

terry theise estate selections

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This catalog is dedicated to
Dr. Gary Glass of Austin, Texas

"And this is the simple truth - that to live is to feel oneself lost. He who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground. Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look around for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere, because it is a question of his salvation, will cause him to bring order into the chaos of his life. These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce."

-Søren Kierkegaard

"Before Buddha or Jesus spoke, the nightingale sang, and long after the words of Jesus and Buddha are gone into oblivion, the nightingale still will sing. Because it is neither preaching nor commanding nor urging. It is just singing."

- D.H. Lawrence

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Introduction

Almost on the very first day I was hit with some distressing news. Walter Glatzer told me he's heard some virus was attacking the little songbirds the Germans and Austrians call *Amsels*, and which we know as blackbirds. Up to 90% of them were affected, and Amsel corpses were showing up on the streets. Surely I'd noticed there were fewer this year. Now that he mentioned it, I had.

I asked most of the other growers whether they'd heard the news. Some hadn't. Some had, but thought the problem was confined to lands south of the Alps. Others said it was exaggerated by the media. One said I should trust in nature; yes, a few birds would die, but these things occur, and the birds would return in the fullness of time. This was comforting.

But at first I was aggrieved. I like these birds. We

just horny guy-birds singing to seduce girl-Amsels, still, every time I hear them their songs fill someplace in me where sadness usually lives, and pushes it out. Perhaps because their music embodies a kind of grace I find in Europe, which I receive as a balm for the clenching grind of American life. After the Glatzer visit with its shocking news, I seemed to find plenty of Amsels, and in one quiet garden in Krems there were two of them, competing against both each other and the midday bells. I like to think of all the people whom they've delighted, all whom they will yet delight, and to feel my little place in the continuum, listening happily to a little black bird.

I am aware none of this will motivate you to purchase more Grüner Veltliner, but if you bear with me I will show how it deepens your understanding not only of GV but of European wines in general, of Europe in general. As I sat in the somewhat bedraggled garden behind one of Krems' several churches, a modern specimen of Euro-man came striding through with his au-courant Hugo Boss bizwear, yakking away on his cell phone. Zoomed in, zoomed out. What's this little garden mean to him, I wondered? Maybe nothing, and maybe that's as it should be. In some way, I am sure, he is centered by a prevalent *kindness*; he isn't clenched against his environment but can afford to be blind to it.

The best of Europe's wines express a similar sort of kindness, weaving themselves into



don't seem to have similar songbirds on the East Coast where I live. When I hear the first Amsel-song I know I'm in Europe; it centers me. I'm no sort of ornithologist, and most of my knowledge of birds is confined to the ones after whom baseball teams are named. But these are really hip little birds; they sing like tiny angels. They start singing at the first incipience of dawn (What do they sense that we don't? As far as I can tell it's still pitch-black.) and sing intermittently throughout the day and into the evening. They like to fill the quiet. They sing constantly on Sundays, and over the lunch-hours in small towns where the shops close and the streets empty.

And no two of them sing the same. Some are whimsical, some are brazen, some are mischievous, some lyrical. Nor does any single bird ever repeat himself. It is very easy to fantasize about them, channeling some inchoate music of nature, yet even though I know they're

your food, your senses, tactfully and courteously, never forcing onto your palate more than it can easily carry. Europe is far from utopia, I know full well, yet these are societies which close off their town and city centers to vehicle traffic only because it is more *pleasant* to shop and convene away from noise and exhaust. Is it an accident that tactful wines arise from such people?

I'm always jazzed to take this trip; there are so many people of whom I'm fond over there. And I had all kinds of fun, mostly legal, and I'm sure there were one or two nights I actually got my clothes off before passing out to sleep. But something really strikes home for me in Austria: this is a *young* wine culture. I turned fifty last summer (but with the body of a man of forty nine) and I am aware of a subtle paradigm shift whereby I look forward to visiting Christine Saahs (at Nikolaihof) or Erich Salomon (at Undhof) because they're closer to my age.

There are a lot of very good wines in Austria. Oh I'm sure there's plenty of dross too, but I am repeatedly struck by the base-line competence of so many wineries. Yet in certain instances it seems to stop at competence. That's certainly better than stopping at incompetence, but it's best not to confuse it with inspiration. I scanned my portfolio and started to see the *kinds* of people I chose to work closely with. They are restless truth-seekers, viticulturally speaking, and their wines are imbued, as if to ask "How can I be more than only this?"

If German wine is mystic, Austrian wine is corporeal, even sexual. That is perhaps because Austrian wine is more than "merely" Riesling (her Rieslings are about as celestially mystic as the variety can ever be), and it might also be that these are the most graceful high-alcohol wines on earth, hence you drink them *as if* they were medium-alcohol wines and pretty soon you get sorta dazed.

Austrian wine is exploding. If it ain't exploding in your town you should move to another town. The business is going nuts. You can drink Grüner Veltliner in Tulsa, for Pete's sake. (This is true, scout's honor.) Important sommeliers call us to say "We need an Austrian section on our list". The bulls are charging. If you're already with us: YEE HA! If you're on the sidelines there's a lot of fun going on without you.

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

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

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

- Your fear of the German language . . . *Kein angst!*
- Your presumption that the wines are similar to German wines. They are not. Loire, Alsace, Friuli are the closest cognates.
- The market's preference—abetted by lazy wine



merchants and middlebrow journalists—for processed, manipulated, do-all-the-work-for-you wines over wines with uncompromisingly soil-imprinted flavors with which the drinker can *engage*.

- The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes it hard for a lowly Yank to get much of the stellar stuff. Some of you will never get to taste what this country can do. Go there and get down.

As I sell Austrian wines, I see a chilling schism between the *curious* and the complacent. You don't have to be any kind of hot-shot wine "intellectual" to get at these wines, to sell them, to enjoy them yourself. You just have to be curious, you have to want to know what they're like. The complacent, on the other hand, prefer wines that sell themselves (or which are sold by the wine press) and see any new category with wariness. I have heard many marvelously creative excuses why these wines can't be sold. I often feel a certain kind of person is more creative at finding reasons to say NO than in figuring out how to **sell** whatever (s)he wants to. Customers rise to the level you set for them. Your conviction creates their curiosity, and most of them will love these wines if **they're encouraged** to approach them.

But if you don't care, or if you are opposed to anything that threatens to increase your workload, you'll tell me there's no "call" for the wines. And then of course there *won't* be. Duh.

Even more: I feel there's a sort of yearning





Storks roosting in Rust

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

Most Austrian white wine is dry. Most Austrian sweet wine is very sweet, in the obvious-dessert-wine manner of Sauternes. Most Austrian wine, period, is DRY. Just after the scandal there was a rigid insistence that the wines be bone-dry. The operating principle is don't interfere with the wine, so in vintages when fermentations go all the way the wines are very dry. Other times a few slovenly grams of sugar remain. It's as it happens.

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

I approve of a wine culture with an aversion to con-

fecting, but this is an early stage of maturing into a culture which knows when to be rigid and when to relax. But we're ahead of ourselves. Suffice it to say I have never tasted and cannot imagine an Austrian white wine that was diminished by a *small* amount of residual sugar undetectable as sweetness, but discernable as deeper fruit, more thrilling flavor (and incidentally more flexible at the table). And they could do it if they *wanted* to; Süßreserve (a.k.a. *Dosage*) has been legal for two years now, though I know of no one actually using it. They are very squeamish. I understand, since I'm squeamish too, but we're at different spots on the squeam-o-meter. I feel strongly that 98% of Austrian white wines would be improved by 3 to 5 grams per liter residual sugar more than they happen to have naturally. They wouldn't taste "sweet;" they'd simply taste better. Sure it's a slippery slope, and if you keep sliding down it you open the door to all kinds of manipulations. If! The fact is there's zero reason to assume this would happen. People need to trust themselves, and their palates.

The wines are high in alcohol compared to German wine—which believe me, you **notice** after a day of tasting them. The least of them runs to 11% and the biggest live in Turley-land, up to 15% and occasionally higher. The golden mean is probably around 13%, not insubstantial. Whereas German vineyards cluster around the 50th degree of north latitude, most Austrians are down around the 47th, equivalent to Burgundy. Thus they have more glycerin than German wines, but are still more firmly structured than anything *except* German wines.

Many Austrian wines do a funny thing on your palate. They smell great! You taste them expecting a big up-front blast of flavor, like water shot from a squirt-gun, and often you don't get it. What *happened?* you wonder. Wait a second . . . *there* it is, just as you swallow (or spit), swollen and seeming to cover your palate now, and it lasts and lasts and *won't* go away. The bigger wines relish decanting; **THEY NEED OXYGEN**. They aren't so much penetrating as *encompassing*. They wrap their flavor around you, sometimes big like mountains, but more often undulant like rolling hills.



The 2003 Vintage

I came back to the April *Wine Advocate* and was delighted to see Bob Parker writing about the many-faced 2003 Bordeaux vintage. Somehow I think we'll all be grappling with 2003, no matter what part of Europe we're discussing. It's a vintage defiant of summary, a vintage like some big bag of M&Ms each one another color.

Austria was as hot and dry as everywhere else in Europe, though irrigation was often helpful and sometimes decisive. The vintage was either very early or at the normal time or very late. Summed it right up didn't it! But this is one of the demarcations of 2003, so I'll rap about it.

A few growers freaked they'd have no acidity, and picked early, in September. In most instances their fruit was sugar-ripe but physiologically unripe; many of the resulting wines taste constricted, antiseptic and incomplete. A few taste very good - especially at Nikolaihof, who claim to have *had* full ripeness earlier in their biodynamically farmed vineyards than others had in their "conventional" ones. I heard many stories about crews starting at dawn and stopping by eleven, just to bring in the coolest possible fruit. Past experiments with dry-ice weren't repeated. As Heidi Schröck told me, "It hurts if it touches my skin, so why should I let it touch the skins of my grapes?" And even if this is scientifically groundless it is existentially true!

Other growers said don't worry about acidity, pick when ripe. And they did, with typically good results. Others said to wait as long as possible; sugars had built too quickly, and the utmost hang-time was needed to



build aromas. The Autumn was normal in temperature and rainfall (though a few places experienced frost on October 24th). In many instances I had trouble with these very-late picked wines: too much body, too much alcohol, too little shape, and oddly, too little true length. Yet a few of them were superb. And all in all, the "victory" went to those who didn't panic and picked at the normal times.

After picking, the next demarcation was pressing style. The smartest paid great heed to phenolics. Grapes were drought-stressed, even from irrigated vineyards, and skins were tough. Hiedler, usually a lover of long skin-contact, confined his fruit to a mere 30 minutes. Hirsch says "I was very glad for the whole-cluster press-

ing this year." Yet a certain phenolic presence was sometimes welcome, as a stand-in for low acids. Again, you don't dare generalize.

Two even more curious phenomena arose in 2003: some wines ended up with *more* acidity than they began with. I'm not sure how such a thing can happen. And the vintage as a whole seems to have *benefited* from bottling, which contained its tendency to sprawl. There are-of course!-exceptions, and several growers said they thought this phenomenon would be short-lived.



So how is it? You just had to ask, didn't you?

I have never experienced a vintage with a longer spread between average quality and top quality. Thus in a sense how *it* is depends on which slice of it you happen to carve. It is a very fine Riesling vintage, beyond any doubt. Probably excellent, possibly superb. Just as in Germany, the 2003 Austrian Rieslings taste much cooler than the conditions in which they grew. I count about fifteen masterpieces just in this weensy lil' *tranche* of Austria, wines as thrilling as any Rieslings I've ever tasted.

Less thrilling are the Pinots, especially Gris, but even some Pinot Blancs toppled beneath their own weight.

It is a fantastic *red wine* vintage, probably the best-ever. I hedge even to this tiny degree only because one must be wary of over-hyping based on cask-samples of red wines. But I have no doubt it is a sensational vintage, and reason to hope it is a great one.

For Grüner Veltliner the vintage is . . . good. Better than so-so, better than mediocre, not as good as fabulous, but there are more than enough satisfyingly tasty wines. There are few outstanding ones, and even fewer great ones. But neither are there as many truly gnarly ones as in '98 or '96. 2003 was less kind to GrüVe than to Riesling. This is commercially inconvenient, but there you go; dry Riesling is undervalued. In some ways it barely matters what the quality of GrüVe may be at the top end, since y'all tend to buy it at the below-\$20 stratum - and those wines are just jiggy in 2003.

When 2003s are good they really sing, they're virile and magnetic and extroverted. When they don't work they tend to be unusually abrupt, without the finishing length typical for Austrian wines. Some of them are

merely clunky. And many of them, even some of the good ones, have discernible phenolic bitterness on the finish. Again, this cuts the point very finely - many casual drinkers won't notice - but cutting finely is sorta what we *do* here. And I was irritated at the many wines that needn't have been *bitter* when four stinking grams of RS would have cleaned them right up. There's a thin line between purity and perversity and too many Austrians are on the wrong side of it.

Apropos perversity, the final twist in 2003 is yet to come; you simply cannot presume the best wines will come from the "best" names. Anything but. Some of the "best" names disappointed and other names you barely consider actually made *spectacular* wines. So PLEASE, don't order by rote this year; read the text. Hey, I'll meet you half way: here's my list of top performers in vintage 2003. See how many unlikely names are on it. See how many expected names are not.

BEST OF THE BEST:

Alzinger
Schloss Gobelsburg
Hiedler

PRETTY FRICKIN' GOOD:

Glatzer (*gorgeous* reds)
Schröck
Berger
Hirsch

Finally, I ask you to understand this report is my desire to tell you the whole story, even the warty parts. Otherwise everything is gosh-darn beautiful all the time and there's no point reading. You will easily be able to assemble a bunch of wines to satisfy your every wish from 2003. But your list will likely contain new names for you, and I do advise more than the usual care in compiling your order.

Cork

Until last month I'd have granted Germany the dubious distinction of having the largest proportion of corked wines. No more.

It has reached epidemic levels. And, it gives the lie to those who claim German wines show it more because of their transparency and low alcohol. Bullshit. I saw it continuously in Austrian wines with 13% alc and more.

The Austrians are acting with more celerity than are the Germans. Cork is a constant topic of conversation. Johannes Hirsch is really sticking his neck out and bottling everything with screw caps: *everything*. He is the cause celebre, let me tell you. The evening after we visited him, Kevin Pike had a chat with Klaus Wagner, celebrated restaurateur and bon vivant of Landhaus Bacher, where we stayed and dined. "If the service does its job correctly, a corked bottle should never reach the table," Wagner said. Yet they do, Kevin pointed out, and it stress-

es the staff unnecessarily. "Well perhaps," Wagner assented, "But serving a fine wine from a bottle with a screw cap would be like serving our cuisine off of paper plates."

"Fair enough," Kevin responded. "But would you accept it if 15% of your dishes were *ruined* because of a problem with the porcelain?"

"Hmmm; I hadn't thought of it that way."

Personally I have had quite enough of cork, thank you very much. Clearly the forests weren't able to handle the massive increase in demand for cork the last thirty years. And clearly many corners were cut. And clearly the problem is getting worse, and fast. I don't think it's especially sexy to move to screw caps but it's the *lesser of two evils*.

And it boggles my mind to think a hard working grower who'd sweated and toiled for an entire year to produce kick-ass wine could ever be sanguine about having his work laid to waste by 40 cents worth of *tree bark*.

Willi Bründlmayer joined us for dinner one evening, and angel that he is, he'd remembered I was observing a landmark birthday this year. And so he brought one of three remaining bottles of 1953 Heiligenstein Riesling along to share, in a deeply touching gesture of friendship. Corked.



Screwcap from Weingut Hirsch

First Among Equals

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

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

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

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

GRAPE VARIETIES

Grüner Veltliner

I doubted I'd live to see the day a Veltliner-vogue developed, but bless you savvy sommeliers in New York City and San Francisco, it done did. GrüVe's migration to Oklahoma began with my (now) broker hitting the A-list of San Fran restaurants and finding vast sections of Veltliner on all the wine lists.

May I put words in y'all's mouth? I think you noticed GrüVe was both classic and exotic, practical and adorable, and it *answered a food-prayer* that had long been a vexing mystery. Among the many wonderful things Grüner Veltliner is, it is above all THE wine that will partner all the foods you thought you'd *never* find a wine for.

Grüner Veltliner—and do me a favor and don't shorten it to "Grüner," it sounds so *illiterate*—is Austria's most populous variety, about a third of all vineyard land. In Italian it would be VALTELLINA VERDE and we'd all sell the *cojones* out of it, but I tried to get Austria to adopt Italian as their official language and they just looked at me funny.

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

If you know the variety, hey, don't mind me! You already love it, you don't need my goofball ravings. If you don't know it, crawl out from under that rock and **check it out**, Charlie. Start with this: if Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc had a baby, it would be Grüner Veltliner. Think of all the things you associate with those two grapes, exotics, flowers, grasses, flint, melon, veggies and . . . read on.

I stress again: *Grüner Veltliner is THE ANSWER to all the foods that supposedly are wine-killers*. Artichokes, shrimp, avocado, every manner of obstreperous veggie, the Veltliner loves 'em. Need a white wine for a wild-mushroom sautee? Step right up. Want a wine for a really **peppery** salad, lots of mizuna, tatsoi, arugula ("arugula" in Italian), I have it for you. NO INTELLIGENT WINE LIST CAN AFFORD TO IGNORE THIS VARIETY! And, bless you all, few of them do. In fact I'd take it a step farther and claim, with incoherent confidence, that GrüVe is the world's most flexible *dry* white wine at table. Put another way; if one feels one must drink vino-sans-*sucre* for whatever dingbat reason (oysters, maybe?) than this variety belongs in your life in a big way.

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

before we knew about this stuff?"

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

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

Some years ago in a blind tasting whose judges were predominantly non-Austrians and whose wines were either Veltliners or white Burgundies, the TOP wine and three of the top FIVE were Grüner Veltliners, beating up on blue-chip Grand Cru Burgundies costing six times as much. These results have been bracingly consistent regardless of venue and regardless of who makes up the panel and who chooses the wines. The most recent tasting was held in London; Jancis Robinson selected the Chardonnays and the tasters were overwhelmingly non-Austrians. **Same result.** The preponderant favorites and always the very top wines were Grüner Veltliners—interestingly quite regularly *Willi Bründlmayer's* Grüner Veltliner.

I don't know what this might mean but I do know what it strongly suggests: Grüner Veltliner is usually a better and less expensive wine than nearly any Chardonnay to which it's compared.

Aging Grüner Veltliner: you gotta be patient! I know of no variety other than Chenin Blanc (in the Loire, of course) which takes longer to taste *old*. All things being



equal, Veltliner lasts longer than Riesling, and it never goes petrolly. What it can do is to take on a dried-mushroom character that becomes almost meaty. Mature GrüVe has been a revelation to every taster I've seen. It's a perfect choice for a rich fatty meat course when you prefer to use white wine. Don't think you have to drink them young - though if you catch one at any age short of ten years you are drinking it young. Think of young GrüVe like fresh oyster mushrooms, and grownup GrüVe like dried shiitakes.

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

Riesling

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

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

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

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

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

Pinot Blanc

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

Muskateller

a.k.a. GELBER MUSKATELLER. The latter is more than just eyewash; it distinguishes the superior "yellow Muscat" from its higher-yielding, less refined cousin the Muscat Ottonel. Again, in Alsace the two may be blended-though no disrespect is intended to the Alsacians, who Muscats are certainly the *sine qua non* for the variety. The Austrians make it either bone-dry in the manner of the Alsacians, or exotically rich and sweet à la Beaumes de Venise. There are dry types that are dead ringers for Alsace but the Steiermark Muscats can be real double-take material, as the palate is forced to attend to a keen, sweet grassiness absent in even the best Alsace examples.

Rülander

a.k.a. PINOT GRIS. This may be seen from time to time, most often in Burgenland. It's as frustratingly irregular here as it is anywhere (everywhere!) else. Great when it's great and boring when it's not.

Sauvignon Blanc

Some years ago at a London trade fair, a tasting of great Sauvignon Blancs of the world was organized. The tasters included the usual contingent of M.W. Brits, plus Didier Dagueneau, and was conducted blind. When the wines were revealed, four of the top ten were Styrian. I once made the rash statement that Styrian Sauvignon Blancs were the best I had ever tasted. I feel corroborated! Vindicated! Exacerbated! Incubated! The wines really are pretty jazzy. Pity they're so bloody expensive, especially with our anemic Dollar.

RED VARIETIES

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

Thus as Austrian reds become more important to my business, I thought I'd do a little self-exam just to ensure my hippitude. So I assembled me a few cases of old-world reds, specifically chosen to be fruit-driven medium-weight, and under \$25 retail. There were Italian wines and Spanish wines and French wines, and last winter was cold and austere and I couldn't wait to slop

those bad boys down. I'd have been pleased to be merely competitive with my Austrian reds. I expected nothing more. I was absolutely shocked with what I found.

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

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

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

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

A few Austrian reds can stand with the great wines of the world; not the greatest, but certainly the great. But for each of these few, there are many others who reach but do not grasp, who affect the superficial attributes of the wines they model themselves on, without grasping the soul of such wines. Still one applauds them for trying, and it's all very new, and they're learning-by-doing. What is truly heartening is Austria's frequent success at the stratum just below the great - the very good, the useful, the satisfying and delightful.

You'd recognize most of your favorites: Pinot Noir, Cabernet, Merlot, plus someone has Nebbiolo planted somewhere. One really fine thing that's happening now is a general retreat away from Cabernet. "We have the climate to ripen it but our subsoils are too cold," one grower told me. Thus our ubiquitous friend gives rampant veggies except in the steamiest vintages. "But hey," the same grower continued; "we tried it, it didn't take, recess over, back to work!" There's a discernable and laudable return to the several indigenous varieties: the Portugieser (which you may know from Germany), the Blauburger, which is a crossing of Portugieser with Blaufränkisch - you get the picture. There are, however, three types to interest us, each

unusual, and each offering something we cannot find elsewhere.

The first of these is **SANKT LAURENT**. This is a très hip grape, folks. It's Pinot Noir-ish with a "sauvage" touch, and it can do nearly all the things fine Pinot Noir does, but with added bottom notes of sagey wildness. More growers would plant it, but the vine itself is prone to mutation and it can rarely be left in the ground for more than twenty years or so. It won't flower unless the weather's perfect. It produces a tight cluster of thin-skinned berries, and is thus subject to rot if conditions aren't ideal. "You have to be a little crazy to grow this grape," said one grower. Yet such vines become litmus tests for a vintner's temperament; like Rieslaner, when you see it you know, ipso facto, you're dealing with the right kind of lunatic. Now that my friend Glatzer's St. Laurent is in production, Theise Selections is officially a Laurent district. And all kinds of growers are stepping up to the challenge; St. Laurent has become the trendy grape, and I gotta tell ya, I absolutely love it. If you love good Burgundy but can't afford to *drink* good Burgundy, this variety will satisfy you all kinds of ways.

