemon-balm, violets and ginger. This year there’s more sponti (for “spontangärung,” or wild-yeast fermentation. The Germans like making words up like “sponti”) and also more lees contact. The ‘17 is a markedly juicier and spicier version of the ‘16; it was freshly bottled and so I don’t assume the tart finish is there to stay. Otherwise it’s polished, stern and smoky.

2017 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling “Magnus”

(+)

6/750ml | GJS-157

In effect the “GG.” Please know, also, that Schneider has the oldest vines and the 2nd largest holdings in Hermannshöhle; he is associated with the vineyard as much as is Dönhoff, though the wines are very different. The ‘17 Magnus is a big boy, a mélange of steel and cask; there’s clear stature here in that self-serious “GG” way; the wine’s still a long way from bottling but even now we see a genial authority and a graceful power.

I’d rather have waited to offer it until it was further developed, but no can do. It’s *in-demand* among Jakob’s “other” customers and if I didn’t reserve it now it would be gone by mid-summer. I don’t know whether I reserved too much or not enough.

2017 Spätburgunder Rosé Feinherb

12/750ml | GJS-153

From Höllenpfad and Rosenheck and full of mojo and spice, a little woody, loaded with character; on the dry side of Feinherb and almost chewy, with notes of rhubarb and orange tomatoes. And crucially—*this is NOT a wine with a drink-by date, but instead it’s a wine-y rosé you can drink year-round (especially in warm climates) and it will keep sweetly for 2-3 years.*

2017 Niederhäuser Auf Der Kertz Riesling Feinherb

++

12/750ml | GJS-159

The wine of the vintage at Schneider. But what is it?

The former single-site “Kertz” has been absorbed into the current single-site “Klamm,” though the soils are entirely different and they occupy different sections of the hill. Kertz was very small, it seemed, and for the sake of some inscrutable Teutonic logic it was decided to obliterate Kertz—one of the Nahe’s greatest vineyards.

But wait! There’s a cadaster name called “Auf Der Kertz,” and so that’s what Jakob will use. This is not only a wine that’s labeled for me, it’s also a wine that was made for me; no one else will get it, and I’m buying it all. I’m gonna push it, first because it’s fricking amazing, and second because “all” was a just-slightly-uncomfortable quantity. That aside, I’m becoming the *cham-peen* of Kertz, its grail-keeper, its bff, because no other wine is like it. No other *Nahe* wine is even like it.

I find Kertz to be a miracle of Riesling. It’s like an exceedingly rare and difficult orchid that blooms every nine years but when it does there’s nothing on earth so beautiful. The slate/porphyry mélange isn’t unique in these parts, but there’s a sleek tangy piquancy I don’t find in any of its neighbors. And this ‘17 is Kertz perfection! Curvacious, exotic, slinky, absurdly complex; a vamping and bewitching beauty, aloe and spearmint and hyssop. Nahe with stilettos. Incidentally, also a perfect food-wine.

2017 Riesling Kabinett

+

12/1000ml | GJS-156L

This year it’s (Niederhäuser) Pfaffenstein and Rosenberg plus Norheimer Kirschheck, and it’s a gracious elegant vintage with an edge of balsam-fir and oolong leafiness; a sweet ginger note in a wine that *isn’t* very sweet. We even have some phenolic texture to contend with. When has this wine not over-delivered?

2017 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GJS-160

Classic Klamm, salty and savory, both lush and also with a needle-jab of acidity. The overall impact is an extract-driven lushness. Klamm’s a lot like (Niersteiner) Hipping; peachy and smoky.



2017 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese

(+)

12/750ml | GJS-161

Again racy, limey and vigorous with an intricate flavor “system” of lime, mint, quince and orchids.

2017 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese

+ (+)

12/750ml | GJS-162

Combines the analog richness of the old-vines heart of this great site with the digital focus of the higher sections, it’s savory and crunchy, both warming and bracing. If it unites all these things into a seamless mélange, we’ll have us a Very Important wine.

HEXAMER



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Meddersheim

VINEYARD AREA

18.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

10,800 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg

(red slate with a high content of quartzite)

Schloßböckelheimer In den Felsen

(volcanic, porphyry)

Soberner Marbach

(volcanic, porphyry)

Meddersheimer Altenberg

(slate and quartzite)

Schloßböckelheimer Königfels

(volcanic, porphyry)

Schloßböckelheimer Felsenberg

(volcanic, porphyry)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

Weissburgunder

Grauburgunder

Spätburgunder

Frühburgunder

Sauvignon Blanc

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

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

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

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

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

2017 Grauburgunder “Vom Porphyr” Trocken

12/750ml | GHX-144

3rd-use oak from local forests—1200-liter cask, in which about one-third of the wine was aged—but the headline here is PINOT GRIS ON PORPHYRY; Harald bought the vineyard thinking to plant Riesling, but wondered what sort of wine those P-Gris vines might give on such an unusual soil. What a gesture of terroir this is! It's a fascinating refutation of the theory that terroir is only transmitted (or rendered, or narrated, pick your metaphor) by grape variety—and if you want further examples of the fatuousness of this idea, I direct your schnoz to Steinertal or Achleiten in the Wachau, whose soil-signatures are such as to supersede the variety planted. This wine comes from the site In Den Felsen (Among-The-Cliffs) and has all the smoky Chinese 5-spice mojo of porphyry. You have never tasted a Pinot Gris like it, and you really shouldn't be without it. The '17 is yet another remarkable bottling, dry, woody, a ton of volcanic twang; it's a kind of dream Pinot Gris, robust flavor encased within a curiously sleek form. Serve it at cellar temp if you can.

2017 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Trocken “#1”

12/750ml | GHX-145

Harald's top dry Riesling of the vintage, it hails from a cadaster parcel called *Eisendell* (iron corner), and **it may be labeled that way**—this was being decided at the time we went to press—in any case the wine is a full-throated chorus of mirabelle, solid and with embedded salts and mineral; generous and graceful and focused, and the analytically high acidity is friendly on the palate.

2017 Spätburgunder Weissherbst Halbtrocken

12/750ml | GHX-146

A true white PN, not a rosé, it smells and tastes as much like a cocktail as a wine; ripe, smoky, with a “sense” of alcohol; the fruit is discreet, but there's a zing of mint, and I suspect bottling will focus it. As a general rule the hefty muscle of '17 didn't play to Hexamer's strengths, and even his best wines are atypical.

2017 Riesling Feinherb “Porphyr”

12/750ml | GHX-147

This usually marvelous wine had just been filtered and was concussed by it. I couldn't take a note, but it's one of my most reliable favorite wines, and so...

2016 Riesling “Quartzit”

12/750ml | GHX-135

2017 Riesling “Quartzit”

12/750ml | GHX-148

From a sub-section of Rheingrafenberg where the soil changes to quartzite, this is our calling-card wine, and the '16 is sensational. Sweated fennel and tarragon engage with the usual spicy apples; the balance is so seamless it subsumes whatever sweetness actually may be present; the finish is taut, herbal and dry, and so long your palate has to serve it with eviction papers to make room for the next wine. The '17 will ship when the '16 has sold out; it's generous and smoky with classic yellow-roses quartzite aromas, and in '17 it's so rich it could be a Berg Roseneck.

2017 Meddesheimer Altenberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GHX-148

The vinosity is expressive but dispersed; everything about the wine is (currently) implied—mirabelle, mineral, smoke and mint. Albeit we tasted it at room-temp. Again, wines like these are often aided by bottling, which can give them form and momentum of flavor.

2016 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GHX-137

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

2017 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GHX-150

102° Oechsle with a “little bit” of botrytis which shows on the palate alongside quince and mirabelle, and it has a spearminty finale.

2016 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Eiswein

12/375ml | GHX-143H

+ +

2016 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Eiswein

12/375ml | GHX-140H

+ + +

A pure joy to still have these to offer! They were picked clean and relatively early—the best conditions for Eiswein. They're Hexamer classics, and very nearly perfect; the Altenberg is fruitier, more of a marmalade, gorgeous but earthbound; it remains sensual and you can see its entirety. The Rheingrafenberg has more of the buzzing steely icicle purity, and while it has the richest fruit it also has an eerie shimmer that's as much mystic as sensual.

OLD WINES

2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GHX-042

2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese *Eisendell*

12/750ml | GHX-039

+

2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese 2-star

12/750ml | GHX-040

+ +

2005 Meddersheimer Altenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GHX-142

+

I hope you know how *fortunate* we are to have access to these MINT-CONDITION back-vintages. Harald only releases them after ten years, and they've been uniformly excellent.

The '06 Kabinett has moderate RS, meaty '06 fruit, and is a just-adult Riesling in a perfect drinking moment. You'll also note the presence of TDN, the aroma you know as “petrol.” (It can be a by-product of ripe vintages, and usually disappears as the wine matures.)

The '06 *Eisendell* was “the first wine I ever made with must-oxidation,” and is a beauty that's almost ready; rich and salty, none too sweet, incense-y and long.

The '06 2-star is utterly wonderful, with ravishingly generous fruit; plum and quince; it's sweeter yet still not sugary, and while the finish is sweet it's also cut with a zip of lime. 2006 at its best.

And the 2005 remains a fantastic beautiful dry Riesling from a supernally great Nahe vintage.

KRUGER-RUMPF



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Münster-Sarmsheim

VINEYARD AREA

29 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

15,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Münsterer Dautenpflänzer

(slate with sandy loam)

Münsterer Pittersberg

(slate)

Münsterer Rheinberg

(weathered quartzite and sandy loam)

Binger Scharlachberg Rheinhessen

(Rotliegend and porphyry)

Bingerbrücker Abtei Ruppertsberg

(slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

Pinot Blanc

Pinot Gris

Pinot Noir

Scheurebe

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

My tasting notebook's all wrinkly on these pages, as Georg spilled wine on it not once but twice. "You really don't want me to be able to read my notes on your wines..." I observed ruefully. I'm just glad the guy doesn't make Syrah or Zinfandel.

It's a large estate with a lot of different wines, and in my earlier less disciplined days I might have gone a wee bit wild. It takes all the iron will I can dredge up from my weak-ass self to restrict the offering to these twelve wines. I leave fine things behind. It helps that Georg, for all he is a clumsy oaf (or loathes my tasting notebook), is refreshingly willing to work with me to "create" useful everyday wines we can sell in quantity. I put "create" in quotes because y'all might be wary of blending, but in fact it improves the world in such cases. What would have been 7 or 8 wines not different enough from one another to justify individual bottlings, becomes one single *delicious* wine that punches way above its weight.

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 slaty 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 Rüdeshheimer 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 Rüdeshheimer 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 Rüdeshheimer 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.

The consensus is that the estate is “improving” year to year. I think this is

true but it also isn’t obvious. It’s a sizeable winery, and has a restaurant attached, and there’s a lot to do, plus Georg is on the move with new plantings and new vineyards and manifold other projects. He’s what we’d call “dynamanic.” What I myself

see in the wines is a process of continual refinement, imparting greater finesse and clarity, but I think it’s old news that Kruger Rumpf is getting better. They’ve gotten (even) better, and the driving force is a push to be excellent.

NON-RIESLINGS

2017 Pinot Noir Rosé

12/750ml | GKF-267

Nicely rich, almost plump; ripe rhubarb; a surprisingly long tertiary finish, as strong and lingering as many Austrian wines. Unusual density and not at all “light” or negligible.

2017 Sauvignon Blanc

12/750ml | GKF-268

These wines always have to surmount my reluctance to contribute to the trendiness of SB in today’s Germany, which is to say I reject them in principle until a wine comes along to shut my ass up. A wine like this. It’s barrel-fermented and long-aged on its fine lees and it’s an excellent SB; bell-pepper sweated on the flame (both the sweet flesh and the charred skin); a smoky, Styrian style (like the volcanic soil wines); ripely grassy, both zippy and lush.

2017 Scheurebe Spätlese

12/750ml | GKF-278

Top-3 mangling’s of the word “Scheurebe:” Shuh-roob. Shooby-rooby. Sha-boomy. I made none of these up. In German the eu sound is always like this: OY. Like boy-toy. Here’s a mnemonic: when you think of the EU, you want to say “Oy!” OK? For shit’s sake, if you can pronounce “Mourvédre” you can pronounce Scheurebe. This is all from the “GG” Dautenpflänzer (whose name can only be used for Riesling, thanks to the wisdom of the VDP trilateral commission poobahs), it has zero botrytis and was picked “extremely” late. It was the last wine we tasted, and my entire note, repeated here verbatim and pure, was “Oh for fuck’s sake!”

+ +

RIESLINGS W/O SWEARING

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GKF-269

This year we settled upon a version that emphasizes fruit, more quartzite than slate, and we took the juiciest and yummiest option, a wine with lots of middle; not digital or theological, just pleasure-giving. I want the buyer of *this* wine (and others like it) to be delighted by it, to feel happy, and if the wine has “complexity” then it’s along for the ride. It isn’t the purpose. The purpose is to say “THANK YOU for drinking our dry Riesling, and yes, that’s all it costs...”

2017 Riesling Trocken Abtei

12/750ml | GKF-270

I introduced my new book to a group of sales and marketing people who work for the publisher, and we thought we’d taste a few wines. But what wines? It wasn’t set up as a “wine seminar;” the wines were supposed to lubricate a meeting to talk about my stunning new book. But I picked the 2016 of this wine to show, however “esoteric” it may have seemed, because A) it was delicious and B) it had a story to tell, and the book is about all those stories, that live in every authentic wine.

In this case it’s the story of an idealistic project for Georg Rumpf, obtaining and working a steep and difficult vineyard directly overlooking the Rhine on a vein of phyllite soil unique to the region, and seldom found anywhere. (The famous Rauenthaler Baiken is most noted for this soil.) The ‘16 blossomed in the bottle (and wowed the tasters at the publisher) but the ‘17 is a step ahead, darker and doughier than the ‘16, with a high-pitched salty shimmer atop the savor of the complicated terroir. Seriously long, it made me want to live twenty more years to taste future vintages and see what this ground really has to tell us.

+

2017 Pittersberg Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GKF-271

(+ +)

2017 Dautenpflänzer Riesling “GG”

6/750ml | GKF-272

+ (+)

No point in noting such embryonic wines except to say the Pittersberg is fluffy, walnutty and mutsu-apple, and the Dautenpflänzer seems more yielding and is as always more exotic.

2017 Estate Riesling

12/750ml | code | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

+

One of this offering's most seamlessly perfect Rieslings, it's curvaceous and cannot possibly be more pure or charming.

2017 Dautenpflänzer “Langenberg” Riesling Feinherb “Grosse Lage”

12/750ml | GKF-274

+ (+)

A warm welcome to the world of the VDP! “Langenberg” is a cadaster parcel in the single-site Dautenpflänzer, and the wine is called “Grosse Lage” because it's a category-A Grand Cru but you can't call it a “GG” because it's Feinherb, and “GG” has to be dry. If this were a play, the script would say “INTRODUCE MARKETING PEOPLE (CHAOS ENSUES)”

But the wine is completely superb, a Nahe wine recalling the great vintages of the 80s to the early 90s (when they were less sweet and less ripe). Most impressive is the piquant, intricate finish that mingles powdery minerality with flowers and spices.

2017 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GKF-276

Well *that's* straightforward. And the wine is racy, yummy, frisky with a splash of freshness; salt and flowers and apples wiggling and yelping. Kabinett! And this wee wisp of flyweight Riesling will outlive every single “GG” made in 2017.

2017 Im Pitterberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GKF-275

+ +

May be the wine of the vintage here. Another forward-into-the-past bottling, a refined and perfect Riesling decidedly on the dry side, gentle and tertiary—what more can you ask? The ultimate question, for which this wonderful intricate seamless Buddhist contended wine is the answer.

