

# terry theise estate selections





# theise manifesto

*Beauty is more important than impact.*

*Harmony is more important than intensity.*

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

*Distinctiveness is more important than conventional prettiness.*

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

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

FRONT COVER PHOTO: A view of Johannes Leitz's holdings in Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck

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

**-Abu Yazid al-Bistami**

# contents

<i>Theise Manifesto</i> .....	i
<i>Let Us Write Your Order For You</i> .....	v
Introduction .....	1
<i>Continuing New Approach to Tasting Notes</i> .....	5
<i>Making the Case for German Wines</i> .....	8
<i>Making the Case for Auslese</i> .....	10
<i>Principles of Selection</i> .....	11
<i>Gray-Marketers</i> .....	12
<i>Core List Wines</i> .....	14
<i>Dry German Wines</i> .....	14
<i>A New Way to Measure Sweetness</i> .....	17
<i>More Principles</i> .....	19
<i>Wine Approach</i> .....	19
<i>2008 Vintage</i> .....	20
<i>Earlier Vintages Revisited</i> .....	24
<i>If I Were Ruler of the World</i> .....	27
<i>Tasting Versus Drinking</i> .....	30
<i>What is a Palate?</i> .....	31
<i>How German Wines Age</i> .....	32
<i>What To Drink Now</i> .....	33
<i>The Question of Tartrates</i> .....	33
<i>Label Basics</i> .....	34
<i>Glossary</i> .....	35
<i>Plusses and The Quest For Perfection</i> .....	38
<i>SOMMELIER ALERT!</i> .....	39
<b>PFALZ</b> .....	42
<i>Müller-Catoir</i> .....	45
<i>Josef Biffar</i> .....	49
<i>Scheurebe: What Gives?</i> .....	51
<i>Dr. Deinhard</i> .....	52
<i>Eugen Müller</i> .....	54
<i>Herbert Messmer</i> .....	58
<i>Theo Minges</i> .....	61
<i>Koehler-Ruprecht</i> .....	64
<i>Kurt Darting</i> .....	65

<b>RHEINHESSEN</b>	.68
J.u.H.A. Strub	.71
<i>Take Me To Your Liter</i>	.76
Wagner-Stempel	.77
Weingut Geil	.80
Gernot Gysler	.83
Christian-Wilhelm Bernhard	.86
<b>NAHE</b>	.88
Dönnhoff	.91
Jakob Schneider	.96
Weingut Hexamer	.99
Kruger-Rumpf	.102
Schlossgut Diel	.105
<b>RHEINGAU</b>	.108
Josef Leitz	.112
Spreitzer	.116
<b>MITTELRHEIN</b>	.118
Florian Weingart	.121
Toni Jost	.124
<b>MOSEL-SAAR-RUWER</b>	.126
Mosel Regionals	.129
Selbach-Oster	.131
Erich Jakoby-Mathy	.138
Meulenhof/Erben Justen Ehlen	.140
Alfred Merkelbach	.143
Joh. Jos. Christoffel	.147
Heribert Kerpen	.150
Willi Schaefer	.152
A.J. Adam	.155
Reuscher-Haart	.158
Hoffmann-Simon	.160
Weingut Ansgar Clüsserath	.162
Carl Loewen/Carl Schmitt-Wagner	.164
Karlsmühle-Geiben	.167
Von Othegraven	.169
<i>Core List Wines</i>	.172

## LET US WRITE YOUR ORDER FOR YOU!

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

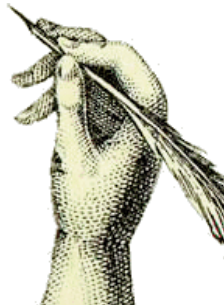
In all seriousness, I have spent the past several years actually writing about 15% of all the D.I. orders I receive, so I thought I'd formalize it. This is for people who want the wines but don't have the time to hack through my Amazonian jungle of quivering prose. Here's what you do:

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

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

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

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



If you've ever read one of these feckless tomes, you'll notice this year's version is shorter. That's because I'm going to, God help me, *publish a book* early next year, and some of the book adapts some stuff I wrote in my various narcissistic rants, ah...catalogues. So I won't repeat it here any more because now I'm going to be a bona-fide *author* and we don't just, you know, give stuff away.

Besides, a shorter catalogue will be nice. I have to tote all three of them around with me in my briefcase, and the bastards are heavy. I'm shrugging off the burden of my profundity, man. Gotta travel lighter.

This year everyone was eager for Spring to finally arrive. We didn't see any almond blossoms until the last few days, and even these were on a little sunny terrace in Alsace, a few lonesome pink trees amidst all the twiggy bareness around them. No one was talking about global warming; they were scouring around for crocuses and venturing outside in shirtsleeves, shivering and hopeful.

And speaking of climate-change, I had a thought. Germany had one of its old-school cold, wet summers last year, and the weather at harvest time was also cool (though dry), and the winter was by all accounts extremely cold, and Spring looked like it would never come. That's ten months of cold weather. In the larger context it really wasn't all that cold, of course, not by long-range standards, but no one was talking about planting Mourvedre in Bernkastel any more.

The story on the ground in March 2009 might be depicted as one of generational surprise. Young vintners with fewer than 6-7 years under their belts had never experienced such a cool growing season, and they were certainly nonplussed by the acidities in the grapes they picked. From my geezer perspective I was sort of glad. We all can use a tough sort of vintage, not that 2008 is deficient, but neither is it luxuriously or voluptuously ripe.

You know, after all these years I'd feel valedictory if I weren't so immature. Or if I weren't so unsettled by some of what I see. More on that subject presently....

With my sagacity and infinite perspective, (did I remember to tell you I have a *book* coming out??) I do find myself looking at my portfolio as a whole instead of a collection of randomly chosen growers. That Whole only began to emerge over time, as things of principle often do.

Someone on one of the internet wine-boards was asking how a German wine newbie should stock his cellar, and the thread quickly devolved into a Theise-versus-Wiest skirmish. Silly, but that's the net. So I wrote in and said I found our two portfolios mutually complimentary *because* of their differences. I have never sought the "elite" as a sort of divine-right-of-cherry-picking, though I do assert that right *within* wineries, where I choose my favorites and leave the others. I want of



course to have *some*, maybe even lots of "elite" growers, but I also want to have really good, lusty, vital, honest examples of wines in every "echelon" of quality. Not because I'm strutting my egalitarian cred (rather the reverse, since I'm an unabashed elitist) but because *I enjoy the variety*. No one would claim a Schneider is "as good" as a Dönnhoff, but what can I offer you for those times when an *exalted* experience is simply not called for?

That's when it helps to be ecumenical. That's where I think (hope?) my strength lies, because I know there are times, lots of times, more times than you may realize, where an honest, grounded, entirely GOOD wine is called for. You don't always want to go to the opera dude; sometimes you want to go to the ballgame. If the "good" wine is honorable and true, it's like having the best seat in the house at the ballgame.

We are at risk of squandering this capacity to enjoy that which is simple, because we seem to need to insist it is *merely* simple, or that simple isn't good enough for us. Great complex wines are wonderful, enthralling, life-affirming, soul-shaking, but it's worth asking whether they are *relaxing*. Good simple wines are. Good simple wines speak to our spirit of play and ease and repose, exactly because they don't demand our attention.

And so I wonder whether assembling a portfolio that's all about the "best" wines isn't really about the guy and not the wines. Because life's various pleasures apportion themselves in diverse ways, and wine's pleasures are no different. The "Schneider-pleasure" is not identical to the "Dönnhoff-pleasure," but I would argue they are *equivalent*. In one case we cultivate an appreciation of the highest refinement of beauty, in the other we cultivate an appreciation of the joys of honesty, integrity, goodness, companionability. We don't have to choose. We get to have them both. As long as we're not cowering inside our dread and insecurity insisting "only the best is good enough for me, or rather, for *me*."

But things proceed along their heedless way, sometimes for the good. I was driving to Geil from Nierstein, which used to entail many tedious passings through little villages, but all of a sudden I was like, *What happened to Oppenheim?* And I realized they'd built a bypass road and Oppenheim was eating my dust. In fact the whole thing is changing, or is changed. It used to be, there were minions of small growers and the only way to unearth the good ones was by trial and error. Mostly error, of course, and you needed a lot of time, and who has time any more? Even those good ones were obscure by today's standards, except for a few. I'd go a week and not hear English spoken.

After the internet and the advent of an activist wine press it all grew different, more feverish, but better. The ordinary grower simply had no hope of survival; his customers were getting older and the new younger wine geeks were going where the press sent them. So if you were any good you had to *get out there*, and fast. When I

started I was serene that any potential newbie for my portfolio would remain unclaimed until I got back a year later. No more. Everyone's reading the same magazines, books and web-boards. (Whether they *care* is another story.) These days the growers are all self-conscious, because they have no choice. This is often harmless, and has definitely raised the water level quality-wise, but



there's mischief inherent in it too, and we should take care.

The audience for wine narrowed to a small geekdom of wine-heads who only wanted the best stuff, and who used the press to point them to it. Thus the enterprising grower had to go all out for glory. This meant investment in the newest geegaws for the cellar (especially if the neighbor had them) and in some instances it meant having a nose to the wind to catch the prevailing scent. What were the "approved" types of wines, what was the new *Zeitgeist*, and how does one get one's hands on the mojo-du-jour?

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

But there's an immense good side to this too, a heartening presumption of excellence and integrity which rescued a potential debacle like the 2006 vintage, and which made one wise-man among the growers opine "I doubt we'll ever see a truly bad vintage again." Really? I asked. Even if the weather's truly awful? "Even then," He replied. "Everything is different now, yields are lower, vine-husbandry is better, vineyards are healthier, people are willing to green-harvest and pick selectively, and there's more pure competence in the cellar, more people who know what to do and what not to do."

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

"truth" of the soil and weather, different from plucking the chocolate chips from the cookie? Hans Selbach said it best (Hans said many things best . . .): "You can't go into a vineyard and first pull out the cream, then go back and get the milk and then finally the water; you have to leave it be and get all of it if you want to know how the *vineyard* tastes." It is heartening to observe the many young growers exploring this idea.

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

In fact, much of the chit-chat about yields risks falling into the category of Great Lies About Wine, since far too many writers have reduced this to a primitive syllogism "Low yields = better wine," as if this were always true and existed apart from every other parameter. But let's imagine it was invariably true: Then what?



Does anyone question the economies of the matter? If you lower your yields from (say) 65 hl/ha to 40, there may well be a modest but discernible increase in quality, call it 15% better. But the size of the crop is reduced by 35%. Are you willing to pay that much more for a wine that's only a little better? And is it really better? Concentration is a virtue but over-concentration makes for opacity and brutishness. I'd rather see a wine whose voice could break a glass than one that takes a hammer to it.

It is also misleading to speak of yields in strict terms of hectoliters-per-hectare (i.e., tons-per-acre) because this figure is very often specious. The best text I have seen on this subject was written by Christina Fischer and Ingo Swoboda from their book RIESLING, and it goes, in part, like this: "*Decisive here is not so much the yield per hectare, but rather, per individual vine. With Riesling, the average value . . . is between 1 and 2.5 liters of must per vine.*" The authors go on to explain new methods of pruning and foliage management to encourage fewer bunches, along

with crop-thinning about a month after flowering. Then comes this passage, which everyone in the wine-world should see: *"The so-called green harvest, which normally takes place mid-August, has proved a failure with Riesling. Since nature seeks equilibrium, it shares out the available nutrients to the remaining [bunches] where a reduction of quantity has occurred. There then appear large juicy grapes, whose relatively thin skin can no longer take the strain, . . . squeez[ing] each other and burst[ing] . . . and particularly liable to rotting."*

Wine, I think, can be a lovely means of training ourselves to examine a question from all angles, but only if we're not terribly eager to assert value judgments, or to



find any one matrix by which wines are either right or wrong. This isn't easy. We're all asking what we should care about, what we should believe in, what positions we should take, and it's somehow *unsatisfying* to be told the best position is to consider the whole dialectic in all its difficulty. But otherwise we're liable to become insufferable, smug, simplistic.

I myself have every good reason to favor organics as an absolute Value. My wife's a doyenne of the "movement" and I believe in its principles. Yet I also know that if I assert this to my growers in absolute terms, it becomes a purity-test with only pass-fail as a possibility. In fact the whole production-culture of wine is moving in green directions, especially where microclimates allow—the drier it is, the easier to eschew fungicides, for example—and where the lay of the land allows for the extra costs organics entail. Johannes Selbach once said:

*"Many producers here practice what we call sustainable or 'integrated' viticulture, with a minimum of treatments, very little fertilization (most of it organic and tight restrictions on nitrogen whether in organic or chemical form). Herbs and weeds are controlled mechanically and only 'mild' herbicides permitted. All of this is governed in a program that pays small subsidies for steep-slope*

*farmings. The viticultural research stations issue a list of "can-use" treatments and methods AND they make random checks so it's not just lip-service."*

So fine, we might respond; it's better if most of the world is mostly organic than if a tiny part is entirely organic and the rest conventional chemical. But even here one is wary of the use of the "integrated" claim as a way to pretty-up ones unwillingness to go the extra green mile. Yet there's no question things are changing for the better.

Still, the Mosel is a real test-case for sustainability versus doctrinaire organics. Its steep-as-all-hell vineyards in a wind-sheltered fjord with high natural humidity augur against strict organic treatments both because it's in essence too difficult, and even if someone were willing to do the work would the consumer be willing to *pay the price*? Steep-slope production costs are already many times higher than in airy flatter vineyards where mechanization is much easier. So, note to self: Steer a value-weighted way through that, smart guy.

A lot of us go through the worlds of people and events with a relentless determination – "I have to know exactly what I think of this." (Or of him, or her...) The categorical is reassuring to some people; no need to think about stuff any more. I often find the categorical to be ominous, especially when it's wielded like a cudgel. That's because I used to be that guy. How did anybody like me? *Did* anyone like me? I was awfully silly. Still am at times. But mostly I seem to be able to move about the world alertly and prepared to engage, to weigh and sift and not insist my mind must be *made up* by quitting time. Often I don't really know what I think until much later, and then I'm usually in the dark about how I reached the opinion. That's something good about writing, the things that emerge, the things you didn't know you knew. Writing makes these inchoate things nascent.

If I have to know *exactly what I think of this*, then I'm taking experience and wrestling it into my little cerebral meat-grinder and sniffing what comes out the other side. I'm not really living the things I encounter, I'm grabbing them and mauling them. This doesn't seem helpful. Once I relaxed I found I'd know the things I knew when they were ready to be known, when they were done cooking, then and not before. Knowledge, experience, wisdom, seem to develop best when they can simmer slowly and for a long time.

All this abstract ram-a-lam is just a way of asking you to approach wine with enormous attention and curiosity; listen actively, probe, *enjoy*, and it will give you what you need, or think you need, when all of this wonderful experience is done cooking.





View of the Mosel.

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

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

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

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

Other goodies in my bag-o-truths are that agricultural wines are *always* more interesting than industrial wines. That doggedness in the vineyard and humility in the cellar are vital to the making of wines of consequence. That wine is a context containing soil-borne flavors — their LANGUAGE — spoken with various ACCENTS according to which cellar-work a given grower prefers. That removing any PART of this context from wine does injury to its being (and if we do love wine, why deliberately injure it?) . . .

Europeans are more aware than we Yanks that peo-

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

This is the fundamental split between two mutually exclusive approaches to wine, and I think also to life. If you are a grower who believes that flavors are *inherent* in your land, you will labor to preserve them, and this means you'll do nothing to inhibit, obscure or change them. You will not write your adorable agenda over your material. You respect your material. You are there to release it, to unlock it, you are there to let it shine. This is the happiest of all the things that emerge from a belief in terroir.

If on the other hand your work as a winemaker is all about the vision you have a priori, the wine you wish to "sculpt," then your raw material is a challenge to surmount, almost an inconvenience. Such vintners make wine as if they were piloting a plane, and nothing wrong with being a good pilot. But terroir-driven vintners make wine as if they were riding the back of a bird.

When I was first into wine, all the growers I met believed something so deeply they weren't aware it was a discrete belief. They knew their vineyards, their land, possessed an existential reality equivalent to their own. And if the land was real, then it too possessed an identity. That is why the lands were named. And why we get to hear their voices.

I had a recent exchange of emails with a hero of mine, Bobby Kacher. I don't always agree with Bobby but he's earned the right to his beliefs and he knows more than many who take issue with him. He'd written a piece called *Our Precious Guardians* in which he asserted the importance of the human who makes the wine as the ultimate "guardian" of quality. No sensible person would disagree. The question is *what is he working with?* Bobby wrote, "Maybe a vineyard is like a Gibson Les Paul guitar and cannot express itself, unless stroked, in just the right way." I think that's right. And *he* used the phrase "express itself," which of course suggests it *has* a self to express, an identity that belongs to *it*, not to the player. No question different players will play it differently, some better than others. But something is inherent to a les Paul, and no matter who plays it, it will never sound like a Stratocaster.

I was struck this year by the number of growers who have little displays of their soils in the tasting room. The message is, this is where it starts, this is what it is, what we do is serve it and honor it. All over Germany there's a wave of naming wines after the soils they grew from. I asked one grower if he wasn't concerned to call his wine "Schiefer" (slate) when other growers could also use that name. "I know that," he replied, "But this is the proper name for my wine and it doesn't matter if it's also the right name for the neighbor's wine."

If this seems cloyingly pastoral to you, please know I have no objection to technology *per se*; the crux of the matter is what it's used for. That said, as a rule most of my growers would tell you the more experience they have, the fewer machines they need.

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

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

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

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

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

**TT:** You are certainly correct that all vinification (and some viticulture) is manipulation, and in my

Austrian catalogue I make the very same point in talking about residual sugar. Yet it is very clear to me where the line needs drawing.

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

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

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

**TT:** It "really fits" on the side of seeing wine as just another commodity to be bent to our preferences. Yes, you can make a case that all those old hot-climate tired

whites were rescued by cold-cellar technology and now produce crispy charming wines (that all taste alike). But I'd rather drink an old-school white Rioja any day of the week. A wine with the character and the ineluctable imprint of its *place* and not the people flicking the switches and pressing the buttons. I mean, if you're staying up nights trying to figure out how to turn a dachshund into a poodle, dude, you have the wrong dog. If you have to have recourse to such intrusive technology just in order to make your wine *palatable*, then it's time to question whether you picked the right place to grow grapes.

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

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

## Continuing New Approach to Tasting Notes

*At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to [Simone] Weil, requires us 'to give up our imaginary position as the center . . .' What happens, happens to our bodies. When we come upon beautiful things . . . they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space . . . or they lift us . . . letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the*



center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede ground to the thing that stands before us.

-Elaine Scarry

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

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

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

How, after all, do we write about flavor? The March 09 World Of Fine Wine has an essay on the subject, which makes the trenchant point that associative language, *even when it is accurate*, is only useful if the reader has experienced the association himself. British children eat gooseberries; American children do not. Thus if we read "gooseberry" in a tasting note we have to imagine or *suppose* what it tastes like. Have you ever eaten something for the first time and likened it to *wine*? When I first ate actual passion fruit the first thing I thought was "Ah! Ripe Scheurebe."

This happens all the time; you taste or smell something and suddenly there's what all these wines have been tasting like. My wife likes *tilleuil* (linden blossom) honey, so I bought her tisanes and infusions and soaps and all the things doting husbands buy their schnookies, but then I couldn't get the damn thing out of my head when I was tasting Riesling, and it squatted in my notes for about two years. A hotel I stayed in had a shampoo made from aloe vera – same thing, showed up constantly in wine after wine. It's not that these things are inaccurate. They're deadily accurate! But even so, are they especially *useful*?

My friend, the dynamic Boston sommelier Cat Silirie, is getting into green tea, and I asked her to tell me what she was drinking (or "cupping" in the argot of tea geeks) and how she liked it. I didn't know I'd receive an exquisite fusillade of lovely writing about flavor, but Cat's got the gift. Here's something she wrote:

"*Wen Shan Bao Zhong*; ethereally delicate, soothing, transportive. HINTS at florals but not heady or overt, calming, pretty, lovely. Associating with perfume Hermes Jardin du Nil for its transportive gently humid green lushness yet delicate effect. Not a single note of dank nori or weedy kelp, its lacy greenness is delicate, ferny."

See what I mean? You can feel her sense, her whole consciousness drifting among things that are hard to say;

she uses "delicate" three times, she keeps referring to the *sense-tone* of the experience ("soothing, transportive, calming...") and finally she has the adjectives you only find when you're in the Zone (unless you're Ann Lamott, who seems to possess the strategic national reserve of cunning adjectives), things like *weedy*, *humid*, *ferny*. I'm absolutely there with her, as if we were both swimming in the same ether. In this case the thing itself, the meditative tea, created the state of consciousness needed to describe it. Wine will do that too, if you let it.

It's hardest when you're really jazzed, when your whole being is incandescent with the wine, when the beauty is so extraordinary the only possible language it summons is superlative – or no language at all. There's a cool Swedish guy named Miran Kegl who'll be familiar to readers of a certain wine-board, and Miran's wine-prose is excitable. Dude makes me sound like Henry fricking James. Since we have beloved growers in common (Dönnhoff and Schaefer most of all) we thought it



would be fun to see who could outdo the other in the emotional volume of our tasting notes. Dueling ecstasies! "The unearthly beauty of this wine brought tears to my eyes." "Oh YEAH? Well it made me fall to the floor sobbing and tearing at my garments." "Ha! That's nothing! I went out to my car and put my head in the trunk and slammed the lid on it!"

I think there are two ways to taste wine. One is to aim a beam of concentrated attention straight at its flavors; some people call this the snapshot effect. Parker and Schildknecht are virtuosic at this technique, and I'm good at it also, though probably not as good as those two



gents. The other way to taste is to do so peripherally, in effect to look away from the flavors and see what the wine has to say when you're not trying to nail the sucka

down. The benefit of this approach is it brings you closer to the truth of the wine, but the liability is it's very hard to verbalize. And I'm a verbal kind of guy.

A tasting note can be two things, either a depiction of how it was to taste (or drink) the wine, perhaps including how it tasted, or a mere dissection of flavors. The latter strikes me as useless, unless it's attached to a specific



purpose such as giving you some clue about what to buy. Otherwise, sorry; I don't want to read your tasting notes. I don't like reading my own. Think about it: to what purpose are you going to put descriptions-of-flavors? Put another way, if I'm trying to describe Scheurebe to you, which is the more useful description? 1) Scheurebe has flavors of red and blackcurrant, sage, pink grapefruit, passion-fruit (when very ripe), or . . . 2) Scheurebe tastes like Riesling would taste, if Riesling were a transvestite? Well sure, both of course, but what if you could only have one, and what if you needed to make someone *curious*?

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



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

agency), but mostly I fell victim to my own affect.

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

One also has "good-writer-days" and "lousy-writer-days" (I have the latter with distressing frequency); on the good days thoughts and images flow and dance. I read what I'm writing and think "Good; this conveys it," but on the bad days it's just "Oh crap, *must* I again write 'slate and apples' for the umteenth time?"

I'd rather not try to grasp or apprehend a wine. I try to summon a kind of calm. To forget myself. If impressions form words, I record them. If the words are sweet then I'm happy. But I am in the middle of this process, still fumbling. I'm just starting to know the difference between "flavors" and *Flavor*. Some days I almost get it. Other days I'm shuckin' and jivin'.



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

There's an active part of the mind whose very existence is to hide its activities from us. Athletes call it "the zone," as do musicians. When I taught guitar (in my mispent youth) I used to ask my pupils whether there were ever times they played beyond what they thought were their abilities, and they always said yes. I then asked them, since those abilities were *clearly* within them, whether they'd like to know how to tap into the source at will. At this point paths diverged. Some of course said yes, but others, the more interesting ones, preferred to admit the presence of the miracle but not to know its first name. If we adapt the idea to wine, where your palate is in effect your "instrument," it starts to seem the point is not to hone your chops but instead to cultivate your *preparedness*. Then watch what happens when you try to write tasting notes. . . .

Someone wrote on one of the internet boards that Hugh Johnson's recently published memoir was useless because "he never says how the wine tastes; he only says

what it was like to drink it." Well sir, that there's just the *point* of the thing. I'd far rather read the genial musings



of a humane spirit mulling over the little nimbus between his soul and the wine in his glass than to see how many arcane adjectives some anal geek can string together.

### **Making the Case For German Wines**

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first thing to know is that some version of this metaphorical idea comes to most wine drinkers spontaneously at some point or other. I remember back in 1988 when I first tasted with Bob Parker and Bob said about one wine *This tastes like crushed rocks*, and in those days he often used the term "wet stones" to depict what we call minerality. It is a flavor of considerable expression — it is quite distinctly there in the wine — but it isn't fruit. Nor is it acidity, nor does it relate to acidity. There's a prevailing critique that we rockheads use "mineral" to excuse underripe wines, but this is manifestly false. There are many wines of gushingly lavish flavor but whose flavor isn't delivered on waves of fruitiness, but rather on mineral.

There are wines you could swear had rocks passed through them, or which sat on a bed of rocks at the bot-



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

But I digress. We were making the case for

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

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

What people think they taste and what they actually taste are sometimes divergent. What they say they like



Stones at Weingart in the Mittelrhein.

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

Quick-cut to June 2003, at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic. I'm standing behind my table when an incandescently radiant young blonde approaches, boyfriend in tow. Said boyfriend is buff and tanned, a manly man. Woman has spied a bottle of dessert-wine from Heidi Schröck in its clear bottle and inviting gold. May she taste it yes she may. I pour. And you, sir, I ask: some for

you? "No," he says, "I don't like dessert wine."

Fair enough, I think, chacun a son gout and all that.



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

But something gnaws at me, and I finally have to ask: "Do you like *dessert*?"

"Excuse me?"

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

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

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

"Well, I . . ."

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

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

"Well?" I insist.

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

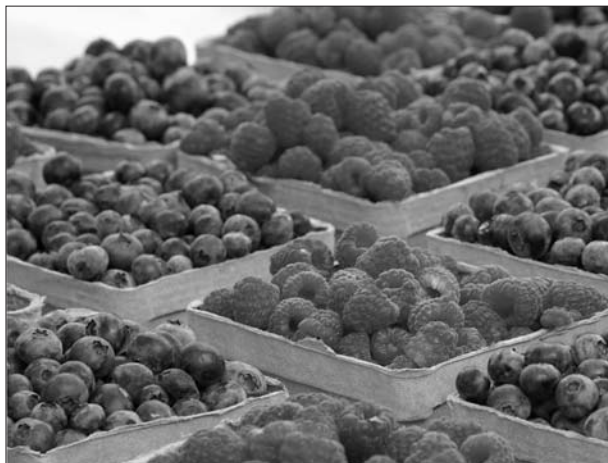
I'm sure I didn't convert the guy, and I probably exploited his good naturedness (plus put him on the spot in front of his date, hahaha), but good grief, the bullshit some people believe about themselves!

I don't know a single human being who doesn't prefer a ripe tomato to an unripe one. Shall we share a basket of unripe strawberries? Even a Granny Smith apple has some sweetness; we'd spit it out otherwise. Somehow the wine world seems to insist we ignore an otherwise routine animal tendency, and affect to despise sweetness. If we were true to our TRUE tastes, we'd fall over one



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

another to get to German rieslings. Then there wouldn't be enough wine, and prices would go up, and it's prob-



*Unripe berries, anyone? Not!*

ably good the way it is. . . . But if you're one of those perverse people who is certain you hate sweetness then please come on a picnic with me, so I can eat all the pink ripe strawberries and you can eat all the fucked up little green ones at the bottom of the basket.

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

"There's too many different wines." This is true, but it's inextricable from the jewel of the German wine experience, just as it is in Burgundy. Comtes Lafon could equalize the casks and produce one white wine and one red wine, as he might were he a Bordelais. It would definitely simplify things. Would you want him to? Would the gain in simplicity outweigh the loss of fascination? You tell me!

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

As such I think Riesling, can give the "discrimi-

nating" palate its greatest pleasure. What German wine teaches us is it isn't the **EXTENT** of the flavor that tells, but its **quality**. We've all had numerous *big* wines which were dull and crude, and we've all had relatively little wines which simply tasted lovely. But there's confusion over this issue, and it won't hurt to repeat a couple of first principles. Bigger isn't better in this view of the world: **better** is better. And the transparency of flavor of fine German wine allows you to consider its structure and enjoy its nuances, and teaches you that nuance and structure are important. Train your palate this way and you'll be a better taster, as well as a more informed voter and a finer human being.

I'm not just being facetious. I do believe cultivation of the German Riesling type conduces to civility and courtesy. That is

because we cannot enjoy wines of delicacy and finesse without appreciation. And when we *appreciate*, we are calmed and grateful. Might the opposite also be true? That is, when we enjoy those wines of coarser virtues do they also color our approach to life and our fellow humans? Hell, I don't



*German wines and food: perfect together!*

know. Nor do I presume that everyone who likes big bruiser wines is a truculent oaf. (Only some of them <wink>.) But I do glean, just a le-e-e-etle bit, a tendency for people who like the shock-and-awe wines to expect the wine to perform for them, to give them a vinous lapdance; *Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about! That's damn sure 97-point fruit there! Oh yeah, come to papa.* Meanwhile, us German wine lovers are reading Tolstoy and drinking cups of jade-oolong tea with our pinkies extended.

## **Making the Case for Auslese**

Last year I offered a bunch of old vintages in response to your many requests. I asked the growers for Kabinetts and Spätlesen (I wanted everyday drinking wines) but several of them showed me Auslese, and when I balked, they pointed to the analyses of the wines and I was viscerally reminded of something I'd only been paying lip-service to. The Auslesen of yore—and by "yore" I mean anything older than around 2001, was less ripe and less sweet than the Auslesen of today. Rumpf showed me a 1992 Auslese that had the sweetness and must-weight of his current *Kabinetts*. These old wines



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

were indeed wines for the table, with no need to prove their usefulness. Today's wines are . . . something else again.

Whose fault is this? Let's find someone to blame! First of all it's the press's fault. They're easy to hate. When the biggest richest sweetest wines get the highest

scores then all the growers start aspiring to that style, and no one makes an "ordinary" Auslese any more, a wine people can actually use but which is eternally damned with "88 points." So boo-hiss to the press. But don't think *you're* getting off the hook so easily, dear reader. The press is only influential insofar as you *cooperate* in the seduction. Another possible culprit is the VDP auction system, which tends to reward the most ostentatious wines with the highest bids, and which can inculcate a "show-reserve" mentality among the growers. Take a normal Auslese and "enhance" it with some Eiswein or BA, and send your fifty liters to auction and get your name in the paper for the price your wine fetches. This is obviously not ubiquitous but neither is it unheard-of.

The greatest paradox in all this is the prime culprits are the growers themselves and their relentless insistence on higher quality. Pampered vines, lowered yields, later and more selective picking, and the whole tide rises until no one would dream of selling "Auslese" with under 100° Oechsle. We then wonder why this category doesn't move as fast as we'd like.

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

A restaurant I really like – Luther, in Freinsheim in the Pfalz – ran an appetizer of mache with little strips of

venison and a pumpkin chutney. We ordered a Dönnhoff '89 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Auslese for the dish. It was nearly perfect; just not quite sweet *enough*. We drank the rest of the bottle with cheese. Savvy sommeliers have discovered this wicked little secret: *riesling with acidity and residual sugar is the perfect wine for many cheeses*.

In fact there's a larger reality at work here. Even today's Auslesen—or many of them—can easily be "used" with American haute-cuisine of most idioms. Of course the idea is *outré*, and of course somms are busy, but if you like the wines there's plenty on the menu to eat with them. The food doesn't have to be tweaked.

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

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

Visit everyone, taste everything, select what I liked



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

the best, and then tell why. Nothing new or revolutionary.

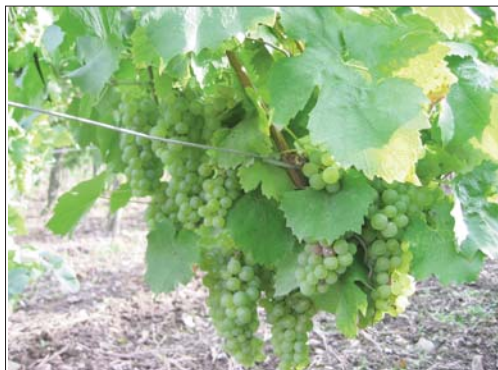
The old broker-system is as good as dead now, and most of you don't remember it anyway. The marketing of German estate wines has at last aligned with their small-batch production structure.

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

At first I was deliberately ecumenical. I wanted to show you many facets of German wine and many different ways for it to be good. I still do. I am fond of the quirky.

But I'm also realistic about how the wines are sold.

You can't visit each estate one-at-a-time like I do. Such visits have advantages and disadvantages. You see the wines in context, as they should be seen. But you don't see them in "peer-group" conditions; i.e., with a



bunch of similar wines from other growers. We show the wines in portfolio tastings wherein a big ol' *slew* of wines are lined up to be tasted alongside one another, exactly *contrary* to how they should be tasted or to any aims their makers had for them. But what choice do we have?

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

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

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

Finally, I've begun to see I like to catch a grower just as

he's wriggling from the egg, so to speak, ideally before he's been detected by the crowd. I'm delighted by the number of growers I selected long ago who have since become famous VDP estates. Wanna know who? Here's who!

Joh. Jos. Christoffel  
Willi Schaefer  
Florian Weingart  
Dönnhoff  
Kruger-Rumpf  
Josef Leitz  
Müller-Catoir  
Meßmer  
Minges

And I'll predict here that Hexamer and Adam will be the next to ascend the lofty ranks of VDP-dom.

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

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

The gray-market advocates want you to believe the importer with an exclusivity rubs his filthy hands at the grotesque markups he plans to take. And all of us children of the radical '60s swallow it whole, since every businessperson is ipso facto guilty. These proponents of pure capitalism neglect to consider one of its basic tenets: If a product is priced beyond its value, people won't buy it. The greedy importer can gouge all he wants; it avails him nothing if he can't sell the wine.

People also claim that monopoly creates opportunities for greed. Seems very logical, again, especially to us Aquarian-Agers who mistrust merchants innately. But the logic falls apart on closer examination. Say you're the sole Jim Beam distributor in your state. You gonna crank up the prices? After all, no one else is selling Jim Beam, right? **WRONG.** No one is selling Jim Beam, but someone's sell-



ing Jack Daniels and someone's selling Wild Turkey, and if your price for Beam is out of line with the other guy's price for his bourbon, you're not taking orders dude. Thus if I even *wanted* to push up my prices for (let's say) Christoffel, it wouldn't be long before y'all noticed Fritz



*"Have I got a deal . . . just for you!"*

Haag was the better value. Ordinary markets suppress the temptation to price-gouge, especially a market as compact and attentive as the one for fine wines.

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

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

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

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

Here's how it should not happen. I broadcast emails to every retailer in Belgium offering them the wine, bypassing the importer my partner wants to work with and ignoring any wishes he has about how his wine gets sold. Some friend I am! "*It's a BRAVE NEW WORLD, BAY-BEE; eat my dust!*" Out of one side of my mouth I'm pontificating about the "free market" and touting my credentials as "consumer-champion" and out of the other side I'm just a hyena scavenging for business because I smelled carrion somewhere, blithely disregarding any norms of courtesy toward a grower whose loyalty I asked for!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. I am essentially apathetic with respect to growers' associations. Many of them are sincere and they sometimes mean well and do good, but just as often it's a way to strut, and life's too short for that crap. Growers associations can be helpful in prospecting,

but all I really care about is what's in the glass, not on the capsule.

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

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

### **Core-List Wines**

The core-list, with which we have been very successful, was created to ensure greater continuity and help you build brands. It began as an empirical record of having consistently selected a certain wine over many years. The wine needed to be in "good" supply (by small-batch standards). Yet for all that it's been fabulously received, it's created many "candid exchanges of views" (in the parlance of diplomacy) among my staff and me. I want you to know this: *no wine will be offered merely because it's on the core-list*. Every wine will continue to earn its way into this offering. In the (extremely unlikely!) event a core-list wine is yucky in the new vintage, off it goes. If we've done our



jobs properly, that will almost never happen. Core-list wines will be clearly indicated in the text (with notes in **bold print**) and I'll explain why each wine is on the core-list.

### **Dry German Wines**

I'm gonna fuss at you guys a little. I've been reading a lot of quotes you're giving wine writers about the "new interest" in dry German wines, which you say you also enjoy. Last year I offered 75 wines either Trocken (the majority by far) Halbtrocken or Feinherb, a little over a quarter of the whole. Sales, shall we say, lagged behind that proportion. I think maybe you like to hear yourselves say you're interested in the wines more than you actually like to buy the wines. I'm such a bitch, aren't I! But if you really like these wines I'd appreciate some tan-

gible evidence pretty please.

Now I'm gonna fuss at the Germans, who are very quickly suffocating what used to be a precious wine culture.

I taste each year at roughly the same 40-some estates, and thus I can compare apples to apples. I know the view I receive isn't comprehensive but I'm sure it's representative. And I was happily perplexed to see how much better the dry Rieslings had gotten in the past years.

Some of this is surely due to accommodating vintages of which more later. Some of it may be the wines the growers opted not to show me. But the general increase in quality was enough to revisit my vituperation against Trocken, to see if it is still justified.

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

David Schildknecht recently wrote a column in the Austrian magazine VINARIA in which he said German Riesling was quickly becoming an either-or proposition, either up-to-9-grams of RS or 60-grams-and-above. He's absolutely right. "You know how Germans are," said one (German!) grower. "They like things in boxes, categories, and they're very absolute." It doesn't matter that most Riesling tastes best BETWEEN 9 and 60 grams RS. Taste is not the issue. I'll repeat that: Taste is not the issue. The issue is concept, and the Germans will tell you "If it's dry then it should be really dry and if it's sweet then really sweet. What's this stuff in between?"

This stuff in between is the golden mean, the realm of truth that almost always lies between the extremes. But actual spontaneous sensual experience doesn't matter if the wine doesn't fit inside the concept *YOU* have determined beforehand. David also wrote (brilliantly!) "Well it's not a stock and it's not a classic reduction, so don't expect me to taste your so-called sauce," and this describes it precisely.

That the wines are getting better is actually beside the point. They are improving – they had nowhere to go but up – but the doctrines and dogmas accompanying them are the same ones they used when the wines were almost all yucky. It's good that quality is gaining on ideology, but it's far from certain they're running neck and

neck. Ideology will always win such races, because ideology cheats.

Grower after grower told me their private (German) customers won't even taste a wine if the sweetness is higher than -X-, and they're afraid of losing customers if they remove these data from their pricelists. Am I the only one who finds this *insane*?



*Are today's German wines being "raped into dryness"?*

Nor is this a mere squabble of ideas. It affects me constantly, because many of the "sweet" wines I offer are effectively bottled for me, and if I don't sell them out the poor grower has no one else *who'll buy them*.

I haven't yet tallied the Trocken totals in the new offering, but I'll bet it continues to grow. The wines are getting better, especially at the top end – the everyday ordinary stuff is still pretty cheerless.

So now they're staging tastings where their top dry wines are pitted against blue chip examples from Austria and Alsace, to demonstrate their own competitiveness. The results are generally rubbed in my face. They think I'm intractable, but what I actually am is empirical. I generalize based on the evidence hitherto. *Truth means that all ravens are black, until you see a white raven*. So let's give credit where it's due. I am tasting a larger number of excellent and worthwhile Trocken Rieslings than I ever did before. I have little doubt that top producers are making sure their Grand Cru dry Rieslings are superb, as many of them are. Regardless, there are two difficult questions that need to be addressed. First, what about the number of foully bitter and grotesquely unbalanced Trocken wines at lower echelons of quality? The ceiling may have been raised but the floor is still awfully damn low. Second, even if the wines are improving, do we need Germany to be yet-another-source for dry Rieslings when she is the *only possible* source for Rieslings of the type she used to make? Let's go deeper.

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

Then I started to wonder.

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

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

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

Gault-Millau likes to do what they call a Ten Years After tasting. (No, this doesn't involve Alvin Lee in any way I'm aware of.) Armin Diel told me when they tasted the top-rated Trocken wines of the 1994 vintage "It was striking to see how thin and sour many of them were compared to the wines we're making now." Yet oh, the passion with which they were extolled! Is it really dignified to be reduced to saying "To be sure, we were overplaying the virtues of those "thin, sour" wines, but now we're not!" Sure we're saying the same things now we did then, but now they're true. This is fatuous, and the melancholy irony is that the best of today's dry German wines deserve better, but the tastemeisters spent too long crying wolf.

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

When an idea appears monolithic it's productive to challenge whether it's a true idea instead of a *truism* or dogma. It seems self-evident that wine styles would apportion themselves spontaneously based on taste if actual taste were guiding then. It is less credible to suppose that, for some reason, an entire generation of wine drinkers has suddenly learned that only dry wines are acceptable. In fact it's only dry wines that are *permissible* if one wishes to be *au courant*.

Peter Geiben told me a revealing story. He was visited by a trio of consumers who wanted to taste and purchase. What did they wish to taste? *Trocken*, of course.

And so a line up of dry wines was duly assembled, along with a single “feinherb” and a “sweet” Kabinett at the end. “It’s necessary you taste all the wines,” said Peter; “those are the rules!” And when all the wines were tasted, the buyers said “Actually, those last two wines were quite attractive . . .” and when the order arrived the next day, “Not one single bottle of Trocken wine was ordered; only the sweet Kabinett.”

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

Remember any little feature of fashion from the last ten years. Doesn’t matter which one. While it was trendy we had to have it, and thought it looked good, and we looked good in it. A few years later when the new trend came along we adopted it. All well and good. But admit



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

it: you look in the closet at the old stuff, whatever it is, wide lapels, four-button blazers, hip-huggers or bell-bottoms or flowered neckties, and you think *That looks ridiculous; what was I thinking!* Fashion exerts a kind of hypnosis, and if this is true of fashion imagine how true it is of dogma. “Wrong?” I think not. Misled, and therefore dishonest with themselves.

Often even the dogma is supported with dishonest (or at least false) explanation. I am automatically suspicious when a German starts in with the whole “traditional” rap. As I see it, “tradition” is a moving target,



usually determined by the time you start from and how far back you look.

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

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

It’s recently been suggested (by a writer who ought to know better) that the great dry German wines of yore were swept away by oceans of cheap sweetened swill in the ‘50s and ‘60s, when *dosage* could be used to pastiche what were formerly rare and truly precious sweet wines. This argument sounds pretty ideological to me. Sure there were lots of yucky wines made sweet in the 50s and ‘60s. Which only says there’s plenty of yucky growers and only a few good ones. The same guys are making yucky dry wines now. At least the yucky sweet wines were *palatable*. But for every true wackoloon who really gets *off* on bitterness, there are hundreds who are losing the ability to discern disharmony; consumers and growers alike. Taste with them if you don’t believe me!

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

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

## a new way to measure sweetness

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

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

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

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

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

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

**ONE** signifies barely discernable sweetness.

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

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

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

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





German spies were not into Trocken wines . . . at all!

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

The wines they currently call “Trocken” — those snarling beasts with 0-9 grams of sweetness — would henceforth be called “Sehr Trocken” (very dry). After all, if there are degrees of sweetness it stands to reason there are also degrees of dryness. The Loire has its “Sec Tendre” designation. There is ripe-dry and smooth-dry and rich-dry and there is also austere-dry and battery-acid dry. I mentioned this idea to Helmut Dönnhoff who was visibly intrigued. “That’s the first time I’ve heard such a proposal,” he said, and I could see the wheels-a-turning.

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

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

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

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

Florian Weingart had a cask of Spätlese he was hoping would ferment to dryness, but which stopped with 35 g.l. residual sugar. This was an owee, because Florian’s

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

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



residual sugar. We don’t want to negate the necessity of regulations and categories but find that life itself and enjoying wine is an experience beyond categories.”

Oh, AMEN!

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

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

I keep waiting for things to right themselves. I look for any little sign that reasonableness is returning. I col-

lect anecdotes, I sniff the air, but this year I started to feel a kind of despair. I asked myself, if I were only now discovering this wine culture, would I find it as magical as I did 30 years ago? Would I want to work with the wines as *they're actually being made*, not as they're customized for me? Would I approve of the wine culture in toto? And I must wearily acknowledge, no, I don't think I would. I might pick and claw at this thing here or that thing there. I imagine I'd find my way to congenial pockets of resistance to the prevailing dogma, to beautiful and *variegated* wines. But overall I think I'd glean something the opposite of vitality, a dark and airless thing, dumb and stuffy.

These things are sad to say. Sadder still to experience.

### **More Principles**

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

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

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

Or, as Johannes Selbach told me once, "when I returned to Germany after being in the States for two years I was totally convinced that all the talk of soil producing fla-

vor was just old wives' tales. But when I started making wines from our grapes I was astonished to find exactly the opposite." He believes it, not from any "romantic" cast of mind, but because it was plainly and concretely proven to be so. Me too.

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

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

*-Alexander Pope*

There are no litmus tests. I don't need to take absolute stands on questions of winemaking. They're not moral questions, and you have to stretch to make them ethical questions. I see no need to decide once and for all if I like reductive or oxidative wines, or this Riesling clone versus another, or wines left on the lees versus wines quickly racked.

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

Apart from which, these things *change*. Today there's a general retreat away from steel, a general movement toward fermentation from natural yeasts (whose results





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

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

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

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

**TT:** Yeah, I appreciated being knocked on my (figurative) keister by so many of the 2003s, because the more certainties that topple away, the closer to that Edenic state

one returns—yet even this is a kind of wishful dream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The 2008 Vintage**

It is the right vintage for its Moment. Could we have absorbed a luxury-vintage, yet again?

But beware of assuming the 2008s are “small” wines or that the vintage is “average” or any other thing that damns it with faint praise. No, it is not a great classic like 2001 or 2005, but if it is a baseline vintage then it signifies how high that *baseline* has risen. It may be modest, but it isn’t simple. There are very few wines tasting inadequately ripe, and very many wines with a dense extract-driven complexity that crams them with flavor even without buxom sugar levels.

The summer was cool and wet the way it used to be

most years before the improbable string of warm years starting with 1988. A period of warm rain in early September gave many growers the spooks. Was another 2000 about to be unleashed? But no, the weather stabilized and most important it *cooled*; the days were brisk and the nights were almost frosty. Vine leaves started to yellow and assimilation was slowed, so picking was prolonged and very late even by German standards. Even where sugar-ripeness was attained the acids were still too high. So they waited.

What they finally picked was as ripe as it could be but with acids sometimes still awkwardly high. Only at the tail end of picking, in early to mid-November did I start receiving those emails "Great picking today, potentially exciting stuff." Bear in mind this is all relative to the assumptions of modern times. Here's an example: on the Mosel you can make "Kabinett" with Riesling at 72° Oechsle (19 Brix). Spätlese starts at 78° and if I recall cor-



rectly, Auslese begins at either 84° or 86°, with BA starting at 112°. Obviously no conscientious grower pays any heed to this blatant nonsense. That said, recent vintages have also provided him that luxury, to disdain the silly standards of the miserable 1971 wine law. But it's a long way from there to some of the "Kabinetts" of vintage 2006, which had over 100° and were close to (legal) Beerenauslese! Last year at Christoffel one of my colleagues said "At last, typical Kabinett again..." but the 07s were still packing must-weights in the low-90s – legal "Auslese" but in fact the prevailing standard for modern Spätlese from a good grower.

In 2008 the "Kabinett wines" have degrees in the mid to high 80s and occasionally higher, so they are lighter than any vintage since 2004. Yet they are still overqualified by the wine-law's lax standards. A Mosel must of 85° is at least what used to be thought of as a "good" Spätlese.

Time for the headlines. The vintage is good everywhere, but better as you go south, so that the Pfalz has a really wonderful vintage that's probably its best since 1998, provided you measure by the actual taste of the wines and not by the proportion of Auslese and other

mega-musts.

In fact 1998 is the year 2008 is most aligned to. I remember those early 98s and they're often echoed here. 2008 wines are, above all, LONG. My notes also started repeating the phrase "mineral core," and I really tasted extract as a palpable material nucleus. In the Pfalz these extracts are shockingly high. "Thickly mineral and long" is the quick & dirty descriptor I'd use. So yes, it's a lighter vintage, most of whose wines are (well-endowed) Kabinetts and very fine Spätlese. Very little Auslese, thank god! First because conditions were seldom propitious and second because few growers wanted to go all out in any case. Everyone has enough Auslese.

I really like these wines. That's partly because I prize minerality and wines with extract-driven density. Again and again I was happy with the amount of *substance* these ostensibly light wines were showing. And I am really stoked with the Pfalz, especially after all the miseries it has had to endure over the past decade. At least five of my Pfälzers made better wines in 08 than in 07 – and 07 is excellent. What's often most impressive in 2008 is the eerie perfection shown by several of the lightest wines. It's as if they're saying "We may not have gotten a lot of sugar but we got a ton of everything *else*." 2008 is the first vintage I've ever written three plusses for a Kabinett wine. So don't forget, it may be "normal" but it's far from ordinary.

There is a single overriding theme, and it is acidity. Many of the young growers, (pretty much anyone with fewer than twelve vintages under his belt), have no experience with a really high-acid vintage. And because most of their wines are dry, and because many are sold and drunk within a year, these 08s cannot go into bottle with the acids they naturally had. Thus we see a lot of deacidification. One guy said "Everyone deacidified, but not everyone will admit it." So I tried to phrase the question as a pragmatic issue with a range of possibilities any reasonable person would tolerate. Tryin' to get me some truth. Even some of the veteran growers seemed to have forgotten what an obstreperous acid vintage was like, and most of all I felt they'd lost their *tolerance* for acid levels they'd have left alone twenty years ago. And so a number of growers deacidified, including many who said they'd never do it – and who had the luxury of saying so when they thought they'd never *need* to.

These things constitute a kind of *zeitgeist* of the palate. Back in the early 90s we had a string of years with pronounced acids: 90 itself, 91, 93, 94, 95, 96, and I wonder whether we'd tolerate them now. 1990 was at the epicenter of a related idea that sweetness should be as low as possible; there were plenty of Rieslings in the 35-55 g.l. range with 10 grams of acid. They'd be freaks today, but we found them classic back then. I recently had a bottle

of 1990 and found this note, which seems to sum it up.

*When no individual component is conspicuous, the wine is balanced. But a flaw in balance can be fascinating. The 90 Auslese from Reuscher-Haart (Piesporter Goldtröpfchen) has a visible excess of acidity, as was usually the case with the 90s. If it had been sweeter by 20 grams/liter, this would have been blanketed, but that wasn't the zeitgeist back then; everyone wanted to tamp the sweetness down as far as they could. But the results were less than one might have wished, which I find interesting. Also, the spiky acids were at first almost invisible beneath a huge foam of youthful fruit. We felt the electricity and tasted the depth of fruit and thought the wines were profound – as some were. But with hindsight 1990 is an important and generally excellent vintage, but one with a common problem, some of which was man-made. So in this flaw there's a bunch of stories being told, about how to relate to acidity as an agent of balance, about how often we mistake a vintage's quality in our first euphoria, about how we're so often wrong about sweetness being an evil which must at all costs be minimized, about how we're misled into thinking the high-acid years will age best. That said, the wine was very good and there were many good THINGS about it, even because of its "flaw."*

There are several methods to deacidify. The easiest and cheapest is to use chalk, but this has the effect of removing mostly tartaric acid, so the resulting wine has less total acid but a higher proportion of the tart malic variety. I noticed in a few such wines a bitter note, either exposed or caused by deacidification. Removing sharpness only to reveal bitterness wasn't much of a bargain, in my view. The biggest pain-in-the-ass method is called "Doppelsalz," wherein a portion of the wine has all its acidity removed, and is then re-blended back into the whole. This ensures the original proportions of acidity remain intact. But it's a lot more work and it's also more expensive. I have a few growers who adamantly refused to touch acids (I was tempted to say *drop* acids...) and Walter Strub – bless his stubborn heart – told me "It's like decapitating a wine," adding "All you need is time and the wines balance themselves, but not if you have to sell the wine in February."

How will the vintage age, then? Will it be aged? Or will we accept it as an unusually good interesting "normal" vintage we don't *have* to make cellar-space for? Bearing in mind this question is never answered with more than hopeful guess work, I see no reason the 08s won't age perfectly well, but they'll zig-zag their way and they'll go through the shadows. They're temperamental, not sanguine. It's not impossible they'll show some green notes in a couple years, as the 98s did. If you want a vintage to drink young without guilt, may I pro-

pose 2008, bitte? I plan to drink most of them young, when their minerality is at its most expressive. I'll put away the 15-20% or so that seem to warrant it, but I'll even drink a few of those bottles early because I like how they taste now.

A few hardy souls risked Eiswein, and those who did had good results, though these were picked between December 30 and January 5 and so were still hard to peer into. I saw almost no BA or TBA, which was something of a relief. I hate to sound jaded, but I'm starting to wonder whether this is perhaps an error of concept in the German wine culture, that grape-sugars should be pursued as an absolute value. I'm being a little unreasonable; I well remember the times when decades would pass between vintages when such wines were even possible. And one grower rebuked me; "Terry, we don't always *set* about to make BA or TBA, often the grapes are *out there* anyway, and what else should we do with them?" So I see the point. But I also see a problem when ripeness and concentration are sought as though more is always *better*, and if you don't believe me just look at the "scores" given the wines, which seem to climb in lock-step with must-weights. The greatest expression of German Riesling comes in a great Spätlese. Certain Auslesen can equal it, as can certain Kabinetts. But I no longer am convinced that a BA or TBA automatically constitutes a quintessence. A few of them do, but for each one of these there are fifty that taste like fig juice with white-raisin nectar, at least to my pitiful, obtuse palate.

Don't let me forget to tell you how über-cool the SCHEUREBE is in 2008! Kinky and edgy and feral, just the way we like 'em.

### HIGHLIGHTS AND SUPERLATIVES

The Winery Of The Vintage is....Wow, *von Othegraven*. For an ethereal collection of quintessential Saar wines that haunted me for days, and from which I recovered wine memories of my earliest days when every sip of such a thing was miraculous. But this was a hard choice, because the two runners-up were objectively as good. *Christoffel* has his greatest vintage since 2001, every single wine a stirring masterpiece, and wonderfully *Mefßmer* has perhaps the best vintage they've ever made, deep into territory only Müller-Catoir has ever explored. But Othegraven's wines take me back to a kind of pre-cognitive state I remember when I first tasted great Saar Riesling: *How on earth can this thing BE?* I know they're expensive and misaligned with the market, but if you have room for a splurge, make it this one.

OTHER OUTSTANDING COLLECTIONS . . . that is, sus-

tained superlative performance over the entire vintage:

**Wagner-Stempel.** Like duh, big surprise! This is the



superstar no-longer-emerging in the Rheinhessen, and you heard it here first. Actually, you heard it three years ago here first.

**Darting** (who will also appear as comeback kids, but this is their best vintage in memory)

**Eugen Müller**

**Dr Deinhard**

**Müller-Catoir** (assuming the dry Rieslings justify the promise they showed. The Rieslaner series was beyond belief or description.)

**Hexamer**

**Loewen/Schmitt-Wagner** (now a single entity as of the 08 vintage, and firing on all cylinders.)

**COMEBACK KIDS OF THE YEAR . . . GROWERS WHOSE 2008S ARE MARKEDLY SUPERIOR TO THE PREVAILING LEVEL OF THE LAST FEW YEARS:**

**Darting**

**Meßmer**

**Dr Deinhard**

**Eugen Müller**

**THE WINE OF THE VINTAGE IS:**

**Von Othegraven** Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage

**RUNNERS UP INCLUDE:**

**Müller-Catoir** Haardter Herzog Rieslaner Spätlese

**Meßmer** Rieslaner Spätlese

**Hexamer** Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese 2-star

**RUNNERS UP INCLUDE CONT'D:**

**Schlossgut Diel** Dorsheimer Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese

**Schmitt-Wagner/Loewen** Maximiner Herrenberg

Riesling Spätlese

**Christoffel** Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese 2-star

**Selbach-Oster** Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese "Anrecht"

**THE AUSLESE OF THE VINTAGE IS:**

**Müller-Catoir** Herzog Rieslaner Auslese

**THE SCHEUREBE OF THE VINTAGE IS:**

I may have to retire this category as the winners are *always* **Diel** and **Müller-Catoir**. As they are again!