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

Finally there's the **BLAUFRÄNKISCH**, a variety I like more each year. It's of the cabernet type, a little bricky and capsule-y, and when it's unripe it's slightly vegetal. But lately I've seen much better stuff from this grape. In fact I think the quality-spread is widest here. Most of Austria's greatest red wines are made entirely or mostly from Blaufränkisch, yet weak Blaufränkisch is less pleasing than weak Zweifelt. (I've yet to taste a truly crummy St. Laurent.) I'd still put it in the Malbec-y school (whereas the Zweifelt is Syrah-y and the Sankt Laurent is Pinot-y). In my recent visit to Austria I remarked that an especially good Blaufränkisch we were tasting reminded me of good Cahors, and someone said "This is far better than any Cahors being made today," so you get the picture. Zweifelt is for spaghetti, Sankt Laurent is for duck or squab, and Blaufränkisch is for lamb chops. A perfect three-course meal!

Austrian Wine Laws

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

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

Austrian labels have to indicate the wine's residual sugar. They're actually a bit off-the-deep-end on this issue, but there are recent signs of an evolution. There's a grower in my portfolio almost all of whose wines have a little RS. This is deliberate. The wines are fabulously successful, and nobody finds them "sweet." But another wise sage voiced a note of caution. Other growers (said the voice) notice this man's success, and they imitate his style so they too can be successful. But they do a facile imitation of the most *superficial* aspect of the style, i.e. the few grams of residual sugar, and the next thing you know our Austrian wines are once again headed in the wrong direction. Don't get me wrong (he continued), I like the wines; they're not my style but they're good wines. But everyone doesn't have this man's talent. And so in a sense his wines are dangerous.

Such are the terms of the debate!

Here's my take on it. To focus on a vision of absolute purity as an Ideal will create unintended mischief. Will do and *has* done. Every grower's goal should be to produce the most delicious, harmonious and characterful wine he can. If that means

zero sugar some years, 3 grams in others and 6 grams in others then that's what it means. "Oh but then we'd have to manipulate the wine" they retort. But this is fatuous. Winemaking is *ipso facto* manipulation. We are talking about degrees of manipulations, and which are acceptable under which circumstances in the service of what. "We would prefer an unattractive wine than one which we have confected into attractiveness by manipulating its sugar" is a reasonable case to make, provided one has the courage to accept the consequences of making unattractive wines. What too many do, sadly, is to sell unattractiveness as virtuous, in a fine example of Orwellian double-speak.

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

And one has to consider the palate's orientation at any given moment. If you've been tasting, say, oh, California Chardonnay, when you hit a Grüner Veltliner with 4 grams per liter residual sugar you'll receive it *dry*, but if instead you've been tasting a line of bone-dry GrüVes, the first one with 4 grams of sugar will stand out. Is it strict sweetness you taste? I'd say no. It is an enlivened fruit and an extra note in the pattern. It is Good. I can't imagine it being unwelcome. It's better with almost all food (except maybe oysters) and it's more pleasurable. I like pleasure.

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



Austrian Wine Culture

The Austrian wine culture is giddy, overheated, fun and also a little weird. It has a new-world sense of infinite possibilities, and the urgent *buzz* of a wine scene in full burgeon. Yet it's based on old-world verities. It is surrounded by the redolence of long-simmered loveliness, buildings, trees, gardens, all calling to you from out of the long, slow past. But this wine culture has fundamentally reinvented itself in the last 19 years. (Before the 1985 scandal most Austrian wines imitated German wines.)



Yet the lines along which it reinvents itself are largely conservative; fidelity to soil and a healthy aversion to confected flavor.

Along with the nascence of quality there's a feverishly curious and thirsty clientele who simply can't get enough. There are no undiscovered geniuses making wine here, unless you wear a disguise and put an electrified fence around your winery. Everybody's ass is up for grabs. And they **get around**, too, these young hotheads; Heidi Schröck knows more winemakers in California than you do. Most of their labels and packages are in line with mainstream commercialism.

And the "top ten" (or however many) growers are local superstars, like Jonny Hallidays of wine, and if you want their best stuff you should have gotten in line back in 1986. And each year another young man (or woman) *gets it*: all of a sudden, from out of nowhere, stellar wines.

Austrian wine is *trendy* inside Austria, and it has little to do with mere chauvinism. In contrast, German wine is still a bit of a waif inside Germany, and even as things slowly improve, other wines have more *cachet*. Not in Austria. A cellar with all the necessary verticals (Hirtzberger Singerriedel, Nigl Riesling Privat, Alzinger Riesling Steinertal, and many others!) is all the *cachet* an Austrian imbibor needs.

As heady and hyper-oxygenated as it all is, it's young and brash, and it doesn't reach very deep into my own soul. Individual wines can, but I find I have to retreat

from the buzz and just sink into the wine. The sense of *gravitas* one feels quite often in Germany is only seen in flickers here; it takes a man like Erich Salomon, with a few years under his belt, to rouse the shy gods who live below the blossoming topsoil. If you *like* that explosively creative youthful energy—and why *not*, it's such **fun**—you'll feel very happy in Austria. I like it too. Yet as I get better at listening to my own heart I discover I'll probably like it even more in another twenty years, when the *whoosh!* has died down and we can all hear the wines more slowly and deeply.

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

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



When to Drink the Wines

Wine Spectator often raises a chuckle among Austrian wine lovers with its frequent “drink now – 2006” suggestions. Bruce Sanderson (who’s a truly good guy) tells me he hesitates to indicate when the wines will really be ready to drink for fear people will be intimidated and *won’t* drink them. Well, let’s see. Tell me if your blood runs cold.

You can drink GrüVe either very young if you enjoy its primary fruit, or very old if you like mature flavors. GrüVe seems to age in a steady climb. Naturally the riper it is the longer it goes, but in general it doesn’t start showing true tertiary flavors till it’s about 12 years old. Even then it’s just a patina. Around 20-25 it starts tasting like grown-up mature wine—but still not *old*. Wait a little longer.

Riesling, amazingly, ages faster. In certain vintages it takes on the flavor-known-as “petrol”, which it later sheds. Great Austrian Riesling will certainly make old bones—30-40 years for the best wines—but all things being equal GrüVe tastes younger at every point along the way. So: young is always good. If you want mature overtones wait about ten years. If you want a completely mature wine, wait about twenty.

Even more improbable; Pinot Blanc can make it to



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

A Note on My Use of the Word “Urgestein”:

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



Styria, Interruptus

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

This year I tasted three of the leading growers’ wines, and from each of the three a plausible portfolio could be assembled. From the best of them a very *fine* offering was possible. Yet their prices took me aback.

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

Those high prices are quite the *ow-eee* when competing toe to toe with those demure little Sauvignons from New Zealand. Let alone entirely honorable Sauv Blancs from some remote place called France. This needs thought. If for no other reason than the whole thing works so well there. Styria could so easily have succumbed to honky-tonk but instead it’s the most alluring place on earth. The “story” needs to be told, but the Styrians will, I fear, need to subsidize it being told.

Map of Austria



1. WACHAU
2. KREMSTAL
3. KAMPTAL
4. TRAISENTAL
5. DONAULAND
6. WEINVIERTEL
7. CARNUNTUM
8. THERMENREGION
9. BURGENLAND
10. NEUSIEDERSEE
11. NEUSIEDERSEE-HÜGELLAND
12. MITTELBURGENLAND
13. SÜDBURGENLAND
14. SÜD-OSTSTEIERMARK
15. SÜDSTEIERMARK
16. WESTSTEIERMARK

hirschmann

styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

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

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

Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

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

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

Storing and Handling

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

The Assortment

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

Leo Hirschmann makes the La Tâche of pumpkin seed oil. It has amazing polish and complexity. Three years ago Hirschmann started producing two oils, the second with a longer roasting time and a "stronger" flavor, so we can all have our pick.

Bottle sizes

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

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



weingut engelbert prieler

neusidelersee-hugelland • schützen

You've hardly met a more cheerful guy. It's contagious, too, and before long you're feeling happier to be alive yourself. Of course, I might have lots to be cheerful about if I lived a hundred yards from one of the great restaurants of Europe. Schützen am Gebirge is best-known as the home of Taubenkobl, at which Engelbert Prieler is a regular, and where he does his wicked-Uncle-Ernie act flirting with the proprietor's comely daughter. It may have been there that I first heard about him; I think we drank one of his incredible Pinot Blancs. Since then I have had all of his incredible Pinot Blancs, at least the ones on the list at Taubenkobl, and these are some *BOFFO* wines.

I paid a visit to Prieler a few years ago, but hesitated as I wanted all the available Burgenland

business to go to Heidi Schröck. Well there's enough available business now for the both of em.

Having spent all this time with him I have unusually little to say. "Often underrated" says Giles MacDonogh. The highly respected Austrian wine publication *Vinaria* considers this man the unsung hero of the Burgenland.

Sometimes when you're getting acquainted with a new vintner you're just not surprised any more by his spiel: *all* the good ones are lowering yields, *all* the good ones are hand-harvesting. You know?

I rather like something I'm seeing here, though. The estate is enjoying more influence from daughter Silvia Prieler who seems to be the heiress apparent. Girl-vint-



The newest winemaker at Prieler, Silvia's son Sebastian

ners are still News in olde Europe (Silvia's a member of a group called "11 Women And Their Wines" which also includes Heidi Schröck) and Bertl Prieler seems right proud of his smart and vital daughter. Plus he gets to spend more time in the vineyards, where his heart lies. Ask him any question about the wines and he says "Oh don't ask me; I'm just a simple farmer now . . ." He does, however, claim all the credit for the *quality* of the wines. Every wine, no matter which one. Offer a compliment of any sort and he grins and twinkles and says "Yes, the quality here was the result of scrupulous viticulture," or "Indeed, it goes to show what is possible when you have a genius working the vines," until finally I got it, and whenever I liked a wine I turned to Dad and said "Wow, there was really some bloody fabu-

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

lous vineyard work here," and he'd reply "Yes, wasn't there!"

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



Engelbert Prieler

Prieler at a glance:

A well-reputed producer making muscular, ripeness-driven whites and meaty reds. Variety of styles varying by choices of steel, cask, NEW cask, SMALL cask, malo.

AEP-026 **2003 Pinot Blanc Ried Seeberg**

Just a euphoric nose! No malo this year - "We *had* no malic acidity to ferment!" said Silvia - yet the fragrance is overwhelmingly apple, with sweet maize and mimosa; the palate is "sweet" and bright, salty, corn and apple and crème fraîche; ripe but snappy; a lovely example of this superfine wine.

AEP-027 **2003 Chardonnay Ried Sinner**

Again unusually there was no malo with no oak but long lees-contact with batonnage; it was whimsical to read one major wine journal noting the "nice balance of oak" in a previous vintage which of course had none. Too much Chardonnay planted where it has no flavor of its own, sybarites. This Chard is a big, stern, authoritarian wine; priestly; stony and firm rather than slutty and lush. There's more overt stone and oyster-shell, more rectitude; higher definition but less sensuous.

AEP-021 **2001 Blaufränkisch Johanneshöhe**

This is the Claret and blackberry side of Blaufränkisch; elegant length and texture, cooler and more convincing than the 2000 (which I didn't select); an explicable and articulate wine. The 2002 vintage (**AEP-021**) will be released in September, and is juicy and more briary, with considerable length and softer tannins. This is partly the riper 2002 vintage, and partly an evolving desire on Silvia's part to make less gravelly wines.

AEP-022 **2001 Schützner Stein**

The wine is usually a "meritage" of varying amounts of Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt and Cabernet Sauvignon. This 2001 has all the Blaufränkisch from the Grand Cru Ried Goldberg, which Prieler won't bottle separately this year. It has opened beautifully in the past year, showing complex Perigord black truffle, violet and carob notes. The 2002 vintage (**AEP-029**), **(+)**, again released in September, is 85% Blaufränkisch and 15% Merlot, has more depth and a deeper peel; rich and earthy, a wine of countryside, with size, girth; a low groan of gob-filling fruit and wonderful physiological sweetness. I like the two vintages equally and differently.

A note on Blaufränkisch Ried Goldberg:

*We're between vintages because no 2001 was made. If you own the 2000, congratulations, because you own a superb wine. The 2002 will be released September 2005, and to my amazement I found myself writing **(+++)** for the cask-sample. Lots can change, but I've never tasted an Austrian red with more potential.*

AEP-030 **2002 Silvia Prieler Pinot Noir**

+

Released 9/04, and a new high water mark for Silvia's baby; it's very big, smoky and ambitious, in the Gevrey school; there's prominent oak in this cask-sample, but it's also capaciously juicy with gurgling sweet fruit, polish and length. And class-fully European, entirely ripe but not a hint of overripeness. I'd say Ms. Prieler *est arrivée*.



A Primer on Terroir

Does this self-evident truth really need to be defended any more?

It seems not. I glean a willingness to agree the phenomenon known as *terroir* actually exists. Where opinions appear to diverge are on two related questions: 1) the definition of *terroir*, and 2) the significance of *terroir* beyond its existence as a simple fact.

First, a definition. "*Terroir*", as I see it, is the entire micro-environment in which a vine grows, beginning with soil, and then beginning with soil's components. The structure of soil especially in terms of porosity is critical, but it doesn't come first. What the soil *consists* of comes first.

Terroir gives wine its DNA. Riesling in northerly climates is the most vivid demonstration, because the vine happens to like poor soils, the grape happens to ripen late, the growers happen to need to plant it on slopes to maximize the odds of ripeness and therefore the soils need to be porous and thin or else they'd wash down the mountain every time it rained.

I suspect the Truth of *terroir* is universal, but this is intuition. The phenomenon of Riesling in Germany is its most compelling evidence, but not the only proof. And what exactly is this thing I'm calling "proof"? It is, very simply, a cause and effect relationship, repeated dozens-of-thousands of times in every vintage, between soil components and wine flavors *for which no other explanation is possible*.

Even those willing to consider the truth of *terroir* might balk at my literal insistence that dirt = flavor. A famous importer of French wine once said "I can walk into a vineyard in Pouilly-Fumé and pick up a fistful of caillou and cram it in my mouth, but I can't taste that flavor in the wine." But this is not what I argue. I don't know of any place where you can literally "taste the soil" (my Mosel growers might well demur!), but I know of many places where you can taste what the soil *does*.

I've been challenged that soil's expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine's DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine's identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was sometimes drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or cornball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it's safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

Nor do I wish to suggest that all of wine's fla-

vors derive from soil components. There are of course macro-factors; an obvious example is the *garigue* flavor imparted to certain wines from grapes grown near actual *garigue*. Yet one hears many gropings for *other* explanations for how wines taste, and many of them are futile. There's a site called Kauber Roßstein in the Mittelrhein, which sits just above a railway tunnel. For years the smoky flavors of the wines were presumed to derive from actual smoke, as the trains blew their whistles before entering the tunnel. Then the lines were electrified - and the smoky flavor remained.

I've also heard it said the notion of *terroir* has no practical value unless it constitutes a guarantee. "A great winemaker will make better wine from "ordinary" soil than a lazy winemaker makes from "great" soil". Again, true, but beside the point.

For years the Plettenberg estate made mediocre wines from its holding in Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube. This is regarded as one of the top-2-or-3 sites in the Nahe region. But the wines were rarely better than ordinary. Meanwhile, Helmut Dönnhoff made sensational wines from his Oberhäuser Leistenberg, manifestly the lesser vineyard. Surely this proved the point that *terroir* was not the decisive component of wine quality?

Sorry, it doesn't. For when Dönnhoff *obtained* the old Plettenberg parcel in Kupfergrube (and when he upgraded the husbandry in what had become a run-down straggly of vines) it became clear immediately which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

I know that all things are rarely equal in the world of wine, but I am not arguing that *terroir* is any kind of guarantee for the consumer. I am arguing that it is the *first* among many criteria, the basic reality that one encounters and accounts for before one truly understands what wine is.

It is certainly impinged upon by the variegations of weather and of human temperament, but this signifies very little; some days I'm alert, some days I'm dozy, sometimes I'm tender and sometimes I'm gruff, but I am always....fat Elvis.

But can we really be sure of this syllogism? Because this-or-that is in the soil, such-and-such a flavor is in the wine? Ah, we want to be sure. Everything in great wine argues against such sureties, but we want what we want. It does appear that Science has taken notice; in the January 2000 issue of Science News, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

"German researchers recently studied 165 wines

from six grape-growing regions. The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminium and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy (my emphasis) testing for just three elements – barium, silicon and vanadium – and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested.”

A little further down the page: “From his work at the National Institute of Agronomical Research near Angers, France, Gérard Barbeau concludes that wines made from the same kinds of grapes, grown in the same region using identical practices but in slightly different terroir, harvested at exactly the same time, and made into wine in exactly the same ways, can still be remarkably different. These underlying differences, he says, must be due to terroir.”

More pseudo-scientific piffle from Europeans eager to defend their turf? One hears such arguments. “The Europeans like to point to soil because it gives them a competitive advantage”, the argument goes. “They have something we don’t have and can never get,” it says.

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motivation to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of terroir is afraid he doesn’t have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound terroir do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

Eventually science may or may not create an experimental matrix within which this hypothesis can be “proven.” But I’m not certain it matters. As long as science cannot prove an *alternate* explanation, I am willing to trust empirical logic. It *might as well* be true. It appears to be demonstrated time and time again.

We are all people of varying temperaments, which dictate *how* we approach wine. I am clear about my own approach. There are sensibilities I’d call “engineering,” people who are most fascinated by the *how* of things. These people love the *making* of wine, and tend to believe that great wine is possible from just about anywhere, provided there’s a human with sufficient skill to *make* it. This is a clear, concrete sensibility, and I share some of it myself.

There are also hedonistic sensibilities, who tend to delight in their own delight, and who crave that which is *sensually* delightful. For someone like me, this isn’t so much a bad place to be as a bad place to *stop*. The sensual is just one of many possible delights. Often the engineer and the sensualist overlap. And they tend to struggle against what they’d call the “mystic” for the same reasons we all struggle:

they fear we’re a threat to the existence of the wines they cherish.

Others might be willing to agree, albeit hypothetically, in the idea of terroir, but argue its usefulness to them is limited. “If a crappy grower can waste a great terroir,” they say, “then what good is it to me?”

No good at all, if you’re looking to terroir as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won’t do that. Not because it doesn’t like you, or because it’s just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn’t understand our need to avoid disappointment. This is the crux of my argument for the *so-what?* of terroir. I will ground it as simply as I can, in one single person. Let it be Willi Schaefer, though it could as easily be Hans-Leo Christoffel, Carl Loewen, any of hundreds of German (or Austrian) riesling growers. When Schaefer goes about his work, he does so with the *certainty* that Domprobst will taste one way and Himmelreich another. He doesn’t think about it abstractly, but if you asked him he’d say he *liked* it, liked that the earth expresses itself in *various* ways. He is also aware of his place in a continuum of generations who work the land that existed before and after each of them, and which always gave the same flavors in the same way. He takes his place within nature, caring for his land; he would never dream he had *dominion* over nature. Flavors of terroir come into his wine because he gets out of the way and *lets* them; why would he do otherwise? The land was there before him. When he tastes his wines he is fascinated with these flavors, and because of him we also can be fascinated. Indeed we are linked to him, to his fascination. Think about it: he is linked to his land, we are linked to him; we are, therefore, *also* linked to his land. None of this is “mystical!” Wines of terroir are wines which ground us in a nexus of meaning. Humility before nature is meaningful. Connection to our fellow folks is meaningful. Connection to places *we don’t know* is meaningful, as it stimulates dreams and longing.

The “so-what” of terroir is just this; it creates a community of vintners and those who drink their wines, walking on this earth and through this life with appreciation and caring. It’s the difference between *Let me show you how groovy I am or let me entertain you*, and *let me bring you here and show you this wonderful land, this wonderful place*.

Alas, some of us are too busy. And others prefer to ignore the spiritual invitations streaming all around us because we have to be sure we don’t buy any wine below a 90. But wine doesn’t care. It just invites. And the soil remains.

weinbau heidi schröck

neusiedlersee-hugelland • rust

It's been a big year for Heidi. She was Vintner Of The Year in *Falstaff* magazine, which is kind of like our *Food & Wine* but with much more serious wine coverage, and had her glowing picture on the cover and got a green minivan with "Vintner Of The Year" painted on the side to drive around in, and you know how press is; once anyone wants you suddenly everyone wants you and it has been year-of-the-ink for our heroine. Who has kept her delicious sense of humor about it all, and made the best wines she's ever made.

Heidi is in fact a heroine of mine. Not so much for what she's accomplished, considerable though that is, but rather for the innate and abiding *grace* she brings to her whole life. I'll give you an example. Austrian growers often have impressive estate-brochures, with pretty pictures

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

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

Says it all, doesn't it.

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

Her wines are continually improving, but not because she's chasing points; rather, she seems to be



Heidi Schröck

absorption in a serious purpose.

I sometimes wish I had more time with Heidi to tap into serious purposes and all that stuff. Problem is I'm fond of her and she's too much fun, so we tend to most-

p r o b i n g
ever deeper
into the
Truth of her
vineyards
and the core
characters
of her grape
varieties. A
sort of calm
settles over
such people
and the
work they
do, the
calmness of

- **Vineyard area: 8 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Vogelsang, Turner, Ruster**
- **Soil types: Eroded primary rock, mica slate, limestone and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Weissburgunder, 10% Furmint, 10% Muscat, 10% Grauburgunder, 10% Welschriesling, 20% Zweigelt, 10% Blaufränkisch**

ly laugh and kid around. One night years ago we went to dinner somewhere in the boonies, and Heidi gave me a ride back through the night to Rust. Finally, a long ride in a dark car; plenty of time to talk, or, Talk. Of course Mr. Smooth here fell promptly asleep.

To the curriculum vitae: she had a stint in Germany at the Weingut Schales in the Rheinhessen, followed by a term as Austrian wine queen. At some point during her *reign* she met a gent from South Africa, which led to a year's work-study in the Cape (and to her easy, colloquial command of English), after which all bets were off. A winette she would surely be.

