

# terry theise estate selections

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IMPORTED BY:

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# theise manifesto

*Beauty is more important than impact.*

*Harmony is more important than intensity.*

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

*Distinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.*

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

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

*"Let us agree that the poet must master the elements of his craft: the rhythm, the strategies, the importance of compression, when to use rhyme and when not to use it—all of that. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge that the craft must not become the content of the poem. The craft must serve primarily to deliver what the poet is trying to say to the reader, and to deliver the feelings or discoveries to him with as little loss as possible*

*I am astonished in my teaching to find how many poets are nearly blind to the physical world. They have ideas, memories, and feelings, but when they write their poems they often see them as similes. To break this habit, I have my students keep a journal in which they must write, very briefly, six things they have seen each day—not beautiful or remarkable things, just things. This seemingly simple task usually is hard for them. But with practice, they begin to see carelessly and learn a kind of active passivity until after a month nearly all of them have learned to be available to seeing—and the physical world pours in. Their journals fill up with lovely things like, "the mirror with nothing reflected in it." This way of seeing is important, even vital to the poet, since it is crucial that a poet see when she or he is not looking—just as she must write when she is not writing. To write just because the poet wants to write is natural, but to learn to see is a blessing."*

**-Linda Gregg**

*"This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it."*

**-Abu Yazid al-Bistami**

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## LET US WRITE YOUR ORDER FOR YOU!

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

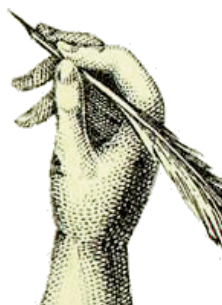
In all seriousness, I have spent the past several years actually writing about 15% of all the D.I. orders I receive, so I thought I'd formalize it. This is for people who want the wines but don't have the time to hack through my Amazonian jungle of quivering prose. Here's what you do:

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

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

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

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





First it was squally and windy and our cars blew all over the road, especially when you zip around as fast as I do. Then it became very mild, too mild, and too early, but great weather for walking and sniffing blossoming trees. Then it snowed. It also thunder-snowed and hailed and there were four inches of hail on the road that melted in twenty minutes. Then it was nice again. All the growers are worried about late frosts. "There was no real winter," they all said, and several of them wondered out loud whether Eiswein might become a thing of the past. Man I hope not. Growers are so close-in to what they do they sometimes lose perspective, and I'm sure when the next cool vintage comes along they'll forget their chat about planting vines in northern Finland. But still.

In some senses 2006 will maybe prove to be the first true climate-change vintage, as its parameters are without precedent even from the heat-wave year 2003. But none of this was at the front of my mind when I took the first of many walks the calm weather allowed each morning along the Mosel.

I was staying with Selbachs in Zeltingen, which lies right below the Himmelreich vineyard, and Karen Odessa and I had a lovely multi-hour romp among the giddy lizards astonished by the early warmth glancing off the slate walls. They were darting around everywhere. We even saw a solitary bewildered butterfly, wondering why it was so warm but there weren't any flowers.

And the weather held for nearly a week. This was good news for your intrepid importer, who battles with his tendency to eat one too many schnitzels – OK, more than one – and trust me, when you've spent a whole day swirlin' and hurlin' all those young frisky high-acid whites you get a total monkey hunger by evening. So those morning walks were helpful for maintaining my trim boyish profile.

Often my sweetie came with me, but one morning she was too dozy and I set off alone. It was misty and cold, fresh and moist, with the high-fog riding about 500 feet over the valley. I stomped up to a trio of wild-cherry trees blooming halfway up the Himmelreich, pushing at top speed to get warm. Kept climbing. Got up into the woods too high for vines any more and listened to the birds fluting away. Many of their calls were new to me. The Himmelreich hill leads back into a small combe which gives way to the next hill, the Schlossberg, and this in turn leads southeast to the great Sonnenuhr. I was on a high path with the Mosel vertically below me through the vines, and only the trees above.

Some workers were pruning and binding here and there, and I thought how lovely it must be to be out on such a cool morning to work with the vines in such pretty surroundings. I know very well it isn't always like this – these vineyards heat up through the summer or grapes wouldn't ripen – but I seemed to have melted through



some sort of membrane and everything was suddenly, and clearly, divine. The small teams of people working, the birds noisily peeping, the silvery Mosel below, the smell of slate and woods. Isn't it odd how it happens; you only take a half-step back out of what you imagine is your self and you suddenly see the blessings inside things, and inside you, and you receive it and give it out as gladness and gratitude.

It's quicksilver, this state, but it's strangely durable when you're in it. I passed a group of workers replanting in the Sonnenuhr and bade them Guten Morgen nearly sopping with happiness as if it were entirely self-evident, but of course to them, for all I know, it's just a gig and I looked like a crazy person. I'm sure the work isn't pretty in the summer heat.

I turned to head back, and caught a glimpse of Zeltingen's church and its cemetery where Hans Selbach is buried. I wanted to tell him *it's still like it was, old friend, it's a beautiful foggy morning and the workers are working and the birds are birding and it's all as it should be. And you were right; it is divine and full of love, and patience, this little bit of our little world.* I got back late and felt bad for keeping my colleagues waiting. But not too bad, to tell you the truth. I burned a bunch of cals and had a mystical reverie, and all before 10am.

They're all talking about replanting on higher ground where until recently it was presumed too cold to ripen Riesling. Now they need cool sites or we won't have everyday wines we can afford. Selbachs are actively adding such vineyards. "The days where we just gobbled up all the Grand Cru vineyards we could find are over," said Johannes. "Now we need what used to be thought marginal land so we can harvest ordinary grapes after the necessary hang-time." Thus are things changing.

We talked about it in the car on the way to the growers; at least we got to it when we weren't guffawing over the remarkable German-English phrase book one of my colleagues had brought along. Call Michele Parent if you should ever need to be able to say in German "I like it when you touch me there," or "Please don't touch me there." You can call me for the esoteric advanced phrases: "Touch me *anywhere* but there, got it?" "My dentist says you should brush your tongue twice a day," or "I'm not sure this phone booth will suffice for our purposes."

Another fun thing that happened was I met Joel Payne for the first time, after years of just-missing each other and writing emails. He came to Armin Diel's for dinner with me and my gang. I thought it was fun, and was mildly taken aback when Armin told me the next morning "You really made an impression on Mr. Payne." "Um, really?" I wondered. "How so?" "Well he was struck by how jolly and cheerful you were," Armin said. Well, *hmm!* "I think he expected someone much more earnest and solemn," Armin continued. I mean, sheesh. I gotta work on my persona.

I've been doing this for twenty two years now, but I don't know how that's supposed to feel. I don't discern a bit of nostalgia; it's all as juicy as ever. It might not look like the rah-rah manic eagerness of a gent in his early 30s, but that's misleading; the eagerness is embedded more deeply and plays as a kind of calm. When I started it was pleasingly lonesome, because it was pure; it was only



about the wines and discovering who made the best ones. It was getting to know people who didn't get many English-speaking visitors. It was about meeting the Merkelbachs of the world, showing you their wines, and carrying their lovely stories back with me like little crystal eggs.

Then came satellite-dishes and computers, and suddenly instead of being younger than most of the growers I was—*ulp*—older. Now babies are being born and I'm, like, avuncular or something. That I can manage; it's actually rather nice. The hard part is the politics, the need to calculate, because in old Europe one is most certainly a Figure, a *personage*. I adore Europe, lived there for ten years, consider myself attuned to European ways, but this part of it doesn't come naturally. Not to a pure-bred roughneck like me. In the Summer of 2003 my esteemed colleagues at Michael Skurnik Wines took an *en masse* trip to Germany together, and at one point we commandeered the stage from a C/W band who'd been hired to play for us. Michael played gee-tar and shook his ass. Harmon (Skurnik) sang and whacked a tambourine. Andrew played drums. I played banshee manic lead guitar. It was so much fun I forgot who was watching us—imagine what Merkelbachs must have been thinking! The mild-mannered wine geek they thought they knew suddenly morphed into a three-headed hydra yowling away on fuzz-whipped guitar. At the same time the younger ones were probably thinking, this might almost have been amusing but what's with the weird boogie crap? In either case, the personage they knew as "Terry" had certainly developed some weird-ass alter ego.

These days the little bastards keep getting younger, damn it, and they all seem to know one another. But the most important seismic shifts took place around two things: The era of the internet, and the advent of an activist wine press.

As soon as the press became important, it became the short-cut of choice for establishing reputations. Thus prospecting became irrelevant; if you were good and

ambitious you were putting yourself out there and not waiting to be found.

These things coincided with a decline in wine consumption in general. You know the phrase; less-wine-but-better-wine, but I've had a chance to watch it at work in the macro-life of German wine. The marginal were being squeezed out of existence. The elderly retired with no one to continue the wineries. The audience for wine narrowed to a small geekdom of wine-heads who only wanted the best stuff, and who used the press to point them to it. Thus the enterprising grower had to go all out for glory. This meant investment in the newest geegaws for the cellar (especially if the neighbor had them) and in some instances it meant having a nose to the wind to catch the prevailing scent. What were the "approved" types of wines, what was the new *Zeitgeist*, and how does one get ones hands on the mojo-du-jour?

The worst of this syndrome is known to you. People crafted wines with an eye to the reviews they'd get. Everyone knows how, you know.

But there's an immense good side to this too, a heartening presumption of excellence and integrity which rescued a potential debacle like the 2006 vintage, and which made one wise-man among the growers opine "I doubt we'll ever see a truly bad vintage again." Really, I asked? Even if the weather's truly awful? "Even then." He replied. "Everything is different now, yields are lower, vine-husbandry is better, vineyards are healthier, people



are willing to green-harvest and pick selectively, and there's more pure competence in the cellar, more people who know what to do and what not to do."

Another grower expanded on this idea: "In the old days you basically grew your grapes, picked them when you could as ripe as you could and made your wine. Nowadays we baby each vine, from pruning to binding to canopy management to green-harvesting; we pick by hand, we're selecting obsessively, our yields are half what they used to be and our cellar work is more gentle and non-intrusive than ever." I can't help but believe. In fact the modern tendency to pluck the sweetest cherries from nature has created a certain curiosity about the alternative. What if one did things old-school and harvested *en bloc*, just swept through the vineyard and picked everything: Wouldn't that tell another kind of "truth" of the soil and weather, different from plucking the chocolate chips from the cookie? Hans Selbach said it best (Hans said many things best . . .): "You can't go

into a vineyard and first pull out the cream, then go back and get the milk and then finally the water; you have to leave it be and get all of it if you want to know how the *vineyard* tastes.” It is heartening to observe the many young growers exploring this idea.

In fact this is all very much the theme-du-jour in Germany at the moment, brought about by the many small crops in a row and by the nearly absurd ripeness levels of the ‘06s. Have yields gotten too low? In the old days (like, 10-15 years ago...!) a must-weight of 90° Oechsle; (see glossary) was cause for celebration as a rare occurrence. In 2006 you were lucky to get anything *under* 100°, and people would have killed for 90° – they could have made plausible Kabinett by modern standards. Many growers are saying they’ll control yields by pruning but will reduce (or in some cases stop) green-harvesting, and all of this is to preserve the lightness and transparency we cherish in German Rieslings.

The press exacerbates the problem. The simplistic syllogism *low yields = superior quality* just ain’t necessarily so. And even if it is, does anyone question the economies of the matter? If you lower your yields from (say) 65 hl/ha to 40, there may well be a modest but discernible increase in quality, call it 15% better. But the size of the crop is reduced by 35%. Are you willing to pay that much more for a wine that’s only a little better? And is it really better? Concentration is a virtue but over-concentration makes for opacity and brutishness. I’d rather see a wine whose voice could break a glass than one that takes a hammer to it.

I haven’t looked at lab analyses of my wines for some time now, and fewer people try and show them to me. The modern young grower is more interested in the forest than the trees. It was Helmut Dönnhoff who first graduated away from obsession over wines’ analytical values, the first among my crowd to push away from deconstructing the aesthetics of wine’s flavor. Because I respect him and he intrigues me, I realize he has influenced me.

But even seeing what he’s moved away from, we should consider what he might be moving toward. What are we trying to do here? Why *shouldn’t* we exercise our cerebral cortex rooting around in wine’s flavor and structure if that’s what floats our boat? Seems innocent enough.

Here’s what I think we’re after: a point of utter receptivity because we’re seeing only the wine instead of seeing *ourselves* seeing the wine. Oh it’s all very Zen. But I am ever-more persuaded it is the way to pleasure and sanity. If we don’t see past ourselves, our discrete palates, we can’t get past *What am I getting from the wine*. The process starts and ends with “I.” What am “I” getting, what do “I” think (how many points will “I” give this wine), and all I can say is if you drink wine this way I sure hope you don’t *make love* this way, because your partner’s bored.

Try this. Next time you drink wine, ask *What is this?* Not what “I” get: *what THIS is*. “This,” the thing outside you, the not-I.

Perhaps you’ll experience the loveliest of ironies; when you relax the “I” and receive the world, the world charges you with its perfect reality and suddenly your “I” becomes larger than you ever imagined. But you have



to be calm. Trust your senses. Let the wine in. You might find it becomes more vivid now, and you slowly cease to care about the brain-game of dissecting. Who cares what’s on the lab report? Peter Jost put it well. “Describing a wine by its analysis is like describing a beautiful woman by her X-ray films.”

I think this is why we love old wines as we do. It isn’t only that they’ve lasted so long; in fact I doubt we truly realize the existential truth of the old vintage on the label. What does “1949” signify? It’s absurd, unless we were alive then and remembered. Sometimes even then.

Great old wine is evocative, this we know. It has to have been meaningful wine to start with, nothing industrial or “manufactured,” a wine of identity and connection to earth and family.

But mere evocation would seem innocuous enough; maybe it could float you into a dreamy mood or make you lambent and warm. But this is more. Great old wine seems to have *distilled reality*. All of reality, not only itself:



old rooms, echoes of the cooking of many meals, smells of worn clothes, the prevailing atmosphere of the time it was made. And like a distillate, it is almost too concentrated to apprehend. Thus we are at once granted entry into a world and a place of soul we never get to see, and it’s so sudden and unexpected that we are disarmed and laid bare.

I used to work with a guy named Anthony Austin. If you knew Anthony I’ll bet you remember him; he is a very dear man, as well as the only man I have ever seen land a plug of spat-out-wine into the bucket *while being technically unconscious*. Poor guy was wiped out with jet-lag, but he hit the bucket. Anyway, Anthony didn’t say a lot, and was hardly what we’d call “emotive,” but one year we were tasting at Christoffel, and Hans-Leo





View of the Mosel.

brought out a bottle of his '76 TBA for us. This is an especially sleek and silvery citizen of this sometimes-blowy vintage, and I was so lost in it I barely registered my surroundings. But when I looked up I saw Anthony's eyes were wet. I wanted to hug him. I knew that feeling, the way it steals over you. It doesn't build, it suddenly takes you over. And you wonder *How did it know where to find me? How could I have not known (or forgotten) it was there? What made me think I could live without it?*

Sometimes I want to call this the "Oh so that's what it's about" moment, because it feels both entirely natural and also unequivocal. Once I sat on the warm terrace of Nepenthe (that most sublime of restaurants) in Big Sur, enjoying a moment of solitude and a badly-needed morning tea. The Pacific was 800 feet below me and as still as a mirror on the windless day. Whales spouted, big-winged birds floated, and the beauty was almost a rebuke: *Don't you dare think you can do without this, Buster.* I felt like I was who I was meant to be, and that feeling always seems to be stunning. But the best thing of all is you don't have to contrive some big vast rapture in order to know this moment: It can live, and lives very easily, in a single sip of wine.

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

Someone asked Herr Schmitt, "Did you make this wine?" "Oh my goodness no, I was just a child," he answered. Then he grew pensive and said "But I do remember being a boy of six, picking the grapes alongside my grandma," and then I lost it. I was looking at his hands just then, as it happened, the hands of a vigorous old gentleman still ruddy from a life in the open air, and I suddenly saw the child's little hands inside them. And saw the child trotting along at his grandma's side, happy to be included in the general activity, proud to be useful,

there among the vines. And now it was sixty-four years later. The wine in our glasses was enthralling enough to us, but to our host it was the pure blood of memory, bound to the filaments of his earliest joys, with affection and usefulness. *This is a man of Wine*, I realized. This is what it means to be a man of wine.

This '37 called to us from across a passageway to a world we barely know. But to Bruno Schmitt it called across each of those sixty-four years from small sweet memories. I was so lost in my vision of the boy that I registered the 70-year old face of the man to my left with a small shock. He had passed his life in wine, I thought. He didn't choose it because he thought it was gracious or sexy or romantic. He chose it (if it were indeed what we would call a "choice") because it needed to be done and it pleased him to do it.

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

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

I think it's useful to be faithful to one's temperament because an integrated fella is also a more effective worker, and the work I do is finding good wines and selling them to you. It's maybe more accurate to say that's the *job* I do. But try as I might I don't always integrate with the ease I look for.

I often feel stratified. One layer is the garden-variety mercantile wine-guy dealing with all the "issues" surrounding the zany categories with which I work. We

both know those issues: education, marketing, perseverance, dog-and-pony shows, “working the press.” I try to be good at those things, or as good as my fallibilities allow. The other (perhaps higher) layer is less concerned with the job and more concerned with the work. I have a voice which always says “Yes: *and?*” Thus if I ask myself, what’s the net effect of what I do, this voice compels me through ever-more big-picture considerations.

I sell wine. Yes, *and?* I help ensure the prosperity of good artisan wine growers. Yes, *and?* I contribute to the continued existence of cultures containing small artisan wine growers. Yes, *and?* To remain sustainable I need to tell people why this is a good thing. Yes, *and?* In telling people why this is a good thing, I have to detail the reasons, which compels thoughts of terroir, of family, of a person’s proper relationship to nature and to his human history. In short, I have to assert values. Yes, *and?* In delineating these values, I find I can’t escape matters of soul. Yes, *and?* If soul enters the equation you can’t select what it inhabits, because soul inhabits either all of it or none of it. So what I finally end up doing is placing wine in the context of a life of the soul. Yes, *and?* So now I am defending and delineating the idea of living with conscience, gratitude, eros, humor, and all the things soul imbues us with. And further, I’m placing wine squarely within this matrix and insisting we don’t have enough time to settle for less. Yes, *and?* And we seem to need certain things: To know where we are. To be connected to something outside ourselves. To be connected to something inside ourselves. And the only wines that actually speak to our whole lives are *authentic* wines, which are themselves both located, and connected. And confected wines are not designed for human beings; they are designed for “consumers.” Which do you want to be?

The more I get into wine the less reducible I feel it to be. Its enigma deepens even as it appears to grow more transparent. It is helpful to see wine connected to gardening, to making things grow, and it’s even more helpful when the person encouraging the growing is companionably connected to the earth; most of all, when he sees the thing through to completion. Which, in wine, means to produce and to bottle it.

It’s different when you go there; all wine is. Otherwise it’s just a bottle and a label (and a flavor you can quantify if you’re into such perversions), disconnected from its taproot. I try and have my gang with me as much as schedules allow, because they need to be there too, not to *sell* more, but to better know what they’re selling. One of the loveliest things about artisanal wines is the imbuing of the grower’s spirit. This isn’t literal; a slim shy guy doesn’t necessarily make slim shy wines. But something of him gets into those wines ineluctably; it can’t be helped. It’s why you suddenly “get” the wines only when you meet the (wo)man, sit with him, look at

the things he looks at every day, dip your feet into his vineyards, listen to the local birds.

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

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

We who care about wine often circle that thing we see as True, each in our way. Karen MacNeil wrote these lovely words:

“So what is it about wine?”

Perhaps it is this: wine is one of the last true things. In a world mechanized to madness, a world where you can’t do anything without somebody’s cell phone clanging in your ear, a world where you can wake up to 67 innocuous emails all of which exude infuriatingly false urgency—in this world of ours, wine remains utterly simple. Pure. Unrushed. Archetypal. The silent music of nature. For seven thousand consecutive years, vines clutching the earth have happily thrust themselves upward toward the sun and given us juicy berries, and ultimate-

ly wine. And so it is that wine ineluctably connects us to that earth. We don’t have to do anything. We drink . . . and the bond is miraculously there.”

When I received her letter I wrote her back, saying, in part:

Your words are true and lovely. I only ask that we remember, not ALL wine fulfills such a noble purpose as you describe. I believe it is important to always distinguish between industrial wine — wine as “product” — and agricultural wines, which are the earth’s emissaries of meaning. Maybe even more important, I believe we need to alert readers to beware of wine as “lifestyle accoutrement” or as a badge signifying “gracious living” because, as you so well know, millions of people drink and love wine who don’t know or care about living “graciously” as defined by the glossy magazines. Wine has nothing to do with finding oneself gorgeous; it has everything to do with finding the WORLD beautiful, and feeling that little happy shock that it’s inside you to feel, and that it matters.

Other goodies in my bag-o-truths are that agricultural wines are always more interesting than industrial wines. That doggedness in the vineyard and humility in the cellar are vital to the making of wines of consequence. That wine is a context containing soil-borne flavors — their LANGUAGE — spoken



with various ACCENTS according to which cellar-work a given grower prefers. That removing any PART of this context from wine does injury to its being (and if we do love wine, why deliberately injure it?) . . .

Europeans are more aware than we Yanks that people actually existed before us, they're aware of the real size of their place in the cosmos. They *listen* to the soil and work to do its bidding. They know that the Riesling vine is the poet of their corner of the earth. They want to hear the poem. They want us to hear it. And so they work to bring the words clearly onto the page. And they are aware they do not, themselves, CREATE those words. The text is created somewhere else, below the ground.

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

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

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

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

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

What is wine trying to tell us about the earth? What is it in wine that transmits the message? (Andre Ostertag has a great line: "With Riesling, all the stones of the world find their unique voice.") Why does the earth want us to hear its message? Why was wine chosen to convey the message? Now I'm not of a particularly speculative bent myself; I don't worry about these kinds of questions. Yet I presume upon a world in which they are LEGITIMATE questions, and I *do* think that wine is a conveyor of meaning. Certainly not all wine, maybe not even *much* wine, but a few wines, those that express a spirit of place and which are uncompromisingly, distinctly, themselves. "Made" wines — wines intended as Products, wines fashioned according to commercial formulas, wines made in very large wineries, wines made by technocrats, wines made without reference to a grape's natu-

ral habitat and/or without consideration of a sense of place — such wines have a kind of half-life; they are without *soul*. They might taste good; they often do. They *show* great. They can show the ASS off your palate — but they are meaningless. Wine-like substances. Junk-wine.

By the time you read this the wonderful magazine The Art Of Eating will publish a letter I wrote challenging some of Derrick Schneider's temptations in a story he wrote about Vinovation. I like Derrick and respect him immensely. He's a responsible and clear thinker and his heart's in the right place. But he took issue with some of my points, and the following dialogue ensued.

TT: One thing these folks are is charming and plausible. Satanic perhaps, but oh so suave. They also appeal to our plain-spoken American sense of down-to-earth logic, as opposed to the *metaphysics* the old-worlders throw around. It's little wonder you were. . . if not seduced, then at least intrigued.

DS: What I found so provocative about Vinovation and its life in the press — other than the intriguing aspects of Clark's research — is that every passionate wine drinker draws a line, often unconsciously, about what is acceptable and what is not. Is sterile filtration acceptable as a practice because it allows us to ship wines farther afield and age them when they might not have weathered the ravages of time so well in the past? Or screw caps, because we can avoid nature's surprises in the form of cork taint? Temperature controlled stainless steel tanks? Aren't these all attempts to bend nature to our whim and remove "the things we might not like?" And what of the research to genetically engineer phylloxera-resistant rootstocks that would allow vinifera vines to be planted on their "natural" rootstock? That question sends me into a spiral of second-guessing whenever I think of it.

TT: You are certainly correct that all vinification (and some viticulture) is manipulation, and in my Austrian catalogue I make the very same point in talking about residual sugar. Yet it is very clear to me where the line needs drawing.

Let's put it this way. A pregnant woman taking prenatal vitamins is an acceptable manipulation. A parent vaccinating his child against various illnesses is an acceptable manipulation. A mother braiding her daughters hair is an acceptable manipulation. A teenager dying his/her hair is an acceptable manipulation. A pair of adults diddling their clones so as to produce a girl who looks like Avril Lavigne or a boy who looks like Brad Pitt is not acceptable manipulation.

Any material alteration of the *essential* structure of a wine is inherently false and leads down a slippery slope we emphatically do not wish to encounter. All you need to do when testing the limits of an idea is to follow it where it leads. And where does this one lead?

DS: Vinovation is just simply one more thing that we have to put on one side or another. Where does it really fit?

TT: It "really fits" on the side of seeing wine as just another commodity to be bent to our preferences. Yes, you can make a case that all those old hot-climate tired whites were rescued by cold-cellar technology and now produce crispy charming wines (that all taste alike). But I'd rather drink an old-school white Rioja any day of the week. A wine with the character and the ineluctable imprint of its *place* and not the people flicking the switches and pressing the buttons.



DS: I found that I don't really know the answer as well as I thought I did. I always want wine to be natural, but in a sense it hasn't been for thousands of years. This century's technological long jumps have simply out-paced our acceptance. And what we view as traditional, of course, is merely a practice whose controversial nature has slipped out of memory.

TT: You're right, and this is why it's more crucial then ever that we arrive at a stand and defend it. And for me, the minute technology allows in and of itself for the production – excuse me, “production” – of wines grown in *unsuitable* locations (which in any case are obliterated by the subsequent manipulations), it does nothing less than suck the soul from these wines, and ultimately from all wine, unless we do something about it.

## Continuing New Approach to Tasting Notes

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

-Elaine Scarry

A friend of mine sent me this funny bit of verse:

*Introduction to Poetry  
I asked them to take a poem  
and hold it to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out  
or walk inside a poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch  
I want them to water ski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the authors name on the shore  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with a rope  
and torture a confession out of it  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means*

It's kinda funny if you substitute the word “wine” for the word “poem.” Try it.

A tasting note can be two things, either a depiction of how it was to taste (or drink) the wine, perhaps including how it tasted, or a mere dissection of flavors. The latter strikes me as useless, unless it's attached to a specific purpose such as giving you some clue about what to buy. Otherwise, sorry; I don't want to read your tasting notes. I don't like reading my own. Think about it: to what purpose are you going to put descriptions-of-flavors? On March 13th at 10:35am a certain wine tasted to a certain person like candied yak spleens dipped in sorghum. What's the value of this information? Will the wine smell and taste identically to you, weeks months or years later?

Put another way, if I'm trying to describe Scheurebe to you, which is the more useful description? 1)

Scheurebe has flavors of red and blackcurrant, sage, pink grapefruit, passion-fruit (when very ripe), or . . . 2) Scheurebe tastes like Riesling would taste, if Riesling were a transvestite? Well sure, both of course, but what if you could only have one, and what if you needed to make someone *curious*?

One thing I find utterly impossible is writing notes



for intensely sweet concentrated young wines. Even my beloved Eisweins reduce me to an inarticulate funk. *How* does anyone manage it? How do you distinguish among fifteen TBAs, all of which taste more or less like white-raisin and fig liqueur? I find it hard enough to select among them, let alone to froth and spume over them. I key off of clarity and form, and hope you won't notice if my notes are mumbly.

I know you sometimes use me to discern what you want to buy, and believe me I want to be helpful. But do you really buy wine because it tastes “like boysenberries and pork-snouts?” Wouldn't you rather know the wine “danced like Gandhi would have had there been discos in Calcutta?” Well it's what I'd rather tell you, so get over it. That, or I'll take my cue from shampoo bottles, and if I like a wine just write, “Open, drink, repeat.”

I used to care a great deal about writing tasting notes as much for my own writer's ego as for the actual wines. I searched for ever-more esoteric associations so you would be impressed with my palate. I strove for pretty language so you'd think I was a good writer. Sometimes I actually wrote well, and sometimes the wine actually *did* taste like “polyvinyl siding in direct sunlight on a Fall day with an approaching cold front” (I no longer represent *that* agency), but mostly I fell victim to my own affect.

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



whom you've just thrown a stick. The grinning beast lopes back to you with some big ol' drool-covered stick in



his slobbery maw, and he's *looking* at you as if every scintilla of his happiness depends on your *throwing that stick again*, and what are you doing? You're writing! Put down the pen and **throw the damn stick**, man.

It's an odd business, this tasting and conveying through words. It makes a wine into a precious object of attention excluding the rest of the world. Who bloody *cares* if it's white peach or yellow peach or peach pit or peach skin or the BARK from the peach tree? That plus it's *fruitless* (pun intended!) because it's tautologous: when you describe flavors in terms of other flavors you eventually hit a wall. "This wine tastes like peaches." Fair enough. What do *peaches* taste like???

I'm pretty sick of the macho business of "getting" more things than the next guy does, not to mention the desperate striving for *original* associations ("The wine boasts a compelling nose of beer-battered kiwi fritters," that sorta stuff). At one point we thought we'd go entirely non-verbal, and created a sequence of pictures of spontaneous reactions to wines which really says it all. I'm into atavism. Let's return to those halcyon days of snorts and grunts.

One also has "good-writer-days" and "lousy-writer-days" (I have the latter with distressing frequency); on the good days thoughts and images flow and dance. I read what I'm writing and think "Good; this conveys it,"



but on the bad days it's just "Oh crap, *must I again* write 'slate and apples' for the umteenth time?"

I'd rather not try to grasp or apprehend a wine. I try to summon a kind of calm. To forget myself. If impressions form words, I record them. If the words are sweet

then I'm happy. But I am in the middle of this process, still fumbling. I'm just starting to know the difference between "flavors" and *Flavor*. Some days I almost get it. Other days I'm shuckin' and jivin'.

Image is fine. Some might think it twee, but I'll happily crawl out on that limb. Feelings of *texture* are fairly easy to describe, and texture is at least as important as flavor. And associative language *can* be useful, especially if it's a *genre* of wine we're describing. Signature flavors are helpful to know.

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



ers, well, they get an edition of the "Mosel Wines Of The '60s" board game, plus the bitter memory of having been bested by some zen galoot.

This year I consciously chose to not worry about what I wrote. I had pedestrian days and good ones, but I was done beating myself up to "make a wine sound attractive" or to "be entertaining;" I simply wanted to say how it was, in whatever language came naturally. I was more relaxed and I think that's why I was *smokin'* in the blind guess-the-vintage department. I mean, I never had a year like this one (and I'm sure I'll make a complete dope of myself next time; wine *does* like to keep you humble), to the point one grower was sure I'd peeked at the label. Until he saw the bottle didn't have a label! He'd pulled it from a dated bin in the cellar and with the first whiff I knew it was a '73. It smelled that way. I don't tell you in order to impress you with my adorable genius but rather to extol the virtues of relaxation around wine.

Someone wrote on one of the internet Boards that Hugh Johnson's recently published memoir was useless because "he never says how the wine tastes; he only says what it was like to drink it." Well sir, that there's just the *point* of the thing. I'd far rather read the genial musings of a humane spirit mulling over the little nimbus between his soul and the wine in his glass than to see how many arcane adjectives some anal geek can string together.



## Making the Case For German Wines



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

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

One night returning home to my hotel, I turned off the car and got out, and heard something I hadn't heard in many years. Three nightingales were singing their dark and eerily beautiful song. Suddenly the world went silent, and it was the beginning of time. I walked in the hotel's garden and listened to the three tiny birds until it was too cold to stay out longer. Inside, I opened my windows — they were still singing there in the middle of the night — and snuggled under the comforter, and let them sing me to sleep.

And now I'm writing about making the case for German wines. As if they *need* me to do so; *nature* makes the case for German wines constantly, with every lark, thrush or nightingale, every snap and crunch of apple, every swooningly fragrant linden tree in full blossom, everything that makes us pause when we are visited by the electric hum of the world. German wine is a small bird that sings in the darkness, a seemingly minute thing that can tingle your pores, and haunt you your entire life.

We who love German Riesling love it with abiding delight and passion, but we who sell it have confronted a variety of challenges over the years. Happily these are starting to melt away. The mainstream is still out of reach, luckily, but nearly all of you tell me it's possible to sell German wine again.

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

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

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

The first thing to know is that some version of this metaphorical idea comes to most wine drinkers spontaneously at some point or other. I remember back in 1988 when I first tasted with Bob Parker and Bob said about one wine *This tastes like crushed rocks*, and in those days he often used the term "wet stones" to depict what we call minerality. It is a flavor of considerable expression — it is quite distinctly there in the wine — but it isn't fruit.



*Stones at Weingart in the Mittelrhein.*

Nor is it acidity, nor does it relate to acidity. There's a prevailing critique that we rockheads use "mineral" to excuse underripe wines, but this is manifestly false. There are many wines of gushingly lavish flavor but whose flavor isn't delivered on waves of fruitiness, but rather on mineral.

There are wines you could swear had rocks passed through them, or which sat on a bed of rocks at the bottom of the tank or cask. Other "mineral" wines show a more inferential, pebbly profile, while still others seem as

if the rocks were literally pulverized, and the powder strained through the wine. The very finest pass beyond the mere sense of stone into flavors mysterious enough to compel thoughts of jewels. Minerality, I would argue, is a higher form of complexity than fruit, because it doesn't yield to literal associations. It compels the imagination (dare I say the soul?) to ignite. And it will not answer your questions. Search for "fruit" and you'll find it eventually: some combination of apples and pears and melons and limes and there they all are. But search for the *detail* in mineral and you grope fruitlessly. This makes me happy, and it's not as paradoxical as you might suppose. An answered question *halts* the process of thinking, but an unanswered question leaves wonder awake, and this is why I prize minerality highest among wine's virtues. Because these wines pose beautiful mysteries, thoughts of which alert us to the gravity and loveliness and ambiguities of the world.

But I digress. We were making the case for German wines, and here's a way I once made it. I once told a woman at a tasting, when she asked if I had any Chardonnays, that all my wines were Chardonnays. "Then give me your best one," she asked, and I think I poured her a Lingenfelder. "Oh this is **wonderful!**" she enthused. "I think this is the best Chardonnay I've ever tasted." That's because it comes from the town of RIESLING, I said, showing her the word on Rainer's label. If you want really good Chardonnay, I continued, make sure it comes from Riesling. "Thank you," she said. "You've really taught me something." Little did she know.

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

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

Quick-cut to June 2003, at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic. I'm standing behind my table when an incandescently radiant young blonde approaches, boyfriend in

tow. Said boyfriend is buff and tanned, a manly man. Woman has spied a bottle of dessert-wine from Heidi Schröck in its clear bottle and inviting gold. May she taste it yes she may. I pour. And you, sir, I ask: some for you? "No," he says, "I don't like dessert wine."



*If you like dessert (and who doesn't?), you like dessert wines!*

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

"Excuse me?"

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

"Sure," he says, "Yeah, I eat dessert."

"So you'll consume sweetness in solid form but not liquid form?"

"Well, I . . ."

" . . . or you'll consume it in liquid form but not when it contains alcohol?" I press.

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

"Well?" I insist.

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



*We want our tomatoes ripe, so why not also our wines?*

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

I don't know a single human being who doesn't prefer a ripe tomato to an unripe one. Shall we share a basket of unripe strawberries? Even a Granny Smith apple



*German wines and food: perfect together!*

there wouldn't be enough wine, and prices would go up, and it's probably good the way it is. . . .

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



*German wines and a chair: not so perfect together!*

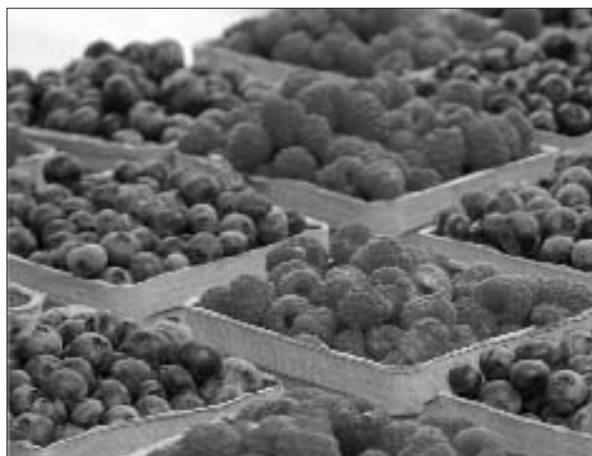
has some sweetness; we'd spit it out otherwise. Somehow the wine world seems to insist we ignore an otherwise routine animal tendency, and affect to despise sweetness. If we were true to our TRUE tastes, we'd fall over one another to get to German rieslings. Then

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

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

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

As such I think Riesling, or indeed any wine with these virtues (Loire Chenins come to mind), can give the "discriminating" palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn't the EXTENT of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We've all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we've all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there's confusion over this issue, and it



*Unripe berries, anyone? Not!*

won't hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn't better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you'll be a better taster, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

I'm not just being facetious. I do believe cultivation of the German Riesling type conduces to civility and courtesy. That is because we cannot enjoy wines of delicacy and finesse without appreciation. And when we *appreciate*, we are calmed and grateful. Might the opposite also be true? That is, when we enjoy those wines of coarser virtues do they also color our approach to life and our fellow humans? If, as they say, wine people are generally convivial and generous, might it also be true that types of wine both attract and form types of people? Hell, I don't know. Nor do I presume that everyone who likes big bruiser wines is a truculent oaf. (Only some of them <wink>.) But I do glean, just a le-e-e-etle bit, a ten-



dency for people who like the shock-and-awe wines to expect the wine to perform for them, to give them a vinous lap-dance; *Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about! That's damn sure 97-point fruit there! Oh yeah, come to papa.* Meanwhile, us German wine lovers are reading Tolstoy and drinking cups of jade-oolong tea with our pinkies extended.



*Riesling with acidity and residual sugar pairs wonderfully with many cheeses.*

### **Making the Case for Auslese**

I did a little staff-tasting at Charlie Trotter's. Things like these are a dream come true, because I can taste and talk with a group of smart professionals and go to any level I choose. One thing I did was pair the 2004 Kabinett and Auslese from Schmitt-Wagner, and I did it for a purpose. Because when you taste these two wines their *sense of sweetness* is virtually identical. To be sure, you taste the additional ripeness in the Auslese, but in the form of a mid-palate umami that doesn't land sweet. I argued, and they seemed to agree, that matching foods to these two wines was a more sophisticated matter than merely serving "sweeter" food with the Auslese.

We need to make a case for Auslese, because it looks like it's here to stay. Modern vintages have produced it in such numbers there's rather a traffic jam in the market; we don't drink them fast enough, because we don't know when and how we should. I'll try to help.

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

But I am falling into the trap of defending Auslese's utility. Let's just finish the job while we're at it. Many

Ausleses are not at all too sweet for the multi-culti eclecticism we see on plates all over white-tablecloth land, even in your home town. Have you tried them? So many "savory" courses are quite sweet these days, and a stern, manly Auslese will march in synch. Let's not even go to foie gras.

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

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

### **Principles of Selection in this Portfolio**

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

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

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



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

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

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

This, by the way, is the final argument against point scoring; though it might work in very strict consumerist terms, it certainly does not in holistic terms. To use one example, are riper wines inherently better than less ripe wines by *dint* of their additional concentration? I submit the answer is very probably yes if one is obliged to score on an absolute scale, and no if one permits notions of relativity and equivalence, i.e. a zippy Mosel Kabinett on a warm summer evening can be a "perfect" wine in its moment. The inherent limitations of all scoring systems is they cannot account for wine as it is used, but only as it is judged.

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

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

But how do I reconcile this with the political need to placate a grower?

There are certain wines with what I'd call iconic status. These wines belong in the market so you can make up your own mind about them. There are other

wines with which I have some small aesthetic cavil or other, some minor but discernible imperfection which might bother me more than it would you. If the wine is otherwise worthy, you should see it.

Bear in mind I'm not trying to create a lower-class of Theise-rejects. Yucky wine is simply yucky wine and you'll never be offered it from me in any form. I am merely allowing you access to important wines with either iconic status or with minor imperfections, and identifying these wines for you.

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



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

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

Yet there's a fundamental issue of honor over which a debate is swirling. One wine journal, which markets itself as consumer cham-peen, has openly endorsed the gray market and has complained about "conventional" wine prices through orthodox channels. I wonder how sanguine they themselves would be if challenged to open their books and show customers what they made for their efforts. But that's a topic for another day.

In any case, I seem to have reached that exalted place where one's selections are imported through "unauthorized" channels.

Merchants who gray-market and the people who

defend them like to claim it is the perfection of pure capitalism. The logic seems reasonable, so much so you might wonder how any *contrary* system could have come into being. Was it actually nothing more than the predations of greedy importers, having their ways with poor hapless growers?

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

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

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

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

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

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the importer with an exclusivity rubs his filthy hands at the grotesque markups he plans to take. And all of us children of the radical '60s swallow it whole, since every businessperson is ipso facto guilty.



These proponents of pure capitalism neglect to consider one of its basic tenets: If a product is priced beyond its value, people won't buy it. The greedy importer can gouge all he wants; it avails him nothing if he can't sell the wine.

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

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

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

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

Here's how it should not happen. I broadcast emails to every retailer in Belgium offering them the wine, bypassing the importer my partner wants to work with and ignoring any wishes he has about how his wine gets sold. Some friend I am! "*It's a BRAVE NEW WORLD, BAY-BEE; eat my dust!*" Out of one side of my mouth I'm



pontificating about the “free market” and touting my credentials as “consumer-champion” and out of the other side I’m just a hyena scavenging for business because I smelled carrion somewhere, blithely disregarding any norms of courtesy toward a grower whose loyalty I asked for!

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

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

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

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



“Have I got a deal . . . just for you!”

o n

Three Mile Island to sell you.

I continually resist seeing my wines as Things or products. That’s why I don’t care whether the same wine is good every year. If wine **A** isn’t happnin’ this year, wine **B** will be, and I’ll just take the better one. This can perplex or annoy growers who are into “marketing,” but that’s a dangerous tendency for a vintner in any case and it can lead to ruffled feathers.

It boils down to an entirely practical consideration:

SELLING GERMAN WINES IS *TOO MUCH TROUBLE* TO BE WORTH DOING **EXCEPT FOR THE VERY BEST**. Otherwise, good grief! There’s easier ways to



bang your fool head against a wall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## a new way to measure sweetness

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

new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

**MINUS TWO** is for lovers of austere wines.

**ONE** signifies barely discernable sweetness.

**TWO** signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

**FOUR** is bona-fide dessert wine.

Put "**SOS**" into your lexicon today!





## Core-List Wines

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

## Dry German Wines

The Germans are bemused at a market bifurcation they themselves created. If you’ve gone there, especially to the Pfalz, you’ll surely have noted they only drink dry (*Trocken*) wines. More correctly, they want their dry wines to be really dry and their sweet wines to be really sweet, i.e., dessert-sweet. They wonder at export markets’ resistance to what they see as a benign change of style. Once or twice they’ve accused me of “using Austria as a source for dry wines and Germany as a source for sweet ones,” and all I can reply is *yes that’s right; what’s your point?* My point is the other guy’s dry wines are better than yours, and that’s why I’m in business; to find the best stuff.

So now they’re staging tastings where their top dry wines are pitted against blue chip examples from Austria and Alsace, to demonstrate their own competitiveness. The results are generally rubbed in my face. Martin Kerpen was in full crow when Schildknecht gave “92” to a dry wine I didn’t select. They think I’m intractable, but what I actually am is empirical. I generalize based on the evidence hitherto. *Truth means that all ravens are black, until you see a white raven.*

So let’s give credit where it’s due. This year I tasted far more excellent and worthwhile Trocken Rieslings than I ever had before. That most of them were 2005s had, I’m sure, a wee bit to do with it. I have little doubt that top producers are making sure their Grand Cru dry Rieslings are superb, as many of them are. Regardless, there are two difficult questions that need to be addressed. First, what about the huge number of foully bitter and grotesquely unbalanced Trocken wines at lower echelons of quality? The ceiling may have been raised but the floor is still awfully damn low. Second, even if the wines are improving, do we need Germany to be yet-another-source for dry Rieslings when she is the *only possible* source for Rieslings of the type she used to make? Let’s go deeper.

One year I wrote this sentence: “There are people who like bitter flavors, but I don’t believe disproportionate millions of them happen to live in Germany.”

Last year I started to wonder.



*Are today’s german wines being “raped into dryness”?*

The Germans are notoriously averse to their own (perfectly good) tap-water. I don’t recall when I’ve ever seen a German person go to the sink and draw himself a glass of water. What they drink instead is a concoction called *Sprudel*, which is a highly carbonated and (to most non-German palates) aggressively salty beverage. A grower in whose home we stayed gave us a bottle of Sprudel for our room, and my wife poured a glass for the bedside. The next morning I reached idly for it, took a sip, and the light-bulb went on above my head. I guess I have magic powers.

The water was significantly bitter, now that it had gone flat and warmed to room-temp. Almost every German drinks such waters from his earliest childhood. And so I find myself wondering whether this might explain their singular attachment to bitterness. Could it be such a deep part of their essential aesthetic imprinting they do not in fact see it discretely?

Someone online took huge umbrage at that comment. In his fit of high dudgeon he conveniently ignored the charge they always hurl at us: that our “sweet-tooth” is the result of drinking soda since we were lil’ tots. Sure dude. If you need to explain our addiction to sucrose then I also need to explain your addiction to bitterness.

Because the basic rap against dry German Rieslings is too many of them are shrill and bitter. I detest such wines and don’t select them. Yet I do select good dry German wines whenever I encounter them, I know the Trocken wines I’m selecting are literally extraordinary. The prevailing human palate will usually reject that which is inherently unpleasant. Yet with exquisite perversity, The Germans wish to establish their market on inherently unpleasant wines.

The proportion of off-sweet wines in my portfolio last year was around 19%, and if you take the Mosel out of the equation (for even the driest of the apostles of dryness concede the style works less well there) it jumped to 24%. This year I suspect it’s even higher. And very often the dry wines I select are top-of-class in the local German wine guides such as Gault-Millau. Speaking of which....

Gault-Millau likes to do what they call a Ten Years After tasting. (No, this doesn’t involve Alvin Lee in any way I’m aware of.) Armin Diel told me when they tasted

the top-rated Trocken wines of the 1994 vintage “It was striking to see how thin and sour many of them were compared to the wines we’re making now.” He is quite correct; modern German dry Rieslings have improved in the last decade. Yet I wonder whether tasting today’s wines in ten years will bring about yet another moment of perspective and clarity.

There’s a certain amount of chatter about increasing U.S. market demand for Trocken Rieslings. I don’t see it. Last year I offered an exquisitely balanced and fascinating “feinherb” Spätlese from Kerpen, a nearly perfect dry (or dry *enough*) Riesling, and ya wanna know how much y’all bought of it? Two cases, dude. We showed the wine in every DI tasting, including those visited by Martin Kerpen himself, at his own table, commanding your exclusive attention, and I’m sure at least 1000 of you tasted the wine. And two of you ordered it. “Demand.”

I have no doubt there are more successful Trocken Rieslings than ever. But the whole matter is rife with group-think and dogma, such that the Pfalz has been suffocated by adherence to an ironclad formula. But let’s take a step back.

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

Would it were so.

I think that fifty years from now some wine historian will write a book about the strange phenomenon that gripped German wine drinkers in the last quarter of the twentieth century. RAPED INTO DRYNESS could be the



*Trendy Trocken wines drinkers — too often concerned about image rather than “taste.”*

title (and thanks to Armin Diel for the wonderful phrase!).

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



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

Peter Geiben told me a revealing story. He was visited by a trio of consumers who wanted to taste and purchase. What did they wish to taste? *Trocken*, of course. And so a line up of dry wines was duly assembled, along with a single “feinherb” and a “sweet” Kabinett at the end. “It’s necessary you taste all the wines,” said Peter; “those are the rules!” And when all the wines were tasted, the buyers said “Actually, those last two wines were quite attractive . . .” and when the order arrived the next day, “Not one single bottle of Trocken wine was ordered; only the sweet Kabinett.”

So what? So this: such things occur very rarely in modern wine-Germany, where people seem to have lost any sensual connection they may have had with what actually gives them pleasure. A journalist in Germany asked me whether I thought Trocken wine lovers were “wrong” in their tastes. A fascinating question. A useless question! I suspect something even more sinister is at work. The German riesling grower is such a captive of the prevailing dogma he has started to identify with his captor. This may also be true of the market at large; people adapt, make the best of things, go along to get along. Many are the growers who have lamented to me they can’t even get their customers to taste their “sweet” wines. The Trocken Stasi may be peering at you from behind the wall. The monolithic quality of this ideology suggests not that tastes are “wrong” but rather they are *dishonest*.

Remember any little feature of fashion from the last ten years. Doesn’t matter which one. While it was trendy we had to have it, and thought it looked good, and we



looked good in it. A few years later when the new trend came along we adopted it. All well and good. But admit it: you look in the closet at the old stuff, whatever it is, wide lapels, four-button blazers, hip-huggers or bell-bottoms or flowered neckties, and you think *That looks ridiculous; what was I thinking!* Fashion exerts a kind of hypnosis, and if this is true of fashion imagine how true it is of dogma. “Wrong?” I think not. Misled, and therefore dishonest with themselves.

Often even the dogma is supported with dishonest (or at least false) explanation. I am automatically suspicious when a German starts in with the whole “traditional” rap. As I see it, “tradition” is a moving target, usually determined by the time you start from and how far back you look.

Yes, most German wine was dry until the ‘50s, but that is because the technology by which they could be reliably be made sweet didn’t exist. And, every broker knew the best casks were those containing wine with natural residual sugar. And, the dry wines of those days were usually aged in Fuders, not steel, and aged longer before bottling, thus helping to round them. When microfiltration and temperature control became available, most producers opted to use these new technologies to make sweeter wines. Thus “tradition” changed when it COULD; changed, you might say, into a new or re-defined “tradition.” 100 years from now it’s quite possible SWEET wines will be seen as “traditional” and dry wines as an aberration.

What I’d prefer to see is that we all stop struggling over theory and simply use our sensual wits to produce and consume the loveliest possible wine. This will, I believe, lead to the celebration of riesling’s ability to shine in a variety of styles, and it will apportion them naturally and spontaneously. That’s my little pipe dream.

It’s recently been suggested (by a writer who ought to know better) that the great dry German wines of yore were swept away by oceans of cheap sweetened swill in the ‘50s and ‘60s, when *dosage* could be used to pastiche what were formerly rare and truly precious sweet wines. This argument sounds pretty ideological to me. Sure there were lots of yucky wines made sweet in the 50s and ‘60s. Which only says there’s plenty of yucky growers and only a few good ones. The same guys are making yucky dry wines now. At least the yucky sweet wines

were *palatable*. But for every true wackoloon who really gets *off* on bitterness, there are hundreds who are losing the ability to discern disharmony; consumers and growers alike. Taste with them if you don’t believe me!

*Come to Germany and taste our fine bitter wines, prized by connoisseurs everywhere!* There’s a marketing approach in line with the Zeitgeist.

Actually, I’ve solved the problem. Oh sure, people go on propounding it like it hasn’t been solved, but still. Here’s what they can do. It’s very simple.

Destroy the word “Halbtrocken”. It sucks, it’s not half-dry, it’s half-*assed*. Inasmuch as most Riesling with 9-18 grams-per-liter of sweetness tastes dry to any reasonable palate, let’s call THAT “Trocken”.

The wines they currently call “Trocken” — those snarling beasts with 0-9 grams of sweetness — would henceforth be called “Sehr Trocken” (very dry).

That way the poor deluded clown who absolutely must drink a commodity called “Trocken” will now receive a *palatable* wine which (s)he will suddenly begin to actually sensually enjoy (and probably wonder why), while the real sour-power guys can have their macho-dry wines. *Oh I don’t drink those dainty little Trocken wines, not a real wine stud like me: I drink VERY dry wines!*

You know exactly what would happen: within a couple years the overwhelming majority of “Trocken” wines would have more RS, taste much better, and harmony would start being restored to the troubled kingdom. I will even waive my hefty consulting fee and consider this my pro-bono contribution to Universal Beauty.

There’s also a huge irony at work. Initially the Germans began making Trocken wines in order to regain market share they were losing to the Alsatians and Italians. They invented the whole catechism of theological explanation AFTER THE FACT, as it wasn’t too cool to simply say “Um, we can make dry wines too if that’s what you all want to drink.” And now an entire generation of wine drinkers in Germany are brainwashed to drink dry. Now comes the irony. The new breed of consumer thirsty for dry wines has discovered *once again* that other

countries can produce a more palatable product in that style, and all of Germany is awash in cheap Pinot Grigio! To which I can only say: yay. Serves ‘em right. This problem is so pernicious that Stuart Pigott published a wonderfully





impassioned book whose stated purpose is to remind the Germans that many of the world's most exquisite white wines grow in their own back yards. Yet I seem to be the only person who sees the whole sorry phenomenon as an inevitable result of the Trocken madness. The Germans do not automatically despise their home-grown products; far from it. But their wines have somehow become unfashionable. And I argue the *reason* is the dry wines weren't good enough to sustain a claim on the market's attention.

A Very Famous winery in the Rheingau is hosting an apprentice I happen to know. And this young man reports that the Very Famous winery routinely *de-acidifies* its Rieslings and then *pumps them with carbon dioxide* at bottling in a sad attempt to restore some sense of the freshness it *already removed*. So the wine is manipulated twice in order that the Product shall be satisfactory. Or, *satisfactory*.

One of us is wacko and I don't think it's me. The glaringly obvious answer to this "problem" is to leave a little sweetness in the wine to balance its acids. No need to manipulate, and the wine is balanced and vital. But no-o-o-o! The wine must be dry A PRIORI.

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

Florian Weingart had a cask of Spätlese he was hoping would ferment to dryness, but which stopped with 35 g.l. residual sugar. This was an o wee, because Florian's "sweet" Spätlese usually has around 60 g.l.—typical of modern German thinking ("If it's dry it should *really* be dry and if it's sweet it should *really* be sweet."). So what was our hero to do? He didn't want to diddle his wine to restart fermentation, nor did he have any dosage in the winery with which to sweeten it. And? He showed me this perfectly balanced wine under the name "anarchy," and all I want to do is change it to SANITY. I tell you I *dream* however hopelessly for a day when growers will make the tastiest wines they can and then figure out how to "position" them or "market" them—as if beauty didn't sell itself!

Later on I had this note from Weingart, which is so apropos I reproduce it verbatim: "While "Anarchie" maybe implicates a total abandoning of normal categories that is actually not what I intended. The "Anarchie" is a natural — non-chaptalized — wine and we would like to show this on the label by using the Prädikat. "Anarchie" refers to the fact that it crossed my plans when it stopped fermenting naturally but in doing so revealed a perfect harmony that I would not have found intentionally. It does not fit in the category halbtrocken but should we care if the result is ideal balance? "Anarchie" just likes to say that every wine is an individual, and that this wine taught me to respect that by naturally finding a balance of residual sugar. We don't want to negate the necessity of regulations and categories but

find that life itself and enjoying wine is an experience beyond categories."

Oh, AMEN!

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

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

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



## **More Principles**

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

After clarity come the lovelier questions. What is the

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

Most important, at least for my romantic side: is the wine distinctive, does it have character? The thing that Matt Kramer calls “somewhereness,” the signature of the place the grapes were grown. Riesling grown in the Rhineland is a mirror reflecting the soil it grew in, and different soils give consistently different flavors to its wines.

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

### **How I Approach Wine, or Let Wine Approach Me**

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

—Alexander Pope

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

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

What turns me on the most is the Joyful Noise! The clamor of methods, visions, opinions, the warp and woof

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



Apart from which, these things *change*. Today there's a general retreat away from steel, a general movement toward fermentation from natural yeasts (whose results are referred to as *Spontis*, for “spontaneous”), and even the stirrings of a challenge to whole-cluster pressing. If you're around long enough you can watch as the pendulum swings. You can also enjoy how necessary it is. A notion takes hold, and for 10-15 years it becomes the prevailing notion and everyone tries it and it becomes the *correct* way to make wine – it signifies you are serious about quality. Then a few people start wondering “What if we did it another way?” Florian Weingart, who is remarkably thoughtful, self-aware and intellectually curious, has had ten years to establish his *regime*, and most of his innovations were defended with good logic. But this year he started making changes, as it started to dawn on him that “My father knew very well what he was doing and many of his approaches turn out to have been better for the style and quality I seek.”

At some point one year, prompted by God-knows-what, I had this exchange with my old friend David Schildknecht. It must have been a slow day, though I understand David has none of these. I'll bet it was a ballgame with a rain-delay. This is some of what we said:

**TT:** It is, of course, precisely the quality we lose ineluctably, the more we “know” about wine. In my own small way I try to “forget” whatever I may know, to encourage the wine to come to be with some of the early immediacy. Yet this is mostly impossible.

**DS:** Mostly, perhaps, but not entirely. I have flashbacks sufficiently vivid that I sometimes think I can recall the way, say, Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Beerenauslese *first* came to me, and then can superimpose that somehow over a contemporary taste impression. And then there are those occasions when we find ourselves being reminded “THIS is what got me excited about . . . in the first place,” and at such moments too we are close to the old wonder. And then there's just being taken by surprise . . . because if in any relationship you lose the ability to be surprised OR to wonder, then you

are—to turn Aristotle’s famous dictum on its head—at the end of knowledge.

**TT:** Yeah, I appreciated being knocked on my (figurative) keister by so many of the 2003s, because the more certainties that topple away, the closer to that Edenic state one returns—yet even this is a kind of wishful dream.

**DS:** Right: being puzzled or confounded is also something close to that Ur-wonder.

**TT:** At the very least it reminds you that knowledge isn’t so much linear as circular, and much of what one dresses-up as “knowledge” is merely time and inference.

**DS:** If one gives up trying to wrestle with the issue of returning to a wonderful or pristine state of appreciation, and one gives up in general trying to obtain a variety of perspectives, then one’s tasting notes can easily become nothing but a conversation with one’s self (or one’s circle), a reinforcement of the prejudices contained within that ambit, or even just pleonasm. (And some wine writers have VERY large circles!)

**TT:** This doesn’t worry me, except to the extent we show our notes to others hoping the notes will be useful. My “best” notes are exactly those I write for my own eyes only. But to the larger questions, it’s obviously fruitless to try and will oneself to some (probably romanticized) state of innocence, though the yearning for that state is, I think, nourishing. I do think, though, the question remains the same: what will THIS be? (“This” being the wine one’s about to drink.) At first we asked it eagerly, even graspingly. Now we ask it more calmly, in a different voice, more genial and lambent perhaps.

**DS:** And as far as the “wrestling” part is concerned (with apologies if I sound pretentious quoting “great philosophers”) what we’re talking about here is something like Wittgenstein’s “knots in the intellect.” It may take a lot of torturous twists and turns and training to remove them, but it’s only so that at the end nothing more needs to be said because you are thankfully, almost literally “back at the beginning.”

**TT:** Well put. With wine it seems the discrete intellect is a wonderful servant and an awkward master. But you can’t see wine from your 3rd-eye if you’re blind out of the other two!

Man, after that exchange you better *believe* I belched loudly and turned on wrestling!

### **An Essay On Tasting Blind**

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

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

Have you heard Keith Jarrett’s solo piano CD, *The Melody, The Night and You*? He’d been suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome for several years, curtailing

his performing career and making it all but impossible for him to even play the piano on some days. The CD is a recital of standards and folk songs played very straight, with little embellishment or technical bravura. The approach is said to have been compelled by Jarrett’s draining enervation, but the result is nearly sublime, a tender, deliberate and caressing reading of these songs, essential and pure.

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

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

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

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



*German spies were not into blind tastings . . . at all!*





## The 2006 Vintage

Commercially the vintage is a bloody mess. Aesthetically it is so schizy the only valid headline should read **2006 Offers Masterpieces, Stinkers**. Merchants and journalists alike will have to earn their pleasures in this vintage. But pleasures there surely are.

Very hot July (but with more rain than in 2003) and very cold August, such that most growers were predicting a “normal” vintage in size and ripeness by early September. Then came October 3rd, and all hell broke loose. A vicious storm broke over southern Germany, dropping insane amounts of rain. As was the case in ‘03 and again (weird coincidence or basic shift?) in ‘05, the weather was best the further north you went. “We on the Mosel received much less rain than they got in the Pfalz, and north of us the Ahr got none at all,” one grower told me. In fact 2006 was a candor-crucible for many growers. How much truth could they tell? One guy said “We (growers) always tell you the truth about a vintage – one year later!”