**THE KABINETTS OF THE VINTAGE ARE:**

(excluding Othegraven's wine-of-the-vintage...)

**Weingart** Bopparder Hamm Riesling Kabinett Feinherb

**Adam** Hofberg Riesling Kabinett

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

**Strub** Grüner Veltliner (which should now have the Austrians peering nervously over their shoulders....)

**Darting** Riesling "Classic" (a bureaucratic category I detest, but a wine I couldn't resist)

**Dr. Deinhard** Langenmorgen Riesling Grosses Gewächs (the best dry Riesling ever from here, and a harbinger of greatness to come under the new regime.)

**Selbach-Oster** "Rotlay" (because it is a naked gesture of terroir and as profound, and masculine, as Mosel Riesling can be.)

**THE GREATEST CORE-LIST WINES ARE:**

(redundant, as they'd be the Adam Kabinett and the Othegraven Kabinett already lionized...)

**THE GREATEST DRY WINE IS:**

*Gotta go plural now since there's so many hip ones!*

**Wagner-Stempel** Heerkretz Grosses Gewächs

**Eugen Müller** Forster Freundstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken (wow!)

**Meßmer** Michelsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs

**THE ABSOLUTE TOP VALUES:**

**Darting** Rieslaner BA (and what a wine)

**Merkelbach** just about everything in 08.

**Selbach** Saar Riesling (best value of the vintage!)

#### SHORT LIST FOR ROCKHEADS:

**Meßmer** Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese  
**Schlossgut Diel** Eierfels Riesling  
**Clüsserath** Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett  
**Selbach-Oster** "Schmitt"

#### SHORT LIST FOR FRUIT AND CHARM HOUNDS:

**Bernhard** Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett  
**Kruger-Rumpf** Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett  
**Loewen** Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese  
**Kerpen** Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese

#### THE MOST PERFECT IMAGINEABLE FOOD-WINES:

*No restaurant should be without them, nor should any self-respecting fridge....*

**Eugen Müller** Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken

**Biffar** Riesling "Josephine"

**Schlossgut Diel** Burg Layen Riesling Kabinett

**Kerpen** Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese Feinherb

**Selbach-Oster** Riesling Spätlese

#### SHORT-LIST FOR GOOFY PLEASURE:

*The wines that give the utmost stupid joy without reference to their objective qualities, just sheer batshit-loony fun. The only things you'll wonder are A) How the bottle got empty so fast, and B) Where the next one is.*

**Darting** Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Kabinett Trocken

**Gysler** Scheurebe Halbtrocken LITER

**Spreitzer** Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett

**Christoffel** Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett #9

### Earlier Vintages Revisited – 2007

I know I've said this before, but you don't really start to see the beginnings of the adult face of a vintage until there's a newer one in your glass. 2007 a year later is smokier than it first seemed. It's riper tasting than 08, it has a *finer* texture, it's silkier, but it's also got more juiciness and less tactile density. The vintage is still excellent and consistently so. I can't think of any 07s which disappointed me on revisiting. At this point I start to wonder whether it's actually the most successful vintage of the decade to date. The best 05s are the best wines of all, and

it remains to be seen whether the 07s will arrive at the depth and grip of the best 2001s or the astonishing perfume of the best 02s, but 2007 doesn't seem to have any *problems*, no areas that were less good than the mean. To the extent that stellar wines are still available I'll keep offering them, and there are a few long-fermenters being offered for the first time. I can't think of a reason to be anything but delighted with any 2007 you bought.

### 2006



It is a baroque vintage that arrived like a foie gras course served after the main course; it looks great but you're not hungry any more, and certainly not for anything so rich. . . .

But I look back on the many dozens of really excellent wines of 2006, and think it will be in some way a lonely vintage. It wasn't really understood by some of the growers who made great claims for it, and it wasn't really understood by the rest of us, who decided we didn't want it and looked for reasons not to buy. To be sure, much of what was labeled "Kabinett" was apposite at best and grotesque at worst. If 2004 tasted as if all the wines had been dosed with Sauvignon Blanc, 2006 tastes as if the wines had been dosed with Pinot Gris. There is, let's admit, a corpulence there.

But, but, but . . . a lot of great wines, a *LOT* of great wines, will be neglected because of our tepid responses to some aura, some aspect of 2006 we decided we didn't want. I have a strong sense that thirty-forty years from now someone will be sitting in a tasting room drinking the 2006s and thinking "*WHY on earth didn't they like these wines back then??*"

### 2005

One doesn't taste them now, but every time I did I was struck by their excellence, their grace, moderation, balance and vinosity. In fact I asked to taste '05-'06 par-



allels where I'd felt the 2006 was perhaps even better—even more grandiose, explicit, determined, complex. But in many cases I was wrong: 2005 was even finer. The tandem will remind German wine geezers of the '76-vs-'75 debates we remember so well, with 2006-1976 linking muscular arms while 2005 and 1975 dance their pretty dance.

### **2004**

What to make of this vintage? At the time it was hailed as a relief after the broiling 2003s, which were generally (if fatuously) written off as clunky and four-square. Tasting the wines pre-bottling I was struck by their freshness and consistency, only noting a small tendency for grassiness in a few sub-regions. But that grassy flavor has intensified, and has started showing up in wines with 1-2 years in bottle. If you told me Sancerre had such egregious overproduction that it hired a gang of vandals to break into German wineries at night and pour off its excess into tanks of Riesling, I'd nearly believe you. The problem is, it isn't confined to Germany. I've tasted lots of Alsace wines, several Chablis, and even a few Champagnes, all showing this *green* flavor somewhere between a pleasing Menetou-grassiness and a yucky cruciferous vegetality.

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

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

talk about it.

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

### **2003**

The best wines of this misunderstood vintage will make fools of everyone who doubted them. Some of the skeptics were young wine people who couldn't be expected to remember the classic hot years like 59, and who missed the digital acid-driven torque they loved. I don't exactly *blame* them, but they were rather too categorical in rejecting 2003. The vintage now shows a beeswax and chamomile note common to warm-weather vintages (99 shows it too) and this usually indicates an uncomplicated evolution. The best wines have slimmed down in bottle and are graceful even in their weighty bearing. Use these beauties to wash down all those words you'll have to eat.

### **2002**

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

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

### **"Antiques"**

**2001** It's almost eight years now, and one can get started. Drink those Kabinetts and approach the Spätlesen, especially from Rhine regions. Even some of the Mosels are getting their groove on. The vintage on

the whole is on the precise cusp between stammering zitty adolescence and clear-skinned robust young adulthood.. I wonder whether the vintage will seem even more lissome when compared to the outsized 2003-2005-2006 trio. 2001 does seem to be the last classic fine vintage, Beethoven versus Mahler. Or maybe the crowding mass of remarkable years will serve to remind us there are many forms of greatness and we get to have them all if we're not obsessed with how things *have* to be.

**2000** remains a kind of tragic watershed; tragic because of the egregious effort that went into making it; watershed because with this vintage we gleaned the great Change. No such wines could have been made in those conditions 30, 20, even 10 years ago. The best 2000s are immensely worthwhile wines.

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

**1999** is as good as forgotten, bland creature that it was, yet again it's often just these vintages that return to amaze us in 20 years. Think of '86, '79, '73. And here's something for your weird-o-meter; many of the German 1999s are evolving the very same beeswax/camomile aromas we see in their distant cousins from Austria. These are wine regions separated by some 500-600 miles, not to mention the Alps, not to mention 2-3 degrees of latitude, and yet the vintages show the same flavor. Perhaps Science should help us explain this instead of twisting itself into knots trying to "disprove" terroir.

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

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

**1996:** What on earth is the vintage all about? Does anybody know? I thought I knew, feared I'd been wrong, then

thought I knew again. It was a cool year rescued by a late harvest of technically "ripe" but high-acid Rieslings. It tasted galvanic in its youth, with buzzing energy and warp-speed complexity, and then it started to grow old before it was really properly young. The unripe acids oxidized and grew vegetal and the fruit pulled away and the wines were stark and bizarre. In those years no grower would show you his 1996s, but two years ago Hans-Leo Christoffel opened a bottle of '96 *Kabinett* to drink with us at dinner. I winced to see the vintage and wondered at his *cojones* of steel, but the wine was all the things I first loved about the vintage, and I was more confused than ever. I think 1996 is like one of those insanely high-performance cars that's in the shop all the time, that breaks down if you as much as sneeze in it. When it's running there's nothing like it, but it's delicate and injury-prone. Part of me believes the best '96s will come around, but then a voice says *Come around from what, exactly?* And I'm floundering again. Still, I've had several really good ones in the last year, so let's say it is a quirky kind of vintage, marked



by green flavors and high acid but not weak or anemic, and one has to be agnostic as regards its eventual development.

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

Young wines are drama, wind-driven clouds and

thunder and lightning, each component puts on a show for you, it's all crazily *there*, all the pieces screaming and eager like little kids who want to show off a trick they've learned. You get to see each piece and also the design into which each piece fits; in effect you get to see the *mise en place* and look at all the sexy ingredients (Is he *really* gonna use all those truffles??) and imagine what the dish will taste like. But honestly, when does it taste like you thought it would? When wines are bottled they begin to settle down, and the Whole they assume isn't only greater than the sum of its parts – it is often *different*. I've noticed that some years, usually "fruity" ones, often improve over time. 1988, 1997, 2002 come to mind. Sometimes the impressively structured ones can have you grinding your teeth: '96 and '98 for sure, and I think '90 escaped because of the immense *fruit* it contained. Though in retrospect its acids were misunderstood and as a whole the sweet wines weren't sweet enough.

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

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

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

First, either do away with cork or find a way to neutralize its damage. I am *fed up* with the number of

corked bottles of German wine I encounter. Yes, outright stinkers are rare, but these aren't as scary as the subtly corked wine, where something indistinct is making the wine taste mute, furry, stale.

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

For a long time we've all suspected something was particularly wrong with the Germans' cork supply, as their wines showed more off-flavors than any other country's wines. And not only the outright reek of TCA, but also the comically-termed "organoleptic deviations" (I resemble that remark . . .) where the wine is muted and furry. George Traber's recent (and excellent) book *To Cork Or Not To Cork* contains this interesting passage:

*Hervé also determined that the alcohol level of a wine strongly affected the amount of TCA extracted from the cork. Higher-alcohol wines might have more TCA, but that was offset because the TCA was less volatile and not as easy to smell. Hervé concluded that the maximum recognition of TCA takes place in a wine that has about 10% alcohol. That is also the reason relatively low alcohol wines such as . . . Riesling have a high incidence of TCA.*

So there is, perhaps, some objective evidence for the impression many of us have formed anecdotally, that German wines are more often corked than other wines. Yet if the quoted statement is true, there should be many fewer corked bottles of dry German Riesling with 13% alc than of Mosel Kabinetts with 8%. I wonder whether this is in fact the case. I suspect . . . not.

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

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

for itself. Then they learned how to refine it, what to leave hanging, how (or if) to protect the fruit, when to give up on it, and what not to concentrate. This last point is crucial, which you'd appreciate if you remembered any of the '87 Eisweins; this unripe vin-

tage gave Eisweins wherein the *unripeness* was concentrated, and I will never forget tasting a Mittelrhein Riesling Eiswein with over *twenty gum-bleeding grams of acidity* which would probably have removed dog blood from silk.

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

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

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

The whole spastic conniptions of the VDP, with their



*If only Terry were "King of the World!" . . .*

Grosses (or Erstes) Gewächs, show what happens when you take a "marketing" approach to wine. By now you know this is a de-facto vineyard classification, unofficial but tolerated by officialdom, created to draw attention to Germany's best

sites, its Grand Crus. Their names appear on labels by themselves without commune, like Bonnes Mares or Richebourg. So *Burrweiler Schäwer* becomes *Schäwer Grosses Gewächs*, and all's right with the world, at least the world that can pronounce "Grosses Gewächs."

I take no issue with any of this. I proposed a vineyard classification in an article in *Decanter* magazine way back in 1985 before you were even born. Why even have site names on a label if they don't matter? And why not codify the consensus of centuries as to which are good, better and best? Mischief will ensue, no doubt, but mischief is already ensuing and it's worse mischief; consumers have to memorize the best names among over 6,000 sites.

You would think, having done a fine days work, the VDP poo-bahs would have retired satisfied they'd left the world a gentler place. But some vile marketing gene must have wafted into the chambers, and these wise elders commenced to fix what wasn't broken and break what was intact.

They decided that all Grosses Gewächs wines would be dry. Must be dry. They said they did it to provide the consumer with a predictable experience. They *really* did it to cement an ideology. Why, why, why?

I know the answer, and it is an answer of sorts, but embedded in it lies a subversive question. They'd probably say: "When the consumer buys a bottle called 'Meursault' he knows he is getting a wine that is always dry, but our German wines could be dry or semi dry or sweet, and this confuses him." Well let's not have that! I have an alternate suggestion. LET'S INSIST THAT ALL WINES LABELLED "ERSTES GEWAECHS" BE

SWEET!!! And let's even do it in fine Teutonic fashion and decree the wines must have "no more than 50.5 grams and no less than 38.623698499 grams (39 if you're married filing jointly)." If we are going to decide, completely arbitrarily, how an entire community of disparate wines will taste, then let's increase the odds they'll taste GOOD, what say?

Ah but this isn't P.C., you see! In a topsy-turvy world where Trocken = Proper it follows rationally (if horrifically) that the potential quality inherent in a site has only to do with the goddamn residual sugar in a wine from that site.

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

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

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

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

All in all I'm starting to wonder about the VDP. They seem to opt as if by instinct toward ideological strait-jackets. Low yields, environmentally friendly viticulture, hand-picking, strict ripeness minima, all O.K.

Good place to stop.

But, alas and inevitably, the "marketing" guys pull up in the white truck with the jackets and the Procrustian bed and the syringes and scalpels and electrodes. Let's establish prices, they insist, and let's further decree the precise parameters of residual sugar a priori. Time to REWIND the tape to just before the silliness started, eh guys?

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

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

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

A few years have passed since this nonsense began, and we're starting to see the predictable spectacle of the VDP correcting awkwardnesses they themselves brought about. The newest idea is the "2nd-wine" from classified sites.

Here's the problem. Gregor Meßmer makes a

“GroGew” (I’m sick of typing the fucker out!) from (Burrweiler) Schäwer, but he has to sell it at a considerably higher price than is usual for him. Nor is he *permitted* to sell it before September of the following year, and Gregor’s is a happ’nin winery with thirsty customers who need wine now, not in bloody September.

He doesn’t want *all* his dry Schäwer to be GroGew, only the best of it. The rest he’ll sell as Burrweiler Schäwer Spätlese Trocken or even Kabinett Trocken. The Spätlese Trocken now becomes the 2nd-wine of the GroGew and if certain VDP apostles get their way, it won’t any longer be called “Spätlese Trocken,” it will be understood the “2nd-wine” is also dry. Much simpler? You tell me!

He’ll have to find *another* way to describe what was his Kabinett Trocken, because he can only use the Schäwer name on two dry wines per vintage. He can use



*Giant German rabbits love Riesling. Seriously.*

it on as many sweet wines as he likes, because of course the sweet shit is infra-dig, not only beneath one’s dignity but beneath one’s very consideration. Do whatever the hell you want with that crap, dude!

So now you’ve set up another knot the poor hapless consumer has to untie, all because you insisted the original wine had to be dry. I’m no marketing genius, but all you needed was two categories, let’s call them GroGew “Stone” (for the dry wines) and GroGew “Peach” (for the non-dry wines) and some means of picturing this on the label. Truth would be served, flexibility would be inculcated, differing tastes would be *honored*, not dictated to, and I’ll give you this idea FOR FREE; you can take the 20,000 Euro you would otherwise have paid and either donate it to Doctors Without Borders or else buy me a bottle of Egon Müller’s latest TBA at the next Grosser Ring auction.

Almost every time these (sometimes) well-meaning people have twiddled around the edges of the disastrous 1971 wine law, they’ve ended up sewing more confusion without removing any of the confusion already created by that laughable document. They also create the image of a wine culture stumbling about like some half-blind twit looking for the monacle he dropped on the floor.

## **TASTING VERSUS DRINKING**

I once got invited to one of those mammoth vertical tastings of some Bordeaux, I think it was Las Cases. Fifty vintages, back to the Punic wars. Me! I never get invited to those things.

It took me all of five seconds to reply; no, I wouldn’t be attending. “Oh, that’s too bad. Is there a scheduling conflict?” “No,” I replied, “I don’t choose to attend. But I hope everybody else has a great time!”

I really do not enjoy sitting in some chillingly well-lighted room in a row with many other people as if we were taking the written segment of a driver’s test, with ten glasses in geometric patterns on the table in front of me, little bitty bits of wine in each glass, sippin’ and spittin’ and combing my mind for adjectives. I don’t enjoy it because I think it’s a waste of wine, and even worse it is a sin against the spirit of wine, and I would just as soon not participate.

Give me any one or two of those mature vintages, along with a mellow evening, a rack of lamb, and the company of people I’m fond of, and I am a very happy man. A great old wine is such a gift of providence that it begs to be savored, to soak into your heart. Sitting in some creepy banquet room and “tasting” fifty old wines not only dilutes the aesthetic experience, it’s a macho snub of the nose to the angels.

Apart from which I respect the hard work of the vintner. If he knew his/her wine would end up, fifty years later, being opened in a “tasting” alongside forty nine other wines for a bunch of earnestly scribbling geeks, he’d probably hurl a grenade at the winery and run away sobbing. I have enough on my poor conscience without contributing to that.

## What is a Palate?

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

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

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

I do think that those of us who make our livings using our palates would do well to think about what types of palates they are and how we relate with them. Part of why I worry this question is that I can't apprehend how differently we seem to taste things. I mean, most of us agree on what red or yellow *look* like, and most of would agree that minor chords sound sad and major chords sound happy. It is manifestly obvious to me that low-alcohol white wine with happy acids and a certain amount of sweetness taste superb with an enormous range of food, and yet it's not only that you haven't experienced it. You have, and you disagree! I sat in *Chinois on Main* in Santa Monica once and watched someone eat shrimp in a pineapple sauce and drink 1986

Gruaud Larose. To my palate, that would be like a bowling ball dropped on my already-infected toe. I'm unwilling to believe that people **want** discordant (and thus ugly) flavors on their palates, and so I have to conclude they don't perceive them as discordant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## How German Wines Age

I have newbies working with me. If you've never visited German wine growers you have no idea how these wines truly age, i.e., when they've never been moved from the perfect cellars in which they lay from the beginning. The first time you get to experience such a wine, it is nearly unbelievable. So seeing everyone's astonishment at the condition – and the *tenderness* – of these old Rieslings caused many more of them to be unearthed. Nothing grandiose mind you; just “ordinary” wines of unremarkable years.

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

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

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

So don't!

The problem is, we are tasting and sampling those wines commercially at *exactly* the most awkward moment. If you encounter such an aroma in a young Mosel Riesling, try swirling the glass for a few minutes; it will dissipate. The number of minutes it takes to dissipate is roughly the number of *years* it will take to disappear from the wine entirely if the bottle is left undisturbed. It is in NO WAY a flaw; merely an inconven-

ience. Or you can look upon it as a warning not to drink these wines too young!

After a couple of years, many Rieslings enter a rather neutral phase in which they seem to have lost their early vitality. I see this as the chrysalis stage; they *are* enclosed, they *are* hard to get at—but be patient, for soon emerges a butterfly.

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

There are also strict chemical reactions wherein acidity softens and sugars polymerize, so that each is less pronounced as the wine ages.

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

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

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

The author Tom Stevenson of whose scholarship I stand in near-awe, summed up the petrol thing neatly. “The so-called petrol aroma is a well-known varietal characteristic of a classic . . . Riesling wine of some maturity. The active chemical compound has been identified as trimethyldihydronaphthalene, or TDN for short. TDN develops during the bottle aging process through the degradation of beta-carotene, an antioxidant that is itself derived from lutein, another antioxidant. The ratio of beta carotene to lutein is higher in Riesling than in any

other white grape variety. Studies show that the lower the pH of a wine, the higher its potential for developing TDN. The longer it takes for the petrol aromas to emerge, the more finesse they have. Interestingly, cork absorbs 40 percent of TDN, thus screwcaps preserve more petrol aromas."

In next month's edition, Tom will demonstrate how you can use this information to get all the girls you want, so don't miss that issue!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My own instincts are to pay heed to the weight of



the wine— Eiswein at 135° Oechsle is a different critter than one at 200° Oechsle— and drink it as you would any other hyper-concentrated dessert wine: either very young or very old.

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

## **What To Drink Now**

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

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

## **The Question of Tartrates**

Now and again we get a pick-up request due to tartrates in the bottle. When I was starting out some 30 years ago, every grower's pricelist had a disclaimer to the effect that tartrates are a naturally occurring sub-



stance and no cause for refund or return. I wish we all could do the same.

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

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

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

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

### **Label Basics**

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

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



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

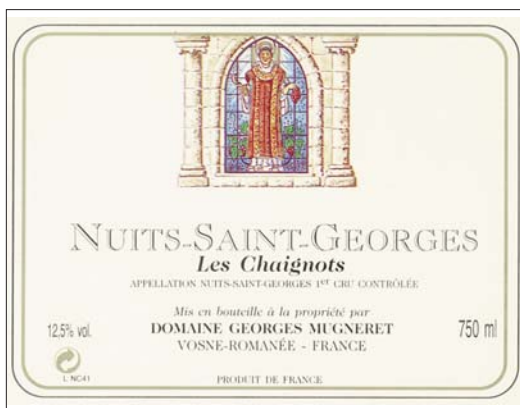
Here's what it means: Selbach-Oster is the producer. If you see the word *Weingut* in any proximity, that's your signal. A Weingut is a winery which estate-bottles its wine. Look for that word. Vintage is self-evident. Zeltinger **Schlossberg** identifies the site and locality. Zeltingen is a place from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

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

In some instances the label tells you how dry the wine is (by means of the words *Trocken* and *Halbtrocken*).

Beginning in 2009, a wine is either a *Qualitätswein* (if it was chaptalized) or a *Prädikatswein* if it wasn't, i.e., if it was ripe enough to do without adding sugar to the must to bulk up the body. The German bureaucrats continue their wild romp through our tenderest sensibilities with the *Amtliche Prüfungsnummer* which is in essence a quality control number awarded by an official tasting panel which certifies that the wine meets certain minimum





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

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

## GLOSSARY

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

You'll hear me mention Oechsle if a wine displays remarkable ripeness for its quality level. Most of my growers are contemptuous of the lenient standards for minimum ripeness. And you need to know if, for example, I'm offering you a Kabinett with near-Auslese

ripeness because you might be looking for a light wine and you won't get it. Each grower sets up his own schemata, and if the baseline level is, say, equivalent to Spätlese, then the lightest wine could be called "Kabinett," even with Spätlese-level ripeness. Better to be remembered for a superb Kabinett than to be forgotten for a run-of-the-mill Spätlese. German wine in general is riper than it was fifteen years ago (it's a global-warming thing), even though I have stopped using aerosol deodorants personally.

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

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

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

**ACIDITY:** I need you to understand just how high in acidity German wines are. Most Champagne has an acidity of around 5.5 to 6 g.l., but this would be considered dangerously low for a typical German Riesling. Most Alsace wine, except Riesling, has acidity in the 4-6 g.l. range, and even the Rieslings rarely exceed 8. For the German Riesling grower anything below 8 looks deficient.

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

The Germans have lurched backward from their acid-obsession. Now the pack has moved too far in the opposite direction. The poor grower! The ones who try to "gauge the market" end up being whipped around, dupes to fashion. The Good Guys just go on making the

best wines they can and look for people to sell them to. I would never advocate a return to the days of Trocken wines with 11 grams of acidity (you could disfigure your own face if you let any of that stuff dribble down your chin), but it concerns me to hear so many vintners talk about adjusting acids downward to make their young dry wines palatable. It signals an inappropriate focus on acidity as such, rather than on the entire flavor of the wine. As Hans-Günter Schwarz so wisely puts it: "Acidity is the fundament of fruit."

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

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

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

When I first started seriously with wine, *herb* was the word growers used to indicate their dry (or dry-er) wines. "Trocken" was unknown. So "feinherb" is an attempt to rub a little spit on it and make it sound nice.

The word is neither here nor there, but the idea of regulating it *sensorily* is so manifestly sensible I wonder why they don't apply it to all the dry wines instead of obsessing over lab figures. Enjoy this wee glimmer of sanity while it lasts, as I'm sure some constipated twit at E.U. Brussels HQ will wrestle it into his airless little box.

**SÜSSRESERVE:** It was striking how many times tasting these 2008s when I wished there was some *dosage* with which to fine-tune them. Literally dozens of wines could have been improved. But this is contrary to the new liturgy, and it's starting to get under my skin.

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

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

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

So-called "Süssreserve" (literally sweet-reserve) is unfermented grape juice separated during the harvest and kept under pressure (carbon dioxide or nitrogen), eventually re-blended into a wine in order to fine-tune the final sweetness. Thus harmony of flavor is assured—at least in theory. Actually, I have decided that I don't like the word "Süssreserve" any more and I won't use it in this text. Since nobody objects to the idea of *Dosage* in Champagnes, and since Süssreserve has connotations of unnatural manipulation to some people—and since the two words mean the SAME THING—I think I'll use the nicer one.

In any case I applaud purism in most places it is found, but the anti-dosage crusade in Germany smacks not of science but of religion. I am quite certain that thousands of growers used *dosage* willy-nilly—but that only demonstrates there's plenty of hacks making wine. I doubt very much they'd make better wine by stopping fermentation. Hacks are hacks. *Dosage* has been seized upon by a community of growers a little too eager to polish their halos. It is a convenient symbol of manipulation, but this is silly; all winemaking is manipulation, and the authentic questions are not whether to manipulate (one already does) but rather *how* to manipulate and to what

end. What we call “non-manipulation” (with rather an excess of romanticism) is more properly called *minimal* manipulation. We prefer growers whose wines are guided by a wish to *preserve* natural inherent flavor rather than ladling all kinds of cellar-sauce over it.

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

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

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

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

In Flurbereinigung, the entire expanse of a vineyard is pulled up. After the new roads are built and the work is completed (sometimes old walls and terraces are rebuilt also), the growers get the same amount of land back, or nearly, but in fewer, larger sections. After replanting, the first commercial crop follows in three to four years. Everyone who’s had vineyards through the process

reports that it is much easier to work the land afterwards. It also levels the playing field, since everybody’s vines are now the same age. It does create short-term shortages of wine, and it does diminish the quality of wine from a vineyard until the vines mature again, but it’s a small price to pay to help ensure the future of viticulture in Germany.

But here’s a curious twist. Every parcel of vineyards in Germany is categorized by quality — categories A, B, or C — so that when the vineyards are reapportioned the grower gets back nearly the same proportions of A B and C land he gave up. Makes sense. But also raises a very sneaky question: Why does anyone still quarrel with the idea of a vineyard classification *when it has already been done??* And is already being used! Show me a grower who fumes that vineyard classifications are undemocratic and I’ll show you a grower who’ll fuss to **high hell** if he gives up A-land and gets B-land back.

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

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

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

## Plusses and The Quest For Perfection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**JF:** *Re Deiss and ZH: I wonder if you agree with me on the following proposition: maybe, just maybe, there are*

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

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

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

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

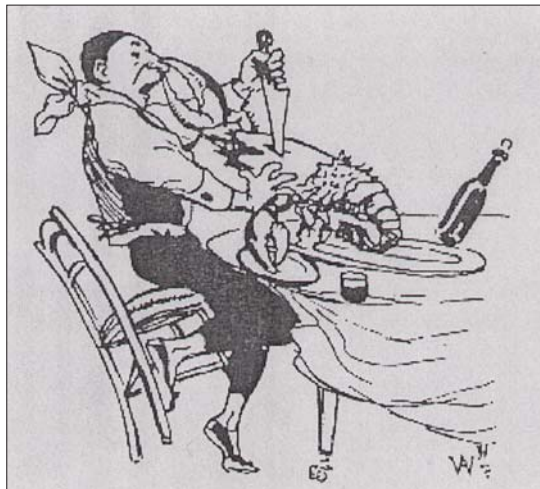


# SOMMELIER ALERT!

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

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

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



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

# sommelier alert

GBR-092	2008	Biffar Riesling Kabinett Feinherb "Josephine" .....	50
GBR-091	2008	Biffar Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Kabinett .....	50
GDD-036	2007	Dr. Deinhard Gimmeldinger Schlössel Riesling Kabinett Feinherb .....	53
GDD-034	2007	Dr. Deinhard Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett .....	53
GDD-033	2007	Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett .....	53
GEM-101	2008	Eugen Müller Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken "Terra Cara" ..	56
GEM-097H	2007	Eugen Müller Forster Ungeheuer Riesling BA, 12/375ml .....	57
GMS-140L	2007	Messmer Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter .....	59
GMS-142	2008	Messmer Rosé .....	59
GMS-143	2008	Messmer Scheurebe .....	59
GMS-144	2008	Messmer Muskateller Feinherb .....	59
GMS-147	2008	Messmer Michelsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml .....	60
GMS-134	2007	Messmer Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese .....	60
GMS-150	2008	Messmer Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese .....	60
GTM-115L	2008	Minges Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter .....	62
GTM-116L	2008	Minges Riesling, 1.0 Liter .....	62
GTM-125	2007	Minges "Froschkönig" Riesling .....	62
GTM-120	2008	Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett .....	62
GTM-122	2007	Minges Scheurebe Kabinett .....	63
GTM-121	2008	Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese .....	63
GDR-174	2008	Darting Blanc de Noir Kabinett Trocken .....	66
GDR-171L	2008	Darting Portugieser Rosé, 1.0 Liter .....	66
GDR-182L	2008	Darting Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 Liter .....	66
GDR-177	2008	Darting Riesling "Classic" .....	66
GDR-170L	2008	Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter .....	67
GDR-172	2008	Darting Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett .....	67
GST-147	2008	Strub Riesling "Soil to Soul" .....	74
GST-141	2007	Strub Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett .....	74
GST-143	2007	Strub Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese .....	74
GWG-040L	2008	Wagner-Stempel Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter .....	78
GWG-042	2008	Wagner-Stempel Scheurebe Trocken .....	78
GGE-035	2008	Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Grüner Silvaner Spätlese Trocken "S" .....	81
GGE-036	2008	Geil Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb .....	81
GGY-077L	2008	Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter .....	84
GGY-078L	2008	Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter .....	84
GGY-080L	2008	Gysler Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter .....	85
GGY-074	2007	Gysler Weinheimer Riesling Halbtrocken .....	85
GCB-085	2008	Bernhard Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett Feinherb ..	87
GCB-088	2008	Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett .....	87

GDH-216	2008	Dönnhoff Estate Riesling .....	94
GDH-218	2008	Dönnhoff Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett .....	94
GKF-136L	2008	Kruger-Rumpf Riesling, 1.0 Liter .....	103
GKF-137	2008	Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Trocken .....	103
GKF-143	2008	Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese .....	104
GSD-082	2008	Schlossgut Diel Burg Layen Riesling Kabinett .....	107
GSD-084	2008	Schlossgut Diel Pittermännchen Riesling Kabinett .....	107
GAW-095	2008	Weingart Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Kabinett Feinherb .....	123
GTJ-074	2008	Toni Jost Wallufer Walkenberg Riesling Spätlese .....	125
GSR-408	2008	Selbach Saar Riesling Spätlese .....	134
GSO-330	2008	Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken .....	134
GSO-328	2008	Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett .....	134
GSO-328H	2008	Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett, 12/375ml .....	134
GSO-331	2008	Selbach-Oster Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett .....	134
GSO-309	2007	Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett .....	134
GSO-332	2008	Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett .....	134
GSO-327	2008	Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese .....	135
GSO-327H	2008	Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml .....	135
GSO-316	2007	Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese "Schmitt" .....	137
GJM-073	2008	Jakoby-Mathy Riesling "Balance" .....	139
GME-161	2008	Merkelbach Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett #7, #8 .....	145
GME-160	2008	Merkelbach Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett #9, #10 .....	145
GME-162	2008	Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #11, #20 .....	145
GME-163	2008	Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #16, #22 .....	145
GME-164	2008	Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #21 .....	145
GME-154	2007	Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese* .....	146
GME-156	2007	Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese .....	146
GJC-173	2008	Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett #9 .....	148
GJC-175	2008	Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese .....	148
GKE-121	2008	Kerpen Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Feinherb Artist Label .....	151
GKE-122	2008	Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett .....	151
GWS-167	2008	Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett .....	154
GWS-153	2007	Willi Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett #2 .....	154
GAD-027	2008	A.J. Adam Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb .....	157
GAC-026	2008	Clüsserath Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett .....	163
GCL-060	2008	Loewen Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett .....	165
GSW-065	2008	Schmitt-Wagner Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett .....	166
GSW-064	1999	Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese .....	166
GOG-007	2008	von Othegraven Estate Riesling Trocken .....	170
GOG-009	2008	von Othegraven Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage .....	170
GOG-008	2008	von Othegraven Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage .....	170
GOG-003	2007	von Othegraven Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Spätlese .....	171
GOG-004	2007	von Othegraven Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Spätlese .....	171

pfalz

# pfalz wines



I'll confess I'm *really* glad the Pfalz kicked such ass in 2008. I like Pfalz wines and was getting tired of them not getting the attention they deserved – at their best. But you need to know this is an entirely changed region from what it was fifteen years ago – “Pfalz, an altered State!” – and the changes are. . . not encouraging.

This can easily be misconstrued, so forgive me if I say it in language like a childrens-first-reader. I love the Pfalz growers I work with, I love their wines, and I love that some of those wines wouldn't exist if I weren't there to buy them. But I also hate that some of those wines wouldn't exist if I weren't there to buy them. It means *no one else* would buy them, and that is a travesty.

I'm open to newbies for the portfolio, especially from the Rheinhessen and Pfalz, but every time—every *single* time—I investigate a new Pfalzer it's the same dreary tale; nothing but dry

wines and maybe a token sticky or two. The entire region has cast itself as a dry-wine supplier, and thus it is an uncongenial place for me to do business. I don't mind dry wines, when they are good, but I don't like not to have a choice. And can you even conceive that nearly every Pfalz vintner will say he cannot sell a Riesling Kabinett??? Pfalz once felt like the land of unlimited possibilities. It now feels like the Eden of the unexamined palate.

But I need to repeat that I've managed to gather a group for this portfolio who (mostly) will make the

much as I love selling under self-imposed pressure to *show you to the MOUNTAIN!*

I love my growers and I'm not ever gonna bail on the Pfalz, but with each passing year it feels more like enemy territory.

In the pretty walled town of Freinsheim my favorite German chef Dieter Luther has a restaurant and a few charming rooms. I've been dining there for many years now. Luther's a very droll guy; when you tell him your meal was fabulous he practically laughs at you, like Oh come on now, gimme a break. He's a wine-guy too and he often asks me how my days go and how the wines are.

His list is naturally heavy into Pfalz wines, and he's both a creature of his times and a businessman serving a clientele, so all the wines are, <sigh>, Trocken. One year he said something that stunned me. He was “unhappy,” he said, with modern Pfalz wines. Really? Yes, because they had become too sweet. “Too sweet?” I asked, astonished. Yes, too sweet he said; he didn't like all these supposedly dry wines with six-seven-eight grams of residual sugar. Say WHAT?!?! If there's the slightest sensible thing about the whole Trocken fetish it's that most of the Rieslings tickle the legal limit of 9 grams of (believe me, untastable) residual sugar.

I left that conversation more depressed than even a Luther meal could relieve. The Pfalz, once my favorite region, once a hyper-oxygenated anything-goes playground of wine's manifold possibilities, has become suffocated by a pathological aversion to as much as a grain of sugar. I get the sense if these pathetic dupes could somehow get into **negative numbers** (“My wine is so dry



*Pfalz vineyard view*

wines we need, and in some cases not only because we need them; they'd have made them anyway. That said, there's an abiding danger of awkwardness if someone bottles, say, 500 cases of Riesling Kabinett for us and we only buy 400. He can't sell the other 100 in Germany! And I hate selling under pressure to *move inventory*,

it has MINUS-5 grams of sugar!") they still wouldn't be satisfied. Perhaps they should simply evaporate their wines and suck on the ash.

Someone will fuss I am being unfair, and will hasten to show me a bevy of the top Grosses Gewächs Rieslings, which are indeed getting better. But it isn't the point whether these wines are good, or how good they are. You're showing me your fine painted ceiling but meanwhile your floor-boards are crumbling with termites, man! Other than the justly celebrated handful of top wines, the *quality-basis* of the region is perilously close to ruin.

The Pfalz is besieged with local tourism from the big cities Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Frankenthal and Heidelberg. Summer weekends are wall-to-wall swirl & hurl. For some reason (perhaps chemical emissions from the heavy industry near Frankenthal?) these fine denizens of taste have embraced masochism as their aesthetic template. The poor growers, who have to sell their wines, after all, have not only to comply, but also to *appear* enthusiastic, and to embrace a guiding philosophy of dryness. It goes emphatically against common sense, but livings must be made. And let me repeat that the best wines are excellent dry Rieslings which I'm offering in greater-than-ever numbers. I hope you buy them. The problem is these wines remain exceptional, and for each one I taste I taste five others that are shrill and sharp – and this is at *good* growers. I shudder to contemplate the dry wines from ordinary domains.

Another lamentable tendency in my beloved and endangered Pfalz is to plant more and more Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris (and Chardonnay, for which they will writhe eternally), the better to produce (mostly) neutral and softer dry wines. A lot of old dubious vines have been hacked up - Optima, Siegerrebe, Ortega, Morio-Muscat - and one is duly grateful; that land was probably unsuitable for Riesling.

A few years ago the Germans had their French-paradox moment and everyone was planting Dornfelder. For a while the world was crazy; prices were higher for Dornfelder vines than for Riesling; Dornfelder was more expensive than Riesling in bulk, and now . . . now? Now the bloom is off the rose, Dornfelder was not the second-coming, there's dreadful overproduction, you can buy the wines for under 2 Euro in every supermarket, and all those poor dupes of fashion are bleeding by the side of the road saying "What *hit* me?" And I hardly feel the tiniest bit of *schadenfreude*!

But Dornfelder notwithstanding, the Pfalz takes itself seriously as a red-wine region – rather more seriously than is warranted by the wines, good though many

of them are. I was heartened when Müller-Catoir told me they'd hacked out their Pinot Noir and would make only white wines from now on. The Pinot Noir was good, but it is even *better* when someone claims an identity instead of trying to be all things to all people. Let's not forget to resist this ominous urge to homogenize. If we allow it to grow malignantly the next thing you know we'll insist on ripe raspberries all year round.

Oh shit; we already do.

Let's suppose for argument's sake they start really getting it right; they learn whatever magic trick is necessary to create consistently and sustainably viable dry Rieslings. Then what? Then there's one *additional* region from which fine dry Rieslings come. What has been sac-

## **The wines have a great affinity for food—certainly the most versatile of all German wines—and yet they have an indefinable elegance.**

rificed, however, is just the thing which makes German Rieslings *unique*. Other places make good dry Riesling, lots of them. But NO other place anywhere on earth makes these miraculously beautiful Rieslings with sweetness. Thus even *if* – and it's a big *if* – Pfalz dry Riesling was abruptly consistently excellent, I don't think I'd take the trade-off. Something one-of-a-kind in return for an also-ran? No thanks!

*THIS IS NOT A SCREED AGAINST DRY WINES. I LIKE DRY WINES!* This is a screed against sheep-think and dogmatic uniformity. I want there to be excellent dry Riesling from the Pfalz, and I want it alongside Rieslings with sweetness (and I don't mean "noble-sweet" Ausleses) and I want growers and their customers to be flexible and ecumenical and *honest* in their tastes.

Still, what little "sweet" wine one does find is uniquely precious. Pfalz wine shows a unique marriage of generosity and elegance; no other wine is at once so expansive and so classy. The idea of "class" usually suggests a certain reserve: NOT HERE! The typical Pfalz wine has big, ripe fruit, lots of literal spice (cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg), a kind of lush savor, a keen tang of pineapple, a splendid tautness of acidity under that frothing stock pot of fruit. The wines have a *great* affinity for food – certainly the most versatile of all German wines – and yet they have an indefinable elegance.

2008 will be a tardy vintage here, the hardest to “read” since Martin Franzen’s maiden-voyage in 02. It is lighter and less dramatic than 2007, which was as superb a collection as has ever been made anywhere. At least I imagined it was less dramatic, until I got to the *Rieslaners*. These are, literally, unbelievable. I’ve been drinking German wine for 31 years and these are the greatest Rieslaners ever made, and since even averagely good Rieslaner is a remarkable experience, these are among the greatest *WHITE WINES* you or I will ever experience. Ironically enough, Rieslaner is shrinking in plantings here, as it was identified with the retired cellar-master Hans-

Günter Schwarz and his wizardly ways with it. It was reasonable to suppose the clientele would retire along with him, and Rieslaner is sort of *recherché* in any case. And yet these stunning wonders came along. After I’d picked my jaw up off the floor, I gaped at Martin and said “These wines are amazing.” (He smiled.) “They have qualities even Riesling cannot attain.” (He smiled again.) “Sorta makes you wonder,” I began, and he cut me off: “Yes, it sort-of does.”

Things in general are shifting somewhat at Müller-Catoir, one senses. They joined the VDP. They cultivate the press now — in the past they sometimes seemed like a Carthusian cloister to which only the privileged gained access. Their private-customer business is a smaller proportion of the total. Whereas they once appeared unconcerned with any publicity they got, they’re now quite pleased. Franzen’s “Wine Personality Of The Year” blurb was delightfully received. And finally, the two of us have reached a kind of ease which only arrives after many years.

My long-time customers are aware of my regard for (and friendship with) Hans-Günter Schwarz, who was Catoir’s cellar-master for 42 years and who is nearly single-handedly responsible for an entire generation of enlightened German wine growers. Martin Franzen had some kind of shoes to fill.

A couple people I know share my very high regard for the new era at Müller-Catoir, yet they often say “Of



Martin Franzen

course the wines are different now . . .” and this I don’t entirely see. Naturally, Martin is his own man, but the wines are recognizably Müller-Catoir wines. The vineyards, after all, haven’t changed. The striving for the outer limits of expressiveness hasn’t changed. Martin Franzen stands, like his

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,250 cases**
- **Top sites: Haardter Bürgergarten and Herzog, Gimmeldinger Mandelgarten, Mussbacher Eselshaut**
- **Soil types: Loamy gravel, clay**
- **Grape varieties: 58% Riesling, 13% Rieslaner, 9% Scheurebe, 8% Weissburgunder, 4% Muskateller, 3% Grauburgunder and Spätburgunder, 2% other varieties**

entire generation, on the shoulders of Schwarz and Catoir and the pioneering work they did in the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s.

If the new wines are different these are delicate differences, and it requires memory and imagination to delineate. After all, we can’t know what wines Schwarz *might* have made from the last few vintages; we can only infer theoretically. Martin hails from the Mosel, and he’s certainly more oriented to *Riesling*. His dry wines are a little drier. His wines are a little leesier than Schwarz’s. His style seems more fluorescent, but I sense I am finding these things only because I’m peering so intently for them. Martin himself believes his wines are less “opulent” than Schwarz’s were. I wouldn’t use that particular word, especially for the wines of Hans-Günter’s later years, but there’s little doubt Martin’s wines cultivate minerality in a different way. Regardless, I myself would say the wines are 93% similar and 7% different, and also that the similarities are more crucial. The great wines of Müller-Catoir continue to convey a surreal brilliance and heart-rending candor.

Philip Catoir seems to be more engaged with the aesthetics of the wines than his father was. Things are shifting. The offering has been consolidated into a tidier and more sensible assortment, as you’ll see. I’m a persnickety terroir-ist, yet I couldn’t say anything critical was sacrificed.

Another interesting change is in keeping with the

times. The estate has re-introduced *casks* into the cellar. The first wines to see them will be the Pinots and I won't be surprised if the eventual Riesling finds its way back into wood. Far from repudiating Schwarz's philosophy I think he'd have come to the same on his own. Stainless steel isn't the only medium in which to preserve brilliant primary fruit, and it introduces issues of its own.

A final change is very sad, but it isn't their doing. You may recall the micro-cru bottlings of the past few vintages (Breumel, Aspen, Gehren, all sections of the over-large Bürgergarten) which the law seemed to tolerate. "Seemed," alas. They just hadn't noticed it yet. But now they have, and they want to deep-six it. Oh this is brilliant. Here's a wine law that allows all the *Piesporter Michelsberg Oppenheimer Krötenbrunnen Bechtheimer*

*Pilgerpfad Niersteiner Gutes Domthal* of the world to flourish, absolutely **meaningless** names, actually MISLEADING names (because the consumer thinks they denote actual places), and this same infinitely wise wine law will *forbid* a name that actually does mean something, because it isn't in the registry of "approved" site-names. If I weren't such a peaceable guy I'd throw a brick through a window. When I suggested the affected growers simply disobey, I was told they'd be fined, and the fines would become painful with repeated transgressions. Ah, THIS they'll pay attention to. They'll *enforce* this. A whole law is based on a fallacy close to a bald-faced lie – but they've got time to prosecute an honest grower who wants his customers to know where the wine came from.

### müller-catoir at a glance:

The greatest estate in the Pfalz and one of the top few in all of Germany. Brilliant primary-fruit driven wines of supernatural steely clarity and multi-layered depth. The overused word *aristocratic* perhaps best describes them.

### how the wines taste:

Extremely spritzy and highly leesy – one wine made me think of Gimmonnet's Cuvée Gastronome! At their best they show a force of expressiveness bordering on the supernatural.

### FROM THE "KLASSIKER" SERIES:

*In effect these are the "village" or "varietal" wines, without site-names.*

*They are all DRY except where otherwise noted.*

#### GMC-134 2008 Mussbach Riesling Trocken

I took the lightest of three dry Rieslings in this echelon, but also the juiciest, easiest and least expensive. The vineyard is actually Eselshaut, which Catoir *amateurs* will remember is the peachy lavish one. There's a riotously blossomy exotic fragrance (plum blossom, allspice) and a tangy juicy spicy palate; very silky texture but it's *raw* silk, the kind you snag a cuticle on.  
SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### GMC-136 2008 Mussbach Riesling Kabinett

This is the "sweet" Kabinett, and the fragrance is immediately more dynamic and melodic, with a palate that grabs you and pulls you *into* the dance; it has the cut of 08 and works tangy rather than sweet, but it's long and as giddy as a garden of roses.  
SOS: 2 (4-15 years)

#### GMC-132 2008 Haardt Sauvignon Blanc Trocken

Ultra-cool and refined, as if it were given a command on pain of death to prove the variety doesn't have to be gaudy or vegetal – which it doesn't! Indeed this is the Riesling-man's Sauvignon, with mineral and sweet red pepper and a cool fine texture that won't pall by the second glass.

It bears mentioning that Sauv Blanc is very much the *it* grape in the Pfalz and Rheinhessen. Most of what I've tasted has been good. The question of whether it's *needed* is worth asking, but inside Germany they like to be able to buy a home-grown wine they used to have to go to France for. In good hands – such as Catoir's – this is a worthy addition to the international fraternity of the *Crottin*!  
SOS: 0 (now-3 years)

#### GMC-133 2008 Haardt Muskateller Trocken

What to say about this any more? I love Muscat, and Catoir's is one of the world's ten best, maybe five best. Maybe two or three best. This one's like the 2004 with its pupils dilated; it has its usual green basil-like notes but also hyacinth and menthol, and instead of mineral it has this sort of crazy pudding thing going. It is stubbornly long. It makes me as happy as if someone I love were tickling me.  
SOS: 0 (now-10 years)

- GMC-135 **2008 Haardt Scheurebe Trocken** +  
 They tell me there's more and more acceptance for my beloved Scheu, perhaps *because* of the popularity of Sauvignon Blanc. Irony upon irony! All things being equal, Scheurebe gives a *superior* rendition of the same type of experience, and this one proves how: it's juicier and prettier – woodruff, sage, cassis – and wonderfully charming, yet also with more depth.  
 SOS: 0 (now-8 years)

**FROM THE "TERROIR" SERIES:**

*All Spätlese quality from the Grand Cru vineyards. I will indicate sweet or dry.*

- GMC-137 **2008 Herrenletten Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 Very early on this is the more even-tempered of two dry Späts; it has the site's *coolness*, that Nordic crisp character; there's almost a scent of white corn tortilla chips, and a minty-salty side-palate wash that deepens into a finish of marjoram and powdered stones. A thoughtful child who likes to play by himself and be lost in his fascinating world.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 8-12 years)
- GMC-141 **2008 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** (+)  
 I suppose this is allowed pending litigation! In any case, now we're getting *serious*. Taste the non-fruit elements of this, and see what Grand Cru means; it's a resonating flavor, often mineral, sometimes earth or spices, in this case a kafir-lime note, burning-leaf, caramel, plums, minty finishing spice; it isn't afraid to be complicated or high-maintenance on your palate because it wants to show you the inexplicable, the improbable. The world.....  
 SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 10-14 years)
- GMC-138 **2008 Bürgergarten Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 The stern mineral aroma does not prepare you for the insurrection of fruit complexity on the palate; cherry blossom as if it were a BA of Ürziger Würzgarten; a stunning dialogue of fruit-mineral-flower-salt; the wine is hyperactive, the finish is almost like artisan root beer. 2008 at its best.  
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GMC-139 **2008 Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese** +  
 Ah yes, Germany's greatest Scheu, again. If you're attuned, you'll note this one is more in the sage-woodruff-cassis idiom (as opposed to the pink grapefruit passion-fruit idiom), and it seems nearly dry, yet with a swelling billowing power that just isn't *allowed* to bellow, it gets pulled down into the 08-core of implacable firmness. Very much WOW stuff.  
 SOS: 1 (now-10 years)
- GMC-140 **2008 Herzog Rieslaner Spätlese** +++  
 This variety, when it's good, brings you to the last frontier of language. Martin mentions eucalyptus, and there are aspects of grain, lemon-balm, orchid and talc – or none of these, or all of them and many more besides. A very rare chance at a Rieslaner without botrytis and in a table-wine form, i.e., not an Auslese. The complexity I'm sure is illegal. Tantric, esoteric, endless finish.  
  
 Look, I can try to explain the way great Rieslaner seems to *seize* you, the way it clearly blasts you with more intricacy than your palate – your poor palate – can withstand, the insane stiletto precision, the way it swaggers like some *alpha* Riesling that will boss your palate around while simultaneously conveying it to an indescribable bliss. But this is a 1st-runner-up *WINE OF THE VINTAGE*, and I think you should just taste it.  
 SOS: 2 (now-15 years)

## FROM THE “KULT” SERIES:

*These are the sweet ripest wines.*

### GMC-143H **2008 Breumel In Den Mauern Riesling Erste Lage Auslese, 6/375ml** ++

There was a regular Auslese that was a more extroverted version of its sibling-Spät, but this is Other – martial, domineering, Rieslaner-like, and saliently, *BA-like*; smoky and shiitake-rich, too intricate to taste and detail, it needs a thousand words and a long, long evening – or imaginative friends...

You know, I mean this literally. Many of the best 08s are such dynamically complicated wines you can't grasp all of them in the 5-10 minutes you usually have to taste and note. You actually do need a half-hour in a silent room. And even then I wonder. I wonder whether some wines aren't actually meant to be deconstructed. I wonder whether we actually understand them best in the first ignition, before we know *what* we're tasting. In that first flash we seem to know quite well what it is, and the rest is just ornamentation, maybe needed, maybe not.

SOS: 4 (15-35 years)

### GMC-142H **2008 Herzog Rieslaner Auslese, 6/375ml** +++

This puts a bass and treble boost on the Spätlese but doesn't *change* it, only intensifies it. Everything is more massive. The concentration even more improbable; this wine tastes *your* palate! You guys really have no idea how great these are.

SOS: 3 (1-16 years)

### GMC-144H **2008 Schlössel Rieslaner BA, 6/375ml** ++

Yet again, again. You won't weep. You might scream at the walls. Or fall to the floor in a mewling, twitching heap. Either way you may hear yourself think "What was it I *thought* was great wine all this time.....?"

SOS: 3 (10-37 years)

### GMC-145H **2008 Schlössel Rieslaner TBA, 6/375ml** (++)

And I *passed* on a Herzog TBA, astonishing though it was. This Schlössel is the kind of wine no one can conjure. The writers give it 100 points because they don't have 1,000. The production is 800 half-bottles. No "dessert-wine" on earth comes remotely close. Y'Quem? Don't make me laugh. But this is a rich-man's drink for sure. Yet if you had to work two weeks to afford it, all I can say is you'd take the first sip and say, "It was worth it."

SOS: 4 (20-60 years)

## RIESLANER, THE RIESLING-VIAGRA

Rieslaner is a crossing bred in Franken, presumably to create a grape which would give Silvaner expression in Franken soils and bring Riesling acidity and frost-resistance along. It does seem to make the best Franken wines and good to stunning wine anywhere else it's grown. Which isn't often, unfortunately. Other growers report its acidity is obstreperous in unripe years, but Schwarz *loved* it for just that reason. I find it an innately fine variety, which gives *more* acid than Riesling of similar ripeness. Its inherent varietal flavor is lime-grass and berry rather than apple or peach. It can produce the most *singular* great wine on earth, the only great wine of its type. But make no mistake, this is "supernally" great wine; nothing else even comes close. Rieslaner is more widely planted than one might suspect, though little of it is bottled as-is. Many growers have it planted as a kind of secret-weapon to be blended with Riesling! Even five percent Rieslaner will galvanize a decently good Riesling, or so I am told, by someone who would *never* himself do such a thing . . .

Two bits of news here. First, the organic certification will come through with the 2010 vintage, assuming all goes well with the transition. Second, there's a new cellar master. Yes, another new cellar master. Tina Herrbruck, it turned out, was commuting hundreds of kilometers each day from her home in Baden, and when she married last summer the couple decided to alter plans to relocate to Deidesheim. The new man seems very sharp indeed, but I do wish Lili Biffar could score some continuity.

Lily returned to assume control of the winery after the sudden death of her father. Though the wines were always good, especially from 1991 onward, the estate was basically treading

water until the inheritance issues could be settled. Now they are, and I expect dynamic action to come. Look for the Biffar-blimp over Super Bowl 2010.

It remains an impressive collection of Grand Cru vineyards, yet I realize we sometimes throw that term around without identifying its value. Personally I have never considered potential ripening *per se* as a quality-guarantor. I look for a certain kind of flavor.

I sometimes refer to "Grand Cru" aromas or flavors, and this is what I mean. The words spring to my mind when I sniff a wine of clearly profound aroma not derived from fruit, where varietality *per se* is absorbed into larger, deeper non-primary characteristics. In Grand Cru wines, the land is the text and the grape is the speaker. You might say the vineyard trumps the variety. Except of course the variety is the means by which the vineyard is heard.

The old ones didn't even *put* the variety on the label.



If it was Grainhübel or Steinberger or Sonnenuhr it was presumed to be Riesling, just like Corton Charlemagne is presumed to be Chardonnay.

"We want to have fruit," says Biffars. "We like mineral, but with low enough yields we get it as a matter of course; we seek to preserve fruit and to differentiate the fruit of various sites."

Very revealing, this.

Minerality is the Given when you work with Riesling in great vineyards. Fruit needs to be nurtured.