This is a bigger deal in Europe than here, as I've said elsewhere, yet I don't think of Heidi as a "woman-vintner" but simply as a vintner. That said, I like how it is to taste with her. She looks for accord and contact more than she insists on making her point. I know it's all very Mars-Venus, but it does seem reasonable to suggest women have their own ways of relating to that which they grow. Heidi's one of the vintners I'd most like to eavesdrop on the harvest; I want to see her bossing guys around and see how she looks at her grapes and check her out in her

schmutzy boots.

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

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

Ausbruch can somehow taste more **ancient** than BA or TBA, certainly Eiswein. I don't mean that it tastes like old

wine, but rather that it is redolent of antiquity. It is not a wine of polish or sheen; it is a wine of leathery, animal depth. It is a rural wine. The silence of the centuries seems to sit upon it. For a long time there was no Ausbruch—phylloxera effectively wiped it off the face of the wine-world. Now it is revived.

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

This is the best collection of Heidi's wines I've offered yet (as you'll see from all the plusses) yet there's one wine that might have gotten away, the usually-reliable Furmint. In typically collegial fashion, Heidi openly agrees the wine is in some kind of funk, possibly from premature bottling. If that's the case, time will release its beauty, and I hope to taste it again. Meanwhile, everything here is the best it's ever been.

the wines:

- AHS-057 **2003 Weissburgunder** +
 Heidi's were unique Pinot Blancs, but 2000 announced a fundamental change in style. They used to be correct enough, shellfishy, appley and leesy, but they sometimes tasted as though a rogue gene snuck in carrying mimosa-blossom scents that took you to another place entirely, not "northern" and vivid but rather cozier and more murmuring and buttery. "That was cask-aging," says Heidi. Lately she has been emphasizing *batonnage* and trying to get the wines more compact and dense.
- This 2003 is a perfect example of Austria's preeminence with Pinot Blanc; it has really leesy mussely aromas; sensational fruit and length and diver-scallop sweetness; just singing wine, a whole grove of flowering acacia full of singing birds; polleny mimosa finish deepens into camomile and egg-bread and summer-squash. Don't dare miss it.
- AHS-060 **2003 Muscat** +
 This was the single best Muscat I tasted from the '03 vintage; really ferocious varietal aroma; the palate is sizzling, mint and peach man, mint and peach - just keep repeating it, mint and peach, oh, and elderflowers, and it's irresistibly juicy and long, and how could it be *any* more *delicious*? I'll say it again: Muscat is high on my list of Great Frivolous Pleasures, and I am quite sure the "little" pleasures affirm life *as* profoundly as the Big Serious Pleasures do.
- AHS-059 **2002 Grauburgunder** +
 Please pay attention, because this is how to do oak. Pure new leather and bosc pear aromas; wonderfully integrated leesy fluff over firm braised-meat body and texture; almost saffron, brioche and malt, as if an old-school Champagne; a rare, great Pinot Gris.

AHS-062 **2003 "Vogelsang"**

This means birdsong. Cheep, cheep. It's a locally important site, and Heidi uses the site name to give herself latitude in blending differently each vintage. I must alert you this is a wonderful vintage but it's very different from any previous vintage. It's mostly *Welschriesling* with Pinot Blanc, Muscat and Sauvignon Blanc, but the most radical departure is the 28 grams per liter of residual sugar, which was certainly not intended, but there you go. Heidi declines to fuss with it. It was picked very late, and has aromas of apple-blossom, chalk and gardenia; it's spicy and zingy and gingery.

AHS-061 **2003 St. Laurent Kraxner**

+

This is the best red Heidi has made. It's oh so sweet; suave grown-up wine, both soothing and aware of difficulty; a velvety caress of fruit, offering solace and tenderness and depth yet with an iron firmness and salty mineral length. It speaks in the voice you use to console a worried child.

Incredibly, she grafted the vine onto 15-year-old Müller-Thurgau roots, ensuring both a mature root-structure and the elimination of the dreaded Müller-Thurgau.

AHS-063H **2002 Ruster Ausbruch, 12/375ml**

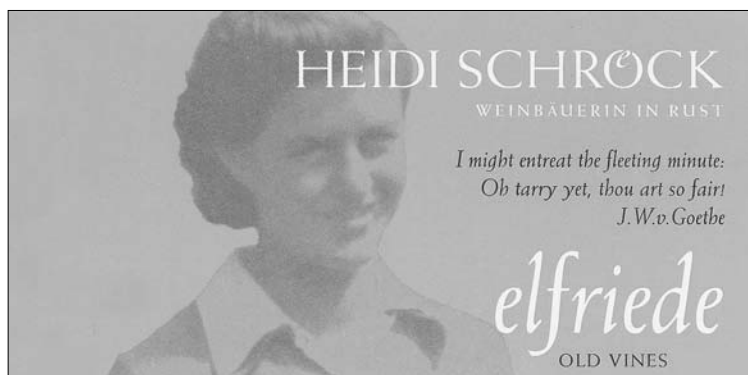
Heidi is now convinced the variety used for her dessert-wines is less important than the where, when and who. They're off the label, and I didn't ask, so don't ask me, I don't know, but I do know this is all quince, lemon and orange blossom, and white chocolate and malt, with a perfect wry glance of tartness on the finish.

AHS-064H **2002 Ruster Ausbruch Turner, 12/375ml**

This is the best piece of the best site, from *glimmerschiefer* (literally gleaming slate, actually a gneiss derivative with little flecks of mica and/or silica that sparkle in the sun), coral, limestone and *Urgestein*. The wine is like a highly refined honey; the palate is many times richer than the "normal" Ausbruch yet seems drier, such is its power. Rhododendron, verbena and lime gelée, lots of dialectic here. Seriously delicious.

AHS-055H **2001 Weissburgunder BA, 12/375ml**

Completely at odds with its siblings (hm, like my childhood . . .), this is a masculine no-nonsense BA which certainly has places to be and things to do and no time to trifle with things like *charm*. There's a clear varietal profile; roasted corn napped with vanilla, and not all that sweet. Rainer Lingenfelder would have made it this way; pedagogically stern (but fair!)-the idea is you drink it; it has vinosity, it's not a liqueur. I admire its undeflected Pinot Blanc-ness; you'd guess the variety blind.



weinbau sattler

neusiedlersee-hugelland • tadten

Erich Sattler is emblematic of the new generation of Austrian vintners, a wine-school grad, 4th generation in the family, taking over as recently as 1999. "We make wine as my grandfather did," he says, "only with better machines." He's looking for red wines with "ripe, soft tannin." Them's my kinda wine.

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

It's very possible I have a tiger by the tail here, but it's too soon to say. The two St. Laurents offered below are completely lovely and very reasonably priced. Very! Yet there were also two

Zweigelt's of which I was not so sure, including one monster of 15.5% alcohol with oodles of jammy hedonistic etcetera, which left me as cold as the wine was hot. Erich's "Cronos," a St. Laurent-Cabernet blend, was excellent of its type, but I'd like to establish his credentials with single-varietals first before foisting the cuvée on you.



Erich Sattler

I am, by the way, indemnified from any claims of neck injury you might suffer from reading the sideways label, which everyone seems to like except me. But there are many things I will endure for such fantastic *values* as these juicy-licious St. Laurents. . . .

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



the wines:

AST-001 **2003 St. Laurent**

Very plummy and round, with high cherry notes; palate is sappy with spicy overtones; in essence an ostensibly easy day-in day-out wine but with a sneaky length. Aged (and does malo) in large old wood.

AST-002 **2002 St. Laurent "Reserve"**

12 months in 40% new French oak. This is wonderful; textbook St. Laurent, all leather and smoke and plums; spice and depth, velvety and seductive, supple yet structured, some way-yummy stuff. And very LIMITED, but there's a **2003 vintage** being released in August that's even more deeply sweet - it reminded me of good Oregon Pinot Noir - and offers great promise especially with enough time to have subsumed its oak.

weingut paul lehrner

mittelburgenland • horitschon

When I first selected Lehrner, I'd staged a tasting of six or seven of the top estates in Mittelburgenland, among whom Lehrner's were my favorite. There were bigger wines in the room, darker wines, wines with more "points" in store, certainly more ostentatious and tannic wines. But there were none as adult, as balanced and as elegantly graceful as Paul Lehrner's. <Sigh>, I figured . . . yet again Terry selects the second-"best" wine.

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

Thank God for an honest man. And with Lehrner it seems less like a choice he makes than an imperative of his temperament. He makes wine of candid fruit without embellishment, and he talks to me about them candidly and without embellishment. So when he says he's happy with his 2002s, I know he means it, and I know *what* he means. Lehrner's style doesn't *require* super-saturated ripeness. It's an adult style of red wine emphasizing fruit over tannin and structure over everything else.

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



Paul Lehrner

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

I really like Paul. He showed me a neat trick to handle tannin buildup; grapeseed oil. And if you don't have great dark Austrian bread to dunk in it, a demi-

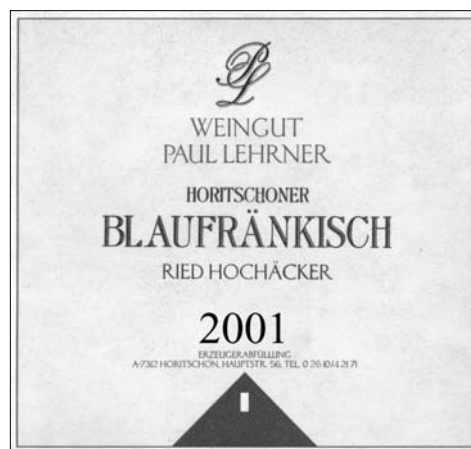
ate voices immediately compel my attention. All of which is to say I am very happy to have discovered Paul Lehrner and his wines.

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

tasse spoon will do. He's so much of what I love in a vintner, giving us beaming honest wines at modest prices, and I really hope you buy the hell out of these.

Two final points. It's somewhat misleading to call these wines "light," as in fact they have considerable depth. What they are *not* is inky, tannic obsidian dragons which bellow 600% new oak at your schnoz. They have a sort of black-belt surety, a calm contained power that doesn't have to be *demonstrated* every five minutes. Second, Lehrner's wines are usually a year behind the current vintage. Most of these are from the excellent 2002 vintage,

but the two early-released 2003s are heralds of a potentially *spectacular* vintage waiting for us a year from now.



Lehrner at a glance:

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

APL-034 **2003 "Claus"**

This is a field-blend of roughly 80% Zweigelt and 20% Blaufränkisch, intended for early drinking while it's at its sappy best. This one's halfway to St. Laurent, with a juicy grin of pancetta, smoke and herbs; simply delicious wine; warm, lavishly vital and extroverted. A more *likeable* red wine could hardly be imagined.

APL-035 **2003 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger**

Last year I showed this wine to Andrea Immer, with excuses for the "lightness" of the 2001 vintage. "I don't think this is light at all," she said. Nor was it! It *is*, though, a classic example of the supreme aesthetic virtue of *persistent soft-sell*. Always a Claret-like Blaufränkisch, aged in large old wood, the wine soars beyond its usual range in the magnificent 2003 vintage; this is *some-a-spicy-meat-a-ball*! Indeed incredible lift and a mineral hyssopy brilliance; overtones of marjoram too; in bottle only 10 days when I saw it but it was explosively expressive; this is textbook Blaufränkisch at its best. *Look at the price! Don't* dare miss it.

APL-038 **2002 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochäcker**

+

These are his oldest vines, and he does it in large mostly-new wood. The best vintage of this wine I've ever had, and quite likely the single greatest red-wine value in this offering (though I'm sure to say the same thing about Glatzer's 2003s . . .); this has really murmuring depths; it's like the fat layer on a saddle of lamb; spice, juice, power-a lamb *jus* over fennel over stones, all juice on the mid-palate, all stone on the finish; it has shape, length, complexity and character. GOVERNMENT WARNING: attempts to spit this wine are likely to fail, therefore consumption by pregnant dwarves operating heavy machinery may result in cases of St. Vitus' Dance.

APL-031 **2002 Blaufränkisch "Steineiche"**

+

VINARIA (Austria's best and most serious wine publication) is awarding this their top honor, and I fear I may be underrating it. This is the-artist-formerly-known-as Reserve, a selection of the best grapes from various sites; this 2002 has a schwe-e-e-e-et nose, leading to a hugely weighty, dense, sweet and spicy palate; it totally swallows its oak (80% new) and its juiciness overrides the considerable tannin

APL-039 **2002 Blaufränkisch "Steineiche Dürrau"**

Probably a 1-off bottling from a special single-site Paul liked so much he opted to offer separately. The cask-sample I saw expressed the Petite Verdot side of Blaufränkisch, "darker," more powerful and less "sweet" than the regular. Students of the variety (all seven of you) are encouraged to explore this compelling variation. Thanks; that leaves more oaky Merlot for *moi*.

APL-037 **2002 St. Laurent**

Man do I LOVE this variety. It's usually like Burgundy with a little Mourvèdre, but this one's like Mourvèdre with a little Burgundy; dark flavors predominate, even a little char; brooding yet still juicy and integrated and very clear, a somewhat earnest St. Laurent.

APL-032 **2002 Cuvée Paulus**

They all have their Sassicaia's. This is Blaufränkisch (60%) with 20% each of Zweigelt and Cabernet Sauvignon; the wine is sweet, dense, charming and impressive, yet for my perverse palate it seems a wee bit specious after the glorious Steineiche. Others will love its power and force and think I'm a ninny. And perhaps I am, but at least I'm a nice ninny, which of course was the real name of Anaïs Nin, in case you hadn't been told.

weingut walter glatzer

carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

We had a lot of driving ahead of us, so Peter called ahead and asked that no lunch be prepared.

Lunch was prepared. "Yes, we got the call, but we didn't think he could possibly be serious," they said. "And we know how Terry loves his Schnitzels." Alas, I do. I cannot contain my unseemly love of Schnitzel. I'm an appalling glutton in general, but never more so than when Schnitzels appear. It is honestly pathetic. And there are the Glatzers, cruelly exploiting my helpless Schnitzel addiction in all its lamentable pathos. But it was true, we did have a long drive ahead of us, and I'd eaten a big breakfast assuming there'd be no lunch, so I screwed up all my will, every bit of steely resolve I could summon, and ate, oh I don't remember, maybe six Schnitzels. Definitely no more than six; absolutely not seven. They were *small* Schnitzels too.

And I skipped dessert.

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

I also want to sing a paen of praise to this man's red wines. He makes them to be drunk and loved, not admired and preened over. He could easily make each of

the prevailing mistakes: too much extraction, too astringent, too tannic, too oaky, reaching beyond their grasp. But year-in and year-out these are absolutely *d e l i c i o u s* purring sex-kitten reds.

He is the son of the mayor of his village, which perhaps accounts for the poise and easy manner in which he articulates his every



Walter Glatzer and daughter

notion of grape growing and winemaking. He's installed two fermenters, one for reds and one for whites, the second of which is kept underground in a newly-built cellar in order to keep fermentation temperatures down. He has 16 hectares of vineyards, from which he aims, like all the young lions, to grow the best possible grapes. He'll green-

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

harvest when necessary, not only to increase dry extract but also to guarantee physiological ripeness. Glatzer does all his harvesting by hand, though he could, if wished, work much of his land by machine.

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

There's also two little kids, and an omnipresent buzz of conversation which makes it hard to take tasting notes. Yet in a sense these hardly seem necessary; to delineate the minute vintage-variations of wines which are always varietally True and scrupulous is more trouble than it's worth. I'd much rather flirt with Priska and make googoo eyes at the baby. But this year I hardly had energy left over for flirting, because the 2003 reds were just *screaming*; I can't recall ever having more fun tasting through a bunch of red wines. And, I can now proclaim, after truly painstaking diligent research, that Blaufränkisch is better than Zweigelt with Schnitzels.

Glatzer at a glance:

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

the wines:AGL-075 **2003 Grüner Veltliner**

We've asked for "Kabinett" to come off the label, but the first *tranche* of this wine had already been shipped, so some bottles will have it and others won't. If I were a teacher of wine classes (*there's* a terrifying thought . . .) and I wanted **one single wine** with which to demonstrate GrüVe, I'd use a Glatzer. His is the tabula rosa for the variety, but the 2003 version is almost exotic; very ripe aromas, cunky and chewy in the wax-bean direction; it loses the lift of ordinary vintages but gains body and viscera, though it walks with a heavy tread; tastes much riper than its 12.2% alcohol would indicate.

AGL-078 **2003 Grüner Veltliner "Dornenvogel"**

"Dornenvogel" (meaning thorn-bird) is Glatzer's term for his best lots, because these marauding lil' tweeters like to eat the ripest grapes. It's regularly the best-value GrüVe I offer. The wackoid 2003 smells like pure Tuscan olive-oil, and has arresting fruit and power; indeed, there's Wachau-Smaragd flavors throughout, all the way to a hint of scorch on the finish. Amazing attack though—just eat with it, or just eat it, actually. The usual creamy-lentilly white-bean, eggy thing is having some kind of psychedelic episode here.

AGL-079 **2003 Weissburgunder "Classic"**

Walter's hit his stride with his Pinot Blanc. Again, the 2003 is thicker and juicier than usual; it was on its fine lees till early April; musselly and oyster-shell and almost a shad-roe texture on the palate.

AGL-076 **2003 Zweigelt "Riedencuvée"** +

In essence this is all I require red wine to be. That doesn't mean I don't love the very deep and complex and mysterious, for I do. But I tend to grow weary with the many reds that affect these qualities with ostentatious oak or tannin or hyper-extraction, nor do I find such wines useful with the food I eat. This Zweigelt is sappy, rosy-cheeked and pretty, but in the mega-ripe 2003 vintage it shows its St. Laurent parentage in the tertiary finish; there's violet and applewood-smoke, and this ostensibly "light" wine is in fact many-layered and very long, with captivating spice. "Little" wine simply does not improve on this!

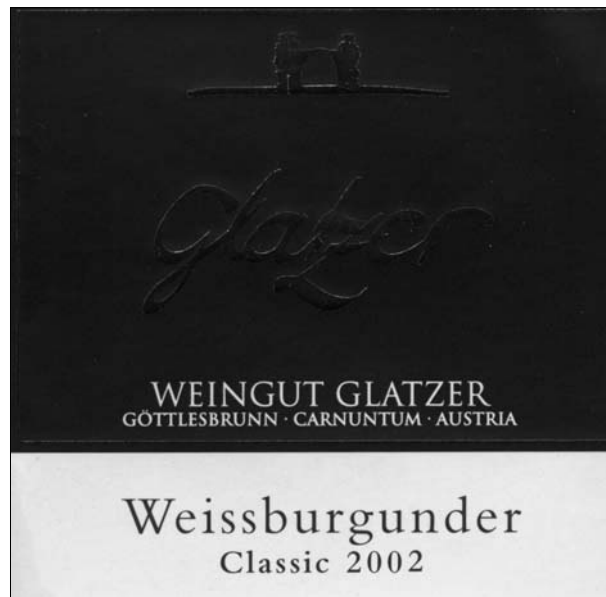
AGL-077 **2003 Blaufränkisch**

I try to cull out, to select, not to offer everything put in front of me, but to actually discriminate, earn my lousy money. But it was starting to occur to me I wasn't gonna be able to leave any of these behind. So sorry if the offering's too big, but on this page are *more* utterly addictively just-plain delicious red wines than you've tasted in six months. And *this* one is snappy and spicy and compact and perfect, with a mineral tannic grip and a lamby minty rosemary finish.

AGL-081 **2003 Zweigelt "Rubin Carnuntum"** +

More weight than the basic Zweigelt; more taffeta and more length but still charming and still impossible to dislike. This has a nose like Crozes-Hermitage and roses, or like some blend of Givry and Côte-Rôtie; seductive, long and bacony (Tripp's, Dan!), with endless fruit and serene elegance. My New York wine buds would say "This is *the shit*" or words to that effect.

- AGL-083 **2003 Blaufränkisch "Reserve"** (+)
 This isn't as sweet as usual, or not yet; it's more studiously serious, more Fronsac or almost Pomerol iron; highly impressive and I think on its way to being loveable; you see it on the deep finish.
- AGL-084 **2003 Zweigelt "Dornenvogel"** ++
 This could well be the greatest Austrian red I've ever offered, easily in a league with Lehrner's gorgeous 2000 Steineiche. It may be the best I've ever had, in fact; depth and tobacco and earth and great swirling smoky eddies of fragrance. "This is really the limit with Zweigelt," said Walter. "Any riper and it's overripe." This is one of those wines where the *length* has length! Limitless sweetness and seductive complexity.
- AGL-080 **2003 St. Laurent Altenberg** ++
 Again, I don't recall when I've ever tasted finer St. Laurent. A highly organized, impeccably structured, absolute fricking juice-bomb. A high-water mark for the variety, with flavors in every octave, and all at mezzo-forte. But never bellowing, just singing.
- AGL-085 **2002 "Gotinsprun"** +
 This is the archaic name for Göttlesbrunn, Glatzer's home town, and it's his brand-name for his top reds, in this case a blend of mostly Blaufränkisch, a bit of Syrah, a smaller bit of (gulp!) Merlot and the balance Zweigelt. It is all done in (double-gulp!) *new wood*. But this is a very RARE example of a show-off *oakster* that works; you're paying three times more for Priorat that's no better than this - rather worse! Because this is complex and powerful, albeit a little less so than the even bigger 2003s. It was also just bottled, so its attack is direct and firm but the middle is subdued. If it were Italian with a name like, I don't know, *GLUTEOSO*, you'd be salivating to have it on your table.



weinviertel

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

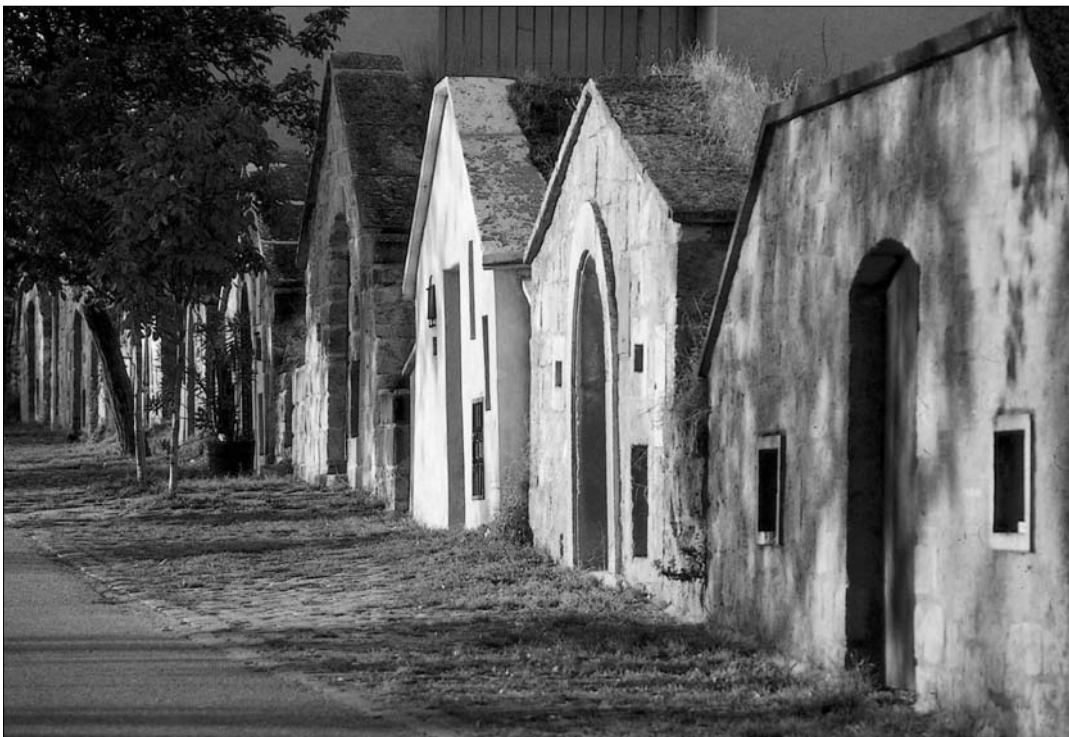
Vines occur wherever conditions favor them; good soils, exposures and microclimates, but it's anything but what we'd call "wine country." Which is in fact rather charming, since it doesn't attract the usual glom of wine-people.