So, lots of rain just before harvest. When it fell on already-ripe grapes with soft skins, rot ensued. When it fell on less ripe grapes with firmer skins, the growers had another week to gear up, but when botrytis came it came overwhelmingly, and everyone said it was the fastest harvest they’d ever done.

Darting sent teams out to select during the day, cutting all the dubious grapes to the ground and leaving the healthy ones on the vine to be machine-harvested overnight. Growers who picked before the rain had “small” wines but clean wines and acted like they’d dodged a bullet. Joel Payne, who lives near Neustadt in the Pfalz and who likes to jog through the vineyards each morning told me “It was distressing; you could smell the vinegar,” something repeated by many others. But paradoxically, it contained a hopeful silver lining.

It recalls 2000, doesn’t it? And as it turns out, the experience of that dreadful harvest was *extremely* useful to growers in 2006, as it compelled them to pick fast and alter their methods. “You had to bring in each bucket of grapes, almost,” one guy said. “You couldn’t leave them in the tractor to warm up; we were driving back and forth five or six times a day.” Others told of the salespeople who swarmed over them offering carbon (for must-

fining) and saying there would be disastrous shortages, but many growers said they used little or none of it because of how and how *quickly* they picked. Others were humbled by nature’s caprices. “It didn’t matter what you did, when or where you sprayed; you had one vineyard with vinegar and the neighbor had none, and you don’t know why.” One resolute non-interventionist showed me two wines and asked which I preferred. I liked the first of them by a long shot. “These are two adjacent parcels,” he explained. “One was sprayed with fungicides and the other wasn’t.” The sprayed vineyard gave by far the more palatable wine.

In the south (Pfalz and most of Rheinhessen) the best you could expect was clean wine of moderate ripeness, but often the wines exceeded your expectations. Darting’s wines have far more extract and grip than usual, and they’re actually less botrytis-influenced than the ‘05s. Minges had a collection of utterly lovely Riesling, thanks in part to the sagacity of his friend Hans-Günter Schwarz, who helped him in the vineyard. In fact in the more challenged regions the victory belonged not to the hotshot cellar-wizard, but to the sensitive and attentive grape grower, and Minges and Schwarz had many telling observations to share about how to read a vine’s state of health and contentment, and how to hear what it asks for.

As you went north the tenor of the stories changed. There it wasn’t uncleanness which had to be battled, but instead the rampant and sudden invasion of *noble* rot. I remember getting bulletins from Johannes Selbach every few days. At first he lamented the lack of everyday wine coming from the vineyards. “Looking for lots to declassify has been a pain in the neck,” he said. Then a few days later he crossed a conceptual line. “At some point we decided 2006 was showing us what type of vintage it would be, and why should we struggle against it?”

All over the Mosel growers told the same tale: each day they had another 5-to-10 degrees Oechsle and each day they had another crop reduction because of it. Low yields are universal. In the south it was an issue of selecting the small amount of clean fruit available; in the north it was noble-rot and its shriveling. The phrase “embarrassment of riches” is apropos.

At first I thought OK, bear down, swallow hard and get through it. We’ve had awkward vintages before and survived them. Then I went to Wagner-Stempel. And then I saw there would be instances where 2006 was – take a deep breath – even *better* than 2005. How in the world would *this* story be told?

In general terms, where 2005 was a panna-cotta, 2006 is more meaty. It has higher acidity and *much* higher extract across the board. Many growers have never seen such extract readings, and the wines have marked mid-palate substance which gives them unusual grip. If 2005s are stately as elms are stately, 2006 is grand as oaks are grand. At its best – and its best isn’t hard to find – 2006 has amazing size and focus. “Grandiose” is a word we’ll often hear. The best wines are regal and command-



ing, sometimes absurdly focused and defined given their sheer magnitude. And yet other times they seem almost delicate. One facet of this quixotic vintage (which is either annoying or entertaining depending on your temperament) is you

never knew *what* you'd find at any given address. For each grower who made the wines you expected (like Justen) another was uncannily *apart* from the vintage norm (like Kerpen).

Cards on the table. I sent a letter to growers the tail end of 2006 saying I expected the 2006 vintage might have rough sailing in our markets. Higher prices (thanks to exchange rates and dangerously small yields) and a vintage laden with Auslese might make for a hard sell when everyone's cellars were crammed with 2005s. For me personally, and subjectively, it would have been best to ride it out and wait for the next cuddly useful vintage. The problem was, the sheer staggering greatness of many '06s kept interfering with my plans! *Oh shit, what do I do now: the wines are stunning . . .*

And it isn't just ripeness, or even ripeness-plus-definition. Many of the '06s have a smoldering magma-minerality that made me think of the ore note in top Wachau wines. You get the sense of huge armies of hirsute muscular giants hammering iron in a boiling factory way below the ground. Dainty, the wines are not. Yet each time I was inclined to find them perhaps on the *muscular* side they'd impress me with their juiciness. And I promise you; "juicy" is the textural adjective that'll dominate your tasting notes.

And in fairness to the whole truth, the wines aren't always clean. Naturally I left anything dubious behind, but when you taste a vintage many of whose wines show various botrytis flavors you're in danger of ceasing to notice them. I had to be vigilant, and so will you.

But what are we to drink? There wasn't a single "true" Kabinett among any I tasted. There wasn't even a declassified Spätlese you could plausibly offer as a wine that *should* be a Kabinett. Yes, some wines attained an incomprehensible delicacy – Karlsruhle leaps to mind – where you thought "OK, this tastes like Kabinett should," until you learned the wine was over 100° Oechsle and you were left shaking your fool head, wondering how it was done.

The fact that we demand a commodity called "Kabinett" led, inexorably, to the creation of lots of "Auslese-feinherb" when growers took the least-ripe fruit they had and gave it "typical" Kabinett sweetness. Most of these wines are misjudged, but it's more our fault than the growers'. We want what we want. Johannes Selbach had it right – as he has most things – when he chose to yield to the vintage and let it be itself instead of twisting it into an unnatural form to fit inside a concept. I think I'll do the same.

I do not retreat an iota from my statement that 2005 at its best is the greatest German vintage of modern times, better than which (in Schildknecht's classic phrase) cannot be imagined. But! That doesn't mean each and every grower's wine embodied the best the 2005 vintage could give. So when I tell you there are quite a number of growers who made *EVEN BETTER* wine in 2006, one statement is easily reconciled with the other. Here's a list of:



#### GROWERS WHO MADE EVEN BETTER WINE IN 2006 THAN IN 2005:

Darting  
Wagner-Stempel  
Gysler  
Hexamer  
Mathern  
Leitz  
Kruger-Rumpf  
Willi Schaefer  
Kerpen

Here's a list of:

#### GROWERS WHOSE WINES WERE ABOUT AS GOOD IN 2006 AS IN 2005:

Dönnhoff  
Spreitzer  
Diel  
A.J. Adam  
Christoffel  
Loewen  
Jakoby-Mathy  
Minges



2006 is at its best, yet again – pity the poor Pfälzers, who are perhaps being cosmically punished for the whole Trocken misery – in the Mosel, Saar and Ruwer, in the Mittelrhein, the Rheingau, the Nahe, and in central and western parts of Rheinhessen near the Nahe.

To the extent '06 was difficult for grapes like Scheurebe and Muscat this had less to do with any inherent challenges they faced and more to do with growers' wishes to protect Rieslings at all cost and leave other varieties to fate. Müller-Catoir made no Scheurebe, because "By the time we got to it, it was useless. But we had to protect the Riesling." Catoir was on the receiving end of almost absurd nemesis in '06 thanks to not one but two hailstorms – and *then* with the difficult harvest. What Scheu I did see was its usual writhing slutty self. Scheu likes higher acid years. Lots of the '06s are good 'n horny.

So to sum up, 2006 is an all-over-the-place vintage whose best wines are as good as German wine gets, and there are plenty of them. It's a better year than its nearest cognate 2000: riper, cleaner and with greater stature. When it fails it *really* fails, and it's not made to give us the light everyday wines we need. Yet if you cherish German Riesling's scintillating clarity and brilliance you will *get it* from many 2006s – just at 25° Oechsle higher than you'd expect!

#### **Vintage Highlights:**

Again, I eliminate Dönnhoff from the running, as this grower is in his own class and would dominate any list of superlatives. (Indeed his 2006s are existentially different from the rest of the vintage and thus perhaps even more astonishing than his gorgeous '05s.)

The Winery Of The Vintage is....oh hell, I don't know. Does it have to be just one? The candidates are Schlossgut Diel for simply ravishing across-the-board brilliance, Kerpen for making an entirely different vintage from any I could have expected, and Karlsruhle for similar reasons. (skritch-skritch-skritch-scratching-head . . .) OK, here goes. One day we went to Justen, Christoffel and Merkelbach, and it was a day's work tasting those supperipe wines from the due-south slopes of Uerzig-Erden. Imagine going to a smorgasbord but all the preps are foie gras. "Um, is there anything that isn't foie gras?" you ask. *Nope, just foie! Bon appetit!* So I approached the next day with, let's say, some apprehension. And then Martin Kerpen showed me something the likes of which I've never seen from him. His entire vintage was almost demure, certainly delicate, and wonderfully charming, quiet and discreet. Wine after wine after wine excelled with virtues almost unique among '06s, remarkably limpid and sappy. I still don't know how he did it and I'm not sure he does either. But with all respects paid to the many (did I mention Wagner-Stempel) who made incomprehensibly deft and brilliant '06s, for *me the winery of the vintage in this portfolio is: KERPEN*. For wine after wine of heart-rending quiet beauty. And for restoring my thirst, and my hope.

#### **THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:**

- ★ **Schlossgut Diel** – Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese

#### **THE RUNNER-UP IS:**

- ★ **Carl Loewen** – Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Beerenauslese (which only missed being #1 because I didn't want it to be a BA)



#### **THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:**

- ★ **Willi Schaefer** – Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #10 (It sucks nominating a wine there's so little of, but Schaefer's Domprobst Auslese #14 is just as good, showing even more fruit and class though with less explicit mineral intricacy) (The two Auslesen of the vintage are. . . !)

#### **THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:**

- ★ **Kruger-Rumpf** – Scheurebe Spätlese (with more-than-honorable mention to Gysler for his astonishing Scheu in LITERS.)

#### **THE KABINETT OF THE VINTAGE IN THIS COLLECTION IS:**

- ★ **Adam** – Hofberg Riesling Kabinett (very likely the most amazing Mosel Kabinett I've ever tasted).

#### **THE BIGGEST SURPRISES OF THE VINTAGE ARE:**

- ★ **Gysler** – Weinheimer Riesling Halbtrocken (because the wine embodies a pure happiness that makes you laugh out loud as if you were being tickled.)
- ★ **Mathern** – Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese (because it establishes an entirely new and unexpected level of quality for Sabine and Gloria).
- ★ **Jakoby-Mathy** – Riesling "Balance" (a masterly recreation of an old style of Mosel wine with barely perceptible but absolutely necessary RS)
- ★ **Weingart** – Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese Trocken (see that word *Trocken*? 'Nuff said . . .)
- ★ **Karlsruhle** – Kaseler Nieschen Riesling Kabinett (a wine I'd *never* have imagined possible from '06 – so delicate and searching and mystic).

★ **Minges** – “Buntsandstein” Riesling Spätlese Trocken (another wine named after its soil, and an astonishingly improbable achievement in any vintage let alone 2006; there’s nothing here but pristine balance and cleanliness and complexity).

THE GREATEST CORE-LIST WINES IN THIS COLLECTION ARE:

★ **Weingart** – Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett

★ **Kruger-Rumpf** – Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese (second year in a row for this beauty!)

THE SINGLE GREATEST VALUE IN THIS OFFERING IS:

★ **Minges** – Riesling Halbtrocken LITERS

THE ESTATES SHOWING THE STEADIEST HAND  
ACROSS THE BOARD ARE:

Selbach-Oster, Schlossgut Diel, and Wagner-Stempel

SHORT-LIST FOR ROCKHEADS:

★ **Selbach-Oster** – Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese “Schmitt”

★ **Wagner-Stempel** – Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs

★ **Hexamer** – Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett

SHORT-LIST FOR FRUIT-HOUNDS:

★ **Darting** – Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett

★ **Hexamer** – Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*

★ **Hoffman-Simon** – Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

SHORT-LIST FOR CHARM-PUPPIES:

★ **Spreitzer** – Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Kabinett

★ **Jakoby-Mathy** – Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese

★ **Merkelbach** – Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese #5

THE TROCKEN WINE OF THE VINTAGE IN

THIS COLLECTION IS:

★ **Schlossgut Diel** – Goldloch Grosses Gewächs

So to try and put the whole mess into perspective....the heights of 2006 are every bit as high as 2005, though fewer wines attained them. But: some wines *exceeded* them. The lows of 2006 are considerably lower than 2005’s, the worst of which were merely mediocre whereas ‘06’s worst wines are undrinkable. I arrived assuming your cellars were as crammed-full as mine is with ‘05s, and the best I hoped for from ‘06 was a small community of usable wines with which to ride out the next 12 months. Alas, happily, amazingly, it isn’t quite so. Drink up sybarites, because you’ll need to make room for the best of

2006 – they are that good and more.

That said, and said with conviction, 2006 isn’t as easily or obviously great as 2005. Those were irresistible, they literally overcame you with their depth of fruit and length of structure.



The new vintage – usually but not inevitably – body-slams you with its implacable strength and dynamism. It is, however, reasonable to observe the *very* best among the ‘06s are the atypical ones, the Dönnhoffs and Karlsruhles and Diels and Wagner-Stempels and Hexamers . . . wait; there are so many of these perhaps they aren’t atypical after all. They might simply represent another possible profile of this bizarrely remarkable crop, which I was personally ready to ignore until the wines got the best of me and my conscience rebelled. When I counted through my “plusses” I had as many as I had for the ‘05s, though I have fewer total selections.

There’s a lot of people saying we’d better figure out a way to drink all these outsized Auslesen. Hey, Comte and Beaufort are my favorite cheeses.

## Earlier Vintages Revisited – 2005

What makes me happiest about this vintage is that we sold it our before any of the significant press appeared. Granted it wasn’t plentiful, but it’s nice to have earned your trust.

A year later there’s little to add. 2005 isn’t great everywhere but where it *is* great it is supernally great. It has developed somewhat deliberately, as one might expect given its material density, and the only thing I noticed tasting ‘05s astride ‘06s was how *creamy* and malty the ‘05s were. Their botrytis – the purest I have ever tasted – is more evident now.

I’m re-offering ‘05 wherever I can find it and offering some of its wines for the first time. All things being equal, 2005 is more accommodating to early drinking than 2006. But the two-vintage tandem is likely to become the stuff of legend, like ‘28 and ‘29 Bordeaux. Unless of course Al Gore is right and we’ll get seven such vintages every decade.

## 2004

What to make of this vintage? At the time it was hailed as a relief after the broiling 2003s, which were generally (if fatuously) written off as clunky and four-

square. Tasting the wines pre-bottling I was struck by their freshness and consistency, only noting a small tendency for grassiness in a few sub-regions. But that grassy flavor has intensified, and has started showing up in wines with 1-2 years in bottle. If you told me Sancerre had such egregious overproduction that it hired a gang of vandals to break into German wineries at night and pour off its excess into tanks of Riesling,



I'd nearly believe you. The problem is, it isn't confined to Germany. I've tasted lots of Alsace wines, several Chablis, and even a few Champagnes, all showing this *green* flavor somewhere between a pleasing Menetou-grassiness and a yucky cruciferous vegetality.

I haven't noticed it among any Mosel wines, but maybe it just hasn't reached them yet. Or maybe it won't. Nor is the flavor invariably unpleasant; in Diel's Pittermännchen Spätlese it acts as a curiously attractive nuance. But no one seems to know whence it arose, or why it's-a-rising more all the time.

Most ascribe it to acidity, specifically to unripe acidity, i.e., malic. Though at the time the same growers were saying how *ripe* the '04 acids were. Nor does high acid necessarily create these particular aromas. The last vintage to show them was '98; they appeared when the wines were 2-3 years in bottle and in some cases they've retreated or even disappeared. Or they come and go. But vintages like 1994 and 1991 had acids as high or higher. Basically dude, we don't know. And I don't get the impression we're in a big hurry to talk about it.

Synesthesiacs everywhere will understand when I ascribe *green* qualities to the 2004s. We use "green" as a synonym for inadequate ripeness, but that's not exactly what I mean. Green things have flavors encased in a certain family: verbena, wintergreen, aloe, basil, et.al. There are *ripe* green flavors. Put it this way: *green* is why a lime tastes unlike a lemon. And 2004s taste green and taste of every seeming *shade* of green from ripe to unripe and from sweet key-lime green to acrid brussel-sprout green. Whether this is just a stormy adolescence and not the basic character of the vintage remains to be seen. I am far from writing it off – I bought a bunch of it for my cellar – but I confess to a certain wariness.

## **2003**

Indeed many of the 03s have *slimmed down* with bottle-age and what impresses most about them now is their purity and even elegance. But I doubt a single German wine grower ever imagined his four recent vintages would include *three* mega-ripe monuments. Some 2003s appeared almost demure next to their more muscular sibs from 2006. We were fools to write this vintage off, but the universe has more urgent matters on its hands.

## **2002**

This vintage gets better and better. It's essential fragrance is ravishing. Its lighter wines are gorgeously ready to drink. There are moments when you can't imagine Riesling any finer or more exquisite.

Many contrarians claimed 2002 was even better than 2001, and in certain regions this was so: The Saar and Ruwer, the Rheingau, certain parts of the Pfalz, and quite likely Alsace too. With a certain perspective now I'd say the virtues of 2001 were those of gold and 2002 those of silver. 2001 was a mountainside in Fall with deciduous trees emblazoned in color; 2002 was the fast-running silvery stream at its foot. But Mosel and Nahe wines were distinctly more profound in '01, though possibly no more beautiful.

## **"Antiques"**

**2001** - I've just started to breach the occasional bottle and for the most part they want to be left alone, especially the Mosel wines. I wonder whether the vintage will seem even more lissome when compared to the outsized 2003-2005-2006 trio. 2001 does seem to be the last classic fine vintage, Beethoven versus Mahler. Or maybe the crowding mass of remarkable years will serve to remind us there are many forms of greatness and we get to have them all if we're not obsessed with how things *have* to be.

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

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



subject to volatile acidity.

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

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

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

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

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

If you really want to get humble fast, go back to your first notes of a vintage and consider what happened to it later. A lot of guys (usually *guys*, and usually wine-writers) seem to need to defend their omniscience, but for me it's an ongoing process. I've tended to underrate fruit-driven vintages, especially when they're on the heels of mineral-extract vintages, because the fruity ones seem simplistic. I'm concerned I might overrate skeletally-driven vintages because I'm so entertained by their early complexities. I am also aware my palate changes with experience and also as my body ages. I want more fruit and symmetry these days, and single components don't wow me like before. I've learned that if I *taste* acidity then it's probably too high, maybe not for immediate drinking if you crave a certain sharpness, but for the long haul.

Young wines are drama, wind-driven clouds and thunder and lightning, each component puts on a show for you, it's all crazily *there*, all the pieces screaming and eager like little kids who want to show off a trick they've learned. You get to see each piece and also the design into which each piece fits; in effect you get to see the *mise en place* and look at all the sexy ingredients (Is he *really* gonna use all those truffles??) and imagine what the dish will taste like. But honestly, when does it taste like you

thought it would? When wines are bottled they begin to settle down, and the Whole they assume isn't only greater than the sum of its parts – it is often *different*. I've noticed that some years, usually "fruity" ones, often improve over time. 1988, 1997, 2002 come to mind. Sometimes the impressively structured ones can have you grinding your teeth: 96 and 98 for sure, and I think '90 escaped because of the immense *fruit* it contained. Though in retrospect its acids were misunderstood and as a whole the sweet wines weren't sweet enough.

1989 developed predictably; we knew it would age quickly and it did, though its best wines make for tasty drinking now. '91 was a spiky little critter and still is. '92 was a good-natured oaf without much finesse or complexity (exceptions exist of course, e.g., Catoir) and yet it's aging quite deliberately and might yet confound us as '79 and '73 did. '93 started out tart and has stayed that way. '94 was a vintage where flesh was at a premium, and has become one of the more compelling years of the '90s. It's rather better than I believed it would be, and it also contradicts my theory about excess acidity. My poor little theory! In fact someone should contrive a test whereby a Wine Person gets to make big declarative statements *What I Have Learned* and then the examiner produces wines that blow what he's learned right out of the damn water. At the end of the whole wretched process the poor schlep has to write a paper called *What I Learned Today* – and then you'll get some truth.

Beware the categorical statement. Including that one. Once in a while you hit upon a durable principle, and it helps to recognize it when you see it. But usually the more certain you are the more often you'll be played for a dupe. That's not because wine is some sort of fiend. It's just too busy being itself to care much about our various theories and certitudes.

### **Things I Would Do If I Were Ruler Of All The Known World**

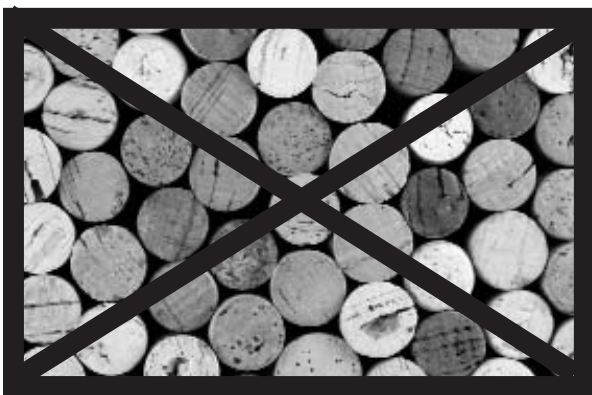
First, either do away with cork or find a way to neutralize its damage. I am *fed up* with the number of corked bottles of German wine I encounter. Yes, outright stinkers are rare, but these aren't as scary as the subtly corked wine, where something indistinct is making the wine taste mute, furry, stale.

The Germans were—characteristically—slow to adapt at first. I get a chuckle whenever a grower laments the problem of cork—at his neighbor's winery! Most of them are certain *their* corks are of the highest quality. "When was the last time you had a corked bottle of mine?" they'll demand. "Um, does yesterday count?" I reply. But things seem to be changing quickly.

Here's something else I'd do; remove the spurious glamour attending to "flying winemakers." I'm not sure why it's sexy for someone to ride a plane to go somewhere else to make wine. I appreciate wanderlust. But I'm happier when someone chooses a place and makes wine there, ideally the place he was born and raised. He then becomes linked to his place and his wine expresses the connection. The connection gives it significance. Otherwise wine becomes a plaything (a *thing*, period). Johannes Selbach certainly racks up as

many frequent-flier miles as any human I know, yet I cannot imagine him starting a wine “project” (the word makes me wince) in New Zealand or Yunnan province. He is a Moselaner; therefore the wine he makes is Mosel wine.

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



*Just say no to corks.*

whatever it is, it ain’t glamorous.

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

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

One thing I’d be sure to do is to protect *true* Eiswein. This genre of sweet wine originated in Germany, and probably happened by accident. Then the growers discovered a chance to make intense sweet wine in years when BA and TBA were impossible. Then they dis-

covered how amazing Eiswein tasted, and came to prize it for itself. Then they learned how to refine it, what to leave hanging, how (or if) to protect the fruit, when to give up on it, and what not to concentrate. This last point is crucial, which you’d appreciate if you remembered any of the ’87 Eisweins; this unripe vintage gave Eisweins wherein the *unripeness* was concentrated, and I will never forget tasting a Mittelrhein Riesling Eiswein with over *twenty gum-bleeding grams of acidity* which would probably have removed dog blood from silk.

At this point, good growers in Germany are making some of the most heart-meltingly gorgeous sweet wines on earth. It involves risk. If you leave fruit hanging and the weather turns miserable, that’s it; you write it off, and better luck next year. And even if it works, the grapes keep dehydrating and you only get 1/11th of the juice from a “normal” picking. Plus, it is very hard work. I don’t know about you, but I’m loath to get out of bed at 4:30 on a winter morning and run out to the vineyard to pick grapes.

There’s a certain utilitarian argument in favor of con-fected Eiswein; what difference does it make how it’s made if it tastes good and people can afford it? And you want to cheer Yeah! People can afford it: that is GOOD. As of course it is. But what are the consequences of affordable Eisweins made who-knows-how? Simply this: producers risking all to create the real thing won’t be able to sell it, and thus will stop producing it. And this is how our world is diminished, step by innocent step, until there is nothing to treasure any more.

I think I would also pass a law forbidding any person with a marketing degree from standing within 500 yards of a winery, and from speaking in any form to a vintner. At least in the old world at the artisan-agricultural level. Marketing persons excrete mischief like cows excrete methane. (That felt good to write!) Here’s an especially repulsive example.

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

Which brings me to the blood-boiling ne plus ultra of the whole matter. For a



*If only Terry were “King of the World!” . . .*

wine to carry the Erstes Gewächs banner, it must be TROCKEN. Somebody help me understand this!

I know the answer, and it is an answer of sorts, but embedded in it lies a subversive question. They'd probably say: "When the consumer buys a bottle called 'Meursault' he knows he is getting a wine that is always dry, but our German wines could be dry or semi dry or sweet, and this confuses him." Well let's not have that! I have an alternate suggestion. LET'S INSIST THAT ALL WINES LABELLED "ERSTES GEWAECHS" BE SWEET!!! And let's even do it in fine Teutonic fashion and decree the wines must have "no more than 50.5 grams and no less than 38.623698499 grams (39 if you're married filing jointly)." If we are going to decide, completely arbitrarily, how an entire community of disparate wines will taste, then let's increase the odds they'll taste GOOD, what say?

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

It is also a dreadful violence to individual wines. Doesn't anyone in Germany actually taste wine any more? Never mind what might be suitable for this wine or that! They MUST be dry. Let's LOBOTOMIZE these wines. Abandon fruit, all ye who enter here. If one of you well-meaning but disastrously wrongheaded people are reading this, please, forget all your abstractions, "the market," "consumer taste," "the modern drinker" and just taste wine! If you make wines that taste balanced and taste delicious you will—imagine!—find a market for them.

You will also avoid a bizarre polarization you yourself created with your dogmatic rigidity. For a grower can — and almost always does — bottle a dry wine from his peak-site called Erstes Gewächs, and another from the same site called Pudyanker Slugberg Riesling Spätlese, and what's the "market" to make of that? "But wait . . . aren't those from the same vineyard . . . ? Why isn't the Spätlese also Erstes Gewächs?" Ah, you see; because the presence of the dreaded residual-unmentionable means that it cannot be sold under the banner of a "great growth".

And all this was done in order to . . . simplify?!?!? What it does in fact is merely to stigmatize the wine with sweetness, and so its effect is to advance a thinly veiled agenda.

People can make any points they want, but I'd prefer they be made openly. By the efforts of these apostles of marketing it becomes clear they seek to brainwash the "market" into despising Rieslings with sweetness (and accepting the so-called "noble-sweet" dessert wines doesn't count, pall!) and it's the sneaky stealthy manner in which it's being done I find so repugnant.

All in all I'm starting to wonder about the VDP. They seem to opt as if by instinct toward ideological strait-jackets. They frequently fix what wasn't broken while

neglecting what is. Low yields, environmentally friendly viticulture, hand-picking, strict ripeness minima, all O.K. Good place to stop. Vineyard classification, also O.K.: I proposed one myself in a DECANTER article back in 1985. Rather blatantly self-serving (e.g. FAR too much Grand Cru land in marginal Rheingau villages which are home to VDP members) but still, it needs doing and any start is better than none.

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

Look, it's always dangerous to force a wine to fit an idea. Better force the idea to fit the wine, because the wine exists in nature, it is there, real and immutable. And if we respect its being and let its needs be heard we'll make something beautiful from it. Yet a certain kind of person feels safer among abstractions. Maybe he's a whiz-bang conceptual thinker, and it's O.K. to let him play with his toys, until he wants to turn them into everybody's toys. It's always healthy to maintain a distance between marketing people and wine, especially so when the marketing people are conceptual-intellectual Germans. "Hmmm, let's see; we have determined that all wines in this discussion should fit into round holes, because the "market" needs round-holed wines." But what if the wine is square shaped? "No! This doesn't fit the concept!" Even if the wine is more beautiful that way? "No. If it's square shaped then we will just pound the living crap out of it until it fits in the round hole!"

They will howl I am being unfair. All Chablis is understood to be dry, they will say. All "Erstes Gewächs Gerümpel" should also be thus simplified; the "market" demands it. Really? Is the Chablis really as predictable as all that? Is it one of them with malo or no malo, with oak or no oak, lees or no lees, all-stainless or all cask in the cellar? Shall we legislate every conceivable variable out of our wines?

Ah but you see, the only variable that matters is residual sugar, because we are obsessed with residual sugar, because we have for some perverse reason turned it into the sole aesthetic CRUX of the matter. Sugar doesn't matter, folks, except as an agent of harmony, one among many, an especially helpful one at table, but finally just one of many facets. Yet singled out for special villainy in a world gone gaga.

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



## What is a Palate?

A palate is two things: first and most important, it's the *quality* of attention you pay to what's happening on it. Second, it's experience; both in duration and intensity. Each of us relates to our palates based upon our temperaments, i.e., a geek will have a geeky relationship with his palate; a right-brainer will have an elliptical and inferential relationship with his palate. A linear, cataloguing type will organize his palate like a well-oiled machine. No single system is the "best"; it's most important that we have the relationship *that comes naturally*. If you try to force it, you're doomed to frustration.

These relationships change over time. I was an obsessive note-keeper when I began, and now I barely take notes at all when I'm not working. It used to be quite necessary for me to dissect each wine, partly because I thought it was the best way to learn, partly because I wanted reassurance I *could* do it. Now I know I can, and the delineation of wines' *parts* is less engaging to me than to grasp the *gestalt*, the shape, the Whole.

I've also learned to trust any impulse that emerges spontaneously. I may not share these with everyone (sometimes not with anyone), but I know what I mean by them. The world's greatest guitarist (the astonishing Mr. Allan Holdsworth) doesn't read music, but has a self-developed system which works for him. Lately I've been considering the question of synesthesia, the cerebro-neurological phenomenon whereby certain people "hear" colors or "smell" sounds. I suspect some aspect of this lives in all of us along some sort of continuum. I find myself thinking of wines in terms of colors. Sometimes this has true cognates: If I think "purple" it is usually a wine that smells of iris, violets, lavender and other purple things. If I think green, yellow or orange that has to do with a wine's nature, or what I grok its nature to be.

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

I'm not talking about aversions. We all have those.

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

I suspect there *are* objective truths out there, to which we are each more or less sensitive. And then we add our individual subjectivities to the mix. Body chemistry plays a part, as do personal habits (such as smoking).

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

Let me explain how I see my own palate, and then you might better be able to use me, since you'll know where we diverge and where we congue.

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

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

fruit is set.

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

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

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

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



## How German Wines Age

I have newbies working with me. We have grown to the point we need regional reps (either that or we need to buy an airline) and so we hired two fine young professionals, Robin Riddell to cover the south-south-east and Michele Parent to cover Colorado and points-west (a territory she devoutly hopes will include Hawaii). We also have with us a passionate young 'un covering NY/NJ named Jonathan Schwartz, who traveled with me and tromped around even more than I did. Jonathan's birth-year is 1981, which info I was required to vouchsafe Johannes Selbach so he'd know what vintages to bring out with dinner.



Now if you've never visited German wine growers you have no idea how these wines truly age, i.e., when they've never been moved from the perfect cellars in which they lay from the beginning. The first time you get to experience such a wine, it is nearly unbelievable. And no matter how many times Johannes has witnessed this reaction from his guests, it gets no less fun – plus he's a sweetie of the highest order. So seeing everyone's astonishment at the condition – and the *tenderness* – of these old Rieslings caused many more of them to be unearthed. Nothing grandiose mind you; just "ordinary" wines of unremarkable years.

I myself have experienced this many times. But something struck me now, having to do with the "tenderness" I mentioned before. For with many of these mature Rieslings it isn't just how well they've preserved, and it isn't even how many facets they've integrated or what complexities they've attained. It's more. It is first the extent to which they've stayed *alive*. They are neither relics nor objects of curiosity or even astonishment: they are still with us in their original purpose, to keep our food and us company and to share their happiness. And it's also the way they've made peace with their factions of flavor. The French describe this process and its result as *fondue*, a melting together of parts into a seamless whole. The tenderness I speak of arises from there.

But it is also a quality of deliberateness. "A 25-year-old Kabinett, and yet it tastes so *young*!" is not where it ends, but where it begins. It is going nowhere fast. It has much life before it. It is in no particular hurry. *It has all the time in the world*. Such wines do not only exist in time; they appear to *embody* it. From here one can

extend many ways outward. But I'll just talk about time. We think of time as a thing there's always too little of, against whose relentless limitations we constantly bang our heads. But wine can show us another kind of time, a more meandering and forgiving time. There's a Zen saying: *The oxen are slow, but the earth is patient*. Wine can bring us to the patient earth, of whose existence we are often not aware, though we live here. The title of this section is "How German Wines Age" but it's also wise to consider *why* German wines age. They have a thing to show us.

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

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

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

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

So don't!

The problem is, we are tasting and sampling those wines commercially at *exactly* the most awkward moment. If you encounter such an aroma in a young Mosel Riesling, try swirling the glass for a few minutes; it will dissipate. The number of minutes it takes to dissipate is roughly the number of *years* it will take to disappear from the wine entirely if the bottle is left undisturbed. It is in NO WAY a flaw; merely an inconvenience. Or you can look upon it as a warning not to drink these wines too young!

After a couple of years, many Rieslings enter a rather neutral phase in which they seem to have lost



their early vitality. I see this as the chrysalis stage; they *are* enclosed, they *are* hard to get at—but be patient, for soon emerges a butterfly.

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

There are also strict chemical reactions wherein acidity softens and sugars polymerize, so that each is less pronounced as the wine ages. In the 1990-vintage zeitgeist the idea was to make “sweet” wines as dry as possible, but many of these wines now seem obdurate and lumpen, with still-prominent acids and not enough fruit; yang, but no yin. Sometimes it’s necessary to allow apparently-excessive sweetness in a baby-wine as a guarantor of great cellaring. A few of the 2005s appear to have more sweetness than they strictly need, but from the right cellar I’m actually glad to see it; it denotes a grower who’s thinking years ahead to the wine’s maturity.

You should also know the curve by which Riesling ages. The “pinnacle” of its development isn’t a peak so much as a table mesa. Riesling doesn’t reach its narrow summit and suddenly tumble down the other side. It gets to the top and walks around the plateau awhile, for *years*, enjoying the view, only descending as evening approaches and the air grows chilly. The figures I cite in my tasting notes are A) the number of years at which the summit is reached, and B) the number of years I intuit the descent will begin.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

TBA: I know you’ll hate to hear this, but these wines aren’t designed to fit into a human lifetime. Unless you started buying TBA when you were, like, seventeen, every bottle you have will outlive you. I drank a bunch of 1953 TBAs in 2003 (in honor of my ghastly birthday) and several of them had more improvement ahead of them. So, peaks anywhere between 35 and 55 years, and shouldn’t fade till the Red Sox play the Cubs in the series — and the Cubbies win.

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

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

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

## What To Drink Now

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

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

## The Question of Tartrates

Now and again we get a pick-up request due to tartrates in the bottle. When I was starting out some 29 years ago, every grower's pricelist had a disclaimer to the effect that tartrates are



a naturally occurring substance and no cause for refund or return. I wish we all could do the same.

After all, haven't we been taught to prize *Vin non filtré*? Don't we feel *great* looking at all that muddy goop in the base of a red-wine bottle? Yet two threads of potassium bitartrate in a bottle of white wine and people start returning bottles. It defies reason.

A retailer I know had a case of wine, seven bottles of which were throwing tartrates. He put these alongside the "clean" ones and charged a Dollar more for them! "Special unfiltered cuvee!" I believe he wrote. All seven of those bottles sold before the first clean one was bought.

At worst tartrates are entirely benign. At best they're an active sign of superior quality, because potassium bitartrate won't precipitate without a lot of *ripe* tartaric acid in the wine, the acid from *mature* fruit. Yes, you can eliminate tartrates before bottling by cold-stabilizing, but some growers dislike what they feel (with justification) is an unnecessary handling that can sap a wine's vitality.

Don't get me wrong; we're not urging growers to encourage tartrate formation in bottle. In fact we're not discussing it AT ALL. Nor should we! Nor should you. If you buy a wine with tartrates from me (or anyone else) you have my blessing to hang a sign *WINE DIAMONDS: A SIGN OF SUPERIOR QUALITY!*

## Label Basics

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

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

The common complaint is the German label is too verbose. Here's a nice terse response: bullshit. If this were

the label of a French wine, we'd be subjected to "Grand Vin du Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, mis en bouteille au domain Selbach-Oster, viticulteur a Zeltingen, Grand Cru Schlossberg du Zeltingen, Vendange Tardive, Riesling..." get the picture? The difference is that you feel urbane and seductive speaking the French words. In German you feel like Seargent Schulz. (I was on a little warpath in Germany last month, correcting my colleagues' mispronunciations until I was sure they'd spit in my soup. I don't object to our mangling the complicated diphthongs, but any drooling idiot can say Zone-en-ur (Sonnenuhr). So please, gimme a break about the German label.)

Here's what it means: Selbach-Oster is the producer. If you see the word *Weingut* in any proximity, that's your signal. A Weingut is a winery which estate-bottles its wine. Look for that word. Vintage is self-evident. Zeltinger **Schlossberg** identifies the site and locality. Zeltingen is a place from which the populace, whether Homo Sapiens or the progeny of *vitis vinifera*, are known as Zeltingers. O.K., New Yorkers? Schlossberg is a vineyard. How are you supposed to know that? It's always the second word in the sequence. Meursault Perrieres. Zeltinger Schlossberg. NBD!

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*). The phrase *Qualitätswein mit Prädikat* is a bit of bureaucratic puffery. Quality wine with special distinction, right! The distinction in this case is that the wine is not chaptalized. Chaptalized wines can only be labeled *Qualitätswein b.A.*; they aren't subject to predicates. Only Germans have perversely decided that chaptalized wine is ipso facto inferior wine. The

French cheerily go on consuming just about all their wines except the most southerly, not caring that sugar was added to the grape must to boost the alcohol a few degrees. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the

*Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum





standards. That word Gutsabfüllung means estate bottled. Think about it: it's actually shorter than *mise en bouteilles au domaine*; it's just a single word instead of a seven-syllable phrase. And then finally on the bottom we find Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, in this case the region of origin. The French wine denies us even this basic courtesy. No "Grand vin de Bourgogne" here. We are thrown upon the dubious mercy of the BATF, which will require "Red Burgundy Wine" to appear on the strip label.

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

## **GLOSSARY**

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

You'll hear me mention Oechsle if a wine displays remarkable ripeness for its quality level. Most of my growers are contemptuous of the lenient standards for minimum ripeness. And you need to know if, for example, I'm offering you a Kabinett with near-Auslese ripeness because you might be looking for a light wine and you won't get it. Each grower sets up his own schemata, and if the baseline level is, say, equivalent to Spätlese, then the lightest wine could be called "Kabinett" even with Spätlese-level ripeness. Better to be

remembered for a superb Kabinett than to be forgotten for a run-of-the-mill Spätlese. German wine in general is riper than it was fifteen years ago (it's a global-warming thing), even though I have stopped using aerosol deodorants personally.

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

**EXTRACT**: Extract really is simple and tangible. It is everything in wine except sugar, acid, water, and alcohol. You can measure it in the lab, and all German wine carrying an A.P. number has had its extract measured. The average reading would be somewhere in the low 20s—speaking in g.l. now. I'd expect to see a Riesling QbA or Kabinett with 22 to 24 g.l. extract, or 2.2 to 2.4 percent. I'd look for Spätlese to be a little higher, Auslese still higher, and the stickies quite high, up to 40 or even 50 g.l.

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

**ACIDITY**: I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine except Riesling has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient. In 2006 acids were higher than what's become the norm over the last 6-7 years, but not always. Lately there's been a seam in the usual corollary between acidity and pH, i.e., high acid normally means low pH. But many 06s had normal levels of acidity *and* abnormally low pH. Strub, to name but one, barely had a pH reading higher than 2.9 (!) despite having almost no musts below 95° Oechsle. I'm beginning to feel there's a lot we don't understand yet. Including what role acidity really plays in the aging process.

Curiously, it does seem that before the second World War, many German Rieslings underwent partial malolactic fermentation, probably by accident, and the wines of ripe vintages may have been lower in acid than we experience these days. Yet the wines aged fabulously.

The Germans have lurched backward from their acid-obsession. Now the pack has moved too far in the opposite direction. The poor grower! The ones who try to "gauge the market" end up being whipped around, dupes to fashion. The Good Guys just go on making the best wines they can and look for people to sell them to. I would never advocate a return to the days of Trocken wines with 11 grams of acidity (you could disfigure your



own face if you let any of that stuff dribble down your chin), but it concerns me to hear so many vintners talk about adjusting acids downward to make their young dry wines palatable. It signals an inappropriate focus on acidity as such, rather than on the entire flavor of the wine. As Hans-Günter Schwarz so wisely puts it: "Acidity is the fundament of fruit."

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

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

**SÜSSRESERVE:** It was striking how many times tasting these 2006s when I wished there was some *dosage* with which to fine-tune them. Literally dozens of wines could have been improved. But this is contrary to the new liturgy, and it's starting to get under my skin.

This is *really* un-trendy now; fewer growers deploy it each year. The zeitgeist is for "purity", and using *dosage* smacks of manipulation. This is fatuous reasoning, which I'll explain presently. But for now, a short anecdote:

Stefan Rumpf is one vintner who'd like to do away with *dosage*, but as a practical matter he's keeping some around until he gets fluent in the new cellar-regime. His residually-sweet 2004s were all made by stopping fermentation (is this not also manipulation???? Oh don't even get me started). There was a Scheurebe I liked and which needed to be sweeter, so we tried it two ways—one using *dosage* and the other by blending an Auslese into the base wine.

It was unanimous; the wine with *dosage* was clearly superior.

So-called "Süssreserve" (literally sweet-reserve) is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor is assured—

at least in theory. Actually, I have decided that I don't like the word "Süssreserve" any more and I won't use it in this text. Since nobody objects to the idea of *Dosage* in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I'll use the nicer one.

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

In any case I applaud purism in most places it is found, but the anti-dosage crusade in Germany smacks not of science but of religion. I am quite certain that thousands of growers used *dosage* willy-nilly—still do—but that only demonstrates there's plenty of hacks making wine. I doubt very much they'd make better wine by stopping fermentation. Hacks are hacks. *Dosage* has been seized upon by a community of growers a little too eager to polish their halos. It is a convenient symbol of manipulation, but this is silly; all winemaking is manipulation, and the authentic questions are not whether to manipulate (one already does) but rather *how* to manipulate and to what end. What we call "non-manipulation" (with rather an excess of romanticism) is more properly called *minimal* manipulation. We prefer growers whose wines are guided by a wish to *preserve* natural inherent flavor rather than ladling all kinds of cellar-sauce over it.

Wines made sweet by stopping fermentation do have their "own" sweetness, but I'm not willing to presume this is superior, and certainly not as a matter of faith or ideology. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. True "residual" sugar has a higher proportion of fructose: therefore it tastes sweeter and "heavier". Stopping fermentation involves either chilling, racking through filters or sulfur-ing. In fact these more "natural" wines require more sulfur than those made with *dosage*. Andreas Adam insists "Süssreserve falsifies terroir!" and I'm delighted by how much he cares about terroir, and if you have to err then it's damn sure preferable to err on the side of purism. But what he says ain't necessarily so. And there's the crux: young growers are also young *people*, and young people like things to be categorical. Then life kicks our ass and we get more humble.

A reasonable compromise is to stop your fermenta-



tions but also to keep a little *dosage* around. After all, how can you be sure you stopped at just the perfect point? The wine is turbulent and yeasty. Isn't it at least prudent to give yourself options? Believe me, every wine is easier to judge several months later.

This was especially apropos in both 2005 and 2006, largely because of the Kabinett "problem." That is, the paucity of *actual* Kabinett, in favor of wines of (sometimes) legal-Auslese ripeness labeled as Kabinett. Many Mosel growers used what little they picked below 90° Oechsle (weak Auslese but still above the legal minimum) for Kabinett: 90°-100° was Spätlese and over 100° was Auslese. Back in 1983 most growers didn't pick *anything* above 100° Oechsle and were happy to bottle Auslese with 90° degrees; times have changed.

But what's to be done about the sweetness? If your Kabinett usually has 80° Oechsle and 40g.l. sweetness, the same 40g.l. will taste deficient with a markedly riper must. If you calibrate the sweetness to the *actual wine*, the result may be too sweet for "Kabinett." I must have tasted 25-30 wines with misjudged sweetness based on this very conundrum. *Dosage* was either the solution, or would have been.

I wonder whether the anti-dosage sentiment doesn't arise from a puritanical disapproval of sweetness, especially sweetness "added" deliberately. No one would say this outright, but I feel its presence. Thus stopped fermentation, especially if it stops spontaneously, can be excused; *oh well, nature wanted it that way*. And so the argument isn't really about dosage, terroir or purism; it is a shadow-argument about ameliorating the despicable sweetness.

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

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

But here's a curious twist. Every parcel of vineyards in Germany is categorized by quality — categories A, B, or C — so that when the vineyards are reapportioned the grower gets back nearly the same proportions of A B and C land he gave up. Makes sense. But also raises a very sneaky question: Why does anyone still quarrel with the idea of a

vineyard classification *when it has already been done??* And is already being used! Show me a grower who fumes that vineyard classifications are undemocratic and I'll show you a grower who'll fuss to **high hell** if he gives up A-land and gets B-land back.

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

**THEIR TWILIGHT-ZONE WINE LAW:** The 1971 wine law is being neutered by the new generation. Eventually it will become so irrelevant to the way wines are actually produced and labeled it will either be forced to adapt to reality or become a laughable anachronism. Many growers are taking their cue from the Austrians: all the dry wines are ostensibly sold as "QbA" because no one likes "Spätlese Trocken" or "Auslese Trocken". Many growers are using old micro-site names as a gesture of recognition to their distinctive terroirs. No serious grower cares (nor do some of them even *know*) about the ripeness minima for the various "Prädikat" levels; they name by *taste*, and a "Kabinett" is the wine that *tastes* like one, regardless of must-weight. Indeed there's never been less concern about must-weight, or more concern about physiological ripeness.

So I asked a few of the wise old sages whether they thought the law could be changed. The consensus is: no. Far too complicated and messy, especially now that the EU is involved. What will happen, they say, is far more growers will take what's useful in the law and disregard the rest.

**FEINHERB:** There must have been a hole in the ozone layer when they permitted this term to be used. Because they didn't *control* it, and this is most scandalously fungible, sensible and un-Teutonic. In fact *feinherb* means whatever a grower wants it to mean. It always denotes a wine on-the-dry-side, and in practice, as one grower told me, the local wine-inspector tolerates anything up to 30g.l. residual sugar especially if the wines tastes as if it should have 70. For some growers *feinherb* are their dry-ish wines above the limit for Halbtrocken. Others use it in place of Halbtrocken because (correctly) they despise "Halbtrocken".

When I first started seriously with wine, *herb* was the word growers used to indicate their dry (or dry-er) wines. "Trocken" was unknown. So "feinherb" is an attempt to rub a little spit on it and make it sound nice. The word is neither here nor there, but the idea of regulating it *sensorily* is so manifestly sensible I wonder why they don't apply it to all the dry wines instead of obsessing over lab figures. Enjoy this wee glimmer of sanity while it lasts, as I'm sure some constipated twit at E.U. Brussels HQ will wrestle it into his airless little box.

## Plusses and The Quest For Perfection

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

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

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

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

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

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

But I understand the feeling, the sense of sublimity and the ache it creates, and the desire to convey such an exaltation of emotion in a way equal to its intensity. It is very natural and human, but it doesn't always do good.

David Schildknecht has found a way out; he defines perfection as "better than which cannot, at that moment, be imagined." Because in the essence of the Moment Of Beauty one is quite certain that all such moments are fundamentally *equal*, and one sees how fatuous it is to catalogue or quantify them.

Sometimes I wonder how I receive beauty. I'd been corresponding with Jacqueline Friedrich as she prepared her fab new book, and the notion of "perfection" came up. Here's some of what we wrote:

**JF:** *Re Deiss and ZH: I wonder if you agree with me on the following proposition: maybe, just maybe, there are other wines this inspired and heartstopping in the world.*

*But I can't imagine wine being "better" than this. I mean, how much can you demand of a wine? How much can you demand of Bach? Deiss and ZH are making the vinous equivalents of the Mass in B Minor.*

**TT:** I'd love to see you answer your own rhetorical question "How much can you demand of a wine?" That's the kind of wine-writing I just can't read enough of. I'd also find it fascinating if you identified your own tipping-point, i.e. what exactly is it that finally convinces you a wine is "perfect"? For me, a wine enters my palate and the first thing I notice is its gestalt, followed by its innate flavor — or Flavor — followed by any intricacy it unfolds, followed by a sense of the harmonies of those elements, followed by a sense of their length. And all of these things can amount to a sort of hypothetical "perfection," but my own tipping point is a feeling of sadness. This is an aspect of my own response to beauty — or, again, Beauty — to which I'm especially sensitive. When I feel the wine has sent me somewhere, or perhaps taken me somewhere, larger, older and deeper than itself, then I feel the presence of the sublime. And that is my marker for perfection. It's no accident your analogy was to religious (i.e. divine) music. Or so I suppose.

**JF:** *One of the problems — as we all well know — is finding the words to describe intensely sensual and subjective experiences. I use the word subjective in a restricted sense. I do believe that there are objective standards -- for painting, music, wine, etc. but once we agree on those, then the value or reaction or whatever becomes subjective. [So] let's ditch the word 'perfect.' it's too loaded and reminds me too much of numbers.*

**TT:** In a sense I don't care what we call it, and I agree with your wariness about "perfect." But maybe we have to find SOMETHING to call it, I think. And we have to describe it somehow, so that people have a chance to see what we mean. For me it is a quality of incandescence. And you're absolutely right, it isn't like comparing a 100-watt with a 60-watt bulb and saying the 100-watt is X-percent "better" or closer to some notion of perfection. It is something that *suddenly* blazes into light.

+

# SOMMELIER ALERT!

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

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

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

Briefly put, if you don't already know, I think you'd be surprised how well German white wine will *work* with your food. It's actually, dare I say it, the best available white wine you could use. Or as Richard Betts wrote in Betts and Scholl's Spring 2005 newsletter, "Riesling is an excellent partner to whatever you want to eat (ask any great sommelier what to pair with the most crazy food you can think of, and 10 out of 10 will say Riesling)." When chefs create preps they are usually looking for flavor synergies, sometimes harmonies and sometimes **telling** disharmonies. Nobody deliberately combines *discordant* flavors in a prep. Why stop there? The idea that "anything goes; you should drink what you like" is dangerous, because it isn't true. Why, you start letting people drink what they **like** and the next thing you know they're wearing white before Memorial Day! I don't care about what's Correct, but I do know what tastes good and I have a small idea why.



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

# sommelier alert

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# subject: why riesling?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I look for *slate*. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness. There are other light and aromatic wines in the world from northern climates: the U.K., Luxembourg, even the Ahr, which is further north than the Mosel. But no other wine expresses this curious permutation of mineral and Riesling. Mosel wines *can* be rich, but flabbiness is simply **out of character**; softness has no place here. I want that malic, granny-apple fruitiness that manages to be so taut and exuberant, set in a binding of minerality you should detect with the first whiff. Mosel wine should never lounge around like a contented feline. It should run like a gazelle, taut and rippling and sinewy.

the precariousness of a vintner's existence. The wines themselves, beneath their extroverted gaiety, have something quite rigid, unsentimental, as though of a flower-essence distilled to a point of almost unbearable clarity. It is so easy to be charmed into euphoria by these wines that I forget how intricate and inscrutable they can be. Even the most rustic and uncomplicated vintners are Catholically devout servants of this particular mystery of nature.

names are either up for sale, have already *been* sold, or are floundering. For we are in the middle of a sea-change in the Mosel valley, the ramifications of which are starting to make themselves felt.

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

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

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

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

even more you will wonder: “who in his right mind would *do* such work?” Who indeed! People who *are* willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer—and older. Much casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but the steep slopes need experienced hands. Families undertake most of the work themselves, *if* they will. Many of the young are opting out. Many venerable



*Trekking up the Erdener Treppchen*

of “discoveries” which were so easy fifteen years ago. If a producer is good, he’s not waiting around hoping to be discovered; he’s aggressively marketing himself.

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

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

All of us who love German wine share a certain guilty secret; we know they are grossly underpriced. They are the last absurd bargains of the wine world. But we cannot expect young people to carry on this beautiful culture, this noble craft, for nothing but the altruistic *glamour* of it all. Glamour don’t pay the bills. Prices are going to rise. It is the cost we all must pay to ensure the survival of the people and the wines we love so much.

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

As a merchant I am caught in the middle. I want Mosel wine to survive because I love it almost helplessly. My conscience revolts at dunning a producer for *pfennigs* (or *cents* in the brave new Euro-world) while I look out his window at the perpendicular mountains I know he

has to work in. But neither do I wish to deliver sticker-shock to you, cherished customer. So we’re going to let prices creep steadily upward until equilibrium is restored.

The Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-wracking flood during the harvest of 1997. (“In the next life,” Sigrid Selbach told me, “I don’t think I’d buy a house along the river.”) On Christmas day 1993 the highest water in two hundred years poured through villages and into cellars. As it had ruptured several underground fuel-storage tanks, the floodwaters were also slick and smelly. You can’t get insurance for flooding and the economic consequences of the flood of 1993 were devastating. The new-world winemaker “lifestyle” is the heaven these Mosel vintners hope they’ll go to someday.

The Mosel is also a self-contained culture. Despite the length of the river (and its tributaries) there is a certain cohesion there, more so than in other German wine regions. This isn’t always good, mind you; there’s more than a little Hatfield vs. McCoy chicanery along with the petty jealousies afflicting small village life throughout most of the world. One day Andreas Adam planted a quarter-hectare. When he went out the following day to

### **But the Mosel can be cruel. Floods are routine, including an especially nerve-wracking flood during the harvest of 1997.**

continue, everything he planted the day before had been vandalized. The young man is sure of himself (as he has every right to be), and this infuriated a neighbor. These cultures are not exclusively lyrical! Yet I have rarely seen such a spirit of true neighborliness as I have on the Mosel, at times, among families where there’s mutual respect and trust.

At Hans Selbach’s funeral I spent a few moments gazing at the faces of the hundreds of mourners, an entire panoply of Moselaners, and it was like looking backward in time. Nearly every face could have been carved on a Roman coin, all these fine faces etched in sadness. All those lives for all those years, beautiful and solemn and brief. Some Summer I’ll take my son Max with me to visit the Mosel. He’s not a wine-guy (not yet anyway . . .) and we’re not going to do a lot of tasting, but there are people I want him to see. Schaefer, Merkelbach, Schmitt, Selbachs of course. I want him to see their faces, and then to walk in their vineyards. At some point I know he’ll look down at the steepness in shock—we all do, even when we’ve been there before—and perhaps he’ll ask me *Why do people make wine here?*

What would you have me tell him?



# mosel regionals

Mosel wine is one of the easiest wines in the world to enjoy, yet when the novice has cut his teeth on the usual regional blends, the real thing may be too steely for him. Most regionals come from Müller-Thurgau grown in flat sites on the alluvial side of the river—if they come from Germany at all (hell, if they come from **grapes** at all). Most are bought on the bulk market as grapes, must, or unfinished wine, commissioned through brokers who are ordered to procure X thousand liters at X per liter. It's a market that calls another breed of procurer to mind.

I'd like to encourage people to drink genuine, honest Mosel wine. I think you agree. Therefore it seems to me if we want to trade people up from regionals, we'd better establish a true style among those regionals. That means Riesling. My regionals are 100% Riesling. Even their Süssreserve is almost always Riesling. They are not purchased on the bulk market, but cask by cask

from growers with whom the bottling firm of J. & H. SELBACH has done business for many years. Nor are they the most expensive regionals you'll be offered, though you can certainly pay less if you don't care what you sell your customers. I've heard all the arguments that the "Piesport customer" only wants a price. One thing I can promise you. He will never care about quality if you don't. Taste some of that cheap stuff some time, and see if you can look a customer in the eye as you take the money from his hand. Good luck.

I'm occasionally asked why I ship regionals at all. What's a nice guy like me doing trafficking in Piesporters and Zellers, anyway? Well obviously, the category exists and this gives me a choice with a high road and a low road, and I can choose the way that makes me proud. Plus it's tonnage. Oh yeah, that. But a few years ago Johannes Selbach and I began to wonder whether we could create our own wine which would fulfill all these commercial functions, provide easily memorable "brand" identity and fill containers and give us something we could call our own, which wouldn't have to be defended as we must even with our honorable Piesporters.

Thus, the development of what we're certain will prove to have been an epochal event in the history of wine commerce. Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy: I give you TJ Riesling!

## The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

I heard an unbelievable story. There was some sort of tasting put on by the German Wine Institute, for the pur-

pose of determining a style of German Wine that would **specifically and particularly** appeal to the American market. I guess there were marketing experts present—I wish I'd been the fly on the wall for that one! A bunch of wines were tasted blind, most of them brands already on the market. But here's the punchline: when the votes were tallied, *one* wine stood out. *here* was precisely the perfect wine to appeal to us Yanks. It answered all the necessary Concepts. Maybe they thought it tasted good too. It was TJ Riesling.

Ah, beginner's luck! I am proud of being a marketing-bonehead. When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

We wanted to charge enough for it to distance it from the Piesporter genre, and also to give us latitude in choosing excellent base wines for the blend. We wanted a wine that tasted slatey and appley as all the best Mosels do, and we wanted a wine that would accommodate the widest possible variety of foods. That means we wanted just a discreet hint of sweetness, enough so the wine wouldn't taste acid or sharp. Finally we wanted a wine that would be sensitive to vintage, not a product that would always taste the same. We remain committed to the **profile** of TJ as a consistently slatey and crisp Mosel Riesling which should be both *agreeable* and *serious*.

Since the 1992 vintage, TJ Riesling has always been better than its class. I am certain there isn't a superior Mosel regional on the market.

**Other Regionals from J. & H. Selbach:**

- GSR-106 **Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-206 **Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA (Screwcap)**
- GSR-306 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-706 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-806 **Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-606 **"TJ" Riesling**



# selbach-oster

## mosel • zeltingen

We spent most of the last year being amazed at whatever harmonic convergences might have accounted for the vintage Selbachs had in 2005. I've been doing this gig a long time now and I never saw its equal. Nor do I suppose I ever will. To have produced so *many* wines of such heart-rending greatness is the stuff of dreams.

Thus the next vintage, regardless of its quality, would have to have been a letdown, if you allow things to be seen through that prism alone. In fact 2006 is an entirely fine vintage for Johannes, the kind of vintage he usually makes; consistent, smart, guided by good sense, soulful, food-friendly. Other producers may have built higher towers with their 2006s – *may* have – but none has a more solid foundation, and none showed greater reliability.

Johannes and I each knew how great his 2005s were. Last year I took a small group of customers to Germany, and I heard a murmur or two that now that we'd been to Dönnhoff the rest would be coasting. "Think again, sybarites," I said. "You ain't been to Selbach yet."

If I call Johannes "modest" it suggests he isn't quite aware of how good his wines are, yet if I say he *is* aware – as indeed he is, being such a smart fella – it suggest he isn't modest. In fact I suspect he's quite aware that some of it is in the hands of the Gods, and with the rest you do the best you can. Thus I was taken aback when he had to ask me "How were the wines?" after we'd finished tasting his 2006s. In fact I was ashamed; I should have said.

One morning I came in from my daily tromp and I must have been glowing. Johannes' wife Barbara met me at the door, saying "Well look at you!" and I said something about how beautiful it was up there in the vine-



Barbara & Johannes Selbach

yards, and Barbara said something sweet and memorable; when Johannes returns from his *many* travels he is often renewed and heartened by having such a lovely place to call home. I have a range of producers along the Mosel, and I love all their wines, but none of them embodies a sense of *home* with

more gravitas and purity than Selbach. As much and as often as Johannes flies hither and yon selling wine, he

- **Vineyard area: 18 hectares**
- **Annual production: 9,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Zeltinger Sonnenuhr, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst**
- **Soil types: Stony slate, partly with loam**
- **Grape varieties: 98.5% Riesling, 1.5% Weissburgunder**

has somehow managed to remain more profoundly anchored to Home than anyone I know. Not just to his particular dwelling, but to the holistic being of Zeltingen and the Mosel valley. Do his wines express this anchoring? Of course they do. It is why they themselves are so grounded. Can I explain how this occurs? Not really. I doubt if even Jo can. We *try*, and I'll spend the next X-hundred words trying to catch this butterfly with a threadless net, but these things aren't strictly linear. At best they arise from a multitude of tiny choices some of which one isn't aware of having made. Still, the truth is perhaps in the groping for truth, so I'll grope away.

