

AUSTRIA 2002

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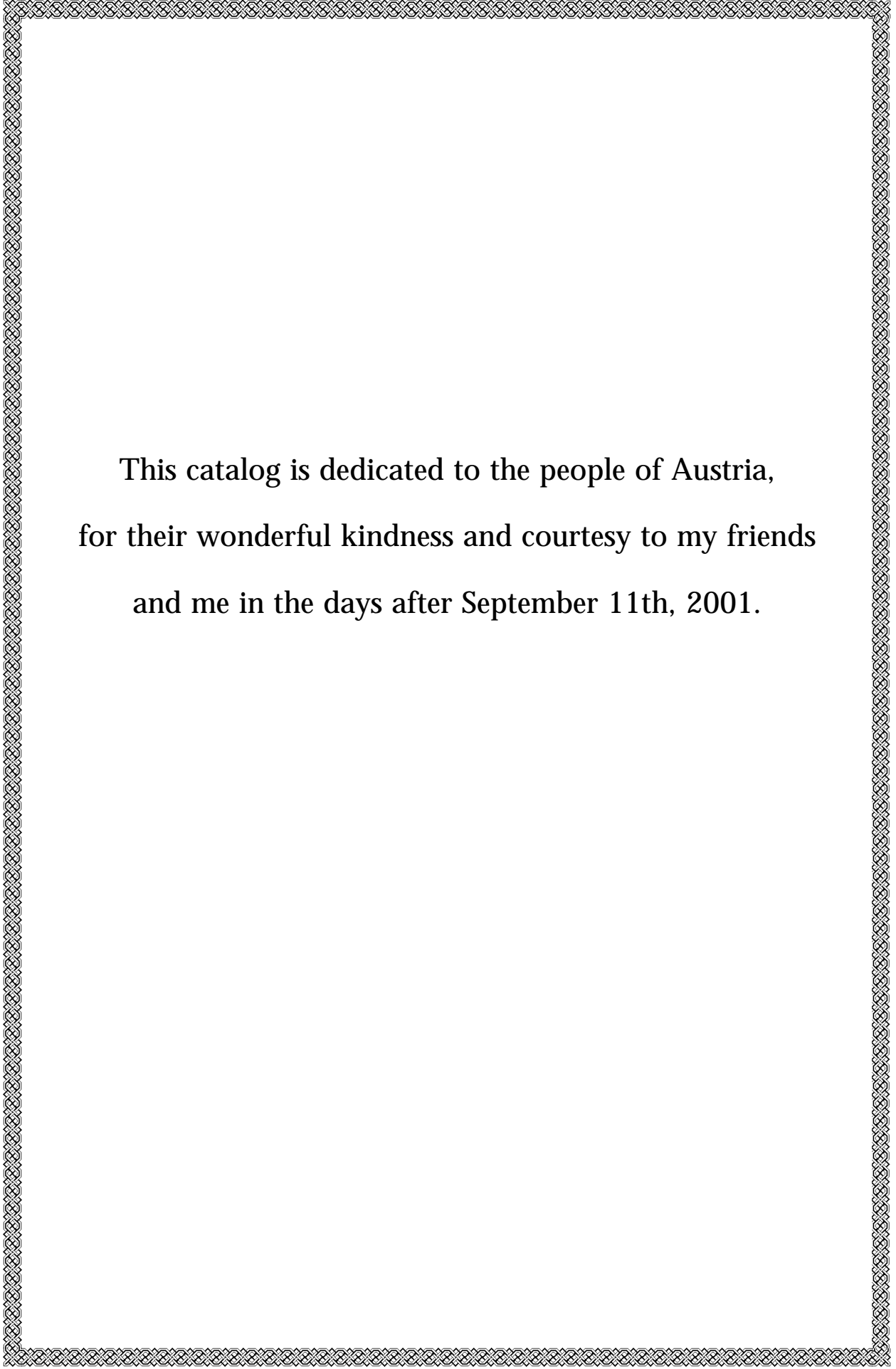
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This catalog is dedicated to the people of Austria,
for their wonderful kindness and courtesy to my friends
and me in the days after September 11th, 2001.

“ . . . every truth is fragile . . . every knowledge must be learned over and over again, every night . . . we grow not in a straight line but in ascending and descending and tilting circles . . . what gives us power one year robs us of power the next, for nothing is settled, ever, for anyone. What makes this bearable is awe.”

- Michael Ventura

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

- D.H. Lawrence

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INTRODUCTION

I had twelve colleagues and customers with me in Austria late last Summer, tastin', spittin' and tellin' jokes, and the trip was going along fine. One day we were visiting Michi Moosbrugger at Schloss Gobelsburg. We had a little lunch and were tasting in the big high-ceilinged upstairs room he uses for visiting dignitaries, and if there are no dignitaries, for people like us. Michi disappears for a few minutes and we're tasting and murmuring and awaiting the next wine. When Michi returns his face is pale. He comes over to me and whispers "There's been some sort of accident in New York, a plane flew into the World Trade Center," and I repeated the news to the group, and we all thought what we all thought when we first heard the news; a strange accident, a small private plane.



But as the ghastly truth began to unfold, someone brought a TV upstairs and we cued up the Austrian 1st Channel which had a live feed from CNN. Peter Schleimer did most of the translating, as the broadcast was of course in German. We sat there with Michi and Peter and watched the images again and again.

Willi Bründlmayer arrived; his was our next appointment. We watched some more. A few of us tried to phone back to the States. I got through to Karen Odessa. Some hours elapsed. Finally, wearily, the repetition of surreal images created a kind of numbness, and we decided to get out in the fresh air of Willi's vineyards, and then see if we wanted to go on visiting and tasting.

After joining hands for a moment of silence, and exchanging many tearful embraces with our hosts and with one another, we drove up into the whistling wind-beaten Steinmassel, to look at the vines and listen to the birds. Nothing felt quite real. The fresh air was good. Willi offered to postpone the visit, but we chose to go ahead with it.

We went down to his tasting room, and for ten or fifteen minutes at a time we tasted as we'd planned, as if nothing had happened to the far-away world, until some-

thing stabbed one of us and the dread returned. And then we'd forget again. At the end of the tasting Willi brought out the single greatest Austrian wine I'd ever tasted (still to this day), a 1969 Grüner Veltliner. I can't speak for the others now, but this wine was, for me, an insistent reminder of some abiding beauty and hope which, in that moment, I didn't want to hear. I felt it clash against my anger and sadness, which made its beauty almost ruthless, savage. All this while the buildings burned and the great wail of mourning arose. But neither could the truth of this great wine be denied.

Eventually everyone got his flight home. Most of us had to wait a few more days than we'd planned. The Austrian Wine Marketing Board provided lodging and even offered concert and opera tickets. At no point were we allowed to feel abandoned. One morning as I was glancing at television, I saw scenes of complete stillness on the streets of Dresden, followed by a similar scene from inside the Frankfurt airport, and then another tableau of a few people standing silently in one of those little stores that sells batteries and radios and cheap watches. It was German TV showing scenes of what must have been a national moment of silence, scenes I later learned were repeated across Europe. I was stunned and terribly moved. We had just snubbed our noses at these people by trashing the Kyoto protocols and looking just like we'd be riding our big dumb horse into our very own big dumb sunset, and all over Europe people stood silent in a gesture of grieving and solidarity.

I stayed on in Europe a few more days. Karen Odessa was to have joined me for a week of hiking, but she couldn't get her flight over. So I went hiking by myself.

It was cold as a bitch. I mean, November weather in mid September. The snow line was at 1100 meters, and most days were gray and blustery. I craved to be with my wife and child. Finally one day was friendlier, just a little warmer and even with occasional peeks of sunlight. I found a trail and hiked it. Clouds rolled in and out; I'd hike in fog for a half-hour and suddenly a massive gothic spine of peaks would emerge. I made it to the little hut—these dot the Alps—and wanted some food. Almost no one was on the trails; it was mid-week, and chilly. I found the hutkeeper and asked if I could eat outside on the terrace. He entreated me to come in from the cold, "It's nice and cozy inside, come and see!" but I explained I was an American, and needed somehow to breathe fresh cold air and look at the huge mountains. "Ahhh, yes . . . I see . . . my heavens what a terrible business," he said, and brought me my lunch with grave solicitude, and wouldn't let me pay him for it.

Three weeks ago I was back in Austria, and as always

it was profusely Spring.

Germany in March has the cressy, silvery beauty of earliest Spring, and the almond-blossoms are sweet and hopeful. But it can be somber if the winter drags on, and the country is bare and candid.

Austria in May is another story. It starts with the flight into Vienna, looking down at all the brilliant yellow fields of rapeseed. Once I'm on the ground, the lilacs start, every lilac in the world all blooming at once, pale purple and lavender and the loveliest of all, the white lilac. Irises and wisteria too, and bridal veil, and the stately horse-chestnuts are all blossoming everywhere. Even poppies wave on their flamingo-stems in the sunniest meadows and embankments. Oleander flowers, and other hedges whose names I don't know. Flowering acacias throw off a scent hypnotic enough to bring a grown man to his knees. The fields are a green so deep you almost cannot bear it. The woods are heavy with the scent of wild ramps. It is an idyll in which you can't be anything but happy.

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

Austrian wine is exploding. If it ain't exploding in your town you should move to another town. The business is going nuts. You can drink Grüner Veltliner in Tulsa, for Pete's sake. (This is true, scout's honor.) Important sommeliers call us to say "We need an Austrian section on our list." The 1985 scandal is way deep history. The bulls are charging. If you're already with us: YEE HA! If you're on the sidelines there's a lot of fun going on without you.

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

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

weight, **food-friendly** wines are made, with rare and wonderful flavors.

- Grüner Veltliner! The last of the great European white-wine grapes. Unique. Adaptable. Food-loving, and delicious.

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

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

As I sell Austrian wines, I see a chilling schism between the curious and the complacent. You don't have to be any kind of hot-shot wine "intellectual" to get at these wines, to sell them, to enjoy them yourself. You just have to be *curious*, you have to want to know what they're like. The complacent, on the other hand, prefer wines that sell themselves

(or which are sold by the wine press) and see any new category with wariness. I have heard many marvelously creative excuses why these wines can't be sold. I often feel a certain kind of person is more creative at finding reasons to say NO than in figuring out how to **sell** whatever (s)he wants to. Customers rise to the level you set for them. Your conviction creates their curiosity, and most of them will love these wines if **you encourage them 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. The rocketing growth of organic foods (and the sensibilities surrounding their production and consumption) is only



Terry rocks out for Austrian wines

partly issues of “healthfulness.” I believe there’s a significance at work; people want to participate in constructive, enriching experience. They like the idea that their food choices help support small organic farmers. They like buying locally not only because the food tastes better but because it’s nice doing business with one’s neighbors, it fosters community and spirit of place. What does this have to do with wine? Just this: 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, late-40s, 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, but this has relaxed as the wine culture matures.

I’d have liked to see it relax yet more in the 2001 vintage, in which most of the wines would have benefited from a discreet few grams of invisible-but-supportive sugar.

I approve of a wine culture with an aversion to confectioning, 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. I’ll beat this poor theme to death in my discussions of the 2001 vintage. 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).

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.



Kevin Pike and Johannes Hirsch

THE 2001 VINTAGE

This is a many-hued fabric, a not-uncomplicated vintage which needs selectivity but which has many wonderful wines, several of which are the best they have ever been.

2001 is one of those years when that which was good for one wine was bad for another. By now you know about the crazy-cold damp September and the genially warm Indian summer that followed throughout October and into November. Botrytis seems to have been a greater factor in Austria than in Germany, and as Austrian table wines are determinedly dry, this is a troublesome thing. I did my best to select away from it if its flavors were at all dubious.

Yet during many visits the whole issue could be forgotten. I keep a running mental tally of what I'll say about a vintage as I'm experiencing it, but with these 2001s I was constantly deleting. "It's a botrytis-vintage . . . oh wait, not really. It's a Riesling vintage . . . hmmm, maybe it's a Veltliner vintage after all . . ."

A few things can be established. It's a 'cool' vintage on the aesthetic wave-length; more ultra-violet than infrared. It's not unripe, but its acids are more prominent than usual, and many of the wines feel *constricted*. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. Some Austrian wines have a tendency to seek overripeness as a sort of id-explosion, and many wines commonly over-the-top were the best they've ever been in 2001. Other wines whose acids are normally just-so, were tight in '01.



I emphasize there's plenty of outstanding wine in 2001, and it adds up to a "successful" vintage, but selecting these wines was harder work than usual and nothing could be taken for granted. Many old favorites faltered. Many wines I'd never liked before *shone*. It's a vintage like this which demonstrates why you can make yourself crazy if you chase "continuity" as a sine qua non.

Good 2001s have great detail and purity, especially at lesser levels of ripeness. I am again delighted as I was last year at how superb the "ordinary" wines are. These are as good as they can be, and I'm happy because they're so affordable and they show how *real* quality has nothing to do with *size*.

Yet the vintage is also marked by an odd tendency; certain of its wines seem to actually *lose* density in the

glass; they enter with a grand flourish of fruit-ripe mineral-soaked flavor but then grow sharper and leaner through the palate. I don't know what to make of this. It's not how bottle-sickness usually behaves. I sense the vintage craves those invisible but immensely helpful 3-4



grams of residual sugar, which would have prolonged the fruit and removed most or all of the sharpness from the finish. The more flexible among the growers have the most ravishing wines. The absolutists have made some pretty tough, stringy old birds.

All in all I'd say it's an even race between Riesling and GrüVe in 2001. The best Rieslings are the best wines of all, but Riesling also failed more often, spiky little weasel that it was.

I don't expect young wine, especially young Riesling, to be flattering all the time. And I know about youthfully closed flavors, and try to allow for them. I look for a balance of components. Fruit may be subdued, but you know it's there and will emerge. Tannin looks a little rough, but it will soften if it isn't too astringent. But when there's blatant imbalance of components in a young wine, I don't think age will *create* balance by itself. I don't see how it can. One grower told me "Every grower's fate is determined by his latest vintage; if it's sour, will his customers desert him?" I sympathize. And, I think it's why so many desperate growers trot out the hoary old saw "The wine needs time." It's a rare vintner who sees his own wines honestly and with perspective. Lucky me that I know a few such vintners.

This is a good year for you to actually read the notes, because if you order by rote you're liable to be surprised. You'll also miss many wines you haven't learned to look for. To sum up, 2001 in general is lighter in body and more piquantly acid than any vintage in the past ten years. This is a GOOD thing insofar as it tamed several normally wild beasts, but it can be a bad thing when it dessicates usually-wonderful wines. Yet is the kind of vintage only explicable in qualifiers. Taste Jamek's Klaus Rieslings (both of them) and you'll wonder how such masterpieces could come from anything but a *Grande Année*. Taste many of the wines I tasted (and rejected!) and you'll say "another over-dry denuded 2001" and . . . both impressions are correct, but only WHEN they are encouraged to coexist.

What sheer fruit it showed alongside 2001! Too much so, in many growers' opinions; they mistrust its speciously come-hither charms. But all of them agree it is perhaps Austria's greatest-ever vintage for red wines. I continue to feel it's an excellent Riesling vintage but only a quite-good GrüVe vintage, and I continue to find the wines likeable across the board.

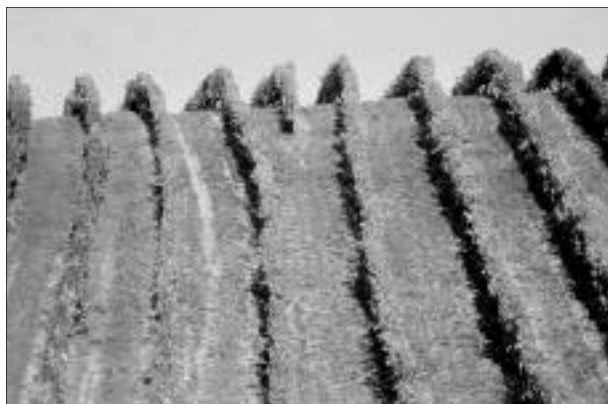
FIRSTS AMONG EQUALS

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.



