

# terry theise estate selections



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“What happened,” Cadman said, “to the old Italians in Napa who used to have such wonderful gardens? And the dairy farmers. It was all dairy farmers not so long ago.”

We were walking under spacious terraces of vines, the air cooling rapidly and a sudden darkness appearing at the edge of things: a lone tree in an ochre field, miles of white fences around the ranches.

Did he like coming up by himself?

Every wine maker, he said, has a place like this. “A place that says it all.”

“I often wonder,” I said, “if they think about a place as they’re laboring over a wine. As if they want to turn that place into something sensual, ethereal. To put it into the liquid.”

“It’s a weird idea, isn’t it? But why not? What else is one supposed to do with one’s life?”

- from The Accidental Connoisseur  
*Lawrence Osborne*

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## Introduction

I am writing with half a face (as opposed to the half-assed way I usually write . . .), having just come from the dentist. I'm really really glad about novocaine but I hate how it feels afterwards. In the mirror I look O.K., just like my normal disaster, but inside it's all numb and blubbery. It suddenly strikes me this is how many wines are; normal-looking from the outside, but inside all numb . . . but I don't actually like this metaphor. In fact such wines are overstuffed with sensation; it's sense they're missing.

In the last year or two there's been a quiet little shift in the Austrian wine scene. It's no longer mint, it doesn't have that new-car smell. It's settling in to what it actually is, showing its lines and creases, and what it will sustain. This is the 12th year I've offered you the wines, and

Austria: this is a *young* wine culture. I turned in 2003 and I am aware of a subtle paradigm shift whereby I look forward to visiting Christine Saahs (at Nikolaihof) or Erich Salomon (at Undhof) because they're closer to my age.

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



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

It's quite pleasing to see more worthy growers finding American importers. I'm happy to have help raising the tide. The market is healthy but interest is polarized, very strong on the coasts (and in urban restaurant-driven markets everywhere),

and still skittish in the less, um, *alert* markets. You know, markets driven by passive retailers who wait for the "call" to create *itself* because they can't, or won't be bothered. So, to any stubborn holdouts, here's the skinny:

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

- Competitive, snappy, vigorous dry whites at the low end of the market.
- The best values on earth for monumentally structured dry white wines.
- World-class dry Rieslings redolent of soil, unmanipulated, tasting entirely *at home*, and presenting flavors more curly, baroque and slavish than Alsatian wines.
- World-class Sauvignon Blancs along Loire lines, with even more mineral and a sweet-grassy fruit which

the 20th year since the Glycol matter. No one refers to it any more except for journalists who were very late getting to the story. At this point I doubt there is a story—just a people, making wine.

Also changing is that restless spirit of envelope-pushing, and this is a very good thing. It might be fun to gun the motor and watch the rpms climb but sooner or later you have to cruise and then you want the motor to hum, not yell. The community of Austrian vintners seems to be saying *We are no longer arriving; we are HERE.*

Thanks for helping me welcome them.

I'm always jazzed to take this trip; there are so many people of whom I'm fond over there. And I had all kinds of fun, mostly legal, and I'm sure there were one or two nights I actually got my clothes off before passing out to sleep. But something really strikes home for me in

never spills over into bubble-gum.

- The world's best Pinot Blancs; depth, complexity and age-worthiness without parallel elsewhere.
- Unique red grape varieties such as Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent, from which medium-weight, **food-friendly** wines are made, with rare and wonderful flavors.
- Grüner Veltliner! The last of the great European white-wine grapes. Unique. Adaptable. Food-loving, and delicious.

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

- Your fear of the German language . . . *Kein angst!*
- Your presumption that the wines are similar to German wines. They are not. Loire, Alsace, Friuli are the closest cognates.
- The market's preference—abetted by lazy wine merchants and middlebrow journalists—for processed, manipulated, do-all-the-work-for-you wines over wines with uncompromisingly soil-imprinted flavors with which the drinker can *engage*.
- The feeding-frenzy market within Austria, which does recognize the quality of these wines and has the disposable income to buy them by the boatload. This makes it hard for a lowly Yank to get much of the stellar stuff. Some of you will never get to taste what this country can do. Go there and get down.

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

Even more: I feel there's a sort of yearning among many of us for experience that isn't vapid. Given the choice, many of us tend toward instances of meaning. People want to participate in constructive, enriching experience. Given the choice between a wine made in a factory, made by marketing nabobs and technocrats, with all manner of extraneous flavors *added* in the "production" process, or a wine made by a family who maintain an intimate connection to their land, and whose land *expresses itself* in the taste of the wine, which tastes *purely* of the land and the grape, many people will choose



soul and the human touch over a sterile "product." Some of these drinkers are people my age, starting to feel their mortality, wanting richer experience in the time remaining to them—to us—and some of them are young drinkers who don't know "better." Whoever they are, they're out there, and they need what you can teach them, if you choose. Or you can wait till they find you, and be willing to be taught. Put your head in the sand and all you see is dirt.

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

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

I approve of a wine culture with an





Storks roosting in Rust

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

After all, it stands to reason that if there are degrees of sweetness there are also degrees of dryness. I appreciate the dryness of Austrian wines, and I suspect it's how they show their best. The issues are two: 1) degree, and 2) flexibility. Most of our palates will not discern sweetness in a typical Austrian Riesling or Grüner Veltliner



below 8-10 grams-per-liter, unless we've just tasted thirty wines with zero, in which case we'll notice more *fruit* in the "sweeter" wine and wonder why. A dash of salt in your soup isn't to make it taste salty; it is to awaken flavors, to make it taste more like *itself*. A similar dash of sweetness in a wine both enhances flavor, extends fruit, provides another voice to the dialogue of nuances, reduces alcohol, and in many cases makes for a more elegant finish. To reject such things in order to be "pure" seems puritan to me.

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



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

## The 2004 Vintage

Confounding little bastard, this crop. PLENTY of outstanding wines, but no rhyme or reason. And very difficult to generalize, except for the pithy (though accurate) statement that generalities are impossible.

Taste at three growers each of whom had quite-good Veltliners but outstanding Rieslings and you form an hypothesis it must be a better vintage for Riesling. But oops: the next two guys you visit have excellent Veltliners and just so-so Rieslings.

The culprit was rain during the picking, which made for a very drawn-out and late harvest (deep into November and even later). But if you hear "rain" and think "dilute, unripe" you'd be mistaken; in most cases the wines are as ripe as the heat-wave 2003s, but they are differently ripe. In 2003 the ripeness was embedded deep in the wines' umami, a roasty smoldering sort of ripeness. In '04 there's more *torque*; ripeness is more explicit, conveyed by palpable flavor; they are more superficially vivid, they seem livelier.

In all, and with the caveat that exceptions abound, it is a better vintage for Grüner Veltliner than for Riesling. That's because GV's thicker skins better withstood (or avoided) botrytis, and because it could be picked earlier. Usually! Rieslings were prone to a sort of dessication in which, from one day to the next, entire vineyards went from healthy yellow-skins to decadent browning skins. This was not universal, but also not uncommon.

The growers all said they were very strict in selection, taking great pains to separate away the botrytis grapes. On many occasions I'd remark "botrytis" and the vintner would say "Impossible: We threw them away, there cannot be more than 1-2% botrytis grapes in here." And I began to wonder; if a vineyard has a botrytis infestation, can its effect be so generalized that a residue remains even on the "clean" grapes? I can't contrive another explanation to fit the fact. I tasted many ostensibly clean Rieslings which showed intensely fungal flavors. And so finally I said "Look, I'm sure you were as selective as you say, and I accept there's no botrytis in this wine. But it *tastes* as though there is, and if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck then as far as I'm concerned it is a duck."

Yet there are *many* absolutely gorgeous Rieslings from 2004, though not always where you expect to find them.

One important note: this is the best vintage I've ever tasted for the "simple" wines. Basically anything retailing for under \$20 (or priced to pour by the glass) is the best it's ever been. There is a charm and complexity in these lil' fellas I've simply never seen before. They show Veltliner at its most winsome and pretty, and the Rieslings have surprising length and depth.

I can't emphasize this point enough. I've been on rather a gypsy-jazz binge lately, and I just love this stuff; it's full of cheerfulness and lyricism and even when it's virtuosic it's always full of melody and vim (not to men-



tion who knew a person could play a freakin' *accordian* so well!) and I will keep saying this until they pass a law I have to stop. *We do not sufficiently cherish those wines that simply make us HAPPY.* We are too busy chasing the nth degree of palate-gasm. I sometimes just want a wine that makes me laugh and want to kiss everyone in sight. And so, again: 2004 "value" wines . . . step right up and get cuddly.

Regional distinctions are not explicit. All three of my Wachau producers had excellent vintages but I also heard disinterested reports of some heavy botrytis wines from the other "big" names. The Kremstal seemed to favor those further from the Danube, yet Berger showed a fine clean vintage. In the Kamptal the lines are drawn in the cellar; indeed this is generally true. 2004 favored those making "modern" reductive wines, especially as regards whole-cluster pressing.

In the Weinviertel all three of my producers had successful 2004s, though Setzer and (especially!) Hofer were really strikingly good. In Burgenland I haven't enough material to opine with. Heidi's whites were utterly lovely, while nearby at Prieler they were more cornery.

The reds are promising, more angular than the ripe (sometimes overripe) '03s but it does well to recall: The vintage was 2-3 weeks later than usual, the winter was very long and cold (which decelerates the wines' evolution) and I myself was two weeks earlier than usual. Most of the wine I tasted was in sundry states of bottle-shock. But it's always better to underrate.

So who are the top performers? Depends!

**WINERY OF THE VINTAGE**  
**(IN THIS OFFERING OF COURSE):**

*Hofer* (say wha . . . !? But yes, because of a superb GV and two great Rieslings, and because this isn't supposed to happen in a sleepy corner of the "lowly" Weinviertel.)

**OTHER OUTSTANDING COLLECTIONS:**

*Nikolaihof*  
*Setzer*  
*Schloss Gobelsburg*  
*Hirsch*  
*Alzinger*  
*Nigl*

**OUTSTANDING PARTS-OF-COLLECTIONS:**

*Bründlmayer* (for *Veltliner*, which was staggering)  
*Jamek* (for *Riesling*)  
*Salomon* (for *Veltliner*; who'd have thought I'd ever write those words!)

## **Cork**

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

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

The Austrians are acting with more celerity than are the Germans. Cork is a constant topic of conversation. Johannes Hirsch is really sticking his neck out and bottling everything with screw caps: *everything*. He is the



*Screwcap from Weingut Hirsch*

cause celebre, let me tell you. The evening after we visited him, Kevin Pike had a chat with Klaus Wagner, celebrated restaurateur and bon vivant of Landhaus Bacher, where we stayed and dined. "If the service does its job correctly, a corked bottle should never reach the table," Wagner said. Yet they do, Kevin pointed out, and it stresses the staff unnecessarily. "Well perhaps," Wagner assented, "But serving a fine wine from a bottle with a screw cap would be like serving our cuisine off of paper plates."

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

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

Fast-forward a year, and I'm sitting in the restaurant along with Mr. Hirsch, and Wagner's joined us for a late-evening bottle of something special with which he seeks to surprise us. He's very busy telling Hirsch he "just doesn't *like* screw-caps, and maybe he's reactionary but that's just how he feels" etc., etc., and meanwhile *three bottles in a row of the wine he's trying to serve us are CORKED. Three!*

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

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

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

Corked.

## **First Among Equals**

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

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

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

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

## GRAPE VARIETIES

### Grüner Veltliner

Lately I've heard whisperings of a Grüner Veltliner backlash of sorts, as the young sommelieres who first brought it to prominence are moving onto even more recherche items. The novelty's worn off, perhaps, and we have to scratch new itches of hippitude with albino Petite Sirah from Guam or whatever. Gotta maintain that *edge*.

OK, I'm cool with it; live by the fad, die by the fad and all that, but *if* (and it's a big if) this is true then shame on someone. Because however "trendy" GrüVe may have been, its greatest value is it isn't merely trendy, but rather has a permanent place in the pantheon of important grapes, and a prominent place among food's best friends. Among the many wonderful things Grüner Veltliner is, it is above all THE wine that will partner all the foods you thought you'd *never* find a wine for.

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

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

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

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

Frankly, if you like it at all, it'll end up in your life in a big way. I guarantee you, within three years of discov-

ering GrüVe you'll be grabbing for it so often you'll say to your drinking companion "What did we used to drink before we knew about this stuff?"

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

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

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

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



**Aging Grüner Veltliner:** you gotta be patient! I know of no variety other than Chenin Blanc (in the Loire, of course) which takes longer to taste *old*. All things being equal, Veltliner lasts longer than Riesling, and it never goes petrolly. What it can do is to take on a dried-mushroom character that becomes almost meaty. Mature GrüVe has been a revelation to every taster I've seen. It's a perfect choice for a rich fatty meat course when you prefer to use white wine. Don't think you have to drink them young—though if you catch one at any age short of ten years you are drinking it young. Think of young GrüVe like fresh oyster mushrooms, and grownup GrüVe like dried shiitakes.

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

### Riesling

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

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

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

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

I noticed immediately that Riesling was at *home* here. You can tell by how it tastes, a certain serenity that allows it to *broadcast* with perfect clarity and conviction. Every

great grape variety is particular about where it's planted, and will not make interesting wine anywhere else. Nebbiolo, Chenin Blanc, Tempranillo, that crowd. Riesling!

### Pinot Blanc

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

### Muskateller

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

### Rülander

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

### Sauvignon Blanc

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

### RED VARIETIES

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

Thus as Austrian reds become more important to my business, I thought I'd do a little self-exam just to ensure

my hippitude. So I assembled me a few cases of old-world reds, specifically chosen to be fruit-driven medium-weight, and under \$25 retail. There were Italian wines and Spanish wines and French wines, and last winter was cold and austere and I couldn't wait to slop those bad boys down. I'd have been pleased to be merely competitive with my Austrian reds. I expected nothing more. I was absolutely shocked with what I found.

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

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

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

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

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

You'd recognize most of your favorites: Pinot Noir, Cabernet, Merlot, plus someone has Nebbiolo planted somewhere. One really fine thing that's happening now is a general retreat away from Cabernet. "We have the climate to ripen it but our subsoils are too cold," one grower told me. Thus our ubiquitous friend gives rampant veggies except in the steamiest vintages. "But hey," the same grower continued; "we tried it, it didn't take, recess over, back to work!" There's a discernable and laudable return

to the several indigenous varieties: the Portugieser (which you may know from Germany), the Blauburger, which is a crossing of Portugieser with Blaufränkisch—you get the picture. There are, however, three types to interest us, each unusual, and each offering something we cannot find elsewhere.

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

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

Finally there's the **BLAUFRÄNKISCH**, a variety I like more each year. It's of the cabernet type, a little bricky and capsule-y, and when it's unripe it's slightly vegetal. But lately I've seen much better stuff from this grape. In fact I think the quality-spread is widest here. Most of Austria's greatest red wines are made entirely or mostly from Blaufränkisch, yet weak Blaufränkisch is less pleasing than weak Zweigelt. (I've yet to taste a truly crummy St. Laurent.) I'd still put it in the Malbec-y school (whereas the Zweigelt is Syrah-y and the Sankt Laurent is Pinot-y). Zweigelt is for spaghetti, Sankt Laurent is for duck or squab, and Blaufränkisch is for lamb chops. A perfect three-course meal!

## Austrian Wine Laws

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

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

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

man's talent. And so in a sense his wines are dangerous.

Such are the terms of the debate!

Here's my take on it. To focus on a vision of absolute purity as an Ideal will create unintended mischief. Will do and *has* done. Every grower's goal should be to produce the most delicious, harmonious and characterful wine he can. If that means zero sugar some years, 3 grams in others and 6 grams in others then that's what it means. "Oh but then we'd have to manipulate the wine," they retort. But this is fatuous. Winemaking is ipso facto manipulation. We are talking about degrees of manipulations, and which are acceptable under which circumstances in the service of what. "We would prefer an unattractive wine than one which we have confected into attractiveness by manipulating its sugar" is a reasonable case to make, provided one has the courage to accept the consequences of making unattractive wines. What too many do, sadly, is to sell unattractiveness as virtuous, in a fine example of Orwellian double-speak.

Remember, I'm not advocating the *addition* of flavor, but rather the preservation of flavor *already there*. A

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

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



## Austrian Wine Culture

It's changing and mellowing now, and part of the reason is actually the economy in neighboring *Germany*, which has always been Austrian wine's number one export customer. The doldrums are deep enough to have nearly dried this market up, and many of the hottest Austrian estates are wondering, for the first time, where they'll sell their wine. Mind you I think this is a good thing, and not only because it increases my own allocations of certain goodies (see Alzinger!), but because it promotes a kind of steadiness that's more sustainable—and agreeable—than the overheated climate of yore. Icarus, one might say, is cruising at a sensible altitude.

It can be odd to deplane into this lovely country for the first time, climb into your car and head off to your first winery. Along the way you are deep within old Europe in all its stately handsome antiquity, yet when you ring that first bell you're entirely likely to meet by a dashing young person who speaks fluent English and knows more California winemakers than you do. His office is chock-a-block with gizmos, he's using a rabbit corkscrew and fancy stemware and his cell phone is programmed to ring with Chris Cornell's voice. But as soon as you taste his wine you're immersed again into a kind of abiding Good. They are "wines as they've always been, only with better machines". They begin with soil, to which they are determinedly faithful, and they eschew confections at all cost. It is quite stirring, these slow, deep wines coming from such cosmopolitan creatures. It is even more encouraging to catch the occasional glimpse of the deeply anchored values which lie below the surface. It says, we don't have to give those up in order to be 21st-Century men and women; it says maybe we can figure out how a person should live.

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

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

This is a slippery matter in any case, because all ripeness isn't equal. A Wachau wine at 11.5% can taste undernourished. Its Kamptal counterpart tastes just fine. Certain Kamptalers with monster-ripeness (14% and up) can taste scorched, but many Wachau wines carry such alcohol in balance. The wise sage of Nikolaihof, Nicolaus Saahs, feels that "wine is a food-stuff and should be above all comely." He also believes



by farming biodynamically his grapes are physiologically ripe at below 13% potential alcohol, and many of his masterpieces have 1.5% less alcohol than wines from Hirtzberger or F.X. Pichler. "There is a difference between wines you *drink* and wines you *taste*," he adds. Haven't you also noticed the difference between what you professionally evaluate as "great" or whatever, and what you *actually enjoy drinking*? My cellar is full of wines whose flavors I enjoy and which accommodate my meals and don't pall. I'm too old for all those big flavor-jerk-offs that leave me feeling hollow.