There've been various changes over the years; less green in the vineyards, more canopy trimming, more emphasis on clean un-botryrised fruit, and harvesting

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,100 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Grainhübel, Kalkofen, Kieselberg, Leinhöhle and Mäushöhle, Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad & Nussbien, Wachenheimer Gerümpel, Altenburg & Goldbächel**
- **Soil types: Weathered red sandstone with loess, clay and granite, basalt and lime stone**
- **Grape varieties: 79% Riesling, 14% Weissburgunder, 3% Spätburgunder, 2% Auxerrois, 2% Sauvignon Blanc**

based on tasting the grapes instead of chasing X-or-Y must-weight. Biffar's wines were more filigree the past two years, with more silken texture, subtle solidity and inference. They seemed relatively introverted, and I liked it; they looked inward because there's so much to see there.

And they have an unusually flexible approach to cellar work. There are both stainless steel tanks and large old casks in the cellar, both of which can be chilled. The wines are fermented with cultured yeasts at controlled temperatures, but they are not strictly reductive. The goal is to give them just enough oxygen to promote secondary aromas; in effect their architecture mirrors the estate's actual architecture.

The harvest is also worked in various ways according to grape variety and to the condition of each picking. One absolute is long lees contact, up to three weeks on the gross lees and another 4-8 weeks on the fine lees. But apart from all this wine-geek stuff, I have always enjoyed my visits here emotionally, perhaps even spiritually.

Every year there've been birds singing clamorously while we tasted. I don't know why the blackbirds make me so happy, but they do, and somehow I leave a heart-print at Biffar. The Pfalz is terribly active, starting Easter

weekend, cars and pedestrians and cafes spilling out onto the sidewalk—for a number of city-folk in the Mannheim-Heidelberg axis (the Pfalz is “wine coun-

try.”) But when I’m there in March it’s all asleep in the buds and seeds, and you can hear the soil talk.

**Biffar at a glance:**

Stellar, first-growth quality estate since the 1992 vintage. Excellent collection of many of the top vineyard sites of the Pfalz. Brilliantly fashioned wines with eye-popping clarity and penetration.

**how the wines taste:**

The taste of these wines is incredibly rich in mineral complexity and incredibly specific in fruit and soil flavors. They are on the rich side. They’re brilliant but not squeaky-reductive. They have a noble glow about them; they realize the greatness inherent in the superb vineyards from which they come.

GBR-092 **2008 Riesling Kabinett Feinherb “Josephine”**

The label shows an ancestral portrait hanging in the Biffar *manor*; I don’t know whether Ms. Josephine actually was a gypsy or was dressed to look like one for the sitting, but either way I’m wary of gimmicky labels and was prepared to disdain the wine.

Then I tasted it.

In its own way this is revolutionary, a kind of stealth-intrusion of sanity (in the form of residual sugar) into the stifling air of Trocken. And this is one of those perfect – repeat, *perfect* – food-wines, with no perceptible sweetness but with all the grace and fruit and charm you could desire, along with the final mineral *dust* of 08. Polish and length and pedigree. Granular texture, a hint of still-green banana; quite a long, appley and meadow-y finish. Take this gypsy girl *home*.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years, again 9-12 years)

GBR-091 **2008 Deidesheimer Herrgottsacker Riesling Kabinett**

The richer and better of two lots, picked later, no difference in sweetness but this one’s much richer, like barley and malt and stock, with a high overtone of stayman apple; again, no sweetness as-such. Just balance and usefulness. And our German friends believe they dislike such things.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (3-12 years)

GBR-093 **2008 Grainhübel Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml (+)**

There were three GroGew available, of which this was the most complicated but also the most compelling. The site makes a manly sort of wine, muscle and sinew and meat, and I myself think it’s existentially predestined to be sweet, but what do I know? This had the finest and most vigorous aromas; groseille, rosehips; the palate is finely mineral and perfumed yet firm and anchored; it made me think of Nigl’s Piri; a vamping, edgy, sexy Riesling.

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 11-16 years)

GBR-094 **1998 Deidesheimer Kieselberg Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml ++**

**LIBRARY RELEASE.** I know it says “Auslese” but in weight and sweetness it most resembles a modern Spätlese. And it’s an utterly wonderful second-stage Riesling, deft and rich but not a “sweet wine,” more creamed-corn, white asparagus, jasmine and freesia; still mineral, with tautly pulling currents between tartness and richness – you can (and should) drink it with food - and there’s a balsam resinous underflavor that’s poised against the lavish ripeness.

SOS: 2 (10-25 years)

# scheurebe: what gives?

Um, I happen to like it, that's what gives.

It was crossed about 80 years ago by a Mr. Georg Scheu (hence its name). I imagine Scheu was looking for a wine with Silvaner's advantages (big berries and early ripening) paired with Riesling's structure and class. His introduction also claimed the Scheurebe would be a Riesling-like wine suited for sandy soils (which Riesling doesn't especially like, or rather Riesling *grows* don't like, as the yields are mingy).

As often seems the case with crossings, the results are oblique to the grapes crossed, i.e. there's no linear sequence of getting Riesling-flavors-plus-Silvaner-flavors. You end up with new flavors you couldn't have predicted. Scheurebe ripens 7-10 days ahead of Riesling, and has a little less acidity, but it's essentially a Riesling structure, i.e. firm and citrussy. It does indeed like sand but doesn't give its very best results; the wines tend to be 1-dimensionally tangerine-y.

Great Scheurebe unfolds a truly kinky panoply of flavors and aromas. Indeed, Scheu is to Riesling what "creative" sex is to missionary-with-the-lights-out. Start with pink grapefruit. Add cassis; I mean pure cassis. Then add sage leaves you just crushed between your fingertips. Then lemon grass. If it's extremely ripe you can talk about passion-fruit and papaya. If it's underripe you will certainly talk about cat piss.

Scheurebe is capable of great finesse and stature. Yet it's becoming an endangered species. Why? Theo Minges told me, "A lot of bad Scheurebe was made from too-high yields. You got cat-piss and sometimes botrytis on top of cat-piss." But times changed, and after a general retreat in acreage, the variety is being rediscovered by good growers sensitive to its manic potential. But you have to respect it. Scheurebe likes vineyard conditions which Riesling likes as well. Scheu will hiss at you if you plant it in the wrong place. This you don't want. But by planting it in good Riesling sites, you have a wine which fetches less money than Riesling. Not good.

Growers who maintain their Scheurebe recognize its beauty and uniqueness. If anything it's almost *more* attractive at table than Riesling, working with boldly flavored

dishes (especially Pac Rim) for which Riesling is sometimes too demure.

Scheurebe keeps very well but doesn't age as dramatically as Riesling. Ten-year-old Scheu is only a little different than 1-year-old Scheu.

Tastes differ, of course, and what's sizzling and emphatic to me might be blatant and vulgar to you, but we who love Scheurebe are truly in a kind of thrall to it. It has little of Riesling's spiritual depth, but neither does Riesling have Scheurebe's erotic power. We need both for a balanced diet! Riesling may indeed represent All That Is Fine And Good, but Scheu offers All That Is Dirty And Fun. Scheurebe is bad for you; it's fattening and wicked and hair will start growing on your palms as soon as you pull the cork. In other words, there's no down-side . . .

The grail-keepers of Scheurebe include Lingenfelder, Fuhrmann-Eymael and one hopes Müller-Catoir under the new regime. I look for it wherever I can. Growers who have discontinued Scheurebe include Meßmer (this was really calamitous) and Dönnhoff – yes, Dönnhoff; his last vintage was 1985, in which he made a gorgeous Auslese from a site in Kreuznach.

Alas, the Scheurebe can be as temperamental as a high-bred feline. Yet when it deigns to accept you it knows some moves you've *never* been shown. In 2006 it sulked in the heat. But in 2007 it came snarling back in full kinky regalia. Of course Scheurebe satisfies our desire to wallow in lust, which we *spir-chull* guys need so's we don't float away on our wisps of bliss. And so there's little point in *delicate* Scheu, or God help us *subtle* Scheu. If you like it at all you like it writhing and sweaty. Yet: this does not, or *need* not preclude a certain elegance, a certain stature, a certain, dare one say . . . aristocracy? Scheu may be slutty, but it isn't ignoble, and I wonder whether there's really *any* equivalent in the world of wine. Certainly Scheu can overstate, sometimes blatantly, but the *thing* it overstates is often marvelous and even *fine*. So, sybarites, you can have it both ways. Scheu is almost as noble as Riesling but unlike Riesling it has the naughty bits still there!

## SCHEUREBES IN THIS OFFERING:

- GMC-135 2008 Müller-Catoir Haardt Scheurebe Trocken
- GMC-139 2008 Müller-Catoir Mandelring Scheurebe Spätlese
- GDD-033 2007 Dr. Deinhard Scheurebe Kabinett
- GMS-143 2008 Messmer Scheurebe
- GTM-122 2007 Minges Scheurebe Kabinett
- GDR-180 2008 Darting Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese
- GWG-042 2008 Wagner-Stempel Scheurebe Trocken
- GGE-033 2008 Geil Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett
- GGY-078L 2008 Gysler Scheurebe Halbrocken, 1.0 Liter
- GCB-088 2008 Bernhard Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett
- GKF-137 2008 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Trocken
- GKF-138 2008 Kruger-Rumpf Scheurebe Kabinett
- GSD-071 2007 Schlossgut Diel Scheurebe Spätlese
- GSD-085 2008 Schlossgut Diel Scheurebe Spätlese



Uh oh, Daddy's gonna make one of his dad-gummed predictions. Get under the table kids. Mavis, lock up the dogs.

In five years, tops, this will be one of the 2-3 greatest estates in the Pfalz. *Provided* the work that's now underway is completed, and that the amazing Mr. Stefan Attmann maintains his warp-speed pace.

D'ja ever meet someone and in the first five seconds you're off and running? You can't stop talking, it's as if you've collected things your whole life to say to this very guy? Hours pass and you don't know how? You have to continue the conversation! All life depends on the conversation being continued. It's like that with Stefan. I don't know how I managed to taste anything let alone write notes on what I tasted. It's like riding a TGV-train of talk.



If you don't already know, the estate was sold, to a very wealthy gentleman named Niederberger, who owns a Scherezade-like villa in Neustadt (where Hans-Günter

Schwarz makes wine from .9 hectares of vineyards) and also Bassermann and Buhl, which, along with Deinhard, used to be a single huge estate.

In effect the estate will be split in two; the base-line wines sold at excellent prices will still go out under the Dr. Deinhard name. The presitige-line, with all the Grosses Gewächs and their ilk will be sold as Von Winning, after the name of a former proprietor.

The handsome old courtyard is a big construction site, and work proceeds on the hotel-restaurant and the

- **Vineyard area: 35 hectares**
- **Annual production: 20,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Deidesheimer Kalkofen, Grainhübel, Herrgottsacker, Kieselberg, Paradiesgarten, & Mäushöhle**
- **Soil types: Weathered calcareous, new red sandstone, basalt**
- **Grape varieties: 77% Riesling, 9% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 2% Gewürztraminer, 1% Scheurebe, 2% Spätburgunder**

private guestroom they plan to add for the "VIP" visitor (like you, precious! I'm just happy to sleep standing up in the barn...). This year's group of wines, the first full vintage under Attmann's regime, is entirely convincing. And next year I'll devote a whole day to this visit, if he'll tolerate me, and maybe we'll make a dent in the mountain of things we have to talk about.

Meanwhile, zoot alores!

### dr. deinhard at a glance:

Big doings at this fine old name, an estate on-the-move, so grab on tight and catch a rising star.

### how the wines taste:

All I can say now is they taste like great Pfalz wines; it's too soon to know what Attmann's "signature" might yet be. The collection of Grand Crus is enticing.

I'll list them from dry to "sweet."

### GDD-035 2008 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett Trocken

Quite elegant for this site; Stefan confirmed the parcel abuts the great Jesuitengarten; cola, fennel and stones; minty mineral shimmer and a stern finish, talc-y and long.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 8-12 years)

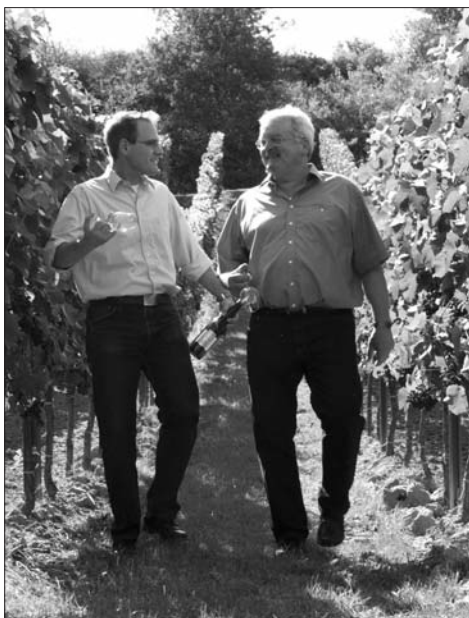
- GDD-037 **2007 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese Trocken** **+**  
**First offering.** Extraordinarily complex aroma, caramel and apple-cellar, old-world cider, even mead; palate is at once lush, focused and salty with the classic Ungeheuer fire; there's a nip of spice and an arch angle, not austere but unyielding, which is wonderful after the creamy entry.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 12-16 years)
- GDD-040 **2008 Langenmorgen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** **++**  
 You don't often see this vineyard, which tasted like a cross of Leinhöhle and Kalkofen, the meat of one, the brightness of the other. And this is *superb* dry Riesling, commanding, gorgeous, long – *long* doesn't begin to grab this baby; quince, banana, wax, almost Furmint or Chenin notes, fiery and enthralling; is there anything more compelling than great Riesling?  
 SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 12-16 years)
- GDD-036 **2007 Gimmeldinger Schlössel Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**  
**First offering.** The old (and lovely) cellar master Mr Bauer blended this site away into an estate-Riesling, but Attmann has other plans. This is a perfect everyday balanced Riesling, fragrant, grainy, charming, gently dry, a *good-looking* wine.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-8 years)
- GDD-034 **2007 Ruppertsberger Reiterpfad Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
 Another one that's improved dramatically since last year; now it's just a fabulous Pfalz Riesling, racy and allspice-y, and perfect food-wine. *We'll move right into a 2008 that's at least this good as soon as this sells out.*  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-14 years)
- GDD-033 **2007 Scheurebe Kabinett**  
 It did in fact receive the little sweetness boost we agreed it needed a year ago, and this is a *wonderful* wine now, a weird hybrid of Pfalz Scheu and Ruwer Riesling, almost delicate, tangy, finely perfumed.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-9 years)
- GDD-038 **2007 Deidesheimer Kalkofen Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
**First offering.** This is marvelous! Absurdly spicy fragrance – Grand Cru on steroids – Tahitian vanilla and Sarawak pepper and talc and peppermint and malt – look, this is complicatedly great wine, it *stings* in the sweetest way, you have to work a little at it, but this baby's freaky in bed.  
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GDD-039 **2007 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Auslese** **++**  
**First offering.** You don't so much drink this as melt into it; it consumes you with beauty. None too sweet. Classic Ungeheuer, and ridiculously long.  
 SOS: 2 (9-25 years)

Serious doings here. The whole “public” area has been remodeled (brand new gleamingly modern tasting room) and the label has also been altered to a sleeker more graceful *mien*, and I can’t help but find these changes metaphorical. I’ll be blunt; this estate has always fallen between two extremes among the Forst growers, neither as modern and stylish as some nor as studiously archaic as others (such as Magin or Werlé). They obtained a remarkable quartet of Grand Crus

when Wilhelm Spindler retired many years ago, and yet the wines were always *values* because the estate presented a fundamental modesty. The wines were solid and honest, sometimes a little rural, but they didn’t mind me cherry-picking and when I did I found plenty of fine and even excellent wines. But Stefan Müller has entirely settled in now, and I think he wants to make a point. The last two vintages have been remarkable, and the 2008s are this estate’s apex, the best collection they have made. The spiffy new label reflects the precise diligent nature of these modern, crushed-stone wines.

That’s not to say Stefan’s ambitions are to join the fraternity of the popular kids. He’s too grounded for that, and he’s inherited a robust unpretentiousness from Kurt, his father. But if Dad’s wines were like comfort food, Stefan’s are starting to show touches of refinement without going all molecular upside your head. “Up to the Halbrocken it could almost be Catoir,” I wrote in my notebook. If you attend to clarity and detail you’ll find these as lovely as I do.

At one point I remarked upon the moderate alcohol of one of the “serious” dry Rieslings, and he said “What’s the point of waiting to pick if all you get is more alcohol



Stephan and Kurt Müller in the vineyard.

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Forster Kirchenstück, Jesuitengarten, Ungeheuer, Pechstein and Musenhang**
- **Soil types: Calcareous loam, sandstone detritus, partly with basalt and clay**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 10% Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, 14% red varieties mostly Spätburgunder**

and medicinal overripe flavors? When the grapes are ready they’re ready, and we don’t want big Riesling, we want elegant Riesling.” That there’s some capital-W wisdom, gang.

Allow me a small rant. Admit it, it’s entertaining when I rant! My pants are full of rants.....OK, it galls me when people obsessively learn every *lieu dit* in Burgundy but are indifferent to the Grand Crus in Germany except for the few Mosel or Rheingau vineyards they’ve heard of. These are great classic vineyards for the world’s best grape variety, and ignoring them is a form of contempt. You may not know this, but the site with the highest land-value, i.e., the one you pay the highest taxes on, is not Erbacher Marcobrunn or Bernkasteler Doktor or Scharzhofberger: it is Forster Kirchenstück. As a matter of fact.

We’re learning of many great and formerly unknown sites throughout the Pfalz today, thanks to the burgeoning of passion and quality among the post-70s generation, but I don’t expect you to have memorized these. The long-established great classics though, the wines that have graced many a label from venerable well-known estates (like Bassermann, Buhl and Bürklin), those you should appreciate, and failing to do so is like saying “Well I’ve memorized the Grand Crus in the Côte de Nuits, so I don’t have to bother learning the vineyards in the Côte de Beaune.”

Scold over. I'm here to help. These, at a minimum, are the sites you should know:

**Forster Kirchenstück** (which some feel is the best site in all the Pfalz), *Jesuitengarten*, *Pechstein*, (these are the big-3), *Freundstück*, *Musenhang*, and *Ungeheuer*.

**Deidesheimer** *Hohenmorgen*, *Grainhübel* (the best-of-the-best), *Kalkofen*, *Kieselberg*, *Leinhöhle*, and *Langenmorgen*.

**Wachenheimer** *Goldbächel* (which I'd put on par with Kirchenstück though the styles are 180° apart), *Altenburg*, *Rechbächel*, *Gerümpel*.

**Ruppertsberger** *Hoheburg*, *Reiterpfad*, and *Nussbien*.

In sketch form, the Ruppertsbergers are strong Premier Crus, but not quite entirely Grand. Wachenheim they say is "feminine," and these are indeed queenly and sometimes swooningly perfumed. Partisans of Forst/Deidesheim will argue which is "best." Forst is more Cajun is the way I'd put it. Forst is full-throttle, overtly expressive, yet with breed and finesse – it isn't sloppy. Deidesheim's more grown-up; it's there at the party but it goes home by midnight, after having had a roaring good time. Forst goes on roaring. Wachenheim declined the invitation because it had theater tickets. Ruppertsberg was invited but felt a little out of place. Forst stumbled into bed in the wee hours, but was up promptly the next morning to work against deadline on an article on Latvian interpretive dance.

Weingut Eugen Müller is an owner of considerable

consequence, with more than 25% of the Kirchenstück, plus significant holdings in the Jesuitengarten (a site many think equal to Kirchenstück and some radicals think is even better), plus holdings in Pechstein and Ungeheuer and Musenhang (every great Forster!), and two of the top sites in Ruppertsberg, Hoheburg and Nussbien.

But back to the Kirchenstück for a moment. The official land assessment value of this site places it at the top of the pile, not just in the Pfalz, but in all of Germany! If you own land here, you are paying higher taxes than owners in Doktor or Marcobrunn or Baiken or Scharzhofberger. What is it about the Kirchenstück? As usual with great vineyards, the "what" isn't always so explicable.

It starts with spice. But lots of sites give spicy wines. Still, not this kind of spice; this sharp, nipping concentration. Then there is a flavor of black-cherry which I've never seen elsewhere in the Pfalz. Then there is a minerality which again seems packed, as though it had been pounded together, carbonized. The whole effect is penetratingly expressive, yet, here's the genius of it: it's also, somehow ELEGANT AND REFINED, and the palate keeps whipsawing back and forth between "ZOUNDS! This is spicy!" and "Oooooohh, this is gorgeous!"

The Jesuitengarten, in comparison, is quite a bit less high-toned and zingy, more lush and caramelly: heavy satin versus raw silk. What makes Jesuitengarten tick is the solidity of its structure, the innate fineness of its flavors and the stylishness of its complexity. Kirchenstück has more genius in it, but also more arrogance. Jesuitengarten is a little less brilliant but a little more accommodating; it's more diplomatic.

#### müller at a glance:

This is a winery on the move, and the next few years will tell a new tale. There's a sensational collection of vineyards and new energy in the cellar. This is what the Germans call an *Aufsteiger*, i.e. one who is climbing.

#### how the wines taste:

They used to be rather matte and caramelly as a whole, though the fabulous Auslesen from the Kirchenstück showed great fire and breed. The 2004s were be harbingers of a change, as they are more "modern," clear and bright. 08 ascends to yet another level, and the dry wines to another three levels.

#### GEM-098 2008 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Spätlese Trocken "Z" +

There was a very sensible specific wine from the sirloin-piece of Ungeheuer called "Im Ziegler" which the wise and benevolent bureaucrats have disallowed. Ziegler is close to Jesuitengarten and is more focused and less caramelly than other Ungeheuers. Perhaps it ought to have been included in Jesuitengarten, but remember, this is the same system that wants to collapse Niederhauser Kertz into its neighbor Klamme, because Kertz is less than five hectares in size, never mind that the soils are *completely different*. Oh don't even get me started.

So Müller has to call his wine “Z” and go to great lengths to explain why. You’ll see the big –Z– on the label. The wine is crazy good! It shows the mass and juiciness of Ungeheuer yet with a spectacular saltiness and a minerality so swollen it almost comes off sweet; it’s both vigorous, racy and aristocratic yet also ludicrously delicious, and the finish is all rocks, plum blossom and hot peppers.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 9-14 years)

GEM-099 **2008 Forster Freundstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken** ++

A new parcel? Indeed, it came “from the Auntie,” and man this is *stunning* dry Riesling, long and absurdly fruity, uniting the more cerebral Kirchenstück to the lavishly juicy Ungeheuer; cinammon and spice cake, dough and stone, spice and eros.

I was almost in shock at this point. I’d tasted two excellent dry Kabinetts (Jesuitengarten and Kieselberg) and was thinking I’d cherry-pick my one of two favorites among the Trockens if they were all so good. Then came this absurd quartet of Späts, and I was scratching my head trying to remember when any German grower had *ever* shown me such a consistently *delicious* group of dry Rieslings....

SOS: 0

GEM-100 **2008 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Spätlese Trocken “Cyriakus”** +

The oldest vines from the heart of the Kirchenstück, and I gather they’re still allowed to use this ostensibly fanciful name. I knew I was cramming the offering with too many dry Rieslings, but how does one leave *any* of these behind? Six of them, all superb, and y’all don’t actually buy much dry Riesling....but maybe you’ll be convinced by this lilac and cherry-blossom scented beauty? Admire its precise aromas, the balsam, lime and spearmint, freak over the laser clarity and digital brilliance of the palate, the gorgeous taut fruit? Be nice to think so.

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 11-16 years)

GEM-101 **2008 Forster Pechstein Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken “Terra Cara”** +

*Also known as “TERRA CARA” with a label to match.* The somm at one of the Pfalz’s great restaurants (the Schwarzer Hahn in Deidesheim) told me Pechstein was his favorite Cru, and it’s easy to see why. Its spice and wry angular saltiness are incomparable. It’s grown on basalt and each one of its wines is *imprinted* with terroir. This starts with plum blossom fragrances and then a leaping soaring brilliance on the palate as if the fruit were on a trampoline; white corn and jasmine, insanely attractive spice and minty length, and a complex mineral finish. *ANOTHER PERFECT, PERFECT FOOD WINE.* SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-12 years)

GEM-102 **2008 Forster Mariengarten Riesling Kabinett**

“Mariengarten” was an old single-site name which still has a certain brand-value among old-timers. Now it’s a “prestige” *Grosslage* consisting only of the primo sites in Forst. This wine is entirely from the Grand Cru *Pechstein*, in fact. What an aroma! Every kind of sweet flower and those amazing autumn strawberries the *mara de bois*; this wine has often been gentle and easy but this isn’t remotely gentle (though it remains easy); it’s demure and delicate and filigree yet there’s also a spine of acidity to reckon with.

SOS: 2 (4-14 years)

GEM-103 **2008 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling Kabinett**

Why three Kabinetts? Because I omitted the “sweet” Spätlese to make room for the dry guys! So here’s this years Ungeheuer-mit-Süsse, and again it has a clamorously pretty fragrance, typically more *braised* than Pechstein, more *sous vide*; the palate is caramel, talc, crushed rocks; it’s an extrovert who’s suddenly discovered reading and is amazed at the deliciousness of solitude.

SOS: 2 (4-15 years)

GEM-104H **2008 Forster Kirchenstück Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **+**

This famously tardy wine is hard to describe in specifics as yet. All indicators are aligned, there’s a juicy almost Eiswein touch, but it’s stormy right now. Still, the track-record of this splendid Riesling makes this a sure thing.

GEM-083H **2004 Forster Stift Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+**

Another of those achingly plummy Eisweins from `04 (God *what* an Eiswein-vintage that was . . .), a salty lime-liqueur, not celestial or mystic but completely sensually *delightful*; firm and piquant, ferally salty and like a green-tea essence. FABULOUS VALUE.

SOS: 4 (13-29 years)

GEM-097H **2007 Forster Ungeheuer Riesling BA, 12/375ml** **++**

**First offering.** This is every possible thing it could be – except expensive! Classic, fiery, commanding, ur-Pfalz, crazy-long, not sugary – actually and without exaggeration, magnificent. And, it’s cheese wine, not “dessert” wine. One of the top values in the entire offering.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 3 (13-35 years)



# herbert messmer

## pfalz • burrweiler

Y'all are probably getting tired of hearing me say yet another guy in the Pfalz made his best-ever vintage, so I'll just say it's Meßmer's best since 2001 and it continues the upward trend he established in 2007. Actually, Gregor was funny. He answered my question about 2008 by claiming immediately that it was better than 07. "Really?" I mused. "Taste and see," he replied calmly.

So I tasted, and saw.

Last year as we were saying our goodbyes, I emphasized that my compliments about the vintage were genuine and not merely polite. "I think it's your best year since 2001, and maybe your

best ever," I said. "I know," Gregor answered, "And not from egotism. Last year I decided to return to the vineyards and the winery after a few years' experimenting with delegating, and now I'm happier and the wines are better."

Too bad Gregor doesn't like to fly, though god knows I understand. During our last two encounters he's been about the wittiest and most fun guys I know. And y'all are to be congratulated for bouncing sales nice 'n up the past years. Believe me, it's nothing less than this stellar estate deserves, and I'll be working to make them even more conspicuous.

Two prominent points to make. The first is that Messmer owns the best and largest parcel of the best vineyard around, the Burrweiler Schäwer. It's pronounced like (electric) shaver. It's a unique site, the only pure slate slope in the Pfalz; practically the only slate vineyard between the Nahe and Andlau in Alsace, for that matter. If you're a wine geek your mind is intrigued by the thought of Pfalz ripeness over slatey minerality. If



Linde & Gregor Messmer

not you'll just discover the wine tastes good and tastes like nothing else.

The second point is the Schwarz connection. Hans-Günter Schwarz hails from neighboring Gleisweiler. Schwarz and Messmer senior have been friends for years and young Gregor had the precious opportunity to form his own friendship. The results show in his wines.

- **Vineyard area: 25 hectares**
- **Annual production: 17,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Burrweiler Schäwer, Schlossgarten and Altenforst**
- **Soil types: Slate, sandy loam, loess, red sandstone and heavy chalky clay and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 45% Riesling, 13% Spätburgunder, 10% Weissburgunder, 6% St. Laurent, 5% Grauburgunder, 21% other varietals including Scheurebe**

Having said that, Gregor has emerged decisively from his identity as a Schwarz protégé and is staking claim to something entirely his own. What is taken from the Schwarz world is the love of reductive viticulture. "What nature gives, we want as much as possible to preserve," says Gregor. "The most important factor is the soil, its composition, its mineral content. We ferment in small parcels, without any fining, and with the gentlest possible handling. We rack only once between fermentation and bottling. " Our goal is the conservation of fine individuality of each grape variety, the production of wine with a fruity and piquant acidity, that needs time to reach its peak. It's also very important that the wine be *pleasant and usable*, wines for drinking."

"The most beautiful wines are those which have had the least 'winemaking'."

That's the reductivist credo as clearly as it has ever been stated. It gives Gregor the kind of wine he most likes to drink: "Clear wine with a clear line of flavor, wine with a fruity acidity, sleek wine that doesn't make you full, but that you can drink the entire evening; I want the taste of ripe sweet grapes in the wine, even if it's dry. Finally I like wine with the greatest possible number of uses."

Messmers use only organic fertilizers. All the white wines are made and aged in stainless steel. They receive their single racking early after fermentation and are left

undisturbed until bottling, usually in March. This is a recipe for noninterventionist winemaking of remarkable purity. And Messmer's wines, indeed, are remarkably pure. They're as clear as glass, etched as sharply as etched glass, transparent as the thinnest glass, but firmly constituted.

I just brewed myself a pot of a Chinese green tea called Linyun White Downy. I'm no expert on the green

teas, and in fact I don't drink them often, and when I do it's usually something in the Jade-Oolong family. I need a certain psychic space to let these Theta-wave teas be; they're quite still and meditative and limpid and if I'm stressed I won't register their virtues. Gregor's wines can show an analogous quality of stillness.

### **messmer at a glance:**

Superbly made wines, exceptional clarity and polish in a keenly etched and chiseled style. Has soared ahead to take its place among the best estates in the Pfalz the last few years. Sure-handed with a multitude of grape varieties.

### **how the wines taste:**

What unites them is CLARITY and SPECIFICITY. Gregor's careful, diligent style seems to allow us to examine the fruit of his wines as though under a microscope. This must be the most honorable way to make wine. Everyone knows how to make bombshells—it's facile and plausible—but the tender, delicate rendering of varietal fruit denotes a **respect** for the grape which only shows when you're nature's humble servant and not concerned with being a hot-shot. Gregor's wines have an exactitude that satisfies my desire for seeing things clearly.

#### **GMS-141L 2008 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

Hey, *yum!* Not as "studied" as this wine often is, more animated and pithy – and you do notice the acidity, but the fruit positively springs from the glass.

SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### **GMS-140L 2007 Spätburgunder, 1.0 Liter**

We seem to have ourselves a little *vogue* for what has to be one of the world's best Pinot Noir values, and this is a really fine, violet, fragrant and smoky PN; structured and even a little tannic, better than the 06, and a perfect by-the-glass Pinot..

SOMMELIER ALERT! (now-4 years)

#### **GMS-142 2008 Rosé**

St. Laurent and Pinot Noir here, and this is a super-pretty wine! Loads of fruit and fragrance and charm but with focus and verve; it's dry though it's wonderfully fresh and gulpable and smartly turned-out. Threads the needle between yumminess and precision.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years)

#### **GMS-143 2008 Scheurebe**

Purchased grapes, since Gregor pulled his own Scheu out in 1999, a decision he now questions. I of course lord it over him. "I told you not to do it," I admonish, to which he sweetly replies "Yes but Terry, you are irrational about Scheu," which of course is true. This wine was barely chaptalized and comes in a clear Bordeaux bottle with a screwcap. It has wine inside, but I'm irrational about the contents so don't believe me when I tell you it's tasty, sage-like, has moderate RS, is very long and very good. Signed, Theise the passive-aggressive.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years)

#### **GMS-144 2008 Muskateller Feinherb**

**+**

Ja, a plus for a mere QbA. But it's a total manic blast of Muscat joy; lighter and more jumpy than usual, and ya gotta love that crazy lime jive.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years)

#### **GMS-145 2008 Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**

**+**

CORE-LIST WINE: If you don't want to labor over "Muschelkalk" (moo-shel-cawlk) you have my permission to refer to this is "fossil-bearing-limestone." Kinda catchy. This might just be my own personal fave on the German core-list, and it shows what's great about 08 – it's so salty and solid and long; it seems drier than the 07 because its RS is swallowed by the massive extract; the 07 has grace, fruit and spiciness while this one has backbone and *conviction*.

- GMS-146 **2008 “Schiefer” Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
 From the Grand Cru Schäwer. If the Pfalz VDP goes the way of the Nahe, this will eventually be sold as a “2nd-wine” of the GroGew; in the interim it’s named for its soil. I did taste the big fella, which seemed austere and persnickety whereas this one is juicy, rich and almost creamy but with an underlying gooseberry oxalis note and even some green pepper; it’s excellent dry Riesling because it’s the firm plump structure that’s seductive, not the flavors.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 9-13 years)
- GMS-147 **2008 Michelsberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++  
 Oh man, mirabelle! And jasmine and lemon-blossom, a bursting giddy grin of joy in *this* glass. Asian pear and guava edge themselves into the parade, and the marchers march and the twirlers twirl, and the palate is like a warm purée of white corn somehow *without* the sugar, just this giddy serenity. I never had a better dry German Riesling.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 12-16 years)
- GMS-148 **2008 Weissburgunder Grosses Gewächs “Im Goldenen Jost”, 6/750ml** ++(+)  
 A worthy heir to the magnificent 07, a little lighter and more compact, “sweet” and scallopy, but man this *saltiness*; it’s like a cooler rendition of Hiedler’s Maximum, lobster stock and corn and dill and meaty langoustines in clarified butter with orange zest. Splendid Pinot Blanc.  
 SOS: 0 (1-12 years)
- GMS-134 **2007 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 GMS-150 **2008 Burrweiler Schäwer Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 40 g.l. RS—exactly half what the 2001 had; boys, they’ve just about abandoned this style of Riesling (“The sweet-wine drinker likes them really sweet . . .”), but oh man, it’s perfect; finely detailed slate nose and a gorgeously salty palate, like a potion of mined salts and violets and spearmint; the sweetness—or ‘sweetness’—is engulfed in foaming waves of salinity and flowers; one of *THE* highlights of the vintage.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-24 years)
- You see the difference between the vintages here. The 08 floats on an updraft of mineral and fragrance, it’s less herbal and aloe than the 07; it glides high and serene, at home in its skin and in its air. There’s kiwi and blackberry and caraway, and wonderful length and liveliness. The 08 acidity makes it taste almost feinerherb.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-18 years)
- GMS-135 **2007 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese**  
 GMS-149 **2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Gewürztraminer Spätlese**  
 We’ll slide into 08 when 07 sells out. The 07 has lots of color from skin contact, and an unusually expressive nose with lemon and plantain along with the customary faded roses. Finesse and class as always, and a drenching shower of lychee on the finish. The 08 is more kinetic and less sweet-seeming, smokier, thicker. Gregor’s micro-chiseled style gives frisk and focus to this often dully structured variety.  
 SOS: 2
- GMS-151 **2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Spätlese** +++  
 Tell you what: you buy this one and the Catoir, and we’ll do a tasting showing them side by side, and if there’s anyone in the crowd who *disputes* my claim that white wine does NOT get better than this, I will buy you a car. I am saying this partly because I actually physically *could not* write a tasting note for this wine. I was overcome. The radiance was overwhelming. I’d try, you know, like “Aromas of—” WHAM! Engulfed. “The structure—” WHAM! Another wave. “It has—” WHAM! So I gave up, and floated in the diamond bliss.  
 SOS: 2 (now-12 years)
- GMS-152H **2008 Burrweiler Altenforst Rieslaner Auslese, 12/500ml** ++  
 It’s not that this Auslese is a *lesser* wine; it is a sweeter wine, a riper wine, and its stunning implacable power is comprehensible, whereas the Spätlese shows more fever and buzz than you ever see in its echelon. A year from now I may well think I was silly hedging a plus here, but honestly, I wasn’t sure you’d believe me if I assigned the third, tempting as it was. . . . My elder readers might well recall Norman Mailer’s essay on sex on LSD. They’ll know what I mean when I describe Rieslaners like these as psychedelic eros. This wine puts on fuck-me shoes and dances on your brain.  
 SOS: 3 (1-15 years)

I visited on a Saturday, I think for the first time. Saturday's are crazed in the Pfalz, especially as soon as the first crocuses appear. I sat in my little corner of the living room/tasting room and watched a nonstop parade of private customers come through. They eavesdropped on me (spitting and drooling) and I eavesdropped on them (buying Trocken wines and refusing to even taste anything else) and a fine time was had by all.

Theo told me he didn't deacidify his 08s, and I believe him, especially given the length of time he keeps his wines on their gross lees. The man still has 2007 Riesling Spätlese and Auslese on their lees awaiting bottling. He isn't worried about acidity. Minges was my final Pfalz visit and by then I wasn't surprised by the quality I was finding. That said, what impresses me most about Theo is the durable steady quality he shows *every* vintage. He spikes up a little in the fine ones and down a jot in the weak ones but I don't know a more consistent vintner throughout my vast portfolio. Minges doesn't have "off" years.

And, he's the newest member of the VDP. For him this is great, because VDP really does confer great benefits on its members from a sales and marketing standpoint. For me it's not so great. Last year when we tasted his 2006 Buntsandstein Riesling Spätlese Trocken I asked whether this wine would qualify as Grosses Gewächs if Theo were a VDP member. "Yes," he said, "But this way it costs half as much and is twice as good," he added. I reminded him of that statement as I tried to explain why I was meeting the news of his VDP status coolly. In fact it does me harm, except insofar as it does him good.

Minges has become quite the new-ager in his old age. Where Gregor is a cerebral sort of guy, Minges is constantly talking about energy fields and similar arcana. And he often talks about transmitting *energy* into the glass; there is clearly a sort of vibrant force he's looking for. He's come to the attention of Hans-Günter Schwarz, who has been, not exactly "consulting," but available as



Theo Minges

an interested friend. Hans-Günter always said there either was or wasn't an ignition of simpatico between him and his many apprentices, and I'm sure as he got to know Minges he felt *This is my kind of man*, and he

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Gleisweiler Hölle, Flemlinger Vogelsprung**
- **Soil types: Limestone, heavy chalky loam, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 30% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 10% each of Grauer Burgunder and Dornfelder, 5% each of Weissburgunder, Chardonnay and St. Laurent, 20% other varieties**

attended to the estate as a kindly force himself.

My language is deliberately obscure. I don't want to say Minges' wines took a leap forward because Schwarz "consults." Theo is very much his own man, and his wines were always good. What *did* happen is their two paths crossed when destiny was ripe enough, and they have since become brothers-in-arms.

I doubt if there has ever been a greater grower than Hans-Günter. If you've ever known someone with a green thumb you'll know what I mean. I think vines *yearn* toward him if he as much as approaches a vineyard. They know he understands them. I've asked him what I thought were unanswerable questions ("How does a vine convey its contentment, or its dismay?") and he's been able to answer in minute, concrete detail. He seems to hear the plant breathe. And he's able to share what he knows. Of course that only goes so far; such genius as his is irreducible and un-transferable. (You can study Mozart but you can't *be* Mozart.) But Theo is Schwarz's spirit-kin, and he's become really electrified the past couple years.

At one point Theo described a new vineyard he had purchased: "These are old, solid, proud vines," he said. A vine isn't a mere *thing* you manipulate: it is a *being* alive as you are. A fellow-being, a companion. So I was hardly surprised to learn that Minges' are in fact practicing Buddhists, and that they'd marched for Tibet the day before my visit.

Minges himself is an old fashioned guy in an old fashioned house; he only just got a fax machine and doesn't own a computer ("Though my daughter has one; I can give you her email address if you want to send me emails," he offered. Somehow I'd rather call. . . .) By the way, you always apologize for your German pronuncia-

tions, and I always tell you it's all right, which it is except it makes my skin crawl to hear "Minges" pronounced to rhyme with "cringe" instead of with LINGUS, which is easy to get your tongue around!

Theo Minges was "thrown in the cold water early" at the tender age of twenty. His father came latterly to viticulture, having originally been a painter, a sensibility which made the transition to viticulture rather comfortable, in Theo's opinion. During the period of euphoria over the new crossings, Minges stayed a classical course, planting only Scheurebe and Kerner, the two most similar to Riesling. Minges was an island of classicism and must feel prophetic now, as so many of the crossings are being hacked out of the ground.

Theo told me something that made me glad. He's planting more and more Riesling each year, thanks to me (of all people), as I've been a good customer for them. Ain't that sweet? I never pause to consider my patronage might actually make things possible for the growers. Because of me and you a great guy like Theo Minges is literally *en-couraged* to produce more Riesling; that makes me feel useful and happy.

Most of the vineyards are on gentle slopes of deep loess-loam, though all Riesling is planted on chalky, stony ground. Unusually, the Flemlinger Zechpeter site is planted in Riesling from MOSEL clones, planted 45

years ago by Theo's father. Everything is hand-harvested—not a necessity here, as the land isn't steep—and many separate passes are made through the vineyards. The grapes are pressed in a pneumatic press with very little pressure. Musts are rarely centrifuged; Minges prefers to let them sit overnight to clarify. Natural yeasts are usually used, though Minges has no ideological objection to using cultured yeasts *if necessary*. Fermentations are quite slow, at least four weeks, and no wine is *ever* racked before January; each wine spends at least a month on its primary lees to help them clarify and build complexity. "You have to leave the wines on their lees patiently," he says. "Otherwise, they become too reductive, too smooth; all their structure comes from acidity alone."

I look at the number of wines I'm offering and I can hear the admonishing from my colleagues and from you. Hell, I rebuke myself. But in response I can only say, you weren't there. I chose nine out of about thirty wines, and each one was good, and what I chose was exceptional. Maybe I need a thicker skin. It's hard to sit across from a guy who's worked all year and is showing you the results, and say "This wine is truly excellent and I'm not gonna buy it because people say my portfolio is too large." On the other hand, maybe my skin is just right.

#### minges at a glance:

Pfalz-meets-Mosel in these high-flying minerally-leesy wines. Extraordinary value across the board. The best, best quality large-format wines I have ever tasted ANYWHERE.

#### how the wines taste:

Intriguingly they're not like typical Pfalz wines, but rather like some Pfalz-Mosel hybrid. They tend to run compact and chalky, with crunchy vivid flavors. And there are no better values anywhere in this offering!

#### GTM-115L 2008 Riesling Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter

By now I'm no longer shocked at how amazingly good these Liters are, and how little they cost. This one has an interesting fragrance or green beans and marjoram, and when I said so Theo told me he'd fermented it with a Grüner Veltliner yeast, and I felt very smart indeed! The palate is just beautiful, full of every flavor component that isn't "fruit." Herbs, lees, in effect the taste of deep green shade, and the sweet shy lives you find there.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-3 years)

#### GTM-116L 2008 Riesling, 1.0 Liter

Barely chaptalized; the nose is a riot of wintergreen, balsam and aloe vera; palate is complex, spicy and salty, and amazingly detailed and lacy. VALUE!!

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

#### GTM-125 2007 "Froschkönig" Riesling

++

In early March of 2009 our "Frog King" was still on its primary lees *without sulfur*, and it is great Riesling, "our crazy wine," he calls it; the very mirabelles of heaven, the swollen ripe ones that swoon into your hand as you approach the tree, yet with all that swell of fruit there's a solid structure, a chalky-grainy core. . . you know what? Riesling fucking RULES. What other wine rocks your senses and dilates your soul?

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-23 years)

#### GTM-117 2008 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett Trocken

#### GTM-120 2008 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Kabinett

This isn't the same wine but rather two separate lots, and they differ essentially, not just in residual you-know-what. The dry wine is a sweetheart, full of sweet-lees and doughy aromas (Minges' wines often smell uncannily like *Champagne*); it's a powdery, minty, sunny sort of wine. The "sweet" wine is equally and differently balanced. There's a sneaky whipcrack of acidity that zings into its finish, but otherwise it's a lime-drenched, spring-onion and scallion scented Riesling, yet the body is creamy with thick extract.

DRY, SOS: 0

"SWEET", SOS:1, and SOMMELIER ALERT!

(DRY, now-5 years, "SWEET" 4-12 years)

- GTM-118 **2008 “Buntsandstein” Riesling Spätlese Trocken** +  
 It's best if you don't drink this ice-cold because you don't want to girdle the creaminess that makes it so delightful, so salty and doughy, with a swell of inside-sweetness and with its woodruffy mirabelle charm. Long and friendly.  
 SOS: 0 (1-9 years)
- GTM-119 **2008 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Muskateller Spätlese Trocken**  
 This is daughter Regenia Minges' project and hers alone. "This is my vineyard, and the family is not invited into it, even to count the leaves," she says, while showing me this no-quarter-given Muscat that's gorgeously dry and steely. This won't only quench thirst, it may very well clear your sinuses.  
 SOS: -1 (now-3 years)
- GTM-109 **2007 Flemlinger Zechpeter Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Salty! And comes very close to Catoir's wines from Bürgergarten in the Schwarz era; bergamot, quince and peach; a delightfully rich wine which seems to melt away like cotton candy into a mineral finish that's dry and smoky—a wine in two distinct parts, like acacia blossoms leading to sel gris. Theo's wines have always been vivid and snap-py but there's a new dialectic and expressiveness here.  
 SOS: 2 (4-15 years)
- GTM-122 **2007 Scheurebe Kabinett**  
 Still cloudy and *sur-lie*, but it's in the guava-cassis direction, and should be salty and vigorous, with invisible sweetness and a slithery tangy finish. Chance at one of Germany's benchmark Scheus at a "Kabinett" price.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)
- GTM-110 **2007 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Spätlese** ++  
**CORE-LIST WINE** (which replaces his Gleisweiler Hölle), and among the very best wines on the core-list; candied-ginger and freesia, talc and meyer-lemon dominate the ultra-fine fragrance; this is one of Theo's best wines ever, with sheer waves of fruit leading to an earthy, chewy mid-palate that anchors it and won't let it adore its own beauty; the finish is a koan of searching complexity. Prototypically great Pfalz Riesling of a type that's becoming an endangered species. Damn right it's on the core-list!  
 SOS: 2 (7-21 years)
- GTM-121 **2008 Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese** +  
**CORE-LIST WINE.** One year it's Schlossgarten and one year it's Hölle, but we'll core-list a Minges Spätlese *whichever vineyard he makes it from*. To the wine. . . how to say this? Some sweetness is sprinkled over the wine, like powdered sugar, but some wells up from *within* the wine, as if they were simmered in the same pot for hours. Lime notes again but now with a plum and vanilla and freesia accent, floating over a leviathan of rock-dust. The effect is amazing.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (6-22 years)
- GTM-123 **2008 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Rieslaner Spätlese**  
 By now I hope you know if it says "2008" and "Rieslaner," BUY IT! This one has a lovely banana aroma leading again into an insanely solid palate that crushes whatever you thought you'd bring to it; you are gorgeously annihilated. This one is *very* domineering even for the genre.  
 SOS: 1 (1-12 years)
- GTM-124 **2008 Gewürztraminer Spätlese “Edition Rosenduft”** +  
 "Rose Fragrance," he calls it. A basket of tropical fruits (pineapple, plantain, mango, litchi...); an ethereal inner perfume floats over a *very* solid body and structure – that's 08 for you – the varietal bitterness is a plus, the necessary "flaw" without which it would be too utterly utterly.  
 SOS: 1 (now-5 years)
- GTM-126H **2007 Burrweiler Schlossgarten Rieslaner Auslese, 12/375ml** ++  
 Got space for an Auslese? Dude, *make* space for THIS Auslese. Chocolate and panna-cotta aromas along with this *indescribable* Rieslaner thing that's enormously expressive yet not enormously "sweet," but rather a primordial smoldering power that leads into a finish combining chiles and an ethereal foamy fruitiness.  
 SOS: 3 (now-12 years)

*(Final Note: there was a very fine, pretty, gauzy 2007 Riesling BA that I hesitated over only because so few are buying "luxury" wines now, but this pure serene beauty, with its purity, lift and transparency, is being almost given away, and if you want it, ask us for a price. You'll be surprised....)*

# weingut koehler-ruprecht

## pfalz • kallstadt

Things are still in abeyance at this iconic estate in Kallstadt, notwithstanding Joel Payne's erroneous report the estate was sold last Summer. In fact the estate has been on the cusp of being sold for many years now, if you listen to Bernd Philippi. Even now there's a buyer "just about" to bite, or so I hear. The question for me is what to do in the meantime.

I have a serious connection to Bernd; I've known him almost thirty years, and Koehler-Ruprecht was in my first-ever offering back in 1985 (with Strub, Schaefer, Selbach and a Rheinhessen grower I've since parted from); he's an old school-friend of Walter Strub's, and I have wanted to do right by Bernd – whatever doing right might entail.

But I haven't seen Bernd for three years. I alter my pattern and don't schedule a visit the same time each March, but no matter when I want to see him he's in Portugal or South Africa or Madeira. His heart's in those places. There is obviously some vestigial connection to his family's estate in the Pfalz, and for all I know it is important. Important, but finite.

So I'm going to discontinue the agency, and I'm very sad about it. It's not because the wines aren't still good. They are. And the property ought to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site of wine, that's how original and characterful these wines are. If the new owner respects the legacy (whenever he/she eventually materializes) I'll go back and see if I want them and if they'll have me. But if it's sold to any-old guy, then why bother?

To Bernd I wish every possible good fortune and happiness.

- **Vineyard area: 12.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Kallstadter Saumagen, Steinacker and Kronenberg**
- **Soil types: Limestone detritus, sandy loam, partly with gravel**
- **Grape varieties: 56% Riesling, 19% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 3% each Chardonnay & Grauburgunder, 2% each Dornfelder & Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% other varieties**



# kurt darting

## pfalz • bad-dürkheim

### PFALZ WINES

"Sometimes you get to make what you want," said Helmut Darting.

Coming off the triumphant-return vintage 2007, it's a joy to report 2008 is not only *even* better, but that it's likely the *best* Darting vintage in ten years. This was my first visit in the Pfalz, and when I came away I was in one hell of a good mood!

We've gotten so used to thinking of Darting as a "value" agency it's good to be reminded what they can do when conditions suit them. These wines are jammed full of extract, such that they need less sweetness than usual, and they are laden with ultra-high-density flavor goobers. If you've thought they were too, I don't know, *commercial* for you, I urge you to approach these

superb 2008s, which aren't at all like you think.

When things work this well it always seems so easy; why can't everybody do it? The ingredients are simple. Outstanding wines at attractive prices. Flexibility in the working relationship. Collegiality in tasting and evaluating the wines. Basic and spontaneous friendliness. Tasting with Helmut you are instantly aware he likes wine, likes making it, likes tasting it, likes thinking about it, is entirely FOND of it. Even with the growers, I'm never entirely sure how much of my heart to reveal when I taste their wines, but with Helmut Darting I can giggle or weep or dance the shimmy.

Until a few years ago the estate was divided between husband and wife, one of whom belonged to the local co-op. With Helmut Darting's arrival, the two estates were combined and all the wines estate-bottled. Helmut had an interesting year of apprenticeship as part of his wine schooling: at Müller-Catoir! Now, plenty of young dudes spend time at Catoir, a few each year. The estate is an official "Meisterbetrieb" meaning that students and apprentices may be sent here. I once asked Hans-Günter Schwarz if it wouldn't be possible (theoretically!) to track down all the up-and-coming new superstars by following his various apprentices. His answer surprised me. "Actually, no," he said, "because I don't always develop a rapport or sympathy with the young men. It seems to take a special type to want to do things this way!" With Helmut Darting it appears to have been a case of sim-



Helmut Darting

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 12,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Dürkheimer Michelsberg, Spielberg and Hochbenn, Ungsteiner Herrenberg**
- **Soil types: Heavy chalky loam, sandy gravel, loess and loam**
- **Grape varieties: 44% Riesling, 8% Weissburgunder, 6% Rieslaner, 5% Scheurebe, 4% each Portugieser, Muskateller & Ortega, 3% each Chardonnay & Spätburgunder, 19% other varieties**

patico instantaneoso. Schwarz even gave permission for his pricelist text to be used, in which he describes his rules of vinification, which is how, when I saw it reproduced verbatim on Darting's list, I knew Something Was Up.

If you're unfamiliar with the reductivist's creed, it goes a little like this: every time you handle a wine, you diminish it; therefore minimal "winemaking" above all! The most important thing is to grow superb grapes and let their flavors sing out in the wine. You ferment as slow and cold as possible, with natural yeasts. You rack once and once only, after fermentation. You keep the wine away from oxygen at all costs. After the first racking, the next time you handle the wine is to bottle it.

No fining, no clarification, no de-acidification, Süssreserve only when no alternative avails, and then only a high-grade Süssreserve, itself made reductively. All of this results in wine in which the original grape character is preserved with an almost unreal clarity.

Darting has arrived among the "classified" estates in Germany, yet wonderful as this is, I can't help but wonder what kind of wines they'd make if they owned land in the classic sites of Deidesheim, Forst and Wachenheim. We need someone sensible there to yawp against the dry-at-all-costs insanity.

**darting at a glance:**

reductively brilliant wines.

The numero uno sales success story in my portfolio. Extraordinary VALUE FOR MONEY for superbly made

**how the wines taste:**

Depending on the vintage, either spicy-gingery and firmly bracing, or flowery-polleny with a candied spice and more talc and malt. Basically reductive, as indicated above, yet with the acquisition of certain Grand Cru sites purchased from Basserman Jordan, one sees how classical Darting's wines can be from outstanding vineyards. All wines intensely, fundamentally varietal.

GDR-173 **2007 Pinot Noir**

**First offering.** A gentle, avuncular PN, berries and leather and, at the moment, oak. But it's violet and contained with an old-world posture, ripe but not sprawling, and the oak will retreat in 9-12 months.

GDR-174 **2008 Blanc de Noir Kabinett Trocken**

70% Pinot Noir, 30% Pinot Meunier, vinified white. This was the first of the extract *freaks*, and I do mean freaks: 28 g.l. is a number you'd expect from a great-vintage Auslese but not from the likes of this. Straw color and spritzy entry; it's weirdly like a Champagne gone flat; full of fruit and yet a coiled fist of structure, charming but not seductive, it doesn't bat its eyelids at you; a lovely food-friendly alfresco sort of wine. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-2 years)

GDR-171L **2008 Portugieser Rosé, 1.0 Liter**

This is pink, with a crazy-pretty aroma of strawberries and bacon; this wine not only has fruit out the wazoo, it has the actual wazoo. In case you wondered where it was.... SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-2 years)

GDR-175 **2008 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Muskateller Kabinett Trocken**

This is ringingly varietal but neither steely nor catty; there is rather a *thickness* of fruit, it's almost creamy withal it's spicy as all get-out, and thoroughly dry; peppermint and animal – a happy clean animal. SOS: 0 (now-4 years)

GDR-182L **2008 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken, 1.0 liter**

The same wine we've been selling in 750s, but I think it's more suited to the big-bottle, and it's how Darting sells it to everyone else. So. Here goes with the crazy-ass extract. Remember, a simple dry Riesling in liters. 28 g.l., a number no one believed when I told them, a number even Helmut Darting didn't believe when he got the forms back from the lab. Has to be a mistake. Analyzed the wine again: no mistake. 2008 is delightfully bizarre. So you'll get a huge lot of mid-palate richness in what is essentially a perfect easygoing light everyday Riesling; fruit runs to guava, there are no rough edges, a sweet-tempered dry Riesling with nothing to prove. No fridge should be without it. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-4 years)

GDR-176 **2008 Dürkheimer Spielberg Riesling Kabinett Trocken**

Now the Cru. Caraway, fennel, garrigue and wild lavender and mint; the palate is firm and juicy, adamant and salty, incredibly satisfying and *affordable* – is there a better value for good, serious, *tasty* pedigreed dry Riesling? SOS: 0 (now-4 years)

- GDR-177 **2008 Riesling “Classic”** +  
 I won’t explain the bureaucratic nomenclature, and Dartings were surprised I took the wine, but *I* was surprised by the wine! Enough to risk portfolio-clutter. But *wait’ll* you wrap your pulsating palate around this....  
  