These are good times for Mosel wine lovers, with more fine producers than ever. We all have our share, my colleagues and me, and I hope we all admire all the wines "apolitically." What I'm about to say isn't a better-worse statement, but it's something I deeply believe. *There are no wines along the Mosel more honorable than those of Selbach-Oster.* They are grounded, honest, intelligent and meaningful — like the family who produce them. Where wine is concerned I trust Johannes as I trust very few other people. He's not only highly intelligent, he's also smart and judicious. He has found his path. His wines have identity and purpose.

Yet Selbach's wines reward a certain attention. In short they are made to be *drunk*, not "tasted." They never



show off. Other wines, even very good wines, often do; like someone with a brand new BMW driving ostentatiously through town honking at the neighbors. Doesn't mean the car's not great. Just means the owner's got some . . . issues.

It's tempting, you know, to strut, but Johannes is instinctively immune to sleight-of-hand winemaking. He knows exactly how it's done, he sees other growers do it, and he simply will not. One year, there were a lot of Auslesen on the table. So much so that I asked Johannes Selbach if there was a 3-star in reserve, as I didn't see one.

Many people say many things to me during my month in Germany, and I dutifully try and scribble the smart things down. Johannes' answer stopped me in my tracks. "Terry, the 2-star Auslese was one block picking; that's how that wine came in from that vineyard on that day," he said. "We could *concoct* a 3-star Auslese of course; blend together some small lot of botrytis-wine with a little Eiswein and a little BA, but it would be a *contrived* wine, the kind you only create 30 liters of to send to journalists and get big scores. That's not the business we're in."

*Listen to this, people.* This is what wine means, this and only this. The vineyards didn't create a 3-star Auslese, so there isn't one. Simple. There's BA and TBA and Eisweins, but no 3-star Auslese.

It's easy to blather about *terroir* and facile to claim the vineyard makes the wine. Johannes has acted on a principle which will cost him valuable PR, but which is the only sustainable relationship a producer can truly have to wine. I am both roused to my core and seething with frustration. Frustration? Witness: a big-Cal-red first-release called . . . oh, I like the guy personally, and it doesn't matter what it's called; let's call it HUBRIS HILL . . . so Hubris Hill goes out for \$125 per bottle. The "producer" doesn't make the wine, doesn't even *own a vine*, but he's sure willing to stake a claim on your Buck-and-a-quarter because he knows the world's gone **mad** and a whole bunch of suckers'll pay it, especially if it has oodles of *jammy hedonistic fruit erupting from the glass in sub-atomic orgasms of delirium: 90 points*.

And this, we are led to believe, is wine.

**Wine:** (n) anything anybody can contrive to make, detached from nature, detached from culture, connected to nothing but our infantile need to be entertained and our adolescent need to be fashionably *correct*, to be sold at the highest price some desperate hipster can be horse-whipped into paying.

If this is the summit of wine's aspirations then it wouldn't hurt civilization if it disappeared. But I know better, and I want you to know better, and I know that we can, most of us, return to the knowledge of wine's true claim on our hearts and bodies and souls. All of which is saturating the very filaments of air at Uferallee 23 in Zeltingen on the Mosel, where Selbach-Oster calls *der schotz*.

One secret is casks, the 1000-or-so liter barrels the Moselans call *Fuder*, in which Selbachs make about 55% of their wine. This proportion will increase when it becomes logistically possible (the barrel cellar is only so large) and my sense is Johannes would prefer all his "serious" wines be made in *Fuder*.

Another secret is lees.

When you ferment in cask and leave the wine in cask on its gross lees for a month or two after fermentation, your wines have wonderful plush texture and rich mid-palates and they *need less sweetness*. They also have what Johannes calls "soul."

I drink plenty of wine with my friend Johannes and I know his tastes are broad. He likes those reductive fruit-brilliant wines. He simply prefers not to make them. He wants his wines more *imbued*. He wants them to make friends with you, to be companionable and useful. You can't be friends with someone who's showing off all the time. You can win trophies, but what would you rather have, a mantel full of trophies or a life full of friends?

Many of you have met Johannes on his travels. Yet for me, his winery is perhaps *the* fundamental example of the difficulty of removing wine from its contexts of family and locality. From the very first, the Mosel makes an impression on you; it's so improbable and so beautiful. And from the very first, the Selbach family made an impression on me, as they do on everyone.

In my case I fell rather dazedly in love with them, or at least with an *aura* I had some role in reading into them. In the years that followed I have tried to reduce that infatuation to whatever unblinking truth lies beneath it. It isn't easy.

Sigrid Selbach told me a story one year. "We picked our Eiswein last year on Christmas Day," she began. "The day before, when we realized the weather might permit us to gather the grapes the morning of Christmas, we were hesitant to call and ask for help with the picking. But you know, we called twelve people, and they all agreed to help us, and they were all **cheerful** to do it. We went out into



the vineyard before dawn to check the temperature, then phoned them at 6:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, and they all came, and all of them were in a good mood. Afterwards they gathered here at the house for soup and Christmas cookies. And when they left they were all singing out "MERRY CHRISTMAS!" as they went home to their families. Isn't that wonderful?"

It's more than wonderful. It literally amazes me that people would *cheerfully* agree to get out of their warm beds before dawn on Christmas morning, leaving their families, to go out and gather enough fruit for a few cases of wine that nobody makes any money on. Can you hear such a story and *still* doubt that angels walk among us?

Stories like the Eiswein harvest signify more than neighborliness, or even esprit de corps among fellow vintners. It is simply taken for granted that certain traditions are ennobled by observing them with love and good cheer. When you have a chance to gather an Eiswein it is beneficence from heaven; you CELEBRATE the opportunity.

I have two Mosel producers who are neighbors in the same site; their parcels are contiguous. One producer hadn't quite finished picking when their Polish workers' work-visas expired, which meant the crew had to return to Poland. No problem, said the neighbor; *we'll pick for you*. We'll pick for you. It really is another world. People may know one another for twenty years and still address each other as *Herr-This* and *Frau-That*. But *we'll pick for you*. There is a certain baseline *kindness* here, I find myself thinking, a certain understanding of neighborliness. And it is without affect; it seems to come quite naturally. It strikes my American ears, so used to hearing platitudes and boilerplate about neighborliness, citizenship, fellow-feeling, that *this is the real thing*. Oh believe me, they have their problems and jealousies and all the ratty bullshit which can possibly exist among people, but—*we'll pick for you*.

Being a vintner along the Mosel signifies membership in a human culture much deeper than mere occupation. Nonetheless, there are many ways to be a citizen of this culture; one might be lazy, content with mediocrity; one might be merely diligent, competent and dutiful. Or one might be conscientious and nurturing. And one's wines **flourish** under such nurturing. They are *vital*, for they exhale back the love that's been breathed into them. This may seem abstruse to the "consumer" but there are many ways to consume, and many things to *be* consumed in a glass of wine. You can see the wine merely as an Object, and assess it "against" its "competitors" using some arbitrary point-system you have chosen.

Or you can drink something that tells you it was made by human beings who want to show you the beauty and meaning they have found in their lives. You choose.

Part of the Selbach's aesthetic is the eschewing of anything *confected* in the wines. Mosel wine is more a matter of its *internal* skeletal makeup, and from that instinct for structure come all the judgements and preferences which constitute a house-style. Thus fruit must also be structured, detailed, and defined, and the overall effect of the wines should be as *bracing* as a leap into a cold pond on a hot day. Hans Selbach once advised a colleague not to select too stringently at harvest. Better to leave a few of the underripe grapes in the bunches. They give *structure* to the wine.

Tasting the wines of *Papa* Hans Selbach's era, one is always struck by how vigorous they are, how ageless. One is also struck by their lack of affect; they never try to seduce with their prettiness. They are upright, firm in posture, correct, impeccable.

Johannes was raised with these wines and he had no desire to alter them. What he did do was to *build upon them*, to add a layer of sensuousness, to give just a little more **warmth**, a wider Julia-Roberts kind of smile. He did this with great tact and love, but I don't suppose he ever deliberately sat down and plotted it all as a STRATEGY, nor ever said "I must do this with great tact and love."

The results are some of the deepest of all Mosel wines. They refuse to be *merely* aesthetic. They strive for (and often attain) a *sine qua non* of Mosel-ness. They take you through the gift-wrapping of mere flavor and they show you something you *may not know how to see*.

Few wines

— few *things* — take us to such places of faith. Selbach's wines take me there frequently. You can't identify that slippery little thing *soul* in wines by how they look, smell or taste. It's how they make you feel. It is how deeply they

peal and echo. It is how quickly they leave *themselves* behind and lead you *elsewhere* away from "wine." Johannes told me that he wants "soul" in his wines, but I doubt if we mean exactly the same thing by it. Nor should we. The sincerity of his wish, the assumption of a *value* in wines of soul is part of what puts it there. The rest, I think we are not meant to know, but only to sense.



## A Look At The Vineyards:

*I find my notes are shorter the past two years as I didn't want to repeat the basic adjectives that depict vineyard characteristics. I wish I had a dingbat I could use each time I want to say "slate and apple!" So below are general descriptions of the Selbach sites.*

**BERNKASTELER BADSTUBE** is a small Grosslage; the component single-sites are distinct from one another, but one can organize them thus: LAY stands alone. DOKTOR-GRABEN (at least the good parts of Graben!) stand together, and MATHEISBILDCHEN-BRATENHÖFCHEN stand together, and give us what we see now; heavier understructure, not quite as tensile, due to richer soil, and signature flavors of kirsch and almost Pouilly-Fumé flint; the piquant exotics of the Mosel. Typically, they are medium in body.

**ZELTINGER SCHLOSSBERG** is mineral to the MAX! I think it's time to give this vineyard its due: it's a great Grand Cru site, fully deserving the status of a Wehlener Sonnenuhr or Erdener Prälat. The pity is most of it is worked by the small growers of Zeltingen, among whom standards aren't particularly high. Flavors are a *borealis* of slate, buttressed by lime and grassy aspects. Mosel-apple is present but discreet. Medium bodied. If you love Mosels for their cussed Mosel-ness, grab these wines and hang on for dear life!

**WEHLENER SONNENUHR** is like Zeltinger Sonnenuhr feminized, slimmed down, and refined. If Zeltinger Sonnenuhr is oaken, Wehlener Sonnenuhr is willowy. It can show a ravishing elegance. Butter-vanilla, very delicate slate and equally delicate apple, now with a slightly herbal tertiary flavor. I would say light-to-medium body, but the beauty in these wines resides in class and actual flavor, and not in size or fullness.

**GRAACHER DOMPROBST**: I doubt there's a better site on the "great ramp" (as Hugh Johnson terms it) between Bernkastel and Zeltingen. Domprobst is invariably starched and magnificent; its flavors are always standing at attention. It has a particularly emphatic slate statement, with nuances of pistachio or pecan, cassis and quince. Medium-bodied, high-bred and snappy, coltish and itchy to take off full-gallop.

**ZELTINGER SONNENUHR** is the Premier Grand Cru. Basically All Of The Above; slate, lime, apple, butter-vanilla, rich, almost chewy earthiness, great depth. Some parcels are prized by locals as the best sites in the entire Bernkastel-Zeltingen ramp—DOKTOR notwithstanding! These wines are full-bodied. Selbachs are now the primo owners in this great site, and have inaugurated an era of selective harvesting and a quality potential such as we have never before seen. Meanwhile, you'll see by the number I offer that the wines had me in a weak-kneed thrall, and - redundancy be damned—I just couldn't walk away from any of these.

### selbach-oster at a glance:

A large estate by Mosel standards means many wines to choose from. The ambitiousness of Johannes Selbach has made this estate the region's most prominent rising star. Since 1989, always among the very best wines in this collection.

### how the wines taste:

Johannes' explicitly stated wish is to make wines for people to drink and not for geeks and writers to preen over. If he says (and I agree) "The best bottle is the first one emptied," it can sound mercantile, but it isn't. The useful wine is the *friendliest* and most companionable wine, not the most "impressive" one. But Johannes earns the right to claim this value by making many of the *most* impressive wines you can drink – depending on what exactly impresses you. If you want bombast and primary-fruit perfume and excess sweetness, look somewhere else. These are meant to drink with food up to and *including* Auslese in most vintages. There is a striking conciliation between brilliant acids and a kind of leesy plushness. There's plenty of minerality, but it seems somehow deeper than a literal depiction of the soil. There can be fruit of almost unbearable purity and loveliness. Finally, they are often among the most **charming** wines on the Mosel, yet they are never frivolous.

**DRY WINES AND KABINETTS (few though they are)****GSO-287 2006 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

This is for lovers of sheer dryness. It isn't at all sharp or bitter, but neither does it yield its point. The nose is as much Wachau ore as Mosel slate, and the palate has a kind of Trimbach Calvinist scrupulousness, round though it is, leading into a taut chalky finish. Bottling sometimes etches away the spikes, but for now . . .

SOS: -1 (minus one) (1-3 years or again between 12-15 years)

**GSO-288 2006 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

It's the hill directly behind the downstream end of Zeltingen, and it's becoming more important all the time in these days of climate-change and mega-musts. In fact sections of it are steep and face due south and are at least *1er Cru* quality but the site is prized because it will deliver Kabinett grapes with normal (i.e., 120-130 days) hang-time.

Not that this brute is anything remotely like a "Kabinett," being rather a big ol' parade of zip, apple and spice stretching in a keen verdant line to infinity; a lot of "90-point" torque and power; mint and verbena; this is really impressive wine in its aerodynamic zoom-y way. Johannes is mapping out a course for this bottling, with his usual steady hand and clear vision.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (1-4 years or again between 13-17 years)

**GSO-286 2006 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett****GSO-286H 2006 Selbach Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml**

One of the very few Kabs we can afford to offer in halves this year. And I expect a run on the full bottles because our core-list wine (Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Kab) *was not made* in 2006. This is a seldom-seen species from 06, but it follows Johannes' wish to have a snappy, taut and light-ish "basic" estate-Kabinett which will be roughly similar from year to year. There's great crunch and snap and little limey puppy teeth; herbal intricacy, powdery minerality and mentholated penetration, yet each sip is juicier than the last. This is about as rare as an ivory-billed woodpecker in 2006.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)

**GSO-290 2006 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Kabinett****+**

2006 is the second great Schlossberg vintage in a row – maybe now this great site will get the prom-queen? Amazingly this is even *sleeker* than the estate-Kab, more silvery and herbal; it also seems (though I'm sure it isn't) drier; it's a kind of thumb of the nose to all the creamy-monster 2006s, and again each sip builds upon the last until the whole is keenly complex yet entirely shade-lit. Still waters, cool and gleaming and gurgling sweetly in the indirect light.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-22 years)

-----and that, my friends, is that. Kabinett: The End.-----

**THE SPÄTLESEN****GSO-291 2006 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese****GSO-291H 2006 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**

Another shot of greeny lime-zest and verbena; even more drive now; this guy gets to 80mph in 3rd gear. These are the *greenest* 2006s yet tasted (in fact they were 6th-from-the-end though first in this catalogue), full of snap and PING! When you've tasted enough 2006s you won't believe how this could have been made.

SOS: 2 (9-25 years)

**GSO-293 2006 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese****++**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The first clearly great wine of the series, crammed with the essence of the *cru*. Splendid complexity and filigree and *spiel* (this lovely word denotes not just interplay of flavors but a *playful* interplay of flavors. We have no English cognate.) The epitome of a Selbach wine, and mouth-wateringly wonderful.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (10-28 years)

- GSO-295 **2006 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
 More redcurrant here (almost a Nahe note), more resolute and muscular; its sweetness isn't fruit-weight but muscle-weight; it's like an Auslese from a "serious" vintage. Half-half *Fuder* and steel, from gold-ripe berries with just the merest onset of botrytis, and from 60-year ungrafted vines. The empty glass almost smells like a roast chicken you stuffed with a lemon.  
 SOS: 2 (12-30 years)

- GSO-294 **2006 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese\*** ++  
 This was all *Fuder* and has a little of the carob aroma from wild yeasts; the wine is fabulously integrated and salty and soulful and silky with suavely murmuring terroir; the super-clean botrytis appears only at the very end, the whole is so seamlessly woven.  
 SOS: 2 (13-32 years)

### **OK; NOW IT BEGINS: THE AUSLESEN**

- GSO-296 **2006 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Auslese** +  
 I tasted them all, all twelve thousand million of them, before I decided which ones were both best and best as a collection – and this one stood out as the steeliest and most cutting: a *good* thing in '06. It has Himmelreich's forthright apple-skin note; almost sorrely, with a hint of fennel; ripe power but little botrytis, and none too sweet for food, unless you're dining on Twinkies.  
 SOS: 2 (13-28 years)

- GSO-297 **2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese\*** +  
 I suspected the stony-as-hell Domprobst would prevail in the creamy-as-hell '06, and this wine is a study in terroir: *fabulous* Grand Cru nose; cracklings, roasted pecan, wonderfully solid and crunchy; plenty of fruit qua fruit but with a great volume of *other* juju; savories and salts and fibers. Kerrrrrrrrrunch for lunch!  
 SOS: 2 (13-35 years)

- - -To this point, all the wines are crisp and food-friendly. Now it changes - - -

- GSO-298 **2006 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese\*** (+)  
 At 130° Oechsle this has literally amazing crispness and detail to go with its big baked power. It's adamant and commanding, not seductive, though it might just start putting the moves on you after it's bottled.  
 SOS: 3 (15-40 years)

- GSO-299 **2006 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese "Rotlay"** ++  
 GSO-299H **2006 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese "Rotlay," 12/375ml**  
 I'm going to quote from a letter Johannes sent to Lorena Ascencios of Astor Wines & Spirits when she asked him what "Rotlay" signified.

*The Rotlay is the single best parcel within the [Zeltinger] Sonnenuhr. Rotlay is an old, local term for a rather unique piece of vineyard which is tucked between a massive wall of slate as the upper border and the large water surface of the river with it's mirror effect as the lower border. On the sides it is open and flows into the other local parcels called "Kakert" and "Lehnschaft" though there [are] some large outcroppings of rock in the border areas, creating a unique geographic scenario, similar to a "clos" in France, with a rather unique microclimate.*

*The slope that comprises "Rotlay" faces straight south here and the soil is very stony, covered with big chunks of blue Devonian slate. (The slate is the compressed silt of the seabed of the giant ocean that once covered most of the earth some 450 million years ago alongside the single continent Pangea.) The inclination of the vineyard ranges between 45 and 60 degrees. Hand labor is a must.*

*"Rot" in German means "red" and some people interpret this as a sign for the high mineral contents of the soil which is visible where iron components, exposed to the elements, actually do rust. "Rodt," in older German orthography, also stands for "cleared" in the sense of barren,*



stripped of vegetation, and some people say it's the massive wall of rock and the surrounding outcroppings of rock, which are barren, resp. indicate a bald spot in the slope.

Either version has its justification since the vineyard is a steep, barren, rocky, hot piece of "dirt" where only deep root systems can survive the always warm, at times hot and arid microclimate. Drought is often a concern here.

Selbach-Oster owns the biggest piece of the Rotlay and, in 2004 we began to pick "Rotlay" as a single block, with no selections pulled from the vineyard prior to harvesting. This brings the unique, diverse mix of greenish-yellow, golden, slightly overripe copper-colored, as well as botrytised berries together, creating a truly wholesome wine which reflects the true expression of this great site's "terroir," without the influence of human selection.

We refrain from skimming through this vineyard but rather prefer a long hangtime to pick at optimum ripeness without pushing for over the top sugars.

Terry here again: I'll pick up on an implication inherent in Johannes' thinking here, which is that the *en bloc* picking is in essence a search for *truth*. All the wine books tell you that Auslese is/was made by successive passes through the vineyard – indeed it's what "Auslese" means – and yet 20-30 years ago only a few growers had the wherewithal to accomplish this. Usually they waited as long as they could bear and then gathered it all. As Hans Selbach was old enough to have lived through those days, I'm sure he contemplated what might have been lost in the modern obsession with skimming the cream from the vineyard in search of higher must-weights (and the "points" such wines engender). Put concretely, you lose a holistic flavor containing both the ultra-ripe grapes plus the less-ripe ones and the grip and green they impart. And which *also* constitutes terroir. It's not much of a leap to infer this is a quest for a deeper authenticity; it's one thing to select *which* flavors you want and another thing to pick the whole magilla and see what flavors you *get*. See why I love this man?

But to the wine in question, which by the way is a masterpiece: this was "scratching 140°" and is a hugely stony, masculine Vendage Tardive style; has a *primordial* Mosel nose, like slate and apples at the dawn of time. The wine has almost intimidating power and truth; it isn't even strictly "agreeable," it's like artillery volleys of ancient smoldering earth.

SOS: 2 (18-45 years)

- GSO-300 **2005 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Auslese "Schmitt"** ++  
 The '05 turned out to have been the great wine of the vintage, greater than even the 2-star Schlossberg Auslese, but as always Schmitt is late to show its cards. There's a rocky profile similar to the Rotlay, but this one is juicier; birchy and leafy with a more pebbly less rocky slate expression; more hyacinth than apple-blossom and an all-encompassing minerality like Clos Ste. -Hûne. It's wonderfully rich (148° Oechsle) but not remotely sugary. It is becoming one of the earth's great Rieslings.  
 SOS: 3 (18-47 years)

## THE “SWEET STUFF”

Culled from six BAs and three TBAs...

- GSO-301 **2006 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling BA** ++  
 GSO-301H **2006 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling BA, 12/375ml**  
 Again remarkably shapely and drinkable for “a BA,” has the seamless texture from *Fuder*; lysergic lime and peppermint and cherry with a saltiness and juiciness that lick your senses with a knowing tongue – erotically compelling wine, this!  
 SOS: 4 (25-60 years)
- GSO-302H **2006 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +  
 Fermented in a new *Fuder* and then racked into stainless steel; lovely almost chocolaty coating of maple-sweetness along with the gentle textures of the cask; it has an easy appeal, relatively speaking; it’s notably sweeter and also quite novel with the new-cask woodiness (which I emphasize is different from “oakiness”); it’s crazily *delicious* but has perhaps less length than the Badstube.  
 SOS: 4 (25-60 years)
- GSO-289H **2006 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling BA\*, 12/375ml** +  
 At 176° Oechsle (TBA starts legally at 150°) we’re into stratospheric richness and wont to become giddy, and at this point one is quickly awash in pure sticky fruit, but this wine has form and outline and even green notes, i.e., a concentration not merely of ripeness but of the tart-apple underlay. Even with its mass the finish is still whispery.  
 SOS: 4 (30-70 years)
- GSO-292H **2006 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** ++  
 It isn’t the mostest of the mostest of the TBAs and might not even garner the highest, um, “score,” but I opted quite deliberately for the one most like *WINE* and which most indicated its *vineyard*. Though this has its complement of figgy richness the Schlossberg profile isn’t entirely subsumed into botrytis.  
 SOS: 4 (40-75 years)

## FISH LABELS

I didn’t like these labels when I first saw them, but everyone else did and you do too. Shows what a marketing hot-shot I am! These are our go-to Mosel wines in the value category, and are certainly wines of the type-no-fridge-should-be-without.

- GSZ-021 The **Dry** wine in the clear bottle comes from Zeltingen, Kinheim, Erden, Kesten and Detzem Kabinettjuice gently chaptalized, and it shows satisfying weight, minerality and stylishness. It’s really dry-minus 1 on my scale – but no sharp edges.
- GSZ-022 The **Kabinett** comes from 15 kilometres around Zeltingen. A lot of it is Zeltingen, Bernkastel-Kues and Kinheim fruit, some Detzem, some Brauneberg. This is bottled in the normal bottle is quite simply delightful; the ’06 is equal to many Späts from good estates; it’s on the dry side; it is *loaded* with fruit and plum-blossom and has amazing length and depth; JUMP ON THIS, as this great-vintage quality may never be equaled again. As fruity as a key-lime pie and as long as The Brothers Karamozov.



# erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

I really want you to meet Stefan Jakoby, but you have to fly over there to do it. He'd gladly come over here to present his wines; problem is, the lad ain't old enough to *drink* in These "Unites States."

At the moment he divides his time between the estate, where he works alongside his father Erich, and a day-job in the Selbach office. But the young man's absolutely nuts about wine, and he has that infectious puppy energy some of us might remember from our own distant pasts.

Normally I taste Jakoby's range in the tasting room at Selbach, but last year I was struck enough by their ambitiousness that I scheduled a visit to Kinheim. Far too much was made of this; it was my honor to visit, not theirs to receive me. But I was quite impressed and even roused by what I tasted. I was also gratified to sit with two generations of Jakoby in the tasting room.

Erich, whom I've known for many years now but who's a *really* shy guy, held back as his sons (Peter does the cellar and Stefan the "marketing") held forth, and as always I wondered at the dialogue of pride and humility such a thing entails. I have the sense it is codified somehow, as many old-world things are, but it's no less moving for all that.

Erich's wines set the precedent for overachievers from the domain, and I heard tales of a certain tension between him and *his* father over the adoption of practices deemed economically unfeasible. Erich persevered and prevailed, and created an environment where *any* effort to increase quality was encouraged. Ho hum, you might say; it's a tale oft-heard. But not in Kinheim.

Kinheim is a village stuck between Kröv on one side – much beloved of tourists for its *Nacktarsch* (bare-bottom)



Stefan and Peter Jakoby

bottlings – and Erden on the other. In early editions of Johnson's *Wine Atlas* this standard reference says "Kinheim begins a decline," as indeed it does. There are no Grand Crus (though there are micro-parcels of near-GC quality and well-known as such by Mosel insiders) because the soils are lighter. Thus prices for Kinheimers are low. And low prices don't stimulate thoughts of increasing production costs. It's one thing to make highly visible grand Quixotic gestures like the outstanding Daniel Vollenweider estate is doing – if you can ask (and receive) stratospheric prices in return. It's quite another to labor in modest obscurity on behalf of an idea that isn't

- Vineyard area: 4.3 hectares
- Annual production: 4,000 cases
- Top sites: Kinheimer Rosenberg
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Spätburgunder

remotely sexy, but every bit as passionate.

Long-time readers will know the connection between Selbachs and Jakobys: Erich was cellarmaster at Selbach for many years, until his father's failing health compelled a full-time return to the family winery. But even then he stayed on with Selbachs on an ad-hoc basis, and went on over-achieving in Kinheim.

If you go downstream from Uerzig-Erden you first come to Löschnich and then to Kinheim. Immediately behind the village there's a crazy-steep hump of hill formerly known as *Eulenlay* which was considered first-class land in the famous 19th-century classification for tax-assessments. Behind it the slope undulates, sometimes steep, sometimes gentle. The soil is lighter. Yet good Kinheimers are scrupulously pure Mosel Rieslings on an everyday scale. Overachievers such as Merkelbach and Jakoby will give us incredible values.

One almost grows nostalgic. When I started out, my *modus operandi* was to unearth just these kinds of things; values from high-achievers in locales others had overlooked. A then-competitor referred derisively to "Theise's little growers," many of whom have since become the superstars of the modern scene. Erich Jakoby's wines were already very good – he took Selbach methods and applied them to wines which seldom receive such exalted care – but Stefan seems determined to take it even farther. And why not? Who knows what Kinheim can show when a young hottie is hellbent on *letting* it show?

Jakoby-Mathy appears in the new Gault-Millau guide for the first time, a definite indicator it has arrived on the radar. Jakobys are proud of this, as they should be, and I am happy for them. Prices, as you will see, remain humble.

**jakoby-mathy at a glance:**

Erstwhile cellar-master at Selbach-Oster until father's illness called him back home. Thus: Selbach methods at off-the-beaten-track prices conspire to create **excellent wines and incredible values**. This is an estate that excels in high-acid vintages: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, and 2006. They're always good and always an incredible value, but in years that suit them they become *unbelievable* value. I'm having trouble keeping the wines in stock, and this year will be no exception. There seems to be a *market* for steep-slope Mosels with ravishing vivacity at insanely low prices; go figure!

**how the wines taste:**

As a rule, Kinheimers tend to run light but true, attractive apple flavors with typical minerality. Other than a small section of the Rosenberg, directly behind the town, there isn't a Grand Cru slope here. But Erich's wines excel by sheer **vitality**; they're upbeat, vivid wines, exuberant and Spring-y.

- GJM-058 **2006 Riesling "Balance"**  
**CORE-LIST WINE** Again it's a blend of 67% Spätlese with 33% "Hochgewächs" (i.e., chaptalized), and I was offered two variations from which I chose the one less sweet – in fact it has an undetectable 30g.l. RS, which gives the wine a lovely weight and mid-palate thickness without conveying "sugar." This is even better than the wonderful 2005, chewier and juicier and with a more tactile texture and explicit slate. This *delivers* in every way; it's the perfect *pouring* Riesling, the perfect everyday Riesling, and *no* other country can produce it. And BRAVO to Jakobys for resurrecting this old-style Riesling that doesn't fit into marketing boxes but merely offers – perfectly – what it says: **BALANCE! SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now to 10 years)**
- GJM-059 **2006 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 I again took the lighter and drier version, something actually resembling a "Kabinett." And this is archetypal Mosel wine: all its juju in perfect proportion and symmetry. There's a decent (but far from huge) amount of it, and it's priced to move, so don't delay. **SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-13 years)**
- GJM-060 **2006 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 Here I *wanted* a leap up from the Kabinett, and this is a key-limey parfait of pure Mosel prettiness; slate, balsam, aloe, hyssop; wonderfully rich yet buoyant; piquantly racy yet long and full of substance, with a high-cheekboned vigor. The best Jakoby wine of normal ripeness I've ever tasted. **SOS: 2 (6-21 years)**
- GJM-061 **2006 Kinheimer Hubertuslay Riesling Spätlese "Goldkapsel"**  
 That's *Goldkapsel* for German wine aficionados, equivalent to a "1-star" designation. More quince now, and even more slate and *quetsch*. Look, this juicy slam-it-down wine is basically entirely seductive and convincing and it costs less than Fiji water and tastes better with food. Way better. **SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-20 years)**
- GJM-062 **2006 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese "Eulenlay"**  
 Just when I land on the perfect association it has to be something most of us never get to taste – the cox-orange pippin, KING of apples. Basically it tastes like a cross between a really ripe apple and a slightly unripe nectarine. And this wine is full of it, as perhaps am I. In any case, *really* high-toned apple fragrance here, and botrytis arrives also; markedly salty and hyssop-y with Shimery wintergreeny high notes and gristly slaty baked-apple low notes. Kind of a prototype for 2006: lots of minty zip on top, and something just a bit chewy underneath. **SOS: 3 (10-27 years)**
- GJM-063H **2006 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/375ml** **+**  
 A wine of amazing purity; less overt botrytis even with 140°, but really the quintessence of the Spätlese and not a gooey dessert-thingy. It is absolutely **THE** great value of any Mosel wine in this offering. Pure lemon balm and marigold and Mirabelle and *peche-de-vigne* and an acid-driven dynamism that keeps it fresh and interesting. W-O-W. **SOS: 3 (15-33 years)**
- GJM-064H **2006 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+**  
 Takes the Auslese and double-concentrates it *without* sacrificing zip and clarity. An **out-landish** value! **SOS: 4 (20-45 years)**
- GJM-043H **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 I *miss* Eiswein! They still have a few cases of this entirely honest and credible Eiswein, though it seems almost to need decanting; fresh-poured it is oblique and subdued. But it's the real thing and there isn't any on the market – especially at **THIS** price. **SOS: 4 (12-27 years)**



# meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

## mosel • erden

I always write this text in early Spring. And today, April 2nd, is opening day for my home-team. A couple years ago I went to my first ball game of the new season one night, alone as it happened. I had seats upstairs, and took the escalator. Riding up, there was a sudden brief glimpse of the field through a gap in the stands, all gleaming under the lights, that impossible emerald. And immediately I was a kid again, looking at the magic of a ballpark, and every time then and every time since my step has quickened and my heart beat excitedly whenever I've entered the ballpark. For it is an experience of *beauty*, you know. Soul doesn't have a fixed address, boss. It lives where it wants to. And each place it pauses to breathe is connected to all the places it has ever paused and breathed.

So today is opening day, and I left this writing for a few hours to watch my home team win their game, and now I'm back. And I am going to risk you rolling your eyes exasperatedly at me, because I'm gonna try to connect two things ostensibly so disparate as to be impossible. Still, away we go.

Each time I arrive at Justen there is always a wine, usually one of the first wines, that sweeps through every bit of experience I've brought with me, that snakes its fingers past everything I think I know and grabs me with its pure Mosel-ness. There is, after all, something singular about these wines! And I am catapulted twenty-eight years backward in time to that first scent of Mosel, whatever it is, and it feels virginal and surprising again. It is partly an alertness — this is something original. And partly a swoon — this is something wonderful.

I'm hardly the first person to liken Mosel wines to Spring. But Spring is of course not a single season, but many.

First come the snowdrops, as early as mid-February, and then the crocuses. The first daffodils begin sprouting. The air is softer now, but below there's still a keen scent of frost. Things gurgle, the first cress arises impos-

- **Vineyard area: 4.25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Prälat and Treppchen, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 11% Müller-Thurgau, 9% Kerner**

sibly soft and green by the water. This is the season of *Merkelbach*.

The first fragrant blossoms are the cherries, each of the several varieties that grow here, and in sunny spots the perfumed crabapples unfurl their petals. The days begin to feel almost warm in the ripening sunlight. On a damp day the perfume of all these flowering trees can almost intoxicate you. Violets, scilla and phlox carpet the yards. This is the season of *Christoffel*.

Then all hell breaks loose. The first honeysuckle opens, and the stately, lissome dogwoods, and the silly, gaudy azaleas, and the air is emphatically warm, and the trees open their sticky new leaves, and everything sprays upward in a whistling clamor of life.

This is the season of *Justen*.

These may not be the most mysterious or intricate Mosel wines I offer, but they are certainly the most gregarious and extroverted. And yet they have virtues deeper than simple winning personality; they are true-blue Mosels, and I often thought that you, and I, neglected them. Thus it was gratifying to see Justen get the credit he deserves with emphatically flattering reviews of his recent vintages. I hope he's been "discovered" now and will take his rightful place among important Mosel estates.

(I always refer to the estate as JUSTEN, by the way, though I really should change this habit; I like a family's



Stefan Justen and daughter Barbara

name more than a property's name if I get to choose. But it's confusing. Meulenhof (pronounced MOY-LEN-HOFE, not mew-len-hoff) it shall henceforth and forever be.)

The great site here is Erdener Treppchen. There's a good parcel in Wehlener Sonnenuhr, part of Frau Justen's dowry. There is a piece of the newly enlarged Prälat, for which a higher price is asked. Justen's piece of Treppchen contains very old vines on their own rootstocks, or did until these venerable vines were cruelly uprooted for *Flurbereinigung*.

2006 is a very particular vintage at Justen. If you like enormously ripe over-the-top wines you will love this. It is beyond hedonistic and well into decadence. Justen's wines tend to be fleshpots by Mosel standards anyway, and in this vintage those qualities are exaggerated almost luridly. If you're a Mosel classicist or if you don't think you could eat nine slices of wedding cake, they won't be for you. On the other hand I doubt anyone can offer more degrees Oechsle-per-Dollar!

Often after making the rounds through the new vintage, a Mosel grower will bring out a few wormy-looking bottles from his Sanctorum. These are always given to taste blind, and one is encouraged to guess the vintage and quality level, all in a spirit of fun. Protocol requires one to make suitably delighted noises, but that rarely presents a problem! No, where I'm concerned the problem is usually how to prevent Terry from babbling like a besotted galoot. One year we had two wines, a lively and intricate 1979 Spätlese which was sensually all kinds of fun. The second wine, though, had us all silenced with perplexity and awe.

It wasn't a vintage whose signature I knew. I eliminated a range of unlikely choices and finally wrote a plausible guess. I thought it might be a light, atypically firm 1959. Stefan finally said "This wine is exactly fifty years old, a 1951 Auslese," and we were melted with wonder. This is what I wrote in my notebook: "This 1951 Auslese is flashing a shiny green tooth of acidity and freshness and is gleaming and

mysterious and haunting. It's like a shirt that's hung in a fragrant wooden closet, not worn for years, your father's perhaps, and one day you put it on and there it all is, him, his body, the time when he was alive, the boy you were then. We swim without cease in a strange bright ether. Light is gleaming and swaying always near us. If we breathe too deep we will die of a joy we aren't built to bear. Just a tiny gasp."

We say our goodbyes too quickly after such an event. Perhaps someone will show these words to Stefan Justen, so he will know how honored I am to share such a wine with him, and how I remember each drop, always.

Last year, as if to up the ante, Stefan brought out a '51 *Spätlese*. The wine was dry, forest-floor, birchy, shellfish-stock, leathery and avuncular, juicy, *long* and delicious and with a deep soulful complexity. You get a shock to the soul with a wine like this. A *good* shock, of course. But there you are, being a Wine Professional, doing bizniz, assigning item codes and securing quantities, and out comes a wine like this and suddenly you're plunged from the brittle surface on which you've been skating into the deep warm waters below. You need soul-bones made of rubber—a kind of spiritual Gumby—to manage the transition.

Stefan brings out not just a lovely old wine, but also a wine his father made before Stefan himself was born. As such it's part of the family's history and legacy, part of the vineyard's history and legacy, and ultimately part of the *earth's* history and legacy. It's almost intimidatingly meaningful. If you go where it takes you, you won't get any more work done that day! And you're already late for your next appointment . . .

But, there is always the wine itself. When all our glasses were empty, I saw another few fingers of wine down in the dark bottle. "May I . . . ?" I asked. *Certainly; help yourself.* So I did something I doubt I could have done 10 or even 5 years ago. *I just drank the wine.* It was beautiful wine. I knew damn well how spiritually meaningful it was, but I opted to merely *love* the wine and let it love me back.

#### Meulenhof at a glance:

Full-throttle fruit and serious stature characterize these ripe Mosel wines. Prices have remained moderate for impeccable quality.

#### how the wines taste:

In general Justen's wines are more lush and peachy than, say, Merkelbach; not as stern as, say, Christoffel. They are comparatively straightforward and "easy" to understand because the fruit is overt and in-your-face. Even a cursory glance into that fruit, though, will reveal the proverbial Coat of Many Colors: interplays of flavor and texture that can be absorbing and rewarding. And the wines both keep and age.

#### GJU-097 2006 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett\*

**CORE-LIST WINE.** And 1-star because it is actually well up into Auslese ripeness; indeed it's a poster-child for the '06 dilemma – can you plausibly offer a "Kabinett" that's in fact an Auslese with a kind-of-Kabinett sweetness? In effect an Auslese-*feinherb*? The nose is classic Treppchen; crackery and very slatey, with an amazing fragrance of roses and arresting salty grip on the back-palate. The wine is balanced for its size and weight, and has finely specific character given its intensity. It's actually my favorite Justen of the vintage.

SOS: 2 (12-25 years)

- GJU-098 **2006 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** This recalls a '75 Auslese – a 3-star Auslese or whatever they were in those days. Robin nailed the “banana-taffy” note; peach-blossom, comice pear; spicy and pointed, and you notice the sweetness because it's just barely not enough, but the finish is classic Mosel – albeit not dry. Bottling will tame all of these, but man they *are* extravagant.  
 SOS: 3 (13-28 years)
- GJU-100 **2006 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese** **+**  
 Cask 14; Though riper – all the Auslesen ranged between 150°-180° (i.e., all TBAs), this is *greener-tasting* than its sibs, with a welcome thrust and tartness. It works in every way; spicy and energetic, with ginger, talc and plantain. Very sweet but very alluring.  
 SOS: 4 (20-50 years)
- GJU-101 **2006 Erdener Prälat Riesling Auslese**  
 A great turbulent mass of vinosity lets little aroma escape for now; what does emerge is earthy like one of Jost's Wallufer Walkenbergs; a megaton-blast of botrytis. Stern length, the most obdurate and masculine of these; no-quarter-given intensity. Way lots in store.  
 SOS: 4 (18-45 years)
- GJU-102H **2005 Erdener Treppchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **+**  
**First offering.** I adore its *moderation* after all the sugary bombast of the 2006s. This has shape and outline and a kind of mashed-potato starchiness; it's *fine*, not only ripe; almost easy to drink, with delicacy and yin-yang. Moderation wins the day.  
 SOS: 3 (20-50 years)



# alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

Two things to get out of the way. First, and man I'm *sorry* to say this; there's very little wine, and NO Kabinett. Second. . . but there *is* a Beerenauslese, the first one for 30 years. You know you're in the Twilight Zone when Merkelbachs make a BA.

Since I've been ringing the bell at this house for twenty two years now, I will confess to the arising of a certain sentimentality. It's not based on the exchange of intimacies, but only on the passage of time, and on gratitude for durable things. It has little to do with how "good" a Merkelbach vintage happens to be, but a lot to do with their basic honesty and the loveliness of the culture they embody.

We'll probably use a new picture, as my colleague Jonathan was in full-snap-mode and has a fine eye. But I won't soon forget what stole over me last year, sitting at this very table, looking at a few photos Rolf and Alfred let me have.

At first I took the "cutest" ones, because if there's one thing about Rolf and Alfred Merkelbach, it's their adorableness. Everybody says so. I've said so. And when you meet them they are always shy and smiling and giggling. So you want a picture that captures it.

The first of the pictures was of Rolf's face peering out from among yellow leaves during harvest. Everyone was giddy during the '05 harvest. Rolf's entire being is suffused in Fall light, as if he is asking "Does it get any better than this?" The second picture showed a Summer day, and the boys were posing in front of the big ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN sign in the vineyard. They're squinting a little into the sun, and Rolf sports an unusually jaunty smile. This is the one we used.

The last of the three pictures they are back at the winery, in what looks like the press house. They're standing a little apart, looking into the camera — it's actually a lovely composition. I don't know quite why it's making me weepy, but it is.



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

I've known Rolf and Alfred for twenty-two years now, but "known" isn't really the word. When I'm there we taste the wine and I enthuse and they giggle, and unless a Selbach is present there's hardly any schmoozing — sometimes even then. I'm sure Merkelbachs are glad of me but I have no idea what they make of me. Nor

- Vineyard area: 1.9 hectares
- Annual production: 1,600 cases
- Top sites: Ürziger Würzgarten, Erdener Treppchen
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

I of them, if I'm entirely candid. I mean, of course I adore them — they're adorable, after all — but as I look at this picture I find myself inside a warm mystery. Who are they, *what are their lives?*

We say they're the "last of a vanishing breed," which is certainly true. They do the whole thing themselves (with a little help at harvest) and they live a modest life, and they don't appear to have raised their prices for at least a decade. They give every appearance of perfect contentment, and I believe they are. I hope they are; it's part of a faith I hold. Theirs are lives reduced to a degree of simplicity and integration we wouldn't tolerate. But they are happy, picking grapes, posing in front of the big sign, smiling into the camera. When I let myself really think about them I sniff a kind of unknowable goodness, and it both stirs and rebukes me. A voice challenges me: *Look at those faces, and now tell me just how valuable all your hip, arch post-modern affects are. But also, feel the divinity in these simple mysterious lives.*

One night I was at the ball park. I'm a purist; I like to arrive early and watch the guys take batting practice and shag fly balls while the stands slowly fill up and the players pause to sign autographs. So there I was watching some rookie who barely had a beard take b.p. and he was really **whacking** the ball, line-drive after line-drive, just sizzling bullets hitting the outfield fences, slapped to all fields with a satisfying crack! And I was reminded of something . . . but what?

And then I opened this text in the computer and there it was: *Merkelbachs!* Not a towering home-run in the



**KINHEIMER ROSENBERG:** this vineyard gives Merkelbachs their lightest wine, the one they always show you first. It's the appetizer to prepare you for the weightier Erdeners and Ürzigers. Rosenberg's wines often seem to actually smell of roses, so that one wonders which came first, the aroma or the name. The slate is brilliant here, the apple fruit ranges from tart-green in the cool vintages to fresh golden-delicious apples in the hot years. The wines are small-scale Mosel classics, and in great years they can show surprising authority and balance while their bigger siblings stumble.

**ERDENER TREPPCHEN:** this is a completely different expression of Treppchen from Justen's or Christoffel's. The site is broad; the upstream sections lean in the Prälat-Würzgarten direction: bergamot, spice, peach. The downstream section is more classically slatey, with nuances of hyssop, walnut and green apple. Now that Flurbereinigung is complete and everyone's vines are young one sees the importance of parcel. I was delighted by the absolute Treppchen fingerprint I saw in even these brash new wines.

Finally the great site **ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN**, which gives Merkelbach's most memorable wines. A vein of red clay running through the soil gives them their eponymous spice—the name means “spice garden”—but it isn't just the extra zingy cut of spice that marks these wines; such a strong flavor could pall if not for their redeeming **class**. Their feel is feminine and lithe; their aspect is springtime blossomy, and their underlying flavors of slate and mineral attain an apex of refinement. Wines of baroque opulence can be made from here, but Merkelbach's are the most **primary** and fundamental of all Ürz Würz., as though you are tasting ur-Würzgarten

bunch, but screaming line-drives that'd take your freakin' head off and bruise your hand through your glove if you were lucky enough to spear one.

After greetings are exchanged, we sit at the rather small round table in the parlor where Rolf or Alfred bring out the wines one by one.

It's self-evident to them that the vineyard is responsible for “at least eighty percent” of the quality of their wines, especially the “Lang Pichter” section of the Ürziger Würzgarten directly behind the winery. Mosel wine for them is like a dear old friend. “We like to hear that you can drink a little more of our wines without any health problems,” says Alfred. I asked Alfred what his favorite type of wine was, purely theoretically, without respect to his own wines. “The flavors I look for are hard for me to describe,” he replied. “A good white wine should be identifiable by its nose, *must* be, in fact. A young wine may be a little acidulous, but a wine that's two, three years old has to have all its pieces working together: the acidity, the sweetness, the fruit and the vinosity.”

Again the wines were presented first by cask number, then by name. Merkelbachs probably refer to the old local names for their various tiny parcels when they speak among themselves, and the cask separation corresponds to those parcels. Just think of it for a second. We're dealing

with a less-than-5-acre estate here, all ungrafted vines, tended and harvested and vinified *bit by bit*. And Rolf and Alfred know these vineyards the way you and I know our children, and wine isn't something they *do* or something they *WORK AT*; wine is in the very pores of their skins, in their veins and capillaries. Nobody punches a clock. There aren't any meetings to discuss marketing. No computers in sight. Just the seamless weaving of work into life. Just wine.

Sigrid Selbach asked Alfred if he ever took a vacation. Alfred answered: “Where would we go? When I'm on the slopes standing among my vines on a sunny day with a view of the Mosel behind me, I have everything I need to be happy.”

One year we walked over to Christoffel – our next appointment – I suddenly felt very sad. Sigrid Selbach and I were walking side by side, and I told her “I haven't always been as good as I wanted to be, and there are things in my life of which I am ashamed . . . (pause) . . . and times I feel the weight of many regrets . . . (pause) . . . but something with which I can console myself is that I brought appreciation and prosperity to Rolf and Alfred during these years of their lives . . . (pause) . . . I sometimes think of that.” Sigrid, perfect friend that she is, looked into my face and said nothing.

#### merkelbach at a glance:

most beloved Mosel agency.

#### how the wines taste:

These are just some of the keenest, spiciest, most helplessly beautiful wines you can ever drink. The iciest blade of electric, splashing acidity supports a fruit so clear, so sharply rendered that the entire experience is so vivid it makes your toenails laugh! Who can possibly dislike wines like these??? Oh, I suppose there's someone somewhere whose temperament is so embittered he's closed all the normal pleasure receptors. I imagine him leaving a tasting where I've poured these wines, kicking a puppy as he walks to his car.

The clearest imaginable look into pure Mosel. Vivid, toe-curling clarity of fruit and terroir make this my

#### GME-142 2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese

**CORE-LIST WINE.** that will likely be sold out by the time you read this. There were four Fuders plus another cask of Auslese they intend to declassify. The first two lots result from blending a light cask with a very ripe one, and in both instances the synergy seemed to work, but in an unfamiliar style – for Merkelbach – bigger, drier-seeming, but with loads of slate and spice and that kiwi-wrapped-in-prosciutto thing we saw (and you're about to see) at Christoffel.

SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-23 years)

GME-146 **2005 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**

**1st offering.** This wasn't shown to me last year, as I think they intended to sell it in cask, but regardless of what happened I'm *glad* to see it now! Who ever imagined we'd be looking to 2005 for a "normal" Spätlese, but even with over 100° Oechsle it seems tight and compact; it's a calm and moderate sort of '05, lots of talc and peony and spicy slate. Yay to even relative normality.

SOS: 2 (10-28 years)

GME-144 **2006 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese**

Here's a Radicchio sort of bitterness (despite low acid and 80 grams of RS) and just absolutely charred slate; how can a wine this ripe seem so ascetic? Dunno, bawse. 121° Oechsle never tasted like this, like burning birch or vine cuttings. Original, to be sure. But it's also an example of what happens when you calibrate the RS to acidity and not to ripeness – and why it's ALWAYS a good idea to have some dosage around.

SOS: 2 (9-17 years)

GME-143 **2006 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese**

++

I think this is the best wine I've ever tasted from Merkelbach. My notes said "Perfect!" and I wished I didn't need to write more. But it's gloriously fragrant and perfectly balanced, cox-orange pippins and mirabelle; just a leaping dancing aroma leading to a sleek yet fruit-drenched palate of wonderful slatey length. Forget "Auslese" – this tastes like the most perfect Mosel Spätlese you ever had. Just one *Fuder* (110 cases), so hurry.

SOS: 2 (10-28 years)

GME-145 **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\***

+

Resplendently rich and queenly, with an amazing and unlikely conciliation of richness and transparency, strength and lightness; lilac and ore, fruit and mint. Considering it costs what most Spätlesen cost, what say we forget how "impractical" it is and just *DRINK THAT THANG*.

SOS: 3 (13-29 years)

-- NOTE: in the (unlikely) event we run out of Auslese, there's a fine Fuder #12 waiting in the wings. --

GME-147 **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling BA**

Well this should be a collector's item, and only 5 cases are available. It's Ürz-Würz on peyote (not that I would possibly know...), all the sassafrass teeming and buzzing and snapping. It's not at all "liqueurous," but rather it rides the jab of penetration to an almost hallucinatory degree. You don't sip it daintily; you take it and *drink* it, and wait for the incandescent starlings to arrive. . . .

SOS: 3 (15-35 years)



## why fuss about “connections”?

I woke up this morning thinking about Hans Selbach, Johannes' father, who died a year ago February. Karen Odessa and I stopped by his grave, and observed his “view” of Zeltingen, of the Mosel, and of the vineyards. Indeed if the steep hill behind St Stephanus wasn't a cemetery it would certainly be planted with vines, and Hans rests deep within the slate.

He died at home, surrounded by family. His body was carried through the house, through the bottle cellar, before it was placed at last in the ground, perhaps three hundred meters from the house. It is not only his spirit which lingers genially amongst his survivors; his body itself is near at hand.

My father died abruptly. I came home one afternoon from my summer job and he was slumped over the kitchen table. He died six hours later in a hospital room while I waited at home with my small sister. He is buried in an enormous cemetery in Queens, NY; I doubt if I could even find the gravesite.

My story may not be typical, but neither is it all that unusual. We were suburban folk, and a certain existential disconnect was a defining parameter of our experience. Nor do I claim this is necessarily tragic. Disconnection has its silver linings.

But when I contemplate the connectiveness the Selbachs nurture and presume upon, it becomes clear that their wines, also, are connected, that *they* are a defining parameter in a complex of connections, and finally that this is as invisible and categorical as oxygen to Selbachs and people like them.

Those of you who know Johannes know he speaks nearly perfect English. In fact he gets along in French and for all I know he can mumble articulately in Chinese. What I didn't know, or had forgotten, is along with his native German he also speaks *Platt*, or regional dialect. I heard him speak it when we visited Merkelbachs together. It struck me what a piece of social glue this was; it was Johannes' way of reassuring Rolf and Alfred. *We are brethren*, another marker of connection and identity. One might almost claim Mosel Riesling is what it uniquely is because of the dialect it speaks.



Rolf Merkelbach

They say no one romanticizes blood-connections like an adoptee, and I am one. But it is perhaps part of our identity to sound a note of appreciation for that which others are too deep inside to consider abstractly. I find I am *satisfied* in some essential way by *connected* wines. It doesn't even matter whether I like them. I happen to have never met a Priorat I enjoyed, but I respect Priorat for its authenticity —

it is manifestly the wine of a *place*, speaking the dialect of that place. I may not like it, but I'm glad it exists.

I can't summon up much of anything for the so-called “international” style of wine, since it's either connected to things I don't care about or it's connected to nothing at all. I've had more than enough disconnect in my life. Many of us have. When I consider a Mosel family like Selbachs — like *any* of the people with whom I work — everything I see expresses an identity rooted in connection; they themselves, their wines, you cannot *disconnect* these things even if you tried.

And it salves a kind of loneliness. Though it isn't my home, it is at least *a* home, and the people are particular people, and the wines are particular wines. I spend too much of my life driving among strip-malls and their numbing detritus, and so when I descend the final hill over the Eifel and the village of Zeltingen comes into view I have a momentary thrill of *arriving*. Here is *somewhere*. I see it, I know it, I will soon embrace people who embody it — and, I also get to taste it.

I will not settle for less from any wine. Nor need you.

But it doesn't stop at wine's abstract quality, nor even at its abstract identity. Connections are curious things to follow. Douglas Hofstadter calls them “strange loops.” One morning last month, asleep in my bed somewhere in Germany I woke a moment to shift positions. Though the room was utterly dark, I heard a bird singing outside through the open window. It wasn't a nightingale; just an ordinary bird heralding the morning. I went to the window to see if I could glean any incipience of light. But no — pure darkness. Dawn would break soon, but now it was dark. In bed again I found myself wondering *how does the bird know morning is about to form?* As far as I can see it is still completely dark. Was he just impatient? Was he perhaps wrong? (“Oops, too soon, sorry guys, go back to sleep!”)

Just the kinds of thoughts where you can't get back to sleep. I remembered a letter I'd gotten from a friend in southern California who'd just gotten diagnosed with lymphoma and who'd started chemo. He was looking for a source for 05 Dönnhoffs and some of his other favorites. “Why, you might ask, do I give a damn about such trivia as buying wine while I am fighting for my life against the big C?” he said. “Because, to put it simply, drinking the wine of the masters like Dönnhoff is one of my great joys in life, and something to which I look forward with relish when I am able to drink again.” So there you go. Wine and the beauty it entails can connect you to life, even if you're afraid or worried, because it is such a particular kind of pleasure. There's more to say, but we can pause here.

I'm counting the days along with my friend. I can only wonder what that first glass will be like. I thought about it while lying in bed thinking about how birds know it's about to be dawn. My friend connects to wine as an agent of hope and renewal, and that connected him to me, and I'm connected to this unanswerable question about some noisy little bird on a cold dark morning in late winter in Germany, and the unanswerable question connects to the unquenchable hope and wine is the blood that beats through it all. I'm sure I got back to sleep eventually.

And peace is restored to the troubled kingdom. If you read my catalogue last year you'll know what I mean. If not, no need to stir up old tensions.

If anything troubles the kingdom of JJC it would be Kabinett wines with 106° Oechsle. It will be nice to taste an ordinary Kabinett from here again. The '06 vintage won't surprise you, or at least it didn't surprise me. The Kabinetts are outsized, and the Spät-and-Auslesen are ravishing. At his frequent best, Hans-Leo's wines have a glint like winter sun on icicles. In 2006 this effect is almost profound; this is an estate whose 2006s stand excellent comparison with 2005.

And speaking of vintages, has anyone tasted an 2003 from here lately? Still think the vintage is invariably formless and sprawling?

I can't remember the last time I tasted cask samples here. Robert Eymael doesn't like to show

them. The last few vintages I've had to hedge my notes on account of bottle-sickness, and this is a most inexact science. For each year the wines come alive (like 2002) there's another where they stay the same (like 2003). Hans-Leo's style had been growing more and more calligraphic, as if each year he wrote his flavors with a finer-tipped pen. I also sense, but cannot state as fact, that Eymael cherishes the stylistic distinction between Christoffel's wines and his own from Mönchhof, which are rather more baroque.

No matter how jaded I fear I've gotten, wines like these have the power to rouse me. They're dangerous, these silky vixens. Yet as filigree as they are, after the fifth or sixth one they begin to consolidate into an impression of remarkable depth and solidity. Their flavors may fall like little flakes, but they settle like big snow.

It's always a challenge to taste here, especially if it's the final appointment that day. There are simply *too many* great wines. Early in the sequence the palate becomes alert; it sniffs beauty in the air. Later as you ascend through realms of richness, the sensitized palate feels as if its nerve-endings are tingling. Suddenly it isn't just wine anymore. It's as though ALL OF BEAUTY is flood-

- **Vineyard area: 2.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 1,700 cases**
- **Top sites: Erdener Treppchen, Ürziger Würzgarten**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate with Rotliegend**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

ing into your heart. As you grope for words to convey this strange experience you find the only words are mushy, and maybe you feel a little embarrassed. But don't. There's a rigor beneath all that showering loveliness that you can trust. Beauty is real, and has nothing to do with sentiment.

"The vineyards, the grapes, play the decisive role in determining quality," says Christoffel. "Our vinification isn't so different from the norm. We lay high emphasis on freshness and raciness. At home we drink everything from dry to sweet, from QbA to Auslese; it only has to be *good*! It should be spicy, fruity and lively, with noticeable acidity. I'd like to think our customers like to return to our wines after drinking others, and that they feel good the next morning even if they've peered a little too deeply into the glass the night before!" Christoffel identifies the section of the Ürziger Würzgarten that lies among the rocks as his best.

This is a matter of exposure, and of the very old vines he has planted here. There's no question that soil has its own role to play. "The higher the slate proportion, (therefore more porous) the finer and more elegant the wines are. Sometimes even *too* delicate. "What's ideal is a slate soil with enough fine-earth to hold water and give the wines more extract."

Most of the vineyards are "Würzelecht," literally root-genuine, i.e. not grafted onto North American rootstock. "I have two parcels of grafted wines," Hans-Leo





told me, “which is two too many!”

THE MATTER OF STARS: the whole star thing came about because Mosel growers had to find a way of distinguishing the pecking orders of their various casks of Auslese. You can’t describe them in terms like “Feine Auslese” or “Feinste Auslese” any more, and that makes sense; there are already too many rungs in the quality ladder. The stars — or any other glyph a grower might care to employ — are a quasi-legal expedient, and a better alternative than asking consumers to memorize A.P. numbers or capsule designs.

For many of us this presents a problem. As soon as you establish a hierarchy you inadvertently push people toward the “best,” or the perceived-best. That’s because we seem to see things from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. Nobody wants to tell his customers “I have the second-best cask!” No, you can’t hold your head up unless you have the big kahoona. It’s a truly shitty way to look at wine. It has in fact nothing to do with wine, only with a commodity that *happens to be wine*.



Hans Leo Christoffel

**christoffel at a glance:**

With Schaefer and Selbach-Oster, the “big three” among the Mosels I offer. Everything one can wish from great wine is lavished on these: depth, clarity, complexity, buoyancy, purity and ineffable beauty.

**how the wines taste:**

Dashingly aromatic, brilliant luster of flavor, inchoate depth which begs for study. The kinds of wines you keep adding to your notes on; each sip reveals another facet, the second glass differs from the first, the very last sip is still saying fresh new things. There’s a jewel-like firmness here; these aren’t leesy or plush. In general, the Erdeners are thicker and more thrusting; they show better younger. The Ürzigers are refined, fastidious and sleek.

GJC-154 **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** And several things to say about that. One, there’s actually enough of it, so you don’t have to drive with a foot on the brakes, and two: the reason there’s enough of it is it’s really a sizable *Auslese* (106° is nothing to sneeze at unless botrytis gets up your nose). They bottled even earlier than usual (mid-Feb) and the wine seemed more accessible.