## When to Drink the Wines

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A Note on My Use of the Phrase Secret Sweetness:

This emphatically does not denote a wine with camouflaged residual sugar; in fact it doesn’t refer to sugar as such at all. It attempts to describe a deeply embedded ripe-tasting flavor that *suggests* sweetness but which is in fact the consequence of physiological ripeness. Most of us know by now there are two things both called “ripeness”: one is the actual measure of sugar in the grape (or must), which can be ostensibly “ripe” even when other markers of under-ripeness (e.g. bitter seeds or high malic acids) are present; the other is a fuller ripeness when both seeds and skins are sweet. Austrian whites from physiologically ripe fruit often *convey* a kind of sweet echo even when they contain little or no actual sugar. I like my little phrase “secret” sweetness, because it’s a sweetness that seems to hide from you, though you’re sure it is there. But if you look straight at it, *poof*, it’s gone. Look away and there it is again. It only consents to let itself be inferred. This I just love.

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“Grilli’s reds, like the well-known Rubino made from Cabernet and Merlot, were less intriguing to me, more like cerebral Californians, with their deliberate linear dryness. Like all intellectual wine makers, he had a passion for Pinot Noir, and as with all intellectual wine makers his Pinot Noir did not quite convince. His Vin Santo, however, was gloriously unironic. It smelled like an old church suffused with incense or like your father’s library nutty with old tobacco. I couldn’t resist blurting this out.

Grilli cocked his head sideways as if considering the idea, then said, “Why not? Why not

your father’s library?”

“Your father’s library?” Johnny looked at me. “Did your father *have* a library?”

It was a good question. He did not.

“No?” Grilli said. “Then how can it smell like your father’s library?”

I said that I didn’t know, but that it nevertheless smelled like my father’s library, *if my father had had a library*.

“Ah,” Grilli beamed, “*molto post-moderno!*”

-from The Accidental Connoisseur  
Lawrence Osborne

## Styria, Interruptus

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

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

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

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



# Map of Austria



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

# hirschmann

## styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

### What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

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

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

### Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

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

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

### Storing and Handling

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

### The Assortment

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

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

### Bottle sizes

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

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



# weingut engelbert prieler

## neusidelersee-hugelland • schützen

It turns out she owes it all to you. Not you *literally*, but to people such as you. For Silvia Prieler was not planning to be a vintner.

"I really just didn't enjoy the work," she said. "Either we spent the whole day in the vineyards binding or in the cellar sticking labels on bottles when the machine was balky. Not fun." And so she started University with, let's say, *other* plans. "But my father had started exporting, and needed someone to represent him at tastings and such who spoke English. And that was me."

And the rest is as they say history. Enough conversations with fascinating people (like you sexy-pie) held over dinners with fabulous wines and our heroine was hooked.

First she wanted Pinot Noir. Right! Papa demurred, but it so happened he's purchased a half-

hectare parcel intended for another purpose entirely, but which was planted with 35-year-old Pinot Noir vines, and which Silvia successfully convinced him to leave to her diabolical intentions.

She now runs the estate along with her "baby-brother" Georg, while Papa oversees the vineyards, from which she seeks to make wines of patience and memory. It's not difficult to fashion what she calls "Hey-here-I-am!" wines, but Silvia prefers wines which may be nervy and angular in their youth but which knit together over time into deep seamless beings.

Prieler are people of what the new-agers would call "good energy," hale and cheerful, even Jonny the schnauzer who always seems to be hovering near the tasting room (where there's bound to be *food* sooner or later) and who is a fine noble animal.

The evening before our visit we had supper at Taubenkobl, one of Austria's (and Europe's) best restaurants, and which is literally five minutes' stroll down the street from Prieler. Hell I'd be cheerful too if I had a Michelin 2-star as a damn-near next-door neighbor. Anyway, we drank a '91 Pinot Blanc from the estate (the last of what was a remarkable vertical of this yummy wine) and it was wonderful.



Silvia Prieler and son

The next day I told Prieler *senior* we'd had it and the whole family were a m a z e d . "Really, you had that vintage?" they said almost in unison. "Was it any good?"

Actually it was plenty good.

Inside of Austria Prieler's considered one of the top-rank red wine producers. They're priced accordingly,

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

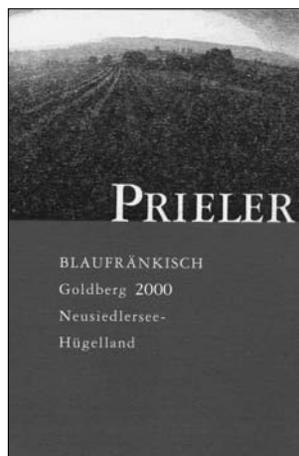
and the young wines aren't all that seductive, so we don't sell as much as I'd like. Silvia can afford to be sanguine since they're perennially sold out, but I'd like to do more. Because here is a family doing everything *right*. Not least that Papa gets to spend more time in the vineyards, where his heart lies. Ask him any question about the wines and he says "Oh don't ask me; I'm just a simple farmer now . . ." He does, however, claim all the credit for the *quality* of the wines. Every wine, no matter which one. Offer a compliment of any sort and he grins and twinkles and says "Yes, the quality here was the result of scrupulous viticulture," or "Indeed, it goes to show what is possible when you have a genius working the vines," until finally I got it, and whenever I liked a wine I turned to Dad and said "Wow, there was really some bloody fabulous vineyard work here," and he'd reply "Yes, wasn't there!"

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

**Prieler at a glance:**

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

- AEP-031 **2004 Pinot Blanc Ried Seeberg**  
Quite different this year. Silvia told me they didn't (or couldn't) do malo as acids were too low already, yet the wine is almost brash and zippy; really explicit varietal aromas; the palate is exceptionally shellfish-y, like lobster stock and oyster shells and white corn; salty and bright; less fleshy than usual but greater *cut* and relief.
- AEP-028 **2002 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshöhe**  
AEP-032 **2003 Blaufränkisch Ried Johanneshöhe**  
The '02 is offered "while supplies last;" the '03 will be available in the late Fall or early next year. Each is from an outstanding vintage, the '02 more classic and the '03 more extravagant. The '02 smells very *Colli Senese*, high-toned and violet-y; smooth tannins but nonetheless brisk and taut, even minerally (Silvia wants them that way, and sees no reason for minerality to be confined to white wines); it's a briary sorta hybrid between old-school Zin and ripe-vintage Chinon. The **2003** is much more plummy but the palate is adamantly firm and tannic. I expect it'll be the seducer of the duo, but at the moment I prefer the '02's ultra-violet blueberry tartness.
- AEP-029 **2002 Schützner Stein**  
AEP-033 **2003 Schützner Stein** (+)  
Same deal; the '02 will be followed by the '03 after the latter is bottled in September. The wine is usually a "Meritage" of varying amounts of Blaufränkisch, Cabernet and Zweigelt, though the '02 is 85% Blaufränkisch and 15% Merlot (I won't tell if you don't); **2002** is a real feast on the nose, utter Blaufränkisch, violets and raspberries; the palate is juicy and racy with a firm berried ripeness; it's a wine of *countryside*. **2003** smells almost like Madiran; it's more brooding, carob-y and truffley; they're both pretty wines, the '02 more ladylike and the '03 more earth-rich and Autumnny. (+) for the 2003, based on its potential.
- AEP-034 **2003 Pinot Noir** +  
She's nothing if not ambitious: this reaches for the stature of Côte de Nuits Grand Cru and doesn't miss by much; there's muscle and mass; smoke, shoe polish, bark, campfire, basil, cherry-tobacco; gets a "plus" for sheer depth of force, though it is a bit oaky; the finish is all violets and prosciutto di San Daniele.
- AEP-035 **2003 Blaufränkisch Ried Goldberg** ++  
We drank the 2000 at dinner, which had almost two hours in the decanter and tasted like it needed two *days*. Without a doubt one of Austria's red-wine monuments, and a great testament to terroir, this hails from a high hillside on slate, and even now the wine shows a stunning nose, though the palate is an inscrutable mass of power and inference; huge minerality and almost a Brunello iron; there's fantastic spice and length—it's like a candy cane of rock, mint and violet, and the minerality just doesn't quit. When the fruit emerges, even two "plusses" might seem stingy. Given the many Austrian reds which affect profundity and don't achieve it, this is the Real Thing.



# weinbau heidi schröck

## neusiedlersee-hugelland • rust

It can't be easy being mother to two fledgling rock stars. But Heidi carries it off, as she carries everything off, with grace and warmth. The twins, now seventeen, are 40% of a metal quintet called Fuel For Hatred, but sitting at dinner with the family all I saw was affection. Mostly we talked music; Heidi has learned more about grunge and thrash than she ever expected to know. A couple nights later we went to dinner in Vienna, just the two of us, and drank (among many other things!) a bottle of '61 Quarts de Chaume to celebrate Heidi's birth year. At the restaurant everyone seemed to know her.

Heidi is one of those very few people who appear to have figured out how to live. She possesses an innate elegance and sweetness. I have no idea what effort this might entail—none, I

suspect—but she is naturally conscientious and thoughtful without being at all self-effacing. She invites affection with no discernible effort. Because all she has to do is offer it.

Kurt Sattler lives all the way around the lake and I didn't have time to drive there, but he kindly offered to come to me, and Heidi graciously offered her place for us to meet. Bear in mind Sattler is her "competitor," or might be seen that way by some mentalities, but for Heidi it's just an unexceptional gesture of friendliness.

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



Heidi and the rock stars

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

delicious sense of humor about it all, and made the best wines she'd ever made.

Austrian growers often have impressive estate-brochures, with pretty pictures and atmospheric prose, but see enough of them and your eyes glaze over. Typically I glance through them to see if there's a picture we can crib for this catalog, but Heidi's contained a statement which made me pause.

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

Says it all, doesn't it.

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

Her wines are continually improving, but not because she's chasing points; rather, she seems to be probing ever deeper into the Truth of her vineyards and the core characters of her grape varieties. A sort of calm settles over such people and the work they do, the calm-

ness of absorption in a serious purpose.

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

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

Leaving must-weights aside, as I understand it, Ausbruch isn't intended to have the golden sheen of the "typical" BA or TBA. It used to be made by taking the dehydrated grapes and kick-starting fermentation by adding some fresh grapes to the must. Then the fermented wine was aged in wood until it began to develop a

slightly Tokay-like, "rancio" character. These days tastes have evolved away from that kind of thing, though I'm told vintners who make Ausbruch are a wild and crazy bunch, and no two of them make their wines precisely the same way.

Ausbruch can somehow taste more **ancient** than BA or TBA, certainly Eiswein. I don't mean that it tastes like old wine, but rather that it is redolent of antiquity. It is not a wine of polish or sheen; it is a wine of leathery, animal depth. It is a rural wine. The silence of the centuries seems to sit upon it. For a long time there was no Ausbruch—phyloxera effectively wiped it off the face of the wine-world. Now it is revived.

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

2004 is yet another excellent collection, deft, articulate and considerate wines, designed less to "impress" you than to aid in your well-being. In fact, ain't *nuthin'* wrong with you that a glass of Heidi's Muscat can't cure.

#### AHS-066 **2004 Weissburgunder**

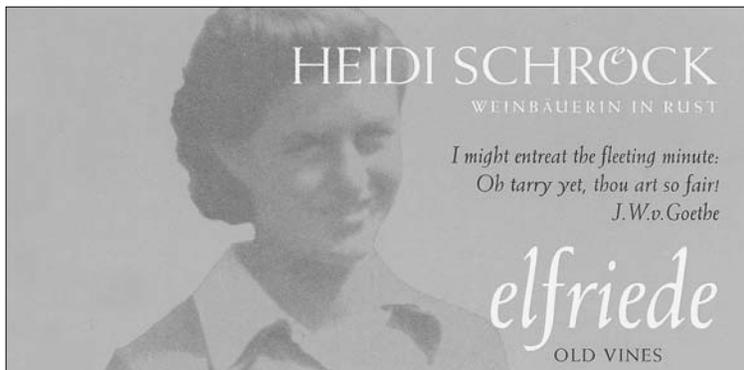
Heidi's were unique Pinot Blancs, but 2000 announced a fundamental change in style. They used to be correct enough, shellfishy, appley and leesy, but they sometimes tasted as though a rogue gene snuck in carrying mimosa-blossom scents that took you to another place entirely, not "northern" and vivid but rather cozier and more murmuring and buttery. "That was cask-aging," says Heidi. Lately she has been emphasizing *batonnage* and trying to get the wines more compact and dense.

Pacific oysters in a glass! Plus the merest (and loveliest) hint of <shhhh> *RS*, and even a suggestion of Sauvignon Blanc in the finish. By the way, all of Heidi's whites in 2004 have a teensy bit of <shhhh . . . > *RS*, which does them nothing but good. If I hadn't told you you wouldn't have known, but wondered why the wines were so gol-danged *likeable*; maize and corn notes, very racy and very ripe; less plump and more vertical than the '03, despite its high alc.

#### AHS-067 **2004 Furmint**

After a 1-year hiatus from this compelling variety (the '03 was an anomaly in an otherwise consistently excellent series) it's a pleasure to show you this again. I ADORE Furmint. And if Loire Chenin is high on your list-o-goodies then you'll adore Furmint as much as I do. Indeed with wines like this it's as if Mosel Riesling and Vouvray were blended in your glass. The variety, famous of course for Tokay, was reintroduced to Burgenland (once a part of Hungary, after all) in the early '90s by Heidi and others of similar mind. It ripens late and holds onto its acidity and is as graceful as storks in flight and as evocative as the nightcalls of strange birds and frogs wafting darkly over the reeds. This '04 was picked November 15th; the nose is all quince, *tilleul* (linden-blossom) and rosewood; the palate is replete with mineral and lime-blossom; it's "cool," firm, evocative, even a little aloof, but long and pointed, getting all waxy in the tertiary finish. Focused and articulate. Don't serve it too cold; Grand Cru Chablis temperature would be perfect.

- AHS-065 **2004 Muscat** +  
 “Muscat” is actually not a grape variety (those would be either Gelber Muskateller or Muscat-Ottonel) but in effect a brand-name for a spicy wine, in this case 40% Gelber Muskateller, 20% Ottonel and 40% Sauvignon Blanc (!), and if you want to be *happy* then no WAY you should miss this! Fragrances between orange-blossom and lime-verbena and a steely gray peak of Muscat spice; the wine *zooms* across the palate on white-water of mint and pear, with a neon buzz of brilliance. This is both original and a masterpiece and I can’t wait till my case arrives.
- AHS-068 **2004 “Ried Vogelsang”** +  
 It turns out someone else had registered “Vogelsang” as a trademark, so Heidi’s choices were either to call it “Ried Vogelsang” (i.e. “Vogelsang-vineyard”) or to invent another name. Canto d’Uccello is Italian for Vogelsang, which is “birdsong.” She’s thinking about it. This superb ‘04 is 60% Welschriesling and the balance is Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Blanc and Muskateller—it is as always a field-blend; a happy, extroverted wine, candid and friendly, and as complex as a fugue. And as cheerful as Mozart, and oh-so leesy and spicy and as chirpy as a bird on a bright Spring morning.
- AHS-072 **2003 Grauburgunder**  
 Pinot Gris of course. I’m starting to wonder whether Pinot Gris and not Chardonnay is the white variety best suited to oak, ‘cause this works for me—it has enough of its own fruit; no malo, so there’s a backbone you don’t expect after the cask aromas; loads of varietality, and it’s all integrated, it knits; not as explosively fruity as the masterly ‘02, but quite suave all the same.
- AHS-069 **2003 Blaufränkisch Kulm**  
 Purest black cherry aromas; capsule and grill-mark; super-spicy but lush and lamb-y; good backbone to an elegant wine.
- AHS-064H **2002 Ruster Ausbruch Turner, 12/375ml**  
 This is the best piece of the best site, from *glimmerschiefer* (literally gleaming slate, actually a gneiss derivative with little flecks of mica and/or silica that sparkle in the sun), coral, limestone and *Urgestein*. The wine is like a highly refined honey; the palate is many times richer than the “normal” Ausbruch yet seems drier, such is its power. Rhododendron, verbena and lime gelée, lots of dialectic here. Seriously delicious.
- AHS-070H **1999 Welschriesling and Weissburgunder BA, 12/500ml**  
**First offering;** four years in cask. And one sees why; the palate shows quite a jolt of acidity below the earthy-honeyed fruit; it’s like one of those Beaudat honeys with their animal undertones; a lime and mango chutney in a glass! If you’re usually cool to Burgenland stickies cuz you want more acidity, check this out.
- AHS-071H **2003 Ausbruch “On The Wings Of Dawn,” 12/375ml** +  
 Wonderful fragrances of acacia blossoms, sultry June flowers; it’s like the *entire* lemon tart, the fruit and the syrup and the buttery crust; perfectly integrated oak, wonderfully exotic fruit; almost a glazed-carrot note deep into the ethereal finish.



# weinbau sattler

## neusiedlersee-hugelland • tadten

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

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

This year we got better acquainted and I also got to meet brother Kurt, whose wife is American and who lived in L.A. for awhile plying his trade as an architect. In many ways it was

like seeing the wines for the first time; I got to taste the (promising) whites and found to my great surprise I liked the Zweigelt even more than the St Laurents. I was explaining the latter variety to a colleague traveling with me, saying how hideously difficult it was to manage, when Erich chimed in, saying “Yes, it’s a diva, but we wouldn’t love it so much if it weren’t such a bitch to grow.”