Grüner Veltliner

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

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

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

Think for a second of Chardonnay. It makes everything from tingly little Petit Chablis to great whumping 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.

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. "**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. You can try this in your own home! (Ring sold separately.)

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 petroly. 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

What does Austria have to contribute to this loveliest of all wine grapes? After all, Alsace wines are (usually!) dry also, so don't we split that market if we take on Austrian Riesling also?

Give me a break! If anyone made that argument about Chardonnay they'd be thought insane. "Well we aren't doing Australian Chardonnays because we don't want to siphon business away from California." And yes, reality-check Terry, I *know* the Chardonnay market is bigger than the Riesling market, though my Jeffersonian belief in human perfectibility has me in pathetic denial about our mawkish affection for that most sleazy of wine-types, but you *would* have more Riesling if you were a *bet-ter* PERSON. You'd eat more healthily, read more books, get more exercise, spend more time with your kids, take part in civic activities, and get laid all the time - simultaneously! Amazing what Riesling can do.

So, what does **Austrian** Riesling do that no other Riesling does? It's the, um, soil. Can we talk about *soil*? Or have the techno-geeks really convinced us that all flavor derives from polyflavinoidalaldehydeazationenzymaticpolymers which we have, in powdered form, in the cellar? (I do ratiocinate!) Austrian Riesling is unique because the soils in which it grows are unique. It's about the **size** of Alsace wine, but with a flower all its own. And there's no minerality on the same **planet** as these wines. And there's sometimes such a complexity of tropical fruits you'd think you'd accidentally mixed Lingenfelder with Boxler in your glass.

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

Pinot Blanc

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

Muskateller

a.k.a. GELBER MUSKATELLER. The latter is more than just eyewash; it distinguishes the superior “yellow Muscat” from its higher-yielding, less refined cousin the Muscat Ottonel. Again, in Alsace the two may be blended—though no disrespect is intended to the Alsacians, who Muscats are certainly the *sine qua non* for the variety. The Austrians make it either bone-dry in the manner of the Alsacians, or exotically rich and sweet à la Beumes 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.



Blaufränkisch grapes

Red Varieties

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 top-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. “You have to be a little crazy to grow this grape,” said one grower. Yet such vines become litmus tests for a vintner’s temperament; like Rieslaner, when you see it you know, ipso facto, you’re dealing with the right kind of lunatic. Now that my friend Glatzer’s St. Laurent is in production, Theise Selections is officially a Laurent district.

The other of the hip red varieties is called **ZWEIFELT**. The last word in red wine! Rolls right off the tongue, eh? Well it rolls right off *my* tongue and down my happy throat, because at its best this is oh-so-drinkable. It should be cropped close, and ordinary 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 didn’t take to right away. It’s of the cabernet type, a little brickly and capsule-y, and when it’s unripe it’s slightly vegetal. But lately I’ve seen much better stuff from this grape. I’d still put it in the Malbec-y school (whereas the Zweigelt is Syrah-y and the Sankt Laurent is Pinot-y). In my recent visit to Austria I remarked that an especially good Blaufränkisch we were tasting reminded me of good Cahors, and someone said “This is far better than any Cahors being made today,” so you get the picture. 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.

Lately there's a discernable trend away from the whole ripeness-pyramid thing in Austria. Most growers don't seem to care about 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 the alcohol. And if there's a vineyard-wine it's because that site gives special flavors. And old-vines cuvées are *tres chic*.

Austrian labels have to indicate the wine's residual sugar. They're actually a bit off-the-deep-end on this issue, but there are recent signs of an evolution. This may be due to certain spectacular wines with modest residual sugar which are so sublime they are utterly convincing. Most growers will now acknowledge that a few grams above absolute dryness are helpful to a wine's fruit and balance. But they won't go the next step and attempt to deliberately produce their wines that way, and the reasons are telling.

"We basically want to leave our wines as nature made them," one man told me. "We don't like the idea of manipulating the wine. You start with a theory that your wine needs 'X' amount of residual sugar, because you had a wine that tasted good that way, or that won awards or was quick to sell out, and the next thing you know all your wines taste the same, and everybody's wine tastes the same as everybody else's. The other thing is," he continued, "we can't use Süsreserve here, and I'd worry about all of the technology we'd have to use to stop the wine fermenting. Not to mention the sulfur. So we'd prefer to just let the wines make themselves, and if we get one with some residual sugar that tastes great, that's fine."

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 reason-

able case to make, provided one has the courage to accept the consequences of making unattractive wines. What too many do, sadly, is to sell unattractiveness as virtuous, in a fine example of Orwellian double-speak.

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

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

The Austrians have just had to change their law to accommodate EU regulations, and the maximum residual sugar level for wines labeled TROCKEN has been raised from 4 grams per liter to **9 grams per liter**. This is some irony! I didn't talk with a single grower who wasn't derisive on this issue. The fact is, with the acids and pH of typical Austrian wine, sweetness levels from 6 to 8 grams really do show, and a sensible feature of the Austrian wine law has had to be sacrificed so some Brussels bureaucrat can have everything tidy. Why can't these nimrods worry about the amount of dog-doots on the sidewalks in Paris, and leave Austrian wines be?

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.



THE AUSTRIAN WINE CULTURE

The Austrian wine culture is giddy, overheated, fun and also a little weird. It has a new-world sense of infinite possibilities, and the urgent *buzz* of a wine scene in full burgeon. Yet it's based on old-world verities. It is surrounded by the redolence of long-simmered loveliness, buildings, trees, gardens, all calling to you from out of the long, slow past. But this wine culture has fundamentally reinvented itself in the last 18 years. (Before the 1985 scandal most Austrian wines imitated German wines.) Yet the lines along which it reinvents itself are largely conservative; fidelity to soil and a healthy aversion to confected flavor.

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

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

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

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

There are encouraging signs this culture is beginning to mature. Many growers told me they were in retreat from the idea of ripeness-at-all-costs and concentrating instead on balance and elegance. The grotesqueries of

many 1998s may have hastened this current. I hope so, because I was getting worried. Even mature growers, who might have known better, were saying things like "We want to see how far we can push (ripeness)," but when they pushed it to yowling, brutal and bitter wines, enough was more than enough. After all, who's to say if 13% potential alcohol is enough that 14% is necessarily better?

This is a slippery matter in any case, because all ripeness isn't equal. A Wachau wine at 11.5% can taste undernourished. Its Kamptal counterpart tastes just fine. Certain Kamptalers with monster-ripeness (14% and up) can taste scorched, but many Wachau wines carry such alcohol in balance. The wise sage of Nikolaihof, Nicolaus Saahs, feels that "wine is a foodstuff and should be above all comely." He also believes by farming biodynamically his grapes are physiologically ripe at below 13% potential alcohol, and many of his masterpieces have 1.5% less alcohol than wines from Hirtzberger or F.X. Pichler. "There is a difference between wines you *drink* and wines you *taste*," he adds. Lord help me, I'm on a roll now. 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.



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.) Jamek's twin-peaks of Klaus and Zwerithaler are both classed as Urgestein sites, yet they're quite different in flavor.

Map of Austria



weingut erich and walter polz

südsteiermark • grassnitzberg

I'm not the only one perplexed that we don't sell more Styrian wine. We sell an O.K. amount, but these are better than "O.K." wines. Seth Allen and I half-seriously raised the possibility of collaborating on a tour for the great Styrian estates so as to raise consciousness for the category. I am possibly myopic, but these wines deserve to be adored and featured to a much greater extent.

I'll use the English "Styria" and the Austrian "Südsteiermark" interchangeably. The city of Graz, Austria's third-largest, lies less than half an hour north of Südsteiermark. The region is one of the most jaw-droppingly gorgeous of any wine region in the world, a chaotic jumble of steep hills with knife-edge ridges, meeting in dreamy folds that seem to stretch into eternity. No consecutive fifty yards are flat. You always seem to be standing on the highest point, looking out at enormous

vistas of velvety undulating green.

Naturally the region became an excursion center for the city-folk of Graz (and farther points also), and most of the growers opened little taverns and wine gardens, and even a few guestrooms if they had the space. Regular hotels and restaurants are also frequent, though all nestle tidily into the landscape as if they had grown from the ground along with the cypresses and poplars. Thus Styrian wine had a guaranteed clientele, and thus it needed merely to be fresh and clean to be drunk happily against a backdrop of some of the world's prettiest scenery.

Two things happened. First, Styria was spared by the 1985 glycol scandal. None of its growers were implicated. Second, the quality revolution which swept Austria after the scandal made its way here too, and a few of the young growers decided to push the envelope and see what came of it.

The best Styrian wines are not **mighty** wines in the Wachau way. They are dancers rather than body-builders. But they stride forward every year, and their best can be fairly placed among Austria's best.

It is hard to depict them without recourse to metaphor. What strikes me about Styrian wines is a quality of *savor*. They are *verdant* in the way that Spring leaves



Erich Polz

are verdant when they have just unfolded and are still sticky, the greenest green that ever is. It's this deep liquid sappiness that takes the place of mere brute power in the best Styrian wines. I wonder why their beaming charm isn't more commercially attractive, but I suppose the same could be said of Loire wines, which are the Styrian's spiritual cousins. I have also noticed these wines are especially sensitive to travel stress, and so they often don't "show" well here. The big-table tasting formats

- Vineyard area: 55 hectares
- Annual production: 29,200 cases
- Top sites: Hochgrassnitzberg, Obegg, Grassnitzberg, Herrenberg, Nussberg
- Soil types: Pebbly sandstone, marl-sandstone, marly silt and limestone
- Grape varieties: 20% Sauvignon Blanc, 20% Morillon (Chardonnay), 20% Welschriesling, 20% Weissburgunder, 20% other varieties

don't flatter them either. I wonder whether these are indeed wines for *tasting* at all. I have the hardest time spitting them; my body seems to want to suck them in. No, they are quintessentially wines for *drinking* and *loving* rather than for *tasting and being "impressed" with*.

And they are profoundly attached to their landscapes and soils and climates. As south Styria is both dramatic and somehow also gentle, so are these wines. If Wachau (and Kamptal-Kremstal) is King, then Styria is surely Queen. We will rock you. I will confess I wish you cared more about a regional distinction like this one, rather than lumping all Austrian wines together. But that's silly of me. I just want to send more business to a grower who's doing everything right.

I'm starting to grow very fond of Erich Polz, and I've respected him hugely from the beginning. He cares immensely, he's indefatigable, he's reasonable, he's humane, he's curious about us, and he's at the helm of an exemplary family enterprise tied to the soil and to his family's roots. Styria could so easily have coasted. Styria could so easily have become precious and cutesy, or ugly and tacky, and yet it is and remains one of the most seamless integration of the human and natural you're ever likely to see. Styria is almost perfectly euphoric, and the afterglow of that feeling makes me want to be a hero to Erich Polz—apart from what a great guy he is.

Styria's climate is more alpine than lower Austria's. Where the Kamptal suffers from drought, the Styrian grower worries about excessive moisture. His ambient temperatures are also a little cooler. His best vineyards are on (very!) steep hills facing south, and his soils change often and abruptly. Thus the wide pallet of grapes are planted. "We're also on a climactic border," says Erich Polz. "Hail, rot, inconsistent ripeness are big problems we face. But it's only in regions like these, where there's a long time between flowering and harvest, that you can produce peak quality. In a sense we're actually glad to have the problems we have!"

The workhorse is **Welschriesling**, which makes a snappy, brisk gulper that just begs to be consumed outdoors on a fragrant summer evening. **Muscat** and **Riesling** are also present, each offering a sweet-grassy savor and a slim but discernable minerality. There's a bit of **Pinot Gris** here and there, but this, with the **Traminer**, are more at home in the volcanic soils of western Styria.

The great triumvirate is **Pinot Blanc**, **Chardonnay** and **Sauvignon Blanc**. Chardonnay is called "**Morillon**" here, having something to do with the chap who introduced it almost two hundred years ago. The Pinot Blancs are unusually complex, and the unoaked Chardonnays can be simply ravishing, with bright blossomy flavors instead of the sometimes mordant minerality that prevents Chablis from having a wider audience. Sauvignon Blanc, when it works, makes such superb wine you're inclined to wonder if you've ever tasted better—and perhaps you haven't.

There are somewhere between six and ten "leading" estates here now, and by most estimates Polz belongs in the top two. I make a point of keeping current with many of the top Styrian estates, and my judgement remains: Polz is consistently among the best at the top level, and he's the very best at the basic level—perhaps more important.

Polz have just finished a snazzy new tasting room, which is maybe why Erich was looking so dashingly scruffy. Long hair suits him! He also had a sweetheart of a vintage in 2001, not grand but winsome, fragrant and precise.

I'm aware the wines are sometimes felt to be on the pricy side. It's all very odd. In some ways you can't have it both ways; if your wine sells for \$9.99 it's doomed to be seen as ordinary and isn't respected. If you demand \$50 (especially for a 1st-release Cal-Cab with oodles of jammy hedonistic fruit) you get respect (except from nimrods like me, from whom you get withering derision) but you don't sell much. One year Erich and I calculated very aggressive prices just to see if "price" was really the issue. Sales appeared to stir, but not to ignite. The wines are far from overpriced, and you know what? Price isn't the issue. The actual issue is, we don't have *time* to be charmed. Wine has a nano-second to "impress" us and if not, it's hasta-la-vista. To be charmed one must engage. To engage one must be available. And able to yield the upper hand. (After all, charm is a force we allow the charmer to exert over us.) This isn't for the likes of us; we're too busy being busy.

Polz is starting to feel many of his region's wines (and his own) are drunk too young. This is a novel attitude in Austria. I saw more cask samples here than anywhere else except Alzinger. There are several wines planned for late release. The old wisdom was to drink Styrian wines young to preserve their fragile fruit, but that results from confusing fragility with exquisiteness. I have the wines in my cellar and drink them between three and six years old and I've never had one *passé*.

I make a final plea to you to listen to these wines. Power isn't all that matters, not in cars, not in instrumentalists, not in baseball players—and not in wines. The *tone*, the *ride*, the *grace*: **THE FLAVOR**. We mustn't forget!

Polz at a glance:

Dynamic leading Styrian estate making feminine wines from many grape varieties. Some of the world's very best Sauvignon Blanc. Uniformly lovely 2001s, just a shade lighter than the last several vintages. Polzs also vinify the wines of REBENHOF, which are thicker and juicier (though a little less exquisite) than their own.

ARP-063 2001 Gelber Muskateller Grassnitzberg

"We were never really satisfied with our Muskateller," said Erich, "so we deliberately lowered the yields by half to get more concentration." Y'all know I like Muscat, and the 2000 vintage was about as wildly gorgeous as the variety can smell. This is close on its heels; crazy-pretty aromas, more in the catty-basil direction but with hints of peach-blossom; the palate is discreet and riesling-like, full of apples, minerals and spices, but then there's a big flourish of Muscat-jazz on the solid gripping finish. The first release to carry the site-name, as Erich begins to feel he's getting to the soul of the vineyard in this wine.

ARP-062 2001 Weissburgunder "Steirische Klassik"

The "Klassik" rubric denotes vinification in the traditional manner, i.e. without oak or other nods toward "international" style. This is extremely charming Pinot Blanc! Scents of diver scallops, wet hay, apples, a whole array of sweetly lovely fragrances; palate is fresh and pretty with wonderful fruit; picture-book Styrian Pinot Blanc.