2017 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GKF-277

+ +

A quick note about sweetness, which as you know I prefer not to talk about. But I need you to know, in an era where many (too many) Spätlese are clocking in with over 90 g/l (and often over 100) of residual sugar—by which they seek to score high points—this masterpiece shows a moderate 67g/l and is essentially dry as the RS is barely visible.

I wonder if the young '71s tasted like this. There's a rich mid-palate warmth, ludicrous complexity, and yet it's a wine at-peace, not only glowing but osmosing and affirming

SCHLOSSGUT DIEL



REGION / SUB REGION

Nahe / Burg Layen

VINEYARD AREA

25 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

15,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Pittermännchen

(slate)

Goldloch

(gravel)

Burgberg

(quartzite)

Dorsheimer Pittermännchen

(slate)

Dorsheimer Goldloch

(gravel)

Dorsheimer Burgberg

(quartzite)

GRAPE VARIETIES

70% Riesling

25% Pinot Noir,

Pinot Gris and

Pinot Blanc

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

Much chatter has been expended the last few years, that Caroline Diel's wines had changed or were changing, and I approached this maybe-topic last year by saying, one finds changes to the degree one looks hard for them, but any alterations I myself found were so subtle as to be immaterial.

The papers were signed last year, and Caroline Diel is now the official proprietor of the estate. Will this make a difference or will it accelerate a difference already being made? All I can say is, the wines were *slightly* different from years past, and when I looked to vintage-17 as an explanation, it wouldn't suffice. The wines are atypical '17s, and it's still the case that any stylistic shift is so subtle that only a micro-examination might reveal it. But that's what I do, it's why I'm there to taste the wines one at a time in situ, and my own sense was, the wines are more yielding this year, gentler, more lapidary and sedate. If this is true—if—then it would be wonderful, because we can never have too many wines full of depth and intricacy yet still placid in demeanor.

Let's back up and offer a teeny bit of context for anyone who just got here....

Caroline's father Armin was quite the *macher* in the German wine scene, a famous writer and reviewer, head of the Nahe VDP, and something of a raconteur. He was also extremely Connected—you'd not have been surprised to see his wines served at the wedding of the daughter of the CEO of Mercedes-Benz or Deutsche Bank. Thus it was never a simple matter to approach the wines *qua* wines, because

Armin's *personage* cast such a long shadow. This era has ended now, and Armin appears to be blissed out by an elegant and peaceful retirement. Before much longer the majority of the estate's customers will not know its recent history; they'll only know the wines are delicious and stand among the elite of the region, and indeed in all of Germany. And the proprietor is a determined, smart and agreeable woman (who's also a young mom and is married to the affable *Sylvain*) whose wines are now hers, with all that may imply.

They are most saliently the wines of a single sort of writhing hillside, whose soil changes around every bend. All of them are "GGs" and they are, in a downstream direction, **Pittermännchen**, on crumbled slate, giving wines often dead-ringers for Uerzig's *Würgartens*, then **Goldloch**, which gives the most peachy and baroque wines—best when they show their delicate mineral spine and aren't merely "fruity"—and finally **Burgberg**, the smallest holding, huddled into a small curve in the road, ostensibly on quartzite but tasting nothing like other quartzite wines; they are as stern as iron, craggy and tasting as though their flavors were carved into them. In fruity vintages they can be stirringly poignant, as they seem to soften forgivingly.

Finally, this is an estate that does everything well. There are no throwaway wines. As was made dramatically clear by the two sparkling wines with which we commenced the festivities....

2009 Diel Riesling Sekt Brut

+

6/750ml | GSD-209

Deg. 6/2017, so about 7 years *en tirage*, this is priced close to NV Champagne, yet there's a world of Champagne that isn't this good. This is exceptionally beautiful and refined, not unlike certain Cramants; polished, leesy, "drinky" (a Caroline word that *has* to be the best-ever wine descriptor) with a seductive finish. For the "basic" estate bubbly, this is an amazing achievement.

2008 Goldloch Riesling Sekt Brut

+

6/750ml | GSD-210

I'd put this alongside a wine from Agrapart (whose wines I love) without hesitation. Also deg. 6/17, it's cooler and crustier than the basic sekt; white flowers and talc and a slim vein of mineral. Please don't see this as a "cheaper alternative to Champagne" (which it isn't) but instead as an ambitious German sparkling Riesling made by a Champagne-lover who wants to explore how fine Sekt can possibly be when it's showered with love and no expenses are spared.

2015 Pinot Noir "Cuvée Caroline"

+

6/750ml | GSD-211

If any wine is changing course at Diel, it's this one. 2015 seems like the vintage Caroline was born to make; elegant and creamy and caressing, with almost an oolong-tea forest-herb profile, lovely dusty tannin, silky and full, graceful and spicy. Caroline doesn't like blatant oak, hates overripeness ("The Coco-Cola flavor") and prefers a certain delicacy and sophistication. Her stage at Dujac appears not to have been in vain...

2017 Rosé de Diel, Spätburgunder Trocken

+

12/750ml | GSD-208

Prompted my simplest-ever tasting note. *Class class class!*

2017 Burg Layen Riesling Trocken

++

12/750ml | GSD-212

(It's the village-wine, but wow does it punch above its weight...) It was the first wine that felt different to me; delicate, affectionate, almost consoling; a sweetly slatey wine with a sweet disposition; freesia and apple, perfect beauty in a tiny little jewel box; a dancing flickering miracle. Such a wine will make you feel better even if you forgot why you were ever sad.

2017 Riesling "Eierfels" Trocken

12/750ml | GSD-213

Remember there's estate Riesling (not offered this year), two village-riesings (Dorsheim and Burg Layen, between which I will offer my favorite) and this, which is the young vines and other material from the "GGs." It's another small masterpiece of subtlety and complexity; flavors in the chervil, fennel-frond family, salty and leafy and more tangy than fruity.

2017 Riesling Pittermännchen "GG"

++

6/750ml | GSD-214

Caroline was surprised, as I usually find this "GG" to be outgunned by Goldloch and/or Burgberg, but in the muscular context of '17 it was actually my favorite. 2017 is the vintage for slate here, pungently so in this case yet with tactile extract; expressive yet not aggressive, just happy to have all this to say, to be this *particular* wine; tautly silky, with a virtual quarry of rock-dust swimming through it.

2017 Riesling "Von Der Nahe"

12/750ml | GSD-215

A custom-made (for me) estate-level Riesling, only a churl and a knave would object to its homeopathic RS. In '17 it smells like smoky Rotliegend though in fact it's 100% slate; sweet rhubarb, a rippling vibrant everyday wine with plummy delicacy.



2017 Estate Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSD-216

Riotously floral aromas plus lysergically vivid key lime; palate is pulled tight like a shoelace; it's balanced on the tangy side, with a neon brightness and an icy splash of vigor. The acidity was prominent but the wine was filtered the day before, so...

2017 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSD-217

Has the caramel-Comté richness of a Pfalz wine and the delicacy of a Nahe wine and the fecund green aromas of a flower shop. Also just filtered, I'm probably over-cautious about the "present" acidity.

2017 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese

+ (+)

6/750ml | GSD-218

A serious, queenly glowy Goldloch. Not merely a fruit-party, it seems to say. It also has an old-master dignity that again recalled the 1971s to me. A dried apricot richness allied to a stoic gravitas. I don't recall anything like this from here.

2017 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Auslese

+ + (+)

6/750ml | GSD-219

The young '59s *must* have been like this; malty and enveloping, not "powerful" but *strong*, not "sweet" but *completed*, culminated; this is potentially magnificent and entirely compelling even now.

2008 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese

+ +

6/750ml | GSD-220

This is insanely good! From the last..."classic" vintage (I don't think '13 or '14 qualify because each was peculiar in some way) that gave archetypal cool wines; this one is winsome, shady, green and herbal, piquant, lissome and wonderful.

THE RHEINGAU

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

I have four suppliers here now, the most I've had in many years. Perhaps because of these outstanding wines, I've been willing to consider a little rustling I've been hearing in the leaves, a few green shoots that may be poking out of the ground in the Rheingau. I've heard these things before and the region has come up empty, and yet a forsaken hope stirs to be revived. I was among the first to suggest that all was unwell in this benighted region, and I wouldn't mind being early to the news of a renaissance, but I won't read one in if it's not actually there. Young readers won't remember the old days, when all of German Riesling was divided into "Mosel and Hock," with Hock indicating the Rheingau. In those days the Pfalz was an outlier, the Rheinhessen was considered trivial, and no one had heard of the Nahe. And so our lamentations over the demise of a classic region are based on

both great memories and also on a paradigm of Rhine Riesling that was profound and even magnificent, and was consistently justified by splendid wines. Today we have either forgotten the Rheingau or we suppose it to be moribund and unimportant. Yet I have four estates to share, all of them peerless, and all of them keepers of a grail, and when you taste their wines it comes as a kind of shock—Oh yes, this was the Rheingau.

But just what is this "this?" I think what the Rheingau contributes to Riesling is a refreshingly unapologetic sense of seriousness. We so often think of Riesling as something more or less "pretty" or charming or comely and even as we know how interesting it is, we anticipate a basic attractiveness. But classic Rieslings from the Rheingau are dignified, diffident, no-nonsense creatures, and even when they are beautiful—which they often are—they don't care whether you notice; they are serenely unconcerned with the impression they make on you.

We don't really think of Riesling that way. We think of Grand Cru Chablis that way, we think of Savennieres that way, and maybe the best Pouilly-Fumé, but what Riesling other than Clos Ste Hûne is willing to enthrall without recourse to deliciousness? This doesn't mean that Rheingau wines are *unpleasant*—far from it—but it means they are self-contained and sober, and it's good for the world for there to be a region where Riesling is serene, serious and confident, and while you are *invited* to enjoy their society, you aren't encouraged to make big old pals.



SPREITZER



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheingau / Oestrich

VINEYARD AREA

21 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

12,500 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Oestricher Lenchen

(gravel, clay)

Oestricher Doosberg

(gravel, clay, marl, loess, quartz)

Oestricher Rosengarten

(tertiary marl, loess, shell-limestone)

Winkeler Jesuitengarten

(sand, loess, gravel)

Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen

(marl, loam)

Hattenheimer Engelmansberg

(loess, loam)

Hallgartener Hendelberg

(clay, marl, colored-slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

96% Riesling

4% Spätburgunder

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

They continue their steady upward climb, and 2017 is excellent across the board. Because they're in Oestrich, where the wines tend to run fruitier than elsewhere in the Rheingau, you might taste them and wonder WTF I'm talking about that Rheingau wines are so firm and indifferent. I direct your attention to the Winkeler Jesuitengarten wines, both the Feinherb and the Spätlese, and with them you'll see what I mean.

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. Another thing to remember is that some of Spreitzer's best vineyards are on loess, and loess always makes *yummy* wines for which my constant cognate is "wet cereal" but if you never ate cereal you have to take my word for it.

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken +

12/750ml | GSP-128 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This is effing delicious! I know, I know, but it's small wonder you've responded to it with such enthusiasm (and thirst); it's winsome, diligent, juicy and articulate, with a perfect dialogue of Rhine-front juiciness (mostly from Oestrich) and hillside nutty clarity (mostly from Hallgarten); it's wonderful, and please remember—no German dry estate Riesling of this quality existed ten years ago—hell, five!

2017 Oestricher Riesling Trocken "Muschelkalk"

12/750ml | GSP-148

Actually hails from a (classified) vineyard called Doosberg, and in '17 it's as earthy and savory as a Pfalz wine. Don't come here for "mineral" but for dark, warm almost animal aromas; chewy and salty, meaty and crusty.

2017 Hallgartener Hendelberg Riesling Trocken "Alte Reben"

12/750ml | GSP-149

I think it's important we see another dialect from Spreitzer, and this hill-grown wine is salty, nutty, cask-y, with a whisper of piquant RS; ripe but bracing like a McCoun apple and a few drops of walnut extract. Fascinating and tasty.

2017 Wisselbrunnen Riesling "GG" + +

6/750ml | GSP-151

I can't recall when this wine has shown so well out of the gate, but this '17 is clearly a masterpiece; classic straw and buttered nuts fragrances; solid and serious but not obdurate; gorgeous minerality and savory brown-butter recite alternate stanzas of a wonderful poem. This is what Grand Cru should always be about: significant and erogenous.

2017 Doosberg Riesling "Alte Reben" +

12/750ml | GSP-150

This might as well be a "GG," it's every bit their equal. Irises, lilacs, wisteria, an almost Austria-riesling heart-of-spring funkiness, floral but in a wonderfully rude, fecund way; a soft-spoken wine with a compelling voice, and an edgy, moving lyric.

2017 Hattenheimer Engelmansberg Riesling Feinherb +

12/750ml | GSP-152

Loessy soil (with tertiary marl and loess-loam also), this is the classic wet-cereal Riesling; in this case it's almost porridge-y, yet the whole thing feels more *zapped* with energy in '17, more distinctly mineral; corn fritters and Chinese 5-spice, feels drier than the last couple years; refined wintergreen below all that farro-like savor.

2017 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Feinherb "Alte Reben" +

12/750ml | GSP-153

A masterly version of their most *interior* wine, and one of the deepest Rieslings in the Rheingau; earth and violets and grape-hyacinth; the depth and profundity are not noisy, and you won't hear them if you're accustomed to wines that do all the work for you, but the brooding quiet of a wine like this can speak to places inside you for which no GPS will take you.

2017 Riesling "101"

12/750ml | GSP-146

We created this wine as the estate wine, and it was designed to be feinherb, and thus it was made from brisker, higher-acid components. The wine is good—it has reliably been good—and it's been overtaken by the dry estate-Riesling above. Still it makes sense to offer both, because this wine is snappy and hyperactive and as zippy as a tart green apple.

2017 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSP-136

Curiously this was the least developed wine on the table. It has almost freakishly high extract (with no botrytis!) of 28g/l but I can't write a list of flavors and hope to be even close to accurate. Thus; lightness, vigor, probably a dry finish, mid-palate fruit.



2017 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GSP-154

A fine, rich, almost thick version of this always-profound Rheingau classic. If anything it's like the all-time-great 2007; a capacious Spät but not a baby-Auslese. Sweetness bound into powerful but not blatant acidity.

2017 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303"

+

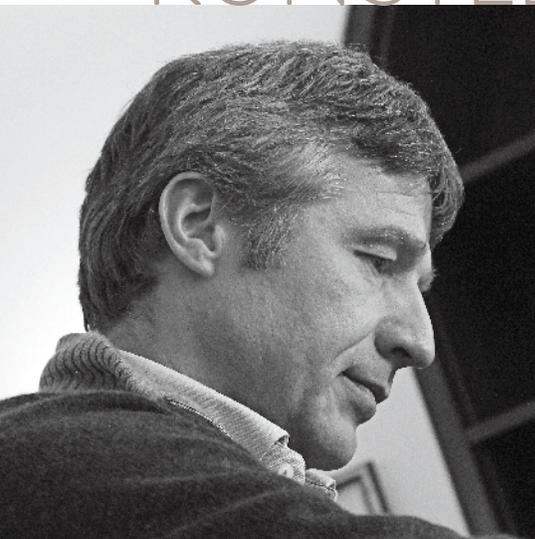
12/750ml | GSP-155

Why "303?" It hails from a cadaster parcel called Eisenberg (iron-hill) from which, in 1921, the highest must-weight yet recorded in the Rheingau was gathered—303° Oechsle.