 It’s actually from Ungsteiner Bettelhaus, picked at 90° Oechsle, it has 15 g.l. RS (“Feinherb”), and I preferred it, markedly, to a single-site Kab Halbtrocken at its side. This has the clone-90 touch, peach, tangerine, cassis, maracuja, and when I asked I learned there are 8 (out of 14) rows of clone-90 in this vineyard – my god, what a palate I seem to have – this is a perfect, balanced, beaming German Riesling, on-the-dry-side but explosively fruity and tangy with a deliciously slinky long mineral finish.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-7 years)
- GDR-170L **2008 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. The best vintage of this in ten years or more. A paltry 25.5 g.l. extract, restrained-seeming RS; actual *complexity* here yet it’s addictively drinkable, with a wonderful yin-yang of fruit and citrusy tartness; both firm and agreeable; insane value.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-6 years)
- GDR-172 **2008 Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. Again, *when* was this ever so good?? There’s that guava thing again; the wine is spritzy, tangy and *alive*, it glows with energy and it’s markedly drier than previous vintages, yet there’s a banana-caramel savor.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (2-8 years)
- GDR-178 **2008 Dürkheimer Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 The other Cru; this is a parfait of flowers atop a firm yet foamy richness; lemon-balm and melisse; zippy and spicy and angular and fine, high-bred and nervy.  
 SOS: 2 (4-12 years)
- GDR-181 **2008 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Gewürztraminer Kabinett**  
 One would expect 08 Gewürz to be wonderful – all that acid structure. One would be correct. Fragrance as focused and fine as Meßmer’s; the formidable sweetness is engulfed by an avalanche of structure; the wine is sinewy and large – “Kabinett” is misleading. I wonder if there’s a better Gewürz value in the *world*. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (now-5 years)
- GDR-179 **2008 Ungsteiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 This year it is serene, gliding, pulsing with vitality but wonderfully calm in its own skin, aglow with fruit and flower, talc and malt all rolling down to a surprisingly firm, almost chewy finish.  
 SOS: 2 (6-15 years)
- GDR-180 **2008 Dürkheimer Spielberg Scheurebe Spätlese**  
 This is Scheu with designs to be Riesling, but it keeps betraying itself with a scorch of wildness, a savagery about the fruit; again that wild lavender that isn’t “pretty” but instead reeks of the field; it’s part of why we love Scheu, that honest unblushing funk and yet the weird aristocratic polish – a *dissipated* aristocrat.  
 SOS: 2 (2-10 years)
- GDR-183H **2008 Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling BA, 12/375ml** +  
 Celestial, exceptional purity; clean botrytis. . . I don’t melt easily at sweet wine any more, but this one’s so vinous and shapely.  
 SOS: 4 (10-30 years)
- GDR-184H **2008 Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Rieslaner BA, 12/500ml** ++  
 F-bombs were flying about my brain. This is less winsome and more complex than the Riesling. It’s difficult, in the best way! It wreaks fucking havoc on your palate with its salty vicious fire.  
 SOS: 4 (10-26 years)

rh einhessen

# rheinhessen wines



A few of you may recall my saying, some years ago, that the Pfalz was the region to watch; it was creative, hyper-oxygenated and full of vitality—and so it was. And the press took notice, and the Pfalz was and remains established as an attractive and important wine region.

But there's a settled-ness in the Pfalz now, and this was inevitable. Eventually the up-and-coming being finally ups-and-comes. And there's a clear and present danger the Pfalz will be suffocated by the ideologies of its movers and shakers, if this hasn't already happened. Am I overstating? Try and find a single Riesling Kabinett with residual sugar on any significant restaurant in the region! You needn't bother: you can't do it. The fetish for dry wine has cast a pall over the land.

But all is not lost. In fact the spirit of inquiry still lives. The sense of community still lives. The heady feeling of youthful energy and idealism still lives. The sense of a region *awakening* still lives. Only one thing has changed—it has migrated a few miles northward, to the RHEINHESSEN.

At this very moment Rheinhessen is Germany's most interesting wine region. And this is entirely due to its *people*, because its terroirs remain unremarkable. Indeed one laments the cruel irony; if only these young lions had grown up in the *Rheingau*. But we take passion where we can find it, and we're finding it here.



And it isn't only happening along the Rheinfront by Nierstein. One year at Gysler I noticed a poster for a tasting featuring growers in a group called Message In A Bottle. Any group to which Alex Gysler belonged was ipso facto intriguing, and I asked Alex whether any of his colleagues might be interesting to me. You'll see the

results of his answer a few pages hence. Perhaps these guys were inspired by the acclaim attaching to Wittmann and Keller, who are making stellar wines from vineyards *no one* heard of ten years ago.

Sure the Rheinhessen remains home to a great deal of dross (Liebfraumilch has to come from somewhere, I guess) but there's no equivalent buzz in the *Rheingau*, where mediocre wine from great land remains the status quo. Indeed the Rheinhessen seems to invert that melancholy formula, making excellent wine from

## **Rheinhessen is Germany's most interesting wine region.**

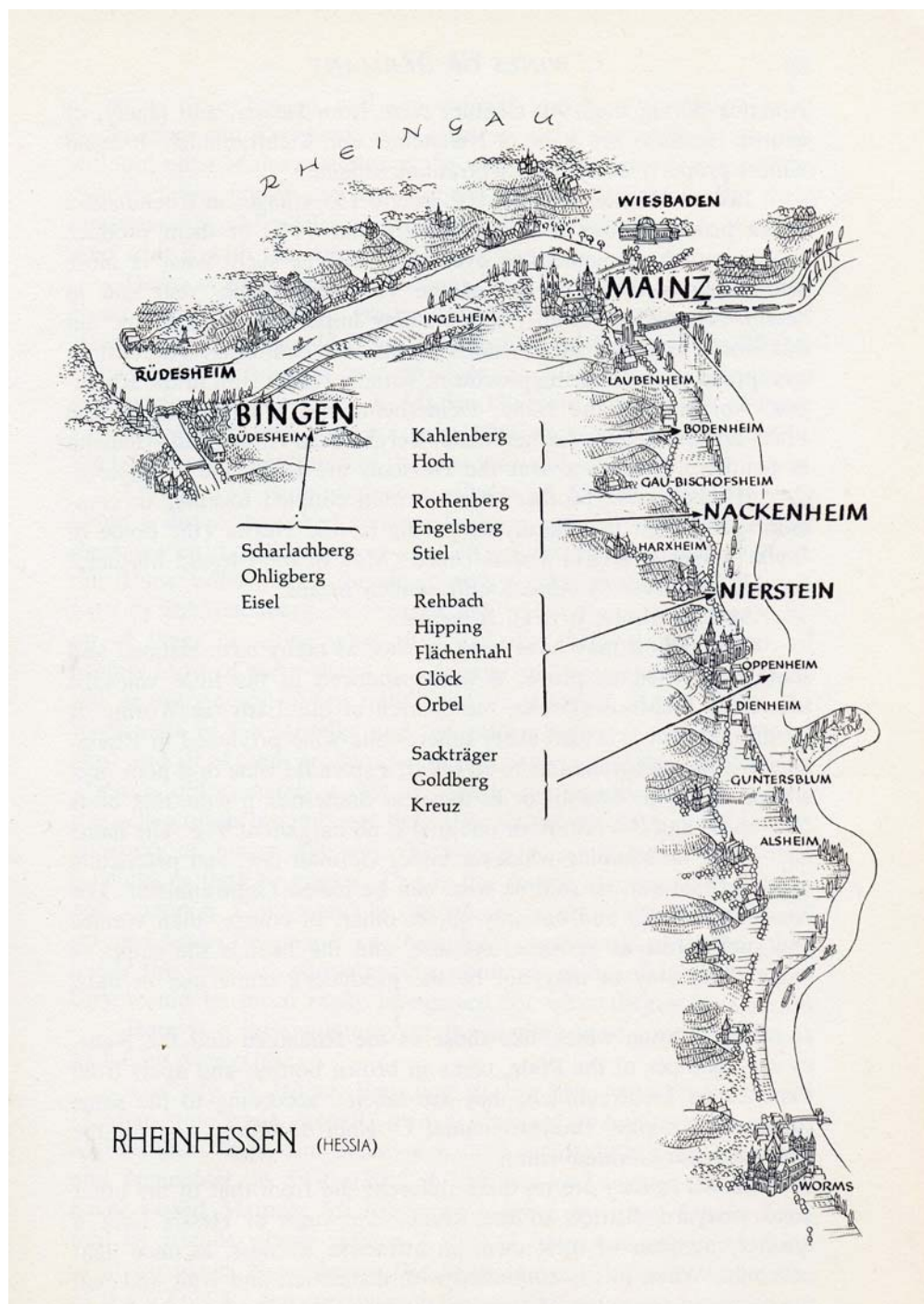
(ostensibly) nondescript land. You don't drive around thinking "Well it's obvious that great wines come from *here*." Instead its landscape is lullingly formless; without rhetoric, rolling and buckling its gentle pointless way. I like it in every kind of weather, sometimes hazy and secretive and other times clear and full of vista. An early Spring morning when the first smoky haze hasn't quite burnt off—that's how I remember it best, dreamy

and indistinct, the plain little villages emerging vaporously from the mist.

You need a really unassailable idealism to worry and strain out a living in the Rheinhessen. It's romantic in a grand, quixotic way to work the steep slopes, but the flat-tish, rich-soiled Rheinhessen is another matter. It may be possible that *great* wines just could be written into some of this land, if you're unwilling to assume they aren't,

and willing to stake it all on your idealism. And, I'd have to add, willing to sell your wine for something less than it's worth. It helps that much of the vineyard work can be done by machine, but it helps even more that these young people no longer feel alone; they are part of an informal fraternity working for a common good.

The results for us are entirely desirable: We can obtain beautiful wines for very gentle prices.



I'm glad I insisted on tasting Strub's 2008s again four weeks after the first time. It taught me. First, the wines were vastly improved, but most of all it showed the *truth* behind the bromide you always hear – "The wine needs time" – and second it showed me the price Walter was paying for his adamant preference not to deacidify in 2008. His wines needed longer. In fact the dry wines had changed so markedly (and were still changing) I hesitated to choose them until they'd arrived at something like their final forms. A later offering is likely.

Why were the 08s so tardy? Was it their acidity? Yes and no. Walter had installed a chilling unit to control fermentation temperatures, and 2008 was the "first vintage it worked perfectly," he said. "So I had cold fermentations and the wines had a lot of carbon dioxide, and such wines need more time to find their fruit."

So, you read my intro to Rheinhessen (right?) and so you won't be surprised to learn I've been snooping around checking these young'uns out. I've gotten samples from several growers, and all their wines are good.

But then I think of what I already have. None of the potential newbies have been as good as Strub, and none of their wines offered better value.

I was so happy I actually won two games of "Asshole" against the seething trifecta of Margit,



from me because there's every chance you'll *beat* me. The adolescent mind was designed to search-and-destroy with this fiendish game. Don't ask me how I managed to

Johannes and Juliane Strub. If you don't know this card game, really, don't ever learn it. If you insist then learn it

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Niersteiner Orbel, Oelberg, Hipping and Pettenthal**
- **Soil types: Red clay, slate, loess, loam & chalk**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 13% Müller-Thurgau, 3% Grüner Veltliner, 2% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder**

actually win.

Walter wisely looked on while the rest of us took turns being humiliated. I opened a bottle of Selbach's 2001 Badstube Eiswein, which is one of those shake-your-soul German wines, and loved the juxtaposition of drinking this while playing cards with my friends. Due attention was paid to the wine, but all life didn't have to stop so that we could *worship* it. We appreciated and loved it, talked about it, and threw down the cards. Don't you suppose that many "great" wines are inwardly screaming *Get me down off this pedestal so I can play too?*

In the late Winter of 1983 I made one final trip to the Rheinland to say goodbye to some close friends. I'd be heading back to the States a few weeks later, after ten years in Germany. One of those friends was Walter Strub, who asked if I'd have some time to taste his young vintage 1982 with him. I agreed readily; I wasn't in the wine trade then, and had no experience tasting pre-bottled

wine.

The samples were lined up when I arrived. Most of the wines were bone-dry or nearly so, and the question arose how sweet they should ultimately be. The Trocken fetish was only incipient in those days. Well yours truly had no earthly idea how sweet the wines should be; I'd never looked at an analysis and had no *idea* how many grams-per-liter of sweetness equaled what impression of sweetness on the palate. Walter gave me an '81 to taste and told me how sweet it was, and I tried using that wine as a benchmark.

The work came easily to me—to my great surprise—but this was another order of tasting, different in essence from anything I'd tasted or drank as a “civilian.” It was one thing to have tasted finished wines analytically, that was recreation, but this was intuition, inference, imagination, peering through a periscope into the future, not to mention the finished wine depended on making the right choice now.

Even after doing it for twenty-plus years now, it's still hard to articulate what it entails. I'm afraid it's very Zen. You receive a wine which may or may not be *incomplete* (some of them are instantly perfect just as they are) and you infer what it will take to complete them. In so doing you are required to examine flavor components under a palate-microscope. But it happens in a flash, it takes longer to explain it than to do it, and it isn't consciously cognitive. You relax, so the wine can come to you, and when it does you flash a beam of super-attention on it. Then you judge and cogitate. And I think I'm good at it, but still I am often wrong. I like being wrong. Because if I'm wrong (i.e., if my initial guess doesn't pan out), I get to keep at it till I get it right, and I get to see my error, and it's the best way to learn.

I've learned a few things over the years. More sugar doesn't always taste sweeter. Often it's the opposite. What tastes perfect in the lab needs more sweetness at bottling, because bottling constricts fruit and body and emphasizes acidity, and because sugars begin to poly-

merize immediately. If a wine's a bit too sweet, time will see to it. If it's too dry, ain't nuthin' you can do.

Here's why I'm going on about this in a text about Walter Strub. Because of the many layers of trust he showed me, out of the goodness of his heart. He invited



Walter Strub

me behind the scenes, allowing me to see his wines au naturel, and to taste as I'd never tasted before. And to my astonishment, he took my ideas seriously. But that's Walter: no secrets, no artifice, full of the spirit of sharing. Many of the hippies of the sixties turned into the very people they despised, but Walter, who was never a hippie, embodies all the virtues they espoused. Giving, trusting, sharing, no games, nothing to hide, sometimes even a little naïve, but actually, remarkably, *Good*. It is good, the collegial trust he shows me; it has helped me grow professionally and personally. It is good he invites me in to the wines, doesn't do the take-it-or-leave-it thing (no disrespect intended to those who do; each is entitled to his own approach) and fosters a mood of easy comradeship. In short, he treats me as a friend. And I am touched and gratified. Finally it doesn't matter how much wine you sold, which pack you belonged to, or whether yours was the fashionable position on the issues of the day. What matters are the faiths you kept, and how you treated other people. By those measures, Walter is leading a good life.

He has joined the new wave of German growers who'd rather stop fermentation than use *dosage*.

Obviously that's entirely O.K. by me, though I do miss the blending work and do not agree with the anti-*dosage* crusaders. But Walter told me "It's always been my dream to be able to do this; it makes the wines more pure." A few years ago a guy named Paul Weber made what he said would be an innocuous TV-film about me and my doings, but which he was asked to sexy-up a bit, so he turned it into an ideological war between the pro and anti dosage camps, and Walter was (as was I) on the unfashionable side of the issue. (Idiots! It shouldn't even be an issue.) Walter says he wasn't spurred on by the film, but I know it annoyed him; correctly so.

In any case 2005 was his first vintage using the technology, and whether coincidental or not, his entire cellar wouldn't ferment to completion: he didn't have a dry wine! This is inconvenient for him, though meaningless to me, though there's an irony in that '05's softness might have favored drier renderings. But, we'll never know.

Walter's is a restless and questing nature. He wants to see how everything would turn out. He's a pilgrim in the cellar. "The worst thing for a cellar is routine and tunnel-vision," he says, though certain patterns become evident over time. "I am always the first to start picking and the last to finish." He says. Walter's wine is rarely the ripest in Nierstein, and I think it's because he wants to pick clean fruit above all, and will let go of a few degrees Oechsle if the resulting wine will have the clarity and elegance he seeks.

His cellar is all stainless steel now. He began whole-cluster pressing in 1993 and liked the results (though he has – typically – started to wonder if he should do all his wines that way). With whole-cluster pressing you sacrifice a bit of body, but Niersteiners have all the body they need in ripe years. You obtain remarkable filigree and polish, and you retain high acidity. I have the sense that Walter is finally starting to feel his wines express his *dreams* for them. His Riesling usually ferments from its own yeasts. Lower-acid types are often started with yeast cultures for slower, colder fermentations, so they don't

lose the little acid they have. After fermentation, Walter likes to keep his Riesling on the gross lees for several weeks to give it stuffing and nuance, but that's only possible in clean vintages.

Walter has a strong sense of what Nierstein is. He's naturally enamored of its special soil, the sedimentary rust-colored sandstone they call Rotliegend. Dig down a way and you'll come to slate, which prevents the wines from bulking up too much in Nierstein's warm microclimate. In fact Walter has little trays of each of his various soils in the tasting room, in case you want to see what you're drinking and don't have time for a drive among the vines. Rotliegend gives Riesling a smoky sweetness, like something that's been cured over a sweet wood.

"You can't FORM a wine by working with must or mash, or even with the wine itself. It is unalterably formed in the vineyard," says Walter. He won't identify a "best" site (though he has his secret favorites), pointing out quite reasonably that "some years favor the ORBEL if it's damp, as this site is porous; other years the HIPPIING is better, as it's a damper and a cooler site." What neither of us can fathom is the perennially excellent wine given by the PATERBERG. "It's not a noble soil," Walter says, shrugging. Walter Strub continues to be modest and questing, never quite according his wines the same status as the Mosel and Nahe wines he so dearly loves, and yet each year he gets closer and closer to attaining their brilliance and radiance. In the deepest sense, this is all made possible by the cohesion of the family. Margit is cheerfully and thoroughly competent ("She does 93% of the work," Walter says, "And I do the other 7, if I'm not too busy.") and eldest-son Sebastian will carry on the winery. One doesn't want to harp too much on these things — they sometimes wither under direct scrutiny — but I both love and admire this family. They have every important piece in place. Between Walter and Margit there's playfulness and loyalty which I know is a bulwark for Walter to indulge his questing side. But no more testimonials!

**strub at a glance:**

Always reliable wines are rapidly becoming stellar—with no increase in price! Availability is always good, so sell like hell! Pleasure-giving wines that are easy to “read” and understand.

**how the wines taste:**

They taste like Saar or Nahe wines superimposed over the soils of Nierstein. We were oversold on Dönnhoff one year, so I half-jokingly suggested we slap some Dönnhoff labels on STRUB wine; the stylistic resemblance is plausibly close. Walter's recent vintages are cool and pure, even when they're ripe and lush. They're very often reductive and spritzzy, complex and long.

GST-146 **2008 Grüner Veltliner Kabinett Trocken**

No you're not reading the wrong catalogue. Walter visited Austria some years ago (stimulated by meeting many of my producers when they all toured around the States together) and brought back GV clippings from Willi Bründlmayer. He claims there was a time Grüner Veltliner was traditional in Rheinhessen, after which it was supplanted by Silvaner. He's planted it in a warm parcel on limestony clay, and '08 is the sixth crop.

O.K., now it's starting to make sense, and you drink this wine as much more than a plausible curio. In fact it is *actively delicious* and a huge leap ahead of any previous vintage; juiciness and snap and true varietality; almost stern in the Urgestein direction, ore-like and almost a Chablis broth and hay note, with scintillating vitality. You can NOT stop at one glass!

SOS: 0 (now-6 years)

GST-147 **2008 Riesling SOIL TO SOUL**

CORE-LIST WINE. The 08 is all Brückchen and Paterberg, as the red-soil wines are making up the dry-wine collection. The two vintages are quite similar, the 08 a little brighter perhaps, but it's hard to say until the blend marries. It might even be better.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (3-14 years, for both)

GST-141 **2007 Niersteiner Orbel Riesling Kabinett** **+**

Nutty, plummy aromas, woodsy-forestry balsam and wintergreen; the palate is seamlessly knit, earthy-spicy and long; perfectly and juicily balanced; liquid *Iberico*!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (2-15 years)

GST-148 **2008 Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE. It blends two lots whose acidity and sweetness paired wonderfully; it's one of the most savory vintages of this wine, as if you'd made a corn chowder off a shellfish stock; at the latter tasting it was starting to show an almost buttery richness.

SOS: 2 (4-14 years)

GST-143 **2007 Niersteiner Oelberg Riesling Spätlese** **+**

Wow, a monster. A happy monster because he is *full* of chocolate; look, it's prototypical Oelberg, both extravagant and solid; crazy-long but *deep*, not only loud, and profound, not only assertive. This is *Grand Cru* defined, and Walter's single best wine since his great 2001s.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-23 years)

**PATERBERG**

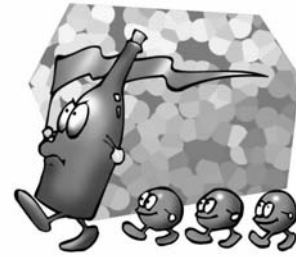
I think we need to highlight this unlikely vineyard because no one suspects how good it is, and Walter always seems to pull something remarkable from it. In fact, over the years I think he's actually more synchronous with Paterberg than with his Grand Crus from the red slope. Yet no one else has even hinted at the beauty which lies inside this land. It's like a shy dog who only obeys one master. Paterberg is a large site, covering the entire limestone plateau south of Nierstein on the way to Oppenheim. I'm sure other growers don't see it as predestined for Riesling; the site is wuthering and windswept, and botrytis is extremely rare. I don't even know that I'd call it a Grand Cru, though I'd argue its best sections are 1er Cru and the whole thing is a fascinating lieu dit. Walter has several parcels, the best (and oldest) of which gives us the "starred" wines. This is lower down and more sheltered. The signature-flavors run to lemon-grass and the minty herbs; mint itself, tarragon, Japanese green teas (Sencha and Gyokoru), spicy apples (Empires) and lime-zest; wintergreen too-you get the picture. Peachy it's not. But there's a kind of density of spice, as if set alight on the palate. These are iridescently scintillating wines, ultra-violet and **fabulous** at the table.

- GST-137 **2007 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE, because he makes enough of it and he's so identified with this site I wanted to honor that identity, and because *very* few German Rieslings do this high-wire act; in 2007 this is actually riper than the old-vines; spicy, lemon-grassy, minty and delicious; lavish and loveable; blade-sharp cut of clarity again *without* pointed acidity. W-O-W.  
 SOS: 2 (4-18 years)
- GST-149 **2008 Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. No wine changed more than this one over the four weeks between tastings; this is the very literal essence of aloe vera, and I know this because I had an aloe-vera *sorbet* at a Michelin 3-star two evenings before, and this Paterberg was that dish melted. It's from the old vineyard the 3-star usually hails from, and it's a compellingly "green" and herbal Riesling we'll bring in later this year.  
 SOS: 2 (6-21 years)



# take me to your liter

This is a schizy segment of my portfolio. Some of you report great success with this size. Others report it's impossible to sell. These, in my opinion, are the arguments in favor of the Liter:



- **It doesn't sit around in the fridge as long as a magnum, thereby diminishing the chance of spoilage.**
- **It's the perfect size bottle for three or four people on a casual occasion. It contains eight glasses of wine.**
- **It's the perfect size for the cook who wants or needs a cup or so to cook with. There's the equivalent of a full bottle left over for drinking with the meal!**
- **It nearly always contains a dry, light wine that's low in alcohol and very high on pure refreshment value. It's nearly always estate-bottled.**

It seems to me the only way to sell this size is to floor-stack it. If it stands on the shelf alongside 750s, it won't stand *out* enough as a larger package. If it's floor-stacked, you can always put a sign behind it screaming **FULL LITER!** Equivalent to just 56¢ per a 750!!!!

But some of you have tried all these bright ideas and you tell me the wines still don't sell. I have one final bright idea. FORGET THEY'RE LITERS. Don't even tell anybody it's a bigger bottle. It's just a bottle of wine for twelve bucks. If someone says "My, it's a bit heavy," you say "Oh, yeah, it's a special; they threw in 33% more free." And everyone's happy. It's like the *Super Deal* aisle at your local supermarket. Shampoo, 33% more **free**. Man we love that word *free*. Free wine!

I think I offer the very best jug-wine quality you can find anywhere on the market today. I know of no other merchant offering such a variety of cheap, estate-bottled wine in large bottles. I say this in all modesty, or at least in as much modesty as I can muster! They'll do the job at least as well as—I think better than—anything else in the category. Give them a try if you haven't yet. Here they are, the PICK OF THE LITERS:

GMS-141L 2008 Messmer Riesling , 1.0 Liter  
GMS-140L 2007 Messmer Spätburgunder , 1.0 Liter  
GTM-115L 2008 Minges Riesling Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter  
GTM-116L 2008 Minges Riesling , 1.0 Liter  
GDR-171L 2008 Darting Portugieser Rosé , 1.0 Liter  
GDR-182L 2008 Darting Dürkheimer Fronhof Riesling Kabinett Trocken , 1.0 Liter  
GDR-170L 2008 Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett , 1.0 Liter  
GWG-040L 2008 Wagner-Stempel Riesling Trocken , 1.0 Liter  
GGY-077L 2008 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter  
GGY-078L 2008 Gysler Scheurebe Halbtrocken , 1.0 Liter  
GGY-080L 2008 Gysler Riesling Trocken , 1.0 Liter  
GJS-085L 2008 Schneider Riesling Kabinett , 1.0 Liter  
GKF-136L 2008 Kruger-Rumpf Riesling , 1.0 Liter  
GSP-055L 2008 Spreitzer Riesling Trocken , 1.0 Liter  
GRH-059L 2008 Reuscher-Haart Piesporter Riesling , 1.0 Liter

# wagner-stempel

## rheinhessen • siefersheim

Daniel Wagner's astonishing winery is rising inexorably through the German critical firmament, as I knew he would. His 08s will do nothing to alter the trajectory.

Wagner-Stempel will be certified-organic with the 2009 vintage, by the way. The 08s are pre-certified, you might say.

He had no botrytis at all, picked very late, and the wines were on their fine lees until late February; the best wines are *still* on the lees as I write in early April. Daniel also made his first-ever Eiswein, actually his first *two*, if you count a three-headed hydra made from a Pinot Noir vineyard picked in early January at below-zero Fahrenheit which was "frozen so rock-solid we didn't see the first juice from the press for 24 hours." The thing I tasted – somehow "wine" isn't

quite the word for it – had 85 g.l. extract, 23 g.l. acidity (this is not a typo) and over 300 g.l. of RS. But there's a virtually perfect Riesling, all of 70 liters of it, that will never be sold.

I was also pretty stoked by Daniel's 2007 Pinot Noir (from porphyry!) which is priced out of Dollar markets besides which he hardly has six drops of it.

The guy doesn't make average wines. . . .

This is an elite-level property who should fetch top-Dollar. But Daniel's wines are misaligned with the US market at the moment. First of course the crapwad Dollar. Then his dividing his assortment into either dry or sweet wines, without the in-between "Kabinett" style that gives y'all an entrée. But I sat at my dining room table drinking the 2006 Riesling "Vom Porphyry" and knew with absolute certainty that the wine belonged with the ELITE dry Rieslings of the world. Yet it remains below the radar. How long? And who will be the first to make the discovery?

I owe the discovery to Alex Gysler, and his "Message In A Bottle" poster, and his answer to my question "Is

- **Vineyard area: 13 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Siefersheimer Höllberg and Heerkretz**
- **Soil types: Volcanic material (porphyry and melaphyre)**
- **Grape varieties: 50% Riesling, 25% Burgunder, 15% Silvaner, 10% Spätburgunder**

there anyone in this group of particular interest to me?" A few months later I sat at home tasting through a half-dozen samples, and with the first sip of the first wine (the 2002 "Riesling from Porphyry") I had the AH-HA! moment.

The estate is 13 hectares, in the westernmost district of Rheinhessen, near Bernhard. Soils vary, but there's a significant vein of porphyry like the great soils of the Nahe (which is just a hop skip & jump over the hill), and there are times I think the world's greatest rieslings grow on volcanic soil in general and porphyry in particular. And young Mr. Wagner has baskets of various soils in his tasting room, and has all his riesling-comprising 50% of his vineyards-is planted on porphyry.

There were times I thought I was drinking the very best of Crusius' wines.

Wagner's first vintage was 1993. He arrived at the apex of the dry-wave and has only recently started making any rieslings with sweetness — I hope to provide encouragement in this direction!

The land is steeper here than in much of the Rheinhessen, and Wagner does 95% of his harvest by hand. Most musts are clarified by gravity, though some are fermented as-is. His basic-quality wines are made in stainless steel, but like many young vintners he's leaning toward more old oak for the top rieslings. Similarly he ferments with cultured yeasts for the basic wines and with natural yeasts for the best rieslings. Most wines sit on



Daniel Wagner

the gross lees till February. All of this reveals a characteristic degree of thoughtfulness and flexibility for a young quality-minded vintner.

He's a self-described acid-freak, but also prizes minerality and "tannin in a subtle form," indicating this vintner prizes structure above all things. He has the luxury to do so, because the wines from his beloved Heerkretz (the steepest and highest-elevated site in Rheinhessen) and Höllberg show astonishing natural *fruit* in a stirring melange of Nahe complexity with Rheinhessen muscle.

He's clearly the rising star — I would say the *risen* star — of his region. His wines, while obviously great, are not easily great; they remind me of Jamek in a sense — they reward your full attention, they ask to be studied, and they reveal themselves deliberately. Indeed they often seem to carry more complexity than they can physically hold.

Sometimes I am extremely emotional, so much so I

cannot summon language of sufficient power to convey it, and I regret the times I squandered such language on undeserving occasions. All I can manage at these times is an inarticulate yammer, not because there's too little to say, but rather too much. Daniel Wagner's wines (you knew I'd tie this together didn't you?) can remind me of the wines Hans-Günter Schwarz made at Müller-Catoir, seeming to almost *stammer* with complexity. You wonder how a mere wine can contain so much *information*. I urge you to approach these wines with the quality of attention you reserve for the elite: They deserve it.

Just one thing to add. This being the modern era, there are no undiscovered superstars, and Daniel's wines are *in demand*, which means we get only ONE crack at them. They are not offered on the Spring DI, nor will they be unless we see a big-volume vintage. Please don't delay. This is one of the half-dozen greatest estates in this offering, and these 2008s, as a group, are second only to Dönnhoff.

#### wagner-stempel at a glance:

Dynamic young vintner making weighty, sensational Nahe-like porphyry-wines, already among the very best in Rheinhessen, and certain to be THE next superstar-estate in the region.

#### how the wines taste:

Generous, complex and polished, serene graceful strength and exotic haunting flavors.

#### GWG-140L 2008 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter

A nice fruity attack and then a sinewy masculine sternness and length, and *then* a weird back-wave of almost sweet fruit on the finish. This is actually too interesting for its class, but I'll let you buy it anyway.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-7 years)

#### GWG-041 2008 Silvaner Trocken

Even this "little" wine shows remarkable vinosity. Daniel understands what makes wine taste like *wine* and not grape juice with alcohol. "I don't like the early bottling any more," he says. If this isn't the world's best basic Silvaner then someone please send me a better one. It's lithe and grainy, appley and almost Riesling-like, harkening back to the days when Silvaner and Riesling were *often* blended in Rheinhessen; there's grip and terroir and length. *Sui generis*.

Just FYI, there are two higher-grade Silvaners, a village wine and an "S" quality (for Rheinhessen Selection, sort of like GroGew before GroGew came along) and I'd offer them both on quality alone, if I thought y'all would line up behind \$35-45 Silvaners. We need to get Schildknecht back in retail.

SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### GWG-042 2008 Scheurebe Trocken

+

"We picked this last, after the leaves fell at the end of October." The wine is salty, suave and fiendishly complex, with a tertiary wave of cassis strained through crumbled granite; the perfumed finish won't let up; sneaky length and arch, cunning expressiveness.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-8 years)

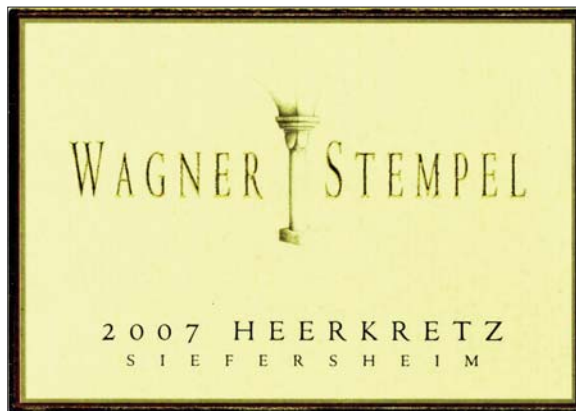
#### GWG-043 2008 Sauvignon Blanc Trocken

+

Polished and sleek and crazy-long, a highly elegant, refined SauvBl, though it was picked at almost 100% Oechsle and was not cultured-yeast fermented; it opens like a Japanese fan on the palate, and the graceful filigree flavors are silken and still, deliberate, with a subtle undertone of apples, reverberating in an endless gentle peal.

SOS: 0 (now-6 years)

- GWG-044 **2008 Siefersheimer Riesling Trocken “Vom Porphyr”** ++  
 It's *riddled* with terroir, lavishly ripe and with a swollen minerality; it could pass for a Nigl Privat very easily. Another “sponti” (no cultured yeasts), a lash of saltiness and slight phenolic grip are overcome by this 1001-nights spiciness. If you *really* like dry Riesling, this is verging on stellar at a sane price.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 9-14 years)
- GWG-035 **2007 Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++  
 GWG-046 **2008 Höllberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++  
 The 07 was bottled extremely late or he wouldn't still have it. Höllberg is to Heerkretz as Loibenberg is to Steinertal; deeper, more exotic, more baritone, less soprano. It's masculine, solid, richly plummy, regal; wonderful dry Riesling, world-class. The **2008** is a masterpiece; creamy, with a luscious minerality (oh yes, mineral flavors can be luscious) and the fluffiest fruit over a grinning core of decomposing stones; light *battonage* flavors and endlessly expressive with – TA-DA!! – less than 13% alcohol.
- GWG-045 **2008 Heerkretz Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** ++  
 I'm sorry I didn't give that third plus to the 07, and I'm thinking I'm gonna be sorry again. I tasted this very early in my trip but even then the fluting soprano brilliance, the rippling nervy snorting vigor – this wine is incredible. If Höllberg is lying in a splash of sun, Heerkretz is in the shade and can see its breath; it's almost not mere “Riesling” any more, like Hengst, or Bastei, it's ludicrously erogenous and spicy, with the apple and vetiver notes that mark young 08s. Expensive yes, but it's among the world's highest class dry white wines. Not just Rieslings. DRY. WHITE. WINES!  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 12-16 years)
- GWG-047 **2008 Siefersheimer Höllberg Riesling Spätlese** (+)+  
 Just a week past fermentation, and filtered and sulfured 48 hours before my visit, so I have to hedge a little. But the usual plum and hyacinth are there, with a clean malty botrytis (or something that reminded me of botrytis since he said there wasn't any...) and 08's salty length. Much more in store.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GWG-048 **2008 Siefersheimer Heerkretz Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 No hedging here: this RAWKS; lively, spicy, vigorous, as beaming as freesia. Classic and more *Spätlese* than the sometimes-outsized wines since vintage-05. And a very good value for stellar quality.  
 SOS: 2 (7-25 years)



# weingut oekonomierat joh. geil i. erben rheinhausen • bechtheim

(hereafter referred to as, simply, "Weingut Geil")

We seem to have gotten into the habit of coming here first. It works logistically and stylistically; Geil's wines are ideal wines with which to begin, they are so clean and candid. And Johannes himself is unpretentious and very easy to talk to, which I'm sure came as a relief to my new colleagues, who may have imagined all Germans would be either philosophy professors or Bruno the fashion guy. It wasn't long before they were off and running on Star Trek ephemera ("I'm still big in the battlestar galactica business," said Johannes.)

I was so delighted to have started with this estate four years ago, and y'all are buying lots of wine. Geil so perfectly exemplifies the new wave in Rheinhausen. Here's some of the reasons why.

"Quality grows in the vineyard, not in the cellar. The art of the cellar master is to preserve the available quality and refine it."

"Vines have it good in Bechtheim. They don't have to drill through ten meters of rock for a little water. They deal with three meters of permeable loess at which point they can drink as well as the citizens of Bechtheim!"

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

"When I think of my favorite among our wines I spontaneously reach for the 2002s; they have a wonderful fruit aroma and acidity."

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

"We prune to a single stalk, and do a green-harvest in August. Normally we press immediately without time on the skins, but experimentation is acceptable; we some-



Johannes Geil-Bierschenk

times have a 12-hour skin-contact if the grapes are ripe and healthy. Clarification is a must; we do it by gravity. We're in the midst of a strong experimental phase on the matter of wild versus cultured yeasts. We'd prefer any

- **Vineyard area: 27 hectares**
- **Annual production: 18,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bechtheimer Geyersberg, Bechtheimer Rosengarten**
- **Soil types: heavy chalky loam, carbonate-rich loess**
- **Grape varieties: 35% Riesling, 15% Spätburgunder, 7% Weissburgunder, 4% Rieslaner, 4% Scheurebe, 35% other**

residual sugar in the wines to be natural, but we do keep a little Süssreserve on hand for adjustments if necessary. The wines are racked immediately after fermentation but they lie on the fine lees for another month or two. We bottle early, to preserve CO<sub>2</sub>"

This is such a wonderful discovery I only wish I'd made it myself. In fact I have Gault-Millau to credit, thanks to their heralding Geil as their DISCOVERY OF THE YEAR 2004. That alone didn't hook me (though previous year's discoveries include Mathern, Biffar and Spreitzer); what hooked me was seeing Rieslaner planted. This variety is a litmus test for the craziness-quotient of a vintner. It creates, or can create supernal wines, but it is a sonofabitch to grow, and if you grow it then you are chasing something well worth capturing, and rarely captured.

Rheinhausen's where the action is, as I said, and I asked for samples from two estates, of which these were dramatically superior. I paid a visit at the very end of my trip, and all was confirmed. Tasting samples at remove is only partially useful: you have to go there, see the folks, pet the dog, taste a range of vintages and taste *together* with the family.

There are three generations in the house, the

youngest of whom is Johannes' new baby. We seemed to have met before we met, if you see what I mean. And when they gave me a dry Riesling from the difficult 2000 vintage to taste I thought "These folks have moxie" and when the wine was outstanding I thought "Man am I lucky I got here before anyone else did. . . ."

Bechtheim lies just where the hills begin, on the west flank of the Rhein plain. The key sites for Riesling are **Geyersberg**—the best one—made up of chalky loess and

tertiary marl. The **Rosengarten** is above the village, on gravelly sand and clay, and the **Hasensprung** rolls off to the west on similar soil. It's a somewhat large estate—28 hectares, about 30% Riesling—and I infer that young Johannes came home from Geisenheim full of the restless idealistic spirit of these times: lower yields, tenderer cellar work. And the results are dramatic, and the prices still humane.

#### geil at a glance:

Honorable traditional Rheinhessen estate energized with the arrival of a young lion. Outstanding modern white wines (Riesling, Scheurebe, Rieslaner) at wonderfully reasonable prices. An emblem of the quixotic new generation in Rheinhessen.

#### how the wines taste:

Firm, delineated, clear, complex, healthy and radiant. I would teach a seminar with them, saying "This is the quality you can now expect from a solid young grower in Germany making wines in unexceptional conditions from good but not great land."

#### GGE-034 **2008 Muskateller Trocken**

A light wine, 78° Oechsle, chaptalized, and wonderfully spiky and catty, a summer thirst-quencher but with *length*, and a tertiary finish like sea-salt and basil oil.  
SOS: 0 (now-4 years)

#### GGE-035 **2008 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Grüner Silvaner Spätlese Trocken "S"**

"S" denotes a range of requirements for "reserve" quality wines from producers who agree to abide. This is remarkable wine by any reckoning. It's his best site, from which 25% of the fruit was picked, leaving both the green and the botrytis berries behind; the alcohol is 13.3% and the whole thing resembles a loess-grown Veltliner, or in other words it's profound Silvaner! Smoky, birchy, ashen, old Fall leaves; impressive purposive length, a manly murmuring being. If you buy it *because* it's *recherché* you'll be surprised by what classically excellent wine it is.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### GGE-036 **2008 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb**

19 grams RS; super-focused mirabelle aromas with meyer-lemon and lemon blossom; perfectly poised, lyric, melodic, playful Riesling. It's a tabula rasa of what Riesling should be, has fine sleek length and finishes dry.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-7 years)

#### GGE-037 **2008 Bechtheimer Rosengarten Riesling Kabinett**

It shows the vetiver-greenness of the vintage and also of the deacidification; it's juicier, more comely, if a bit less brilliant. But certainly more flattering *in the time it will be drunk*.  
SOS: 2 (2-8 years)

GGE-033 **2008 Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE. I tasted both a natural and a deacidified version and the natural was everyone's favorite, more dialectic, more grapefruit, more backbone, whereas the other was more marked by its fructose. This one's marked by its spine and spice.

SOS: 2 (1-5 years)

GGE-038 **2008 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Riesling Spätlese**

97<sup>th</sup> Oechsle but still brash and nippy (which will change; I was there very early); it's the way we silverbacks remember Riesling, apples, apples and more apples plus not-quite-ripe peaches – ripe Riesling pulled *tight*.

SOS: 1 (3-12 years)

GGE-039H **2008 Bechtheimer Geyersberg Rieslaner BA, 12/375ml**

+

A ripe, almost toasty wine; powerful varietal aromas and its usual martial power; a militant *gelée*, commandingly intense and convincing.

SOS: 3 (8-21 years)



# gernot gysler

## rheinhessen • weinheim

"Before I started working organic, I'd felt I'd gone as far as I could in winemaking," said Alex Gysler. "But since I started organic I see the wines have more depth and more soul. How can you talk about terroir if you can't let the vineyard be? If you're forcing it all the time?" The estate is certified now. But Gysler's changes go deeper than that. "2008 was the first vintage we did absolutely no handling of the juice," he says. "We didn't rack, we didn't fine; the wines sit on

their primary lees until three days before we bottle them."

It's all quite idealistic, and I admire it. I'm not suspicious of idealism. But there are two concerns.

One is that prices have to increase. Will you accept the increases? You have been asking for organic wineries, but *how much are you willing to pay for them?* Gysler has always been a "value" agency – the wines have sold for less than they're worth – but how will you react when they sell for *exactly* what they're worth? My sense is, we want organic estates and we want bargains, and if we can't have both, we'll take bargains. You're very welcome to prove me wrong.

I'm less concerned about the wines themselves, but I do wonder to what degree Alex is flying blind with his new regime, at least for the first couple vintages. Mind you, I had no issue with his 08s, quite the contrary. Change makes one wary. And while I'm proud of Alex for his ambition and accomplishment, I now have to find another "value" estate, which is getting almost impossible in modern Germany, where quality minded vintners



Alex Gysler & family

want the standard of living they're entitled to.

What we really need is a sensible Dollar. As if.

Alex's decision to convert to organics (and now to biodynamics) was motivated by his wife's first pregnancy, beautifully enough. I know the feeling; you want to make the world perfect.

- **Vineyard area: 12 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Weinheimer Hölle, Mandelberg and Kapellenberg**
- **Soil types: Reddish weathered soils with stone, loam and clay**
- **Grape Varieties: 30% Riesling, 30% Weissburgunder and Spätburgunder, 10% Silvaner, 10% Huxelrebe, 8% Scheurebe**

Even last year Alex's wines were more than merely correct. There was a quality of unusual vitality and self-confidence. I used to give guitar lessons back in the hoary days of my misspent youth, and you always knew the exact moment when the player stopped fighting the instrument and started to play. Two new things enter the picture: serenity and expression. He knew he'd grab the notes, he's figured out the HOW. Now it's time to work on the WHAT. I got that sense from Gysler's '06s – they had more of him in them. They were more animate, more crucially alive.

Gysler is how you can see the enormous changes in German wine in just the past ten years.

Alex assumed control of the estate abruptly due to the untimely death of his father Gernot. Father was a man of his times, an honorable and honest vintner who came of age in the post-war years, and was seduced by both technology and by all the new crossings which promised Auslese every year. "My father liked soft wines," said Alex, "And they were good of their type, but I want to change things."

He threw away the separator. He started whole-cluster pressing now up to 70%. He's shifted cover-crop to every second row, renewed composting, entirely done away with dosage, moved almost entirely toward stainless steel. He's pulling out the new crossings and replanting with classic varieties (no mean feat with 12 hectares to manage).

Yet even as Alex turns the cellar completely around, in even deeper ways he is his father's son. You see it in his kindness and care and lack of artifice.

And needless to say, he's been discovered. None of the young can afford to work in obscurity; their only hope is to get on the Map fast. So they send their samples to all the necessary reviewers and they make all the necessary scenes.

Alex has settled in, and his wonderful dog still gazes dolefully at all the fun from which he feels excluded. What's happening here is good. Recognition from the German wine press is also good. Soon it will be time to take the next steps. Because it isn't reducible, after all, to formula, or if it is, you risk making formulaic-tasting wines. Germans have a great word with no English equivalent: "Fingerspitzgefühl." A long 'un, yes, but translated it is "the feeling on the finger tips" and it is the difference between correct wines, even "exciting" wines . . . and great wines.

It's best when you don't *know* what the vintner did. I have traveled with tasters who seize upon a single aspect of winemaking and try to determine whether-X-or-Y with each wine they taste. Cultured yeast or wild yeast? Tanks or casks? And when they're wrong they feel great consternation,

while I smile inside. Because that fumbling is how they learn; it's how I learned and still learn. I doubt if anyone tasting, say, Dönnhoff's wine could tell you whether they're aged in casks or tanks. Take Justen and Christoffel: casks or tanks, and which is which? The more you look for cause-effect syllogisms by which wine is "explained" the more frustrated you'll become. Wine is explained in the feeling of the fingertips. And it takes the time it takes, for the taster and for the vintner.

The best Rheinhessen vineyards seem to occur in relatively hidden corners. When you approach Weinheim from the north, you descend from a highish ridge, which takes you down a long, gentle slope through the best vineyards, Hölle and Mandelberg. These are the south-facing slopes on a mélange of soils, most prominent the red soil that makes Nierstein famous. Without stumbling upon it—or exploring quite diligently—you couldn't infer it was there. Unless you see the whole great sweep from the south, as you can if you're on the Kaiserslautern-Mainz autobahn and aren't screaming by at a zillion m.p.h. If there weren't any vineyards on that great wide bowl, you'd look at it and think "grapes should grow there."

#### gysler at a glance:

Big changes afoot as son Alexander Gysler takes control. The new wines are slimmed down, streamlined and modernized, jazzy and full of crispy, primary fruit. Prices, though, remain un-real for the time being!

#### how the wines taste:

In transition from the juicy forthright style of before to the streamlined clarity of the steely now.

### AGAIN, A FABULOUS TRIO OF LITERS

GGY-077L **2008 Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter** +  
CORE-LIST WINE. It's the best one yet. I know I keep saying it, but he keeps making it better. And this isn't merely cheap-and-cheerful, it's good, *well-made wine*; I have a bottle open six weeks in my fridge *au naturel* and it's still going strong. The 08 has spritz and focus and zip but also creaminess and charm. Have fun!  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-5 years)

GGY-078L **2008 Scheurebe Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter**  
I was invited to a Cantonese banquet, 17 courses, cooked in the home of a chef-restaurateur friend of mine here in DC, and I brought the wine. A bottle each of a slew of things, except for four bottles of the 07 Scheu Liter, which I knew would rock the grub and make everyone happy. As indeed it did. Those boys drained but pronto.

A few years ago this wine was a waving scarf of elderflower, but it's slowly morphed into the kind of Scheu I get weak-kneed over, a vicious evil riot of hissing Scheu, with malevolent vitality. It also has another personality; focused, spicy, green and minty and charming and witty and very nearly civilized. But I like the Dr. Jeckell-side best.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-3 years)

GGY-080L **2008 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 Liter**

A crisp dry Riesling with some clone-90 exotica about the fruit; balsam and aloe; really charming stuff here, and this is a bona-fide *steal*.

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

GGY-082 **2008 Riesling "S"**

Again, "S" denotes a wine that's met very stringent requirements for "reserve" quality from a Rheinhessen growers association whose members agree to abide. This wine stopped with 11 g.l. RS (in other words, yay nature) and it's fragrant, shapely Riesling; wintergreen and kaffir; smooth juicy texture but rocky-minty extract. The final finish is like walking into a home where stock's been simmering.

SOS: 0 (now-1 year, again 8-12 years)

GGY-074 **2007 Weinheimer Riesling Halbtrocken**

+

This is more pointed and perhaps less extroverted than that giddy exuberant 2006, but will again be an exemplary dry Riesling, less peachy-appley and more wintergreeny-spearmenty, but the filigree etching of nuance is lovely, and I can't believe any Riesling at or near this price delivers the class and stylishness of this; every restaurant in the country should have it, at least until we sell the 200 available cases. . . .

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-9 years)

GGY-079 **2008 Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett**

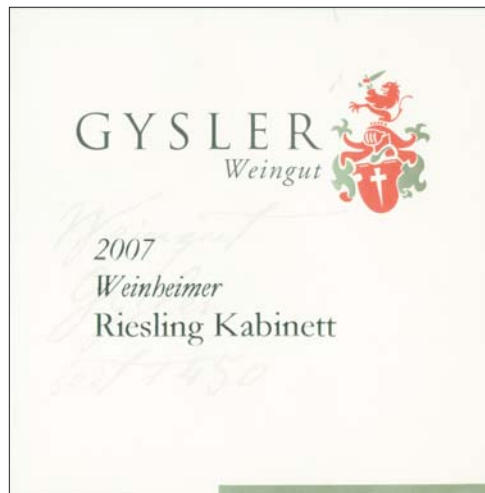
CORE-LIST WINE. We've just moved on from the pretty and extroverted 2007. The 08 is possibly "better" but also more challenging. I took the drier of two options, which had a lovely fragrance of mirabelles and a chalky-dusty extract, plus a hint of gooseberry and a sweet-grain meadow-flower element. The RS is almost invisible. But acid-heads pay heed: the wine has 10.2 g.l. acidity with a pH of . . . 2.7! So we'll see what kind of manly acid-loving men you are. . . .

SOS: 1 (3-8 years)

GGY-081H **2008 Weinheimer Hölle Huxelrebe BA, 12/375ml**

Sweet Huxel tastes like white raisins and sweet straw; it has acidity and thus makes fine dessert-wines which are less celestial than Riesling, but also less expensive. This one's a curvaceous, honeyed, fine-grained and very rich BA.

SOS: 4 (12-30 years)



# christian-wilhelm bernhard

## rheinhessen • frei-laubersheim

I'd grown so accustomed to thinking of Hartmut Bernhard as a young pup I was taken aback to see a little gray starting around his temples. There's a photo-essay on the wall in the tasting room showing the 1980 harvest, and Hartmut looks all of eleven years old. Maybe that's why. My fault, though, for these wines and this winery are striding forward each year, and no-longer-"young"—Hartmut Bernhard is entering his prime.

2002 marked the end of the fiberglass and cement tank era in his cellars: all stainless steel and old casks now.

The Bernhards are out of the way, just over the hill from Bad Kreuznach and the Nahe Valley. It's one of those curious little corners of Germany. The soils are not unlike Nahe soils; igneous weathered rock, even porphyry in some places. Others are typically Rheinhessen clay; a hybrid of styles emerges. Some wines show Nahe-like skeins of curranty delineation and do best in damper years. Others are typical Rheinhessen but with a more compact profile, as though their proximity to the Nahe caused them to speak with a Nahe-accent. They're also lighter and more buoyant than many Rheinhessen wines.

Hartmut's a shy man, but his wife is hearty and gregarious, plus she's a trained vintner from a Mosel family. These are exceptionally warm, loving people, and we have a keen, almost telepathic rapport as tasters.

Happily, since the 1999 vintage all Rieslings have had only Riesling dosage. I'm sure this contributes to their ever-increasing polish.



- **Vineyard area: 10.9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Hackenheimer Kirchberg, Frei-Laubersheimer Fels**
- **Soil types: Porphyry, weathered volcanic soils, clay and sandy loam**
- **Grape varieties: 25% Riesling, 21% Spätburgunder, 11% Silvaner, 6% Grauburgunder, 5% Auxerrois, 3% Scheurebe, 3% Gewürztraminer, 22% other varieties**

Bernhards make a bigger deal out of my visits than my meager talents warrant. I'm sure they know I like their wines, but I hope they know I *respect* them too. Hoping they're reading these words; gentlemen (and lady), it remains a pleasure to grow in the knowledge of our respective crafts together over the years we've known one another. And it is a joy to know you all. There. It's just the sort of thing I can't say out loud without dying of embarrassment. Now go away, I'm blushing as it is.

As it happens they *did* read that little passage, and were duly touched, which embarrassed me even more. I don't know whether 2008 is so remarkable here because it's just a superb vintage, or because Hartmut's settling in even more. The house is both actually and aesthetically his now. Things feel complete.

**bernhard at a glance:**

Though I went at first looking for Auxerrois, this has turned out to be a Riesling and Scheurebe agency, offering excellent value especially for Scheu.

**how the wines taste:**

It depends on the soil. Rieslings from the volcanic porphyry soils taste like Nahe wines under a sun lamp, complex and intricate. The wines from the clayey Kirchberg site are real gob-stuffers; they're not elegant (though far from clumsy) but rather concentrated and chewy. Each year Hartmut inches closer to his pinnacle.

- GCB-085 **2008 Frei-Laubersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett Feinherb**  
 The RS is circa 20-25 g.l.; this is a sweetheart from young vines, a frisky, stylish angular and piquant wine; salty porphyry touch, smoke and peach and peach-blossom; "tea-smoked" aromas lead to a ripe plummy note on the palate as it warms in the glass. Useful at the table since you'll be parched after having pronounced the 16-syllable name.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-8 years)
- GCB-086 **2008 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Kabinett**  
 A highly developed and multi-faceted fragrance – 08 has made it more graceful than usual – violets, iron, grape-hyacinth, quite polished with nothing countrified; the palate has lift and grip and freshness, even at room temp.  
 SOS: 2 (4-12 years)
- GCB-088 **2008 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Scheurebe Kabinett** **+**  
 Exceptionally good! At this moment – early March at room temp – it's more a kinky Riesling than a classic snarling Scheu, but this pithy chewy length is impressive, it's both sprightly and as toothsome as a pan-fried dumpling; the wine makes you happy, even giddy; oxygen brings a big waft of grapefruit, and a slithery rippling belly-dancer shimmy. Daddy do like Scheu.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (now-7 years)
- GCB-087 **2008 Hackenheimer Kirchberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 The merest kiss of *dosage* elevated this to a lavish but firm full-throated Riesling; almost a woodruffy note, lots of green overall (chervil, parsely) and as always a chewy, meaty sort of fellow, though this is more limber than hot vintage examples.  
 SOS: 2 (6-19 years)
- GCB-089 **2008 Frei-Laubersheimer Fels Gewürztraminer Spätlese**  
 With 25 g.l. RS this is quite *Alsacien* in its surmise of sweetness without overt "sugar." O.K., like Alsace used to be. The fragrance is classically rosy, the structure is unusually firm and winsome; a cherry-tobacco note arrives; a stern thump of body; a very successful Gewürz.  
 SOS: 1 (now-3 years)

nahe

# nahe wines



It is a joy to labor lovingly on behalf of what I feel to be the loveliest Riesling wines on the face of the earth.

You know, the Rhineland is really quite compact. You can get to the Nahe in a half-hour from the Rheingau, a half-hour from the Rhinehessen, an hour from the Pfalz, and an hour from the Mosel. Yet the Nahe is the forgotten acre just out of view, trilling beyond earshot in its winsome, lonely corner. Especially after the soaring scenery of the Mosel, the dreamy Nahe is almost narcotically soothing. It's still, and intimate, and stirs the soul as it calms the nerves.