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

- AST-003 **2004 Zweigelt**  
Racy stuff, a parfait of violets; juicy and long; an easy-going tasty extrovert. Very *dolce* but unlike many modern Dolcettos it isn’t black as squid-ink and its alcohol is under control. . . .
- AST-005 **2003 Zweigelt “Reserve”** +  
More overt and sexy now; mint and Szechaun spare-ribs (with plum sauce!); hugely sappy; this is really bright and racy, like raspberries and bacon fat; Heidi describes a cassis-candy she knows (she tasted with us), and this wafts a cool breeze of charm but not only charm; there’s length also.
- AST-004 **2003 St. Laurent “Reserve”**  
Quite a Burgundian nose (Santenay or Beaune); this has a lot of torque and spice, and it’s not (as I’d feared) overripe or overstated; a rich and juicy mid-palate and really no echo of oak—it’s more in the Rosenthal camp than the Kacher.
- AST-006 **2002 “Cronos”**  
Here’s the “super-Tuscan” which every Austrian red producer seems to insist on having. I quite like this wine, but am bemused by the phenomenon. Perhaps we should have really evocative names for some of these monsters. *Cuvée Armageddon*, or *Cuvée Egregia*. This wine is mostly St. Laurent with little bits of Syrah and Cabernet, and I like the color, a lovely shade of ruby and for once not opaquely black; indeed I like the transparency and elegance overall—this is adult wine, with forthright thrust and candor; it isn’t chasing the nth degree of *the 90-point flavor* but is instead quite zingy, though entirely intense and pure. Deft, and nicely done.

# weingut paul lehrner mittelburgenland • horitschon

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

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

Thank God for an honest man. And with Lehrner it seems less like a choice he makes than an imperative of his temperament. He makes wine of candid fruit without embellishment, and he talks to me about them candidly and without embellishment. So when he says he's happy with his 2004s, I know he means it, and I know *what* he means. Lehrner's style doesn't *require* super-saturated ripeness. It's an adult style of red wine emphasizing fruit over tannin and structure over everything else.

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



Paul Lehrner

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

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

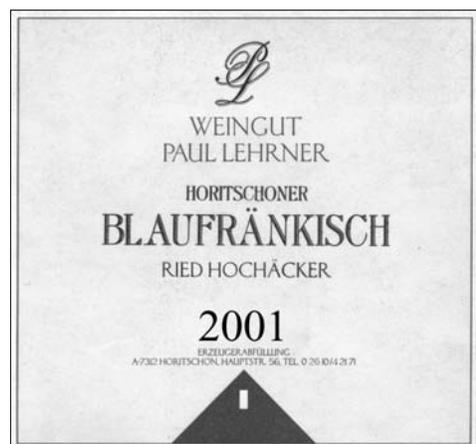
ate voices immediately compel my attention. All of which is to say I am very happy to have discovered Paul Lehrner and his wines.

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

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

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

Second, Lehrner's wines are usually a year behind the current vintage. Most of these are from 2003.



**Lehrner at a glance:**

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

- APL-034 **2003 "Claus"**  
 APL-043 **2004 "Claus"**  
 This is a field-blend of roughly 80% Zweigelt and 20% Blaufränkisch, intended for early drinking while it's at its sappy best. This one's halfway to St. Laurent, with a juicy grin of pancetta, smoke and herbs; simply delicious wine; warm, lavishly vital and extroverted. A more *likeable* red wine could hardly be imagined. The '04 has a little less Zweigelt, and was unfinished when I saw it (he thinks of removing some acidity) but there's a promising chocolatey richness. We'll stay with '03 as long as we can, by which time the '04 (to be bottled in July) will almost surely have come around.
- APL-035 **2003 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfänger**  
 APL-044 **2004 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfänger**  
 One year I showed this wine to Andrea Immer, with excuses for the "lightness" of the 2001 vintage. "I don't think this is light at all," she said. Nor was it! It *is*, though, a classic example of the supreme aesthetic virtue of *persistent soft-sell*. Always a Claret-like Blaufränkisch, aged in large old wood, the wine soars beyond its usual range in the magnificent 2003 vintage; this is *some-a-spicy-meat-a-ball!* Indeed incredible lift and a mineral hyssopy brilliance; overtones of marjoram too; in bottle only 10 days when I saw it but it was explosively expressive; this is textbook Blaufränkisch at its best. *Look at the price!* **Don't** dare miss it. The '04 is really snappy and capsuley; the palate is "sweet" and racy with a yin-yang of mint and lushness; a certain raffish charm! Again, we'll stay with '03 till it's gone, and then into this.
- APL-041 **2003 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochäcker** **+**  
 APL-045 **2004 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochäcker**  
 These are his oldest vines, and he does it in large mostly-new wood. The best vintage of this wine I've ever had, and quite likely the single greatest red-wine value in this offering (though I'm sure to say the same thing about Glatzer's 2003s . . .); this has really murmuring depths; it's like the fat layer on a saddle of lamb; spice, juice, power-a lamb *jus* over fennel over stones, all juice on the mid-palate, all stone on the finish; it has shape, length, complexity and character. The '04 marked a dramatic step up in the range; *full* of charm and physio-"sweetness"; spicy, caroby, lamb-y and delightful. Though the '03 is clearly the more "serious" wine I think I'd rather *drink* this graceful '04, even if I *do* have a screw loose.
- APL-046 **2003 St. Laurent**  
 Milk chocolate and damson plum juice; rather *expressive* oak at this point but also a Volnay-ish fruit and very high spice; we tasted from a freshly opened bottle and one opened for four days, and the new one had more of the Mourvèdre gristle, more firmness and complexity—and less oak. It's a stylish St Laurent with Pernand blackberry, good grip and earthiness.
- APL-042 **2003 Blaufränkisch "Steineiche"** **+(+)**  
 This is a brand-name denoting the top "reserve" quality. We were talking about harmony, specifically as related to a 2000-vintage of this we opened to see the effect of bottle-age, and Paul said "Wines cannot become harmonious if they don't start out that way. I've not seen this miracle myself, and I wasn't alive in the time of Christ!" I think what I love most about this wine is its seamless weaving of power and symmetry. *Even* in the immense 2003 vintage; the wine is wild and powerful; fiery, yet lush, and full of violets. One notes the alcohol and allows for bottle shock (2 weeks when I tasted it); as I nursed and swirled the wine the sweet fruit seemed to catch up to the lush power and the wine was more seductive. It reminds me of the Cahors du Cedre. I can't wait to follow this.
- APL-040 **2003 "Cuvée Paulus"** **(+)**  
 60% Blaufränkisch, 20% each Zweigelt and Cabernet. And it smells like Valrhona 60% cocoa! Leather, oxtail soup; great force and penetrating fruit. Again, mute from bottling, but in many ways this is an "*oh, why not!*" since if you're gonna do this at all then go all the way and make it massive. Time will tell which cards it's really holding.

# weingut walter glatzer

## carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

I discovered a low-fill bottle of Glatzer's '97 GrüVe Dornenvogel buried away in an out-of-the-way case, and thought I'd better drink it. The wine was *wonderful*, and now I wish I'd kept it! One gets used to seeing Glatzer as a supplier of "useful" white wines to be pounded through and hardly thought about, but this '97 was every bit as good as an entry-level Smaragd from the Wachau—at a third of the price.

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

I also want to sing a paen of praise to this man's red wines. He makes them to be drunk and

loved, not admired and preened over. He could easily make each of the prevailing mistakes: too much extraction, too astringent, too tannic, too oaky, reaching beyond their grasp. But year-in and year-out these are absolutely *delicious* purring sex-kitten reds.

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



Walter Glatzer and daughter

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

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

He's one of those people who wants to make *sure* you're content. "All the prices O.K.?" he kept asking. "Is

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

everyone having a good time?" he asked me during the group's visit. "You bet," I assured him. "There's enough food, isn't there?" he persisted. "Oh, plenty!" I replied. "There isn't **too much**, is there?" he wanted to know. "No, there's just EXACTLY THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF FOOD, WALTER. *Relax*, man! Everybody's in the pink."

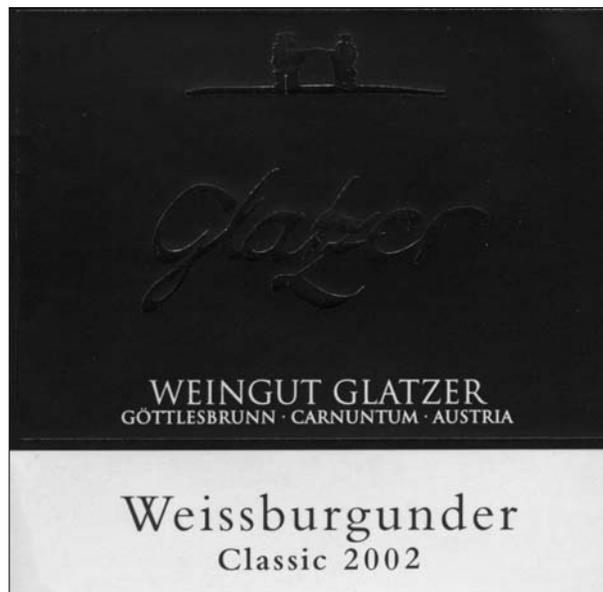
There's also two little kids, and an omnipresent buzz of conversation which makes it hard to take tasting notes. Yet in a sense these hardly seem necessary; to delineate the minute vintage-variations of wines which are always varietally True and scrupulous is more trouble than it's worth. I'd much rather flirt with Priska and make googoo eyes at the baby. And, I can now proclaim, after truly painstaking diligent research, that Blaufränkisch is better than Zweigelt with Schnitzels.

**Glatzer at a glance:**

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

- AGL-087 **2004 Grüner Veltliner**  
 This coming Summer I'll conduct a seminar on Grüner Veltliner at the Society of Wine Educator's conference, and this will be wine #1 in the tasting—the benchmark. And 2004 is the perfect vintage to show; the wine follows the vintage model, plump and fruity but lithe and snappy; olive oil and pepper, juicy stuff; the best vintage since '99. If you skipped the introduction, let me repeat *2004 is a great vintage for the low-end wines, which have never been so charming and complex.*
- AGL-089 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “Dornenvogel”**  
 “Dornenvogel” (meaning thorn-bird) is Glatzer's term for his best lots, because these marauding lil' tweeters like to eat the ripest grapes. It's regularly the best-value GrüVe I offer. And this wine has a super nose. Complex and many-layered; palate is pure pepper, a little char, more power than the regular GV but rather less pure sweet fruit, though I tasted a cask-sample that was still on the fine lees. The mineral length is striking, and promising.
- AGL-096 **2004 Weissburgunder “Classic”**  
 Snappy entry typical for '04, but a rising-dough softness in the mid-palate; lots of charm and sweet lees; simple but not simplistic—in fact the most *pleasing* vintage of this wine for several years.
- AGL-090 **2004 Sauvignon Blanc**  
 If you seek an antidote for all those blatant SB's that like to *whomp* you upside the head, here's a discreet, curranty and juicy wine that's as “sweet” as roasted red peppers; neither grassy nor flinty, and very long. It's just loaded with umami and charm, and if you sell the first glass the first glass will sell the bottle.
- AGL-088 **2004 Zweigelt “Riedencuvée”**  
 Aromatically it seems lighter than the '03, but the palate seems quite thick and substantive; it has the weight (and style) of Régnié or St.-Amour—then the finish is again vaporous and slim—a “Summer-red” par excellence.
- AGL-086 **2004 Blaufränkisch**  
 Man, this is like 200% Blaufränkisch, as if the base wine had been blended with some sort of extract-of-Blaufränkisch; it's really penetrating and a varietal object-lesson, spicy and craggy, with loads of substance.
- AGL-091 **2004 Zweigelt “Rubin Carnuntum”** +  
 This is a region-wide concept to create something typical and essential. Here it's a sizeable step up from the basic Zweigelt; bacony aromas (a lot like Dan Phillips' Gattón farms secret smokehouse blend), and here you really see the sweet-Syrah side of Zweigelt; great charm, length and spice and the palate is all maplewood and bacon-fat; lush, fine, useful wine.
- AGL-092 **2004 Blaufränkisch “Reserve”**  
 Again the almost hyper-expressiveness of BF in '04 is on display; taut-feeling acidity gives serious grip; palate is dark, plummy and inky; no harsh tannin but tight and adamant, like some cross between basic Chianti Classico and (modern) Cahors.

- AGL-084 **2003 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”** ++  
**Only 40 cases remain.** This could well be the greatest Austrian red I’ve ever offered, easily in a league with Lehrner’s gorgeous 2000 Steineiche. It may be the best I’ve ever had, in fact; depth and tobacco and earth and great swirling smoky eddies of fragrance. “This is really the limit with Zweigelt,” said Walter. “Any riper and it’s overripe.” This is one of those wines where the *length* has length! Limitless sweetness and seductive complexity.
- AGL-093 **2004 Zweigelt “Dornenvogel”** +  
 Inky; black-cherry notes on the extremely dense nose; blackberries, bacon, bread, sweet smoke; what a track record this wine is establishing; this ‘04 is more “blue” than the “deep-red” ‘03, but just about as dense and concentrated.
- AGL-094 **2004 St. Laurent Altenberg**  
 Here’s the bricky Mourvèdre face of St. Laurent; this is in the best sense gritty and grippy; spicy and high-toned, not smooth but rather gravelly, as if an old-school Nuits St.-Georges; perhaps it’ll become more *comme il faut* after bottling, but who says St. Laurent always has to be *sumptuous*?
- AGL-095 **2003 “Gotinsprun”** +  
 This is the archaic name for Göttlesbrunn, Glatzer’s home town, and it’s his brand-name for his top reds, in this case a blend of mostly Blaufränkisch, a bit of Syrah, a smaller bit of (gulp!) Merlot and the balance St. Laurent. It is all done in (double-gulp!) *new wood*. But this is a very RARE example of a show-off *oakster* that works; you’re paying three times more for Priorat that’s no better than this - rather worse! This ‘04 is like Châteauneuf-du-Pape as interpreted by Austria; very deep and plummy, with a fruit-sweetness and power that’s quite impressive; rugged, earthy, massive fruit; a wine to impress, certainly, but it *does*, with its polish and animality.



# weinviertel

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

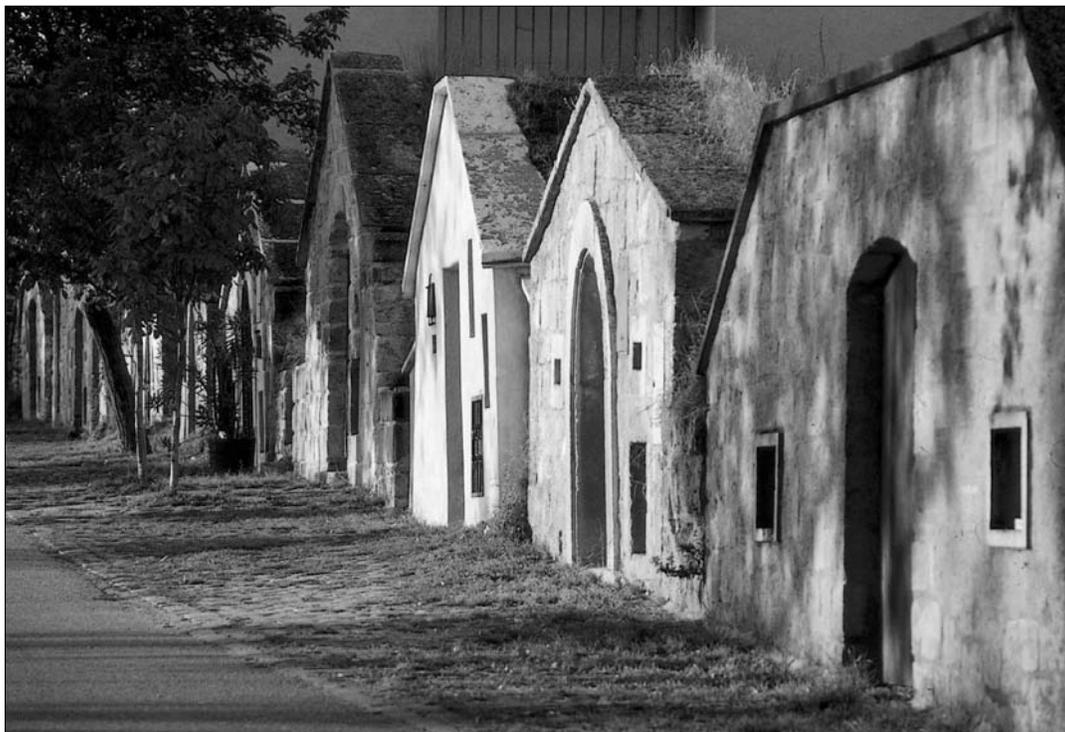
Vines occur wherever conditions favor them; good soils, exposures and microclimates, but it’s anything but what we’d call “wine country.” Which is in fact rather charming, since it doesn’t attract the usual glom of wine-people.

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

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

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

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



# weingut h.u.m. hofer

## weinviertel • auersthal

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

Auersthal is just barely beyond Vienna’s northern suburbs, in a dead-still little wine village. It’s rather odd to drive there and see lots of wee little oil derricks, but such little oil as Austria produces comes from these parts, deep below the loess. I had either forgotten or had never known the estate was organic; they belong to a group called Bio-Ernte which has standards above the EU guidelines. In speech, by the way, “bio” is pronounced to rhyme with “B.O.” which can lead to some drollery as you hear references to “B.O. wine”

unless, unlike me, you have left behind your adolescence.

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

In both vintages I tasted (the normal 2002 and the wacko 2003) I was impressed with the clarity and articulation in the wines, with their candor and gentleness, and with their striking value-for-money. In fact I wished I’d had a “normal” vintage with which to introduce these wines to you, and I wish it even more after tasting these *fabulous* 2004s. I visited Hofer after having finished in the Wachau, Kamptal and Kremstal, and the people with me will tell you I was more excited here than anywhere; this is simply a *wonderful* vintage for this fine grower, made all the more enticing by coming from “nowhere” and costing next-to-nothing.

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

So, great wine, amazing value, and certified-organic viticulture? Help me make this lovely man a star!

### AHF-006L **2004 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

Last year he was clearly nonplussed when I said I wanted this wine, which he needs for his Heurige and was worried I’d plunder too much. Then he went and actually filled orders several *hundred* times larger than I thought he possibly could, and we’re already nearly sold out of his ‘04!

So, he’s looking to buy wine in cask (and also from certified-organic growers) to produce a 2nd bottling for us. I’ll taste it when he does.

The problem is, this wine is much better than it “needs” to be, and costs about a third what it’s worth. It has remarkable polish and sheer delight of fruit; prototypical GV, long, peppery and happy, with a creamy sort of smoothness; it’s on the market now as you read this—do you have some?