In some ways this wine has no place in the *Prädikat* system, because it hovers oblique to both Spät (for which it's too concentrated) and Auslese (for which it's too buoyant), so what exactly do you "do" with it? The '17 is exotic, angular and racy, and there looks to be a small jolt of botrytis; licorice and ginger and tarragon, and the sweetness is front and center now but encased in a lemony brightness.

Is it enough to study or appreciate or dream over such a wine? Is it enough for it to be an *objet d'art*? Or must we demand UTILITY? Do we have *time* for a wine that only does one thing, to entice and fascinate and delight you, or does it have to do double-duty washing down your cupcakes or your Roquefort?

KÜNSTLER



REGION / SUB REGION

Rheingau / Hochheim

VINEYARD AREA

42 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

Between 250,000 and 320,000 bottles total

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Hochheimer Domdechaney

(calcareous clay marl with pebbles from the river Main)

Hochheimer Kirchenstück

(heavy limestone with loamy loess)

Hochheimer Hölle

(heavy clay with limestone sediment)

Hochheimer Herrnberg

(limestone debris with layers of sand)

Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland

(Tanus quartzite and loess)

Rüdesheimer Bischofsberg

(loess, loam)

Rüdesheimer Drachenstein

(Tanus quartzite and loess)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling

12% Spätburgunder

8% Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Grüner Veltliner and Silvaner

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

“Ask me who makes the best dry Rieslings in the Rheingau, then my answer has to be Gunter Künstler of the Franz Künstler winery in Hochheim, just as it would have been 20 years ago.”

– Stuart Pigott, from *Best White Wine On Earth, The Riesling Story* (2014)

I love so many things about this estate, not least among them something I didn't know until this year; they've been members of Fair and Green since 2014, and didn't preen about it or hasten to make sure that I knew. Here, check it out: I think it's the most sensible organization of its kind: <http://www.fairandgreen.de/en/english-home-page/>

I also love Gunter himself; he's about the most passionate men I know, who doesn't wear it on his sleeve, and his passion doesn't show as overt emotionality but rather as a power of intellect and determination. He is in all the best ways a serious man. He is intellectually serious, ethically serious, beyond conscientious, and it stands to reason his wines, too, would be serious. Or what we could call “serious,” in shorthand terms. Please do not take this to mean he (or his wines) are solemn or dour. He isn't and they're not. If you taste his “fruitier” wines (Hölle in Hochheim to cite the most dramatic example) you'll wonder WTF I'm talking about. But Gunter's aim is to make wines of the nth-degree of clarity and expressiveness, and he isn't worried about how come-hither they might be.

This aligns neatly with the domestic German taste for powerful dry Rieslings

that give no quarter. Gunter's wines are polished and markedly sophisticated and they appeal to drinkers who like strong Rieslings regardless of how much “fruit or flowers” they might contain. Think of the Kamptal a moment: these are more *Gaisberg* and less *Heiligenstein*. The man has such a steady hand it's all I can do to triage among the availabilities, and confining the offering to twelve wines was nails on a blackboard.

Künstler is now essentially bracketing the Rheingau, with land in Hochheim and Rüdesheim. (Yes I know there's other villages “technically” part of the Rheingau but actually and properly part of the Mittelrhein.) The Rüdesheim thing is fairly new, and gives this vintner a chance to speak a radically different language than that of his native Hochheim. The latter is also “attached” to the Rheingau because the wines kind-of resemble Rheingau wines, plus where else could they put it? The river Main, which defines the wines of Franken, empties into the Rhine at Mainz, and the very last vineyards on its north bank are those of Hochheim. The great site is Domdechaney, followed closely by Kirchenstück—both Grand Crus—followed by Hölle and Stielweg which I think are 1er Crus, though I suspect Gunter would disagree. Soils run to loams, marls and clay, and the microclimate in Hochheim is rather more humid than its environs.

Cellar work is generally in line with the norms among elite producers. Musts settle by gravity and are pressed clear. He ferments with cultured yeast, because it's often still warm when grapes are being

picked (“Which means flies and bees...”) and to work sponti would mean a greater risk of volatile acidity. The cellar orients toward cask as opposed to steel, though each is used. Wood gives the ideal low

tech micro-oxygenation. The overriding goal is to produce wines with “heart and soul,” and here I think is where these new Rudesheimers are especially interesting. Of course it will take several more years

for these vineyards to improve to Gunter’s prevailing standard, but it’s already apparent how much more unruly the Rudesheimers are compared to the rather more *comme il faut* Hochheimers.

2016 Pinot Noir “Tradition”

12/750ml | **GKU-062**

After all my yammering about the Rieslings, I’m gonna show you the whole range of Pinot Noirs, for which Gunter is equally well reputed. This one’s made in 1,000-liter casks; it consists of the “rejects” from the single-sites, and please *please*, drink it from a tulip and not from the homicidal Zalto “Universal.” This creamy and fruity wine is classic Dijon clone and has a bell-pepper note a bit like the 1998 Cotes du Beaunes—indeed this recalls an honorable Beaune from a good grower.

2015 Pinot Noir Assmannshäuser Höllenberg

6/750ml | **GKU-05**

2016 Pinot Noir Assmannshäuser Höllenberg

6/750ml | **GKU-059**

The site is around the corner downstream from Rudesheim, where the Rhine goes into its gorge and becomes the Mittelrhein, except for a few east-bank villages who stubbornly continue to insist they’re “Rheingau” wines. It’s rather steep (20°) and soils vary from loamy quartzite to slate and even to loess downslope near the town. It’s a new acquisition for Gunter, and he’s proud of it.

Rightly so, as it stands in start contrast to his more muscular wines from Hochheim, and gives his PNs a new, tenderer dialect to speak. Both of these take their cue from *fruit*; the ‘15 is supple and feminine with an especially fetching perfume. You can fool people with this Volnay-type Pinot, ambitious, classy and bewitching.

The ‘16 is lighter, but *oh*, that purity! Here you’re best advised to forget all contexts and cognates—this is cool, silky, beautiful red wine with a fruit drawing near to the divine. With the first sip you know, you needed this wine in your life.

2010 Chardonnay Sekt Brut

12/750ml | **GKU-060**

Again I’ve had Champagnes inferior to this; it’s somewhat like the vein that runs through Villedomange and Jouey; a hard meringue crunch of straw and dried apricot; salty and brothy, almost Chablis-like; flavor, like a *court-bouillon* of crayfish shells.

2015 Sekt Rosé Brut Nature

12/750ml | **GKU-061**

From the high slopes of Assmannshausen, all PN, zero dosage; a strawberry note echoes Margaine; the wine is stylish and silky and though it’s fruit-driven it isn’t “fruity.” It’s sophisticated, “drinky” and complete, balanced throughout its considerable length.

2017 Sauvignon Blanc

12/750ml | **GKU-066**

It’s discreet elegant and classy, as were earlier vintages, which is why I stubbornly continue to offer it. The varietal red-pepper is seen through a delicate gauze. And though it’s polite (for this often loutish variety) it’s intriguingly persistent; a smart man’s rendition of a wild man’s grape.

2016 Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken

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

2017 Spätburgunder Rosé Trocken

12/750ml | **GKU-067**

The ‘17 was just bottled the day I showed up, but the ‘16 is out of this world, reaching what seems like its best only now, giving the lie to the fatuous notion that every Rosé must be drunk young. The wine is both fascinating and superb, a little like Diel’s but more rugged. The ‘17 promises to be solid and earthy and maybe less sweet-fruited, but both are aristocrats.

WILL WE EVER GET TO THE RIESLINGS????

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken +

12/750ml | **GKU-062**

What's left to say about this perennial overachiever? Yes it's the highest priced wine in its category, but the *quality* is several levels above that "category." Indeed this is the best conceivable version of such a wine; the '17 is smokier and more gravelly than the '16. This kind of craftsmanship entails more soul than all your oranges and amphorae combined, my friends.

2017 Hochheimer Kirchenstück Riesling Kabinett Trocken + +

12/750ml | **GKU-163**

One of the best two sites in Hochheim—the other being Domdechaneu—this is in fact a "GG," and it's not supposed to be offered as a "Kabinett." Why then is it? The answer is so logical it calls the entire wisdom of the VDP into question. Gunter picks when the grapes are ripe and clean, because if he waits he runs the risk of having overripe and/or botrytis-y material, neither of which he desires. The result of his eminently sensible decision is a wine with alcohol around 12.5% that tastes like the site. Such thinking is anything but radical, yet it runs afoul of the "system" and thus our hero is a calm and reasonable outlaw. The '17 has a magnificent aroma, and it had only just been bottled. A complex chord of root and rock dust and garrigue; implosively but deftly intense; spicy, a bacchanal of terroir! True Riesling lovers: Your toes will curl and your scalps will tingle.

2017 Hochheimer Domdechaneu Riesling Trocken, 1er Lage +

12/750ml | **GKU-064**

Grand Cru aroma and then some. Thrillingly intricate and angular; a polished rendition of a gorgeous chaos of terroir. There's an odd thread between this and Gobelsburg's *GV Renner*, with this Riesling emphasizing the keen point of mint and the *GV* a fuller mid-palate.

2016 Berg Schlossberg Riesling "GG" +

6/750ml | **GKU-056**

And off we go to Rudesheim. This is a courteous, genial and articulate explication of terroir; complicated but good-natured; mineral as etching or needlepoint.

2016 Hölle Riesling "GG" + +

6/750ml | **GKU-065** | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

This Hochheim "GG" seems always to show best in cooler years, when its savory generosity isn't overbearing. Like now! A first impression of cask is quickly overwhelmed by a seductive palate, a savory malty wine, maple and candy-cap mushrooms; mineral embedded in the sweetest doughiest swoon of charm and loveliness.

GOLDATZEL



REGION/SUB REGION

Rheingau/ Johannisberg,
Winkel and Geisenheim

VINEYARD AREA

12 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

Between 60,000-75,000
bottles in total

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Johannisberger Goldatzel

(loam, loess, quartzite)

Johannisberger Vogelsang

(gravel, sandy loam)

Johannisberger Hölle

(loam, quartz and
some iron rich earth)

Winkeler Hasensprung

(deep loess, loam with
chalk, quartz and slate)

Geisenheimer Kläuserweg

(loam, marl, chalky clay)

GRAPE VARIETIES

80% Riesling

15% Pinot Noir

5% other varieties

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

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

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

them kept tasting lovely after days open in the fridge.

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

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

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

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

ambient yeasts. In principle the wines are whole-cluster pressed, which accounts for their polish and transparency. Wines are made and developed in tanks or casks according to their characters. Fermentation temperatures can be controlled but very seldom are. The family has no “formula” regarding lees-contact, preferring to judge it wine by wine. They bottle on the young side, to preserve primary fruit. Ecologically the estate is classic “sustainable,” which means (among other things) that spraying is usually done between 2:00-3:00 *in the morning*, so as to inhibit unwanted dispersal. “We do not use copper, insecticides, botyticides. If Herbicide is used, it is only underneath the vines

and [no more than] once a year; the use is more and more declining.”

As someone who has long lamented the dearth of new talent in the Rheingau, this was a momentous discovery for me. It is all the more heartening to see them respecting and fulfilling the paradigm for these unique Rieslings, and not seeking to “reinvent” the recipe. I can’t wait to taste them with you.

That was written a couple years ago, and now that I have tasted them with you I’ve watched how impressed you became. And for good reason; these wines remind me of what Martin Nigl would make in the Rheingau. And in the three years I’ve tasted full-vintages here, there hasn’t been a

single wine—not one. single. wine.—I didn’t like and wouldn’t have offered. As it is there are 11 wines to show you, a few disparities between these and last year’s collection, done in order to show the widest possible range of styles—hence the Rudesheimer Bischofsberg, for which another wine had to give way. I bring this up because, when *every* wine on the table is good, you know you’re in masterly hands. You almost suspect yourself, because you like everything!

My notes were sketchier because I wanted to note every wine and *then* select among them based on both personal faves and variety of flavors. This I did....

FIRST, THE DRY WINES

2017 Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling Kabinett Trocken +

12/750ml | GDZ-027

Really Nahe-like; every kind of anise, chervil, wisteria, a gorgeously refined aroma. Aloe vera comes into the sleek piercing picture.

2017 Rudesheimer Bischofsberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken +

12/750ml | GDZ-028

Who snuck *this* guy in? It’s entirely different from the rest of the range but entirely typical of the site, with all its smoky charming self on full minty display, addictively “drinky” and tasting like liquefied *charcuterie*.

2017 Johannisberger Goldatzel Riesling Spätlese Trocken “Bestes Fass” +

12/750ml | GDZ-029

This “best cask” among the dry wines is often Goldatzel, but not invariably. This ‘17 is cool and pure and silvery, a moony neon buzz of high-frequency gamma-flavors; cerebral but not aloof nor abstruse; just a stop-and-think sort of wine. Herbs and grasses but not “herbal” or “grassy.” Intensely interesting wine with a teensy nip of phenolics.

2017 Geisenheimer Kläuserweg Riesling “Erstes Gewächs” + +

6/750ml | GDZ-030

This is where I really thought of Nigl, specifically his *Pellingen* Rieslings; what a duo that would be. An iris-like spice, violets and roasted straw; a thick juicy cling of extract and physio-sweetness. The cadaster is *Hohe Rech*, which we suggested ought to appear on future vintages.

THE NOT-COMpletely DRY BUT STILL PRETTY DRY RIESLINGS

2017 “Wie Im Flüge” Riesling

12/750ml | GDZ-031

It means “as time goes by” and is envisioned as a summer-evening quaff while you watch the sun set over the vineyards. Sounds nice. Me, I’d probably drink it with my a/c yammering, watching professional wrestling on TV. The wine was bottle-sick when I visited, but it’ll do its scintillating young dry-enough Riesling thing to perfection.

2017 Johannisberger Goldatzel Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

+ +

12/750ml | GDZ-032 | **SOMMELIER ALERT!**

We are CORE-LISTING this now, which means year-round availability from our convenient New Jersey warehouse! Order now and we’ll throw in, absolutely free of charge, this 100% spurious platinum electric nose-hair trimmer!

The wine in ‘17 is perfect. Digital, quince-like, wintergreen and ginger. Does Riesling give greater sheer *joy*?

2017 Johannisberger Hölle Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

+

12/750ml | GDZ-033

At this estate the designation “Feinherb” denotes a wine decidedly on the *dry* side—usually around 11-14g/l RS, so barely more than Trocken. *Hölle* is as its name suggests, a heat-trap from which strong intense wines issue, and this already-smoky strong ‘17 is *mega*. Muscular and salty, it’s like a warm braise of savory brown-butter richness; flan, pumpkin-sage filled pasta in a perfect *brodo* with a big chunk of Reggiano shredded over it.

2017 Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

+ +

12/750ml | GDZ-034

Mint and pungent herbs but also aloe and pepper, gingery, talc; a stunningly particular Riesling with a salty marjoram-like finish.

2017 Johannisberger Vogelsang Riesling Feinherb “Alte Reben”

+

6/750ml | GDZ-037

I was ready to leave this behind, reluctantly, and I was actually relieved when he asked me to list it. He believes in the wine! I loved it and was sighing to let it go. I found it wonderfully Pfalz-like, in fact. From an 80-90 year old vineyard that avoided *Flurbereinigung* (you can Wiki it if you’re curious).

NOT-VERY-SWEET SWEET RIESLINGS

2017 Johannisberger Hölle Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GDZ-035

A paradigm for Rheingau Kabinett; strong, chiseled, stoic, fruit-sweet but not sugar-sweet.

2017 Winkeler Hasensprung Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GDZ-036

The sweet wines were less ready than the dry wines, and here I was waiting for the palate to catch up with the *amazing* aroma. Which it will of course, but it will always be a more adamant wine than the swan-graceful ‘16.