Apropos; there have been times I felt Eymael insists on bottling these wines too soon. They can become like preemies, it can make them seem runt-y and it takes them years to “catch up.” I am certain I’ve underrated each of the last five vintages of Kabinett here because they’re so *stunted* by early bottling.

This wine manages somewhat better thanks to its insane ripeness. I mean, this would have been the 1-star Auslese in a vintage like ’93; it’s spicy and zingy and sort of works as “Kabinett” in its own gargantuan context. The wine is excellent whatever it’s called. SOS: 2 (12-28 years)

GJC-155 **2006 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**

More weight and power, drier-seeming and even more slatey — I mean, now it’s 110°-precise articulation of walnut and mineral; it tastes more like Auslese *feinherb* but the wine is almost forensically specific, like an MRI of Treppchen. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (10-26 years)

- GJC-156 **2006 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** OK, the Späts have must-weights around 120° and extracts. . . near 40, god help us. And this wine is just fiercely slatey and penetrating. It suffers somewhat from a dearth of sweetness, even with 75 g.l. (a BA with this must-weight would have had 140 or more) but the silky length is striking, and anyways there've never been Mosel wines like these. . . .  
 SOS: 1 (15-40 years)
- GJC-157 **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +  
This is convincing! But then again this wine is *always* convincing; I'm sure it's the parcel it hails from. Though (again) absurdly ripe and spicy; it's almost like a Gewürztraminer from a limestone site like Goldert; riotous blackberry and raspberry, or like a kiwi fruit wrapped in a Black Forest ham. Bizarrely long finish as keen as a paper-cut.  
 SOS: 2 (15-45 years)
- GJC-158 **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*** ++  
 There was no 1-star Spät nor an un-starred Auslese. This always hails from the same parcel, a remote and scary set of terraces among the cliffs, called "Werzgarten," and again it has that *para-slate* nose – last year I wrote "toasted" slate. This year it smells uncannily like a great Nahe wine from a site like Kertz; now the sweetness suffices completely, the wine is ravishing; oh those ancient (100+) vines have a thing to say! Like a distillate of lilac in this vamping, erotic, haunting and encompassing wine, which casts a spell of itchy-salty gorgeousness. There's a kind of buzzing, pulsing terroir that expresses each fleck of mineral, each drop of rain, each beam of sunlight, and each impulse of longing or curiosity among the human beings who work there.  
 SOS: 3 (20-50 years)
- GJC-159 **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\*** ++  
 The hedonist's antonym to the 1-star, which is more mystic. Lucky for me I'm both. I'm not rigid, but I can be taut. Now we're into pure *fraise de bois*, with even a fine crystalized note like Reggiano. You forgot them both in their bag in the car and left the car parked in the sun. Remembering them later, you run to the car, open the door – and you're met by an aroma that almost buckles your knees, and you climb in the hot car and sit there till the heat drives you back out, and on your way back indoors you can't wait and you reach into the bag and the little wild strawberries crush in your fingers, so you lick the sticky juice and for a moment the whole world is a strawberry: you too.  
 SOS: 3 (15-50 years)
- GJC-160 **2006 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese\*\*** ++  
 The apotheosis of Treppchen. Magnificent. A clear, transparent mass of pure Moselness. Both powerful, filigree and miraculous. This one we talked about for days.  
 SOS: 3 (20-55 years)
- GJC-161 **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\*\*** +  
 The '06 is more rugged and sinewy than usual, as overt botrytis enters the picture; it seems to concentrate the 1-star and replaces the lilac with notes of 5-spice, carob, star fruit and Belgian milk-chocolate; for me these darker notes are less lovable than the brighter flowery ones, but you could well disagree. "This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than forty hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from this site in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in." It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it.  
 SOS: 4 (20-55 years)
- GJC-162H **2006 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** ++  
 I offer this to respect Hans-Leo's pride in a monument. It's Vegas-silly expensive. It has amazing sleekness for its weight – 200° Oechsle – and it's *pâtisserie* frilly-sweet. It does what the best TBAs do – extend and concentrate the Auslese – in this case the 1-star. I know the wine is miraculous, but in a silly subjective way I'm unmoved by the massive sweetness, preferring the transparency of the lighter wines – but this is just me.  
 SOS: 4 (25-75 years)

## OLD VINTAGES IN SMALL SUPPLY:

We asked producers for *normal* wines (i.e., Kabinetts and Spätlesen) at least ten years old. Anything more than 3 cases' worth was of interest. I was motivated not only by the sales but also the *quality* of Schlossgut Diel's lovely '97 and '98 Kabinetts we offered last year. Who ever gets to see great German Riesling out of its baby-stage? In mint condition? It is only right to give you a shot at seeing what such wines *really* are.

In a couple instances there was a "commercial" quantity of wine available and these will be shown on the grower's own page. The list you see below is a nab-it-and-grab-it proposition – strictly first-come first-served. I tasted them all; indeed I tasted many more that didn't make the cut.

Alphabetically:

- GAC-022 **1988 ANSGAR CLÜESSERATH Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Auslese**  
3 cases only. . . and bear in mind "Auslese" then is Kabinett now! So this is none-too-sweet; beautiful, citrussy, bee-balm and Chartreuse, in perfect condition and great food-wine.
- GDD-029 **1993 DR. DEINHARD Ruppertsberger Spiess Riesling Spätlese**  
10 cases. Just lovely, quintessential Pfalz Riesling in perfect condition.
- GDD-030 **1994 DR. DEINHARD Deidesheimer Paradiesgarten Riesling Auslese**  
8 cases. Hardly sweet (SOS: 2) and again a superb food-wine.
- GSD-046 **1989 SCHLOSSGUT DIEL Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese**  
15 cases. Couldn't be lovelier. Smoky adult Riesling, still mineral, winsome and delicate, and quite long.
- GSD-047 **1990 SCHLOSSGUT DIEL Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Auslese**  
10 cases. This tastes five years old and only barely sweet, such was the *Zeitgeist* back then. The umami of "Beerenton" is haunting. Again a **table** wine.
- GSD-048 **1994 SCHLOSSGUT DIEL Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese**  
8 cases. Has that Chartreuse-y wintergreen 94-thing. It's excellent but you'll need a tolerance for pronounced acidity.
- GSD-049 **1997 SCHLOSSGUT DIEL Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling**  
15 cases. And yes, 10-year-old QbA. And: *YUM!* Light, zingy, herbaceous, insanely gulpable, with a guava nuance. You won't believe it.
- GSD-050 **1997 SCHLOSSGUT DIEL Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese**  
20 cases. This is sublime; pure *peche-de-vigne* and key-lime.
- GHX-036 **1994 HEXAMER Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
15 cases. I didn't write a note except to say it was ideal.
- GHS-040H **1997 HOFFMAN-SIMON Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Auslese**  
6 cases of 12 halves per. Again none too sweet; times have changed! Ultra-fine.
- GHS-039H **1995 HOFFMAN-SIMON Klüsserather Brüderschaft Riesling Auslese**  
15 cases. Utterly vintage-typical, both juicy and pointed with acidity and extract.

*continued...*

## MORE OLD VINTAGES IN SMALL SUPPLY:

- GKE-107 **1993 KERPEN Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese\***  
10 cases. Creamy-puddingy and calmy and graciously “dry” –really long, cool and complex.
- GKF-116 **1992 KRUGER-RUMPF Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Auslese**  
4 cases. Believe me, these Auslesen were *drier* than today’s Kabinetts. It has 38g/l. RS if you still don’t believe me.
- GKF-117 **1994 KRUGER-RUMPF Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Auslese**  
4 cases. Superb! *Not* “sweet.”
- GKF-118 **1994 KRUGER-RUMPF Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese**  
7 cases. Clean and sleek.
- GKF-122 **1994 KRUGER-RUMPF Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese “Silberkapsel”**  
6 cases of “silver-capsule”, and it’s excellent; lime and quicksilver.
- GKF-121 **1994 KRUGER-RUMPF Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese**  
16 cases. A little cooler and more aloof, but correct. Getting spoiled....
- GKF-119 **1997 KRUGER-RUMPF Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Eiswein**  
4 cases, and only one word: *SUBLIME*.
- GJU-103 **1997 MEULENHOF Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
8 cases, with a special label for Japan; smoky and fine, with racy fruit and moderate sweetness.
- GRH-050 **1989 REUSCHER-HAART Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**  
15 cases. Superb! The young peach-blossom aromas have burnished to include cloves and a power of balsam.
- GRH-051 **1990 REUSCHER-HAART Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**  
10 cases. More serious and solid and has ‘90’s iron-acids, but though it’s less charming than the ‘89 it’s actually even better. Endless length.
- GSW-052 **1995 SCHMITT-WAGNER Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
8 cases. Juicy, sassafrassy and on the money, with 95’s crunchy acids.
- GSW-053 **1992 SCHMITT-WAGNER Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
15 cases. Drier and more varnish-y, needs 15-20 minutes in the glass. Riper and with less acidity than the ‘95.
- GSW-057 **1992 SCHMITT-WAGNER Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
5 cases. Juicy with bright acids and a grainy texture. Decant and love!
- GSW-058 **1997 SCHMITT-WAGNER Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
5 cases. Wintergreen and key-lime and lavish youthful juiciness.



# heribert kerpen

mosel • wehlen

Everyone in Wehlen stands to some extent in the shadow of Manfred Prüm, yet I don't really see anyone trying to emulate the style. There are good wineries making splendidly steely-mineral wines — you know who they are — and then there is Kerpen, who stands stylistically off to the side. The wines, in fact, resemble Selbach's more than any neighbors in Wehlen; verdant, shady, woody, vinous, mid-palate density, lots of soul.

Martin Kerpen has been variously described as "gentle" and "modest," but he seems to know quite well how good his wines are and to feel the appropriate pride. He is very funny and he loves to laugh. He is the most genial of hosts, and his wife Celia is a substantive and lovely woman with whom I always wish I had more time to talk. They lay a bountiful and happy table.

Some of what's happened at Kerpen reveals the prosaic truths which lie beneath much wine romance. The quality of his wines improved significantly when Martin bought his new house along the Mosel, and completed the cellar. He used to have to make the wines in weeny widdle crannies in several different locations; now he's not only all under one roof but he's got ample space besides.

So tell us, Martin, how is it done? "I don't know, exactly! You have to work *clean*. My wife wishes I were as clean in the house as I am in the cellar. Your quality is

70% the vineyard, 25% the cellar. The other 5% is luck." I would agree, but the proportion of luck can be (and has been) diminished by the most stringent possible selection in the vineyard. Martin likes clear-tasting wine, therefore he labors to make clear-tasting wine. Some have said that he makes wine in his own image —

Martin is a tall, wiry sort of fellow — I said it too, but I've changed my mind. His wines are sleek (and long!) enough, but what impresses me most about them is the multi-layered *depth* beneath all that finesse. It's an almost magical mingling of super-fine clarity with a remarkable chordal richness that takes the wines from very good to great. These are wines towards which you feel both admiration *and* tenderness; they are dear, winning wines. They needn't strain to be *great* wines; their beauty is their *beauty*.



- Vineyard area: 6.5 hectares
- Annual production: 4,100 cases
- Top sites: Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen
- Soil types: Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

Maybe it's the land Martin has added, which would permit him to harvest even more selectively, but something's sure been up starting with 2004. And I don't hesitate to say 2006 is the best vintage Martin has ever made, and one entirely at odds with the prevailing norm of '06. It remains to be seen how the blockbuster dessert-wines will fare, but we have them from 2005 still available, and that group set a new standard for Kerpen. Tasting his '06s was like coming into the deep shade on a blistering-hot day.



Martin Kerpen

**kerpen at a glance:**

Sleek, feminine, elegant and soulful wines with silky fruit of exceptional beauty. Prices reflect the “Wehlen premium” but are still below the levels of many of the richer and more famous!

**how the wines taste:**

They are clear and lithe in structure but with juiciness which gives them a haunting charm. Leesy along Selbach lines, with even more flowery perfume. Unabashedly pretty but not vapid, not *just* pretty.

- GKE-108 **2006 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**  
Only 50 cases. Martin winced when I asked him for the quantity. “To be honest I never thought you’d offer this wine!” Sorry squire. It has Himmelreich’s usual fiji-apple but elevated to cox-orange pippin by the ‘06 ripeness; it’s creamy and serenely slatey, with gleaming fruit and easy length. How on earth did he balance it with so little RS in *this* vintage? A triumph in this or any year. (He plans to sweeten it ever-so-slightly not to make it taste “sweeter” but to ameliorate the back-palate phenolics.)  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years, and again 13-18 years)
- GKE-109 **2006 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
CORE-LIST WINE. And damn little of it. And it’s the best vintage of this wine I can recall. If I weren’t such a halcyon fellow I’d be frustrated. Again this is astonishingly limpid and sappy for an ‘06; lots of Sonnenuhr vanilla, and this wine actually is believable as a Kabinett, but it has the ‘06 length and sinew and the fine slatiness of the very best.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (5-19 years)
- GKE-112 **Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
These wines start making me think of Dönnhoff, they’re so existentially *other* than the vintage-norm. This is really fetching Mosel wine; the cerise aromas recall Kirschheck; there’s a melting swoon of ripe fruit (not to mention whole forests of balsam and wintergreen) leading into a luminous and deliberate finish.  
SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GKE-110 **2006 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese\* (Artist Label)** **++**  
CORE-LIST WINE with the bird-in-the-boat ARTIST LABEL. The nose recalls the 2005, incredibly, in its seamless melding of ripeness and (clean!) botrytis; it’s a dead-ringer for a top ‘75 Auslese, down to its woodsy touch – which by the way I adore – from a now-20-year-old cask Martin received as a wedding gift. It’s all here; fruit and herbs and talc and flowers and a cool, dewy slatiness. Mosel wine doesn’t get any more soulful than this.  
SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GKE-111 **2006 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese\*** **+++**  
A new level of beauty from this estate. It has the woodsy touch again, but oh this is insanely good wine! Firing on every possible cylinder, with a salty inner thickness that doesn’t let up. It is sheer miracle, this one; arcing flames of brightness, incredibly complex mélange of herbs and forest-y notes on the firm and creamy mid-palate, and a pitted-fruit finish of evanescent delicacy, a haunting murmur of malt.  
SOS: 3 (13-33 years)
- GKE-103 **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese\*\*** **++**  
A masterly performance, both from nature and vintner; Kerpen has rarely shown such a sure hand with explicit botrytis; there’s wonderful malty-salty fruit, great solid structure, and the lingering, searching finish is pure Sonnenuhr.  
SOS: 3 (12-30 years)
- GKE-104H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese\*\*\*, 12/375ml** **(+)**
- GKE-105H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling BA\*, 12/375ml** **++**
- GKE-106H **2005 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling TBA\*, 12/375ml** **++**  
These are by far the greatest dessert wines Martin has made. The 3-star Auslese has 145° Oechsle (TBA starts at 150°!), and is polished and clear with lovely gentle power. The BA is a wonderfully delicate, winsome elixir, and the TBA somehow continues to be astonishingly sleek and clean despite a throbbing 250° Oechsle, maintaining form, outline and clarity throughout.

# willi schaefer

## mosel • graach

Well there's bad news and good news at Schaefer this year. The bad news is we're getting about 40% less wine than last year. The *good* news is Christoph's really settled in and he and Andrea are gonna make a GRANDDADDY out of Willi later this year. And Willi is going to be the silliest Gramps any little kid could desire.

Willi's 2006 vintage continues his uncannily confounding streak of excelling when you don't expect him to. They're actually a notch up from his 05s, and it's a great Schaefer vintage. At some point between our customary gales of laughter I assumed a solemn visage and asked Willi to explain why his damn wines were so damn good. "Be serious now," I demanded. "Well," he

began, "It was important to press very softly, even by our standards, and to constantly taste the juice. You also had to bring the grapes back as cold as possible. We often started at or before dawn. This played havoc with my jet-skiing, but quality means sacrifice." *QUIZ: which part of that statement did I MAKE UP?*

I have no idea what I did to deserve it (maybe they were expecting someone else and I rang the doorbell) but there was a '59 ready to be opened when I arrived.

After we finished drinking it I commiserated with Willi. "I feel for you when I drink a wine like this," I said. Willi knows I can't be trusted to ever say anything sensible, so he smiled wryly and said "Comiserate? Why so?" and I answered "Well, it has to be frustrating when you feel like drinking an old wine and every damn thing in your cellar tastes so young."

In fact I have never once had an "old"-tasting bottle from Willi, and this lovely '59 was no exception: *It is Graacher Himmelreich Auslese, the same parcel from which the best '76 Auslese came, directly next to Domprobst. As always, eerily green still, a few flecks of yellow but no gold; fresh aromas*

*of lime and slate dance with beeswax and balsam. The palate is*



Will Schaefer and Terry

*sappy with a lovely undertone of grain, pine, tilleul at its highest form; a l m o s t unnervingly limpid and fresh. Willi says "You taste the heaviness of the vintage," but all I taste is this comely transparent grace. The finish is searching but the wine is Spring-gentle and sparrow-voiced. BLESS this culture, who brought and still bring the world these gentle, helpful, self-effacing works of beauty.*

It was May 1978 when I first visited and met with him. I loved his wines and went whenever I could. I'll never forget one time I took a friend who was just get-

- Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares

- Annual production: 2,600 cases

- Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Wehlener Sonnenuhr

- Soil types: Devonian slate

- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

ting into wine. It was a perfect Spring day, and Willi's garden looked inviting. "Would you like to sit in the garden with a bottle and relax awhile?" he asked. There were other visitors and his father was entertaining an old client. "Sure," I said. I purchased a half-bottle of '75 Domprobst BA, and we sat in the shade listening to the birds, looking straight up at the impossibly steep Domprobst. The air was sweet with blossom. The wine was sublime. We were nearly in tears. Then suddenly a tenor voice started singing, some chipper little *lied* about Spring. My friend stared at me and we both laughed. "No!" he said, "You staged this, right? It isn't actually happening, right?"

At this point Willi and I are so boisterous together I'm sure we'd absolutely freak out my teenager (Oh God dad, ICK) and in fact it's pretty silly I must admit. But this is truly the world's nicest guy and I'm just giddy to see him, and we laugh and laugh. But laughing isn't all we do. We've known each other 28 years now, and one respects the dignity of such a clump of time. One year Willi announced that our occasion deserved to be commemorated with something a little special. He disappeared for a few minutes, and returned with a 1953, which he knew was my birth-year. "Twenty five years for us, and fifty for you," he said; "It seems appropriate, I think!"

It was Willi and his son Christoph, me and Corrie Malas and Mark Hutchens and Bill Mayer, and Willi's wife Esther joined us (though it was a little early in the day to drink wine; still, it was a '53 . . .). And the wine was poured. It still tasted *primary*, still had fruit and architecture, still had some chlorophyll green flecked

in among the gold. It was limpid and essentially ageless. (Like me!) The wine was in fact astonishing, yet the experience of sharing it in friendship with Schaefer was beyond description.

"Willi, let me take a glass to your mother," said Esther. "She'll enjoy drinking a wine her husband made."

Well, this day was off to a good start! Barely 10am, and I had a '53 in my glass in the company of the family who made it, and who seemed to like me.

Eventually, Willi tells me, the holdings will be enlarged and there'll be more wine for us greedy sybarites. As it is Willi *could* easily choose to grow, but he elects not to. "The estate is the right size for me to work and give the proper attention to the wines," he says. How's that for capitalism! Willi could make, say, 50% more wine and **sell it instantaneously**, thus obtaining kid-leather seat covers for his zippy new Porsche, but instead he knows in his bones what the proper size for his estate must be, if he is to preserve his relationship to his wines, to his work. Hopeless Willi, just hopeless; where's your ambition, man; where's your **can-do spirit**? **DON'T YOU WANT TO MAKE MORE MONEY???**

Pleased as we were to see Schaefer make Parker's *Great Wine Estates Of The World* book, I had to explain the Porsche comment to him. First I had to get over my slack-jawed incredulosity that the author (who may have been Rovani) took an obviously facetious comment and read it *literally*. The idea of Willi screaming around the Mosel in a Porsche is only marginally more plausible than Merkelbachs roaring around Ürzig in a Lamborghini with the top down. But I do enjoy it when our omniscient writers show how very careful they are! Though I'll cheerily grant they have many priorities higher than to unscramble the meanings in my banshee prose.

When we finished tasting one year, Willi brought out a bottle of the celestial 1975 Domprobst Auslese, which is about as good a Mosel wine as has ever been made. Christoph appeared in the doorway to say hi in

his raffish sideburns. I recalled that the first time I drank this Domprobst was in 1980, in Willi's living room. His kids were little then. Willi left the room to take a phone call and I sat there with my glass of Auslese while the kids sat on the floor playing with a little top which hummed as it spun. The humming and the playing and the beauty of the wine and the friendliness and hospitality of my host became a single thing. I often recall that moment when I hear someone defend the idea of giving point-scores to wines.

Schaefer grows only Riesling and only on steep slopes. The best is the Domprobst, though there's no scoffing at his Himmelreich (fruitier), or his Bernkasteler Badstube (actually Matheisbildchen, and typically rich and flinty) or his little bit of Wehlener Sonnenuhr (light but true to form). Vinification isn't unusual, expect for the *very* gentlest of pressings, which leaves few bitter phenols in the wines, and gives them their strikingly pale colors. Willi knows his vineyards like he knows his children, all their quirks and foibles and capabilities. As a taster he responds to "character above all. The finesse of fruit is also important to me, and the harmony of sweetness, fruit and acidity. Apart from that, the wine should embody its vineyard and grape variety."

Christoph's decision to carry on the winery is quietly momentous. Schaefer said, with characteristic understatement, "we really didn't pressure him at all, he came to the decision entirely on his own," and there was something even more stirring than Willi's and Esther's quiet pride and gratification. How can I put it? I hope that Christoph observed the contentment in this household, the bedrock joy when one's heart is at home in one's work. Different vintners have said this to me at different times: Hans-Günter Schwarz is always saying, "you have to love it." Helmut Dönnhoff repeats almost as a mantra, "It has to be FUN." And Willi Schaefer has the glow of a man doing exactly what he was put on earth to do.

I am fortunate to be a part of it, and to know this kind, honorable, modest and lovely man as a friend.

### schaefer at a glance:

For many tasters, these are the *Ne Plus Ultra* of Mosel wine, and they have attracted an almost religious following. Thus my most frustrating agency, as there is never enough wine.

### how the wines taste:

It is hard to put a finger on exactly what it is that makes these wines so precious. There is a candor about them that is quite disarming. They are polished too, but not brashly so. They are careful to delineate their vineyard characteristics, and they offer fruit of sublime purity. They are utterly soaring in flavor yet not without weight. What many of you seem to have warmed to is their clarity, precision and beauty of fruit, so maybe I'll leave it at that!

#### GWS-142 2006 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett

As exotic as Domprobst in a normal vintage; quince, cox-orange-pippins, jasmine and lemon blossom; again a hint of the '76 type, though juicier, but this is outsized and extravagant – 2006.  
SOS: 2 (12-26 years)

#### GWS-143 2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett

Still exotic but more tart-apple and nut-husk; it's so high-toned it's even a little stavey (this is a kind of celeriac aroma that makes me think of steel barrel staves; just one of Terry's little incomprehensible words...) with quite the acid kick – as if '90 and '76 were blended; again the *dark* slate and the angularity that comes from configuring the RS to the Prädikat and not the ripeness. Very long; the empty glass smells of verbena and spearmint.  
SOS: 2 (13-28 years)



- GWS-146 **2006 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese** +  
This is about the *prettiest* botrytis wine I recall from Willi – at least since the last time I said that. Just a refinement of apple that defies credulity, with a flavor like a liqueur of apple-blossom mixed with hyssop and talc and white tea. Again an immovable finish.  
SOS: 2 (15-32 years)
- GWS-144 **2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #12** ++  
A masterpiece, and so outsized yet so quintessentially Mosel, though it's also like a slatey Nahe wine, Brücke or Pittermännchen; flavors tingle like a bell-tree but consolidate into a big swollen chord within which you can hear the guy striking the triangle with the little steel stick; texture like layers of silk hung across the whole sky; astonishingly buoyant and transparent. I was so blown away I forgot to write my SOS number.  
(15-35 years)
- GWS-145 **2006 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
Key-lime, verbenä, wintergreen, a little drier and with a more pointedly precise acid statement; almost intimidating vigor and penetration. Some incipience of Sonnenuhr has been liberated here. It is again both stingingly brilliant and identifiably *Schaefer* yet also does something entirely different.  
SOS: 2 (13-28 years)
- GWS-147 **2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5** +  
This is naked slate and gunflint, and as keen as the blade on a sushi knife; more integrated albeit fervidly green; the wine is aerodynamic, it stays aloft so long on the palate; it's like the continuation of the Domprobst Kab, the air still cold but the trees are flowering, and the stiff cold wind blows a spindrift of blossom.  
SOS: 2 (15-35 years)
- GWS-148 **2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #11**  
Like a 90 though with less muscle and even more precisely chiseled; again in the green family though overtly juicier than #5; this really tastes like some ether of 45 wild herbs strained through pulverized flint. I have a question about its acid-jab but none about its implausible beauty.  
SOS: 3 (14-33 years)
- GWS-150 **2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #14** +++  
GWS-149 **2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese #10** +++  
Two utterly mind-warping wines here! Willi's greatest wines since the legendary 1990 BA.
- I tasted #14 first. It was immediately not just great but Great, a wine of profound stature, clearly both complex and magnificent; every vintage tributary comes together in a single great river of amazing elegant grandeur; at once lacy and endlessly juicy, with sublime botrytis; a singing, lyric wine of perfect pitch.
- I thought the summit had been reached, and that the next Auslese would add only botrytis and must-weight. *Nope.*
- #10 adds a more explicit crag of pure slate; it's a little cooler and more obviously intricate – indeed it's a pinnacle of slate-driven fruit, whereas #14 is fruit-driven slate. The structural grammar is deft and perfect; the pulsing and evolving flavors are crystalline and articulate; it's more existentially *Domprobst* than #14, and the salty-slatey counterpoint is wicked and sizzly.  
SOS: 3 for both (20-45 years, also for both)
- GWS-151H **2006 Graacher Domprobst Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +  
Though this is overt and assertive, it has a mineral dimension another BA (from the Himmelreich) didn't show. The broiling minerality seems to flash in a sweet stony wave over the palate; the malty marmelade makes sense. God what a vintage here.  
SOS: 4 (25-60 years)



You want a garagiste? Here's a garagiste! The guy makes about 600 cases of frickin unbelievable wine from Grand Cru vineyards.

It took me (too) many years to learn there'd never be enough time to have the kind of soul-searching conversations about wine philosophy I wanted to have with my growers. Also, that such conversations couldn't be contrived, but needed to happen spontaneously. Yet I wanted to know what made a grower tick, and so I created a little questionnaire which I leave behind for the grower to answer at his/her leisure. The results go into my catalog text, augmented by *bon mots* which actually do arise in conversation.

Andreas Adam is an *intense* young man, and meeting him for the first time it was subdued by his old-world politeness. But answering my written questions in solitude seems to have unleashed the beast. Adam is both his own man — very much so — yet also emblematic of the new wave in German wine-think. I don't agree with everything he espouses, but his bedrock passion is stirring. I think of that instant of ignition when I tasted my first Adam wine, and it all starts to make sense.

Here's some of what he wrote:

"The hardest work of vinifying a great wine takes about nine months, from February till the beginning of November — rather like a pregnancy — during which time we let what happens happen, without disturbing or perturbing nature, but rather we watch over and work in harmony with nature's larger power."



Andreas Adam

"An aside: I'm sitting here writing on our terrace under a blue sky. Nearby sits a fallow vineyard, to which a vintner is carrying chemical fertilizer. . . .

"I renounce any and all such treatments. I sustain my vineyards by intensive soil-work (I was ploughing this morning; it smells so wonderfully of fresh earth and slate) to

bring the essential nutrients up from the primary rock, the natural compost of a vineyard. This completion of the bond between the elemental soil and the work of the vintner is another piece in the puzzle of terroir. "

Well-said!

I then ask the grower, which is his peak-site. And

- Vineyard area: 1.75 hectares
- Annual production: under 600 cases
- Top sites: Dronerhofberg
- Soil types: Weathered slate with clay
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

why; is his choice due to specific terroir/microclimactic factors, or other circumstances such as vine-age or vine-material?

"We love our Dhronhofberger, in its lovely quiet side-valley, which leaves stress behind and is out of the stream of all which is trendy in German wine-growing; today Cabernet, tomorrow Sauvignon Blanc.

This year we took a small excursion up into the Hofberger to try and grok the ambience and look at Andreas' new parcels. He's made the decision to be a full-time vintner (much to the consternation of the many estates who tried to hire him) and has added three-quarters of a hectare, and wants to add more. Hofberger is one of those sacred spaces, I think. It isn't merely symbolic that it faces away from the river-current. One has a 180° view from it, but it isn't a grand aspect — rather a sweet, almost intimate one, of little valleys and old houses with slate rooftops. It is also very quiet, except for the many birds. A perfect place for a thoughtful introvert to work, I think. And what flavors come from this ground! Andreas says: "Even young it often shows a striking exotic fruit, subtle spice, *wild* slate aromas and a finesse of acidity."

I agree. The only reason this site isn't front-and-center among Mosel Grand Crus is the lack of a flagship-estate — until now. Hofberger is one of those Mosel sites with *complex* slate, in this case with a vein of clay and with a measure of the sandy slate-variant of the Nahe. It is both archetypal Mosel yet also extra-Mosel; it sometimes makes me think of Dönnhoff's Brücke.

Next I ask about *terroir*. Of course! Not for nothing have I been anointed *terroir-lama*. My question is specific: do you believe that components in your soil create flavors in your wines?

"I think in Germany we see *terroir* as a unity of grape, climate, soil, and the mentality of the person who works the vineyard. But the essence of that mentality is a knowledge that the geology of his terrain indeed creates the flavors in the grapes which grow there. Thus if you consider Riesling from blue-gray slate from the Goldtröpfchen, in its youth it's herbacious, with delicate lime fragrance and mineral-salty on the palate. Contrast the Dhronhofberger Tholey, with its brittle blue clay-slate mixed with quartz and *Klimmer*, whose riesling tastes almost as if it emerged from a tropical garden; maracuja, papaya, pineapple and with a slight breeze of honey and caramel. Here on the Mosel we have lovely variations of slate and exposure."

And vinification, I ask? Anything which separates you from the prevailing norm?

"Actually we do nearly nothing differently than did our forefathers in the '20s: small yields of late-harvested Riesling grapes are gently handled and pressed (we still press some in an old wooden press); after an open must-oxidation the wines fall bright at cool temperatures in stainless steel, and later ferment in old wooden Fuders. **Finito!** That's all, nothing else, just wait for the wild yeasts to begin their work. No must or mash sulfuring, no enzymes, no gelatin, no added vitamins, no bentonite — **pure nature!**

To the extent we employ technology it is only in the service of cleanliness."

I'm curious to know what kinds of wines a grower drinks at home in private, i.e. what he drinks for pleasure. Adam says, "A wide range of Grüner Veltliners, which I prefer to Grand Crus in white Burgundy; Rieslings from great sites in our region whether dry or sweet; vintage Champagnes; the occasional rose-scented Muscat from Südsteiermark or a smoky-flinty Loire Sauvignon from someone like Dageneau." Nice to know if I were ever quarantined at Adam's there'd be plenty to drink.

He has a telling comment to make about deacidification: "A great Riesling with a rather high level of acidity is no catastrophe on the palate; it just needs time. But if we ever needed to deacidify, we'd have done it before the grapes ferment, via reduced yields, intensive soil and leaf work, air-flow management, sun-exposure management, and finally a selective harvest where we only pick ripe fruit. I can get aromas from the skins in the press-house, and also reduce acids by must-oxidation, which also eliminates undesirable tannins and phenols."

Or, one might add, you can take it easy and just dump in some chemicals.

Finally, as I run through the basics of his vineyard and cellar work, I need you to understand the extent to which this is emblematic of the new thinking in quality-minded German vintners, a thinking which has undergone a 180-degree turn in the last twenty years. These basics are:

- Exclusively organic fertilizing

- Green-harvest to reduce yields
- Hand-harvesting only
- Must-clarification by gravity (no centrifuges or filters)
- Ambient wild-yeast fermentations (There are many shades of opinion on this question.)
- Long lees-contact (4 months, followed by another 6 weeks on the fine-lees)
- No dosage (I happen to disagree with this but applaud the purism which prompts it)

He had a practicum at Heymann-Löwenstein, a celebrated estate in Winningen who was the first to break free of the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. I gather he's worked at Van Volxem too. His wines are at least as good as those of his mentors. Maybe even better. And Adam has arrived on the scene: Gault-Millau anoints him an *Aufsteiger* (literally "one who's on the way up") saying "Such fine Riesling expression, with minerality bound to clarity, elegance and depth is not so often found on the Mosel." And a private newsletter published by a Mr. Werner Elflein had this to say about Adam's '06s: "It speaks for the know-how of Andreas Adam ("My Rieslings are only allowed air and sulfur.") that even in the difficult botrytis-vintage of 2006 he used no carbon or other fining materials."

But the truth is, it isn't easy. His father was a co-op member; I think the estate only has five rows more than a hectare, and if young Mr. Adam wishes to continue, it will cost many Euro. We are hoping he will, and standing by to help. All kidding aside, what I actually told him was "I won't pressure you, but I *will* say if you *do* decide to continue you will have a highly committed customer in me." He'll probably do a little of each; work



for one of his kindred spirits while growing his own estate incrementally.

Friend, if you've tasted these wines, you'll know why I care so much.

With the first taste of the first wine I knew it; here was someone to be reckoned with. There was simply more going on here, more weight, more expression, more seriousness, more drive. How was this estate under the radar?

As we tasted through his range (7 wines) it was unequivocally clear to me: *This is a star in the making*. I decided to list the wines before I knew their prices!

**adam at a glance:**

Tiny, still part-time grower making some of the longest, most exotic, most old-school Mosel wines in existence. Stellar across the board, and for the quality, far from expensive.

**how the wines taste:**

They taste *deep* and leesy, and they never seem sweet and almost never seem *dry*, even when they are in fact either sweet or dry. Flavors are both thick and opalescent, and one is aware of a sense of stature: this is immediate. It's self-evident these are wines of profound terroir; it's their *raison d'être*. And for me it's a great pleasure to *finally* offer you Dhroners which embody the greatness of that land.

I have a powerful connection here, because the first wine I ever drank which fascinated me was a 1971 Dhronhofberger Kabinett. Till then I'd been drinking fruity wines which were more or less sweet or polished or balanced, but it was supermarket cheapies. The Dhroner was the first wine with a haunting flavor, something more than grapey, something that didn't pander, something that just *was*. So I always looked for Dhroners, and for awhile I found them from the Bischöflichen Weingüter, vintages from the '60s and '70s. Then quality slipped, and there weren't any other sources. Dhron itself is sleepy and the land is steep and no one seemed to come along - till now.

- GAD-018 **2006 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett** ++  
 I had every intention to core-list this but there's only 58 cases so we'll wait for the '07 vintage. Adam's were the first Mosels I tasted and let me tell ya, my mood improved *rapidement!* This is like a GPS of the soul, precisely directed to this very place. *Classic* Mosel nose – I mean archetypal; this might well be the greatest Mosel Kabinett I've ever had, adding a hint of sassafrass to its sublime and easeful symmetry of Mosel-markers. Make that 56 cases, 'cause I'm buying some for me!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (8-25 years)
- GAD-020 **2006 Dhron Hofberger Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 108° Oechsle; riper, more salty and muscular and less luminously serene than the Kabinett; willful and adamant and pointed, but if this is fractionally less pretty it is even more impressive. Cox-orange-pippins and freesia; ridiculously long mid-palate and finish. 50 cases available.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (12-30 years)
- GAD-019 **2005 Dhron Hofberg "Reserve"** +  
**First offering** of a wine still fermenting when I was last in Germany in June '06. This is a deliberate reenactment of the style of Mosel wine which existed between 1871 and 1914; it sat on its fine-lees in *Fuder* for 16 months, and has only the sweetness (12 g.l.) it stopped with. Oddly it reminds me most of *Nikoloaihof's* Vom Stein bottlings – "odd" because Andreas and Nikky Saahs were roommates at Geisenheim – but this is a lovely soulful thing, full of leaf-smoke and verbenia and quinine and a pronounced mineral tang atop the quince. It's masculine but not overblown; its 12.5% alc is testament to how much flavor can be packed into even such moderate body.
- GAD-021 **2006 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Auslese** +  
 120° now; hand-pressed in an old basket press; the nose is pure violet and *peche-de-vigne*; the palate unites an ultra-ripe '76 tone with greater mid-palate fruit and a dense demi-glaze of mineral; lots of panache and grace here.  
 SOS: 3 (15-45 years)
- GAD-016H **2005 "Hofberg" Riesling BA, 12/375ml** ++  
 "I had to go out and buy a small basket-press to make this wine," he said. It has the smell I call "marigold." With all its botrytis this remains a clear portrait of Mosel-fruit and the finish is like a honey you fined with slate. A mere 180° Oechsle, by the way. There's the sublime fruit of a '75 but the amber-weight of '71.  
 SOS: 4 (20-45 years)



Something seems to be up at Reuscher Haart. Maybe it's the influence of Bernd and Mario Schwang, Dad Hugo's two sons (who look like members of Limp Bizkit) or maybe it's just one of those things. In any case, the past two vintages reminded me of the majestic 1990s and brilliant 1993s. Even the 2003s, about which I was dubious at first, have firmed up wonderfully with bottling, and I now feel my first impressions were misleading. Then along came the stunning 2004, and this estate is really showing me something yet they haven't abandoned their fundamental style, Mosel wine in the form of a heavy suede jacket; if anything they've renewed it in even stronger form.

These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. I really shouldn't do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often

stubbornly present. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but these wines aren't really made for our frantic world. SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT'S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations who'll live in microwave-time. It really isn't conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there's an incipient movement toward a more *attentive* mode of living? Not ouiji-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to *notice* stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

I have a stormy relationship with Piesporters. When I first encountered Reuscher-Haart's wines, I thought I had found my Piesport pie-in-the-sky. In their acid-drenched, thick, leesy style I found for the first time stunningly detailed and authoritative wines from these maddening slopes **that didn't need to be archly modern in order to succeed.**



Hugo & Mario Schwang

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. "We use no cultured yeasts," he said. "If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character." This made sense; Schwang's wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured-

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr, Falkenberg, and Treppchen**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Müller-Thurgau, 2% Regent**

yeast wines can display. He leaves his wine on its primary lees for a remarkable length of time: two to three months is common, though less-ripe wines will be racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. "I'd personally say that these are the most important factors for high quality," he says. "First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don't use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make."

Last year the talk was all about organic. In essence, said Schwang, the estate is nearly all the way there, so why not take that small final step? What did we think? I said we applauded organic viticulture as a matter of principle, but we could offer no commercial incentive. "I hope you'll do it," I said, "because it's *worth doing*. But that doesn't mean I'll think less of you or your wines if you don't."

In fact the Mosel is among the most difficult regions to work strictly organically, yet the so-called *lutte raisonnée* of France, known as "integrated" agriculture in Germany, has taken a firm hold. In essence this stops short of certifiably organic but encourages organic as a preference as much and as often as possible.

I had a moment during the conversation wherein I realized, Hugo Schwang isn't the most voluble heart-on-his-sleeve producer in my portfolio, but I have probably

underestimated how thoughtful and passionate he really is. Mario's settling in seems to have turbo-charged the energy here, and this looks like an estate on the move.

### reuscher-haart at a glance:

Leesy, old-fashioned Piesporters that need time. Great resonance and depth in the best examples.

### how the wines taste:

At their best one can see why they're held in such renown. Schwang's wines can have impressive, almost majestic corpulence without being fat, plus a positive depth and stuffing from the lees. When that happens the Piesport fruit shows its **raison d'être**; an almost lurid court bouillon of bewitching fragrances and flavors; patchouli, passion fruit, bergamot, mango. And all in a voodoo voluptuousness that's the wine equivalent of an erotic trance. We should have to get our PARENTS' permission before drinking them. My parents would have refused!

#### GRH-047L **2006 Piesporter Falkenberg Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

This is a true single-site, in fact the highest slopes of Goldtröpfchen; it's unchaptalized (and was picked at over 90° Oechsle), and was the slimmer of two QbAs I saw; indeed it's rather sleek for an '06, with a pure happy grin of apricot-y fruit (You didn't know apricots could grin? Shame on you.) and an edge of ginger and quince. Just your basic everyday yumster. Just not too much of it: 166 cases.

SOS: 2 (now- 8 years)

#### GRH-048 **2006 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

This is one of those not-sweet-enough 2006 Kabinetts, though the fragrance is certainly typical of ripe PiesGold, and the thick creamy-salty mid-palate comes on, and the key-lime finish is attractive. Taste it: you may think I'm silly. Even if you don't taste it.

SOS: 2 (8-20 years)

#### GRH-049 **2006 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

I'm not sure in what form "#10" will appear on the label – maybe the AP number. But it's the one I want. And here the vintage struts its sultry stuff. And here this estate realizes itself; that chewy meaty richness is what Reuscher-Haart is *about*. Though riper and sweeter it seems somehow *cooler* than the Kabinett, with more emphasis on lime and white nectarine, and with a racy spiciness.

SOS: 3 (12-28 years)



I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year *stage* at the German Wine Information Bureau, where he says he met me once, and maybe he did. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs. These were strikingly vivid wines, and I heard myself thinking a new star was on the horizon.

Dieter wants to produce wines of fruit and fullness. The clean must (gravity-settling, twice) sits on the skins 2 hours before pressing and after fermentation the wine sits on its lees until February/March "because you get the most optimal aging-potential when the wine has time on the gross lees."

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fermentations but not all. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the



*The Hoffmanns*

current idiom. The cellar's all stainless steel now. If there was ever a complaint about Hoffman's wines it was that they were perhaps too "correct," but 2006 seems to have unleashed the beast here. I wouldn't have expected it, but these are a soulful group of Mosel wines, Dieter's best since the 2001 vintage.

- **Vineyard area: 9.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Maringer Honigberg, Köwericher Laurentiuslay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 67% Riesling, 28% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Regent**



**hoffmann-simon at a glance:**

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart.

**how the wines taste:**

They're not as leesy-plump as Reuscher-Haart but more so than, say, Kesselstatt. Not as squeaky-clean as Kesselstatt, but more so than Reuscher-Haart! In Piesport there are two ways you can go. You can make lavish, sensual voodoo-wines that barely taste like Riesling at all, or you can make wines as compact as this terroir will give — which isn't very. Hoffmann's wines lean in the compact direction, focusing the Piesport fruit but not resisting it.

GHS-035 **2006 Piesporter Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**

It's from the wrong side of the river but I liked it much more than the Gutsriesling this year; it's juicy and amenable; it has no Grand Cru breed and it's not what you'd call racy, but there's pith and loads of up-front apple-y charm; a lot of middle to this entirely *good* Riesling.

SOS: 2 (3-12 years)

GHS-034 **2006 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

More earnest now; this has airs and *attitude*; pink-peppercorn and bay leaf aromas, with excellent solidity and swagger; this is actually quite a bit better than the 2005 – the firmness of 2006 does it a heap-o-good – but you'll need to swirl for a minute or two.

SOS: 1 (5-17 years)

GHS-037 **2006 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese** +

I had no intention of offering this – we're seriously trying to de-clutter this offering (against every scintilla of my natural inclinations) – but it was actually even better than the PiesGold, and you will restore my wavering faith in humanity if you buy the better (and less expensive!) wine and not just the better-known. It's wonderfully *cool* for an 06, focused and really pretty; yellow and green fruits; salty and silky and sweet.

SOS: 3 (8-23 years)

GHS-036 **2006 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

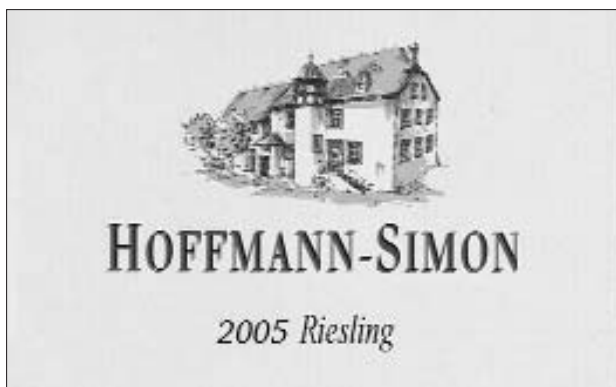
The wine has a cheery glow about it, along with good grip and a stylish weave among its several dimensions; generous and fine.

SOS: 3 (8-23 years)

GHS-038 **2006 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling BA** +GHS-038H **2006 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

Again he put the wine in a new cask, in this case a 2nd-use barrique, and much as I rebel against blatant oak in dry wines I seem perversely to love it in sweet ones. This wine is like a gauzy, evanescent Jurançon, and it's priced to pour and be honest: it's hipper than what you're pouring now!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 4 (10-30 years)





# Weingut Grips

## Ströking, Pfalz

Onan Daly, famous as the first Irishman to hold both the MS, MW and MPAA PG-34 rating, and who is also partially hydrogenated and fully assumable, bought this venerable old domain from its previous owner, Graf von Schwanz. Upon consummating the purchase Daly was bemused to learn the estate hadn't any vines, though they'd been making wine for several generations. "The first thing we had to do was plant the buggers," said Daly, "and then we had to figure out what to do with all the little green um...what the feck are those little bastards called. . . ah, oh right, GRAPES. We had to figure out what to do with them grapes." So they hired one of the great oenologues of Europe, the near-legendary Dutch genius Gøobs van Fruijt, who agreed to consult. "I almost pissed myself when this guy shows up on a feckin' *bicycle*," said Daly. "Plus he was yammerin' away and gobbin' all over the soil, but hey; the guy's made some great wines. I mean, look what he did with that super-Tuscan Chlymidia; that *shit* rocks, dunn'it?"

For his own part, Fruijt is pretty tight-lipped about what he did to improve – hell, to *create* quality at Grips. "Hmmm, <hawk!>, verll, ik var am mejsten heenter dem bojners met a moijsht ond supple hajnd," he said. "Yah, right, whatever!" adds Daly. It's great to see two guys work so well together. Any frictions in the relationship thus far, I ventured to ask. "Well it's all aboot friction, innit?" said Daly. "I mean, friction's the straw that sterrs the drink. . . come to think of it. . . ." he added before abruptly disappearing. Left alone with Fruijt I tried again to get him to dish. Maybe a walk among the vines would help?

"This vineyard's called the "Spurtberg" isn't it?" I inquired. "O ja ja, eergenvoos solke name, verzeehong. . . <hawk!>...aber met a grøoode langen zwanz kann een man veejle tüouren ovvneen." I could see I wasn't going to get anywhere with this man who had such lofty and arcane concepts on his mind. I decided to go to the wines.

### 2005 Pudyanke Throbbingmann (Riesling?) Floss-lese

The variety is unknown – "We bought it on sale and the fecker wasn't too sure what it was," said Daly. "I *thought* he said Riesling, or maybe it was Alicante Bouchet. . . ." The clusters are so tight the individual berries have to be removed with dental floss. "Sometimes to save money we take used floss," Daly explained, which could account for the little bits of chewed-up meat floating in myglass.

### 2006 Cumminna Bucket (Riesling?)

A so-called "handlese" wherein the pickers hands are coated with a self-warming gel in order to increase ripeness. I couldn't discern the extra ripeness, but then it was hard to discern much of any flavor at all. "Ja,ja. . . het vijn eet een bizzel onzowberjdg," agreed Fruijt.

### 2003 Strøkinger Diddelbutton Merlot

"Sort of like a nosebleed innit!" said Daly. "Happens to me all the time, especially if I'm distracted while I'm wanking away on....on the *grapes*, I mean on the feckin' *grapes*, (oh man that was close wann'it – shite!)" Daly wasn't going to be much help, so I turned to Fruijt to show him my tasting note and see if he could shed any light. *The color is that of arterial blood, from a wildly spurting wound on a body you've just hacked to pieces; the aroma, though, is exceedingly refined, boasting heady scents of ortolans, Sicilian road tar, and the dung of a three-year-old swamp adder; the palate, alas, seems to grow quite limp, as if spent and exhausted, though a minute dribble of viscosity is present on its clipped finish.* Fruijt pondered what I'd written. "Ja,ja. . . ." He mused. "Een meeijsne meenong, het vijn est-eeen grøoode voøtervaal vom sploodje. . . ." but I had heard enough.

# weingut ansgar clüsserath

## mosel • trittenheim

Eva Clüsserath is featured (with a totally happenin' pic) in a lovely new book called RIESLING, co-written by the charming Christine Fischer, who's kinda like the German Andrea Immer except she's still a floor-working somm. Eva has a wonderful quote: "Riesling is really just fun, because it can be so heart-refreshingly uncomplicatedly complicated!"

Not too many people know how to say that, and I myself struggle with it. Wine is complicated — agricultural wine, at any rate — and if you wrestle against it, it will pin you. Yet the instant you relax, the very second you say *OK, it's complicated, it will always be complicated, and I'm going to quit trying to **master** it and just let complicated-ness be FUN*, well guess what? Wine becomes your best friend.

Size vineyard and cellar work are unremarkable in the context of conscientious Moselaners. The cellar is virtually all wood fuders. "We work with little influence from technology," says Eva. She ferments with natural yeasts, filters only once, leaves the wines on the lees till March or April. No one will ever improve on these old ways.

What is significant, I think, is Eva's palate. She's more cosmopolitan than her parents were, I'm sure, and her relationship with Phillip Wittmann gives her a drinking-sweetie in another region plus a comrade with whom to explore the wine-world. They love Burgundy. But Eva herself wants "our wines to be minerally and individual, even more; unmistakable." Good for her! You can always trust a Riesling palate that *starts with mineral*. That's what Riesling is.

The estate has a wonderful future. And I love work-



Eva Clüsserath

ing with girl-vintners, and with the Daddies who flew in the face of all that old-world silliness and *nurtured* their daughters to carry on the estate.

Last year I had a telling conversation with Eva. We're not selling what deserves to be sold from here, and part of the reason why is that ol'

Mosel-stink problem. If you didn't read my intro to this catalog, this is the smell of H<sub>2</sub>S resulting from the lees; it vanishes with something between seconds and 2-3 minutes of swirling, and it will vanish in bottle in a couple years. It's not a "flaw;" it's a marketing nuisance. And it tends to be exaggerated in big-tasting situations, where you have 20 Kabinetts lined up on a table and suddenly one of them is

- Vineyard area: 4 hectares
- Annual production: 3,000 cases
- Top sites: Trittenheimer Apotheke and Altärchen; Mülheimer Sonnenlay
- Soil types: Slate
- Grape varieties: 90% Riesling; 10% other

stinky, and it's *oh-kayy*: NEXT! Even if you know such tastings almost demand that you form the most superficial impressions, you still can't help it.

I said as much to Eva, and she agreed. She's been to the tastings and she's no one's fool. But, she says, it's crucial for her to make what she feels are honest wines; she does not wish to "form" them for commercial considerations, and so she'll continue on her grounded old-fashioned way and what we sell, we sell. Curiously, the "problem" appears solve-able by using cultured yeasts to ferment, but for a certain mentality this is tantamount to diluting terroir. However awkward this may be for me, I must say I applaud anyone who's striving for *truth* in her wines, and I am proud to show you these inconvenient little stinkers! Maybe we'll put a stack of pennies next to Eva's bottles . . .

The estate is on-the-move; they've just obtained parcels in Piesporter Goldtröpfchen (from Adam, I wonder?) and Dhron Hofberger, partly for curiosity's sake and partly to have alternates from which to make wine while the Apotheke is in flurbereinigung. Yet I think Eva would have bought the vineyards regardless; it's like her. A young, curious vintner doesn't want to be associated exclusively with one site.

**clüsserath at a glance:**

Mid-sized Mosel estate making old-school slatey-leesy classics and selling them at fair prices. Under the careful eye of a smart young woman, these have nowhere to go but up.

**how the wines taste:**

A charming amalgam of Trittenheim's charmingly pliant fruit (less stiff than say Graacher Domprobst) with striking minerality.

**GAC-017 2006 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett**

Eva's 2006 vintage is infinitesimally teensy. I mean *homeopathic* amounts of wine – 90 cases of this, for instance. It shows the ore flavor again, that Wachau note so rare among Mosels; really pungent mineral and wild herbs – it could almost pass for Piri – until the mutsu-apple note returns along with the fibrous apple-skin texture; the palate has a taut mineral tension and head-turningly pretty fruit; an articulate wine.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (8-22 years)

**GAC-018 2006 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

30 cases are all. Eva's first vintage of PiesGold, and one of the loveliest I've ever offered, loaded with maracuja, cox-orange-pippins, mirabelle and tangerine, but there's a wonderful tension here, and polish and gloss; it's like Reuscher-Haart but sleeker, like Hoffman-Simon but with more stuffing; still a fruit-based Mosel but that's inherent to the site, especially with old-school vinification.

SOS: 3 (11-28 years)

**GAC-019 2006 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese**

Craggy mineral now and a more phenolic texture; this has a boatload of grippy greenness given how crazy-ripe it is; all key-lime and balsam and wintergreen; the empty glass smells of verbena – the PiesGold smells of sandalwood.

SOS: 2 (14-29 years)

**GAC-020H 2006 Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
**+**

This is thrilling! A stayman-apple sweet-tartness with a wild minty spice and fine salty botrytis, all of which is exalted by the mass of fruit on the mid-palate. It seems none too sweet. I love it.

SOS: 2 (15-35 years)

**GAC-021H 2005 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml**
**++**

First offering and a lesson to me: this wine seemed too 1-dimensionally "botrytis" when I tasted it in March 2006 – but it has evolved amazingly in bottle. Just stunning aromas of ultraviolet slate and infra-red fruit, less apple than guava and cherry; gorgeously smoky and pure and astonishingly long and bee-pollen; marigold, toasty and quince-y, malt and thyme honey; one of the great citizens of THE great Mosel vintage.



# 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 straggle of vines) it became clear immediately which was the greater site. All things being equal, soil will tell.

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

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

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

"German researchers recently studied 165 wines



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

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

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

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same 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 strug-

gle: 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.

Here at These selections we like to say *We ain't no spinning cone zone!* Hey, come to our office and you'll hear us say it all the time, at the water cooler, in the company kitchen, in the parking lot. We hate spinning cones and everything they imply. Instead we like growers like Carl Loewen who say lovely true things like *"A good wine is always made first in the mind."* Here are some other things he says.

"In the modern world of winemakers there are hitherto unimagined possibilities to form the tastes of wines. The grape-breeders send us ever-new varieties, in my region there are people using barriques, using the most current techniques to concentrate natural musts; special cultured yeasts aim to form the characters of wines, and special enzymes to form bouquets.

Is this the brave new wine-world?

I have a different philosophy. Wine is a product of nature, the badge of its origin. And anyone who thinks this way views terroir as the defining important point."

Pretty words, even good words, but only words—until you taste.

And dear friend and reader, since the 2001 vintage Loewen is the unheralded superstar in this assortment. Our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence.

Loewen is another grower who'd rather not know the analytical figures for his wines, preferring to make any necessary decisions based on taste and intuition. "When you have the figures in your head you can't taste the wine any more," he said. And he's right, provided he can absolutely trust that intuition.

Leiwen is just upstream from Trittenheim, and its best site, the Laurentiuslay, is one of several unheralded Crus along this stretch of the Mosel. A lot of the renown a site may or may not possess is dependent on a flagship estate. To cite a somewhat absurd example, if J.J. Prüm happened to have been a resident of Pölich and not of Wehlen then the Pölicher Held would enjoy the renown



of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr. There are great vineyards we don't know because there hasn't been a great vintner to do them full justice.

At least till now. Loewen claims the Laurentiuslay stands "among the best the Mosel has to offer. And it was a stroke of luck for us the *flurbereinigung* was voted down here because it was too expensive. The vineyard shows its original profile with countless little terraces and walls." Another great site, he says, is the *Thörnicher Ritsch*. Many years ago I went to Thörnich with Hans and Sigrid Selbach, on a prowl for a vintner who would do the vineyard justice. Hans knew well the old-timer's wis-

- Vineyard area: 8.7 hectares
- Annual production: 6,200 cases
- Top sites: Leiwener Laurentiuslay, Thörnicher Ritsch, Detzemer, Maximiner Klosterlay
- Soil types: Devonian & light weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 98% Riesling, 2% Müller-Thurgau

dom; Ritsch was a great site. Well we didn't find its champion then, but we know him now. Finally there's the awkwardly-named Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay, from which Loewen makes a "tribute to the old proprietor of this vineyard, the cloister of St Maximin in Trier." Mercifully he calls this wine simply *Maximiner*, describing an "extreme terroir," a 65% mountain falling directly into the river, hard un-weathered blue slate, with an open west flank that catches every moment of afternoon and evening sun. Its position right up against the river moderates nighttime temperatures and the soil retains water so that "even in a Summer like 2003 we had enough moisture for the grapes."

Natural fertilizing, reduced yields, slow fermentations, minimal handling—they only rack the wines once, for instance, It's an all-cask cellar. "I'm dubious about wines made in steel," says Loewen. "The summer after the vintage they're highly presentable, but I doubt they have the stature to age well."

Loewen's wines also have a quality of *companionability* which can't be isolated or quantified but which determines how friendly you feel toward them. Some wines seem to want to take you to a world where *all there is is wine*. Others, no less absorbing or delightful, seem content to meet you in *your* world. Whenever I drink or taste Loewen's wines I always want to curl up with a book, ideally by an open window near a singing thrush.

### loewen at a glance:

Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! “Cool” chalky-minerally style, as if the wines were blended with 15% Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

### how the wines taste:

All that’s stony is not slate. Loewens have some wines on sand or gravel, and these have a “northern” coolness without being explicitly slatey. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: “I don’t like ‘old-wine’ flavor and I definitely don’t like this petrol taste,” he says.

#### GCL-047 2006 Riesling “Quant”

The name comes from Mosel dialect: “We use this word to describe something where everything seems to fit,” says Loewen. “A good meal, a nice evening with friends, in short anything which feels good is *quant*.”

It’s a dry wine – how dry I don’t know. It ferments till it stops. It’s probably not dry enough to be bottled as “Trodden.”

Last year I sold the so-called “Varidor” which was the best dry Mosel wine I’d ever tasted. With the harder acids of 2006 the Varidor seemed a little sharp to me. This Quant has more fruit (and Carl thinks it has more RS), and I loved its sorrel-y tenderness – it’s a little like a loess-grown GrüVe – a charming and useful dry wine that shouldn’t be served ice-cold and will reward decanting.

SOS: 0 (now to 5 years, again 11-14 years)

#### GCL-046 2006 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett

“Here one can find blue and grey slates and also soils where the gravel subsoil is covered with a layer of weathered slate brought down from the surrounding hills by erosion. The Kabinett is made from the slate soils at the foot of the slope.”

So, it’s slate but not steep slate, which gives the wines an extra suppleness and fullness. Year after year this excellent wine is among the *BEST* values in this offering, as many of you have discovered. Not surprisingly, there’s less in ’06 than in ’05 – so don’t delay.

I needed to swirl for two minutes. “I find if a wine smells reduced in its infancy, that when the reduced smell dissipates you’re left with an aroma you can’t get any other way,” says Carl. This 2006 has its lemon-blossom, pollen and jasmine nose, as much like Blanc de Blancs Champagne as always; creamy, elegant and utterly lovely. I own an out-sized amount of it, and drink it with great pleasure.

SOS: 2 (5-13 years)

#### GCL-048 2006 Detzemer Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

+

This is wonderfully light, spriggy, even delicate. Slate, woodruff and fennel, flowering marjoram; the 23 g.l. RS is *crucial* but undetectable, and the fruit is compact and focused. It’s almost perfect food-wine. If I let myself, I can get pitifully discouraged that everyone’s making vile shrill Trocken wines instead of serene beauties like this.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now to 4 years, and again 10-15 years)

#### GCL-050 2006 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese

This is a sort of base-line for 2006 when it succeeds; it’s capacious and enveloping rather than precise and pointed; it’s a warm sort of roasty lemon sweetness, markedly long in umami; it spreads over the palate in a pollen talc-y finish.

SOS: 2 (9-23 years)

#### GCL-049 2006 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Auslese

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The sheer beauty of fruit almost won me over, but the grip on the mid-palate sent me completely over the top, and the cool elegance encased within its ripeness was the final melt; OK, *I’m yours baby*. Certainly one of the triumphs of the vintage.