- ARP-53 **1999 Obegg "Reserve"**
 This is 60% Sauvignon Blanc and 40% Chardonnay (Morillon). Erich wants to market the site name as a significant terroir. It's limestone, and very steep, facing west. This is a Graves-like wine, fine and a little fierce; the Sauv Blanc is tempered by the Chardonnay (which in effect stands in for Sémillon); the oak works, indeed a year in the bottle has subdued it considerably; the wine's splendidly juicy and "salty" and richly satisfying; well-stitched. It made me think of outstanding home-made fish stock you'd reduced by 3/4ths. Erich's policy of late-release is entirely convincing. How to sell it? I dunno! Go beg for Obegg.
- ARP-061 **2001 Sauvignon Blanc "Steirische Klassik"**
 This is filigree and fastidious; gooseberry and tarragon; beautifully chiseled and finely expressive, more perfumey than flinty. Light but long. Very fine foresty-herbal finish, with a deep inner physiological sweetness. A parallel bottling from Rebenhof was more blatant but compared to this it was schmaltzy.
- ARP-064 **2001 Sauvignon Blanc "Therese"** +
 A new wine for Polz, from urgestein soils in the region of Kitzack, about 40 minutes away. The site is called Theresienhöhe; aren't you glad they shortened it? This is different from the nearby vineyards' wines; less varietal and more *terroiré*; in fact this amazing thing is almost like a blend of Savennières, Brand Riesling and Pouille Fumé; granitic, elderflower and currant-leaf aromas; silky-juicy but with amazing *spiel* and nuance and a lovely tart perfume that coats the soft-palate. Wonderful and rare combination of *gras* and spice.
- ARP-065 **2001 Sauvignon Blanc Hochgrassnitzberg** +
 Certainly one of the world's great Sauvignons. There's a friendly competition among a few great names in Styria to see who can make the most breathtaking Grand Cru Sauvignon, and there are times I cannot see how this gem from Polz can possibly be improved upon. Over time I've started to feel this is a great Grand Cru that *happens* to be Sauvignon Blanc. The 2001 has a sensationally complex nose; spiced apple, kiwi, star fruit, *alisier*, lees, sage leaves; splendidly adamant palate, minty and spicy; lands with a big crash and finishes with a sizzle . . . perhaps just a little too much so. As dramatic and charismatic as this is (and I like it a bunch) it'd have been in ++ territory with 4 grams more residual sugar, anathema though such a thing is.
- ARP-066 **2000 Sauvignon Blanc Hochgrassnitzberg "Reserve"** +
 First offering. The most age-worthy lot was aged in large old oak. This is surely a 10-15 year wine. It's unfolding glacially, but teases with glimpses of supernal complexity. All incipient now, but huge; a sleeping giant. Wonderfully salty mineral complexity. Watch this evolve into a masterpiece. If you drink it now, decant it an hour or so beforehand.



hirschmann

styria • roasted pumpkin seed oil

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

And my culinary life was forever changed.

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

What It Tastes Like and How It's Used

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

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

Other Decisive Factors for Quality Are:

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

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

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

Storing and Handling

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

The Assortment

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

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

Bottle sizes

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

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



weingut engelbert prieler

neusidelersee-hugelland • schützen

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

I paid a visit to Prieler a few years ago, but hesitated as I wanted all the available Burgenland-business to go to Heidi Schröck. Well there's enough available business now for the both of em.

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

Sometimes when you're getting acquainted with a new vintner you're just not surprised any more by his



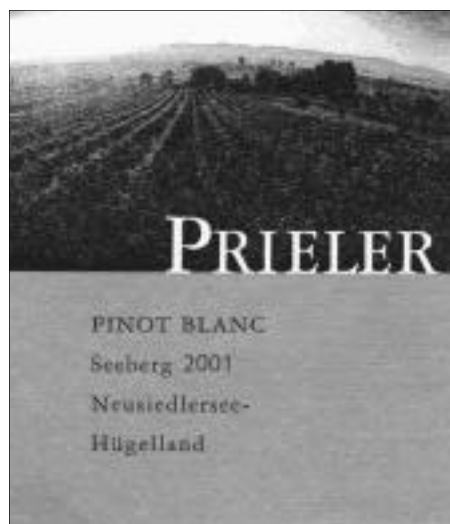
Engelbert Prieler

spiel: *all* the good ones are lowering yields, *all* the good ones are hand-harvesting. You know? Give me something colorful, man, something I can *use*! "Yes, ah, my great-grandmother was married to a horse whom she called 'Mr. Costigan' even after forty-five years of marriage. And this horse actually planted the vines and installed the indoor plumbing . . ."

You know, that kind of thing.

He's up and hobbling around now (after a disastrous injury in the cellar) but that poor foot will "never be the same" and it throbs in damp weather. Luckily there's an heir on the horizon in the form of a charming and ambitious daughter who's been making a few of her own wines, good wines too. He's the kind of sweet man who wants to do everything for you; show you the vineyards, guide you back to your hotel even though you know the way. I even like his dog. But then I like most dogs.

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



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-015 2001 Pinot Blanc Ried Seeberg

The best vintage of this I have shipped and the best I have tasted since the great '97; jammed with scallopy fruit and mineral, and wonderfully solid structure; here's an instance of the 2001-tightness working to great advantage; the wine's generous and big-bodied but not blowsy; rather limestony, reminded me of Fuisse. He makes it in steel with malo (in varying proportions depending on the vintage) and extended lees contact with *batonnage*.

AEP-016 2000 Schützner Stein

A "meritage" of varying amounts of Blaufränkisch (85% this year), Zweigelt and Cab-Sauv. You should know that I suspect my palate of being inordinantly fussy as regards tannin, especially when I've been tasting all day. *Suspect*, mind you, because sometimes when my palate's really been rode hard and put away wet I'll taste what seem to be ideally balanced reds, so that maybe what *feels* too tannic actually is too tannic. Also, you might like tannin more than I do. That said, this wine is tannic to beat the band but with plenty of fruit parading around in there somewhere. I loved its blackberry and violet-y spice; it's a real salivater, with a fragrant, long berried finish.

AEP-017 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon Ungerbergen

Vinaria has a system whereby its various contributors nominate what they feel to be the greatest possible Austrian wines (3-stars in their system), at which time they convene to taste all the nominees blind. They vote simply yes or no, so that any ultimate 3-star wine was determined by consensus. Very few wines make the cut. While at Prieler I learned that this Cabernet had received the coveted three stars, and I happily delivered the news to Bertl Prieler, who received it delightedly. And then I tasted the wine. I prefer to offer you reds from Austrian varieties because these add to the complexity of the red wine firmament. I'm also not convinced the world needs more Cabernet. Yet there is depth here, in an ostentatious way, and I'd like you to see what the best palates in Austria (really) feel is the best-possible Austrian red wine. So dig in.

AEP-018 2000 Silvia Prieler Pinot Noir

Silvia's been experimenting with the wine for a few vintages now but here she really aced it. Which makes me happy because I respect her talent and diligence plus I like her too. There's depth of color, and a densely concentrated nose which unfolds into Côte de Nuits fragrances (Morey especially); generous palate with ample but soft tannins; dark plum and roasted tomato, carob; a contained and classic old-world Pinot Noir.



A Primer on Terroir

Why on earth does this self-evident truth need to be defended?

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

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

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

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

I’ve been challenged that soil’s expression is determined by the weather, the exposure, the age of the vines, among many other reasonably cited variables. And all true, and all irrelevant. Remember my point that soil-component is a wine’s DNA. It is the fundamental building block of that wine’s identity. Elvis is Elvis. Some years it rained and he was thin Elvis; some years it was hot and he was fat Elvis. He was some-

times drunk Elvis, sometimes sleepy Elvis, or cornball, sleazy, charismatic or horny Elvis; in fact it’s safe to say he was every imaginable variety of Elvis his temperament could contrive.

But always, he was Elvis.

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 2000 issue of *Science News*, Damaris Chrisensen has some searching things to say.

“German researchers recently studied 165 wines from six grape-growing regions. *The team showed that the differing proportions of 15 chemical elements, such as aluminium and calcium, can correctly distinguish wines from particular regions with 70-100 percent accuracy* testing for just three elements—barium, silicon and vanadium—and three organic compounds, the researchers correctly identified the geographic background of as many as 90 percent of the wines tested.”

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

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

But surely this argument cuts both ways, if it cuts at all! If you propound soil to gain commercial advantage, you have the same motiva-

tion to deny soil; to maintain your commercial advantage. Any vintner who denies the truth of *terroir* is afraid he doesn’t have the right one! And yes, it is undoubtedly true that some vintners who propound *terroir* do grievous disservice to its potential. But that only proves that people can be lazy or apathetic. The soil remains.

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

No good at all, if you’re looking to *terroir* as a kind of vinous tip-sheet. Wine, at least agricultural wine, won’t do that. Not because it doesn’t like you, or because it’s just cussed and churlish, but because wine doesn’t understand our need to avoid disappointment. Wine, or the soil, or the earth, something somewhere has a thing it has to say, or else why would flavors arise so? Why else would nature have contrived this way for the earth to be tasted? We are meant to hear something, to know something. Wines of *terroir* may be portals into the mysteries of Place, its meaning and spirit. Even more inscrutable, wines of *terroir* are portals into the fundamental Mystery.

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



Steiermark

weinbau heidi schröck

neusiedlersee-hugelland • rust

Heidi and I have traveled around the States a couple times now. As I knew she would, she melted audiences everywhere we went. You feel good drinking her wines, which is how it should be. Heidi's wines have always been good and she insistently continues to improve them. Her Pinot Blanc is unlike any I know. Ditto her Muscat. Her Furmint adds to what-can-be-known about white wine, it's so original.

Heidi herself is original also. At first I didn't even plan to offer any growers in Burgenland, thinking I'd prefer the more vertical styles of the Krems triangle to the warmer more capacious profile of this easterly region. Then I met Ms. Schröck, and reconsidered.

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 calmness of absorption in a serious purpose.



Heidi Schrock

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

- 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

Usually when I'm tasking with a guy vintner for the first time it's a brisk affair and it has a certain amount of Wary Male Circling. With Heidi it was an agreeable process of exploration and when I reflect on it now I am amazed at the egoless clarity of our communication. What kinds of wines do you want to make? What do you see in this one? To what extent do you shape your wines, or do the wines shape *you*? Those kinds of questions. And she was asking her own questions of me: what is it you liked about this wine? or didn't like? what are you particularly sensitive to as a taster? or insensitive to!? She attends to such questions with an intensity that reminded me of Hans-Günter Schwarz at Müller-Catoir, whom she has recently met and made friends with. I'm glad for them both!

The 2001 vintage was light, almost uncharacteristically northerly, and Heidi's wines seem to shimmer and crackle. They're always tardy, though, and perhaps their murmury flavors will still emerge.

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 vint-

ners 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 is somehow more **ancient** tasting 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.

the wines:

AHS-045 2001 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. The '01 continues in the vein of the 2000; in fact it resembles Nikolaihof's Grüner Veltliner *Hefeabzug*, the one they bottle off the lees. It's bottle-schocked and thus mute in pure varietality, but it's highly crisp and bright, a zippy wine. Only after ten minutes of patient coaxing did the Pinot fingerprint emerge. When it's all the way back, with this degree of clarity, the wine should be a knockout.

AHS-047 2001 Furmint

The grape of Tokay reintroduced after nearly vanishing from Burgenland. It's usually confined to the production of botrytis-sweeties but a few intrepid souls are making sizzling exotic dry wines also, and if Loire Chenins are high on your list-o-goodies then no way you wanna miss this. As the vines get older the wines are less scrutable their first six to twelve months in bottle. This 2001 had pale, delicate quince and rosewater scents—it reminded me of Chignin-Bergeron (a fave from Savoie); it's ripe, vigorous and expressive on the palate; Heidi says linden and camomile (and I'd walk a mile for a camomile), but this still-tight wine needs a year, and then ten more years to reach all the way into its mysterious soul.

AHS-046 2001 Muscat

Perfect fragrance. The wine is pristine, light and spicy. A great hot-weather aperitif, like fresh icy mountain water with elderflowers. I'll say it again: Muscat is high on my list of Great Frivolous Pleasures, and I am quite sure the "little" pleasures affirm life as profoundly as the Big Serious Pleasures do.

AHS-048 2001 "Vogelsang"

This means birdsong. Cheep, cheep. It's a locally important site, and Heidi uses the site name to give herself latitude in blending differently each vintage. This one's Welschriesling, Pinot Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc and Muscat! I am *thrilled* how much of this wine you guys bought last year; I imagined its lack of a varietal tag would hinder sales, but oh you're just so much hipper than that. This is one of the great originals in this offering, and Heidi's best 2001; high fragrance, exactly banana; the palate is dry but texturous and quite rich; attractive fruit and much more mineral than earlier vintages. Long tertiary finish.

AHS-049H 2000 Ausbruch Furmint & Pinot Blanc, 12/375ml

This is delightful; lush, woodsy. Pale color, aromas of lemon blossom and peche-de-vignes and freesia; mango and malty flavors wash firmly over the palate; a flavory wine that's thickly sweet yet also fresh and bright. By the way, there's an '01 Furmint & Sauvignon Blanc Ausbruch to be offered next year that's the most Germanically-styled Burgenland sticky I can recall; salty with fabulous vigor.

AHS-41H 1999 Ausbruch Furmint & Sauvignon Blanc, 12/375ml

+

I made this selection from the nose alone. I gave it my little star from nose alone. Also, the palate doesn't suck. 12.8 grams per liter of acidity! Tangelo and spice and honey. It's fierce rather than creamy. Gorgeous dessert wine. Haunting finish and fragrance in the empty glass. You'll see for yourself. I promise you will empty any glass of this you're lucky enough to score!

AHS-42H 1999 Ausbruch Muskateller "Elysium II," 12/375ml

+

Both massive and exquisite. A real Muscat essence, with lovely clarity; an elastic s-t-r-e-t-c-hhhh of flavor, almost like a jam of Muscat. It's *really* dessert, seeming to refer to every possible flower, yet serene and stately. Wonderful achievement for a wonderful vintner who's only just starting to show what she can do.



weingut walter glatzer

carnuntum • göttlesbrunn

Don't accept a lunch invitation if you don't know exactly what you're doing. We were a group of six, Walter Glatzer, his lovely sister Priska, Mark and me and Hacksaw Bill Mayer and Peter Schleimer. First was a platter of empanadas, stuffed with either leek or blood-sausage. I ate three or four; I didn't know what was coming. An enormous tureen of consommé with veggies and semolina dumplings. Then at least five different salads. Then platter after platter of fried chicken and schnitzels: chicken cordon bleu schnitzels, pork schnitzels, veal schnitzels, pork cordon bleuschnitzels. It was a veritable horizontal tasting-o-schnitzels. I ate, I don't know, maybe five schnitzels and a few pieces of chicken. Oops! DESSERT. Oops again, two desserts, including the house-special, semolina dumplings filled with strawberry purée and dusted with powdered sugar.

A light lunch at Chez Glatzer. I don't think I ate dessert, but I wasn't conscious, having passed out after the umpteenth schnitzel.

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-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 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."

- 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

There's also two little kids, one of whom is just a teeny baby, 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.