GEORG BREUER



REGION/SUB REGION

Rheingau/Rüdesheim and Rauenthal

VINEYARD AREA

33 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

Between 150,000 and 175,000 bottles in total

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg

(predominantly slate and quartzite)

Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland

(rich loess, loam with some slate and quartz)

Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck

(Tanus quartz and loess soil)

Rauenthaler Nonnenberg

(Monopole—phyllite soils—slate with white mica and gravel deposits)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

Pinot Noir

Pinot Gris

Theresa Breuer wouldn't be there on either of the possible days I might visit. I was worried it might be because she thought I had a screw loose after what I wrote about the domain last year, so I asked Markus, her affable cellarmaster, whether they had read the text and if it bore any connection to reality as they understood it. Turns out they had, and it did. They were actually pleased with it.

These are different from many other wines, and because of that disparity I wanted to try and describe and explain it. If you come to our big trade tastings you'll have a similar moment to that which you experience at the Nikolaihof table; "these aren't like the others." I don't really need to *depict* it any more; I've gotten to know the wines, and they feel familiar, and the particular way they are is lovely to me. But if you don't know them or only know them superficially, let me go at it again.

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

you in and you can be friends together. I don't have any idea how this is brought about. And I suppose if anyone had any idea, there'd be a lot more wines like these. But there's a corollary element, and that is texture. More saliently, there is a studied, meditative texture; the wine can't be too buffed or brilliant. It needs to have something gentle, needs to convey a tenderness. And tenderness is a curious thing. It takes time. Early in love we may be ravishingly affectionate or exquisitely gentle, but tenderness takes years; it's the sum of all the things we've forgiven and been forgiven for. When I sense it in a wine, it feels beautifully old, bur-nished and glowy. It feels like you slipped through a seam in the hillside and found some eternal stream of kindness, some place where the world always loves you. It's a lot to ask of a wine, so I don't ask. Asking is futile. But when it comes to me, I know how to hear it. And I'd begun to wonder if I was hearing it in these remarkable wines. (Often when I drank them I thought of Alzinger, another family of "loving" wines.)

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

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

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

Yet even while I doubt whether the existential life of these wines can be deconstructed, I do think it's fair to ask whether Theresa could identify if and how her wines are different from those of her peers. Growers can squirm under a question like that, but Theresa approached it head-on, "*I don't want to divert with wine making techniques, I don't want to produce overloaded fruit bombs... I don't want the wines to be everybody's darlings; we try to produce wines with a character and a life line...*" and this answer went part of the way. I asked her a bunch of other questions about basic cellar practices, and her answers were as I hoped—basi-

cally, it depends. That's always the best answer.

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

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

wines to wonder over. Wines of gratitude and contemplation.

To put this in more concrete terms, Breuer's Rieslings are almost always *tertiary*. That is, they present aromas and flavors of things other than grapes, and even their terroir expressions are more inferential than direct. The wines seem to embody atmospheres, whether incense, spices, simmering things, far-away smoke, you don't smell anything that gives an impression of technology. The very fact that the "serious" Rieslings are offered two years after the vintage is a clue; they seek the flavors that come *after*.

Finally, this was the first visit in which the new above-ground tasting space was ready, and I was mindful of the newness of tasting the wines in the daylight. It made their special-ness more clear.

2016 "GB Rouge" Spätburgunder

12/750ml | GGB-022

A wonderfully light, vinous red—which has more to do with 2016 than with any basic intention to make the reds "light." I found it to be, in the best way, *correct*, and in every way tasty. Think along lines of a Côte de Nuits Village from a good grower in a good year; it's marrowy and sociable without being overtly fruity. It's not a wine you preen over, it's a wine you simply like.

2016 "GB Riesling Charm"

12/750ml | GGB-023

There are two estate Rieslings, one called "Sauvage" and this one.

This shows their often-seen sandalwood and soy and cinnamon exhale—what wine nerds call (somewhat repulsively) the "retro-nasal;" it's a special accent of Riesling, not exactly "woody" but certainly exotic. Not freaky—but when did you last drink a Riesling that tastes like star-fruit, cloves and lacquered duck-skin? Take a tiny moment to consider the face of originality! And don't serve this (or any of their wines) too cold.

2016 Riesling Rauenthal

12/750ml | GGB-018

It's the eternal inexplicable phenomenon, how this Gregorian incense-y perfume can emerge from the simple grape grown in simple dirt. It's the way a simple arrangement of notes and chords can equal a melody that rends your heart. This little miracle exists outside any matrix of evaluation. You can't stop wondering: *something tastes like this*.

2016 Riesling "Terra Montosa" +

12/750ml | GGB-024

Here's a wine like Ott's "Der Ott," a miniaturization of the Grand Crus you can approach more easily (and less expensively) if you're willing to cherish flavor more than power or intensity. The wine is solid and juicy, a little meaty (like a guinea hen) and a little mineral (like finely ground sel gris), a little physio-sweet (like a well-reduced stock), and a little phenolic, but that's the solidity talking. The wine is discreet; it gets your attention and speaks its message, and then it retires kindly and you go back to your friends and your evening.



2016 Riesling *Berg Schlossberg*

+

6/750ml | GGB-020

The “GG” equivalent, of course. This ‘16 is near to a perfection of delicacy and slate, spoken with the clearest diction; energetic yet in a kind of alert repose, relaxed but not dozy.

2016 Riesling *Nonnenberg*

+ +

6/750ml | GGB-021

Some sourpuss said this vineyard—held exclusively by Breuer—belonged more to neighboring Martinthal than to the more famous (and better reputed) Rauenthal, but that was jealousy speaking. This 5ha vineyard has a soil not dissimilar to the supernal site *Baiken*, and is currently among the best (and most reliable) wines emerging from this tragically under-exploited commune.

This ‘16 adds a silvery mineral gleam to the usual exotics, and the top notes of ginger and coconut make it even more intricate, more brilliant. Another wine at-peace with all life’s questions, not because it has answers but because the questions are the right ones. They used to call a wine like this “racy,” and I myself use the word “vamping” but this is no cheap seduction.

MITTELRHEIN

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

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

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

WEINGART



REGION / SUB REGION

Mittelrhein / Spay

VINEYARD AREA

4.3 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay

(devonian slate)

Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg

(devonian slate with small amounts of loess)

Bopparder Hamm Engelstein

(loess with variable contents of lime, slate and volcanic ashes)

GRAPE VARIETIES

93% Riesling

5% Spätburgunder

2% Grauburgunder

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

The new winery and house are almost finished—only the tasting room's left to build, so we tasted in a trailer on the work-site. The "compound," when it's done, is recessed from the village and bucolically nestled among the hills and vineyards. I think that Florian's questing spirit will be happy there.

That spirit didn't seem entirely aligned with the basic nature of 2017. This isn't about whether the wines are good, or how good they are. It's about a sense I form that a vintner, in any given vintage, feels he is working either with familiar material or with foreign material. Also, it was Florian's first crush in the new cellar, the very new cellar, and I had an image of him scraping the UPC sticker and price tag off the press right before the grapes were tipped in.

This blessed man wants only to be truthful to his wines, which can create inconveniences for him and me, but which I am happy to support regardless. Here's Florian on the subject of long names: "I re-

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

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

2017 Spay In Der Zech Spätburgunder Weissherbst Kabinett Halbtrocken

6/750ml | GAW-141

The name's so damn long we had to offer it in cases of 6, ha-ha-ha! But look, it's a single-vineyard pink Pinot Noir, unchaptalized, on the light side, with a little RS. Not so hard, right?

There's great big fruit here, along with impressive vinosity and depth; indeed this is serious stuff, not sprightly or zippy but dense and impressive.

2017 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken 1-star

12/750ml | GAW-142

This "GG" type wine struck me as the most impressive of his vintage; stentorian and decisive; a large authoritative fragrance (cured ham, *quetsch*), a capacious, stern palate reminds me of Dönnhoff's *Höllentpfad*, but if it sounds like I'm admiring an austere wine, no I'm not. It's delicious in a way that doesn't intend to ingratiate; it's just durable and harmonious in its own singular way.

2017 Spay In Der Zech Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

12/750ml | GAW-143

Another of Florian's lovely not-sweet not-dry Rieslings; wet cereal and sweet hay; sunny and lush until a slightly clipped finish—a component of '17, it had begun to seem, as one travels north.

2017 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GAW-144

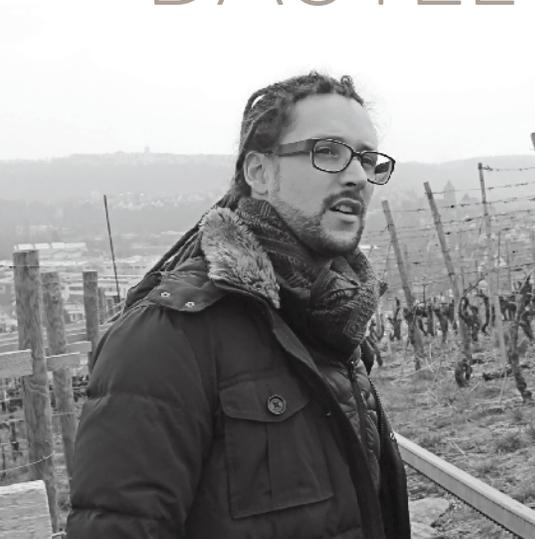
This is really the classic German Riesling Kab in the manner you expect. Racy, fantastic aromas of Mirabelle; the palate is malic and vigorous.

2017 Bopparder Hamm Engelstein Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GAW-145

Botrytis appears as a sprinkling of malt and cardamom; the wine is high-bred and spicy, like mirabelles sautéed in slices in a hot pan so their flesh is caramelized. Leaf-smoke and exotic spice in a "classic" German Spätlese.

DAUTEL



REGION/SUB REGION

Mittelrhein / Württemberg

VINEYARD AREA

20 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

75,000 bottles

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Michaelsberg Grosse Lage

(colored marl)

Steingrüben Grosse Lage Schilfsandstein

("reed sandstone")

Schupen Grosse Lage

(Gipskeuper, weathered limestone)

Forstberg Grosse Lage

(colored marl and stony clay with limestone inclusions)

Sonnenberg Erste Lage

(Schilfsandstein "reed sandstone," Gipskeuper)

Wurmberg Erste Lage

(fossil-bearing limestone)

GRAPE VARIETIES

24% Riesling

18% Spätburgunder

16% Lemberger

12% Weissburgunder Trollinger, Cabernet & Chardonnay

With Württemberg it depends on who you ask, whether the glass is half empty or half full.

The same story is told by both factions: the region is (or was) dominated for many years by huge co-ops who made ordinary wines even from excellent vineyards, and who had little motivation to improve because the local citizens of Württemberg drank a lot of wine and weren't too choosy. The optimists say that this is slowly improving, and that the main impediment to faster progress is an inbuilt modesty among the locals, who aren't sure they "deserve" to have excellent local wine or prefer the image of themselves as unpretentious guzzlers. No elitism here, or so the tale is told.

The region is a more or less ad-hoc agglomeration of several disparate regions, less coherent than the Nahe, Pfalz or Rheingau. It is dominated by the city of Stuttgart—home of Mercedes-Benz and Porsche, apropos of elitism—where one surmises much of the plonk is happily swilled. It is predominantly a red wine region (around 70%) but this doesn't seem to have arisen from any great wisdom that it is predestined for red wine. Indeed the leading grape(s) aren't especially well suited to the surroundings. Lemberger (a.k.a. Blaufränkisch) has staked the highest claim for quality, but even middling competent Burgenland BF is better wine. The other conspicuous grape is Trollinger (a.k.a. Schiava) which makes fruit-happy wine in the South Tyrol and mostly innocuously pleasant wine in Württemberg. There are also a bevy of new crossings from a viticultural institute

in Heilbronn, many based on Cabernet, few if any warranting more than theoretical interest.

And then there's Pinot Noir—about which more later. (I'm building up to the happy news...)

Among white varieties, Riesling somewhat surprisingly leads the way. The pessimist view is that Riesling is poorly understood here, and often planted in unsuitable land. But the optimist sees ample reason for hope. Stephan Reinhardt (who covers Germany for *The Wine Advocate*) writes that "While more than ten years ago most of the [Riesling] wines were too broad, round and soft...they have become much better recently. The finest are dry, pure, lean, mineral and vibrant, and they can compete with the *finest* (my emphasis) dry Rieslings in Germany today."

Soils run to calcareous marl, so-called *Gipskeuper* (deeper clay with a high gypsum content, which we often see in Franken), a rare soil called *Schilfsandstein* which is a hard yellow-ish sandstone often used in building construction. We also see our old pal *Muschelkalk*, which as you well know means "fossil-bearing limestone." The region itself is rather formless, marked most of all by ancient, very steep terraced vineyards, among the most beautiful and forbidding I've ever seen, including the lower Mosel. These tend to occur along the Neckar river and its tributaries, apart from which the region recalls Austria's Weinviertel, a (somewhat more) steeply rolling landscape with isolated hillsides suitable for viticulture. The vineyard tour we received from Christian

Dautel entailed quite a bit of driving to and fro—but man, those terraces! If you think you've seen it all in the wine world, trust me—you haven't.

Dautel's estate and vineyards occur in the Württemberger Unterland, the "main body" of viticulture in the region according to one source.

In the recent past a few serious names started popping up in Württemberg, several of whom have intrepid American importers. There's an avowed interest in wines from "the other Germany" but this seems less a genuine curiosity than a desire to speak an original thought before someone else does. Speaking for myself, I've never supposed the detour to such regions was warranted. I'd need to dedicate a half-day or full day to a detour that probably isn't justified by the amount of wine I'd sell, especially in regions where local consumption drove prices up. And yet, I considered, I was already doing that very thing in detouring to the Mittelrhein to pay tribute to Mr. Weingart, so that precedent was set. And I kept hearing about Dautel from existing suppliers who were sure I'd love the wines and that we'd hit it off personally. (Indeed, it seemed

that everyone knows the man, especially everyone near his own age, and everyone likes him.)

So I did what I do; got a nice cross-section of samples and drank them at home, gradually and attentively, and in general I was pleased. But near the end of the process I tasted two wines that really fired me up: a completely and perfectly delicious estate Riesling, and one of the best basic Pinot Blancs I had ever encountered. I'd been corresponding with Christian Dautel, enjoyed doing so, and wrote a visit into my schedule for last month.

Christian will be the "face" of the winery for you guys, but the deeper truth of the estate is the partnership between him and his father Ernst, who was a genuine pioneer and a major figure in the history of the region. He broke away from the cop, he planted "foreign" grape varieties, he went all out for quality however radical the wines might seem; he was one of those people who not only move the needle—they move it so quickly and violently you need another needle.

Those wines were, let's say, sometimes extremely expressive in terms of both ripeness and barrel-regime. That

drew attention to them, and justly so. But Christian is moving in a direction of greater refinement, greater minerality, a "cooler" style of wine overall. Born in 1985, he did what many German vintners of his generation do, traveled the world soaking up impressions and experiences until he returned and was folded into the winery in 2010. The greatest among those impressions was Burgundy, not only in the matrix of Pinot Noir but also as a *meta* principle that wine didn't have to be "big" to be intense or beautiful.

I feel incredibly fortunate that the stars aligned for this. He was very kind to wait for me to do my "process," and I was lucky we had so many friends in common—because this is a rip-roaring introduction and it will only get better. I assembled my favorites among what I could obtain, and my only regret is having arrived a year too late to score the 2013 Spätburgunders. (I also must note that Christian, like Christopher Loewen, appears in magazine ads for *Selters* mineral water. I plan to collect the set, as it were, and will happily add anyone to this portfolio who either has waist-length dreadlocks or sells *Selters* mineral water.)