Just think about it: you’re sitting in a leafy garden on a warm summer evening with friends, just chillin’ and schmoozin’ over plates of cold-cuts, listening to the birds, glad to be alive. You’d be happy if the wine you’re sluggin’ down were merely *pleasant*; after all, it’s not about the wine, it’s about something larger in which wine plays a necessary part. But the moment you taste the wine . . . *Hey; this is good*. Suddenly life seems absolutely perfect, and you are somewhere above your body, looking at the happy faces of your friends and hearing the cheerful clamor of plates, glasses and voices. You take another sip, and rejoin the merriment.

AHF-007 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “Weinviertel DAC”**

They’re trying out an appellation controllee system in Austria with Weinviertel as the lab rat, and I suppose this is harmless enough. Though I don’t get why GV is the only variety entitled to be called by the regional name “Weinviertel” and everything else is simply called by the name of the State (Niederösterreich), though I’m sure this makes sense, or “sense.” Anyways, it’s supposed to be *typical* I suppose. This wine sure is!

It’s the chervil-mineral-hyssop side of GV, sorrely and soft (classic loess flavors) but with a brisk peppery snap at the end. I confess I’m wary of the DAC idea—I’m innately wary of all such ideas—but this wine has utter integrity.

AHF-008 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Freiberg** +

Ripe and exotic nose; much more *vetiver*; this is absolutely wonderful GrüVe! Tons of secret-sweetness, intensity; toasted rye bread and corn; granular texture—the site is loess, with a forest above it which makes for rapid nighttime cooling—talc-y, hedge-flowers; he says “fresh hay, white peaches, Riesling-like”; the wine is very long and just glowing.

AHF-009 **2004 Riesling Kabinett** +

*If you only buy one Riesling from Austria this year, make it this one.* Not only is it that damn good, it is also the most screaming deranged freaking VALUE anywhere for GREAT dry Riesling. It puts many “big” names to shame, especially in the difficult ‘04 vintage. First it is absolutely squeaky-clean, and then it has the most flowery elegant nose; shimmery length and *spiel* (interplay); piquant dialectic of mineral, co-orange pippins and Spring flowers (iris and purple lilacs), and finally it is absolutely delightful—with its 5g.l. residual you-know-what.

AHF-010 **2004 Riesling vom Satz** +

These are the botrytis grapes, and I was sure I wouldn’t like it. Botrytis = yucky in every Riesling I tasted. Then this.

There’s 12g.l. residual sugar (which you notice but don’t “taste”) and how did he do it? Only Alzinger and Gobelsburg made “better” Riesling in ‘04. Utter violets and wisteria; neon fruit and mineral, and just absurd *tastiness*; complex smoke, cherry-tobacco, smoked mountain trout; lovely, lingering finish. 10/10 on the suck-it-down-o-meter. But really, when I came away from these two Rieslings I was as euphoric as wine can make me.



# weingut setzer

## weinviertel • hohenwarth

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

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

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

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



Hans Setzer

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

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



Uli Setzer

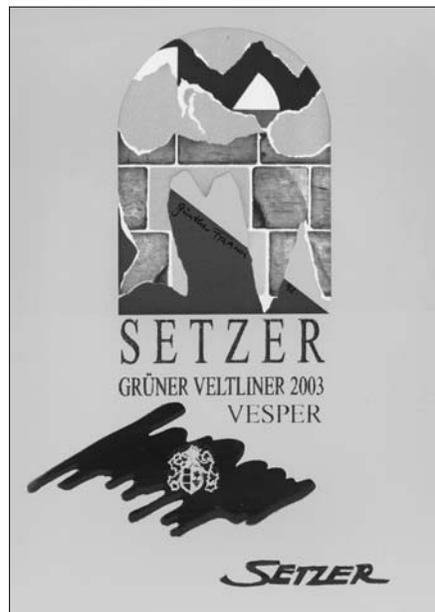
- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares (plus 6 hectares of contracted grapes)**
- **Top sites: Eichholz, Laa, Kreimelberg**
- **Soil types: loess over alluvial gravel and limestone**
- **Grape varieties: 40-50% Grüner Veltliner, 20-30% Roter Veltliner, plus Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc,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

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

For now please bid welcome to these charming, dancing wines with their saffron-yellow labels. Which will be affixed to bottles closed with plastic corks for the 2004 vintage, while he studies whether to move to stelvins or glass corks for good.

A final happy note: Setzer was named VINTNER OF THE YEAR for Austria in one of the major German-language wine magazines, and his GrüVe "8000" (offered below) was best-of-tasting. The accompanying text was laudatory and sophisticated, but all I've got to say is: *DUDE!*

- ASZ-005 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “Vesper”**  
 This is the “little” one, and it’s indeed light, honest, filigree and true; lentilly, polished; discreet but with substance.
- ASZ-006 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Eichholz “Erste Lage”** +  
 In some ways this was the first great *typical* GV I tasted from `04: we began at Mantlerhof (who had an unusual vintage) and then to Nikolaihof (who stand apart in any case), but one taste of this and WOW; it’s exactly the type of wine impossible in 2003; the nose is a spice-box of potpourri, flowering field, vetiver, tropical fruit and curry; palate has fabulous snap and clarity; delicately leesy; finest inner sweetness on entry but grows spicier until it finishes with pure varietal ore.
- ASZ-007 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “8000”** +  
*Here’s* an interesting concept: he’s planted the vines exceptionally densely (8000 vines per hectare) but has very few bunches per vine. He attains high physiological ripeness without excessive alcohol, thanks in part to the limestone-rich soil and to the genetics of the old Veltliner material. Fermented with ambient yeasts, the wine is wonderfully convincing. Indeed the `03 was among the top-3 GVs I offered last year, and the `04 doesn’t miss a trick; fabulous nose, again with a Graves accent; fig, mirabelle, wheat-bread dough, almost porridgey, and then ultra-ripe lentilly GrüVe jazz; palate shows a fine, stern power, huge spice; almost flinty, as if a Grand Cru Chablis vineyard were planted with Veltliner (now there’s a thought . . .); it wears its 14% alc with rare grace, though one feels a certain *see~~th~~e* on the finish.
- ASZ-008 **2004 Riesling** +  
 He only makes one, always fully ripe, and it’s their only *Urgestein* vineyard, a sheltered south-slope. This is a dead-ringer for Nigl’s Kremsleiten; really pitted-fruit and mirabelle confiture; crystalline, long and ultra-fine; utter refinement of fruit, juicy intensity, great honesty; a thoroughly good glass of wine! And why yes, there most certainly are a lot of plusses on this page.



# weingut familie zull

## weinviertel • schrattental

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

The 2001s were just wonderful. The 2002s were perplexing. The 2003s and 2004s are on track again, though Phillip Zull is beginning to consolidate his regime and has made a few changes.

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

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

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

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

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

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



Zull family

**Zull at a glance:**

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

**AFZ-053 2004 Grüner Veltliner DAC**

Pretty and winsome, tenderly “green,” like escarole or sorrel.

**AFZ-054 2004 Grüner Veltliner Aussere Bergen**

A classic `04; mint and pepper, cress and chervil and mineral; fine clarity and detail, salty and genial.

**AFZ-055 2004 Riesling Innere Bergen**

Wonderfully charming nose, pitted fruit and jade-oolong, spiced apple and lime-blossom; this is one lovely wine, with embedded “sweetness,” mineral and salts; calligraphic detail; a sappy, verdant wine, almost Styrian in style. Best-of-vintage at this address.

**AFZ-056 2004 Zweigelt Schrattental**

Five months in 3rd-year barriques, and it's so charming and tasty—I mean it's 300% sweet cherry, with enough acidity to quench thirst.



# kremstal and kauptal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# weingut erich & maria berger

## kremstal • gedersdorf

After a stunning series in 2003, Berger continues his development toward more expressive wines, in line with the *Zeitgeist*. I like his recent wines, and the '04s are steady as she goes, but I confess I wish the *Zeitgeist* were more concerned with comeliness and less with force and impact.

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

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



Erich Berger

humonguous home run and everyone else is waiting to see how far he hit it, says "Wow, did you see that sweet graceful swing?"

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

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

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

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



**Berger at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

ABG-065L **2004 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter**

We sell a whole lot of this lovely wine, (Berger's neighbors seem to have been non-plussed when two containers pulled up at his door to be loaded . . .), and I am proud to have found it. It's almost pointless to detail its flavors: it's perfect light Veltliner and it has remarkable class for its *echelon*. The '04 has more charm than the rather unnaturally *august* 2003; there's a note of caraway, and as always it's an aromatic thirst-quencher that's light but far from slight.

ABG-066 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Lössterrassen**

Fine everyday GV; peppery penetrating fragrance; charming, salty, mizuna-like palate, a little snip of frisee; a char and ore-like finish that seems a little clipped—this was not uncommon among '04s but I strongly suspect it's not the vintage but rather a combination of recent bottling and my seeing the wines 4-6 weeks earlier than usual.

ABG-067 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Gebling**

Erich's biggest GV, and this has a large ripe nose, lentils and green beans and even a hint of grassiness; palate shows length and spice and mineral; quite snappy given its weight; a hint of wasabi enters the finish, a kind of drawn-out charred stoniness. Odd (and lovely) how 13% alc can still taste "light." **Also available in MAGNUM finished with stelvin.**

ABG-068 **2004 Gelber Muskateller**

Well YAY for this! Can there ever be too much dry Muscat in the world? *Nah*. This maiden-voyage is indeed Riesling-like, with a nap of orange-blossom sauce over a plate full of minerals; richly verdant with a deep-forest cool and shade-grown herbs; almost spring-onion GV notes; delicate but not entirely civilized!

ABG-069 **2004 Riesling Steingraben**

I underlined "racy" twice in my notebook. It's another *green* Riesling, not unlike many of the '04 Germans; tarragon, Sencha, even a vetiver note; squeaky-clean and zippy, with a tic of finishing bitterness—but one month in bottle, so let's see; it might also show more *fruit* when it recovers.

ABG-070L **2004 Blauer Zweigelt, 1.0 Liters**

I am won over by this violet, racy, lush wine; gulpable but substantive.

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

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

ABG-071 **2003 Cuvée Maxim**

60% Zweigelt, 40% Cabernet Franc, all barriques mostly from Austrian wood, and one-third new. Labels hand-printed on Florentine paper with Abyssinian ink and bottles mouth-blown by a cyclops named "Horst." At last we get to the wine; and there's a really complex fruit here along the licorice and blackberry continuum; a sumptuous palate with nubby soft tannin and lots of minerality; a seriously likeable wine!

# weingut mantlerhof

## kremstal • brunn im felde

Our hero is a moving target. Having experimented with whole-cluster pressing in '99 and to a larger extent in 2000, he was unhappy with the results and has gone back to stompin' the huevos outa them grapes. The lustier style seems to suit him better. It does not necessarily suit the wines better though, especially in a vintage of dubious cleanliness. I'm entirely willing to give the wines (or some of them, mostly the Rieslings) many more chances, but on first encounter a few of them seemed to indicate both questionable botrytis with stinging unknit acidity.

Some of this is a Terry-quirk, I'm sure. One of Mantler's German importers was there when I was, a trio of guys who were *all over* a wine I felt was hidden under a pall of botrytis. I don't like that flavor. Other people, maybe, do. I sensed Mantler himself was bemused by my coolness,

which pained me because he's *such* a good guy. But 2004 can be a demanding and particular vintage and people who make meaty-earthly wines had struggles.

I was surprised when he showed us a 1987 as a cognate to the new vintage. '87 was an unripe year with pronounced acidity, and from everything I heard the Austrian '04s were at least ripe, even from a difficult harvest. But as we tasted I started to see his point. And right about now you're starting to turn the page—but please don't. For two reasons: 1) the Veltliners are much better than the Rieslings here in '04, and 2) one of them is among the very best of its type.

Josef Mantler's winery has long been regarded as among the best in the Kremstal, indeed as one of the leading producers in all of Austria. Apart from that, he's also carving out original ground with his championing of

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



Josef Mantler

the rarely-seen variety called Roter Veltliner. Here's Giles MacDonogh in *Decanter*: "Mantler is Austria's great specialist for Roter Veltliner, which is . . . Grüner Veltliner's slightly earthier cousin. It is thinner skinned and rather more susceptible to botrytis of both the noble and ignoble sorts. Mantler's vinifications are about as good a lesson in what it can do as you will ever have."

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

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

**Mantlerhof at a glance:**

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

world's nicest guy!

AMH-050 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Löss Terrassen**

"We never picked a 'light' wine so late," said Sepp, "the 7th of November, and I swear you can *smell* it." Mantlerhof's a member of the Traditionsweingüter (along with a.o. Salomon, Nigl, Hirsch, Gobelsburg, Hiedler, Bründlmayer . . .), which holds a bunch of tastings throughout the year, including a blind look at the young vintage, in which THIS fella was judged the best among the "light" GrüVes—which is saying ein mouthful when you look at the company. It's full of "sweet" GV fragrances, rhubarb and snap peas; the palate is peppery, with lots of ore and char; a hint of botrytis (not disagreeable); it starts out charming and finishes adamant and stern.

AMH-051 **2004 Riesling Zehetnerin**

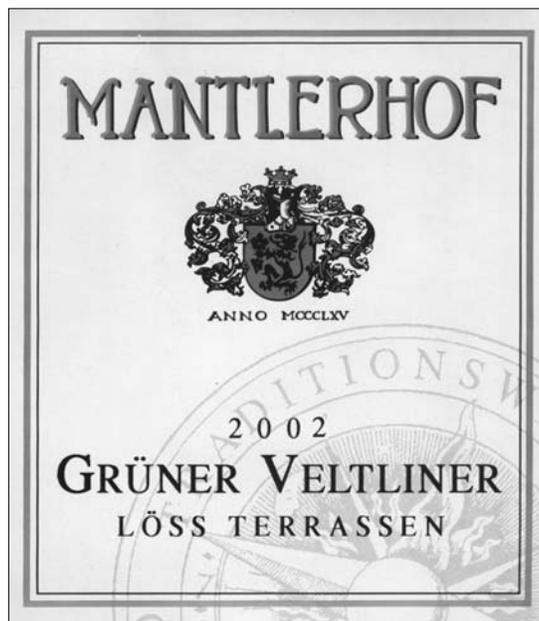
This is correct and entirely good; clean and fragrant with a "soft" minerality and ver-bena-like spice; the finish is long but rather a rebuke at this early stage.

AMH-049 **2004 Roter Veltliner Reienthal**

Lots of snap and pinch to this; pretty smells of roasted red peppers; a tight, electrically charged palate, and a finished clipped and lean through being bottled a week prior. I know this will come through, and you'll get a good look at this fascinating variety, which tastes like 5-year-old GV from a ripe vintage.

AMH-052 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Spiegel**

This is one of Austria's *important* GrüVes, and given its enormity this '04 has some *schwing*; it's playful and complex; a big stony nose with contained botrytis, caraway and marjoram; palate is solid, juicy and salty. Here's a perfect instance when residual sugar in lieu of .5% alc would have done great good; still, a strong surface.



## 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.

# weingut familie nigl

## kremstal • priel

When I first met Martin Nigl I had tasted his wine the day before and been completely blown away. So I tracked him down at his little estate in the very sleepy village of Priel, above the Kremstal. It was as unpretentious as a little former farm could be; chickens still clucked and mumbled in a coop, a little rabbit chomped away on some veggies in a fragrant hutch, and there were no vineyards to be seen anywhere. Priel sits on a plateau with the diminutive Krems valley in one direction and the Danube valley in another, and it's so quiet you'd swear you could hear the bars let out in Krems, six miles away.

Now it has all changed, and Martin Nigl is the *Patron* of a brand spankin' new hotel-restaurant

in Senftenberg, just below the castle ruin in about the most lyric idyll you could imagine. It's piquant to think of him being Master Of The Manor now; the rooms are sexy, there's a modern tasting-room, a sweet regional restaurant with a couple fusion accents, and basically, you should hurry up and go. On a Fall evening you can open your window and look up at the old castle and hear the leaves whisper in the Piri, just outside.

I'd been hearing what a splendid vintage Martin had in '04 and I couldn't wait to taste them. Alas I seem to have waited exactly two weeks too long, as they were in the utmost tantrum of bottle-sickness. Even so they were frequently wonderful, and I'm sure I've been too sparing in my effusions. In fact this is the first homogeneously excellent vintage in several years here, and it stands to reason bottling will have flattened a few of the peaks, temporarily.

In essence between the 1993 and 1999 vintages I never tasted a wine that wasn't stellar, and one started to wonder if Nigl wasn't some kind of magician. 2000 and 2001 showed the first wines, only a couple, short of perfection. But 2002 was another magnificent Nigl collec-



Martin Nigl

tion, though the wines are evolving quite deliberately. 2003 tasted fundamentally Other, and what was absent was the usual fluorescent hum of keen clarity, the digital-laser-HDTV thing he always does and does again in 2004.

I was glad to be scheduled for the first visit of the day, as Martin's wines repay a clear palate, and I am also less defended in the morning. Nigl is unambiguously among the *elite* in Austria, yet within that small group his are perhaps the most intricately difficult wines. They do not pour

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

a saucy blast of charm over your palate, nor do they have the explicit (perhaps even obvious?) intensity of certain famous Wachauers. On the other hand they're so precisely detailed and crystalline you feel your IQ increasing while they're on your palate. Flavors are chiseled and focused to an unimagineable point of clarity; your palate almost never has to "read" such detail, and it grows instantly more alert and probing. That's a large part of the reward of such wines; the other part is that they taste good.

I think you know I love to be raised on an updraft of delight when I drink an irresistibly attractive wine. I write about it often enough! It's important and life-affirming. But also, there's another kind of thrall, a rarer one, which wines such as these and Dönnhoff's and Boxler's can provide. When flavors are so clear and written in such fine sleek lines, rather than lift you up they seem to pull you *in*. And as you go deeper you feel as if you're below the surface, in a kind of cave where the earth-secrets are buried. You have to be available for this experience, and you need to listen very quietly, but it is an experience like no other. It doesn't leave you *happier* but it does leave you wondering, because there is somehow *more* of you on the other side.

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

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

Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are racked twice, never fined, and bottled—as I once saw—first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles wines with a high, keening brilliance and with an amazing density of mineral extract which can leave an almost salty finish on the palate,

as though an **actual** mineral residue were left there.