Things feel astir on the Nahe these days. Mr. Dönnhoff has brought acclaim to his region, and a number of excellent growers are in the slipstream of that attention; Schönleber, Hexamer, Schäfer-Fröhlich, not to mention Mr. Diel, who is in nobody's slipstream. A case could be made that no other German wine region has the Nahe's concentration of outstanding estates in a similarly

small area. The region is also especially lovely for wine pilgrims because it remains quiet and authentic. In contrast to the Pfalz, where every weekend from Easter to harvest is cram-a-lama with gawkers and slug-it-downers. At least there's *one* place on earth wine lovers can go to get away from it all. There are no billboards here, no wine trains, no neon "DEGUSTATION-VENTE" or "VIS-

**The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be.**

ITEZ LES CAVES!" signs. You can hear a breeze rustling through trees in the *next* orchard before it reaches the one in which you're sitting. There's a constant clamor of birds. Signs by the side of the road warn of frog crossings. You wouldn't drive fast even if you could.

The least of Nahe wines are refined and delicate, with a feline grace. The best of them are the beating heart of Riesling, as fine as it can possibly be: intricate, searchingly complex, with hypnotically shimmering overtones of flavor that can stir you to a point between perplexity and awe. Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted. If the pure *flavor* of wine interests you in and of itself, these wines will give you as much delight and absorption as wine ever can.

There are four basic soil types in the Nahe. Each gives its own kind of wine. **Slate** does what it always does; the Nahe variant has more middle, almost like a super rich

Saar wine. **Rotliegend**, our old friend from Nierstein, gives smoky, tangy wines along Nierstein lines but more compact, with an ethereal redcurrant taste and a cool marbeline feel. **Loam** and **clay** are the plebians, mostly planted to the commoner varieties, though even these varieties are more fetchingly graceful along the Nahe. Finally the volcanic soils with the exotic names: **porphyry**, **melaphyr**, **gneiss**, **rhyolite**, give the world's most spellbinding white wine, Riesling at an impossible pinnacle of fire and grace. Blackcurrant, honeysuckle, raspberry, a heavenly host of flavors astonishingly differentiated and an almost prismatically filigree.

Several years ago, while I was with a group of customers, we had a nice alfresco lunch along the Nahe with Helmut Dönnhoff. After we finished eating, people began rising from the table and stretching. Helmut set out on a walk between rows of vines. I followed. We were in the Oberhäuser Brücke, a small, one hectare site along the river. It is longer than it is wide, and I followed Helmut as we walked, heads bent, silently. Finally after

**Good Nahe Riesling is slim but not scrawny, with a succulence that seems to magically glaze the palate, coolly elegant and spectrally multifaceted.**

having walked perhaps a hundred yards, we reached the end of the row. Helmut stopped, and turned to face me. He was grinning from ear to ear, and by then, so was I.

We returned to the group and I beckoned them to follow me. The exercise was repeated, this time with eight of us walking one behind the other—we looked like a chain-

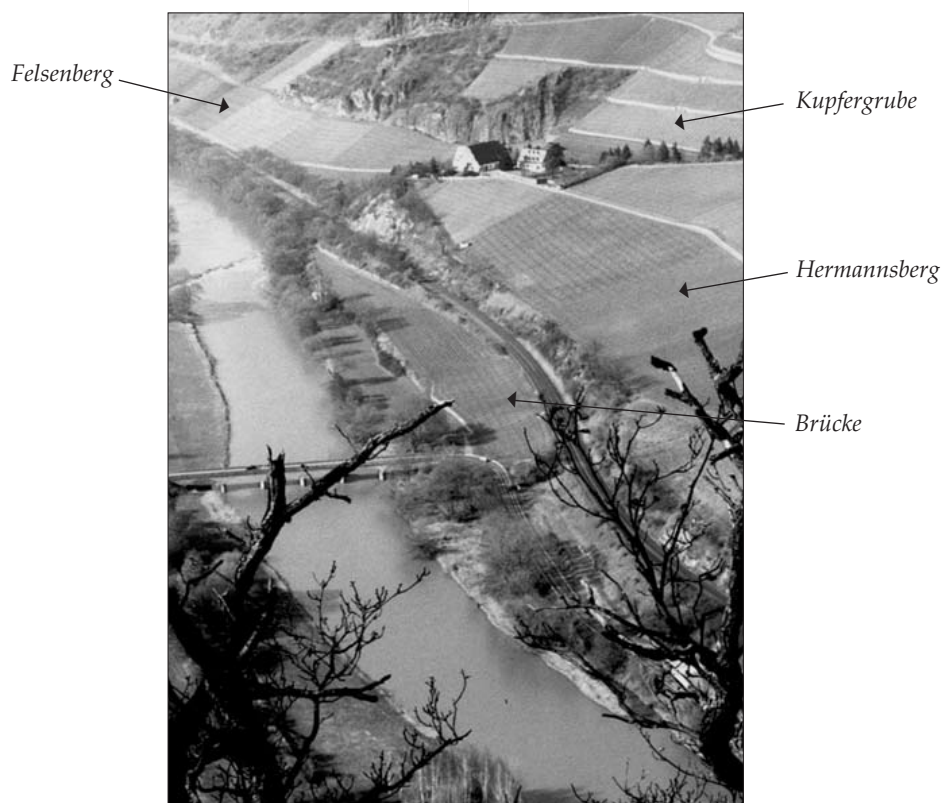
gang! We got to the end of the 100-yard row of vines, and this is what we all saw: four distinct, absolutely different soil types in the space of a two-minute stroll. There was grey slate, pale yellow loess, silvery-tan porphyry and deep rusty melaphyr. I turned to the group. "You hear a lot of crap about what makes complexity in wines. Some people would like you to think that winemakers give complexity to their wines. Look at what you've just seen here. THAT, and THAT ALONE is complexity."

I know of nowhere else in the world of wine where grapes grow on such an intricate confluence of geological currents. No grape except Riesling could do justice to such soil.

Each year I try to hike to the top of the Lemberg, the highest hill in the region. It does me good: the birds, the fresh spermy smell of early spring and the view. At this time of year, the vineyards are bare of leaf, and it is telling and fascinating to look at the various colors of soil

In my dream I wished I could bring you here with me, and we could sit out for a few hours in the afternoon light and look down on those miraculous vineyards and listen to the birds. Let that time gestate in our hearts, so that when we taste the wines later on we taste them *with* that heart, relaxed, dilated and ready. And then I think of those wines, arranged in sterile rows on a table somewhere, while I pace nearby and worry about how they'll "show." And for a moment it becomes impossible to be both people at once, the hot-shot wine guy and the plain-and-simple me who sits on the hill, pensive, calm and grateful.

I happen to believe that wine **means** something. And much of what wine means was visible to me then, and every time since. I also *buy* wine in part because of what it means, which is a more vital question than its simple exterior flavor. Yet if we wish to make a living buying and selling wine, we often confront a perplexing ques-



*View of vineyards from the Lemberg*

forming miasmic currents on the exposed ground. Almost all the great Nahe vineyards can be seen below, among the noblest homes for Riesling anywhere on earth, spread out like a necklace of diamonds: Kupfergrube, Hermannshöhle, Hermannsberg, Brücke. I peer through the spring sunshine, remembering the first time I ever saw this astonishing view, when I suddenly had an eerie sense of something being *shown* to me. I was a million miles from marketing. Looking into a remote hollow on a distant limb of the world, grateful in my utmost heart for the beauty that lives in the land, but also somehow lost.

tion: who are we to be? We all let meaning into our lives in *some* way; we thirst for meaning unawares. When you cheer like a banshee for the home team, you're feeding a need for **meaning**; on the face of it, what does it matter *who* wins the game? We *create* meaning because we *need* to have it in our lives. Wine is one of the things which happens to feed that need in me, and Nahe wine does so in a particularly suggestive, caressing way. "There are mysteries here of the most exquisite sweetness; I will show them to you," it seems to say.

Enter Helmut Dönnhoff.

*"The soul does not supply solutions. It sends messages. It beckons."* —Michael Ventura

"Er lebt noch," said Helmut Dönnhoff as he walked through the shadowy corridor into the tasting room. *He's still here.* Helmut had a scare this March, one of those things that turn out to be very little but which visit with a message. And so I had to see him at the very end of my trip when I didn't have a huge amount of time. But that didn't matter; I was glad to see him at all. We spent most of our time talking about his health and schmoozing about doctors and hospitals. Our talk only glanced over the wines; we tasted attentively but didn't dissect what we tasted. This time it wasn't about playing with metaphors, as he and I like to do. Nor was it about

me retreating to my cloister to catch the wines' ether; there wasn't time. It was odd to be matter-of-fact about these wines, but in retrospect I'm not sad it happened, at least once.

You'll see the assortment is smaller, and that was by Helmut's design. There are no Ausleses. "During the harvest I began to see what kind of vintage this would be, and I preferred to see it express itself than to try and force certain wines from it because it was "expected" of me," he said.

It occurs to me we are all very lucky in Helmut Dönnhoff. Me of course 'cause I represent him, but more than that. First of all we have an unusually intelligent and articulate guy. Good so far. Next we have a guy who's uncommonly *happy* in his work. Then it happens that this smart, happy guy has some of the greatest vine-



Helmut Dönnhoff

yards in the world. And that for years the region in which he worked was so sufficiently obscure that he got to *do* his work in almost monastic purity. He was never in danger of becoming that most queasy and dreadful of creatures: a "wine celebrity." More correctly, when that danger first

began to manifest, our hero was old enough to assimilate it and not allow it to disturb the basic integrity of his relationship to the work.

I mean, consider how often great vineyards are in indifferent hands. Practically the entire Rheingau! Think how often passionate vintners don't have sites to do them justice. Practically the entire Rheinhessen! With Dönnhoff we have not only an ideal confluence of desire

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Oberhäuser Brücke, Schlossböckelheimer Felsenberg & Kupfergrube, Norheimer Dellchen,**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, weathered volcanic soil**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 20% Weissburgunder and Grauburgunder**

and a means of realizing it; we also have someone smart enough to recognize what he has.

When I try to describe Dönnhoff's wines I create an itch I can't reach to scratch. Someone, I think it was James Hillman, said to beware of the things we have no words for. And I've never quite had language with which to detail the existential life of Helmut Dönnhoff's wines. But I think it is there, and the limitations are mine.

Not that I don't try. And trying, I find myself in places we usually call spiritual, whatever that means. It's easy to distrust "spirituality" or the life-of-the-soul because the words are wielded with what sounds like a rebuke, that we should live *in* spirit or that our souls should live our lives for us. Yeah well poo on that.

Yet very often we make the opposite mistake. We insist on banishing soul from our lives. We actually make an effort to do so, a semi-conscious choice to be, what, matter of fact, grounded, "simple folk"? As if *soul* were a kind of spiritual elitism. I think it's extremely stupid to make *either* effort, to pull soul in or to shove it away. I think it's better to ignore it and go about your life, as long as you *are* alive, by which I mean attentive and available. Soul is pretty smart, and will show up when it's warranted, not necessarily in *special* experiences but in ordinary beautiful ones. Baseball season just started, and I can't wait to go to that first night-game. I'll buy my soul some chicken fingers. My soul likes the fried stuff.

Dönnhoff's wines speak to me in that place – call it “soul” or whatever more palatable name you choose – because they are ineluctably serene and tender. They are psalms of flavor. Even when they're intense they are serene and tender. They never seem to strive, to thrust or assert. In common with Nikolaihof's wines, they convey a lit-from-within-ness that stirs me deeply.

Maybe when you see someone or something that radiates the well-being expressed when one is at peace with oneself, it suggests the life that's available to you too. Then you feel hope, and longing. It *can* be better, kinder, more grateful, sweeter. A certain kind of beauty is an invitation to *look on*. Another kind of beauty is an invitation to *sink in*. Into the warm amniotic fluid of safety, and the beating heart nearby.

I want to know what this quiet place is, and I want to know how a wine can bring you there, and I want to know who lives there and why we hardly ever get to see it, and I want to know why we should need to see it at all. Because when we are there we seem to know, immediately, that this is something we cannot actually live without.

This quality of evanescence is one of the most interesting things that can happen to us. We are both out of our lives yet also more deeply immersed in them than ever. Everything seems *true* here, yet a condition for being inside this truth is being unable to articulate it. And why should *that* be?

Here's a little story. Karen Odessa and I were nearing the end of a hiking vacation in the Alps, and we were leaving the high mountains and heading into the French Jura. We were terribly sad to leave the glaciers, and we craned our necks to catch the last glimpses of Mont Blanc as we climbed up the Col de Faucille. Then it was getting on evening, and we were in the sweet little valley of the Doubs. Tender, silvery evening light, and the little river and smoke rising from the chimneys of lighted houses and farms, and all at once two swans took off from the water, skimming the stream with their wings, and I looked at my wife and she was weeping, “It's so beautiful,” she said through her tears. We had left the country of the spectacle, the unbelievably massive peaks, and had arrived somewhere littler and dearer, with reeds and swans and grassy hills.

These places of beauty and meaning come to us, not very often, and sometimes we realize some of the other beings who inhabit them, poems, streams, clouds, wines like Dönnhoff's, and the only condition of life in this place is that it be free of artifice and admmissive of every question, with no demand for answers.

It makes perfect sense the maker of these wines is himself the most grounded of gentlemen. Helmut Dönnhoff likes, as he puts it, to “speak through the flowers,” to use metaphor and image. He is quicker even than I am to carry wine into that realm, yet he is also the most matter-of-fact person I think I know. I suppose he's heard his share of tasters wishing to impress him with all the stuff they “get” in his wines, but Helmut's had enough of it. It's 180 degrees different from tasting with Aubry (in Champagne), who only *wants* to add to his ongoing catalogue of associations. Helmut is rather the

*shaman* who doesn't explicate but simply creates the environment for the thing to be known. What *does* amuse him, and clearly exasperates his wife Gabi, is metaphor, especially anthropomorphizing.

Great wines also arise from people who are at home – or at *one* – with their landscape. Helmut's been hinting that new vineyards were going to enter the picture, and when he showed me two new wines from sites in Bad Kreuznach called Kahlenberg and Krötenpfuhl (two of the top-3 in this town), I asked if he was at all curious about any *upstream* sites. “Not at all,” came his typically unambiguous

answer. I asked why not. “I want the wines I make to contain a story, and the story I can offer them is that of me at home in my landscape. I feel myself a man of the middle-Nahe, that is, the area between Oberhausen and Kreuznach. You

have to be at home not only in the vineyard but also in the landscape in which it's contained. Of course, I could make a perfectly nice wine from a “foreign” vineyard, but it would only be a product; it wouldn't contain a story.”

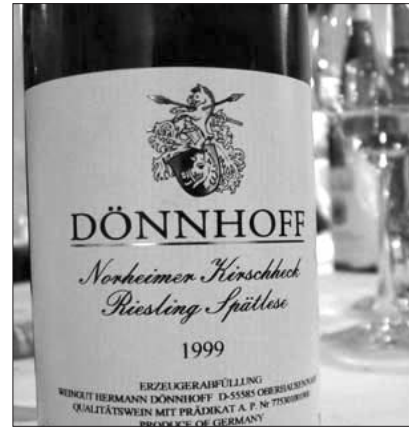
Great wine is wine which is incandescent with *reality*, larger and more eternal than its mere ostensible self, and which speaks to that thing in each of us. But don't go looking for it. Be calm and prepared, and it will find you.

Helmut Dönnhoff knows his wines are good. He doesn't strut about it but he isn't aw-shucks either. I once asked him if he agreed his goal was to make wines of crystalline texture and precise articulation. “I don't disagree,” he replied. Then how do you get there? I had to know. There is, in effect, no “how,” was his answer. Wine results from the confluence of a multitude of small choices, which alter as circumstances mandate. There's no recipe. There is ever-more reliance on instinct. Dönnhoff is very respectful of spontaneous instinctive recognition, and has become wary of the intellect's appetite to deconstruct. One year he spoke with David Schildknecht and said this telling thing:

*I am always asking people who have no technical expertise to assess the taste of my wines. The postman, for instance. I ask him, “Would you just please taste these three wines and tell me which you prefer.” “Oh, it's really too early in the morning...” he protests, but I pull him in and sit him down anyway. And then he says something quite amazing and insightful that suddenly opens your eyes to the wine. And here is the decisive point: there are a lot of us who know too much about wine to be able to taste.*

Precisely.

Dönnhoff sees his work as craft; such art as may exist in wine comes from nature. “All the real work of the



vintage happens before the pressing,” he says. “What you do afterwards is repair.” He approaches wine respectfully but not reverentially.

As a vintner he takes his duties completely seriously and applies himself calmly and fastidiously to his work. The result is a community of wines as transparent and filigree as spider webs, but the wonder for Helmut lies not in the strange fact of such a thing’s existence, but in the beauty of the workmanship.

My friend Robert Houde has a great way to convey this idea: “People have to get over the idea that *intensity* always means **volume**,” he says. Thank you Robert! Think of some yahoo blabbing away behind you in a movie theater. Beyond all patience, you turn to this clod and whisper, “*Would you please SHUT UP?*” You haven’t raised your voice above a whisper, but you have spoken with seething intensity. Wine does this too. It is always asking me to shut up.

I loved something Helmut said once: “DAS GANZE DING MUSS KLINGEN!” That is, the whole thing must harmonize; it isn’t enough if this **part** or that **part** is interesting or arresting, the *whole* picture has to be balanced. Helmut is unaware of it, but he offered quite a gleaming gift of instruction with that simple little sentence. We’d all be better wine drinkers—and happier lovers of LIFE—if we could somehow remember: the whole thing must harmonize.

Dönnhoff ferments with yeast cultures he creates himself from his own wines, the better to give him the highest common denominator of controlled, slow fermentation without having to resort to commercial yeast. The wines are aged in cask until bottling, but no longer than six months. If the wine isn’t bottle-ready after six months it is racked into stainless steel. Low-acid wines are racked immediately after fermentation; wines with healthy high acid may sit on the lees as long as a month. Sounds simple, doesn’t it?

“Winemaking alone cannot bring quality, it can only retain the available quality,” he says, adding: “You can, however, quickly make bad wine from good fruit if

you’re not attentive in the cellar. We try to make wine of maximal quality with minimal technology.” He knows the smallest nuances of flavor are heightened if you pick for acidity as well as ripeness. “It is the concentration of *all* the flavors of the grape, especially the mineral extract, that gives the wine its *real* taste and structure,” he says. “If you have a barrel that’s not so nice, that is the way that wine is. Standing on your head with technology will not make it better, and will strip its character.”

Dönnhoff’s wines are different texturally, and they feel different existentially; they seem to have emerged fully formed. Of course it’s my conceit to imagine so, for I know well what year-long schvitzzy work goes into them. I know a lot of you who regard these wines with an almost religious awe. I watched Helmut (and his wife Gabi) pouring at my New York DI tasting one June. A taster had his epiphany: “Wait a minute,” he said, “Are you Dönnhoff?” Helmut assented bashfully. “Omigod! We’re not worthy. We’re not worthy.” He cried, waving his arms in the hosanna gesture. I sidled up behind Helmut and winked. “Star-power.” I said. “Verrückt” (Crazy!) he replied.

It’s lonely at the top, of course, and when you’re perceived to be “Number 1” all you can do is fall. Wine writers looking for a story have been known to hasten that process—it’s hardly news when the number 1 guy made the best wines yet again. But I can’t say I see the slightest sign of this happening with Dönnhoff. No revisionism, no nitpicking for “flaws” just because someone else lauded the wines to the skies. And I think I know why. It’s because we don’t just admire these wines—we *love* them. Helmut is content to do the smallest, most elusive thing of all with his wines—to tell the simple truth.

It says something about the Riesling religion that its high priests are so **down to earth**, because great Riesling COMES DOWN TO **EARTH**. Earth and soil is the reason it is great. Welcome then, to many of the greatest soils in the world of wine, and the wry, genial and careful man who midwives them into being for us.

### Some Notes On The Vineyards:

In essence the BRÜCKE is a minerally wine; it shows a more masculine profile, it’s more fibrous and nutty than many other Nahe wines, but just at the moment you think you’re tasting everything in it, it comes at you with even more nuance, yet another facet of flavor. If new-world-oaky-creamslut wines are like basic addition and subtraction, these wines are like integral calculus—except that any ragamuffin palate (even mine!) can grok them.

NIEDERHÄUSER HERMANNSHÖLE is one of those vineyards that gives utterly miraculous wine. You shake your head in delighted perplexity that fermented grape juice can attain such flavors. It is a steep hillside, not very large (8.5 hectares), with ideal exposition and a soil whose complexity is mirrored in its wines. Walk fifty yards through the vineyard and you see a mish-mash of soils, as though this were a geological junction, an Arc de Triomphe of slate, porphyry, melaphyre and conglomerates—sometimes all jumbled together. The only possible drawback is drought in the drier years. Its favorable exposure makes Eiswein almost impossible.

Dönnhoff is currently producing the very best wines from HERMANNSHÖLE, and you need look no further to see one of the wine-world’s great confluences of a great vineyard and a great proprietor. I don’t care what a hot-shot palate you have, the complexities of these wines will tax it to its outermost limits. The fundamental aromas and flavors are a mingling of sharply sweet cherry, sometimes black cherry, and currant-cassis, but there is a hint of anise too, something spriggy, and an undertow of stoniness from the slate. Botrytis brings tropical fruit notes. I would go so far as to claim that NO SINGLE WINE IN THE ENTIRE WORLD IS AS COMPLEX AS DÖNNHOFF’S BEST FROM HERMANNSHÖLE.

**dönnhoff at a glance:**

In this humble taster's opinion, these are the greatest Rieslings on earth. No other wine, anywhere, exceeds the clarity, polish, complexity and sheer beauty of flavor of this grower's finest wines.

**how the wines taste:**

Simply, like the most perfect Riesling that can ever be.

- GDH-225 **2008 Riesling Dellchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 3/750ml** +  
 GDH-225 **2008 Riesling Hermannshöhle Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 3/750ml (+)**

NOTE; these wines will be sold in a mixed case of six, three bottles of each.

There is no Felsenberg GroGew in 08, there is only a "Spätlese Trocken." Why? "I don't want to be compelled by expectation to produce the same 'products' every year," Helmut said. "The Felsenberg is very good, but it isn't Grosses Gewächs." He picked it when it was ready instead of forcing a "profound" style by dint of overripeness alone.

Dellchen was embryonic but long, complex and oblique; smoky, mossy, with its usual *salumeria* fragrance; grilled eggplant and shiitakes; the palate is smoky, gripping, tea-like, firming into a stubborn long finish – and all this with a blissful 12.5% *alc.* Helmut and I agreed one of the genius-markers of the 08 vintage was the expressiveness and complexity available without high alcohol, which neither of us likes.

Hermannshöhle is slimmer and higher-toned, more digital and incisive, showing the *Nahe-garrigue* of this amazing vineyard; eucalyptus, nettle, spectral and minty – but these two wines will need time, will change significantly by bottling and for the first few years in bottle. My plusses will likely be too conservative.

- GDH-216 **2008 Estate Riesling** +

Clearly this wine has gotten too good. All that exotic porphyry terroir mojo, all that polish and poetry, at *this* level? The 08 is full of incense, smoke, violets; perfect balance to a perfect Riesling, period. Near the level of the stellar, but somehow friendlier, less insistent.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-17 years)

- GDH-218 **2008 Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Kabinett** +

Boy did I screw up underrating the 07 Spätlese, which has started to taste heinously good. It's descendant is this Kabinett, because Helmut sensed 08 as a Kabinett-style vintage and also wondered whether the assortment of Spätlesen had grown too broad.

Yet in a sense the particular virtues of this site are even more evident here, in the lighter-bodied form. There's a tangy fragrance I can only call *Nahe*; earth-sweet, with a hint of *quetsch* or plum-grappa; it's a serious wine, even determined, not pushy but it knows what it wants; there's ham-salt but also strawberry parfait, and there's that serenity again, at-peace-in-its-own-skin.

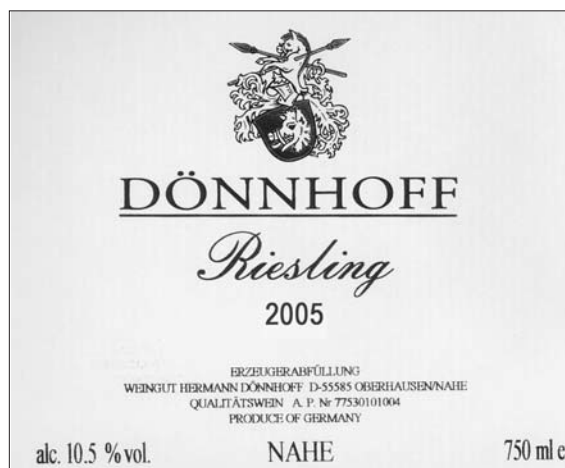
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)

- GDH-219 **2008 Oberhäuser Leistenberg Riesling Kabinett** ++

The best Leistenberg since the 2001 Auslese, and by far the best Kabinett Helmut has made. We were in deep chatter about Helmut's recent trip to South Africa when this was poured, and at one point I looked at him with eyebrows raised. "Yes?" "This is amazingly good, right?" I asked. "It is!" he replied. It has all its usual fruit but even more mineral, as if the flavor were broken down and threaded into a visible skein; ridiculous detail and length, the finest possible slate and apple and the pear's crystal-crunch.

SOS: 2 (6-22 years)

- GDH-220 **2008 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
 After the Leistenberg I expected this to be similarly silky and digital, but to my surprise it's quite feline, gentle, dear, and calm. Less animated and frisky, but by no means worse! Just more lambent, tranquil. The strawberries are ripe, the basket beckons, the sun has started to warm them. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (7-20 years)
- GDH-221 **2008 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese** **+++**  
 GDH-221M **2008 Schlossböckelheimer Kupfergrube Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5L**  
 The single greatest wine I tasted from the 2008 vintage.  
 It's a nirvana of Riesling, utterly mysterious, ethereal, shimmery, a borealis glow, a deliberate finishing dialogue...is life comic or tragic or both? Continuing into the deepest quiet night, even the crickets go to sleep, and the question goes on. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (7-25 years)
- GDH-222 **2008 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese** **++**  
 GDH-222M **2008 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5L**  
 It started out unusually open and visible (Brücke's so often an inscrutable youth)...then the palate draws itself up and then the finish seizes down; it's the first of Helmut's wines where acidity as-such plays a role – at least in this almost zygote stage. But I suspect this will be a stern, complicated wine, very likely an imposingly great wine, in its time.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GDH-223 **2008 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese** **++(+)**  
 GDH-223M **2008 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese, 6/1.5L**  
 It's filigree to a point beyond sensual or cerebral comprehension. It's hyperactively intricate! But as buzzing as it is, it too wants time to settle into its structure. But it's all here, and all silky, but neither soft nor creamy; these last wines have a bit of the serpent's tongue about them.  
 SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GDH-226H **2008 Oberhäuser Brücke Riesling Eiswein, 6/375ml** **(++)**  
 Picked in late December with 200<sup>o</sup> Oechsle (a January picking is riper and still fermenting), this has enormous potential; the balance and fruit quality look to be superb. Again, I'm erring on the side of caution but, I mean, who's made more great Eiswein the last ten years?  
 SOS: 4 (12-35 years)



Schneiders are decidedly on the move. They were promoted to three (of a possible five) “stars” in the opinion-leading Gault-Millau guide. And Jakob’s in a group of young Nahe growers that also includes Georg Rumpf. Next year, they tell me, you won’t even need to go down the steps, through the press room and down *another* flight of steps to get to the loo.

For all its famous vineyards, Niederhausen itself is strangely sleepy, the kind of town you can hear a kitchen alarm go off when your *neighbor’s* egg is finished boiling.

When Schneiders know we’re coming they put a little wreath on the door with a sign saying Welcome! They always have, and I think it’s sweet. But everything else is changing, and for the better. I remember first coming here, and tasting out of these really weensy little Pokal glasses, each of which held about a tablespoon of wine if it was filled to the brim, and you kept having to ask for re-pours and snorting like a bull just to get any smell from the wines. Today we taste from perfect Schott-Zwiesel “Riesling” tulips. And we can inhale like the cultured ladies and gentlemen we truly are, or imagine ourselves to be, fruitlessly in my own case. Young Jakob has finished a *stage* at Knoll in the Wachau. Coincidence? Two estates cut from a similar cloth in their respective hommages to the old ways. But Schneider plans to modernize- there was no other direction in which to go – and he’s a fast-talkin full-of-beans young ‘un whose best wines are ahead of him.

It could seem incongruous for this (or any) portfolio to present the likes of Dönnhoff and Schneider cheek-by-jowl, one the arch-mage of polish and poetry, the other almost rustic by comparison.

And yet it was Dönnhoff himself who urged me to stay with Schneider when I considered dropping them a few years back. It is a superb, incomparable collection of vineyards, he said, and a feet-on-the-ground relationship to them. And with the influx of the new generation, there’s reason to expect fine things to happen. All of which is true – and persuasive. But there’s another layer

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 18,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle, Klamm & Felsensteyer, Norheimer Dellchen & Kirschheck**
- **Soil types: Grey slate, porphyry, melaphyre; 52 different soil types**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 10% Pinot varieties**

of truth which isn’t easy to get at.

We all know the difference between bad wine and good, good wine and fine, fine wine and great. And we prize the splendors of great wine, as we should. Yet I am wary of the tendency to reach only for great wine. Anaïs Nin warned: “Beware of the esoteric pleasures, as they will blunt your appreciation of the normal ones.” And in the Pfalz there’s a proverb: “There is nothing better than that which is good,” and we all know the saying “The great is the enemy of the good,” and it has to do with outgrowing the insistence that only the best is good enough for moi.

And it has also to do with the circles in which one wishes to move. We all want to hang with the popular kids, but you know, after a point I don’t care what parties I’m invited to. I do care, though, about Mama-Schneider throwing her arms around me when I arrived, and pressing upon me a bottle and a card to give to my wife, and it is very good to represent all kinds of wines from all kinds of people, as long as the people are good and the wines are honest.

It’s ten years now since Papa Hans Schneider left us. Things are changing. Much more stainless steel in the cellar, in emulation of contemporary idioms. It is odd to think I am closer to Papa’s age than to the age of this fresh-faced youth. Odder still to see the winery crawl out from under its particular rock. Personally I liked the rustic 19th-century touch of a lot of the old wines. They did-



n't make wines like that anymore. And now, they don't. But progress lurches on in its blithe heedless rush.

It is indeed all changed. But Papa Hans still casts a giant shadow. I met him in May 1978 when I made my first-ever foray to the Rhineland. He'd have been in his fifties then, more vigorous but every bit as cussed and opinionated as he was to the end. When I visited just a few weeks before his death, it turned out, he only greeted me briefly before attending to a group of visitors in the next room. Every now and again we'd hear him through the wall, yammering away, worrying one of his many pet themes, and his son and I made eye-contact and exchanged knowing smiles.

This was a man made to talk. And not merely to converse, but to address, to pontificate, to perorate. He seems to have been born unable to speak except in rhetoric. What a character this was.

His property may have been the last surviving example of an estate that combined viticulture and agriculture. It seemed to have frozen in time somewhere just after the War. Other growers would speak in pure bewilderment of Schneider's antediluvian techniques: "It's like an open air museum of how wine was made fifty years ago," one grower said to me. No growers' association meeting was complete without Hans Schneider. "If I looked around and didn't see him, I'd try to leave undetected," one guy told me. "The meetings were dull without him."

The young are indeed grabbing the reins now, but there is a legacy they carry even as they change and modernize it. I wonder if we Americans can really understand such a thing. So many of our basic human contexts—senses of time, of history, of continuity, family and community—lay in tatters. And we ourselves have shredded these things so we could get at other things we imagine we want. Can we actually see someone's wines as representatives of a family **legacy**? Can we understand how wines become *members* of the family? It is sometimes obscure even for me, and I *want* to believe it.

So I think of Schneiders, and how they render their wines, those strange songs of the earth who share the house with the family. There's our world, all a-rush and full of clamor. Schneiders have a computer in the house now, and a satellite dish on their roof, and an email address. For all I know they watch more CNN than I do. I'm not into making them adorable peasants. I am just struggling to isolate a slippery little creature, that they seem fundamentally **anchored** and that we do not. And wine is part of what anchors them, or part of what they're anchored to, or perhaps these are the same thing. And so it seems strange to dissect the wines as though they had no context in human life. It can't be done.

With the 2007 vintage the estate attained a new level of quality. Young Jakob is out to make a statement, and these were the very best wines I'd ever tasted from this house. They will impress in the general way fine wines impress; you needn't know the story. The new story is the advent of a young man who's growing wiser by the month, and who will show us things we haven't seen and wouldn't have guessed.

The 08s continue the upward trend. We changed our appointment date to buy some time for Dönnhoff to get out of the hospital, which meant we were three days earlier than Jakob had planned for. "I wanted to fix the blends and show you the final product," he said. "But this way we can do it together, if you have the time and don't mind." Don't *mind*? I delight in looking "backstage" and working collegially with a vintner. It was the best of all possible outcomes.

Jakob also made the estate's first Eisweins this year, a sexy-pie Kirschheck and a potentially brain-warping Hermannshöhle. Remember, it's *Schneider*, not Dönnhoff or the (former) State Domain who owns the largest segment and oldest vines in the supernal Hermannshöhle. And *thanks* to all of you who took my word and bought the marvelous 07 Spät from Schneider; good, wasn't it?

#### schneider at a glance:

"Colorful" stories aside, these can be the most hauntingly, intricately perfumed wines I have ever tasted. They are modernizing but still a fair way from modern; great wine-y depth in the best of them.

#### how the wines taste:

This differs from site to site. The wines are less mealy and more vigorous than they once were, more contemporary now. But you'd be well advised not to even try isolating any single consistent denominator from a village with 52 different soil types (!) That said, it's clear these hail from great land.

GJS-086

#### 2008 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese Trocken

+

It'll be fascinating to contrast this with Helmut's GroGew, not to prove them "equal" but to explore the ways they're *equivalent*. Schneiders picked this the first week in November (at 92° Oechsle) and the wine is amazing, the best dry Riesling I've ever had from here. Wonderfully smoky, hyssop, salty; a juicy lush palate and as tangy and complex as a guy can stand. Complicated mélange of spices on the finish; a watershed wine of real Grand Cru stature.

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 8-12 years)

GJS-085L **2008 Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter**

You know, if you asked me “Show me a wine, Terry, one single wine that encapsulates why you do what you do,” I think I’d reach for this one.

You wouldn’t find it without *looking*, and you wouldn’t look if you merely followed the guides to the perceived-“best” estates. This astonishing wine is mostly *Niederhäuser Klamm* (a legit Grand Cru, in this case a “sponti” vinified in cask), *Norheimer Kirschheck* (strong 1er or moderate Grand Cru, in this case late-picked with a little botrytis) and *Niederhäuser Rosenheck* (a 1er Cru making slatey hearty wines), and this is like getting “Bourgogne Blanc” from a blend of Criots-Bâtard Montrachet, Meursault Perrieres and Meursault Poruzot. This 08 is old-school, woodsy and salty and less flowery than the 07; it’s full of *patisserie* but it doesn’t read “sweet,” and as always it’s far too good for its class.

SOS: 2 (now-13 years)

GJS-087 **2008 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Kabinett**

Again less frilly-sweet than the 07 – not by design, but by the 08 extract and acidity – more *San Daniele* sweet-smokiness, plus lavish wintergreen and cox-orange pippins leading to a yielding strawberry-scented finish.

SOS: 2 (3-14 years)

GJS-088 **2008 Niederhäuser Klamm Riesling Spätlese**

+

This could be an Erdener Prälat from Justen, that interplay of bergamot, cox-orange and strawberry; it sizzles with a bright attack, like a fruit sparkler going off inside your mouth; it defaults to a golden-delicious richness and then cools to mitsu-like fruit, the malic without the “sweet.” It bounces around in the mouth on the finish, in a manic dance of intricacy.

By the way, this was the first German vintner I visited after a week in Champagne. In fact we drove directly from Epernay to Niederhausen, sat down, started tasting. With the first scent of *Riesling* (in the form of a winning dry wine called “Melaphyr”) we laughed out loud. Yeah baby: Daddy’s back! I love Champagne like no one’s business, but I mean, come on? Riesling!

SOS: 2 (5-17 years)

GJS-089 **2008 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese**

+

My colleagues won’t believe me, but I’m constantly thinking how to tidy this offering and not offer too many wines. I don’t “need” two Spätleses from Schneider. On the other hand, there are *these two wines* and they are both superb. And when I think of the fucking oceans of dross throughout the wine world, millions of gallons of useless crap, and then I think of jettisoning one of these *true, valid, beautiful wines*...I can’t do it.

There are two casks; the earlier-picked had lots of botrytis, while the other, picked two weeks later, was clean. I liked them both and blended in any proportion; these were two agreeable wines determined to *get along* with each other. A 50-50 blend synergized the best of each, the linear clarity of one with the incensey 1001-nights spell of the other, and the result is (among other things) a really complex saltiness, caramel, and tea-smoke.

SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

GJS-090H **2008 Norheimer Kirschheck Riesling Eiswein, 6/375ml**

(+)

Their first! And it shows excellent potential, a sunny clean salty gingery Eiswein prototype.

SOS: 4 (13-29 years)

# weingut hexamer

## nahe • meddersheim

"I'd be lucky to have two or three more vintages like this one (2007) in my whole life," said Harald, about midway through the tasting when we started realizing we were in the presence of something remarkable. Fast-forward just one year. Is 2008 as good? It is certainly in the same *class*. In certain ways it may even be better, as Harald has begun to question whether some of his "sweet" wines had gotten too sweet. He's dialed it back with most of the 08s, and they show more forthright terroir and less frilly fruitiness. My own sense is 2008 joins the *category* of great Hexamer vintages of which 07 is perhaps first among equals. But we'll see.

Changes abound. The new tasting room is finished (and gives the kids lots of space to whoop around in) and one senses VDP membership is imminent. The estate is growing also, and this is

a not-unmixed blessing.

It's part of a general trend throughout Germany. As the marginal and unsustainable estates close up shop (due to diminishing business and/or no heirs to keep them going), the best of their vineyards are snapped up by the young and successful who can afford them. This is every good grower's dream, a bevy of top sites. But it also means a grower who liked being small is now forced into a Faustian bargain; great vineyards in return for a *different* relationship to them. It can also mean layers of personnel and more time "administering," and less time up-close. And more pressure to sell wine. That's the dirty secret. I predict a lot of ambitious young vintners will be questioning their choice to expand 5-10 years from now. I only hope the market continues to offer a livelihood to those who seek to stay little, the Willi Schaefer of the world.

Not that Harald is fretting. He's in the white-water, he has no time for existential crises. We touched on the subject and agreed some of these choices would have unforeseen consequences. But our boy's as hale as ever. So one night I did a class for the Smithsonian lecture series on regional distinctions among German Rieslings. You could have heard a pin drop, but nobody had one. I tried dropping a stapler, but people were just annoyed. So we started with a trio of Mosels to get that benchmark



Harald, Petra, and Fido Hexamer

- **Vineyard area: 17.3 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg, Schlossböckelheimer In den Felsen, Sobernheimer Marbach**
- **Soil types: Quartz, red weathered sandstone with high percentages of quartzite, conglomerates and porphyry**
- **Grape varieties: 62% Riesling, 12% Weissburgunder & Grauburgunder, 11% Spätburgunder, 3% Frühburgunder, 12% others**

in place. Then we tasted two Nahe wines, the first of them Hexamer's '04 Spätlese.

This was revelatory even to me. Harald's wines have all the attack and snap one associates with Mosel wine, so there was no surprise at first glance, but the mid-palate was suddenly flooded with another kind of *substance*, something less direct and more allusive, more exotic. Nahe wines always taste as though they were fined with bath-salts and jewels. Hexamer's wines are a vivid demonstration of the Nahe's uniqueness, precisely *because* they're so steely and pristine.

He's bought a parcel in the Grand Cru (and painfully named) Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen from a Kreuznach estate selling off vineyards. The site is virtually unknown except to Nahe-fiends; it's small (6 hectares altogether) and the soil is sandy-stony loam over sandstone and conglomerates based on rhyolite. Most important, it's the first time we've seen what Hexamer can do aside from the particular context of his Meddersheimers. This is keenly enticing, for when I consider the many tired old growers making dull wines from great sites in, say, Niederhausen, I yearn to see what a guy like Hexamer could do. Now, we begin to glean it.

The melancholy fact is that fewer and fewer 20-somethings are opting to carry on their family's wineries. This isn't entirely bad. The ones who *do* self-select; they're the real idealists, wine-lovers, and I also believe they choose the life because of the example their parents set. It stands to reason. If the family life growing up was happy and successful, the child connects the career of a vintner



Rheingrafenberg Rock at Hexamer

with good warm feelings.

But whatever my theoretical musings, Harald Hexamer is about as dear as they come. I have a little questionnaire I hand out to all my growers (the answers from which are often quoted herein) and when Hexamer sent his back he wrote "For some of these questions I could have written a book in response."

He aims to become identified with a genuinely superb vineyard which has an unfortunate name for non-Germans . . . **Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg**. (It is fine with me if you want simply to call it "the Grafenberg spot".)

This is a steep southward hillside crawling off into two lateral valleys. The soil is based on sandy loam but, this being after all the Nahe, it ends up being a complicated melange of various weathered products, slate, sandstone and other conglomerates among them. The first time I sniffed a Hexamer from this site I was immediately delighted: a true *terroir* wine. In fact we took a PICTURE of a big ol' rock from the Rhein-grafenberg Harald keeps in his tasting room. It looks like something the Mars rover might have found. If you're reading the on-line version of this text the color shot should be nearby.

These wines have been consistently impressive for their *dicht* (which translates as "density"), delineation, and charm. Think about it. How many wines exhibit all three qualities? Density usually precludes charm. Delineation often presupposes a certain transparent

lightness.

Hexamer is emblematic of the best of cutting edge thinking among quality-minded vintners. He's a vineyardist first, only thereafter a cellarmaster. "I can only attempt to optimize in the cellar what I pull from the vineyard; the quality of the grapes is decisive." He often harvests riper grapes from another site (Marbach) but the wines of Rheingrafenberg are "more filigree and better-structured." He handles as little as possible. Doesn't deacidify, doesn't use dosage. The grapes are picked exclusively by hand and fermented very cold (below 12 degrees celsius) with cooling when necessary ("but we often pick so late we bring naturally cold fruit — below 10 degrees — back to the winery.") Yields are controlled by pruning ("We often end up with only six to eight bunches per vine"). Most of the wines are whole-cluster pressed; "The most filigree wines come from this method." 95% of all Rieslings are made in stainless steel, and only racked three to six weeks after fermentation is complete. The wines are bottled early to preserve their vigor.

All quite modern, yet Hexamer's not what I'd call a modernist. Rather, he seeks the most neutral cellar-environment so as to preserve the complexities he pulls in from the mountain. He's also a fun guy to drink wine with, and shows ceaseless curiosity and omnivorous glee in all the world's wines.

Acidity has been a theme here, less for its actual extent and more for the way it behaves; Hexamer's wines are (if you like them) "brilliant" and (if you don't like them) "tart". Mind you, I don't actually know if the wines are high in acidity; they just taste that way. In fact I only ever ask to see analyses to confirm an impression or to have a starting point for dosage blends. My favorite growers hardly look at all. Dönnhoff told me last summer he never looks at analyses once the grapes are in the press. "I'll check during harvest for Oechsle and acidity, but once the press is running how can it possibly help me to know the figures? I can't *do* anything about them; all they do is cause me to worry needlessly." For better or worse — in his case, better — he trusts his palate. And he's influencing a young generation who are blessed with his encouragement to trust their wits and senses.

#### hexamer at a glance:

wines of *terroir*.

#### how the wines taste:

Anti-varietal in the best sense, the same way that Condrieu isn't merely viognier; the best from the Rheingrafenberg are wines of deep site-character as rendered by riesling. Splendidly mineral wines into which fruit of great charm is interwoven. Fresh, with exceptional purity.

#### GHX-055 2008 Schlossböckelheimer In Den Felsen Riesling Kabinett Trocken

Don't be mad if it ends up being Spätlese, because on March 9th when I was there Harald hadn't made up his mind. Nor should he have to be wrenched into our need to know *now*. The wine itself was unfinished but it was certainly the juiciest and most exotic of the 08 Trocken series. It may yet be deacidified (Harald's another who used to say he'd never do it, until he had to do it. I'm not gloating, just extolling the virtues of flexibility and pragmatism.) and will certainly see some *dosage* to the limit of "Trocken," but I love that salinity and fine *terroir* expression.

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again 8-11 years)

- GHX-053 **2008 Estate Riesling**  
(In fact a Feinherb blend of various sites near the winery) It's an uncapitalized "QbA" and designed as a table wine when the Quartzit is too sweet. The wine is firm, fragrant, classy Riesling. You need to tolerate a noticeable acidity, but this may change between now and bottling.  
SOS: 1 (now-9 years)
- GHX-044 **2007 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit"**  
GHX-054 **2008 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit"** +  
CORE-LIST WINE, because it's an amazing value and because it makes a wonderful terroir statement; it's a single-parcel bottling from a side-valley in the Rheingrafenberg that sits on quartzite instead of the usual conglomerates. This is almost always Spätlese quality, and if you've liked this wine before (as sales say you have) then yer gonna *love* the living hell out of this. All the mirabelle and candied lemon of 2007 and with a fine powdery minerality.  
SOS: 2 (3-15 years)
2008. I *love* it when it's this good! More green aromas (in the aloe-vera sense, and the palate overall is in the tart-apple, fibrous and tangy idiom, but it's markedly long in both its fruit and mineral; the 08-thing has really catapulted this to a 2nd-dimension of length and complexity.  
SOS: 2 (4-16 years)
- GHX-056 **2008 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
Back to fruit – and *what* fruit. A *sponti*, thus a little rounder than the cultured-yeast fermented Quartzit, but this recalls most of all a Dönnhoff Leistenberg in its multi-apple mirabelle fruity-salty tang; it's less chewy than Quartzit, and seems to glissando across the palate.  
SOS: 2 (5-16 years)
- GHX-057 **2008 Monzinger Frühlingsplätzchen Riesling Spätlese** +  
I think whenever Harald's looking at buying a new vineyard his first question is "Is it multisyllabic with many impossible umlauts?" In any case, here's his first wine from this great site made famous by Schönleber and more recently by Tim Frölich. Fortunate consumers will appreciate access to a trifecta-o-Frühlingsplätzchens. I just know you will.
- The wine *rocks*. 40-year-old vines, it has that Bellota-ham ripe earthy saltiness; plum-blossomy fragrance; zippy but substantive with wonderfully moderate RS; full of vigor, rippling with energy; transparent, lavish and yet precise.  
SOS: 2 (7-23 years)
- GHX-058 **2008 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese\*** ++  
As good a wine as has ever been made here; solid, explosive, and as coiled as a cobra; vanilla, apple, mirabelle, mineral; the sweet-acid balance is glorious; extroverted and major-key, hyperactively vigorous Riesling!  
SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GHX-059 **2008 Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling Spätlese\*\*** ++  
This is from the *Eisendell* parcel, and it's as explosively out-of-the-gate as the 1-star but with more mass and richness (and sweetness) and this salty-gingery elixir of concentrated cox-orange fruit; 2008 at its very best.
- By the way, some context. There was a Spätlese from Schlossböckelheim, along with a 3-star Rheingrafenberg, plus an Auslese plus I think three Eisweins. I do have some *self-discipline*!  
SOS: 3

# kruger-rumpf

## nahe • münster sarmsheim

Something's sure up at this winery. Maybe it's because his children are growing up and helping out (kids have a way of giving their dads a kick in the pants, don't they . . .), and maybe it's just simple ambitiousness, but there's no doubt Stefan Rumpf has taken a significant step forward in each of the last three vintages. I'm just guessing here, but I intuit a subtle kind of competition between Stefan and son Georg. Dad has an audience now, and he wants to show off a little, to earn the boy's respect. I saw them spur each other on while we were tasting, and felt the frisky new energy.

It's also worth pointing out the wines are improving in matters of texture, of polish and gloss and a finer mouthfeel. Fruit was always there, but the *tones* have improved. In fact everything is improved yet the prices have stayed the same. Hmmm. . . .

It used to be quite the decathlon tasting the young vintage here, but Stefan showed me his '08s in nearly-finished form, and the vintage was far less bracing and phenolic than any of its predecessors. We were done remarkably fast (my rough notes from the cask-samples used to look like an engineer's diagram for a cyclotron) and we used much less dosage.

I do think a small tribute is in order for his geniality. Many producers, especially young studs in their twenties, can be quite the divas. "I make the wines I like and he takes them or leaves them" is a typical sentiment. And it's reasonable enough on its face; it only locks a door whereby collegial interaction might benefit grower and buyer alike. But hey, I understand, having been an insufferable twit in my twenties, and I didn't have to deal with boffo reviews before I was old enough to handle them gracefully. All of which is to say that Stefan Rumpf's collegiality is becoming rare, which makes its underlying gesture of respect and friendliness even more precious. I am also delighted to see their willingness to still use *dosage* as a means of fine-tuning, which is part of a larger willingness to eschew dogma and surf all possible options according to the needs of the wine. I'd like to hire a plane and fly a banner over the Mainzer



Stefan & Georg Rumpf

Weinbörse —  
**DOSAGE IS NOT EVIL, BUT DOGMA IS.** A good dosage from top-site Riesling, used to fine-tune just before bottling, nearly always works better—which is to

- **Vineyard area: 20 hectares**
- **Annual production: 11,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Münsterer Dautenpflänzer, Pittersberg & Rheinberg, Dorsheimer Goldloch, Binger Scharlachberg (Rheinhessen)**
- **Soil types: Grey and red slate, quarzite, loess**
- **Grape varieties: 65% Riesling, 5% Scheurebe; the rest mostly Weissburgunder, Grauburgunder & Spätburgunder**

say *tastes* better—than throwing in a BA or other sweet wine, which often muddies the waters. This is out of tune with the *Zeitgeist* but the *zeitgeist* is full of shit. Buncha smug young twits with their holier-than-thou posturing and their purity tests. . . .

Back to more congenial subjects; Stefan's latest lil' plaything is three-fourths of a hectare in the Binger Scharlachberg; yes, our hero is making RHEINHESSEN WINES. "We had to take everything out and replant with Riesling." I wondered what had been planted in such an obvious Riesling site. Albalonga! Perhaps this is why the wines of the former proprietor (who shall remain nameless) tasted so much like cherries. 5% of Albalonga with its high acid could marry quite well with an overcropped Riesling—give that thin little sucka some aroma. Don't think such things aren't done.

As a vintner, Stefan is as practical as they come. Ask him how he does things and he often answers, "It depends." Two fairly consistent practices are early racking and early bottling, but for the rest he lets the wine do the talking. "You can't improve wine in the cellar, only make it worse," he says. "At least ninety percent of the quality of a wine comes from the raw material you harvest." He sees himself as a craftsman, a worker, whose goal is to make clean, varietally typical wine that expresses its origins in the soil.

## A PROFILE OF THE SITES:

**Dautenpflänzer** is one the leading Grand Crus of the lower Nahe, with a typical mélange of soil types within its borders. Rumpf claims some of it is slatey and some of it is “sandy loam,” which agrees more with the standard references. It is in any case singular and immediately significant, giving a sometimes damnably complex set of aromas and flavors including coconut, violet, soursop, leaf-smoke – it is a very long list even if you’re sober. In any case it belongs with the vamping exotics of the Nahe.

**Pittersberg** is the other of the top Crus, and this site is more classic and less mischievous than its neighbor. Stefan refers only to “slate” and very often the wine smells just like Mosel wine – in fact just like Graacher Himmelreich. “In parts dusty loam over slate,” according to the textbook. Pittersberg is related to the Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, which is just over the Rhine less than two miles north, though without the Taunus-quartzite of the Rheingau site. Diel’s great Pittermännchen is also on slate; I’m sure the similar names are not coincidence. Pittersberg gives firm, nutty Rieslings.

**Rheinberg** is the steepest of the three, on weathered quartzite and dusty loam – “similar to Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck,” according to Stefan. It’s flavors are indeed virtually identical, though the Nahe wine has a grace and curvaciousness the more stoic Rheingauer lacks. Sweet apples and yellow fruits are paramount here, though the minerally terroir notes give a firm foundation. These are wines of true charm, not merely winning ways. I’d categorize it as a 1er Cru.

**Scharlachberg** is a Grand Cru, but in fact a Rheinhessen Grand Cru, as it sits across the (mighty!) Nahe from Münster-Sarmsheim; it’s a serious prow of hillside acting as a kind of warm-up to the Rüdesheimer Berg just to its north over the Rhine – though on a radically different soil; a mélange of rotliegend and various volcanic derivatives (e.g., porphyry). The wines are, or can be, superb, seeming to mingle the succulence of Hipping or Pettenthal with the exotics of Felsenberg or Dautenpflänzer.

### kruger-rumpf at a glance:

Up-and-comer the past few years, making more glamorous wines than ever before. Deft, appley and minerally wines from the greatest sites of the lower Nahe. Priced quite reasonably for blue-chip quality.

### how the wines taste:

They’re as sturdy as before but there’s more flesh on the bones. There’s more mineral density, more complexity of texture, and they are invariably site-specific: The PITTERSBERGS are still nutty and slatey, the DAUTENPFLÄNZERS are still complex and multi-faceted, with all the intricacies of real Grand Cru style, but the fabric is finer now. You know the hoary old truism about Nahe wines being a cross between Mosel and Rheingau? When you taste these you’ll see the truth behind the cliché.

#### GKF-136L **2008 Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

*Pssst!* (This is actually Münsterer Rheinberg Spätlese Feinherb! Don’t say I told you....) It has an exotic note, like plum-blossom and esoteric herbs, elderflowers and hyssop; the palate is tangy, heirloom-apples aplenty, vigorous with the 08 crunchiness and substance; again a fine value from a site that’s reportedly on the list to become a Grosses Gewächs.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-12 years)

#### GKF-137 **2008 Scheurebe Trocken**

Another exotic. If this came from some little undiscovered ratty scrubby corner of Italy, you’d buy it with the first sniff. “Wow, that’s got some character!” Embrace the umlaut, man! This has everything you want from a frisky, pupil-dilating rama-lama dry white. SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-8 years)

#### GKF-140 **2008 Scharlachberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 6/750ml** **+**

Stefan and Georg had a fine collection of dry Rieslings, but 08 seems to have sprinkled fairy-dust on Bingen – there was a basic “Binger Riesling” that was lovely too – but this was the fruitiest among them, almost absurdly exotic and flowery. “When we first tasted it I thought I’d put the wrong label on the tank; it had to be Scheurebe,” said Georg. It’s indeed a kind of *freaked-out* wine, the way Scheu can be, not just extroverted but like its id was sprung loose. A fanfare, an eager euphoric yet dry Riesling.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again from 9-14 years)

#### GKF-138 **2008 Scheurebe Kabinett** **+**

Quite expressive and more angular than Rumpf’s Scheu’s usually are; very late picked (end of October), a cymbal-crash of sage and cassis; goes into a visceral crescendo on the palate and then again into a ridiculously swollen finish; it enters like a stock, grows into a *demi-glace* and finishes like a *glace-du-viande*.

SOS: 2 (now-7 years)

- GKF-128 **2007 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 GKF-139 **2008 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. Because this is the very essence of what German Riesling is.

2007 is the best vintage yet, with the incredible fruit-solidity of the vintage, utter quartzite “yellow” flavors and a whole second wave of this salty elixir that completes the seduction—you *can’t* resist it, and if you can, I’ll bet you’re the kind of person jokes have to be explained to.

SOS: 2 (5-18 years)

The 08 is equally superb but also unusual; it’s drier and even more apple-y, and with 08’s mineral core it’s more fibrous, more apple-skin; streamlined and tasty and *interesting*. We’ll get to it when the 07’s sold out.