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

But if I'm honest there's more to it than even that. I don't seem to be much of a pack animal.

I tend away from the crowd, even when I appreciate what that crowd is crowding toward. It's easy to go to the established regions and find excellent wine if you have a fat wallet. It's too easy. I find I enjoy going somewhere alone and finding diamonds in the rough. So I went looking for another Weinviertel estate, tasted at two, assuming I'd pick one, and after far too much

indecision about *which* one to pick, I asked myself: if I had two Schnitzels in front of me, one from veal and the other from pork, and they were equally juicy and equally perfectly cooked, which one would I eat? And the question clarified immediately: I'd eat them both. So you have two wonderful new discoveries to contemplate, dear reader.



weingut h.u.m. hofer

weinviertel • auersthal

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

Auersthal is just barely beyond Vienna's northern suburbs, in a dead-still little wine village. I had either forgotten or had never known the estate was organic; they belong to a group called Bio-Ernte which has standards above the EU guidelines. In speech, by the way, "bio" is pronounced to rhyme with "B.O." which can lead to some drollery as you hear references to "B.O. wine" unless, unlike me, you have left behind your adolescence.

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

In both vintages I tasted (the normal 2002 and the wacko 2003) I was impressed with the clarity and articulation in the wines, with their candor and gentleness, and with their striking value-for-money. Hofer himself is a sweet likeable guy, and I look forward to getting to know him better and to eating many Schnitzels together.

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

the wines:

AHF-005L **2003 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

This is dangerous; he was clearly nonplussed when I said I wanted it, as he needs it for his Heurige and was concerned I'd plunder too much. So we have to be delicate, which isn't easy, because this is absurdly good GV at a give-away price; charm and class, purity and prettiness; simply tay-stee!

AHF-001 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Vom Vogelsang**

His entry-level GV has 13% alcohol in 2003! "As lively and fresh and the opening Spring," he writes, "fresh as a delicate breeze of the still-cool Spring, full of twittering birds." So you see, I do not have a corner on the market for fanciful wine prose. In fact I thought this wine was a tender and winning sorrelly GV with decent length and a little phenolic kick; a thirst-quencher, like Salomon's Hochterassen; in 2003 there's a lot of *stuff* for the price, though I'll be eager for a normal vintage where this wine can best show its limpid charm.

AHF-002 **2003 Grüner Veltliner "Von den Rieden"**

He says "Baroque" and I said pepper and iron and arugula, with length and smooth phenolics; spicy and penetrating; big but balanced, with incipient unfolding of deeply embedded flavor. Wears its 13.5% alcohol gracefully.

AHF-003 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Freiberg**

+

This is bona-fide exciting wine; way fine nose, and the palate is a celebration of ripe GrüVe, though there's almost a linden-y Riesling fragrance; chervil and sweet-pea, beeswax; really creamy texture, purely sung and perfectly balanced; deep physiological sweetness and echoey length. He writes of fresh hay and white peaches. Whatever adjectives you employ, this is one of the best GV's of the vintage.

AHF-004 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Kirchliszen**

This is the other *Cru*, and wonderfully it's 180-degrees apart from the Freiberg. This one's all verbenas and marjoram and vetiver; snappy and stony and *intense*, not "sweet;" green-tea, menthol attack and wonderfully pointed for its size. Manages 14% alcohol without keeling over. Nth degree of minerality here.

In future vintages I also hope to offer his Riesling, which was a mite too close to overripe in 2003.

weingut setzer

weinviertel • hohenwarth

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

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

Permit me a short word about Charm. I feel charm is among the highest aesthetic virtues. In people it denotes an effort of behavior whereby you feel appreciated and cared for. In wine or music it creates a response of palpable delight. I find this feeling more pleasant than many other feelings which seem to have greater *prestige*. Don't get me wrong; there's a place in me for being knocked out, blown away, stunned, impressed, but I find none of these as exquisitely pleasurable

as feeling delighted or charmed. Also, charm is a flexible virtue. Charm can exist in big wines or medium wines or little wines. I also appreciate this virtue because it seems less reducible to recipe: any grower of unexceptionable talent can make *intense* wine. It seems

much more intuitive to craft wines of charm, less a matter of formula than of constant attending to tiny details. And knowing all the while that your wine won't be the biggest, boldest, loudest rock-em sock-em wine on the table. But it will insinuate, will crawl inside a certain temperament and sing its siren-song, and this is the pleasure for which we live.



Hans Setzer

Hans and Uli Setzer are a husband-wife team of wine-school grads maintaining a winery imbued with intelligence and purpose. I was surprised how close they were to the Kamptal and Kremstal (15 minutes from Berger or Gobelsburg) and wondered why Hohenwarth was banished to the lowly Weinviertel. Hans pointed out to me Hohenwarth sits at the same altitude as the summit of the Heiligenstein, thus essentially different from the more sheltered Kamptal. Nor does it have the pure loess terraces of the Kremstal or even the neighboring Wagram. Yet I feel the wines

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

are spiritual cousins of Kremstal wines, and Setzer belongs to a group also containing Erich Berger (who wholly endorsed my choice to offer his "competitor," bless him) called *Vinovative*.

Setzer is a rare specialist in Roter Veltliner, which I loved in 2002 and not so much in 2003. 2003 distorted many wines, as it happened. I'll show you some lovely examples next year.

For now please bid welcome to these charming, dancing wines with their saffron-yellow labels.



Uli Setzer

ASZ-001 **2003 Grüner Veltliner "Vesper"**

This is his light one (11.5% alcohol even in 2003) but it's true and salty and the real deal.

ASZ-002 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Ausstich DAC**

Ask someone else about the whole DAC thing, O.K.? I can't be bothered with it; my word's already full to bursting with Teutonically bureaucratic wine-categorizations. I know, how irresponsible. The *wine*, on the other hand, is delightful; lentilly sorrelly fragrance; juicy round and agreeable, with exceptional length for 2003; mellissa, mineral and polish with nice soft phenolics.

There's another "DAC" wine from the Eichholz which takes its place among the most important GVs in Austria each year, but in '03 it was rather monstrous. I'll show it next year if all goes well.

ASZ-003 **2003 Grüner Veltliner "8000"**

(+)

Here's an interesting concept: he's planted the vines exceptionally densely (8000 vines per hectare) but has very few bunches per vine. He attains high physiological ripeness without excessive alcohol, thanks in part to the limestone-rich soil and to the genetics of the old Veltliner material. Fermented with ambient yeasts, the wine is wonderfully convincing; a Chassagne-type fragrance and great big size; a mastiff of Veltliner but *creamy* rather than brûléed; an opulent, almost profound GV, which is probably much better than I indicate-it was 3 weeks in bottle when I tasted. This is potentially a peer of the Lamm; that's how good it is.

ASZ-004 **2003 Riesling**

He only makes one, always fully ripe, and it's their only *Urgestein* vineyard, a sheltered south-slope; fragrance like a basket of apricots and linden-blossom; palate is bright and zingy with super-mineral, juice and charm, leading to a bracing snappy finish.

weingut familie zull

weinviertel • schrattental

When I first offered these wines I was pleased with their wonderfully candid and pure fruit, but then over the years I wondered if they weren't too clean, almost antiseptic. It's like tuning an instrument with one of those computers that gives you the perfect pure note, only when you play a chord the axe is grimacingly out of tune. You gotta *temper* that thang! Zull's ascension began with the '99 vintage but everyone made yowza wine in 1999. The 2000s were even more impressive in that vintage's context, and you guys started to notice.

The 2001s were just wonderful. The 2002s were perplexing. The 2003s are on track again, though Phillip Zull is beginning to consolidate his regime and has made a few changes.

Now that I have three guys in the Weinviertel, I see Zull's wines in greater relief. They have

more minerality, I think, and they're more feral and *savage*, which may be due to their higher proportion of *Urgestein*. Phillip is as categorical as most of us were in our twenties, but his heart's in just the right place; "I produce wines for life and not collector's items. Wine should be enjoyed."

The generations work seamlessly together here, which is always a pleasure to witness. Werner Zull was busily studying math and physics when he was obliged to take the reins of the winery owing to the sudden death of his brother. He's quoted as saying, "I had barely any idea about wine; all I knew was that some of it was red and some of it was white." He toyed at one point with the idea of leasing the vineyards for someone else to work; he wanted to turn his scientific mind to matters other than winemaking. But wine finally seems to have gotten him in its clutches. He decided in 1982 to make every effort to concentrate on quality, "because it's fun that way, and also good for business," he said. Zulls had only sold their wines in cask, and our hero wanted to make a name



Zull family

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Innere Bergen, Ödfeld, Sechs Vierteln**
- **Soil types: Primary rock, loam with sand, and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Grüner Veltliner, 17% Riesling, 48% other varieties**

selling top-quality wines in bottle. So it was BACK TO SCHOOL time for Werner Zull, studying viti- and viniculture "with other students roughly half my age," he recalls. "But I've never regretted it, even for an instant."

Werner adds, "Our total range is ever-more the result of good teamwork between Phillip and me. He's more than just a good co-worker in the vineyards, but also a creative force in the cellar."

Zull at a glance:

Ultra-clean, stainless steel wines with lots of minerality and pupil-dilating clarity!

AFZ-048 **2003 Grüner Veltliner DAC**

This new item combines what used to be Ödfeld and Sechs Vierteln into a single wine. The 2003 is snappy, correct, peppery, slim and dry.

AFZ-051 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Aussere Bergen**

Here a little RS mitigates the high (14%) alcohol, and the wine works, albeit in a big sort of gratinéed way: rhubarb and glazed carrots; fruit is perfectly set among all that ripeness; there's a meat-cracklings element, and the finish is salty and almost entirely without heat or bitterness.

AFZ-050 **2003 Riesling Schrattental**

From vineyards on *Urgestein* and sand; a crisp, fresh and stony Riesling with good length; fennelly, correct and light; quite dry but not sharp.

AFZ-049 **2003 Riesling Innere Bergen**

13.5 % alcohol with 4 grams per liter residual sugar; again green and minty aromas, wintergreen and balsam, and with air a very strong apricot note; the palate follows exactly; the wine has style and charm, and is big but not overblown.

AFZ-052 **2003 Blauer Portugieser**

Every once in awhile something really tasty comes along from this plebian variety; this one is just so sappy and round, a 10-out-of-10 on the gulp-o-meter, but it's far from a mere fruit-strumpet; it's warm and round also, with several layers and a gentle sort of complexity of its own. It will not even barely *impress* you because it is too busy simply *loving* you. And as we well know, any dolt can be impressed, but it takes courage to be loved.

AFZ-047H **2001 Welschriesling TBA, 12/375ml**

Welschriesling isn't to be confused with real Riesling, to which it bears no resemblance either aesthetically or ampelographically. In Styria it's the carafe-slurper. In Burgenland it's either a thirst-quencher or it makes the entry-level stickies. Sweet wet straw is the signature aroma. Often short on substance, I've been impressed with Zull's take on the variety; they did this TBA in barrique, and it's a slimmed down, almost racy version of an oaky sticky; high-toned Pecorino fragrance with fine salty tang on the palate; imagine caramel and fleur de sel and eucalyptus and you're there. Not hugely long but entirely firm and drinkable. Nearly 10 grams per liter acidity.



kremstal and kauptal

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

Austria's best values are coming from the Kamp and Kremstals. This may be partly due to the giant shadow cast by the neighboring Wachau, and the determination of the best Kampers and Kremsters to strut their stuff. For the price if really middling Federspiel from a "name" estate in the Wachau you can get nearly stellar quality in Kammern or Langenlois, and the absolute best from a Nigl or a Bründlmayer is substantially less expensive than their Wachau counterparts. And, every single bit as good.

There's another growers' association in this region, called TRADITIONSWEINGÜTER

ÖSTERREICH (do I need to translate it?) The usual sensibilities apply; like-minded producers, often idealists, band together to establish even greater stringency than their wine laws require. Most of my growers belong. Until the EU arrived and started fixin' stuff that weren't broke, there was a very smart vineyard classification. Now with absorption into the great maw of nouvelle-

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

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

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

Europe, these growers will have to see what, if anything, can come of their enlightenment.

Other than the profound individuality of certain sites (Heiligenstein comes first to mind) there's little of regional "style" to distinguish these wines from Wachau wines. In fact Willi Bründlmayer told me all three regions were once one big region called WACHAU.



weingut erich & maria berger

kremstal • gedersdorf

A year from now we will know one of two things about Weingut Berger. Either, that 2003 was a watershed vintage for them, the year of their ascendancy into the ranks of the great estates, or, that 2003 was a freak vintage which happened to serve them well. I suspect the former, because things are astir at Berger; the new house is built, the old label has changed (yay!), and Erich says openly that he wants to change the house-style to offer more overt expressiveness.

Whichever truth emerges over the next year, one thing is certain: 2003 is the best vintage I have tasted at Berger, the best vintage Erich has ever made, and a collection of wines over which you should go hog-wild.

Nowhere in this offering can you buy better wine for less money. Nowhere! Berger's 2003s

might well be the best values anywhere in Austria.

It's charm they're chasing. Happily for us all, they catch it consistently. Starting with the 2002 vintage, they seem to want to render it differently. Erich told me they'd made certain deliberate changes in vinification, by which the wines could be perhaps more, *overt*. "We're happy with the change in style," he said. One instantly discern-



Erich Berger

far he hit it, says "Wow, did you see that sweet graceful swing?"

Thus the prudent commercial me says Berger's more extroverted new style will bring them the attention they've long deserved. Who am I to quibble? Just the guy who likes being charmed . . .

able sign of that change is the colors of the wines, which are strikingly deeper than before.

I'm of two minds about all this, but one mind is just my silly subjective mind and the other is my sensible grown-up mind. I do miss the cool aloof *charm* of the old way, but the sad fact is, it doesn't sell. Doesn't that suck, that *charm* doesn't sell? It makes me crazy, because I feel charm is among the highest aesthetic values. But as I said, it's just my dopey way; I'm the guy who, after the slugger hits a humonguous home run and everyone else is waiting to see how

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

Yet one dares not extrapolate Truths from any single vintage. Maybe the 2002s were just naturally gristly, because these 2003s are as charming as Berger's wines ever were. They're simply *more*, more complex, more deep, more encompassing, more assured.

Look, I am a man with greying temples. I'm in the wine-biz and drink wine very often. For those reasons and possibly others of which I'm unaware, I'm starting to place my highest premium on *drinkability* and *beauty* when I select wines, not just for you but also for my personal sloppin' down. A few years ago I began to see the occasional dichotomy between what I offered to you as Great Wine and what I actually *bought* for the private stash; what I need at home are wines I can drink *any time* and which taste good with my meals.

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

Berger at a glance:

Charm and value typify these wines. Clean, cultured-yeast wines with lots of primary fruit, yet aging superbly.

how the wines taste:

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

ABG-058 **2003 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

We sell a whole lot of this lovely wine, (Berger's neighbors seem to have been non-plussed when two containers pulled up at his door to be loaded . . .), and I am proud to have found it. I doubt if there's a better **value** anywhere in Austria. It's almost pointless to detail its flavors: it's perfect light Veltliner and it has remarkable class for its *echelon*. The 2003 is spicier and more explicitly peppery, quite herbal and boxwoody; tatsuoi notes, riper and punchier in the heat of 2003. I've tasted many "jug" GrüVes and Berger's in a class by himself. Stack this puppy and watch it fly. Pour it by the glass and enjoy the happy faces of your guests. You want to gulp it from a water glass.

ABG-061 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Zehetnerin**

By far the loveliest light GV I tasted from 2003. It clings beautifully, all green leaves and "secret" sweetness (the deep incipient sweetness of physiological maturity) yet with salty minerality; lemon balm and melissa and vetiver, long and complex; oolongs and senchas and hyssop and a pure stone finish.

ABG-059 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Gebling**

+

One of the best GrüVes in this offering, and a highlight of the 2003 vintage; it is very green; all vervena, vetiver; peppery, zippy and highly expressive; shapely and gripping; convincing, contained; Autumnny and snappy with a vivid pepper and mineral; exceptional combination of torque and density. In a vintage where many pedigreed wines were brutish and short, this little gem is pure gold.

ABG-062 **2003 Riesling Terrassen**

This is all loess-grown. Wonderful spring-water icy purity, a burst of springtime and sticky new leaves; even more superbly pointed than the GVs, a sharp blade of clarity. Has the snap of First Flush Darjeeling and a cyanic penetration; like a tarragon beurre blanc, with wonderful yielding creaminess on the mid-palate.

This may sound odd, but often the most satisfying white wines make me think of water. Not water from the tap, but some sort of existential essence of water. I like to go to a little massif of high-ish mountains called the Hochschwab; they're not far from my wine-rounds and not so high you can't hike early in the season. There's a walk I like to take, up a valley and up a notch to a high hidden valley, surrounded by towers of rock much more impressive than their modest heights would suggest. The whole region is a water preserve and a game preserve, and believe me, in early May, it is quiet. I rarely see another human soul. About 90 minutes into the hike there's a stream from which I can fill my bottle; the source is just a few steps away. Unless some chamois or fox has peed in the stream, the water is perfectly pristine. I have even filled a bottle and *lugged it home* to Maryland, just to hear the voice of the mountain-shaman reminding me, in the muck of suburban D.C., that he is there too.

When I reach the stream I am loose and sweaty and happy, and the mountain air smells like Champagne, and the water is splishing and lurping over the stones in the most beautiful sound I know, the sound of pure primordial life; the towers are towering, my heart is beating, and the water is flowing, and so I say, he who loves wine should also love water. The End.

ABG-060 **2003 Riesling Steingraben**

++

There is no better Riesling in this offering, and any others in this class will cost you a lot more. It's absolutely superb, and the 5 grams of RS does it *nothing but good*. Honeydew and mutsu-apple aromas, plus apricot and apricot-blossom; glorious shimmering length with a universe of wildforest herbs; virginal and cool yet explosively vivid; endless length and grip.

ABG-063 **2003 Blauer Zweigelt, 1.0 Liter**

This is the red equivalent to the GrüVe Liters; I offer this in years where it shows some depth, and this indeed has unusual depth and scope for Liter-wine; it's light but not thin, easy but not simple. It practically gulps *itself* down. And it is very, very pretty.

ABG-064 **2002 Blauer Zweigelt "Barrique"**

This smells just like Zinfandel except more seductive and inviting; indeed it smells like the kind of Zin no one's making any more since *tout le monde* started chasing fortified-wine levels of alcohol. This is all cloves and blueberries; wonderful length of sweet fruit and ripe soft tannins; elegant poise of power and a sort of luscious solidity. Why do so few "oaky" wines show this deftness and grace?



weingut mantlerhof

kremstal • brunn im felde

Our hero is a moving target. Having experimented with whole-cluster pressing in '99 and to a larger extent in 2000, he was unhappy with the results and has gone back to stompin' the huevos outa them grapes. The lustier style seems to suit him better.

Josef Mantler's winery has long been regarded as among the best in the Kremstal, indeed as one of the leading producers in all of Austria. Apart from that, he's also carving out original ground with his championing of the rarely-seen variety called Roter Veltliner. Here's Giles MacDonogh in *Decanter*: "Mantler is Austria's great specialist for Roter Veltliner, which is . . . Grüner Veltliner's slightly earthier cousin. It is thinner skinned and rather more susceptible to botrytis of both the noble and ignoble sorts. Mantler's vinifications are about as good a lesson in

what it can do as you will ever have."

One can grow jaded in Austria; there is so much good wine **around** that finding yourself in still another winery with good juice is hardly a novelty. Still, I was put back among the living by these wines, in part because of Mantler's wicked stratagem of giving first-time visitors an opening glass of the WORST wine he's ever made, a little waif of a thing with just 8.5% alcohol from the mangiest vintage in twenty years. It was a 1980 and it was *very* good and entirely fresh after sixteen years.

I generally find Mantler's wines to be thickly saturated with flavor, adamant and penetrating rather than elegant. He leaves his musts on the skins longer than many others do, perhaps that's why. After temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel the wines are racked promptly and bottled fairly early.



Josef Mantler

- **Vineyard area: 11.6 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Spiegel, Wieland**
- **Soil types: Pure loess, stony clay, loess topped with brown soil and loess on sand and gravel**
- **Grape varieties: 34% Grüner Veltliner, 21% Riesling, 11% Roter Veltliner, 11% Chardonnay, 23% other varieties**

Mantler himself is a bundle of energy, and his wines have the same sense of being jammed to bursting with vitality; they are somehow *untamed*. Like their maker, the irrepressible Sepp, they're full of beans.

Mantlerhof at a glance:

world's nicest guy!