It's all well and good for wines to be filigree; refinement is good. But too much refinement can be arch or precious. *What* are we refining, that is the question. What impresses me about Nigl is his depth of texture. There are layers upon layers of the loveliest raw-silken fruit-mineral jazz, a little nubby and not so smooth the palate can't adhere, and just as you fall happily *through* all those cirrussy layers, you notice how crystalline it all is. I remember a music reviewer praising a pianist's delicacy of touch by saying "You can hear his fingerprints on the keys." It's like that. Nigl is to Austria what Dönnhoff is to Germany. He's less famous among y'all, I'd argue, because his wines are dry. Sweetness in a wine is like a great plot-line in a novel; all the art in the world may be there, but it's sugar that turns those pages. Yet here in these spectral shimmering beauties are all the things to love about wine.

#### Nigl at a glance:

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

#### AFN-107 2004 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit

Ah, back to the form of the gorgeous '02; exceptionally expressive and peppery; classic, textbook spice and varietality, lots of boxwood and ore; in good vintages this offers as much silvery finesse and polish as a "small" wine possibly can. Don't miss it.

#### AFN-108 2004 Grüner Veltliner Senftenberger Piri

Bigger now but the same wonderful polish and purity. Martin talks of quince and gooseberry and I shot back with mizuna and Thai basil (then he said Oh YEAH? Well apricot and horseradish and then I said to hell with that; miitake and jerk-sauce and then he said Oh I know all about jerk-sauce; in fact I'm looking at it *right now* and then I said well *HUH*; try some hog-jowl dandelion-green beetroot turkey sausage bald-tire airplane pillow laminate squid-ink Mesopotamian donkey sweat plantain pollen dead flies Taleggio-rinds yo-yo strings new-magazine sloe berry car-key old snow equine simulacrum Patagonian toothfish *All right, I give up! I give up! Just ZIP IT, WILL YA* . . . jeez, what's wrong with you anyhow. And I said "I don't know, but the precision of spice in this Piri is finer than any needle," and then he spat in my soup.

#### AFN-109 2004 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben

The best vintage of this in *many* years, with elegance and weight but never merely heavy; a finely poised intensity, big compacted fruit and mineral; almost painfully unevolved but incipiently explosive; dusty mineral and sorrely fruit.



- AFN-110 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “Privat”** (+)  
It smells exactly like toasted dill-bread. Vetiver and flowering fields; the palate is almost like crunching directly into white peppercorns; a serpent-coiled intensity now; some physio-sweetness is overcome by waves of ferrous power. Yet this is precisely what you’d expect from a bottle-sick wine; the steely elements prevail over fruit and sweetness, SO: a potential masterpiece whose truth will unfold in the fullness of time. Also available in MAGNUMS.
- AFN-111 **2004 Riesling Senftenberger Piri** +  
The nose is pure *terroir*; the palate has a wonderful (and unexpected) pull toward the back in a swollen mineral crescendo; there’s palpable embedded “sweetness,” great concentration and substance, and nearly old-vines creaminess. This could be the best-ever vintage of this wine.
- AFN-112 **2004 Riesling Kremser Krennsleiten** ++(+)  
A *heavenly* fragrance! A basket of heirloom apples, a potion of spices, a grove of flowering apricot trees on a warm damp evening, and then the palate almost shocks you with its spice and adamant grip; like a mineral Altoid, but again the mass of fruit is quashed from bottling and will reemerge.
- AFN-113 **2004 Riesling “Privat”** ++(+)  
Powerful, as-yet undifferentiated nose, all green minty herbs and apple; the palate conveys a shimmering florescent buzz; violet and wisteria fragrances—there has to be a TON of fruit asleep in here! Also available in MAGNUMS.
- AFN-114 **2004 Gelber Muskateller** +  
If you know me then you know how much I like Nigl, and you know how crazed I am for Muscat, so *imagine* how off-the-wall banshee NUTSO I went for this little beauty; it’s a dead-ringer for a dry *Scheurebe*, amazingly enough; really catty and woodruffy; the palate is juicy and citric and mineral. And it plays in two acts: Act 1 is a frosty morning in a narrow valley. Act 2 sees the sun come up over the hills and suddenly everything melts and little circles of bugs zip around like atoms and the heat rises fragrantly from the ground, and Act 3 is you, just you, falling in love. The length of spice and mineral here is arresting; the wine is pure, and pure joy.
- AFN-115 **2003 Zweigelt Eichberg**  
Hey Nigl fans: *RED* wine! I may never offer it again (though who knows?) but I so dug this critter: he uses barriques of local wood, and like Berger’s Zweigelt it’s what you wish Zinfandel was still like, spicy and briary and with 13% alc! The wine is racy; blackberry, dark chocolate, coffee; integrated tannins—and charm!
- AFN-105H **2003 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml** +  
An October 24th picking mostly from the Freiheit, it’s not really liqueurous but rather *Vendage Tardive* in style, and insanely expressive of GrüVe, as if from a concentrated must; there’s no great electricity but instead a kind of voluptuous focus, and anyone who loves Grüner Veltliner should own this.



# weingut erich salomon/undhof kremstal • stein

I arrived early this year to find a sniffly Bert Salomon and an M.I.A. older brother Erich, who was recovering from surgery. Bert seemed delighted to see me—god knows why—and I found myself remarkably *touched* to be there, just him and me.

Salomons strike me as a noble family. Bert I'm sure is reading this and thinking "Oh don't be silly," and of course I understand; we're all just folks. I had an Uncle when I was a kid, my Uncle Eddy, who was the most affectionate man I have ever known. He was a great mystery to me. I'd stay in his house—he had a son my age with whom I was chummy—and at night Uncle Eddy would come in to say good night, and he would scratch our backs. Uncle Eddy wasn't terribly "successful" in conventional terms, but I will remember for all my life the thing he showed me,

how to live in this world with kindness and tenderness.

Both Bert Salomon and his brother Erich are very sharp cookies, and if I've made them sound like two Prince Mishkins wandering the world it's my fault. But when I think of them I know they belong to a larger family of people who are *grateful*, appreciative, concerned, ready for delight, and who beam with affection and decency.

Construction continues. The tasting room is done and now the courtyard's being landscaped. The linden tree has recovered as I hope its protector Erich is himself recovering.

Apparently one of the construction crew backed a vehicle, I think a forklift, into the linden and tore off some bark and may have penetrated the wood. So Erich



Erich and Berthold Salomon

set about to heal the tree. He layered the torn bark back over the wood and held it in place, I don't recall precisely how. But the "bandage" had to be changed every so often, which he did, and the result is a lovely old tree nursed back to health by a man who loves it.

And a man who will care for a tree from sheer affection is the sort of man I want making wines for me.

Bert and Erich seem to get along better than any two brothers I've ever seen. I sense a true symbiosis at work between them; Bert correctly understood the Grüner Veltliners were a level below the Rieslings, and together

they're striving to improve them—and succeeding. Bert's also more alert to the strictly commercial questions.

A few years ago Erich decided to modernize his wines, to emphasize their primary fruit and make them more attractive younger. We live, after all, in a culture which assigns wine a commodity value based on a *very* fleeting impression of a thing that's barely out of grape-juice diapers. But we won't change it by kvetching—if only! I'd be silly if I told you I objected; the wines are still among the most original and characterful in all the world, and recent years are nothing short of marvelous.

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

This is quite the topic of debate these days. Erich had already removed most of his old casks in favor of stainless steel, and had switched from spontaneous to cultured-yeast fermentations. But whole-cluster pressing really signaled his determination to change. With whole-cluster pressing you get sleek, vertical, transparent and filigree wines. If your harvest is superb your wines can

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

be celestial. If your harvest is ordinary your wines can seem small and sterile. Many of the best growers do it in part, some do it entirely. Hiedler is a conspicuous example of one who does not. Bründlmayer is one who does (but Willi does conventional pressing with 10% and then blends the two). Sometimes you lose a little *gras* with whole-cluster pressing, but you can gain a lot of brilliance. I like the style though I'd be saddened if everyone did it. Wines might become too formulaic.

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

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

I think of Selbachs. Johannes is the driving force behind the **superb**-ness of the wines, but it was Hans his father who was the spiritual and ethical compass for the family,

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

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

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

This was an especially winning collection of '04 GrüVes; I'm showing no fewer than *three* of them in my Society Of Wine Educators seminar, they are so exemplary.

On my first night in Austria this year I met Peter Schleimer (my man on the ground over there—which come to think of it is an apt way to describe Peter . . .) for dinner, and we ordered a 1990 Riesling from Mantlerhof, which turned out to be corked. And was of course the last bottle. So the sommelier brought something else for us and didn't say what it was. It too was corked. This time a second bottle was found, poured, and wow: This was stunning. I mean, blown-away ear-to-ear grin stunning. And it was the very 1990 Riesling Kögl which I was offering *you* until two years ago. A very nice feeling!

#### Salomon at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### ASU-063 2004 Grüner Veltliner "Hochterrassen"

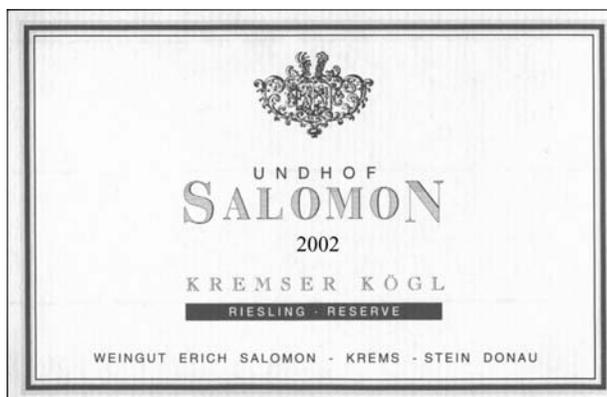
This is one of our front & center value GV's, always correct and snappy, but this '04 is by far the best vintage ever; addictively fresh, gregariously fruity, crisp and delightful, thanks to that beaming lovely fruit. It's estate-bottled, by the way, from a variety of high terraces on loess and river deposits.

#### ASU-066 2004 Grüner Veltliner Wieden

Now a cuvée from several vineyards on both loess and Urgestein. A very easy wine to adore, this one! Again that secret-sweetness but more herb, salt, lime and lentil; more concentration and *spiel* but once again glowing with sheer charm.

- ASU-067 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Lindberg “Reserve”**  
 Just next to the great Kögl, terraces of loess with weathered schist. I am entirely aware this is one-GV-too-many to offer you, but in good conscience I couldn't walk away from any of them; this is the wackoid one, all szechuan pepper and elderberry, wisteria and raspberry and rhubarb; compacted mineral and great grip; almost exotic and certainly unique.
- ASU-068 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Von Stein “Reserve”** +  
 All Urgestein now. And a very serious nose here! Smoke and mirabelle and talc, a little amylic (which I like); the palate is both succulently juicy and insanely spicy, like violets growing in charcoal; this is *really* igneous, with a white-heat of mineral leading into a finish that clings for dear life. GV as made by a sorcerer with electricity in his fingertips.
- ASU-064 **2004 Riesling “Steinterassen”**  
 Again *emphatically* fragrant, all iris; shows wonderful charm and length—folks, basic Riesling does NOT improve on this. It's winsome, curvaceous, lithe, fruity and clean as mountain water. This “little” wine delivers the sum of purity to you. God I love Riesling.
- ASU-065 **2004 Riesling Kögl**  
 Urgestein, in this case a crystalline weathered schist. I often think Kögl's Rieslings are poster-children for the genre; they always show that particularity of character whereby Austrian Riesling tastes like none other. That said, this '04 is inside-the-lines, with rather less terroir craziness than it often shows. It's very sleek, with *tilleul*, hyssop, a hint of botrytis, salty, almost plump—and very good.
- ASU-070 **2004 Riesling Kögl “Reserve”**  
 Hugely zingy and minty, as this wine often is; no quarter given. Botrytis shows here too but it's overwhelmed by verbena and mint. A *sizzling* kinda Riesling.
- ASU-071 **2004 Riesling “Noble Botrytis”**  
 I didn't think I'd like this, since I'd liked almost none of the botrytis Rieslings I'd tasted, but here the botrytis really was noble, it makes sense, especially in the Halbtrocken rendering; the wine, though, is a table wine (not for dessert by a LONG shot) and has marvelous fruit and length, with *quetsch* and spiced apple.
- ASU-072 **1991 Riesling “Library Reserve”** ++  
**First offering.** This is old-school, almost buttery, from the former cellar-regime; all camomile (I'd walk a mile for a camomile) and beeswax, but as always with air it stiffens and grows fresher, showing minerality, balsam and wintergreen; the little RS does it great good; it's an affectionate caressing wine, stylish and limby and complex; highly *mystic* if you're inclined that way, but forthright and approachable if you're not.

The price is a veritable *gift*, and sommelieres ought to queue up NOW to make sure you score. There isn't very much, and the wine is gorgeous.



# weingut bründlmayer

## kamptal • langenlois

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

All I can do with such a vision is admire it. It’s the “correct” stance for a man to take toward nature, or whatever you want to call that which is larger-than-we. But my admiration can quickly grow precious if I’m unwilling to accept the consequences of acting on these ideals,

which sometimes isn’t convenient and sometimes is even quite uncomfortable. Damn it, this isn’t one of those shining white Truths, but rather a sloppy ol’ bag of conflicting truths which my poor conscience has to muck around in.

When I grow up I want to be like Willi, so serene, thoughtful and wry, but stern as iron about his core principles. He’s one of the best people you could meet. He’s sharp as a tack, quick as a whip, cute as a button and very alert. He follows a conversation with his gaze, absolutely interested and ever curious. One wag of a journalist dubbed him the “Wine Professor” because of his thoughtful mien, but these wines, serious as they are, come from someone who knows WIT—and how to brandish it!

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



Willi Bründlmayer

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

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

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

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

2004 is a near-great vintage here, simply fabulous for GrüVe (it contains the wine-of-the-vintage) and rather up-and-down for Riesling. I also think Willi’s wines are changing somewhat from the time I first encountered them, or perhaps it is I who have changed. They are like an extremely good-looking woman (or man!) who wears very understated clothes. They are almost completely without affect, but with great candor and transparency. I also appreciate the willingness to risk, even when I’m unconvinced by the results. I’m sure Willi would say “It keeps things interesting.”

**Bründlmayer at a glance:**

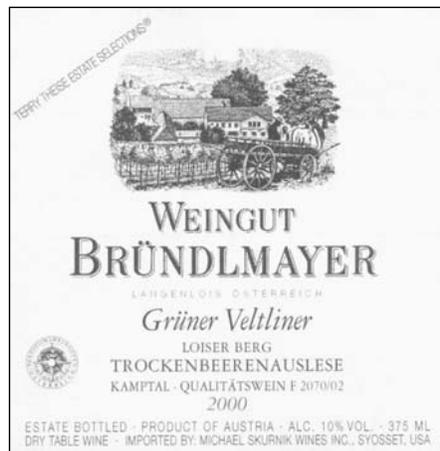
Generally considered Austria's best winery, based on steadily outstanding wines across the entire range. Remarkable attention to detail for a large (by my standards at 75 hectares) winery.

**how the wines taste:**

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

- ABY-151 **2004 Grüner Veltliner "L & T"**  
 "Light and dry" is exactly what this is. I don't ship it every year but 2004 is so bleeding *great* for light GVs and I wanted you to have access to Bründlmayer at entry-level prices. The wine is clean, charming and gulpable.
- ABY-145 **2004 Grüner Veltliner "Kamptaler Terrassen"**  
 Lentils and snap-peas; there's some real depth here, and even secret-sweetness; length and polish and spice and mineral; in short—breed. It is absolutely perfect mid-weight GrüVe.
- ABY-144 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang**  
 ABY-144H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Berg Vogelsang, 12/375ml** +  
 I can't recall a better vintage than this one; the wine is little short of astonishing; wax beans, green pepper; wonderful thick sweet minerality and class; carefully articulated structure—the wine has *diction*—it threads the needle; both a GV-prototype and wickedly individual; some sort of potion of apple-skin and powdered stones.
- ABY-148 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** ++  
 The GrüVe of the vintage in this offering; a fabulous nose, clear and profound, peppery and sweet; the palate is stunning, it's one of the greatest GV's I've *ever* offered. Clear and profound, peppery and sweet!
- ABY-149 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Ried Lamm** +  
 It's always a struggle with me and this wine; how much is too much? Often it seems this big fiery thing is finally redeemed by its thick depth of flavor. And it's the wine that's constantly trouncing all those whomping White Burgundies and Mastiff-like Chardonnays in the tastings, so what do I know? This is more, um, *correct* than the '03, which was GV on a PCP-binge; more in line with the greatest-of-all-time 1990, in fact; it smells just like bacon, and tastes like one of those pepper-cured bacons or like certain smoky old-bush teas; there's fierce peppery spice and it carries its alcohol with grace; gradually it unfurls into more typical Lamm flavors, rosemary and roasted fennel.
- ABY-150 **2004 Riesling Kamptaler Terrassen**  
 This shows what I came to identify as "the '04 Riesling aroma," mistakes and enoki, which when overstated was really yucky, but here it's nice and clean and subtle; the palate is slim and chalky, and the wine is useful and good.
- ABY-153 **2004 Riesling Steinmassel**  
 From the high wuthering slopes of schistous granite comes one of Austria's great "ordinary" Rieslings, showing the BASIS of their greatness. This '04 shows characteristic aromas but with even more powdered-mineral; palate shows more juice than spice, with a hint of celeriac on the finish. Here the connection to the 2004 German Rieslings is very strong; it's less exotic and orchid-y than usual but also more crumbly, less hard-textured. Will be fascinating to follow, as I suspect *terroir* will tell after the wine recovers from bottling.
- ABY-154 **2004 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**  
 Here I was unsure. The wine is fervid and spicy but also shows more mushroomy botrytis than I'm comfortable with, though it's ameliorated by a fine minerality. Like most of the growers, Willi didn't know what I objected to, and I really don't know whether I'm over-fussy or the growers are too close to their own wines. We'll know in time.