SOS: 2 (4-16 years)

- GKF-142 **2008 Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. By now this wonderful wine is firmly established, both stylistically and commercially. If you want Grand Cru Riesling that’s consistently fascinating, complex and delicious, this is the surest of sure things. The 08 shows incense, tropical fruit, burning-leaf. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)

- GKF-144 **2008 Binger Scharlachberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 We *lowered* the sweetness and sacrificed a teeny bit of fruit for a whole *slew* of terroir; now you really see the Rotliegend, it could be Klammer or Hipping, the peach and prosciutto, and the 08-effect of showering a lavish rain of rock-dust over the palate.  
 SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

- GKF-143 **2008 Münsterer Pittersberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 Wonderful aroma of guava, walnuts and balsam; these are 56-year vines, and this is one of the great wines Kruger-Rumpf has made, an apotheosis of apple-cellar, even a little mossy – it’s a wine not only of flavor but of memory and reflection, with all that deeply embedded fruit and soft stoniness. Remarkable, beautiful Riesling.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-24 years)

(BY THE WAY: if anyone wants a wine no one else in your market would have, there’s a Kabinett from the Kapellenberg that makes you wish you were a dog and could lap it from a bucket, that’s how *dee-lish* it is. . . .)

## **A DUO OF MATURE RIESLINGS IN SMALL QUANTITIES**

- GKF-145 **1998 Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 (A Kabinett by today’s standards; smoky, tangy, vanilla-bean)
- GKF-146 **1997 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 (Offered before, final 20 cases; this remains wonderful, suave, licorice-y, murmury grown-up smoky Riesling)

# schlossgut diel

nahe • burg layen

Caroline Diel is settling in. She showed me the wines with Dad at her side, and seemed a little miffed when I was distracted by a side-chat with Armin about VDP politics. Caroline also told me, with a not-quite-concealed sigh, that she hadn't done much traveling of late. But even more she positively lit up talking about the vineyards, which she's "getting to know" (and she has the schmutzy vineyard boots on her feet to prove it), and it's always fun to see a woman as charismatic

and lovely as Caroline come clomping into the tasting room in her mud-caked footwear. I think her boots should attain iconic status, like Marc Veyrat's hat. That's what I think. The big news of course is that Schlossgut Diel is officially *THE BEST WINERY ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH*. This is indeed official; you can look it up. In the new Parker Buyer's Guide, there's a scale of up to five stars, with five going to the greatest-of-the-great; you know who they are. But Diel? **SIX** stars baby! The only estate with six. Better than Le Pin, better than Krug, better than Egon Müller, Gaja, Screagle, you name 'em. They cower miserably, all those measly "5-star" estates, damned with faint praise in a 6-star world.

I'm certain this was Caroline's doing. Armin just couldn't break the 5-star ceiling, but his daughter has. I am actually very proud of Caroline, as if I had any right to be.

She's a very rare and special person; intelligent, disarmingly charming and friendly, the kind of person who could have done anything, anywhere, and lived a life of "glamour." She chose instead to continue the winery. That takes some heart, baby! Caroline is my hero, and no wonder Armin is humming.

I don't deal in a prioris, and I'm a lousy tactician. I never sat down and said "I will make a specialty of catching the rising stars before anyone knows them," yet in many cases this is what I've done. Dönnhoff, Hexamer, Rumpf, Weingart, Catoir, Meßmer, Leitz, Spreitzer, Christoffel, Schaefer, Adam, Karlsmühle; all were relatively "obscure" when I began importing their wines, and all are Big Names now. This is satisfying because I share-at least a tiny part-in the achievement.

Thus my representing Schlossgut Diel constitutes a departure, and will ramify in unpredictable ways. For it's rare for a superstar-estate to enter this portfolio with its reputation already established.

The first thing to tell you is: the wines are stellar. That's not a word I casually throw around. Schlossgut Diel belongs in the class of the elite. The wines will wow you.

Armin occupies an unprecedented position in the wine world. He is proprietor of his estate on the Nahe, and he is perhaps the most influential wine writer in Germany. Imagine if Bob Parker owned one of the 1st-Growth Bordeaux: just like that. Needless to say neither Armin nor his colleagues writing for the same books or



Armin Diel

- **Vineyard Area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual Production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top Sites: Dorsheimer Goldloch, Pittermännchen and Burgberg**
- **Soil Types: loam and gravel over rocky subsoil, quartzite and slate**
- **Grape Varieties: 65% Riesling, 20% Grauburgunder, 10% Spätburgunder, 5% Weissburgunder**

magazines review the wines of Schlossgut Diel, which is why the name doesn't appear on the various lists of estate "classifications." But of course there's a meta-message: "The man is such an expert, imagine how good his own wines must be." The ethics of the situation are quite sophisticated to American sensibilities, yet behind it all are the wines themselves.

The Rieslings hail most importantly from a trio of contiguous Grand Crus: Goldloch on thin loam and gravel over a rocky subsoil, Burgberg on quartzite, and Pittermännchen on Hunsrück slate. "The age of the vines are similar in the three sites, the microclimates are similar in the three sites, only a few meters separate them from one another, yet they are entirely different based on terroir," say Armin and his cellar-master Christoph Friedrich. These two have an admirably close working relationship.

Indeed it's a pleasure to see the penetration and flexibility of their mutual intelligence. Of course we rapped about the usual wine stuff, but at one point Armin interrupted to say "We do this and we do that, but most important is that all indications are in question every year, there is no monolithic recipe to 'make' wines year by year. Each vintage asks different questions than the previous one. I'm really thrilled to have a sensible guy like Christoph who can play in both major and minor keys." Quite so. In effect there is very little in the "hard" viti-and-viniculture data that stands out from the norm among top estates; what does stand out is a certain deftness of intuition, the thing whereby a pastry-chef alters the puff-pastry prep depending on the humidity. It isn't even a matter of responding to conditions: that's an I-thou thing. It's more that one lives at ease within conditions, moving naturally as they mandate.

There's a great German word "Betriebsblind" which is one of those neologisms you need an entire phrase to translate into English. In essence it denotes the tunnel-vision that results from being too close to your own

wines. Armin describes it as “sadly the rule” in the wine profession. Yet he of all people can escape it, he tastes so many wines constantly, and I sense the air is bright and clear with perspective at his estate. The wines are both beautiful and *smart*. You might notice I never use the

phrase “well-made;” it’s eyewash, it means nothing, but in a larger sense Armin and Christoph’s wines are well-guided by their perspective and intuition. It’s true across the board, even among the wines I did not select.

### **schlossgut diel at a glance:**

viticulture and intelligent craftsmanship in the cellar make this one of Germany’s leading estates.

### **how the wines taste:**

The temptation is to compare them to Dönnhoff, he-to-whom-all-riesling-producers-aspire and all that, but I think Diel’s wines are too different to tolerate direct comparison. Armin’s and Christoph’s wines are more studiously brilliant, more explicit; they’re no less pure, but it’s another kind of purity. I’m tempted to wonder whether Diel’s are the Nahe wines Hans-Günter Schwarz might have made had he not made Pfalz wines.

I published a piece in *WORLD OF FINE WINE* on the subject of evanescence and the unsayable, and it deals in part with a comparison of Diel’s and Dönnhoff’s wines, not to determine which is “better” but rather to try and explicate their disparate existential lives. In short, Diel’s wines “add up” and Dönnhoff’s do not. In the five vintages I have tasted in their entirety at Diel, I’ve never seen a wine askew. Please don’t misunderstand; I am not saying the wines are too perfect to have soul. They have plenty of soul. But it’s a kind of soul that has its shirt tucked-in, and the shoes match the purse. They are visible and depictable. With Dönnhoff there is always something para-sensual that resists compressing into language. Not everyone loves this quality, just as many people prefer baroque and classical-period music to that of the impressionists, with their greater tonal ambiguity. I’m fascinated by the differences between these two types of wine, and relieved I don’t have to choose only one.

### **ESTATE DRY WINES**

- GSD-078 **2008 Diel de Diel** +  
A multi-varietal blend whose goal is to offer a yummy dry wine that’s reasonably priced. The 08 is a real beauty that unites the dark aromas of Pinot Gris to a clear smiling fruit from Pinot Blanc and Riesling; there’s a sweet leesiness, an air-kiss of wood, and an almost Semillon-like fig and guava. A smartly *crafted* wine.  
SOS: 0 (now-7 years)
- GSD-079 **2008 Rosé de Diel**  
Again *stylish* is the word here. Though it had just been bottled, it was smartly turned out and full of fruit, not as opulent as the 06 had been but silkier, along lines of the elegant 07. This is all Pinot Noir and not conceived as a “picnic” wine unless you provisioned at Fauchon. It seeks to be world-class, and succeeds.  
SOS: 0 (1-6 years)
- GSD-089 **2007 “Caroline,” 6/750ml**  
This has to be the most sophisticated Pinot Noir in Germany, and it stands comparison with the Burgundies Armin so appreciates; so silky and blackberried and violet; this 07 is soft but not unstructured, and its perfume is intoxicating; spicy and expressive but elegant and contained, *just enough* vamp and tra-la, smart use of oak; crusty, “blackened” finish which lingers determinedly considering the sleek mouth-feel.

### **DRY RIESLINGS:**

*These were less flattering as a group than the 07s or 06s had been, but I was there earlier and the vintage was later, and 08 has its acids with which to contend. I’m underrating them, and expect to be justly chastened when the wines are bottled and ready.*

- GSD-080 **2008 Eierfels Riesling**  
This is actually a section of Goldloch, and very close to GroGew quality; here’s a fruity substance blanketing the stones, though this is an adamantly rock-drenched wine for Goldloch, normally so baroque. The wine’s like a sexy philosophy professor. And who doesn’t like *them*?  
SOS: 0 (up to 2 years, again from 9-14 years)
- GSD-081 **2008 Burgberg Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml**  
GSD-081 **2008 Goldloch Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml**  
GSD-081 **2008 Pittermännchen Riesling Grosses Gewächs, 2/750ml** (+++)  
(+)  
To be sold in a mixed case of six, two bottles each. What I saw were pre-filtered and mostly impossible to describe except in very general terms. *Burgberg* is the Paterfamilia, “old Rocky.” *Goldloch* is an eruption of fruit and smokiness, with unprecedented gravitas of terroir. *Pittermännchen* is esoterically terroiré, and though lean and fennely it’s also thickly extracted.

# WINES WHICH ARE NOT DRY!

- GSD-082 **2008 Burg Layen Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Feinherb styling. Euphoric fragrance of mirabelles, slate, apples. This is another of those wines where, if you asked an angel to give you "A perfect white wine for food," she'd blush shyly and put a single glowing bottle in your hands. "This is what you asked for," she whispers, and flutters away.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (3-16 years)
- GSD-084 **2008 Pittermännchen Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Absurdly licorice-y and sassafrassy and granny-smith; it's a kite shaped like a green apple and blown aloft by a stiff cold wind; the finish even at this early stage is searchingly complex. I'd forgotten such wines existed, with this ultraviolet lightness.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-17 years)
- GSD-083 **2008 Goldloch Riesling Kabinett** +  
 As expected, more exotic, richer fruit, more sensuality and seductiveness; more *mojo* and easier to 'see' and to like. But! Excellent as this is – and it is – my dumb-ass self is just in love with Pittermännchen.  
 SOS: 2 (5-18 years)
- GSD-068 **2007 Burgberg Riesling Kabinett** ++  
 An astonishing wine! Apples and herbs and sweet grasses and flint; this has it all, wry and grinning and fleshy and fibrous and vaporous and long; a *panna cotta* of violets and stones; a salty acid-driven finish; Riesling as rendered by a crazed and loony Muscat. Serious joy!  
 SOS: 2 (6-24 years)
- GSD-086 **2008 Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 One of 2008's miracles. It adds a glow of fruit and richness to the Kabinett, with an exquisite hint of cask; wonderfully long, fruit-driven finish – the 75 Ausleses were like this – spicy, apple-skin texture yet with this thick lime-parfait richness in the middle. This is Riesling nobility.  
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)
- GSD-071 **2007 Scheurebe Spätlese** ++  
 We'll run through all of this 2007 before we ship any of the 2008. What a pity one of Germany's truly great Scheus is only available in homeopathic quantities! Better than none at all, I guess, and this is one *grrrrrowwwlll-hisssssssssssss!* Scheu kitty; sage and cassis, ramps and slightly burned leek or spring-onion; the palate is an incantation of wisteria and lilacs; the inner perfume *occupies* your palate and probably soaks into the hypothalamus; writing and rippling and digging its nails into your back, this Scheu draws blood.  
 SOS: 2 (now-15 years)
- GSD-085 **2008 Scheurebe Spätlese** +  
 Really, this has become one of the few best Scheus in all of Germany. This 08 is a wickedly cassis-y Scheu, precise, perverse and dangerous, with little cat-fangs of Scheu bite. A Roman orgy of spiciness. So drop your toga and *git DOWN*.  
 SOS: 2 (now-13 years)
- GSD-038 **2005 Dorsheimer Burgberg Riesling Auslese** +++  
 I reserved the last 20 cases of this staggering masterpiece from the supernal 2005 vintage. All three of the Auslesen were wonderful but this one had that tiny extra dimension which induced a kind of swoon; fragrances of iris and blown-out-candle and moonglow pear; length enough to defy credulity, and a riveting dialogue between stones and honey. If you missed it then, don't miss it again. This is Riesling not merely aristocratic, but divine.  
 SOS: 3 (15-45 years)

# THE "TEN-YEARS-AFTER" SERIES

- GSD-087 **1999 Pittermännchen Riesling Spätlese**  
*Just 15 cases; vintage-typical beeswax aromas; fine, filigree palate, smoky, open and agreeable; just entering its 2nd-stage.*
- GSD-088 **1999 Burgberg Riesling Spätlese**  
*More mineral and more grip, spiel and dialogue; exotic, satisfying. A whopping 25 cases of this.*
- GSD-076 **1998 Goldloch Riesling Auslese (+)** is a little drier; smoky and juicy with the prosciutto savor-sweetness; seductive and yummy. 10 CASES ONLY
- GSD-077 **1998 Burgberg Riesling Auslese (++)** this is so wonderfully angular and wry, sweet stones against perfect botrytis, one of those why-we-love-Riesling Rieslings. 10 CASES ONLY

rh ein hga u

# rheingau wines



Recently Jancis Robinson included the Rheingau in a group of regions which had become “less interesting” since the last edition of Hugh Johnson’s *Wine Atlas*. They say by the time Hollywood picks up on a trend it’s already passé. Similarly perhaps, by the time an idea gains general currency in the wine-world it’s already growing outdated. No disrespect to the wonderful Ms. Robinson, who’s one of the Greats of our time! But when I first wrote about the Rheingau’s malaise it was, what 1985? And now, finally, there are the first little stirs and twitters heralding, dare one hope, a comeback.

What an irony. There’s almost no call any more for “Rheingau” as a commodity. It took a generation of indifferent and downright crummy wines from most of the erstwhile Great names of the region to throttle its reputation to death. I find I have to defend my selections, of which I am as proud and happy as I am with all my offerings. And some of the Great Names are staging a comeback! Schloss Johannisberg is said to be much improved. Von Simmern’s getting there. We have quite

a way to go still, but one can no longer simply write-off the Rheingau.

**Though things are discernibly better now, there’s still distressingly little buzz about the region.**

The tragic suicide of Erwein Matuschka-Greifenclo (erstwhile proprietor of Vollrads) was, perhaps, a wake-up call. Something needed to change, and designer bottles were not the answer. The emperor had

been naked long enough. A certain prevailing hauteur may have prevented the truth from being heard. But the financial ruin of a 600-year old business could no longer be ignored, and a regional epidemic of denial was drawing to a close. Now, we may hope, the idealists will no longer be suffocated. Or so we may hope!

We still gotta do something about those prices. I’m just not sure what. Perhaps Mr. Leitz will consent to being cloned. There’s an historic precedent for Rheingau wines to price themselves, *ahem* “aristocratically,” which might have been justified thirty years ago but which has





*Early Spring at the Rudesheim Schlossberg*

zero bearing on their real value or cost of production vis-à-vis other German wines. Of all the habits that die hard, greed must surely die hardest.

Though things are discernibly better now, there's still distressingly little buzz about the region. The Rheingau feels rigid if not fossilized. There is still no shortage of fussy polemicizing on behalf of some rusty, encrusted *concept* of the sacred Rheingau, not as a paradigm but almost a freemasonry whose runes and arcana need to be protected, lest the whole region lose its sacrosanct air. One hopes, wistfully, for a day when no more energy need be expended in Hegelian debates over what constitutes a "true" Rheingau wine, as though such a thing could be defined by its chemical analysis! Perhaps, dare one hope, we might return to some innocent *sense* of wine?

One does wish for a little more spirit of *fun* here. I get the impression when Leitz, Spreitzers and my gang are whooping it up, our laughter can be heard from Rüdesheim to Eltville.

But when a man like Leitz shows a vintage, it offers an itchy tantalizing glimpse of the Rheingau's real potential. And then you remember what a uniquely blessed piece of earth this is.

In a space one can traverse by car in fifteen minutes, the Riesling grape gives ten or fifteen distinct and different expressions of its best, noblest self. Obviously I love the Nahe and the Mosel, but the truth is there's no equivalent-sized area in either region whose wines are as fascinatingly *different* from one another's as Rauenthal's are from Winkel's, as Erbach's are from Hallgarten's—all of

them. Taste *any* of these as they should be, and you'll see Riesling at its most—it must be said—aristocratic; its most refined and impeccable. The "classic" wine of the Rheingau can possibly best be defined by what it is *not*: not as lavish or exotic as Pfalz wine, not as easy and fruity as Rheinhessen wine, not as delicate and tangy as Nahe wine. It is firm, contained, dignified; it is amiable, certainly, but it's not eager to please.

As such I begin to suspect that the old preeminence of Rheingau Riesling was a product of a very different time than the present. The virtues of its wines are such as to be admired by educated ladies and gentlemen in an age of leisure. They are wines for "experts" who taste attentively. No dripping wet rock & roll hyper-erotic sybarites need apply. Ah but I overstate. Still, do words like *polished*, *impeccable*, *aristocratic* sell any wines these days? Now that so many Bordeaux have abandoned such virtues in favor of inky sweet fruit-blasts that get them *big*

## **The classic wine of the Rheingau is firm, contained, dignified.**

*scores*? I wonder. Hugh Johnson writes that he's less interested in wines that MAKE STATEMENTS than in wines which ask questions. But I fear the problem is even more pernicious. So many wines shriek at us like Discount-Louie the *cheapest guy in town!*—that a wine content to merely make a "statement" seems almost bashful.

I do have faith that a small market will endure for

mystically intricate wines. And I'm quite sure there will always be a clamor for big-ass bruisers. But what of the ones in the middle?

We're looking at the beginnings of a renaissance now, thanks to one Johannes Leitz, and it heartens me to see you embrace the wonderful wines of a manifestly Good Guy.

The Rheingau wines I offer you aren't merely honor-

able, they are EXEMPLARY. And they are worth the prices asked for them, and much as I join you in snubbing our noses at all those butt-heads who disgraced the region, we shouldn't punish the good and honorable for the sins of the lousy and dishonorable. *These* growers, at least, deserve your support.

*"The vine is cultivated with loving care . . . and what the Riesling gives in return is beyond praise." A shrine in the vineyards, near Erbach, in the Rheingau.*



In the candid daylight of the tasting room, I see the first few gray hairs peppering the temples of my friend Johannes. He wasn't much more than a boy when I met him. Riding around the courtyard on a cute little tricycle. . . .

Maybe the 2008 harvest hastened the arrival of those gray hairs. The results were marvelous, but it took some work, much more selecting, two passes through every site, sometimes more. These things happen when you receive high praise, and Johannes' 07 Berg Roseneck Spät was anointed the best Spätlese of the vintage by *Gault-Millau*, who gave it 97 "points," which is equivalent to 106 "points" from RP. Wow, best-of-the-vintage. Once the glow wears off, you have

this ominous feeling of having something to live up to. Next year it's only news if you don't place first.

08 is a somewhat different Leitz vintage, a vintage you'll like if you're into acidity, and a vintage you'll like *again* if you'd been thinking his wines were getting maybe too opulent. It's also different because Johannes has a new facility and press-house, and the logistics allow him to make the wines he actually *wants*. So they are finer, more detailed and starched.

Do I even need to write a profile on Leitz for you any more? He's here all the time; y'all know him as well as I do! Ah, but you didn't know him back in 1990 when I first paid a visit to a baby-faced young man with all of 5 hectares to his name. Who could imagine what would ensue in the last 15 years?

He's up to a whopping 26 hectares, in large part in order to supply us with enough "Dragonstone," but also because success accrues to success and good growers often find access to good land. Johannes has secured parcels in two fascinating sites hovering just above Rüdesheim as well as the Erbslöh estate in Geisenheim, with its scarcely known Grand Crus. If he obtains any more important land, he oughta split the estate in two and put one of those passionate young Rheinhessen guys in charge of part of it, just to shake things up.

I must say I like best of all to see him there, at home, lord-of-the-manor, because being an international-wine-guy can obscure some of what gets you there — any clod can climb on a plane — and what got Johannes Leitz

- **Vineyard area: 26 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg, Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland and Berg Kaisersteinfels**
- **Soil types: Weathered gray and red slates, sandy loam and loess, chalk and quartzite**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

there was connectedness to his land and honesty in his winery.

A Rheingauer making wines this stellar could easily ask double these prices. Could drib-and-drab them out in crumbs to make them seem more precious. Could sit in his ivory tower waiting for the world to beat a path to his door. My friend Johannes has the biggest heart I think I have ever seen. He supplies me as a friend and encourages a companionable partnership to which every other business relationship should aspire.

His father had passed away when Johannes was a year old, and his mother resolutely maintained the winery until Johannes was old enough to hand it over to. He accelerated his studies by doing the basic courses at Eltville rather than the grand chi-chi at Geisenheim. He got home in the nick of time. The winery had survived, but barely. And it was frozen in time 18 years earlier. Johannes would need to invest, soon, a lot. He was determined to make great wine.

He's a man with a passion for **aroma**. "I almost prefer inhaling to actual tasting," he says. "I can't really love a wine regardless of how it tastes if it doesn't excite me on the nose. I want my own wines to seem more fragrant than the norm, fruitier and more harmonious. They should simply be *better*!" Leitz insists that "Wine grows in the vineyard; it isn't made in the cellar. There's no question that different soils give different flavors. Anyone who tastes a Berg Schlossberg, with its high proportion of slate, alongside a Bischofsberg, will taste the importance of soil in a hurry!"



Johannes Leitz

"I work very clean," he says, echoing the *one* refrain you hear in every good estate. "My friends call me finicky about cleanliness," he continues. "I also try to disturb the wine as little as possible, pumping for instance." On the subject of Trocken wine, Johannes can speak with authority, having earned the right by making many of the *greatest* dry German wines I have ever tasted. "I'm of the opinion that during the dry wave a lot of wines were made dry that weren't in any way suited for dry wine. You really need a certain kind of base wine to make a good Trocken. If you're honest about it, there's probably no more than, say, thirty percent of any cellar that fits. The rest would be better with a few grams or more of sweetness." He also practices what he preaches, which takes unusual courage in the topsy-turvy modern German wine market.

You have been buying these wines with great vim,

and this is a good thing! It's all rather giddy but you know, it makes me happy. Because Johannes Leitz has it all. He's a perfect expression of my holy trinity of value: soil, family, artisanality. His connection to his vines is a priori and intimate. His scale permits – *relishes* – a degree and type of attention any industrial wine producer (and many other artisans) would think insane. He's close to every part of it; the wine he drinks with you in your restaurant, having fun (and studying your response, believe me!), is the wine he nurtured *himself*, from pruning to binding to trimming to canopy-thinning to green-harvesting to selective multiple hand-harvesting to inspecting the fruit to fermenting in individual small lots to monitoring to aging on the lees to tasting again and again to determine the best moment for bottling, and finally . . . to doing it all again.

#### leitz at a glance:

Universally regarded as one of the three stars of the new generation of Rheingauers (with Künstler and Weil). Extraordinarily aromatic, vigorous wines from a vintner who grows more commanding each vintage.

#### how the wines taste:

His wines are like he himself is, a mixture of serious and playful, finesse and earthiness, open and robust but also earnest and commanding. They have the lusty vitality of wines that were never racked; he bottles them off the gross lees from the casks in which they fermented. "A lot of people talk about 'yeast-contact' but I think I'm the only one who actually does it." And it's not your garden-variety leesiness either. Leitz's lees express somehow sweetly, like semolina. I drank the 2000 Schlossberg Spätlese Halbtrocken, and it was like semolina dumplings in a sweetly fragrant mix of veal and vegetable broth. No other wines are like them. They have a remarkable reconciliation of weight, solidity and buoyancy. They tend to run stony, as is the Rheingau type—when it's true! And they are fastidiously specific in their site characteristics. The dry wines are better than most! Still, almost none of Johannes' wines taste "sweet." They have the coiled power of a tightly closed fist. They are **intensely** fragrant, as though they wished to **convince** you of something. They are like Wachau wines; they crave oxygen, and they don't show their best ice-cold. They are, to my way of thinking, the most exciting wines currently made in the Rheingau and they didn't get there with bazillions of yen or with mega-technology or with a Kantian superstructure of philosophy: Just a man, his dog, and their wines.

#### "THE DRY STUFF"

##### GJL-150 **2008 Riesling Eins-Zwei-Dry "3"**

CORE-LIST WINE, and punny name notwithstanding, this is from the Geisenheimer Rothenberg, which a greedier guy would (and could) bottle as an Erstes Gewächs and sell for the price of an Alba truffle. I mean, this is a mind-boggling value; the stature and length are ridiculous in this echelon, and the sample in my glass is seriously bottle-sick! Thus I'll defer a detailed account, but I remember the cask-sample, and the bedrock quality is there in spades.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 7-12 years)

##### GJL-154 **2008 Rudesheimer Riesling Trocken**

These are the 2nd grapes from Rottland; the wine fires a shocking volley of fragrance, leesy and almost chocolatey, juicy and 'dark' – as always I think of the Wachau's great Kellerberg; the Rottland is so brooding and bready and mammalian; there's nothing stony here, just sleep-warmed lover-flesh.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again from 11-16 years)

### Rüdesheim Vineyards:

Usually the Taunus hills sit back from the Rhine about two miles, with vineyards carpeting their lower slopes. Only at Rüdesheim do the hills advance almost to the river — all the way to the river beneath the Schlossberg. The so-called Rüdesheimer “Berg” is one of Riesling’s most remarkable homes, an imposing mountainside facing due south, sometimes brutally hot and dry. It should be a UNESCO zone. The three great sites are SCHLOSSBERG, from which the most delicate minerally wines issue, from slatey soil with quartzite, like a Mosel-Rheingau marriage. ROSENECK is the fruit euphoria, with lyric and gracious aromas from quartzite with flecks of slate. ROTT-LAND is lower down; the wines are massive and brooding and earnest; Riesling as Serious Business.

Above these Grand Crus lie the DRACHENSTEIN (above the Roseneck) and the recently reclaimed BERG KAISERSTEINFELS (above the Schlossberg). To their east, rising imposingly behind Rüdesheim itself, sit a range of sites on richer soils ranging from limestony loess in the MAGDALENENKREUZ to a similar soil but mixed with slate in the KLOSTERLAY. Rüdesheim is an open-air living museum of *terroir*!

GJL-155 **2008 Rüdesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Trocken**

*Note: at press-time Johannes had yet to decide whether to call this “Kabinett.”* This is classic Leitz; small-cask aged and with his sweet leanness leading to a glory of Riesling aromas, apple, spearmint, meyer-lemon; the palate is bright and talc-y and as crunchy as the surface of a crème-brûlée.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again from 11-15 years)

GJL-156 **2008 Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Trocken “Alte Reben” (+)**

Bottle-sick, but the substance shows through, the Grand Cru’s *erogenous* terroir; apples and nuts and quinces and slate; thickly mineral and long; moderate body (12.5% alc) but streamlined, expressive, with silvery rivulets of terroir.

SOS: 0 (1-3 years, again from 12-17 years)

GJL-157 **2008 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland Riesling Trocken “Alte Reben” (+)**

A cask sample, and perhaps not the final blend because two planned components were still fermenting, but what’s in the glass is a marvelously juicy baritone of Riesling, glowing with its dark bready richness. Rottland makes a wine that seems to have little to do with mere ‘grapes.’ Wouldn’t it be lovely if this were 2% lower in alcohol/vol than the last few vintages?

SOS: 0 (2-3 years, again from 14-20 years)

### THE NOT-DRY STUFF

GJL-151 **2008 Riesling “Dragonstone”** **+**

CORE-LIST WINE. I love that this wine, which has become almost, dare I say, *commercial*, keeps reverting back to the style that we first loved all those years ago. “Draggy” was always lusty and vital, but after 2002 it got sweeter than was strictly *useful*, but this 08 has its own, un-reduced bazillion grams-per-liter of acidity that gives it a minty cast alongside its usual cherry; the sheer brilliance is like a cold splash of water on a hot day; tarragon and briskness and fennel-seed and lovely quicksilver detail on the lingering finish.

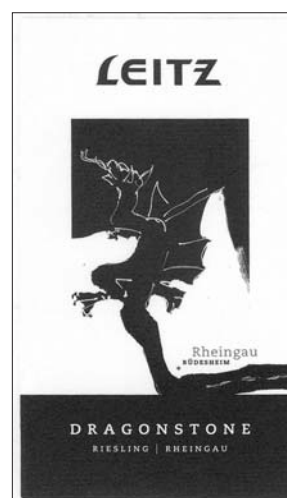
SOS: 1 (now-10 years)

GJL-152 **2008 Rüdesheimer Klosterlay Riesling Kabinett**

Again the sample was bottle-sick, but with coaxing I got that Klosterlay-ALTOID thing. I suspect this will be a whip-crack of zingy-sharp piercing minty fruit.

SOS: 1 (4-12 years)

- GJL-158 **2008 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. Call it “Maggie;” he does. I have a secret to share with you about being pragmatic. The first taste of this showed a lot of terroir to go with its typical luminous fruit, but there was, let’s say, an acid statement. We talked it over, and tried a (legally permitted) addition of 15% Roseneck Spätlese, which rounded out the finish, extended the fruit *atop* the acidity, which remains bright but now in harmony. Shame on us. The wine is lovely.  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GJL-159 **2008 Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Salty and showing the melted-vanilla ice cream flavor we often see from this site; there’s both botrytis and cask tones – both agreeable – and the wine is sexy and lingering (always a good combination. . . )  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GJL-144 **2007 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 This is the botrytis-lady, though with exceptionally fine slatiness; indeed this is in every way exceptional; electric and neon and phosphorescent, yet refined and detailed, yet fruity and with notes of sweet corn and peekytoe crab; fruit strapped to a joy-buzzer here! A great citizen of a great vintage.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GJL-160 **2008 Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 There was talk of bottling this as an Auslese; it’s a ripe, malty botrytis wine, with the polish of an Auslese but not as massive as recent vintages have been. In *size* it’s a memorable Spätlese, but in *flavors* it’s more typically Auslese, especially the caramelly finish. This should develop into something very fine.  
 SOS: 2 (8-26 years)



They had to thread the needle with the 2008 harvest. “The corridor of the right time to pick was rather narrow, past underripeness but before rot,” Andreas explained. Their vintage is consistently successful, if less lavish than any year since 04.

Because they’re in Oestrich, where the wines tend to run fruity, one can forget this is a Rheingau estate. But one taste of the astonishing Jesuitengarten Spätlese brought home why this

region attained its reputation for aristocracy. It is, however, a bastard to put into words.

Let’s try anyway. Rheingau Rieslings are alpha. They assume the right to be in command. They have the natural bearing of the born leader, including the geniality that makes the best leaders. Yet behind it is an essential indifference to the *impression* they make on you. This isn’t haughty, but they aren’t going to preen for you. They have no desire nor need to ingratiate themselves. You’d seldom use a word like *gushing* or *seductive* to describe a classic Rheingau wine, but you’d use words like *splendid* or *impeccable*. And all of this is entirely compatible with deliciousness, just as all leaders display an irresistible magnetism.

Spreitzer has ascended to the top rank in the Rheingau. No one is better, and few are as fine. Yet the German press is likely to feel otherwise, in large part because of the emphasis they lay on the dry wines. This is reasonable enough. For my part I simply don’t consider a German grower’s dry wine. If they are good I am delighted, and offer them. But this is an extra, not the thing I come looking for. They could cease producing them altogether and I wouldn’t mind. Nor would the wine-world be discernibly the poorer.

You might recall a Spreitzer wine finished among the top ten dry Rieslings in all of Germany three years ago. I loved it too, and selected it, and was delighted to show it to you. Our reviewers’ enthusiasms extended to



Andreas & Bernd Spreitzer

the “high 80s” — maybe a little too low. Yet the reverse is also true, as Stuart Pigott wrote in a recent article for WEIN EXTRA. Noting the difference between the monster scores (high 90s) certain Dönnhoff wines received over here, in contrast to the around-90 the same wines received in Germany, he said: “Whereas across the sea tasters everywhere stood and cheered these great examples of German Riesling, inside Germany they were met with Hm, well . . . yes, I suppose . . .”

So it’s the silly culture-wars between them and us which prevents them from recognizing how freakin’

- **Vineyard area: 17 hectares**
- **Annual production: 8,500 cases**
- **Top sites: Oestricher Lenchen and Doosberg, Winkeler Jesuitengarten, Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen**
- **Soil types: Deep tertiary loam and loess**
- **Grape varieties: 96% Riesling, 4% Spätburgunder**

marvelous these Spreitzers have become. Help me ‘splain it to them! Oh they get praise enough; (another “cluster” in *Gault-Millau*, another “F” in *Feinschmecker*, another “star” in *Mondo*, and another placement on DM’s 100-best list) but each of the last three vintages has exceeded what are increasingly high expectations, but alas in a style the Germans do not seem to cherish.

The wines certainly speak in the prevailing “syntax” of the times: crystalline, refined, perfumey and polished. These are Rheingau wines as Armin Diel might make them. Indeed it could be their diametrically opposed personalities to Leitz’s wines which allows the two to coexist so benignly, without “competition” (the close friendship between the two helps I’m sure!). Where Johannes’ wines are ruggedly individual, Andreas and Bernd’s wines are, in the best sense, fashionable, spiffy, well turned-out. Thankfully the two of *them* are plenty unpretentious.

The wines do require a certain understanding, because they are never fined and they often show reduced aromas. As always these vanish with swirling, if you remember to swirl, and have the time to wait.

All harvesting is by hand. The must is cleaned by gravity for 24 hours before whole-cluster pressing. After fermentation (in wood or jacketed stainless steel, partly with ambient yeasts partly with cultured yeasts, depending on the vintage) the wines rest on their gross lees for some time before receiving their only filtration, with racking. They are bottled off the fine lees.

In 1997 Andreas and Bernd Spreitzer leased the estate from their father, who remains active. Johannes Leitz first tipped me off. He’s friendly with Andreas and wanted to help. I really don’t think it crossed his mind he was creating a competitor. Leitz is a guy whose friends will also be sweethearts, and I was intrigued to taste Spreitzer’s wines.

I did, and liked what I saw. Oestrich seems to have gotten short shrift when the 1971 wine law re-drew the

vineyard boundaries. The two main sites are Doosberg and Lenchen, each among the largest single-sites in the region and each embracing a wide range of soils and exposures. The top of Doosberg borders the Hallgartener Jungfer, while Lenchen touches the Schönhell. Nearer the Rhine the wines are fruitier.

Oestrich seldom shows the nervy vigor of other Rheingauers, and the keen finesse of spiciness is often absent here. Oestrich is about *fruit*.

Still, I'd like you to see what Spreitzers can do in Hattenheim and Winkel ("Let's Go To Winkel With Spreitzer!" Now *there's* a slogan one can work with.) Read on . . .

In fact I keep urging Andreas, only half-jokingly, to grab any available land in Grand Crus with nothing but underachievers working them; this pretty much covers all of Rauenthal, to cite but one melancholy example. To be sure, Oestrichers can be delightful and in certain cases remarkable, but no serious observer would place these among the top sites in the Rheingau. All the more striking what Spreitzers make from them. Yet when I'm having trouble sleeping and I've replayed the entire 1986 World Series through in my mind, I'm likely to catalogue all the great sites whose wines would blossom in Spreitzer's hands: Hölle, Mannberg, Siegelsberg . . . Wülfen . . . Gehrn . . . Baiken . . . Rothenberg . . . <ZZZZZ>

#### spreitzer at a glance:

Finely fruity wines in the modern idiom, with polish and class, at reasonable prices, from a young vintner with many years of greatness in store.

#### how the wines taste:

They're polished and fruity and full of finesse. The modern style of winemaking at its best.

#### GSP-055L **2008 Riesling Trocken, 1.0 liter**

I like this wine very much, but it was only later that evening in a *restaurant* that I realized they made a 'sweet' liter Riesling also. I wish they'd told me! Next year. . .

But this has loads of charming fruit in the context of a purely dry palate, with an apple-skin fibrous chewiness and racy cool fruit. It's a mix of Lenchen and Doosberg mostly made in steel.

SOS: 0 (now-5 years)

#### GSP-056 **2008 Rosengarten Riesling Erstes Gewächs**

'Rosengarten' is a sub-parcel of Lenchen but actually disparate from Lenchen; it's another abomination of the 71 wine law's elimination of thousands of valid site names in the name of "clarity." Yah Boo. This is a fruit and flower driven *dry* wine; rocks and lilacs; pretty in its way, with 08's filigree minerality. It would be Nigl or Salomon if it were Austrian, with the irises-and-jewels finish, and the way it craves oxygen. Open, decant, wait 30-60 minutes, serve at 55° and have a nice day.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 11-16 years)

#### GSP-058 **2008 Oestricher Doosberg Riesling Kabinett**

Wow, this smells good. Wisteria and minerals; the palate shows a hint of botrytis whose saltiness swirls through the flower and mineral; the moderate RS lets the tangy root-vegetable savor come through.

SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

#### GSP-059 **2008 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett**

CORE-LIST WINE. I am well aware of having written that the 07 "made me its bitch," and believe me I want to top that. I can't quite, as this impeccable 08 doesn't quite have the wiggle, but it does have apples to the end of space and time, apples beyond good and evil (actually, apples *are* beyond good and evil); it shows a pure delight of ur-fruit; it won't raise your IQ but it will walk you into nature and show you a simple pure sweetness. There's spiel and grace here, a kind of girlishness, slim hands placing apples into a basket. . .

SOS: 2 (5-16 years)

#### GSP-060 **2008 Winkeler Jesuitengarten Riesling Spätlese** +

I showed the 05 of this to a Yale undergrad wine society, and man that wine was *smokin'*. . . here it's the already-solid-wine-in-the-already-solid-vintage, with a palpable density, of vinosity and mineral; it's the substance of substance. Plums and violets, massively thick but light on its feet, serious but not brooding; balsamic and long. What a legacy they're creating with this wine! Every vintage since 2004 has been brilliant.

SOS: 2 (8-26 years)

#### GSP-061 **2008 Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Spätlese "303," 6/750ml** +

It hails from a micro-cru called Eiserberg, from which a TBA with 303° Oechsle was gathered in 1920 by Spreitzer's great-great grandfather, and which was the record must-weight for Rheingau Riesling until 2003 came along. A noble, beautiful fragrance; it seems to combine each facet of their vintage – apples flowers salt botrytis – into a pure, rich racy wine with quite the acid-kick on the finish (which may yet be adjusted with a dollop of Auslese) to unite richness and sternness.

SOS: 2 (8-27 years)

mitted to rhin

# mittelrhein wines



In 1900 there were 2000 hectares of vineyards planted in the Mittelrhein. In 1970 this had sunk to 1000. In the next thirty years it reduced again by half; as the new century began there were just 500 hectares remaining, a loss of 75% in a single century. 50 more hectares were abandoned last year alone. What's to become of this region?

In most but not all cases the best sites remain. In most cases the most impassioned vintners will continue. We're seeing a possibly beneficial herd-thinning, but we're also seeing a changing world, and would do well to consider how it will look and how happy we'll be to live in it.

Because the Mittelrhein is so rife with tourism, a lot of ordinary plonk was made to be sloshed down by heedless gawkers misty-eyedly sailing past the Loreley. I'll bet the boat-lines and taverns bid prices down to below subsistence for the poor growers. The vineyards are steep, Mosel-steep, and costs of production are high. The system was basically unsustainable. But what will take its place?

This point was driven home while I drove downstream to dinner with Linde Jost. We passed the beautiful vineyard site Kauber Rosstein (whose wines I used to rep-

in it. And so the thing goes to seed, and one of Riesling's finer habitats shall be no more. A specie of beauty is extinct. That makes me a little sad.

## At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated . . . .

resent via Heinrich Weiler until the domain encountered some problems and I opted out) and Linde noted wistfully that its days appeared to be numbered. "But it's one of the great sites of the region," I protested. "Why is that?" "Well look at it," Linde replied. "It's all old terraces, too steep to work by machine. You can't get to it. Do you realize what you have to do to bring the harvest in from that vineyard?" she continued. "First you have to carry all the grapes on your back as there are no pathways for tractors or wagons. Then you have to cross a busy road, **and then you have to cross the railway line**, and *then* you have to get into a boat and row across the Rhine!" Well, I dunno; sounds like a day in the park to me. I mean, it's not like there's man-eating *fish* in the river or anything. In any case, it turned out the vineyard's sole proprietor was merely leasing the winery and had no incentive to invest

Still, go if you can. Along with the Mosel valley, the Rhein between Bingen and Koblenz is one of the few places left in Europe that actually looks like the tourist brochures. Amazing how the usual picture of the old castle somehow omits the lard-rendering plant across the road, isn't it? At least the very best vineyards remain cultivated though there isn't a flagship site like Scharzhofberger, nor a flagship estate like Müller. But I'd



wager that a generation from now, the Josts and Weingarts will have become the standard "great names."

The vineyards fall into two groups: the riverfront sites (giving the slatiest, most minerally wines) and the side-valley slopes (whose wines are tangier and spicier). Soils are Devonian slate and quartzite, so the wines bear

a strong resemblance to Mosel wines, though fuller in body, more "masculine" and sometimes with more lavish fruit. Most Moselans sense a kinship with Mittelrhein wines and would drink them first if they couldn't drink wines from their own region.



*"A time of general rejoicing . . ." Harvesting Riesling grapes on the Rhine.*

# florian weingart

## mittelrhein • boppard-spay

When I arrive, the entire vintage is laid-out on the table for me. “I like when you visit,” says Florian, “Because it’s also my first time to taste the whole range, and taste them up here and not in the cold cellar.” Glad to assist, squire. We also get to have a chinwag about all kinds of things, as Florian’s is a probing, philosophical mind. But first a couple words about the vintage.

“We picked earlier than most colleagues because we started to see botrytis in late September,” he said. This is telling, and what it tells is how locally *warm* it is in the Bopparder Hamm. However ‘north’ it might seem, this is such a splendid mountainside the microclimate ripens Rieslings at the same time as in the Pfalz.

It was with Florian I first talked about the perils of growth, and once the subject was raised I invited others to tell me how it was for them. I don’t mean at all to suggest Florian is unhappy. He rather describes a sort of *triste*, because he loves the work and wishes he could keep doing it, the everyday vineyard and cellar work, from which he is now removed by a layer of ‘management’ brought about by the estate’s growing size. It was moving to talk about this, as I’ve felt it too. This year I happened to be solo the first 9 days in Germany, and I loved it, it was like the old days, intimate, calm, conversational. Of course we didn’t sell much *wine* in the old days, and I wouldn’t want them back. Just the fun parts.

It’s not enough for Florian Weingart to be considered the “top” estate in his region and one of the elite Riesling estates in Germany. He is inherently modest and restless. His is a mind that chews things over, and I doubt he even has an auto-pilot function. We were talking about the reduction-aromas which often attend the early stages of wines fermented with wild yeasts. This came up not only because we’re a bunch of pencil-necked geeks – he isn’t but I probably am – but because Florian has returned to “spontis” and ambient-temperature fermentations after a decade using more modern (I dare say trendy) approaches. “After ten years I’ve come back to many of the things my father did,” he observed.

A few weeks later, back in the States again, I had this email from him. He had continued to mull the question over – typically! How can you not be fond of such a guy?



Adolph Weingart

- **Vineyard area: 11 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Bopparder Hamm Engelstein, Feuerlay & Ohlenberg, Schloss Fürstenberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Spätburgunder, 2% Grauburgunder**

“I just thought about your question concerning the volatile S-compounds in spontaneous ferments: In many spontaneous yeast societies there are types that are more capable [of] break[ing] up proteins and amino-acids that contain Sulfur than in cultured yeasts (which have been selected especially not to produce off-flavors). Those released S-bindings can react to H<sub>2</sub>S (and so on) in the reductive climate of the fermentation. I have probably just been lucky that the right [yeasts] are at work. Another reason – [which has] proved to be the most important S-source in volatile-S-compounds (US-research) – is elementary S from late crop protection treatments with Sulfur. This is probably more important than the differences in reductivity of the fermenting wine

(barrels or stainless; small or large cell numbers) but again I don’t really know. I think though that reductivity during fermentation and after has not been given the right attention for white

wines [in terms of] their aroma development and their aging abilities.”

Florian seems self-conscious about the accolades regularly heaped upon him, like putting on a tux and looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking “Who is this guy?” He’s more of an intellectual than many growers. “There is no single True way,” he says: “Rather a multitude of possibilities.” I sense he’s delighted to play among them! Florian has always been transparently candid and unaffected with me, which I find unendingly delightful. It’s such a pleasure to connect simply as colleagues. I think he is instinctively genuine, as are his wines.

These are very happy visits. The wines are full of melody, and Florian’s kids keep coming into the room, shyly at first and then like wound-up little sprites. I like tasting wine with young vintners whose kids are sitting in his lap. It stops me from getting too precious about the wines. It puts the work in context. Context is good. It helps me define a thing I need to remember: the connection of the family, the land, and the wine. Somehow I doubt I’d be tasting with Mr. Kendall or Mr. Jackson in a little living room with kids peering shyly around the corner and the simmer-fragrance of lunch cooking. One year both girls seized upon my Karen Odessa, who amused them for two hours with her laptop. She recorded the two girls very shyly singing “Ten Little Indians” and every time she played it later I felt happy.

Florian is improving what were already excellent wines, but I still miss his folks. Papa set a fine example of diligence, fortitude and joy. He suffers from a degenera-

tive nerve ailment that deprives him of the use of his fingertips, not an easy prospect for a small family-domain on steep slopes. Yet he was invariably cheerful and uncomplaining, and his wines were tensely fruity, and it does the soul good to see a talented young man inspired by the life of a vintner.

The wines had become more scrupulous, mineral and green, all in the modern idiom, but Florian seemed to want something more. He looked to the past, as many smart young growers are doing. The Bopparder Hamm is one of the few due-south exposures in the Mittelrhein, and one of the few hillsides with almost no abandoned vineyards. Boppard and its neighbor Spay are an isolated warren of activity in a region that’s grown ominously sleepy. The sites are slatey of course, but there’s also a residue from the volcanic activity of the Eifel hills to the north, which imparts a certain ripe tropical note. Florian may have missed it, I don’t know. But it is singular, and maybe unique.

The “Kabinett” issue arises here, again; the vineyard is paradoxically too good – “We’d have to pick physiologically unripe grapes to make a Kabinett from the Hamm,” he says. Florian is sensitive to such things. He understands for example that his best dry wines come from sites with deeper soils giving physiologically riper fruit. But like everyone, he needs a source for reliable everyday wines, and he found it 35km upstream in a side-valley near Bacharach. These are the Schloss Fürstenberg bottlings, which give us a chance to see this vintner’s work in a very different terroir dialect.

#### weingart at a glance:

A risen star on the Mittelrhein with the advent of young Florian Weingart at the helm. Still-good value for in-your-face fruity-minerally steep-slope wine.

#### how the wines taste:

They’re urgent above all; these are wines that move, that push and pull on the palate. Then tropically fruity, vanilla, papaya, mango in the ripest wines. With the 1996 vintage a new minerality came; you feel it on the sides of the palate, and it sets up a call-and-response of fruit and stone that keeps you returning to the wine just when you were done attending to it. These are smiling, cheerful wines, but now perhaps with a fundamental intelligence that makes you want to spend lots of time with them.

#### GAW-094 **2008 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese Trocken**

Exceptionally clear and refined cox-orange and tropical fruit aromas; the palate has a certain steely shimmer but also a mineral length, albeit the fruit is more taut here than it seems on the nose, but this will change in development. A comely, successful dry Riesling, as he so often seems to make.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again from 11-16 years)

- GAW-095 **2008 Bopparder Hamm Riesling Kabinett Feinherb** +  
 From an early harvest to clear botrytis, this is fascinating wine; ultra-refined lime, kaf-fir, balsam and fuji apple; a virtually perfect Riesling palate, granular and malic; tautly stretched fruit like pulling your shoelaces tight, but a great volume of fruit and charm and an irresistible saltiness on the finish. I'm always amazed at the number of such wines Germany produces: perfect, useful, tasty and reasonably priced....and we're schlepping to the ends of the earth to find some novel nonsense from Phryzikxstigstan. **SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1** (now-12 years)
- GAW-096 **2008 Schloss Fürstenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Wisteria and hyacinth aromas lead to a wonderfully wry, piquantly angular and absurdly delicious palate, all that flower and mineral in the dearest possible coolness of aloe vera and lime; the finish shows the acid-snap of 08 but this is a valid coda after the fusillade of flower that preceded it. Full of character and loveliness. **SOS: 2** (5-18 years)
- GAW-097 **2008 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 Plums and malt, healthy botrytis; a big, dense Spät, a heavy-fruited wine, old-school "dark" Riesling. **SOS: 2** (7-21 years)



Want to hear a story of fortitude? Peter Jost broke his leg in the vineyards just three days before the harvest one year. He was in utter denial. This simply could not be. He didn't go in for X-rays for three days, and when he did he was told "your leg is broken and you'll be laid up for about six weeks." "Um, I don't think so!" After three weeks hobbling around on crutches, including picking grapes in vineyards as steep as 60 degrees, his Doctor told him "Look, if you don't get off your feet we'll put you on your back!"

The solution? A WHEELCHAIR! "I rolled through the cellar in my wheelchair and made my wines," said Peter.

This is an estate with the lion's share of a single vineyard, with which they are identified, in this case the BACHARACHER HAHN. There are a few other parcels also (along with some Rheingauers), but Jost and Hahn are inextricably linked. I've looked at Hahn from all sides now; from across the river (where it looks impossibly steep), from immediately below it, from above it, within it, and any way you slice it, this is one special site; steep goes without saying, perfect exposure, large enough to allow selective harvesting. One cannot tell anymore whether its exuberant glory of fruit is innate, as there aren't any other proprietors to speak of. But who cares? It's one of the diamonds of the German wine world.

The wines can be calm and shining. *What* polish and beauty of fruit is in them! They can attain a celestial elegance and a fine nectarine-y fruit, always generous but never overbearing, underpinned with slaty filaments and a second wave of berried tanginess which lifts them from merely delightful to truly superb.

The wines are fermented in stainless steel, using cultured yeasts, with controlled temperatures. "We're particularly careful of how we handle the grapes," says Peter. "All the grapes arrive at the press in undisturbed condition. We press with a maximum of 1.8 bars of pressure; the best wines don't go higher than one bar." Lees contact is "as long as possible, but regularly three months. Actually our wines throw very little sediment since we ferment a very clean must," says Peter. What lees do exist are stirred. "I want a partnership

- **Vineyard area: 15 hectares**
- **Annual production: 10,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Wallufer Walkenberg (Rheingau), Barcharacher Hahn**
- **Soil types: Weathered Devonian slate in Hahn; loess and loam on gravel sub-soil in Walkenberg**
- **Grape varieties: 80% Riesling, 17% Spätburgunder, 3% Weissburgunder**

between primary fruit and the richness of the lees."

Peter is friendly toward the use of Süssreserve if it's produced optimally. "Each wine should have its own Süssreserve," he says. "It's labor-intensive and it falls just at the busiest time of the harvest, which means working the night shift!" But, he says, the later fermentation stops, the better for the wine. "In any case, at least for our wine which we ferment technically clean with the cultured yeasts, we can use a third less sulfur."

Jost reports their oldest of three daughters will take over the winery. I remember her and her sister when they were little girls, producing something like one liter of "TBA" which they bottled in 200ml bottles and offered for sale to their Uncle. For ten Marks! I'd say the estate will be in good hands, and I love any example of Frau-power in old Europe.

I will confess to a certain impatience for a great Jost vintage. I think the last bunch of years have either been too hot (and the Hahn is a heat trap in any case) or too vulnerable to unwanted rots. I once said to Peter that I yearned for a wine like the great '93 Kabinett, and he insisted its must-weight was *as* high as the new vintage's Kabinett. But all must-weights are not equal, as we know. Sometimes the wines seemed typically vibrant and expressive in cask, only to seem mute and disgruntled after bottling. I am not convinced the long lees-contact is the best thing for them, but 2007 and 2008 herald a return



Peter and Linde Jost

to the form I remember. Josts have also extended their vineyard, planting higher up the hill to try and get grapes that *won't* flirt with overripeness.

A digression: I am not convinced in *general* by the practice of long fine-lees contact nor of the stirring it often entails. Rather, I'm agnostic. At times it improves the wines and at times it diminishes them. Leesiness is almost always the same flavor, and it bores me when everyone's using the same seasoning. In Champagne there's a little modishness around lees-stirring for base-

wines before they go *en tirage*. This is fine if you want your wine to reek of *battonage* but it does seem to obscure the finer points of terroir. Again, I express only a note of caution, because I can't join the bandwagon of those who're shouting *Oh yeah, LEES baby, right on!* For every grower whose wines are infused with a lovely seamless nuance of sweet-lees (like that semolina thing in Leitz's best wines) there's another whose lees are blatant and whose wines taste like every other lees-freak's wines. As always, taste and see.

#### jost at a glance:

Primo estate with impeccable reputation for top-flight Rieslings. Wines emphasize beauty of fruit rather than mineral.

#### how the wines taste:

It is the quality of fruit you look for here, and this can be about as lovely as it gets; a delicate melange of sweet-apple, white peach, honeysuckle, expressed in a resplendent elegance, always stopping short of mere sultriness.

#### GTJ-073 2008 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Kabinett

Peter's wines were 'late' this year, and so this is less a "tasting note" than the view through the periscope. There's a stony undertone to a generalized fruit; the mineral and apple aromas are typical for 08 but unusual for this wine historically; a *kirsch* tone arrives with cajoling; there are indications of a lovely fibrous malic crushed-rock sort of thing, which I prefer to the exotic-fruit parades of the hotter years. Promising!  
SOS: 2 (5-15 years)

#### GTJ-074 2008 Wallufer Walkenberg Riesling Spätlese

This RHEINGAU Spät is barely higher in price than the Hahn Kabinett; it's what they call a "Zuckerfresser;" (a sugar-gobbler); it finished with 30 g.l. of RS and seemed to want just a little more. In fact it needed a *lot* more to taste balanced without screaming "sweet." It has its earthy red-fruit thing (rose-hips and redcurrant) with a shapely plump mineral and granular fruitiness like the little crystals in some hard cheeses; the sweet-saltiness is like slipping wedges of pear & Parm into your mouth together.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (7-22 years)

#### GTJ-075 2008 Bacharacher Hahn Riesling Spätlese

5% botrytis shows more than that small dimension. It's relatively robust and leans toward the 08 tartness on the finish; passion fruit and dried apricot and cider and saltiness; the wine's got some voodoo-séance thing going compared to the streamlined babies that preceded it, but it's buxom sexy stuff.  
SOS: 3 (8-23 years)



mosel-saar-ruwer

# mosel-saar-ruwer



I was staying with Selbachs in Zeltingen, which lies right below the Himmelreich vineyard, and Karen Odessa and I had a lovely multi-hour romp among the giddy lizards astonished by the early warmth glancing off the slate walls. They were darting around everywhere. We even saw a solitary bewildered butterfly, wondering why it was so warm but there weren't any flowers. And the weather held for nearly a week. This was good news for your intrepid importer, who battles with his tendency to eat one too many schnitzels – OK, more than one – and trust me, when you've spent a whole day swirlin' and hurlin' all those young frisky high-acid whites you get a total monkey hunger by evening. So those morning walks were helpful for maintaining my trim boyish profile.