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-056 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett**
If I were a teacher of wine classes (*there's* a terrifying thought . . .) and I wanted **one single wine** with which to demonstrate GrüVe, I'd use a Glatzer. His is the tabula rosa for the variety, and this 2001 is so perfect-and so let's not-mince-words, cheap-that you really don't want to be without it. It's bright, lentilly and clean; fresh and brisk, a real sucker-downer. Drier than the 2000 and more piercingly vivid.
- AGL-057 **2001 Grüner Veltliner "Dornenvogel"**
"Dornenvogel" (meaning thorn-bird) is Glatzer's term for his best lots. It's regularly the best-value GrüVe I offer. It's riper and rounder than the Kabinett, full of persimmon-like fruit and something of the character of Spanish olive oil; quite a peppery jolt on the finish, after a creamy-lentilly white-bean entry. I wrote "really eggy egg-noodles" and I *think* I know what I meant . . .
- AGL-058 **2001 Weissburgunder "Classic"**
Walter's hit his stride with his Pinot Blanc. Snappy and mealy and bright, good grip and middle, slight bite of ripeness, clean vivid and true. The '01 is perfectly along these lines.
- AGL-059 **2001 Zweigelt "Riedencuvée"**
In essence this is all I require red wine to be. That doesn't mean I don't love the very deep and complex and mysterious, for I do. But I tend to grow weary with the many reds that affect these qualities with ostentatious oak or tannin or hyper-extraction, nor do I find such wines useful with the food I eat. This *Zweigelt* is tender and soft and delightful, with a sweet bacony charm. It has all the substance it *needs*, and if it weren't three-months-away from fresh local tomatoes I'd whip me up a big greasy BLT and suck me down a bottle right now.
- AGL-060 **2001 Blaufränkisch**
This is just *gorgeous*. Red wine (any wine) doesn't need to be solemn in order to be serious; this has immense sappy charm and genuine complexity, all the lamby-minty varietal jazz, delineates into skeins of spice and finishes seductively. *This* is Austrian red at its best, and my perfect vision of delight-o-rosso. Exceptional in its class.
- AGL-061 **2001 St. Laurent**
Haven't these been just wonderful? 1998 was Walter's maiden-voyage, and as usual he aced it. (The man has wonderful instincts for red wine, knowing exactly when to STOP and not let them get too narcissistic.) I adore this grape! If you skipped my introduction, it's a finicky Pinot Noir-ish vine which gives wines that seem to suggest a Burgundy mixed with 15% Mourvèdre. Good examples are kinetic and layered. Finding excellent and affordable St. Laurent had become something of a rosetta stone for me, but the search is over. And let us raise a great cheer, there's actually some *wine to be had!* Not a ton, but more than the mingy driplets we've *been getting*. This 2001 shows the darker, more Mourvedre-like face of St. Laurent; it's rich, plummy and sumptuous but rather more stern than was the 2000. To obtain this quality at any other winery you'd be paying at least 50% more.
- AGL-062 **2001 Zweigelt "Rubin Carnuntum"**
More weight than the basic Zweigelt; more taffeta and more length but still charming and still impossible to dislike. I dare you. Seductively spicy and chocolatey with grinning cherry fruit.
- AGL-063 **2001 Zweigelt "Dornenvogel"**
I got to taste this 8 degrees too warm and then eight degrees too cold (when we forgot it in the ice bucket. This is among the most inscrutable vintages of this wine I've experienced; there a lot of density here—almost opacity—and the Zweigelt-specific note is subdued; but the thing has its own complexity, juicy and dense as it is. Can't wait to see it open and show its fruit. There's virtually no apparent tannin, by the way.
- AGL-064 **2000 "Gotinsprun"**
This is the archaic name for Göttlesbrunn, Glatzer's home town, and it's his brandname for his top reds, in this case a blend of mostly Zweigelt, a bit of Blaufränkisch, a smaller bit of (gulp!) Cabernet Sauvignon and the balance is 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! Because this is dark, inky and plummy yet still *juicy*; large, rich and sweet but with sweet ripe tannins; this never ceases to flatter and delight. If it were Italian with a name like, I don't know, *GLUTEOSO*, you'd be salivating to have it on your list.

This is the most improved winery in Austria the past three years. When I first offered the 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 are just wonderful. The wines are as pristine as they ever were, but now they are simply more *expressive*, more flavorsome, more fruity, and therefore more complex. I complimented

Phillip (son) and Werner Zull (dad) on the working relationship they'd established. "Yes, it's usually pretty smooth," said Dad, while Son added "As long as my ideas aren't too expensive!"

I started to inquire what those ideas might be, but then I stopped myself, I'm not sure why. Something in me didn't need to know *how* this was all being done. I felt it was enough to register and applaud it by compliments both on the wines themselves and on the cooperation between the generations. I'm very very happy to share this news with you: Zull is becoming one of the primo estates in this offering, and the wines are insane values.

Werner Zull was busily studying math and physics when he was obliged to take the reins of the winery owing

- 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



Phillip & Werner Zull

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 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."

Zull describes the vintage as "looking almost sub-tropical through the summer, before the famous September rains. But we had fortune-in-misfortune as it was a cold and windy period too, not just rainy, so we had few problems with rot. Even so we went through the vineyards our usual two or three times and only brought the best fruit back to the press." His 2001s, he says, have higher acidity than 2000 but so well-bound you don't perceive it. Ultra-clean, stainless steel wines with lots of minerality and pupil-dilating clarity! Three consecutive fine vintages strongly suggest a new quality level has been attained.



AFZ-037 **2001 Grüner Veltliner "Primavera"**

Tender, clear, lovely fruit, a little like the Gärtling I used to ship from Nigl; a dear and winning little wine, a light carafe-gulper with surprising length.

AFZ-036 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Sechs Viertel**

A "viertel" is a quarter, or idiomatically a parcel of vines; thus the wine hails from six parcels. It does not mean "sex fearful" as you may have supposed. The wine is lentilly, greeny and fennely; all kinds of fruit; wintergreeny penetration; broad-leaf parsley; long and palate-coating; wonderful charm of fruit; *outstanding* in its class.

AFZ-035 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Ödfeld**

Here there's a hint of botrytis, but engulfed by all the plushness and density of fruit, though there are seriously "dark" GrüVe notes, leeks or ramps or marjoram; rabbitiness and long, focused yet round. Minerally finish to an awfully satisfying wine. A few invisible grams of rs do nothing but good.

AFZ-038 **2001 Riesling Steinbreiten**

A snappy and very "cool" Riesling, as fine as needlepoint; on the lime-blossom and tarragon wavelength; a lovely slim wine, not showy, for easy drinking; ideal wine-by-the-glass. In a vintage where several "important" Rieslings stumbled, I felt it important to draw attention to this fine lil' critter, which so perfectly expresses the fundament of good dry Riesling.

AFZ-039 **2001 Riesling Innere Bergen**

+

Now it's all sweet lime and Japanese green tea, with superbly clear and encompassing fruit; so pretty and charming; long and complex, a pretty mineral skeleton just decked out with fruit; a just-plain-tasty wine but far from simple. The "plus" is for sheer stylishness. Compare to Wachau Federspiel and *exult*: you bought the wine with the flavor instead of the name. Didn't you. . . ?

AFZ-34H **1999 Welschriesling Eiswein, 12/375ml**

Welschriesling isn't to be confused with real Riesling, to which it bears no resemblance either aesthetically or ampelographically. In Styria it's the carafe-slurper. In Burgenland it's either a thirst-quencher or it makes the entry-level stickies. Sweet wet straw is the signature aroma. Often short on substance, I was happily surprised by the brilliance of this lil' fella; it has real Eiswein character, spice and grip and really brilliant *bite*. Given the paucity of really fine Eiswein out of Germany in 1999/2000, take a peek at this.

AFZ-040 **2001 Blauer Portugieser**

How we effect to despise such grapes as these, which give only the simplest (and it must be admitted, often the most sentimental) pleasure. And this wine starts out sappy and simple, but it billows and deepens on the palate, showing suave and tender bass notes; reminds me of good Bardolino; long satisfying finish. You'll blast a sip into the spit-bucket at a tasting and think "Eh . . ." and I do understand, yet; I sympathize with you if your life contains no occasions for a wine like this.

AFZ-041 **2000 Pinot Noir**

"A star is born!" says Zull on his pricelist. Son Phillip, fresh from graduation from wine-university, can no longer be restrained; he must come to terms with the fiend that is Pinot Noir. And in this, his maiden-voyage, he has succeeded. It's real Pinot Noir, with acceptable oak and lots of sweet fruit and *tendresse*, plummy soft tannins and an elegant sheen.

A MELANCHOLY FAREWELL

Attentive readers will note the disappearance of two growers' wines from this offering. I've discontinued representing THIEL and FRITSCH, because sales were soft and it wasn't an effective use of time. It had nothing to do with the quality of the wines. Fritsch in fact performed outstandingly in a tasting of leading Donauland estates (with one Wachauer thrown in as a ringer). Someone should pick him up. Thiel too. Those are original and compelling wines full of character, and he's as nice a guy as you could hope to find.

One never really knows why some things ignite and others don't. You create a cause-and-effect syllogism of varying degrees of plausibility to try and explain what's already happened – but you never truly know. I used Fritsch to supply (primarily) Riesling and GrüVe, and maybe he got lost in the shuffle. Thiel was perhaps too *outré*. The logic of releasing them was irresistible, yet the fact is sad.

Now that it's done, though, it frees me to devote more attention to what's proving to be the core of this portfolio, and it creates a little space should the next superstar-agency swim into my ken.

weingut paul lehrner

mittelburgenland • horitschon

It's especially pleasing to offer you this group of wines, because the vintage is supernal and the "point" has never been made more persuasively; Lehrner's is 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 voices immediately compel my attention. All of which is to say I am very happy to have discovered Paul Lehrner and his wines, and even happier

we have a great vintage to show you.

Once I finally got there and met Lehrner, he spoke such a rapid and opaque dialect it might as well have been urdu. I managed to glean that he's unusually forthright and passionate.

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's candid and he never knew what a chip on the shoulder felt like. He also showed me a neat trick to handle tannin buildup; grapeseed oil. And if you don't have great dark Austrian bread to dunk in it, a demitasse 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.

- 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

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-019 2000 Blaufränkisch Ried Gfanger

Very fine, detailed, precise, Claret-like Blaufränkisch, aged in large old wood. Sweet and lamby, forthright and charming; has 13% alc but works as if it had 11.5, with a fine dusty moderation.

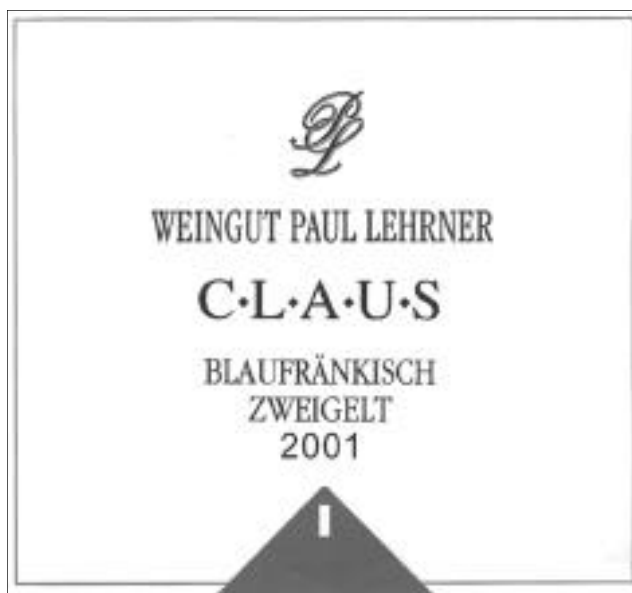
APL-020 2001 "Claus"

This is a field-blend of roughly 50-50 Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch; a juicy, meaty and fruit-driven wine with a charming long finish; violets, ample sweet tannins, and given its ostensible simplicity it's actually juicy complex; grainy texture but all the sweet blackberry and marjoram you could want.

APL-021 2000 Blaufränkisch Ried Hochäcker

You'll see more wines offered this year, because I couldn't leave any of them behind! Thus I hurled logic into the dark void, gave free rein to all my suppressed passions, and ye shall be bludgeoned by Blaufränkisch. These are his oldest vines, and he does it in large mostly-new wood. The wine is crusty and oxtail-soupy; more southern-Rhône in profile; dense and vinous; less fruit per sé, with a forthrightly rustic touch.

- APL-023 **2000 Blaufränkisch Ried Steineiche** ++
 If this isn't the best Austrian red I've ever tasted (which it may very well be) it is certainly the best Blaufränkisch; fabulously sweet yet solidly varietally spicy; ripe tannins and oak in harmony; minty penetration with European "coolness"; highest denominator of generosity and focus. Make haste, as we only have 100 cases and you do NOT wanna miss this beauty.
- APL-022 **2000 St. Laurent**
 His first-ever vintage of St. Laurent is some achievement; ink-dark and primordially deep, with a tarry Piedmontese nose; stewed plum and cracked black pepper; a big groan of depth, lush yet stern through the mid-palate until a note of sweetness enters the finish—this I expect will spread throughout the wine as it develops. All small wood, 25% new. VERY LIMITED.
- APL-15 **2000 Blauburgunder (Pinot Noir)** +
 In a sense this is the St. Laurent's older brother; more settles and at-ease, but taller and thinner. Wears nicer clothes. A sweet polished wine that still needs time for its fruit to hatch from the oak membrane; plummy and resinous; fully done but not overdone; great explosive aroma and lush sweet fruit. The finish suggests great complexity in store.
- APL-024 **2000 Cuvée Paulus**
 They all have their Sassicaia's. This is Cabernet Sauvignon (30%), with the balance Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent. It's fiendishly deep, long and plummy, and the super-Tuscan analogy is entirely apt; bricky and zingy, many-layered. It has more ostensible depth—will get higher scores—and could well make a fine old wine. But such are the depths of my perversity I'd swim against the current and take the Steineiche.



kremstal and kauptal

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

Austria’s best values are coming from the Kamp and Kremstals. This may be partly due to the giant shadow cast by the neighboring Wachau, and the determination of the best Kampers and Kremsters to strut their stuff. For the price 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

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

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-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. If you lined up a slew of them blind you wouldn’t be able to guess at them by dint of flavors; you’d look more for body or thrust, or for the specific styles of certain vintners. You might say that Wachau compares to Hermitage as Kauptal-Kremstal does to Côte Rôtie. It would need another two importers of Austrian wine to get all the deserving growers into our market, there are so many of them. I could actually see myself becoming identified with this region exclusively—The CHAMPEEN of the KREMS-TAL!—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 . . .



weingut erich & maria berger

kremstal • gedersdorf

“These are the kinds of wines I particularly like,” said Erich Berger about his 2000s, “they’re tender and fragrant.” Bergers *could* easily make wines with Z-O-O-O-M!!!! on the palate—Mantler does, and they’re neighbors in many of the same sites. But it’s charm they’re chasing. Happily for us all, they catch it consistently.

I don’t know of a steadier winery than this one. Even in the most difficult years they always make their grinning, lilting wines. In the very *greatest* vintages they still make their melodic medium-weight beauties. This caused them to be (unfairly) neglected in the 1997 and 1999 vintages, because amidst all those Great Wines, theirs were merely as lovely as always!

I don’t arrive here looking for high points, nor do I expect to be deeply roused. I’m always

delighted to see Bergers *Père et Fil* and I am sure I’ll be well pleased with their vintage. Yet an interesting thing took place this year tasting the 2001s. It felt like falling in love. There’s a moment when you can no longer deny your tides are pulling toward someone beyond your power to resist. It’s such a sweet, grave surrender. As wine after wine followed one another, each more melodic and pretty than the last, I began to feel what Bergers are doing is angelic and noble.



Erich Berger

Even when Mr. Berger *senior* disappears into the cellar to unearth a masterpiece, he never brings out a blockbuster. I have now tasted what he says are his greatest Riesling and greatest Veltliner, and they are superb, and yet they excel by dint of greater *length* more than by greater **weight**.

Look, I am a man past my mid-forties. 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

- 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

need at home are wines I can drink *any time* and which taste good with my meals.

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



Berger at a glance:

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

how the wines taste:

The Veltliners are zingy and spicy; in soft years like 2000 they have a winsome 'sweet' vegetality (the red beet aspect); in years like 2001 they have more lift and cut. Cultured yeasts give them all a similar profile; fresh, long in middle and finish, polished, with a finely doughy aftertaste; clean, pure through and through, vital, frisky and crisp. This is a father/son estate of fourteen hectares. Half of the land consists of south-facing loess terraces with locally renowned names. Vines are Riesling, Veltliner, Pinot Blanc and the "C" word. There's some land on the Gedersdorf plateau that's planted to red varieties. All the wines are made dry, of course. They use cultured yeasts to get slow fermentations and to preserve the utmost CO₂. Berger is all stainless steel, of course. Technology for controlling fermentation temperatures, by no means universal in Austria, has been in use here since 1990.