REDS

2016 Estate Spätburgunder

12/750ml | GDT-001

Even this "basic" PN (from a light-ish vintage) is marrowy, grown up and charming; a slim line of fruit, pleasant tannin, good length, a high juicy charm-factor but not *merely* charming; the black-cherry foreground is supported by good tertiary flavors.

2014 Spätburgunder Sonnenberg

12/750ml | GDT-002

The best 2014 PN I've tasted from Germany. A complex Burgundian aroma is fetching and inviting; delicious fruit and impressive tertiary vinosity; it doesn't "taste like Burgundy" but tastes like the work of a lover of Burgundy.

2015 Spätburgunder Sonnenberg

12/750ml | GDT-003

This, not surprisingly, is sexier and more marrowy; if the '14 is Volnay this one is Chambolle; it's really hedonistic but not in the overdone fruit-bomb way; it just tastes gorgeous.

2015 Spätburgunder Forstberg "GG"

6/760ml | GDT-004

Massal Selection PN cuttings from the Côte de Nuits planted in marl/limestone/clay soils (thanks David!), this is just the 2nd vintage of this "GG," and it's a beauty; wonderfully polished, rich and sophisticated wine; serious dark energy and density, a lovely spice-box, *griotte*, red pepper roasted over an open flame. (There's a second "GG" called *Schupen* that was even better—and sold out. We're in the queue for '16.)



2014 Pinot Sekt Extra Brut

12/750ml | GDT-005

I talked myself out of taking bottles to Champagne just to send a chill through those guys. I mean, I *like* those guys. But this wine—wow. It's entirely remarkable; a gorgeous PN aroma. Fruit and polish, and the palate is rich, earthy, virtually “chalky,” vinous and long, though it's wonderfully compact and directed to a keen point of chalk-like spiciness.

THE WHITES

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GDT-006

A characteristic '17 and a Riesling inside-the-lines, i.e., if you approach it looking for something *Other*, you'll be let down because it's actually quite classical, vigorous and tasty.

2016 Riesling Trocken Wurmberg

6/750ml | GDT-008

From near-50-yr-old Rielsing vines planted in steep limestone-soil terraces overlooking the Enz River (ta David), it's smoky yet with the twiggy sleek lyric qualities of both the soil and the vintage; and how do you poise herbs and oolong teas and salts with such a gentle demeanor? This wine is *definitely* original.

2016 Riesling Steingruben “GG”

12/750ml | GDT-009

This is fabulous and no other word will do. An even higher level of detail and complexity now. Trust me; there was a lot of chatter and I couldn't write descriptors, but this is righteous!

2017 Estate Weissburgunder

12/750ml | GDT-007

Man this is a perfect basic PB! Fluffy yet stony; energetic and hyper and skipping; solid generous and fruity but it's so light-footed it hardly seems to adhere to the ground. (There's an oak-aged “S” version also, and the '15 was sensational, but for this opening offer I think I'll wait for the '17 next year. The wine's best if it starts out with flesh.)

MOSEL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SELBACH-OSTER



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Zeltingen

VINEYARD AREA

21 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

13,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Zeltinger Himmelreich,
Schlossberg and Sonnenuhr**

(blue devonian slate)

Wehlener Sonnenuhr

(blue devonian slate)

**Graacher Himmelreich
and Domprobst**

(blue devonian slate with loam)

Bernkasteler Badstube

(blue devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

98.5% Riesling

1.5% Pinot Blanc

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing sustainable viticulture

The harvest emails started to arrive in mid-October. The news was fair; quantities would be *very* small (for the 5th time in 6 years) but the early wines were sound. The real truth of the harvest was a couple weeks away. Then I started getting emails from Johannes mixing dismay with determination. The grapes were *very* ripe. The vintage would have a paucity of Kabinett (ouch) and a lot of Spätlese, and also....a lot of Auslese. For which the grapes were perfect. And lots of them. Auslese.

As recently as 2001 and 2005, we celebrated those wines, and if they're in your cellar you're still celebrating them. The '01 Selbach Ausleses are actually drier than many growers *Spätleses* in the vintages that followed. But we've had a lot of Auslese the last 5-6 years, and we don't need them. Except of course, we do, as long as look at the question of "need" through a more holistic prism. And I say this as someone whose cellar has, let's say, a surplus of Auslese—so I get that we don't reach for them often. But what are we supposed to do—I ask this *really* and not rhetorically—when there are wines this beautiful? Ignore them? Disdain them? That feels like a crime against affirmation and gratefulness, and so I don't know *what* to do.

There were five "normal" Auslese, plus a few 2-and-3-star ones, plus the *en-blocs* which are in that family, and for the sake of loveliness alone there were none to omit. What I did do, was to select the ones *most singular and different* than any of the other wines. That meant two, plus the *en-blocs* of course. If you see them as Mosel-legacy

wines—which they are—then maybe you (and I) can see them in a context larger than commodity or utility. Yes, you can say "They're cheese-wines but how often do I eat a cheese-course," and I would reply "How often do you eat buttered nuts and yet you're all over *sous-voile* Jura wines." With most other categories we grab the wine because we're crazy about it, and then we figure the food thing out.

Selbach is certainly in a class by themselves in 2017—Loewen notwithstanding—and this follows on the heels of an equally impressive 2016—and this is happening while Johannes goes ever deeper into his wines' essence. This is different from "style." This isn't just partisanship. There are obviously a great many stellar Mosel wines from producers I don't represent (that goes without saying) but when I taste most of them I find them to excel in brilliance and explicit complexity, which of course are wonderful! Selbach's wines, though, seem more inferential, in some ways quieter; they seem to be looking for truths deeper than the sensual and visible. This doesn't mean they are more "honest" than other wines. It means they are perhaps truer, more anchored in depth of foundation, and less eager to show us their curlicues and gables and gargoyles.

A final note: Thanks to the short-crop of 2017, I'm going to offer my favorites from the outstanding 2016 again. They'll begin each category. The vintages are different but equally good, with '16 being more straight-lined and ductile and '17 being more smoky and strapping.



DRY WINES, MOSTLY RIESLINGS

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-553

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

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-555

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

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-557

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

2017 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GSO-577

Lots of fruit here, and even a sense of desiccation (conceivably botrytis); in any case a big rich dry Riesling making its point with large minerality and fruit so concentrated it’s halfway to savor, like phyllo or toasted brioche.

Johannes is convinced I was too cautious with his dry ‘17s, insisting they were merely in an ungenerous snit and would begin to sing when their fruit returned. If he’s right I’ll offer them later.

2017 Selbach-Oster Pinot Blanc

12/750ml | GSO-574

A cool little vogue behind this charming and singular critter. It hails from a steep slate vineyard and receives a teensy smooch of cask, so you get a pike quenelle PB with a slatey energy. Except perhaps in ‘17. This wine has more body and “seriousness” and is even more saline; indeed it tastes as much Austrian as German.

RIESLINGS WITH ITTY-BITTY SWEETNESS

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “Ur-Alte Reben”

12/750ml | GSO-560

+ +

2017 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “Alte Reben”

12/750ml | GSO-579

+ +

2017 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Feinherb “Ur-Alte Reben”

12/750ml | GSO-580

+ +

These wines are every bit as important as the three *en-blocs*. They go as deeply into Mosel-legacy as those wines, and they're also more “drinky.” Basically, we have two very old plots—the Sonnenuhr has vines well over 100 years—ungrafted of course, and made (which is to say *not made*) as they would have been when the vines were planted. *Spontis*, fermented without pre-cleaning, no temperature control, in *Fuder*, and resting on the lees for a long time before bottling. They can be “funky” out of the gate, but hugely less funky than most of the “natural” wines you make elegant excuses for.

Tasting the '17 Domprobst I had to wonder—is there really any way for Mosel Riesling to be better than this? It's like 150 years of Mosel beauty and love encapsulated in this glass. But also the undergirding of gorgeously unyielding stone and starch and salt. It's Domprobst, the wine that stands at attention, the wine with .07% body-fat, the pistachio-crunch and the quince pucker. Every true Mosel lover cherishes this vineyard!

The Ur-Alte Sonnenuhr is more oblong, richer, spherical; in '17 it's less explicit than Domprobst, but these are deep rich waters here, a wine of *interiors*. More introverted, more drawn to the seethe and the silence of the depths.

2017 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

12/750ml | GSO-578

+

Quite the wild boy in '17, zizzing lime tarragon wintergreen lemon grass in a manic spiciness, yet mineral and fruit appear and flow in limey rivulets, all underpinned by the vintage richness.

SWEET WINES NOT VERY SWEET

2017 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSO-584

Impeccable! And do secure a supply, as we'll run out before the end of the year.

2017 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSO-582

+ +

Perfect! Can you tell I was getting tired of writing notes? Who the fuck needs it? It's almost painful to slow it down, especially if you've written notes for, like, twenty nine vintages of the same wine. So one sip, and *perfect!* 2017 really swells the slate chord and pushed the density and power. Forget “Kabinett;” this is stunning Mosel Riesling. (“Perfect!”)

2017 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GSO-581

+ +

More middle, more umami, the same sense of deep-shade, a weird cool heat. Sure that's crazy but this wine is massive yet inferential, not so much deep as subterranean.

2016 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GSO-562

+

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

2016 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese 1-star

+ + +

12/750ml | GSO-567

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

2017 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GSO-585

The paradigm! (Glad I didn't write "perfect?")

2017 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GSO-586

I was admittedly going a little bonkers by now. This, to be fair, is completely a *WTF!* wine, but "force majeure as a rock-slide that coats the whole village with flint dust and the windshield of your car is festooned with cherry-blossom petals?" Really?? Well why not!

2017 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese

+ + +

12/750ml | GSO-587

The best vintage ever. It has some explosive fructose to assimilate, but has decades to do it.

2017 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

+ + +

12/750ml | GSO-583

The mid-palate salty syrup is different from the extroverted attack of Schlossberg. This is the chords first and the melody later. An Iliad and Odyssey of slate, sublime fruit, endless gentle depth. If you're not stilled and thankful here, then why not, and when?

2016 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese 1-star

+ + +

12/750ml | GSO-568

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

2017 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese

+ +

12/750ml | GSO-588

It's not that this was "better" than a Zeltinger Sonnenuhr next to it on the table, but the Sonnenuhr amplified flavors we had already seen, whereas nothing tasted like this. It's a near-perfect expression of botrytis as a doer-of-good, recalling the great 2005s, and as starchy and magnificent as Domprobst ever is.

2017 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese

+ + (+)

12/750ml | GSO-589

Again different from the others. Perhaps a bit sweeter, but it has a clearer line and more tangible acidity; salty and with sublime fruit. It made me think of a BA from the great 1975.

2017 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling BA 1-star

12/375ml | GSO-593H

2017 Zeltinger Sonenuhr Riesling TBA

+ + (+)

12/375ml | GSO-594H

These two were the purest and most refined of a scrum-o-stickies.

THE EN-BLOC MASTERPIECES

– INTRODUCED BY JOHANNES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2016 Riesling Schmitt

6/750ml | GSO-570

+ + +

2017 Riesling Anrecht

6/750ml | GSO-592

+

2017 Riesling Schmitt

6/750ml | GSO-590

+ + (+)

2017 Riesling Rotlay

6/750ml | GSO-591

+ + +

The ‘17 Anrecht is the lightest of the trio; it actually reminded me of a concentrate of the Halbtrocken Kab, but it may just have the most in reserve. Schmitt showed botrytis (as they all did) but what a concatenation of mineral and herbs! Rotlay on the other hand is just *sick*, maybe the best one since the 2004 though it’s more similar to ‘05.

J&H SELBACH REGIONALS



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

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

The small négociant firm of J&H Selbach are minor players in this market. Because they're small, they're more sensitive to blips in the cost of grapes or juice, but they're also able (and willing) to pay a hands-on attention that's otherwise unheard of. For example, nearly 100% of their grape supply is under contract with growers they know and trust, and they're making the wines with more lees contact and with spontaneous fermentation. And so I wanted to taste the wines this year with the same attention I give to the wines I take "seriously," just to be sure they wouldn't tarnish my own hippitude.

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

has vinosity and most important, moderate residual sugar for the genre.

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

Just know but don't be concerned with those old "generic" names that looked like actual vineyards but weren't. Thank the wise elders who wrote the 1971 wine law for this abomination. Thus a wine called "Zeller Schwarze Katz" is in effect bulk wine grown vaguely in the area of Zell. Same with "Bernkasteler" or "Piesporter." The big companies often use Müller-Thurgau for this category— Selbach uses only Riesling.

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

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

MEULENHOF / ERBEN JUSTEN EHLEN



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Erden

VINEYARD AREA

7 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,200 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Erdener Treppchen
and Prälat**

(devonian slate with Rotliegend)

Wehlener Sonnenuhr

(devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

85% Riesling

10% Rivaner

5% Kerner

There's always a lag. If an estate enters a rough patch, it takes the trade 2-3 years to take notice—at least in Germany, which is less attended-to than other places—and concomitantly, when things begin to improve it takes the trade a few years to catch up. Justen is there now. His '16s were the best vintage since 2009, and 2017 is also very good, like in the old days, certainly informed by the vintage but not impeded by it. It also bears mentioning that Justen's run of bad luck was just that—bad luck. He is a careful and conscientious vintner and didn't suddenly think "I'm tired of making good wine, I think I'll just suck for a few years."

It was the first Mosel estate I visited and had nothing really to go on except for some correspondence and chatter. I liked '17 here, and I'll also show you some '16s again. They're really good!

The person I'm addressing is someone who's followed these wines for a while now, and has (or had) come to rely on them as offering hale, generous and honest Mosel Rieslings that always cost

less than you anticipated. But of course many of you don't have a history with these wines, and the "image" of the estate has a conservative aura. No man-buns in sight. I think you're losing out on wines that will perform well, that don't know how not to be helpful, and that age classically. If you know them, please look again. If you don't know them, just please *look*.

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

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett “Alte Reben”

+

12/750ml | GJU-159

Lots of people have Alte Reben in the Mittelmosel, but here in Erden it signifies something more. When the commune had Flurbereinigung some 15-20 years ago, the upstream sections of Treppchen among the cliffs were physically impossible to restructure, and so we have young-ish vines from the “normal” steep slopes from the bridge downstream, and very old ungrafted vines from the redder soil in the more rugged terrain. The difference is manifest and vivid. This is the most masculine Kabinett I ever tasted from Justen, an almost chewy blast of terroir; bergamot and cherry blossom; slices of slate and a whomp of boulders; key lime and maple-glazed ham; the overall effect is Feinherb and the finish is slate and sassafras. This is close to thrilling.

2017 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GJU-167

The char of the '17s is like charcoal or shoot-smoke; it's a form of botrytis or an echo of the ambience of botrytis. The RS balance is fine. It's rather earnest for a young Mosel and has some resinous herb where apples normally reside.

2017 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese Trocken

12/750ml | GJU-166

A smoky charred-slate aroma leads to a palate with wonderful fruit and a peppery twang, like a granitic Alsace Riesling or a boxwood-y Austrian one.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #16

12/750ml | GJU-160

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

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese #7

+ +

12/750ml | GJU-163

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

2017 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese “Alte Reben”

+ (+)

12/750ml | GJU-168

The most impressive among the 2017 Späts here, this was the first time I thought of young 1971s—though everyone else disagreed (but what do they know? They're just vintners with photographic memories...) The wine is grand and dignified, an antidote to assuming Mosel Rieslings are invariably sprightly.

2017 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese (#102)

+ +

12/750ml | GJU-169

I'm sorry, I'm gonna insist on this young-'71 business. It's the near-grandeur and the regal structure of these young Mosel '17s—and I *know* they have less acidity and in most cases less botrytis, but the personalities are so familial I can't chase away the thought. The botrytis is fine here and I appreciate the lack of a domineering sweetness, and I can't remember when I've ever had a Justen wine quite like this.