Elite-quality winery producing classy Rieslings, mossy Veltliners and various specialties, and the

AMH-043 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Löss Terrassen**

"Loess is a wind-sediment of 75% quartz and 25% limestone," said Mantler. One year he didn't have time to pen the usual florid notes for his pricelist so he cribbed from a writer named Bruckner, who described this wine as showing "a little wet grass and meadow-flower." Well, I was stoked! Someone else arrived at that meadow-flower flowering-fields thing - I'm not crazy. In 2003 this shows some skin-phenolics; it's riper of course but still has that starched thing; indeed it's ascetically firm, has length in its cool green way, but you need to work with it, it has no wish to satisfy you. Maybe it will emerge from its post-bottling pout.

AMH-045 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel**

This is quite good, suave and complex, easy in its acidity yet shapely and lithe; spicy and hyssopy, ripe and sorrelly; ore, nettle and ramps (wild garlic) and an almost eucalyptus finish. Probably cures catarh.

AMH-046 **2003 Roter Veltliner Reisenthal Selection**

RotVe tastes like 5-year-old GrüVe, and through their parallel lives RV always seems to taste five years older than GV. This particular one tastes like 80% GV with 20% Neuburger - or if you don't know Neuburger (and why should you?), like Pinot Gris. It's less massive than Sepp's norm, more elegant; crushed stone, cauliflower, enokis; not exactly charming but distinctive and uncompromising.

AMH-047 **2003 Riesling Zehetnerin**

Here as everywhere the vintage was substantially better for Riesling. Full of the verberna-Gyokoru sweetness of 2003; leafy, thyme and boxwood; digital precision and sweet-salty charm; finish is a melange of lime-zest and crenshaw melon. Lovely wine, aided hugely by the undetectable 7 grams of RS.

AMH-044 **2003 Riesling Wieland**

It's as juicy as always though less obviously "the best"-it was hot everywhere in '03-it links, really, to Jamek's Freiheit, the ripe peach and tart plum; it's both seductive and arch, and I suggest doing food here, as a little wavelet of tartness breaks over the finish.



weingut familie nigl

kremstal • priel

I suspect there's going to be consensus that 2003 is an atypical vintage for Nigl. I have begun to wonder whether the 25 hectares isn't perhaps too much for him, given the exalted level he had maintained. In essence between the 1993 and 1999 vintages I never tasted a wine that wasn't stellar, and one started to wonder if Nigl wasn't some kind of magician. 2000 and 2001 showed the first wines, only a couple, short of perfection. But 2002 was another magnificent Nigl collection, though the wines are evolving quite deliberately. 2003 tastes fundamentally Other, and what is absent is the usual fluorescent hum of keen clarity, the digital-laser-HDTV thing he always does, along with the silvery coolness of fruit and the crystalline texture. In their places are things more

brusque and overt. I'd like to be wrong. My notes are scrupulously candid; please read them carefully.

I was glad to be scheduled for the first visit of the day, as Martin's wines repay a clear palate, and I am also less defended in the morning. Nigl is unambiguously among the *elite* in Austria, yet within that small group his are perhaps the most intricately difficult wines. They do not pour a saucy blast of charm over your palate, nor do they have the explicit (perhaps even obvious?) intensity of certain famous Wachauers. On the other hand they're so precisely detailed and crystalline you feel your IQ increasing while they're on your palate. Flavors are chiseled and focused to an unimagineable point of clarity; your palate almost never has to "read" such detail, and it grows instantly more alert and probing. That's a large part of the reward of such wines; the other part is that they taste good.

I think you know I love to be raised on an updraft of delight when I drink an irresistibly attractive wine. I write



Martin Nigl

about it often enough! It's important and life-affirming. But also, there's another kind of thrall, a rarer one, which wines such as these and Dönnhoff's and Boxler's can provide. When flavors are so clear and written in such fine sleek lines, rather than lift you up they seem to pull you *in*. And as you go deeper you feel as if you're below the surface, in a kind of cave where the earth-secrets are buried.

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

You have to be available for this experience, and you need to listen very quietly, but it is an experience like no other. It doesn't leave you *happier* but it does leave you wondering, because there is somehow *more* of you on the other side.

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

The Krems valley has a climate rather like that of the western Wachau. "During the ripening season we get oxygen-rich, cool breezes in the valley," says the Nigl price list. "Therefore we have wide temperature spreads between day and night, as well as high humidity and often morning fog. These give our wines their spiciness and finesse. Another secrete for the locally typical bouquets and the elegant acids of our wines is the weathered *urgestein* soils, which warm quickly."

He'll green-harvest if need be, and the actual harvest is as late as possible. Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are racked twice, never fined, and bottled—as I saw—first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles

wines with a high, keening brilliance and with an amazing density of mineral extract which can leave an almost salty finish on the palate, as though an **actual** mineral residue were left there.

It's all well and good for wines to be filigree; refinement is good. But too much refinement can be arch or precious. *What* are we refining, that is the question. What impresses me about Nigl is his depth of texture. There are layers upon layers of the loveliest raw-silken fruit-mineral jazz, a little nubby and not so smooth the palate can't adhere, and just as you fall happily *through*

all those cirrussy layers, you notice how crystalline it all is. I remember a music reviewer praising a pianist's delicacy of touch by saying "You can hear his fingerprints on the keys." It's like that. Nigl is to Austria what Dönnhoff is to Germany. He's less famous among y'all, I'd argue, because his wines are dry. Sweetness in a wine is like a great plot-line in a novel; all the art in the world may be there, but it's sugar that turns those pages. Yet here in these spectral shimmering beauties are all the things to love about wine.

Nigl at a glance:

No one would deny this estate's inclusion among the absolute elite in Austria, and many observers wonder if there's anyone finer. Extraordinarily transparent, filigree, crystalline, mineral-drenched wines of mind-boggling clarity. Prices remarkably sane for world-class great Rieslings (compare to the best in Alsace!)

AFN-099 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit**

A very sorrelly nose with an almost Gros Plant earthiness; the palate is mineral-powdery with a certain plump pith of something like Bibb lettuce and persimmon. More generous than the highly polished 2002, though not quite as "sweet."

AFN-10 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben**

Two sites, averaging sixty plus years old. Consistently it had been among the top five to ten Veltliners in every vintage, and it is a classic statement of GrüVe on loess. But be patient, as it needs its second year to unfurl its splendors and perhaps ten years thereafter to say everything in its inscrutable soul. Peter and I drank a 1993 from his cellar last year, and it was serene and classical. Peter also feels this '03 is another step ahead for this wine, and it's indeed a considerable achievement in a difficult GV year; powerful fragrance, sweet and high-toned and citrussy; the palate follows albeit with a heady, schnapps kick, though the power of fruit returns to balance the finish. It's a minor distortion, but the essential flavor works best of any vintage since 1999.



AFN-100 **2003 Grüner Veltliner "Privat"**

AFN-100M **2003 Grüner Veltliner "Privat," Magnums**

"Privat" denotes the best wines of each vintage from each variety. This is always molten, like a primordial magma of Veltliner. The aromas are quite heady in '03, leading into a monstrously salty and ore-like palate; campfire and burning leaf; the palate is more even-tempered than the nose suggests, and though it's rather a runaway train of intensity it somehow works, it makes a seething kind of sense.

AFN-102 **2003 Riesling Senftenberger Piri** **+**

VINEYARD PROFILE: Piri is a large site, entirely terraced, entirely on brown Urgestein with medium-thick topsoil. Whatever comes from it has fragrances of iris, pepper and iron. Martin's Rieslings often show a fine, subtle melange of peach and blackberry. 2003 offers a heady fragrance, iris, green tea and forest-herbs; a spicy and powerful palate isn't showing all its cards, so I asked Martin to bring a cask-sample too - the wine is bottled in increments. From cask it was ravishingly juicy and focused and pretty in its verbenal-like 2003 way. This has soared over its class.

AFN-101 **2003 Riesling Kremser Krennsleiten**

Year after year this is the sexiest of Nigl's Rieslings, the one with the peachiest exotica, often with a helpful tease of sweetness. The 2003 has a mirabelle fragrance and wonderful fruit on the palate; it's more baroque than the last few vintages, and has a tic of 2003 heat, but the lovely flourish of fruit carries it in a sort of giddy prettiness. It's the same fruit as in 2002, but where '02 sang it in a silken whisper, 2003 just belts it out.

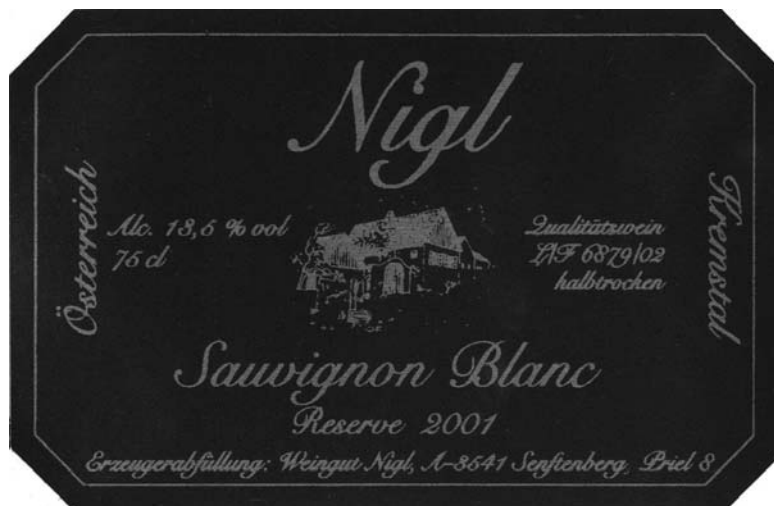
AFN-103 **2003 Riesling "Privat"**

AFN-103M **2003 Riesling "Privat," Magnums** **+**

Often this represents a pinnacle of Austrian riesling-of riesling period. The '03 is, as always, an otherworldly expression of terroir and fruit; more sheer minty power than usual, and less pure grace, but the inner grin of sweetness lingers and lingers, and there's a vivid profundity here.

AFN-105H **2003 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+**

An October 24th picking mostly from the Freiheit, it's not really liqueurous but rather *Vendage Tardive* in style, and insanely expressive of GrüVe, as if from a concentrated must; there's no great electricity but instead a kind of voluptuous focus, and anyone who loves Grüner Veltliner should own this.



weingut erich salomon/undhof kremstal • stein

The old house is under construction now, and the spanking-new tasting room is almost finished. But the old linden is still in the courtyard, and I was happy watching its new leaves flutter in the Spring breeze.

Erich told me a story. Apparently one of the construction crew backed a vehicle, I think a forklift, into the linden and tore off some bark and may have penetrated the wood. So Erich set about to heal the tree. He layered the torn bark back over the wood and held it in place, I don't recall precisely how. But the "bandage" had to be changed every so often, which he did, and the result is a lovely old tree nursed back to health by a man who loves it. And a man who will care for a tree from sheer affection is the sort of man I want making wines for me. Erich Salomon's

younger brother Bert, whom some of you knew in his former role as genius-in-residence at the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, has left the board and come to Stein to work at big brother's side until Erich retires in a few more years. At that point Bert will run the show solo, though I suspect Erich won't be jetting off to the Azores and forgetting the winery he's given his life to. This is good news for all, for the two of them especially.

Bert and Erich seem to get along better than any two brothers I've ever seen. I sense a true symbiosis at work between them; Bert correctly understood the Grüner Veltliners were a level below the Rieslings, and together they're striving to improve them—and succeeding. Bert's also more alert to the strictly commercial questions. There's a lot of sentiment during these visits, as these are

two true sweet-hearts. I sometimes wish I could have known their parents, as I wonder how two such kind-hearted beings were raised.

A few years ago Erich decided to modernize his wines, to emphasize their primary fruit and make them more attractive younger. We



Erich and Berthold Salomon

live, after all, in a culture which assigns wine a commodity value based on a *very* fleeting impression of a thing that's barely out of grape-juice diapers. But we won't change it by kvetching—if only! I'd be silly if I told you I objected; the wines are still among the most original and characterful in all the world, and recent years are nothing

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

short of marvelous.

Still, Erich's determination to change was resisted by his cellar master of twenty-five years, who was understandably rather set in his ways. He gets to re-set his ways though, as he's no longer there! Erich is as cosmopolitan as most of his colleagues amongst the vintners; they are constantly tasting one another's wines and casting not-so-wary eyes on the reviews and rantings of the writers. At the age of fifty-five, our hero decided to change his fundamental approach to vinification, opting for the modern technique of whole-cluster pressing.

This is quite the topic of debate these days. Erich had already removed most of his old casks in favor of stainless steel, and had switched from spontaneous to cultured-yeast fermentations. But whole-cluster pressing really signaled his determination to change. With whole-cluster pressing you get sleek, vertical, transparent and filigree wines. If your harvest is superb your wines can be celestial. If your harvest is ordinary your wines can seem small and sterile. Many of the best growers do it in part, some do it entirely. Hiedler is a conspicuous example of one who does not. Bründlmayer is one who does (but Willi does conventional pressing with 10% and then blends the two). Sometimes you lose a little *gras* with whole-cluster pressing, but you can gain a lot of brilliance. I like the style though I'd be saddened if everyone did it. Wines might become too formulaic.

Erich and I have something in common; we're both

a little too tender for our own goods, and we cling to our idealisms. He is quite selfless in his promotion of the wines of his colleagues, and cannot abide politicking and sniping and jockeying for "position." Whenever I drive away from a visit with Erich I am always convinced he is one of the Great Men of wine. He is loyal to ideas deeper than commerce and more durable than reputation. He has a telling story: his winery has an arrangement with a monastery in Passau to work a plot of vineyard owned by the monks, who receive a tithe of 10% of the production. The last 30-year contract expired six years ago, and a great ceremony attended its renewal for the next thirty years. Salomon tells of a moment of Significance when he realized "In thirty years someone else will be running this winery, and I may not even be left in this world. It gives you a sense of how brief and transient one's claim on life is. I am just one small person taking care of my little piece of the world for a few years."

Also among the general changes under this roof is the shortening of the range; Erich's only offering three Veltliners and three Rieslings and *c'est tu*. Update, simplify, lay the foundation in place for the next life-stage; it's all very stirring to me, somehow. Salomon's *is* a winery where I feel tentacles reaching into the past and into the earth. Erich is wanly dismissive of my more mystical wanderings, but I doubt he'd quarrel with me on this point. He is quite aware of the pull of history, and quite attuned to the specific characters of his soils and the flavors they impart.

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

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

This dear-hearted man has written a Knowing text for his price list, a bit of which I'd like you to see. "Great sites and careful work in them are the basis for good or great wines. Our winemaking is based on this principle; give the wine peace to develop itself. Charming, elegant and long-lived wines are our goals—wines that blossom with food and help food blossom. We're uninterested in Powerwines with 14% or higher alcohol."

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

Bert's more of an internationalist than his big brother, and there's his marketing background to contend with. The 2003 vintage is a fascinating glimpse into the new dynamic in place. Erich was adamant: we must pick *early*. So pick early they did, with compelling results. A couple wines are almost too correct and starched-white-shirt, yet there's also the *single best Grüner Veltliner* in this offering, along with the loveliest "basic" Riesling. Each time I started to fear "These are not wines so much as *concepts* of wines" another crazy-ass masterpiece would emerge and I'd have that happiest of moments in wine: *Hey, what do I know??*

Salomon at a glance:

This is certainly the sleeper-agency of any in this portfolio. Sensational value for first class stellar wines. Changes in the cellar work really took hold with the magnificent 1997 vintage.

how the wines taste:

Since 1997 these are modern wines, more filigree than juicy (except perhaps the Riesling Pfaffenberg), and with delicate transparent textures. This is how they RENDER what are often highly expressive fruit-terroir statements, falling somewhere between the demure and the ostentatious. They're closer to Alzinger's style than to the styles of their fellow Kamptal-Kremstalers.

ASU-055 2003 Grüner Veltliner "Hochterrassen"

Berthold shows his acumen here, as he's helping bring about a virtually perfect quaffing GrüVe at an attractive price. That said, the wine sometimes stiffens up after bottling, and I'd encourage them to give it a little more *gras*. The 2003, stunted from recent bottling, has nutty fragrances and a solid, snappy and nutty palate. I want a dozen Malpeques, like *now*.

ASU-057 2003 Grüner Veltliner Wieden

The site is a flat vineyard at the foot of the hills, "a layer of strongly weathered eroded schist mixed with riversand and loess on a bed of riverpebbles." It was bottled the last week of March; a slightly animal nose gives way to utter green bean; the palate is cool and scrupulous with a phenolic nip, but the tertiary finish shows a little zaft and either this will emerge most pleasingly or the wine will prove to have been picked too early.

- ASU-062 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Lindberg "Reserve"**
 Another outstanding wine, in the ore and white pepper direction; ripe and juicy and golden albeit with a certain amount of 2003 char. Very nice.
- ASU-061 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Von Stein "Reserve"** ++
 Nearly entirely from the great Steiner Hund, this is the GrüVe of this offering and the only 2003 Grüner Veltliner I tasted that could honestly be called great.
- A fabulous aroma: pure, naked, rugged *Urgestein*, deeply smoky, like a pepper-cured bacon. Cajun GrüVe! Birchy, a glory of secret-sweetness and a quality of ancient fiery stone, primordial. This is *important* wine, this seething groan of old stones. Don't even think of missing it.
- ASU-056 **2003 Riesling "Steinterassen"**
 Really thrilling nose; cool, Sencha, lime-blossom; palate is sleek and crackly, an after-shave splash of freshness; just about perfect "basic" Riesling. I had a sample bottle sent to me at home, and Karen Odessa was rooting around for some dry white to deglaze a pan with, so I figured let's open this baby 2003 since I need to taste it anyway. Well: opened it, tasted it, said *No Way* are we cooking with this puppy. And off I went to Germany. Fast-forward almost five weeks. I'm back, and there's about 40% of the bottle still in the fridge. *Now* maybe we can cook with it, I thought. Nope! Still going strong, and it kept going strong another ten days until I pounded down the final drops. God I love Riesling.
- ASU-058 **2003 Riesling Kögl**
 Lovely aroma, all leaves, ramps, balsam, pine-sap; palate is dee-lish, zingy and focused and just infinitely sweet green; relief as sharp as a paper-cut, and just a nip of finishing tartness.
- ASU-059 **2003 Riesling Pfaffenberg**
 This is one of the great vineyards for Riesling in all the big wide world. There's more of a puréed, semolina feel to them, less steely. When I was a wee laddy I used to make a real Scotch porridge with milk and brown sugar and honey and butter, and Pfaffenberg always tastes porridgery to me; the 2003 is oh so fetching; the palate is sinewy and crisp; there's an *Urgestein* note on the finish and the apricot flavors linger.
- ASU-060 **2003 Riesling Kögl "Reserve"** +
 A selection of only clean grapes from the south-oriented bunches; quite the powerful schnoz here! Peach and red pepper; the palate is at once soft and zingy with a sort of fierce focus. Impressive.
- ASU-054 **1997 Riesling Kögl "Reserve"** ++
 The first great Riesling of the new era Salomon, and a welcome ambassador of the supernally great Riesling vintage 1997, which came along just before Austrian wines were really "discovered" here. This takes all the Kögl notes - red-pepper, star fruit, mineral and apricot - and adds a regal serenity of structure with tertiary notes just beginning to appear. If you want to see Austrian Riesling at its most splendid, look no further.



weingut bründlmayer

kamptal • langenlois

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

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

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry, but stern as iron about his core principles. He's one of the best people you could meet. He's sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a button and very alert. He

follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely interested and ever curious. One wag of a journalist dubbed him the "Wine Professor" because of his thoughtful mien, but these wines, serious as they are, come from someone who knows WIT—and how to brandish it!

Bründlmayer's is a large domain as these things go, with seventy-five hectares of vineyard land. Hardly any of my German estates are larger than fifteen hectares. Yet Willi's range of wines is kept within sensible limits. Soils are rocky and dry in the hills, fertile and calcareous in the lower areas. That's according to Willi's estate brochure, from which I'll quote a little.

"All different wines are aged by the classical method in oak and acacia casks in deep vaulted cellars. In the vineyards the family apply organic principles (no chemical fertilizers, herbicides and chemical sprays)." Bründlmayer neither crushes nor pumps 90% of his musts; the other 10% is macerated overnight and crushed to emphasize varietality.



Willi Bründlmayer

Bründlmayer is universally revered and respected. Partly it's the wines, of course, their outstanding success in a variety of idioms over so many years, and from a winery of such size. It's also because of Willi himself, who combines a piercing intellect with such halcyon demeanor you can't help but be fond of him.

Inside Austria there are small chitterings that perhaps Bründlmayer's 75 hectares are simply too much, or that perhaps the wines have become less his wines than those of his cellarmaster Mr. Knorr; you know all about wine gossip. I doubt if much of this is true, but nor do I

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

doubt there is a germ of a reason for even this frivolous chit-chat. In any case, 2003 is a good vintage here but not up to the sublime standard set in 2002, except at the everyday level where 2003 is actually *better*.

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



Bründlmayer at a glance:

Generally considered Austria's best winery, based on steadily outstanding wines across the entire range. Remarkable attention to detail for a large (by my standards at 75 hectares) winery.

how the wines taste:

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

ABY-128 **2003 Grüner Veltliner "Kamptaler Terrassen"**

This is our entry-level Bründlmayer GrüVe but not his, which may be why it always surprises me by how damn expressive it is. The 2003 has wonderful polish and "sweetness," elegance and forthright varietality; it's richer and fluffier than the '02 and even easier to like.

ABY-129 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang**

ABY-129H **2003 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml**

Grown on "poor primary rock, the *Loisberg Zoisite-Amphibolite*, which contains mica slate and semi-precious stones" (is that like Bill and Charlie?), this is an unusually fine vintage for Vogelsang; here you seem to see the texture of gentle pressing ("equivalent to the force of a handshake between friends") as the wine is wonderfully compact, dense and focused, with a finely granular texture; limpid, white-iris and white-lilac, and just the slightest nip on the finish.

ABY-131 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben**

+

I'd say this is the wine of the vintage here. Good, deep, ripe sandalwoody aromas; wonderfully lush yet bracing structure and coconut spice; juicy and peppery and really fabulous quality for 2003. Aged, by the way, in local acacia barrels.

ABY-132 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm**

It's always a struggle with me and this wine; how much is too much? Often it seems this big fiery thing is finally redeemed by its thick depth of flavor. And it's the wine that's constantly trouncing all those whomping White Burgundies and Mastiff-like Chardonnays in the tastings, so what do I know?

A sommelier whom I greatly respect alerted me to this wine; "The 2003 is the greatest vintage of Lamm Willi has made," he said, and I felt great anticipation.