ABG-045 2001 Grüner Veltliner, 1.0 Liter

We sell a whole lot of this lovely wine, and I am proud to have found it. I doubt if there's a better value anywhere in Austria. It's almost pointless to detail its flavors: it's perfect light Veltliner and it has remarkable class for its *echelon*. Stack this puppy and watch it fly. Pour it by the glass and enjoy the happy faces of your guests. The 2001 is even richer and deeper than usual—it's dangerously good, in fact—pure, true and snappy. You want to gulp it from a water glass.

ABG-046 2001 Grüner Veltliner Zehetnerin

+

This must be the first time I gave a star to a wine just because I had such a bastard of a *crush* on it. I don't know when I have ever tasted anything so pretty. It's addictively drinkable, sleek and charming; tender, cressy, with superb fruit; light and perfect, and absolutely transparent. It bears mentioning, by the way, that Bergers had zero trouble from botrytis in '01 thanks to a pitiless green-harvest the third week of September. It's quite moving to contemplate their taking such trouble not to make blockbusters but instead to preserve the pristineness of ravishing little beauties like this one.

ABG-047 2001 Grüner Veltliner Holzgasse

Like the above with more mid-palate weight; still flowery, rhubarby and charming; a virtually perfect mid-weight GrüVe.

ABG-048 2001 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Gebling

Without sacrificing charm this adds depth and layers and even profundity; plum blossom and spring-meadow fragrances; wonderfully spicy palate, tautly fruity and sweetly herbal.

ABG-049 2001 Riesling Spiegel Kabinett

Snap and bite and charm and iridescent freshness; "a stroll through the herb garden," as Berger says, yet I find it more sappy and foresty and wonderfully uncivilized, with surreal clarity; "transparent" doesn't begin to describe it. A *riesling-y* riesling.

ABG-050 2001 Riesling Steingraben

+

In certain years—this one!—this can be marvelous classic Riesling. Rich and full but polished to a high gloss; a gleaming diamond of a wine; penetrating nose, brilliant greengage; palate is pulled gloriously tight; vivid, lavish and succulent. Cruel to miss it.

ABG-051 2000 Blauer Zweigelt Haid

One sip . . . YES! How much do you have? I'll take it all. "All" isn't very much, but man, violets on violets on cherries on spice; velvety and fruity but not at all sappy; just layers of charm and drinkability, even its own complexity. I can never own too much of this type of wine.

ABG-052 2000 Cuvée Maxim

70% Zweigelt and 30% Cabernet Franc; how interesting that Bergers make the rare and appropriate connection between this variety and their own Austrian reds. Everyone else yammers about Cab-Sauv and all the sexier grapes. This was done entirely in barrique, a third new (Austrian) and a third each 2nd and 3rd use (French)—and I love it. Cab Franc dominates the nose. This is all deep fruit, soft tannins, balanced oak, complexity and stylishness. Long, fine and polished.

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.

After a singularly successful GrüVe vintage in '00, this year's collection excelled among the rieslings. I couldn't tell you why! But I do like never quite knowing what's going to happen at Mantler in any given year. It seems truer to the basic human experience.

Josef Mantler's winery has long been regarded as among the best in the Kremstal, indeed as one of the leading producers in all of Austria. Apart from that, he's also carving out original ground with his championing of the rarely-seen variety called Roter Veltliner. Here's Giles MacDonogh in

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

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

I generally found Mantler's wines to be thickly saturated with flavor, adamant and penetrating rather than

- 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

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.



Josef Mantler

Mantlerhof at a glance:

Elite-quality winery producing classy Rieslings, mossy Veltliners and various specialties, and the world's nicest guy!

AMH-033 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Weitgasse**

"Thick for its lightness," I wrote last year. "A lot of weight for its lightness", I wrote this year. I glean a pattern. The wine did 20% malo (I don't recall whether this was planned!) and it seems to help; it's snappy but dense, mineral and weedy, almost flinty, yet also quite solid and meaty.

AMH-034 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Löss Terrassen**

This is the best vintage of this wine I've yet to taste, and it's a classic loess-grown GrüVe; rosemary and lamby; wonderful spice, density and clarity; all kinds of bang for der Buck.

AMH-035 **2001 Roter Veltliner Reisenthal "Selection"**

This is a textbook example of the variety; basically it tastes like GrüVe at six years old, more roasted pepper and smokymushroomy *umami*. Indeed this example is so over-the-top you just have to like it; all musk and sandalwood and shiitakes; spices, pine-sap, duck and plums; a foaming waterfall of fruit here. It's the kind of wine experienced tasters of Austrian wine would remark "What other wine could it be? It *must* be Sepp Mantler's Roter Veltliner."

AMH-036 **2001 Riesling Zehetnerin**

This is snappy, juicy and firm, not at all brisk but a real mouth-juicer; quite long and fenely, almost oyster-shell; hell, almost the oyster itself, it's so saline and mineral. A lovely everyday riesling.

AMH-037 **2001 Riesling Steingraben**

Classic limestony riesling nose (see Berger also), and this is very fine serious stuff; has stony length, tilleul and tarragon, and a wonderful firm thickness. Nods toward the Rhineland now; could easily be placed in a flight of Alsace rieslings and not stand out as Other.

AMH-038 **2001 Riesling Wieland**

+

This has it all; clarity and density and many-dimensional exotica; a haunting fragrance of tropical fruits; lavish fruit and mineral contained in firm structure that itself leads to a solid endless finish. The best since the great '97. A riesling of fine Grand Cru stature.

AMH-24H **1999 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/500ml**

+

This is EXACTLY what it says it is! Magnificently spicy and sassafrassy. A steal. Completely seductive, thrilling and I mean, we're talking *gorgeous*.



weingut familie nigl

kremstal • priel

Even though Martin Nigl has put signs up everywhere with directions to his winery, Priel remains a very sleepy place, up there on its airy plateau above the Krems valley. You get the feeling the nearest disco has to be at least a hundred miles away. Martin still keeps a few chickens in a little coop across the courtyard from his tasting room; you sometimes hear them cluck and hum as you walk through. There's a little white rabbit with pretty pink ears, who lives in a little cage. I stopped to look in on him on my way back from the bathroom. He found a tasty stalk in his dusty pen. Chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp. I left him to his snacking and went back inside to taste more wine.

I was glad to be scheduled for the first visit of the day, as Martin's wines repay a clear palate,

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

I think you know I love to be raised on an updraft of delight when I drink an irresistibly attractive wine. I write about it often enough! It's important and life-affirming. But



Martin Nigl

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

- 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

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 estate has existed in its current form only since 1986, before which the grapes were delivered to the local co-op. All the more remarkable, then, the extent of this man's achievement.

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

He'll green-harvest if need be, and the actual harvest is as late as possible. Only natural yeasts are used to ferment in temperature-controlled tanks. He doesn't chaptalize and his musts settle by gravity; after fermentation the wines are racked twice, never fined, and bottled—as I saw

—first thing in the morning while they and the ambient temperatures are cool. What he gets for his troubles are singularly great white 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. Flavors

seem to be written in *italics*.

The 2001 vintage is atypical across-the-board here. Very few of the wines behave to type. We played with the allocations so I could get more of my favorites (shameless, I know), and this will reflect in *your* allocations.

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-76 2001 Grüner Veltliner Kremser Freiheit

Martin wondered whether his Gärtling, which I have offered in the past, is really meant to travel; it's a summer-wine which excels by its gurgling freshness, perhaps not enough of a Statement for our exalted market. So we're trading up to this loess site in Krems. This wine is already in distribution here, and it's an especially excellent vintage; has its typically fine precise loess GrüVe nose; especially fine-grained and filigree in '01; contrapuntal interplay on the palate; a judicious wine, clear and logical. And tasty.

AFN-077 2001 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben

Two sites, averaging sixty plus years old. Consistently it has been among the top five to ten Veltliners in every vintage, and it is a classic statement of GrüVe on loess. But be patient, as it needs its second year to unfurl its splendors and perhaps ten years thereafter to say everything in its inscrutable soul. 2001 shows a big, deep, beany nose, with fennel-frond and oyster mushrooms; comes onto the palate salty and thick, and a little warm—there's 14% alc and about 20% botrytis; "It's not our usual style," says Martin—but rather more rugged and smokier. It's a truculent little toddler right now, but I can't wait to see where it goes.

AFN-078 2001 Grüner Veltliner "Privat"

AFN-078M 2001 Grüner Veltliner "Privat," Magnums

"Privat" denotes the best wines of each vintage from each variety. This is always molten, like a primordial magma of Veltliner. And the '01 has a remarkable nose, carbon, grilled meat, some botrytis; the wine has a harmless snarl of power and a fervent concentration. As always pure terroir-wine with virtually no "fruit"; a flourishingly mineral wine which behaves differently according to which part of the tongue it's on.

AFN-083 2001 Sauvignon Blanc "Reserve"

This is a late-harvest wine with 15 g.l. residual sugar, and the minute I tasted it I wanted it and took it all. The nose is in-your-face (where else would it be?) but the palate is original, and better-balanced than the one or two late-picked Sancerres I've had; all woodruff and currant and spring-onion. I find it bizarrely delicious, or deliciously bizarre, but in either case the sweetness is in perfect balance and this wine will *fuse* with your fusion.

AFN-079 2001 Riesling Senftenberger Piri

VINEYARD PROFILE: Piri is a large site, entirely terraced, entirely on brown Urgestein with medium-thick topsoil. Whatever comes from it has fragrances of iris, pepper and iron. Martin's Rieslings often show a fine, subtle melange of peach and blackberry. This '01 smells just like white irises, and oh, this is very fine all the way; elegant and focused; lovely dark mineral poised against violet; a softly tactile dispersal of mineral. Wholly good riesling.

AFN-080 **2001 Riesling Kremser Kreamsleiten**

+

Year after year this is the sexiest of Nigl's Rieslings, the one with the most peachy exotica, often with a helpful tease of sweetness. This is one of the great rieslings of the vintage. All apricots and honeysuckle, recalling its neighbor the Kögl; acacia-flower fragrances also; the palate is incredibly slim and lithe behind all that fruit; the sense of restraint is quite poignant. Mirabelle comes into the finish. A blonde blue-eyed nordic kind of wine, radiantly great-looking and not a sloppy bone in its body. "It took two months to ferment, and I didn't sleep during this time," said Martin. "I thought he'd never stop!" (Aside: don't you like that in many European languages wine is gendered, so that it's a "him" and not an "it"? I do. Makes it more animate and less of a Thing.)

AFN-081 **2001 Riesling Ried Hochäcker**

This is in fact a small sub-section of Piri on poorer soil, and it has consistently given Martin his most mystically complex wine. Pour it at night and you'd think it could attract the aurora borealis. All the more reason to wonder at this perplexing 2001. The wine will be discussed for years. It has its nose, and the usually lovely clarity of mineral nuance is even more visible than usual, but Martin, unusually, did skin-contact with this riesling and it's rather obtruded on by its something that seems like botrytis but which is actually not. He counsels patience, at least 6-12 months' worth. I like the greengage-like fruit (a lot) but dislike the phenolic bite on the finish. So I'll defer judgement for awhile.

AFN-082 **2001 Riesling "Privat"**

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AFN-082M **2001 Riesling "Privat," Magnums**

Often this represents a pinnacle of Austrian riesling – of riesling period. The 2000 was the wine of the vintage for me. This comes very close. It's all iris at first. A gorgeous entry, superexpressive, tautly pulled mineral with endless greengagey-gingery fruit behind; solid and sizzling all the way through, yet never *mezzoforte*, never screechy or overstated. The fruit outlasts every other component here; it's at once ringently powerful but also fastidiously complex.



weingut erich salomon/undhof

kremstal • stein

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

As we sat outdoors in dappled sunlight on a warm Spring day (it's almost idyllic but one is pulled firmly down to earth by the noisy train-line not to mention Austria's largest *prison* right next door) I realized the Change had come, and I was sitting with the two brothers as co-proprietors for the first time. Sitting behind my computer now, I wish I were back there. You need time to soak into

such experiences and let human spontaneity emerge. In a three-hour visit every moment has to count; it's a kind of theatre. Ah, it's just my Wordsworthian side coming out, I guess. Bert and Erich surely have better things to do than while away a whole afternoon with the likes of me. They've heard all my jokes and quips.

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.



Berthold Salomon

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

- 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

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

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

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

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

I think of Selbachs. Johannes is the driving force behind the **superb**-ness of the wines, but it is Hans his father who is the spiritual and ethical compass for the family, just as it's Sigrid his mother who makes such things

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

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

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

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-37 2001 Grüner Veltliner "Hochterrassen"

Another wine that's already here makin' the scene and flirting with the servers. Berthold shows his acumen here, as he's helped bring about a virtually perfect quaffing GrüVe at an attractive price; the 2001 is lentilly, fresh, slinky, salty and complete.

ASU-039 2001 Grüner Veltliner Wieden

The site is a flat vineyard at the foot of the hills, "a layer of strongly weathered eroded schist mixed with riversand and loess on a bed of riverpebbles" and I am repeating this partly to fill space because we were talking up a storm and I barely took a tasting note and what I did write was in German! I found the wine discreet, sorrelly and with a tender texture.

ASU-040 2001 Grüner Veltliner Lindberg "Reserve"

40-year-old vineyard on terraces of loess mixed with weathered schist. Put Lindberg in one of *your* flights to-day! There's a fine ripe nose in the vetiver-persimmon direction; complex and salty; palate is refined and mealy and granular; a lovely intricate tender GrüVe, less pointedly peppery than was the 2000.

ASU-041 2001 Riesling Kögl

We debated whether the label should say "Koegl" (which I argued doesn't look very nice) or "Kögl" (which they argued nobody sees the umlaut) so it could go either way. Terry's little Kögl exercises . . . but the WINE, ah; the wine is lovely. All hedgeflower and grassy-green tea (specifically a kind from China called Tai Ping); sleek, dense and texturous, raw-silk; vetiver fragrances, as if it were riesling imitating an aspect of Veltliner, only with slightly finer bones. Charming and inimitably Austrian.

- ASU-042 **2001 Riesling Pfaffenberg** +
 This is one of the great vineyards for Riesling in all the big wide world. There's more of a puréed, semolina feel to them, less steely. This smells like peach jelly and jasmine, wonderfully flowery and chalky, almost Champagne-like; gauzy transparency, fine length; flavors of greengage and chalk and peony. Certainly the *single greatest riesling value in this offering*.
- ASU-043 **2001 Riesling Kögl "Reserve"** +
 More salty and roasty now; a juicy succulent veal roast with red peppers and plums in the pan. It's as if it's three weeks later in the Spring, warmer and more fecund and full of a general buzz and hum of the warming world.
- ASU-044 **2000 Riesling Kögl "Reserve"** ++
 Man I *like* all this lavish fruit against the regal reserve of 2001. This now is more berried, taffeta, riper and more gregarious and piquant; turnipy and again, uncannily like 10-year-old Blanc de Blancs; has wonderful drive and fabulous complexity of mineral and sweet vegetable elements. The others around the table are surprised at my slutty taste—the '01 is more impeccably "riesling," but goodness, flavor counts for *something!* **First offering.**
- ASU-33 **1990 Riesling Kögl Spätlese**
 This 1990 Kögl is a library release. Erich intends to continually offer wines in the second stage of their development. After the 1990's gone a 1995 is in the wings. Meanwhile, it's a gift of providence to have such wines to play with. Bear in mind they come from a very different cellar regime than that which prevails now. Apart from being wonderful Riesling, this is a herald from another age, mealier and woodsier, smoothly textured and just off-dry. You don't feel either the 9.5 grams per liter of acidity (!) or whatever residual sugar may be present. You do feel this lovely flavor of mulled peach-cider coating your senses. This is also deeply, fundamentally Austrian.
- ASU-045 **1987 Grüner Veltliner Wieden**
 I hope we still have some when you read these words. It's '87 all the way, that famously unripe year which gave so many slim and adorable wines. Light, limey, transparent, wonderfully complex nose; leafy, incredible intricacy of herbs; one of those wines that perfectly shows that ripeness and concentration per sé are relatively unimportant. The finish is like lightly toasted egg-bread. See if this 24-year GrüVe from a piddling vintage isn't one of the most original and interesting (and *good*) wines you've ever tasted.



weingut bründlmayer

kamptal • langenlois

In many ways Bründlmayer is the poster-child for the 2001 vintage and its strange brew of opportunity and challenge. Nothing here was predictable. And I'm starting to feel that Willi Bründlmayer, this lovely and mysterious man, wants it that way.