OLD VINTAGES FROM THE ESTATE BERNHARD JAKOBY

It's rather a saga how these bottles were unearthed, but there were a lot of them, and a wide variety of them, and I got to cherry-pick. Quantities are not gigantic. Apart from their mint condition (and how often do we get to see such things any more?) They show the quality available from an unexceptional and averagely talented vintner of a bygone era.

We have three.

1985 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese, has some color but also the classic '85 raciness (it was a ripe but high-acid year), green (sorrel, balsam) and white flowers; spicy and really long. Superb!

1979 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese, from what was considered a friendly mannerly sort of year, a relief after the underripe pair of 1977-1978. Give this a few minutes in the glass; it starts out seeming gentler than the leg-jiggling twitchy '85, and I think it's entirely mature, with the sunny corn and vetiver profile of '79, but a slatey energy emerges as it freshens in the glass, and it gets more firm and starchy.

1983 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese, the best of the three and also the smallest quantity; this really shows how excellent 1983 was or turned out to be. Well stored examples of this vintage are as ageless as any vintage after the SO² laws were changed post-1970 (when the wines lost some of the stamina of great vintages of the 50s and 60s); in any case this is almost girlishly lyric and pretty.

ALFRED MERKELBACH



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Ürzig

VINEYARD AREA

1.9 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

1,700 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Ürziger Würzgarten

(blue devonian slate)

Erdener Treppchen

(blue devonian slate)

Kinheimer Rosenberg

(blue devonian slate)

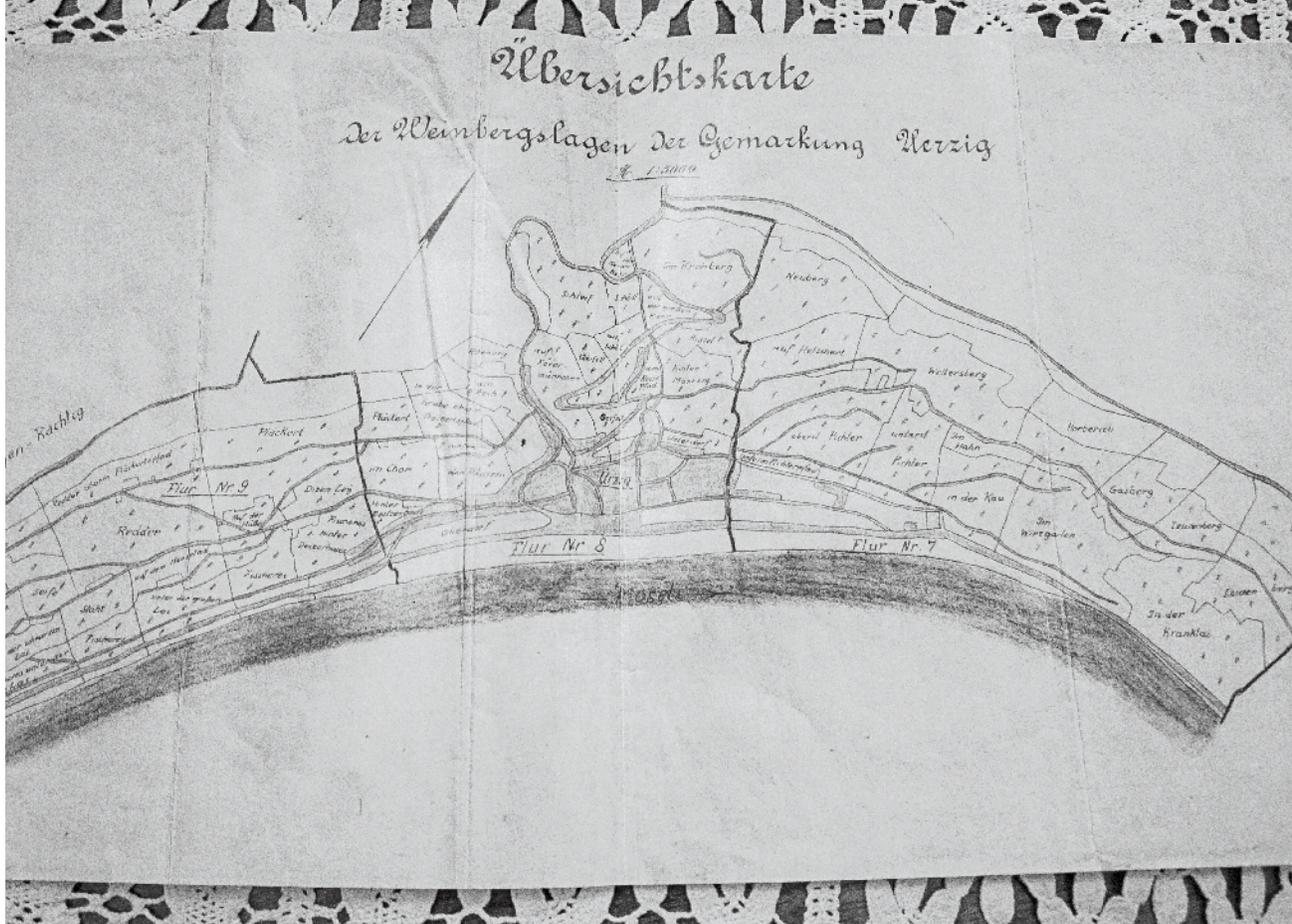
GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

Great vintages here are like VAPING Mosel Riesling. Yet it's a suggestive kind of greatness, partly because it's become so rare in a world in which people want their wines to "make an impression." And partly because we don't really know what to do when we're faced with the ur of a thing. The origin point, the purity that's not only unspoiled, it's never been trammled at all. Merkelbach's wines are like the world before anyone wrote poems about it. This is the estate, and these are the people, by whom I am most moved, who touch me most deeply, and whom I am proudest to represent. They live deep inside my heart. Alfred is the older brother. He's 83. Rolf had just had his 80th birthday this year. The brothers would sell their estate, rather than let it go to probate, or whatever the German equivalent is for probate. But there are two problems. One, they want to keep working, and the new owner would understandably want to install his "team." Two, they can't establish a price, because they don't need money. This isn't because they're so honking wealthy, but because they live simple lives. Until I started buying wines in-bottle, they sold most of their production in cask. These days they make more, but don't appear to spend it. Merkelbachs have become conspicuous of late, as various media have been able to package them as "The Last of a Bygone Age." This is superficially true. The nostalgia we're made to feel is also superficial.

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

I was uncertain what I might find here, as botrytis vintages have sometimes been unkind to this estate. But in 2017 all the dubious grapes seem to have clustered in a single fuder, which I didn't buy (prompting an understanding nod of assent from Rolf). Curiously it was the riper casks that seemed most lively and clean, and I like this collection very much. It was also a chummy sort of visit; the brothers seemed as though a burden had been lifted and they were jovial again. Yet 2017 was as mingy a crop here as it was all over the Mosel, and quantities are less than half of what I was obtaining as recently as 5-6 years ago.



2017 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #3

12/750ml | GME-245

Two fuders is all. This '17 is....exotic, let's say. Not tainted as was the case in '13 and (especially) '14, but curiously licorice-y, as if no grapes had been involved. Sassafrass is a common cognate for Uerz-Würz, but this wine almost makes a caricature of it. I liked it, mind you, but expect the unexpected.

2017 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese #1

12/750ml | GME-247

Now this is a Merkelbach wine! Explosively fresh and spicy; here the botrytis is positive; the wine is energetic and flourishing, recalling the '15s. You can't help but love it. It's sweeter than they usually bottle but acidity carries it.

2017 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese #2

12/750ml | GME-248

Same exact parcel, one harvest day apart. This one's drier and the acid-phenolics are more grippy; a curious departure from their usual type, denser, more inscrutable. A case could be made for combining the fuders...but I didn't make it. I'm into small-batch.

2017 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese Urglück

12/750ml | GME-249

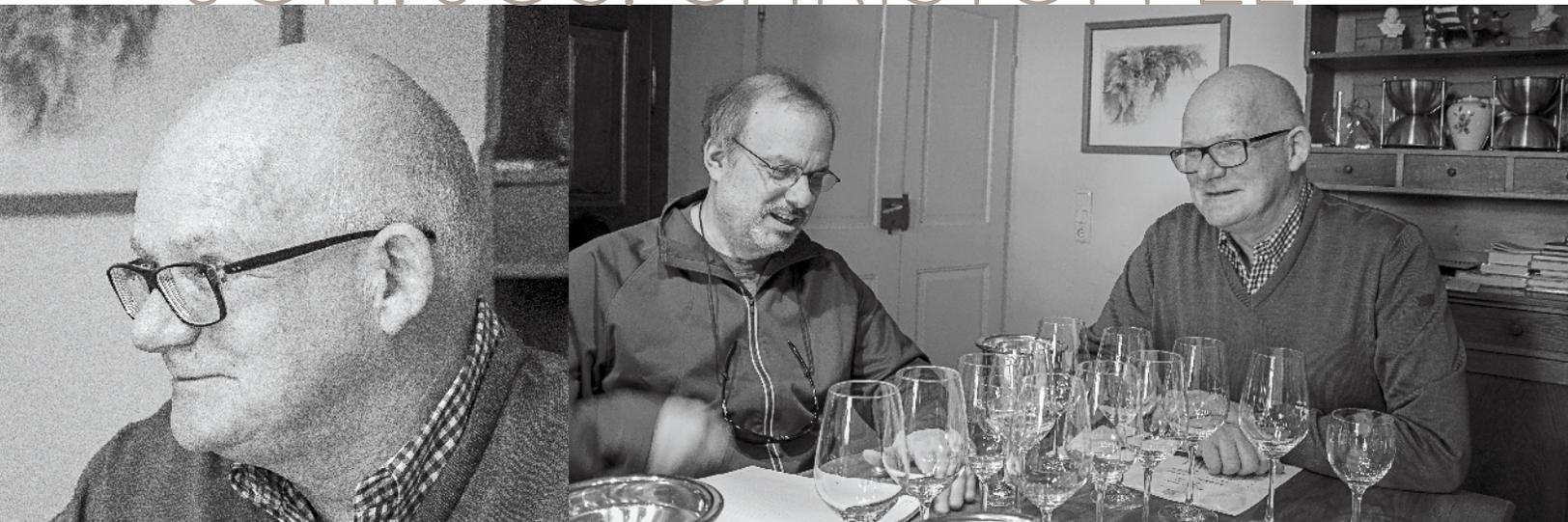
Probably the masterpiece of their vintage, but not an "easy" wine. Extreme sassafrass, and very stony, but a hyssop-y spice trails along a subtle vein of fruit. Mosel at its most masculine, but hugely impressive, with its serious "resting face."

2017 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese #7

12/750ml | GME-250

All from the great cadaster *Lang Pichter*, this is really remarkable; huge fruit served by positive botrytis, classic "big-vintage" mien; a grand conversation among strawberry and kiwi and licorice and all with lovely surging fruit.

JOH. JOS. CHRISTOFFEL



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Urzig

VINEYARD AREA

4 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

3,200 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Ürziger Würzgarten

(red slate)

Erdener Treppchen

(blue slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

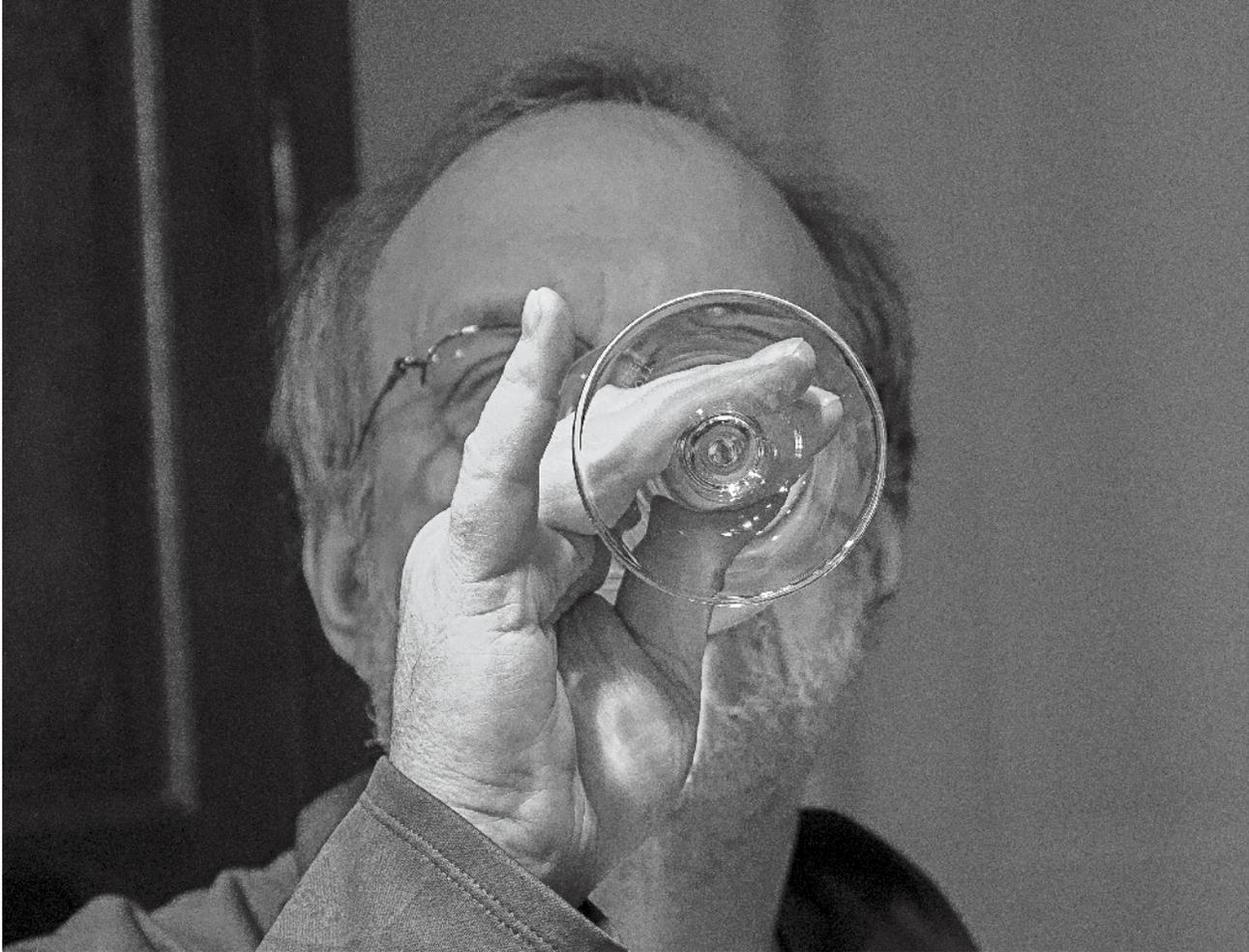
It was nice to see Hans-Leo but it wasn't at the winery. We ran into him on the street near Merkelbach. He looked well. It was an odd moment.

What does his name mean any more in the context of this winery? For that matter what does its *own* name mean, now that the whole thing (vineyards and cellar and home and buildings) has been sold to a Chinese buyer? Please understand, the wines I present below are excellent, but I'm not sure to what larger context they might belong.

We probed a little, to try and understand what "J.J. Christoffel" actually signified. We also tasted a Mönchhof wine parallel to the JJC—same site, vintage and quality level—and while we did taste a difference between the two wines, we remained at a loss trying to ascertain the significance. The cellar work, we were told, was "identical" (yet the results differ?) and only the vineyard work differed between the two "brands." When we asked how, we were given generalities.