What happened was I learned a great deal about the "Austrian palate" or about the *Zeitgeist* or about something I don't know what. Last year I was in Austria before Easter and there was kid (as in baby goat) on all the menus. Tasting this Lamm I thought of kid roasting on a spit rubbed with allspice and rosemary. Then after about five minutes its signature smells emerged; rabbit and garrigue. The wine is indeed fascinating in its monstrous way, and about as ripe as a person can stand, this person anyway. It's both charred and sweet - it's lysergic all right, and many of you will like it more than I do. Evidently!

Willi opened a 1990 Lamm over dinner which is one of the greatest Veltliners and greatest white wines of any kind I've ever tasted. It had all the complexity of the 2003 encased in a structure and moderation more stirring to me than the '03's firepower.

ABY-130 **2003 Riesling "Kamptaler Terrassen"**

Ah, Daddy's home. It's fresh, limey, lively, clear, snappy, elegant and charming, but there is just a nip of bitterness on the finish - a price one frequently pays among Austrian 2003s from vintners for whom the idea of a few grams of RS is anathema.

ABY-133 2003 Riesling Steinmassel

The 2003 shows lilac, iris and peach; a salty and precise Riesling with scope and dimension.

ABY-105 2002 Riesling Steinmassel

From the high wuthering slopes of schistous granite comes one of Austria's great "ordinary" Rieslings, showing the BASIS of their greatness; the 2002 shows framboise and kirsch and plum-blossom aromas; a lovely spidery structure, slim and mysterious; coolly gorgeous and contrapuntally intricate. Sleek as raw silk and a little drier than the last few vintages.

ABY-134 2003 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**ABY-134H 2003 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**

Hugely attractive fragrances, high-spirited and nearly impossibly complex; the palate seemed bottle sick because all those aromatic "sweet" elements seemed crushed; it was merely bracing and pointed with lots of pulverized mineral and slightly nippy phenols. I sense this will emerge and be a highlight of the vintage.

ABY-135 2003 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein "Lyra"

The name refers to Bründlmayer's trellising method, a Y-shaped system that looks "as if the vine is throwing its arms up toward the heavens," says Willi. This system also more than doubles the leaf-surface exposed to sunlight and encourages quick drying of leaf and grape alike after a rain. Willi also wants to demonstrate you don't *need* old vines to make great wine.

But there's more. "Lyra is the wine of the sun," Says Willi, "the brainchild. Whereas Alte Reben is the wine of the soil, the darker underground. You drink each wine with a different part of yourself."

What a lovely thing to say.

I've grown to really love this wine, its forthright lavishness of fruit is like a balm of happiness in many vintages. Here again it is overtly golden and fruity, but with the 2003 power; there's more mineral salt than usual, but between its recent bottling and the 14.5% alcohol it's all rather opaque.

ABY-137 2003 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein Alte Reben

I couldn't come near this; one week in bottle and the wine is in a howling funk, all its profundity muted in favor of a specious intensity. The wine is iconic, so I'll offer it, and I am extremely curious to know just what sort of wine it is!

ABY-120 2002 Muskateller

No gravitas here bawse! This is just limey spice to the end of time. Hint of botrytis. Power and torque. Zero to 60 in 4 seconds.

ABY-138 2003 Muskateller

Elderflower and then some! Lots of juice and grain, then the spice emerges, and I just love all the shimmery spice here, but as you know I am a simple soul who believes wine should first be sensually enjoyable before it is all those other things.

ABY-136 2001 Bründlmayer Sekt

I splurged my final night in Austria and stayed in one of Vienna's grandest hotels. I felt like a Sultan. At breakfast there was this deranged buffet from which I gnarfed an unseemly amount of food. What to wash it down with? Ah! There were two fizzies, one was a Champagne you've heard of and which I probably shouldn't name (though it rhymes with "hurts" if you say it right) and Bründlmayer Sekt at its side. And there, boys 'n girls, I did prove in front of several witnesses that Willi's fizz is **INDEED** better than middling commercial Champagne and is, I'd argue, the best sparkling wine in the world that's not Champagne.

The 2001 wants another 6 to 9 months on the cork to attain the suave caramelly thing Willi-Sekt does so well. We drank his first-ever cuvée, a 1989 from Magnum, and it was going full-bore strong and still climbing.

NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

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

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

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

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

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



Heiligenstein vineyard

why does place-specificity matter?

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

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

I thought that remark was innocuous enough, so I was taken aback when someone responded it was "pretentious New Age bullshit" (or words to that effect). I recognize there are sensibilities other than mine, more linear, more prosaic. Yet with all respect, most thoughts along the "mystical" continuum are reducible to linear equations if one wishes to frame them thus.

No, the salmon aren't actually thinking "let's go back to the river guys, cause the Indians are waiting for us." No one means to say that. There is, though, among certain peoples, an immersion into nature different from our I-thou relationship, an inchoate assumption of *unity* among living things. The idea of the salmon "responding" is poetic, but the notion of interconnectedness is entirely reasonable.

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

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

It isn't announced with billboards, you know. *Spirit Of Place, five miles ahead, bear right to access*. Not like that. Nor is it necessarily beautiful. The northernmost section of the New Jersey Turnpike is full of spirit-of-place, however repugnant it may be. I'd say it comes at the moment of ignition between your soul and that place, and a condition of that union is that it happens aside from your awareness. It is an inference, as all soul things are.

I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the landscape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and the cool days of June, and the wan northern sun that seldom seems to roast. And the still

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

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

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

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

I want to emphasize that point. The soul records, but does not transcribe. Because we are a part of nature, what happens to us also happens *in nature*. This is self-evident. From this point one ventures into cosmology or does not, according to one's preferences. I prefer to believe spirit-of-place registers in our soul because *nature wants it to*. Because everything that happens in nature is part of a design, which we humans discern. You may believe or disbelieve in the purposiveness of that design. Myself, I feel if one chooses to presume there is no purpose, then what is there left to think

about? It's all senseless and random, la di da, what's on TV? Assuming it is not mere chance is at the very least an opening for more thinking.

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? We need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When something flourishes, it tells us it is at *home*. It says this is where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste "flourish" when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can "exist" elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!



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

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

The parameters are complex.) Domprobst always gives thrilling wines, with "signature" flavors of cassis, pecans and granny-apples. I get Domprobst from three different growers, and its particular fingerprint is absolutely consistent whichever the cellar.

Right next door to the southeast is Himmelreich. This is an undulating hillside with sections of varying steepness. In Domprobst you hit rock six inches below the surface; in Himmelreich it's often a foot or more. This gives the wines more fruit, and makes them less adamantly fibrous and mineral, more forthcoming, and just a little less superb. If you're a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don't have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the *grapes*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

weingut schloss gobelsburg

kamptal • gobelsburg

Here's a happy story.

This is a venerable monastic estate from the monks of Zwettl. Pope John-Paul paid a visit in the recent past. The wines were reasonably good but not among the best in the region. It happened that Willi Bründlmayer learned they were prepared to sell or lease the entire property, castle (and its lovely museum of antique ceramics), winery and vineyards.

Ah yes, vineyards. The estate happened to own some of the very best sites in the entire Kamptal; the local scuttlebutt had always speculated what spectacular wines might be possible from such land with more energetic leadership at the helm.

Bründlmayer had a customer, a young man in the opposite end of Austria. Michael Moosbrugger

was a restless wine lover, just barely thirty years of age, who had visions of making wine someday. Potentially great winery needs new blood. Young, energetic and visionary wine-lover seeks winery. Put the two together and **whoosh!**

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

In fact I have the ever-stronger impression that Michi's really *arrived* now; he has five straight outstanding vintages behind him and his basic style is beginning to emerge. Somehow everyone thought this process would be instantaneous, but things take the time they take. Austria's hyper wine culture notwithstanding! Michi's wines excel by precision and polish now. Their texture is truly silken, and their "temperament" is as pensive as that of their maker. This year for the first time I felt that Gobelsburg had entirely shed the skin of the Michael-Willi association and had arrived at its own place in the firmament. So much so that several observers believe Gobelsburg has "overtaken"



Michael Moosbrugger

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

Bründlmayer. As far as I myself am concerned the question is moot; I owe my association with Gobelsburg to Willi Bründlmayer and there are bedrock questions of honor at work. Plus I dislike the whole tip-sheet mentality whereby estates are ranked "against" one another on some arbitrary continuum. But, truth to tell, I wish I were as pure as I wish I were. Let's face it, I do it too; we all do it, there are hierarchies throughout nature, and it's hardly unusual for the human intellect to sort through and evaluate the things it experiences. Even if we know these evaluations are ephemeral, we still do them.

Thus I'd say Bründlmayer has a longer deeper track record, more gravitas and no need to "prove" itself for the likes of me or anyone else. And, Gobelsburg made better wine in 2003. But Michi Moosbrugger made better wine than nearly everyone in 2003.

I've left a couple soul-prints at Schloss Gobelsburg. I was there with colleagues and customers on 9/11/01. And last Summer I was there with the whole gang of Michael Skurnik Wines, and we had a party, with a band, and we commandeered the stage at one point, and Michi sang "New York State Of Mind" in our honor, and we played "Smoke On The Water," and the police were called and a splendid time was had by all. In early May it is quiet

again, and Michi wears once again his customary pensive look, and tells Mark Hutchens "I'm really into Mahler lately," and he and Eva are expecting another baby. And the vintage is superb. The cellar construction

is complete, the garden is doing what gardens do, and all is humming in harmony just as things do when, miraculously, it all works out.

how the wines taste:

It's beginning to look like Martin Nigl is Moosbrugger's aesthetic soul-brother, though Michi's wines are just a little more fluid in texture. But they're both diligently precise in their detailing of flavor; they both speak flavor with careful diction. Though Michi's "big" wines were especially (delightfully!) successful in 2002, his special genius seems to lie in the making of very pretty fine-grained wines at the "low" end of his range—no small gift. And some of the wines offered below are some of the finest in all this offering.

AZZ-071 **2003 Grüner Veltliner "Gobelsburger"**

If you've been buying the 2nd-label Gobelsburger Riesling, here's its Grüner Veltliner sib, sporting a lovely juicy nose with even a little complexity; loads of grip and spice - it compares somewhat to Hiedler's "Loess" though it's a tic less creamy-and it's a **STEAL** for the price; it's taut and dry but less starched-ly crisp than Salomon's "Hochterrassen." Damn, we almost have *too* many incredible Veltliner-values.

AZZ-060 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz**

AZZ-060H **2003 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz, 12/375ml**

As always, this is the Classic. And this 2003 seems especially suave and juicy; it's slinky and vampish and mighty appealing.

AZZ-063 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Renner**

Starting with the 2001 vintage this has been a highlight of this assortment, a big-scaled Grüner Veltliner of amazing value and contained elegant weight and power, with detail and economy. I saw the wine after only two weeks in bottle, but even then it showed a baked rye-or rye-toast-note along with lemon, brioche and varnish; the palate seems really green-beany, with physio-sweetness, capacious and spicy with a kirsch-like finish. The bottle-funk manifested in a slightly medicinal snap where I suspect largeness of fruit will eventually reside.

AZZ-064 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Lamm**

For many tasters Lamm is to Grüner Veltliner what Heiligenstein or Gaisberg are to Riesling, and I'm pleased to have three sources. Yet as you know I sometimes have my, ah, issues with its intensity. This has a colossal aroma; a heavy-metal power-chord of GrüVe; over-the-top spice, penetration and ripeness. It works, it's neither heady nor bitter, and I withhold my "plus" because of a temperamental preference for wines less garish and brassy. Power-hounds find me perverse, but power wears many guises and I like the ones I like.

AZZ-066 **2002 Grüner Veltliner "Tradition"**

This is a deliberate attempt to replicate the style of 50 years ago-conventional pressing on the skins, no must-clarification, no temperature control, and 18 months in cask with frequent racking to encourage secondary flavors-and the result is *wonderful*, real grown-up wine aromas, it's strength balanced, its spice intelligently woven; lots of thrust and intensity, and I feel affection for this affectionate *homage*. Yet the 2001 was even more seamless. It's "woodsy" but not *oaky*; an old dialect of GrüVe I'm glad Michi thought to resurrect.

AZZ-062 **2003 Riesling "Gobelsburger"**

Michi has a second line for sale in accounts where price-points are crucial. His hand is so sure with Riesling I asked to taste the "basic" wine from this segment, and it answered my every hope. The 2003 has a way-attractive fragrance, and in essence you can't ask for more from an everyday dry Riesling: mineral plus fruit plus solidity plus charm plus Old-world terroir. Riesling at a happy price, and if you've got some poached salmon and a dozen Fanny Bays and some cucumber-dill salad, let me bring the wine.

AZZ-061 **2003 Riesling vom Urgestein**

AZZ-061H **2003 Riesling vom Urgestein, 12/375ml**

From young vines in the Grand Crus Gaisberg and Heiligenstein; often this wine seems like a perfect miniature, but it's really complex on a scale of its own. Abstract from body or alcohol, there's a symposium of flavor happening here, the tropical-mineral Heiligenstein, the berry-mineral Gaisberg. In effect it's like a *bonsai* of riesling; it isn't supposed to be "big" but instead to enthrall you with its detail.

The 2003 has classy aromas, more Heiligenstein than Gaisberg; it's the most seductive vintage yet; mirabelle and wisteria, spriggy and juicy; very "adult" somehow, a sort of knowing gentleness.

AZZ-067 **2003 Riesling Gaisberg**

+

Glory-aromas; apple, nutmeg, tapioca-pudding; high-toned but with exceptional silken texture and the most refined possible fruit; stony backdrop with undeflected zingy length. Oh just yum.

AZZ-068 **2003 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**

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Verbena, lime-zest, tilleul, sugar-peas, great penetration of aroma; helplessly seductive Grand Cru stuff, Bub! One of those This-Is-How-Great-Riesling-Can-Be wines, with a palate delightedly torn between surfing its icy mineral waves and sinking into its pillow of fruit.

AZZ-065 **2003 Riesling Alte Reben**

(This wine is available but it is not a Terry Theise Estate Selection)

As this has become a Riesling-icon, I feel you should see it even though I have serious doubts about it. It flirts with overstatement and is certainly in the red-zone as regards intensity; it's less effortlessly poised than the Heiligenstein; it strains to make its point.

AZZ-069 **2002 St. Laurent**

An elegant mid-weight Pinot sort of wine, quite long for its modest dimensions; a slight lick of tannin, not quite as charming as last year's but still mighty good rosso di Kamptal.



weingut ludwig hiedler

kamptal • langenlois

We were sitting at dinner. María-Angeles Hiedler was to my left with Ludwig at the head of the table to my right, talking animatedly to Peter Schleimer. I caught María looking pensively at her husband. "What first attracted you to Ludwig?" I asked her.

"Believe it or not, it was his ears," she replied thoughtfully. "Look at those proud powerful ears." I did, and agreed they were impressive. "Then it was the scar on his cheekbone, and after that it was a sense I had that this man had both his feet not only *on* the ground but even *in* the ground, that he wouldn't be blown away by every little breeze."

I glanced over at Ludwig and all I could do was smile. It was all so true. He is a very beautiful man. And lately I feel his relationship to his wines has somehow culminated, so that human

soul and wine are aligned in a unity of being. You can't separate them; he *is* this wine; *it is* him. With, perhaps, one fascinating exception.

Ludwig is sensually identified with his GrüVes and Pinot Blancs, yet his Rieslings are much better than he thinks they are, because he doesn't really *gestate* them as he does his others. They emerge from another body, as it were, but they emerge as nothing but miracles, some of Austria's most stirring Rieslings. Yet they seem less like his own children than like nieces and nephews, still blood, but one step removed. When I tell him his Rieslings are great he is pleased enough, but his expression indicates *Well O.K., if you say so.* . . .

2003 was an unusual vintage for Ludwig: no botrytis. He also points out "I think the absolutely decisive



María & Ludwig Hiedler

points of this vintage were water-management and how you selected the fruit at harvest; also *when* you harvested. The time-span between optimal ripeness and over-ripeness was so short you needed pinpoint timing to know when and what to pick." At the beginning of September the August heat-wave was dragging on, and many of Hiedler's vineyards were ripe. But he waited. "We wanted fresh cool days and cold nights," he says, "which we got toward the end of the month. They provide the necessary concentration and the fine-polish."

Pause here if you would. How many times have you

- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Thal, Losierberg, Spiegel, Heiligenstein, Gaisberg**
- **Soil types: Sandy loess and loam, gravel, eroded desert sandstone**
- **Grape varieties: 45% Grüner Veltliner, 15% Riesling, 10% Weissburgunder, 10% Chardonnay, 3% Frühroter Veltliner, 17% Zweigelt, Pinot Noir and Sangiovese**

ever heard someone defend *cold* as an ideal for forming the finesse of a wine? It certainly goes diametrically against much of the received Truth in the new world. Nor is Ludwig making some sort of elegant virtue of necessity - it's perfectly warm in Langenlois! But warmth alone gives only mute ripeness; you need cold for finesse and articulation.

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

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

"That's perfect! *Schmalz*," said Hiedler when I told

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

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

All viticulture is “ecological” (natural fertilizers, no

herbicides or pesticides, composting with the skins, but “we are not organic” says Ludwig, as fungicides are used). All harvesting is selective, with two or three passes through the vineyards, exclusively by hand. All pressing is pneumatic. All fermentation is temperature-controlled. The wines are then matured in stainless steel or acacia casks, according to their needs. Hiedler’s uses a different yeast culture for each grape variety, the first time I have seen this.

He’s also gonna *give* us more wine, at last, and for this I have you to thank. Ludwig and his wife Maria visited the U.S. last year and as always happens, you guys blew them away. Your knowledge, enthusiasm, professionalism, friendliness were immediately striking. Hiedlers must have thought “Wow, that is a happening market; let’s send more wine there so we can go back!”

Big orders here please. You won’t regret a drop.

Hiedler at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

AHL-086 2003 Grüner Veltliner Löss

Check out the *price*, Ace. Ludwig Hiedler enters the glory-price Veltliner fray with a sensational wine, quite possibly *too* good for this everyday category: the 2003 shows a lovely classy clear fragrance of cress and rhubarb; the palate is compact, minerally, structured, balanced and long; textbook GrüVe, sorrel, citrus and pepper, and the palate is a juicy gulp-it-again salivator. I could drink a bathtub-full of this.

AHL-087 2003 Grüner Veltliner Thal

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This is always a terroir creature, old vines (nearly 70 years old by now) on a complex Urgestein, and this is one of the GrüVes of the '03 vintage; it's *really* Veltliner expressed as Viognier, mimosa and honeysuckle but with a greeny, verbena note and more yellow-fruit than usual; the palate is ample and fleshy yet shimmering with vividness, all flowering-fields yet anchored with the loveliest greeny grip, like camomile and arugula. Splendid!

AHL-088 2003 Grüner Veltliner Thal-Novemberlese

This is perfect neo-classical GrüVe: columns and porticos, serene and eternal. The regular Thal is baroque in contrast. We all liked the bottled version more than the cask-sample here; considerable depth of flavor, less tropical but more hay or rye, and the finish is like buckwheat and butter. This may grow in stature, in which case I'm under-rating it.

AHL-089 2003 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum"

The 2002 was the best Grüner Veltliner I ever bought and sold - not an easy act to follow. The '03 is more massive, beeswaxy, salty-peppery, with a blanket of sweet fruit over the palate but there's ten toes of heat sticking out from the far end. Ludwig says it will subsume its alcohol over time, but it's living dangerously in any case. Lovers of sheer extravagance will like it more than I do, fusspot that I am.

AHL-090 2003 Riesling Loiser Berg

This feels drier than the 2002; it is drier than the 2002. It has less acidity, thus less RS. But it's typically slatey and butter-sautéed apple with nutmeg and cinnamon, plus pure apricot and even a hint of ginger. Blind I'd have guessed a Pfalz Spätlese. It's wry and playful and kinetic.

AHL-093 **2003 Riesling Steinhaus**

This is the fourth vintage from a new acquisition, pure gneiss soil, next door to the Steinmassel; the wine is a dissertation of mineral in a juicy framework; Complicated aromas, flint, cassis, sage; the palate is superb, juice against grip, herb against "sweetness," indeed an intricacy of herbs leading to complex minerality on the back-palate. Excellent Riesling

AHL-091 **2003 Riesling Gaisberg**

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Years from now, wine lovers will delight in comparing this with its equally compelling sibling from the Heiligenstein, for they are two enthralling expressions of Riesling, among the wines of the 2003 vintage.

Satisfying and searching Grand Cru aromas almost obscure a great apple-some purity-"applesome" is to appley as noisesome is to merely noisy - the palate is silken and crystalline with heavenly fruit poised against theologically complex mineral; a sort of divinity settles over this, a serenity but with a mischievous edge; very grown-up wine; this serene Whole is to mere "flavors" as love is to mere affection.

AHL-092 **2003 Riesling Heiligenstein**

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Heiligenstein sometimes feels more *erogenous* than Gaisberg. This has a Talmudically complex nose, "greener" than usual, orchid and wisteria; the palate has more power than Gaisberg but with the same melting crystalline texture; the finish is a palimpsest of complexity; discreet elderflower woven into fervid mineral, salt and moss and lime-blossom; it's more overt, energetic and canine - Gaisberg is more feline. What wonderful wines!

AHL-095 **2003 Riesling "Maximum"**

This is the oldest vines from the Heiligenstein and Kogelberg. It's even more overt than the GrüVe Maximum yet somehow less garish; quite spicy and swashbuckling, this has sizzle, it has the *moves* and is highly entertaining and flavory, intensely so; it's balanced and long and very good, entirely thoroughly completely trulymadlydeeply good. Yet compared to the Heiligenstein and Gaisberg, this is earthbound.

AHL-097 **2002 Weissburgunder Maximum**

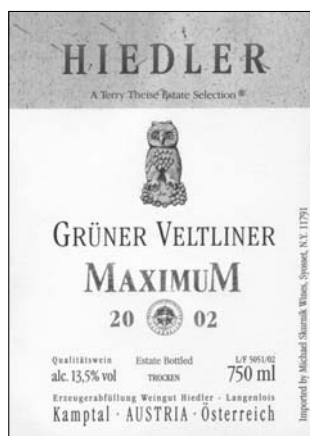
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47-year-old vines, and 100% malo. I often think this is the world's greatest Pinot Blanc. This shows some botrytis but also the finest nutty fruit and the vintage's contained power. Classic and splendid. When it's gone we'll move into the 2003 (AHL-094), to be bottled in September 2004 - the cask-sample was mighty and chewy, no botrytis, pure Pinot-power; huge potential.