We arrived from the Nahe, where one of my growers said that he loved Mosel wines too, as every wine lover does, but that tasting them day after day would have to be less interesting than tasting the geological miasma that is Nahe wine. After all, the Mosel offers only minute variations on a single theme of slate. "Uh oh," I thought, "I'm not gonna be able to get this out of my head." But after the first Mosel day it was gone, and it was only on the 6th and final day it came to me again. Here I'd been tasting slate-grown wine endlessly for nearly a week, and they hadn't remotely begun to pall. Rather the opposite. I found the flavor delightful and fascinating and was in no hurry for it to end.

Slate defines the Mosel and her wines, and slate is what I look for when I select them.

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

The valley itself is spectacular but unforgiving; the very steepness of its slopes suggests the precariousness of a vintner's existence. The wines themselves, beneath their extroverted gaiety, have something quite rigid,

## **I look for slate. I want to taste that soil, for it's slate that gives the Mosel its signature, its somewhere-ness.**

unsentimental, as though of a flower-essence distilled to a point of almost unbearable clarity. It is so easy to be charmed into euphoria by these wines that I forget how intricate and inscrutable they can be. Even the most rustic and uncomplicated vintners are Catholically devout servants of this particular mystery of nature.

Recent vintages have shown the Mosel off, and its renown has increased markedly. However searching the

wines may be, the work of producing them is sweaty and brusque. You know, until you actually *see* these vineyards, you cannot imagine—even the best pictures cannot convey—just how steep this ground is. Our forbears were stoically accustomed to a certain physical travail as a condition of being. But not us. Sometimes you will look up at little specks of people, pruning, binding, spraying, and you will wonder: "how do they keep from falling?" But even more you will wonder: "who in his right mind would *do* such work?" Who indeed! People who *are* willing to work the steep slopes are growing rarer—and older. Much casual vineyard labor in Germany comes from Poland these days, but the steep slopes need experienced hands. Families undertake most of the work themselves, *if* they will. Many of the young are opting out. Many venerable names are either up for sale, have already *been* sold, or are floundering. For we are in the middle of a sea-change in the Mosel valley, the ramifications of which are starting to make themselves felt.

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

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

This isn't easy work! You have to love it in your bones, and so the young generation of Mosel vintners has self-selected its most enterprising and conscientious members; if you're



*Trekking up the Erdener Treppchen*

a young guy making wine at *all* along the Mosel, you're probably making *excellent* wine. You wouldn't have chosen the life if you didn't love wine and didn't plan to excel.

But two critical things have changed. First, the young person does not wish to work in obscurity. His only chance to prosper lies in spreading the word quickly and widely. So he sends his samples to all the necessary publications. In theory, his wines are noteworthy, he makes his name, he places himself on the *scene*, and customers ensue. This means a guy like me just isn't going to make the kinds of "discoveries" which were so easy fifteen years ago. If a producer is good, he's not waiting around hoping to be discovered; he's aggressively marketing himself.

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

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

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

For everyone along the Mosel plays the same lament; **labor**. It's hard to get, and because it's hard to get it commands a high price. The slopes are forbiddingly

steep—it's physically dangerous to work such land—and there's very little feasible machine work. Hand-labor on steep slopes in this satellite-TV world is not consistent with Kabinett wine costing \$10.

As a merchant I am caught in the middle. I want Mosel wine to survive because I love it almost helplessly. My conscience revolts at dunning a producer for *pfennigs* (or *cents* in the brave new Euro-world) while I look out his window at the perpendicular mountains I know he has to work in. But neither do I wish to deliver sticker-shock to you, cherished customer. So we're going to let prices creep steadily upward until equilibrium is restored.

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

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

ners hope they'll go to someday.

The Mosel is also a self-contained culture. Despite the length of the river (and its tributaries) there is a certain cohesion there, more so than in other German wine regions. This isn't always good, mind you; there's more than a little Hatfield vs. McCoy chicanery along with the petty jealousies afflicting small village life throughout most of the world. One day Andreas Adam planted a quarter-hectare. When he went out the following day to continue, everything he planted the day before had been vandalized. The young man is sure of himself (as he has every right to be), and this infuriated a neighbor. These cultures are not exclusively lyrical!

A well-known grower filed suit seeking redress for vineyards he said he "lost" as a result of *Flurbereinigung*, and which ended up in the hands of a nearby neighbor with whom relations had always been cordial. The courts determined the case was frivolous and baseless, but what struck me was that it was filed at all, in such a narrow valley, such a fish-bowl culture, in whose narrow perimeters it wouldn't seem prudent to roil the waters. Yet I have rarely seen such a spirit of true neighborliness as I have on the Mosel, at times, among families where there's mutual respect and trust.

# mosel regionals

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

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

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

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

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

## The Proud and Noble History of TJ Riesling

I heard an unbelievable story. There was some sort of

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

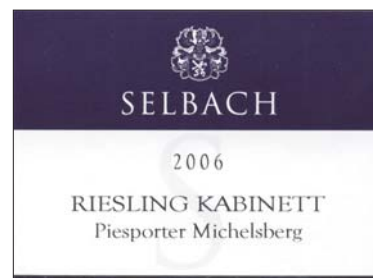
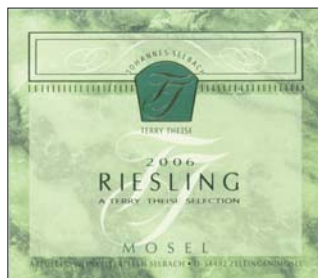
Ah, beginner's luck! I am proud of being a marketing-bonehead. When Johannes and I first conceived and created the wine, all we wanted was something regionally typical that didn't pander with softness or excessive sweetness.

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

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

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

- GSR-107 **2007 Bernkasteler Kurfürstlay Riesling QbA**
- GSR-208 **2008 Zeller Schwarze Katz QbA**
- GSR-308 **2008 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling QbA**
- GSR-707 **2007 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Kabinett**
- GSR-807 **2007 Piesporter Michelsberg Riesling Spätlese**
- GSR-607 **2007 "TJ" Riesling**



Johannes and Barbara's two kids are getting older twice as fast as I am, because otherwise I can't explain how they have become 18 and 16 all of a sudden. Hannah is more voluble and Sebastian is more reserved, but each of them is more thoughtful than any adolescent of my recent memory. It struck me. These two young people have become citizens in some way, not only of their particular country, but of the worlds of thought and values and conscience. There is something in this family that grows rare people, and here it occurs again. Somehow I don't imagine the kids sitting with their parents having "weighty discussions of matters of the mind," —Johannes and Barbara are playful folks—but somehow this family incubates a kind of

concern in its members. I wonder if there isn't a kind of Selbach-charter-of-values in a box in a safe-deposit vault somewhere. I imagine unscrolling it and reading something like *Life is a pleasant business, most of the time anyway, but it is also a serious business, and one should be mindful of the need to proceed with thoughtfulness, in all things and all ways, while still having every possible fun.*

We had a visit from Selbachs last June; they stopped over in DC as they began an American vacation. Sigrid Selbach was an exchange student in Ohio in the 50s, when such a thing was unusual, and for a young Mosel *Mädchen*, positively radical. As I write, Sebastian's doing a year of American high-school in Oregon, and Hannah will brave the wilds of Louisiana in the Fall. But we were all together last June, and I took them to the Newseum. And a wonderful thing happened.

There's a permanent exhibit of all the Pulitzer-prize winning photographs, and as you might expect, it is emotional. Now bear in mind these are two teenagers whom I've had the temerity to bring to a museum. Yet I almost couldn't pull them away from the photos. This moved me almost as much as the pictures themselves did. *The important things matter.* There's plenty of time for fun – you should have seen us fighting over Frank Ruta's unbelievable fries at the Palena café – but a responsible human being takes a serious thing seriously.



Barbara & Johannes Selbach

So it is at Selbachs.

Often I go through the membrane into a mystic zone when tasting at Selbach. The wines consolidate into a great chord of beauty, and they do so in an especially allusive way; they

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

crawl in your windows while you're running to get the door. But this year I never really lost my matter-of-factness, even when certain wines sent me into silvery silent places.

Selbach's wines aren't like books of poems, where you can dip in here and there or dog-ear your favorites; they're more like novels, where you can certainly indicate passages you like especially, but where you can't just start reading any old where. Any given vintage is a whole story of which individual wines are scenes or sometimes chapters. This is also true, I think, for the progression of vintages. For as the Mosel is a weave, the Selbachs are woven through the weave, and the wines are woven through the family which is woven in the big tapestry called Mosel. They are so connected it is hard to see them in the isolation we insist upon when we judge them merely aesthetically. And yet we must, of course; they are bottles of wine we buy and sell—and drink.

One morning I came in from my daily tromp and I must have been glowing. Johannes' wife Barbara met me at the door, saying "Well look at you!" and I said something about how beautiful it was up there in the vineyards, and Barbara said something sweet and memorable; when Johannes returns from his *many* travels he is often renewed and heartened by having such a lovely place to call home. I have a range of producers along the Mosel, and I love all their wines, but none of them embodies a sense of *home* with more gravitas and purity than Selbach. As much and as often as Johannes flies hither and yon selling wine, he has somehow managed to remain more profoundly anchored to Home than anyone I know. Not just to his particular dwelling, but to the



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

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

Yet Selbach's wines reward a certain attention. In short they are made to be *drunk*, not "tasted." They never show off. Other wines, even very good wines, often do; like someone with a brand new BMW driving ostentatiously through town honking at the neighbors. Doesn't mean the car's not great. Just means the owner's got some . . . issues.

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

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

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

It's easy to blather about *terroir* and facile to claim

the vineyard makes the wine. Johannes has acted on a principle which will cost him valuable PR, but which is the only sustainable relationship a producer can truly have to wine.

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

Another secret is lees.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Few wines — few *things* — take us to such places. You can't identify that slippery little thing *soul* in wines by how they look, smell or taste. It's how they make you feel. It is how deeply they peal and echo. It is how quickly they leave *themselves* behind and lead you *elsewhere* away from "wine." Johannes told me that he wants "soul" in his wines, but I doubt if we mean exactly the same thing by it. Nor should we. The sincerity of his wish, the assumption of a *value* in wines of soul is part of what puts it there. The rest, I think we are not meant to know, but only to sense.

## A Look At The Vineyards:

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

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

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

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

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

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

### selbach-oster at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

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

# NOT-TO-BE-MISSED!

*Note: This is not an estate-bottled Selbach-Oster wine, but rather a few casks they bought from a VDP estate on the Saar whom we're not allowed to identify.*

- GSR-408 **2008 Selbach Saar Riesling Spätlese** **+**  
A ridiculous bargain for old-vines steep slope pedigreed Saar wine; the loveliest pink-grapefruit aroma; quinces, gentle slate, barely perceptible sweetness, just a delightful crisp refreshing Riesling!  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (8-21 years)

## DRY WINES AND KABINETTS:

- GSO-329 **2008 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Trocken**  
I rarely offer Selbach's Graacher Himmelreich, but 2008 seems to have been exceptionally good in Graach (*see also, Kerpen...*) and this was the most fragrant and charming of the dry wines; the classic site's apple-y fruit is more granular in 08; it's long and broad, and the wine is *dry*.  
SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again from 7-9 years)
- GSO-330 **2008 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Halbtrocken**  
Cheers to this reliably intense and incisive standby! The 08 is exceptionally minty even for this tarragon-scented wine; less 'intense' and more pointed than usual; serpentine length – it doesn't really 'finish' but glides in a seemingly endless echo, as precise as acupuncture and as emerald as Sencha-powder.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-2 years, again from 9-14 years)
- GSO-328 **2008 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett**  
GSO-328H **2008 Selbach-Oster Riesling Kabinett 12/375ml**  
An exceptionally rich rendition of this little item, lots of mid-palate plushness, mossy and orchid-like...back to thoughts of tea. It's like really fine fresh BaoZhong, with excellent length, chewiness and seamless perfect balance.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (5-18 years)
- GSO-331 **2008 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
It's rather an embarrassment of riches among the Kabinetts, so I picked my favorites, and if they sell out I'll move on to my next-favorites which are still PFG; there's a silky sleek length here along with the classic jade-vanilla flavors; wonderfully playful and sophisticated with a streamlined lime-parfait lightness.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)
- GSO-309 **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** **++**  
GSO-309H **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett 12/375ml**  
CORE-LIST WINE. And we're going to get this whenever Johannes makes it, because recent vintages have been *too* ripe for Kabinett in this Grand Cru site. It is everything a Mosel Kabinett could possibly give you; mostly a "*sponti*" (fermented with ambient yeasts); immense, deep, fruit-massive and soil-solid; absurd quality and breed in this *echelon*; rich, focused apple and grain on the vaporous yet infinite finish.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-25 years)
- GSO-332 **2008 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
CORE-LIST WINE: all kinds of fuder and *sponti* tones in a big juicy soulful Mosel Riesling; a reverb of mid-palate energy burnishes down into a limey smoky finish; a 'light' wine with more *substance* than most wines with twice its body.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-21 years)

**RIPER WINES**

- GSO-327 **2008 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese**  
 GSO-327H **2008 Selbach-Oster Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
 Aromas of roses and golden-delicious apples; actually these are seldom so literal and forthright and this wine is rarely so charming and friendly, with its salty lime-tinged finish.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GSO-333 **2008 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Spätlese**  
 Characteristic *kirsch* and flint in a really salty slinky wash of angular charm; there's even a hint of strawberries and wisteria; precise and yummy.  
 SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GSO-307 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 GSO-307H **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese, 12/375ml**  
 CORE-LIST WINE: Because I want you to see what the Mosel-lover's Mosel wine is like. It's a leap up from the Kabinett in ripeness and creaminess with wonderful rich mirabelle and cox orange aromas; almost fluffy in its weirdly transparent thickness; ripe 3-point perspective of fruit and citrus going off into the beyond. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-335 **2008 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese**  
 CORE-LIST WINE, and hard to write a definitive note as the sample was unfinished; it showed classic herbal deep-woods flavors, a lusty attack and a firm but lush mid-palate. The final version will receive the benefit of another, riper fuder (which was still fermenting).  
 (8-23 years)
- GSO-337 **2008 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 This is a German Riesling paradigm; plush but firm, aristocratic, 'important' but neither forbidding nor haughty; it's salty and plummy and deeply grounded. *Mosel!*  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-336 **2008 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Streamlined, twiggy, quinces and pistachio; just a quicksilver stream of precise terroir and taut fruit and copious herbs, green apples, mint and pepper. Not as plush as its fellow Späts, but a more satiny feel than, say, Schaefer's wines.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GSO-315 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese\*** +++  
 Supernatural expression of fragrance, ethereal and shimmering; a quiet and haunting beauty like those John Taverner pieces he wants played "at the threshold of audibility"—an acme of quiet purity. I can't promise your mind will be blown, but your *soul* will be stirred and fed, and if you're not sure how to find your soul, don't worry; this wine will find it.  
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

**THE TRIO OF BLOC-PICKED MICRO-PARCELS**

The concept continues to be refined. This year there was a *bloc*-picking of the best parcel in the Zeltinger Himmelreich, which amounted to two fuders. "We intended to blend it into the general Himmelreich Spät, but when we tasted it we knew we had something special." Selbachs are also moving away from emphasis on the Prädikat levels of the wines, which I also applaud. In a sense it doesn't matter whether they're Spätlese or Auslese; they are the full picking of the ripest possible grapes at the best possible moment, and their business is not to fit into bureaucratic categories, but to tell the *truth* of the vintage.

- GSO-334 **2008 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese "Anrecht"** ++  
 This is a filet-piece of the vineyard, steep and south-facing, and I can attest from my many vineyard tromps that it gets the first instant of sun on a mid-March morning. There's a note of mirabelles suggesting a Nahe wine, and the complex interplay of both fruit and mineral is thrilling. It may be the kid brother of the trio but it's every bit as fascinating and valid.

GSO-319 **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese “Rotlay,” 6/750ml** +++

GSO-319H **2007 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese “Rotlay,” 12/375ml**

I’m going to quote from a letter Johannes sent to Lorena Ascencios of Astor Wines & Spirits when she asked him what “Rotlay” signified.

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

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

*“Rot” in German means “red” and some people interpret this as a sign for the high mineral contents of the soil which is visible where iron components, exposed to the elements, actually do rust. “Rodt,” in older German orthography, also stands for “cleared” in the sense of barren, stripped of vegetation, and some people say it’s the massive wall of rock and the surrounding outcroppings of rock, which are barren, resp. indicate a bald spot in the slope.*

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

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

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

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

My wine of the vintage last offering, and an astonishing wine; since 2004 this has had what I call the “1975 fragrance” (perhaps the most beloved of all recent Mosel vintages) as it does now again; there’s also a brashness of pure apple; but my god, the palate! Explosive, shattering intensity of what’s at core a tender thing, zen-tender, calm in confidence of its perfect firm strength; endlessly generous but without gushing or bellowing; a mentholated high-toned apple vein fills out the finish, which seems to spiral outward into eddies and whorls of complexity.

SOS: 3 (17-40 years)

GSO-338 **2008 Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling “Rotlay”** ++

This is absolutely naked terroir, the very bones and sinew of Riesling. What gave the 2007 the charge of neon terroir to ground its immense fruit is blatantly exposed in this magnificent 08. Outsized, transparent slate, boulders of it, as if you were licking the very rocks; the wine is extravagantly salty, barely perceptibly sweet, and there’s virtually nothing like it in the Mosel, as if a great vintner from *Riquewihr* decided to try his hand in the shale.

SOS: 2 (10-30 years)

GSO-316 **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese “Schmitt”** ++

GSO-316H **2007 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese “Schmitt,” 12/375ml**

Most of you know by now this is one of the old pre-1971 site-names that most wise and enlightened law made extinct. The underlying philosophy is explained in the note for the “Rotlay” later on, but suffice to say this is both a cult-wine and an *occult* wine if you believe terroir is just some kind of magic. Johannes, like many growers, is concerned pruning may have become too draconian, and so “in 2007 we pruned to two canes instead of one,” which is perhaps why this wine is “merely” a Spätlese. Jo again: “We wanted a drink, not a monument,” and indeed this is becoming one of the wine world’s most trenchant terroir statements; toasted slate, burning leaves, carbonized mineral, granular and dried-herbs and transparent. A quiet determined force of old buried rocks and grubs, invading some sort of supernatural apple.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (12-32 years)

GSO-339 **2008 Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling “Schmitt”** ++

Twiggier, more tensile, more *X-treme* if you will. Minty and fanatically slaty – you’re tempted to gargle with it; the moderate RS heightens the starkly beautiful stoniness. You could have had more prettiness, more “points,” but this way you get more honesty, and another, rarer form of beauty. Where Rotlay is stocky, Schmitt is taller and more sinewy. And if you taste these and still for some godforsaken reason don’t believe in terroir, all I have to say is *Schmitt on it and Rotlay*.

SOS: 2 (9-28 years)

### THE FROZEN STUFF

GSO-340H **2008 Zeltinger Himmelreich Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++

Selbach and Dönnhoff are the greatest Eiswein producers I know personally, and each knows something very few others know.

You probably don’t taste a lot of extremely young Eiswein, but often they have a weird horseradishy thing going that sometimes follows them into bottle. Somehow Johannes’ Eisweins are what Eiswein is *supposed* to be, a quintessence of the fruit of the vineyard. This one is delicate and ethereally clear, the purest wintergreen, lunar and still.

When they are this balanced at this age I’d suggest they’ll never enter a dumb or awkward stage. You can drink them now if you cherish the cherub fruit. The acids are far from spiky.

SOS: 3 (now-40 years)

GSO-341H **2008 Bernkasteler Badstube Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** ++

Like its sibling, this was picked between Christmas and New Year, and the acids are zingy but not at all aggressive; this is like the supernal 2001 in its eerie ultraviolet clarity and concentration; it hasn’t squandered its identity into a *genre* of “sweet wine;” it is the literal essence of Badstube, its flavors elevated to a mystical sublime intensity.

SOS: 4 (now-45 years)

### FISH LABELS

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

GSZ-028 The **Dry** wine in the clear bottle comes from Zeltingen, Kinheim, Erden, Kesten and Detzem Kabinett juice gently chaptalized, and it shows satisfying weight, minerality and stylishness. The ‘07 is wonderfully creamy.

GSZ-025 The **Kabinett** comes from 15 kilometres around Zeltingen. A lot of it is Zeltingen, Bernkastel-Kues and Kinheim fruit, some Detzem, some Brauneberg. This is bottled in the normal bottle and is quite simply delightful.

# erich jakoby-mathy

mosel • kinheim

The estate is changing its label and its name, to Jakoby pur, which translates to “Just-Jakoby.” The label is stark, almost denuded, as if to say Here we are. No frills. Onward!

Lots of fresh wind in Kinheim. I know I’ve said this elsewhere, but it’s one thing to take the reins of an estate in a glam-location, and quite another to do so in an out-of-the-way place like here. Stefan and Peter Jakoby are obliquely within the Selbach nexus, but that doesn’t automatically mandate their claiming the hardscrabble life of the steep slopes. Wine is a singular passion.

Normally I taste Jakoby’s range in the tasting room at Selbach, but in 2006 I was struck enough by their ambitiousness that I scheduled a visit to Kinheim. Far too much was made of this; it was my honor to visit, not theirs to receive me. But I was quite impressed and even roused by what I tasted. I was also grat-

ified to sit with two generations of Jakoby in the tasting room. Erich, whom I’ve known for many years now but who’s a really shy guy, held back as his sons (Peter does the cellar and Stefan the “marketing”) held forth, and as always I wondered at the dialogue of pride and humility such a thing entails. I have the sense it is codified somehow, as many old-world things are, but it’s no less moving for all that.

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



Peter, Erich, and Stefan Jakoby

Kinheim is a village stuck between Kröv on one side – much beloved of tourists for its *Nacktarsch* (bare-bottom) bottlings – and Erden on the other. In early editions of Johnson’s *Wine Atlas* this standard reference says “Kinheim begins a decline,” as indeed it does. There are no Grand Crus (though there are micro-parcels of near-GC quality and well-known as such by Mosel insiders) because the soils are lighter. Thus prices for Kinheimers are low. And low prices don’t stimulate thoughts of increasing production costs. It’s one thing to make highly visible grand Quixotic gestures like the outstanding Daniel Vollenweider estate is doing – if you can ask (and receive) stratospheric prices in return. It’s quite another

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

to labor in modest obscurity on behalf of an idea that isn’t remotely sexy, but every bit as passionate.

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

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

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

Jakoby-Mathy appeared in the 2007 *Gault-Millau* guide for the first time, a definite indicator it has arrived on the radar. Jakobys are proud of this, as they should be, and I am happy for them. Prices, as you will see, remain humble.

**jakoby-mathy at a glance:**

Erstwhile cellar-master at Selbach-Oster until father's illness called him back home. Thus: Selbach methods at off-the-beaten-track prices conspire to create **excellent wines and incredible values**. This is an estate that excels in high-acid vintages: 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, and 2007. They're always good and always an incredible value, but in years that suit them they become *unbelievable* value. I'm having trouble keeping the wines in stock, and this year will be no exception. There seems to be a *market* for steep-slope Mosels with ravishing vivacity at insanely low prices; go figure!

**how the wines taste:**

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

- GJM-073 **2008 Riesling "Balance"**  
CORE-LIST WINE. And **Bravo** for resurrecting this in-between style of Riesling that may well frustrate any clod who needs to squeeze wines into suffocating little boxes. It delivers what it announces – *Balance* – and it tastes delicious. This 08 has nice fullness and a fresh appealing Riesling aroma; an easy-going amenable glass of wine, this. Animated finish with a slaty pull to the back-palate.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (now-7 years)
- GJM-074 **2008 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Kabinett**  
Textbook Mosel golden-delicious apple and slate along with the yellow-roses Kinheim always seems to show; lacy veins of slate are playful, giving the structural lift and spring of steep-slope Riesling.  
SOS: 2 (4-14 years)
- GJM-075 **2008 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Spätlese**  
I have to guess at a note, as I wished to reduce the sweetness of the sample I was offered, but couldn't taste a prototype. Everything else seemed fine!
- GJM-076 **2008 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Auslese "Eulenlay"**  
The best section of the vineyard. There's a braeburn-apple thing along with the mirabelles, and either way this is a Mosel *gelée*, with smoky-malty botrytis and a tangy finish.  
SOS: 3 (7-23 years)
- GJM-043H **2002 Kinheimer Rosenberg Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** **+**  
I'm bringing this back because it's simply delicious, past its infant stage, and reasonably priced for its quality.  
SOS: 4 (8-27 years)



# meulenhof / erben justen ehlen

## mosel • erden

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

I am going to risk you rolling your eyes exasperatedly at me, because I'm gonna try to connect two things ostensibly so disparate as to be impossible. Still, away we go.

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

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

First come the snowdrops, as early as mid-February, and then the crocuses. The first daffodils begin sprouting. The air is softer now, but below there's still a keen scent of frost. Things gurgle, the first cress arises impossibly soft and green by the water. This is the season of *Merkelbach*.



Stefan Justen and daughter Barbara

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

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

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

This is the season of *Justen*.

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

(I always refer to the estate as JUSTEN, by the way, though I really should change this habit; I like a family's name more than a property's name if I get to choose. But it's confusing. Meulenhof (pronounced MOY-LEN-HOFE, not mew-len-hoff) it shall henceforth and forever be.)

Stefan Justen isn't what I'd call a voluble fellow. He is fairly shy, and very kind and loyal. His dad was the same way, but his dad's wines were similarly soft-spoken, while Stefan's are clamorously fruity. It's become a running joke between him and me, how we never seem to have the same favorites. I like the cool and slatey ones and he himself prefers the ones with more overt fruit. That said, Justen's wines in *general* are fruit-laden and extroverted—one of the reasons they “show” so well in competitive tasting formats—and even the “cool” ones are vamping sexy Mosel wines. And I must say, my own preferences are evolving in the direction of greater fruit, as I depart from the need to identify a clear set of *parts* in a wine as a cerebral exercise. I'm also noticing that wines with prominent fruit (as opposed to “fruity” wines) *age* better than the skelet-y wines I thought were more fascinating. Justen is a dramatic case in point. You may not find the N-th degree of Talmudically abstruse complexity in the young wines from here, but you will find no Mosel wines that taste lovelier with age. Sometimes, lots of age.

One year we had two wines, a lively and intricate 1979 Spätlese which was sensually all kinds of fun. The second wine, though, had us all silenced with perplexity and awe.

It wasn't a vintage whose signature I knew. I eliminated a range of unlikely choices and finally wrote a plausible guess. I thought it might be a light, atypically firm 1959. Stefan finally said “This wine is exactly fifty years old, a 1951 Auslese,” and we were melted with wonder. This is what I wrote in my notebook: “This 1951 Auslese is flashing a shiny green tooth of acidity and freshness and is gleaming and mysterious and haunting. It's like a shirt that's hung in a fragrant wooden closet, not worn for years, your father's perhaps, and one day you put it on and there it all is, him, his body, the time when he was alive, the boy you were then. We swim without cease in a strange bright ether. Light is gleaming and swaying always near us. If we breathe too deep we will die of a joy we aren't built to bear. Just a tiny gasp.”

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

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

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

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

I think I hit Stefan's 08s on a bad day for them, because my colleagues tasted them later and wondered why I'd been cool. I was skeptical of their claims until I went back to Strub a week later and saw how *his* wines had utterly changed, and so I suspect I've underrated these 08s from Justen. Still, if I must err then that's the error I'd prefer to make.

It's also possible the wines weren't sweet enough. I'll know when I see them again. Stefan said he'd dialed the RS down because the must-weights were lower, which makes sense until you remember the acids were correspondingly higher. Still, consider many of these notes to be tentative, faithful to the impression of the day, but far from definitive.

### Meulenhof at a glance:

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

### how the wines taste:

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

- GJU-111 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. There are two; #8, already bottled and arriving by the time you read this, and #104, which I tasted as a tank sample. With #8, the rich and heavy-fruited Treppchen aromas are there whereas the structure is tightly wound and coiled – this may have been bottle-shock. The finish lingers and is balanced and proportionate. There's an almost peppery note.
- #104 is the lot that's always *crackery*, and this one even shows a hint of cloves; it also shows juiciness and dialogue among apple, tarragon and licorice in an animate chatter that resolves into a long finish of *quetsch*, ginger and mineral.  
 SOS: 1 or 2 (depending on the lot) (6-19 years)
- GJU-105 **2007 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese** +  
 GJU-112 **2008 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese**  
 CORE-LIST WINE. We'll stay with the wonderful 07 as long as we can, then move to a lighter 08 that's spicy and edgy.  
 SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GJU-113 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese\*** +  
 This was the first clearly and unmistakably superb wine on the table of 08s, and things got much better from here. The wine is rich yet gloriously taut; classic flavor parameters, long and solid; rye-crackers and sautéed apples and coriander and a phosphorescent minty shimmer; tertiary notes of key-lime.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GJU-114 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese\* Alte Reben** ++  
 Old-vines is significant in this instance, as *flurbereinigung* tore up most of the Treppchen except for a few isolated parcels like this one, where the vines are now 60+ years old and ungrafted. And this wine is grandiose! A thoroughly complete ripe Treppchen fragrance, peach and cox-orange pippins; the palate is all that plus sea-salt and sassafrass; overtly expressive and generous with a ripe meringue of slate; an extroverted and unfussy Mosel beauty.  
 SOS: 2 (9-29 years)
- GJU-115 **2008 Erdener Prälat Riesling Spätlese**  
 Either I caught this wine in a distorted phase or it really is unusual; a complicated mélange of stones and herbs, as if Steiner Hund were made on the Mosel; this come-hither lady wants to show you her expertise in 12-tone chamber music....there's a ferocious integrity I can't help but like, with its no-quarter complexity.  
 SOS: 1 (7-22 years)



# alfred merkelbach

mosel • ürzig

It was a nice day when we arrived along the Mosel, and since my colleague Leif had never been there, I planned some time for a hike through the Würzgarten. There's a tractor-road that climbs quite steeply out of the village, and when it ends there's a dirt path that meanders high above the cliffs. You're surrounded by this lunatic steepness, and remote little parcels on such lonesome

terraces you'd think the workers would have to be lowered by helicopter. It's almost shocking when you see it for the first time. *Who had the idea that people should do this??*

We were descending and almost down when lunchtime was over and the workers were returning to the vineyards. A tractor was huffing its way up the road, and I thought I knew the profile of the two fellows in it. As we passed each other, lo it was true: Rolf and Alfred, going up to bind in the sunlight on the first nice day in weeks. We exchanged our surprised delighted greetings and said we'd see them tomorrow.

Near the end of the visit Alfred asked if we'd seen them on TV. Excuse me? Yes, he said, "They made a little program about us that showed on the 2nd channel," he said with an exquisite shy pride. And of course we'd like to see it.

It's a little 5-minute "lifestyle" piece. The hostess played the human-interest angle for all it was worth. Poor thing. It was rainy the day they shot, and she looked pretty forlorn in her slicker. Rolf and Alfred were "colorful" since they can't help themselves. The TV-lady interviewed their housekeeper, who was about to leave after twenty five years, to care for her sick husband. She was one of those stern-looking ladies who weep easily. Did she like working for Merkelbachs? "Yes, it was good here," she said. They quick-cut to Rolf and Alfred at their little table eating the dinner she'd cooked, a ceiling-shot that made them look very lonely. Or maybe it was I who was feeling lonely. I sat with my back to the room and cried, and hoped nobody could see me.

This silly little film was one of those things that are inadvertently beautiful. They tried so hard to play up the cutie-pie thing, the two little trolls of Ürzig, the "last of a dying breed," all the stuff I myself have also said. But not any more. There is a mystery and a dignity to those two lives that I will never know.



Alfred & Rolf Merkelbach

Since I've been ringing the bell at this house for twenty four years now, I will confess to the arising of a certain sentimentality. It's not based on the exchange of intimacies, but only on the passage of time, and on gratitude for durable things. It has little to do with how "good" a Merkelbach vintage happens to be, but a lot to do with their basic honesty and the loveliness of the culture they embody. I won't soon forget what stole over me one year, sitting at this very table, looking at a few photos Rolf and Alfred let me have.

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

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

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

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

I've known Rolf and Alfred for all these years now, but "known" isn't really the word. When I'm there we taste the wine and I enthuse and they giggle, and unless a Selbach is present there's hardly any schmoozing — sometimes even then. I'm sure Merkelbachs are glad of me but I have no idea what they make of me. Nor I of them, if I'm entirely candid. I mean, of course I adore them — they're adorable, after all — but as I look at this picture I find myself inside a mystery. Who are they, *what are their lives?*

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

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

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

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

Somewhere the conversation tuned to Zen (it always does when I'm around and the dirty jokes have all been told) and I thought how arcane and mysterious it all seems. Monks, retreats, silence, monasteries, all that jazz, and that strange calm no one seems to be able to explain. Immediately I thought of Rolf and Alfred, and something became clear to me: *They embody the Buddhist ideal of contentment. They are at home in their lives. They have what they need to be happy. And they are happy.*

I slowly realize the reason I find them so strangely beautiful is that they're entirely mysterious. I don't know them, really, at all, and I'm not sure who does. I don't know what they say to each other over breakfast, or in the vineyards, or how they decide what to watch on TV in the evening, and I have no idea what each of them thinks as he's falling asleep at night. I don't know how they drive a car; they've never had a dog, so you can't tell what kind of dog they might like or what name they'd give it, or if it would reveal some hidden vein of affection in its masters. This mystery haunts the wines, because the wines are so euphorically pure and expressive they seem to contain an inchoate love. I'm always saying they're pure-Mosel, which they are, but there's also a categorical *identity* about them you'd be tempted to call “honesty” except that honesty implies a choice, the option of being dishonest. These Mosel wines seem ineluctable, and the friendliness and beauty with which they are *charged* comes from two quiet, solitary men I can never know, but only honor.

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

And then I opened this text in the computer and there it was: *Merkelbachs!* Not a towering home-run in the bunch, but screaming line-drives that'd take your freakin' head off and bruise your hand through your glove if you were lucky enough to spear one.

After greetings are exchanged, we sit at the rather small round table in the parlor where Rolf or Alfred bring out the wines one by one. Each bottle represents a single cask of wine. They are presented not by name but by cask number.

It's self-evident to them that the vineyard is responsible for “at least eighty percent” of the quality of their wines, especially the “Lang Pichter” section of the Ürziger Würzgarten directly behind the winery. Mosel wine for them is like a dear old friend. “We like to hear that you can

drink a little more of our wines without any health problems,” says Alfred. I asked Alfred what his favorite type of wine was, purely theoretically, without respect to his own wines. “The flavors I look for are hard for me to describe,” he replied. “A good white wine should be identifiable by its nose, *must* be, in fact. A young wine may be a little acidulous, but a wine that's two, three years old has to have all its pieces working together: the acidity, the sweetness, the fruit and the vinosity.”

Merkelbachs probably refer to the old local names for their various tiny parcels when they speak among themselves, and the cask separation corresponds to those parcels. Just think of it for a second. We're dealing with a less-than-5-acre estate here, tended and harvested and vinified *bit by bit*. And Rolf and Alfred know these vineyards the way you and I know our children, and wine isn't something they *do* or something they *WORK AT*; wine is in the very pores of their skins, in their veins and capillaries. Nobody punches a clock. There aren't any meetings to discuss marketing. No computers in sight. Just the seamless weaving of work into life. Just wine.

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

As always, when we've finished tasting the new wines we're invited to drink an old one. Any requests, we were asked? Well, Leif was born in 1981 (a middling-good Mosel vintage but not the kind that people cellared) and he'd never had a Riesling from his birth-year. The Brothers were thrown off their plan – it turned out they had a bottle ready, a '90 I believe. It was duly poured and we all admired it. Alfred disappeared. In the chatter we hardly noticed his return, but he'd brought a bottle to present to Leif, an 81er. It was wrapped with cheap green paper so that it could be unfurled to show Leif his birth-year bottle. The little ceremony was unbearably touching. I thought of Alfred finding the bottle, cleaning it, possibly labeling it, then wrapping it, all to give to a young man he'd never met. He seemed surprised when Leif embraced him.

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

**merkelbach at a glance:**

most beloved Mosel agency.

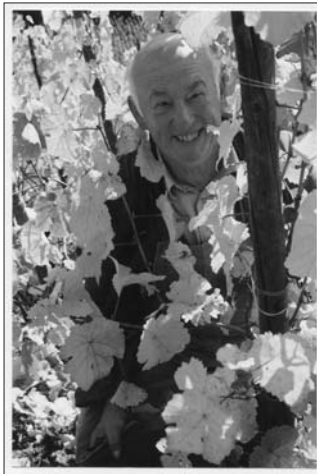
The clearest imaginable look into pure Mosel. Vivid, toe-curling clarity of fruit and terroir make this my

**how the wines taste:**

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

- GME-161 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett**  
A blend of fuders 7 and 8. The 08s here are racy and lighter than 07 was, but they have way more than enough fruit and more acidity than 07 did, for them as likes 'em better that way. #7 was a crunchy old-school Mosel, entirely delightful in its rural honesty. #8 has more polish. The blend is *perfect*, articulate slate over cool granular apples. I want to fall to my knees in gratitude for the honesty of this wine – Mosel as a wine of the *country*, without “polish,” purely itself.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-17 years)
- GME-160 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett** +  
Fuders 9 and 10 together. Oh-so-slightly riper and with a puff more sweetness; it's slightly more articulate, the slate is more determined and serious. Honestly you could combine the four casks, but they don't have a holding tank large enough! So this is the “Reserve” Kab.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-19 years)
- GME-162 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett** +  
Fuders 11 and 20. I found myself wishing they had a few duds in the mix, but everything was super-good. This was a sonnet of slate with delicate caraway and strawberry notes. Perfectly itself. These are the wines we say we want in this somber economy, cheap-and-cheerful and as quick as a hiccup.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-17 years)
- GME-163 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett** +  
Fuders 16 and 22. It has *quite* some perfume plus an adorable little elixir-note of salt and the Würzgarten *garrigue*. The richest and longest of the group of Kabinetts.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-20 years)
- GME-164 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #21** +  
Single-fuder. That's 110 cases, ideal for someone to just buy it all. This stand-alone cask shows wonderful substance and length, with a richer fruit now.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-19 years)
- GME-165 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett #23** +  
This is the most elegant and strawberried of them all; graceful, with a lovely mélange of high and mid tones.  
SOS: 1 (7-20 years)

- GME-166 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. There are four fuders total, which we combined in various blends in search of consistency. That said, there are slight differences among them. We'll ship #24 first, as it's the lightest. Then a blend of 19 and 17 which is more elegant (and kudos to Leif for suggesting it), and last #18, which is this year's Lang Pichter (the top parcel) and which is 08's nobility; refined, polished fruit, perfect upswell of slate, and a salty finish. It's the "sweetest" of them all but still as dry as most estates' Kabinetts. I'd have kept it separate, but see below....  
 SOS 1-2 (depending on which fuder) (8-23 years)
- GME-154 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese\*** +  
 Fuders 24-26 (blended) and a change of character; it shows mirabelle now yet is still high-toned and racy, but with a long, snappy, granular-fibrous texture; a riotously fruity Riesling that lifts a steely sun-on-snow brilliance.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GME-156 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese** ++  
 Fuders 16-17 (blended). I mean wow I mean . . . holy hanging chad, this is almost hyperactive; lavender and sassafrass-salty complexity, the best Merkelbach wine in years and maybe ever; just seductive; this is a fitness coach who pushes you past your gasping limits, but man, that runner's high!  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (9-25 years)
- GME-157 **2007 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*** ++  
 Fuder #18. Improbable penetration and richness, with kirsch and mint-on-viagra, and it's like one of those incredibly long icicles you can't imagine being formed, such is its brilliance. I asked Rolf and Alfred if they'd compare it to a 2001; "Oh no, this is much better," they replied, as well it may be.  
 SOS: 2 (10-27 years)



*Rolf Merkelbach*

I can't remember the last time I tasted cask samples here. Robert Eymael doesn't like to show them. The last few vintages I've had to hedge my notes on account of bottle-sickness, but the 08s, in bottle 2-3 weeks when I tasted, were bizarrely fabulous. I can't account for it – they should have been closed and yowling – but if I'm right this is the best Christoffel vintage since 2001, and honestly I can't recall a better one, ever. Hans-Leo's style had been growing more and more calligraphic, as if each year he wrote his flavors with a finer-tipped pen. I also sense, but cannot state as fact, that Eymael cherishes the stylistic distinction between Christoffel's wines and his own from Mönchhof, which are rather more baroque.

No matter how jaded I fear I've gotten, wines like these have the power to rouse me. They're

dangerous, these silky vixens. Yet as filigree as they are, after the fifth or sixth one they begin to consolidate into an impression of remarkable depth and solidity. Their flavors may fall like little flakes, but they settle like big snow.

It's always a challenge to taste here, especially if it's the final appointment that day. There are simply *too many* great wines. Early in the sequence the palate becomes alert; it sniffs beauty in the air. Later as you ascend through realms of richness, the sensitized palate feels as if its nerve-endings are tingling. Suddenly it isn't just wine anymore. It's as though ALL OF BEAUTY is flooding into your heart. As you grope for words to convey this strange experience you find the only words are mushy, and maybe you feel a little embarrassed. But don't. There's a rigor beneath all that showering loveliness that you can trust. Beauty is real, and has nothing to do with sentiment.

"The vineyards, the grapes, play the decisive role in determining quality," says Christoffel. "Our vinification isn't so different from the norm. We lay high emphasis on

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

freshness and raciness. At home we drink everything from dry to sweet, from QbA to Auslese; it only has to be *good!* It should be spicy, fruity and lively, with noticeable acidity. I'd like to think our customers like to return to our wines after drinking others, and that they feel good the next morning even if they've peered a little too deeply into the glass the night before!" Christoffel identifies the section of the Ürziger Würzgarten that lies among the rocks as his best.

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

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

THE MATTER OF STARS: the whole star thing came about because Mosel growers had to find a way of distinguishing the pecking orders of their various casks of Auslese. You can't describe them in terms like "Feine



Auslese” or “Feinste Auslese” any more, and that makes sense; there are already too many rungs in the quality ladder. The stars — or any other glyph a grower might care to employ — are a quasi-legal expedient, and a better alternative than asking consumers to memorize A.P. numbers or capsule designs.

For many of us this presents a problem. As soon as you establish a hierarchy you inadvertently push people toward the “best,” or the perceived-best. That’s because we seem to see things from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. Nobody wants to tell his customers “I have the second-best cask!” No, you can’t hold your head up unless you have the big kahoona. It’s a truly shitty way to look at wine. It has in fact nothing to do with wine, only with a commodity that *happens to be wine*. That’s partly why I suggested to Hans-Leo and Robert that we include the old parcel-name for each of these Auslesen, so as to undermine the whole pecking-order aspect of the thing, and return it to the soil where it belongs. The idea wasn’t met with enormous enthusiasm, alas.



Hans Leo Christoffel

#### christoffel at a glance:

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

#### how the wines taste:

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

#### GJC-173 2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett #9

A single fuder, kept separate because it’s the drier of two bottlings. But man this wine is fun. Chunkier and more yummy, wonderfully juicy and walnuty and a living bitch to spit; an old(er) school Mosel style I just can’t get enough of.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (6-22 years)

#### GJC-174 2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett

+

CORE-LIST WINE. Amazingly filigree and lacey; classic blackberry and sassafrass; as deft and articulate as any vintage I can remember.

SOS: 2 (6-22 years)

#### GJC-175 2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese

++

CORE-LIST WINE. This has, no exaggeration, *astonishing* minerality, paired with the purest snap of granny-smith apples and searchingly complex slate; it’s not a noisy wine but in its whispery melodies are lovely mysteries of terroir, and of beauty.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

- GJC-176 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 All playful melody now; *mara de bois* and wild lavender and hyacinth; here's where I started wondering when I'd ever had a better group of young Christoffels. As eerily fluorescently buzzingly *alive* as Hans-Günter Schwarz's wines; silky little filaments of extract; this is what refinement means, and complexity, and an electric density of flavor with hardly a bit of alcohol. My god. . . .  
 SOS: 2 (8-27 years)

### AN ASTONISHING COLLECTION OF AUSLESEN

*Yeah I know people aren't buying Auslese, but I'm not offering many, and I promise you, these are as great as German Riesling can be.*

- GJC-177 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*, 6/750ml** ++  
 GJC-178 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\*, 6/750ml** ++  
 GJC-179 **2008 Erdener Treppchen Riesling Auslese\*\*, 6/750ml** +++  
 GJC-180 **2008 Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Auslese\*\*\*, 6/750ml** +  
*All to be sold in cases of 6/750ml*

The 1-star always hails from the same parcel, a remote and scary set of terraces among the cliffs called "Wertgarten," and it always seems to have a *para*-slate nose as if the slate were toasted. The wine's like one of those receivers that picks up interstellar magnetic disturbances; I mean, what is there remotely in the world to compare with a thing like this, let alone "equal" it? Such wines shouldn't have to wait to be used; they compel their own occasion.

The 2-star gets better each year. Once it was the "fruity" wine of the sequence, but no more; this is by far the best-ever, with more mineral density than I've ever seen, an ecstatic expression of slate and strawberry that will light up your entire being. It's denser and plumper than the 1-star but still speaks with surreal clarity and diction.

This year's Treppchen *is the best young wine I've ever had at Christoffel*; it's cooler and more silvery than the overwhelming 07, but no less profound; indeed, this is an *incantation* of slate, an ur-Treppchen, the very primordial jolt of carbon that ended in this concatenation of nuts and slate and apples; you can open the scroll and the text is there, the eternal riddle. And part of the answer is you, and the wonder you feel at the voices of these old gods.

With the 3-star Würzgarten we're back among the living, back in sensual life – and how! As melting and delicate as this always is, mirabelles and cox-orange pippins in a *confiture* of heartrending restraint and clarity.

"This is always from the same parcel, and it cannot produce more than forty hectoliters per hectare," says Hans-Leo. "We've had at least Spätlese from this site in every vintage except 1991. I could make these wines heavier, but it goes against my philosophies. The day I can't make wines like these any more is the day I'll pack it in." It's down below, to the right of the sundial, in case you want to locate it.

SOS: 3 (10-35 years) for all

I keep thinking of shade images, but shade encased in warmth, like a pocket of cool air in the deep shade of a summer forest on an otherwise hot day. It was the same the last years too, tasting Martin Kerpen's 2006s and '07s, and it was so welcome and so improbable I felt an immense *relief*, to drink something that wasn't **pressing** down on me. And now again, this delicious coolness. I don't suppose Martin's "doing" anything radically different in the vineyards or the cellar, but there's a new fineness about these wines, and this I know I don't imagine.

Everyone in Wehlen stands to some extent in the shadow of Manfred Prüm, yet I don't really see anyone trying to emulate the style. There are good wineries making splendidly steely-mineral

wines — you know who they are — and then there is Kerpen, who stands stylistically off to the side. The wines, in fact, resemble Selbach's more than any neighbors in Wehlen; verdant, shady, woody, vinous, mid-palate density, lots of soul.

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

Some of what's

happened at Kerpen reveals the prosaic truths which lie beneath much wine romance. The quality of his wines improved significantly when Martin bought his new house along the Mosel, and completed the cellar. He used to have to make the wines in weeny widdle cran- nies in several different locations; now

he's not only all under one roof but he's got ample space besides.

So tell us, Martin, how is it done? "I don't know, exactly! You have to work *clean*. My wife wishes I were as clean in the house as I am in the cellar. Your quality is 70% the vineyard, 25% the cellar. The other 5% is luck." I would agree, but the proportion of luck can be (and has been) diminished by the most stringent possible selection in the vineyard. Martin likes clear-tasting wine, therefore

- **Vineyard area: 9 hectares**
- **Annual production: 7,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**



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



Martin Kerpen

**kerpen at a glance:**

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

**how the wines taste:**

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

- GKE-127 **2008 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese Trocken**  
*A sponti*, with its typical carob aromas along with key-lime and the rye-cracker aspect of Domprobst; this is a sinewy, masculine wine with a fine complex slatiness; it's tensile but not lean, it's just the twig and moss side of Domprobst, and as good a dry Mosel as I've ever tasted.  
 SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again from 8-13 years)
- GKE-121 **2008 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett Feinherb (Artist Label)**  
 More Graachers than usual from here, as 08 seemed to favor this deeper-soiled village; green apples and kaffir-lime aromas lead into a seamlessly balanced and graceful palate that's full of wry salty charm. Another *perfect* food-wine, complex threads of slate and balsam and apple-skins.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-12 years)
- GKE-122 **2008 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. The first bottling, and this is *delicious*. The very paradigm of Sonnenuhr, vanilla and key-lime, and of Martin's leafy green-shade style. The plus is for its sheer winsome cuddly self.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-14 years)
- GKE-124 **2008 Bernkasteler Bratenhöfchen Riesling Spätlese**  
 All the Späts are good here. This is the most exotic, with the classic flint and *kirsch*, long and lavish and spicy.  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GKE-123 **2008 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Wow, what's up with these Graachers? It must be the mineral density of 08, but this is the fruit of legend, paired with an irresistible tensile slate and a lavish apple-pie fruit-butter-crust – a super-sexy Mosel.  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GKE-126 **2008 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese\*(Artist Label)** +  
 CORE-LIST WINE. We do love the label with its insouciant little bird in the boat. And let the record show we were using this label *long* before the whole ghastly critter thing. (I'd like to have a *piranha* label on a wine called “Eat Me.” Don't tell me you *wouldn't* buy it, you sick freak.) Anyway, for the second year running we opted to *lighten* this wine up. I don't really want a small Auslese here; I want the utmost expression of Sonnenuhr, plus or minus 10° Oechsle and with or without botrytis. And man, this is perfect Mosel wine. If you love it, *this is why*. The fresh breath of the river and the hills, crisp and lissome.  
 SOS: 2 (8-24 years)

So I arranged to meet this remarkable gentleman from Sweden, who took the family portrait you see nearby, because we both know Willi Schaefer (among other beloved growers we have in common) and we'd never met each other. So we were there, and many were the yucks and tit-ters. Or tits and yuckers. Something along those lines. Willi observed the occasion of this momentous Swedish-American "summit-of-the-slate" with a '67 Graacher Himmelreich Feine Auslese. This 40 year-old Riesling with its 8% alc was paler than a 1 year-old CalChard, and an atypically limpid, genial citizen of what had been a brooding botrytis vintage. It was of course still *fresh* and fruity, with the color of a dandelion and lovely aromas of jasmine and chamomile; a still, shady garden, dear and birdy and cool, not a blow-you-away wine but a friend-for-life wine. Like almost all of Willi's wines, gentle loving beings.

There's another baby on the way, and Christoph looks very pleased. We looked at family photos, and my Karen Odessa almost cried at one of Willi and his tiny grandson on the tractor together. You know, you try to be open-eyed, to convince yourself there are dark veils of shadow and *thanatos* even around these happy-looking lives. You don't want to sentimentalize them. But you sit in the house with father and son and you look at baby-pictures and you see everyone glowing just-because – I mean, why wouldn't you glow? And you find yourself, your miserable skeptical self, thinking "Life is supposed to be like this, and sometimes is." And a dopey sort of desire visits you. *Pare it down. It isn't that hard to be happy.*

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

After we finished drinking it I commiserated with Willi. "I feel for you when I drink a wine like this," I said.



*The Schaefer family!*

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

In fact I have never once had an "old"-tasting bottle from Willi, and this lovely '59 was no exception: *It is*

- **Vineyard area: 3.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,600 cases**
- **Top sites: Graacher Domprobst and Himmelreich, Wehlener Sonnenuhr**
- **Soil types: Devonian slate**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

*Graacher Himmelreich Auslese, the same parcel from which the best '76 Auslese came, directly next to Domprobst. As always, eerily green still, a few flecks of yellow but no gold; fresh aromas of lime and slate dance with beeswax and balsam. The palate is sappy with a lovely undertone of grain, pine, tilleul at its highest form; almost unnervingly limpid and fresh. Willi says "You taste the heaviness of the vintage," but all I taste is this comely transparent grace. The finish is searching but the wine is Spring-gentle and sparrow-voiced. BLESS this culture, who brought and still bring the world these gentle, helpful, self-effacing works of beauty.*

I'll never forget one time in the old days I took a friend here who was just getting into wine. It was a perfect Spring day, and Willi's garden looked inviting. "Would you like to sit in the garden with a bottle and relax awhile?" he asked. There were other visitors and his father was entertaining an old client. "Sure," I said. I purchased a half-bottle of '75 Domprobst BA, and we sat in the shade listening to the birds, looking straight up at the impossibly steep Domprobst. The air was sweet with blossom. The wine was sublime. We were nearly in tears. Then suddenly a tenor voice started singing, some chipper little lied about Spring. My friend stared at me and we both laughed. "No!" he said, "You staged this, right? It isn't actually happening, right?"

At this point Willi and I are boisterous together and in fact it's pretty silly I must admit. But this is truly the world's nicest guy and I'm just giddy to see him, and we

laugh and laugh. But laughing isn't all we do. We've known each other 3 decades now, and one respects the dignity of such a clump of time.

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

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

When we finished tasting one year, Willi brought out a bottle of the celestial 1975 Domprobst Auslese, which is about as good a Mosel wine as has ever been

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

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

There are fewer wines in 08, but that's not a comment on the quality of the vintage. Rather a sensible choice to blend here and there and keep the offering at a sensible size, especially after the many 07s. It's a fine, lovely vintage here, but smaller than 07, and we won't get nearly as much wine. Still, I'm too happy to snarl.

#### schaefer at a glance:

never enough wine.

#### how the wines taste:

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

For many tasters, these are the *Ne Plus Ultra* of Mosel wine, and they have attracted an almost religious following. Thus my most frustrating agency, as there is

#### GWS-165 2008 Estate Riesling

A big fragrance and a tangy slatey racy palate. Forthright and salty, not as polished as the *Prädikatsweine*, but you can also knock it DOWN, man, heedlessly and irresponsibly, without feeling guilty for the attention you failed to pay. So slurp away. SOS: 2 (now-12 years)

#### GWS-166 2008 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett

Now this is another story. There will be a quiz! It's a *lissen-UP* wine, asking and rewarding every attention you opt to pay; sleek filaments of slate and a happy blast of cinnamon and clove; racy and yet gentle. SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

+

- GWS-168 **2008 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett**  
 Another *cool* beauty; skeins of slate, lemon balm and orchids; this is what I hoped 08 would be: true Kabinett.  
 SOS: 2 (7-16 years)
- GWS-167 **2008 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett** +  
 Another wonderful brisk 08; more herbs and green apples now, and a kick of slate that's almost spicy.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-21 years)
- GWS-153 **2007 Graacher Himmelreich Riesling Kabinett #2**  
 Fuder #2; a wonderful fragrance and crispy classical appley fruit, a darling wine with so much cut you'll drool like a fool.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (9-27 years)
- GWS-169 **2008 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #10** +  
 What a fragrance! It comes on with a lemony coolness and broadens into an amazingly flowery mid-palate that broadens even more into a sensationally ripe moonglowpear finish with salty rivulets of terroir; a deliberate yet dramatic crescendo.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GWS-170 **2008 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Spätlese #5** ++  
 Extravagantly fruity aromas with the first stirrings of botrytis; the palate is obliquely stony until the explicit slate on the finish; there's a certain dressed-up glamour-puss thing about this wine, with its lavish piquant fruit, yet it's also digitally brilliant. Am I making any sense? No? Good!  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GWS-171 **2008 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Auslese, 6/750ml** ++  
 Extraordinary Auslese; mostly golden dehydrated berries and also with impeccable botrytis; the slate never lets up and the fruit quality is restrained and sublime. How can this be?? The fruit isn't in-your-face but it seems to be everywhere *else*, omnipresent, it seems to coat you but not cover you.  
 SOS: 3 (12-35 years)



Our hero's on the move, up to 2.7 hectares. I'm so glad he decided to do it. He's also climbing in critical acclaim, and I feel very good and only a tiny bit smug.