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

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

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

When I first met Willi, he was one of a contingent of Kamptal-Donauland vintners who has arranged to present



Willi Bründlmayer

their wines to me in Krems. It was a convivial group of colleagues, each tasting the other's wines, no secrets, no jockeying for position. Willi kept to himself for the most part. I'm hazy on the details, but I recall learning that the wine in my glass (not one of his) was unblended. I'd asked whether it was at all thinkable to adjust a low-acid 1992 with a judicious few liters of

1991. I turned to Willi, hoping to score a point for my broad-mindedness, and said I wouldn't object to such a practice if it made for a better wine. But he wasn't having it: "I actually have more respect for the vintner who refuses to alter his wines in any way," said he. "It shows someone who

- Vineyard area: 60 hectares
- Annual production: 23,300 cases
- Top sites: Heiligenstein, Steinmassel, Berg-Vogelsang
- Soil types: Primary rock with mica slate, calcarous loam, gneiss desert sandstone with volcanic particles
- Grape varieties: 33% Grüner Veltliner, 25% Riesling, 15% Pinot Noir, 10% Chardonnay, 17% other varieties

is determined that his wine be truthful and who will not compromise." There it is again; truthful.

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

"All different wines are aged by the classical method in oak and acacia casks in deep vaulted cellars. In the vineyards the family apply organic principles (no chemical fertilizers, herbicides and chemical sprays)." Bründlmayer neither crushes nor pumps 90% of his musts; the other 10% is macerated overnight and crushed to emphasize varietality. Willi's been around since 1976, first in the vineyards and then in the winery beginning in 1981. It's an efficient operation with many familiar gizmos, and Willi's *au courant* in all the winemaking lingo.

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.

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 60 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-90 **2001 Grüner Veltliner "Kamptaler Terrassen"**
This is all from loess. A lovely GrüVe; transparent, zingy, lentilly and bready with lovely bouyant lift.
- ABY-094 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg**
From these schisty terraces come wines that always act like riesling even when they're not; this is remarkable GrüVe, with exceptional polish; a stony, marbeline texture; a filigree and minerally Veltliner; quite long and solid and almost adamantly detailed—you will attend. And be oh so glad you did.
- ABY-095 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Alte Reben** +
This is surely the best of these since the great '97, and here's an instance of the '01 tightness working to a wine's advantage; there's incredible conciliation of mass and detail here; fragrances and flavors of hay and morels and lobster mushrooms; bright and leafy, dense yet brilliant; spicy highlights, and a wolfishly sly mineral grin on the end.
- ABY-096 **2001 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. I tasted a 2-week-bottled wine; it was like a thick *gelee* of Veltliner. It flirts with being obtrusively hot but is supported by huge mass on the mid palate, and fruit will emerge as the wine recovers.
- ABY-91 **2001 Riesling "Kamptaler Terassen"**
A firm, fragrant dry Riesling; crackly-vivid, limey and grassy-herbal.
- ABY-097 **2001 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 '01 seems to feint toward Sauvignon Blanc at first before returning to its riesling-soul; mineral, tarragon, white-iris, lilac, red-currant; gloriously taut and electric; more zing than the 2000, and quintessentially Austrian.
- ABY-104 **2001 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**
A true Grand Cru and one of the greatest homes for Riesling on earth; It's an imposing hillside, all terraces, facing south, with a primary-rock soil based on permafrost. Its wines are invariably (even the Veltliners) exotic, papaya, lichi, ginger-vanilla, firm, dense and minerally. I have four guys with vines there and wish I had more; it's the kind of site you can never have too much of. But The Great One seemed to falter in this vintage. At first I thought I wouldn't offer it, but Willi and I had a meeting of the minds. Though I am not officially "selecting" the wine (it won't have my name on the label), neither am I willing to block it from getting to you. The wine is something of an institution, and you should form your own impressions of it. In essence, it was (for me) an instance of the 2001 austerity leaching away too much fruit and sensual appeal. It smells very fine and enters the palate handsomely but seems to sharpen at the end and finish very spiky. Willi believes it's a classic young Heiligenstein, whose character is innately tardy; the classic duckling that becomes a swan. He may well be right. My fear is of a fundamental imbalance that time won't ameliorate. We will see—and so will you.
- ABY-098 **2001 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein Alte Reben**
This is a riesling monument carved in iron and granite. The wine has implacable stony complexity; almost opaquely concentrated, and longer than "length" can encompass; the huge fruit is discernable but still inchoate. *This* is an instance where the "too young" thing is intuitively true; the wine will always be more profound than it is gorgeous but I have no doubt it will explode magnificently into flavor, some time! *Even now*, though, it's head-shakingly impressive.

ABY-099 **2001 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. This is more yielding than the Alte Reben, but that's neither here nor there; what really impresses here is a sizzling undertow of *green*, every blade of fragrant green thing; it could almost be Veltliner, but for a lime-grassy almost *Rieslaner* aspect. Improbable wine, and possibly great wine.

ABY-100 **2000 Bründlmayer Sekt**
 I spluged 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. Vintages differ; we have an extraordinary 1999 in stock now. I tasted the first disgorgement of 2000; it has more sheer fruit and mineral, more vinosity and complexity though perhaps less autolytic juju than one wants from fizz. But the next disgorgement may well have the best of both worlds.

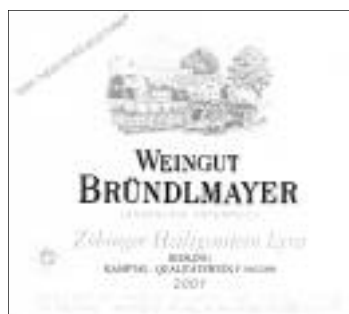
STICKIES:

Dessert-wines are less than a basic intention yet more than an afterthought in lower Austria. They are far from the economic or aesthetic basis for a winery. They seem to be made according to un-sought opportunity, and often they're presented with an air of "Naturally these aren't what we really *do* here, but, well, what else were we gonna do with the grapes, you know?" Yet oddly, in good wineries when conditions are right, to my palate there's **NO QUESTION** such wines are the **best** sweet wines made in Austria. I will never forget sitting in Bründlmayer's Heurige, late for the next appointment, figuring I'd give a quick once-over to the inopportune quartet of '98-vintage sweet wines Willi brought to the table. And emerging forty minutes later, my mind blown and my senses virtually wracked with bliss. I was humbled too; till then I'd approached such wines with an air of "O.K., ha-ha-ha, let's see the little sweet-ums y'all made," but upon tasting through those '98s of Willi's, and being more moved than I'd ever been by a range of dessert wines at any winery expect Müller-Catoir, it was clearly time I grew up. Thus this trio of 2000s; packed 6-to-a-wooden-case.

ABY-101H **2000 Zöbinger Heiligenstein Riesling Beerenauslese, 6/375ml, wooden case**
 Wonderfully, it tastes like Heiligenstein, and this despite a hefty helping of (clean!) botrytis; stylish, firm and spicy; many-layered and suave; full of spiel; the flavors play in four octaves; man there's everything (laurel, linden, lemon-blossom, white chocolate) twitchin' around through here!

ABY-102H **2000 Zöbinger Heiligenstein Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese, 6/375ml, wooden case** +
 This craved oxygen but when the massive fruit finally emerged it completely subsumed the botrytis; exceptionally fine honey here; tender, vinous; papaya, talc and new leather; deft and balanced; pure dried fruit.

ABY-103H **2000 Grüner Veltliner Loiser Berg Trockenbeerenauslese, 6/375ml, wooden case** ++
 Frightening stuff here! One of the great sweet Austrians ever, GrüVe with its own honey; crazily high-toned and spicy, varietally and site-specific; galvanically spicy and ringent, with length and the sweetest lime-verbena-jasmine flavors.



why does place-specificity matter?

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

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

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

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

Big chalk cliffs on a walk in Champagne. I'd been tasting five days and needed a walk to shake out the bubbles. I had one of those accumulated-finish tastes in my mouth that you get when you've been tasting one type of wine for many days. It was September, a week or so till harvest. A little fissure in the hills through which I walked revealed the cliffs, a chalk so white it shrank my retinas. I had a little walking-daydream in which I remembered a producer of California sparkling wine telling me years ago, "You know, we have the exact-same degree-days they have in Épernay," and he was very proud of this, as it showed he had studied the question, done his due diligence, and found the perfect spot to grow grapes for sparkling wine.

I had one of my Moments: in my fantasy I took the hapless chap by the face and pressed him right up against the chalk . . . "But ya don't have *this*, do ya buster!" I cried, mashing his pitiful face against the powdery rock. "It's the SOIL, stupid!" I added. "Now go clean yourself up."

Later, and calmer, I was driving down an especially inviting road through a tunnel of huge elms, appreciating the tranquility of the Champagne countryside. Odd, I thought, that such a vivacious wine hails from such serene land. But then I realized the vivacity of Champagne is the voice not of the landscape, but of the crisp nights of early September, and

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

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

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

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

How do we know when WINE is expressing spirit-of-place? Romantic notions aside, we need some-thing tangible to grasp. Here it is: When something flourishes, it tells us it is at *home*. It says this is

where I belong; I am happy here. I believe we taste “flourish” when a grape variety speaks with remarkable articulation, complexity and harmony in its wines. We know immediately. And the very best grapes are those who are persnickety about where they call home. Riesling seems content in Germany, Alsace, Austria. It can “exist” elsewhere but not flourish. It likes a long, cool growing season and poor soils dense in mineral. Then it can rear back and wail!

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

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

Right next door to the southeast is Himmelreich. This is an undulating hillside with sections of varying steepness. In Domprobst you hit rock six inches below the surface; in Himmelreich

it’s often a foot or more. This gives the wines more fruit, and makes them less adamantly fibrous and mineral, more forthcoming, and just a little less superb. If you’re a vintner with parcels in these sites, you know them as if they were your children. You don’t have to wait for the wine to see their distinctions; you can taste them in the must. You can taste them in the *grapes*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

weingut schloss gobelsburg

kamptal • gobelsburg

Here's a happy story.

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

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

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

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

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

In fact I have the ever-stronger impression that Michi's really *arrived* now; he has three straight outstanding vintages behind him (2001, improbably, the best yet), and his basic style is beginning to emerge. Somehow everyone thought this process would be instantaneous, but things take the time they take. Austria's hyper wine culture notwithstanding! Michi's wines excel by precision and polish now. Their texture is truly silken, and their "temperament" is as pensive as that of their maker.



Michael Moosbrugger & family

Botrytis was an issue here in 2001, as it was most places, but Moosbrugger aquired a slow conveyor-belt by which to separate bunches in the press-house, and this did much to create the wonderful clarity of these '01s across the board.

Michael's natural expression when his face is in repose is inscrutable and melancholy, but I hope he smiles when he reads this. He has much to be proud of.

- 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

Not only were the wines all kinda lovely, but there are two wee ones now and a young mother who glows and cracks jokes and looks angelic, and a Spring garden and an alfresco lunch (and a bottle of 1979 Amoreuses from Vogüe which defined Burgundy) and a tree full of gossipy birds, all a great inscrutable distance from the cold pall of 9/11 when I was last there. All in all it was a portrait of a young, loving family with all the pieces in place. Add great wines and stir, and be stirred.



Gobelsburg at a glance:

New life breathed into an old monastic estate, with Willi Bründlmayer as consultant. The wines are excellent VALUES while Moosbrugger consolidates his reputation. They won't always be so. The 2001s are soaring above their class, and Moosbrugger has ARRIVED.

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 2001, 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. Occasionally his bigger wines remind me of being pulled around by a large hyper dog; you wonder who's in charge of the proceedings. Power is untamed, and runs away. Most 2001s avoided this. And some of the wines offered below are some of the *finest* in *all* this offering.

- AZZ-039 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Gobelsburger Messwein**
An adorable little GrüVe, all dimples and rosy cheeks; clean, softly lentilly, and long for its weight. "Messwein" denotes its suitability for high mass. I wonder what kind of religion could ever use Cal-Chard in its religious services. . . .
- AZZ-040 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Gobelsburger Steinsetz**
As perfect as always; classic primary-rock GrüVe, ore-like and ferrous with a cressy tat-soi snap; but with charming fruit, a fine weave and a spicy finish.
- AZZ-041 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Kammerner Renner** +
With this wine I knew we'd entered another era at Schloss Gobelsburg. This is a wonderful Veltliner from a gneiss site, full of chirrup and gossip, a wine that dances five steps at once; dense yet etched and detailed; power with transparency; snappy yet full of inner sweetness, complete, culminated; lime and wintergreen; a Veltliner that behaves like riesling; exceptionally verdant and sappy. A *crazy* value at this price: don't miss it!
- AZZ-042 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Lamm** +
Well well; the young wizard has wiser magic than the old mage in this vintage. This is Michi's high-water-mark for GrüVe (ah but the night is young. . .); more enamel than the Renner; a fine ripe Veltliner; hay and lamb and rosemary; really shimmering; has the same jumpy complexity of Renner on a larger scale, with more *demi-glace*; gorgeous fire of zingy greens; refined, delicious, intelligent wine.
- AZZ-043 **2001 Riesling vom Urgestein**
From young vines in the Grand Crus Gaisberg and Heligenstein; often this wine seems like a perfect miniature, but it's really complexity 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. The exquisite nose is all iris; the palate is salty and refined with a fine granular texture; fine length and polish. Everything about it is refined, yet never precious.
- AZZ-044 **2001 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**
Raw-silken texture and rivulets of apple-blossom cream running through; dry and cool but wonderful flavor and a lovely endless murmur of refined fruit. Seductive yet coolly aloof; feline and lovely.
- AZZ-047 **2000 Zweigelt**
Michi is no longer perplexed that I want to taste his reds. This is really everything I want Austrian red to be: sappy and deep, soft but with murmuring depths. Tender, fruity, moderate but long. Perfect in its perfect way.
- AZZ-045H **2001 Grüner Veltliner Eiswein, 12/375ml**
From the Steinsetz. No note here as I tasted from a pre-filtered cask sample, but he's really showing a sure hand with these; the wine promises to be zingy and true. Probably one+ quality.
- AZZ-046H **2000 Riesling Heiligenstein Trockenbeerenauslese, 12/375ml** +++
A supernal masterpiece. Fabulous refinement; gossamer transparency and spectrally vivid yet ultra-concentrated; crystalline texture; pure honey but not "burnt" but rather like fine linden-blossom honey; wonderfully mineral. Simply perfect sweet wine. I need ten stars for this. And *you* won't need many buck-a-rooties to buy it, but you will need to hurry; there isn't much. (And there'll be even less once I plunder it for my stash.)

weingut ludwig hiedler

kamptal • langenlois

The good news: **outstanding vintage, the fourth in a row.** The bad news: Aw, *crap!* There is very little wine.

This is probably not news any more. Ludwig Hiedler appears to have entered his *prime*. He's in the zone. He's seeing the ball and hitting it with the fat of the bat. The man is *cookin'*. And bless him, he goes his own way. No one else's wines are great in quite this way.

Ludwig Hiedler—who is just the nicest imaginable guy, and who is dedicated to the point of derangement to his wines—likes extract most of all. “It’s the single most important facet of wine,” he says. “That’s why I don’t believe in the whole-cluster pressing, because you lose too much extract.

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

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



Ludwig Hiedler

Hiedler’s wines are like he is, both intense and genial. He makes a white Zweigelt and a Malvasia both of which are suffused with summery charm, but which are snatched up for alfresco slurping by the sensible locals. And for many of the wines you’ll see offered below, there are sib-

- 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

ling wines of virtually equal quality.