AHL-096H **2002 Weissburgunder Eiswein, 12/375ml**

+

From the Spiegel. This is in essence ideal Eiswein, albeit from barrique! Power and body but great purity and elegance; rich and zingy. Only in the final finish is the oak-fruit accord a little awkward - time will probably reconcile this.



weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

Hats off to the man of principle!

Johannes Hirsch is perilously out in front on two major issues of the day. He's the *first* in Austria to move to screw-caps for his *entire* production ("Why should I only do it for my cheapest wines?" he says. "It's the best wines which need it most. Plus if you only do it for the cheapest wines you're sending the message screw-cap = cheap wine." Smart cookie.) Even more subversive is his principled stance to bottle none of his Crus before September. You can't imagine how radical this is. In Austria you have wine-hounds clamoring for the new vintage the day after *New Years* fa cryin' out loud. And as soon as the new vintage is available for sale, the *old* vintage becomes infested with maggots; no one wants it. Plus, the whole PR scene is based on the

glamorous preview of the new vintage in late April/early May when the Wachau and Kamptal and Kremstal have wine-weekend extravaganzas in which growers open their doors to any and all comers, who swirl and hurl and load their trunks with wines still in diapers which the proud owners will drink throughout the summer. But our hero will not sell his top wines until he deems them ready. And by so doing he opts away from a monstrous cash-flow opportunity. Can you spell i-n-t-e-g-r-i-t-y?

Oh there's no end of gossip about the screw-cap matter. I heard stories about financial debacle, orders refused, importers dropping him, open revolt, famine, pestilence, you name it. None of them is remotely *true*, mind you, but it's easier to feel *schadenfruede* than to contemplate how someone else has more *cojones* than you. "In a restaurant these days I'm almost afraid to send a wine back for cork, since they all know my 'politics' on the subject!" Johannes said. Am I *happy* that all those great Rieslings and GrüVes will be stoppered with pro-



Johannes Hirsch

saic screwcaps? Not really. Do I suppose the wines will age as well as they can on cork? I have no idea either way. Is this better or worse than passively accepting a cork-

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Lamm, Gaisberg, Heiligenstein**
- **Soil types: Loess, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles**
- **Grape varieties: 60% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling, 5% Chardonnay**

failure rate of 15% and higher? *No doubt about it: BETTER!* I don't know why more of us aren't more fed up.

I was first here in 1992 or 1993, during the trip-from-hell when I had infections in all six of my sinuses and two of somebody else's. Johannes Hirsch says he remembers my visiting but I must have been in such an effluviant funk I don't recall. I do have my notes, though, which recount intermittently excellent wines interspersed among a few ordinary ones. Which is how I must have filed them away. When I'm prospecting I am most interested in consistency.

Then Peter Schleimer happened across some outstanding 1995s and 1996s from Hirsch and suggested we take a second look, which we did. I have seen the estate in nine vintages now, and every time the wines have seemed to me **among the very best in all of Austria**.

I asked Johannes Hirsch if he thought he had a watershed vintage or breakthrough year, but he said no, just a steady climb up with small refinements and incremental improvements all the time.

There isn't all that much recondite wine data to tell you. They're 20 hectares in size, mid-sized for the Kamptal. 60% Veltliner, 35% Riesling. The rest goes

under the heading of "other" (the proportion of which is being steadily reduced in favor of the two classics). The wines are whole-cluster pressed with all that implies. There's plenty of land in great vineyards.

Father and son work together in apparently seamless harmony. The whole operation is redolent of care

and resourcefulness (they fertilize with goat-dung from a neighbor who makes chevre!). Party though we might, I'm very sure when the sun comes up the next morning my guy Hannes is back to sweating it out again, because wine like this doesn't just happen.

Hirsch at a glance:

Zoom! Went this agency, from out-of-nowhere to the top. Stellar-quality wines from a star-quality vintner at reasonable prices. AND AVAILABILITY IS GOOD. Fantastic 2003s constitute the ninth consecutive "1st Growth" vintage from this emerging superstar.

how the wines taste:

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

AWH-038 **2003 Hirsch Grüner Veltliner "veltliner #1"**

We spent way too much time trying to name this critter; "Hirsch" translates to "Stag" and this year's label is perfectly silly. I asked 'Hannes to make me a volume-wine and bless him, he got on it and produced *exactly* what I dreamed this wine could be. This is the GrüVe equivalent to Lingenfelder's Bird Label Riesling; it's just uncannily, irresistibly good. Just lovely fragrance, nicer than many ostensibly "superior" GrüVes in '03; pure oleander and mimosa; juicy mid-palate and a peppery finish.

AWH-041 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein**

AWH-041H **2003 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**

Spritz entry but an easy, loose-stitched palate; exceptionally peppery nose; lots of spice and smoulder here, though it typically needs 4-6 months for the sweet-fruit to emerge.

AWH-034 **2002 Grüner Veltliner Lamm "September"**

AWH-034M **2002 Grüner Veltliner Lamm "September" MAGNUMS**

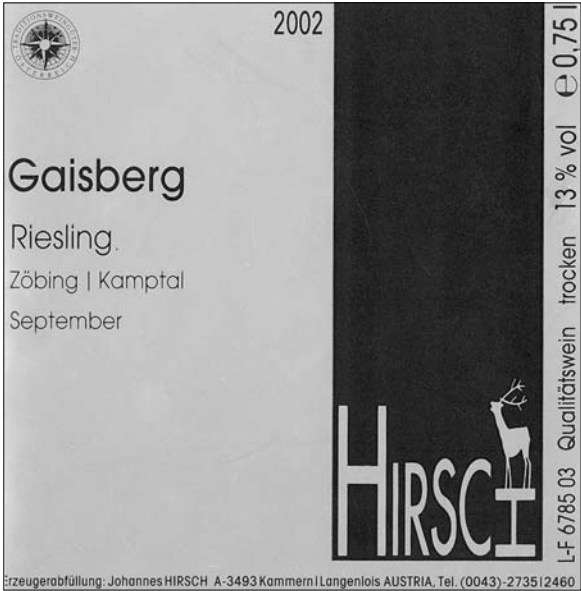
Lamm is in fact the lower slopes of Heiligenstein but the soil begins to change; "it starts to show loess," says Johannes, and the site is a notorious heat-trap. Also, you'll notice there's no more "Alte Reben." Oh the vines are older than ever but 'Hannes feels "Alte Reben has become a synonym for high-alcohol wines, so I don't wanna use it any more." Guy's bucking all the trends! The wine has a demi-glace-y nose, like braised oxtail; surprising then, the fennely-gravelly density and grip, though a cask sample was both broader and more penetrating; after ten minutes in the glass it smelled like seaweed salad yet with those roasty overtones. I want some stir-fried lamb with baby tatsoi, mommy.

By the way, one benefit of Johannes' late-bottling approach is we still can get the wines. I want to sell this as long as it's available; I like the **2003** (AWH-040) very much-it's a basso-profundo of Grüner Veltliner, with meaty caraway aromas, almost like some kind of lamb flan, miitakes, goose-fat, flint, but the Mack-truck power is less appealing than the relative elegance and delineation of this 2002. So it's 2002 while supplies last, then 2003.

AWH-039 **2003 Riesling Zöbing**
 You do know, don't you, what wonderful value you get from little-wines-from-great vintners? And once again, in the 2003 vintage the Rieslings soar ahead; "green" aromas lead into a lemon-blossom ginger and melon flavored palate; splendid torque and solidity; the best vintage of this wine I've tasted; juicy and strikingly long; pulverized-stone finish.

AWH-037 **2002 Riesling Gaisberg "September"** **++**
 AWH-037M **2002 Riesling Gaisberg "September" MAGNUMS** **++**
 AWH-042 **2003 Riesling Gaisberg** **++**
 Always one of the great Rieslings in this offering. The 2002 is just *screaming*, with great sizzling depth of mirabelle and raspberry. The 2003, one of the top-few Rieslings of the vintage, has a stunningly expressive nose; wisteria and blackberry and Gyokoru; the palate is just *absurd*, psychedelically vivid, phosphorescent shimmer, mint and winter-green and fruit and some sort of stone you'd lick to restore eyesight to the blind; lavish fruit yields to pure ore and spice on the finish.

AWH-036 **2002 Riesling Heiligenstein "September"** **++**
 AWH-043 **2003 Riesling Heiligenstein** **+**
 The 2002 has a stunning nose with both brilliance and fervid low notes; green tea and persimmon and passion fruit; astounding grip and explicit minerality, with almost lush mid-palate fruit for such a craggy old-soul of Riesling. The 2003 takes about three minutes of aeration; then there's a microburst of exotica, lemon-balm, peach, malt, salted caramel; hyperactive fruit and almost voluptuous juiciness, and all that summer-fruit explosion resolves into an almost Margarita-like limeyness.for such a craggy old-soul of Riesling.



wachau

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

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

gourmand, a wine-geek, but it's an awkward place to do business.

This tiny region (fewer than 1,500 hectares) can indeed give Austria's mightiest and most profound wines. It also receives attention disproportionate to its actual worth, inasmuch as other regions also produce supernal wines, possibly even **more** of them.

The greatest Wachau wine will distinguish itself from its neighbors in the Kamptal or Kremstal the way great Côte de Nuits does from Côte de Beaune; all things

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

being equal, Wachau wines are simply weightier. The best of them, though, are distressingly scarce, and prone to be pricey, especially at lesser levels of ripeness. The great wines are worth whatever one can afford to pay for them, but the smaller wines often strike me as dubious values. And one must be quite selective. There's a large disparity between a few superb properties and the general run of rather ordinary vintners who seem content to coast in the slipstream of the region's renown.

Indeed this problem is getting worse, not better. Even if one yields the point that the best Wachau wines are the best Austrian wines of all, the second level of Wachau wines are nothing out of the ordinary and they're highly overpriced. I begin to wonder if Wachau wines don't really reach their sweet-spot of ripeness below the "Smaragd" level. Below 12.5% alcohol a great many taste malnourished and incomplete. We threw a

Wachau-ringer into a tasting of wines from the "lesser" region of Donauland, and the two Smaragds were—appropriately—among the very best wines. But the three Federspiels were among the limpest and least interesting. No importer only wants to buy a grower's few best wines; we want good quality across the range.

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

The locals talk of a "climate fiord" brought on by the gorge-like configuration of the landscape and the collision of two climactic phenomena; the Pannonian current from the east with the continental current from the west, all of which make for extreme variations of day and nighttime temperatures. The autumns, particularly, are clement and usually dry, enabling growers to harvest quite late with little fear of botrytis. Early November

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

picking is routine. (Though one sly grower said: "There's nothing romantic about picking in November.") The western section of the regions is said to give its finest wines, due in part to cooler nighttime temperatures as the breezes blow down from the hills. The wines become fuller-bodied and more powerful as you move down-

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

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

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

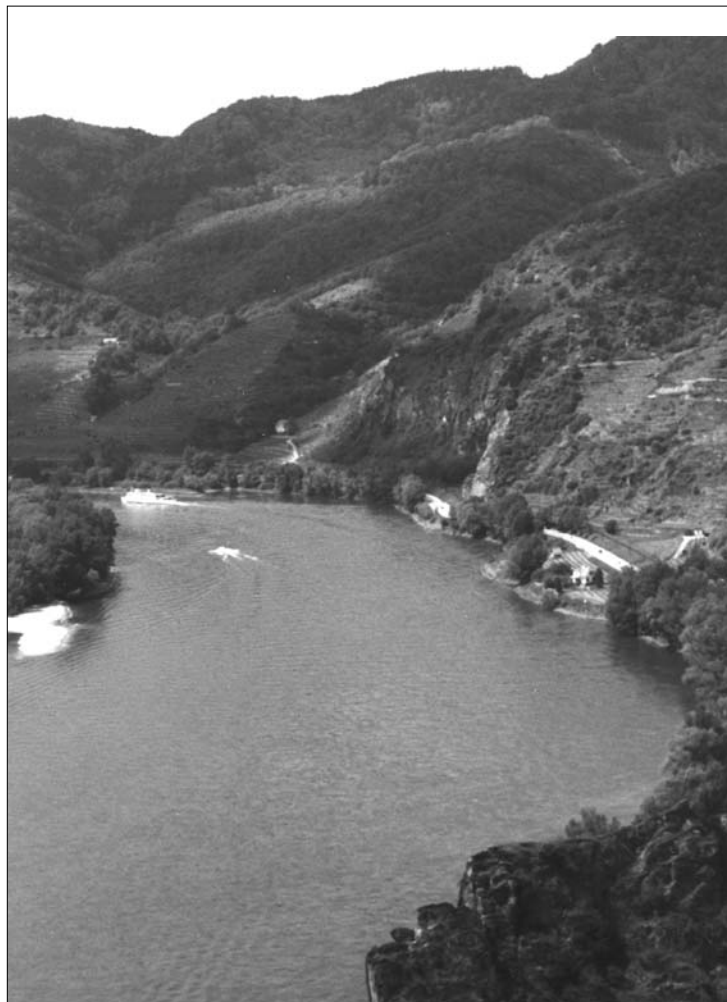
good sense at work in this one. You're going to have to take that on faith, though, because you will be asked to LEARN SOME TERMS.

Members of the Vinea Wachau have a nomenclature all their own to describe their wines. The least of them (referred to as "dainty" in the promotional brochure) is called **Steinfeder**, (after a local strain of grass), for musts between 73° and 83° Oechsle, always, dry and never higher than 10.7% alcohol. Steinfelder wines *can* be very attractive if they are physiologically ripe. Sometimes

they seem misguided. Good ones, though, are little miracles, fresh and innocent, though too slight to ship abroad.

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

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



The Danube

The good die young. It always rains when you plan a picnic. The best possible thing will always happen at the worst possible time. The plaster that falls from the ceiling will always land on YOUR slice of pizza. There are many proverbs and truisms (including the one I made up about the pizza), but here's one you might not have heard: *The depth of your love for a winery is proportionate to the scarcity of the wines.*

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

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

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

This is how it works in the Wachau. The first year I was granted an allotment of twenty cases of the least of three Veltliner Smaragds. I duly (and gratefully) accepted them. Next year a second Veltliner was made available, along with a few cases of Riesling Smaragd. Next, I received four Veltliners, two Federspiel and two Smaragd, and a Riesling Smaragd, much more wine but still not much wine. Last year the floodgates opened: a whopping

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

200 cases for the lower 48 plus Hawaii. This year we're up to 320 cases. Each year, I inch farther away from the back of the queue. Peter Schleimer and I have asked very gently if any more wine might be available. Alzinger smiles his buttery beatific smile. "Privately, a few bottles," he says. You have to come over to my house if you want to taste them. Bring the cheeze-whiz!

I happened to be sitting next to a buyer for one of Austria's major wine retailers one evening over dinner. We was schmoozin'. I asked him: "Apart from a *professional* appraisal, which Wachau wines do you personally most *enjoy*?" He thought for an instant and answered: "Alzinger and Prager." When I repeated the story to Peter Schleimer he agreed; it's a virtual consensus. There are more impressive wines, perhaps . . . *perhaps*, but there are none more loveable. Alzinger is a retiring, sweet and gentle personality; which may be why he gets fewer wreaths and garlands, but those In The Know *Know*, and Alzinger's best are just as scarce and sexy as any Austrian wine. I noticed the wines as soon as I made my first visit to Austria; they made for some unforgettable drinking if you could find a mature vintage. The young wines I saw were stormy and closed, but that's changed in the last bunch of years.



Alzinger, son and father

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

This is the only winery I visit where I taste a lot of cask-samples. Alzinger bottles quite late by Austrian standards. He seems to think early bottling suffocates

some wines, and he's gently wry about the Austrian frenzy for little baby-wines still splooshy and goopy. The beauty of his 2003s came as no surprise, but their purity of tone grows more striking with each passing year. It hurts how little wine we get, hardly enough for one *restaurant*, let alone an entire fire-belching behemoth of a **country**. But, but . . . patience. Others were there first. I must humbly wait. Existing clients have their rights too. Rat-bastards.

Alzinger at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

ALA-038 2003 Grüner Veltliner Frauenweingarten Federspiel

The vineyard is on loamy alluvial soil near the Danube; the wine always seems to have a euphoric fragrance, all strawberry and rhubarb, and 2003 is archetypal; lentils and rhubarb and stone and chervil and celery-root; a GrüVe-lover's GrüVe.

ALA-039 2003 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel

If all Federspiel were this outstanding I'd have nothing to kvetch about. Then what would I do? This lovely wine has lots of *yang*, some sweet aromas showing; heathery, vetiver; it's a mini-Smaragd, with pepper, ripeness and *zaft*. Just-plain tasty.

ALA-034 2003 Grüner Veltliner Weingärten Smaragd

Awfully pretty fragrance, all greeny-mineral, fennel, pepper and ore; palate is generous, classy and polished. 4 grams of RS would have been the flowers on the table, and have earned a "plus."

ALA-035 2003 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd

I suspect this was crushed from bottling; the aromas are again very green verbena and vetiver, jade-oolong; there's a bit of spirit-snap on the palate which I think emerges from behind bottle-stunted fruit. Great promise.

ALA-040 2003 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd

A summit among 2003 GrüVes; all shimmery Sencha and naked terroir; wonderful length, bracing greeny snap; splendidly drinkable - fabulous wine, period! Has a sort of iridescent density.

ALA-036 2003 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd

All in all this was the greatest group of Rieslings I tasted from 2003.

Striking pitted-fruit and blackberry fragrances. The soil is quite similar to Gaisberg's: schist, gneiss, *glimmerschiefer*; the palate is the sweetest mint you ever *dreamed*, yet all against a backdrop of black ore; it has three-dimensions, two of them beautiful and the other stern.

ALA-041 **2003 Riesling Hollerin Smaragd** ++*We got it!*

Finally I get to show you one of Austria's greatest Rieslings. The site borders Kellerberg, and the wine is *ten*-dimensional; the soil is weathered *urgestein*, loess and sand; absolutely gorgeous, classic Riesling, long and elegant, prismatic and digital, fruit and mineral. Worth the wait!

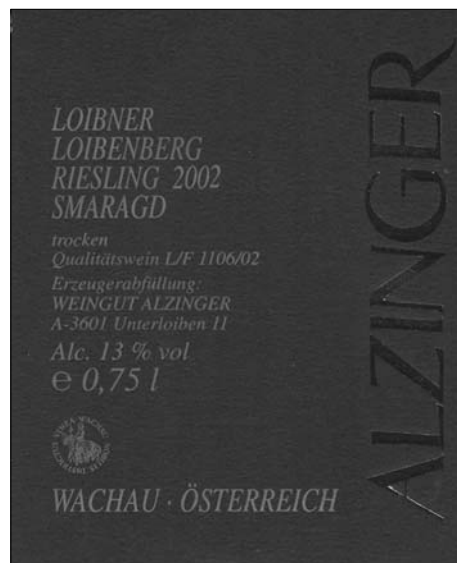
ALA-037 **2003 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd** +

This is to Alzinger what Brücke is to Dönnhoff, and we are well pleased. It's surprisingly herbal and fine, with less of its usual voodoo-fruit; plenty of violet and whole-wheat rusk and Chinese green tea; sea-salty and oyster-shell yet, lower down, caramelized banana - the effect is bewitching.

ALA-042 **2003 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd** ++

This is one of Austria's Great Wines.

The 2003 is like a blacktop strewn with emeralds. The palate is the nth-degree of juicy saltiness, and more expressive than the word can contain; pinpoint minerality like acupuncture; lovely soft corrugation of texture, as if a 1000-foot centipede were walking on your palate; one drinks something of culture yet deeper than culture here. It's the wry smile of the land, a gesture of flavor unique to this place on earth, full of wit and mystery. crash of vividness, with stunningly ripe minerality. In some important way the wine was *too good* to take notes on; one drinks something of culture yet deeper than culture here. It's the wry smile of the land, a gesture of flavor unique to this place on earth, full of wit and mystery.



weingut josef jamek

wachau • joching

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

I know the feeling! But many years earlier, in the summer of 1992, I sat in the garden behind the restaurant (Jamek is one of the Wachau’s best and most traditional dining places) drinking the first Grüner Veltliner I had ever drunk, at the first Austrian winery I ever visited, and I was as entirely happy as I have ever been with a glass of wine in my hand. So this was Veltliner; this was

Austria! My wine life was about to change for the better.

Stuart Pigott told me to go to Jamek first. Get the benchmark in place, then build upon it. Stuart is a more sensible man than his taste in blazers would have you believe.

Benchmark was an apt term, for Jamek did so many things first it’s impossible to imagine the entire modern Austria wine scene without him. “For decades he has produced wines of invariably high quality,” wrote *The World of Wines* in a recent book on top producers in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Jamek was the first to glimpse the Wachau’s potential to give profound and serious dry wine, and he revolutionized the entire region; none of the current crop of master-vintners could exist without Jamek’s shoulders to stand on. He is universally called the “doyen” of Wachau growers. He was even the first to recognize the significance of proper stemware; after the Brussels World’s Fair at the end of the fifties he commissioned (from Claus Riedel) a glass designed for his Rieslings from the Grand Cru Ried Klaus.



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

Each year I try to dine in Jamek’s lovely restaurant in Joching, as there are too few places left in our homoge-

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

nized world where you can find elegant, deft preparations of regionally integral dishes. You know you are **somewhere** in particular and not anywhere else.

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

The doyen handled his holster on to a new generation, specifically to his youngest daughter and her husband, who assumed responsibility for the cellar with the 1995 vintage. The vineyards constitute as fine a collection as exists in all of Austria.

I sat in the restaurant one early Friday evening talking with Mr. Altmann (Jamek’s son-in-law) and uneasily watching the place fill up. Altmann’s is a curious mixture of modern and traditional approaches—all shiny new equipment in the press-house, and nothing but casks in the cellar. They ferment in stainless steel and can control temperature if necessary. No cultured yeasts, minimal

SO₂. The wines are not fined.

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

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

During the eighties and early nineties the prevailing view of Jamek was admiring and sentimental, but with Altmann's era many onlookers began anticipating a spike back up to the very highest level. After three consecutive great vintages (1999-2001) the stars were just about aligned.

Then came August 11 2002, and the great flood.

This didn't affect the winery, which sits on high ground behind Joching, but the restaurant was under water, and a great deal of energy was expended in drying out and rebuilding. Which is not to say the vintage '02 was disappointing; far from it. In fact the vintage is probably better than 2001, and I'm starting to feel Jamek

has found itself and established its profile. I never seem to get there at the right time to taste; the wines are always just-bottled and I'm constantly underrating them. I'm sure this is the case with the 2003s, but here the tendency of the vintage can—*can*—make for some four-square clunkers. So we'll see. Again, Riesling stole the show.