Let me pause again to repeat: The wines are good. But the brand has taken on something of a fantasy name. And the wines, though they are highly crystalline in the modern manner, are so glossy and polished it's as though a face had all its *features* buffed away. They are the conceptual antonym of, say, Selbach. They do offer an interesting look at a kind of reducto-ad-absurdum for the keen polished style of Riesling, and if one wished to make a case for them, one can truthfully say they are silky and as delicate as the surface of a crême-brûlée. It's why I continue to offer them. But, with the transition to the new owner, and with Hans-Leo Christoffel no longer even pretending to be involved, "JJC" isn't really connected to a ground-wire of any kind.

Thus what I'll be doing is to offer the wines I like the best, regardless of whether it "makes sense" as an offering, because in the end it comes down to the juice in the glass. With that in mind, try these; you'll learn a little, and the wines do taste very good.



2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | **GJC-236**

I liked this wine a year ago, but we were moving through the 2015 and I didn't want to leapfrog over it. This is typically lacy and has excellent length and some sasafrassy stylishness. (As a rule Würzgarten has a bit more identity than Treppchen here, though it may be that the latter is more mute in its youth.)

2017 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | **GJC-237**

Unusually, a tank sample; normally Robert doesn't want to show a wine until it's in bottle in its final unalterable form—which has meant I'm always tasting bottle-sick wines. In any case this was as expected from a '17, some of the smokiness of the year but otherwise same high standard and personality as always.

2016 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | **GJC-234**

I liked this last year and still do. It's a careful, chiseled buffed wine with tweezer-flavors.

+

2016 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | **GJC-235**

Longer and more complex, as if from another entire class of site.

+

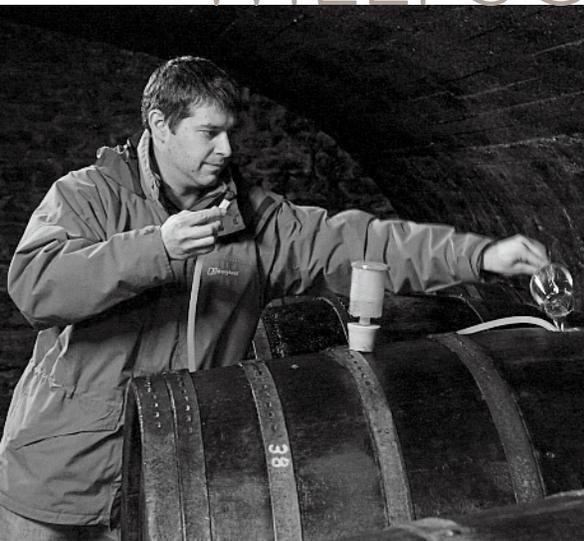
2017 Uerziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | **GJC-238**

This is a very encouraging wine; it has true character and style, and it doesn't feel anonymously genteel; there's palpable sensual reality.

+

WILLI SCHAEFFER



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Graach

VINEYARD AREA

4 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

2,900 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Graacher Himmelreich

(devonian slate)

Graacher Domprobst

(devonian slate)

Wehlener Sonnenuhr

(devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

On a May morning exactly 40 years ago, I was walking through the village of Graach looking for growers who had Himmelreich and Domprobst. I started at the downstream end, and tasted at perhaps a dozen places. The last of them was Willi Schaefer. Fledgling though I was, I recognized these wines were superior, and I bought what I could, to take back home to Munich. It was, as best I recall, a visit of under and hour.

The next time I visited was in January 1980, eighteen months later. As soon as he opened the door he recognized me. And thus began a friendship that has lasted to this day.

Willi is a markedly golden sort of guy. He's warm (but not especially touchy-feely) and both amusing and ever-ready to be amused, and he's one of the most basically decent people I have ever known. We planned a little observance of our 40 years, but fate had other ideas. Nothing serious, mind you; just some medical issues that needed attention sooner rather than later. This treadmill-of-treatments (from this doctor to that clinic to the other doctor to yet another doctor to yet another clinic) was wearisome and discouraging, and so Willi and I had a short talk by ourselves and agreed, we'd postpone the party for a year and then we'd *dance*. We more than agreed, we promised.

There's an angelic quality around the

entire family. If you've met Christoph and Andrea, you'll know what I mean. It is a glow of kindness that seems easy for them—or at any rate, easier than it is for bossy old me. It also permeates the wines, which is part of why they're held in such affection. For people don't just "admire" Schaefer's wines, they *love* them.

They have changed a little over the years, as may be expected. They're riper now—of course everything is riper now—and you could say they're more expressive, less modest. What they retain is a remarkable candor and a lapidary clarity. This stands them especially well in tenderer vintages (such as 2011) and perhaps less well in acid-driven vintages (such as 2015), but these are questions of taste and I know of fine tasters who see it differently. 2017 presented challenges as it did all along the "great ramp" between Zeltingen and Bernkastel, and if Christoph and Andrea were to maintain quality standards, they'd have to make draconian sacrifices to yields. Graach was evidently in the cross-hairs for every issue the vintage presented—frost, hail, botrytis—and Schaefer, who never have very much wine to give us, are down to homeopathy in '17. That's made even sadder by dint of '17 being a markedly successful collection of wines, especially from a year-with-acidity, and I find it better than similar years like 2001 and 2015.

2017 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett

+

12/750ml | GWS-277

Apple apple apple and more apple, Cox-Orange, and several buckets' worth. Balsam and slate arrive, but this wine is fruit-driven to an almost unheard-of degree. Silky, almost sedate but too giddy with its apple-euphoria to hold still for long.

2017 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett

+ (+)

12/750ml | GWS-276

You know, I don't think I ever explained this. If I do "+(+)" that doesn't mean I can't decide between one plus or two; it means that I anticipate development towards two though it's one at present.

In any case this shows the typical quince of Domprobst; it feels both lissome and tensile and crisply dry; a lot of class and polish, firm and snappy.

2017 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GWS-278

Ultra-refined, and with '17's acidity not exactly tamed but neither is it yelping and snapping; complex fruit *as-such*, not as part of an interplay among obvious slate and citrus and herbs. A surmise of botrytis is hovering on the periphery...

2017 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10

+

12/750ml | GWS-279

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

This '17 is total pistachio! A grand zizzy Domprobst (don't fuss at me; Pauline Kael invented that word), slate-char, a long steel syringe of compacted mineral and shoot-smoke.

2017 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese

+ +

12/750ml | GWS-280

Schaefer's '17s seem to almost exaggerate the native characteristics of each site; in this case the herb-and-lime custard in its cool creamy form, floating near the palate in a strange articulate glow. Serene yet quite definite, just self-contained. Wehlen suffered less than Graach from crop loss (and had less botrytis) and I really loved this wine and Selbach's Auslese.

2017 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5

+ +

12/750ml | GWS-281

Riesling mastery here; sensational fruit seems to move in writhing gliding waves, around corners and over the hedge and weaving through the copse; almost as herbal and orchid-y as the Wehlener; at once rippling and eager yet aglow with calmly ravishing fruit. There's a girding of stern acidity but it cannot obtrude on the elegance of this wonderful wine.

A.J. ADAM



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Dhron

VINEYARD AREA

3.7 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

1,250 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Dhroner Hofberg

(weathered devonian slate with quartzite)

Piesporter Goldtröpfchen

(blue slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

The place is a true idyll, sitting along the reedy shushing Dhronbach, and I am poignantly aware it's a peace not easily won. Andreas started nearly from scratch, was a hair away from packing it in on more than one occasion, and has prevailed by determination and sheer talent. The man is a master of dry and almost dry Mosel Riesling.

That is to say, a master at a genre that was barely tolerable until not very long ago. To do this, you have to have an excellent palate, plus the know-how to enact your vision. Mosel Trockens will never have the generous bodies and amenable acids of, say, Pfalz wines, and they have to locate a fullness and a mid-palate buoyancy that's not so often found.

And yet this is the second consecutive vintage where I found myself confused by parts of the collection. In my dotage I seem to recall Andreas' earlier wines as generally leesier and tilted more toward Feinherb. (He makes two actual Feinherbs, which are his best wines.) The last couple years I've found the Trocken wines sometimes spiky and the sweet wines rather too sweet. I tend to think acidity is the culprit, if there is a "culprit," and no one wishes to manipulate acidity by interventions, not to mention acidity is a religion among some German Ries-

ling growers, but neither do I enjoy sour wines. I wonder as I always do, whether I'm seeing the wines on cranky-pants days (for them or for me...) but this is when I see them, same time every year. Then there's the issue of item-creep, whereby a grower's portfolio chain-reacts into more and more wines. This is a by-product of a phenomenon whereby good growers have access to great land being sold (or leased) by crappy growers who have no heirs or who need to raise cash. More sites equals more different wines, which is lovely in principle, but it is senseless to foist fifteen wines upon you, though Andreas prefers me to make everything available. He's a purist and he likes that I am too, but the pragmatist in me (an orphan who struggles to be heard) knows that too many options dilutes attention and paralyzes a customer.

This, in essence, is to say that my coolness to some of these '17s entails considerable doubt. Not of him: of myself. People don't suddenly decide "I'm sick of making beautiful wines; time to make a few sour-pusses." The rogue-variable is more likely to be me. Still, I saw what I saw, and my notes won't tell you what I *hoped* a wine would taste like, but what it actually tasted like.

2017 Estate Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GAD-129

2 weeks in the bottle when I saw it—usually the worst possible time. It was limpid and very dry. Slate rendered by bacon, which obviously makes no sense. “Pungent, smoky, mineral” is maybe better. The wine is cool, polished and very good.

2017 Dhroner Häschen Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GAD-132 | SOS : minus-1

“Little hare” also describes the state of my head, as it happens.

This isn't fruit-driven nor does it show the grace of Hofberg, but I actually quite like its leanness; it's “puristic” and directed more by structure than by fruit; it's funky-flowery (hyacinth) and is spirit-kin to Spreitzer's Doosberg, spicy and tensile.

2017 Hofberg Riesling Trocken

12/750ml | GAD-133

Richer, more middle and more extroverted. It's earthy rather than slatey.

2017 Riesling “Im Pfarrgarten” Feinherb

12/750ml | GAD-131

The 4th vintage from a 53-year old vineyard in a flat-ish site by the lyric little “Dhronbach” stream. It means “the garden of the rectory,” suggesting a contemplative temperament, whispering to the little birds in the silver flow of water. Perhaps you think I'm being silly, but *this stuff matters to me* and you'd be a happier person if it mattered to you. There's a little poem in this wine, one of those life-graces we assume, wrongly, we can do without.

The wine in '17 shows a LOT of *sponti* which slowly subsides to green apple, and this old-school Mosel wine is spicy and uncompromising, if not quite atavistic; it's just a wine with two left eyes and a quirky old soul. It's also the nth-degree of what small-batch “natural” wine should be.

2017 In Der Sängerei Riesling Feinherb

12/750ml | GAD-137

A cadaster parcel within the Hofberg, this has often been a beloved wine for me. This '17 is quite serious, in the vintage way, not as suave as usual but with a different kind of grip and length. Half was lost to frost, so there's just one Fuder, of an earnest, dark-toned mineral wine, with a pointed acidity that sucks up every one of the 25g/l RS.

2017 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GAD-134

More pungent *sponti* leads to a fine Mosel Kab albeit one with a few spikes and jabs of acidity. Less sweet-seeming than usual, partly the '17 dark-notes and partly that acidity. There's a seamless Mosel classic in there somewhere; is it hiding in waiting to emerge, or is it really buried? We shall see.

2017 Dhroner Häschen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GAD-135

Has the coconut and lilac thing the Trocken wine alluded to; it's sprightly and buoyant; acids show again but this picture is rather more seamless; the gingery lift here is charming and persuasive—and it'll help if you relish acidity.

2017 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GAD-136

This was the most challenging wine on the table. It's seriously stinky at first (*sponti* and then some) but this usually diminishes in time. He did it all in stainless steel, which might explain. It's not superripe (90°) and it's very salty, a bit phenolic, the acidity is once again quite pointed, it's blatantly slatey, jagged and angular. Many wines are this way when they don't have enough sweetness, and they sometimes get rapturous reviews and I'm the only one with doubts.

CARL LOEWEN



REGION / SUB REGION

Mosel / Leiwen

VINEYARD AREA

12 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

8,300 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

**Leiwener Laurentiuslay
and Klostergarten**

(grey slate)

Thörnicher Ritsch

(grey slate)

Longuicher Maximin Herrenberg

(red slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

100% Riesling

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture

WINERY OF THE VINTAGE

It starts to feel partly miraculous and partly absurd. You taste wine after wine and everything has this sort of divine glow, this force of gentleness, and part of you can't believe it, and the other part is borne aloft. I've had great vintages delightedly often over the years, and it's always this way, the curious certainly that a hole opened in the sky above the winery and a benediction was conferred. Otherwise you can't explain it.

In any case I'm showing you everything I tasted with only a single exception, (a wine I'd have selected any other year) and as much as I'd like to have stimulated a feeding frenzy for Loewen's 2017s, the crop is short here as it is everywhere, and we'll have some oversolds. Strange, yes, from a winery for whom I made a somewhat lonely case for a great many years? Think of a band you like. Imagine they release a truly great album, and even though you already like them you listen to this new album gob-smacked. *I knew they were good but for shit's sake, every damn song on this album is a masterpiece.* We've all been there, right? Suddenly your guys are IN THE ZONE. And if you're a long-time fan you can't believe how happy it makes you—"I knew it, I just knew it, I've loved these guys for years and I knew they had this in them." Well that's how I feel right now.

In effect we get to reinvent this agency, because many of you don't know their history; you only know that Christopher is passionate and charismatic, and that the

wines are outstanding. From my standpoint I see this as a long-delayed recognition, that Loewen is a stellar producer who has long been undervalued. This is one of the FIVE MOST INTERESTING ESTATES IN MY OFFERING, and among them it's the one you know the least about. And that is gonna change. A couple decades ago an idealistic young couple realized there were great vineyards—not "good" or "interesting" vineyards, but truly great ones—along this stretch of the Mosel, and that no one knew of them because of the lack of a flagship estate. If J.J. Prüm had been a citizen of Leiwen and not of Wehlen, we'd be giving all that Sonnenuhr luv to Laurentiuslay and Ritsch. This is clear, and obvious. Karl was also convinced of the old Mosel verities; spontis in cask with no fussings or tweakings. When the estate Schmitt-Wagner had to fold its tent, as there were no children willing to carry it on, we were all very fortunate that Loewens could buy it. Carl now has every great site on this section of the Mosel.

These are:

Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg

Thörnicher Ritsch

Leiwener Laurentiuslay

They are every bit as important as Graacher Domprobst, Wehlener Sonnenuhr and Zeltinger Schlossberg, only you don't know them, and therefore they **COST LESS**. Karl-Josef's son Christopher is now fully installed and brings his own vision and infusion of vim. They are discontinuing the name Schmitt-Wagner for wines from the vineyards they bought

from Bruno Schmitt when that venerable estate had to sell, for want of heirs. This consisted of some 9,000 ungrafted Riesling wines, planted in 1896 and 1903, which constitutes as great a legacy as one could hope for, and cemented Loewen's

position as the great holder of every noble Riesling vineyard on the Mosel upstream from Leiwen. This won't matter to you if you're too young to remember Schmitt-Wagner. Older Riesling lovers may join me in a moment of gratefulness

and sadness, first that Bruno Schmitt existed—he was the only reason to attend to Longuich at all—and second that the gentle tactful style of wine he made is a quickly vanishing species.