- ABY-152 **2004 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein “Lyra”** +  
 The name refers to Bründlmayer’s trellising method, a Y-shaped system that looks “as if the vine is throwing its arms up toward the heavens,” says Willi. This system also more than doubles the leaf-surface exposed to sunlight and encourages quick drying of leaf and grape alike after a rain. Willi also wants to demonstrate you don’t *need* old vines to make great wine.
- But there’s more. “Lyra is the wine of the sun,” Says Willi, “the brainchild. Whereas Alte Reben is the wine of the soil, the darker underground. You drink each wine with a different part of yourself.”
- What a lovely thing to say.
- The `04 shows great opulent aromas; spiced apples, wisteria, verbena; more “green” and less “yellow” than usual; the palate is priapically firm and zingy, with chili-pepper and cloves; iridescently juicy and tarragon-y; Gyokoru-Riesling! It seems to heighten the essence of the skin of the vintage.
- ABY-137 **2003 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein Alte Reben**  
 For many years this was one of the most profoundly great Rieslings in Austria. Recently it has flirted with overstatement—the `04 has 15% alc—and no doubt this `03 is spittin’ some fire of its own but there’s mammoth fruit to cloak it; all toasted brioche with vanilla pudding. It’s more blatant than I like, but others might respond to the jet-blast of sheer intensity.
- ABY-155 **2004 Muskateller**  
 This is like Riesling with an infusion of elderflower; discreet yet characterful, and I know it’s a cliché but there’s really a whole bouquet of flowers here, firmly set in a binding of *tilleul* and mineral.
- ABY-103H **2000 Grüner Veltliner Trockenbeerenauslese, 6/375ml (wooden case) ++**  
 Frightening stiff here! One of the great sweet Austrians ever, like GV with its own honey; crazily high-toned and spicy, varietally and site specific; galvanically powerful and ringent, with length and the sweetest lime-verbena-jasmine flavors.
- ABY-146 **2002 Sekt**  
 I splurged my final night in Austria and stayed in one of Vienna’s grandest hotels. I felt like a Sultan. At breakfast there was this deranged buffet from which I gnarfed an unseemly amount of food. What to wash it down with? Ah! There were two fizzies, one was a Champagne you’ve heard of and which I probably shouldn’t name (though it rhymes with “hurts” if you say it right) and Bründlmayer Sekt at its side. And there, boys ‘n girls, I did prove in front of several witnesses that Willi’s fizz is INDEED better than middling commercial Champagne and is, I’d argue, the best sparkling wine in the world that’s not Champagne. The `02 has a fine bready nose with hints of apple-blossom; the palate is texture-driven and reminiscent of Marne-Valley Champagnes; it’s the best since the `99; crackery and elegant but with grip. It also tastes *ready*, unlike the `01 did a year ago. There are oceans of middling Champagne not as good as this.



NOTES ON GAISBERG AND HEILIGENSTEIN

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

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

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

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

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



*Heiligenstein vineyard*

# weingut schloss gobelsburg

## kamptal • gobelsburg

Here's a happy story.

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

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

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

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

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

In fact he has six straight outstanding vintages behind him and his basic style is beginning to emerge.



*Michael Moosbrugger*

Somehow everyone thought this process would be instantaneous, but things take the time they take. Austria's hyper wine culture notwithstanding! Michi's wines excel by precision and polish now. Their texture is truly silken, and their "temperament" is as pensive as that of their maker. Gobelsburg has entirely shed the skin of the Michael-Willi association and had arrived at its own place in the firmament. So much so that several observers believe Gobelsburg has "overtaken" Bründlmayer. As far as I myself am concerned the question is moot; I owe my association with Gobelsburg to Willi Bründlmayer and there are bedrock questions of honor at work. Plus I dislike the whole tip-sheet mentality whereby estates are ranked "against" one another on some arbitrary continuum. But, truth to tell, I wish I were as pure as I wish I were. Let's face it, I do it too; we all do it, there are hierarchies throughout nature, and it's hard-

ly unusual for the human intellect to sort through and evaluate the things it experiences. Even if we know these evaluations are ephemeral, we still do them.

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

Thus I'd say Bründlmayer has a longer deeper track record, more gravitas and no need to "prove" itself for the likes of me or anyone else.

I've left a couple soul-prints at Schloss Gobelsburg. I was there with colleagues and customers on 9/11/01. And one Summer

I was there with the whole gang of Michael Skurnik Wines, and we had a party, with a band, and we commanded the stage at one point, and Michi sang "New York State Of Mind" in our honor, and we played "Smoke On The Water," and the police were called and a splendid time was had by all.



*Gneiss soil in the Gaisberg vineyard*

**how the wines taste:**

It's beginning to look like Martin Nigl is Moosbrugger's aesthetic soul-brother, though Michi's wines are just a little more fluid in texture. But they're both diligently precise in their detailing of flavor; they both speak flavor with careful diction. Though Michi's "big" wines were especially (delightfully!) successful in 2004, his special genius seems to lie in the making of very pretty fine-grained wines at the "low" end of his range—no small gift. And some of the wines offered below are some of the finest in all this offering.

- AZZ-070 **NV Brut Reserve, N.V.** +  
 It's almost three years on the lees, a cuvée of 2000-2001, 15% Pinot Noir, 15% Riesling and 70% GrüVe, and man this is some classy stuff; highly fragrant, a touch of *tilleul*; the palate is just yummy, loaded with charm, fruit, length and breed; at a price one-third below N.V. Champagne it offers 85% of the quality; it's generous, fruit-driven and long. Bravo! Between the dee-lish-ness of this and the elegance of the Bründlmayer these are the two best Champagne alternates I've ever tasted.
- AZZ-076 **2004 Grüner Veltliner "Gobelsburger"**  
 In effect a 2nd-label value category (as is the Riesling y'all have been buying the *huevos* out of), and it was the first in a truly jaw-dropping series of "light" GV's the likes of which I've never tasted. I wish I could have bought them all, they were so scintillating and polished. This has a tender and lentilly nose; palate is peppery, ripe and flavory; outstanding quality in its echelon, with almost a big ol' plump-i-tude of fruit.
- AZZ-074 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz**  
 AZZ-074H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Steinsetz, 12/375ml**  
 The best vintage yet? It has all the ore and pepper one expects from this archetype of Urgestein but also an amazing sort of creamy inside-fruit—he picked it November 26th, for crying out loud—vetiver and complex spice and remarkable transparency and secret-sweetness . . . yes, it IS the best vintage yet.
- AZZ-078 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Renner** +  
 Starting with the 2001 vintage this has been a highlight of this assortment, a big-scaled Grüner Veltliner of amazing value and contained elegant weight and power, with detail and economy. The nose is doughier than the Steinsetz's; more lemon, but still with an oyster shell overtone; this has really fervid spice and torque; more peppery than usual, smoky and countrified, thick and charred; if it's less deft than Steinsetz it's also more adamant, and there's probably an avalanche of snoozing fruit.
- AZZ-079 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** (+)  
 Classic aromas; the palate is salty and powerful, but man the *sel gris* here! As if ten different sea-salts were mixed in your grinder with dried rosemary; almost a black hole of complexity, and a slow deliberate unfurling of intricate nuance; wonderful length and no heat or bitterness despite its power.
- AZZ-073 **2004 Riesling "Gobelsburger"**  
 We wanted a classic everyday Riesling at an affordable price and man does this deliver. It's long, thick, textured with a veritable quarry of pulverized mineral; very dry (even a tic phenolic) but would wash down a dozen Malpeques—O.K. two dozen—to perfection.
- AZZ-075 **2004 Riesling Vom Urgestein**  
 AZZ-075H **2004 Riesling Vom Urgestein, 12/375ml**  
 From young vines in the Grand Crus Gaisberg and Heligenstein; often this wine seems like a perfect miniature, but it's really complex on a scale of its own. Abstract from body or alcohol, there's a symposium of flavor happening here, the tropical-mineral Heligenstein, the berry-mineral Gaisberg. In effect it's like a *bonsai* of riesling; it isn't supposed to be "big" but instead to enthrall you with its detail.  
 Greener aromas this year; this has cut and depth, if only because of its striking length and mineral complexity; it's stylish, verdant, and again: DRY.

- AZZ-080 **2004 Riesling Gaisberg** +  
 The loveliest aromas of blueberry and a freakin' doctoral thesis in minerality; deep and juicy with blackberry notes emerging; it isn't entirely *civilized*, this creature, but rather a grinning feral beast of perfect Riesling.
- AZZ-081 **2004 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein** ++  
 Hypnagogic nose, a Grand Cru fragrance of stunning fruit-mineral-herbal complexity; lemon, lime, apple, talc, lovage, laurel, all expressed with pointillist articulation—really has it all, juiciness, minerality, clarity, secret sweetness; a merry-go-round of flavor and no two horses alike. Given the track record of this wine the past five years I'd say it is an annual *MUST-BUY* for anyone serious about Riesling.
- AZZ-082 **2003 Riesling "Tradition"** +  
 This is a deliberate attempt to replicate the style of 50 years ago—conventional pressing on the skins, no must-clarification, no temperature control, and 18 months in old casks with frequent rackings to encourage secondary flavors. It's not a pastiche so much as an *homage* to an old dialect of white wine disappearing from the modern world.  
 He's done it three vintages now with GrüVe—I didn't offer the '03 because I felt it to be too hot and coarse—and I admire the *gratitude* these wines embody. And this one is a great beauty; there's a little RS; it starts out cellar-fragrant but then Riesling fruit comes on; bananas sauteed in butter, then the mineral Gaisberg notes (for it is indeed from that Grand Cru) and the wine shows another kind of complexity; cozier, less arch, more soulful, less *aesthetic*; friendly, long and affectionate.
- AZZ-083 **2003 St. Laurent**  
 Murmury and plummy; like old-school Pommard; stuffed roasted tomatoes; round and lush and generous.
- AZZ-084H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Beerenauslese, 12/375ml** +  
 If they made candies from GrüVe they'd taste like this. There's even a feint toward Eiswein. Imagine a liqueur of lime and green pepper with empire apple and winter-green; a lithe clever clarity and impish charm. Picked December 22nd, by the way; hope Michi had his shopping done by then!
- AZZ-077H **2003 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml**  
 First offering. Picked Xmas Eve. It's very rich and liqueurous; a parfait of '03, with TBA weight; banana, malt and strawberry; gushingly adorable fruit; this really pretty wine is actually sweet enough to serve WITH dessert.



## 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-crusting 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.



# weingut ludwig hiedler

## kamptal • langenlois

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

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

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

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

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



María & Ludwig Hiedler

like to be different from the others!” I remember holding one of my gala tastings one year in New York, and Johannes Selbach happened to be there. He had a moment before the teeming hordes arrived, so he made

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

Plus,” he added with a merry gleam, “I

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

his way through the Austrians, a big ol’ buncha Veltliners. So wadja think, boss? I asked him. Very good, very good, he said . . . only there’s one wine I don’t understand, this Hiedler. Why not? “Well, compared to the others it has so much *schmalz*,” Johannes answered.

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

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

bigger belly of fruit.

All viticulture is “ecological” (natural fertilizers, no herbicides or pesticides, composting with the skins, but “we are not organic” says Ludwig, as fungicides are used). All harvesting is selective, with two or three passes through the vineyards, exclusively by hand. All pressing is pneumatic. All fermentation is temperature-controlled. The wines are then matured in stainless steel or acacia casks, according to their needs. Hiedler’s uses a

different yeast culture for each grape variety, the first time I have seen this.

Ludwig was a guy whose style wasn’t aligned with the condition of many 2004 Rieslings, which seemed happier with a more reductive style of vinification. I’ll offer the ones with the most promise (or fewest “issues”), and as always would be happy to have mis-read or underrated the wines. The Veltliners were very fine.

**Hiedler at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

AHL-098 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “Loess”**

Ludwig Hiedler enters the glory-prive Veltliner fray with a sensational wine, quite possibly too good for the category; the ‘04 has a spicy and enveloping nose; a classic loess-grown GrüVe; leesy-semolina textured and drier than the ‘02 and ‘03.

AHL-099 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Thal**

I saw both bottled and cask samples and, interestingly, preferred the bottled wine; there’s botrytis present, or something that reminded me of botrytis because Ludwig said there wasn’t any, it all went into a BA. In any case, fragrances of oyster-mushrooms, yellow peppers and wax beans; strong solid palate with thick spiciness and swollen minerality; polished wine, with its fruit-magma set in a clear binding. Nearly 70-year-old vines, and as always leaning toward the Viognier aspect of GrüVe.

AHL-100 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Thal-Novemberlese**

Cask-sample: riper, more declamatory; neo-classical as compared to the baroque “regular” Thal; very long and flavory with lots of ore and pepper, almost szechuan pepper; it’s less “sweet” than usual but bottling will straighten its posture; granular and maizy, power and penetration.

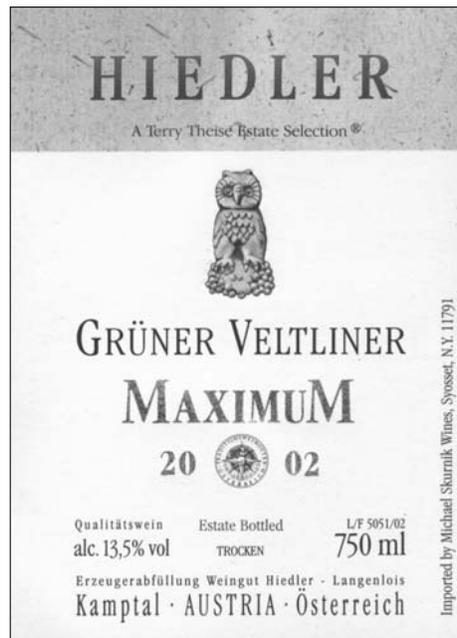
AHL-101 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “Maximum”**

GrüVe as directed by Fellini—a varietal circus with clowns and acrobats, and (more concretely) roasted red pepper and fennel; crammed to the rafters with spice and power; another primordial Veltliner.

AHL-102 **2004 Riesling Loiser Berg**

This often smells like Mosel wine—this time it smells like Uhlen or Goldtröpfchen; lime and verbena, redcurrant and sauteed apples; there’s plenty of mineral, a hint of botrytis (or the sense of botrytis); it’s taut and at the moment a little tart—but the moment is, as I’ve written so often, unusually early.

- AHL-106 **2004 Riesling Steinhaus**  
In some ways this is the best of the Rieslings; it's a little stern but the minerality is as fascinating as always, in its cerebral way.
- AHL-107 **2004 Riesling Heiligenstein**  
Ludwig asked me to offer this. I asked him if I could write honestly about it, and he said I could. He knows his wines better than I do, naturally, and I've been wrong before, but the wine had aromas and flavors I simply didn't like. Maybe they're botrytis and maybe not, but whatever they were was disagreeable to me. Oxygen helps but doesn't rescue. I'd be VERY pleased to retaste the wine a few months from now and find I'd made a fool of myself. But if I tell you I liked it when really I don't, then I'd *definitely* make a fool of myself—so, I remain agnostic. I'd gladly give this sweet conscientious man EVERY benefit of the doubt on my own behalf. But not on yours.
- AHL-105 **2004 Sauvignon Blanc Steinhaus**  
Well here's a lusty yelp of SB: redcurrant and currant-leaf and red pepper; salty and siz-zly and wild; not blatant or garish but *happy* and expressive.
- AHL-097 **2002 Weissburgunder "Maximum" +**  
47-year-old vines, and 100% malo. I often think this is the world's greatest Pinot Blanc. This shows some botrytis but also the finest nutty fruit and the vintage's contained power. Classic and splendid. When it's gone we'll move into the 2003 (AHL-094), to be bottled in September 2004—the cask-sample was mighty and chewy, no botrytis, pure Pinot-power; huge potential.
- AHL-103H **2004 Chardonnay Beerenauslese, 12/375ml**  
Once again, sweet oaky Chardonnay rules—provided it's REALLY sweet. Picked at 140 Oechsle and fermented in once-used barriques, the wine is like a honey of maize and corn; thick-licious (I made up a word!), firm and spicy, with an amazingly esoteric app-ley finish.
- AHL-104H **2004 Weissburgunder Eiswein, 12/375ml +**  
The *name* is the flavor! Eiswein *SO* rules.



# weingut josef hirsch

## kamptal • kammern

Hats off to the man of principle!

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

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

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



Johannes Hirsch

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

- **Vineyard area: 24 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Lamm, Gaisberg, Heiligenstein**
- **Soil types: Loess, eroded mica slate topped with brown soil, eroded primary rock with desert sands and volcanic particles**
- **Grape varieties: 60% Grüner Veltliner, 35% Riesling, 5% Chardonnay**

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

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

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

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

There isn't all that much recondite wine data to tell you. They're 24 hectares in size, mid-sized for the Kamptal. 60% Veltliner, 35% Riesling. The rest goes

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

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

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

#### Hirsch at a glance:

Zoom! Went this agency, from out-of-nowhere to the top. Stellar-quality wines from a star-quality vintner at reasonable prices. AND AVAILABILITY IS GOOD. Fantastic 2004s constitute the tenth consecutive “1st Growth” vintage from this superstar.

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### AWH-044 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “veltliner #1”**

“Hirsch” means “stag” (indeed “Johannes Hirsch” could be translated as “John Deer”) and so each vintage of this winning little wine will have a new illustration using a visual pun on “Hirsch.” Johannes was the first to produce a wine like this for us; everyday GV we could sell cheap, but he makes it the same way he makes all his wines, whole-cluster pressing, which has the effect of lowering yields about 25-30%.

This is the best of the three vintages we’ve offered; it’s way fragrant; sorrel and yellow pepper; nice grip and interplay; salty, walnutty, arugula; truly piquant, lively and juicy. Dangerously drinkable stuff.

#### AWH-041 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein**

#### AWH-045 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein**

#### AWH-045H **2004 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**

Spritzzy entry but an easy, loose-stitched palate; exceptionally peppery nose; lots of spice and smoulder here, though it typically needs 4-6 months for the sweet-fruit to emerge. We’ll sell `03 while supplies last, and then move with our usual seamless elegance into 2004.

The `04 has a wonderful aroma! Yellow pepper, meyer-lemon; very juicy texture leads to a palate surprisingly stiff and mineral; fennel-seed, mussel shell; remarkable brilliance; solid, even a little phenolic. A highlight among the mid-range GrüVes.

#### AWH-040 **2003 Grüner Veltliner Lamm**

#### AWH-046 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Lamm**

**+(+)**

The `03 is a basso-profundo of GrüVe, with meaty caraway aromas, almost like some kind of lamb flan; miitakes and goose fat, with a Mack-truck power.