SOS: 2 (12-28 years)

#### GCL-051H 2006 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling BA, 12/375ml

+++

I don’t recall the last time I was this amazed and stirred by a “dessert-wine.” But this is completely astonishing, in this or any vintage.

It’s not malty or caramelly or figgy. It is *pure essence of Ritsch*, accent on **pure**. Key-lime and verbena in a divine form; simply perfect supporting botrytis; amazing push-pull of grip and richness while staying shapely and compact. I am, to put it mildly, blown the fuck away. 15 cases max – don’t miss it.

SOS: 4 (20-50 years)



# carl schmitt-wagner

mosel • longuich

The half-bottles come out when we're through with the young wines. I have almost lost count of the number of old wines this remarkable man has shared with my friends and me. But he hasn't! I think he remembers each and every one.

I think I'll share what we drank one year, not to rub your nose in it (well maybe a little) (O.K. a lot) but rather as a *tribute* to his generosity and avid spirit.

We started with a 1963 *Kabinett*, very much alive and leafy. I thought it was a '62, and was abashed. One of my traveling companions had surely never dreamed of a 40-year-old "Kabinett" with barely 8% alcohol even making it, let alone drinking like a dream. Next came an elegant, fine '62 *Spätlese*, slatey and solid. A gorgeous wine followed: '69 *Spätlese*, ethereal,

long, evocative and tender.

The next wine was obviously younger, a '92 *Auslese*, just emerging from its adolescence; then a 1997 *Auslese*, not my type (too much botrytis); then an improbable and obscure wine; I thought maybe a 1966 but as it grew in the glass it seemed too stern and "important" for '66. "Could be a 1971 *Spätlese*," I wrote. Bulls-eye! Then a rather old-tasting '71 *Auslese*; "We should have used more sulfur," said Bruno. The next wine was easy; nothing tastes like this magic-Mosel vintage: '75 *Spätlese*. Corrie Malas was happy; it's her birth-year. Next up came a 1971 *BA*, 145° Oechsle, superb, but I still loved that '69 best. Then the *coup de gras*, a '71 *TBA*, about which I wrote "It's an adult but it hasn't been wounded yet; it's still perfectly confident the world is splendidly beautiful and safe. It needs fifteen more years to find its

way to kindness and tenderness; right now it's all happy malt and orange." This at 32 years old! So remember when I write "25-75 years" for a drinking envelope for such wines, this is based on many such experiences.



Bruno Schmitt

And all this took place over maybe 45 minutes! Nor was it in any way worshipful; quite the contrary. You get the sense this is how Bruno Schmitt likes to PARTY DOWN. I'll bet he looks forward to the chance to rampage through a bunch of old vintages. Happy to oblige, squire. Though forgive me if I get a little *emotional*, you know. I know these wines literally live in your basement and all, but for a guy like me this is a sanctum of beauty.

I only wish I could show it to you, because all you get to see is this "drink now to four years" crap by wine

- Vineyard area: 4 hectares
- Annual production: 3,000 cases
- Top sites: Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg
- Soil types: Blue Devonian slate
- Grape varieties: 100% Riesling

writers who've never set foot in a German winery. I also love the ceremony with which the new wines are presented. Wine is significant not only as a provider of livelihood, but also as a filament connecting us to a human continuity.

It's interesting to note that the Herrenberg was classified category "A" — the *best* category — during the world's first official vineyard classification, undertaken by the Prussian land office during the early nineteenth century for the purpose of — you guessed it — *tax assessment*! The original document, published by Stuart Pigott as a vineyard map, is remarkable in its fidelity to current notions of the best vineyards.





**schmitt-wagner at a glance:**

This was a SLEEPER agency, an unsung hero in my portfolio, but the 2001s changed that. Spicy-grassy wines ideally suited to the last few vintages. 109-year-old ungrafted vines—some SIX THOUSAND OF THEM. Makes among the two or three best Kabinetts along the Mosel.

**how the wines taste:**

Of course this varies a little from parcel to parcel, but as a rule the wines show remarkably expressive lime and licorice, almost sassafrass. Sounds a little like Ürziger Würzgarten, right? Both have red clay and sandstone mixed with the slate. Schmitt's is an old style, cask-aged and leesy. The wines *seem* quite open and scrutable yet they age endlessly. One unusual feature here is the rather narrow span between Kabinett and Auslese in recent vintages, but I think this has less to do with undernourished Auslese than with overnourished Kabinetts; after all, a Kabinett from 109-year old ungrafted vines is gonna have some *taste*, one might suppose!

GSW-036 **2002 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett**

**First Offering:** There is no Kabinett in 2006, as indeed there should not be. This is a cask bottled late, and by the time I saw it I was persuaded we should offer the then-current 2003 Kab. Now this one has 4-5 years of bottle-age and is just coming into its own. Who will want it, I wonder? It isn't "the new vintage" but it happens, however inconveniently, to taste wonderful.

SOS: 1 (6-27 years)

GSW-049 **2005 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb +**

36 g.l. of virtually undetectable sweetness, and this masterpiece is a last hurrah from an endangered species, a perfectly balanced dry-ish Riesling: smoky slate and wisteria aromas; palate shows superb Mosel fruit in a tenderly dry form. Absolutely perfect food-wine! Pour it and see.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now to 4 years, again from 17-28 years)

GSW-055 **2006 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

#21, which I hope will appear on the label. I liked this better than another lot of Spät; though it has a whopping 102° it works in its manic minty way; I mean this is all stone and spearmint and flint and cherry; uncompromising forceful stuff, and quite strikingly beautiful in its angular way.

SOS: 2 (11-30 years)

GSW-051 **2005 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** We'll slide into this when the '04 has sold through. Spearmint and candy-cane aromas; higher-toned than the Kabinett, more sassafrass and slate; minty spiced-apple finish.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS:1 (10-30 years)

GSW-056 **2006 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling BA**

At a "mere" 125° Oechsle it's like most others' 2-or-3-star Auslese, and very much a wine, which is rather a relief; shapely and comely and not at all liqueurous; grainy, marigold, even a green-apple note; really a *demi-glace* of his Spätlese, all too easy to drink, and a fine value.

SOS: 3 (15-40 years)

GSW-059H **2006 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling TBA, 12/375ml**

Well I see I've listed this but I don't seem to have taken a note on it. Sheesh. I mean, we did taste five old wines for "commercial" purposes and another seven just for fun. At some point I guess I closed the book!

# karlsmühle-geiben

ruwer • mertesdorf

It was a suddenly warm day when we arrived, and it would have been cruel to sit indoors. So we tasted *al fresco*, the way young Ruwer Riesling *should* be tasted, it so embodies the spirit of Springtime.

Bugs were buzzing and green was greening and everything alive was squirming with energy and even Peter Geiben's news that snow was forecasted for the following week couldn't dampen our spirits. After an hour or so we all heard a sound from the sky, looked up, but didn't see anything. A moment later Peter pointed skyward and said *There it is*. It was two large flocks of migrating cranes, several thousand feet aloft and very small, on their way north to their summer home in Russia. The two flocks were trying to join, milling and billowing as if to form

letters in the sky, crying to one another to establish a flying formation, their cries echoing through the air as if they were lonely or afraid. But they only told each other *follow me, follow me. I sense a wind. . .*

Sigrid Selbach was with us, and I reminded her of the last time we'd been to Geiben and it was warm enough to taste outside. We set us a table in the quiet parking lot, and the sun was in my eyes, and when the first wine was poured I turned my head to the left and spat onto what I *thought* was the ground but which was in fact the dog's head. Poor old Sam. Lying there enjoying the sun just like us when SPLAT; some plug of viciously high-acid young Riesling lands on his innocent head. This year I spat into a little bucket. I ain't into vandalizing no dawgs.

I really don't know *how* Peter Geiben made the vintage he did in 2006 – none of us did. It's as if he'd walked through some invisible seam into a parallel reality and made that guy's wines. It is, if not the best, then the most *singular* wines he has made. And I wouldn't fuss if you called them his best.

When I first started visiting the Ruwer (well before you were born) it was a secretive little valley you hardly

knew how to find; you turned off from a markedly bland village-suburb of Trier and suddenly everything was green, pastures, vineyards, and if you were attentive you might catch a glimpse of the tiny Ruwer stream hissing and gurgling its way to the



Mosel. These days the turnoff is still there but the valley is compromised; it's become quite the bedroom-community for commuters to Trier. I guess they gotta live some-

- **Vineyard area: 14.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Kaseler Nies'chen, Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen**
- **Soil types: Clay and slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 2% each of Weissburgunder, Spätburgunder, Dornfelder, Müller-Thurgau and Elbling**

where, but they went and spoiled my bucolic fun.

You can almost forget they're close by when you sit by the little stream at Geiben's hotel-restaurant, eating a trout so fresh it's almost quivering, drinking the most exquisite Rieslings you could ever have imagined.

These wines seem to invite the sap to rise. See if you can taste them and not hear the beats of countless tiny hearts, or the squirmings of the seeds.

The wines sometimes have that Mosel-yeasty stink their first year in bottle, and they're more expensive than Mittelmosel wines. We Yanks don't have time to distinguish between Mosel & Saar & Ruwer because we're too busy to take German wine as seriously as other wine. Put it this way: can you imagine us refusing to pay more for Côtes-de-Nuits Burgundies than for Côtes-de-Beaune— "Hey it's all Burgundy, man." Who cares about a piddling matter like where the wine comes from! Oh don't mind me: I've got rants in my pants.

Peter Geiben is a gentleman of rather brusque temperament, yet he's fiercely dedicated to every detail involved in making great wine. I both respect and like him, but my response to his wines is uncolored by any warm 'n fuzzies. Peter doesn't have a poetic temperament. He'd brush away any wine faery who happened to alight on his shoulder. Peter speaks tersely, if at all, about such things. He'd rather talk about the trellising method he's developed, and he'd *far* rather talk about hunting. A friend convinced him to stop de-acidifying. He experimented with natural yeast fermentation and was pleased with the results. He's done away with wood in the cellar

and is now making everything reductively in tanks. Wood is too rustic, and too dangerous in his view.

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets there from Trier. That imposing hillside to your left, behind the hotel, contains Peter's monopole vineyards. The upper section is the **Felslay**, the steepest section, with the lightest soil. Just below is the **Mäuerchen** on its deeper soil. Around the corner facing due south is the great **Kaseler Nies'chen**, in which Geiben now has two fine parcels. There's some Kehrnagel from the Patheiger holdings. Peter has enough to do.

His wines from the Lorenzhöfer hillside are positive and adamant, they walk with a firm tread, and they have a slight and pleasing earthiness. The wines from the Kasel sites are nominally lighter but utterly ravishing in polish and beauty of flavor. It's like the difference between the top part of Clos Vougeot near Musigny and the parts lower down toward the route nationale.

In fact I learned one year that the **Nies'chen** is fine-stoned; i.e., lots of crumbled slate and thus superior

drainage, plus a certain filigree quality in the wines, and **Kehrnagel** is more coarse-stoned, thus less porous, and the wines are less elegant. Peter took us for a walk through the vineyards. He also gave us various *spring-waters* to taste; the region is gifted with subterranean streams. We tasted from springs beneath the Nies'chen, Kehrnagel and Felslay, and of course they all tasted different.

The best Ruwer wines seem to *distill* the essence of Mosel-ness into a nearly unbearable exquisiteness. Nothing smells so beautiful. The cassis note is haunting. "They have CARAMBA!" said Sigrid Selbach. They have that and more; they are the *acme of the genre*. If you love Mosel wines - and based on my sales it appears you do—this is as fine as they can be.

A FINAL NOTE: There's a spiffy new label, which gives Peter's name pride of place over "Karlsmühle." I always prefer the name of a family to that of a place, but we want to introduce the new label with as little clerical disruption as possible!

#### karlsmühle at a glance:

Ruwer wines are prized in general for their astonishing spiciness and delicacy. Since the acquisition of great Grand Cru sites in Kasel, Karlsmühle has become a serious landowner and very important producer of green-bottle Rieslings.

#### how the wines taste:

Ruwer wines can be the *ne plus ultra* of refinement, with their own keenly slicing flavors of cassis and sometimes cinnamon.

#### GKM-100 2006 Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett

A rather stony-earthly fella by Ruwer standards; a superfine wild lavender nose with even a little hint of *prosciutto di Parma*; the palate is solid and fine; you want to call it 4-square but the *fruit* is too exquisite, pure mirabelle and guava. Almost lovely, almost muscular, entirely improbable. What was going on here?  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (10-25 years)

#### GKM-099 2006 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett

+

**CORE-LIST WINE.** And there's enough of it, for once. This had been poured when we noticed the birds. When I looked back down into the glass it reflected the earth-green and sky-blue, and when I sniffed it my eyes teared uncontrollably. Blink blink blink. This is the wine of the cranes, the intersection of many things of beauty, itself an uncanny perfection of delicacy and fruit; a fine jasmine fragrance like mature Blanc de Blancs Champagne; this one utterly threads the needle, it is the needle and the thread; haunting finish, breathy and sweet. You can't taste it outside on an early Spring day with the cranes forming undulating waves in the sky, but believe me, it tastes you.  
SOS: 2 (8-23 years)

#### GKM-101 2006 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Spätlese

++

20 fruits and 16 flowers and 11 minerals and their names don't matter, it is a diction of beauty that explicates something you never understood because it was never quiet enough. It surely won't *be* quiet enough in some wretched big tasting, but do the wine a favor – step away, let the next wine wait, it will be there when you get to it, and listen just to the *finish* of this wine, an amazing *pianissimo* that takes you into the heart of the silence and mystery.  
SOS: 2 (14-30 years)

#### GKM-102 2006 Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Auslese

+

How on earth did he coax out this delicacy in wine after wine? *No one* but Diel has an equivalent in 2006. Only a suave malt note is added to the Spätlese, plus concentration of course, especially of the flower nuances. Sigrid calls it a "miracle" – indeed it is.  
SOS: 3 (15-35 years)

# Is all taste equally valid?

Sure it is! There's a feel-good, all-American democratic answer for you. One man's opinion's as good as another's and all that. It is self-evidently the right answer to the question.

It's the *question* that's bogus.

One evening at the ballgame I had the good fortune to sit next to one of the advance scouts who attend every game, gathering intel on the players. It was a slow night, and I asked if he could "think out loud" for me, tell me what he saw. And what he saw was an entirely different ballgame from the one I saw. I sat in admiration of his trained eye.

Similarly, if I take my car to the mechanic he hears different things in the engine's hum than I do. A piano tuner hears minute tonal variances to which I am effectively deaf. A massage therapist discerns muscle tensions of which I'm not consciously aware.



All these are examples of expertise we take for granted. And yet if someone asserts expertise in *wine*, we are promptly suspicious; we sniff for snobism, we get defensive and put up our dukes — and I have always wondered why.

Wine writers such as my friend Jennifer Rosen feel a degree of responsibility to "demystify" wine, to make it accessible to everyman. That way, they reason, more people will drink it and the world will be improved. Other wine writers want to reassure you there are no "rules" and that you should always drink what you like; reasonable advice on the face of it. If you like drinking young Barolo with a dozen

raw oysters I won't stop you (though I'll shudder to think what's going on inside your mouth). If you like a beer with five sardines steeped in it for 20 minutes, go on and drink it that way. No one wants to keep you from the consequences of your perverse taste. No one denies your "right" to it.

Some of us, however, like to call things by their proper names. Not from snobism, sadism or any other-ism, but because it helps to order the world of experience. It fends off the chaos.

I had a conversation on an airplane recently, with a cellist in her 20s. We talked about music, naturally, and it became clear to me her tastes were wider than my own. (I'm an ossified old geez in his early 50s.) I remarked upon her ecumenical listening habits. "Well," she said, "don't you think one should search for the virtues in everything?" Much as I wished to say yes, to do so would have been false. Instead I said: "No, I think you should seek the good in everything; that's where you are in your life. But what I need to do is identify that which annoys or wounds me, and avoid it."

Stuart Pigott once wrote: "We should . . . start making wines with balance, elegance and originality sound so astonishing that our readers feel they've just got to try them," and this of course is true. A critic must stand for something; otherwise he is merely pusillanimous. And so our first task is to find the good and praise it. But any time we take a stand FOR something, we imply the thing's shadow, i.e. the thing we love suggests, ineluctably, the thing we don't love. And we *cannot* shrink from naming both things, especially not for fear of wounding the delicate sensibilities of the philistines (who, by the way, are both robustly insensitive and also have no scruples about insulting us with labels such as "snob," "elitist" et.al.).

God knows we'd prefer to be everyone's best friend, and we feel humane and generous telling anyone with unformed (or simply atrocious) taste that his taste is as good as anyone else's. But it's a lie we tell so that we can feel noble, and furthermore it is unfair to the recipient, who, if he's being patron-



ized, is entitled at least to know it.

Pigott went on to claim that any wine anyone likes is ipso-facto “good” wine, and this is just the slippery slope we can’t help sliding down when we try to be “democratic.” It is manifestly impossible to support a definition of “good” as “wine that someone, regardless of who they are, finds to taste good.” This is irresponsible, it ducks the question. Once at a presentation I was terribly busy and opened bottles without a chance to screen them. A punter remarked that a particular wine was “fantastic; I never had anything that tasted like this, wow, how was this made . . . ?” and his enthusiasm infected me and I poured myself a taste. CORKED! What should I have done, based on Pigott’s definition of “good?” The gentleman liked a patently flawed wine. He has every “right” to like it; no one disputes this. But I felt honor-bound to (discreetly and tactfully!) correct him.

Thus I can’t endorse a definition of “good” that is as “inclusive and democratic” as some desire. I do not believe nature has any use for our democracies; she is in essence heirarchal. Some things *are* better than others, and one of *our* functions is gently to guide our readers toward appreciation of these distinctions.

If we take these democratic principles and apply them to any other thing about which aesthetic or cultural criticism is warranted, do they stand up? Shall we endorse a statement such as “All art is good art as long as someone likes it?” Does this sentiment apply equally to architecture, poetry, cuisine? Or is wine somehow “special” because too few people drink it? And should we pander to every sort of unformed or misguided taste because we’re trying to get more people to drink wine?

Let me be clear: no one has to like wine the way I like it, or the way any “expert” likes it. If wine is a casual beverage for you, then the discussion ends. Wine is complicated and therefore intimidating to people, but I’ll make you a deal: you promise not to lash out at me for what I know because *you* feel intimidated, and I’ll promise not to guilt-trip you into acquiring “expertise” over a subject you don’t care that much about. Deal?

The truest reason to write humanely is because it is good to be humane. Any professional who uses

words does well to shade them so as not to deliver gratuitous insults to people with dubious or uneducated taste. But that doesn’t mean he abrogates his entire judgmental faculties — which by the way are why we *hired* him — in search of some romance about inclusion or democracy.

There are no “invalid” moments of pleasure in wine. But, there are higher and lower pleasures. Once you have graduated from the low you can always return. It’s fun to return! If you’re somewhere in the process of honing your wine taste and you want to continue, no one helps you if he fails to delineate the distinctions between inadequate, ordinary, good, fine and great — or between “industrial” and “agricultural” wines. Maybe there is a thin line between this and Pigott’s “attach[ing] an imperative” but the way through involves nurturing one’s own kindness and honing one’s craft with words.

I feel it is indeed unkind to flatten all taste to a specious equality, made even more pernicious by encouraging the philistines to set the level.

Me, I have a powerful aversion to wines that gush and scream, they annoy me, and I tell you why, and you make up your own mind. MY imperative isn’t everyone’s, self-evidently: but I strive to send clear signals, to advocate what I think is worthy and to identify and explain what I think is unworthy, and if my tone is “superior, even dictatorial” then the fault lies with ME. I have failed to communicate my point. But, the POINT remains.



# mittelrhein wines



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

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

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

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

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

## At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . . .

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

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

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



# florian weingart

## mittelrhein • boppard-spay

It's not enough for Florian Weingart to be considered the "top" estate in his region and one of the *elite* Riesling estates in Germany. He is inherently modest and restless. His is a mind that chews things over, and I doubt he even *has* an auto-pilot function. We were talking about the reduction-aromas which often attend the early stages of wines fermented with wild yeasts. This came up not *only* because we're a bunch of pencil-necked geeks – he isn't but I probably am – but because Florian has returned to "spontis" and ambient-temperature fermentations after a decade using more modern (I dare say trendy) approaches. "After ten years I've come back to many of the things my father did," he observed.

A few weeks later, back in the States again, I had this email from him. He had continued to mull the question over – typically! How can you *not* be fond of such a guy?

"I just thought about your question concerning the volatile S-compounds in spontaneous ferments: In many spontaneous yeast societies there are types that are more capable [of] break[ing] up proteins and amino-acids that contain Sulfur than in cultured yeasts (which have been selected especially not to produce off-flavors). Those released S-bindings can react to H<sub>2</sub>S (and so on) in the reductive climate of the fermentation. I have probably just been lucky that the right [yeasts] are at work. Another reason – [which has] proved to be the most important S-source in volatile-S-compounds (US-research) – is elementary S from late crop protection treatments with Sulfur. This is *probably more important* than the differences in reductivity of the fermenting wine (barrels or stainless; small or large cell numbers) but again I don't really know. I think though that reductivity during fermentation and after has not been given the right attention for white wines [in terms of] their aroma development and their aging abilities."

Florian seems self-conscious about the accolades regularly heaped upon him, like putting on a tux and looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking "Who is this guy?" He's more of an intellectual than many growers. "There is no single True way," he says: "Rather a multitude of possibilities." I sense he's delighted to play among them! Florian has always been transparently candid and unaffected with me, which I find unendingly delightful. It's such a pleasure to connect simply as colleagues. I think he is instinctively genuine, as are his wines.

These are very happy visits. The wines are full of melody, and Florian's kids keep

- Vineyard area: 11 hectares
- Annual production: 7,000 cases
- Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Engelstein, Feuerlay & Ohlenberg, Schloss Fürstenberg
- Soil types: Weathered slate
- Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Spätburgunder, 2% Grauburgunder

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

Florian is improving what were already excellent wines, but I still miss his folks. Papa set a fine example of diligence, fortitude and joy. He suffers from a degenerative nerve ailment that deprives him of the use of his fingertips, not an easy prospect for a small family-domain on steep slopes. Yet he was invariably cheer-



Adolph Weingart

ful and uncomplaining, and his wines were tensely fruity, and it does the soul good to see a talented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

The wines had become more scrupulous, mineral and *green*, all in the modern idiom, but Florian seemed to want something more. He looked to the past, as many smart young growers are doing. The Bopparder Hamm is one of the few due-south exposures in the Mittelrhein, and one of the few hillsides with almost no abandoned vineyards. Boppard and its neighbor Spay are an isolated warren of activity in a region that's grown ominously sleepy. The sites are slatey of course, but there's also a residue from the volcanic activity of the Eifel hills to the north, which imparts a certain ripe tropical note. Florian may have missed it, I don't know. But it is singular, and maybe unique.

The "Kabinett" issue arises here, again; the vineyard is paradoxically *too* good – "We'd have to pick physiologically unripe grapes to make a Kabinett from the Hamm," he says. Florian is sensitive to such things. He understands for example that his best dry wines come from sites with deeper soils giving physiologically riper fruit. But like everyone, he needs a source for reliable everyday wines, and he found it 35km upstream in a

side-valley near Bacharach. These are the *Schloss Fürstenberg* bottlings, which give us a chance to see this vintner's work in a very different terroir dialect.

There's another irony. When Weingart first leased the vineyard no one else wanted it. It was considered second-rate. When the lease came up for renewal last year, *tout le monde* wanted it, as it's just such vineyards which give the most perfect Kabinetts. Happily for us, Florian got it. And to celebrate, we're putting it on the **core-list**.

Florian's 2006s follow the staggering success he achieved with his '05s. It's hard to imagine lovelier fruit than that Schloss Fürstenberg Spätlese! Without quite scaling similar heights in the new vintage, the *general* quality across the range was even higher. The vintage-phenolics are evident, and I asked Florian if he felt this to be the result of his return to a conventional crush and press. His answer, typically, viewed the question from a novel angle. "In fact whole-cluster pressing can give *more* phenolic impression because such phenols as are present are more *prominent* against such a still back-drop." Well of course, and I'm sure I'd have thought of this in another forty nine years or so.

#### weingart at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

GAW-083 **2006 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Grauburgunder Spätlese Trocken**  
Yes, dry Pinot Gris from steep slate vineyards in the Mittelrhein! I taste this wine every year and *want* to like it, being such a sucker for a novelty. But usually my reaction doesn't go past "Interesting" – till this guy. There's lots of *battonage* flavors, restrained alcohol, and a novel and lovely conciliation of smoky varietal fruit and sleek minerality and the tensile texture from the steep slopes. It's almost delicate and certainly comely and graceful; lots of melon and sautéed pears wrapped in bacon. Original wine, especially for Somms who crave original wines.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

GAW-084 **2006 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
What can I say: kid makes it look easy. You taste a perfect dry Riesling like this and think "why can't they *all* suss how to do it?" Classic Boppard aromas of peony and papaya and crème-brûlée; opulent and juicy with a *demi-glace* of fruit and a long minty finish, whose mineral notes don't emerge for a few minutes but then come on strong. Seductively likable dry Riesling.  
SOMMELIER ALERT: SOS: 1 (now-3 years, and again 12-16 years)



- GAW-085 **2006 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +  
 Yes it's redundant but they're both wonderful – and there was another I left behind with great reluctance. This is completely different, more *Riesling*; lime and tarragon and with an overt powdery minerality; the wine is less seductive but more *exciting*; juicy balsam-green and racy charm; glorious snap and vigor.  
 SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 11-14 years)
- GAW-086 **2006 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** It does the heart good to say that. For this is yet another stunning vintage for this site, with lilac, hyacinth and violet aromas; both a high-cheekboned profile and a piquant minerality allied to a really esoteric floweriness, like some bloom that grows on the slopes of a remote volcano in Iceland and only flowers every twelve years.  
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GAW-087 **2006 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese** +  
 The aroma alone justifies the purchase! Lime, *quetsch*, mint and wet straw – this is a wine of SWAGGER that has the mojo and knows it; spicy wintergreeny finish to this smelling-salts Riesling.  
 SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GAW-089 **2005 Bopparder Hamm Feuerlay Riesling Spätlese\*** +  
**First offering.** Originally presented as an Auslese but Florian offered to declassify it – and it makes a *very* convincing Spätlese. God I love the serenity and glow of the '05s. This one's on the dry side, with slate and mirabelle and mineral and a gesture of salty botrytis; animally satisfying and seriously *useful*.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (10-29 years)
- GAW-088 **2006 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Auslese**  
 135° Oechsle. Heavy botrytis nose, but the palate is convincing, a wonderfully fine marmelade of caramel and overripe plum.  
 SOS: 3 (12-35 years)



## toni jost

## mittelrhein • bacharach

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

The solution? A WHEELCHAIR! "I rolled through the cellar in my wheelchair and made my wines," said Peter.

This is an estate with the lion's share of a single vineyard, with which they are identified, in this case the BACHARACHER HAHN. There are a few other parcels also (along with some Rheingauers), but Jost and Hahn are inextricably linked. I've looked at Hahn from all sides now; from across the river (where it looks impossibly steep), from immediately below it, from above it, within it, and any way you slice it, this is one special site; steep goes without saying, perfect exposure, large enough to allow selective harvesting. One cannot tell anymore whether its exuberant glory of fruit is innate, as there aren't any other proprietors to speak of. But who cares? It's one of the diamonds of the German wine world.

The wines can be calm and shining. *What* polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They can attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous but never overbearing, underpinned with slatey filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb.

The wines are fermented in stainless steel, using cultured yeasts, with controlled temperatures. "We're particularly careful of how we handle the grapes," says Peter. "All the grapes arrive at the press in undisturbed condition. We press with a maximum of 1.8 bars of pressure; the best wines

- **Vineyard area: 9.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Wallufer Walkenberg (Rheingau), Barcharacher Hahn**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate in Hahn; loess and loam on gravel sub-soil in Walkenberg**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 17% Spätburgunder, 3% Weissburgunder**

don't go higher than one bar." Lees contact is "as long as possible, but regularly three months. Actually our wines throw very little sediment since we ferment a very clean must," says Peter. What lees do exist are stirred. "I want a partnership between primary fruit and the richness of the lees."

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

Josts report a likelihood their oldest of three daughters will take over the winery. I remember her and her sister when they were little girls, producing something like one liter of "TBA" which they bottled in 200ml bottles and offered for sale to their Uncle. For ten Marks! I'd say the estate will be in good hands, and I love any example of Frau-power in old Europe.

I will confess to a certain impatience for a great Jost vintage. I think the last bunch of years have either been



Peter and Linde Jost

too hot (and the Hahn is a heat trap in any case) or too vulnerable to unwanted rots. I once said to Peter that I yearned for a wine like the great '93 Kabinett, and he insisted its must-weight was *as* high as the new vintage's Kabinett. But all must-weights are not equal, as we know. I have also wondered about an odd sort of beery tone creeping into the wines of late, obtruding on what used to be their pristine clarity of fruit. Sometimes the wines seemed typically vibrant and expressive in cask, only to seem mute and disgruntled after bottling.

Mine is not an inevitable impression, of course, and some readers have taken me to task. Believe me, I'm glad you like the wines and I'm very willing to be wrong. I love and respect Peter and Linde and I am absolutely sure Peter is as conscientious and talented as ever. Growers like that don't suddenly decide "Well I've made a bunch of good wines, now let's coast for awhile. . . ." Obviously not. I'm also sad I didn't get to see Peter this year, as we couldn't align our schedules. I tasted the wines in Zeltingen at Selbach.

#### jost at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### GTJ-066 **2006 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett**

Here I wish I could have talked with Peter. It is clear to me this super-warm site wasn't made to grow "Kabinett" in a year like 2006. This is a very big wine with a hole in the mid-palate where something needs to be. The overall flavor is long but the fruit is broad and sprawling. Bottling can sometimes tighten up wines like these, so I'll defer final judgment. We can *really* use a normal year again. . . .  
SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

#### GTJ-067H **2006 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel," 12/500ml**

I skipped over the Spät, which appeared to exacerbate the "issues" of the Kabinett. This was the first of the wines to suggest an inherent *form*. It smells like a perfume called ROMA (by Laura Biagiotti), sultry and almost luridly voluptuous, but the palate is finally sweet enough to support the ripeness, and the tangelo-caramel thing is appealing – not cloying – with a salty botrytis edge.  
SOS: 3 (14-35 years)

#### GTJ-068H **2006 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

This takes the Auslese up another notch or two, and for sheer prettiness it can't be beat.  
SOS: 4 (20-45 years)



# SOS

## a new way to measure sweetness

There's entirely too much yammering in Germany about sweetness, dryness, sugar; it's a kind of fetish. For our part, we're making progress but we still haven't quite outgrown a preoccupation with residual sugar as a measure of "correctness." I do feel we have reached the point of knowing the difference between actual sweetness and the sense of sweetness a wine conveys. Many of us know a Mosel Kabinett with 30 grams of residual sugar and 9 grams of acidity tastes drier than a new world Chard-oak-nay with 9 grams of sugar, no acid, and 14% alcohol.

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

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

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

**MINUS TWO** is for lovers of austere wines.

**ONE** signifies barely discernable sweetness.

**TWO** signifies sweetness which is discernable but not obtrusive.

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

**FOUR** is bona-fide dessert wine.

**Put "SOS" into your lexicon today!**



# nahe wines



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

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

Things feel astir on the Nahe these days. Mr. Dönnhoff has brought acclaim to his region, and a number of excellent growers are in the slipstream of that attention; Schönleber, Hexamer, Schäfer-Fröhlich, not to mention Mr. Diel, who is in nobody's slipstream. A case could be made that no other German wine region has the Nahe's concentration of outstanding estates in a similarly

small area. The region is also especially lovely for wine pilgrims because it remains quiet and authentic. In contrast to the Pfalz, where every weekend from Easter to harvest is cram-a-lama with gawkers and slug-it-downers. At least there's *one* place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "VIS-

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

ITEZ LES CAVES!" signs. You can hear a breeze rustling through trees in the *next* orchard before it reaches the one in which you're sitting. There's a constant clamor of birds. Signs by the side of the road warn of frog crossings. You wouldn't drive fast even if you could.

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

There are four basic soil types in the Nahe. Each gives its own kind of wine. **Slate** does what it always does; the Nahe variant has more middle, almost like a super rich

Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marbeline feel. **Loam** and **clay** are the plebians, mostly planted to the commoner varieties, though even these varieties are more fetchingly graceful along the Nahe. Finally the volcanic soils with the exotic names: **porphyry**, **melaphyre**, **gneiss**, **rhyolite**, give the world's most spellbinding white wine, Riesling at an impossible pinnacle of fire and grace. Blackcurrant, honeysuckle, raspberry, a heavenly host of flavors astonishingly differentiated and an almost prismatically filigree.

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after

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

having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

We returned to the group and I beckoned them to follow me. The exercise was repeated, this time with eight of us walking one behind the other— we looked like a chain-

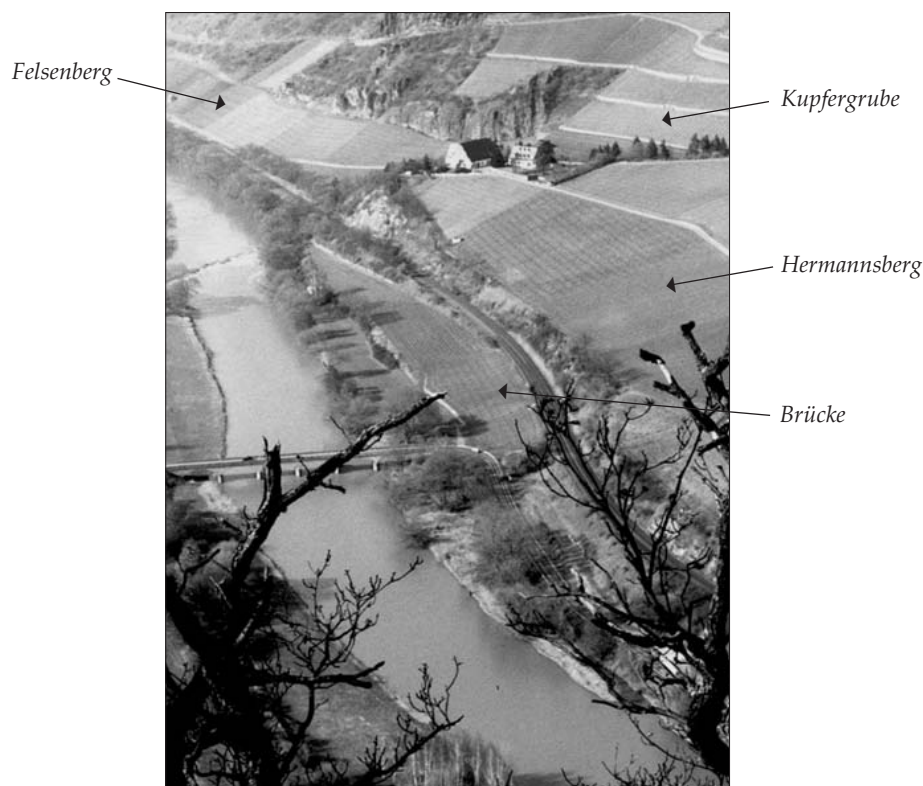
gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyre. I turned to the group. "You hear a lot of crap about what makes complexity in wines. Some people would like you to think that winemakers give complexity to their wines. Look at what you've just seen here. THAT, and THAT ALONE is complexity."

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

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

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

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



*View of vineyards from the Lemberg*

forming miasmic currents on the exposed ground. Almost all the great Nahe vineyards can be seen below, among the noblest homes for Riesling anywhere on earth, spread out like a necklace of diamonds: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle, Hermannsberg, Brücke. I peer through the spring sunshine, remembering the first time I ever saw this astonishing view, when I suddenly had an eerie sense of something being *shown* to me. I was a million miles from marketing. Looking into a remote hollow on a distant limb of the world, grateful in my utmost heart for the beauty that lives in the land, but also somehow lost.

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

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

*"The soul does not supply solutions. It sends messages. It beckons."* -Michael Ventura

It occurs to me we are all very lucky in Helmut Dönnhoff. Me of course 'cause I represent him, but more than that. First of all we have an unusually intelligent and articulate guy. Good so far. Next we have a guy who's uncommonly *happy* in his work. Then it happens that this smart, happy guy has some of the greatest vineyards in the world. And that for years the region in which he worked was sufficiently obscure that he got to *do* his work in almost monastic purity. He was never in danger of becoming that most queasy and dreadful of creatures: a "wine celebrity." More correctly, when that danger first began to manifest, our hero was old enough to

assimilate it and not allow it to disturb the basic integrity of his relationship *to the work*.

I mean, consider how often great vineyards are in indifferent hands. Practically the entire Rheingau! Think how often passionate vintners don't have sites to do them justice. Practically the entire Rheinhessen! With Dönnhoff we have not only an ideal confluence of desire and a means of realizing it; we also have someone smart enough to recognize what he has.

Writing this text takes something out of me. I try to return to whatever *zone* I may have been in when I tasted the wines. But I'm sitting in my office and the wines are far away. So no choice but to go deep. When I try to describe Dönnhoff's wines I create an itch I can't reach to scratch. Someone, I think it was James Hillman said to

beware of the things we have no words for. And I've never quite had language with which to detail the existential life of Helmut Dönnhoff's wines. But I think it is there, and the limitations are mine.

Why bother? Because I'm just made that way I guess. I'm thinking about Dönnhoff's 2006



Helmut Dönnhoff

vintage, which wasn't just "better" than other growers' vintages; it was *of another order of being*. It was as if Helmut walked through some membrane into a parallel world where the vintage was quite different. But all it did was to dramatize the *ongoing* difference between these wines and others.

Put it this way: if I take other great wines, say Diel's or Catoir's, these wines are deliberately and explicitly

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke, Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg & Kupfergrube, Norheimer Dellchen,**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, weathered volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder**

and clearly great. They *come at you*. They are not ambiguous. Nor do they hint or imply; they come straight to the point, and the point is, they are great. I don't think this can be said of Dönnhoff. *His* wines do not so much approach you from this, that or any angle; they rather invite you to enter a larger nexus which includes them but doesn't stop with them. They beckon with a sort of spell; they are hypnagogic. If I think of Diel, I envision the tower of an immense Gothic cathedral, both mighty and also filigree, rising symmetrically to a definite point, which the eye follows up into the sky. But when I think of Dönnhoff I think of the cloisters attached to the cathedral, and of the sacred and peaceful little garden encased within it.

Another metaphor: Diel's wines are like a leap into a cold pool on a hot day. They are kinetic with the *splash!* and they live inside that vivid ecstatic freshness. Helmut's wines are more like a massage, as the pleasure is coaxed from your bones and your spirit falls liquidly into the deep. The problem with all this is that one thing is explicable and the other isn't. Even in strict wine terms, most excellent growers can say *how* they got the clarities and textures you taste in the wines; what they did and didn't do. But I'm not sure if there *IS* a way to get at the particular texture of Dönnhoff. I mean, these wines taste as if crystal were liquefied, and you can't fathom

how something with such unearthly glassy smoothness can also contain so much *information*.

To describe that information is hard enough, but to do it in the company of this genial and wickedly witty fellow is well-nigh impossible. Helmut is a master of the offhand observation that says a thing so *perfectly* you can't NOT stop what you're doing and attend to it – and write it down. Often I'm also obliged to translate for non-German speakers, which adds another distraction. But oh poor me! This must be what the Gods wish; that once a year I get to hear the most sublime, achingly beautiful music in existence but *when* it's playing there's static in the signal and a loud party happening upstairs. Still I try to get it all down.

Helmut noticed my notebook filling up, and we talked about the old days when we'd taste in the cellar and I'd use a micro-cassette to speak notes into. "The problem with dictating," he said, "is it's too fast. We undress our women slowly! The time it takes to write a note is important, because the wine changes."

"As do we," I replied.

It's easy to stake a claim for the mystic when talking about Dönnhoff's wines. They are beautiful in just such a way as to stir these kinds of thoughts, even in people whom such thoughts seldom visit.

About the *wines*, mind you, but not about Helmut himself. He's entirely down to earth, remarkably so for someone on whom such superlatives are routinely lavished. Someone posted a note on one of the internet boards a few months ago: they were touring the Nahe and saw a guy on a tractor in a riverside vineyard just as they were approaching a bridge. They stopped their car and approached, and of course it was Helmut. Now I don't imagine my friend suffers fools gladly, but if you've traveled a long way and you seem to care and be curious, he has all the time in the world for you. He took the impromptu visiting party on a tour through his vineyards, and the posted report was full of amazement that such a "superstar" of wine was so generous and *normal*. As indeed he is.

His wines don't answer any questions; they only pose even more inscrutable ones. That is because they are rarely what we'd call "intense;" they seldom land on the palate with huge impact. Theirs is a quality of tenderness you cannot identify, isolate or explain. But you know it is there. And it stills you, if you let it, in that eerie way that beauty has.

It makes perfect sense the maker of these wines is himself the most grounded of gentlemen. Helmut Dönnhoff likes, as he puts it, to "speak though the flowers," to use metaphor and image. He is quicker even than I am to carry wine into that realm, yet he is also the most matter-of-fact person I think I know. I suppose he's heard his share of tasters wishing to impress him with all the stuff they "get" in his wines, but Helmut's had enough of it. It's 180 degrees different from tasting with

Aubry (in Champagne), who only *wants* to add to his ongoing catalogue of associations. Helmut is rather the *shaman* who doesn't explicate but simply creates the environment for the thing to be known. What *does* amuse him, and clearly exasperates his wife Gabi, is metaphor, especially anthropomorphizing.

I mean, let's face it: wine works upon the imagination, especially great wine. This we know. So if the imagination is stimulated, what is it to do if not *IMAGINE*? That is, after all, its job. And it seems like an enormous waste if in that moment we're pitifully lost in "grabbing" the wine so we can dissect it to show how cool our palates are. It's like ignoring the rainbow while you balance your checkbook.

It's best if I don't think about the wines until they're in the glass. I try to subdue any pleasure of anticipation. I just want the wines to come to me. I want the awe to live in them, and come to me; I don't want to bring it. I tasted the wines twice one year, about two weeks apart, as I made a second visit with Kevin Pike. The latter run-through was a brisk affair—we hadn't much time—and it lubricated a somewhat delicate conversation which engaged most of my attention. I found it fascinating to scroll through these wines, which I love like none other, with only a sideways glance. In one particular moment I was groping to say something subtle in my inadequate German, concentrating entirely on finding words I didn't know, and suddenly the wine in my glass found a seam and soaked through it, and I realized I was near tears. It was shockingly beautiful. I was closed to the world, and the world opened me. And what of this? it seemed to say.

I like to hike in high mountains, it is huge and stirring, but this was different, this was anything but overwhelming. This was quiet, it was the underside of a leaf, it was hoar frost on a branch, the kind eye of an old dog, a small thing standing simply in my sight as if by accident, and I was alight with it. *And what of this?* And I wondered, what of it? Yes it is beautiful, but what of it? *It is always here.*

My wife is someone who likes to remember her dreams and consider their meaning. I find this lovely, but do not share it. It seems ordinary enough that our subconscious hums and buzzes all the time, and that we only see it when our waking consciousness gets out of the way, just as we only see stars in a dark sky. I thought of this





suddenly. *It is always here.* Yes, just as the stars are always there, even when we can't see them. Just as the dreams are always there even when we don't dream them.

This is a long way to venture out from a single sip of wine. But any single sip of wine can show us the whole world, can show us the reality we usually ignore, the thing that is always there. Wine can remind us to pause, notice and appreciate. It is always here. *Beauty* is always here. This strange, sad, beautiful world is always here in all its gravity and gorgeousness, ready to unfold us. Colin Wilson once said "What if we aren't risen apes, but instead fallen angels?"

Think about when you make up after a quarrel. Think of the moment you realize *I love her, she is beautiful, why are we fighting?* You are suddenly inside the deeper truth, the one which abides below all your politics and power struggles, the truth that is *always* there. Sometimes a great wine will deliver all of wine—all of beauty—to you, and for a moment you are inside the slower, deeper truth, and you know that all your fussing, over adjectives and associations and quantification of your pleasure and dissecting of flavor is all a bagatelle, a waste of time. A waste of wine.

I envision Helmut reading these words and thinking "Hey, don't hold me responsible for this!" I imagine any instruction he might wish to impart would boil down to not losing the forest for the trees. Which is true enough, yet on we go.

From the top of the Lemberg you look out not merely on vineyards, hills, rivers; you don't even look out on "scenery." You look out on *landscape*, that thing which is larger than scenery or the parts of scenery. Just as the idea of "forest" is different in *essence* from the fact of trees. And when you see landscape you are quite sure it *means something*, though you can't say just what. Great

wines arise from landscape as much as from vineyards. Great wines arise as much from civilization as they do from people or cultures.

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

Great wine is wine which is incandescent with *reality*, larger and more eternal than its mere ostensible self, and which speaks to that thing in each of us. But don't go looking for it. Be calm and prepared, and it will find you.

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

### Some Notes On The Vineyards:

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

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

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

said this telling thing:

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

Precisely.

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

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

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

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

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

"Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality," he says, adding: "You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if you're not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology." He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. "It is the concentration of *all* the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract,

that gives the wine its *real* taste and structure," he says. "If you have a barrel that's not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character."

The 2006s harvest was as fast as it was everywhere. "We picked with 40 people – 15 is the usual number – to get it all done in two weeks," he said. "We were grabbing passers-by off the street. 'Whatcha doing today?' we'd ask. 'Oh sorry, I'm busy' – 'NO YOU'RE NOT! We have grapes to pick.' For a week people would detour around the block to avoid walking past our house." The results are, as you'll see, extraordinary – not merely in terms of strict quality, but also in essence. The fundamental other-ness of these wines has never seemed more clear. They are also on average 10 grams sweeter than their equivalent 2005s, yet they *taste* drier.

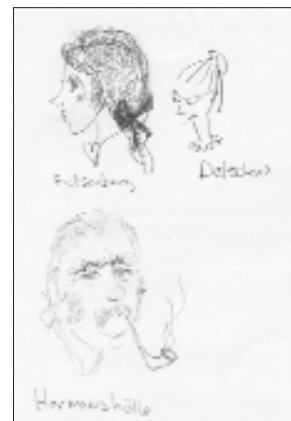
Dönnhoff's wines are different texturally, and they *feel* different existentially; they indicate a divine serenity, they seem to have emerged fully formed. Of course it's my conceit to imagine so, for I know well what year-long *schwitz* work goes into them. But if any companion said that a Dönnhoff wine was "well-made" I'd be taken aback. "But they're not . . . oh, well yeah sure, I guess someone makes them," I'd mumble.

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

Well, the '06s aren't gonna change your mind dude.

It's lonely at the top, of course, and when you're perceived to be "Number 1" all you can do is fall. Wine writers looking for a story have been known to hasten that process—it's hardly news when the number 1 guy made the best wines yet again. But I can't say I see the slightest sign of this happening with Dönnhoff. No revisionism, no nitpicking for "flaws" just because someone else lauded the wines to the skies. And I think I know why. It's because we don't just admire these wines—we *love* them. Helmut is content to do the smallest, most elusive thing of all with his wines—to tell the simple truth.

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



**dönnhoff at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

GDH-184 **2006 Hermannshöhle Grosses Gewächs**

Helmut's dry wines are far less polished, and to be entirely candid quite a bit less harmonious than some of his colleagues'. They are the truth they describe and we take it or leave it. This recalls the 05 but even more so; it's for lovers of firm, uncompromisingly austere wine, in no way formed to look pretty. You smell the fury of the volcano and taste the salt and magma. It reminds me of old-school Rangen (from before it became so often sweet), the old embers still pulsing. The terroir *gravitas*. There's an almost *broiling* minerality, and the wine is impressive, but don't expect to be charmed. SOS: minus-1 (2-6 years, again 25-22 years)

GDH-185 **2006 Gutsriesling**

+

That amazing 05 is an impossible act to follow!

This is the calling-card for good 06s; verbena, wintergreen, wild lavender and stoniness. But there's a creaminess on the palate and a complex mosaic of fruits that goes by too fast for you to catch; the finish is all spices and stones again. You could argue for more RS (in this more pointed vintage) but Helmut wants this wine to be as it is.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (2-6 years, again 13-17 years)

GDH-186 **2006 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett**

+

A Mosel-type grown on the sandy slate called *Tholeyer*, which we see in sites like Hofberg and Apotheke. Freesia and jasmine fragrances, and here we have mineral and charm along with a sweet green complexity that plays as a quiet fugue below the smiling fruit. Exceptionally filigree and crystalline, even for Dönnhoff; it's like a daddy-long-legs, so wry and delicate and useful. The wine somehow links the icy threads of hoar-frost with the yielding sweetness of pollen.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-22 years)

GDH-187 **2006 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese**

++

*Aroma!!* Cherry blossom and peppermint. Oh man, this is another level of seriousness from this vineyard – it could be Christoffel's 1-star Würzgarten Auslese, for all its mirabelle and stayman-apple; amazingly saturated, as if a fragrant forest wind were blowing over your basket of apples; length like a freight train with 200 cars as you sit waiting at the crossing. Get out, eat one of those apples, go buy some flowers for your sweetie.

SOS: 2 (8-25 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

GDH-189 **2006 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Spätlese**

++

A serious, diligent wine with something to tell you. Pungent terroir gets your attention, and the ripe salty mid-palate keeps it; it's more enveloping and chromatic than Kirschheck. Here the truth lies in the *whole* and not in the particular configuration of the pieces. But clearly important, this dispatch from the earth. How is it to speak if not here? Wines like these are like music made into water.

SOS: 2 (7-23 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

- GDH-188 **2006 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 First time! And an entirely different terroir from the hills, now loamy gravel with a little loess, though Helmut referred to a vein of quartzite – and the wine surely was like Nahe-meets-Berg-Rottland, smoky and curranty, deeper-voiced and juicier, with a roasted-beet sweetness, more savory and corporeal. But lovely! I just gotta get used to this sudden new language.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-22 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE
- GDH-191 **2006 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** **+++**  
 Here goes; Riesling as fugue-state. Again as it often is, it seems like the primordial essence of Riesling, in sublime balance, with a gesture of pure force and another gesture of pure delicacy. This is an old soul here, a Saturnine being. On the surface there's mineral and quince and salty botrytis, but it all roots so deeply into your being you can never pull it out. It awakens the person you are when you're not busy being you. Here it all is, time and love and sorrow and gratitude, the pool from which we drink when our mere lives seem to fail us.  
 SOS: 1 (10-33 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE
- GDH-192 **2006 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
This wine, though, is jumping on a giddy trampoline of vitality and ecstatic joy. You've heard the adjectives before, and they're all here, don't worry. Helmut said "I like wines with stories. Without a story all you get is drunk." Yes sir! And they are stories we get to hear and to sense but which are *not ours*, but are near us, always, as long as we're not moving by too fast to hear them. I don't remember when Brücke-Hermannshöhle ever embodied so dramatically the diad of pure life-force *vim* in contrast to the strange dark knowledge of the rocks.  
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE
- GDH-194H **2006 Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **++**  
 In a way this extends the Türmchen and is the most firm, adamant and pointedly mineral wine yet. The inner elixir is concentrated, the botrytis is discreet, the finish is all incense and violets.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (10-30 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE
- GDH-195H **2006 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **+**  
 This (excellent!) wine is the first in the group that someone else could have made, which is to say its exquisite talc and white chocolate and jasmine scents and flavors belong as much to the genre of "top Auslese" as to the specifics of Helmut moving attentively through the vines.  
 SOS: 3 (12-33 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE
- GDH-199H **2006 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** **++(+)**  
 Too young to see. It's forceful and steely, yet also yielding and succulent; it's all hints and glances and inferences now as young Brücke Auslese often is, but still waters in this case are a deep deep well, the bottom of which no one has ever reached.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (14-35 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE



GDH-200H **2006 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml +++**

The lightest and springiest 120° Oechsle wine I've ever tasted! It's from the highest and windiest section of the vineyard where botrytis continually formed and continually dried out. This is an absolute masterpiece containing *everything* – everything; fruit, length, mineral, *core* and proportion, angular but symmetrical, endless and ethereal. Astonishing. I mean, you know theoretically that wine can do this; you may have even tasted it before. But each time is like the first. *How can it be? And what if we can never know?*

SOS: 3 (14-33 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

GDH-198H **2006 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml ++**

Cinema-verite here: my book says "This is the marmelade; a truly insanely gorgeous wine that lands a huge wet smooch on your yes! Muscle. Dellchen-mirabelle and milk chocolate leads into *BEING INTERRUPTED*. (Something must have been said that made me rejoin the chatter and I didn't realize I hadn't completed this tasting note till the next day. The world will somehow endure, I think).

AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

GDH-196H **2006 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling BA, 12/375ml ++**

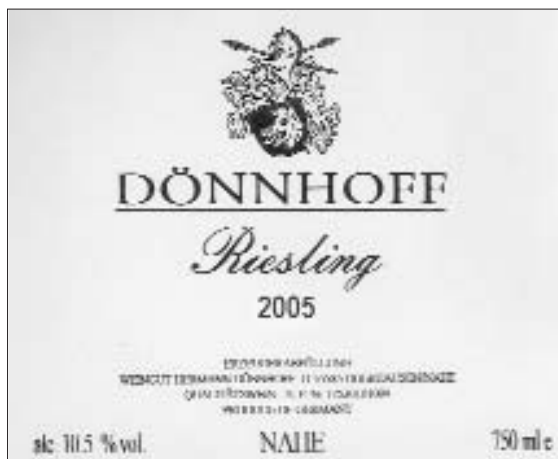
This follows the vintage-idiom for Brücke at high ripeness; militant and pulsing and strong and backward; not a giant (135°) but "I worked for cleanliness – any amount of must-weight would have been possible but better give 10° away and have it clean."

SOS: 3 (20-50 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE

GDH-197H **2006 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling BA, 12/375ml ++(+)**

Wrung out of words by now. Tremendously salty and black-cherry – tremendous, *period*, but with amazing precision; smoky and stern but also spicy and delicious; the empty glass is all cinnamon and incense.

SOS: 4 (23-55 years) AVAILABLE IN MAGNUMS: PLEASE INQUIRE



# helmut mathern

## nahe • niederhausen

The press within Germany had generally downgraded this estate in the last year, yet the 2006s are by far the best vintage Sabine and Gloria have made. I found a sharp spike up from what had been quite good 2005s. The difference between our various impressions is likely that I don't judge based on an entire vintage, but rather on the wines I select and how numerous the successes were. It's immaterial to me whether the dry wines work; I'm glad if they do but I don't expect them to, and in any case chasing the niche-within-a-niche that is the dry-Riesling aficionado is a classic race to the bottom. And if an estate persists in making odd grapes or undernourished reds for a private clientele that's of no significance to me. The wines you see listed below constitute a markedly fine group of Nahe-Rieslings and if you haven't looked before I

urge you to look now.

Gloria Mathern soldiers on, gamely keeping the winery alive until . . . when? One hopes one of the kids will want to take it over. But regardless, I feel this estate is being continued in tribute to Helmut Mathern's legacy.

The wonderful and talented Sabine tends the vineyards and makes the wines. She's been there nearly five years now, and I wondered if the wines were slowly morphing into *hers*. I loved the look she gave me, as if to say "Well yes, that would be the question!" Yet her actual answer was sensible. "The vineyards haven't changed," she said, "And the cellar hasn't changed. I'm sure there might be several very small shifts but nothing of a fundamental nature. How could there be?"

These wines always tasted as if incense were burned in the cellar. They still do.

Helmut Mathern, you may remember, died in November 2002 from melanoma. I gather the winery's base of private customers remain loyal. Most of them knew Mathern. In Germany a winery's private customers like to visit as often as possible, and they become less a

client-base than an extended family. It is almost unbearably touching to think of them r a l l y i n g around the widow.

Mathern was always loyal to his private cus-

- **Vineyard area: 10 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Kertz , Rosenberg, and Norheimer Dellchen**
- **Soil types: Grey and red slate, porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 12% Müller-Thurgau, 10% Weissburgunder, 10% Dornfelder, 3% Würzer**

tomers. As his fame grew, he deliberately abstained from cultivating the trade at large and resisted efforts to recruit him into the VDP.

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

He had time to complete his new cellar, more spacious, and all stainless-steel. He left the vineyards in good condition. Best among these is an old parcel (49 years now) in the ROSENBERG. Helmut's wines were always firm and zippy, rather like Saar wines, piquantly spicy. I wonder if, when and how they will change under Sabine's knowing hands. I do believe there is some ethereal print of Helmut among his vines; he spent many a contented and watchful hour with them. Sabine will breathe that ether for a while. But not forever. Even if she wants to, even if she tries to maintain the "style" of Helmut's wines for the private clients, eventually she will merge with his aura and subsume it, and they will be her vineyards, responding to her as she does to them.



### A Look At The Vineyards:

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

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

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

#### **mathern at a glance:**

Fine estate with super vineyards bouncing back from the death of its proprietor a year and a half ago. Charismatic, racy wines and an easy confident atmosphere give hope for even better things to come.

#### **how the wines taste:**

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

- GMA-067 **2005 Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
This is one of the great unknown Nahe Grand Crus— because it is so small. A conglomerate of porphyry and slate, it makes Rieslings that taste like they were hewn from jewels. This wine is exactly what is meant by piquant; an orchid-y complexity defying description; Riesling as ultra-violet light. Don't think of missing it.  
SOS: 2 (from 4-16 years)
- GMA-070 **2006 Niederhäuser Kertz Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
Kertz is perhaps the most exquisitely frivolous of the Grand Crus, and this wine ought really to be on the core-list. Again the sleek blackberry-raspberry flavors, laser focused and as penetrating and incisive as a Samurai sword; rosewater, green-apple; almost hyperactive *spiel*, and the finish is like chewing on rose pollen – which yes, I do all the time of course!  
SOS: 2 (5-14 years)
- GMA-071 **2006 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
Let's hope this heralds the entering of a new era at Mathern. It is certainly the best wine Sabine has made. We're coming almost into Hexamer territory here, with its silky polish and shimmering brightness; exceptionally searching fragrance, like a green apple studded with emeralds and flowering jasmine; the palate has a scalpel-cut with almost incredible micro-focus, and a juicy complexity that defies capture. Best to let it capture you.  
SOS: 2 (7-19 years)
- GMA-072 **2006 Norheimer Dellchen Riesling Auslese** **+**  
This is glorious, lavishly fine wine that few will drink: there's no "place" for it. I would say such works of beauty create their own place. Generous clean botrytis brings a toasted pumpernickel note with chestnut and summer truffle; a marrow tropical creature with a desperately salty long finish.  
SOS: 3 (8-22 years)
- GMA-073H **2006 Niederhäuser Rosenberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **+**  
Could easily be BA of course, yet despite its huge botrytis it has a core of fruit; tilleul honey, freesia, and that amazing salt and meyer-lemon elixir such wines give. More in store here.  
SOS: 4 (10-27 years)

## the matter of “globalization”

The matter of globalization in wine seems to put certain people on the defensive. This is regrettable, not least because defensive people often lash out, and a dialogue which ought to be able to be conducted civilly ends up being conducted evilly. Robert Parker’s recent essay, posted on his website, contained many reasonable and persuasive points, the value of which was diminished by an intermittent tone of invective. All intellectuals aren’t “pseudo-intellectuals” (I wonder how he tells them apart) and all persons taking views contrary to his aren’t guilty of membership in the “pleasure-police.”

I’ll try to summarize the positions of the two camps. Critics of globalization in wine are actually suspicious of a uniformity of wine-styles they perceive has arisen over the past roughly-20 years. For the sake of brevity, let’s call these people “romantics.”

Proponents of globalization—let’s call them “pragmatists”—argue that wine in the aggregate has never been better, and that good wines are hailing from a larger number of places than ever before. They do not perceive a problem, and think a bunch of fussbudgets are trying to rain on their parade.

Romantics would counter that the sense of multiplicity is misleading, because it’s actually the same *type* of wine hailing from all these new places.

I cannot reasonably deny the validity of the pragmatist’s argument. There are certainly many more competent and tasty wines (and concomitantly fewer rustic, dirty or yucky wines) than there were twenty years ago. Yet I can’t help but wonder; certainly the floor has been raised on overall wine quality. But has the ceiling been lowered? That, I interpret, is the romantic’s argument. But not all of it.