Even more heartening, Andreas wants to focus exclusively on his native village of Dhron. This young man seems to have been born knowing about things like identity and connection, and I'm touched by his dedication to his home soil, not least because Dhron is rather an underdog among great Mosel places.

He bottled early this year, not for philosophical reasons but because his 07s were sold out. He never racked the 08s, but bottled them directly off the gross lees. The wines are amazing, which is hardly a surprise any more.

It took me (too) many years to learn there'd never be enough time to have the kind of soul-searching conversations about wine philosophy I wanted to have with my growers. Also, that such conversations couldn't be contrived, but needed to happen spontaneously. Yet I wanted to know what made a grower tick, and so I created a little questionnaire which I leave behind for the grower to answer at his/her leisure. The results go into my catalog text, augmented by bon mots which actually do arise in conversation.

Andreas Adam is an intense young man, and meeting him for the first time it was subdued by his old-world politeness. But answering my written questions in solitude seems to have unleashed the beast. Adam is both his



Andreas Adam

own man — very much so — yet also emblematic of the new wave in German wine-think. I don't agree with everything he espouses, but his bedrock passion is stirring. I think of that instant of ignition when I tasted my first Adam wine, and it all starts to make sense.

Here's some of what he wrote:

"The hardest work of vinifying a great wine takes about nine months, from February till the beginning of November — rather

like a pregnancy — during which time we let what happens happen, without disturbing or perturbing nature, but rather we watch over and work in harmony with nature's larger power."

"An aside: I'm sitting here writing on our terrace

- **Vineyard area: 2.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: under 1000 cases**
- **Top sites: Dhroner hofberg**
- **Soil types: Weathered slate with clay**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**

under a blue sky. Nearby sits a fallow vineyard, to which a vintner is carrying chemical fertilizer. . . .

"I renounce any and all such treatments. I sustain my vineyards by intensive soil-work (I was ploughing this morning; it smells so wonderfully of fresh earth and slate) to bring the essential nutrients up from the primary rock, the natural compost of a vineyard. This completion of the bond between the elemental soil and the work of the vintner is another piece in the puzzle of terroir."

Well-said!

"We love our Dhronhofberger, in its lovely quiet side-valley, which leaves stress behind and is out of the stream of all which is trendy in German wine-growing; today Cabernet, tomorrow Sauvignon Blanc."

One year we took a small excursion up into the Hofberger to try and grok the ambience and look at Andreas' new parcels. Hofberg is one of those sacred spaces, I think. It isn't merely symbolic that it faces away from the river-current. One has a 180° view from it, but it isn't a grand aspect — rather a sweet, almost intimate one, of little valleys and old houses with slate rooftops. It is also very quiet, except for the many birds. A perfect place for a thoughtful introvert to work, I think. And what flavors come from this ground! Andreas says: "Even young it often shows a striking exotic fruit, subtle spice, *wild* slate aromas and a finesse of acidity."

I agree. The only reason this site isn't front-and-center among Mosel Grand Crus is the lack of a flagship-estate — until now. Hofberger is one of those Mosel sites

with *complex* slate, in this case with a vein of clay and with a measure of the sandy slate-variant of the Nahe. It is both archetypal Mosel yet also extra-Mosel; it sometimes makes me think of Dönnhoff's Brücke.

Next I ask about terroir. My question is specific: do you believe that components in your soil create flavors in your wines?

"I think in Germany we see terroir as a unity of grape, climate, soil, and the mentality of the person who works the vineyard. But the essence of that mentality is a knowledge that the geology of his terrain indeed creates the flavors in the grapes which grow there. Thus if you consider Riesling from blue-gray slate from the Goldtröpfchen, in its youth it's herbacious, with delicate lime fragrance and mineral-salty on the palate. Contrast the Dhronhofberger Tholey, with its brittle blue clay-slate mixed with quartz and *Klimmer*, whose riesling tastes almost as if it emerged from a tropical garden; maracuja, papaya, pineapple and with a slight breeze of honey and caramel. Here on the Mosel we have lovely variations of slate and exposure."

And vinification, I ask? Anything which separates you from the prevailing norm?

"Actually we do nearly nothing differently than did our forefathers in the '20s: small yields of late-harvested Riesling grapes are gently handled and pressed (we still press some in an old wooden press); after an open must-oxidation the wines fall bright at cool temperatures in stainless steel, and later ferment in old wooden Fuders. **Finito!** That's all, nothing else, just wait for the wild yeasts to begin their work. No must or mash sulfuring, no enzymes, no gelatin, no added vitamins, no bentonite — **pure nature!**

To the extent we employ technology it is only in the service of cleanliness."

I'm curious to know what kinds of wines a grower drinks at home in private, i.e. what he drinks for pleasure. Adam says, "A wide range of Grüner Veltliners, which I prefer to Grand Crus in white Burgundy; Rieslings from great sites in our region whether dry or sweet; vintage Champagnes; the occasional rose-scented Muscat from Süddeistermark or a smoky-flinty Loire Sauvignon from someone like Dageneau." Nice to know if I were ever quarantined at Adam's there'd be plenty to drink.

He has a telling comment to make about deacidification: "A great Riesling with a rather high level of acidity is no catastrophe on the palate; it just needs time. But if we ever needed to deacidify, we'd have done it before the grapes ferment, via reduced yields, intensive soil and leaf work, air-flow management, sun-exposure management, and finally a selective harvest where we only pick ripe fruit. I can get aromas from the skins in the press-house, and also reduce acids by must-oxidation, which also eliminates undesirable tannins and phenols."

Or, one might add, you can take it easy and just dump in some chemicals.

Finally, as I run through the basics of his vineyard and cellar work, I need you to understand the extent to which this is emblematic of the new thinking in quality-

minded German vintners, a thinking which has undergone a 180-degree turn in the last twenty years. These basics are:

- Exclusively organic fertilizing
- Green-harvest to reduce yields
- Hand-harvesting only
- Must-clarification by gravity (no centrifuges or filters)
- Ambient wild-yeast fermentations (There are many shades of opinion on this question.)
- Long lees-contact (4 months, followed by another 6 weeks on the fine-lees)
- No dosage (I happen to disagree with this but applaud the purism which prompts it)

He had a practicum at Heymann-Löwenstein, a celebrated estate in Wonnegau who was the first to break free of the whole ripeness-pyramid thing. I gather he's worked at Van Volxem too. His wines are at least as good as those of his mentors. Maybe even better. And Adam has arrived on the scene: Gault-Millau anoints him an *Aufsteiger* (literally "one who's on the way up") saying "Such fine Riesling expression, with minerality bound to clarity, elegance and depth is not so often found on the Mosel." And a private newsletter published by a Mr. Werner Elflein had this to say about Adam's '06s: "It speaks for the know-how of Andreas Adam ("My Rieslings are only allowed air and sulfur.") that even in the difficult botrytis-vintage of 2006 he used no carbon or other fining materials."



Friend, if you've tasted these wines, you'll know why I care so much.

With the first taste of the first wine I knew it; here was someone to be reckoned with. There was simply more going on here, more weight, more expression, more seriousness, more drive. How was this estate under the radar?

As we tasted through his range (7 wines) it was unequivocally clear to me: *This is a star in the making*. I decided to list the wines before I knew their prices!

**adam at a glance:**

Tiny, grower making some of the longest, most exotic, most old-school Mosel wines in existence. Stellar across the board, and for the quality, far from expensive.

**how the wines taste:**

They taste *deep* and leesy, and they never seem sweet and almost never seem *dry*, even when they are in fact either sweet or dry. Flavors are both thick and opalescent, and one is aware of a sense of stature: this is immediate. It's self-evident these are wines of profound terroir; it's their *raison d'être*. And for me it's a great pleasure to *finally* offer you Dhroners which embody the greatness of that land.

I have a powerful connection here, because the first wine I ever drank which fascinated me was a 1971 Dhronhofberger Kabinett. Till then I'd been drinking fruity wines which were more or less sweet or polished or balanced, but it was supermarket cheapies. The Dhroner was the first wine with a haunting flavor, something more than grapey, something that didn't pander, something that just *was*. So I always looked for Dhroners, and for awhile I found them from the Bischöflichen Weingüter, vintages from the '60s and '70s. Then quality slipped, and there weren't any other sources. Dhron itself is sleepy and the land is steep and no one seemed to come along - till now.

GAD- 026 **2008 Dhroner Riesling**

50-50 Fuder and stainless steel; a nearly perfect dry – or “dry” – Riesling, with 15 g.l. of RS which it doesn't show; explicitly slatey and fennel-y, you feel like you could melt away the liquid and make sea-salt from the residue; it's long and its length is *mineral*; its richness is a kind of Calvinist grudging (“Life is hard business, boy.”) while the lissome fruit skips away and frolics.

SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again from 12-17 years)

GAD-027 **2008 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Feinherb**
**+**

The word *intricate* was invented to depict a wine like this; a Rubik's cube of structure, each little piece visible and discernible as they dart around in a kind of spasmodic rush; each speck and gleam of slate arranged in a 1000-piece mosaic of nuance. A rare and difficult kind of gorgeousness.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (2-16 years)

GAD-028 **2008 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett**
**++**

CORE-LIST WINE. This is becoming reliably among the 1-2 best Kabinetts in the offering. A wonderful aroma, ur-Mosel as its always been, bothsleek, flowery and fervidly mineral, with carob-y *sponti* tones; purple lilacs too, andkaffir; the finish is hauntingly intricate, the mid-palate fruit is plump and ample but themineral is lacy, a web veining its way through the wintergreeny farewell.

SOS: 2 (6-22 years)

GAD-029 **2008 Dhron Hofberg Riesling Spätlese**
**++**

Now the fruit rushes to the fore; the mineral is just as brash but the fruit insists on playing too; talc, lemon-blossom and mirabelles – certain old-bush *Wu-Yi* teas smell like this – and a salty wash comes on that makes this hard to spit. In its precise, piercing way this is entirely seductive.

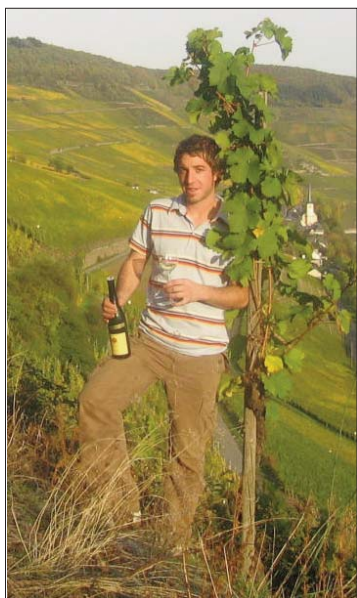
SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

The Moselaners describe the citizens of this village as “rich kids” because everyone wants their wine and will pony up accordingly. And here’s an estate giving their wines all the time they need, not caring to make wines that will flatter the palate five months after the vintage. This I think is known as integrity.

Something seems to be up at Reuscher Haart. Maybe it’s the influence of Bernd and Mario Schwang, Dad Hugo’s two sons (who look like members of Limp Bizkit) or maybe it’s just one of those things. In any case, the past few vintages reminded me of the majestic 1990s and brilliant

1993s. Even the 2003s, about which I was dubious at first, have firmed up wonderfully with bottling, and I now feel my first impressions were misleading. Then along came the stunning 2004, and this estate is really showing me something yet they haven’t abandoned their fundamental style, Mosel wine in the form of a heavy suede jacket; if anything they’ve renewed it in even stronger form.

These are Piesporters as Justen might make them; corpulent, leesy and old-fashioned. I really shouldn’t do the cask-tasting thing here at all. The sulfury aromas of some young Mosels are often stubbornly present. Eventually you get a kind of x-ray vision with cask samples, but these wines aren’t really made for our frantic world. SHOW WELL! KICK ASS! SELL THROUGH! WHAT’S NEXT? Not like that. Maybe ours are the last generations



Mario Schwang

who’ll live in microwave-time. It really isn’t conducive to savoring the wine experience, that mentality. Do you suppose there’s an incipient movement toward a more *attentive* mode of living? Not ouiji-board goopy, but just pausing long enough to *notice* stuff? I hope so, or wine as we know it is doomed. Life as we know it is doomed.

I have a stormy relationship with Piesporters. When I first encountered Reuscher-Haart’s wines, I thought I had found my Piesport pie-in-the-sky. In their acid-drenched, thick, leesy style I found for the first time stunningly detailed and authoritative wines from these maddening slopes **that didn’t need to be archly modern in order to succeed.**

Talking with Hugo Schwang confirmed certain thoughts I had formed about his wines. “We use no cul-

- **Vineyard area: 4.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 2,800 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Domherr, Falkenberg, and Treppchen**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 93% Riesling, 5% Müller-Thurgau, 2% Regent**

tured yeasts,” he said. “If your harvest is clean and you let your must clarify by settling, the natural yeasts will give you a wine with more character.” This made sense; Schwang’s wines lacked the finicky refinement cultured-yeast wines can display. He leaves his wine on its primary lees for a remarkable length of time: two to three months is common, though less-ripe wines will be racked earlier. Bottling is rarely earlier than May or June. “I’d personally say that these are the most important factors for high quality,” he says. “First, your vineyard, its soil and its exposure. Second, your yields, i.e. your pruning. Third, the timing of your harvest. Fourth, the selectivity during harvesting. Fifth, gentle and natural handling of the wine. We don’t use any sorbic acid and we never blue-fine. I want my personal enthusiasm as a winemaker to be mirrored in the wines I make.”

Last year the talk was all about organic. In essence, said Schwang, the estate is nearly all the way there, so why not take that small final step? What did we think? I said we applauded organic viticulture as a matter of principle, but we could offer no commercial incentive. “I hope you’ll do it,” I said, “because it’s *worth doing*. But that doesn’t mean I’ll think less of you or your wines if you don’t.”

In fact the Mosel is among the most difficult regions to work strictly organically, yet the so-called *lutte raisonnée* of France, known as “integrated” agriculture in Germany, has taken a firm hold. In essence this stops short of certifiably organic but encourages organic as a preference as much and as often as possible.

I had a moment during the conversation wherein I realized, Hugo Schwang isn't the most voluble heart-on-his-sleeve producer in my portfolio, but I have probably

underestimated how thoughtful and passionate he really is. Mario's settling in seems to have turbo-charged the energy here, and this looks like an estate on the move.

### reuscher-haart at a glance:

Leesy, old-fashioned Piesporters that need time. Great resonance and depth in the best examples.

### how the wines taste:

At their best one can see why they're held in such renown. Schwang's wines can have impressive, almost majestic corpulence without being fat, plus a positive depth and stuffing from the lees. When that happens the Piesport fruit shows its **raison d'être**; an almost lurid court bouillon of bewitching fragrances and flavors; patchouli, passion fruit, bergamot, mango. And all in a voodoo voluptuousness that's the wine equivalent of an erotic trance. We should have to get our PARENTS' permission before drinking them. My parents would have refused!

#### GRH-059L **2008 Piesporter Riesling, 1.0 Liter**

This combines what used to be two wines (from the not-significant sites Treppchen and Falkenberg) into one handy-dandy Liter, and this is just fine, a zippy and tangy wine with the 08 length and grip; it skips up to you.... "Let's make *friends!*" That kind of wine. SOS: 2 (now-7 years)

#### GRH-061 **2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

Much as I liked the 07s here (and I did and still do), 2008 is the kind of year that's very kind to Piesport; it adds form and core to the wines, which can sometimes seem to sprawl. In this case it's *apple* that's prominent, not the voodoo-fruit, though a tangerine note is also present. There's lots of juicy yet solid substance and an almost peppery note on the slatey finish. SOS: 2 (5-17 years)

#### GRH-062 **2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese #12**

Again it smells like a *Mosel* wine, not like a séance; cox-orange with a hint of cinnamon; seriously juicy and somehow solidly plump. Hugo agrees with the parallel to 1993 – a superb Piesport vintage – and this is like eating a wedge of apple and one of nectarine in the same bite. SOS: 2 (7-23 years)

#### GRH-060 **2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese #10** **+(+)**

The best young wine I've tasted here in fifteen years; it tastes *steeper* than #12, more elemental and purely fruity; riotous golden-delicious and honeydew aromas; massive vinosity and fruit solidifies into a stiff wave of slate on the finish; wonderfully rich yet deft and articulate. SOS: 2 (8-25 years)

Sometimes I'm in so close I don't really see what *effect* the wines have, and it was good to be reminded (by some fulsome Spectator reviews) how well these charming wines can *show*.

I wonder who actually discovered whom. Dieter Hoffmann did a one-year *stage* at the German Wine Information Bureau, where he says he met me once, and maybe he did. My hopes were high, based on two samples of 1999s I'd tasted with Selbachs. These were strikingly vivid wines, and I heard myself thinking a new star was on the horizon.

Dieter wants to produce wines of fruit and fullness. The clean must (gravity-settling, twice) sits on the skins 2 hours before pressing and after fermentation the wine sits on its lees until February/March "because you get the most optimal aging-potential when the wine has time on the gross lees."

There are nine hectares of Riesling, mostly in Piesport, also in two unheralded but fascinating sites, Maringer Honigberg and Klüsserather Bruderschaft. All pumping is gravity-produced. There's some whole-cluster pressing but not all, some cultured-yeast fer-



*The Hoffmanns*

- **Vineyard area: 9.2 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Piesporter Goldtröpfchen, Maringer Honigberg, Köwericher Laurentiuslay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 67% Riesling, 28% Müller-Thurgau, 5% Regent**

mentations but not all. None of this is surprising; it is the typical system for making crispy-clear wines in the current idiom. The cellar's all stainless steel now.



**hoffmann-simon at a glance:**

Wonderful new discovery making fine Piesporters at sensible prices! Modern, spritzzy style closer to Kesselstatt than Reuscher-Haart.

**how the wines taste:**

They're not as leesy-plump as Reuscher-Haart but more so than, say, Kesselstatt. Not as squeaky-clean as Kesselstatt, but more so than Reuscher-Haart! In Piesport there are two ways you can go. You can make lavish, sensual voodoo-wines that barely taste like Riesling at all, or you can make wines as compact as this terroir will give—which isn't very. Hoffmann's wines lean in the compact direction, focusing the Piesport fruit but not resisting it.

**GHS-045 2008 Estate Riesling**

This was perhaps the best of the chaptalized wines I've seen (and it was tasted 4th from-the-end); a yummy lusty being yet with more structure than is sometimes the case here. As fun as a basket of puppies.  
SOS: 2 (now-6 years)

**GHS-041 2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

It has the structure of the '07s with the maracuja and bergamot of the site; a nice yinyang of stone and wisteria and quetsch (purple plums); good length for an entirely attractive and characteristic Mosel wine.  
SOS: 2 (4-12 years)

**GHS-046 2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Kabinett**

Again 08 is *very* kind to PiesGold. This is a playful and sprightly being, with a giggling skipping charm but also with grip and saltiness. Less rich and smoky than the 07 but more compact and refreshing.  
SOS: 2 (4-14 years)

**GHS-047 2008 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**

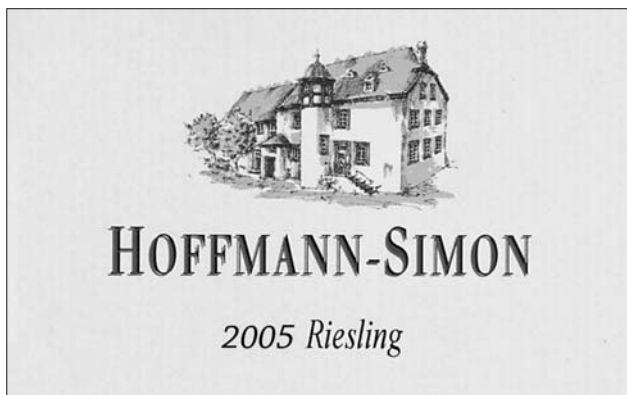
There is simply more stuff here, more than the other Späts, more than the very good 07, an aspect of solidity that announces the wine is *significant*, not only good. There's all the *quetsch* of ripe PiesGold; the palate is rich with waves of interplay of acid-mineral-fruit, with a stewed rhubarb note on the finish, the acidity and the tangy sweetness.  
SOS: 2 (6-18 years)

**GHS-048 1998 Köwericher Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese**

There isn't a ton but there's *some*. I wonder if 2008 will turn out similar to its older sib...this is an excellent Spät from a ripe but high-acid vintage, at the start of its grownup life, showing its typical orange and pepper notes along with mirabelles and what y'all call "petrol;" it's a juicy and tasty adult Riesling.  
SOS: 2 (7-18 years)

**GHS-044H 2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling BA, 12/375ml**

O.K., I confess I have a drooling weak-spot for these sweet wines in barrique, but this one is so easy to drink, and the (far from blatant) wood tones soften the sometimes-rough edges of a young BA; milk-chocolatey, papaya, plantain; it tastes like Jurançon would with half its usual alcohol. The price is astonishing!  
SOS: 4 (15-35 years)



# weingut ansgar clüsserath

## mosel • trittenheim

I find I must issue a gentle admonition. You don't show these amazing wines nearly enough *LUV*. The time is now, as Eva Clüsserath's 08s are her best since 2005.

Last Fall I accepted an invite to do a tasting for the Yale undergrad wine society. It sounded like fun and it was. I took a random bunch of wines from inventory, including a frickin' *stellar* 05 Apotheke Spätlese from Eva Clüsserath. The wine shocked everyone and it even shocked me. Simply great Mosel Riesling.

Then this year we had access to a "name" estate with vineyards in Trittenheim, who wanted to sell more wine in the U.S.. The samples were very good, polished, spiffy wines. By coincidence we had Clüsserath's samples on hand also, so I suggested we taste side by side and get a reality check. It would have been revelatory had I expected a different outcome, but Eva's wines were at least as good and in my own opinion, a little bit better. Yes, I prefer the old-school leesy-nubby school of Mosel Riesling to the tidily gleaming samples from the other fellow. But leaving that preference aside, why were we even considering a new guy when we already have wines that were just as good (and lower-priced) from our guy?

Eva Clüsserath is featured (with a totally happenin' pic) in a lovely new book called *RIESLING*, co-written by the charming Christine Fischer, who's kinda like the German Andrea Immer except she's still a floor-working somm. Eva has a wonderful quote: "Riesling is really just fun, because it can be so heart-refreshingly uncomplicatedly complicated!"

Not too many people know how to say that, and I myself struggle with it. Wine is complicated — agricultural wine, at any rate — and if you wrestle against it, it will pin you. Yet the instant you relax, the very second you say OK, it's complicated, it will always be complicated, and I'm going to quit trying to master it and just let complicated-ness be FUN, well guess what? Wine becomes your best friend.



Eva Clüsserath

Size, vineyard and cellar work are unremarkable in the context of conscientious Moselans. The cellar is virtually all wood fuders. "We work with little influence from technology," says Eva. She ferments with natural yeasts, filters only once, leaves the wines on the lees till March or April. No one will ever improve on these old ways.

What is significant, I think, is Eva's palate. She's more cosmopolitan than her parents were, I'm sure, and her marriage to Phillip Wittmann gives her a drinking-sweetie in another region plus a comrade with whom to explore the wine-world. They love Burgundy. But Eva herself wants "our wines to be minerally and individual, even more; unmistakable." Good for her! You can always

- **Vineyard area: 4 hectares**
- **Annual production: 3,000 cases**
- **Top sites: Trittenheimer Apotheke and Altärchen; Mülheimer Sonnenlay**
- **Soil types: Slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling; 10% other**

trust a Riesling palate that starts with mineral. That's what Riesling is.

One year I had a telling conversation with Eva. We're not selling what deserves to be sold from here, and part of the reason why is that ol' Mosel-stink problem. If you didn't read my intro to this catalog, this is the smell of H<sub>2</sub>S resulting from the lees; it vanishes with something between seconds and 2-3 minutes of swirling, and it will vanish in bottle in a couple years. It's not a "flaw;" it's a marketing nuisance. And it tends to be exaggerated in big-tasting situations, where you have 20 Kabinetts lined up on a table and suddenly one of them is stinky, and it's oh-kayy: NEXT! Even if you know such tastings almost demand that you form the most superficial impressions, you still can't help it.

I said as much to Eva, and she agreed. She's been to the tastings and she's no one's fool. But, she says, it's crucial for her to make what she feels are honest wines; she does not wish to "form" them for commercial considerations, and so she'll continue on her grounded old-fashioned way and what we sell, we sell. Curiously, the "problem" appears solve-able by using cultured yeasts to ferment, but for a certain mentality this is tantamount to diluting terroir. However awkward this may be for me, I must say I applaud anyone who's striving for *truth* in her wines, and I am proud to show you these inconvenient little stinkers! Maybe we'll put a stack of pennies next to Eva's bottles . . .

The estate is on-the-move; they've just obtained parcels in Piesporter Goldtröpfchen and Dhron Hofberger (from Adam, I wonder?), partly for curiosity's sake and partly to have alternates from which to make wine while the Apotheke is in flurbereinigung. Yet I think Eva would have bought the vineyards regardless; it's like her. A young, curious vintner doesn't want to be associated exclusively with one site.

**clüsserath at a glance:**

Mid-sized Mosel estate making old-school slatey-leesy classics and selling them at fair prices. Under the careful eye of a smart young woman, these have nowhere to go but up.

**how the wines taste:**

A charming amalgam of Trittenheim's charmingly pliant fruit (less stiff than say Graacher Domprobst) with striking minerality.

- GAC-026 **2008 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Kabinett** **+**  
A wonderful angular mineral intricate Mosel wine, with amazingly clear diction and digital precision; apple-skin along with the most piquant floral note, as if it were a salt bath with wisteria petals floating in it. If rocks had souls (and who knows that they don't?) this is how their souls would speak.  
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (5-18 years)
- GAC-027 **2008 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Spätlese** **(++)**  
The sample I tasted was just finished fermenting and wasn't yet filtered; a blend of two lots, one with 92° and the other with 98° picked very late. Wonderful potential here! The slim graceful fruit and the *ripe* mineral; the structure has swallowed the acidity completely even as it thrusts the flavors forward; a cox-orange cider and every kind of salty stone.  
SOS: 2 (8-22 years)
- GAC-028 **2007 Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spätlese**  
**First offering.** I tasted it alongside the Apotheke offered last year (and whose mordant minerality pleased my warped palate) and thought you'd enjoy Eva's Rieslings in a *fruitier* expression; this has all the smoke and musk of the site, but the palate is wonderfully cool and contained and even salty; a warm sunny blast of stewed apple and passion fruit; a moderate prosciutto-like middle, and a cool breeze of mineral on the finish.  
SOS: 2 (7-21 years)
- GAC-025H **2007 Dhroner Hofberg Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **+**  
Why aren't more Auslesen like this? It intensifies every aspect of the site, especially minerality; it loses neither precision nor focus; it tastes like itself, it's still brilliant and delineated, and the botrytis comes as a welcome nuance instead of the annoying lead guitarist who keeps turning up his amp. This is ultra-elegant and useful wine.  
SOS: 3 (10-30 years)
- GAC-029H **2008 Trittenheimer Apotheke Riesling Auslese, 12/500ml** **++**  
The old-school Mosel fragrance albeit with almost no botrytis; a nearly perfect palate ablaze with mineral and wisteria and ripe mirabelles in a body so limber and sinewy you can see the tendons stretch. One taste of this and you'll join me in asking "And Auslese doesn't sell *why???*"  
SOS: 2 (8-25 years)



# carl loewen/schmitt-wagner

## mosel • leiwen

As you may know, Carl Loewen leased the Schmitt-Wagner estate beginning with the 2008 vintage. Bruno Schmitt remains active – if you know Bruno you couldn't imagine him anything but active – but Loewen's making the wines.

One of my colleagues felt a bit of *triste* that Schmitt-Wagner's wines had changed. (Lucky for him old vintages Bruno made are still available.) I didn't share that opinion, though. Loewen's own wines are *riper* than Schmitt's were, but they are more similar than different, *spon-ti*-type wines made in Fuder, old-school Mosels, the way I adore them. Still, it was melancholy not to visit Longuich and sit in Schmitt's parlor and taste the farandole of old vintages, though Bruno insisted we leave time in our schedule next year to do exactly that, just for fun.

Carl Loewen knew full well the legacy he was carrying on. Not just in human terms, but in the monumental value of the 6,000 vines Schmitt possesses which were planted in 1896. This is possibly the largest-oldest stand of ancient ungrafted vines in Germany, perhaps in Europe. The vineyard – Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg – has various sub-sections and exposures, but it's all steep and there's a lot of red slate that gives the wines the sassafrassy *garrigue* we also find in Ürzig. As Carl is a *terroir-iste* of the first order, I can only imagine how it feels to have three equally great and entirely different Grand Crus to play with.

Here at These selections we like to say We ain't no spinning cone zone! Hey, come to our office and you'll hear us say it all the time, at the water cooler, in the company kitchen, in the parking lot. We hate spinning cones and everything they imply. Instead we like growers like



Carl Loewen who say lovely true things like "A good wine is always made first in the mind." Here are some other things he says.

"In the modern world of winemakers there are hitherto unimagined possibilities to form the tastes of

- **Vineyard area: 8.7 hectares**
- **Annual production: 6,200 cases**
- **Top sites: Leiwener Laurentiuslay, Thörnicher Ritsch, Detzemer, Maximiner Klosterlay**
- **Soil types: Devonian & light weathered slate**
- **Grape varieties: 98% Riesling, 2% Müller-Thurgau**

wines. The grape-breeders send us ever-new varieties, in my region there are people using barriques, using the most current techniques to concentrate natural musts; special cultured yeasts aim to form the characters of wines, and special enzymes to form bouquets.

"Is this the brave new wine-world?"

"I have a different philosophy. Wine is a product of nature, the badge of its origin. And anyone who thinks this way views terroir as the defining important point."

Pretty words, even good words, but only words—until you taste.

And dear friend and reader, since the 2001 vintage Loewen is the unheralded superstar in this assortment. Our hero is one live wire, a vigorous intellect and a calm confidence.

Loewen is another grower who'd rather not know the analytical figures for his wines, preferring to make any necessary decisions based on taste and intuition. "When you have the figures in your head you can't taste the wine any more," he said. And he's right, provided he can absolutely trust that intuition.

Leiwen is just upstream from Trittenheim, and its best site, the Laurentiuslay, is one of several unheralded Crus along this stretch of the Mosel. A lot of the renown a site may or may not possess is dependent on a flagship

estate. To cite a somewhat absurd example, if J.J. Prüm happened to have been a resident of Pölich and not of Wehlen then the Pölicher Held would enjoy the renown of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr. There are great vineyards we don't know because there hasn't been a great vintner to do them full justice.

At least till now. Loewen claims the Laurentiuslay stands "among the best the Mosel has to offer. And it was a stroke of luck for us the flurbereinigung was voted down here because it was too expensive. The vineyard shows its original profile with countless little terraces and walls." Another great site, he says, is the Thörnicher Ritsch. Many years ago I went to Thörnich with Hans and Sigrid Selbach, on a prow for a vintner who would do the vineyard justice. Hans knew well the old-timer's wisdom; Ritsch was a great site. Well we didn't find its champion then, but we know him now. Finally there's the awkwardly-named Detzemer Maximiner Klosterlay, from which Loewen makes a "tribute to the old proprietor of this vineyard, the cloister of St Maximin in Trier." Mercifully he calls this wine simply Maximiner, describing an "extreme terroir," a 65° mountain falling directly into the river, hard un-weathered blue slate, with an open west flank that catches every moment of afternoon and evening sun. Its position, right up against the river,

moderates nighttime temperatures and the soil retains water so that "even in a Summer like 2003 we had enough moisture for the grapes."

Natural fertilizing, reduced yields, slow fermentations, minimal handling—they only rack the wines once, for instance, It's an all-cask cellar. "I'm dubious about wines made in steel," says Loewen. "The summer after the vintage they're highly presentable, but I doubt they have the stature to age well."

Loewen's wines also have a quality of companionability which can't be isolated or quantified but which determines how friendly you feel toward them. Some wines seem to want to take you to a world where all there is is wine. Others, no less absorbing or delightful, seem content to meet you in your world. Whenever I drink or taste Loewen's wines I always want to curl up with a book, ideally by an open window near a singing thrush.

This was the first stop we made on the Mosel, and the Mosel was the last region I visited, and I had a vision of the 08 vintage mostly formed, and I wasn't sure how the Mosel would fare. But oh boy, this was encouraging! The wines were lusty and enormously expressive, and Loewen had integrated the two sets of wines without diluting their individuality. I'll do the same with the structure of the offering. I was blown away. You'll be too.

### loewen at a glance:

Energetic, idealistic young couple on a quixotic quest to gain renown for the great unknown sites of this part of the Mosel. Astoundingly reasonable prices for very high-quality juice! "Cool" chalky-minerally style, as if the wines were blended with 15% Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

### how the wines taste:

All that's stony is not slate. Loewens have some wines on sand or gravel, and these have a "northern" coolness without being explicitly slatey. The wines from the sirloin-quality Laurentiuslay have a fruit all their own: feline and nectarine-y. Loewen also places high emphasis on fruit-freshness: "I don't like 'old-wine' flavor and I definitely don't like this petrol taste," he says.

#### GCL-059 2008 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Alte Reben Trocken

The vines were planted in the 30s, and the wine is stirring; there's a fruit recalling quinces or underripe nectarines; the wine is very dry and you need to appreciate its particular wavelength, but what's good here is *very good*, importantly good; dense, complex and mineral, the wine is neither thin nor inexpressive, but it's for lovers of the strict.

SOS: **minus-2** (1-2 years, again from 10-13 years)

#### GCL-060 2008 Leiwener Klostergarten Riesling Kabinett

+

CORE-LIST WINE, because it offers an explosively generous and flavorful Mosel Kabinett experience at a fabulous price. Carl says: "Here one can find blue and gray slates but also soils where the gravel subsoil is covered with a layer of weathered slate brought down from the surrounding hills by erosion. The Kabinett is made from the slate soils at the foot of the slope."

So, it's slate but not steep slate, which gives these wines an extra fullness and supple texture. And it is back in form (and then some) after an atypical 07; a superfine old-school Mosel; the palate is overcome with a foamy swell of lime and mineral.

What joy!

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (4-12 years)

- GSW-065 **2008 Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett** +  
*Schmitt-Wagner's old vineyards.* These vines are mere babies, around 90 years old. Parvenues. Schmitt's Kabinetts were legendary, often among the few very best in any given Mosel vintage. And *this* has all the classic sassafrass and caraway-seed aromas we know and love; the palate is salty, limey and with almost lurid mineral, and a billowing rich fruit that spreads over the palate but it still completely *green*. Masterly and delicious.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-27 years)
- GSW-062 **2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese Feinherb** +  
 GSW-061 **2007 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 GSW-066 **2008 Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 CORE-LIST WINE. We'll stick with Schmitt's wine through the summer and move to Loewen's bottling thereafter.
- The astonishing 08 will have "100" somewhere on the label in tribute to the ancient vines. The wine is *ridiculous*, with aromas I only remember from Christoffel's 1-star Auslese; there are *sponti* carob notes; the thing is gloriously rich, dense, capacious; it's like endless post-orgasmic ripples tingling and shimmering over the palate; kaf-fir, wintergreen, wild cherry, crazy-long and absurdly good!  
 SOS: 2 (8-27 years)
- GCL-062 **2008 Thörnicher Ritsch Riesling Spätlese** +  
 Chartreuse aromas, extraordinary animation and brilliance; you'll notice the acidity but not object because the lime and spearmint finish will overwhelm it, but this wine is spastically alive on the palate, every scintilla of flavor jerking and twitching – no repose in this baby!  
 SOS: 2 (7-22 years)
- GCL-061 **2008 Leiwener Laurentiuslay Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 This "fruit-bomb" is Carl's own favorite, and it's a regal and well-fed feline after the feral Ritsch; somehow it's both light and enormous – paradox, the one sure marker for greatness. Comice-pear and vanilla, talc and toasted mineral; the vintage is eerily like 05, a little lighter maybe, perhaps not so overtly Great – but what wines these are.  
 SOS: 2 (8-23 years)
- GSW-064 **1999 Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Auslese**  
**FIRST OFFERING: Library release.** The wine is a half-fuder picked at 106° Oechsle (ripe for 99), and none-to-sweet (as was his style); it's very rich and beeswaxy but still a food wine; rich, sweet-grain, it's not hugely long but it's hugely tasty and *drinkable*. And it shows how 99 is continuing to surprise we who wrote it off young. That's "we," *including me*.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (9-27 years)



# karlsmühle-geiben

ruwer • mertesdorf

When I first started visiting the Ruwer (well before you were born) it was a secretive little valley you hardly knew how to find; you turned off from a markedly bland village-suburb of Trier and suddenly everything was green, pastures, vineyards, and if you were attentive you might catch a glimpse of the tiny Ruwer stream hissing and gurgling its way to the Mosel. These days the turnoff is still there but the valley is compromised; it's become quite the bedroom-community for commuters to Trier. I guess they gotta live somewhere, but they went and spoiled my bucolic fun.

You can almost forget they're close by when you sit by the little stream at Geiben's hotel-restaurant, eating a trout so fresh it's almost quivering, drinking the most exquisite Rieslings you could ever have imagined.

These wines seem to invite the sap to rise. See if you can taste them and not hear the beats of countless tiny hearts, or the squirmings of the seeds.

The wines sometimes have that Mosel-yeasty stink their first year in bottle, and they're more expensive than Mittelmosel wines. We Yanks don't have time to distinguish between Mosel & Saar & Ruwer because we're too busy to take German wine as seriously as other wine. Put it this way: can you imagine us refusing to pay more for Côtes-de-Nuits Burgundies than for Côtes-de-Beaune—"Hey it's all Burgundy, man." Who cares about a piddling matter like where the wine comes from! Oh don't mind me: I've got rants in my pants.

Peter Geiben is a gentleman of rather brusque temperament, yet he's fiercely dedicated to every detail involved in making great wine. I both respect and like



Peter Geiben

him, but my response to his wines is uncolored by any warm 'n fuzzies. He'd brush away any wine faery who happened to alight on his shoulder. Peter speaks tersely, if at all, about such things. He'd rather talk about the trellising method he's developed, and he'd far rather talk about hunting.

A friend convinced him to stop de-acidifying. He experimented with natural yeast fermentation and was pleased with the results. He's done away with wood in the cellar and is now making everything reductively in tanks. Wood is too rustic, and too dangerous in his view.

The Ruwer suffers a low profile inside of Germany

- **Vineyard area: 14.5 hectares**
- **Annual production: 5,400 cases**
- **Top sites: Kaseler Nies'chen, Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen**
- **Soil types: Clay and slate**
- **Grape varieties: 90% Riesling, 2% each of Weissburgunder, Spätburgunder, Dornfelder, Müller-Thurgau and Elbling**

right now. This is odd, considering how quickly one gets there from Trier. That imposing hillside to your left, behind the hotel, contains Peter's monopole vineyards. The upper section is the Felslay, the steepest section, with the lightest soil. Just below is the Mäuerchen on its deeper soil. Around the corner facing due south is the great Kaseler Nies'chen, in which Geiben now has two fine parcels.

His wines from the Lorenzhöfer hillside are positive and adamant, they walk with a firm tread, and they have a slight and pleasing earthiness. The wines from the Kasel sites are nominally lighter but utterly ravishing in polish and beauty of flavor. It's like the difference between the top part of Clos Vougeot near Musigny and the parts lower down toward the route nationale.

In fact I learned one year that the Nies'chen is fine-stoned; i.e., lots of crumbled slate and thus superior drainage, plus a certain filigree quality in the wines, and Kehrnagel is more coarse-stoned, thus less porous, and the wines are less elegant. Peter took us for a walk through the vineyards. He also gave us various springwaters to taste; the region is gifted with subterranean streams. We tasted from springs beneath the Nies'chen, Kehrnagel and Felslay, and of course they all tasted different.

It was a hard winter for Peter. He had open-heart surgery and he lost a beloved dog. When we visited he was decidedly off his oats. "I haven't been able to taste since I got out of the hospital," he said. "It's the strangest

thing; I can *smell*, but not taste.” As this is a crucial time in cellar-work, the wines were waiting for direction, so to speak. Most were stubbornly reduced and hard to penetrate. What could I do: I can’t *rev up* the prose, I can only say what it was like on the day. So if I seem tentative, I

am tentative. That said, Geiben’s wines *always* come around, and I’m sure they’ll be attractive by the time you read this, and even more so early in 2010. The base material suggests a potentially better vintage than even 07.

### karlsmühle at a glance:

Ruwer wines are prized in general for their astonishing spiciness and delicacy. Since the acquisition of great Grand Cru sites in Kasel, Karlsmühle has become a serious landowner and very important producer of green-bottle Rieslings.

### how the wines taste:

Ruwer wines can be the *ne plus ultra* of refinement, with their own keenly slicing flavors of cassis and sometimes cinnamon.

- GKM-109 **2008 Lorenzhöfer Mäuerchen Riesling Kabinett**  
Seems to be a typically earthy and salty wine with perhaps more grapefruit than usual.  
SOS: 2 (5-17 years)
- GKM-110 **2008 Kaseler Nies’chen Riesling Kabinett** +  
CORE-LIST WINE. It took two minutes of swirling but finally the true-aromas arrived, which more closely recall a discreet Scheurebe than a down-the-middle Riesling; the palate is elegant, mineral and prettily balanced if a bit *wilder* than usual; the interplay of granular apple and overt salty slate is kinetic and the finish is deliberate and solid.  
SOS: 2 (6-18 years)
- GKM-111 **2008 Kaseler Nies’chen Riesling Spätlese**  
Essentially a concentrate of the Kabinett, not intrinsically *different* in any way except for more plums and more botrytis; this wine really was too young to have reached its customary finesse, and I must defer judgment.
- GKM-112H **2008 Lorenzhöfer Riesling Eiswein, 12/375ml** (+)  
This has excellent potential, “only” 11 g.l. acidity and a fine fruit starting to form. It ought to be bewitching.  
SOS: 4 (now-27 years)



You know how there's some movies you like the first time you see them, but it isn't until the second time you realize how really *great* they are? Your attention isn't claimed by following the story, and you relax more. There was some of that in my response to Othegraven's astonishing 2008s. But only some. The wines, intrinsically, are among the most stirring miracles of Riesling I have ever known. You might glance at the prices and be tempted to look away. Don't. I live in the same dismal economy as you do, but life really is too short to miss a chance at wines like these, and the Gods always bring the best possible thing at the worst possible time, right?

Their virtues, though, aren't noisy. They won't reward superficial attention. The deeper you can go, the deeper the prize, for these aren't merely great German Rieslings, or great Rieslings, or great wines....they are great moments of life; they show that a certain thing is possible, a thing you hardly ever saw and may not have even suspected, something miraculous, and mysterious. Hedonism washes away, it won't adhere, it's why we chase it so desperately. *This*, though, this stays, this actually changes your life. It might not be a huge change; it's not, like, getting your degree or losing thirty pounds or having your first child....it's a small glimpse of unfathomable possibility, tiny and delicate. But you will not forget it.

Ever since I was a young wine-pup I knew there was something singular about Saar wines, but could never put it into words. Let me fail to do so again here.

The Mosel itself is of course a kind of fjord, a gorge. As such it is protected from wind to a large degree, and its microclimate is moderated by the proximity of the river itself, which also irradiates the vineyards with reflected sunlight on bright days. The Saar, though, is more open country, exposed to winds, and certainly a few degrees cooler than its big sister Mosel. Vineyards are interspersed with pasture land; the countryside is wonderfully calm and beautiful, less dramatic than the Mosel, more serene. Vineyards occupy every possible south-facing slope, but it's a more hardscrabble life for a vine here, having to do without the pampered protection of the Mosel-proper. I'm sure my Mosel growers will chuckle to hear their vines called "pampered," but I'm equally sure they'd be in no hurry to trade places with their Saar colleagues.

Saar wine seems to take an essence of Mosel wine and concentrate it, but this isn't something one can isolate as a flavor or flavors per se. Saar soils are a little different from Mosel soils, but only a little; there's more so-called *Grauwacke* here intermixed with the slate. Almost every Mosel wine has an herbal profile and a citric profile, and it is these two things that are seemingly intensified in Saar wines. They are also rather more earthy than Mosel wines. They convey an even more palpable solidity. When they show the expected apple-y fruit they

- **Vineyard area: 11 hectares**
- **Annual production: 4,300 cases**
- **Top sites: Altenberg, Bockstein, Kupp**
- **Grape varieties: 100% Riesling**
- **Soil types: weathered slate with quartzite, iron "Grauwacke" and loam**

prompt you to imagine the apples were smaller and more dense, or had been picked later, when the fruit-sugars were concentrated by a light frost. Indeed one could say Saar wines taste like Mosel wines from grapes that slightly froze, not deep enough for Eiswein, but just enough for a tangy little jab of concentration. They are also shadier than Mosel wines, with more silvery flavors. Not bad for a guy who basically has no idea what he's talking about!

Egon Müller is, obviously, the standard-bearer for the Saar. He is, if not the very "best" grower there, indisputably the first among equals. In the same class are a few excellent growers making classically fruit-driven wines, and every German wine lover cherishes them, as do I although I do not sell them. Then our friend Mr. Niewodnicianski came on the scene at Van Volxem and really shook things up, opting to make extremely dense, concentrated old-school wines mostly chewy and dry (or dry-ish) which are consistently compelling.

Somewhere between these two poles is Von Othegraven, neither as *outré* as Volxem nor as keenly fruity as Müller et al., but instead hewing to a classical line, making scrupulously honest terroir-drenched Saar wines of admirable depth and form. If you like Trimbach best of all Alsace producers you'll probably like Othegraven best of all Saar producers.

The estate is 11 hectares, with 7.5 in the great Kanzemer Altenberg which looms spectacularly above the manor. It's almost comical to open the front door and have this immense mountain of vines occupy your entire field of vision. It beats the view out my front door, in any

case.

The current proprietor is the charming Dr. Heidi Kegel, who left a career as a physician when her Aunt Maria von Othegraven needed a successor back in 1995. You know, one *tries* to be gender-blind, being of an elevated sensibility and all, but I do think a woman often runs things differently than a man might, in a way I find congenial.

The wines are *spontis*, done in tank since the 2005 vintage, with very long aging on the fine lees, and only racked once *during* fermentation, and not again. Musts clarify by settling. There are three great sites: WILTINGER KUPP on highly weathered gray slate with lots of crumbled earth, making compact brilliant wines with a whole basket of heirloom apples. These are what you'd call *keen* or *penetrating* wines. OCKFENER BOCKSTEIN is famous of course, blue-ish silvery slate, a real

Saar archetype. Finally the KANZEMER ALTENBERG on pure Devonian slate with rusty flecks from weathered iron oxide, making the most primordially concentrated wines, almost meaty, with such depth as to be almost inscrutable when young, as if they have so much to say they can only stutter.

I adore wines like these. They are purely themselves, and even when they are highly pleasing it's not because they *set out* to please. They're assertive but not adamantly so. They are, though, adamantly *honest*. If you look at a tree from the top down, first you see the thready little branches and then as the eye travels down it gets thicker and thicker until you come to the big round trunk. That's how the palate registers these wines, first the nuances and then the deep-grounded solidity. And they have the innate kindliness of trees. Let's get to 'em, what say.

#### von othegraven at a glance:

archetypes.

Venerable estate on the Saar, making intense soil-imprinted wines which are true Saar-

#### how the wines taste

They fall between the fruit-oriented style typified by Egon Müller and the more *recherché* antique style practiced by Van Volxem; on the dry side but explosive with terroir and with ever-unfolding depth. Kupp is the keenest and most piquant; Bockstein the most extrovertedly fruity, Altenberg the most profound.

#### GOG-007 2008 Estate Riesling Trocken +

Usually I murmur politely and wait for the sweeter wines, or for the more "important" dry wines. This one, I could hardly believe. It is in fact Bockstein and Altenberg, and it is *perfectly* gracious and balanced, with a lovely tide-swell of minerality; a paradigm of what dry German Riesling *should* be, smaller in body than Rieslings from other places, but utterly drenched with extract and the specificities of its terroir.

SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 0 (now-2 years, again 9-12 years)

#### GOG-009 2008 Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage +

Another mineral beauty, more 'blue' and lithe than Altenberg, as if it were the kid-sister jumping on a giggly trampoline; here we're really into balsam-fir and aloe-vera and wintergreen. *Ur-Saar*, it carries me back to the first instant I tasted these improbable Riesling miracles, thirty years ago...

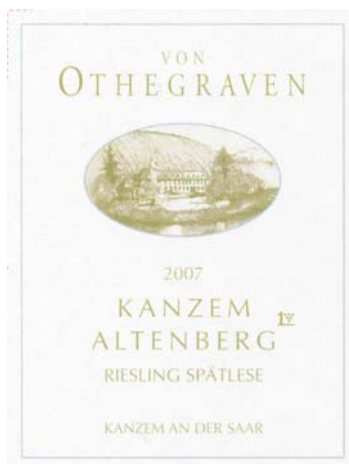
SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (7-23 years)

#### GOG-008 2008 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage +++

CORE-LIST WINE, though I didn't even remember that when I was tasting this amazing thing. Yes, the first time I ever "gave" three plusses to a Kabinett, and that's not the story, it doesn't matter what I or anyone else "gives" a wine. What matters is the things this wine does that *no other wine does*. But getting to it; it smells good! Complex, serene, with the kind of thick lovely melancholy of Saar wines; expressive quince and balsam; silvery and clear; the palate, if anything, overtakes the aromas... have I ever tasted a better Kabinett? What length, mineral, haunting fruit. A sublime masterpiece. Everything there is to cherish about Riesling is shown to us here.

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

- GOG-003 **2007 Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Spätlese** ++  
 One of the GREAT WINES OF THIS OFFERING, this one had us all abuzz. It is basically just insanely beautiful; fabulous spicy fruit, playful and slatey to within an inch of its life (but not archly mineral), almost luscious but still firm; cinnamon, cherries, fiji apples; about as great as Saar Riesling can be.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 2 (8-27 years)
- GOG-010 **2008 Ockfen Bockstein Riesling Spätlese Erste Lage** +  
 Some botrytis. Actually you could imagine a young '71 smelling like this, especially if you're a silverback geez like me; a relative glamour-puss among these iridescent 08s; almost a vetiver note, a lot of corn and lime and the most perfect mineral 'sourness' at the end. It shows the unyielding solidity of the wines from the old great years.  
 SOS: 2 (8-25 years)
- GOG-004 **2007 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Spätlese** +  
 AP # 8; as solid as a water-balloon, with classic Altenberg smoky-earthiness, deep and soulful; you'd never call it lithe or curvaceous, but with what, 9% alcohol, it has an amazing material density and almost an allspice tang.  
 SOMMELIER ALERT! SOS: 1 (9-28 years)
- GOG-012 **2008 Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Auslese Erste Lage** +++  
 A thrall of complexity on the nose, quinces and wintergreen and that *other* thing, the inexplicable one; the palate is iridescent and rich and shows an apotheosis of fruit, every cell is charged with fruit, mineral and mint; the length is almost intimidating; I didn't even know my palate had *chakras*, but all of them are buzzing now.  
 SOS: 3 (10-30 years)
- GOG-011 **2008 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Auslese Erste Lage** ++  
 This is drier and earthier and embodies the old Saar reticence; you can drink this during a meal, and should. The clarity and compact malic-earthly density are arresting; it recalls Dönnhoff's Brücke most of all. This is as great a vintage as I've ever been shown at any single winery.  
 SOS: 2 (10-30 years)
- GOG-013H **2007 Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Eiswein Erste Lage, 12/375ml** ++  
**First offering.** Melting yet explosive, more an Eiswein-BA hybrid than a glaringly spiky freeze-bomb; in fact amazing beauty of fruit, a swoon, a rapture of fruit. It's the taste of forgiveness, that strange moment when somehow you can't hold the anger any more, it seems to fall from you. It isn't even kindness and you don't know why it happens. The world brings a mercy to you, and this is how it tastes.  
 SOS: 4 (14-40 years)



# core list wines

GMS-145	2008 Messmer Muschelkalk Riesling Kabinett Feinherb .....	59
GTM-110	2007 Minges Burrweiler Schlossgarten Riesling Spätlese .....	63
GTM-121	2008 Minges Gleisweiler Hölle Riesling Spätlese .....	63
GDR-170L	2008 Darting Dürkheimer Nonnengarten Riesling Kabinett, 1.0 Liter .....	67
GDR-172	2008 Darting Dürkheimer Hochbenn Riesling Kabinett .....	67
GST-147	2008 Strub Riesling "Soil to Soul" .....	74
GST-148	2008 Strub Niersteiner Brückchen Riesling Kabinett .....	74
GST-137	2007 Strub Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese .....	75
GST-149	2008 Strub Niersteiner Paterberg Riesling Spätlese .....	75
GGE-033	2008 Geil Bechtheimer Heilig Kreuz Scheurebe Kabinett .....	82
GGY-077L	2008 Gysler Silvaner Halbtrocken, 1.0 Liter .....	84
GGY-079	2008 Gysler Weinheimer Riesling Kabinett .....	85
GHX-044	2007 Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit" .....	101
GHX-054	2008 Hexamer Meddersheimer Rheingrafenberg Riesling "Quarzit" .....	101
GKF-128	2007 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett .....	104
GKF-139	2008 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Rheinberg Riesling Kabinett .....	104
GKF-142	2008 Kruger-Rumpf Münsterer Dautenpflänzer Riesling Spätlese .....	104
GJL-150	2008 Leitz Eins Zwei Dry "3" .....	113
GJL-151	2008 Leitz Dragonstone Riesling .....	114
GJL-158	2008 Leitz Rüdesheimer Magdalenenkreuz Riesling Spätlese .....	115

# core list wines cont'd

GSP-059	2008 Spreitzer Oestricher Lenchen Riesling Kabinett .....	117
GSO-309	2007 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett .....	134
GSO-332	2008 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett .....	134
GSO-307	2007 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese .....	135
GSO-335	2008 Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Schlossberg Riesling Spätlese .....	135
GJM-073	2008 Jakoby-Mathy Riesling "Balance" .....	139
GJU-111	2008 Meulenhof Erdener Treppchen Riesling Kabinett .....	142
GJU-112	2008 Meulenhof Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese .....	142
GME-166	2008 Merkelbach Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Spätlese .....	146
GJC-174	2008 Christoffel Ürziger Würzgarten Riesling Kabinett .....	148
GJC-175	2008 Christoffel Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese .....	148
GKE-122	2008 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Kabinett .....	151
GKE-126	2008 Kerpen Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese* Artist Label .....	151
GAD-028	2008 A.J. Adam Dhron Hofberg Riesling Kabinett .....	157
GCL-060	2008 Loewen Leiwener Kloostergarten Riesling Kabinett .....	165
GSW-061	2007 Schmitt-Wagner Longuicher Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese .....	166
GSW-066	2008 Schmitt-Wagner Maximiner Herrenberg Riesling Spätlese .....	166
GKM-110	2008 Karlsruhle Kaseler Nies'chen Riesling Kabinett .....	168
GOG-008	2008 von Othegraven Kanzem Altenberg Riesling Kabinett Erste Lage .....	170



*The extraordinary terraced vineyards of the Rudesheimer Berg, seen from across the Rhine. In the foreground, the town of Bingen; to the left, the Nahe. Note the Ehrenfels, just above the church steeple.*

*A companion photograph to the above. The junction of Nahe and Rhine, seen from the Rudesheimer Berg. In the foreground, the Ehrenfels; to the left, Bingen and the Scharlachberg vineyards.*