2017 Riesling "Alte Reben"

12/750ml | GCL-109

This is a cuvée of various plots from 50-70 years old. Just two weeks in-bottle, so I may be underrating it (especially in light of what followed...) but it showed a fine smoky '17 char; an interesting (truly!) balanced wine almost entirely without "fruit" yet full of herbs (verbena, mint, hyssop) and vetiver; super-detailed mineral diction; all the t's are crossed. A curious way for a wine to be beautiful, but that's Riesling. And I'll bet the fruit will emerge as it comes out of bottle-shock.

2017 Riesling Maximiner Klosterlay

12/750ml | GCL-110

Notice the absence of the word "Trocken?" Do please, because it's important. They don't put it on the label because they *don't manipulate the wine in order to be within the Trocken limit*. "When it stops (fermenting) it stops, and we don't mess with it. Sometimes it could be *Trocken* and sometimes not. Important is how it tastes."

Oh, BLESSINGS RAIN UPON YOU!! I admire this more than I can possibly say. It is everything that's right about wine. It leads the way.

This wine *tastes* dry and should be dry enough for anyone who isn't a troglodyte. The fragrance is beautiful! The palate is lapidary, sophisticated, herbal and oolong-y; a calm flowing caress of flavor leads into a really complex finish—you could take dictation from these flavors.

It's an east-facing vineyard directly on the Mosel, and is usually for aficionados of Riesling's mineral side. In '17 it attains an apotheosis.

2017 Riesling Maximiner Herrenberg "1896"

12/750ml | GCL-113

From the ancient vineyard but this is made in the prevailing way. And oh boy...this is one of the great wines in this estate's history. Classic and ecstatic slate-sassafras fragrance; a fantastically expressive palate, naked crushed slate and yet withal this inner stillness, like Bach in a reverie between triple fugues. This lives in the home of intricate rarefied loveliness, made more poignant by its calm interior life. So much flavor, so little stress to hurl it at you.

2017 Riesling Ritsch "GG"

6/750ml | GCL-115

The (Thörnicher) Ritsch is among my VERY favorite Mosel sites, and as Loewen's new plantings begin bearing fruit, they're considering reintroducing a Spätlese (or even a Kabinett). I've been kvetching that to polarize the production into a "GG" from clean fruit and an Auslese from botrytised fruit isn't doing full justice to the vineyard. You should see it some time. It's a forbidding, dour and spectacular terraced gray mountainside, a real jaw-dropper, and as you gape at it you are categorically sure that great wines come from it. And you're right.

And 2017 is an astonishing vintage of it! All the manic citric tarragon mojo of the site with a motherlode of *sponti* soul and an almost creamy mouthfeel, ending in a shimmer of slate, lemon grass and ginger. I never had a greater dry wine from this supernal vineyard. And they've obtained more parcels in it, and there's even talk of a *Riesling KABINETT* at some point.

2017 Riesling Maximin Herrenberg "GG"

6/750ml | GCL-114

Another haunting beauty, more overt and angular in a spicy (as opposed to herbal) way; there's that quality of tranquility but here the delivery has more force; still, the wine is juicy and caressing.

2017 Riesling “1896”

+ + +

6/750ml | GCL-116

It was my wine of the vintage a year ago and it is again now. Again. All the way into the exquisite inscrutable soul of terroir, not only the soil this time, but also the sum of the longings of every human who crossed paths with this amazing place. A wine of the ultimate interior, where weight doesn't exist any more, yet where some core of life is stored, reposing, waiting for you to arrive. It's the culminated essence of slate-apple-balsam that is the outer skin of Mosel wine, but like Dönnhoff's *Brücke* can be, it's also an ur-paradigm of Riesling ad of the souls who swim in its glowing green waters.

The wine makes me think more than anything of Michi's "Tradition" bottlings at Schloss Gobelsburg; it's atmospheric and inferential; analog, soulful, more pealing, bell-like overtones, more poetic and secretive. Even in its animation it shows repose, and a complexity you don't subdue, but simply and calmly allow it to guide you to the mystery. Here's what Christopher had to say about this amazing wine: "Our Maximin Herrenberg, which was planted in 1896, is the oldest Riesling vineyard in the world of this dimension (more than 6,000 vines). Planted 1896. This is an incentive to us. I have asked myself over weeks: How did they produce wine in that period, in a time when Mosel Riesling was one of the most important wines of the world? In the Maximin Herrenberg we still have the single post training system with 10.000 vines per hectare, which was common in those days. No chemical fertilizer is used, everything, even the hardest work is done by hand. Never has the Maximin Herrenberg seen a machine! The adventure started in the harvest. The handpicked grapes were being transported to the trailer with the help of a hotte (a hotte is something like a rucksack, with which you can transport about 60kg of grapes in it; it was used before tractors made the vineyard work easier). The grapes, which were collected in a basket, were being stamped by foot, which had been common then. Through that procedure the maceration starts directly in the vineyard. On the evening of the picking day, the press process started. For the 1896 we used a very old wooden basket press, which we found in a small dusty corner at the lower section of the Mosel valley and which we restored with a lot of love. Pressing was done by brawniness, the juice is guided without any sedimentation or pumping directly into the Fuder. The fermentation, of course, is spontaneous, without any added yeast. The result is a wine, which shows perfectly the strength of Riesling. It is a unique statement of consistency in a fast moving world. Due to the small scaled 1896 vineyard, we are just able to do one Fuder of the 1896 Riesling."

Obviously these are not only great wines, they're also meaningful wines. The inverse is also true; they're not only "meaningful," (which you may or may not be able to taste) but also, and dramatically, great.

2017 Estate Riesling

12/750ml | GCL-112

A Theise exclusive, along lines of the wines I get from Catoir and Diel; the 17 is super-salty, less gigglesome than the '16; a lower register of flavor and more murmur than chuckle, but the balance is perfect, and this wine more than "does the job"—it invents the job.

2017 Longuicher Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett

+ +

12/750ml | GCL-108

Ungrafted vines planted in 1903. Honestly I was lost for words at this point. Did they not make an *ordinary* wine in 2017?? This is every element of '17 at its best—and forgive me, but WHERE ELSE can you get an estate-bottled wine from 115 year old vines for this kind of money?

Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

+

12/750ml | GCL-117

Consistently and for many years one of the very GREAT wines in this offering, and among them, the least celebrated. Again, very old vines (at least 80, some over 100, all ungrafted) from an old terraced vineyard, because the wise citizens of Leiwen rejected the Flurbereinigung. Think Wehlener Sonnenuhr on steroids. (Or wait a minute; that's Zeltinger Sonnenuhr. OK, think Zeltinger Sonnenuhr on steroids...) In essence this is weighty, extravagant fruit anchored to profound and almost chewy earthiness. I think I was wrung out by this time, noting only that this was one of the definitely semi-solid "clotted" vintages (like 2010 for example) of the wine, like a crème-brulée of Laurentiuslay, earth, apricots and butterscotch.

2017 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Auslese

+

6/750ml | GCL-118

Damn this smells good! On the palate the '17 char is most present. It's like a bright red-head in a tuxedo. Baked apple in a *nage* of lime and verbena. Crisp, virtually dry finish. For all the richness of the vintage, this is full of fresh air.

SAAR

The Saar valley is singular in many ways. Close as it is to Trier, it seems entirely removed. Unlike the fjord of the Mittelmosel, the Saar is more open country, and vineyards mix with forests and pasture. It is deliciously relaxing, quiet and verdant and birdy.

In massage they talk about the cleansing breath, the exhale that sends the tension away. Coming to the Saar is like taking cleansing breaths, one after another.

And so when I taste the wines, something in them speaks of this place where they grow, both its serenity and its drama. It can't be helped, or at least I can't help it. At the same time, though, I am evaluating each of them as wine qua wine. However much I may love it because it speaks to my soul, the wine has to work by itself, has to have something convincing to say to you in your shop or restaurant, and to me when I taste it months later in the throb and crash of a trade tasting.

It's the only way I know how to respond—how to be alive—by combining a strict professional appraisal with whatever arises spontaneously from within, impulses or impressions or dreams or just emotion. I can't transfer that to you, but we're both human beings and I want you to know it is there. Something is there. These wines offer an opportunity to pass

through a curtain.

I also think there are gregarious wines and also introspective wines, and I love those autonomous little beings who don't look up when you enter the room. I have an amazingly clear rapport with wines like that.

Saar wine seems to take an essence of Mosel wine and concentrate it, but this isn't something one can isolate as a flavor or flavors per se. Saar soils are a little different from Mosel soils, but only a little; there's more so called Grauwacke here intermixed with the slate. Almost every Mosel wine has an herbal profile and a citric profile, and it is these two things that are seemingly intensified in Saar wines. They are also rather more earthy than Mosel wines. They convey an even more palpable solidity. When they show the expected apple-y fruit they prompt you to imagine the apples were smaller and more dense, or had been picked later, when the fruit-sugars were concentrated by a light frost. Indeed one could say Saar wines taste like Mosel wines from grapes that slightly froze, not deep enough for Eiswein, but just enough for a tangy little jab of concentration. They are also shadier than Mosel wines, with more silvery flavors. Not bad for a guy who basically has no idea what he's talking about!



PIEDMONT



REGION/SUB REGION

Mosel / Saar

VINEYARD AREA

4.5 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

30-40,000 bottles

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Filzener Pulchen

(grey weathered Devonian slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

Sitta Piedmont has arrived as a newly minted graduate from the viti-versity in Geisenheim. We peppered her with questions, partly because she speaks such easy English, and partly because, you know... we talked to Dad last year. I'd like to get to know her better, in part because it's an uncommon choice for a young woman to make—uncommon, but very much welcomed—and I'm curious to understand the allure of steep vineyards and the huge effort to replant them. The estate had lapsed back from 6 to 3 hectares, but the current plan is to grow it to 10. We have a privileged view, as we watch Ms. Piedmont rise.

This estimable VDP estate has been absent from the American market for more than a decade. There is a daughter arriving from Wine-University in the next year or so, and they'd like to be exporting a little. In the "quiet years" they'd let some vineyards go fallow, and had shrunk from 6 to 3 hectares, but there's room to expand to 10, and plans to do so. The estate and vineyards are in Filzen, which is the first village you come to as you leave

the Mosel and head upstream on the Saar. It's vineyards face southeast, which in the old days before climate change was presumed to be a liability. Today it's actually a guarantor of Saar prototypes. I have a producer of crunchy Saar Rieslings (Helmut Plunien at Vols) and didn't need another, and so I came to Piedmont thinking OK fella: convince me. I had the wines in my cellar and drank them over the winter, just like a regular person—you can't overemphasize the value of drinking whole-bottles of wine, sometimes over several days, as opposed to merely "tasting" them. That hoary old ad slogan Good to the last drop contains many grains of truth.

I liked the wines. The young wines were smokin'! The back-vintages were either precisely what they ought to have been, or better than they ought to have been. A visit to the estate confirmed the impressions. These are Saar classics for super-reasonable prices, and yet they are slim but not thin, polished but not turned out, graceful but not bland. They are never very sweet. And they aren't quite like anything else we are offered from the Saar.



2017 Filzen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GPT-006

This feels like a classic Saar wine to me. It has only 18g/l of RS (most would have called it Feinherb) and 8.5 g/l acidity (natural, without deacidification); it leans dry of course, showing a tart apple edge in a cashmere texture; a lovely friendly wine full of character, but it slips easily down—all too easily! One can forget the virtue of simple *tastiness*.

2015 Filzen Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GPT-002

Another effectively-dry wine, with perfect poise. It has some of '15s phenolics but this is subsumed into a rich texture in general. I like its cut and edge, but these are too analogue to be "sharp."

2016 Filzener Pulchen Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GPT-004

My favorite today; this has turned into a sleek lissome beauty, actually both interesting and adorable. It has a big big smile of flavor; herbs, quince, matcha powder, salts.

+

2015 Filzener Pulchen Riesling Spätlese

12/750ml | GPT-003

A lovely Saar archetype; "cool", spiced apple, angular and piquant beneath a fine rich fruit; malic, herbal, complex and long, an equipoise of richness and coolness with a blown-out-candle finish. The wine has entered its "quiet moment" especially vis-à-vis the extroverted '16, but it's the "better" wine in terms ripeness and umami. You have to summon and coax its big internal richness to peek out of the gopher hole.

+

VOLS



REGION / SUB REGION

Saar / Ayl

VINEYARD AREA

7 hectares

ANNUAL PRODUCTION

4,000 cases

TOP SITES AND SOIL TYPES

Ayler Kupp

(weathered slate)

Ayler Schonfels

(weathered slate)

Wiltinger Kupp

(weathered slate)

Wiltinger Braunfels

(weathered slate)

Wiltinger Schlangengraben

(weathered slate)

GRAPE VARIETIES

Riesling

FARMING PRACTICES

Practicing organic viticulture

To a certain extent both 2016 and 2017 were atypical here. “Atypical” doesn’t imply any disappointment on my part; it’s just the facts. As a rule Helmut Plunien made wines you really crunch and snap into, sort of ur-Saar, as if Merkelbach made them. 2016 was smoother and more flowery, and ’17—which is the better vintage—is also a little less starched than before. Sometimes!

Plunien, for those who don’t know the back-story, had a couple executive jobs in a couple very-well-known big wineries, the last of which he left when he could no longer tolerate their shoddiness and dishonesty. At that point he and his family realized he wouldn’t be happy unless he could do his own thing. It began with some vineyards in Wiltingen (including the excellent Braunfels and has since grown to encompass sites in the Ayler Kupp. These are not (in Johannes Selbach’s words) “cookie-cutter wines;” they are loaded with character and are determinedly individual. The estate is named “Vols” after a cadaster parcel in Braunfels.

These days Plunien is obtaining new parcels hither and yon, and some of them are planted with truly strange grape varieties, so that Vols is offering a *Cabernet Sauvignon* from the Saar; thus the sum of incoherence in the world is increased by one. He’s also made a rosé and seems in general to be playfully enjoying the detours he’s taking. But I came in search of classic Saar Rieslings and shall maintain my purist’s vision.



2017 Estate Riesling

12/750ml | GVL-036

All from Ayl. A young sulfur shroud precludes detailed descriptors, but it fits the classic Saar profile I seek. Unchaptalized (ostensible) “QbA” with 29g/l RS and acidity around nine. It’s salty, fibrous-crunchy and on the money.

2017 Ayler Kupp Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GVL-037

Seems drier than the estate Riesling; it’s a gorgeous old-school Saar Kab—“classic” barely begins to describe it; apple-skin and mineral and those crunchy little crystals you find in old Comte or Reggiano; long, saturated finish.

2017 Riesling Ayler Kupp *Stirn*

12/750ml | GVL-038

This is a cadaster parcel in the best part of the Kupp, not to be confused with the single-site in Saarburg. The wine has something of the 2016 silkiness as well as the ‘17 smoke and char; it’s full of *quetsch* rather than apple—is this ‘17 or is it inherent to the site? A complex almost Nahe-like finish.

2017 Wiltinger Kupp Riesling Kabinett

12/750ml | GVL-039

Again more silken than the Ayler Kupp; overtly slatey yet with this hyacinth florality and an intense herbal-limey profile.

2017 Wiltinger Braunfels “Vols II”

12/750ml | GVL-042

The best vintage of this wine I have tasted. It tastes like *Saar Riesling* and not Romorantin or Chenin. Salty and herbal and showing the ‘17 smoke, this wine is actually a wee bit sweet in the estate’s usual context, but it *works* for this wine.

2017 Wiltinger Braunfels “Vols I

12/750ml | GVL-041

Elegant, Spätlese style and again a solid Saar profile; pronounced and with authority; fine botrytis, fine length, a different “type” for this wine but one I very much welcome.