I liked him instantly and instinctively. He’s informal, open, transparent. He’s quite candid about his wines, thoughtful too. Even his tasting room is clear, a modern, white room under a tempered-glass sunroof. He feels the wines of Kamptal-Donauland 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 also unusual in his use of a different yeast culture for each grape variety, the first time I have seen this.

Ludwig and I make better chums each year. There’s something earthy about him that I trust, and I see it in his wines, too. They’re lustier than Bründlmayer’s, a little more visceral. He likes describing fragrances in terms of light and dark; he’s at home in metaphor. It signifies a person with an intimate and intuitive relationship to wine.

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-065 2001 Grüner Veltliner Vier Weinberge

Literally "four vineyards", a blend of four parcels each too small to vinify alone. Here it's all roasted corn and flowering fields and roasted red peppers; juicy and elegant; has the Hiedler *gras* and a blossomy note but with a sorrelly cressy underflavor; wonderfully amenable and interesting.

AHL-064 2001 Grüner Veltliner Thal

This is always a terroir creature, old vines (nearly 70 years old by now) on a complex Urgestein; there's a classic peppery nose like mizuna; remarkable firm and cogent, even stern, but far from austere; a deep smolder of complexity; meaty and crusty and blackened; not as "easy" as the above, but more to ponder.

AHL-066 2001 Grüner Veltliner Thal-Novemberlese

+

The past several years Ludwig's been picking the botrytis fruit first and leaving the clean fruit hanging for a later gathering. This has a sensational nose, a perfection of Grüner Veltliner, and the palate is seriously peppery. GrüVe fruit at an apex, and then a wicked lash of spice at the end; all vetiver and persimmon; sinewy considering its big-bodied structure.

AHL-067 2001 Grüner Veltliner "Maximum"

Even juicier now, and with well-integrated botrytis; the second wave of flavor is still knitting together, the botrytis is rather aggressive, but on the finish it marries once again; a glace du viande of GrüVe; smoky, meaty, little black morels. A year from now I'll wish I'd been more fulsome!

AHL-068 2001 Riesling Loiserberg

Slate par excellence. This is about as perfect as mid-weight dry Riesling can be; sleek, key-lime, diddy-boppin' wine. Almost Mittelrhein profile; verbena; lively and frisky and wonderfully gulpable.

AHL-069 Riesling Steinhaus

+

Ludwig's continually acquiring more Riesling vineyards, although he himself isn't a "Riesling man" (he likes Pinot Blanc most of all), thus it's remarkable to see his sure hand with them. This is the second vintage from a new acquisition, pure gneiss soil, next door to the Steinmassel; the wine is sensational. We were all jazzed over it and kept talking about it for days. It's so curranty and woodruffy with Sauvignon Blanc accents; the palate is jumpin' and jivin' with more lemon-verbena or even lemon-basil; gorgeously fruity but so fervently exotic and green, with mirabelle showing up on the finish. Long and masterly. AND, with its distinctly un-Austrian 8.8 g.l. acidity there are also, hooray, 8.5 g.l. residual sugar. *It works, it works, it works.*

AHL-070 2001 Riesling Gaisberg

+

With the first sip of this wine I rose from the table and went outside; I was so roused and moved. And then the curious 2001 thing started to happen; the wine seemed to unravel before my eyes, and by the end I wasn't sure *what* it was. The nose is instantly compelling, at first simply great, later possibly great but with more botrytis. The palate is piquant, with a haunting berried complexity, endlessly intriguing, filigree but with an *embossed* texture—this is virtually tactile, as if tiny flavor fingers softly scratched your tongue. Ultimately the wine grew more tart and more impregnated with botrytis, and at the end I loved it less than I did at first—but I still loved it.

AHL-071 **2001 Riesling Heiligenstein**

This was discernibly bottle-sick but sheesh, one only has a single shot at the 20 cases allocated to America, so: botrytis again, dancing with the spice, talc and violets; there's fire and panache, but I need that fruit to return and wash over the ungainly gap in the mid-palate.

AHL-072 **2001 Riesling "Maximum"**

This is the oldest vines from the Heiligenstein and Kogelberg. The wine feels gigantic yet not elephantine; a foamy tide of juiciness washes through and ameliorates the botrytis; the wine is still defined; superripe but it registers as immense concentration. One of you could buy it all.

AHL-073 **2001 Sauvignon Blanc Steinhaus**

Say what?? Yes, Hiedler Sauvignon is unleashed upon the world. And this 1st release fits the 2001 mold; thick, dense fruit, galvanic penetration; active play of fruit and herbal elements, leading into a peppery (as in capsicum) finish. The fruit is exceptionally fine and riesling-like. After that sharp blast of heat-scorch, the tertiary finish is clean and varietally pure again. What does one make of a wine like this? Will it always war within itself, or will one side prevail? And will it be the good side that prevails? And can we shimmy with the uncertainty, or do we have to *know*?

AHL-074H **2000 Weissburgunder Beerenauslese, 8/375ml**

+

This is outstanding! A spicy, corn-frittery nose with some oak; the palate is absolutely firm and solid; fabulous melding of sweets and salts; varietally true but exotic; french-toast with lemon syrup but with solid structure; wonderful length; not really "dessert" wine but rather a kind of Nth degree of varietal expression.



weingut josef hirsch

kamptal • kammern

The thing is, Johannes Hirsch is so much *fun* that we spend most of our time partyin', and it didn't help that he left a Strat out where I could find it (who wants to taste wine when you could be playing guitar solos anyway?), and the wines are so bloody good and sell so well, that it's easy to forget just what this estate achieves, and what it signifies.

I'd have to say 'Hannes has the most *perfect* collection from the 2001 vintage. He "read" it acutely, and every one of his wines glows with balanced fruit, buzzes with complexity, and caresses with the finest of texture. Without exception. Thus does our young grunge-god take his place among the leading estates of Austria, at barely-over 30. After seven consecutive superb vintages, it's churlish to deny him his due.

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

Then Peter Schleimer happened across some outstanding 1995s and 1996s from Hirsch and suggested we take a second look, which we did. I have seen the estate in seven vintages now, and every time the wines have seemed to me **among the very best in all of Austria**. The 1998s are high in the running for WINERY OF THE VINTAGE as far as I'm concerned. 1999 belongs in the highest class. 2000 took it up another notch.



Three generations of Hirsch: grandfather, father and son

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. Only in a German-speaking country could such an estate have gone so long undetected by American importers greedy for stellar agencies. I'll happily take the good fortune, but it's kind of pathetic!

There isn't all that much recondite wine data to tell you. They're 20 hectares in size, mid-sized for the

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

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.

Prices are below-market value for such sterling quality. Johannes Hirsch himself is a *hunk*, speaks great English, knows lots of good jokes and how to tell them, and says he'll come over here whenever we need him. He gives us enough wine. What more can one ask from a supplier? Do you think he'd buy me a car?



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 2001s constitute the seventh consecutive "1st Growth" vintage from this emerging superstar.

how the wines taste:

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

AWH-024 **2000 Grüner Veltliner "Messwein"**

This is the artist-formerly-known-as-Kammern, but whatever it's called the wine always delights in its sweet demure way. Crisp this year; a sweet melange of cressy-rhubarby-herbal fragrances; wonderful palate, as polished and finely fruity as always but now with a push-pull of sleek grassiness and a crackling minty finish. The best vintage yet.

AWH-025 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein**AWH-025H **2001 Grüner Veltliner Heiligenstein, 12/375ml**

Plump, elegant fruit and salty mineral; lots of substance; both coolly vanillin and also a real *zing!* of spice, arugula and boxwood. Has more overt fruit, thus more "spiel", a 2nd waveband of flavor to this overt lip-smacker.

AWH-026 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Kammerner Lamm Alte Reben**AWH-026M **2001 Grüner Veltliner Kammerner Lamm Alte Reben, 6/1.5L**

+

Lamm is in fact the lower slopes of Heiligenstein but the soil begins to change; "it starts to show loess," says Johannes, and the site is a notorious heat-trap. I adored this wine. A mass of fruit and fennel on the nose; outstanding energy and lift; lighter (by a jot) than 98-99-00, and thus more explicitly kinetic and mineral; wonderful rosemary and lavender highlights; dense and complex; first rate. Real Grand Cru profile. Also available in MAGNUMS.

AWH-027 **2000 Riesling Zöbing**

You do know, don't you, what wonderful value you get from little-wines-from-greatvintners? This is indeed light but with more sheer substance than dozens, hundreds, bazillions of big dumb brute-wines. This is just a bit more citrussy and pointed than the GrüVes, but otherwise similarly lush, light and herbal; a stylish, tasty and interesting riesling.

AWH-028 **2001 Riesling Gaisberg Alte Reben**AWH-028M **2001 Riesling Gaisberg Alte Reben, 6/1.5L**

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One of the great rieslings in this offering; wonderful fragrance, silica and jewels and raspberries, pink peppercorns, violets and wisteria; transparently complex, built on an elegantly poised fruit but with kaleidoscopic interplay of mineral, minty herbs and spiced apple. Brilliant conciliation of flesh and focus. *Sizzlin'!* Also available in MAGNUMS.

AWH-10 **1998 Riesling Gaisberg Alte Reben**

+ + +

It is astonishing to still be able to get this wine. Want to know why? Because the AUSTRIAN market was, shall we say, nonplussed by its (almost undetectable) residual sugar! Their loss is manifestly our gain, for this is an Everest among Austrian Rieslings, celestial, prismatically delineated fragrances. The palate is a drowning surge of solid stone. Then the fist-full of tight little sugar-berries. After five minutes in the glass, there are UNBELIEVABLE aromatics. Explosively tight and just infrared fruit. How does white wine get better than this? I bought some immediately to send to Hans-Günter Schwarz at Müller-Catoir; "You GOTTA try this!" It was the wine of the vintage for me.

AWH-029 **2001 Riesling Zöbinger Heiligenstein**

+

Grandiose, amazing nose; more mid-palate volume (and a small snap of heat on the finish) with a megalith of lemon-powder and papaya and iris and guava; more seductive than Gaisberg but also more demanding. It could end up even better, if its fruit expands to subsume the spiky finish; outstanding riesling in any case!

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.

This tiny region (fewer than 1,500 hectares) can give Austria's mightiest and most profound wines. It's also very pretty, has many "name" vintners, and 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 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

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

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 quality range.

The lighter wines tend to be better elsewhere, but the world is chasing Wachau wines like a greyhound running after a slab of bacon. It's the result of the great froth of hysteria whipped up by the hyperactive wine press, which sends everyone hurtling to a small group of wines, which leaves a lot of nerves frayed, expectations disappointed, and can foster some prima-donna-ism among the growers. I recall one grower, no longer in this portfolio, who had all of **five cases** of one of his Rieslings to ship to the States, and who exhibited at a SPECTATOR wine experience, which required him to have **seven cases** of the very same wine! So we got five to sell, and he *poured SEVEN*. (Then when he had three cases left over, he left them here and invoiced us for them the following week. Can you say "brass balls"?) I know you can't reduce these things to strict commercial equations; he was there to show he belonged there. But it reveals how absurd things get.

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

The Wachau will always draw tourists because it's amazingly beautiful. 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 picking is routine. (Though one sly grower said: “There’s nothing romantic about picking in November.”) The western section of the



The Danube

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 downstream, 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. This began in 1983, before you-know-what. I tend, as you know, to be rather curmudgeonly on the subject of growers’ associations, but there’s some 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

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!

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.

It happened Alzinger's were the first 2001s I tasted; it was the first stop. "A fragrant, elegant vintage, full of fruit," said Leo. "But our harvest was 23 days from beginning to end, of which we spent 10 days doing nothing but selection." (in terms of botrytis)

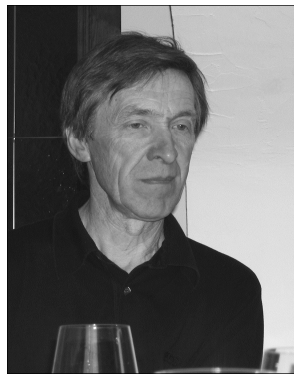
Leaving the winery I was rubbing my hands anticipating the glories in store over the coming days. What happened to them? Now I only wish I'd come later to Alzinger, so I might better have appreciated just how extraordinary his 2001s are. They are fragrant, elegant, full of fruit—and then some!

Leo Alzinger and Hans-Günter Schwarz (Müller-Catoir) are friends. Hans-Günter told me, when we were schmoozing about Austria and growers we knew. This news didn't surprise me in

the least; both men are strangely angelic. "He is such a dear man," said Schwarz. "He called me one evening and said he had a question for me. Might it be possible for his son to do a little *practicum* here with me? And he asked his question and then was silent, and I wasn't sure if he was finished speaking. But then came, many seconds later, like a little peep . . . 'please'?"

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

This is how it works in the Wachau. The first year I was granted an allotment of twenty cases of the least of three Veltliner Smaragds. I duly (and gratefully) accepted them. Next year a second Veltliner was made available, along with a few cases of Riesling Smaragd. Next, I received four Veltliners, two Federspiel and two Smaragd, and a Riesling Smaragd, much more wine but still not much wine. Last year the floodgates opened: a whopping 200 cases for the lower 48 plus Hawaii. This year we're up to 260 cases (though I still can't get any of the glorious Riesling Hollerin; next year I think I'll just beg abjectly. This would bother me if Alzinger weren't such an angel.) Each year, I inch farther away from the back of



Leo Alzinger

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!

- 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

His 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 2001s 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-018 2001 Grüner Veltliner Frauenweingarten Federspiel

The vineyard is on loamy alluvial soil near the Danube; the wine has a euphoric fragrance, all strawberry and rhubarb; smoky, long, silky but with grip; the length is striking given the affectionate caress of texture; very long finish.

ALA-019 2001 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Federspiel

Delicate and wax-beany; comes on with spice and solidity but still croons, a kind of lullaby of Veltliner. A little bottle-sick; it might thump and clomp its fruit when it recovers but now it's like waving a silk scarf of flavor over your palate.

ALA-021 2001 Grüner Veltliner Weingärten Smaragd

Elegant, mineral and boxwoody; this is classy, unique and fascinating; wonderfully peppery and spicy with a szechuan-pepper botrytis note; a fine ripe GrüVe for (relatively!) early drinking.

ALA-020 2001 Grüner Veltliner Mühlpoint Smaragd

Just as this was poured a hedge-thrush really started blasting away outside the window. Such a beautiful song, but I had to laugh—horny little guy. I hope he found a lady bird, 'cause he sure sang to beat the band, and made an American wine merchant very glad for a few minutes. You can smell this wine a foot from the glass; flowering field, sorrel, beany; a very sunny and rich mouthful of GrüVe with stony undertones, fine length, and incipient pepper.

ALA-022 2001 Grüner Veltliner Steinertal Smaragd

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Oh sorry, there's only a little, but look, there isn't *any* of the lovely Liebenberg Smaragd, and this is actually the best one so let's be glad we can get it at all. You know it right away; the Grand Cru nose; it's unmistakable. Grandiose density and palpable thickness; serious but not dour; compelling amalgam of herbs, wildness, fruit, botrytis; an almost minty finish; a transparent wall of vinosity.

ALA-023 2001 Riesling Liebenberg Smaragd

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Ah, a new entry. A fine new entry! Ultra-fine pitted-fruit fragrances lead to heart-rendingly piquant charm of fruit. AUSTRIA all the way. The tongue doesn't *want* to obey the—spit—command here! Nothing but sleek fine-boned prettiness all the way till a slight smoky gaze of botrytis appears on the finish.

ALA-024 2001 Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd

As tropical as usual, but in this context almost sultry; dried fruits; almost as if a passion-fruit cream cheese. Dense and somewhat "stunning," all kinds of tangelo; this wine might well be aided by bottling, and time will tame its gaudier aspects. I'm probably underrating it.