Baseball fans are cruelly aware of the steroid scandal threatening the basic integrity of the sport. We are sometimes less aware of the role we ourselves have played in bringing this about. We seem to want to wish it all away. We enjoy the prospect of herculean demi-gods bulked up on chemicals hitting baseballs 500 feet. This is

becoming our Ideal, and players embodying this ideal put butts in the seats and command the largest salaries. They are also the envy of other, less “enhanced” players, some of whom seek to climb on board the gravy train.

I see a metaphor here. There is no doubt that the prevailing recipe for modern wines with commercial aspirations effectively seems to *churn them out*; ripe, sweet, softly embedded tannins, large-scaled and concentrated. The pragmatists care less about how such wines get that way than they do about being entertained and thrilled by juiced-up sluggers hitting the ball 500 feet.

I’ll yield this argument is properly conducted in shades of gray. Parker has often expressed his esteem and admiration for moderate, elegant, temperate wines. He typically scores them in the high 80s, and has told me he wishes more people prized and drank such wines. Yet he must be aware the commodity called a “Parker-score” in fact damns such wines with faint praise. And though he admires these wines well enough, he reserves his love and expressive emotionality for their bigger, more hedonistic cousins.

Thus a particular idiom becomes the prevailing idiom, because everyone wants the scores and the financial success they engender. It is the singular persuasiveness of this monoidiom against which the romantics struggle. They—we—are innately wary of uniformity, as it is contrary to nature. We are also alert to an insidious effect such uniformities can create. We risk becoming passive, infantilized, dulled. When all things are one single way there’s less need to pay *attention* to them, for they no longer can surprise you.

Pragmatists will claim I am overstating the case; none of them argues that all wines should taste the same. Fair enough. Yet they themselves often accuse romantics of wishing to return to some imagined Eden of dirty, weird and rustic wines (which, they sneer, we excuse by citing *terroir*). The dialogue threatens to reduce to a war of straw men.



I would ask the pragmatists to consider this question. How, in a world of wines made by an indisputably prevailing set of practices in pursuit of a given result, will there still be room for the quirky, the asymmetrical, the evocative? Or, are we content to permit such wines to disappear? Is this the wine-world—is it the *world*—in which we wish to live? If not, how do we prevent it?

I am not placing value judgements on “modern” methods. Many of them are benign. Nor is this the time to argue against the falsifications. Some people think it’s fine for ballplayers to use steroids! I am asking for consideration of the *consequences* inherent in a belief system. It is certainly true that regions such as, say, Priorat, were unknown and unavailable twenty years ago. Yet to my palate this signifies very little, for Priorat’s wines join an international *glom* of hot-climate reds whose wines are, in the old phrase, much of a muchness. Yes, there is another (*yet* another) source of big-ass reds. I’m not sure why I should care.

In cuisine there comes a point of ennui when all one sees are the same luxury ingredients in nearly interchangeable preparations. Monday it’s squab stuffed with foie gras in a truffle *nage*; Tuesday it’s squab stuffed with truffles in a foie emulsion; Wednesday it’s truffle-crust ed foie gras in a squab jus, and eventually it becomes a meaningless farandole of dishes constituting the *luxury-dining-experience*, which you could have in Hong Kong or Los Angeles or Las Vegas or New York or Kuala Lumpur. It becomes a membrane separating you from the world, swaddling you in a specious bliss, seducing your senses. I imagine this when I taste yet another big wine indistinguishable from myriad other Big Wines, and yes, it might well be superior to the weird little wine that grew there before—*might* be—but what does it signify? That people in many different places can suss the formula and apply it? I’m not sure why I should care.

And yet we romantics *must* yield the point: the floor has risen, and this is a good thing. Our struggle is to applaud this while protecting the ceiling. And the “ceiling” isn’t merely new stratospheres of hedonism (even *more* ripe fruit, even *more* intensity: more *more* MORE) but rather those wines *uniquely* great. What other great wine is great as the best Loire Chenins are great? As the best Barolos are great? As the best

Jurançons, the best Mosel Rieslings, the best Grüner Veltliners, the best Grand Cru Chablis? Ultimately it isn’t greatness we must protect—it is uniqueness. Preserve the unique, and greatness will take care of itself.

The pragmatists need to realize there are risks inherent in their aesthetic.

And we romantics need to realize certain things too.

We *have* misapplied the concept of *terroir* to excuse flawed wines. This concept is precious. We need to respect it, and use it with care.

We *have* been guilty of a form of puritanism; if it tastes unpleasant it must be virtuous.

The pragmatists ought in turn to acknowledge theirs isn’t the only form of pleasure. There are worlds alongside the sensual, and wine can be intellectually and spiritually nourishing, and people can desire these experiences, and the *true* hedonist isn’t threatened by them.

I wonder if we cannot all unite behind the value of diversity. I would like to think so. From my high-rise window I can often see raptors soaring and swooping through the sky, and I love these big graceful birds. But I could never imagine myself feeling “I sure love these big hawks, and other big birds too, eagles, buzzards, and I sure wish all birds were like these because they give me such pleasure.” What of the assertive red cardinal? The graceful heron? The silly woodpecker? The pensive dove? I want to live in a world of thousands of different wines, whose differences are deeper than zip-code, each one of which shows me the unending variety and fascination of this lovely bit of green on which we walk.



# jakob schneider

## nahe • niederhausen

Young Jakob is doing a *stage* at Knoll in the Wachau. Coincidence? Two estates cut from a similar cloth in their respective hommages to the old ways. But Schneider plans to modernize—there was no other direction in which to go – and he’s a fast-talkin full-of-beans young ‘un whose best wines are ahead of him.

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

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

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

And it has also to do with the circles in which one wishes to move. Great growers everywhere form a kind of fraternity, an in-crowd (in Germany this would be a Brat-pack of the wurst kind) and we all want to hang with the popular kids, but you know, after a point I don’t care what parties I’m invited to. I do care, though, about Mama-Schneider throwing her arms around me when I

- **Vineyard area: 16 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Kamm & Felsensteyer, Norheimer Dellchen & Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry, melaphyre; 52 different soil types**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Pinot varieties**

arrived, and pressing upon me a bottle and a card to give to my wife, and it is very good to represent all kinds of wines from all kinds of people, as long as the people are good and the wines are honest.

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

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



many pet themes, and his son and I made eye-contact and exchanged knowing smiles.

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

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

The young are indeed grabbing the reins now, but there is a legacy they carry even as they change and modernize it. I wonder if we Americans can really understand such a thing. So many of our basic human contexts—senses of time, of history, of continuity, family and community—lay in tatters. And we ourselves have shredded these things so we could get at other things we imagine we want. Can we actually see someone's wines as representatives of a family **legacy**? Can we understand how wines become *members* of the family? It is sometimes obscure even for me, and I *want* to believe it.

So I think of Schneiders, and how they render their wines, those strange songs of the earth who share the house with the family. There's our world, all a-rush and

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

Thankfully the wines are lovely. I'd never have returned otherwise. But they are lovely in *just* such a way, such a particularly *Schneider* way. They shouldn't be served too cold, as it mutes the astonishing perfume that's their *raison d'être*. Also, theirs is a self-contained world; the wines aren't planned, nor are intended to be placed, in gigantic tastings with seventy-five other wines. Schneider is a perfect example of the impossibility of isolating wines from the people who make them. Yet every drinker doesn't have the chance to go there and sit in the parlor and soak up the vibes, and so the wine must have *something* of value purely **per se**. Which harks back, again, to those aromas and flavors. If you can somehow drink a few of these at cellar temperature in circumstances permissive of reflection, I guarantee you'll never be more enthralled by any other wines. Even wines I might agree are "better." They are intensely *poetic* wines, but not necessarily lyric wines. They are elemental in some way; they have no time for frills or flourishes. They just exhale the earth.

#### **schneider at a glance:**

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

#### **how the wines taste:**

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

#### **GJS-075L 2006 Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

This is THE sleeper-wine in this portfolio, like getting a by-the-glass priced big-format of Criots, Chevalier and Batard-Montrachet! So let's see; which collection of Grand Crus make up this vintage's Liter. . . Ah, it's *Rosenberg* (a wee lad of 107° Oechsle), Klamm (a mere 90°) and *Felsensteyr* (a veritable waif at 85°); this is more taut and piquant than usual; it reads drier and more interesting albeit less seductive – depending of course on what seduces you. This is indeed complex with call and response and a dialogue of violets and quince. I'm seduced at any rate, well-known slut that I am.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (1-6 years)

- GJS-074 **2006 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett**  
 96°, from young vines, partly raisined; sublime aromas of cox-orange pippins. It's one of two "spontis" he made in '06 (i.e., no cultured yeasts), and it seems a leetle drier than usual, with more angularity and a suave mineral-flowery length; indeed it's a *long* length.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (5-16 years)
- GJS-076 **2006 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Spätlese**  
 We gave this a DRY *dosage*; the base wine had 109° and its substantial RS was ameliorated by blending in a dry Klamm; the nose is lavish, baked apple, white peach, *prosciutto di Parma*; again the 2006 melange of quinine and quince (Chenin-like, come to think of it), and a steel-toed kick belies the still-high RS.  
 SOS: 3 (8-22 years)
- GJS-077H **2006 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Auslese "Junior," 12/375ml**  
 This is in fact a VERY big BA, and a hugely dense salty delicious botrytis-wine. Outsized and grand.  
 SOS: 4
- GJS-078H **2005 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling TBA, 12/375ml** ++  
**First offering.** Back to school for me, because when I first tasted this I felt it was just-another-botrytis wine. I was very, very wrong. It is an *outrageously* fabulous TBA that's a quintessence of Hermannshöhle, the exact way I adore TBA to be. Massive yet clear, as if of a gigantic statue made of crystal; it's like a Kryllian photograph of Hermannshöhle, revealing hitherto-unseen essences and auras. The price is reasonable for a monumental wine of such beauty and meaning.  
 SOS: 4 (20-60 years)





# weingut hexamer

nahe • meddersheim

Two happy items to report. One, Hexamer has purchased even more land in Schlossböckelheim, which will give him more flexibility. Second and more important, *2006 is the greatest vintage he has made*. The polish and breed of these wines is nothing short of amazing. It's easy to forget Harald only took the estate over from his father in 1999.

So one night I did a class for the Smithsonian lecture series on regional distinctions among German Rieslings. You could have heard a pin drop, but nobody had one. I tried dropping a stapler, but people were just annoyed. So we started with a trio of Mosels to get that benchmark in place. Then we tasted two Nahe wines, the first of them Hexamer's '04 Spätlese.

This was revelatory even to me. Harald's wines have all the attack and snap one associates

with Mosel wine, so there was no surprise at first glance, but the mid-palate was suddenly flooded with another kind of *substance*, something less direct and more allusive, more exotic. Nahe wines always taste as though they were fined with bath-salts and jewels. Hexamer's wines are an avid demonstration of the Nahe's uniqueness, precisely *because* they're so steely and pristine.

His '05 vintage was curtailed by hail, but fortunately for him (and for us) he'd bought a parcel in the Grand Cru (and painfully named) Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen from a Kreuznach estate selling off vineyards. The site is virtually unknown except to Nahe-fiends; it's small (6 hectares altogether) and the soil is sandy-stony loam over sandstone and conglomerates based on rhyolite. Most important, it's the first time we've seen what Hexamer can do aside from the particular context of his Meddersheimers. This is keenly enticing, for when I consider the many tired old growers making dull wines from great sites in, say, Niederhausen, I yearn to see what a guy like Hexamer could do. Now, we begin to glean it.

This arose as a tip from Dönnhoff. Samples were procured, and tasted over the winter, with great pleasure. (The man made some of the most *interesting* wines from the rarely-enthralling 1999 vintage.) We squeezed in a visit to Meddersheim, which believe me requires a detour. Harald and Petra Hexamer are all the things one wants a young



Harald, Petra, and Fido Hexamer

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Schlossböckelheimer In den Felsen, Sobernheimer Marbach**
- **Soil types: Quartz, red weathered sandstone with high percentages of quartzite, conglomerates and porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 62% Riesling, 12% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 11% Spätburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 12% others**

vintner-family to be. But first let me back up a little.

The melancholy fact is that fewer and fewer 20-somethings are opting to carry on their family's wineries. This isn't entirely bad. The ones who *do* self-select; they're the real idealists, wine-lovers, and I also believe they choose the life because of the example their parents set. It stands to reason. If the family life growing up was happy and successful, the child connects the career of a vintner with good warm feelings.

But whatever my theoretical musings, Harald Hexamer is about as dear as they come. I have a little questionnaire I hand out to all my growers (the answers from which are often quoted herein) and when Hexamer sent his back he wrote "For some of these questions I could have written a book in response."

He aims to become identified with a genuinely superb vineyard which has an unfortunate name for non-Germans . . . **Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg**. (It is fine with me if you want simply to call it "the Grafenberg spot".)

This is a steep southward hillside crawling off into two lateral valleys. The soil is based on sandy loam but, this being after all the Nahe, it ends up being a complicated

melange of various weathered products, slate, sandstone and other conglomerates among them. The first time I sniffed a Hexamer from this site I was immediately



Rheingrafenberg Rock at Hexamer

delighted: a true *terroir* wine. In fact we took a PICTURE of a big ol' rock from the Rhein-grafen-berg Harald keeps in his tasting room. It looks like something the Mars rover might have found. If you're reading the on-line version of this text

the color shot should be nearby.

These wines have been consistently impressive for their *dicht* (which translates as "density"), delineation, and charm. Think about it. How many wines exhibit all three qualities? Density usually precludes charm. Delineation often presupposes a certain transparent lightness. These are rare and wonderful wines, sybarites; I'm not looking to add estates to this portfolio in my advancing decrepitude unless they offer irresistible deliciousness.

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

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

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

Acidity has been a theme here, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer's wines are (if you like them) "brilliant" and (if you don't like them) "tart". Mind you, I don't actually know if the wines are high in acidity; they just taste that way. In fact I only ever ask to see analyses to confirm an impression or to have a starting point for dosage blends. My favorite growers hardly look at all. Dönnhoff told me last summer he never looks at analyses once the grapes are in the press. "I'll check during harvest for Oechsle and acidity, but once the press is running how can it possibly help me to know the figures? I can't *do* anything about them; all they do is cause me to worry needlessly." For better or worse — in his case, better — he trusts his palate. And he's influencing a young generation who are blessed with his encouragement to trust their wits and senses.

We saw Hexamer early on, when all we'd tasted were Pfalz and Rheinhessen wines and the vintage looked like it might be a tad on the gnarly side. Only Wagner-Stempel was stellar, but Daniel Wagner's a genius and you can't judge a vintage by what he does. Hexamer's were the first wines to show gloss and elegance — in some ways they were the first *beautiful* wines among the '06s. It was tremendously heartening. I called back to my colleagues in Skurnik-land and left some late-night babbling message "Remember what I said about the vintage? Forget it, Hexamer was surreal..." or something to that effect. These wines have done really well for us, and I know y'all like them, but believe me: *NOTHING* you've tasted will prepare you for these.

#### hexamer at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

GHX-035

#### 2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quartzit"

**CORE-LIST WINE.** As you know by now this is a single-parcel bottling from a side valley in the Rheingrafenberg that sits on quartzite as opposed to the usual conglomerates. This 2006 was made from two days' pickings, one with 89° (and barely chaptalized) and the other at 94° (and not chaptalized) — both qualify for "Auslese" under the wise and enlightened German wine law. It's the most directly *stony* of any vintage yet but also has a euphoric fragrance of yellow fruits and roses like a Berg Roseneck. . . which is also on quartzite, which of course is pure coincidence, terroir being a romance as we all know. Lovely salty grip with again this wintergreen finish of the '06s, with notes of spiced-apple.

SOS: 2 (3-15 years)

- GHX-042 **2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 If Quartzit is stony, this is mineral; lighter and with melting purity along with pungent terroir; quince and asian pear play off the *silkiest* texture – one of the rare '06s that can be said to be *fine*.  
 SOS: 2 (6-21 years)
- GHX-032 **2005 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Spätlese** +  
 An amazing maiden-voyage from a vineyard that was in some disrepair when our hero took it over; from near the end of the harvest, and a classic middle-Nahe fragrance, straw and sweet hay, Chinese 5-spice and star fruit, lavender; really, is there any greater soil for Riesling than these? This is fiendishly charming stuff, all the pulverized mineral juju of '05 with plummy fruit; great focus with gentle acids and balanced botrytis; stylish and complex.  
 SOS: 2 (6-19 years)
- GHX-039 **2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese "Eisendell"** +  
 You may recall a "Birkenfelder" I offered a couple years back. Harald's into micro-crus; he picks them and vinifies them separately and will also bottle them thus if they demonstrate enough distinctiveness. As does this. It's mineral again, with mirabelle-y fruit; it's a wine for those who like the bite of Riesling, the tart fruit and pulverized stone, and of course the earth speaks this way also, with a knowing stony grip. But the wine is also *delicious*.  
 SOS: 2 (9-25 years)
- GHX-040 **2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*** ++  
 Could this be the single best Riesling yet from here? It's a Kupfergrube type with spell-binding detail of fruit, clear *tilleul* and a smorgasbord of heirloom apples, meyer lemon and papaya; some Auslese tones of talc and malt; melty and primordially pure. Snow falling like a blessing, and it settles over the world and then slowly melts, and the pure white trickles into the earth to grow next year's apples, which peer back to the silence of the snow.  
 SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GHX-037 **2005 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*** ++  
 Astonishing wine; almost a Dellchen fragrance; the palate has the '05-*everything*; resplendent fruit, firm structure, clean talc-y botrytis, wet straw and apricot and the serene confident power of this magnificent vintage.  
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GHX-041 **2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Auslese** +  
 GHX-041H **2006 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Auslese, 12/375ml** +  
This is breathtaking. Dönnhoff quality here. A silent orgasm of terroir seasoned by botrytis. Malt, maracuja, salt and sautéed apple, caramel – oh enough! Tired of words. . . .  
 SOS: 3 (15-45 years)
- GHX-034H **2005 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling BA\*, 12/375ml** ++  
 Again I wince at how I underrated this a year ago. This wine embodies a joy that doesn't even feel happy, but gives you the shock you always feel when confronted with the divine. For all its ambrosial depth it's light on its feet, and the cinnamon and orange-zest finish is striking. Your palate goes to confession here. You can't lie. Yes I have wasted my time on frivolity, yes I have forgotten this beauty exists, and must be acknowledged. Yes I accept the gift, though I am unworthy, *because* I am unworthy. Yes I will try to remember. Yes I will fail.  
 SOS: 4 (20-50 years)



# kruger-rumpf

## nahe • münster sarmsheim

Something's sure up at this winery. Maybe it's because his children are growing up and helping out (kids have a way of giving their dads a kick in the pants, don't they . . .), and maybe it's just simple ambitiousness, but there's no doubt Stefan Rumpf has taken a significant step forward in each of the last three vintages. I'm just guessing here, but I intuit a subtle kind of competition between Stefan and son Johannes. Dad has an audience now, and he wants to show off a little, to earn the boy's respect. I saw them spur each other on while we were tasting, and felt the frisky new energy.

It used to be quite the decathlon tasting the young vintage here, but Stefan showed me his '06s in nearly-finished form, and the vintage was far less bracing and phenolic than any of its

predecessors. We were done remarkably fast (my rough notes from the cask-samples used to look like an engineer's diagram for a cyclotron) and we used much less dosage.

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

Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our hero is making RHEINHESSEN WINES. "We had to take everything out and replant with Riesling." I wondered what had been planted in such an obvious Riesling site. Albalonga! Perhaps this is why the wines of the former proprietor (who shall remain nameless) tasted so much like cherries.



Stephan Rumpf

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Münsterer Dautenpfläner, Pittersberg & Rheinberg, Dorsheimer Goldloch, Binger Scharlachberg (Rheinhessen)**
- **Soil types: Grey and red slate, quartzite, loess**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe; the rest mostly Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder & Spätburgunder**

5% of Albalonga with its high acid could marry quite well with an overcropped Riesling—give that thin little sucka some aroma. Don't think such things aren't done.

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

Stefan's modesty expends to his very reasonable pricing — less than the wines are worth.

2006 maintains the markedly high level set in 2005, and possibly exceeds it. There's no question this estate is on the move, and if one considers only the top Rieslings and Scheurebe it has few betters in the Nahe. I am also amazed and stoked to offer you a sensational Riesling that's *ready to drink* and available in commercial quantities.



## A PROFILE OF THE SITES:

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

**Pittersberg** is the other of the top Crus, and this site is more classic and less mischievous than its neighbor. Stefan refers only to “slate” and very often the wine smells just like Mosel

wine – in fact just like Graacher Himmelreich. “In parts dusty loam over slate,” according to the textbook. Pittersberg is related to the Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, which is just over the Rhine less than two miles north, though without the Taunus-quartzite of the Rheingau site. Diel’s great Pittermännchen is also on slate; I’m sure the similar names are not coincidence. Pittersberg gives firm, nutty Rieslings.

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

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

### kruger-rumpf at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

They’re as sturdy as before but there’s more flesh on the bones. There’s more mineral density, more complexity of texture, and they are invariably site-specific: The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you’ll see the truth behind the cliché.

#### GKF-110 **2006 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs**

Classic Pittersberg in fine form; nutty, mineral and balanced, with fiji and mutsu apple notes, considerable length and refinement, and a *cool* Alsatian feel, like Geisberg or Kastelberg. It’s very *Grand Cru*.

It’s also very curious that you won’t really get to taste it. The VDP says the Grosses Gewächs are not to be sold until September following the vintage, and also that they cannot be shown beforehand except to visitors to the winery. By the time we make our 2nd offering in January, they are in many instances sold out. Sehr trendy in Germany, you see. So an ostensibly “wise and enlightened” policy has the effect of denying you access to samples at the *only* time you can taste them. Hats off to the fine theoreticians at the VDP for making our lives so much easier!

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 12-16 years)

#### GKF-111 **2006 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken** +

OK, here is the IDEAL DRY RIESLING; juicy, full of inner richness; typical cox-orange pippin, lemon blossom and gardenia aromas; a lovely dispersal of mineral through fruit through body back through mineral; the wine seems to ripple like water over stones; just amazingly *pleasing* flavor and seamless balance. *PERFECT* food wine. Perfect dry wine period, and I don’t give a rat’s ass what the RS is.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-7 years, again 14-20 years)

#### GKF-112 **2006 Rosé**

This comes from old, low-yielding Portugieser vines, and gives a dewy, yielding fruit somewhere between strawberry and granny-smith apple; it’s a slight and gauzy thing, not strikingly long or serious but strikingly girlish and charming. If Diel’s Rosé is *too* earnest for you, and Darting’s *too* picnic-y, this is the perfect compromise.

SOS: 1 (now-2 years)

- GKF-108 **2006 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** We tried two blends using other wines but the blend with *dosage* was by FAR the best. A *pox* on all these misguided dingbats for whom this manifestly sensible practice is somehow “impure.” Spare me the attitude! OK, the wine has gold-en-delicious and vanilla notes as Rheinberg always shows; yellow roses, limey zing and 2006’s pith and limey brightness Yum good stuff.  
 SOS: 2 (6-19 years)
- GKF-113 **2006 Münsterer Kapellenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 Two reasons to offer both Kabinetts: 1) this was simply too good to leave behind, and 2) there’s hardly a lick of Kabinett from ‘06 anyway. And though this is lighter than the Rheinberg and more forthrightly apple-y, it is, I mean WOW, a *really* charming Riesling. In fact it most resembles Willi Schaefer’s Himmelreich Kab, if that gives you any idea. **SOMMELIER ALERT!** SOS: 2 (5-16 years)
- GKF-114 **2006 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 As is often the case with 2006, the vintage finds its sweet-spot with a certain ripeness, and I had a tactile sense that this was what ‘06 *wants* to taste like. It’s true Grand Cru stuff, with all the stature, length and complexity that implies: the nose is something between Hipping and Kupfergrube with a hint of the Heerkretz wild-herb and hedge-flower; really fine botrytis and an elegant regal carriage. It recalls a great 1975 Rheingauer.  
 SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GKF-109 **2006 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** ++  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** This is really billowing and rising with a swollen terroir; a wine of almost frustrating complexity; you wish you could freeze-frame it and zap each of its hundred nuances - land of a thousand nuances (hahaha!) – OK stop groaning and buy the wine, please.  
 SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GKF-120 **1997 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Want to *see what I mean* when I write “10 years” for the ideal first-approach? Here you go – and we have enough to sell. There’s an utterly lovely grown-up Riesling aroma, fruit-oriented, with the ‘97 violet and lavender; elegant, nutty and sleek, still mineral-ly; lots of bergamot and gardenia; a perfect example of German Riesling just attaining its young-adulthood, and a perfect enactment of the virtues of the wholly *good*.  
**SOMMELIER ALERT!** SOS: 1 (10-26 years)
- GKF-115 **2006 Scheurebe Spätlese** ++  
 This is not only my **Scheu of the vintage**, it’s one of a handful of Scheus that were made at all. You’ll recall most estates hurried to protect their Rieslings and let the Scheu chips fall where they may. This, my friend, is a Tomcat PAR-TAY in the glass! A kinky lurid orgy of spice and sage and currant-leaf, but after the party’s over, this cat sits in his chair and reads the great philosophers. It’s so giddy and yet also so fine; I wonder when a Scheu has ever made me happier; this has just absurd length, peak to peak to peak.  
 SOS: 2 (2-12 years)
- GKF-123 **2006 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Auslese** ++  
 A moderate (for the vintage) 115° Oechsle (I mean, Christoffel’s *Kabinetts* were 110°), but this is extraordinary wine in every way. It has the smoky, spicy, almost obdurate sternness we used to ascribe to Rheingau wines – specifically to *Rauenthaler Baiken*. And it’s by no means “sweet,” it simply delivers a message from some primordial underground; not just mighty, but seemingly almighty. German wine old-timers who thought you’d never see a wine like this again – looky here.  
**SOMMELIER ALERT!** SOS: 2 (13-32 years)



# schlossgut diel

## nahe • burg layen

I have been known to be cranky, and I have even been known to kvetch. Ask my wife. I herewith give her permission to remind me, whenever I am in one of my snits, that on a single afternoon and evening about a month ago, I drank several of the greatest young Rieslings I have ever had, plus I got to meet the urbane Mr. Joel Payne, plus we killed a Magnum of '88 Krug after dinner, plus I got to enjoy the charming society of Armin and Monica and not least (for *sure* not least) Caroline Diel.

I have never seem Armin so radiant and jocund. He walked through the rooms humming and gave every appearance of a man hardly able to contain his mirth. I mean, even though I was

there, with my foul vibe and all. I think it has to do with Caroline, who has returned to the winery after her many *Wanderjahren* abroad. I am enormously proud of Caroline, as if I had any right to be "proud" of her. She's a very rare and special person; intelligent, disarmingly charming and friendly, the kind of person who could have done anything, anywhere, and lived a life of "glamour." She chose instead to continue the winery. That takes some heart, baby! Caroline is my hero, and no wonder Armin is humming.

I'll confess there were moments tasting these 2006s when I was so overcome with amazement and delight I considered locking myself in the bathroom so I could laugh out loud. There's an image for you: (*Importer retires discreetly to WC, from which after a moment manic laughter is heard. Upon emerging to the perplexed eyes of the others,*



Armin Diel

*importer says "Um, oh, ah hmmm. . . it was really, um, very witty what I just did in there. . . .")* Um, sure dude: have another glass of Scheurebe. . . .

I don't deal in a pri-  
oris, and I'm a lousy tac-  
tician. I never sat down  
and said "I will make a  
specialty of catching the  
rising stars before any-  
one knows them," yet in  
many cases this is what  
I've done. Dönnhoff,  
Hexamer, Rumpf,  
Weingart, Catoir,  
Meßmer, Leitz, Spreitzer,  
Christoffel, Schaefer,  
Adam, Karlsruhle; all  
were relatively  
"obscure" when I began  
importing their wines,  
and all are Big Names

now. This is satisfying because I share-at least a tiny part-  
in the achievement.

- **Vineyard Area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual Production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top Sites: Dorsheimer Goldloch, Pittermännchen and Burgberg**
- **Soil Types: loam and gravel over rocky subsoil, quartzite and slate**
- **Grape Varieties: 65% Riesling, 20% Grauburgunder, 10% Spätburgunder, 5% Weissburgunder**

Thus my representing Schlossgut Diel constitutes a departure, and will ramify in unpredictable ways. For it's the first time a superstar-estate has entered this portfolio with its reputation already established.

The first thing to tell you is: the wines are stellar. That's not a word I casually throw around. Schlossgut Diel belongs in the class of the elite. The wines will wow you.

Armin occupies an unprecedented position in the wine world. He is proprietor of his estate on the Nahe, and he is perhaps the most influential wine writer in Germany. Imagine if Bob Parker owned one of the 1st-Growth Bordeaux: just like that. Needless to say neither Armin nor his colleagues writing for the same books or magazines *review* the wines of Schlossgut Diel, which is why the name doesn't appear on the various lists of estate "classifications." But of course there's a meta-mes-  
sage: "The man is such an expert, imagine how good his own wines must be." The ethics of the situation are quite sophisticated to American sensibilities, yet behind it all are the wines themselves.

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

one another, yet they are entirely different based on terroir," say Armin and his cellar-master Christoph Friedrich. These two have an admirably close working relationship.

Indeed it's a pleasure to see the penetration and flexibility of their mutual intelligence. Of course we rapped about the usual wine stuff, but at one point Armin interrupted to say "We do this and we do that, but most important is that all indications are in question every year, there is no monolithic recipe to 'make' wines year by year. Each vintage asks different questions than the previous one. I'm really thrilled to have a sensible guy like Christoph who can play in both major and minor keys." Quite so. In effect there is very little in the "hard" viti-and-viniculture data that stands out from the norm among top estates; what does stand out is a certain deftness of intuition, the thing whereby a pasty-chef alters the puff-pasty prep depending on the humidity. It isn't

even a matter of responding to conditions: that's an I-thou thing. It's more that one lives at ease within conditions, moving naturally as they mandate.

There's a great German word "Betriebsblind" which is one of those neologisms you need an entire phrase to translate into English. In essence it denotes the tunnel-vision that results from being too close to your own wines. Armin describes it as "sadly the rule" in the wine profession. Yet he of all people can escape it, he tastes so many wines constantly, and I sense the air is bright and clear with perspective at his estate. The wines are both beautiful and *smart*. You might notice I never use the phrase "well-made;" it's eyewash, it means nothing, but in a larger sense Armin and Christoph's wines are well-guided by their perspective and intuition. It's true across the board, even among the wines I did not select.

#### **schlossgut diel at a glance:**

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

#### **how the wines taste:**

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

### **ESTATE DRY WINES**

#### **GSD-052 2006 Diel de Diel**

The winery produces an expert range of Pinots in the "traditional" style (barriques, batonnage et al) of which this remarkably satisfying wine is the entry level. One might cavil the wine speaks a kind of vinous Esperanto, but this world-citizen happens to taste so good it felt churlish to deny you access to it on "principle." The 2006, bottled only a few days before I tasted it, showed a smoky nose more informed by the Pinot Gris than was the case in the more Riesling-y 2005; the leesiness reads less "sweet" now, but bottle-sickness has tamped down the fruit. In any case this is bigger and more masculine, less winsome, showing more weight and seriousness, even though this note is by necessity preliminary.  
SOS: 0 (now-12 years)

#### **GSD-051 2006 Rosé de Diel**

I used the '05 in a James Beard House dinner I did with the wonderful DC restaurant Kolumbia, and no one could believe how good it was. This 2006 seems a little drier, with more sinewy grip; it enters demurely but then explodes with Pinot fruit (I forgot to say it's 100% Pinot Noir), shiitake-earth, smoke and a hint of wood, but a really hyper sort of clanging around between mineral and tomato-water on one hand and Pernand-like violets on the other. Not a "picnic wine" unless you're going on a picnic with Noam Chomsky.  
SOS: 0 (now to 5 years)



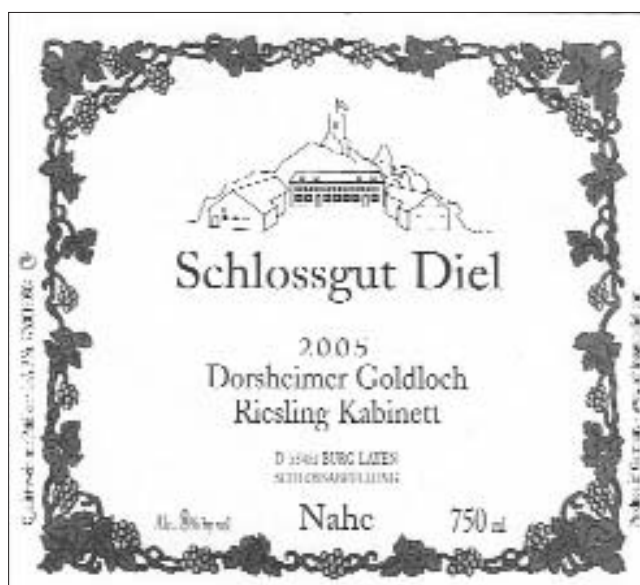
## **DRY RIESLINGS:**

- GSD-056 **2006 Dorsheim Riesling**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Allowing for recent (2 weeks) bottling: redcurrant and tarragon aromas; the fruit is a *seizure* of mint and mineral, with juicy lemon blossom and sour-sop and an Altoid sting. What this will be when it recovers its fruit should be fabulous – it's already exciting.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now to 3 years, again 11-15 years)
- GSD-053 **2006 Eierfels Riesling** **+**  
 In effect this is a kind of 2nd-label for the Grosses Gewächs; in fact it's largely from the Goldloch – perhaps the higher sections, because it's less succulently fruity than the Goldloch norm. Indeed the wine is utter quicksilver – it's like those fillings that pick up radio waves; pungent, fennely, like pork-loin and marjoram and *demi-glace* and the breast meat from an heirloom chicken; so juicy it reads sweet. Actually amazing, uncanny stuff.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years, again from 12-17 years)
- GSD-054 **2006 Burgberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs** **++**  
 This was hard: all three GroGe were superb, but returns diminish when there are too many redundant-seeming choices, especially in a narrow category like dry German Riesling.  
  
 All I can say, as I've said before, is if they were *all* like *these* the sum of vinous joy would be augmented enormously. This one has massive rocky bones and a wild fragrance of garrigue and bouquet-garni; a real *mass* of fragrance in a Riesling tasting like it was hewn from iron and aged in plutonium tanks. It is about as amenable as the north wall of the Eiger – but also as stunning.  
 SOS: 0 (1-4 years, again from 14-22 years)
- GSD-055 **2006 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs** **++**  
 This is the baroque cathedral, magnificent and opulent; the fruit is a madness of tropicality; if you put Nigl's Kremsleiten and Hochäcker *together* you might get this; the minty peak and the crazy-thick pudding of fruit; this stands with the greatest dry Rieslings I've ever tasted from Germany – from anywhere – and my two plusses might be stingy.  
 SOS: 0 (1-4 years, again from 15-25 years)

## **WINES WHICH ARE NOT DRY!**

- GSD-057 **2006 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Kabinett** **++**  
 Oh this is just not right! An astonishing Kabinett in any vintage and an incomprehensible one from 2006; it's as derangedly ultra-violet brilliant as Christoffel at his *very* best; utter lime and kiwi and sassafrass with a scintillating cicada-hiss of tingling borealis shimmer. There is really a quality of *magic* over this.  
 SOS: 2 (6-22 years)
- GSD-058 **2006 Dorsheimer Goldloch Riesling Spätlese** **+++**  
 The wine of the vintage in this offering, and there's none too much of it; I don't seem to be the only person to have noticed its quality!  
  
 This is nothing less than an utter ecstasy of Riesling, the apples of heaven, the purest, most heart-rending fruit you will ever taste. It isn't a matter of being overwhelmed by complexity, as sometimes happens. It is one single soul-wracking vein of beauty that makes the world fall away, leaving you with no more doubt and no more ambiguity – this is IT.  
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

- GSD-059 **2006 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
*Here's the dialectical complexity of great Nahe wine, the whirligig of intricate nuance, of seemingly ceaseless nuance such that it keeps whirling and spinning away from you just when you think you've grasped it. It has a spiciness recalling Winkeler Hasensprung, limes and apples and stones seem to bounce off one another in mid-air. This is more Great than the Goldloch, but it's nowhere near as rapturous and sexy. Still, rapture takes many forms, and who's to say *what* this professorial Riesling might look like with its clothes off?*  
 SOS: 2 (11-32 years)
- GSD-060 **2006 Scheurebe Spätlese** ++  
 You think you were frustrated not to get any of the 2005 Scheu? I didn't score any either, pal. My cellar rebukes me to this day. This 2006 is a little less manic than the 2005 – but only a little. It seems more Riesling-like, though drenched with cassis strained through fifteen minerals. Catoir's '93s had a similar beginning and went on to become lavish and grand.  
 SOS: 2 (now to 15 years)
- GSD-061 **2006 Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Auslese** +  
 I think I was running out of affect by then. I noted a nose like a Christoffel 3-star (don't ever tell Armin his wine tastes like a Mosel wine; he'll reply "Yes, they've been imitating us for years.") and a palate that easily and seamlessly blends a raw-silken texture with mineral intricacy and superripe clean fruit. I think I'd be a better taster if I didn't get so emotional, but probably not a better guy.  
 SOS: 3 (15-40 years)
- GSD-038 **2005 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese** +++  
 I reserved the last 20 cases of this staggering masterpiece from the supernal 2005 vintage. All three of the Auslesen were wonderful but this one had that tiny extra dimension which induced a kind of swoon; fragrances of iris and blown-out-candle and moonglow pear; length enough to defy credulity, and a riveting dialogue between stones and honey. If you missed it then, don't miss it again. This is Riesling not merely aristocratic, but divine.  
 SOS: 3 (15-45 years)



But there's a settled-ness in the Pfalz now, and this was inevitable. Eventually the up-and-coming being finally ups-and-comes. And there's a clear and present danger the Pfalz will be suffocated by the ideologies of its movers and shakers, if this hasn't already happened. Am I overstating? Try and find a single Riesling Kabinett with residual sugar on any significant restaurant in the region! You needn't bother: you can't do it. The fetish for dry wine has cast a pall over the land.

And it isn't only happening along the Rheinfront by

Nierstein. One year at Gysler I noticed a poster for a tasting featuring growers in a group called Message In A Bottle. Any group to which Alex Gysler belonged was ipso facto intriguing, and I asked Alex whether any of his colleagues might be interesting to me. You'll see the results of his answer a few pages hence. Perhaps these guys were inspired by the acclaim attaching to Wittmann

Sure the Rheinhessen remains home to a great deal of dross (Liebfraumilch has to come from somewhere, I guess) but there's no equivalent buzz in the *Rheingau*, where mediocre wine from great land remains the status quo. Indeed the Rheinhessen seems to invert that melancholy formula, making excellent wine from (ostensibly) nondescript land. You don't drive around thinking "Well it's obvious that great wines come from *here*." Instead its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

The results for us are entirely desirable: We can obtain beautiful wines for very gentle prices.

Walter Strub's 2006s were among the first '06s I tasted, and they were the very last. It was interesting to see them four weeks apart, and when we were finished we celebrated by making *schnitzels* – many, many schnitzels. Walter's and my respective spouses took a trip to get some corn-fed free-range chickens and the results were so tasty we all ate much too much. Poor Walter had recourse to some serious eau-de-vie whereas I suffered through a card game called "asshole" in which the loser – which seemed distressingly often to be *me* – was known as the "asshole." That I was soundly beaten by a 14-year-old girl just rubbed salt in the schnitzel, as it were.

There was plenty to enjoy among the 06s here, but still I felt for Walter. He was touchingly conscientious about making sure there'd be plenty of Paterberg and Brückchen Rieslings for the bottlings we sell the most of, but the Grand Cru red-slope wines were all Auslesen, and big-ass Auslesen at that. There's '06 for you. The crop was small here as it was everywhere. And it will seem smaller, as we're compressing what were several different wines into one yummy wine we can sell in volume.

Under normal circumstances we'd be all over the page with banner headlines announcing the new baby, but again the 2006 vintage makes for an awkward launch. The wine is called SOIL TO SOUL and it will take its place alongside Dragonstone and the Fish-Labels as our go-to everyday everyman's Riesling. In fact we deliberately conceived Soil to Soul to land smack in between the big fruity Dragonstone and the light dry Fish Label. Walter sunk a lot into it and has every right to be thrilled with the results. Except: there isn't enough wine!

The idea was to supplement his own fruit with purchased fruit, but no one was selling Riesling in bulk from



the teeny crop in '06, and then when they started offering wine it was absurdly expensive (especially for a "price-point" wine) and you couldn't be sure it was clean. So Walter and I arrived at a blend using only his wine – in fact using the wine that would've gone into the LITER bottling, which will now be phased out.

Thus the maiden-voyage for Soil To Soul will be

- Vineyard area: 15 hectares
- Annual production: 7,500 cases
- Top sites: Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping and Pettenthal
- Soil types: Red clay, slate, loess, loam & chalk
- Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 13% Müller-Thurgau, 3% Grüner Veltliner, 2% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder

small in quantity but large in quality, and will be estate-bottled.

In the late Winter of 1983 I made one final trip to the Rheinland to say goodbye to some close friends. I'd be heading back to the States a few weeks later, after ten years in Germany. One of those friends was Walter Strub, who asked if I'd have some time to taste his young vintage 1982 with him. I agreed readily; I wasn't in the wine trade then, and had no experience tasting pre-bottled wine.

The samples were lined up when I arrived. Most of the wines were bone-dry or nearly so, and the question arose how sweet they should ultimately be. The Trocken fetish was only incipient in those days. Well yours truly had no earthly idea how sweet the wines should be; I'd never looked at an analysis and had no *idea* how many grams-per-liter of sweetness equaled what impression of sweetness on the palate. Walter gave me an '81 to taste and told me how sweet it was, and I tried using that wine as a benchmark.

The work came easily to me—to my great surprise—but this was another order of tasting, different in essence from anything I'd tasted or drank as a "civilian." It was one thing to have tasted finished wines analytically, that was recreation, but this was intuition, inference, imagination, peering through a periscope into the future, not to mention the finished wine depended on making the



right choice now.

Even after doing it for twenty-plus years now, it's still hard to articulate what it entails. I'm afraid it's very Zen. You receive a wine which may or may not be *incomplete* (some of them are instantly perfect just as they are) and you infer what it will take to complete them. In so doing you are required to examine flavor components under a palate-microscope. But it happens in a flash, it takes longer to explain it than to do it, and it isn't consciously cognitive. You relax, so the wine can come to you, and when it does you flash a beam of super-attention on it. Then you judge and cogitate. And I think I'm good at it, but still I am often wrong. I like being wrong. Because if I'm wrong (i.e., if my initial guess doesn't pan out), I get to keep at it till I get it right, and I get to see my error, and it's the best way to learn.

I've learned a few things over the years. More sugar doesn't always taste sweeter. Often it's the opposite. What tastes perfect in the lab needs more sweetness at bottling, because bottling constricts fruit and body and emphasizes acidity, and because sugars begin to polymerize immediately. If a wine's a bit too sweet, time will see to it. If it's too dry, ain't nuthin' you can do.

Here's why I'm going on about this in a text about Walter Strub. Because of the many layers of trust he showed me, out of the goodness of his heart. He invited me behind the scenes, allowing me to see his wines au naturel, and to taste as I'd never tasted before. And to my astonishment, he took my ideas seriously. But that's Walter: no secrets, no artifice, full of the spirit of sharing. Many of the hippies of the sixties turned into the very people they despised, but Walter, who was never a hippie, embodies all the virtues they espoused. Giving, trusting, sharing, no games, nothing to hide, sometimes even a little naïve, but actually, remarkably, *Good*. It is good, the collegial trust he shows me; it has helped me grow professionally and personally. It is good he invites me in to the wines, doesn't do the take-it-or-leave-it thing (no disrespect intended to those who do; each is entitled to his own approach) and fosters a mood of easy comradeship. In short, he treats me as a friend. And I am touched and gratified. Finally it doesn't matter how much wine you sold, which pack you belonged to, or whether yours was the fashionable position on the issues of the day. What matters are the faiths you kept, and how you treated other people. By those measures, Walter is leading a good life.

So imagine my surprise when I descended into Walter's cellar and found he'd outfitted all his tanks with chilling units. He has joined the new wave of German growers who'd rather stop fermentation than use *dosage*. Obviously that's entirely OK by me, though I do miss the blending work and do not agree with the anti-*dosage* crusaders. But Walter told me "It's always been my dream to be able to do this; it makes the wines more pure." A few years ago a guy named Paul Weber made what he said would be an innocuous TV-film about me and my doings, but which he was asked to sexy-up a bit, so he turned it into an ideological war between the pro and anti dosage camps, and Walter was (as was I) on the

unfashionable side of the issue. (Idiots! It shouldn't even be an issue.) Walter says he wasn't spurred on by the film, but I know it annoyed him; correctly so.

In any case 2005 was his first vintage using the technology, and whether coincidental or not, his entire cellar wouldn't ferment to completion: he didn't have a dry wine! This is inconvenient for him, though meaningless to me, though there's an irony in that '05's softness might



Walter Strub

have favored drier renderings. But, we'll never know.

Walter was working in a wine shop in Munich for an impossibly haughty Bavarian snot, and I was browsing in the store one day in May 1978, and the snot was Holding Forth and said something so magnificently dreadful that I caught Walter's eye, and between us there flashed a bolt of recognition.

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

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

On the wall above my desk I have a photograph of an old woman binding and pruning. She's wearing some sort of macadam, as it's cold outside. Her pocket is bulging with all the clippings she's produced. Her hand grasps the stalk with vigor and *insight*, as if it had eyes of its own and could see *inside* the vine. One little stalk is rakishly dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her fine old eyes have seen more than we can imagine; her face is furrowed with the winds of centuries. I keep her there where I can see her because I need to see the basis for this work I do. It's all well and good for me to compliment my friend on his "achievement," but I'll bet it feels less like an "achievement" to him than a decathlon which he only finished panting and gasping.

Walter's is a restless and questing nature. He wants to see how everything would turn out. He's a pilgrim in the cellar. "The worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision," he says, though certain patterns become evident over time. "I am always the first to start picking and

the last to finish.” He says. Walter’s wine is rarely the ripest in Nierstein, and I think it’s because he wants to pick clean fruit above all, and will let go of a few degrees Oechsle if the resulting wine will have the clarity and elegance he seeks.

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

But none of this is quite as systematic as I make it sound. In effect, our hero blunders through with good instincts and good will. He has a strong sense of what Nierstein is. He’s naturally enamored of its special soil, the sedimentary rust-colored sandstone they call Rotliegend. Dig down a way and you’ll come to slate, which prevents the wines from bulking up too much in Nierstein’s warm microclimate. In fact Walter has little trays of each of his various soils in the tasting room, in case you want to see what you’re drinking and don’t have time for a drive among the vines. Rotliegend gives Riesling a smoky sweetness, like something that’s been cured over a sweet wood.

“You can’t FORM a wine by working with must or mash, or even with the wine itself. It is unalterably formed in the vineyard,” says Walter. He won’t identify a “best” site (though he has his secret favorites), pointing out quite reasonably that “some years favor the ORBEL if it’s damp, as this site is porous; other years the HIPPIG is better, as it’s a damper and a cooler site.” What neither of us can fathom is the perennially excellent wine given

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

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

The morning-after the schnitzel extravaganza I walked over to Strubs to say good-bye before my homeward flight. Walter and Margit were sitting in their newly remodeled kitchen, still trying to figure out which switch pertained to what light or burner, and I strode through the door calling out “The *asshole’s* here!” I was still smarting from my abject disgrace the night before, but my pain was nothing compared to my friend Walter’s, who pointed toward his stomach and lamented “I’m still *suffering*!” It was a morning like hundreds we have known with one another, but that is what friendship is. Love and schnitzels, easeful and consoling, with two of the best people I will ever know.

#### strub at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### GST-131 2005 Niersteiner Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Feinherb

No you’re not reading the wrong catalogue. Walter visited Austria some years ago (stimulated by meeting many of my producers when they all toured around the States together) and brought back GV clippings from Willi Bründlmayer. He claims there was a time Grüner Veltliner was traditional in Rheinhessen, after which it was supplanted by Silvaner. He’s planted it in a warm parcel on limestone clay, and ’05’s is the third crop.

Now it’s a little *recherché*, this wine; it tastes somewhat like Glatzer’s Kabinett in a normal vintage, though this little dickens wouldn’t go dry, and ends up with around 20g/l. RS. Young vines notwithstanding, it is varietally true; I tasted it twice (before and after fining) and it’s a charming delicate wine, almost Riesling-like: sugar-snaps and peppermint, just off dry, with a snappy kind of charm and a hint of licorice on the finish. As the vines age I know Walter wants to make lusty dry GrüVe, but I invite you to welcome this excellent first stab at German GV, and hats off to the man who’ll try anything! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

- GST-135 **2006 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Feinherb**  
 Alone this was quite good, but something told us to see what might happen if we put a little Riesling in it. We used 15% from a contingent of Brückchen that stopped fermenting below the legal minimum alcohol for “wine”. This seemed amazingly good. We could barely believe it. Tried it again using only 10%, but no, the wine with 15% Brückchen Riesling actually tasted *more* varietal, more essentially *GrüVe* than the base wine alone. Balance always seems to underscore character. The wine smells again Glatzer-like in its green-beany forthrightness; it’s both juicier and more pointed than the 05; longer, rockier, crustier and more crackery – the 05 has more charm and creaminess but a little lighter fingerprint.  
 SOS: 0 (now-5 years)
- GST-134 **2006 Riesling SOIL TO SOUL**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** We tried at least five different blends, working to get the utmost quantity of the highest quality. This was complicated by the very low pH of the young samples (nothing over 2.9!) which made for some astringency which needed to be accounted for. There were seven tanks at play, and at the end we found we had to sacrifice volume to get the wine we wanted.  
  
 It will be all Paterberg and Brückchen, and it seems most informed by the chalky character of the latter, with its signature notes of corn, crab meat, scallion and wet stone; it’s drier than Dragonstone but still a *fruit-driven* wine, with a lime-zest edge and a sweet-salt finish.  
  
 We understand what the wine needs to be. It has to PERFORM well for you, i.e., when your customer tastes it it needs to be *convincing*. Walter wants it fragrant above all, with balance among body, fruit and freshness. We want character and focus. It should taste *underpriced*. We’ll all see the wine in finished form round about the time you’re reading this, and I think you’ll agree: we have a wiener!  
 SOS: 2 (now to 10 years)
- GST-133 **2006 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** Two lots, one with 90° and the other with 100° and there’s still not much of it, but *super* quality; toasted corn, endlessly juicy, sweated leek, redcurrant, muscle and sinew; outsized and swaggering, with brass-knuckle thrust and smoky length. Should become rather more *polite* with bottling.  
 SOS: 2 (6-18 years)
- GST-124 **2005 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett**  
 A red soil site but harder and rockier (“You wouldn’t go barefoot in this vineyard,” says Walter.) The ’05 is quite the exotic: meat-skin aromas; szechuan spare-rib and oxtail; it’s solid, a wine you eat as much as drink; it’s Riesling as Lustrac or Moulis, not the Nth degree of refinement but it makes the *jaws* feel good; at the end there’s a hazelnut-praline crunch.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (5-18 years)
- GST-136 **2006 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Auslese**  
 There were four or five pretty kinky Auslesen here from the Grand Crus, of which this was the most lavish and convincing; it recalls a ’95 but is much bigger; *peche de vignes* and Serrano ham; a big chewy-roasty Auslese, not a frilly pastry-like one. Early days yet, but this has loads of succulent yumminess.
- GST-129 **2005 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 Over 100° Oechsle; massive milk-chocolate aromas with *pêche-de-vignes*; the palate is thick and dense, as thick-textured as braised meat; all sorts of viscera and muscle with a laquered caramelly sweetness; Peking duck in a glass!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-24 years)

**THE PATERBERG SERIES**

I think we need to highlight this unlikely vineyard because no one suspects how good it is, and Walter always seems to pull something remarkable from it. In fact, over the years I think he's actually more synchronous with Paterberg than with his Grand Crus from the red slope. Yet no one else has even hinted at the beauty which lies inside this land. It's like a shy dog who only obeys one master. Paterberg is a large site, covering the entire limestone plateau south of Nierstein on the way to Oppenheim. I'm sure other growers don't see it as predestined for Riesling; the site is wuthering and windswept, and botrytis is extremely rare. I don't even know that I'd call it a Grand Cru, though I'd argue its best sections are 1er Cru and the whole thing is a fascinating lieu dit. Walter has several parcels, the best (and oldest) of which gives us the "starred" wines. This is lower down and more sheltered. The signature-flavors run to lemon-grass and the minty herbs; mint itself, tarragon, Japanese green teas (Sencha and Gyokoru), spicy apples (Empires) and lime-zest; wintergreen too-you get the picture. Peachy it's not. But there's a kind of density of spice, as if set alight on the palate. These are iridescently scintillating wines, ultra-violet and **fabulous** at the table. Here goes. . . .

- GST-125 **2005 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** In '05 there's less lemon-grass and more a sort of sweet celery or celeriac; it's *very* long and adamantly spicy, with an inside-sweetness like roasted beets; picked very late with a hint of botrytis; crunchy and tasty.  
 SOS: 2 (7-19 years)
- GST-127 **2005 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*\*** **+**  
 Just one tank that was perfect as-is. 40-year old vines, the wine is sweet on paper but the very low pH (2.9!) makes for another tactile impression entirely: it's quite rococo, but also cherubic and playful; incredibly minty fragrance; electrically spicy entry, so much buzz and zing it would crimp your hair, yet the tertiary finish suggests a grand core of fruit concentration and a regal future.  
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)



# take me to your liter

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



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

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

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

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

GRH-047L **2006 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Falkenberg Riesling, 1.0 Liter**  
GJS-075L **2006 Schneider Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**  
GST-132L **2006 Strub Niersteiner Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**  
GWG-028L **2006 Wagner-Stempel Riesling, 1.0 Liter**  
GGE-015L **2006 Geil Bechtheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**  
GGY-064L **2006 Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**  
GGY-063L **2006 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**  
GGY-065L **2006 Gysler Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**  
GMS-119L **2005 Messmer Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter**  
GMS-121L **2006 Messmer Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**  
GTM-100L **2006 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**  
GTM-101L **2006 Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter**  
GDR-144L **2006 Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**  
GDR-146L **2006 Darting Portugieser Rosé, 1.0 Liter**

# wagner-stempel

## rheinhessen • siefersheim

We had dinner with Daniel Wagner and his charming wife Catherin, and after dinner Daniel pressed a bottle into my hand. It was his 2003 Spätburgunder, which he suggested I open at some point. Then it was three weeks later, the final evening with Strubs, and we were hanging out in the kitchen and I found the bottle on the back seat of the car; it had been heated and chilled and bounced to Champagne and back and all over the Rhineland, but what the hell, I said I'd taste it. It was the damn *best German red wine I'd ever tasted*, elegant, grown-up, balanced, loaded. And I found myself wondering, *CAN THIS GUY MAKE AN ORDINARY WINE?*

Ladies 'n gents; sybarites of every stripe, incubi and succubi, pointers and setters, Mars' and Venus,' step right up, for I have a prediction:

*This estate will be the next superstar in the Rheinhessen.*

I owe the discovery to Alex Gysler, and his "Message In A Bottle" poster, and his answer to my question "Is there anyone in this group of particular interest to me?" A few months later I sat at home tasting through a half-dozen samples, and with the first sip of the first wine (the 2002 "Riesling from Porphyry") I had the *AH-HA!* moment.

The estate is 12.5 hectares, in the westernmost district of Rheinhessen, near Bernhard. Soils vary, but there's a significant vein of porphyry like the great soils of the Nahe (which is just a hop skip & jump over the hill), and there are times I think the world's greatest rieslings grow on volcanic soil in general and porphyry in particular. And young Mr. Wagner has baskets of various soils in his tasting room, and has all his riesling-comprising 50% of his vineyards-is planted on porphyry.

There were times I thought I was drinking the very *best* of Crusius' wines.



Daniel Wagner

- **Vineyard area: 13 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Siefersheimer Höllberg and Heerkretz**
- **Soil types: Volcanic material (porphyry and melaphyre)**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Riesling, 25% Burgunder, 15% Silvaner, 10% Spätburgunder**

Wagner's first vintage was 1993. He arrived at the apex of the dry-wave and has only recently started making any rieslings with sweetness — I hope to provide encouragement in this direction!

The land is steeper here than in much of the Rheinhessen, and Wagner does 95% of his harvest by hand. Most musts are clarified by gravity, though some are fermented as-is. His basic-quality wines are made in stainless steel, but like many young vintners he's leaning toward more old oak for the top rieslings. Similarly he ferments with cultured yeasts for the basic wines and with natural yeasts for the best rieslings. Most wines sit on the gross lees till February. All of this reveals a characteristic degree of thoughtfulness and flexibility for a young quality-minded vintner.

He's a self-described acid-freak, but also prizes minerality and "tannin in a subtle form," indicating this vintner prizes structure above all things. He has the luxury to do so, because the wines from his beloved Heerkretz (the steepest and highest-elevated site in Rheinhessen) and Höllberg show astonishing natural *fruit* in a stirring melange of Nahe complexity with Rheinhessen muscle.

He's clearly the rising star — I would say the *risen* star — of his region, and he has a lot coming at him not

least of which is a bonny new baby! His wines, while obviously great, are not easily great; they remind me of Jamek in a sense — they reward your full attention, they ask to be studied, and they reveal themselves deliberately. Indeed they often seem to carry more complexity than they can physically hold.

Sometimes I am extremely emotional, so much so I cannot summon language of sufficient power to convey it, and I regret the times I squandered such language on undeserving occasions. All I can manage at these times is an inarticulate yammer, not because there's too little to say, but rather too much. Daniel Wagner's wines (you knew I'd tie this together didn't you?) can remind me of

the wines Hans-Günter Schwarz made at Müller-Catoir, seeming to almost *stammer* with complexity. You wonder how a mere wine can contain so much *information*. I urge you to approach these wines with the quality of attention you reserve for the elite: They deserve it.

Just one thing to add. This being the modern era, there are no undiscovered superstars, and Daniel's wines are *in demand*, which means we get only ONE crack at them. They are not offered on the Spring DI, nor will they be unless we see a big-volume vintage. Please don't delay. This is one of the half-dozen greatest estates in this offering, and these 2006s, as a group, are second only to Dönnhoff.

#### wagner-stempel at a glance:

Dynamic young vintner making weighty, sensational Nahe-like porphyry-wines, already among the very best in Rheinhessen, and certain to be THE next superstar-estate in the region.

#### how the wines taste:

Generous, complex and polished, serene graceful strength and exotic haunting flavors.