The astonishing `04 will be bottled in late Summer and we’ll get it to you ASAP. There’s caraway aromas again, pheasant too; raw bacon, chicken *demi-glace*; again the palate is different than one expects, more solid and mineral, but this will change as the mouth catches up to the nose; it’s weighty and thick, and when mineral collides with exotica, this wine will soar.

AWH-047 **2004 Riesling Zöbing**

I love this but it's different than usual, or seems so; a spicy red-peppery, almost Veltliner-like nose; a serious, even brooding sort of palate, less the accustomed dancer than a philosopher taking a walk by a gray river; it is, though, finely citric and has detailed minerality.

AWH-042 **2003 Riesling Gaisberg**

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AWH-037M **2002 Riesling Gaisberg "September" MAGNUMS**

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

AWH-048 **2004 Riesling Gaisberg**

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The '04 is a devilishly complex thing; spicy-salty aromas, ferrous, and showing some of '04's charred smoky notes; a sizzling spicy palate, thickly juicily mineral—don't *ever* let anybody tell you "mineral" is a euphemism for "unripe," because this (and hundreds of wines like it) is about as lavish as wine gets, only its flavor dialect is mineral, not "fruit". There's a note of not-quite-fully-ripe blackberry; the palate really swells and billows and sweetens, reaching a crescendo of lavish iridescent intensity.

To be bottled in late Summer and offered to you ASAP thereafter; 2003 in the meantime.

AWH-043 **2003 Riesling Heiligenstein**

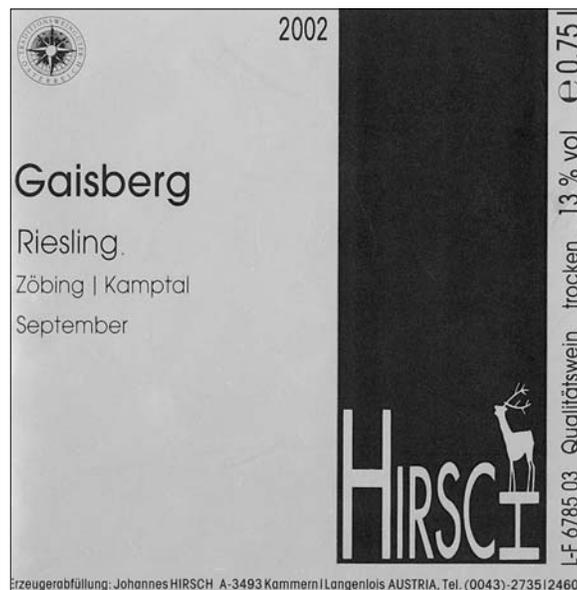
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AWH-049 **2004 Riesling Heiligenstein**

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The 2003 takes about three minutes of aeration; then there's a microburst of exotica, lemon-balm, peach, malt, salted caramel; hyperactive fruit and almost voluptuous juiciness, and all that summer-fruit explosion resolves into an almost Margarita-like limeyness.

The '04 (bottled late Summer and offered ASAP) has a fulminant, adamantly profound nose, and this time the palate corresponds; as massive as a thunderhead; roasted red pepper, noticeable (but not objectionable) acidity; wild plum, malt and apricot; it has a real smoldering intensity *without* high alcohol. The work of a master, my friends.



# wachau

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

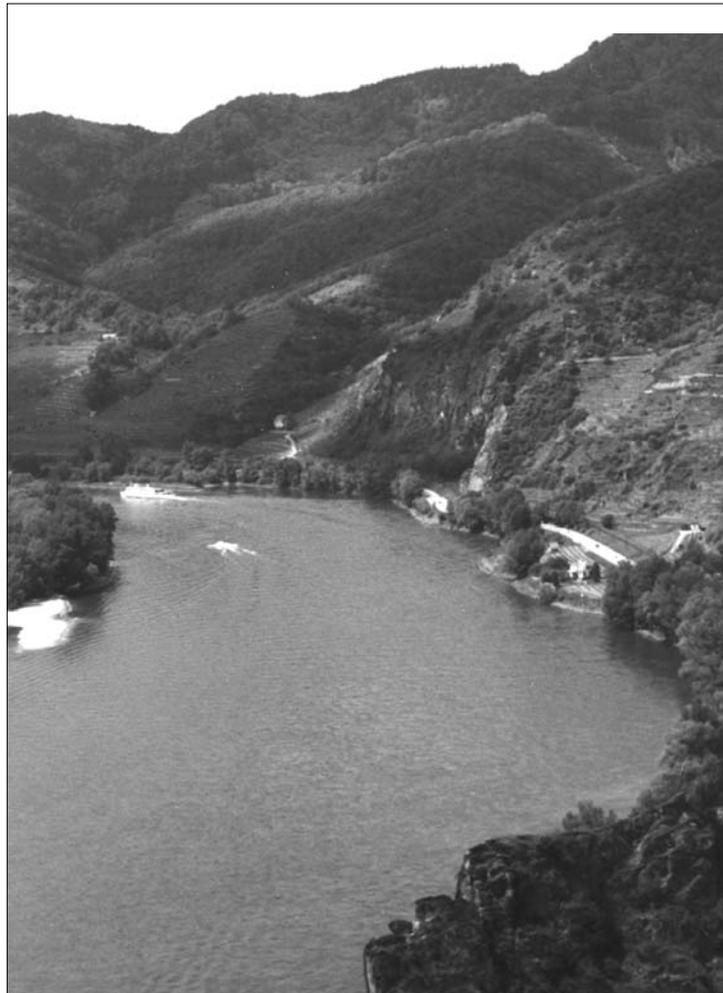
good sense at work in this one. You're going to have to take that on faith, though, because you will be asked to LEARN SOME TERMS.

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

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

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

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



*The Danube*

# leo alzinger

## wachau • unterloiben

When I got to Austria it was cold and rainy for five days, but on the morning of the visit to Alzinger Spring had suddenly arrived, and it was a fine blue day replete with singing birds and flowering trees. Every garden looked like an illustration of: *Spring!* It was hard to go inside.

And we were the first to break in a brand new tasting room finished only two days earlier (and reeking of wood and varnish), and I was feeling happy and alert, though quiet and non-verbal. I found, as I often find these days, that I *grok* the wines completely but it starts to bypass the analytical faculty and doesn't ask to be put into words, or to be compared to other things. This is not always convenient. Alzinger's 2004s were entirely at One with the Spring morning, with its busyness and freshness and urgency; the whole thing made perfect sense and I wrote

my notes, as it were, under soul-protest.

Leo Alzinger Sr. and Hans-Günter Schwarz (ex-Müller-Catoir) are friends. Hans-Günter told me, when we were schmoozing about Austria and growers we knew. This news didn't surprise me in the least; both men are strangely angelic. "He is such a dear man," said Schwarz. "He called me one evening and said he had a question for me. Might it be possible for his son to do a little *practicum* here with me? And he asked his question and then was silent, and I wasn't sure if he was finished speaking. But then came, many seconds later, like a little peep . . . 'please?'"

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



Alzinger, son and father

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

This is how it works in the Wachau. The first year I was granted an allotment of twenty cases of the least of three Veltliner Smaragds. I duly (and gratefully) accepted them. Next year a second Veltliner was made available, along with a few cases of Riesling Smaragd. Next, I received four Veltliners, two Federspiel and two Smaragd, and a Riesling Smaragd, much more wine but still not much wine. Last year the floodgates opened: a whopping 200 cases for the lower 48 plus Hawaii. This year we're up to 450 cases. Each year, I inch farther away from the back of the queue. Peter Schleimer and I have asked very gently if any more wine might be available. Alzinger smiles his buttery beatific smile. "Privately, a few bottles," he says. You have to come over to my house if you want to taste them. Bring the cheeze-whiz!

I happened to be sitting next to a buyer for one of Austria's major wine retailers one evening over dinner. We were schmoozin'. I asked him: "Apart from a *professional* appraisal, which Wachau wines do you personally most *enjoy*?" He thought for an instant and answered: "Alzinger and Prager." When I repeated the story to Peter Schleimer he agreed; it's a virtual consensus. There are more impressive wines, perhaps . . . *perhaps*, but there

are none more loveable. Alzinger is a retiring, sweet and gentle personality; which may be why he gets fewer wreaths and garlands, but those In The Know *Know*, and Alzinger's best are just as scarce and sexy as any Austrian wine. I noticed the wines as soon as I made my first visit to Austria; they made for some unforgettable drinking if you could find a mature vintage. The young wines I saw were stormy and closed, but that's changed in the last bunch of years.

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

steel, more whole-cluster pressing, a lot of reasons.

This is the only winery I visit where I taste a lot of cask-samples. Alzinger bottles quite late by Austrian standards. He seems to think early bottling suffocates some wines, and he's gently wry about the Austrian frenzy for little baby-wines still splooshy and goopy. The beauty of his 2004s came as no surprise, but their purity of tone grows more striking with each passing year. It hurts how little wine we get, hardly enough for one *restaurant*, let alone an entire fire-belching behemoth of a **country**. But, but . . . patience. Others were there first. I must humbly wait. Existing clients have their rights too. Rat-bastards.

#### Alzinger at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### ALA-043 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Frauenweingarten Federspiel**

The vineyard is on loamy alluvial soil near the Danube, and this '04 is more expressive of its vintage than its site—at least in April '05; it's quite voluminous for Federspiel; lots of chervil and pepper; palate has juice and snap, horizontally structured, with char on the finish.

#### ALA-044 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel**

Mühlpoint is in effect the lower slopes of Steinertal, below the terraces, on light loess and alluvial sand. Though its Grüves are usually beany, this '04 is a study in pepper; really stretchy sinewy texture, barky and leafy; it's not overt but rather insinuating and long, with chewy phenolics on the end.

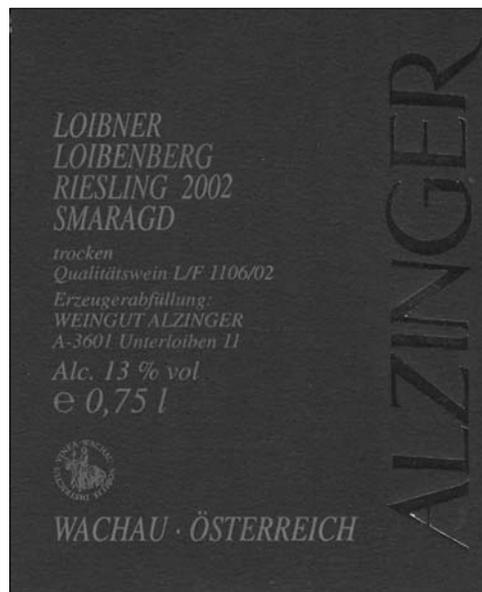
#### ALA-050 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd**

Hello Mr. Bean! I see you've been rolling in the boxwood again. Oh dear. You've put on some weight too, haven't you? No? Well there seems to be, shall we say, more *substance* about you. And you've been to your tailor, it appears. Why do I say that? Well you look so *classy*, you see. What's that? You'd like to buy me dinner? Why how very generous of you! I accept. Oh, you knew I would? Cheeky little dickens, aren't you!

#### ALA-051 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Loibenberg Smaragd**

The first-ever Loibenberg GV from Alzinger, and quite the maiden-voyage. It's one of the great Grand Crus of Europe, a steep (18 to 34 degrees) terraced hillside of weathered Urgestein (the so-called Gföhler Gneiss) and slate, overlaid with loess in some easterly sections. All of which sets the stage for the production of many masterpieces like this one; it has more dialectic and detail than anything yet; mineral and iris but each spoken fervently as if the wine urgently needed to convince you of something; stunning power and almost eucalyptus penetration of the high notes; one rarely finds power this contained and purposive—in effect it doesn't *merely* assert; it has earned its calm complex power and can't not display it—it's etched into its nerves and bones.

- ALA-052 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd** **+**  
 A supernal Grand Cru on crystalline Urgestein, giving wines for mineral-lovers everywhere. YO, *rock heads!* There's more of the sweet-veggie now; squash and roasted fennel; the palate shows a high-toned clamorous intensity of citrus and explicit mineral; almost hermetically tight, and resolving into a classic peppery finish.
- ALA-045 **2004 Dürnsteiner Riesling Federspiel**  
 Notwithstanding my general antipathy to Federspiel, I've wanted to show you this wine for years, and now at last I can. Such a pretty fragrance, like every blossom in April; there's a vintage-typical hint of botrytis; the wine has a slim floweriness over firm bones; mirabelle shows in the pleasingly angular profile; the finish is pure mineral.
- ALA-046 **2004 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd**  
 The soil is quite similar to that of Gaisberg; schist, gneiss, *glimmerschiefer* a fine lilacy Riesling; white iris, burning leaves; satisfying thickness, as meaty as a good pork chop; dry but juicy; less "mineral" than outright **rock**.
- ALA-047 **2004 Riesling Hollerin Smaragd**  
 It's a very rich deep soil, just below the renowned Kellerberg, Urgestein mixed with sand, and it gives highly pronounced Rieslings; this '04 has a euphoric fragrance of white peach and mirabelle; lovely granular texture; a hint of (positive) botrytis; great detail of fruit—a *pretty* wine that flirts with greatness.
- ALA-048 **2004 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd** **++**  
 One of the great wines in this offering; a true Grand Cru nose; a sense of mass, of hugeness; wonderful *spiel* and detail; sweet pepper and *quetsch*; light-footed yet endlessly long, with grip and determination; wonderful counterpoint of smoke, mineral, meatiness and a kind of deft intensity.
- ALA-049 **2004 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd** **++**  
 One of the world's greatest Riesling monuments. It's suddenly *greener*; more grapefruit, verbena, Sencha; just ravishing brilliance here; a fabulous vintage; all blossom and mineral, endless shimmering length and a finish that doesn't finish but leaves behind a fresh green vitality, like clothes dried outside near a flowering meadow.



# weingut josef jamek

wachau • joching

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

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

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

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

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



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

Each year I try to dine in Jamek’s lovely restaurant in Joching, as there are too few places left in our homogenized world where you can find elegant, deft prepara-

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

tions of regionally integral dishes. You know you are **somewhere** in particular and not anywhere else.

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

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

I sat in the restaurant one early Friday evening talking with Mr. Altmann (Jamek’s son-in-law) and uneasily watching the place fill up. Altmann’s is a curious mixture of modern and traditional approaches—all shiny new equipment in the press-house, and nothing but casks in the cellar. They ferment in stainless steel and can control temperature if necessary. No cultured yeasts, minimal SO<sub>2</sub>. The wines are not fined.

They practice integrated viticulture, organic fertiliz-

ers, no insecticides. Most of the good ones do.

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

I never seem to get there at the right time to taste; the wines are always just-bottled and I'm constantly under-rating them. That said, I don't recall a more forthcoming group of Jamek wines than these florescent '04s.

Opinions differ as regards the results of his taking over. Some observers believe the wines have reestablished

themselves among the Wachau elite, while others *expected* this to happen and are still waiting. I hear the chatter and try to stay focused. In my own view there's no doubt—none—that GrüVe Achleiten and Riesling Klaus (at Smaragd levels) are among Austria's great monuments.

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

### Jamek at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

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

- AJJ-052 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Stein Am Rain Federspiel**  
Forthright, flavory, peppery, charming.
- AJJ-055 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Ried Achleiten Smaragd** +  
One of the greatest Grand Crus, "one of the four best sites in the Wachau" according to many knowledgeable observers. It's again an Urgestein variant, in this case a light, weathered crystalline soil with a top layer of loam and eroded material from the cliff-sides. This is Grüner Veltliner wrought in iron, or put another way, this is Achleiten as spoken by Grüner Veltliner; it's pure mineral, with notes of red apple, soursop and oven-roasted stones; *sel gris*, great length of extract; toasted dark bread just barely napped with plum jam—and surrounded by powdered stones brought up from a deep cavern.
- AJJ-053 **2004 Riesling Jochinger Pichl Federspiel** +  
Yes, a "plus" for a Federspiel, since this is about as perfect as mid-weight Riesling can be. And it's a highly *Rieslingy* Riesling, a wine I love to show in tastings to demonstrate Riesling's fundamentally mineral character. This may be the best Federspiel I've ever tasted; it's a little amylic (which I like), with amazing length and grip; tastes like a custard of mineral, with almost sweet extract; talc, pear, lemon-blossom, cool reserved vanilla, *quetsch*, all glommed together in a kind of Riesling *semifreddo*.
- AJJ-054 **2004 Riesling Ried Klaus Federspiel** +  
I take it back: THIS has to be the greatest Federspiel I've ever tasted.  
  
Klaus is in effect the lower slope of Achleiten; it's among the few steepest sites in the Wachau, on weathered gneiss and slate, and its Rieslings must be considered among the very best on earth. Jamek has made a series of monuments at the Smaragd level (which continues with a breathtaking '04), but in some ways this wine is more uncanny and miraculous; its very lightness gives it remarkable transparency. It's a fraternal twin of Nikolaihof's Steiner Hund; toasted grain, toasted oat bread, spice, and a fabulously complex mineral-maize texture; it's flavor-as-*mosaic*, with endless interplay of salts and spices and wonderful length.
- AJJ-056 **2004 Riesling Ried Klaus Smaragd** ++  
Very early days yet for this, but already there's a monstrous nose of barley crackers and rusks and melba-toast and below it an almost peppermint note; it consolidates a nearly fearsome power; lime and vetiver and flint and black cherry and fruit like 10 eaux-de-vies mixed in your glass; the '04 is more overt than usual and highly *emphatic*, but <whew!> there's a whole lotta wine here.
- AJJ-057 **2002 Mittelburgen**  
A cuvée of St. Laurent and Zweigelt which I really love in certain vintages; it's plummy, fragrant and absolutely lovely, like Barbera used to be before the 90-pointers hijacked it; tender, avuncular, evocative and friendly—a wine to be loved, not worshipped.