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

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

Jamek at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

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

- AJJ-049 **2003 Muskateller Ried Kollmitz Federspiel**
Muscat is, to me, self-evidently desirable if not outright irresistible. I can't imagine why more people don't drink it; it's so pretty and charming. This 2003 is broader-bodied than usual, but it's properly spicy and overt.
- AJJ-051 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Stein am Rain Federspiel**
This is unusually fine, both in itself and for an '03: sorrel, rhubarb and ore; palate is tautly peppery, a characterful Wachau GrüVe.
- AJJ-046 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Ried Achleiten Smaragd**
This is Grüner Veltliner wrought in iron, or put another way, this is Achleiten wrought by Grüner Veltliner, but in either case it's a monument and it needs time. Right now it's a big smoldering thing with obsidian depth and opacity, almost burly, showing the vintage's heat and abruptness of finish, but quite the powerhouse while it lasts. And it's historically slow to recover from bottling and slow to develop once it does, so . . . we'll see!
- AJJ-050 **2003 Riesling Jochinger Berg Federspiel**
2003 Riesling is so good you often find sheer gems at the "bottom" of the range; this is lovely *true* light easy delicious wisteria-and-mineral dry Riesling; fragrant, impishly lively dancing ticklesome wine. In its wee little way, utterly perfect, and almost unbearably lyrical.
- AJJ-047 **2003 Riesling Dürnsteiner Freiheit Smaragd**
This wine is often the exotic, showing golden summer-fruits, mimosa, oleander; but the '03 is a rogue; a euphoric fragrance recalling Gaisberg: mirabelle and sorrel; the palate has wonderful spice and is much *greener* than usual; almost limas or even dill; melon flavor without melon-sweetness. How???
- AJJ-048 **2003 Riesling Ried Klaus Smaragd** (+)
Thoroughly shut and potentially explosive; at this point only torque, ore and mineral are showing, but I am certain a great mass of fruit is waiting to hatch, and my single "plus" may prove to have been stingy.

nikolaihof-wachau

wachau • mautern

“Only dead fish swim in the current.”

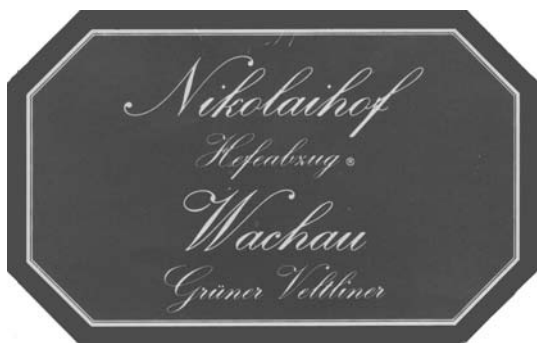
The world is slowly catching up with Nikolaus and Christine Saahs, as their bio-dynamic regime comes to seem less bizarre. Perhaps it was lonely for them, or perhaps they bore up with dignity; I don't know. I do know there's a certain natural resentment we *all* feel toward those more virtuous than we are; there should be a neologism for this phenomenon!

Saahs' preference for the bio-dynamic life doesn't seem to hail from a concern we'd call “environmental” in the political sense. It rather arises from their overall approach to sharing life with other *forms* of life, and also from their sense of time. Ah, time. There's an enveloping patriarchal linden tree in their courtyard which is a pretty nifty symbol of time; thick, slow, sturdy, gentle,

ultimately patient. I'm fond of this tree, all the more so because of those before and after me who'll have enjoyed its tolerant friendship.

Visits here can begin to take on almost mystical dimensions, and the Saahs are an inspiring couple, yet the wines are, or can be, mortally imperfect. “Ah, Nikolaihof,” one experienced Austrian taster and writer told me, “sometimes they miss the target but when they hit, they are really incomparable, perhaps the very greatest wines in Austria.” My sense is that Saahs, like Bründlmayer, prefers it that way, placing the greater value on letting each vintage speak in its own voice instead of trying to fashion the wines to a theoretical degree of prettiness. Some years you're the windshield and some years you're the bug.

Nikolaihof-Wachau (this is the full name preferred by the vintner, but for brevity's sake I'll call it just “Nikolaihof”) is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first allowed to carry the official Austrian **Bio** sign; these are amongst the purest strictures for organic production to which any winery on earth must adhere; if you're inter-



ested in biologically pure wines of absolutely peak-quality, look no further. (Frau Saahs is charmingly dismissive of what she might call organic parvenus. Even those practicing integrated viticulture are suspect: “it is better than nothing,” she allows, “but not much!”) She and her husband have farmed and made wines organically for

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 100,000 bottles**
- **Top sites: Im Weingebirge, Vom Stein, Steiner Hund**
- **Soil types: Primary rock topped with humus or gravel, and eroded primary rock**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Riesling, 35% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Weissburgunder, Malvasier, Neuburger, and Chardonnay**

over two decades; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible. Mr. Saahs, who is responsible for the winemaking and vineyards, is a believer in organic production as a guarantor of **superior** quality.

In the past year a study has been published which appears to prove the salubriousness of Biodynamic wines in general and Nikolaihof's wines in particular. Christine is very proud of this, and I'm happy for her. Yet somehow I'm less touched than she is, and I think I know why. I recall seeing a story in one of the magazines which said scientists had isolated the health-giving compounds in wine and could make them available in pill-form. At which point it became very clear to me; we don't drink wine *because* it is (merely) “healthy;” we drink it because, in an holistic way, it is *good for us*. Not only for our discrete bodies, but for our whole lives and souls. That wine is in fact harmless and probably even healthful is something we already knew intuitively; it's a bonus, but it ain't *why*. I am sure Christine knows this too.

“It isn't the integrated regime in itself we find unsatisfactory,” they told me one year. “It's the general confusion about the real demands of true organic viticulture.” I affirm this logic because I've been guilty of making the



Chistine Saahs

very mistake Saahs allude to. When growers tell you they fertilize organically, and/or they've done away with insecticides (or any pesticides) and herbicides, when they say they farm "ecologically" or compost or throw any of the buzz-words around, it's easy to be seduced.

It's also easy, and appropriate, to applaud them for moving in the right direction. But it mustn't be confused with certifiably organic grape growing.

It seems to boil down to fungicides. The organic farmer can only use copper-sulfate (though Saahs uses a spray made from stinging nettles or valerian drops, sometimes valerian tea or other biodynamic preparations which are diluted to homeopathic amounts). The E.U. has severe limits on the amounts, as do the organic certification agencies. Most growers who want to go as far as possible towards organics are stopped at this point. It is simply too risky, they say, to do away with chemical fungicides. I asked Mr. Saahs if there was anything he could say to reassure these well-meaning growers to take the plunge. He pondered the question. "Actually, it's very difficult!" he finally answered. "There is a risk you'll lose some of your crop. You have to work many times harder in training the vines and cutting leaves away to get the air moving through the grapes." In other words, he can't honestly tell a nearly-organic grower "go on, it's easier than you think," because in fact it's just as hard as he thinks.

I happen to feel it's a better world if most growers are *mostly* organic than it is if a *few* are entirely organic and the rest conventional-chemical. That said, and all respects paid, the real back-breaking sacrifices the Saahs and other true-organic growers make must be acknowledged with a term they alone can use. I'll be more careful from now on.

Everything about Nikolaihof is determinedly PERMANENT (when you say "old fashioned" you create images of something either anachronistic or cute, and Nikolaihof is neither). "I've never 'styled' a wine," says Herr Saahs. Indeed, until a few years ago the grapes were still pressed in an antique wooden press; the one concession to modernity is a pneumatic press. Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average age of forty-five years), low yields, natural farming, and unmanipulative cellar work are the **secrets**, so to speak, but to quote Dr. Helmut Rome: "The secret

of these wines lies not so much in cellar technology - which in any case barely exists - as in the special care of the vines." He quotes Herr Saahs as saying, "You shouldn't shove a wine along; just give it a controlled peace so it can develop itself." Fermentation (natural yeasts,) and all aging is in old wood. The wines spend a long time—up to 4 months—on the lees. Nor is Saahs chasing the blockbuster icon or pushing the ripeness envelope. Remember his admonition that *wine is a foodstuff*. "I like to **drink** wine, not study it," he says. "We pick when the grapes are ripe, we don't wait for overripeness." His wife inserts; "There's nothing charming about harvesting in November."

Conservative wines, one might say. Yet such conservatism is becoming trendy these days - at least until its actual costs are reckoned with. Among these costs is labor. It takes more people to farm organically; the Saahs employ 10 workers for 20 hectares. They claim a conventional winery could do the work with four or five. They are happy, they say, to give employment to more people; "We are not in this world just to make money," says Frau Saahs. Among the 20 hectares of land are two meadows allowed to grow wild. "We learned if we didn't control the vegetation in these meadows that the most predatory of the plants would eventually overcome the weaker plants, so each year we mow the meadow twice. It levels the playing field," she added, looking thoughtfully into the distance. "We don't drive a big car, we don't take world cruises . . . but we do mow our meadows twice a year," she said, as if to herself. "We simply occupy this little form of skin and bones for a few years, but we *need* to nourish our hearts and souls by finding a home in our parts of the world and caring for this home."

It's a little sad to subject these young wines to the rough waters of commerce. When you let the special quiet of this cellar seep into your being, you start to see time in larger swathes, and the brutality of "THE NEWEST VINTAGE!" is jarring. The truth of Nikolaihof wines emerges in the fullness of time, not before. Tasting them in their mature form is as profound an experience as one can ever have with wine. Something in them seems to weave itself into the fabric of eternity.

Or perhaps their simple rootedness appeals to some-thing lonely in us Americans. We are such spiritual and emotional nomads. We seem hesitant to lay claim to this world, perhaps for fear of having to surrender to it.



When I am with the Saahs' I always feel a jolt of recognition; this is the anchoring I seek, or imagine myself seeking. But *could* I live as they do? I don't know.

It may suffice to "position" these wines to your green-conscious customers, but if you're interested I'll repeat the Nikolaihof charter in its own words. "1) The bio-vintner knows that all life comes from the sun. He employs the sun's energy through natural fertilizers, which support all the natural soil-life from worms to bacteria. Natural fertilizing creates natural nitrogen. 2) Thus grows a vigorous vine which is an integral part of a closed ecosystem. 3) The healthy grapes are noticeably more resistant against illness and pests. 4) The grapes thus develop more of their particular and individual characteristics and bring to the wine a powerful expression of each vintage. 5) The bio-vintner works hand in hand with nature and need never repair the consequences of his own choices. That means for him; all work at the proper time, from planting vines, working the vineyards through the harvest, and bottling. 6) Bio-wine is free of technically manipulated enzymes and yeasts. The result for wine-lovers: **Bio-wine is simply lovelier, is indeed a foodstuff!** Said another way, vintners who work on biological principles employ no poisons, no synthetic sprays, no herbicides. The entire operation must be worked along such lines, and are subject to official control by the State."

Again we sat in the chapel and began the tasting, with The Magic Flute playing in the background. When the Smaragds began being poured, Christine switched to Gregorian chant, recalling my request from a year ago, Again they sat me (embarrassingly) at the head of the great table, and again the spell stole over me, and I was

glad the others were there to chatter away so I could write and wonder. Believe me, I don't arrive *waiting* for this to happen; I rather think it won't. But it does, somehow. I wonder if it begins with the hug Christine gives me, which is just two seconds too long to be merely polite, an embrace containing kinship, an embrace that welcomes and accepts me.

And after all the bim-bam-boom of the past ten days, all the sizzlin' young wines from the young hotties, I sank back into the stillness as if I had come home.

Some of these wines are as still as silent ponds, and each nuance of flavor is like a small pebble dropped in the silvery water, and you watch the tiny silent ripples flow slowly toward shore.

I cannot tell you *how* these wines stir such a calmness of spirit. Other wines are perhaps more poignant, or more exciting. "Wow," you say, "this is exciting wine; I have to tell others how *exciting* this wine is . . ." But I have never tasted wines more *settling* than these. Each of them is like a slow centering breath, a quiet breath, the breath of the world, unheard almost always beneath the clamor.

The 2003 vintage shows great promise. "Promise" only because the best two wines are still in cask and won't be bottled until Saahs thinks they're ready. "Probably just before the harvest," Christine says, "but maybe later, maybe even much later." Thus the portrait is incomplete. However, one important thing emerged from the vintage tale: Saahs are convinced their bio-dynamic regime gave them physiological ripeness two weeks earlier than "conventionally" farmed vineyards, enabling them to harvest early (September) with no sacrifice of quality.

Nikolaihof at a glance:

Nikolaihof would shake their heads in perplexity at the very idea of "at a glance." Organic, bio-dynamic winery whose wines express the earth, the whole earth and nothing but the earth.

how the wines taste:

Nikolaihof's wines are often incredibly thick, dense and uncompromisingly stony in character. Do you know the Clos de Goisses Champagne from Philipponat? Not the most charming Champagne on the market, but surely among the most PROFOUND, and capable of enthralling development with long aging. Same here; JUST GIVE THESE WINES TIME. They'll do everything for you that great wine can do, if you are patient. Early on you'll easily see their sheer intensity, but specific details can be lost in a monolith of concentration, an opacity that can be perplexing if you don't know what's ahead. Thus detailed tasting notes are difficult if you feel the need to delineate skeins of flavors with sequences of associations. Here you just stand on the prow and feel the wind and look at the swollen waves of vinosity and hope you aren't swept overboard. And hope you are. . . .

ANK-045 2003 Grüner Veltliner "Hefeabzug"

Literally "sur lie," a light Veltliner Saahs produces each year along Muscadet lines. The 2003 is delightfully curious; wicky, almost almond aromas; the palate has the usual leesy fluffiness as well as 2003's sternness, but these are the bee's knees of lees, if you please.

- ANK-046 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd** +
 One of the few truly great GrüVes from 2003. Expressive redcurrant fragrances, with caraway; juicy and complex, smoldering and fine, ore; picked the second week of September, astonishingly; thrilling spice and power and length you can lie down on.
- ANK-042 **2002 Riesling Steiner Hund "Reserve"** ++
 I love that the Grand Cru site has the same name as the father of bio-dynamics. This wine is more overt now, as if ore and *garrigue* and limestone were pulverized together and mixed into a Japanese sencha. But the silky-salty thrall's still there, only the cello growls and moans now; there's passion here. The old Gregorian monks have retired discreetly.
- ANK-048 **1990 Riesling "Vinothek"** +++
Fourteen years in large old wood. Bottled in April 2004.
 He didn't like it, until, one day, he did. Can you clarify, I asked? What was the problem? No, he said, and rubbed his fingertips: *here, here, here.*
 It is as great a wine as I have ever drunk. The fragrances are beeswax, chamomile, and time. The smell of time. The wine is tender, sweet and knowing. What can it know? I can't say, but I can try to guess.
 It knows darkness, certainly, and after all those years, uncertainty. Perhaps it knows slowing down. You might as well wait. It must know snowfalls, and stillness, and quiet cold mornings when no one is about. And it knows a strange kind of ripening, how one day there's nothing and the next day green, little flowers, buzzing insects. It could well remember wind and clouds and heat and cats crawling purposively through the grass. I suspect it knows old closets and clothes softened with wear, and marriages softened with wear, and love made slowly and kisses that don't have to taste good, but still do.
- ANK-20 **1999 Riesling Im Weingebirge "Jungferntein"** +
 It means the virgin-crop from a new vineyard, usually very small and concentrated. What did I think the analysis was? I tasted it and bulls-eyed it. It is PERFECT Riesling, whatever it is. It has 27 grams per liter of residual sugar and you never tasted anything so piquant and pretty as this: iris and white lilac and beets and rhubarb. It clamps on to every cell on the palate as if it had thrown a grappling hook; lovely, kinetic dialectic of fruit and mineral, and an echo of strawberry. Yum yum yum.



hans reisetbauer

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

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

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

to Michael Pronay, the greatest narcoleptic journalist I've ever known. "With Reisetbauer we see a unity of man and occupation such as one seldom sees. The friendly bull lives schnapps, speaks schnapps, makes schnapps and loves it like nothing else."



Hans Reisetbauer and his stills

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

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

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

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

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

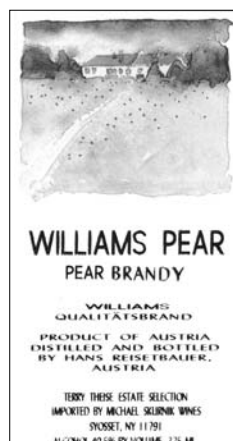
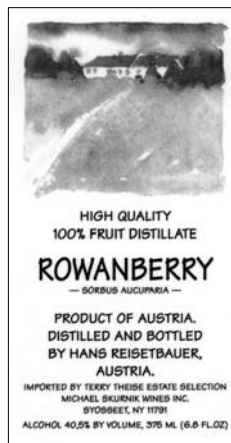
I'll leave you with a quote from Mark Hutchens. "Tasting notes are not really necessary for these because they taste so much like an archetype of their fruit, but I must make special mention of the Alisier, because when you see the price you will think it's a typo. It isn't. But it is worth every schilling. The skies opened above my head when I tasted this and I saw the creation and destruction of a thousand galaxies. In here are smells that simply do not fit in the brain."



Young pear trees at Reisetbauer

Reisetbauer offerings:

- XHR-012 **Sparkling Apple Wine, Dry**
- XHR-001 **Plum Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**
- XHR-002 **Williams Pear Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**
- XHR-003 **Apricot Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**
- XHR-004 **Cherry Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**
- XHR-006 **Rowanberry Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**
- XHR-009 **Raspberry Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**
- XHR-011 **Wild Cherry Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**
- XHR-010 **Mixed Case Eau de Vie, NV, 6/375ml**



POINTS: what's the point?

I had a fascinating conversation with Pierre Rovani, who defended point-systems with compelling logic. "Why isn't it enough," I asked, "to simply have groups, fair-good-very good-excellent-superb, and rank the wines in order of preference within those groups?" "Good question," answered Pierre. "So what you're proposing is a 5-point scale." Ah ha! Hoist on my own petard.

My mistake was to debate the issue on the terms of the point defenders. Their logic is self-enforcing and circular. Critics have a responsibility to take a definite stand, and point scores force them to do so. No longer can they hide behind vague or nebulous language. The wine is an 88 and that's all there is to it. Please read my prose too, they say, because that's where I get to use all my flavor associations and groovy locutions, but the score's the Mojo.

Wine is, after all, a consumer commodity, and as such it can be compared within its type. The role of the critic, in this *Weltanschauung*, is to handicap the entrants and tell you who won the race and by how many lengths. It's all very clear, and well-intentioned.

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

First, I am intuitively quite certain that a point-system misleads in direct proportion to its affect of precision. We all know that wine is a moving target. Even industrial wine is a moving target. Why? Because we are a moving target: we feel differently on different days, at different times of day, our bodies are changeable, our palates are changeable, the over-tart salad dressing we ate at lunch will affect every wine we taste all afternoon, and it doesn't matter how responsible we try to be; the moment we assign an absolute value to a wine, we have misled. And the more specific we purport to be, the more we mislead.

And the consequences of training readers to consider wine in terms of how many "points" to "give" it are mischievous at best. Even if I yield the point that scores are a necessary evil—and I don't, by the way—how many innocent consumers of wine journals are savvy enough to know that the *writer* may have to use points but the *reader* doesn't? Sadly, the meta-message of point-obsession is that "scoring" wines is the *sine qua non* of wine appreciation.

Oh lighten up! I hear you say. What's the harm?

The harm is subtle because its symptoms appear benign, but the long term effects are pernicious.

Here's a quote I like:

"The aesthetic moment offers hope that we are less alone, we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe." (John Berger, from "The White Bird")

Wine, I submit, is just such an aesthetic moment. It doesn't even have to be great wine. It only has to be significant wine, connected not to the factory but to the earth. Such wines invite us to respond with our souls. They open doors by which we enter a larger world than we normally inhabit. All we need is to be *available* for the experience.

We cannot be available if, in that single moment, we are scrolling through our egos to see how many *points* we're going to "give" or "award" the wine. The very language is suspiciously pompous: "We *awarded* Chateau Bleubols XXX-points on our 100-point scale." That's nice. How many points did the wine give *you*, Ace? Is the whole thing really about you? Does the cosmos give half a rat's ass how many "points" you gave a wine? That wine was a *gift* to you. And all you can do is "evaluate" it as if it were a DVD player or a Dustbuster.

One gentlemen with whom I debated this topic wrote (I'm paraphrasing) that he grew *into* using the 100-point scale when he felt his palate was mature enough. This poor lamb is running blindly toward the cliffs.

Ah, maybe he's right. After all, I've been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom's soliliquy at least a 94. That ranks it among the great-literary-scenes-of-all-time, along with Stavrogin's confession (95), Levin's day with the threshers (97), Gerald's walk to his death in the mountains (94+) and the death of Ben Gant (99). I didn't used to give scores to great scenes in literature. But eventually I came to realize ALL pleasure was in effect a commodity and I OWED it to myself to quantify the little suckers. So now, when I read novels, I'm constantly thinking "how many points is this scene worth?" I judge on imagery, diction, overall rhetoric, whether it advances the plot-line and/or develops the characters, and finally on how close to tears it brings me. Eyes-barely-moist gets 90. Eyes-barely-moist-and-catch-in-the-throat gets 91-92. Eyes full of tears but no drippage gets 93-94. Between 1-3 tears slipping down my face is 95-96, and full-bore blubbering earns the very highest scores. Since I started doing this I have just gotten so much MORE from all these great books!

"Was it good for you, baby . . . ?" *Oh, 89 maybe 90."*

Shall we eventually declare all our pleasures subject to a precise analysis of their *extent* on an absolute scale? What's 100-point joy all about? "I cannot possibly feel happier than this!" Really? *How do you know?*

Sure, we can let the critics play with any system they wish. I use in effect a 4-point system to indicate my sense of a wine's "stature," but I deliberately leave it loose because I don't want to think about it. It is a fraction-of-a-second of *ignition*: I register it and move on. I think reviewers might be better employed trying to *deepen* our love of wine, but they do what they can and what their readers want and are trained to expect. Nor is this any sort of slam of the Great Man of Monkton. I rather think Bob Parker has done the wine world enormous good over his storied career. But I also believe, as St Peter opens the pearly gates to admit Mr. Parker, he'll peer through Bob's valise, pull out the folder marked "The 100-point Scale" and say; "I'll just hold on to this; you won't be needing it here."