#### GWG-021 2006 Silvaner Trocken

I don't recall when I have ever tasted a more amazing Silvaner. It has clarity, juiciness, wonderful grip and pith and mineral saltiness — it's grown on *porphyry*, fa god's sake! There's a burning-leaf smokiness. Many growers' Rieslings are nowhere near this good. Hey Somms! Looking for something novel that actually also KICKS ASS? SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now to 8 years)

#### GWG-022 2006 Sauvignon Blanc Trocken

+

Really sleek and racy, as if a Pouilly-Fume had 20% Alsace Riesling in it. Again grown on porphyry. Currant-leaf and green-pepper aromas remind me of Polz's "Therese" bottling (also grown on volcanic soil, but of course terroir is a myth as we all know); the palate is all roasted red pepper; utterly brilliant, almost glaring brightness and charm; you want to plunge your whole face in it. Impeccable, classic Sauv Blanc. SOS: 0 (now to 5 years)

#### GWG-028L 2006 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter

As usual, here's a dry Riesling for those who truly like a wine with — well not austerity exactly, but with a certain sardonic edge. Stony and green-apple nose leads to a palate that presses the spit button; man do you salivate! It's juicy despite its dryness, and it grips with an iron hand. SOS: 0 (now to 3 years)

#### GWG-020 2006 Gutsriesling Trocken

+

Well I mean JEE-ZUZ: this is absurdly good! A winsome, flowery aroma and just glowing with physio-sweetness and mirabelle-y charm; it's a tabula rosa of Riesling, defining the genre, with a racy Ferrari-sleekness and just nutso torque, and it's less a flavor than a dialogue of flavors, with stubborn length and a really seductive finish. Look at the price! I know some Austrians who should be very nervous indeed. . . . SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now to 2 years, again from 10-15 years)

- GWG-023 **2006 Seifersheimer Riesling Trocken "Vom Porphyr"** ++  
 SERIOUS Grand Cru quality here, and truly great dry Riesling that would stand alongside ANY of the best Alsations and Austrians. Stunning porphyry aromas; hay, violets, thyme-blossom; the palate is ravishingly brilliant and spicy; lemon and peppermint and soursop into an endless smoky finish. The palate *reads* it as "sweet," it's so ripe. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now to 3 years, again from 12-18 years)
- GWG-024 **2006 Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs** ++  
 Still on the *gross* lees; to be bottled in May; for all its muscle it has a strikingly high-toned brilliance even despite its chewy-juicy depth; it's like a plum tart without the sweetness, a simply magnificent dry Riesling with primordially smoldering depths. The nearest cognate is the *best* Riesling from Furstenturm. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now to 3 years, again from 15-22 years)
- GWG-025 **2006 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 2006 seems to have blessed this site. Again even more sheer substance here, more clear dimensions; *charcuterie* and dark plum aromas, more gravitas and length; more *significant* tasting, with stubborn willful clinging length. "You think you're done with me but you're NOT!" SOS: 3 (11-27 years)
- GWG-026 **2006 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese** +  
 He's priced it higher and maybe he sees something incipient lost to me in my early encounter. Not that the wine isn't wonderful! In fact it is just deranged; the closest cognate is in fact *Kupfergrube* with some of the cherry of *Kirschheck*; wonderful push-pull of tart mirabelle and key-lime and white nectarine; it has feline pliancy and caressing length. "You think you're done with me but *I'm not done with you. . .*" SOS: 3 (12-28 years)
- GWG-027 **2006 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Auslese "Paul"** ++  
 Guess what lovely little baby this is named after. At 140° Oechsle (i.e., good BA) but with perfect clean botrytis; it was the last wine they harvested, and one almost doesn't dare expect this from 2006; it's semi-solid with steel-toed acidity; the fruit is shot forward like a cannon ball; you can't even speak of length since there's no apparent end and you feel like the flavor began when the *earth* began. What a stunning group of wines! SOS: 3 (17-42 years)





# POINTS: what's the point?

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

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

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

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

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

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

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

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

Here's a quote I like:

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

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

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

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

Ah, maybe he's right. After all, I've been using the 100-point scale to assess literature ever since I turned forty. I give Molly Bloom's 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."*

# weingut oekonomierat joh. geil i. erben rheinhessen • bechtheim

(hereafter referred to as, simply, "Weingut Geil")

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

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

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

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

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

"We have done away with deacidification; at least we haven't even confronted the question for many years now. We'd prefer to regulate Riesling's acidity with later harvesting at higher ripeness."

"When I think of my favorite among our wines I spontaneously reach for the 2002s; they have a wonderful fruit aroma and acidity."

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

"We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is acceptable; we some-

times have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We're in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We'd prefer any residual sugar in the wines to be nat-



Johannes Geil-Bierschenk

- **Vineyard area: 27 hectares**
- **Annual production: 18,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bechtheimer Geyersberg, Bechtheimer Rosengarten**
- **Soil types: heavy chalky loam, carbonate-rich loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 4% Rieslaner, 4% Scheurebe, 35% other**

ural, but we do keep a little Süßreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO<sub>2</sub>"

This is such a wonderful discovery I only wish I'd made it myself. In fact I have Gault-Millau to credit, thanks to their heralding Geil as their DISCOVERY OF THE YEAR 2004. That alone didn't hook me (though previous year's discoveries include Mathern, Biffar and Spreitzer); what hooked me was seeing Rieslaner planted. This variety is a litmus test for the craziness-quotient of a vintner. It creates, or can create supernal wines, but it is a sonofabitch to grow, and if you grow it then you are chasing something well worth capturing, and rarely captured.

Rheinhessen's where the action is, as I said, and I asked for samples from two estates, of which these were dramatically superior. I paid a visit at the very end of my trip, and all was confirmed. Tasting samples at remove is only partially useful: you have to go there, see the folks, pet the dog, taste a range of vintages and taste *together* with the family.

There are three generations in the house, the youngest of whom is Johannes' new baby. We seemed to have met before we met, if you see what I mean. And when they gave me a dry Riesling from the difficult 2000 vintage to taste I thought "These folks have moxie" and when the wine was outstanding I thought "Man am I

lucky I got here before anyone else did. . . .”

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

the west on similar soil. It’s a somewhat large estate—28 hectares, about 30% Riesling—and I infer that young Johannes came home from Geisenheim full of the restless idealistic spirit of these times: lower yields, tenderer cellar work. And the results are dramatic, and the prices still humane.

**geil at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

GGE-018 **2006 Weissburgunder Trocken**

Creamy and “Burgundian” in profile; aromas of diver scallops. Semolina and oatmeal; the palate is round with a really swollen umami in the middle; it’s almost semi-solid and at the moment mostly inferential, even oblique. Bottling will tighten it.  
SOS: 0 (now-3 years)

GGE-015L **2006 Bechtheimer Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

He didn’t think I’d want this (am I *really* so la-di-da that I’d affect to despise a “mere” Liter?) and so there isn’t much of it. But this actual Kabinett is just beaming with well-being and healthy fruity charm; ideal everyday Riesling, with limestoney and musselly aromas with woodruff and lime; the palate is juicy and in the best sense simple – as in forthright and scrutable.

I can’t say this too many times: it is usually considered acceptable to offer *merely* acceptable wine at this price and for this purpose. When you find something this good it is every bit as impressive and probably even more meaningful than finding high quality among the glamour-wines. A vintner who offers this quality to the customer who’d have settled for FAR less is a person of *INTEGRITY*. This, we celebrate!  
SOS: 0 (now- 4 years)

GGE-014 **2006 Bechtheimer Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

This is the most cheerful of the dry Rieslings; mutsu and fiji apple aromas lead to an easygoing palate; it’s a perfect wine-by-the-glass, with all the virtues of old-world Riesling.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

GGE-016 **2006 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Trocken “S”**

This is the quasi “Grosses Gewächs” (Geil isn’t in the VDP, thank god), and it’s really serious dry Riesling with Grand Cru aromas; mineral and mirabelle – I mean *classic* mirabelle – the palate is juicy and lavish and resolves into a chalky finish with a meyer-lemon nuance.  
SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 9-13 years)

GGE-017 **2006 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**

The first thing that happens is sweetness makes the wine more slender and graceful, more piquant and cool. It's like a key-lime cheesecake aromatically; the palate is chummy, more compact than the 05 and with more back-palate kick. Plum-blossom overtones in a sleek useful Riesling. A mere 92° Oechsle – almost plausibly "Kabinett!"  
SOS: 2 (5-13 years)

GGE-019 **2006 Bechtheimer Heiligkreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**

Still finding its inner feline, but a lovely open-textured Kabinett, more in the passion-fruit and grapefruit idiom, with no discernible cassis; like an empire apple on the palate, with a red pepper note on the finish. Scheu sometimes emerges from the shadows after bottling (and hisses and pees on the furniture, just the way we like it). 89-90° with about 10% botrytis.  
SOS: 2 (now-4 years)

GGE-020 **2006 Bechtheimer Hasensprung Riesling Spätlese**

Tangier than the Kabinett; mirabelle and a kind of Darjeeling-cashew note. Someone said fresh thyme. Lots of seckel pear and vanilla; a wine that fulfills a thirst the body didn't know it had till it commenced to *gulin'*.  
SOS: 2 (5-15 years)

GGE-021H **2006 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml**

+

Quite linear and sleek despite its mass; almost overwhelming power of aroma; hardly a *dessert* wine but predestined for salty and blue-veined cheese; it reminds me of the biggest of the Catoir Auslesen, muscular but as vertical as a gothic tower; smoke and peach on the vaporous finish; as dense as a paperweight. And, by the way, a STEAL.  
SOS: 3 (8-22 years)





# gernot gysler

## rheinhessen • weinheim

We went to Gysler right after Wagner-Stempel, and I felt guilty. Usually I don't schedule anyone after the stellar domains; it isn't fair to the next guy. Plus it was Gysler who *referred* me to Wagner. But a very sweet thing happened. It was Alex Gysler's best vintage, and it seems to have been on the right side of the quality-border, where the wines to the east and south were "difficult" and the ones here and to the north and west were sensational.

But Alex's wines were more than merely correct. Theirs was a quality of unusual vitality and self-confidence. I used to give guitar lessons back in the hoary days of my misspent youth, and you always knew the exact moment when the player stopped fighting the instrument and started to *play*. Two new things enter the picture: serenity and expression. He knew he'd grab the notes, he's figured out the HOW. Now it's time to work on the WHAT. I got that sense from Gysler's '06s – they had more of *him* in them. They were more animate, more *crucially* alive.

Having kids will do that. Alex is also in the 3rd year of transition to certified-organic, and this changes one's relationship to one's vines and to nature in general. Or maybe I'm reading-in. But I doubt it.

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

Alex assumed control of the estate abruptly due to the untimely death of his father Gernot. Father was a man of his times, an honorable and honest vintner who came of age in the post-war years, and was seduced by both technology and by all the new crossings which promised Auslese every year. "My father liked soft



Alex Gysler & family

wines," said Alex, "And they were good of their type, but I want to change things."

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing now up to 70%. He's shifted cover-crop to every second row, renewed composting, entirely done away with dosage, moved almost entirely toward stainless steel.

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg**
- **Soil types: Reddish weathered soils with stone, loam and clay**
- **Grape Varieties: 30% Riesling, 30% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder, 10% Silvaner, 10% Huxelrebe, 8% Scheurebe**

He's pulling out the new crossings and replanting with classic varieties (no mean feat with 12 hectares to manage). He's done away with herbicides entirely, and is using all-organic copper and sulfur. He's in the stage the organic organizations would call "transitional," and indeed he wants to join the Naturland group and be certified-organic as soon as he can. This was in large part motivated by his wife's pregnancy, beautifully enough. The baby was born in 2004 a week before my visit, and I know the feeling; you want to make the world perfect.

Yet even as Alex turns the cellar completely around, in even deeper ways he is his father's son. You see it in his kindness and care and lack of artifice.

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

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

It's best when you don't *know* what the vintner did. I have traveled with tasters who seize upon a single aspect

of winemaking and try to determine whether-X-or-Y with each wine they taste. Cultured yeast or wild yeast? Tanks or casks? And when they're wrong they feel great consternation, while I smile inside. Because that fumbling is how they learn; it's how I learned and still learn. I doubt if anyone tasting, say, Dönnhoff's wine could tell you whether they're aged in casks or tanks. Take Justen and Christoffel: casks or tanks, and which is which? The more you look for cause-effect syllogisms by which wine is "explained" the more frustrated you'll become. Wine is explained in the feeling of the fingertips. And it takes the time it takes, for the taster and for the vintner.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in rel-

atively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg. These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn't infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you're on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren't screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren't any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you'd look at it and think "grapes should grow there."

#### gysler at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now.

### A FABULOUS TRIO OF LITERS

#### GGY-063L **2006 Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** The best of these since the wonderful 2002; amazingly sleek and clear – has Silvaner ever had this much definition? Almost hyacinth in its pungent floweriness; seamlessly balanced and charming; a pleasure-giving wine with limpid spring-water purity and freshness. *A better value than this CAN NOT BE IMAGINED!*  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-6 years)

#### GGY-065L **2006 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

Sweet-straw and apple fragrances; another 2006 that opens the spit-gates! Shimmery and prettily balanced; tastes tighter than the lab-acid suggests; excellent everyday dry Riesling here, with a taut spicy finish.  
SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### GGY-064L **2006 Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

+

Oh man, this curls the toes. A PERFECT light-bodied Scheu; clear and long and spicy and irresistibly magnetic and vital; it's liquid static electricity, and this one is *jammed* with catty cassis and wild lavender. **There's only 80 cases**, so do NOT tarry. The wine is gee-or-juss!  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-6 years)

#### GGY-066 **2006 Weinheimer Riesling Halbtrocken**

This was my runner-up for WINE OF THE VINTAGE. Not because it is "great," but because it is so completely, entirely, thoroughly *good*. No other wine I offer or could offer makes me happier than to offer this. At its price it makes wine not only easy but inevitable. Not a splurge, not an *occasion*, but a thing to shove in the bag with the bread and the eggs and the onions. You'd have been glad if it was just OK, but what this wine gives you is delight and joy – and every kind of joy, body-senses-sex-mind-soul; it is yummy and complex and fine and delineated and "serious" if you want it to be and just plain fucking *good* if you only want that. Drink and be glad you're alive.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years, again 9-12 years)

#### GGY-062 **2006 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE-LIST WINE.** This works! It's drier and less tart than usual (Gysler's wines are known to have very low pH); more middle, more herbal and salty, but still every bit the critter you know and love and buy a ton of – except this is 2006 and there isn't a ton. About half what we can usually secure.  
SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GGY-067 **2006 Weinheimer Mandelberg Riesling**

This again would be the “Grosses Gewächs” if there were one. Do you think chaptalization renders a wine automatically “inferior?” Think again. These are Alex’s oldest vines, from his best parcel, and he opted to chaptalize a segment of it; It’s like a *demi-glace* of the Kabinett; there’s simply more *material* here, and great curranty smoky length.

SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

GGY-060 **2005 Weinheimer Mandelberg Riesling Auslese**

A very flowery Auslese, plum and cherry blossom; more berry than fruit; uncomplicated and tasty.

SOS: 3 (8-18 years)

GGY-068H **2005 Weinheimer Hölle Huxelrebe TBA, 12/375ml**

+

**First offering.** This is only slightly riper but quite a bit more elegant and shapely than the Mandelberg I offered last year. It has higher acidity and *more fruit*. This isn’t just “good for a Huxel,” it is excellent TBA period. It also isn’t – thank god – a figgy monster with 280° Oechsle where you get the “score” but you *can’t drink it*. This is a wine to SWALLOW.

SOS: 4 (15-35 years)



# christian-wilhelm bernhard

## rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

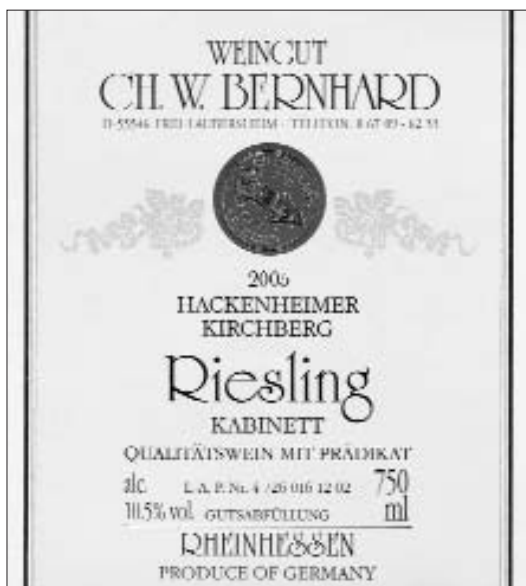
I'd grown so accustomed to thinking of Hartmut Bernhard as a young pup I was taken aback to see a little gray starting around his temples. There's a photo-essay on the wall in the tasting room showing the 1980 harvest, and Hartmut looks all of eleven years old. Maybe that's why. My fault, though, for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

2002 marked the end of the fiberglass and cement tank era in his cellars: all stainless steel and old casks now.

The Bernhards are out of the way, just over the hill from Bad Kreuznach and the Nahe Valley. It's one of those curious little corners of Germany. The soils are not unlike Nahe soils; igneous weathered rock, even porphyry in some places. Others are typically Rheinhessen clay; a hybrid of styles emerges. Some wines show Nahe-like skeins of curranty delineation and do best in damper years. Others are typical Rheinhessen but with a more compact profile, as though their proximity to the Nahe caused them to speak with a Nahe-accent. They're also lighter and more buoyant than many Rheinhessen wines.

Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

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



- **Vineyard area: 10.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Hachenheimer Kirchberg, Frei-Laubersheimer Fels**
- **Soil types: Porphyry, weathered volcanic soils, clay and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 25% Riesling, 21% Spätburgunder, 11% Silvaner, 6% Grauburgunder, 5% Auxerrois, 3% Scheurebe, 3% Gewürztraminer, 22% other varieties**

Why? His private customers expect it Trocken!

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

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



**bernhard at a glance:**

Though I went at first looking for Auxxerois, this has turned out to be a Riesling and Scheurebe agency, offering excellent value especially for Scheu.

**how the wines taste:**

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

**GCB-070 2006 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Feinherb**

At first it was presented as a Halbtrocken and the wine was throwing a tantrum of imbalance against the phenolics and botrytis of '06. Oh well...but: would I like to taste a sweeter version? You mean....(looking around the room to make sure there were no hostile witnesses) with *Süßreserve* (a.k.a. *DOSAGE*)? Uh huh. SANITY PREVAILS! The RS was increased to 25 g.l. and suddenly all the gnarlies were *banished*. I don't think I have the patience to wait for the inevitable swing back to acceptance of *dosage*. Now this wine has all its wonderful pepper-bacon aromas, like your hands smell after you've peeled off the slices; and by the way this is a novel way to experience a "QbA:" 98° Oechsle and *not* chaptalized. Just wonderful Riesling, full of complexity and suave distinctiveness.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now – 6 years)

**GCB-071 2006 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**

Well KA-POW! You need a sternal saw to slice through this one. We tried two variations separated by 5 g.l. RS; they both work – the "sweeter" one is more elegant, the other is stonier with more Riesling starch. I don't know which one we'll get!

SOS: 2 (in either case) (4-14 years)

**GCB-069 2006 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**

All bergamot and cassis, with nice mid-palate focus and a ton of wry charm; lavender and incense and marvelous spiciness; ginger and meyer-lemon.

SOS: 2 (now- 5years)

**GCB-066 2005 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**

Firmer and even smokier; indeed this is like liquefied bacon and toast, with Mirabelle and stayman apple; the finish shows receding smoke and an oolong-narcissus flower; the overall effect is enormously charming.

SOS: 2 (7-20 years)

**GCB-068 2005 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Spätlese**

It starts out all grapefruit and papaya and ends up like a custard of meyer-lemon; tasted colder it showed more mint and herb, but at every temp it has wonderful length and it's a citric circus on the finish, all the little Scheu clowns performing their bumps and pratfalls. Laughing is good.

SOS: 2 (1-5 years)

**GCB-067 2005 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer Spätlese**

As a rule the Germans don't do Gewürz very well, and so I thought the successes among 2004s were a fluke of the vintage. As indeed they were – except here. Hartmut's Gewürzes used to be earthy and blatant, but the last two vintages he seems to have accessed their inner-feminine, and this '05 is surprisingly graceful. He blended two casks, one of them dry and vigorous and the other rich and creamy: the resulting wine has 30g.l. RS, and it's typically rose and lychee; the palate is all freesia and talc, and markedly long; the finish really clings; the wine is elegant and fine but with substance.

SOS: 2 (now- 5 years)

# tasting versus drinking

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

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

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

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

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



# special offering on half-bottles

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We have to suspend this for a year, until there's enough wine again to divert some of it into half-bottles. With such a scarcity of *anything* we can sell as "Kabinett" we had to put everything possible into regular sizes. The concept is sensible – offering ordinary wines in small formats. We won't abandon it.



# rheingau wines



Recently Jancis Robinson included the Rheingau in a group of regions which had become “less interesting” since the last edition of Hugh Johnson’s *Wine Atlas*. They say by the time Hollywood picks up on a trend it’s already passé. Similarly perhaps, by the time an idea gains general currency in the wine-world it’s already growing outdated. No disrespect to the wonderful Ms. Robinson, who’s one of the Greats of our time! But when I first wrote about the Rheingau’s malaise it was, what 1985? And now, finally, there are the first little stirs and twitters heralding, dare one hope, a comeback.

What an irony. There’s almost no call any more for “Rheingau” as a commodity. It took a generation of indifferent and downright crummy wines from most of the erstwhile Great names of the region to throttle its reputation to death. I find I have to defend my selections, of which I am as proud and happy as I am with all my offerings. And some of the Great Names are staging a comeback! Prinz von Hessen is said to be much improved. Von Simmern’s getting there. We have quite

a way to go still, but one can no longer simply write-off the Rheingau.

The tragic suicide of Erwein Matuschka-Greifenclaus (erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a

could no longer be ignored.

A certain prevailing hauteur may have prevented the truth from being heard. But the financial ruin of a 600-year old business could no longer be ignored, and a regional epidemic of denial was drawing to a close. Now, we may hope, the idealists will no longer be suffocated. Or so we may hope!

We still gotta do something about those prices. I’m just not sure what. Perhaps Mr. Leitz will consent to being cloned. There’s an historic precedent for Rheingau wines to price themselves, *ahem* “aristocratically,” which might have been justified thirty years ago but which has zero bearing on their real value or cost of production vis-à-vis other German wines. Of all the habits that die hard,

**Though things are discernibly better  
now, there’s still distressingly little  
buzz about the region.**

wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had been naked long enough, and the pathetic spectacle







*Early Spring at the Rhudesheim Schlossberg*

greed must surely die hardest.

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

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

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

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Pfalz and the Mosel, but the truth is there's no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly *different* from one another's as Rauenthal's are from Winkel's, as Erbach's are from Hallgarten's—all of them. Taste *any* of these as they should be, and you'll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The "classic" wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is *not*: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it's not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence

of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an age of leisure. They are wines for "experts" who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like *polished*, *impeccable*, *aristocratic* sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them *big scores*? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he's less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more

### **The classic wine of the Rheingau is firm, contained, dignified.**

pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the *cheapest guy in town!*—that a wine content to merely make a "statement" seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for mystically intricate wines. And I'm quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

We're looking at the beginnings of a renaissance now, thanks to one Johannes Leitz, and it heartens me to see you embrace the wonderful wines of a manifestly Good Guy. Johannes offered to scout for me. He found someone superb. You'll see!

The Rheingau wines I offer you aren't merely honorable, they are EXEMPLARY. And they are worth the prices asked for them, and much as I join you in snubbing our noses at all those butt-heads who disgraced the region, we shouldn't punish the good and honorable for the sins of the lousy and dishonorable. *These* growers, at least, deserve your support.

## josef leitz

## rheingau • rüdesheim

"We started on the 21st of September and ended October 18th. We may have been the first in Germany to begin. After the rain the must-weights went through the roof and the yields went through the floor. If I could turn back the clock to 1976 I'd be a multi-millionaire, but today there's a lot of BA and TBA around."

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

I think Johannes Leitz should grow a beard or something, so he can start looking his age. I first met him as a "big baby" of about 25 and now he's a man of 41. A big baby of 41!

He's also up to a whopping 26 hectares, in large part in order to supply us with enough "Dragonstone," but also because success accrues to success and good growers often find access to good land. Johannes has secured parcels in two fascinating sites hovering just above Rüdesheim, which he will see through an entire cycle this year. The first wine, a Kabinett, was a promising maiden-voyage, somewhat Geisenheimer Rothenberg in style, with lovely fragrance. Look for "Rüdesheimer Rosengarten" in future offerings.

I must say I like best of all to see him there, at home, lord-of-the-manor, because being an international-wine-guy can obscure some of what gets you there — any clod can climb on a plane — and what got Johannes Leitz there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

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



Johannes Leitz

- **Vineyard area: 26 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland and Berg Kaisersteinfels**
- **Soil types: Weathered gray and red slates, sandy loam and loess, chalk and quartzite**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

ages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire.

When I made my first approach to Johannes Leitz I found a sober young man still not out of his twenties, running a 5.8 hectare estate. His father had passed away when Johannes was a year old, and his mother resolutely maintained the winery until Johannes was old enough to hand it over to. He accelerated his studies by doing the basic courses at Eltville rather than the grand chi-chi at Geisenheim. He got home in the nick of time. The winery had survived, but barely. And it was frozen in time 18 years earlier. Johannes would need to invest, soon, a lot. Johannes was determined to make great wine.

He's a man with a passion for **aroma**. "I almost prefer inhaling to actual tasting," he says. "I can't really love a wine regardless of how it tastes if it doesn't excite me on the nose. I want my own wines to seem more fragrant than the norm, fruitier and more harmonious. They should simply be *better*!" Leitz insists that "Wine grows in the vineyard; it isn't made in the cellar. There's no question that different soils give different flavors. Anyone who tastes a Berg Schlossberg, with its high proportion of slate, alongside a Bischofsberg, will taste the importance of soil in a hurry!"

"I work very clean," he says, echoing the *one* refrain you hear in every good estate. "My friends call me finicky

about cleanliness,” he continues. “I also try to disturb the wine as little as possible, pumping for instance.” On the subject of Trocken wine, Johannes can speak with authority, having earned the right by making many of the *greatest* dry German wines I have ever tasted. “I’m of the opinion that during the dry wave a lot of wines were made dry that weren’t in any way suited for dry wine. You really need a certain kind of base wine to make a good Trocken. If you’re honest about it, there’s probably no more than, say, thirty percent of any cellar that fits. The rest would be better with a few grams or more of sweetness.” He also practices what he preaches, which takes unusual courage in the topsy-turvy modern German wine market.

One wonders how Leitz’s clear-headed honesty sits with the high priests of the VDP.

Johannes is done with his various building projects; the press-house is finished, the tasting room’s there (and I’m sure the jacuzzi and the twin skee-ball lanes won’t be far behind), the family’s out from under a range of

health-related challenges . . . and then there’s you, dear reader. You have been buying these wines with great vim, and this is a good thing! It’s all rather giddy but you know, it makes me happy. Because Johannes Leitz has it all. He’s a perfect expression of my holy trinity of value: soil, family, artisanality. His connection to his vines is a priori and intimate. His scale permits – *relishes* – a degree and type of attention any industrial wine producer (and many other artisans) would think insane. He’s close to every part of it; the wine he drinks with you in your restaurant, having fun (and studying your response, believe me!), is the wine he nurtured *himself*, from pruning to binding to trimming to canopy-thinning to green-harvesting to selective multiple hand-harvesting to inspecting the fruit to fermenting in individual small lots to monitoring to aging on the lees to tasting again and again to determine the best moment for bottling, and finally . . . to doing it all again.

#### leitz at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. “A lot of people talk about ‘yeast-contact’ but I think I’m the only one who actually does it.” And it’s not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz’s lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. I drank the 2000 Schlossberg Spätlese Halbtrocken, and it was like semolina dumplings in a sweetly fragrant mix of veal and vegetable broth. No other wines are like them. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type – when it’s true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes’ wines taste “sweet.” They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are **intensely** fragrant, as though they wished to **convince** you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they crave oxygen, and they don’t show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn’t get there with bazillions of yen or with mega-technology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

GJL-126

#### 2006 Rüdesheimer Bischofsberg Riesling Trocken

+

A fine-grained easy-going dry Riesling with the classic smoky notes of the site. “Smoky” of course can mean many things, but here I glimpse an ashen quality and a bit of char like you get on Tyrolean *Speck*. This wine adds a mirabelle note not often found, along with a fine violet note and a spicy stoniness at the end. I think it’s aura of amenability is partly deceptive; the wine means business.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years, and again 9-13 years)

### Rüdesheim Vineyards:

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

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

GJL-127 **2006 Rüdesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels “Alte Reben”**

Old terraces above the Roseneck are recently reclaimed thanks in part to my colleague Kevin Pike. Quantities are always very small and usually Kevin just does it out without it ever seeing this catalogue. But this vintage is exceptional and I wuz on my *knees* beggin’.

First, though, a note: all the “Alte Reben” (old-vines) bottlings from Leitz will henceforth be sold as such, with no reference to Trocken or Halbtrocken or whatever. It is understood the wines won’t contain appreciable RS.

This wine shows a complex minerality somewhere between Pittersberg and Mittelmosel and Kastelberg (one of the only two slate vineyards in Alsace); it’s a granular nutty sort of slatiness; ultra-clean and focused, really threads the needle; it’s both vigorous and Zen-serene, as wines can be when they express the perfect truth of themselves.

SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 13-18 years)

GJL-128 **2006 Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Trocken**

+

A monument. Massive, stony, statuesque, and then a bomb goes off and pulverizes it, and the dust and power is passed through a wine, and it becomes this *absurdly* mineral thing, the likes of which I can barely remember. Steinertal (in the Wachau) is the nearest cognate. So high-toned and yet so dense and compact, as if it were compressed with bulldozers. Amazing Riesling, and *the* argument for minerality – whatever it is!

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 14-21 years)

GJL-129 **2006 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland “Alte Reben”**

At 14% alc this is about at the limits of what I can appreciate; i.e., what gives me pleasure in Riesling or any wine. But Johannes’ avowed purpose here is to “compete” with the Wachau Smaragds, and this smells for all the world like FX Pichler’s Kellerberg – or, even more weirdly, like Chassagne or even like a monster-ripe GrüVe like Hirsch’s Lamm. It’s Andre The Giant, but more graceful. Even the mineral is outsized. Immensely impressive but tilts toward overwhelm by sheer strength, about which I am innately wary – but quite willing to be convinced.

SOS: 0 (2-4 years, again 11-16 years)

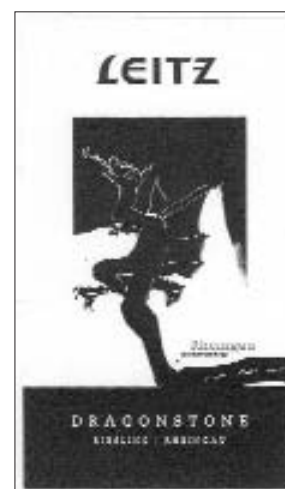
GJL-123 **2006 Dragonstone Riesling**

**CORE LIST WINE.** *Must* one write a note, really, any more? It’s like it always is only actually a bit finer, with even more lilac and cherry, and an even smoother, thicker texture. In fact it’s the best vintage since 2001, and if the wine seemed to have gotten too sweet for you, the RS has come back down – though this tastes *very* “Spätlese.” I don’t even know if he chapitalized it.

SOS: 2 (3-8 years)



- GJL-124 **2006 Rudesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett** +  
 This will probably be sold out by the time you read this, alas. There wasn't much, and what was probably shouldn't have been. I mean, get this: 110° Oechsle, yet you can just about defend it as a Kabinett, though it's in effect (as are so many 2006s) an Auslese Feinherb. A manic fragrance of spearmint and tarragon with *serious* grassy cut, but what makes this soar above its usual level is not the ripeness but the swollen billowing minerality. Extra fine.
- By the by, Johannes always says *Klosterlay* is slatey, as "Lay" is old dialect for slate, and the wines *taste* slatey. The standard text says otherwise, describing deep loess containing limestone, with islands of Taunus-quartzite. I dunno. . . .
- GJL-125 **2006 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese**  
**CORE LIST WINE.** Tough to say. Leitz himself is known to call it "Magda" but recently has started in with *Maggie*, which gives rise to an interesting tandem with Dragonstone, i.e., *Maggie and Draggie*, which sound like the names of ventriloquist's dummies. Whatever you call it, wasn't that 2005 just *luminous*? For the loss of that glow and serenity we get considerably more grip, length and mineral from the '06; a snaky structure slithers and glides, and the finish is an evanescent echo of cherry and apple. SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GJL-130 **2006 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 This was the first 2006 that made me think of 1976 – the somewhat disconnected candy-sweetness. Then we blended it *down* with some of the Trocken Roseneck and it became seamless and deft and playful and mineral. Hmmm! In fact it now shows great complexity and gravitas – it recalls Dönnhoff's Kirschheck, and is a standout of the vintage. Goes to show what balance can do. SOS: 2 (10-28 years)
- GJL-131H **2006 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +  
 This queenly BA is one of those which elevates the *Spätlese* to a sublime level, and the botrytis feels less like an "issue" and more like a grace. Lemon-blossom honey and salty mineral and sautéed apple and vanilla bean; it's more feminine, less sinewy than many '06s, and one of the few BAs I thirst to drink. SOS: 4 (20-50 years)



# spreitzer

## rheingau • oestrich

### RHEINGAU WINES

Spreitzer has ascended to the top rank in the Rheingau. No one is *better*, and few are as fine. Yet the German press is likely to feel otherwise, in large part because of the emphasis they lay on the dry wines. This is reasonable enough. For my part I simply don't *consider* a German grower's dry wine. If they are good I am delighted, and offer them. But this is an extra, not the thing I come looking for. They could cease producing them altogether and I wouldn't mind. Nor would the wine-world be discernibly the poorer.

You might recall a Spreitzer wine finished among the top ten dry Rieslings in all of Germany three years ago. I loved it too, and selected it, and was delighted to show it to you. Our reviewers' enthusiasms extended to the "high 80s"—maybe a little too low. Yet the reverse is also true,

as Stuart Pigott wrote in a recent article for WEIN EXTRA. Noting the difference between the monster scores (high 90s) certain Dönnhoff wines received over here, in contrast to the around-90 the same wines received in Germany, he said: "Whereas across the sea tasters everywhere stood and cheered these great examples of German Riesling, inside Germany they were met with Hm, well . . . yes, I suppose . . ."

So it's the silly culture-wars between them and us which prevents them from recognizing how freakin' marvelous these Spreitzers have become. Help me `splain it to them! Oh they get praise enough; (another "cluster" in *Gault-Millau*, another "F" in *Feinschmecker*, another "star" in *Mondo*, and another placement on DM's 100-best list) but with each of the last three vintages has exceeded what are increasingly high expectations, but alas in a style the Germans do not seem to cherish.

The wines certainly speak in the prevailing "syntax" of the times: crystalline, refined, perfumey and polished.



Andreas & Bernd Spreitzer

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen**
- **Soil types: Deep tertiary loam and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 96% Riesling, 4% Spätburgunder**

These are Rheingau wines as Armin Diel might make them, as Peter Geiben might make them. Indeed it could be their diametrically opposed personalities to Leitz's wines which allows the two to coexist so benignly, without "competition" (the close friendship between the two helps I'm sure!). Where Johannes' wines are ruggedly individual, Andreas and Bernd's wines are, in the best sense, fashionable, spiffy, well turned-out. Thankfully the two of *them* are plenty unpretentious.

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

All harvesting is by hand. The must is cleaned by gravity for 24 hours before whole-cluster pressing. After fermentation (in wood or jacketed stainless steel, partly with ambient yeasts partly with cultured yeasts, depending on the vintage) the wines rest on their gross lees for some time before receiving their only filtration, with racking. They are bottled off the fine lees.

In 1997 Andreas and Bernd Spreitzer leased the estate from their father, who remains active. Johannes Leitz first tipped me off. He's friendly with Andreas and wanted to help. I really don't think it crossed his mind he was creating a competitor. Leitz is a guy whose friends will also be sweethearts, and I was intrigued to taste Spreitzer's wines.

I did, and liked what I saw. First opportunity, I was making the scene in Oestrich. I want to pause a second to

draw attention to Leitz's touching gesture of friendship, both to me and to Andreas & Bernd. He brought us together, and he's *still* scouting around in the Rheingau for young new growers still below the radar.

Oestrich seems to have gotten short shrift when the 1971 wine law re-drew the vineyard boundaries. The two main sites are Doosberg and Lenchen, each among the largest single-sites in the region and each embracing a wide range of soils and exposures. The top of Doosberg borders the Hallgartener Jungfer, while Lenchen touches the Schönhell. Nearer the Rhine the wines are fruitier.

Oestrich seldom shows the nervy vigor of other Rheingauers, and the keen finesse of spiciness is often absent here. Oestrich is about *fruit*.

Still, I'd like you to see what Spreitzers can do in Hattenheim and Winkel ("Let's Go To Winkel With

Spreitzer!" Now *there's* a slogan one can work with.) Read on . . .

In fact I keep urging Andreas, only half-jokingly, to grab any available land in Grand Crus with nothing but underachievers working them; this pretty much covers all of Rauenthal, to cite but one melancholy example. To be sure, Oestrichers can be delightful and in certain cases remarkable, but no serious observer would place these among the top sites in the Rheingau. All the more striking what Spreitzers make from them. Yet when I'm having trouble sleeping and I've replayed the entire 1986 World Series through in my mind, I'm likely to catalogue all the great sites whose wines would blossom in Spreitzer's hands: Hölle, Mannberg, Siegelsberg . . . Wülfen . . . Gehrn . . . Baiken . . . Rothenberg . . . <zzzzzz>

#### spreitzer at a glance:

Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of greatness in store.

#### how the wines taste:

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

#### GSP-044 **2006 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Erstes Gewächs**

This is a site on tertiary marl mixed with loess-loam, separate from the rest of the (too-large) vineyard, close to the Rhine. The pre-1971 wine law name for this site was Rosengarten. I hope they can use its name somehow; it really ought to be an *Einzellage* of its own. Though the nose was rather stern, the palate had a lovely minerality that made me think of Kaefferkopf (for you Alsace lovers); lime and tart apple aplenty but also a sort of toasty juiciness atop its powdery chalky mineral. I preferred it to the Wisselbrunnen this year.

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 14-18 years)

#### GSP-043 **2006 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Kabinett**

+

This in its way is a little miracle, it is so detailed and transparent and lacy; fervid lily-of-the-valley and lavender and *quetsch* aromas; remarkable clarity and complexity; green tea and sweet-smoky elements; you feel like grape-hyacinth is sprouting up inside your mouth. I promise you've never tasted anything like it – and it's a true-enough Kabinett and there's enough of it!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (6-21 years)

#### GSP-042 **2006 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett**

**CORE LIST WINE.** Sleeker and more piquant than the luscious '05 – indeed closer to the 2004, and more cox-orange pippin than peach this year, but as always this is an irrepressibly joyful wine, which also embodies the 2006 virtues of length and muscle.

SOS: 2 (6-22 years)

GSP-045 **2006 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese (+)**

This always-backward wine was even more backward in 2006 – plus I made my visit early. The vineyard-borders are far too generously drawn (that ol’ enlightened ’71 German wine law again. . .), but the best parts sit near the Rhine on sandy loam and gravel, and the site is especially warm. Its wines can exemplify the classic Rheingau virtues of firmness, spice and a kind of brooding stoic depth. Johannes Eser makes such wines; Spreitzer’s are marginally more accessible and open-textured. This 2006 is an archetype of the site, very *purple*, firm and adamant, yet also with 06s flooding juiciness and also with its phenolic kick on the finish. I strongly suspect I’ve underrated it.

SOS: 2 (8-26 years)

GSP-046 **2006 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese “303” +**

It hails from a micro-cru called Eiserberg, from which a TBA with 303° Oechsle was gathered in 1920 by Spreitzer’s great-great grandfather, and which was the record must-weight for Rheingau Riesling until 2003 came along. Andreas brought out a bottle of the 2004 to taste; I was curious to see if I’d had some sort of trance when I three-plussed it – but no, the wine is really *that* good, and if you own any, lucky you! This wonderful 2006 isn’t far behind; it has at first a smoky nose and shows botrytis (106° would do that), but the botrytis recedes on the palate to reveal massive extract and solidity. If you yearn for the *STEINBERGERS* of old, the way Rheingau-Riesling *used* to be – this is your wine. It’s stern and patriarchal but it has stayman-apples in its thick suede pockets; the wine crescendos into a massive, long, stony finish. You could say this is the 1971 of modern times, a wine like this.

SOS: 2 (10-30 years)





# why does place-specificity matter?

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

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



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 interconnect-edness 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. 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.

If you're a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don't have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you

can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the *grapes*.

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

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

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

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



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

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

# pfalz wines



Yet another beleaguered vintage in the Pfalz. These guys deserve better. They've been killing themselves five of the past six years. And in fairness, several of my guys had better vintages in 2006 than they did in 2005, as you'll see, but they won't make a dime on it and there isn't much wine.

I find the monolithic modishness of bone-dry wines in the Pfalz so disagreeable I start to wonder whether the cosmos is exacting some sort of nemesis.

In the pretty walled town of Freinsheim my favorite German chef Dieter Luther has a restaurant and a few charming rooms. I've been dining there for many years now. Luther's a very droll guy; when you tell him your meal was fabulous he practically laughs at you, like Oh come on now, gimme a break. He's a wine-guy too and he often asks me how my days go and how the wines are.

His list is naturally heavy into Pfalz wines, and he's both a creature of his times and a businessman serving a clientele, so all the wines are, <sigh>, Trocken. Last year he said something that stunned me. He was "unhappy," he said, with modern Pfalz wines. Really? Yes, because they had become too sweet. "Too sweet?" I asked, astonished. Yes, too sweet he said; he didn't like all these supposedly dry wines with six-seven-eight grams of residual sugar. Say WHAT?!?! If there's the slightest sensible thing about the whole Trocken fetish it's that most of the Rieslings tickle the legal limit of 9 grams of (believe me, untasteable) residual sugar.

I left that conversation more depressed than even a



Pfalz vineyard view

Luther meal could relieve. The Pfalz, once my favorite region, once a hyper-oxygenated anything-goes playground of wine's manifold possibilities, has become suffocated by a pathological aversion to as much as a grain of sugar. I get the sense if these pathetic dupes could somehow get into **negative numbers** ("My wine is so dry it has MINUS-5 grams of sugar!") they still wouldn't be

satisfied. Perhaps they should simply evaporate their wines and suck on the ash.

Far from the wonderfully *human* playfulness of twenty years ago, the Pfalz these days feels positively robotic. It is sad sad sad. All this potential, laid to waste; an Eden of the Unexamined Palate.

I used to think that notions like "kilocalories of sunlight" were specious, but now I'm starting to wonder. I suspect there is indeed a difference between the sun-warmth in Alsace and that of the Pfalz, an hour or two North. Because most Alsace Riesling basically works, even at its most dry. One might have small aesthetic cavils with this wine or that, but the *formula* is sound. It is just the opposite in the Pfalz. There are successful, even superb dry Rieslings there, but the *essential* basis is seriously flawed. That is, unless you like (or *think* you like) shrill, meager, sharp and bitter wines.

Someone will fuss I am being unfair, and will hasten to show me a bevy of the top Grosses Gewächs Rieslings, which were uncommonly good from the tender 2005 vintage, and which will be far less homogenous in '06. And it isn't the point whether these wines are good, or how good they are. You're showing me your fine painted ceiling but meanwhile your floor-boards are crumbling with termites, man! Other than the justly celebrated handful of top wines, the *quality-basis* of the region is perilously close to ruin.

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



of dryness. It goes emphatically against common sense, but livings must be made.

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

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

A few years ago the Germans had their French-paradox moment and everyone was planting Dornfelder. For awhile the world was crazy; prices were higher for Dornfelder vines than for Riesling; Dornfelder was more expensive than Riesling in bulk, and now . . . now? Now the bloom is off the rose, Dornfelder was not the second-coming, there's dreadful overproduction, you can buy the wines for under 2 Euro in every supermarket, and all those poor dupes of fashion are bleeding by the side of the road saying "What *hit* me?" And I hardly feel the tiniest bit of *schadenfreude*!

But Dornfelder notwithstanding, the Pfalz takes itself seriously as a red-wine region—rather more seriously than is warranted by the wines, good though many of them are. I was heartened when Müller-Catoir told me they'd hacked out their Pinot Noir and would make only white wines from now on. The Pinot Noir was good, but it is even *better* when someone claims an identity instead of trying to be all things to all people. Let's not forget to resist this ominous urge to homogenize. If we allow it to grow malignantly the next thing you know we'll insist on ripe raspberries all year round.

Oh shit; we already do.

The reducto ad absurdum of all this is the truly ghastly set of rules applying to the "Erstes Gewächs" (Grand Cru) program. Everything is perfectly enlightened — low yields, old vines, hand-harvesting, minimum necessary ripeness — until the ideologues began vomiting their ghastly ideas and insisted the wines must either be DRY (up to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar) or "NOBLY" SWEET (above 50 grams per liter). It is distressing to be asked to accept these (often) brutally hot and bitter wines as arguments for Grand Cru status. It is distressing to see an entire community of wines strait-jacketed to squeeze into a marketing person's convenience. If anyone knows a stealthy little munchkin who needs a job I'd like to hire him to break into all these deluded wineries and drop Süssreserve into the tanks.

Let's suppose for argument's sake they start really getting it right; they learn whatever magic trick is necessary to create consistently and sustainably viable dry

Rieslings. Then what? Then there's one *additional* region from which fine dry Rieslings come. What has been sacrificed, however, is just the thing which makes German Rieslings *unique*. Other places make good dry Riesling, lots of them. But NO other place anywhere on earth makes these miraculously beautiful Rieslings with sweetness. Thus even *if* — and it's a big *if* — Pfalz dry Riesling was abruptly consistently excellent, I don't think I'd take the trade-off. Something one-of-a-kind in return for an also-ran? No thanks!

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

**The wines have a great affinity for food—certainly the most versatile of all German wines—and yet they have an indefinable elegance.**

What is he talking about, you wonder: after all, there's plenty of "my" kind of Riesling in my Pfalz offering. Yes, because my existence as a client *creates* these wines, which would otherwise be bottled Trocken and sold in Germany. And because I've whittled it down to producers willing to continue making such wines. I look very much forward to visiting them; I love them personally and their wines thrill me to the toenails. But I feel stifled in their environment, and it's a relief to get away again.

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

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



Thanks to a scheduling hiccup, I visited Catoir extremely early; it was my 4th visit, made on my 2nd day. And I found many things different.

First, and hardly surprising, a smaller assortment of wines. Many things that used to be separated into several wines were consolidated into one wine, so there'd be enough wine. You'll see many fewer offerings here, but please NO NOT take that as an editorial comment on the quality of Catoir's vintage. I took almost everything I was offered!

Then, and sadly, a shift away from Rieslaner, which I understand but which is nonetheless lamentable. Rieslaner was strongly associated with Hans-Günter Schwarz, who was cellarmaster at Catoir until the summer of 2002, and who made an astonishing community of masterpieces from that most temperamental of grapes. Since his departure the Rieslaners aren't selling as fast – or so I suppose – and the estate made a sensible decision to reduce the acreage. The land will go over to Riesling but also to the Pinots, Blanc-and-Gris, which, however you justify it, is a serious downgrade. That said, the decision is absolutely warranted in financial terms: you have to make wines people will buy. I'd just like to have a complete exchange of *people*; send all those dweebs on the first Richard Branson space-flights to some halcyon planet where all the wines are dry and bland, and get a bunch of *new* people here who'll know *GREAT* wine when they see it.

Another interesting change is in keeping with the times. The estate has re-introduced *casks* into the cellar. The first wines to see them will be the Pinots (with compelling results, as you'll see) and I won't be surprised if the eventual Riesling finds its way back into wood. Far from repudiating Schwarz's philosophy I think he'd have come to the same on his own. Stainless steel isn't the only

medium in which to preserve brilliant primary fruit, and it introduces issues of its own.

Catoir's had not only the garden-variety mess of '06 to deal with; they also had *two* serious hail storms which further decimated the crop. Not a year they'd like to repeat. However,



Martin Franzen

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,250 cases**
- **Top sites: Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog, Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten, Mussbacher Eselshaut**
- **Soil types: Loamy gravel, clay**
- **Grape varieties: 58% Riesling, 13% Rieslaner, 9% Scheurebe, 8% Weissburgunder, 4% Muskateller, 3% Grauburgunder and Spätburgunder, 2% other varieties**

as Philip Catoir put it, "Such gray hairs as the vintage gave us were justified by the quality of the results, though it took a lot of work." As I was tasting through I found myself pleased they had not groped toward "greatness" but had instead made wonderfully realized wines on a smaller scale.

Things in general are shifting somewhat at Müller-Catoir, one senses. They joined the VDP. They cultivate the press now — in the past they sometimes seemed like a Carthusian cloister to which only the privileged gained access. Their private-customer business is a smaller proportion

of the total. Whereas they once appeared unconcerned with any publicity they got, they're now quite pleased. Franzen's "Wine Personality Of The Year" blurb was delightedly received. And finally, the two of us have reached a kind of ease which only arrives after many years.

My long-time customers are aware of my regard for (and friendship with) Hans-Günter Schwarz, who was Catoir's cellarmaster for 42 years and who is nearly single-handedly responsible for an entire generation of enlightened German wine growers. Martin Franzen had *some* kind of shoes to fill.

A couple people I know share my very high regard for the new era at Müller-Catoir, yet they often say "Of course the wines are different now . . ." and this I don't

entirely see. Naturally, Martin is his own man, but the wines are recognizably Müller-Catoir wines. The vineyards, after all, haven't changed. The striving for the outer limits of expressiveness hasn't changed. Martin Franzen stands, like his entire generation, on the shoulders of Schwarz and Catoir and the pioneering work they did in the '60s, '70s and '80s.

If the new wines are different these are delicate differences, and it requires memory and imagination to delineate. After all, we can't know what wines Schwarz *might* have made from the last few vintages; we can only

infer theoretically. Martin hails from the Mosel, and he's certainly more oriented to *Riesling*. His dry wines are a little drier. His wines are a little leesier than Schwarz's. His style seems more fluorescent, but I sense I am finding these things only because I'm peering so intently for them.

The larger truth is: Müller-Catoir has resumed its position at the top of the Pfalz and thus—at least—among the greatest wineries in Germany.

#### müller-catoir at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

Extremely spritzy and highly leesy— one wine made me think of Gimmonnet's Cuvée Gastronom! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

### DRY WINES

#### GMC-115 2006 Haardter Herrenletten Weissburgunder Spätlese Trocken

The first vintage in wood, 1000-liter barrels, new but untoasted and steam-cleaned. This is the best Pinot Blanc I've had from Catoir (I taste them every year); salty and spring-oniony; wood is present as an ingredient but doesn't dominate; the palate suggests ramps and mizuna, and has more of the Chardonnay stone than the Pinot Blanc scallop, but it's a many-faceted, animate and surprisingly deft and vivid wine. "The Pinots can be constricted when you do them only in tanks," says Martin – correctly. (now- 3 years)

#### GMC-116 2006 Haardter Bürgergarten Muskateller Trocken

+

For the sheer animal joy it gave me it warranted *three* plusses. 98% unchaptalized, this is masterly, with just *retarded* length for only 11.5% alc; it's classic Catoir Muscat (which is to say the *best* in Germany and one of the world's best), dripping with opal-basil; cool, stony, fennely, sorelly and spearminty; just utter *joy* here; you want to drink it like piercing-clear mountsin water, on your hands and knees with your mouth slurping from the hissing stream. I'm buying a ton of it for myself so if you don't like Muscat don't come over!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now – 8 years)

#### GMC-109 2006 Müller-Catoir Riesling Trocken

They thought this modest wine was somehow beneath me. Ah but I am depraved. This is ostensibly "just a QbA" but what it really is is a smiling tasty dry Riesling that doesn't need to flog a confession out of you but merely wants to make you glad; it's "sweet" like cold-grown root-veggies and leaves a subtle finish of verberna.

SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

#### GMC-110 2006 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Kabinett Trocken

Again shows balanced clean fruit, in a wintergreen direction; juicy and plummy, charming and focused, with a burning-leaf smokiness.

SOS: 0 (now – 8 years)

## THE NOT-DRY WINES

### GMC-112 2006 Mussbacher Eselshaut Riesling Kabinett

The first candidly phenolic wine I can recall from here – not disagreeable! And I'm a good 3-4 weeks earlier than usual. Minty-limey aromas with a subtle peach-pit note, but the palate is all cool green; pea-pod, balsam to the nth degree; wonderfully knuckle-y, angular and wry; the absurdly long finish is key-lime again. I sense I'm underrating.

SOS: 2 (4-14 years)

### GMC-114 2006 Haardter Herrenletten Riesling Spätlese

These are all quivering with un-readiness, but a diligent and patient swirl reveals a spicy wine with an aroma like sautéed spring-onion; the palate is more puddingy and pure though botrytis is a factor, finishing with an almost pepperminty zing.

SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

### GMC-111 2005 Mussbacher Eselshaut Riesling Kabinett

**First offering** because last year I elected to do the Mandelgarten instead so as not to clutter the offering with two Kabinett options. I am VERY GLAD this is still here! A euphoric fragrance leads into a small-scale masterpiece; talc and tropical fruit in a light *gulp-me* palate; a perfect frivolity of prettiness; a wine of delight for those who still cherish delight.

SOS: 2 (5-13 years)

### GMC-113 2002 Haardter Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese

+

"Um, did I taste this before?" I asked Martin.

"Yes, you tasted it with the rest of the 2002s when you visited us in March '03," he replied.

"And I rejected it then?" I asked.

"Yes, you rejected it," he answered.

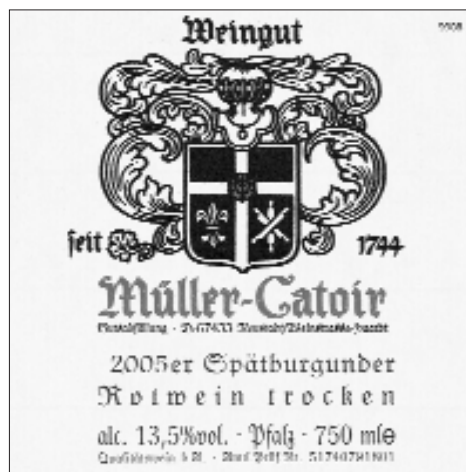
"Is it possible I am a tremendous asshole?" I persisted.

"Yes, it is quite possible!" he answered, to gales of laughter from my colleagues. "But Terry, you didn't know me or my wines, and you couldn't have known how much time they need; more than many other Rieslings." Martin observed charitably.

"Well that is very kind of you to say," I stammered. "And can I have something to scrape off all the EGG I have on my face?"

So mea culpa! And what an aroma in these '02s. Coconut, powder-puff; palate is smooth and silvery with verbena and moonglow pear and cloves; as-good-as-dry, with a shimmering minty finish. Don't miss this striking beauty just because *I'm* clueless, and an asshole.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-22 years)



## **RIESLANER, THE RIESLING-VIAGRA**

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

- GMC-101 **2005 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner Spätlese** **++**  
 Archetypally monumental Rieslaner! Both the stewed-peach of the site and the fierce complexity of the variety. Power, spice, scintillating juiciness yet so solid and resolute it never palls. This is a masterpiece.  
 SOS: 2 (3-16 years)
- GMC-105 **2001 Mussbacher Eselshaut Rieslaner Spätlese** **+**  
**First offering.** (In 2002 I shipped the Schlüssel.) Like the '01 Riesling, this seems drier, more of a "table-wine" though this could be simple age and not a fundamental difference in winemaking; where the '05 motor **roars** this motor *hums*. Insane complexity goes almost without saying. Cherry tobacco, old *armoire*. What a TREAT to be offered it again. Thanks Hans-Günter, for the soul you put into these wines — as if you could have done otherwise.  
 SOS: 2 (3-16 years)
- GMC-087 **2004 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner Spätlese** **+**  
 110° Oechsle. Elegant yet martial; a fine proud wine that cuts a figure; smoky bacony wild-herb aromas; lime-grass melts into mineral with great transparency and serenity; a stylish, buoyant, complex wine.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now – 15 years)
- GMC-107H **2006 Haardter Herzog Rieslaner BA, 12/375mL** **+(+)**  
 185°, and even at this infantile stage the wine is clearly magnificent; solidity and complexity; resin, caramel, old *armoire*, but has not only intensity, but *form*.  
 SOS: 4 (15-30 years)
- GMC-108H **2006 Gimmeldinger Schlüssel Rieslaner TBA, 12/375ml** **++(+)**  
 225°, and again what astonishes here is how *shapely* it is despite its insanely massive ripeness. Some of those European single-blossom honeys come to mind – the Italian *asfordelo* or the French *citronnier* – but the flavor-goobers will need 35 years to emerge from this fella. "It had 105% botrytis," said Martin. It is literally hard to fathom the limpid clarity of this enveloping ecstatic tsunami of beauty.  
 SOS: 4 (30-75 years)



# Beauty In The Ashes

Two remarkable things happened today. First, it is the 7th of April, baseball has started, the cherry blossoms in DC are already past-peak – and last night, it snowed. Not much, but enough to cover the ground and to coat the branches of trees, and to appear quite otherworldly against the new green leaves, as if someone had traced eerie white lines with a highlighter-pen. Spring green is markedly liquid and verdant in any case, but who has ever seen it against this silvery-white backdrop?



Two hours later, by mid morning, the snow was gone. Late-risers won't have seen it at all.

The second remarkable thing was the publication of an astonishing article in today's WASHINGTON POST in which Joshua Bell, one of the world's great classical violinists, agreed to play as a busker in a morning rush-hour Metro station, just to see whether passers-by would notice the presence of the extraordinary. Obviously the lives we live are all stupefying to some degree, especially when we're shooting robotically through space and time on our

ways to work, latte in hand, i-pod in ear. It won't surprise you to learn that almost *no one* stopped to hear Bell's performance, and that many who *did* were actually annoyed by what they perceived as an intrusion, such as the shoe-shine woman who had trouble schmoozing with her customers.

The author of the piece (the wonderful Gene Weingarten) is far too smart for the obvious cheap-shot. Nor will I take it. We cannot reasonably accuse those commuters of being (in Anne Lamott's lovely phrase) worthless Philistine scum. They're merely busy drones who've accepted that much of their lives – *our* lives – will be lived on auto-pilot. But why am I telling you this?

I deal with a commodity which none of us needs. We can live without wine. We might not *want* to, but we can. We care about wine in many and varied ways; at the very least, because it gives us pleasure. For some people wine is just a genial sensual diversion. Others become more deeply intrigued by its multiplicity; it makes a good hobby. Still others are more seriously curious about wine's role in culture and history. And for some of us, when we experience a wine of great beauty, we are compelled to pleasant speculations on the meanings of the aesthetic experience.

This current improvisation (I have no idea where this essay will go) is concerned with the relationships each of us forms to beauty. I'm also curious about how we manage when beauty is, by circumstance or design, a paucity in our lives.

I understand we don't have identical thirsts for strict beauty. Though as I say it, I don't entirely believe it. Just as our bodies *register* thirst differently as we age, I believe we have roughly similar needs for beauty in our lives; what differs is our *awareness* of the need. I remember being a little kid and having an LP of Songs From The Wild West, and hearing the song "Tumbling Tumbleweed" and crying because it was so beautiful. I suppose I am especially sensitive, not because I'm a better person, but just because I am made that way. If you are made differently, I'll be the last guy to try and force you to fake beauty-orgasms to demonstrate your precious sensitivity. But I do believe there is a universal thirst for beauty, and that it is ground out of us by the sedative effect of everydayness.

I am also convinced of this: no matter *how* much we have or haven't cherished beauty in our lives, at some point we'll regret *it wasn't more*. This is especially true for Americans. Octavio Paz

wrote these words:

*The North American wants to use reality rather than to know it. . . . We get drunk in order to confess; they get drunk in order to forget...We are sorrowful and sarcastic and they are happy and full of jokes. North Americans want to understand and we want to contemplate. They are activists and we are quietists; we enjoy our wounds and they enjoy their inventions. What is the origin of such contradictory attitudes? It seems to me that North Americans consider the world to be something that can be perfected, and that we consider it to be something that can be redeemed.*

(Thanks to Michael Ventura for bringing this passage to my attention.)

Wine, for me, has always been an unusually *pure* bringer of beauty. It is something akin to music in that respect, that is, it moves us without recourse to narrative and without stirring our empathies. In that sense it is perhaps even more pure than music, which is often contrived to produce certain emotions. Wine, as I said elsewhere, is music in the form of water. Since it is such an unspoiled conveyor of beauty, I respect it in a very particular way, and I feel it needs protecting. It's way too easy to stomp it into the ground with all our obsessions and manipulations. Not too many things convey beauty to us in such pure form. And beauty is a thing we sorely need.

However, a life *in pursuit* of beauty is vulnerable to a certain neurosis, and it can quickly grow merely precious. Groping for beauty is a good way to send it packing. Insisting that all wines must be measured by how skillfully they wiggle your beauty-knob or how quickly they open your tear-ducts is more than tiresome. *Some* wine is exceptionally vivid, and demands attention, and most of the time I am gratefully and respectfully willing to give it. Other times I want to be left in peace. And I am as grateful for the wine that discreetly washes down my mushroom omelet and salad – especially if it tastes good – than I am for the wine that compels my full attention. There are *look at me!* wines and there are *let me keep you company* wines and we need them both. And once in a great while, there are wines like Dönnhoff's, which simply play for you like Joshua Bell busking in the subway; they open a door but do not tap you on the shoulder – they just open the door. *If you are AWAKE to possibility*, you'll notice the open door, and if you're *curious* you will wonder what it leads to.

It leads to beauty. And beauty leads to gratefulness. And gratefulness leads to reverence. And reverence leads to prayer. And prayer, no matter who or what you pray "to" or even, perhaps especially, if you pray "to" nothing or no one at all, leads to a particular awareness, that everything is *charged* with divinity. *It is, you are*, the current that passes *between* you is, and this is *always* here, in every breath and snowflake and sip of wine. And loveliest of all, you don't have to attain this by dint of some tremendous effort or "spiritual practice;" you don't have to meditate or hold séances or even do Yoga. You just have to be willing to *relax* and step out of your damn life for a few minutes. Trust me, it won't always be Joshua Bell playing for you in the subway – but it will always be *something*.