# nikolaihof-wachau

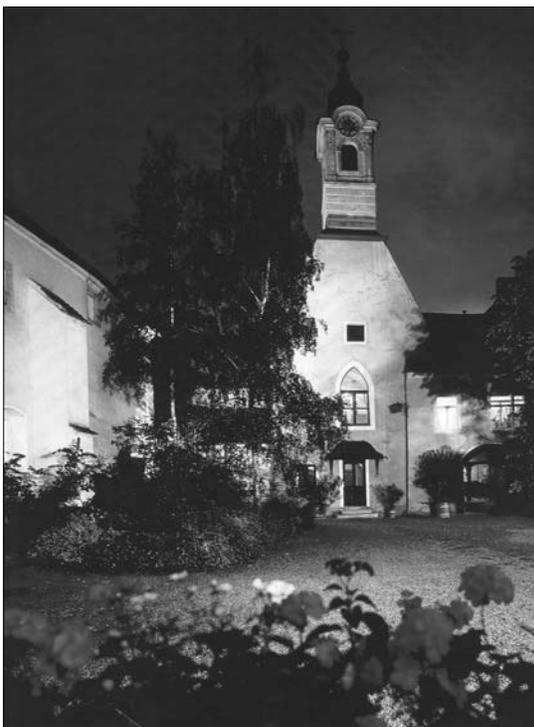
wachau • mautern

This year we were here at the beginning instead of the end, just to see how it would feel. I was surprised to see so many wines already bottled, but this has to do with the bio-dynamic calendar. Christine Saahs told me “When Easter is early we bottle early, even if we picked late,” and this is typical for the domain, which hardly seems to consider its wine as an abstract object but rather as an ingredient among many which grow in nature and transmits a life-energy of its own.

This can be confusing to a certain kind of wine-freak who obsesses on the wine-object as such, but in the end I am comforted by the desire to integrate wine into all the things that emerge from creation and give us pleasure. At Nikolaihof they do not merely grow grapes and make wine bio-dynamically; they live their entire lives by these principles.

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

Saahs' preference for the bio-dynamic life doesn't seem to hail from a concern we'd call “environmental” in the political sense. It rather arises from their overall approach to sharing life with other *forms* of life, and also from their sense of time. Ah, time. There's an enveloping patriarchal linden tree in their courtyard which is a pretty nifty symbol of time; thick, slow, sturdy, gentle, ultimately patient. I'm fond of this tree, all the more so because of those before and after me who'll have enjoyed its tolerant friendship.



- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,300 bottles**
- **Top sites: Im Weingebirge, Vom Stein, Steiner Hund**
- **Soil types: Primary rock topped with humus or gravel, and eroded primary rock**
- **Grape varieties: 55% Riesling, 35% Grüner Veltliner, 10% Weissburgunder, Malvasier, Neuburger, and Chardonnay**

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

Nikolaihof-Wachau (this is the full name preferred by the vintner, but for brevity's sake I'll call it just “Nikolaihof”) is the oldest winery in the Wachau; the buildings are soaked in history. The winery was the first allowed to carry the official Austrian **Bio** sign. (Frau Saahs is charmingly dismissive of what she might call organic parvenus. Even those practicing integrated viticulture are suspect: “it *is* better than nothing,” she allows, “but not much!”) She and her husband have farmed and made wines organically for over two



Christine Saahs

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

"It isn't the integrated regime in itself we find unsatisfactory," they told me one year. "It's the general confusion about the real demands of true organic viticulture." I affirm this logic because I've been guilty of making the very mistake Saahs allude to. When growers tell you they fertilize organically, and/or they've done away with insecticides (or any pesticides) and herbicides, when they say they farm "ecologically" or compost or throw any of the buzz-words around, it's easy to be seduced. It's also easy, and appropriate, to applaud them for moving in the right direction. But it mustn't be confused with certifiably organic grape growing.

It seems to boil down to fungicides. The organic farmer can only use copper-sulfate (though Saahs uses a spray made from stinging nettles or valerian drops, sometimes valerian tea or other biodynamic preparations which are diluted to homeopathic amounts). The E.U. has severe limits on the amounts, as do the organic certification agencies. Most growers who want to go as far as possible towards organics are stopped at this point. It is simply too risky, they say, to do away with chemical fungicides. I asked Mr. Saahs if there was anything he

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

In the past year a study has

could say to reassure these well-meaning growers to take the plunge. He pondered the question. "Actually, it's very difficult!" he finally answered. "There is a risk you'll lose some of your crop. You have to work many times harder in training the vines and cutting leaves away to get the air moving through the grapes." In other words, he can't honestly tell a nearly-organic grower "go on, it's easier than you think," because in fact it's just as hard as he thinks.

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

Everything about Nikolaihof is determinedly PERMANENT (when you say "old fashioned" you create images of something either anachronistic or cute, and Nikolaihof is neither). "I've never 'styled' a wine," says Herr Saahs. Indeed, until a few years ago the grapes were still pressed in an antique wooden press; the one concession to modernity is a pneumatic press. Needless to say, the utmost emphasis is laid on the vineyard. Old vines (average age of forty-five years), low yields, natural farming, and unmanipulative cellar work are the **secrets**, so to speak, but to quote Dr. Helmut Rome: "The secret of these wines lies not so much in cellar technology—which in any case barely exists—as in the special care of the vines." He quotes Herr Saahs as saying, "You shouldn't shove a wine along; just give it a controlled peace so it can develop itself." Fermentation (natural yeasts,) and all aging is in old wood. The wines spend a long time—up to 4 months—on the lees. Nor is Saahs chasing the blockbuster icon or pushing the ripeness envelope. Remember his admonition that *wine is a foodstuff*. "I like to **drink** wine, not study it," he says. "We pick when the grapes are ripe, we don't wait for overripeness." His wife inserts; "There's nothing charming about harvesting in November."

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

year," she said, as if to herself. "We simply occupy this little form of skin and bones for a few years, but we *need* to nourish our hearts and souls by finding a home in our parts of the world and caring for this home."

It's a little sad to subject these young wines to the rough waters of commerce. The truth of Nikolaihof wines emerges in the fullness of time, not before. Tasting them in their mature form is as profound an experience as one can ever have with wine. Something in them seems to weave itself into the fabric of eternity.

Or perhaps their simple rootedness appeals to something lonely in us Americans. We are such spiritual and emotional nomads. We seem hesitant to lay claim to this world, perhaps for fear of having to surrender to it. When I am with the Saahs' I always feel a jolt of recognition; this is the anchoring I seek, or imagine myself seeking. But *could* I live as they do? I don't know.

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

Again we sat in the chapel and began the tasting, with The Magic Flute playing in the background. Again they sat me (embarrassingly) at the head of the great table, and again the spell stole over me, and I was glad the others were there to chatter away so I could write and wonder. Believe me, I don't arrive *waiting* for this to happen; I

rather think it won't. But it does, somehow. I wonder if it begins with the hug Christine gives me, which is just two seconds too long to be merely polite, an embrace containing kinship, an embrace that welcomes and accepts me.

Last year I wrote these words: "And after all the bim-bam-boom of the past ten days, all the sizzlin' young wines from the young hotties, I sank back into the stillness as if I'd come home." But this year we went there on the first day, and it was more matter-of-fact. We'd only tasted at one other winery and I had no idea what to expect; Nikolaihof is seldom a barometer of a vintage's average style. It's only now in retrospect that I realize the degree to which I relax there no matter what; it's because the thing *makes sense* as a Unity. It makes sense to taste those wines in that place with those people. A couple nights later we ordered two older vintages of Nikolaihof (83s, in fact) at dinner nearby, and I felt the strangest sense of being *taken elsewhere*, to the place within the walls, the silent dark cellar, the handsome tree and the birds who nest in it, the little chapel where we taste. It both creates a kind of loneliness (*where am I?*) and at the same time slakes it (*Ah; somewhere, always somewhere*). When you sit at Nikolaihof and taste their wines, you may feel sad; I do (*why can't my life be like this?*). Or inadequate (*why don't I have the courage to live this way? Why do I compromise so much?*), or sometimes, in brief flickers, connected and charged (*so THIS is what I have longed for*) but whatever you feel I have no doubt you will feel something. You are not just anywhere. And you may wonder at the odd notion of "living with meaning" as if meaning were a thing you could stuff into your backpack. When you see it done it looks so simple. That's because it is. All you do is assume our actions have purpose and consequence. And the first task is to value that which is authentic. And to floss every day, and don't forget to read Dilbert.

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

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



**Nikolaihof at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

ANK-051 **2004 Grüner Veltliner “Hefeabzug”**

Literally “sur lie,” a light Veltliner Saahs produces each year along Muscadet lines. The 2003 is delightfully curious; wicky, almost almond aromas; the palate has the usual leesy fluffiness as well as 2003’s sternness, but these are the bee’s knees of lees, if you please. The `04 is really the *perfect* expression of lees, and the best vintage of this wine in years; very sleek and snappy; playful yin-yang of mineral and that semolina-leesiness; light but long, like spring water or a high-mountain white wine.

ANK-054 **2004 Grüner Veltliner Schlossberg Jungferlese** +

i.e. the virgin-vintage from a new vineyard. The wine stopped fermenting with 17g.l. residual sugar, which of course is how it went into bottle; they don’t tinker at this address. A lovely loess-grown GV nose; wax beans, nutmeg; the palate is just *delicious*, racy and long, and the sweetness is seamlessly integrated; every classic GrüVe element is there but the fruit is catapulted higher; it’s as limey as a margarita with endless snap and ping. There’s probably not another wine like it in all of Austria.

ANK-052 **2004 Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel** +

Yes, *another* remarkable Federspiel! There’s a really Biblical minerality here; this wine seems to embody that old linden tree, the big sturdy trunk, the enveloping canopy, and the little fluttery leaves; it has wonderful grip and length and is everything you wish Federspiel would be, but so seldom is. Don’t miss it.

ANK-053 **2004 Riesling Steiner Hund Reserve** +

By the way, it’s “reserve” because the vineyard is actually in the Kremstal (thus no “smaragd”) and they dislike the word Spätlese.

This `04 embodies a high aesthetic principle, which I call persistent soft-sell. Because it is graceful and delicate through and through but also endlessly long, meditative; a still-life of flavor. A fantasy of terroir-complexity, like a bouquet-garni of every fragrant green thing in a deep forest; spicy and fundamental.

ANK-050 **2003 Riesling Steiner Hund “Reserve”**

From a tiny but supernally great Grand Cru, this can be one of the world’s profoundest wines—from any grape variety. The `03 is all boucherie, with roasted beet and red-currant accents; again it’s a wine of *atmosphere*, hugely ripe and exotic, as if five different incenses were burning simultaneously.

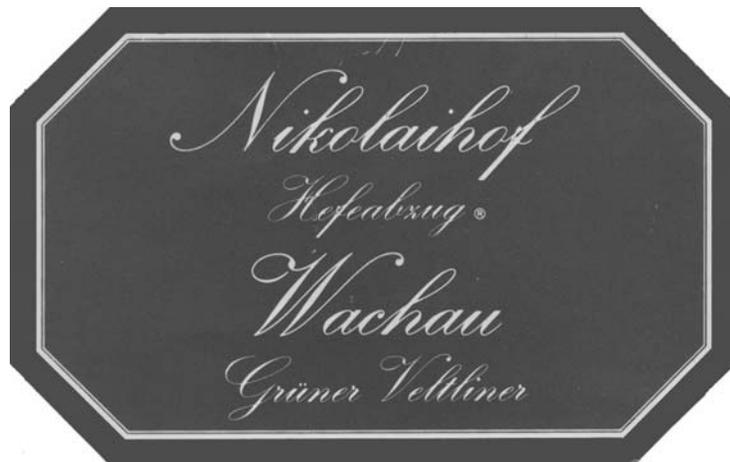
ANK-20 **1999 Riesling Im Weingebirge “Jungferwein”**

+

It means the virgin-crop from a new vineyard, usually very small and concentrated. What did I think the analysis was? I tasted it and bulls-eyed it. It is PERFECT Riesling, whatever it is. It has 27 grams per liter of residual sugar and you never tasted anything so piquant and pretty as this: iris and white lilac and beets and rhubarb. It clamps on to every cell on the palate as if it had thrown a grappling hook; lovely, kinetic dialectic of fruit and mineral, and an echo of strawberry. Yum yum yum.

ANK-055H **2001 “Nikolauswein” TBA, 12/375ml**

**First offering** of a wine picked December 1st '01 and only just bottled. It's two-thirds Riesling and the rest is a mishmash of “every other botrytis grape of the vintage”. There's one-third new oak, by coincidence: “We had 600 liters of the juice,” said Christine, “but only a 400-liter cask, so we had to rush out and buy a 200-liter barrel!” The wine has grip and considerable acidity with huge vinosity—it is NOT dessert-in-a-glass; it has a dry finish, or almost, and loads of bergamot.



# hans reisetbauer

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

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

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

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



*Hans Reisetbauer and his stills*

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

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

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

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

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

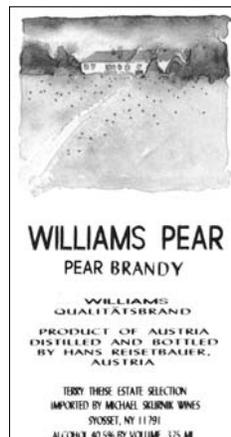
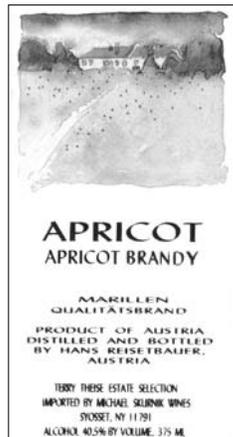
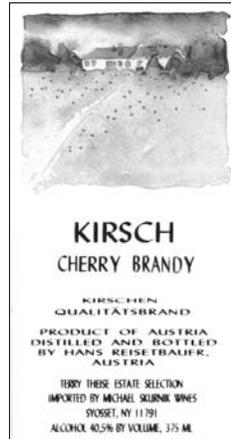
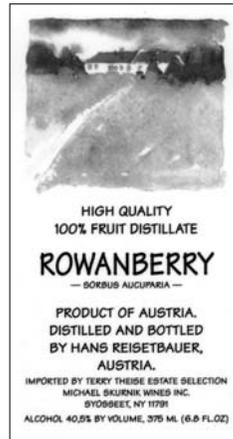
I'll leave you with a quote from Mark Hutchens. "Tasting notes are not really necessary for these because they taste so much like an archetype of their fruit, but I must make special mention of the Alisier, because when you see the price you will think it's a typo. It isn't. But it is worth every schilling.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

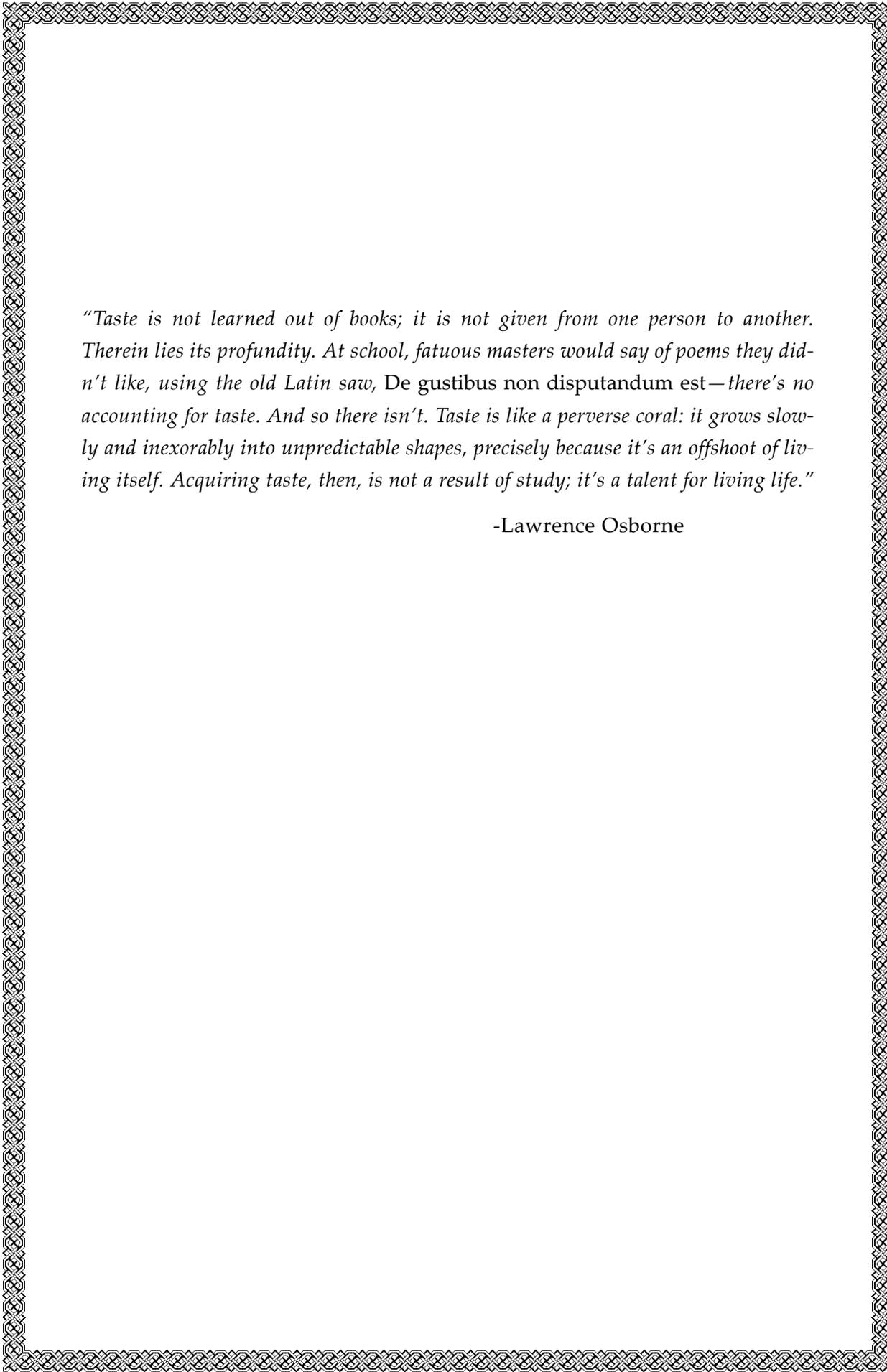


*Young pear trees at Reisetbauer*

**Reisetbauer offerings:**

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





*“Taste is not learned out of books; it is not given from one person to another. Therein lies its profundity. At school, fatuous masters would say of poems they didn’t like, using the old Latin saw, De gustibus non disputandum est—there’s no accounting for taste. And so there isn’t. Taste is like a perverse coral: it grows slowly and inexorably into unpredictable shapes, precisely because it’s an offshoot of living itself. Acquiring taste, then, is not a result of study; it’s a talent for living life.”*

-Lawrence Osborne