ALA-025 2001 Riesling Steinertal Smaragd

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Here we go; a beauty! Again, compact (as was the GrüVe), with green-tea and salt and kiwi-lime flavord and taut structure and six volumes of mineral; sensational spice, and a ravishing *contained* power. Sorry again: not much wine! You could get the whole quantity into a VW-beetle.

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 preparations of regionally integral dishes. You know

you are **somewhere** in particular and not anywhere else. Sad how rare and precious that experience has become.

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

- 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

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*.

I had tended to take Jamek as a matter of course, steady-as-she-goes, but word began to reach me of a change in the wind here. The doyen was handling his holster on to a new generation, specifically to his youngest daughter and her husband, who would assume responsibility for the cellar with the 1995 vintage. The vineyards constitute as fine a collection as exists in all of Austria. Fresh energy in the cellar would make for some spectacularly exciting wines in the very near future. Time for a serious visit.

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. Tasted around fifteen wines and had the chinwag about cellar stuff. Altmann's is a curious mixture of modern and traditional approaches—all shiny new equipment in the press-house, and nothing but casks in the cellar. They ferment in stainless steel and can control temperature if necessary. No cultured yeasts, minimal SO₂. The wines are not fined. I raised the question of malolactic fermentation as I'd heard it was standard practice at Jamek—and might be responsible for a certain old-fashioned touch the wines were reputed to possess. NO, it is by no means regular, came the reply; very seldom for white wines, only in unusually unripe

vintages, yes we do it on occasion for red wines. But then why? Everyone seems to believe you do it, I said. No. We don't. And truth to tell, among the many vintages I've tasted I have never specifically identified that special malo butteriness in any of Jamek's wines and I don't know how the question assumed the status of an urban myth.

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

Money is always a vexing question in the Wachau.

Jamek's is an estate where the Federspiel-level wines can put the hurt on your *geldtasche*, but neither do I want to give Mr. Altmann the impression all I want are his cherries. So I wrassled this issue, 'til it beat me with a tombstone piledriver.

2001 is a great classic vintage here. Iffy as it was elsewhere, here it was the greatest vintage I'd tasted from Jamek; don't ask me why! But do ask me to send you a lot of wine; you do not want to miss these.

Jamek at a glance:

Renaissance in quality from this most venerable of Wachau estates. Remarkable array of Grand Cru sites, and superb success in the 2001 vintage.

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 sparrow 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-036 **2001 Muskateller Federspiel Ried Kollmitz**
Muscat is, to me, self-evidently desirable if not outright irresistible. I can't imagine why more people don't drink it; it's so pretty and charming. This has a thick, penetrating nose, grape and **ore**; indeed this is a fabulous Muscat that's more like riesling with white pepper; delightfully blatant and extroverted; the nth degree of Muscat, turbocharged and zooming off down the road to a pagan orgy you wish *you'd* been invited to.
- AJJ-034 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Ried Achleiten**
Grand Cru time. And something else quite improbable. Near the end of the trip I was running it down with Peter Schleimer, and I started to say "But the most surprising wines of any I tasted this week. . . ." And he cut me off . . . "were the Federspiels at Jamek!" and I stared at him and burst out laughing (as often happens when I state at Schleimer). What got *into* these wines? I've never tasted a better GrüVe Federspiel than this one, not from any winery; enthralling nose, pure harmony of site and variety; bacon, jicama, jerusalem artichokes, malt, flowering fields, hedge-flowers; long and juicy and gripping; every facet of great Achleiten in small form.
- AJJ-035 **2001 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Ried Achleiten** ++
An acme of finesse and precision; all clean fruit. Saturated with *terroir*. Crazy length and depth; a noble terroir-wine that happens to be GrüVe. Clearly and instantaneously compelling. Achleiten-signature roasted corn and red-pepper and 2nd-Flush Darjeeling muskiness. ONE OF THE TWO GREATEST 2001 VELTLINERS IN THIS OFFERING.
- AJJ-037 **2001 Riesling Federspiel Ried Klaus** +
Again, a mini-version of the Grand Vin—not flaccid, as Federspiel often is; no, all the complexity is here, the salt and sweat of Klaus; a superb finish to a truly great wine. I've never had Federspiel of this depth.
- AJJ-038 **2001 Riesling Smaragd Dürnsteiner Freiheit**
As always, this shows the golden summer-fruits, mimosa, oleander, and a strong pulverized mineral backdrop. This 2001 is a little unhinged; sort of nutso-lavish fruit; reminds me of Lingenfelder's dry Auslese; emphatic plummy nose; lavish, lavish fruit, deeply embedded spice—makes quite a voluptuous statement!
- AJJ-039 **2001 Riesling Smaragd Ried Klaus** +++
This ought to be as famous as Zind-Humbrecht's Rangen or Brand. It's a terroir-wine where the variety is nearly irrelevant, and in the 2001 vintage it is as profound as riesling—as WINE—can be. Celery-mousse and fennel; the palate has a perfect blend of power, torque and precision; fervently mineral with fruit so deep you don't even taste it as fruit. A smoldering primordial message of the earth. Everything conceivably great in white wine is embodied here. THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE in this offering.
- AJJ-040 **2000 Jochinger Mittelbergen**
RED. 80% Zweigelt, 20% St. Laurent. Aromas of plum and tobacco. The palate is lush and spicy with sweet soft tannins. Elegant suave and tasty.

At the end of one year's visit Christina Saahs brought us a little glass of something golden to taste blind. It wasn't fair, because I thought I already knew what it was. A customer had tasted the wine at VINITALY and came back raving, and besides I had seen it from cask the year before, though I don't think the Saahs' recalled showing it to me. They had an Eiswein from the 1977 vintage that spent twenty-two years in cask; surely this was it. But no, when I raised the glass to my nose the wine smelled too fresh, and I was immediately confused. Was there a dessert wine in the new vintage? On the palate it veered weirdly between youthful vigor and estery mature complexity. Utterly at a loss, I guessed it was the **1977** as I couldn't fathom what else it could possibly be. It was.

"We didn't like this wine at first, and so my husband put it in cask and forgot about it," said

Frau Saahs. "For eighteen years it sat on its fine lees without any sulfur at all. Somehow the wine seemed to create its own shield against spoilage." (I felt unaccountably moved at this thought, and felt a shock of tears rise. Who knows *what* "wisdom" nature may be capable of if we just leave her be?) The story went on. "About four years ago, we tasted it and my husband was amazed at how the wine had developed. We racked it then, for the first time. We still didn't know what to do with it!"

The wine was released late in 1998 in honor of the birth year of one of Saahs' children. I am telling you this story because it's so quintessentially a NIKOLAIHOF saga; in what other winery in the world could something like this take place?

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



Nikolaus Saahs

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

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

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 is the first allowed to carry the official Austrian **Bio** sign; these are amongst the purest strictures for organic production to which any winery on earth must adhere; if you're interested in biologically pure wines of absolutely peak-quality, look no further. Frau Saahs is charmingly dismissive of what she might call organic parvenus. Even those practicing integrated viticulture are suspect: "it *is* better than nothing," she allows, "but not much!" She and her husband have farmed and made wines organically for two decades; for them it is vitally important to treat wine as a grocery first and foremost, as a comestible. Mr. Saahs, who is responsible for the wine-making and vineyards, is a believer in organic production as a guarantor of **superior** quality.

"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 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). You might dine under an enveloping patriarchal linden tree in the courtyard, so dense it will keep you dry if it's raining. You will certainly hear the birdsong of the three families of hedge thrushes who live in the leafy place. You might taste in a twelfth century chapel that the Saahs have recently restored. You will certainly eat nothing but delicious food from ingredients produced organically and procured from suppliers known personally by the Saahs from a *local* network of farmers. A seasonal menu is a matter of course.

"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 conser-

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

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

Or perhaps their simple rootedness appeals to 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.”

When I first went to Austria Nicholas Saahs took me under his wing, for reasons of which I am still unsure. We spent a good deal of time together and I received many

courtesies I had done nothing to earn. I never heard boo from the winery when I began this portfolio without them (believing they were a Winebauer exclusive), and when I finally did come along we seemed to have tacitly agreed; now we were ready. Mr. Saahs is a very gentle and sweet man. All my instincts tell me his is a monastically diligent and kindly soul, yet his wines can be stern as steel.

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-034 2001 Grüner Veltliner “Hefeabzug”

Literally “sur lie,” a light Veltliner Saahs produces each year along Muscadet lines. And it's a three-peat, with all these consecutive happy vintages cheek by jowl; indeed this is the happiest yet; leesy and snappy and nicely full; utterly dry and crisp, oystery-saline. Come inside from the heat, have a little cold poached salmon with dill, cucumbers and cream; go on, live! Here' have some wine. Why yes, now that you mention it, it is perfect isn't it!

ANK-036 2001 Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel

Surprisingly friendly, lime-grassy aromas; palate is smoky with inner sweetness and riesling style. Upright. Charming fruit—tilleul—and good length. The most accomodating of Nikolaihof's 2001s.

ANK-035 2001 Grüner Veltliner Im Weingebirge Smaragd

Flying in the clouds with this one. It was a little obscured by either botrytis or whatever that thing is that tastes *like* botrytis; the palate recalls Nigl's Privat; rugged and smoky; good material here, indeed compelling material—what's good is VERY good—but where will those gnarlies go?

ANK-037 2001 Riesling Im Weingebirge Smaragd

Fennel and greengage fragrances, as well as tilleul, as well as many GrüVe-like scents; palate is firm and shimmery, with a wonderful wildness about the fruit; snappy finish with good cut. As yet un-knit. In fact of all the 01s I tasted these are the ones I most *need* to retaste, as their palate-*reception* seemed as if some electro-magnetic interference was preventing my getting at them. It bears mentioning there's another Nikolaihof wonder-wine waiting in the wings, a still-in-cask Smaragd from the vintage **1990** to be bottled this Fall or next Spring. “It didn't please me at first,” Saahs said placidly. It pleases me now.

ANK-20 1999 Riesling Im Weingebirge “Jungferneinwein”

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.

dinstlgut loiben

wachau • oberloiben

WACHAU WINES

Transitions here. The last two vintages have appeared to trend down, and now Walter Kutscher is leaving. His plans, he says, are to “take a vacation”, and his place is to be taken by Elisabeth Altenriederer, a trained enologist who’s been handling sales and marketing up till now.

It is rather perplexing because up through the ‘99 vintage (a few of which are happily still available) this was arguably the better of the two Wachau co-ops. I fear it may have to do with the unsustainably low prices at which the wines were sold, at least to me. Whatever it is, the only responsible thing for me to do is hedge my bets.

Therefore I will offer my favorite among the 2001s and supplement with repeats from earlier vintages. There are also a few cases of a sensational TBA—these were always Kutscher’s plaything,

and regularly outstanding.

And hope for better times to come.

Everybody’s pissed off. This upstart little co-op is showing them up. Better wines, incredible prices, no pedigree; why, the nerve.

Poor Walter Kutscher, who is a gentle and very nice man and who has to stay up nights honing his *sang froide*. The Wachau, you see, is ruled by a clique who make wonderful wines but who have grown used to having things their way. If it were high school, Mr. Kutscher would need a phalanx of bruisers to guarantee his safety, but we are civilized, adult beings, and above all we are tolerant of fine wine whoever makes it. At least, as long as we *approve* of the guy who makes it. . . .

It’s a teeny co-op as co-ops go, around 230 hectares farmed by 400 small growers. Objective observers have become aware of the fine upward spring of quality here the past several years. 1997 was a real jaw-dropper in

- Vineyard area: 230 hectares
- Annual production: 75,000 cases
- Top sites: Loibenberg, Schütt, Pfaffenberg
- Soil types: Eroded primary rock, gravel with sand topsoil, and loam
- Grape varieties: 70% Grüner Veltliner, 5% Riesling, 5% Weissburgunder and Chardonnay, 5% Neuburger, 10% Zweigelt, 5% Blauer Portugieser, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon

and sometimes very good.

It’s symptomatic of the Austrian wine scene that someone like Kutscher could have become involved with a winery like this one. Kutscher, you see, is a wine **writer** first and foremost, and a well-respected one to boot. When he assumed the executive winemaker role, I’ll bet he couldn’t *wait* to see the potential of the Dinstlgut vineyards realized at last. It’s such a pleasure to not have to deal with marketing geeks! These are hip people, just like you or me; well, maybe more like you, since I am about as hip as Ward Cleaver. **THE GOOD GUYS ARE IN CHARGE, GANG!** I very strongly encourage you to support them/me/us/all the cowerin’ and timorous beasties who love wine and want to offer the best they possibly can.



Walter Kutscher

many instances. 1998 has the botrytis-thing at the top levels but the little wines are even better than the little 1997s. 1999 was just crazed, over the top. And 2000 . . . is good

Loiben at a glance:

Very small co-op has made great strides in the past four vintages under the guidance of one of Austria's leading experts and winemakers. Absolutely the best values, bar NONE, in the generally overpriced Wachau.

AAC-049 2001 Grüner Veltliner Pfaffenberg

Has its typical nose of semolina, malt and peach; the palate is leafy, firm, sorrelly, elegant and peppery. Botrytis is present here, but within acceptable limits.

AAC-050 2000 Zweigelt "Reserve"

The best lots are put into barrique, 20% new, but the oak is an ideal servant to a suave complex wine. Rhône-like, lush and firm, with soft tannins and a nice mineral note; tender, a little dusty; deep violets; medium-bodied; plain tasty.

AAC-37 1999 Riesling Loibenberg "L"

"L" for "Lingenfelder" in this case, for it's a dead-ringer for one of our beloved Rainerrheinners, which, as you know, ain't zackly no dawgs they-selfs. This is ripe and tropical, lush and resplendent; fraise and beets, queenly Riesling.

AAC-38 1999 Chardonnay Loibenberg "L"

Ah, Chardonnay. In truly noble soil, look what it can do! Ripe, with no wood, a hint of sweetness (10 grams per liter); a firm complex wine with a keen mineral snap on the finish. "L" by the way, signifies a reserve quality with discernible residual sugar

AAC-053H 2000 Riesling Loibenberg Trockenbeerenauslese, 6/375ml

++

The botrytis-dominated nose does not prepare you for the grandiose, regal, sensationally complex palate. Umber, lemon-blossom, chestnut-honey; salty-sweet palate, almost an olive-oil note; amazingly defined and tender despite its mass; shimmering high notes—a concentrate of wintergreen. Fabulous stuff, and very little to be had.



hans reisetbauer

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

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

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

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

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

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."

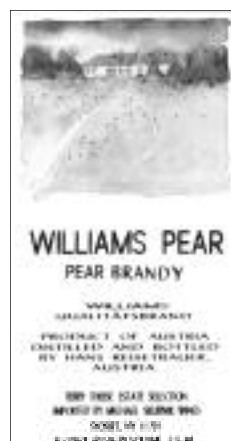
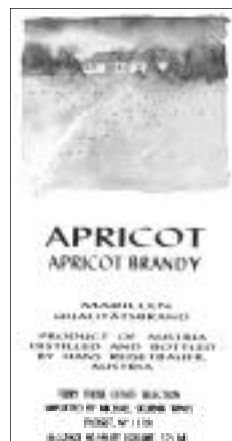
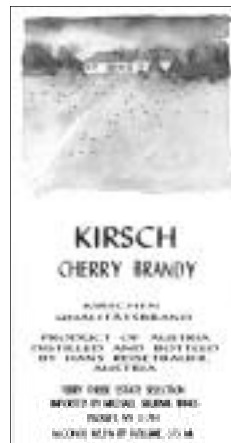
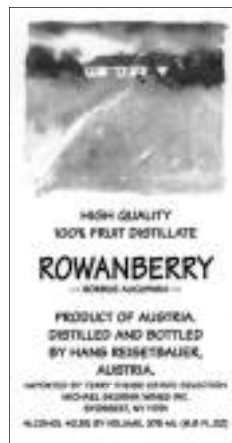


Hans Reisetbauer

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

Reisetbauer offerings:

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



POINTS: what's the point?

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

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

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

The logic isn't so much false as incomplete.

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

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

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

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

Here's a quote I like:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