Nor will this make you a beatific and benign person. It's not about "self-improvement." I'm as cranky as the next guy. All it will do is stop us from wasting too much of our little brief lives. If we're alert to beauty we'll appreciate things more. And as we do that we might become more aware of the difference between the real and the bogus, in many things *including* wine.

There are three questions worth asking: Who are *we* to insist this is all meaningless? Why *should* my soul be a stranger to me? Why *should* I accept the cheap and false when the valid and real is everywhere?

# josef biffar

## pfalz • deidesheim

2006 was Biffar's first year organic. Nice choice of vintages, guys! Let's be thankful they decided to soldier on. 2006 is also the first vintage with a new cellar master, the impressive Ms. Tina Herrbruck, who is one tres sharp cookie and who hasn't begun to show what she can really do, having arrived mid-harvest and a hard harvest at that. But things are astir in this quiet house on a quiet street in Deidesheim. A Yank like me has to remember things don't turn on a dime in the old world. They don't move in bytes, they move in sap-time, leaf-time, sugar-time.

Lily Biffar returned to assume control of the winery after the sudden death of her father. Though the wines were always good, especially from 1991 onward, the estate was basically

treading water until the inheritance issues could be settled. Now they are, and I expect dynamic action to come. Look for the Biffar-blimp over Super Bowl 2007.

It remains an impressive collection of Grand Cru vineyards, yet I realize we sometimes throw that term around without identifying its value. Personally I have never considered potential ripening *per se* as a quality-guarantor. I look for a certain kind of flavor.

I sometimes refer to "Grand Cru" aromas or flavors, and this is what I mean. The words spring to my mind when I sniff a wine of clearly profound aroma not derived from fruit, where varietality *per se* is absorbed into larger, deeper non-primary characteristics. In Grand Cru wines, the land is the text and the grape is the speaker. You might say the vineyard trumps the variety. Except of course the variety is the means by which the vineyard is heard.

Grand Cru lands are the earth's erogenous zones, some confluence of nerve endings which tingle at the touch of sunlight. The old ones didn't even *put* the variety on the label. If it was Grainhübel or Steinberger or Sonnenuhr it was presumed to be Riesling, just like Corton Charlemagne is presumed to be Chardonnay.



Tina Herrbruck & Lily Biffar

"We want to have fruit," says Biffars. "We like mineral, but with low enough yields we get it as a matter of course; we seek to preserve fruit and to differentiate the fruit of various sites." Very revealing, this. Minerality is the Given when you work with Riesling in great vineyards. Fruit needs to be nurtured.

There've been various changes over the years; less

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,100 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg, Leinhöhle and Mäushöhle, Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad & Nussbien, Wachenheimer Gerümpel, Altenburg & Goldbächel**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and granite, basalt and lime stone**
- **Grape varieties: 79% Riesling, 14% Weissburgunder, 3% Spätburgunder, 2% Auxerrois, 2% Sauvignon Blanc**

green in the vineyards, more canopy trimming, more emphasis on clean un-botryrised fruit, and harvesting based on tasting the grapes instead of chasing X-or-Y must-weight, Biffar's wines were more filigree the past two years, with more silken texture, subtle solidity and inference. They seemed relatively introverted, and I liked it; they looked inward because there's so much to see there.

Biffar's is a baronial place (I don't think there's any actual barons in residence but the *mien* suggests they're hiding away in a tower somewhere), certainly one of the Gentleman's Estates of the Mittelhaardt. And they have an unusually flexible approach to cellar work. There are both stainless steel tanks and large old casks in the cellar, both of which can be chilled. The wines are fermented with cultured yeasts at controlled temperatures, but they are not strictly reductive. The goal is to give them just enough oxygen to promote secondary aromas; in effect their architecture mirrors the estate's actual architecture.

The harvest is also worked in various ways according to grape variety and to the condition of each picking. One absolute is long lees contact, up to three weeks on the gross lees and another 4-8 weeks on the fine lees. But apart from all this wine-geek stuff, I have always enjoyed

my visits here emotionally, perhaps even spiritually.

Every year there've been birds singing clamorously while we tasted. I don't know why the blackbirds make me so happy, but they do, and somehow I leave a heart-print at Biffar. The Pfalz is terribly active, starting Easter weekend, cars and pedestrians and cafes spilling out

onto the sidewalk—for a number of city-folk in the Mannheim-Heidelberg axis the Pfalz is "wine country." But when I'm there in March it's all asleep in the buds and seeds, and you can hear the soil talk.

Here's some of what it has told me.

#### Biffar at a glance:

Stellar, first-growth quality estate since the 1992 vintage. Excellent collection of many of the top vineyard sites of the Pfalz. Brilliantly fashioned wines with eye-popping clarity and penetration.

#### how the wines taste:

The taste of these wines is incredibly rich in mineral complexity and incredibly specific in fruit and soil flavors. They are on the rich side. They're brilliant but not squeaky-reductive. They have a noble glow about them; they realize the greatness inherent in the superb vineyards from which they come.

### TWO REMARKABLE SPARKLING WINES!

I admit it: Champagne has spoiled me. I rarely ask to taste German *Sekt* any more, good though some of it is. But some idle impulse asked me to sample these and I was literally amazed at what I tasted. Here goes. . . .

#### GBR-082 **2005 Weissburgunder Sekt Brut**

This smells for all the world like Pierre Larmandier's Blanc de Blancs, with the sweet-lees and even the Vertus fruit; lots of hawthorne and strawberry, a wine that welcomes you open-armed; a remarkably deft Champagne-like fizz, missing only the long mineral undertone of the real thing.

#### GBR-083 **2005 Riesling Sekt Brut**

+

100% from the Grand Cru Kieselberg, and bottled without dosage. Really excellent fizz, like some Milan-Margaine hybrid, but with Varnier's graphite and apple; striking *appearance* of sweetness; fine mineral lift and piquant length. I must say I'm blown away – didn't expect this.

#### GBR-084 **2006 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken\*\*\***

This is offered contingent on its *not* being labeled "Grosses Gewächs." Just to be ornery. It's the pick of a small group of dry wines – a small group of wines, period. Biffars also suffered through hail. "The frogs had left the ponds and we wondered why," said Lily. "And then we saw the hail. If the frogs had stayed they would have been killed." This was picked quite late, and has baked-ripe aromas more typical of the heat-trap Kalkofen vineyard; sautéed crab-cake and brown butter aromas; another Riesling that reminded me of Furstenturm; less mineral than *stony*, and a crunchy-fatty note like the skin-layer on a pork roast; a needly lick of stone on the finish; fine balanced serious dry Riesling.

SOS: 0 (now- 3 years, again 9-13 years)



GBR-086 **2006 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Kabinett**

Toast! Like a piece of honey-bread toasted, buttered, and sprinkled with fleur de sel. It makes me think of trees, for some reason; it's forest-y, but it's also like a pheasant consommé; it has '06s minty brightness and glycerol length.

SOS: 2 (5-14 years)

GBR-069 **2003 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Kabinett**

OK smarty-pants; your disdain for the 2003 vintage led to this wine having been overlooked and therefore overproduced – which now leads to its being in effect *closed out*. Not by us: by the winery. So we have a chance at a Kabinett that's drinking wonderfully, at a crazy-low price.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

GBR-085 **2006 Ruppertsberger Nussbien Riesling Spätlese**

(+)

With the same RS as the 2006 Kabinett this tastes drier; yes there's lots of botrytis fragrance, but what a cool, deft, lyric mineral palate; salty toward the end, a little ginger-snap and a slight scorch on the finish, which should disappear and remove the parenthesis from the *plus*.

SOS: 2 (5-15 years)

GBR-087 **2006 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Auslese "Goldkapsel"**

2006 to the max; botrytis-salt leading to a mid-palate like a mousse of quince and a singed stony finish.

SOS: 3 (7-18 years)



# scheurebe: what gives?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

too demure.

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

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

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

Alas, the Scheurebe can be as temperamental as a high-bred feline. Yet when it deigns to accept you it knows some moves you've *never* been shown. In 2003 it sulked in the heat. But in 2004 it came snarling back in full kinky regalia. Of course Scheurebe satisfies our desire to wallow in lust, which we *spir-chull* guys need so's we don't float away on our wisps of bliss. And so there's little point in *delicate* Scheu, or God help us *subtle* Scheu. If you like it at all you like it writhing and sweaty. Yet: this does not, or *need* not preclude a certain elegance, a certain stature, a certain, dare one say . . . aristocracy? Scheu may be slutty, but it isn't ignoble, and I wonder whether there's really *any* equivalent in the world of wine. Certainly Scheu can overstate, sometimes blatantly, but the *thing* it overstates is often marvelous and even *fine*. So, sybarites, you can have it both ways. Scheu is almost as noble as Riesling but unlike Riesling it has the naughty bits still there!

## **SCHEUREBES IN THIS OFFERING:**

- GKF-115 **2006 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GSD-060 **2006 Schlossgut Diel Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GGE-019 **2006 Geil Bechthemer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GGY-064L **2006 Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**
- GCB-069 **2006 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett**
- GCB-068 **2005 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GTM-104 **2006 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese**
- GKR-093 **2004 Koehler-Ruprecht Kallstadter Steinacker Scheurebe BA**
- GDR-152 **2006 Darting Dürkheimer Fronhof Scheurebe Kabinett Halbtrocken**
- GDR-150 **2006 Darting Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese**



Back when I was a young pup I lived in Germany and fancied I might establish a career as a wine writer. (Hey, before that I wanted to be a rock critic and before that I yearned to be a guitar-God. So ease up on me.) Well, I was writing for the *Friends Of Wine* magazine, which commissioned me to do a piece on Deinhard, to whom I'm sure they hoped to sell lots of advertising. Deinhard, as many of you know, used to be a Name in the American market.

So I spent three days knocking around with the charming Karl Liebetrau, touching down in Bernkastel, Oestrich and Deidesheim. It was then I first visited "Dr. Deinhard" and met the memorable Heinz Bauer, who makes the wines there. My arrival coincided with a kid's birthday

party, and the final impression I carried with me as we drove off was of Bauer hobbling on stilts around the cobblestone courtyard.

His hair's a little whiter than I remember, but the piercing blue eyes remain, as does the angelic mien. Bauer is a soul-twin of Hans-Günter Schwarz (they know each other, of course, and each speaks fondly of the other), typical sweet-hearted Pfälzers making wine in which you can *taste* the affection with which they are lavished.

Indeed affection can be understood to be the Point. I asked Bauer if his cellar-work was different from the prevailing-usual among quality estates. He answered, in effect, by claiming I'd asked the wrong question. "Quality results from what one does in the vineyard," he said. "There are no wonder-winemakers. Intensity, flexibility, knowledge and intuition are the things which bring quality."

The Deidesheim estate is now in the hands of the Koch family, yet is called Dr. Deinhard after its founder, who moved from Koblenz to Deidesheim in the middle of the 19th century, before you were born. Deinhard has leased a proportion of the property from Kochs; in effect



Heinz Bauer

the wines were/are custom-made for Deinhard from the X-hectares of vineyard they lease. That number is falling sharply now.

Deinhard used to stipulate that no other wine from the "Dr.

- **Vineyard area: 35 hectares**
- **Annual production: 20,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Kalkofen, Grainhübel, Herrgottsacker, Kieselberg, Paradiesgarten, & Mäushöhle**
- **Soil types: Weathered calcareous, new red sandstone, basalt**
- **Grape varieties: 77% Riesling, 9% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 2% Gewürztraminer, 1% Scheurebe, 2% Spätburgunder**

Deinhard" estate could be exported to their markets. This is no longer the case.

I made an exploratory visit. One can never have too many great Pfalz wines, and I'd been told quality was extremely high – the estate took a key prize for the best Halbtrocken wine in Germany from the 2001 vintage (Bauer has a touch with halbtrockens I suspect because he himself likes them best of all) – and prices were very reasonable.

The estate is rather large by my standards; over 30 hectares outside of the Deinhard lease, with a high proportion of Riesling and a gratifying proportion of Grand Crus. Bauer seems to be both jovial and sensible. He has both steel and casks in the cellar and can control fermentation temperatures.

I went there on spec, but grew more and more impressed as the tasting progressed. There were a lot of wines, yet there was a deftness and tenderness across the board; these were the wines of a mature vintner who sought honesty and expressiveness. I found myself wishing I could stay longer and go deeper. My notes are scribbled in an inexplicable shorthand onto the tasting sheet

he provided. At some point I knew I was hooked. I looked over at Kevin Pike and said, *Hey Kev; it isn't just me is it? These are really wonderful.* He grinned and nodded. "I was already filling out the forms, babe."

These are old-school Pfalz wines, which is to say they are entirely distinctive and true without trying to be spectacular. The leading German wine-guide rates them equal to Erni Loosen's J.L. Wolf estate, and to Von Buhl, if that gives you an idea. The "sweet" wines are never very sweet; the wines are made with food in mind. I sus-

pect if I asked Bauer "Do you deliberately form your wines with a view to how people will use them at table?" he'd look at me as if I were from Mars. What *other* reason could there be?

My notes are somewhat terse, but **NOT** because the wines weren't compelling, but rather because Herr Bauer most gallantly set himself to entertaining my two colleagues and I was constantly pressed into service as a translator. I gotta find uglier colleagues.

**dr. deinhard at a glance:**

1st-quality Pfalz estate available in the U.S. at last; big range of Grand Cru sites rendered in a genial and intelligent way, AND (yay!) enough wine.

**how the wines taste:**

Dense and minerally, with focused fruit and with almost unerring BALANCE in a range of styles. Gentle and charming more than forceful and shoulder-grabbing. Imagine a cross between Minges and Biffar!

GDD-027 **2006 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

The more mineral of two *very* good dry Späts – the other was Forster Ungeheuer – this is pungently stony and charred, but it swells on the palate and finishes not only stronger but fresher and plumper and even more eclectic – lots of flavor-pebbles knocking around your pail here.

SOS: 0 (now – 2 years, again 9-14 years)

GDD-004 **2001 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

+

Great polish and detail; a fine smoky Grand Cru with more cut than the 2002; this is not at all unlike a Nigl Privat. And it is wonderful to see it with a few years on its fine bones; sommeliers especially should grab the chance to offer a Riesling out of diapers (the wines, not the somms).

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years, again 12-15 years)

GDD-026 **2006 Deidesheimer Mäushöhle Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**

Fragrance like those wonderfully caramel-y cave-aged Gruyères; a juicy palate with mutsu-apple fruit and a nubby crystallization; it's as sweet as a sweated onion and has a rooty winter-parsnip earthiness.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years, again 12-16 years)

GDD-006 **2001 Deidesheimer Herrgottsäcker Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken**

This won an important prize as the Halbtrocken wine of the vintage for 2001. It's round and detailed, what the French would call *fondue* (i.e. amalgamated or "married"), entirely smooth and winsome; an utterly elegant, granular Riesling. A final crack at a great 2001.

SOS: 0 (now to nine years)

SOMMELIER ALERT!

GDD-023 **2005 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**

+

Wow, what *this* has done with a year in bottle. It's ever-more elegant and pretty, with an exquisite aroma of smoke, peach, *prosciutto*, guava; granular and gorgeous, with *spiel* and grip and gingery spice; in its unassuming way this is *perfect* Pfalz Riesling.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-17 years)



GDD-009 **2002 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett**

Perfect clone-90 Riesling, with a slim 95° Oechsle (!!!); fresh, lively, serene, long; how on earth could it be any better? We bought every drop he'd give us. A year later I still think it's perfect Pfalz riesling. I'll show it as long as it exists!

SOS: 2

GDD-028 **2006 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Gewürztraminer Spätlese**

Oh so lurid and sultry, the drunken and depraved sex you think you shouldn't have had, except you did and it was so good. . . where was I???

SOS: 2 (now-4 years)

GDD-031 **2005 Deidesheimer Grainhübel Riesling Auslese** **+**

**First offering.** This is another perfect food-wine, notwithstanding whatever "Auslese" is *supposed* to mean; ripe, spicy and smoky; manly stuff here! Roasted stones and guava and campfire and lime-zest; minty brightness to a long, exotic giant-o-ginger. This is fusion-cuisine in a glass.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-24 years)



Stefan Müller's was a typical tale of the 2006 harvest in the Pfalz. They, too, suffered through a June hail (but didn't get the July one that wreaked such havoc at Catoir) and of course the heavy rains of early October. "We picked in thirteen days, which is unheard-of," he said. "After I saw the mold setting in in the flat vineyards we decided to pick immediately in the Grand Crus, which turned out to have been smart. We gathered clean fruit, and four days later the molds started appearing."

After getting my attention with his ascendancy-vintage 2004, Stefan hasn't really been able to show what he can do. In some vintages you can only hope to prevail over nature's challenges, as is the case in 2006 as it was in 2005. The next clement Pfalz vintage will unleash this star-in-waiting, I'm

sure.

Müller has become an owner of considerable consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück, plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien.

But back to the Kirchenstück for a moment. The official land assessment value of this site places it at the top of the pile, not just in the Pfalz, but in all of Germany! If you own land here, you are paying higher taxes than owners in Doktor or Marcobrunn or Baiken or Scharzhofberger. What is it about the Kirchenstück? As usual with great vineyards, the "what" isn't always so explicable, but let's try and explic-it!

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Forster Kirchenstück, Jesuitengarten, Ungeheuer, Pechstein and Musenhang**
- **Soil types: Calcareous loam, sandstone detritus, partly with basalt and clay**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 10% Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, 14% red varieties mostly Spätburgunder**



Stephan and Kurt Müller in the vineyard.

It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines. Still, not *this* kind of spice; this sharp, nipping concentration. Then there is a flavor of black-cherry which I've never seen elsewhere in the Pfalz. Then there is a minerality which again seems *packed*, as though it had been *pounded* together, carbonized. The whole effect is penetratingly expressive, yet, here's the genius of it: it's also, somehow ELEGANT AND REFINED, and the palate keeps whipsawing back and forth between "ZOUNDS! This is spicy!" and "Oooooohh, this is gorgeous!"

The Jesuitengarten, in comparison, is quite a bit less high-toned and zingy, more lush and caramelly: heavy satin versus raw silk. What makes **Jesuitengarten** tick is the solidity of its structure, the innate fineness of its flavors and the stylishness of its complexity. Kirchenstück has more **genius** in it, but also more arrogance. Jesuitengarten is a *little* less brilliant but a little more accommodating; it's more diplomatic.

**müller at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

GEM-077 **2005 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**

"Mariengarten" was an old single-site name which still has a certain brand-value among old-timers. Now it's a "prestige" *Grosslage* consisting only of the primo sites in Forst. This wine is entirely from the Grand Cru *Pechstein*, in fact, and the wine is almost dainty (not a characteristic typical of '05); certainly it's front-and-center flowery, and a refined orchid-y sort of flower; even what the French call *Dore*, or wild lavender; palate is a blast of talc-y charm; lemon-blossom; leads into a finish like a fruit liqueur ladled over warm stones.

SOS: 2 (5-14 years)

GEM-078 **2005 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**

This is a big belly-rich Riesling, like caramel with fleur de sel; a new-leather animal sweetness, simmery and root-veggies, a carrot-bisque with orange zest. It's food dude.

SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

GEM-086 **2006 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**

Almost creamy, and with its classic caramel atop a stony bone of 2006-structure, so there's more dialectic than usual, more piquancy; it might just be a little less ripe than the 2005 –not necessarily a bad thing. . . .

SOS: 2 (7-19 years)

GEM-079 **2005 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese**

+

Oddly this is finer, slimmer and more elegant than the Kabinett, as if it were Jesuitengarten; exceedingly fine focused slender-boned wine, selected from a higher parcel richer in limestone; for sheer Grand Cru breed and refinement, this is so satisfying. The Kabinett is delicious: this is *beautiful*.

SOS: 2 (8-22 years)

GEM-089 **2005 Rieslaner Spätlese**

+

**First offering.** This is seriously good wine! Fervid aroma of aloe-vera and mirabelle and marshmallow; the palate unites Rieslaner's striking solidity to Müller's thick carpet of fruit; you seem to *bite* through it but then it spurts with juice even as it clamps the palate like a boa constrictor. Allllll *righty* then!

SOS: 2 (now-8 years)

**THE GREAT FORSTER KIRCHENSTÜCK SERIES**

GEM-087 **2006 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese**

(+)

A squalling infant still, and marked more by sheer botrytis (at 116° Oechsle) than by its still-incipient fruit, though there's cherry and redcurrant in there somewhere; right now this wine is mineral-madness, like chewing a cherry pie with a crust of stone; almost a cardamom note in the finish.

SOS: 2 (8-23 years)

- GEM-080H **2005 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** ++  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** It's still fleshy and dimpled but what salty-sweet power here! Fragrances of cherry and flint, Szechaun spare ribs, lime and gardenia, *boucherie* and jasmine; palate washes over you with piquant tangy sweetness but ambushes you with salt, like tapioca pudding with maple-smoked bacon.  
 SOS: 3 (8-25 years)
- GEM-088H **2005 Grauburgunder BA, 12/375ml** +  
**First offering.** They're calling it "1 Oktober" to denote an early selection of *good* botrytis, and what we have here is a *tasty* and AFFORDABLE dessert wine that's focused and varietally scrupulous; it's dense and rich but not at all sugary; indeed it's incredibly *drinkable*, with the "sweetness" of long-braised meat and carrots.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 4 (now-2 years, again 12-18 years)
- GEM-083H **2004 Forster Stift Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** +  
**First Offering.** Another of those achingly plummy Eisweins from '04 (God *what* an Eiswein-vintage that was . . .), a salty lime-liqueur, not celestial or mystic but completely sensually *delightful*; firm and piquant, ferally salty and like a green-tea essence. FABULOUS VALUE.  
 SOS: 4 (13-29 years)





# herbert messmer

## pfalz • burrweiler

Too bad Gregor doesn't like to fly, though god knows I understand. During our last two encounters he's been about the wittiest and most fun guys I know. And y'all are to be congratulated for bouncing sales nice 'n up the past years. Believe me, it's nothing less than this stellar estate deserves, and I'll be working to make them even more conspicuous.

As such I fall in line with the received wisdom of the German wine community. That's O.K., but our *reasons* for appreciating Meßmer are diametrically opposed. Inside Germany he's lauded for his dry wines. He sells them like loco, and sometimes I like them too, some of them.

I've represented this estate since almost the very beginning, and nothing would please me more than to get chummier and to keep showing you wines like these. Gregor Messmer is an almost comically serious man. He would be comic if he didn't conduct himself with such quiet dignity, but really, you want to tickle him! I'll bet he'd tickle you back. But first he'd have studied *The Tickle Points Of The Human Body* and he'd be deadly accurate.

Two prominent points to make. The first is that Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slatey minerality. If not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

The second point is the Schwarz connection. Hans-Günter Schwarz hails from neighboring Gleisweiler.



Linde & Gregor Messmer

Schwarz and Messmer senior have been friends for years and young Gregor had the precious opportunity to form his own friendship. The results show in his wines.

Having said that, Gregor has emerged decisively from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz world is the love of reductive viticulture.

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Burrweiler Schäwer, Schlossgarten and Altenforst**
- **Soil types: Slate, sandy loam loess, red sandstone and heavy chalky clay and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 45% Riesling, 13% Spätburgunder, 10% Weissburgunder, 6% St. Laurent, 5% Grauburgunder, 21% other varietals including Scheurebe**

"What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. "Our Süßreserve comes only from the healthiest grapes and we use no preservatives to treat it. We never de-acidify. Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking."

"The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least 'winemaking'."

That's the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I like wine with the greatest possible number of uses."

Messmers use only organic fertilizers. All the white wines are made and aged in stainless steel. They receive their single racking early after fermentation and are left undisturbed until bottling, usually in March. This is a recipe for noninterventionist winemaking of remarkable

purity. And Messmer's wines, indeed, are remarkably pure. They're as clear as glass, etched as sharply as etched glass, transparent as the thinnest glass, but firmly constituted.

2006 was a vintage of challenge here, depending of course on your tolerance for botrytis flavors, an area in which I recognize my palate is extremely persnickety. But something else is at work too.

I just brewed myself a pot of a Chinese green tea called Linyun White Downy. I'm no expert on the green teas, and in fact I don't drink them often, and when I do it's usually something in the Jade-Oolong family. I need a certain psychic space to let these Theta-wave teas be; they're quite still and meditative and limpid and if I'm

stressed I won't register their virtues. Gregor's wines can show an analogous quality of stillness, which is why botrytis seems so blatant in a year like 2006. I selected carefully and was reassured by the many earlier vintages still available.

The southern Pfalz suffered from draught in '05, partly as a residue of the parched summer of '03. Irrigation is now permitted in Germany, and I asked Gregor if he was ever tempted to deploy it. "Actually, I am fundamentally opposed to irrigation," he replied (rather to my delight), "It isn't the solution. I'd rather deal with draught by adjusting yields lower."

### messmer at a glance:

Superbly made wines, exceptional clarity and polish in a keenly etched and chiseled style. Has soared ahead to take its place among the best estates in the Pfalz the last few years. Sure-handed with a multitude of grape varieties.

### how the wines taste:

What unites them is CLARITY and SPECIFICITY. Gregor's careful, diligent style seems to allow us to examine the fruit of his wines as though under a microscope. This must be the most honorable way to make wine. Everyone knows how to make bombshells—it's facile and plausible—but the tender, delicate rendering of varietal fruit denotes a **respect** for the grape which only shows when you're nature's humble servant and not concerned with being a hot-shot. Gregor's wines have an exactitude that satisfies my desire for seeing things clearly.

#### GMS-119L **2005 Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter**

This needed two minutes of swirling or a vigorous decanting to remove a reduced aroma, but when it emerged it did so as a coolly dense, blueberryed Pinot Noir of impressive concentration, and a fine value.

#### GMS-121L **2006 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**

Sporting a *spiffy* new label; this is a studious, deliberate Riesling; round and balanced, with a smoky redcurrant note. It has admirable gloss and polish but it's the opposite of ostentatious.

SOS: 0 (now-3 years)

#### GMS-123 **2006 Michelsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs**

The site belongs to the village of Weyher; it's just north of Altenforst; the soil includes slate along with mineral-rich sand; it is certainly Gregor's most compelling dry Riesling; This was the stoniest of the 06 dry Rieslings here, with the largest core of terroir; it has the boskop-apple and quince and waxy notes; it's very silky and suave in its structure leading to a tight fist of mineral on the finish.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 12-15 years)

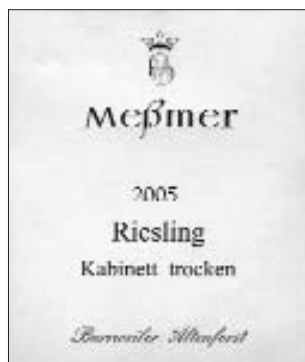
#### GMS-122 **2006 "Schiefer" Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

"Schiefer" means slate, and as you know I have no problem with wines named after their terroirs. But get this: the wine hails of course from the Burrweiler Schäwer, now anointed a "Grosses Gewächs." And if you *produce* a Grosses Gewächs bottling you *may* NOT produce any other DRY bottling using the site name. *Sweet* wine, that's OK. Just not a second dry wine. Um oh-kay. . . .

Thus the new name. The wine shows some botrytis but also a juicily balanced length with spicy licorice notes; it isn't as digitally pixilated as usual but it's also creamier and more fun to drink than usual.

SOS: 0 (now-3 years)

- GMS-114 **2005 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Kabinett** +  
**CORE LIST WINE.** Tangelo and malt aromas; bright, citric and zingy but it's in no way *green*, but rather *yellow-orange*, as if an orange-blossom honey had most of its sweetness removed. This is now a CORE-LIST wine but we have to determine whether he can produce it every year for us. Know why? He can't sell such a wine at home! It has the dreaded sweetness you see . . .  
 SOS: 2 (5-14 years)
- GMS-124 **2006 Muskateller Kabinett**  
 This is always one of my very favorite Muscats, *because* it's always "Feinherb" with an RS that swings back and forth according to the vintage but which never tastes "sweet." I confess it's this wine I most want to taste again, because I suspect it will make a fool of me. It seemed as expressive as 2006 would allow, with good bite and with its customary mint and mineral; its markedly creamy body contrasts to the keen shimmer of 2004 and '05, but the wine has a sneaky length and seems to finish cleaner than it starts.  
 SOS: 1 (now-7 years)
- GMS-125 **2006 Riesling Feinherb**  
 From the Grosses Gewächs (Gleisweiler) Hölle but won't carry its name. Not chaptalized but may or may not be sold as "Kabinett." All these rules are twisting growers into unhappy pretzels, aren't they! The wine shows the best face of '06, its rural power and crescendo of force; it's all sweet-smoke like *prosciutto di Parma* with persimmon and hibiscus.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-2 years, again 8-12 years)
- GMS-126 **2006 Weissburgunder Grosses Gewächs** +  
 I don't know them all, but of the ones I do know this is the *best* German Pinot Blanc I've ever tasted. If there's a site-name I was too amazed to score it! We're in Hiedler territory with this wine; hugely expressive nose of langoustine and wet hay with overtones of mango; enters the palate with towering "sweet" fruit and physio-power. Wow wow wow.  
 SOS: 1 (now-5 years)
- GMS-116 **2005 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese**  
 Again this is serene and luminous; rather on the sweet side; a lovely nose of violet, hyacinth, mirabelle and *tilleul*; a caressing refined and satiny palate leads into a spicy perfumey finish that's all flowers. For the long-haul.  
 SOS: 3 (12-27 years)
- GMS-115 **2005 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese**  
 Mr. Midas-touch with this variety does it again, this time with '05's form and grip. There is no Gewürz in Germany as consistently superb as Meßmer's.  
 SOS: 3 (now-6 years)
- GMS-117 **2005 Rieslaner Auslese** ++  
 GMS-117H **2005 Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** ++  
 This is quite the critter here! 116° Oechsle; it tastes like a bunch of clotted cream poured over a Sherman tank; penetrating lime-grass spice and wintergreen leads to an amazing palate at once poundingly intense yet bubble-bath voluptuous, and the fruit is astoundingly clear and candid; the botrytis was pristine. I mean, YOW; one of the great wines of the vintage.  
 SOS: 4 (8-22 years)



# theo minges

## pfalz • flemlingen

### PFALZ WINES

Clearly we'd passed unbeknownst through some portal into a parallel reality. "2006 is one of my best vintages," said Theo. "*One of my Best.*" Please understand Minges is about two minutes' drive from Meßmer, and they own many of the same vineyards. The sense of unreality grew even stronger as we tasted. The man is right; 2006 is superb here. How he did it I don't know. But here are a few reasonable guesses.

Minges has become quite the new-ager in his old age. Where Gregor is a cerebral sort of guy, Minges is constantly talking about energy fields and similar arcana. I recall him saying "In 2006 you had to work for balance in the vineyard – there was power enough." And he often talks

about transmitting *energy* into the glass; there is clearly a sort of vibrant force he's looking for. He's come to the attention of Hans-Günter Schwarz, who has been, not exactly "consulting," but available as an interested friend. Hans-Günter always said there either was or wasn't an ignition of simpatico between him and his many apprentices, and I'm sure as he got to know Minges he felt *This is my kind of man*, and he attended to the estate as a kindly force himself.

My language is deliberately obscure. I don't want to say Minges' wines took a leap forward because Schwarz "consults." Theo is very much his own man, and his wines were always good. What *did* happen is their two paths crossed when destiny was ripe enough, and they have since become brothers-in-arms.

I doubt if there has ever been a greater grower than Hans-Günter. If you've ever known someone with a



Theo Minges

green thumb you'll know what I mean. I think vines *yearn* toward him if he as much as approaches a vineyard. They know he understands them. I've asked him

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Gleisweiler Hölle, Flemlinger Vogelsprung**
- **Soil types: Limestone, heavy chalky loam, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 10% each of Grauer Burgunder and Dornfelder, 5% each of Weissburgunder, Chardonnay and St. Laurent, 20% other varieties**

what I thought were unanswerable questions ("How does a vine convey its contentment, or its dismay?") and he's been able to answer in minute, concrete detail. He seems to hear the plant breathe. And he's able to share what he knows. Of course that only goes so far; such genius as his is irreducible and un-transferable. (You can study Mozart but you can't *be* Mozart.) But Theo is Schwarz's spirit-kin, and he's become really electrified the past couple years.

One year I had some yucky chest-cold thing while I was in Germany; it didn't hit the schnoz, luckily—I could still work—but it made me wonder what I'd do if I was KO for a few days and couldn't taste: what then? I'd hope I was laid-out on a day I was scheduled to visit Theo Minges, not because I don't like to see him (I do!) but because I know with this grower as with few (if any) others I could say "Sorry to have missed you; just send what you sent last year." He is that reliable.

Theo was chatty. And he talks fast. So I've learned to listen fast, because he keeps spouting out these gems. One year I asked him as I asked everyone, whether he acidified. "Almost not at all," he said. "You know, there are growers who usually de-acidify, and who



added acidity this year—who in effect fight against nature, but I see it differently. We are part of the whole; we don't stand apart from nature."

This is a crux of the matter, isn't it! To one sort of vintner, a vineyard is a mere production-unit, a thing which is used like any machine, to bring about a result he's already decided upon. To another sort of vintner, a vineyard is teeming with life. He goes out among his vines, his soils, his breezes, his birds, and listens. None of them speak his language but all of them speak their own, and this he tries to hear. He nurtures his vines and gathers the fruit they give, and follows the will of that fruit all the way to the alchemy of wine. Sure he knows what *font* he likes, but he knows he doesn't write the text; the text is larger than he but includes him. Indeed he is crucial; he takes the inchoate and urges it alive.

At one point Theo described a new vineyard he had purchased: "These are old, solid, proud vines." He said. A vine isn't a mere *thing* you manipulate: it is a *being* alive as you are. A fellow-being, a companion.

Minges himself is an old fashioned guy in an old fashioned house; he only just got a fax machine and doesn't own a computer ("Though my daughter has one; I can give you her email address if you want to send me emails," he offered. Somehow I'd rather call. . . .) By the way, you always apologize for your German pronunciations, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

Theo Minges was "thrown in the cold water early" at the tender age of twenty. His father came latterly to viticulture, having originally been a painter, a sensibility which made the transition to viticulture rather comfortable, in Theo's opinion. During the period of euphoria over the new crossings, Minges stayed a classical course, planting only Scheurebe and Kerner, the two most similar to Riesling. Minges was an island of classicism and must feel prophetic now, as so many of the crossings are being hacked out of the ground.

Theo told me something that made me glad. He's planting more and more

Riesling each year, thanks to me (of all people), as I've been a good customer for them. Ain't that sweet? I never pause to consider my patronage might actually make things possible for the growers. Because of me and *you* a great guy like Theo Minges is literally *en-couraged* to produce more Riesling; that makes me feel useful and happy.

Most of the vineyards are on gentle slopes of deep loess-loam, though all Riesling is planted on chalky, stony ground. Unusually, the Flemlinger Zechpeter site is planted in Riesling from MOSEL clones, planted 38 years ago by Theo's father. Everything is hand-harvested—not a necessity here, as the land isn't steep—and many separate passes are made through the vineyards. The grapes are pressed in a pneumatic press with very little pressure. Musts are rarely centrifuged; Minges prefers to let them sit overnight to clarify. Natural yeasts are usually used, though Minges has no ideological objection to using cultured yeasts *if necessary*. Fermentations are quite slow, at least four weeks, and no wine is *ever* racked before January; each wine spends at least a month on its primary lees to help them clarify and build complexity. "You have to leave the wines on their lees patiently," he says. "Otherwise, they become too reductive, too smooth; all their structure comes from acidity alone."

This was my final visit, and about mid-way through Hans-Günter arrived and all bets were off. Notes? Like hell! The chat was zipping around the table and every word a gem. The vintage is wonderful but in a sense, narrowly so. Like many vintners, Theo protected his Riesling above all. I don't think he made Rieslaner or Muscat. The late-gathered high must-weight Rieslings were the least successful. But the "ordinary" wines were literally and entirely EXTRAORDINARY.

I wish you could meet him! But he doesn't come over (I don't know if he likes to fly) and couldn't communicate if he did. We tickled the idea of him traveling with Hans-Günter, which incited a certain degree of curiosity. There's no "personality" cult around Minges, as there ought to be. But believe me, this guy is **THE REAL DEAL**.

#### minges at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

#### GTM-100L 2006 Riesling Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter

+

**THE VALUE OF THE VINTAGE!** This is simply unbelievable quality, blowing many estate wines of far greater pretension clear out of the water. It has jaw-dropping mid-palate complexity of *material* minerality, so you can suck the guy down or pause to notice its complexity and density; just wonderful dance of lime, herbs and stone and with an ear-to-ear grin of sheer loopy charm. DON'T miss it!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-7 years)

GTM-101L **2006 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Here something of the '06 "thing" appears, then fades in the glass. Someone says mirabelle; I'm not the only one! I said "oxalis" just to one-up the bastard. We agreed on lime, and an almost Rieslaner-like roasted limey length. Again remarkable quality – as it is in every vintage – and tremendously *useful*.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-9 years)

GTM-098 **2006 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

Again this nods seriously toward Oger and Avize (Theo's wines often seem akin to Champagne, they're so leesy); also lots of lemon-balm and granny-smith apple; it's balanced, ripe, talc-y and minerally and fruity in a cool malic idiom; no knees or elbows but a keen gaze of clarity, length and stylishness. Tasted, unusually, from bottle – Theo bottles late, but he was sold out of his '05 and needed this.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years, again 11-16 years)

GTM-099 **2006 "Buntsandstein" Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +

Were Minges a member of the VDP this would have been sold as *Hölle Riesling Grosses Gewächs*, but this "costs half as much and tastes twice as good." In fact this is "The wine that's exactly what I most want my Rieslings to be," according to Theo, and at 94° Oechsle it's remarkably limber and dancing; what's really amazing is its compact energy, its core of lemon and mineral and its endless unfolding of intricacy. This is an achievement in any vintage but an *amazing* one in 2006.

SOS: 0 (now – 3 years, again 12-16 years)

GTM-102 **2006 Flemlinger Bischofskreuz Riesling Kabinett**

Pure and absolute mirabelle now, and so solid you swear there's a pit in there somewhere; that tart-fruity energy-soaked flavor pops out of the glass like a Jack-in-the-box. Ka-BING!

SOS: 2 (6-15 years)

GTM-103 **2006 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese** +

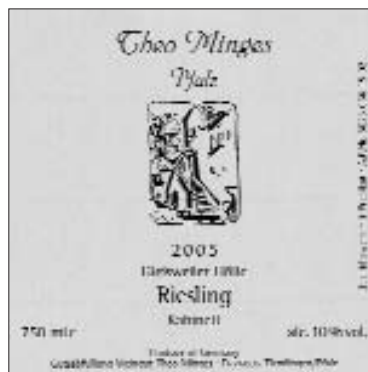
Now explicit ginger and candied lemon-rind and a wonderfully wry and angular sweetness; somehow *profusely* flavory – you can't believe the flowers, the field is alight with them; and like all of these it just clings to your senses in this salty slurp of pure seductiveness. How on earth did he do it?

SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

GTM-104 **2006 Gleisweiler Hölle Scheurebe Spätlese**

A little master-class here. At first the wine showed really feral aromas, like an ocelot rolling around in currant-leaves. The palate is fiercely spicy and spearminty, with a fine sort of sharpness; wickedly fun, but a little of "the '95 flavor" gave me pause. Schwarz didn't taste it, but I'm inordinantly sensitive to it. We added five grams-per-liter of sweetness with *dosage* and wow: the pink grapefruit suddenly appeared and the bitterness *completely* vanished, and the wine was finer in every way. FIVE GRAMS. Now it tastes like a '75. Gotta find the sweet-spot. . .

SOS: 3 (now – 7 years)



# koehler-ruprecht

pfalz • kallstadt

I confess I'm not sure what to do here.

It's widely known Bernd Philippi wants to sell the winery. Put it this way; I knew of no one in the Pfalz who *didn't* know. He has no kids to whom to leave it, and he's been there part-time anyway the past several years, what with his various projects in Portugal, Madeira and South Africa.

This puts me in rather a quandary. My loyalty is to Bernd Philippi specifically, not to "Weingut Koehler-Ruprecht" abstractly, but how much effort should I expend for something that will cease to exist sooner or later? Who knows whether the new owner will opt to perpetuate the monument-status of the estate? Maybe he'll decide it's an anachronism that needs to be

brought into the 21st century. I want to orbit closely enough that I'm there if the new owner's enlightened and simpatico. But what of the interim?

I'd love to have spoken with Bernd about it, but he was elsewhere when I visited. The few 2006s I tasted were not examples of the estate at its best.

Let me tell you why Koehler-Ruprecht is so particular, and offer a few wines exemplary of its special status.

I remember an old Charlie Parkerism (when asked how to go about being a great jazz musician): "First master your instrument," he said. "Then forget about all that shit and just PLAY." There you go! Bernd makes his way through the cellar like a virtuoso who no longer has to *think* about technique. And his wines are saturated with personal expression. His "voice," deep, resonant, gravelly, comes through in all his wines. Often remarkable, sometimes astonishing, sometimes *undrinkable* but

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Kallstadter Saumagen, Steinacker and Kronenberg**
- **Soil types: Limestone detritus, sandy loam, partly with gravel**
- **Grape varieties: 56% Riesling, 19% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% each Chardonnay & Grauburgunder, 2% each Dornfelder & Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% other varieties**



always original, these wines are not for the faint of palate, and no one feels lukewarm about them. They represent the purity of an old style you almost don't see any-

more.

Bernd has no fear of oxygen; indeed, these wines' profound acid-extract structure seem to *relish* extended aging on the lees, frequent rackings, and lengthy storage in wood. I've known cellar-rats here who've told me privately that Bernd's winemaking breaks most of the modern rules, that by all reckoning they shouldn't work at all. Well, guess again. Other Philippi principles include no cultured yeasts, and none but the "classical" Geisenheim clones of Riesling. He likes alcohol and body and Nietzschean *thunder* in his wines. He doesn't like sweetness, and even his wines with residual sugar are on the dry side. Left to his own devices he'd drink nothing but dry wines.

Which is a pity, at least to me, because good though many of the dry wines are, even a modicum of sweetness often elevates them; really **profound** now, not *just* voluminous, with gut-grabbing flavors of ginger, dough and maize. These stand as the antonym of the current trend toward reductive vinification which—you may have

noticed—I happen to like. But the world would be a *much* poorer place without wines like these, great charging bears, with all manner of woody, animal secondary fla-

vors, yet supported by a rigid acid skeleton and capable of amazing aging.

### koehler-ruprecht at a glance:

In many opinions the leading estate of the Pfalz — certainly among the top five. Of those estates, these are the biggest, most massively scaled wines. Extraordinarily old-style approach to vinification: no stainless steel.

### how the wines taste:

They are uncompromisingly stony-gingery, dense, wine-y, not at all grapey. They tend to polarize tasters; if you love them they give you something you almost can't get anywhere else: a warmly satisfying old-fashioned *bigness* of flavor that's masculine and lusty. Other tasters just don't "see" them, as they lack the modern steely brilliance. Bernd's grudgingly willing to concede that the reductive style makes friends but in his heart he finds that type of wine too sterile and simple, and lacking the capacity to age. Bernd routinely makes elite-quality wines; in most tastings of Pfalz wines his are in the top group. I myself reach for them frequently and find they give that little **extra** that great wines give. If you don't know these you owe it to yourself to check them out, ESPECIALLY IF YOU BUY FOR A RESTAURANT, as these are among the *most* food-friendly wines of any in this vast universe of possibility.

#### GKR-091 **2005 Kallstadter Steinacker Riesling Kabinett**

Now more red beet and cinammon, and less pure stone; soy and honey-mushroom aromas; thickly dense and tannic; barely off-dry; it finds a talc-y jasmine-y mineral as it finishes. Remarkable.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)

#### GKR-092 **2005 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese Halbtrocken** ++

I confess I expected *nothing* like this. I'd wondered whether Bernd's big wines would collapse under their botrytis, but this has a seductive creaminess like I've never seen: it smells exactly like *Mesnil*, in fact: apple-blossom, jasmine, chalk, honeysuckle; the palate is a creamsicle of *terroir*, a masterly weaving of mineral, sweet lees and endless winter-green length. There is no other Riesling like it, and EVERY order should include it.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years, again 13-18 years)

#### GKR-095 **2005 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Spätlese** +

**First offering.** And superb! Woodsy-grainy, like a corn flan; reminds me of his great 2001s, with wonderful grainy length; white chocolate and truffle and freesia; deft, gleaming. A Bernd-wine at its most feminine.

SOS: 2 (11-27 years)

#### GKR-096 **2005 Kallstadter Saumagen Muskateller Spätlese**

Actually Halbtrocken with 9.1 g.l. RS. Very *charcuterie*, baked ham – an original! Part Muscat, part lees, part wood, entirely amazingly delicious minty-spicy wine.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### GKR-093 **2004 Kallstadter Saumagen Scheurebe BA** +

A Philippi wine to the very marrow; fiercely spicy and brash; where anyone else's BA would be sweet this is pupil-shrinkingly minty, a wasabi-Scheu; crazed ginger and lime, phosphorescent brilliance; I mean we're talking babbling-loony wine here folks!

SOS: 3 (now- 13 years)



# kurt darting

## pfalz • bad-dürkheim

I'm not sure how, but Dartings have their best vintage in several years. "We were especially early picking," said Helmut Darting. "And very fast, three and a half weeks as opposed to the eight weeks we usually take." It was also Darting who told of selecting stringently by day and machine harvesting by night – a sensible and original approach. His 2006s have unusually high extract and acidity but with relatively high pH for '06. At Strub two days before, everything had less than 2.9; at Darting everything was around 3.3-3.4. The 2006s are ripely chewy here – Helmut likes them a lot, as do I. It's the first vintage in a decade where you didn't need to sacrifice ripeness to obtain structure.

It's like a runaway train, this agency. When things work this well it always seems so easy; why can't everybody do it? The ingredients are simple. Outstanding wines at attractive prices. Flexibility in the working relationship. Collegiality in tasting and evaluating the wines. Basic and spontaneous friendliness. Tasting with Helmut you are instantly aware he likes wine, likes making it, likes tasting it, likes thinking about it, is entirely FOND of it. Even with the growers, I'm never entirely sure how much of my heart to reveal when I taste their wines, but with Helmut Darting I can giggle or weep or dance the shimmy.

Until a few years ago the estate was divided between husband and wife, one of whom belonged to the local co-op. With Helmut Darting's arrival, the two estates were combined and all the wines estate-bottled. Helmut had an interesting year of apprenticeship as part of his wine schooling: at Müller-Catoir! Now, plenty of young dudes spend time at Catoir, a few each year. The estate is an official "Meisterbetrieb" meaning that students and apprentices may be sent here. I once asked Hans-Günter Schwarz if it wouldn't be possible (theoretically!) to track down all the up-and-coming new superstars by following his various apprentices. His answer surprised me. "Actually, no," he said, "because I don't always develop a rapport or sympathy with the young men. It seems to take a special type to want to do things this way!" With Helmut Darting



Helmut Darting

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Spielberg and Hochbenn, Ungsteiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Heavy chalky loam, sandy gravel, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 44% Riesling, 8% Weissburgunder, 6% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 4% each Portugieser, Muskateller & Ortega, 3% each Chardonnay & Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties**

it appears to have been a case of simpatico instantaneoso. Schwarz even gave permission for his pricelist text to be used, in which he describes his rules of vinification, which is how, when I saw it reproduced verbatim on Darting's list, I knew Something Was Up.

If you're unfamiliar with the reductivist's creed, it goes a little like this: every time you handle a wine, you diminish it; therefore minimal "winemaking" above all! The most important thing is to grow superb grapes and let their flavors sing out in the wine. You ferment as slow and cold as possible, with natural yeasts. You rack once and once only, after fermentation. You keep the wine away from oxygen at all costs. After the first racking, the next time you handle the wine is to bottle it.

No fining, no clarification, no de-acidification, Süßreserve only when no alternative avails, and then only a high-grade Süßreserve, itself made reductively. All of this results in wine in which the original grape character is preserved with an almost unreal clarity.

Darting has arrived among the "classified" estates in Germany, yet wonderful as this is, I can't help but wonder what kind of wines they'd make if they owned land in the classic sites of Deidesheim, Forst and Wachenheim. We need someone sensible there to yawp against the dry-at-all-costs insanity.

**darting at a glance:**

reductively brilliant wines.

The numero uno sales success story in my portfolio. Extraordinary VALUE FOR MONEY for superbly made

**how the wines taste:**

Depending on the vintage, either spicy-gingery and firmly bracing, or flowery-pollenly with a candied spice and more talc and malt. Basically reductive, as indicated above, yet with the acquisition of certain Grand Cru sites purchased from Basserman Jordan, one sees how classical Darting's wines can be from outstanding vineyards. All wines intensely, fundamentally varietal.

GDR-151 **2005 Pinot Noir**

Toasted Pfalz oak, but large (3500-5000-liter) casks; the juiciest and finest of 4 reds he showed, with oak in proportion and true Pinot fruit, though it smells a little like Tempranillo, actually. This isn't as suave as the 2004; it has some tannin and will want 2-3 years of bottle-age; we decanted and retasted after two hours, and it showed more spice, softer tannins, and more oak!

GDR-145 **2006 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

In bottle a week, but quite some *schnoz*, like a fig jelly; the palate is smooth and fruity and clean (not a safe assumption from '06. . .); this really exemplifies agreeability! SOS: 0 (now-4 years)

GDR-152 **2006 Dürkheimer Fronhof Scheurebe Kabinett Halbtrocken**

This is the site from which the Eiswein usually comes; it's a sneaky little kitty with feral Scheu aromas; manchego and sbrinz, pineapple and lemon-candy; the palate is bright and high-toned and spicy with a long eucalyptus finish. Restaurants should offer a parting shot of this in lieu of mints. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

GDR-146L **2006 Portugieser Rosé, 1.0 Liter**

Michele was on her blackberry immediately, beseeching the company to get this wine on a container now! It should be here when you read this, and it's a picnic in a bottle; *fraise-de-bois* and strawberry-scented cream; even more mid-palate than the '05, so it flatters a little less and impresses a little more; sockeye salmon and watermelon. Serve cold and watch it disappear. SOS: 1 (now!)

GDR-144L **2006 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

CORE LIST WINE. Well here's an aroma: a little botrytis and a whomp of ginger; the palate is both drier and thicker than the '05; indeed this has *spiel* and an exotic note almost like *Rangen* of all things. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-4 years)

GDR-143 **2005 Dürkheimer Steinberg Muskateller Kabinett Trocken**

+

A TRIUMPH of the '05 vintage *chez* Darting; an arrestingly pretty fragrance; palate is crystalline, dense, bright and long ; it's on the lime and herbal side of the variety but with the glorious '05 crushed-rock chewy mineral density. I tasted this AFTER the TBA and it just rang out with beauty and grace. SOS: 0 (now - 5 years)

- GDR-134 **2005 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 This one made it to nearly 100° — pineapple and botrytis aromas; the palate is a real ginger-pudding you dipped a plantain-chip in! The 60g.l. RS is swallowed by all that ripeness; the finish is talc-y and snappy; overall this is an Annick Goutal sort of wine, spicy and redolent of the pastry shop.  
 SOS: 2 (3-10 years)
- GDR-147 **2006 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**  
**CORE LIST WINE.** You'll see we're also offering every last drop of Kabinett from 2005. We need Kabinett! But wow, these 2006s have such solidity you think you could roll them into balls and bounce them. Classic tangelo and spiced-apple nose; a spicy and adamant palate resolving into a granular sweet-salt finish like *prosciutto* wrapped around a pear.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)
- GDR-138 **2005 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett**  
**CORE LIST WINE.** Again the sweetness is more restrained; the wine is malty and powdery; botrytis shows on the nose; the palate is tangy, like a meat stock flavored with tangelo.  
 SOS: 1 (now - 8 years)
- GDR-148 **2006 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 This will be the crowd-pleaser and the one that'll "show" best in tastings; jasmine and meyer-lemon and *peche-de-vigne*; again wonderfully solid palate and a finish like gingersnaps; the extract seems to *suck* away the sweetness. The wine is more interesting with each sip. Best Kab in years from here.  
 SOS: 2 (3-11 years)
- GDR-149 **2006 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewurztraminer Kabinett**  
 Roses roses roses. Roses! Smoky meaty palate but with grace and fluidity and a peeping lark-note of high fruit at the end.  
 SOS: 2 (now-3 years)
- GDR-150 **2006 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese**  
 All wild lavender, the feral-herbal side of lavender, almost animal; this is very much in the "Gold-capsule" idiom; i.e., it's a light Auslese, and it's more site-pronounced than varietal, but its marked richness is a step up from the range thus far.  
 SOS: 3 (now-6 years)
- GDR-154 **2006 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 Lighter than the '05 but still in character; wet straw and peach-blossom; a lissome spice and lemon-y glazed fruit; interestingly *more* gauzy and transparent than the Kabinetts.  
 SOS: 2 (3-12 years)
- GDR-139 **2005 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This wine shows that all must-weight isn't equal: this is nearly the same as the Michelsberg Kabinett but the palate here is pronouncedly richer and thicker; simply, it tastes *riper*; white corn and guava fragrances; palate is high-toned, jasmine-y and fine; it shows botrytis and has a chewy tropical fruit and mineral finish that softens into caramel.  
 SOS: 2 (5-17 years)

- GDR-153 **2005 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Spätlese** **+**  
**First offering.** This is the kid-brother to the sensational '05 Auslese (which you should *lunge for* if you don't already own some), from an early harvest with 101° Oechsle, no botrytis but some dessication. Classic varietal nose, vetiver, lychee, empire-apple, papaya; amazing clarity and solidity, with an exotic peppery spice. You simply CAN-NOT buy a more glorious wine for this price!  
 SOS: 1 (now-12 years)
- GDR-155 **1977 Dürkheimer Spielberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 Several things to say. One, there are 25 cases available. Two, Hans-Günter Schwarz may have had a hand in it somehow. Three, you should know this was not a great vintage, but was in fact a quite-ordinary one which followed two great vintages. '77 was barely ripe, and plentiful, and I'm sure this Spätlese was a rarity at the time. I didn't expect to like it. The color is yellow with greeny glints; a deep color signifying a wine in the last 2-3 years of its life. A classic smoky nose of the vintage. With oxygen notes of guava appear; sweetness is still present, and salts and five-spice awaken on the palate; it's a juicy and friendly old Riesling at the end of its prime but still **IN** its prime. Has a burnt-wick thing like certain old Chenins. I imagine there will be bottle variation, but at *this* price it's hardly much of a gamble. And the wine is, like; *who knew???*  
 SOS: 1 (I'd have said "6-18 years," and yet here it is 29 years old and still going)
- GDR-140 **2005 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner Auslese** **++**  
 You need *two* mouths to taste this wine; it's too huge to fit into one. I checked carefully for V.A. (a sometimes-issue with '05 Rieslaners) and found none. Cherry and toast-ed brioche; gigantic, implacable mass and force; cashing cymbals of ginger and pepper and yet it rumbles like an 18-wheeler over the palate; the finish is like one of those wild skies dotted with angry clouds but sunny with crepuscular beams. Oh man, *Rieslaner!*  
 SOS: 3 (3-16 years)
- GDR-141H **2005 Huxelrebe TBA, 12/375ml**  
 Still cloudy and not-yet-wine when I tasted it, but excellent potential.  
 SOS: 4 (12-28 years)





## **A Little Essay About Nothing Much**

As a junior in high school I took honors-English. Figures, right? I must admit I had no great love of reading; I rather had great love for the young woman who taught honors English, Jane Stepanski. Every year I realize how much Jane forgave us, and every year it seems like more.

I wasn't actually a nerd; I was a freak exactly two years before everyone else was. It was painfully solitary for awhile, and I craved a pack, any pack, and honors English helped satisfy the craving. Oh I read some, but mostly I was earnest and clueless. I recall a time when my classmates were especially derisive at what they called "truth-and-beauty poems." I went along with the prevailing contempt; truth-and-beauty poems: *pfui!* Only ignorant clods liked those. What kinds of poems did I like? Um, er, ah . . . well—*ahem*—um, y'know, all kinds of poems as long as they are not truth-and-beauty poems.

It might appear as though I look back on all this with disdain. Far from it. I see it as pitiable; we were so needy, we hungered for any scrap of certainty, any piece of solid floor we could stand on. And so we struck our fatuous attitudes and somehow Jane Stepanski didn't spit at us.

I got into wine as a man of twenty five. I was like every fledgling wine geek; it consumed me every hour of the day. Alas it also consumed anyone in my proximity for a couple years, for I was as great a wine-bore as has ever trod the earth. But I was greedy for knowledge, or rather for *information*, and I did as every young person does: I sought to subdue the subject by accumulating *mastery* over it. Ignorance was frustrating, and uncertainty was actively painful. And lo, there came a day when I felt I had at least as many answers as I had questions. I started, mercifully, to relax.

I was amazingly lucky to get my basic wine education in Europe, where I lived the first five years of my drinking life. It gave me a solid grounding in the "Classics" of the wine world. I still believe it does the novice nothing but good to drink somewhat aloof, cool wines to start. (S)he is thus encouraged to approach a wine, to engage it, to have a kinetic relationship with it. This is substantially less possible (If not outright impossible) with most new-world wines, which want to do all the work for you, which shove you prone onto the sofa saying "You just watch, and I'll strut my stuff."

Eventually, I came to see wine as the mechanical rabbit that keeps the greyhounds running along the track. No matter how much "knowledge" I hoarded, the ultimate target was the same distance away—if not further. The "truth" of wine, it seemed, was a sliding floor . . . and even then you had to first gain access to the room. This frustrated my craving for certainty, for command, for *mastery*. And for a period of time I was angry at wine.

Now I rather think wine was angry with me. But, as patiently as my old honors-English teacher, wine set about teaching me what it really wanted me to know.

First I needed to accept that in wine, uncertainty was an immutable fact of life. "The farther one travels, the less

one knows." There was no sense struggling against it; all this did was retard my progress toward contentment. But it is a human desire to *know*, to ask why. Would wine always frustrate that desire as a condition of our relationship?

Far from it. But I was asking the wrong *why*. I was asking *why* couldn't I know everything about wine? I needed to ask why I *couldn't*, why none of us ever can. The essential uncertainty exists ineluctably, or so it seemed, and the most productive questions finally became clear. *What purpose does this uncertainty serve? What does it want of me?*

One answer was immediately clear: there would be no "answer." There would, however, be an endless stream of ever-more interesting questions. And questions, it began to seem, were indeed more interesting than answers. In fact it was answers which were truly frustrating, for each answer precluded further questions. Each answer quashed, for a moment, the curiosity on which I'd come to feed. It seemed, after all, to be questioning and wondering which kept my *elan vital* humming.

The less I insisted on subduing wine, the more of a friend it wanted to be. Now that I know that wine is an introvert which likes its private life, I don't have to seduce away its secrets with my desire to penetrate. The very uncertainty keeps it *interesting*, and wine has grown to be very fine company. I'm inclined to guess that the uncertainty wants to remind me to always be curious, always be alert to the world, always be grateful that things are so fascinating, and to remember to be grateful for the hunger. Because the hunger is *life*. Accepting the irreducible mystery of wine has enabled me to immerse myself in it more deeply than I ever could when I sought to *tame* it.

Immersion has come to be the key. I am immersed in the world, the world is immersed in me. There are filaments and connections, always buzzing and always alive. The world is not a commodity destined for my use; its cells are my cells, its secrets are my secrets. And every once in a while, usually when I least expect it, wine draws its mouth to my ear and says things to me. *Time is different than you think. A universe can live inside a spec of flavor. There are doors everywhere to millions of interlocking worlds. Passion is all around us always. The earth groans sweetly sometimes, and small tears emerge, and tell us everything. Beauty is always closer than it seems. When you peer through the doorway, all you see is desire.*

You hear these words and it all sounds like gibberish, a stream of sound which doesn't amount to anything and only confuses things more. But if you've ever held a restive infant, there's a little trick you can do. Babies like to be whispered to; it fascinates them. They get a far-away look on their little faces, as if angels had entered their bodies. And so I do not need to know what wine is saying to me; it is enough that it speaks at all, enough that it leaves me aware of meanings even if these don't fall neatly into a schemata, enough how sweet it feels, the warm moist breath of beauty and secrets, so soft and so close to my ear.







